

Devoted exclusively to the writings
of military veterans for over 65 years.

Summer 2019

VETERANS' VOICES®

You Have Much to Share

The Power of *Veterans' Voices*

By *Kennith Harvey*

Wartime Pets

by Shon Pernice

**For Those Who Come
Back Broken**

by Wallace D. McGregor

High Open

by Alan Smith

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VeteransVoices.org

You Have Much to Share

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

The Power of *Veterans' Voices*

By Kenneth Harvey, VA Medical Center – Richmond, VA

Veterans Voices Writing Project is a vehicle that encourages the power of voice. Veterans can seek remedies when medical issues don't go right.

“Writing about one’s physical journey offers power that releases your story and shares it with others experiencing the same. This support is important to the veteran’s way of life.”

There are illnesses and physical challenges that weigh heavy on a veteran’s chest and sometimes it seems there is no place to filter them. It is important to believe factual information and be aware of errors impacting organizational services. Internal and external self-destruction becomes a service member’s plight if frustrations are held in. Yes, ruminate about our pains, wounds, who questions, how long will it take for life to get better. Still our emotions are hidden within. The “Why me syndrome” creeps around absorbing our freedom to breathe. Without the ability to determine what direction an outcome will take, there is no power of voice. Voice is how one’s mind finds results. Power of voice puts one in the driver’s seat to sort through portions of the solution to a problem.

Writing about who you are can settle a soul and help a veteran exude the mindful control needed to make their point. In doing so, the veteran speaks for themselves and their fellow veterans. Fear holds many of us back. Perhaps you feel like what you do won’t matter and nothing is going to change.

“Tell your story through poetry, prose, song writing or the visual arts.”

No, writing has nothing to do with being a recluse, even though quietness offers spontaneous writing. The Veterans Voices Writing Project is listening as you write, review and search through past and future editions of the magazine to learn from other veterans. You will be astonished with the artwork, as well as the writing. Join fellow *Veterans' Voices* authors, while adding an outlet to your life that is therapeutic and rewarding.

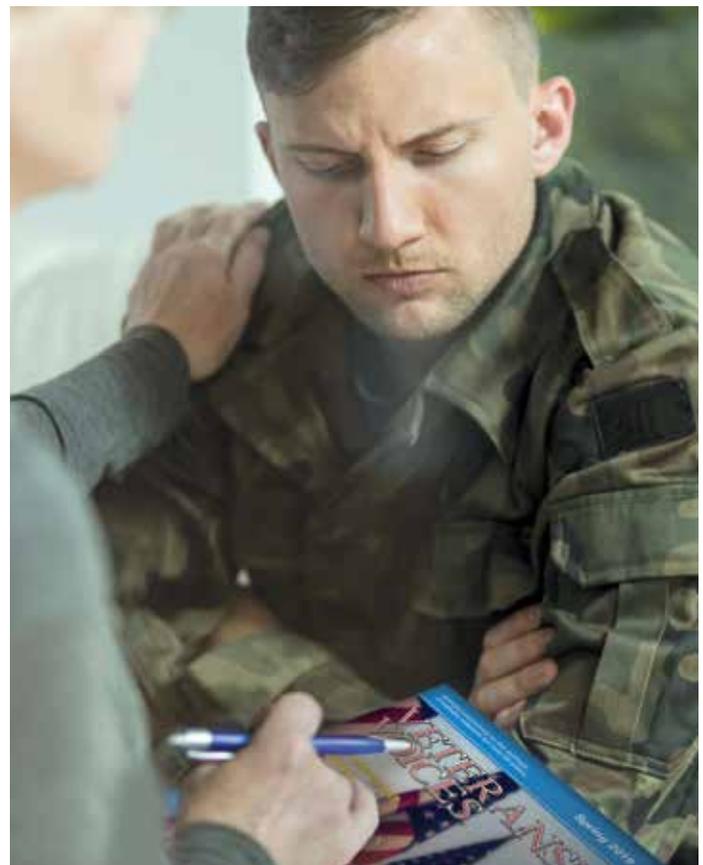
The project offers a chance to interact with those who mediate with the power of voice. It’s time to build broad communication

and openness. The power of *Veterans' Voices* is second to none when you consider strength in numbers creates listeners.

Writing is the messenger of speaking our mind, body and soul, the bedrock of beliefs, ideas and purposeful actions. Most important is how veterans present their power to those who care to listen. Writing and *Veterans' Voices* allows us to exercise that power.

I encourage veterans to use the power of their voice. Keep it coming! I have seen the benefits writing offers me. Final thought, if you are in search of a story, especially one that will uplift your emotional spirit just start writing.

“Write, submit and write some more. Heighten your artistic energy and make your voice heard.”



Veterans' Voices®

Summer 2019 Vol. 67, No. 2



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

History

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

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- Read writings from other veterans at facebook.com/VVWP1946.
- Email us with any questions at support@veteransvoices.org.

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Audio Version

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

Submission Guidelines

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

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

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

Veterans' Voices

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I Think About War

By Samuel J. Hall

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

I think about war all the time. My guess is that only people who have been to war carry the haunting vision about how war left them.

As a nation, we have a military. At times our military goes to war. Not everyone who goes to war has a good experience. Only those who have not been to war can live without thoughts of war.

On Veterans Day everyone gives thanks to our veterans, but most people don't consider what we veterans think about the remainder of the year. We think about the war we were involved in. We don't think about the free meal we may receive on Veterans Day or Memorial Day. For some of us the thought of war doesn't go away with a free meal. You don't remember war, if you haven't been there. The only time those memories will go away for me is when I die. I think about war all the time.

War has never been fun.

**VFW AUXILIARY, DEPT. OF KANSAS AWARD:
PERSONAL STORY**

Rescue Me / Rescue Us

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

Of all the things I have written, this is the hardest. As you read this story you will see why. It forces me to look inside myself, which is something I have avoided doing my entire life. I have always chosen to reach outward and focus like a laser, trying to help others throughout my professional careers. I've been so afraid and scared! Afraid to visit what I call the "Black Hole," where I found myself twice in my life, once in September 1970 and another time in December 1972. We will return to those two occasions later.

Remember the TV show "Rescue Me?" It ran for several seasons, and it was a really adult-themed show that was cutting edge. I think it starred Dennis Leary as a fireman on a big city fire department. He was a hero and everybody liked him. He took chances on the job that no one in their right mind would take. He was looked up to and highly respected. His department was his family and even went beyond brotherhood and sisterhood. They



all had each others' backs but there was something about Dennis' character that made him stand out! He was a multi-year veteran who preferred to remain the lowest rank and just be a fireman. He wasn't a driver, not a lieutenant, not a captain or a chief, though he could have been any of those. He was a natural leader, and everyone knew it!

As great as he was on the job, never missing a shift—his personal life was a train wreck. He could not hold on to a relationship and had a couple of ex-wives and some children. Even his exes loved him! He tried to do the right thing with his children and ex-wives. He supported everybody. The only thing he wanted for himself was booze! He started heavy when he lost his best friend in a blaze. Nothing he'd done wrong, but it tore him apart mentally. When he drank he would see his friend and have conversations with him. His best friend was always trying to help him get over his loss and get him to stop drinking. It got to the point in the show where he started drinking on the job and many of his friends knew it but would not squeal on him. However, they did talk to him and knew he was no longer safe to work with and they even started to cover for him. That is the point where I lost track of the show because I stopped watching it. It hurt too much. He developed PTSD, but would never do anything about it—that would show weakness. He never talked about what he did on the job or what he experienced at work. He stuffed it. For 20 years!

Now I ask you, the reader: what happens when "Rescue Me" is real life? My first child was born in January 1975. I was hiding how I was a baby-killing, drug-addicted Vietnam vet. Nobody wanted me, and I had just gotten laid off from a factory job when my wife delivered. We were so broke we did not even know where the baby formula and diapers were going to come from. I did anything for money that I could while still obeying the law. Then I went to school only to get the GI bill so we could get some money. I had no intention of staying there until I found out I liked it and was good at school. Plus I was motivated and once I get motivated wild horses can't stop me!

The kid grew (imagine that), and pretty soon in September 1977, he had a brother who grew too. I finished college in three and a half years with a degree in physical education, and therapeutic recreation. I needed an internship for my minor, and that is where I got my big break! The state of Wisconsin liked my work and my style in the Department of Corrections. Plus, I could work all alone with hundreds of inmates at a time! Piece of cake after Nam!

My job was to go and play with the inmates! Basketball, tennis, take them swimming in summer, snow skiing in winter, you name it and I did it. I never once had a problem with an inmate—just dumb management. As long as they left me alone I was fine! After many years they knew better than to rattle my cage. They left me alone. I was just that good at my job! Working alone was all I could do or handle. I could not get along with others and could not deal with authority. I could flashback in a heartbeat. Although I was a great dad and loved to play with my children, I had a sense of justice that wouldn't fly today. I would probably be locked up!

My firstborn was a hero from 18 months on! His idea of a good time was climbing the bookcases and falling down laughing! As I was in school, I did anything for money. I washed dishes at an IHOP. The boss knew I had a kid. He would give me big blue balloons by the dozens. I would blow them up and these balloons were huge! My firstborn just had gotten some teeth. His idea of fun was to bite the balloons until they exploded! He would laugh and laugh and laugh, and do it all over again! He was always a natural leader. Children grow up and they reach that 15, 16, 17 and 18-year-old stage where you, the parent, know nothing and you are completely tuned out and not listened to! My firstborn always needed a physical challenge. He was great at bull-in-the-china-shop sports. As long as he could destroy something, hit something or run into something, he was good. He built himself up into a brick with workouts that amazed me. He graduated from high school—barely. He was no momma's boy and liked to party. Girls threw themselves at his feet. He never had to even try for a date!

The physical challenge loomed over him though—he wanted to join the Army! Over my dead body. No boy of mine was ever going to go into the military—not while I was living! Argument after argument followed—my firstborn knew my history. He was 18 now, and he defied me! He joined for four years and signed up to be a Cavalry Scout and made the Army promise to send him to jump school so he could be airborne, and jump out of my perfectly good C-130s.

He excelled! Made private first class coming out of his 16 weeks of training. One of only four troops to be immediately promoted out of 200. Then jump school, and then tromping around the

demilitarized zone in Korea for a year. He came back to the states and made E-5 sergeant in under three years. Then he got bored. He got out wiser and motivated.

He used his GI bill and sailed through fire science, and did another year to become a paramedic. Straight A's all the way through school. He needed an internship for school and a fire department took him in and after a few months knew what they had and hired him on the spot.

It is now 16 years later. My firstborn could substitute for Dennis Leary's role in "Rescue Me!" It is uncanny, unbelievable, and heartbreaking to see how much my firstborn's life has patterned after me. All we know is service. PTSD has eaten both of us up. The only difference is I found a woman who does not believe in divorce and she still loves me but I don't know why. I will not bother you about the black holes I faced. I was medevacked out of Vietnam on my third tour. I was in the black hole.

As I finish this story I have to tell you I have tears running down my face and am deeply moved emotionally. I love all my children and they are great! My firstborn a hero in every sense possible so, so good—and yet in real trouble for his own health! He does not care—he stuffs everything—and I feel as a father and a dad and more than that—as his friend—I have failed him. And just like "Rescue Me" I want to stop watching. It hurts too much.

DAVID A. ANDREWS, JR. MEMORIAL AWARD

Elevators and Enemies

*By Michael W Doust
VA Medical Center – Portland, OR*

The day started like so many of the rest; take the Orange line to Portland, the No.8 bus to the VAMC. I have long since forgotten the reason for my appointment, except that it was on the eighth floor. The time was midmorning so the lobby and elevators were relatively quiet. I was standing next to an elderly Marine Corps veteran waiting for the elevator. He was in his wheelchair with his wife by his side. Like all elevators it seemed too slow. Eventually the bell rang and the door opened. I held the door while his wife wheeled him in. I pushed the No.8 button and she pushed the No. 7 button. Up we went, listening to the voice announce each floor.

As I glanced at my elevator partner, I could see him slumped in his chair, his head quietly drooping forward. He seemed not to care where he was going or why. A sense of melancholy filled the air, a little from him and a little from me. Elevators always seem the bearers of bad news, like silent enemies waiting behind the metal doors. As we passed the third floor I put my hand on his shoulder and quietly whispered "Semper Fi." Two words, nothing

more –nothing less. As we passed the fifth floor he was beginning to straighten himself up and with his Marine Corps pride showing, I could see a smile growing on his face.

At the seventh floor the door opened to let his wife push him, in his chariot, out into the lobby. As she maneuvered the chair I could see tears on her cheeks. “I haven’t seen him smile like that in a long time,” she said.

While waiting for my appointment I began to think about what had just happened. For a few minutes I made a proud vet smile. As for me, I also bore a smile. Two simple words and I was a little closer to peace with myself and the realization the elevators were no longer the enemy.

PALLAS ATHENE BEST STORY AWARD

A Special Baseball Cap

*By Jeffrey O. Ellis
– Lake Quivira, KS*



Photo submitted by Jeffrey O. Ellis

Every growing boy needs someone who is not a parent who understands what it is like just to be a kid. Someone who doesn’t correct you at every turn, or set high expectations. Someone who is an adult, but also a friend.

Uncle Bill was that someone for me. We lived in Kansas, he lived out in California, but he would always make it back to Kansas for our large family reunions. I didn’t need his attention all the time, I just wanted to hang around him and listen. He seemed to naturally understand my 10-year-old self.

Bill had been a Marine in World War II. I remember him at a reunion talking with his five brothers around a pickup. He shared stories about his time on Iwo Jima. He showed his brothers a steel

helmet with a sharp crease down the top and laughed about how that had “rung his bell pretty good.” I didn’t know about Iwo Jima then. I just knew that his brothers were enthralled by his story. I remember he came over to play catch with me after the storytelling.

For my 18th birthday, my parents treated me to my first commercial airplane ride. I chose to go see Uncle Bill at his home in the San Francisco Bay area. He treated me to my first deep sea fishing experience by booking me on a fishing charter. I left Sausalito at dawn with a group of about 20 men and sailed under the Golden Gate, which was the most gorgeous sight this small-town Kansas kid had ever seen. After we traveled about three miles off shore to begin fishing, the boat began moving relentlessly up and down on the Pacific swells . . . and I threw up every hour and 15 minutes all day long. When we got back to shore the captain told Uncle Bill about my rough day. Bill laughed all the way back to his house. I had been initiated to California.

The next time I flew to the Bay Area, I was an Army captain leaving for my tour in Vietnam. I left my wife and two-year-old son in Chicago, and cried silently on the plane all the way to Travis Air Force Base. Uncle Bill and Aunt Veva, the girl he married right after the war, met me there and took me to dinner before I was to board the flight to Nam. I was still upset and ate only about half of the large steak they bought me. I didn’t have to talk much. They understood how I was feeling. I might not have gotten on that next flight had they not been there to sit with me until time to board.

Uncle Bill was the first one I called when I returned from my tour and landed at San Francisco Airport. His younger daughter, my cousin, answered. Bill was out, but he soon called me back and had me paged at the airport before I headed back to Chicago to reunite with my wife and son. Again, he didn’t have to say much. He simply welcomed me home and understood as only those who have been to war can.

Years later, I was designated the surrogate dad to attend the graduation of my younger brother’s son, Sam, from Marine Boot Camp. My brother had been disabled with multiple sclerosis and could not go, much to his regret. Since Uncle Bill was a Marine, I called and asked him to join me at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego for the occasion. He was then in his mid-70s and initially begged off. I chided him that I thought Marines always stuck together and that he needed to come. He finally agreed.

I met him at the San Diego airport and we immediately drove onto the base. Bill observed that the place had not changed much. I looked at him surprised and remarked that I hadn’t realized he had also trained at the Recruit Depot. He began the story of



leaving home at age 17, 57 years earlier, and having to get his widowed mother's special permission to enlist. There were nine children in the family and their dad had been killed in a car accident when Bill was 13. His older brothers, my dad included, worked to provide for the family. It actually helped to have one less mouth to feed.

So off Bill went alone on the train from Kansas City to San Diego, a teenager destined to grow up way too soon. Right after graduation from boot camp Bill was on his way to Iwo Jima after a quick trip home. He was engaged in combat at age 18 for the entire battle of Iwo Jima, landing in the third wave to hit the beach on February 19, 1945, and staying until the end of the battle on March 26, 1945. That battle was notorious for its brutality. The Marines suffered a third of the casualties they incurred for the entire war on that tiny island in the Pacific and more awards for valor were awarded than for any other single battle.

We happened on the base museum as we drove through the Recruit Depot that afternoon before the boot camp graduation scheduled for the next day. I suggested we spend some time there. We soon came upon an Iwo Jima display. Bill looked at it quietly. He pointed out a photo of John Basilone, a Marine Corps sergeant, who had received the Medal of Honor for earlier action on Guadalcanal and whom Bill knew. He said he saw Basilone killed in action on Iwo Jima in the early part of the battle.

About that time a man emerged from an office near the display and asked if Bill was an Iwo veteran. When Bill acknowledged that he was, the man invited Bill into his office for a visit. They disappeared, so I went down to the museum gift shop and decided to buy Uncle Bill a baseball cap that announced that he was a veteran of Iwo Jima. I didn't expect him to wear it, but I wanted him to have it. When I returned upstairs Bill was leaving the office with the man who had invited him in for a conversation. He had tears welling in his eyes.

I gave him some time to compose himself then gave him the baseball cap and urged him to wear it. He initially begged off and commented that he never really wanted to tell people about that time in his life. But he finally relented and put on the cap as we left the museum to walk around the base in the late afternoon sun. In a truly astounding display of honor and admiration, every Marine we encountered during our walk, regardless of rank, saluted Bill and asked to shake his hand.

He was overwhelmed and frankly puzzled. He had never really talked about the experience and was haunted by the things he had witnessed and some of what he had done. As we walked quietly, I could see that he was deeply processing the honor he was now experiencing, something he had never sought or expected.

We went to dinner that night at a nice San Diego seaside restaurant, had too many martinis, and he started telling stories. While my experience in Vietnam was nothing like Bill's experience as a teenager during the most horrific battle ever fought by U.S. Marines, he seemed to sense that I at least had some sense of what it was like to experience war. So he told the "real" story. It was not the one he had told his brothers around the pickup at the family reunion years earlier when he could laugh about the bullet crease down the top of his helmet.

He told the stories of leaving home at 17, being alone at boot camp, visiting home once more before shipping out for some additional training in Hawaii before landing in a hell named Iwo Jima. He told about how terrifying it was to lay on the beach for several hours with so much enemy fire raining down on them from Mt. Suribachi that they knew they couldn't stay on the beach, and they also knew it was likely certain death to go over the top. So, being Marines, they naturally went over the top and attacked.

He told stories of having to use flame throwers to oust the Japanese soldiers from tunnels and caves and how they shot the burning enemy soldiers as they emerged from hiding. He told stories of being so exhausted that he went to sleep in a shell hole holding a pistol on his chest only to wake in a start to find two dead Japanese soldiers on the rim of the shell hole and two rounds missing from his pistol, but he had no memory of shooting them.

He told stories of putting his famous steel helmet on backwards so that he could see under the raised back edge of the helmet to shoot over an earthen berm and how a bullet had creased the top of his helmet. He wanted to be clear that he had not been running away from battle as might have been assumed since the bullet hit the helmet from the rear. But he admitted he was knocked a little crazy by the impact and had to be sent to the medics in the rear for a couple of days before returning to battle.

He told stories of coming home to Kansas after the war and trying to go to junior college only to find that he couldn't sit in a classroom because a car would pass, backfire or make a loud noise that caused him to try to dive under his school desk. He told how he decided to leave school, marry Veva, the pretty red-head down the street from his house, and move to California to work in his new brother-in-law's grocery store.

He told stories of how he was confined to bed for three years after he and Veva got to California because he experienced such a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis that he would constantly wake up in painful cold sweats, sleep only two to three hours at a time while his new, young wife nursed him. He told stories of how he forced himself to get out of bed and go to work part-time stocking grocery shelves while pushing himself around on a grocery cart with one good leg, and how he was finally able to return to full-time work by taking way too many aspirin daily, still only sleeping four to five hours a night.

Bill admitted that he ended up just plain angry about his time in the service. He said that he had never told the stories he shared with me over drinks and dinner to anyone else. He was loath to revisit the horrors he had experienced and ashamed of some of the things he had done. He said these were the awful memories that you could only share with people who had experienced war. There was simply no basis for empathy or understanding. And you certainly could not share the stories with a wife or daughters. They were just too awful and revealed a side of you that you couldn't be sure people could understand and, more importantly, forgive.

I was honored that he felt confident in sharing those stories with me. I think he felt I had some basis for understanding even though my war experience was not even in the same realm of reality. I treasured the trust he had put in me.

The next day, Bill and I went to the base to observe the recruits' graduation from basic training, the day they would finally become Marines. When we arrived, the newly-minted Marines were assembled on the parade field before a reviewing stand. I saw the commanding general standing with some of his staff members waiting for the ceremony to begin. Bill was wearing the ball cap I had gotten him. The general noticed Bill's cap as we got close to that group of dignitaries. He, too, saluted the former Marine corporal, an Iwo veteran, and immediately invited Uncle Bill to join him on the reviewing stand.

Bill stood next to the general while I sat a few rows behind filming them and my nephew Sam's graduation parade. Bill was overcome as the new, young Marines passed in review before

him, undoubtedly a memory of what he had experienced 57 years earlier when he graduated from boot camp as one of the young Marines parading before the commanding general with all the pride that comes from "measuring up" and becoming "one of the proud, the few."

Sam went on to serve during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. I served during the Vietnam era. Bill served during World War II. Three generations from the same family, each serving during a different war. And the story keeps building as the experiences are shared from generation to generation.

I visited Uncle Bill several times after our trip to San Diego and as he grew older. He had become successful in the grocery business, owning a couple of his own stores. He retired to Idaho where his daughters lived. He lived out a good life as he emerged into the role of family patriarch.

When he came back to Kansas for his last family reunion, I asked our Congressman if he could find Bill's military record and find out what medals and awards he had earned. Bill shunned those decorations just as he avoided the memories of that time. I had the medals framed along with an American flag which had been flown over the Capitol by the congressman in Bill's honor. At the reunion, I presented them to Bill before the assembled family members. He was finally ready to accept them.

It was remarkable to see him in the living room later that day with all the youngest generation of our family sitting on the floor before him listening to stories of military service and of the "old days" of him growing up with their grandparents, the family members of the Greatest Generation.

I had the honor of giving the eulogy at Uncle Bill's memorial service. I told the story of how, over too many drinks in a San Diego restaurant, we shared his stories of his time in the hell of Iwo Jima. After the service, several of Bill's contemporaries and friends commented that they had witnessed a change in Bill after his trip to San Diego and had wondered why. He began wearing his Iwo Jima veteran ball cap regularly and frequently engaged in conversation with other veterans of World War II who saw the cap and approached him. He became like the man who had approached him from an office near the Iwo Jima display at the museum, a compassionate listener and fellow storyteller.

