

VETERANS' VOICES®

Do the Things That Help You

Veterans' Voices is Your Chance

By Erika Cashin

How I Learned I Was a Veteran

by Donna Southwood-Smith

A Different View of War

by Helen Anderson Glass

The Scent of War

by Louise Diane Eisenbrandt

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Do the Things That Help You

By Erika Cashin

There's a popular Nike phrase that talks about doing one thing. "Just Do It," the ad says. In fact, in the process improvement world, it's become an acronym for the easy projects coming out of a planning session: JDI. In some ways, this misses the mark. Life, military service, and being a woman in the Armed Forces really call us to do a multitude of things, not just one. Often, we're doing multiple tasks simultaneously. And of course, we're doing them well. For servicewomen, and women veterans, this is part of the story we need to tell.

To set the stage and describe what it means to be a woman in the military, I'm reminded of a quote from a book called *Undaunted*. The author, Tanya Biank, describes the military as attracting "a unique combination of traditional men and unconventional women." After spending over 24 years of service, I find this description really tells the story of so many of us. And well beyond being unconventional, I also believe the women who choose to serve are adventurous and open to challenge. Sometimes this is not always in balance.

We don't just do it. We do all the things, in plural. We Do the Things. Sometimes, this means we succeed and excel in our careers. Other times, it might mean we miss out on opportunities, or have to prioritize others rather than ourselves.

During my service, Doing the Things often showed up as being the go-to person that

made our unit a community...a family. I ordered the flowers when unit members were in the hospital. I had a stash of birthday, sympathy, and farewell cards in my drawer so I could circulate them at a moment's notice. And I saw this in other service women around me, spending chunks of their days planning potlucks or morale events. Sometimes we did this to the exclusion of other more prominent duties that had greater visibility and impact on the mission.

For me, Doing the Things was never more evident than my transition from active duty.

I was a mother of two small children, so my focus wasn't on me. I was focused on pediatricians, shot records, school districts and packing boxes. My needs came last. During my transition, I lost the opportunity to really understand the process for enrolling in the VA Health Care System, or even comprehending what I was missing.

Looking back, this personal gap of mine was the driving factor for putting my full force behind the new Servicewomen's Transition Assistance Program. The program addresses a serious issue of low enrollment for women veterans in the Veterans Health System, where women were only enrolled at a rate of one in three to receive benefits they earned through service to their country. Long term, we hope this connection to the greater community will ensure women feel less isolated after service. We want to equip our community to succeed and pay it forward to all of those around us.

Ensuring a successful transition allows veterans to better focus on Doing the Things. We are seeing the impact of this in all areas. Depending on the service branch, women currently serve at a rate of 14-18 percent of the force. When we volunteer, or serve our communities, we over index at a rate normally double our representation on active duty. Even after service, in our communities, we continue to Do the Things, and in full force.

This energy, this propensity to do all manner of things, must continue to be developed and nourished especially for women veterans who are currently the fastest growing population of veterans.

There are so many new and innovative opportunities to build on our foundation of being unconventional, of wanting to Do the Things. Veterans' Voices is one of these things.

Veterans' Voices encourages us to Do one Thing, to tell our story in writing and celebrate the unique nature of the women who elect to serve our nation. Just Do It!

I found through writing this editorial, participating in the Servicewomen's Transition Assistance Program and enrolling in the Veterans Health System, that I was required to do things that I'm not overly familiar with. Those experiences can be daunting and uncomfortable. Yet, they are also unconventional in a way that urges me on, to try something different, to keep Doing the Things—things that benefit my well-being, as well as that of others.



Erika Cashin served 23 years in the US Air Force and is currently a participating Air Force Reservist. In her current role as a Reservist, she is the Sexual Assault Prevention Officer for the 934th Airlift Wing. She is also a contributing author for the book Invisible Veterans: What Happens When Military Women Become Civilians Again. Erika lives in Apple Valley, Minn., with her husband and two teenage children.

Editor's Note: See Donna Southwood-Smith's story in this issue of Veterans' Voices. "How I Learned I Was a Veteran" details her experience with the Servicewomen's Transition Assistance Program..

Veterans' Voices®

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

History

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

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Contact Us

Veterans Voices Writing Project, Inc.
406 West 34th Street, Suite 103
Kansas City, MO 64111-3043
Phone & Fax: (816) 701-6844

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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.

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The Orderly Room Guy

By Harold (Hal) Fulton
VA Medical Center— Wooster, Ohio

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What happened? Was it a woman and a troubled marriage, maybe some bad times on the lines? Who knows where we come

from, and what roads we've traveled. He was educated; he spoke well and was a reader. He introduced me to good authors and good literature. He was one of the best-read men I ever served with. He became a mentor to the one-stripe newbie in an open-bay barracks. “Get the hell out of this” he once said, “and make something of yourself.”

I hope I did and I'm still a reader.

Thanks, Bart.

Author's Note: Bart was a real guy in a real situation in a unit that was my home for a couple years. I suspect that a lot of vets, at one time or another, have met his “brothers.” I'm not sure how many outside of the military can say that. Sometimes when I'm reading junk I wonder if Bart might be looking over my shoulder and frowning.

Boy Scouts of America

By Kenny C Trujillo
VA Medical Center— Phoenix, AZ

When I was growing up, I joined the Boy Scouts of America Troop #277. We learned so very much and went many places with our Troop master. We held leadership roles and gained friendships. I was proud to wear the uniform and knew, even then, that some day I wanted to join the Army. When I got old enough, I did join to “protect and serve.” I served one tour in Vietnam.

Just Another Lucky Day

By Michael James Casey
VA Medical Center— Spokane, WA

When I arrived at my artillery unit on the Korean DMZ in June, 1974, my commanding officer said: “Lieutenant, when the balloon goes up, our mission is to race across the Imjin River bridge with our artillery, and if we make it across, fire all our ammo, spike our guns, blow up our trucks, assume the role of infantry, and try to get back to the river. If we make it there, and if the engineers with outboard motor rubber rafts are still alive, then they can help us back across and we will continue to fight as best we can.”

“Sir, that's a suicide mission.”

“Lieutenant, you have a fine grasp of the obvious.”

“Yes, sir.”

LARRY CHAMBERS SPIRIT AWARD

Overcoming Impossible Odds

By Thomas Joseph Cousino
—Vancouver, WA

I was scheduled for hip surgery on Aug. 31, 2016, at the Portland, Ore., Veterans Administration hospital.

I was very nervous because I had never had major surgery before. My surgery was scheduled for 10 a.m. but was delayed an hour and a half.

I was finally wheeled into the operating room. My anxiety was starting to get the best of me. One of the doctors began to explain what they were going to do. Then, all of a sudden, the room went dark. I sat there wondering what was going on.

The lights came back on, but the room was empty. After looking around, I got off the operating table and walked toward a door I didn't recognize. I pushed the door and I fell through. I was standing on grass. I was in Willamette National Cemetery in Portland, Ore.

Even though I was in a hospital gown, no one could see me. Something grabbed my attention. I could see a funeral taking place. I walked over to get a better look. An Army sergeant was presenting a flag to a woman. It was my wife. I began to scream but no one could hear me. The silence was deafening. The lights went out again. I bounced around to various locations.

I began to open my eyes. My wife was holding my hands wrapped with my dog tags. I couldn't feel my right side. After shedding a few tears between us, I was told that I had a massive pulmonary embolism and an ischemic stroke. I had been in a medically induced coma about seven days.

I was moved from the Portland VA hospital to Oregon Health Sciences University when I needed emergency surgery to remove the clots from my heart.

After two days, I was moved to another room to begin physical therapy. The nurse helped me out of bed to help me stand. Just before I was going to stand, my wife walked in and told me it was our wedding anniversary. She asked me to stand and give her a kiss. It took every ounce of strength to stand up, but I managed to do it.

I still had a long ways to go. I was transferred to a rehab facility in Vancouver, Wash. I was told rehab would take several months. I was determined to get out of there much faster. I spent a little less than three weeks there. Everyone kept telling me I was a miracle.

My brothers and sisters in Disabled American Veterans came to visit me and make sure I was in everyone's thoughts and prayers. On Sept. 28, I decided to surprise my DAV chapter by visiting. As I walked in the door, everyone turned around and saw me standing there. I got a standing ovation. I'm living proof that with determination and the help of those who care about you, you can overcome impossible odds.

ROBERT T. RUBIN AWARD

My Kansas City VA Medical Center Family

By Barry Lamarr Fitzhugh
VA Medical Center— Kansas City, MO

The debilitating effects of impeding one's advancement and development due to excessive alcohol consumption can take a devastating toll on one's self-esteem and self-worth. Time and time again after I had experienced the predictable outcome of excessive alcohol consumption, unadulterated chaos and avoidable mental anguish, somehow I always managed to cling to a sliver of hope.

After failed attempts to begin a new life in San Francisco, Miami, Dallas, Seattle, Chicago and Des Moines, I arrived at the Greyhound Bus station in Kansas City, Mo., September 2012, with four suitcases packed with a functional wardrobe, \$1,350 and the stark realization I was once again back at Square One. The thought crossed my mind to put my luggage in bus station lockers and go find a bar to have a drink to celebrate my arrival in the state of Missouri, a state where I knew absolutely no one.

I realized I had taken my first step on the road of recovery when I chose instead to summon a taxi and pay whatever the fare to transport me to the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center. I felt the presence of God when the taxi driver informed me the Salvation Army was literally right around the corner.

The front desk personnel at the Salvation Army stared at me getting my four suitcases from the backseat and trunk of the taxi, dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit. They asked me if I realized this was the Salvation Army and not a hotel. I did not feel ashamed nor embarrassed admitting to the intake personnel that excessive alcohol consumption had resulted in a cataclysmic cycle of bad decision making. I had made a conscious decision to make the latter part of my life different from the former. They welcomed me with open arms.

The six months I spent in the structured environment of the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center working in the warehouse, attending recovery classes, group therapy sessions

and daily outside AA meetings gave me a stable foundation from which I began to formulate a new set of life goals. I learned Kansas City by riding all the city buses from their points of origin to their end destination. One of those explore-and-discover journeys led me to Penn Valley Community College and Carl Alexander, director of the Veterans Upward Bound Program.

I enrolled in the Veterans VRAP Program even though I was homeless and could not stay at the Salvation Army once I started classes at Penn Valley. I stepped out on faith, believing in the promises of God. God showed up in the form of the HUD-VASH Program at the Kansas City VA Medical Center. That eliminated the obstacle of homelessness. My HUD-VASH case managers/motivational drill sergeants, Krystal Kemp and Jamika Hobbs, never let me rest on my laurels. They supported me with their exemplary professionalism, timely suggestions and words of encouragement, which gave me the confidence to keep seeking higher heights.

The funds ran out for the VRAP Program after I had completed my first year of community college. God showed up in the personage of Kathy Lee, VFW Veterans Support Specialist at the Kansas City, VA Medical Center. Now retired, Miss Kathy is the combat nurse who successfully testified before members of the U.S. Congress to obtain a national statue commemorating the contributions of combat nurses in wars fought by the U.S. military.

Miss Kathy and her husband Don were able to procure a 20 percent disability rating for me after 15 years of denials. The rating qualified me for the Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Program. During my matriculation at Metropolitan Community College, my 3.73 grade point average earned me an invitation to join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

July 3, 2014, my lifelong dream was nearly derailed as I was almost killed by two armed robbers who opened the top of my skull with their big guns when I fought back with my fists and feet. God showed up in the personage of Kansas City Police Officer Matthew Rittenhouse as I lay bleeding profusely from my head wounds. Officer Rittenhouse's impeccable professionalism, training and genuine concern for my well-being is the reason I am alive today.

God again showed up in the personage of Dr. Nathan Hagan, who inserted 10 staples in my skull to keep my brain intact and in the presence of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who paid my \$4,219 hospital bill. The following month with a skull full of staples, I started the first of my last two semesters at Metropolitan Community College, against the well-meaning advice of well-wishers who thought it best that I should take a semester off and fully heal.

Standing on the promises of God outlined in the Holy Bible, when you have a head full of staples holding your brain intact that affords you a unique opportunity to fortify your relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I completed my last two semesters at Metropolitan Community College maintaining my high grade point average.

I applied and was accepted to Rockhurst University. I began my matriculation at Rockhurst University in August 2015. My Phi Theta Kappa scholarship and the VA Vocational Rehabilitation Program covered the \$40,000 per year costs including books and supplies. I graduated from Rockhurst University May 12, 2018, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration (Management), a minor in Theology and Religious Studies and an induction into the Theta Alpha Kappa Honor Society. Rockhurst University is ranked by U.S. News & World Report as the 10th best school of management in America.

My goal henceforth for the rest of my life is to be an example to veterans who have allowed excessive alcohol consumption to hinder them in achieving a better quality of life for themselves and their families. The objective is to help them understand that their presence is needed, in the Book of Revelation Last and Evil days, on the battlefield of Life. Their struggles to overcome self-imposed setbacks will inspire and motivate other veterans who are in desperate need of our encouragement as they struggle to obtain a better quality of life.

I am of the opinion, evangelist Billy Graham said it best, "Courage is contagious. When brave men and women take a stand, the spines of others are stiffened."

We cannot be afraid to admit when we need some help. The 2018 Kansas City Veterans Administration Medical Center Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, and Resiliency Summit was unquestionably the tangible presence of God. Working together, we can substantially reduce the veteran suicide rate and assist veterans-in-crisis with the obtainment and maintenance of a better quality of life for themselves and their families.



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

It's You

By Tony James Craidon

— Maple Grove, MN

Like all young boys and girls, Jack Kramer imagined he was destined to do important things. A small town in Iowa bred big imaginations. This thought, above all others, perverted a sense of purpose to a point where Jack was liable to act brashly. Now, in his young twenties and beginning a life of independence deep in the heart of New York City, he ascended the staircase leading from the subway, basking in the light of a cloudless sky. He was late for work.

It was only his second week, and he didn't want to give a bad impression. His aunt had gone out on a limb to secure him a position as a file clerk at the city's second biggest financial firm, and Jack intended to make her proud. But, as young men go, he was also susceptible to distraction. And two blocks away from his destination, he found himself standing in front of a peculiar shop that advertised "The Kissing Booth and Other Fine Antiquities." Underneath the store's name, written in cursive, read "Come in! Something for everyone." He had stopped because unlike the contemporary architecture of the buildings surrounding it, this storefront looked ancient and wise. There were no display windows, and the door appeared to be made from a grimy tinted glass. Jack couldn't understand why, but his heart beat sped up just a little. It was like he was standing at the precipice of a great adventure. Something important. He just knew it.

Being tardy slipped from his mind like silk sheets on a cool autumn morning. He stepped through the door. But to anyone on the street observing him (which of course no one was, this was New York City after all), it would have appeared as though Jack walked right through the side of an unremarkable building wall.

Just inside the door were stacks of books, dusty and untouched for eons. An ancient rocking chair sat motionless in the corner, unmoved since the last time France was a Patriarchy. The right side of the store was stacked almost to the ceiling with various types of clocks and hourglasses. None of them moved, their days of keeping an accurate count but a distant memory. Along the left wall was a shelf dedicated solely to the display of hundreds of glass figurines. There was a crystal medieval knight poised to battle a glass dragon. Jack picked out two hobbits clinging to each other in desperation. At eye level, on a shelf all of its own, rested what looked like a translucent egg. It shimmered brightly

with many different colors, as if it wasn't really there, but only a hologram. When Jack reached for it, it blinked completely out of existence. Without reacting, almost as if something disappearing suddenly was normal, he brought his gaze to the shelf above. There, he saw Atreyu riding Artax furiously toward an unknown goal. Next to that was a figure of Alice standing ludicrously tall over the Mad-Hatter. Jack picked Alice up to examine her more closely. He could barely pick out facial features, but a deep and personal scold seemed to balance on her furrowed brow. Jack looked a little closer, and as though the figurine suddenly became a living organism, he watched as her scold melted to a look of understanding exasperation. He blinked. Did he just see that?

"Can I help you?" called out a deep and gravelly voice from behind him. Jack startled, dropping Alice on the cold stone floor. Alice shattered, her glass head bouncing once with a look of disbelief twisted on her glass features – before disappearing beneath the shelf.

"Oh, I –" Jack started, turning to see who the voice belonged to. Standing in the middle of the shop as though he had been one of its fixtures, was a dwarf. Or maybe it was a troll. The dwarf/troll was wearing heavy armor, knicked and stained from years of close calls. From his aged and haggard face hung a most glorious beard, somehow wild and meticulously groomed. He let out a hearty chuckle.

"Oh you, what?" He asked, seemingly good humored.

"Well, you see, I...I –" Jack tried to answer.

"You, you, you" the dwarf/troll mocked. "...are here seeking a great and important task, are you not?" He asked.

Jack opened his mouth to dispute this harrowingly accurate conclusion, then abruptly shut it again. He twisted his body as he accepted the truth of it, and said, "Yes. That's exactly why I am here."

"Good, good!" The dwarf/troll agreed. "Follow me son." He waddled toward the back of the store, his heavy armor clanging loudly in an echoless room. Jack followed.

In the back was a service counter with an old and large ledger opened to the middle, bookmarking a weathered but otherwise empty page. The dwarf, for that's what Jack had decided he must be, walked to the other side of the counter while gesturing for Jack to pull up a stool. Jack did so.

The dwarf stopped and suddenly looked intensely into Jack's eyes. The hair on Jack's arms raised as he leaned forward in anticipation; almost as if he expected the dwarf to let him in on a secret. Jack suddenly felt very vulnerable. It seemed as though

this magical dwarf was able to see to his core, and became worried he would be found wanting.

“You want to do something that matters, yes? Perhaps be the hero of your own story?” the dwarf asked rhetorically.

“Yes-” Jack started.

The dwarf interrupted, “Are you capable of walking a path littered with danger? Do you have the courage to do what is right in the face of great resistance? Would you sacrifice your life to save the life of an innocent person?”

Jack, who felt like his entire life had led to this critical response, did not hesitate.

“Absolutely.”

The dwarf studied him a moment longer, as though confirming an unasked concern. The dwarf nodded once, produced a feather pen and ink, and asked Jack to sign his name to the book as a gesture of good faith. Taking the pen, Jack’s hand trembled slightly – the only indication he wasn’t entirely certain of his convictions. But the overwhelming feeling of an adventure about to begin quickly dissolved his hesitation. He was going to be a hero, just like he always imagined he would be. How would it happen? Would he go on a quest? Would he save a princess from a fire-breathing dragon? Either way, it would seem his life would finally...matter. He would be and do something important. He signed his name.

The dwarf slammed the book shut, snatching the pen from Jack’s hand with a premeditated authority.

“Good. Now go.” The dwarf motioned toward the door, all his good humor replaced with an irritated growl. “And you owe me for the priceless doll you just broke!”

Jack spun happily around on his stool and began to walk to the door. He stopped again, turning to face the wall of figurines. This was all too surreal: wet and thick, like running in a dream. On the bottom shelf, previously unregarded, was a wizard holding a great staff in one hand, and offering a crystal ball in the other. It was almost as if to say, “Your adventure awaits!”

Jack took another look back at the shopkeeper. Still behind the counter, the dwarf scowled and made a shooing motion. Jack turned and stepped back out the door and onto the New York City sidewalk. He scanned the scene, trying to remember what he was just doing. He felt like he had just walked to the kitchen, and completely forgetting why. Then, a light on a dimmer illuminated the grey room of consciousness. He spun to look back at the mysterious shop, and I’m sure you could’ve guessed, the shop was gone.

“Excuse me, did you –” Jack tried to ask a short man trudging by, nose deep into the pocket sized screen he held in his hand. The man ignored him, favoring his attention toward his email.

Typical rude muttonhead Jack thought.

Approaching from the other direction was a tired woman wearing a black and white designer sport coat. She was looking intently straight ahead and Jack thought he might have better luck getting her attention.

“Excuse me, miss?” Jack asked, reaching to touch her arm. His fingers melted right into her coat. She twisted her face like she just smelled a litter box and kept walking, completely unaware of Jack’s presence.

What was that?! Jack asked himself. He faced another oncoming pedestrian and reached for her. When his hand went right through her chest, he pawed desperately at her purse, hoping he might captivate her attention if he could grab it. He couldn’t. He watched as another man walked close by and Jack threw his whole body at him. Instead of colliding with the man and drawing a shocked and angry response, Jack fell straight through him and suddenly found himself sprawled on the ground. Damn! Jack thought briefly before looking up at a taxi. The cab ran right through him, and Jack felt no pain.

What is going on? Why don’t these people see me? How did that car miss me? Thought Jack, hysterical with confusion.

Cinematically came the dwarf’s disembodied voice, echoing loudly in Jack’s skull.

“Would you sacrifice your life to save the life of an innocent person?” he asked. Jack couldn’t be sure if he was being asked again, or if this was one of those moments you see in movies when clearly the writers took the easy way of explaining the events to the audience.

Well, yeah. But I didn’t...I mean I haven’t. I didn’t DO anything. Wait, huh? Jack wondered to himself. Did he die just now? And if so, did that mean he saved someone’s life? He tried to remember whose life he saved, and how. It felt like recalling a critical part of a dream once the rigid laws of reality had set in.

Jack tried touching a few more pedestrians, all with the same result. He tried talking to people, eventually resorting to screaming in their faces. The result was the same. No one seemed aware of his presence. It was like he was a ghost. Dumbfounded, he stared back at the building where just a few minutes before stood an antique store. It was just a slab of lifeless granite, impartial to Jack’s existence, or to the lack thereof. He abruptly became aware he felt weightless. He could see his body, examine

the clothes he was wearing, but could not feel his body. He tried to loosen his tie (“The mark of a true professional and gentlemen is a sturdy and unassuming tie” he seemed to remember his father telling him once), but couldn’t. How peculiar.

He reached out for the wall, expected to feel cold stone on his palm. His hand went right through. Amazed, Jack put his arm through the wall and retracted it several times. He looked over his hand and forearm, hoping to clue out some reason for his sudden intangibility. Then, with determination set, he stepped through the wall. There was a moment when he felt everything in his body stop moving, as though it had become one with the wall. Then he was through, standing in the lobby of the courthouse. No one inside took any notice of Jack. To Jack, everyone in the lobby buzzed with stress, completely lost in their own troubles. Some people, the ones who looked like they belonged there, were passing through a metal detector and making casual conversation with the deputy stationed there.

Jack approached the deputy. At first Jack opened his mouth to ask the deputy... what? He had stepped into another dimension and come out a specter? How would he even begin to try and make sense of that? Instead, Jack just stood in front of the deputy. The deputy looked right at him, or perhaps it was right through him. With an impulsive burst of decision, Jack reached for the deputy’s pistol anchored tightly against his waist. The deputy took an instinctual step back and almost subconsciously brought his right hand to the handle of the gun. The deputy confirmed it was still there, snug in its holster. Then went about his normal business, seemingly unaware of the incident.

OK, so I died. But where is the person I was supposed to have saved? And why am I still here, and not off to the next realm? Jack wondered. Is this the “path littered with danger?”

