

VETERANS' VOICES

A Story Worth Telling

“Everybody has a story to tell.”

By Thor Ringler

Things Undone

On Suicide and Other Things Undone
by Joaquin R. Roces

Leaving a Mark on History

by Matt Davison

Alone

by Dan Yates



A Story Worth Telling

By Thor Ringler

“I don’t have much of a story.”

It is the most common thing that veterans say to me when I tell them I want to interview them about their lives. And I always tell them the truth, “It’s the people who tell me that, who always have the interesting stories.”

I’ve interviewed hundreds of veterans at VA hospitals over the last seven years. I’ve laughed with them. Cried with them. Sat with them in silence. But mostly I’ve just listened to them. And they have taught me a lot. I never served in the military, but each of these interviews is a lesson for me, another step forward on a long journey. I know much more about the military and the veteran experience than I did seven years ago, but I still feel like I know nothing.

You are probably wondering, “How does this guy still have a job, if he knows nothing?” It’s because I have a job where knowing nothing is an asset, where being curious is the job, where the best way to spend an hour is to talk and connect and share that hour with someone I’ve never met.

I’m a writer and it is my job to interview veterans and write up their life stories. Once they have edited the story and approved it, I print out copies of the story for them to

share with family and friends. I also put a copy of the story in their VA medical chart so their nurses and doctors can learn more about them. It’s a program called My Life, My Story and it’s available now at over 50 VA hospitals around the country.

If I’ve learned one thing, it’s that everybody has a story to tell, a story that is worth telling, a story that can teach us something about how to live our own lives.

In the words [slightly updated] of Mark Twain: “No narrative that tells the details of a person’s life in their own words can be uninteresting.” Our stories don’t have to be heroic, or tragic, or earth-shattering to be memorable. All they need to be is human, to reveal those common threads of hope, disappointment, loss and joy that hold us together.

I encourage you to share your story.

The magazine you are holding in your hands (or reading on a screen) is a great way to do it. *Veterans’ Voices* is a forum for you, for veterans who have stories, poems, and truths to tell. Use it.

Writing isn’t easy. It is scary to put it down in words, to put it out there, to believe that

someone will listen. But they will. So, start writing. You have something to say. Don’t wait until tomorrow.

In the words of a one veteran who was interviewed for the My Life, My Story project: “Going through this process of writing my life story has helped relieve some of the pain (physical and emotional) but more importantly just when I thought I hadn’t made an impact on anyone’s life, after sharing my story with family/friends, I realize that I did.”



Thor Ringler is a poet and a therapist. He is the national program manager for My Life, My

Story and works as a writer-editor at the VA hospital in Madison, WI. He has an MFA in Poetry from the University of Pittsburgh and an MS in Marriage and Family Therapy from Edgewood College.

Veterans' Voices®

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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.

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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.

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Veterans' Voices®

Fall 2020 Vol. 68, No. 3

A Story Worth Telling	2
<i>By Thor Ringle</i>	
Mail Call	63
Special Prizes for Writers	64
Thank You	65
Submission Guidelines	66
Heal Through Visual Art	67

Prose

The Bathrobe	7
<i>By Tanya Whitney</i>	
Courageous Cora	7
<i>By Faith Fables</i>	
Change	9
<i>By Richard Wangard</i>	
Leaving a Mark on History	10
<i>By Matt Davison</i>	
It's Your Life	12
<i>By Diane Wasden</i>	
Say Something	12
<i>By Kevin Joinville</i>	
Taking the Reins	16
<i>By Trina Mioner</i>	
The Forgotten	17
<i>By Steven Russell, Jr.</i>	
Memories of Mole City	17
<i>By Peter Steciow, Jr.</i>	
What the "Star-Spangled Banner" Means to Me!	18
<i>By Kimberly Green</i>	
My Last Ride	18
<i>By Support Our Troops Committee Zaloga Post, American Legion</i>	
Duty on a Cold Winter Night	19
<i>By Newberry Scott</i>	
Things Undone - On Suicide and Other Things Undone	20
<i>By Joaquin R. Rocas</i>	
The Power of Reunions	23
<i>By Jim Barker</i>	
Story of My Experience	24
<i>By Robert Opekun</i>	
Long Black Shawl	27
<i>By Lawrence Rahn</i>	

Hard Consonants and Red Gladiolas	28
<i>By Donald MacDougall</i>	
What Freedom Means to Me May 28, 2020	31
<i>By Richard Wangard</i>	
Happy Veterans Day	32
<i>By Diane Wasden</i>	

Artwork

Forever in My Heart	33
<i>By Keely Seymour</i>	
Art 11	33
<i>By Daniel Strange</i>	
God Bless Our American Door	34
<i>By Penny Deere</i>	
Calendar Cover	34
<i>By Zaloga Post American Legion Support Our Troops Committee</i>	
Watching the Sunset on a Sunday Afternoon	34
<i>By Anthony Phillips</i>	
Jitterbug	34
<i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	
Art 3	35
<i>By Daniel Strange</i>	
Smoke	35
<i>By Demetrius Kastrenakes</i>	
If Only Everyone Saw the Glory	35
<i>By Jacquelyn Cranford</i>	
Communication	35
<i>By Diane Wasden</i>	
Art 5	35
<i>By Daniel Strange</i>	
Heading Home	36
<i>By Ty Andrews</i>	
ART 6	36
<i>By Donald Sherwood</i>	
Soul Rider	36
<i>By John Payne</i>	
Drawing 4	37
<i>Bruce McClain</i>	
ART 10	37
<i>By Donald Sherwood</i>	
Silence!	37
<i>By Diane Wasden</i>	

Art Heals	37
<i>By Kenny Trujillo6</i>	
Robiton	37
<i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	

Poems

Love	38
<i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	
Gethsemane	38
<i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	
Guilt-Free Prayer	38
<i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>	
I'm Going to Spend Christmas With You	38
<i>By Anthony Cocozza</i>	
What Does Veterans Day Mean to Me?	38
<i>By John E. Jones</i>	
The Enchanted Chair	39
<i>By Charles L. Carey</i>	
The Youthful Man	39
<i>By Charles L. Carey</i>	
Captain Ahab and Moby Dick	39
<i>By Scott Lehman</i>	
Captain Trump	39
<i>By Scott Lehman</i>	
Blow Wind, Blow	40
<i>By CJ Reeves</i>	
Infinite Intelligence	40
<i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>	
Thanksgiving Day	40
<i>By John E. Jones</i>	
My Prayer	41
<i>By Karen A. Green</i>	
Women of African Descent	41
<i>By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.</i>	
Exceptionally You	42
<i>By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.</i>	
'Tis the Season	42
<i>By Scott Sjostrand</i>	
To Feed the Poor	42
<i>By Scott Sjostrand</i>	
Moments of Introspection	43
<i>By Benjamin J. Williams</i>	
Welcome Home	43
<i>By Tanya R. Whitney</i>	
Listen	44
<i>By Lawrence William Langman</i>	

Let Freedom Ring	44
<i>By Gene Allen Groner</i>	
Color of the Day	44
<i>By Carl Kerwick</i>	
For Those We Take for Granted	44
<i>By Helen Anderson Glass</i>	
Long History	45
<i>By Carl Kerwick</i>	
Get With It	45
<i>By Charles S. Parnell</i>	
The Arrival of 5 Composers with Hyphenated Names ...	45
<i>By Charles S. Parnell</i>	
Blood of Our Best	45
<i>By Michael Moslander</i>	
Heroine	46
<i>By Michael Moslander</i>	
Drinkers	46
<i>By Lynn A. Norton</i>	
Human Again	47
<i>By Kimberly Green</i>	
I'm	47
<i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	
A Soldier Lies Here	47
<i>By Jason Kirk Bartley</i>	
Just a Poet	48
<i>By Dan Yates</i>	
This Is How You Heal	48
<i>By Anthony Ramirez</i>	
Free Fare	48
<i>By Anthony Ramirez</i>	
We Are Women Veterans	48
<i>By Helen Anderson Glass</i>	
Judgement Day	49
<i>By Diane Wasden</i>	
Winter's Way	49
<i>By Lisa J. Farabelli</i>	
Ebony and Ivory and Many Shades of Gray	49
<i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	
God Bless America	49
<i>By David Wesley Samson</i>	
You Never Saw Me	50
<i>By Wayne A. Ince</i>	
The Sandbox	50
<i>By David Wesley Samson</i>	
Army Strong	50
<i>By Trina M. Mioner</i>	
1969	50
<i>By Michael Kuklenski</i>	

Alone 51	Shadows 56
<i>By Dan Yates</i>	<i>By Jay B. Massey</i>
A Winter's Tale 51	Mind Darkness 57
<i>By Wallace D. McGregor</i>	<i>By Val Benitez</i>
The Last Kiss 51	Today 57
<i>By William L. Snead</i>	<i>By Val Benitez</i>
Highway of Death 51	First on the Field 57
<i>By Kimberly Green</i>	<i>By John M. Koelsch</i>
Spring Is Gone 52	Warriors for Peace 58
<i>By William L. Snead</i>	<i>By William Wyatt Hull</i>
Uncle Sam 52	Heavenly Encounter 58
<i>By Kenny Trujillo</i>	<i>By Kellie Davenda Daniels</i>
Sacrifice 52	Say Hey 58
<i>By Kenny Trujillo</i>	<i>By Larrie David Green, Sr.</i>
My Guitar 52	We're All Equal 59
<i>By Louise Diane Eisenbrandt</i>	<i>By Jason Kirk Bartley</i>
Believing 2020 53	Conscience 59
<i>By VicTor</i>	<i>By Robert John Valonis</i>
"Golden Years" War 53	The Ocean's Reflection in Me 59
<i>By Ronald Nash</i>	<i>By Anthony Phillips</i>
For Many of Us Older Vets 53	Listen to the Wind 59
<i>By Michael Young</i>	<i>By Anthony Phillips</i>
Willing 53	Dolly 60
<i>By Kellie Davenda Daniels</i>	<i>By Robert John Valonis</i>
Forty-Five Years Ago 54	Flight 60
<i>By Michael Young</i>	<i>By Richard Wangard</i>
The Vietnamese Boy 54	Winter Sunrise 60
<i>By John Henningson</i>	<i>By Gene Allen Groner</i>
Dire Straits 54	Nocturnal Wind 61
<i>By Lawrence William Langman</i>	<i>By William Kurrle</i>
Retreat 54	I Can't Breathe 61
<i>By Demetrius Kastrenakes</i>	<i>By CJ Reeves</i>
Dealing With Covid-19 55	I Am Grateful 62
<i>By Sean Richards</i>	<i>By Christine Rose Hazuka</i>
The World 55	A Hero's Hero 62
<i>By Demetrius Kastrenakes</i>	<i>By Anthony Cocozza</i>
The Masked Generation 55	Yonder Comes Your Man 62
<i>By Sean Richards</i>	<i>By Anthony Kambeitz</i>
Coronavirus 55	Trust Your Maker 62
<i>By Diane Wasden</i>	<i>By Anthony Kambeitz</i>
When 56	
<i>By John Henningson</i>	
Reflections 56	
<i>By Jay B. Massey</i>	

The Bathrobe

By Tanya Whitney

VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

In the far recesses of my closet, hangs a bath robe. It is yellowed with age and threadbare in some places. The robe is made of cotton chenille popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Once upon a time it was light blue and hung on the door of my great-grandmother's bedroom.

Lenora Leader was my mother's grandmother and we called her Momo. She was only about 4 feet 9 inches tall and weighed about 90 pounds soaking wet as my grandmother (her daughter) would say. She lived alone in the house where she and my great-grandfather raised seven children, buried two young sons, and later raised my mother's three cousins. It was off a gravel road which was later paved. I can remember going there in the summers. We would pop hot tar bubbles in the road with our bare feet until they were black and sticky. Then we would climb the pear tree out front, confident we would not slip and fall with our feet covered in tar.

I remember my Momo Leader would get up early in the morning, keeping to her farmer's hours even though there was no longer a farm and Popo Leader had passed away when I was three. She would get up, put on her bathrobe and start breakfast. Once it was ready, she would call us all in to eat. We would be scattered around the table, us in our pajamas and Momo in her bathrobe. After breakfast we would be shooed outside to play while she cleaned up the kitchen and then changed her clothes. The bathrobe would be hung back onto the hook for the day until the next time she would wear it.

We got the call she had passed away when I was 15 years old. We drove down to the house and started getting it cleaned up. Being old school, my Momo wanted her wake at her house and then wanted her buried at the local cemetery next to her husband and sons. My mother was tasked with going through her closet to choose an outfit for Momo to be buried in. While following her around the bedroom, I spied the bathrobe hanging on the door. I waited until no one would see, took the robe off the door and hid it in our car. Once we got home, I brought it to my room and hung it in my closet--a reminder of her warmth, patience, and

love. For many years it held her scent, that lilac bath powder she always put on. Today it no longer holds her scent, but one look at it brings back the memories of those summers spent at her house.

Courageous Cora

By Faith Fables

—Portland, OR

She sat on the park bench under a tree by the front gate guard post. This place at her first military base was her comfort zone. She was surprised when she saw it was still there. It was 20 years ago when she found it, and she sat to watch the guards at work while she ate an ice cream cone. They were still there in their combat issue with heavy loaded long guns at their sides. They stopped every car and leaned in to question the occupants. They stopped everyone on foot as well and questioned them. Cora usually didn't allow herself to go back in her memory, but today was special. She would be mustering out tomorrow and she'd allow it.

Escaping a pimp isn't easy. It takes a whole lot of courage. She was only 17, and weak. He told her, "If I can't have you, no one can." He said he would find her anywhere she went, and first she would suffer from his torture, and then he would brutally kill her. She had seen his temper tantrums. He took her high heel shoe in his hand, and raising it asked her, "What will break first when I take this and beat your head in with it? The heel, or your skull? Don't ever say to me you will leave me again, not ever!"





She was his money bag, his personal bank, counting out hundred-dollar bills in his greedy palms at will. When walking, his fists were always balled into his pockets.

The day she had the courage to escape her pimp and prostitution was terrifying. She waited for her train to pull in at the station. It was the last time in her life she remembered having uncontrollable body trembling. Where did her courage come from? That courage to escape? Can someone be born with courage? Can someone make it?

She had an address of an older brother a few states away. But after only a few days in his studio apartment, he told her he couldn't afford to feed her, and he had a life of his own to live, and she didn't fit there, and she'd have to leave.

She'd met a U.S. military recruiter that first week in town. Was it luck or destiny? She thought no one will ever have to know about her past. No one will ever know, not him or anyone in Cora's 20 years in the military would ever know about the violent pimp and the prostitution.

It was her secret, always and forever.

So she tried the military. She made it through boot camp and then on another week, then another month, then a year, then 20 years.

Sure, there were guys in the early days who flirted and pursued her and asked for dates. When she showed no interest and didn't respond, there would sometimes be insults, and jokes from some

of the guys. But, unaffected, she walked away smiling to herself and thinking, "You know nothing. You know so little. You just don't know anything."

After active duty for about 10 years, she tried civilian life for a while. She got an apartment, a car, and enjoyed not reporting her whereabouts all the time. She went shopping, to shows and museums and to lunch with friends. But soon she realized civilian life wasn't for her. She missed the military and her military family. She reenlisted and was deployed to another part of the world where she soon realized what her destiny here on earth was to be.

You see my fellow warriors, as my friend Cora would tell you, if you haven't been there yet, there is a part of the world where females are nothing more than chattel. They can be stoned to death by the men in a barren field for nothing more than having an opinion. Cora had driven by this happening to a woman one day, and the woman's cries and screams would remain forever in Cora's memory.

Women in one of the countries could be burned to death out on the street by their husbands if they got tired of them.

One practice was that girls nine years old were commonly sold into sexual and/or domestic slavery. Others of nine sometimes had to experience painful female circumcision without anesthesia and done with unsterilized tools.

In most of these places women were not allowed to drive any vehicles or read anything other than their holy books. And, a normal practice was to feed all the males present at a meal first. When the males were finished, the leftover food was the meal for the females in the household.

I could go on and on with more common practices of abuse and violent abuse in that part of the world, where females were nothing more than chattel, but you get the picture here, I'm sure.

So in 2020 why does this continue to go on? Well, because no one even knows where to begin to stop it all. Cultural and religious practices of others are not something we are prepared to challenge and attempt to change. That is what I think, and Cora agreed. So the violent abuse continues every day, every year.

Now, for Cora. Well, she wanted to go back, even though she would have been basically powerless. She'd had many restrictions put on her behavior over there. It was in her training. But she knew there was sometimes eye contact with the women. Certainly she could pray.

Once she was close enough to a woman that their hands touched, and they squeezed each other's hands. Women communication. Hugging was discouraged. However, they could see her standing tall in her uniform, see her interaction with brother warriors. She felt she could set an example. Leave them? Desert them? Cora could not and would not leave them.

So Cora volunteered to be redeployed back over there. She rolled up her unis, got on the next flight over, and returned to base. Not long after that she was called to battle. Readiness for combat was in her training. Her ammunition was in order. She followed commands.

That was the day Cora died in battle. That day she had taken out many male enemy combatants who were known to her as abusers. She was very happy when she died. Her remains were flown home. Her ashes rest in the Hero's Wall at a local cemetery.

The bench on base is still there. I walked past it not long ago, and it was surrounded by yellow detailed daisies, the color of Cora's hair. There was a young woman sitting there watching the guard post. She was sipping her coffee in the comfort zone. The gate where pimps cannot enter. The gate where abusive males cannot enter. She watched. A guy with a trumpet marched by practicing the songs of the five branches: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard.

I was glad to be an American woman warrior. And proud to have known Courageous Cora.



Change

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

Seems like forever since I last wrote for *Veterans' Voices*. So busy writing legal things for a friend and trying to help him where there is no change or compassion. Yet we both fight on being the vets we are. Two different wars but death knows no difference and if exposed to enough of it you are altered forever. My friend has both TBI and PTSD and I have just PTSD because I was not blown up.

Soon---sooner than I want. Change will happen to me in a big way. I will go to a place that is beautiful and a luxury resort. It is called King Veterans Home here in Wisconsin. About 650 vets and their wives live there and it is a full care nursing facility. The stories I will be able to convey for *Veterans' Voices* about these vets is endless. Many have had a stroke and can not write but they can talk just fine. Different stages of problems affect the vets. Some are young like me and so I will start a writing group. You should see their multi-media center. It has the best of everything and I am so looking forward to real computers and ease of work as I learn the new tech. Most of all I look forward to sharing with *Veterans' Voices* what these heroes are all about and why! Imagine the stories of each one. At King there is a huge military cemetery of all vets. Guys die at King and then join their brothers for eternity. Every year there is a huge motorcycle rally to King and we ride through the cemetery to pay our respects. I have never missed a year and I don't plan on missing one for a long time. I am just 70 but I am 100 percent disabled from all kinds of things. Not the greatest heart as well as bladder cancer and a little short on breath, but all in all a pretty spry 70 that loves to write.

Change is hard for most people. They don't seem to like it too much and I must say I am nervous. I like being independent and my wife still loves this house. She will stay here until she is ready to join me. I don't want her to have to play nursemaid to me anymore. Twenty-five operations were enough and she has a very active church lifestyle with many friends. I can come and go at King and it is only one half hour away from my house so that is handy — both for me and my wife. No real long distance driving either way. The one problem is that you only get 12 furlough days a year but you may write the commandant of King and ask for more as long as you have a good plan for care and usually for visiting family. I know I will adjust and there are activities all the time. Everything you can imagine but it is change from what I am used to. Like all things you can embrace it, fear it, doubt it,

complain, or have a positive attitude. Feelings are dealt with by mental health and the care is outstanding.

Beautiful place right on the Chain-O-Lakes so the fish are in real trouble! Yeah we go fishing too!

I am excited and Sandy (my wife) knows I need some help but not too much so this place represents the perfect match. Even my dog can visit!

Life throws many changes at us—marriage—kids—work—different play opportunities as we are young and then grow a little older until we really are old. Change keeps happening throughout the life span. Our feelings change too. We can Love or Hate. We can be Happy, Sad, Joyful, Depressed, Jealous, Soulful, Spirited. We can take risks or play it safe. Our changes are sometimes made by the choices we make and other times there are no choices at all and change is sudden and shocking. War is a good example and all the armed services are good examples too. I am happy to be going to where my brothers are. It all started when I was 17 and joined the Air Force and flew and spent all my time in Vietnam and Okinawa. A time that changed me forever and I would do all over again in a heartbeat. Still, that is the most worthwhile thing I ever accomplished in my life. Nobody could see that change—it just happened and by the time it had happened I was changed forever. For good and ill!



