

VETERANS' VOICES®

How to Put Your Hearts and Words on Paper

By VVWP Board of Directors

Writing Really Does Help

By Kim Gwinner

Somewhere a Woman Is Building an Ark

By Louise Eisenbrandt

They Were Warriors First

By Matthew Davison

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VeteransVoices.org

How To Put Your Hearts and Words on Paper



Phyllis Bibeau

When volunteers or hospital staff ask Veterans Voices Writing Project how to organize a writing group for veterans, we have one group that serves as a model. It is composed of approximately 10 veterans who meet at the Albuquerque VAMC under the direction of a writing aide. It was established and nurtured by volunteer writing aide, Phyllis Bibeau.

Somehow, Phyllis was born knowing how to help veterans write to get their hearts and words on paper. Phyllis gracefully encouraged veterans to write about their feelings regarding the military and subsequent life experiences. Then, during weekly group meetings, she would listen intently as the vets read aloud from their writing.

Her instruction was informative and laced with constructive suggestions.

She was never hard on the participants. Instead, she offered good feedback and helped them expand their ideas. Veterans and VAMC staff felt that Phyllis' approach to writing allowed the participants to express their thoughts and memories on paper when they couldn't talk about those same feelings with doctors, therapists or even families. For example, one veteran who couldn't talk about his PTSD wrote a novel with a main character who suffered from the same condition he did! Her vets used to tell Phyllis, if they didn't write down descriptions of their trauma, it would eat them up.

If the veterans wanted to share their writing with others, Phyllis encouraged them to send stories and poems to *Veterans' Voices* for possible publication... and they did! Albuquerque writers published in the magazine include, among others: Allen Burns, Paul David Gonzales, Sam Hall, Vondell Jones, C. L. Nemeth and Tim Segrest. These writers and fellow writing group leaders at the Albuquerque VAMC were instilled with Phyllis' methods of unlocking angst and trauma by putting pen or computer to paper. Phyllis began facilitating the writing group in 1984 and managed it for the next 30 years. During that time, she volunteered 7,000 hours for the Raymond G.

If you or someone you know is interested in starting a writing group for veterans, please contact:

Lori Kesinger , VVWP Outreach Director
support@veteransvoices.org

Murphy VAMC. She also served as VVWP National Writing Aide Chair and received the organization's National Pen Award. She retired from her volunteer job as writing aide in 2014 due to failing health, but her interest in veterans and the importance of putting thoughts on paper never lagged.

Phyllis Bibeau died August 29, 2022, in Albuquerque at the age of 92. Her husband predeceased her, but she is survived by three children, 11 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren. She was born in Detroit, Mich., met her husband in Ashville, N.C., but soon settled with him in Albuquerque, where they fell in love with the Southwest and spent the rest of their lives. Her family has named VVWP as memorial beneficiary to honor Phyllis. She touched many people with her sincere interest in hearing a person's life story, her uncanny ability to know when someone needed checking on and her deep love for family, friends and veterans. One of her veteran writers once said about the writing program Phyllis introduced him to:

"I had a choice that day to either write or commit suicide and I chose to write. Writing lets me write out emotions that I feel, and it allows me 'to let my demons loose' and really express myself."

Phyllis was a cheerleader for veterans. Helping them write their stories in prose and poetry healed many a sore heart. She proved that writing is good therapy and she understood how to facilitate that writing. We will miss her wise counsel and sunny personality, but we will always have her example to follow.

– Board of Directors, Veterans Voices Writing Project

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, recreational and therapeutic needs of veterans returning from World War II. In 1952, journalists **Margaret Sally Keach** and **Gladys Feld Helzberg**, with assistance from the Greater Kansas City chapter of Theta Sigma Phi, established *Veterans' Voices* to provide a national outlet for writing produced by the project's participants. The three founders believed that writing could do everything from entertaining bedfast veterans to helping others conquer mental health issues.

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- Read the writing of other veterans at facebook.com/VVWP1946.
- Email us with any questions at support@veteransvoices.org.

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Audio Version

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Magazine Guidelines

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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.

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

Veterans' Voices®

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5 Breaths

By Trina Mioner
Cincinnati, OH

I thought to myself that I did not want to do a writing assignment for a group of veterans about what I am thankful for this holiday season. It was too much of a cliché to do this list around Thanksgiving. I did not want to make a grocery list of things. I felt that the devil must be pulling at my strings because I am so thankful.

There are obvious things that I am thankful for like the roof over my head. I have more; I have a nice house and home. I do not want to sound like I'm boasting, but I have a two-person walk-in bathtub with whirlpool. I am not going to make a list of things because the things are too numerous, and it would be a boast festival.

Last night at about 3 a.m. (I'm guessing), I inhaled and only caught a half of a breath, and then it stopped, like a train wreck. It felt like I was suffocating. The air would not enter my body. It felt muffled, like someone had a pillow over my face. There was no pillow; I just could not breathe. I could not inhale. Then I sucked hard, and it was as if a dam broke and a flood of air burst in.

My lungs filled. I slowly took in five deep breaths. I heard the voice in my head count five times, exactly five times. That is how long it took for me to get out of the panic mode and relax. After five deep breaths I was no longer in danger.

I sit here writing with tears in my eyes. You know when you are half asleep and half awake and you are not sure if it was a dream or if it really happened. I ask: Did I stop breathing in my sleep or was I just dreaming? All I know is that

it came to me that I am so thankful for the breath of life. I am so thankful for being able to inhale and exhale; that is a gift.

I don't want to compare myself to other people who are less fortunate. I am sure there are people who drag around an oxygen tank and are thankful for the oxygen. I see commercials where they have some tanks that are so small that you can carry them around in a backpack. I am grateful that I do not need air in a tank, and I'm thankful to God for that invention.

I am preparing to read what I'm thankful for to a group of generous women. I write "lol" because I have been doing a lot of texting. Laugh out loud. I am so happy and thankful that God allowed me to inhale and exhale to the fullest capacity of my lungs last night and in this moment.

I have no needs. I have extra everything. My storehouse is overflowing, and I can give. I have a heart to give. I feel ashamed to say that because it sounds like I am boasting. I am still resisting making that list because it seems small compared to what I'm really thankful for. I am thankful for my relationship with God and my family.

It is time for me to present this list to my group. I am thankful that there is no time to make a comprehensive list of all I am thankful for. In light of last night, the things are really not that important.

Dance, Little Children

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

Dance, little children,
for the river runs deep.
You have a long road to walk upon
before you can sleep.

Sing, little children,
for the soul runs deep.
Take care of one another
in life's journey to keep.

Love, little children,
for the heart runs deep.
Let go of all your hatred
if it's truth in life you seek.

Share, little children,
for poverty runs deep.
Wipe out all the hunger;
become humble like a sheep.

Care, little children,
for kindness runs deep.
Earth could become a paradise
for the shepherd to become meek.

Reach, little children,
for kindness runs deep.
All questions are worth asking;
no mountain is too steep.

Dance, little children,
for the river runs deep.
We have a long road to walk upon
before we can sleep.



Stones River

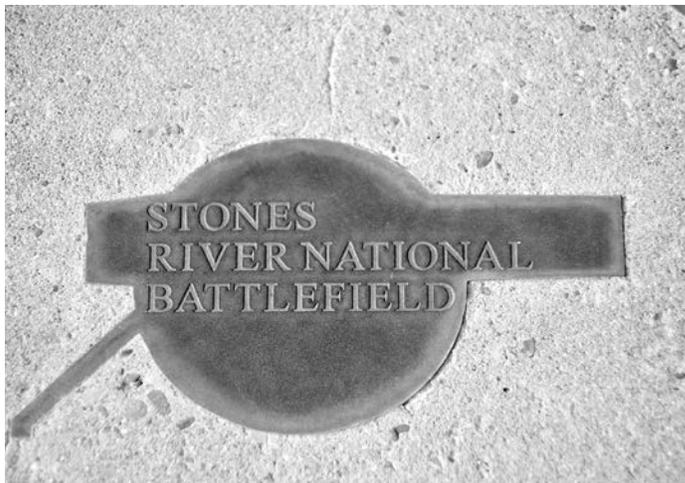
By Steven Miller
—Holly Springs, NC

As the Civil War raged to the south, the 82nd Indiana Infantry was formed in August 1862 to be prepared to meet the threat of Confederate forces moving north through Kentucky.

Ethan Newkirk had left his home in Pike County, Ind., at age 18 and joined the 82nd. His father had been killed in a hunting accident, and the following year his mother had died of pneumonia, leaving him and his 14-year-old sister to survive on the small farm. He had wanted to get away. So, he left his sister in the care of his grandparents and joined up. Like many of the young recruits, it was an opportunity to escape the farm and embark on an adventure. The politicians had told them that rebels would be whipped and that they would probably be home within three months. The adventure turned into repeated drills followed by endless marches southward through heat, rain, mud, sleet and snow.

In September, they joined Union Gen. William Rosecrans' forces as they pursued Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg south toward Murfreesboro. There was a pitched battle at Perrysville, but the 82nd arrived as the Confederates pulled back. The men were assigned the task of digging graves and burying the bloody and broken bodies, both Union and Confederate.

The Union forces had caught up with the Rebels near Murfreesboro, and the two armies faced off early in the morning of Dec. 31. Bragg threw his troops against the Union forces. It was a daylong battle of



flanking maneuvers, advances, retreats and more advances, each leaving the fields and woods littered with dead and wounded.

In the Round Forest, Union troops had dug themselves into rock formations and repulsed one advance after another by the Rebel forces. At many points during the day, the Union army was virtually on the brink of folding into itself and losing it all but was saved by the fact that the Confederate forces had taken terrible losses and were literally exhausted from the daylong fighting. The day ended with the battered Union Army digging in along the Nashville Pike, preparing for another push from the Rebels early the following day.

Ethan had survived the bloody fighting of the day and curled up in the trench, and in spite of the cold wet uniform and blankets, fell fast asleep. It was a little after midnight when his corporal kicked his thigh to wake him up.

“Git up, Newkirk,” he said. “You got picket duty.”

Ethan slowly dragged himself to his feet, gathered his gear and followed him into the

darkness. As sleepy as he was, his senses went on alert immediately, realizing that he could easily blunder into Confederate pickets in the dark woods. He gripped his musket firmly and squinted to see all around him into the dark woods. Finally, the corporal stopped.

“This is your post,” he said, pointing down the slope through the trees. “You hear anything coming from that way, you shoot first and talk later, you hear me?”

Then he turned around and slogged back up the hill through the thick brush.

Ethan settled down and leaned against a tree, sliding down to a sitting position. Through the treetops, he could see the clouds breaking up, and the moonlight helped the woods around him take shape. He knew that if he fell asleep, he could be shot, or worse; some Rebs might slip past him. It was times like this when his thoughts turned to home and his sister Rebecca, who was living with her grandparents. He doubted they would recognize him now. The dirty whiskers that now covered his gaunt cheeks felt like they had been there forever. The damp, cold uniform felt stiff and musty.

He sat for a while until he noticed the sound of running water of a stream to his front. He thought that he could fill his canteen and splash some water on his face. He decided to make his way to the creekbank. As he knelt by the water, in the darkness, he heard the sound of movement on the other side of the creek. He gripped his musket and peered into the darkness of the bushes.

“Easy, Yank,” a quiet voice warned from the shadows. “I ain’t fixin’ to shoot you unless I have to.”

Ethan squinted into the bushes across the creek, and the form of a man materialized from the shadows.

“I just come down to get some water.”

“Me, too,” whispered Ethan, still gripping his musket, thumb on the hammer. As his eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight, he could see a young man in a slouch hat, whiskers covering his face. He saw the man lean his musket against a log and squat beside the creek to fill his canteen. Ethan cautiously did the same and dipped his canteen into the clear creek water. The man sat back and took a drink.

“Where you from, Yank?” the Reb asked.

Ethan was silent for a moment. “Indiana,” he replied.

“I don’t rightly know where that’s at.”

“Just on the other side of the Ohio River, north of Kentucky.”

“Yeah. Heard of it,” said the Reb. “Never been there, though. Never been much of anywhere I guess.” He took a swig from his canteen. “What’s it like?”

Ethan thought a minute and looked around at the dark woods.

“About like here, I reckon.”

“Why’re you here?”

“You mean here in Tennessee?”

“I mean here, in the army.”

Ethan thought for a minute.

“My ma and pa died last year, and I didn’t have much else I could do but try to stay there and work a little piece of land.” He took a sip from his canteen. “I heard the army was recruiting and thought I could sign up for a few months and get some money.”

“A few months? That’s what they told us. Said we’d whip you Yanks in a few weeks. We’re still here and so are you.”

Ethan just shrugged.

“Sorry to hear about your ma and pa,” the Reb said. “You got any other kin?”

“Just a little sister. She’s living with my ma’s folks. I send her money when I can.”

Ethan sat for a minute. “Where you from, Reb?”

“Near Lynchburg.”

“How far’s that from here?”

The Reb looked at him carefully. “Fer enough.”

“You got any kin?” Ethan asked.

“I got a wife. I think she’s had my baby by now. Don’t hear much.”

He was quiet for a minute. He tugged at a scarf tied around his neck to keep the night chill away.

“She sent me this scarf. Said she knitted it herself.” He tucked it into the collar of his coat. “What’re you Yanks doing down here anyway?”

Ethan sat back on a flat rock by the stream.

“President Lincoln says that it ain’t right for the Negroes to be owned like cattle. Says they should be free like everyone else.”

There was a silence between them.

“I don’t own no Negroes,” said the Reb. “I’m lucky to own a mule.”

“You don’t own no Negroes?”

“Hell, no. Only rich folks own slaves. Most of us are just dirt farmers like you.”

“That don’t make much sense,” said Ethan.



“Why’re you fighting for something you don’t even have?”

The Reb looked at him across the stream. “I really didn’t have no choice. They passed a law in Richmond that said we all had to go. All except kids and old men, that is.”

“Even if you don’t have no slaves?”

The Reb laughed a bitter laugh. “Hell, the law says that if you have more than 20 slaves, you get to stay home and watch ‘em. You don’t have to go and fight. The rich folks that started this goddam thing don’t even have to fight.”

Ethan shook his head. “I still don’t know why they wanted to fight a war.”

“You know, Yank, I guess Southerners just don’t like people who don’t understand us telling us how to live our lives. What if a bunch from Tennessee or Atlanta came up there across the river and started telling you what the hell you can and can’t do?” he said, pointing up the hill. “What if some important man in Nashville started telling folks in Indiana what they can own and can’t own. What would you do?”

Ethan thought for a minute. “Wouldn’t like it much, I reckon.”

“There you go,” the Reb said, nodding. “You’d fight to run ‘em off.”



Ethan took a sip from his canteen and thought for a minute. "Yeah, I guess I would."

"So, if all you Yanks would just turn around and head back north, this would be over and we could all go home."

"Maybe. But it still ain't right to own other folks like they were farm animals."

The Reb began to gather himself and get to his feet. "Well, I don't know about that." He picked up his musket. "What's yer name, Yank?"

"Ethan," he said. "What's yours?"

"Ben."

"I hope you get back home to see your baby soon," Ethan said.

The Reb looked at him for a minute and nodded. "Well, Ethan, you sound all right. I shore hope I don't have to kill you tomorrow."

With that, he disappeared into the woods.

Before dawn, another corporal came through the trees with Ethan's replacement and told Ethan to return to his unit. Ethan trudged back uphill through the wet underbrush and back to the camp. As he approached, he saw his sergeant barking

orders to men in the trenches as they were gathering up their gear.

"What's going on?" he asked Gritz, his best friend, as he stepped into the muddy trench.

"Them artillery boys under General Crittenden have set up on a hill over by the river," Gritz said, "and they're sending some of us from E Company over to set up and protect them."

"Protect the artillery?"

"Yep. We need to set up between the guns and lay down cover fire if they need it."

"Why us?"

"Believe it or not, Hoss, they think we're the freshest troops around here."

The men followed the sergeant for a mile or more through the breaking dawn to a hilltop overlooking the river. Ethan looked through the early mist and saw a row of field guns lined up almost wheel to wheel along the ridge, their muzzles trained down the hill toward the river that flowed through the trees below. Past the river, to the east, he could see Union troops dug in along a small hill, waiting for the Confederates to do something.

"God," Ethan said, looking down the line of artillery, "there must be fifty of them."

"Listen up!" the sergeant barked. "You men find a place between these guns where you have an open field of fire down toward that river. These artillery boys are gonna have enough to do and ain't got time to fight off a charge. You're gonna make damn sure no Rebs come up this hill."

There wasn't much cover for them, so Ethan and Gritz settled in between two of the cannons and put their knapsacks in front of them to rest their muskets on. Then they waited, shivering in the cold air. The day passed slowly, and Ethan could hear the sounds of battle off to the west.

"I hope the Rebs aren't pushing our boys back to the point where they're behind us," Ethan said.

Gritz looked back over his shoulder, then back down the hill toward the river.

"We best not think about that," he said.

Late in the afternoon, the weather began to get worse again. Thick, dark clouds rolled in and settled low. Suddenly, the scene in front of them became alive. The Confederate forces had launched a full-fledged frontal assault against the Yanks on the far side of the river. The Union forces were badly outnumbered but held for a while. The artillery began to fire over the Union troops at the advancing Rebel line. Using the artillery for cover, the Union troops abandoned their position and retreated across the river, up the hill and past the artillery batteries.

The Rebels, seeing the men in blue falling back, felt victory was in their reach. They continued to advance across the river and charged up the hill directly toward the line of Union guns.

"Load the cannister!" bellowed the artillery commander. The cannons brought the bags of grapeshot from the wagons and began to ram them down the barrels.

"Good God," said Ethan. "Those Rebs aren't going to keep coming toward these guns, are they? They're gonna be slaughtered!"

