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Summer 2022

# VETERANS' VOICES.



**To The Reluctant Writer**

*By Ted Iliff*

**My Hardest Good-byes**

*By Christine Hazuka*

**Coping With the Pain**

*By James Janssen*

**Labels Are for Soup Cans**

*By Scott Sjostrand*

Vol. 70, NO. 2  
ISSN 0504-0779

**VeteransVoices.org**

# To The Reluctant Writer:

By Ted Iliff

So, you've got something to say, and you're ready to write about it.

Then, you're stricken by a common curse that afflicts every writer at some time or another.

You don't know how to start. Those first few words defy discovery. You think of enough opening lines to fill a book, and to you they all stink. Or you draw nonstop blanks. After a fruitless time suck, you give up.

What you are doing at that instant is cheating yourself out of a fulfilling and even surprising experience. You're also denying your friends and family, and in some cases all of posterity, a chance to learn something about who you are, what you've done or what's important to you.

If you take the advice of countless writers, editors and teachers, you'll find a simple way to overcome the first-line blockage.

Write the second line.

By that I mean just start saying what you want to say. Begin your story as if your spouse or grandchild were sitting next to you. Where or when does the story begin? "I was at boot camp." would work. So would "It was the summer of 1965." Don't think about writing the story; tell it.

From that point, your tale or your message should start flowing, just like it does when you start to tell a joke or share an anecdote from the past. Once it gets going, try not to stop. Let the torrent of words run its course. Then you can go back and tinker with it as much or as little as you like.

Warning: stopping can be as challenging as starting. Some writers never let go; they keep adding unnecessary wordage or fixing what doesn't need fixing. Remember, perfect is the enemy of good. Look for the moment you can comfortably declare your piece done...and let go.

As for that missing first line, you'd be surprised how often the writing process sparks an idea to fill that void. It may not reach the level of "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." So what? If it gets you and your reader into your piece, that's all that matters.

So much for the mechanics of writing. Now let me try to convince you of its value. I'm not talking about any monetary value or historical value or literary value or even the archiving value. I mean the value to you personally.

You can talk about something all you want, but it will never have the impact on you and others that the written word creates. There's a permanence, a stature, a gravitas unmatched by any other form of communication.

Only you can feel the amazement and satisfaction when something appears on a screen or on paper that you instantly realize is pretty damn good. Maybe it's funny or profound or whatever, but it came from you, and it's there for the ages. Maybe you'll be the only one who ever sees it. Even so, you still get that buzz, that rush, when words that you piece together reflect a thought or idea so well that you say to yourself, "Damn, where did THAT come from?" There's no feeling like it. It still happens to me, and I've been writing almost nonstop for more than 50 years.

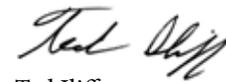
The buzz only intensifies when you summon the courage to show it to someone else. Maybe it's just a relative or trusted friend. I say courage because you are after all exposing your work, and therefore your ego, to judgement and even criticism.

Hopefully, your editor or coach will be gentle but candid. If you like the suggestions, use them. If not, ignore them (graciously). After all, it's your work, not theirs. But in the process, you will discover that someone else likes your writing as much as you do, maybe more.

Finally, when the piece is done to your satisfaction, bask in the accomplishment. You've put something dear to you into words. Or, perhaps, you've dragged something from an internal dark place out into the light, where you, perhaps with the help of others, can find a new perspective to ease the burden it has caused.

If you're a veteran, there's one more step to consider. When your prose or poetry piece is complete to your satisfaction, send it to us via our online system ([veteransvoices.org](http://veteransvoices.org)). We'll consider it for publication in this magazine. We can't publish every submission, but I promise you we will try hard to find a way to make you a published author.

Good luck and warmest regards,



Ted Iliff



Ted spent nearly 50 years in journalism with stops that included CNN (executive editor), Voice of America (associate director), USA

Today (at its inception) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich. International consulting work took him to Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans. He lectured at University of Missouri-Kansas City and Bahcesehir University in Istanbul. He grew up in suburban Kansas City, studied journalism at the University of Kansas and earned a B.S. in Liberal Arts from the State University of New York. He has authored three books – *Hitler and Munich* (1988), *The Golden Times* (2008) and *Mission Road: A Journalist's Life from Kansas to Kandahar* (2021). In retirement, he leads tours at the National World War I Museum in Kansas City and serves as prose editor and board vice president with Veterans Voices Writing Project.

# Veterans' Voices®

Summer 2022 Vol. 70, No. 2

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

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

## History

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

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

## Magazine Subscriptions

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

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## Magazine Guidelines

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

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

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

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# Forever in Flight

By Norma Rowe

VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

I'm running late. I can't believe this! I just know the helicopter is going to leave without me. As I drive up to the helipad I see everyone waiting. Hurriedly I lock up the jeep, and we all run to the helicopter, a Huey. I climb into the gunner's seat and strap up.



When I gaze on these seemingly deserted villages, an air of peacefulness settles over me. I'm saddened by what the war has done here, but I feel the grace and splendor of Korea overwhelm me at the same time.

This is great, my first helicopter ride in Korea. As the chopper slowly lifts off the ground, an awesome feeling comes over me. I feel as though I have the wings of a hawk and can soar through the endless skies. Everyone around me fades to the back of my mind, and my thirsty eyes drink in the scene unfolding before me. The sun glistens on the river, winding through Seoul like a silver snake. We follow the river north, using it as a guide.

As we leave the city, mountains close in on us. They get larger, reaching up daringly. I feel the wings in my mind banking right and left with the chopper through the mountains. The wind in my face is exhilarating.

I survey the countryside and see rice paddies and villages scattered below. I'm saddened as I see more and more burial plots. I try to imagine, years ago, when the war was here. A Huey like this would have guns mounted on each side, and the joy of this beautiful country would be dampened by desolation.

As my thoughts dwell on times of war, I notice there are no people around the villages. I am told by the copilot that they hide when they hear the chopper approaching. The past war is a constant reminder to never let their guard down.

The chopper and I have become one, gracefully soaring through mountains, dodging rain clouds and dipping in air pockets. I feel the adrenaline flowing through my veins, freeing my soul with the wind.

As we soar over the still-winding river, rain begins to fall. To the west the sun gleams in the rain, creating a brilliant rainbow. It spreads over the country, promising hope and peace as its treasure. The thrill of the picture causes me to catch my breath in wonder.

I feel as though I'm in a dream. The buildings and vehicles are like toys, so close you can reach down and touch them. With one swoop of your hand you can gather the boats together, creating waves that would flood the fields.

A valley appears on the horizon. Nestled between the mountains is our destination. I know that this flight will be endless for me. I don't want to tuck in my wings.

Too soon we spot the helipad at Camp Long. The helicopter touches down gracefully, but I find that I still have not touched down. The experience and beauty of the flight will remain locked in my mind forever. Korea is indeed "the best kept secret." Only now, I know the secret.

## You Were Our "Doc"

By Michael Kuklenski

—Rowlett, TX

You were lean and green,  
Fresh to our unit,  
Brash, bold and bragging,  
Pushing yourself to the limit.

We were Marines  
With our own swagger.  
You were FMF,  
New to our banter.

You were against the war  
And refused a weapon to carry.  
Once we understood,  
We knew you weren't Navy.

You carried more med bags  
And knew what to do.  
We carried more ammo  
To help get us all through.

You were with us  
In the darkness of a firefight.  
We were under siege,  
Hoping our reactions were right.

You were injured more than once  
With no one to render you aid.  
We kept trying to kill,  
While you continued to save.

You did the best you could;  
Words won't erase your pain.  
A few marines didn't make it  
But you weren't to blame.

Thanks, "Doc."

# My Hardest Good-byes

By Christine Hazuka  
—Selkirk, NY

We all have to say good-bye to someone or something all through our lives. For myself, it was a very hard thing to say. In our little family, we said so long.

Ma, Daddy and I had gone on a weekend stay in the Catskills with my aunt and cousins. We packed up sandwiches, fruit, cookies and coffee, and we always stopped to fish in Prattsville at Schoharie Creek. I petted my dog Corky and my cat Patrical as Ma called me to come on, let's go! I knew my pets would be okay because our neighbors, whom I called Aunt and Uncle, would watch over them. The trip was great. I remember catching a nice bass that Daddy helped me bring in. It was a sunshiny, happy day.

Arriving back home on Sunday afternoon, I was content to see home. That hour and a half drive seemed so long! I helped bring in our things from the trip, excited to see that my bass was still alive in the pail. I let it go in the bathtub. Then, outside, I ran to find my Corky and Patrical. Corky practically jumped into my arms, wagging her tail and speaking to me the way she always did. But no Patrical in sight. I looked anxiously for three days, and no Patrical. Uncle Merrill came down to speak to Ma and Daddy the third evening. I overheard him telling them that he had found Patrical. We all went up the hill to a tool shed. There he lay, an awful



sight. Maggots were all over him. He was dead. I will never forget the sad ending. We carefully brought him home and buried him in Ma's rock garden. I said a prayer and said a loving, hard good-bye.

My Daddy was a hard-working, handsome man whose hands were twice the size of mine. I never heard a harsh word come from his mouth. His pet name for me was his little Chicken. I went everywhere with my Daddy. When he played cards at Albright's garage, I sat up on the Coca Cola cooler with a bottle of chocolate soda. Then, under the car in the grease pit, I went to watch. I knew I would get it good from my Ma, but it was worth it to be with my Daddy. I even got to go on Saturdays to

the brick yard where Daddy worked and sat on his broad shoulders to reach up and blow the 7 a.m. whistle. While riding home with my Ma, I would see her with a slight smile on her face. She knew how I loved my Daddy and how proud I was.

The only time I saw my Daddy drink was when he finished mowing our acre of ground. He would come in and sit at the table with a bottle of Utica Club beer. He never complained of any sickness or pain that I knew of. Then one day, he went to the doctor. He was hurting. It was cancer, and three months later he was gone. The very night before, I stood by his bedside at Catskill Memorial.

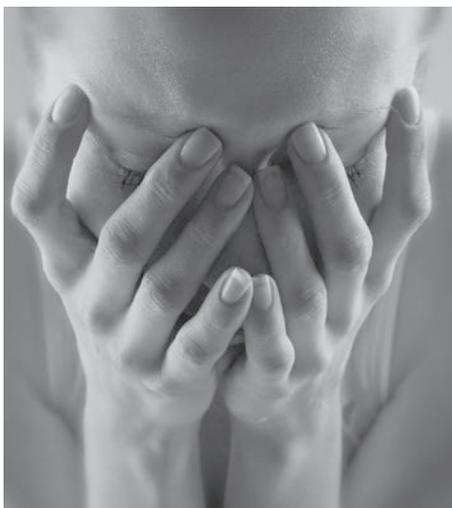
After a hopeful hug, his words said he hurt to the bone. He said with a tear in his eye, "Good-bye Chicken. Watch over and be good for your mother." I held his hand tight and didn't want to let go. Through the long night, I prayed to God that Daddy didn't have to suffer anymore. The next morning, the phone rang at five; he was gone. He lay in the front of our little Dutch Reformed Church in New Baltimore. He was loved by all, and the church was full. The Masons and the Firemen were there and carried him out the door. I sat in silence, not even a tear. Then, before they took him away, I said my good-bye to my Daddy. My heart hurt so bad.

Months passed by so slowly for Ma and me. We went through the motions of being alive. Not many words were said by either of us. Corky and I spent many hours alone together. She was getting old now; we were both 13 that year of 1960.

I walked up a steep hill to catch the school bus. Now I was going to the new high school. Unless I had some thinking to do, I took the bus. Anxious to get back home and leave the place that I really disliked, I boarded the bus for the ride to the steep hill. I couldn't walk that half mile fast enough. I had to get home.

Ma and her friend Ken were sitting at the table, with the rifle standing close by. Corky was gone; Ken had shot her. They had buried Corky in the flower bed before I even got home that day. I went to the place where she lay and said "Good-bye, my girl, my forever friend. I love you." Then I ran away to a friend's house and refused to come home for two weeks. I was beyond anger and hurt bad inside. When I returned Ma and I had harsh words and she slapped me hard in the face. I finally let loose, tears coming now. I cried. I felt so alone.

Many times through the years I have said good-bye to my Grandma and Grandpa, my first loves, then many friends and veteran comrades. I hate the word "good-bye." When I hear or say that word, I know it's forever.



## Smells

*By Daniel Paicopulos*  
—San Diego, CA

I enjoy a home with smells,  
real ones,  
from cooking and cleaning  
and such,  
from pets and plants,  
and still-wet shower towels.  
No vanilla need apply.  
I like a house with books,  
don't trust one without them,  
perfumed magazines, too,  
and moldy driveway newspapers,  
not too neatly piled, please.  
I crave a life with peace,  
the scents of earthbound angels,  
yet welcome the bumps and fevers,  
the odors of sincere living.  
I cherish friends who last,  
the ones who know who I am.  
They smell of memories and love,  
of days gone and yet to come.

## Cumulus Clouds

*By CJ Reeves*  
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Cumulus clouds sail in the sky  
Like ships on the ocean blue,  
Around and around like birds in the sky.  
Where is the port they sail to?

Like a magic carpet, they sail away  
And drift to distant lands,  
Over castles in Spain, France in spring.  
They sail, but never land.

I would like to be as free as cumulus clouds  
And sail over the ocean blue,  
Over rivers and vales, mountain and dales,  
Searching for something new.

---

SALLY-SUE HUGHES  
MEMORIAL AWARD No. 1

---

## Second Chances

*By Daniel Paicopulos*  
—San Diego, CA

Moving around  
in a used body now,  
I recently found  
it's when, not how  
that truly matters.  
I'm just passing through,  
occasionally feeling like new,  
but usually in tatters.  
All things ephemeral,  
they come and they go.  
It's a good thing, in general,  
to think this, to know  
that if we would be happy,  
to prosper, to thrive,  
it's best to be joyful  
about being simply alive.  
We all want to live  
as long as we might,  
to keep keeping on,  
to fight the good fight,  
wishing for second chances  
to come up to bat,  
but hope can't stop the age game  
to a body run flat.  
It's all over too soon,  
in a flash, in a blink,  
and none of us has  
as much time as we think.  
In my case, I pray,  
I'll be caring, more present,  
before my final day,  
attentive and pleasant  
in the here and the now,  
thinking at the end,  
now that was some wow.

# Board Games

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

I would pull out board games on the weekends with my children. We took over the dining room table. It was great quality time, and they requested it. I think back on how I actually got started playing war games and why and how life-changing these games would be during my military career.

I was embarrassed when I arrived at my first duty station as an intelligence analyst supervisor. I had just completed a very basic course in intelligence school (eight weeks) at Ft. Huachuca, Ariz. All of a sudden, I was in charge of an office full of other soldiers who knew much more than I did. I had just reclassified from being a postal clerk during my first 10 years in the service. I could run any aspect of the post office, including the post master position. I only changed specialties to get promoted.

It was during the Cold War, circa 1985, a matter of supply and demand. I needed to play catch up real fast. Not only did I need to learn about the enemy but also basic military tactics. One good thing was some of my new male subordinates had recently reclassified from other specialties – infantry, armor, artillery, air defense. I would pay close attention to them because they understood our military tactics.

However, three other female soldiers had reclassified just like me from an administrative field. They were in the same situation as myself, except I was in charge. They seemed less motivated and maybe a little slow on the draw, but I had faith I could whip them into shape. I was a leader regardless of what specialty training I had. The bottom line was we all were new, and we would learn together and build a team.

But time was our real enemy, now. We had an important job; we needed to gather raw information, make it into intelligence and be ready for me to brief a three-star general every morning at 7 with our most current situation.

Luckily, my section had a warrant officer, which meant he had been enlisted previously and he knew his stuff. He could see there were major elements missing in the staff, so he came up with an interesting training format. He started from scratch. He pulled out a board game, with little tanks, artillery pieces, infantry and even bombers. We learned about their capabilities, as well as their enemy's. We learned military tactics. The training was extensive and demanding, but it worked. Our crew became informed intelligence members of the securities forces in Germany until the wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union fell apart.

In August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. We were called to the operation. Here we go again, I thought. I needed to learn about a new enemy, its weapons, military tactics and hopefully its limitations. In a matter of months, I was once again briefing the VII Corps commander in Desert Storm and Shield. My job was to have as much information as possible on the enemy forces affecting our units so the commander could make the best military decision possible in real time.

Although our board games at home were just for fun, that board game at Fort Huachuca was far more serious, teaching us how to win at something far more important.

## Carpe Diem

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

Our world is filled with the unknown.  
We schedule what doctors say  
and live in fear with our aches and  
pains.  
Our hearts are filled with loss and the  
loss of possibilities.

Today is a new day, Carpe Diem.  
It is just another day, Carpe Diem.  
Take what comes, live for today,  
seize the day, Carpe Diem.

Toss all this aside, get out of bed,  
embrace life's challenges.  
Give back and pay it forward.  
I am still serving.

Today is a new day, Carpe Diem.  
It is just another day, Carpe Diem.  
Take what comes, live for today,  
seize the day, Carpe Diem.

Make the bed, shit, shower, shave,  
pretend you have a purpose.  
Others are counting on you;  
you are counting on you.

Today is a new day, Carpe Diem.  
It is just another day, Carpe Diem.  
Take what comes, live for today,  
seize the day, Carpe Diem.



# Sergeant Dorsey

By John Boors  
—Altoona, PA

As I write this story for a great magazine, I am pushing 91 years of age. But I think this story should be told because it may touch the hearts of many men and women who lived through this hell called prejudice.

I was born and raised in a small coal town in southwestern Pennsylvania. I graduated with the class of 1950. Two months later I was a combat medic with 110th Infantry, 28th Division, Pennsylvania National Guard when President Truman activated us near the beginning of the Korean War.



I don't know to this day why I was picked to go to Brooke Medical Center at Ft. Sam Houston in Texas, where I spent several months learning to be a surgical nurse even though my MOS was combat medic.

After that training I was transferred to Ft. Riley, Kan., where I served as a scrub nurse in the operating room until my honorable discharge.

My roommate was a combat medic who served in the 7th Division, a black man. I believe he was from Michigan or Illinois. I was 18, and I believe he was 20 or 21. We never had an issue with race, and I do not even recall having a discussion about race. We just respected each other. We were roommates for about a year when he either was transferred or discharged. Just one great kid, and he taught me a lot.

After my discharge in 1953 as a sergeant first class, I followed one of my childhood dreams to become a Pennsylvania state trooper, and I applied to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia because I wanted to study anesthesia. I enjoyed my duties in the operating room, but we had so many burns from white phosphorus bombs and amputations, dozens every day on kids returning from Korea.

Often only one Chinese soldier would have a gun, but a dozen other Chinese troops would have knives, hatchets, ice picks, etc. All these wounds would show up in our operating rooms. I never read a newspaper about this travesty, then or now, but they did exist, and the guys lived through this hell to tell us in the operating room about this savage treatment by mostly Chinese troops.

Sorry, I digressed. I became a state trooper, served five years, then joined the Port Authority Police for 10 and a half years. I was talked into submitting an application as chief of police in Edgewood, where I served only four years. One day one of my desk sergeants informed me that a CIA agent was on the phone and wanted to talk to me.

His name and how we met will remain with me until my passing. He informed me that the State Department was seeking men with my command experience to go to one of several countries where

they had advisors stationed. After a discussion with my wife and kids I resigned as chief and went to D.C. for extensive training including time at Fort Bragg and Georgetown and ended up in Vietnam in February 1969.

A week later I was assigned to Ba Xuyen province in the delta. I was stationed there almost three and a half years, then transferred up to II Corps. Getting back down to Soc Trang, I studied my roster of the people assigned to my office, then referred to as Public Safety Directorate, or commonly called the police advisor.

I asked my staff, "Who is this Sergeant Dorsey?" They kinda smiled and told me he runs the enlisted men's (EM) club. Later that day I walked over to the EM club and asked the Vietnamese lady bartender if



Sergeant Dorsey was around. She said he was there somewhere. So I ordered a beer, and a few minutes later this big black man showed up, and I asked if he was Sergeant Dorsey. He said he was, so I introduced myself, and we had some chit chat about the Village Hamlet Radio System (VHRS), where he was my advisor to the program.

