

VETERANS' VOICES®

**Writing at the School for
Better Living**

By Dr. Donna Ames

**Through the Rocket's
Red Glare**

By Zachery Space

The Hollyhock Dolls

By Christine Hazuka

Korean Hills

By Donald Chase

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VeteransVoices.org

Writing at the School for Better Living

By Dr. Donna Ames

At the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, I developed and led a transitional learning center, the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC). Its goal was to help veterans with serious mental illness to reintegrate into their communities by focusing on the biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions in their lives. The veterans called it the School for Better Living and were partners in its development. Our faculty included psychologists, social workers, nurses, peer support specialists and volunteers from the community. Veterans were encouraged to see themselves as “students,” and they held graduations and received diplomas after finishing classes.

Each veteran developed a recovery plan and worked toward personal community integration goals – to get a job, go back to school, do volunteer work and create art through gardening, cooking, writing, painting, dance, etc.

Many remarkable recoveries occurred for these veterans as they worked on what gave their lives purpose and meaning.

Some of the classes at the PRRC included a creative visual arts class and an art appreciation class. For art appreciation, veterans visited museums around the Los Angeles area and studied the biographies

and artistic styles of classical and contemporary artists, many of whom suffered from mental health problems.

Because many of our veterans were physically inactive, we promoted nutrition and exercise, such as gardening. With help from Chief of Psychiatry Dr. Robert Rubin and guided by the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) of Brooklyn, N.Y., we developed Dance for Veterans, based on MMDG’s Dance for Parkinson’s Disease. With each class, veterans improved their movement, coordination, mood and socialization. They also participated in other mind-body activities, including yoga (breathing, stretching, relaxation).

Given the therapeutic benefit of writing, we developed a class entitled “Creative Expressions.” We focused upon the tenets of recovery and worked to enhance positive mood states with writing assignments. We opened each class with 10 minutes of free writing. The class then would move on to instruction on poetry and story writing. The veterans learned many forms of poetry, as well as folk and short-story writing, as one might be taught in a college writing class. We read examples of a form of writing, and then veterans tried their hand at the form. At the end of the class, veterans read their pieces aloud, sharing their creative accomplishments. Annual compilations of their poems and stories were published, and



they were encouraged to enter VA-sponsored writing contests.* One veteran went on to study creative writing in college; another published a book.

Veterans can create their own recovery plan. Steps include 1) surveying satisfaction with your life activities, 2) determining your overall vision of recovery, 3) listing the specific goals to achieve your vision and 4) assessing the strengths that will help achieve your vision. It is particularly important to find someone to be an accountability/recovery coach to periodically review your recovery journey. Part of the recovery plan should include at least one way to creatively express yourself.

Looking back, it has been an honor to work with veterans to improve their mental health through their creative artistic expressions. The sense of self-esteem when we create is part of a very human need—to be in touch with something bigger than ourselves. The Creator of the universe put a spark in every one of us. I hope that all veterans can get in touch with that spark as part of their recovery journey.



Dr. Donna Ames is a psychiatrist who served at the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System for 33 years. She also is professor emerita of psychiatry in the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. While serving at the VA, Dr. Ames fostered veterans’ artistic expression to help them achieve their mental health recovery goals.

*Editor’s Note: *Veterans’ Voices* is another outlet that showcases veterans’ writing and art.

See pages 65 and 66 to submit stories, poems and visual art.

Veterans' Voices®

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

History

VVWP was established as Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project in 1946 by **Elizabeth Fontaine** with the support of the Chicago North Shore chapter of Theta Sigma Phi (now The Association for Women in Communications) to address the physical, 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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Magazine Guidelines

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

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

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

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Veterans Voices Writing Project

presents

After “The End”

What to do when the writing’s done

Panelists



Lou Eisenbrandt
Vietnam War nurse, author



Vivien Jennings
Founder/Rainy Day Books



Virginia Brackett
Author, educator, editor, writing coach

★ *Panelists will sign books after program* ★

NOV. 12 | 2 -4 PM

**R.A. Long Learning Center
National World War I Museum and Memorial
2 Memorial Drive, Kansas City, MO**

Public invited / Free admission



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At Least I Wasn't the First To Leave

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Tonight, at my niece's engagement party, I felt different than the others, like an outcast. I knew some people there, including my family, but I still felt like I didn't belong. They were partying and having a good time. But being disabled, I sat there on a log. I did converse with a few, posed for some pictures. But it felt like they were tossing me a bone. People stayed in groups among themselves, inside and outside as well.

I'm sure it was just me and my PTSD for being down in the dumps and feeling alone. I just can't shake that feeling when I'm a guest. I'm sure that maybe some of you understand.

But here's the good news: I wasn't the first to leave.

Loyal

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

Are words loyal
or the words written by the one who wins the war.
Words can be shaped like clay
manipulated to make the foe look better than he deserves.
The enemy is inside the wire.
They are our "friendlies" but they are predators.
She has the courage to speak out
but is condemned as the victim, the prey.

The system is broken
like it is her fault words given to her
are dishonorably discharged,
with special service codes and mental health diagnosis
kicked to the curb.
All of this indecency swept under the rug
with no punishment
for he gets promoted and retires with no repercussions.

But she is a survivor.

Drop the Gun, Cop

By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

Drop the gun, Cop; drop the gun, Cop. Do it now.
Don't shoot the man in the back, Cop. Don't do it.
Drop the gun, Cop; don't take the man's life.
Don't shoot the man running away from you, Cop.
The man is not armed at all, Cop. Don't shoot.
Show respect for all men in all colors, Cop.
The honorable God don't want people to hate.
Don't make false arrests, Cops. Stop it now.
Don't rob, Cops; don't kill, Cops; don't rape, Cops.
Don't choke the man, Cops; let the man breathe.
Drop the gun, Cop. Drop, drop the gun, Cop. Do it now.
Don't hate, Cop; stop your hate, Cop. Stop it now.
Don't cheat, Cop, if you have a girlfriend or a wife.
Stop lying, Cop, and stop making false arrests, Cops.
Don't break into people's houses, Cops. Stop it now.
Don't beat up on people, Cops. Stop the hate at once.
When you mistreat, abuse, violate and terrorize people,
You make people hate you. That ain't good at all, Cops.
Drop the gun, Cop; drop the gun, Cop. Do it now.
Stop the hate, Cop. You don't have to take the man's life.
Show some respect for God, Cops. Stop the hate.
Don't rape that poor woman, Cop. Don't do it.
Don't rob people at all, Cops. Leave them alone.
When you make false arrests, you harm people, Cops.
Stop wrongfully demanding money from people, Cop.
Don't kidnap or harm the children at all, Cops.
Show respect for all people, Cops.
Don't do crimes and obey the laws yourself, Cops.
Pay your bills, Cops; don't defraud anybody, Cops.
Drop the gun, Cop; drop the gun. Do it now.
Don't choke the man, Cop; let the man breathe.
Don't beat up on people, Cops. Stop the hate.
Don't rob, don't steal, don't rape or lie to people.
Pay your bills, Cops; don't defraud anybody, Cops.
Don't do crimes and obey the laws yourself, Cops.
Don't shoot the man in the back, Cops. Don't do it.
Don't shoot any man running away from you, Cops.
Drop the gun, Cop; drop the gun at once. Do it now.
Show respect for God and all people, Cops.
Drop the gun, Cops; drop the gun, Cops. Do it now.

Circular Feet, They Stink

By Tom Lauterback
—Wimauma, FL

I have wide feet. Do I mean the E width that most shoe retailers and shoe buyers consider “wide?” No, Dear Reader. Would that it were that easy. I’m talking EEEE or even F. The next time you’re in the mall, stroll into a shoe shop and ask them if they have those sizes available. If you’re lucky, they won’t call security and have you evicted for being a loony.

Let’s assume you’re still in the mall. You’ll see a stupefying array of men’s and women’s shoes. Let’s take a look at athletic shoes, 99 percent of which are offered in any width men want, as long as they are D, and likewise for women as long as they’re C.