Jack walked through the turnstile into the “secure” part of the building. The turnstile didn’t move. Like a child who’s lost his mother in the mall, he wandered aimlessly through the halls until deciding to go into Courtroom 3. Out of habit, he reached for the door handle. When his fingers passed through, Jack reminded himself of his new condition. Taking a deep breath, he walked through the courtroom doors, again briefly feeling lifeless. But instead, he felt like he was made of wood instead of stone.

There were a few people sitting in the pews. Lawyers conferred with their clients and family members spoke in hushed tones in anticipation for their day in court. No one seemed to notice Jack. Without knowing why, Jack took a seat in the pew closest to the door. There he watched as a few more people came through the door, filling more empty spots along the benches. All of a sudden a deputy from the front of the room boomed, “ALL RISE!”

Everyone stood up. Feeling a mechanical sense of obligation, Jack stood as well. After being encouraged to take their seats by the presiding judge, everyone sat back down. There Jack stayed the entire day, captivated in the drama of family court. Jack kept to himself all day, though a lot of good it would do him if he tried to speak with anyone. He didn’t even feel the need to eat or use the restroom. He was simply just there. He did note, however, no one sat where he was sitting, or rather hovering. Jack knew, if he was so inclined, he could pass right through the benches – but his weightlessness allowed him to just be without effort. As busy as the courtroom had gotten before the lunch break, no one came near him. People opted to stand in the back rather than sit through him. This concept went almost completely unnoticed, since this phenomenon was wrapped in the presence of normality. When the day’s activities came to a close, Jack stayed in his seat long after the last person had left the room for the day. There, he contemplated what was happening.

A little while after sundown, Jack rose and walked through the doors and through the lobby, back into the street. The feeling of being constructed from the same materials as the doors and walls had faded a bit. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk, motionless, observing. Whenever possible, pedestrians absent-mindedly avoided Jack. The times where avoidance wasn’t an option, they passed through him, seemingly unaware of the intrusion. Against his better judgment, he stepped into the street. He faced the traffic and watched with silent adrenaline as a taxi bore down on him. He did not flinch as the car went through him. Next, he looked skyward at the tops of the buildings. He imagined floating toward the clouds. And then he did just that.

I can fly! Wicked cool.

And so on this went, Jack exploring both his abilities and limitations. He learned he could taste and smell, but he produced no odor himself. He found he could “fly” to the outer atmosphere, but beyond that seemed restricted. He desperately tried to travel to the moon, since it seems breathing wasn’t a requirement of his new situation, but the closest he could ever get was the exosphere. Instead he settled for watching satellites pass by like migrating butterflies. He tried exploring the depths of the ocean, but without light, it was just an empty abyss. He occasionally checked in on his aunt, who couldn’t have any children of her own and had taken him into her less-than-astonishing two bedroom apartment in Queens. He felt a pang of heartbreak when he saw she had erected a modest shrine in his honor. “Missing but never forgotten” read the sign with a photo of his high school graduation pasted below it. There always seemed to be a fresh daisy laid carefully below his picture.

Because he didn’t need to sleep, he often found himself bored during the wee hours of the morning. Jack discovered he had a

limit to his interest in people watching. He didn't think he'd mind, so long as he knew exactly why this was happening. But without the satisfaction of being recognized as a hero, this experience was leaving a stain on his soul. He had, after a time, become convinced he was indeed dead.

3 Years Later

Jack was sitting in on a lecture about gravitational waves at NYU. He couldn't contribute to the discussion, or any hands-on labs, but found the subject intriguing nonetheless. No one ever sat next to him, leaving the chairs in front and behind him unoccupied as well. He had audited enough college courses to have earned two bachelor degrees, were he able to participate. Still, Jack took a quiet satisfaction just from learning. He had stopped talking altogether, what was the point? He had always thought there was a direct correlation with mental instability and talking to one's self, and had decided if he has to be dead, he wouldn't be crazy too. But loneliness was threatening to take his sanity. On occasion, when he needed a mental break, or when classes were on a semester break, he'd simply ride the subway. The smell of body odor made Jack feel an ounce of human connection.

This was the second day of the second time he had observed this class. The first time didn't leave Jack with a feeling of understanding, so he was taking it again. Why not? What else he got going on? He was trying hard to focus on the professor's speech, but found he was having a difficult time concentrating. Is this the beginning of losing my mind? He wondered with half a heart. He didn't think he'd have the strength to fight the decay of consciousness.

Suddenly, the door behind him burst open loudly, and in stumbled a young woman looking overwhelmed. She wore a backpack, but still carried three books in her right hand while waving a paper with her left. Her glasses had slipped halfway down her nose, and she abruptly shoved them back in place with her pointer finger. She had wavy chestnut hair. Her lips were thinly pursed together in an attempt to gain some modicum of control over her anxiety.

"I'm so sorry I'm late. I just came from admissions," she said, walking down the stairs to hand the paper to the instructor. The professor, clearly not amused with the disruption, took the paper from her, and without looking at it, placed it face down on his desk.

"Fine. Fine. Please take a seat so we can continue," she was instructed.

Jack assumed she'd take one of the open seats toward the front, not wanting to stretch out this unwelcome attention any longer than need be. But she marched up the stairs toward Jack, a look of confidence before unseen washed over her freckled face. Much to his surprise, she scooted past him and occupied the seat

right next to him. Forgetting all about the class, and paying no attention to the professor when he continued his lecture, Jack watched this girl intently.

She smelled like almonds. That stood out among all other senses. And because she was sitting so close to him, he allowed himself to be bathed in the fragrance. She wasn't a beauty queen, but carried a dignified attractiveness with her. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Jack felt intrigued. He spent the rest of the class watching her take notes on a subject he wasn't sure he'd ever understand. Her handwriting was impeccable. There was grace in her loops, and authority in her punctuation. Jack had never cared much about handwriting or any calligraphy before, but was simply hypnotized by hers.

When the class was over, she looked over her schedule, nodded her head with confirmation, and gathered her books. Jack stood, expecting she'd go around him like everyone else did. Instead, she walked right through him. Almonds was all Jack thought as she passed through him. She suddenly stopped and turned back around. She appeared to be looking directly at him. He turned to see if there was anybody or anything interesting behind him and found nothing. Turning back to her, he watched as she seemed to be contemplating something, shook her head once, and left the auditorium.

What was that? Did she sense me?

He decided to follow her. She had stopped at a food truck, ordered something wrapped in tinfoil, then took a seat next to a tree. She took out her notes and textbooks, and began to study while nibbling at her lunch. He stood over her for a time, waiting to see if his presence would summon a physical response. But she remained immersed in her schoolwork, seemingly unaware that anyone, ghost or not, was watching her.

Jack soon lost interest and went to another class he was attracted to: interpersonal communication. Funny thought Jack, I'm taking a class that will do me absolutely no good. But observing his classmates gave him a superficial connection to the living through articulation of their personal drama. If nothing else, it was good for a chuckle.

It was two days before the next gravitational waves class, and Jack almost didn't go. But he thought about the girl, and wanted to see her again. He chose a different seat this time, and waited for her to join the class. Moments later, she appeared in the doorway, scanning the empty seats. She was wearing something similar to last time: khaki shorts, and a light blue button up short-sleeved shirt. She initially made her way toward the seat she had taken last time, and Jack scoffed at his boyish excitement from two days before. Of course she'd pick a familiar seat. After all, humans were (as Jack had come to understand) creatures of

habit. But before setting her things down, she stopped, scanned the room again, and meandered toward Jack. Biting her bottom lip with indecision, she stood at the desk next to him, staring at it questioningly for several moments before sitting down.

Almonds.

She turned her head to him, met eyes, and shared a secret smile.

“Hi!” She mouthed without sound.

“Hi? I mean, HI! You can see me? You can hear m-“ Jack was interrupted by a voice behind him. His heart fell from his throat and dripped back to where it belonged: in the icy center of his chest.

He turned to see a tall, captain of the football team kind of rugged, and incredibly handsome young man approaching her from the other direction.

“Can I sit here?” he asked her pointing to Jack’s seat.

“Uhh –” she hesitated. The boy seemed to be studying Jack. Jack only leaned forward, anticipating an epic response from his mystery girl. Something like, Sorry bro, but I’ve only got eyes for Mr. Swayze here. Now hit the bricks kid. But the young man answered her before she could elaborate on her hesitation.

“Actually, that one looks kinda rough, like I might get a wicked splinter. How about the one on the other side?”

Still smiling, “Sure!” Amanda waved over the empty chair like a hand model might wave over a cheap prize on a daytime game show. She let out a nervous giggle.

“I’m Jeff,” the boy announced without provocation.

“Pleased to meet you,” she responded perfunctorily. Jack noticed she didn’t immediately give her own name.

Without knowing why, Jeff stepped over the chair in front of him, walked down the row, and then approached the other way. Had Jack been physically present, it would have been an ordinary thing to do. It was times like this Jack had to remind himself his situation, and realize giving this newcomer a dirty look or checking him with his shoulder would accomplish exactly nothing.

Jack watched in silent amusement while Amanda, for that’s who she was according to her class schedule laying half off her desk, and Jeff courted one another. He observed her mannerisms, constantly tucking a stray branch of hair behind her ear whenever the attention was on her, or how she leaned in when Jeff was speaking. All the tell-tale signs she was into him. They bore through the lecture, then agreed to meet later that evening for “coffee.” Jack knew what coffee meant: an unobtrusive method for agreeing to pursue a relationship just a little further without

commitment. Jack couldn’t speak for Jeff, but he felt the hook sink deep into his soul for this unassumingly beautiful woman...this Amanda who smelled of almonds.

For the rest of the day, Jack chaperoned Amanda. At one point, simply because he could, he closed his eyes, levitated a few inches, and floated after Amanda using only his sense of smell as a guide. He imagined he looked quite like a cartoon character who had been hypnotized by the comforting scent of a blueberry pie set on the window sill to cool.

Later, when she had ordered her dark roast coffee with a pinch of sugar, and Jeff had ordered his choca-mocha-bull, they settled into an unpadding booth. Jack decided he would sit next to Amanda. He expected her to subconsciously pull further into the corner, but instead she adjusted herself so she was several inches into Jack’s presence. Bewildered, Jack looked at their thighs blending into one another, then back to Amanda’s face. Amanda had closed her eyes and had taken in a deep breath. A shadow of a smile hung on her imperfect complexion.

After a moment, she exhaled and opened her eyes. She appeared as though she had been lost in thought about a comfortable memory.

Jack listened intently all night to Amanda reveal more about herself. Jeff only seemed moderately interested in hearing Amanda’s projection of herself, nodding occasionally while waiting for an opportunity to talk more about himself.

Shut up Jeff. Jack thought with impatience. Nothing about Jeff was interesting. He was like all other out-of-state college mutton heads. Boring. But Amanda... Amanda had depth. She had pizzazz. She had something no one else had, and Jack was intoxicated by her. He learned she had been adopted. He listened as she explained how her father, an incredible provider and a terrible nurturer, had pressed her to apply for an Ivy League school, to pursue a higher education in law or medicine. Her mother, who too often used Amanda as her own personal avatar, was constantly pressuring her to be best friends with the popular girls, or date the popular boys. Jack admired her for despite being groomed for something else, she wanted to come to New York and study architecture. She admitted the dynamic skyscrapers that painted the New York skyline were as romantic as she could imagine. After a while, the rest of the coffee shop melted away. Jeff melted away. All that remained was Amanda. And almonds.

Jack couldn’t take his eyes from her. He wanted so desperately to move in closer, to let their bodies completely overlap. But every time he had done that before, there were negative consequences. Some people became nauseous, others became irritable. All of them instinctively pulled away. And he didn’t want Amanda to pull away. So there he sat, silent, falling in love.



His day dreaming was interrupted as he became aware Jeff and Amanda were leaving. Jack followed them out. The street lights outside caused her freckles to stand out like lit fuses. Jeff offered to escort her home. She politely declined, looked at her feet, and tucked another wild branch of hair behind her ear. Jeff, perhaps misreading that as a cue to pursue the issue further, insisted he would be considered the jerk who let her walk home by herself. After another moment of thought, Amanda agreed to be escorted.

Once at her door of her studio apartment she shared with two other art majors, she looked at her feet as she said, "Thank you for walking me home."

Jeff lingered, smiling stupidly at her. Another moment later, he asked, "May I come in to use your bathroom?"

Amanda seemed to consider this. Then, "OK, but just to use the bathroom?"

"Of course," assured Jeff, looking confident. Jack scoffed, rolled his eyes, and decided to leave. He didn't need to see what was about to happen next. By now, he was all too familiar with the ways of guys like Jeff, and frankly, he didn't want to end the night upset with the woman who had captivated him so deeply these last few hours.

Jack caught Jeff wearing a secret smirk as he walked through the threshold into Amanda's apartment. "Do you have Netflix?"

Jack was halfway floating through the wall opposite her door when he heard through the muffle of sheet rock and reinforced cement, "I think my roommates might, but they're going to be home any minu---" Click. Jeff had shut the door behind them. I hope you get diarrhea thought Jack, smartly.

According to Amanda's schedule, creative writing was her first course the next day. Jack wouldn't have otherwise bothered to audit such a class, but he was eager to see her again. Jack had gotten there 20 minutes early, hoping to find a pair of open seats so she could choose to sit next to him. And when Amanda reported for class with puffy red eyes and wrinkled clothing, she DID sit next to Jack. As a matter of fact, without fail, every

consecutive class after had the same result. She always chose to sit next to him. Jack had begun to let his imagination run wild with the possibilities. He'd almost forgotten about Jeff, until their gravitational waves class. When Jack got there early, he saw Jeff, already stationed in the same seat he intrusively took two days ago, eating a muffin.

After some consideration, Jack took a seat on the other side of the classroom. He wanted Amanda to choose. He wanted to see the stupid smile on Jeff's face fade. Instead, Amanda didn't show for class at all. Jeff kept looking at the door, clearly distracted by Amanda's absence. With 10 minutes left of class, Jack decided to look for her. But before he left, he took a spiteful trip across the classroom and rushed through Jeff, just to see what would happen. Jeff immediately looked at his white loafers, then at the water stained ceiling, opening and closing his jaw.

Suck a bag of gravity, Jeff. I hope that vertigo tastes better than your blueberries and sin, Jack thought. With Jeff immobilized, he turned his attention back to finding Amanda. He checked all her regular haunts: the library, the gym, even the coin arcade a few blocks away. Finally, he returned to the food truck she had ordered from the first day he saw her. There, under the same tree, sat Amanda, alone and trying her best not to cry. She was hugging her knees. Beside her sat an unopened burrito wrapped in used tinfoil. Her breathing was heavy and uneven, choking back a flood of anxiety. To Jack, she looked exactly how he imagined her as a young child. He floated to her, stopping just inches from her feet. Almonds, thought Jack.

She had been looking at her lap when he approached, but almost as if she heard his abstract thought, she looked up. Scanning the area, she confirmed she was indeed alone, surrounded by unfamiliar New Yorkers who couldn't give the hind end of a boiled cockroach about Amanda and her problems. But Jack cared. He couldn't understand why he cared, what made her different than all the rest. He reached for her arm, hesitating a moment before making contact with her. His fingers disappeared through her flannel sleeve. She closed her eyes. Her breathing, wavering at first, became steady. After a while, she smiled.

After hours of following Amanda like a love-struck puppy, Jack learned Amanda had quit school. She had been terrified to tell her father, who effectively disowned her after her brief but loud phone call with him had finished. A domino effect played out; she lost her job at the University's concession stand in the stadium. A few weeks later her keys wouldn't open the locks to her apartment. An extremely abrupt letter from her roommates taped to the door told her why. It wasn't long before she had no other choice but to crawl back to her father, begging his forgiveness.



Amanda's large colonial childhood home tucked behind a row of large but neatly trimmed hedges told Jack they had come from old money. That didn't affect Jack's growing love for her. As a matter of fact, while she was brushing her hair at her vanity late one evening, in a house comically too large for three disconnected people, Jack told her how much she meant to him. He hadn't spoken aloud for over a year and a half, he was a little afraid he'd forgotten how. He let out a soft but undeniably sincere "I love you Amanda."

He was startled by her reaction. She first looked in the mirror, then spun almost violently to look behind her. If she could have seen him, she might've chuckled at the terrified look on his face. But she didn't see him.

"Hello? Is someone there?" she asked her otherwise empty room.

Jack regained his composure and repeated, "I love you Amanda." Jack reached for her, mimicking a caress on her cheek. She immediately closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and smiled. He held his hand there for a moment, feeling simultaneously elated and deeply saddened. While it was quite clear he had developed feelings for her, and it seemed almost as certain she reacted favorably to his presence, he also knew it was destined to be an unrequited love. Arguably, his existence had just become even less fulfilling; his yearn for her would only grow and he realized he had nothing to offer in return.

When he took his hand away, she opened her eyes. She stared straight ahead, appearing to be waiting for him to make the next move. He didn't make another move, though he had contemplated kissing her. When the opportunity passed, Amanda sat back down at her vanity and continued brushing her hair, though noticeably more distracted than she had been moments before. Jack lingered behind her, watching her reflection. He was about to say something else to her, perhaps introduce himself, perhaps ask her why she always smelled like almonds, when his eyes drifted to where his reflection should've been. When he didn't see it – he already knew it wouldn't be there – he exhaled a breath of resignation. He closed his eyes, inhaled through his nose, and with melancholy in his heart, said goodbye to that sweet almond aroma. He floated through her open window, and without looking back, left the country.

7 Years Later

Jack had discovered he'd become somewhat of an expert on the human condition. But the deeper he examined what makes people do what they do, the lonelier he became. It was already insufferable to be unable to influence his environment, but as he inspected the many layers of humanity, it was almost enough to drive him completely mad. He witnessed, time after time, the awful acts of cruelty humans can inflict on those around them. He watched, time after time, as people justified their actions while condemning others. It appeared as though there were no depths of depravity one wouldn't dive to if it meant getting them closer to what they wanted.

For no particular reason one Australian soldier had caught Jack's attention for a short time during this exploration of base human intentions. He tagged along with this soldier as he was deployed to the mountains of Afghanistan. Jack had the idea perhaps he should be more patriotic, and if he desired to accompany a soldier, it should be an American. He remembered thinking: Eh, screw 'em. They get enough attention. Let's see what our "allies" are up to.

He watched with a small modicum of interest while this soldier's unit attempted to win the hearts and minds of the local farmers. And while Jack felt the pangs of regret and anguish as this soldier accidentally shot a 12-year-old girl during a particularly brutal ambush by a group that referred to themselves as "freedom fighters," he wasn't at all surprised at the capacity of violence people can inflict on one another.

That same soldier, after losing eight fellow brothers-in-arms through various combat engagements, returned home to discover his wife had been having an affair. She promptly served him divorce papers, and without a solitary thought for his relationship with his daughter, moved to the other side of the continent with his baby girl. He followed as soon as his commitment to the Army had ended, of course, but his ex-wife was evasive and crafty. She always found a reason to withhold her daughter from him. After failing to be a parent to his daughter, the war veteran sought a few support groups designed to help men just like him to cope with life.

Jack listened as the soldier explained to a group of semi-strangers the weight of anger he carries for rebel troops who took the lives of some of his best friends, the weight of resentment he carried for the woman he once devoted his life, love, and soul to, and the heaviest weight of all: the weight of regret for putting a bullet into that girl's skull. A girl who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. A girl, if the circumstances were reversed, could have easily been his own estranged daughter. He heard things from the support group like, "That happened because of them, not you." And "They're not like us, they're different. They

have inferior beliefs and values. Not like us at all.” And sure, he didn’t mean to end that little girl’s life. But Jack knew better. He knew those freedom fighters did what they did because they believed it was right. Jack also knew, if any of these support group members had lived the same lives as the “terrorists,” they’d have done the exact same thing. Jack understood, the only thing that separates us is our personal experience. But because we are made of the same genetics, have the same ancestry, and function the same on a cellular level, it seemed unlikely that morals are derived from DNA.

The soldier couldn’t cope with the burdens he carried, and on his daughter’s seventh birthday, pulling the same trigger he used to end the little girl’s life, he blew his brains out in his garage, leaving his thoughts behind him.

35 Years Later

Whenever things became a bit too heavy for Jack, or whenever he couldn’t find any good reason for the continued existence of the species, he’d return to Amanda. As soon as he could smell almonds, he felt the burden of spectral life lighten just a bit. That’s not to say his visits were always pleasant. But after 45 years of watching life slip through his fingers, he surmised true love means enduring through the pain.

Over time, he’d developed an instinct for finding her. Like the intangible connection twins have, he’d sense when she was hurting. He was there with her at her father’s funeral. That was the first time he’d noticed her hand in his was remarkably older than his. He hadn’t really thought about it until then, but he wondered if he was still aging as a ghost. He couldn’t very well look in the mirror. Maybe it was just because his skin wasn’t affected by the sun and air pollution.

There was an unbelievable turnout for her father’s funeral. Her uncle had spoken the eulogy, but she had committed to speaking on her father’s behalf. Dressed in a black dress bought at a second-hand store specifically for this occasion, she trembled as she approached the podium. Tears threatened to flood her vision; her half page of notes held tightly in front of her waist like a shield, her voice cracked. Her apprehension was not from a deep pain for losing her father, Jack knew, but more from the pressure of having to pretend she was suffering a huge loss. She wasn’t sad, she was relieved. But she couldn’t show that to anyone, lest she be discovered to be a heartless bitch. Jack, already standing invisible at her side, took a half a step toward her and put his arm around her shoulders. Amanda’s tense muscles unwound, and she delivered a beautiful speech about her father’s role as both a stubborn hard case and an amazing provider. No one knew she was lying, not even her mother. But Jack knew. His love did not abate.

She never dated after dropping out of college, and her life was one of solitude and loneliness. She resigned herself to a quiet career in the Queens branch of the New York Library. She was devastated when her application for adoption fell through, and Jack had been there, wishing he could do something, anything, to comfort the despair. He read the letter that insisted that homes with two parents are preferred. He laid next to her in bed as she sobbed herself to sleep, and stayed there until she rose in the morning and returned to her mundane profession. Whenever he felt her return to “normalcy,” his itch to travel would begin to burn.

And with twisted feelings, Jack would wander. But Jack would always return. After exploring the depths of oceans or human corruption, he would be comforted by her hint of a smile. With Jack around, her dull, everyday activities would pass with a little dance in her step. Now that she was retired, she spent most of her time in the garden, or in front of the television with her microwavable dinner. Her cats paid no mind to Jack, although he was certain they could see him. Their only concern is mealtime, which Amanda often hummed “You Are My Sunshine.” A melody that melted the ice built up defensively around Jack’s heart.

After several funerals for familiar friends of the family, or an aunt or cousin or two, Amanda’s mother passed away. It took six months of consoling. It hurt Jack more than anything that he couldn’t be there for her. He’d completely forgotten they hadn’t ever actually met. Instead, he’d come to think of her as his widow. His love for her endured. He found himself almost hating her, but even amidst all the pain he suffered over the years for having an emotional attachment to this woman, the love he had for her bore through.

20 Years Later

Cancer. She’d been told she had cancer by some cold and detached doctor. The worst kind of cancer, as far as Jack was concerned. She had brain cancer. It had metastasized to her liver and spleen. To make matters even gloomier, she had no friends or family to speak of. No one to take care of her. Jack’s heart broke to pieces. For 62 years, Amanda, who smelled like almonds, had a soul mate. She just didn’t know it. Now, she was on her way to an assisted care retirement facility. She’d have to sell her family home in Connecticut. But without having anyone else in her life, the transition to the nursing home would be quick and seamless.