He didn't seem to want to discuss the program, even though we were the only two people in the club and the bartender was busy cleaning tables, floors, etc. So, I told Sergeant Dorsey, "I'll see you at 0800 tomorrow at the office" and he replied, "Yes sir."

He arrived before 0800, and I told him where the coffee pot was and to help himself. He brought no briefing papers, charts, into the office. What he started to tell me was an eye opener and somewhat sickening personally to me in 1969.

He told me my predecessor was from Georgia or Alabama, a sheriff for many years with a total disregard for people of color. Sergeant Dorsey often requested a vehicle and interpreters to do his job as the advisor to the VHRS and was rejected time after time.

Here was a man trained in communications and communication equipment but was not allowed to perform his duties. I asked Sergeant Dorsey if he talked with the PSA or deputy, and he informed me "they" knew the problem but also did nothing.

It didn't take me but a few minutes to inform Sergeant Dorsey there was a new ballgame in town, and from then on as long as I was there, not only was he going to get the tools he needed, but I would also go with him sometimes because I wanted to get to know my province. I told Sergeant Dorsey I had five vehicles out front, and he could use any one he wanted. Also, one of my interpreters was a retired ARVN soldier and Sergeant Kiet was in the ARVN but assigned to this office, and he could use either man to do his job.

I never once heard Sergeant Dorsey complain about anything. His work ethic was excellent, attitude fantastic. I received numerous field reports as well as oral reports from village and hamlet chiefs about his exemplary knowledge of the radios and his patience in explaining their working parts. His reports were always current. If a radio was captured or lost, I was made aware of it as soon as Sergeant Dorsey was.

Overall, he made my responsibilities easier to manage. Therefore, I wrote him up with my highest recommendation for a Bronze Star as a team player who made numerous trips into enemy-controlled areas and never shied away from his responsibilities. He got approvals up the command with no negatives and only favorable comments. He was awarded the Bronze Star a few weeks later.

I was so pleased that he was awarded the Bronze Star for going far above and beyond what he was asked to do. He richly deserved this award.

## Who I Am

*By Shon Pernice  
—Moberly, MO*

I may be your neighbor  
Or work as a caterer.  
I might serve your food  
Or fix your hairdo.  
I am a taxpayer  
And may be a bricklayer.

There are some occupations  
That reject my persuasions.  
A job application  
Comes with consternation.  
Mention a background check,  
My heart hits the deck.

All that I ask  
Is to give me a chance.  
My mistakes of the past  
Were treated with an iron cast.  
Time has given me skills  
And has strengthened my will.

I will prove my worth  
As I embark on new turf.  
I feel like an outcast;  
How long will this last?

As I live in your community,  
I yearn for the unity.  
What you see is the real me,  
Living with a felony.



# Keep a Grip

By James Janssen  
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS



January, 1967. As I recall, the drill sergeant blurted out “attennnnnnchun!” I thought: just another session of commands, inspections, marching, etc. And I guessed right to start with.

There we stood at “attention” as he walked behind us for what seemed to be an inspection. So far so good. No problems, until I felt a sudden jerk on my right hand. I surmised that he was inspecting my M-1. But no. He emphatically let me know that losing my piece to the enemy more than likely spelled certain death. The importance of keeping a tight grip on my piece became firmly implanted the very moment my weapon was suddenly jerked from my right hand. That began to center my thinking on events in my younger years.

One example was being recognized by my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Calderhead, as having the strongest handshake grip in the class. Example two was understanding the fact that my great grandfather was an inventor and efficiency expert in the construction industry. Among his credentials was the invention of the cement truck which stemmed from his surmising that cement could be prepared while en route to a work site. I so admired his worthy traits that I began adopting two of them — efficiency and multitasking. The end

result was landing entry level jobs at JCPenney followed by Target.

But there was a much larger payoff swimming around in the dark shadows of my head that had not come to light. My life to this point was peppered with various forms of child abuse and traumatic experiences that directly affected my emotional well being and control issues. Like the sudden brightness from a light bulb that had just been turned on, I realized that having a firm grip on my M-1 could be applied on my complex PTSD triggers by merely using the same technique that I will label replacement thoughts — responding to every emotion, thought and trigger with a strong “grip.”

Would this take practice? Oh yes. But the result was a sense of freedom when I realized that those unwanted patterns of old destructive thoughts would no longer be welcome. Placing a firm grip of resolve on living the life I want and deserve became the current reality. Letting go of the unwanted trash would now be much easier.

Realizing I still possess that strong grip from so many years ago has returned in full force, allowing me to be the real me to pursue traits and talents that had been locked and hidden. No one will ever take my mental M-1 away again.

## Small Things With Great Love

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

Lord, I long to change the world,  
To make the world a better place,  
Safer, cleaner, healthier, happier.  
I confess that I don't know how.  
How can I possibly make a difference?  
I don't even know where to begin.

When I was younger I dreamed.  
I dreamed of doing great things,  
But I know that I'm not a great person.  
Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things  
Only small things with great love.”  
What small things would You have me do?

I can't feed all the hungry children,  
But I know I can feed one or two.  
I can't shelter everyone who is homeless,  
But perhaps I can donate a tent  
And a meal and a new sleeping bag  
And a new coat when it's cold outside.

I can't heal all the sick and lonely,  
But I can pray for those who are ill.  
I can donate to the homeless shelter.  
I can visit someone in a nursing home,  
Someone who is lonely and afraid,  
Someone like me who needs a friend.

Thank You for listening to me, Lord.  
Thank You for opening my eyes  
And showing me small things I can do.  
Thank You for loving and caring for me.  
Thank You for everything You do.  
In Your Holy Name I pray, amen.

“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.”  
—Psalm 37:4

## Summer

*By Charles Fredette*

*VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA*

The rain fell outside my window,  
And I breathe rain inside  
With my groceries. The rain resumed  
And the traffic flowed. And roared.  
When the rain stopped  
The traffic sounded,  
And the clouds appeared.  
The sun comes occasionally.  
It's another New England day.

## Not at My Best

*By Kimberly Green*

*—Fort Smith, AR*

Forgive me if I'm not at my best.  
My strength and fortitude have been put to the test,  
for you see I've been to war.  
My body bares scars  
and I harbor memories of death and gore.  
Allow me to put my mind at rest.  
Forgive me if I'm not at my best.  
I've been shot at and hit many times;  
Sometimes I feel I have nine lives.  
If I'm foggy and ill at ease,  
it's because I have recurring dreams.  
My Purple Heart rests in my war chest.  
Forgive me if I'm not at my best.  
Sometimes I'm in a dark space;  
I am alive today because of God's grace.  
I strive daily to overcome  
combat images which leave me numb.  
I am what I am, I attest.  
Forgive me if I'm not at my best.

"A soldier's life is never the same  
when they have been to war."

## A Man Who Was Kind

*By Gene Allen Groner*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

When I was a young boy  
and in my youth,  
Being clever and funny  
made me happy, that's truth.

But now that I'm older  
and close to my time,  
What I value the most  
is for me to be kind.

When I think of the legacy  
that I want to leave,  
It's not goods or money  
but kindness, I believe.

So on my gravestone of granite,  
write these words of mine:  
"Here lies old Gene  
a man who was kind."

## A Beacon of Light

*By Jason Kirk Bartley*

*VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH*

You are a beacon of light  
in everyone's sight.  
Keep your flame burning bright  
through the night.  
Show the way to the cross,  
illuminate the way  
in this sea of life,  
through the burdens, tides  
and the waves of strife,  
crashing onto the shore,  
safely to be with Jesus,  
safe forevermore.  
You are a beacon of light  
to those who cannot see.  
Lead them to Jesus  
and sweet victory.

# Broken Life, the Restoration

By Scott Sjostrand  
—Hallock, MN

It all began Sept. 27, 1964, when I was born into a dysfunctional, broken Christian home. My dad was my hero but had a severe alcohol problem. Mom was a saint. At around five years old, I remember him coming home drunk at night and him and mom arguing till all hours. I used to cry and pray that God would make them get along.

I'm the oldest child and felt very protective of my mom and brother and sisters. I grew up on a farm, so I learned how to drive straight-sticks at five also. Little did I know how life-saving that would prove starting three years later. I loved school but got very little sleep because of my home situation. At eight years old, instead of pulling dad out of the ditches early every morning, I volunteered to be his personal chauffeur. I drove him to every bar in Kittson County and waited for him after "last call" every night like a faithful dog. He called me "Pardner;" I was his wingman.

We would usually get home around 3 a.m., including school nights, I'd usually get around three or four hours of sleep per night, but at least mom and the kids were safe. We never hit the ditch when I was driving in all four seasons. Dad was safe too.

I graduated with honors from high school in 1983, but I never reached my full potential. Then, off to the U.S. Air Force in 1984. To secret security clearance, responsible for weapons of mass destruction. I prayed silently when handling them that those in charge would have enough sense never to use them ever



I first sought help in 1994, at Fort Gordon, Ga. I needed in-patient treatment but didn't receive it. Next stop, Seoul, South Korea, Hooker Hill. Women and alcohol to the extreme. I earned two Army Achievement medals in 11 months there and a yellow belt in Tae Kwon Do.

My life came crumbling down around me then. Walter Reed Army Medical Center came next. It took

months; they honorably retired me with a damaging, inaccurate psych diagnosis leading to horrible forced injections in isolation wards that gave me epileptic seizures. Some almost killed me. Many trips to the emergency rooms. It took over seven years to correct it.

My former psych diagnosis pretty much discredited anything I had to say. Atrocities were done against me by people who didn't like me, and they would call me a liar. I was even given electric shock treatment. It was terrifying. I wished I'd never been born. I paid a severe price.

Every Memorial Day I salute our flag and the POW/MIA flag with tears in my eyes. I can relate. I'm a paid-in-full, 100 percent lifetime member of the Disabled American Veterans, but I'm a unique and able American veteran.

I now do creative writing as a therapeutic interest, and have won a few awards. I'm working on publishing my own books. I started a profitable new career from my kitchen table. My sister thinks I should have my biography published. Finally, the future looks bright!

## Evidence Seen and Unseen

*By Deborah Ann Cole*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

The meaning of evidence is clear and vivid,  
meaning that there's something tangible  
and that something happened  
even though they say it didn't.  
Sometimes the evidence is hidden  
by people, places and situations.  
This leaves me feeling as though  
I have no accreditation.  
This leaves my soul open and feeling  
unbearable pain.  
I continue to pursue the truth.  
I feel as though evidence not seen  
is making the truth appear in vain.  
I use my voice to advocate  
for myself and others.  
But it seems to me that the more I speak  
about the issue,  
the more my heart feels trouble.  
And when unseen evidence indicates bias,  
I believe others are thinking I'm lying.  
Sometimes I'm not sure what to do  
or whom to trust due to lack of evidence,  
leaving me feeling doomed  
and without existence.  
Even though I stood up to fight for this land,  
who's standing up for me  
when the evidence is not at hand?  
To find closure even though  
the evidence is not seen,  
I must turn my trust to God and believe  
the truth won't be covered up  
like dead, wilted leaves.  
Somewhere along this path,  
I know the love of God  
will eventually unfold the truth  
and allow me to beat all the odds.

## Who Am I?

*By Deborah Ann Cole*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

I am this girl who's humble and meek;  
I am this girl who's strong and weak.  
I am this girl whose voice wants to be heard;  
I am this girl that God uses for words.  
I am this girl that sometimes is misjudged;  
I am this woman that always shows love.  
I am this woman whose head twirls around and around;  
I am this woman that sometimes feels bound.  
Even though I feel bound, I break through  
by God's grace.  
He gives me the courage and tells me  
to continue with his race.  
I am this woman that will fight until the end;  
I am this woman that encourages others to win.  
I am this woman that transfers magnificent gifts;  
I am this woman that inspires others' spirits to lift.  
God is in me and directs me each and every day.  
As long as I follow Him diligently, He endows me  
with His amazing grace.  
I am this woman sent from God above to you,  
To let the whole world know that His word  
remains true.  
I am that woman.

## Summer II

*By Charles Fredette*

*VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA*

The shadows danced on the wall  
and the reflections were standing tall.  
The more I walked, the more I saw  
the sunbeams.  
And the shadows played  
Despite the cloudy sky.  
And a crumpled leaf  
Fell to the ground.  
The crickets still make me smile,  
But I am enjoying summer  
All the while.

# My Vietnam Story

By Albert Hernandez

VA Medical Center—El Paso, TX

I was born in March of 1946. I came from Mexico with my mom and a younger brother. My mother was a widow. My biological father was a politician and was assassinated. Life for a widow in Mexico was really hard in those days. My mother wanted a better life for us, so we came to America and settled in El Paso, Texas. I became an American citizen in 1969, after Vietnam.

I graduated from Jefferson High School in El Paso in May of 1965. After graduation, I visited my grandparents in Casas Grandes, Mexico, where I was born. I was having a great time celebrating my graduation until my mother sent a telegram telling me to get home as soon as possible. When I got home, there was a letter waiting for me, telling me to report to the reception station downtown for my physical. I was on the verge of being drafted. Immediately I went to the Navy recruiting office. The recruiting officer said not to worry; they would take me in right away. They signed me up. Whew! I did not want to get drafted. I was officially enlisted in the U. S. Navy in late June of 1965.

I reported to boot camp and underwent 12 weeks of training. In those days Navy boot camp was brutal. During the last week of boot camp we saw our assignments. I was to report to Navy Hospital Corps School in San Diego. I was going to be a Navy Hospital Corpsman (medic). It was 16 weeks of intensive study and training in medicine and patient care. It was an experience that would shape my future in health care.



After Hospital Corps School I was assigned to the Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. I worked on the wards for six months. I worked all three shifts. I know what hospital work is like. It's not easy.

Then came the shocker. I was "drafted" to the Fleet Marine Force (FMF). In October 1966 I reported to the Field Medical Service School in Camp Pendleton, Calif., to be trained as a combat medic. Navy corpsmen serve as medics for the Marines. We didn't know that. The Marines trained us hard, got us in top physical shape. It was six weeks of grueling training. We were on our way to war! A Marine trainer told us that the only thing tougher than an FMF corpsman was a Navy Seal. Wow! A Marine told us that. I believed it.

After that, we got five days of leave to say goodbye to our families. I remember wearing my Marine dress greens. My dad was confused and said, "I thought you

joined the Navy." I had to explain to him. My dad was really my stepfather. My mom met him in El Paso when he was in the Air Force. He was a veteran of World War II and Korea. He knew and understood where I was going, and why. He passed away in 1997. My mom passed in 2008. I miss them dearly.

I deployed to Vietnam in December of 1966. It was a very bleak time for me and my family. My mother and a small brother of mine saw me off at the airport. My mother could not stop crying. She gave me the blessing of

the Cross on my forehead. I boarded the plane at Travis Air Force Base in the San Francisco bay area bound for Hawaii. From Hawaii, I took a C-130 military transport to Okinawa, then on to Vietnam. From Camp Pendleton to Vietnam, it was a lonely journey going to war.

I arrived in Da Nang on a cold and rainy December night. They gave me a sandwich and drink for the night and a bunk to sleep on. Next morning, I along with several others were flown in a Chinook chopper to Phu Bai, my home combat base. It was not too far from the DMZ. I reported to the processing area where I was fitted with combat gear, my medical bag, and a .45 caliber pistol with five clips. In Vietnam corpsmen were authorized to carry a weapon but only for self-defense. That's how bad it was even for combat medics.

I was then trucked to my company, which was about 10 miles from Phu Bai,

up on some hill. I reported to the senior corpsman. My medical bag was filled with pills, needles, syringes, wound dressings and other medical items. I was assigned to the second platoon of Hotel Company. I was immediately introduced to some hard-core Marines and the other platoon corpsman. They didn't waste any time. I went on my first patrol that night.

I was really scared. It was pitch dark, and you couldn't see where you were going. Somehow, the squad leader led the way. We heard a firefight. We waited our turn, but nothing happened. The next morning, we saw what had happened. Another squad ran into a pack of Viet Cong (VC). I got my first glance of war. VC bodies were lying on the side of a road. It was a gruesome sight. Reality set in. I was in war. Now I was shook up. I won't make it, I thought. This could have been us. I prayed that day. Every night I would say a prayer. Every night.

I will not bore you with a bunch of war stories or details, but there is a particular experience of mine that I need to tell. We were on a company patrol one day and I got sick. The senior corpsman couldn't spare anyone to take me to the nearest camp that was about three miles away by road and railroad tracks. I was told to follow the tracks that would lead me to an Army outfit. I walked the tracks alone. I kept thinking what would happen to me if the enemy spotted me. I was scared. Every step I took was in fear. I would be no match for the enemy. When I got to the Army camp, they were amazed that I had walked that distance all by myself and that no one spotted me. I have to believe the hand of God was over me. My guardian angel was with me. I was not alone. I was given food and shelter by the Army guys and trucked to Phu Bai the next day.

There were many close calls, and there were days when I was sure I would not make it. I was in over 100 patrols and three major operations. In the last operation, my company got hit really hard. We were

ambushed by a North Vietnamese Army outfit. These were highly trained troops. The other corpsman in my platoon was severely wounded. I heard he died later. Every other corpsman in the company got hit. The senior corpsman was killed instantly along with the company commander. The platoon officer, a young Marine lieutenant, was also killed. Only about 20 guys were left of my company, I was later told. I was the only corpsman alive and unwounded.

The reason I am alive today is because I was pulled from my company to another company that was retreating and had no corpsmen left. Only about 40 guys were left of that company, but they needed a corpsman because there were some that required medical attention. I think about this quite often because I remember how upset I got when I got pulled from my company. Out of eight corpsmen, I was the one chosen to transfer to another company. The next morning at about 6 we heard what sounded like a firefight. One of the guys from the retreating company I was assigned to said, "That's your company being hit, doc." He was right. The firefight lasted about an hour. We saw medivac choppers flying into the area, picking up the dead and wounded. Huey choppers provided cover. Then came the jets that sprayed the area with napalm bombs. It was something to see. I have to believe the hand of God was over me once again. I could have been killed that day, but I wasn't. I was chosen. I was spared.

Every war has its own horror. In Vietnam, I saw things I couldn't believe. I saw innocent women and children die, memories that still haunt me. But that's war. War changes you. It torments you. You see things you cannot forget. I tell people when they ask me about Vietnam that it is by the mercy of God I'm still here. I could have easily been killed that day my company got hit. That's really all I can tell them. In a war zone, you can die at any given moment. From a sniper bullet, a booby trap, a kid with a grenade or



weapon, a mortar attack or a firefight, your life is in constant danger. Each day that you survive is a gift of life.

However, patching up a wounded soldier or Marine or seeing one die before your eyes is something that will be embedded in your mind for the rest of your life, no matter how many doctors you see or how much therapy you get or how many pills you take. A combat medic sees things others can't.

From boyhood to now, my life has been a roller coaster. For years I've lived on the edge and didn't realize it. But I moved on. I didn't quit. I went to college on the GI Bill and got my degrees. My specialty was in health care. I worked at the William Beaumont Army Medical Center from 1978 to 1999 and held different positions there, one being the physical evaluation board liaison officer. I processed medical boards on soldiers. Then I worked at the VA Health Care System as a health systems specialist and administrative assistant to the chief of staff. I retired from the VA in 2006 with a total of 36 years federal service, counting active duty. I know about veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. I've seen

them. I've talked to them. I've seen the toll it took on them and their families. It's hard. It's sad. It took me back to 'Nam. I keep my flashbacks to myself.

Nevertheless, I am grateful for many things. I am a proud Vietnam War veteran. I am proud to have served as a Navy corpsman with the Marines. That is a heritage and legacy that only a few can claim. In my living room there is a display of my medals and ribbons with pictures of me in Vietnam. This was inspired by my wife, Alicia, when she said, "Display all your medals and ribbons. You have much to be proud of." Coming from my wife really meant something, so I did. In my study you will also see symbols of my legacy as a Navy corpsman. You will see Vietnam and military paraphernalia. You will see my college and naval school diplomas. From an associates degree to two doctorates, you will notice my level of education. Education for me was not an option;

it was a must. Also, my license plate reads "Navy and Marine Corps Medal." Needless to say, I drive my car with great pride.

Today I reside in my hometown, El Paso. I am comfortably retired and happily married to my sweetheart Alicia of 50 years ago. We finally married in 2004 after so many trials and tribulations, and, well, just life. We are blessed with a nice home. We have two adorable pet dogs named Babygirl and Precious. I am also an ordained, certified minister.

