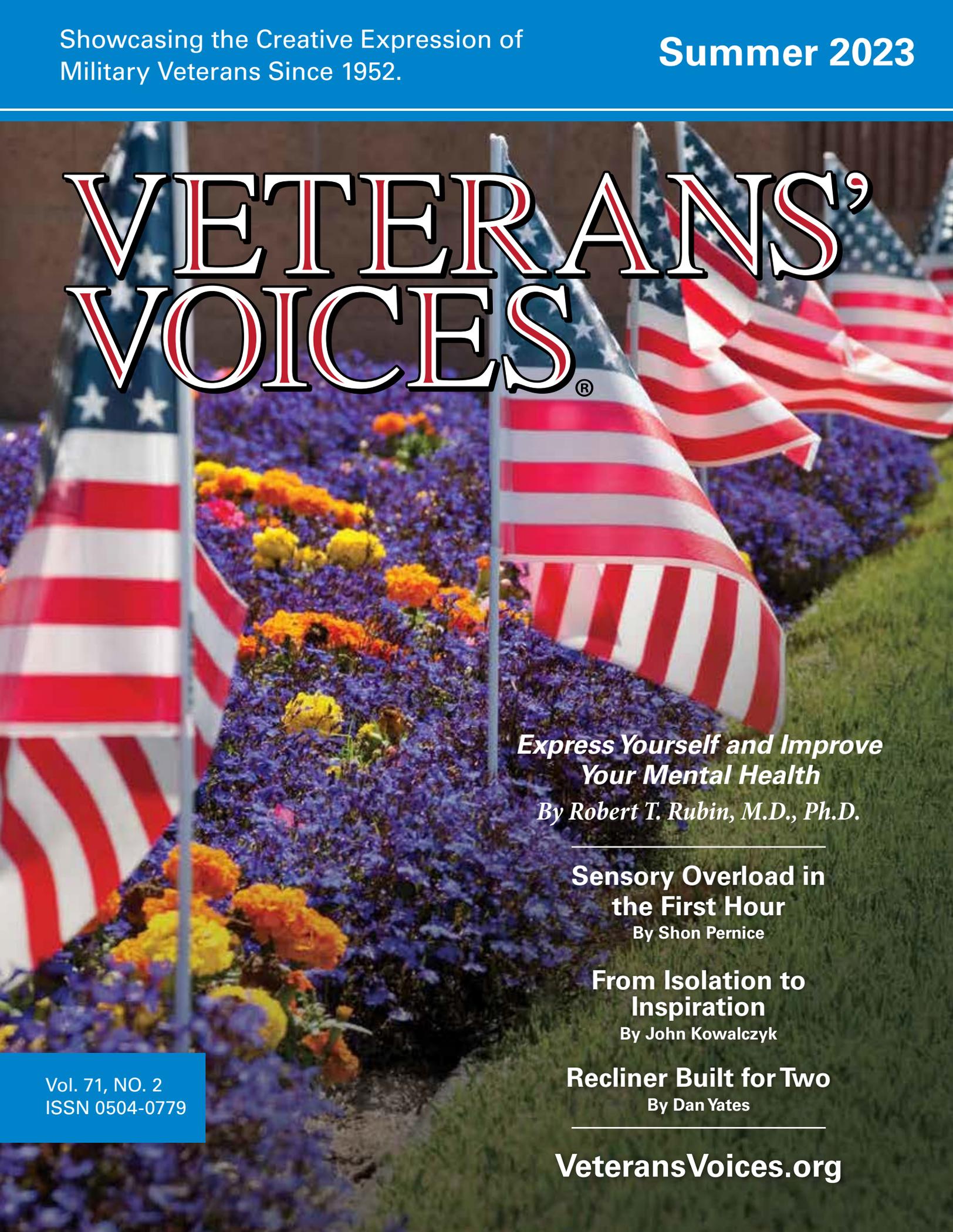


VETERANS' VOICES®



***Express Yourself and Improve
Your Mental Health***

By Robert T. Rubin, M.D., Ph.D.

**Sensory Overload in
the First Hour**

By Shon Pernice

**From Isolation to
Inspiration**

By John Kowalczyk

Recliner Built for Two

By Dan Yates

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VeteransVoices.org

Express Yourself and Improve Your Mental Health

By Robert T. Rubin, M.D., Ph. D.

Expressing our feelings and thoughts through written and visual artistic expression allows us to get our feelings out, memorialize them through art and hold them up to examine, reflect on and use to foster healthy change. That's it!

From my perspective, the unique importance of *Veterans' Voices* is that it provides an outlet for veterans' expression of their thoughts and feelings through writing (stories, essays, poetry) and, in recent years, the visual arts (painting, drawing, photography). The professional standards of *Veterans' Voices* are a point of pride for anyone who has their work accepted for publication.

Some years ago, I began sponsoring a writing award for the best submission exemplifying "*Restoring and Maintaining My Mental Health*." This refers to what I can do to care for my mental health (which also includes what I can do to care for my physical health). Those of us professionally involved with improving mental health know that every person struggling with mental health issues must participate vigorously in their treatment plan, which includes learning to better cope with the stresses that living imposes on all of us.

The submissions for the writing award were inspiring, revealing how hard veterans are working to maintain their places in society as productive and happy persons. Meanwhile, in the Psychosocial Recovery Center at the VA Greater Los Angeles

Healthcare System, I helped start a program, "Dance for Veterans," in partnership with the Mark Morris Dance Group of Brooklyn, N.Y. This program was quite successful, in that it provided a natural social activity bringing together veterans with serious mental illness, who often were socially isolated, and required them to make emotional (and sometimes physical) contact with other veterans in a setting of happiness and joy.

Another program, "Art Appreciation for Veterans," also was well received. This art appreciation program was the inspiration for my proposing the Visual Arts Initiative to *Veterans' Voices*. It is now a part of every issue and is heralded by the phrase, "Heal Through Visual Art."

The theme throughout this essay has been self-healing, starting with mental health, but encompassing the totality of one's being, from physical health through spiritual health. Everyone's environmental and societal challenges and stresses are different; some are extremely severe, and everyone has different built-in coping skills. But, as veterans, we can reduce our stress burden, and we can strengthen our coping skills and learn new ones, which will make us more resilient in managing life's problems.

In addition to getting expert help when we need it, participating in



real-world activities, such as provided by *Veterans' Voices*, will offer both joy and healing.

I am pleased to continue supporting this vital work by veterans to restore and maintain their mental health.

There is a wealth of submissions for every issue of *Veterans' Voices*, and it is particularly gratifying to see the new visual arts pages expanding in number as more artwork is being submitted and accepted. I look forward to many more issues of *Veterans' Voices* with wonderful contributions by our nation's veterans.

Dr. Robert Rubin is a psychiatrist, a Vietnam veteran (MC, USNR, 1967-69), and formerly Chief of Psychiatry at the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System for eight years (2005-2013). While serving at the VA, Dr. Rubin recognized the unique importance of Veterans' Voices, and for some years he has supported and helped sustain the magazine.

Veterans' Voices®

Summer 2023 Vol. 71, No. 2

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This issue of *Veterans' Voices* was made possible with assistance from Dr. Robert T. Rubin. See page 2.

VVWP

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

History

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

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

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

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

Veterans' Voices®

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Regulations, Regulations, Regulations!

By Dan Yates
—Blue Springs, MO

April 1972, Fort Knox, Ky. I was a “holdover.”

Basic training had been completed, and more than 95 percent of the graduating class had received orders for advanced individual training (AIT) and were gone. The 10 to 15 of us who remained were consolidated into one barracks. There were various reasons why we were still there — injuries, AIT classes not scheduled to begin for several weeks or, in my case, I was waiting for the government to complete the clearance required for me to attend the schooling to which I had been assigned.



The battalion was now between cycles and waiting for the next group of trainees to report. The drill instructors gathered all of the holdovers together in late March, the day after graduation, and told us that our orders could come down any day and that our goal was to stay out of trouble until then. We would police the area and pull two-hour fire guard shifts as we had during our training.

Then Sgt. Geary, our training NCO, asked if any of us knew how to play pinochle. I did, so I raised my hand. At that point I was informed that I would be the “day runner,” meaning that I would do anything necessary that would assist the company clerk. It also meant that I would not have to pull fire guard, for which I was grateful. The others were not happy about that, but they had their days free, so they really couldn’t complain. For the next six weeks I played a lot of pinochle and ran some errands while the number of holdovers began to decrease.

Basic training was quite a learning experience for all of us in C Company of the 17th Battalion. We learned chain of command, first aid, marksmanship, how to trust our gas masks, march and for some the difference between left and right. We also learned

about military regulations. Our brass had to be positioned on our uniforms down to the sixteenth of an inch; it had to be angled just so, and we changed from winter gear to summer gear on a specific date. We also learned that regulations required that we wear headgear any time we were outside. For some, that was a hard lesson to learn, but it got easier as the violator’s entire squad might be told to “drop and give me 20” for each transgression.

One night in late April 1972, it began raining. I was fast asleep in my bunk when the fire guard woke everyone up. We were told

that the drain outside the duty hut was backing up and the drill sergeant on duty wanted all of us outside to fill sandbags and stack them in the doorways to keep the water from flooding the duty hut. By now there were only five or six holdovers remaining, and in unison we complained, but to no avail. While the others got dressed and went out into the pouring rain, I mentally assessed the situation: If I get my orders tomorrow, I’ll have to pack my wet clothes in my duffle bag with my dry clothes, and I really don’t want to do that.

The fire guard hollered at me to get a move on, and in a few minutes, I was walking through the rain to the duty hut in my military-issued boxer shorts, shower shoes and cap. Everyone looked at me in disbelief, and the drill sergeant yelled, “Yates, what the hell are you doing?”

I replied, “I’ve got my cover, drill sergeant. Just following regulation.”

Needless to say, I was the topic of conversation the next few days. My orders did not come down the following day, but if they had, I was prepared.



ROBERT T. RUBIN AWARD

Art That Heals

By William Shepherd
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

The power of art can take you through time. When you view a painting, it opens your eyes.

A painting can bring back memories to a time you may have known or to a place you once saw. It can take you to places of joy and happiness. Your body is being renewed from the inside. A painting can make you feel good, and you may say, “I wish I could go there.”

Let your feelings and emotions take you to a place you haven’t travelled to through the wonder of the artist’s gift. God has given you the artist so you can travel somewhere each time you enjoy a painting.

So, I say to you that I’m convinced art can heal.

My Safe Haven

By Debra Ann Cole
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

My Safe Haven is where I ran.
This is where my hope began.
I was lost without any light in sight.
There was my refuge shining very bright.
I’m desperately looking for my Safe Haven
that I was told I had.
But because I’m feeling tremendously sad
and dwelling on the past,
I ache so bad in my soul,
asking myself when will I ever fill this hole.
So I fall on my knees and look beyond the stars.
And I saw a hand that reached from afar.
There was an aura that took away my strife.
That’s when again I saw a light.
It was my Safe Haven without any doubt.
I now know what this was about.
“I’m so grateful for the KCVA.
It’s my SAFE HAVEN.” This I’ll shout.

Watch the Flag Wave

By Raymond Gallegos
—Myrtle Beach, SC

Watch the flag wave.
We think of the loved ones
and the lives they gave.
Wives, husbands,
girlfriends, boyfriends
and fiancés, too.
All came to tragic ends,
but who ever knew?
People searching for family,
searching for some relief.
How some tried to take our pride,
tried to be the thief.
But we will stand tall
and don’t let them take
our freedom.
That would be our worst mistake.

Bomb Cyclone Indeed

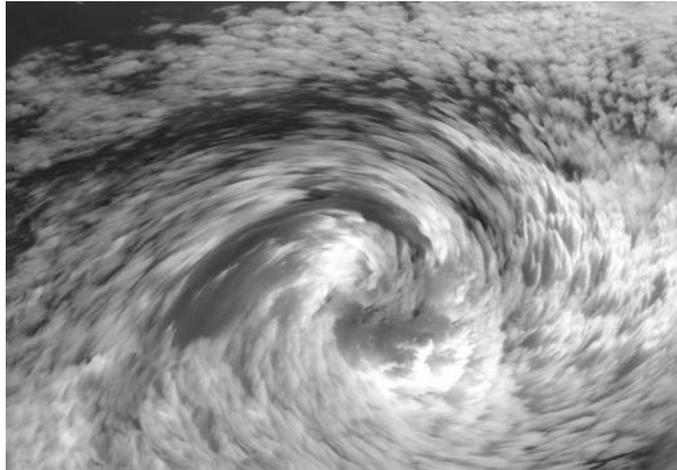
By Rich Wangard
VA Medical Clinic—Appleton, WI

I sit here in layers of clothes as a bomb cyclone hits my home. Living in Wisconsin, I have seen cold. Living in Nam I have seen heat and humidity that rotted your uniform right off of you. You might say I have seen it all.

But not this. A bomb cyclone sounds like something out of war. May as well be. True minus-50 degree wind chills with winds that don't stop for three days clocked at 60 miles per hour. Let's not forget the snow either. So far only about eight inches are piled up, but the plows can't even function, and the wind puts it wherever it wants.

Nothing, and I mean nothing, moves. Not a bird, a squirrel or a human. Go outside and you're three minutes from frostbite.

In Nam, for three different times, you couldn't move either. Just sweat, lose weight and hope you survive the next day. The only reason I was there by my own choice was my brothers and flying. Slow movers that saved lives on medivacs. Pretty impressive, that C-130A. It really could do it all. Drop a 10,000-pound "daisy



cutter" that a B-52 could not even do. Need a gunship? Call sign Spectre — Angel of Death with firepower to wipe anything out. Need a drink, buddy? Here, have the officers' booze. We resupplied all. Da Nang, Cam Ron Bay or Tan Son Nhut — your choice.

Yeah, I did it for my brothers, and guess what? As I sit here in this bomb cyclone I wish I could do it all over again. Why? Because that was living and

living on the edge. Never counted the rounds we took; we were just too damn busy.

So I wear the only two medals anyone ever bothered to put on me — National Defense Medal and Vietnam Service Medal — for me the only ones that count because we all showed up.

So go ahead, bomb cyclone, give me your best. I laugh in your face along with my brothers who have seen far, far worse.

Bomb cyclone indeed. What a joke.

Never Give Up, Never Surrender

By Antonio Jose Figueroa
—Hopewell Junction, NY

When I used to fight, it was with my fist.
I'd fight to the end.
Never give up, never surrender.
When I joined the Army, I became a number.
Drill Sergeant, you will not break me.
Never give up, never surrender.
When I went to war, it was with a gun.
I'd fight to the death.
Never give up, never surrender.
When I pulled the trigger, I became a sinner.
God will you forgive me?
Never give up, never surrender.

SALLY-SUE HUGHES AWARD NO.1 OF 3

Political Solutions

By Dwight D. Jenkins
—Rensselaer, NY

Like flies on a desert corpse,
The politicians buzz around Memorial Day,
Landing here and there, feeding on the
Memories of the smiling dead,
American flags hung like table napkins
Beneath their double chins,
Hoping there're votes for dessert.
And when the food runs out?
They'll just make more speeches.

Coping

By C.L. Nemeth
—Albuquerque, NM

I wondered from time to time, as I'm sure others have, just how I would react to a situation that threatened the very way I lived my life. Well, lucky me, I found out. Rather, I'm finding out. It's an ongoing process.

It was in 2008. I was just about to turn 80. One day my ophthalmologist, while looking into my eye, said, "I see some onset of macular degeneration. We need to check this out."

He sent me to a specialist, who confirmed the diagnosis. I had age-related macular degeneration (AMD). I had read about AMD, and I knew it was the deterioration of the "rods" in the center of my eye. They control the focus so you can zero in on an object and see it in detail. My doctor asked if I had noticed anything about my vision. I replied that when I closed my eyes, then opened them, for a brief second a sort of black spot was present but soon dissolved. I didn't tell him that I was having problems such as putting a screwdriver on a screw so I could turn it. In fact, this one little thing was the main problem I began to face, and it made me finally realize that Chuck, old man, you've got a problem.

When I thought about a life-changing episode, I usually thought that I would throw myself on the floor, kicking and screaming about my fate. That's an exaggeration, but you know what I mean. The fact is, I found myself quietly considering just what the onset of AMD would mean for my daily living. I was running a business, driving all over the state, manufacturing the equipment I sold, then servicing it.

I was already well past the normal retirement age, and I think the fact that I must retire soon kept me calmer than a younger person could expect. Looking back, I'm astonished that I actually kept on for five more years, retiring at 85. I see now that someone with a brain would have done so a few years before I did. But, as they say in France, "C'est la vie." So, I closed it all down and found myself retired in October 2013.



A customer, who turned into a good friend, had been urging me to enroll in the VA medical program. I had never utilized this service and agreed to do so. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. The low-vision programs provided by the VA far exceed anything available in the medical services to the non-military population. I could easily write another paper on the VA blind rehabilitation programs, but let me stick to the subject of this writing.

I really thought that I would react poorly to my affliction. After all, although I was assured I would never reach full blindness, the thought of using a cane, feeling my way along and having others help me with normal daily living didn't do much to increase my enthusiasm for the future.

With the onset of my retirement almost simultaneous with my vision problems I found myself musing over just what this would mean as I lived out my term. To my surprise I found I was looking toward changes, serious changes, in my day-to-day living. I had always been an impatient man. I couldn't suffer fools very well. I was an avid antique clock collector and repaired clocks as a second career. That was now gone; no more clock fixing for me. Home repairs and the like also had to be put to rest. Hell, I was having trouble seeing the weeds in the yard. I used to stream fish and planned to go back to it, but that was out too. I loved to drive, and driving was now a very big no-no. No doubt, changes they were a-coming. Just what would I be able to do from now on?

I enrolled in the VA medical service early in 2014. This one act has been the source of my activities and continues to be so today. The very act of going to the Blind Rehabilitation Center in Tucson removed all misgivings of how I would cope and showed me that, with the help of experts and the use of specialized equipment, I could do a lot more than I had realized.

If there was one single thing that I can point to that has changed the way I go about daily, it is this: I learned... no, I'm learning patience.

Friends with the same vision problems laugh about the fact that what used to take five minutes to accomplish, now takes 30, 40 minutes. If you lack patience, you're in for it, for sure.

The first year of retirement found me doing small jobs I never had time for. I started a daily walking program. I could use a computer, but it was getting harder and harder to see the screen.

At the VA's Blind Rehabilitation Center in Tucson, I spent 30 days in what I call their basic training program. Later, I learned Zoom-Text, a computer magnification program that also reads the screen to you. This opened up the use of a computer.

In May 2016, I was looking for something to do. I was bored; sitting around was not my style. So, I asked Trudi at the VA if I could be of any help to her, or someone else. She recruited me, and I was elected secretary/treasurer of the New Mexico Group, Blinded Veterans Association (BVA). I am now in my seventh year. To quote an old saying, it has kept me off the streets.

In 2018 I began tai chi at the VA. On Thursdays we had to wait until the writers group meeting ended before we had the floor to ourselves. Upon inquiry I was invited to join, another decision with a profound effect upon my life. And the friendships sustain me daily.

So, I began to write. To my surprise, I found I could do so and was encouraged by my writing group associates to persevere. Kathy Hopkins, the volunteer leader of the writers group, took me under her wing. She reads my efforts to the group because I cannot see the printing, and she did a lot of editing of my work. I have since learned to edit by listening instead of reading. And to my surprise, in 2019 I won national honors from the VA Creative Arts Festival. I attended the national symposium in Kalamazoo, Mich. There I met many other veterans with creative skills. And I'm trying like the dickens to win again. Writing and working on BVA matters are what keep me looking forward.

I'm a poor candidate for distributing advice. I am still learning how to live with my affliction. The deterioration of my vision is an ongoing, day-to-day situation. What I could see last month may or may not be seen next month. So, adjustment is the order of each and every day.

As improbable as it may sound, I actually think I am more accepting of my lot in life than I had ever been before AMD entered my world. I find I am more tolerant of my fellow man. I can accept minor inconveniences more easily than I could in the past. I consider every day I live as a gift. Would I rather I didn't have this affliction? Yes, but it has expanded my life in ways I could only dream about before. Even with conflicts daily in my path, I am calmer than ever. I cherish my friends. I can only hope they find it in their hearts to reciprocate.



Destiny

By Sandy Clark

—Erie, PA

My final destiny took my dreams away
The day my husband left for eternity.

I spoke of him so softly and united with his soul.
He taught me about the Messiah
And taught me which way to go.

He sat there in agony as one day I slipped away.
Yet I found my way back to him,
And he had something to say.

He said, "San, you have to let him in;
You have to forgive the sin."

He struggled with me daily
As it broke his heart.
Yet he picked me back up
When I fell apart.

He said, "San," so easily and looked at me so.
He said, "Love is earned" and which way to go.

Then the final curtain fell upon his face
As I watched him cry
And held his hands with grace.

I knew then God took the final key
Of Bud's last breath,
Of his final destiny.

