

Devoted to the creative expression of
military veterans since 1952.

Spring 2022

VETERANS' VOICES®

“Write To Learn, Share”

By Richard Wangard

The 4th of July

By Wallace MacGregor

**Defending the Rights
of Others**

By Shon Pernice

Why I Write

By Daniel Paicopulos

Vol. 70, NO. 1
ISSN 0504-0779

VeteransVoices.org

Write To Learn, Share

By Richard Wangard

Why write? Why draw or paint? Why bother? That is for other people, smart people and talented people, people with brains---not a lowly veteran like me!! I don't have any gifts or talent, and certainly nobody is going to be interested in what I express in art form! That's how I thought, until six years ago when I discovered *Veterans' Voices*. I'm just a regular guy, a Vietnam veteran who did three different tours in-country and wound up being medevac'd out the third time, messed up physically and mentally.

I have PTSD and my Vietnam veteran friends have it as well. We've also encountered cancer, thanks to Agent Orange. No wonder, out of more than 2.5 million boots on the ground in Vietnam, there are only approximately 600,000 of us left alive. Iraq vets I know, the guys and gals who walked through the burning oil fields and worse, are hurting as well. They're the new generation of vets coming out of someplace and somewhere, who did their duty and left with scars on their bodies and in their minds.

My PTSD embarrasses me when I fly off the handle for no reason, talk without filters, crush people with words, or do stupid things for lack of impulse control. These actions leave me feeling so depressed, I want to die! I know now writing for *Veterans' Voices* is where I can go to find others with similar concerns and anxieties, express my story in words and help me better understand my actions, and maybe assist another vet by doing so. We all need fellow human beings who not only comprehend but show compassion based on brotherhood and sisterhood.

In April of 1970, when I deplaned in California and was showered with rotten fruit and vegetables, called every name in the book, spit on, and hated by my own countrymen, I couldn't recover and worked

my way back to Nam for a third tour--a place I understood and where I could save lives. All until my weight fell to 110 pounds and my mind broke from the screams of young teens crying out for their moms. I was a 20-year-old sergeant who looked 40. They knocked me out and I awoke at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas where they fed me and gave me the help I needed. I was there for three months and then the Air Force gave me a full military retirement, acknowledging what I had accomplished. Yet, I lost my planes and the Air Force life. I was crushed.

So, along with many of my friends, I took a step forward and sought a helpful ear: a counselor, a group of fellow vets, a group of motorcycle vets. Membership in veterans' organizations led to friendships with men and women I trusted. We realized we weren't alone, we had someone to "watch our six." *Veterans' Voices* has been watching "my six" for some time now, and it can watch yours as well! It will help you share your story. As we share our stories, the civilian community begins to better understand us and our service. Over the years, I've become popular and proudly wear Vietnam all over me!

Ever since I submitted my first article to *Veterans' Voices* in 2016, I've been able to explain the unexplainable, all in my comfort zone. People listen to me without anyone trying to shove something down my throat or impress me with their "great ideas," "knowledge," or the latest "psycho babble." As I wrote, I cut loose. Some was raw but all was true. Some was about my life now and some was from my Air Force days. For me all of it hit home and I learned as time passed that I felt better and gained a little pride in what I wrote. "Author" was a scary word for me, but I accepted it because I found other authors and people who read my words were interested in what I had to say. My writing seemed to help others like it helped me.

Don't get me wrong. Nothing can wipe out my memory bank, no matter how many "treatments" I undergo. However, if we try to share those feelings, we discover we are not alone and not the only ones who have acted inappropriately. That can inspire us to work on trying to become the best possible version of ourselves because we care, we love, and we want to be "normal," whatever that is. We're able to help ourselves because we were taught to overcome and improvise. *Veterans' Voices* helps us to do just that! I have six years of proof! I am no doctor, nobody special. I believe in science but think in many ways the arts are more powerful. For me, and I hope for you as well, science, the arts, and spiritual awareness blend together to form a sense of peace and a path to health. Hopefully, even if the demons still come—as they do for me—always remember: "Call Me Brother, or Sister, and we will fight them together!" You are never alone and working to produce a story, poem or artwork for *Veterans' Voices* proves that "in spades" my friends! I do it and you can, too!



Rich Wangard entered the Air Force at age 17 inspired by a lifelong love of aircraft. He was deployed to Vietnam three times, although he had to be medevac'd out before completing his third tour. His MOS was jet engine mechanic on C-130A aircraft. His unit, the 834th Air Division, was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

By age 20, the Air Force awarded him full retirement. Rich is married to the "best woman in the world" and together they raised three children. He still finds PTSD troubling. He calls himself "anything but close to normal" and counsels to this day. He credits Pris Chansky, VVWP's retired administrative director and current treasurer, with his writing success. Rich lives in Neenah, Wis.

Veterans' Voices®

Spring 2022 Vol. 70, No. 1

Volunteer Staff

Publisher

The Board of Veterans Voices Writing Project, Inc.,
Sheryl Liddle, President

Editor-in-Chief

Margaret Clark

Poetry Editor

Tina Hacker

Prose Editor

Ted Iliff

Art Editor

Tracy Cheng

Office Support

Katherine Menges

Treasurer

Pris Chansky



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

VVWP

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

History

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

Veterans' Voices Reprints

Reproduction of material published in *Veterans' Voices*, in whole or part, is welcomed and appreciated. Full credit must be given to the author or artist as well as the magazine. Forward a copy of the reprint to the office director at the VVWP address below.

Contact Us

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

- Register and submit your writings at veteransvoices.org.
- Read the writings of other veterans at facebook.com/VVWP1946.
- Email us with any questions at support@veteransvoices.org.

Donations

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

Magazine Subscriptions

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

Audio Version

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

Magazine Guidelines

Manuscripts, photographs and artwork submissions are accepted online. Follow the guidelines on pages 66 and 67 of the magazine or as listed on the web site.

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

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

Veterans' Voices®

Spring 2022 Vol. 70, No. 1

Write to Learn, Share 2 <i>By Richard Wangard</i>	Mail Call 63
Jerry D. Brown Tribute 7	Special Prizes for Writers 64
Know Yourself Through Writing 62 <i>By Dean Vakas</i>	Thank You 65
	Submission Guidelines 66

Prose

My Death Defying Life as a Soldier 7 <i>By Dr. R. Douglas Iliff</i>	Alive Day 24 <i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>
Dog Days - A Blast from the Past 9 <i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	Ammo for Your Resolve 25 <i>By James R. Janssen</i>
Memories of a Battlefield Nurse 10 <i>By Louise D. Eisenbrandt</i>	The Burger Story 26 <i>By Vondell Jones</i>
Ella's Submarine 11 <i>By David Ludlow</i>	Alone II 28 <i>By Tony Craidon</i>
Going South 13 <i>By Bill Greenhut</i>	The Hulk 29 <i>By Michael Monfrooe</i>
Ride 'em Cowboy 15 <i>By Dan Yates</i>	Bookends 30 <i>By Katherine Iwatiw</i>
Viet Lament 16 <i>By Paul Nyerick</i>	Restoring Our Honor 31 <i>By Shon Pernice</i>
Control 18 <i>By Trina Mioner</i>	Who You Are 38 <i>By James R. Janssen</i>
The Drink 19 <i>By Christine Rose Hazuka</i>	The Ability To Express 39 <i>By Richard Wangard</i>
Why America Will Never Run Out of Marines 20 <i>By Phil Hosier</i>	The Lost Photo 40 <i>By Brant Parker III</i>
Lord Fletcher's 21 <i>By Charles Bremicker</i>	Defending the Rights of Others 41 <i>By Shon Pernice</i>
The 4th of July 23 <i>By Wallace MacGregor</i>	

Artwork

City Lights 33 <i>By Daniel Strange</i>	Field Trip 35 <i>By Daniel Strange</i>
Horses 33 <i>By Jack Tompkins</i>	Art 1 36 <i>By Daniel Strange</i>
Endeavor 34 <i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	Machine Gun Fire 36 <i>By Daniel Strange</i>
Light the Way 34 <i>By Michelle Pond</i>	Faces of the Homeless 37 <i>By Ty Andrews</i>
Two Buddies 34 <i>By Jack Tompkins</i>	ART 5 37 <i>By Donald Sherwood</i>
Celebration of Life 35 <i>By Charles Kasbarian</i>	Drawing 4 37 <i>By Bruce McClain</i>

Poems

I Joined the Army 8 <i>By Kenny C. Trujillo</i>	Lonely Soldier 42 <i>By Jason Kirk Bartley</i>
Haiku for Spring 10 <i>By Gene Allen Groner</i>	Champion 42 <i>By Nila K. Bartley</i>
School House 10 <i>By Carl Kerwick</i>	Ride 43 <i>By Charles L. Carey</i>
We Never Learn 15 <i>By John L. Swainston</i>	The Protesters 43 <i>By Jeffrey Lewis</i>
Jacks 15 <i>By Scott Lehman</i>	A Door to the Future 44 <i>By Louise D. Eisenbrandt</i>
Wildfire 18 <i>By Karen Green</i>	Pictures 44 <i>By Kimberly Green</i>
Peace at Home 20 <i>By Gary Hughes</i>	On the Road to Recovery 44 <i>By Ronald P. Grella</i>
COVID 19 20 <i>By Lisa J. Farabelli</i>	Hooked on Chaos 44 <i>By Josh Groesz</i>
Cool and Seven 24 <i>By Rich Maguire</i>	Seasoned 45 <i>By E. Glen Price</i>
Why We Stand 28 <i>By Kimberly Green</i>	MIA—Missing in America 45 <i>By Matthew David Davison</i>
Shame the Boy 32 <i>By Kevin Laurens Lewis</i>	Why I Write 46 <i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>
Endlessly 32 <i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	My Name Is Nickel 46 <i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>
Years Gone 35 <i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	To Pick a Wild Rose 46 <i>By Christine Rose Hazuka</i>
Stolen Honor 38 <i>By Karen Green</i>	Who Is This Person 47 <i>By Kim Gwinner</i>
For Time 38 <i>By Charles L. Carey</i>	Respect 47 <i>By Lawrence W. Langman</i>
Road To Nowhere 39 <i>By Tanya R. Whitney</i>	You're on My Team—Thank God—I'm No Longer One... 48 <i>By Kim Gwinner</i>
The God of Gods 39 <i>By Scott Lehman</i>	Our Brotherhood vs. PTSD 48 <i>By James R. Janssen</i>
Veteran's Day 40 <i>By James Allen Breitwieser</i>	To Understand 48 <i>By Anthony Kambeitz</i>
I May Be Casanova 40 <i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	Not All Wounds Are Visible 49 <i>David R. Marchant</i>
Drifting Wood 41 <i>By William L. Snead</i>	The Drawer 49 <i>By Michael D. Monfrooe</i>
Infinite Infinities of the American Legion Preamble 41 <i>By CJ Reeves</i>	Prayer of a Tunnel Rat 49 <i>By Michael D. Monfrooe</i>

Joyful Expectancy 49 <i>By Nila K. Bartley</i>	I Never Met a Lady Worth Singing About 57 <i>By Michael Pride Young</i>
Short Timer 50 <i>By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.</i>	A Red Alert 58 <i>By Williams Kurrle</i>
Who? 50 <i>By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.</i>	His Limbo Soliloquy 58 <i>By Carl “Papa” Palmer</i>
Remote Control 50 <i>By Lynn A. Norton</i>	Tree 58 <i>By William Shepherd</i>
Lunar Illusion 51 <i>By Michael Moslander</i>	This Valley of Thistles 58 <i>By Mary de Morales</i>
A Tear 52 <i>By Dan Yates</i>	911 59 <i>By Martin Jonquiere</i>
Light in My Darkest Days 52 <i>By Brant Parker III</i>	There’s Always That One 59 <i>By Jason Kirk Bartley</i>
Some Shakespeare Plays 52 <i>By Charles S. Parnell</i>	From the Cotton Fields to Country Music 59 <i>By Michael Pride Young</i>
Storm Clouds 53 <i>By CJ Reeves</i>	Surrounded by Screams 60 <i>By Tanya R. Whitney</i>
The Price 53 <i>By Scott Sjostrand</i>	Sunny 60 <i>By Charles Fredette</i>
When You Wish Upon a Star 53 <i>By Scott Sjostrand</i>	The Written Letter: A Sonnet 60 <i>By Charles S. Parnell</i>
The River Sped On 53 <i>By William L. Snead</i>	The Love of God 60 <i>By Gene Allen Groner</i>
Vietnam Memories No 3 54 <i>By John L. Swainston</i>	Football 61 <i>By Norman L. Jones</i>
An Eagle Feather 54 <i>By William Shepherd</i>	From Where I Sit 61 <i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>
The Fall 54 <i>By Richard Wangard</i>	Double Flanked 61 <i>By James R. Janssen</i>
Never Judge a Book by Its Cover 55 <i>By Diane Wasden</i>	Twenty-two Every Day 61 <i>By Brant Parker III</i>
Time Stops for No One 55 <i>By Diane Wasden</i>	
Daddy’s Hand 56 <i>By Dan Yates</i>	
All of Us 56 <i>By Mike J. Young</i>	
To the Brothers and Sisters Who Returned 56 <i>By Kenny C. Trujillo</i>	
Awakening 57 <i>By Lawrence W. Langman</i>	

My Death Defying Life as a Soldier

By R. Douglas Iliff, M.D.

—Topeka, KS

Lt. Gen. Hank Emerson took command of the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg in July of 1975. I arrived the same month, a newly minted M.D. from Kansas. He was once, in Korea, the boss of a guy named Colin Powell, who later became Secretary of State. I was, at that time, about to embark on the journey of becoming the boss of four children.

Lt. Gen. Emerson was a character in the mold of Patton and MacArthur. His commands in Korea and Vietnam were marked with creativity and success. His helicopter crashed in the Mekong Delta, and he was severely burned. He carried a pearl-handled six-shooter strapped to his hip, in lieu of the regulation automatic. He liked his troops to train nights and sleep days.

I liked to sleep nights and work days, but my family medicine residency at a short-staffed and very busy military

base hospital immediately cured me of that. During my shifts in the emergency room, I learned about “triage by attrition.” I was the only doctor, and I would see patients nonstop until the less-ill finally drifted away to recover at home. Then I would catch a couple of hours of fitful sleep, shower and go back to work in the clinic.

By regulation, my medical comrades and I were supposed to get a couple of weeks of basic military training. No time for that, as it turned out. We were basically civilians with a uniform. And then, Lt. Gen. Emerson discovered that we had been allowed to shirk our martial duties.

Backspace: why did I choose a training program at the most gung-ho base in the country, when I could have gone to Hawaii, coastal Washington, or Monterey Bay? My brother, Steve, was serving there

in the 5th Special Forces Group.

Once “Gunfighter” Emerson discovered the training omission, he suggested that the defects could be corrected by physicians accompanying real soldiers on training missions. Fool that I was, and deprived of sleep by a newborn son and every third night on call, I offered to join my brother’s A-team on an insertion into Eglin Air Force Base on the Florida panhandle.

That nearly cost me my life. His, too, through no fault of my own.

Thus it was that I found myself on a C-135 “Blackbird” flying the hump from North Carolina to Florida at night. Steve was not with me. His team was doing a HALO jump into Eglin. My transportation was on a different mission, involving a low altitude

Jerry D. Brown Tribute

Veterans Voices Writing Project recently lost a dedicated supporter and promoter. Jerry D. Brown died on Feb. 10, 2022, at the Kansas City VAMC. He was born Sept. 12, 1945, in Independence, Mo., and lived in the area most of his life. He is survived by two sons. He was a retired funeral director and former owner of the Reppert-Brown Funeral Home in Buckner, Mo. In 1993, he was the state disaster coordinator for the Missouri Funeral Directors Association and supervised the recovery and identification of over 700 remains from the flood-ravaged Hardin, Mo., Cemetery. He received a flood disaster award from the State of Missouri for those efforts. He was a veteran of the Vietnam War as a US Army PFC and received the Bronze Star and Combat Infantry Badge.

He served on the VVWP Board of Directors and was president of the organization between 2010 and 2014. His goal during his presidency was name recognition for VVWP and *Veterans’ Voices*. He encouraged lapel pins and name badges for public events as well as bookmarks, flyers and pamphlets for convention handouts. After he resigned from the VVWP board due to poor health and the desire to devote time to other organizations, he continued to search for ways to increase VVWP’s visibility so more veterans could profit from the writing program. As recently as several months ago, he put the organization in contact with a radio station he hoped would help promote the project. He was always quick to thank others for their commitment to VVWP. Once he thanked the executive director with a bouquet of roses and magazine staff members with corsages. We will miss him but remember his devotion to our organization. –VVWP Board of Directors



static-line jump. I was just along for the ride to the airport. Or base. Whatever.

To one unaccustomed to military flying, this counted as an adventure. It was noisy. I had been issued jungle fatigues and a beret. It was dark, and these guys were jumping out of a perfectly good airplane.

As I followed them down the line, I gradually got a better look at the process. Red light, green light, push from the jumpmaster, repeat. Unfortunately, my best look came after the last guy with a parachute was launched out the door.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Fortunately, the jumpmaster realized that this idiot lacked the requisite apparel to land alive. I could see that he was trying to share some advice with me, but I couldn't hear him over the roar of the engines. I slunk back to a seat in the safe center of the plane, my

tail firmly between my legs, until we made a safe landing.

I did get the opportunity to atone for my stupidity later. I was attached to three guys with a jeep — playing the part of guerrillas — who were assigned to meet my brother's team on the ground. I encountered confusion. They could hear the plane pass overhead in the night sky, but no parachutes appeared. After some minutes a flare was spotted, and we were hot on the trail. Another flare was spotted, still a long ways off. More confusion. I had my map and my compass, and I understood triangulation. I plotted the location of the flares and persuaded the spotters that they were headed to the wrong location. We almost got there too late.

The Air Force navigator, a deskbound lieutenant colonel doing his periodic

obligatory time aloft, had dropped them six miles from the planned landing zone — into a swamp. They had not been issued flotation gear. The lieutenant colonel was later forced into retirement for that blunder.

The command sergeant major of Steve's team had landed in water. We found him on his tiptoes, arms trapped behind him by his soggy pack. His mouth was just above the surface as he repeatedly called for help.

Steve landed in the trees. Everyone survived, but they lost a number of M-16s in the drink, necessitating a time-wasting and futile search. I learned how to sleep in a hammock listening to the barking of alligators. I also learned how to interpret a war story from Vietnam told entirely through varying inflections of the F-word.

Did I become a more competent soldier? Not that I could ever tell.



I Joined the Army

By Kenny C. Trujillo

VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

I joined the Army

April 29, 1971—June 4, 1973.

It feels like it was just yesterday...but not.

When we met our drill instructor, Sergeant Gonzalez, it was an eye-opener.

“Here they make boys into men.”

When I joined the Army,

“They break you and build you up to make you.”

Our first stop was to be trained at Fort Ord, CA.

Basic Training.

And then after that, A.I.T.,

which means Advanced Infantry Training, to get us all ready for Vietnam.

Yes, we were ready and scared and nervous.

But we were well trained.

I joined the Army to serve my country

and never to forget those who served before us.

As soldiers we were all brothers;

we did not see different colors in our skin.

When I joined the Army,

I joined a brotherhood with one another.

Dog Days—A Blast from the Past

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

My son, who was 14 at the time, is punching his fist on a book, doing his best to break the binding. I begin to yell at him, my usual reaction during one of his common fits of rage. But what I say sends a chill up my spine.

“How would you like that done to you?” I scream. Where in the world did that come from? Then it hits me. All in a flash I remember those same words directed at me, a defenseless little girl, as I landed on our flagstone patio. I was recalling an incident that had been buried for 35 years. I am guessing I was about 5 years old. My recollection of the scene is this:

I had been mean to a little puppy. I would pick him up and then throw him back down again. I can still remember his yelps. I can't imagine doing that to any animal or anything today, which makes me wonder what led me to that act of violence. I have no idea why I would do such a horrible thing. Did I see other people treat animals and people like that? Is that why I hurt the defenseless little dog? I don't know why a quiet, pretty, blonde-hair little tyke would do that.

My mother came to the dog's rescue. She had heard its wails from inside our ratty old house. This enormous woman – think white Aunt Jemima – was going to show her pip-squeak daughter a thing or two.

She comes at me screaming. “How would you like that done to you!” she bellows.



Since I do not have a scruff on my neck like my puppy, she grabs my ponytail. As soon as she gets me high enough, she slams me down, then snatches me right back up again, over and over, again and again. This continues until her strength runs out. Thank God she was a heavy smoker—four packs a day.

That's all I can remember from that awful day. The old battle-ax always pulled my hair instead of giving me spankings. That same spot on my head still hurts. Every time I get angry or upset, it's as if she is still torturing me. This reminder has stirred up notions about what other awful events might have happened to me that I cannot recall.

I ask myself how a human being could do this to anyone. But that little girl was being evil to those poor little dogs.

As an adult, I wanted so desperately to break the cycle of abuse, and then I found myself doing the same thing.

My daughter also remembers that day I lost my temper with my son. You see, I had just gotten notice that he had not been attending school for a 20-day period. I was livid. I stormed into the house and found him playing games with another boy who had also skipped school that day. I picked up the nearest thing close to me — a curtain rod. And I began to wale on him. This weapon was so very similar to the switches my mother found so handy throughout my childhood.