"Sure looks that way," said Gritz, as he sighted down the barrel of his musket. "But I'm fixing to shoot any of the bastards that are still standing."

As the Rebels crossed the stream, 45 Union cannons opened up on them at near point-blank range. The results were beyond horrific. The pieces of metal that comprised the grapeshot tore through the men, shredding their bodies. The stream immediately ran bright red with their blood and pieces of their bodies. At that

moment, the clouds opened up, and wind-blown sleet pelted the men on the hill and in the river below. Rebels that somehow survived the rain of steel were blinded by the rain of ice. The cannons continued their merciless barrage, and the Rebel troops turned, struggling desperately to escape back to their positions east of the river.

Through the cannon smoke, the mist and the sleet, Ethan could barely make out the scene below. But he saw well enough.

“Dear God,” he said as he put his head down on his knapsack in front of him.

“I don’t think God’s anywhere near here right now,” Gritz said.

The Rebs continued their retreat, and the cannons fell silent. Ethan’s ears rang from the sound of the guns, and his nostrils burned from the acrid smoke that hung thick in the air.

The only noise was the sound of the screams and cries for help from the human wreckage below.

An artillery captain hurried along the line.

“Ok, men,” he said, surveying the carnage. “We have wagons coming. We’re going to hoist the white flag and see if we can get down there and help any of those poor devils and get them back to the hospitals. Let’s go.”

Ethan and Gritz looked at each other for a minute, then stood and began to walk down the hill toward the river. The sleet had stopped, but the footing was slippery. As they approached the stream, they saw up close what direct cannon fire can do to a human being. The bloody bodies, and parts of others, lay in heaps. Rebs who were still alive reached out and begged for help. A few, with injuries too horrible to live with, begged to be killed.

Ethan and Gritz began to push the dead aside, lift wounded men from the heaps and carry them to the west bank, where several hospital wagons were approaching.

Darkness was falling, so they worked as fast as they could. The Union men lit torches and lanterns to see what no man should ever see. They worked into the night to help as many as they could, but the dead far outnumbered the living. Lantern in hand, Ethan waded across the stream through the bloody pieces of humanity, looking and listening for any sign of life. He stepped out on the east bank and almost stumbled over a body lying in the wet grass. He held the lantern close and saw the body of a Confederate soldier. His head had almost been severed by the steel shot, and the features of his face were damaged beyond recognition. Snug around his neck was a blood-soaked knit scarf.

It was well after midnight before Ethan and the others were sent back to rejoin the 82nd. They settled into the line behind the newly constructed breastworks. Ethan saw Ronald Covert sitting in the mud, back against some logs, chewing on a hardtack biscuit.

“What’d we miss?” Ethan asked.

Covert continued to chew for a minute and said, “We were in it. The Rebs came at us several times, but we sent ‘em packing.”

Ethan asked, “How bad did we get it?”

“Not bad. We were lined up in two lines with all them Ohio boys. One line would fire, then lay down to load. Then the other line would fire and load. We had the Michigan boys behind us with the cannons. The Rebs took a pretty good lickin’. Most of the worst of it was off to our left flank. They got hit pretty hard.”

Ethan looked over the logs toward the Rebel position and saw nothing but darkness.

“Does the lieutenant say they’re going to try again tomorrow?” Ethan asked.



“Hell, we’ll probably charge them. It’s like two stupid bull deer butting heads.”

He looked at Ethan. “Where’d they send you?”

“They had us up on a hill over yonder a piece, with the artillery boys. The Rebs tried to take the hill where we were.”

“Was it bad?”

“The crazy bastards just charged across the river into the guns.” He took a deep breath. “The most God-awful thing I’ve ever seen. The artillery slaughtered them.”

His thoughts went to Ben, the young Rebel at the creek, and felt himself begin to tremble. As he sat back against the muddy logs, he pulled his hat down over his face to sleep. And to hide the tears that were leaking into his whiskers.

When the sun came up the morning of Jan. 3, the men of the 82nd checked their ammunition pouches and prepared for another day of fighting. But as they looked out at the Confederate lines, they saw no movement. The Rebel forces had left during the night.

The Battle of Stones River was over, leaving more than 13,000 Union and 10,000 Confederate dead or wounded. General Breckinridge’s troops that charged across Stones River into the Yankee cannons had lost almost 1,800 men killed or wounded in less than an hour.

A 1984 Exception

By Katherine Iwatiw
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

I was a fresh-faced American soldier with a pocketful of Deutsche Marks out for a night in Nuremburg, Germany. When the city center's bar and dance hall announced, 'last call,' the trains and buses had shut down. I hadn't kept enough marks for a taxi back to my post, but I had danced with a cute American soldier who mentioned a hotel down the street for U.S. military personnel.

Outside the closed bar and dance hall, I spotted my friend.

"Hello, soldier," I said. "Walk with me to the government hotel."

He held my hand as we drifted down the empty cobblestoned street. He joked; I laughed, and there we stood in front of the hotel. Flood lamps illuminated the U.S. and West German flags mounted above the hotel's first floor. The facade looked pre-World War II and war-spared with no visible bullet holes.

My friend held open the large wooden door inlaid with antique glass while I sashayed through, allowing myself a Mae West moment.

He asked for a room from the clerk, a middle-aged German man who spoke impeccable English. After my friend handed over his ID card, I asked for a room. The clerk pointed to a sign in German and English: "Keine Frauen erlaubt. No women allowed."

Holding up my green American military ID card, I said, "I am not a woman. I am an American soldier."

The man turned the signboard around, "Keine Ausnahmen. No Exceptions."

Looking around the lobby, I spotted a couch in a far corner.

"I'm going to lie down on the couch over there. I don't give a f__k what you boys decide to do."

It was a two-cushion couch about five feet long, enough for all of me. I wrapped my black Army trench coat around me and allowed my body to sink into a respectful coexistence with every lump, bump and bug living in the couch. I closed my eyes and focused on a mechanical hum coming from a distant room. I listened until I heard nothing more.

"Wake up. The clerk wants to see your ID."

I pushed myself to a seated position and coordinated my eye-blinking and breathing patterns until I was awake.

"Hurry or he'll change his mind."

I stood up and adjusted my clothes. I pulled my card from my pants pocket and hastened to the counter.

"Thank you, Fräulein," he said as I handed my card to him, "Please sign here."

With squinting eyes, he inspected both sides of my card and then made copies front and back using a noisy 1970s copier.

My friend and I rented one room with two twin beds. I intercepted the key as it was being handed over.

"I'll take this," I announced.

Walking away, I allowed myself a smile. No exceptions some other night.

Writing Really Does Help

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Here I am all alone,
Sitting at the table here at home.

Haven't seen my therapist in three weeks.
My guard is down and I'm feeling bleak.

My mind is twisted, confused and congested.
I need to talk to get my head rested.

My bad coping skills are knocking at the door.
I've relapsed to smoking, but I want to do more.

I am doing my best though trying to hold on.
I've worked so hard I don't want my progress to be gone.

But flashbacks and intrusive thoughts
Are filling my time and, yeah, there's a lot.

I'm writing to release some negative energy.
For now, I have become my own worst enemy.

I want to hurt myself, but I know better.
But today I'm feeling like the weather.

Dark, gray, stormy. You know, just downright gloomy.
It so changes me and makes me feel loony.

Come on now, Kim, you've been through worse.
I know sometimes LIFE can feel like a curse.

Writing this poem has released some fear.
Take a deep breath and wipe away the tears.

You know, I'm not really at home alone.
Now I can see I have me, paper and a pen.
And the Veterans Crisis Line number for my phone.
1.800.877.8255 or 988 (press 1).

What Is a King?

By Deborah Ann Cole

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

“What is a king,” I asked myself one day.
As I was gazing at the sky, thanking God for his amazing grace,
I thought hard about what a king must wear.
Then it came to me that his crown shows magnificent courage
and the sacrifice that a king must bear.
The crown will hold so many priceless and beautiful gems.
He lets his people know courageously and indubitably
that he would be the one to lead them.
The next thing that a king wears is his mantle or robe
which symbolizes his authority. Of course, it’s made of satin,
sapphire and gold.
I asked God above, “What is the purpose of a king in my life?”
And God answered me and said, “My king will keep you
from harm and strife.
A king must uphold the law, keep peace and be equally fair.
A king will protect his people from harm and despair.”
I asked my friends if any of them had ever met a king.
I did! I did but I can’t tell you his name until this story ends.
I thought over and over, wondering in my head,
if I ever met a king,
someone who has royalty running through his veins.
I thought about my son and all the magnificent things
he has done.
I begin to hear a whisper in my ear that told me
he was the One.
I was told that a king carries a legacy
and I believe this is true.
And, Chris, your legacy gives me the strength and courage
to continue and pursue.

Dedicated to my son Christian Harris, 1988-2021.



Snowquet

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

Precious flower seeds are in the soil below a blanket of snow,
protected when the cold winds blow.
Farm-Town Floral supplies us with flowers from afar.
We have ice on our steps, even the tar.
Fresh bouquets have a way of spreading joy and good cheer.
Even though it’s January, April is near.
April showers bring May flowers;
Mayflowers bring Pilgrims and Thanksgiving.
Oh, I can hardly wait until spring.
Snow sculptures could make a snowy bouquet of flowers.
Spray paint them perfectly; it could take hours.
Just to see people smile at such beauty.
Hey, it’s part of our wintertime duty.



A Knock on the Door

By Diane Wasden

— Millen, GA

I am always worrying, even still today, whether I did or said enough to have stopped it all from happening. I immersed myself with guilt and experienced gut-wrenching pain, along with years of wrestling with my grief.

At 17, my eyes had not seen, and my ears had not heard. Growing up, I had always seemed to be in all the wrong places at the wrong times. These are the hidden pathways of my life.

I was in basic training, summertime in the '70s, at Fort Jackson, S.C. Another soldier and I were ordered to pull KP in our unit mess hall. It was very early in the morning, and we had mistakenly gone to the wrong mess hall. If any one has ever been stationed there for basic training, you know how all the buildings look the same. We hadn't been there long enough to really know our way around yet.

The top sergeant in charge ordered me to follow him into a storage room to get some canned food. As the door closed behind us, I felt alone, nervous and deeply vulnerable. I heard him inhale deeply as he forced me into a corner in the back of the storage room. A blur of thoughts and emotions flooded my mind and body. I was stunned and outraged as he started kissing my neck. My resistance only angered him, and he frightened me. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. The odds were all against me as he pulled rank on me. I worried that if I did or said the wrong thing, I would be punished or worse, discharged from the Army.

I could feel the beads of sweat on my forehead, and my hands were hot and sweaty. My knees were wobbling so fast

that it became hard for me to even stand up. I became filled with fear, and I trembled with humiliation as he started to unbutton my top. He proceeded to touch me, saying, "Doesn't this feel good?"

I felt like I was going to vomit. I could hear my own heart beating so fast and loud in my ears that it was the only sound I heard. I felt light headed, as if I were about to pass out.

I begged him to please just stop. I promised I wouldn't tell anyone.

He yelled at me, "Shut up! You are taking my moment away."

He then tried to kiss me on the lips. When I refused to cooperate, he covered my mouth with his hand. I knew this was a bad sign. He then put his other hand down into the front of my pants. Tears were falling, and I felt so ashamed. My body became numb.

Then I heard the best sound in the world to me — a knock on the storage room door! It was the other sergeant in charge demanding to know why the door was locked. It had seemed like forever in that room, like time forgot about me. (Thank you, God, for setting off the alarm clock, so to speak).

As the sergeant uncovered my mouth, he looked straight into my eyes and ordered me not to say a word to anyone. When I caught my breath and wiped my face, he led me to the door. I felt like a prisoner being set free. Freedom never looked so good.

He took away my dignity and I still feel angry, resentful and bitter. People like that don't care about whom they hurt. They don't understand or grasp the

lasting effects of the damage it will have on their victims or how the pain and sorrow will weigh us down.

The whole day this sergeant made sure that I worked alone, washing dishes, sweeping, mopping floors, etc. I thought my nightmare was over.

But this was not the case for me.

While my life was being torn apart in that mess hall storage room, another situation was unfolding. The other soldier and I were reported to be missing to the post commander, staff and military police. My drill sergeant was not at all happy with us. She told us that we were an embarrassment to the U. S. Army; how could we be soldiers if we couldn't even find our way to the unit mess hall?

I felt like a huge knife had been stabbed straight into my heart. I was lost and had no one to talk to or turn to. No one had ever done something like that to me before. I felt so unclean and unworthy. I felt dead, and I would take my secret with me to my grave. My life was over at 17.

I will never ever forget what happened, what he did to me and how he made me feel. And there's nothing in this world that can ever, ever remove all this from my memories. It has altered my view toward having any kind of relationship. Predators like him ruin fragile lives that bear very heavy burdens.

Sergeant, you have helped to give me a whole new perspective about loneliness, heartache, sex, trust, isolation and misery. What I have learned from you, Sarge, is:

TRUST NO ONE.

A Favorite Christmas

By C. Nemeth
— Albuquerque, NM

All but one of my Christmas holidays have been spent with family and friends. The one exception, upon reflection, is my favorite. Let me explain.

In 1951, I was serving in the Army at an ammunition facility in Germany. This ammo dump was located in far western Germany near the Saar basin, a piece of land claimed by both Germany and France for many years.

The Rhine Ammo Depot was the only one issuing ammunition for training in Europe. It was situated among farms and between two small towns. Miesau was directly north, and Bruchmuehlbach was south, containing the train terminal for the area. I remember a gasthaus (tavern) in Miesau where you could get some great food and which I frequented on pay day.

As the Yule season approached, my roommates and I were feeling homesick. Someone, I do not remember who, came up with a suggestion that immediately energized all of us into action: "Why not find a church and go to midnight Mass?" We asked our sergeant whether we could be provided with a bus and driver for Christmas Eve. After a day he was able to authorize a bus and driver for us to go to Mass.

We began to look for a church. One of the German nationals working on the base suggested one in a town some six miles from the base. My memory does not allow me to tell you its name.

Christmas Eve, and we all clambered onto the bus. As I remember there were between 12 and 15 of us. We were dressed in our Class A uniforms. As we arrived at the church, we could see that there were many people moving toward

it. We all stepped off the bus and made our way to the entrance.

The church was already quite full as we entered. After a moment the people began to move together to give us room to sit. The church interior was decorated with fresh pine boughs. Even the end caps of the pews were covered with boughs. I cannot describe to you how beautifully the church was decorated. The people near us turned and wished us welcome.

The Mass began. The choir began singing as the congregation rose and knelt. A small boy no more than 9 or 10 stood in front of the altar and began to sing the Christmas story from the Bible. His young soprano voice was clear and strong. He appeared fully at ease.

The service continued. The priest would turn and face the congregation from time to time, and the young boy would sit while the priest spoke and then, once again, rise and continued with the story. None of us understood German very well but it made no difference. The beautiful sanctuary, the pine boughs, the candles, the little boy and the welcome by the congregation had us all enchanted.

As we left after the Mass we were greeted by many people, again wishing us holiday greetings, smiling and shaking our hands.

We were a subdued and quiet bunch of GIs on the way back to the base. Throughout the years I have remembered the church and the people when I celebrate the Christmas holidays. I will treasure it always.

The Doc

By Michael Kuklenski
—Rowlett, TX

The "Doc" always wondered if he did his best to help his fellow Marines as they fought to resist.

The NVA were determined to kill them all, only succeeded in putting four names on the Wall.

The rest went on to fight many more battles before being "welcomed home" only to be treated like cattle.

Their days are OK for they can see the light. What haunts them most is the dark of night.

Their time is running out; this they sense all too well. Many of their "stories" they've yet to tell.

If nothing else, thank them for their service, but don't do or say anything that will make them nervous.

I'm not out of words, just out of feelings. Compassion has left me along with the promise of healing.

A Lifetime Christmas Day With the Orphans

By Jim Barker
— Keaau, HI

A sobering revelation to a newcomer coming to any country ravaged by war is the social disorganization and not infrequent compromise of human values. Many people struggle to basically survive. For Vietnam, the presence of orphanages was a stark image of national deprivation and loss.

I had the initial good fortune of being assigned to a radio research company by the coastal city of Nha Trang, a popular tourist mecca. It was generally spared large-scale assault by Communist forces, as it fortunately did not have a high strategic value. With the beckoning beach front, tree-lined boulevards and constant processions of local residents, mostly on bicycles, it almost seduced a visitor to conclude all was in harmony and at peace.

Starting to get an impression of the geography and people after work, I donned my running gear and took to the roads. A daily one-hour run introduced life on a more serious level.

Finishing a particular run in the pronounced heat and humidity, I made a quick detour into the ocean to cool off. Preparing to run the final few miles back to my unit, I looked up at the entry gate of the military beach section to see a few dozen ladies in garish makeup clinging to the gate. Like the mythological Sirens, they were shouting in broken English to gain the amorous favors and finances of any interested soldiers. This nearly “naked ape” in mere shorts and running shoes was also included as “fair game.”



One evening I attended a church service in a trailer. Upon departing, I had barely set foot on the ground before I was approached and propositioned. This experience was balanced by a cordial meal with a local schoolteacher. It was becoming clear that dark and light flourished on the same stage.

Curious about more of the cultural life and geography of the area, I allied with the youthful “hotshot” driver of the company commander. Specialist Cole had liberal access to a motor pool jeep. After hearing about an orphanage by the bay, we set out on a discovery romp the following Sunday.

Being welcomed into an expansive, sandy yard by the attending Catholic sisters, we were not prepared for the next experience. Within moments, we were rushed by a tide of young orphans. Some of the little folk literally clung onto our pant legs. One would think that Santa Claus and Elvis Presley had come to town at the same time. It quickly dawned on us that these young folk were emotionally starved.

The managing sisters were only a small handful in this large community. The senior sister explained that many of the orphans’

parents were dead. Some were from families that could not afford to raise them. The young people had the right to remain until 18 years old.