I get my health care from the VA. Despite the many challenges our VA health care systems are experiencing, the VA has taken very good care of me. They are truly great people. They understand veterans because that person walking through the doors of a VA clinic or hospital is not your typical patient. That patient is a veteran. You don't know what that person has been

through and the medals and decorations that person may possess. Every veteran has a story. Respect is all veterans ask for. We've earned it. Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard, we're all brothers and sisters in arms. We know the price of freedom. We know the meaning of blood, sweat and tears. To be an American veteran is an honor and a great privilege. The honor is yours; the privilege you earned.

*It has been said that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Well, that's how Vietnam impacted my life. I refuse to die without a purpose. I cannot leave this world without making my mark, especially for those who did not make it back from war. My message is this: Don't give up; don't quit. Life is too precious. Live it.*

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## Crisis of Middle Age

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

Parents, read to your kids, help them grow,  
share some soul for them to know,  
and when to turn each page.  
Maturity will later behold  
the crisis called middle age.

Let childhood go; day by day,  
measure life like a gauge.  
Work your magic like a mage  
to avoid the crisis of middle age.

If you have regrets for time you lost,  
don't succumb to that rage.  
Be your own boss; stay far away  
from the crisis of middle age.

Be kindhearted; crave peace of mind.  
Love is the price we wage.  
The only enemy could be time  
in the crisis of middle age.

## The Total Price

By Boyd Alan Burke  
VA Medical Center—Pueblo, CO

The cost we pay can never be  
Planned. Some give all and  
Some are destroyed partway!  
There can be some who come out  
Unscathed in much of any way.  
The cost can never be calculated  
In dollars or cents in any of the  
Endeavors once started.  
The cost can only be done when  
The final breath is taken.  
The thought of need is not  
Challenged at the time in any way!  
The thought is realized in the end  
And viewed for what it is worth.  
The cost of thought, when doing it,  
Is to analyze it from start to finish.  
The cost you paid: was it enough  
Or not the price you wanted to pay?  
The cost you paid: was it worth  
It in the end today?

## Sgt. Kelley

By James Allen Breitwieser  
VA Medical Center—Honolulu, HI

I see you ogling my lanky athletic beauty,  
my cropped brindle hair brushed and glossy.  
My dark eyes track your reckless approach,  
and, yes, that's my tongue that drapes and  
drools over fanged teeth as I pant in the  
suffocating Iraqi heat, sprawled here in

the enclosed hold of a C-130 night flight  
to Baghdad. Do upright ears, narrow chest  
betray my Belgian Malinois heritage?  
I'm Sgt. Kelley, military working dog.  
That kickass corporal over there, who calls  
himself my handler, he works for me,

not I for him. He exists only to ensure my  
safety and survival. When I burn my paw pads  
on the scorched hard ball while out on patrol,  
the big lunk picks me up and carries me. I'm  
sure I got heavy after a couple clicks. If roaming  
ferals threaten attack, he employs lethal force

to protect me. But his show of true devotion  
came last mission when special ops requested  
a dog to sweep for unexploded ordnance. That's  
my MOS, sniffing out explosives. So we Black  
Hawk-in, link up with the cowboys. No sooner  
set down, an incoming round knocks me

flat. When I pop back up, corporal sees  
that I'm bleeding from shrapnel wounds.  
She's wounded! He shouts, pressing bandages  
to stem the blood flow. Call the nine-line!  
Lead cowboy balks at his dust-off request;  
still wants me to perform the sweep!



No can do, you bastards! She's out of here!  
Dust-off evacs me to a battalion aid station  
for wound suturing and Purple Heart pinning.  
Our C-130 descends, touches down, taxis to  
terminal. After this short layover, I'm off  
to USA for well-deserved R and R leave.

Corporal stays; he'll team-up with another  
dog. They don't want us forming close bonds,  
which lead to bad habits. I'm okay with that,  
though I'll never forget he saved this dog's ass.  
I'll soon return for 'nother tour, then retire  
when old, if I survive Iraq's mean streets.

## Autumn Nights

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

The crisp smell of autumn is in the air.  
Gathering wood from the dying forest,  
to be arranged into a blazing pyre.  
The season of fall, transforming nature.

Flames shimmy and grow brighter as they flare  
to life with cheery illumination.  
The dry wood crackles as smoky plumes rise  
in swirling mists of a bluish grey haze.

A towering blaze shoots high in the sky,  
flickering red and orange in the dark,  
hypnotizing those huddled around its  
swelling of gyrating intensity.

Fanning the fire, stoking the glowing coals  
that rise like a hellish inferno.  
Sparks hover above like fireflies soaring  
and gliding in the chilly autumn night.

Streaks of fiery light and color explode  
with the popping sounds of Roman candles.  
They shoot skyward, lighting the darkened sky,  
then spiral down as smoldering cinders.

The autumn aroma of burning wood  
chases away the chill of the cool night.  
The brilliant light dims like the season fades,  
vibrant at the start, death coming at the close.

## It Is Not

*By John L. Swainston*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

It is not  
a cold snowy night.

It is not the desert heat.  
But a jungle full of bugs.

It is the endless rain.  
It is not hell on earth.  
But it could be.

It is not another canned meal.  
Steak and lobster would be  
most appreciated.

It is not the smell of burning  
flesh.  
It is not a wounded soul—yet.

It is—Vietnam.

## Hurry Up and Wait

*By Carl “Papa” Palmer*

*—University Place, WA*

Sir, permission to speak, Major, sir. Go ahead, Private.  
Sir, what time is the 10 o'clock inspection, Major, sir?  
You mean the ten hundred hours inspection, Private?

Sir, yes, sir. I mean ten hundred hours inspection, sir.  
The inspection will be at ten hundred hours, Private.  
Sir, yes, sir. However we've been standing here since

ten hundred hours for thirty minutes now, Major, sir.  
It will be ten hundred hours when I say it is, Private,  
as he checks his watch, waits for the colonel to arrive.

Will I ever get the military out of my mind; must each  
situation become another army wrinkle in time? While  
I wait thirty minutes past my 10 o'clock appointment,

ponder if I should be the private, ask the receptionist  
how much longer until my 10 o'clock job interview or  
take the role of major and wait for the colonel to arrive.

## What's Going On?

*By Richard Wangard*

*VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI*

The freedom I fought for is being used as an excuse  
to bury people!

On Sept 18th a rally is going to happen in support  
of the people who attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6th 2021.  
I should be there!

With a big, big sign and wearing my old Nam helmet!

The sign would say:

THIS IS NOT WHAT I FOUGHT FOR!

I AM UNDER OATH TO PROTECT AGAINST

ALL ENEMIES BOTH FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC!

I would hold my ground!

Then promptly I would be beaten up and overrun  
by people who think Jan 6th was right!

“KILL MIKE PENCE,” they shouted and made a gallows!

NO! I would not have a weapon except my sign.

When the first guy hits me I would fight

until I went down which might take all of five seconds.

Me, a disabled Air Force vet who still knows

what is right: caring about others,

getting a couple shots to protect people I don't even know!

And my loved ones!

What's going on?

1,000,000 dead Americans that did not have to die!

Americans no longer caring about Americans

or if they get sick or not!

Don't worry about the USA!

They will fall without a shot being fired.

Democracy? Values? Apple Pie? Mom?

All our memorials?

Decency toward our fellow man and woman?

The rule of law?

Where is the National Mandate so people may live?

Or did those 1,000,000 not have loved ones?

The unvaccinated put us all in peril!

No surprise; someone made it political.

Tell me please! What's going on?

# Balance, Harmony and Respect



*By Gene Allen Groner*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

We face a difficult challenge in our lives. Many of us have forgotten how to live in balance and harmony with the world around us. We have become accustomed to life in a world that places more value on material possessions than on respect for others and for nature that surrounds us. The voices of fear and desire drown out our inner voice of harmony and spirituality. How can we get back on the right path — the path of balance, harmony and respect?

We can begin with prayer and the spiritual practice of living with nature. Our wise elders found a way to help us get back on the right path — the path of balance and respect. They created the medicine wheel as a place of healing and purification and prayer. The wheel symbolizes the sacred circle of life and the connectivity of all people, wildlife and nature.

The medicine wheel is created by placing stones in a circle. In the center of the circle is a cairn of stones representing balance. Then spokes, or lines of rocks, radiate from the center to the four directions — east, west, north and south — reminding us of the need to balance all four aspects of our being: spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. When these four aspects

are in balance, we experience health and happiness. When they are not in harmony, the outcome is chaos and disease.

Through prayer and meditation, we can connect with our true inner self, and the Creator will show us the path of life — the path of balance, harmony, and respect.

I made a small medicine wheel at the outer edge of our south lawn, overlooking a small stream that flows from a living spring about 70 yards to the north. Mine is made with a circle of small stones about three feet in diameter, with the traditional four spokes of small stones crossing at the center. I made a cairn of several stones at the center of the medicine wheel for balance.

I have a small stone bench about 10 feet from the bank of the stream, so I can sit on the bench in the quiet beauty of nature, contemplate the medicine wheel in front of me and hear the stream of water flowing below. It is a sacred and peaceful place for me to pray and center myself in nature with my Creator, the Great Spirit who is always present. I go there to pray and meditate whenever I feel the need to restore balance, harmony and respect.

It works.

## The Big Red One

*By Kimberly Green*

*—Fort Smith, AR*

There was something about his eyes.  
The way he looked at me  
made me feel alive.

I had been dead for so long,  
couldn't express myself,  
couldn't hear the birds or their songs.

The way he carried me  
to the door  
gave me a reason in which to live for.

The way he held my hand,  
gave me a chocolate  
that came from his land.

Never shall I forget  
the American soldiers  
who saved us and were no threat.

They came upon us as we laid in a heap,  
smells of death,  
living skeletons with no teeth.

The Americans picked each up,  
carried us gently  
to a Red Cross truck.

These Americans with the BIG RED  
ONE,  
each had tears in their eyes  
as they brought us out into the sun.

Seventy-five years have come and gone.  
We're grateful to the soldiers  
of the BIG RED ONE.

# The Best of Intentions

By Tony Craidon

VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN

Janet Whitfield had spent the last decade looking after her husband, Roy, when she received the call that would change everything. A call that promised relief from Roy's Alzheimer's and dementia.

"Mrs. Whitfield?" a gruff voice inquired.

"Yes? Who's calling?" Janet asked.

"I have an opportunity for you. I think you'll want to hear me out."

That had been 27 hours ago. Now Janet and her husband were walking through a dimly lit, concrete-walled hall led by a petite Asian woman who only referred to herself as "Roy's nurse."

Janet was given just six hours to decide whether to take the mysterious man's offer to fly them both to an "undisclosed location," or the offer would be extended to another family fighting with the horrible brain-destroying diseases. She had decided in just one hour. It had been a hell of a decade, and the last five years were an absolute nightmare. She knew her two adult daughters would have helped if called upon, but they had their own families, and Janet had made the noble decision to care for Roy herself, through sickness and in health.

She had driven Roy to the nearest airfield, where they were met by a person identifying himself as Col. John Smith, though he wore no uniform or insignia. He attempted to usher them both into a



Blackhawk helicopter, but Roy resisted as soon as he saw his transport.

"Mom, there's an angry dragon ahead!" Roy exclaimed, struggling to turn back to the safety of the car. "It wants to hurt me! It wants to hurt me real bad, mom!"

But before Janet could respond, Colonel Smith brandished a small syringe and promptly stuck it in the back of Roy's exposed neck. Roy almost immediately fell backwards into the colonel's arms, and an airman seemed to appear out of the ether with a wheelchair. Janet had no idea what the airmen's ranks or titles were. Roy had been in the Marines, and she wasn't familiar with the Air Force.

"Is that really necessary?!" Janet yelled over the Blackhawk powering up.

"Yes ma'am. It's for the best. I'd hate to have our patient hurt himself on the way."

There was a coldness about the colonel that Janet did not care for, a coldness she

had seen in Roy many times as he slipped into memories of Vietnam. Janet knew that coldness and understood pushing back would only result in an even colder disposition. Janet said no more.

Several transfers to different aircraft had left Janet feeling simultaneously weary and stir-crazy. The colonel accompanied them the entire way, offering little kindness and even less conversation. Finally, they were driven several hours through unfamiliar mountains while the sun retreated to another part of

the planet. Once twilight had made way for a moonless night, Janet rolled Roy in his wheelchair to a door that seemed made of the mountainside that framed it.

"I want ice cream." Roy said quietly in his chair, the last dose of sedative having worn off within the hour.

"I know sweetie," Janet said in a soothing, reassuring voice. She had become accustomed to Roy's regression. The last time Roy had spoken her name was nearly five years ago. "I'll get you some ice cream in just a little bit." That satisfied Roy, who had been unusually compliant the last hour or so.

They were met at the door by Roy's nurse and parted ways with Colonel Smith.

"This way please, Mrs. Whitfield." The nurse motioned to an elevator. Inside the elevator was a series of unmarked buttons. The nurse punched a sequence, and they began a long descent. A chill ran down Janet's spine. For the first time, she began



to question her decision to bring Roy here. None of this seemed right. All of this seemed...dark.

“What can you tell me about the procedure?” Janet asked with some concern. She hadn’t really thought there was a chance they could be in danger when she accepted the offer. After all, the United States of America wouldn’t allow for unethical treatment of a patient, right?

The nurse just turned, said nothing, smiled a plastic smile, nodded a perfunctory nod and gave a mechanical wave of her arm signaling Janet should follow her. Janet was certain she spoke English because her introduction had sounded articulate, if not a little broken. But now she wasn’t so sure.

The drab hallway was dimly lit. In some parts, moisture had worked its way through the walls, and in those places, swaths of mold and a kind of fungus Janet couldn’t identify had grown. The floor was also concrete, or so it seemed. But several times Roy’s wheels bogged down as though they just ran over wet tar.

They passed many intersections, occasionally taking one confusing turn after another. They did not pass another person. After what felt like an hour but was really no more than 10 minutes, they came upon a dead end. Their path was blocked by a heavy steel door with a wheel lock like the kind you’d see on a submarine. Roy’s nurse led them both into a 10-foot by 10-foot room with a single, incredibly bright bulb hanging from the exact center of the ceiling. Against the far wall was a rolling table with several syringes and a mess of wires with electrodes dangling off the side. The walls were painted a calming sky blue. Several nylon hook-and-loop straps were bolted to the floor, set evenly apart. Roy’s smiling, nodding nurse motioned for Janet to move his wheelchair over those straps.

Once in position, the nurse bent to secure the wheelchair with the straps. Roy looked around curiously, like a child at a zoo. He seemed particularly interested in the wall he faced. Janet turned to see what had captured Roy’s attention and saw the wall opposite of them was floor-to-ceiling mirror. From the lower left corner appeared a door that Janet would have sworn hadn’t been there five seconds ago. The door opened to a brightly lit room, and a very tall, gaunt man bent his head through and silently motioned for Janet to come toward him.

When she reached the threshold, she had to squint. Her eyes had adapted to the dimly lit halls and even darker mystery room. After giving her eyes a few moments to adjust, she saw a cheerily painted room about the same size as the one with Roy, still looking on with childlike wonder. The walls were a light blue with cloud illustrations every few feet. Just inside the door stood the man who had beckoned her, and behind him, another petite woman who could have been the nurse’s twin. Maybe she was. She wore the same plastic smile and did not shy away from Janet’s gaze.

“Please, Mrs. Whitfield, come in and help yourself to a coffee or hot chocolate.” The tall man waved an open palm toward a small table in the back of the room that featured two hot liquid dispensers as well as an assortment of cookies, crackers and cheese.

“Umm, no thank you.” Janet replied warily, “May I ask who you are?”

“No need for such formalities Mrs. Whitfield.” The tall man spoke in a surprisingly calming voice. “You can just call me Doc. I’ll be overseeing your husband’s procedure.”

Just as Janet was going to ask what exactly the procedure was, Roy called out from behind her.

“Mom? Mom? I don’t like this! I want to leave!” Roy pleaded. Janet turned to see the nurse had strapped Roy into his chair by his wrists and ankles and was currently shaving the hair on the side of his head. The speed of the nurse’s actions was for Janet surprising, and eerie.

“Mrs. Whitfield?” The tall man called for her to return her attention to him. “If you’ll just step inside here, we can get started.”

Janet turned back again to look at her husband. He looked genuinely frightened. She started toward him, but the tall man reached out with alarming speed and grabbed her by the elbow. “Mrs. Whitfield,” he exclaimed in a gruff whisper, “the sooner we begin, the sooner you and your husband can enjoy the rest of your lives together.”

Janet was startled by the strength of the grip on her elbow. Never being a confrontational person, she had Roy for that when needed. She nodded and turned back to Roy. “Roy, honey? You’ll be okay. These people are here to help you. Remember, if you do well, we can get ice cream.” It seemed to work. Roy calmed down. Through Roy’s wrinkled face, the heart-skipping smile Janet had fallen in

love with bared itself. "With sprinkles?" he asked. "Of course, Roy. Of course."

Janet stepped through the threshold into the room with the coffee and faux clouds. Doc let go of her elbow and closed the door behind her. Then Janet saw the viewing panels. One-way mirrors, she surmised. She watched in quiet fascination as the nurse deftly attached the electrodes to the sides of Roy's head. Then, the nurse administered three injections in rapid succession. She was so quick Roy didn't even seem to notice. The nurse turned toward the mirrored glass, smiled her plastic smile, nodded almost imperceptibly, and walked out of the room the way they had come, the door slamming with a metallic finality.

"We're ready to begin Mrs. Whitfield." Doc said gently.

"Janet."

"Excuse me?" Doc asked.

"Please, call me Janet." Janet said, feeling tense and wanting desperately to believe she'd made the right choice coming here.

"As you wish, Janet." Doc said, wearing a sympathetic smile. "I must prepare you, Janet. What you will see in just a moment may be difficult. The procedure is relatively quick. However, it will cause Mr. Whitfield some discomfort. You don't have to watch."

Janet didn't know how to respond. She thought to ask again for an explanation of the procedure but couldn't get her mouth to cooperate. Instead, she just said, "Let's get this over with. I owe him an ice cream date."

She looked through the mirror and noticed a web of electrodes affixed to Roy's head. "When did that happen?" she thought.

Doc's assistant, still wearing her plastic smile, typed a few commands into her console keyboard and then nodded at Doc to begin. Janet sat in a plush chair facing the mirror, sick with anticipation. Will this work? Oh God, I hope this works!

Janet reflected on the last 10 years. Roy, once the rock and pillar of their expanding family, had degraded into a fussy child incapable of making any adult decision for himself. Janet, having once quietly worshiped this war hero, had taken on the responsibility of caring for her husband unto death. The days she wished she would wake to find him peacefully not breathing saddled her with an enduring guilty conscience.

Doc nodded once at his assistant, turned over his shoulder, nodded at Janet reassuringly and placed his hand on a control that looked much like an accelerator lever one would find in a passenger jet cockpit. All at once the lights dimmed. Janet looked through the mirror, and her heart lurched.

There, strapped helplessly in a wheelchair, Roy's face contorted in a torrent of reactions. First, confusion. Then shock. Then came the pain. Roy's face, once strong jawed and determined, always confident, twisted into agony.

"What's happening?" Janet yelled as she sprang out of her chair.

Before she could protest, Doc's assistant deftly swabbed Janet's neck with an alcohol wipe and plunged a syringe into the exposed skin. Janet immediately felt woozy and strangely at peace. She sat back down.

"What was that?" she asked meekly. No one answered. Instead, all of Doc's attention remained on Roy, who was straining with all of his still considerable strength against his restraints. Terror flashed through his eyes, and a lifetime of painful episodes, from childhood to 'Nam, flooded his corroded mind.

"You have to stop." Janet murmured, feeling a galaxy away. "This isn't right."

"Hush now Mrs. Whitfield. It's almost over," the doctor's assistant cooed in broken English. Janet wasn't at all convinced, but she found she did not have the strength to argue.

Another 10 minutes passed. Roy periodically screaming in agony, twitching as far as his restraints would allow. His eyes remained squeezed shut most of the time, occasionally opening to stare or glare at nothing, bulging in agony before forcing them shut again. His heart rate spiked. Veins pulsed on his face, neck, and hands. His knuckles remained white, fists clenched so tight his poorly manicured fingers cut four half-inch gashes in his palms, blood dripping to the floor like a faucet not shut all the way off.