Leaving a Mark on History

By Matt Davison

VA Medical Center—Long Beach, CA

Serving incarcerated veterans creates bonds with warriors who took part in wars spanning Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf. One vet, who was incarcerated at the Federal Correctional Institution at Terminal Island, Calif., preceded all these wars and became a valued friend. Because of confidentiality issues I will not give his complete name but will refer to him simply as Rene. This is his story.

Rene was a World War II veteran, one of the many Marines who took part in the invasion of Iwo Jima on Feb. 19, 1945. Rene was part of the 5th Marine Division that was there on the first day.

Rene was born in upstate New York in 1924. He and his family lived through the Great Depression. They were a close-knit and loving family. He was in 10th grade when a radio news flash announced the attack on Pearl Harbor. He recalls all the students being called to assembly to hear President Roosevelt's remarks, including "a day that will live in infamy."

For Rene it seemed that life had been forever changed and was now full of uncertainty. He graduated from high school in 1943, moved with his family to California, and volunteered for the U.S. Marine Corps. Rene took his boot training in San Diego. He became an expert with the M-1 rifle and graduated private first class. From San Diego, he was sent to Camp Pendleton where the 5th Division was formed.

The Story in Rene's Words

After six months of intense training, our division was shipped out to Camp Tarawa on the Big Island of Hawaii. Another four months of vigorous training followed. Finally, in January of 1944, the division sailed out of Hilo to take on supplies. We had no idea what our final destination would be. Some 800 vessels of all types made up the invasion armada, and after several days at sea, we were finally told that the target was a small volcanic island called Iwo Jima.

We were also told that the island was made up of earth-covered structures with connecting tunnels that ran from one end of the island to the other. At the left end of the island stood Mount Suribachi, where defenses were coordinated. The division was briefed by intelligence and told that the operation could probably be accomplished in short order.

The main objective for taking Iwo was to destroy the Japanese radar station that alerted anti-aircraft stations in Japan and to

seize the airfields there. Japanese fighter planes, attacking from the Iwo Jima airstrips were shooting down too many American B-29s returning from bombing runs over Japan. Gen. Curtis Lemay wanted those airstrips for his B-29s and P-51 Mustangs.

At 3:30 a.m., we were awakened and given a breakfast of steak and eggs, plus a “good hunting” message from our commanding officer. Climbing down the cargo net into a landing craft was a tricky maneuver with full packs and weapons. One missed step would result in being tossed into the churning ocean. There were 40 men per landing craft.

As we neared the beach, we observed devastating gunfire coming from the island and blanketing the beach, blowing up landing craft on either side of us. It was the most frightening moment in my life. Our training paled in comparison to what was actually happening.

As we hit the beach, the ramp was dropped and we dashed through raindrop-like barrages and explosions, trying to get to some protected coverage. I ripped my pack off to move faster and dug in. When I went back to retrieve my pack the only thing that was left was a crater hole from where a mortar had hit. The landing beach was a mass of Marines being put ashore and having almost no place for cover. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

This lasted all morning and intermittently throughout the day and night. Our landing on the Red Beach 2 location was about 500 yards from Iwo’s number one airfield and about 2,000 yards from the base of Mount Suribachi. During the devastating barrages from enemy weapons, we attempted to dig our foxholes. My buddy and I, along with the rest of our troops, were taking sniper fire from the airstrip in front of us. Hidden behind a wrecked Zero aircraft above our elevation, he had good cover. The sniper was eventually silenced after an hour or so, and after taking his quota of young Marine lives. The Japanese had the advantage of directing gunfire from Mount Suribachi. Our commanders considered withdrawing us from the battle because of the great losses we incurred through our first day.

Everything had been stalled on the beach. That night, we finally started to slowly move inland. The constant rain along with the volcanic sand caused our heavy equipment to be bogged down, making it difficult to move off the beach. This amphibious landing was a nightmare, but we were to prevail in spite of the odds. How did any of us survive the beach landing? This is a question that I have asked myself over and over again. It’s a very haunting memory that I have carried and will carry with me the rest of my life.

Picking Up Where Rene Left Off

Rene was unable to share the rest of his Iwo experience because of the distress and anguish those memories evoke. He told me that he felt guilty because he was able to come home when his buddies didn’t make it through the battle. I’ve heard this sentiment many times from veterans of all wars.

At one point in his life, Rene made a wrong turn, a mistake, and he was incarcerated. He would become just another forgotten veteran, joining the many others incarcerated or homeless out on the streets.

An unexpected phone call changed all that for the man who had just turned 80. The curator from the Veterans Museum of Los Angeles called me. She said that the museum had dedicated a section to the battle of Iwo Jima, and she was given a lithograph of the flag raising on Mount Suribachi to hang in the museum (the original hangs at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C.). The curator asked me if I knew any veterans of this battle, because she wanted some Iwo veterans to put their signatures on the lithograph before she hung the piece in the museum.

I told her that I only knew one man who had taken part in that battle, and he was incarcerated at Terminal Island. The curator asked if I thought he might be able to sign the lithograph. I promised her that I’d find out. I called the administrators at Terminal Island and explained the situation. To my surprise, they gave their permission for the curator to enter the facility and have Rene sign the lithograph. Arrangements were made, and a date was set.

On the day of the event, my team and I, the curator, and Rene’s 85-year-old sister (to whom he was devoted), gathered at the institution. We were led into a special room and joined there by prison administrators and the warden. Then all the veterans we serve at this institution were led in to witness the event. The lithograph was unrolled, Rene signed it, and recognition came in the form of applause, hugs, handshakes, and some tears. The institution even provided refreshments for attendees to enjoy after the ceremony took place.

The lithograph now hangs in the Veterans Museum of Los Angeles, and Rene is no longer just another forgotten vet. He will be remembered for as long as that lithograph hangs and as long as people come to honor those who served in one of America’s fiercest battles for freedom. Rene was released in 2007 and has since passed away.

It's Your Life

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

Everyone has a private battle to win—depression, fear, drugs, alcoholism, PTSD. The list goes on.

Mine involve sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse and mental abuse. They all can have the power to make the light go out of our lives and leave us in total darkness.

Trouble is something no one can escape. Everybody has it happen in their lives in some shape or form. Some people hide it way down deep inside themselves. For others, it calls to them, lures them and will lead them astray. We are all constructed differently; ain't no two of us who think alike or act the same. Almost every one of us is fighting a demon, a very powerful one. Some of us have learned to live with it, and others have learned to control it. The demon has a name: anxiety, aka worry.

We must all exercise caution in today's world. It is filled with so much trickery; it's hard to know who to trust. All predators wear a mask that grins and lies. You never know by looking who is what: predator or prey?

There are always two sides—good and bad, right and wrong, heaven and hell, happy and sad, light and dark and God and Satan. Our lives are set forth on a journey from our beginning to our end. Time will pass and so will we.



Yesterday is a memory that once was today. Tomorrow is only a vision, nothing promised. Today is here now, and if you choose life then live it before it is gone and is known as your past.

There are so many decisions and circumstances that I regret still today. How could I have known that those decisions I was forced to make would still haunt me today? How did I not know that those soldiers meant me such evil? They all corrupted my life and made my life a living everyday hell. It was hard keeping such big secrets that you were threatened not to tell. I don't even understand why I kept them for so long.

I used to think I was somewhat normal until they changed me. I have only a glimpse of a memory that reminds me of what I used to be like before that time when I was raped, after they took everything from me while, ironically, they left me with a lifetime of nightmares. They altered everything in my world in a blink of an eye. Their memories took up a full-time residency in my mind!

DAVID A. ANDREWS, JR. MEMORIAL AWARD

Say Something

By Kevin Joinville

VA Medical Center—Marion VA

The Union Square station smelled like it always did of fresh urine and rat. I followed the stench past an old dude playing *Amazing Grace* on his bagpipes and down the staircase to the uptown 4, 5, and 6 train. There was an express parked on the track, but before I could reach the platform, the doors closed with that familiar “bing-bong” sound that made me give out a full-on pissed off groan.

I pushed through several hundred of New York City's most disgruntled strap-hangers with my large, unruly backpack crashing into everyone attempting to exit. I caught an onslaught of dirty looks, bad attitudes, and a kick to the shins for all the effort I took to stop it from hitting them. People didn't understand that my school filled up my bag, not me.

I broke through the crowd and planted myself at the end of the platform. Faces blurred through the windows as the train sped off.

When the last car passed, the surrounding air filled the vacuum the train left behind. It lifted my arms slightly toward the tracks and for a second, as the wind rushed past my ears, the entire station fell silent.

The junkie dug through a tall black garbage can. He wore a grimy jean jacket over a white t-shirt. Light brown hair covered his face and hid his features. Even hunched over, I could tell he towered me by a head. He had a pole-thin frame, straight up and down without an ounce of muscle or fat.

He nodded off and his head lowered into the can. He woke up and nodded again. He repeated this dance over and over. That guy had probably spent his whole life stoned off his ass. I mean, I was a loser since I barely made it to the eleventh grade, but at least I didn't search the trash for food.

An old lady came down the stairs. She didn't move well and gripped the railing tight while taking it one step at a time. She waited for the train at the bottom of the steps. She planted herself right by the garbage can. She couldn't go much farther. She seemed like a nice grandmotherly type with her purse hanging from an arm too frail to fight back if the junkie tried to take it. She purposefully turned away from him.

I thought about standing next to her to protect her, but I chickened out the moment the thought of being stabbed with a diseased needle popped into my head. It didn't feel like the manliest thing, but I decided to go, though it meant leaving the old lady defenseless. Before I could move, the junkie lifted up his head, turned, and walked away. With him gone, I stood next to the old lady, just in case.

Partially for safety and partially out of fascination, I kept my eyes on him. I wasn't the only one. Two dudes stood behind me talking about him.

"Look," said one of the guys, "it's some of the New York City wildlife."

"What?" asked his friend. "This city only has concrete. There's no wildlife here."

"Sure there is. It's got pigeons, rats, roaches, alligators, and junkies."

They both laughed. I wanted to laugh, but I thought better of it. The guy had failed at life, but he was still a person.

The junkie bobbed and weaved his way toward the far end of the platform taking a quick nap every few shuffles where he would do his heroin dance toward the floor. I hoped for him to make it all the way down, but he kept popping back up before hitting the ground. He fought sleep hard, although I couldn't imagine where he tried to go in that condition.



He bobbed his way over to the edge of the platform and stopped. His feet crossed over the yellow safety line. I would've said something. I didn't want him to slip and be crushed on the tracks. But every time he nodded forward, a moment later he popped back up. So I figured he knew what he was doing. Even when I heard the loud screeches of the train coming, I didn't feel like I should say anything.

My foot crossed the yellow line as well, but I stepped back when the lights of the Number 4 train appeared in the tunnel. The junkie didn't move his feet. He stayed at the edge. I inhaled deeply as he nodded forward right before the train reached him and I exhaled in relief as he moved backwards in time for the first car to safely pass him. He didn't fall onto the tracks.

I don't remember if it was a smack sound or a thud, but there was definitely a sound, because the next time the junkie nodded forward, his head smashed into the third car.

"Holy shit!" I yelled.

The man's face whipped to the side and vacant eyes looked back at me. Adrenaline rushed with such power that I jumped from the force of it. But the adrenaline didn't make me look away from the man or send me off in a safer direction. No, when I jumped, I jumped toward him.

I planned to run fast, to pick the man up, move the man to safety, but that didn't happen. I didn't make it half a step before his feet slipped in between the train and the platform. His right side slammed to the ground. His head bounced. His hands flew out behind him as the train dragged his body toward me.

“Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shit!” I started shouting as I searched for help. The old lady let out a scream. The two friends behind me ran away. I had no idea if I should follow them or what to do, so I stayed.

His body slipped further down the gap to his thighs. The train darted down the tracks. The man’s arms flailed above his head not grabbing for anything. His eyes were closed and mouth silent. His only movements came from the train scrapping him along the platform. I decided that when the junkie got closer to me, I would grab him under his armpits and lift him up.

So I waited.

I aimed for his arms, but I would’ve settled for anything, even his hair. But something else snagged his hair and his head got sucked under the train, his face squashed in the gap.

“Oh shit!” was the only thing I could say and I kept repeating it. I ran alongside the junkie until the train stopped. That car had a conductor with his window open. I ran up to him.

“Hey! Hey, man!” The conductor’s head stuck out the window, but not facing me. He had his earplugs in and couldn’t hear a thing. I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and opened his right ear. “Hey, man, you just ran over someone!”

“What?”

“You ran over this guy, look!”

I pointed back in between the first door and the second, from mid-thigh to mid-chest was all that was visible of him. His head, upper torso, arms, and legs had all been sucked inside the gap. “The guy’s dead, man!” I didn’t know that exactly, but he had to be. A chest jammed into a gap two inches wide couldn’t house a heart that still beat.

The conductor’s eyes widened, and he ducked his head back inside, I guessed to use the radio. I didn’t know if telling him would be enough, so I ran upstairs.

I went back through the turnstile and stopped in front of the token booth where a clerk spoke to a buddy of his. I banged on the glass.

“Hey, somebody just got run over!”

The guy either didn’t hear me or didn’t care.

“Are you listening?” I banged again. “I said someone got run over!”

He wore the MTA uniform dark blue sweater and tie and was supposed to be a professional, but the big diamond earring in his left ear told me something different.

“Which train?” he said then moved back from the microphone.

“The 4 train. The 4 train hit a guy.”

“Uptown or downtown?” he asked calm and relaxed as if he dealt with someone getting run over every day.

“The uptown.”

“Okay.”

I don’t know if he called 911 because I turned away. My pulse pounded in my head, and my hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

Someone left the station through the emergency exit. I still had to get home, so I ignored the turnstile and slipped through the open gate. I looked back at the clerk expecting him to say, “Pay your fare!” but he didn’t. He continued on with his conversation.

I walked down the steps pissed off and on wobbly legs. I reached the platform where the 4 train stood with its doors open and passengers emptying out of the cars. An announcement said it was out of service.

Most people didn’t notice the dead man, but a few did, mainly the ones who ran away after the hit. They came back like I did.



I squatted down to watch and hoped that somehow he had survived. Two cops were there, but my view was blocked. The 6 train rolled in behind me. I didn't pay attention to it. I felt I needed to stay to give a statement or something.

A guy came down the stairs. He wore a badge around his neck that hung by a chain, but he didn't have a uniform on. He wore regular clothes, a thick flannel shirt, Yankees cap, and had a mustache. He must have been undercover because the other cops ignored him when he made his announcement.

"Okay everyone, listen up!" he shouted to the people on the platform and the others getting off the local, "I need you all to either head upstairs or hop on this Number 6 train. I need this area clear so we can make room for Emergency Medical Services."

He said it again. People hesitated then eventually did what the undercover guy said, but not me.

"Hey, son," he said, "Son, do you need medical attention?"

I shook my head without looking at him, hoping he wouldn't tell me to leave. He came over and bent down, "What's your name, kid?"

"Me? I'm Kevin."

"Okay, Kevin. I need you to get on this train before it leaves, so I can make room." He had kind eyes.

"But I can help."

"Go ahead," he said, "you don't need to see this." He straightened me up and waved at the conductor to hold the door.

Me and another guy boarded the local. The other guy was short and in his forties with a thick black beard. Hard looking, he wore an Army hat and jacket with blue jeans.

"Here, you dropped this," said the Army guy. He had my backpack in his hands. I didn't remember taking it off.

"Thanks," I said and grabbed it from him as the doors closed behind us. I looked out the window. The platform had cleared except for the cops. They were shouting stuff at the junkie, but he didn't respond.

"There's no blood." My words came out weak.

"What?" said the Army guy.

Not a single drop.

"There's..." I let it go. It was a stupid thought. "I tried to help him."

"At least you did something," he said. "All those people out there, they didn't do jack. They saw a person get run over and they ran."

"It wasn't enough," I said.

He seemed like the kind of guy who liked to have answers, but he was failing at comforting me and knew it. It made him look hurt, or maybe he was sad for me. Without saying anything, he pursed his lips and moved further into the car, stopping at the next door.

The train moved, and I stared at the body until I lost sight of him. I turned and faced the other passengers. Why wasn't there any blood?

I stood in the car close to the last. There shouldn't have been such a crowd. And they were all smiling. They didn't witness a person get run over so they were smiling. I mean, they were giggling and laughing and having conversations. They were reading and listening to their headphones. They were relaxed and having too normal of a day. I didn't want to ride with them for the next nine stops. I hated them too much.

The train entered the tunnel and I turned back around. Out the window, darkness sped by and blackened the glass. I watched the Army guy's reflection. Both of his arms were stretched out, grabbing the overhead bars on each side of him. His head was down and his body swayed in rhythm with the train.

I wanted to talk to him. He didn't call the guy a junkie. He called him a person. I hoped he'd catch me staring at him, but he never raised his eyes.



Taking the Reins

By Trina Mioner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, Ohio

I stood in formation, shifting from one foot to the other, impatiently waiting for the commander to shout “fall-in.” As I stood there at Fort Sam Houston (Texas), I pondered my belief that these formations and subsequent mile runs would end after basic training. Add this misconception to the rapidly expanding bag that contained all the other misconceptions and falsehoods my recruiting officer assured me of before I took my oath to serve. My recruiter had shown me a short, quaint film of women in ankle socks and culottes, merrily doing jumping jacks in white gym shoes. I laughed to myself and looked down at the shiny, size ten combat boots I had worn all my waking hours since stepping off the bus.

At Fort McClellan, Ala., in 1977, combat boots, fatigues and an M16 rifle were all part of the finished portrait of the Women’s Army Corps turned Army Corps. My platoon was a test case to see if women could complete the same rigorous training men endured. If we could, we would be called Army Corps. I was one of the last women to wear the Pallas Athene on the collar of my uniform. I was sworn into the Women’s Army Corps, but I was a graduate of the Army Corps. I was now a proud, regular Army soldier. The word “women” fell from the title but not the treatment.

I stifled my thoughts that the future big picture of the U.S. Army would include women on the front lines. Usually for women to see any combat, they had to be associated with a medical specialty.

The commander shouted to fall in. My head was overflowing with negativity and depression. Within a few months of my arrival on base, I had accumulated more Article 15s than most soldiers get in their entire career. It was evident I needed to get my head in the game.

I had gone to base counseling to determine why I had been feeling so low, depressed and angry. I wanted to know what I could do to lift my spirits. Unfortunately for me, the doctor missed the mark with his diagnosis. He said I had a severe case of homesickness. He was wrong.

The truth was I had secrets buried so deep within me that they were no longer visible to me. My rape at the hands of a soldier

tipped the scales of my self-worth and rational thinking. I would push the memory of my violation to the very back corners of my mind and then go and do something stupid. The Article 15s kept my pay grade at Private E-2. Each time I gained a rank I would get busted again. Soon I got the reputation of being the base goof-off.

One day, the commander ordered me to report to the South Gate for guard duty at 1400 hours. Too bad my focus was on the beautiful summer day and a jumbo margarita. The temperature in San Antonio was 80 degrees at 9 a.m. The heat was so dry that by noon one could bake instead of boil.

Impulsively, I decided to go horseback riding rather than reporting for guard duty. Instead of walking the gate, I felt the warm breeze on my face as I sat on the smooth back of the powerful brown beast. Unintentionally, I let the horse take control. He pulled the reins out of my hands and walked me into the middle of a lake. I could hear shouts from people on the bank. “Take the reins! Take the reins!”

Standing in the water on the back of that horse, I knew deep within myself the time had come for me to make some changes. I needed to take control of the reins of my life. I needed to make better choices and to face my truth. Although I did not have the slightest idea how to move forward, I was ready. As the tears rolled down my cheeks and dripped into the water around the horse, I grabbed the reins and took back control. I know the onlookers thought my tears and laughter were strange, but I did not care.

The consequences of that eventful horseback ride would be another Article 15 and another appointment with the base counselor. But this time, I knew my decision about taking control of the reins of my life also meant sharing my secrets.

Note: Cincinnati VAMC Women's Writing Group



The Forgotten

By Steven Russell, Jr.
—Grady, AR

I am an Operation Iraqi Freedom Army veteran. I served on active duty for four years and have an honorable discharge. I am also a disabled veteran with a PTSD rating. I am a father, a son, a brother, and an uncle but also a friend.

I am also an inmate currently confined to the Arkansas Department of Corrections serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Because of this conviction, I forfeited my GI Bill benefits and a proper military burial, I no longer exist in the eyes of my country, nor do I matter. I served my country with honor and pride, I put my life and mental health on the line to keep Americans free.

Still, I do not matter.

You always hear the saying, “Never leave a man behind; we don’t leave our brothers on the battlefield.” I and thousands of other warriors have been left on the battlefield, forgotten in the penal system. We are here because the system did not work for us. We did our jobs the way we were taught and because we could not turn it off when we got home, people suffered.