Nearly all of the financial help came from donations. The children survived on a very basic diet. The orphanage bordered a picturesque sector of Nha Trang Bay. As we played ball with the children, their basic burlap and raggedy clothing presented a shocking and perplexing image in contrast to the

flora and sparkling beauty of the bay. After taking many pictures of the vast smiling audience, I promised the sisters that my friend and I would return the following week and bring some bakery goods.

The next Sunday, my jeep ally and I made our way into town to the most promising bakery (boulangerie) we could locate. We ordered an impressive variety of cookies and items which were all compiled in a bag nearly the size of a Nebraska hay bale. Loading the goodies in the jeep, my friend and I ran back into the shop to make final payment. Suddenly, we heard a shout from out in the street. We ran back to discover some highly mobile thieves had spirited away our orphanage treats.

Stunned and incensed, I made a complete repurchase. Unable to hold back, I launched on a moralistic soliloquy in very clear Vietnamese that the poor shop owner had to endure.

Reinforced and reorganized, we were enthusiastically received at the orphanage. My driver buddy and I also had the pleasure of interacting with some Navy Seals who had stopped by to play catch

with the kids. Upon departure, I told the sisters I would see if our company could host the children for a Christmas banquet.

Back at the company, I met with the administrative officers and promoted the idea of a special meal for the orphans on Christmas Day. By good fortune, I had become acquainted with the command staff of the company. Following discussions about the logistics and security issues for hosting such an event, we reached agreement that it could be conducted in the mess hall. The meal was to be like a Thanksgiving banquet, sparing nothing. The company's soldiers were invited to participate and make modest donations for gifts to the children. I felt a special pride that my unit was enthusiastically supporting the event.

On Christmas morning, two covered deuce-and-a-half trucks rumbled out in the direction of the orphanage. The ride itself, with the chaperoning sisters, proved to be a treat for the kids.

When the children arrived at the company, we were surprised and delighted to see the children transformed from their common pajama type clothing to striking identical outfits like Girl Scouts uniforms.

As the Christmas lunch got under way, it was amusing to observe how wide-eyed the orphans were, looking at the vast array of choice and quantity of the food. I stayed totally busy as a host linguist.

When it was time for gifts, it was great to see the company staff and other volunteers

having fun distributing the presents. It was as if we were all having a nostalgic déjà vu with our own family Christmas experiences. Even our rather stodgy Georgia unit colonel got in the mix.

To everyone's surprise, the children lined up afterward and sang a medley of carefully practiced Christmas carols. The harmony was perfect and the pitch fully first soprano. The enthusiasm and energy were electric. It felt as if everyone had played a part of Santa Claus while also receiving tangible and intrinsic gifts.

The afternoon became an indelible experience for all of us – lifetime validation of the timeless scripture, "For it is in giving that we truly receive."

Leaves That Turn

By William Shepherd
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

As summer ends, fall brings cool winds
eager to come and turn the hot days
and nights into a peaceful rest,
so welcome from the days' heat.
And night brings the darkness as if to say,

*You stars come! Bring out your light
That I may dream of nights gone past!*

Your light shines so bright on the leaves
and trees. Red, yellow, green!
Oh, what joy it gives to me!
The gifts of this sight, life and leaves
falling from above, telling me of His love.



The Nurses and Staff of My VA Hospital

By Jeffrey Saarela
VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

The nurses here are one of a kind.
They work really hard, and when you hit
the call button, they don't mind.
They work on three shifts.
They all have separate skills and traits.
Each of them is great!
They go out of their way to address your request.
I feel as far of my nurses go, they are the best!
The meals served are always on time.
If you have a request they don't mind.
When it comes to recreational activities
or outings that are planned,
they always are great and even grand!
To compliment them for a job well done,
we're always looking forward to the next one!

Combat Nursing

By Louise Eisenbrandt
— Leawood, KS

To paraphrase poet Robert Frost, upon my graduation from nursing school in June 1968, I chose to take “the road less traveled.”

I received my commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Nurse Corp. Following officers’ basic training in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and nine months as a nurse at Walson Army hospital in Fort. Dix, N.J., I received orders for Vietnam. The 91st Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai was my final destination. I knew, shortly after arriving, that this would be a year unlike any other I might experience.

After I had spent three months on the medical wards treating soldiers with malaria, hepatitis, intestinal parasites and infections of their feet with jungle rot, the chief nurse offered me the chance to move to the emergency room (R&E receiving and emergency). Without hesitation, I accepted the opportunity. The thought of caring for those who had been wounded really appealed to me. I had had excellent training in my nursing school, spent time nursing stateside and now felt acclimated to life in a war zone. I hoped that I was ready to tackle what I considered the most intensive of the nursing specialties, especially in a combat theater. The date was Feb. 20, 1970, eight days before my twenty-third birthday.

Looking back on that day, I realize that no one can truly be prepared for the type of trauma nursing that I would



experience over the next eight months. On my second day in R&E, a young man was brought in on a stretcher missing both legs. I had never seen a bilateral amputee before. Dried blood was caked to his fatigues, hands, face, and the IV bottle lying next to him on the litter. The medic in the field had bandaged his stumps, started the fluids and given him morphine; it was up to us to take it from there.

The standard procedure was to cut off all his clothes so we could thoroughly assess the extent of his injuries. Modesty took a backseat to saving a life. In many cases, time was of the essence. After we made all the necessary adjustments and notes, he was covered with a sheet and whisked into pre-op on his way to surgery. He was 19 years old.

When I got off duty later, a bunch of us celebrated my birthday with a cake sent from home by my mom. That evening I was blowing out birthday candles; the next morning my patient was waking up to a new life, without legs.

A Blight—No Outside

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

Businesses gone;
is it true?
Businesses gone,
tears of rue.
I’m stuck up here
through and through.
I’ve been in this room
since the heartbreak ensued.

The Cycle of Abuse

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

As a very young boy,
I decided not to treat anyone
The way I was treated.
I do not wish for anyone
To suffer the abuse that I have suffered.
“Do unto others
As you would have them do unto you”
Is very important to me.
As a teenager,
I decided to stand up,
Confronting those
Who were mistreating and abusing me.
As a young man,
I let it be known
Not to take my kindness and generosity
As a weakness.
That would be a serious mistake;
There is nothing weak about me
Being kind and generous to others.
As a man beyond the age of 25,
I can tolerate and deal
With abuse and mistreatment.
However, I will not accept it
As a way of life.
It should be stopped and prevented
In a loving, kind and respectable way.
If this does not work,
Then being blunt and to the point
May be the only way
To stop and prevent it.
Not being sarcastic.

She Still Stands Today

By Jason Kirk Bartley
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

She still stands today,
her torch straight up in the sky.
She stands for liberty, justice
and everything by and by.
Crown upon her head,
she looks bravely over the bay.
Nothing tries to rattle her
and nothing gets in her way.
She stands for millions;
they go to greet her,
snapping pictures here and there.
Her gown covers her body;
her hand holds her flare.
She looks out across the water,
her complexion a light green.
She stands so proud and tall,
reaching for the stars.
She stands for freedom's call,
immense in this world,
the greatest symbol from the past.
She still stands for freedom

and what has made it last.
She still stands for our rights
and how some gave their all.
They gave the ultimate sacrifice
for what she stands for,
so she would not fall.
We take her for granted,
boasting of our rights,
that she stands for freedom
on the most perilous of nights.
We love what she stands for
and the country in which we live.
We stand on the shoreline singing
the Star Spangled Banner,
with hearts that desire to give,
praising our land of liberty,
appreciating the land
in which we live.
Many have come to join us
from lands that are afar.
This shows how
and what she stands for
are viewed by cultures
around the earth.
She is and always will be
the epitome of liberty
and freedom's worth.

These Verses

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

They tell a tale of living
From Wilkinsburg to here,
Of taking some and giving,
How good that friends are near.
The best and worst of all
Are lost now to the past.
Most times that I recall
Now comfort to the last.
Each day an uphill climb
From dawn till fading dusk.
The days, a pleasant rhyme,
The past a scrimshaw tusk.
Still, blessings come my way
As I rely on hope.
I know to stop and pray
To better help me cope.

Dust Storms in the Wind

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

Trials and tribulations will
sting like a bee,
and weep and seethe
like a roaring sea,
and shake with sadness
beneath an entangled willow tree.
Winds rant and rage against
a weary soul,
and bound into moments
that are there
through endless reflections
that rip beyond the distant air.
Torn between the endlessness
within the cold,
a fragile joy descends back
into a true state of mind.
Then raging winds
carry one's silence
into the end of time.



An Affinity With Acronyms (OTUS and OTY)

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Army calls me SATA,
Navy says I'm MATA.
At the SFVA,
Just an average YATA.
Isn't that IRONIC
Or just RHETORIC?

This year I'm PLOTY;
Last year I was VOTY.
At the CAPO,
I'm never SMOTY.
Sounds so PLUTONIC
Maybe PEDANTIC.

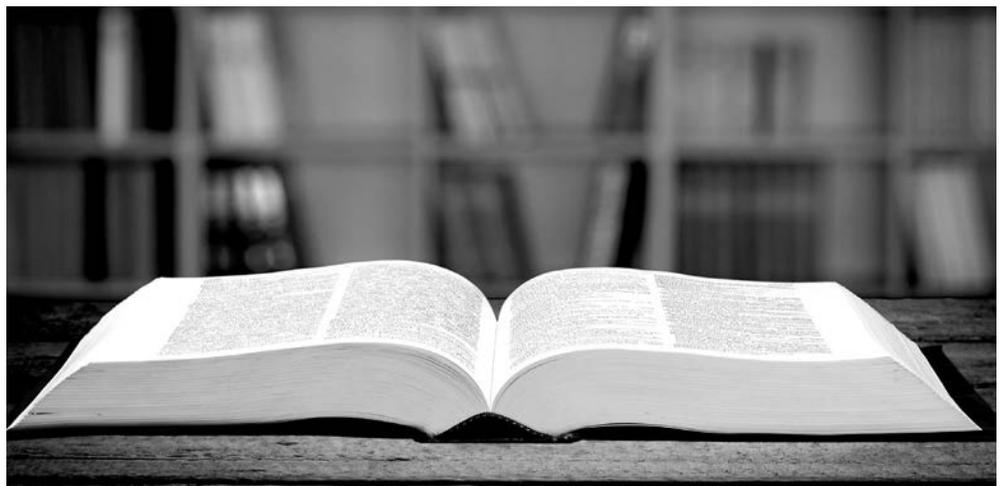
On CAPITOL hill
Joe is POTUS,
Jill is FLOTUS,
There is no SLOTUS.
It's so SATIRIC,
Hint of SEMANTIC,
Just plain ROMANTIC.

Our first ever SGOTUS,
Will he be FGOTUS?
And, Justice on the SCOTUS,
Read your COTUS
On the TOTUS.
Just ask the VEEP.

Intent here was DIDACTIC
To employ neither TACTIC,
Nor make one FRANTIC,
Nor TRAUMATIC.
Not to be HYPNOTIC,
Rather HYPOSTATIC,
Or OXYMORONIC!

To Help You:

- OTUS—Of The United States
- OTY—Of The Year
- SATA—Sergeant-At-Arms
- MATA— Master-At-Arms
- SFVA—San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center
- YATA—Joe or Moe
- PLOTY —Post Legionnaire Of The Year
- VOTY—Volunteer Of The Year;
- CAPO—American Legion Cathay Post (384)
- SMOTY—Support Member Of The Year
- POTUS—President Of The United States
- FLOTUS—First Lady Of The United States (Wife of President)
- SLOTUS—Second Lady Of The United States (Wife of Vice President)
- SGOTUS—Second Gentleman Of The United States (Husband of Vice President);
- FGOTUS—First Gentleman Of The United States (Husband of the President)
- SCOTUS—Supreme Court Of The United States
- COTUS—Constitution Of The United States
- TOTUS—Teleprompter Of The United States; VEEP—Vice President).

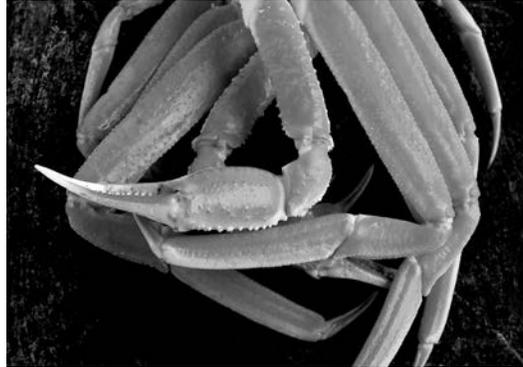


Crab Story

By William Perry

— Prescott, AZ

One December in the late 1960s, my Navy P-3 squadron deployed to Adak, Alaska, a naval air station on a small island about half way out the Aleutian chain between Anchorage and the Soviet Union. For the next six months we would fly out of there in some of the most hazardous flying conditions imaginable: icy runways, 70-knot crosswinds, minimal visibility and no nearby alternate airfield.



We had been there less than a week when our duty officer received a mysterious phone call seeking a favor.

“Would you ask your doctor to come down to our boat in the harbor and look at two of our men?” the voice asked. “Oh, and please don’t tell the Navy brass.”

We did indeed deploy with our own doctor, in this case a burly young physician just out of med school. He agreed to go down to Adak’s harbor to see what was up.

Besides being a base for reconnaissance flights along the Soviet coast, Adak also had a dock area that allowed a small civilian

factory vessel from San Diego to tie up there. Its workers caught and processed the delicious and highly valued Alaska king crab. The crew seemed made up of about 10 young American couples. The men were involved in catching the crustaceans, and the women then processed them into long, frozen blocks of pure sweet crab meat.

As can be imagined with 20 young women and men living in very close quarters in terrible weather and with few leisure activities, there was some hanky-panky going on. As a result, there had evidently been a knife fight between two husbands. The reason for the mysterious phone call

was that they badly needed a doctor to come down and sew up the resulting wounds. Fortunately, our doc was willing to stitch them up without telling the base commander, who probably would have thrown the boat out of the harbor.

As a result of this secret good deed, for the next six months of our deployment, all we had to do was call a certain phone number, and within a short time a 30-pound block of choice frozen crab meat would magically appear at the designated door in our quarters.

Much of the sweet, tasty meat went to our galley, but a surprising amount was consumed by individuals at late night, post-flight poker games. Delicious!

The only problem was that the melted butter for dipping made its way onto our fingers and then the cards, making them difficult to shuffle and deal. We had to replace the decks frequently, but as with the dangerous flying, we were able to endure that challenge with quiet bravery.

Possessions

By James Janssen

— Lorraine, KS

Ever hear that possession is nine-tenths of the law? Really? Does it really matter?

I’ve always figured possession of a material object is but of a temporary nature in the first place and subject to being taken back by the man upstairs at any designated time he sees fit. And why not? He created it. It’s his anyway.

And while on this subject, what about us? Aren’t we expendable too? But is there a difference between material goods and

humans? Oh yeah. We have a purpose to fulfill. Material goods don’t.

I think it’s hilarious when someone blurts out “It’s mine!” Okay pilgrim. It’s yours. Don’t choke on it.

As veterans, however, we have one indisputable possession – a definite belief system, an ingrained pride and a sense of honor, special attributes worth far more than medals or material objects of any kind. And those attributes are only

surpassed by a deep and abiding love and respect we possess regarding the lifelong camaraderie for our present and departed brothers and sisters in uniform.

Hand in hand we now live in peace. But make no mistake: a dormant, unseen fire exists inside our souls that can be rekindled in a heartbeat if triggered. As Travis Tritt so aptly recorded, “Just leave this long-haired country boy alone.”

Jamie and Roxy

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

It is funny how much I remember from 'Nam. Such as my Australian fellow airmen who flew the rattiest, smallest most unsafe aircraft there. The C9 Caribou, a small cargo aircraft that was old and had two prop engines. These guys were fearless, knowing the odds they were facing, knowing that what they carried was essential to the troops they were resupplying.

But what I remember best about them is their attitude and smiles, always pleasant and friendly, calling me “mate” as I tried to learn their own way of English. I flew on the big C-130As, ones that could take dozens and dozens of rounds and still fly. The C9 Caribous were nothing like that; hit one of their engines, and they were going down.

And then there's Jamie and Roxy. Those two fearless Australian 40-ish women remind me so much of those boys that flew the C9s. Both were dealt bad hands. Jamie has multiple sclerosis; Roxy is a two-time cancer survivor. But you would never know it. They are typical Aussies. Improvise and overcome, always with a smile. And yet they are fierce fighters. I would not want to take either one of them on; I would lose hands down.

Just how strong is Jamie? So strong she does a 50-kilometer run every year to raise funds for MSWA Western Australia. They both live in Perth and are best of friends, so close they call each other “sis.”

And they support each other, something I can relate to because we are all disabled. We all say, “What disability?” We fight, live our lives, contribute to the betterment of humankind. We care. We love. We do our best. We improvise and overcome.

And yet, we face many bad days physically, times when all we can do is rest and pull back because our bodies fail us. But then we have a good day, and the game is on. Not knowing what the next day brings can be a psychological nightmare for me and can raise some holy hell for me because of my PTSD. My wife Sandy knows how to handle me. Don't know where I would be without her and the 48 years with her.

Roxy has Gary and Jamie has Brad. Rock solid relationships. I wish you could know both of those women who make the world a better place to live. They are indeed remarkable people.



Memories

By Daniel Paicopulos

—San Diego, CA

Where I grew up,
at the edge of the lake
at the end of Elm Avenue,
the elms are all gone,
but I'm told that
further down Road Q,
at the bottom of a long backyard,
there's still a plank swing
dangling from a long rope
tied way up high
around a thick oak branch,
useful for daring dives into the water.
It's been 60 years since I last saw it,
so surely it's been changed a few times.
I wonder who does that,
and I wonder how they get up there,
and I wonder if their mom knows about it.
The elms might be gone,
but those firs we planted are living,
or so I'm told by old friends,
the pines my grandfather helped me plant,
even the one that was struck by lightning
on its very first day planted in the earth.
BAM, like a spank on a newborn's bottom.
That one is the tallest, no sign of early scars.
There's a lesson there, I'm sure,
and maybe I'll get it one day.