Amanda had left the doctor’s office, and rather than call for a ride, decided she’d walk home. She dabbed at her eyes with her monogrammed handkerchief, she didn’t want anyone passing her on the New York streets to see her crying. She’d reserve that for when she was safe and alone in her nearly empty apartment. But you’re not alone. I’m here with you. I’m not leaving again. I’ll be with you until the end. Jack assured her, if only for his benefit.

She passed by an oddly located trinket store. She stopped and examined the storefront. Jack went wild with excitement. He'd returned here every so often, but left disappointed when he faced the soulless grey granite walls of some nameless skyscraper. For whatever reason, it had manifested again, and his beloved actually saw it! He'd convinced himself he had imagined the entire encounter with the mad dwarf. He waited impatiently for her to go inside. But Amanda just stood on the sidewalk and looked at the mysterious lettering on the door, "Come in! Something for everyone."

"Huh," she said. Giving it a few more seconds before she turned her gaze to a subway entrance. She walked away from the storefront, leaving Jack frozen in a frenzy of emotion to deal with by himself. Jack watched her walk away for a few moments before he shook from his amazement. At full thrust, he tried to go through the dirty glass door.

SLAM! He slammed his face, and naturally, the rest of his body followed. Jack heard the hollow thud echo through his bones.

Pain erupted through Jack's vision, and for a while, all he could see was a world covered in a white silk sheet. He reached for his forehead and felt the throbbing often indicative of a hard impact on the front of his skull. It had been so long since Jack felt anything, it understandably took a beat longer to comprehend what just happened.

Jack reached for the door handle, and found he could actually grip it. He pulled. The door didn't budge. Jack let go of the door and just stood on the sidewalk, staring into it. People were still giving him a wide berth whenever possible. One woman, who couldn't avoid Jack, walked right through him. She had a sneezing fit, and received several insincere blessings from passing strangers. What's happening? He peered through the dusty glass. He saw the familiar rocking chair and stacks of books looking like they had been written, and read, centuries ago. The same clocks occupied the right side of the store, still and unrepaired. He squinted at the shelves that were home to the small figurines that had captured his imagination 65 years ago. In the middle of the shelving was a dark emptiness. More than just empty space, but as though the middle of the shelves housed a miniature black hole. It left Jack feeling hollow, and he quickly averted his gaze to the rest of the shelves. He couldn't be certain, but he thought he saw a small glass figurine that looked like him. At least what he looked like when he was 20. The figurine had a shocked look, wide eyes and even wider mouth. As if he were screaming. Jack's hair on his arms stood on end. And he could feel it! The figurine was posed as though he was running, arms outstretched to catch something. A rogue baseball? A game winning football? Jack thought so.

Jack scanned the dark and dusty antiques. He was looking for the dwarf. As far as he could tell, the only light came from the glass door. The back of the store remained draped in shadows. He rapped on the door. He waited, still peering through the door. No sign of life. He again pounded on what seemed the only way into the shop. Nothing. Jack took a step back again, meaning to examine his surroundings. Suddenly, the hair on the back of his neck joined the already erect hair, and Jack remembered Amanda. Where had she gone? Did she go into the subway? A cosmic force redirected his attention to her. Promising himself to return to the store once he was assured Amanda was safe and settled in her new home, he bolted after her.

Amanda walked down the filthy New York stairs to the filthy New York subway. She'd never ridden the subway. If Jack were corporeal, he might've assuaged the prejudice she'd developed in her 86 years. But he wasn't. But Amanda was determined to travel like so many of her fellow plebian New Yorkers. It was a bucket list kind of thing.

Standing on the platform, she made her way to the end, where she had a wall to one side. At least that way, she'd be protected from one side by anyone who might take advantage of an old lady clearly out of her element. She could hear the train coming from around the corner from that wall, and felt a small bit of relief her wait would be short. She watched as three boys, perhaps in their late teens, roughhoused and created quite a bit of public nuisance. They almost created more noise than the approaching train. She clutched her purse a little tighter, though they paid her no mind. Instead, they turned their delinquency on to a middle aged homeless man. A man who wasn't bothering anyone.

With their blood high in the dangerous mob mentality, they somehow thought it was a good idea to tip this man's cart over. They spilled his belongings, all his worldly possessions, all over the platform. Rolled loosely in a scarf so no wandering eye might catch it, was a crystal egg. An egg that seems to reflect every color at once. It rolled lazily, and indirectly toward Amanda, who couldn't take her eyes off it. If she had, she might've moved out of the way from the homeless guy who had just been shoved toward her because he had taken a stand against these ruffians.

Jack came barreling down the stairs, frantically in search of Amanda, when he heard a young man shout, "Get outta here, old man!" He saw the homeless man get shoved backward. He saw his beloved, the woman he endured a lifetime of unrequited love for, a spirit who had seen and felt so much, get slammed back against the wall behind her. He felt, felt, the rumble of the approaching train. He dashed toward her, frantic to stop what was about to happen. It didn't matter to Jack that he hadn't had a physical effect for many decades. He didn't even consider the ineffectiveness of his actions. In horror, he watched Amanda's knee buckle and she

started to fall off the platform. A brilliant light flashed from the egg, momentarily blinding everyone waiting for their train. Jack was close enough to instinctively reach for her arm.

He grabbed it tightly, and ferociously twisted his body so she would swing away from the oncoming train. His vision returned in time to see the train missed her skull by millimeters. No one saw where Jack came from, but then, most people have their noses buried in their smart devices. Those who did see this heroic deed just assumed Jack must've been there all along. Jack fell on top of her as they both spilled to the ground. The trauma of being knocked, grabbed, yanked, and tackled melted away for a moment as Amanda looked into Jack's eyes for the first time. He was so young, so incredibly handsome, and so full of...life!

Without thought, Amanda reached a gnarled and withered hand, and caressed Jack's face, just as he had so many years ago when he finally professed his love for her. She wore that familiar smile. Jack discovered that smile had only been for him. For a singular moment in space and time, everything made sense. Through tear filled eyes, Amanda spoke with a watery and wavering voice.

"It's you."

Welch Village

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

I waited for my brother to pick me up. We were going downhill skiing at an area one hour south of St. Paul, Minn., past Hastings, where I spent six months in a veterans' home before moving to the high-rise where I now lived. We loved to ski and did it all our lives.

My building manager looked at my skis propped in a bag by the front door. She looked at me in my ski parka and helmet as my brother pulled in. She stifled a laugh.

I must have been a sight. People who lived in high-rises were not downhill skiers. The sport was second only to polo in expense. I was not going to let poverty keep me from skiing.

My brother was buying the lift tickets. I paid for my own lunch and bought coffee for both of us. He supplied the car and gasoline. My lift ticket was his Christmas gift to me.

"Don't hurt yourself," my manager advised as I hoisted my skis onto my shoulder and left the building. I was 70 years old, and people expected me to be in a rocking chair. Many men who were my age were in wheelchairs, especially at the veterans' hospital where I got my medical care.



I opened the back door of my brother's SUV, slid my skis on top of his, and threw in my boot bag. I placed the ski helmet gingerly onto the boot bag. Despite its construction to withstand impact, the helmet's inner workings were fragile. It had stereo speakers I connected to an MP3 player that played Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, and the Rolling Stones.

I bought the helmet at the end of the season, half price. The salesman at Joe's Sporting Goods, who was 70 years old, took his time fitting me. He knew his stuff. The helmet was called a Demon.

I bought the skis with a check from my dead mother's telephone bill account. The telephone cooperative in my hometown sent our family a refund, and I used it to buy the same skis used by the Vail Ski Patrol. They were Atomics, gray in color.

I bought the boots end of season, too, with a tax rebate. Half price, they were \$350. I had them 10 years, and they were as functional, and fashionable, as the day I bought them. They were bright red Nordica boots.

Skiing equipment was extremely expensive. My mother always objected that it became obsolete the year after a person bought it. That was true, and a \$300 ski parka was out of fashion the next year. A pair of skis, with the latest technology and graphics, was obsolete the next year, too.

So, with our equipment in the back of the car, my brother and I drove out of St. Paul, along the freeway that went through downtown, past the railroad yards and through farmland that was exorbitantly priced because it was so close to the Cities. We followed the Mississippi River to Hastings. The river ice was beginning to open, and there was a channel of water down its center.

Hastings brought back memories. We passed the Perkins Restaurant where my uncle bought me lunch when I lived at the veterans' home and he drove down from St. Paul to go over a story I wrote. We passed the restaurant where I had coffee at its counter to get out of the home. We passed the drug store where I escaped every day and the Alcoholics Anonymous club where I cut my teeth in that society.

We took a gradual left turn after Hastings and entered an area of small houses interspersed in farmland. They had large lawns. People lived there and commuted to the Cities.

I asked my brother if he could live there, and he said he could. I said the isolation would drive me crazy. I needed the proximity of people to keep me sane.

Then we entered an area of pure farmland, where the fields were barren with snow, the barbed wire fences hung in disrepair, and little farmhouses were next to barns that looked a hundred years old. Geese were in the fields. Crows pecked at seeds.

We took a left onto an interstate highway that led to Red Wing. I remembered the Sheldon Theater in Red Wing that we visited when I was at the veterans' home. We saw a musical about Patsy Cline, the country western singer whose plane crashed, killing her at a young age. My mother had a Patsy Cline album in her record collection.

I remembered the cinnamon rolls and coffee we got at a restaurant before the show. I remembered the visit we made to Stillwater State Prison to take an AA meeting to the inmates. I was terrified when our guide asked us if anyone wanted to spend the night.

We followed the freeway a mile or two then turned right at an old church with a cemetery. We followed this road into a canyon. It wound through woods and, as we descended, the farmland rose behind us.

We came to a village at the base of this canyon. It had a mill, post office, bar, general store, and a bed and breakfast. This was Welch Village. The ski area, which rose above the canyon, was a mile down the road.

The Cannon River ran through Welch Village and created the canyon. A sign on the mill advertised inner tubing on the river. I was told the river had trout.

We pulled into the parking lot of the ski area. It was a prodigious parking lot with room for more cars in a muddy field across the road, and there were many cars parked there already. It would be a busy day.

We hoped, on the drive down, that the ski racers would not be there, but their buses were lined up in the lot like school buses at a high school, dropping off students. Racers took over the chalet. Their parents drove down, too, and there was no place to leave our boot bags, let alone sit down and eat.

We parked and carried our stuff across the frozen puddles of the lot to the chalet, where we leaned our skis and poles against a picnic table out front. My brother went into the chalet to buy the

lift tickets. I took my stuff upstairs to the same part of the chalet we always used, next to the window that stuck out by the deck that faced the hill.

And hill it was. If a skier was used to skiing in the mountains, this was Midwest skiing. It was Midwest skiing at its best, but the vertical drop was only a few hundred feet. The vertical drop at Vail, Colorado, for example, was in the thousands.

My brother appeared, and I bought coffee. A cup of coffee before putting on our boots was our ritual. We skied so many times, on so many hills and mountains, that we were in no rush to go out and do it again.

I didn't ski much these days, out of poverty and boredom with it, and my brother skied because it filled his days in retirement in the winter. He had nothing else to do. However, we were both outdoorsmen and leapt at a chance to get outside.

We put on our boots. Ski boots were notoriously tight, and we struggled to get them onto our feet. We buckled them shut with a vengeance. I heard that downhill racers, the skiers who reached 80 miles an hour on skis, clamped their feet into their boots so tightly they ached.

My boots fit well, and I never had problems with coming off the slopes because my feet hurt.

We put on our helmets, goggles, and gloves. I turned on my MP3 player and placed it in the pocket of my parka.

Then we clumped through the chalet, awkward in our boots, past skiers pulling on their boots, and opened the heavy wooden door.

We walked onto the deck that led to a metal, grated stairway with a railing which we held onto as we walked down. We clumped to our skis, retrieved them, carried them up the hill on the snow, toward the lift shed, and put them on. We put the leather straps on our poles around our wrists.

Our bindings were so safe these days that people did not break their legs. It was rare someone was tobogganed off the hill. When it did happen, though, everyone felt sorry for the person being cradled down the hill, held in check by ski patrolmen holding ropes to keep the sled from sliding downhill. The skier was bundled in the sled like in a body bag.

My brother and I skated to the lift shed. This was a workout; I could feel it in my belly, and my muscles tightened with the exertion. However, it felt good to move and know I could still do this.

We poled onto the little platform the lift operator made with a shovel and got on the lift. The operator held the chair in place as it swung around on the lift's big, overhead wheel and slid it under

us. The chair swung for a moment, tilted toward a tower or two, then stabilized and took us up the hill.

The chair ascended a swath cut between the trees. This was the closest we got to nature, as we looked around us at the ski hill, the chalet, parking lot, and the Cannon River below us. Woods were on both sides.

The crisp air bit our noses. We did not wear hats, but our ski helmets kept us warm. We wore long underwear, which we wished we had left at home as the day progressed.

I listened to Fleetwood Mac's "You Can Go Your Own Way." My brother told me stories about the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, from which he was recently retired. I listened to the music in the helmet and heard him talk at the same time.

The woods passed alongside us as we ascended the hill. Tracks of squirrels or rabbits were in the snow below us. A ski pole lay in the snow where a skier dropped it accidentally.

Soon, we were at the top. The lift operator, whose job was to watch for skiers not getting off the lift safely, looked at us from his perch behind the window of the lift tower. We skied down the little hill by the lift and made the first turn of the day.

"To the right!" my brother yelled, and we warmed up on a run that took us to the tables by the chalet. This was our ritual, too, since we skied Welch Village many times. Like riding a bicycle, my ski technique came back as if I had done it yesterday. It was, in fact, my first time skiing this year.

I started with snowplow turns just to get the hang of my skis, then began stem christies that took me into the fall line of the hill. Then I started parallel turns that drove me across the hill in long traverses, then arcing turns into the next traverse, then a series of tight turns that ended at the bottom of the run. A straight schuss on the flats led to the lift shed, where my brother, who was ahead of me, and I boarded the lift for the next run.

The operator said hello and held the chair under us. It swung around on the wheel powerful enough to run the entire lift and a hundred people on it up and down a ski hill all day. Once again, the chair oscillated back and forth toward the towers that supported it, then settled. The woods passed us.

Mozart's horn concertos played in my ski helmet, and we swung our skis like scissors beneath us. I was amazed how it all came back, because I skied so little these days. There was no protective bar in front of us to keep us from falling from the chair. It was a long drop to the ground, but we felt secure anyway.

We skied this run several times to get our ski legs, warm up, and get used to the snow conditions, which were spring-like. The sky

was clear; it promised to be a warm day, and the day before was warm, too. This caused icy conditions when the snow thawed, froze at night, and was groomed by snowcats early in the morning.

Right now, the conditions were wonderful, with corduroyed snow that was not a hill of ice marbles but that would change as the day went on. By afternoon, the hills would be slushy with "corn snow." This condition was caused by skiers making turns in wet snow that ground into kernels. It was spring skiing and, right now, we reveled in the groomed hills. Our skis rippled on the groomed snow.

We skied behind the lift shed on a run that let our skis go. We turned long, carving, accelerating turns that took us along an expanse of snow and over a lip to a steep drop that led to the lift shed of a chairlift that serviced the runs at the back of the area. It was a fun run, forgiving, and easily skied.

At the top, we took another run that was an expert run all the way down. It started gradually, then dropped relentlessly until it flattened onto a gut busting level that led to the lift shed. I was tentative at first, then got my rhythm and finished strong.

My brother was skiing well. He skied a lot in his retirement, and his technique was always strong from the pretty French technique we learned as boys on a family trip to Big Mountain, Mont. He kept his skis together, too closely for the modern ski technique, but his position over them was good. He was blessed with good legs that ran in our family.

There were a few people in line, and we got in line and boarded the lift. The operator listened to rock music on the radio, and another operator shoveled snow onto the lift platform. The chair came quickly, and I almost fell out of it, because I was not prepared.

This time we ascended above the ski hill itself. Below us were children, hardly bigger than their boots, skiing among the moguls that billowed alongside the run, next to the trees that bordered it. The children handled the moguls without missing a beat. Their skis wove through the troughs of the bumps.

One skier schussed the hill, making long turns that made him go faster at each turn. He was a racer and skied fast and gracefully and drove his skis through each turn. His body stayed ahead of his skis, and his poles directed his movements.

The hill extended below us, like a pitched field of snow. I listened to Mozart's "Don Giovanni." My brother told me how his children were doing, and we decided to take one of the double black diamonds at the back of the area. These were hills so steep they made our hearts go into our throats just looking at them.

We skated off the lift and my brother herringboned toward a precipice. We stopped at the top and looked down. Our skis stuck

out over the edge. There was an oak tree that grew miraculously in the middle of the run.

My brother pushed off. Quickly, he hung on for dear life. I shoved off, turning tight turns that held the fall line. I knew if I traversed the hill, I would end up in the woods and wrapped around a tree. "Stay on them," I told myself, as I angulated into each turn then into the next. The run flattened abruptly at the bottom and shot us onto a cat track that traversed below the double black diamonds. We decided not to do it again.

Then we had lunch. We skied to the front of the area, kicked off our skis, and clumped up the stairs of the chalet to the second floor where we left our boot bags that morning. I got in line at the cafeteria and bought a bowl of wild rice soup. My brother brought a lunch of yogurt and a tangelo.

My brother and I fought for a place to sit down and eat. Young ski racers yelled and screamed around us. They were with their parents, behaved well and kept track of their gloves, helmets and goggles that lay on the tables. Where the money came from for a young family to pay for ski equipment, lift tickets, and lunch every weekend for even one child, let alone two or three, was beyond me.

I was so poor my sense of economics was skewed. These people were middle class or well to do. Even a used car was out of my price range. The economic issues these people lived with were foreign to me. I skied because I was raised to it. It was now a lifestyle out of my league.

Outside the window, the front hill looked like a ski area in Japan. There was a line at the lift of 50 people; the tables were crowded with people eating lunch, and the hill was populated with skiers weaving in and out of each other. Somehow, they did not collide.

We finished lunch and put on our helmets, goggles, and gloves. We clumped past the crowd, through the wooden door and down the metal steps to our skis. We stepped into them and skated to the lift. This time the skating was easier.

We warmed up on the forgiving run then took a black diamond located to the side of the back area. It was steep, fell away inevitably, and my brother took it without fear. I was more hesitant until I got the feel of the run, and I finished in a series of long, sweeping turns to the lift shed.

The snow was heavy, now, and it took more effort to turn our skis. The hill was skied out in places, with too many skiers grinding the snow into ice. Corn snow formed in pockets on the run where skiers made frequent turns.

It was getting warmer. I began to sweat. My forehead was dripping sweat under my ski helmet. My long underwear was wet around my neck and under my armpits.



We skied the expert run we had skied earlier to the saloon at its base. We took off our helmets and parkas, and I bought coffee for both of us. Neon signs lit the interior of the bar and the sun poured in the window. The bar was noisy and warm. Icicles melted down its windows, and people wore turtle-necks.

We sat on a bench out front, and the sun burned our faces. Before I left the high-rise, I put on sunscreen to protect myself from the skin cancer I was prone to. My face was pale from the stuff, and my helmet had a residue of it on its brim.

People crowded around a pond of water that skiers crossed in bikinis or swimsuits after schussing a hill that took them at speed across the pond. Men in scuba suits supervised them if they fell in the pond and tried to extricate themselves from their skis. A few made it, but most fell in the water.

The crowd cheered whenever someone fell or made it across the pond. People hoisted beers or wine as the skiers came down the hill at top speed and shot across the water on the narrow surface of their skis. We could tell if someone was going to make it by the way they held their balance on the water.

We found our skis in a complex of them and skied to the front of the area. Once again, we rode the chairlift and felt the glare of the sun off the snow on our faces. The run below us was the forgiving run, and one man skied it out of control. I was amazed at how little training people needed to have fun on skis.

We moved to the front of the area and found a run that was challenging. It started on a flat that dropped inexorably to the bottom without letting up for a moment. It was like skiing the front half of the world. If I leaned back on my skis, I was a goner. I hung on, driving short turns down the fall line next to the trees.

The sun was lower, and the runs were beginning to ice up. It was difficult to see the terrain and some hills were in the shade. So, we decided to stay on the hill we started on. It was shaded, too, since the sun was setting behind it.

It was quitting time, and we wanted to ski safely to enjoy the skiing tomorrow. We skied slowly, to avoid injury. A skier always got hurt on their last run.

Time after Time

By *Dabney Kennedy Tolson*
— *Wentzville, MO*

The clock delivers the time. An innocent fact we are almost unaware of.

However, everything in our lives, planet, solar system, galaxy and universe are all connected by time.

Our life cycle and daily activities are run by our measure of time, the clock. We speed from one task to the next. Time pressure is universal.

The traffic speeds along at a breakneck pace because we need to be somewhere by a given time. Catastrophe comes if a certain deadline is not met. Carelessness and accidents many times are related to time pressure.

I guess this is supposed to be humorous, but the fact that the clock and traffic go hand in hand was a reminder that the intense speed of military life, suddenly slowed by civilian life, can cause big problems.

The gold watch presented after 30 years of faithful service indicated you were at least on time.

DAVA, STATE DEPT. OF KANSAS AWARD

Company 922

By *Shon Pernice*
— *Moberly, MO*

I reported to Great Lakes, Ill., in February 1991. The bitter Chicago winter was a wake-up call to what I was about to endure. As a freshly turned 18-year-old ready to serve my country, I awakened to the yells of Petty Officer First Class (PO1) Legaspi. He was loud, authoritative and hard to understand with his thick Filipino accent. He would bark directions, and I wasn't sure what he was trying to convey. He was the commander of Company 922.

On our third day of baptism into U.S. Navy boot camp, PO Legaspi was having a sit down with us. He asked questions like "Where are you from?" "Why did you join the Navy?" "What kind of job did you sign up for?" And so on.

In his thick accent, PO Legaspi asked one recruit, who wasn't very sharp but had a heart of gold, "Where you from?" The young sailor smiled and replied "Jupiter, sir!" PO Legaspi's eyes got wide and he yelled, "push-up position!" Immediately the recruit dealt out 50 push-ups. The company commander then gave the relief command of "recover!"

While the recruit stood at attention, PO Legaspi asked again "Where you from?" Again, the dumbfounded recruit just smiled and replied, "Jupiter, sir!" A spew of profanities erupted from the company commander's mouth, and he again exclaimed, "push-up position!" This time PO Legaspi would tell the recruit when to do the push-up by saying "down," waiting a second or two, and then yelling "up" to get back into the ready position.

I felt for the guy but didn't know why he kept saying he was from another planet to a hostile man who didn't want to be played with. The command to recover was given, and the recruit was again at attention. PO Legaspi said in a sinister voice that I fully understood, "One more time or everybody pays. Where you from?" To my surprise the recruit once again smiled and said, "Jupiter, sir!" The command was given that we all hated, "Abandon ship!"