Again I ask myself how anyone could do such a thing to their own child or any child. I ask you now: am I so different than that mother I despised?

I had no idea what I had done. When I saw I left welts on my firstborn's legs, it was awful. I asked my daughter about it recently. She is a grown woman now.

“Mom, you never hit either one of us again,” she said.

Well, I am glad of that, but still.

Too many years later, long after my son's death, I found out why he did not go to school. His social studies teacher was molesting him. My son did not confide in me. I'm very sorry for that and my actions still today. As a type of repentance, I tend to look out for the underdog, for those who cannot defend themselves.

Memories of a Battlefield Nurse

By Louise D. Eisenbrandt
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO



The chopper blades caught the hot wind as the Huey settled down on the square of steamy asphalt outside the emergency room. Whop, whop, whop—that familiar sound announcing the latest arrival of casualties.

They were expected. Minutes earlier, the squawk box on the wall crackled with the announcement. “Three United Sierra. One gunshot. One amputee and one head wound.”

As the dusty whirlwind swirled about, fatigue-clad corpsmen ran, with heads bent low, to grab the three litters. IVs were started, vital signs taken, clothing cut off. Bodies rolled over to check for hidden wounds. Triage complete, the soldier with the gunshot injury was whisked into the OR

where three hours of surgery would debride his wound and remove dead tissue. Chest tubes allowed his lungs to re-expand, and sutures would make him whole again.

The young man, missing his left arm, whose right foot came off with his boot, would be in the other surgery suite. His recovery would mean months of therapy and learning to function with artificial limbs.

The third soldier, with the blood-soaked bandage covering his entire face and head,

would not be joining his buddies. He was not going to heal. Ever. There was only one treatment we could offer—kindness.

We would hold blood-encrusted hands and “lie” to the dying that everything was going to be all right. We would reassure them, as they raised their supplicant voices seeking mothers, wives, or girlfriends. As they breathed their final shallow gasp, we would cry as another soul was carried away from the useless war.

When there is nothing left, kindness is the only answer.

Haiku for Spring

By Gene Allen Groner
VA Medical Center—Kansas City,
MO

Daffodils in bloom
Yellow trumpet corona
The flowers of Spring.

When all nature sings
And sunshine rains on great lakes
Sky, earth, wind rejoice.

The hills come alive
With wind and rain and sunshine
Souls soar heaven-bound.

Green is everywhere
Gentle falling of the rain
Happiness is here.

Easter lilies bloom
Making all the world so bright

School House

By Carl Kerwick
VA Medical Center—San
Francisco, CA

The little red schoolhouse
that sits on the hill
has a little brass bell
above the wishing well.

Children bound
from the open doors
upon the completion
of their chores.

Pondering school,
I grew blue;
school could be so cruel.
Surviving it all,
no one's help did I call.

But to live in a world of real
employment is no big deal.

Ella's Submarine

By David Ludlow

VA Medical Center—Buffalo, NY

All the trailers in the mobile home park had snow drifting up to the bottoms of their living room windows.

Gray-haired Ella Jasper, a petite, frail 93-year-old, was depressed by the weather. Widowed 10 years now, Ella was still mentally sharp and conducted her own affairs.

As usual, Ella was awake at 7 a.m. Her son Ron, who shared the mobile home with her, slept in the smaller bedroom at the trailer's opposite end. Trying to let him sleep, she got up and pulled on her flannel powder blue house coat. Using her walker, she slowly shuffled out to the kitchen to peer out the window over the sink. With her brittle, wrinkled left hand she reached up to open the worn linen curtains decorated with faded yellow and blue tulips. Ron had closed them as part of his bedtime ritual. The cloth slid easily along the brass curtain rod, revealing the sea of snow that all the neighboring trailers and hers were stuck in. Ella could see the wooden deck her husband Ned had built 12 years ago and the red bench swing he hung there. She remembered how on many summer nights they had cooked outside and enjoyed being together. It is still her special place.

As she considered the sight before her eyes, Ella thought to herself, "My trailer may as well be a submarine. It's nearly submerged in snow." She laughed to herself at that thought. Ella took a dish rag to clean the window,



placing it under the tap and releasing a bit of water on it. Ella mused to herself. "I should clean my periscope."

As Ella gazed outside, she took a silent tally of her life. It was as if the window glass became a television screen. Ella could remember the party sending Ron off to college. And that time back in 1965 before Ron was born. Ella remembered their great Dane Sarge had nipped Mrs. Holly, the trailer park busybody. She thought, "No one was sad about that." Laughing to herself, Ella recalled that Ned said it best when he told her, "Hon, the \$200 medical bill was well worth it." Then he reached down, patted Sarge on the head and gave him a doggie treat. Ella playfully admonished him, saying, "Ned Jasper, you're going straight to hell." As if a sudden heart pain grabbed her, Ella, for

the thousandth time, heaved a sad sigh and thought, "Oh Jesus, I miss my Ned. He was a good husband."

The sound of her son wrestling with his covers brought Ella back to the kitchen from her bittersweet visit to those early years. She looked at the coffee cups on the cup tree in the center of the kitchen table. Ella hadn't planned to need one this morning, but then Ron came out from his room and derailed her secret intention. At 50, Ron was tall with an average but fit build, brown hair and brown eyes. He kept a light coat of facial hair that Ella had never cared for. Ron cared about his mom and waited on her hand

and foot.

He teasingly greeted her, saying, "Good morning, Mrs. Jasper, what would like you for breakfast?"

Ella replied, "Ron I'm not hungry; Feed yourself. Maybe just grab me some coffee, ok?"

Ron thought her next request unusual. "Hon, I would like to use the cup your dad got me a couple years before he passed. Do you mind?"

Gently helping her to a kitchen chair, Ron held up a little bowl and replied. "Sure, mom, anything you want, but make me happy and at least eat a small bowl of oatmeal for me, would you?"

He went to the china cabinet; the cup she wanted was considered too special to be kept on the coffee cup tree. Ron grabbed the cobalt blue coffee cup with a white etched depiction of a front porch with a wooden swing on it. He filled it with hot coffee for his mom, then carefully placed it on the table by her hands.

Ella, realizing she was sending up warning flares, relented. "Sure Ron, you can make a small bowl for me."

Still, Ron noticed his mom was distant, more than ever before. She seemed strangely at peace. It was good, but not good. Ella lifted the coffee cup to her lips and then looked at the image on it.

"I miss sitting outside with your dad," she sighed. "I would like to do that again. I'm grateful I have you, but I still feel alone. Is that so much to want?"

Ron gently replied, "Mom, you know eventually you'll be back together when God decides it's time."

Tears welling up in her eyes, Ella said, "Hon, I can barely walk. I need help doing everything, I'm just not me anymore. I think I'm done."

Ron despaired at her revelation, saying, "You have led a wonderful life and have much more to offer the world."

He knew he was grasping at straws, trying to interest her in possibilities that didn't really exist. But the day had to continue, and he had to get ready for work. Ron cheerfully told his mom, "Hey Princess Ella, I got to hit the shower for work, and I'll bring you some Chinese home for dinner. How's that?"

Ella replied with forced cheerfulness, "Yes dear, thank you, that would be nice."

It only took 40 minutes for Ron to finish his shower and dress for work. As he left the mobile home he told her, "Mom I'll be home before five with the Chinese. OK?"

Ella replied smiling, "I'm blessed to have you son." Over her coffee cup, Ella cheerfully called after him, "Don't work too hard!"

It was 20 degrees and snowing outside the mobile home. Still at the kitchen table, Ella halfheartedly thought to herself, "My submarine must be half submerged in snow by now."

Ella grabbed the little note pad and pencil she kept on the table near the telephone. Though writing had been hard for her for quite some time, Ella carefully scribbled Ron a note: "I love you dearly my son. You have been good to me. Please allow me this bit of dignity. My life is diminished at best. I want to be with your father again, so I'm going."

Ella then changed into her nicest pants suit (it was too cold for a dress), along with her warmest boots and got her gloves ready. She did her make up as best as her shaky hands could and shuffled to the coat rack. She lifted her green faux fur coat from the hook. It was heavier for her now than in past years. It was a gift from her husband, and she had taken good care of it. Ella slid her right arm into the jacket, then her left. Her shaky fingers fastened one big white button. Ella called them clown buttons. One, then the next until all five were done. Next, she pulled the green furry hood over her head; it framed her face in fur. She tied its strings as best she could. Now it was time for their reunion.

Ella was sad to leave Ron but knew he could move on with his life. Though it was still 20 degrees outside, she refilled her

husband's gift cup one last time, put on her gloves and, coffee in hand, headed for the door. Ella had a hard time controlling the walker, but she made it. She opened the door and the blast of cold air and snow blowing in her face almost knocked her over.

Ella for the first time in years freed herself from the walker, cautiously taking her first unsteady step down the stairs while holding on to the railing. The last two steps were easier. It was a bit of a struggle, but Ella managed to close the door behind her. In the deepening snow, Ella carefully negotiated the 10 steps to the swing where she and her husband had spent so many evenings. As she reached the swing, Ella was exhausted. It was not easy, but she managed to dust off the powdery snow from the seat. She had spilled surprisingly little coffee from her cup. She was proud of herself for having accomplished her plan.

Ella sat quietly, lost in memories while the cold, as expected, slowly stole her energy. She took an occasional sip of coffee to revive her as she and it got colder. Now getting sleepy from exposure, fully bundled up, Ella waited for nature to reunite her with her husband.

By the time Ron returned from work seven hours later, Ella was gone. Her snow-dusted body had frozen on the swing. Her head was nestled precariously against the bench chain, He was struck by the weathered but contented look on her face. She had her Ned's coffee cup in her right hand resting on the seat at her side. About half the cup's coffee, frozen now, had spilled on the seat and dripped to the ground as her hand lost its strength. Heartsick at his loss, Ron was upset that no one had noticed her in the swing. Still, he was not alarmed or surprised. He realized why she had been so distant that morning. Her mind had been made up.

Going South

By William M. Greenhut
VA Medical Center—Montrose, NY

As I stepped out of the car in front of the Induction Center, Dad said, “We’ll see you at Fort Dix in a few weeks.” It was the only basic training facility in the northeast, conveniently located an easy two-hour drive down the Jersey Turnpike from our home on Long Island. At the outset, I would be going to a place where I would be able to get home some weekends, see my friends and sleep in my own bed. Knowing this eased my transition into the unknown.

I was four months past college graduation and had exchanged my draft notice for enlistment papers that committed me to an additional year in exchange for the Army’s guarantee to train me as a “communications specialist,” whatever that meant.

As I walked toward the building, the sun was shining and the light spring jacket I was wearing was enough.

When I entered, I was directed to take a seat in a crowded room among many others. We were all of a similar age, averaging around 20, and we sat in silence awaiting our fate. A man in uniform sought volunteers for the Marines, which I quickly dismissed from consideration. I was too engrossed in trying to anticipate what would happen next to entertain thoughts going off in a completely different direction with implications that I could not imagine. He received a couple of



positive responses, probably from two who had enlisted and were already committed to three years, not from the draftees who were in for two years and were counting down from now, this day, May 11, 1966.

When that business was finished, we were ordered to line up in rows and raise our right hands. Once sworn in by an officer, we sat again, presumably awaiting transportation. The bus arrived. Just before we loaded up, he announced, “At Penn Station you will board the train that will

take you to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.”

I was horrified, in shock. What happened to Fort Dix? As we filed onto the bus, I was thinking it would be impossible to contact my parents who, as soon as Dad returned home, were leaving for the airport on their way to vacation in Jamaica. I realized there was no possibility of seeing them in the near future.

As the bus rolled away from the curb, I was completely disoriented. The other passengers, Long Islanders all, were probably rethinking their own expectations. I suppose the looks of puzzlement, anger and resignation that I saw on their faces reflected some degree of recognition that the Army now owned us. Silence prevailed; no one screamed, “Stop the bus!” Nobody cried out, “Let me off!” Most of us must have understood that this was only

the first unwelcome order that we were bound to obey; we had to follow the itinerary the Army prescribed.

The overnight journey had one beneficial outcome; I was able to befriend two guys who were seated nearby. At least I no longer felt completely alone. We spent most of the time speculating, without any real knowledge, about what the experience would be like.

At Fort Jackson Reception Station, it started: the haircuts, issuing of uniforms and bedding and the most basic of basic training, i.e., using latrines with no privacy, cleaning the same latrines, mopping and buffing the barracks floors, extracting cigarette butts from the surrounding grounds, saluting, marching and being subjected to discipline (absolute, unflinching obedience no matter the abuse someone was screaming directly into your face). It all took one week. At its conclusion, many of us were bused further south to Fort Gordon, Ga., for basic training.

The marching continued, more important as a method to de-emphasize our individuality than to move a large group from place to place. After safety and familiarization training, we were issued M-14 rifles, learned how to break down and clean them and were trucked to the rifle range, where we spent a week learning how to shoot.

We were granted our first pass around week four. We had been required to mail home the civilian clothes we'd arrived in at Fort Jackson along with a postcard stating we had safely arrived, so we were leaving Fort Gordon in uniform. It felt like a day pass from jail. I took a municipal bus, along with several mates from my squad, into Augusta.

I had never really experienced the "deep south." I'd been to Miami on college spring break, but you heard more New York accents there than southern ones. And my family had traveled to Louisiana to visit relatives when I was five years old, but I had few memories of that trip. All I knew about the town was that it was the home of the exclusive Augusta National Golf Club where professional golfers

competed in the world-famous Masters Tournament. From that television event and movies like "Gone with the Wind," my vision of Georgia was of stately white colonial homes, open porches fronted with columns and expansive green lawns dotted with weeping willows.

The weekend sidewalks teemed with hundreds of drunken soldiers lurching from bar to bar or past or through tattoo parlors when they weren't blowing up and down the streets on rented motorcycles. Some of them, having downed enough alcohol, would be scraped up and returned to the post via ambulance for treatment at Martin Army Hospital. Assuming they had a successful recovery, they would enjoy repeating basic training from week one.

There were no women visible outside on the two to three blocks of the town's tawdry center. Apparently, the U.S.O. down the street was the only venue where women felt safe enough on weekends. This dozen or so volunteers found themselves the objects of attention of a horde of young soldiers trying to make time and so had become adept at deflecting while managing to seem hospitable.

And that was just the 'White' side of town. From the darkened bus filled with disheveled soldiers "sleeping it off" that trundled us back to the post before "Taps," the "Black" side of town was barely visible. As far as I could tell, we came nowhere near the famous golf club. Our less sizeable cohort from Puerto Rico, most of whom spoke little English, probably stayed on post. From the racial division I'd seen on my sojourn, I doubt there was a side of town where they would have been welcomed.

Having experienced what Augusta had to offer, the attraction quickly wore off. We who had ventured into town together, becoming more accustomed to our military surroundings, decided to spend our weekends at Fort Gordon, partaking of the less than stout beer served at the gathering spots designated for that purpose. By this time, anyone could see by the degree to which our oft-laundered green fatigue uniforms had faded that we were no longer raw recruits. Through the oppressive heat and humidity of June and July, at some indiscernible point, we were woven into the fabric of the Army and thought of ourselves as soldiers.

When the eight weeks of basic training ended, those of us heading north took the overnight train due to an airline strike. We sprawled across the seats in an attempt to sleep in the swelter and rotated standing in the open doorway at the end of the car to catch the breeze and get some relief.

My family met me at Penn Station to take me home for two weeks of leave. I had passed a written test and received the recommendation of my basic training company commander for officer candidate school. The commitment the Army had made to induce me to enlist, which would have returned me to Fort Gordon for signal school, was nullified. My next stop, for eight weeks of advanced infantry training, would be... where else? Fort Dix.

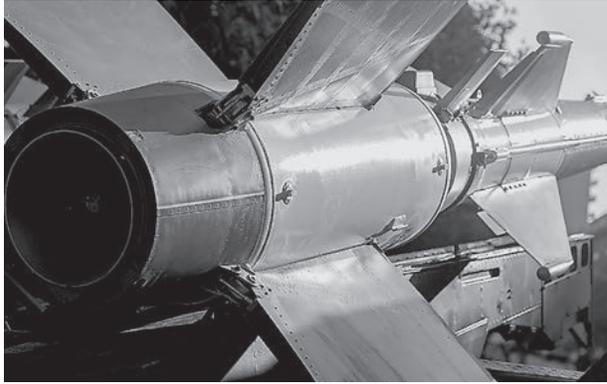
Ride 'em Cowboy

By Dan Yates
—Blue Springs, MO

In 1973, I was stationed at a small American base in Herborn-Seelbach, Germany. The entire installation had eight buildings, and there were approximately 100 GIs assigned to the base. There were no American military vehicles; we were supported by a neighboring German base. Most of the local German residents knew of our presence but not our reason for being there. I was assigned to the 96th Ordnance Company, and our purpose was to maintain, monitor and perform modifications to nuclear warheads stored in that part of the country but under the control of the United States.

One week in the summer of 1973, my team received orders to go TDY to Waldbroel, site of a small artillery detachment, to perform modifications on some nuclear warheads stored there in underground silos. The artillery detachment consisted of fewer than 50 American troops, who were assigned to oversee the stored nuclear weapons. They would periodically perform tests and inspections on the missiles, and if the weapons failed any of them, we were summoned to conduct more detailed tests and take appropriate action. A secondary purpose was to tear the missile down to the warhead should modifications or scheduled maintenance be needed. That was the reason for our TDY assignment that week.

We traveled to the detachment, and upon our arrival we saw that the artillery troops had disassembled one of the missiles, leaving the section containing



the warhead in a maintenance building for us. Their training ceased at that point, and that is where ours began.

Officers were the only artillery personnel who had proper clearance to see the warhead outside of the missile. We finished the disassembly and performed the assigned modification to the warhead. To document the modification, two steps were required: first, complete a paper log that accompanied the warhead, and second, stamp codes onto the exterior of the warhead. This was a safeguard in the event that the paper log was misplaced. To do this, we would straddle the warhead as if we were riding a horse and then use a beryllium hammer to pound the warhead with individual number stamps.

While doing this, a young second lieutenant from the artillery detachment came into the maintenance building. He saw me hammering on a nuclear warhead and immediately left the building, not sure what to make of what I was doing.

I looked at one of my team members and said, "He must think 100 feet will make a difference."

We both laughed.

We Never Learn

By John L. Swainston
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

They fought the war.
Not because they wanted to,
it was their job.

Some were wounded.
Some were mutilated.
Most will be scarred for life.

Vietnam taught the policy
makers nothing.
Never had they been in the field.
Never taken fire.
Never ate a meal from a can or bag.

Around a mahogany table they would sit.
Padded seats—aides behind.
Not one general at the table.
Not one member of the Armed Forces.
Discussions only ended when
the decision was made.

Let's do it again—
AFGHANISTAN.

Jacks

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

Jacks
Roll the dice and pick up one.
Jacks
Make a wish and roll the dice.
Jacks
Hold your breath and hope
it will be alright.
Jacks
Roll the dice and pick up twice.
Jacks
Bounce the ball off the floor;
roll the dice and pick up four.
Jacks
Hold my hand and bounce the ball;
roll the dice and pick up all.

Viet Lament

By Paul J. Nyerick

VA Medical Center—West Haven, CT

My body left the war when I boarded that freedom bird in Da Nang, but my mind remained glued to the jungle canopy. I vowed that all the horrible memories would dissolve when I left country, but that proved impossible. A Continental Airlines DC-10 lifted us from one living hell to a hell we had to live with, an unfamiliar USA.

The perception of our native land changed with ferocity. It became alien to me. I just couldn't get a handle on my emotions. I was out of harm's way but still scared. Something was missing. There was no way this experience could possibly affect me, because of my upbringing and moral grounding. Then everything changed. In my mind, I could never leave the bush. The American dream and hope in the future seemed like a distant memory. I could not shake the emotional baggage I collected during combat. Shame and guilt replaced youthful exuberance. I needed to forget the horror. This burden weighed heavy on my psyche.

All I could do was temporarily mask the pain. In 1970 there were a multitude of costumes to fit any mask. There was the lack of respect for authority of any kind that justified outlaw behavior. Laws made by the same institutions that started this conflict meant absolutely nothing. This



was a recipe for confrontation with anyone who had power. Often such confrontations ended with disastrous consequences, including emergency rooms or incarceration. After surviving Nam there was nothing to lose.

There was a burning desire to revive the adrenalin rush of combat. The mask of daredevil behavior and the lust for sexual conquest coupled with the constant drone of loud, loud music recaptured the warrior feeling. Nothing was too dangerous or irreverent. Cheating death over and over again felt so, so good.

Spirituality was just another joke. How could anyone who participated in such unspeakable acts have the audacity for

spirituality? I lost faith in any god who could condone such depravity. Blasphemy gave me another vehicle for coping.

This emotional confusion craved cures — psychedelic substances and the juice of the blue agave. Alcohol, marijuana and LSD became the temporary savior that was the most far-out mask of all. Expanding the mind with foreign substances was supposed to sort out the confusion and arrange it into the proper perspective, while eventually leading to spiritual healing. Drugs and reading books were supposed to be the answer to enlightenment. That hippie dream sounded wonderful but forgot to mention hangovers.

There was no room for honest meaningful labor. The Christian work ethic did not go along with full-time escapism. I tried to fit into the workforce, but the mundane routine just brought back the horrors. When you spend all of your time trying to kill yourself with thrills, there is no time for societal endeavors. Besides, I was too tired to work every day anyway. Remember, there is no such thing as too much fun.