HD—April 18th

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

Around since 1903.

Some kind of rumble was created, distinct in sound.

Some raced; some flat tracked; some just rode.

Harley Davidson was born. I thank the Lord.

Legend was here to stay. "Made in America" was what it said.

"Live to ride, ride to live" became the motto,

but before that, they served with honor in two world wars.

The name spread, not just across our country,

but across the world. HD was here to stay.

The groups multiplied after the Nazis went down.

Action needed from restless men, home now

after going through hell. They formed up

and patches were created, some good, some bad.

Hollister, CA, ruined the image, but those boys meant no harm,

just restless and ready for action where none was to be found.

I don't know why so many groups went to war.

One wrong move from a wrong-patched guy never settled

the score. Today the battles continue but not

from us grandpas and grammas

who remember The Mamas and the Papas.

Are we the last riders to turn into flame?

Some say HD is dead as they move afar,

setting up factories in new countries.

Still "Made in America?" Or just assembled here?

Don't walk into any dealership; that's where the yuppies go!

No matter the cost, fat wallets they've got.

Yet coast to coast, fair shops you find to keep that HD

mighty fine. You take pride and many do their own work

and all polish that chrome till it has blinding bling!

Riding clubs form and we all get older and smarter.

No fights we want, just the thrill of the chase.

Ma Nature at her best, the smell of fresh-cut hay and grass.

We ride because we have to; nobody can explain.

If you don't "get it," no use to even try to tell.

Is HD dead and perishing? All I see are '50s, '60s and '70s.

Even the crotch rockets and the young disappear.

Generations missing out because of some fear?

Can't answer that as my two Harleys are ready to go.

More adventures await this grandpa as grandkids

scream with glee. Maybe I am old and have lots of pain,
but take my Harleys away and death would come quick.

Some say I've got no business going down the highway.

Get away, Naysayers! Still hell on wheels I am,

always will be for I understand.

"Live to ride, ride to live." HD—I thank my Lord!

Through PTSD, marriage, kids and all kinds of trauma and
drama,

she sits calling my name, and off I go turning into flames!

HD lives on, the older the better.

And, no, my friends, it will never die! So ride on,

Brothers and Sisters, for the code never dies either.

Patched or Lone Wolf does not matter.

You got an HD and that's all that matters!

How

By William Shepherd

VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

Clouds with silver lining,

Fluff like cotton balls,

Floating by and gliding.

How do they never fall?

Stars that always shimmer

And always shine so bright,

Twinkle, too, and glimmer.

How do they stay in flight?

Moon that lights our night,

And sun that lights our days.

How'd you get here

Anyways?

I'll tell you how they got here;

I know within my heart.

God put them here in one week,

And also gave man a start.

That's how you and I

Became what we are today.

And since He gave me a place,

I gave Him my heart to stay.

Making Spirits Bright... From Prison

By Shon Pernice
— Moberly, MO

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear about a men's medium security prison? Probably not the happiest of thoughts. Moreover, what if I were to tell you about a group of offenders who held a candy collection among themselves in order to help the local community at Christmas? It may not capture the top of the news hour as some of their crimes did. However, the story shows that humanity and the desire to assist others are not eclipsed when the cell door closes.

The Moberly Correctional Center (MCC) located in Moberly, Mo., houses roughly 1,700 men serving sentences for a variety of offenses. Inside the 15-foot razor wire fences is Housing Unit Four, which consists of two wings, A Wing and C Wing, holding 66 men per wing. The Therapeutic Community (TC), located in A Wing, was created in 2012. It is a structured wing that offers offenders a path for growth and personal development as well as an environment free of the typical prison distractions.

The men in the TC unit must take classes, volunteer to clean their living environment and maintain a monthly tracking sheet to show their therapeutic progress. Their mission statement begins, "Through positive thinking, inspiration, accountability, and dedication, we are transforming individuals..."

The veterans program in C Wing, with its signature flagpole displaying the U.S. flag in



the front, houses military veterans from all the branches of service. Founded in 2017, the wing offers veterans specific resources to assist in their transition back into the community. From mental health services to the local Veterans Administration hospital involvement, the Veterans Wing promotes a structured living environment that revives a sense of duty from prior military service.

Their mission statement reads, "To reduce recidivism in the Veterans Community by restoring our Honor and means to succeed." The men are always in search of humanitarian and restorative justice projects. The Veterans Wing at MCC is the pilot program for the entire Missouri Department of Corrections.

The Community Kitchen in Moberly is funded solely by donations and is run by volunteers. They serve healthy home-cooked meals twice a week to about 125 guests who are having a hard time making

ends meet. With the news showing the economic impact of Covid, inflation and merchandise shortages, the men yearned to do something different this year. They wanted the kind of venture that would positively impact someone's life.

The majority of the men come from low socio-economic backgrounds that included being raised in group homes, the Division of Youth Services and living on government assistance. They know hardship firsthand. However, nobody ever forgets childhood memories of the sweet bliss from possessing a bag of assorted candies. Thus, the proposal to the prison's administration for a candy drive was submitted and approved.

On Dec. 20, 2021, a Community Kitchen volunteer picked up two large boxes of candy weighing 34 pounds donated entirely by the men of Housing Unit Four.

Inside America's prisons, sadness, homesickness and depression resonate through the cell walls. In many cases, the incarcerated do not have the opportunity to participate in altruistic projects. However, for the Christmas of 2021, men from Housing Unit Four's Therapeutic Community and Veterans Program came together and made a difference not only in the local community but also in their own lives.

The Dread

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

(To be sung by a rock and roll band!)

Oh, no!

They come again—relentless,
the demons even at 71.

One hundred fifty times I flew THE BEST! C-130As.

No going home after April 1970.

No USA. Just protesters and hatred
greeted us.

Mid-air diversion again! Drop load.

RIG—medivac! No engine to fix!

Just screaming Army troops and young Marines.

But hey, I was 19, already a Sergeant!

I never deserved those stripes.

Wanna know why?

The Air Force needed NCOs—too many killed.

Next man up!

I want my MOM, they screamed.

Blood on the floor, we slipped and slid.

I held his hand and then closed his eyes.

Fly faster, Aircraft Commander!

Screw altitude and safety; it doesn't matter!

Only hospitals are what count.

We land, help offload,

the six of us in tatters, all shaking.

Back to the load, wishing for ten stiff drinks.

We fly, pick up the load and I make it finally
to the broken bird.

The Army guys knew what we did.

Now they set up a perimeter

and I go to work on that wounded bird.

Back to base it goes with me on it.

Maybe two, three or four days later,

after the parts I need make it to me,

the Army guys treat me like gold!

Share sandbag hoochs and yummy C-rats,

even a nice hot beer

Back to base and the comforts of a flightline!

Hey, Sergeant Wangard, we need some help.

Mind going again? 006 lost number four engine.

I don't know, never counted, you see.

Vietnam was the only place I wanted to be!

100? 125? 150?

Missions never stopped but my mind did!

After three different times in 'Nam,

she gave up the ghosts and I was medevaced
because I was nuts!

At 71 the demons still come.

Hey, Brother or Sister, come give me some help.

I can't fight alone; the bastards are invisible.

Memory Banks explode

as I close the eyes on that poor soul!

Dwell in Hope

By Ben Hawkins

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Hope is a desire or expectation for something to happen.

Hope is everything; it keeps us alive with poverty in check,
with gambling on life and fame and fortune possible.

Today the abode of the dead is vacant;
all the devils are here offering no hope.

With all the devils here

and hope against hope pervading,

hoping can be difficult.

But hope always offers hope.

Dwell in hope.

Hope deferred maketh the heart sick:

but when the desire cometh,

it is a tree of life.

Proverbs 13:12 KJV

The Shoot-Out Between the Illinois Police and the Lampkin Boys

By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

The Illinois police claim that the Lampkin boys
were clocked at ninety and speeding it up.
Few really know what really happened that night.
Somehow or another a shot was fired.
A speed and chase are taking place;
red lights flashing, a siren blows.
The Lampkin boys just not driving slow.
A lot of shots are now being fired.
The way it looks somebody's sure to die.
This just shouldn't have happened at all.
I knew twelve brothers, the Lampkin boys.
They're good folks and I know them well.
Now the speed and chase have stopped.
A tire blowout; hell is come about.
They're shooting at each other; the bullets are flying.
Somebody's just bound to wind up dying.
More Illinois cops rushing to the scene.
So many shots are being fired.
This is just a really bad scene to see.
An Illinois cop just shot down,
the Lampkin boys loading up the second round.
Shots are still being shot; all hell has now broken loose.
Cleveland has just been shot dead—a Lampkin boy.
There's twelve of them.
This just shouldn't have happened at all.
A deputy sheriff, he's shot dead now.
Blood is bleeding; Illinois is bloody.
This is just a great big mess tonight.
Monroe has been shot—a Lampkin brother.
David shot dead, I knew him well.
David, a Lampkin brother. The people like him so.
This just shouldn't have happened at all.
Illinois is bloody; it's bleeding to death.
Few really know what really happened that night.
The Lampkin brothers were all good boys.
This just shouldn't have happened at all.

After the Lampkin Boys Had Been Killed by the Illinois Police

By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

Now, after the Lampkin boys had been killed
by the Illinois police,
this just about worried their mama and papa to death.
Johnny took sick; Gussie lost weight.
They just couldn't believe what had happened to them.
David was dead and Cleveland was, too.
Monroe been shot and facing time.
This all just about worried the Lampkin family to death.
They buried them boys on a Sunday afternoon,
clouds in the sky and sad-looking day.
Johnny and Gussie just couldn't believe
it happened that way.
They shouted and hollered, crying at the funeral.
What a sad day for the Lampkin family, it was.
It was a double funeral they had that day.
Gussie and Johnny cried and shouted all the way.
Gussie walked up to David's casket.
Her sweet son was dead and gone.
She hollered out, "David, my boy, is dead."
She fell over in Johnny's arms just a-crying so,
tears from her eyes on Cleveland's casket.
This just about worried the Lampkin family to death.
Nine other brothers, sad at the funeral that day.
One of the Lampkin boys had just got killed that summer.
Yes, Leroy is dead, the baby boy we had.
This just about killed Johnny and Gussie, too.
The Lampkin boys were all good boys.
They worked hard farming and cutting pulpwood, too.
Twelve boys were born to Johnny and Gussie.
They love all twelve of them boys so much.
Johnny took sick; Gussie lost weight.
Them boys' funeral was sure sad that day.
In Mississippi, this family lives on.
Johnny and Gussie are getting by;
they hurt so bad them boys did die.
Folks said Leroy was dumb and David, too.
What do you know? Is it really so?
The Lampkin boys were all good boys.
They worked hard farming and cutting pulpwood, too.
David picked the guitar and sang so well.
Music in the family, it is.
Them boys' funeral was sure sad that day.

The Promise

By Nila K. Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Once I was in a sea of sorrow.
For me, I thought there would be no tomorrow

Drowning, I was caught in a huge wave.
Your kindness was there to save.

No longer did I think of suicide.
With the life raft you gave me, on life's waters
I glide.

I am now free,
To hope, to dream, just to be.

A future I look forward to since I have been freed,
And you are the ones that planted the seed.

I now have the promise of what life may hold
And look forward to, even when the voices
in my head scold.

The delusion was in control,
But the freedom I feel now goes down to my soul.

I have all this and more because you cared
How a fellow human being you didn't even know
fared.

I have reached life's watery bank,
And I have all of you to thank.

But saying thank you does not address
How to express—

Putting me back on the right track,
The gift of giving me my life back.

I owe a debt I can never repay,
Not now or any other day.

Because of you, I am on the mend.
I can only try and repay you by being
your friend.

Being Present

By Daniel Paicopulos

—San Diego, CA

I can only really
please one person
per day.
Today, I thankfully
choose me.
Expressing gratitude
as soon as I wake up
brings me happiness.
Today, I plan
to pay close attention
to all of the
little things.
Today, I plan
to observe
without reaction.
I'm better that way.
Today, I plan
to be quiet.
No talking
will be necessary.
Today, I plan
to listen,
Really listen.
So, feel
free to speak.
Sometimes I still get angry,
but then I tell myself,
nope, not today.
Call me an idiot; I don't mind,
would even welcome that.
I like an empty, beginner's mind.



My Trip to Catalina

By Jonathan Craig
—Hillsboro, OR

It was the spring of 1987 when I left Arizona and headed for sunny California to see the Pacific Ocean for the first time in my 16 years of life. My folks, brother and I headed west at 4:30 p.m. from our home in Tucson in our Chevy van. My brother and I fell asleep after daylight faded and awoke in San Diego early the next day around 4:45 a.m. as the sun started rising from the east.

My brother and I were amazed at the expanse of the Pacific Ocean unfolding before our eyes as we approached La Jolla beach. The many people walking hand and hand along the shore. Surfers on their boards, riding the large waves. The hundreds of seagulls. And of course, the main attraction, those beautiful girls in their bikini's with bronze tanned skin.

Leaving La Jolla, we headed north to Long Beach, where we spent the night to get rested up for our boat ride to Catalina Island. We headed to the port of San Pedro the following morning to catch our tourist boat to Catalina Island, which lies almost 25 miles off the California coast.

Arriving in San Pedro we parked our van in the secured area and purchased our roundtrip tickets. We boarded a 105-foot vessel and headed out of the harbor and into the vast Pacific.

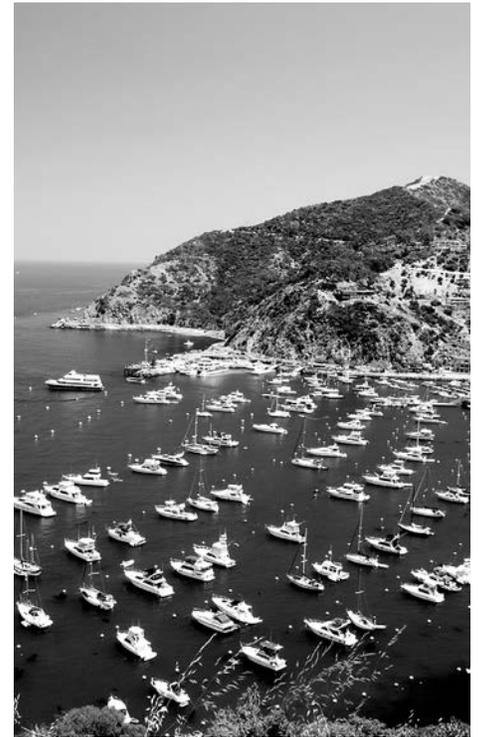
I secured a spot on the bow of the boat and found it hard to contain my excitement on this first-time adventure. The warm, balmy breeze, the salty spray on my face, the dolphins racing at the bow, the spouting whales in the distance, were all new and became indelible in my mind.

We approached Avalon harbor after a one-hour boat ride. As we entered the harbor, I was amazed at the quaint shops, marina, the huge casino and the hustle and bustle of life unfolding before my eyes. My brother and I explored the shops, beach and oddities on our own, while our parents seemed to prefer a chance for a bit of alone time. I can see why they call it "The Island of Romance."

Leaving Catalina Island behind, we were on our way back to San Pedro at 7 p.m. After arriving, we drove back to Long Beach for the night and some much-needed sleep from a long day of fun and adventure.

Having rested from the day before, we ate breakfast then headed to Anaheim, Calif., for a surprise. A 30-minute drive brought us to Disneyland, and what a thrill for all of us. The theme parks, rides, animated characters and food all provided a great day for all of us. The Disneyland Electric Light Parade was the star attraction to top off our Disneyland adventure. We decided to stay in Anaheim for the evening and head back to Arizona the following morning.

Our trip back home brought a sadness to us all, as we talked and laughed about our fun days on the Pacific coast. I haven't been afforded the opportunity to go back there in these past 44 years. But I will never forget that once-in-my-lifetime adventure.



Birds

By Charles Fredette
VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA

The birds are here today;
They fly east and west.
They're always on the go;
They hardly ever seem to rest.
Their bodies are so small,
But they love the trees,
The trees that are tall.
I'm glad they are here;
They rarely seem to stop.
They're always together
And love to build a nest
So their babies don't drop.

Mallards in the Park

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY



This park is a very pleasant place to be on a wonderful spring afternoon. I feel safe. The sun is bright, and it feels so good on my skin. I am calm inside; everything is perfect.

There are couples sitting on park benches, dogs in obedience training, people walking and sounds of children playing. It is a perfect opportunity for this intruder (me with and my camera) to capture the perfect shot.

I turn my lens to the wildlife, and I am in awe of what fills my frame. All of a sudden, I see these three beautiful mallard ducks running toward me. I'm sure it's not me they are interested in. No, they are blinded by pure, raw desire.

I see what is surely a female duck running, desperately wanting to escape. She has the three males in pursuit, but there is no use trying to escape. They are successful.

The first drake takes her, then the second. The last also takes what he wants from her and just leaves her wondering what to do next. She shakes herself and continues on with her afternoon as if nothing ever happened. While I just stand there, aghast, I realize I have just witnessed a gang bang.

I no longer feel safe. I feel a sudden change in the sun. Shadows fall and clouds appear; dusk is setting in. I want to get out of there. I want and need to be safe or at least feel safe again, fast. I need to hurry, racing against the next inescapable thoughts to cloud my judgment and come barreling in, uninvited.

Wreaths Across America

By Dan Yates
—Blue Springs, MO

The trees are naked; the wind is blowing.
Buses arrive and the crowd is growing.
Mittens and parkas say it's December.
What's in common is that we remember.