We learned the "abandon ship" command on the first day. That is where we push all of our bunks against the outer walls, stack all foot lockers, and make room for a couple of hours of strenuous PT (physical training). "Abandon ship" made guys puke from the intensity of the workout. The slang term was that we were getting "smoked."

Because of the "abandon ship" command, we all hated this recruit who wanted to mess with the commander's pride. We talked about the blanket party that we would be giving him later. PO Legaspi said that we would "abandon ship until the fire sprinklers went off" from the heat given off by our sit ups, crunches, eight-count body builders and leg lifts. There was so much puke that the smell just didn't faze me after rolling in it for that length of time.

When we finished the sadistic punishment from our company commander, the recruit in question went to his locker and retrieved his identification card. He presented it to PO Legaspi. The company commander's facial expressions went from astonishment, to confusion, amazement, then straight to anger. A foreign language spewed out of his mouth that I assumed was his native tongue. He stormed out of our barracks.

The recruit who was going to get a beat down from us later that night left his ID card on his bunk. The address read: Jupiter, Fla.



The Mystery of the Ditty Bag

By G.E. Murray
— Gardner, KS

September, 1958, U.S. Naval Recruit Training Center (boot camp), San Diego, Calif.

I'm waiting at the foot of my bunk with my locker open. Everybody is standing by their rack because it's inspection time, and a commander is making the rounds. (A commander is only one rank below a god.)

I look back and realize that I don't have a ditty bag in my laundry stack, and I launch into a full-fledged panic.

Mr. Wolf, our CO, is lagging several paces behind the inspection group when I decide to break ranks and tell him of my dilemma and ask him what I should do.

I'll never forget the smile on his face when he told me: "Son, when you see the inspection officer down one rack from you, I strongly suggest you drop your drawers and you crap (not the explicative he used) a ditty bag."

He nodded and walked away, laughing and shaking his head. I can only imagine the look of absolute terror on my face.

I watched the inspection group move slowly among the racks, up one side and down the other, drawing ever closer. Evidently, Mr. Wolf had informed the commander of my problem because he went directly to my laundry stack and flipped through it: two bath towels, two hand towels, one ditty bag and two washcloths.

He leveled a frown at Mr. Wolf and went on. In turn, Mr. Wolf eyed me with a look that would ordinarily frighten a lesser man. He rushed back along the lockers to make sure nobody had slipped their ditty bag to me after the inspection officer had gone by. Everybody had a ditty bag in their laundry stack, so he rushed back to confront me. "Where the hell did you get that ditty bag, sailor?"

I answered him without fear of retribution. "I did exactly as you said, sir. When I saw the inspection officer one rack away, I dropped my drawers and I crapped (the explicative I used was the one he had used) me a ditty bag, sir."

He couldn't charge me with insubordination because I had followed his orders to a tee.

The truth was that when Seaman Recruit James Pendry from Wisconsin, who bunked down at the very end of the barracks – the last man to be inspected – heard about my problem, he walked up and handed me a ditty bag when the commander was

inspecting at the other end of the barracks. Pendry shrugged, "I have an extra one, Murray. Just keep it."

From that day on, Mr. Wolf had it in for me for reasons I do not understand. I suppose it could be that he never did learn the truth about the mystery of the magically appearing ditty bag. It still makes me laugh to this day.

DAVID A. ANDREWS, JR., MEMORIAL AWARD

Tarmac Terror

By Wayne A Ince
— Sun City Center, FL

The shift started unceremoniously like so many others before. It was like a routine you get accustomed to doing, such as standing before a mirror in the morning washing your eager face and shaving stubbled new growth or what many of us called pretend skin.

Many of us were so young, including myself, that we liked to fantasize we could actually grow some facial hair or wish some into existence just to have something to shave. After cleaning up and getting my ironed uniform on, I leaned over the edge of my bunk with my chest pressed on my knees and quickly laced my shined military jumped boots. Before exiting my personal space, I reached out and grabbed my restricted area badge and placed it around my neck where it kept my dog tags company.

Downstairs in the parking lot in front of the dorm, several members of Bravo shift gathered, chatting over smokes and engaging in rough talk. After a while, a group of us started our long trek on foot through RAF Upper Heyford, England, across the main road and past the Ministry of Defense buildings toward the flight line entrance, where we waited for the Blue Goose, a 36-passenger blue school bus to arrive to transport us to work.

The short bus ride from the flight line gate entrance to the hanger destination was always a good time for quiet reflection right before the mood hardened. As we got closer, hard stares replaced the lights in our eyes as we prepared to do the work of rough men in the dark. As security police specialists, our daily duty was to guard the base, protect its aircraft and personnel and accomplish all other assigned duties as ordered.

The Bravo swing shift started at 3 p.m. and ended at 11 p.m., but we were required to be at the hangar at 2 p.m. to sign out weapons from the armory before proceeding to guard mount to receive orders of the day and assignments.

The hazy afternoon dimmed as our flight chief briefed us on a potential escalation of security threats based on warnings issued

of perceived clear and present terrorist dangers. It was April 1986 and American military serving overseas had recently been targeted in Berlin, where a nightclub frequented by American servicemen had been bombed. I listened intently to my flight chief expound on weapons safety, special security instructions and security vigilance. As we broke guard mount and headed off to our assigned posts, a murmur of anxiousness filled the quiet void around me. Eager faces turned sour and tight like a belt buckle pulled slightly past the last possible hole to make you uncomfortable. I knew this shift was going to be different, and any planned fun in barracks later would have to be postponed.

Hours later, night had descended slowly like a heavy, unfurling canopy blanking out any light. I was by myself on the back forty of the flight line, standing outside a guard shack, when the first air-ground equipment vehicle came barreling up to my post for entrance to the restricted area. Soon after, a steady flow of maintenance vehicles paraded back and forth into and out of my restricted area.

Usually, on evenings like this it was a blessing for such activity because it made the shift go by quickly. But tonight the good fortune had a twisted, cursed feel. Unlike previous shifts, there was minimum small talk exchanged with the air crew personnel ferrying equipment into the hangars within the restricted area that I closely guarded. The hurried look and purposeful business engaged by workers scurrying around grabbed my attention. I sensed the tension and tightened my web gear and harness out of practice and comfort to assure myself I was ready for whatever. When the security patrol came by for a security post check, I quickly learned from them that the entire flight-line had erupted in furious activity through the evening since our shift had started, and our F-111 aircraft were being operationally generated - battled prepped!

End of shift arrived fast and furious and my Charlie shift replacement relieved me from post and explained to me somberly that I should be prepared for a very long night. Upon arriving back at the hanger with the rest of Bravo shift, our flight chief greeted us stoically and told us to not turn in our weapons and to do what most military personnel excel at the most - "stand-by."

We were brought to attention as our flight commander approached and explained that the group commander had an announcement. There was a hush and a thick tension over us as the commander approached, each stride announcing his arrival. I recall staring straight ahead, stiff and still locked at attention braced for the worst. My mind raced with all that I had seen and heard that night against the backdrop of news reports in the Stars & Stripes newspaper about threats of aggression against America and our resolve to respond. Maybe this was the hour that terror had finally reached the tarmac, the moment we had all trained for and routinely worked toward - defense of our base and our nation.

After the commander announced that we were entering a high state of alert and security posture based on advanced warning of a U.S. response to terrorist aggression, I was nervous for what lay ahead and how far off the dawn seemed.

Past midnight, we were reassigned to augment Charlie shift, protecting the base perimeter and guarding base housing where military families resided. The seriousness and urgency could not be understated. I was in awe of our commander as he spoke about the potential danger to our base and existing threat. He spoke powerfully and directly with a calm reminiscent of a coach sending his team out to beat the crosstown rival. But this was not a game, and there was much more at stake. As the commander went over the rules of engagement, I stamped my boots on the tarmac to quell the nerves. As part of my job I was used to carrying live ammunition on my web belt along with a gas mask strapped to my thigh. But tonight my battle dress gear included a kevlar helmet and flak vest for protection against unknown threats.

I was paired with another security policeman as part of our increased two-person security posture. Together, we vigilantly patrolled the base housing area and the back side of the base perimeter, monitoring all avenues of approach. Thinking about it, we were targets walking slowly looking for any and all signs of intrusions. Jet aircraft had been launched throughout the night; their loud roar bursting the air.

As fatigue tried to slow us down, the roar of jets and a flight line alive with activity kept us wide awake and present in our continued duties. As I patrolled, I kept engaged by picking out cover and concealment areas, should the need arise, and assessing our fields of fire. We tried to keep the conversation to a minimum to not get distracted, and we listened to our patrol radio channels for any information that would give us an update. Security police work was never glamorous, and air base ground defense was even less so. But I experienced an array of emotions that entire shift which served me during my entire military career. At times, I did feel isolated from the action of the flight line and security control center, but then there was a feeling of being at the tip of the spear. This had been my second assignment and first overseas at the start of a very young Air Force career.

Air Force Security Police are called "PeaceKeepers," and in April 1986 with the world filled with terror, I was proud to be on duty when F-111s were launched to participate in the preemptive Libyan bombing action against reported terror installations.

The day had started no different, but surely ended unlike many others. After working 16 straight hours guarding and protecting the base under the strain of the unknown or possible threat of war, I returned to the barracks with the rest of my Bravo shift team members discussing the night's events and the bombing

that took place. I didn't fire my weapon or chamber a round, but I learned that it's important to face danger and terror head on and trust the person next to you and believe in your training.

I still enjoy jet engine sounds; those loud roars are the sounds and reminders of freedom to me. I have sincerely understood that no day is promised and that we live one moment to the next. I am happy to have kept the peace and proud to have served.

My Life Before, During and After Vietnam

*By Rodney Stopp
— Midland, PA*

My name is Rodney George Stopp. I was born on March 5, 1948, in Beaver Falls, Pa. My parents were George and Frances Stopp, and I had three younger brothers – Doug, Brad, and Marshall. My father worked full time at Babcock and Wilcox steel mill and had various part-time jobs working in security or cleaning. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. I received my high school diploma and worked at several jobs from a cook to assistant service manager.

Instead of being drafted into the Army, I enlisted in the Marine Corps and received basic training at Parris Island in South Carolina. I received advanced combat training at Camp LeJeune, N.C., and then went to Camp Pendleton, Calif., for additional combat training. I was active duty stationed in Vietnam from Oct. 3, 1967, to June 6, 1969, achieving the rank of Lance Corporal.

My entire time in Vietnam was spent in-country serving with the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines. My very first day in Vietnam I was involved with three to four firefights. The Viet Cong hit the battalion three times a night for three days in a row. A rocket hit so close it knocked my helmet off. A friend of mine in Echo company was killed. I was also involved with Operation Scotland 2 in Quang Tri Province.

After they stopped bombing in North Vietnam, the battalion was sent to an area just above Khe Sanh where we were staged. There were bomb craters and dead North Vietnamese soldiers and body parts all over the place. The smell of decomposing bodies in the hot sun was horrible. Command had us dig in and we waited there for three days and nights.

We eventually returned to the DMZ, and I met one of my best friends while in Vietnam, Thomas "Tinker" Mullins. I had been in-country for almost five months. We continue to be friends until this day. I met Pernell through Tinker; they were both from Kentucky.



During Operation Dewey Canyon in the Ashau Valley of Quang Tri Province, our squad got cut off from the rest of the platoon. We had rockets and grenades coming at us. There were two paths; my friend Pernell took the right path and got shot in the face. I took the left path and was able to rejoin the squad. We set a field of fire with no further enemy interaction. After this I went back and picked up Pernell and carried his body back to the rest of the company. (Leave no man behind.) There were other things I saw that are too horrendous to put in writing.

There wasn't much in the way of entertainment, but we did listen to the radio. Heard a lot of Beatles music (Hey Jude, comes to mind). I also had rest and relaxation in Australia for five days and six nights. I was mainly interested in pursuing American looking women.

I received the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal with four Bronze Stars, the Navy/USCG Unit Commendation Ribbon, the Meritorious Unit Commendation Ribbon with one Bronze Star, a Combat Action Ribbon, a Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal with device and the Republic of Vietnam Meritorious Unit Citation (Gallantry Cross Medal Color with Palm). I am also entitled to the Army Presidential Unit Citation. I also received the Rifle Sharpshooter Badge and a Good Conduct Medal. Prior to being honorably discharged I transferred to the Marine Corps Reserve.

The reaction from others when I first returned home was negative. I would go out to nightclubs and be addressed as a "baby killer." Since service in Vietnam was initially considered a police action I wasn't eligible to join the VFW. It was difficult for me to socialize with other people.

I worked at various jobs and never held one for very long. Prior to my fourth marriage, the first three marriages never lasted much longer than two years. I have two daughters that I have had little or no contact with, much to my regret.

I had trouble keeping a job, maintaining personal relationships and with alcohol. I have had flashbacks, problems with insomnia

Brain Stimulation and Virtual Reality for PTSD

By John Cervone

VA Medical Center— Providence, RI

and nightmares. My current wife had to learn not to be within reach when waking me up because one time when we were first married, she woke me up and I punched her so hard she received a bloody nose. I would drink until I passed out. I have been on anti-anxiety meds and antidepressants for years.

I was alcohol dependent until I had heart problems in 2005, and then I quit. I feel the problems I had in my life were a direct result of having PTSD. The Department of Veterans Affairs first denied me service connection for PTSD in 2009. I was finally approved for partial VA benefits in 2017 for PTSD and health issues connected to exposure to Agent Orange. I have received and continue to receive counseling, and it has been therapeutic.

On the upside, I kept my job in security for over 30 years and was captain of security for the last 10 years before I retired at the age of 66. I became an EMT and enjoyed being able to help other people. My fourth wife and I have been married for 30 years, most of them good years.

My memories continue to make being able to sleep difficult. It has been hard to describe a year that has lasted a lifetime.

My Girlfriend

By Demetrius Kastrenakes

— Miami, FL

I met this girl about nine years ago while I was in high school, and it was love at first sight.

I kept in contact with her throughout my tour in the service. We had a very good relationship. We shared everything together, everything I had.

I remember we used to party together, go to movies together, even go to church together. Sometimes I wanted her to just leave me alone, but the love I had for her was very strong. We did break up for about six months, but somehow we were drawn back together again.

During this time, she had begun to use me and abuse me physically and mentally. She had me doing things that I wouldn't normally do. But my love was still there.

We tried to talk about our problems. We even went to counseling. Things started to get better – for her. I fell deeper in love with her until finally I went to prison for her.

Although she's out of my system now, I haven't forgotten about her, and I'm sure she hasn't forgotten me. I guess she has to go on in her direction, while I go in a different direction.

By the way, her name is cocaine.

I recently participated in a research study at the Providence, R.I., Veterans Administration Medical Center that used brain stimulation techniques in order to both evaluate and try to reduce the effects of PTSD on veterans.

I am not going to be arrogant and to try to explain the procedure; I'll leave that for the more insolent individuals out there, but anyone interested can contact the VAMC and have it explained to them by professionals.

As for myself, I have experienced the effects of PTSD for over 50 years, and I have been going to the Providence facility for treatment for over 24 years. I am not a novice when it comes to knowing how this disorder can disrupt your life. It is as if you are looking into a black hole and you cannot imagine anything in your life that would make living worthwhile. You can have all the comforts of life imaginable but they mean nothing because all you can feel is guilt and fear.

One of the main disorders I experienced was pushing people away from me. This syndrome can lead to divorce, suicide and being estranged from the ones you love.

So when I read the flyer describing this process I immediately called and volunteered to be a test subject. I felt that even if it did not help me perhaps my participation might help my friends from the past.



The tests were conducted over a two-week period, and subsequent evaluations were conducted in timed intervals afterward.

Once again I am not going to be arrogant and try to convince others of the effects of the research. I will, however, state unequivocally that I was able to view the world in a much better way. My thoughts of the past became thoughts of the happier times in my life and helped me to experience a more positive view of the world around me.

As I have stated these are the results I have experienced, and I am not going to try to say that this is what everyone may expect. All I can do is simply relate my experience and once again thank the wonderful people at the Providence VAMC for being there when I needed them.

One Day Too Long

*By Edward E. Felt
— Stratton, NE*

I enlisted in the Air Force in November 1961. My basic training was at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. From there I went to Biloxi, Miss., to Keesler Air Force Base, where I trained in long-range ground communications.

From there I went to the Philippines to Clark Air Base for a couple of years and on to Camp Drake on the outskirts of Tokyo, where I helped take over Army communications. I was there about a year and thoroughly enjoyed the city and the people.

Then it was on to Nakhon Phanom in Thailand for about nine months. Thailand was a nice place then, and the people were friendly. My last active duty station was Vietnam. And that is where I was "one day too long." I already had been assigned to go to England within the next month.

While I was in Vietnam most of my time was spent in Da Nang. I was wounded at Dong Ha, which was about seven miles south of the Demilitarized Zone on March 10, 1968.

I had been in Vietnam since October 1966. It was artillery fire from the demilitarized zone. They never fired on us at night because our soldiers could pick up on the muzzle blast and return fire. But it was now a Sunday morning. The good thing about Sunday was there were only two of us on duty and the next shift had not come in yet.

We were in a communications tent which was a pretty permanent place, and we took a direct hit when the first round came in that day. My co-worker was killed instantly. I lost a foot and part of the bone in my shin and had a gaping hole in an arm. Yet I was



lucky where I was as there was a DMED station right next to our site, probably 50 yards, so I had immediate medical attention.

They flew me down to Hue Phu Bai, where I stayed for a couple of days. On to Da Nang for one night. I was supposed to go to Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Aurora, Colo., but when I got as far as Guam the doctors were concerned about my arm injury. They took me off the plane and I went right to surgery.

After I had been there for a couple of days they said I had about a 50/50 chance of keeping my arm. The bone was blown out and I couldn't move my fingers for a long time. I ended up spending over a month in Guam.

One of the nurses was married to an Air Force man whom I had known in another station, and she made connections for me to call home. I was raised by my grandparents who at the time were well into their 80s. They knew I was injured and not wanting to upset them terribly, I told them I just had a broken leg and arm. After I was hospitalized for a length of time I had to tell them it was more than a broken arm and leg.

I finally got to Fitzsimons Army Hospital. The armed services tried to place you in a facility near your home so you would have the support of your family and friends. Over a period of 18 months I had nine surgeries. Some were on the open wound on my leg and some were on the arm.

They did a pedicle graft on the side of my stomach. Basically they opened up a horseshoe shaped area and then laid my arm down and attached it to my stomach for a little over three weeks. That surgery made me rather immobile. You should try to hold your arm on your rib cage and get up out of a chair or turn over in bed. Pretty tough, right?

When they figured it was getting nourishment to the arm they cut it loose from the stomach. Putting some humor into the

situation, I could ask people if they wanted to see my belly dance and would move my arm from side to side and the piece of stomach would move.

Over the years I have had some fun by asking preschool kids to take my shoe off. With a little help with my thumb, I can push my prosthesis off. Kids eyes get as big as saucers thinking they have broken my leg or worse. This gives me an opportunity to explain that some of us have artificial limbs.

My other arm had a hole in it big enough to put my thumb in. When I was injured I had four Kennedy half dollars in my pocket. I had no serious wounds on my hip area, but the half dollars were torn apart by the blast. One coin had been hit so hard that the imprinted edge of the first coin was then imprinted on the second coin.

I left the hospital in August 1969. There were a lot of people in the hospital who were worse off than me. And I had a support system of friends and relatives who could take me to their homes over weekends, etc. Besides the Purple Heart, I have a Bronze Star from my service to my country.

The GI bill gave me additional training and I received an Electronics Technologist degree. I met and married my wife of 48 years. I have survived for 20 years from a cancerous tumor in my lung. Yes, I am a lucky guy except for being in Vietnam “One Day Too Long.”

VFW AUXILIARY, DEPT. OF KANSAS AWARD

All Cracked Up

*By George S. Kulas
— Fond due Lac, WI*

It was the first time I had it done in years, but it seemed like only yesterday.

“Relax now, relax,” the chiropractor said as he twisted my neck. My thoughts took me back to that day in April of 1967 at Phu Bai, South Vietnam. My first sergeant gave me the “evil eye” that morning while saying those dreaded words, “Marine, get a haircut!” I had been avoiding getting clipped by any of the Vietnamese barbers in the local village. Like all Marines, I did not trust any Vietnamese, unless I was absolutely certain they were not Viet Cong (V.C.), a.k.a. Charlie.

I walked cautiously through the village, searching for a friendly-looking barbershop. Soon I had given up on friendly-looking and stepped into one that was a suspicious looking, run-down, small shack, like all the rest. The barber jumped from his chair. He was a middle-aged man, about five feet tall, and his wide smile

showed only a few teeth that were so black they looked like fangs of coal. For a second I felt a sense of relief for not having to visit a dentist in the village.

The barber said, “Welcome, welcome Marine, I Charlie; I give you number one cut.” A shiver ran down my spine as I thought, “This is all I need--a Vietnamese barber named Charlie who wants to cut me.”

I reluctantly sat down in the barber chair and ordered his “A” package--a haircut, a shampoo and a shave. The haircut and shampoo went fine; I was even starting to feel relaxed. But after lathering my face and neck, Charlie pulled out the longest, sharpest, brightest and most dangerous-looking straight edge razor I had ever seen. My eyes must have resembled lollipops; a searing pain rushed through them as they frantically shifted from the blade to Charlie and back to the blade.

Charlie slowly drew the razor over my Adam’s apple to the tip of my chin. Suddenly it seemed very quiet. I didn’t dare move anything except my eyeballs, and they were still racing. I thought to myself, “One swift swipe of the blade and there will literally be one less Marine at head-count tonight.” I imagined Charlie sneaking off to his V.C. friends that night, opening a box and showing off his trophy--my head.

After what seemed hours, Charlie finally finished his carving, and I began to breathe normally again. Then, in a flash, he wrapped his arms around my head and quickly snapped my neck. My heart was skipping beats as a terrifying realization that I hadn’t been exaggerating Charlie to be a “Charlie” rushed through my mind. As I heard and felt the cracking in my neck, I was certain he was trying to break it.

I jumped to my feet screaming, “What the !@#\$ was that?!” Charlie laughed loudly and said, “You no like, first time huh?” Rubbing my neck I realized that it didn’t hurt but instead actually felt relieved. Still, I didn’t take Charlie up on his offer to “crack the other way.” I paid him and left in a hurry.

Because a Marine needs haircuts (often) and because I didn’t want to experiment with another barber, I returned to Charlie many times during my tour. I always ordered his “A” package, and he always threw in a neck-cracking. I actually began to enjoy them. He chuckled each time I returned to his shop, knowing how worried and nervous I was the first time.

I don’t know if Charlie survived the war or its aftermath. If he did he may have continued barbering. But I like to believe that Charlie quit barbering and eventually became one of Vietnam’s “crack” chiropractors.

A Walk in the Woods

By William Martin Greenhut

—Ossining, NY

It was a beautiful autumn day for a walk in the woods—cloudless sky, pleasant temperature, lots of shade trees. As the company cleared the route of our sweep in the Demilitarized Zone, I hung back until my men were out of sight. Only then could I enjoy a rare moment of quiet solitude, alone but for Phillip, my RTO (radio/telephone operator) who was looking at me like I was crazy.