Remove your shoes and socks. I’m betting that most of you will notice that your feet are three-dimensional appendages. But those of us with ultra-wide feet buy shoes based on one dimension – length — and hope for the best. We may compromise as I did for years. We may buy a longer length in the hope that it will offer needed width. But for most of my life, I’ve been disappointed by that compromise. I’ve flopped around like a clown in the circus with ridiculous shoe lengths and still not achieving the right width. And the similarity to circus performers is the least of the problems. Tight fits make walking, let alone running or playing a sport, uncomfortable. Probably the reason I was never invited to play in the NFL, NBA, NHL (skates are an even more restrictive dilemma) or the like. That plus a total lack of skill, which is the subject of yet another essay.



Would we buy a shirt with an unknown collar size, based only on sleeve length? I think not. Ditto for a pair of pants with undisclosed waist size based only on the inseam? Again, seriously doubtful. But we hit the shoe stores that offer an important option—style—but treat the human foot as if it’s one-dimensional. If those of us with nearly circular feet are lucky, we can find a wide (E) or extra wide (EE) or the female equivalent and are so uncomfortable in our shoes, we think we should qualify for a handicapped parking tag so we can limp into and around the mall. By the way, the situation in big box/discount/club stores is even worse. Style and length, length and style. No matter how you look at it, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment.

There is a plethora of online retailers, some of whom claim to accommodate

high insteps and wide feet. I got lucky with an online source recently and acquired a pair of athletic shoes that seem to do both. But it was pure dumb luck. And even with said luck, I probably only acquired a slight increase in width.

I’m given to challenging shoe retailers verbally and online vendors in writing to pay more attention to parameters other than length and style. I hope against all hope that they will pass the word up the chain of demand to the manufacturers.

The solution? I’m moving to Florida, where I’m told that flip-flops are all one needs. Even so, I don’t even want to think about whether flip-flops are available in ridiculously wide, but my consideration of flip-flops is in its formative stage at best. Maybe I’ll go barefoot. Or stay on the recliner in the lanai.

There you have it, the very definition of “buying a pig in a poke,” whatever that means. One positive footnote: retailers in the Chicago area purportedly stock a broader mix of wide and extra wide shoes, based on a belief that we Chicagoans are mainly a mix of German and Eastern European lineage and therefore are condemned by heredity to big feet. I have no idea if this is still the case; it’s old information. And that still leaves the instep as the third and almost completely ignored dimension.

Alright, you can put your shoes and socks back on.

To Hell and Back

By Karen Green

VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV

They went freely
to another land;
they answered
their commands.

They saw things
nobody should see;
they never became cowards
by trying to flee.

Some gave their lives
while fighting
in what some say was not a war.
Other civilians didn't understand
what these men were fighting for.

Protesters marched
back here in the States,
holding rallies
and debates.

The demonstrators
marched with violence and hate,
while these soldiers fought bravely
not knowing their fate.

Then, when these soldiers
started to return home from over there,
they were cursed at and spit on.
There was no fanfare.

Now it's 2023.
Many veterans still have bad nightmares
of things they experienced
while stationed over there.

Some still fight
for the benefits they deserve,
because of injuries they suffered
while they served.

Most of these vets
served overseas,

and, now once home,
fight for their needs.

Homelessness and drugs
are plagues some vets face,
while others are jobless and have little food.
Furthermore, some don't trust the human race.

One veteran gone
is one veteran too many,
but the only solution some see
is to take their own life.
They feel so empty.

There are programs and help
some could use,
but some vets don't
because they fear abuse.

NCOERs

By Kimberly Green

—Fort Smith, AR

What do I do with your NCOERs
when you have gone away?
Should I keep them or burn them
Or just store them away?

Your accomplishments and medals,
the decorations that hung on your chest
lay silent and lonely
in our old cedar chest.

I have kept everything just as it was.
In the attic, your BDUs did go.
I sometimes go up there
and go through all your old clothes.

I figure one day all this, too,
shall simply turn to dust.
Why did you die so young?
Life can be so unjust.

Our United Brotherhood

*By James Janssen
—Lorraine, KS*



When in battle, we stood side by side protecting each other's back. At home our camaraderie continues with a steadfast resolve for one another while keeping a finger on the heartbeat of democracy and the freedoms Americans cherish and enjoy.

Leaving behind the fact that some of us were spit upon coming back home from those trying days of war, we keep neatly tucked in our hearts and souls the good and bad memories of what we endured that made us what we are today. We forge on, keeping a watchful eye out for one another, both veterans and all Americans.

United we stand through good and bad weather, the enjoyment of a new car or times of financial distress. As the adage goes, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Strong we became fighting side by side, and that same strength will always have a space in our being.

We took an oath of enlistment to always follow the orders of our commander in chief and commissioned officers, and we apply that principle to this day in all matters of our current life. We band together to unite and strengthen our lifelong brotherhood.

The same applies to our country. Encouraging others to follow the lead of the greatest nation of freedoms adds glue to our current strengths of resolve and endurance. It was true when we fought that first war to form our constitution and this great nation, and it has been the common thread of endurance throughout the years to this day.

Rebirth

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

The chill in the autumn air,
crisp like the bite of an apple.
The turning leaves rustled in the trees
with the wind blowing its deathly knell.

All around squirrels, mice and others
hurry to stack their winter stores
for the coming snows and bitter cold
that will blanket the earth in pure white.

Flowers start to huddle and lie
nearer to the ground with closed buds.
Green leaves will soon turn a deathly brown
as they are buried in winter's frost.

Birds swoop across the cooling skies
seeking treasures to truss their nests.
They rush to secure them in the trees
to shelter their downy fine feathers.

The skies turn ashy grey to match
the mood of the coming season.
The ancients revered the harvest time
paying sacrifice for their bounty.

The land will soon slumber in sleep,
with the season's blanket of snow.
The healing dormancy will renew
all to be reborn in the spring's thaw.

Not Too Cool To Cry

*By Paul Nyrick
—Granby, CT*



While watching a clip of a young Ukrainian soldier looking into the teeth of a Russian convoy with dismay, I flashed back to the last time I shed a volume of tears. It was at the Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Concert at the Fabulous Forum in Los Angeles.

The concert was held in the early '80s with an array of performers welcoming us back. For some reason, I can't remember most details of that memorable experience. What I think I remember are some of the performers, including Buffy Sainte-Marie singing "Universal Soldier," Roger Waters of Pink Floyd singing "Wish You Were Here," John Fogerty singing "Fortunate Son" and Jesse Colin Young singing "Darkness Darkness," the song that kept me sane while sleeping in the bush.

I also remember Linda Ronstadt blowing my mind with her rendition of "You're No

Good," something we were all feeling when we returned to the world. Paul Simon sang "American Tune," another fave of mine. Sting and Branford Marsalis played an unforgettable instrumental version of "Bridge Over Troubled Waters." There were many more acts that have left my memory bank.

I do remember a couple of the hosts—Steely Dan and Doobie Brothers, Jeff "Skunk" Baxter, and Los Angeles disc jockey, Dusty Street.

There was one particular song that made my eyes flow like rain in the desert. Neil Young entered the stage wearing a buckskin jacket and a confidence that made us sit at the edge of our seats. He then took down the house with his anthem "Powderfinger." This timeless tune has so much relevance today, especially for that Ukrainian kid, face to face with the jaws of the Russian bear. I

could feel his anguish, knowing quite well that he was on a one-way trip to oblivion. He knew his fate and just did what he had to do to help his country survive. To this day my eyes well up every time I hear the opening chord to that prophetic song.

I can't believe there was no mention of this significant emotional event anywhere I looked. I scoured the net to no avail. There was no mention of the concert on any website. But not to worry. I remember taping a broadcast from L.A.'s PBS station. I just have to remember where the acetate ribbon may be hiding, but if I do retrieve this snippet of my fractured memory bank, I don't have a working VCR.

This night just became relegated to the dustbin of time.