Emily's Merry-Go-Round

By David Ludlow
—Angola, NY

Seven-year-old Emily Bean was a tiny-framed girl blessed with shoulder-length, curly brown hair that was as uncontrollable as she was. At five feet, she stood taller than many of her friends. Not so much as a single freckle dotted her face. Emily would lament to her mother, saying, “Mom, I wish I had freckles like the other kids. I feel left out.”



since Deep River lacked war production jobs, most families relocated to survive. Eventually, there were not enough children to keep the schools open. The school board began a home-schooling support initiative with two teachers qualified to cover all the grades. They were available to advise the parents and document the children's progress. Emily's grade school

building stood abandoned now. The last formal classes were held in 1942.

Her mom teased her. “Emily hon, freckles weigh heavy on a person's soul, and it's easier for Satan to spot you when he roams the earth seeking children to feed to his fires. So be glad, girl, that you don't have them.”

Emily replied, “That's fine. I'm glad that bully Elsa King has a face full of them!” Her mom, laughing at her daughter, could only say, “Emily, you're terrible.”

Jennifer Bean, Emily's mother, was just 30 years old. She worked as a cleaning woman in the homes of several nearby families. It was hard work, but in the spring of 1944, cleaning was all the work she could find. The Bean family lived in the tiny village of Deep River, N.Y., just south of the Finger Lakes. There wasn't much in the way of war production going on there.

As a parent, Jennifer was a strict disciplinarian but not physically abusive. Unlike Emily, she had blue eyes and blonde hair, and so did her husband Gregg. All the members of Emily's mom's and dad's families were fair skinned as well. Emily was not, her brown curls and eyes easily recognized by the neighbors. It was just one of those things.

Gregg Bean, a man of smaller stature at five feet, three inches, tried to ignore any busy-body rumors in town that Emily was not his biological child. It was hard to avoid sometimes. Tensions often rose in the home. Despite those outside influences, Emily loved the time she spent with her dad.

Since the war had started, the town was depleted of people for two reasons. The draft took the majority of the local men. And

building stood abandoned now. The last formal classes were held in 1942.

Since not many families lived close by, only Emily and her dad went there. They enjoyed having the run of the playground, even in its overgrown, deteriorated state. They often sat and discussed anything on her mind. Emily's favorite ride there was the merry-go-round. It had a wooden floor of dried gray boards, but it still turned well. Gregg would spin her, and she never tired of riding it. It was their domain.

That's when Gregg, with his arms outstretched, named it.

“I hereby dub this our secret special place,” he declared. “Do you agree, my lady?”

Emily, all smiles and impressed with the sense of silly intrigue, clapped with joy and replied, “Oh yes, Daddy, I agree.”

As Emily was getting off the merry-go-round, the snap of the shoulder strap on her blue denim coveralls came loose. Her dad, sitting with legs crossed on the ground grabbed her to fix it. As Emily stood by him, she looked at the merry-go-round and spotted a muddy soda bottle underneath the ride. This was a valuable find; muddy or not, it was worth a two-penny deposit. Two cents meant she could visit the last store in Deep River and buy some candy. Emily was almost giddy with the fun day she was having with her dad. And her new find was icing on the cake.

They visited the merry-go-round at least once a week. Emily and her dad would talk about the scary news of the war that she heard

on the radio. She hoped against hope her dad would never get drafted. Sadly, all too soon, Gregg did get drafted, just like most of the other local men had been.

Not wanting to leave on bad terms, he took Jennifer into his arms and told her, "I don't care what anyone says. Emily is my daughter, and you're my girl."

Jennifer was so glad to hear those words she kissed him and hugged him tightly. A few days before he left, Emily and her dad sat on the chair swing in front of their tiny wooden cottage. Holding her on his knee as he often did, he told Emily, "No matter what happens, even if I don't make it back alive, you can still call to me, and, sweetie, I will try to come to you."

Emily, upset with tears falling, asked, "But Daddy, how can I talk to you if you're not alive?"

He thought for a moment and responded, tapping his chest, "Sweetie, remember that only my body will be in a box. My heart will be right there."

Then, with his right index finger, he touched her heart and told her, "Our hearts will always be together."

Emily, tears welling up once more, asked him. "Daddy is there a special way, or place, I need to call to you?"

He concentrated for a minute and thought of a place he knew was safe for her to go alone.

After a bit more consideration he announced, "Yep sweetie, I know the perfect place. Remember, our secret special place? I mean the abandoned school by the old wooden merry-go-round you like so much. How's that?"

Emily perked up as delightful memories flooded her mind. She replied, "Great Daddy. I'll go there!"

Gregg took his daughter's hands into his own, then looked into her eyes and told her, "Good then, sweetheart. When you feel you need me, go there. Just remember to tell your mother. All you have to do is just sit on the floor of the merry-go-round to get it spinning just a little with your feet, the way you have to when you're playing by yourself. Do you understand?"

Emily, tears gone now, replied excitedly, "Oh yes Daddy, I can do that."

"Good." Gregg replied. Tears were now filling his eyes too. Then he continued, "Remember what I told you about our two hearts being

together. Well, all you have to do is put your hand over your heart and think of me. Then if I can, I will come to you. I will try very hard sweetheart."

Emily, now feeling as though she had something to hold on to, felt a bit better. Gregg, remembering the muddy soda bottle that had gone undiscovered for a least two years, hatched a secret plan of his own. He wanted to be sure that if something did happen to him, and she did go to the merry-go-round, she would not leave empty-handed. He planted something special for her to find, in the same spot where she found the soda bottle.

Three days later, Gregg left for the Army. In the train station, by the food tables set up by a group of ladies called the Doughnut Girls, they shared some coffee, doughnuts and hugs. Both Jennifer and Emily held on to Gregg until the last minute. Greg and Jennifer had one final embrace. The sergeants and officers began ushering troops toward the tracks yelling, "Everyone on the train now, men!"

Complying with their very first order, they all hustled to board the train bound for basic training. The train noise as well as people crying and saying goodbye was distracting. There wasn't much time for talk. Emily gave her dad one final hug and said, "I love you, Daddy." He hugged her back and then Jennifer, telling them both "I love you two. Write to me, okay?" Without hesitation, they replied together, "You write too!"

Then, with one hand grasping the railing, he leaped up the train car steps, and through the door. All too quickly, her Daddy disappeared into the gray railroad car. Gregg, in an aisle seat, reached over another future soldier who occupied the window seat. He waved goodbye to the two ladies he loved most in the world. Jennifer, and little Emily waved back as the train moved out, and then he was gone.

Jennifer and Emily tried to settle into some kind of normalcy at home with Gregg gone. He wrote almost every day at first, but eventually the letters slowed. Soon, they arrived only once a week. A neighbor lady told Jennifer not to be discouraged.

She told her "Those boys are busy training honey, and they are tired at the end of the day." Jennifer understood, but it wasn't so easy on young Emily. Nevertheless, she acted bravely.

Emily and her mom enjoyed walking to the tiny village post office. It was a quaint, refurbished 100-year-old green cottage with whitewash window trim. It had two rooms and was built on stilts. That construction feature protected it from the heavy spring thaw and flooding from Deep River Creek, from which the village got its name.



A letter finally arrived after a 30-day dry spell. Jennifer and Emily sat down on the post office steps to read it.

Gregg wrote, "They are pushing us through boot camp in a hurry. Scuttlebutt is something big is coming, but no one knows what's up. Boot camp will be shortened to six weeks, so that means less than two weeks to go."

Then he crushed Jennifer's heart. "Should something happen to me, my will is complete in my Army 201 file. They made us all do one. I sent a separate letter for Emily in this envelope, too. Please hug her for me. Jennifer hon, be strong, and don't let her know what I have written to you."

Trying to hide the urge to burst into tears at the mention of a will, she decided to wait to let her guard down when she was alone. Jennifer then handed Emily the letter for her, saying, "Daddy sent you your own letter too, honey, and he also sent you this." Jennifer gave her daughter a tight hug there on the steps.

Emily's only comment was, "I miss him, Mom." Jennifer gave her another hug and replied, "I know, sweetie. Me too."

Gregg was kind and gentle in his writings. He told Emily, "Help your mother. She will need that more than ever before. Also, Emily, remember our secret special place, the merry-go-round. And also remember that I'm as close as your heart. Love, Dad."

Emily read it and looked at her mom. His letter said everything well, but it made this bright seven-year-old fear for her dad's safety. She was a strong girl and did not cry. It didn't escape either of them that his tone seemed depressed.

Jennifer and Emily walked home slowly, hand in hand from the tiny post office. Neither mother nor daughter talked much. Emily pointed out a newer car driving through Deep River. With the steel shortage, that was a big deal. Jennifer remarked, "It must have been built before '41."

Once home, Jennifer took her letter to her bedroom and gave it the tears it deserved. Two weeks later, in local theaters everywhere, during the news reels, Americans heard about the D-Day invasion. Jennifer and Emily plainly saw what had concerned Gregg so much and why everyone had to complete their wills.

Gregg's platoon was one of the first to hit the beach. There was little resistance at first, but soon the enemy let loose with machine gun and rifle fire. Gregg was assigned to a machine gun crew. He was carrying the tripod to the beach when he took a machine gun round.

His heart was blown apart, but during the few seconds he was able to speak before he died, he said to his buddy Don Peters, "Please tell Jennifer I love her, and tell my Emily to meet me at the merry-go-round. Please, it's important. Tell her to look where she found that old soda bottle." He offered his last smile at the thought of his daughter. "She'll know what I mean."

"It's fine, Gregg," his buddy promised. "I'll get it done for you." Then Gregg was gone.

It took two weeks before the chaplain and an escort arrived at the Bean's house. She was surprisingly calm when she saw the green Army car drive up. Then, her visitors called Gregg a hero, delivered his will and presented Jennifer with a flag. Upon hearing the news, Emily screamed, crying out as if from her soul, "Not my Daddy, no, no please!"

The officer escorting the chaplain had a note for Emily from one of the guys with Gregg when he died.

"Emily sweetheart," it said, "I don't know you. I'm Pvt. Don Peters. I was with your dad on the beach. He wanted you and your mom to know he loves you both. And Emily, your dad said to remind you to meet him at the merry-go-round. And he especially wanted you to look where you found an old soda bottle. He said you would know what that means. He didn't have time to say any more. If I can be any help, please let me know. Gregg's buddy, Pvt. Don Peters."

Jennifer and the officers talked a bit. It took about 30 minutes for her to break down and cry. But when she did, she cried so hard they had to help her to the sofa. It took Emily three days until she



I Didn't Know Your Name

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

It was dark,
But the tracers of rounds
Lit up the sky, and they continued to whine
As they whizzed by.

I crawled to your foxhole and fell in.
You sat silently
And held your face as to be hidden.

You asked me for a smoke.
I gave it and you gave me your chocolate candy.
We talked about good times,
Girls and parties.

We laughed when I told you
About my Ma's Boston Brown Bread
And how all the kids in the neighborhood
Would come running over for a piece of her tart.

You responded again.
Somehow, that rasping hiss of your laugh
Brought back the sounds
Of a voice I once knew.

Orders were now given.
You went up and out,
And I followed you out.

The pounding of heavy weapons never
ceased,
And hideous glare of tracers lit up
Like a carnival in a dark, forbidden sky.

The grey dawn broke,
And I dragged myself back to the foxhole.
I waited for you, but you didn't come back.

I never saw you again,
And, what a shame, I never knew your name.

felt up to going to the abandoned school yard and the old merry-go-round. Even though it was an oppressively warm day, she put on her favorite yellow dress just in case her Daddy really showed up. In her heart, Emily knew it wasn't possible.

When she approached the merry-go-round, she noticed a little tin cigar container hidden exactly where she had found the soda bottle. Her Daddy was right. Painted on the lid was her name. Somehow, he had managed to put it there without her knowing, just another one of his surprises.

There was a note inside for her. It said, "I know this isn't exactly what I promised you, but in a way I will be here. When you ride the merry-go-round, my heart will beat alongside yours."

Emily sat back hugging the note and began to turn the merry-go-round as she had before. As it squeaked to a stop, Emily tapped her chest to feel her dad's heartbeat.

As she went to put the letter back in the tin box, Emily noticed a picture inside she had almost missed. It was of her happily sitting on her Daddy's knee. Holding the picture and note to her heart, Emily lay back on the dry boards of the old merry-go-round, staring at the blue sky. Soon, the seven-year-old girl with the brown, curly hair as uncontrollable as she was, wearing that yellow dress for her Daddy, drifted off to sleep.

When she woke up, Emily felt strangely calm and more relaxed than she had in days. But what surprised her most, it seemed as though someone had come by while she slept. The merry-go-round was gently spinning.

Testimony of a Veteran

By Steven Dillman
—Harvard, NE

I grew up an only child. Molested by my male cousin when I was seven. Still today I play with GI Joes and read comics.

Even though I was always in the principal's office getting corrected, I enjoyed school greatly, whether doing worksheets, book reports, presenting a project or building something in shop class. Throughout school I ran track and cross country and was part of the chess club. I was very active in my church youth group and accepted Jesus as my savior when I was nine years old.

My father was in the Army, deployed to Operation Desert Storm when I was in the sixth grade. Later he obtained the rank of first sergeant. He spent 24.5 years active and then after retirement went to work overseas in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving my mother to raise me.

During my senior year in high school, an Army recruiter called me and asked me what my plans were after school. I replied I didn't know. He then asked what I thought about joining the Army. I said well, I guess so. Sure. I would eventually be a fourth generation combat veteran.

It took me three times to pass the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. I tried to be an MP with my friend but was only offered Infantry (11B) or Truck Driver (88M). I chose Truck Driver. I would rather drive than walk. I had another friend that would follow me as a truck driver a year later. Coincidentally, both of our fathers served together.

The church I went to gave me a pocket-size Bible that had a metal plate on the cover to protect my heart if ever in combat. One month after graduation, I was off for basic.

In basic I failed the first PT test (push-ups). Never failed a PT test again. After basic was AIT and truck driving school. I failed the



air brakes test. I was recycled to the next class. I can remember calling home worried and my mom asking my father to do something. He couldn't; it was on me. That would make me think: "Dad, did I let you down?" I did not fail another test after that.

After AIT graduation I got sent to Fort Campbell, Ky., home of the 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles. I was pretty excited because that was my dad's first duty station, too. Well, during my

time at Fort Campbell I got told to go to Air Assault school. I got sent twice and dropped out both times. Got negative performance counselings due to it.

When I went to the promotion board for sergeant, I was so scared I broke down crying in front of the sergeant major and fellow first sergeants. They told me to leave. I was a complete mess and disappointment. I was in trouble every time I turned around. But I never received an Article 15. I was a heavy drinker and filled my eyes with pornography.

There would be times when I would read God's word in the Bible to stay away from trouble but still give in. It came time for me to reenlist. I raised my hand for six more years. I had to go overseas just to let my driver's license rest. I had four speeding tickets in less than a year, all 20-plus miles over. I even spent a day in jail for a \$25 returned check. Came so close to DUIs but never got one. I was off to Germany. I know, the land of beer.

I report to Germany, and as my first sergeant interviews me, he looks me in my eyes and asks me if I drink. I say proudly, Yes! I could just see his mind and heart saying, "Why another one that does not get it?" I knew he was wanting someone to be a leader and not just another follower.

Well, I always told myself I would quit when I got into trouble. Needless to say, I finally got what I asked for. I was drunk in public and kicked in a German lawyer's BMW car. The German

police picked me up, and then the MPs came. I was in Alcoholics Anonymous for over a year. I had to do a public apology to the mayor, the German city and the lawyer, plus pay for damages. I was made a pure example of what not to be.

Part of corrective training was I would get paired up with soldiers that needed a mentor to help them quit or recover. (Was this God working through me?) Throughout this time, the senior E4s (specialists) were being promoted to corporal, and my name was off and on the list. I did get it after complaining.

In April 2002, after being sober for three months, there was a new female soldier in the unit. I always volunteered for any driving mission or support mission so was hardly in the barracks. I was set to go to Kosovo for a six-month rotation. I had just started talking with the new female. She would be my first girlfriend at age 23. We would both be virgins when we got married. She prayed for me to stay. I had no way of getting out of going to Kosovo.

Ironically, we were doing PT in the motor pool a few days before leaving. What's Rule One in the motor pool? No running, right? Well, we were doing wind sprints and running backwards. I lost my balance and landed on my wrist. It broke. I was not on the list to go. Rachel and I continued to date, then got engaged, then eventually married in 2003.

I got sent to another base to help out because I was a corporal. I finally had enough and got into it verbally with my first sergeant and basically told him to take my rank. He did. Rachel got promoted to specialist and I got demoted to specialist the same day. But the paperwork never got turned in for the demotion, so everything followed me as a corporal.

After 9/11 happened, we got sent to Iraq for our combat tour. We engaged in firefights and experienced the results of war—trauma. After our first tour in Iraq together, Rachel got pregnant. I went to my next unit deploying right back to Iraq. Rachel got chaptered out due to a child.

I got sent back to Fort Campbell to an infantry unit. Be careful what you wish/pray for because I said to myself it would be cooler if I had the 101st combat patch instead of 1st Infantry Division. Remember 11B or 88M. See, it's what God wants you to do for him.

For some reason it was God's time now, and I came up for sergeant. I didn't even go to the promotion board. All my correspondence courses, awards, PT scores and weapons scores added up to the cut off. In the infantry unit I would be completely



set apart from the other leaders. But Christ would be with me, and the soldiers would see that.

On my second tour in Iraq I lost a good friend from combat. It really tore at me. For 10 years I held it in and finally reached out to the Oregon VFW to connect me to his parents. I was able to talk with his father and express our friendship. The worldly pain was lifted. I still want to make it up there and visit his gravesite and monument.

I got honorably discharged from the Army in December 2006. It took me 11 months to find a job. I enrolled in college and took it by the reins. I excelled in all classes, setting the standard for other students. Even though the VA paid for school, I still won scholarships which helped with raising a family. There was a miscarriage in 2007 that really took a toll on Rachel and me. A few years later our second son was born. We have two very handsome boys—very smart and love Jesus.

I worked at a seed corn plant (Remington Seeds) for 10 years (2007-2017) and excelled in all positions I was put in. Seeing others get promoted before me and others with bad attitudes about life would wear me down, but I stayed faithful in Jesus. I even had three different multi-million dollar mess-ups at work and they wanted me to stay. God kept me safe, but even though I went in-patient twice for mental health, it still wasn't enough.

I reached out to other veteran organizations for help and finally received the help I needed. God uses me now as veteran outreach for spiritual care for other veterans or military families. He blessed me and my wife with being able to retire early and not worry about finances. God will provide. He allowed me to start Cease-Fire Ministries. Now I am an independent minister for veteran outreach.

I thank Jesus for never giving up on me and am pleased to do His work and share His word with others.

Pictures

By Steven Miller
—Holly Springs, NC

I had just started the coffee in the little coffeemaker they put in hotel rooms and opened the door to pick up the Cleveland newspaper they had dropped at my door. I threw the paper on the bed and stepped into the shower. After I had showered, I poured a cup of coffee and sat down to leaf through the paper while listening to CNN on the television. I had a meeting with a client at 9 a.m. to try to explain why their stock portfolio was continuing to go down the drain.



As CNN delivered the updated news about the war in Iraq, I unfolded the paper and did a quick glance at the front page. My usual routine has always been to read the comics first, followed by the sports pages. I always found that “Doonesbury” helped to prepare my psyche to face the news about the financial markets, international affairs and the rest of the increasingly depressing developments.

This day, my eyes caught the picture of a young man in the lower right section of the front page. There was something familiar about him, the way he smiled into the camera. The headline of the story accompanying the picture read “Indiana man among aid workers killed in Afghanistan.” The story began, “An Indiana man was one of three Americans killed when the Red Cross truck they were riding in drove over an explosive device buried in the road. They were part of a group delivering food and medical supplies to a village southeast of Kabul. Paul Slagle, 28, of Fort Wayne, was killed instantly in the explosion.”

I glanced further down the article and saw that Slagle was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Slagle of Fort Wayne. He was a 1997 graduate of Ball State University and had been working with the Red Cross since completing work on a master’s degree in public policy from Indiana University. He had been in Afghanistan for seven months. I could find nothing in the article that would have given me reason to think I should know him, so I turned to the

comics. When I had finished reading about the expectations of another dismal day for the stock market, I closed the paper, tossed it onto the bed and began to get dressed.

As I finished packing my garment bag, I glanced at the paper lying on the bed. The picture of the young man stared back at me almost as if he expected me to recognize him. I studied him for a moment. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I

knew him, or at least someone who looked like him. I zipped the bag shut, closed my briefcase and slipped the strap of the bag over my shoulder. I opened the door and glanced around the room before stepping into the hallway.

As I did so, my eyes fell once more on the face in the picture. I stood transfixed as I stared at the eyes and the smiling face. For reasons I could not explain, I stepped back into the room and set the garment bag and briefcase down. I went to the bed and picked up the newspaper.

The young man in the picture smiled in a knowing, familiar way that made me certain I knew him. I studied his face for a long moment and started to lay the paper back on the bed. At the last moment, I opened my briefcase, slipped the paper inside, and left the hotel room.