All of these physical and emotional stresses placed an enormous burden on health. Injuries healed quickly, but physical healing could not ease the emotional pain. After the body felt

normal the mind ached even more. How long could this pace keep up? I needed relief so I could feel the needed peace everyone deserves. I did not want to die.

The only clarity was looking at reality deep within the mirror. I could gaze directly into the glass and feel the depths of my soul, looking through pale blue eyes at a future that seemed futile. The pain of guilt ruled my future. My future was bleak at best. I needed to release myself from the guilt that prohibited me from enjoying life to its fullest.

As I looked deeply I could only picture her eyes. Those eyes pierce through me like daggers every time I try to sleep. They were the eyes of an old mama-san who was in the wrong place for her and the wrong time for me. That wrinkled, defenseless crone was the unfortunate recipient of a grenade I threw into the bunker where she was hiding. We were ordered to blow up all bunkers to ferret out any enemy taking refuge. I pulled the pin and rolled the frag into the hole when the old lady poked her head around a corner of that underground maze. She looked at me with those piercing eyes reflecting the anguish of that misunderstood land. She knew her fate.

There was nothing I could do to save her. The die was cast, but in those few seconds before detonation I saw in her face the hopelessness of the situation. She was crying out for help, but all I could do was watch her die. Those eyes look down on me with the constant barrage of guilt. I uselessly killed another human being. The act was not only condoned, but praised. When I walked away, that innocent but deadly mistake drifted into the fog of war. It pushed me to the edge of insanity.

Those eyes would become a constant reminder of the downside of my Vietnam

experience. My dreams and the mirror's unforgiving reflection eventually made clear what to do. On a rainy summer night, I got into my MGB and drove alone, south to the seat of government, Washington, D.C. No one had any idea where I was headed, nor did I tell anyone of my journey for many years. It was something I just had to do on my own. Not too many people could understand anyway.

With a six-pack of beer and my Purple Heart on the seat beside me, I drove like the wind. The top was down while it rained. Still I drove, as if I was on one final mission. The stinging rain dripped down my long hair, keeping it in place. Rain drops and a soothing wind on my face cleansed away all doubt and reinforced my resolve for what needed to be done.

I drove in the storm oblivious to my surroundings. Connecticut, New York, the entire New Jersey Turnpike, Delaware and Maryland breezed by. Seemingly in the blink of an eye, I stood in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The six-pack was gone but I was clear-headed and focused.

This White House stood stoically guarding the leader of this great nation, Richard M. Nixon. His power was unrivaled throughout the free world. He could pull the plug on Vietnam any time, but he and the rest of the shortsighted politicians were stuck in that stay-the-course mentality. All he had to do was ask the 58,200 dead if the war was worth keeping the Vietnamese people from embracing communism.

If he had asked me, I would have certainly explained my situation in detail. Since that was not likely to happen, I decided to show my displeasure for the entire fiasco in my own way. I took my Purple Heart and flung it in the air. That symbol of gallantry felt heavy in my hand. It sailed

over the fence like a tiny unguided missile, landing with George Washington looking in my direction. Security lights reflected his image in that ounce of pure gold.

Instant jubilation flooded my entire being. I felt joy that I hadn't in a long, long time. At that moment I came home. While looking at my medal on the lawn, a giant weight lifted from my heart. I could see the old lady in the bunker smiling, as if everything was all right now. It felt so, so good.

There was no way I could cherish an award that I received from the president of the United States, so I gave it back. I threw it over that fence for everyone on both sides who were affected by the scourges of combat. I threw it over the fence for my fellow Marines who sacrificed so much but were repaid with guilt and shame for surviving. We must still live with the horror. Maybe now I could travel down life's highway with the knowledge that with this small gesture, I tried to make it right.

As the first rays of sunlight peaked over the Potomac, it was time to leave the war behind. People started going about their daily routines to grease the wheels of government. I accomplished my mission and needed to go home. I'd have a six-hour drive to sort out what had taken place on that rainy night. I gave my Purple Heart one final glance and hopped into my car. It looked at peace.

I drove near the National Mall, where the Washington Monument stood high above the rest of the history on that hallowed ground. I shifted into first gear and drove north. I had to play softball that night and couldn't be late. *Semper Fidelis, Always Faithful*, is branded on my soul. I will never let my team down.

Control

By Trina Mioner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, Ohio

As a little girl my life was chaotic, and I would often slip off into fantasy. My daydreams would take me away from the violent arguments.

I dreamed of being tall and slim in a blue uniform, white shirt and blue tie with a pin on the lapel that read “Fly the Skies.” I was in control, spending hours practicing hand movements, telling my passengers to remove the airbags from above the overhead compartments. The passengers were empty metal fold-up chairs.

My future led me to the uniform of my fantasy that I wore with the same startling pride as I did the Army uniform. I don’t know if it was self-fulfilling prophecy or what, but I ended up being or doing what I pictured in my dreams. I loved to wear the uniform and the order that the uniform brought.

Moving to the reality of today at age 66, I am happy with the way things turned out. This evening was the same as many others. I had a late dinner of spicy food, knowing that eating spicy food late resulted in vivid dreams. My grandkids surrounded the bed with goodnight kisses. Laying my head on the pillow I felt agitated, like I was forgetting something. Closing my eyes, I started counting backward: 100, 99, 98... The last number I was conscience of was 63.

There I was, standing in my blue uniform in front of two wide rows of seats, five seats on each side of the aisle. Gripping



the microphone in my hand, I smiled and gave instructions for the air bags. A loud explosion blew a gigantic hole in the side of the plane, followed instantly by fire. A passenger held a little girl by her ankles to keep her from being sucked out into the sky.

I crouched terrified in a compartment with what was left of the microphone in my hand, blood dripping from my eyebrows. The second captain was standing over me, shouting for me to get control of things. I was frozen, listening to cries of agony in the passenger cabin. Blood and limbs were everywhere. My ears hurt from the explosion. I shook my head trying to wake myself up. The words “get control” sounded like an echo.

Shaking my head, my eyes opened to the darkness of my bedroom. I switched on the lamp, saw the medi-planner sitting on the table and realized I had skipped taking my night meds. I reached for the nearly empty water bottle and swallowed the brown and tan capsule that guarded against the recurring nightmares. I decided to document this dream so that I could recall it for my psychiatrist.

My dreams always ended up with shouts about me getting control of things. If I followed the ritual of taking my meds, my sleep went uninterrupted. My psychiatrist said the dreams were symptoms of the PTSD.

I took several deep breaths — inhale, exhale. Then 100, 99, 98...63.

Wildfire

By Karen Green

VA Medical Center-North Las Vegas, NV

“One tree
can become one million matches.”
One match
can turn a million trees to ashes!

Many animals
lose their lives in these flames.
How do these fires start?
Some by nature while others,
humans are to blame.

Millions of acres
burn every year.
Some lose their homes
and possessions they held dear.

In some of these fires,
citizens and firefighters die.
To see all this destruction
makes one cry.

Be careful
and obey the laws that there are.
One little spark
can burn and travel quite far.

The financial costs
to fight these fires are high,
as resources are used
on the ground and from the sky.

The smoke as it spreads
becomes a health risk to all.
And it’s so sad
to see these gorgeous forests fall.

We must take care
to save this land.
We can try
if we lend a hand.

The Drink

By Christine Rose Hazuka
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I indeed liked the taste and the numbing of my mind. It got me through the rough and horrible incidents. It even helped to keep the nightmares bearable.

I didn't think it would hurt to partake during the days and nights. I stashed it in safe places, so I was never without its help. It prompted me to keep a smile on my face for those outside of me to see. I hid my feelings and my thoughts and, of course, the real story for so many years, holding it inside, by myself with the drink to help.

Then one day I stopped taking a sip; I was taking more. Awakened now, I was seriously scared, unprepared for what my mind would go through without the help. I was now alone and sick with depression, anxiety and panic attacks. Going to a store, or church or any group of people was almost unbearable. Elevators were my enemy for sure, and distrust filled my life.

Marriage after marriage failed miserably. Letting my children go with their

grandparents, then finally with their father was the only sensible thing I did. Saving them from seeing me get worse day by day and from putting them in danger of me, their mother, was inevitable. I had to let them go; no choice there. The loss almost ended me many times.

Over 20 years had flown by. Talking to this psychologist and that one, I still hid the nightmares of my life. One day the truth came flying out. A female counselor really listened and guided me to go on and on. She didn't set time limits or say our session was up for now. She heard my life in those hours. I don't think I ever cried so much for so long, but I didn't stop my words, I let it all out.

I have not had the thought of having the crutching help in many years. I think I am scared of reliving the past all over. Maybe I fear that I won't stop again, so I stay clear



of the bar and people who make the drink their habit. I will often think of that day when I let loose the monsters that liked the drink, the false life and the torture it gave to me. It didn't help me at all, so I am thankful to be alive and know I don't need that drink to prove I am here and I am all right. I am a survivor.



Why America Will Never Run Out of Marines

By Phil Hosier

VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

This is a story about a very good friend of mine, a Vietnam veteran who eventually became 100 percent disabled from wounds suffered in combat.

Roger D. Flood had enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1965. I think all of his combat wounds shaped his personality and his outlook on life. He was a great supporter of the Corps, the American flag and the American way of life; his beliefs were carved in stone, and he lived by them. When Roger made a friend, it was for life. His friends knew where he stood on subjects, and so did his detractors.

At work breaks, veterans tended to gather together, and each would tell war stories, no matter the branch or where they served. Roger would tell about all the ways he was wounded in combat — by a bullet, a grenade, artillery and the last time being overrun by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). An NVA woman soldier shot Roger, and as he lay on his back, she jumped over the ditch he was in and then saw he was looking at her in his wounded state. She turned around, came back, bayoneted him in the stomach, smiled and ran on. Roger always said his other wounds stung some, but that bayonet really hurt. He said he needed more than a year recovering before he knew he would survive.

As Roger told his combat stories, he repeatedly said he wasn't very lucky in Vietnam. One day, I looked at him and told him with veteran humor, "Roger, you weren't unlucky, You were just slow." A big laugh went up around the group, and a few choice cuss words followed. He was affectionately called Slow Roger after that, but only by a select few.

We knew Roger had stared at death too many times. We not only loved him like a friend but a brother, a brother in arms, who had worn the uniform and had seen too much war up close and personal.

Roger was with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in Vietnam, known as "The Walking Dead." This wasn't a handle that unit was given by other Marines or even the American press corps. "The Walking Dead" handle was coined by none other than Ho Chi Minh. The casualty rate for the 1/9 was the highest in Marine Corps history.

By the time Sept. 11, 2001, happened, Roger had been classified as 100 percent disabled by the VA. A week after 9/11, Roger went down to the local Marine recruiter and asked to be placed back on active duty. The recruiter listened to Roger's reasons but told Roger that at 65 years of age and 100 percent disability, there was zero chance of him being accepted for duty as an active Marine. Roger looked at the recruiter with those steely eyes and said, "Just give me a uniform and a rifle, I'll show you who's disabled."

Roger wanted to go back on active duty so he would be sent to a combat zone, willing to give his own life in combat, thus saving the life of another young Marine. This is the kind of men America raises, and it is why America will never run out of Marines.

Roger now lies with his comrades in Arlington National Cemetery.



Peace at Home

By Gary Hughes
—Mission, KS

Peace at home
Peace at home.
I am 10,000 miles
Away from home.
I am cold, wet and tired;
I am not alone.
God let there be
Peace at home.

COVID 19

By Lisa J. Farabelli
VA Medical Center—Lebanon, PA

Silence is my friend
Time has stopped
Masks are worn for protection
Caskets are made daily
People didn't take you seriously
Favorite restaurants are closed
From symptoms to ventilators
Death stops for no one
I got my vaccines
Writing this helped me.

Lord Fletcher's

By Charles Bremicker

VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN

Lord Fletcher's, the site of the Take a Vet Fishing event, was an hour from my house. Annie and Paul picked me up at six in the morning; Paul handed back from the front seat a McDonald's breakfast of a tall stack of pancakes, sausage, scrambled eggs and a biscuit, and I ate it, trying not to spill crumbs on the back seat of Paul's Lexus SUV. Annie was beautiful as she drove through traffic of the freeway then the elusive roads that led to Lake Minnetonka and the fishing event that blew the lid off them all.

Seventy-five veterans joined 40 guides, who provided boats, tackle, bait and bottles of water.

Then our guide, Jason, took over, and we walked down the dock to the boat, an orange rocket that sparkled in the sun, with silver instrumentation, an electric trolling motor, stationary anchor, and a 350-horsepower outboard motor. Paul jumped onto the gray carpeting of the boat, which took balls, I told him, and Jason held my hand as I stepped onto the deck. He untied the boat from the dock, started the motor that rumbled and backed us into the lake, where he turned the boat on a dime, gunned the motor, and drove the boat leaping across the waves of the windy lake. The boat was wide and long and handled the waves while hammering the wakes of bigger boats. The



four pedestal chairs withstood the impact of the whitecaps and the windswept water.

On the boat, Paul opened the can of mixed nuts Annie bought and handed them around. The day was perfect, with a mild temperature, bright, sunny sky, but a stiff wind. Jason took us into the middle of the bay, pointed out houses that looked like hotels and navigated the boat through a

channel and under a bridge.

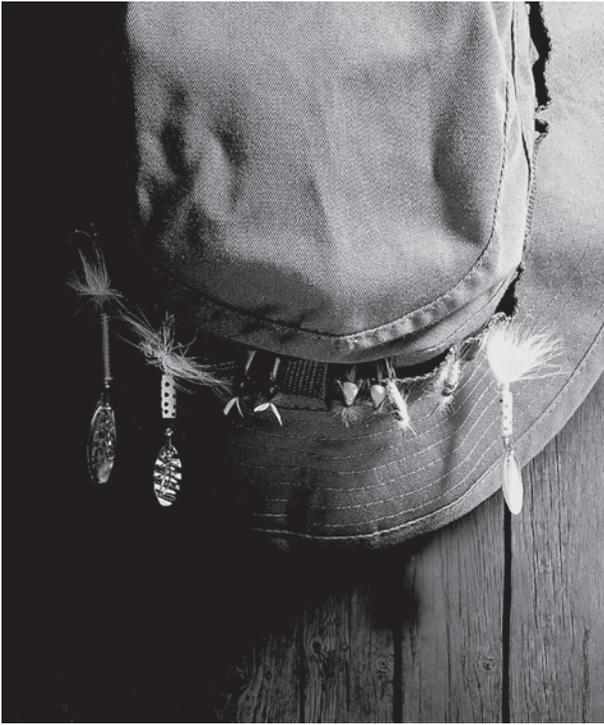
We got into a bigger part of the lake. Jason slowed the boat near a marina of sailboats, and we stood in the boat and threw our baited hooks into the wind. He maneuvered the boat with the trolling motor. The wind blew us around, and we caught nothing but weeds. Jason called them salads; they came in heavily and felt like a fish until we realized they did not pull back. It seemed impossible for a fish hook to hold so much shrubbery.

An eagle flew toward us, dropped to the water, taloned a fish, lifted it skyward and took it to its nest. Then Jason caught a fish. He caught it without telling us, suddenly holding it up for me to take a picture. It was a small bass, but a fish, nevertheless.

We changed locations, stopping offshore from a mansion. The wind fanned the water, blew us around, and we caught nothing. I said, "The owner might come running out on the lawn and tell us to get the hell out of here."

"I've seen it happen," Jason said.

We reeled in. Jason gunned the motor and drove us lickety-split to another bay. The sun beat down, but the wind kept us cool. Jason tried another spot, and another, to find fish. Then I caught one. I felt it tap



then tug, and it began to fight as I reeled, the rod jerking and bending with the pull of the fish. The fish came in; I pulled it to the bow, where Jason reached over to lift it into the boat. The fish threw the hook. Jason was left holding an empty line and regretting that he left his net at home.

“Paul, it’s your turn,” I said, and we all focused on catching another fish.

Jason drove the boat to the middle of another bay, where we avoided the traffic of other boats. The wind churned up stiff waves that slapped our hull. He gave us rods with spinner bait; they were heavier than jigs and easier to cast in the wind. Paul sat in the back seat and cast. I stood in the cockpit and used the steering wheel for support as I cast my spinner bait downwind. My bait had a yellow rubber skirt and a silver blade that spun when I reeled.

Jason told us about robotics, that he had been with his company for ten years, and in his previous job he traveled the world. Then we were quiet as we concentrated on casting our lures, letting them sink to

the bottom, reeling them in and withdrawing the weeds that clung to our hooks. Paul opened the box of Cheez-its Annie bought and handed it around. Jason refused, his hands having put worms on our hooks for hours.

The houses onshore stood like mansions or shacks, depending on when they were built, and many looked like homes of fabulously wealthy people whom I never heard of. Canopies covered Chris Crafts; manicured lawns aproned shorelines, and huge windows reflected the sunlight that lit the lake.

Sailboats ventured out, their jibs catching the wind and captains at tillers tacking to fill the sails with wind. I caught another fish.

I set the hook, and the fight began. The rod bent double, whiplashed, and the cork handle stiffened in my hands. I reeled it in; the rod pulled back, and the fish tugged as he came in hard. The bass fought like a fish twice its size. Jason stepped to the back of the boat, reached over as I brought the line to him, and he pulled it into the boat.

He took a picture and promised to send it to me. I held the small bass by the jaw, stood in the sun for the photo, then threw it back. It paused in the water, twitched and swam away.

We had half an hour before we had to go in for lunch, and I said, “Paul, the next one is yours, just to put the pressure on you.”

Jason let us fish to the bitter end, then we reeled in. He stowed our rods and gave the motor full throttle. Our bow lifted then planed, our hats in our hands to keep them from blowing off. The hull

banged the waves, and the marina of Lord Fletcher’s approached as Jason slowed the boat to find a slip. We trolled along docks filled with big fishing boats like Jason’s and docks for yachts with beautiful women just climbing off.

Jason found an unused dock, glided his boat in, tied it to the timbers and helped me out. Paul got out of the boat by himself, and together we walked up the dock to the wooden walkway to a tent decorated by volunteers. We had a lunch of hamburgers, pasta salad and chips. Afterward, an awards ceremony went on forever. The president of Take a Vet Fishing, who had his own TV show, “Fishing for Freedom,” was longwinded, emotional and invested in the lives of the veterans he loved. Although he never served in the armed forces, his grandfather and father were Marines.

The president introduced people who helped him. His vice president started a harangue that turned sweet as he praised our country’s peaceful transition of power after the presidential election and veterans who sacrificed their lives or time to keep America free. Annie winced when he started, afraid of a political tirade, but relaxed when the man’s sentiments touched our hearts.

After lunch, Paul and I waited for Annie to bring up the car. She negotiated the backroads that led out of Lord Fletcher’s and got on the freeway home. They opened their windows, and the warm wind buffeted me in the back seat. Then Annie opened the sky roof to make conversation impossible. We stopped for gas; she bought a bag of gummy bears, and we handed them around.

For one hour, I was happy as never before.

The 4th of July

By Wallace MacGregor

—Boston, MA

It was the absolute celebration, a celebration for ourselves, of our unique independence, of a freedom never before known. It was a celebration born out of the victory of our first war.

My wife and I wove through the crowds that had gathered along the Long Beach, Calif., waterfront for this saturnalia of sensual delights and visual spectacles. On the Belmont Pier we waited for the spectacle promised by radio and newspaper.

Firecrackers randomly popped. Green, red and blue sparklers flared into existence only to fade into darkness along the beach. Yawls dotted the channel between the oil islands and the shore. The beach was peppered with explosions. A flare reminiscent of the kind used in Vietnam to signal distress rose into the sky.

Suddenly I was transported back into a leech-infested rice paddy 90 kilometers west of Da Nang. Coordinates “five-zero-niner-delta.” My orders read, “Photograph and narrate hostile activities and friendly counter measures at Bridge 5, I Corps.”

The blast of an anti-tank grenade flared white and blue as it shattered the reinforced steel frame and axle of our self-propelled howitzer. Shrapnel slammed into a 20-year-old corporal. Red tracers came from the tree line, zipping through our perimeter defenses. The corporal sat behind the wreck of the vehicle. He held



his arm in the air and stared in stunned disbelief at the white bone protruding jagged and splintered from the stump that had once been his left wrist. The CO ordered starlight flares. They floated down under their parachutes, illuminating the jungle 100 meters away with a cold, white light. We poured everything we had into the jungle.

I was back on Belmont Pier. “Doesn’t the dome of the Spruce Goose look great!” a little girl said. “And the Queen Mary! My gosh!” The fireworks burst in the sky—blasts of brilliant color and three-dimensional spheres burning into my deepest emotions. “That must be the finale,” someone said. But the explosions came and came—beauty and sensations that went beyond the salute to patriotism and courage with their force.

The repercussions of the rocket blasts reverberated throughout my body.

Three people left. One said she was bored. I’m sure it was shell shock. “When’s the finale?” people kept asking. Spectators debated what would signal the beginning of the end. Then it came. Blast after blast of dazzling lights and colors springing to life in mid-air, then floating into the deep blue-black sea below. A twin engine Cessna flew directly into the cloud of gunpowder smoke.