Fall

By Charles Fredette

VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA

The sky changes color
In a logical way,
Sometime blue
And sometimes gray.

The trees don't look cold
As the wind blows.
They turn and turn
As their mastery shows.

They sway and sway
All day and at night.
They don't change much;
They don't know what is right.

It's getting cooler
At day and later, too.
My shorts won't stay much longer;
I know it's true.

It's getting darker earlier;
The warmth is fading today.
I hope we have more sun;
I hope it will stay.



He Wanted Freedom

By Rhonda J. Chavez

VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX

He was a dreamer, with fire inside,
Had a way with words that no one could deny.
When he couldn't say them, he would write them down.
He knew if he didn't, he would surely drown.

Went into the service and put in the time.
He came back home, but never left it behind.
Teaching came easy; that's what he loved.
And it broke his heart when he gave it up.

(CHORUS)

He wanted freedom for you and for me;
He wanted freedom for the land of the free.
He couldn't quite find it when he looked for himself,
But he wanted freedom for everyone else.

He loved his family and his little girl.
When she came along, it changed his whole world.
He found his best friend and the love of his life.
Throughout everything she stood by his side

He said we all need something to believe in;
We all want to be free.
I think I can have both of these
If I would only believe in me.

(CHORUS)

He wanted freedom for you and for me;
He wanted freedom for the land of the free.
He couldn't quite find it when he looked for himself,
But he wanted freedom for everyone else.



I Remember

*By Richard Rodriguez
VA Medical Center—Syracuse, NY*

Ramstein AB, Germany
Aug. 28, 1988

I remember that beautiful day with a wisp of white in the blue sky holding and the promise of joy and happiness.

I remember the viewing stand, people laughing and smiling, awaiting the start of the air show. I remember watching the sky as the various planes flew by. I remember a father holding his toddler, who gleefully stretched his arm as if to grab the aircraft from the sky.

I remember the toddler's expression change from wonder to bewilderment as his father's expression changed to horror. I remember not quite understanding what I was seeing as the three planes collided and debris started raining on the stands. I remember thinking this is a joke, a sleight of hand, illusion, but feeling the truth.

I remember the screams as flaming parts of planes crashed into the stands. I remember hearing each individual word that was shouted out by hundreds of people as well as the tortured howl of the burning, twisted metal. I remember the smell of the fuel, the smell of the burning masses and the smell of fear.

I remember glancing at the blue sky and noting how it was still so beautiful with its wisp of white. I remember feeling like a coward for not caring about anyone else. I remember running. I remember running very hard, very fast. I remember stopping only when I was overtaken by exhaustion. I remember walking miles until I returned to the base in Kaiserslautern. I remember going straight to my room in the barracks, collapsing onto the floor and crying.

I remember cursing the memory of that damn blue sky with its wisp of white for leading me to believe in a false wonderment to come.

I remember.

The rest of this story goes as follows: we were a transportation battalion, so we had refrigerated trucks that we provided as temporary morgues. Volunteers walked the crash site looking for personal belongings and organic residue. We were given little flags to place where we found something.

I remember this every day.



A Good Girl Is Hard To Find

*By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI*

A good girl is hard to find.
They don't come easy;
It's tough out there.
Girl, if you would only treat me fair,
I'd love you and I'd be there.
Give me a chance; I really care.
A good girl is hard to find.
Take your time;
Baby, just be mine.
Just give me the chance to know you.
I'll know you
And you'll know me.
Together we'll say it'll be okay.
A good girl is hard to find.
She'll never take your last dime,
Don't have to worry about being left behind.
Don't you know it's tough out there,
Finding a girl who really cares?
A good girl is hard to find.
Tell the truth and stop the lying.
Mistreat that girl, don't you dare.
Finding a girl who really cares,
They don't come easy.
It's tough out there.
A good girl is hard to find.

I Go Flyin' So High

By Tom Lauterback
—Wimauma, FL

Picture a guy who'd just resigned his Air Force commission and started his civilian career. As a go-fer, not exactly what I was used to or expected. But I should have realized I'd be starting over at the bottom of the proverbial totem pole.

Picture a rental car loaded to the gunnels with liquor for the Kroehler Furniture hospitality suite at the 1971 High Point Furniture Market in High Point, N.C., and me as the driver, having had the fear of God pounded into me by the clerk at the state liquor store. I was told that I could be arrested if I was caught off the direct route to our hotel. I'd had to file with the State of North Carolina to purchase an extraordinary quantity of liquor. What if I had missed a turn and deviated from my plan? Breaking rocks in a prison full of hillbillies was most assuredly not what I'd anticipated in civilian life.

Picture my chagrin when I made it to the hotel successfully, avoiding a lifetime in prison with no chance of parole, taking an inventory of my demon rum and finding I'd forgotten to buy vermouth, mandating another trip to the state store. I eventually got the bar set up so we could numb the decision-making processes of furniture store owners from throughout the country.

But all of this is back story. The true highlight of my first national furniture show was hearing a song come on the radio that caused me to pull over to the curb,



without deviating from my established route, so as not to miss a word. I'd never heard the voice before, and he was backed up by... a cello? Was this rock 'n' roll? Folk? None of the above; it was Harry Chapin singing his first hit, "Taxi."

Picture me being shocked by my inability to compartmentalize the song. I considered myself a fairly serious music fan, from classical to rock to folk to whatever. But this was utterly new. "...it took a while but she looked in the mirror, and she glanced at the license for my name... she said, 'how are you Harry?' and I said, 'How are you Sue?' Through the too many miles and the too little smiles, I still remember you."

Picture my inability to put the car in gear and continue on my appointed rounds. I had to hear the song again, but it wasn't like I could stop at a record store, pick up the album if there was one and go home and drop it on the turntable. No, the show lasted a week, which actually seemed like three months. "Taxi." A cello? And a backup singer who sang everything from bass to soprano? I couldn't wait to get home, find the record and make it mine. Which I did.

Picture me over the years, seeing Harry in concert several times with more than a few girlfriends, until Harry's untimely passing in 1981. He was simply, along with Leonard Cohen, the best lyricist of our time. There was a sequel to "Taxi." There was "Cats in the Cradle," especially impactful since

I had become a single father in the late '70s. There was "Sniper." There were way too many great songs to list. In concert, Harry was a party. And, yes, it was a cello, with different players throughout the years and "Big" John Wallace providing the vocal pyrotechnics from bass to soprano.

"She was gonna be an actress, and I was gonna learn to fly. She went off to find the footlights, and I went off to find the sky. And here I'm flyin' in my taxi, taking tips and getting stoned. I go flyin' so high when I'm stoned."

A cello?

Through the Rocket's Red Glare

By Zachary Space

VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

(I'm a disabled vet, PTSD being only part of it. For me, to write is to heal.)

Near the northeastern tip of Ohio, east of Cleveland along Lake Erie, is Madison, Ohio, my hometown. Growing up, Christmas in Madison was steeped in family, tradition and community. When I joined the service, Christmas never entered my mind, but my first Christmas in Vietnam was lonely and frightening, cut off from everything that felt humanizing. Ironically that's the Christmas that remains most memorable.



Our options for Christmas dinner were the chow hall or the in-country terminal. The chow hall was a long and often dangerous walk due to snipers. It had history as a preferred target and was hit three times by Vietcong rockets. This made the in-country terminal the easy choice for our holiday meal. We dined on ice cream sandwiches and beer. Yes, it was Christmas, but it was just so hot. At the row of booths sponsored by the AMVETS, Eagles, Moose and Elks, we picked up free packs of cigarettes, coffee, cigars and sometimes beer. It was the best stop on base.

Christmas Eve in Madison: Santa settled into his chair on the stage of the large gazebo in the town square park. While kids disliking the cold headed to the church basement to make decorations for the big pine tree in the park, older kids helped younger kids meet Santa, hefting them onto Santa's lap or taking pictures. Every child grabbed handfuls of candy after whispering to Santa their wish list. The night always ended with everyone singing Christmas carols as we walked to the church on the square for the Christmas Eve service.

