

Devoted to the creative expression of  
military veterans since 1952.

Fall 2019

# VETERANS' VOICES®

**Veterans Endorse Writing  
and the Visual Arts**

*By Rickey Bennett and Tana Young*

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**VeteransVoices.org**

# Veterans Endorse Writing and the Visual Arts

As our regular readers know, *Veterans' Voices* launches a visual arts initiative in this issue of the magazine. The promotion complements VVWP's writing as therapy mission and offers another means of healing through artistic expression. With the very generous support of Dr. Robert Rubin, retired Chief of Psychiatry and Mental Health at the Greater Los Angeles VAMC, this issue features a full-color center page spread highlighting artwork by our country's military veterans. Pen and ink drawing, painting and photography are included on pages 33 through 36.

We know creative endeavor can heal the visible and invisible wounds sustained while serving in the military. Psychiatrists like Dr. Rubin testify to this (See his guest editorial in Spring 2019 issue of *Veterans' Voices*) as do our veteran writers and artists. Testimonies from two of our contributors are included here. Rickey Bennett, VAMC Sheridan, Wyom., shares his thoughts about the healing benefits of painting and writing poetry while Tana Young, VAMC Spokane, Wash., describes how painting sustains her. We hope you find inspiration in their words and come to appreciate this special issue of your magazine.

—The Editors

## Artist Statement *By Rickey Bennett*

It has been a difficult journey for me following my seven month deployment to Iraq during the early 2000s as a Navy chaplain. My battalion suffered its share of death and horrific war scenes while I was there. Six years later, PTSD exploded inside my head hindering my life, laugh and love. It has been nine years since PTSD stole everything and everyone from my life, including myself. Nearly half of those years have been spent in a hospital to keep me safe.

Now, I have found something new in my quest for wellness: poetry and painting have helped me explore my experiences from an objective perspective and see the existing possibilities for life. Writing and visual art have become the vessel through which healing penetrates my darkness and invisible wounds. The arts probe the incessant memories. I am inclined to avoid painful memories and situations but that approach only retards the healing and recovery process, while a clean canvas, empty sheet of paper, or blank computer screen invites me to express myself freely, without judgment. In fact, poetry and painting have opened pathways to recovery that no other sources have provided. Sure, exploring the pain through art opens up raw wounds, but it is better to face the pain now and allow it to lead me one step at a time toward inner peace and purposeful living. The arts permit me to be honest with myself and God about my perceived failures and strong negative feelings. Honesty will allow healing.

*The painting Rickey submitted for Veterans' Voices art initiative (see page 36) depicts a combat scene with a helicopter approaching to retrieve the wounded. The dog tags in his painting symbolize those soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, who lost their lives in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.*

## Visual Arts *By Tana Young*

I've always been involved in art; for me, it has been a source of joy. However, when I became a quadriplegic, I had to relearn how to enjoy art by using my non-dominant hand to paint. Today, painting makes time pass more quickly and it helps me forget my pain. It endures as the focal point.

Making art is still possible for me. Art takes me out of myself. I'm building a bridge between my past love and my new skill set. I don't think about my pain when I am painting. I think about all the possibilities painting offers. I'm more certain of myself as well. My body forgets itself, and I'm simply letting the paint brush be the extension of my excitement and ideas. Painting is also a form of independence, creativity and the utilization of my art skills from long ago. It allows me to rekindle my love of art. I lose my sense of time, which can be interminable when you're in a hospital. And when I'm done, I have a product intermixed with color on the sparkling white space of canvas.

The psalmist wrote, "Weeping may stay for the night, but joy comes in the morning." For me, painting is the morning.

*Winner of the WAC Veterans' Association, Arizona Roadrunners Chapter 119, Award*

# Veterans' Voices®

Fall 2019 Vol. 67, No. 3



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

## VVWP

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

## History

VVWP was established as Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project in 1946 by **Elizabeth Fontaine** with the support of the Chicago North Shore chapter of Theta Sigma Phi (now The Association for Women in Communications) to address the physical 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.

## Veterans' Voices Reprints

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## 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 **reader.ku.edu/veteransvoices** and can also be heard on Lions Telephone Reader Service. For more information call Audio-Reader at 785-864-2686.

## Submission Guidelines

Manuscripts, photographs and artwork submissions are accepted online. Follow the guidelines on pages 66 and 67 of the magazine or as listed on the web site. Page 67 lists criteria for the magazine's new Visual Arts Initiative.

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

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

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## Colors of a New Day

*By Ron Scoggins.*

*VA Medical Center—Spokane, WA*

Amidst the soft amber glow of city street lights, there was a boundless maze of stone gray walkways marred with jagged cracks and crevices that crawled and grew like the telling lines on my face. A map of life's hardships, worries and age. Time shows no mercy. Everyone and everything on this earth will someday fall to its relentless grip as it eventually steals the life from our bodies, an inevitable truth we all must face, some sooner than others.

In the dense midnight mist along an endless expanse of storefronts, cafés and taverns full of music and laughter, townhouses and ornately decorated church towers that solemnly watch over a sea of rooftops soaring high into the vast darkness of the winter night sky, I wander aimlessly along crowded cement corridors in search of warmth that never comes. Empty pockets, empty stomach, empty emotions. Like a ghost, I silently weave through a carousel of rushing figures dressed in fitted suits and bright dresses, all with perfect hair never out of place.

I reluctantly move out of sight into the shadows of a small nook, never staying in one place too long for fear of being noticed. Tonight I haven't the strength nor the will to fight off the hurt their scrutiny brings. Though I'm close, their eyes are listless and stare through me as if I were transparent. Vacant smiles, judgmental scowls, and frightened eyes look away from my own, avoiding the chance they may have to give of themselves. Suspicious stares and misplaced anger are etched on their faces, and their body language is corrupt with a better-than-you demeanor.

Compassion, sympathy, empathy and kindness escape their heart's prison. Humanity is long-forgotten as they stay their distance from the unshaven man with matted hair, baggy dirty clothes and feet wrapped in a torn woolen blanket.

I wonder, "does the way you look on the outside really reflect how you feel on the inside?" If only they could slow down and take a real look at what's beneath the rags. Are their hearts so hard that they are blind? If only they could taste the bitterness of rejection and the infinite pain and sorrow of loss that forever burn in my soul. Once I was their champion and protected them. Now they see me only as a threat.

God tells us we are all his children, but I feel like a child of a self-righteous society, shallow and oblivious to a world revolving



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### GLADYS M. CANTY AWARD

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## A Sharp Shark Shooter

*By Cecil Prescott*

*—Burlingame, KS*

During July 1970, we were in and out, back and forth off the coast of Vietnam for about nine weeks or so. Our captain was a mustang. He went from seaman to captain and was one of a kind. My friend and comrade Kayo Popp was from the upper peninsula of Michigan and was of Norwegian descent. He grew up as a lumberjack, hunter and trapper.

Kayo joined the Navy in early 1969 and was a proud E-3 gunner's mate. Shortly after his arrival, the captain called for a man overboard drill. G.Q. was set. My station was port side, aft line handler. Kayo took his 3rd class petty officer's place as shark watch with a bolt action Springfield rifle just forward of me.

The captain was on the wing on the wheelhouse above us. As the whaleboat started to retrieve seamen Sam, our dummy, the captain threw a yellow disk and screamed, "Shark!" While the disk, "Shark!" was still in the air, Kayo splintered it before it hit the water. About five minutes after Sam had been retrieved, the captain threw another disk and screamed "Shark." While still in the air, Kayo again splintered the disk before it hit the water. G.Q., or emergency drill, was called as we were leaving our station. The captain came on the intercom congratulating us for breaking our records. The captain then said, "Seamen Popp, sharks don't fly."

From then on, Kayo was the ship's main gunner and ran mount 32. That blond-haired, blue-eyed, red-bearded Viking was my six and I his. He died in 1996 just before deer season. Later, Pazsano!

**Author's Note:** *I'm an old union roofer and retired after 41 years. I had never been a writer. The reason I wrote this story, sailor to sailor, was to keep it from being forgotten.*



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**ROBERT T. RUBIN AWARD -  
RESTORING MY MENTAL HEALTH**

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## **The Trip**

*By Richard Wangard.  
VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI*

outside their pampered lives, too busy to give without profit. Self-righteousness is born of worldly riches and selfishness. Humbleness is born of love and faith. If only they knew of my struggle and the heartache of shattered dreams. Though my life is paved with “if onlys,” now that I’m in survival mode, there’s no time for regret. For me, there’s only here and now.

Finally, down a dark alleyway beyond the gleaming lights of the city, hidden in the moonlight shadows, I find a dry patch of asphalt under a decrepit cascade of old stairways once used to escape the crumbling brick building. Its windows are plastered over, including a small coal chute next to me. With my back against the decaying brick wall, I close my tired eyes, shivering from the early morning cold.

I try to control the thoughts racing through my mind.

I can fight the cold and the lingering sounds of the night—distant screams, wailing sirens, roaring engines, clattering closed shutters, and opening and closing trash dumpster lids. They echo down the unfamiliar alleyway. Some things never change like the familiar odor that fills the air of rotting garbage and decay or the enticing smell of cooking food wafting from the rooftop vents of surrounding restaurants. My hunger grows, but I must wait until morning when the shelters open. Sleep doesn’t come easily, and the voices in my head betray as they spin a web of discontent, unwanted memories, guilt and fear.

Loneliness drifts in with the cold wind of seclusion.

I start to yearn for the warm touch of another, someone who believes in me, someone who fights for me when I feel defeated, and someone who shows me the path back home, someone I can trust. But somehow I know I am meant to be alone during this journey. My only companion is faith that God won’t let me slip away into a dark abyss of no return, far from reality, far from the love of my family.

I fear that slowly I’m losing myself. I fight to accept who I really am and lay everything at God’s feet.

As dawn approaches, so do the colors of a new day. It’s then I remember that through Christ, I can find forgiveness. With faith in his unconditional love, I find hope.

I had to go! I can’t even put the reasons in order, but there were many. Many people wondered and asked me just how the heck could I ride a Harley Davidson. I am a guy with the world’s worst back, a guy totally disabled, a guy who can hardly move his neck. I honestly can’t even tell you how many spinal operations I have had now. I don’t remember.

The answer lies in my timeline. If I could get through three tours in Vietnam (although I didn’t finish the third one) then I can do anything. Nam changed me forever! For good and for ill. It left me with PTSD that I still treat and it taught me how to save many lives. I never would have left Nam on my own. Although my Dad and I never got along, I remember him saying two things to me that stuck. 1. Rich, it only takes once! 2. Never, ever quit until the job is done. In September of 1970 the job was still not done in Nam and I refused to quit. I knew the war was lost by that time and Vietnamization was a failure! Morale had sunk to a new low. I was medivaced out weighing 115 pounds with a mind shattered by trying to do too much. But, I loved my brothers.

The reasons I took the Harley trip were these: to clear my head, conduct a social experiment, cross off the only bucket list item I had, see my west coast son and his family, break my writer’s block, experience total freedom, and have an adventure that I could not know what the outcome would be. And, to let my heart pound as if I was going straight up or straight down in a C-130A.

So, how did I ride 5,000 miles in 14 days? First of all, really I should thank all the docs I had over the years, the different meds I take at night and a limitless supply of lidocaine patches. I point my bike in the direction I need to see and when at rest I stand and turn from the shoulders to see both ways. I have been riding since 16. I am a good biker.

Wow, did I take heat!! Big time, from everyone who knew me. Even Wayne, my riding partner. My wife Sandy said, “Oh, Rich, you’re just going on a suicide mission!” My daughter Ann was livid and called me selfish and said that everyone would worry about me. She put up the most resistance. Both my sons thought it was a bad idea, but they knew their old man and the look in his eyes. Gregg knew I had wanted to do this for a very long time.

And so, on August 3, I kissed Sandy goodbye at 6 a.m. and was off. Me and my 2002 Harley Heritage Softail. We carried about 100

pounds of gear. Air Force guys always have back up systems for back up systems. Wayne laughs at how prepared I am even when we go on a short ride.

Bad luck hit almost immediately as I ran into a thunderstorm that soaked me and all my gear. I was only 60 miles out. I did find a nice place to hole up and dry off and regroup. Rain gear also went on over my Nam heavy leather coat. The huge Vietnam Service Ribbon was always visible on the back of my helmet. I rode in the rain mostly to Rochester, Minn. I put on about 400 miles that day and was very surprised by the niceness of all the people I encountered—at gas stations, rest stops, travel plazas, and restaurants. People were friendly, encouraging and talkative. I had many great conversations and I had NO schedule. I love to talk! This I found out was to become a common theme as I moved from state to state, even given all the different regions and cultures.

From Fairbanks Minn., I drove 414 miles and had no intention of going to Sturgis until I found out it was opening night there and I remembered Wayne saying everybody has to go there at least once! So I did with no place to stay. I like to think of myself as a free spirit—a 67-year-old guy with the mind that gets me back to 18 again. Only once in a blue moon, though.

I drove into Sturgis at 5 p.m. Thousands and thousands of motorcycles—I had died and gone to heaven! Then, I parked in back of the Iron Saloon where they had 24-hour security. All my stuff was safe and I proceeded on foot. I drank my first beer. That was mistake number one. After listening to some good music I walked up to the main street and got directions to places people said “I had to see!” This took me to One-Eyed Jack’s where I met the only other Nam vet at Sturgis. One beer turned into a lost count and then I was 18 again, and I had never ever seen so many beautiful young women in my life! Their dresses were eye candy of the highest caliber. They made thousands, all by a dollar tip at a time! This other Nam vet and I finally parted ways because we both knew that neither of us would ever quit buying each other beers. I was walking just fine but I was feeling no pain. For one night I was 18 again. I walked by a tattoo shop. Another reason for taking “The Trip,” was my 50th anniversary of joining the Air Force. I hate needles of any kind! But by this time I was way beyond being a happy camper. I went in and walked out with the following on my right shoulder: C-130A, NAM, 69-70. Sandy was really impressed! She knew what kind of shape I was in if I would allow anyone to stick me with needles.

From there I wound up in the Dungeon, which was a small underground bar whose claim to fame is an entire ceiling lined with women’s panties and bras. After all, we were at the edge of the Wild West! People would not leave me alone. My Nam vest

stuck out (along with my Nam hat) like a sore thumb. I can’t remember buying a drink. After that, I can’t remember much of anything, except walking back to the Iron Saloon and finding a nice couch in their outdoor bar and sitting on it and just resting my eyes and taking a little break. At 3 a.m., a nice guy shakes my knee and says “Sir, Sir, we need you to stay awake!” This is where I got stupid and I knew better. Remember I had no place to stay. The beers I thought had pretty much run their course. I had enough Sturgis and had transformed back into the 67-year old guy. So, I hopped on my bike and drove 60 miles south to a travel plaza where I drank coffee, ate a doughnut, and felt like I had been dragged through Sturgis by a spurred horse with a rope tied around my boot. I waited there until it got light.

Next up: Wyoming! I purposely drove across Wyoming on the diagonal because of two-lane roads. What a magnificent state! Nothing but grasslands and beautiful rock formations like Devils Tower. No rest stops there! I pulled over several times on the shoulder. No wind, no bird chirp, no sound whatever! The quietest experience of my lifetime! Just awesome scenes that took my breath away! I came out in far western Wyoming and saw a hand-painted spray painted sign that read CAF. The building was old with flaking whitewash. My kind of place! I walked in and found some of the greatest western art I have ever seen hanging on the walls. It was nice inside. Several locals were there eating lunch. There was only a waitress, a beautiful young woman with a bright smile. I sat at the counter after walking all around to study the amazing art! I ordered a brisket burger and fries, and ice water to drink. My heavy leather Nam coat hung on the chair next to me. The waitress was talkative and her shirt read “This Girl Can Shoot!” I got up to pay my bill. She gave me a big smile and said, “Sir, you don’t owe anything someone paid for your meal.” I was deeply moved! I looked back at her and asked her, who? She told me the person wanted to remain anonymous. So, in my loud voice said, “I don’t know who you are but this means the world to me and thanks so much! You folks are the reason I and every other Nam vet, would do it all over again. You make me proud to be an American and you helped me heal!” I walked out and started up my Harley and let that bike roar to the max, as the earth shook with red, lining each gear. A biker’s thank-you!

Beautiful Utah and Nevada and then California. Crossing the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada mountains was just eye-popping beautiful. Good weather all the way and fresh mountain air! I took my time until the speed limit changed to 80, then I covered ground fast! Every motel, usually—Super 8’s, had kind people and staff. Other visitors stopped me and struck up conversations always ending in a truly genuine, “Thanks much for your service.” What made me really stand up and take notice was how people would look me straight in the eyes, shake my hand firmly, and

show such great respect. This entire trip healed the rest of what bitterness was leftover in me from the LZ Lambeau ride Wayne and I took earlier. That ride was special and healed me 50 percent. This western states ride healed the rest! For years, I flew my Vietnam flag outside my house. Old Glory to me was stained and had black stars, not white. It was a shameful symbol to me and all my brothers on how we were treated after we came home. I lost faith in my country, its people, and I still to this very day scoff at Washington, D.C. and what is termed “our leaders.” I don’t trust any of them any further than I could pick one up and throw him. Which by the way I would love to do! Please tell me what a billionaire or a millionaire has in common with Rich Wangard. The elite of this country are just plain disgusting! Let them eat cake!

Enough! Two days ago for the first time in a very, very long time I went to the store and made a purchase. I bought the best one I could find! I put it together. I drilled holes into the side of my house and made a new mount. Then, I hung up Old Glory—it was a very big deal for me! I retired my Vietnam flag in a place of honor in my garage to watch over my Harley.

“The Trip” healed me with so many nice people, helpful people, healing people, kind people and for me respectful people! I forgave a long time ago, but you cannot change history. However now, once again I feel as much American as anybody else because you healed me America—You made me proud! My social experiment to find out how much this country had healed was a whopping success. Our people will always be the strongest asset to this nation—all colors, all religions, and all cultures. The diversity of our nation unites us. America, thank you from the bottom of my heart! You make me proud. We are the greatest nation on earth.



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## DAVID A. ANDREWS, JR., LEARNED VALUES AWARD

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### Military Uniform: 1961

*By Faith Fables*

*VA Medical Center—Portland, OR*



I had no idea where I was going. I kept walking around downtown, enjoying the clear pleasant, warm day in my pretty flowered sundress. But, intermittently a reminder shot into my head of my parents shouting at me, “So what are you going to do with your life now high school is behind you?”

A cute guy in the military uniform marched past me and I followed him. Like me, he must have been in his late teens. Soon he walked into the recruiting station, and I followed him in. I remember briefly looking at the pictures of uniformed people in the window. I especially liked the Navy women’s parade dress. I just loved that hat! It was so cute, neat, and darling. Little did I know that hat would soon get me into a whole lot of trouble.

So, I found out his name was Joe. I liked him. We talked, and talked, and talked some more. Soon I was on a military bus on my way to Navy Boot Camp. The second day in our barracks we new recruits were instructed to report to the pool with our swimsuits. “Great, a day in the sun,” I thought. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

When we arrived there were two big, tough, muscular, strong-looking women standing, waiting for us at the side of the pool.

They both had on decorated Navy T-shirts. I looked at them and thought, “Those smart, brand new shirts look like they’ve

just been carefully ironed. No wrinkles anywhere. They have no intention of going into the water and getting them wet. That's for sure." There was pride in those shirts, and in them, an undaunting look of unstated superiority.

We changed into our swimsuits and returned. One had her arms folded across her chest. The other had her hands on her boney hips. Both stood straight, legs planted, glaring and examining us.

Then, unexpectedly, one voice bellowed out. "Form a line at the bottom of the stairs." The other woman pointed. "Climb, jump off the high board one by one. Swim to the end, and exit the pool."

"Oh!" I thought and turned to the wall for a second so no one could see my shocked facial expression. Controlled panic. Then, quick, I got to the end, behind the last girl in line. I needed time to figure out a strategy. A survival plan.

The other recruits climbed the stairs and jumped off one by one. I followed up. Then, without enough time to plan, I was alone on the edge of the diving board looking down. I was cold, and I wrapped my arms around my skinny, unprotected body. "Jump," they both shouted up harshly.

"I can't swim!" I shouted back bravely. But, let's face it, the fact that I have a loud voice wasn't going to save me now. They heard me. Silently and slowly they turned to look straight at each other in disbelief, then returning to me. Sternly, and slowly one said, "Why did you enlist in the Navy if you can't swim!?"

"Because I just love the Navy women's cute parade dress hats," I shouted back. "They're so darling. Just push me in, please. Please," I begged, "I'll be OK, really."

Secretly, I knew darn well if I could get one of them onto the diving board to give me a push she'd jump in after me and make sure I didn't drown. Once she dragged me out of the water, I'd pass the test and go on with the Boot Camp.

So I wasn't scared at all. Not at all. I just couldn't jump. And I wasn't going to move from that spot no matter what.

"Please, push me off. Please just push me," I repeated.

One instructor shouted, "We're not allowed to push you in. Just jump."

The other one was less patient and not as kind. You could tell by her voice. She scolded angrily. "Go back to those steps. Now! We're sending you back home."

While she was rambling on with that stuff I could see from the corner of my eye the other one climbing the stairs slowly, one step at a time.

I could see the other girls glaring up at me from the cold cement they were made to sit on to wait for me. There was only one small towel wrapped around their necks. Knees to their chins shivering, they were huddled together. I was sure now I'd never be invited into the friendly clique.

Before I knew it, somehow one of the instructors was standing next to me with her little pinky finger pressing on my shoulder. I don't know if it was the look in her eyes or the pool calling to me that motivated me, but I threw my body into the water like a first-time bungee cord jumper off a bridge. And, yes, I knew yelling here would not be acceptable. But, I could feel all my body parts were flying off in different directions. Then I hit the water.

Of course, she did jump in after me. I knew she would. My head bobbed up and she was there with her pinkie finger still resting on my shoulder. Her beautiful Navy T-shirt was soaked. Her face was, well, not happy. No one in that pool had a happy face, but me. I was smiling. Technically I passed!

"Move your arms," everyone in the pool shouted. "Move your arms." So I did. I did it just like I'd seen people in the movies and real life do it. Somehow, I got to the end of the pool.

"Go up to the pool steps," they shouted. Well, for the life of me, when I looked around, I didn't see any steps to climb to get out of the water.

But, eventually, even that was resolved. Believe it or not, every other problem that I had in Boot Camp was resolved, after I learned how to swim.

Yes, only a few weeks after the pool day I was "mustered" in formation, in uniform with my "parade dress" hat for my graduation. We proudly marched into the ceremony with a military band, cheers and applause, from an adoring crowd which included my parents and friends.

The years went by and I learned many other things as well: how heavy steel-tipped boots are. How to cheat inspection in my patent leather shoes instead of spit shining my issue. How loyal we all could be and how to keep a secret. How to aim my rifle by tipping the nose down. How to carry a duffel bag, a seabag, and a footlocker all at the same time. What hierarchy really means. How to "curse like a sailor," under my breath and out loud! I learned what integrity means. I learned about honor, loyalty, respect, tenacity, bravery and courage.

No, I wouldn't change my military years for anything else in the world during that time in my life.

*"Until we meet again Here's wishing you a Happy Voyage Home."*

*From "Anchors Away."*



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## LARRY CHAMBERS SPIRIT AWARD

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### Man's Nature

*By Milton Evans*  
—Staten Island, NY

The nature of man will never be fully understood. Only God knows what makes us click? Only God knows the minds of people better than they know themselves. There is much life surrounding us. We see the life of creatures everywhere. When we look into the clouds, we can watch the birds fly from one place to another.