There's a catharsis that happens when you can start telling your story and forgiving yourself for what you had to do in the service of your country. It is possible to recover your humanity. It is possible to find peace in your soul. Getting soldiers to open up can be hard. Sometimes it just takes a sign that others care. For one old Marine all it took was a special baseball cap.

Wartime Pets

By Shon Pernice
– Moberly, MO



Soldiers yearning for normalcy in a combat zone might just create a pet out of an uncommon critter. Anything that crawls, slithers or gives the slightest bit of attention might just be captured, even though there is a general order in place that prohibits the possession of feral pets by U.S. military personnel.

Forward Operating Base Grizzly, Iraq, 2007. The Tactical Operation Center (TOC) of the 735th Combat Support Company was just another normal green command tent fortified by thousands of olive drab sandbags. Somewhere along the line, from an unknown source, an aquarium was obtained. A very large, black scorpion became a resident of the enclosure. Soldiers would stop in just to view the critter. Many would go out and collect bugs in hopes of providing nutrition and acting like a friend.

One hot summer day, a People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI) refugee brought a water bottle to me. Inside was a 12-inch venomous snake. My first thought, "How did he thread the snake into the water bottle?" He wanted to trade cigarettes for this new-found treasure. I really had no desire to mess with the thing. A few days later, when I stopped by the TOC to see the scorpion, I noticed the same snake inside with the scorpion. Two poisonous creatures, together, being cared for by soldiers. From a medical standpoint it was an accident waiting to happen.

I did hear that the creatures had names and wagers were being placed on who would kill who. There was lots of interest in these two animals that felt foreign in the company of Midwesterners. Eventually, the battalion found out and instructed the commanding officer to immediately dispose of the deadly animals. It was a disappointment to the soldiers.

In the fall of 2007, our Farsi interpreter, Homi (the shortened version of his long Persian name), brought a hedgehog into the Troop Medical Clinic (TMC) where he worked with us. This was the first time I'd ever seen such a critter. It was a soft, furry little thing rolled into a ball. It had huge black eyes and a face that resembled a rat. He opened up a bit as one of the medics held him in the palm of her hands. He was a content little guy. The medics wanted to keep him in the TMC and set up a nest for him to sleep/play in. Our major reminded us of the posted general order and stated that "nobody better get bit!" One of the medics took the critter back to her trailer and kept him. I did get a few pictures with him to show my children. The medics would bring lettuce, from the chow hall, to feed him.

Homi told us a story about the life of a hedgehog. "The hedgehog sees the fox and rolls into a ball. The fox urinates on the hedgehog. The hedgehog thinks he's drowning and opens up to swim. The fox eats the hedgehog." It was a story I will never forget. The girls did talk about not being able to find him for days at a time. I don't know if they let him go, lost him, or turned him over to our reliefs.

Stray dogs were everywhere. The Iraqis hated dogs. They knew we loved them and utilized that weakness against us. While patrolling route Dover my unit saw a dog tied to a post, yelping. The patrol stopped and noticed that the dog's hind legs had been slashed open. The soldiers tried to help the dog by bandaging up his wounds. A huge explosion rocked the very spot the dog and soldiers convened killing two of our men. The insurgents had buried an improvised explosive device and detonated it with precision. A new U.S. Army directive was issued: don't stop for wounded animals—kill them.

Grizzly Check Point, in Ashraf, had several stray dogs keeping us company. They were mixed breeds: one white and the other black, both medium size. The dogs were filthy and full of ticks but gave us attention. The PMOI terrorists who controlled the city, hated those mutts. We constantly fed and played with the animals. Bowls were set up and their meals usually consisted of our MREs. One morning, the dogs were discovered dead. There were no apparent injuries, no trauma and no vehicles hit them. Their sudden deaths were very suspicious. We believed that they were poisoned by the PMOI terrorists.

The cats were feral and in no way friendly. They were off limits to all military personnel. The majority of the feline population tested positive for various diseases, including rabies. We all had to be vaccinated for rabies if we worked in the TMC. The Forward Operating Base (FOB) had a civilian contractor whose job was "vector control." They set up animal traps around the base. When a cat was caught, we had a medic who was specially trained to give a lethal dose of medication. The lethal drug was a two-part mixture that was kept in a safe and only accessed by the major and me. The cat problem was dealt with humanely.

Odysseus and Vietnam Vets

By Tom Paul Reilly

VA Medical Center – St. Louis, MO

Another instance of exotic wartime amusement occurred when one of my medics, Derrick, caught a baby camel spider. This creepy crawler, also known as the sun scorpion, has a body about the size of a thumb with six-inch-long legs. Its mouth consists of large outer mandibles that open sideways, exposing the second set of inner mandibles that chomp up and down. It has an extremely painful bite, and is not afraid of humans, very aggressive, and will charge at you fearlessly, rear up its back legs and snap its jaws. A camel spider is one way to clear out a tent of the most highly trained Special Forces around. They can run up to 10 mph and jump very high. Yet, my medic donned his fire-retardant gloves and let this active critter climb hand over hand. There was no way to contain the spider, so he had to let it go. Plus, we had no idea what to feed it. The spider did fulfill about three hours of entertainment for us with plenty of photo opportunities. I do have to note that the local population leaves these vicious things alone.

Outside the FOB were three donkeys who roamed freely. I'd see them on my way to and from the Ashraf Refugee Camp. They would eat out of our garbage before it was burned. They were a nice sight to see in a war zone: animals out free to wonder without harm, minding their own business and certainly not a threat. One day, I took an ambulance out and I stopped to pet the donkeys. They were nasty, dusty, and smelled like a moldy wet dog. I developed this burning desire to sneak one back onto our secured military installation. I took a litter (stretcher) out of the ambulance and set it up like a ramp onto the back of the ambulance. I first tried to coax the beast, but he wasn't going for it. I got behind him and pushed him onto the ramp, and into the back of the ambulance. This was a chore and took the good part of 30 minutes to force him in. I snuck him back into the FOB past the northern entry manned by a Marine regiment. I parked behind the TMC and set the makeshift ramp back up. This guy was afraid of heights and did not want to leave the emergency vehicle. I had to manhandle him and force the beast down my runway. I filled up a bucket of water for him and retired to my trailer.

The next morning, at breakfast, the chatter was sighting a donkey. Soldiers, Marines, airmen, officers, and enlisted were all trying to figure out how a donkey had penetrated our perimeter? I overheard some officers discussing the possibility of the Marines falling asleep at their post last night. I just sat there with a smirk on my face. It has been the best kept secret of FOB Grizzly until now, when I revealed my prank.

To make sense of combat, death, and just being in a crazy environment, the soldier seeks out comfort in unusual products of nature. The American way of life doesn't quite fit into the customs of the Middle East. But just to have the company of something that isn't trying to blow you up or shoot you is sought out every moment in the combat zone.

Homer's epic poem, "The Odyssey," chronicles the journey home of the Trojan War hero, Odysseus. Odysseus encountered angry and spiteful gods, natural disasters, monsters, temptresses, sloth and even a brief visit to the underworld. While this was happening, suitors in his hometown, Ithaca, relentlessly pursued his wife. His 10-year odyssey to reach home tested the limits of his strength and perseverance.

It is a tense and challenging story. Most Vietnam veterans can identify with these challenges but would claim that Odysseus was a piker. It only took him 10 years to get home. It has taken most Vietnam veterans 50 years to get home.

The journey home for Vietnam veterans was filled with unique challenges that other warriors did not face—alienation and a profound sense of unfinished business. Alienation described the estrangement from their country that Vietnam veterans felt. They returned to a nation that hated the war and despised the warriors. Returning veterans quickly shed their uniforms, hoping to put the war behind them. No parades. No welcome home. No recognition from a grateful nation. They were greeted with rejection for answering the call of duty. This isolation shadowed them for decades.

Though Vietnam veterans finished their tours, the war continued. Many brought home a sense of unfinished business; the war raged on and they left behind their friends. These two loose ends haunted returning veterans. It violated their code, "Leave no man behind." The fact that their friends were still fighting the war contributed to the survivors' guilt that many felt. They made it home, but their friends hadn't, yet. Some never made it home alive. Vietnam veterans lived with the haunting memory that they were not permitted to finish the job for which they had been trained. Politics got in the way.

Most Vietnam veterans had little choice but to get on with their lives. Some returned to school, others got jobs, married, had families and pursued careers. Then, they retired with plenty of time to think about their lives. In these twilight years, they finally processed what they had experienced. They paused, took a deep breath and said, "Wow, what an experience! In spite of it all, it was an honor to serve."

Editor's Note: Tom Reilly is the author of the book, Hope in the Shadows of War (Koehler Books, 2018).

Compassion

By Helen Anderson Glass
VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ

The dictionary defines compassion as “sympathetic concern for the suffering or misfortune of others.” Albert Schweitzer said “The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.”

“Wisdom, compassion and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of man.” These were the wise words of Confucius.

What is with this word compassion? When I picked up a “Reader’s Digest,” I always read “Word Power” in the back to see how many I know and to learn more word meanings. Recently, the first word I looked up was compassion. I attended a book signing for Veterans Heritage and that word came up again. Someone I did not know said she liked my poetry and asked if I would write something she could put in a thank you card to a friend who had helped her get through recent tragedies. I told her the word she was looking for was compassion and I could give her a copy of “True Friends,” a copy of one of my poems I had on hand that day to put into the books I was signing. Her request inspired me—I should write how compassion fit into my life.

Compassion has played an integral part in my life of 94 years. When I was a young girl a neighbor complimented my father about me being such a “compassionate daughter.” I did not know what she meant. I was inclined, just as my father was, to sob at the playing of taps at a veteran’s funeral and many times when I heard the national anthem or even “God Bless America” sung by Kate Smith.

When I was in the Navy in World War II, we could sign up for overseas service. I did. My name was on the list of those accepted. So we had our sea bags and gear ready. But some time later, I received a letter from the Navy Department. My application for overseas duty had been denied. I was informed this was a “compassionate letter;” I had been turned down because my brother Arthur J. Anderson, had been “killed in action” September 11, 1943, on the USS. Savannah at Salerno, Italy. My father was in the VA hospital in New Jersey and at the time was given only a short time to live. That left my mother home alone. Thus my request was denied. (My dad lived for 20 more years, I am pleased to report.)

I married my Chief while I was in the Navy and after we were discharged we drove to California to live with his mother and



brothers. I had only been married a year, when I realized this kind of life was not for me. I was not raised the way I was now being forced to live and I knew I had to leave, to go home. But, I was thousands of miles away and very little money to get me there. I had found a small church I could walk to and after I attended a few times I confided to Pastor Wilkes. I was three months pregnant at the time. He listened and then introduced me to a member of the parish. Madeline and her six girls. She heard my story and helped me get what belongings I had and welcomed me into her home. She showed me the compassion I needed for two weeks. The pastor and the church got me a train ticket home and some money for expenses. My parents met me at the station in Newark, N.J.. My daughter was born six months later and my husband never saw her in person. To show my appreciation for the pastor’s kindness and compassion, my dad sent a certified check to the church and to share with Madeline and her girls. We kept our friendship for a few years and then somehow lost each other when she moved to Michigan to be with her family.

Because of my love for the military and veterans, I try to show my compassion for them in my writing and poetry. I am inspired by their stories of misfortune, their fear, sacrifices and the horror of war. They do not seek sympathy, just understanding and compassion, I am sure. So I have the tendency to show it in what I write. This compassion was intensified upon hearing the stories of Veterans Administration hospital patients I met with my dad in New Jersey and Florida. Then, I was a patient and a volunteer at the VA in Tucson, Arizona (since 1978). I would hear them as they talked to my dad or me. I would be so moved I would make notes of what was said and I would then have to leave because of tears and a lump in my throat.

I had the honor of meeting and talking to one young wounded veteran at our Tucson VA. He had been the lone survivor when his tank was hit by friendly fire. He was badly disfigured and was a willing public speaker. When asked if he was bitter at what had

happened to him, he said he wasn't and was honored to be able to tell his story. He was thankful for the medical treatment he underwent and he said he had no regrets and would do it again if needed. I am sure that is a definite show of compassion. I still have the picture I took of him. I asked if I could give him a hug. He said many people turned away at the sight of him. I told him he was as tall as my brother and that he was the same age my brother was when he was killed during World War II.

Then about 10 years ago, I became interested in the Missing In America Project (MIAP) I learned about them through Bob Day who was in charge and became committed to their cause. According to Bob and the organizational literature, the MIAP's goal is to locate and inter the unclaimed cremated remains of American veterans through the joint efforts of private, state and federal organizations and to provide honor and respect to those who have served our country by securing a final resting place for those forgotten heroes. These veterans deserve honor and respect instead of being left on the shelf at some mortuary or crematory. Bob Day is now the County Remains Officer and Ed Torres is in charge of MIAP in southern Arizona. For nine years a cavalcade, with an antique hearse carrying the remains, motorcycles and private cars motored to the veterans cemetery in Sierra Vista. Now we have the new veterans cemetery in Marana. I was so taken by MIAP, I wrote a poem for them and recited it when I attended my first event in Sierra Vista. I dedicated it to my brother who did not have the honor of a full military burial. There were 207 killed as a result of the German radio-controlled bomb that hit his ship the USS Savannah on November 9, 1943. My brother and 24 others whose remains were unidentifiable were buried at sea off the coast of Malta. Bob Day, being the compassionate man he is, presented me with a flag to honor my brother. The Navy returned his belongings but my parents never did receive a flag.

Now, I've left a more personal act of "compassion" to the last. I met Isabel "Liz" Halloran, U.S. Army and Air Force nurse at the VA in Tucson. We served on the Women's Advisory Board for the Women's Clinic for several years. "Liz" represented the Air Force and I nursing for the U.S. Navy and World War II. There were others representing the Army and the Marines. We met once a month. Liz and I became good friends and before she died at the VA almost 10 years ago, unbeknown to me, she, being a very compassionate person, made plans for me to be taken care of in the event she died before I did. I was failing and had been living alone in my trailer when I was welcomed into her home with Bob and Linda Henry, Liz's daughter and her husband, and their children, four adorable pets. Their pets included Casey, a very old and vocal black male cat; Ginger, a shy, princess-like golden female; and the youngster Abby, a beautiful calico female cat. At

the time there was lovable old Crystal, a brown and black German shepherd who died several years ago. Never have I ever known a more loving, caring, thoughtful, compassionate family. God and fate surely had a hand in this union.

And, now, that I can no longer physically volunteer at the VA, I show my compassion by sewing for them. I make lap robes, over the shoulder wraps, ditty bags, tote bags, wheel chair and walker bags, over the shoulder medvac holders (which I invented you could say), urine bag covers and busy aprons. I also make items for our American Legion Auxiliary to sell to provide funds for their veterans projects. Isn't it about time we replaced hate and anger with love and compassion? It has been said "You can not do kindness or show compassion too soon, for you never know when it is too late."

I hope those who read this story think of me trying to show love and compassion and not think of me as an old woman bragging, even though I'm concerned that my words might read like that. Please, be compassionate and give this old sea-hag, salty ex-Navy gal, the benefit of the doubt. I have certainly experienced my share of compassion and I just try to return a measure to others.

MARGARET SALLY KEACH MEMORIAL AWARD

To My Fellow Veterans

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

History! It is yours and it is mine! All eras! I just received the latest copy of, "The Veteran," a magazine for my era. Me? I am just an old Nam Vet. Let's face it: I pick up the latest issue of "The Veteran" and it is filled with pages of Taps. The Nam vets are all in the twilight of their lives. What Agent Orange has not killed, Mother Nature will. There are approximately 800,000 of us left of the several million who had the pleasure of serving in that "Land That God Forgot." The survivors have a story to tell America. Your history! Your story! Write it down!

I write for therapy 50 years after being in that land. Like many of you, I did my time and my duty. I paid a heavy price, but I would do it all over again—and I bet you would, too! There is something about us. We are different. No matter what your reason for joining you took the oath and thus your story began. Your history! *Veterans' Voices* allows you to share your story and that history no matter what it is. All of us can relate to it! It doesn't matter if it is a story, a poem or visual art. We can paint pictures with our words and fill in America on what really happened from the perspective of a trooper, not a politician. I guess I am showing my age: I quit trusting by the time I was 20!

You are my brother, you are my sister! I understand you! I feel you! I love what you stand for and what you have accomplished. All those old values! Service to others, doing what is good, protection of yourself and others around you, caring, learning and listening, and most of all having the courage to take on the bad guys of the world so our country and the people who live here can be safe and stay free.

Your story—your history—must be told. *Veterans' Voices* is the best platform to accomplish that. Ever see one commercial in *Veterans' Voices*? No, it contains only veterans' writing and artwork. You all make me proud! Your sacrifice, your pain, your suffering goes without fanfare because all of you say the same thing.

When you say, "Oh I was just doing my job," I politely say, "WRONG!" I know of your trauma! You might hide it but you can't escape it! Trust me! I have been getting help for over 50 years and NO I am not ashamed! If I had not gotten help I would be dead! What you and I went through is a life-changing event and it does not matter if you went to war or served in peacetime! You are part of history, whether you want to be or not! You younger guys and gals out there—form up!

Let America know what Desert Storm-Desert Shield was really like! And you Iraq and Afghanistan heroes tell us about it! All of you have been fighting longer than us old Nam vets ever did! America needs to know! I am linked to you in the most intimate way possible—a brotherhood and sisterhood that knows no bounds. There is nothing like it in the entire world! Can you still feel the rush of adrenaline as it courses through your veins? All of you felt it! That first time the drill instructor yelled at you! Or did worse!

Now, we look at our country and I often wonder just what the heck is going on? Is this what I fought for? The answer always comes up, I guess so! History is written every day! I don't have to like it, I don't have to agree with it, I can have my own opinion. I can express myself; all of us have earned that right. It was not given to us. So, my brothers and sisters—add your story, your poem, your art, but most of all your history. America deserves to know it because you count. I'll be watching for what you have to say in the next issue of *Veterans' Voices*.

Editor's Note: *Richard Wangard is a regular contributor to Veterans' Voices. He understands the value of the therapeutic writing and is committed to helping veterans through self-expression.*



On My Return to Vietnam

By Rick Raskin
— Manassas, VA

Years ago I had decided that one day I would return to Vietnam. I served there in 1967 with the US Army's 1st Signal Brigade at Nha Trang. Forty-three years later my wife and I made that visit.

We decided that the best way for us would be to take a cruise. Departing from Singapore we would visit the Vietnamese ports in the areas of Vung Tau, Nha Trang, Da Nang and Hanoi. The first leg of our journey was to fly to Singapore where we spent an enjoyable three days prior to beginning the cruise.

Our first port of call was Vung Tau, located near Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon. Several options for land based tours were available and we chose to visit the Cu Chi Tunnels about a two and a half hour ride away. The tour focuses on the resilience of the Vietnamese fighters who both lived and fought from underground tunnels. Originally constructed to fight the French by the Viet Minh, the tunnels were later expanded up to 12 meters below ground using only rudimentary tools. I was especially taken by the quality of the engineering that went into their construction. I was also impressed by the human engineering where such factors as venting of smoke and masking of smells were taken into consideration. I found the experience touching to say the least, even taking into consideration the very old propaganda film we were shown on the bus from Vung Tau.

The following day the ship anchored at Nha Trang and we were tendered into the port. Since I had spent the better part of a year there, we opted to hire a cab and explore on our own. I was able to get a few photos from some of the same locations I had visited before but recognized little today. After some confusing conversation with our cab driver we drove to the old unused

Guardian Angels in Vietnam

By James Lee Pfau

VA Medical Center – Big Spring, TX

airbase, and thanks to a friendly guard I was allowed to take a few pictures across the airstrip. Nothing remains from my U.S. Army days except the runways and terminal building. Nha Trang has grown four to five times the size I remember and the once deserted beach is now lined with high-rise hotels and restaurants. Hon Tre Island, once a leper colony, is now a resort and is connected to the mainland by an aerial tram.

Day three in Vietnam, we visited the imperial city of Hue. Our tour began at the Thien Mu Pagoda, probably the most famous symbol of Hue. Its seven-tiered tower atop a steep hill overlooks the Perfume River. We continued on to the Imperial Citadel. Built on a plan similar to the Forbidden City in Beijing, construction began in 1804 under Emperor Gai Long. Extensively damaged during the Tet Offensive of 1968, there has been and continues to be much rebuilding. We then continued on to visit the tomb of Emperor Tu Duc, considered by many to be the most impressive tomb in Hue. We concluded the tour with a stop at a little village that specializes in the production of incense.

Our last day in Vietnam we opted to visit Halong Bay by boat. Made famous in the French film “Indochine,” Halong Bay is dotted with thousands of limestone islands in an area of over 1,500 square kilometers.

So what were my impressions? I was truly curious as to how the Vietnamese people have fared over the years. First, there is no war so they are better off for that. The majority of the population wasn't even born when the war ended and I did not experience any animosity towards Americans.

Secondly, because the people live in a Communist country they are subject to the whims of the government. Those whose relatives fought on the Communist side fare better for jobs and benefits than those who are descended from former South Vietnamese supporters. A tour guide I spoke with had been an English teacher in the 1960s but is now unable to find work in that profession.

So much has changed in the years since I served in Vietnam, but so much remains the same. Cell phones are everywhere but so is the abject poverty I witnessed in 1967. There are resorts and high-rise buildings, but also the thousands of little shops selling everything imaginable. Great restaurants abound but there are also the little hovels with their steaming pots and unrefrigerated meat.

Overall, I would have to say the people are better off than before. That is because they can expect to live and raise their families in a peaceful environment.

They landed the Cobra gun ship by a bar, leave it to officers! When they came out they couldn't get it started. The flight officer told me to get in the Huey and get the ship running. We flew to the zone out in the middle of a rice paddy with nothing but the Cobra and a bar. I had them spin the engine, but I couldn't hear the igniters working. I went back to the base and removed an igniter harness from a turbine that was scheduled for overhaul. It was starting to get dark, Charlie's favorite time of the day, so I grabbed my flack vest, the igniter harness and my tool box, then flew back to the Cobra.

It was getting good and dark when we landed. They had set up lights for me to work by; everyone else jumped on the Huey and left me to do my thing with the igniter harness. I normally enjoy being alone, but this was too alone. The bar didn't even stay open after dark. I was getting pretty good about praying, and that is what I did the whole time I was replacing the harness. Finished, I radioed to come get the Cobra and me. They brought another pilot to take the Cobra back; he cranked the turbine, hit the igniters and answered prayer.

About a month later, I was on my way to R&R. I was flying on a 727 to Hong Kong. My seatmate was a grunt from the 25th and out of the blue I asked him what was the strangest thing he had encountered while on duty in Vietnam. He then told me about his platoon that had been in the boonies for three weeks, and were finally back in camp looking forward to hot showers, cooked grub and a soft bed. Just as they were beginning to wind down, their sergeant told them “saddle up.” There was a Cobra down and some mechanic was going to get it running. He then told me that they made a perimeter and settled in watching this mechanic with the Cobra lit up like daylight as he put it back together. In Charlie's country! I did not have the courage to tell him that I was the mechanic. But, I did ponder on the fact that God is in control, and even though they were a bunch of dirty and hungry grunt, I had my guardian angels.