Janet began to feel her strength coming back to her. She lunged at the doctor. Engrossed in whatever readouts his monitors were telling him, he was a bit startled when he heard his assistant forcibly restrain Janet and shoved her back into her chair with unexpected strength from such a petite woman.

"Sit!" the assistant instructed with none of the previous softness in her voice. "It is almost over. Once started, it cannot be stopped unless you want your husband to be put through all this for nothing."

Before Janet could protest, the dimmed lights turned brighter, and Roy's screams subsided. The doctor turned and straightened his back, a wily smile fixated where moments earlier had been pressed lips locked in a concentrated straight line. Janet looked beyond the doctor into the room where Roy sat passively, his head down as though unconscious. Janet stole a look at his heart rate monitor and was relieved to see it hadn't flat lined. The extreme rate of heartbeats was slowly subsiding, giving way to a more relaxed rhythm. The assistant let go of Janet, again smiling that plastic smile.

"Give him just a moment to recover," the doctor told her, "and you can go into the room with Roy. It's done, Mrs. Whitfield."

After a few agonizing minutes of waiting, the doctor, assistant and Janet all walked into Roy's "operating" room. The assistant

began to undo the restraints while the doctor verified Roy's vitals. Janet, feeling anxious and uncertain, called out to her husband of 51 years.

"Roy?"

Roy didn't respond, so Janet tried again, a little louder. The second time, Roy responded with a grunt, and slowly lifted his head, eyes open and unfocused.

"Ja-Janet... where am I?" Roy asked, his voice broken and raw from 20 minutes of periodic screaming.

Janet let out a combination half-laugh half-sob and threw both hands to her mouth as tears flowed. Janet experienced a moment of light-headedness while a blanket of relief wrapped her soul. She ran to him, taking one of his bloody hands in both of hers.

"Yes!" she sobbed, "Yes Roy, it's Janet! How do you feel?"

Both doctor and assistant stepped aside and posted behind Janet, watching the exchange in silence, both taking notes. Janet paid them no mind. It would appear she had her Roy back.

"Like a peeled grape. Ate up like a soup sandwich." Janet had heard that phrase from his days as a Marine all too often throughout their marriage but so rarely in the last 10 years.

Janet collapsed on Roy, sitting in his lap like a newlywed. She leaned her head against his neck, not minding the sweat and sharp bristles of his beard. She just sat there a few moments, occasionally laughing, occasionally sobbing tears of relief and joy. Her nightmare, as well as his, was over. Finally.

Janet felt Roy go slack. She lifted her head and watched as Roy's eyes rolled back, showing only the bloodshot whites. The doctor and assistant rushed to them, the assistant once again taking control of Janet and forcing her away from Roy.

"What's happening?" Janet screamed, not for the first time since this experiment started.

The doctor, after getting negative reads on Roy's vitals, ran into the other room to investigate more readouts from the wire harness still affixed to Roy's head. Janet waited for him to return, to begin life-saving techniques they always did in television shows. Instead, the doctor poked his head in from the lab, looked at his assistant, and shook his head.

Without a moment's hesitation or any apparent sympathy, the assistant spoke to Janet in a rehearsed cadence.

"He is brain dead. There is nothing the doctor can do." She let go of Janet, stepping into the lab to join the doctor.

Janet just stood there, looking at Roy's limp body, his mouth hanging open while drool began to ooze. So many emotions ran through Janet all at once. Fear, surprise, anger, sorrow, but none as pervasive as the feeling of relief, and guilt for the relief. At least her nightmare was finally over. She was going to sue this organization back to the stone age, that was for certain. Leave a nice little going away present for her children when it was her time to go. But for now, it was the feeling of relief and guilt that dominated her thoughts.

After a while of just staring at Roy, she finally said quietly, "Wait for me. I'll meet you at the clearing at the end of the path."

Janet heard a click. A very distinct click. She'd heard that click often after Roy had cleaned his 1911 .45 service pistol he kept in pristine operating condition. She turned to see the plastic smile on the nurse who had reappeared sometime during Janet's mourning. She was holding a cocked pistol pointed eye level at Janet's head.

"Sooner than you think, Mrs. Whitfield," the nurse said without an ounce of malice. She pulled the trigger. A dime-sized hole



appeared on Janet's forehead, while a much bigger hole was blown out the back of her head. Janet's last thoughts painted Roy's face and clothes, as well as the wall behind them.

The doctor and his assistant came back into the room. The doctor was shaking his head in frustration. "I really thought that one was going to take," he said solemnly. "Oh well, we must carry on. Who's next?"

The nurse, lowering her firearm to her side, casually looked at her clipboard. "Mr. and Mrs. Garapolis, Athens Greece."

"Well," the doctor sighed, running a hand over his face, "give them a call." He then looked to his assistant. "And grab some more blue paint."

## The Student Is Ready

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

Inside her womb, the baby kicked;  
The teen girl felt a thrill!  
To carry life, she now was blessed;  
She marveled and stood still.

The boyfriend had made promises  
And said he would stand by,  
But left her then to “find himself.”  
He said he had to try.

She told her folks what he had said  
And, all at once, they knew:  
The baby soon would come to term,  
And, somehow, they’d make do.

No other choice was thought about;  
No other choice would do!  
This baby soon would have safe birth;  
It all had been thought through.

Choose Life! Always in view of her,  
Her love for life so dear!  
This “lesson” keeps us all “in class.”  
The “teacher” will appear.

## Three Wise Men

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

I have a dream!  
Three young boys,  
fishing in a stream,  
a Coleman lantern for light  
on a cool summer night,  
their toes in the stream.

I have a dream!  
Ed, Bobby and Jack,  
we would get them back.  
They grew up straight and tall,  
three musketeers,  
all for one and one for all.

## Lost Souls

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

Mothers lose their  
sons and daughters.

Husbands never return home,  
taken not by their maker, but by  
soldiers and their weapons of death.

Aggressor or defender matters not,  
they both end life.  
Destroy an apartment building, a  
maternity hospital, a cancer ward.

This has a name—Collateral Damage.  
Death coming to those not in uniform.

Too many are dying;  
too many are dying.

**One** man wants what is not his.

Even those that live have a  
lifetime of memories—nightmares.  
Never forgotten.  
Haunted until their death.

## Besieged

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

Haunted dreams awaken within the drowsy mind,  
curdled memories that descend.  
Images flare and flash into darkness  
in the stifling air of time.  
Hidden reflections besieged by bitter  
trials and tribulations surround a broken heart,  
separated from the realities by trembling darts  
that pierce one’s soul and plunge it  
into another day of sorrow,  
shackled by bondage and flowing tears  
formed on good and evil.

# The Power of Color

By James Camera  
—Mamaroneck, NY

To this day, when I blunder, lapse into poor judgment or otherwise fail to make the right choice, my mind goes back to 1969 and the reception center bus, painted blindingly yellow against the glare of the sun, that carried me to the start of basic military training.

This bus deposited our motley group of raw recruits into the harsh world of a new reality. It was the start of a life where every decision was made for us, and consequences were suffered when orders were not carried out to the most exacting detail.

We were stripped of our civilian clothing, shorn of our neglected, unkempt locks and treated in an undignified manner the likes of which I was completely unaccustomed. I chose to be there, having boosted my draft status to be a part of the war effort and to avenge the death of a friend. At 19, I was naïve enough to think that I could make a difference. But I was taken aback by this lack of respect and inconsideration.

The “reception” center was anything but welcoming, as we were separated from one another to stand a foot apart and begin the process of de-individualization, the intent being to rebuild each of us from the ground up in order to become a cog in the wheel of a unit with one sole purpose.

Bright yellow in color, reminding me of the red-orange buses that carried me to the Coney Island amusement park in the 1950s with my catechism group of boys and girls and chaperoning Catholic priests amidst the sounds of laughter and excitement as the carnival came into view. This yellow bus carried with it the anticipation of



an exciting chapter in our lives until the moment a demonic drill instructor grabbed the boy ahead of me and pulled him to the ground, holding him in place at the neck with a shiny, spit-shined boot glistening in the South Carolina sun and silver spittle flying as he shouted inarticulate obscenities at the frightened young man.

The colors swirled in my mind — red with rage, grey with uncertainty — as I thought that this couldn't possibly happen to me. But it unfolded in an instant, and I was grabbed by the arm and forced off balance, the hot breath of the glaring drill instructor fouling the air in front of my sweating face.

He screamed at me, “Your momma must be mighty ugly boy, judging from the looks of you!”

I tried desperately to contain my anger over the remark. “Don't take it personally,” I said to myself. “He doesn't even know my mother.”

But still, the indignation swelled red hot in me nearly to the point of no return. I was

new to this environment and tried desperately to accept the adjustments I knew I'd have to make. I was in for the long haul, after all. For the next several years anyway.

When I failed to react quickly to his remark, the DI moved on to his next target. That taught me something in itself. This time the subject was a young man bigger than the rest of us, a bit slow-witted and awkward in his movements, and he was wearing an expression of complete bewilderment. The master sergeant in charge had

hit pay dirt.

“What's your name, boy?” He glared at the young man with malicious intent.

“Bailey,” came the nervous and barely audible reply.

“Where you from, Bailey?”

“Buffalo.” Again, a tense, short response.

“I didn't ask what you was, I asked where you was from.”

The drill instructor guffawed along with the rest of the cadre in charge as Bailey from Buffalo stood awkwardly staring at the red clay dirt at his feet. He fumbled for a plausible explanation until the DI interrupted his thoughts.

“Fall back in formation, Buffa...I mean, Bailey!”

Again, his cruel remark set off a burst of laughter as the recruit's eyes glistened with tears. Fortunately, the sergeant didn't notice as he moved on to his next subject of ridicule.

That moment stands out graphically, its white brilliance illuminating my mind with the appalling look on Bailey's face, the uncertainty of his environment and the circumstances that brought him to it emblazoned across his face for all those around him to see.

Time has done little to diminish that memory, and every bus that I've ridden on and every trip that I've taken by this mode of transportation reminds me of that bright yellow bus.

I am unsure of the reasons why these events are connected to colors. Maybe it has something to do with the white heat of emotions that ran through me at the time as I anticipated the outcome of each journey. The burning red desire to avenge my fellow recruits and my own callous treatment by the drill instructors. Or the mood that permeated the atmosphere as the mud-rust colored, open-sided, canvas topped bus took us from Saigon to Phu Bai, then on to a holding camp on our way to a meeting with an elusive and formidable enemy.

Each emotion frames a color to accompany it. Perhaps it's an attempt to cope with the beginnings of what we now know as PTSD, which was unheard of at the time. It all created feelings of doubt and hopelessness, like a grey and rainy day. My emotions were extremely high back then, and the colors may have been my way of compartmentalizing events to keep them in perspective.

Maybe. At times it is beyond my understanding, but suffice to say that colors stir passion and trepidation in me, and recalling those old dormant wounds is perhaps my way of finding closure in varying degrees or shades.

As my outfit stepped down, we were greeted by the solemn faces of the troops, the "boonie rats," whom we had come to replace. Their tour of

duty was coming to an end, and ours was just beginning. We stood across from one another facing in opposite directions. No one made eye contact. The atmosphere was tintured a dull blue as shadows of late afternoon began to form. We were about to become the new boonie rats.

We were then hustled to the waiting olive drab flying behemoth larger than a city bus commonly known as a 'shit-hook', or Chinook. Its dual propellers' deafening "wupping" filling the air with a hazy brown dust and nearly drowning out the sound of the waiting airborne bus.

I turned my head for a final glance at those returning to "the world" boarding their homeward-bound transport and saw, in my mind, the yellow reception center bus where in essence my journey had begun. And just beyond over the next hill, the orange sun fading to a burnt umber. Then I turned to step up into our waiting oversized conveyance with a vision in my mind as black as pitch, black as the jungle around us, of the harrowing place it was about to take me. I was wondering what I was in store for and thrilled and terrified at the same moment. Oh, how the complexion of my mind would alter the man I was to become.

## In Memory of

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

Heaven's tears rain down  
in rivers from the eaves,  
cascading down, landing below  
in puddles of hushed grief.

On the front door opening,  
a black wreath hangs silently.  
Whispered reverent sounds  
ruffle the ebony ribbons.

A familiar face stares out of  
still photos placed around  
the crowded room filled with  
subdued friends and family.

Smiles and gentle eyes forever  
captured for those left behind,  
to remember the life and love of  
one who didn't return from war.

Comforting embraces with words  
of sympathy quietly expressed.  
Embellished tales of old retold,  
continuing the fond memories.

A collection of testimonials and  
remembrances will forever  
flourish through the coming years  
and keep those gone with us always.



## Morning Mist

By William H. Anderes  
—Cresskill, NJ

The morning mist silently covers the meadow,  
Leaving part of itself on each and every flower,  
Becoming the morning dew. Then like unrequited love  
It too is gone within the hour.

The love I've lost still lingers within my very soul;  
It will be a part of me for all eternity.  
My mourning mist leaves but a tear for me to wipe away,  
But the longing in my heart will forever burn in me.

Yet in my dreams I'm comforted by her presence,  
Her voice, her loving touch upon my face;  
To know that somehow, someday, we will reunite  
With eternal perfect love in His heavenly place.

## The Dark Steel Door

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

As I walk past that dark open door,  
I do hear familiar sounds once more.  
I must keep this date,  
my last one with fate.  
I took a life  
over someone else's wife.  
So on I must go,  
sun, rain or snow.  
to meet the man with the rope  
and say my last prayer of hope.  
Now around my neck is a ring of steel  
like the dark door made of steel.  
It steals away my breath  
at this last moment of death.  
And as the trap door snaps open,  
I fall into oblivion.  
And at last I say, "good-bye."

## Christian

By Jason Kirk Bartley  
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

I'm a God-praising,  
thunder-praying,  
everlasting life-seeking,  
church every day of the week  
and Holy Ghost-filled,  
spirit-sealed,  
verse-quoting,  
Bible-toting,  
Jesus-witnessing,  
door-to-door-knocking,  
devil-socking,  
hymn-rocking,  
hollering and hooting,  
rooting and tooting,  
demon-booting-  
Christian.

## P-T-S-D

By Howard L. Adams  
VA Medical Center—Leavenworth, KS

### P—

You bore the pain.  
Deep and cutting to the marrow of your soul.

### T—

You gave your time and placed your lives on the line.  
How much time to heal and how many times to die again?  
Lost in time, a warp of anguish and sorrow, of pain.  
Only you know and your fellows.

### S—

Salutes are what we give  
to honor the sacrifices you made over and over again.  
Reliving the dreary carnage of death and dying all around,  
but yet you stand!

### D—

Dear to our hearts are the gifts y'all gave.  
Time, blood and sorrows unknown to those at home.  
Broken, but not beat.  
Daring to live on with minds of determination.  
Dare we forget the battles you fought, we can only salute!

## Princess Diana

By Michael Pride Young  
—Fond du Lac, WI

They call her the beautiful princess,  
but the fame and attention she drew  
was not the kind she dreamed of in her mind.  
Like a fugitive from justice  
looking back across his shoulder,  
running away from every lawman that he can.  
The love and attention she often drew  
was not the kind she dreamed of in her mind.  
Her beauty has been used  
and abused by the assets of mankind.  
From England and across the world,  
what she found was disappointment's bitter weed.  
And the love she too often found  
was not the kind she dreamed of in her mind.  
Her beauty has been used  
by the assets and hands of mankind.  
The demons took her picture  
in the paper, on TV, on shows,  
but now the demons are enjoying the fame.  
Still inside the hunger lust goes on.  
From England and across the world,  
she found disappointment's bitter weed,  
while the love that she too often found  
was not the kind she dreamed of in her mind.  
She embraced many strangers  
and shook the hand of the demons on the way.  
They call her the beautiful princess,  
but the fame and attention she drew  
was not the kind she dreamed of in her mind.



## A Message From Above

By Lawrence W. Langman  
—Portage, IN

Hello, Father, who now dwells above in Heaven;  
I was just thinking back to when I was eleven.  
Remember the time I fell and scraped my knee?  
How you rushed over in haste to comfort me.  
You brushed off my jeans, reassured me I was fine;  
You told me then you'd be there for me at all times.  
I just wanted to tell you that I'm feeling kind of alone;  
I call your number and then realize, that no one's home,  
although I can feel your presence all around me at times.  
I see a cardinal, or a butterfly, or even when a bell chimes.  
Just the other day I was placing flowers on your stone  
when I felt a slight breeze brush my hand; I was not alone.  
Dad, I guess what I'm asking is, "Am I following the right path?  
Do I continue moving forward and never stop to look back?"  
Just then a tiny wren had landed upon my window sill.  
My mind filled with so much joy and my heart grew fulfilled.  
It just sat there for a while as a tear ran down my face.  
As it flew away, a feather left behind, I shall forever encase.  
I looked out the window and laughed; felt like I was eleven.  
I said, "Thank you, Father, for this gift; I feel like I'm in Heaven!"

## Mr. Zoot

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

My brother, Dino A. Zarate Sr.,  
a piece of my heart is gone  
because of your departure.  
You are now in Paradise with  
your son Dino Jr, Dad, Mom, and Chita.  
Go to them with open arms.  
I will miss you dearly, my little brother;  
you will be missed by all of us!  
Brother Dino, apparently your job  
was done in the name of Jesus.  
All I have left are all our good  
times together through recent  
phone calls, letters and prayers.  
I love you, Bro, Mr. Zoot.  
Rest in Paradise,  
Love your oldest brother.

# KISS Me Like You Mean It

By Melvin Brinkley  
—Davis, CA

It unnerved me every time I had to go over to the Air Liaison Officer's (ALO) tent. He had a sleeping tent tall enough to walk into, a cot, four camping chairs, a table, a miniature TV and a small refrigerator. Outside he had an electric generator, a gas grill, an aluminum picnic table and a partridge in a pear tree for all I knew. I had never seen anyone come to the field with so much stuff, not even a general. He was a lowly butter-bar — a second lieutenant. I outranked that punk by two promotions.

One evening I heard the beckoning call of beers being opened, “psst, psst, psst,” from the ALO's tent. I walked over and said, “Dammit lieutenant. We're training for a full on, no holds barred, toe-to-toe shoot out with the Rooskis. If you can't pack up your shizzle in a hurry, then you will be left behind and if you are lucky to survive being captured then one thing is for sure, you won't be able to bring all your creature comforts to a Rooski POW camp.” As I walked back to my sleeping pup tent I thought about writing him up, but since he did not belong to my unit or even my branch of the military I thought the paperwork and hassle would be outrageous. Besides, I was being transferred soon.

As I self-righteously crawled into my sleeping bag for the night, it dawned on me that the problem wasn't that the ALO and I came from two different branches of the U.S. military. The problem was that we came from two different worldviews. The principle of KISS guided my role in the military and life in general. KISS, by the way, stands for “Keep It Simple, Stupid.” Don't let anyone tell you differently. That's what it meant back in the day,



and that's what it should stay meaning from now on. The last word, “stupid,” is there for a good reason.

When I got back home from that particular field training exercise, my wife said she didn't want to be in the Army anymore. Half joking, I said, “I didn't know you were in the Army.” That attempt to lighten the mood bombed so badly I quickly shifted over to a strategy right out of the KISS playbook — active listening. In less time than it took for us to share a bottle of wine, I discovered we were in agreement. Why should I sleep on the ground when a butter-bar from the Air Force gets to sleep on a cot in an enormous, air-conditioned tent and drink beer? Believe it or not, it wasn't that hard to transfer to the Air Force.

It wasn't all wine and roses, though. There were anti-KISSers everywhere in the Air Force. I thought my new boss would make an excellent candidate for rehabilitation to the simpler virtues of KISS. Not getting the point of his horrendous slog through a PowerPoint presentation, I suggested to him that we could make our staff meetings more efficient by incorporating the 10/20/30 Rule: use no more than 10 slides, talk no longer than 20 minutes and use no font smaller than 30-point. My boss hissed that the 10/20/30 Rule did not fit his “ethos.”

In spite of my heartfelt plea to him to think about the average person's attention span as well as his own staff's need to get back to work, my boss continued to use his bizzarro, painful 100/200/300 PowerPoint technique. As best as I could tell, he had to show at least 100 slides, talk at least 200 minutes and then suppress any hope of anyone pushing back with a barrage of at least 300 bullet points.