I flew back to Chicago after the meeting and spent the rest of the afternoon in my office. When I opened my briefcase, the face of Paul Slagle was on top. I had put him out of my mind during the client meeting, and now I picked up the paper and stared at him again. I started to drop the paper in the trash, but something in the young man’s smile gnawed at me. I folded the front section of the paper and placed it on the credenza behind my desk.

I arrived back to my apartment in Lincoln Park around 7 p.m. I had not had dinner but was not particularly hungry, so I sat

down to sort through the junk mail and checked my telephone messages. There was one from my friend Larry reminding me of the tee time on Saturday. Nothing else. I had vaguely hoped to hear something from my daughter or one of the boys. It didn't really surprise me that they were not bending over backwards to keep in touch with their father, since they felt I had never expressed an overwhelming desire to be a major part of their lives. I met Karen when we were both working in Chicago. We married within a year, and two years later Ellen was born. Karen and I decided we wanted to raise our children in a smaller city, and when I was offered a job with an investment company in Indianapolis, we moved to Zionsville, a quiet northern suburb.

However, my job had always demanded a lot of my time and the travel was extensive. So, I was seldom there for baseball games, dance recitals, school plays or the like. I guess I somehow thought that as long as I kept the money flowing for clothes, vacations, cars and private schools, the kids would understand and somehow magically accept my role in the parental scheme. However, their apathy toward me grew as they passed through their teen years and turned to something akin to hostility when Karen and I split up three years ago and I moved back to Chicago for this job.

My daughter Ellen had graduated from DePauw University two years ago and taken a purchasing job in Indianapolis with a local department store. David was now a senior at Indiana and would soon be on his own. Michael was a freshman at Rose Hullman, and Gordon was still in high school. My efforts at this juncture to remain connected to them were falling sadly short of the mark, and at this point, I doubted they would ever get much better.

Still, I had a desire to hear Ellen's voice, even if it was distant, both in terms of geography and emotion. I checked her number in my book and dialed. It rang briefly but was interrupted by a computer-generated voice informing me that the number was no longer in service. I dialed again, thinking I had misdialed, but received the same message. I thought for a moment, and dialed Karen's number. She picked up on the second ring.

"The fact that you picked up tells me that the caller ID must not be working," I said.

"Don't start on me," she said. "I only ignore the people I care enough about to dislike."

"It's nice to talk to you, too. How are you?"

"I'm OK, but I can't talk. I'm on the way out the door to go watch Gordie play tennis. He's on the tennis team, in case you care."



"I know he's on the team, and I do care. But there's not much I can do from here, is there?" Silence. "I tried to call Ellen, but her number is disconnected. Did she move?"

"Yes, in fact, she did. She took a new job and moved to Chicago."

"She's in Chicago? When did this happen?"

"She started the job about three weeks ago."

"Three weeks ago? You mean she's been here in Chicago for three weeks and neither of you have seen fit to let me know? Why didn't she call me? Why didn't you call me?" I felt the anger rising slowly.

"Maybe if you showed an interest in her life, she would have. Maybe if you had ever showed an interest..."

I rubbed my forehead with my thumb and forefingers, feeling a headache coming on. I really did not want to get into this again.

"OK, look...just give me her number. I'll call her."

Karen gave me the number and hung up. I called Ellen, and after three rings, she picked up.

"Ellen?" I said. "This is Dad."

"Dad? Oh. Hi! How are you?"

I remember a time when I was "Daddy". Somewhere I became "Dad". I don't remember when.

"I just talked with your mother, and she told me you moved to Chicago. Why didn't you call me?"

“I know... I should have, Dad. I'm sorry. I just have been really busy, and I know you have been, too.”

We talked for a few minutes. She told me about her new job at the Merchandise Mart and how exciting it was and how busy she had been getting moved and settled and all. I asked if she needed anything, and she said she did not. I promised to call her next week and take her to dinner.

I sat for a few minutes and stared at the framed picture on the bookshelf. It was one of those family portraits taken back when we were still a family. Ellen in her flowered dress, the two boys smiling at the camera and little Gordon sitting on his mother's lap. I stood behind them all, a picture of the family provider and protector. I went in to change clothes and settle in to do some reading.

A week later, I finally met up with my daughter at a restaurant on Hubbard Street. I arrived a few minutes ahead of her and was having a drink at the bar when she walked in. I was struck by what a beautiful young woman my daughter had become, and as she walked into the bar, I could see that her arrival was not unnoticed by several young men.

At dinner, she gave me all the inside scoop on the lives of her brothers and my ex-wife. There seems to be a special bond between fathers and their little girls that even benign neglect in parenthood can't completely destroy. Ours was no different, and Ellen was always willing to excuse my shortcomings in the parenting role, thankful, I think, for my willingness to accept her as a bona fide adult.

I came home late as usual and sorted through the mail. Among the offers for a special introductory rate on yet another credit card was a plain white envelope with a hand-written address. There was no return address, and I checked the postmark. It was Kendallville, Ind. I didn't know anyone in Kendallville that I could think of, but the writing had a feminine look to it, so I opened it. Inside was a single piece of paper folded once. Inside the folded sheet was what appeared to be a newspaper clipping. There was nothing else, and when I unfolded the clipping, I was looking at the same picture of Paul Slagle. I sat down at the table and stared at the picture. I looked around on the floor to make certain that a letter or something had not fallen from the envelope when I opened it. There was nothing. Nothing but the picture of Paul Slagle, smiling at me.

I sat for a long while staring at the picture. Finally, I went to the refrigerator and opened a bottle of beer and turned on my computer. I went to a search engine and found the Fort Wayne

newspaper, went to the archives, scrolling down until I found the article about Paul Slagle. The article contained much of the same information as the Indianapolis paper, except it mentioned that he was the son of Edward and Sheila Slagle of Kendallville. There was nothing in the article that gave me reason to think I should know him or care. Still, someone in Kendallville had sent me a copy of the newspaper article and the picture.

I sat for a long while looking out the window at the darkness thinking about Paul Slagle. I did not know him, nor had any reason to think I knew anything about him. Still, somehow, somewhere inside I knew that I did in fact know him very well. The little defense mechanisms that help shield us from those places in our subconscious that we know are there but don't want to visit were kicking in. His mother's name was Sheila. A dull sadness overtook me as the night passed on, and somewhere along the way, I understood what I had to do.

The next morning, I called in and told my secretary I had come down with a cold and asked her to clear my schedule for tomorrow and Friday. I threw some clothes into a bag, climbed into the car and drove south on Lake Shore Drive, the Chicago skyline passing on my right and the sparkling blue of Lake Michigan on my left as I moved along with the traffic. I eventually picked up the toll road and drove east across northern Indiana. It was a pleasant summer day, and shortly before noon I turned off I-69 and headed toward Kendallville. I had gotten the Slagles' address from the web and mapped directions to their house.

They lived in a neighborhood of older two-story homes that looked as if it had once been moderately affluent but had fallen on hard times. The tree-lined street was edged with cracked and irregular sidewalks, but a number of the houses had apparently been fixed up and returned to at least a form of their original state. It was a neighborhood in transition back to respectability.

I stopped by the curb and checked the address. It was one of the houses that had been refurbished. The paint was recent, the small yard and shrubs well-groomed and the wooden door freshly varnished. I got out of the car, climbed the four steps to the large porch and rang the doorbell. I waited, and finally, through the sheer curtain that covered the oval window in the door, I detected movement. Then, nothing. I waited for a minute and rang the bell again. Another minute passed, and as I started to push the button once again, I heard the latch turn, and the door began to open, slowly at first, then steadily. She stepped from the darkness of the house into the light of the doorway.

Sheila did not look much different than I would have imagined she would after 28 years. She still had her trim figure and her

shoulder-length hair that had begun to turn “salt and pepper” as a young woman. Her face still had the gentleness that had been the essence of her character, but her eyes revealed a deep sadness. She did not seem surprised to see me, a reaction that confirmed what I knew. She smiled a little.

“Hello, John”, she said in a quiet voice. She cocked her head a little to the side, resting it against the door.

On the long drive from Chicago, I had tried to think of what I would say when this moment came, but it all fell away, as did the years.

“My God,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me I had a son?”

I saw a tear well up in her eye, and she backed away from the door. “Please come in,” she said and turned and walked into the living room. I followed her in. She stopped for a minute, and then asked, “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Do you have iced tea?” I asked. She turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

I stood uncomfortably for a minute and looked around. The room was furnished with overstuffed furniture and antiques. There were some newspapers on the floor by the fireplace and books and other everyday clutter around the room. On the mantle was a collection of family pictures. There was Sheila and the man who must be Edward and at least three different children captured at various ages from infancy to adulthood. There was one girl and two boys, one of which was Paul.

Sheila returned with two glasses of tea. She had gathered herself and the slight, sad smile had returned. “Please sit down,” she said, and nodded her head toward the couch.

I sat at one end, and she settled in at the other end. She slipped off her shoes, leaned back, cradled a small pillow to her chest, and tucked her legs in under her. She looked pensively down at the floor for a moment, then looked at me.

“I once told you that if I ever got pregnant, it would be my problem, not yours. I really meant that.”

I waited for her to continue, but she looked away, toward the pictures on the mantle.

“But how could you think I wouldn’t care?” I said. “Did you think I would just run away?”



“You didn’t love me enough.”

“How could you know that? How could you decide to make that your decision alone?”

She turned and looked at me squarely.

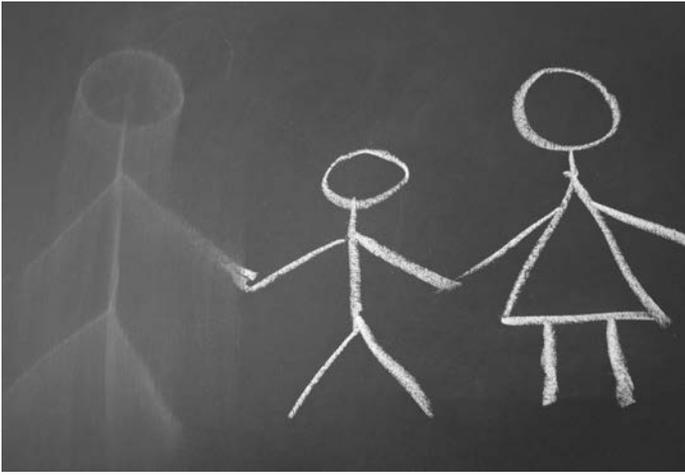
“You have to understand. I fell in love with you in college, on that first date. I loved you and everything about you. I knew you liked me, but I also knew I wasn’t as pretty as some of the other girls you had dated. Still, I held out hope you would someday come around to where I was.

“Then, after we graduated and you left for the Army, I decided to give it up. All the time you were gone, I wondered if you were safe and if you ever thought of me. Then when you came back and we were back together again in grad school, I fell for you all over again. Living with you, even for that short time, I was as happy as I could imagine ever being, but as miserable as I have ever been.”

I remembered the year we shared a small apartment in Bloomington. She was working on her master’s degree in elementary education, and I on my MBA. I was a veteran and still had the conservative values that I had grown up with and that had been further ingrained by the military. Sheila always gravitated toward sixties-generation left-wing alternative types with their disdain and contempt for everything I was.

While Sheila and I seldom argued, I nearly came to blows with some of her friends who saw nothing wrong with constantly camping in my apartment, smoking dope and telling me what a tool of the establishment I was. Going to job interviews in my banker’s suit was almost a source of embarrassment for her.

I took a job with a bank in Chicago, and she took a teaching job in Indianapolis at one of the inner-city schools. For a while, we tried



to maintain the relationship by trading weekends. This went on for a few months. She seemed to be content and would have gone on indefinitely. But I was restless.

Finally, on one visit to Indianapolis, we lay together and she told me she had an opportunity to take a teaching job in Chicago. I'm not sure if she really had the job or if she was just testing my reaction. Whatever my reaction was, it was not the one she had hoped for.

A few days later, I received a letter from her. It was short and to the point. She told me that she loved me more than I knew but couldn't go on like this. If I wanted her in my life, she wanted to be in it all the way. If not, I should say so, and she would get on with her life.

I read the letter a hundred times. I picked up the telephone a dozen times to call and put it back. I started letters, all of which ended up in the trash. In the end, the truth was clear. She loved me completely and would have been willing to spend her life with me. That much she said. And I did love her. But the truth was, I just did not love her enough.

I never called her. I never wrote her. I walked away from her life and did not see her again until that afternoon 28 years later as I sat in her living room drinking her iced tea.

She continued. "That last time we were together, I knew I was pregnant. But I decided that I wouldn't tell you unless you wanted to be with me. I knew that if I told you, you would 'do the right thing' and insist we get married, and sooner or later you would realize how unhappy you were and then we would all be unhappy. And you would be trapped. I just decided that the baby and I would be happier without you. When you just went out of my life without a word, I knew I had made the right decision."

"I... I tried to write you... started to call you..." I struggled with

the words, and she held up her hand to silence me. "But you didn't, did you?"

We sat silently for a moment, just looking at each other. Whatever hurt she had experienced 28 years ago, she was well over it now.

"So, what did you do?"

"I finished the school year, took the summer off, and had the baby. I moved to Fort Wayne to be close to my parents and got a job substitute teaching. My mother was a big help."

"What did you tell your parents?" Her parents owned a hardware store in Fort Wayne. They were hard-working, God-fearing Midwesterners, and they would have struggled to understand the choice their daughter had made.

"I told them that the baby's father had been killed in Vietnam. That somehow made it a little more acceptable to them."

I took a drink from my glass. "Wow. When you slam the door, you really slam it, don't you? What did you tell Paul?"

"That his father was dead. I met Ed when Paul was three. He's a decent man, a teacher like me. When we were married, he adopted Paul. He was, in every way that counts, Paul's father."

She seemed to be gripping the pillow a little tighter. Suddenly, tears welled up again, and her voice broke.

"He took Paul's death very hard. I don't know if he will ever be the same."

I looked at her for a minute, not knowing whether to feel grief, anger or what. "Sheila," I asked. "Why did you send me the picture? Why now? What do you want of me? How did you find me?"

She gathered herself again. "I ran into one of your old college buddies recently. He caught me up on what you have been doing. I know about your kids, your divorce, all that."

She was quiet again, then got up and walked to the mantle and picked up a picture of Paul. She shook her head slowly.

"I don't know why I did it. My emotions are all screwed up. I think in a way I wanted to punish you, to tell you what you missed. Maybe to hurt you a little bit for not wanting to share your life with me. And Paul."

I sat back in the corner of the couch for a moment, then rose and went to the mantle, picking up a picture of Paul. He was in a tie and sport coat. It looked like a high school senior picture.

“What was he like?” I asked.

She rose and stood quietly for a moment, then went to a built-in bookcase beside the fireplace, pulled out a photo album and returned to the couch. She placed the album on the coffee table and patted the cushion next to her.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’ll tell you about your son.”

For the next half hour, she turned the pages of the album dedicated only to Paul. She led me on a tour of the life of the son I never knew. There were pictures of Paul as a baby, smiling at the children’s photographer, probably at some mall. There was a tiny Paul in soccer shorts that came down to his chubby knees, with a yellow shirt so oversized that the tail of the shirt actually hung out the bottom of the shorts it was tucked into. I know at home, Karen had a similar picture of David. I was struck by the similarity between the two boys. There was a picture of Paul at Disney World with his brother and sister, and a picture of teenaged Paul standing beside a beat-up Toyota. There was Paul fishing with Edward, holding up a sizable bass for the camera, the infectious smile on his face. There was Paul in his high school cap and gown, standing with his proud parents, and another that was obviously taken after college commencement. There were more pictures of Paul as he had made his way into adulthood, including one where he appeared to be standing in a primitive village somewhere. Then there weren’t any more pictures.

Sheila closed the book, sat back and looked down at her hands folded on her lap. I saw a tear make its way down her nose and drop onto her hands. She began to shake, crying silently.

I thought about the young man who had been my son, who had been born, grew up, loved and been loved and died, and I never knew him. I thought of my other children who had also grown up without me noticing, all the soccer games, school plays, dance recitals that I was too busy to attend; of the marriage that lasted 22 years and then fell apart due to my detachment and inability to allow myself to be close. I looked at the woman crying softly on the couch next to me, who had done it all the right way, had loved completely, and now had lost it. I had loved her once, but not enough. And now I had lost what I didn’t even know I ever had.

All this rushed through my brain in an instant, and I found myself trembling, my head in my hands, the tears soaking my palms. I felt Sheila move closer to me and put her arms around my slumping shoulders.

“Oh God, John. I’m so sorry. This was a dreadful mistake on my part,” she cried. “I thought I wanted to hurt you, but I was wrong. It would have been better if you had never known.”

We sat holding each other for a while, and there was nothing else to say. I gathered myself and rose from the couch. “I guess I’d better go,” I said. “It’s a long drive back to Chicago.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek. “Yes, you should leave. Ed will be home soon. He teaches a summer course at a junior college in Fort Wayne.” She followed me to the door, and I turned to face her.

“Don’t feel bad about sending me the picture,” I told her. “I’m glad to know about Paul. But he was Ed’s son. Ed gave him a father, and he has the right to grieve for him.”

“Are you sure you’re OK?” she asked.

I thought for a minute. “Yeah. I’m OK.”

I wasn’t sure I should, but I put my arms around her and held her to me for a moment. We embraced, and I turned to leave.

“John?” she said. “You missed Paul, but you have another chance.” She handed me a piece of paper, folded once.

“Before Paul left for Afghanistan, he was living with a young woman in Bloomington. They were in love and planned to be married when he returned. After Paul left, she learned she was pregnant. She didn’t tell him because she knew what he was doing over there was important to him, and she didn’t want him to cut his stay short to come home. She decided she would wait until he returned. She knew they would have all the time in the world then.”

I unfolded the paper and saw a name and address in Bloomington.

“She had the baby two weeks ago,” Sheila continued. “She’s all alone and so is her baby. You have a grandson, John. You can be a part of their lives.”

I looked at her for a moment. “Goodbye, John,” she said as she gently closed the door.

I left Kendallville, and when I got to I-69, I pulled over for a minute. I sat and thought about the son I had never known. I put the car in gear and entered the ramp for I-69 southbound, the road that would eventually lead to Bloomington.

The Cathartic Cup of Coffee

By Melvin Brinkley
—Davis, CA

(Stage setting: Two veterans sitting at a booth in a VA medical center's snack bar. Pete is already seated.)

MEL: (Walking up to the booth.)
“I got a veterans’ discount for our coffee.” (Hands Pete a coffee. Sits down.)

PETE: “Yeah?”

MEL: “I also got a ‘Thank you for your service’ from that cute cashier over there.” (Winks at Pete)

PETE: (Grumpily.) “I’ve got a problem with that.”

MEL: “What? You’ve got a problem with what? Me paying for our coffee, or me talking to that cute cashier?”

PETE: (Angrily.) “People think they’re being patriotic by saying that.”

MEL: “Who knows what people think? Look. It’s good for business. Hell, her parents probably weren’t even born when you were a grunt in ‘Nam.”

PETE: “Exactly. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She doesn’t know anything about your service. When I got back from ‘Nam nobody said ‘Thank you for your service’ every time I turned around. Now all of a sudden it’s a (shouting) THING.”

MEL: “Hey, you don’t have to be a grump because you got drafted.”

PETE: “Listen, for your information I wasn’t drafted. I volunteered for ‘Nam and I signed on with the United States Marine Corps. I wanted to go to ‘Nam. I wasn’t drafted.”

MEL: (Pauses.) “Wow. I didn’t know that. Look. Here’s an idea. Since I don’t know what you did in ‘Nam, why don’t you tell me one short story. Anything?”

PETE: “Yeah?”

MEL: “Yeah.”



PETE: (Pauses.) “Hmm. Okay. During the Tet Offensive of ‘68, I saw rockets slamming into the Da Nang Air Base.” (Looks away, trying not to get emotional.)

MEL: (Pauses.) “Look, I know it’s hard to talk about what happened. I get it.”

PETE: (Shakes head.) “My mortar platoon was up on a hill that overlooked that base. The rockets were coming from a free fire zone. No friendlies. Right?

I had a pretty good line-of-sight on them. It looked to be about three clicks away. I was a little short on that first round.”

MEL: “Wait. Whoa. You fired your mortar without a proper fire mission?”

PETE: “Yep.”

MEL: “Man o man. I might not know much, but I do know that sounds like you might have stretched the rules of engagement a little bit. I was in field artillery. Remember?”

PETE: “Yeah. So what? Direction is to azimuth is what distance is to quadrant and all that jazz. So, anyway, I was a little bit long on the next round, but the third round made a direct hit. There was a huge explosion, like the Fourth of July. That was the end of that rocket attack.”

MEL: “Did you get in trouble for firing without permission?”

PETE: “If I had waited to get permission, I would have had to wait for the whole damn chain of command to get involved, from platoon to company, from company to battalion, from battalion to regiment, until God almighty had to be asked for permission. The enemy would have been long gone by then.”

MEL: (Pauses.) “I bet those guys at the air base were glad you didn’t wait. Right?”

The Clothesline Watch

By Galen Murray
—Lawrence, KS

PETE: “How would I know? I didn’t go down there to check on them. I was a little busy trying to stay alive myself. (long pause) One thing I do know; most people who say that, ‘Thank you for your service’ thing have no idea what they are saying.”