Tarmac

By Wayne Ince
– Sun City Center, FL

The shift started unceremoniously. It was like so many others before like a routine you get accustomed to doing, like standing before a mirror in the morning washing your eager face and shaving stubbled new growth or what called pretend skin. Many of us were so young, including myself, we liked to pretend or fantasize we could actually grow facial hair or wish any into existence so we'd have something to shave. After cleaning up that day and getting my ironed uniform on, I leaned over the edge of my bunk with my chest pressed on my knees and quickly laced my shined military jumped boots. Before exiting my personal space or dormitory barracks rooms I reached out and grabbed my restricted area badge and placed it around my neck where it kept my set of military issued dog tags company.

Downstairs in the parking lot in front of the dorm, several members of Bravo shift gathered and chatted over smokes and engaged in rough talk. After awhile, a group of us started our long trek on foot through RAF Upper Heyford, U.K., base, across the queen's main road and past the Ministry of Defense toward the flight line entrance where we waited for the Blue Goose a 36-passenger blue school bus to transport us to work. The short bus ride from the flight line gate to the hanger destination was always a good time for quiet reflection right before the mood hardened. As we got closer, hard stares replaced the lights in our eyes as we prepared to do the work of rough men in the dark. As Security Police specialists, our daily duty was to guard the base, protect its priority resources, and accomplish all other assigned duties as ordered.

The Bravo swing shift started at 3:00 p.m. and ended at 11:00 p.m. but required us to be at the hangar at an hour early to sign out weapons from the armory before proceeding to receive orders of the day and assignments. The hazy afternoon dimmed as our flight chief briefed us on a potential escalation of security threats based on warnings issued of perceived clear and present terrorist dangers. It was April 1986 and U.S. American military serving overseas had recently been targeted in Berlin where a nightclub frequented by our servicemen had been bombed the week prior. I listened intently to my flight chief expound on weapons safety, special security instructions, and security vigilance. As we broke guard mount and headed off to our assigned posts, a murmur and din of anxiousness filled the quiet void around me. Eager faces turned sour and tight, like a belt pulled slightly past the last possible hole to make one uncomfortable. I knew this shift was going to be different and any planned fun in barracks later would have to be postponed.

Hours later, night had descended slowly like a heavy canopy unfurling and blanking out any light. I was on a lonely guard post by myself on the back 40 of the flight line standing outside a guard shack when the first air ground equipment vehicle came barreling up to my post for entrance to the restricted area. Soon after, a steady flow of maintenance vehicles paraded back and forth into and out of my restricted area. Usually, on evenings like this it was a blessing for such activity because it made the shift go by quickly but tonight the good fortune had a twisted cursed feel. Unlike previous shifts, there was minimum small talk exchanged with the air crew personnel ferrying equipment into the hangars. The hurried look and purposeful business engaged by workers scurrying around grabbed my attention. I sensed the tension and tightened my web gear and harness out of practice and comfort to assure myself I was ready for whatever. When the security patrol came by for a security post check, I quickly learned from them that the entire flight-line had erupted in furious activity and our F-111 aircraft were being operationally generated–battled prepped!

End of Shift arrived fast and furious and my Charlie Shift replacement relieved me from post and explained to me somberly that I should be prepared for a very long night. Upon arriving back at the hanger with the rest of Bravo Shift, our flight chief greeted us stoically and told us to not turn in our weapons and to do what most military personnel excel at the most and that is to “stand-by!” We were brought to attention as our flight commander approached and explained that the Group commander had an announcement. There was a hush and a thick tension settled over us, as the commander approached. I recall staring straight-ahead, stiff and still locked at attention, braced for the worst. My mind raced with all that I had seen and heard that night against the backdrop of news reports in the “Stars & Stripes” about threats and aggression against America. Maybe this was the hour that terror had finally reached the tarmac; the moment we had all trained for and routinely worked toward, defense of our base and our nation.

After the commander announced that we were entering a high state of alert and security posture based on advanced warning of U.S. response toward terrorist aggression, I was nervous about what lay ahead. Past midnight, we were reassigned to augment Charlie shift and protect the base perimeter and guard base housing where military families resided. The seriousness and urgency could not be understated. I was in awe at our commander as he spoke about the potential danger to our base and the existing threat. He spoke powerfully that late night and early morning with a calm reminiscent of a coach sending his team out to beat the cross-town rival. But, this was not a game and there was much more at stake. As the commander went over the rules of engagement, I stamped my boots on the



or chamber a round, but I learned that it's important to face danger and terror head on and trust the person next to you and believe in your training.

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

The Military Is a Great Adventure

By Samuel J. Hall

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

tarmac to quell the nerves and march on my fears. I was used to carrying live ammunition on my web belt along with a gas mask strapped to my thigh but tonight my battle dress gear included a kevlar helmet and flak vest for necessary protection against unknown threats.

I was paired with another security police as part of our two-person security posture. Together, we vigilantly patrolled the base housing area and the back side of the base perimeter monitoring all avenues of approach. Thinking about it, we were targets walking slowly looking for any and all signs of intrusions. Jet aircraft had been launched throughout the night; their loud roar bursting the evening air. As tiredness and sleep tried to slow us down and arrest us, the roar of jets and a flight line alive with activity kept us wide awake and present in our continued duties. As I patrolled, I kept engaged by picking out cover and concealment areas should the need arise. We tried to keep the conversation to a minimum and instead listen to our patrol radio channels for any information that would give us an update. Security police was never glamorous and air base ground defense was even less so but I experienced an array of emotions that entire shift which served me during my entire military career. At times, I did feel isolated away from the action of the flight line and security control center but then there was a feeling of being at the tip of the spear. This had been my second assignment and first overseas at the start of a very young Air Force career.

Air Force Security Police are called "Peace Keepers" and in April 1986 with the world filled with terror, I was proud to be on duty when F-111s were launched to participate in the preemptive Libyan Bombing action against reported terror installations. The day started no different but surely ended unlike many others. After working 16-straight hours guarding and protecting the base under the strain of the unknown or possible threat of war, I returned back to the barracks with the rest of my Bravo Shift team members discussing the night's events and the bombing that took place earlier. I didn't fire my weapon

I enlisted in the United States Navy just after my 17th birthday to get away from the many people living at home. I came from a family of 13 kids. I was number 12 in the line up. When I entered the Navy, I was happy to have my own bed, a sea bag full of new Navy uniforms that I thought were great looking, and a galley full of all the food I wanted to eat every day. I felt like I was in seventh heaven at the time. I had entered a man's world with all the opportunities a man could want.

Many of the other recruits had a hard time getting out of their bed and getting started for the morning. I was up and ready to go every morning. To me the whole boot camp experience was a walk in the park. I felt like I was off to summer camp.

Though Great Lakes was very cold in the winter, the Navy uniforms were comfortable and warm. The winter I went through boot camp, 1963/64, the temperature got down to 20 degrees below zero. Throughout boot camp, we swam almost every day. I was on the swim team, swimming the back stroke. Many of our training exercises were in the water, since the Navy spent most of its time on the waters of the world. I was an equal in the water, not just a young kid. I went on my first liberty in windy Waukegan, Ill. I had never been there, so that place was somewhere to me.

I figured that if all those other men made it through boot camp, so could I. After three months of training, a case of the three day measles, lots of swimming and a great variety of food, I completed boot camp and was off to my first duty station. First, I stopped off at home to see my mom and dad. I was a new man with new uniforms as a part of the Navy. My world had changed.

My Navy life took me to a small town called Port Hueneme, Calif. That city was one of only two cities where the Navy Seabees were stationed. I attended a Class "A" School for several months. Plus, I was able to settle into my new Navy life. The Construction Battalion Center, CBC, would be my go to base during my Navy

career. After Class "A" School, my first duty assignment was to Midway Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Traveling to Midway, I went through Hawaii. Midway Island was 140 miles from the International Date Line in the Pacific. We called it one "140 from Tomorrow." The island was a tropical paradise. We had beautiful weather and beautiful sandy white beaches. We had a coral reef lined lagoon surrounding the island. We loved to swim in that lagoon. What a place to spend a year of my life. The island was inundated with Albatross, aka, goony birds, for most of the year. What a sight to watch the birds grow from an egg to a full grown adult. I worked in the island's power house while I was on Midway Island. I got to go fishing on the waters around Midway, which was a bird and fish refuge for 200 miles around the island.

My next duty station was in Mobil Construction Battalion Eleven. The battalions were a different kind of duty. We were like Marines in a Construction Outfit who work around the world and in war zones.

We not only had to learn our individual occupations, we had to be able to do our work in a combat situation. We learned how to be combat effective as well as completing our jobs under enemy fire. In addition to my mechanical abilities, I learned to build with wood frame construction. I learned to mix concrete, and build cement block walls. I learned electrical wiring. I learned to use plastic explosives for construction use. For combat, I learned to clean and fire my M-14 rifle, I learned to throw grenades, I learned to use a mortar. I learned how to keep my body out of enemy fire. I wore combat greens, a helmet, a flak jacket and combat boots. I can shoot a 3.5 rocket launcher.

I did not reenlist in the military, which I wanted to do. I attained the rank of E-5 in the four years that I was on active duty. I feel I could have attained the rank of E-8 in 20 years and that I could have completed my college education. I could have spent my military life traveling the world with a guaranteed job at every location. I would have had my meals provided. I would have had my uniforms provided. I would have had a place to sleep. My travel would have been provided. I would have had 30 days vacation each year and I would have been paid as well. Plus, when my 20 years were completed, I would have been able to retire with full benefits and a retirement income, plus a GI Bill to attend college.

The military is indeed an adventure with benefits. Reenlistment would have been a major change in my life. I kind of wish I had made that change.

Memorial Day

*By Albert A. Hernandez
VA Medical Center – El Paso, TX*

As a war veteran and man of God, Memorial Day is really one of the saddest times of the year for me. While many will celebrate it with festivities that include eating and alcohol drinking, I will be in mourning for those who are buried in the cemeteries of our nation. Seeing the graves of those who died for our country is not something you celebrate.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in D.C. with more than 58,000 names of the precious lives lost in that war will break your heart. Our national cemeteries will make you weep. The many casualties currently in our military and VA hospitals will remind you of the cost of war and all those others who died in previous wars. Many of them are buried in our community cemeteries. It is because of them that many people, not only Americans, can be free today in the world.

It is not enough for me to just remember these souls on this special day. It's a time for serious mourning and soul-searching. For I remember the bodies I had to prepare to be shipped home, knowing it could have been me instead.

It is this day that reminds me of the horror of war. It is this day that I will display my flag at half-staff. It is this day that I will probably cry and curse the act of war, and those that cause it. You see, our true enemy is not some ruthless dictator or fanatical terrorist. Those will always exist. It is war itself. It is man who is the warring creature, and for what? A piece of land, religion or just plain politics? Millions have died for these insane reasons. "War is a mere continuation of politics by other means." (Carl von Clausewitz).

So as we share in remembrance this Memorial Day, let's really think in solemnity of those who died for this country. Let's also pray for divine intervention in the quest to stop all war and to restore the true American way of life: free, fearless and prosperous. I'd hate to think that those we remember this day, died for nothing.

"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."

(2 Corinthians 10:3-4)

Memorial Day Reflections

*By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center – Albany, NY*



Photo submitted by Penny Lee Deere

Today signals the beginning of my favorite season, summer! This is a time to celebrate and reflect. People are happy!

Memorial Day, initiates the summer season. It honors people like me and the others who came before and after me to answer the call of duty. Just think if we had not served, we might be able to speak another language: say Japanese, German, Spanish, Russian, or Arabic. Soldiers like me took up their arms so that we Americans could be free. We're able to practice the religion we choose; we can vote; and, we are allowed to have a democratic society. We have choices and I'm thankful for that.

Memorial Day is a huge parade with joyous children, clowns, floats, music, marching bands, military honors and patriotic songs. We might have a barbecue in the backyard or go to our favorite lake! Many people come out, from the youngest to the old-timers to take part in this festive occasion with decorations in red, white and blue. The symbol of old glory can be seen everywhere. It is on display from the graves at Arlington Cemetery, to our front porches, on our cars, heck, I even have a scarf that's the flag! There are hot dogs on the grill, a Chevy in the driveway and maybe even apple pie a la mode made with homemade ice cream for dessert.

I am proud to say I'm one of the many who served the country, leaving three dear children behind, not knowing if I would return but willing to make that sacrifice. I thank you for this day of remembrance set aside to thank veterans and service men and women from across our great nation. God Bless America!

Mirror Image

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

He sat across the aisle from me on the morning train headed to Boston. The sunlight's bright stream beamed through his window and the light played whimsically on his face. It was a pleasant face with a tranquil quality that showed neither happiness nor sadness.

His cheeks were shallow in a depth of color found at the bottom of a whiskey glass. His eyes were two, milky lenses drained of sight after a lifetime of gazing into the darkness of intense disillusionment.

His hair was neatly combed back, kept in place with two-day-old scalp oil and some granules of accumulated dust from the air. His clothes came from a Navy surplus store, old but not shabby, recently pressed by a landlady in the halfway house he called home.

Otherwise, he was calm in a tense sort of way. It was a sense of serenity he grasped at again and again. It was an attitude of pessimistic optimism, a point of view acquired by disbelief in the possibility of good fortune. Resigned to fate, he was another lifer searching for the dreams he left behind. Where he was headed was a place over there where lost soldiers are always found.

He almost disappeared from my sight as he stepped off the train at Chelsea. He stood, crooked and not too tall on the platform, his brown leather suitcase in one hand, in the other a plastic, supermarket grocery bag containing a blue, cardboard box with medals he had won in some war.

He was bent a little at the shoulder as was I and I saw his reflection in the window as the train began to pull away. He threw a sharp salute in my direction, as did I in his. Then, he took his first step into the wind of a new beginning.



For Those Who Come Back Broken

By Wallace D. McGregor
VA Medical Center – Boston, MA

Oscar Boneyard fled down the steps of the C-131 into the blistering heat of the California desert at Travis Air Force Base. He was home at last but his mind was still in Iraq. What disturbed him now was how his comrades split into a hundred different directions abandoning their platoon loyalty as they raced into the shadows of the terminal. He was alone and vulnerable again in this strange land he once called home.

He saw her standing there mingling with the expectant wives and daughters and sons in the reception area where families greeted their returning soldiers. She was dressed in a flower-printed summer dress beaming as bright as a star in his disillusioned eyes. She waved with subdued exuberance studying his every move. He betrayed no sign of emotion when he saw her. He froze as though he was caught in the piercing beam of an approaching headlight.

In his phone calls of the past 12 months he told her everything. He told her nothing. He was afraid she would know he was not the hero he was expected to be. She wouldn't understand how much he had changed. She wouldn't know how much he had grown to hate her.

He never told her about the unspeakable horrors except in a single rush of words after his first patrol. He had to shoot a young Iraqi woman who was carrying a grenade into the midst of his buddies gathered in a marketplace. He hated the woman for that one first kill. He hated his woman in the summer dress who he now saw down the barrel of his gun sight.

She could barely contain herself as she broke free from the confines of the little group and ran onto the tarmac to receive him home. She held him tightly and wouldn't let go. He was paralyzed with rationalizations, feeling none of her warmth and

none of her love. As she cooed softly in acceptance, he turned numb in waves of distress. He pushed himself away with a start.

Smelling his sweat and sensing his suffocating nightmares, she pulled herself back to give him space. Then panic overwhelmed him. She was slipping away just as that Iraqi woman slipped away when he tried to stop the bleeding.

But, as her body lingered close to his the internal fortress where he hid the damaged remains of hope began to crumble and the billowing dust filled his senses as unexplained emotions. Uplifted, the disease that riddled his soul rushed out of his body like a river. He wept uncontrollably.

They meandered home in the cool of the desert evening. And he felt that he would trust her as she started to sooth away his year of broken dreams.

People in War Will Tell You That

By Milton Evans
– Staten Island, NY

Let peace be your vision of glory instead of putting the fear in the hearts of anyone; look into the eyes of those who fight, and hear what they have to say. War is a reality, but remember what war does to people: it makes you sad, it makes you blue and it will make you lose your very soul. Keep the peace and don't let anyone run over you. That's the very first thought you should have in mind at the beginning, before that act of war. No, the statement is not double talk; it's a good reason not to destroy the beauty we now see in the world. Think about it, there is much to glorify in man, himself.

To all the people, both the men and women and yes, the old folks, children, and animals, we all pay the price in war. Somebody is living in miseries. If you were there in war, you would see no glory in it. People who see battle firsthand, will tell you they would rather not talk about the action that took place but they did protect their own when necessary. In this world, wars will be a fact of life, hunger, hurt and all the bad that goes along with it, but the good must outweigh those obstacles we see before us.

Many nations, and many people with many ideas, share words about the same things, which are not understood in the same way. To speak of peace, there is no shame in it, and to protect your home takes sacrifice, and love of country, no need to bluff and carry on. That's just the way it is. We can only pray and hope that we are right in what we see for the sake of life's harmony between us. I, myself, seek to hurt no one. This is the peace I have in mind. Your belief is for you to keep, never try to force yours on



someone else for if they are wrong they will soon see the light.

As I look at other life than the life of people, I think we should be very grateful for the creation around us and enjoy the view. We have miracles everywhere, even the things you don't see but know must be there. Nothing is new, we just didn't know about it at the time; people and the place were not ready for the discovery, yet. This is what I believe to be true: nothing is old, just read all of the stories that have been told and you will see my point clear and bright.

Author's Note: In a movie we glorify a war story, a war story is nothing to be glorified.

Medal, Mettle, Meddle

*By Keith Raymond
– Vienna, Austria*

“Cold blue steel.”

“Light gun oil that smells...”

“Now you're talking.”

Tyrell and Santos were on their bunks, holding their guns, thinking about their weapons. They had no shame nor shyness around each other. After months in the dust, fighting, eating and bathing together there were no secrets.

Zero Dark Thirty is coming up quick, gentlemen. Get yourself some shut-eye!”

“Yes Sir!” they said at the same time. Knowing it would annoy the sergeant.

The sergeant was about to say what he always said about “working for a living” when the air raid siren went off and everyone groaned.

“Rocket attack, rocket attack,” the British female voice exclaimed after the pause in the siren—that is after the first set of explosions rocked the base.

“Hey, do you think you can get me a date with her, sergeant?”

“Shut up and get to the bunker, Santos.”

Huddling in the concrete open-ended tube, covered with sandbags, they heard the explosions from the second volley detonate. “Sorry to disappoint, Santos, but I met her over at headquarters,” Tyrell said, to break the boredom and exhaustion.

“She's ugly.”

“Who?” Santos asked.

“Rocket girl.”

“C'mon man, did you have to tell me that. A guy's gotta dream.”

“All-clear, all-clear.”

“OK girls, hit the sack,” the sergeant ordered. “I want you bright eyed and bushy tailed for the morning mission.”

Rust dust greeted the men for as far as they could see, rolling, as the sun crested the dunes. “MREs for breakfast,” Tyrell whined, spooning cold spaghetti. “It's waffle morning at the DFAC.”

Santos, is up in the turret, scanning the desert in Helmand Province, and yells down, “King crab tonight though.”

“That's if we finish our patrol by then,” the sergeant crackled over the loud speaker.

“Damn well better,” muttered Tyrell. The driver next to him nodded.

The first Humvee in the patrol did a frog jump, belching dust, then the concussion and roar washed over them.

Santos screamed, and opening up with his .50-caliber machine gun sprayed the cliff tops they were passing, as the driver slammed on the brakes.

Several arms thrown over their heads up ahead told him he had hit his mark.

Santos yelled “RPG” as he ducked into the cab. The Humvee directly in front of them had brushed aside in the blast.

“Back it up, man,” Tyrell yelled over the gunfire pinging off the armor, “We're in a kill box.”

The driver was already reversing and cutting it as the rest of the patrol tried to break out of the pass. The rear vehicle hit the other land mine; the convoy missed. Only two of the Humvees remained.

“Lance corporal, break right, we'll break left. Flank these Hajjis,” the sergeant ordered.

“Get some...” Santos barked, opening up again on the .50-caliber. “Like a shooting gallery out here,” he revealed, as they came around to the backside of the dune.

Tyrell rolled down his window and used his MP5 to help. Three rounds of controlled bursts peppered the enemy.

Return fire was heavy, white steam jetted from the engine compartment. A spray of blood from above and the silence of the .50-caliber told Tyrell all he needed to know.

“We're walking from here,” the driver said, jumping out, and using the Humvee hood for cover as he fired up the dune.

The enemy was scattering as Tyrell pulled Santos into the cab and climbed into the turret. He wanted to put some more hurt on them. He fired until the feed was empty.

Tyrell looked down to where the driver had been but he had taken a round to the head. He squatted down when Santos yelled, "Medic!"

"How ya doin' brotha?" Tyrell asked. Climbing into the cab, Santos was sitting up inspecting a wound in his left shoulder.

"Nothing that some morphine and a Band-Aid can't fix," Santos answered. He looked down at the slug embedded in his body armor. "That's a keeper."

After dressing and some water, they abandoned the mortally wounded Humvee and moved around to the backside of the other ridge. They spotted the sergeant hanging over the side of the turret. The driver and the other Marines were dead. Tyrell checked the sergeant, wounded badly, but alive.

Tyrell set up an IV and applied some pressure dressings while Santos checked the Humvee. "We're in luck, it runs," answered Santos, firing it up. "We better get back."

"What about the others?" Tyrell asked, "Never leave anyone behind."

"Dude, we can't strap bodies on the Humvee. We'll send the cavalry to mop up and collect them."

Just then gunfire ricocheted off the Humvee.

"Time to go," said Tyrell, "they're coming back."

"Copy that," Santos said, gunning it, surging over the next hill.

The Apache gunships cleaned out the ambush coordinates, so the Black Hawks could collect the dead.

Back at Leatherneck, the Marine colonel looked sharp as he pinned the medals on the survivors of Foxtrot Company. Tyrell and Santos looked tough, but acted bashful before the assembled brass.

"Heroism, huh? You havin' that much pain? Yeah, Santos said "We are havin' a lot of that goin' around here in Milwaukee. They're even calling it an opioid crisis."

His brother looked at him through the Skype connection. "Bet you get the good stuff there. From the source."

The sad part was, he wasn't joking, he just didn't understand.

Author's Note: Afghanistan remains a problem spot. I did contract work there with LOGCAP IV to get a better feel for war as a physician from an older perspective than when I was active duty in Germany. This is one of the stories I brought back from Camp Leatherneck.

Love at the VA

By Neil Heine

VA Medical Center – Castle Point, NJ

I have been in the VA nursing home for eight years now. I have been looking for the kind of love that you enjoy with your wife, but I did not know that at first. Yet, I have found another kind of love that is just as good; the caring love of nurses, other staff and volunteers.

Most of them are very sensitive, caring people who take great interest in me. Especially all the volunteers and community people who come in during the holidays. Many young people visit and then wish us a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. They honor us as veterans. Any day you want can be a new adventure. The doctors come from many places on earth and if you're lucky enough they will tell you about themselves which will expand your horizons.