After that, I started calling my boss the “Chairman of the Bored.” He mistakenly thought that I meant “Board.” I never bothered telling him otherwise. I kept that little gold nugget to myself. Being word-boarded by him at staff meetings every week made me realize that “Death by PowerPoint” is not some jokey office jargon. It's real. Or at least it felt real enough to make me daydream about accidentally-on-purpose tipping over the projector and breaking it.

Now that I'm retired from the military and in my golden grandfatherly years, the last S in KISS reminds me to laugh at myself. That last S stands for Stupid, in case you had forgotten. Laughter is my superpower against all the anti-KISSers of the world. I know I can't convert all of them. I can spot them a mile away. They are so encumbered with their own grandiosity they can barely move, much less have a full-bodied, side-splitting, tear-drenched laugh at themselves. My soul-cleansing bouts of laughter at myself strip away everything that is not worth worrying about. I am at one with the cosmos, no less than the trees and the stars — and certainly no less than the ALOs and the Chairman of the Boreds of this world.

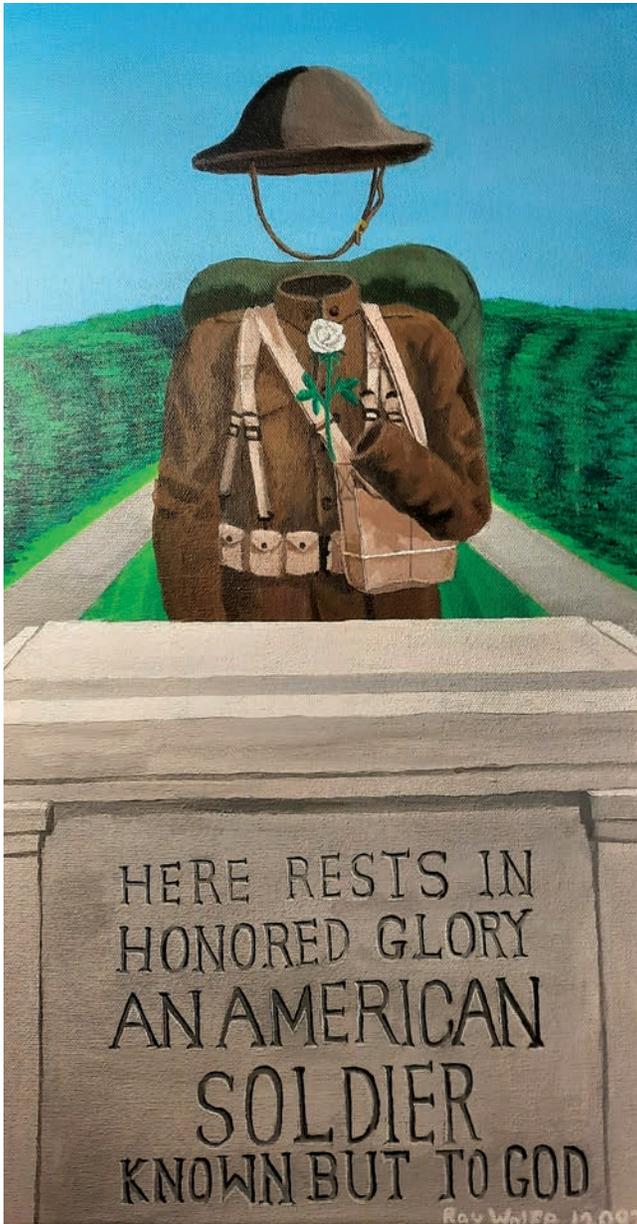
# Visual Arts Initiative

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

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

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

— *The Editors*



## Artwork

By Raymond Wolfe

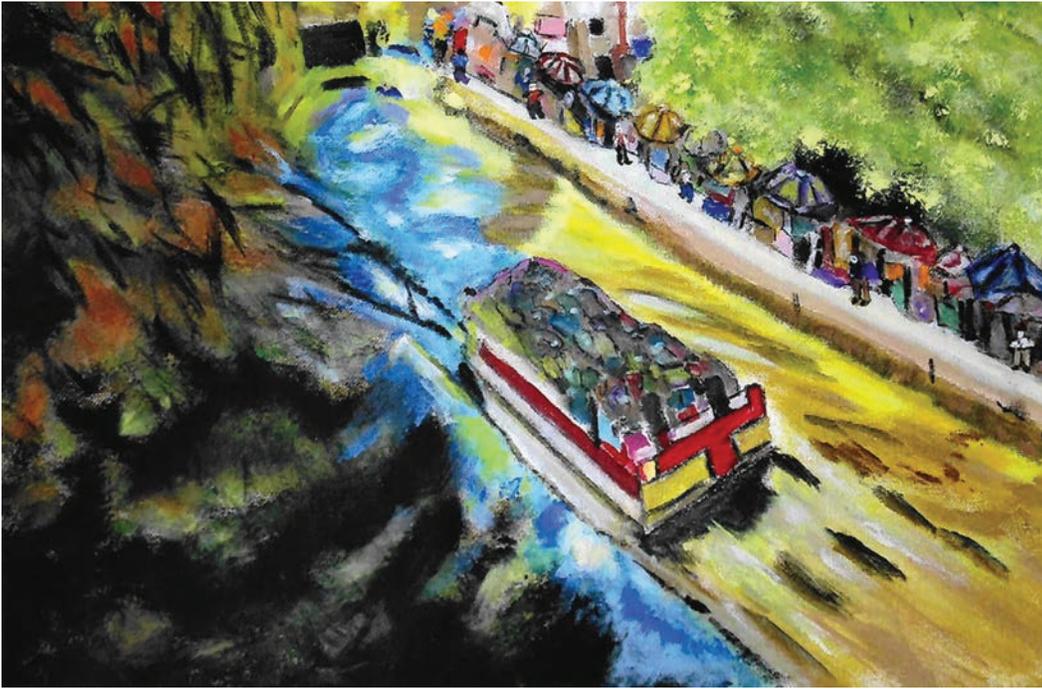
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY



## Haircut

By Gary Hughes

—Mission, KS



**Art 11**  
By Daniel Strange  
— San Antonio, TX



**Duck**  
By Jeffrey Saarela  
— Iron Mountain, MN



**Cross on Calvary**  
By Lawrence Rahn  
— Vadnais Heights, MN



**Tracks to Nowhere**

By Daniel Strange

— San Antonio, TX

**Purple Heart**

By Ty Andrews

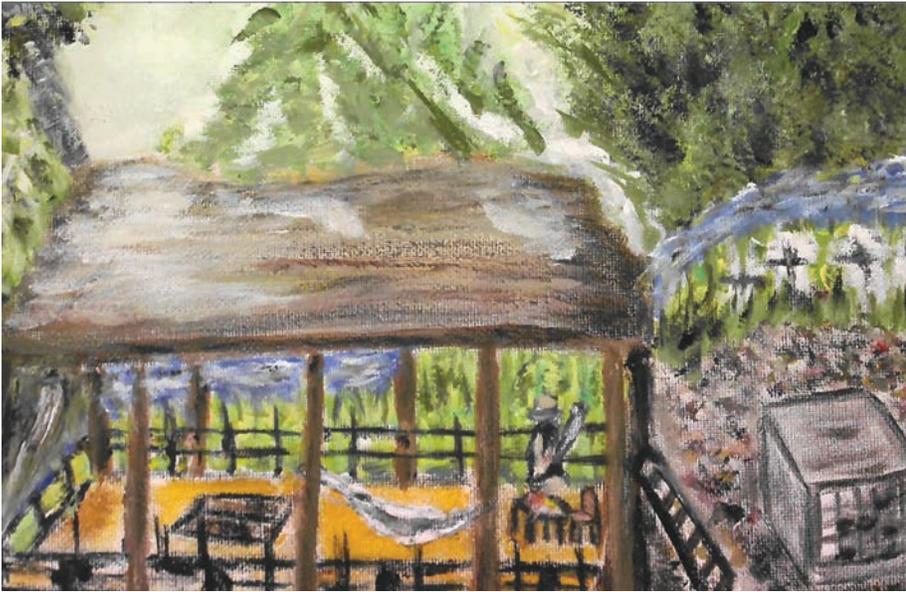
—Lincoln, NE



**Bluebonnets**

By Daniel Strange

— San Antonio, TX



**Field Camp**  
By Daniel Strange  
— San Antonio, TX



**Studying**  
By Gary Hughes  
—Mission, KS

**Painter's Workspace**  
By Daniel Strange  
— San Antonio, TX



**Drawing 2**  
By Bruce McClain  
— Blue Springs, MO



**Color Two**

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

As I sit at my easel, I look at my canvas  
and say to myself the story I could tell,  
the adventure we could go on. I paint the story.  
The sky in blue and mountain in the far distance  
tell of the day. I feel the sun shining  
on the fields of yellow waves of grain.  
That said I'm in the open country!  
I feel free to paint the things  
I feel you would like as we travel.  
Just as the colors tell the story  
of the painting we paint,  
you see where the road's trees end  
and the fence begins. That brings  
us to the house I once knew as a boy!  
Oh, how I want to paint the things of yesterday.  
They tell me the story with paint, canvas and color  
as I review my life of long ago!  
I paint a painting to enjoy.



**ART 7**  
By Donald Sherwood  
— Danville, IL

## Free

*By Scott Lehman*

*VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO*

Smile, you're free,  
 thanks to the 79th infantry.  
 Smile, you're free,  
 thanks to the Statue of Liberty.  
 Smile, you're free,  
 just ask Francis Scott Key!  
 Smile, you're free.  
 "In God we trust."  
 Smile, you're free,  
 thanks to those who died for us.  
 Freedom does not come for free.  
 This is for those who made  
 the ultimate sacrifice  
 because freedom has a heavy price.  
 Thank you for your service  
 to bring peace across the land,  
 to the brave soldiers who made a stand  
 and, of course, to the women  
 who fought hand in hand.

## Mind, Body, Soul

*By Penny Lee Deere*

*VA Medical Center—Albany, NY*

Writing soothes the soul,  
 opens the heart,  
 embraces the spirit,  
 allows us to move forward.

Express yourself!  
 Sing, dance, move.  
 Be that drama queen.  
 It doesn't matter if you can't.  
 Be the one that does!

Live for art.  
 After all it mends me.  
 Art heals.

## The Twelve Months of Covid

*By Melvin Garrett Brinkley*

*VA Medical Center—Sacramento, CA*

On the first month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 some hand sanitizer.

On the second month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the third month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 three jugs of bleach, two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the fourth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 four bottles of vitamins, three jugs of bleach, two face masks  
 and some hand sanitizer.

On the fifth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 five face shields, four bottles of vitamins, three jugs of bleach,  
 two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the sixth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 six latex gloves, five face shields, four bottles of vitamins,  
 three jugs of bleach, two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the seventh month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 seven home tests, six latex gloves, five face shields,  
 four bottles of vitamins, three jugs of bleach, two face masks  
 and some hand sanitizer.

On the eighth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 eight pleas to get vaxxed, seven home tests, six latex gloves,  
 five face shields, four bottles of vitamins, three jugs of bleach,  
 two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the ninth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 nine Fauci briefings, eight pleas to get vaxxed, seven home tests,  
 six latex gloves, five face shields, four bottles of vitamins,  
 three jugs of bleach, two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the tenth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 ten pro-vax testaments, nine Fauci briefings,  
 eight pleas to get vaxxed, seven home tests, six latex gloves,  
 five face shields, four bottles of vitamins, three jugs of bleach,  
 two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the eleventh month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 eleven get well cards, ten pro-vax testaments,  
 nine Fauci briefings, eight pleas to get vaxxed, seven home tests,  
 six latex gloves, five face shields, four bottles of vitamins,  
 three jugs of bleach, two face masks and some hand sanitizer.

On the twelfth month of Covid my true love sent to me:  
 twelve eulogies.

# What's Wrong With Rich?

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

In at 17—USAF.

All he wanted to do was fly; got his wish.

Big old C-130A aircraft.

Trained as a jet engine mechanic,

first stop after Tech-Okinawa-Naha.

Ah, Ah, excuse me, Airman 1st Wangard.

Need guys to go to Nam for a 90-day TDY.

Will you? Don't worry you don't have to go.

Nobody says no to a Master SGT!

Air Force guys never get ordered; they get asked!

Word has it you can get in the air over there!

Bags packed next day and gone.

Now 18 and still green as bright grass—

brighter than the jungle!

May '69—one of my first missions to go fix

a broken bird and I am flying!

Wait, one over! 101st big battle!

Need medivac; divert OVER! Drop load!

We land on dirt several clicks south of Hamburger Hill.

The Hueys landing were stacked in the sky.

Medics rush out to help blown-up bodies

and carry the dead.

A poor soul, his mind shattered,

walks into the rotor blade of a Huey.

I am 18 and frozen as the load-master Staff SGT

puts his arm around me and says,

“Come on, Airman, we have work to do!”

120 guys later on my aircraft; we stack body bags last.

Guys crying, guys screaming, no medics as we fly

for the hospitals.

We the crew and specialists are the medics!

All five of us for the 120!

Now repeat 150 times! A jet engine mech,

who by the time he was medivacked out of Nam,

and after two 90-day TDY's and a PCS,

all of which he was always asked and volunteered for,

he too left with a shattered mind.

The Air Force knew what he did—full retirement

at age 20 as a SGT.

The only thing in the world that meant anything to him at all

was that little Vietnam Service Ribbon

with the little silver star in it.

It meant that out of the thirteen distinct, separate

Vietnam campaigns—

he served six of them before breaking!

He would not leave on his own!

Not after that April 1970 leave back to the States

before going back PCS to Nam for the third time.

WHAM! The rotten fruit and veggies hit us all

as we got off the plane in California!

We all walked a gauntlet of protesters

got spit on, called vile names and humiliated!

Never finished the leave!

Dad said, “Rich, don't wear your uniform.

Never share Hamburger Hill with any family!”

The only thing I ever shared was my love

for the woman

who saved me, now working on 48 years' worth.

My, my, what that poor woman has been through.

Lost count of treatment sessions, lost count

of how they tried to dope us all.

We had to hie-lie to find jobs. Perfect one!

Sixteen years as a Recreation Specialist in prisons,

working all alone with up to 100 of the baddest

of the bad!

And I didn't care! Take weapons away? No problem!

Bust for drugs? No problem!

Get in someone's face? No problem!

Never a scratch in 16 years until Agent Orange

caught up with me!

Lost count after operation number 20.

What's wrong with Rich? Why is he so so loud!

Why does his house look like an armed camp?

Set perimeters! No filters, no sugarcoating

after all the treatments!

Go ahead and crawl inside my head! I am 71.

What's wrong with Rich?



# I Opened My Eyes

By Carl Hoerdeman  
—Champaign, IL

I felt scared and alone,  
just wanted to hide every time.  
I try to be honest;  
I did nothing, just thought I was strong,  
but really I was weak.  
Needed to reach out for help,  
but was too afraid to speak.  
I was frightened for my life;  
I had nowhere to turn.  
As much as it has hurt me,  
you'd think I would learn.  
Scared beyond imagination,  
just curled up in a ball,  
I did nothing but lay in my bed  
and just stared at the wall.  
I hit rock bottom;  
I don't know what to do.  
I need to reach out for help,  
but I ask myself who?  
I ask for God's guidance  
and to reach out His hand  
to give me the courage,  
to admit I'm powerless.  
Yes, I finally understand.  
I finally opened my eyes and my heart.  
Surprise! I see  
the Lord my Savior  
standing right next to me.  
I now can be brave  
where I was once weak,  
not afraid to talk  
where before I wouldn't speak.  
I know I won't be perfect;  
mistakes surely will be done.  
Now I can face them  
and no longer will I run.

# Masada

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

When I visited the Holy Land in 2008, I had the opportunity to see the ancient fortress of Masada. This fortification sits on a hill in the southern district of Israel, on the eastern edge of the Judean desert overlooking the Dead Sea.

Herod the Great built a palace and fortified it on the mountain in 31-37 AD. Israeli armed forces used to have training exercises on this hill and hold graduation ceremonies there. Today, the ancient city atop the mount is an archaeological site where many of the structures buried under centuries of sand and rubble are being carefully restored. A 2,000-year-old date palm seed was uncovered there and taken to Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where it was nurtured and is now growing into a beautiful date palm tree.

I took the cable car from the base of the mountain up to the top, where I walked around the site and looked to the south where I could see the Dead Sea, the lowest land-based elevation on earth. "Why is this hill such an important place in the Holy Land," I asked our guide? Here's what I was told:

Roman troops had taken over Jerusalem and all of Judea around 70 AD. After destroying the Temple in Jerusalem, they chased the remaining Jewish rebels south to Masada. According to the historian Josephus, the 960 rebels held out for two years during the Roman siege of Masada. When the Roman army finally completed construction of a ramp up the west side of the mountain and reached the top, they were shocked to find all the occupants dead from an apparent mass suicide. They refused to give the invading army the satisfaction of capture and torture which they knew would happen.



Today, Masada is one of Israel's most visited tourist attractions, drawing approximately 750,000 visitors each year. In 2001 the site was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

When the Masada National Park is open, visitors can take the tramway to the top. Hikers can take the narrow, winding trail up the side of the mountain to the top, but it can be dangerous. In 2015, a young woman from Florida State University was hiking up the so-called Snake Path and fell to her death when she veered off the path. Hikers are cautioned to stay on the trail and take a bottle of water since temperatures can reach over 100 degrees (F) during the summer months; remember, the hill is situated in the eastern Judean desert. I recommend the visit to anyone who may be interested in biblical history. It's a journey I shall never forget.

# Man Behind the Mask

By John Priestley II  
—Huntington, WV

I served a one-year tour on the staff of Commander, U. S. Naval Forces, United States Central Command, during Operations Desert Storm/Southern Watch/Restore Hope. I replaced a Navy Chief who lived in an apartment “off base” and whose only daily function, as far as I was ever



able to determine, was to compile the daily personnel status report of naval forces in the area of responsibility.

Early on, I decided to forego the off-base living privilege my billet afforded, choosing to live on board the flagship like my men. Indeed, many jobs seemed “compartmented” with incumbents jealously guarding their turf. One of the first things I did was to inventory classified material and shift the command protocol from centralized to decentralized. Supervising junior yeomen proved difficult, also. They were used to a “free hand” and initially resented my taking back the reins of leadership.

Adapting to the environment on Bahrain and the flagship, USS La Salle, was one more major adjustment. Unlike other countries I have served in, Bahrain was an Islamic culture where we did not fit in. Even with limited recreational opportunities, the long, empty hours seemed destined to invite trouble. I had to remain vigilant over my consumption of alcoholic beverages. The arrival of the vice admiral and his hand-picked senior chief inaugurated profound changes, shifting the headquarters from afloat to ashore. By the end of my difficult tour, I was exhausted.

Two more years of sea duty on the staff of Commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Group 5, homeported in San Diego, proved to be only marginally better. While I was allowed to research, document and set

up the command awards program, I did not foresee that generating awards for the battle group was about the only thing the flag secretary was interested in. Being an administrator in an “operator’s” world created friction and difficulty in maintaining morale. I never had a chance to regain my balance and stamina.

I barely survived one year on the joint staff in Washington before long-term psychological difficulties spiraled out of control. Two weeks of in-patient therapy helped me to bounce back, but it proved to be only temporary. I returned to Walter Reed, and it was determined that medical separation was in order. It was against my personal wishes, but submitting an appeal would have made the already lengthy Physical Evaluation Board last even longer.

Part of milieu therapy involves creating and talking about artwork. It is evaluated by the resident art therapist and the patient’s psychiatrist. Making and painting a paper-mâché mask was one project. I had been thinking about yin-yang philosophy, and I crafted my mask accordingly. Later in the day, my psychiatrist’s junior partner came rushing in, obviously agitated. He asked me to explain what I meant by my mask, so I coolly explained it to him. I later found out that they had read suicidal intentions into the mask.

It was over one year before I was evaluated formally by the board. I was issued a medical separation after more than 23

years of highly distinguished service. I was placed on the Temporary Disability Retired List for five years with yearly reevaluations by psychiatrists at the naval hospital in Portsmouth, Va. Three evaluations did not find improvement, and I was given

a final examination at National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. I received a final disability determination.