Countless stones in every direction.
In silence I stand, quiet reflection.
They fulfilled their vow to serve and protect.
Now it's my turn to pay my respects.

Veterans are laid here, regardless of race
as bagpipes ring out with "Amazing Grace."
Without warning, emotions are stirred.
As the bugler steps forward, "Taps" can be heard.

Directions are given; the crowd will disperse.
A widow takes a kerchief out of her purse.
She walks toward the section where her husband lies.
Despite her best efforts she breaks down and cries.

I'm given a wreath; as I walk, I'm nervous.
Place it at a headstone; say, "Thanks for your service."
In less than an hour all the wreaths were laid,
sixty minutes of my life that I wouldn't trade.

As I stand on a hill, I see the work that we've done.
Can't help but wish God would send down some sun.
Though the gesture is small, I shall not forget
the freedom I have, thanks to a vet.



Our Life-Changing Job

By James Janssen
—Lorraine, KS

The most memorable job a veteran ever has or had in life is serving in the military.

Whether called by Uncle Sam or called from within, we go to fulfill that call. Motives, reasons, beliefs and desires may all be varied depending on the walk of life of each veteran prior to enlisting, but the result is always the same as the right hand is raised to recite the U.S. armed forces oath of enlistment.

New recruits are introduced to military training where discipline, physical toning and a mental state of awareness are instilled in preparation for the basic aspects of warfare. We all endured and learned a way of life no other job in the world would match.

It is for this reason veterans look back with an entirely different perspective, with a warrior sense of being. After serving, some will have had many jobs and some perhaps but one. I can only speak for myself but “the job” in the military (although I really hesitate to term it as a job) had the strongest impact on my life. Life changing it was. The effect on my spiritual, physical and emotional being was profound. Stressors? Yes! But isn’t that part of becoming stronger?

The outlook I had on my fellow man before and after the service was like night and day. Relationships became meaningful, and the enriched camaraderie became pronounced. I reckon the reliance we had on one another was real and truly meaningful. I’m sure I’m not just speaking for myself. I feel the close camaraderie with other veterans. We aren’t just friends but friends for life with a sustained reliance on and respect for one another in the good times and bad times.

Most of us cherish our memories. Yes, there are the moments we struggle with on a personal basis, but then we really aren’t alone. That reliance on each other carries over to support one another. An oath was taken to defend against all enemies foreign and domestic. That oath NEVER DIES as long as we can breathe. No, we don’t take up arms anymore, but we do support law enforcement, stand to honor our flag at events and encourage one another. And that, my fellow Americans, is a job that never changes. My best wishes to each one of you.



Daddy’s Sax

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

Some fathers favored golf clubs,
Some hunted, some caught fish.
My father had a saxophone,
And this was his dish.
He played it in the cellar,
Not loud, but soft and sweet.
Choice standards were his repertoire
No father could beat.
He played recitals solo,
And his music went up above.
Passersby heard free of charge;
No man knew greater love.
Sometimes he hit a wrong note;
It never changed his pace.
I tried to learn the sax,
But never made first base.
For hours on end he practiced,
And never budged or tired.
He was the best musician!
And I am still inspired.
But everything was “first chair,”
Not saxophone alone.
And so he built our spirit,
And never picked a bone.
My father is a good man;
No finer will I know.
His music still is playing
Back home, so sweet and low.

Remembrance

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Observance
Perseverance
We are gathered here today to
remember
Our comrades fallen.
Duty, Honor, Country
Two centuries, two score and
seven years ago
Our nation observes.
From the halls of Montezuma
We remember
To the shores of Tripoli
We remember
We will fight our nation's battles
We persevere
Molon labe
Come and take them.
We shall overcome
We shall prevail.

Anchors away
De oppresso liber
Liberate the oppressed.
We remember
We observe
We overcome
Aim high
Fly, fight, win
Aut vincere aut mori
Conquer or die.
The red poppy
We remember
In Flanders Field
We observe
The white clover
We remember
The corn poppy
Never to forget.

Armistice Day
We observe
The daisy

We remember
To the Army
Hanc defendemus
This we'll defend.
Hooah.
We remember
To the Marines
The few, the proud
Semper Fidelis
Always faithful.
Oorah
We remember
To the Navy
Semper Fortis
Always courageous.
Non sibi sed patriae
Not for self, but for country.
Forged by the sea
Hooyah

We remember
To the Air Force
Aim high, fly, fight, win.
To the Coast Guard
Semper Paratus
Always ready.
Born ready
Vigilantia aeterna
Eternal vigilance.
We remember
To the Merchant Marines
Acta non verba
Deeds, not words.
We remember
To the Space Force
Semper Supra
Always above.
Until Valhalla
Let us this day remember
Let us this day never forget.

Gone Wrong

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

And when they put the Bible down
And dressed in another gown,
The computer was its name,
And that was the name of the game.
To distort the legitimate law,
Mobs would legalize their
Own rules which were out of concept, context, reality
And out of due process.
Mobs and the media would
Use causes and statements
To politicize and be weaponized
To promote their own pet
Programs.
Under the honor of American jurisprudence,
Rights, hearings, and defense
Of the individual would be
Forsaken.
Tort-ing, media and mob pressure
Would rule the day and we'd
Advance into a world of darkness
By self-justification and appointment.
We'd play God and not be God.
And the only way back
Is to return to God and
Once again let God be God.
Let us forever alleviate the
Curse of anarchy.



Knock, Knocking Upon My Door (With Echoes of Edgar Allan Poe)

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

Dear of the nightly air and the daunted,
haunted dew appeared,
while the dreamless awoke me
by tapping, rapping at my door.
Through the rushing waves
that sounded by the shore,
through the midnight clear
that left a hollow sound,
through my fears,
the knock, knocking kept knocking
upon my door.
It seems like a dream
but reality looms now and forevermore.
Could my heart be beating and fluttering
as weary as the shore?
That knocking rang upon my door
beneath the gleaming, unseeing
that I deplore,
thrashing, crashing
as the wind went clashing,
through the shutters
above the windowed door.
Then my eyes quickened their stare,
bound within my stillness there.
My years ran with fears
as the echo went knock, knocking forevermore,
knock, knocking upon my door.



Landing In-Country

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

I joined the Army, 1971-73,
went to Basic Training at Fort Ord, Cal.,
and AIT also at Fort Ord, CA.
I landed in-country in South Vietnam, 1971-72.
All you could smell
was burning diesel fuel.
Landing in-country,
I saw the hardened look
on the faces of the soldiers
leaving their tour of duty.

War

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

War is a last resort.
We always try to avoid war.
War is never good for either side.
War will cause all involved to be
Lost in spirit, lost of faith, lost to self.
God, keep us away from war.

My Face Hurts

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

When I gaze at the open sky,
My love for her multiplies.
She said she would walk across fire for me.
Every day my heart would freeze;
She was out of my league.

Promise me you would never leave.

*Oh no! You're not going to trick me with that line.
Girl, before I met you I was FINE.*

I won't get fooled again.
Sorry, sorry for this Kool-Aid of emotions.
Check out of my life any time of night.

Do as I say, not as I do. We're through!

Visual Arts Initiative



Post Card

By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX

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*



Eternity

By Russell Nelson
— Harrison, OH



Untitled

By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



In the Garden
By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



Blue

By Katherine Iwatiw
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO



Three Messengers
By William Shepherd
—El Dorado, KS



The Turret Guard
By Jack Tompkins
— Marshalltown, IA

Autumn Light
By Michelle Pond
— Overland Park, KS





Hope

By Scott Kennedy
—Kidder, MO



Gathering Around

By Gary Hughes
— Mission, KS



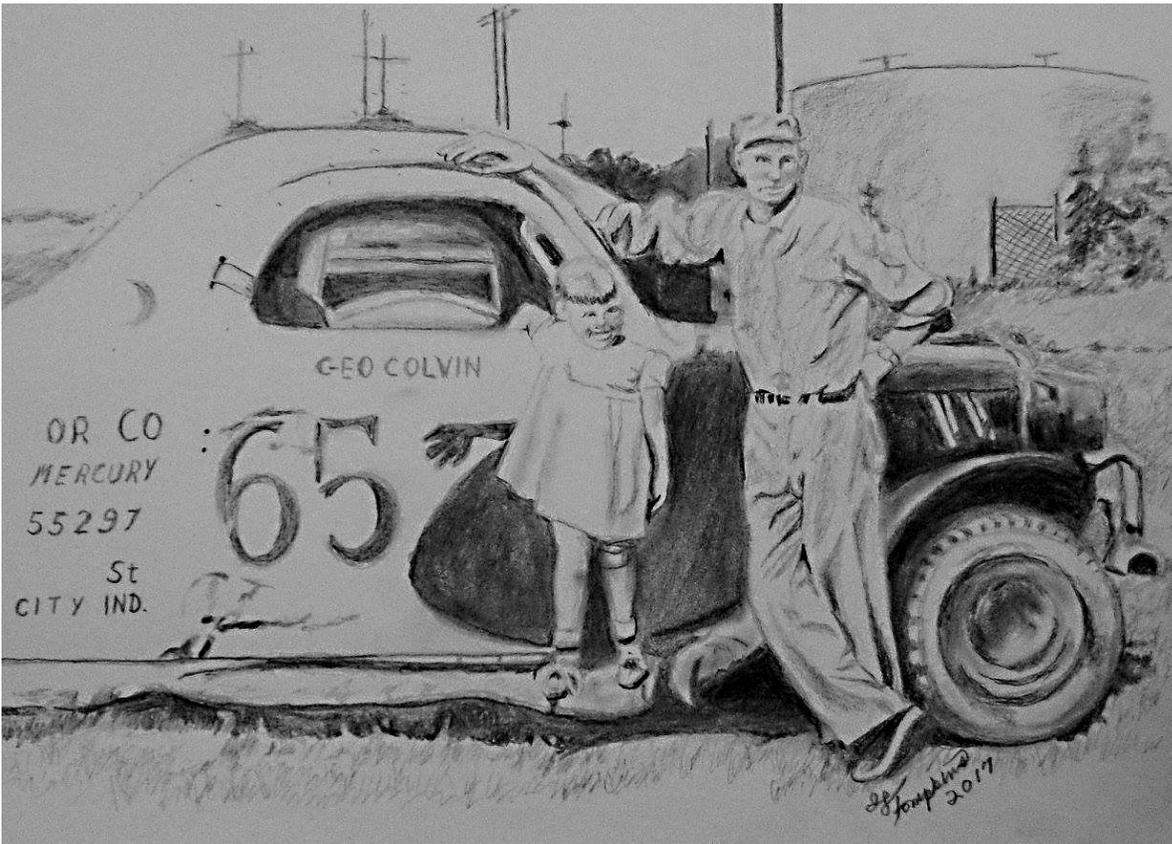
Convoy

By Katherine Iwatiw
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO



Empty

By Michelle Pond
— Overland Park, KS



Mercury 65

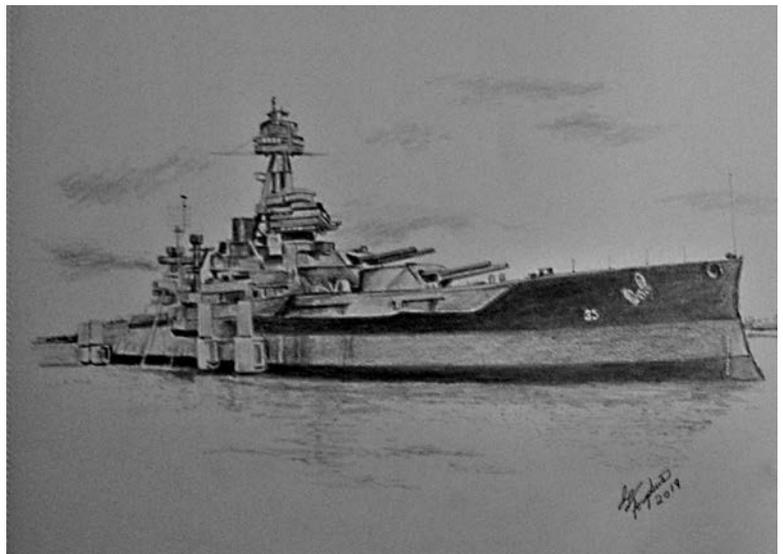
By Jack Tompkins

— Marshalltown, IA

What a Beauty

By Jack Tompkins

— Marshalltown, IA



Fallen Not Crying

By Kenny Trujillo

— Las Vegas, NV



Under the Radar

By Ty Andrews

—Lincoln, NE

Passenger
By Ty Andrews
—Lincoln, NE



The Mickey Mouse Watch

By Arthur Wiknik, Jr.
—Higganum, CT

In the spring of 1968, I was 19 years old and living the ultimate teenage life. I had a good job, a new car and a steady girlfriend whom I was crazy about. However, that was all put on hold when I received my draft notice ordering me to report for induction into the US Army.

Upon completion of infantry training, I was sent to Vietnam for one year, where I served as a combat squad leader. Life in the steamy jungle was miserable. In addition to being far from home, soldiers also contended with the enemy, snakes, voracious insects and oppressive weather conditions.

However, the one thing that keeps soldiers going is support from home, primarily in the form of mail. During the first half of my tour, I received letters from my girlfriend nearly every day. Her devotion sustained me and kept me focused. As a result, hardly a moment went by when I did not dream of the day when I would return home so we could get married.

As I entered the second half of my tour, her letter writing dwindled to the point where several weeks would pass without a word. When an occasional letter did arrive, it read like a high school homework assignment. The passion was gone, and some of the topics were of places and events that I had never heard of. It was obvious that my girlfriend had found someone else.

I was devastated at the realization that I no longer had someone waiting for me. My morale quickly fell to an all-time low. I had trouble concentrating and often

took unnecessary risks because I no longer cared if I would survive the war.

Then one night, a fellow soldier handed me his luminous Mickey Mouse pocket watch so I could keep track of my guard shift in the dark. I stared intently at the timepiece as Mickey smiled back at me. I began to think about when I was a kid and how much I loved sitting in front of the television after school to be entertained by the Mickey Mouse Club. I thought about sitting in my parents' home where I was warm, safe, well fed and carefree. I thought about the neighborhood kids and all the fun we had playing baseball, ice skating and camping in each other's backyards. I even missed my father yelling at me.

Suddenly, something magical happened. All my anxieties vanished. I looked again at Mickey's silly grin. It was a grin that seemed to tell me not to worry because everything was going to be okay. I smiled back with a nod, as if I was actually communicating with Mickey. I still had to complete a danger-filled tour, but that pocket watch made me care again and gave me the confidence to survive the war unharmed.

Shortly after returning home from Vietnam, I purchased a Mickey Mouse wristwatch, and I have worn one ever since. I wanted to have a constant reminder that no matter how many obstacles life sends my way, no matter how bleak the situation, things could be worse, so I am thankful to be alive.

A luminous Mickey Mouse pocket watch on a dark lonely night did that for me.



Optimism

By Neil C. Morrison, Jr.
VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

A positive attitude
A positive outlook
A positive frame of mind
Enriches the mind, body and soul,
Converts negativity into positivity.
If you look for clear skies after a storm
You will always find
The rainbow and the sun shining through
Even the harshest and most severe storms.
Being optimistic enables you
To overcome any negative situation,
Turning sour grapes into sweet wine.
For every negative situation,
There are many lessons to learn,
Improving the quality of life.
You'll learn
How to improve, correct and avoid
Any form of negativity
When it knocks on your door,
Be it at home or at work.
You'll have the power;
You now have the skill.
Optimism is a key to success
Optimism is the key to happiness
Optimism is the key to all things
Optimism removes all boundaries.
Life has unlimited potential
Being optimistic.

The Light Bulb Man

By Sean Parrish
—Wilmington, NC

I am a U.S. Marine Corps veteran. I served nine years of active duty service from 2008 to 2017. I wrote something akin to what I believe is a decent novel after my third overseas deployment.

I first deployed as a foreign security force advisor way up in the mountains of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. There, our band of advisors made a valiant attempt to teach the allied Afghan forces war fighting skills ranging from hand-to-hand combat to the defeat of improvised explosive devices and more. Due to cultural and language barriers, these lessons didn't always "take." Moreover, we conducted numerous battlefield missions together, such as partnered foot patrols, long-range vehicle convoys and combat operations. Those didn't always go well, either.

But if the Afghans were not showing up late to our training classes high on hashish and opium, they were out digging up IEDs and bringing them back to our cramped living quarters, which was not only NOT what we taught them but also just plain bad. They acted much like a cat that, having just killed a mouse, prances gleefully back home to its owner holding its prized kill in its mouth. You really couldn't be mad at them. But you could run the other direction (highly recommended). Those IEDs often exploded in their faces due to cleverly installed anti-tampering devices which those crafty Taliban hid inside. I know because I often helped to pick up body parts afterward. Those poor Afghans,



while often uneducated and ignorant, simply seemed to make a concerted effort to die in truly needless ways. I, on the other hand, typically endeavored to stay alive by avoiding those poor souls.

I survived that harrowing trip, only to return a few months later for another fun-filled "deathcapade" in my second helping of Helmand. Round Two in these hinterlands was a continuation of that first harrowing experience, but different in the way that I felt more like a highly confused teenager than a highly trained combat expert. The root of the confusion lay in what was known as U.S. foreign policy at the time. I've got other names for this policy in one of my other writings.

On this next little-big adventure, I served as an intelligence chief. I led our group of Marines in tactical site exploitation, detainee handling, battlefield evidence collection and biometrics, among others. Here, the rules of engagement would change on an almost hourly basis. And as you may imagine, it was highly confusing to us men and women who were the ones holding the guns on the battlefield.