MEL: “Well, how could they know what you did in ‘Nam unless you told them? And even then it is probably murky for most civilians?”

PETE: “Nobody has to worry about me being thanked. My platoon sergeant made me a permanent member of his clean-that-latrines-Marine-dream-team after my little solo act.”

MEL: (Pauses.) “Well, that sucks.” (Pauses.) “Hey, what if I pretend to be one of those guys on that air base? Look, I’ll be one of them and I’ll thank you. Play along with me. Okay? Just humor me.”

PETE: (Shaking head.) “You know you’re crazy, right? Certifiable.”

MEL: (Walks away and comes back after a minute.) “Hey, aren’t you the guy that single-handedly stopped a rocket attack during the Tet Offensive of ‘68?”

PETE: (Pete’s mind goes back to a place halfway around the planet, over half a century ago.) “Yeah, that was me.”

MEL: (Reaches for Pete’s hand and shakes it vigorously.) “I was at Da Nang when those rockets rained down on us. Man o man. You really saved our bacon that day. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! (long pause) And thank you for your service.”

PETE: (Shaking his head.) “Hey, don’t expect me to say that thank-you thing back to you. You can forget that.”

MEL: “You know I was deployed to war zones in Croatia, Kosovo and Afghanistan in my day. Right? Got shot at. The whole nine yards. Even so, I don’t expect a ‘thank you for your service’ from you. (Long pause) But a thank you for the coffee I pay for every week would be nice.”

(End of scene)

October 1959, at the U.S. Naval Training Center (boot camp), San Diego, Calif. I am assigned to guard duty (clothesline watch) on the tarmac, outside our barracks.

Along about 2300 hours, a body advanced into my area. I, being an alert sentry, challenged him.

“Halt, who goes there?” I called.

“Superman,” came the insolent reply.

“Well, fly your ass over here and get recognized,” I replied back.

The company C.O. appeared out of the darkness and stood before me with a very displeased look on his face.

“Son, that is not the correct way to challenge a trespasser. You could find yourself standing before a court martial.”

“And you did not properly identify yourself to my challenge, Sir.”

It really irritated him because he knew I was right, and any court martial proceedings would result in making him look like an incompetent fool.

He didn’t like me much after that incident; I, being a brilliant legal mind, who had been in the Navy all of four whole weeks.



The Day the Viet Nam War Began

By Jeffrey Loeb
—Kansas City, MO

I stepped out into the dark, frigid air and heard muffled shouts from across the street. Right away, I knew I had problems. One by one, the other boys got shoved out the door to join me in the hazy night. We huddled on the front porch, half a dozen of us, shivering in the crisp January air. We'd briefly perk up whenever headlights topped the dark hill down the street but then lapse into blank silence with each false alarm.



I gawked at the officers' bright medals, then flashed my best eye-rolls at my fellow victims. But the excitement had caught us too. We found ourselves elbowing each other and standing on tiptoes to catch sight not of them, but our blonde gladiator strolling forward in the brassy wake. Then, the phalanx parted and into the porch light's scant cone strode the Golden Boy himself, just then a nation's brief idol: Paul Hornung. He

From behind the door came riotous shouts: the klatch of tipsy parents who'd forced us out there. It was a humiliating spectacle, six of us shilling for the adults as cutesy first impressions. No girls, of course; the whole event was about football – power and domination. None of us had our coats on. Light filtered dimly through the near window, adding to the slim output of the single yellow porch bulb.

We'd been out there freezing a good 15 minutes when three identical olive Chevys emerged from the gloaming and bumpered up beneath the streetlight in tight formation—U.S. Army sedans, the kind that chauffeured Fort Riley's command staff. Their drivers leapt out smartly into the bitter air and jerked open the rear doors for their passengers—six officers, bronze and silver medals gleaming on their chests. Each of them grinned at the light touch of snowflakes, then ducked their heads and scurried up the sidewalk in loose formation.

We found ourselves being suddenly shoved from behind by our own fathers pouring out the door, all gripping amber highballs. The porch was suddenly overflowing with suits. Apparently, their meet-cute plans involving us boys had been unceremoniously tossed to the frigid wind. The tiny porch couldn't hold us all, so we got thrust down onto the walk, the flakes suddenly salting our hair. I grimaced at the embarrassing mewling from behind: "How's the wife, Colonel? Family all squared away tonight?" I could see through the picture window our mothers' willowy shapes; they were stuck in a worse position than ours, I realized.

towered over the adults, taller than any of us had pictured him and larger through the shoulders. To a boy, we slavered when he lifted his hand and took a long pull on his Marlboro, the brand he advertised on television. In 1962, professional athletes smoked openly. I'd seen Mickey Mantle puffing in the lobby of the Muehlebach hotel in Kansas City a year earlier after the Yankees had finished giving the Athletics their usual drubbing. Still, it was thrilling to see our hero do it in person. Most of us secretly smoked too, of course, pilfering freely from our parents' open packs. But Paul Hornung? He was our absolute idol.

Then, suddenly it seemed, we were all inside. The klatch of colonels found their status shriveling. Hornung, without even trying, had swept them aside, as he did the town leaders of Junction City, Kan., assembled in our living room to hail the conquering hero – MVP in the NFL championship game only weeks before. And, of course, to congratulate him on having willingly accepted his military call-up (as a reservist, he'd been granted weekends off for games) to humbly serve in his country's Army. This was 1962. The Gulf of Tonkin, Mario Savio and Muhammed Ali lay years ahead. It was still the patriotic thing to do.

It was in the early '60s when football began shouldering out baseball as the fan favorite. In summers, all of us, public and private schoolers both, played little-league baseball. This very fall, though, we St. Xavier freshmen left inferior equipment and leadership behind and had finally gotten to go full tilt on the gridiron with actual gear and coaches and a reasonably decent practice field. I was 14, the underweight, weak-armed

quarterback. Our private school's home games were fitted around the public senior high's schedule in their brand new stadium. Warm evenings and towering lights had filled our autumn.

Everyone had televisions, some with the new color ones, so we could watch our pro football heroes crush each other every Sunday. No one equaled the Packers just then; Vince Lombardi had assembled a juggernaut in Green Bay, and Hornung, the former Heisman Trophy winner, stood at its pinnacle. When he suddenly got drafted into the Army and was sent to sedate Fort Riley, Kan., it seemed as if the dynasty would collapse. The Army proved understanding, though, and let him work out daily, soldier a little, then fly out and play for the Packers on Sundays. He'd made it to every game, and they'd repeated as champions. Needless to say, he was a frequent speaker on the Junction City-Fort Riley-Manhattan rubber-chicken circuit and, of course, at private parties put on by the local elite, such as this one on a chilly winter's night. Tough duty.

After the dignitaries bunched up in the packed living room, we boys got shunted into the basement to wait for our personal meeting. While he enjoyed cocktails upstairs, all of us desperately clutched our footballs for signing. After an eternity (maybe 15 minutes or so), Hornung descended, drink in hand (likely his second or third). He was too tall for the rec room, his curly blonde locks brushing the white ceiling tiles, and he actually had to duck to avoid the heat ducts.

Nothing except his size and the brown drink remain clear in my memory. Only a newspaper photo remains, taken by a Junction City Daily Union photographer lassoed in to capture the occasion. In this rough print, I'm surrounded by eight of my peers and younger brothers, eagerly pressing close to the gilded demigod, seeming to be in active conversation with him – all stunned at our carefully arranged good fortune.

Then the Golden Boy was gone, upstairs and out into the night, leaving us to hug our precious autographed trophies (I have no idea what ever happened to mine) and listen to our parents basking in pride and congratulating each other.

There's more to tell, though. Looking at the photo, I see only children of the town's elect. Four of us are Loeb's, of course. Two others are offspring of the city's wealthiest (and, arguably, most powerful) citizen. Another's family owns the state's largest telephone network. The current mayor's son is there in the back. And enjoying Hornung's actual arm around his shoulder is the son of the mayor-to-be. Noblesse oblige, you might think I'm tempted to say. Well maybe, though certainly said sardonically

from this 60-year vantage. Let me give you more of the story.

As the dignitaries headed for the country club, new shouts came from the deep dark of a thicket in a neighboring yard, the voices I'd heard before Hornung's arrival. I doubt the departing guests even heard them, what with the booze and the running motors. I did though, and worse, had even expected them with a kind of shudder. They came from the un-elect: some of our less fortunate, and therefore uninvited, school friends, crouching in the bushes to see (but not really see) the blond god. Their faint calls went unheard by everyone but me, that is. and they set me to shuddering in guilt from my own roiling pride. (In fact, I think that memory eventually helped to propel me a few years hence into the service myself.)

It's fascinating now to parse the time to see how, in a few short years, Vietnam (at this point, merely a distant distraction) would come to dominate the Army's attention, and how most of the military guests present that night went on to hold command positions and carefully plan and direct the deadly maneuvers of their recently conscripted privates and corporals.

So, when Paul Hornung and all the adults spilled out of the house and we kids flocked back out onto the frigid porch to watch him stroll toward his chauffeured olive sedan, we heard the faint, high-pitched shouts of derision coming from the shadows across the street, our uninvited classmates – my friends — who didn't quite make the social grade in haughty Junction City and who'd shown up just to catch sight of the man, even if doing so had meant waiting for an hour in the dark cold. And we, up on our porch – the few, the proud, the elect – pretended not to hear a sound.

A few years hence, how many of our parents would stare at the nightly news on their new color televisions, recounting their own World War II heroism, bursting with pride at our great victories in bombing a small country "back into the stone age?" Hornung, of course, would have finished his brief stint in the service by then and be nearing retirement from his Hall of Fame career in the NFL.

And how many of us privileged ones in that newspaper photo, all perfectly situated by age for the war, would actually wear a uniform. Well, the answer is none besides me — into the Marine Corps and then out by 1969. Not one of my fellows in that photo with the Golden Boy ever saw military service. And our friends across the dark street? Well, all of them, no doubt.

Noblesse oblige.

The Reverse Side

By Paul Nyrick
—West Haven, CT



I ran across the ancient Japanese proverb: “The reverse side has a reverse side.” This seemingly simplistic oration made me ponder what those sages actually meant. There must be multiple interpretations to these prophetic seven words. I can only guess how to interpret this as deeply as I can with minimal data available. So, I will attempt to verbalize what it has to do with life and death.

Let us begin with the obvious. Take, for instance, a day. This phenomenon happens every 24 hours, where the reverse side of light is darkness, and the reverse side of darkness is light. This has been happening since the earth started rotating on its axis and will continue until our sun eventually burns itself out.

Now observe the flight of the black zebra butterfly, adorned with concentric, pale yellow stripes filled with a mesmerizing reflective bright light, flitting effortlessly between red blossoms on gentle breezes, dancing a beautiful ballet. I can watch her as she visits each flower, allowing the species to continue and thrive. This is how life can and must renew itself.

Now see the same specimen pinned under glass. She silently resembles her former living self, with the same colorful patterns, except for one; she will never fly freely on flapping wings. We all can observe the shell that was once a viable entity, now relegated to a display with a pin penetrating where her brain once gave her the ability to rule the garden. This is how the reverse side engages us to still observe beauty through life as well as death.

Now there was Jeral Winger. He gave up the ghost the other day from the scourges of multiple sclerosis and a kicker of a pulmonary defect that robbed him of enough air to sustain life. Some say pain is the portal to real life, but in Jeral’s case, his painful demise was an obvious blessing.

In this life, he was the quintessential angry old man, a contrarian to the max. When I first met Jeral, he was an angry middle-aged man. He possessed the ability to bad-mouth and anger anyone and everything. It seemed that he had a negative opinion on most subjects, including politics, his marriage, science, the VA and especially his perceived notion that the world dealt him a bad hand and was always out to get him.

Besides the obnoxious bravado, he had a gentle spirit that rarely surfaced. He was knowledgeable on many subjects. As a Seabee in Vietnam, he learned how things worked while coming up with applications that would make them better. As an engineer, he definitely had mechanical intelligence but lacked the tact to make people listen.

It saddens me that I never knew him when he was rational and whole. That would be the reverse side of how all of us knew him, and we will go down into the great beyond without that knowledge. Hopefully Jeral Winger has finally gotten some peace, but nobody knows how or if it ever transpired. Happy trails my friend, wherever you are.

The Flag

By William Shepherd
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

So know! I’m here to share my life with
Those who know his spirit. To take a stand
Against the wrong, but for what is right.
So take my hand and stand beside me as
We sing, “God Bless America.” This is our land
As it always will be! My flag is stained
With the blood that was spilled from days
Gone by from men that stood by God’s word!
He gave us truths to live by—the right to
Say “yes” or “no” and how we stand.
We live in this land of plenty. So give thanks
To God for all things we say and do.
Pray every day for the good that comes from
Above to guide our steps from day to day.
And remember to help our fellow man!

Black and That's That

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

So now you see how this is to be.
My sweet Blackness moving
with softness
between social
society.
Between bitter realities that formed
from darkness and now rises
as the sun rises
from a dark sea.
Now you see my rebirth
from a distant
dawn that now allows your true
heart to feel me,
and your eyes to glow with thee.
How Black is my Blackness?
That is a part of life that is created for me,
and yet you thought to bound me. My
heart pleads for you to our God
beyond the deep blue sea.
Can you feel my Blackness grow and flow
endlessly
through your mind that needs
to feel “we.”

Bring Them Safely Home

By Gene Allen Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

Father in heaven,
Thank you for your love and mercy.
Although I have at times forgotten you,
You have not forgotten me.
You have never left me.
You reached down to earth
And picked me up
And brought me home where I belong.
Thank you. May I have the grace
To reach out to others
Who may have fallen as I did.
And with your help,
We will bring them safely home.

The Kotel

By Gene Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ



The Old City of Jerusalem and its walls have been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims throughout the world.

The Kotel, commonly known as the Western Wall, is a section of the 60-foot-high retaining wall surrounding the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the holiest site in Judaism. The wall itself is a sacred site where Jews and Christians from around the world come to pray.

On the platform above the wall is the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the second holiest site for Muslims after the Kaaba in Mecca.

I was privileged recently to visit the Holy Land, and I made it a point to pray at the Kotel. Friends in America had given me six prayer notes, which I placed in a crevice in the wall, a tradition dating back nearly 300 years.

A head covering is always worn when praying at the wall out of respect for the holiness of the site. After placing a yarmulka on my head, I made my way to the wall to pray. As I placed my hand on the stone wall, I could feel the spirit of holiness. I was immediately overcome with a power that caused me to fall on my knees. This immense and all-encompassing power has been described as the presence of God.

As tears flooded my eyes, I began to pray for peace, the peace of God which passes all understanding. I prayed for my family's peace and for the peace of the world.

Tears continued to flow down my face and onto the stone pavement below me. This continued for some time until I at last regained my composure and was able to stand. I just stood there in amazement. Never before or since then have I had such an experience. Finally, I understood why this is such a holy place.

Four Two One

By David R. Marchant

VA Medical Center—Salt Lake City, UT

Four strangers
with a similar goal
brought together
by circumstance
destined for greatness

Two Heroes
perishing just days apart
ultimate sacrifice
arriving home
under a flag

Four men
driven to succeed together
always pushing
each other
to be better

Two survivors
making it home again
forever changed
emotions buried
trying to forget

Four officers
taking their oaths together
to protect
and defend
against all enemies

One survivor
unable to let go
intrusive memories
one bullet
his battle over

Four soldiers
deployed to fight overseas
duty bound
fully prepared
facing their fears

One remains
grieving the other three
painful losses
tearfully expressed
finally letting go

Praise

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

Pray in love
Ray of sunshine
Almighty we serve.
Inward we sing
Sing psalms
Eternal blessings.

Good
Orderly
Direction.

Paved the Way

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I was given the best compliment:
you “paved the way.”
I appreciated this response
when I called myself an old fossil—
to leave an impression.

We are...
I am...
Compare how they overlap and diverge.
We are a group of veterans.
Many of us are woman veterans
from all eras.
We paved the way!

I am Woman’s Army,
I am Cold War,
I am Desert Shield, Desert Storm,
I am Retired Army,
I am a Trail Blazer.

We are one,
hanging out with history.

I Say Again

By Anthony Phillips

—Las Vegas, NV

As the wind speaks through my soul,
temptation without risk is not a life.
It is a life full of unwanted baggage.
Reaching for the unknown is worth the risk
of living without a net.
I strive to become more than a worker
who watches the world go by.
We are entrenched in a life
of mistakes, missteps and wrong turns.
The beauty of this life
is that we take it for granted.
You can always start over, turn around and start again.

Veterans Incarcerated

By John Tidwell
—Conneaut, OH



There is a point to being an incarcerated, honorably discharged Marine Vietnam veteran with the disability designated by the VA as PTSD. However, I am not sure what that point would be.

The point cannot be positive in nature or benefit. At least not positive for me. What about fellow veteran prisoners who live under the same incarcerated consequences that I have survived and am still attempting to survive for my 49th incarcerated Thanksgiving holiday since 1974.

Many civilians believe it's appropriate to say "Thank you for your service." I don't believe it's appropriate, or even beneficial. What does it help? Maybe they feel better, hopefully. My whole life and belief of not using drugs doesn't appear to matter. My anxieties and depressions come and go in my negative environment. Life is all the same.

After graduating from 21 different education and vocation programs, my situation is the same still. Undergoing 23 therapy programs for learning how to control my PTSD, change my mindset awareness and stay discipline free for four decades hasn't changed my environment.

My multitude of attempts to seek help, an archangel of sort, to change from a digressive environment to a more veteran-conducive institution has achieved nothing. I hear a lot from spin doctors. Where is society's humility that everyone wants me to possess?

I could go on and on, but continuing to drone further will not change my digressive environment nor end my half century of

continued incarceration. Due, for the most part, to PTSD, should a veteran be punished to the full extent of the law, caged when the mandatory sentence was 15 years to life with the possibility of parole, or is it just politics?

True, great weight must be given to our victims; that's understood. But should great weight also be given to programming and rehabilitating veterans? The U.S. Supreme Court suggested so.

But without deep pockets, how do we find our archangels? Are other programming veterans experiencing the same negativity?

Semper Fi!

Don't Lose Out

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

When your focus remains on the past,
you become your worst enemy.
It's impossible
to move forward and backwards
at the same time
for the past cannot be changed or altered
in any way.
Focusing on the past is self-defeating;
it serves no purpose.
This can only prevent you
from having a wonderful productive life.
The past is only meant for reflection;
never focus on the past.
By doing so, you lose sight
of the present and future.
Past events, good or bad,
give you an indication of the future.
Turn sour grapes
into sweet delicacies of delights.
Learn from past events
so you can handle the present and future.
Reflections on the past can enhance
the quality of your life.
To focus on the past, you will lose out
on everything life has to offer.
Don't lose out.

Word Power

By Daniel Paicopulos
—San Diego, CA



When I began writing, I quickly learned that if I was to become a good writer, I needed to be a great reader, remembering also to re-read my own words before making them public, because, good, great or poor, my words have power to influence others, to impact the world, to affect who I am. I learned too that it is best for me to write about useful, helpful things and to set reasonable goals for what I wish to say.

So, I think often about that for which I am grateful. I get less excited about big, noisy events and more moved by small soft acts of kindness and generosity, clearing my muddled mind until the clarity helps me feel lighter. In doing so, I see that my writing makes my thoughts and feelings more three dimensional so I can engage with life and its daily experiences in a way which helps me manage and control them. Writing helps me be saner, more balanced, calmer, healthier, more efficiently organized and productive. In a sense, my own words, when I read what I have put to the page, are transformative and enlightening.

I find, even when writing about memories and experiences, I am not bound by the past nor limited by thoughts of the future. If I choose, I can be eager, excited and optimistic, even when I am writing serious thoughts. Writing, for me, is important to my health in aging, equal in value to nutrition, music, physical exercise, rest and friendship. I see how regrets or remorse can inflict a powerful bite, so I try to be flexible, even amusing, more forgiving and gentler with myself. I remind myself that I am living in grace, that healing is a process and that changing my thinking can change my life.

When I write, be it fiction, poetry or essay, I think of the audience, the readers of my words. Especially when I write with my veteran brothers and sisters in mind, I do my best to come from a place of humility and dignity, honoring their brave sacrifices, knowing many are still locked in their safe zones, living a quiet life, attempting to not remember some life-altering events, avoiding unimaginable thoughts. Realizing that some of them share while others don't, I am even more grateful that I enjoy the freedom to write and that I have a place to make my words public, perhaps helping readers to reflect on their blessings, to know they are not alone.

I give thanks for the comradeship I feel, with hope and optimism for the veteran and writing communities in which I participate.