We could, if we would, do art, draw what we see. But we can't do it unless we try. If we say, I can't do it, it won't happen. Instead we can practice, and eventually, do well. When you do learn, don't look back by saying to yourself, I could have failed. The nature of people is weak because most people have very little faith in what they are capable of doing. Switch off the negative ideas and replace them with positive ones. It is in our minds, hearts and souls, to do so. Meditate, and tell yourself I can do it, over and over again.

Because of a lack of faith, most of us do not believe in what we can't see. Some people try believing, but they are still bothered by doubts. We know and we understand that we have time zones, daylight here and nighttime there. Smart people have no problem believing that.

Think about the story of a seed. A farmer plants the seed. It must have a place to grow out of harm's way. It is not a question of whether the seed obeyed the farmer, but we know the seed grew because of the will of God. For good growth inside yourself, remember the secret of a seed when you are trying to find out about yourself. We can only plant a seed in the soil, and that seed will have to rot to become what it is in life. We too, were created out of the dust of the earth, to become who we are.

Each time I see myself, I only see a shell, for the real me, is inside, looking out.

### Man's Best Friend

*By Helen Anderson Glass*  
VA Medical Center—Tuscon, AZ

I joined the Navy in 1943. My brother had joined the Navy a year earlier. With both of us gone from home, our parents felt a void in the family, but they took it in stride and did what they always did. They opened their home to those in need, especially those in service to their country.

I was delighted when I received a letter from home informing me in late 1945 that they had welcomed into their home a WWII, decorated Army Air Corps veteran whose parents had died while he was in service. Also his best friend, Scout, a beautiful German shepherd, and a former war dog came with him. It seems he had made friends with the dog's handler while overseas and was made a gift of him when his handler was killed and the dog was wounded.

Recently, while searching for something to help me write a story, I found that letter and pictures of our friend and Scout and it inspired me to write a story about man's best friend to go with the poems I had written about dogs. Domesticated dogs date back to ancient times. The partnership between man and dogs is probably based on man's need for help with hunting and gathering. Dogs continue to be important and revered today. From President Roosevelt's dog, Fala, who became famous during World War II, to Laika the Russian dog in space, to Rin-Tin-Tin rescued from a World War I battlefield to, Toto in the "Wizard of Oz" to "Lady and the Tramp," and TV dogs like Lassie, to the cartoon dogs like Snoopy, and advertising mascots like the Budweiser beer wagon dalmatian, our society holds dogs in great esteem.

However, I think there are dogs more entitled to fame and glory. Military dogs who work in wartime should be recognized and remembered for their service, loyalty, devotion and sacrifice.

Many dogs have distinguished themselves during wartime. Sgt. Stubby was the most decorated American war dog in World War I. Chips was a German shepherd mix who was the most decorated sentry dog in World War II. In Korea, the 26th Infantry scout dog Platoon was cited for meritorious service and support. Sinbad was the famous mascot of the U.S. Coast Guard. Smoky was a well-known Yorkshire terrier who served in the Pacific in World War II. Nemo became famous for saving his handler's life in Vietnam; and Lex, a German shepherd who served in Iraq, was granted early military retirement to be adopted by his deceased handler's parents.

My dad told me about military dogs. He said he had heard many stories about military dogs during World War I. He didn't deal with working dogs, but knew about them, He said they were



being used as messengers, scouts and decoys, to sniff out mines and explosives, as attack dogs, sentries, sled and pack dogs, as well as mascots. There were special casualty dogs. They carried medical supplies strapped to them. They would search out wounded and dying soldiers, so they could medicate themselves. They were loyal and stayed with the men until help came.

My dad served as a private in World War I in the 76th Field Artillery 3rd Division. He fought in many famous battles in France, including Belleau Wood, Chateau Thierry, La Marne and Mont Saint Michel. He was gassed, wounded and suffered all his life from shell shock, now known as PTSD. So when I was growing up I observed what he went through when a car backfired or firecrackers exploded.

I remember one July 4: we were at a picnic in the park near our home. We noticed a man acting harshly toward a German shepherd. He was hitting him, yanking his leash and calling him, "Howard you coward!" My dad finally had enough and went over to the man and yelled at him for his treatment of the dog. My dad asked why he named the dog "Howard the Coward." He said because every noise made him run with his tail between his legs and cower and hide his eyes with his paws. He told my dad it was none of his business and to "back off." Then he kicked the dog. My dad grabbed him and shook his fist in his face. By then a crowd had gathered. My dad cooled down and asked the man if he could buy the dog. The man agreed and named a price. My dad could not afford the cost, so he walked away.

The man left but when he tried to leave in his truck, it wouldn't start. My dad, who was an electrician and a great auto mechanic saw this, went over and said he would repair his truck in exchange for the dog. The man hesitated, but then agreed. My dad asked him where he got the dog. The man told him he had been given the dog as an Army castoff. Later my dad followed up on the information. The dog had been trained by the Army to be a scout. Dad learned from the number on the dog's tags that he had been a hero. He had sniffed out an unexploded bomb and given warning barks and body gestures alerting his handler. Dad was delighted and understood that the dog was probably suffering from shell shock, just like he did. He found out the dog's Army name. It was "Jack."

Many war dogs were donated to the war effort. After the war or when a dog showed combat effects they were considered "undesirable" to return to society and were often euthanized. This provoked many dog lovers so in 2000, President Bill Clinton signed the "Robby's Law" to protect these dogs. They were then reevaluated so the ones who passed could be returned to their "donor" or their handler and integrated back into society. Many proved to be loyal, true friends and a part of the family.

I have a friend in Florida who takes cast-off greyhounds that dog track personnel are inclined to euthanize when the dogs can't run races. She and her family give them love and care; treat them like pets and then find a family that can provide a forever home for the dogs.

In 1998 while volunteering at a Veterans Affairs facility, I met some of the visiting pets. Pet owners would bring their dogs to share with patients, who welcomed them with open minds, arms and hearts. The dogs ranged in size from as big as a pony to tiny enough to fit in the palm of your hand. Then while volunteering in a VAMC office I met a young veteran in a wheelchair with his beautiful German shepherd. He was new to Arizona and he said his dog was not used to the hot sidewalks and streets, so his paws were being treated for burns. I was moved by this and went home that day and made some dog paw booties out of deerskin. I put ties on them so they would fit any size paw. I was so proud when I gave them to the veteran the next time he came into the office. We tried them on the dog and they fit just fine. I knew I had made a friend when he, the dog, smiled at me that day.

As time goes on, I learn about dog organizations that help both animals and people. They include Freedom Service Dogs of America, K9s for Warriors, Paws In Service, Pets for Vets and the list goes on. During 2017, the American Legion Auxiliary Department of Arizona, President Jan Cushing, had as her project, Paws In Service, securing support and donations to help provide companion dogs for wounded veterans.

There are thousands of sayings about dogs that lift our spirits. Charles Schultz, the cartoonist said, "Happiness is a warm puppy." Will Rogers said, "If there aren't any dogs in heaven then send me where they went." Andy Rooney said, "An average dog is a nicer person than an average man." Even though there are sayings we use such as, "The world has gone to the dogs," I don't agree with this. Dogs can teach us a lot about love and loyalty. I like the following better: "Man's best friend," "It's a dog's world," and "Dogs leave paw prints on your heart." I especially like this last statement.

I hope I have written this story in a way that the patients at the VAMC facilities, fellow writers, and those who read *Veterans' Voices* will become interested in finding out more about dogs and their heroic deeds, and be inspired to write their own poems and stories about dogs.

## Ali's Plane

*By Nate H. McClain  
VA Medical Center—Bonham, TX*

The summer of 2005 was a very busy time for the Iraqi Special Police Commandos, based in Baghdad, and their American Army advisers. In addition to equipping the Iraqis, there was training, patrolling, and operations conducted to secure Airport Road. Airport Road was the link between Baghdad International Airport and the Green Zone. Any significant event within the sectors around Airport Road had the potential to affect one of the highest visibility roads in all of Iraq. Chances were good that if a distinguished visitor arrived at the airport and had official business to conduct in the Green Zone, they traveled Airport Road. Security was a huge responsibility and training our Iraqi counterparts was critical in “putting an Iraqi face” to the security of Baghdad.

The Iraqi Ministry of Interior (MOI) had operational control of the Special Police Commandos and often developed orders for the Commandos. When MOI obtained information on a credible threat within the area of Airport Road, the mission fell to the Commandos. The Commandos were the primary drivers at all levels of the mission; they conducted target development, mission execution and detainee processing, with assistance from the peer echelon advisers assigned to them. The advisers were also to liaison between their Iraqi counterparts and “Big Army” units assigned to the area of operations (AO) specifically 6th Squadron, 8th Cavalry, 3rd Infantry Division.

As an advisor, I was focused on the operational side of the tasks. I was the lowest-ranking member of the advisor team, and knew the most Arabic, so most of my time was spent with the *jundis* (soldiers) and the *areefs* (sergeants). An American soldier that knew some Arabic was a bit of a novelty, so the *thabuts* (officers) also sought me out from time to time. I was able to conduct training and operations without heavy reliance on our interpreters (*terps*), but the *terps* were never too far away. This freed the *terps* to work more closely with the other members of my team that didn't know as much, or any, Arabic.

MOI forwarded the information to the Commandos early in the summer of 2005 that an insurgent cell was preparing for operations in and around Airport Road. The Commandos immediately began operations with surveillance activity that led to target development. Iraqi confidential informants were used to identify financiers, bomb makers, gunmen and bomb-emplacers. Once the vital intelligence collection work was completed, the

planning began and was quickly followed by preparations for the mission. We received notification, from MOI's U.S. counterparts that the mission had been approved. The Special Police Commandos would conduct raids around the city of Baghdad to arrest and detain the specified targets. We coordinated with appropriate landowners to keep them informed of all pertinent operational information.

The appointed day of the raid arrived and there was much to be done; equipment checks, rehearsals, loadouts, etc. There was vehicle maintenance, U.S. and Iraqi, which needed to be done; weapons and gear had to be inspected; radio checks and situation reports (*sitreps*); and for the Iraqis – cellphone contact with active surveillance. Commando knowledge had to be checked in order to guarantee that every Iraqi commando knew the plan. In addition to Iraqi partnership, every member of the advisor team had to know the Iraqi plans, our U.S. specific plans, contingency plans and isolated personnel procedures. During all of this critical, failure-is-not-an-option preparation – my stomach growled, and all of the *jundis* around me heard it.

Some of them smiled and snickered. Dennis, one of my team's *terps*, laughed and asked if I was OK.

Without thinking, I grabbed my stomach and over-exaggerated a long-drawn-out, sorrowful, lamentation, “AHNI COOLA JOHAN!” (I am very hungry).

I knew that I had messed up when I saw the Iraqis reaction to my misguided attempt at humor. Their initial looks of concern soon gave way to glancing around and pointing followed by quickly spoken Arabic that I had no hope of understanding. They scrambled in many directions all at once.

I tried to call them back. “Ahni zien, maku mushkulla!” (I am OK, no problem!).

“Now you've done it,” Dennis said, shaking his head.

Our cultural training had been very specific: it is important in Middle Eastern traditions to share food with friends and family. Relationships are more useful to building a strong team than sticking to a strict rank structure. It might be perceived as rude to refuse food offered by the Iraqis. I am sure that is common all-around the world however, in this case specifically, building a relationship with an adviser's counterparts was critical.

I glanced at the Iraqis now furiously digging through their backpacks. One or two called out what they had to eat and the others dismissed them. We didn't have time for this. I was only joking and half-way showing off that I even knew how to say “I am hungry.” The Iraqis would not be dissuaded from what they were doing, trying to find something to offer me.

Just me. I was building rapport with the Commandos and they were reciprocating. I knew that I would have to eat whatever they brought to me—I would have to eat it, even as we were losing daylight. A jundi walked toward me holding a brown paper bag.

“La!” (No) said Abu-Hamet, one of the older jundis. He made a clicking sound with his tongue and teeth and looked disapprovingly at the brown paper bag guy.

The jundi with bag would not be deterred. “My friend,” he said handing me his paper bag. He looked proud of himself.

I accepted the paper bag from him and said “Shukron, shukron jezeelen.” (Thank you, thank you very much).

Wasfi, a senior areef, said “No. Mejnoon.” (He’s crazy). Wasfi glared at the brown paper bag jundi.

This was getting out of control; not only had I allowed the Commandos to lose focus, now there was a chance that brown paper bag jundi would be embarrassed and we would lose even more time until the jundis and areefs could find something they deemed suitable to share with me. I said, “thank you” a few more times and unrolled the top of the brown paper bag. I had to eat what was in the bag, offer some to everyone, and continue to be thankful for whatever kind of food it was.

I looked inside and saw a big white onion. It was one of the biggest onions that I had ever seen. And it was also the only thing inside the bag. Brown paper bag guy had offered me an onion. My face did not show it, but how was I going to eat an onion? That’s when it hit me: an onion was all that he had to eat for the day. Even more than that, he was willing to share it with me. I concentrated hard on what I was doing, and how I was doing it. I continued to say “thank you.”

I unclipped the M4 from my vest and placed it on the hood of my Humvee. I took out a knife from my belt and flattened the brown paper bag on the hood. Onto the flattened paper bag, I placed that big white onion. Very carefully, I cut the onion in half, and half again, until there were portions to offer all-around, oldest guy first.

“Wasfi.”

“Shukron,” Wasfi said.

“Abu-Hamet.”

“Shukron,” Abu-Hamet said.

I offered portions of that onion all the way around the circle. All took a portion, except Dennis, who told me, “No thanks, brother. I am full. That is all you.”

“Yeah, you’re full of something,” I said, smiling.

We ate chunks of that onion while standing around the hood of the Humvee and the tailgate of the Iraqi Police pickup truck, but

I was careful to leave some for later. I returned the remainder to the brown paper bag jundi. I again told him, “Thank you.”

Sitting quietly on the tailgate of the pickup truck, Ali watched everything that was going on. He ate some of the onion and broke a piece off to give to brown paper bag guy.

Wasfi smiled, mumbled something, and playfully smacked bag guy on the back of the head. I was getting ready to clip my M4 back onto my vest when the next idea for a quick laugh hit me.

“Es ma. Islahee mu areedee,” (Listen. I don’t need my weapon) I said while putting my M4 back onto the hood. Everyone looked at me, puzzled.

I leaned in close to Dennis and said, “Ahgaf, Ahrhabee! Arfah eedek!” (Stop, insurgent! Put your hands up!).

I exaggerated breathing out all of that onion breath in Dennis’s face. As soon as he caught a whiff of my breath, he slumped over as if incapacitated. Everyone erupted in laughter and mimicked me, pretending to kill the insurgents with onion breath.

“That’s right brother, you’re going to kill them for sure,” Dennis said laughing and waving his hand to swat away the onion breath. “You almost killed me!”

Ali laughed. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of Miami cigarettes, and offered me one.

Like food, sharing cigarettes was something that I did with the Commandos. I thanked him. I told everyone else what needed to be done and how much time we had left. Ali motioned for Dennis to come over to us.

He talked to Dennis in Arabic and Dennis translated.

“He says that he is happy that we got to eat together today before this important job we have to do tonight. He wants to make something for you so you remember this time when you are back in America.”

I was getting ready to respond that it wasn’t necessary for Ali to do that, but he was already working on it. I didn’t say a word. Instead, I watched him tear the aluminum foil out of the cigarette pack, and carefully roll it into a cone shape. He then carefully tore, folded, tucked, and shaped that empty pack of cigarettes into what was becoming apparent: a plane. I was amazed. I watched transfixed at how he manipulated the pieces and worked them into wings and a stand. He took the aluminum foil cone and stuffed it into the fuselage. Folding pieces of paper into recognizable shapes is impressive enough, but Ali’s undertaking was even more impressive because he had no thumbs.

Ali told me, through Dennis that Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday or Qusay, (maybe both—I didn't ask for a lot of detail) had cut off Ali's thumbs for something that had happened a few months after the First Gulf War. Like the rest of the Commandos, Ali was Shia and had suffered under Sunni domination before 2003.

Joining the Commandos gave Ali a chance to bring justice to his country and help shape Iraq. Hearing Ali's story helped put into perspective what was at stake – Why we were there. Ali's stories, along with all the other stories that the Commandos told me, were pieces of the puzzle that I believe I needed in order to have confidence in what we were doing in Iraq.

Like always, there is more to the story. To finish this story though, I found a place in the Humvee where I could hide the plane and protect it from being crushed. It made it through the raids that night. The plane even survived being shipped home from Iraq. I still have it, sitting on my shelf as a reminder of those days.

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#### PALLAS ATHENE BEST STORY AWARD

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## A Son's Salute to His Dad's Service in World War II

*By Loren Flaugh  
VA Medical Center—Sioux Falls, SD*



An honorable, hard-working farmer, whose reassuring presence I still miss, served his country patriotically in the Army from December 1942 until October 1945. Sadly, Dad was unable to enjoy a full life due to an acute coronary occlusion that suddenly took him away on a sad October day in 1959, just as Iowa's harvest season began.

Dad, five brothers and three sisters were born in the Hartington area of northeast Nebraska. Dad attended Hartington's elementary school and received an eighth-grade education during the 1920s and early 1930s.

During the Depression years, Dad enrolled in the United States Civil Conservation Corps (CCC), Company No. 4722 at Valentine, Neb. Young men from across the Cornhusker State learned many valuable skills while living and working together south of Valentine in a rural area called the Sand Hills. Life was regimented and their comradeship would portend how the future would unfold for many of them a few short years later.

Dad's group spent the long cold winter of 1935 -1936 coping with the weather. During one five-day period, no mail arrived and the only communication was by telephone. At the end of that period, food, gasoline and coal supplies were running low. It became clear that someone had to get to the nearest town and replenish supplies. Through the efforts of all, a 36-hour battle against snow blocked roads was won and they were able to get out. Dad's stint with the CCC ended in September 1937.

Dad migrated to northwest Iowa and was hired out as a farmhand working there until 1942. While there, Dad met Lillian Strangeland who grew up on her family's farm southwest of Primghar, Iowa. As fate would have it, they fell head over heels in love and were married November 8, 1942 at Kearney, Neb, just as World War II was ramping up.

After only one fleeting month of wedded life, Dad voluntarily enlisted in the Army at Fort Crook, Neb., on Dec. 10, 1942. His first duty assignment was to report to Camp Callan Army Recruit Training Center near La Jolla, Calif. Much later, Camp Callan became the fabled PGA Torrey Pines Golf Course, where the Farmers Insurance Open is held every January. More about this storied place that would become near and dear to the hearts of the Flaugh family will be addressed later.

Longing to be near Dad a while longer, my mom boarded a train at Hopsters, Iowa, and journeyed to La Jolla early the next year. While dad went through Army Basic, Mom babysat the children of a Navy doctor who was aboard ship. When Dad graduated from Boot Camp in early April, Mom returned to the Strangeland farm to await Dad's return from the war. However long that would take was anyone's guess. Dad received orders to join C battery 410th Anti-aircraft Artillery Gun Battalion (410th AAA) and to report to Fort Bliss, Texas, where the unit was formed. The 410th was ordered via troop train to cross the country to New Jersey. They boarded a troopship, USS Goethals, at Staten Island, N.Y., on April 28, 1943, bound for an unknown destination. Thirteen days later, the troopship docked in Oran, Algeria, and the 410th was assigned to Gen. George Patton's 7th Army.

An Army AAA gun battalion consisted of four gun batteries A, B, C, D with a separate headquarters battery labeled H. Each gun battery fired four 90 mm heavy artillery guns and a number of lighter 50-caliber guns for enemy aircraft flying at lower altitude.

The 90 mm gun was the primary weapon for shooting down enemy aircraft. The gun could fire a high explosive (HE) shell horizontally to a distance of over 12 miles, or vertically, to a height of over eight miles.

The 410th convoyed at Djedeida, Tunisia, arriving July 5. C Battery fired their 90 mm guns for the first time August 7, when 18 enemy aircraft flew within range to bomb the harbor area of Bizerte. C Battery fired 145 rounds of HE with no results.

August 8, the 410th AAA arrived at Palermo, Sicily. On August 23, an unknown number of enemy planes attacked Palermo. Every gun battery fired at the enemy planes, with C Battery firing 64 rounds of HE with no hits claimed.

With the exception of C Battery, the 410th AAA departed Palermo for positions near Naples, on October 19, 1943, now assigned to the 5th Army Headquarters. C Battery and H Battery traveled from Termini, Sicily, by motor convoy around the toe of southern Italy and along the coast to Naples. C Battery set up their 90 mm guns on what had been the campus of the University of Naples on October 21.

An estimated 30 enemy aircraft attempted to attack the ports of Pozzuoli and Naples in waves on November 1. A, C and D Batteries claimed one plane each in the attack. C Battery fired 601 rounds of HE and 1150 rounds of 50-caliber ammunition.

Again, on November 5, an estimated 30 enemy aircraft attempted to bomb the same two ports. All the batteries in the 410th fired on the raiding German planes. The only claim was from C Battery with one probable shot down.

German bombers attacked in waves of 8, 10 and 15 planes on November 11. The attacking planes were hedgehopping “flying low at 500 feet,” with two unexploded bombs landing near the Headquarters. No hits were observed and no claims were made by the 410th. C battery fired 308 rounds HE.

And, then, on Nov. 26 Thanksgiving Day, at least 30 enemy planes attacked ships in the harbors at Bagnoli and Naples. B Battery claimed one plane, as did C Battery, shot down.

No material damage was incurred but three men in C battery were hit by shrapnel from an exploding bomb and suffered minor injuries.

Dad was one of the men hit by shrapnel and taken to Naples hospital. He was hit in the legs, recovered from his injuries and returned to his unit. Indeed, Dad had something to be thankful for that day.

By early 1944, fewer and fewer enemy air attacks were experienced because German aircraft and aircrew losses had

become unsustainable. German heavy industry couldn't make new aircraft as fast as it once had and training new aircrews was also a problem.

On March 20, 1944, the 410th departed by tank landing ship for the island of Corsica. The battalion landed at Ajaccio and then took a motor convoy to Bastia where they set up a gun defenses for this area near the coast.

On April 23, Bastia was attacked by both enemy aircraft and small German boats. Several rounds from the German naval craft landed in the area and caused some minor damage. It was believed that C and D Batteries of the 410th may have damaged one of the enemy boats because it lagged far behind the others when they hastily departed the area.

The 410th observed a special day on May 11, 1944, when the men injured by shrapnel near Naples were Awarded their Purple Heart medals. Crp. Bernard G. Flaugh and Pfc. Junior Russell were presented their metals by the commanding officer of the 410th.

What would be the last enemy air attack of the war on the 410th happened the next day, May 12, when a flight of 20 to 50 planes attacked the port areas of Poretta and Borgo, Sicily. All gun batteries in the 410th fired on the attacking planes. A Battery claimed two planes and B Battery claimed one.

On October 19, 1944, the 410th received orders to ship out for southern France. The 410th had 586 enlisted men and 29 officers when the battalion boarded the Ville D'Oran en route to France and arrived at Marseille on November 14. Then December 31, 1944, the 410th, as with many Army AAA gun battalions, was disbanded.

Dad became part of the 401 Engineer Maintenance Company on Feb. 10, 1945. Dad and the men of the old 410th first crossed into southwest Germany on March 29, 1945. By May 6, they were at Furstenfeldbruck, Germany, with only days left until the end of the war.

They boarded the SS Santa Maria on August 22, 1945, crossed the Atlantic for the last time and arrived at Camp Myles Standish, Taunton, Mass., on Sept. 1. Dad was separated from military service with an honorable discharge at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., on October 29, 1945. Dad had attained the rank of Army Technician 4th class. Mom and Dad were finally reunited after nearly 35 months of separation.

Dad and Mom lived on a farm two miles south of Primghar throughout 1946. In February of 1947, my grandfather Andrew Stangeland bought a 160-acre farm four miles south of Archer, Iowa. Dad and Mom quickly moved into a two-story wood frame house and started farming. Their daughter, Barbara, was born

about that time. I came along a year later in February of 1948. Beverly and Arlan quickly followed.