It was an F-4. Two 500-pound bombs, napalm, fell from its belly. The resulting fire obliterated the Queen Mary,

Spruce Goose, the boats and schooners and the oil islands. The entire harbor erupted in flames and billowing, black smoke.

For a moment the crowd applauded. They were thrilled. The sweat rolled down my face and soaked my jacket. I wanted a cigarette. I wanted to inhale the nicotine and dull my senses. I wanted to cup it in my hand to hide the glowing red tip from enemy detection. But I was only on Belmont Pier.

As I drove home, I thought about the spectacle. I thought about how rockets and fireworks celebrating courage, patriotism and democracy went the way of the horse and carriage. Of how the power and force represented not independence, but rather the specter of war itself.

Alive Day

By Daniel Paicopulos
VA Medical Center—San Diego, CA

October 27 was my Alive Day, 54 years after death came alongside me, took several of my buddies but didn't claim me.

It tried. It tried hard, even sending me floating above my corporeal self on the battlefield, having me meet with my mother, dead some nine years earlier, as she gave me directions to go back and live a good life.

Alive Day is not a formal event, not so much celebrated as experienced, mostly by wounded veterans, but also by anyone who has had a brush with infinity. While not formal, it is a very real thing, the date one might have died or been killed, but wasn't. I write about it and spend this day in reflection as part of my own ongoing healing process, as my never-ending effort to be content when my actual transition occurs. I support veterans by submitting to *Veterans' Voices*, donating to the Wounded Warrior Project and being a life member of Disabled American Veterans. I urge veterans to make special note of their own Alive Day.

Most, if they are like me, spent every day after their most important war—the one which happened to them—trying to forget what they saw, what they did. I learned after years of denial that it is healthier and more transformative, to remember. This is a very personal day, not one for speeches, for toasts, for “thank you for your service” comments. It is a day



for self-thanks, for contemplation, a chance to listen to the whispers of gratitude and appreciation. This is a day to allow the memories to be heard and shared if the sharing might contribute to the good. This is how one heals and goes forward, in honor of fallen comrades, in appreciation for opportunities to be of service, living gratefully in the life one was given.

Some young corpsman risked his life and saved mine at Con Thien, Vietnam, at 0230 on Oct. 27, 1967. I wish I knew his name so I could thank him in person, but I have never forgotten him. He pulled me to safety and morphine until the medevac chopper arrived to carry me off many hours later. I would so like him to know that I lived a good life, made a difference to many in need and aim to be a true and steadfast friend.

Cool and Seven

By Rich Maguire
—Chelmsford, MA

It's tough being cool and seven
When your dad doesn't know what to do.
He takes out your clothes,
Picks out grey, brown and blue.

He doesn't understand at all.
He doesn't even think
That being cool is being dressed
In bright yellow, orange and pink.

It's tough being cool and seven
When you're playing video games.
You talk about all the bad guys,
And Dad doesn't know all their names.

He thinks the Power Rangers
Are all just hyper girls and guys.
He thinks Ninja Turtles are IN;
He thinks Spider Man flies.

It's tough being cool and seven
When Dad takes you out for a day.
I meet a cute girl to play with,
And Dad gets in the way.

He comes over and just stands there,
Gives me a smile and a wink,
Asks the girl what her name is.
Good grief, what does he think?

Does he think we're getting married?
Does he want me to hold her hand?
I want to say we're just friends,
But old people don't understand.

It's tough being cool and seven
When your T-shirt doesn't hang down,
Your hat brim faces ahead
And your pants don't drag on the ground.

But seven and cool is what I am;
I'm really quite a man.
Dad will never be cool though,
But he's doing the best that he can.

Ammo for Your Resolve

By James R. Janssen

—Lorraine, KS



Speaking flat out as a veteran, I know right off, a writer I'm not. These words flow from my heart with an urgency equal in intensity to the wars I've fought. PTSD tries to stand in my way, but my message to you will not be swept away. With a heavy heart overwhelmed by haunted memories of grief, rage, and an ocean of tears, I only ask you to hear my pleas.

Far heavier than the strapped supplies I bore on my back in those days of yore, the load strapped to my heart in current days weighs far heavier. But by the grace of the man upstairs, a lifetime of trauma now fuels my resolve to convey a determination for survival. May we secure in our hearts and souls a new strength and understanding to learn how to cope and live with PTSD, to hold our ground and never back down.

Holding our heads high, we continue to shout:

*I am a soldier and I'm marching on
I am a warrior and this is my song
My eyes are steel and my stare is long
I am a warrior and this is my song.*

Seventy five years young, Vietnam War included, I survived traumas many times. I mean what I say and say what I mean without hesitation.

Always know I'm here for you, willing to always lay my life down for you.

Feeling down and wanting to give up? Whether you walk as a civilian brother or sister or as a fellow veteran, my arms reach out to embrace you right now with these words: You are never alone and have purpose for marching on. The coping skills you possess will implore your heart to once again fight—fight to heal, fight for life.

Author's Note: I was born in 1946 in a small town, Altadena, Calif. Look out! The fun began immediately. First trauma was as a newborn. The largest concentration of trauma occurred at age three ranging from TBI to abandonments and severe beatings. Trauma was peppered throughout the years tapering down as of late. I've been diagnosed with most every malady known to mankind and been on more types of drugs than I remember. Long story short, life's journey has been rough but as Jon Voight stated in Runaway Train, "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." I'm currently waiting to enter the veterans PTSD program.

My passion is helping others, my fellow veterans. Brother and sister vets put their lives on the line and basically vowed to do so

for a lifetime. My father, Norman L Janssen was a World War II vet with stories (the one and only time he talked about it) that would curl a sailor's hair. He served under General Patton in the Battle of the Bulge.

I recall as a child walking with him around the square in Lyons, Kan. As we walked he, without hesitation, blurted out "shoulders back boy, suck that belly in, head up, eyes straight ahead, and a few other admonitions I'm probably not recalling. I did know how strange I felt trying to comply with all these requests. Mom was an aspiring movie queen, raised in various parts of California. Her other aspirations included acting, singing and dancing. Her appearance was stunning as a young woman.

The Burger Story

By Vondell Jones

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

It was a humid summer day.
The air smelled of rain.

I pulled my 2015 Chevy into a handicap spot in front of Happy Burger, just as most of the lunch hour crowd was leaving the parking lot.

Situated in a gleaming aluminum-clad railroad car, Happy Burger is one of the city's more popular eateries, acclaimed for its delicious hamburgers, real potato French fries and its classic 1950s ambiance.

"Welcome to Happy Burger," chimed a smiling teenager. "My name is Eddie. Counter or booth?"

"By a window."

"Sure thing. Right this way. Been here before?"

"No."

The restaurant's retro decor swept me into a whirligig of time, magically transporting me back 70 years into a cobwebbed world of haunted echoes and blurred memories.

A dozen red-cushioned bar stools stood obediently before a glossy lunch counter. The floor was a gigantic chessboard made of black and white tiles. A kid wearing a white T-shirt and paper hat was busy scooping ice cream at a small but efficient soda fountain. An old fashioned, neon-illuminated jukebox mechanically sifted through a stack of neatly racked vinyl



45 records as it played the soundtrack of a bygone era. A young fry-cook shifted his attention from a row of beef patties hissing on an open grill to the screaming-hot contents of a gurgling deep fryer.

This novelty diner was an authentic shrine to rock 'n' roll's golden age of doo-wop and American Bandstand. Boy servers with crewcuts wore starched white shirts beneath red cardigan sweaters, black chino pants and penny loafers. Girl servers with ponytails wore white blouses, gray poodle skirts, bobby sox and white sneakers. A collage of photographs and placards papered the walls. All the music icons of the era—Elvis, Little Richard, Richie Valens, Fats Domino and others - were pictured in a jumbled patchwork of noteworthy curiosities, including time-capsule memorabilia like old Ivory soap and Pepsodent toothpaste ads and a panel of really large posters showing Marilyn Monroe modeling one-piece swimsuits.

Happy Burger diner sparked an eerie connection to my heart and brain, like I

was reliving events that had happened a lifetime ago when my dreams were young and the days seemed hopeful. A few years later, I would experience the life-altering horrors of grotesque combat, and the world would never again seem as radiant. The heavy dark clouds of war hover still.

"How's this?" Eddie said, stopping at a booth with a window that captured a snapshot of the parking lot.

I slid onto the Naugahyde seat.

"Can I take your order now, or do you want to look at our menu?"

"I don't know." Whiffs of sizzling burgers on the grill made my mouth water. "I like my burgers simple: charbroiled with lettuce, tomato and raw onion. And three shakes of catsup on top."

"Oh you want the American Burger. It comes with a Coke and fries."

There was an awkward silence.

"I hope you don't mind my asking, but I noticed the cap you're wearing has the logo 'Vietnam' printed on it. Well, I just want to ask, were you there? Is that where you served?"

"Yep, 3rd Marine Division, 1968, 1969."

I complimented the young man on his powers of observation. I don't think he caught my intended sarcasm, but the kid

was right. I felt like an old relic, kind of useless.

It's true, though. I'm proud of having served our country, and I am not ashamed of having served in Vietnam, despite the war's public unpopularity. I still wear Vietnam emblems on my caps and sweatshirts and jackets. The older I get, the more I seem to need to display this important symbol of that indelible time in my life.

"Gosh," he said, "I never really talked to anybody who actually fought in Vietnam."

I scrutinized the young man. I looked into his bright, untroubled eyes and saw a reflection of my own innocence 50 years removed.

"I'm 19," he continued. "I go to community college, and we're learning about Vietnam in our American History class."

"It was a war from the last century," I said. "I guess that makes me ancient history."

"Oh, no sir, I didn't mean it like that. Well, it's kind of like working here at Happy Burger. I get to know about what life was like two generations ago, like studying history close up, without books. So getting to talk to you gives me a chance to know how things were back then, what people were really talking about."

"Wow Eddie, you're deep," I said feebly. "No offense taken. If I didn't want to talk about 'The Nam,' I wouldn't be wearing this cap."

"You see? That's what I mean. You called it 'The Nam.' That's what you guys called it. If I hadn't talked to you, I wouldn't have known that. I learned that just now, from you. Thanks so much for your service. I'll get your order."

In an instant that brief conversation changed me. My thoughts were set adrift

in a flood of complicated feelings. The conversation with my teenaged waiter made me recall how Vietnam turned me into an old, old man before I was 20.

The promise of rain was about to be fulfilled. Through the window I could see thick clouds swimming in a dark sky, pulsing thunder, winking lightning.

By the time my burger arrived, rain streaked the window, and tears streamed down my face.

"Are you OK?" Eddie asked, placing my meal on the table. "I didn't upset you did I? Hey, I'm so sorry."

"No, no kid. Things fall apart sometimes. I'm good."

I looked at my lunch. The hamburger made me salivate, again. The toasted bun was a domed platform for a two-finger-thick, quality beef patty charbroiled to perfection, luscious and juicy.

To this day I cannot explain why I felt what I felt, but for me this sandwich was a thing to behold, a magnificent creation topped with pale green iceberg lettuce, two slices of tomato and a small mound of chopped onions. When I picked it up, catsup oozed.

Fries as thick as potato wedges cooked to a golden exactness, soda fizzing in a frosty Coca-Cola glass dripping with cold sweat — a scrumptious feast from the past.

The pounding rain had turned the parking lot into a miniature lake when I took the first bite of my burger.

This hamburger was no impostor. It tasted so good it snapped me out of my depression and put me in a more reflective mood. I munched on a French fry, took a sip of soda and suddenly felt more alive than I had in years.

Being in that nostalgic environment at that moment made me realize how fortunate I was to be alive when so many men and women were killed in human wars. I was forced to confront my guilt. I'd survived war. So many of my friends had not. Ghosts. They'd never enjoy this great culinary construction I was privileged to eat.

My anguish grew with every bite. My thoughts went on a loop, replaying ugly combat memories and projecting the faces of boys who died as men.

That burger joint and a bright-eyed kid put me on an emotional turntable spinning around and around until it seemed that time circled on itself, stood still, rushed forward.

I thought about the young brief lives of the dead, motionless in their graves for eternity, and I realized we are all part of a story that expands beyond ourselves. I did not invent war or violence. I'm just another soul in an endless parade of souls marching into the vast mist. A weight was lifted from me; stale bitterness and old grievances eased away. For so many years I'd tempered my existence on the irreversible events from that damned war, clinging to it every day and lugging it into the future with me. Suddenly it seemed safe to let the war go, or at least begin to.

The rain stopped. I finished my meal, paid the bill, gave Eddie a generous tip. I assured him that he had not offended me with his questions. Just the opposite occurred. My tears signaled a personal catharsis. I told him I was happy about meeting him and how he had stirred a reawakening within me.

Outside, the air smelled fresh and clean. The sky was blue, and the sun peeked through the lingering clouds.

Alone II

By Tony Craidon

VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN

Alone I sit in a room barren of sentiment. There's no love left in this house that was once a home. It's every corner whispers of memories far lovelier than the present. What we had, what brought us all together, has been picked apart, one cosmically microscopic piece at a time. This home we built, and with our passion, adoration, and affection serving as the mortar to our foundation, was once a sanctuary from the chaos all around us. Now it's just another cookie cutter shell with windows and shingles. I wonder, will the next tenants feel the vacuum of despair, destruction, and destitution? If so, I hope they have more love than I was capable of protecting. This house needs a new remodel. Something with more endurance for the storms that are known to roll through here from time to time. Some new paint for certain.

Promises were made, futures were planned, love was made like cupcakes from scratch. It should then follow promises were bent and broken, futures burned to ash and scattered to the wind, and the memory of making love cannot be guaranteed accurate.

I never thought I'd be one to believe it couldn't happen to me. My cynicism had been tempered before my eyes, and I remained blind. Hindsight 20-20, I should have remembered, too much of a good thing will always rot from the inside like a spoiled watermelon promising sweet delight. Cut it open and taste disappointment. In the end, it



was a symptom of the pandemic – my desire to capture time itself. So how am I so surprised when burning the candle at both ends would bring swift doom and divorce? I ponder while the ghosts of a future murdered whisper to me from the empty halls I once considered my castle.

Before I vacate, I'll leave a note: "The windows, once steamy and offering a warm, safe hovel to anyone looking in from the yard, now cry when it gets cold. Their tears have warped their frames and the glass has sunken to a shallow and fragile state. Consider replacing at once."

I could just tear it down. Start anew. But these old bones don't have enough life in them to start again. Better to shove some spackle in the holes of the walls. Holes created in heated passion, negligence, and anger. Just the bare minimum. Just enough to destroy the ghosts. Cash out and spend the rest of my days a vagabond, exploring roads that don't exist, destined to cry alone, reflect alone, grow alone, and someday in the not-too-distant future, die alone.

Why We Stand

By Kimberly Green

—Fort Smith, AR

He didn't know if anyone was home,
so he waited outside
in his chair alone.

On the drive with its winding path,
thoughts of his brothers
would make him laugh.

He waited and waited most of the day.
He really didn't want
to come back home this way.

But here he was, his belongings by his side.
He brushed back a tear,
hoping his mother wouldn't cry.

The car neared as the sun crept down,
throwing off dirt.
Maybe he shouldn't have come around.

"Billy!" his mother exclaimed.
"You're home at last!"
Cold War medals upon his chest.

He hadn't prepared them;
he knew it was a mistake.
His mother's heart, he knew, would break.

"My son! My son!"
was all he could hear,
his mother's face blinded with tears.

"My legs are gone;
it's okay, Mom, don't cry."
His father sobbing, he thought he'd die.

His chair he sat in of course had wheels.
This amazing war hero,
a United States Navy Seal.

The Hulk

By Michael D. Monfrooe
VA Medical Center—St. Cloud, MN



In the summer of '82, I was stationed at Aberdeen Proving Ground as an infantry instructor in the Combined Arms division. One evening I was stopped on post for speeding. Yes, I was guilty.

For some bureaucratic reasons, arrangements were made to allow a local magistrate to hold traffic court on post. Since all traffic violations came under civilian jurisdiction, I guess it made sense.

Rumor had it that if you appeared in front of the judge, there was a chance you

could have your fine thrown out or reduced. I always listen to rumor control.

On the day I was to appear, I was in the field teaching patrolling techniques to brand new ordinance second lieutenants. My major gave me

permission to make my court date and wished me luck with a rather sarcastic grin on his face.

I showed up in jungle fatigues with a pistol belt, survival knife and full camo face paint. I looked like I just stepped out of a recruiting poster.

My plan was that by playing to his strong sense of patriotism, the magistrate would throw out my case all together.

Finally, they called my name. I stood tall and

erect and proud before the judge. Then he looked me in the eye, which meant to me that my face paint needed work.

He asked me why I chose to come before him as I did. I explained that I was teaching new officers to lead their troops in combat. I laid it on thick. He thanked me for my service to our country, and at this point I thought I had him.

He then looked past me and asked everyone in the large room if they ever watched "The Incredible Hulk" on TV? It was a popular show, so everyone, including some kids, raised their hands.

He looked at me, and for the first time all day he smiled. Then with a loud judgmental voice he said, "Watch the Incredible Hulk pay a \$30 fine."

Even I had to laugh along with everyone else. The magistrate saved the integrity of the court; I saved \$20.00 and saved face, even if it was green.



Bookends

By Katherine Iwatiw
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Business is good today. Many of my regulars have spent their lunch hour with me, with some sitting outside under umbrellas and others inside where the a/c is working on overdrive. One of my favorite Saturday customers is the pretty lady and her small dog. She's been coming here for as long as I've owned this place, almost 15 years now.

A few years ago, she came when I wasn't busy, so we talked. I told her I was from Syria, one of the luckier ones. She told me she was an Army veteran but hadn't been to Syria. I learned her current job took her to other countries and coming to my restaurant was her "bookend."

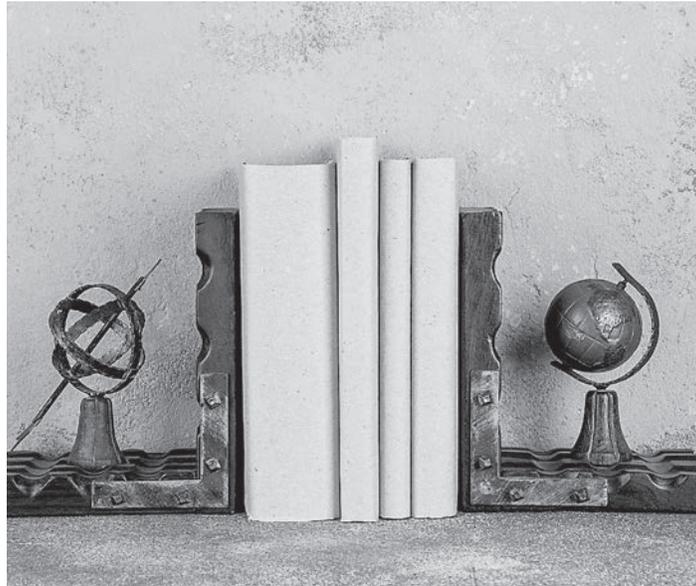
"What kind of 'bookend'?" I asked.

"A place I visit before I leave the country and one of the first places I visit when I return home. I like your cheeseburgers."

Today my eyes follow her as she ties the dog's leash around a table leg that sits in the shade, protected from the afternoon sun. She points to the dog as if saying "stay" then walks toward the door. As a man walks out, he waves good-bye and holds the door open for her.

"Hello, how are you, lady?" I ask as she walks the few steps to the counter. She smiles and answers, "OK, thanks."

The menu board never changes; neither do the prices, and neither has she. The lady squints, stares at the board for a moment, then orders her usual—a double topped



by Swiss cheese, mayo, pickles, an order of onion rings, and a small cup of water.

"\$11.12. For here?" as I hand her the cup of water.

"No, to go."

"How's your son?" I see him sometimes at the grocery store. He is a handsome young man.

"Too busy to visit his mother. Jay comes to the house to do his laundry when I'm not home."

I smile, thinking of my youth, then watch as her upper lip begins to quiver, "I'll be outside," she says in a whisper as she turns away from me.

She takes a sip of water from the cup, turns to a customer, and says, "Pardon me, are you reading the newspaper?"

"No," the customer answers and just like a magician, the lady pulls the newspaper out from under the customer's tray, and presto,

the door closes behind her.

I watch as she sets the cup down in front of the dog. She sits at the table with her back to the sun and opens the newspaper. An older couple arrives to pick up their food. Another 10 minutes, another three customers, and the lady's food is ready. I toss ketchup packets in the bag and walk outside.

"Here, lady."

She smiles, exchanges the folded newspaper for the bag. "Thanks for everything," she says. She unties the dog's leash from the table leg, and together they walk toward the parking lot.

I turn to ask the customers at a nearby table how their food tastes. Smiling, pretending to hear their answers, I watch the lady help the dog into her car, and I wonder if today's was a "bookend" visit.



Restoring Our Honor

By Shon Pernice

—Moberly, MO

“Our objective here at the Missouri Veterans Program is to reduce recidivism in the veteran community by restoring our honor and means to succeed. We will accomplish this objective by providing veteran-specific resources and a therapeutic environment.”

MVP Mission Statement

Service in the U.S. military can develop lifelong qualities and characteristics in an individual. The main mission of the armed forces is to serve and protect American citizens.