I will continue to wait until my brothers come for me.



Memories of Mole City

By Peter Steciow, Jr.
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

As the dew burned off at Mole City, our remote firebase, the whirling sound of a Chinook closed in on our location. I pulled the pin for purple smoke, and the hissing sound of the smoke erupted from the canister. The pilot reported “I identify purple.” “Roger that,” I replied.

The dual-rotor craft approached with a sling of goodies. Everything for Mole City was delivered by Chinooks. The exception was an extremely rare hot meal that we may have had at Thanksgiving or Christmas, and that was only if we were lucky.

As the Chinook slowly descended and hovered in place, its precious cargo touched the ground, and the webbing fell away. The delivery was large, heavy wood crates. They needed to be unloaded, unpacked and delivered to the fire base. That was accomplished by means of back-breaking work of soldiers like me.

We formed a human bridge and methodically hoisted the 105-millimeter artillery shells and the rest of the ammunition to the next man and so on until they reached their destination, the ammo dump. I hoped my place in this human bridge was not downwind of the diesel-fueled burn pit. Suddenly, I inhaled a whiff of the drifting black smoke that made me want to puke.

When the initial delivery was cleared, in came another Chinook with a small bladder of drinking water and C-rations. There was no mess hall cooking at this rough and dirty outpost. After each five-gallon container was filled with water and the bladder was emptied, the containers along with C-rations were carried to Mole City.

Wait. Someone almost forgot the dirty, drab green bag on the ground. Mail!

A voice yells out, “Ain’t no use in go-in’ home, Jo-dy got yo’ gal an’ gone.” Sure, that soldier got some dirty looks, but we all knew there was some truth in what he said. The Dear John letters appeared more frequently in that mail bag than anyone would like.

After the ammo was neatly stacked and the water had been delivered to the squad areas, those not pulling guard duty quickly assembled for mail call. Pushing and shoving, soldiers surged

forward anxious to hear their name as the names on the list were called. Anything handed to you meant a connection to home.

As my name was called out along with some derogatory comment, I wondered about the number of sarcastic or mean-spirited comments that were hurled during mail call. Even rank did not seem to make one immune from the commentary. I moved quickly through the crowd to pick up my box and slither silently back to the dirt bunker I called home.

Knowing I was going to have to share the box's contents with my men, I wanted to open the box alone and savor this little piece of home. I pictured my mom and my sister making and carefully packing the oatmeal raisin and peanut butter cookies, along with the Jiffy Pop popcorn, the hard candy and the pictures and letters from much-missed family.

After reading the letters, I heard loud whooping and hollering outside my bunker. It sounded like a pack of hyenas waiting to pounce on their prey. There was still some time before the nickel bags of potent Vietnamese pot would open, so I decided it would be safer to pop the Jiffy Pop with C-4 (explosive) now, rather than later.

As I prepared what I hoped was a safe amount of the C-4 to pop the corn and not blow the place up, I thought again of my mother. I was sure she expected this box of treats to last me for a whole week or more. Realistically, it was gone in less than fifteen minutes.

I guess we had all become a pack of wild, screeching animals. War can dehumanize a man. But thousands of miles away, my mother decided to tame the wild beasts with a box of cookies, popcorn and candy. She knew what I and my men needed in that far away dirt hole named Mole City. Mom always said she had a sixth sense when it came to knowing what people needed.

Thanks mom. We love you!



What the “Star-Spangled Banner” Means to Me!

*By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR*

For me the “Star-Spangled Banner” means perseverance under unspeakable odds. It means sacrifices that men and women of all walks of life, of all colors and all religions made so that future generations will live in a land of liberty and enjoy what the Constitution spells out by our Founding Fathers.

When I hear the “Star-Spangled Banner,” I am reminded of Staff Sgt. Richerson, an Army MP who lost his life in Somalia one day short of returning home on rotation in 1992. I am reminded of Staff Sgt. Bruce Horner, who was killed by a sniper’s bullet while serving in Iraq in 2007.

I am reminded of the men and women who sacrificed their lives, some coming home in body bags, many returning with missing limbs and many more forever living with conditions such as PTSD from their combat experiences.

I am proud to have had the honor to serve my country for 21 years. My husband, a decorated combat veteran, also served 23 years.

The Oath of Enlistment, which every person who enters military service in this great land takes, promises “to support the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” My oath has no expiration date.

That, my friends, is what the “Star-Spangled Banner” means to me!

My Last Ride

*By Support Our Troops Committee Zaloga Post,
American Legion
—Albany, NY*

It was not about going fast or even showing off. It was the evening cruise with the top down.

My late wife, Caron, had presented the Vette to me on a mid-winters night, and we spent many evenings cruising the roads around Lake George. Caron understood the need or love of the cruise.

It was a mistake to sell the Vette at any price. Down the road maybe there will be another, if only in my cruising dream!

Duty on a Cold Winter Night

By Newberry Scott
—Midlothian, VA

It was Jan. 19, 1959. My 23rd birthday, or would be at 10:37 p.m. I had assumed the duty and was standing watch on the midnight to 0800 shift at the American Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan. The temperature was minus 10 outside. Here on the inside at my guard desk was a ceramic gas heater. I was scorching my ass on one side and freezing it off on the other.

I would have to tour the outside in a little while. I was thankful for the detachment's only cold weather parka hanging in the corner. It was too big for me, and I was bigger than most of the Marines in the detachment.

The mittens that came with it were the kind that if you wore them, you couldn't get to your weapon if you needed it. I didn't wear them very often. I did the un-Marine like thing. I kept my hand in the parka's pocket. I had a plan in my head. With a sharp knife and needle and thread, I'd modify the right-hand glove so you could grip and fire a Smith and Wesson. Later I did the modification.

On this watch, in this lonely place, it was not unusual for my mind to drift and start reviewing the events of my life. I'd stood this watch many times after I arrived in Kabul on New Year's Day 1958. I was a corporal then and had made sergeant last May 1, 1958, on my dad's birthday. I could have been proud of making sergeant in 22 and a half months except for one fact. The yard stick by which I measured my success, my twin brother, now Sgt. Beldon K. Scott, already had been a sergeant eight and a half months when I made it.

His enlistment date came one week after mine. I secretly kept score on the accomplishments I deemed important. I had him down three to nothing until he got promoted. I beat him on the rifle range by one point in boot camp and won a \$5 bet. Up to one year after I'd graduated boot camp no one had broken my record running the obstacle course. My feeling of self-importance was really boosted when I was meritoriously promoted to corporal in 10 and a half months—one month before he made it

No one made sergeant in 13 and a half months in the Marine Corps. But my brother did. I was in shock. I was in awe.

I found out about his amazing accomplishment in the most direct of ways. I had gone over to take a test to see if I qualified for the Naval Academy. I didn't. I missed one math problem too

many. The testing was done in a building across the street from the 7th Motor Transport barracks where he lived. I'd visited there a few times and knew one of the Marines who was a part of his unit. I went through boot camp with him. Bro Keith's squad bay was on the second floor so I went up there with the intention of seeing him and visiting. Well blow me down; there was Bro with sergeant chevrons on his collars and cap. He was doing what sergeants do. He was falling the troops out for the noon formation. He prepared to march the troops to the mess hall for chow. He acknowledged me with a nod and a smile and went on outside to take care of his sergeant business.

I was just standing there with an astonished-dumb look on my face, when Bud Kiem, the Marine I'd gone through boot camp with, told me what happened. According to Bud, seven of the 7th Motor Transport Marines decided to go beer drinking at Ma's outside the rear gate. In this group was brother Keith and a big thick-necked, heavy-muscled corporal from Chicago who was supposed to be really bad. His name was something that ended with 'ski. So 'Ski is all I know to call him.

It seems, according to Bud, that after a few, 'Ski started insulting and playing the better of Bro Keith. If I had been there, I could have told him how this was going to play out. The only thing quicker than Bro's fists was his wit. If you started trading insults with him, you were going to lose. 'Ski lost his cool and said something to the effect of, "Scott, I'm coming over there and kick



Things Undone - On Suicide and Other Things Undone

By Joaquin R. Roces

VA Medical Center—Reno, NV

your Missouri hillbilly ass.” It wasn’t a fatal mistake, but it was a mistake. According to Bud, who was there, Bro whipped him really fast and left him with swollen eyes and a big pregnant lip.

Monday morning, when the company’s tough old gunny sergeant saw ‘Ski, he made inquiry and found out what had happened and how. He was really impressed with Bro Keith. He put him up for meritorious corporal, and he made it. Two months later, the gunny put him up for meritorious sergeant. Bro impressed the review board and got promoted.

I have to tell you; I was both proud and jealous of my brother. My internal self-defense mechanism took over. In my mind I took credit for his success. I was responsible for Bro becoming tougher than a weather-cured hard oak board. I was the reason he became a skilled fighter and scrapper, the main reason he got promoted. I had been his sparring partner his entire life.

My god how the time does fly by. I’ve got to don that parka and go outside. I’ve got to “walk my post in a military manner, keeping on the alert, and observing everything that takes place within sight or hearing” on this cold winter night.



The sun melted in the sky like a pat of butter on a stack of momma’s flapjacks.

I stood on an empty sidewalk staring up at a monolith of concrete, iron and steel. There was a storm rolling in over the Sierras like spilled molasses. I could feel the warmth of the sun on my upturned face and the cold bite of the wind on my cheeks. My therapist explained that contrasting truths that occupy the same space are called a dialectic.

The gray concrete parking structure loomed above me. At seven floors, it was not the tallest building downtown, but it was tall enough. I looked to my left and right at the empty streets and buildings. I thought it was eerie for a midweek lunch hour as I walked into the cool shade of the first floor. Like the streets, the floor was void of any cars. I had been here before and knew there would be no easy way out.

I walked seven steps from the sidewalk to the first rise of the concrete stairwell that would carry me to the clear blue skies of the seventh floor. I remember my first son learning to walk in our apartment living room, struggling with balance and unsure footing, his chubby little arms held out for balance.

The second floor was 23 steps. I remember my stepfather pinning my shoulders to the floor and pummeling me with his fists. The musty smell of the carpet and the syrupy sweet smell of rum and coke on his breath.

My days were usually measured within those steps. Some days I was at 25 steps, and others I was at 128. I counted the steps in my mind as I rose floor by floor, each one as empty as the one below. The wind became louder and more forceful as I climbed, rushing through the empty floors. The fifth floor was 85 steps from the sidewalk. I was a varsity lineman running 40-yard sprints in the August heat my senior year in high school.

At 122 steps, I emerged from the sheltered darkness of the stairwell. I blinked in the bright light; my eyes took a second to adjust. I was face down in the middle of the rodeo grounds in Nixon. I pushed myself up spitting dirt from my mouth. It was

my first bull ride and I lasted a full four seconds. The bull had reached the far end of the arena and was circling around.

131 steps took me to the ledge on the seventh floor. My drill instructor was pinning my head to the floor of the quarterdeck with his hand. He was screaming at me about my underwear not being folded correctly as my warm spit pooled on the cool concrete floor.

The wall was about four feet high and two feet wide and was made of unfinished concrete. This had been the barometer of my life the past two months. Zero was the sidewalk and 131 was the ledge on the 7th floor, a hundred feet above the sidewalk. I had been here a dozen times already. Like before, the streets were empty, and all the businesses had shut down because of the pandemic. Over 150,000 were already dead, and the death toll continued to climb. Everyone was at home behind locked doors under a nationwide quarantine. Casinos, restaurants and bars were empty, and businesses were closed and shuttered.

I was standing in the ocean as a young boy. I was squinting at the yellow sun. It seemed to shimmer and pulse in the sky. I blinked against the salt and light. In the distance a small narrow dugout canoe with double outriggers headed out to the open sea. There were three men in the canoe paddling hard against the waves. The outriggers were made of large bamboo stalks lashed to the rigging. It was a sliver of wood that rose and fell with the swells. I could feel the tug of the tide against my small frame as I watched them slip into the distance. My small legs buckled against the pull of the sea. I felt the sand being sucked out from beneath my feet. I saw something in the frothy swirl of the sea, and I looked down.

I turn my head to the west and there was still snow on the jagged peaks of the Sierras. Like the sea, the wind surges in gales buffeting me with its unseen force. The wind roars in my ears. I can feel the wind around me, against me, like a child standing in the sea, feeling the tide and waves surge against him. Salt stung my eyes. I saw a small jelly fish struggling in the maelstrom of the ebb and flow of the tide. It fought desperately to keep from being driven onto the beach. I reached down to save it, but the tide was retreating into the sea and sucking the sand from beneath my little feet. I was losing my footing, and the next wave toppled me over.

I was lost like the jelly fish being pulled out into the sea. My arms flailed and I kicked with my legs, but the undertow was too strong. The sand swirled around me in the emerald waters, sparkling in the translucent light. The sea rolled over me like

water spilling over a glass table, its roar distant and muted. My tiny hands grasped at the sandy bottom. A dark hand cut through the murky waters and grabbed my wrist. I could feel the strength in it as it pulled me upright. I once again found my footing. I gasped for air as my father smiled down at me, the sun a halo behind his head.

I remember, with a smile, when my girlfriend paid for parasailing in Tahoe for my 13th birthday. I was strapped to a glider tethered at the end of a nylon rope 70 feet above the lake. A speed boat towed me across the lake. But all I heard was the roar of wind. My girlfriend waved from the boat, and I think she was smiling. I closed my eyes and listened to the wind. Am I flying or falling?

I face east and turn my back to the coming storm and the impatient wind that pushes at my back toward the ledge. Its cold fingers trace geometric patterns on the back of my neck, a sharp contrast to the warmth of the melting sun in the blue sky.

I am at 130 steps. I close my eyes to the sun and feel its warmth spreading across my face--on my brow, down the bridge of my nose, onto my cheeks. On the back of my neck and on my bare arms, I feel the cold bite of wind. I feel grains of dirt peck at my skin. I hear nothing but the roar of the surf. I try to think of that child on that empty stretch of beach. But I cannot.

Instead, a Marine burdened with gear and sweating beneath a steel helmet and a Kevlar vest is wading ashore in Beirut. We walked onto the beaches amidst topless Europeans and speedo clad men. Overdressed, my boots heavy with sea water, my legs struggling in the loose sand. I climbed the barrier wall at the end of the beach. The bare concrete was warm and rough like sandpaper on my calloused hands. My therapist calls this being "mindful."

I hoisted my wet heavy legs over the wall as I pushed myself up with my arms, my shoulders heavy with the things I carried. A small boy watched me as his ice cream melted into his tangled fingers. He dug his toes into the warm sand, and he spoke to me in French, "Qu'est-ce que tu fais?" I reply, "I am saving you."

I stand on the wall, the sun warm on my skin, the salt of my sweat stinging my eyes. The storm is coming. The wind lashes at me and I sway with each push of the wind, like seaweed swaying with sea.

Chickarelli called after me, his tanned face smiling behind oversized aviator glasses. He was our radio man. Innocenzi, Bailey, Moses, Greaser and 237 others would never leave Beirut

alive. Chick died in Korea in 1986. Digger and Johnson died in a helo crash in Pillar in '87. We retrieved their bodies. Rother died in the desert outside Twenty Nine Palms, forgotten and abandoned by his unit. Mike was shot by a 12-year-old in a middle school playground. Wayne committed suicide on the rez, and Baird died in a diabetic coma at the VA in Frisco.

The boy asked once more, "Qu'est-ce que tu fais?" I am trying to save you, but I am so tired.

The storm's cold kisses on my neck bring me back to an empty world. The wind lashes and snaps at my clothes. I sway in the wind like seaweed. I stare across at my reflection on the hotel window across the expanse. This is 131. I slowly breathe in, deeply, I feel my chest expand as the cool air fills my lungs. I roll my shoulders back, filling myself with air. You can turn back at any point between zero and 131. But 132--there is no turning back from 132.

I keep my eyes fixed on my reflection on the window. My knees feel weak, and my stomach feels like it will float out of my throat and rise up into the sky like a para sailing kite. I feel the sand beneath my bare feet being pulled away, grain by grain. I am slipping away.

My eyes are closed, and I feel the jerky stop-start tug of the rope on my harness. The boat is reeling me in. I am like a child who just learned to fly. The whole world lies before me. I am grinning ear to ear, and I can see my girlfriend smiling and waving at me. I can hear the mechanical whirl of the winch and the hum and splash of the boat. She is smiling and saying something. I am trying to hear what she is saying. I see her lips move and I hear the words seconds later. "I don't love you anymore."

I open my eyes and I see my image on the window fall from sight. I exhale. There is a squeak of rubber and again the rush of wind roars in my ears. I know right away this is a mistake. I want to undo it, but there is nothing to hold on to, nothing to grab at, but air. I flail and kick like a small boy lost at sea. I know then that nothing can undo what I have just done. But still I believe. I want desperately to believe that something, some universal, divine power, will save me. I see the jelly fish struggling against the sea. I feel myself being pulled out into the emptiness. I am waiting for the hand to save me. Someone. Anyone. Save me from myself. I desperately want to be saved, but...

A small boy walks out of the surf hand-in-hand with his father. His life is a story yet to be told. Their footprints lie side by side in the wet sand. The boy looks up to his father and smiles at him.

The little boy does not notice that next to one of his footprints lies a small jellyfish, like a dropped egg, cooking in the sun.

Author's Note: I am a disabled veteran living with PTSD, Borderline Personality Disorder and chronic suicide ideation. I have had 10 attempts in my life with four of them while I was on active duty. My most recent attempt was this year in April during the quarantine. I have been processing that recent attempt and am still working on it with my therapist at the VA. This is a piece that I have come up with as I am sewing it all together. After reading a recent "USA Today" article about a veteran who committed suicide after being turned away by the VA in Washington, D.C., I decided I wanted to come forward and share it. That unknown veteran's story could have been my story, I was admitted to the VA Emergency Room at my VA here in Reno for a past suicide attempt. Our experiences and outcomes were vastly different even though we engaged in the same Veterans Administration Medical System. I realize all too well, every time I wake up 22 veterans have committed suicide, and by the time I go to bed another 22 have died. I am not writing this to raise awareness—that doctor at the Washington, D.C. VA, has probably had more "awareness" than most doctors and people around. I am writing this to prevent veteran suicides. Our society is plenty aware of the numbers. The problem is society sees it as numbers. I see faces. Friends and comrades. I see my own face. I am one of the 22.



The Power of Reunions

By Jim Barker

—Keaau, HI

More than 20 years had passed since that memorable cap and gown ceremony with the rousing classic march in the high school gym. It was a typical Iowa evening with a rural fragrance and soft humidity. My Heartland Class of '65 found itself in an exciting and daunting intersection of U.S. history. Social movements were beginning to foment; politics were in flux, and the flames of War were starting to ignite in Southeast Asia. Some friends had already paid the ultimate price in Vietnam and others were to follow.

The time felt right for the “return of a native” to his hometown. Beyond the interest and curiosity to reconnect with classmates, I felt a strong compulsion and passion to describe my military experience and the values gained as a soldier having intense experiences.

Anyone who has lived through traumatic exposures has internalized them and has witnessed deeper dimensions of life that demand understanding and healing. On the positive side of those who endure the gauntlets of war, the classic adage rings timeless: “Of those who have fought for it, life has a flavor the protected shall never know.”

The challenge now was to share those things with those who were close. Nostalgic songs of that era coursed through my emotions, like the idealism of the Youngbloods, Creedence, Crosby Stills, Nash & Young, and the Beatles.

Aboard the flight from California to Iowa, I noticed a career Marine officer on board, appearing deep in thought. Greeting him, I asked if he was on leave for a home visit. He replied: “I’m going to my class reunion in South Dakota. I will be making a presentation.” I said the same. We were both war veterans. We had both become more serious and passionate about life.

The subsequent reunion was highly positive. My classmates heard about the themes of honor, dignity, brotherhood and teamwork. My personal reward was feeling appreciation that others had recognized the importance of valuing and caring for one another.

The 24th Scout Dog Platoon Reunion

A few years later, as I was employed in the clinical field with the VA Vet Center Program, there was a special opportunity to host a Scout Dog reunion. The attending veterans had not seen



each other since their Vietnam service, when they had shared unique jobs as dog handlers. Their mission had been critical and dangerous. Over 3,700 dogs had served in Vietnam. Per capita, the veterans and their dogs had among the highest casualty rates, serving mostly on point. For more than two days these men shared memories of their experiences, laughed and wept together.

An example of the deep and intense bond of loyalty between a handler and his dog occurred in one of the therapy sessions. One of the veterans spoke of delaying going home on emergency leave with his son seriously ill because he couldn't easily leave his dog and those he was protecting. The reunion concluded with the mutual realization of lifetime ties these veterans shared together.