My Digital Dating Dilemma

By Melvin Garrett Brinkley
VA Medical Center—Sacramento, CA

We met on an app called eHarmony.
My profile, I'll admit, was malarkey.
She got to the point, "You might be okay.
But if you're boring, flabby, gross or gray,
or you wear a rat's nest as a toupee,
you'll be starting right off on my bad side.
I'm less like a Jekyll, more like a Hyde.
I'm not a gal that lets any stuff slide.
The dating game is definitely grim.
I'll give you a chance, no matter how slim."
She was my Mary and I was her lamb,
hiding the fact I was a randy ram.
Losing my cool, I sexted her one night .
She texted back, "You must not be too bright.
You're clueless on how to treat a girl right."
"It's a joke," I said, using that old line.
She said, "Be honest, man up, grow a spine.
What is your problem? Have you lost your mind?"
I'm sure I'll never ever be her groom.
I did her dirty and I got the broom .
It blew up in my big fat face. Kaboom!
Yet, I was back on the net in no time.
I tweeted, "I'm rich and I'm in my prime."
A lie so loathsome it should be a crime.
I know what I should have sent her—
not sexting. Roses. Be a big spender.
Maybe I'll have better luck on Tinder.

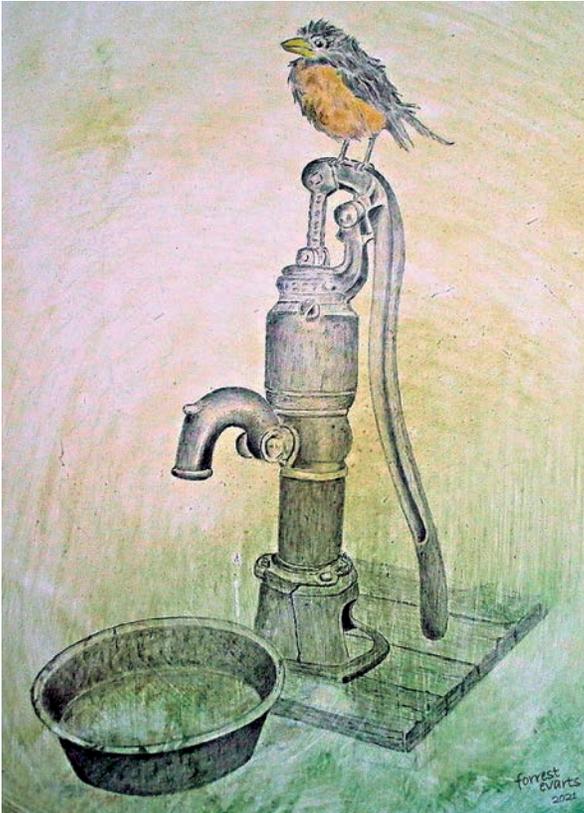
Visual Arts Initiative

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.

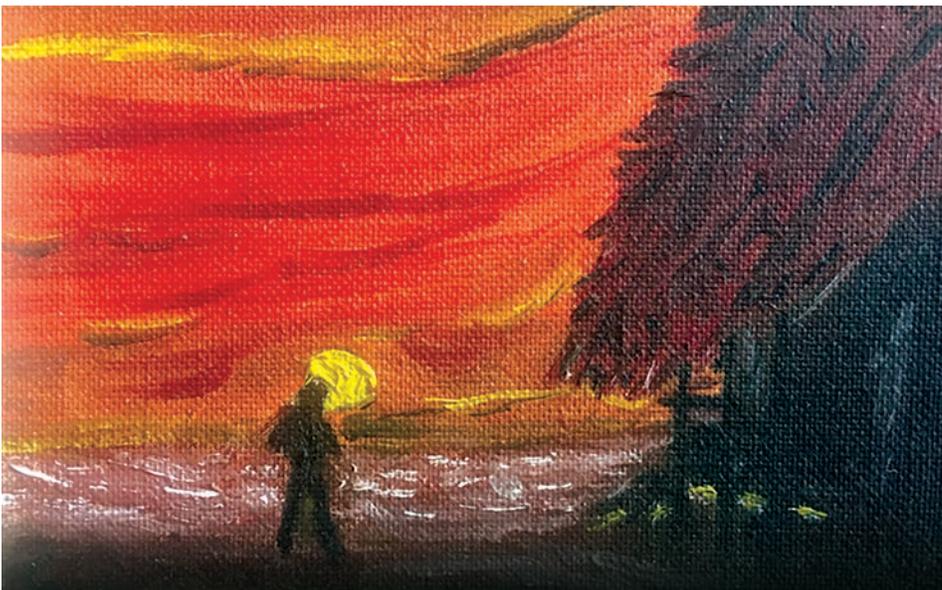
Our writers and readers responded with generous amounts of artwork and we are pleased to share it with you in this ongoing section of the magazine.

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*



Bird Bath
Forrest Evarts
—Deering, NH



On The Beach
John Swainston
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO



The Measure of a Man
Russell Nelson
—Harrison, OH



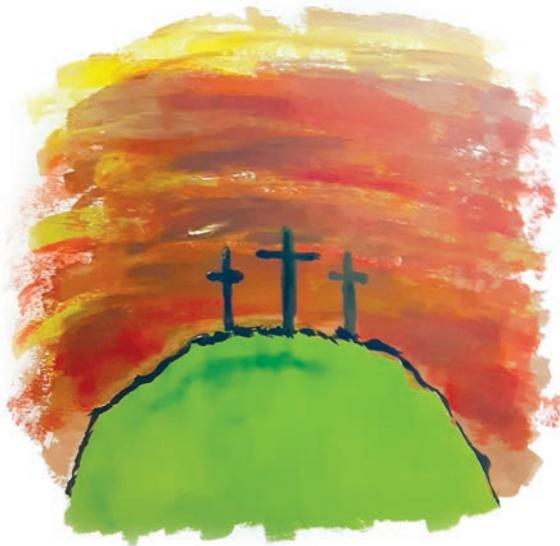
Sharing Between Crews
By Jack Tompkins
—Marshalltown, IA



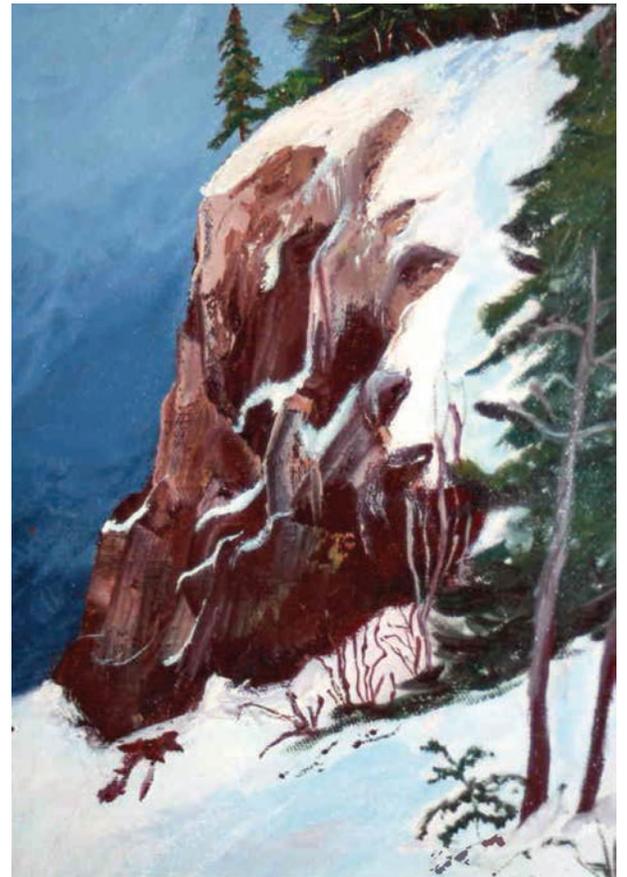
The Fewer the Prouder
Karen Silverstrand
—Lincoln, NE



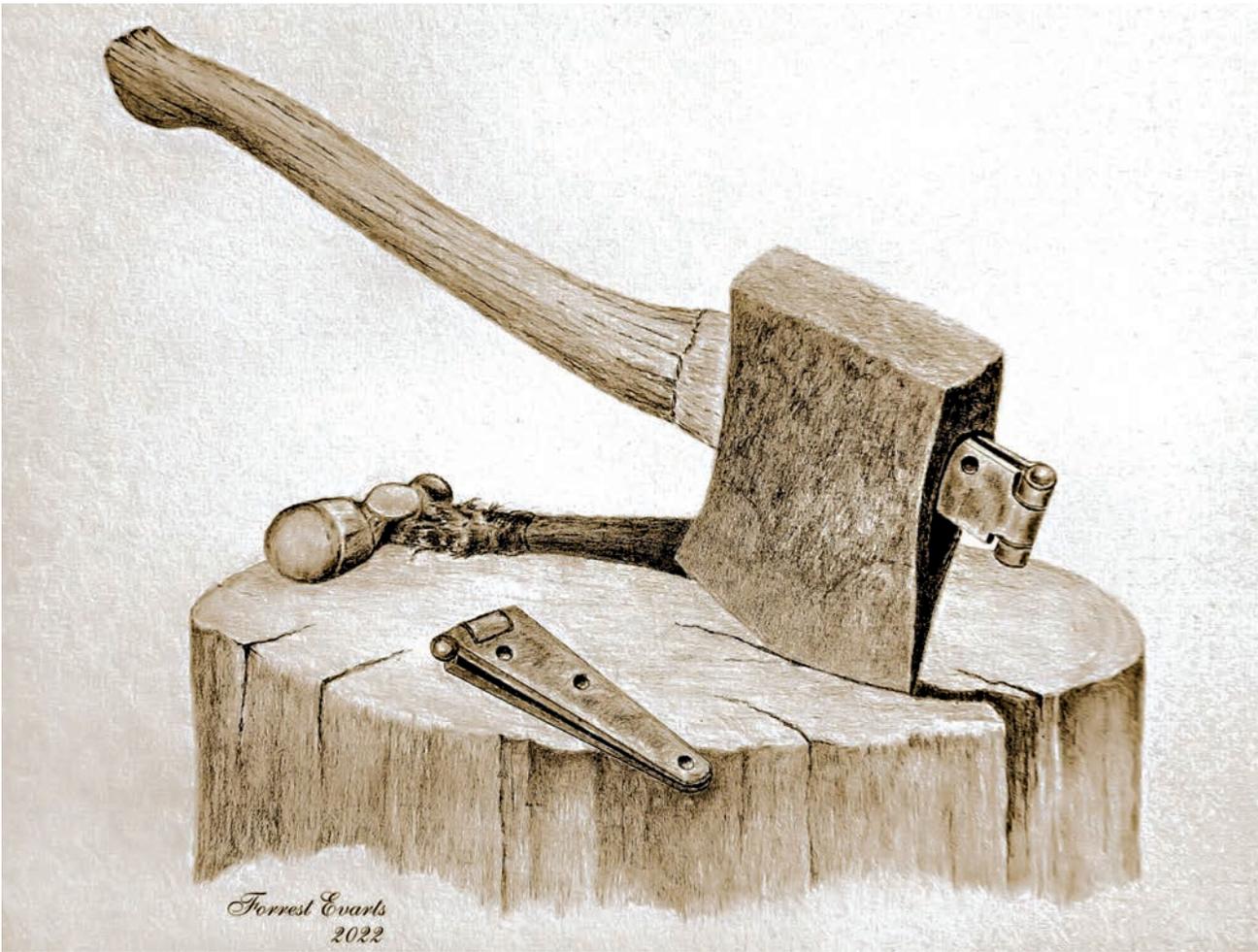
Bird
Daniel Strange
—San Antonio, TX



Golgotha
By Gene Groner
—Independence, MO



Mountain Landscape
By Daniel Strange
—San Antonio, TX



Grandfather's Axe
Forrest Evarts
—Deering, NH



Warrior Spirit
By Ty Andrews
—Lincoln, NE

Gun Violence

By Karen Green

VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

Another mass shooting
inside a store,
people wonder
what did he do it for?

A manager
shot coworkers on his shift.
Why did he target managers?
Was there a rift?

Why was the teenager shot?
Was he just in the way,
or was he just shopping
at the end of the day?

It's getting so bad
people don't know who's next—
a baby, a grandparent, a patient
or more students at their desks?

A six-year-old
shot his teacher one day;
he did this on purpose
as some looked on in dismay.

Now in a warehouse
many more die,
while their friends and loved ones
grieve and cry.

Then a church
is under attack.
Why did this person
carry out this act?

Shots are heard
in a hospital ER;
you wouldn't think
someone would go this far.

A sleeping family
was the target of a teen.
Is he depressed
or maybe mean?

There have been more than a hundred
mass shootings in this country
already this year.

Close to 8,000 more also died from
guns
that weren't part of mass shootings.
No wonder some live in fear.

How many more?
When will it end?
The shootings are even
among families and friends.

Two children were shot
while inside their home;
one is dead.
The bullets came from outside,
but from whom?

This war
goes on every day
in this country.
With lives, those shooting pay.

Issues of Trust

By Norman L. Jones

VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

Earning respect on demand
is needed for any man.
Women expect some security.
Relating is the plan
for all of humanity.
But unity can rust
from issues of trust.

We all want what we need.
The needy have wants,
but how much can society bleed
from capitalism's taunts?
Cauterizing is a must
for the issues of trust.

Believe in what you know.
Knowing, I believe.
Awareness to grow
could be a great relief.
Living isn't a short cut
from the issues of trust.

Unless

By Dennis Edward O'Brien

VA Medical Center—Wilkes-Barre, PA

The day is going to come
when the sun won't shine.
The cities will tower
over yesterday's towns.
The feeling of love
will be on no one's mind.

There will be no happy days;
there will only be sad days.
The sun won't shine anymore;
there will not be a reason
as there was once before.

The sounds you hear in the streets
will not be happy sounds.
They will be preaching
of the goodness of war.

In this quiet town,
there will be no love;
a feeling is long forgotten.
There will be no love
of man or woman.

There will be no happy days
where the sun no longer stays.
There will be no happy days
once war is here to stay.
There will be no happy days
unless we change our ways.

Some say war is just an option;
well, so is felt peace.

Sensory Overload in the First Hour

By Shon Pernice
—Kansas City, MO

I am overwhelmed with nervousness as I pace the floor, taking shallow, rapid breaths, and my heart is racing. I know my name should be called soon. As the time approaches, 10 a.m., I must have urinated at least four times in the previous hour, and I need to go again. What if something goes wrong? I have seen it before with other men, and the experience is heartbreaking. I have tunnel vision and don't care about anything else going on around me. Finally, I hear the golden words, "Pernice to the rotunda."



I take in a deep breath, the kind that you hold for a few seconds as you process your next move. Then I grab my clear plastic bag with the last of my prison belongings and head for the rotunda. This is goodbye to my home for the past 10 years, still home to the people I know intimately and the enemies I am aware of. Now, I am off to the unknown. A whole new world. A society that I have been hidden from for a long 13 years.

My approach to the main building feels as if I am in slow motion. I am looking in the eyes of every person I pass. I am not sure whether to smile or remain stoic. Some of the others will not leave for many years, and I do not want to make them feel envious or sad. I take in the faded blue paint of the chow hall, followed by the brownish brick recreation building that I worked in for the last five years, the long stretch of the school where I attended college, and then I am faced with the biggest building in the camp and the most intimidating: administration. As I go through the double steel doors for the last time, I am starting to feel a sense of loss. I should be excited about my freedom; however, the fear of the unknown creates a tsunami of apprehension.

After I turn in my keys at the final window on the secure side of the gray metal bars, the female corrections officer tells me good luck. I do not need luck; I need to manage my eyes that are about to water. I am overwhelmed with emotions that range from

happiness to fear to a sense of adventure in the unknown. It is a bit confusing when torn between crying and smiling. I am still in a medium security prison and must keep my emotions in check.

My next phase is the strip-out room. Why I need to get totally naked in front of a male officer and the hidden eyes of a security camera before I leave, I will never know. As I strip off my prison gray uniform, the officer happily hands me my dress-out

clothing. The blue jeans are nice and soft and feel like a foreign material to me. The light blue polo shirt not only brings color to my appearance but also to my soul. Then come the white Athletic Works Memory Foam shoes that are like putting my feet into a cloud. I have a bit of a problem feeding the brown belt through the belt loops; it has been a long time since I owned a belt. While the new clothing makes me feel totally different and strange, it is where the clothes came from that touches deep into my heart. A local church has donated a bag of clothing specifically for my transition. They care about my release and want me to feel confident in my new start. When strangers care about you, it helps you to care about yourself. I feel like I matter.

After my final signatures and a packet of documents is in my hand, I cross the threshold to the veterans who are giving me a ride to my next destination. I pause before we go out the reinforced sliding glass doors. I look over at the officer escorting me to make sure it's OK. I have had to get permission for everything the past 13 years. I learned the hard way the consequences of "failing to follow directions," a Department of Corrections rule that resulted in a conduct violation. The officer nods his head and says, "You're good."

I am mesmerized by the outside of the prison. I am now standing outside of the concertina wire fences. Am I about to actually leave? I inhale deeply again. I am at a loss for words. My two escorts want to ask questions, but my brain is in a fog. I get into

the backseat of the gray SUV, and we depart the prison grounds. I look intently out the window to see if any of my friends are out in the prison yard for their recreation time. I want to wave one last time at someone I know, but due to the distance, I cannot make out any faces.

Once we get on the road, it is sensory overload. Buildings have changed, and the flashy colors of the storefronts are foreign to me. I am not used to so many vibrant color schemes. Everything in prison is drab or neutral in color. Now I feel like Alice in Wonderland with all the new marvels to take in. I hardly recognize any vehicles on the road. They go from super sleek and aerodynamic to boxy. (I am later told that those are electric vehicles.) Cars are going fast, and I see people talking with no one else in their vehicle. Not just one, but several people I catch doing this. I feel as if I am in a time machine and my body has been frozen in cryogenics for many years. As I try to take this all in and process it, my brain starts to hurt. My fellow veterans want to converse, but I am starting to feel exhausted and a bit nauseated from the forward momentum. However, I do know that we are going to be eating soon, and I cannot wait.

As we pull into the Waffle House, I scan the people in the parking before I get out. I am not from Columbia, Mo., so I am not worried about anyone recognizing me. But I feel a sense of uneasiness before we go in. This is new to me. I am opening a door and going into a restaurant around other people whom I do not know. In the chow hall at prison, you knew who was who. We had sections that we sat in with our group and could easily identify friends and foes. Your group, gang, circle of friends or clique were your safety net. And now I do not have that. I am solo, and these two older veterans with me will not be able to fend off any threat. So much is going through my mind. It is tough to sort things out and just go with the flow.

I sit down in the booth, and the waitress is nice to me. She asks me how I am doing and what I want to drink. I know this sounds simple to most, but it is much different from what I am used to. I stumble over my words as I ask for a glass of orange juice. I have not had orange juice in a very long time. In prison, it can be used to make “hooch,” homemade alcohol. And drinking from a glass! This may sound weird, but the hard sheen and smoothness of the glass is another welcomed sensation.

I then order the steak and eggs over medium, hashbrowns and toast. This is the meal of champions. In prison, there are no fried foods, real eggs or even skirt steak. The waitress brings the steak knife to the table, and I freeze for a couple of seconds. I focus on the shiny, steel blade; in prison, a knife is considered “dangerous contraband.” That is my prison mind working. After I get past my

deer in the headlights phase, I accept the knife. I looked around to see if anyone else saw me holding the sharp instrument and if they were scared. No. People are talking and eating. I keep scanning the restaurant. I am looking for potential adversaries, tattoos on people (to see what gang they are in), and where the police are. It’s that prison mindset again. I eat my meal slowly. I am used to rushing because we would only have about 15 minutes to eat in the chow hall, but now I am enjoying every savory bite. The creamy egg yolk that I dip my toast in is like heaven to my tastebuds. And the tangy A1 sauce on my steak brings back happy memories of the life I once had. What is comfort food? Anything edible outside of prison.

As we approach Kansas City, we stop off for a break at a roadside convenience store. I am now intently scanning everyone around me. I am searching for someone I may know or who recognizes me. How am I going to handle this? What do I say? My anxiety is bubbling up like a geyser. The first thing that shocks me in the store is the selection of items. One of my companions lets me know that I can get anything I want. Whether it’s a drink, trail mix or a candy bar, this is going to be a difficult task. The next issue that I encounter is the prices. Why is a bag of beef jerky \$10? Candy bars are all over \$2. I thought that canteen prices in prison were bad, but this is ridiculous. So I’m entering this world with no money and these prices? How am I going to make it? A sense of worry is now added to my bank of conscious fears.

I make it back to the vehicle unscathed from my uncertainties. People treat me like the next guy or just pass by without any reaction. That’s good, but it seems like everyone is doing something with their cellphone — texting, talking or watching something. So many people are glued to those devices. And then outside the store, I see a man standing there having a conversation with the air. He is dressed nicely and has well-kept brown hair. He does not appear drunk, high, crazy or homeless. However, I also notice he has these white plastic things in his ears. They do not have wires and do not appear to be any type of hearing aid that I can identify. I also notice that a lot of women are wearing spandex-type pants that leave no room for the imagination. I do not want to stare and creep them out, but I am not used to seeing the female body like that. I am torn between looking and averting my gaze.

The world has changed, and I have a lot of catching up to do. The prison mentality and norms of that subculture do not dissolve upon leaving the institution. They are something that I carry, but I can also recognize the differences between today and the steel bars of yesterday. I am now on to the next phase of my new life.