Our farm was in a frequent state of transition. A winding creek that hindered farming operations was straightened so that planting and harvesting would be easier. The large grove of trees that boarded the west side of the building site soon began to shrink. Then, to top that off, a new brick, single-story home was built in 1953 for the six members of the Flaugh family. Because Grandpa believed in building a sturdy home, we weathered many summertime storms in the basement of the house.

For recreation, Dad loved to watch and play baseball for the Archer town team. Residents of the small town raised money to buy baseball uniforms for the players. An old paper shows how much money was raised and it also shows where Dad contributed \$4 to the cause. I can recall trips to Sioux City to watch the old Sioux City Soos play baseball against other larger city teams.

Life on a small farm was relatively quiet throughout the middle 1950s. School buses came in the morning and transported us to the elementary school in Archer. Many old family photos show me and my three siblings growing older year after year.

Besides watching and playing baseball, Dad relished two other recreational activities, hunting and fishing. Dad loved to hunt pheasants with his friends on our land and neighboring farms. Perhaps like the challenge of leading an enemy plane in wartime, one must lead a pheasant in flight to bring it down. However, sometimes Grandpa would bellyache about Dad spending too much time hunting and fishing and not enough time farming.

A family vacation we took in early July of 1959 has left me with lasting memories, even 71 years later. Just like the Griswold family vacation to Wally World, the Flaugh family enjoyed a vacation at central Wisconsin's water wonderland, the Wisconsin Dells. Also, on our vacation itinerary was a day or two in Minneapolis and then on to west-central Minnesota's lake region for several days of fishing.

Perhaps my siblings and I were a bit too young to fully grasp that our family was in a state of transition. In six months, my siblings and I would welcome another baby brother or sister. Perhaps, this and other changes are what make our 1959 family vacation so memorable.

Sitting in the back seat and admiring the north country scenery pass by is one memory I still retain. The Wisconsin Dells were known for using old Army DUKW boats, colloquially known as duck boats, which were amphibious craft able to travel on land or water. Riding in them is another lasting memory that I still retain. And, catching my first trophy, a dandy walleye, is another lasting memory.

That summer flew by and soon we were back in school. The changing colors of fall also meant that another harvest season was fast approaching for Dad. I awoke one morning, ate some breakfast and waited for the school bus to stop at the driveway. However, Dad seemed to be having a serious health problem that morning. He was still in bed experiencing a lot of pain and discomfort when we left for school.

When we arrived at home that afternoon, Dad was even sicker. Neighbors were there, some with nursing experience, to help Mom take care of Dad. With Mom now seven months pregnant, she needed the help. Dr. Phillip from Paullina drove the eight miles to the farm to see what was causing Dad's pain and discomfort.

Later that night, after we were in bed, Dad took a turn for the worse. He passed away, leaving everyone in a state of shock. I don't recall learning of his passing until the next morning when we were awakened. Many of Dad's family were present. I never got a chance to hug him one last time, or say goodbye.

Dad's death certificate uses three simple words to explain the cause of his sudden death: acute coronary occlusion. I have a vague recollection of being told that a large blood clot in his leg moved to his heart and it stopped.

Dad's funeral was held in Siloam Lutheran Church in Paullina. To this day, I have strong memories of sitting in a front row pew next to the center aisle and looking behind me at our relatives, Dad's friends and our neighbors. I simply couldn't stop myself from crying. At a mere 11 years of age, I was learning how stark death feels. Dad was buried at Paullina's Prairie View Cemetery.

Dad's sudden death left a gaping hole in our family. I longed for his reassuring presence for several years before I came to terms with our loss. The day after Christmas, we welcomed a new member into the family. Over two months after Dad's passing, my third sister, Loretta was born.

As I grew older, throughout high school and into adulthood, I became aware of many World War II photos that belonged to Dad. Dad is shown in photos taken in North Africa, Sicily, the Naples area and on Corsica. One shows him seated in a Naples area hospital window frame with his legs hanging down while recovering from being wounded.

A couple of old postcards that Dad mailed to Mom were intriguing, especially one mailed on January 1, 1943, from Camp Callan, near San Diego. The postcard shows Army recruits taking rifle target practice at the Camp Callan Rifle Range.

An old Camp Callan postcard interested me even more when I became a fan of the PGA golf tournament broadcast on

network television. I particularly enjoyed the spectacular video championship courses like Torrey Pines, Pebble Beach and the Augusta National Golf Club.

It was while watching the 2001 Buick Invitational that CBS broadcast from Torrey Pines that I became aware that this might be the same place where Dad reported to his first duty station in December 1942. After some searching on the internet, I learned that Camp Callan and Torrey Pines are indeed, one in the same place.

While watching the 2011 Farmers Insurance Open –the PGA had changed sponsors—a profound idea struck me. Why not write Jim Nantz at CBS Sports and propose an idea. The idea was to use the 2012 Farmers Insurance Open as a way to salute all World War II veterans and particularly those veterans who knew Torrey Pines Golf Course as their Army Recruit Training Center at Camp Callan. I mailed that initial letter to Jim Nantz on March 23, 2011.

Nantz wrote me a brief letter on April 15, 2011. Underlining the first three words several times he exclaimed, “A fabulous idea! I admire you so much for helping to bring awareness. I will be keeping up with this. Warmest Respect, Jim Nantz.”

On June 30, Jim Nantz wrote me a longer letter including a suggestion “I admire your spirit and tenacity. I have a great suggestion. Take your idea to the people who run the Torrey Pines tournament. They are the ones who could put your beautiful vision to work. Last year they did connect with a military theme by designating the 14th hole as Military Appreciation Hole.

You are on to something grand. We need them to implement the ideas. I don’t have that authority. Have a great 4th of July! With Admiration, Jim Nance.”

I followed Nantz’s suggestion and emailed the PGA. The PGA wrote back and said it was a great idea and the tournament director would make the suggestion to the CBS producer who was managing their PGA and NFL sports broadcasts. I even received emails from Peter Ripa the Farmers Insurance Open Tournament Director in San Diego, who was very supportive of my suggestion.

About a week or so later on July 8, I received an unexpected letter from Andy Freedman at CBS Sports. Freedman said he was a broadcast producer for Nantz at CBS Sports. We also exchanged phone calls and several emails in the upcoming months.

Freedman wrote, “I received your letter from Jim Nantz. I’m a producer for Jim on golf and football. I love your idea for the 2012 San Diego golf tournament. I will be doing my research when the tournament gets closer. Thanks, Andy Freedman.”



This letter was the first confirmation I had seen that CBS intended to use my suggestion. During the rest of 2011, I became increasingly anxious to see what Andy Freedman would put together for a tribute about the early history of Torrey Pines Golf Course and a salute to World War II veterans. I had an inkling that Freedman’s tribute would air during the final round on the Sunday broadcast when the tournament leaders were on the 14th hole. That had been designated a year earlier as the “Military Appreciation Hole.”

As the time for the January tournament drew nearer, I was beside myself with anticipation. Mom was now 91 years of age and a resident in the Primghar nursing home. She was still reasonably healthy and able to carry on a conversation. I had plans to sit in the Family Room with her at the nursing home and watch the last round of the tournament on TV. However, I knew she wasn’t that interested in watching golf.

I had hoped that the sudden surprise of watching a brief historical report about what she knew as Camp Callan would suddenly arouse her interest. I had hoped to ask her questions about her brief stay in the La Jolla area during 1943 while Dad was still in Army Basic Training. I also wanted to know how much she was able to visit Dad while he was going through training. However, on the day of the golf tournament, she grew tired and fell asleep 30 minutes before Freedman’s tribute aired.

Needless, I was very pleased when CBS took my suggestion and presented the Camp Callan history. It was a really special moment in my life. Maybe Dad watched the salute of the World War II veterans from an easy chair in heaven!

**Author’s Note:** Along with the submission I am also enclosing a reproduction of an old postcard dated Jan. 1, 1943. It pictures the Camp Callan Rifle Range at La Jolla near San Diego, Calif. Dad mailed this postcard to Mom when he began his Army recruit basic training before going to North Africa in April of 1943.



## The Battle of the Toaster

By G.E. Murray  
—Gardner, KS

September 1958, I joined the U. S. Navy. During the first month of boot camp, everybody is assigned to one week of mess duty. (Working in the mess hall) I, being like no other raw recruit, take my job very seriously, if not literally.

For breakfast, on the first day, I'm assigned to the monster, a toaster. It is a huge machine with a rotating metal grid that turns slowly, around and around. I stand there, putting four slices of bread per rack; in just one minute, the toast falls out onto the serving line on the other side, and everybody is happy.

In an hour, the head cook comes to tell me to stop making toast and clean up the area.

I wipe that thing down until it shines like a brand-new dime. I stand back, admiring my work when the cook returns and asks me if the toaster is clean.

"Look for yourself, sir," I say with confidence.

With that said, he pounds a firm fist on the side of the monster and all these crumbs fall out.

"Clean it again," he growls, "and see if you can get it right this time."

The next morning, I was back at the toaster again, feeding the slices of bread into the monster. However, when the call came down to clean up, I commenced pounding on that toaster so hard, it was rocking back and forth, threatening to fall off the serving line. The head cook came running, waving his arms in frustration. "What the hell are you doing?" he bellowed, giving me the evil eye.

I looked at him innocently. "I'm cleaning the toaster . . . sir."

That was the last time I was assigned to the toaster.

## A Veteran's Christmas Cancer Wish

By Mark Walter Benjamin  
VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN

This year, my Christmas wish was to get cancer. This wasn't like most Christmas wishes and might offend those who suffer from or have survived cancer. But, I also suffer. I have chronic depression and chemical dependency problems. Part of effective treatment for these disorders requires strong support from family, friends and church. Yet, such support is mostly limited to those with cancer.

They get cards, letters, emails, texts, phone calls, tweets, Facebook prayers, hot dishes and home visits. Our veterans suffering from mental illness and chemical dependency get nothing.

Maybe it's a stigma or lack of understanding. Whatever, all three illnesses are life-threatening, needing aggressive treatment and caring support. Cancer patients are lovingly embraced, while mental health and chemical dependency patients are awkwardly avoided.

Regarding stigma, some cancer patients might be judged for smoking or chewing tobacco. But that judgment evaporates quickly. Family and friends quietly "tut tut" at first, but soon come around . . . literally. Not for veterans suffering from chemical dependency and depression. The stigma is endless for them.

Then there's ignorance. With depression, people might say, "I had a bad divorce once but got over it. Buck up, man!" For chemical dependency, they blithely blather, "Just say, 'No' Can't you just say, 'No'?"

It might make someone feel better delivering this drivel, but it doesn't help us. We do a pretty good job repeating such deadly stories to ourselves for days, weeks, months and years. Veterans are told they are true, brave and strong. So when we can't "get over it" or "just say, 'No,'" we tell ourselves we must be weak. Many veterans don't seek treatment; some take their lives. Others live in drunken or drugged misery.

So, I wish I had cancer instead, because here's another reality: if you survive surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment, you are in remission. The promised "light at the end of the tunnel" is five years of cancer-free checkups. Once out of that dark tunnel, cancer patients are cheerfully declared cured. Free from fear, they get to move on. Five years and they're off to the next "5K Run for the Cure." The cancer thing is a five-year thing.

For veterans, with chronic depression or chemical dependency, our thing is a life-long thing. Nobody becomes a depression or chemical dependency survivor. Survivor labels are happily

handed to those who have fought and survived their battles. Our battles never end. Our “light at the end of the tunnel” is gently slipping into a peaceful demise or getting smashed by the dependency/depression train. Our battles end only at death.

So our thing never ends. It is always there, patiently waiting for the tiniest trigger to throw us down the rabbit hole once, twice or 23 times more. A veteran friend of mine was sober for 22 years, started drinking again and lost everything—again. He thought his battles were over. They weren’t.

Myself, I was sober three months until I spotted a bar and grill on a sunny summer day. I decided to have myself a burger and cold beer like any other well-adjusted, red-blooded American man. I lounged on the patio enjoying myself with others doing the same—all normal people.

My trigger that day was my childhood desire to be normal. I wasn’t so good at sports, school or making friends. But here I was, years later, a successful attorney supping and drinking with all the rest. I felt normal.

Normal became my friend and companion.

Normal followed me home that day, like a stray dog I had fed. Normal fetched me normal bottles of vodka to hide in my normal closet so that I might enjoy a normal glass of diet Coke and vodka while reading into the normal night. Then it was a larger glass. Then it was early evening with normal, my wife and I relaxing and watching television. Then normal paid me a visit in my home office after I finished writing and we had a nice, normal drink together. Then normal and I drank while I was writing, which was not very good writing but normal claimed was brilliant. Then, normal woke me in the morning and splashed vodka in my coffee to calm my shaking hands so I could put in my contact lenses.

In three short weeks, my relationship with normal grew from a mug of beer together on a sunny summer afternoon to a full quart of vodka a day. Normal and I were thick as thieves.

That is why nobody can ever tell me I am cured. It’s just that simple. It’s just that long. It’s just that hard.

So, cancer? Yeah, it was a pathetic pity-party Christmas wish hoping people would come by offering support. But I shouldn’t fight my battles alone. So, I changed my Christmas wish. *I wished for the strength to continue seeking the support of my brothers and sisters in arms at the VA.* It seems they know a little something about fighting battles.

**Author’s Note:** *We sometimes talk in Group about the lack of understanding and support related to mental health and chemical dependency. Group members wonder if we might be treated differently if we told family and friends we had*

*cancer. Rather than engage in a boo-hoo pity party, this essay argues that we veterans should search out our own family and friends for understanding and support. I think outreach could reduce the 22 veteran suicides per day that nobody discusses.*

## Top Gun

*By Jim Sebero*

*VA Medical Center—Spokane, WA*

Nearly 50 years ago I went to Top Gun, the Navy Fighter Weapons School in Nevada as a naval aviator. People ask me what it was like to go to Top Gun. They want to know if it was like the movie “Top Gun,” the iconic 1986 summer blockbuster classic.

The Navy Fighter Weapons School opened March 3, 1969, at the Naval Air Station, Fallon, Nev. The Air Force opened its Top Gun training school at Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar, Calif., where it is still held today.

The military has always spelled TOPGUN as one word unlike the movie.

Like one of the movie hero’s, my dad’s flight career preceded me. He had flown in the Army Air Corps. He was a navigator on a B-52 during World War II. I wanted a flight career as well.

I had just graduated from Rhinelander High School in Wisconsin in June 1968. On Jan. 30, 1968, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched the Tet Offensive against South Vietnamese and United States targets. The Tet Offensive became a major turning point in the Vietnam War. The war effort needed fighter pilots.

I wanted to be a fighter pilot. At the time, Rhinelander High School had a flight school for seniors. I signed up for the yearlong class along with 16 boys and three girls. I took ground school flight lessons; I needed 40 hours of ground school before I could fly with an instructor. I practiced for hours in a simulator.

Then I flew the Cessna 172 aircraft that had been donated to the high school. It held one pilot and two passengers. I flew 45 hours of flight time with my high school instructor. During high school, I also learned to fly helicopters. Toward the end of my senior year, a designated FAA instructor came to Rhinelander High School to administer the air flight exam in order for me to qualify for my beginning flight license which allowed me to fly alone. The test involved different flight maneuvers and flight navigation.

I passed the test, graduated high school, and enrolled at Notre Dame University to study engineering. At Notre Dame, I continued to fly. I rented a Cessna 310 with an instructor in order

to earn a twin-engine flying license, the next level license. I also enrolled in the Land and Sea program at Notre Dame in order to earn my flying sea license. It was an add-on to my original flying license. With that, I could fly planes that landed on the water, including the de Havilland Beaver.

I stayed at Notre Dame for two years, but I still wanted to become a fighter pilot. My goal was to fly the F-4 Phantom jet, so I applied to the U. S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and was accepted. I enrolled in both the engineering and flight programs at the academy with two years left of college.

At the academy, I started flying the trainer aircraft, Northrop T-38 Talon. Training continued until I could apply for the F-4 program. I was chosen for training. I had to drop the engineering program (which I finished later on my own time while I was in the service). Training was focused on getting into the jet program, and the last six months of the year were spent exclusively with extensive F-4 training. I did not know that the Air Force had selected me for the Top Gun program, and I would not officially know until the last day of college.

I graduated from the academy in June 1972. Literally, the day after graduation, I headed to Topgun, the elite competitive program for combat jet pilots. The training was held at the Naval Air Station Fallon in Nevada.

Just like the movie, I scoped out the competition. I knew who to beat to stay in the program. Who was the best? Who had the top written scores? Who had the best flying? Who had the best mental and physical tests? Who did I want to fly with? Most of the truly successful pilots were quiet; they didn't puff up their chests. Did I want to fly with the overly boastful ones? Would they be dangerous?

Just like the movie, it was intense fighter weapons training and air combat. Forty men from my class were chosen. The competition was intense and 20 washed out in 30 days. It was a challenge every day to be thrown into training with the instructors, and then training with my group of pilots. I had classroom training as well. Then I would spend about five hours a day in the simulator.

The Vietnam War was raging. The military was training and shipping soldiers and airmen out as fast as possible. It was where I wanted to be—it was where I was headed.

It was incredibly competitive every day. Daily competition involved simulator, classroom, and aerial training. Straight flying time, dogfight time, recognition time, night flying, and landing. Scores were posted daily.

To practice landing, “touch and go” and sorties, I flew from Nevada to an aircraft carrier sailing in the Pacific Ocean. At 600 miles an hour, it was a quick 25-minute flight. Boom. My first practice was on a sunny day, calm waters. It's really a challenge to land on a windy day with 20-foot waves at night and low on fuel.

My call sign was Chopper because I had flown helicopters in high school. My navigator's call sign was Green River. He was originally from the Seattle, Wash., area. We had met at the Air Force Academy. We were both chosen for Top Gun and assigned to train together. We stayed together for the entire year.

Unlike the movie, we headed to war. We were sent to Vietnam. We chose to stay together in Vietnam as well. Our training kicked in and it paid off once we landed in country. We were stationed at Marble Mountain, right next to the North Vietnam and South Vietnam border. It was an American Marine built base. About 150-200 soldiers were stationed there. All were there to support the air effort.

Each pilot flew one-day sorties and then had three days off, however if needed air support pilots were always available. My job was to “scrape” a village. Intelligence would find a layout where the Viet Cong were. Then the Air Force or the Army would fly in and clear the foliage with Agent Orange. The infantry would enter the village on foot.

We flew in Vietnam for four years. We were shot down in Vietnam and I headed to the Presidio hospital in San Francisco. I was a mess. My back was broken. A kidney was gone. Part of the liver was destroyed. I was both physically and mentally broken and I spent two years in the hospital recovering. I was medically retired.

My career didn't end like Maverick's, but in 2020, I'll find out how Maverick fared in his career in the sequel “Top Gun: Maverick.” The competition he felt between himself and the other pilots was the same. It really does take a special mindset to succeed in the Top Gun environment.





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## VFW AUXILIARY, DEPT. OF KANSAS AWARD

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### The Clowns Cried Today

*By George H. Arnold  
—Leawood, KS*

The clowns cried today. On July 6, 1944, disaster struck the people of Hartford, Conn., in a way I will never forget. Ringling Bros, and Barnum & Bailey Circus was in town with their Big Top show.

The matinee started that hot Thursday afternoon with the three-ring tent filled with Hartford's citizens, many of them children. Fifteen minutes into the performance, smoke brought the first signs of the impending disaster. Along the east side of the tent, flames ran up the wall and quickly spread to the tent top. The flames arched across the top in the shape of a rainbow, spreading rapidly, due to waterproofing the canvas with the application of paraffin wax and a gasoline mixture.

The first to see and feel the fire's heat were the trapeze performers, who quickly jumped to their safety nets. Laughter that was had turned to screams of panic heard inside and outside the tent. People stampeded toward the small entrance way exits in a frenzy, pushing, shoving and stepping on the bodies of others as they clambered toward safety. At least one of the exits was blocked by circus equipment. Moments later the tent collapsed, trapping those still inside under a blanket of flames.

Circus staff and others outside the tent were the first to start giving aid and fighting the fire. Boy Scouts with their scout knives cut slits in the canvas walls to let people escape. Clowns who had brought smiles and laughter minutes before, now with sad and frightened faces, helped move buckets of water to throw on the fire. The quick action by all involved saved many lives that day but not all. When all was done, 168 men, women and children had lost their lives, while approximately 700 were injured in the worst circus fire the United States had ever experienced.

I should know, I was almost four years old and there with my mother and brother that afternoon and among the more than 6,000 circus goers who experienced the catastrophe. I still remember the sounds, the horrors and the mental anguish caused by that fire 75 years ago this summer. To this day, I have never attended any circus performance.

### The Werewolf

*By Harry Leon McCleary  
VA Medical Center—Washington, D.C.*

Post traumatic stress disorder can be a difficult challenge for those who suffer with it and for their loved ones. This analogy will illustrate the similarities between PTSD and the iconic figure of the werewolf.

A werewolf is a creature that is created after a person is exposed to the bite of another werewolf and subsequently becomes a werewolf. The event or events that serve as the inception of PTSD follow a similar path. Whether or not the traumatic event was intended or unintended, the event occurred and the individual was changed as a result. In other words, they were "bitten."

Arguably the most dangerous and scary part about being a werewolf is that initially the person has no idea he has been transformed. In the movie renditions, werewolves are often baffled upon waking up covered in blood or in the middle of the woods, not knowing how they got there. Similarly, there may be times when a person with PTSD does things that seem to be out of character or out of proportion to the surrounding stimuli. This person may have to constantly apologize for their actions or spend considerable time cleaning up the mess they created when they were out of control. They may even struggle to remember what actually happened.

The young werewolf struggles to control his or her anger and behaviors. This can be a scary place for the werewolf and the people around him. Not knowing how they are going to react in multiple situations causes many werewolves to isolate or chain themselves up in reaction to an inability to trust themselves. This behavior is more often seen when the werewolf has unintentionally hurt someone they care for. Those close to the person with PTSD may also grow to fear the werewolf and chose to distance themselves.

But there is hope. Treatment involves acceptance, control and "learning your moon." Acceptance refers to recognizing that yes the trauma or "bite" did occur, and you were changed as a result. However, this trauma does not have to continue to control your life. "Learning your moon" or moons refers to recognizing the triggers and symptoms of PTSD. There is no cure for being a werewolf just like there is no way to erase the trauma that occurred with PTSD. However, with treatment, one can learn to accept and control the werewolf inside.

# Taps

*By Larry E. Connelly*  
*VA Medical Center—Liberty Lake, WI*

“Day is done, Gone the sun...” From the nearby hill the haunting notes of a warrior’s last song echoed among the thousands of white stone crosses.

The Totem Drive-In opened one hour before dusk. A dozen cars were waiting at the ticket booth. My ‘49 Ford with a pretty blond girl sitting next to me was first in line. Arnold Reed’s ‘53 Lincoln was up against my rear bumper. My girl laughed when she saw Arnold’s two younger brothers in the backseat. Sharon, his girlfriend forever, ignored us when we gave them an ‘O-well’ wave. Senior Night, before the chaperoned all-nighters, was different. We tried to spend it parked in the gravel pit or out by the riverside park.

Once a month Dad would say, “Payday, let’s eat out and go bowling.” Mom would say to me, “Bring your girlfriend.” We all looked forward to family nights together. I was frequently asked to dinner by my girlfriend’s mother and was at most of their summer picnics. Both families knew we planned a future together.

Arnold Reed, the Springs Country, Ohio, Draft Board has found you to be eligible for military service. You are hereby directed to report to the Armed Services Receiving Center in Akon, Ohio, on the fifth of July 1966 at 800 hours.