Delta Raiders Reunion

One of our Vietnam veteran clients who was on operations in the Imperial City of Hue during the momentous Tet Offensive of 1968 agreed to attend a reunion in Las Vegas. One of his biggest challenges was trying to get in touch with his emotions, mainly grief and guilt. He attended and was drawn into the fellowship. Afterward, he related how he now felt better understood and more valued as a person and veteran. Things were a little rough given his unit's intense combat exposure. His summary statement: “We spent the weekend closely together, and there was a lot of drinking and crying.” The former officers and enlisted soldiers now recognized each other on an equal fraternal basis.

The Media Gathering of Combat Veterans

Following the showing of the movie “Platoon” in 1986, a national outrage was sparked among veterans. For many, it revived painful experiences and flashbacks. The one unintended consequence was that some veterans became motivated to seek treatment for their war trauma.

The movie had largely profiled Vietnam veterans as “psychopathic killers,” having little regard for the Vietnamese. This image motivated veterans to unite themselves for a media response. This writer helped to initiate and facilitate the gathering with Tom Brokaw’s “20/20” film crew for a nationwide NBC broadcast.

Facing the bright lights and microphones of the interviewing staff, the veterans were able to bring up impacted emotions, some for the first time. Expressions of anger and grief were intense. It was a lifetime moment for all, as America got to hear the voices and see the emotions of members of a rejected generation of warriors.

Team Advisors Reunion

Last year the Military Assistance Command hosted a reunion in Houston, Texas. This had the unique feature of bringing veterans together with members of the Vietnamese community there. It quickly became a reunion of old friends who had fought and sacrificed together, often in perilous conditions. The advisors had been highly professional soldiers assigned to assist and often live with local villagers in defense efforts against Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces. Working with minimal troop reinforcements, a special relationship and comradeship evolved with the native people. I was honored to be among such men and contribute as a language specialist and advisor with Vietnamese units in the Central Highlands through the spring offensive in 1972.

A joint memorial service, individual contacts with fellow advisors and personal exchanges with Vietnamese veterans and boat people were touching beyond words. The Vietnamese attendees heard a reaffirmation of the original dedication of their allies who never abandoned their commitment in the face of external influences and arbitrary politics. For all present, the reunion had taken the expanded meaning of a homecoming. As one advisor observed, “This is the first time since the war I could be in the presence of a group of people and know we all felt the same.”

The reunion did not escape the attention of researchers and historians. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted for national veterans’ archives. It was special to have the scholarly and respectful team from West Point available. For several of us, it was also a special opportunity to get in touch with our deepest emotions.

Conclusion

For any generation of veterans, particularly in their advancing years, the benefits of reunions and memorializing our comrades

and their experiences help to promote emotional and physical health as well as “peace of soul.”

Fundamentally the scriptures speak of and invite community. We are better together than we are alone. The fundamental need of all persons is trust and belonging, relying and depending on one another. Community is in man’s nature.

John Donne wrote “No man is an island.” No veteran should have to be an island. Joy and sorrow are meant to be borne together.

Story of My Experience

By Robert Opekun

—Orange, CT

I walked in (to the VA Medical Center in West Haven, Conn.) and was directed to a bed. I took off my clothes and put on a hospital gown. I don’t know how or when I got to the operating table.

A surgeon did the operation and removed an infected section from my leg. With her expertise and guidance, she put me on the road of recovery. When I woke up and realized where I was, I was told that I died twice on the table. They did not think I would last the night. I did survive and later was told that I did not die, but I had an out-of-body experience. This I remember clearly. I was floating through the air toward a black square. As I came closer, I could see that it was a wall. I heard a voice say that I could not get over or around the wall. It told me to go back, and I did. This happened twice.

My son Matt and his wife Robin sat with me that first night. Nobody knew which way the pendulum would swing. As Matt and Robin watched me, it was slow going, but I did improve. The nurses and doctors were watching me every moment, day and night. They fed me intravenously and cared for me the best that they knew how. They did it right because I lived.

Matt said that I had visitors. Unfortunately, I didn’t remember who they were. I would like to say that I appreciated the time they took to visit. I often wondered if I did any good when I visited those who could not get around. Now, being on the other side, I guess that I did do some good.

I don’t know how long I was in the intensive care unit, but then I was transferred to the step-down unit. I was still watched carefully, and all that was possible was done to and with me. Time was not considered, and I never turned on the TV. All this happened in Building One.

At the end of November or maybe the start of December, I was transferred to Building Two. I was put in a room in the so-called Heroes Living Quarters. There were North, South, East and West sections. I was in the South section. The doctors and nurses took care of me day and night. They gave me the medicine that I needed. They kept me comfortable. I guess that they thought I was near the end of life. I learned that I was in hospice.

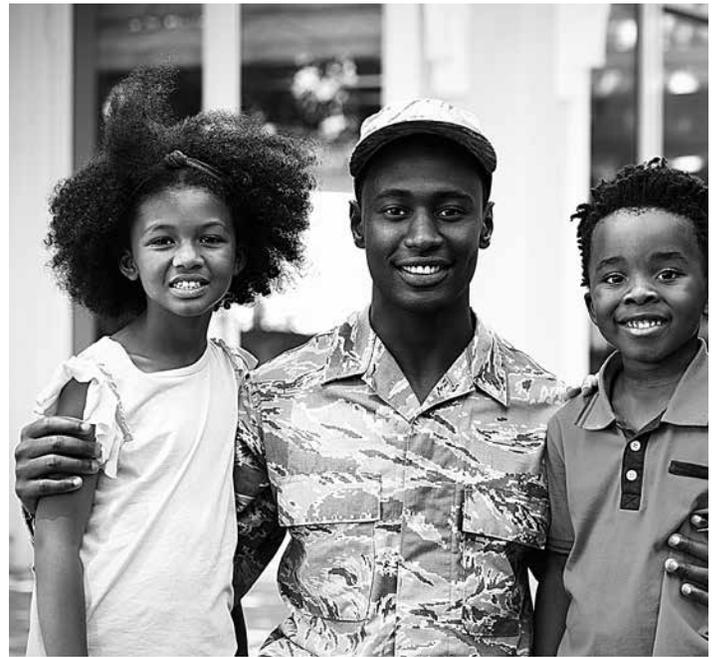
As time went by, I got stronger. I began to move myself in the bed, and the nurses took me to physical therapy. There the therapist put me on a machine that helped me pump my legs. Each day I improved and began to walk with walker and a nurse next to me for security. As time went on, I walked farther and better.

I began to walk in the unit with a nurse. Soon I started to walk without guidance but still with the walker. I began to care for myself and went to the recreation hall for lunch and dinner with other veterans who could get around. I also joined in with other therapy groups for activities such as bingo and music. I was getting less help from the nurses, but they were there every second to make sure that I was alright.

Christmas was just around the corner. I asked if I could get a pass to visit Matt and Robin. I was granted the pass. On Dec. 24, the kids picked me up at 2 p.m. I went with them to their house and enjoyed my time there. I had a Sombrero to drink and spaghetti smothered with sautéed clam sauce. I ate enough for two people. It was a short visit and soon came time to say goodbye. I went back to the VA at 8 p.m. Everybody was happy.

The next morning, I woke up hungry. I began to eat better and finished most of the meals that were served. In January and February, I gained about 20 pounds. The outlook for my future changed. At first, I was slated to be carried out, but now I was a survivor and was being prepared to walk out of the hospital and go home.

The nurses gave me a nickname Mr. O. Everybody knew me as Mr. O as I walked through the halls to therapy, music and other activities. Someone always said hello--doctors, nurses, workmen. This was to all patients, not only to me. I was taught to care for my ostomy bag and to get dressed. They gave me gadgets to help me put on my socks and shoes. I had seen these items on TV. Everybody said that they would miss me as a patient but were happy when I was walking out to go home. Going to the VA in West Haven was the best choice ever. In my opinion, if I went somewhere else I don't think that I would be here today.



I walked out on March 24, 2018, to go home. Since then, many good things have happened to me. The VA gave me a hospital bed, which is very comfortable. They also gave me a stair glide so that I did not have to climb the stairs in my home.

It also approved two home aides who helped me adapt and live comfortably at home.

One aide was Melva. She helped me and guided me while taking a shower so I would not have a mishap. The second aide was Sue. She came two times a week. Sue vacuumed and dusted the rooms, cleaned the bathroom, did the laundry, helped me shop for groceries and cooked wonderful meals so that I had meals on the days she was not here. I felt fortunate to have these aides.

Now let me take you back to November 2018. This was when I got a few surprises.

It was about the second or third week of October when I received a notice in the mail that I was scheduled for an appointment with the therapy nurse. I could not think why after all this time the therapist wanted to see me. Maybe they just wanted to see how I was progressing. A few days later my son Matt came over and invited me out to dinner at an exclusive restaurant for which he had a gift certificate. I told him about the appointment, and he said I should get dressed up and he would pick me up after the appointment.

It was Nov. 7, 2018, when I arrived at the therapist's room at the proper time. One of the girls greeted me and was glad to see me. After a few minutes of conversation, another girl brought out a



walking cane and explained that it had a prong on the tip for ice spots. I considered the offer for a while and then declined. I felt that I was walking and getting about very well. I decided that it was time to leave. The girls suggested that I might be interested in something going on in the recreation room and that I should stop in to take a look. I did that. When I reached the entrance of the room, I looked in. I saw two workmen putting a plaque on the wall, and some chairs were lined up, but that was all. I decided that I didn't want to stay, so I turned around and left. I walked to my car and went home. When I got home, I called Matt and asked where to meet him. His reply: "What the heck are you doing home? You are supposed to be here at the VA. Get over here. We are waiting." A nurse got on the phone and also said to get there right away.

I got into my car and drove directly to the VA. In the parking lot the attendant pointed to a space in the first row. Little did I know that this was prearranged. I parked the car and walked into the VA entrance, where I looked for Matt.

Before I could think, two nurses grabbed my arms and said they knew where my son was. They rushed me into an elevator, up to the third floor and into the recreation room. I could see maybe a hundred people. Nurses, doctors, patients, members of the VFW post that I belong to, and family. I also saw U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro. I was escorted to a chair labeled "Courage Award Recipient."

Once I was seated, Congresswoman DeLauro gave me a Certificate of Special Congressional Acknowledgment. As she ended her presentation, I saw two girls stand up and motion to

me to join them. As I walked across the room, they opened up a blanket. They explained that it was the Quilt of Valor. It was made in Plantsville, Conn., and partly in Branford, Conn. The girls wrapped the blanket around me. After receiving the quilt, I discovered a large cake on a side table. I was led to the table and cut the first piece. After that all the other people joined in and had a piece of cake.

As I walked around the room, I saw the plaque the workers were putting up earlier that day. On the plaque was attached a brass plate. That plate listed my name and the year 2018. This was placed along with other names in a section called Courage Award Recipients. It will stay there forever.

After enjoying the party and talking to many people, we left and went to that nice restaurant for a meal.

Some time has passed, and I have talked to many people about my experience as an inpatient and also an outpatient at the VA. A few times I've said I missed the funeral and was late for my party. It's my honest opinion that I was given a second chance for life.

I was told that some of the reasons I received the award were because of my attitude and visiting other patients who were not able to get up and around and also the selling of poppies. My reply was and always will be that I will continue to do those activities as long as I am able.

Other awards that I have received were a plaque for being Grand Marshal in the Seymour parade, where I also received a plaque for my service in the Korean War.

Finally, I would like to take you back a few years and tell you about something that happened at the VA. I saw a spirit. And so did others.

Actually, this started back in 2016. I often visited patients at the West Haven VA hospital. I usually started in the veterans' community living center. On one visit I walked into a patient's room and asked him how he was doing. He did not answer me but moved his head from side to side. A nurse walked in and told me that they named this patient the Candy Man and that he needed to write everything he wanted to say because he could not talk. After a few minutes, I left and went on my way.

About three weeks later I was at the VA again. When I got to that section, I was told that the Candy Man died. At that time I learned that this was the hospice section. The Candy Man was in his mid-thirties. The nurses had put a picture of him on a bulletin board.

Long Black Shawl

By Lawrence Rahn

VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN

Time passed, and I became a patient. As I wrote earlier, I was put in this hospice section and in a room across the hall from the Candy Man's former room. As I lay in my bed, I could see into that room. It was empty. As evening approached, I thought that I saw an image in that room. I fell asleep. The days and nights came and went, but every night about 9:30 I saw that image. I finally told a nurse about seeing the image. She said yes, she had seen him once in a while. We thought that he was the spirit of the Candy Man.

As time went on, I thought of him as my friendly spirit. I watched him move about. The mattress moved, and the curtain waved. I talked to the spirit and asked who he was and what was he looking to find out. He did not answer me. The fact that he did not talk made me believe that because the Candy Man did not talk, the spirit could not talk. As time went on, I still could not get up and about, so I asked the spirit to come over to my room and visit me. He did not come to my room. Soon I began to get up and around, so I decided to visit the spirit in his room. That night when he appeared, I got up and began to walk with my walker across to his room. Keeping my eyes on him as I approached, I reached the doorway and stepped into the room. He vanished. I walked farther into the room and looked around. The room was empty. I went back to my room and got into bed. Once again I looked across, and there he was moving about. I fell asleep.

Time came for me to be discharged. I asked the spirit if he would come with me. He did not answer. I have not seen him at home. After a couple of months, I went over to the VA. I asked how my friendly spirit was doing. The nurses told me that they had not seen him. The nurse Diane said that he was there to watch over me, and now that I was discharged, he probably had gone to someone else who needed to be watched.



In these hills, she walks the ridge end to end, calling for her son to hurry and come home.

Pausing for a moment, looking around for any sign of him, asking herself many times over, "Where can he be?"

She summons her friend, the Northern Wind, to help look for him, he can see for miles around.

Asking the Lord in her prayers, "Won't you please bring him safely home once again?"

Her son promised her he would return once the war had come to an end. It's been quite some time, and still no word from him.

Her son was proud to serve his country. At that time, a war was going on. Many times, he freely admitted how senseless the war really was. Still he went to do his patriotic chore.

His mother cried, over and over, "Forget the damn war!"

He insisted, "I'm no coward," shouting at her to drive home his point. "If I must die so be it! That just means I'll see my maker a little sooner than expected!"

Then he softened, giving his mother a smile. "Don't worry, mom, I will return. Just watch for me among the hills on that ridge."

The Army took him before she even had a another chance to protest. She wrote him every day, and he wrote back again and again. Then, suddenly, the letters stopped coming. She worried something had happened to him. Then the war ended.

It has been over for a while, but she hasn't heard from him.

"I hope he's okay," she keeps saying, "so I can stop worrying. Please dear God bring him safely home."

He promised he wouldn't take chances. Only a mother knows that this was a promise that couldn't be kept with the amount of danger he would be in.

"Where can he be? When is he coming home? Help me God! Find him, please!"

Still she walks these hills from end to end, holding the shawl her son gave her as a token of his promise to return after the war.

Then she sees two men approaching, both in military uniforms.

“Finally,” she cries, “a word about my son’s whereabouts. They must be friends coming to visit, only they don’t know he isn’t home yet.”

Both soldiers come up to her and come to attention. Then one steps forward, looks straight into her eyes, and with a ready-made speech, he begins to speak.

“Are you the mother, the owner of the long black shawl given to you by your son as a token of his promise he would return after the war?” he asks. No answer comes, so he carries on. “I’m sorry to tell you, but your son died serving his country honorably. You see, he was killed saving the lives of seven soldiers in his squad from certain death while sacrificing his own. Truly he is an American hero among all soldiers in this man’s Army.

“On behalf of the United States of America, the military would like to express its deepest condolences for your loss and present you with this Medal of Honor and this American flag. He fought under it in a war he didn’t think was necessary but fought bravely next to his comrades. Once again, the Army offers its deepest sympathy.”

Then the soldier puts away the ready-made speech. His face softens, and in his own words he says, “I knew your son well. He was a good friend and a buddy you could count on for anything. We were going to get together after the war and hang out. We enjoyed each other’s company that much. But it didn’t work out as we planned. For, you see, I was one in that squad he saved that day. I would surely have died if he didn’t throw himself on that hand grenade.

“I’m sure he is with almighty God, where all war heroes go. I also believe very much in heaven, and he is waiting for you to meet him there when the time is right. He spoke very highly of you many times and how he was going to return home after the war. His last words were, ‘Tell mom I’m coming home a little late but to watch for me on the ridge of those hills.’”

The soldier turns and walks away with his comrade as tears stream down her cheeks.

Even now only she knows why, she walked those hills watching for him. One day, her friend the Northern Wind started blowing so hard that she could barely stand. Then, looking to the furthest hill, she saw someone approaching her.

“Yes,” she shouted, “it’s him! My son has come home! Just like he said he would.”

With outstretched arms, he beckoned his mother to follow him.

She was never found. The concerned citizens of the small town looked for her for days. They searched along the only trail; they couldn’t have missed her. “Where could she have gone?” they kept asking one another. All they found was a Medal of Honor and her long black shawl.

Her son had kept his promise—that he would return. It was that gift, the long black shawl, that kept her going, reminding her that he would be back.

PALLAS ATHENE BEST STORY AWARD

Hard Consonants and Red Gladiolas

By Donald MacDougall
—San Jose, CA

“...and some hard consonants can become soft when combined with another letter. Consider T, as in Tennessee. Add an H, and the sound becomes softer, as in then, or three...”

Mrs. Williams the middle-aged English teacher droned on, but Milo Simmons was barely paying attention. It had hit him that his own name had no hard consonants. He wished his name had more impact. There wasn’t much he could do with his middle name, either. James could become Jim or Jimmy, but that was



no improvement. Buck Braddock, now that guy has the hard impact sounds coming out of his ears, thought Milo. Why didn't his parents give him just one? All he had was a bunch of soft consonants and vowels.

Milo had a hard time trying to focus on Mrs. Williams' voice. She talked about phrases, and clauses, and proper use of the comma. It all became a jumble in his mind. Milo was in love. How could he care about consonants and clauses and commas when Bonnie Collins invaded his thoughts? Bonnie, the girl he had loved since his sophomore year, and he was now a senior, ready to graduate in two more months.

It was a warm spring in a medium-sized town in the West, and Milo gave little thought to what he would do after graduation. Some of the seniors said they wanted to attend the local state college in the fall. Not a large percentage of high school graduates went to college in the early 1960s. Boys from well-to-do families could go to college, and their sisters could study to be a teacher or a nurse.

Eighteen-year-old boys were required to register for the draft, so a lot of guys were talking to the Army recruiter. It would be better to enlist now than to get drafted when there was a war. The Korean War had been over for less than a decade, and there were new hot spots around the globe.

Milo looked forward to his afternoon math class. He sat one row over from where Bonnie Collins sat, and two seats behind her. He struggled with factoring and equations, but he got to watch Bonnie for 50 minutes every day. Bonnie also struggled in math class. She was mooning over Buck Braddock. Buck was tall, and he had broad shoulders and a strong chin. He was the quarterback of the school's football team, and he ran sprints for the track team. He had all those hard consonants in his name, and he was going steady with Bonnie. Milo sat and contemplated the unfairness of it all.

Mrs. Simmons was widowed when Milo was 11 years old. She and her son lived in a small house about a half mile from the high school. She worked part time as a seamstress, but she didn't drive. Milo worked three days a week at a small grocery store a couple of blocks from his house. He gave most of his wages to his mother, who had a hard time paying the mortgage. Mr. Simmons died of liver cancer, and he had too little life insurance. Still, Milo managed to save up a few dollars.

Milo was dreaming about what he could do with his money if only Buck Braddock were not in the picture. He could buy Bonnie

a present or take her to a movie. The math teacher called on Milo, and he answered a question about quadratic equations, even though he was a bit tongue-tied.

He had Bonnie on his brain. Then the teacher called on Bonnie. She couldn't figure how to solve the problem. "Bonnie," the teacher said, "take your book and go sit in the back of the room. Milo, you go show her how to figure it out." The math teacher went on to lecture the rest of the class on factoring.

Bonnie sat at a desk in the rear corner. Milo moved another desk close to Bonnie. He sat down. Then he froze. I'm actually sitting next to Bonnie Collins, thought Milo. His throat was so tight he could hardly breathe. After a long silence, Bonnie finally said, "I just don't get this problem. Please help me, Milo."

He allowed his eyes to focus on the math problem. His throat loosened up a bit, and he replied, "You have to do this step first. Then all the numbers fall into place."

Bonnie played with the numbers a bit, then a light bulb went off in her head. "Oh, now I get it," she said. Then she flashed Milo a smile. He almost melted into a puddle right there on the floor. "I'm sorry, Milo. I'm a bit distracted today. I just broke up with Buck Braddock."