Fears

By George Pissos
—Wellsburg, WV



It's so hard to believe that the beautiful country of Panama could have suffered so much devastation. I was there to see it. It was an experience going through Panama on P.T. boats instead of walking. I saw rockets going through buildings, churches, schools. Noriega's men held two unit-members hostage while I was there.

The war in Panama started while I was on my way back from Panama. Then I did a PCS to Germany. My company went to different parts of Iraq and Turkey. I'll never forget seeing dead people and smelling that smell. Bombs went off night and day. I remember being at an air base, when a helicopter flew in with six prisoners of war. I was glad to talk to them, but had gone through hell. Everything was okay. It made the guys smile being in U.S. custody.

I went back to Germany. While I was in Germany, two Blackhawk helicopters were shot down in the Persian Gulf region by friendly fire. They were from our sister unit. I didn't realize it at the time, but I knew every one of those guys. We used to play basketball and softball together.

I got deployed to Somalia and was there for five months. Here again I got off the plane and smelled death. The smell of Somalia and seeing rocket holes in buildings didn't make a great first day. Hearing helicopters and Marines leaving every five minutes was not a good sign, but I made it okay. Until

the last week, when I went back to the main airport to pick up a comrade. I lived through an ambush. People were running around like chickens with their heads cut off.

I saw a Somali shot dead off the back of a pickup truck. One of his friends jumped down out of the pickup truck and got out of the line of fire. When I buried myself in the sand, waiting for permission to fire, he just shot over our heads at the equipment. Don't know why I lived or why I wasn't just forgotten in the sand. I jumped back into the Humvee when it started moving. We went back to the main post and got an MP escort. The escort fired through a wall at a guy who was shooting at us. We did not see him.

While on a convoy, I saw a kid about 16 years old with a 9mm handgun. It was pointed in my direction, I lifted my M16 to blow off his head, but the commander noticed the kid's gun was rubber. The commander grabbed my M16 and told me no. Then I was going to run him over with the Humvee. The commander grabbed the steering wheel and again told me the gun was rubber. I wonder what would have happened if I had shot or run him over. I will never know. I'm glad I don't know. But I still worry about why I let him live.

Weeks before I was ready to go home, I was in a friendly fire incident. A group of Somalis jumped onto the back of trucks next to us with medical supplies and garbage. A sergeant just started shooting anywhere and everywhere. It wasn't justified, but he outranked me. The Somalis wanted the garbage to live.

Hopefully, I am not forgotten through the VA system, but I feel like I am.

Going Out With a Curse

By Charles Kesler
VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX

My father did not go gentle.
He went out with a curse.
Rage, rage, raging
as he had lived
in war and peace,
never at peace.
It was only a drink
that could make him brace
against his darkness.
It was only the morphine
that took his breath away.

Ron

By Trina Mioner
—Cincinnati, OH



It seems odd to me to have a women's writing group run by a man. But Ron is different.

Ron is not the stereotypical man. I am not afraid to let my guard down and show my skin or weaknesses because he has shown that he is kind, loving, gentle and an empathic soul. With him it is okay to show who I am behind the self-imposed armor. I hide myself from most men because of a history of abuse. I shared the abuse in the group, and Ron was a comforter with tears in his eyes.

Ron had eye surgery last year, and someone goofed up. He missed a couple of Thursdays. His eyes are still not 100 percent. He made the announcement that he had Parkinson's disease. Then there was a series of biopsies; thank God for the report of no cancer. The diabetes wears the body down slowly, but I'm reading that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.

What did he teach me in his group? Be kind and considerate. Don't talk over each other, or he will threaten to mute the room. He told me I was a good writer, and that fueled my efforts. He let me know that he heard what I said I did, and he still gave me his stamp of approval. Ron has been my standing ovation. He made me want to put my best foot forward.

Lately it's been hard. Ron has been on the battlefield for a long time. God called him; he thought it would be behind a pulpit in front of a congregation. But instead, it is behind a desk or sitting in a circle. I want to tell you Ron that you are doing it; you are doing what God called you to do.

To tell the truth, I am afraid that we are going to lose you one day, and we are. Who knows? For any of us, tomorrow is not promised. Every time I answer the phone and they tell me the group is canceled, my mind goes into a mode. O no! My heart beats fast. Is Ron alright? What are we going to do without you?

Approaching 68, sometimes I think about my immortality. It's all good. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

I'm writing this because I want you to know you have touched my life. I love you, Ron. I spent an hour talking about you in therapy, and she said write about it and share it with the group. So now it's out in the open. I love you, and my spirit bears witness with your spirit.

Mahalia Jackson sings: "If I can touch somebody as I travel along, then my living shall not be in vain." You have touched my life.

Don't Thank Me

By Joyce Leneave
—Cincinnati, OH

Don't thank me; thank your recruiter.
I will probably always twitch and squirm
when someone says to me,
"Thank you for your service."
A reminder that I am different,
that I'm an outsider.
A reminder that I am a discard.
A necessary tool, much like
a used piece of toilet paper.
I don't feel honored or understood.
Just an afterthought.
Like saying, "Bless you," after a sneeze.
Or, "Thoughts and prayers."
More for you than me.
I will give you a smile.
I will say, "You're welcome."
I will move away quickly.
You will think that what I said
was a complete sentence
and you will go about your day.
The sentence wasn't complete.
What my soul said to you was,
"You're welcome to serve, too."

They Served

By H.D. Bedell

VA Medical Center—Tampa FL

“Time will not diminish the glory of their deeds” – Gen. John J. Pershing.

Wars of the 20th Century hit rural America hard as the Atchison County Memorial Building in northwest Missouri attests. Located in Rock Port, the county seat, the building was constructed with citizen contributions collected during the period 1919-1921. It was listed in the National Registry of Historic Places in 1987.



Two of the names on the Wall of Those Who Served are ancestors—Lewis Jesse Bedell, my grandfather, and Lee Essery Deering, my uncle. They served in World War I and World War II, respectively, and left behind letters and memorabilia that have been placed with the State Historical Society of Missouri in Columbia. Book form compilations of their experiences are in the Atchison County Library in Rock Port. What I know of their stories follows.

Lewis Jesse Bedell was born Aug. 13, 1893, near Decatur, Iowa, to John and Hester Bedell. In 1903, the family moved to a small Missouri farm in Atchison County near the village of Nishnabotna.

He registered for the draft with the local board for the County of Atchison, State of Missouri, South Clark Township, June 5, 1917, and was classified 1-A on Feb. 11, 1918. After receiving notice from the local board to report July 15, 1918, for induction, he enlisted on July 12, 1918.

Lewis returned home after receiving an honorable discharge July 11, 1919, after serving with the American Expeditionary Force and the Army of Occupation. He died June 24, 1936, at age 42 and is buried in Pleasant Ridge Cemetery near Fairfax, Mo. The grave is marked with a veteran’s white marble headstone.

He was not a big man — 5’6” and 161 pounds with blue eyes, brown hair and ruddy complexion, according to his official Army physical. He farmed with mules and owned 20 when he enlisted, a fair number for the time. He also owed the bank \$800, a large

sum for a 24-year-old tenant farmer in 1918. His letters often ask about crops, shucking corn, his mules and other things of rural life in the period. He could not know that 15 years later a \$400 bank debt in the Great Depression would make him, his wife and his son itinerants living in a “Hooverville” in Rulo, Neb.

The historical society’s collection has 51 letters, some

incomplete and others undated, and several official documents and photographs. Transcriptions and copies of material are in the book compilation. In addition to the documents, the war souvenirs in our house included a defused hand grenade, a haversack and a “doughboy” helmet. These were stored in a porch cabinet, and I played with them as a child. To my chagrin, they have since disappeared.

Lee Essery Deering was born in Morristown, Tenn., Dec. 8, 1922, to Oscar and Carrie Deering. He moved to Rock Port, Mo., with his family in 1929. In 1933, the family moved to Tarkio, Mo. He attended Loss Grove School in Tarkio and completed the course of instruction to enter high school in 1939. He attended Tarkio High School for three years.

An Atchison County Local Board No. 1 notice dated Jan. 1, 1943, ordered him to report to the Atchison County Courthouse in Rock Port on Jan. 10, 1943, for induction into the Army. He was sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kan., for initial indoctrination and training. Subsequent duty stations, in order, were: Fort Joseph T. Robinson in Arkansas, Fort George G. Meade in Maryland, Fort A. P. Hill in Virginia, Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, Fort Meade again, embarkation to England, Southampton, England and Normandy, France.

His last letter is dated Aug. 7, 1944. It is believed he was sent to Normandy to participate in Operation Cobra, an Allied offensive waged from July 25, 1944, to July 29, 1944, to break out of the Normandy hedgerow country stalemate.

Operation Cobra was successful; however, the Germans launched a counterattack Aug. 6, 1944, to Aug. 13, 1944. It was in this

fight that Lee E. Deering was killed in action on Aug. 10, 1944. Originally, he was reported missing in action. His remains apparently were not recovered until shortly before the family was officially notified of his death on Oct. 4, 1944. His name appears on the roll of Fallen Loved Ones at the Memorial Building. He is interred at Brittany American Cemetery.

The story of Lee E. Deering did not end with his death. The family held out hope that he was misidentified and was, in fact, still living. The passage of nearly 60 years did not dim this hope; it was passed down finally as the confusion of personal effects of the two soldiers. Ultimately, it became the belief that Lee's remains had been returned to the United States and were buried somewhere in Cape Girardeau, Mo., as Leo Deering.

In 1981, some of Lee's effects were returned by Leo Deering family members. Another 20 years later the confusion reached its end: Both soldiers were in the same unit from Missouri and died on the same day during the German counteroffensive.

Leo Deering was first buried in a temporary American cemetery in Marigny, France. Sometime in 1948, Leo Deering's remains were returned to the United States.

As a final note, I encourage anyone with relevant legacy items to contact a suitable repository for preservation.

My Mansion

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

I have not any wealth, none to really spare.
I do not dress elegantly in a suit or neatly part my stringy hair.
My name does not make the headlines
of People or Vanity Fair.
I am not the most intelligent man,
but my wisdom is out of this world.
He knows me.
He knows me.
My connection to Him is by grace.
He promises me that where He is, I'll go to that same place.
So I've promised Him to stay in this race.
He has built for me my mansion, not of earthly material things.
When He is ready, this earth will not hold me down.
I'll be with my Master to accept a bright shiny crown.
My mansion awaits me; true riches I'll see.
I'll be with Christ Jesus for eternity.
Then will I truly have all that I need.
My mansion awaits me; you just wait and see.

Change: A Song

*By Paul Michael Lombardo
—Wethersfield, CT*

He said my life wasn't always like this
As a tear ran down his face.
I appreciate your kindness;
It's kinda rare to see these days.

You won't believe it by the looks of me,
But I once stood with the best.
I got this so we could be free,
Tapping on that Purple Heart
Hanging on his chest.

Chorus
The pain of war still haunts me
When its memories come to call.
The smoke and noise surround me
And again my heroes fall.
My biggest fear in life right now
Is that it just stays the same.
So, Mister, "Thank you for the money,
but I need change."

Had the dream of a picket fence,
But it was lost in a foreign land.
The kids we were gave it all we had,
And they made me the man that I am.

Bridge
I've been treading whiskey for a long time.
There were times I almost drowned
Till the night that Jesus saved me
From the judgmental streets
Of my hometown.

Chorus
The pain of war still haunts me
When its memories come to call.
The smoke and noise surround me
And again my heroes fall.
My biggest fear in life right now
Is that it just stays the same.
So, Mister, "Thank you for the money,
And thank you for the change,
Thank you for the change."

Her Golden Hair

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

I couldn't hear your silence there
behind the woods beyond the daffodils
swaying within winds slowing
your golden hair.
I could not see how your laughter ran
like an hourglass running out of time.
And yet memories are still so clear
of caressing touches that curled within my years.
I should not be held alone
with moments of gloom,
with dreams of heartfelt doom
and distilled with glances
of a wayward moon.
My joy is crippled and snared
by many distant seasons without your flare,
for I see no reason to ever love again
or relive the precious dances beneath the rain,
though the children stop and stare
like mountains beneath the air
and flowers still blossom and bloom.
Now the years have come and gone
and my heart stills with memories
still so rare and long.

The Master Painter

By CJ Reeves
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

The sunset in the western sky
Has colors all complete,
Painted by the Master's hand.
No human can compete.

Master of the School of Art,
No palette does he own.
He needs no model for his shop;
His paintings stand alone.

The blue sky and the rainbow
Are a Masterpiece of art,
And free for all who will enjoy
The Master painter's art.

Hurting Others

By Debra Ann Cole
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Why do people hurt people?
It seems like a vicious cycle of pain.
Sometimes it feels surreal; is this reality
or some kind of insidious, insane game?
They say the ones we hurt are the ones closest to us,
which makes me feel appalled and think, "How unjust."
People who are living happy, joyous and free—
that's what I'm working toward and striving to be
from the snowball of pain that has evolved over time.
I want to embrace what life has to offer
and am always willing to help others' lives to shine.
Our unity is what brings us all together,
letting us know that we can storm any weather.
So my mission today is to let others know
we should always help others,
allowing all of us to live
as though we are sisters and brothers.

Marvel at the Hopeful Fate of Love

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

We're born through hell on earth
where lives the inevitable sins.
The "Garden of Eden" created for no rebirth,
rights to wrongs shall make a trend.
From the one true God from above,
marvel at the hopeful fate of love.

Most are destined to grow
from God's angels who bestow
gifts for the immortal souls
of what reaps and sows.
Our heavenly spirits shall rise above
to marvel at the hopeful fate of love.

Every religion is the Lord's puzzle,
as everybody shall never be alike.
Good and evil will always tussle
while the flesh transcends in flight
for compassion from the cosmos above.
Let us marvel at the hopeful fate of love.

Yellowstone

By Gene Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ



I was fishing for trout in Yellowstone Lake in Wyoming one beautiful summer day. The golden sun was shining that late afternoon. The water was a lovely dark blue, and I couldn't be happier.

Live bait isn't allowed on the lake, so I was using a small silver spoon tied to a thin monofilament line. As I slowly began reeling in the line, I felt a slight tug, and I immediately pulled back, setting the hook. I was so excited when the fish began darting back and forth and jumping around in the water. I caught my very first cutthroat trout that day, a gorgeous gray-brown trout with a thin red line around its neck. I have never been happier than I was that special summer day.

Covering an amazing 132 square miles, Yellowstone Lake is the largest lake above 7,000 feet elevation in North America and is fed by the Yellowstone River, the longest free-flowing river in the lower 48 states. Yellowstone has the largest population of cutthroat trout in North America, and I had just landed my first one. Of course, I quickly released it into the lake to return to its family.

I can't wait to return to the beauty of this wildlife wonderland. It is truly heaven on earth.

TH NORTON AWARD

The Taste of War

By Paul David Gonzales
VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

The taste of war is foul, nasty and full of a horrid insult to the palate.
Its odor is that of rotted meat left in the hot sun.
It reeks of decayed flesh and clotted blood.

The recipe for this rotted dish is conjured up by those who embrace the serpent of power and control. That serpent coils around their hearts and minds, tempting those who are willing to sacrifice others for their greed.

As every soldier is forced to consume this awful dish, the flavors seem to marinate together and become more and more palatable. The servings keep coming from those whose devious ambitions grow while dancing with the devil.

The soldier is reluctant to accept this unsavory dish served by the evil force, but the soldier is force-fed and begins to nibble at his or her serving of war, morsel by morsel. Soldiers begin to accept the taste of flesh, blood, fear, anger and revenge.

It is not long before the soldier craves the taste of war and devours more and more. Serving after serving, never getting enough. Much like an addict who craves the needle in a bulging vein. Soon the taste of war sweetens and becomes a staple to the soldier's soul. Even after the battle, the taste for war lingers on the tongue and forever seasons the meals of tomorrow.

If No One Else Tells You

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

If no one else tells you how important that you are,
how purpose-driven your life can be,
how you've come so far.
If no one else tells you that you're a light that's getting brighter,
how you've overcome so much, that you do not give up cause you're a fighter.
If no one else tells you how special you are to them,
that your kindness fills their hearts to the brim.
If no one else compliments or tries to lift you up
when you're down on the world and feeling in the dumps.
If no one else tells you how much they love you today,
remember, I tried my best above all the rest to help you in a very big way.
Remember that you matter; you're a shining star.
You try and go out of your way to brighten another's day,
'cause that's just who you are.
If no one else will tell you, remember that I tried
to let you know you are very loved by Jesus who was crucified.

Intrinsic Beauty

By Nila K. Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

In spring, summer and early fall and all that it entails,
everything is green, lush and colorful,
especially the flowers.
Take the tall, majestic, in-your-face-look-at-me flower,
the sunflower.
The elegant, regal, many-layered, soft rose
quietly garnering your attention.
The open-faced, trumpet-shaped welcoming beauty
of the lily.
The brilliant hues of the tulip entrancing me,
drawing me ever closer with its charming allure.
The simplistic splendor of a daisy, its sunny, yellow center
and purity of the white petals
in sharp contrast to each other.
The colorful and delicate-looking mums
can't help but catch your eye.
Mums' rich, vibrant colors invite and engage one into fall.
These are merely some of the examples
of the intrinsic beauty of flowers.
Without these wonders of nature,
we would have a lower quality of life.

The Art of Love

By Gene Allen Groner

VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

A painting begins in the heart and the mind,
The feeling expressed by one's love.
Art at its best bespeaks a world view,
A view of the world that's creative and new.

Love can be seen through emotion and art,
The feeling of warmth and of pleasure,
Of intimacy and tenderness and truth.
Enduring love is birthed from choosing
To love and to give forever.

The color of love expresses true feeling,
Passion and trust from the heart and mind.
Love at its best is devotion and patience,
Caring and loving through all of time.
The art of love is full and shared freely.

The love of creation is bright and beautiful,
A love that is like none other.
Painted warm and wonderful with grace divine,
A sacred covenant of heart and mind,
The creation of love is heaven sublime.

Light From Above

By William Shepherd

VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

I'm thinking about my flag
and the spirit of freedom that is in the sky.
It reminds me of the blood that was taken
to cut the chains from our bodies.
And now I can look up to the light
that comes from heaven like stars
that give their light to guide my steps,
like a drummer's cadence coming out
to show the way of the day!

Because of his love that is holier than any
from any high hill or mountaintop,
I will stand with my hand over my heart,
with eyes looking up to an open sky
and know tomorrow will be a new day.
And I move on tomorrow as I walk
with hope in my step and love in my heart.

Broken and Alone

*By Rhonda J. Chavez
VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX*

How did this happen?
How did my life get so dark?
I thought I was good and deserving,
But I'm afraid I missed the mark.
I wonder what I've done
To deserve this broken and lonely life.
I've been the best I could be
As a friend, mother and wife.
That obviously wasn't good enough
Because I'm being tested every day.
I am trying to be happy and accept myself
In every possible way.
There's a demon in me somewhere
That refuses to let me have peace.
I only have deep sadness
That I feel will never cease.
I'm looking deep inside myself,
Trying to learn and understand
How to remove negativity from my heart and soul
So that I can experience happiness firsthand.
I hope one day things will change for me;
I can't stand to live this way.
I struggle to live my life
Each and every day.

Prayers Work

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

About seven months ago I ended up in a wheelchair
due to a heart condition.
Now, due to prayers and God,
Prayers work!
I received my blessing through prayers.
Prayers work!
I even walk my service dog
which I could not do seven months ago.
Prayers work!

Why?

*By Rhonda J. Chavez
VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX*

Why won't my mind shut up?
It's like a tornado swirling in my head.
Believe me, during times like these,
I really wish I were dead.
What's the purpose of living
Only to be so sad?
I've truly tried to be happy.
Because I've failed, I'm so mad.
People say I'm overreacting,
But what do they know?
They have no idea what goes on within me.
Oh, it's quite the show.
There are demons fighting one another
To see who has control over me.
Why can't they just disappear
And leave me be
I don't think I've done anything bad
To deserve this torture,
But there has to be something evil
Or I would have felt more nurtured.
Are my feelings accurate and true?
Or am I just overreacting?
My feelings are very real and painful
For me to only be acting.
No one wants to feel like this
Unless they love drama.
Not me, I just want peace and happiness,
But I only attract bad karma.

I really do want to be happy.
I'm trying to see the positive in my life,
Working to get my mind healthy
And forget about all the strife.
After years of being made to feel unworthy,
It's difficult to flip the switch.
But I'm determined to give it my all
So my life I can begin to enrich.
I would never speak to others
The way I do myself.
I need to stop being negative
And treat me like I do everyone else.

Room 17: A Song

By Paul Michael Lombardo
—Wethersfield, CT

Two hours out of Mobile,
a million miles from home,
just outside of nowhere,
I found a run-down old motel.
The Taj Mahal it wasn't.
It was cheap, but not so clean.
I gave the man my money;
he gave me the key
to room 17.

A 60-watt bulb
in a lamp with no shade,
the bathroom was dirty
and bed wasn't made.
That's what 20 bucks gets ya
on the bad side of town.

From a half-open drawer
in the nightstand,
I saw this tattered old book.
Coffee-stained pages
and the cover was torn
like my soul.