The recreation staff here always try to make our stay as pleasant as possible. But, the volunteers are a great bonus. They help us get to where we are going and assist in other ways too. Volunteers from the military organizations also come to visit us periodically with canteen books and other items. The best gifts of all are the bingo games. Of course, our best resources are our families who come to visit faithfully, especially the ones with strong wives because they visit for a long time.

It takes a close look at yourself and a willingness to talk with these many other people to make you realize you don't have it so bad.

A Haircut To Remember

By Garlen Wayne Funnell

– St. Louis, MO

Of all the haircuts I remember, the one that stands out is that one on June 30, 1965, at the San Diego MCRD. It was early in the morning and still dark. The only light came from fixtures illuminating the yellow footprint shapes where I was standing. I was shaking like maple leaves blowing in a summertime breeze. My eyes straight ahead, not moving to the left or to the right. I made certain my eyes were not eyeballing the brownish-greenish campaign hat, or the tan shirt with the golden USMC tie clasp. That no-jawed person standing in front of me had razor sharp creases on his shirt. I was sure he and the other D.I.s were waiting for something to happen. I felt like they were going to slice and dice me.

As I look back, it is amazing what I committed to memory by looking straight ahead. The things, objects that surrounded me. The sounds of controlled breathing in and out. The ability to control everything and control nothing.

We listen for the next command to move, “Move it you worthless scum bags; this ain’t no party.” Into an ivy-covered building, through the green archway door with a single glaring light bulb we moved. It was pushing and shoving, always back to belly button, but at attention, not a word muttered. I don’t think I could do that now. I have been trained.

Suddenly, it’s my turn in the chair, my turn to stare at my brownish-blond hair staring back from the silver face mirror, always at attention. It is a good thing my body bends to the chair, or I would have slid to the floor like a knotty pine straight board.

Next the barber asked me “how I wanted my hair cut.” I knew the answer. With any mention of how, I would be doing push ups or sit-ups on the floor covered with hair. Either of which I wanted to avoid, especially since the hair was black, brown, red, blonde and unknown, looking like small tree branches broken off during a summer thunderstorm on my farm in Indiana.

As I watched in the mirror, he started at the back zip-zapping toward the front. A patch fell down to the floor just hesitating for an instant on my shoulder before continuing its path to the floor. This painful process continued in a crooked form—zip-zap back and forth until it was done, over, finished, hair gone lost forever.

As I sat there looking at this naked hairless head. I wouldn’t need a comb or brush. I lost the person who sat down. I was a stranger looking back now—a bowling ball with ears sticking out.

But as I think back, I survived to continue another day in boots. The first step had been completed.

Left Hand Salute

*By William Martin Greenhut
– Ossining, NY*

We were used to operating at night, occupying foxholes that served as an anti-infiltration barrier below the Demilitarized Zone, in order to prevent North Korean agents from making their way south. It was early August. The summer monsoon was waning and there began sunny days not seen since late June when an unraveling ribbon of clouds unleashed the rains.

Our mission on the Barrier had recently ended and plans had been made to keep our battalion south of the Imjin River and spend the next few months in training before rotating north and relieving one of the forward units. We were still feeling the



sadness and anger of having one of our positions assaulted by the North Koreans less than three weeks earlier, resulting in the deaths of three of our company. Because the North Koreans continued to transition from escorting agents surreptitiously after dark with the goal of avoiding contact, to targeted attacks anytime, the division commander responded by designating us, on this day, the Division Quick Reaction Force and ordered us to move, with no return date, across the river so that we would have immediate access to the DMZ.

As we rode slowly down the dirt road through the treeless battalion area where we were to be billeted, I was atop the first armored personnel carrier, in the command turret behind the 50-caliber machine gun, leading the long procession of 16 tracked vehicles in addition to two-and-a-half-ton supply trucks containing our bedding and equipment, jeeps and maintenance vehicles. The clanking and roaring of our column wafting clouds of fine brown dirt drew the attention of everyone within sight and sound along the way. We were bristling with firepower and I was in control of an overwhelming force.

Walking on the left side of the road coming toward me was Les who I had last seen some years ago on the basketball court of my alma mater on Long Island. He wore a soft cap that could not prevent the sun from glinting off his glasses on this hot day, and the sleeves of his fatigues were rolled above the elbow up to the single stripe identifying his rank as private first class.

A simultaneous flash of recognition loosened the tethers of time and space. I suppose I looked as surprised as he did before the instant passed and, amused, we both smiled. There was no one in Korea who knew more about me when I wasn’t a lieutenant and he wasn’t a private first class.

To satisfy the formality required between us by regulation, before we came abreast and he would be enveloped in the dust of our wake, the private raised his left hand sharply to his forehead and smartly saluted the officer.

My Story, My Poem, My Song

By Joseph A. Shirley
VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

As I walked across an empty field, coming out of a bad time, I was still fighting not to return to a more desolate place, a most sorrowful place in my mind and spirit. As you read the words that came to me and turned my mind, please note, what I wrote.

Today, I asked the Lord to give me strength and I have never been this strong before!

Today, I asked the Lord to show me a way and now I have a new life to explore!

You see, I pray to Jesus every night and every day.

Now I understand the price he had to pay, so I could have a better life. I thank the Lord this way. Jesus saved my life! Lord, you picked me up when I fell down. Jesus saved my soul! He turned my life around.

Yes, you are the light that let me see. Yes, you are the strength inside of me. You let me know God had a plan for me. You let me know God was all I'd need.

When I reached the end of the field, I felt strengthened! Enlightened! Prepared for what the day, my life, had in store for me. I wrote a song and put it in my heart so I would remember, that I could sing when I was lonely. But, I am never alone.

Who Am I?

By Bryan A Moore
VA Medical Center – Leavenworth, KS

I am a creator, a vessel, one God works through. I have feelings, and with these feelings I have the ability to create love, to instill hope, and to express joy. I also can destroy, I can hate and instill fear. The latter I wish not to do.

I am not perfect. I am an inspiration, a fighter and a servant. I am smart and perfectly made in God's eyes. I have passion, I am love and I am lovable. I am forever evolving, forever learning, and always changing. I value life, love and family.

There are parts of me that I do not like. I am a killer, an alcoholic and a monster. I am a thief, a cheat and a liar.

You cannot know love without knowing hate. The only way to recognize anything about myself is to look for opposite characteristics. For without an opposite, there is no opportunity

for choice – that is a conscious choice. Without quiet reflection of my soul, or the perceptions that I find around me, I cannot see the contrast of my actions and how they affect the people around me. How I interpret this reflection, based on every sense I have ever taken in, will be who I am. It's not of the physical sense of the body, more of the mind and soul.

Therefore there is no way to perfectly describe myself – I am constantly adjusting after an awakening to my self's counterpart.



Yoga

By Christopher G. Bremicker
VA Medical Center – Minneapolis, MN

I had a psychologist at the Veterans Affairs facility who took yoga year round and claimed it benefited her. In the winter, she curled, a sport she learned in her hometown in southern Minnesota.

When the VA put in a holistic medicine department, she recommended I try yoga, too.

I was late for my first class. Our instructor calmly told me to I take off my shoes and socks and she rolled out a rubber mat for me and put a black yoga strap, two blue blocks, and two white blankets next to it. There were five of these mats, including hers, on the carpet in the room.

The other people in class, two men and one woman, were seniors, like me. We stood on our mats. Our instructor was a young woman in a T-shirt, with a mane of long, curly hair. She had a Mona Lisa smile and a gentle voice.

I followed her directions. I sat on the rubber mat and put myself, unsuccessfully, in the lotus position. My knees stuck up awkwardly and I rested my hands on them like a man unable to bend. I was known as the most limber member of my family, but

our instructor's knees were spread wide and lay flat on the floor. Her hands lay gently on her knees.

She started us slowly. She told us to lie flat on our backs. "Now, grab your right foot with your hands and pull it to the back of your leg," she directed. We did as she told us. "Hold that," she said. I liked exercise and it felt good to stretch my muscles. We did this with the other foot, too.

"Now, put both of your legs in the air." We stuck our legs in the air, as far as we could reach them.

"Now, hold that," she said. My legs did not bend completely. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the other people doing this, too. Some were having more success than I was.

"Now, lower your legs, keep your knees up, and put your feet flat on the mat." In this position, we rotated our knees to the right and tried to lay them flat on the floor. Then we rotated our knees to the left and tried to lay them flat on the floor again.

"This is like skiing," I interrupted our instructor, whose voice cajoled and caressed us.

"Downhill or cross country?" she asked. She was on her mat, doing the same movements as we were.

"Downhill," I said. "It's called angulation." This movement stretched the muscles in my legs and back. We did this one more time. It was pleasurable, and my body responded to it because of my years of downhill skiing.

I was limber but some of the other people in the class handled the positions better than I did. Our instructor adjusted the difficulty of the class to the ability of the people in it. She knew what we could handle as a group.

"Now, everyone lay flat on your stomach on your mats." We rolled over and laid face down. "Put your hands next to your shoulders." We imitated her position. "Now, push up with your hands."

We arched our backs then released them then arched them again. It felt like doing push ups with just as much strain. We tried it without touching the floor with our hands and lifting our legs at the same time. "You should feel it along your back," she said.

"Everyone, please roll over and get on your backs." We did so and awaited her instructions. "Now, raise both knees and keep your feet flat on your mats." It was pleasant to lie on the floor on my back.

"Place your right foot over your left knee." This was uncomfortable for me, but I managed to do it. I had trouble crossing my legs, normally. "Now, place your left hand on the

mat behind you and push yourself up with your left arm." This position was getting increasingly difficult.

"Now hold that and reach over and stretch your right arm across your left leg." This contorted me, but I was able to do it. My upper body went one way and my lower body went the other.

"Try to keep your hips flat on the floor."

"Nice," she said, then told us to do it on the right side. This was the most difficult position she asked us to perform.

"Now, everyone, swing around on your mats and come back to the lotus position." I scrambled to do this. "Now, stand up and face the window."

I was not overweight but had trouble getting off the floor. Our instructor leapt to her feet from the lotus position. She unfolded upward, on her toes, like there was nothing to it.

"Let your arms hang to your sides," she said, as she faced us. Then we raised our arms to the ceiling and stretched them as far as they would go. "Feel the center of your body as you do this." We inhaled as we raised our arms then exhaled as we lowered them. We did this several times.

"Let's try this," she said. "Everyone, step over here." We followed her to the heat register and put our elbows on it. We looked out the window at the backyard of the VA. She told us to walk our feet backward until our backs were parallel with the floor.

"Lift your hips and straighten your legs," she said. "Your hips should be directly above your feet."

"Nice," she said. "Now hold that for a moment." My legs ached behind my knees. Then she told us to walk back to an upright position.

She supervised and guided us in slow motion. She did not want us to hurt ourselves and too much stretching was painful. She went slowly and methodically, so we understood the movements.

Then she turned on the music. It was Asian music and fit the mood, tempo, and origin of what we were doing. It was soft, like that played by a geisha girl, and reminded me of a bamboo house and a tea ceremony.

Then she put us in the warrior pose. "Face the window and spread your legs," she said. "Put your hands on your hips." This was easy and all of us in class were able to do it.

"Point your right foot toward the wall." This was easy, too. She had spectacular posture and showed us exactly the way the position was supposed to go.



“Point your back foot halfway toward the same wall.” This required balance and a few of us teetered as we stood, with our legs spread widely, and faced the wall.

The lady next to me faltered. The instructor stepped to her side and held her upright. Our instructor never played favorites. “Nice,” she responded, when we all got a position right.

“Now, bend your right knee so that it is above your right foot and straighten your back leg.” We did this and stretched our bodies in the classic pose we felt was real yoga.

“Now spread your arms straight out and look down your right arm at the wall.” We did this and felt close to tipping over. “Now hold that.”

We were in the warrior pose. “The warrior pose is one of surrender,” our instructor said, “not of victory.” We stood solid as Samurai warriors.

I had bad posture and she touched my shoulders to relax them. I was ashamed of the way I stood. I realized I lifted them from stress. When I lowered them, I felt I was in a true yoga pose.

She talked us through the warrior pose in the other direction.

Then, she told us to walk our feet together on the mat and shake ourselves out. This was like jump school in the Army, when our drill instructor told us to shake it out after a session of jumping jacks or sit ups. She told us to wiggle our fingers and toes, too.

“Everyone, let’s place our blocks the long way and reach down and hold them.” We did this, and the back of my legs ached. It was like touching my toes without bending my legs.

“Straighten your legs, as much as you can, and hold that.” The music played, and our instructor moved among us. I tried to touch the floor with my fingertips but could not do so. When I tried to straighten my legs, it was painful.

“Let’s see,” she mused. “Lie down on your back on your mat,” she decided. We moved at a pace I could handle, and her instructions were clear and easily followed.

“Take your yoga strap and wrap it around your foot.” I saw this one coming.

“Now pull your foot into the air.” We did this, with varying levels of success. The man to my right was more limber and his leg was almost straight.

“You should feel your leg lengthen behind your knee.” We did this with the other foot, too. My leg was crooked when I did this. “Now hold that.” The back of my knee ached but I pulled the strap as hard as I could tolerate.

This is ridiculous, I thought. If my friends saw me, they would be in hysterics. They were downhill skiers, duck hunters, and alcoholics, not Buddhist monks. Soon, this thought passed.

“Put your legs flat on your mats and your arms at your sides.” She placed two white blankets behind our heads and a bolster under our knees.

The music twanged in the background like an Indian sitar and I thought of nothing. The world stopped and my thoughts, which plagued me, of my job, family, and friends, disappeared.

My mind became a blank slate, on which I wrote nothing. The music of the tea ceremony played in the background, but I was not aware of it. I thought only of my body, my heart, which beat too rapidly, due to two heart attacks, and my breathing, which was too rapid for the same reason.

We stayed in this position with our heads on the blankets and our knees on the bolster for 10 minutes. The quiet was of eternity. It was the first peace I had known since my breakdown 45 years ago.

Every movement we did, and each position we achieved, were pleasurable. Each was worth extending in time and repeating but the variety of the positions kept our interest. The session lasted a full hour and passed quickly.

Then she brought us back to reality, told us to kick away our bolsters, and swing ourselves upright into the lotus position. She placed the palms of her hands together in the gesture of salutation and we returned it. “Thank you,” she said, and we thanked her. I struggled to my feet and put on my shoes.

“Where are you from?” I asked her and broke the spell.

“New York was my home for the last seven years,” she replied.

“New York City?”

“Yes, I studied yoga there and went to school.”

“I was born in New York,” I told her.

“Manhattan.”

“When did you come here?”

“When I was two years old,” I said.

“You have no memory of it, then?”

“None,” I said, “but I liked New Yorkers when they got off the airplane at the airport,” I said. “I used to work at the airport,” I explained. “I liked that in-your-face attitude.”

“Do I have that?” she asked.

“A little,” I said. My shoes were back on my feet and my belongings were back in my pockets.

I said goodbye to her. “See you next time,” I said. I became a devoted yoga student.

Heat Exhaustion

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

Winter lasted until the middle of April, when it snowed 21 inches. However, spring did come, and the weather finally changed. Day after day, the sun beat from a cloudless sky onto the sidewalk.

The weather got hot and the manager at my high-rise posted a heat advisory on the bulletin board. Instead of playing handball or getting on the treadmill for my workouts, I walked around the block. It was a big block and I went around twice. I did this for three weeks, even when the weather got steaming.

I had a lady friend who liked it when I walked to my A.A. club. She was a marathon runner and respected people who exercised. It was a half-hour walk and the sun scorched my shoulders even in the evening. I walked on the shady side of the street, but it did little good.

Then one morning, I came down to the community room in my building and people who were gathered at a table said I needed to go to the hospital. I weaved when I walked, and my face was ashen. Two ladies in the building volunteered to drive me into the Veterans Affairs hospital. I put some gas in their car and soon we were at the VA.

They sat in the emergency waiting room with me. After I checked in at the desk and a nurse took me into a room with a bed,

television and heart monitor. Another nurse appeared, started an IV and made me comfortable. He showed me how to operate the TV. I watched a snowboard competition.

I waited a while, then, the doctor came in. He said the snowboarders were modern day gladiators.

He said also that Roman gladiators were not allowed to fight to the death. They were too valuable.

My doctor obviously liked to get to know his patients. He invited the ladies who drove me to join us in my room. He asked if they were members of my family.

The doctor said my blood pressure was too low. He was not sure if my beta blocker, or the pill that lowered my pulse, had been properly prescribed. He said he would wait until the IV took effect to see.

Then a phlebotomist drew my blood. He said I was all tuckered out. Indeed, two days earlier, I had gotten over the hump of a 45 year nervous breakdown. It took all my strength and tenacity to last that long and now I was spent. Or, at least that was my theory.

An escort showed up and wheeled me to get a CT-scan. A young woman there told me to lie on the bed of the machine and scoot my head against it. She inserted my head into the machine's tube and took a picture.

Back at the emergency room, a young woman arrived with an X-ray machine. The camera was on wheels and had an adjustable arm. She placed the camera against my chest, stepped out of the room, and took another picture.

Then the doctor reappeared. He said I had not had a stroke. He said the blood draw showed I was not having a heart attack. The enzyme that indicated a heart attack, troponin, was not in my blood. I told him that was how they diagnosed my second heart attack. My stents were working well, too, which the X-ray indicated. I'd had two heart attacks and it was a relief to hear my heart was okay. The last time I'd been checked was two years earlier.

The doctor said I suffered from dehydration. He would let me go home, after he got a second bag of IV fluid into me. I watched TV, my nurse found a container of diced peaches and a carton of milk for me, then the doctor came for a talk.

It was Memorial Day weekend and the emergency room was slow. He asked what I did in the service and was impressed when I told him I was a Special Forces medic. He appreciated my training. He asked if I had ever started an IV and I said, “not that I can remember.” Knowing how to start an IV was his mark of a trained medic.

We discussed movies and he gave me a list of his favorites. I put the list in my pocket. For some reason, I thought it would come in handy later. I told him I was a published author. He said so was he, in "One Story," a prestigious literary journal. I congratulated him. He gave me his email address so I sent him the link to my book.

My blood pressure returned to normal and the doctor discharged me with a note to my employer for me to take three days off work. By now the two ladies that had brought me to the emergency room were back home, so my nurse said I could take the bus home.

I took off my hospital gown, got dressed and left. I shook the doctor's hand. He was on the phone but reached over his desk and gave me a heartfelt handshake.

I had lunch at the hospital Starbucks, which was all that was open on a weekend, and ran into a friend who worked at the Veterans Affairs as a graphic artist. He was back from a workout in the hospital gym and looked trim and healthy. I was pleased with my exuberance at seeing him and felt I was back on my feet after the dehydration.

Then, I took a bus home. I looked at my hospital discharge papers. My diagnosis was heat exhaustion. I would be susceptible to it for the rest of my life, a friend said. The only cure was to drink a lot of water. I spent three days resting, as the doctor recommended, and watched two movies on his list, "Blade Runner" and "Three Days of the Condor."

I changed my habits and began drinking water at Starbucks instead of the huge cups of cold brew that I was accustomed to. I took two days off from work and toughed it out at work two or three other days.

However, a week and a half after all this happened, my strength did not return. I did not know if I suffered from the aftereffects of heat exhaustion or, as the phlebotomist said, I was all tuckered out from my battle with mental illness.

I decided a game plan. I went home early from work and would take a long walk. I had four days off and would work out each day. Later I would meet with my psychologist. She and I could determine if I was all tuckered out or if I suffered from the effects of walking in the heat without enough water.

In the meantime, I worried about retirement years. I needed a job to counteract my writing. If I did not have a job, I could not write. Then, I was a dead man.

My problem was not heat exhaustion, I concluded. And since, I was over the hump in my battle for recovery from mental illness,

maybe I just needed a rest. Like Ulysses home from his labors, I needed to lie on the beach and let the waves wash over my body. My strength was not back yet. My game plan of working out each day was not working. Nothing worked, not even rest. I was still beat.

I slept 13 hours one night. Then I got on the treadmill the third day of the plan and got off after 20 minutes. My usual performance was a half hour. I went back to bed and slept another two hours. Then I took a half hour walk. I barely made it around the block.

Perplexed, I reached out to people. At our high-rise coffee klatch, I asked one of the ladies who drove me to the emergency room what she thought about my dilemma. She said I was more important than my job. She told me the story about her quadruple bypass and the day she quit her job. She was a supervisor at the airport, in charge of 30 people in a cleaning company, and loved her work and her employees. She couldn't do it any longer even though she was well paid. I felt the same way. If I had to go to work the way I felt right now, I would walk off the job.

I talked to the cook at our high-rise who was studying psychology at a private university. She worked for public housing and had expertise working with the mentally ill. She said it was time to quit my job. Listen to what your body tells you, she said. There were other things I could do with my time. I could devote more of it to my writing, she suggested. She didn't know I needed a job to write. For me the two went hand in hand, like a teeter-totter.

I remembered once when I was unemployed for a year up north. I wandered the streets of a small town. I ended up at the Hastings Veterans home for six months. I knew I needed a job to stay healthy.

I waited to see my psychologist. I hoped she could resolve my situation, one way or the other. Stay on the job or quit. Historically, her judgment was excellent. She would let me decide but guide me in my decision.

I worried that I could not afford to retire. However, it was possible I would have more money if I retired than if I didn't. My rent was 30 percent of my income. With reduced rent, food, and no outlay for lunch on the job, I might come out ahead. I did have mounting credit card debt but it should be eased in two months with a tax refund.

I worried about my activity level but knew I could play more handball, attend more A.A. meetings, and volunteer somewhere. I was afraid of isolation and with nowhere to go. I did not want to be stuck on my laptop.



What if all this was in my mind? The people with whom I conferred were professionals. Their judgment was to be trusted. Secretly, I harbored the opinion I was over the hill. A vocational rehabilitation lady told me I should work until I couldn't. Maybe that's where I was. I did not know what to make of my situation.

My boss at Walgreens noticed my lack of performance on the job. She suggested I cut back from three days a week to two. She said that way, it was fair to the other employees who would not be called in to cover me if I called in or decided to go home for the day. Putting me on the schedule at two days let everyone know what to expect.

I sent my psychologist a message telling her about my boss' idea. She messaged back I should set up an appointment with my primary care doctor. He thought my strength should be back by now.

I called the Veterans Affairs scheduling and talked to a nurse. She called back and my primary care doctor was not in, so I saw another doctor, who ordered a blood draw. I went to the blood draw clinic where a technician drew my blood. I returned to the primary care clinic and waited for the doctor to call me. They had snuck me in at the last minute so I needed to be patient.

She motioned me into her office and told me to sit on the examining table. My kidneys were back to normal, she said, or at least my normal. My kidneys had not functioned normally for years. Then, she listened to my lungs and heart. She put her stethoscope to my abdomen. Then she stepped back to her desk and looked at her computer.