It has taken years of medical management by both private and VA medical personnel to get my condition back to normal. I am a happy, well-adjusted and thriving person. I have never found any reason to discredit anyone else for my long decline in health. The clash of my perfectionist work ethic in highly demanding work environments was bound to cause problems. I hope this article will provide some solace to other military members who have experienced their own trauma.

Isolation is the enemy!

## Wounded Warrior 1996

By John Priestley II

The warrior has an unwell mind, unfit for duty the doctors find, serving two weeks in milieu care, passage of time too slow to bear, where medication and mood align.

Artwork and greenhouse are designed to relieve the boredom of the confined, yet bureaucratic cogs will not spare the warrior.

The Review Board is, essentially, behind for over a year, and in the daily grind the 24-year veteran suffers scars that affect devastating tear and wear; unhealed, and by the “normal” maligned, the warrior.

# The Wire

By Angie Lupe

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

We come home to the wire.  
Safety in numbers and worn-out shades of camouflage.  
We drink from canteens, the blood of soldiers spent  
like ammo littered on yellow ground.  
We toast them and spill drops of us  
to show that we are lost in this land, too.  
They are not alone.

Real men cry within the wire.  
I tell them it's a sign of  
Strength, Respect, Love for the soldier.  
Not the war.

We leave the wire daily, sometimes for days.  
Funny how a wire can separate life from death,  
fear from terror—a powerful Almighty in our world.  
This desert is dry and cracking like bodies and faces  
where life and laughter were snuffed out by bullets and bombs.  
Pain and struggle remain  
and the blood STILL flows. It flows.  
It fills the cracks and disappears  
Every Day and Night.

I was QRF.  
My wire became invisible. My God, too.  
Faith became a struggle; hope a dangerous wish.  
I jumped hurdles in my brain,  
swallowed fire every night to cleanse, re-cleanse  
my soul with lies.  
We branded flesh with hot metal to feel human,  
not just the monsters they made us.

*You can trip a wire in your brain  
to bring you right back to war again.  
But that doesn't replace the home you knew,  
the life you want to get back to you.  
The more you trip that wire though,  
lights shut off in rooms you know,  
and they won't come back on anymore.  
The life you knew is gone.\**

Yet, we always come home to the wire.  
March with dirty faces and broken minds

past the field of sunflowers hung out to dry  
with the day's blood.  
Now HOME there is no wire,  
only rope to tie the noose.  
Life is not what we had wished for over cigarettes  
and talks of home.  
HOME is not a place to find.  
It was the dream and we awoke,  
humans and monsters in limbo between foreign  
lands now forgotten.  
And there is nothing here to separate life from death.

\* Intended to be spoken/sung in a different tone.

# Dark Horse

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

He's my little dark horse,  
pounding hoofs –  
pushing—pushing  
along the course,  
thundering, whirling,  
flying legs of steel  
that show only the dust  
of his hoof and heel.  
Then when you came  
on the scene,  
they were filled with envy, malice  
and plenty mean.  
But you were true of heart,  
were never apart  
from your quest to be the best.  
And from place to place  
and race to race,  
you'd win.  
Once you'd enter in,  
your thundering hoofs  
would defeat the great  
War Admiral,  
and Red Pollard would ride you  
into the hallowed halls  
of everlasting fame.

## The Potbellied Stove

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

The potbellied stove, its sides aglow,  
Stood in the general store.  
Its warmth spread o'er gray, bowed heads;  
They told tall tales of yore.

The potbellied stove, with sides grown cold,  
Stands no more in the general store.  
It has gone the way of the gray, bowed heads;  
They tell tall tales no more.



## Mother Russia

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

Mother Russia, at what cost?  
Just so Vladimir Putin can be boss?  
An aggressive nature with ruthless tactics  
like a spoiled child. Watch his antics.  
He feels no remorse shedding innocent blood.  
His plagues will come in one day just like a flood.  
“Let my people go,” saith the Lord.  
Why do you insist on sowing discord,  
creating war where there was once peace?  
Your type of leadership is like a disease.  
Cancer comes to mind; it destroys from within.  
You’re like the devil, filled with sin.  
Women and children flee Ukraine;  
men stay behind, fight without refrain.  
Mother Russia, you will be sorry for your actions.  
The people of the world won’t put up  
with your warring factions.  
I say to you, “Cease the attack,  
or you’ll be like McDonald’s without the Big Mac.”  
No fries or cokes either, so just beware.  
When it is your turn, who would care?

## Expiration

By Lynn A. Norton

—Leawood, KS

My resolution for the new year: purge  
pantry of expired products. Discard  
five-year-old beans, ten-year-old condiments,  
desiccated Halloween candy.

Some expiration predictions exceed  
my life expectancy. Made me wonder,  
where’s my expiration date, list of ingredients,  
useful instructions? I’ve looked everywhere.

No dates, QR or bar codes, prompts  
for handling, storage, disposal. No warnings  
to reject if seal is broken. Sell by Friday,  
consume or freeze by Monday.

Science claims all encoded in DNA.  
Too cryptic for easy viewing. Better to  
stroll through family cemeteries, read  
stone labels, take notes, calculate averages.

The coroner will record my expiration date,  
decode instructions written on remains. Fully  
cooked, handle with care, contains peanuts,  
refrigerate after opening, recycle.

## Stepping Through My Door

By Robert John Valonis

—Stuart, FL

Stepped through my doorway  
Onto slippery frosted lawn.  
This sleepless night betrays me,  
A few more hours left till dawn.

Yawned into moonlight,  
Moist breath condensed in air.  
Another night of anguish,  
I shall not sleep, I fear.

A whitened moon shone brightly  
Through the leafless tall oak trees.  
Their branches leave shadows  
That move in wintry breeze.

I craned my neck to set my eyes  
Upon the moonlit sky.  
Had I slept, I may have missed  
The heavens passing by.

Above in lighted darkness  
Clouds move from east to west  
Like a translucent hue of pillows  
Slowly drifting at their best.

Ten thousand stars behind them  
Were peeking dim and bright,  
Shooting flicks of light rays  
Through a starlit, chilly night.

The ebb and flow of motion  
Pushed the pillows through the air,  
While opaque nighttime colors  
Lace around the moonlit glare.

My thoughts turned to the masters  
Applying paint to brush  
That try to capture brilliance  
In a nighttime wintry rush.

Only a master's master  
Could get this painting right.  
This orchestra of silence  
In a symphony of sight.

It seemed it was a minute  
Yet knowing it was more,  
I moved my tired, cold body  
Slowly through the door.

I laid my head on my pillow  
And quickly fell asleep,  
Dreaming of the beauty  
Of the painting I shall keep.

## Don't Let Them Call You a Failure

By Karen Green

VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

Sometimes in your life  
your plans are derailed.  
If they don't work out  
you have not failed.

People judge you  
by what you can and can't do,  
so that leaves you feeling  
happy or blue.

You're not a failure;  
just try your best.  
If you still have a lot to do,  
it's fine if you rest.

Stand up to them;  
you have that right.  
Don't let them call you a failure;  
keep your goals in sight.

So the next time  
you feel you have lost,  
just take a look  
at what it has cost.

Live your life  
the best you know how.  
You have long-term goals  
but live for now.





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## WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

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### Labels Are for Soup Cans

By Scott Sjostrand  
—Hallock, MN

Labels are for soup cans.  
There are too many negative labels in our great land.  
“You’re mentally ill. You’re stupid.  
You’re the ‘N’ word. You’re fat.”  
These are all damaging labels  
and there’s something wrong with that!  
They negatively affect a person’s self-esteem.  
We all have value.  
*People encouraging one another—that’s my dream.*

Being rejected is a terrible thing.  
In their alone-time, some of those people  
write poetry and sing.  
The “indomitable human spirit” seeks acceptance,  
no matter what may be the cruel circumstances!  
The arts are a means of personal expression.  
Individual human experiences that are shared  
can teach many a lesson.  
So just remember, before you judge someone,  
you’re not in a grocery store.  
There, they have varieties of soup galore!

### Republic?

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

“WE HAVE A REPUBLIC IF YOU CAN KEEP IT.”  
Democracy is never safe.  
There are no guarantees of a fair and just government.  
We must forever be vigilant  
to ensure safety and freedom for every citizen.  
Equality is for all,  
for the majority, for the few, for the wealthy and the poor.  
If it’s not applied to all, then none should have it.  
We must never allow our Constitutional law  
to ever become a pipe dream.  
We must preserve our democracy against all enemies,  
foreign and domestic.  
Our democracy is greater  
than any individual, group or political powers.  
If we can’t follow the rule of law,  
we’ll be nothing more than barbaric savages,  
deserving to be enslaved and slaughtered.  
“GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH.”  
If I can’t have my way, I will surely take your life.  
We must subdue and abolish  
all terrorists, foreign and domestic.  
Democracy for all must prevail.  
Be forever vigilant.

### Lives

By Carl Kerwick  
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

Two lives not the same.  
Which one if at all is sane?  
Cover up one life  
to live another.  
The other life still may gain.

## Breaking Free

By James R. Janssen  
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

Is it that I never found myself  
or that no one ever found me?  
Over and over the question remains  
as I walk through the hills and valleys  
of life's journey in my mind and soul.

Friends come and go,  
experiences come and go,  
memories come and go,  
living in this shrouded misty fog.

Reaching out to you, my love,  
my query yearns for a ray of light.  
Blurred by filled eyes in the night,  
I catch a glimmer of your returning gaze  
engulfed by a strained smile of haze.

In frozen time our love remains a sigh  
while our hearts and thoughts race on high  
for any form of an answer lending support,  
handicapped by conditioning days of yore.

In this occupied space of misunderstanding,  
my heart cries and screams out a plea withstanding  
to break this code, to free my heart of locked chains,  
fighting to keep our country free  
if only there was a key for me to be free.

Hope is alive; we await to see  
with awakened eyes a true answer,  
for an understanding how to control  
and keep at bay the locks that persisted.

We can become FREE by VA counseling.  
It is time now for "US" to be free.  
PTSD: post-traumatic stress disorder  
SHOULD BE: prevent terrible stress-disappear.

## Memories

By C. L. Nemeth  
VA Medical Center—West Haven, CT



I estimate that in my lifetime I have driven somewhere between five and six million miles. But no more.

So, it was with nostalgia when I stepped out into the garage the other day and beheld our family KIA, sitting there in its black glossy glory. I ran my hand along the shiny metal, around the rear and forward up the left side. I opened the driver's door and sat. Sitting there looking out over the steering wheel I began to reminisce about the days when an auto seemed liked an extension of my body.

I then remembered how, as a little boy, I would open the door on the Model A Ford and crawl up into the seat behind the steering wheel. Sitting there moving the steering wheel back and forth and pushing the gear shift lever, mimicking my Dad's driving. The fantasies of my trips were heroic, and I would sit there making engine noises. The world was my oyster.

As I sat in the KIA, I didn't move the steering wheel or the shift selector. Memories formed of trips in good weather and bad. I have driven coast to coast twice, driven autos in all but a handful of states. I dealt with flats beside the road, fan belts, thermostats, dragging mufflers, overheating, out of fuel. These things came flooding back. I must have sat there for some time before reality pushed the past back into its niche in my mind. I sighed, got out, closed the door. My reverie was over. Maybe again some time.

Memories are to be enjoyed, sometimes even the bad ones. They illustrate a catalog of your life. Enjoy them. They are priceless, each a one-of-a-kind history of a life, your life.

## The Verge

By Lawrence W. Langman  
—Portage, IN

I'm standing on the verge of the precipice  
as a world of evils seeks to envelop us.  
Technology seems to be our downfall.  
Enslaved in electronics and robocalls,  
in a trance we walk around like zombies.  
So many people aren't complete without these,  
destroying one another over trivial pursuits.  
With a government that causes internal disputes,  
we banter over the pigmentation of our skin,  
never stopping to peer inside to what's within.  
Misinformation seems to control our minds.  
Seeking the truth is almost impossible to find.  
We are allowing the powers that be to rule.  
They are playing us like pawns and fools,  
depleting all our resources like naive children,  
witnessing all of the damage that's been done.  
They have created divides between races and creeds,  
preventing us to become as one and intercede.  
The answer is right before all our faces.  
Let's pull together as one and delete all the races!  
Together we'd be an unstoppable force of nature.  
Let's resurrect all of us as our country's Crusaders.

## Squirrel

By Lynn A. Norton  
—Leawood, KS

Arboreal emperor, defiler of potted plant.  
  
Gymnastic champion, poacher of fruit.  
  
YouTube celebrity, mutilator of turf.  
  
Leafy builder, destroyer of lawn chair.  
  
Tree planter, shredder of electric cable.  
  
Fearless climber, burglar of bird feeder.  
  
Prescient harvester, invader of attic.  
  
Step into my trap so I might  
introduce you to new admirers.

## The Group

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

Like me, you will be frightened as you walk on the floor.  
Your stomach will tighten as they shut the door.  
They will show you your room; it will seem like a cell.  
As you say goodbye to your family, you will want to yell.

You won't understand it now but you're not alone.  
In time you'll feel better; then you can go home.  
The doctors and nurses, they really do care.  
This is the first sign that life can be fair.

The first night is the longest; it will seem to never end.  
Sleep will eventually come, a thankful friend.  
You are not alone; there will be others.  
No matter their problems, you are still brothers.

Feel free to sit, feel free to walk,  
Feel free to be quiet, free to talk.  
In time your emotions will not feel so numb.  
In time you'll look forward for the morning to come.

There is no button to push that relieves the pain.  
You have nothing to lose, everything to gain.  
You won't be perfect; no one can be.  
Today, I'm looking forward to just being me.



# Battle's End

By Lenny Ellis  
—Madison, WI



I came across a friend  
but he looked more like a fiend.  
With a drink in his hand,  
he looked very mean.

He looked at me through glassy eyes  
and told me how he wished to die.  
I took the bottle from his hand  
and told him how to take a stand.

“Reach into your soul  
and pluck out the mole  
which eats at your heart  
so you lose control.

“Your vision is blurred  
in more ways than one.  
You can't see yourself  
or what you've become.

“You look disgusting  
in your dirty clothes,  
bloodshot eyes,  
and a dripping nose.

“You need a bath  
and some hot food.  
You need some rest,  
or you will lose.

“You have a drink  
to get you by.  
You make excuses  
for every high.

“It feels so good  
or so you say.  
But, my friend,  
someday you'll pay.

“You'll slip away  
further down each day  
and when you fall,  
that's where you'll stay.

“You've lost your wife  
and children, too.  
Forget your job;  
that's gone, too.  
Heads will shake  
when they look at you.

“You'll live in fear  
without a drink  
'cause you can't cope  
when there's no hope.  
And the smell of death  
is on your breath.

“So there it is;  
it's up to you.  
It's your choice;  
what will you do?”

My friend went home  
to face his demons alone.  
He turned out the lights  
and switched off the phone.

He lit up a smoke  
and nervously paced.  
Then he ranted and raved  
for the whiskey he craved.

He cursed God and country,  
humanity, too,  
lost love and friendships,  
opportunities, too.

He'd lost his dignity  
and turned to self-pity.  
He saw his image in the mirror,  
and put his fist through it clear.

He charged the door  
like a wild boar.  
He cursed and spit  
and swore some more.

He broke the windows;  
his hands were bleeding.  
All the while,  
a drink he needed.

He knocked down tables  
and kicked down chairs.  
He clawed his face  
and pulled his hair.

His reasoning gone,  
his mind was brittle,  
like a rabid dog  
with foaming spittle.

He finally passed out,  
exhausted at last,  
able to sleep  
and let go of the past.

He awoke in the morn  
without the usual scorn.  
His vision was clear  
and his eyes full of tears.

He cleaned up the house,  
showered and shaved.  
He brushed his teeth  
and was quite behaved.

He stepped outside  
into the sunshine  
and felt its rays  
upon his face.

Finally, he smiled  
and said to himself,  
“Now I can live  
at peace with myself.”

## An Abundant Life

By Nila K. Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Calamity. Crisis. Catastrophe.  
My own mind is the adversity I face every day.  
The voice inside my head calls me names that are degrading.  
The voice inside my head talks about depraved things.  
Overwhelming. Paralyzing. Schizophrenia!  
Jesus Christ. Without Him I would have no hope.  
No joy. No contentment. No peace.  
Or any kind of life that is worth living.  
Word. The Word of God which is the Bible.  
Fight. Weapon. The Word of God is the weapon  
that I use to fight the voice inside my head.  
When the voice says degrading things,  
I say, "I am made in the image of God."  
When the voice says depraved things I say,  
"...whatsoever things are true...  
whatsoever things are pure...whatsoever things are lovely...  
if there be any praise, think on these things."  
God's Word conquers the voice every time.  
I do more than just exist or merely survive  
the voice that occurs daily.  
I am an overcomer!  
Freedom. God's Word frees me from anxiety, depression,  
worry and—the worst one—despair.  
God's Word is Holy. It is alive.  
It has all the power of uttering Jesus's name.  
I do more than just cope. I live an abundant life.

## Ring in a Dream

By Charles L. Carey

VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV

My joyful soul rises to take a stare  
at kisses of a pale moon, cloud-broken there.  
The moon brings forth truth during a moment's flare;  
this is what the dreamer must bear.  
The eerie night bells ring within my dream,  
slipping through, solemn, while I still sleep.

## Opus One or Five Easy Pieces

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA

The "Grand Canyon Suite" brings a burst from a cloud;  
Each march by Sir Edward has pomp and is proud.  
Much music of Mahler is lengthy and loud,  
And Haydn quartets are quite mannered and mild.

Great Bach wrote cantatas long into the night;  
Mussorgsky's "Bald Mountain" is always a fright.  
Von Reznicek's output is ever so slight,  
And Gershwin's concertos are sassy and bright.

"Pachelbel's Canon" uplifts us today,  
And music of Mozart can sweep us away.  
The Chopin concertos turn night into day,  
And Zoltán Kodály inspires us to play.

Puccini wrote operas that thrill and amuse,  
But Ellington gave us a taste for the Blues.  
While Strauss wrote those waltzes—so many to choose!  
Yet Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody" grabs like the News.

Franz Liszt gave us music to nourish a need,  
And Holst with "The Planets" is magic indeed.  
Stravinsky's "Le Sacre..." inspires us to seed;  
Such masters of music are still the top breed.



# Frozen

By Marie Slider

—Orem, UT

Scared to heal, scared to live,  
Why is there no care that I give?  
Desire to run or walk away,  
But can't take a step to get out of my way.  
I'm frozen in a bubble of time,  
Completely surrounded by dust and grime.  
Cobwebs entangle my conscious mind,  
Body entangled by ropes that bind.  
Apathy threatens to take control,  
Darkening my beautiful soul.  
My light inside, it flickers and fades;  
Isolation cuts like sharpened blades.  
Fear of failure and fear of success,  
My brain and heart are completely a mess.  
Can't see a way out most of the days,  
My mind's labyrinth firmly betrays.  
Self-awareness, a strength to many who seek;  
For a person like me, it just makes me weak.  
The answers to questions are already found;  
How to put them to work is way too profound.  
Feeling alone in this world of pain,  
For many, relief is easy to attain.  
Stuck in this loop day by day,  
Consistently fighting to find a way  
To keep me from taking the easy way out  
Of running and hiding or lazing about.  
Or going back to my old way of life,  
Avoiding these feelings that cut like a knife.  
Although these feelings are overwhelming,  
The benefits of healing are very compelling.  
The pain is a bridge to a new way of life;  
I'm not sure what that is while still in this strife.  
But glimpses I've seen in the eyes of many;  
The resemblance to God is completely uncanny.  
Lots of work to be done and patience to find,  
To help me get out of the ropes that bind.  
I've learned that I do not fight solo,  
For help was promised a long time ago.  
A Christ was born to take this pain,  
So happiness I can attain.  
One day, I hope to understand this,  
When He reaches out for my hand with His.