Milo summoned all the courage he could and said, "Would you like to go to the prom with me?" Bonnie replied, "I might as well. That Buck is such a jerk."

Milo floated on a cloud the rest of the day. He had to work that afternoon. He bagged groceries and stocked shelves with his mind only half functioning. The boss told him to take a break.



He went outside, and he ran into his old classmate Jack. Jack had quit school back around Thanksgiving. The school counselors had told him his grades weren't quite good enough to graduate, so he dropped out and ran off to join the Army.

"Hey Jack," Milo said, "I heard you went to Fort Ord. Are you all through training now?"

"Yeah, and I'm on leave now. Next week I have to report to artillery school in Fort Bliss, Texas. Hey, Milo. Come back behind the building and have a smoke."

"Oh, Jack, you never smoked before?"

"Hey, everybody smokes in the Army. You almost can't afford not to. Cigs are so cheap at the PX."

Jack and Milo puffed on cigarettes and swapped jokes for a while. Milo wasn't a smoker, so he coughed when he tried to inhale. He finally gave up and stepped on his cigarette butt. Jack told him some of the funny things he observed at Fort Ord. He taught Milo a couple of verses of the "Sammy Small" marching song.

"Oh, by the way," injected Milo, "I'm taking Bonnie Collins to the prom."

"Wow, she's the prettiest girl in the school, but hasn't she been Buck Braddock's girlfriend about forever?"

"Yeah, but they broke up. As soon as I heard about it, I asked Bonnie to the dance. She said, "yes."

"Well good luck with that, Milo. Have you ever been to a school dance?"

"No, but I asked a couple of guys. I'll have to rent a formal suit and get a corsage from a florist. I already arranged to borrow Bill Wilson's car. I have a driver's license, you know, I took driver's ed in school. I don't have a car, and my mom never did learn how to drive. I was thinking about buying an old heap with the money I saved from working at the grocery, but I don't know how much this prom is going to cost me. And actually, I had to offer Bill 20 bucks to use his car."

"O.K., well listen. I hope it all works out well for you. Your boss is going to come looking for you in a minute. You better get back to work."

"Hey, let's keep in touch. You know my address. Send me a letter from Fort Bliss."

Milo went back to work, and Jack went about his business. Milo counted down the days until the prom. With three days to go, he took a bus downtown to the formal wear rental place and got fitted for a white jacket and trousers. The day of the prom Milo walked over to Bill's place and got the car. He went home to put on his formal clothes and had only to stop at the florist shop before arriving at Bonnie's house.

"Sorry, son, we're all out of corsages," said the florist. "You got to order them ahead of time. We had a few extra, but they sold out just 10 minutes ago."

Milo looked so downhearted that the florist decided not to let him leave empty handed. "Listen," he said, "I can give you a deal on glads. We ordered in quite a few for an event that got canceled." The florist led Milo near the back of the store. There were several containers of dark, blood-red gladiolas. "I can give you a bouquet of these flowers for half price. Your girlfriend will love them." He quoted a price, and Milo agreed.

Milo parked Bill's car around the corner from the front of Bonnie's house. He wanted to surprise her with a ride; she thought they'd be walking to the prom. And that's how Milo Simmons showed up at Bonnie Collins' door carrying in his arm a dozen spears of dark red glads.

"Hello, I'm here for Bonnie," said Milo when Mrs. Collins answered the door.



“Oh, she went to the prom with Buck Braddock.”

“Well, uh, (Think fast, Milo.) some of the other kids and me, uh, we just wanted to make sure she has, uh, a ride and everything.”

“Yes, Buck picked her up in a big red Buick.”

“Oh, well, I guess I’ll see her over at the school. Uh, good night Mrs. Collins.”

“What a strange young man,” said Mrs. Collins to herself.

Milo got around the corner near where he had parked the car before he realized he was still carrying the gladiolas. He threw the bouquet down on the sidewalk and stepped on it. Then he stepped on it again. Then he was jumping up and down on it. He stomped the once-beautiful flowers until they were just a pile of red and green mush.

Milo got in the car and started to drive. He drove around the outskirts of town in a daze for quite a while. When it started to get dark, he pulled into a drive-in movie theater. He parked near the back fence, as far away from the screen as possible. Then he turned up the speaker to maximum loud, so nobody could hear his sobs.

It was after 2 a.m. before Milo got home. He went to bed quietly and slept late. In the morning, his mother asked if he had had a good time at the dance. He only replied that it could have been better. “I have to return my formal wear, Ma. I’ll go do that now and then leave Bill’s car off. I can walk home from there.”

The guy at the formal wear store charged Milo an extra \$3 for additional cleaning. Somehow a red stain had gotten on the lower pants legs. When he got home, his mother told him a letter had arrived. “It looks like it came from El Paso.”

Milo avoided Bonnie all through the end of the school year. After finals, he went to the graduation exercise, but he didn’t enjoy it. He didn’t want to continue working at the grocery for minimum wage, so he job hunted for the next couple of weeks. The only offer he had was as a plumber’s assistant. It would be dirty work for almost no more money.

Buck Braddock got a football scholarship to a college in the Mid-American Conference. He tried for the Big Ten but didn’t quite make the grade. A broken ankle in a practice game ended his athletic career. He finished the fall semester of his freshman year, then he dropped out of college. He joined his father’s new car dealership.

Bonnie Collins didn’t graduate with her class. She had to finish her last remaining credit in summer school. She passed the red stain on the sidewalk every day on the way to school. She didn’t know why the sidewalk was red. It might have been some kids playing with a paint set. Maybe someone spilled a bottle of juice. Perhaps it was blood wrenched from the heart of a young man who dared to reach for something he was ill-prepared to experience. In any case, Bonnie passed the stain several times, until the summer rains washed it away. She never gave it another thought.

After she got her diploma, she went to work in a local department store. She sold cosmetics and perfume. She married the son of a hardware store owner and had four kids.

Milo Simmons left his hometown that summer, but he never saw it again. You can read more about him in Washington, D.C. That’s where his name, with all its vowels and soft consonants, is engraved on the polished surface of a long black granite wall.

What Freedom Means to Me May 28, 2020

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

What is it that vets understand so well about freedom?

I think it goes well beyond any training they have had in peacetime or in war. They know because they offered their services to their nation not knowing what the cost might be.

I along with all Americans love my freedom.

The ability to make my own choices, go where I want to go, and say what is on my mind without fear of a knock on the door.

To enjoy the sites of this beautiful land.

To work hard for what I consider more than what I need and strive for what I want.

To improvise and overcome not always by myself but with the help of friends, family, and professional folks who can heal and fix me when I am broken.

To see that good triumphs in this land and that there are compassionate people always willing to help out another human being.

A National Brotherhood and Sisterhood.



Happy Veterans Day

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

To some, freedom is nothing but a seven-letter word, but freedom is owing your life to those who gave you your freedom to choose.

Can you hear the veteran yell, “I’m all in!”? It’s a familiar phrase in poker. A player will say those words when he puts all his chips (life) into a bet. He holds nothing back, and the risk he takes is great. If he wins, he gains a huge payout (victory for his country). But if he loses, he’s out of the game (life over) and loses everything.

Our military plays just that game. They are all in. They will go to any length, suffer any inconvenience and run any risk for God, Family and Country. Some leave behind their homes and loved ones because they are dedicated to their country, their eyes tearing up, appearing brave to hide the fear for no other to see.

They make that all-in bet, never knowing their fate. They start feeling anguished and all alone, separated from special ones at home who patiently wait. They have leapt across time, cultures, languages, seas, oceans and lands. Many represent this country in life-or-death situations with honor, courage, and loyalty. Some

face death everywhere they turn. So many survive devastating combat wounds, and let us never forget about the ones who have come home in a grief-stricken, exhaustion-induced stupor.

What it all boils down to is we have great men and women in our armed forces. Thank a veteran—past, present and soon to be—for yelling “I’m all in!”

It was once said to me:

I am an American soldier.

I am a warrior and a member of a team.

I serve the people of the United States.

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade behind.

I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.

I am an American soldier.

May God bless all you heroes and bring all who are away from your loved ones home safely. We are all so thankful for your service, and we are very proud of you.

Happy Veterans Day!

Visual Arts Initiative



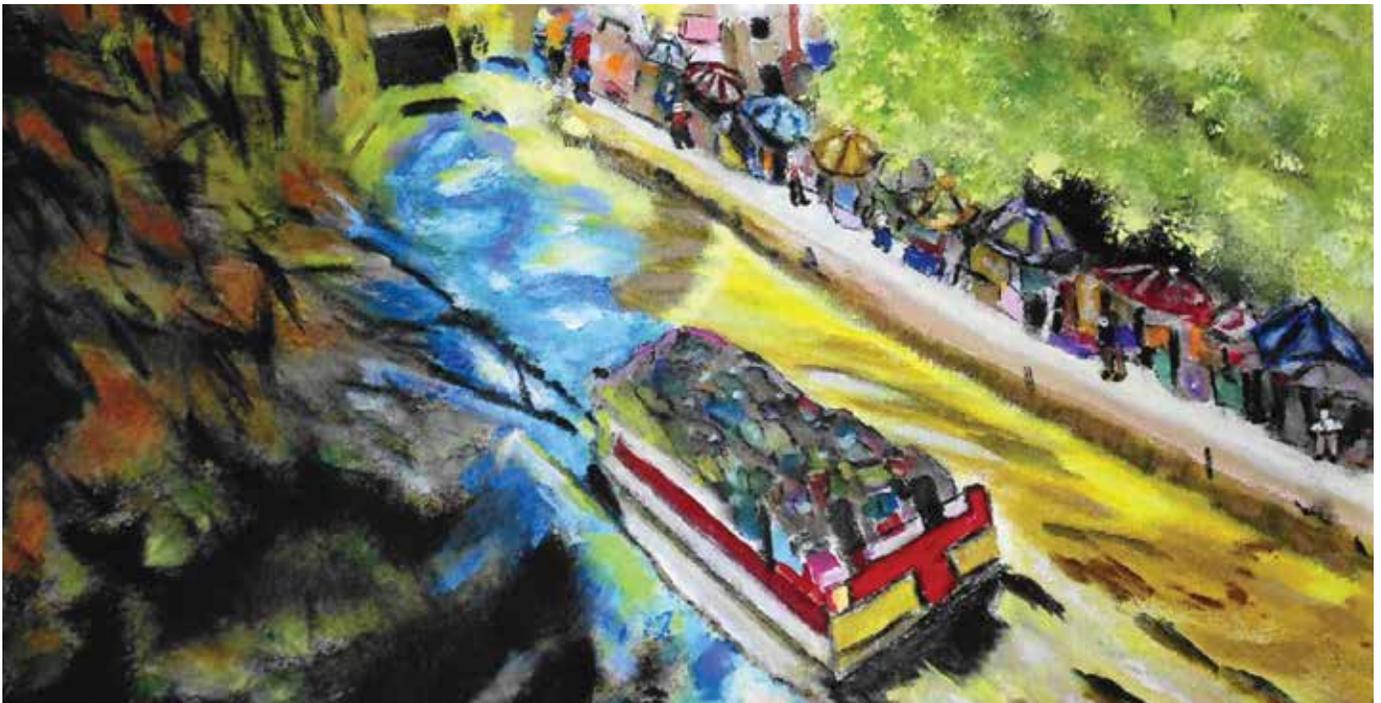
Forever in My Heart: By Keely Seymour
— Valrico, FL

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

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

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

— *The Editors*



Art 11: By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



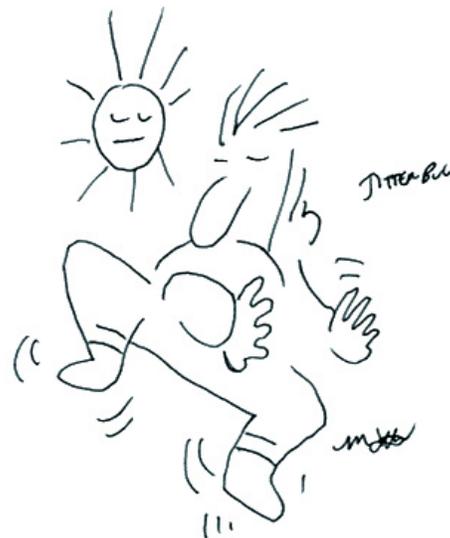
God Bless Our American Door: By Penny Deere
— Albany, NY



Calendar Cover: By Zaloga Post American Legion Support Our Troops Committee
—Albany, NY



Watching the Sunset on a Sunday Afternoon: By Anthony Phillips
— Las Vegas, NV



Jitterbug: By Frank X. Mattson
— Spring City, PA



Art 3: By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



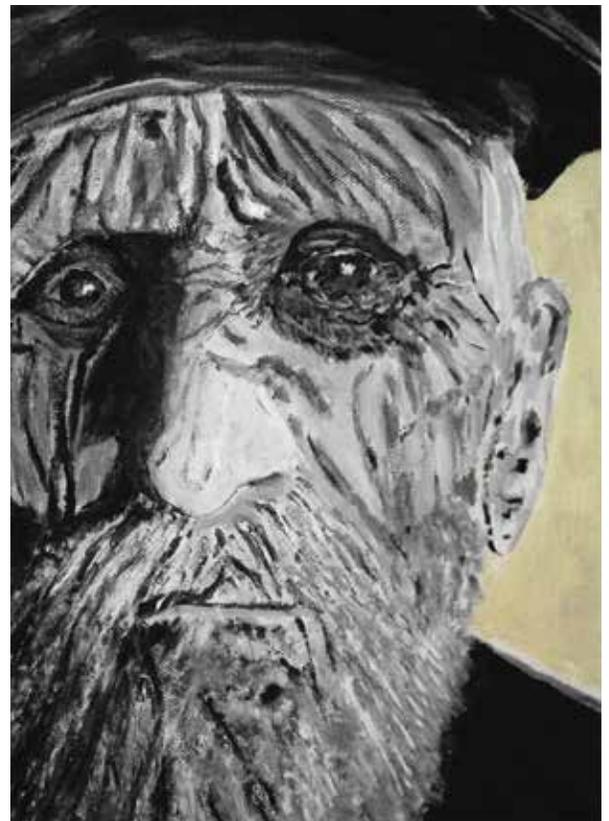
If Only Everyone Saw the Glory: By Jacquelyn Cranford
— Memphis, TN



Smoke: By Demetrius Kastrenakes
— Miami, FL



Communication: By Diane Wasden
— Augusta, GA



Art 5: By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



Heading Home: By Ty Andrews
— Lincoln, NE



ART 6: By Donald Sherwood
— Danville, IL



Soul Rider: By John Payne
— Chillicothe, OH



Drawing 4: Bruce McClain
— Blue Springs, MO



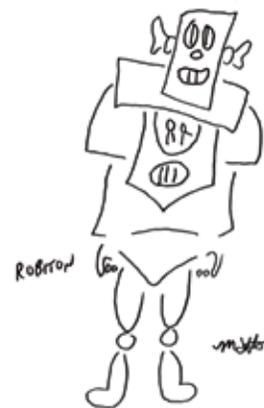
ART 10: By Donald Sherwood
— Danville, IL



Silence: By Diane Wasden
— Augusta, GA



Art Heals: By Kenny Trujillo
— Phoenix, AZ



Robitor: By Frank X. Mattson
— Spring City, PA

Love

By Frank X. Mattson

VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA

In
A face
A build
A smile,
Emotions
So
Ecstatic,
I know
You're it.

Gethsemane

By Frank X. Mattson

VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA

They are
But a foot
Away.
The Spirit—
I don't care.
The Flesh—
Screams.
I did no
Wrong!
Treason.
I lied.
I did
Not
Know
What
I said.

Guilt-Free Prayer

By Daniel Paicopulos

—San Diego, CA

If it please God,
may my friends forgive me
my mistakes,
mostly unintended.
If it please God,
may the world forgive me
my interruptions to the flow,
my combative honesty,
my angry outbursts,
mostly unintended.
If it please God,

may I write from my heart,
sing with my soul,
accept praise and criticism,
mostly without judgement.

Author's Note: This poem was written midway during my PTSD treatment, seeking forgiveness.

I'm Going to Spend Christmas With You

By Anthony Coccozza

VA Medical Center—Los Angeles, CA

I'm going to spend Christmas with you,
and promise to spend the night with you.
I have a special gift for you;
I'm giving you my heart,
a real Christmas present, a work of art.
If you're going to spend Christmas with me,
we celebrate together, both you and me.
We've known each other for quite a while;
we date and we dance a lot, you and I.
Let's hold hands together
and look at the stars above.
Let's make a wish together,
for this is real; this is true love.
I'm going to spend Christmas with you,
because I'm falling in love with you.
You are my Christmas present;
You are God's creation that He sent.
True love never dies; it just fades away,
and lives to love with happiness another day.

What Does Veterans Day Mean to Me?

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

What does Veterans Day mean to me?
Honoring all veterans we know and see.
Those who lived, those who died,
Those who had faith, hope and pride.
Today we live open and free;
Without their service, this wouldn't be.
Now our flag proudly waves and stands
with beauty and meaning throughout the land.
Our veterans have cleared the way
For all the freedom we have today.

The Enchanted Chair

By Charles L. Carey

VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV

Alone stood a chair;
dreams were somehow fulfilled there.
It was if all time stood as if in a stall,
no noises at all, every sound blocked by a wall.
Outside the window, one lonely barrel was kept
to catch rain while we were awake
and while we slept.
The enchanted chair stood alone
where I sat, not made of stone.
The cherished sands of time
dripped through an hourglass.
With you there, endless reflections from the past.

The Youthful Man

By Charles L. Carey

VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV

The shutters flip and flap
during the youth of time.
Dreams twist and twirl
and settle into the youthfulness
of a playful mind.
The seasons rally
into a purpose,
a direction,
a stand of what will be
inside weathered reflections,
but are then lost,
gone out to reality.
Changing,
rearranging,
a true self will appear.
Selfish triumphs build and sway
into unenlightened reflections
in a bewildering display.
So, hail to the gods that are so near,
holding close
youthful memories that
are so clear.

Captain Ahab and Moby Dick

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

Those were the days when ships were made of wood
and men were made of steel.
The leviathan raged in the seven seas.
Whales were hunted for blubber,
to be turned into oil and then exotic perfumes for women,
and for bone to be turned into scrimshaw
and fancy jewelry.
All ludicrous, done by all countries.
One man, Captain Ahab, stood on the high seas
seeking revenge for his lost leg.
The leviathan he chased
was the real master of the oceans.
Moby Dick, the great white whale,
could capsize a ship with his tail.
There was no hook that could catch him.
The water would boil when he was trapped in nets
ripped to shreds by his mighty strength.
Bruised and maimed because of his fame,
Moby Dick was outnumbered on the high seas.
Captain Ahab, tied on Moby Dick's bleeding back,
was taken under forever, along with his hatred.

Captain Trump

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

He's a real go-getter;
we the people couldn't do better.
He has charm and enthusiasm for the people.
The Russians love him so much
they even voted for him!
Full steam ahead, Captain Trump.
Keep them guessing; don't let them be messing
with Lady Liberty. Do as you please.
If you want the job done right,
you've got to do it yourself.
I met him walking down 5th Avenue
when he was dating Marla Maples.
She had legs like a baby grand piano,
and her eyes sparkled like the Milky Way.
He probably knew he would be President one day.
While the cat's away, the mice will play.
This man will change the course of history;
he will lead us to victory.

Blow Wind, Blow

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Blow wind, blow, sing me a song.
Sing me a song of love.
Sing me a lullaby, sweet and low,
Only a song you and I should know.
Blow wind, blow, sing me a song.
Sing me a song night and day.
Where you're going, where you've been,
Tell these things to me.
Blow wind, blow, sing me a song.
Sing me a song of might,
How you topple the tallest tree
And sink a ship on a wave-tossed sea.
Blow wind, blow, sing me a song,
A song of bitter cold wind,
How you can bring the ice and snow
And chill the hearts of all.
Blow wind, blow, sing me a song,
A song of summertime, please.
When the sun is hot and the day is long,
You come with your cooling breeze.

Author's Note: The poem pays homage to the elements and Mother Nature as we come out of the bitter cold and hope for a warmer and sunnier day.

Infinite Intelligence

By Daniel Paicopulos

—San Diego, CA

If some day, we sat outside,
watching the sun rise,
feeling the heat of the day,
would we think we had caused it?
If some night, we sat by our window,
watching the moon rise,
observing the stars being switched on,
would we think it was our doing?
If some week, we were quite still,
noticing the flower buds opening,
sensing their smell, eyeing their beauty,
would we believe we created this?
If some season, we stood quietly in a forest,
hearing the blooming of the trees,
sensing the eons of this repeated pattern,
would we lay claim to this magnificence?
Hopefully, we would be more aware, more humble,
appreciating that we—and the universe we inhabit—

are already cared for,
already maintained, sustained.
There is no need to arrange anything with Spirit,
to ask anything of God.
We are one with God; we are in the Spirit's care.
All of these wonders are already ours,
the days, the nights, the flowers, the trees.
We needn't ask for them,
need not judge our own worthiness,
simply accept that what is, is,
and there is no separation.
We are one with all of it.