I felt sad, and actually afraid for my best friend. This would be the first time we would be apart since kindergarten. Arnold said he felt the same way when the notice came for me to report at the same time and the same place. There was no thought of Canada or of claiming some type of religious objection, although I prayed that I might be found not acceptable or 4-F, but I knew that wasn’t likely after four years of high school sports.

Nine young men from Springs County, Ohio, boarded the outbound train as a group, having been shepherded to the station on an Army bus. Tears were shed and shared with hugs and handshakes from relatives and friends for the college dropout and the eight high school classmates. Most of us had gravel pit hangovers that were tempered by the forever memories of the previous night.

We were flown first to Hawaii, refueled on Guam and landed in Vietnam on a different day because of the International Date Line. (I must have missed that lesson in geography!) We all, enlisted and officers alike, wore the same jungle green fatigues. Ten weeks of boot camp and close order drill had prepared us for nothing like the miles of swamp and 10-foot, razor-sharp elephant grass of the Mekong Delta region.

I had no tears left for the others after Arnold was sent home in an aluminum coffin, with a tag that read, “Do not open.” The pictures his mother had taken of us at the train station were still in the drugstore film department.

Arnold is buried below the stone cross with the number 1384 engraved on the top, his short story of life is told on the front. My stone cross has 1385 engraved on it; we are still together and always will be.

Taps is now playing for the young college dropout who lies forever below No. 1451. The haunting song ends: “Soldier rest. Rest in peace. God is nigh.”

## Our Trip to Florida

*By Samuel J. Hall*  
*VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, New Mexico*

My wife and I took a road trip to Florida. I wanted to show her where I spent the youthful years of my life. We drove to the Washington, D.C., area to visit our daughters who lived there. They had just bought a new home, an office building along the Leesburg Turnpike Boulevard in Falls Church, Va. We spent about three days traveling from Albuquerque to D.C. We had planned to take about a month for the road trip. It was during springtime, Easter break to be precise.

We spent a week visiting the D. C. area. The new house and office looked like a very nice investment and home for the ladies. I was surprised to find the D.C. area was no more congested than any other metropolitan area I had visited in these United States. I was truly impressed. We all went to dinner and we visited the U.S. Capitol. We went to dinner and ate at some very nice restaurants. My wife and I attended a service at a Catholic church and we walked around the neighborhood. When it was time to leave, we packed our things and headed south to Florida.

As we drove, my wife asked about the many motorcycles, mostly Harley Davidsons, we saw driving north on the opposite side of the Interstate highway. Then, we reminded ourselves that it was probably the end of spring break and most of the motorcycles were coming from the Daytona Beach area. I was just hoping that the motorcycles traffic would have left the area by the time we arrived there.

We pulled into Saint Augustine, secured a hotel room and went out to dinner. The next day we walked and visited the tourist area for a few hours then drove further south on the way to Key West. We stopped in Daytona Beach to walk on the hard sandy beach. The spring break festivities had closed down there, but we didn’t

stay long. On the way to Key West, we drove past Miami. That place was too congested for me to visit. I liked driving along the many bridges and causeways that took us to Key West. The drive was a long one. We didn't arrive in Key West until almost dark. The hotels were full. We had to beg our way into a hotel room for the night. The hotel we found could only promise us a room for the one night. Although the hotel desk clerk said that if we were there for the next day we could probably stay another night. We were hopeful that would work in our favor.

After securing the room, my wife and I went into town for dinner. We had a good fish dinner. After dinner, we drove back to the hotel. Weather moved in and rain fell through the night. I had to make repairs on the toilet before we went to bed. The running toilet was the reason we were able to get the room for the night. I had agreed to make the repairs in order to secure the room.

The next morning my wife and I went to the buoy that represented the most southern point of the state of Florida and the United States. We then drove down to Beal Street, the main drag in Key West. We parked the car and spent the day walking around the town's tourist area. We took in all the sights. We shopped in the Jimmy Buffet Store, we visited the Hemingway house, and we ate lunch in the Crab Shack.

We went back to the hotel early because of an approaching storm. At the hotel, we rested until dinner time. For dinner, we walked down the road past two hotels to eat dinner at a Cuban restaurant. We asked the waiter if we could have a nice long dinner since the hard rain was coming down. It rained so hard early in the evening that the sky was black with rain. My wife and I agreed to order all kinds of different Cuban foods and share, so we could sample as many different foods as possible. We ordered two entrées each along with a nice dessert each, double dark chocolate cake. We ordered both coffee and cappuccino. My wife and I sat there and enjoyed our meal for two solid hours while the storm roared on. We did enjoy our evening. As the rain slowed a little, we took care of our bill and ran to the next hotel, then on to our hotel. We still had our room, thanks to my toilet repair!

Two days and two nights were enough for our visit to Key West. The next morning, we started for the Everglades. The road back to the Everglades was quite long. We arrived at the park's tourist area and took the boardwalk walking tour. The special tour was created, so tourists could visit and see what the watershed area looked like, and not be in any danger. We enjoyed seeing the alligators in their habitat along with all the beautiful white egrets. Egrets are the most beautiful birds in the wild.

After a couple of hours, we traveled on the old Tamiami Trail to Naples following along the Gulf coast. The Tamiami Trail usually had a couple of alligators crossing the road, something we had to be on the lookout for. It was a long drive. We knew staying in

Naples could be expensive, so we drove on up the coast. It was a beautiful drive. The Gulf coast water on the southern end of Florida is brilliant blue in color.

As we drove up the coast, the traffic was heavy. My wife got on her cellphone looking for a motel where we could stay the night without taking a big chunk out of our wallet. She found a suitable room and we took the next exit off the freeway. Our hotel room was on the third floor.

The next morning after breakfast we drove on up the Gulf coast. We made a stop in Sarasota or Bradenton to visit a botanical garden. I remember the garden because I was informed that I could not touch the plant life. All I did was touch some leaves to see what they felt like. I guess they were not to be handled. I broke the rules! I didn't get the memo!

After the botanical garden, we headed north again. The new Sunshine Skyway Bridge was a beautiful sight to see. As a young man, I was always amazed at the old bridge. The new bridge is beautiful. A large ship had rammed into one of the concrete pylons on the old bridge so it had been replaced. The new bridge was inspiring: a beautiful sight to see.

As we entered the most southern part of Saint Petersburg, I tried to recall what it was like when I roamed around the area as a teenager. The roads were all widened and the area built up. We drove up into Pinellas Park where we were going to be staying. My wife and I stayed with my sister's oldest son and his girlfriend for our week's stay there. We drove around my old haunts, especially the beach roads. Everything had built up so much, nothing looked the same to me. The area looked like a different town from what I remembered. I took my wife to the old John's Pass Drawbridge where I used to fish for sharks as a teenager. We walked the sandy beaches. We visited my family who lived in Pinellas Park, and we visited my parent's graves.

Leaving Pinellas Park we drove north to Tarpon Springs, where people used to dive for natural sponges. Tarpon Springs was originally a Greek town. We stopped off at Crystal River that was known for its clear water. We ended our day at Cedar Keys where we found a woman who would rent us an above ground bungalow for two nights. While in Cedar Keys we ate at a restaurant where I ordered both oyster stew and clam chowder to let my wife taste the difference in the two meals.

After two days and nights, we left Cedar Keys and drove up to Panama City. That town was overflowing with spring break college children. The next morning we drove north to Fort Benning, Ga. We stopped early to avoid a storm that was to arrive that evening. My wife's first husband had been stationed at Fort Benning years earlier. On Sunday, we attended church there. We even stayed an extra day to wait out the storm.

The next day we traveled across Alabama and Mississippi to Interstate 55. The weather was rainy all day. We drove north on to Memphis to Interstate 40. The rain was coming down so hard I could not see the front of our SUV, and could only drive twenty-five miles an hour. It was early afternoon when we drove over the Mississippi River bridge. I was tired of driving in the hard rain, so we found a motel on the Arkansas side of the river and got a room.

After an early evening, we started out first thing the next morning. It was a nicer day of driving. We crossed Arkansas and drove halfway across Oklahoma. We stopped early in the evening in Yukon, Okla.. There is a nice steakhouse in Yukon. We had a delicious dinner there. After being away from home for such a long time we were tired of driving and felt homesick after a month on the road. Oklahoma is a lovely state to drive through. After a great breakfast at the hotel, we started for home. One more day of driving was in store for us. As we left Oklahoma and entered Texas I could feel the air drying out. The atmosphere was starting to feel like home again. I have traveled across the country so often, I even like to stop at the same service stations, if it's a good one. I like the routine of it all. I like the fact that when I am leaving Oklahoma City, I only have a 10-hour drive to home!

When I leave Amarillo, I have a six-hour drive to home!

We finally crossed the New Mexico state line. We stopped in Tucumcuri for fuel. That was my last fill-up until we reached Albuquerque and home. The dry New Mexico air filled our lungs as we crossed the state. We were back home again. As we drove down the western side of the Sandia Mountains, we entered the city of Albuquerque. I pulled off onto exit 164 and stopped in the Phillips 66 gas station to fill my tank with the last fuel we needed to top off the tank. A couple of more miles down the road, we pulled into our driveway and were home at last. Staying away from home for 30 days was a real hoot. We saw a lot of people and we visited a lot of states. We did see a good part of the state of Florida. We both visited family on our travels. Our trip to Florida was great!

## A Soldier's Christmas Story

*By Shon Pernice  
—Moberly, MO*

It was November 2007 and I signed up for forward operating base (FOB) Grizzly's troop medical clinic (TMC) for holiday care package requests. I found several websites that were offering assistance. It was the first deployment for most of my medical team due to the fact that we were a National Guard company that had been activated.

Depression, homesickness and separation anxiety were spreading like a virus. We were limited on comfort items that we could purchase due to being a small FOB in a combat zone. To add to our misery, it was the start of the rainy season in Iraq. Precipitation turned the soft, powdery dirt into a thick pasty mud that caked onto everything you possessed. What little glimmer of joy you had left was eliminated when dealing with the Mesopotamian mud.

American citizens answered the call and care packages started to arrive. One congregation sent a mega size container of pistachios that was a big hit. All of the fruit snacks, socks, toiletries, candies, granola bars, trail mix, feminine products, body wash and beef jerky were greatly appreciated and boosted morale amongst the medics. Chewing gum was a cherished item due to not being able to brush our teeth when outside the wire. We had accumulated so many treats that we set up a snack bowl in the small waiting area of the TMC. Troops knew to stop by after a mission to get a handful of candy.

I can't neglect to mention the massive amount of Girl Scout cookies. We received thin mints, peanut butter sandwiches and lemon cookies, just to name a few. It had been years since the majority of us had tasted those iconic treats, but when we did—a flood of homegrown memories was resurrected. We reminisced about the door-to-door sales with young girls pulling a wagon full of cookies. One of the medics had been a Girl Scout and she shared her stories with us. If we could have built a campfire, and not been mortared, we would have been back home in our minds.

A Texas church really stood out for its generosity. As I was sorting the items into seven different stacks for each of my medics, I came to a major surprise: a green Xbox, two controllers and games! I pulled out more items and then discovered a PlayStation 2 Slim, two wireless controllers, memory cards and games. I could not fathom what was in front of me. It was proof the people at home cared about us. They put forth time, money and effort to get these gifts to us. What kind of child would give his or her gaming system to strangers? But now I had a burden; I needed to keep this secret hidden until I could spring it on my medical team when they were all together. As I soaked all of this in, I tried to think tactically: how to deliver a shock and awesome Christmas campaign.

A week before Christmas, I scheduled a Sunday mandatory meeting along with weapons cleaning. I played my part as the stoic NCOIC with the "Maintain your situational awareness," "Keep your head on a swivel" and "Complacency kills" speech. As I was getting the "Yes, we know Sarge" nods, I sprung it on them. I brought a large pile of goodies to each medic. Then, the gaming systems. You would have thought I had brought out the hope diamond for these warriors to view. Their expressions went from

confusion, disbelief, cautiously optimistic, to a HOOAH! I felt like I was at home watching my family open gifts on Christmas day. In all actuality—I was.

I sent out several letters of appreciation to the churches, organizations and individuals who had supported us that Christmas. The TMC major and I signed the certificates. The gifts boosted the medical team's morale that holiday and, it contributed to our successful mission of saving and preserving life. It gave us hope and normalcy in an unfriendly environment. My gratitude for those donations will last a lifetime.

Thank you America!

*Writing Aide/Typist: James R. Bloom*

## **Martian Response to U.S. Invasion Threat**

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

"We absolutely will not use military force against the planet Earth," the emperor of Mars and head of the council for highest community laws, stated in good faith for the good of the planet.

"The parliament voted unanimously and we all agreed on the same final conclusion not to invade and destroy planet Earth. It would be futile. To even try to use violence on such a planet at this time, would go against our code of honor. Besides what would be the point of launching such an attack? The Earth is hundreds of light-years away from our planet and earthlings don't even have the capability to reach us with the obsolete and fragile equipment they call a rocket. No, the conclusion to strike Earth is denied. This matter is closed! Now, let's move onto other pressing matters," commented the emperor of the red planet, in his demanding tone of voice.

"Wait, I have not finished with my say on this matter and according to the code of laws I have the right to disagree and put my point of view across," demanded Commander Adore, who was in charge of all military forces on the red planet.

"Very well, the council recognizes Commander Adore to step into the speech box so he can express his point of view before we move on. This is according to our new code of bylaws, giving others the right to speak! The floor is now yours commander," replied the emperor in an annoyed sounding voice.

"Emperor you are wise in culture and spirit but are you forgetting how vulnerable of the red planet we were against the devastating enemy forces? We thought our planet was invincible and no

other planet could conquer us and wouldn't even dare to try with our defenses and capabilities. Yet, they nearly annihilated us because we chose to ignore their secretive advances. How can any of us forget any of the ruthlessness of their attack against our planet? Surely one can't put a blind eye to their killing of defenseless women and children, or anything that moved for that matter. You say it would be futile to attack the earthlings using our military forces at this time. To even try such an attack for no real reason would not be wise. It would give them even more reason to up their space exploration, once they have proof that life does exist beyond their planet. Yes, maybe we could become allies with these humans in time, but are you forgetting how we tried that with other enemies of our beloved planet. What I'm totally against is how ruthless and barbaric they really are, even toward their own kind. You must admit that we have conquered all diseases that plagued our planet and conquered them by going underground. Here we have built a beautiful city without any more invisible fears or for that matter any other forces in the universe. I do agree with you on one point. Who knows maybe in many light years we could become comrades with Earth, when they learn to live peacefully among themselves.

"However not at this time! These humans are just too ruthless and must conquer their barbarian ways toward one another. They would sooner inflict pain on someone who is helpless than lend them a helping hand, as we would do. Who knows how they would feel toward us because we look different from what they do? No gentleman! At this time, we cannot allow these humans to enter our world even though it is getting closer for them to come here.

"I realize the force field that protects planet Earth cannot be penetrated easily, but it can be done. If you will give me permission to pursue this quest, I will find a way to conquer and destroy the planet before they do that to us. Our best defense is to stop these earthlings from setting up a colony on our surface.

"Be aware. They would destroy us simply because we are different. Because they discovered small spots of what they think could be moisture on the surface of our planet, they think there could be life of some sort. That is why they want to come here. They will put anything they find in test tubes to study and see how it ticks. My last point is this gentleman: they are already playing Star Wars with their toy weapons in make-believe games. What would they do with the real thing?

"No, we must stop them now! Thank you for listening.

"Thank you Commodore Adore, for putting your concerns to the council," replied the emperor. "Although duly noted our scouts tell us the earthlings are preparing to launch what they call a rocket which is still an obsolete mechanism of a machine. But never the less they will try to reach Mars with people aboard, and not just

robots, sometime in the near future to probably start a human colony of their own on the surface of our red planet, as they call it. We will be prepared for this intrusion by not tipping our hand and watching their exploration actions. Then, if we deem their interest is not a peaceful one, but rather to build weapons to destroy others, only then will we take defensive action against these earthlings.

“Thereby, all our people will be under strict orders not to tip our hand that we have gone underground to live in peace. For now, the earthlings know that it was possible at one time for our planet to sustain life and we will keep it that way.”

The young warrior in charge of the military forces spoke up and out of turn. “My military is ready to mount a strike and we would have the element of surprise. Just say the word and I will lead our Army to victory,” demanded Commander Adore.

He had risen from a corporal to a four-star general overnight. As a corporal, he had proven to be very capable of commanding the battle units to defeat the invading enemy against all odds. That alien force had found its way to the planet Mars through a black hole.

“As you recall, their scouts infiltrated our cities unsuspecting to us by blending in with the people, finding our weak points and capitalizing on them. They had no problem gathering the information needed for the enemy to launch an invasion and almost succeeded in taking our planet,” the Commodore said.

The Mars military leaders were the first to be killed by the surprise attack. With Cpl. Adore’s courageous leadership and without regard for his own life he led the Mars Army to victory and was awarded the prestigious Medal of Honor. At the same time, he was put in complete charge of all the military forces. His proven leadership stopped the enemy from destroying the planet. In fact, since then he had made many changes in the planet’s defenses, so this kind of surprise attack would never happen again.

“The council’s word has spoken, we all agreed the planet Earth is no threat to us at this time. We will not use force against planet Earth at this time. Do I make myself clear commander?” the emperor repeated.

“Quite clear emperor; I will not use any force against the planet called Earth. You have my word, but just for the record I think the council is making a foolish mistake.”

Then, Commander Adore left the parliament in disgust and didn’t look back to see if the council was convinced that he meant it. Although he had promised not to use force, he had something in mind. It could cause him a court-martial and prison time if found out. The old fools didn’t realize he was doing this to save

his world. At least it would buy us more time for the council to realize just how much of a threat these earthlings were.

Adore waited until the timing was just right and darkness took over, with everyone asleep. He made his move and launched his secret balloon weapon that he alone had put together for such a time as this. There, now it’s just a matter of time until it does what it was meant to do, he thought to himself. He told no one of his intentions about his project weapon and what was about to happen to planet Earth.

“The weather has taken a turn for the worse and will make landfall after all.”

“The fair will be busiest with people all in harm’s way if the gunman carries out his threat.”

“We had two back to back earthquakes in the same region in the bible counties, just miles apart from one another. At first count, there are hundreds of dead and many more injured.”

“An unexpected volcanic eruption has hit both Hawaii and Mexico causing severe damage and the loss of many lives.”

“This just in: there is a new plague that is threatening to go over the entire world and with no remedy to stop it as of yet. A very strange phenomenon is happening; wild as well as domestic animals are dying at an alarming rate and mad cow disease is still running rampant.”

“If rain doesn’t come soon, we will be in the worse drought ever in the history of the globe. Scientists are still saying global warming is the cause of all the problems.”

“There are at least six new wars breaking out in many foreign countries. Here in America, we are experiencing a large number of protests over many issues, the principle one relating to reestablishing the draft.”

What in the world, the people and the networks ask!

“There, that will hold them at bay and give them something else to think about, besides invading the planet Mars,” Commander Adore thought to himself. “And no, I didn’t use any force on the planet either. I kept my word to the emperor and the council.”

Is this scenario possible? Could this really have happened? We say there could have been life on Mars and now it is a race to heaven to get there, regardless of what it means to conquer the red planet. Is our planet Earth under surveillance? Just take a moment to think about what might cause so many natural disasters and unending wars. Could another planet impact us? Does a balloon exist that could cause chaos like this?

## I Remember Staff Sgt. Richerson

*By Kimberly Green  
—Fort Smith, AR*

I remember Staff Sgt. Richerson. I wonder if any other of his military friends still think about him? In the summer of 1993, my husband, an active-duty soldier, was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. He was a military policeman.

We moved on post into military family housing. The housing unit next to us was vacant at the time and I remember praying for good neighbors.

A few months later, a family moved into the unit next to us. Ronald and Teresa Richerson had two little boys. The mom and both boys had red hair. Everybody called the dad, Rich. Richerson was also a military policeman, although he was in another MP company than my husband's.

They were a great couple. They were also a very religious couple and it showed. When my husband deployed to Panama, Richerson always made sure we were okay and checked to see if we needed anything. I recall he even mowed our lawn one time. My husband came back from his deployment and all was well until Richerson's MP Company was notified it was to deploy to Somalia.

Somalia! Of all places but he was really accepting and so was his wife. In fact, Richerson made note that he would be spreading God's word while he was deployed. I remember Richerson's wife redecorating their bedroom while he was gone and she was so excited for him to come home.

On Aug. 7, 1993, Richerson called his wife asking her to pray for him and his soldiers as he was to provide a reconnaissance mission for his replacements the next day in Mogadishu.

Staff Sgt. Richerson and three other MPs, who were from Fort Riley, Kan., lost their lives, on Aug. 8, 1993, when the Humvee they were riding in ran over an IUD. Staff Sgt. Richerson was providing an orientation reconnaissance for his replacements and was one day away from rotating out of Mogadishu.

His wife was notified the next morning when at 0600 hours the post commander and the post chaplain drove up along with an escort of MPs.

To this day, I can hear Teresa Richardson's agonizing screams and sobs as she was told the horrific news of her husband's death.

I know for a fact that Staff Sgt. Richerson's soul resides in heaven. He was a good person, an unselfish, dutiful soldier who served his Lord.

Yes, I'll always remember Staff Sgt. Rich Richerson.

## Have You Ever Been Really Scared?

*By Ronald Mosbaugh  
VA Medical Center—Mt. Vernon, MO*

Have you ever been really scared?

I've got a war in my mind I would like to tell you about it. In my thoughts, it's hard to separate history from the present. My history goes back 50 years, but in my way of thinking, time is irrelevant. The trauma I experienced in Vietnam is as clear to me today as it was in 1966. I have written many stories of my time in Vietnam. Some of these stories were hard to write, many brought on uncontrollable tears, but in the end it was a healing mechanism. I remember reading a quote years ago, "Face your fear, accept your war, it is what it is." I witnessed killing daily. The Marines were good at it. They were told that it's natural to kill. Then, how come young boys have to go into training to learn how?

One of the stories I wrote about was "Battlefield Emotions." It is amazing how many emotions are brought to surface during one battle. Emotions are hard to handle. They just happen. This story is going to be one of those stories that is hard for me to write. It's about fear, the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind. This emotion can literally kill a person. There is perhaps nothing so bad and as dangerous in life as fear.

I am talking about fear you experience when your very life is in danger such as being in battle during war. There is fear and then there is real fear. There is a difference. I don't mean frightened by seeing a scary movie, hearing a scary story around a campfire or walking through a spook house.

During my 13-month tour in Vietnam, I constantly felt fear. Every day we ran scared. That's the only way we stayed ahead. Killing was the name of the game. However, war is much more than killing the enemy. There is the human factor. People's perception of war is much different from reality. Movies and books tend to glorify war, but there is nothing glorious about it. It is not a place where you want to go.

Today, my mind is always flashing back to things that happened in Vietnam, and most of them are scenes in which fear played a big factor. In one such nightmare we are on patrol south of DaNang and our situation goes from bad to worse. We walk into a well-planned trap by the Viet Cong. They are waiting for us, and chaos is everywhere. We are all fighting for our lives. I am constantly looking for wounded Marines and watching for the enemy. They too, are everywhere. While I'm treating a Marine for a gut wound, I look up and see a Viet Cong looking at me. He is about 20 feet from me with a rifle in his hand. The shock is so great that the boy I was helping dies of fright and fear. At this



moment the world around me seems to be suspended in time. The noise of the battle ceases and everything is at a standstill. I am in a twilight zone where it is hard for me to digest the events taking place.

The Viet Cong is holding his rifle in one hand, the barrel pointing slightly downward. My hands are busy treating the Marine. My .45-caliber pistol is in my holster, and my rifle is lying on the ground next to me. I have no doubt that the VC is contemplating whether to kill me or move on. He's about my age with black shorts, a black shirt and sandals. His hair is dark black, thick and unkempt. The dark eyes stare at me with a haunting gaze. It's as if he is looking through me.