He will pull me up where I truly belong,  
And I will praise Him in holy song.  
To God, he will bring this humble girl,  
The one inside me to be unfurled.  
She has been hiding under this mess;  
She's been yelling out to me in distress.  
I just keep on pushing her down,  
But I know that, to God, she will always be found.  
God will embrace me with his heart,  
And all of his love he will impart.  
Then I will learn what this life really meant,  
And understand why I chose to be sent.  
With this reminder, faith again takes control,  
Reminding me to keep God in my soul.  
I can fight through these feelings, with help on my side,  
And make it through this life's crazy ride.  
Ancestors, friends and family, too,  
Are there to help, my faith to renew.  
Ups and downs will keep happening, that is a fact;  
I have to keep fighting to get out of that act.  
I keep telling myself to never give in,  
For if I stay frozen life will never begin.

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## TH NORTON AWARD

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# Another Wannabe

By Katherine Iwatiw

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Hurry—pull your heads out of the sand;  
your plump naked butts are not safe.  
Putin said, "I will not invade...you.  
I will not violate...your sovereignty."  
Then Putin invaded. OUCH!

We appease, we live in chains, or  
we fight and risk epic-level destruction  
in two to four years, I suspect.

*Wait—is this how OUR story ends?*

By ONE man who fancies himself  
a modern-day Lex Luthor?  
I can't let that happen.  
I am Superwoman.  
Lex Luthor dies in the end.

# America's Largest Mobile Library

By Dan Yates  
—Blue Springs, MO

One of the largest “libraries” in the United States has more than 1,300 branch offices in all 50 states. What is it, you ask? The Veterans Affairs Medical System, better known as the VA. With nearly 200 medical centers and more than 1,000 clinics, the VA system treated more than nine million veterans in 2017, the last year statistics are available. Considering that there were more than 20 million veterans alive in 2017, how many stories or just experiences are unaccounted for, or MIA?

Each time a veteran enters a VA facility for the first time, the number of stories in the “library” increases. Every veteran has a story and for most, many stories. Also, every veteran is a story. Conservatively speaking, if each veteran has three stories, the total number of stories would be 27 million. For those veterans who have retired after more than 20 years of service, the number of stories within each of them is increased exponentially.

Another fact is that every story falls into the same genre, nonfiction. I can't think of any other library, outside of the Library of Congress, that might offer a larger nonfiction selection than the VA. Not every story is one of pain, though many are. Since mankind apparently cannot live in peace, war and conflict are inevitable. The result: painful stories. However, there are countless stories of compassion and humor that we have starred in, or perhaps witnessed. Some stories bring attention to social injustice and disregard for the health and well-being of humanity and thus can bring about change.

Some may say that we have already heard their stories from someone else, but that's wrong. Each of us is unique, and though we may be side by side in a firefight or in a foxhole, or marching in formation at basic training, each experienced something different from the same exposure. No two stories are identical.



How will others benefit from these millions of stories unless we tell them? Too often we say that we don't have any stories, but if prompted by the right questions, we will discover not one but several stories worthy of sharing that are archived within us.

My favorite example of that is taking part in the free breakfasts that businesses now offer across the country on Veterans Day. Vets of all branches and generations attend, and an immediate bond is formed. After just a couple of bites, stories are flying off the table, laughter is

heard, smiles light up faces and playful banter takes place among service branches. Sharing experiences in the service is infectious. Each veteran is a “mobile library,” and stories are freely told with pride and often with animation. You can “check out” some very interesting stories and ask all the follow-up questions you'd like. Last November I finished my meal and stayed for another hour, just to listen to stories. If you have never been to one, I highly recommend it. Many establishments offer free breakfasts to spouses, and on the drive home you may hear something like “I don't remember you ever talking about ....”

Let me encourage you to share your stories with family, friends and other veterans. Help build and be part of one of the largest libraries in the country. Sit down in front of a keyboard or pick up a pen and write your story, then send it to *Veterans' Voices*. There is no ‘wrong’ story, and by not sharing yours, you may be robbing someone else of a laugh or a healing.

# The Rendered Salute

*By James R. Janssen*  
*VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS*

We salute with pride our flag of colors.  
Standing at attention, we think of valor,  
turn to reflect what our flag stands for.  
Burned into our hearts forevermore  
is the true meaning of Old Glory's red, white and blue.  
Red represents valor, courage and sacrifice,  
revisited memories of the bloodshed  
in the ultimate sacrifice of our fallen brothers  
who paid with their lives as they fought  
to protect our freedoms, rights and principles.  
Blue signifying equality and justice for all,  
standing our posts with vigilance and perseverance,  
always watchful, strong and challenging.  
The color white symbolizes purity and innocence.

We proudly salute our Commander in Chief,  
the United States Constitution and officers.  
We proudly stand in observance of recruits,  
right hand raised reciting the military oath.  
We proudly stand and salute an honored veteran  
being recognized at a public event.  
And all the while there waves the colors in each case,  
reminding each veteran of their individual memories  
of serving to protect our cherished freedoms.  
There are thoughts of memories of our individual tours,  
revived memories of our fallen buddies  
and, most of all, knowing we did our best to serve  
and preserve the best way of life our great nation enjoys.  
Yes, we render a salute for many reasons  
and are proud to do so with conviction.  
Some of us walked through hell  
while others of us served in a peace setting.  
But we all served, sacrificing our own wants,  
taking home a new way of thinking for others.  
But our most heartfelt emotion stems  
from our fallen heroes that paid the ultimate price  
for that special moment we pause to proudly  
acknowledge and honor their great sacrifice.  
And in that light, like no other, we hold a very  
special lifelong salute rendered in their memory.

Our last very special salute honors our wounded  
warriors scarred by physical injuries in untold numbers.  
Our warriors suffering from PTSD and suicidal thoughts,  
sitting in their wheelchairs staring off into the distance  
with the long stare from battle-weary moments untold.  
May we all share in a moment of silence and prayer  
for their ongoing sacrifices, living with 24/7 physical pain  
and for the stream of tears slowly trailing down their cheeks.  
Support our fallen veterans.  
Hug the veteran suffering without hope.  
And with a special salute render:  
a smile of warm expression,  
a hug that says you care,  
a gentle touch that says "a friend."

# Death's Door Knocking

*By Lawrence E. Rahn*  
*VA Medical Center—Minneapolis, MN*

I came very close to the end of my life,  
not even knowing the reason why.  
I do know this: my guardian angel was with me that night,  
or I would be pushing daisies by this time.  
My wife insisted I call my doctor to let him know  
what was the matter.  
I took it lightly, but made the call.  
He said to me, "Come right in and be quick about it.  
Your life may depend upon it."  
They kept me in the hospital eight days and nights,  
not even a single bite to eat or anything to drink.  
Finally, the young surgeon discovered the problem.  
A hole in my heart was the culprit and an operation  
was my only option. But with God's help,  
plenty of prayers and asking Him for his blessing,  
the hole had scabbed over on its own.  
I believe this was all God's doing.  
The surgeon said to me, shaking his head,  
"Buddy, you are one lucky dude. I'm not operating on you."  
So, when I'm asked if I believe in miracles  
along with guardian angels, I will tell anyone listening,  
"There is a God without a doubt!  
I do love Him with all my heart!"  
Heaven forbid He's not finished with me yet;  
otherwise I would be dead!

## Seemed

*By Carl Kerwick*

*VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA*

Could discover  
Had attracted  
Seemed  
Snarled  
Growled  
Barked  
And leaped around.  
Could hardly tell.

## Supernova

*By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.*

*VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA*

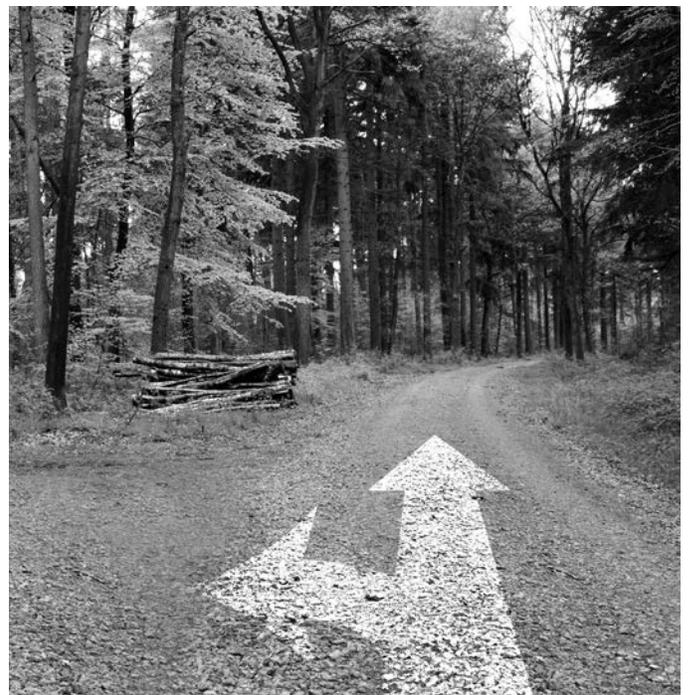
I often wondered why  
about the truly powerful and great ones among us.  
Why do they fall so heavily?  
Why do they die so young?  
They have achieved and obtained many things  
we all hope for, wish for, dream of.  
And yet they abuse themselves,  
walking a path of self-destruction and annihilation.  
They are talented, beautiful and wealthy.  
They live the life of which dreams are made.  
They are like a shining star,  
burning so brightly in the heavens.  
All we can see is their shining light.  
They outshine all the billions and billions  
of stars in the heavens.  
They burned so brightly,  
as if they were the greatest of all the stars.  
Then suddenly, almost without warning,  
this one, the greatest of all the stars,  
erupts and explodes, becoming a black hole.  
Now a major star is gone;  
all the minor stars are still here.  
They're still shining, not as brightly,  
but they are still shining.  
All the universe mourns the destruction  
of the bright shining star.  
Without love in our lives, we all will face  
the fate of the supernova.  
No matter how great,  
how powerful you may be,  
without love, peace and harmony,  
you will self-destruct.

## Footloose Days

*By Anthony Ramirez*

*VA Medical Center—Augusta, ME*

I know what it's like to miss the road—  
the one that they told you to travel if you could.  
Instead, I chose the road that is broad,  
the path that leads to destruction.  
Elevator up! Elevator down!  
And my confusion—worse—confounds me.  
My behavior—stark— appalls me.  
For more useless than a crooked arrow  
is to utilize foolery in order to glow with the glory of God.  
This stubbornness is a luxury that I can no longer afford,  
deftly leaving me a long way from where I want to be.  
Yet many times the more difficult road can become  
the one that keeps us on course.  
The obvious paths are rarely the most interesting.  
Empty high! Empty sky!  
This hard road that I chose,  
you would have never wanted for me to travel.  
So just walk with me along some of the way patiently,  
and as far as the tumultuous canyons  
careening into the majestic mesas,  
blazing a new trail to the narrow gate.  
If you will.  
Only a few there be that find it.



# Coping With the Pain

By James Janssen

VA Medical Center—Wichita, Kansas

Ever find yourself boxed into a corner knowing the usual coping skills are not working, finding it necessary to call the veterans suicide hotline?

Trauma, depression and other issues of life affect us in various ways. We use and sometimes exhaust our known personal coping skills and action plans to weather these storms, and in most all cases they work effectively.



But what about the hopefully rare instances when triggers grab us by the ying-yang, and without warning we find ourselves in trouble? It's like a strong wind that comes along and pushes us around. Utilizing all of our strength, we struggle to regain our balance. Worse yet, it can be like an unexpected tornado touching down with little time to escape. The options at this point become very limited. Perhaps we grab a metal flagpole nearby and desperately hang on. On such occasions the trauma can be quite serious, and a body is left wondering what if anything could possibly intervene to help relieve the severity of the situation.

As we are all aware, suicidal thoughts are one thing, but a plan of action to take our life is far more serious. We fight to stay short of nearing that line by any means possible.

My sweetheart and I had a serious falling out. She then took off and had been gone for two weeks. Her son and I became concerned for her safety since she had made noises of suicide ideation before leaving. My coping skills were wearing

thin, and I couldn't sleep. I began calling the veterans suicide forum for support. Called the local sheriff. My desperation had escalated to stating that if anything did happen to her I would be gone.

I was searching Facebook, attempting to find any clues leading to where she might be. Not finding anything obvious, I just happened to notice her own friend listing. It only had two friends and she was one of them. The other was a blank picture with a man's name under it that I did not recognize. Her son told me she had known this guy for some time. I looked him up and found a history of him preferring married women for his relationships. Then I discovered they were in the same vicinity, although I had no exact address.

I immediately went into an uncontrollable rage, grabbed my gun and headed out to kill this man. I found out the town they were in, but that was all. While driving around, I kept thinking about what I was doing and began weighing the consequences of causing harm. I thought about my dad, who fought in World War II, and my service in Vietnam. We fought

for freedom and the right to choose good and bad, right and wrong. I kept asking myself if crossing the line of my own beliefs would dishonor both my dad and myself along with ending my life.

I asked myself, "What are you doing?" It was in that instant I decided to return home, call the hotline and then call the sheriff to turn myself in. The sheriff said I had not broken

any laws and told me to just stay home while seeking support.

What is my point here? What new coping skill am I referring to? I had superimposed my desperate situation onto my principles and values as a human being, a man and a veteran. Those values of honor, duty and dedication MUST remain intact, not for the sake of myself but for the sake of honor and respect in my continued relationships with other people that I fought for and the great veterans that put their lives on the line.

So, I write this in the sincere hope that if life dumps a tornado on you, you have that flagpole to hang onto. We must go on no matter the cost. It is our duty and responsibility to set an example for others. True, I am suffering a big loss, but the scales are being tipped by the unsavory actions on her part.

Today I raise my head up high and march on to fight the next fight that life will send my way, but it will be with honor and dignity to uphold the true reasons we do what we do and will continue to do.

# A Special Recipe

By Diane Wasden  
—Millen, GA



I can see the Devil's train coming down the track,  
with all its evil coming up and above the tall smokestack.  
He has traveled a very long way to get here;  
the closer he gets to me the more dangerous he becomes.

I know he is coming for me...  
regardless of what happened yesterday,  
or what will happen tomorrow.  
The Devil has no plans of ever setting me free.  
I'd change all my tomorrows for a better today,  
because tomorrow just starts  
the whole ugly thing all over again.

I found myself in uncharted territory,  
engulfed by flames coming straight up from Hell  
through the railroad tracks.  
Each time I was up against the Devil,  
I found it so much easier to run than fight.  
I have been stumbling my way through life for years;  
I became very good at hiding all my pain and fears.

But not this time, Devil! Enough is enough. Not today,  
I could feel a new kind of weird sensation overtaking me,  
and it felt good!  
I knew that I was fed up of jumping a magnitude  
of multiple hurdles of emotions.  
My life was already crumbling all around me.

I had a recipe...  
Yes, a recipe to stop Satan dead  
in his own railway tracks.

## Recipe for Your Devil

1 CUP of GUILT  
1 WHOLE BROKEN HEART  
1 HALF TEASPOON of DECEPTION  
3 TABLESPOONS of HOPELESSNESS  
1 HALF PINT of FALLEN TEARS  
3 FOURTHS CUP of PARANOIA  
A SMALL HINT of SHAME  
1 HALF CUP of FEAR  
2 PINCHES of HUMILIATION  
1 STICK of MELTED ANGER  
1 FOURTH GALLON of PURE 100% PAIN  
and SUFFERING  
1 TEASPOON of PANIC  
1 THIRD CUP of ANXIETY

Mix all the ingredients together in very large mixing bowl—  
except for the one stick of melted anger,  
half pint of fallen tears,  
one fourth gallon of pure 100 percent pain and suffering,  
one broken heart, small hint of shame  
and two pinches of humiliation.

Then add the anger, fallen tears, pain and suffering  
and broken heart. Mix the mixture very well.  
Spray an extra large cake pan with MISERY;  
then slowly pour the mixture into the pan.  
Sprinkle the two pinches of humiliation and hint of shame  
on top of the batter in the pan.  
Send it on down to Hell to bake. Temperature—Red Hot Inferno.  
Bakes in seconds. Than feed it to Satan.  
We'll call it PAYBACK.  
As we humans say, a taste of one's own medicine.

Then you can walk away from all of your devils:  
that toxic, negative, abusive, one sided relationship,  
and those sexual, verbal, physical and mental abusers.  
And your biggest demon, aka your PAST.  
Congratulations! You have won.  
Feed all those devils the recipe!

## Anna and the Boys

By *Larry E. Connelly*  
—Liberty Lake, WA

You ask me, “Could that be young Jake hanging  
from the swaying branch yonder on that old tree?”  
That lifeless thing dressed in rags, no hat or shoes,  
if not Jake then there would hang you or me.  
We were three once, the rulers of County Arbreast,  
its miles of wooded paths all told.  
By day or nightfall, unaware, the wealthy and proud  
toward our open purses had rode.  
No quarter did we give, and none could we ask,  
for who would easily give up a weight of gold?  
Unless forced to yield by vagabonds, well-horsed,  
well-armed with attitudes so bold.  
The story has oft been told of how the girl came  
to capture us and lay claim to the posted reward.  
Her plan was simple: first went my heart, then John’s,  
followed by young Jake’s.  
We were too blind to recognize the growing of discord.  
Just a wink here, a quick hug there shared by each of us,  
at first to the others’ delight.  
Then came the night sounds that proved Jake  
was the only one; John and I sat apart, alone that night.  
To the sounds of hooves and muted commands,  
we two losers swiftly faded into the morning’s mist.  
Till the cry, “There he runs by yonder path!”  
We had no proof of complicity. Jake’s name  
was scratched in villages from the list.  
Sometime later, in a small market town, John glimpsed  
sweet Anna with bread, cheese and wine.  
Along, with a fat purse for Jake’s demise,  
came a fair young officer with whom she alone would dine.  
Revenge blinds even the most astute; experience and care  
meant naught. John drew his sword, his challenge fair.  
From my hillside perch, the valley’s beauty  
has only one slight blemish,  
as John’s silent body twists in its air.  
In their shabby graves, there now lay Jake,  
next would be John into the paupers’ section placed.  
After Jake and John, the third grave awaited me,  
to whom no good deed could be traced.  
I shivered.

## Let Life In

By *Kim Gwinner*  
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

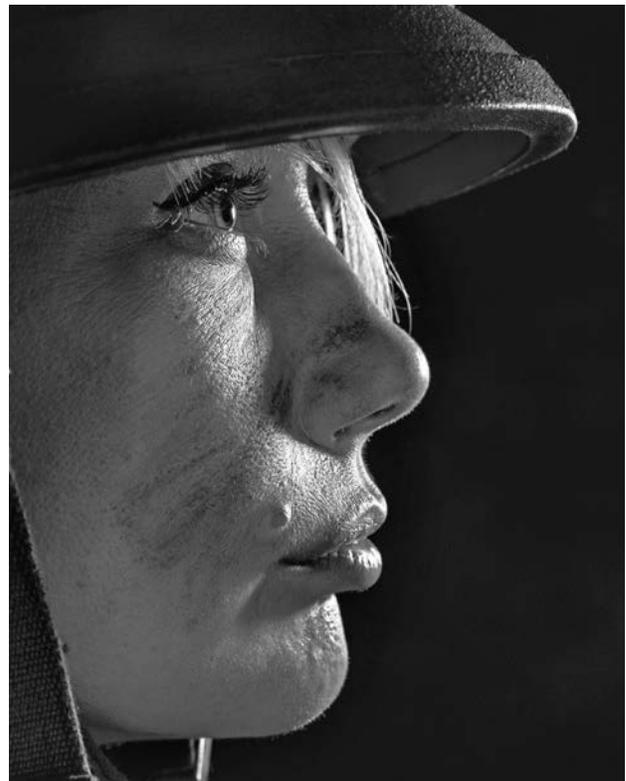
Trying to find my peace while being alive.  
I really don’t want to be of the 22 who commit suicide.  
Sadly, I have given it many a thought and have even tried.

I want the emotional pain to cease.  
Like others I want to rest in peace.  
But life is not finished; please, a few more years at least.

I’m sober almost a year now.  
But I still struggle and want to throw in the towel.  
I’m getting healthier; so take that, MST/PTSD! Pow!

I have a story to share in hopes to help others  
In arms, my military sisters and brothers.  
Work hard to rid ourselves of our monsters.

We are so damn worthy of that and much, much more.  
When we fall, pick yourself back up off the floor.  
Remember to open your door; let life in and let it pour.