We might as well have fought the Taliban dressed like clowns, slowly advancing in a Gettysburg-like fashion to the thump of our monkey-like leaders behind us clashing cymbals as we juggled exploding bowling pins. But the most frightening part was that occasional pause in the middle of those tactical advances. This occurred when some officer would change the rules, or at least tell us to change the rules of engagement. Yes, this did get some of our people killed. As for being an

effective way to kill the enemy, let's just say I do think those pauses scared them more than it put us in danger—usually.

Allow me to explain. When we would shoot at them nonstop, it was very obvious we were trying to kill them as fast as possible. But look at it from their perspective: if we shot at them, then paused for a while, then started shooting again, then paused, then shot, then started, then stopped, and all of a sudden just disappeared. It was like some ghost who snuck into your house and didn't know whether it was going to kill you like a malignant spirit or just play some cruel game and then run away.

That is really scary. And possibly worse than death. The Taliban must have thought we Marines didn't want to actually kill them, but instead just constantly torture them with the thought of death. All in all, it was certainly not a tactic I believe we chose (it was the higher ups, I guess), but those of us who were actually on the ground executing these orders would have conversations with each other about whether that was a real, purposeful tactic or not.



We still don't really know. And it hurts to think about it.

But after surviving these misadventures, I found myself questioning my own sanity again and again. Yes, I was a Marine who followed orders with instant, loyal obedience, taking the fight to the enemy with ferocious violence. But there was just all this other stuff mixed in that was harder to explain.

After the fog of war had lifted, I could feel these aftershocks slowly separating in my mind like oil and water, with describable ones becoming ink on paper. The scariest things I saw and felt would be internalized, but those odd and almost magical ironies I witnessed that made me chuckle uncontrollably were destined for externalization via writing.

Originally, I sought for my writing to be a personal form of journalistic therapy, one that would keep me away from things that combat veterans often do to cope with extreme levels of nonstop trauma, like excessive drinking, heavy drug use, driving super-fast, fighting, hitting things in general, occasionally lighting something on fire and more creative ones which probably wouldn't be appropriate to describe here. Like nonstop masturbation while you're crying. See what I mean?

So, I often locked myself in my own padded room and began my own self-imposed writing therapy. More than just my own type of therapy, though; it became a novel undertaking which sparked the actual undertaking of a real novel. Here in my "safe-ish" space,

I could express the inexpressible, free from the immediate and often terse judgment of others, and relay these thoughts to readers in a poignant and unassuming way. I even created my own special genre—"True Fiction."

The writing process blunted the bleeding of my wounded mind and distracted me from the horrible events of the past, allowing me to focus on the reality of the day at hand and finding the humor in between that past and this future.

This therapy helped me so much that I made it into a ritual, more than just an occasional thing I did.

Since I had already endured two incredibly harsh back-to-back combat deployments in austere hellholes, I opted to make a career shift within the Corps by veering onto a vocational trajectory, the "intelligence" discipline.

I trained as an intelligence agent, and after some ridiculously insane and difficult training that I failed multiple times but managed to eventually pass, it was off to Central America, where I faced a very different, unusual and ambiguous type of mission: using humans to collect information instead of killing them.

After returning from Central America, I requested 30 days of military leave and

began my own writing therapy in earnest. I went home to my lonely kitchen and put three things down—my pen, my paper, and my water glass. I forced myself to sit down at this very spot for 30 days straight and write a work which came to be titled "The Light Bulb Man."

While I always appreciate and enjoy a great military story, I chose to write this work in a way that allows just about any human the opportunity to see a unique side of the world and possibly understand the raw human condition contained therein. No politics, no societal issues, no censorship, just a firsthand account of a newly minted, highly unsupported and extremely under-budgeted government employee sent off on a wayward, poorly directed mission to an Alice in Wonderland kind of place.

After 30 days in that somewhat uncomfortable kitchen chair averaging around 2,500 words per day, I finally finished what I thought was the final chapter. Sitting back with an initial sense of satisfaction, I read the work in its entirety. Then I went to bed. I woke up the next morning and reread it, thought about it, and went back to bed that night. The next morning, I awoke and instead of reading it for a third time, I poured myself a glass of whiskey and stared intently, then said to myself "This is some crazy shit, and if anyone reads what I wrote, I will likely be forced into a mental institution."

But instead of burning it in my back yard, I put it in my filing cabinet next to all my other bad ideas. It remained hidden away for seven years until I remembered recently that I had even written such a thing. Or maybe I had just sobered up enough to remember things I did as a sober person. Or maybe it was because I was moving my belongings out of my now ex-girlfriend's house. Or whatever. In short, I can't remember what triggered finding this old manuscript just like I can't remember what led to the breaking up of that relationship.



Upon reading this novel for the third time, I had a really bad idea: let other people read it too.

I decided this one could be an interesting aside to what most people are used to reading and/or seeing in movies, which are

usually stories about super-spies, covert operatives, missing nuclear bombs and saving the world.

Instead, this was an honest attempt to share my observations, display my own human fragility and gleefully showcase the kind of dumb shit that happens when you mix real world intelligence assignments with crazy people, guns and my absolute favorite—U.S. foreign policy.

Everything in those jungles never went according to any kind of plan. But maybe that was the plan all along, because in the jungle I was no longer the clown marching to the beat of the monkeys. I was hunting the monkeys with the clowns I had created. And so, who was I? What were my actual orders? I didn't always know.

One day at lunch, my friend Chris told me that if anyone asked who I was, I could always say I was just the guy who went

down there to change the light bulbs. Boom! This book title was born.

No one was harmed too severely in this novel, but then again no one involved expected anyone on that mission to actually write a novel, much less publish it.

There were a lot of fighting mad people down there already, including the dangerous cartels, violent street gangs and even radicalized extremists. But worst of all were the ones translating U.S. foreign policy into action based on their own seriously unique and wildly entertaining but hardly moral or correct interpretations.

Some people in my field call it “business as usual” to just go along with what you're told to do. Me, on the other hand, I'd rather turn the light on and let you decide whether it is right, wrong or just totally “f_ _ _d” up. In any case, that's your decision and not mine.



Our Lonely Death

*By George Ansel Nolta
—Lancaster, CA*

Death stalks me like a sadistic cat prowling the night.
The timing is his and the suspense is mine.
I search through the days, trying to find a method to cope.
Solutions elude me.
I perceive the loneliness of the solitary passage.
No comfort comes from friendly companions.
A sole performance is required, no training in sight.
We live in a busy crowd, but we exit like a lonely prisoner.
I take this journey alone—totally unprepared.



Waves of Life

*By Michele Roxanne Johnson
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY*

Every day awakening to the realization
that I am in the beginning of a new dawn.
A place where the pain, anger and frustration
ride the waves out to sea.
A place where the wave comes crashing to shore,
washing away the negative flow of my past life.
In its place it leaves healing that ebbs and flows freely.



Retail Blues

By Lynn A. Norton
—Leawood, KS

We're going out of business!

Everything must go. Incredible selection while supplies last. Act now and receive a valuable gift. Ask for our colorful brochure. We will not be undersold. No coupons accepted for clearance items. Allow thirty days for delivery.

Today only. Don't miss out!

For a limited time, fifty percent off retail prices. Not a penny more. Volume discounts for qualified buyers. Don't settle for less. Try it before you buy it. No reasonable offer refused. Get a full refund if not completely satisfied.

Guaranteed to last a lifetime!

You will be amazed. It slices, dices, lengthens, strengthens, lifts and separates, melts inches off waist, hips and thighs, removes unwanted facial hair, finds your missing socks, comes in all colors. Easy assembly instructions.

Don't be fooled by cheap imitations.

New and improved, organic, non-toxic, safe around children and pets, natural ingredients, no artificial colors. It cleans, disinfects, sanitizes, moisturizes, kills viruses on contact, eliminates odors, makes glass seem to disappear.

It's the only product you will ever need.



Medication Blues

By Lynn A. Norton
—Leawood, KS

Doctor recommended!

Use by date on bottle. Void if seal is broken. May cause drowsiness, itching, flushing, sweating, denture breath, acid reflux, muscle cramps, swollen hemorrhoids, the heartbreak of psoriasis. Call your doctor for an erection that lasts more than six hours.

Feel better overnight!

See dramatic improvement after only one dose. Remove foil wrapper before inserting into rectum. Do not operate machinery, enter into debt, legal agreements, new relationships until you know how the medication affects you. Dispose of unused contents after expiration.

Get immediate help if symptoms persist!

Side effects have occurred, including deaths. Discontinue use if you experience swelling of lips and tongue, sore throat, difficulty breathing, headache, fatigue, blurred vision, fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, restless legs, jaundice, flatulence that only dogs can hear.

Call now for a free consultation!

Metamorphosis of the Mind

By Shon Pernice
—Moberly, MO

“Education has for its object the formation of character” — Herbert Spencer

The American prison system is filled with many dark voids. When you have failed in society, how do you rebuild your sense of self-worth?

A day in prison is so rigidly controlled, structured and dictated that prisoners lose the ability to make decisions for themselves. A prisoner does what he or she is told (if they know what is good for them), which is not conducive to the development of strong critical thinking skills. When a prisoner's existence is restricted by external forces, he or she may eventually fall victim to incarceration's degenerating influences.

Prison deprives an individual of freedom, but an education can help tear down the constraints of the mind and awaken the drive to work toward short-term and lifelong goals. The Correctional Education Program, through Ashland University, has provided me with a solid foundation as well as the resolve to avoid detrimental activities while incarcerated. It is a gateway to creating a sense of purpose and meaning. Moreover, it has transformed my views of the world around me. Higher education imparts the ability to analyze, reason, and think for yourself in any situation. As a powerful liberating tool, it can never be taken away. Knowledge can only be surrendered by your choice not to utilize those skills.

When you arrive in a correctional institution, time stops. There is limited contact with the outside world, and any meaningful relationships are distanced.



Criminal behavior becomes a means for survival, and the brain starts to lose its need for higher forms of thinking. By not being fully alive in the present, a prisoner stays more firmly imprisoned in the past.

The scarlet letter “F” for felon is going to be a permanent part of my identity. In addition, many other constraints in society, such as housing, employment and opportunity, will be adversely affected by this new label upon release. Without any positive influences that can bring knowledge and hope to the prisoner, a cycle of distorted thinking will contribute to a destructive lifestyle.

I had tried for several years to get into a college program while incarcerated. The correspondence courses were expensive, and navigating the prison bureaucracy on my own seemed more trouble than what it was worth. I can only have up to five books on my property list at a time, and the mailroom procedures seem to change yearly.

I am a disabled veteran with G.I. Bill eligibility. However, finding an accredited college that was VA approved was another encumbrance. I had almost given up hope until I saw the college leaflets that were

posted around the prison in the fall of 2019. Ashland University's Correctional Education Program gave me a renewed sense of encouragement and a path to reclaim my self-worth. My perspective about the future, and myself, began to change. I learned that I had something significant to work toward and a future that had potential value.

My values, norms and thinking were soon to be challenged during the spring semester of 2020. I had

my own unique view of how the world functioned, and I quickly learned that education is the enemy of bigotry, racism and stereotypes. My ethnocentric feelings towards other faiths were stereotypical and negative. The World Religion course provided me with a balanced understanding of the unique differences in the global community. My dislike for any religion or denomination other than my own was solely based on fear and ignorance. The lack of understanding of other cultures and their values has caused me to regret some of my past attitudes. I found myself occupied with retrospective thoughts as I started to accept my intellectual poverty.

I would never have thought about the theater or a Broadway show. That was for rich people. However, I fell in love with human action before my eyes. Through the Theater class, I was able to view “A Raisin in the Sun,” “Rent” and “Oklahoma.” My thoughts of the Tony Awards before this class were that it was for want-to-be actors. Now, I find myself clapping to a scene from the 2011 Tony Awards for the musical “Anything Goes” starring Sutton Foster. The more I studied, the more I appreciated



something I most likely would never been exposed to. Imagination and the arts are absolutely critical to the quality of our lives. I may not be able to afford a Broadway show, but an Off-Broadway or regional play is now on my bucket list.

I thought that jazz was just a type of music that Kenny G played or some shady nightclub lounge singer crooned. I then discovered, in my Music course, that jazz is a part of our American heritage. It originated right here in the United States. The different styles, tempos, instruments and regional origins made me wonder how I missed this treasure. The next thing I knew, I was purchasing songs by Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and the Glenn Miller Orchestra. I am now elated to be able to discuss the various types of saxophones and how they differ. My life before prison was too close-minded and sheltered to be able to appreciate a form of music that I was oblivious to. While I was surrounded by drugs, gangs and violence, jazz became a soothing island in the sea of misery that I face every day.

From my prison cell, I visited Machu Picchu in Peru. Through the poetry of Pablo Neruda in my Latin American Literature course, I was exposed to the domination of indigenous people by the conquistadors and discovered that they were not friendly explorers. The institution of slavery is a horrible chapter of our nation's past. And that was all that I knew about it. Former slave and writer Frederick Douglass offered

me first hand accounts in the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass." A literary piece that I previously would have never picked up showed me a race of people who were done a terrible injustice. It was a horrible event that must never be forgotten or repeated.

Moreover, Aristotelian Ethics has me reevaluating my own morals and virtues. Philosophy encouraged me to conduct an autopsy of my moral compass and reexamine the values that I hold. My craving for connection soon reemerged as motivation to become a contributing member of a larger social culture as I grow intellectually and emotionally.

The Prison Education Program has allowed me to break free from the prison routine that hinders growth. By not being fully alive in the present, I was kept more firmly imprisoned in my past beliefs. Furthermore, by embracing an educational opportunity over criminal activities inside of prison, I am choosing to overcome some of the common barriers that can obstruct reintegration.

I will graduate with my bachelor's degree in the spring of 2023. By being able to identify with a new social group as a college graduate, I have a renewed sense of hope as a motivating factor for me to succeed. Doors of my past have closed, but new ones will open. The scarlet letter that I now bear is a reminder of my situation and of how I turned my predicament into a human achievement.

Purple Heart

By John L. Swainston

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

To take a bullet,
not a test of one's manhood
but a test of valor.

Your country awards you
the Purple Heart.
You no longer serve.

Now a member of a unique
Club—Wounded Veteran.
Now you serve your community,
helping veterans and their families.

The "Club" provides a scholarship
program for members, spouses,
their children and grandchildren.
Helping "...ease the cost of college
or trade school education."

Sacrifice to Enlightenment.

Old School

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

I'm old school,
Nobody's fool.
Whaddya say—
I'm headin' out West.
I heard it was the best!
Coast to coast,
Sea to sea!
We call it
manifest destiny.
Love it or leave it.
You have the choices.
Write a poem
for *Veterans' Voices!*

That Look

By David R. Marchant

VA Medical Center—Salt Lake City, UT

There it is,
that look in your eyes
distant
empty of emotion
the one
masking the memories
of a battlefield
far, far away.

I recognize it,
because I have seen it
before
staring back
at me in the mirror
absent of feeling
devoid of any hope
lost and alone.

I've been there,
sat in a similar chair
desperate
for answers
fighting alone
always looking back.
Then help was offered;
my journey began.

You'll need courage
to make this same journey,
determination
eyes forward
never looking back
willingness to trust.
Let me help you;
you're not alone.

This Road I Am On

By David R. Marchant

VA Medical Center—Salt Lake City, UT

This road I'm on is hard,
but there's no option
for me to turn back.

The painful memories I have buried
have taken a toll
on those that I love,

but more so on myself.

I have to face my deepest fears,
tear open the scars
of my traumatic experiences,

Feel the emotions and the pain
that I buried inside
and tried to forget.

The journey will be difficult,
but I don't have to
take it by myself.

This road I'm on can only
go in one direction,
straight ahead.



The Perfect Communion

By Jim Barker

— Keaau, HI

It was a Sunday afternoon at the main Ban Me Thuot marketplace. As the major city in Dak Lak province, it was also the center of South Vietnam's largest minority population, and a major center for coffee cultivation.

Dak Lak was just south of and Kon Tum province, which had just weathered the most intense siege of the spring offensive of 1972. With the siege of Kon Tum lifting, and the North Vietnamese units being forced to retreat to their sanctuaries, I had been evacuated and safely returned to my security camp at Ban Me Thuot.

I was a fortunate survivor of the siege of two months of troop attacks, tank assaults and heavy rocket bombardment by the Communist forces. My intercept intelligence unit had performed remarkably under those perilous conditions, and my language skills had helped to keep the enemy thrusts at bay, which enabled our B-52 drops to strike targets with surgical accuracy.

On this sultry Sunday in the highlands, fortified with my camera and my M16, I embarked on a casual stroll into the downtown market. The marketplace was bustling with activity, enhanced with the melodious chatter of the highly tonal Vietnamese language. The vendors were nearly exclusively women. An aggressive street urchin brusquely demanded I give him cigarettes. This created a great opportunity for me, an avid runner, to give him a health lecture, all in his language.

I purchased some bananas from one of the ladies, and to everyone's surprise, I started conversing in Vietnamese. Soon, a congregation gathered, and we proceeded to talk about life concerns, their hopes and worries.



One lady said, "Our husbands are all in the military, and we have little contact with them. We stay here and work in the market most of the time, take care of our children and live a simple life."

Our dialogue evolved more to a communion of like souls. I was gaining a sharper realization that we were universally sharing the same hopes and dreams and apprehensions, with the quantum exception: for these villagers, life was far more tenuous.

Then a moment of transcendence occurred. I was no longer in the midst of those curious village folk amicably chatting on a sunny afternoon in South Vietnam's Central Highlands; I was visiting heart-to-heart with a neighbor across the fence in hometown Iowa. In those moments, the ceiling of ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences simply flew away. Our hearts and minds became one.

In our concluding interaction, a few of the ladies made a poignant apology.

One said, "We wish we could invite you to our homes for a meal, but there are community people who will be suspicious and censor us."

This was understandable given the context of social disorganization and compromised social values that occur in the context of war.