Many veterans struggle with a variety of social problems, and some end up in prison. However, their warrior values can be revived when a challenge becomes an opportunity. The men residing in the Veteran’s Wing at the Moberly, Mo., Correctional Center (MCC) were given such a challenge when asked to help a struggling nonveteran assigned to their housing unit. This was a trial for the institution’s administration, the veterans, and the young man who had become a product of the prison system at an early age.

While growing up, Johnathan Box moved frequently around the neighborhoods of Kansas City, Mo. At the age of 14, he entered the juvenile system. At 17, he was arrested for second-degree murder and armed criminal action. By his 19th birthday, Box was in a maximum-security prison where hardened criminals sized him up daily.



While trying to survive in that environment, he was charged with voluntary manslaughter after being attacked by another inmate and defending himself. Most teens in adult institutions become either predator or prey. As a result, Box joined a prison gang. Although he had experimented with drugs before incarceration, he became addicted to heroin while in prison. When that was not available, he would use anything that would get him high. Box says his drug use was a “coping device” and a “way to pass the time.” Whenever drugs are involved, criminal behavior and criminal thinking are magnified. Narcotics and gang affiliation became the main source of power, money and enjoyment for him.

Box arrived at MCC the summer of 2018 after his custody level was lowered by the

prison administration. It was going to be a fresh start for Box. However, the criminal mindset was programmed into his way of thinking. Drug use, fights and gang life defined his religion, purpose and understanding of normalcy.

“Old habits die hard,” he said as he accumulated too many conduct violations and was at risk of returning to a maximum-security prison. The official reason was listed as “poor institutional adjustment.” However, some staff members had an ounce of hope left for Box and wanted to try a different plan of action as a last resort. It was something that could backfire and create a disturbance among the

offender population. So, in July 2021, Box was assigned to the Missouri Veterans Program at MCC.

Picture a six-foot tall male with prison tattoos on his face, neck, arms, and most of his body, along with a cast on his right arm from his most recent fight strolling into the most quiet and disciplined wing at the institution. Most of the veterans did not know who Box was due to his gang association and because he had spent the last several months in administrative segregation (the hole).

Fear, anger and resentment hit many of the veterans like a tidal wave. However, several of the veterans knew Box from the prison yard and welcomed him into their environment. This was their chance

to lead by example and expose Box to military values—strength, honor, and professionalism, something that Box never had as a foundation in his life. Now the veterans had an opportunity to once again serve society by helping a person who could one day be released back into the community. But he still needed direction and values set by example.

After living in a military-style environment with more rules, standards and requirements than the rest of the prison system, it was time for Box to sit down with me and answer some questions about his experience. It had been 30 days since his arrival at the Veteran's Wing, and the tension surrounding this civilian among the vets had decreased sharply. In order to live in the Veteran's Wing, Box had additional restrictions set by the prison administration to see if those "old habits" would reemerge.

I asked Box how he felt his first day in the wing, and he replied, "I felt nervous about the Veteran's Wing. I was thrown into an element that I knew nothing about."

Box was required to take the mandatory two-week orientation class, the core values class, and the color guard course. (All residents of the Veteran's Wing are required to participate in the flag raising and lowering ceremony.) Box adapted impressively to the military-style leadership positions that govern the daily operations of the wing. I inquired about how he was able to conform to this garrison-type configuration, and his reply was, "The structure we live by in the wing is no different than the (prison) yard. The gang affiliations

have a ranking system adopted by the military. I knew who I was accountable to and who was accountable to me. But this ranking system (Veteran's Wing) is for the positive, not the negative. I understand the ranking structure in the Veteran's Wing, and I respect it."

Since Box was able to remain in the wing, he has modified his behavior and qualified for the offender long-term drug treatment program. He was placed on the transfer list as he eagerly awaited his next challenge. Box described his "awakening moment" that the Veteran's Wing allowed him to discover. He realized that "prison is only temporary" and that a good life is possible for him outside of the fences. He confesses that his "foundations in life were built upon criminality, narcotics and misery."

I asked Box what he had learned so far in our wing, and he described how he had discovered a different type of people to emulate, ask for advice and seek knowledge from, men who had built a foundation while they were in the military service, a foundation that he missed out on. At the end of the interview, Box looked at me with a grateful smile and said, "This was the best four weeks I've spent in prison."

While this second chance for Box is still in its infancy, the experience for the veterans in the wing validates the saying: "You can take the man out of the military, but not the military out of the man".

Shame the Boy

*By Kevin Laurens Lewis
VA Medical Center—Little Rock, AR*

'Nother tale of an old knight
overcome by a risin' son.

Old eyes fare but the morning glare
blinds heroes while they're still young.

And so another conqueror
misread a time-worn futile plan.

Made a miniature of himself,
but in the process failed to make a man.

For the man it was all about pride,
but for the lad a way to hide as others sighed.

"Shame the boy's not like him,
but even the man never really fitted in."

Rulers fiddle, Kingdoms burn,
and as prophets fail, a real man dies.

Sometimes such darkness
comes before a son's normal rise.

But by the dawn the knight is gone
and a new man's born to a middle age.

Thus the son overcame the knight
but for a mere half-life, just to burn with rage,

for the man tried to slay his own fears,
but all he killed were the lad's best years.

And still he hears,
"Shame the boy's not like him."

Endlessly

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

I turn and take
a look endlessly
at those stunning
women.

I need them
but they
probably
don't need me.

I feel sad
and crumpled up.

Visual Arts Initiative



City Lights

By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX

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

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

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

— *The Editors*



Horses

By Jack Tompkins
— Marshalltown, IA



Endeavor

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY



Light the Way

By Michelle Pond

— Overland Park, KS

Two Buddies

By Jack Tompkins

— Marshalltown, IA





Celebration of Life

By Charles Kasbarian

—Teaneck, NJ

Years Gone

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

One year minus—until what?
Make a plan. What is next?
Return to college.
Change of lifestyle.

Five years gone.
Almost completed
my special education degree
minus student teaching.
Loss of son, my love.
Foe went to prison.
How do I go on?

Ten years gone.
I am lost; I need help.
Floundering.
Can't get out of my own way.
Asked for help.
Went to school
for massage therapy.
Learned.
Have a better understanding
of mind, body and soul.

Twenty years gone.
Started Art4vets.
Giving back. Found a tribe.
Belong. I have a purpose.
Completed
human services degree
at age 65.



Field Trip

By Daniel Strange

— San Antonio, TX



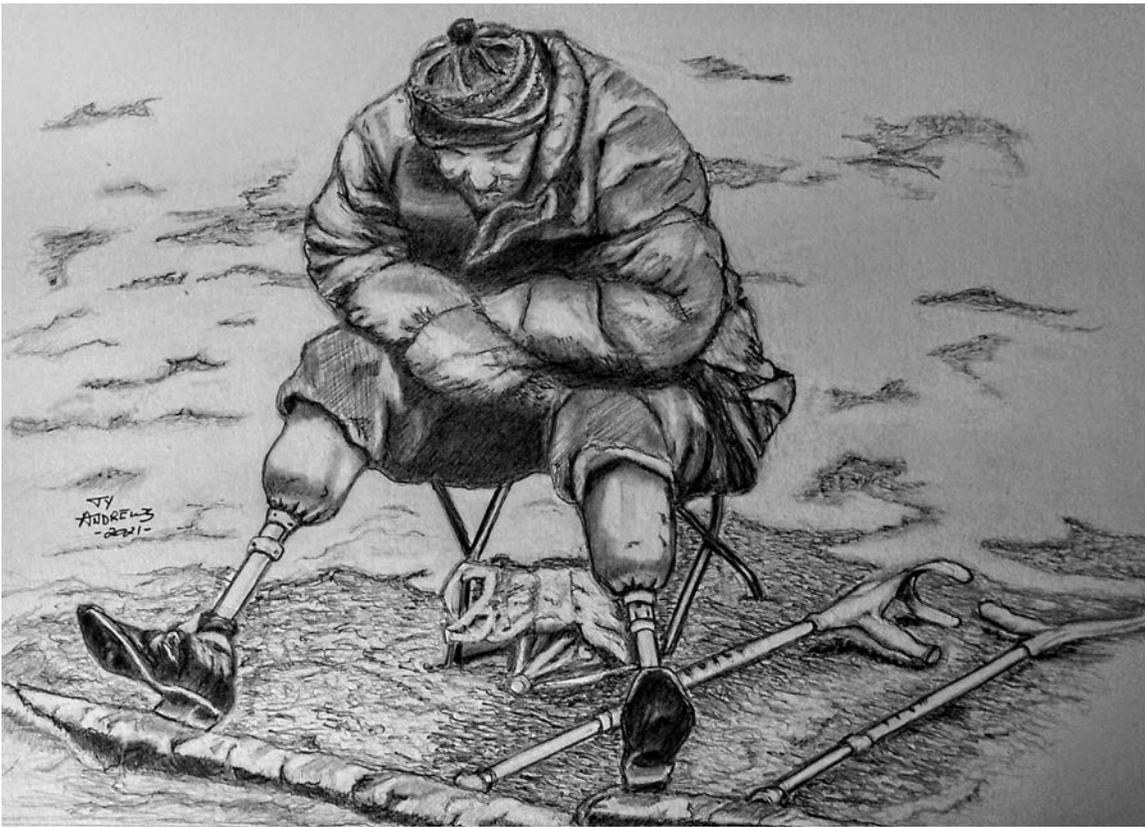
Art 1

By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



Machine Gun Fire

By Daniel Strange
— San Antonio, TX



Faces of the Homeless

By Ty Andrews

—Lincoln, NE



ART 5

By Donald Sherwood

— Danville, IL



Drawing 4

By Bruce McClain

— Blue Springs, MO

Who You Are

By James R. Janssen
—Lorraine, KS

I bought a lottery ticket two weeks ago hoping that with a little luck I might win. Odds on the back of the ticket stated one in 262,589,650 to win. And as you might guess I did not win.

Last week I bought a lower-end lottery ticket with stated odds of one in 250,000 to win. With my somewhat reasoned thinking I told myself perhaps a second opportunity might present better odds. And hey, you never know; lady luck might pay a visit. After all, odds were better than the first shot. Nope. Lost again.

Kinda reminded me of my life...a life of strife, traumas, and bollixed opportunities that never worked out. I more or less wandered around in a state of survival, waiting for the next bomb of bad trauma to present itself. Hope wanes during times of attempted suicides, abandonments and a myriad of diagnosed maladies assigned to me by docs and interns. PTSD is the most accurate one and one to live with for a lifetime. Some of us became good at fighting to survive. And survive we do, living with the battle scars of traumas, triggers, blackouts and the knowing and unknowing damage we cause in relationships and acquaintances.

But wait a minute! This just hit me like a ton of bricks. The new weapons we have: coping skills, veterans hotline, PTSD therapy and much more, all designed to help regain quality in our lives without having to rely on a spark of long odds with some lotto ticket.



But the biggest winner of all is YOU because of a guaranteed ticket you purchased some time ago and didn't know was a winner. And it was! You enlisted, willing to put your life on the line to preserve a way of free life for others and to defend our great United States of America. Yes, you had that—the biggest guaranteed win any person could have.

Who are you? You are a huge winner and always will be. Others tell you “thank you for your service,” and humbly you accept the remark. Maybe it's time YOU realized just how great a person you are. You are the cream of the crop and always will be. Be proud, hold your head up and smile. And by the way, I thank you for your service, but more importantly I thank you for being you!

Author's Note: For the past 75 years I have been struggling, surviving, and fighting chronic PTSD. Through inspiration and guidance I find new thoughts and ideology to write. It is my fervent desire to help other veterans. And this is the only way I know.

Stolen Honor

By Karen Green
VA Medical Center—Las Vegas, NV

Some people
pretend to be someone they are not.
Some wear uniforms and medals
they know they never got.

They strut around in public,
wearing medals they never earned.
Some wear uniforms they were never issued;
it makes a real veteran's stomach churn.

There are men and women out there
who served this country fair.
Then there are these frauds.
Oh, how do they dare?!

Some have given their lives
and earned these medals
with their blood, sweat and tears,
while others pretend
to have had military careers.

Something must be done
to catch these ruthless fakes.
We must stand firm
and do whatever it takes!

Contact your elected officials
to get laws passed on these crimes.
Then when these fakes are caught,
they'll have to do prison time!

For Time

By Charles L. Carey
VA Medical Center—Topeka, KS

Till the clock does tick
within the shadows of the thick
billowing flowers that dance and sway
in my reflections all day,
echoes will ring in my ears,
caress despite my fears.
To cease my beckoning tears,
which in my silence ring so clear,
time tells tales, my dreams to bare
with well-wished memories to care
for all time.

The Ability To Express

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

Who would ever have thought that I would write a book? It only took me six years. Six years of trying to let you know me and comfort me through my expression to you, my fellow vets.

Writing released me to explore what I was feeling and to understand it is ok to be fearful and what society would call “not normal.” But all of you understand why and don’t judge my words. You have a story; how far can you share it with us, your brothers and sisters? When you do, you will find a release you never knew existed by letting yourself be known, all in your own space, your own time, in your own private setting. No judges, no criticism, no put-downs, just you sharing yourself with people who can identify.

Writing allows me to be able to cope much better with my own issues of PTSD and memories I don’t want. I find solace in the fact that you all can comprehend them. Understanding is half the battle for coping and for self-improvement to try to become the best version of myself.

I stumble and fall short and share some of those experiences, and somewhere along the line I make some sense out of things that made no sense at all. Is this healing? I don’t know. But I hope to make some kind of sense for you too.

All my life, in everything I did, I helped others until disability forced me to retire. At 65 I started writing, coached by a great lady who turned out to be a great friend and led me to *Veterans’ Voices*. She’s Pris Chansky, the former

administrative director of Veterans Voices Writing Project, always giving everything she has to further the cause of veteran issues. A national treasure.

My book is unpublished because I don’t have the courage, time, money and effort to see the project through. It is written in manuscript form, and I have printed out dozens of copies and given them away to all those who ask. They never knew why I am the way I am, and now they know me.

I let myself be known. Nobody can know you unless you allow yourself to be known. From 21 to 65 I never looked at myself, only others. Looking inside was difficult for me. Now, it has unleashed a torrent of feelings that somehow have made me a better person, all through the written word.

You, my brother and sister, have a story to tell. It can be serious or funny or filled with your innermost thoughts. It can bring back great memories along with those that are not so great. This I can tell you for sure: when you write you will have an eager readership waiting to know you, and every single one of us will understand what you are writing about.

The power of writing awaits you and will open you up to exploration you never thought possible. My admiration for all the authors over the last six years helped me tremendously and made me a better writer in both stories and poems.

So, there you have it, my friends, the reasons why *Veterans’ Voices* means so much to me. If you try, it will mean the same thing to you too!

Road To Nowhere

By Tanya R. Whitney

VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

Raindrops settle on the windshield
Obscured by the flow of wipers.
A hazy mist hangs in the air
Over this lone stretch of highway.

A road seemingly to nowhere,
Never a car or house in sight.
Through a maze of valleys and hills,
It meanders along its path.

Once a lifeline to the small towns
Nestled between its bends and turns.
It is now a forgotten path
Amongst today’s modern highways.

Roadside parks where drivers once stopped
Are overgrown and unpleasant.
Once a haven for the weary,
They stand forlorn and forgotten.

A tranquil beauty still exists
Driving on this road to nowhere.
One can travel at their own speed
Unbound by the needs of others.

There is no need for urgency
On this passage to redemption.
This is a path of reflection.
A road that always leads us home.

The God of Gods

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

Let Jesus lead us
He is Alpha and Omega.

Let Jesus lead us
He is King of Kings.

Let Jesus lead us
He is Lord of Lords.

Let Jesus lead us
The first and last.

Let Jesus lead us
The beginning and the end.

Let Jesus lead us
Our long lost friend.

The Lost Photo

By Brant Parker III

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH



I had started moving from my apartment into a home, and like most people I had a storage unit I hadn't been into in years for various reasons. Besides, I just didn't have the space at my place at the time to handle all the things I had...old Army stuff, footlocker, and my favorite junk.

It would be a couple of months before I would open my footlocker. Until then I really didn't have the ambition to go through all the things I had tucked away for safekeeping.

My day usually started with coffee and news, checking the stock market to see how things were going, and making calls for things that needed follow-up or for appointments. Well, it was a rainy day that day, and out of boredom I decided to go through my old footlocker. I found many treasures from my past that I had forgotten about. I ran across pictures that made me laugh and remember all the great times I had when I served.

Looking through and digging I found an old disposable camera containing film that had never been developed. I set it aside and continued to find all kinds

of mementos and things. I grabbed the camera and set it on my desk. It sat there for another three weeks.

Finally, I had some prescriptions to pick up, so I thought it would be a great day to drop the thing off and have the film developed. When I dropped it off, the gal at the counter and I had a good laugh. She said, "That's an old one." I agreed and said the proof might be there if she sees anything crazy.

About a week later I got a call saying my film was ready to be picked up. Talk about curiosity killing the cat; I dropped what I was doing and went to pick up my pics.

Back home, I sat down and eagerly opened the pouch containing photos of my past. What came next, I was not ready for.

The pics were of my mom on the day she passed. I had been home on leave for the holidays, and I guess I put the camera in my footlocker just so I could forget about that day. Never in a million years did I think I would see pics of my mom's last few hours on her last day. The dinner, the gifts, the smile on her face.

A tear formed, and I wiped it away. It wasn't because I was sad; I was happy that I could catch my mom at her best before she was taken home.

I had been thinking of my mom, and I guess this was her way of saying "I'm still here and watching over you son. Things are ok. Love you!"

Veteran's Day

By James Allen Breitwieser

VA Medical Center-Honolulu, HI

Stick walking the beach,
pedometer click-clacks
the metrics of the trek.
Lost your skis, sir? The
passing jester quips.

Glistening lines overhead
entice elusive ocean prey,
while shrieking tots turn
away as they embrace
the saline smash.

Poling down the sand,
through the ivory froth,
where stealthy threads
of orb's blue-stained fire
streak the lonely sole.

Retrace lopsided track as
dog gaggles frolic after ball
and disc. Inquisitive brindle
menaces sinister alien limb,
retreats to master's plea.

Weary now head home under
sprawling "Kalama Ha'u" to rest.
Wrapped in musty poncho liners
on trash bags full of regret, an
old soldier's fateful sleep.

I May Be Casanova

By Frank X. Mattson

VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA

Reincarnation.
I even look
Italian.
I'm not Casanova
but he spent time
in jail,
me a mental
institution.
The only difference.
All the rest
the same.

Defending the Rights of Others

By Shon Pernice
—Moberly, MO

When I was inducted into the U.S. Navy, I raised my right hand and swore to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” As a young 18 year old, the true meaning of that oath did not influence my moral compass until many years later. A prison sentence, the “thank you” from a beautiful person and maturity set me on the path to advocate the “right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for all people.

The social structure of a prison yard is comparable to high school cliques. People will form groups based on race, sexuality, area code, religion or gang affiliation. I knew a lot of people in the prison but identified mostly with a group of combat veterans. I never initiated conversations with people I did not know and mostly kept to myself. However, an afternoon walk on the track prompted me to take an internal review of exactly what I was defending during my military service.

Fancy identified as a gay male and a professional female impersonator. He was popular in his home city and was a hit at the drag queen shows. Standing at six feet tall with a slender frame, neatly trimmed brown hair, perfect skin and model-like facial features, I could envision Fancy as an attractive female. Since I knew other veterans who identified with the LGBTQ community in the prison, I was called over to a small group of inmates, and there I met Fancy.

Tony, a veteran, was asking me about some benefits when Fancy turned toward me, looked me in the eye and asked if I had served in the military. I replied, “Yes, I served for 14 years.” Fancy stuck out his right hand and said, “I want to thank you for your service.”

I was caught off guard with this show of appreciation. I mean seriously, no other inmate had ever thanked me for my service. I was confused, so I asked, “Why are you thanking me?” as I stuck out my hand to accept his gratitude. After the heart-warming handshake, Fancy used both of his hands to outline his face that had hints of make-up and continued the gesture down the rest of his body until he ended in a curtsy, saying, “Because I can be this.”

At that very moment in time everything in my life was on pause. I remembered the oppressive societies that I had witnessed in the other parts of the world, places where gay, transgender or even men with a nonconforming hair style were ridiculed, chastised or even stoned to death for violating a religious law. I looked deep into my values as a soldier and a veteran. The first one of my peers to thank me for my service in seven years of my incarceration was someone different from myself. It dawned on me at that moment that I swore to defend ALL people’s rights—even those whose lifestyle I knew nothing about. A new door in my life was opened to a group of people whom I had overlooked in the past, and now I wanted to embrace them. I wanted to learn how I could better assist in their struggles.

I will never forget the gift that Fancy gave me that summer afternoon in the prison yard. That gift is respect, understanding, but most important—love. While the germinal seed that Fancy planted in my soul continues to grow, I have made some awesome new friends along the way. The main message for all active duty military, reserves, National Guard and veterans is to remember the oath of enlistment and what we stand for as a people.

Drifting Wood

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

See the splashing,
Swirling driftwood.
See how it flows.
Where it goes,
Nobody knows.
One cord after another,
Like passing ships
That signal on sight.
But some never signal
And are not in sight.
They plummet
Over the waterfall,
To be lost
In their plight.