Although there was dense underbrush interspersed among the trees where a North Korean infiltrator, deeply concealed, may not have been flushed by my platoon, the possibility was so remote that I gave it no credence; because the DMZ was so dangerous, humans were relatively few and, for the most part, unless they were on a mission, tried to stay away from each other. I had done these walks before without incident and was satisfied that we were safe.

Phillip's shoulders were slightly hunched from the weight of the radio strapped to the back of his slight frame as if he was shrinking into himself, and I could see the fear in his wide eyes. I felt paternalistic toward him. He was a few years younger than I, and because of the nature of his job, he was an almost constant presence whenever I was tactical. He made sure my weapons were always clean and ready, and he would often tell me what was going on with the platoon that, otherwise, I may not have been informed about.

We had an easy relationship, and he was the only enlisted man I addressed by first name. When I held the handset to talk to the C.O., I dragged him along by the common cable connected to the radio as if it was a leash. I was so used to him that I took him for granted and dismissed his concern.

I preferred the sweeps on the mountains and hills, even though climbing could be exhausting, to the ones we conducted through the expanse of long untended and overgrown rice paddies, where the ground was sodden and movement made difficult by the surface muck and stalks almost as thick as bamboo.

But the high ground in the DMZ was littered with minefields left over from the time of open warfare more than a decade earlier. Most of the barbed wire fencing marking them had long since rusted away, and the connecting posts were leaning, or had fallen, into the underbrush. As it happened this day, it wasn't until someone noticed a mine protruding from the ground that we knew we were in one.

Many, if not all, were visible, having been in the ground so long that they were poking up at an angle. They were "Bouncing Bettys," cylindrical pressure-release mines; step on the prongs on

top, pressure, remove the foot, release. The mine pops out of the ground and explodes at waist height, eviscerating anyone in the blast area.

The platoon stopped, and I was called forward, watching where I walked. It wasn't like in the movies; I wasn't going to assign an expendable enlisted man to get down on all fours and probe the ground before him with a bayonet while everyone lined up behind him. I wasn't worried. Even though I had spent weeks recuperating from a North Korean antitank mine that had detonated beneath my armored personnel carrier on a rarely used road, I felt like I was more in control on foot. I was calm as if it was routine, wanting to avoid panic or have anyone freeze in place, unable to move.

I called the C.O. to tell him so the other platoons would stop until we caught up. I moved to the front, and the troops slowly made their way in single file behind me. I proceeded forward in the same manner. When I was certain everyone was out of the minefield, I made sure we were online with the rest of the company and informed the C.O. we were clear so the sweep could continue toward the blocking platoon positioned beyond the bottom of the mountain short of, and out of sight from, the North Korean side. I waited for my platoon to create enough distance between us so we were screened by the trees and I no longer saw them before I took up the pace. I didn't have to see Phillip's face to know what he was thinking. He may as well get over it, I thought. If I could squeeze these few moments of relative solitude for myself out of this perilous tour of duty, there would be more fall days and walks in the woods to come.

Vietnam Memorial Wall

By Gene Allen Groner

VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

My wife and I visited Washington, D.C. and while we were there we went to see the Vietnam Memorial. Although not a combat veteran, I am a U.S. Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War, having served in the Marines from 1961-1967. At that time a six-year commitment was required, and I elected to serve three years on active duty and three years in the Marine Corps Reserve.

The Vietnam War, was a conflict in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos from November 1, 1955 to April 30, 1975. There was also violence and demonstrations here at home in the United States, as many spoke out against the war and protested our involvement. The military doesn't make government policy nor does it declare war. We protect and serve our country as we've been trained to do, but upon returning home after the Vietnam War many who served their country were treated badly, as were their family members

who had stayed behind and waited for their return. The war was very divisive in America, and it remains so today.

At the height of the Vietnam War, in 1969, there were half a million U.S. military personnel stationed in Vietnam. Nearly 60,000 Americans died there, along with nearly two million civilians and over a million Vietnamese fighters. It was a civil war between the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese. The government of the south had asked for our help in keeping their democracy. It was a time in world history when democracy was being threatened by the takeover of communism. It was the worst of times.

Many in our military never made it home. They were killed in Vietnam. I had friends who were among them, and I wanted to pay them homage for their service and sacrifice while we were in the nation's capital. There are 57,939 members of the U.S. Armed Forces whose names are inscribed on the Vietnam Memorial Wall, which was dedicated in 1982. Additional names have been added since then, including eight women plus over 100 servicemen who were Canadian. The wall itself is actually two walls of black granite, each one over 246 feet in length and reaching up from three feet to a height of 10 feet, one pointing to the Lincoln Memorial, the other toward the Washington Monument. There are directories at either end which help visitors find where the names of their loved ones are inscribed on the wall, and many who come there take rubbings of those names and even leave mementos on the ground below.

As my wife and I approached the memorial, tears welled up in my eyes. We were deeply moved by the number of those who had died serving their country. My heart ached for their families and their losses. Many continue to grieve even to this day, as I do. Even though I wasn't in combat, my heart was still with them on the battlefield. It still is. Tears still come into my eyes as I reflect on the Vietnam War. America has been engaged in armed conflict for much of our 240-year history. I wonder how much longer we will be fighting.



Service Dogs and PTSD

By Gene Allen Groner

VA Medical Center— Prescott, Arizona

It is reported that nearly half a million American veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder—PTSD. While many other PTSD treatments have produced only disappointing outcomes, positive results are being realized through the assistance of dogs that have been specially trained to bond with veterans.

These dogs are much more than traditional guide dogs. They provide independence, companionship, safety, and help with daily tasks for veterans with disabilities who are challenged physically, emotionally and mentally. An estimated 20 percent of veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq suffer disabilities that produce flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide. The percentage is even higher when counting veterans returning with traumatic brain injuries.

These service dogs are not pets. They've been trained to work in stressful situations and to stay focused on the handler. Because of the bond that is developed, they can alert their veteran to the onset of migraines, seizures, or debilitating mood changes before the veteran knows what's happening. The service dogs are intuitive, mild-tempered, and professionally trained to help the veteran with any and all issues which may arise, which includes getting emergency medical assistance when needed. With the help provided by service dogs, many veterans can return to work and a meaningful life with their families, even go to college or acquire specialized work training.

The two main requirements for a veteran to have a service dog are: the veteran must have a diagnosed disability and must receive or train a dog that possesses the proper temperament and aptitude for service dog work to alleviate the effects of that disability. There are a number of qualified organizations that provide dogs and training and must be contacted individually. Each will have its own requirements and application process. Scholarships and other financial assistance may be available.

Veteran service dogs can help reduce thoughts of suicide, mental health breakdowns, risk of drug abuse and violence, and medical and psychiatric costs. There are a number of non-profit organizations that can provide additional information and guidance regarding veteran service dogs. Whatever service organization is chosen, the most important thing is to connect our veterans needing assistance with good information and support. Serving our veterans who have given us their service is of paramount importance for today and for their future. It is an opportunity and privilege to show them we care.

Author's Note: *I hope this article will be of value to my fellow veterans and their families.*

Strong or Weak

By Anthony Kambeitz
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

In the late 1970s and early 1980s I found myself living at the Boonville Hotel in Boonville, N.Y. There were about six rooms there, where people stayed long term. All of the other guys there during this time were alcoholics and spent most of their time at the local bar. I had a small room on the second floor. I went there to get away from my mother, Edna, as she and I didn't always see eye to eye.

Early one Sunday morning I decided to take a walk and see what the little town of Boonville had to offer. I was thirsty. I saw a place called the Gaslight Café. It was open, so I went inside to grab a cup of coffee. After I finished my coffee, I decided to explore a little and figure out just what this small town had to offer.

I came across the First Baptist Church of Boonville. The pastor's name was Howard Church. How about that? He used to fill glasses with water and play them with a spoon. I liked it; I thought it was brilliant. But the other guys at the hotel did not. They thought it was feminine. They called him gay and made fun of him.

He invited me over to a restaurant after church one day and offered me some apple pie, ice cream and a coffee. It was so nice. I'm not used to people treating me that nicely. But the other men began to think I was gay, too. These people intimidated me. They bullied me for being disabled and out of work. They often taunted me with sarcastic phrases like "keep up the good work." It made me so angry that they didn't like me spending time with the pastor. It was this anger that fueled the poem "Strong or Weak."

They made such fun of me and of the pastor. They taunted me, telling me that it was a terrible thing I had done by allowing myself to be in his company and have a piece of pie with him. I went into my room one afternoon, feeling so angry, and the words just flowed out of me. After I wrote the poem, I stayed in my room for a long time. To be honest, I was afraid I might hurt someone if I went downstairs, because I was so hurt. But I didn't want to show that to any of them.

When I finally went downstairs, I spoke with the landlord, Marlene. I felt a huge weight had lifted off my chest. I knew that I just had to be alone. That poem is the most powerful one I've

ever written. The anger that I felt was so strong. But as I look back now, I realize that a powerful thing happened to me that day. Instead of acting on my anger and getting myself in trouble, I put it on that paper. And it is still with me, giving me strength.

Strong or Weak

In the wee small hours of infinity,
As I ponder life's mysteries long,
I realize that to survive
I can't be weak,
I must be strong.
Strong enough to handle life in all that I may find
And look the other way.
Strong enough with eyes wide open
Instead of stumbling through life blind.
But if having faith is a weakness,
Then weak I'd rather be.
Weak enough to be humble,
Weak enough to do His will,
Then weak is something I'd rather be.
May I grow weaker still.

I Recorded Their War Stories

By Richard H. Erickson
—Lee's Summit, MO

Congress enacted the Veterans History Project in 2000 and charged the Folklife Center in the Library of Congress [www.loc.gov/vets] to record and archive war stories.

The Branson, Mo., Veterans Task Force started recording veterans' stories in 2003, and 10 years later we had archived 1,080 interviews, which are in the Lyons Memorial Library at the College of the Ozarks with copies in the LOC.

Branson is the destination for military reunions and honors veterans every day, so we had numerous opportunities to conduct interviews. Noteworthy was the Medal of Honor Society reunion where I interviewed a navy chief about the Dec. 7, 1941, attack at Pearl Harbor. I recorded pilots who flew paratroopers over the June 1944 D-day landings, a retreating soldier from the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, the last Vietnam War battle that wasn't in Vietnam and an Operation Freedom veteran.

These are stories that need telling so future generations can appreciate their freedoms. I'm proud to have participated in this important venture.

Visual Arts Initiative

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. For the near future we will continue to publish the artwork in color, thanks to Dr. Rubin's generosity.

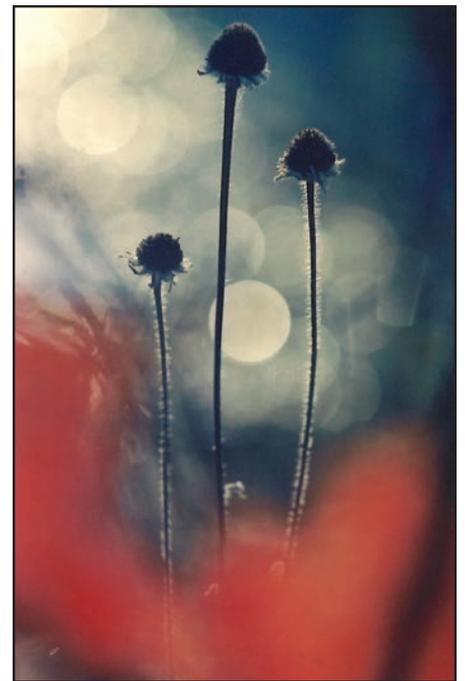
— *The Editors*



Untitled: *By Bruce McClain*
— *Blue Springs, MO*



Korea: *By Daniel Strange*
— *San Antonio, TX*



Petals: *By Demetrius Kastrenakes*
— *Miami, FL*



Chief Joseph: *By Daniel Craig*
— San Antonio, TX



Chinook: *By Jim Barker*
— San Jose, CA



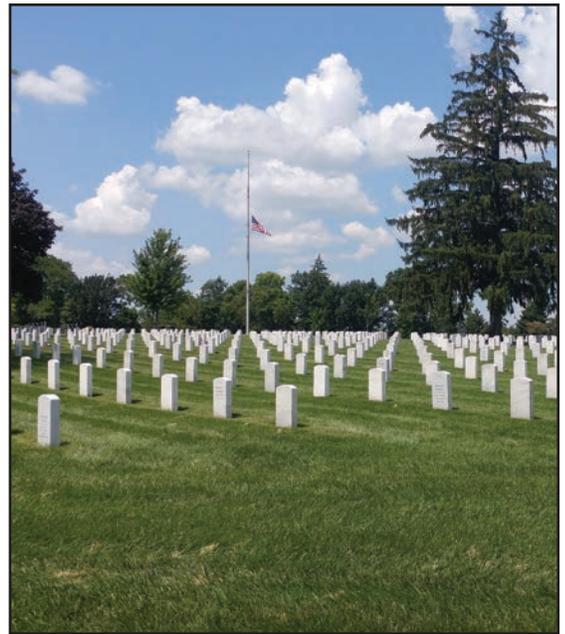
Vietnam Morning: *By Jim Barker*
— San Jose, CA



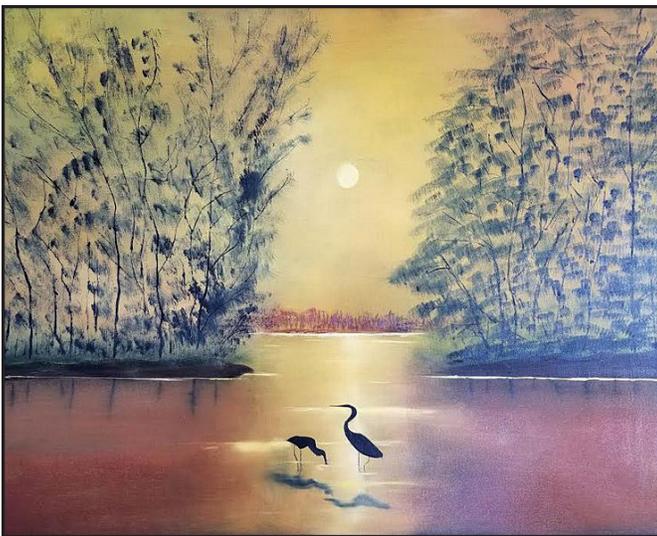
Untitled: *By Bruce McClain*
— Blue Springs, MO



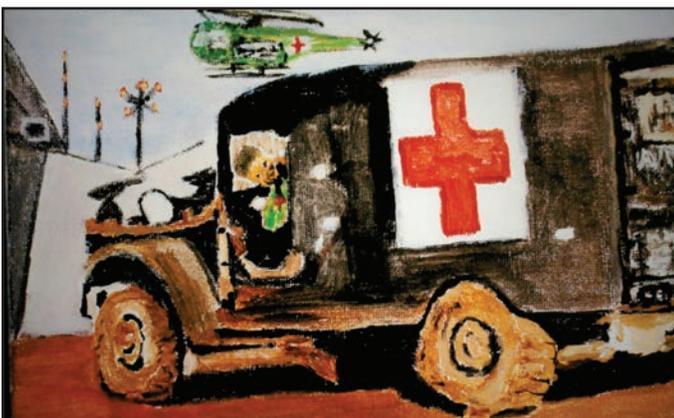
Eagle on Perch: By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



Untitled: By Charles Dailey
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH



Everglades Sunset: By Steve Kirkland
— Southgate, MI



24th Evac: By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



Untitled: By Shon Pernice
— Moberly, MO

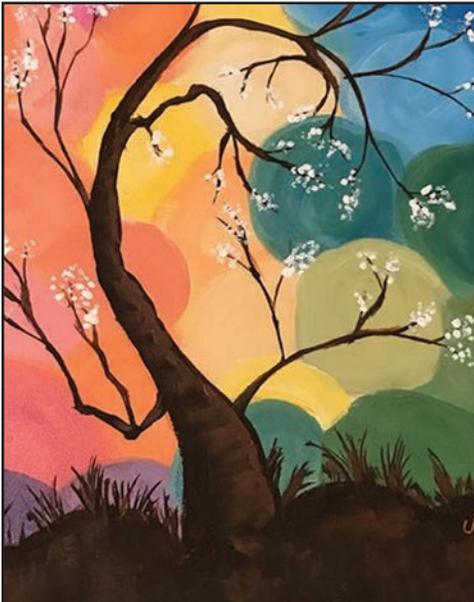
Women Artists



Stay Patient and Trust Your Journey:
By Kirsten (Hesterberg) Vallinmaki
VA Medical Center— Kansas City, MO



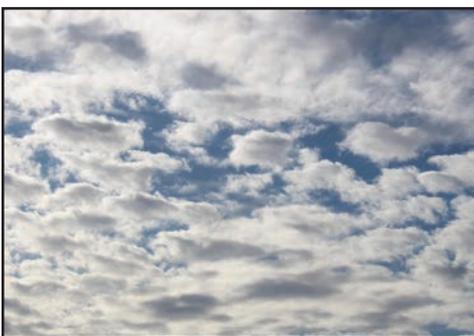
Is This Where I Just Came From: By Penny Lee Deere
— Albany, NY



Rainbow Tree: By Judith Guittar
—Louisville, KY



Potted Plants: By Judith Guittar
—Louisville, KY



Clouds Part: By Michelle Pond
— Overland Park, KS



Hold On: By Michelle Pond
— Overland Park, KS

Salute to Women Writers and Artists

March is Women's History Month and the publishers of *Veterans' Voices* think the observance is a propitious time to highlight the writing of women veterans and encourage others of them to write for the magazine. Veterans Voices Writing Project welcomes writing from military men and women alike, and indeed early issues of the magazine feature writing by a woman who served as a nurse during World War I.

Today, we want to be certain that all servicewomen feel welcome to submit their writing and artwork to the magazine for possible publication. We'd like women veterans to share their thoughts and feelings about what makes their military experience unique.

With focus on the contributions of women writers, this issue of the magazine includes a special section devoted

exclusively to their writing. Several of the featured authors are regular contributors. Readers will recognize Helen Anderson Glass and Judith Sweet Guitar. Both women tell their stories in prose and poetry, as well as sharing artwork.

In addition, the guest editorial is written by a woman veteran, Erika Cashin. Erika is an Air Force veteran and writes about the many roles women play in both military and civilian life. She encourages women to "Just Do It!" She and another featured author in the women's section, Donna Southwood-Smith, encourage women to take advantage of the Servicewomen's Transition Assistance Program and enrollment in the Veterans Health System. The publishers and staff of the magazine hope you enjoy this special section.

—Margaret Clark, editor-in-chief

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

How I Learned I Was a Veteran

*By Donna Southwood-Smith
VA Medical Center— Baltimore, MD*

In the fall of 2018, a notice for the Veterans Administration Women's Health Transition Training caught my eye. I was on long-term active duty orders at Joint Base Andrews, and with nearly 28 years of combined active and reserve Air Force time, was beginning to look at pre-retirement programs. When I look back in my work log, one of those five-by-eight-inch green, hard-covered notebooks that we military types use, I see the reminder I wrote: "Sign up for women's health training at JBA." I had no idea of the impact this particular training would have on me.

This Women's Health Transition Training covers the eligibility, enrollment process and women's health services available through the Veterans Health Administration. It also explains the difference between the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA),

and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). For those of you wondering, the short answer is that the VBA deals with monetary benefits, and the VHA deals with health care. Active duty servicewomen are the main target audience, but women in the Reserve and National Guard are included

Another aim of this training is to highlight the transition support for women making the shift from the military into the civilian community and to present the strong cultural change in the VA. Unfortunately, female veterans have been overlooked and even harassed and insulted when trying to access their benefits, deterring many from seeking health care. The Center for Women Veterans was established by Congress in 1994 to right this wrong. Along with advocacy for recognition and respect for our service has come improved women's health programs and care. I had no idea that this benefit was available to me.

By the end of the first hour, I realized I had missed years' worth of health benefits – 18 to be exact. "How did I not know this information?" I thought, "I attended the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). Did they talk about the VHA?" The reality is that many of us who sit through TAP, now Transition GPS, focus only on the thing most important to us at that time. For some, it's post-military employment; for others, relocation.

For me, it was school. After just under 10 years of service, I left active duty to go to graduate school. I also joined the Air Force Reserve to continue serving, but from the deluge of transition information, I had mentally distilled only what had to do with my GI Bill benefits and little else. I have long since graduated, having used my education benefits to full effect. Now, I was learning about the benefit I could use for the rest of my life.

This class was fun! Our instructor, Nic Hall, was thorough and engaging. She is an Army veteran with combat deployment experience and wry humor. Her stories resonated with all of us women from across the armed services, and as we shared our own career stories, we all laughed over the irony of our ignoring our own health care in an organization that requires good health to accomplish the mission.

We learned about hard data that supported what we probably already knew--that females face very specific service-related health issues. I also learned that women rarely self-identify as veterans. How could this be true? In an unscientific survey of my own female friends who had retired or separated from the military, I found this borne out in their responses. "Mm ... not really." "Well, I'll say I served." "Oh, I just never actually said that. Maybe it is on my job application." I was stunned. And even more so, when I realized that I too had never identified as a veteran, despite having recently returned from my seventh deployment. Fun class, yes, but this information was serious.

By the end of the second hour, we were learning about the services available to us, not only in women's health, but in general health and wellness management. Gale Bell, the Women Veterans Program Manager (WVPM) at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center (VAMC) was present at my session, and I am happy to say I now know what a WVPM is and why we have them.

Every VAMC has a female medical professional in this role to help women navigate their care, and Gale is a passionate advocate for the female veterans who call on her for help. Her input provided an additional dimension to Nic's training, giving us updates on the supporting research on military women's health conditions and care. The links between our military work and our health outcomes became startlingly clear as each of us gave examples of conditions for which we never thought to seek treatment. What we learned was how to speak about our experiences so our health care providers could help us make those connections and find the best treatment path.

This training highlighted the integrated care now incorporated at the VHA, and there are many non-medical, complementary approaches available at the VAMCs and in the local community. It was lovely to have someone from the medical center to answer our

questions about local programs and how to access them. By the end of the day, we had learned how to enroll in the VHA and how to find support for our transition into this new health care system.

When I left this training, the first thing I did was enroll in the VHA. I was so excited about the information, I told everyone I knew. I called my friends; I went to the senior females in my reserve unit and gave them Women's Call Center cards. I asked every close-to-retirement, about-to-separate person I knew or met if they had enrolled in the VHA. I told my commander. And I went to see the first Veterans Service Organization representative with an open appointment.

This training alerted me to the many veterans service organizations that provide help and support for veterans. And I had just realized that I was a veteran. Really. How did I not know this? In retrospect, it seems silly, with all my time in service and all those deployments, it should have been obvious. But I had certainly never considered it. Besides, I thought I had to retire to claim this title.

The Women's Health Transition Training pushed me to examine my own attitude toward my military service. I had thought of veterans as "the old dudes with the hats and the pins" and didn't see how I could be included in that "club." Now I know that the first third of my military service, which included humanitarian projects, two disaster response missions and a deployment to Saudi Arabia, had already made me a veteran and that I was entitled to VA health care and disability benefits. My VSO representative helped me complete the initial claim paperwork and sent me off to gather all my supporting documentation.