Three years beyond, when North Vietnamese forces were to attack and inflict severe damage and human casualties on the city with their heavy artillery, I often wondered about the fate of those friendly villagers.

However, as surely as the Earth rolls on its wings in glory and Divinity rules in mercy and justice, we shall all meet again.



When Your Body Turns Against You

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

When the body turns against itself,
hoping the innate immune system is enough,
homeostasis is a must.
Watch and see words used repeatedly,
and all these bumps, bruises, spots, oh my!
The butterfly organ has a goiter.
Watch and see; take a sample here and there.
The lungs have encapsulated
the fine grains inhaled from that wasteland.
The basal-gala does not regulate;
alphabet soup thrown around: ALS, MS and more.
The brain is a light with misfiring information
impairing that fine balance.
The legs have trouble staying in one place,
trembling and carrying on
as if they are having a conversation.
Plumbing removed years ago after much
probing, prodding, enough, “take it.” Wait and see.
The mind declines to shut down long enough
to rest and restore.
No wonder one is always exhausted.
Skin explodes; blood lies just below the surface.
How and why, who knows?
Breast tissue, dense; biopsies, wait and see.
A lot of the unknown and unexplained,
more research is required.
Additional testing: MRI, CT with or without contrast,
ultrasounds, bone density.
Abnormal results, specialist called in, consults ordered.
Throw medication out as option for more unknown side effects.

Good thing
the heart is full, the Soul at peace.
Life has been lived.



Somewhere a Woman Is Building an Ark

By Louise Diane Eisenbrandt
—Leawood, KS

Somewhere a woman is building an ark.
Of course she is! Why, you ask?
Because it's been raining for an entire week,
because the basement is filling up fast,
because the dachshund is having to dog paddle.

Somewhere a woman is building an ark.
But why not her husband?
Because he's busy watching football,
because he hasn't a clue where the toolbox is,
because the weather guy didn't predict the rain.

Somewhere a woman is building an ark.
Isn't that why we have intuition?
Because we anticipate future needs,
because it is quicker to just “do it yourself,”
because we must keep the family together.

Somewhere a woman is building an ark.
Are you surprised? You shouldn't be
because we're tired of procrastination,
because we know how to organize,
because the animals are pairing off.

Somewhere a woman is building an ark.
A “Mrs. Noah” with blueprints under her rain cape.

Afternoon

By Charles Fredette

VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA

The sun walked
Through the cluster of trees
As the birds eased by
In the wonderful blue sky.
And the helicopter
And the single engine
Sounded in the bright afternoon.
My cares drifted away
As the time passed by.
I don't know the "whys" all the while
But I really like the "ways."
They make me smile.

The Time to Always Remember

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

In the darkness of night shone a bright star above
To tell us that God sent His Son to bring love.
We applaud the birth of Jesus Christ, the One
Who teaches us that we will never be alone.

We're grateful to Jesus Christ; His praises we sing,
Thankful for His Holy Spirit and blessings He brings.
He sends us love, gives us hope we so need.
With our true faith in God, we will always succeed.

While celebrating Christmas, we care and we share.
Life's filled with gladness and promise everywhere.
He renews our faith and with Him we will stay.
Out of darkness He brings us every hour, every day.

His birth on the twenty-fifth day of December
Is a day of joy we will always remember.

A Special Thanksgiving Day

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

We've come to this special holiday
but to me every day is Thanksgiving Day.
God uplifts and enlightens even if it snows,
not just in November like the calendar shows.

Everyone at a holy setting is thankful in prayer;
People reach out to the needy everywhere.
At holy places, people sing Thanksgiving songs,
Though we could sing God's praises all year long.

Today I feel something deep within me,
Changing my soul, something I cannot see.
Today I promise to be obedient and kind,
For His gifts of the Spirit I always find.

I give God recognition for His love and care,
Not only for today but for every day before.
Throughout my life, He has touched my heart.
He holds me in His hands and will never, ever part.



Wounds of Words

By Lloyd Johnson

—Middletown Springs, VT

Words have always been able to cut deep and leave wounds that resist, or refuse, healing. Some of the deepest wounds, and maybe those most resistant to healing, may not be those inflicted by the words of others, but those we inflict upon ourselves.

We were about to be inserted by helicopter for a four-day reconnaissance patrol on the edge of the DMZ in Vietnam.

We were approaching our landing zone when enemy rounds suddenly pierced and exited the taut aluminum skin of the helicopter, not with the sound of a bullet hitting something solid (that sound would come moments later), but with a strange plinking sound, a sound that anyone who ever experienced it will likely never forget.

Jumping to our feet, we immediately joined the door gunner and returned fire through the already smashed out windows as the enemy tracer rounds rose toward us from the jungle. The CH-46 helicopter suddenly fell like a rock. I momentarily thought we were crashing, but the pilot quickly regained control and moved us away from the enemy fire. We headed back to our base camp at Dong Ha in a helicopter that was spewing smoke and vibrating badly from the damage it received.

After an interminable flight back, wondering if we were going to make it, we landed at Dong Ha, where a waiting fire truck quickly foamed down the chopper. Both helicopter gunners and two members of the seven-man reconnaissance team had been wounded in the encounter but, amazingly and fortunately, none

too seriously. A conversation with the pilot after we landed informed me that the sudden fall of the helicopter was an evasive maneuver to escape the enemy fire.

Later that day, safely back in our area, I felt quite a bit of apprehension when our team leader informed us that we were going to attempt to get back into the area in the morning. Maybe it wasn't apprehension as much as dread. That evening, as I was checking my gear for our morning insertion, our patrol leader came into our hootch and informed us that it was decided to send in another team because we'd have to go in with two replacements who weren't familiar with how our team operated in the bush. I felt a sense of relief knowing that we wouldn't have to attempt to get back into that area.

There were six platoons in the company, with two teams to a platoon, so the men all knew one another and were very close because most had trained together in the states before going to Vietnam. Others had joined the company in-country as replacements from other reconnaissance units. I knew all seven of the men who would be taking our place in the morning and considered them friends.

I don't remember what I was doing the next day when someone came up to me and informed me that the team that took our place had been shot down. The helicopter had inverted and crashed in a fireball, with the likelihood that there was no possibility of survivors. It was then that I would utter, to no one in particular, those

cold, unfeeling words that would haunt me to this day: "Better them than me."

There weren't any tears, no hand wringing like one sees in the movies, just cold detachment. But how could I say those words? Maybe it was the sense of relief that I had dodged another proverbial bullet. More likely, it was the fact that I had shut down emotionally to everything that I was experiencing in Vietnam. Seven of my friends had just died, and all I could say was "better them than me."

Then I went about my day and prepared myself for the team's next patrol. Little did I know at the time how much those four little words would haunt me for the rest of my life.

The area where the helicopter went down was so heavily defended by the enemy that the bodies couldn't be recovered, despite attempts by a Marine infantry unit that resulted in four being killed. Sometime in 2007, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command investigated the crash site and identified the remains of two of the recon team, but I haven't heard anything about the other five team members or the four-man helicopter crew.

With the help of a wonderful psychologist at my local VA outreach center, I've come to a better understanding of the event. It's terrible living with the guilt of words uttered, a guilt I silently carried for so many decades, without ever mentioning it to anyone, all the while never recognizing or understanding the toll the open wound I had inflicted on myself was having.

Voices in the Sky

By Paul J. Nyerick

VA Medical Center—West Haven, CT

Pipers march in unison,
Circling the granite in reverent serpentine,
Droning sadness throughout the grieving throng,
Hitting home the sacrifices this day honors.

From the northeast corner of a newly crescent moon,
Light cracks the heavens,
Releasing voices in the sky,
Sounds of the unheard.

No living thing can hear what is said.
Only gentle breezes can understand
The true meaning of horror, combat burns.
We must choose for ourselves what is truth or just illusion.

May they all rest in peace.



Answer to Our Youth

By Dennis Edward O'Brien

VA Medical Center—Wilkes-Barre, PA

You've got to keep going
as you keep your mind intact.
Realize you are growing;
this truth has its fact!

You've got to keep going
even when hurt along the way.
It matters what you're showing
as well as what you say!

You've got to keep going;
believe in your dream.
It's you that is knowing;
True love you can redeem!

You've got to keep going;
don't give up in defeat.
Life is always bestowing;
good and bad days we all greet!

You've got to keep going;
you know it helps to have a friend.
A true one is always growing,
one where there is no end!

You've got to keep going;
accept this as your truth.
It's you who can be showing
an answer to our youth!

Keep carrying on!
Yes, keep carrying on!

Solitude by the Sea

By William H. Anderes
—Cresskill, NJ

A seagull hovers motionlessly, wings outstretched
on the north breeze, searching for sustenance.
Its forlorn cry, echoing from sand to sky, is etched
with hunger that long ago commenced.

She walks the beach below gazing forlornly
into the infinity of her feelings,
like the seagull searching for sustenance, to quench
the painful loneliness of losing her dearest love.

The solitude of the seashore, the quiet sound of lapping waves,
administer the healing touch she longingly hopes for
and bring peace her agonized soul desperately craves—
touched by the healing hand of God by the shore.

Snowstorm

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

The flakes differ in configuration;
None are the same.
It is God's creation
And has many names.

It flows in the air with a minuscule sound
Like frosty liquid till it touches the ground.
Mother Nature can be warm
When it comes to a snowstorm.

Winter's beauty will unfold,
Clinging onto wherever it lands.
Let the cold be known to any man;
There's a good reason for this season.

The corner of Christmastime,
Omega and Alpha of the calendar.
Then the wait for spring warmth
From the aftermath of a snowstorm.

Grandpa's Path

By Robert John Valonis
—Stuart, FL

The man looked backward on his walk
While resting on his cane.
A little boy looked up at him,
But he did not know his name.

"Grandpa," said the little boy,
"Did you make this path?"
The old man said, "Yes, long ago.
I'll let you do the math."

"Where does it end?" said the boy
While smiling up at him.
The old man said, "This one's mine,
But it ends where yours begins."

He said, "I made it long ago when
Just a child like you.
Through all those years I wore it down
When I had not much to do.

"I leave this path to you now.
It's been quite good to me.
I've turned the grass to dirt and stone
While setting troubles free.

"So take my hand and walk with me
To just around the bend.
I'll show you where your path begins
And where my path shall end."



Courage

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

“Courage
is not the absence of fear,”
but rather bringing your fear into submission,
taming the lion within
while you pursue an ambition,
or complete a task.

It does not mean that one will
not go through some pain.

It does not mean one will
not go through some period of sorrow.

It does not mean one will
not find a thousand excuses
why he should “give in.”

It just means he clings to the one excuse
and holds it close to his heart
of why he shouldn’t.

Courage.

I Stood Up

*By Deborah Ann Cole
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

I stood up for this land as many have done before me,
to fight for my country without doubt or insecurities.

I remember raising my hand not knowing
when I will return back home,

only trusting and believing this is where I belong.

Being sworn in, I felt courageous, proud, confident
and just a little bit perplexed.

But I still accepted my mission to defend my country,
not knowing what was coming next.

At some point during my tour, I became anxious and numb.
I asked myself if this feeling was acceptable, even though
I was told, “Job Well Done.”

I remember my old buddy who was no longer by my side.

I felt very dismayed the day I was told my buddy died.

I reminisce on these memories over and over again

and they take me back to the fearless day I gave my country
my hand.

Dedicated to all the soldiers gone but not forgotten.



What Have You Really Given Up?

*By Boyd Alan Burke
VA Medical Center—Pueblo, CO*

Have you ever given some time to
A worthy cause or a total waste of
Consideration to a real need?

In fact, do you consider your
Time’s worth is at an all-time high?
The need in your life: was it
Given or feel as if it was taken
From you unwillingly, at a time
Of non-desire?

The thought of asking by someone
At the wrong time: is this a disservice?
The thought of your own: do you
Consider it a necessary requirement
In the present time span?

The thought at the time: are you
really self-indulged, at a need of
Your own self want?

It can be a very puzzling thought
For one to contemplate at the
Desired commitment, or need that
Is on the present surface.

In the long run, how much are
you willing to give forthright?
Where in ways are you willing
To stand?

I may not have given my share.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

A picture is worth a thousand words
Or at least that is what I heard,
As the shrapnel was picked from my skin,
From my face, neck, head and chin.
In times of battle you hear no birds;
A picture is worth a thousand words.
Didn't die that day but felt like a corpse,
This deployment could always be worse.
Saw my brother take one to the head,
Just another day of annihilation and bloodshed.
Disabled battlefield conditions by two-thirds,
A picture is worth a thousand words.
In war it doesn't matter the color of your skin;
Black white, red or yellow—a brother is a brother—like kin.
Metal shards pulled from your face,
From your brother—not a color, not a race.
Alliance of colors are like drawn swords;
A picture is worth a thousand words.

The Great Eagle

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

The majestic bird of prey,
riding the winds of the northern hemisphere,
is a beautiful vulture, some would say,
ruling the air of its atmosphere.
His desire is absolute without haste.
It's time for him to find a mate.
May he listen unto the like of a beagle,
So is the task of the great eagle.
Bold he is, strong his stare,
The symbol of fifty states.
Searching for a companion, he must bear.
Choosing her forever is his fate.
She'll dive to certain death;
He'll fly beneath her, carrying the weight.
He takes care of her till his dying breath.
His union can only be called "Regal."
Such is the goal of the great eagle!

My Psychologically Chaotic Phenomena

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Pardon me for interrupting how you think a life should be.
As I'm headed down this road in my head,
I pass along all the familiarity that's collected there.
It's a dark and gloomy path but one I know,
Made by acts of others who like me are broken.
I stroll through isolation, guilt, depression, anger and fear.
Into a deeper darker hole, I go.
I'm strangely comforted by the voices I hear.
It's a place of freedom I know most won't understand.
But I can be just me, not who you want or think I should be.
I tried to fit in but it's killing me.
The racing thoughts don't separate before my eyes.
Push! Push! Push and brainwash me to your side.
Then take away what I have come to love most.
I'm just a pawn,
Cut off and swallowed whole by your rules.
I've stood still in the tears I have cried.
To live or to die? The answer is who is asking and why.
I try not to make you ill; why do you want to make me well?
Have you not been listening? Have you not been watching?
For now, I beat myself more.
I've tried to please, fallen to my knees,
Finding an emotional release,
An inner peace, knowing the comfort of being.
My Psychologically Chaotic Phenomena.





No Fear

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

Our forefathers showed no fear
As death was immediate and always near.
June 6, 1944,
As American soldiers landed on the shore,
There was no time to shed tears.
Our forefathers showed no fear.
Holding their position with all their might,
Combat-hardened soldiers were ready to fight.
Some came home; most died,
Holding feelings always deep inside.
After combat, realizing life is precious and dear,
Our forefathers showed no fear.
Reload before you're shot;
Try not to look as soldiers are left to rot.
As your ears ring and blood makes you grow,
You pray to God you might live to grow old.
World War II vets are meant to be revered.
Our forefathers showed no fear.

Dictionary Definition of Revere: To have great respect for something or someone; to show devotion and honor to something or someone.

A Place Where Soldiers Go

By Paul David Gonzales
VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

There's a place where soldiers go when the battle is o'er,
A place of sunshine, fields of poppies and emerald clover.

A place where generals and privates first class
Can hoist their glass after a requiem high mass
When the battle is o'er.

There's a place where soldiers go when the battle is o'er,
A place where ships pull up anchor,
Planes fly to meet the sky,
A place where the Marines all yell, "Semper Fi,"
A place where "the caisson's go rolling along,"
A place where the angels stand at attention
When each name is mentioned,
A place where soldiers go when the battle is o'er.

There's a place where soldiers go when the battle is o'er,
A place where orders echo throughout the heavens,
A place where cadence is sung with rhythm and song.
That's the place where soldiers belong
When the battle is o'er.

There's a place where soldiers go when the battle is o'er.
At the dawn of each new day, the bugle blows reveille
And the angels sing in revelry.
"My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty,
Of Thee I Sing."
The flag is raised to the highest point;
All salute with stiffened arm, polished brass, uniforms pressed
When the order is given, "Eyes Right" and "Dress Right, Dress."

When the day ends and the sun surrenders its light
To the moon's brilliance,
The bugle blows the final note of "Retreat."
That's the place where soldiers go when the battle is o'er.

A Day at the Zoo

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Saturday morning is finally here, a day for just us two.
I roll over, Sue smiles at me, says, “Let’s go to the zoo.”
Deep inside I cringe; of all there is to do,
securely in my “bottom ten” is going to the zoo.
I took a vow for better or worse many years ago.
Today will put me to the test; “Alright,” I said, “let’s go.”
I slowly take a shower, then nurse a cup of tea.
She says, “Get a move on; if we’re there by nine, it’s free.”

We finally arrive; I pull in the lot, then turn off the car.
She asks me what I want to see; dare I say, “a bar?”
We enter the grounds, she opens the map, I begin to stare.
Oh, my goodness, there must be hundreds, children everywhere.
Some are shouting, some are crying, some don’t have a clue.
I think I’ll join the second group, stuck here at the zoo?

Sue grabbed my hand, gave a squeeze, then dragged me
down the trail.
First on her list were monkeys with and without tails.
Some were playing, some were eating, some had scoliosis.
I saw one try to kiss another despite his halitosis.
Next stop was the Reptile House, dark and damp inside.
Sue said that I looked scared; a statement I denied.
We saw giraffes and elephants, tigers and a bear.
All the while I’m faking happy, excited to be there.

Before we leave, we’ve one more stop; she wants
to see the lion.
We pass a lady with three kids, two of which were cryin’.
We reach the den; I see a worker, food piled on a board.
The lion takes a look at him and yawns; he must be bored.
He doesn’t have to hunt, just strut and show his mane.
He’s probably thinking, as am I, “These kids are just a pain.”
All these wild animals don’t seem so tough to me.
Could it be because they’re caged and not running free?