Author's Note: I came to know this during the times before and after my many, many visits to surgery, realizing this life to be a benediction through which we are all passing.

Thanksgiving Day

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

Thank God every day to be alive;
Within the Holy Spirit we survive.
It's His spirit that gives us life
Among the shadow and the strife.
We're thankful for the will no one can change;
His caring love reveals what He arranged.
We're thankful for His goodness time after time,
Healing each heart, soul and mind.
With a tender heart, we help others to cope,
Sharing, caring, always having hope.
I'm expressing words and have to say
I am grateful for His love every day.
He reaches every soul, bringing faith;
Our God-given life we always appreciate.

My Prayer

By Karen A. Green

VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

I don't want to be left behind
when this world ends.
I want to see Jesus
and go where His angels send.
I want to shout Hallelujah
to the King of Kings,
and walk on golden streets
and so many other things.
I want to see
my friends and loved ones there,
but most of all spend time with Jesus
while the angels sing so fair.
I don't want
to feel pain anymore.
I'll pray for healing
and leave my burdens at Heaven's door.
I want to go
to where there's no sorrow,
but for now
I'll face tomorrow.
I need
not fear,
because I know
Jesus is near.
He is
so grand.
He guides me
with His right hand.
In Jesus
I trust,
because
He is so just.
I consider it an honor
to do anything for Jesus I can,
and to share
God's good news with my fellow man.
I'm so glad
that I can see
how Jesus Christ
has set me free!
I look forward to come to the cross
when the trumpet sounds,
to lay down my trophy
and pick up my crown.

Women of African Descent

By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.

VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

The hardship, suffering and abuse
You have faced go far beyond
Any story of recorded history,
Especially the women
Who are the descendants
Of those captured
And brought to a foreign land,
Forced to work as slaves.
Descendants of the slave trade,
What you have endured
Has not defeated you.
You maintain
Dignity, love and respect
For your men and children.
You have always been
The power base of the family unit.
Without the love you provide,
We could not exist.
Slavery should have moved us
To the point of extinction,
Yet you are the most powerful
And beautiful women on earth.
Regardless of the evil
Forced upon you,
You manage to always
Show love and respect
For your men and children,
To uplift us
Even when you were
Trodden upon.
You will always have
My greatest admiration,
Love and respect.
Let it be known to men,
If they are not aware,
That we are nothing
Without our Black women.
You are, without a doubt,
The greatest creation
God has ever made,
For your wisdom and ability
have no limit.
I thank God
For the power and belief
He has always placed in you.
The Black woman is the mother
Of all civilization,
The architect of our future.

Exceptionally You

By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.

VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

Are you ordinary or extraordinary?
Do you stand with the crowd
Or do you stand
Out of the crowd?
Do you give in
To peer pressure
Or do you go your own way?
Are you a follower
Or are you a leader?
Do you follow
What others tell you
Or do you follow
Your own mind?
Do you totally
Submit to others
Or do you deny yourself
For others?
Do you need
To be accepted by everyone?
Do you feel validated
By others' approval?
Do you feel worthless
When others think badly of you?

You are one of a kind
You are unique
You are special
You are exceptional.
Don't deny yourself;
Don't allow the world
To deny you.
Don't allow anyone
Or anything
To hold you back
From being exceptional.
Following the crowd
Will get you nowhere.
If your peers
Are going nowhere
So will you.
Do you have
The need for others
To think good of you
Before you
Think good of yourself?
This may never happen.
Being liked by everyone
Gets you nowhere.
Be whom you were meant

To be.
Follow your heart
Follow your mind
Create your own path.
You will discover
The person God has meant
You to be.

'Tis the Season

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

'Tis the season; Jesus is the reason.
Christmas is near to bring holiday cheer.
A time to give gifts, a time for charity,
People helping people, in December not a rarity.
Salvation Army kettles placed in many a store
Help many people, especially the poor.
The Ole Grinch and Mister Scrooge
at this time of year won't be a deluge.
Families reuniting, ceasefires instead of fighting,
Homeless people being fed, the Holy Bible being read,
The virgin birth of Jesus Christ who would later pay the price.
Toys for Tots and the U.S. Marine Corps
With dress blues and white gloves which the children adore.
Thank you, Jesus, for the gift of salvation.
May you protect and bless our great nation.

To Feed the Poor

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

Stocking food shelves across the nation
to help feed God's whole creation.
Hungry people around the Earth,
charity giving birth.
No more famines and starvation,
part of Jesus Christ's salvation.
Now it's neighbor helping neighbor
with a meal they all can savor.
Good nutrition is necessary;
choice of meals may sometimes vary.
Satisfaction saving lives
including honey from beehives.
Volunteers lending a hand
to the music of a band.
Accepting cash donations,
watching Presidential standing ovations.
Fewer people sick and dying
put an end to needless crying.

Moments of Introspection

By Benjamin J. Williams

VA Medical Center—Biloxi, MS

How high, steep and snow-capped
Were the mountains
You faced, then left unclimbed?

How deep, wide, filled with mystery
Were the valleys you feared to explore,
So never dared or took time to spare?

How many chances came along for you
To do the right and honorable thing?
And you let each slowly pass you by.

How far away are the stars
You wished upon many nights?
And did even one wish ever come true?

How much of your heart's love, joy
Or happiness did you freely share
With those you held dear?

How many songs to lift the spirit
Did you leave unsung, so others
Never heard the beauty of your melody?

Welcome Home

By Tanya R. Whitney

VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

He left his home and family
To travel thousands of miles away,
Naïve in the ways of life and of war,
Not ready for the horrors to come.
A young woman ready for life,
Wanting to be patriotic and do her part,
Sheltered and untouched by the world,
She would come of age in a land far away.
Their country called them to serve,
So they left family and friends
To a struggle in an unforgiving land,
Vilified by an unforgiving population,
Thrust into a world of unknown dangers,
Knowing death could call at any time.
Each day they are there is another year lived,
Aging them with a hardened maturity.
Living through the hells of a battle
Their fathers never saw in their war.
Nurses treating wounded bodies and souls

Their mothers had never imagined in their war.
A political war with no way to win
Against an enemy with nothing to lose.
An enemy with the face of a friend
And in the person of woman and child.
Many returned home in flag-draped coffins,
Others with physical wounds and scars.
All came home changed in some manner
While some have yet to return home.
Unlike their fathers in the World War,
There were no parades or confetti for them.
They were not welcomed home as heroes.
They were spit upon and called names.
Isolated by their service in a hated war,
Detached from the social changes going on,
They no longer knew their place or role
In the foreign world they once knew as home.
Ostracized for serving their country,
Abandoned by those who served before them,
These men and women swore never again
Would a generation of veterans be denied.
Healing comes slowly to some; others
Lose the battle to cope and can't go on.
An old adage takes hold in one's heart
As time begins to heal a wounded nation.
To make amends and honor their service,
The nation answers the call to dedicate
A monument to those who answered the call
And served an undeserving populace of the time.
An ebony granite wall that mirrors
The souls of those who gave their all.
To the brothers and sisters who returned,
The names of those never to be forgotten.
A statue that brings to life the faces of the war,
The hardened warrior and the nurturing angels,
To the first taste of the unimaginable horrors,
Bringing the past and the present together.
Many years have passed since that time.
The young men and women have grown older
And are now grandfathers and grandmothers
To a generation who have no knowledge of 'Nam.
The veterans of the Vietnam War promised
Never to abandon a veteran as they were before.
They rallied in support of young men and women
Who answered the call to serve as they did before.
We honor them for their service and sacrifices,
For they never lost faith in those of us who followed.
So from the newest generation of combat veterans,
Thank You and Welcome Home, Brothers and Sisters!

Listen

By Lawrence William Langman
—Portage, IN

You look into the eyes of the earth,
What Mother Nature wrought and birthed.
Where man has failed within her eyes,
Like a wounded animal, lays and cries.
We tell ourselves we're not to blame.
Prior generations are the reason, we shame,
Responsibility once held in high honor.
Now, our resources, we just waste and squander.
Horrified, we gasp in such disbelieving.
At a point in time, we're past all retrieving!
What will be left for our daughters and sons?
Our grandchildren, our family and friends, escaping no one!
What will it take to open one's eyes?
The death of us all as the universe cries!

Let Freedom Ring

By Gene Allen Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

I dream of a world that's free from hunger,
A world that's free from war,
Where peace can live in every heart
And freedom lives forever more.

Freedom to learn and believe,
Freedom to live and to love,
Freedom to give and receive
And to sing with the angels above.

I dream of a bright and beautiful world
Where happiness abounds,
Where all are free to work and play,
A world with wonder all around.

Freedom to live in a country
Where truth and honesty prevail,
Where both young and old are cherished
And no harmful force can assail.

A home with freedom to worship
Whatever pathway we trod,
Where we value the worth of everyone
And each one is loved as a child of God.

Author's Note: As a Marine Corps veteran, I have thought a lot about freedom. I never want to take it for granted. I was willing and prepared to die for the freedom of my family and my country, then, as I am today. "Let freedom ring" is an expression of my thoughts and feelings about freedom.

Color of the Day

By Carl Kerwick
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Color of the day
Let's go out and play.
We choose and pursue
Fun and adventure,
Living, loving and laughing all the way.

Purple and pink flash in a wink;
Yellow and green let us be seen.
Red and blue or any other hue
Brings you forth into
A colorful day.

For Those We Take for Granted

By Helen Anderson Glass
VA Medical Center—Tucson, AZ

Sometimes we take for granted
The great things that people do,
Making things pleasant and safe
For all of us, for me and for you.
Dad, for providing food
And a roof over our heads.
Mom, for cooking and sewing
And seeing our prayers are said.
The police officers on the corner,
Facing danger on their beat.
The firefighters putting out fires,
Enduring danger of flame and heat.
Our military on land, in the air and at sea,
Guarding our nation—you and me.

Being taught by our teachers,
Learning in the right way.
Spiritual guidance from ministers of God
About the Golden Rule and how to pray.
We all together make a wonderful "family"
Right here at home, the way it was meant to be.
I pray that I will never again take for granted
These things that they do.
I'll make this a solemn vow to them:
If I can do it—how about you?

Long History

By Carl Kerwick

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Writing poetry in my head,
There it will stay till I'm dead.
No one ever knowing
What poetry is in my head,
The beautiful, tranquil verses
That are ever flowing,
The songs I remember of yesterday
Never really changing,
Just transforming for today.
Writing poetry in my head,
There it will stay till I'm dead.
Writing poetry in my head.

Get With It

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

If the toilet has a dribble
And the faucet has a leak,
You can try yourself to fix things
To last another week!
Make Do!
If you can find a rubber band
Or a common piece of string,
Perhaps a jumbo paper clip
Will work to fix the thing!
Make Do!
If the window has a slight crack
Or the door hinge has a squeak,
Break out the trusty Scotch Tape
And the petroleum jelly seek!
Make Do!
If a wooden chair is nicked a bit
And the sheen has disappeared,
Apply some matching surface wax
And it won't look so weird!
Make Do!
In short, resort to what's at hand
And do your best to try.
Those small repairs will save you much
And you can buy more pie!
Make Do!

SALLY-SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL AWARD

The Arrival of 5 Composers with Hyphenated Names

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

Ippolitov-Ivanoff starts us off in this poem;
His *Caucasian Sketches* reminds some of home.

Camille Saint-Saëns follows quite close;
His *Carnival of the Animals* is quite a dose!

Rimsky-Korsakov rings in as number three;
We all know his *Flight of the Bumblebee*.

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari follows next;
His opera, *The Jewels of the Madonna*, has some text!

And Heitor Villa-Lobos is last to arrive;
Listen to his *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*.

Blood of Our Best

By Michael Moslander

—Moberly, MO

War has tested the core since the days of yore.
Standing tall before they fall,
All gave some and some gave all.
Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters,
Children of the brave,
Fathers and mothers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers,
Nations of kindred never to waver.
Lines of ancestors all the way back, monuments of memory,
Homeland and heritage, liberty and family,
Paid for in the blood of patriots and more blood of the enemy.
Deeds and sacrifice of heroes, bestowed by bards
Down through the ages, steadfast in the face of fear.
Sword and bow, rifle and cannon, rockets and missiles.
Legionnaires, hoplites, river raiders and hussars,
Rangers, cavalry, frogmen, recon and death from above.
Fighting in the field of horror and terror,
Through carnage, death and destruction
Until nuclear annihilation.
Boots breaking ground,
Deserts, jungles, forests, plains and mountains,
Streets and cities the globe around.
Soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen,
Warriors and weapons.

Boom of the Battalion, stomp and shout as one,
 Marching to the final call till it's won.
 Fury of the fleet steaming across the depths,
 Shot across the bow,
 Keel of steel, impervious to bend or kneel.
 Scream and shudder of wings overhead,
 Flight in the heights bringing death by day or night,
 Wading through clod and darkness toward an icy enemy,
 Against all odds they achieved a bloody victory.
 Bodies and earth scorched by sun, battle unwon,
 Alone in the sea, alone in the field, alone in the pit,
 Dreaming of a loved one.
 Across land, sea and sky,
 Driving into the breach of battle to live and die,
 Swallowed into storms of gas, bullets and bombs,
 Drowning in the roar of men and machines.
 Ribbons, patches, pins and medals adorn those who fight,
 Blood-soaked camouflage cloaked in Stars and Stripes.
 Watery graves, salt-filled sands, moss-filled bogs,
 Ashes in the air.
 Poppies are placed, crosses are raised,
 Monuments on the mound, pillars on the pyre,
 Halls of honor and gardens of glory.
 Faces of the fallen in petrified perseverance,
 Faces of the free in silent remembrance,
 Stoic folk,
 Our vigilant guardians,
 The fabric of our family.
 With eternal gratitude and echoed grief,
 We swallow the love, pain and loss
 Into the bosom of our breast,
 Shedding tears from the heart of our chest,
 Love and memorial bestowed upon our best.

Heroine

By Michael Moslander
—Moberly, MO

I met you on a cold winter's night.
 It was love at first sight, so soft and white.
 You were a tantalizing seductress of fantasy.
 Your first kiss brought me warmth and comfort
 in the dying of the light.
 But the effects of your love had a secret source,
 A spring of toxin glimmering with deception.
 Eyes glazed in the dimness of death,
 Blind to the essence of your embrace,
 To your lullaby like Lorelei,
 I stumbled along that rocky cliff.
 Forsaking family, friends and foes,
 I walked alone in the woods so wild,
 lost in lies.

I was beaten, broke and bound.
 Was I dead or alive, confusion to reality?
 But then I heard a sound,
 A rhythmic percussion.
 Was it a concussion in my head?
 Was it the beating of a soldier's heart?
 Was it a call to arms on the drum of battle?
 Was it the striking of the smith's hammer,
 The forging of a warrior's weapon?
 Awakened I am by the clash of thunder.
 Envisioned I am by the storm of lightening.
 I vomit up the vile of your poison from the core of me.
 Emerge I will from this forest of futility,
 Returning to reality an instrument of mythology,
 Never again subject to your fallacy.

Drinkers

By Lynn A. Norton
—Leawood, KS

Beware of towels.
 Minions of household cleansing,
 ubiquitous as air,
 their docile appearance belies
 unquenchable thirst.

Never satisfied by our meager offerings,
 they are ravenous for any moisture within grasp.
 Liquids, sweet or fowl, soothing or corrosive,
 all potential victims, indiscriminate
 choices of their cravings.

Exotic fiber or domestic strand,
 thick as wool or thin as dandelion spore,
 they lie motionless as spiders,
 waiting for a meal to cross their web.
 A single touch can drain any vessel.

They keep drinking
 until gorged and bloated beyond capacity.
 The last drop absorbed,
 grudgingly sharing their excess
 with atmosphere and gravity.

Laundered and refreshed
 after a day of consumption,
 warm and fragrant
 from a cycle in the dryer,
 addiction begins anew.

Human Again

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

She had not a name
Though she used to.
Her name was taken away,
The purpose—to dehumanize—
Because she was a Jew.
When she begged for her mother,
The guards just laughed.
Pointing to the crematory,
Said, “Your mother is NOW ash.”
Wanting to cry,
Yet the tears would not flow.
She was alone in this world.
IF she survived, where would she go?
The hunger she felt
Was an indescribable pain.
In the pit of one’s stomach,
Even a crumb was fair game.
The constant crying,
The gnashing of teeth,
The rotting of bodies
Always at her feet.
When liberation came,
She was at death’s door,
Weighing only 80 pounds.
They found her on the floor.
An American soldier
Wrapped her in his arms.
She noticed a tear in his eye,
And #27328 became alarmed.
Not seeing empathy in years and years,
#27328 couldn’t help but cry a tear.
And when this American soldier asked her name,
“Helga” she said. She became human again.

Author’s Note: The #27328 is a fictional number I made up. This is a poem that was written by me and has no resemblance to any person living or dead. It is a representation of the horror of the Holocaust.

I’m

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY



I’m from the twig the battle-axe snapped from the bush.
I’m the homemade fudge, but more like taffy—
from the battles of wills it took to create it.
I’m the spaghetti that simmered
on the wood-burning stove all day long.
I’m from “Get that smile off your face—
or I’ll wipe it off for you.”
I escaped to “Hup, 2, 3, 4” that was drilled into us
as I made my way!
I became the Momma, Mom, Mommy dearest, Ma!
My children declared I’m that “Penny Lover”
Lionel Richie sings about.
I’m from another time and place, but I’m here now.

A Soldier Lies Here

By Jason Kirk Bartley
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

The shots rang out like lightning,
her voice so cold and grim,
the early fog so hazy,
the setting sun so dim.
My heart was racing
as I crunched over leaves and twigs,
and silence was broken by whistling wind.
Shadows played tricks among the trees,
slowly dancing to and fro.
The enemy lurked within the trees.
Where? I do not know.
In the darkness of the night,
shots rang out and gave me fright.
Taps began to play.
I stopped to say a prayer.
Here lies a soldier who met His God
where only family and friends are gathered there.

Just a Poet

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

If I was an athlete or movie star,
if I was a singer or driver in NASCAR,
if I was on TV as a game show host,
I'd be recognized by all from coast to coast.

Should I be seen in public, people would flock to me;
the price of fame is simple: lack of privacy.
They'd notice how I dress, the way I wear my hair;
their attention would be more than I could bear.

But I don't have those problems; people walk on by.
They don't even wave; the girls don't cast a sigh.
I have a gift with words; folks don't even know it.
If they did they might say I am "just a poet."

My words might make you think or pose the question, "Why?"
Or when my poem is done, a tear might fill your eye.
The words I write might tickle, give you cause to laugh,
but never am I asked for my autograph.

I like the life I have, wouldn't opt for fame;
I am quite content that no one knows my name.
I find satisfaction, put my work into a book
and freely walk the streets, don't get a second look.

This Is How You Heal

By Anthony Ramirez

VA Medical Center—Augusta, ME

There's a quiet moment that whispers:
if you put your hand out and open,
palm up and fingers cupped,
and if you have peace,
it will find you.
Remember: hand out and open,
palm up and fingers cupped,
like you are ready to be joined.

Free Fare

By Anthony Ramirez

VA Medical Center—Augusta, ME

If I were to win one million dollars,
I would go around for a day,
randomly handing out Metro passes to a wide array.
Someone would ride free along with their company
to visit Joey, Mary or Suzie.
Tell the mayor, the council or the people of LA
that I would share free fare all day,
one million dollars 'cause I won the lottery.
Just imagine smiling faces in each seat!
"All hail to the bus driver and his gas-pedaled feet."
Girls on the bus won't fuss and the boys will still be boys,
so save your bus fare or your transit pass.
Double-dutch it on down because this won't last!
Gonna find this poem on the bus and ask, "Who knows?"
Everyone may start dancing in the street.
No one would complain about their tired swollen feet,
and someone may meet someone
that they otherwise wouldn't meet.

We Are Women Veterans

By Helen Anderson Glass

VA Medical Center—Tucson, AZ

We will stand by our convictions
With no restrictions.
We will not bow to a tyrant's needs.
"We Are American Women Veterans."
We will not vanish into the night.
We'll proudly stand up for what is right
Because we stand strong and true,
Faithfully serving the red, white and blue.
"We Are American Women Veterans."
Come rebellion, hell or high water,
Every mother, sister or daughter
Will pick up the torch and carry on
Until all evil forces are gone.
"We Are American Women Veterans."
We women veterans who served back then and now
Are proud, loyal, faithful American women
Who sincerely took a vow
To fight or even die for our country,
If that was to be,
Just so we would always be proud to say
We fought to keep America free.