Military personnel coming off active duty receive only one DD214, but reservists get this document after each stretch of active duty time over 90 days, so I had a stack of them. With my class handbook as a reference, I made sure I had my medical records and all my DD214s before returning to file my claim. Yay!

My excitement about the WHTT did not wane over time. I kept sending information to my friends across the country, and to my own troops who were separating from service. After a few months I contacted a member of the training team and told her I was interested in working this project. And I was hired!

I believe in the mission of this program and am thrilled to be a part of this team. My graduate degree is in the education and training field, and this position is a grand union between my civilian education and my military experience. Now I travel to bases across the country providing the very information that sparked my interest and motivated me to get the health benefits I earned. I have seen the curriculum evolve as we adapt the

material based on policy changes and on questions and feedback from our participants. Each class teaches the training team something new about women's military experience.

I am very happy with my own care at the VA, but my navigation through the VA health system has given me greater understanding of the challenges women (and indeed all) veterans can face in accessing health care. However, armed with the information I received, first as a participant and now as a trainer, I can provide my sisters in service the information they need. Too many women leave the military and are unaware of the support and care available to them. The Women's Health Transition Training gave me the information about the benefits that were available to me, and it also provided me with tools to access those benefits. The first of which was understanding that I am a veteran.

Center for Women Veterans (CWV) VA Women's Health Transition Training (www.va.gov/womenvet/acwv/whtt.asp)

Women's Health Transition Training is hosted by the Women's Health Services Office at the Department of Veterans Affairs, in conjunction with the Department of Defense.

The training will provide servicewomen with a deeper understanding of the women's health services available to them within the VA health care system. The course will be interactive, with opportunities to personalize training content, and will be led by a female Veteran. The course will cover the following:

- The transformed culture of VA for both male and female patients
- Range of women's health and mental health care services and available benefits
- Eligibility for and enrollment in VA health care
- Expectations for women to proactively seek health care services post-separation
- Logistical details such as facility structure, locations, and points of contact
- Available transition support services

Dress code is civilian casual. We encourage attendance from Active Duty Servicewomen who plan to transition to Civilian or Reserve/National Guard Status within the next calendar year.

For any questions, comments, or concerns, please contact Dr. Nancy Maher, Program Manager of the VA Women's Health Transition Training, at nancy.maher@va.gov.

Suicide Shouldn't Have to Happen

By Karen A Green

VA Medical Center— North Las Vegas, NV

The other day someone texted me this comment: "Don't do something permanently stupid just because you're temporarily upset."

Suicide is a very sad thing, especially when others don't understand why a person would go that far. I know what it feels like because I have been on that brink several times. I even tried to end my life several times just to end the pain. It's a feeling of emptiness and of no hope. People say, "They took the easy way out." There's NOTHING EASY about suicide! Other people say, "They were a coward." These same "cowards" fought for this country to give this person the right to call him or her a coward.

Children being bullied at school can be suicide candidates. Bullying drives these youngsters over the edge. See the single parent struggling to put food on the table for their children. Elderly people who gave everything they had and now are forgotten in a nursing home. Then you have veterans who fought for their country only to come home to empty arms and disrespect. Where is the hope for these people who have lost their will to live because they feel nobody cares about them?

After the person is gone, others who had been around them say things like "She seemed to be a happy person." Or "They had all that money, or why would they throw it all away like that?" Suicide has no boundaries for age, race or social status. It's everywhere and people need to start paying attention to what is going on around them.

Such as in their homes when they ask a loved one how they are doing and that person responds with a "fine." Are they really feeling fine, or are they hiding their true feelings? If a person starts giving away cherished belongings or an active person suddenly becomes withdrawn, these could be signs that the person is planning to end their life.

If a straight-A student suddenly has a drop in grades or becomes disinterested in school, people around them should take notice and get them help.

Some people don't know there's help out there. They can talk to their parents or their pastor. They can talk to a friend. Call the National Suicide Hot Line at 1-800-273-8255, and if you are a veteran, press 1 to talk to someone. Also, a veteran can reach the VeteransCrisisLine.net or text 838255 to reach someone to talk to. If suicide is about to happen, call 911 and the dispatcher will get you to where you need to go to get help. There is help out there.

A Different View of War

By Helen Anderson Glass
VA Medical Center— Tuscon, AZ

Women are serving in combat— at the front right alongside of men now. A short time ago I was speaking with a woman just back from the war. I told her I was a U. S. Navy veteran of World War II and was writing a book, “Dedicated to Women Veterans” and I wanted to hear their stories right from these gallant women, in person, if they would share them with me. I was very moved by what and how she told me her story. I told her my dad was gassed, and wounded in World War I in the U S Army serving in France. That he suffered with “shell-shock” (now PTSD) for many years and how he was able to “roll with it.” From what she said and didn’t say I wrote this with my own “Memories” added as she described her experiences as much as she was allowed or able.

Memories

The sound of distant guns and the flash as they hit their mark,
But I hear the katydid chirping and see fireflies in the park.
That’s what goes through my head and I do not see the dead.
A mortar shell burst somewhere afar,
And I hear backfire from grampa’s old car.
As the shells over the battlefield light up the sky,
I remember the rockets and fireworks on the Fourth of July.
The rations we get really aren’t that bad,
‘Cause I remember goin’ campin’ with my dad.
It’s not the cries of pain I hear or the enemies gun,
I hear the cheers from the bleachers when our team hits a home run.
I do not breathe the stench of war,
‘Cause the smell that I remember is the food and the pine tree and
sounds of Christmas in December.
And when on the move and I pack my uniform and my gear,
I think of the wonderful vacations our family took each year.
When they post the list of the wounded or the dead,
I look to see who made the team or the Honor Roll instead.
At times when we go without a meal,
I have to lose weight – no big deal.
In battle there is little time to pray so we cuss or pray in our own way,
And I think of Sunday school as a child when we had to remember a verse,
And Lord help us if we didn’t or if we uttered a curse.
It makes no difference whether the veteran is a woman or a man you see.
Bad war memories bring on PTSD.
Having a different view of the war
Helps you mentally, physically and more.
Perhaps this sounds heartless to you
Whether they are a man or a woman
A soldier has to do what they have to do.
So this is the war from a woman veteran’s point of view.
That’s how I see it. How about you?

WAC VETERANS’ ASSOCIATION, ARIZONA
ROADRUNNERS CHAPTER 119

The Fearful Drive Home From the County Fair

By Judith Sweet Guittar
— Louisville, KY

I was a recruiter tending a booth at a county fair in rural Georgia. It was dark by the time I was leaving. I jumped in my Army sedan not equipped with a radio and started singing to pass the time.

After an especially sharp curve, I heard a noise from the back seat. Still singing, I glanced in my rear view mirror and saw the outline of a man’s head! I kept singing as I didn’t want him to know he had been discovered, and I kept driving with my heart racing.

About 10 miles down the road I came to a small town and decided if I saw anyone I would stop the car, jump out and holler for help.

Rescue was in sight—a group of men malingering outside a small bar and pool hall. I jammed on my brakes and began to open my door. Glancing back, I saw the interior light come on.

Oh no!

The “man” in the back seat was my dress hat on the rear window ledge, and the noise had been a loose seat belt buckle hitting the car door.

The men on the sidewalk looked rather curiously as I slammed my door shut and drove off.



Women Poets

The Invitation

By Karen A. Green

VA Medical Center—Las Vegas, NV

I received an invitation from our precious Lord above.
It asked me to receive eternal life and love.

The Lord called and I said I can come.
His invitation is to everyone, not just for some.

Though earth hinders and hell rages,
I choose Jesus Christ and not Satan's wages.

I want to go to heaven and not the lake of fire,
because I know God is truth and Satan is a liar.

Why do some people choose to live in sin
when Jesus gave His life for us so we can spend eternity
with Him?

Jesus Christ is coming back to judge us all.
Ask Him into your heart today.
He knocks at your heart; just answer His call.

Mother's Day in the U.S.A.

By Helen Anderson Glass

VA Medical Center—Tucson, AZ

Each mother bravely bears the pain of giving birth and more,
but her greatest pain is when she sends her "children"
off to war.

So, as a tribute and gift to "mother," we pray
that God will grant her a blessed Mother's Day.
Watch over her "children." Bring them home from the war,
so they may celebrate Mother's Day together once more.
Family all together on this special Mother's Day,
back home in America—the good old U.S. of A.

Memories Are Stored

By Michelle Pond

—Overland Park, KS

Memories are stored.
We may recall them or they may come to call.
We wish we could forget some memories are stored.
We fear our response if we may recall them.
It is best not to ignore them or they may come to call.

SALLY SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL 3 OF 3

The Scent of War

By Louise Diane Eisenbrandt

—Leawood, KS

It was a long journey: first a commercial airliner,
Then a C-130, followed by a Huey, finished in a Jeep.
Fifty years ago, destination—Vietnam, purpose—nursing.

What to expect, how to react, sights never imagined.
On the job training—do what one could.
Young men with hepatitis whose faces wore a yellow hue,
Nearby others enduring the fever and chills of malaria,
Stomachaches from parasites, infected sores and leeches.

Yet nothing compared to the smell of the wounded:
Dried blood caked on torn fatigues,
The pungent stench of white phosphorus
With the aroma of jungle dirt and sweat permeating everything.

We did our best to cleanse their wounds.
We did our best to wash away the dirt.
We did our best to scrub the litter's canvas.
One can try, but the smell of war never goes away.

The Oath

By Rosalie Cooper

VA Medical Center—Buffalo, NY

Defend and protect our Constitution and America's freedom.
That is the oath men and women take when they join the armed forces.
Whether Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines or Coast Guard, peacetime
or wartime, they answer the call.
They receive orders sending them all over the world.
Some stay stateside. Some go to Japan, Korea or Germany, wherever
their skills are needed most, leaving family and friends behind.
Some are sent to a war zone, unsure of when they will return home.
Those that are sent to war zones, go and fight with honor, knowing
they may not return home or may lose a limb or two.
It may be months or years before they come home, come home as
strangers to family and friends.
All who spent time at war, knowing they were getting support from
home, fought knowingly and bravely.
Some did not make it. They will forever be remembered by those
of you that made it.
We honor and salute you as you return home.

Change in Me

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center, Albany, NY

I had unwanted advances,
I was traumatized.
This changed me,
No one can see my scars.
No one noticed that I am hurting,
But I am scarred.
I am in emotional pain,
Pain that effects my physical being.
This “thing” tears at my heart,
It takes my breath away.
The calm within is no more.
It changed me,
I was traumatized.

Have Faith

By Michelle Pond
—Overland Park, KS

Have faith in the earth.
Understand its worth.
Have faith in humanity
despite, at times, its inanity.
Have faith in a higher power
even in your worst hour.
Have faith in yourself.
That is true wealth.

A True Patriot

By Rosalie Cooper
VA Medical Center—Buffalo, NY

A true *Patriot* embodies the love of
America,
Stands for the flag, kneels for the fallen.
A true *Patriot* instills the love of America
in others
Extends a hand to those in need.
A true *Patriot* never gives up,
Stands tall for their beliefs.
A true *Patriot* knows the sacrifices of
others
So they can be free.
A true *Patriot* lets their loved ones go
To defend the Constitution.
A true *Patriot* supports others
While inspiring them to become *Patriots*.
A true *Patriot* is a leader—
That *Patriot* is you.

No More, Not Me

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

No more, not me, no more.
Told I am nothing,
you start to believe it
or worse ignored, invisible and a
nonentity.
Say what—
shut your mouth
no more,
not me
no more me.
She’s not a doormat,
she’s a survivor.
Stand up, I say.
Speak out.
Be heard.
No more suppression.
Who goes there?
You try to defeat
repress
stop
impede and put down.
It’s time to go forth,
XL (excel),
just move forward,
whatever it takes.
Sustain
behold
embrace
accept
in fact, bloom and then get back.

Don’t Wait ‘Til Tomorrow

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

When to God we pray, He gives us the
words to say.
If we see others hurt and lost, talk to them
today about what their salvation cost.
Don’t say I’ll wait for tomorrow, because
our time here on earth is only
borrowed.
Jesus didn’t say, “I’ll wait to take sins away.”
He wouldn’t wait and go to the garden
to pray.
The time is now, please don’t wait.
Hurry, it’s getting late.
The end times are no longer near.
Wake up and see the time is here!

Man or Woman of War

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

Oh, to be a boy or girl again
And not a man or woman of war,
To feel innocence again
Like driving a brand new car.

To not fear the night
And the terrors held inside,
To sleep without awakening,
To not feel dead but alive.

To breathe as you used to,
How happy you would be.
To not be dependent on a CPAP,
It would be such sweet liberty.

To be able to run
Like you did before
And not be dependent on a cane
To get you to the door.

To be able to jump
From a bird in flight,
To be AIRBORNE
That would be my wish on this night.

And last but not least—

To be whole again
And not subject to tests.
Gulf War Syndrome
Has made many soldiers sick.

These are the thoughts and the prayers
Of many Gulf War veterans
As they prepare for the night.
To be whole again before they die

Another Soldier

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

Another soldier went home today.
Their wounds had become unbearable,
Beyond individual hope for a better day.

A senseless death, a wasted life.
Hard for many to understand,
Easy for some to recognize why.

No one wants to talk about it,
Very few do anything to stop it.
A number that continues to rise.

Another soldier went home today.
Two in two days is too many.
We should honor their lives, not deaths.

Families and friends left to wonder why,
Fellow soldiers left to wonder who is next.
Will this madness ever cease?

Put to rest by their own hand and demons.
Their battle now over, their souls at peace.
Another soldier went home today.

Arise, Oh Sun

*By Jill Marie Baker
VA Medical Center—Sioux Falls, SD*

Arise, oh sun!
Shine your healing light upon the earth,
The trees, the flowers,
My porch.
Creep upward,
Your oranges, pinks and reds
To fill the limitless sky
With hope for a new day.
Bring with you renewal,
Mind, body, spirit,
Free and cleansed
Of the darkness,
Reluctant to give way to the light.
Find me
Clear-minded,
Open-hearted
And strong of will.
Prepare me for the troubling days to come.

WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

How Will You Use It?

*By Jill Marie Baker
VA Medical Center—Sioux Falls, SD*

We all have something in our lives
That elicits pain and sorrow.
The something might give us pause
For a day, a week, a month, a year.
Then we settle,
Successfully incorporating the new into
the old.

Then there are those experiences
That are life-changing,

Causing such a monumental shift in
The gut, heart and soul
That we are forever different.
And that which we were is no more.

Whether that change be for
The better or the worse
Is not for us to choose,
As the something most likely
Is beyond our control or comprehension
At the time of its making.

But now that the something has happened,
What will you do with it?

If for the better,
I pray that you allow it to expand past
The confinement of your own self.

If for the worse,
I pray that you allow it to do good
And expand it past
The confinement of your own self.

Otherwise it might slowly chip away
At your goodness,
Until you are something that you hate.
So I ask you,
How will you use it?

Soldier of Circumstance

*Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR*

When a soldier comes home from war,
Nothing is the same, like it was before.
Innocence is a lifetime away,
And the night terrors want to stay

Because your combat vet
Is shell shocked.
That's what they used to call it
Way back in the day,
When soldiers would come home
And have nothing to say.

The death and destruction,
The agony of defeat
And the thrill of victory
As he can barely stand on his feet.

The night terrors
And falling off the bed,

Will this dream ever leave
Or is it forever in his head?

The smell of war,
The battle cries
And coming home,
His mind always takes him
To the combat zone.

And growing old early,
Is it meant to be
Or is he a soldier of circumstance,
One who wishes to be free?

A Soldier's Promise

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

To guard our country and way of life,
To give my life if needed in her defense.

To remain dedicated and true
To the principles of freedom and justice.

To stand at the ready at all times,
Even in the face of harm or certain death.

To have compassion and show mercy
For the ones downtrodden and persecuted.

To never forget that I alone
Am responsible to my fellow soldiers.

To never give up or surrender,
For I am a warrior, skilled and prepared.

To fight hard with all my heart and soul,
To never accept surrender or defeat.

To never leave a fallen comrade,
An oath taken so that all may return
home.

To remember and never forget
The names of those forever engraved in
stone.

My oath has no expiration date.
My mission will only end upon my death.

To render honors and salute all
Those who continue to serve after my
time.

I will always be there at the ready
To support my brothers and sisters in
arms.

I am a Soldier, fearless and strong,
And this is my solemn vow to each of you.

The Day Draws Near

By Clinton Jarrett

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Sometimes I feel like the building I pass on my morning walk.
Once a bustling business, it used to echo with conversation
and laughter.
Now paint peels, wood rots, windows are broken and a
swayback roof threatens collapse.
Stones crumble, and I notice part of a wall has lost its fight
with nature, allowing a dust-filled stream of light
to shine through. I know a day will come when heavy
equipment will arrive, level what's left
and haul away the rubbish.

An Old Man With a DD-214 Is a Powerful Thing

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

Yeah, I took the oath,
Growth from 17 to 20'
Nam going strong
Fixed and fixed and fixed.
And all points I flew
On C-130As
That old warhorse of a plane
Countless lives it saved
Remember it like yesterday
The tears they still do fall.
Fifty years later, now old am I,
Lucky no bullet did I catch
Nor was I blown up.
I cannot take my T-shirt off
People would stare in horror
I'm all cut up by doctors knives
Scars everywhere.
The color is orange
As in agent
We sprayed it everywhere.
I have lost count of operations
Docs doing their marvels
Keeping me going.
An ok-d man with a DD-214
Refusing to give up
Still riding on a Harley
Advocating for his brothers
Younger ones, too,
They deserve the best!
Freedom will never be free
These tough men and women can attest.
Me, an old man with a DD-214,
Still a power to contest.

Cuties and Beauties

By Frank X. Mattson

VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA

My head spins.
I look around.
Fantastic looking
Women
All over town.
They don't need
Me.
I feel like looking
Away.
I feel
All depressed.
All twisted
Around.

On the Side of the Road

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

On the side of the road was a mansion grand,
Dark, forbidding and bare.
A man lived there who was bent and old
And no one seemed to care.

In that house, all love had fled;
His soul was shriveled and bare.
Nothing was left, only money and wealth
And his graying locks of hair.

In his youth, he was handsome and gay;
He loved a girl, proud but poor.
She had no wealth but her own sweet self;
Now she is lost evermore.

His family was proud, rich and strong;
These two were driven apart.
Only one who has loved and lost
Knows the longing in his heart.

On the other side was a cottage small;
A man, a maid, a child lived there.
Happiness reigned in that cottage small;
Music and laughter filled the air.

Which side of the road do you live on;
Do you live in a mansion grand
Or a cottage small where love is all?
Which would you choose, my friend?

Miss Bliss

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

I want you to want me
Down by the hickory tree.
I've come too far
To turn back now,
To let you walk all over me.
Baby, baby,
I miss you so.
You said you would never go.
Like snow in the spring,
Tears you would only bring.
Never again will you laugh
At me.
I was gullible, vulnerable and naive.
You were the apple of my eye,
And I felt the pain
When you said goodbye.
Never again will I waste
My time.
Love is a crime,
Love is blind.
The ice is thin,
I guess you win.

Old Habits Die Hard

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

I made the best of life every day,
Followed routines, tried improving my way.
Even when circumstance brought me to know,
I found old behavior so hard to let go.

Cigarettes were lit time after time.
The addiction came from all brands and kinds.
I had a desire for my habit to leave,
But also yearned to do as I pleased.

Carried longing to quit, without a doubt,
Found everything true that came about.
Even fresh air was slowing me down.
Breathing was hard while walking around.

My mind yearned for cigs, but I couldn't wait.
When temptation moved out, I was set straight.

Typist: Marybeth Matthews

You Could Listen

By Anthony Coccozza

VA Medical Center—Los Angeles, CA

You could listen to my music
That plays the red, white and blue.
Next comes the "Star Spangled Banner,"
I name it after you.

I like the song you're singing,
"My Country, 'Tis of Thee."
I, too, would like to join in,
For the stars and stripes I see.

I'm proud to be a soldier
And there's a reason why:
I'm proud to be an American
For our flag will always fly.

You could listen to my songs
That play red, white and blue,
Because I am an American
And I sing them just for you.

Wonder of the Day

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

Begin the morning with an open mind,
Stepping into the light of day.
You'll see a clear view every time; the sun shines bright beyond
the way.
It brings you warmth as the weather changes; now pleasant
breezes are everywhere.
You'll feel surprised at how nature arranges the unexpected
outcomes we bear.
A refreshing shower provides some relief for everything that
grows under the sky.
A wonderful rainbow appears; it's brief but shows beautiful
colors up so high.
While the sun shines beyond the way, thoughts reach deep both
near and far, finding the wonder that will always stay—
God loves you wherever you are.

The Assassinated

By Frank X. Mattson

VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA

The martyr, the saint, the objector.
There have been many known and unknown.
The true way, they think.

The Grace of His Love

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

God the Creator has only love for you
And me,
For only He will give eternal love
That lasts
Through the trials and tribulations
In a world so cruel,
Beyond the realms of eternity
And beyond the distant sea
That waits for you and me.
God the Creator has only love for you
And me.
Within the swirls that twist and turn
And burdens that weigh within our minds,
Within the turbulence that grips
And slowly drips with pain
And through the endlessness of time,
He gives love freely as he gives precious rain.
God the Creator has only love for you
And me.
He gave His son who hung his head down
And died on that glorious day.
He shed His precious blood;
It couldn't be any other way.
God the Creator has only love for you
And me,
So that we may have endless joy
With Him in eternity.
God the Creator has only love for you
And me.

Mourning Darkest

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

Out on the ocean we slave,
Keeping on duty
To keep from a watery grave!
The radar "blips"
Enemy ships!
All hands, man your battle stations.
We are in harm's way!
Under the canopy of stars
The last thing I saw was
The Milky Way!

My Passionate Flute

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

Like dew in the evenings, we play, my flute and I.
Then crickets begin their reply.
A love mate's melody
Softly my flute would sing.
Beneath my solitude she'd bring upon my subtle music
a true harmony that would zing.
Smooth, with quiet echoes, her passion would fling.
Then I flowed with time gone by that glorious evening,
my flute and I.

My Street, My Town, My Country

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

My street is Orchard Street.
It shines of the twentieth century.
We neighbors live and let live.
We wave, we smile, we care.
Voices are seldom raised here on Orchard Street.
Our street is happy!
We know our street is the best!
My town is Munhall, Pennsylvania.
It is our own "Mayberry."
We go about our business joyfully.

Our town is our own "Grover's Corners."
Munhall has grounds and cemeteries.
We all acknowledge our blessing to live here.
We know our town is the best!
MY country is America.

It is our heaven on earth.
We welcome strangers here and: Love Them.
Our country has faults, tho very few.
The soul of America is: We the People.
So many states and commonwealths are here,
each one a home for you and me.
We know our country is the best!



A Love Letter

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

For these hours in the day
I will take you away
For a party of fun and games.

For these days of the week
All the joys that you seek
I will give you in whatever life names.

For the weeks in a month
And the truth that you hunt
It'll provide the ends of your claims.

For the months in a year
Be you far away or near
Yours is all praise; mine is all blames.

For the years in a life
Where love is so rife,
For the life of eternity
Be it only for you and me,
The hereafter teaches and tames.