Finally, we get home and I walk into the house.
I turn on the light, then scream, scared by a tiny mouse.

Just for Today

By Michele Roxanne Johnson

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Just for today I am free.
I am the whispering wind and the twinkling star.
Just for today I am the rising moon
and the setting sun.
Just for today I am a butterfly freeing myself
from the restraints of the cocoon.
Just for today I am the baby bird breaking free
from the egg.
Just for today I am the rushing river flowing
ever so freely.
Just for today I am the ocean, vast and always moving.
Just for today I am free to be me in any way
my heart, mind and soul want to be.
Just for today I am free to just be!

Queen

By Orlando Harding

—Lynchburg, VA

Endure bright todays (present).
Engage bold tomorrows (future).
Enjoy beautiful yesterdays (past).

Envisage voluptuous beauty.
Enthroned a queen.
Ensconce her essence.
Engorge her love.

Encomium

Enigma

Enough!



America's Best

By James R. Janssen

—Lorraine, KS

To each and every veteran that served
To defend The United States and preserved
The freedoms all Americans enjoy and cherish
And our great Constitution that will never perish,
We thank you, honor you and will never forget you.

You took an oath of loyalty to defend and preserve
As you marched to the enemy with resolve to conserve
The right of every American to pursue life, liberty
and happiness.

You are a true warrior, your courage and valor
by purpose or happenstance.
We salute you for your integrity and sacrifices.

We exchange gifts at holidays and celebrations
for one another.

But the greatest gift will always be from each veteran brother,
Providing a warm blanket of freedom we all enjoy every day
For each American to pursue their dreams in every way.
You are a warrior and our hero; so this is your poem.

May we forever honor and praise our fallen vets as we reflect.
Rest in peace, my brother, as you lay in the green fields
of Elysium.

Your ultimate sacrifice will forever be honored in the annals
of our freedom,

A special salute held while an utterance of words
in prayer is given.

The ending of this poem is reserved for a very special group
of veterans,

A group foremost on our minds: our wounded warriors of valor.
Whatever the malady: loss of limb, cancer, PTSD
or other injuries,

We vow to restore your physical, mental and spiritual prowess
in the present. Now.

You are a great warrior that knows how to fight and now fight
for being restored.

And always know this: you are America's best!

Hangin' in There

By James R. Janssen

—Lorraine, KS

Sitting in this chair wondering what...
Wandering from thought to thought,
Fighting to escape being caught
From the anguishing moments I fought.
Over and over I roll, forgetting naught,
Reliving the revivals of what I never sought.
Trapped and alone in a downward spiral
To a lost world of isolation gone viral,
Fading into the shadows of darkness
With little hope the chance to regain
By chains and locks intended to detain.
Grasping this rope reducing to a thread,
I hang by a nail falling off. I dread
The approaching nightfall of no sleep
With no chance of counting sheep.
Flooding memories invade my head,
Triggering anger automatically fed,
And suffering the loss of peace I once had.
Fearing nightmares, I dare not slumber,
Knowing the revisit that throws me under.
And oftentimes, coping skills fail and encumber,
Causing a mediocrity of recovery as I remember,
So I call the veterans suicide hotline to recover.



Bare Feet

By Carl Kerwick

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

A child was born, so cute and cheerful.
So old-fashioned life must follow these examples.

The shoes fit just so tight.
When you get too big you must fit
into others or go barefoot.
You can get bruised, have a fungus take hold.
You learn to live without those shoes
and your feet become callused,
and you will always wonder
whether you were to wear shoes or go barefoot,
and what the other may have been like.
But you don't want to start anew
and suffer through the pain.

If like me, you don't want either but haven't learned
to walk on water or fly yet.
You are stuck in a glass tunnel
where on one side they wear shoes
and on the other side they are barefoot.
When will the tunnel open up
or when will I shatter the glass on one side?
What next?



WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

Taming the Tiger

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I wish I can say I've given up being angry;
unfortunately the nasty monster
just comes out of nowhere.
That is until I can regain the common sense
to calm down that little critter.
My theory is you can't have peace
if you're feeding that tiger,
so I try my best to coax
the positivity feelings out little by little,
having them show themselves
like a short shadow early in spring,
having the faith that one day
I take notice of the shadow.
She is strong, sturdy, moving forward
alongside me, not dragging me down.
After all, nothing including energy can occupy
the same space at the same time.
With peace there is love, a kind of happy,
a calmness within.
No room for the others.

Fort Ord 1965 C-2-3

By John L. Swainston

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Every training Company had one.

What to call them?

“Sad Sack” or “Goofus.”

“Dumb-ass” or “Goofball.”

Let us call him Private Goofball.

Your Right, Your Right

was always his Left.

Not once but not more than twice.

PVT Goofball would run to morning formation,
come to attention and stand there:

Boots in his left hand,

fatigues in his right hand.

Yup, there he stood in his skivvies and
green socks!

Every training Company had one.

Dreaming of This Painting

By Carl Kerwick

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Set in a classroom

Getting up off the couch

Streaming yellow light from right

Robes dark red, brown outlines

Faceless

Door to left, white light

Doorway, blue bright light

Dark corners, ceiling

Natural marble floor

Mortar walls with mahogany wood.

Open Wounds

By Lawrence W. Langman

—Portage, IN

My heart lies open like a worn-out book,
pages torn and aged, meanings mistook.

We as humans get our hearts torn to pieces;
as days and nights go by, a part of us deceases.

We all are such creatures with so many feelings,
in everyday acquaintances, in all business dealings.

Our minds seem to ebb and flow like the oceans' tides,
yet we all have our limits to what helps keep us alive.

There are times the damage can feel like life ending,
no way of salvation, no way we can start mending.

It resonates, deep down past our hearts into our souls,
leaving us wide open and vulnerable, impossible to console.

We patch and we mend like we are stitching a wound;
it's painful without dumbing, like a singer out of tune.

Some of these never heal; they fester inside our minds,
fighting, struggling to climb out, but no exit we can find.

As we grow older, our hearts have been forever scarred,
some so much that it feels as if we've played the wrong card.

The damaged souls we are have weathered many storms
to the point of deep depression; it's become our daily norm,
making it hard to trust one another from years of uncertainty.
None of us wanted to be this way, but it's what our minds need.

The Gates of Nothingness

By Ben Hawkins

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

If life was born out of a random chance event,
not God's revolt against nothingness,
life may be without meaning,
unplanned, unmanageable and not understandable.

A life where God is only a convenience word,
a word to drag in when explaining gets difficult
and excuses, not answers, are more convenient.

A life without support at the gates of nothingness.

They Were Warriors First

By Matthew Davison

—Long Beach, CA

Some people ask me why I do what I do, attempting to transform the lives of veterans incarcerated. Some say they are only criminals. They broke the law and have to pay. Most people don't consider that maybe PTSD has something to do with choices made at a young age, or that self-medicated drug use, in order to forget the horrors of combat,



could lead to addiction and imprisonment. I worked with vets who took part in the invasion of Iwo Jima and fought in the Solomon Islands during World War II. I worked with decorated vets who were turned around after the war and made bad choices. What I tell these people is that the men I train for successful and productive releases back into their communities were veterans first, and they must be recognized for their service and their sacrifice. They didn't run when they were called to war, and we can't run from them when they extend their hand. What follows is the recollections of a Vietnam warrior named Tony. After 40 years, he's finally on his way home.

"From Fort Benning, Ga., we sailed across the ocean together, sharing the stories young men share on the way to a place they are not sure they will return from. The stories moved from plans to marry their high school sweetheart to business ventures to be undertaken upon their return, and the first things we would do when we got back. Eventually, the conversation would drift to the fact that we might have to actually take

a life or lose ours. These were solemn talks and were always followed by a period of time when it got very quiet. Everyone knew what everyone else was thinking about.

"We finally arrived at the First Air Cavalry Division, the first full division to sail the ocean to a war in a place called Vietnam. It was August 1965. We built an area called Camp Radcliff and complained about the heat, food, work and of course, when we were going to get into the fight with this enemy, the Communists. We drank and bragged about what we would do when the enemy showed himself. I was a rifleman of the Alpha Team, First Platoon. First Squad, Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion 7th Cavalry (Custer's outfit).

"On Nov. 16, we went to support the First Battalion 7th Cavalry at a place called LZ X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. As we arrived, my first view of the battle was a medic putting the guts of a man back into his body, and I got so scared my finger pulled the trigger of my M-16, and my first round of the war went safely into the

ground in front of me. We were placed in positions that were occupied by other troopers, and they returned to the rear area for rest and recuperation. The First Battalion had been surrounded by 2,000 NVA regulars and the battle had been bitter. The U.S. forces had lost 79 KIA and 125 wounded. The enemy had sustained an estimated 1,334 KIA.

"On the morning of the 17th, we walked to another place called LZ Albany and were

immediately overrun. In this battle, we would lose 151 KIA and 121 wounded, plus four MIA. I became the only private to survive in the First Platoon of Alpha Company. All my friends were dead, and I clearly recall thinking, "What happens to all those dreams and plans that these guys had?" And I remember thinking how come I was alive and they were dead. Had I done something wrong? Had I not done my job right? I had just turned 19, and since I joined the Army from a Catholic orphanage, I had not shared any plan or story because I had none to share. The swollen, maggot-infested bodies of my friends were all I had left then. And, at times, still today.

"When we got back to Camp Holloway in Pleiku, my mail from a Red Cross pen pal was given to me out of the "dead bag" and Costello said, "We thought you were dead with all the others." I was dead in a sense and continued to be for a long, long time. I went on to become a hero in the eyes of some, and today I believe my actions under fire that were termed heroic were only my attempt to try to never let happen



again at any other place what happened at Albany. The only reason I survived was because a fellow soldier had been the first man shot, and in taking him to the rear for evacuation, I had been spared. I should have been killed with the rest of my outfit. I received the Cross of Gallantry for that action from the South Vietnam government and nothing from my own government. I began to learn the agenda of this war had very little to do with what we were told it was about, and I began to see that leadership sought recognition for actions that other men did. At 19, I was not well versed socially or politically and couldn't believe what I thought I was seeing. When we returned to the base camp, all my buddies' stuff had been boxed and stacked in a squad tent, and the bunks they slept in were occupied by new guys, all ready to go to war. I remember thinking, "How many of these are not going to make it?"

"In January, we went on Operation Masher/White Wing, and these men I didn't even know began to die. Our losses from Jan. 28-31 were 121 KIA and 220 wounded. By the end of February, the total losses were 228 KIA and 834 wounded. We were credited with having killed 1,342 enemy

soldiers and capturing 633. By March 1966, I was a very different boy. I received a Bronze Star with Valor Device for bravery under fire. We went on to serve in Operation Jim Bowie, Operation Lincoln, Operation Mosby I, Operation Davy Crockett and Operation Nathan Hale. I was sent back to the United States against my wishes in July 1966. I was a trained killer.

"Total losses for the first tour of the First Cavalry Division are hard to realize some times. They were 579 KIA, 1,842 wounded, and four missing in action. The enemy lost 4,059 KIA and 794 prisoners of war captured.

"Today, I am 59 years of age and have spent about 30 years in and out of hospitals, jails, prisons, rehab centers, homeless shelters and halfway houses. I don't feel sorry for myself anymore, and I clearly see what was done to us in the name of defending America. As a misguided punishment for what I did and for surviving, I managed to sentence myself to a life where I am not counted, am not trusted, am not needed or wanted. I have punished myself far worse than any court could—to be dead and yet walk the earth with the constant memory of my fallen comrades, along with the lives that I destroyed.

I am, at this writing, serving 110 months in prison and have five years of real sobriety, being proactive in my own recovery. I fight the good fight, and I know that if I don't, no one will care and no one will cry for me. I could easily blame my life on the war and subsequent treatment I received from the Army upon my return home, but what good would that do? There are many very ill veterans who need help in coming home. Now that I am making the journey myself, I want to spend the rest of my days helping others come home.

"In prison, I have found the indifference and apathy that was in the Veterans Administration and military.

But today, I do what is good and try to be a person of integrity and compassion. I only regret not having come out of this emotional coma sooner. But the old saying "better late than never" couldn't be more true. I'm going to go to The Wall some day and say goodbye to my friends and apologize for these wasted years that I could have lived for them, if not myself.

"For almost 40 years, I have been a useless, wandering soldier with the truth of war on his heart. Today, I tell the truth to myself and others, and when I have to cry, I do it openly and unashamed. There is no more reason for shame, and the tears come from love. There can be no shame in that.

"I once swore to defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Today, I have returned to my country and its social/political circumstances. The difference today is that I understand who and what I am and what my responsibilities are.

"I hope all the men who survived are happy and well, and have put our past behind us. Peace."



Sergeant Mackey

By Dwight D. Jenkins
—Rensselaer, NY

John IV made his final pass well beyond
the settling of the late autumnal sun.
It was the last cutting of the year, the great and final cut,
rich with summer's sighing warm nutrition.

The fourth was only 24, much too young
for one in such an old and worn condition.
He sang a little sunset song for his scarred and seizing back,
jangled tight from hours in that fatal same position,
hours that fed the flame of coming night,
the aging soldier's inquisition:

"I think I may, I think I might
be home before the dying light,
and if I do I'll fly with you, my crying apparition."

Even so, old John went round and round and round,
but the only sound this silent night,
his great-grandfather's tractor,
as four circled one, two and three,
all buried deep beneath the maple tree
in the heart of Mackey's pasture.

Thunderstorms

By Lawrence W. Langman
—Portage, IN

As clouds churn and the storms begin to brew,
lightening pierces the skies, each one a new debut.
Like spider webs of neon blue, electric in the air,
reaching out to the unknown, showing its own flair.

Followed by a rumble that sounds like a raging train,
building up in its intensity, ruling up in its own domain.
Windows shake upon the earth like the ground is alive,
letting go of its ferocity, lunging forth as tenacity strives.

Like a symphony of percussion instruments, echoing afar,
followed by electricity flaring from the strings of a guitar.
The sky changes colors like a chameleon blends its shade,
moving rapidly across the heavens on its own crusade.

In a flash it happens; the raindrops fall down to the earth.
I'm sitting by the fireplace, hearing their powerful
torrential birth.

I can picture a conductor standing way up in the heavens,
waving a baton like a magic wand, leaving such impressions.

As fast as it arrived upon you, the air has become eerily still.
The rain has receded upward, bringing forth this morning chill.
The air smells pure like the planet has started a new beginning.
Nature has aided the gods, cleansing some of creation's sinning.

Mail Call



“I was so surprised and delighted,” wrote **Joan Carroll Allred**, Milwaukee, Ore., “Thanks for publishing my poem, ‘Asking’ on page 63 (Mail Call) of the Spring edition.



Lucine Kasbarian, of Teaneck, N. J., daughter of recently deceased author, Charlie Kasbarian, wrote, “It gave me great comfort to receive a copy of *Veterans’ Voices* magazine, full of so many meaningful contributions from men and women who have served our great country. The Spring 2022 issue also contained a work of art submitted by my late father. This magazine arrived in the mail two days after his passing and the title of the work was ‘Celebration of Life.’ What could be a more appropriate message from him from the heavens?” She enclosed a “modest donation to support your worthy efforts.” Lucine thanked the VA for its many programs which extended her father’s quality of life to his 95 years...productive to the very last.



“I am grateful for the opportunity to share my creativity with other veterans,” said **Carl Kerwick**, San Francisco, Calif. He enclosed a donation to support the project.



“Thank you for publishing my poem, ‘Hurry Up and Wait,’ in the Summer 2022 issue of *Veterans’ Voices*. I am honored and will not be cashing the generous check,” wrote **Carl “Papa” Palmer**, University Place, Wash. “Please use my donation to send me a *Veterans’ Voices* as I left my copy with a friend on hospice in an assisted living facility.”



Andrew Smith, Elmore, Ala. wrote to Michael Kuklenski, who purchased a *Veterans’ Voices* subscription for Andrew, who is incarcerated and could not afford to subscribe. Andrew is grateful to have been published in the magazine. Recently Auburn University started a writing class and Andrew hopes to introduce *Veterans’ Voices* to other veterans through the class.



“Thank you for publishing my writing!” wrote **Rich Wangard**, Neenah, Wis. “For the last six years you have and it means the world to me! For well over six years now I have written and worked at trying to stop veteran suicide. Your publication acts as a huge deterrent to that end and gives veterans someplace to express their deepest thoughts and their stories and poems that lead to healing. A place where their art and drawings can be shown to those that understand. A publication that educates any person that was not in the military to help them understand what a veteran is and goes through. By publishing my story in the Spring issue, I was able to raise some funds for *Veterans’ Voices* on a more successful scale than ever before... I am delighted to send this large check to support *Veterans’ Voices*. If this publication saved just one veteran, please tell me how much is that worth. To me, who understands trauma and the effects of war, just one saved veteran is priceless. Thank you for all you do!”



The Montana VA Health Care System and the Topeka Eastern Kansas HCS have expressed their thanks for the donation of copies of *Veterans’ Voices* for their patients and staff.

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

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

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



FOUNDERS

Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual)\$50

Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:

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

Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:

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

STORIES — *Fact or Fiction*

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

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

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

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

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

POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. Of Florida Award\$30

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

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

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

SPECIAL CATEGORIES

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

Medical Center administrator nominates; publisher approves\$50

Thank You



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

– VVWP Board of Directors

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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.

The editors prefer that writers and artists submit their work online. 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 years served. Continue down the page and select **Open Section** under *Your Details* and fill out your contact information. Your address is required. Now click **Register** and you will be directed to a login page. Log in by entering your username and password that you just chose.

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

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

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

Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

SUBMIT ONLINE:

www.veteransvoices.org

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: _____

Heal Through Visual Art

Watch for your artwork in a future issue!

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

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

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

Instructions for Artwork Submissions

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

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



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