Judgement Day

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

Judgement Day will fall upon us;
do you know where your soul will go?
You'll ask God for forgiveness,
and if he will save your soul.
Will that be enough for you,
to walk through Heaven's doors?
It doesn't matter what color you are,
or if you are rich or poor.
We all have God's love inside of us;
it was put there when we were born.
So open up your heart wide,
and let God's love be reborn.
God knows all your secrets,
you know, the ones that you don't tell.
If you were judged this very minute,
would you go straight to Hell?
No matter how bad life has been
or how you were beaten down,
it's time for you to use all God's love
and turn your life around.
You can beg for mercy;
it might be your only ticket in.
But first you must be willing
to give up on your sins.
I know how hard that is to do,
for I know I am no saint.
But if God is willing to give me
a second chance,
it's mercy I will take.

Winter's Way

By Lisa J. Farabelli

VA Medical Center—Lebanon, PA

Cold surrounds me,
painting the canvas gray,
putting us to bed early.
Mr. Sun is hiding.
I feed the birds
for my own SALVATION.
Snow covers the earth white;
we wait impatiently for green buds.
Sitting in your chair, I'm questioning reality,
remembering yesterday, but not today.
Memories are kept in a box;
pictures hang behind yellow glass.
I'm putting the puzzle together.
Dying is part of living.
Here I am living, waiting to die.

Ebony and Ivory and Many Shades of Gray

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Ebony and ivory
with many shades of gray
make a team and army of one
leading civilians into soldiers,
but leaving empty
shells called veterans.
There is no right or wrong.
Just do.
The yin and the yang of troops.
They say, "What Courage.
How Trustworthy.
Speak of Valor."
Then why do we
feel like cowards
in despair?
Have no trust?
Feel ignored rejected and afraid?

*Author's Note: This writing is from of the Support Our Troops
Committee/art4vets Zaloga Post, American Legion Community
OutReach.*

God Bless America

By David Wesley Samson

VA Medical Center—Omaha, NE

God Bless America
'cause we have so many rights
like Freedom of Speech,
Freedom of the Press
and Freedom to Assemble.

In some countries they don't have
all these beautiful rights.
We enjoy them every day
yet, we often take them for granted.

God Bless America!
Look at all the beautiful wonders
God created by his hand for our nation,
from the Grand Canyon to the Great Lakes.

Also for all those who fought
and died for our nation,
and those who were crippled.
For all our rights and our homeland,
I say, "God Bless America."

You Never Saw Me

By Wayne A. Ince

VA Medical Center—Sun City Center, FL

You never saw me step off the bus.
First thing I felt was the searing heat,
Heard shouts of, “Get in line,” so I stood in front,
My slow weary feet planted in concrete.
I wanted to melt and sink right away,
But I remained in place and present.
“Pick ‘em up” and “Put ‘em down” commands
Rained down and quickly made it evident
You were in charge, every spit and spittle
Infused anger to remind there is no mother
Nor any shield for screams that grew louder,
While steel-toe taps drew close to others.
Dusk ushered troop dismissal, epic relief to most.
Forever in shadows, time crept slowly each hour.
Patience and hope joined the company of ghosts.
More yelling and shouting, then pushing and shoving.
My invisibility worn away, the pain was very real.
Smokey Bear hat pressed on my forehead, no ducking.
I asked why I was different, but I got, “No talking back, Boy.”
Sleepless, unmoored with a constant feeling of dread,
My face met your fist. Hidden blows tasted bitter though
Fear was not mine to harbor,
But you must have had yours the entire time.
I disappeared into myself to mask everything.
Graduation finally arrives after completion
Of training and chores.
Marched heel to toe with guidon, but you’re still eyeballin’ me.
Parade time final pass and review, an earned strut in the sun.
Mission accomplished!
Kept my eye on the prize, but you never saw me.

The Sandbox

By David Wesley Samson

VA Medical Center—Omaha, NE

Little girls and boys,
Playing in a sandbox.

They play with guns, artillery,
Bombs, fighters and bombers.

They all play with the real items,
Killing each other for real.

Why can’t we see
We’re all Brothers and Sisters?

Do we see what we’re doing,
Or do we have to destroy with the A-Bomb?

SALLY-SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL AWARD

Army Strong

By Trina M. Mioner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

“Join the Army and See the World.”
Army Strong, more than a slogan,
a secure grip, an extended hand,
I’d be someone, other than....

I would escape, not smother,
the cycle of abuse
that befell my mother
and mother’s mother.

Sergeant said, “Pull over!”
There’s something for me to see,
him,
before I take my oath to serve.

He stood erect, pants
around his ankles.
A nauseous scent of musk
permeated my very being.

His salty essence,
thick and dry.
No matter what,
I wouldn’t cry.

A military purpose,
I think not.
Why?
Army Strong...Army Wrong!

Note: Cincinnati VA Hospital Women’s Writing Group.

1969

By Michael Kuklenski

—Rowlett, TX

He lost his limbs and soul
in Vietnam,
so many years ago.
Painful thoughts
were his daily “mayday.”
His mind fought them day by day.
At 5:00 a.m. today,
he took his own life away,
having been turned away,
again, by the VA.

Alone

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Three weeks ago life filled sweet Aunt Renée;
May fourth was her ninetieth birthday.
The gifts that were given to someone her age
were memories and laughs as she took center stage.

Didn't need a walker, she was nimble and spry;
as we sang Happy Birthday, a tear filled my eye.
She was everyone's favorite, second to none;
when she was around, we always had fun.

Next week there was tightness deep in her chest;
she went to the doctor and they ran every test.
Results showed a virus, called COVID-19;
this one was different, nothing routine.

WHO searched for a cure, but none was known;
because it's contagious, she must be alone.
Doctors clad in gowns and PPE
said, "You can't be with her," and they meant me.

"No visitors allowed" read the sign on the door;
"We're not taking chances," said the medical corps.
She laid there alone, hooked to a vent,
with loved ones outside in the midst of torment.

We held hands in the hall, with glass in between
us and her—a heartless quarantine.
We watched from a distance as she took her last breath,
making the journey alone, from life into death.

A Winter's Tale

By Wallace D. McGregor

VA Medical Center—Boston, MA

As the winter of my life draws near,
I look back to see the path I have taken
and count my meandering footprints
in the sands of a long, winding road.
With no clues as to my future,
fate slips me into the dark uncertainty
of the absolute destiny of all men.
I pray to find the home that I lost along the way
where the promises of a better life
are said to be true.

The Last Kiss

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

Tears welled up then rolled down Laughing Water's cheek
as she gazed across the great gorge
at the huge, thundering, waterfall.
Her gaze then turned toward Dancing Bear who would soon be
deploying to Iraq for his third tour of duty.
He was bronzed, dark eyed, with jet black hair.
Dancing Bear was the pride of his Indian tribe.
She thought, if only he could have stayed for just one more day,
but orders were orders. He had the train tickets in his pocket.
Small talk then more small talk was made.
And with one last embrace,
he swept her into his embrace and his kiss.
The memory of him would live in her heart forever.
In an instant he was gone.
And Laughing Water gazed again
across the gorge at the thundering, roaring, waterfall.

Highway of Death

By Kimberly Green

—Fort Smith, AR

Do you remember me
when I was young
and disease free?

When I could run
without breaking a sweat?
When "stand and deliver"
was a walking threat?

Do you remember
the death scenes,
burned bodies, cars and trucks,
when Saddam Hussein ran out of luck?

White flags flying in the air,
dug in the sand
by Iraqi soldiers,
hands in the air.

Republican Guard,
with betrayed foresight,
watched as American and Allied Forces
destroyed their fight.

Never to forget,
just like the 'Nam vets
who were also exposed
to toxic elements.

Spring Is Gone

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

All was green,
such a lovely scene.
The geese flew on their way;
there were butterflies in the hay.
Then the earth, the sun had parched,
and giant locusts, they had marched.
The grain waved in the field,
but to the locusts would not yield.
Then the leaves were browned;
they fell down to the ground.
The geese flew again
and we lost our best laying hen.
Now there's a chill in the air;
it's winter—beware.
The trees are all bare,
and snow is on the stair.

Uncle Sam

By Kenny Trujillo

VA Medical Center—Phoenix, AZ

Looking around,
I board the jet.
Uncle Sam, we know,
Doesn't like to wait.
I feel the excitement
And smell the fear
Of the unknown.
Travel across the ocean
To the jungle floor,
Not realizing
What I was getting into.
The government draft
To Vietnam,
Fighting the enemy.
It wasn't even "our" war,
An ugly-ugly war
With death everywhere.
I pray to God to please
Watch over me & my boys.
It's over—I'm going home.
Some of us will make it,
And some of us won't.
Even with blood spilt,
I did my duty
For Uncle Sam.
Guess what— if asked
I would do it all over again.

Sacrifice

By Kenny Trujillo

VA Medical Center—Phoenix, AZ

Proud of the flag,
The red, white and blue,
Bonuses and college degrees,
Signing up before
Your number was pulled,
Fighting for freedom,
Liberty and justice for all.
From the jungle to the ocean,
Across the desert floor,
In the air, on the ground
And under the sea.
Sacrifices made of self and family,
And all the lives lost,
Our POWs and MIAs,
Our wonderful military,
The men and the women
Of all nations and creeds.
I salute you and thank you
Forever more
For sacrifices made.

My Guitar

By Louise Diane Eisenbrandt

—Leawood, KS

Six nylon strings, sending mellow tones
to those who would listen.
Simple chords, strummed, plucked,
with or without capo, no pick.
We would gather to forget the carnage of the day:
the dangling limbs held by tattered ligaments,
compressed by blood-soaked tourniquets;
the acrid smell of burning flesh from white phosphorous;
piercing screams from the afflicted.
Familiar strains to celebrate
the quiet of the night sky lit by flares
searching for the enemy, revealing so much more.
Songs of love and loss, of sweat-drenched nights
and blood-smeared days.
With others—singing, laughing, escaping—for there is comfort
in community.
Monsoon-drenched days,
shared in the company of others, free the soul.
There is joy in voices raised in song,
fleeting relief in laughter
healing the soul and preserving our sanity.
Love of a different kind for those with uncertain futures.
All brought together by my war-scarred guitar.

Believing 2020

By VicTor
—Albany, NY

Fences reach high,
uneven, broken in many spots,
lost in landscape dividing
all the neighborhood lots.
Animals crawl between,
little children used to follow,
vines quickly grow trying
to fill empty hollows.
Broken boards
and rotted posts fall
to ground in time.
Where once were trails,
now are ghosts
lost in storybook rhyme.

Note: VicTor is a member of the Albany NY Community Outreach program within the Zaloga Post, American Legion.

“Golden Years” War

By Ronald Nash
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Mortar fire explodes in my mind;
Napalm blisters my senses.
A time machine within hurls me
back to another place, a foreign land.

Anguished screams from the maimed
and dying permeate my very being.
Senseless death and destruction.
WHY?

You said it was not war.
I think you called it, “Conflict,”
marching,
as you burned “Old Glory” to the ground.

Reality remains unchanged.
What was not called war
is now and evermore...
abiding inside of me.

Author's Note: Ronald Nash is a member of the Therapeutic Writers Group, Cincinnati VA Medical Center.

SALLY-SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL AWARD

For Many of Us Older Vets

By Michael Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

For many of us older vets,
When we joined we didn't get
To serve with women, side by side.
But now they serve with just as much pride.
They do their part to help defend this land.
It is hard for many to understand
Why women would want to be
Sent far from home or out at sea.
For whatever reason they choose to serve,
And we must remember they too deserve
The honor and respect all veterans receive.
They are no different than you or me.
They sacrificed as did we.
They did their part to help keep this country free.
So thank you to each woman out there
Who stepped up, raised your hand and said I swear
To defend this land at all cost,
Knowing at any time, your life could be lost.
Thank you for what you're doing,
And for what you've done.
I'm sure it wasn't easy for everyone.
But for all of you who made it through,
Thank you for serving the red, white and blue.
The title of veteran belongs to you,
And the honor and pride do, too.

Willing

By Kellie Davenda Daniels
VA Medical Center—Memphis, TN

I'm willing, willing to surrender.
To whom?
To you, my Lord, my lover, my friend, my guide.
To what?
To your grace, your mercy and everlasting virtue.
How?
However your mercy descends into my cold, grieving heart.
When?
When the time is right. I'm willing even tonight.
Where?
In your sanctuary where hearts are given away and
love bears sway.
Why?
Because I'm willing to ascend where life never ends,
to commune in a future so bright,
the moment I begin to walk in your light.

Forty-Five Years Ago

By Michael Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

Forty-five years ago, I said goodbye to Navy life.
I picked up my papers and got in the car with my wife.
We couldn't get off the base fast enough.
The car was packed with all our stuff.
I thought there and then I would never think of the Navy.
And I didn't for a lot of years.
But then later on in my life, talking to my peers
Who were veterans themselves, they told me
I should be proud of my time in the Navy.
I started to think back on what I'd done,
The buddies I had and all the fun.
And I really started to miss those days,
Out at sea riding the waves.
Now I've always had a bond with the sea,
But never gave it much thought that it could be
From my long days and nights on a ship.
All those deployments, months and months on a trip.
But as time went on, I started thinking more and more
About those times at sea, far from shore.
And for some reason, I can't explain why,
I'd like to go back to sea before I die.
Now when I think of my time in uniform,
There are many, many memories reborn.
And I'm glad I served when I did,
Just out of high school, an 18-year-old kid.
Would I do it again? In a minute,
But, my uniform, I can't get back in it.
So issue me new ones and I'll be on my way,
An old salt who would leave today
To get my wish—Anchors Aweigh.

The Vietnamese Boy

By John Henningson
VA Medical Center—West Haven, CT

Why are they here,
invading our land?
Who asked them to come—
this ruinous band?
They denigrate our shrines
and our crops are destroyed.
Our houses are burned
wherever they are deployed.
How can we fight
against their bombs
and warplanes?
Wherever they go,
they wound, kill and maim.

Dire Straits

By Lawrence William Langman
—Portage, IN

If you look into the eyes of an angel,
what is it you will see?
You will see a universe that spans
from sea to deepest sea.
If you look into the eyes of a child,
what is it you will see?
You will see the heart of an innocent,
one that you should never leave.
If you look into the eyes of an animal,
what is it you will see?
You will see the freedom of a species,
running wild and running free.
Those eyes are the windows to the souls,
with beating hearts beneath their chests.
We are creatures of this planet,
and we stand high above the rest.
Intellect and passion,
we human beings possess.
We need to show compassion,
so we can pass this vital test.
Our world has turned into turmoil
right before our eyes.
The destruction and the killings
have made every statue cry.
If you look into your own eyes,
in that mirror you stand before,
can you live with yourself tomorrow,
knowing what that flag stands for?

Retreat

By Demetrius Kastrenakes
—Miami, FL

Retreat into your inner mind,
Corridors where no one walks
But yourself.
Footsteps heavy-laden sounding
Over decisions made,
Following with their own
Consequences,
Molded by your fingers
In the soft wet clay
Of your intellect.

Dealing With Covid-19

By Sean Richards

VA Medical Center—Fort Worth, TX

It's a new pandemic, worse than anything
in the last one hundred years.
This is today's new normal;
we hunker down in place and hide indoors.
It is sometimes enough to bring
even strong men to tears.
The new deal is to isolate in place;
to some this feels like a disgrace.
It has been weeks since I have left my house.
This self-imposed isolation can make you
on edge and irritable.
Covid-19 can make you feel
like a caged, crazed mouse.
It seems that when required to self-isolate,
it can make you miserable.
Unless your vacation is in your house,
you might as well forget it.
Air travel is going nowhere; it's almost at a standstill.
We are all afraid to spread the pandemic,
no matter where we sit.
I continue to wonder, with all these issues,
just who will foot the bill?
Now, with many trying to gradually emerge
from this self-isolation, our world is now a population
currently living behind the mask.
However, it seems it is we
who need to begin to recover as a nation.
We are still suffering the ill effects;
it's time to step up to the task.

The World

By Demetrius Kastrenakes

—Miami, FL

The world,
Which you try
To prove to be real,
Is all the time
Mocking at you
For seeking to know it
Without first knowing
Yourself.

The Masked Generation

By Sean Richards

VA Medical Center—Fort Worth, TX

This is a new form of normal for a new decade.

What was not tolerated early in the year is now at bay.
The mask was once evil and seen as outlaw garb.
It's now required for entry to businesses in May,

and now required to enter nearly all public spaces.
For many weeks it was impossible to find or buy masks.

The prices soared and supplies dwindled for us.
It was left to those who could sew to take up the task.
This new century has changed us as a nation and as a people.

The mask is our new normal; it is our new fashion statement.
The mask has become the new fad and attraction.
The mask is the new decade's newest normal requirement.

Coronavirus

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

I feel like I'm stuck in a real Hollywood sci-fi movie
like *Outbreak* or *Contagion*,
only it is the real deal we are dealing with,
an unseen enemy we all have become,
in one way or another, afraid of.
We are all going through a painful time
and are truly not prepared whatsoever for what's in store.
Everyone's pain, loneliness, fear and anger
are far too strong to ignore.
So many questions keep going through so many minds,
but few if any answers can we really truly find.
Our politicians from both parties
can't seem to agree on anything,
leaving our country with false hope.
The problem is that false hope
can be a very dangerous thing.
They say this is the new normal,
but I don't see anything close to normal about it.
So much death, quarantine, stay-at-home orders put into place,
ordered to wear masks to cover our face.
Restaurants, schools, churches and more have been banned,
no more hugs or shaking anyone's hands.
We older adults are told we're much more likely
to become seriously affected by the CORONAVIRUS.
Our entire lives have been changed.



When

By John Henningson

VA Medical Center—West Haven, CT

It's not a question of WHERE,
and HOW doesn't really matter.
WHAT is also meaningless,
but WHEN can make nerves tatter.
Will it be in a rice paddy,
wading through the muck
or on a dark jungle trail?
It's just a matter of luck.
Will it be a booby trap
or an errant Arty blast?
It really always ends the same,
as long as it is fast.
For in 'Nam,
death became a certainty,
an acceptable turn of fate.
The end was always with us
whether now or at a later date.
So WHEN can become the nagging ache,
the darkness in our brain.
The uncertainty debilitates
and could turn a man insane.
But once you accepted that uncertainty,
you could push it all aside.
You could drive on, do your best
and face each day with pride.

Reflections

By Jay B. Massey

VA Medical Center—West Palm Beach, FL

As my age approached my eighteenth year,
so young and carefree,
the things I said and did back then
didn't mean that much to me.
I remember high school days and the senior prom,
hadn't thought of Cambodia much less Vietnam.
I was young in a reckless way,
still wet behind the ears.
How could I know the ghosts unleashed
would follow me for years?
For years the water flows
beneath the endless bridge of time.
I am now plagued by morality;
was killing then a crime?
I guess we all are victims now,
as I'm sure that you can see,
'cause I was once a part of it.
Now it's a part of me.

Writing Aide/Typist: Kathy Romeo

Shadows

By Jay B. Massey

VA Medical Center—West Palm Beach, FL

As evening shadows engulf the world,
creeping like a snail,
such evil things they do unleash;
yes, they do unveil.
It's said that one man's kingdom
should rightfully be his home.
As spiders weave their webs of thought,
they're his and his alone.
A man does spend his fortune on happenings to be.

The evil cast down on him was caused by only he.
Oh woe to those whose lives are ruled
by passion and desire,
for soon their hedonistic ways will set their souls afire.
The gift of thought within you,
that's used so recklessly,
should give you peace for where you are,
not where you'd like to be.

Writing Aide/Typist: Kathy Romeo

Mind Darkness

By Val Benitez

—Austin, TX

Silent,
Waiting for therapy,
Mind darkness.
Nightmares, pain,
None understands,
Stress,
Mind darkness.
Streets cold,
Hungry, sadness,
another day passes.
None cares,
“Get a job, Scum.”
And the mind
Goes darker.
I beg you to love me,
I beg you to see me,
It is just my mind,
It is just my heart,
It is not me.
Give me a chance.

Today

By Val Benitez

—Austin, TX

Pro women,
pro Latinas,
all inclusive
but no men.

I am sorry, but not sorry.
Men showed hate,
wars, money,
power. Wanted more.

We're just watching
Women for men?
Another four years,
We need to change.

Men failed women,
always took all,
beat them,
harassed, tortured,
made laws against them.

They're all scared.
While women surf,
while women rule,
while women read,
women see.

Women protest,
women die
for women
until men rise,
support women,
support right to choice,
education,
equity and equality.