I was glued to the pages
when the sun came up,
the story of a man we all heard of,
how he spread the word of his father.
I found love and forgiveness.

Two hours out of Mobile,
on the other side of town,
just outside of nowhere,
nowhere to be found.
I planned to meet my maker,
feeling worthless and unclean.
I found redemption in the pages
of that old book
in room 17.

My sins washed away
in that dirty ole shower.
When I knelt down and I prayed,
all my demons lost their power.

Two hours out of Mobile,
and I don't feel so all alone.
I finally found my somewhere,
somewhere I belong
that night that Jesus shined his light
on my soul and made it clean.
For the first time, I felt worthy to be saved
by the hand of God
and a lamp with no shade
in room 17.

Unspoken

By Sandy Clark
—Erie, PA

She knelt down to thank God
For all she had today.
My daughter, my true friend,
That's all she had to say.

Being grateful, sincerely,
It's all I really know
Because God does check
Deep within my soul.

I cry, I suffer.
I've done this route before.
Only God has a right
To even up the score.

We are the children
And pigeons from the sand.
All I want to do
Is obey God's holy hand.

Not Lost

By Marie Slider
—Orem, UT

Lost in my brain, feeling insane,
not sure of where to go.
Yearn to be free; what's happening to me?
In a boat I cannot row.

Thoughts reign supreme,
or so it seems;
where can I find release?
Where can I run?
This is not very fun;
why can I not find peace?

What's that I hear? It's not very clear;
where is it coming from?
A pitter, a patter, I feel like this matters;
the noise is that of a drum.

It's not a loud sound,
but it booms all around,
a stirring within my heart.
The spirit, it speaks;
the brain starts to weep,
for the curtains, they finally part.

They show a love there
that the brain said was bare.
And so I could not see
how much I have grown,
that I'm never alone,
that someone is holding me.

The scars that I've earned
are lessons I've learned
and I cannot forget.
The fact of the matter,
I did not shatter,
And I will not live in regret.
So when I feel lost,
and my brain feels tossed,
I hope these words come easy:
"You can push through;
this is not new;
fear not, I am with thee."

City of Fear

By Sean Richards

VA Medical Center—Fort Worth, TX

In this city,
dark and gritty,
where mean people sleep
and where nothing is pretty
in a place where only evil sleeps,
it's where flitting creatures creep.

Where evil is done
beneath the noonday sun
and the blissful silent moon,
it's murder by the gun
or gutting to a tune
or even a drowning in the lagoon.

Where people go missing,
even while kissing,
never to reappear
from within the cities' hissing,
soon we all disappear.
Strange, has something got your ear?

It Was Almost Yesterday

By Raymond Gallegos

—Myrtle Beach, SC

It was almost yesterday.
As you faced toward the setting sun,
the wind rustled your hair.
The pinkish color of the light
enhanced the emotions
as you turned to stare.
You hinted a simple smile
as you mouthed goodbye.
It was almost yesterday
as I shouted with a tear in my eye.
With you in the darkening shadows,
there was no chance.
It was too late to recover.
It was our last dance.
It was almost yesterday
as the sun slowly faded away.
I tried to catch your essence a while ago,
but I wouldn't know what to say.

Silent Mountains

By Donald Chase

VA Medical Center—Brockton, MA

If the barren mountains of Korea could talk,
what memorable tales they would tell
of men who fought in a forgotten war,
which gave them a preview of hell.

They would speak of things that tried men's souls,
leaving the survivors to remember so well
the cold with its snow, mud from the rain,
and underground holes where they dwelled.

There would be stories of human endurance
brought on by the will to survive,
bravery and courage and unthinking sacrifice
for warfare demands some must die.

They also would tell of the burial place
of soldiers now locked in eternal sleep,
whose grey-white bones lie silent and still
though loved ones and comrades still weep.

These voiceless mountains with their untold tales
have a far greater meaning than most.
To the men who fought and existed thereon,
they are a separate world full of ghosts.

Human Detritus

By Lynn A. Norton

—Leawood, KS

I've been called trailer-trash,
moniker indelible as a forehead
tattoo. Home with wheels, hitch,
taillights and license plate, ready
to roll on a whim. Wanderlust
is in my DNA, addiction to change,
refusal to root in permanent dirt.

Like celebrated "air-conditioned
gypsies" of rock and roll fame,
I'm delighted by waking to novel tritrus
sounds, exotic fragrance, new
neighbors. Sunlight pours through
different windows, paints shadows
on fresh canvas. How trashy is that?

Unacceptable

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

Self-perpetuating defeat, repeating false notions
of those who want to suppress, destroy
and manipulate your opportunities of advancement
is self-perpetuating hatred.
Self-evaluation is in order.
Allow no others to write your history
for it would be filled with lies and deceit.
Let no one tell you the value of your life.
You will be manipulated, abused, misused,
devalued at every opportunity.
Your entire existence will be at the pleasure of others.
Give no one power over your self-worth.
Give no one the authority
to evaluate the purpose of your existence.
Let no other tell you what has meaning,
what has purpose, what has value in your life.
Don't listen when others tell you
the choices, opportunity and decisions
you make don't count.
Truth be told, if it didn't matter,
no one would tell you it doesn't.
If a lie is said often enough,
many will believe it to be true.
Watch, observe, pay careful attention.
If what matters for others,
you're told it doesn't matter for you.
You're being manipulated.
What control you have over your own destiny
is being stripped from you.
You, as an individual, can make a difference.
Every significant event, every great discovery,
every great empire,
every multi-billion-dollar corporation,
every great idea
starts with one person, one thought,
one action, one commitment.
Allow no one to diminish your life
with lies, deceit and manipulation.
By doing so, you are defeated before you begin.
Never underestimate your own abilities.
Never deny the power of one.
Your destiny awaits.

Tic-Toc-Tic

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

Tic-Toc-Tic goes the clock on the wall.
Time advances forward, spring, summer, winter and fall.
Don't take one second for granted!
Appreciate your life; if you do, it's royally enchanted!
Too many people get caught up in the rat race!
Pause to appreciate: do more than just take up space.
God's creation is fascinating!
Explore it; time's a-wasting!
Our time on earth is limited.
Make the most of it! Don't be primitive!
We can be masters of our own destinies,
Living free like wild mustang ponies!

President Putin, Stop the Madness, Please

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

President Putin, stop the madness, please!
As I write poems for peace,
you're warring in Ukraine
like a cancerous disease!
Where's your humanity?
Stop the insanity!
Russia is no stranger to being invaded.
Napoleon, then Hitler.
If it weren't for the winter, your nation
would have long ago been separated.
The Ukrainians want to be a sovereign nation,
not ripped apart and divided.
The devil's oblation.
My written words of peace and unity
will prove victorious eventually!
Stop and think for a moment.
What if it were your homeland under attack?
Now there would be something wrong with that!

Night Sounds

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

I try to envision sugar plums
that dance in my head.
But I can't; I still see the dead.

The dead and the dying,
memories that won't go away.
Long, long years—forever they stayed.

I was young once, years and years ago,
when my parents
were both shot in the snow.

The Nazis loaded us—one by one—
into cattle cars.
Animals we had become.

We were taken to a death camp
in the Nazi's and Hitler's reign,
treated as if we were inhuman.

I survived—a miracle, in fact,
for it was an American soldier
who carried me out, across his back.

And now my time on this earth—
it too shall end. I tell my story now
to the astonishment of my friends.

I never told a soul
where I once had been.
It was my secret. I held it within.

I'm a survivor of a Nazi death camp.
An orphan I was made.
It is a miracle that I was saved.

I pray the Holocaust* shall never happen again.
My faith persevered: I'm thankful I'm alive.
I was just a child of ten.

* *Never forget the Holocaust and the millions of
innocent people who were murdered.*

Look and Feel, But Listen

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

And you'll hear
The soft moans
Of the south soft wind.

The pitter-patter of rain
Falling in the grain,
Pelting the stalks of corn
Again, again and again.

Might you even
Take in the fragrance
Of a honeysuckle rose?

Or could you glance
Across the field
To enrapture yourself
With the presence of a billowed willow?

Listen. Don't you hear the hoot owl?
Or the far-away call
Of the silver wolf's howl?
And the BA-BA of a billy goat
Who finds himself stuck in a deep, dark moat?

And now, like a whisper in the wind,
I hear the deer that cries with a tear.
She seems very near.
Ah, no. She just bolted out of here.

And, as you listen,
You also feel the warmth
Of summer
In the sunlight.

It's time to celebrate.
A new season has arrived
For all of us to love,
Listen and be listened to.

Warriors

*By Lawrence W. Langman
—Portage, IN*

I listen from afar yet can rarely
be seen by few,
Always watching and waiting
for times to come due.
Through all my windows,
I peer out to see the clouds.
Sometimes searching, tirelessly
through endless crowds.
Although at time it's like a needle
in a stack of hay,
I promise you, with all my heart and soul,
you'll be okay.
I might not have been there for all your times
of deep despair,
Always away from you in foreign lands.
I know it wasn't fair.
Never for one moment,
were you absent from my mind.
One picture I held on to, never wanting
to leave you behind.
I want you to know how proud I am
in all you have survived.
Guiding you from this distance has been hard;
tears flow as I cry.
As you lay your head down each day,
I softly kiss your forehead.
Being in this awful place
makes me long for home instead.
On dark clear nights,
I can almost hear you
calling out my name.
Thank you for calling me a hero
to all that will hear your pain.
Although, proud of all my accomplishments,
my family tops my list.
Of all the things to be desired in this world,
you would be my wish!
Late one evening, when you're alone,
go outside and lay on the ground.
Look deep into the skies in the night
as a star comes falling down.
Wish for me to enter your dreams;
in the darkness I will find my way.

And on the day you walk down that aisle,
I can't wait to hear you say,
"Father, I know you can't be here,
but I feel you are in spirit for my day.
Your battles are over and I will be fine;
I shall see you in every sun ray,
For every star you see at night
is my window to your world.
Life now stands before you,
and I spread it far and wide, unfurled."
Thank you to all the fathers that took the fall,
so we could stand together for them all!

The Medic

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

The sound of rounds
zoom by in unison.
Pop! Pop! Pop!
as they fly through the air.

Point man goes down
as one finds its mark.
They move forward as
the call goes out...Medic!

A young man responds
in a race against time
to save a life or
to give final comfort.

The bright red cross glows
upon his haloed helmet.
An angel of mercy
on a field of death.

The bravest of the brave,
he moves forward quickly.
His job is to save the lives of
young men cut down by war.

Oblivious to the battle raging
as he tends to his charge,
giving care to the wounded,
providing hope to the dying.

Riverine Assault Flotilla

By Dwight D. Jenkins
—Rensselaer, NY

Born in Hudson, 18 years, my flag was too long furled
when Lyndon Johnson offered me a chance to see the world.
Should be fun. I'll have some laughs and wear a sailor suit.
No danger for them Navy boys, won't even have to shoot.

Go "River Boats?" Yeah sure, why not and thank you, Uncle Sam.
But I was thinking Tennessee, not southern Vietnam.
Oh, the Mekong Delta hated me; it laughed at my mistake.
This wasn't like the painter's Hudson back in New York state.

Oh, Riverine Assault Flotilla, friendly though you sound,
if I could do it o'er again, I'd stick to solid ground.
Oh, Riverine Assault Flotilla, friendly though you sound,
if I could do it o'er again, I'd stick to solid ground.

I aged ten years in one spent there; my hair turned quickly white,
bleached from sun but more from fear, patrolling in the night.
On 9/15 of '67, the war would end for me.
I lost so much I wanted kept, except for memory.
A spleen, a neck, oh, what the heck, an eye, a jaw, an ear.
Bits and pieces left behind in Vietnam a year.

Oh, Riverine Assault Flotilla, friendly though you sound,
if I could do it o'er again, I'd stick to solid ground.
Oh, Riverine Assault Flotilla, friendly though you sound,
if I could do it o'er again, I'd stick to solid ground.

Prayers

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

Prayers are what saved me.
Prayers are No. 1.
Prayers are the foundation of life and love.
Prayers give us faith and God's love within.
Prayers are communication with God, our Father.
Prayers are everything.
Prayers are what help all of us in so many ways.
All we need are prayers so we can help one another.

LARRY CHAMBERS SPIRIT AWARD

I'm Thankful for That Every Day

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

I was broken, but now I'm healing.
I'm no longer bouncing off the walls or ceiling.
My mind is slower than it once was
which is much healthier because
I no longer am angry or full of rage.
I'm thankful for that every day.

When I wake up, it's with a positive thought,
even though when I sleep battles are fought.
I don't wake up in the middle of the night,
and that in itself is dynamite.
And if I must say,
I'm thankful for that every day.

Don't get me wrong, I still have episodes.
Yes, I'm not yet completely mellowed,
but I don't ponder about my past as long,
and I'll play a happy, feel-good song
because music is something that I crave.
I'm thankful for that every day.

I spend time taking care of me.
That's my daily good deed,
for I am learning how important self-care is.
There's no test or a quiz,
but it's healthy anyway.
I'm thankful for that every day.

As long as my emotions are equal,
then I'll look forward to the sequel,
and to living my life to the fullest.
I can even have my own fun fest,
a single event or an array.
I'm thankful for that every day.

Forged by the Fire

By Michele Roxanne Johnson
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I have walked the streets of hell,
gnarly beings gnashing,
trying to steal my mind, body and soul.
My life was like the railroad spike
set into the fiery flame, twisted and turned repeatedly,
forcing it to take on an unfamiliar and new shape.
Hard as steel and hot as hell,
it is being molded into something different,
changing shapes as it gets hotter and hotter.
The hammer strikes the spike,
triggering it to become thin and spread,
identical to my feelings when I have been
broken and betrayed time after time.
The spike and I are losing our original self.
Forged by the fire,
my feelings are burnt beyond recognition,
no longer recognizable, forced to be something new.
Now pulled from the fire,
rising like a phoenix, a new shape.
I have been forged by the fire,
refined, and remade into my new and authentic self.
I have been forged by the fire,
bent, burnt and broken and now made beautiful.

This Is All I Need

By Christine Rose Hazuka
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

A hint of blue sky
Sunshine peeking through the rain
Seeing new life in spring
The song of one bird
My kitty in my lap
To hear my children's voices
Friends to share life with
To get a smile back
Knowing that I am loved
The promise of my forgiveness

Mirror Image

By Lawrence W. Langman
—Portage, IN

I've been walking these streets of ice and fire.
I've suffered great pains and felt deep desires.
I've witnessed things that no mortal should.
I've still stood tall from the evil I've withstood.
I wake every morning and walk past that mirror.
I see no reflection, just my end getting nearer.
I feel like I'm in quicksand, slowly losing control.
I'm slowly losing ground, although I'm consoled.
I feel loved ones all around me yet behind the glass.
I feel just out of reach as I approach an impasse.
I see two paths: one to the left and one to the right.
I don't know which shall redeem me from feeling contrite.
I notice one path is darkened and the other is lit.
I feel synapses firing in my brain, unable to quit.
I grab hold of the edges of my dream and pull myself out.
I need to leave it hidden in my mind, leaving no more doubts.
I once again look into my mirror; a reflection comes into view.
I feel I'm in a fun house where the walls and floors go askew.
I stare at my image as it slowly but surely comes into focus.
I hope everybody can come to terms; it's time somebody woke us!

The Search

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

I prayed to God
to see me through another day.
He gave his nod
for me to seek and find his way.
Felt him near
in all that I could hope to do.
His way was clear;
I knew to search within anew.
It dawned on me, at length,
to know and keep his law.
Then I felt free at last,
in spite of human flaw.
So keep his law
and know these precepts every day.
This truth will gnaw
within yourself as you kneel down to pray.

Say No to Tyranny

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

War is transgenerational,
thus universal,
a means of suppression.
Lines are drawn by whom?
The winners write the history books.
Tyranny is alive and well.

Might I suggest we take a stand.
I've had enough
of the "great old white man stomping on others,"
trying to hold them and us down,
trying to steal hopes and dreams.
We should break the glass ceiling.
It needs to be shattered and never rebuilt.
No more complacency.
No more acceptance.
Find the truth,
speak the truth,
be silent no more.
It's up to you and me,
not to give them the power to be misused.
After all, we are the generation
to take back our country,
to make the change
and spread the word universally.
No more tyranny!

Memorial Day 2023

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

At the cemetery
so many flags to salute
and leave a penny.

A Moment in Time

*By Paul David Gonzales
VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM*

There comes a moment in time
when all the words no longer rhyme,
when there are no ambitious stairs to climb.

There comes a moment in time
when the clock stops recording life's events
and pauses its movement.

The tick-tocks of time
echo silence without a musical chime.
When gravity no longer rules your fall,
you stoop and can't stand tall.

When the present makes no sense,
and those profound moments are all past tense,
there comes a moment in time
when the future goes blank,
void of any plan or shape,
where there is no door or path of escape.

There comes a moment in time
when we must face our destiny
and review our life with scrutiny.
There comes a moment in time
when you cry without a tear
while facing that monster called fear.

There comes a moment in time
when you keep your thoughts
silent and to yourself,
placing them on that private shelf,
locked within that vault of pain
deep inside your human form.

There comes a moment in time
when past and present collide
but no longer desire to compete
for that moment of life's greatness.

There will come that moment in time
for you and me.
Today
is my moment in time.

I Want To Know

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

I want to know...I want to know.
I want to know what was going through your mind?
I got to know...I got to know.
Well, did you think what you did to me was right?

When I woke up Friday morning
and I came to work my last day with you,
I never thought I would be leaving the office
broken, black and blue.

I want to know...I want to know.
Tell me what the hell was going on in your mind?

I want to know...I want to know.
Why did you send me to the dark side
where I can no longer see?
I got to know...I got to know.
Will I ever again see the light of day?

Every morning when I wake up
and look into the mirror,
the face that is looking back at me,
her face is full of fear and tears.

I want to know...I want to know.
Tell me, please, what was going on in your mind?
I want to know...I want to know.
Did raping me make you feel like a man inside?

I got to know...I got to know.
When do you pull rank on your victims,
because I'm pretty sure I am not your first.
Does it work every time?

I want to know...I want to know
what the hell is wrong with your mind?

When I joined the Army,
I thought I was working where I could feel safe,
but you tried to brainwash me and say
we were friends having sex.
News Flash!
“Sarge, it's called R A P E!”

I want you to know...I want you to know.
I have a shadow that goes in and out of my body.
And what can be her use, you ask?
She carries off your memories a little piece at a time.
One day I will have a clear mind.

I want you to know...I want you to know.
As long as I live, I shall always be myself
and no other—JUST ME!

PREDATORS like you will never have the power
to change me again!

Jesus

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

In the valley of darkness, sin and despair,
When there's no one else to care,
We know there's one who hears our call.
His name is Jesus, the savior of all.

No cross too heavy, he helps to bear;
No sorrow, no sadness he doesn't share.
No pain, no sickness he cannot heal;
With faith and love, at his feet, we kneel.

The sweetest voice we ever heard,
Nothing so beautiful as his word
Embedded deeply in my heart,
So deep it never shall depart.

How lovely his name, the greatest of all;
The sweetest story ever was told.
Emmanuel, Counselor, Bright Morning Star,
Lily of the Valley, that's what you are.

Thank you, Lord, for your mercy and grace
Sent down from your heavenly place.
In all these things, we can rejoice
In the beautiful name of Jesus.

Way Too Many Scars

By Kim Gwinner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

I have way too many scars,
but I see them not as a group.
They are from different times of my life.
Some of them are good memories and some sad.

Some are from others, some from myself.
They range in size and in depth,
but most remind me that I put up a good fight.
I take pride in a few, while others make me mad.

There are many that can't physically be seen
unless you catch me in a moment of my PTSD.
Scars are caused by my actions and the actions of others.
The ones on the outside don't hurt as much,
but the ones inside do.

On a scale of one to ten, they fall somewhere between.
When a wound is open, not all of them bleed.
Some, for a lifetime, will ever remind me
of those that loved and those who wanted to hurt me.

I guess they are one and the same, come to think about it.
Love and pain are one and the same while looking at scars,
whether caused by me or by them,
and if I share them or not.

Scars are just from a moment of the past.
Some bring me good thoughts,
and others not so.
But scars are my very own.

Group Drop-out

By Charles Kesler

VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX

He's leaving the group,
and he'll probably go away,
saying, "They're just
a bunch of whiners."
But the real issue is his
unwillingness to deal with
the real issues.

Cadence of My Life

By Christine Rose Hazuka

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Raised my hand to join the team,
Shy was I and now was strong.
Proud to be a girl no more,
Now a woman fit to fight!
A team we were and I belonged.

This, our flag, is flying high.
Side by side, we're marching by.
Positive we will go on,
Positive we will go on!

Sound Off: ONE-TWO
Sound Off: THREE-FOUR
Bring it on down: ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR
ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR!

Back to home, where I did go,
Lost my way, too down to care.
Gave up spirit and my pride.
Life was hard; I almost died.

Myself alone, it cannot work.
Be a team and gather 'round.
We, all in all, we WILL survive
For freedom and life. Watch her fly!
Side by side, we're marching by!

Sound Off: ONE-TWO
Sound Off: THREE-FOUR
Bring it on down: ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR
ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR!