On Christmas day we tore into our gifts. Family and friends gathered in our house, settling kids in front of the TV for "King Kong" followed by "The Wizard of Oz," distracting them while the meal was prepared.

We're a family of hunters, so the table was stocked with wild game, rabbit stew, squirrel noodles, roast pheasant and

duck, fresh caught fish and venison chili. Everyone added something to the meal. The Greeks in the family brought spanakopita, kofta patties and moussaka, while pans of stuffed grape leaves were judged as the cooks observed. My mom's were always best. From across the road, old Mr. Stern brought chipmunk gravy, the perfect complement to mashed potatoes. Finally, there was enough baklava to last for days. That's the Christmas I left behind when I joined the service.

My first service Christmas in 1968 was stateside in South Carolina, but there was no leave available to go home. My second Christmas found me on Tan Son Nhut Airbase as an E4 fuel systems specialist. We worked in teams of two. Henry, an E3, became my "assistant" and buddy. We went TDY (temporary duty) together living out of a duffle bag wherever we landed in Vietnam.

The hour was almost 9 p.m. With an ice cream sandwich and a couple more beers in hand, we strolled outside behind the terminal, the side facing the flight line. We looked up at the giant electric star on the main water tower. It really lit up the tower. It was so bright it could be seen for miles.

The VietCong could also see it. Around 9:30 the VietCong started launching rockets at the star. The first one hit the ground, illuminating the night sky like lightning. BOOM! The rockets hit about every 20 seconds. I could hear the hiss in the air as they came in. BOOM! Each time one went off I could feel the air compress and the pressure against my chest. BOOM! The ground shook under our feet. Henry was standing next to me. His hands covered his ears, his eyes wide open, just taking it in. I'm sure mine were too. BOOM! The whole attack lasted about 15 minutes. There must have been 20 rockets fired, hitting the ground all around the tower. BOOM!



Ghosts on the Battlefield

By Kimberly Green

—Fort Smith, AR

I'm a ghost on a battlefield;
I was killed long ago.
I was at Gettysburg, Fallujah
and the Ho Chi Minh trail.
Sometimes I still look down
and I wail.

I'm the soldier whose body laid unclaimed.
Days and months I laid still.
Other soldiers joined my plight,
too many brothers killed.

I'm the soldier who was shot in the head
on a cold German night.
I lay in freezing water,
fighting my last fight.

I'm a young soldier, just 23.
Myself and four other soldiers in our Humvee
blown to pieces
from an IED.

And I'm the one who took one to the head.
Though I tried with all my might,
I just didn't make it home.
Tell my wife, "Goodbye."

Ghosts on the battlefield—
their souls survived.
Rest assured they reached the Heavenly gates,
guarding it for you and I.

In all this spectacle not one rocket found its mark — the water tower star.

Once the rockets stopped, we stood there, stuck in place, marveling at the star's survival. Finally, I looked at Henry. He nodded. It was time to walk back into the terminal. We needed more beer.

I missed Christmas back home. Like everyone, I longed for my family. After 19 wonderful Christmases with my family, this was the Christmas I was going to remember most of all. Watching that big, beautiful star withstand that attack filled me with a joy that I can only describe as pride. The star took a place in my heart and soul as the spirit of our resolve, our willingness to face whatever this war would send our way.

I cried that night knowing my family was enjoying the joyful Christmas of my memories. Henry and I were alone, and yet we were alone together. This was our Christmas, our time.

I've never shared this experience, not with my family, not with my wife, not with my buddies. I doubt that Henry did either. However, sharing this story finally brings some peace.

I wish Henry a Merry Christmas, wherever he is.

Melt and Felt

By Scott Lehman

VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO

Snow is on its way.
I wish it would snow every day!
Then I could use my sleigh.
Dashing all the way down the hill,
I would spill,
Laughing and cheering
Into a clearing,
Between the trees,
Fast as a breeze!

Typist: Mary Dobbins



The Hollyhock Dolls

By Christine Hazuka
—Selkirk, NY

The other day, a friend and I were riding around, and my eye caught some hollyhocks growing in front of an old schoolhouse. They were so beautiful. I hadn't seen hollyhocks in a few years, and they spurred memories that I had to write down.

I was a tomboy then and still a little now. I could hardly wait for school to be out so I could spend the summer with my grandparents on their farm. There were no trucks, tractors or farm machinery there. All was done by hand. Raking and forking the hay up to the loft was fun for me, even though it was hard work. I carried pails of water from the well as soon as I could lift them. It was fun, showing off my muscles and comparing them with my Grandpa's. I loved walking out to the back field to help lead the cows home to be milked. I enjoyed teaching the new calves how to drink and eat using my thumb.

Gathering eggs and cleaning the coops was my job in the summers, too. In the house I swept and mopped the floors and dusted the wooden shelves and furniture. I churned butter, helped make the pot cheese and dug potatoes. I picked berries; some were sold, some were put up for winter, and, of course, I ate some.

After supper, we listened to music and shows on the radio and watched maybe an hour of black-and-white TV. Sometimes

I would help Grandma write letters to family in Lithuania. I learned a little of the language, enough to talk to cousins that came for visits.

One cousin brought fabric swatches from the factory where he worked. Those swatches were cut and sewn by hand into pretty quilts. I loved picking out which square to sew to what.

Grandma's brother would come and stay for a couple of weeks. He and Grandpa spent some time in the cellar making dandelion and grape wines. I always sneaked a taste, of course. Also, my great uncle would make beautiful baskets and necklaces from willow branches he cut. I sat next to him watching in awe.

One of my fondest memories was picking hollyhock blossoms and sitting on the floor making dolls with all the colors. I would pretend they were princesses and queens. I moved them all around, talking and singing to them as if they were human, playing for hours in my imaginary world. Looking up sometimes, I would see Grandma smiling down at me from the doorway. During those times, I was not the tomboy like I usually was. I was Grandma's young lady.

I wonder how many other girls get to know and enjoy their Grandma and Grandpa and help out with chores, to learn and to be happy and loved, just for a little while?



Veterans are you looking for something to write about?

The tall, colorful hollyhocks triggered childhood memories for Christine and inspired her story. What did you see today that suggests a story or poem for you to write?

I Believe in Miracles

Gene Groner
—Prescott, AZ



I believe in miracles. As I say that, my mind is drawn back to a time in Canada, when my wife and I were vacationing in Quebec City.

We stayed at the historic Frontenac Hotel on the St. Lawrence River, and we went to an antique shop in the old city. The storekeeper suggested we pay a visit to the Miracle Church on the north side of the river. It sounded interesting, so we went there.

The Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré is a basilica set along the Saint Lawrence River in Quebec, Canada, 30 kilometers (19 mi) northeast of Quebec City, and one of the five national shrines of Canada. It is beyond any doubt, the most beautiful church building I have ever seen, and I have been to many churches and synagogues all over the world.

The Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré has been credited by the Catholic Church with many miracles of curing the sick and disabled, earning it the name of The Miracle Church.

The church was originally built in 1658 as a chapel and shrine to honor Saint Anne, the patron saint of sailors and protector from storms. The original church was destroyed by a fire in 1922. Rebuilding started in 1926, but it wasn't completed until 1946.

My wife and I left Quebec City and crossed over the St. Lawrence River, where we started walking to reach the famed basilica we had wanted to see and spend some time in. I remember walking under a waterfall we called Sainte-Anne Falls, locally known as Chute Sainte-Anne, and along a path to the church.

We reached the beautiful basilica and were astounded at its sheer beauty—what a lovely monument to honor the Lord, our Savior. We were amazed, to say the least.

Once inside, above the votive candles, lit as prayers were offered for loved ones who were sick or disabled, hanging on the wall of the narthex which was semi-round, were crutches and other walking aids, etc. These artifacts were left at the church after the pilgrims using them had come there and had been healed. Dozens of such artifacts were hanging on the walls, symbols of the miracles of healing. I remember thinking of the healing miracles performed by Jesus during his ministry, miracles disbelieved by many who heard of them, both then and now. I wondered at the time if my faith was enough to believe the miracles of those who had journeyed to this church on the St. Lawrence River in Canada. Even today, I wonder if my faith is sufficient to believe. I do believe in miracles, don't I?