During my previous time in Vietnam, I was scared but not to the extent of this moment. My life is at his discretion. All he has to do is tilt the rifle up and fire. So many things are going through my mind. Is this the last day of my life? Will I ever see my family again? What will happen to the Marine I am treating and the rest of our casualties? These are all split-second thoughts. There is much more to this story but I wanted you to know of my fear at that moment.

The fear of dying is beyond description. It is a finality. Life as we know it has come to a close. However, I have always taken comfort from the words of our apostle Paul, when he said "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Being a Christian, and saved at a very young age, helped pave my path through Vietnam. I can't tell you how many times I could have been killed but was saved through his grace.

During my tour I treated over 200 Marines in battle, and many died while I was treating them. You never forget the look of fear on the face of a Marine who is about to die, the pitch of his voice, and the content of his language.

Some would say: please write to my mom or family, or my

girlfriend, or whoever and tell them I love them. These were heartfelt requests, and I am sorry to say I never carried out their requests. To this day, I regret that decision; they deserved more than that. These were 18 and 19-year-old children, just out of high school; we were youngsters forced to grow up overnight.

We were on a two-day search and destroy mission just south of Da Nang, and we had intelligence that several Viet Cong soldiers were in our area. The day before we had a short skirmish without any casualties. It was a long night: we slept under the stars in our sleeping bags. We slept with our boots, flak jacket, and helmet and weapons lying next to us. We had claymores positioned around our perimeter, and security by the Marines in two-hour intervals. The night was extremely dark as the clouds were hiding the light from the moon. A couple of times we used illumination to light the area. It was as bright as a football field under the lights. If the enemy was close by we could see them. A short time later the Viet Cong started banging on their gongs sticks. The sound was frightening. They did this for two reasons: to send messages and for harassment and psychological fear. Their plan worked. I was scared to death.

The next morning we were on patrol once again. Every now and then we received a single sniper round but no contact was made. All of a sudden we heard several weapons exploding, and then I heard that all too familiar cry, "Corpsman up!" My fear spiked once again. When I got close to the wounded Marine's position he was about 30 yards from us in a rice paddy. Even though he was in open space, I was forced to run to his aid and treat the wound. Once again, I was experiencing fear that was almost uncontrollable. I was perspiring profusely and my nerves were a wreck. Deep inside I wanted to turn around and run from the battle. It was a fight or flight response. It's not easy to enter the lion's den.

I stepped off the dike into the water and started running as low as I could toward the Marine. It was a long run through the rice paddy water and mud, which slowed me down. My adrenaline was running so fast that I was worn-out within the first few steps. I could hear bullets whizzing by me, and I don't mind saying I felt fear. When I got to the Marine, I positioned myself on the backside of where the Viet Cong was shooting from. The Marine was in a lot of pain and losing blood. Gunfire exploded in quick bursts, and the high pitched sound of bullets flying through the air preceded the sound of muffled bullets landing in the water of the rice paddy. Cries of the injured Marine pierced the battle sounds, and officers were yelling out commands in the confusion.

I immediately applied a battle dressing over the wound and started dragging him to the dike. I was crawling in the mud pulling him a small distance at a time, and the Marines were giving me fire support. Bullets were splashing near us, and then

it happened. The Marine received another bullet. His name is written on the Vietnam Wall.

Once again, I feared for my life. Do I get up and run or do I finish my job? I knew what the answer was before the thought occurred to me. The Marines have a saying: never leave a soldier behind. I grabbed the Marine by his shirt collar and flak jacket and drug him to the dike. It seemed like it took me forever to drag him to the dike. When I got close the Marines grabbed me and the dead Marine and pulled us to safety. I was exhausted and trembling so much I had trouble writing on the casualty card.

This is the type of fear I am talking about. My life was spared yet another day, but I could have been that Marine next to me. I have asked the question many times “Why not me Lord?”

I was put in harm’s way many times during my tour. Most of the Marines who were wounded or killed were hit while in the rice paddies. We had no cover there and were silhouettes for the Viet Cong shooting gallery.

Most front line grunts have experienced this kind of fear. We all knew we were expendable. It was an inevitable fact. Each day we lived was a day closer to rotating back to the world. Each day we fought the enemy we did so not to win the war, but to stay alive. It was a fight for survival.

At the beginning of this story, I mentioned that I have lived Vietnam over and over for 50 years. For the past 20 years, I have attended the Veterans Affairs mental health program for PTSD. Many of the warriors in our sessions are still mentally in Vietnam. Their war is not over. We all suffer from flashbacks, nightmares, depression, anxiety attacks and the list goes on. Many nights I have woken up in a cold sweat from a violent nightmare I have just experienced once again. It’s another nightmare of fear.

## For My Brothers-in-Arms

*By Wallace D. McGregor  
VA Medical Center—Boston, MA*

This is for my brothers-in-arms who have answered the call—met hell head-on and now deal with the demons that remain—and even more for those who were overpowered by those demons. Godspeed.

I was tired of unloading groceries from the van and decided to take a break. I sat on the back of the vehicle facing out of the garage. I slumped down allowing my muscles to droop and relax. My senses suddenly increased and I began to feel changes in the wind as it blew across my skin with varied velocity. My

eyes noted the changing sky as the sun fell behind the horizon. My ears sensed the rustling of the leaves as the breeze moved them back and forth with the changing current. With all of this working, I relaxed even more, concentrating on my senses.

I had an immense feeling of calm as my demons vanished into the night air. A warm fuzzy filled my body, mind and soul as peace descended upon me. This was the release I needed and yearned for.

I realized that only those who have faced the devil could understand this. If only the sense of well-being would remain, but it is elusive. Something will release the demons, again and again, I will long for the serenity that has given me this moment of relief. If only someone had warned me of the ash that remains when the fire of conflict burns out. The charcoal of evil wanders about, haunts our mind and disrupts any hope of peace and love. Those who have not seen the fireflies approaching at blinding speeds or smelled the odor of burning cordite disrupting one’s olfactory organs, they lack the ability to comprehend the creation, the cause of these demons that haunt us. They also lack the realization that the demons cannot be ignored nor forgotten. They live in our brain cells as if they were an integral part of them. Only occasionally do we manage moments without them, and these few instances are what we live for so we can continue.

Forgive us if we don’t seem there, for we are chasing the demons which have been aroused and invade our mental territory. Sympathize with us for even though our minds are not with you our hearts are and we care. Love is still within us, even as we mourn those we left behind. We are truly the victims. We beg your forgiveness and tolerance but we are not at fault.

## Every Day Is Veterans Day

*By Daniel Paicopulos  
—San Diego, CA*

Being a part of the community of veterans, especially the Veterans of Foreign Wars, is both an honor and a duty, a sacred obligation to past, current and future generations of our country’s warriors, and protectors. I do not take this association lightly.

Veterans’ missions did not end with their active military service. They all remain steadfast in their comradeship with one another, even while at home, awaiting further orders. Many of them have dealt with and continue to deal with illness and injury which changed them and their place in the world. For some, the pain has not ended. For others, as many as 20 each day, the agony was too great to continue in their current bodies, in their current life.



Now, those of us who have found ways to live in peace, in the Spirit's hands, must be a shining example, a lamp of hope, a light at the end of the tunnel. We all know what war costs, whether we were in battle or not. We all know that memories linger and, unless we continue with courage, find a way to change our thinking about the past, the pain will persist. The nightmares will continue. The burden which our friends and families must share will grow.

We joined the military for different reasons, some were drafted, and many volunteered. After boot camp, however, we all learned that we had become part of a new family, one bigger than that of our previous, solitary lives. We had become larger than before. We mattered, and others depended upon us. It is no different now, even for those of us who long ago qualified for our AARP cards. I have, personally, lived with pain and turmoil, found some answers, still seek others. I do not, however, regret even one day of living with the consequences. Not anymore.

In my middle years, regret, remorse, shame and anger ruled the day. Now, the fog has lifted. While some of the pain remains, I have no confusion about the special gifts which military service afforded me. Whether I like it or not, I am now duty-bound to ensure that all veterans are appreciated, all wounded heroes are cared for and all invisible injuries are brought into the light of day, so that treatment can be provided. There is a value that I take from camaraderie with my brothers and sisters, and it does not have a number. It is incalculable. I hope to plant the seeds of appreciation, honor, encouragement and sustenance for the rest of my life. It's a lot to do, so I'd best get on with it. I know that I am not alone in these goals. Many institutions, associations and individuals are doing so much more than I will ever accomplish, yet even though I am like a single raindrop in an ocean, I will continue to find the drive to be of help. My brothers and sisters, the veterans, deserve nothing less.

**Authors' Note:** *I wrote this essay after spending a day at a VA hospital, seeing young vets with titanium limbs and older vets with shaking limbs.*

## Doughnuts

*By Christopher G. Bremicker  
VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN*

I saw a dietitian at the Veterans Administration who was horrified when I told her about the doughnuts our high-rise got for coffee klatch. They were huge, with chocolate pudding oozing out of them, coated with sugar or covered with red, white and blue sprinkles. The shop down the street donated its leftovers to us.

"Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine" devoted an entire issue to doughnut shops in the Twin Cities. A photograph of doughnuts was on its cover. The shop where our doughnuts came from was one of the best in town.

These were gourmet doughnuts. The shop's signature doughnuts were long johns, layered with white frosting, with a strip of bacon down the middle. Bear Paws dripped sugar. Cake doughnuts were coated with shredded coconut or dotted with red, orange and blue M&Ms.

Every Friday night, one of our residents drove to the shop and brought back about 50 doughnuts. "We have doughnuts!" he would announce, as he put them in the closet of the community room. Some days, the shop was sold out and we got none. The lady in charge of the coffee klatch laid them out on a table in the community room the next morning.

The community room looked institutional, with its linoleum floor and furniture like that of a hotel lobby. The doughnuts were on trays next to a stack of white napkins. They were arrayed like wedding cakes and cheered the residents, many of whom thought our high-rise was only one step above a psych ward.

Our coffee klatch was the best! We admitted everyone. People who did not ordinarily mix joined in. I faulted people who complained there was never anyone to talk to at the high-rise. We came from all walks of life and thought it was a pleasure to get to know each other.

My dietitian and I talked about how to handle the coffee klatch. I saw her once a month. Each time I saw her, she asked me how the coffee klatch went. Under her guidance, I was svelte and no longer diabetic. I never celebrated well. I never ate a vegetable plate, instead of a slice of pizza. I never ate one slice of pizza, instead of three. If it was a party, I ate too much.

I told myself to have one piece of toast at the coffee klatch. The lady in charge made toast to order and spread peanut butter and jam onto cinnamon, raisin or caraway bread. Yet, I wanted doughnuts when they came out, and I saw them with their white frosting, I could not control myself.

# Visual Arts Initiative



**Lou Eisenbrandt:** *By Dawn's Early Light*  
—Overland Park, KS



**Ron Barker:** *Landscape*  
—Boise, ID

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

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

We feel that this promotion complements VVWP's writing as therapy mission and offers the veteran another means of healing through artistic expression. Please continue to send us your artwork as well as your writing. For the near future we will continue to publish the artwork in color, thanks to Dr. Rubin's generosity.

— *The Editors*



**Penny Lee Deere:** *The Smell of Horses*  
—Albany, NY



**Kenneth Andersen:** *War Torn*  
—West Fargo, ND



**Shawn Ripley:** *Black Hawk Flag*  
VA Medical Center—Macon, GA



**Daniel Strange:** *Still Life*  
VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX



**Zeke Crozier:** *Semper Fi*  
—Overland Park, KS



**Daniel Strange:** *Patrol Boat in Vietnam*  
VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX



**Doug Berg:** *Angel's Stairway to Heaven*  
—St. Louis, MO



**Jonathan Craig:** *Howl*  
—Portland, OR



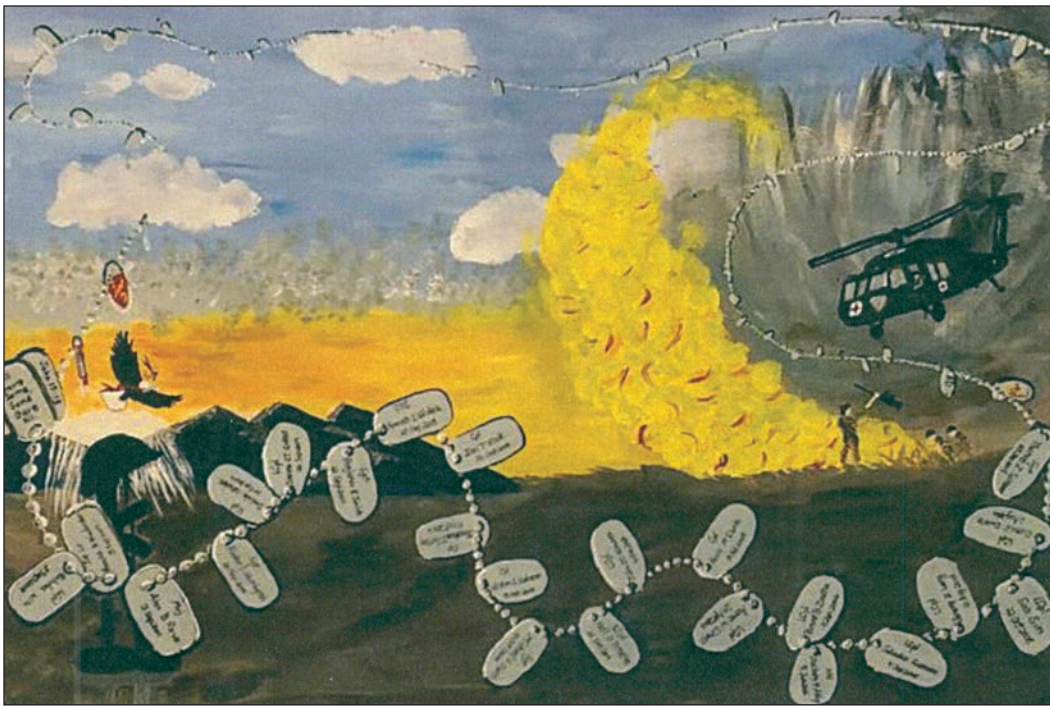
**Daniel Strange:** *Face of a Soldier*  
VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX



**Charles Darby:** *Our Heroes*  
—Moberly, MO



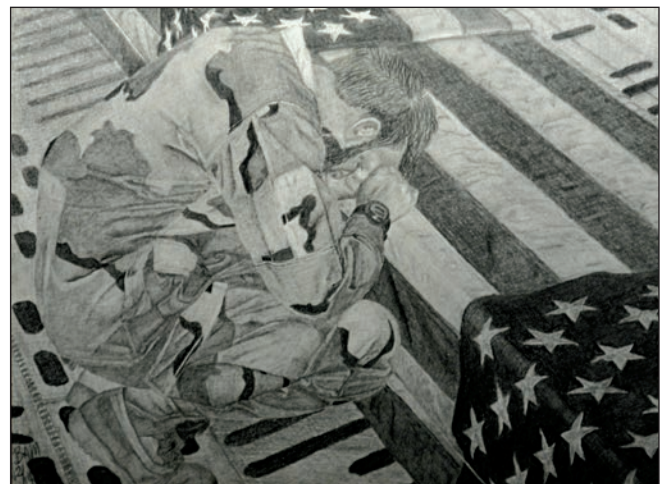
**Michelle Pond:** *Red Tiger Lily*  
—Overland Park, KS



**Rickey Bennett:** *Memorial to Those KIA from 1st Battalion, 7th Marines*  
VA Medical Center—Sheridan, WY



**Ty Andrews:** *True Grit*  
VA Medical Center—Lincoln, NE



**Brian Moore:** *Forever Vigilant*  
VA Medical Center—Leavenworth, KS



**Bruce McClain:** *Against Her Will*  
—Blue Springs, MO



I grabbed one and ate it without guilt. One doughnut would not hurt me, I reasoned. Then I saw a cake doughnut, topped with chocolate pudding, and a strawberry. Doughnuts were a slippery slope and I had another. It was a Bismarck, loaded with chocolate pudding. It had a thick layer of white frosting and, when I bit into it, the pudding gushed out. It weighed a pound.

Once, a man who liked opera and whistled talked me into having seven doughnuts. “Go ahead,” he said, “have another.” I went to the table of doughnuts each time he prompted me, like the devil on my shoulder. Seven doughnuts were a record for the high-rise (and me)!

Today, one man was on his third doughnut. “You are reprehensible!” I kidded him, to which he replied, “I know!” He was always broke and often borrowed a dollar from me for a Coke. The doughnut was a small pleasure for him.

I ordered some toast. This was a protective move to avoid having another doughnut. I ordered cinnamon with peanut butter and strawberry jam. The coffee klatch lady wrote my order on a paper plate then delivered the toast to my table. It looked so civilized, it could not be bad for me. I was convinced it was the last thing I was going to eat at the coffee klatch.

The talk became more animated and the noise in the room escalated. Thirty of us sat at the tables and told stories about the old days, when we were healthy. For many of us, our lives had been destroyed by mental illness.

One man told stories about the hood, where he was raised. Another told stories about elk hunting in Montana. These were not stories of glory days. They were memories, all they had left. I was fortunate. I was able to hold down a job and participate in life. I battled what they fought and won. Maybe I was still battling it.

I had another doughnut. It was my third. I stood at the table and debated which one to choose. One had my name on it, a man said, as we looked at them together. This time it was a cake doughnut, with no frosting and no decorations. As soon as I bit

into it, I kicked myself for succumbing. It was a small doughnut, not loaded with calories, like the apple fritters, which were dipped in sugar, or the Bismarck that oozed chocolate, but it was a doughnut, nevertheless and my guilt set in.

My dietitian had urged me to have one order of toast at the coffee klatch and already I’d had three doughnuts and one order of toast. I was still hungry. It was going to be one of those days....

Lunch would start in a half-hour. I planned to eat only fruits and vegetables to compensate for what I had eaten at the coffee klatch. Even that was too much food, since fruit and some vegetables are carbohydrates, too.

Yet, I was starving. One more order of toast, I told myself. You’re a goner already. You might as well go all the way. That was my dietitian’s wisdom about binges. Let them run their course.

I placed my order, raisin toast, buttered, with grape jelly. I watched the coffee klatch lady drop the slices of bread into the toaster. She spread the toast with peanut butter and jelly. She was liberal, and the peanut butter glistened, and the jelly sparkled. The burned edges of the toast peered out. Like a drug dealer, the coffee klatch lady brought the toast to my table. I ate it like I was shooting cocaine. Its taste was a rush to my brain.

Then, I went to the dining room and sat at my table. The cook brought out lunch. I ate the cauliflower and peaches and left the beef patty. The healthy food nourished my mind, body and spirit.

It would take three days of good eating behavior and exercise to work off what I ate today. I had a “propensity to poundage,” as my uncle said of the men in my family. A five-ounce doughnut could put on two pounds of weight.

Before the coffee klatch, I had been at my military weight of 170 pounds. I could fit in my uniform. After the coffee klatch, I dressed out at 180 pounds! Time for me to take back control.

## Cleaning My Shotgun

*By Christopher G. Bremicker  
VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN*

I took the gun out of its case. My brother had dropped it off, so I could clean it before going hunting. I was mentally ill, and my psychiatrist thought it was best to leave the gun with my brother when I was not using it for hunting.

A few months ago, I had suicidal thoughts and called the veterans’ crisis hotline to avoid acting on them. I was okay now; the people at the veterans’ hospital trust me to handle the gun responsibly, I



forgot about the incident that caused the thoughts.

I disassembled the gun. The cap on the magazine tube did not come off and I used a pair of pliers wrapped in a dishcloth to unscrew it. It was corroded with age.

I withdrew the forearm, which was made of maple. Many years ago, when I got sick, I refinished the forearm and stock. It was a good project to keep me busy; woodworking was an old hobby of mine, and it helped me feel productive. At the time, I was unemployed and seeing a psychiatrist twice a week.

I scraped off the old finish from the wood with paint stripper and a piece of glass. Then I sanded it with steel wool and coated it with polyurethane. I hung the forearm and stock by hangers to dry overnight then applied another coat. I did this several times, until the wood sparkled. The wood held the finish and looked as shiny as when I restored it.

I withdrew the barrel. It was a long barrel, 28 inches. The gun was built around 1945 and was heavy, especially for me at the age when my grandfather gave it to me. I was 16 years old and my grandfather's oldest grandchild. I remember the sporting goods shop downtown, where he had it fitted to my shoulder. I also remember the first time I threw it up, to sight down its length.

My father, brother and I hunted with my grandfather near our cabin up north every weekend of the duck hunting season. My grandfather owned a brokerage firm, could hunt at any hunt club in the state, but chose to hunt with us. He loved to hunt ducks and even hunted them on vacation in Mexico.

When we stayed at the cabin, we took the outboard motor in every night to keep it from freezing. Every night, our grandfather would encourage us. "We might get some ducks tomorrow," he would say. In those days, we stayed in the duck blind all day, brought our lunches and took in our decoys after sunset. Tragically my grandfather was killed on his way to work one morning by a drunken driver.

There is history to my shotgun. It is a Remington Model II. It has a square backed chamber, characteristic of Browning shotguns, which were the best money could buy. Browning shotguns were made in Belgium. There was a war going on when my gun was built, and German U-boats patrolled the seas. This prevented Browning from shipping its guns to the United States, so, Remington collaborated with Browning to build the Model II. That explains why my gun looks like a Browning at first glance. It is not an uncommon gun and is seen often at trap ranges. It was the first mass produced semi-automatic shotgun in the world.

Here's how the gun works. The bolt and barrel recoil together and cocks the hammer after I fire the gun. The barrel returns to its initial position and the bolt stays behind. The shell ejects, the elevator inserts another shell into the chamber, and the bolt closes to be fired again.

The gun was so old, and I had shot it so many times that it did not work well if I did not clean it the night before hunting. My brother was picking me up tomorrow for a day of shooting at our favorite lake. That's why I wanted to clean the gun, now.

I slid off a compression ring around the end of the magazine tube that held a bronze ring in place. I slid off the bronze ring, too, then a third ring below it. Two of these rings were beveled. I made sure to place them on the table the same way I took them off the gun. The gun did not work properly if I put them on upside down.

I took off the spring that forces the barrel back to its initial position, after the gun is fired. The spring is powerful and about a foot long. The spring has never worn out, no matter how many times I shoot the gun. The job it does when I fire the gun is amazing.

My brother and I did not care if we shoot a lot of ducks. We shot a lot of them in our time. If we shot only a few, on this upcoming trip then we won't have that many to clean! It will be nice to get out, be in a duck blind, and see the sunrise.

I took a saucer out of the kitchen cabinet. I opened my cleaning kit, which I have owned for years, which was the best buy in any sporting goods shop, and assembled the cleaning rod. Then I screwed on the bronze brush that scoured the gunpowder out of the barrel. I attached the adapter to the end of the rod that held the brush.

I rammed the brush through the barrel several times. I twisted it in a circular motion as I pushed it through. A little carbon came out on its bristles. Then, I removed the brush from the rod, attached an eyelet, and inserted a cotton patch into it. I poured solvent into the saucer and dipped the patch in the solvent. I ran the patch through the barrel. I twirled the rod as I did this. The patch came out black. I replaced the patch with a clean one, dipped it in solvent, and ran it through the barrel again. I did this



at least 10 times until the patch was reasonably clean. From the looks of the patch, I had neglected to clean the gun before I put it away last year. Not a good idea!

When we were in the Army we cleaned our M16s the same way, after we used them on the firing range. Our company clerk's standards were high. If they passed inspection, he put them back in the weapons room, but not before that.