Incarcerated PTSD

By John Tidwell

—Conneaut, OH

Your lockup PTSD behind walls and fences,
There appears to be no adequate defenses.
The life must demand to be endlessly paid;
What is forgotten, man's life you have made.
Politics doesn't want to openly publish or say
How many heroes' lives they let waste away.

Nocturne of the Enlisted

(*Apologies to Edmund Blunden, 1929*)

By William Paul Gruendler

—Cape Canaveral, FL

About the bunkers, quiet as your mom
Watching you in your dreams, the Vietnam night
Begins to fall. Soon will come her stars
To look down on the land's fake harmony.
And men with guns again await their fates.
You stand or squat on sandbags, watching where
Yon setting sun now shines on Freedom Hill.
The Dum-Dum rounds impact on Freedom Hill.
You grin, test-firing in the creeping dark,
Conventions of Geneva quite forgot!
Jets passing over, emptied of their loads,
Will perch at Da Nang Airbase for the night.
NOW—who will own Tonight? Will Peace or War?
Our Peasant Army or the NVAs?
A great gulf spans our “wired property”
To barbed eyes, then, our compound feels secure.
So we begin again to cheat ourselves
By doping ecstasies. And do we “Halt—
Who goes there?” With our ordnance close at hand,
We have the means to turn the night to day!
Besides, the Lifers? safe and snug in bed,
And “Puff” (read “Spooky”) anxious to assist!
So snort it up your nose! Inhale! and hold!
It's but a pinch of Scag—a fresh-rolled Jay!
And we begin to turn ourselves into ghosts.
Summon the Muse. The Witching Hour has struck.
Our stoner faces poisoned into masks,
We'll hit the heights tonight and let “them” rest.
“Them” Lifers sleep—juicers who drink their rules.
In faded voices, whispered, addled, burned,
Commence the rap. Our gun barrels long cooled.
Atop our sandbagged fortress, nodding out,
Oblivious to time in wakeful sleep,
Incapable to stir, children besot.

WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

A Poem Means to Me

Janice Walker

VA Medical Center—Dublin, GA

A poem means to me... an expression of my inner self.
A poem means to me... a way to serve my country and give her help.
A poem means to me... A spiritual awakening.
... A victory over error.
... A thought of good that has not been taken.
A poem means to me... Truth revealed and deceit overcome.
A poem means to me... A way I can love everyone.
A poem means to me... Love, joy and peace.
Though I express anger at times...
A poem means to me... my Sanity
... my Serenity
... my Peace of mind.

I Did My Part

By Antonio Jose Figueroa

—Hopewell Junction, NY

When you see me in the streets,
you look at me funny
as if I were a criminal,
or a bum asking for money.
You pass judgement like you're the almighty,
which is cool because you look like a fool.
Never will you know I did my part.

While you slept peacefully,
I was fighting a war.
You began your day
knowing how it would finish.
I lived for the moment,
not caring when my light diminished.
A rough day for you
might end with a ticket.
A good day for me
might end with asking for forgiveness.

So pass your judgement and see if I care.
My shoulders are back and my head is high.
I did my part. You didn't even try.

Frenchman's Restaurant

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

Pink miniskirts,
Golden tan,
Red pumps,
I want to be your man.
No finger nail polish,
Just natural beauty.
No jewelry,
One tattoo on her back,
A cross
Colored black.
She was rich;
I was just a toy,
Working as a busboy.
I could have been wrong
About the way she dressed;
That woman sure was blessed.
Years later I am sure
That face so pure
Was on the silver screen.
“None of your business,”
She used to sing.

Nothing Left

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

The silence seeps into my soul.
No sounds, no thoughts.
The air is as stagnant as death.
No movement, no motion.
Empty eyes can no longer see.
No colors, no shapes.
My mind is devoid of thought.
No images, no memories.
A vacant body exists now.
No emotions, no feelings.
Tossed aside like unwanted trash.
No value, no worth.
Left alone in an unknown world.
No family, no friends.
Paralyzed by the horrors of war.
No heart, no soul.

Always a Part of Me

By Joyce Leneave
—Cincinnati, OH

Shoot, move, communicate.
It's embedded in my being.
“What makes the grass grow?”
“Blood. Blood.
Blood makes the grass grow.”
Another chapter in the book of my life.
Always ready for battle.
Gas! Gas! Gas!
Drill and ceremony,
All me.
I was trained to react—not think.
I've spent years trying to figure out
why I act without thinking.
It's what made me a soldier.
Suddenly, I was in another foreign,
different type of world.
Everything that once made me great
was completely wrong.
I've seen it in faces—
The faces that were never trained
to “suck it up and drive on.”
I've always engaged in an inner battle
against myself.
No squad forever scanning my sector.

Breaking Through

By Anthony Phillips
—Las Vegas, NV

I am breaking through a one-way dream,
seeing past the broken glass
and looking at the reflection of the person
I used to be.
I leave behind the pain of yesterday
and embrace the joy of today.
Why does a dream capture me when I am awake?
Who am I? Dream or the dreamer?
What will I accomplish in my waking life
that cannot be done while I sleep through the night?
The night consumes me.
The daylight rewards me
with one more waking moment to gather my sense.
There is no end without a beginning.

Prisoners of War

By Donald Chase
VA Medical Center—Brockton, MA

Off to one side and silent,
they sat with downcast eyes,
not knowing what their fate would be
or whether they would live or die.

One had blood dripping down his face
from a bullet crease in his head.
Another's arm hung mangled
with its bandage stained bright red.

The third had feet discolored
in sneakers that were full of holes.
His toes all swollen and useless,
frozen stiff by the winter cold.

They were enemy soldiers,
yet human like you and I,
and one couldn't help but notice
the pain in their anguished eyes.

That scene of pain and misery,
which has defied the passage of time,
is another unwanted souvenir
from a war that left scars in the mind.

Insanity to Justice

By William Kurrle
—Chewelah, WA

There is this insanity to justice
that asked and made you give it all.
Times of immortality
that demanded your all
and those that did let all have it.
Only those that gave their all
attest to the cause that took
that all.
May their souls
be vindicated in the end.

From Isolation to Inspiration

By John Kowalczyk
—Olathe, KS

Quarantine—a word that became all too familiar in recent years. In some areas of the country, it was mandated (another word that became too popular), in others, highly encouraged, while in still others, completely ignored. Those who heeded the warning and stayed home tolerated it for a few weeks, but as it dragged on to more weeks and then months, we all became susceptible to a disease other than COVID, the dreaded “cabin fever.”

In my case, I chose to quarantine, but after putting together every jigsaw puzzle I had, reading every Lee Child book that was published, binge-watching mindless TV programs day after day and playing too many games on my phone, I too became a victim of cabin fever and decided that I needed to find a cure. I needed to do something about it, something different, maybe even something useful. I just didn’t know what that was.

That’s how my novel, “Number 43,” was born.

One of the special times I have during the day, when I am completely by myself, with nothing else to do but think, is when I walk my dog, Joli Jean. During one of those walks, as I was thinking about what I could do with the rest of the day while stuck in the house, the idea for the story came to me.

The basic idea for “Number 43” had been bouncing around in my brain for several years. It was just a thought or two along



the lines of “boy meets girl, they fall in love, something happens, they break up, then they get back together.” If you’ve ever watched a Hallmark movie, you know the story line.

Yes, that might sound like the makings of a romance novel, but I wanted the romance to be in the background, just a small part of the overall story. I really enjoy the game of football and thought it might be able to provide a great venue for the main characters to meet for the first time. After they met, since the main characters are two young men, the rest of the story could be about what the rest of their lives might be like at that time in our history.

When I got home, I sat down, looked at my keyboard and thought, “I’ve never done this before. How do I start? Do I have it within me to write a short story?”

Taking to heart the old adage of the best place to start is at the beginning, I typed out a basic outline of how I thought the story should start, a couple of events that should happen as it unfolded and how it

should end. I originally thought that it would be a short story, would start with a chapter on football and then have a chapter or two to introduce each of the two main characters.

As I wrote, I quickly realized that two chapters on the main characters weren’t enough. So, a week later, after about a hundred edits and rewrites, the first four chapters were done. Creating the characters was fun, and I was happy with what I had written.

Surprisingly, the descriptions of them ended up being very different from what I originally thought they would be, but I was satisfied.

With four chapters done, I was amazed at how just sitting down and typing out a story could be so satisfying. I was proud of what I had done, but it didn’t take long for me to wonder, “OK. What’s next? Where do I go from here?”

I had several possible ideas and tried working them out in my head as I walked my dog, but I realized that I needed to put them on paper (or at least a Word document). After a couple of starts and stops, and a few internal pep talks when I got frustrated, I finally got to the point where I felt comfortable going forward.

Once I convinced myself that this was really good for me, almost therapeutic, the words flowed until I got stuck at the next tough spot in the story, which happened a lot. I found out on more than one occasion that maybe I thought about the story a little too much.

Several times I would be in the middle of a chapter, get a brainstorm of an idea and then realize I couldn't include it in that chapter without going back several chapters to plant the seed for it. Sometimes the new idea would fit inside a previous chapter; other times a new chapter was added. One idea would lead to another, and before I knew it, I had over 50 chapters written. But the story still wasn't finished. It would take 23 more to do that. I never dreamed that the short story I originally had in my head would end up needing 73 chapters to complete.

For the most part, "Number 43" is a work of fiction, that's all. No deeper, hidden meaning. All of the characters and their homes are fictional, but there are some places and events that are loosely based on real events. To make sure I didn't make any major mistakes, I did a lot of internet research. Actually, I'm reasonably sure that I spent as much time researching things as I did writing the story.

Considering the main characters, their ages and the situations they were in, I first

tried to make the dialog as close to what I thought might actually be said at that time. However, when I was about halfway through, my pseudo editor said my dialog was "too clean" and wasn't how the characters would talk. I thought about that, reread several chapters and realized she was right, so I started yet another rewrite, adding a smattering of f-bombs and other expletives where appropriate throughout the story. I think they add an element of realism.

When I realized I was finished, the first thing I felt was relief. Then an overwhelming sense of total accomplishment came over me. I was proud of what I had done. I had taken a few thoughts and ended up completing something I never thought I could do.

I think the biggest surprise I had was how creative I became as I wrote, coming up with idea after idea that added to the overall story. There were many times when I might be watching TV, reading a book or doing some other activity, and suddenly I'd get a brainstorm of an idea

and run to the computer to see how I could work it out. That's probably why it took me so many chapters to complete the story.

At one point, I thought about getting the story published, but after doing some research, I learned that would cost money that I wasn't willing to spend, so I decided to forget or at least postpone that idea. I still might self-publish, but for now, I'm happy with things as they are and sharing my story with close family and friends.

I've used the word "amazed" several times because that's what I was. If someone had asked me at the beginning if I could write a book with 73 chapters, I would have said "No way." But I did and was "amazed" at how much fun it was.

I think we all have a story or two floating around in our heads. I am so happy that I took the time to write mine.

Almost Spring Again

*By Janice Walker
VA Medical Center—Dublin, GA*

Oh, the coming of the storms and showers.
The strong winds can last for hours and hours,
Yet behold the greeting of the heavens,
The glorious new birth of flowers and trees
And the miracle of their beauty.
The glory of the Divine Spirit, God of heaven and earth.

Oh, oh, it's almost spring again.
And I, too, seek the new birth.
How beautiful, the diversity of fragrance
Of the new flowers.
Such beauty to behold moment by moment, hour by hour.
How I love flowers, so beautiful like art
And God's perfect children.
Oh, look out! Here she comes! It's almost spring again!

Let Go

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

Let go of the pain of the past
and all the emotions attached.
The anger, frustration, shame and guilt,
anything that is toxic to my soul.
My soul cries, "Let go and be free."
The tears fall, washing away the emotions
that have me shackled,
weighing me down day by day.
Today, I choose to let go
and stand firmly anchored in my present,
no longer tethered to the tragedies of my past.
Today, I let GO.
Today, I am set free.
Today, I choose me.

The Wall Still Heals

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Sitting in a lawn chair, the sun at ten o'clock.
His tired and heavy eyes hide pain and old shell shock.
He doesn't say a word, stares at that wall of black.
One name has his attention, igniting a flashback.

For five days in a row, he's glad that he is here.
His feelings on his sleeve, he doesn't hide a tear.
He got two hours of sleep though ten were spent in bed,
just to relive memories of darkness and bloodshed.

A trip to our nation's capital was never meant to be.
Thus, that wall of granite was one he'd never see.
So, when he heard that wall would be here in mid-May,
his kids made him a promise to bring him every day.

From the weathered cap I wore, he knew I was a Vet.
When asked why he was there, he said, "I can't forget."
I knelt down beside him, said, "I don't know what you're feeling,
but give this wall a chance; it's capable of healing."

From his threadbare vest he pulled a black and white,
said, "That's Scooter on the left; me, I'm on the right.
We were both just twenty, consumed by real fears.
It was both the saddest and the worst of years.

"My wife had never met him, but she knew his name.
Sarge said it wasn't my fault, but I take the blame.
Each year on August 2, I stay inside and cry.
That was the day that Scooter woke up just to die.

"I don't talk about the war unless I've had a few
and I'd rather talk to Scooter, no offense to you.
I've no medals on a shelf; I'm just an old draftee,
while memories of Scooter still live inside of me."

He looked at me and asked if I served over there.
I told him, "No, but Dad did; that is why I care.
I've seen firsthand how lives can change from a child's view,
so can scarce imagine the damage inside you."

Twenty minutes passed in silence; I got up to go.
I thanked him for his service. He nodded, then said, "No,
it's you who should be thanked, but maybe you don't see
how much I appreciate the time you spent with me."

Recliner Built for Two

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Surfing the net I saw it; what was I to do?
I just had to have it—a recliner built for two.
I closed my eyes and smiled; I saw us side by side,
the man I love and me. I wouldn't be denied.

There was no need to call and see if he'd agree.
I added it to my cart; they're delivering at 3:00.
It was bigger than I thought and wider than the door.
Maybe I should have measured; now it's nearly 4:00.

They finally got it in; to have it was a "must."
I'm almost finished sweeping wood chips and sawdust.
Joe pulls in the drive; I rush out to greet him,
so he won't see the door and the missing trim.

I told him that I loved him, that my day went well.
He said, "I love you, too," and "What is that I smell?"
I ignore his question and lead him to the den,
ready to surprise my man since I can't remember when.

We walk in; he sees it in the corner of the room.
He is truly speechless; that's what I assume.
He doesn't say a word, not a single sound.
Words could not describe the bargain that I found.

I tell him we can cuddle while we watch TV.
We'll never miss a romcom, just my man and me.
During each commercial, we can turn and kiss,
an opportunity I'm sure he wouldn't miss.

Suddenly it sunk in and he began to nod.
No longer was he shaken; I think that he was awed.
He said that he could picture us every single night
sitting close together, no need to have a light.

He asked me what I paid for it; I said, "It was a steal.
I got it on the website, 'C'mon, Let's Make a Deal.'"
He shook his head and asked, "Darling, did you think
the reason that it was a deal is because it's pink?"

Mail Call



Charles Hood, Joplin, Mo., wrote, “I just wanted to write to you and tell you how much it meant — first when you told me my poem was good enough to be printed; then again by actually giving it an award. I haven’t written very much since I left high school. My teacher told me I could write, but I didn’t want to sit and get in my own head what I was afraid I might find. Time and healing have allowed me to come to terms with the things swimming in my brain and soon I will write about them. Thank you for giving me peace. God bless you all.”



From Clarksburg, W.V., **Barbara Forsha**, executive director of the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center there, extends appreciation to *Veterans’ Voices* for the magazines for their patients.



Ruann Handy, at the Beckley, W.V., VA Medical Center, thanks *Veterans’ Voices* for copies of the magazine on behalf of its patients and staff.

ATTENTION

ALL VETERANS’ VOICES CONTRIBUTORS

It is apparent that some authors and contributors may not be updating their profile on the *Veterans’ Voices* website. **PLEASE check your information, particularly your address, and make sure it is current.**

This is the information that the office uses to mail author award checks and several have been returned from the mailing after the spring issue. If you did not receive your check, it may be that we do not have your current address. Please make the correction in your profile on the website and then call Jeanne in the office, 816-701-6844, and report that you did not receive your check. The bookkeeper will have to verify this and reissue a check so it will not happen immediately.

Sharon L. Smith Tribute



Veterans Voices Writing Project recently lost another dedicated friend. Sharon L. Smith, a past president of VVWP, died April 10, 2023. Sharon was born in rural Wyandotte County, near Kansas City, Kan., on August 31, 1942, the eighth of eleven children. Except for several years spent teaching English and journalism at a high school in Topeka, she lived the balance of her life near Kansas City, Kan.

She graduated from Kansas State University, Manhattan, with a bachelor’s in journalism and a master’s in journalism education. She was the longtime editor of “Bank News” magazine, a publication focused on the banking industry. As a volunteer, she served as a church elder, worked at a food kitchen for those in need and recorded books on tape for the visually impaired. She was an avid reader and book lover. Like many of those who have volunteered for *Veterans’ Voices* over the years, she came to the magazine through her membership in the Greater Kansas City chapter of The Association for Women in Communications. She served as president of VVWP during the 1980s.

Sharon is survived by five siblings. In addition, she was the well-loved aunt of 27 nieces and nephews and numerous great and great-great nieces and nephews. She was their inspirational role model, acted as their counselor, took them traveling and made certain they experienced in-person attendance at professional sporting events. One of those appreciative nephews conducted Sharon’s memorial service on May 13. VVWP and AWC members will miss her but always remember her service to the project and the difference she made to numerous veterans.

–VVWP Board of Directors

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

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

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



FOUNDERS

Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual)\$50

Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:

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

Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:

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

STORIES—*Fact or Fiction*

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

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

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

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

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

POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. Of Florida Award\$30

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

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

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

SPECIAL CATEGORIES

Joseph Posik Award: Given to a veteran who encourages other veterans to write\$50

Thank You



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

– VVWP Board of Directors

Gifts of \$38,000 or more

Beets Charitable Trust Foundation, Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$10,000 or more

Helzberg Foundation, Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$5,000 or more

Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$2,000 or more

Breidenthal-Snyder Foundation, Leawood, Kan.

Tina Hacker, Leawood, Kan.

Gifts of \$500 or more

VFW Auxiliary 7573, New Baltimore, Mich.

WOSL San Antonio, Texas

Gifts of \$400 or more

Chris Iliff, Overland Park, Kan.

Alan L. Molasky, Las Vegas, Nev.

Gifts of \$200 or more

American Legion Auxiliary 36, Ludlow, Vt.

Thomas Clark, II, St. Louis, Mo.

DAV Auxiliary 34, Lenexa, Kan.

VFW Auxiliary 1622, Lomita, Calif.

VFW Auxiliary 7234, Ocean View, Del.

Rich Wangard, Neenah, Wis.

Gifts of \$100 or more

Leonora Bisby, Phoenix, Ariz.

Pris Chansky, Overland Park, Kan.

DAV Auxiliary 4, Wichita, Kan.

Milton Evans, Staten Island, N.Y.

Pat Meads, Merriam, Kan.

Mary Pitchford, Overland Park, Kan.

Ginzy Schaefer, Kansas City, Mo.

VFW Auxiliary, Department of Kansas, McPherson, Kan.

VFW Auxiliary 1008, Waterford, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 2692, Lumberton, N.J.

VFW Auxiliary 4054, Edwardsville, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 5968, Orange Park, Fla.

VFW Auxiliary 6712, Revere, Mass.

VFW Auxiliary 7769, Beebe, Ark.

WAC Veterans 62, Weaver, Ala.

Larry W. Westhusing, Pittsburg, Mo.

Gifts in Kind

Dazium Design, Kansas City, Mo

Kansas Audio-Reader Service, Lawrence, Kan.

Kaw Valley Computer, Kansas City, Kan.

Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.

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

VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.

Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



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

Instructions for Writing Submissions.

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

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

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

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

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

Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

SUBMIT ONLINE:

www.veteransvoices.org

SUBMIT BY MAIL:

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

QUESTIONS:

support@veteransvoices.org
(816) 701-6844

Mail Submission Sample.

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

Author Name _____

VAMC Name _____

VAMC City, State, Zip Code _____

Author's Permanent Street Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

Branch of Service _____

Conflict or Era _____

Approximate dates served _____

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

Date Submitted to *Veterans' Voices* _____

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

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

Writing Aide: _____

Typist: _____

Heal Through Visual Art

Watch for your artwork in a future issue!

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

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

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

Instructions for Artwork Submissions

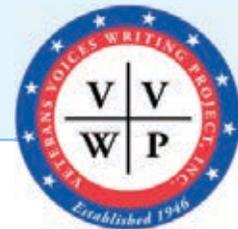
For more than 65 years Veterans Voices Writing Project has provided an outlet for military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction by sharing their stories, poems and artwork. Send your submissions today!

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



Submit Today!
For a Future Issue

Calling for
Photographs,
Drawings and
Paintings



Artwork Submissions

Online or By Mail

www.veteransvoices.org

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



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

**Share
Your
Story**



In Prose, Poetry and Artwork

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

Send submissions to www.veteransvoices.org.



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