"Nothing jumps out at me as being wrong," she said. "Your organs did not collapse as a result of the heat exhaustion." She paused. "What do you think I should tell you?"

"I'm older and it's taking me longer to recover," I said.

"That's a good explanation," she said. "If you feel 80 percent of yourself, give it 80 percent."

"Should I cut back a day at work?"

"If you can afford that, it might be a good idea."

I left her office and was leaving the hospital when my psychologist called. She wanted to discuss my boss' idea of working just two days. My psychologist appeared in a few minutes. We talked for 15 minutes, although a normal visit with her was one hour. We decided I should take my boss' advice and drop a day at work until I was feeling better.

I called my boss from the lobby of the VA. She was glad I had talked to my doctors about my problem. She told me I should come into the store after the weekend and we could set up a two-day schedule then.

The only thing that remained was for me to get back on my feet. I planned to work out daily, get plenty of sleep, and drink a lot of water. It probably was the only formula that would work. In the meantime, I was tired and not operating up to snuff. Time would heal that. As for being over the hill that did not seem to be the case.

Time passed, but my strength did not come back. I had good days at work and bad days, where I had barely enough energy to finish my shift. At the cash register, I was known as a charmer. This part of my performance at work was hard to maintain.

I devoted all my life outside of work to contributing to my job. I played handball to stay cheerful at work. I attended A.A. meetings to avoid the cravings that plagued me on the job. My greatest contribution to my job at Walgreens was to be in a good mood.

The weakness lingered. It was in my legs and I could barely walk. It took me twice as long to circumnavigate the block around my high-rise as it normally did. I sang military cadence to make it around the corners of the block. Often, I shuffled. I staggered to the front door afterward, like a marathon runner crossing the finish line.

I took a road trip to a nearby university campus and signed up for a three-hour introduction to music class. Leaving the registration office, I barely made it to the light rail station three blocks away. I could not return to school in this shape.

I slept a lot. Whatever I did, whether it was walk, attend a party, go to church or an A.A. meeting, I took a nap afterward. Maybe this sounds normal for a man who is 71 years old. Before the heat exhaustion episode, activities like these did not tire me.

I watched movies. In addition to the ones recommended by the doctor at the emergency room, I watched “Terminator,” “Batman,” “The Avengers,” “Thor,” “Alien II,” “Saving Private Ryan” and “Spiderman.” I like adventure movies, not thought-provoking ones.

I wrote stories but found this exhausting. None of them were any good. I got published for a second time and spent hours putting the stories in my submission in order and attributing them where they first appeared.

My weakness continued. For a second time, I took a road trip to the university, this time to buy school supplies, a textbook and a set of CDs. I was exhausted by the time I got home.

I studied. I read my textbook for two hours, took a nap, then listened to music for three hours. I listened to Beethoven, Scott Joplin and Schubert, to learn about rhythm, tone, syncopation, style and form. I felt a glimmer of hope, as I finished the first unit in the book about the fundamentals of music.

I kept my psychologist informed of all this. I described the level of my weakness as best I could on her website. She advised me to be patient. School was a month away and a lot could happen in a month.

Then, things began to change. I put in a big day soon after, with an A.A. meeting in the morning, coffee klatch, lunch, a nap, carrying a bag of ski clothes six blocks to the dry cleaner, an A.A. meeting in the afternoon, and a party at the high-rise. It was a four-block walk to and from each A.A. meeting. I wrote letters that night and slept like a baby.

My strength came back. I grabbed my gym bag to play handball at the YMCA, took the bus downtown and drank a bottle of water before I entered the court. I bought the bottle of water from a vending machine outside the men’s locker room. I sat down at a table by the window to drink it. As soon as I sat down, my strength came back.

My weakness disappeared. After handball, church and writing this, I am only a little tired. I took a nap, to be sure, only because I am going to an A.A. meeting tonight.

The way it looks now, I will return to school this fall. I owe my good fortune to an understanding boss and the help of Veterans Affairs. Mother Nature and Father Time did their work, as well.

Maoist Insurgents

*By Jeffrey O. Ellis
– Lake Quivira, KS*

I called the only person I knew I could depend upon in an emergency, my Dad.

“Hello.”

“Hey Dad. Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No, I was just sitting around.”

Dad was never “just sitting around.” He was a colonel and Ranger in the Reserves. He usually worked seven days a week. He held a D.D.S., M.D., and Ph.D. degrees in pathology and was continuously engaging further studies. He held a world record in fishing and several in the Senior Olympics. There were too many publications to count going back to his research days and departmental position as dean at the medical school. You never would have known he was any more than a coal miner, who grew up in the depression, if you didn’t ask.

“I’m back stateside at Bragg, but hopefully not for long. We’re waiting on approval for a mission. I thought you might be able to help me out with preparing for it.”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“I’ll be the only medical support for our team on an uninhabited island for 18 months. I expect trauma. I’m trying to get a portable O.R. If I can’t, I’ll set up a jungle surgical unit. I can handle all the routine medical and dental care, but I could use a refresher in trauma surgery. I would have to get it as soon as possible because I might deploy any day now.”

“Can you call me tomorrow at the hospital about 9 a.m.?”

“Yeah, I still have the number you gave me from before, for emergencies.”

“Tell them who you are and I’ll be waiting. Anything else going on?”

“No, not really. I’m reading all the medical journals I can get, about a dozen every month and doing military training when I’m not deployed.”

“When did you last call your mom?”

“I haven’t called since I’ve been back this week. I guess I better call her when I hang up.”

“She worries about you. Your sister asks about you, too.”

"I'll call them both, Dad. Thanks for the help. I love you."

"Love you too. Talk to you in the morning. Bye."

Sure enough Dad arranged for me to go to either one of two trauma care hospitals, both in cities with the most gun-shot wounds and stabbings in the country, all expenses paid.

What Dad didn't know, was the hand-picked A-Team being put together was a counter terrorism team being sent to assassinate the assassins attempting to kill a very prominent U.S. military figure. As it turned out, instead of deploying, we made arrangements to attend the funeral. Mission denied, compliments of the U. S. Government.

For Those Who Served

By James Scott

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

As military veterans, we have experienced traumatic events and endured countless incidents of dangerous, sometimes near-fatal tragedy, and we forget to externalize and therefore tend to suppress emotions sometimes for years. The discipline received from memorable encounters with drill instructors, company commanders and noncommissioned officers becomes an integral component of our personalities and composure.

The psychological effect that stems from combat duty, as well as peacetime tours, forever remains embedded within our mind-set and ideology. Returning home only to encounter divorce, court battles, addiction to a variety of illicit substances, as well as legitimate drugs of choice, can result in disaster, leading to the victimization of children and other loved ones.

Many of today's veterans, whether man or woman, have become victim to a vicious cycle of suicidal contemplation. Desperate times call for desperate measures! We, as American citizens, must continue the tradition of our forefathers. It really doesn't matter what ethnicity we are. Nor, does it matter what gender we are. When despair captures the moment, rely upon the innate strength bestowed upon us all by the heavenly father, and reach out to your fellow veteran. We are trained to confront and fight the enemy. As private citizens, we can implement these same principles to combat the many issues we face as we continue to "forward march!" after the tour of duty ends.

Remember: "never leave a man/woman behind." For every attack, there is a counterattack. Our most vicious battles have already been won, for where faith lives, hope abounds. Where there exists love, remember charity is not too far behind.



About Face

By Ronald Mosbaugh

VA Outpatient Clinic – Mt. Vernon, MO

We were at the point of adolescence, just out of high school. We were put into ranks and remolded; we were made over; we were made to "about face" the naive or simplistic life we lived.

"About face" is a military term which is the act of turning to face in the opposite direction, or it could also mean a complete change of attitude or opinion. We stood shoulder to shoulder, and through mass psychology we were entirely changed. They used us for a couple of years and trained us to think nothing at all of killing or being killed. Then suddenly, we were discharged, and we were told to make another "about face." This time we had to do our own readjusting without mass psychology, without officers' aid and advice, without any psychological help whatsoever. The military did not need us anymore; we were pawns that served them no more. We were scattered throughout the country without any welcome ceremonies or parades. Many of our young boys were destroyed mentally because they could not make that final "about face" alone.

I remember the day I was released from the Marine Corps at Camp Pendleton, Calif. We were told not to wear our uniforms and just go home and forget the war. We'd just left Vietnam three days ago! Outside the main gate protesters were yelling and throwing trash at us.

History proves the effect the war had on us. We were destroyed mentally, because we could not make that final "about face" alone. My life was permanently changed. My safe world transformed into a threatening expedition in my journey from warrior to civilian. It has taken me ages to get to where I am today. After many years attending PTSD sessions with the Veterans Affairs system, I have finally completed my "about face." Instead of

walking toward the dark side of my life, I am now walking toward the light. That is not to say that my PTSD is behind me. I still face my demons daily. Many of the warriors I know are still living subconsciously in Vietnam; they cannot hear or comprehend, the command, "Halt, about face, forward march."

Many of our combatants have suffered from some of the worse case scenarios I know. Why else are we suffering over 23 veteran suicides per day? We lost over 58,000 soldiers in Vietnam, however, we have lost over 170,000 Vietnam soldiers to date due to suicides since the end of the war.

It has been close to 50 years since we left Vietnam, but as I said earlier, many of our veterans are subconsciously still there. We are now in our 70s and getting forgetful in our old age, but we still remember different operations, events and horrific situations we were part of. We remember those events like they happened last week. We can still hear the shells flying, bombs exploding and soldiers yelling in pain. We can still smell the rice paddies, smoke of grass huts burning and the spilled blood.

How can we explain to someone who has never been in combat what it is like? How to convey all the ways soldiers change in the course of surviving a war remains a mystery to every combatant who returns home. We lost warriors daily, but we had to survive. We finally convinced ourselves, "It don't mean nothing." This was a common phrase we used every day almost like a mantra. Oh, it meant a lot, but we had to tell ourselves it didn't mean anything when something bad happened, but it always hurt just the same. We had to give up our emotions to accomplish our mission. I hardly ever saw a Marine cry or show grief or vulnerability. That showed weakness and we had to succeed. I suppose we had to do this to survive; this was all OTJ (on-the-job training). The mantra had a numbing effect to help us cope. However, it brought on separation, isolation and alienation. At this point we have gone too far. There is no "about face." It's only onward soldiers.

I remember one specific operation. We were on a search and destroy mission south of Da Nang. It was a dreary day and we were walking on a dike between the rice paddies. We were spaced about 15 to 20 feet apart, the only sound was that of boots sloshing in the mud. Suddenly we heard an M-79 explode, and we witnessed a water buffalo being blown to bits. A Marine got bored and wanted some excitement. When the other Marines witnessed the event, they started laughing, enjoying the excitement. Personally, I too accepted it as part of the war, I felt unfazed; "it don't mean nothing." The Marine who killed the water buffalo felt no remorse; it was no different than killing a Viet Cong. Minutes later some Vietnamese people came out from the village yelling vocabulary that we could not understand. Some children also

followed, many were crying from the loss of their loving animal. Water buffalo were very special to the villagers and their greatest capital assets. They symbolized family wealth, economic and financial stability. They were pets and workers in the rice paddies, and they helped till the rice fields. They are often referred to as "the living tractor of the East." The water buffalo was very sacred to the Vietnamese people.

Marines were trained to kill, maim and destroy. They showed no remorse, and the Marine who shot the water buffalo needed a fix of high adrenaline level in order to feel alive and at the top of his game. The high kept them from fixation on the boredom they were experiencing. He and the other Marines had no regard for the consequences of the heinous act that occurred. You must remember, we were playing on satan's playground. There were no boundaries, no rules and no thought of an "about face."

I would like to take a moment and talk about adrenaline, as it relates to soldiers and Vietnam soldiers in particular. Adrenaline is another aspect of the permanency of how the strain of war affects human biology. In our design and makeup, humans are geared for survival. The urge to survive is placed above all human instincts. In order to accommodate the impulse to live, we have been equipped with two small glands located on the top of each kidney. These tiny glands are stimulated by our nervous system, and when we get upset or frightened, they secrete survival hormones. These chemicals pour into the bloodstream giving us new energy and strength to overcome the perceived danger. This sudden flow of hormones makes us stronger and more alert. They protect us from blood loss, increase our lung capacity, sharpen our vision, and direct blood flow away from unnecessary organ functions to the large muscles of the body. These are known as adrenal glands.

While this system keeps us alive in the face of extraordinary danger, it does have one major flaw. The reactive portion of the human brain cannot differentiate between a real threat and an imagined one. The brain does not notice or even care if it has encountered something real or a memory stimulated from something in the environment. Determined to keep us safe, it simply sends out the urgent signal to react. The adrenaline flows and we function with automatic responses. False alarms can be dangerous to our own health. Not only does adrenaline put extra stress on critical body organs like the heart and circulatory system, but the constant presence of adrenaline can be addictive—nearly as addictive as an illegal drug. You have most likely heard the expression, "That was a rush." This, of course, refers to the effects of our adrenaline surges. Many of our Marines were addicted to the rush; they enjoyed the high of the excitement and the danger. Many Marines spent several tours in Vietnam because

they didn't like the boredom back in the real world. The Marine who shot the buffalo was bored and needed a fix, even if he had to create his own.

When I returned to my world, I reenlisted in the Naval Reserves, as I needed to be close to the troops. There were a few Vietnam veterans, but most had served on ships. They could not understand where I was coming from. However, I needed the camaraderie of someone in uniform. After 31 years I retired as an E-9 Master Chief Corpsman, of which I was very proud. During all those years I hardly ever mentioned the trauma I endured in Vietnam. I even kept it from my family. This was common among most warriors; our attitude was that civilians could not comprehend the trauma we experienced. Besides, we chose to keep it bottled up and not dwell upon it.

For several years, I was the Jasper County, Mo., coroner and dealt with murder cases, suicides, car wrecks and the list goes on. Again, I dealt with trauma like that of Vietnam. The situation was different, but trauma is trauma. During this time I attended paramedic classes and learned some procedures I could have used in Vietnam. More lives could have been saved. While in Vietnam, I felt that if I had been a better corpsman, I could have saved more lives. However, I did the best I could at the time.

After a while my PTSD was getting the best of me. I was dealing with low self-esteem, depression, isolation, anger management, stress, thoughts of suicide and the list went on. I was at the point in my life that I knew I needed help. I contacted our local Veterans Affairs, and they enrolled me in a mental health clinic. I was then admitted into a seven-week PTSD medical facility in Topeka, Kan. The rest is history.

"I am young, I am 20 years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear... what do they expect of us if a time ever comes when the war is over? Through the years our business has been killing; it was our first calling in life. Our knowledge of life is limited to death. What will happen afterward? And, what shall come out of us?" *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque.



TH NORTON AWARD

I Didn't Enlist for This!

By Karen A. Green

VA Medical Center – North Las Vegas, NV

It all began in nineteen seventy-four, when I enlisted in the Air Force.

Our male drill sergeant walked into our dorm during shower time.

It happened more than once.

I thought it was normal and not a crime.

This behavior continued during technical school, but everyone seemed to accept this as if it weren't against the rules.

Then to my permanent station I was sent, and all of this continued wherever I went.

It was so bad that enlisted men even demeaned females of higher rank, and made a joke of it laughing at their pranks.

Then one night when I was working alone, a man threatened me on the telephone.

In the morning

I told my supervisor, who was a male, and he laughed it off saying it was a tale.

Then one night while I was at work,

I was raped by this jerk.

I reported it to the Security Police; they didn't seem worried in the least.

But in the end

I was the problem in this case, so I had to cross-train and go to another base.

But I saw the abuse at this base, too, and the men thought it was funny, but it was nothing new.

I understand that it continues to this day.

This is inexcusable is all that I can say!

SALLY-SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL AWARD

Poets

By Lisa J. Farabelli

VA Medical Center – Lebanon, PA

We have words so we write poems out.

We see what others may not.

We choose our words carefully.

We write our truth.

We have the courage to tell our story.

We die, but our words live on.

Poets pay dearly for writing their message between the lines.

SALLY-SUE HUGHES MEMORIAL AWARD

Preparation for War

By Neal C. Morrison Jr.

VA Medical Center – Hampton, VA

How can it be called war games?
People don't die playing games.
This is far from a game,
Preparation for death, destruction, annihilation
Of your fellow human beings.
No one gets bludgeoned to death,
Bleeds out and loses limbs
In a game.
We faced a real enemy of war.
This now makes us combatants,
Not only to achieve a goal
But for survival as well.
And it's still called a game.
It's not a game, unless you can call it,
"The Game of Death"
Which is no guarantee of anyone's survival.
After our bodies are mangled and twisted,
With loss of limb and loss of mind
From witnessing the horrors of war,
We are now discarded, pushed to the side
And thrown away like trash.
We are now invisible.
Society does not want to see,
Does not want to know
The sacrifices that were made
For civil liberties
And the pursuit of profit,
So that society may continue to enjoy
The happy prosperous life
At the sacrifice of those
Who are less fortunate.

WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

High Open

By Westley Alan Smith

VA Medical Center – Boston, MA

We lumber across the tarmac, full combat load.
"Close it in," our platoon leader shouts.
"Make your buddy smile." Oxygen tank:
check. Night-vision goggles: check. I waddle inside
the C-130 and take my seat. The ramp begins
to close, swallowing us. We sit shoulder to shoulder
as engines roar to life and propellers spin.
The plane ascends. The walls compress from
the pressure, squeezing us tighter together.

No photographs. No Dog Tags, no ID.
This mission doesn't exist—neither do we.
The ramp lowers—we wait for the green light
and shamble toward the open maw.
Wind takes our breath. So many stars. Our goggles
mash our face. At 30,000 feet, we leap—
oxygen running low, check the altimeter.
Pop the chute, grab the toggles so we can steer
twenty miles from the place we dropped into air.
We sail to the zone, still dark, infrared the only light.
Equipment check, quick count, form up, move out.

DAVA STATE OF FLORIDA AWARD

Sibelius Instead

By Charles B. Parnell

VA Medical Center – Pittsburgh, PA

Stravinsky is striking,
And much to my liking,
But I'll take Sibelius instead!
Delibes is delightful,
And Strauss so insightful,
Brahms' Lullaby puts me to bed.
Ravel is revealing,
Purcell appealing,
And Bach is the butter on bread.
Berg never is boring,
Debussy alluring,
Tchaikovsky "THE CHIEF" it is said.
Respighi resigns me
To some Roman pine tree,
But I'll take Sibelius instead!
Rachmaninoff rocks me,
And Chabrier shocks me,
As Berlioz beats in my head.
And Poulenc so pleases,
And Wagner who teases
With melodies suited to wed.
Many rave about Handel,
But he can't hold a candle
To Finland's own hero, well-bred.
And of Haydn they're seekin'
To brighten his beacon,
But En Saga intrigues me instead!
They may tell me of Telemann,
Still I say to my fellow men,
"No! I'll take Sibelius instead!"

Author's Note: This comes from the painful memories and horrific experiences I had to deal with as part of my military service that I must live with each day of my life. I will answer the call of my country again without hesitation.

Falling Forward

By Ancel D. Neuburger
– Olathe, KS

There are superstitions among soldiers of the line that
their survival depends on harbingers and signs.

Here is one from the great war to end all wars that
imagination might have stolen from the stars:

If you are shot and fall backward, you will die, but you will
do so with a memory of the sky.

If you are shot and fall forward, you will live, a fate you
hope your dead comrades will forgive.

In life as well as death we can determine how we fall, and
falling forward seems the best direction of them all.

*Author's Note: This poem is based on a true story told to me
by a friend whose father fought for Canada in World War I.
He was shot, started to fall backward, but then remembering
the superstition, corrected himself and fell forward. He was
in a British hospital for several months, but made a full
recovery and lived into his 80s.*

Fallen

By Joseph F. Higgins
VA Medical Center – Medford, MA

Lightning burst the tree,
Down fell the black crow,
Like blown ash floating
Into virgin snow.
I wanted to save her,
Be a modern Thoreau.
She felt the savage fear
As my footsteps drew near.
She conquered her fright,
Rose with mounting dread,
Raised an inky head,
Spread wings and took flight.
Burning a purple scar
Deep in the fleshless night.

We Marched

By Ayeshah King
– Aliceville, AL

Through the dreadful fury, we marched.
Overcoming severe terrain, we marched.
Through the hideous desert, we marched.
Although our eyes couldn't bear to see through the
dusty erosion, we marched.
Through rain, sleet, hail and/or snow we marched.
Through the gloomy night, we marched.
Through the Congo and the depths of hell, we marched.
Through life's misery, we marched, we marched and
we marched.
Having only our self perseverance, we marched.
Giving up our own life's sorrow, we marched.
Making extreme personal sacrifices for our beloved
country, we marched.
With strong faith, hope, bravery, courage and undying
determination, we marched, we marched and we marched.
Numbing all our emotions and dreams, we marched.
For our sake, our battle buddies' sake, our families' sake,
most of all for "freedom's" sake, we marched.
Overcoming the treacherous adversities of what was ahead,
we marched.
Depending only on our fellow men, we marched.
Solely based on our allegiance and the "oath" of signing a
blank check with our lives, we marched.
Most importantly, through our own blood, sweat and tears
we marched, we marched and we marched.

A tribute to the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces.



Final March

By Wayne A. Ince

– Sun City Center, FL

I am so tired but not afraid because duty calls.
I must answer before it's too late.
The challenge is before us all.
My boots are tightly laced,
Preparation is my savior.
The long days training,
My saving and lasting grace.
Not too long a mile ahead,
Heart races and pulse quickens.
Beads of sweat crown my head,
Road narrows, eyes glisten.
Victory captured by defiance
With a stone-cold iron grip.
A steady, soft shift in balance.
Kiss the earth rested on my lips.
Remember me as the Airman
Who fought the discord,
Sacrificed for the freedom of the land,
Carried my thoughts to the Lord.
Cry not for my answered call.
My memory lives on
From honored home on tomb wall.
Rested peace has finally begun.

The Overcoming of Fear

By Connie M. Tasby

VA Medical Center – Dallas, TX

I could not come out of my house to go to the store.
I would not, if I were dared, step through the door.
My well-being, I feared, would come under attack.
While driving in my car, I would continue to look back.
I could not take a bath in the house if I were by myself.
I would rather not, even if I did smell.
What was this thing called? But fear?
It continued in my life for many years.
One day, I heard a word while I was sitting in church.
Oh! How it churned!
It was a word spoken through a man, which the Lord used
for me to learn.
The word was, “God is busy” controlling our tongues, keeping us
speaking the right words out of our pipes and lungs.
The word was magic to my ears.
It was as if I were released of fear from many years.
The overcoming of fear is what I am doing.
I took a bath, stepped outside my door, and did not continue
to look back in the car while I was going.
So, when things in your life do not look like they are going
right, believe in yourself and continue to fight.