Then I dipped a toothbrush in the solvent and scrubbed the base of the barrel, which was bare metal, below the bluing. This was where the barrel met the action of the chamber. The steel showed no signs of wear.

My bottle of solvent was almost empty, and I had to conserve. The solvent I used was recycled and dirty. I did not own a car and had no way to get to a sporting goods shop to buy more. I took a toothbrush to the firing chamber. I pulled back the bolt, which opened the chamber, and kept it open. I scrubbed solvent into the recesses of the mechanism.

There was a residue of grime in the cracks of the chamber, but I cleaned it anyway. I spent a lot of time scrubbing the chamber. I closed the bolt to expose angles I could not get otherwise.

I pushed up the elevator to get a different angle at the chamber. I was liberal with the solvent and did not care if it splashed. The bolt was still dirty, but it was clean enough to work.

I cleaned the trigger, safety and outside of the chamber, where designs of a pheasant on one side and a drake mallard on the other side were engraved into the steel. I cleaned the square back

of the chamber and the corrugated sight, too. The bluing shined.

Then I dipped a patch in the solvent and ran it down the spring. I wrapped a patch around the coil and spiraled it along the spring until it shone. I did this with the three rings, too. The gun was as clean as I was going to get it.

Then I oiled the gun. I inserted a clean patch into the eyelet of the cleaning rod, applied oil to it, and ran it through the barrel. I did this several times until the patch came out clean. I ran a patch of oil along the barrel to protect it.

Gun cleaning reminds me of the time in the Army when we were on a mission on a raft off the coast of Puerto Rico. We paddled on the ocean for hours. Our weapons rusted in the salt air and we had to clean them when we got to shore, before we could continue on to the next destination.

The next day, the gun lay in the bow of our duck boat against the blind of cattails my brother designed. A flock of ringbills veered in, I reached for the gun, threw it up, and it recoiled against my shoulder. It hammered three times and I got one duck. Then the gun went back to my brother's house for safekeeping.

## Call Sign Dracula

*By Michael Ray Carroll  
VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX*

I come out of hiding to tell my story about the unforgettable nightmares I relive every night. On this morning I come out of my cave, and the gatekeeper tells me I have a mission. I am to cause as much pain to the enemy as I can, he hands me this map with the enemy locations.

I grab my trusted machine gun, and with the rest of the guys head out on a nice little walk through the jungles. We walk all day. By night we set up an ambush on a hill, we call for an airstrike. After the napalm clears, we get the word to go into the Valley and cause pain. Then somebody says "Dracula, light it up."

I don't know how many we killed that night, but I do know that the thought of bodies sends chills down my spine. There was nobody left alive. They all died for their country.

When I close my eyes I relive this nightmare, nobody knows the pain I live with. I often think about taking my own life, but I fear no man, only god, I think god would not forgive me If I did this. The hardest thing to do is forgive myself. I hope and pray that one day I can make it into heaven.—Call sign Dracula.



## Alone

*By Tony James Craidon  
—Maple Grove, MN*

Alone I stand in a crowd of thousands. I watch the faces of the blurry and realize they don't see me. If they did see me, they would hate me. I don't belong here. I am not one of them. The differences are beyond peaceful resolution. Still, the feeling of isolation is overwhelming. But I prefer it that way. Here, alone, I am who I want to be. I have no shame, no fear and no worry. I believe I am still invisible when I reach out to touch one of them.

All at once, a furious scream resonates through my head. They've discovered me. They want to destroy me. I am trapped. Trapped like a fly in a kitchen with the window open. I meant no harm, but they can't hear me. I plead to their humanity, but they are void of compassion. They are blind with anger. I think about that fly. I know there is a way out, I just have to find it. I will myself to evolve.

Magically from my back, two wings appear. I fly. I fly high above the crowd, laughing as I ascend. They can't hurt me. I feel weightless and free. The clouds are thick and dark as I pass through them. I close my eyes and feel the gray liquid sun pour down. Before long, I am above the clouds. The stars sing in harmony for my victory. I'm washed with an ethereal warmth. I've done it.

There's no way I can crash. But that is exactly what happens. I can't control it anymore. Like Icarus before me, my wings melt. I fall and crash, leaving smoke in my wake. Again, amongst the thousands. Their memories are short, and I am forgotten. I look at the blurred faces. I realize how futile it is to change my station in life. I feel it once again, the hollow emotion that can be described with one word, alone.

## Abe's Train

*By Jonathan M. Craig  
VA Medical Center—Portland, OR*

Abe loved toy trains. His father loved them, too. Every time payday came his father would take him down to the hobby shop and buy one thing for his growing 40 scale train set.

Abe loved to blow the train whistle and watch it clickity-clack around the tracks. After quite some time, over the years, Abe and his father started planning on big finish for the train set they had built together. He had buildings: a factory, school, train station, lumber mill, some houses, a church, a movie theater, and a restaurant. He had collected a billboard, some train crossing warning bells and lots of curved and straight track. He had enough track to go around the big board three times! He also had some cars, people, street lights, lots of trees and bushes and artificial grass. He had a bridge and a tunnel too!

It took a couple of months to pull it all together just so, but Abe and his father worked on it every weekend and since it was summer and school was out, a little through the week too. Besides soccer camp and playing with his friends, that's what he accomplished over the summer.

So, by the end of summer, the train layout was completed and what a sight to see! They both had the track winding and circling its way around the board. They had the tunnel set up and the bridge going over the river his dad helped him build. All the buildings were connected by streets, sidewalks and parking lots. It took all summer to put together and Abe invited his friend over to see it. They told Abe how cool it was and how lucky he was to have his dad's help to put it all together!

It may have taken all summer for Abe and his Dad to build, but it was a lifetime of memories!!!

## Aches and Pains

*By Phil Hosier*

*VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ*

There'll come a day when these old legs won't ache.  
I remember my youth when running was a piece of cake.  
These twisted limbs have answered the battle call.  
I did my best, came too close to giving it all.  
My youth is gone, never to return.  
How I wish to have it all over again.  
Life ain't fair; it is just life, I've learned.  
To be pain free, I've prayed and yearned.  
At least you're alive, some have told.  
Sometimes I wonder, in these years as I grow old,  
When they tell me the pain will be less if I meditate.  
I've tried, but it is easier just to medicate.  
Whenever I see our beloved flag flying free,  
The pain I endure for then I know it is not about me.

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## GLADYS FIELD HELZBERG MEMORIAL AWARD

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### SOS

*By Dan Yates*

*—Blue Springs, MO*

I remember that day, when I was only eighteen,  
I let Uncle Sam mold me into a fighting machine.  
To be part of a team, I'd pay my dues,  
finally had colors, my BDUs.

We fought in the jungle, fought in the sand,  
never alone in a foreign land.  
Whether T-Man or Charley, they had their tricks.  
Music to my ears was, "I've got your six."  
Twenty-four seven, three sixty-five,  
we trusted each other to stay alive.  
We never knew when or where they'd strike,  
but when it was over you heard, "Tango Mike."

My enlistment now over, I've ETS'd  
back to the world. I should feel blessed.  
Instead I'm on edge or chilled to the bone.  
Who's got my back? I feel so alone.  
Where are my friends? I can't get a date.  
I try to talk, but none can relate.  
I try to think, but my mind's not clear.  
I'm tired of screaming at that guy in the mirror.

Twenty-two vets take their lives each day  
by guns or pills, or some other way.

The VA has a number, but it's too long,  
too many chances to dial it wrong.  
1-800, then dial seven more.  
I fight off the voices as I lay on the floor.  
Dial 9-1-1, the call is free,  
hear a voice ask, "What's your emergency?"

Why not a short number, just for a vet  
after all we've done, or did you forget?  
Show some urgency, priority one,  
change twenty-two into twenty-one.

If you could hear our pleas, see the tears we've cried,  
you'd know SOS means "Stop Our Suicides."

## So This Is How Being Homeless Goes?

*By Jason Kirk Bartley*

*VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH*

Christ died for all,  
that is why He bled.  
I am often forgotten,  
often left for dead.  
It does not matter how I got here,  
the problem has arrived.  
The journey's been rather rough,  
but I know I have survived.  
I am not looking for any handouts.  
My sign often reads, "WILL WORK FOR FOOD."  
The problem is some take advantage,  
or some may try to scam,  
so a bad name I often bear.  
That's not who I am.  
I am just a homeless man with nowhere to go.  
Many have forgotten my name.  
Jesus hasn't.  
I am glad I am a child of the King.  
My scraggly clothes have become so foul,  
my body odor pollutes the air.  
All I want is a little help,  
while people often sit and stare.  
Have they forgotten that I am human?  
I have feelings, too.  
Being homeless can be conquered.  
At least my heart is true.  
I am beginning to wonder if anyone really cares.  
Some whisper things behind my back  
that cut me like a knife.  
I start to get really mad.  
Why bother? That's just life.

## Summer of '67

*By Daniel Paicopulos*  
*VA Medical Center—San Diego, CA*

How long does it take,  
I wonder,  
for a war to become  
a tourist attraction?  
What's the rotation time,  
I ponder,  
for foxholes to fill in?

The only war that matters  
is the one you fought in.  
All warriors know this.  
So many wars,  
yet only one was the worst.  
It's the one you fought in  
because it happened to you.

That year I went to war,  
all thrumming energy,  
rising above the cacophony,  
struggling beneath the fear,  
wishing mightily to be invisible,  
knowing I had put myself there,  
the trace elements of ego  
so visible in God's microscope.

For a little while, I died  
that day long ago,  
thought it was over.  
I was going home.  
No sadness, no fear,  
no swell of clinging to life,  
grasping what's here.  
All day and night,  
I floated above my body.  
The bombs cast their light,  
yet from that tunnel bright  
a mother's word,  
a chiming tone,  
calling my return  
to the work undone.  
Time enough remained  
for service and more  
for pain, guilt, lessons  
still to master, before  
this life's final peace  
brings an end to my war.

## Touching

*By George S. Kulas*  
*VA Medical Center—Fond Du Lac, WI*

The old man touched many names on the wall.  
Each one touched him, especially his son's.  
With tears in his eyes and with shaking hands,  
The old man touched many names. On the wall  
built for heroes who had answered the call  
To Vietnam and returned as the ones  
The old man touched. Many names on the wall.  
Each one touched him. Especially his son's!

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## MARGARET SALLY KEACH MEMORIAL AWARD

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## What Does *Veterans' Voices* Mean to Me?

*By Kimberly Green*  
*VA Medical Center—Fort Smith, AR*

What does *Veterans' Voices* mean to me?  
I'll tell you; so sit for a spell.

Let me release my energy  
With the stories I have to tell.

Just for a moment, as I take my hand  
And write these words  
About my young soldier  
In another land.

How he endured the highway of death,  
Sand fleas and the like,  
And vaccines unapproved  
That he took despite their type.

And now when  
He should be alive,  
He and the rest—instead—  
Lie toe to toe. To this I can attest.

He was young  
When he was exposed  
To a limitless amount of toxins.  
This I am told.

And all the other veterans,  
Those veterans, too, of all wars  
Who died too young—  
This is something that shouldn't be ignored.

So let the *Veterans' Voices*  
Be heard above and to no end.  
Let their writings and testimony  
Be heard for they are America's next of kin.

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## SALLY SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL

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### This Has Got to Stop

*By Michael James Young*  
—Suncook, NH

We're going home; this war was hell.  
So many things I've seen, I will never tell.  
I just want to get on with my life,  
Hug my kids and kiss my wife,  
Find a job and pay my bills,  
Forget about this war and all that were killed.  
As time goes on, I find little hope.  
I lose my job, I drink and use dope.  
The doctors give me all kinds of meds,  
But they can't remove what's in my head.  
My life is a wreck, full of despair,  
Nothing matters, I just don't care.  
I go to church and pray and pray,  
But nothing helps take the pain away.  
No one can see the wounds I bear.  
Because there are no scars  
Doesn't mean they're not there.  
Then one day, I've had enough.  
This veteran, once fearless, proud and tough  
Can't take any more. He's done his best,  
Takes his gun, puts it against his chest.  
You know the rest.  
His family cries; they don't understand why.  
The demons have won another round  
As they lay this soldier in the ground.

### Ceasefire

*By Westley Alan Smith*  
VA Medical Center—Boston, MA

He fights to stop from gobbling his pills  
so he'll have enough for the next day, the next.  
At six glasses, he twists the cap on the fifth  
of Jack, and lights another smoke, breathes deep.  
He digs the pistol out of the dresser drawer  
and chambers a round, clicking the safety on,  
then tucks the pistol into his waistband.  
He chooses his place to stand and watch the sun  
retreat again behind the broken hills.

### We Have Kissed Enough

*By Charles Kesler*  
VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX

We have kissed enough  
(ten thousand times ten thousand)  
to make me forget the kisses  
of another.  
We have touched enough  
to make me forget  
the touches  
of another.  
We have loved enough  
(oh yes, we have, forty full years)  
To make me forget  
the love of any other.  
Thank you  
for chasing away the ghosts  
of lovers past. I had wondered  
if it was even possible.

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## WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

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### Garden in the Ghetto

*By Dannie Lee Baldwin, Jr.*  
—Woodbridge, VA

Gardens in the ghetto—  
is that so hard to believe  
among all the turmoil and poverty?  
It's not hard to see,  
like a garden of roses  
covered by a weeping willow tree,  
like a flower in someone's window  
where a butterfly grazes  
as it flows within the breeze,  
where a man tills the soil  
and plants a fruitful seed.  
To grow a fruit or vegetable  
which some day he knows  
he will need,  
where a child looks up toward the sky  
at the tallest tree  
that reaches out toward the heavens  
reaching to be free.  
Yes, a garden in the ghetto  
is not so hard to believe.  
Just listen to a baby laugh,  
then ask him what he sees.  
Gardens in the ghetto—this is really a reality.

## Christmas in the Morning

*By Anthony Cocozza*

*VA Medical Center—Los Angeles, CA*

Christmas in the morning  
Christmas in the afternoon  
Christmas in the evening  
In every year, too.  
Christmas in December  
Christmas not far away  
Christmas in your heart and soul  
Help Celebrate Jesus Day.  
From the highway to Heaven  
The band of angels singing  
With Joseph and Mary gave birth at the inn  
I heard the band was playing.  
Merry Christmas, Jesus.  
Christmas to the newborn King  
Merry Christmas, Jesus.

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### SALLY SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL

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## The Long and Winding Road

*By Scott Lehman*

*VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO*

Here's to the old school,  
Four brothers from Liverpool  
Spreading love, joy, peace and harmony,  
John, George, Ringo and Paul McCartney.  
"Beatlemania" across the land,  
"Beatlemania" the ultimate band,  
One of a kind.  
I can't get their songs out of my mind.  
"I Want to Hold Your Hand"  
"Beatlemania" taking a stand.  
What the hell is going on?  
Magic in every song!  
Four young punks  
Playin' that funk.  
Watch out, it's contagious!  
"Beatlemania" is outrageous.  
No whiskey or wine,  
Just teenagers havin' a good time.  
"Twist and Shout"  
That's what the Beatles were all about!

## Christmas in a Foreign Land

*John Raymond*

*—Bridgewater, MA*

Last in line I cover our six,  
Heads held low and fear up high,  
Stepping carefully as no one wants to die.  
We found a village six clicks from our base;  
The distrust of us showed on every face.  
It's December 25th and it's hard to believe  
That no one there ever heard of Christmas Eve.  
We helped rebuild all the damaged huts  
To show that we did care.  
They were all very hungry, having only scraps and peals,  
So we gathered all our food and made a Christmas meal.  
We invited them to join us making sure they were well fed.  
Then we ate what was left over and went to bed.  
The Spirit of Christmas was with us in this foreign land.  
We learned that Christmas is more than presents,  
It's about helping your fellow man.  
So the next time you want to complain about  
Only getting one or two presents,  
Stop and remember this story.  
Then go out and help others  
That are less fortunate than you.

## A Soldier Within Me

*Paul David Gonzales*

*—Albuquerque, NM*

The soldier within me never sleeps, patrols by day and guards  
by night, keeps me safe as the sun dips out of sight.

He adjusts his steel pot to his chin, with a sinister grin.

The soldier's only mission is to win over an enemy that stalks  
his mind day and night, ever vigilant with all his might.

He dons his flack jacket over his chest and stands firm at the  
gate to protect the rest.

Fear not, my friend, for you are safe. I stand guard in your  
place, sleep sound with a peaceful face.

My rifle is locked and loaded with the trigger ready, with a  
firm grip sure and steady.

I'll shoot to kill without the thrill, to keep you safe while you  
sleep.

May your dreams be sweet and full of fun until the dawning of  
the sun.

## CODA

*By Daniel Paicopulos*

*VA Medical Center—San Diego, CA*

He's actually dying now  
in ICU, wires and hoses his mechanical friends.  
So what's left to say?  
All the clichés were used up long ago,  
first when the diagnosis came,  
then after the chemo,  
and, finally, the burning.

He was dying back then as well.  
We meant well, his longtime human friends,  
saying what was right to say.  
All the bromides were well-intended,  
first when the fear struck,  
then when hope was treasured,  
and, finally, reality.

He'll die soon,  
in a white room, surrounded by friends.  
No one will say anything  
which is not the truth.  
First we'll thank him for his friendship,  
then tell him how much he's loved.

## Disguise

*By Rick Keel*

*VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ*

I thought Patriotism was a disguise,  
that it was an illusion, a dream full of lies.

Old men of war told, as part of a story, a tale  
of battle-torn men, all seeking glory.

So I enlisted to serve and also to seek till I find  
this thing called Patriotism, so I could ease my mind.

Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Iraq and the rest,  
I was determined to put it all to the test,

Never settling till I could remove the disguise  
from this thing called Patriotism of the wise.

Could it be true, or is it lies?

Then one day, while looking into the mirror,  
I stared at myself with total surprise.

I suddenly realized that there was no more disguise.  
This thing called Patriotism was in my own eyes

## A Young Wife's Letter

*By Dan Yates*

*—Blue Springs, MO*

I'm all alone on Christmas Eve; this wasn't supposed to be.  
I had plans for just us two, but tonight it's only me.  
Carols in the background, fire in the place, who could ask for  
more?

I didn't see this coming—that you'd go off to war.

You said the day we married, we had to be a team.  
Marriage in the military mirrored salmon swimming upstream.  
I read your letters, do my best to recall your silky voice,  
wishing we could be together. This never was my choice.  
I wonder where you are tonight, with buddies or alone,  
on a cot or in a foxhole, frozen to the bone?  
Will you have a tree, perhaps a Christmas feast  
or listen to last rites given by a priest?  
They say the world is safer because of what you do,  
but I don't feel safer when I'm not with you.  
Did you get my package? I wonder every day,  
jerky, seeds and Slim Jims, a real man's buffet.  
My family asks about you, especially Mom and Dad.  
It's hard for me to celebrate as I move from mad to sad.

I think I'll stop the music, let the fire die,  
stare into the distance as storm clouds fill my eye.  
Tomorrow when I wake, Christmas will be here,  
but not the gift I wish for, that war would disappear.

## Driving the Cows Back Home

*By CJ Reeves*

*VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA*

When the sun is low in the western sky,  
And the shadows lengthen and fall,  
I swing off down the winding trail  
To drive the cows back home.

Through the meadow, over the hill,  
I hear the tinkling bell.  
I whistle and sing as the cowbell rings  
As I drive the cows back home.

Back to the meadow, through the tall grass,  
The cows would like to roam.  
I hear the call of the whippoorwill  
As I drive the cows back home

Over the winding trail, once again,  
Through the barn lot gate we go.  
It's growing late as I close the gate,  
Driving the cows back home

# An Angel Arrived From Heaven

*By Anthony Cocozza*

*VA Medical Center—Los Angeles, CA*

An Angel arrived from Heaven  
To lead Santa Claus this year.  
With the reindeer, roamed in the sky,  
So high, so close, so near.  
An Angel arrived from Heaven  
To help celebrate Christmas Eve  
On earth, as it is in Heaven  
With a messenger for peace.  
An Angel arrived from Heaven  
To honor our newborn King.  
With our Savior we pray  
To our Lord of Lords, King of Kings.  
An Angel arrived from Heaven  
To bring this year—a better one.  
For all mankind, we pray for peace.  
With Jesus, our lives will go on.  
An Angel arrived from Heaven  
To guide us in prayer and greeting.  
Coming home on Christmas Eve,  
I do hear my phone ring.  
An Angel arrived from Heaven  
To meet my own Guardian Angel.  
Isn't Christmas too wonderful?  
I, too, would like to become an Angel.

# Christmas Enlightenment

*By John E. Jones*

*VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI*

Church bells ringing, happy people singing,  
Christmas meaning the joyful day bringing.  
“Glad to meet you,” jolly people say.  
Everyone's so happy on Christmas Day.

God gave us Christ to mend our love,  
We celebrate His coming from above.  
Under the starlight in a manger He lay,  
Uplifted and glorious on his birthday.

Jesus Christ, the child who came to be,  
His Spirit lives within everyone we see.  
His birth we commemorate; He never sinned.  
Both now and then our rejoicing's genuine.

Parades on Christmas Day are like no other,  
People exchange gifts and feel no bother.  
Others help people in despair,  
Providing to the needy everywhere.

Christmas love shows in every way,  
His Spirit fills our lives every day.  
Commemorate Jesus Christ and every time  
He uplifts your soul, heart and mind.

# Confidential

*By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.*

*VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA*

Those who may be seeking  
Information about you  
Can only learn of events  
That have taken place in your life.  
Hearing information from others  
Is only hearsay  
Unless they hear it  
Directly from you,  
For no one can truly know  
Who you are  
What's in your heart  
Your mind and soul  
Unless you tell them.  
No amount of research  
Regarding your background  
Could ever tell them  
What's in your heart.  
All they will ever know  
Is just the chain of events  
That have taken place  
In your lifetime,  
Not the true person  
Your true character.  
Have no regard  
For what people say  
Or find out about you,  
For this  
Is not who you truly are.

# Drowning

*By Joseph F. Higgins*

*VA Medical Center—Medford, MA*

Raging white waves roar,  
stabbing sandy shore.  
Plumes of wet despair  
laugh in darkening air.  
Like a drowned sailor  
from a watery tomb,  
thrust into Gaia's womb.

## Dealing With Grief

*By Clinton Jarrett*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

We all grieve in our own way.  
Mine is selfish. I want her  
here to guide me.

Mom is well loved.  
The evidence is here  
in our gathering today.

I consider myself a Christian  
and believe Mom is also.  
Now she has achieved the goal I strive for.  
Admittance to the Kingdom.

When I weave this  
thought into the tapestry  
of my grief, I find comfort.

## “Dear Mom”

*By Paul David Gonzales*

*VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM*

Dear Mom,  
JFK and LBJ sent me here to Vietnam.  
I did what I was told,  
and now I'm wet and kinda cold.  
It's thick and lush here in the green,  
but not a pretty scene.

You see, Charlie came in the night.  
We put up a hell of a fight,  
they surprised us as we slept.  
I prayed to the Lord my soul to keep.  
I'm safe in his arms so please don't weep.

Dear Lord, please take my hand,  
Mom will understand.  
There is no pain; it's gone away.  
Here in heaven I will stay.  
What a beautiful place  
the preacher said of this heavenly space.

You know I won't be home in May.  
Here in Vietnam I lay, but I want to say,  
I did my job and did it well.  
There's nothing more, only time will tell.

## Fly With Thee

*By Williams Kurrie*

*VA Medical Center—Chewelah, WA*

I want to fly,  
Like a bird on the wind.  
Like the next of kin,  
I want to fly.

High in the sky  
I want to fly  
If I can  
And I will die.

Come along with me,  
And sing this song.  
Come along with me  
And let me be.

Come along with me  
And together with thee (the Lord)  
Will all be  
Again with thee.