Everybody Owes Anyone

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

Recognize the natural traits;
Be good to your soul.
Only you can charter fate
By planning a reasonable goal.
Time shall never wait;
For the brave and old,
Destiny has already won.
Everybody owes anyone.

Victory is for the resilient;
Options display chance.
Discernment reveals the road
Of purity for the meek,
Only the humble and whole.
Turn the cheek,
Challenge the heated cities,
Weigh situations, forgive your enemies.
Survival is for the strong;
Lift your head up to the sun.
Be better; know right and wrong.
Everybody owes anyone.



Fight Every Situation with Resilience

By Diane Wasden

—Augusta, GA

I'm living in a world that makes little sense to me.
It always seems to rain the hardest on the ones who deserve the sun.
Life can be cruel; life can sometimes be downright crappy.
No, I wasn't always like this, lacking common sense or looking like I'm insane.

Where does one draw the line on subordination?
Does rank, authority and power always have the final words over the underdog
even if the misused power leads to sexual harassment, sexual assault or rape?
I was left with words I could not speak, hidden behind my lips
due to threats involving the rank card being pulled.

I can barely begin to tell you how much this so-called man ruined my heart and soul,
crushed my hopes and dreams and purely stole my life.
I was truly horrified, scared to death and embarrassed beyond words.
This surprising turn of events altered my life forever.

I'm going to open Pandora's box of horrors, filled with memories I fear and hate the most.
I could feel a tightening inside of me as the sergeant's wicked fingers
crawled slowly up my spine, digging into every vertebrae.
As he feels his manhood come to life, he made his filthy move on me.
He thrusts himself into me and the pain riles through me.
It pierces through my heart like an arrow; I could feel his heart beating so fast.
I even gagged at the smell of his cigarette breath.

I was nothing to him but another notch on his belt; it was a crime of appetite.
He's standing there so proud of himself with that crocodile smile on his face.
My failure in following his every command left me severely wounded and conquered.
It puzzles me to picture him as a human being; he is mean, spiteful, heartless and cruel.

I feel enormous guilt and misery.
That day has haunted me for so long; pieces of him are forever tattooed in my mind.
I doubled over with such pain when the reality sunk in: "I've been RAPED!!"
Sedate me, tranquilize me, knock me out, put me to sleep or tell me it's a bad dream.
Then wake me up. Somebody HELP me!

Everything is so sketchy; he locked me to a ball and chain.
He drained me physically, mentally and emotionally.
Success is failure turned inside out.
I've been lied to, used, stabbed in the back and walked on for the very last time!

So many people pity us or blame us now; those are hard pills to swallow.
So here I go again; confetti of emotions squish my mind all at once.
It's gonna take all I have to be forgiving and merciful; mercy urges us not to hold grudges,
but I'm here to say that it's a very hard thing to even consider, let alone do.

Genuine, heartfelt, true forgiveness may not always happen at once.
I wish I could take back the decisions I was forced to make, but that's behind me now.
I have to stop looking back at that life that no longer exists.
I have learned to stop breathing life back into my past life.

The pain and suffering we feel is a process that is a very slow recovery.
Take control and believe in yourself. Little by little,
step back from your past and make the right changes for the better.
Over time these will add up to a new and better life and a much better you!

Stop being treated as rubbish; you have to be like a chameleon
to adapt to the changes and challenges that life throws at us.
I can now tear every chain that man wrapped around me. FREEDOM!
I broke the spell that held me for so long.

Small achievements have fueled the desire
that exists within me to want more and move on.
I see my potential and I want to succeed and prosper.
Our future will someday seem bright when the past no longer haunts us.
Best Antidepressant Ever!

Life might get a little out of focus, but I've grown to value and treasure it.
Thank you, Dr. Jump, for the therapy and time, for taking this squeezed heart of mine
and expanding it to hold love, compassion, respect, caring, empathy and sympathy.
Forgiveness is still a work in progress; it's a gnawing issue that eats at my insides.
Forgiveness isn't just difficult; it's impossible at least on one's own.

I do wish I could say I forgive him, but regretfully I cannot at this time.
I am consumed by all that he took from me and knowing I'll never get it back.
I just don't have it in me to let him off the hook so easily.
I thought I knew him but I didn't. His selfishness, ignorance and mockery
put me into a trance bedeviled by regret and resentment.

It's not up to me to change anyone nor for them to change me,
but merely to accept them as they are. It's essential that you free yourself quickly
because you must emerge from the conflict if you want peace in your mind.
Your conscience is the key to your happiness.
There is no limit on what the mind is capable of thinking.

My perception is my choice; it's not a factual thought.
Misperceptions produce fear.
Your emotions respond to what your mind perceives.
Please remember that only your mind can produce fear.
Nothing can hurt you unless you give it the power to do so.

Don't allow the negative feelings to creep into your consciousness.
Put a positive spin on your every thought.
May every day of your life bring you fresh hope for tomorrow
because hope gives all of us our reason for getting up each day and trying.

A Mother's Knot

By Jill Baker
—Sioux Falls, SD



For years, I thought about getting a tattoo. People who have them willingly share the back story with anyone who shows an interest in the art. To be inspired by something so profound as to forever etch it into one's skin is really a tribute to living.

Some tattoos honor a time, a place, or a person, while some find inspiration in nature through images of flora and fauna. Still others find an outlet for an emotion that expresses a part of their soul. Others honor their service to country. Getting a tattoo takes courage and an endurance of pain, which is why it has taken me so long to etch an image into my forearm.

Inspiration struck me at 17 years old and I enlisted in the U.S. Army. I was excited, proud, dedicated, and ready to take on new challenges, but by the time I graduated from AIT (Advanced Individual Training), I had been sexually assaulted. It didn't stop there. My second duty station was fraught with sexual harassment that I couldn't reconcile within the ranks. There was

no support. It was a truly devastating time that still haunts me to this day.

Then some 32 years after enlisting, I had a Celtic Mother's Knot tattooed on my forearm. It symbolizes the everlasting bond between mother and child. I have two sons who make me proud to be their mother. They inspire me to be my best self, and their unconditional love lifts me up. It was the thought of my children leaving the nest that has finally spurred me to action and forever etched my love for them into my skin.

Each time I look at my newfound tattoo, I feel grateful and humbled. The love for my sons has helped me look to the future with optimism, and now a portion of my momma soul is a story that I can share with anyone who shows an interest in the design.

I don't know about the future, but I wonder what it holds and what might inspire a new story with its symbol, necessitating a trip back to the tattoo parlor for me.

Jesus Is Waiting for You

By Jason Kirk Bartley
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Jesus is waiting,
Are you coming around?
Have you traded your reins
for a robe and a crown?

Have you accepted His way?
What will you do?
This is so important,
'cause He's waiting for you.

Have you decided to follow Him?
Will you drop everything?
Is your heart learning which song
it will sing?

Or will you hesitate
for worldly things?
Nothing's worth your soul.
Hope you take what you need,
but put Jesus in full control.

Or have you already accepted Him
into your heart
where He'll never leave and
never depart?

He stands there waiting.
What will it be?
Where will you spend eternity?

Your answer will settle things
once and for all.
Will you accept Jesus and His
beckoned call?

The Cold War

By Richard Rodriguez
—Syracuse, NY



I was one of the lucky American soldiers to be stationed in Germany when the Berlin Wall fell, but what I want to share about that event was how the wall came down from the start of a trickle, like ice melting in the mountains, a drop of water rolling down picking up volume and speed, so much so that when it reaches the valley below, it becomes a force that can transform the landscape.