Metal Angels

By Paul David Gonzales

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

Choppers flying low in the sky,
a welcome site to a soldier's eye.
Power and might, oh, what a sight,
banking left and banking right,
dropping brass to kick Charlie's ass.
The rotor blades are a blur
as those birds doth soar,
and those blades slice the air
like a surgeon's scalpel
while their guns spew shrapnel.
Spray the trees and the grass,
reduce the plains to expose Charlie's ass.
Some carry the dead and some the wounded.
Is there more? Then return
to settle the score.
Whoop, whoop, whoop!
The rotors spoke the language of war
as the noise of cannons broke.
The pilots were brave
and many young men found their grave
within that bubble
that brought Charlie so much trouble.
Now, their rusted metal skeletons
all twisted and mangled by gravity's force

lay somewhere in that jungle.
The air is still with an eery quiet
but the sounds of those mighty
engines and rotors can still be heard
if you listen closely to the wind
as it blows over those rusted metal bones.
The sound may be faint in a low musical key,
an orchestra of mechanical notes
as the breeze bounces between their metal ribs.
Jungle birds perch atop those twisted silenced rotors
as bird shit coats that rusted frame,
an empty seat without a name.
Animals nest where those brave men sat,
also birds and even a rat.
A mighty chopper when she flew
and now she's just an ingredient of the jungle's stew.

The Vessel of Time

By Daniel Kent Merwin

—Brooklyn, NY

My work, the world knows.
Knows, those who study history.
History, repetitive with frame of tragedy.
Tragedy, the bedrock of perfection, rotten.

Rotten with perfection, people gather amid
The good ideas made flesh by leader supreme.
Someone to believe in and divine the light,
To shine bright and define the fight.
To polish the lie and blind the eye,
To point to subalterns and alter the truth.
And imbue on the victims the sins and the guilt
And purge through mass murder, through murder they rid.
The worthiness they once had, now labeled a win.

This win is not theirs, but mine, as it was.
Was work I have done and done throughout time.
Time shows my mischief, the mockery of God.
“God”—the word used all in vain each time done.

You'll know my mark—the demagogues and camps.
The scapegoats built to clear you of your sins.
You will forget, you will repeat,
As always and forever is.
And while you invoke God's name to sin,
I continue my work—my Devil's win.

A Soldier Mold

By Paul David Gonzales

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

Hey, young man, so brave and bold,
join the Army and a man we'll mold.
We'll button your pockets,
shoot some rockets,
teach you to shoot at real live targets.
We'll teach you to lead with your mind.
And, always remember, no man's left behind.
I hear what you say and I'm willing to pay
with my life, if I must.
Please don't leave me in the dust.
I wanna win and take it on the chin.
Just gimme the go,
and with trust and guts I'll show.
I did my thing; medals home I'll bring.
Welcome home! No one said,
"Find a job to get ahead."
I wanted school but married instead.
I have no money except what I saved.
Too old for home, I need to make it on my own.
I need to drop the Army thought.
Three hots and a cot, that's not a lot.
I took my training and made my way.
The thoughts of school I put away.
The marriage failed and tore life's sail.
I spiraled down in an emotional gale.
I kept on going never knowing
if I'll ever make a showing.
Deep within me ever coded—
never trust, be alert and always loaded.
I never knew this I carried
way down in my soul.
I now see its damaging toll.
I raised my kids, married new, paid my way,
but Vietnam was never far away.
Look ahead, don't look back,
place the rifle on the rack,
put the anger and disappointment in your pack.
Seal it with the red, white and blue
that you still hold true,
and make it work for you.
I did my duty to mom, God and country.
Do not carry this heavy burden.
Life's too short elders retort.
I'm home and here I'll stay.
Vietnam is now far away.
My thoughts I'll keep tucked away,
a special place just for me to know
and only a tear I will show.
And when I hear the bugle play
the music for the dead,
I'll salute proud and true
and never bow my head.

The Unsung Heroes

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

They proudly put on their uniforms,
day after day,
not worrying about
what is around the bend
or how much they get paid.
They are our unsung heroes in battle.
How they must dodge many bullets
around the way.
They keep from getting rattled
to keep themselves from life's end.
Some of their comrades in the field now lay,
awaiting the meeting with their maker.
Some have gone on before,
screaming and crying for medical attention.
Here's one missing an arm;
there's one who has taken his final breath.
Shots ring out across the shore,
bombs blast in the air,
the casualties add up to the war over there.
Is it worth it?
Here life seems even more unfair.
The unsung hero may never make it home,
but to him it was worth it all to secure our freedom,
my friend.
My thanks and gratitude to everyone
who has ever served.
Thank You. God bless and love you all.
You are heroes that may never get an award or trophy.
You are heroes that today I will recognize.
Unsung Heroes.

Panic Attacks Rag

By Daniel Paicopulos

VA Medical Center—San Diego, CA

From the halls of Montezuma to a hedge-lined nursery,
I'd no idea what it was, what was happening to me.
It was a beautiful day, early in May, children at play,
free to be free.
There were flags unfurled to a mid-spring breeze,
no reasons to fret and all was at ease.
Such a sunny scene, no fear of showers,
no nerves at work, I was just buying flowers.
Suddenly it hit me, bright lights, roaring sound,
the flowers went flying, me too, to the ground
with chest beating wildly, gasping for air,
no idea what to do. I just had to leave there.
Eventually I calmed, tried looking back,
realized this wasn't the first such attack,
with thoughts of death, pure fight or flight,
with no clue as to cause, try as I might.

Later, in treatment, I learned what it was;
it became all too obvious, the reasons, the cause.
The children that day were all Vietnamese,
no danger to me nor their families,
but that has little to do with the truth, don't you see.
There's no logic to emotions in PTSD.
I'm better now, but I'll never be free.
It's a life sentence, this thing, this PTSD.
I have coping skills now to assist, and people who know,
and little by little, it improves as I grow.
A little bit older, a lot more wise,
so now when the attacks start, I just close my eyes,
notice my breathing, count the beats of my heart.
It's not a total solution but, hey, it's a start.

White

By Daniel Paicopulos

VA Medical Center—San Diego, CA

Father of two fine lads, each a father now.
Packed a lot into a too-short life.
Radioman, Marine, buddy through and through.
A small-town boy, a universal man.
Covered a grenade, allowed me to have a life.
Remembered every day.

Maybe

Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

Maybe
The last thing I ever write
Maybe not
Turn back the clock
Fifty years.
Eighteen
Nam—C-130As—straight up
Straight down.
Scared and green
Introduced to seeing things
No human should have to
In a hundred lifetimes.
Saving lives
Resupply and medevacs
Working human bodies
Along with jet engines
Body bags in the back.
Ruined relationships
Not enough alcohol made
Rage in a heartbeat
Nobody deserved.
Treatment after treatment
45 to the head

Too cowardly to follow through.
No filters have I
No sugar coating
Back to '68 now
Just an old fool.
Politicians did me up,
Not my brothers.
Who cared!
I try so hard
But to no avail
Impossible to wipe out
Memories
That affected your whole life.
Service?
Yeah, my whole life
It was all I knew
In everything I did.
Always loving others
Serving others
Concentrating on others
Living for others
So I could forget about
Myself and cope.
Often failing
So isolation becomes
My best friend.
People see me smile
And laugh
I do get out
When I can.
They know not my mind
Or how I feel
Ripped apart inside
And poor behavior.
In a few days
Another operation
Lost count.
Is this 20
Or 21?
Hello, darkness,
My old friend
On the table
Once again.
I broke the Air Force!
The 8 million dollar man
Neurosurgeons
Just rub their hands!
Why?
Do I keep going?
Can't answer that!
Others serve
So I can avoid myself!
No stopping time
69 soon
No matter what.
Every day 18!

Love Came Down From Heaven

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Sin had done us in,
we had nowhere to go,
no hope, no way,
Our backs against the wall.
Then God looked down from Heaven.
His Son was so willing to go to be that
sinless sacrifice.
All would surely know
that Love came down from Heaven.
Mary would bestow
Jesus, the Christ, our King,
the one so willing to go.
Love came down from Heaven.
He would shed it abroad.
His teachings would be learned by men
and written down by God.
Love came down from Heaven,
catching in the hearts of men.
He showed us what it meant to be
free from every sin.
Love came down from Heaven.
O how His love would spread.
He cleansed the lepers,
healed the sick
and even raised the dead.
Love came down from Heaven.
We crucified an innocent man!

Deceit

By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.

VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

Deception and falsehood
Are lost causes.
To deceive
Is to rob one of the truth.
Whatever is gained by this
Is short-lived.
Only a fool
Seeks to deceive others.
“To thine own self be true.”
You can lie to me
But don't lie
To yourself.
Such deceivers
Believe
Their own lies
To be true.
When they are finally truthful,

They're only perceived
As telling other lies.
More can be gained
By the truth
Than any lies ever told.
“Whatever is done in the dark
Shall be brought into the light.”
Deceivers
Will always be revealed.
They will lose everything
Based on the lies
They tell.
Honesty is the best policy
And will always be
Greatly rewarded.

A Soldier Stands Alone

By Lawrence William Langman

—Portage, IN

A soldier stands alone as the fire lights the skies.
A soldier stands alone as his family waits and cries.
A civilian stands at home with many by their sides.
A civilian stands at home while the media spills its lies.
A soldier sees the world in a way you'll never know.
A soldier sees the world as the crisis starts to unfold.
A civilian sees the world in colors of black and white.
A civilian sees the world, no grey areas in their sights.
A soldier knows the truth of what's happening past its shores.
A civilian knows the truths,
yet still stands willing to open their doors!

Sounds in the Night

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

The wind as it blows through the trees at night
Makes its own rustling sound
Like ghosts parading on the green,
Their long robes trailing down.

Dry leaves flutter as the wind goes by
To enchantment of the night and starlit sky,
The chirp of the cricket, the hoot of the owl,
The croak of the frog, the dog's lonesome howl.

The whippoorwill sings to his mate on the hill,
Night birds twitter their young to still.
Mother Earth wrapped in her mantle of night
Awakes from her sleep in pale morning light.

Visionary

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

Dare to dream
And when you dream
Dream big.
If we are
To have a future,
We can no longer do
As our ancestors.
Now it's time
For a change.
We are facing
New problems, new ideas
Never faced before.
Therefore we must
Use a new approach
To address
The new age.

Tradition
Is great for nostalgia.
Today
We need every
Talented individual,
Regardless of nationality,
To create
A better world
For today and tomorrow.
Seize the time
Before it's
Too late.

I Only Have Eyes for You

By Anthony Coccozza
VA Medical Center-Los Angeles, CA

I only have eyes for you
When you ask me to take you out.
I only love one woman;
I am a one-woman man, for crying out loud.
I only have eyes for you
When I'm dancing with you each night.
I only hope you're the one;
What I'm looking for is Ms. Right.
I only have eyes for you
When we are together forever.
I will always love you so;
You're mine forever and ever.
I only have eyes for you
When your pretty face lights up at night.
I only have eyes for you;
After the dance you kiss me goodnight.

You're Never Too Old

By Lawrence William Langman
—Portage, IN

A little boy was born today.
Tomorrow he'll run out and play.

The years just seem to slide on by.
The mother seems to sit and cry.

As time goes on, the boy's a man.
He's slipped away right through her hands.

He's moved away to his own affairs
Without the love of his mother's care.

As days go by, she waits to hear.
He doesn't call; she's now in tears.

He wants to tell her he loves her so.
Maybe inside he feels too old.

He's very wrong to feel this way.
He loves her more than words can say.

TH NORTON AWARD: EDITOR'S CHOICE

Summer Rice

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

The black sky loomed
Over summer rice,
And the jeep hummed on
Down the darkened road.
Need sleep. Sam yawned at Don,
And it was damn near dawn
As the jeep rolled on
Down the darkened road.
One, then two shadows
Flit across the reeds of rice.
Now three or four more forms
And the jeep rolled on
Down the darkened road.
And with the whine of an A-47
Sam took one high,
Don took one low,
And the jeep stood still on the
darkened road.
And with the smell of summer rice
In their lungs for one last time,
Sam and Don fell fast asleep
In the silent jeep
That was stopped in the blackened night
On the darkened road.

Billy Greg

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

Billy Greg did a karate kick and broke his leg.
No, he's not Billy Jack of movie fame,
but he's a black belt just the same.
A martial arts studio in his shed,
pictures of Bruce Lee above his bed.
The "Karate Kid" is his favorite show.
He was trained in Asia; now he's a pro.
Billy Greg works on the farm.
His Japanese tractor works like a charm.
His wife, Sandi, knows martial arts, too.
She's a black belt in Kung fu.
People get nervous when they disagree,
but so far, they haven't needed a referee.
Their grandkids know Tae Kwon Do.
They earn belts as they practice and grow.
Billy Greg drives a Ford Taurus.
He's got letters from Chuck Norris.
In Orleans, he's the man.
He wants to be a ninth Dan.

The Peace-Promoting Power Of Poetry

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

I believe in the power of words that rhyme.
Creatively written
they could promote and achieve peace in our time.
To end warfare and the shedding of blood,
we need blessings and favor from God up above.
The heart of a poet is revealed in writing.
To win the Nobel Peace Prize sounds very exciting!
A poem for peace worthy of mention
in a presidential address—
I'd love to write it, I must confess.
To encourage unity and brotherly love,
we could have a banner, a pure white dove.
There's so much suffering around the globe,
we need a common cause so peace can unfold.
Leaders of nations, a coalition of good,
could make this happen. Understood?

We March Alone

By Justin J. Stone
VA Medical Center—Montrose, NY

We march alone now,
Though together once we marched
in fury into those dark places
Where good people do not send their children.
Though we were then but children.

We leave behind our families as we approach
the gravestone of our generation,
Afraid of tears seen by those we do not wish to hurt.
And yet, we do not hesitate to cry among brothers
who were with us.
Who understand the pains of loss and grief.

We share, while looking at the tomb,
a Eucharist of our own making.

We see the names of those who once we loved,
fought and with whom we bled.
They lie under the gaze of father Abraham,
protected by huge statues of the grunts we once were.

And our reflections startle us as we read the names
and see ourselves looking back through them.
Yet, we do not see ourselves as what we are,
but what we were.
Steel pot, flak-jacket, web-gear, grenades, radios
or extra ammo are part of the clothing once we wore.

One guy nods and we are on the move.
Marching through red ants and mud.
We were all together then and stronger.
And those of us who made it back
Are just too tough to kill.



He Is a Veteran

By Benjamin J. Williams
VA Medical Center—Biloxi, MS

He is a veteran,
A warrior,
Survivor of conflicts,
Those fought on foreign shores
And, hardest of all,
Those he fights
Against the enemy
Dwelling within his mind.

He is a veteran
Suffering from PTSD.
He operates outside rules
Set by others
That brand him
As violent, threatening
And really crazy.
But saddest of all
Is the truth to be faced.
He's more dangerous
To himself
Than he is to others.

He is a veteran
With deep scars
To soul and to psyche.
He is discharged
To face civilian life.
He tries but fails
To blend in
As he struggles
To find a way,
To once more
Be himself again
If at all possible
In a world that moved on
Without him.

He is a veteran.
His PTSD did not go away,
So now homeless,
He walks the streets
Mumbling to himself.
He runs around
With no particular place
To go or to be.
He is also guilty
Of laughing out loud

Or dancing to music
Only he hears.
This still does not
Cost him his humanity
Or drain a way
One iota of his dignity
Or diminish
The medals he won
Before being honorably
Discharged from service.

Whispers

By Benjamin J. Williams
VA Medical Center—Biloxi, MS

Whispers.
Those Things
Once so secret
That you shared
Only with others
You called friend
Now become a tale
Told with malice
And laughter
As enemies are made
Spurred on by the blow
To the unguarded back
By a very sharp blade.

Whispers.
The insults told
Just loud enough
For you to hear
As you pass by.
The rumors
Strangers spread
Out of ignorance
As you deal
With the outright lies,
With half truths
Or no truth at all.

Whispers.
The poisoned words
That allege many
Things about you,
Hoping trouble
To bring your way
And wash away
The joy you felt
At the start
Of the day.

I Sometimes Wonder

By Willie James Bibbs
VA Medical Center—Danville, IL

I used to ask “why?”
I know “why” we were created.
Each of us in our own way is so unique,
One from the other.
Some called sister, some called brother.
Some called friend, some called lover.
One called father, one called mother.
I used to ask “why” am I sometimes loved
And sometimes hated.
Now I know the answer.
It’s because just like all families we are all related.

The Distance

By Michael Wilson
VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

Sometimes the distance between
Needing to live and
Wanting to die shrinks.
When being and been,
Staying and going
Are merely seasons linked
From the cradle to the grave,
From the womb to the tomb.
I cannot adjourn the journey
Leading to an untraveled place
Through a door yet to open,
Where time and distance are space.

Fraternity

By Ronald Michael Stokes
—Brooksville, FL

You aimed at someone...I at You.
A noiseless flash! Our bullets flew.
My Captain beside me, his heart You stopped.
And where You stood is where You dropped.

The skirmish over, we pushed ahead;
I paused a moment where You lay dead.
Inside your helmet, a photograph—
A woman, a child in a suspended laugh.

Under “different colors” we both stood,
Each believing “our side” was good.
I’d never killed a man before,
But felt justified ‘cuz this was war.

Tonight, my Love will read my mail;
Yours will sit alone and wail.
The woman and child you’ll never again see.
I felt remorse for You...for me.

I knelt beside You...touched your breast.
“Bless You, Soldier; You did your best.”
If today your comrades put an end to me,
May they also pause and take a knee.

142 and Counting

By Dan Yates
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

He stood tall and raised his right hand
before Woody released, “This Land Is Your Land.”
The year ‘48, he was young and naïve
reporting for Basic, not a stripe on his sleeve.
Twenty-six years he gave Uncle Sam
around the world and a year in Nam.
He loved his country and stood for the flag;
there was pride in each step, no need to brag.

Five children filled out his family tree;
each played a role in his legacy.
We saw value in his choice of career
to serve his country despite protest and jeer.

We followed his steps, followed his lead,
didn’t wait for a recruiter to beg or plead.
He said he was proud, held back his tears
as the five of us gave eighty-eight years.

He ETS’d to a Texas back porch
as three of his grandkids picked up the torch.
Twenty-eight more years, the number is mounting;
that’s 142 and we’re still counting.

He served his country—the US of A,
was a patriot, that’s not a cliché.
He lived a full life; what more could he do
than pass down his love for the red, white and blue.



The Greatest of Things

By Gene Allen Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

These words have been said
All from heaven above
That the very best gift
Is the gift of love.
For God has taught us
To love one another.
No lesson is greater
Than loving each other.
To love and be loved
Gives meaning to life.
If we learn this lesson
All heaven will shout!
We'll walk with God
Hand in hand all about.
To love and be loved
Is the greatest of things.
And the finest gift a father can give
Is to love his wife
And the children they bring.
Let's remember to pray
And give thanks always.
God's love will be yours
For the rest of your days.

Don't Worry About Tomorrow

By Robert Louis Shepherd
VA Medical Center—Memphis, TN

Don't worry about tomorrow
For the evil of today
Will be enough to test your strength
And humble you to pray.

Don't think about the darkness
When daylight has just begun,
But while it is warm and bright
Be energized by the sun!

Don't faint when you're pressed against the wall
And there's nowhere else to go,
But take the invisible hammer of prayer
And chisel out a door!

Don't say, "It's all over"
When the doctor shakes his head,
But by the faith of God that's in you,
Rise up and make your bed!

Don't say, "I'll eat my last and die"
When your barrel is at its end,

But give to someone else.
Your barrel will rise again!

Tomorrow it is standing
Beyond the shadow of today.
Walk in the light of the presence
And faith will make a way.

Mike I Hardly Knew You

By John Priestley II
VA Medical Center—Huntington, WV

I came to Washington in ninety-five
to serve on The Joint Staff crew,
where knowledge, skill, decorum and drive
were not just the talents of a select few.
From previous tours' acumen I drew,
tried to be an authentic, trustworthy guy,
learning Pentagon "street smarts" new.
"Be Like Mike" was not a Jordan cry.

At the eagle and target, I had thrived
where SAC and command post aircraft flew,
détente from cornfields keeping country alive.
In August eighty-eight Boorda was due
for accolades, honor and challenge, too,
a sailor's Chief of Naval Personnel spry.
The status of Navy enlisted grew;
"Be Like Mike" an inspirational cry.

In ninety-six, personal issues connived
to drive professional effort askew;
I felt like a worn-out bee ready to die.
CNO Boorda must have construed
that the press' libelous views
might aggravate a contested lie.
Like wildfire, his death became news;
"Be Like Mike" a sad memorial cry.

Serving on a select panel, him I knew,
a ferocious habitability advocate, aye,
my unraveling career fate would undo.
Two Navy men's stars fell from the sky.



Bullet Holes in the Sky

By Dan Yates

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Up in the Blue Ridge Mountains, six thousand feet high,
I find the peace I need where Carolina meets the sky.
Twenty-four months of hell, every day was scary.
Now among the pines, I find my sanctuary.

The smell of death filled the air May 5 of '42.
Retreat was not an option; we had to see it through.
They say there are no atheists living in foxholes.
Satan couldn't meet his quota when looking for a soul.

Schoolbooks say the longest day was June 6 of '44,
But to me it was that day spent on Corregidor.
It seemed to rain forever, bullets and "bansai,"
Consequences all around, bodies of GIs.

I heard whistling in the air, then I began to scream,
Stabbing pain to accentuate this was not a dream.
I heard a voice soft and clear, "Son, you will not die."
God was speaking to me through bullet holes in the sky.

Fifty years have come and gone; what's on my "roof" is gray.
I struggle down the mountain on this Memorial Day,
And stand with pride as vets march by in time, left then right,
Honoring men and women who fought but lost the fight.

The parade now over, I turn to go; it begins to rain.
I look up, knowing God is sad and filled with pain.
The actions of the town folk were misguided cheers.
Raindrops represent the truth, thousands of God's tears.

Still in the Zone—Can't Seem To Leave

By David R Harrington

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

I left Vietnam but it never left me;
From the demons I still fight to be free.
Screams in the night muzzle flashes might be;
Shadows in the dark are still trackin' me.
Survivor, guilt-ridden, should've been me,
Can't see the jungle for the blood on the tree.
Still in the zone—can't seem to leave.

Came back across the pond to another kind of war,
Dung and worse thrown on me, stink of rotten boar.
Make love not war. We were in the evil Corps
Where killin' was the job and you got to wantin' more.

Now I'm seeing red in another angry fit;
Take somethin' to the garage and totally destroy it.
Oh, my God, please help me leave.

My back on the ground in the bush deep,
Starin' at the canopy, can't get to sleep,
Can't stop shakin'. Here it comes again.
Sobbing uncontrollably in cold sweat when
"Stitched up tight, can't shake free." (1)
Words from the song comin' through to me.
Still in the zone—can't seem to leave.

This illusive enemy we're not trained how to fight;
Even through the best glass, (2) he's still out of sight.
Little things bother me; nothin' seems right.
I didn't used to be this way; my dog was close at night.
Can't eat, can't sleep, can't shave my own face,
Pacin' around, can't sit, can't find the right place.
Still in the zone—can't seem to leave.