*Amen*

## Let Freedom Ring

*By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.*

*VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA*

The United States  
Is a country of immigrants.  
The Founding Fathers  
Who gave us the Constitution  
Were immigrants, British citizens  
Who rejected the rule of the English king.  
Do we live in a country  
Where all its citizens can be free?  
Can anyone who wishes to be free come here  
Or is this a country  
Where only a few are free?  
The rest of the citizens  
Are to be used, manipulated  
Like pawns in a chess game,  
Where the life of the minority has little value.  
Only the few  
Who are extremely rich  
Can enjoy the beauty of life.  
The Constitution promised freedom for all  
With pursuit of happiness.  
Or is this just for the elite?

# Fear

*By Milton Evans*

*VA Medical Center—Staten Island, NY*

Fear of this, fear of that and fear  
Everywhere that you go,  
But there is nothing to fear but that state of mind,  
That deep darkness where no one's eyes could see.  
The mighty, loud sounds of water flow  
Bring out the fear of not being aware,  
But the words of God can control all of that.  
You, yourself, are very smart,  
But still you know so little.  
No one knows more than the Maker Himself.  
You can speak of this and you can talk about that,  
But someone else knows more of that subject  
Than you claim to.  
Listen and learn for there is much more in  
This big world for us to know.  
Ignorance is not some bad word to say,  
But it is a word to take heed to.  
Ignorance is covering this world,  
Perhaps, much more than grains of sand.  
Wherever there is a seashore,  
The word in the world  
Will always be as universal as ever.  
The word in the world  
Can have the same meaning,  
But sound quite different still,  
For people, if you notice,  
Are all the same  
All over the world  
With their attitudes lingering in places  
You know not where.

# Forgotten

*By Tanya R. Whitney*

*VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA*

To sit alone  
Watching all the people  
Go by on their way  
To start their busy day.

Oblivious to the  
Forgotten people on the streets  
Ignoring them and their suffering  
Never acknowledging their existence.

My eyes follow  
Each one as they go by  
Knowing they don't see me  
Nor do they care who I am.

I once was  
One of the horde  
Hurrying to the grind  
Of my daily job and life.

I traveled all over  
This country and the world  
Away from my family  
All for those who are ungrateful.

For once I was  
A soldier for my country  
Until the dark shadows overtook  
The recesses of my thoughts and deeds.

Driven out by  
The demons from a life  
I loved and a uniform  
I was proud to openly wear.

The very people  
Who sent me to those  
Dark places also threw me away  
Like a worn-out piece of equipment.

Tossed away with  
No support or safety line  
Unprepared to live in the world  
I once openly embraced and lived in.

A stranger now  
To my family and friends  
For they could not cope nor I  
With a familiar face on an injured body.

Unable to survive  
As the person I once was  
I left to find myself a haven  
Drinking away the pain and hope.

Each day a struggle  
To keep from just laying  
Down to die and end the horrors  
Lived each day and night in my dreams.

Maybe one day  
I will find the strength  
To ask for help to leave  
The darkness and begin to live again.

But today my eyes  
Follow people as they pass by  
Not seeing me here on the street  
Knowing today will not be that day.

## Freedom

By Greg Johnson

VA Medical Center—Altoona, PA

Once, a nation torn by shredded thorns  
Grew to hatred of a powerful grasp,  
Fought with sabers and muskets with hope  
That freedom of choice would prevail.  
Angry people full of wisdom and drive  
Put forth a standard to live by.  
Those in strife will break their chains.  
Down with anarchy; replace with democracy.  
One new nation, contained to be true,  
Made up of people old and new,  
Came forth together to brighten the day  
When all men could walk in peace.  
Now is the challenge left up to us all.  
Calm and creative are we,  
Mightier than the sword our story is told.  
Fight on, America.  
You're standing proud and tall.

## Harm's Way

By Lynn A. Norton

—Leawood, KS

An Air Force Medic,  
hospital duty in the Philippines  
beyond the range of hostile fire, ballistic shards  
from Ho Chi Minh's determined wrath.  
*Treat the afflicted and tag the remains.*  
I was shielded from harm's way.

Outreach missions to Negrito tribal lands,  
descendants of warriors who vanquished invaders.  
Their bodies ravaged by parasites,  
tuberculosis, dysentery. Yet they lived.  
*Treat the afflicted and tag the remains.*  
I was shielded from harm's way.

Restricted to base as Ferdinand Marcos'  
campaign thugs terrorized voters,  
stole ballots. Fragile democracy  
in the crosshairs of hired guns.  
*Treat the afflicted and tag the remains.*  
I was shielded from harm's way.

Tectonic indigestion from deep waters  
in the Mindanao Trench launched waves  
of vertigo, shock. Planetary thunder  
pummeled earth, structures, flesh.  
*Treat the afflicted and tag the remains.*  
I was always in harm's way.

## The Better Portion

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

How much I like to watch TV.  
There's "Springer," "Broke Girls" and "Big Bang."  
But after a while, I lose my smile  
And look for a book within range!  
I'm happier reading a novel!

The radio offers quite a list  
Of news and music and shows.  
Still I feel perplexed for page and text,  
Then "good-bye" radio goes!  
I'm happier reading a novel!

The front porch and chair provide such fare  
Of commerce, nature and breeze.  
But I limit such time to thinking of rhyme,  
For a book is all that will please.  
I'm happier reading a novel!

I will go for a drive to feel more alive;  
With the view and fresh air I'm content.  
But calling me back is a book in a stack,  
And I submit to the story that's meant!  
And I'm happier reading a novel!

## Homeless Still

By Jamie Lee Alexander

VA Medical Center—Battle Creek, MI

As a child I was selfish,  
but now that I'm fully grown,  
my eyes mist with tears  
whenever I hear of the millions  
that don't have a home.  
It tears at my heart like a knife  
when I happen to see  
homeless people out on the streets  
knowing that this could be me.  
To walk down the street and the people you meet  
look at you as though you were sin,  
but what would they say if they couldn't pay  
the rent for the home they live in.  
Game show stars, fancy cars,  
we pay credit cards off with checks.  
If the homeless are ignored right now  
I wonder who will be next.  
We are the breadbasket of the world,  
a nation of peace and goodwill.  
But in a nation with all of these virtues,  
the homeless are homeless still!

## Gardens of Stone

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

Lines of white marble  
Gleaming bright in the morning sun.  
Dew glistens like diamonds  
Atop the rounded smooth edges.

Each one set with tender care  
As precise as a drill team.  
Left to right, dress right dress  
Buried in this hallowed ground.

Some known, some unknown  
Everyone led a hero's life.  
They should not be forgotten  
Though many have been.

Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marine  
Black, white, male and female.  
Segregated and unequal in life  
Integrated and equal in death.

Forever immortalized in stone  
Names, ranks and service inscribed.  
Indelibly on the faces of marble  
A few words expressing a lifetime of history.

A place of serenity and honor  
Set aside for the heroes among us.  
Men and women willing to die for us,  
Many here having done so.

Each stone evidence of their courage  
Each one a reminder of the brave.  
Their love of country and sacrifice  
Immortalized in these Gardens of Stone.

## Greed and Hate

*By Jamie Lee Alexander*  
*VA Medical Center—Battle Creek, MI*

Greed is an age-old monster  
that dwells in the hearts of men.  
It wants more than its take  
from every plate,  
and destruction will come from within.

Hate is so mean it makes dirty the clean,  
and what was once fat is now lean.  
With our heads to the sky,  
we ask ourselves why

does reality feel like a dream?  
Hate killed a man called Malcolm.  
It killed John and Martin, too,  
for they envisioned a world of brotherly love  
where hate would never do.  
So when things go wrong as they sometimes will,  
don't look to man for a pill.  
Things will be great when we eat from our plate  
because greed and hate will be still.

*Typist: Elizabeth E. Marshall*

## For My Marine Friends

*By Michael James Young*  
*—Suncook, NH*

Somewhere tonight there's a young Marine,  
He joined the corps, barely nineteen.  
His first time away, and he would rather be  
Back home with his family,  
But he knows he has a job to do.  
It's now his duty to protect the Red, White and Blue.  
He took an oath to defend this land  
Not long ago, when he raised his right hand.  
Now he's where he has to be  
To keep the people back home safe and free.  
He may be young, only nineteen,  
But he's damn proud to be a Marine.  
And he will do what needs to be done.  
He will live in a dirt hole and sleep with a gun  
Or sail on a ship at sea  
Doing a tour with the Navy.  
He'll do things he'd never had to do,  
And before you know it, his hitch will be through.  
He'll go back home to the life he once knew,  
But it won't be the same 'cause into a man he grew.  
His friends won't know him; they'll think he's strange.  
And they are right because he's changed.  
From now on till the day he dies,  
He will always be a veteran, a Marine, one of the few  
Who served the Red, White and Blue  
With honor and pride.  
It was one hell of a ride,  
And don't ever ask him why.  
Only a Marine knows. Semper Fi.

# Hanging Rock

*By Daniel Kent Merwin*

*VA Medical Center—Brooklyn, NY*

Four young women entered Hanging Rock.  
Only one came back.  
The fear took hold, the town went cold  
And search parties failed, their efforts now old.  
And all the days turned black.

I lived each day since with despair,  
Her face still in my head.  
Charisma, smiles, strength in voice,  
She never feared to talk to boys.  
She always made a daring choice  
When faced with rules she didn't like.  
She would respond in kind through strike!  
Her spirit strong, her actions like  
The many role models who inspire  
So many who grow up and learn the desire  
To grasp life's fruits and experience joy.  
Sometimes her persistence I'd try to employ  
In my daily life when facing adversity,  
To make a new day of fun and diversity.  
But I can't now go on in this grim university  
With her face still in my head.

Three years have passed, but my nightmare's the same.  
She calls me by name to come play a game  
Called "Picnic at Hanging Rock," she and I.  
We'll dance the whole time, perhaps 'til we die.  
And when I awake in cold sweats, eyes red,  
I tell myself there's one way to stop this dread.  
I must face the ghost, must go to the Rock  
And, by so doing, I can stop the clock  
That ticks in my ears, giving me warnings  
That my fate is hers. She calls me, imploring  
Me to let go and enter, no need for the world.  
And absolute ecstasy will be unfurled.

Like in a trance, I approached Hanging Rock.  
And unlike before, I stood watch, in shock.  
A light shined forth from the cracks of the cave  
Where she and the others were lost all these years.  
But maybe they're back, their lives I could save  
If only I got past my sweats and my fears.

I heard her voice sing from the cave and the light.  
She called my name aloud, she knew it, despite  
The fact that we'd never met in this life,  
And only through newspaper, my thoughts always rife  
With her story, her face, her spirit, her presence.  
I felt so afflicted by her ghost's essence.  
She could not know me, this could not be true!

And anything from this, only evil would ensue.  
I turned my back from there, departing the Rock  
And did not look back, her voice I did block.  
But although I thought that would be the last,  
I still hear her voice in my dreams. That day is now past.

So now I must make a choice.  
Drink this poison to silence her voice,  
Or continue each day in bed, shivering in shock  
Because of the souls lost at Hanging Rock.

# Life—the Gambling Game

*By Lawrence William Langman*

*—Portage, IN*

I remember your eyes when I first saw your face,  
The laughter, the joy, the tears you've embraced.  
Oddly enough, we were there for the same reasons.  
Unhappiness and loneliness are not reserved for a season.  
We talked through the night; oh, how the time flew by.  
We found a lot in common without much of a try.  
I was still married, in jail, so it seemed,  
Waiting for judgment or parole, whichever was deemed.  
You were with him, still confused with your feelings,  
Hoping to find escape from his wrongful dealings.  
Who would have thought that a few months later,  
A divorce, a good-bye, and then we were married.  
No one could believe what we really had done,  
We'd jumped into the fire with no protection on.  
We were the talk of the town, in a manner of speaking.  
The odds were against us, but we were not sinking.  
We took a hell of a chance and gambled it all,  
High rollers through the scheme of it all.  
If only they knew how happy we've been,  
A dog and a cat and even three kids.  
We've been through a lot, some hell, some high water,  
Managing to swim or put out the fire.  
It's been seven years now, and still seems like a dream.  
My love for you is stronger and flows like a raging stream.  
I hope you understand there is no one else for me.  
You're life, my love; you're my everything.  
When it's all said and done, we have come a long way.  
I hope in your heart and your soul you feel the same way.  
I hope the next seven years will be as good as the last.  
With many more to follow, let our love last and last.  
I'll love you till tomorrow is no more. If there's life after death,  
And we walk through those gates, I hope we stay together  
Until eternity is our fate.

## Hope Beyond

*By Dorothy Remo*

*VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX*

Deep of heart, hear my soul,  
Pains dig deep, billows roll.  
Find the peace I need so long,  
Help me, Lord, renew my song.

Last of days may never end,  
Clouds above, the rain descends.  
Pure the night, dark the day,  
Keep me still, not run away.

Bide the time, anger spills,  
Catch me up, my joy fulfills.  
Sightless eyes, I hear no more  
Tumultuous sighs, the lion roars.

Voice of wisdom, minds portrayed,  
Simple enough, much they weigh.  
Cry the truth, hear my heart pound.  
Ceaseless tears, Your love's all around.

Seeking Your light, peace returns,  
Lift me up to the place I yearn.  
Stumbling about, I'm so, so tired,  
Sinking deep in the murky mire.

The sun so bright, love breaks forth,  
Knock once again, I'll open the door.  
Enter in, renew my sight  
To capture all Your glory and light.

Hope restored, faith regained,  
Cleanse my heart from all its stains.  
Never to leave you, stay by my side,  
Refresh, make whole from Your blessed life.

You've loved me forever and ever to be,  
You commune in the quiet, my life you set free.  
Come touch me now, I need You so,  
Promises kept, will never let go.

O, Lord, O, Lord, it's plain to see  
It's You that's won my victory.  
The battles and wars never were mine,  
But always Yours throughout all time.

I praise You now, Almighty God,  
For all the journeys I had to trod.  
To find Your greatness and all that You are,  
My morning glory, my bright morning star.

*Typist: Lee Torres, LCSW*

## I Ride and I Write

*By Richard Wangard*

*VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI*

I ride and I write.  
The demons cannot catch me  
Whenever I do either.  
The loudness of sweet exhaust notes  
I go nowhere and everywhere  
Purposely getting lost.  
I can wonder at God's  
Great creation.  
Mother Nature at her finest  
Smells so good.  
Fresh cut hay and grass  
The animals I see  
The warmth of the sun  
As it bounces off my skin.  
Troubles fall away  
So I ride and ride  
And ride some more  
To parts unknown  
Laughing at PTSD  
Feeling for those moments  
When all is right with the world  
And myself.  
But wait!  
Is that rain?  
It is November already?  
Too cold to ride anymore!  
My bones ache  
I know I am worn out!  
So I write  
And write and write  
And write some more!  
The demons cannot catch me  
When I put thought on paper.  
I laugh in their face  
Knowing they will have their turn.  
I share.  
It is in my nature  
Writing my troubles away  
To parts unknown  
To places where only my fellow  
Brothers and sisters understand.  
Fifty years ago  
That seems like yesterday  
Oh, YES!  
The Demons come  
I am an old knight  
I slay them one by one.  
With courage I fight on and on  
And on  
Riding and writing  
Writing and riding

To find what solace there is for me  
For I don't know how to give up  
How to surrender  
Improvise and overcome.  
Duty and honor  
My oath never expires  
But I am an old knight  
I am tired  
Too many dragons.  
So I still ride on to escape  
I write to escape  
For even an old knight  
Needs rest.

## If You Were a Soldier Like Me

*By John Donnelly*  
*VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA*

If you were a soldier like me,  
then I'm sure you know  
The daily details — the blow by blow.  
That ever-present pains of our separate miseries  
Can cause conscious hearts to be confused as what is to be.  
The daily struggle for the happy heart  
Is to present yourself above and apart.  
But if you're a soldier like me,  
You should already know the daily race  
To win, place or show.  
You rise and wake and go and go  
To some family's tune of dosey doe.  
So forgive yourself if you were a grumpy guy  
'Cause, come on, it was hard today to get on that bus.  
If you're a soldier like me,  
Then you already know of the daily fight.  
You'll go toe to toe and round and round.  
Then you can find, amid thee, sweet and bitter  
And true happiness with mate and critter.  
So realize we are all soldiers of life  
Or veterans of something.  
So don't be grumpy, you sweet little dumpling.

*Typist: Christine Vertein MA-ATR-BC*  
*Notes: Typist: Christine Vertein MA-ATR-BC*

## No Idea

*By Charles Kesler*  
*VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX*

We have no idea what every person  
is carrying around his neck.  
It could be a light necklace or a heavy ship anchor.

## On the Snowy Day

*By John E. Jones*  
*VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI*

On a cold December morning when you awaken,  
if it's snowy outside, you're not mistaken.  
Look through the window, see snow everywhere,  
Blowing in the wind, drizzling in the air.

Snow crystals settling upon the ground  
Reveal a wonderland coming down.  
The sun is shining, but the ice is slippery,  
And falling, no doubt, brings much misery.

Softly falling in fluffy mounds,  
Snow piles up and scatters around.  
Children cheerfully greet the day  
As out in the snow, they laugh and play.

Everyone's laughing, inside or out,  
When flurries float merrily spreading about.  
The holiday approaches, it's very near.  
At last it arrives—a Happy New Year!

## Land of the Free Because of the Brave

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

Where would America be  
if all our soldiers had turned around to flee?

If nobody had stood up for what is right,  
there might not be any freedoms in sight.

Some people take their freedoms for granted each day,  
but for those freedoms others with their lives did pay.

Some people say we shouldn't be at war,  
and they forget what we're fighting for.

Have they forgotten when those towers fell,  
of all those still inside who were going through a living hell?

What about our Pentagon,  
or those who died in that Pennsylvania field  
and the rest who are gone?

This nation is the land of the free,  
because of the brave on land, air and sea.

## Just Across the Road

*By William Paul Howard*  
*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

B Company squad tents  
Are just across the road  
Among the rice paddies  
On the edge of the firebase.

Choppers come every morning  
Landing on the dirt road.  
Rice waves in the wash  
Of the rotor blades.  
Women working the paddies  
Hold on to their pointed hats.

With all their gear,  
Soldiers mount up,  
Some in the seats,  
Others on the floor.

Red dust swirls as they lift off,  
Turn west, fly low  
In formation  
Toward the Plain of Reeds.

Jim was among them.  
I didn't know he was in-country  
Until months later  
Back in the States.

Called to the Captain's office,  
Sent to escort Jim's body,  
Talk to his parents,  
His brothers,  
His girlfriend.

They have questions:  
Where is the Plain of Reeds?  
What is it like there?  
What was he doing there?

I wish I had known  
He was just across the road.

## Keep Them at Bay

*By Wayne Scott Wallace*  
*VA Medical Center—Walla Walla, WA*

Understand.  
Rise up to the future to make a better place.  
Rise each to his own and help the human race.  
We know how to heal the wound that man can impose on man.

We know what war can do to us,  
Those who have taken a stand.  
We hate war,  
But it is what we know.  
Peace we cannot understand.  
So if you see us suffer,  
Please reach out a caring hand.  
You don't have to help us; just try to understand.  
We are forever changed by what we saw,  
And know the worst of our fellow man.  
Now the good we would like to know,  
That is for what we try.  
So don't be put off by our anger, frustration and rage,  
For in the book of transformation from war to peace,  
We somehow missed that page.  
It can take time to process the images in our minds,  
Maybe witnessed for just a second,  
But with us for all time.  
So thank you for your welcomes, your thank-you's  
and your praise.  
Just don't be scared and run away  
On our darker days,  
For we are merely human,  
Dealing with inhuman emotions.  
The brain cannot process the images we process  
at any given time.  
At times the memories come out slowly like a movie  
on slow motion.  
At times they come out quickly like a fast movie playing.  
Sometimes the scenes are cluttered with pictures  
of the past,  
Interspersed and jumbled with pictures of today.  
We cannot run, we cannot hide,  
Sometimes we can't abide the terrors that we have seen.  
So please be understanding  
When we seem far away.  
From the place we go, we don't know how to get away.  
But with your help and caring, we shall make it back at last.  
Thank you for understanding that helps us leave our past.

*Notes: I am a US Navy veteran of the Vietnam Era. I was also a contractor in Iraq during IOF for four years, 2004-2008. My poetry reflects that.*

## The Acronym Soldier

*By Jacob Lindholm*  
*VA Medical Center—Spokane, WA*

FOBs and COPs  
PCIs and PCCs  
MREs and 203s  
IEDs and EOD.

## U.S. Air Force Honor Band

*By Scott Sjostrand*

*VA Medical Center—Hallock, MN*

The U.S. Air Force honor band played  
Patriotic music throughout the land.  
On the Today Show, 4th of July,  
They looked and sounded perfect  
Under the canopy of a safe sky,  
With blue and silver uniforms,  
Their chosen attire.  
They played American music  
With a country to inspire.  
Their many songs were  
Pleasing to the ear.  
It was the sound of freedom  
For all to hear.  
They were well-rehearsed  
And played in perfect harmony  
For God and the entire world to see.  
So continue to aim high,  
Those dressed in blue.  
You represent a freedom—  
This much is true.

## Life on the Other Side

*By Kenneth Harvey*

*VA Medical Center—Richmond, VA*

Life on the other side.  
Step aside, life is a joy ride.  
No time while the mind is confined,  
appears to wander in meaningless destiny,  
entertains feelings of hope.  
Life on the other side in search of truth.  
Life now, twice on the other side.  
Look up.  
Welcome its climb.

## Lonely Children

*By Charles L. Carey*

*VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV*

There are too many children  
Living in the streets of pain,  
In the dark dewy nights, in cooling air.  
They're standing all alone  
In the chilling autumn dark,  
Portents of winter shadows in a quiet park.  
They're dreaming dreams beyond the sparkling lights  
Of life beneath sun-drenched skies,

And living in houses made of stone.  
They're waiting for their own dreams to appear,  
For lives without hunger and without fear,  
Waiting for someone to really care.  
Oh, for torches in their dreams,  
So like untarnished gold,  
Not glistening glass  
That shatters in the cold.  
Although they're reaching and trying to hold on to life,  
Another day brings more sudden tears,  
Falling at a painful price.  
Between childhood and survival they run and play,  
Hiding all their hurts and tears  
That drip silently within their seeming joy.  
They pile up their secret pain,  
Their deepening heartbreak,  
And only in dreams do they weep.  
They hope it will all change.  
Finally, one sparkling, sun-drenched morning  
A stranger did appear  
Who took a hand and held a child near.  
Finally noticed!  
Church bells rang true and clear.  
Inside there were words of hope  
Sounding so different from before.  
Now there is laughter true,  
Unlike days gone by,  
Real reasons for living, no need to cry.  
Those impossible dreams have all gone away,  
Replaced by reality in a different light  
And true laughter as they play.  
For a few, a true light did appear,  
Bringing joy.  
Life can be seen  
Without darkness or endless fear.

## Time Tells

*By Lisa J. Farabelli*

*VA Medical Center—Lebanon, PA*

I feel like I died ten times  
and came back as many people.  
Emotions are replayed,  
Thoughts are different.  
Circumstances are brand new,  
Phases of myself disappear.  
The meaning of life is never ending,  
Time tells the truth.

## Lonely Tombstones

*By Phil Hosier*

*VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ*

Wherever we go in this world and throughout, a field of marble  
and granite from early times and now stands all about.  
Some, so old with foundations crumbled, can no longer sit  
straight.

Caretakers of those graves have no doubt met their fate.

By dates, we know how long one has been here.

By names, we'll know if it is sonny boy or daughter dear.

By the shapes and sizes, there is no rhyme or reason, all laid to  
rest in all types of weather and in every season.

The stones with names looking to the sky, the occupants of that  
place surely asking—why?

The markers tell little about the life laid low, give us no hint if  
the soul went to Heaven or was sent to Hell way down below.