When I arrived in Europe (West Germany to be exact), I was witnessing the whispered unrest coming out of East Berlin, particularly, and Eastern Europe in general. I witnessed with pride (and I say pride because I was an American, product of liberty, justice and apple pie.) While, East Berliners were a product of fear, darkness, and the Bogeyman.) I watched as, one by one, East German leaders resigned, ending with one named Egon Krenz, who spewed promises to be a different leader than those who preceded him. He promised to relax the decades of restriction, and

everyone should calm down and within time, he would bring the wanted social adjustments. Now, as you can guess the populace was not going to wait, the proverbial genie was out of the shattered bottle and Pandora's box was smashed open. There was no turning back.

One of the East Berlin protesters ran for the wall. The guards who were always trained to shoot, hesitated as the protester climbed the wall and was greeted with a tremendous cheer as he was assisted over the wall by West Berliners who had gathered by the thousands at Checkpoint Charlie on the West Berlin side of the wall. Another East Berliner ran to the wall, and climbed over with the same results, now fearless, ten charged the wall, then fifty, then hundreds of East Berliners began charging the wall, and climbing over.

The East Berlin guards sensing that they were in the path of a tsunamic historical event, did not want to find themselves

on the wrong side of history. They lowered their weapons and stepped aside, most, disappearing into the human tide that swept toward the western shores. Thousands on the west side lent aid to the fleeing easterners by lowering ropes, some produced hammers and started chipping away at the wall, thousand aped this action and soon gaps, then holes, then huge spillways started appearing as sections of the wall collapsed.

East Berliners flooded into the west through these openings. I watched transfixed, heart-pounding, tears flowing, as long-separated people were once again united. The pride threatened to explode in my chest as I realized that I was part of the mechanism that united these people, that I was an American soldier stationed in Germany, and that I helped bring this iconic change in human history.

Conquering Adversity

By Wayne Ince
—Sun City Center, FL

Once upon a time, amidst the treacherous peaks of the Haitian mountains, Air Force Sergeant Wayne Ince, a master of military communication, found himself entangled in a perilous predicament during the audacious Operation Uphold Democracy. The United States, driven by a fervent mission to aid President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in reclaiming his rightful throne after a military coup, dispatched troops to Haiti. Through a blend of cunning diplomacy and unwavering resolve, America orchestrated the resignation of the despotic dictator, paving the way for justice and democracy to ascend.



As I ventured through the thick forest, my eyes caught a glimpse of a flickering light in the distance. Curiosity ignited within me, yet a sense of caution held me back. Undeterred, I pressed on toward the mysterious source, my heart pounding with anticipation. To my astonishment, I stumbled upon a hidden encampment nestled amidst the trees, a sanctuary for brave local villagers who had managed to elude the clutches of their rebel adversaries. The sight filled me with awe, for it spoke of their unwavering spirit and indomitable will.

I found myself concealed, evading the relentless Haitian rebels, my heart pounding with a mix of trepidation and unwavering resolve as I traversed the perilous wilderness. My mission entailed providing vital radio communication support to the U.S. Army stationed in this volatile land, shielding the innocent villagers from marauding insurgents who rallied behind the iron-fisted military dictator.

Aware of the lurking perils, I braced myself for the merciless rebels who held an iron grip over this region. Yet, amidst the chaos, my eyes remained fixed on the ultimate objective—to establish seamless radio contact with the valiant U.S. Army soldiers, who dutifully erected watchtowers. This connection would guarantee safety not only for us but also for the local inhabitants who relied on our protection. With every step, I chanted the mantra, “Stay focused on the mission,” while whispering the Lord’s prayer, seeking divine guidance and strength.

The dense foliage provided me with concealment, but it hindered my ability to move swiftly. Beads of sweat trickle down from my nose and trickle down my neck under the scorching sun. My heart pounds in my chest, freezing me in place at the slightest sound of a twig snapping beneath my boots. The silence amplifies my vulnerability, heightening the intensity of the moment. As a forward deployed radioman, solitude is a constant companion, yet the burden of anxiety never lessens.

Throughout the day, anxiety surges within me, causing my thoughts to scatter like leaves in the wind. The realization dawns on me that time is slipping away. If I fail to relay my message swiftly, the rebels could discover my presence and spread the word that the mighty U.S. forces are here to safeguard the villages. However, thanks to my honed training and past experiences, I am able to remain vigilant and remind myself to find serenity amidst the chaos.

The villagers, perceiving my apprehension, recognized the lurking threat of insurgents. With wisdom beyond their years, their venerable leader emerged from the crowd, extending a warm invitation to find solace within their humble community. It was a gesture of solidarity, a shared belief in defying the oppressive regime imposed by the military coup.

This profound connection, this united front against tyranny, resonated deep within my soul. It fueled the fire of determination within me, fortifying my resolve to press forward and remain steadfast in my mission.

As I ventured into the village donned in my battle-worn attire, the locals welcomed me with open arms. Amidst the shadows of lurking rebels, my senses were heightened, forcing me to remain ever vigilant. Yet, the resilient spirit and unwavering support of the villagers propelled me forward. Their intimate knowledge of the community and its surroundings surpassed my own.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting an eerie darkness upon the land, I managed to establish radio contact with my comrades in the U.S. Army. A wave of relief washed over me as their familiar voices pierced through the airwaves. News of my location and the village camp swiftly reached the support base, ensuring my imminent rescue.

Several kilometers away, a U.S. Army patrol braved the treacherous terrain of the dense forest hill, employing their intellect and unyielding determination. Finally, their arrival marked the end of my harrowing jungle ordeal. Adaptation and triumph were inherent to this unforgiving domain. The villagers swiftly prepared themselves, knowing that the Army escorts, acting as their guardian angels, had emerged to ensure their safety.

I stashed my radio pack into the second vehicle and expressed my gratitude to the helpful villagers. Not all the inhabitants of the island welcomed the presence of the U.S. military but, that didn't deter me. Their kindness had left an indelible mark on my heart, reaffirming my unwavering belief in the inherent goodness of humanity.

As I returned to the base camp, I embodied the resilience of the human spirit and the power of collaborative efforts. Our team established a forward operating and listening post, ensuring that our mission would be a triumph. I shared my captivating story with fellow U.S. Army comrades and later with my Air Force deployment command. This experience served as a poignant reminder of the significance of resilience, the necessity of rigorous training, and the importance of maintaining hope even in the bleakest of times. They playfully teased me about my ability to get lost and needing the Army to rescue me, but I took their jests in stride, knowing that they valued my expertise in Morse code and tactical radio.

The bond between the U.S. Army and the resilient Haitian villagers grew stronger. The military presence instilled a sense of security within us, empowering us to fight back against danger. It was a small victory against adversity that made me realize the immense power of determination and courage, especially when accompanied by a stroke of luck.

In that daring predicament, fear and unwavering determination played crucial roles in shaping my actions. Fear, rather than paralyzing me, sharpened my focus on the problem at hand. It ignited a fire within me, compelling me to take action instead of idly waiting for fate to intervene. Despite the multitude of challenges and looming threats, I was resolute in my determination to confront my fears head-on and conquer them.

The pulsating rhythm of heartbeats and the sound of breaths racing in frenzy serve as a powerful reminder that life is a precious gift, surpassing all else. Harnessing the power of fear, I transformed it into a driving force that propelled me forward, motivated to aid the Haitian villagers in their time of need.

My military background and heightened self-awareness, sometimes make me feel isolated even in the midst of a bustling crowd. Only those who have experienced similar circumstances can truly comprehend the sensation of being disconnected from family, colleagues and friends. Military encounters have the potential to mold and shape one's character, leaving an indelible mark. The aftermath of such experiences can lead to PTSD, impacting not only the individual but also those in close proximity.



Fear during deployment as a radio man propelled me to meticulously analyze the situation. Embracing fear as a guiding force allowed me to make informed decisions, ensuring the safety of my team and the Haitian community. My unwavering determination compelled me to strategize, navigate through dense foliage, and discover alternative solutions to establish communication despite the scarcity of resources.