Infinite Infinities of the American Legion Preamble

By CJ Reeves
VA Medical Center—San
Francisco, CA

To uphold
To defend
To maintain
To foster
To perpetuate
To preserve
To inculcate
To combat
To make right
To promote
To safeguard
To transmit
To consecrate
To sanctify.

Lonely Soldier

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Lonely soldier, so far away from family and some good friends.
Your buddies on the battlefield, are they your next of kin?

Have you heard lately about what is going on?
Has your family written to you since you've been gone?

Do you get distracted with your memories so dear?
How you are a father, but your nation needs you here.

You long to step back into your own town.
Bullets fly and rocket blasts rattle you around.

Does fear sometimes grip you and take you hostage?
Does your mind wander here and there,
captivated by your duty, brave beyond compare?

You're sitting still in your foxhole,
your enemy is in your sights,
kill or be killed on this most perilous of nights.

Gun blasts and bombs rattle in your ears.
People are taking shelter; you depend on your peers.

Man down! Man down!
Your buddy you've just met goes to meet his maker,
but the Lord's not done with you yet!

Pop! Pop! Pop!
Gunfire rattles through the midnight sky.
Flames and shadows can be seen as you ask the question, "Why?"

Lonely soldier, please don't quit.
Your nation needs you, our liberty and freedom at hand.

The bravest of the brave will be by your side
to help you take this stand.

Please, mighty soldier, don't give up the fight.
We pray you make it home,
for your family misses you every single night.

Champion

By Nila K. Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Childhood longings. To belong. To be loved.
Betrayed by a father figure.
I had looked upon him as one from the beginning.
Instead he was a predator and I was the prey.
He used me and my need to be loved.
He used my need to be loved as a weapon against me.
The attention he showed me, I thought was because he cared.
It was meant to disarm me,
to lull me into a feeling of security.
That left one day in violence.
The sexual assault that followed wounded my whole being.
I was in pieces. Pieces that had to be put back together or
I could not function as a normal human being.
A million pieces. How to begin to fit them back together
in a cohesive way?
To provide cohesion meant to pardon my attacker.
That did not mean that I was giving approval for what
he had done.
As long as I could not pardon him, I stayed a casualty.
A casualty identity for the rest of my life.
I could not live in that mentality.
When I gave the pardon to my attacker, the identity was
reversed.
He no longer had dominance over me. I now had the power.
The power to live and enjoy my life to the fullest.
I am in charge of my life.
I am more than a survivor.
I am a Champion.



Ride

By Charles L. Carey
VA Medical Center—Topeka, KS

I ride and I ride.
To save my soul, I ride
through hardships, through rain beneath the bored pain,
in the torrential winds that twist beneath the withered
soul that's already slain.
Beyond the early dawns within my worn, torn heart,
beneath the streets that beat apart.
Danger, stranger, though it may seem
when the darkened souls appear.
Within, without the endless dreams
and the unfurling echoes ringing, bringing hollow tears.
I ride and I ride.
Still awaiting, anticipating within the distant night
that falls through the channeled weakened flesh,
the calls in the eve of each dawn before the dew
that challenges my soul to rise,
before the grand reaper of death's weary blue.
Step by step my faith must survive beyond the destinies
that somehow keep me alive.
I ride and I ride.
To save my soul, I ride,
marching within the beat, that beats in and out
of the deep barren sea that never flows,
never ceases to quench its hungered thirst of me.
Up and down the rugged mountains to which
I climb endlessly,
I try to find the everlasting truth of my soul's eternity.
I ride and I ride.
Through the breaking, heart-aching, twisting
never-existence of my weakened soul, I ride.
Testing, never, never resting all the days of my life.
Riding to save my soul at whatever costly price.
Doing my best, doing my best.
Through life's deadly weariness
I ride and I ride.
Though weakened, battered, bruised,
my soldier-self will fight to save my beaten soul
beneath the eeriness of life
that is dangling from unrest.
I ride and I ride
to keep my withered soul alive every day of my life.
I will ride and ride still looking for the light.

The Protesters

By Jeffrey Lewis
VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

At 14, I watched the news with Chet Huntley;
He spoke of a soldier killed with less than a month in country.

The paper pictured a neighbor killed in action called Doc;
He wouldn't be the last boy from our block.

I was too young to understand the protesters' tactics
And why many of them wore fatigue jackets.

The brutality of the D.N.C. protest really bothered me;
I heard many cops were hit with bags of animal feces.

Protesters saw the cops as government threats
But a lot of those cops were other-war vets.

At 17 I enlisted right after graduation;
Walking in the airport I was the target of protesters
and their demonstration.

I will always remember those feelings of loneliness and fright;
As all vets know, the worst is at night.

I think of burial detail and the grief I found
As the mom slapped away the flag and it hit the ground.

I'm certain of her son she had always bragged;
Now all we had to replace him was our country's flag.

The war tore my country apart
And loved ones still live with a broken heart.

College clarified mistakes the politicians made;
I pray they bore a heavy burden for the price we paid.

Once called a crybaby by a World War II vet;
The hurt from that hasn't left me yet.

I still have a problem with some of the protesters
And demonstrators and all.

But if someone hadn't done something
There might be 100,000 names on that wall.

If someone smarter than me can figure it all out,
Please let me know.

It's still way too sad for this aging G.I. Joe.

A Door to the Future

By Louise D. Eisenbrandt

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

At the end of our suffering, will there be a door?
Will the relationships that we formed over the years
Spring back to life?

Can the damage that's been done,
The hurt that's been poured over the inflamed earth
And oozed into its scarred skin
Be washed away?

Can differences be set aside;
Can healing begin anew?
With hope struggling to survive,
As gunfire rocks our cities
And tear gas clouds our minds,
Can civility return; will hugs make a comeback?

Will the virus fade away?
Will all lives matter?
Can our children rediscover their youth?

And will the door of common sense and forgiveness
Be opened once again?

Pictures

By Kimberly Green

—Fort Smith, AR

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

On the Road to Recovery

By Ronald P. Grella

VA Medical Center—Wilkes-Barre, PA

I am on the psychiatric ward again
because I am not okay in my head.
My freedom was taken from me
for my own safety.
What brought me here
was saying things I do not mean.
The pain gets so bad in my mind,
I want to scream out the agony.
The medication helps my brain
and keeps me out of pain.
My stay is winding down,
so I'll enter the real world.
I can take on everything
that comes my way
because the staff built up my will
for a better day.
The good Lord will help me the most
as He is the closest to my soul.

Hooked on Chaos

By Josh Groesz

—Tigard, OR

I was failing school; enlisted at seventeen.
Made my parents proud.
At Camp Rilea, told I was going to war.
Put training to use.
Landed in Kuwait, seven days before Hell's gate.
Always drive forward.
I entered Iraq; went across the Euphrates.
Humbled by the past.
Time to go to work; complete strangers want you dead.
Don't get paid enough.
Patrol at night; the enemies are hidden.
Bomb explodes; the end.
My eyes open; fuck, truck is injured, I am not.
Stay out of the kill zone.
Quick, replace Humvee; need to go back out ASAP
To get hit again.
Came home in one piece; could not say the same for friends.
I will honor them.
Nothing feels the same, adrenaline withdrawals.
I must keep going.
I do not fit in, depressed, isolated.
Shit, PTSD.
How do I survive...remember to enjoy life.
Because I still live.

MIA — Missing in America

By Matthew David Davison

VA Medical Center—Long Beach, CA

America does not see them.
America does not hear them.
America looks through them.
America does not claim them.
They are close to 3,000,000 strong,
an army of the unseen,
like Cheyenne Dog Soldiers.
You can't see them, but you feel their presence.
Most went missing in Nam.
They were never welcomed home.
Politicians denied responsibility;
yesterday's vets turned their backs.
They were the hope of this nation,
all American boys, idealistic and visionary,
products of peace and prosperity.
Most made it home, intact;
too many never made it back to the world.
The rest are missing in America,
wounded and untreated.
You might find them asleep,
with frightened eyes wide open
in the street, hidden in a junked car
or maybe some abandoned tool shed.
You might catch a glimpse of them
behind the green curtain of Humboldt County,
or deep inside a park in a mountain shack concealed by pines.
You might hear them call out a name,
warn of incoming, scream for a medic, cry out in agony.
Don't turn away; don't leave them again.
Embrace them; welcome them home.
Make them believe they will be okay.
Like ghosts, they move through the years,
dragging their youth behind them,
hoping we will intervene before it's too late.



Seasoned

By E. Glen Price

—Anadarko, OK

One of life's constants, change,
Part of nature's own special will.

Youth, wild and free, raw power
When a river is not still,

Stirring, mixing and grudgingly slowing down
Until it can carry burdens no more,

Pausing to reflect new images in its still waters.
Peace on a distant shore,

Cool, clear water with fishing as fishing
Ought to be done,

Relaxed, quietly listening to songs
That ought to be sung,

Lying, watching autumn leaves fall.
Trees closing one circle of life, serene,

Rejuvenating, invigorating, making
The senses sharp, keen.

To the hills, river waters return
In torrents or soft gentle rain,

Rebuilding strength, kinetic,
Anticipating anticipation once again.



Why I Write

By Daniel Paicopulos

VA Medical Center—San Diego, CA

Never really a conscious choice,
how nice it was to find my voice,
rough edges rounded, made more smooth
by words which heal, thoughts that sooth.
“This – or better” has been my creed,
simple tools all I’d need,
writing of grief and love and joy,
grateful like a child with a new toy.
Who could have known what lay before,
beyond the walls, the open door.
First one chapbook, then some others,
enjoyed by poets, sisters, brothers.
A blog which gained more fans, more eyes,
some laurels, too, to my surprise.
What fun it was to turn each page,
as decades brought me to this age.
Now I simply play my part,
encourage others from an open heart,
stay aware of my place, my season,
sometimes without rhyme or reason.
Playing the long game, it’s not a race,
comforted by my convictions and
God’s great Grace.

My Name Is Nickel

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

My name is Nickel.
I affirm to be patient
and accept others as they are.
This includes myself.
I am the avatar of any of the following:
Penny Lee Madden, aka: Miss Penny,
Penny McInnis, Penny Joyce, Penny Deere.

I dress casually,
with little make up, minimal jewelry.
I no longer color my hair to hide invading gray.
Matter of fact, I embrace the change,
letting my character shine through.
I refuse to put on airs; I am well adjusted,
strolling through the world with purpose,
not overpowering others.
I’m comfortable in my own skin.
I am respected and determined.

Penny Lee Deere

is one of my hardest, even harmful critics.
I was created to assist her with her egos
who drag her down, keep her submerged.
I, Nickel, will provide her the lifelines
she currently needs to stay afloat
and move on to a place
where she is confident, feels safe.
I will gladly go ashore when she no longer needs me.

To Pick a Wild Rose

By Christine Rose Hazuka

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I bent to pick a pink blossom or two,
Wondering how it got there?
So fragile these dainty little blossoms of pink,
With petals falling from sprig to the ground.
Bees are coming to find its sweetness,
Flying bloom to bloom to sip the nectar.
Thankfully remembering this happy thought:
While in my childhood...
Walking and picking a wild rose.

Who Is This Person

By Kim Gwinner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, it is not who I see.

It's someone else that hurt me at a very young age,
a parent of mine that was so full of rage.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, it is not who I see.

It's someone else from a long time ago,
a parent of mine that didn't grow old.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, it is not who I see.

It's someone else that was so wrong,
a parent of mine that was my mom.

So, who is this person that I call me?
That is a good question; stay tuned. We will see.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, it's hard to believe

I'm no longer a scared child; I have been doing some
major growing.
But still, with much needed help, to Mom's grave
I AM GOING.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, it's hard to believe

I have strength, energy and am full of hope.
With Cindy's help, I feel more able to cope.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, it's hard to believe

I'm ready to begin allowing myself to heal.
New emotions I shall embrace, but how will this feel?

So, who is this person that I call me?
This is a good question; stay tuned. We will see.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, I am now so relieved

I went to Mom's grave after all these years,
letting some of it go and releasing some tears.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, I am now so relieved.

You know, Cindy was right and she kept me in sight
as I was reclaiming a part of my life.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, I am now so relieved.

Even sober, I was able to face her and face my fears.
I didn't speak a single word, but I'm sure she knows
I was there.

Who is this person that I call me?
When looking at me, I am now so relieved.

I am very proud of myself, very happy and very optimistic.
You know, I believe my soul is beginning to show signs
of being prismatic.

So, who is this person that I call me?
It's me emotionally growing; stay tuned. I'm sure there
will be more to see.

Respect

By Lawrence W. Langman

—Portage, IN

Now we lay you down to rest,
medals pinned upon your chest.
Head held high, you've walked this earth,
honor and dignity held since birth.
You gave your all for country pride,
yet always able to keep astride.
Your strong belief in the American dream
kept in high regard, held in such esteem.
Nary a soul wouldn't follow you into harm;
death do we part, we brothers in arms.
Your children and grandkids will know of your deeds,
as you climb on the back of your war-ready steed.
As you're lowered into the ground that you've defended,
the love felt for you, my friend, will never be ended.
It's been my honor and privilege for me to have known
a person of your caliber, and for that I have grown.
This rose I lay atop of your eternal coffin;
these tears I shed now will return very often!
For all those memories we've shared throughout the years,
each one is worth more than a thousand tears!

You're on My Team—Thank God— I'm No Longer One

By Kim Gwinner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Blind faith is what it's called,
letting people inside of my wall.

Will they hurt me? Only time will tell.
If they do, I hope they go straight to hell.

But that's not how I feel about the ones I loved.
I do hope they make it to the heavens above.

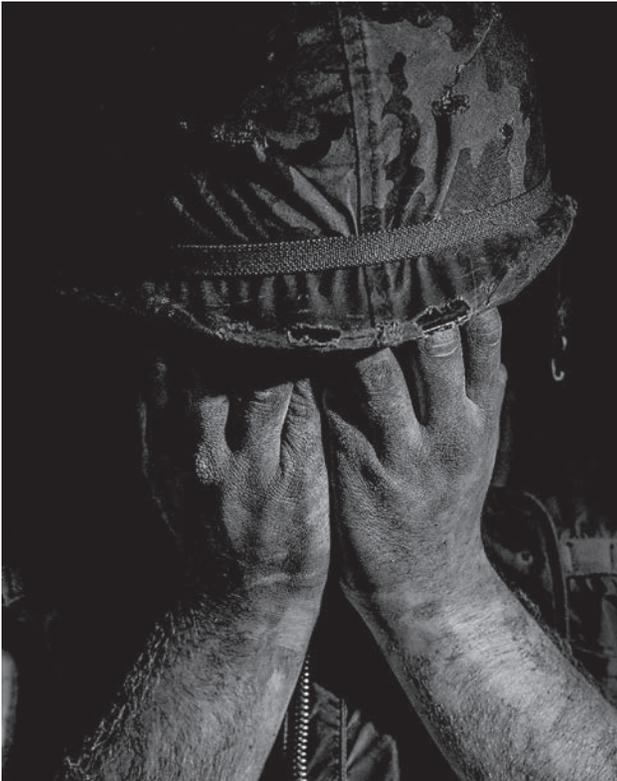
But I'm left here in pieces to struggle with it all,
and PTSD is what that's been called.

So here we all sit—my monsters and me.
Why won't they leave and let me be free?

I don't want to live with them any more.
They continually beat me, but who's keeping score?

They live in my heart, my head, my mouth—to name a few.
Come on, Cindy, help me; what is it I need to do?

Medication, detox, honesty—that I have done.
You're on my team—thank God—I'm no longer one!



Our Brotherhood vs. PTSD

By James R. Janssen

—Lorraine, KS

It is what it is. Huh? Yeah? That's how it is?
So now we just tuck it in and let it all go. Huh, Sis?
I sit here now pondering those words
as the Doc appears with the latest word.
The long stare from an eon of yore
remains familiar right down to my core.

Images flood my mind as though the fight was nigh,
the Doc now flanking my left, Sis on my right.
Familiar words ring in my ears heard before.
Now to join our squad of warriors met by C4;
worn out coping skills flee to escape B4.
A raging wrath from a short-fused trigger explodes,
leaving more damage from a heart that implodes.

My soul cries out "help," but did anyone hear my pleas?
Writhing in pain, I go on marching, lying down or on my knees.
I'm a warrior; I will fight. I will survive; I will survive or die.
But I must fight. The word "surrender" to the enemy (PTSD),
makes me sigh.
We fought for our country, survive or not.
Learning to control PTSD, we must give our best shot.

Fighters we were; fighters we remain.
We fought for our country. Now this hidden enemy
we must detain.
With determination we resolve to overcome once again.
Ingrained in our hearts and souls lives our will to regain.
Regain and flourish our purpose of honor, duty and pride.
We ban together to heal and support each other on one side.

To my cherished brothers, I wish you each the very best in life.

To Understand

By Anthony Kambeitz

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Just when I start thinking I know it all,
Reality comes by full circle!
I mean like 360 degrees, 24/7,
And makes me realize just how little I truly know!
Like a moth I'm attracted to your flame,
But I'm getting tired of playing your childish games.
See me.
Free me.
Lord, take me by my hand.
Take control.
Save my soul.
Help me to understand.

Not All Wounds Are Visible

David R. Marchant

VA Medical Center—Salt Lake City, UT

I am a Warrior
Who overcame his fears,
Served with distinction,
Returned with honor.

But the person I was before
Will never be the same.
I carry scars on the outside
That time has healed.

But there are others
That haunt my memories,
Far more difficult to overcome
But I will never give up the fight.

The Drawer

By Michael D. Monfrooe

VA Medical Center—St. Cloud, MN

Every so often I go through this drawer,
bringing back memories of when I fought in the war.
Here is my beret; I wore it with pride.
It meant I was special, special inside.

Here are my dog tags; I always kept them around.
Still taped together so as to not make a sound.
There are my blood wings; I was one of the best.
I showed them off proudly, pinned on my chest.

The Air Medal we got for going in hot.
The Purple Heart for getting shot.
Other medals for the sacrifices I gave.
A picture of Joe who died being brave.

Then there was Doc who would never stay down.
I can still see his blood staining the ground.
Here's my P-38; I opened many a can.
Only in the Nam would you eat canned Spam.

Here's a picture of Sgt Garr.
On his second tour, he won the Silver Star.
And there was Irish with his hair so red.
I remember the ambush and then he was dead.

That's the lieutenant; he wasn't a bad guy.
He was the first guy I ever saw die.
I remember the day I returned from the war
and put my past in this dresser drawer.

Prayer of a Tunnel Rat

By Michael D. Monfrooe

VA Medical Center—St. Cloud, MN

Oh God, please protect me from my innermost fears,
only a few more months till I'm through my year.
They needed a volunteer to go down the hole.
All you needed was courage and a believing soul.

The first time was easy; the excitement was there.
You knew the enemy was close, but just not where.
Time after time you go beneath the ground,
darkness, the enemy; your friend, the sound.

You look for shadows or a weapon glare.
You're a veteran of the tunnel with a ghost-like stare.
"Tunnel Rat Forward," the sergeant yells.
They call it a hole; you call it hell.

Oh God, please protect me from my innermost fears,
only a few more months till I'm through my year.

Joyful Expectancy

By Nila K. Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Once I took everyday joys for granted.
To me those things were an ordinary part of my day.

The fresh smell of the air after a cleansing summer rain.
The sight of a squirrel scurrying up a tree while carrying a nut.
The sounds of many birds singing together as if in harmony
lovingly orchestrated by the Almighty.
A tree's limbs dancing in the wind with its leaves
being playfully teased by the current of air.
A total stranger smiling at me and saying, "Have a good day."
The sound of a child's laughter done in such total abandonment.

My life was so hurried. I was so absorbed with chores
and responsibilities that I forgot.
I forgot to savor my life. To be so engrossed in the moment,
instead of thinking about the next chore I had to do.
What changed me? A mental illness that devastated me
and led to a failed suicide attempt.
My brush with death led to an appreciation of this life.
Even the ordinary everyday moments I look at now as precious.

My choice now is to be in the moment and live it to the fullest.
To delight and look for the enchantment in each day.
Joyful Expectancy!

Short Timer

By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.

VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

One day and a wake up;
I will be a year older.
Have I learned anything;
am I any wiser?
Am I a year smarter;
have I grown in stature and ability?
Am I better off than a year ago?
What do I value; what's truly important?
Am I happy, sad, angry or indifferent;
am I still seeking or have I found
what I have been after?
Do I love anyone; does anyone care about me?
Have I made a difference in anyone's life;
has someone made a difference in mine?
Have I set the world on fire
or has this world burnt me out?
Will anyone notice I have existed;
will I be unnoticed and just a statistic?
What's the meaning to my life
or life to my meaning?
Did I have a sense of direction
or was I tossed around
like a leaf blowing in the wind?
I may have some ideas
about answers to these questions.
All remains to be seen;
I have one day and a wake up.
If I live to see tomorrow,
maybe then I may have the answers
to all my questions.

Who?

By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.

VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

Who should care
about what is said behind their backs?
Who should give power to a coward?
Who should care about the foolish?
Who should give a helping hand to those
who don't want it?
Who should care about those
who don't care about themselves?
Who wants to waste time with people
who don't care or respect you?
Who wants to love those
who want to use you and abuse you?
Who wants to be treated like an ATM machine?