Sometimes the markers are so old and so blurred, we can only  
guess the many seasons the stone has endured.

The military markers may tell us more, sometimes the rank, unit  
and even what war.

Seniority doesn't count for much in this place.

We're all equal here once they've thrown dirt in our face.

These markers stand guard and testify for all to see  
that someone lived and are now a part of history.

*Written for my friend Chris Love.*

## Too Good

*By Dennis Silas*

*VA Medical Center—Danville, IL*

I've been too good to you.

I've made you smile

Made you cry

Made you get out of your comfort zone.

Had you to look in the mirror and ask yourself,

Is this the real me?

Had you pick a choice

Between God or Satan in our life,

Try and succeed

Or fail by Satan's command.

I've been too good to you.

I've been where you are trying to get to.

Life is too short

I am not a saint

But death is eternal.

I can continue to be good to you,

But it's your turn.

So what are you going to do,

Friend?

*Typist: D. Mitchell*

## The Masterpiece

*By Jason Kirk Bartley*

*VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH*

A Master painter set off one day,

He wanted to paint and so he did.

His student sat silently and snickered at the mess.

The canvas he saw was a glob of paint.

"Not no Masterpiece; a piece of art it ain't."

Well, the Master painter stood by his art.

He could see something beautiful had began to start.

He could envision the waves and the dark starry night  
behind the work.

His student had lost all faith and began to smirk.

The painter took out different hues of paint.

He mixed some colors with others and scratched lines for  
borders.

A lighthouse began to form in the midst of a violent sea,  
guiding lost ships to a sanctuary.

The Master painter painted away as his student just sat and  
sighed.

He poured out his creativity into a stormy night sky.

He painted a picture as if he had seen it with his own eye.

He bled onto the picture his heart and his soul.

His emotions flowed into the portrait.

He proudly signed his initials on the back.

It was auctioned some years later,

It brought a hefty price.

Nothing could repay the lesson a student  
had learned on that day by a Master painter  
who had a vision and made a way.

## Under the Weather

*By Lawrence William Langman*

*VA Medical Center—Portage, IN*

I've slid, I've slithered, I've crawled and I've crept.

All alone in the night, in my hovel, I've slept.

Off course I have landed; hostel territories I have found.

In this hell where I struggle, in this reality enemies abound.

My radio is damaged from the fall I had taken.

Static I hear through my tears, body quaking.

In my eyes tears swell; high ground I'll be taking.

My mind is strong; my training needs to save me.

Fire once, fire twice, two less foes in my wake.

Once again I reload; my wife I won't forsake!

I key my radio: three dots, three dashes, three dots I do send.

Make the ridge high above, chopper seen, must defend!

Suppressible fire from above, that rotor sound.

Forgive my sins.

## Open Your Door

*By Dermott Sullivan*

*VA Medical Center—Battle Creek, MI*

Like a cellar that's been locked for years,  
Been forgotten and never spoken of,  
It has so much in it, still there,  
Waiting for the right moment to arrive.  
It's been sunk in misery for so long,  
I'm afraid to open, but don't know why.  
There are some gifts still untouched  
Just waiting for me to claim.

Through all the years of darkness, it had  
Finally a light, beaming through a crack.  
I'm peeping, yet I do hesitate,  
'Cause I don't know whom to trust.  
The knock is light and the voice is low,  
Hoping not to frighten me at all.

It says, in a warm and friendly tone,  
If you let me in, I'll open your door.

*Typist: Elizabeth E. Marshall*

## Trapped, Afraid and Alone

*By Colleen Stanhouse*

*VA Medical Center—Memphis, TN*

In my mind, I am trapped,  
Looking for an elevation of who I am.  
Like a lion in a cage,  
So much hurt has turned to rage.  
I become savaged by my thoughts  
Thinking should I or shouldn't I  
Seek counsel within my soul,  
Asking God to heal my heart, restore all the holes,  
And the piece of me that got left behind.  
Do I stand in line?  
I am afraid because of intrusive dreams,  
Remembering that every thought  
Can be removed or made worse by me.  
In my dreams, I seem to keep falling,  
Keep falling.  
That little voice in me is calling.  
Entrapment is the way I protect me,  
Like no one else could see  
The Trapped,  
The Afraid,  
The Alone Me.

## Proud to Be an American

*By Helen Anderson Glass*

*VA Medical Center—Tucson, AZ*

I'm proud to be an American born, living in the USA.  
Free to go to school, work, vote and pray in my own way.  
We don't want a "new America."  
We want it as it used to be.  
We are proud to be Americans.  
"It was meant for you and me."  
We just need to renew our pledge of support and loyalty  
And help bring it back again.  
"The land of the brave and the home of the free."  
So stand up for America. Stand up proud and tall.  
The America we know will never give in,  
And we certainly will never let it fall.  
We pledge allegiance to our flag—  
The red, white and blue.  
We support our Constitution  
That governs what we say and do.  
English is our language. It has and will always be  
That which is spoken and written in America's history.  
You may speak in any language you prefer.  
But English is our language, you must remember.  
Our Statue of Liberty still welcomes visitors  
With open arms and heart, too.  
But this is our country, and our laws  
Are to be obeyed by you.  
So Americans, stand proud, stand tall and say,  
"I'm proud to be an American,  
And God bless the USA."

## Violet Valley

*By Frank X. Mattson*

*VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA*

Pagan drums  
Ancient music  
Dancing in  
Flowers  
A Roman  
Holiday  
All dressed  
For  
A  
Celebration  
Down a  
Violet  
Violent  
Valley.

# Proverbs

*By Scott Sjostrand*

*VA Medical Center—Hallock, MN*

The Book of Proverbs from the Holy Bible,  
If interpreted correctly, is like a bridle.  
It gives wise counsel: seek and ye shall find.  
It restores sight to the spiritually blind.  
It's said that Solomon wrote most of this book.  
If you're searching for wisdom, it's worth a look.  
A wise man has great power,  
And a man of knowledge increases strength.  
Wise counsel for your spiritual life  
Will increase its length.  
Do not be foolish, pay close attention  
Because there are hidden treasures  
Too numerous to mention.  
The Bible can guide you all of your life,  
It'll teach you how to deal with troubles and strife,  
And a faithful man will be richly blessed.  
The Book of Proverbs helps you pass many of life's tests.  
A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his Father,  
Studying God's word is certainly no bother.  
The righteous care about justice for the poor,  
To help the underprivileged gives meaning to life more.  
Proverbs 31: a woman extends her hands to the needy,  
She does not eat the bread of idleness  
And, no, she's not greedy.  
These words of wit can help you as a guide,  
Just remember not to be filled with arrogant pride.

## THE 22

*By Richard Wangard*

*VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI*

Three hundred and forty million of us?  
One percent take the oath—  
Protect us  
Our way of life  
Our freedom.  
Follow orders  
Lawful ones  
No questions asked  
Disciplined.  
Loyal and dedicated  
All branches, all ages  
Both sexes.  
Why the epidemic  
That goes unnoticed?  
Just a few organizations trying  
And trying to help.  
The numbers do not change  
I know why

I can feel why  
Several reasons  
Pretty much all but ignored.  
Mental Health?  
Who will admit to it  
Especially active duty?  
Pressure and stress  
Deployment after deployment  
PTSD and TBI  
Just carry on.  
Who cares?  
The military?  
The VA?  
Try to get in!  
The country?  
Its citizens?  
Foundations with billions?  
A national epidemic!  
Each year  
A full combat infantry brigade  
Or an aircraft carrier with one escort—gone forever.  
An entire air wing—where are they?  
Seventy-two thousand less Marines  
Twenty-two vets per day no longer here and alive  
As our nation watches  
Heads buried in the sand.  
Not mine!  
These are brothers and sisters  
For I know the brotherhood  
Peacetime and combat.  
Wake up, America!  
Thank you for your service?  
How do you tell that  
To a dead vet?  
National epidemic  
Nobody wants to see!

## Witch Hunt

*By Frank X. Mattson*

*VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA*

He cast a  
Smile.  
They stared.  
He turned  
And gave  
Out  
A horse laugh.  
He left  
The room.  
She rode  
Away on  
Her broom.

# The House on Ovington Ave.

*By Daniel Kent Merwin*

*VA Medical Center—Brooklyn, NY*

For 158 years, it stood—  
The house on Ovington Ave.  
Its tan bricks covered with mass and age,  
Its iron gates still standing tall.  
Window panes still brown and beige,  
Gargoyles still standing guard upon the wall.  
Its Victorian-era style, an anachronism  
To the surrounding lots and apartment buildings.  
Its stained glass windows a reflecting prism  
When sunlight powers its radiant shining.

But when moonlight's glow comes down at night  
On the house on Ovington Ave.,  
Feral cats, raccoons and crows all  
Keep their distance, knowing well what  
Goes on inside its walls of antiquity,  
A place of cryptic but well-known mystery.  
The morbidity of events cast the house  
As a place of death. All townfolk are wary,  
For always a visitor decides to intrude  
Only to run mad or suddenly vanish.

And if you were to ask what lies within  
The house on Ovington Ave.,  
The common stories speak of cults,  
Whispering walls, rooms that grow.  
The horror and mystery consume the history  
Where people vanish, but the house remains.  
The truths adjust as strangers discuss  
Their invasive excursions and wild versions  
Of what they saw, what they heard.  
And average plebes believe lines that are blurred  
Of fact and fiction, a contradiction  
Of what was originally seen by me.  
What was originally heard and believed  
By those whose place in the land has lasted  
For generations. They know what happened.  
They know what happens to this day  
To anyone who dares enter the fray  
Of arcane madness that will cut through  
Those who enter the house on Ovington Ave.

## The Loss of My Friend

*By Colleen Stanhouse*

*VA Medical Center—Memphis, TN*

My mother would hear my sounds and voice,  
and know something down deep inside.  
She could sense the deepest emotion and draw near to me.

It was her acceptance that I need to feel  
coming from the soul. My heart aches

At this loss of my friend, mother and advisor in need.  
The rock, stone or stability bleeds.  
The tears of Love were shed  
because my mother made loving me easy.

God above showered flowers to bloom in every room.  
The pink, red and white roses are all in my last sight.  
My friend will watch over me tonight.  
The loss of my parent, mother and best friend  
will deepen a dark shadow on me.  
But rejoice because my mother is in heaven with God above.

The angels did guide her all the way home.  
She now doesn't need to roam.  
Feeling pride and accomplishment in what she taught me  
provides strength in my heart, you see.  
The golden rays will lead up, and she will follow  
many she knows and many she doesn't.  
Following the voice of Love.

My mother, my loss, my best friend,  
will be a guiding light to the end.  
The gentle voice of God will be my choice.  
I will see my mother then, hear a kind voice  
as God watches all who know me, draws me close to heaven,  
where my mother and friend will stand with me at the gate.

## The Winter Wind Blows

*By Charles L. Carey*

*VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV*

When the winter wind blows,  
Fierce and loud,  
Through leafless trees  
And enchanted clouds,  
I hear lake waters run  
And wonder if the coming day  
Will bring the sun.  
Lake waters are lapping at the shore,  
A steady rhythm that reminds me of the cadence  
Of soldiers marching off to war.  
When the winter winds roar their raging sound,  
Blowing through farmlands,  
Across deserted-looking little towns,  
All creatures cower and hide  
From wind sounds so loud.  
The sky is filled with a huge rolling cloud.

## The Most Precious Christmas Gift

*By Karen A. Green*

*VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV*

When people think of Christmas gifts  
they think of pretty paper and strings,  
but the most precious Christmas gift  
is the child who heard angels sing.

Children get gifts  
with toys so they can play,  
but the most precious Christmas gift ever  
had a bed filled with hay.

People make New Year's resolutions  
to make changes to do their part,  
but the path Jesus took  
was known from the start.

He wasn't like other children  
who can play and run.  
He was born  
as God's only Son.

He was killed  
by those He came to save,  
but He's alive forevermore—  
he's not in a grave.

He gave the gift of Salvation  
to those who accept it.  
He stands at the door—  
have you asked Him in yet?

The most precious Christmas gift  
was born the King of Kings.  
He was born in a manger  
surrounded by animals and angel wings.

He is the most precious gift  
to us from God above.  
He's a gift  
filled with passion and love.

So when you make  
a list of gifts to give,  
share the Gospel, so they'll know  
God who will help them live.

The most precious Christmas gift  
can't be bought, and we can't afford.  
He was a free gift  
from our wonderful Lord.

## The Sleep of Leaves

*By William L. Snead*

*VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI*

Sleeping autumn leaves  
That glisten in the rain  
Remind us of golden,  
Green summers once again.  
We drowse and dream  
And hear the ring,  
Then a ting,  
Of the beauty  
Of spring's most  
Perfect Song,  
As she opens her  
Yearning wings  
With loving warmth  
To flee from last  
Winter's biting stings.

## The Wall

*By Charles Kinler*

*VA Medical Center—Little Rock, AR*

She stood there staring quietly,  
A lone daisy held in her hand.  
Her second child lay in her womb;  
They say her first looks like the man.

The names, Oh Lord, so so many,  
She continues her search for a while.  
As a shadow was cast on her son,  
Her memories brought back a smile.

She was but only five years old,  
Her memories search through the past  
Of playing together in the park.  
This remembrance forever will last.

A small hand tugged at her arm,  
"Look, Mommy, I see Grandpa's name."  
As the eight-year-old touched the wall,  
It was then that the weeping came.

"My daddy," she choked back a tear.  
She placed her hand on the wall,  
"I named your grandson after you;  
Already he has grown so tall."

Quietly she put the daisy down  
And kissed the name carved in black.  
She took her son's hand and walked away  
And knew she could never come back.

## To Donna G.

*By Sean Richards*

*VA Medical Center—Fort Worth, TX*

Other than my wife, she is the only one  
that can get me to work for free.  
She is one aggressive lady  
who is the only one I will volunteer for.  
She is creative and industrious,  
a go-getter who knows what she wants.  
She can put up with my stubborn pride  
and aggressive nature.  
She has helped me calm my stubbornness  
and get along with others.  
She has helped me from my shell  
and taught me to be less aggressive.  
She is my recreation specialist at my local VA.  
She can make a difference for you as well.  
Visit your local VA soon!

## Waiting Time

*By Kimberly Green*

*VA Medical Center—Fort Smith, AR*

Eighty-nine...and not a day older,  
The combat veteran waited.  
He never complained or flinched,  
He just sat getting colder and colder.

Watching him from afar,  
Noticing the blood as it ran,  
Why is this veteran being ignored?  
Does no one understand?

It's because of the veteran  
That you employees have jobs.  
But these employees could care less,  
To them he is just another cog.

Eight hours he sat,  
Not a sound did he make.  
No one came or called  
While the combat veteran withered away.

Surviving Normandy and Nazis,  
He helped liberate the Jews.  
But the combat veteran  
Could not survive the VA emergency room.

No more lists!  
No more excessive waiting times!

## What Is Our Purpose

*By Dermott Sullivan*

*VA Medical Center—Battle Creek, MI*

In our journey of life  
There are many obstacles we will endure.  
Yes, there will be difficulties indeed  
Which at times may seem impossible.  
We have to seek the right alternatives  
Or our lives will be greatly disturbed.  
We are always looking for the answers  
Not knowing where they will come from.

As we travel the path we meet many people.  
We share our knowledge with each other  
Hoping we will understand our myths,  
Only to discover the multitude of them all.  
So as we continue from day to day  
We are forever striving for what is our purpose.

*Typist: Elizabeth E. Marshall*

## The Final Cut

*By Clinton Jarrett*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

The table saw in the wood shop sits idol,  
longing for a strong hand to adjust the fence,  
to engage the power and set the blade whirling  
until the individual teeth, like your final year, become a blur.  
The whirling madness chews away  
the last few inches before spitting splinters.  
The board drops off the edge and crashes to the floor.

## Won't You Buy a Toy Balloon?

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

An old man on a busy street  
Was selling toy balloons.  
As I drew near to him  
I heard him sing this tune:

Won't you buy a toy balloon?  
I think they're very nice,  
The colors of the rainbow,  
A nickel is their price.

The children like to hold the string  
And watch them float about.  
Won't you buy a toy balloon  
And help an old man out?

I sell them at the carnival  
And at the county fair,  
On the street and at the park.  
Children gather there.

I like to watch them run and play  
And hear their merry shouts.  
Won't you buy a toy balloon  
And help an old man out?

**Author's Note:** *This is a very nostalgic poem which brings to mind the days of old. They were simpler times when a balloon was just enough to satisfy. Memories of going to the carnival or the county fair swarm as you read this poem. I remember the old man who used to stand in the park trying to sell his balloons.*

## Stories

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

We spend much free time in their pages.  
They tell us who we are in many ways.  
Great Scott! What friendly sages!  
Our imagination soars! We fly!  
We go to many places far away!  
Great mysteries are solved at last.  
We celebrate the common day.  
We come to know new heroes.  
We seem to break out of our shell.  
The climax ends, at last, in logic.  
We love the stories that they tell.  
All words on paper come to life somehow,  
And give us pictures for our minds to see.  
We turn new pages more and more each day,  
And know our life is what it's meant to be.  
They entertain us! They heal!

## Ambassadors Sought

We are looking for individuals to help spread the word about Veterans Voices Writing Project. If you are passionate about *Veterans' Voices* and want to help tell our story, email your contact information to [lkesinger@veteransvoices.org](mailto:lkesinger@veteransvoices.org) or call us at 816-701-6844 and leave your name and number.

# Mail Call

"Thank you for publishing my work. I am humbled," wrote **Paul D. Gongales**, Albuquerque, NM He returned his award check "as I only write to heal and cleanse my soul."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**Diane Wasden**, Millen, Ga., said "Thanks ever so much for the prize money. I enjoy writing for you all and I hope to connect with others in some way." She returned her prize check.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Thank you for helping veterans. I can't tell you how much I look forward to receiving the magazine," wrote **Ronald Mosbaugh**, Joplin, Mo. "Writing my stories and seeing them in print improves my self-esteem considerably." He enclosed a subscription and gift to *Veterans' Voices*.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**Helen Anderson Glass**, Tucson, Ariz., will be the Grand Marshall in the local Veterans Day parade on Nov. 11. She returned her award check and wrote, "I am honored that my writing and poetry were published in the summer issue of *Veterans' Voices*...I have so much pleasure writing items and specially military and patriotic poems. It is my at-home therapy. ..I received several calls from people who saw it." Helen received a letter from Joyce Barry, newsletter editor, Richmond Central (Va.) Chapter of the American Sewing Guild asking her permission to print her poem, "Bits and Pieces." One of their members had read it in *Veterans' Voices* and was so taken with her poem that she asked to have it published in their newsletter. Helen is 96 and still going strong!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A new submission was received from **Albert Wright**, Cleveland, Ohio. He wrote, "I pray that you will accept "Short Story" as my offering to your magazine project. Although I am 73 years old, I had never heard of this publication...The VA Domiciliary rescued me by offering me a place to lay my head and hence I encountered *Veterans' Voices* and here I am knocking at your door and asking to be let in."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

VFW Auxiliary #318, Olympia, WA, sent a donation in memory of an Auxiliary member, **Sylvia Behrends**, who worked tirelessly for veterans and their families.

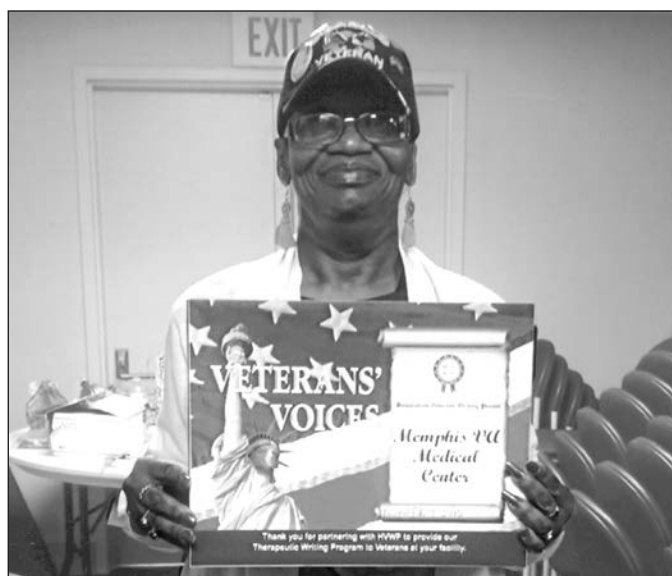
"We enjoy sharing the writings from *Veterans' Voices* magazine at our Auxiliary meetings," wrote **Ruth Holmgren**, Pelican Rapids, MN. "Your providing the opportunity for veterans to share their writings is wonderful."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Congratulations on a fine summer issue! Once again you honor me with putting my words in print," wrote **Rich Wangard**, Neenah, Wisc. "The power of *Veterans' Voices* knows no bounds and saves lives! By letting a veteran express in his own time and place words on paper, he/she can find the courage to share with others showing themselves with their thoughts and compassion." Rich returned his author award check "in hopes of great future issues to read and I send more because this is our platform, our voice, our outlet, and for some – real entertainment. Let all of us authors support *Veterans' Voices* as much as we can. It takes great effort and money to produce and thanks to all the volunteers! What special people."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**Sharon M. Gartrell** (photo below) wrote that she conducted her first Writers Workshop at the Memphis VAMC. Medical Center staff and volunteers assisted Sharon with the inaugural session. Her star volunteers were her granddaughter and that teen's "other" grandmother. A nearby VFW post provided lunch for those in attendance. Sharon used visual aides to inspire participants to "tell their story" in either prose or poetry. She is an award-winning contributor to *Veterans' Voices* and is so committed to writing as therapy that she is determined to help others write and submit their work to the magazine. Sharon is looking forward to conducting subsequent workshops!



# Thank You



Contributions to *Veterans' Voices*, both the writing and the financial gifts, are an inspiration to the editors and publishers of the magazine.

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

– VVWP Board of Directors.

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## **Gifts of \$20,000 or more**

## **Gifts of \$15,000 or more**

## **Gifts of \$10,000 or more**

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

## **Gifts of \$3,000 or more**

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

Bowlers to Veterans, Fairfax, Va.  
Carol Habgood, San Antonio, Texas  
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Shirley & Barnett Helzberg, Shawnee  
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WAC Vets Natl., Weaver, Ala.

## **Gifts of \$500 or more**

Jake Paltzer, Appleton, Wis.

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

Lynn Mackle, Palm Beach, Fla.  
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Samual Hall, Albuquerque, N.M.  
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## **Gifts of \$100 or more**

American Legion Auxiliary 257,

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DAVA 34, Lenexa, Kan.  
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Patricia Meads, Roeland Park, Kan.  
Michael Lucas, Monterey, Tenn.  
Marianne Watson, Wheatland, Mo.

## **Gifts In-Kind**

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, artwork or photograph. Published submissions also qualify for special Awards made possible by generous donors. Those Awards are listed below.

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



## FOUNDERS'

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

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

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

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

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

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

## STORIES — *Fact or Fiction*

**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

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

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

## SPECIAL CATEGORIES

**Joseph Posik Award:** Given to a veteran who encourages other 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.

## Instructions for Writing Submissions.

To submit writing online, go to [www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/](http://www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/) or [www.veteransvoices.org](http://www.veteransvoices.org) and select **Registration**.

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

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

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

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

## Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

### SUBMIT ONLINE:

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

### SUBMIT BY MAIL:

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

### QUESTIONS:

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

## Mail Submission Sample.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

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

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

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

# Heal Through Visual Art

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

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

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

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

## Artwork Submission Guidelines

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

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



**Submit Today!**  
For a Future Issue

Calling for  
Photographs,  
Drawings and  
Paintings



## Digital Submissions

*Submit artwork as a digital file  
either online or by mail.*

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

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

*Please reproduce this announcement to encourage others to enter the contest!*



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