I am incredibly grateful for the anxiety and determination that compelled me to confront my fears, carefully consider my options, and successfully complete a crucial communication task. In recognition of my service during Operation Uphold Democracy, I was honored with the prestigious Army Achievement medal. Every day, as I catch a glimpse of the framed placard hanging in my closet, I am reminded to persevere, confront my fears head-on, and bravely battle against the challenges of PTSD.

Stay ready, no need to get ready!

My Promise to Myself

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



In my life, I will honor my family, my fellow veterans and myself by continuing to volunteer for those in need.

I will be loving and supportive to friends and family. I will start by forgiving myself for all the years of self-neglect, self-doubt, self-harm, negative self-talk and missed opportunities. I will remember my worth is not based on the negative words and actions of others.

My self-discovery/self-care journey is a process that will be my priority. I will “live” the rest of my life, not just exist.

I will travel, I will laugh, I will accept myself as I am and will find peace within. I will continue to surround myself with other veterans who lift my spirit, who I connect with, who make me feel accepted, seen and heard.

I will continue to be the best Mom and Gramma to my boys, Derek and Nathan along with Desmond, my beautiful grandson. Desmond truly is my happy place, my pure joy.

I will honor the memory of my siblings Timmy, Denise and David, who have left this world all too soon. I will slow down, take time to be present, see and appreciate the signs sent to me.

I will not feel lazy when my body needs rest. I will learn that food is NOT the enemy, I will realize that my body is a temple which needs nutrients to function. I will appreciate my body for what it has done for me. It has given me two amazing children. It saved my life when I almost died.

I will look back at myself as a little girl and give her all the love, guidance and compassion that she deserved but never got. I will remind myself that I am enough, that I didn't deserve the traumas I suffered starting in childhood, throughout my military career and until now. I was naïve, trusting, I am not to blame. I do not have to carry the shame, guilt, disgust with me any longer.

I am a warrior. I am worthy. I am enough!

Invisible Portals

By Tanya Whitney
—New Orleans, LA

An invisible portal to the world outside.
Cool to the touch as the sun's warmth radiates through the clear panes of glass.

Giving protection from the elements as it provides opportunities to watch the tempests of life continue on the other side.

The only means of living while imprisoned inside the confines of this sterile room.
Trapped by the dark memories in my mind.

A way to watch the days and nights pass, to observe the change of the four seasons, as my reclusive life passes slowly by.

The portals of this soulless room are
The means to escape my shuttered reality.
Reflecting images between the world and me.

Free to peer out to the world I'm no longer able to venture into willfully or physically.
Experiencing life through the glass panels.

Walk With Love

By Janice Walker
VA Medical Center—Dublin, GA

Walk with love, come what may,
Peace, love, joy, comfort, harmony,
Even happiness along the way.
Walk with love, good times, happy times,
Seemingly bad times and sad times.
Walk with love, come what may,
For that beautiful eternal, peaceful, glorious day.
Walk with love, come what may.

A Look Into the Future

Trina M. Mioner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Panic gripped me; I laid in despair.
Afterlife is better, nothing to fear.
Scattered pills on the floor, an empty bottle,
No reason to live, no hope for tomorrow.

From within, a voice cried, "No!"
Call for help; this is no show.
What you feel deep within,
A wish to live, a life to spend.

The empty nest cannot last.
Loneness, loss, they shall pass.
The children, grown up and gone,
Friends have died, left you alone.

My heartbeat is loud, starting to race,
Drowsiness like a blanket covering my face.
My breath's growing shallow;
Darkness surrounds me. It's hard to swallow.

The knock on the door penetrates like a hammer.
The police question; I just stammer.
Around me, they busily move
With looks on their faces that disapprove.

That night I remember ten years ago.
I couldn't imagine the happiness I felt.
The grandchildren--
Make my heart swell.

In the well of my life, I have plenty.
I couldn't investigate the future;
I didn't know time would bring peace,
That emptiness within would eventually cease.

The Day After the Day Before

By Paul David Gonzales

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

There is always a day after the day before,
Just as sure as the tide caresses and rejects the shore.
There are certainties in life that tell us the score,
but nothing like the day after the day before.

I sit and think of the many days after the days before,
Resurrecting those thoughts from the vault of my inner core.

I try to justify those days after the days before,
Asking why and nothing more.
Only GOD knows the secrets of the days after the days before.
He'll reveal those secrets when I reach Heaven's door.

Pit-Pat

By William Snead

—Iron Mountain, MI

Pit-Pat
Just listen to that
I hear the scratch-scratch of
A clawing rat.

And do you hear the woosh
And goosh goosh goosh
Of the murmured whining rain
Slamming like a hammer at
My broken window pane?

Yes, and poof poof poof
Away flies the tarpaper
Blowing off the roof.

And ding ding ding
I hear a musical ring
rain is splashing down in
The kitchen sink.
I must have time to think.

I've no time to loaf and lurk
I should go back to work,
Or just sit and wait again
For the pit-pat of falling rain.

Veteran Takes on Trapping

Steven Dillman
—Harvard, NE

What does a Machine gunner in the Army do, one might ask?

A machine gunner in the Army requires a range of characteristics and capabilities to be successful. Physical fitness, mental toughness, and the ability to work well under pressure are essential. Attention to detail, situational awareness, and the willingness to follow orders are also important. Additionally, a machine gunner must possess marksmanship skills, be able to maintain and repair their weapon and have a thorough understanding of tactics and strategy, like the tabletop board games of chess and Risk. Effective communication skills and the capability to work as part of a team are also crucial for success in this role. The guns are heavy weapons that can fire rapidly and continuously.

While in the Army, I carried the SAW M249 (Squad Automatic Weapon), weighing 17 pounds. Along with it you are carrying three, 200 rounds of belt-linked 5.56 in a drum pouch, weighing five pounds each. This was your basic load for being a saw gunner. I qualified as an expert several times and actually used it to return fire in Iraq during firefights, gaining the nickname Rooster from the Alice in Chains song "Rooster." It is used for laying down cover fire, suppressive fire, or as part of a team that provides support to infantry units as well as my own transportation company for ambush or gun truck security. I was primarily a truck driver that hauled tanks into battle. When not hauling vehicles or equipment I would be the gunner for convoy security. The description of a



machine gunner is what a trapper is. I feel I am prequalified for that name. Now, I must live up to it as a trapper, setting my own family trapline legacy.

I was honorably discharged from the Army in December 2007. Faithfully I served my country AMERICA for ten years, with two deployments to Iraq (2004, 1st Infantry Division - Big Red One and 2006, 101st Airborne - Screaming Eagle). I miss it greatly, however that is but a chapter of my life. Now being a husband and a father I get to experience outdoor adventures that my wife and sons enjoy. That may consist of fishing, hunting or camping. Even though I did what was required to be a certified fishing, hunting, bowhunter instructor here in Nebraska, I personally do not have the patience to fish. Tangled lines, snagged lures, and worm hooking is not my desired form of relaxation. I know

I can catch fish because I have done so and understand what is required, but a part of me enjoys watching others reel in their fish for their tall tales. I will walk the banks to find lost lures or equipment that others have left behind. Hidden treasures or blessings is what I call it. I also get to experience deer hunting with my family. I myself can sit in the same spot, a tree stand, or a blind for three to four hours waiting and surveying the land but that's just me. I would rather sit back and allow others, especially youth to have the opportunity to shoot the animals. I will guide them and spot for them as needed, maybe a leadership characteristic I accepted in the military as a sergeant. Or it could be related to me being a machine gunner. Who knows! I

would spray and lay down cover fire so others could advance.

Being a veteran in the state of Nebraska you are benefited with the Resident Disabled Veteran Lifetime Legacy Hunt/Fish/Fur license. If it were not for that, I would probably not have taken up trapping. Fur harvesting as professionals call it is right up my alley. It is a locked in season that lasts for four months. It starts on Nov. 1 and ends on my birthday, Feb. 28, giving me the months of November, December, January and February, a total of 120 days of checking traps daily on our family trapline.