## 1692 Salem

By Larry E. Connelly  
—Liberty Lake, WA

The morning fowl did not announce the coming of the day.  
Milking buckets stayed empty; why, no one could say.  
Muffled, through the open windows came haunting sounds;  
Something chased away the dreams, like lathered hunting  
hounds.  
These nightmares had no bugles; they had no marching drums.  
She had started every day with a verse,  
or a long-remembered song.  
Having done no hurt nor, to my knowledge, no wrong.  
These times were called evil; dark souls were close about.  
When the pious dammed poor Elisabeth, with devils' work  
related,  
Her staked demise brought a cold fog to the village,  
to which it was soon mated.  
Worried lips and eyes spoke that she had never confessed.  
Someone was needed to cleanse this troubled land;  
A knight of Christ was chartered for the strength of his hand.  
The Vicar cried out for relief, but the dark fog lingered on.  
He came, large and proud, for how many dragons had he slain?  
Roaring out a challenge and flashing high his sword in vain.  
At the ashes, the villagers turned their heads as they passed.  
From the fog came the sound of her crypt being opened.  
Elisabeth's voice called out through charred lips the names,  
until now unpenned.  
Doors and windows were hurriedly closed and shuttered.  
Having heard the charges that brought an innocent's  
fire-bound death,  
The knight then spoke. "If guilty you will each feel  
the dragon's breath."  
The dark fog slowly settled around this house and that one.\*

\*19 persons were executed in the witchcraft trials in Salem,  
Massachusetts in 1692.

## A Simple Act

By Nila K. Bartley  
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

I was beyond despair. I did not want to live.  
No hope. No joy. No laughter.  
Devoid of anything except fear of living.  
I tried to kill myself.  
After that I felt nothing. I was numb.  
Being numb was a brief respite  
from being terrified all the time.  
Someone smiled at me in the psych ward  
of the hospital and I did not know how to respond.  
I was dead inside. What brought me back to life?  
Kindness! Kindness of people I barely knew.  
It pierced through what had seemed  
like an impenetrable haze.  
The haze had surrounded me till it engulfed me.  
I felt like I had been swallowed whole.  
A saving but vigorous wind of compassion  
blew the rest of the haze away.  
I could see again.  
People. Goodness. Goodness in people.  
I had thought none was left.  
Traveling so long in what had seemed  
like an impenetrable haze  
dulled my senses to the point  
that I could not see beyond my own misery.  
The combination of kindness and compassion  
restored my faith in people.  
It was that combination that totally obliterated the haze.  
With it gone, I have returned the kindness and compassion  
I had been given and passed it on to others.  
Please do not ever doubt the difference  
a simple act of kindness can make.



# The Doc's Doc

By Richard Wangard  
—Appleton, WI

I sit here tonight feeling like run-over garbage in a wagon wheel rut. I've got a gout attack going on. I take more medicine than five horses. Heart meds, gout meds, blood pressure meds, statins to control cholesterol, pain meds to control the chronic pain. But I stay away from the heavy ones. Eighteen years on fentanyl were enough, and when I kicked that habit, I celebrated by going out and buying my first Harley. That was eight years ago now. Since then, even with all that has gone on physically, I ride. If you took my Harley away, I really would die.

Which brings me to the subject of the best doctor in my world. His first name is Dallas (how cool is that?). My favorite movie has always been "Tombstone." I feel I was born way too late and always saw myself as a Doc Holliday. My friends will attest to the similarities — an educated wise ass who can shoot, have strange women walk over and start up a conversation, is very quick, talks way too much and is loud enough to be heard by the whole bar, always with a deck of cards in his pocket.

Back to Dallas, my real-life doctor. I am losing him because he is moving to the Denver area after taking care of me for 17 years now. Or is it 18 years? I don't remember so good now. But he does.

After 10 major spinal operations, a gall bladder operation, two broken ankles, gout, COPD, a bad heart and countless specialists, not once has he ever been wrong about anything that concerns my



health. I think he is some kind of wizard with a magic wand that puts Harry Potter to shame.

Beside all that, he takes his time with me and all his patients. He has a great, honest bedside manner and a real gentle way with people. All business, but you can see the care in his eyes.

He has seen me through so much over the years, and a couple of days ago when I went to see him he laid out the truth as only he could: "Rich, you should have been dead a couple of times." But he didn't even try to give me the "no smoking" speech because he knows I am hopeless with the cigs.

I came back with a smart-ass dumb remark about still riding my Harley. He didn't laugh as usual. He said nothing and just looked at me. He knows me inside out, upside down, all my history going back to 17, what's inside my head, what triggers me. He knows I am a gambler, smoke too much, maybe a drink too much here and there, but not as a habit.

Dallas genuinely cares about me, and he got that through crystal clear as he looked at me like he had never done before. He was trying to tell me that each day I wake up is a real bonus day for me and to make good with it. It took a while for me to process this; he has been trying to get through to me for years now. He finally did, and it scared me.

No, I am no Doc Holliday. I'm just a real nobody who has enjoyed life to the max. Have I seen my share of raw deals? Hell yes. Have I gone

through all kinds of physical pain? More than my share. Have I seen and witnessed the true dark side? Been there and done that. And no, I never want to see it again, but sometimes it won't leave me alone, so I have to fight with the help of friends and the Dallases of this world.

You can only wish a guy like Dallas the very best. I teased him, saying that with all the money he made off of me I expect house calls from Denver whenever I want. That one cracked him up.

But I am here to tell you all one thing for sure. Neenah, Wisc., is losing a great deal, and the Denver area is blessed. Thanks, Dallas, for all the great care and friendship you gave me as just one of your many lucky patients. You're a Doc's Doc.

## You Can Sing Along With George Jones

By Michael Pride Young  
—Fond du Lac, WI

You can sing along with George;  
he sings a song for us all.  
The sad life he's had,  
the happy times he's seen,  
George made a song for you.  
George Jones sings a song for us all.  
The good times you've suffered,  
George can identify with them.  
You may have been an alcoholic;  
You may have been divorced.  
There's a song George has for you.  
Have you been lonely?  
Did you ever find yourself alone?  
George has got a song for you.  
You ain't by yourself;  
You don't stand alone.  
George has a song for you.  
Have you lost your wife?  
There is a song George has for you.  
Did you ever sing a duet?  
Listen to George and Tammy Wynette?  
There is a story for you, I bet.  
They sing the love life,  
and they tell the sad life.  
George has something for you.  
Your life may be his life,  
and his life may be like yours.  
George can identify with you;  
he sings a song for us all.  
Yes, George sings a song for us all.



## Their Strife

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

Our home is the Earth always.  
There's no shore we will not see,  
to share our memories of happy days,  
serving our country overseas!

We've done this for friends and family  
because we chose to care a lot.  
Six years in Germany,  
a mechanic on the spot!

Generators to the flight line,  
Light carts to shine in the night.  
Eagles flying every time,  
full afterburners glowing so bright!

Alerts to happen frequently,  
don't you know we are prepared?  
Did our best for peace to be  
more than a word that's shared!

There are many generations  
that served before us.  
It helped so many nations.  
In the States, they placed their trust!

Let the young ones know  
the little lessons of life.  
Yes, if needed, I would go  
to any length to end their strife!

Our Children Are Our Future,  
So Let's End All Strife!

# Passage of Solitude

By James Camera  
—Mamaroneck, NY

The shaft of flickering light extends several feet in front of him; the ceiling of earth and rock looms six inches above his head. As he twists and contorts his body to retrace his sluggish progression along the narrow passage, the illumination from his lighter plays tricks on his senses. His projected profile against the gnarled walls reveals a disfigured rendition of his remembered self. His misshapen head reflected in a disproportioned version of normality, he shuts his eyes and forces the haunting likenesses into the distant corners of his imagination.

“Focus,” he utters into the stagnant air as the metallic click of his lighter returns everything to darkness, a putrid odor from its fluid stinging his nostrils. Digging the tips of his boots into the hardened earth, his hamstrings strain with the effort of belly crawling backward until a suggestion of light appears at the opening of the tunnel.

He backs up against this openness until he is free of the enclosure and sucks the air as though it is a rare offering that will be withdrawn before he has had enough to satisfy his hunger. The accessibility of the openness around him nearly overwhelms his senses, and he contemplates returning to the darkness of the tunnel. But only for an instant as he recalls the murkiness within. The sunlight is blinding, the vastness startling as he waits for his heartbeat to rediscover its natural rhythm.



He awakens from the dream. This one felt so real, the sensation of being in the tunnel so absolute. He contemplates the possible reasons for his distress about the recurring dream, this feeling of impending doom that hangs over him. What was the last thing he did before sleep overtook him? Watched the late news with its images of the masked populous traversing the urban landscape amid calls for social distancing. And still they gather, fearful of the solitude that is suggested for the upcoming holiday season.

“Plan to have your Thanksgiving dinner solely with those you live with,” the broadcaster says, regurgitating the warnings of the Center for Disease Control. More admonitions talk about limited dinner parties, disposable tableware, open windows and kitchen exhaust fans. Shelter in place in order to minimize your outdoor movements, the warnings add. Stay connected but avoid close contact. Be of affable holiday cheer but keep your face covered so no one can know

your temperament. Be kind and open-hearted but aware of the proximity of others.

The world has become a labyrinth of tunnels as the rats scamper about and return to their respective dwellings. The contradictions abound as he burrows into the warmth of his bed. The morning sunlight plays across the spread as he turns his head from the light. He excavates deeper under the covers to shield his eyes from the shimmering brightness when all at once he realizes that this bed, this room,

this house have become the tunnels of his torment, though now he seeks their protection to isolate himself from the rest of the universe.

He considers this paradox: is it possible to find safety in the thing that he has feared the most for more years than he had been alive when it began? Could the suffocating confinement of the tunnels take him into its clutches and offer comfort and calm as the world experiences disorder all around him? Logic tells him that this cannot be possible, and yet, he yearns for enclosure and containment to breathe uncluttered air in his cavern of solitude. Has his survival of the tunnels in his dreams given him the strength to distance himself and maintain detachment? Envisioning them now, he considers the safety of their isolation.

He listens to stories of the many who have grown tired of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Those who have become

weariness of behaving for the better good. Those unaccustomed to compromising their freedom and unwilling or unable to comply with suggestions of seclusion. But he can because he has.

The tunnels have served him well. Now he examines a way to know them in a new light. One that offers restitution. A giving back of his fearlessness. The virus and the tunnels have offered a silver lining, and he is shaken by this new reality.

He closes his eyes beneath the cover of his bedding and whispers “Make my weakness work for me” as he ponders the concept of claustrophobia. Has the virus given him strength? Can he outlast the pandemic?

He dares not to open his eyes, for the perimeter may be closing in on him.



## America's Daughters and Sons

*By Anthony Ramirez*

*VA Medical Center—Augusta, ME*

We are still America's Daughters and Sons,  
in spite of the crime or offense that we have done.  
And although we may be shunned,  
it will be the future and not the past  
that will determine who we are and what we may become.  
“Murderers! Molesters! Misfits! Miscreants!”  
Let them call us what they will.  
Ne'er-do-wells: unite! We can't love and help others  
until we love and help ourselves.  
Hark! Never be consumed by the failures,  
the mistakes, by the bad breaks.  
Stand! Rise from your penitent knees  
and truly be accounted for.  
Scoff! Who we've been isn't who we have to be.

To live. Positively. Means annulling the decrees  
of “street wisdom” in favor of taking some time away,  
thereby shaking away the lamented chains  
of what we cannot become:  
perpetual prisoners of our own pasts.  
So remember, Brethren:  
we are still America's Daughter and Sons,  
in truth of the crime or offense that we have succumbed,  
because when all is said and done,  
it will always be the future and not the past  
that will determine who we are and what we will become.

## PTSD and I

*By Kenny C. Trujillo*

*VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV*

Many have had strokes.  
Our heroes are hurting  
in so many ways.  
Embrace life as if it's your last day.  
Recognition comes in the form  
of applause, hugs, handshakes  
and some tears, too.  
Practice fellowship and understanding.

# Life of Yesterday

*By William Shepherd*

*VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS*

Where the pavement ends and the dirt begins  
is where my life began.

Where the river meets the road across  
the old bridge will bring you  
to the old yellow house where Dad, Mom, Jake and I  
spent the seasons of our lives.

Work and play bring to memory the days  
of my life of yesterday.  
Thoughts come of that gunnysack swing that hung  
out back on that old cottonwood tree.

Old getta-up gunnysack swing would call to me,  
“Come see what the day would bring!”  
We would call out “Getta-up” as we rode  
through the West on a hot summer day.  
We would stop at the old watering hole for a swim  
where we posted a sign, “No Girls Allowed”  
and we liked it that way!

Pretending we were desperados riding  
through the wilds of the West  
on that old getta-up swing  
is what we liked best.

Oh! Those times were the best of my life.  
How I miss that old yellow house of my youth.  
Time passes too quickly now  
as spring and summer turn to fall.  
Then winter brings the snow,  
and it washes the land as if to say,  
“Bring on spring, the best time of all.”

I feel my age as I turn down the road.  
I see the old yellow house  
and that old cottonwood tree.  
Here I know I will find my rest  
under that old cottonwood tree.

# Mail Call

“I find that writing is a therapeutic tool which helps me to see and understand difficult circumstances in life more clearly,” writes **Jim Camera**, Mamaroneck, N.Y. “Writing enabled me to organize my thoughts and rationalize remedies to a greater extent than I am able to before I put something in print. It affords me a comfort and enables me to put to rest incidences like the two pieces I have enclosed... Without the ability to write, I would see the world much differently than I do and I would understand it even less.” Jim has been enrolled in the Veterans Workshop at Fordham University’s Westchester campus since 2018.



**Lisa Farabelli**, Harrisburg, Pa., writes, “I wish you could see the faces (of veterans) when they see a copy of *Veterans’ Voices*. Your magazine brings joy into my life. I am proud to be a part of *Veterans’ Voices*.” When veterans see it and they want a copy, she tells them to subscribe.



Since 1975, **Women’s Overseas Service League, San Antonio Unit**, Texas, has supported VVWP as their project. “We are pleased to support this most worthwhile program for our veterans,” the members wrote.



“I read more stories in Spring 2022 issue of *Veterans’ Voices* than just mine,” writes **David J. Ludlow**, Angola, N.Y. “I read ‘Dog Days,’ a blast from the past by Penny Lee Deere. It was a honest look at parenting and I read ‘Going South’ by William M. Greenhut. It reminded me of my brothers’ time at Ft. Dix where I visited with my parents, and ‘Ride ‘em Cowboy’ by Dan Yates. I’m glad my story, *Ella’s Submarine*, is in such awesome company.”



**Paul J. Nyerick**, West Haven, Conn., says, “Thanks for everything. I’m returning my (award) check to preserve the fine work you are doing.”

“Many thanks for awarding me the TH Norton Award for ‘MIA: Missing in America,’ published in *Veterans’ Voices* magazine. I am returning the award check so you can continue your life-changing work for our veterans. God bless you for all that you do,” writes **Matthew Davison**, Long Beach, Calif. Matt is writing a book, “Lost and Found” containing essays, poetry, and a dramatic poem play.



**Michael Kuklenski**, Rowlett, Texas, sent a donation to pay for a subscription for Andrew Smith, whose lament that he could not afford a subscription was published in the spring issue of *Veterans’ Voices*. Thank you, Michael, for reading MAIL CALL and heeding Andrew’s plea.



VVWP was thanked for its “steadfast support to ensure that our medical center’s efforts to care for our nation’s heroes successfully continues during this COVID experience,” said **James L. Deen, Jr.**, chief, Center for Development and Civic Engagement, Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center, Spokane, Wash. He lamented the reduction in volunteer staff participation but praised the number of hours contributed.



Thank yous for copies of *Veterans’ Voices* were received from **James Coty**, Wilmington -VAMROC, Del., and **Katie Maxon**, Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, Iron Mountain, Mich. Both are chiefs of Community Development and Civic Engagement at their respective posts.



Joining the subscribers to *Veterans’ Voices* is the Semper Fit and Exchange Services Division, Headquarters, United States Marine Corps and Marine Corps Community Services, a part of the Department of the Navy and Department of Defense. Welcome!

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

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

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



## FOUNDERS

### Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual) .....\$50

### Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:

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

### Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:

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

## STORIES — *Fact or Fiction*

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

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

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

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

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

## POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Florida Award .....\$30

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

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

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

## SPECIAL CATEGORIES

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

Medical Center administrator nominates; publisher approves .....\$50

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

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

# Thank You



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

– VVWP Board of Directors

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## **Gifts of \$18,000 or more**

*Beets Charitable Foundation, Kansas City, Mo.*

## **Gifts of \$7,000 or more**

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

## **Gifts of \$5,000 or more**

*Dr. Robert T. Rubin, Oxnard, Calif.*

## **Gifts of \$3,000 or more**

*Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.*

## **Gifts of \$2,000 or more**

*Breidenthal-Snyder Foundation, Leawood, Kan.*

## **Gifts of \$1,000 or more**

*Bowlers to Veterans (BVL), Fairfax, Va.*

*Richard Wangard, Neenah, Wis.*

## **Gifts of \$500 or more**

*Women's Overseas Service League, San Antonio, Texas*

## **Gifts of \$400 or more**

*Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 6504, Waterloo, Ill.*

## **Gifts of \$300 or more**

*Christopher Iliff, Stillwell, Kan.*

## **Gifts of \$200 or more**

*America's Best Local Charities*

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

*Newcomer Family Foundation, Prairie Village, Kan.*

*Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 1296, Bloomington, Minn.*

*Kay Watts, Springfield, Mo.*

## **Gifts of \$100 or more**

*Central Texas VA HCS, Temple, Texas*

*Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary 4, Wichita, Kan.*

*Lynn Norton, Leawood, Kan.*

*Danniel G. Paicopulos, San Diego, Calif.*

*Scott Sjostrand, Hallock, Minn.*

*Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 1263, Renton, Wash.*

*Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 2735, St. Francis, Minn.*

*Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary 7829, Monument, Colo.*

*WAC Veterans 62, Weaver, Ala.*

## **Gifts in Kind**

*Dazium Design, Kansas City, Mo.*

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

*Kaw Valley Computer, Kansas City, Kan.*

*Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.*

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

*VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.*

# Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



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

## Instructions for Writing Submissions.

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

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

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

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

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

## Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

### SUBMIT ONLINE:

[www.veteransvoices.org](http://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](mailto:support@veteransvoices.org)  
(816) 701-6844

## Mail Submission Sample.

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

Author Name \_\_\_\_\_

VAMC Name \_\_\_\_\_

VAMC City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Author's Permanent Street Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Branch of Service \_\_\_\_\_

Conflict or Era \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate dates served \_\_\_\_\_

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

Date Submitted to *Veterans' Voices* \_\_\_\_\_

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

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

Writing Aide: \_\_\_\_\_

# Heal Through Visual Art

**Watch for your artwork in a future issue!**

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

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

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

## Instructions for Artwork Submissions

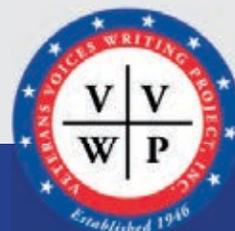
For more than 65 years Veterans Voices Writing Project has provided an outlet for military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction by sharing their stories, poems and artwork. Send your submissions today!

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



**Submit Today!**  
For a Future Issue

Calling for  
Photographs,  
Drawings and  
Paintings



## Artwork Submissions

*Online or By Mail*

[www.veteransvoices.org](http://www.veteransvoices.org)

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

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



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NOV. 12 | 2PM CST

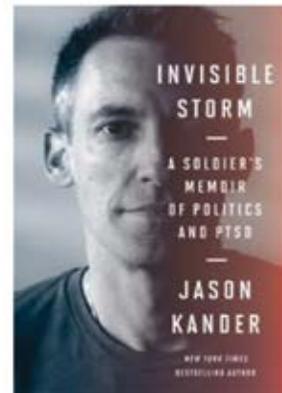
# SAVE THE DATE

**VETERANS PEN CELEBRATION**  
THE NATIONAL WORLD WAR I MUSEUM AND MEMORIAL

FEATURING



**JASON KANDER**



- Former U.S. Army captain and Afghanistan veteran
- President of Expansion for the **Veterans Community Project**, a national nonprofit providing transitional homes and services to military veterans, including the villages of "tiny houses"
- Best-selling author of, *Outside the Wire* and *Invisible Storm: A Soldier's Memoir of Politics and PTSD*
- Former Missouri statewide officeholder