The only time you are contacted
is when something is wanted.
Who wants to be treated like a punching bag?
Who wants anger and frustration
taken out on them?
Who wants to be falsely accused
of things they have not done?
Who, Who, Who?
I'm beginning to sound like that wise old owl.
Therefore, I asked the question, "Who?"
When you're told, "It's not you, it's me,"
Who wants to hear that?
When you're told, "I don't know what I want,"
Who wants to hear that?
Who wants to be rejected and disrespected?
Who wants to love, not receiving love in return?
Who wants to live
life when no one cares about them?
I wonder who?
Is there anyone out there
who really cares?
Who?

Remote Control

By Lynn A. Norton

—Leawood, KS

Plastic handguns designed to shoot infrared bullets.
No skills needed. Acquire the target, aim, press
trigger. Avoid accidental discharge.

How remote? Enough range to tease neighbors. Shots
fired through windows change TV channels, introduce
families to anime, test patterns, subtitled movies.

How much control? More like suggestions, really.
Appliances seem to have their own agendas. Instructions
are routinely challenged, misinterpreted, ignored.

Let machines know who's boss. You have a gun. In fact,
you have many guns: one for each brand and purpose.
Brandish them in holsters, belts, ordinance vests.

Euthanize devices that defy your will. Unplug them until
circuits succumb to amnesia. Treat them like newborns
upon revival. Provide guidance, secret codes, trust.

You are the master of their universe. Act like it.

Lunar Illusion

By Michael Moslander

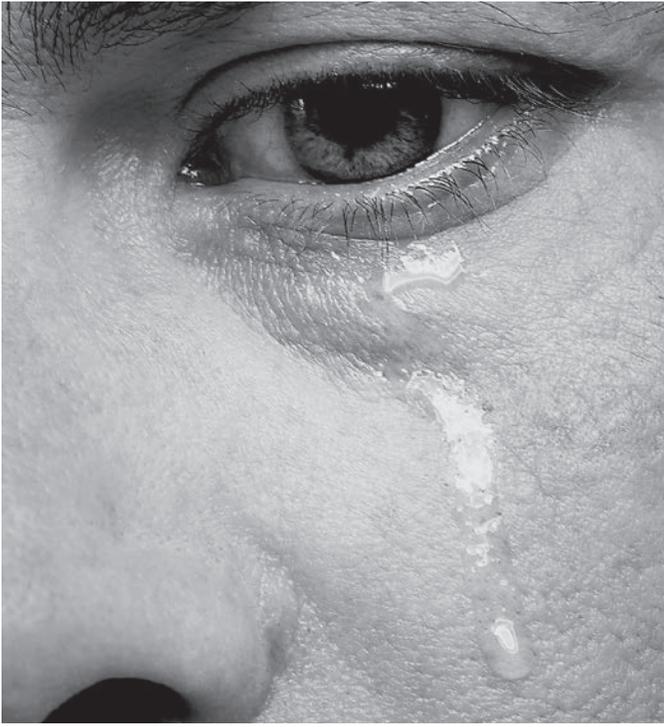
—Imperial, MO

The hyper speed of humanity,
Racing from horizon to horizon,
Slicing between the diminishing shadow.
The specter of societal haze
In a distorted display of digital blaze.
From a quarter of a million miles away,
I see them, monuments of morals by the day,
In night's light and mind's eye, merely mortals in decay.
Family, friend and foe, living life at home,
Beautiful blue and gorgeous green of that earthly dome,
Far from the lifeless lull of my grey grave
On this cold dusty lunar stone,
Mortuary of misfits on the moon,
Oblivion, hanging in the heavens,
Padlocked, paralyzed and perishing in this powdery prison.
Peeking out my porthole,
Pierced by the paradigm of perennial pain through a prism,
Living in a landscape
Where time has become the destroyer of stars,
Standing at the precipice
Of the raven's infinite abyss.
Dead are the fires,
Faded are the faces of the folk.
Souls are lost in infinity.
No one seeks this raving lunacy.
Banished beyond the bounds of benevolence,
No travelers here.
Slow suffocation, choking to breathe with care,
 this artificial air,
No wind blows here.
Longing for the light since I was born,
Dying of the dawn, despair kept no tear to mourn.
Spiraling endless in gravity's ravenous keep,
Stoic, petrified stone statue, no tears left to weep.
Burned daily by the blaze of solar lunacy,
Frozen nightly by the ice of isolation.
Gliding through the black void, transcending relativity,
Warping earthly moments into faded cosmic eternity.
Voices from home echo from the past in static delay,
Illusions roam, a former future echoing an old radio wave.
Looking by lunar light,

Minimized in mind as a minute memory, do they ever think
 of me,
Or am I forgotten in the night?
I imagine
They look up at a sky full of darkness,
Twinkling stars and shining moon in illusory resplendence,
Displaying the world of another existence,

Though they see no signs of life at that distance.
I am but a fleeting memory of a lost remembrance.
Sleep befalls them with the speed of a spell,
Drifting into new dreams, mind unable to glean.
Old dreams lost in a waking moment before dawn,
Grasping an empty thought, memory wiped clean.
Rising to their renascent rave of a new day,
A moribund meteor, a flicker in the twilight,
I am all but gone,
Isolated in cold numbness on this cursed moon,
Stark raving madness to end no time soon.
What went wrong to bring this rain?
Is it all in my brain?
Sick to my stomach with nothing to gain,
Swallowed all my shame and pain,
The fury of fire and ice flows through my veins,
Never to cry, never to say goodbye, never again.
Never to lie, waiting to die, never again.
Voyaging with an immortal mind,
Passing celestial horizons in the sky,
I walk amongst the ruins of time,
Seeking the edge of the universal divine.
A quarter of a million miles between you and me.
Far from home, I see my earthly dome.
Frozen to the bone, I stand alone.
Beyond the known, I walk alone.
Far from home, in the dying light I roam.
Deep in the wilderness of my mental galaxy
Lies my hidden heart of homeland memory:
Forests, rivers and hills of green,
White sails soaring through an oceanic sky of blue.
Feeling the fabric of family, singing the song of spirit,
Love and loneliness know no limit.
What is real in the delirium of my lunar delusion?
Wandering the dunes of this moon,
I long for home in this lunar seclusion.





A Tear

By Dan Yates

VA Medical Center—Blue Springs, MO

Every day without fail she would say, “I love you.”
I would always nod and smile, then respond, “Me, too.”
She would say, “I mean it. I’ve given you my heart
and it’s yours forever, until our lives will part.”

She said her love for me was love she’d never hide.
While I loved her, too, I kept mine deep inside.
I was a man, had my pride, understood my fears
that saying those three words might produce some tears.

Decades spent together saw boyhood dreams come true.
Every day was fresh; every day was new.
I truly felt those words, words I couldn’t share
and it took her passing to know it wasn’t fair.

Then she took her last breath; it’s scarcely been an hour.
Somewhere deep within I finally got the power.
As I hold her hand, somehow I can’t let go,
knowing my emotions, I had failed to show.

Too late I realized just what I was stealing,
the joy that she desired, to hear my deepest feeling.
I lean down and whisper, though she cannot hear
me say, “I love you,” enveloped in a tear.

Light in My Darkest Days

By Brant Parker III

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Dark days, battle worn-torn, no hope in sight.
Alone in loneliness of a shrouded past seemed to be
a fated future.

An Angel entered the darkness bringing hope and new light.
Always there, caring and sharing right words
of encouragement.

I was lost in darkness and depression;
you brought light and showed me the way.
And now I walk on the path of recovery and will not stray.
Because of you, I live in the light of each brand-new day.
What is love? I think I know.

It is you!

I am grateful every day.

Dedicated to Dr. Deanna DeBello.

Some Shakespeare Plays

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

My favorite will always be *King Lear*;
So many people, while watching, will shed a tear.
Julius Caesar follows close, I tell you;
Studying it in depth, how much I grew!

Macbeth was great with lots of good quotes;
I listed many of them on pages of notes.
Hamlet's so pretentious, too familiar to us;
His father's ghost haunts the Prince to cuss!

Richard II was wordy and glib;
Richard III was quick with a fib.
Henry IV made his move so to reign;
Henry V loafed with Falstaff in vain!

Romeo and Juliet sure breaks your heart;
Innocent young lovers so doomed from the start!
The Merchant of Venice leaves us undone;
And the quality of mercy is finally won.

The storm in *The Tempest* gets action to flow;
Caliban and Ariel are so in the know.
A Midsummer Night's Dream so enralls;
Always remember Puck after the curtain falls.

Storm Clouds

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Storm clouds gather in the sky,
Lightening flashing at my feet.
I hear the noise of thunder roar
With raindrops falling fast and deep.

The storm clouds are blown away;
The sun comes shining through.
The rainbow spans across the sky
In all its glorious hue.

Little children run and play;
Flowers nod their pretty heads,
And raindrops sparkle on the green
Like jewels on a maiden's hand.

Then Mother Earth is fresh and green
And all the rivers seem to sing.
The birds so busily build their nests
Where all the little birdies rest.

The Price

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

Little Johnny learned early in life,
you don't get something for nothing.
There's always a price.
He stole a piece of bubblegum once;
his mom made him pay for it.
"That's not nice!"
Well, he studied hard, got his diploma,
spouts trophies, too; takes effort.
"It's yours if you want it."
One day he walked into a recruiter's office;
there are many of them.
He enlisted in the army,
part of a helicopter rescue squadron.
He was deployed to various hostile environments.
He and his team saved many people;
they were angels of salvation, their mere presence.
One day they came under enemy fire;
their helicopter erupted into a funeral pyre.
His remains were buried with honor back home.
The price for freedom was paid, but not alone.

When You Wish Upon a Star

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

When you wish upon a star,
it's like a soldier, gazing from afar
in a desert, longing for home.
When they reached the USO,
All they got was a dial tone.
With the night comes an occasional "full moon,"
while you're eating your MREs with a plastic spoon.
Your Army buddies can relate.
You're far from home
and your daughter's going on her first date.
Your wife's alone, worrying about the bills.
This peacekeeping task will test all of your skills.
You wanna reunite with your wife and kids.
Why, yes! Of course!
Hopefully your deployment won't end in divorce.
A soldier's job is complicated.
The time away from loved ones is understated.

The River Sped On

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

Tons of water, ice and snow
slammed down from the ice-capped mountain
and plummeted a THOUSAND FEET
to the bottom of the mele.
Gushing water spurted upward to form
a dazzling blue, red, green rainbow.
And here the river was born;
from here the river sped on.
It saw villages and towns at peace with themselves.
And the river sped on.
It saw a speckled fawn grazing
near the end of a lush green cornfield.
And the river sped on.
It flowed through the bustle of business of a large city,
its dark buildings looming as grotesque phantoms
during a soft summer night.
And the river sped on.
Then a wayward hand touched the wrong button,
and the world stood still.
But the river asked no questions;
it gave no answers. And it told no lies.
It just sped on.

Vietnam Memories No. 3

By John L. Swainston

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

"You Send Me"
to a place I do not want to go.
"How Did You Do It"
"Don't Be Cruel"
but I am told
"Silence Is Golden."
It is going to be
"A Hard Day's Night"
"The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore."
There is
"Something in the Air"
and
"I've Gotta Get a Message to You."
There is a
"Bad Moon Rising"
and
"We Gotta Get Out of This Place."
"It's Now or Never"
"Release Me"
And they did three years later.
"There's a New Moon Over My Shoulder"
And I did not send home a
"Soldier's Last Letter."
"I Am Alive"
and
"Glad All Over."
"What a Wonderful World!"

Editor's Note: This poem was created using song titles from the '40s, '50s and '60s.

An Eagle Feather

By William Shepherd

VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

If I were an eagle's feather,
I could see from on high,
and know what it is to fly
so near to water and be so free!
I'd know the air flowing
over my feather
so I could ride the air on high!
Oh, what fun, what joy to fly so fast and free.
Oh, to be an eagle feather.
Such fun for me!

The Fall

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

Delta runs wild.
One half of population unvaccinated.
Uncaring—unwilling—unknowing?
Misinformed? Politicized?
Breakthrough infections now.
Young children getting sick
and I thought I had it bad in Nam.
Values? Religion? Freedom of speech?
Caring about your neighbors? Your community?
Your fellow human beings?
Whereas 150 million no longer care.
Polio—measles—mumps—smallpox—cancer.
Advances—gains against so many diseases
and this one? The pandemic kills millions worldwide.
We fail! Why? YOU TELL ME?
Parents don't care about their kids. Grandparents take no lead.
The rich and famous do nothing.
Politicians try and fail because one man made it political.
And now the nation and the world are in serious peril.
Nowhere to hide—nowhere to go. Delta will find you.
And Delta is not the last letter in the Greek alphabet.
The virus will mutate yet again and again until vaccines
are overcome and new vaccines will have to be invented.
Just follow the science if you are smart enough—
if you care to live.
People say, "Oh Rich, you are over reacting!"
Go visit a COVID ward! Worse than Nam!
If there is anything I can say, if there is anything I can do,
then hear this and hear it in plain English.
Hear it loudly, hear it from someone who has lost brothers.
Hear it from the bottom of my soul and heart:
GET VACCINATED FOR THE ONES YOU LOVE AND BECAUSE
YOU LOVE YOURSELF ENOUGH TO GET IT FOR YOU!



Never Judge a Book by Its Cover

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

He sat on the corner, had long stringy hair
and wore a veteran's cap on his head
that read "Vietnam Veteran."

He had a dog sitting right beside him;
the wind was howling as it was pouring down rain.
I found myself wondering how it would feel
to have to sleep out in the rain,
to be soaked to the skin
and so cold that you are literally in pain.

I couldn't fathom what it would feel like
to have nothing to eat in this overfed country,
having to search in dumpsters
for anything half eaten to eat.
How one must feel to have no one
or a country he once served to care,
to lie each night in the streets
and suffer all the people's stares.

A patriotic man who stood for duty, honor and country,
yet there he sat with his whole life in a bag
lying on the sidewalk beside him.
His pride was only a faded memory now;
he wears tattered clothes and he looks tired.
He appeared frail with wrinkles covering his dirty face.

No one could ever comprehend
what this man has been through,
yet they walk on by like he's invisible.
If I don't look at him, maybe he won't see me.
The multitude glance sideways at this brother,
uncomfortably in pity and disgust.

As we hurry off to our destination of nowhere,
there are those who verbally attack this man
with comments so sharp they cut like a knife.
None of us cried, "Crucify him,"
but wouldn't we be guilty just the same?
How and why did we become the enemy
to one who fought to keep us all free?

Little did they know he once had a wife and child.
When he went off to war he kissed them goodbye.
When he came back he was expecting a hug and a kiss;
so many things he had missed.
To his surprise his wife and child had left with no reason why.
His loss was great; his heart had shattered.
His life was turned upside down
and to the world it did not matter.

For those of you who condemned this man
and the many more like him, homeless and alone,
let those without sin cast the first stone
for standing on that corner with his staff and his rod.
He might have been the Savior, our Lord, our God.

Time Stops for No One

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

I remember my days of innocence;
I was young and naive.
I had no worries or responsibilities,
just running around and being me.

I learned fast that time can change everything
in the blink of an eye.
Too many things are going on; life is moving too fast.
Nowhere to go and nowhere to hide.
Tick-tock, tick-tock, time goes by;
another day older, another day wiser.
Life can sometimes be cruel and unkind;
things happen and we don't know why.

Here in fear I sit alone with my knees gathered
to my chest in total empty darkness.
When does the hurt go away
enough to make it bearable to live another day.
Tick-tock, tick-tock, time goes by
and I can't say I know where it went.
I can't understand how my past manifests itself
into physical pain that makes me want to die.

All these days alone, words and memories
trapped inside my head.
Tick-tock, tick-tock, it will never stop.
I know I can't turn the hands of time
and that I can never get my innocence back!
It's easy to forget exactly why you strive,
then want to die until one day you're not sure
who you are or how you're still alive.

Daddy's Hand

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Today's a day I'll not forget, when Daddy walks me
down the aisle,
then turns and lifts my veil to see my loving smile.
He'll place a kiss upon my cheek; that's what daddies do,
and I'll whisper through my tears, "Daddy, I love you."

He finished college, married mom, then at twenty-four
said that he would serve his country, signed up for the Corps.
He fought to help the helpless in a foreign land,
when one day a bomb went off, severing his hand.

Many months of rehab were spent at Walter Reed
where tears and sweat were requisite for Daddy to succeed.
Those were days I don't remember; I was only three,
but I recall the loving way he bounced me on his knee.

As I think back throughout my life, it's all I've ever known.
He never made excuses; it was something that he owned.
It wasn't rough and calloused, neither was it tanned,
but I've always felt the love of Daddy's hand.

When I was young my friends would ask, "Jan, how did it feel
to hold your daddy's hand when it was made of steel?
Was it cold, was it sharp, did he wear a glove?"
I never even noticed; all I ever felt was love.

He never hid it from me, worked on his technique;
he could lift a strand of hair from my little cheek.
With that hand of steel, he had wonderful control.
I know his love for me came deep within his soul.

Later when we dance, friends and family will see
in my smile just how much Daddy means to me.
While others may see steel and never understand,
I'll feel the love that flows through the tip of Daddy's hand.

All of Us

By Mike J. Young

—Suncook, NH

All of us who raised our hand
And took that oath to defend this land,
Know what it is to sacrifice
So we can all live our lives
In a country where we are free.
Is there anywhere else you'd rather be?
Many had to sacrifice more than some;
They gave their lives for everyone.
But all who joined gave up a lot,
Didn't matter if you fought or not.
You left behind your friends and family,
Went to faraway places, maybe sailed the sea.
You gave a part of your life so we can stay
The greatest country, the U.S.A.
And for that, my friend, I thank you
For your time you gave to the red, white and blue.
And I may not know you; that matters not
Because all who served are a special lot.
We are veterans, you and I,
And will be till the day we die.
That is something they can't take away.
Because of your sacrifice, back in the day,
A brother or sister you will always stay.
Or a shipmate because, you see,
I served in the U.S. Navy.

To the Brothers and Sisters Who Returned

By Kenny C. Trujillo

VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

Vietnam was a political war,
and this enemy was very hidden.
Woman and children
were caught up in the middle.
Our troops suffered physical and mental
wounds and scars.
Some returned home and some did not.
We were spit on and we were abandoned
by our government.
As brothers and sisters, we gave our all.
We never lost faith in one another,
and we leaned on each other.
So please—
for the ones that did not make it back—
may they not be forgotten.

I Never Met a Lady Worth Singing About

By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

I never met a lady worth singing about;
They all rejected me.
They turned from my tender touch
and never cared nothing about me.
Lies and cigarette smoke,
deception and mistreatment
Are all they offered me.
I never met a lady worth singing about;
I had no wife, no family,
No kid to call my own.
The ladies ignored my tender touch
And blew smoke in my sexy brown eyes.
How can such a great man
Be mistreated by all the ladies?
How can such a wonderful man
Be left out in the cold by the ladies?
Now I see them fighting on Jerry Springer
About nothing worth fighting for.
I never met a lady worth singing for;
Lies and cigarette smoke,
deception and mistreatment
Are all they offered me.
Many years have passed me by
With the ladies playing their games.
Some gave me a false name;
I had no wife, no family,
No kid to call my own.
They ignored my tender touch;
Sometimes there were one night stands.
How can such a wonderful man
Be mistreated by all the ladies?
And how can such a wonderful man
Be left out in the cold?
They blew smoke in my sexy brown eyes
And turned from my tender touch.
I have no lady fan;
I'm not a lady's man.
I never met a lady worth singing for.



Awakening

By Lawrence W. Langman
—Portage, IN

As our days and nights fall into the veil of our existence,
we reach for a peaceful enlightenment of consistence.
Why can't we just look into the mirror and see a resemblance,
instead of looking outward to a pigment of skin's semblance?
We fight over our different beliefs of how we came to be alive,
yet shoulder-to-shoulder we stand on this rock, trying to survive.
Look to your left, now to your right; aspire to see one another.
We've been born into this world; let's act like sisters and brothers.
Where have all these discrepancies gotten each one of us today?
They've taken us all down a path of darkness and constant dismay.
Just imagine, for one moment, how our lives would be as one,
instead of listening to those lackeys spurring our media to be undone.
Brown, Black, Asian, Indian or White are all in this battle of survival;
as long as we are at each other's throats, no need for reprisal.
Why is this con so easily being dismissed amongst all the masses?
Too many walk around with blinders; so many need glasses.
As the man, Martin Luther King, once said, "I have a dream,"
wanting everyone to finally come together and stand redeemed!
How is all of this being swept under the proverbial rug allowed?
We are so much stronger as one unity with truth being avowed.
Please don't allow our nation to suffer from a corrupt few;
let's stand together as the human race as our intelligence construes.

A Red Alert

By *Williams Kurrle*
—*Chewelah, WA*

A candid night,
A miss with fear,
Enraged with grief,
I know no relief.
Infernal pain
A forever drain
That enrages the soul!
And won't leave one whole.
Let's heal one,
So it too may reside
At peace inside.

This Valley of Thistles

By *Mary de Morales*
VA Medical Center—Oklahoma City, OK

Dear heart and gentle one,
You have trouble near the water's edge.
Thistles' roots take hold of you,
This valley is all you've ever known.
The thistles may not be aware,
Seeing changes to speak of—I do not dare.
For all they've done, withstood such pain,
Strong and proud, I see their strength,
These thistles.
I reflect all the time of sadness growing,
Receiving not one damn DIME!
Their losing friends that needed losing,
Found true hearts along the way.
If these thistles become strangers,
That would be so very sad.
Tell them always so not to forget.
I love you, Thistles.
This valley is all you've ever had.
Pain—Strength—Survival—MST!