Walls

By Daniel Kent Merwin

VA Medical Center – Brooklyn, NY

Day 500, day 600, day whatever—I forget.
It's been so many days, and I'm still set
Inside these walls, they can't get me yet.
I am safe.
I am sound.
I am alone.
They say, “Thank you for your service.”
They say, “Toughen up.”
And when they go off sounding their mouths,
I'm in here getting messed up.
High on Benzos, low on pride,
Fear and trembling, lost inside.
Lost a job, lost it all.
And outside of these self-built walls,
The vampires and zombies wait to feed
And howl as I write my screed
Of madness, misery and dread,
Living only on water and bread,
Hiding from all the ones who said
That I knew what I had signed up for...
I brought it all on myself.
And while others tug on bootstraps,
I have nightmares about MRAPs.
This is my life, and some life it is.
No place left in the society I fought for.
No stock left in Shakespeare's line: “Tis
Not enough to help the feeble up, but to support them after.”
Is this the final chapter? Of a
Life too afraid to venture outside these walls?
I am not safe.
I am not sound.
But I am alone.



It Is Said

By Williams Kurrle
– Chewelah, WA

“That time heals all.”
But like the rain
Comes the pain.
The drain,
The drink,
The blood within.
It sucks out life,
Almost with due strife.
It almost is said,
As if I were dead,
That Satan had called
And was quick on the draw.
The pace is like a dying ember,
Inflamed, imbibed
in the last of December.
Knoweth not the will,
lest your name be Bill.
Only on this day,
You’re fit for the kill.

And Then, We Paused

By Tom Paul Reilly
VA Medical Center – St. Louis, MO

Greetings.
Such cordial tidings this summons—
Duty, honor, country beckon.
We raised our hands,
Our salute to manhood
And then, we bid adieu.
We came.
We served.
We vanished—
Innocence, of course,
The first casualty of war,
And then, we vanished, again.
Back to the world
Whole, except where we were broken,
To study, work, marry, parent—
Memories simmered in the caldrons of our minds
As stalwarts stoically stood watch
And then, we paused.
Lid lifted.
Spirits released.
Guarded memories of yesterday’s youth
Waft above our restlessness.
Silence silenced.
And now, we speak.

The Path

By Travis Harman
VA Medical Center – Wilkes-Barre, PA

The path that he followed was the path
Of the damned. It was covered
In grey ashes of those who came before,
A trail of tears and horrible pain.
Lost souls and misfortunes found on the way.
For the man was lost on this
Grey winter night. He could not
Turn back, for he had lost his direction.
Would this be the end of the man?
Or would he find redemption?
There was no end in sight on this
Grey and dreary voyage of life.
Trapped in his own personal hell,
He continued the path of
Ash, dust, pain and sorrow,
Only to find that when he reached
The end, there was peace for him.
No more tortured soul or pain.
The grey turned to light as he
Finished his voyage and took his last breath.
He does not know what lies in wait,
For he has no vision of the future.
Like the dew from a mist he sits idly,
Waiting for the new dawn to arrive.

Welcome Home, Brother

By Ronald Michael Stokes
– Brooksville, FL

On a bench in the park they found him today;
Last night in the dark his life slipped away.
He appeared to be sleeping as people walked past;
No one was weeping as he breathed his last.
What was his name? Who had he been?
From whence he came? Had he any kin?
He’ll go to his grave alone and not lauded,
But once he was brave and hundreds applauded.
No where was evident the medals pinned on
That day by the President on the White House lawn.
Also not seen as he came to his end,
The life that had been...no family, no friend.
Who sees, who knows, what’d be our fate
If our life goes like the guy on the grate.
If you see him tonight, whisper, “Welcome Home, Brother.”
He went left, you right, or one might be the other.

Grandpa's Scar

By Steven Stetler

VA Medical Center – Dayton, OH

Sitting on my grandpa's lap as a young boy, one day I reached up and touched his face.
I asked Grandpa how he got that scar, and he teared up and gave me a huge embrace.
He reached up and felt his scar with a trembling hand, and had a gaze that seemed far away.
He said when I was older he'd tell me about it, but just not today.
Grandpa never did tell me about his scar, and he died during the night.
I know he's now in a better place, and somehow that makes it seem alright.
Today we are burying Grandpa, and I realize it's all part of the good Lord's plan.
Grandma tried to console me, and handed me some letters held together by a single rubber band.
As we looked at him in his coffin, Grandma told me the letters would answer a question asked long ago.
Grandpa had told her I was old enough to understand, and he now wanted me to know.
Grandma said Grandpa told her about the letters he'd written as he lay dying in his bed.
He said the letters were addressed to me, and it was time that they were read.
She told me the letters were about his scar, earned long ago on a fateful day.
Tears welled up in my eyes as I heard my dear grandma start to pray.
She asked the Lord to care for this old man and take away the scar that for years everyone could see.
She felt he'd carried the burdens that came with it long enough, and asked humbly if this could be.
Her prayer then ended, and she said goodbye to Grandpa as the casket lid was sealed.
Grandma whispered the scar was nothing compared to the pain he kept inside, and to no one revealed.
Now listening and thinking at the graveside, I can still see Grandpa laying there in his best suit.
I feel my body jerk as it was awakened by the first volley of the gun salute.
The wake is now ended, and Grandpa lays silent in his final resting place.
My question will finally be answered about the scar on my grandpa's face.
Looking at the stack of letters addressed to me, in Grandpa's written hand,

I'll soon find out about Grandpa's Scar, earned long ago in a foreign land.
It all started, he said, with a letter and a number he received in the mail.
He thought he'd receive a notice, and it happened without fail.
His words then talked about commitment, because he was asked to go.
Grandpa felt it was a duty to serve his flag and country and, with heartfelt pride, never could say no.
His words were then about Grandma and how she told him she would always keep him near with letters of love and positive thoughts written to him all through her disguised fear.
His letters spoke of friendships made, of names not known to me, but with reverent words for all.
These men became brothers for life, for they, too, had responded to our nation's call.
He talked of life in a jungle dealing with thoughts of a wife and family so far away.
Grandpa said thinking of getting back to them was what kept him going every day.
They looked forward to the sound of Hueys for it meant supplies and maybe a letter or two from home.
When you read the heartfelt words or looked at a new picture, you didn't feel as hopeless or alone.
Grandpa talked about the smell of napalm, ambushes, patrols, blood-sucking leaches and driving rain, and the faces of his friends, soldiers and brothers, bloodied and wounded and the hopelessness in their pain.
Not complaining, he talked of many others that had it far worse than he, brave young men who had paid the supreme cost with their lives that would no longer be.
He spoke of many places with names that were foreign to me: Pleiku, Van Toung, La Drang, Khe Sanh.
Grandpa said the land was quite beautiful to see.
He wrote of this valley he called A Shau and a battle that was fought over a hill.
It was May of sixty-nine when he said his life seemed to stop as if it were standing still.
The battle raged on for days, he wrote, with many wounded and the dead paying the supreme cost.
Many times, both sides felt this raging fight would certainly be lost.
The sounds and smells of this battle, he said, would remain forever etched inside his head, with haunting memories of friends and brothers lost, as their bodies lay there among the dead.
Grandpa said all that he remembered, when it happened, was a bright flash of light.

A mortar round had landed next to him and taken him out of the fight.

As he came to, lying there, Grandpa wrote that he heard people scurrying all around.

He tried to see but couldn't, and he realized with eyes closed, his head was tightly bound.

Doctors soon came and spoke to him and said he would be okay.

Grandpa only had one question, would he have his vision so he could find his way?

After two weeks, it was finally time to find out if he would ever see.

Grandpa said, as they removed the bandages, he thought, "Well, what will be, will be."

Grandpa said he felt nothing but pure joy as he saw a beam of light.

Tears rolled down his face, and he thanked the Lord, for he still had his sight.

Nurses then brought him a mirror and, as he looked, he wrote that all he could do was gasp.

He saw a huge and ugly scar that he knew would forever last.

The letters tell the story of my grandpa's scar that was earned by him on that day.

But it didn't end there, for as I read on, I realized he had more to say.

Grandpa wrote that his scar ran deeper than the one seen there upon his face.

He said that when he got home, he was treated terribly by a country as if disgraced.

He wrote that he could never understand how he was treated, because he was sent there, by them, to fight.

His country and flag turned their back on him and many others, and he felt that certainly wasn't right.

His words spoke of his country that had sent him and others off to war, and how they were treated when they returned, how it hurt him deeply, down through his core.

So, a scar he also wore inside, and few people were ever told of his thoughts about a county that he loved, and why it had treated him so cold.

Years have gone by since I learned about how my grandpa's scar was earned.

But through the words he wrote me, I know there were lessons learned.

Our country knows of the errors made for these men and women who served in that foreign land.

These people need now be honored, yes, all who served in Vietnam.

Now standing beside you and Grandma's graveside in my uniform, saluting proudly with my right hand, I'm thinking about my Grandpa's scar and how, now, I truly understand.

Bliss

By Greg Johnson

VA Medical Center – Altoona, PA

Open your eyes to greatness,
 Collect your fears at the door,
 Fasten your mind to the memories
 And come with me and explore.
 At last we're alone to find
 The peace that exists in our minds,
 Caring for each other's doubts,
 Knowing what life's all about.
 Easy—it's not for us to have,
 Anger and grief will be unto us.
 Laughter and fun will come, I know.
 Give it a chance; let's run.
 A chance to change, to know more,
 A will to live and be strong,
 A strength to never say die
 And the love to carry on.

That Military Journey—Once Upon a Time of Service

By Zarrod Beck

VA Medical Center – Hines, IL

I was sitting around in high school
 When that recruiter came to me
 And asked me what I wanted to be.
 I told him to send me overseas,
 Make me all that I can be.
 They put me on an airplane,
 My life had really changed.
 I went to Basic and
 That got me ready.
 I continued to learn my job
 And found that to be hard.
 Combat, combat, here I come,
 Because another war had just begun.
 I finished my tour and then I was done.
 After my mission I was coming home.
 I continued to learn and grow
 Just in case I had to go.
 Eventually the time came.
 I had to go back to the sand—
 Another tour overseas—
 This is what my country needs.
 Twenty years have come and gone.
 NOW my service is over and done.

Creek

By Greg Johnson

VA Medical Center – Altoona, PA

Among the still of a parched creek bed,
I sense the calm of a once great spread,
Of waters fast and rushing free,
Now but a haven for a child's spree.
Stones of marble glazed with mold
Caress each other when nights grow cold.
Sands scorched white now fade in time,
Majestic colors appear to rhyme.
Now the bees, those busy souls,
Will make a haven in sands of old,
Stealing fragments of garnished dew,
Sifting moisture from evening's frost.

Take a Knee

By Zarrod Beck

VA Medical Center – Hines, IL

After running directly in the line of fire with the intent
to seek out and destroy all enemies of the United States,
you are injured and can no longer stand—*take a knee*.
You are receiving small arms fire and are forced to take a
kneeling fighting position—*take a knee*.
Your battle buddy is injured, and you must immediately
perform first aid—*take a knee*.
You are completely exhausted after overtaking enemy
ground—*take a knee*.
You are planning your next engagement in the
sandbox—*take a knee*.
You are preparing to carry your battle buddy—*take a knee*.
You are receiving rocket and mortar attacks—*take a knee*.
You can no longer move forward and fight—*take a knee*.
You just need a moment to pray—*take a knee*.

The Wall

Ronald Michael Stokes

– Brooksville, FL

Smooth and cold and black,
Sunken in the ground.
Names just staring back,
Stillness all around.
People on the track,
Sobs the only sound.
Searching forth and back
Where loved ones' names are found.

Home Run

By Lynn A. Norton

– Leawood, KS

A house in the city,
Country or burb,
It just doesn't matter.
Address and street,
Highway or lane,
It just doesn't matter.
Concrete and steel,
Wooden or stone,
It just doesn't matter.
Color and hue,
Stippled or smooth,
It just doesn't matter.
Mantel and hearth,
Electric or fire,
It just doesn't matter.
Table and chair,
Counter or bench,
It just doesn't matter.
Water and tub,
Flowing or still,
It just doesn't matter.
Pillow and bed,
Fiber or coil,
It just doesn't matter.
Love of my life,
Heart of our home,
The only one that matters.



I Am But a Simple Man

By Wayne Scott Wallace

VA Medical Center – Walla Walla, WA

I am but a simple man
In a world I don't understand.
Of religion I am confused,
Not knowing which one to choose.
All claim right, that others are wrong.
But who is right
And who is wrong?
I have been in the church of God,
One was simple,
One was large,
One said this way,
They all said this is the way.
I have seen people pray
To God, Allah, and Buddha,
All are sustained by their faith.
Am I to tell one group, "You are chosen,"
And the next, "You are not?"
They are all the same in my eyes,
Just people who have got
Something to hold on to,
To make them feel based in a world
Of a confused human race.
It is not for me to tell them
How they should make their sacred vow.
Let each on their own find their way
As they believe and pray.
Far better that I don't choose
Their faith or reason why.
As for me, I have my faith,
But it is mine and I do not share.
I try to show it in how I care, live and carry on,
For mine is mine,
But not always everyone's chosen one.
I have seen people impose their will
With shouts, anger and even kill.
To prove their right they employ their might
And some don't make it through the night,
Gone like a light in the nighttime wind.
I am but a simple man,
I live my life without a plan.
I have my faith
And I know that what is for me may not be for you.
I have seen the sorrow,
I have seen the pain,
It has almost driven me insane.
When others inflict their will
On those who have chosen still another path in life,
I just don't know which path is right.
So let us all travel down our chosen path in peace,
Meet on the other side of the light,
And pray we have all chosen right.

Treasure Chest

By Velma Vasquez

VA Medical Center – San Antonio, TX

I've been sitting here reflecting—
I do want to say something to you today because maybe I need
this as much as you may.
Only a mother can share and understand the feelings I am about
to express today.
There is nothing more beautiful or amazing than the feeling
of joy and happiness when the day comes that they put this
miraculous being in your arms for the first time.
Yes, at that very second, you think back—after nine long months
of wonderment and curiosity, protecting it since you started
feeling the flutter in your belly.
The soft flutters that turned into bumps, then kicks and punches
until the slow, aching stretches that make you feel like a whale.
Then comes the first communication, the baby's first cry.
But as your eyes meet for the first time your heart pounds
with such dynamic force that you just contain the tears
that pour out.
And as you experience all the firsts, they turn into
memories of love.
The little treasures of rhinestones, jewels, jades, ambers,
amethysts, crystals and sometimes a few pebble stones
and rocks.
But all cannot compare to the diamond you hold and kiss every
day, morning and night.
They are your sunshine in the mornings with their endless smiles.
And they are your stars in the night that shine deep in their eyes.
Hold on to them. These are the times that will pass faster than
you can catch up with them.
Look into their eyes and tell them how much you love them.
Tell them how much you treasure and cherish them.
Tell them how wonderful and amazing your life is with them in it.
And let them know how you can't even imagine your life
without them.
No matter how happy or sad or mad they may make you—
HOLD THEM!
Even when they pull away or wonder what's going on with you.
Remind them of your treasure chest.
Because, as the time went by, this box became heavier, and you
grew stronger.
There is nothing you would or wouldn't do for them to make
them happy and help them shine in life.
You'd carry the weight of motherhood, this treasure chest.
And although at times you might stumble, you will always be
there gathering stones: the gems, jewels and diamonds of life.
Why? They may ask.
Because I'm MOM! That's why.
So let me be because tomorrow is not promised.
Just like those long nine months were not promised, but on
that day—tomorrow—it came and that is my diamond in
my treasure chest.

Our House

By Helen Anderson Glass

VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ

Our house is built upon a solid foundation from our past.
The materials in it made it strong and sturdy so it will last.
The floors are made to withstand the pressures over the years, as well
as the scratches and nicks that came from doubts and fears.
The walls around it are upright, sturdy, firm and true.
Like loving arms enfolding us, within are tasks we had to do.
Because we welcome everyone inside, the doors are made to
open wide, with windows large and clear, letting in light of
knowledge, not fear.
The pictures on the walls, you see, are all of our “family,” depicting
what they were or want to be.
And see the comfort of the furnishings, bright and homey not
just “things,” and a firm roof built to last forever, through
bright and stormy weather.
But the main ingredient of our house is the “family.”
It is they who light the fires in our fireplace, you see.
They’ve made a house a home with a sturdy foundation as well,
where only peace, harmony and love will abide and dwell.
If we abolish the ignorance, intolerance and hate that’s here, our
house will again be a home, have no fear.
Our Special House is our country, the good old USA that rose
from a humble beginning to the power it is today.

Eyes That Seek the Truth

By Colleen Stanhouse

VA Medical Center – Memphis, TN

Experience brings mistrust and anger with a rage
That could be considered a mind in a cage.
Speaking clearly, seeking to find
That part of me that goes to mind and inner strength.
Looking for answers that no one can find,
Seeking truth to help change my fate.
Inner frustration, not knowing to rate
Just how much is fate.
Shaking off the anger from being lied to,
degraded and put to shame.
Who’s to blame? Where to turn?
What road do we burn?
Seeking help before it gets out of hand,
Watching for footprints in the sand.
Seeking truth to ease my mind,
Running a race not too behind
Faith, hope, charity and love.
Knowing God’s grace
Helps me rest in one place.

Mother–USA’s Treasure Chest

By Helen Anderson Glass

VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ

Our mother, the USA, has a treasure chest filled to the top.
She hopes that what is put in there will never go away or stop.
It’s not full of jewels, pearls and rings. No silver or gold,
But filled with gifts from her family, some new but most are old.
Generations of those who were born here,
Back to when our Independence took place,
And those who immigrated here,
Regardless of origin, color or race.
Things they brought with them and passed on to you and me.
They too were looking to find a new home and a new family.
Songs and music that had you tapping your feet,
Recipes for ethnic meals that were a real joy to eat.
Traditions and stories their generations had proudly told
That fell on listening ears, both young and old.
All these were to “Mother” a new treasure,
Each placed carefully, making it a pleasure.
Overflowing, memories of life with them through the years,
These gifts bring much joy to her, many smiles and many tears.
All from her family of men, women and children by the score,
With a sad heart for those lost defending her in war.
We are, “One nation under God with liberty and justice for all.”
We must make it great again and not let it fall.
Mother’s treasure chest is the USA, so for all it’s worth,
We shall not let it perish from this earth.

Battlefield Brain

By Westley Alan Smith

VA Medical Center – Boston, MA

Once it’s turned on—it’s always
on—forever, until you die.
On the road, potential ambush points
loom rattling until we pass.
In public, it’s a must to sit
with your back to a wall.
Everyone asks why. The slightest
noise can make you jump and make
your wife sigh. You hear about
mass shootings and wherever you go
you make your fight-or-flight plan.
You have a fight-or-flight plan
for everywhere: the shower, T.J. Maxx.
Someone asks, what’s wrong
and you glance over their shoulder
behind you. Nothing, you say.

My Wedding

By Joseph F. Higgins
VA Medical Center – Medford, MA

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Stabs forth a painful kiss.
I hold her bloody hand,
Engulfed in deadly bliss.
Her wedding veil,
A blood-clotted flag.
Her love I crave,
My living grave.
She is the black widow,
Dancing in shattered dreams
Of silent banshee screams.

Grace Under Fire

By Colleen Stanhouse
VA Medical Center – Memphis, TN

Bombs, guns and snipers in trees,
Saying, kill or be killed,
The fight to live.
What is missing inside of me?
Where do I go?
Who do I blame?
How will I be able to see?
Mortar, bombs bursting and running far away?
Let's start a new day,
One where we can all play,
Dreaming, wishing and giving.
Every day sharing, striving to be living,
Playing all day, helping others.
All my sisters and brothers:
Today is here, yesterday is gone
And tomorrow is not promised.
Let's have "Grace Under Fire,"
For in God we hold our heads high
For miracles in the sky.



Cobwebs and Dust

By Wayne Scott Wallace
VA Medical Center – Walla Walla, WA

There was a time my heart was gladdened
To see the machines of war,
To protect our troops,
Our fighting men
From harm in times of war.

There was a time, there was a place
For these machines we made.
Up-Armored is a good thing,
But they have a place.
They were designed for protection
Against the face of war.

But this is not the place
That they really should be.
They are meant to face the enemy,
And that enemy is not you or me.
MRAPS are for war.
I have seen the good they do,
But not on the streets of home
To use on me and you.

We need to come together,
Those on the left and right.
We need to find a center
Where we can sit at the table of life.
Put a damper on the protest,
Put a damper on the strife.

They say they need protection,
Both this side and that,
But protection from what,
And protection from whom?
Sit at the table,
And then be able
To sup on the dinner of life.
So sit down and dine.

Let's put the instruments of war in the back,
Let them gather cobwebs and dust.
And if we should need them,
Then bring them out.
But not to the neighborhood of mine.

Author's Note: I wrote this when and because I see all the instruments of war such as armored vehicles now used by local police departments.

Vietnam

By Charles Kesler

VA Medical Center – Dallas, TX

“They’re still out there shooting fireworks,” Willie yells.

Willie’s wife hollers at him, “Stop looking for your shotgun, Willie. If you take it out there you’ll go to jail.”

Willie says, “OK, I’ll get my BB gun.”

“You are not taking that BB gun out there. It looks like an M-16.”

“It does, doesn’t it. OK, I’ll take my BB pistol.”

“No, Willie. That looks like a real pistol. If the police come they will shoot you.”

“OK, Willamena. So what can I do?”

If we call the police, they’re not gonna catch those kids. Just put your ear plugs in your ears and go to the back bedroom.”

“This is just not right,” Willie says. “I have a right to peace and quiet. I’m gonna get the pest spray and a flashlight and go out there and act like a crazy old war veteran. I’ll kill ants, or something.”

“Just ants, Willie, just ants.”

“OK. Pest spray it is.”

Willie’s wife says, “OK, Willie. I will pray for you. Do not get yourself in trouble!”

“OK, Willamena. I am out the door. Pray away.”

To a Little Baby

By Scott Sjostrand

VA Medical Center – Hallock, MN

Sleep, my children, sleep.

Your eyes are pearls so deep.

They hold God’s mystery.

Now close your eyes tight and see what other realms there are in dreams that grasp a star.

Sleep, my children, sleep.

Sleep, my children, sleep.

Let no dark shadow creep across your innocent face.

Sleep, my children, sleep.

A light with winsome grace shines across your gentle face.

Sleep well till morning’s sun.

Sleep, my children, sleep.

The First Steps on the Moon

By Jonathan M. Craig

VA Medical Center – Hillsboro, OR

After NASA was created, a very special event took place, the event of the very first steps by a man on the moon.

The first three men chosen to make the trip were astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins.

They trained for more than five years to prepare for that trip.

At 9:32 a.m., on July 16, 1969, the Saturn V rocket launched.

There were flames and smoke from the five main engines of the rocket, with a thrust of 7.5 million pounds, equal to 92,000 locomotives.

Apollo 11 had to travel 218,986 miles to reach the moon.

It would take three days to get there, and, as the rocket launched, it left trails of flames hundreds of feet long. It left earth at 5,329 feet per second.

Traveled through space at more than 24,000 miles per hour.

The command module had panels inside with switches, buttons, dials and readouts. The command module was named Columbia.

There was also a lunar module named Eagle.

When it reached the moon (going behind the moon), it lost radio contact with the earth for more than thirty minutes.