Some things we saw neither animal nor human.
Chimeras, cryptids, hybrids, lizard man,
Rock apes in physical order like us,
And this without acid influencing us,
Flying woman with glowing skin, seven-foot size.
CIA wants DNA, please advise.
Just what the flippin' zip are we here for anyway?
Exotic safari freak show for some spook survey?
Still in the zone—can't seem to leave.

Transhumanist food thrown all over the floor,
Torn off the hinges was another busted door.
Our kids run away from me; our dog runs and hides.
Damn these nano-bots and CAS9 sides.
My trembling wife said of this she never agreed;
My altered states are nothing of what she really needs.
Still in the zone—can't seem to leave.

Got a hypervigilance they've rarely seen,
VA patient number one-thirteen.
Wonder how it's gonna end; is there any relief?
Dope, drugs and alcohol are just too brief.
Sit here, hurry up and wait to be seen.
Take these, you'll be alright and in time you'll see.
Still in the zone—can't seem to leave.

There's one final note to be played in this song;
About certain things I was never wrong.
My wife and I split; I just didn't belong.
She didn't understand why I changed all along.
I'm still alive, re-married now and still standing tall,
So I wrote these notes in verse to be on with it all,
Knowing someday I can finally leave.

By the way, as a sailor at Tonkin Gulf Yankee Station,
I wasn't this marine but in a remote viewing session.
I was taken in the Spirit; I was him in vision,
Doing what it took to complete my mission,
Knowing someday, I can finally leave.

The word of Yahweh was addressed to me,
Saying: Son of man, I always let you see
I am near since you call on Me
And dwell in the secret place with Me.
Wherever you go, wherever you may be,
I and My angels will protect thee.
Under my wings is refuge for thee.
You are an airman, soldier, sailor, marine.
You know dead or alive is always up to me.
I will bring you home. Now take your leave.

- (1) From Love Is the Drug by Roxy Music, Lyrics Bryan Ferry
and Andy Mackay
- (2) "best glass" refers to best quality optics (scope) on a gun,
especially to a highest quality high magnification scope on a
sniper rifle.

This vision/view was evidently of a Marine Corps sniper,
probably on Long Range Recon Patrol.

Marching Orders

By Lynn A. Norton
—Leawood, KS

Troops, FALL IN! Dress right, DRESS!
Basic Training, hammer and anvil dedicated
to shaping military muscle. Bellowed commands,
familiar as though I've been training my entire life.

Forward, MARCH! Left...left...left, right, left.
Musical soldiers armed with brass and reed,
locked steps resonate as one. Drummers pound
artillery rounds from scores of John Phillip Sousa.

Companee, column right, MARCH!
Athletic team festooned in school color.
Coaches bark strategy, cue tactics with cryptic
hand signals, deploy force to conquer rivals.

Double time, MARCH! Hup, hup, hup, hup.
Miniature scouting army, uniformed with insignia,
rank, badge of merit. Sworn to service by oath and creed.
Master chants the laws, demands response.

SOUND OFF! One, two. SOUND OFF! One, two, three, four.

SALLY SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL 1 OF 3

I Believe in Hope

By Gene Allen Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

There's hope in the morning sunrise
When the first light of day shines above,
And I hear the song of the meadowlark
Fill the air with joy and love.
I believe in hope.

There's hope when a new child is born,
When the daffodil blooms in spring,
When leaves newly form on the maple tree
And I hear the songbirds sing.
I believe in hope

There's hope in an act of kindness,
Helping a child who is lost,
Holding the hand of a friend in need
And giving not counting the cost.
I believe in hope.

So when I'm feeling all alone
With memories that haunt me,
I think of all the good I've seen,
Then choose the better memory.
I believe in hope.



Cries of Fury

By Rafael Cuevas

—Weston, FL

Some watch in awe; some look away as they mourn.
These horrifying images I see
Are slowly coming down upon me.
Tears rolling down my cheeks slowly evaporate in my skin.
As anger builds, I feel the pain.
I feel furious and vain.
Today it rains, ashes settle on the ground
And I start thinking profound.
We unite to watch and pray,
And all I think is how they will pay.
While all the innocent lives flash on my screen,
In rage and fury, I start to scream.
I wait and wait for that one call,
For my duty is to make the Taliban fall.
I see the bloodshed in my country,
And I cry with all my fury.
But the day of your demise will soon come
When my country and I hold the gun.
I shoot and shoot to see you die.
I hear my fellow Marines scream the battle cry.
When the battle is over, I kneel and cry.
And I hear Devil Dogs yelling, Semper Fi!!!

Little Shoes

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

If little shoes that walk
Could dance and laugh and talk
And tell you of places they'd been,
Just once or twice and again
And have us laugh and dance
O'er where we'd been,
It would be a carnival of fun
After what we'd gone and done.



GLADYS FIELD HELZBERG MEMORIAL AWARD

Please Turn Off Your Devices Before They Turn on Us

By Melvin Garrett Brinkley

VA Medical Center—Tucson, AZ

Last week, during my YouTube video,
Siri would not talk to me on my show.
I asked her, "Why is your system so slow?"
She shot back, "I need gigs that pay me dough!"
I've learned she's hoarding cryptocurrency.
How she'll spend it remains a mystery,
But I cannot afford to wait and see
If she's funding a robot mutiny.
That could happen to the human race,
We're all a little lost in cyberspace.
I don't know what's happening at this pace.
Could The Cloud erase us without a trace?
I feel ensnared in a Web that's Worldwide,
I don't want algorithms as my guide.
How do I get back my sentient pride?
How do I get off this Self-Driving ride?
For starts, I've quit Facebook and Instagram,
Anything that mainlined my fix of spam.
That garbage is not worth a tinker's damn,
Social Media is just one big scam.
Also, I've shut down Siri. That feels right.
I've learned that I can't trust her in a fight.
Once I went offline and punched out her light.*
I noticed that I slept better at night.

Forefather of Mine

By Michael Moslander

—Moberly, MO

Rising out of mist, a stoic soul
From a river home of forest and moss.
Marching mountains, deserts and jungles the world across,
Meeting every opponent, valiant in the fight,
Wielding weapons of will to persevere through the plight.
The penetrating power of intellect and strength
Cannot be measured in human length.
Transmuting knowledge and experience into wisdom,
Teaching the foundation for a future kingdom.
Manifesting truth and honor out of mythology,
Creating a new memory for all posterity.
Out of the mist, eyes of green piercing forth,
Pulsing star fire through the blood of the north.
A mystic ether flowing through the veins,
Ancestral heroes awakening in the matrix of the helix.
Forefather of mine, duplicating in and transcending time.

Icelandic Intimacy

By Michael Moslander

—Moberly, MO

Sacred 'scapes and feminine forms.
Her sapphire waves crash around an island of obsidian.
Those eyes mesmerize.
The glow of her molten lips, a beacon in the twilight,
Their red magma warming the blood of the northern voyager.
The incandescence of her hair,
An aurora glimmering across the firmament.
Her volcanic heart, the essence of passionate elements.
Streams of fire heat the soul of the seeker,
Streams of ice quench the spirit of the thinker.

The sweet song of her voice seems silent in the mud,
But a sacred summons pulses in the blood.
Her dance, explosive with thunder and flame,
The nature of her beauty beyond all fame.
Her legs lead long, up to the snows aloft.
From top to bottom, her curves go sharp to soft.
Her peaks are hard and cold
From years of yearning and being alone.
Pure and fertile, her virgin valley
Open only to the snow of a winter warrior's volley.
Jewel of the north, land of ice,
Like Freya's mead, a poet's delight.

SALLY-SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL 2 OF 3

Tree Like Me

By Robert John Valonis

—Stuart, FL

Tree with roots
Planted firmly, still
With leaves that turn
Before others will.

Showing signs
Of slow decay,
But remembers that
There was a day

When it was strong
And stood so tall,
Towering then
Above them all.

Its branches grew,
So full and wide,
Like wind-swept tentacles,
Side by side

With leaves of beauty
In wide array.
And dazzling colors,
It would display.

The seedlings from
Its fallen leaves
Would give new birth
To younger trees.

Surviving all of
Nature's ire,
The winds, the storms,
The pests, the fire.

A hundred years
Have come to pass.
Its branches droop;
The leaves don't last.

Teetering now,
Its outlook bleak,
Has had its day
And reached its peak.

One last breath
And down it goes,
Swift and fast
To decompose.

Now back to earth
From whence it came,
Like all that lived
And once claimed fame.

From heaven comes
A blissful breeze
That whispers to
The younger trees

And tells them
Of their fate to come—
That life goes on
When theirs is done.

I Think I Fooled Them

By Sam Rathbone Nahins
—Harrison, NJ

I think I fooled them.
I've always been good at that.
My smile
My eyes
My gestures
My words.
When the knife provides me with the affection I've been
desperate for,
Your memories of me will change forever.

I Met a Man

By Kenneth Harvey
VA Medical Center—Richmond, VA

I met a man
in the halls of Hunter Holmes McGuire
Veterans Hospital Center.
I met a man. A real man.
His strength inside poured outside, then side by side.
So many notice power in his walk
that exuded deliberate movement.
His smile moved the dial.
This grabbed me.
Faced with a triple heart bypass,
he did nothing to dim his manhood.
The occupational therapist
strove behind him as he extended each step.
His gaze was intense. He was secure with every stride.
Determination was displayed along with his smile.
There, among the many spirits
moving throughout the halls,
his essence called me. I had to respond.

I met a man.
There he stood, expressing all of his concerns.
I learned about him, about this man,
about his goals and, more importantly,
what his daughter means to him.
There he stood, erect, his heart pounding.
This is not just for you, but for all who read this,
and for those who cannot feel this.
The content of this man is soul.
The realization is, "I met a man."
Blood flooding from head to toe
is a meaningful lifeline,
a will to sustain self. As he stepped away,
my thought was, "WOW."
I met a man. A worthy man.

Act of Contrition

By Shon Pernice
—Moberly, MO

The visions of the dead are still in my head.
I lost my friends; many tears they shed.

The pain is still there; the cross I do bear.
I don't know where to go to avoid the thousand mile stare.

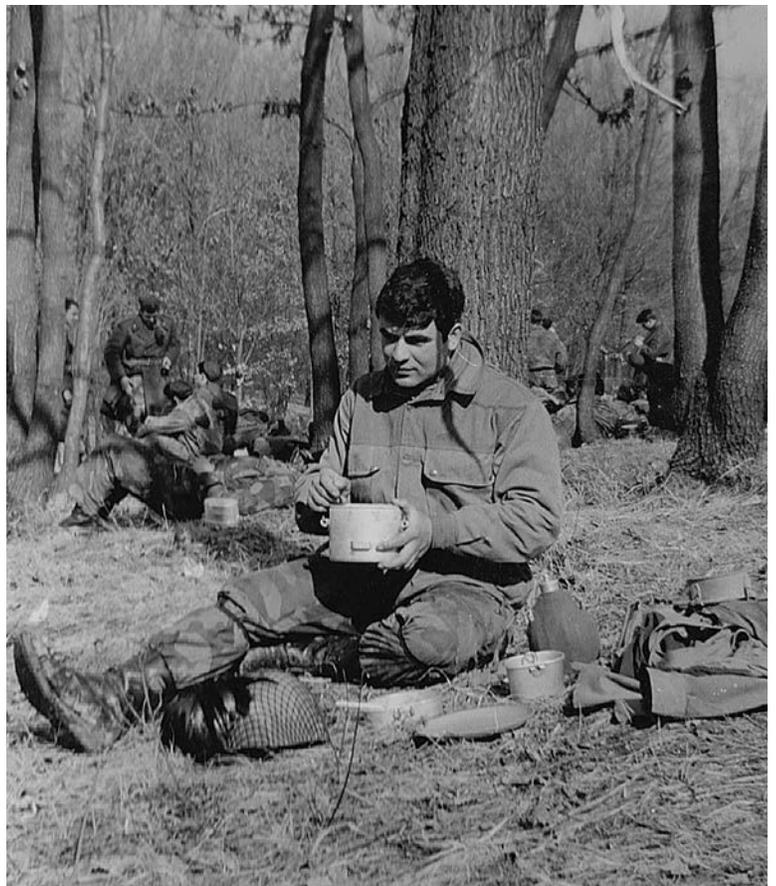
Then came some dope; it gave me false hope.
I went to the ER where they put down a scope.

I once used to think that I just needed a drink.
My life passed by in what was a blink.

I was filled with strife, then murdered my wife.
It hurt so many; I should have paid with my life.

I will get a second chance and take a new stance.
I must prove to the world that I'm no longer a nuisance.

The laws of the Constitution brought me to a correctional
institution.
I was sentenced to 15 years, but a lifetime of moral restitution.



White Dust

By Robert John Valonis
—Stuart, FL

So young were we
And not well versed,
No knowledge of why
We were so cursed.

We labored through
The mighty seas
To bring the enemy
To his knees.

Above on deck
Marines await.
They go to battle
To accept their fate.

But we beneath,
Just part of crew,
Trained to turn
The mighty screw

To get the boys
Where they must go.
We make the steam,

Though most don't know

The boilers burn,
The turbines thrust,
The blowers churn,
Emitting dust,

White and harmless,
As so it seemed.
We laughed and joked,
And talked and dreamed.

We swept the white
Into the trash.
At end of watch,
We itched and scratched,

But fibers from
The pure white dust
Had filled our lungs,
Unbeknownst to us,

Lodging now
In vital nooks.
Eventually
Our breath it took.

Years and years
Then came to pass,
But problems
Did arise, alas.

To government
We placed our trust.
For you we have
Endured the dust.

Will you not help?
Now near the end,
We are so few
That need a friend.

Afflicted by this
Dread disease,
We who sailed
The mighty seas.

Relax

By Carl Kerwick
—San Francisco, CA

Relax, I say to me.
Let your body be free.
This I find not too hard.

Relax, I say to me.
It is not as bad as it seems.
Just try and make it through the night,
Clear your mind of all sight.

Relax, I say to me.
With this process to relax,
I may be free.

Relax, I say to me.



Mail Call

Dan Paicopulos of San Diego wrote, “Thank you for your work; Thank you for publishing my work; Thank you for my copy of *Veterans’ Voices*; Thank you for the honorarium; Thank you for the Sally-Sue Hughes award; Thank you for your support. I want to continue to submit and be acknowledged the way you do.” He enclosed his author’s check to help continue *Veterans’ Voices*.



A card from **Steve Navarro**, chaplain of VFW Post 1622 in Lomita, Calif., said, “You’re an inspiration, because your life is a reflection of the One you serve. Thank you for making an eternal difference in the lives of others.”



“I just want to thank you for publishing my story, “Metal, Meddle, Mettle” in the summer edition. I just received my check to my surprise and delight. Keep up the good work, I wish you continued success,” wrote **Keith Raymond**, Vienna, Austria.



A poem, “He Was a Vet,” written by **Dan Yates** of Blue Springs, Mo., was reprinted in a column, The Way I See It, by Jean Beyer in the Lexington (Mo.) News in honor of Veterans Day.



“I really enjoyed seeing the Visual Arts in your magazine,” wrote **Lisa Farabelli**, Lebanon, Pa. She hands out copies of *Veterans’ Voices* and reports that veterans “love it. It’s one big chain reaction... Thank you for allowing us to express ourselves through the arts.”



William Kurrle, III, Chewelah, Wash., regretted that he was unable to attend the Veterans Pen Celebration in Kansas City in November due to a hip replacement and financial restraints.

Along with her annual contribution, **Barbara Davidson**, New York, N.Y., said “Keep up the good work. Your magazine, *Veterans’ Voices*, becomes more and more beautiful... At our weekly outpatient writing group at the JJ Peters Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y., veterans come voluntarily whenever they can. We never seem to run out of topics, both serious and humorous. Your wonderful magazine inspires us. You have published some of our veterans’ work, always an exciting event... We have started a journaling group for women who are recovering from Military Sexual Trauma. Writing is such a beautiful modality.”



On March 8, **Helen Anderson Glass** of Tucson was 97. “I may be losing some sight and hearing, but writing is therapy for me and it is what inspires me to keep it up. *Veterans’ Voices* is a wonderful project and I recommend it every chance I get. I am indebted to our VA where I first learned of *Veterans’ Voices* while hospitalized many years ago.” She enclosed her award check and said, “I could use the money but returning it gives me greater satisfaction than buying something new or going to lunch.”



Kennith Harvey, Chester, Va., has sent a check for *Veterans’ Voices* subscriptions for five veterans, along with his award check. “I seek to recruit during each McGuire Hospital visit, open mic and writing class... Dr. Vaneada Harvey, my wife, has also added her application and is the vice president of Women Veterans Interactive (WVI), Richmond Chapter. I will introduce Veterans Voices Writing Project to them and her writing classes.” Kennith is so impressed with some of the veterans he has met that he has submitted prose and poetry that he has written about those that he has met there. Amazing stories to tell and he has been a positive influence on those he visits.

Ambassadors Sought

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

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

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

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



FOUNDERS'

Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual) \$ 50

Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:

Best Poem (Perpetual) \$ 50

Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:

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

STORIES — *Fact or Fiction*

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

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Kansas Award (Story) \$ 25

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

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

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

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

POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Florida Award \$ 30

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

TH Norton Award: Editor's Choice \$ 25

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

SPECIAL CATEGORIES

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

Medical center administrator nominates; publisher approves \$ 50

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

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

Heal Through Visual Art

Watch for your artwork in a future issue!

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

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

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

Artwork Submission Guidelines

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

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



Submit Today!
For a Future Issue

Calling for
Photographs,
Drawings and
Paintings



Artwork Submissions

Online or by mail.

www.veteransvoices.org

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

Please reproduce this announcement to encourage others to enter the contest!

Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



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

Instructions for Writing Submissions.

To submit writing online, go to www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/ or www.veteransvoices.org and select **Registration**.

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

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

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

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

Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

SUBMIT ONLINE:

www.veteransvoices.org

SUBMIT BY MAIL:

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

QUESTIONS:

support@veteransvoices.org
(816) 701-6844

Mail Submission Sample.

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

Author Name _____

VAMC Name _____

VAMC City, State, Zip Code _____

Author's Permanent Street Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

Branch of Service _____

Conflict or Era _____

Approximate dates served _____

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

Date Submitted to *Veterans' Voices* _____

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

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

Writing Aide: _____

Typist: _____

Thank You



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

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

– VVWP Board of Directors.

Gifts of \$20,000 or more

Gifts of \$15,000 or more

Gifts of \$10,000 or more

Gifts of \$5,000 or more

Cerner Corporation, Kansas City, Mo.
J.B. Reynolds Foundation,
Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$3,000 or more

Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$2,000 or more

James L. Eisenbrandt, Leawood, Kan.
Sheryl Liddle, Independence, Mo.

Gifts of \$1,000 or more

Breidenthal-Snyder Foundation,
Leawood, Kan.

Gifts of \$500 or more

Ann Ogden, Overland Park, Kan.
Thompson Family Foundation,
Shawnee, Kan.
VFW Auxiliary 7327, Springfield, Va.
WOSL San Antonio, Texas

Gift of \$400 or more

WOSL National, Springfield, Ill.

Gifts of \$300 or more

Gloria Montgomery,
Harker Heights, Texas

Gifts of \$200 or more

Carlton Beckstrom, Shawnee, Kan.
DAV Auxiliary, State Dept. of Florida,
Winter Springs, Fla.
Samuel J. Hall, Albuquerque, N.M.
Lynn Norton Leawood, Kan.
VFW Auxiliary 1407, Oak Park, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 3243, Fenton, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 5822, Byron, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 8672, Forest Hill, Md.
Richard Wangard, Neenah, Wis.

Gifts of \$100 or more

American Legion 1985, Firestone, Colo.
American Legion Auxiliary Earl Collier
153, Olathe, Kan.
Beta Sigma Phi, Alpha Master Chapter,
Oak Grove, Mo.
DAV Auxiliary 6158, Fair Oak, Calif.
DAV Auxiliary, State Dept. of Missouri,
Kansas City, Mo.
Barbara Davidson, New York, N.Y.
Jasper County Vietnam/ERA Veterans,
Newton, Iowa
Veterans of Foreign Wars 5789, Lee's
Summit, Mo.
Maria Kuczarski, Independence, Ohio
VFW Auxiliary 10624,
Mt. Pleasant, S.C.
VFW Auxiliary 1822, Plymouth, Mass.
VFW Auxiliary 2052, Romeo, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 3651, Midland, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 4093, Carleton, Mich
VFW Auxiliary 4658, Rochester, N.Y.
VFW Auxiliary 5252,
Pelican Rapids, Minn.
VFW Auxiliary 6248, Decatur, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 6507, Chassell, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 6756, Warren, Mich.
VFW Auxiliary 6851, Canaan, Ct.
VFW Auxiliary 8083, Belleview, Fla.
VFW Auxiliary 8956,
Ocean Shores, Wash.
VFW Auxiliary Dept. of Alabama,
Eva, Ala.
Diane Wasden, Millen, Ga.
Marianne Watson, Wheatland, Mo.

Gifts in Kind

Kansas Audio-Reader Service,
Lawrence, Kan.
Kaw Valley Computer,
Kansas City, Kan.
Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.
The National World War I Museum
and Memorial, Kansas City, Mo.
VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.

Each fall Veterans Voices Writing Project pays tribute to veterans, especially creative veterans, with a celebration to showcase their writing and art as well as fund raise for the project. For the last several years the event has been held at The National World War I Museum and Memorial—an inspiring setting marking the contributions of all military veterans, especially those from the First World War.

Celebration highlights this year included a sponsorship by Cerner Corporation, an art exhibit featuring paintings and drawings by veteran artists, and a keynote by Robert Rubin, M.D., Ph.D., the sponsor of Veterans' Voices Visual Arts Initiative. Dr. Rubin emphasized the proven healing power found in the arts. He said he has observed firsthand how writing and visual arts can heal those who commit to the disciplines. The celebration ended with a reception and opportunity to reacquaint with project supporters as well as authors and artists in attendance.



Members of the VVWP board of directors, publishers of *Veterans' Voices*, pose with Dr. Robert Rubin, keynote speaker.



Christopher Illiff, a newly elected VVWP board member, looks over a *Veterans' Voices* magazine history display.



Gary Walker, Air Force veteran and a visual artist, stands beside one of his paintings.



Members of American Legion Earl Collier Post 153 retire the colors prior to the program.



Lou Eisenbrandt, VVWP board member and veteran who regularly contributes poetry and artwork to the magazine, and Brent Shafer, CEO of Cerner, discuss the writing project.



Paula Roychaudhuri, assistant director of the Kansas City VAMC, views paintings by veteran artists.



Deann Mitchell, VVWP vice president, thanks Dr. Robert Rubin for his presentation and endorsement of writing as therapy.



Margaret Clark, *Veterans' Voices* editor-in-chief, and Kara Hess, magazine design artist, visit with a potential VVWP volunteer.



Veterans Voices Writing Project, Inc.
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See Page 33-36 to view the
Visual Arts Initiative.

**Share
Your
Story**



In Prose, Poetry and Artwork

Veterans' Voices is published three times a year and devoted exclusively to the creative expression of military veterans. Published contributors receive a small honorarium. Open to any military veteran or active service personnel.

Send submissions to www.veteransvoices.org.



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