His Limbo Soliloquy

By *Carl "Papa" Palmer*
—*University Place, WA*

"Actually, I like lockdown. I already was before COVID anyway, but now I've got my privacy. No family feeling forced to visit or hold vigil in my netherworld, he confides through the phone."

Both of us former Army soldiers placing us on common ground made introductions easier with the usual "where were we when" comparisons of duty assignments all military members embrace.

Though sharing multiple telephone calls these past seven months since my assignment to be his companion as a hospice volunteer, I have yet to meet him face-to-face due to pandemic restrictions.

Using his bedside number at the nursing home I can call anytime, not worry about visiting hours, ask if he's busy, got time to talk.

His answer's most always the same, "Just busy here being alone, too close to death to complain." Clicking me to speaker, he begins what he calls "me-memories from a time when when was when."

Mostly musing of being anywhere but there, lost in an actual place, blurring "what was with what is" behind and in front of his shadow, recalling dreams as a younger man, of a future in past perfect tense.

And times talking of present times from his no man's land outpost, "All days end as they begin in purgatory, today recopying yesterday, cared for by hosts of faceless masked angels not letting me die alone.

"Forgive me for only thinking of myself; I just need you to hear I'm here. Inside I'm your age, the two of us sharing a brew at the NCO club, years ago and oceans away, comrades-in-arms talking of our day."

To me he's the sergeant with permanent change of station orders in transition for his final mission, ending his time on active service, in hopes his God is religious and his terminal assignment is good.

Tree

By *William Shepherd*
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

Life is like a tree that grows by the river.
It will not be moved till its lifetime is through.
The river brings cool drink from the mountain.
In turn the tree gives shade and protection
from the wind and sun on a hot summer day.
As I lay under it in the night, the stars shine brightly.
The tree stands so strong as if to say all is alright.
I'm here! And I'm not going anywhere.
My home is here by the riverside!

911

By Martin S. Jonquiere

—Mount Vernon, WA

They came
From their homes, down they came
Selfless, from all 'round
All 'round, all the same

They went
Without doubt, up they went
Heroes, the righteous
Righteous, heaven sent

We bring
We come in and we bring
Faces, all over
All over, hopes cling

We weep
We walk out and we weep
Oceans, 'round the world
'Round the world, so deep

We hear
In their homes, now we hear
Voices, soft calling
Soft calling, so near.

There's Always That One

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

There's always that one
who turns night into day.
When they see dark clouds forming,
they know exactly what to say.

There's always that one
who without even talking,
can uplift your spirit,
so back on your feet you'll be walking.

There's always that one,
a special talent they've got.
They see that you're hurting
when the smile on your face says you're not.

There's always that one
whose presence you feel.
You know they're the truest.
You know they're for real.

From the Cotton Fields to Country Music

By Michael Pride Young

—Fond du Lac, WI

The world knows this Charley
From the cotton fields back home.
In Mississippi he was born
Where the cotton fields are long.
Down on his knees picking cotton down back home.
Carrying the Kroger sack
With cotton strapped on his back,
Charley Pride made it,
Picking from the cotton fields
To singing country music today.
He sings the love songs so many love to hear.
Charley tells the love stories;
The world needs more of them.
The world knows this Charley;
Country music is where he stays.
Charley Pride from the cotton fields
To singing country music today.
Charley is one of a few
Who's made it the way he has
In this tough old world we live in.
Country singing is tough to begin;
They ought to make a movie
About Charley and his life.
There are many singing Charlies
Who never made the scene at all.
Yes, they ought to make a movie
About Charley and his life.
Charley is one of a few
Who's made it the way he has.
God bless singing Charley;
Is there another like him?
The world knows this Charley;
Country music is where he stays.
They ought to make a move about his life
While he's singing and doing well today.

Surrounded by Screams

By Tanya R. Whitney

VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

Loneliness feels like
A deep abyss in the ocean,
A dark place of strange unknown creatures.

A place where the earth's core bides its time,
Waiting to explode in the nothingness of deep water
Where the shadows leave no indication of day or night.

Just a deep hole with no bottom,
Fathoms below the living spirits above.

Loneliness feels like the vast chasm of emptiness.
There is no light or sound to blind or deafen the world,
Like the soul darkened by the depths of nothing.

To hear nothing genuine or real,
Surrounded by the screams of one's deliberate lies.

The Written Letter: A Sonnet

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

My writing is a part of me;
A letter has a soul.
My words will tell you what I see;
The pen becomes my tool.
Each sentence builds to tell the tale;
Each paragraph breathes out.
The page is ready for the mail;
My message seems to shout!
A postage stamp is now attached;
The envelope is sealed.
A friendship is thus firmly patched;
A falling-out is healed.

This letter travels to your home;
My words become your private poem.

The Love of God

By Gene Allen Groner

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

The love of God
Is more than we can measure.
His spirit flows
Like wind from shore to shore.

Love makes us free
And is our greatest treasure,
God's gift to all
For all e-ter-ni-ty.

The love of God
Is wider than forever.
Love lifts our hearts
And souls to heaven's door.

Love brings us light
That reaches through the darkness,
And gives us hope
And strength to carry on.

The love of God
Can lighten all our burdens
And bring us peace
That lasts forevermore.

Sunny

By Charles Fredette

VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA

The leaves were smiling
this morning
on the tree outside my window.
They were happy for another
on this sunny, warm day.
One tree looked happier than the others.
But I don't know why.
The grass was greener
and the traffic flowed smoothly.
It was beginning to be another lovely day.

Football

By Norman L. Jones, III

VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

High school from the little league,
Citizens will always be intrigued.
Scholarship plays win games.
The fans will remember your name,
But the coaches' dream is to usurp it all,
A title for the team before the dean calls.
Now it's time to choose an All-American on the spot.
The NFL's offer is hot,
Guaranteed for five years,
A top draft of the first round.
The college will shed tears
Because the star has left town.
Protecting the quarterback as you've done
For life. This is part of the contract for kids
And the wife. Sixteen weeks out in the field,
Earning your family a cool mil. Life couldn't
Get better than this. Football will never be missed.

From Where I Sit

By Daniel Paicopulos

—San Diego, CA

Even when the clouds weep
or the earth cries out in pain,
it is possible to find love
throughout the day.
We can find joy midst the suffering,
no matter our circumstances,
uncovering the spiritual truth of things,
behaving as harmlessly as we know how to be.
Regardless of life's mandates,
calm is desirable,
strength is obtainable,
healing is available.



Double Flanked

By James R. Janssen

—Lorraine, KS

Do what you are told or you might get killed,
eyes widened and blood running as though it were chilled.
Increased awareness building on the right and left,
being located would mean certain death.

Hiding under the dining room table, trembling with fear,
a young warrior awaits heavy footsteps he can hear.
Overwhelmed and in shock, he starts to weaken,
again being dragged by the hair and repeatedly beaten.

This the first battle of many to follow,
for each day becoming more hollow.
A skirmish a day endured for one year,
but a lifetime of scars, his mind will constantly sear.

The once happy three-year old now catatonic
lay still and numb, no thoughts but ironic.
Scores of wars and battles to come
lay in his wake, layers of pain become numb.

Twenty-two Every Day

By Brant Parker III

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Where are you, my friend?
I called, texted and drove past your house.
You weren't there, and as time passed,
I learned you were among the twenty-two.
You're in the ground, an etched stone with a name;
you gave up as many warriors do.
Too many Demons in your head and it became too much
for you to bear.
I feel hurt and betrayed because you chose that way.
I was a phone call away just like every other day.
I can't help, I can't cry, I can only ask why?
Rest forever, in peace among the twenty-two.
Suicide is not the only way.
RIP Mark Thomas... "Roomie."

Know Yourself Through Writing

By Dean Vakas



On Nov. 6, 2021, Veterans Voices Writing Project marked its 75th anniversary with a virtual version of its annual Veterans Pen Celebration. The keynote speaker was Dean Vakas, a retired Army veteran with numerous commendations and an incomparable record of service and achievement. Vakas served in Iraq and Kosovo and held top leadership positions at the Command and General Staff College and the Defense and Logistics Agency. His name is on the Kansas State University ROTC Wall of Fame. He lives in Olathe, Kan., where he was chief operating officer for the Kansas State University Olathe Campus.

Here are excerpts of his remarks that emphasized the value and importance of creative expression for veterans:

I'm a firm believer in the value of the Veterans Voices Writing Project. There is an ongoing flood of memories and emotions associated with being a veteran. You've seen a lot and you've done a lot. Many of the memories are hard to talk about. In some cases, you suffer guilt from what you did or didn't do. In other cases, there is an overwhelming accumulation of stress for all the things you experienced that you could not control. You keep a lot inside of yourself, and it weighs you down. There are unbearable times when you feel alone, times when a return to some sense of normalcy really seems impossible. It falls to each veteran to find a way out of this despair. You must take charge and lead yourself back to well-being. But you must have help. And this is where the Veterans Voices Writing Project fits in.

Writing about your feelings is a way to let them out, to find freedom from the burden. It is a private and personal means to confront yourself. Look in the mirror and decide what you see. Look into your own eyes. Look into your soul. Feel the body that you occupy. Then you choose the words and express your feelings on paper. Tell a story. It can be what you feel at the moment. It can be a historical recollection. It can be allegory. It can be art. It can be a poem. You are

writing to yourself, essentially about yourself, and this is powerful therapy. Writing therapy suggests that writing one's feelings gradually eases the feeling of emotional trauma.

I suggest to you that writing therapy is a method to know yourself. It is the beginning of a new-found wisdom that allows you to return to an emotionally healthy life.

Writing in a diary is my form of written therapy, sometimes called journalistic therapy, and it is more powerful than just thinking. I am now recording my key thoughts, and I can return to them for perspective as often as needed as days go by.

Veterans who have the opportunity to read the writings of others can often identify with their stories. Shared experience helps to create a pathway of healing. The Veterans Voices Writing Project amplifies veterans' voices throughout our extended community of veterans, and it creates a sustained, powerful therapy. "I can't emphasize enough the value of veterans sharing their written thoughts with others through both printed and online versions of *Veterans' Voices* magazine.

The value of veterans' written words also extends into our general society.

Friends and families of veterans as well as citizenry writ large without a connection to the military see the depth of humanity represented by the veteran community. Veterans have witnessed first hand the pain and suffering associated with war. In their own way every veteran tells a story relatable to all Americans. Most Americans do not fully appreciate the inhumanity of war. By participating in the Veterans Voices Writing Project throughout the various forms of expression, you help create a tableau of thought-provoking pieces of literature, and each and every one makes a lasting impression. I want to believe this raises our collective sensitivity throughout our great country to the impact of placing service men and women in harm's way. Veterans Voices Writing Project is a prescription for caution before we engage in future actions and create more veterans.

Veterans who write should feel a sense of pride. You are making a powerful contribution to the welfare of our society. I encourage everyone to make the widest possible distribution of *Veterans' Voices* through the magazine and the website.

Excerpts compiled and edited by Ted Iliff, Veterans' Voices Prose Editor

Mail Call

“Thank you for all the wonderful work you do,” wrote **Emily Kirkegard**, Closter, N.J. “I know my grandmother would be so proud.” Emily is the granddaughter of VVWP founder Elizabeth Fontaine.



Shon Pernice, Moberly, Mo., wrote, “On behalf of the men in the Missouri Veterans Program at the Moberly Correctional Center, we thank you for your support of our veterans. You have given us a voice through poetry, art and prose. Because of this, you have made a difference in our rehabilitation.”



The members of the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 70 sent a donation check to *Veterans’ Voices*, proceeds of fundraising activities in their facility.



Enclosed with a subscription to *Veterans’ Voices*, **Ruth Holmgren**, treasurer of VFW Auxiliary 5252 of Pelican Rapids, Minn., wrote, “Thank you for the continued work to keep veterans telling their stories in writing and art!”



“During these unprecedented times, our VFW Auxiliary 7327 has been affected by things happening around us; however, we wish to support the Veterans Voices Writing Project, wrote **Floy A. Lipscomb**, Springfield, Va. “We have read the magazines and feel it must be an excellent outlet for the veterans sharing their stories, art, etc. One of our Auxiliary members has worked in publishing and realizes the expense to publish books and magazines.” A donation check was enclosed.



“I enjoyed trying to write for you all in the past,” wrote **Andrew Smith**, Elmore, Ala. “I can’t afford a subscription anymore, but I hope that you have a great year. Thank you for the service.”



James W. Rice, Medical Center Director, and **Katie Maxon**, Chief of Voluntary Service, both at the Oscar G. Johnson Medical Center in Iron Mountain, Mich., wrote VVWP to extend thanks for the donation of copies of *Veterans’ Voices*.

David C. DiFuccia, program leader at the VA Pittsburgh (Pa.) Healthcare System expressed his thanks for copies of *Veterans’ Voices*.



“I am thanking you once again for helping us veterans,” said **Demetrius Kastrenakas**, Miami, Fla. “It’s been a long time since you asked for my pictures to put in *Veterans’ Voices*. I really enjoy all the writing and prints. I’m sending some of my photos this time and hope you can use them. I always pray for our peace of mind.”



Scott Sjostrand, Hallock, Minn., sent a donation along with more poems. He asked for copies of *Veterans’ Voices* so that he could share as “people express interest once they know you exist.”



“I am returning my award check with many thanks,” wrote **Helen Anderson Glass**, Tucson, Ariz. “As I have said in the past, you publishing my poems is payment enough for me. Giving back the money so you can continue to help us veterans is more important than using it to go to lunch... I am so pleased that I came across your veterans creative writing publication many years ago when I was a patient at our VA. I will be 99 in March and if an old gal like me can do it so can other veterans. I love receiving your publication. As I read the contributions of others, I learn a lot and so can all veterans.”



Joan Carroll Allred, who retired from the VA in Portland, Ore., sent this poem that she wrote in 2003.

Asking

Treated so badly by his own country, then by the Viet Cong
Sent overseas to fight and die quickly, or to take long.
Why do we always need to get things so wrong?
Isn't his life as precious as any king?
Why destroy his desire to dance and sing?
Vietnam War's now a name for the history book
Maybe it's time to take another look.
Didn't the prophet warn us that this is not the way to go?
And God, Our Father, sent Jesus so we would know
He once was a soldier sent to live or die.
Now he looks back and asks why.

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

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

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



FOUNDERS

Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual) \$ 50

Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:

Best Poem (Perpetual) \$ 50

Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:

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

STORIES — *Fact or Fiction*

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

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

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

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

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

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

POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Florida Award \$ 30

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

TH Norton Award: Editor's Choice \$ 25

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

SPECIAL CATEGORIES

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

Medical Center administrator nominates; publisher approves \$ 50

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

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

Thank You



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

– VVWP Board of Directors

Gifts of \$5,000 or more

*Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.
Shirley and Barnett Helzberg, Kansas City, Mo.
J.B. Reynolds Foundation, Kansas City, Mo.*

Gifts of \$3,000 or more

Louise D. Eisenbrandt, Leawood, Kan.

Gifts of \$2,500 or more

Gifts of \$1,000 or more

*James Eisenbrandt, Leawood, Kan.
Helen Marquette, Olathe, Kan.
Network for Good, Washington, D.C.
Peggy Thompson, Yorktown Heights, N.Y.
Lynn Mackle, Palm Beach, Fla.*

Gifts of \$500 or more

*Christopher Iliff, Stillwell, Kan.
Thompson Family Foundation, Shawnee, Kan.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 5789, Lee's Summit, Mo.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 7573, New Baltimore, Mich.
Richard Wangard, Neenah, Wis.*

Gifts of \$300 or more

*Scott Sjostrand, Hallock, Minn.
Women's Overseas Service League, Springfield, Ill.*

Gifts of \$200 or more

*American Legion 2, Pueblo, Colo.
Anonymous
William Anderes, Cresskill, N.J.
Priscilla Chansky, Olathe, Kan.
Milton Evans, Staten Island, N.Y.
Lydia J. Herz, Washington, D.C.
Emily A. Kirkegard, Closter, N.J.
Patricia Meads, Merriam, Kan.
Dianne Render, Spicewood, Texas
Vietnam Veterans of America 70, Moberly, Mo.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 1407, Oak Park, Mich.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 9283, Southgate, Mich.
WAC Veterans 33, Columbia, Ky.
Marianne Watson, Wheatland, Mo.
Raney Wright, Seattle, Wash.*

Gifts of \$100 or more

*American Legion 36, Ludlow, Vt.
American Legion Auxiliary 153, Olathe, Kan.*

Anonymous

*Leah Ballard, Annapolis, Md.
I.Christopher, Rockville, Md.
Barbara Davidson, New York, N.Y.
Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary, State Dept. of Missouri,
Kansas City
Disabled American Veterans 10, Independence, Mo.
Tina Hacker, Leawood, Kan.
Alice Calderwood Hawk, Leawood, Kan.
Albert Hernandez, El Paso, Texas
Maria Kuczumski, Independence, Ohio
Judith Leu, Renton, Wash.
Karen Johnson, Westwood, Kan.
Lynn Norton, Leawood, Kan.
Daniel Paicopulos, San Diego, Calif.
Jacob Paltzer, Appleton, Wis.
Sarah Schroer, Overland Park, Kan..
Dottie Snow, Lee's Summit, Mo.
John Springer, Bandera, Texas
John Swainston, Gardner, Kan.
Veterans of Foreign Wars 813, DuBois, Pa.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 1008, Waterford, Mich.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 1231, Canton, N.Y.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 1332, Bennington, Vt.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 2654, Moberly, Mo.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 2673, Cody, Wyo.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 3343, Clyde, Ohio
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 4005, Corunna, Mich.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary, 4548, Jacksonville, Ark.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 6947, Bismark, MO
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary, 7327, Springfield, Va.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 7530, Mechanicsburg, Pa.
Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary, 10980, Eutaville, S.C.
Kay Watts, Springfield, Mo.
Melanie Wrensch, Woodbridge, Va.
Dan Yates, Blue Springs, Mo.*

Gifts In Kind

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

Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



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

Instructions for Writing Submissions.

The editors prefer that writers and artists submit their work online. To submit writing online, go to www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/ or www.veteransvoices.org and select **Registration**.

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

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

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

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

Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

SUBMIT ONLINE:

www.veteransvoices.org

SUBMIT BY MAIL:

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

QUESTIONS:

support@veteransvoices.org
(816) 701-6844

Mail Submission Sample.

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

Author Name _____

VAMC Name _____

VAMC City, State, Zip Code _____

Author's Permanent Street Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

Branch of Service _____

Conflict or Era _____

Approximate dates served _____

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

Date Submitted to *Veterans' Voices* _____

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

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

Writing Aide: _____

Typist: _____

Heal Through Visual Art

Watch for your artwork in a future issue!

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

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

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

Instructions for Artwork Submissions

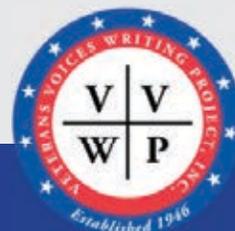
For more than 65 years Veterans Voices Writing Project has provided an outlet for military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction by sharing their stories, poems and artwork. Send your submissions today!

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



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 share their art!



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

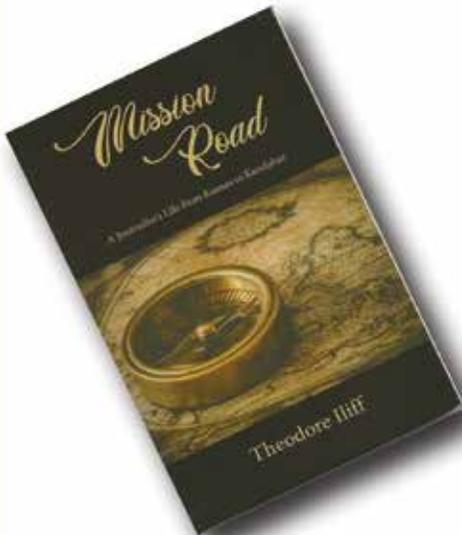
Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. POSTAGE

PAID

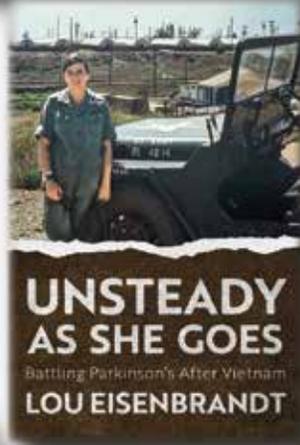
PERMIT NO. 1115
Kansas City, Missouri

Looking for earlier issues of *Veterans' Voices*,
check the website at VeteransVoices.org.

New Books by *Veterans' Voices* Leaders



Mission Road
by Theodore Iliff
(Prose editor)
This sweeping memoir covers the evolution of journalism over a half century, including stops at CNN, USA Today, Voice of America and Radio Free Europe plus Iraq and Afghanistan.



Unsteady as She Goes
by Lou Eisenbrandt (Board member)
After serving as an Army nurse in Vietnam, Lou was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease from exposure to Agent Orange. This is her story of life with a chronic, progressive disease.



GOLEMS
by Tina Hacker
(Poetry editor)
A collection of poems about Jewish folklore creatures made of mud and clay who help, protect and have some fun while aiding mankind.