Armstrong and Aldrin had to go through a small short tunnel into the lunar module, after they swung around the moon.

There was a 1202 Program Alarm during the descent.

Finally, on July 20, 1969, they landed on the moon.

Millions of people watched on TV as Armstrong took his first steps on the moon.

Armstrong and Aldrin took three hours to walk on the moon, Michael Collins stayed with the command module.

Armstrong stated: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

They also planted a plaque which read: “Here men from the planet Earth first set foot on the moon. July 1969 A. D. We came in peace for all mankind.”

On Thursday, July 24, 1969, they made it back home.

Editor’s Note: July 20, 2019, is the 50th anniversary of man’s first steps on the moon.

A Beeper

By James William Miller

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

What’s old fashioned?

A beeper.

What’s the cross between a bee and a kitty cat?

a beepurr.

A cat does purr.

Down Home Indiana

By Jonathan M. Craig

VA Medical Center – Hillsboro, OR

Born in Indiana,
That's where I come from.
Fields of grain stretch out before me
In the glistening noonday sun.
So simple yet so needed,
The land expands as far as I can see,
Stretched out beneath the sky,
The terra firma to be
Where fields rise up to the clouds,
Open to the blue above,
Like loving between the two
And the state I love.
All around I've been,
But memories of my first home are
Of my Midwest state and my youth.
In Oregon now, from there so far,
I've traveled across the country,
And I love Oregon, too.
But the crossroads of America
Are where I spent my youth.
Never will I forget
The storms and beauty of
My birth state, finding there
Snowy winters, budding spring,
Ice cream truck summers
And the leaf changing falls I love.



I Will Never Leave a Fallen Comrade

By Shon Pernice

– Moberly, MO

I kept you alive in the combat zone.
I'll help you survive, as we rest at home.
We've been on foreign soil and weathered turmoil.
In faraway lands, filled with desert sands,
I patched up your wounds and prayed for you, too.
Now back in the States, you start to break plates.
I can't leave you alone, as you go into the zone.
Drugs and alcohol temporarily relieve the pain, as the memories
make you feel like you're going insane.
If suicide is a must,
I'm the one you can trust.
Let's talk and work through this, as your eyes start to mist.
I will always have your six, if you get lost in the mix.
I have the anesthetic because I'm your combat medic.

Hell To Pay, But I Don't Have a Dime.

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center – Chillicothe, OH

Hell to pay, but I don't have a dime.
I did my time, locked away in my cell.
Now the visions seem real, the combat still rings,
blasting my ears.
I cry many tears.
Will tomorrow come?
I'll just have a shot, maybe a beer, then no more will
I fear what tomorrow holds.
Maybe something to numb this pain that I relive everyday.
My senses alert, being lied to, how will it end?
Not an easy road for me.
How I lean upon others, how I want to be free.
Some call me lunatic, some call me a weirdo, others
just tell me to go away.
I think I will.
I throw in the white flag,
I retreat from my post.
The enemy is in hot pursuit.
He often disguises himself as people I trust the most.
Blow the trumpet.

Hooked on Coffee

By Charles B. Parnell

VA Medical Center – Pittsburgh, PA

The first cup in the morning is best.
It gets the body going!
And throughout the day there's several more,
Such comfort in the knowing!
The tasty brew invigorates.
I sip and sip some more!
The hotter the better, I must say,
So let the Java pour!
No matter what the time of day—
Morning, noon or night—
A cup of Joe will fit right in
And make the moment bright!
Like an old friend or confidante
The pleasant cup invites us!
We feel its warmth and, once again,
Its satisfaction ignites us!
A cup of coffee and a book,
And a comfy chair in your favorite nook
With music playing on the radio nearby
Are some simple pleasures on which I rely!

Happy Hour

By Arvell L. Duckworth

– Oskaloosa, KS

As we drive around the country enjoying the fresh air, we see the sign “Happy Hour” almost everywhere. I began to define the word “happy,” and this is what it seems to say.

You can have a “Happy Hour” with Jesus, twenty four hours a day. The “Happy Hour” at the fast food will only last from two to four.

When time has expired, it's not “Happy Hour” any more.
But when you think of heaven, how happy we will be, not for just two hours but for eternity.

So let us be glad and rejoice and keep our spirits high.
When Jesus splits the clouds of glory, we will bid this world goodbye. When our savior calls our names, it will be so loud and clear.

He will say to us in his soft voice, “Come home, my child.
It's ‘Happy Hour’ here!”

Moment of Peril

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center – Iron Mountain, MI

Like an arched arrow
Poised to strike,
His rivet eyes of steel
See all that's far below.
And like an arched arrow,
He plummets down to strike
And execute
The last moment of peril.

Vietnam Soldier

By Dudley K. Letourneau

– White River Junction, VT

Back at home the nightly news would say, “How many young soldiers died today?”

The war goes on, and they continue the fight.

How many young soldiers will die tonight?

How many more widows will there be by the time we shut off the TV?

Back at home, protesters march against the war, but have no worry, it's only for the poor.

Poor white men and persons of color answered the call,
but those with connections were the luckiest of all.

Party time and college fun, future businesses to be run.

Their lives were worth more than those who were poor.

As we fight and die for some unknown cause, rich kids at home break the laws.

Today they play tennis and on golf courses they roam
oblivious to the injuries that kept them at home.

To a draft dodger no thoughts exist, but to a soldier harsh memories persist.

Brave young men answered the call.

All gave some, some gave all.

Coming home to face the hate would be the young soldiers' fate.

Changed young men, they evolved.

Baby killers they were called.

How many old soldiers will give up the fight?

How many old soldiers will die tonight?

How many old soldiers will die tonight?



The New Battlefield

By Charles Kesler

VA Medical Center – Dallas, TX

The new battlefield for the soldier, both young and older: no energy against energy.
No energy binds him to his bed with chains of depression.
Energy from above and below and all around unlocks the chains and comes mercifully to him, so mercifully.

Boundaries

By Connie M. Tasby

VA Medical Center – Dallas, TX

Boundaries are rules put in place to say, “No.”
Boundaries provide ways of protection for the things we trust or hold dear.
When we stop and look at someone who gets too close, or someone in our space, then our instincts kick in to say, “Please step back; you are too close.”
What if you never knew there was a word called boundaries?
What if you were never taught how to use them?
Does that mean that boundaries don’t exist?
Does that mean we can’t use the word for our benefit?
People who are close to us step in and out of our boundary lines every day.
Some people who are close to us violate these boundaries every day.
Do we hate the people who have violated our boundaries with or without our permission?
Do we continue permitting this violation?
I say start where you are, and learn about boundaries.
Say, “No” to people that violate these boundaries.
Know what you will and won’t allow in your lines of boundaries.
Stand up for yourself.
You have the right to say, “No” and “Stop.”

Vietnam

By John Donnelly

VA Medical Center – San Francisco, CA

There are tears here that have been cried — many.
And there are tears here, both happy and sad!
There are tears here that have yet to be cried for the many yet to come.
There have been goodness and laughter here, a lot of it!
And between those who stay here to help, and the many who have yet to come and go, there will be more goodness, laughter and smiles
I can feel it! I can feel it!
In honor of so many of my courageous veteran brothers, all now bathing in the twilight of our long journey of adventures, common or special,
I salute you all!
And even if you can only return that salute back to me with your eyes,
I can feel it! I can feel it!

Dogma

By Daniel Kent Merwin

VA Medical Center – Brooklyn, NY

Mommy said that she would keep me safe.
These words run through me as I sit in here
With kids my age whose mommies say the same.
They sit like me and, like me, sit in fear.
The hands of the clock are almost there,
As we, the students, sit and stare.
The warning from him said, “Beware
The teachers for they do not care.”
And when the clock strikes three, the hair
Upon my neck will rise. Nefarious
The motives, all so bare,
As we are then taken downstairs.
The cauldron hot, the bell molten,
The hallways lined with children.
One by one, we’re guided in by
In loco parentis.
With them are the mommies and daddies,
Now all standing by our sides.
They say with others, parents and teachers,
“We offer our own to Jesus.”
The cauldron close now, three more children ‘til
My time’s at hand, as Issac’s once lay bare.
But unlike he, the sacrifice completes.
As dogma steals moral ground, my feet
Plunge into golden fire, bell, and heat
To toll for future ears,
To rebuke all gospels made of fears.

Hey, Everyone!

By John Donnelly

VA Medical Center – San Francisco, CA

I'm not a "Poet" and I know it.
And I think I have less sense
than a "Billy Go-it."
But I do seem to have fun with rhythm and rhyme so I challenge
you to try it sometime.
If you're like me and you have some words bouncing around in
your head, write them down so they can be read.
Try it once and write it down.
What you say might just change your frown to a smile for awhile.
Come on, everyone, do it today.
I'd really like to hear what you have to say.

Author's Note: Remember to keep it clean and don't be mean!

The Dying Cowboy

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center – San Francisco, CA

The sun was sinking in the sky
Across the western plains.
A cowboy on his lonely bed
Was dying slow in pain.
He prayed for a loving hand
To cool his aching head,
But only his saddle boys were there
To hear him when he said,
Take me back to Mother, boys,
I know she's old and gray.
I'm on my last great round-up,
I hear my master say,
Come home, my son, to peace and rest.
Your round-up days are o'er.
Tell Mother dear, I'll meet her there,
On the other shore.
They tell me there are pastures green
And music low and sweet,
Cowboys ever walking up
And down the golden street,
And loved ones there to hold your hand
And cool your aching head.
Farewell, my friends, I bid adieu.
The young cowboy was dead.

*Author's Note: This is a mixture of nature and death.
It includes the earthly plains with sun and sky, a token rodeo
cowboy and the eminent death that comes to us all in the end.
It also illustrates the hope we see at the VA hospitals.*

The Picture

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center – Iron Mountain, MI

There's a picture on the wall
That sits out in the hall.
And if stories it could tell,
It would tell them all so well
Of its own saga
And of all the scenes it has seen
When people in the hall
Stopped to look and looked back
At the picture on the wall
That sits out in the hall.

Memories of Fresh Air

By Kimberly Green

VA Medical Center – Fort Smith, AR

Barely moving
Resisting the urge to flee.
Combat soldiers
Vivid memories.
Highway of death
Hot days filled with sand.
Fleas and diarrhea
In this barren land.
Orders given
Or court martial it would be.
Desert Storm warriors
Have never been set free.
Years have passed
Illnesses still persist.
Could it be that answers have
Always been known to exist?
The burn pits
And burning of the lead.
Depleted uranium
Causing brain cancers of the head.
And the lung illness
Shortness of breath.
Breathing with a CPAP
Oh, to have air fresh.
Gulf War Syndrome is not a mystery.
Its causes we all know to be true.
Our Desert Storm warriors are dying young.
Its survivors are becoming few.

Remodeled

By Dan Yates

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

“In good times, in bad times, in sickness and in health” words
from our lips like marbles on linoleum.

Material things meant nothing; love was our wealth.

There wasn't a challenge that we couldn't overcome.

We bought our first house; it was just perfect for two.

The walls needed rescue so that's job number one.

With some time and money we could make it feel new, followed
by new flooring and the work would be done.

Uncle Sam sent a letter; he asked for two years.

Now the walls are padded since I don't like to talk, no Purple
Heart for the damage between my ears.

The floors are eggshells where my wife gingerly walks.

My house isn't remodeled, instead it's my life, and now my
greatest fear is that I'll lose my wife.

State of the Union, the 45th, January 2017

By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.

VA Medical Center – Hampton, VA

Today is the beginning
Of a disappointing season in American history.
All that our ancestors
Have sacrificed their lives for
Is in jeopardy.
I myself cannot heal the nation
From such a disaster.
All I can do is pray,
Asking God for help and guidance.
American people,
Be not in despair.
As a nation,
We have been through much worse.
Our system of government
Is designed so that no one person,
Or group of people,
Can destroy our way of life
Or place any group of people
Back to a state of slavery.
Please maintain
Your faith, hope and trust in God.
May God continue to bless and heal our nation.
A true patriot never gives up!!!

God Sees All

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center – Chillicothe, OH

God sees all, why would we want to hide?
Confess to Him,
He already knows what goes on inside.

Your darkest secrets come to light.
Your hidden fears no longer hide.
Your grueling pains in Him confide.

He knows your weaknesses and your strengths.
He knows what you believe and think.

When all seems lost and nothing seems right, trust in the Lord
and the power of His might.

It is when we feel weak, without a clue,
He's waiting there to pull us through.

Words of Love (?)

By Dan Yates

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

I turn the page, it's February. I scan the numbered squares,
Wonder if our relationship is in need of some repairs.
I pondered all the words and phrases said throughout the year,
I'm sure something soft and sweet was whispered in her ears.

My lady's hair is soft and silky. One day, to my dismay,
I casually mentioned to her, "I think this one is gray."
I took an elbow to the ribs; she never did say why.
But it was sharp and pointed, as a tear formed in my eye.

A few months later she bought a dress and a matching hat.
She held it up to show me. I asked, "Can you get into that?"
It only took a moment, as a knot formed in my gut,
For me to think a wiser man would have kept his big mouth shut.

Soon it was October and the leaves began to fall.
It was time for Halloween and a costume ball.
She would go as Beauty, and I, the Beast, of course.
Why I said it, I'll never know, that Beauty was a horse.

I remember Christmas time, her face centered in a wreath.
And when she smiled she revealed spinach in her teeth.
Not sure how to mention it, so I never said a word,
And when confronted I lamely said, "My vision had been blurred."

Now's my chance, it's Valentine's, to make up for my errors.
I can buy her flowers and stuffed teddy bears.
There's just one thing to remember so that I don't miss.
The next time that I move my lips, don't speak and only kiss.

Alone Without Myself

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center – St. Louis, MO

Life is so unfair.
Do you feel like no one cares?
Like no one cares if you live or die?
Living's easy if you try,
No hell below us,
Above us only sky.
Get your groove on,
Sing and dance,
Only one life to live.
No time for you to boohoo,
No time for feeling blue,
No time for half steppin',
No time for feeling sorry for yourself.
No time to be or not to be.
That is the question.

Gunships

By Paul David Gonzales

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

Gunships coming in hot and low with cannon barrels
all aglow.
Rotors slicing through the air like a surgeon's scalpel
through a pear.
Side door open, a soldier there, spitting bullets everywhere.
Skids topping the jungle trees bring the enemy to their knees.

Amputee

By Ancel D. Neuburger

– Olathe, KS

When I overheard you mention amputation, a sympathetic pang
possessed my leg. I must have understood the implication that
I was somehow predisposed to beg.
Nature often favors the redundant, so when you left I had to
count my parts, imagining you must have been the one that
surgically removed my morbid heart.
Now, as I contemplate our separation, I notice that I too am
somewhat maimed, but cannot escape the lingering sensation
that you are nothing but a phantom pain.

The Geriatric Jody

By Melvin Garrett Brinkley

VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ

They say when getting older... you're going to weep and whine
About your achy, breaky... dilapidated spine!

(Chorus)

*Oh, Lord, I'm often told... that I am getting old!
O! O! O! O! O!*

*They say when getting older... it's best not to recline.
You gotta keep on truckin'... to slow down your decline!*

They say when getting older... a cruise is mighty fine.
Ten of us went out to sea... and now there's only nine!

(Repeat Chorus)

They say when getting older... you're like a vintage wine
That peaked a long time ago... and turned to turpentine!

(Repeat Chorus)

They say when getting older... sex is mighty fine.
While looking for a blue pill... you forget what's on your mind!

(Repeat Chorus)

They say when getting older... look out for Mister Doom.
Better fill your bucket list... before you are entombed!

(Repeat Chorus)

They say when getting older... and you're way past your prime
That you should stop complaining... 'cause you're wasting
precious time!

Author's Note: This Jody goes exactly like the Jody: "They say that in the Army/the pay is mighty fine. They give you a hundred dollars/and take back ninety-nine." The ellipsis denotes a pause during the chant while marching.



A Soldier Carries

By Thomas Jeffrey Liljestrand
VA Medical Center – Cheney, WA

A soldier carries the world left behind,
Letters longing for home,
Pictures of a past too distant to be real,
Memories of soldiers lain down before them,
Pain of their destruction by which only war brings,
Cries of war's torment from dreams too real.
Be it peace or war, faith or folly, they carry it still.
A soldier carries the world,
The hope of all who want peace,
The faith in humanity to bring order to chaos,
The love for others to die in their stead.
A soldier carries the letters
with loved one's proud tears,
Letters of remembered times and awaited returns,
Letters of passion and faithful prayers,
Letters from strangers with gracious thanks.
A soldier carries pictures from loved to lost,
Pictures of happy times and tear-stained memories,
Pictures from times and places now foreign to reality,
Pictures for hopeful encounters gripped tightly.
A soldier carries memories of footsteps in the sand,
Memories of blood and bonded brothers,
Memories of funny jokes and crazy stories,
Memories of the lost and broken.
A soldier carries the pain of war's inevitable destruction,
Pain of faces before them,
Pain of the cruelty of war's rage,
Pain for the deeds of blood-stained hands.
A soldier carries the cries in the night,
Cries of the lost unsaved,
Cries of fright in children's eyes,
Cries of the victor, bloodied by vengeance.
It is the soldier that carries the flag
of peace in the face of war,
It is the soldier that carries the faith of love in the clench of hate,
It is the soldier that carries all these,
For the cost is great, and the payment greater still.
Hold dear the soldier's heart.
It beats for the sake of us all.



Soldier's Lament

By CJ Reeves
VA Medical Center – San Francisco, CA

Did you ever see a gopher
When he runs into his hole?
That's the way I am feeling
Down here in this old foxhole.
Sitting here in mud and water
With no place to make my bed,
This is why I am complaining,
Got no pillow for my head.
Sitting down here, wrapped in silence
Like a shroud around the dead,
Listening for the sound of footsteps
Or the sudden whine of lead,
And my body, tired and aching,
With no place to make my bed,
This is why I am complaining,
Got no pillow for my head.
I'll be glad when this war is over
And I get back home to stay.
Looking at the starlit heavens
And the sun at break of day,
Laying down on clean, warm blankets
And a clean sheet for my bed,
That's why I stopped complaining,
Got a pillow for my head.

Author's Note: Just wanted to shine a gentle smile on the terrible conditions faced by soldiers. Hope you get a chuckle out of it, as I do.

Haiku Master

By G.E. Murray
– Gardner, KS

Guilty:
The old vet next door,
I meant to go visit him, but now it's too late.
The Pond:
Ripples expanding,
Dragonflies rest on cattails.
The sun warms my soul.
Missed It:
There's always one guy
Who fails to get the memo.
And that would be me.

All the President's Men

By Paul David Gonzales

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

All the Presidents men gave an order, sent many of us to Vietnam,
Laos and the Cambodian border.

We went quite willing, even though the results could be quite
chilling.

Gimme a rifle and some rounds, and we'll teach those Asian
clowns that freedom is our job to uphold, so we're told.

I'll go and my brother, too.

What the end would bring, we never knew.

It seems that others had a clue, students, hippies and the
social stew that there would be no end to defend.

What was the gain, I maintain, with all the sacrifice
and family pain?

So in the end we left the land with so much American
blood in the sand.

Many of our brothers left lying there... never found...
echoing with a loud resound.

Take me home where I can rest once again at my mother's breast.

Without You, There Is No Us

By Diane Wasden

– Millen, GA

I never got to tell you goodbye.

Now each and every day, all I do is cry.

You were such a big part of my life.

Together we were happy all the time.

There are times in life when everything comes to an end, a time
when you were gone and you left me for dead.

I'm lost in the darkness without you.

I'm truly sorry I just didn't know what to do.

Everyone is born a predator or prey, and once the bait is taken,
your life will never be the same.

The guilt and shame will leave you feeling unworthy and unclean.

That's when you broke away from me.

I wanted to make you proud of the soldier I became, but we never
factored in the predators that would change my life along the
way.

A young girl's mind was shattered and broken in two, and now
there is no longer a me and you.

There was no indication and no warning signs.

My eyes were wide open, but somehow I was blind.

They all used their power and rank to intimidate me, and the gap
between us became bigger than it really had to be.

We were so much more together than when we were apart, and
now I lost the beat of you in my heart.

I now carry silent scars and hidden pain.

I have no sense of purpose since you went away.

Nothing but demons are left inside of me.

I can never give you back the person I used to be.

Sometimes we just didn't see eye to eye.

There was no win win, no fix all or compromise.

Sometimes our greatest strengths don't dwell far from our
deepest weaknesses.

My humility boards a place where feelings of shame lurk.

I can still sense these thoughts in the back of my mind and it
hurts.

We always came from a place of strength, and we never let
anyone see us broken and weak.

But sometimes we have situations where we don't need to try
harder and harder.

We just need to give up because they are smarter.

Life is a struggle we all face today, and it's best faced with good
allies to help keep predators at bay.

Without you I am nothing; I am no longer complete.

There is only one mission that predators have, and that is to
defeat.

The moment he raped me, I felt you slip away.

Our minds couldn't cope and now I'm not the same.

I am locked into the present day with struggles way beyond my
control.

The hollowness slowly eats away at me as my life unfolds.

I can no longer exist in this depression and misery.

I am slowly dying each day you are away from me.

There is no way to combat the unpredictability of life.

You see, despite my worrying, bad things happen.

We all become afraid of things we don't understand.

The greatest threat in this world today is man.

You have to follow the universal code: treat everyone
like they are the predator.



Kill the Sound

*By Tony James Craidon
Maple Grove, MN*

Carousels, spinning with chaotic intent,
holding life to its center.
Free thought creates hostile interactions,
allowing madness to enter.
Look up! God is in the stars,
consuming and creating gravity.
Like flies on wax paper,
we can only watch the boundless depths of depravity.
We were given favor among the Plagues,
burning sin with varying degrees.
But the antibiotics have become useless,
and we've become the disease.
Do we defend life's basic instinct
to survive no matter the cost?
Or will our own enlightenment
determine we have lost?
Murdering prisoners congregate,
kill everything but the sound.
Resolve to killing themselves
when no one else is around.
Cracked eggs in a basket
contaminate the unborn.
The abundance has left us
feeling weak and forlorn.
It is our duty now,
derived from guilt of obedience
To fall on our swords
and finally end our sentence.

Kids Are Back

*By Dennis Silas
VA Medical Center – Danville, IL*

No more summer camp
More swimming
More staying up late
More going to the park hanging out.
Back to books and rules
Different classes
Students
Boring teachers
New friends
System.
Back to school is better than being in jail.
Even if you do fail
Going back to school is going
To program who you are and what tools
You need to succeed in life.
Have a good year.

Vets of Nam

*By George S. Kulas
– Fond Du Lac, WI*

Monsoons in sixty-seven
Didn't cleanse their wounds of war.
Saw too many buddies go,
Nobody could say what for.
The early trips to heaven
For boys their son's wouldn't know.
Those who saw sixty-eight
In a year had grown so old.
Coming home just off their flight,
Baby killers they were told.
Make love not war, spat with hate,
Yet still more were sent to fight.
Years and years of devilish dreams,
Whiskey nights don't drown them out.
Names remembered on a wall,
Fallen in a war of doubt.
Patriots alone it seems,
Vets of Nam who gave their all.