First on the Field

By John M. Koelsch

VA Medical Center—Salem, VA

I have been first on the field of battle.
I have been the point of the spear.
I have been last to leave the field.

I have fought on fields chosen by others.
I have completed missions created by others.
I have paid the bill accrued by others.

I have carried my anger for over half a century.
I have isolated my soul in fear of harming others.
I have forsaken human touch to protect others.

I will fight for a better life for all.
I will not accept people treated as second class.
I will not accept a life where all are not equal.

Author's Note: In Vietnam I was on point for the battalion on two occasions where combat occurred. I was first on the field both times. I led my platoon defending Saigon during Mini-Tet in May 1968 which was the worst month of the entire war for American casualties. We defended the outer perimeter and were the tip of the spear. On two occasions I was last off the field with my Company. Once I was completely exposed as the last one on that side of the Saigon River fighting time to reach our chopper ride for home as a monsoon was hitting. An interesting experience sitting in the open door of a Huey, legs dangling, while the wind bounced us up and down 10 feet at a time. On the second occasion we exited under fire. I blew our last claymores and was the last one on the last Huey out.

Warriors for Peace

By William Wyatt Hull
—Paradise, TX

Out of darkness
We strive for peace.
For reprieve, we pray,
And for fighting to cease.

We shout our message.
Does no one care?
For peace, we strive,
As bold as we dare.

No fighting we seek,
For fighting brings death.
Yet we'll perform our duty
Till we breathe our last breath.

An oath we swore
And by it we stand,
To honor our nation
And keep free our land.

Author's Note: USAF, Operation Desert Storm, November 1990.

Heavenly Encounter

By Kellie Davenda Daniels
VA Medical Center—Memphis, TN

You knocked.
I opened the door to my heart.
You came in.
My life was filled with sin, but not anymore.
Ever since I opened the door,
I've encountered you on a daily basis.
Now my spirit is an oasis.
An oasis for your Word, my mind, my gifts.
My soul is stirred.
What must I do now that I've found you?
Shall I surrender my soul as in the days of old
when the Samaritan woman found you at the well?
She went on to tell everyone she knew
about a man that could explain all she ever did,
and had the power to make all things new.
Your Word is made plain; I'll never be the same.
I have a new name because I encountered Heaven.

Say Hey

By Larrie David Green, Sr.
VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

To you, I'll always say, "Hey
yes, YOU, the red, white and blue."
No matter what my color,
I'll be so true to you.
Every time you see it wave,
think of all those in harm's way.
Even if its colors fade,
let it stand tall, each and every day.
Look closely at the color red,
and visualize the pools of blood.
Remember all the blood that's been shed
while praying for the day it will all stop.

Look closely at the color white,
and visualize tears shed day and night.
When you see it standing tall,
think about those who fell and will fall.

Look closely at the color blue,
and visualize how it connects the rest.
Whether you see it waving or still,
it stands for the goal that we want best.
Think about for what each star stands,
and wonder what our future has in store.
Its stars are the makeup of all its people
who stand side by side within our shores.
You have many stories still untold;
my heart is full of freedom songs to sing.
Let my mouth speak in truth what your colors profess,
and may my ears soon fill with the freedom bell ring.
In the spirit of freedom,
some is better than none,
but when it comes down to it,
it's the best thing under the sun.

Author's Note: This poem expresses my sentiment about the Stars and Stripes. It is a constant reminder of the goal of this nation. The goal must live on if the goal is to be achieved.

We're All Equal

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

We're all equal.
Who are we to say?
We're all equal?
We've seen the brighter day.
The past is the past,
It's all dead and gone.
Let us live a brighter future,
Let us live on,
Let us forgive and forget.
We cannot right the wrongs,
We cannot turn back time,
We can learn from our mistakes,
not make the same crime.
Let us move on and love one another,
the way it should be.
Love is the answer,
Love is the key.
God grant us the victory.

Conscience

By Robert John Valonis

—Stuart, FL

A restless mind won't let him sleep
Or free his soul to let him weep,
For words and deeds that he regrets
Of long since past, he can't forget.
His joyous past now ticks away
While lowly deeds are here to stay.
Forgotten though, while at his best,
Yet haunting him while at his rest.
He justifies the home he's built,
But while alone he knows his guilt.
Forgiveness? Yes! But they are all gone.
In him alone his pain lives on.
To help erase this guilt and shame
And, in his mind, regain his name,
He reconciles his lowly deeds.
To higher powers, he then concedes.
He cannot change this sordid past
And knows his pain will always last.
But better off is he than some,
For, in remembrance, he has won.

The Ocean's Reflection in Me

By Anthony Phillips

—Las Vegas, NV

Looking out at the sea at night,
the stars, moon and clouds reflect off the water below.
A perfect portrait of heaven above.
A light breeze walks around me,
swirling, dancing in the moonlight.
Two pictures above and below.
This is the moment when the world shows us our soul.
Peace, quiet in all its beauty.
Taking my moment, holding it in time.
Taking in the image that will forever stay
in my mind's eye.
We run around with life in motion,
never taking time to see things as they should be.
No war or hate.
An understanding of peace that we all share
is in the reflection out over the sea.
Stand with me on the sands of life.
Take this moment; make it your own.
This view of the world
is what keeps our souls from growing old.

Listen to the Wind

By Anthony Phillips

—Las Vegas, NV

Calling my name in a low voice of love,
the wind passes the message from cloud to cloud
like the child with a secret.
The clouds tell the mountains
to pass on this important message.
“This comes from his true love who misses him so,”
say the clouds.
“Yes,” say the mountains who tell the trees.
Each tree stands tall and listens to every word,
passes on the message until it reaches his window.
His window opens; he can hear her voice.
The trees outside sway back and forth
with this message of love.
He hears her voice as the wind speaks to him.
“Love gives me hope, hope gives me strength,
strength gives me the courage to go on one more day.
A feeling of heaven is not in the stars.
It is on earth with you by my side.”
To have true love and happiness,
let go of your fears of being hurt.
Open your soul to the one who wants you,
not to the one who needs you.

Dolly

By Robert John Valonis

—Stuart, FL

A gentle rub against my legs,
My thoughts are not disturbed.
Another brush across my legs,
She tries to get me lured.
I'm focused on my day's despair,
Relentless in my thoughts.
My reflections are all negative;
My positives are naught.
Again a brush across my legs,
She plops down and sits by me.
As if she senses my despair,
She rests her paw on knee.
Sadness and longing in her eyes,
And fixed upon my gaze,
She arouses my attention now,
Disrupting my malaise.
I can't resist her lonely stare;
My thoughts turn to her day.
Window staring all alone,
Her boredom, my dismay.
I realize she's much like me,
And gently stroke her back.
Reluctantly I lift myself
And don my coat and hat.
Silently we walk the streets,
Now grateful for the day,
Appreciating simple things
That slowly come our way.
Now longing for another day
To rest her paw on knee
That takes away the day's despair
And sets our sadness free.

Flight

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

I have time now,
Lots and lots of time.
I sit on my deck,
Marvel at the birds.
In Okinawa,
We teased the new guys.
Look! Look! A BI—RD!
Hey, JEEP!
Slang for a new airman,
One-striper.
Get me a bucket of prop wash!
I need five yards of flight line!

Go to the shop and get it!
Poor soul!
A rite of passage,
We all went through it!
No such thing in 'Nam!
No joy!
No goofing around!
Straight up,
Straight down,
C-130As shaking,
Vibrating so, so loud
We're wondering,
Exactly when are we going to crash?
Holes coming through
The thin aluminum,
762 x 39,
Claw for altitude,
Medivac.
Never can I forget my flights
And I want to!

Winter Sunrise

By Gene Allen Groner

VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

Winter morning sunrise
Above the shimmering water,
Streaming along from east to west
Through pathways known by God alone.
How lovely is the sunrise.

Gently lighting winter's morn
With radiant hue of peach and blue,
Light painted from heaven's palette,
Weaving through leaves ever so lightly.
How lovely is the sunrise.

Nature's way of ushering in
The beginning of a brand new day,
With tinted rays of sunlight
And pale blue shades of gray.
How lovely is the sunrise.

If ever I've seen a lovelier view
Of winter morning sunrise,
That memory is lost to me
For this is a brand new day.
How lovely is the sunrise.

Author's Note: Looking eastward through my picture window, across the lawn all covered with snow and just beyond a meandering tree-lined stream, I witnessed the most wonderful winter sunrise I think I'd ever seen. And I felt compelled to compose this poem. I sincerely hope the readers of Veterans' Voices like it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you for sharing it.

Nocturnal Wind

By William Kurrle

—Chewelah, WA

There is a nocturnal
wind in my sail,
i.e. my Soul,
an unmanly thirst,
an unequivocal drive.
Outside, an impenetrable pain,
a desire for some internal relief.
Tonight, I cannot drown out the grief
in disbelief,
flagrant shortcoming
indirectly placed, misplaced.
Cut this internal disparity now.

I Can't Breathe

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

I can't
Gasp for air
Masks smother
I can't breathe
Knee on neck
Let me up
I am somebody
Not nobody
Say it loud
I am somebody
I can't breathe
Mask too tight
Let me go
Constricting
I can't breathe
On so tight
Knee on neck
Can't exhale
Let me breathe
I am somebody
Don't hit me
No hitman
Family man
Say it loud
Black man, yo
I am proud
Colored man
Don't hit me—say it loud

I can't
Don't shoot me

Let me breathe
Say it loud
I am MLK
I have a dream
I can't breathe
I am BLM
Choking me
Knee on neck
I am Gandhi
Resistance—say it loud

Satyagraha
Gasp for air
Let me breathe
Say it proud
I am somebody
A good man
Do no harm
I have a dream
Satyagraha
Say it loud
I am black
I am white—all unite

Lives matter
I matter
Don't smother
Let me
Say it loud
Satyagraha
I am somebody
Father, son
Brother, too
Say it loud
I am somebody
Gasp for air
Let me breathe
Say it loud
I am somebody—say it proud

All lives matter
My life matters
I am the world
Satyagraha
Knee on neck—say it loud

I am somebody
Bin Deutscher
Kann nicht atmen
Help me breathe
I am somebody
Life matters.

I Am Grateful

By Christine Rose Hazuka
—Albany, NY

I am grateful for this day
and that I can still see all the beauties around me.
My choice is not to view the disrespectful,
hateful things on television.
I am grateful to have ears that hear all of nature's sounds,
my friend's and family's voices
and the music that I love, so needed for me to hear.
I am grateful for my senses to still be alive and working.
I can smell the rains coming,
the strange smell of moth balls that no one else smells
that remind me of my mother.
Strangely I love the smell of manure
and fresh-cut grains of the fields.
I still can feel, with my hands, the softness of a kitten
or a pup and flower petals all around.
I can still write my thoughts and share with my voice.
I feel pain in my heart when someone is hurt and suffering.
I am grateful for all these things that my creator has given me.

*Note: Christina Hazuka is a member of the Albany, NY,
Community Outreach Program within the Zaloga Post,
American Legion*

A Hero's Hero

By Anthony Cocozza
VA Medical Center—Los Angeles, CA

So many soldiers living on the street,
their spirits broken with defeat.
What must they think when they look around,
see eyes pass them by, staring at the ground?
Does anger fill them when we turn away
from the debts we owe that should be repaid?
What, if at that moment, just once,
instead we saluted them with honor,
right hand to head?
To let them know they are not ghosts,
that we thank them for being braver than most.
If everyone would show them grace,
we just might find their pain erased.
For all the heroes still fighting to live,
and for heroes like you who continue to give,
if you see someone who is really lost,
please stop and remember what our freedom cost.
*P.S. May their spirit and courage go on forever,
the heart eternal in the spirit of America.*

Yonder Comes Your Man

By Anthony Kambeitz
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Woman, don't you realize
All the beauty you possess?
Never
Never
Never
Settle for second best.
You tell yourself,
"I'm doing
The very best I can."
Take a look behind you;
Yonder comes your man!
Grooving to the beat,
You look so mighty fine.
Just dancin' and prancin'
You move better on wine.
Just a-dancin' and a-prancin'
Hotter than a spark, Girl,
You know you keep me
Happy as a lark!
Looking back at midnight,
I know you've made
This such a special day.
You are my "Special Angel."
May it always stay that way.

Trust Your Maker

By Anthony Kambeitz
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Looking at life,
How quickly it passes,
Tired of those who sit on their asses,
Ignoring the messenger
And the message that is sent.
Looking back ten years later,
Wonderin' just where he went!
Somewhere, someone cries to be free.
Somewhere
That someone,
That someone
Is me!
Hold on to those things
Precious in His sight.
Put your trust in your maker
For all shall turn out right!

Mail Call

Veterans' Voices author **Thomas G. Manuel**, Corte Madera, Calif., writes, "I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude for the writing award and check. I feel I must return it so you can give it to someone more deserving and in need. My reward was seeing my poem published. I hope it will resonate with other veterans as they remember their youth and their service and know they have brothers and sisters who shared those times and will never forget."



"Thirteen years ago, I had a heart attack and could not write," says **Christopher Bremicker**, St. Paul, Minn. The VA assigned a writing mentor to me and I spent an hour a week in her office and countless hours in coffee shops working on stories. After a year and a half, I was able to write and produced 15 stories that have appeared in *Veterans' Voices*. These are included in a just published book, *Song for My Baby and Other Stories*, published by Unsolicited Press. *Editors' Note:* His book will be added to the VVWP library of books published by our *Veterans' Voices* authors.



The **Montana VA Health Care System**, Ft. Harrison, Mont., wrote to thank *Veterans' Voices* for copies of the magazine.



"I saw Rich Wangard's interview online," writes **Bill Trawbride**, former Staff Sgt., USAF, 1968-79. "I served with Rich from 1969-70 in Okinawa and Vietnam. I support his cause and think he is a very caring man."



Gwyneth DeBiase, Lompoc, Calif., lives near several military installations and supported *Veterans' Voices* by placing ads in local newspapers urging veterans to write and send art to the magazine.



"Thank you for allowing me to have some of my work in *Veterans' Voices*," writes **Daniel Strange**, San Antonio, Texas. He sent photos of his art and said a short story would be sent soon.



Jim Barker, Kaaau, Hawaii, is featured in a recent book by Tom Sanders titled, *Portraits of Vietnam War Vets*. His experiences appear on page 192 of the book.

Bert J. Peterson, Kingsford, Mich., writes that he would like to resume working as a volunteer writing aide and VAVS representative at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain, as soon as the Corona virus restrictions are removed.



"Thank you *Veterans' Voices*—you are the best," writes **Demetrius Kastrenakes**, Miami, Fla. I am sending more of my photographs and a donation. I wish I had more to give." He adds a P.S. "Give a special 'hello' to Pris (Chansky) as she is the one who turned me on to *Veterans' Voices*."



Veterans' Voices poet, **Anthony Cocozza**, San Francisco, Calif., writes that he will be 93 years old on Nov. 26. He was born on Thanksgiving Day. He is a frequent contributor to *Veterans' Voices* and he encourages all veterans to join the American Legion.



Helen Anderson Glass, Tucson, Ariz., writes, "I make copies of the *Veterans' Voices* writing guidelines and insert them in a stamped envelope addressed to VVWP and put them in each lap robe I make for the VA hospital in Tucson. I hope you will hear from them. I am happy to return my award check because it gives me great pleasure just having my poems and stories published in *Veterans' Voices*." In another letter, Helen wrote, "I have enclosed a check to honor my brother, Arthur J. Anderson EM1/C U.S. Navy, WWII, killed in action 9/11/43 on the USS Savannah .at Salerno, Italy, and my dad, Pvt. Arthur O. Anderson, U.S. Army, WWI, who served in the 76th Field Artillery 3rd Division in France...I recommend all veterans take part in your wonderful project. It is the finest therapy I know."



"Once again you honor me by publishing my prose and poems," writes **Rich Wangard**, Neenah, Wis., "I wish I could draw or do art! The new addition of art is terrific – WHAT TALENT! Many counselors and therapists are learning the value of "The Arts" as a way of healing and therapy. Thus, your publication saves lives with a goal to stop the 22 vets a day from taking their own lives. Since I have "opened up" about my tour in Nam and military experience, I have found a measure of peace!...Since 2016, I have done everything possible to support your efforts and will continue to do so."

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

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

Thank You



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

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

– VVWP Board of Directors.

Gifts of \$20,000 or more

Gifts of \$15,000 or more

Gifts of \$10,000 or more

Gifts of \$5,000 or more

Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$2,000 or more

Tina Hacker, Leawood, Kan.

Gifts of \$1,000 or more

*Breidenthal-Snyder Foundation,
Leawood, Kan.*

*James and Louise Eisenbrandt,
Leawood, Kan.*

*Shirley and Barnett Helzberg, Jr.,
Kansas City, Mo.*

*Thompson Family Foundation,
Shawnee, Kan.*

Gifts of \$500 or more

Helen Anderson Glass, Tucson, Ariz.

Lynn Mackle, Palm Beach, Fla.

*Newcomer Family Foundation,
Overland Park, Kan.*

Jake Paltzer, Applegate, Wis.

*VFW Auxiliary, Department of Ohio,
Columbus, Ohio*

*WAC Veterans Association 119T,
Peoria, Ariz*

Gifts of \$300 or more

Priscilla Chansky, Olathe, Kan.

Sheryl Liddle, Independence, Mo.

*VFW Auxiliary, Department of Kansas,
McPherson, Kan.*

Richard Wangard, Neenah, Wis.

Gifts of \$200 or more

Theresa Raydo, Olathe, Kan.

VFW Auxiliary 2335, Mecosta, Mich.

Raney Wright, Seattle, Wash.

Gifts of \$100 or more

American Legion Auxiliary 257,

Loudonville, Ohio

*William and Martha Anderes,
Cresskill, N.J.*

Central Texas VA HCS, Temple, Texas

Hon. Thomas C. Clark, II, St. Louis, Mo.

*Disabled American Veterans 32,
Albuquerque, N.M.*

Jeffrey Ellis, Lake Quivira, Kan.

Hub Erickson, Downers Grove, Ill.

Ronald Grella, Nanticoke, Pa.

Peter J. Harrington, Clinton, Minn.

Christopher Iliff, Stilwell, Kan.

Karen Johnson, Westwood, Kan.

Lori Kesinger, Lawrence, Kan.

Michael Kuklenski, Rowlett, Texas

Michael Lucas, Monterrey, Tenn.

Lynn Norton, Leawood, Kan.

Edward Pahl, Fond Du Lac, Wis.

Mary Pitchford, Overland Park, Kan.

Virginia Schaefer, Kansas City, Mo.

Gerald Spette, Pleasantville, N.J.

*Veterans of Foreign Wars 10624, Mt.
Pleasant, S.C.*

VFW Auxiliary 1008, Waterford, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 10624, Mt. Pleasant, S.C.

VFW Auxiliary 2224, Puyallup, Wash.

VFW Auxiliary 4116, Rouge River, Ore.

VFW Auxiliary 4548, Jacksonville, Ark.

VFW Auxiliary 5968, Orange Park, Fla.

VFW Auxiliary 6782, Eastpointe, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 8586, Perrysville, Ohio

VFW Auxiliary 9283, Southgate, Mich.

*WAC Veterans Association 62, Weaver,
Ala.*

Marianne Watson, Wheatland, Mo.

Kay Watts, Springfield, Mo.

Michael Young, Suncook, N.H.

Gifts in Kind

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

*Kaw Valley Computer,
Kansas City, Kan.*

Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.

*The National World War I Museum
and Memorial, Kansas City, Mo.*

VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.

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/ or 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 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

SUBMIT BY MAIL:

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

QUESTIONS:

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* includes 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 or (816) 701-6844.



Submit Today!
For a Future Issue

Calling for
Photographs,
Drawings and
Paintings



Artwork Submissions

Online or By Mail

www.veteransvoices.org

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



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See Page 33-36 to view the
Visual Arts Initiative.

Miss the Summer 2020 issue of
Veterans' Voices? It is digital only,
so check it out on the web at
VeteransVoices.org.

MY
LIFE
MY
STORY

**VIRTUAL VETERANS PEN
CELEBRATION**

**SATURDAY NOVEMBER 14, 2020
2:00 PM CENTRAL
VIA ZOOM**

Featuring Thor Ringler, National Program
Manager for "My Life, My Story"

To reserve your spot or find out more visit <http://veteransvoices.org>
or email Support@veteransvoices.org

VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The logo for the Veterans Voices Writing Project, Inc. is circular with a red border and white stars. Inside, a white cross divides the space into four quadrants containing the letters V, V, W, and P. The text "VETERANS VOICES WRITING PROJECT, INC." is written around the inner edge, and "Established 1946" is at the bottom.