Alone at Night

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

At night when I'm all alone,
Usually sewing in a quiet place,
I think about the past
And I clearly see your face.
Your funny faces you would make
And your laughter filling the room,
And sometimes we talk
As the light comes from the moon.
I ask you if you miss me
And you always nod and smile.
We reminisce about the boys,
This feeling of love makes it worthwhile.
I know it won't last long.
The visits get shorter each time,
But just for a moment
I pretend you're still mine.

Just Let Me Live One More Day

By Dennis Silas

VA Medical Center – Danville, IL

Tomorrow is promised to no one:
Black, White
Blue, Green
Red, Gray
Fat, Skinny
Short, Tall, Bald.
It doesn't work like that.
You're not the one
That has the last say.
But I just want to live
One more day.
When your trial is up,
And the verdict is in,
It's not up to me to say,
Your time is up.
Sorry.
There's only
One thing
I can say,
Not today.

Stupid

By Charles L. Carey

VA Medical Center – Martinsburg, WV

How can stupid be a word?
With so many words that sound absurd
Like first or second and even third!
How can stupid be a word?
Why are a bunch of cattle called a herd?
A flock of geese isn't just one bird!
How can stupid be a word?
When a chunk of milk is a curd,
Another word that is absurd!



New Love

By Charles L. Carey

VA Medical Center – Martinsburg, WV

We laughed through days that ran so fair,
Always so much cuteness there.
Breezes blew through her golden hair.
Often we met in her garden; it had her flair.
It had such a mystical air.
Those were the days without a care.
Summer reached into my heart.
I knew I'd been hit by Cupid's dart.
Gentle kisses were just one part.
Melodies blended with harmonies so well.
Our music was a wonder; anyone could tell.
It had us under a spell.
We were so taken with love so new.
Clouds on our horizon were very few.

A Walk Among Society

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

I traveled every day among society,
And saw many children play,
And imagined our reality,
Cheerful in a mutual way.
Love possessed every soul,
And hope dwelled within to find.
Inside everyone was a future goal,
Provided to each individual mind
Outside everywhere freedom rings.
People do what they do best,
Move peacefully, fix common things,
Hope for changes that lead to success.
Life carries on, reaches without fear,
As society journeys throughout the year.
Another day reveals, now and then,
New thoughts and ideas without end.

Summer Sounds

By Charles Fredette

VA Medical Center – Bedford, MA

The summer is here!
It's always welcome,
Whether you are far or near.
The bees are alive in their cozy hive.
I can't wait for the sun again,
Maybe to share it with a friend.

If the Table Moves

By John C. Bradley

VA Medical Center – Nashville, TN

If the table moves, don't sit and complain, move!

Even when I know what is best for me to do, very often I do not act accordingly.

Birds of worry and concern flying overhead are beyond our power.

But we do have enough power to prevent their building nests in our hair!

I'm happy with the bread I have bought, the red roses I have been given.

I grasp both in my hands!

How happy to become learned, understand others, become wise, understand yourself.

How happy to become strong, understand how to subdue yourself and become wealthy.

But do not sell your soul.

Stupidity?

By John C. Bradley

VA Medical Center – Nashville, TN

Does it only appear as a childhood disease like chickenpox? Or does it lie dormant until later, in adolescence, adulthood, beyond, throughout life?

I am sure it's chronic because

I still have outbreaks more often than I have common colds!

Whisper Country

By Karen A. Green

VA Medical Center – North Las Vegas, NV

In central Wisconsin, while growing up on a farm, some of the things I saw had their own kind of charm.

Early mornings and late at night were very quiet and quite a sight.

If it were summer, birds flew all around, but in the winter, snowflakes sparkled on the ground.

The flowers were beautiful for all to see, while butterflies and hummingbirds whispered while glad to be free.

Sometimes we could see the Northern Lights, while on other nights stars twinkled very bright.

Whisper Country is a very fitting name, for the lovely sights that look so tame.

When I'm in the smoggy city, I miss the beautiful sights of the spacious country and the fresh, airy nights.

Everyone should experience these awesome things that God has made as the angels sing.

Puddles

By Charles Fredette

VA Medical Center – Bedford, MA

The puddles were there, some big, some small.

Some wanted to leave while others wanted to stay.

I like either way.

But what I like the most is when they visit at night.

It's so uplifting and gives us no fright.

I hope you like them as do I.

They may brighten up your day if only for awhile.

My Head, My Prison

By Sean Richards

VA Medical Center – Fort Worth, TX

It comes on clear days and stormy nights.

Sleep only comes with medication and a fight.

The words and memories come flying back.

Through my mind they swirl and randomly attack.

My mind is in a whirl until I nod off exhausted.

Is it me or is it my mind that is filled with excess stuff?

My memories are tainted with uneasy and fitful dreams.

Some are more like nightmares with bloody screams.

My mind works on these problems both day and night,

Trying to reconcile which is wrong and which is right.

Until morning comes, and I need to medicate again,

I fight off the nightmares and dreams from within.

These play and repeat in my mind day by day,

Until exhausted I dream in fits as on my pillow I lay.

I have tried to talk to some, but few seem to listen,

While for another night the tears on my cheeks will glisten.



Time Out of Time

By Tony James Craidon
– Maple Grove, MN

My time is out of time.
In retrospect
It was never really mine.
So many things left undone.
So many words left unsung.
What is courage without fear?
To some
It is a feeling quite queer.
Prove nothing to those never satisfied.
Pursue that which has always been denied.
Virtue is long forgotten.
Why has
This left such stains, rotten?
I miss you, fellow Spartans,
Buried in driftwood cartons.
You've given my life promise.
Always have
Valued burying the honest.
To me, many more thoughts
As I kneel on overlooked plots.
We all transition alone.
In honor and memory of those who have breathed
and breathe no more. You are missed.

All Things in Time

By Darrell W. Brown
VA Medical Clinic – Talihina, OK

Oh, Muse! Can a leopard change its spots?
Or a Bengal or African tiger its stripes? Ebony eyes?
(My beautiful ebony eyes.)
The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I. (Baudelaire, French
Romanticist Poet)
Bloom! Ye, bloom where ye are planted. All things in time.
The face I see, your countenance, fair, but mindlessly.
It is needed in this place. I love you dearly, sweetheart!
I love you forever, desperately. Return, forever.
You must obey! Right now, love.
Right now! Before it is too late.
Don't put off today for tomorrow or another date.
To be expedient is to be obedient. To be any less is rebellion.
Oh, my ebony eyes! You must obey the call of your lover's
Beckoning to this wild ride of romanticism called "love."
Return, dear, for I love you forever and a day.

Author's Note: Dedicated to my wife, Roberta!

A Yearly Tally

By Sean Richards
VA Medical Center – Fort Worth, TX

A sound is heard across the valley.
It is the thud of the axe and the rip of the chainsaw.
The winter's cold has given the tally.
With the thaw of spring, comes the maddening guffaw.
The need for wood next winter is ten cords.
Suitable trees are chosen and marked.
The logs are cut to size and stored.
The deadfall from last year is cut and debarked.
The days grow long and hot as we enter summer.
The work of woodcutting is heavy and slow.
We may not work in the heat of the day, yet we still simmer.
Yet the tally is still ten cords before the winter snows.

Somewhere a Friend Is a Friend

By Anthony Cocozza
VA Medical Center – Los Angeles, CA

Somewhere beneath a blue sky
Where purest water gently flows,
Our Lord has made a place for us
Free from all trials here below.
And there someday we meet again
The ones we love and long to see.
And in God's presence we shall live
Together for eternity.
A friend is a friend and a hero,
An American hero who would give his life
For another human being.
Is a Godsend of an angel
Is an American hero to serve God
And country with his life.
I'm a soldier of God, a human being.
Have I earned my wings to become an angel?



Someday

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

Someday the demons will stop coming.
I hope to fall into the arms of a merciful God,
For I know not where I will wind up.
I am human having done very bad things
And very good ones.
I am a modern Doc Holliday exploring the mysteries of Rome,
Knowing what justice looks like.
My demons are relentless and present as ghosts,
Trying to steal my soul.
I fight tooth and nail for I am not alone,
Over 58,000 angels with names on a wall are along side me,
Family on my left flank and the VA on my right flank.
They come and I am prepared knowing their position
With a sixth sense honed over 50 years of battle.
I do not always win. I let myself be hyper-vigilant–
Always on guard, angry, irritable,
Talking without a filter, thinking the world is out to get me,
Wondering, “Why did I make it? Not Them!”
The demons are powerful, but angels always beat demons.
On my bad days I remember my oath never expires.
I have honor and, if fight I must, I will
For there is no surrender.
Some days I have to call in the fire upon my own position.
The demons vanish and I stand unvanquished,
An old man with a DD-214 hoping for a merciful God
That can forgive this sinner and remember a good airman.

The Medals

By Tanya R. Whitney

VA Medical Center – New Orleans, LA

A chest full of medals
Worn with dignity and pride,
Swaying against each other
With every step taken.
Each step taken shows
An unnatural gait of courage.
Each one a tale of valor,
Each one earned with blood.
The medals tell a story
Of duty, honor and country.
A tale of sacrifices given
In the storms of battle.
The medals are still now
Lying on the soldier's chest,
Shining in their glory
As the flag covers the casket.

The Sun and I

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

The sun heats me up until sunset,
Then slows me down, often getting me wet.
When rising at the same time,
The sun and I both shine.
When I come into the bright light,
The sun seldom blocks my sight.
It shines down on all of nature growing,
Often with a warm breeze blowing.
Beauty all around I see,
But today was changing to me.
The weather was turning hot
When I approached a cool spot.
I settled beneath a shade tree,
And rested, so cool, calm and free.
Sun rays shone down from the sky
Until vivid green leaves grew dry.
Energy flew through the air,
And warmth was felt everywhere.
As the day was passing by,
Atmospheric pressure was high.
When peaceful movements
Of weather are traveling about,
The warmth and glow of the sun
I wouldn't be without.

Shared Quarters

By Daniel Paicopulos

VA Medical Center – San Diego, CA

I awoke to see an NVA or was it really a VC?
He was only seven feet away or was it only three?
He was badly hurt, wrapped and tied, or was he actually free?
He was obviously a prisoner, or was it truly me?
He was suddenly convulsing, dying now, or trying to get free?
I awoke to see my enemy, and he was simply me.

*Author's Note: Thoughts on waking in a Quonset hut
after field surgery.*

Decisions and Kings

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

Every year I rode
Still do
Up to Kings Veterans Home
Waupaca, Wisconsin,
Where the heroes live.
Pay my respects
To the living and the dead
Huge cemetery
We ride through
On Memorial Day
Hundreds of bikes
Our rolling thunder.
Then we visit
Grill out
Old car show
Festivities
The vets love it!
They are in their
Own prison
A place to die
And then
Be buried
Among their brothers
Resting well
Duty honored!
Never ever
Did I think for one second
That I would ever consider
Such a place!
Death home
The bell tolls
But nobody gets out
Of this life alive.
My time comes
Faster than I thought
Body breaking
Vision lost
I have all the paperwork now
Refuse to have wife play
Nursemaid
Decisions must be made.
If die I must
And I will
Let me rest with my brothers
Up on that hill.
Yes, I am scared
But great care waits
For plush is Kings
Great staff
Although never enough.

Who wants an old veteran?
Needy and such
Decisions I must make
Sad is the tune
Leaving wife of forty-four years
So she can live on
Be active and engaged.
So spiritual,
She fights me all the way
Expect nothing less
In love we are
Forty-four years that went by too quick.
But Nam still feels
Like yesterday and help
I still need
Not just the physical
But mental, too.
Not ashamed
I did my duty
No hero am I
Just an old airman
With heart in the sky.

Truth American

By Anthony Coccozza

VA Medical Center – Los Angeles, CA

If you love America
Then you love your country,
So remember your heritage
For God and country.
Where America is,
That is my home.
My privacy
And my life will live on.
I'm a born Catholic,
A true Christian I am.
Believe in your living soul,
A life of sincerity can.
Live right is what I believe,
Or where would I be?
I fight for my independence,
The truth will set me free.
I am proud to be born American,
To remember my true heritage.
I have my constitutional right.
What I believe in is faith.
How many of us are left today
To preserve our American flag,
To fight for our freedom and liberty,
The spirit of the American flag.

Come as You Are

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center – St. Louis, MO

I'm a lonely sailor lost
At sea.
Won't someone rescue me.
I'm going down for the count,
No one will ever doubt
I'm not guilty by reason
Of insanity.
A fine line between
Madness and genius.
A fine line between
Success and mess.
A fine line between
Love and hate.
A fine line between
A love affair
And when you just don't care.
A fine time to say
It's been nice to meet ya
As you reach the door.
No one's holdin' ya back
No one's cuttin' ya slack
No one's home.
Better leave well enough alone.

Family of Man (A Triolet)

By Daniel Paicopulos

VA Medical Center – San Diego, CA

It's old men who send our young to war.
I don't listen to them anymore.
It's time to stand up, say nevermore, it's old men who s
end our young to war.
I've seen the play and ask once more, what the hell
are we fighting for?
It's old men who send our young to war.
I don't listen to them anymore.



Into the Mist

By Donald Sherwood

VA Medical Center – Danville, IL

My beat.
Slow
Fast
Go around
Sit behind
Come through
Over
Under
Into
Misty waters.

Numbers

By Donald Sherwood

VA Medical Center – Danville, IL

Numbers
3 to 6
9 to 5
Help they said
Born with a
Number
They don't
Get it
Largest
Containing
No. of googles
Money
Numbers
And numbers
To live by
Ancient
No. from
1 + 100
4 + 600
To do
With
Nos
666
No. of
The Beast.

Harder to Rhyme

By Scott Sjostrand
– Hallock, MN

Poetry has been therapeutic for me,
Trying to stay afloat in a mental health sea.
Some of the meds had harsh side effects.
My memories are fading. Oh, what next?
Creative notebooks help me to cope,
They're like a life raft or a rescue rope.
We all have our challenges; some have it worse.
I want to make a blessing out of this potential curse.
This morning I was watching the news,
Saw people in wheelchairs tap dancing
With their hands, dancing away the blues.
People who are impaired are still quite able,
With creative instruction for them to enable.
On my aptitude testing I score quite high,
I had big dreams. Why, God, why?
So I make the best with the hand I was dealt,
Fears and doubts I have felt.
My vernacular is diminishing,
While this poem I am finishing.
With my poetry I am prolific.
Writing my thoughts down,
To me it's terrific!

According to Him

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

Don't run a
Bad signal,
Sir.
The world
Is great.
It's OK,
More
A like
As of
Late.
It might
Lead
To Heaven's
Gate.

Radio Rhythms

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

It's all there
In the corner.
Radio rhythms.
I own
Everybody owns them.
Turn me
On
Turn you
On.

While in Rehab

By Samuel J. Hall
VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

While I was in rehab, I felt like I was in a movie.
I was sitting in the lunchroom during my first few days,
and the movie that came to mind was, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.
Now I know we are not supposed to make fun or poke light
of another person's disabilities or his or her physical
defects, but these thoughts did enter my mind.
There I was, sitting at a table, having lunch with an 85-year-
old man who was in that facility for the past eight years.
There was another man sitting there who was not happy
with any part of the facility.
He shared his dislikes at every meal.
He complained about the food.
There was not enough.
He ordered double rations at every meal.
Before the food was brought out, he was off smoking a
cigarette.
He was not happy with his bed.
He said he slept on the couches in the lobby.
This man was homeless before he entered the rehab facility.
There was a man in the room who directed the wheelchair
traffic as the chairs entered the room.
Some men in the room could not control their loud
outbursts.
Some of the residents had to be fed by hand.
There were a few people there who really needed to be
there.
Someday I may have to live there because I cannot function
at home.
I hope the people who work in the residential section are as
nice as the people in the rehab recovery section.
I soon found out the people who were not reliable and the
ones who were.

Mail Call

“This is a brilliant magazine that you edit and publish, wrote **William Kurrle, III**, of Chewelah, Wash. “It sometimes captures a demonic-psyche mind as mine at times. Your media allows a man to express his inner demented mind. Take this as not random disbelief.”



“Thank you all for your volunteer work in this wonderful cause of publishing the poetry and prose of U.S. military veterans,” said **Charles Kesler**, Dallas, Texas. “The last couple of years have not been good for me concerning my writing. I haven’t written, and that is my loss. I am coming out of a literary coma and with God’s help I will fight for my life again, with my writings... I have always enjoyed *Veterans’ Voices*. It is the lifeline and the very breath of my fellow veterans. We all still fight, and writing can be resupplied energy.”



Shon Pernice, Moberly, Mo., wrote, “Spring 2019 – another outstanding issue! “A Holocaust Survivor’s Surprise of a Lifetime” is a moving story of serendipity. Holocaust stories from survivors remind me of the fragility of life. Mrs. Warshawski went through horrors and yet she prevailed. I am incarcerated and my first stop when released is to view the entire interview, see “Big Sonia” on Amazon Prime and visit the World War I Museum. Mrs. Warshawski is my liberator.”



“Please receive this (donation) as my sincere appreciation for the hard work you do for us veterans,” said **Albert A. Hernandez**, El Paso, Texas. “Expressing our thoughts and feelings to our nation means a lot to us and is great therapy.” He sent VVWP a copy of his book, “The Audacity of Truth – A Bold Presentation of the Issues Challenging our Country,” with the inscription, “To my friends at *Veterans’ Voices*, I dedicate this book. You have inspired me by accepting my writings and placing them in your magazine.”



“Enclosed are four subscriptions to *Veterans’ Voices* magazine,” wrote **Marlene Richards**, VFW Auxiliary District 6 President. “We were asked to come up with a creative way to earn money to subscribe and I put together a basket with stamps, pen, pencils, writing paper and cards. The basket was raffled and earned enough to pay for four subscriptions. Thank you for helping our veterans.”



Helen Anderson Glass, Tucson, Ariz., volunteer and World War II veteran received the *National Martha Washington Spirit Award* from the Military Order of the Purple Heart Auxiliary (MOPHA). She has been volunteering for the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System for 41 years and continues to make lap blankets and bags for veterans. MOPHA representatives traveled to Tucson to present this award on June 11, 2019. These annual awards usually are presented at the national convention, but they were so impressed by Ms. Glass that they celebrated with her family and friends in Tucson. MOPHA is considering traveling to present the awards at the local VA facilities in the future.



Pictured in the center is Helen Glass surrounded by MOPH and MOPHA representatives.



The **Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 70** at the Moberly (Mo.) Correctional Center sent a \$200 donation to VVWP with this note, “We thank you for your continued support of veterans, wounded warriors and their families. The men of VVA Chapter 70 take great pride in fundraising activities, for organizations like yours, as a way of giving back to their communities.” Signed by **Shon Pernice**, Chapter Service Coordinator.

Ambassadors Sought

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

Thank You



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

The writers who submit their stories and poems as well as those who read and subscribe to the magazine encourage veterans everywhere to express their thoughts and feelings in writing.

The financial contributions, no matter how large or small, make possible the publication of the magazine. Those who have made larger financial gifts since the last issue of the magazine are listed here.

– *VVWP Board of Directors.*

Gifts of \$20,000 or more

Dr. Robert T. Rubin, Oxnard, Calif.

Gifts of \$15,000 or more

Gifts of \$10,000 or more

Gifts of \$5,000 or more

Gifts of \$3,000 or more

Gifts of \$1,000 or more

Breidenthal-Snyder Foundation, Leawood, Kan.

Gifts of \$500 or more

Rich Wangard, Neeneh, Wis.

Gifts of \$200 or more

Local Independent Charities (Combined Federal Campaign)
Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 70, Moberly, Mo

Gifts of \$100 or more

Mary Pitchford, Overland Park, Kan.

DAV Auxiliary 4, Wichita, Kan.

Deann Mitchell, Olathe, Kan.

Mr. & Mrs. Steven Richards, Uniontown, Ohio

Virginia Schaefer, Kansas City, Mo.

FWA Auxiliary 10004, Jewell City, Conn.

FWA Auxiliary 5968, Orange Park, Fla.

FWA Auxiliary 6158, Fair Oaks, Calif.

FWA Auxiliary 8956, Ocean Shores, Wash.

FWA Auxiliary 9283 Southgate, Mich.

Gifts In-Kind

Kansas Audio-Reader Service, Lawrence, Kan.

Kaw Valley Computer, Mission, Kan.

Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.

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

VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.

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

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

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



FOUNDERS' AWARDS

Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual) \$ 50

Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:

Best Poem (Perpetual) \$ 50

Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:

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

STORIES — *Fact or Fiction*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Florida Award \$ 30

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

TH Norton Award: Editor's Choice \$ 25

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

SPECIAL CATEGORIES

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

Medical center administrator nominates; publisher approves \$ 50

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

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

Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



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

Instructions for Writing Submissions

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

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

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

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

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

Guidelines for Local Contests

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

SUBMIT ONLINE:

www.veteransvoices.org

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 Art

Watch for artwork in the Fall 2019 issue!

Veterans' Voices will publish a special section in the Fall 2019 issue of the magazine with visual art from military veterans. We already showcase your writing, now the editors want to highlight your art!

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

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

Submission Guidelines

For more than 65 years Veterans Voices Writing Project has provided an outlet for military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction by sharing their stories, poems and artwork. With the generous assistance of Dr. Robert Rubin, the editors will publish a special centerfold section featuring visual arts created by veterans.

- Entries must be submitted as a digital file, either online or by U.S. mail.
- All art must be original and submitted by a military veteran or active service member.
(List branch of military service and years served.)
- Media may include: acrylic, airbrush, assemblage, casein, charcoal, color pencil, graphite illustration, drawings, ink, oil, pastel, printmaking, tempera, watercolor, and traditional and digital photography.
- An artist statement is preferred to convey the artist's inspiration behind the artwork.
- Image requirements for entries: JPG files (Please try to keep the file size under 5MB to ensure proper uploading). For publication these files should be 300dpi when saved at approximately 8x10 inches (2400x3000 pixels), ideally, and 5x7 inches (1500x2100 pixels) at minimum.
- Submission deadline for the Fall issue will be **August 26, 2019**. After August 26, 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!
Deadline is Aug. 26th.

Calling for
Photographs,
Drawings and
Paintings



Digital Submissions

*Submit artwork as a digital file
either online or by mail.*

www.veteransvoices.org

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

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



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See Page 67 for the Visual Arts
Submission Guidelines!



★ Pen Celebration ★

The Healing Potential of Writing and Visual Art

Save the Date and Join Us!

Saturday, November 9, 2019 at 2:00 p.m.
The National World War I Museum and Memorial
Kansas City, Missouri 64108



Featuring Military Veteran
Dr. Robert Rubin, M.D., Ph.D.

Los Angeles VA Staff Psychiatrist and
Sponsor of the Visual Arts Initiative

See page 67 – “Heal Through Art”

Contact the VVWP office 816-701-6844 or veteransvoices@sbcglobal.net to learn more or request an invitation.

www.VeteransVoices.org