This will be my fifth year of trapping. Together with my sons we have been able to trap racoon, opossum, skunk, badger, and rabbit, and the occasional field mouse. We have used dog proofs, steel foot holds, conibears, cages, and dabbled with snares.

We finally bought urine and other baits from “Fleming Traps” this year so will give it a try. We use the animals as food because we are thankful for them. We have captured mink and coyote on trail cam but have not yet caught one in a trap. We are persistent though and will not give up. The farmer who owns the land gives us permission and appreciates our respect for something that isn't ours. Since we have been trapping the pheasant population has increased in the fields.

There are times I think about the soldiers I served with who passed on while in combat and ponder about them not being able to hunt or fish again. When I was with them in uniform, they would talk about the freedom of being outdoors back home in America. Growing up they either went out on their own or family members taught them the ways of an outdoorsman. They were huge on hunter education and staying up-to-date with annual state literature about hunting and fishing laws.

I remember the soldiers I served with who took their own lives upon returning due to combat trauma, not being able to be a civilian again, or not having a purpose in life. That has allowed me to accept the calling to be a chaplain for veteran outreach. With the spiritual care that is provided, I would like to add, if given the opportunity to take a veteran out on a trapline to let their mind be free from the military and show how they can be in control of a situation and receive the prize of a trapped animal. Not sure if it would work for all veterans, but I can say it has been my scapegoat of healing from war.

I may not be leading and training soldiers now, but however I am leading and training a new generation of fisher-men, fisher-ladies, hunters and trappers. I have over twenty nieces and nephews and they all

know when they turn the correct age to do hunter education that I am there for them. They will know about the state laws, how to respect landowners, private or public property, and just be aware of what is right when being outdoors, choosing safety first.

As a trapper, I get to experience a lot of interesting things that would just be taken for granted. For instance; proper identification of foot prints, paths/trails, homes/dens, scat, and overall habitation of the wildlife. Knowing these things will help me scout the area and draw out or into the trap. Proper placement of traps is a must for maximum use of lure, bait and time. We made it to our state trappers convention. It was something else. Other trappers were very supportive of the youth. They encouraged learning how to skin a coon, set foot holds, snares and conibears in different situations. I also got to meet and personally talk with well-known professional trappers, shake their hand, have a cup of coffee, and hear their stories. I hope to be there someday on the other end.

What first interested me in trapping was Jedeiah Smith. His character matched his reputation without any flaws. It would have been only a dream to have been part of Ashley's men who were with him and learned from him. But his legacy is left behind for us to read and gain knowledge from. Just like Smith, who had a copy of the Lewis and Clark journals, the main value I liked about Jedediah is he is known for his faith in God and carrying his Bible at all times. I have been very blessed to have had a boss similar to Jedeiah Smith in the civilian workforce. He looked out for me after getting out of the Army and my combat tours. I think about how Smith must have looked out after Clyman. I had some battles with PTSD—mental health that I had to get help with. He (my boss) was a phone call away anytime of the day.

During the fall of 2015 he allowed my son, (then 10 years old) and me to go with him, his brother and a few church buddies for a weeklong elk hunting trip at Lone Cone Mountain near Durango, Colo. There we would have wilderness devotions, find shed antlers, bear markings, deer and coyote tracks in the snow but never got to see a single elk. There were five of us who bought out-of-state bull elk tags at \$615 each and none of us saw one to shoot. The weeklong journey was well worth it though. The bonding, the teamwork to set up and tear down camp, shared cooking and individual time was what was needed to have peace with God's country. One gift I carry from that boss is book he shared with me by Louis L'Amour called *Riding for the Brand*. His father shared that book with him, when he was young, along with the Bible. It gave me another perspective to look at how the west was pioneered.

Okay, back to trapping: physical fitness is a must for walking and carrying equipment from truck to trapping lines. Mental toughness is the pushing forward everyday when nothing is in your traps, but the bait is gone. Or forgetting to take the safety locks off on conibears. Working well under pressure is adjusting to the weather and getting the animals skinned in a timely manner. Attention to detail is the lure or bait used in traps assigned for targeted animals. Situational awareness is the desired placement of the traps. Ability to follow orders is the permission to trap on another person's land and knowing the state laws for the season. This is how a machine gunner turned into a trapper.

Thank you for taking the time to read my story and may it encourage some of you to trailblaze, become a trapper and set an example for the next generation.

Christmas Eve 1962, Ascom City, Korea

By William J. Day
—Hamilton, OH

“This story is a slice in time, about the events of one evening in the lives of a group of soldiers. They were all lonely being away from home at Christmas time. There is much humor and laughter, but with a sensitivity that reflect a genuine respect for each other. They find solace and strength in being together with a common purpose and shared burden; and yes, they did a little growing up at the same time.”

Again the shadows of Christmas Eve enfold us in their spell as our minds recall the memories of Christmas past. The colors of the lights strung around the entrance to the NCO Club at the old 44th. The feeling of warmth when we entered. The smells of food, smoke and drink waft across our faces. Sounds of Christmas music and laughter ring in our ears. The smiles and cheers from our friends greet us. They are all here: “Lamb, Hood, Hatler, Wilkerson, Reilly, Machefske, Kissinger, Barton, Etheredge, Kabasawa, Moore and Day.”

The Josans are all dressed for the occasion; one wears a gold tooth and shows it proudly. We sit at our usual table and order drinks. Glancing around we take in all the sights of Soldiers and Josans expressing their unbridled happiness. We lift our glasses in a toast to good comradeship and appreciation of how friends can make a time of separation and isolation seem, not so lonely after all.

A pretty girl approaches our table and asks one of us to dance. I'm feeling festive so I agree. We converse in a kind of broken Korean-English attempt to discuss politics and world events-(just joking) rather, just ways of improving her economics. I smile and play a little hard to get. I'll throw this one back in and continue fishing; the evening is still young and who knows what Santa has in store.

Happy hour in the Army is a stroke of genius by the Club Recreation Officer-tonight it doesn't end. PFC Hood, the only G.I. in the place without a dance partner is striking out. Sp4 Etheredge, holding up his empty glass, orders another round; to be put on PFC Moore's bar tab.



The live floor show singers have major problems with their L's, R's and W's. They struggle with 'Rudolph the Re-Nose Reindeer'. Somehow, on this most special night of nights, it doesn't matter. We enjoy their oriental verse and rhyme and are caught up in the Spirit of Christmas. PFC Machefske, the avowed intellectual of our group, sits gazing with that wiry smile of his, muttering words such as "Indigenous Expostulation." Meanwhile, PFC Lamb remains bolt upright in his chair, his hands buried deep between his thighs, watching the floor show dancers.

Sgt. Wilkinson, finishing his umpteenth beer, invites the whole room to his place, (in Texas). Meanwhile, PFC, resorting to offering PX privileges, is still striking out. Suddenly, a rather angry looking Josan appears at PFC Moore's shoulder, holding an IOU signed "John Wayne". (this should be interesting) He speaks very slow and soothing to her and replaces her first note with one signed "Roy Rogers". In Korea, referring to a girl as 'Number One or Number Ten' could get you kissed or slapped. Who could have known in later years a Female "10" would mean 'visionary'?

The music stops and from the shadows in a dark corner of the room I see her approaching. (Somewhere, far off in the distance, I can swear I hear sleigh bells) Ah, yes, my present is here at last, Josan Extraordinaire. She was dressed all in green in a form-fitting sweater dress that tried to follow her every curve. Snow white fur trimmed her collar. She had the scent of Jasmine about her, not even a hint of Kimchee here. All at once I felt like I was back in the States, asking a beautiful girl to dance. She smiled with that self-assured look one sees when they have just caught 'the Big One', hook, line and sinker. We danced close together, slow and smooth. No words were spoken, no words were necessary. She recognized me as a player-of-games, with emotional barriers up all around me, less a serious thought might penetrate my façade. (Strange how seemingly naked I appeared). In Korea, love is not real and sex is a way of life. I believe sometimes we can too easily confuse these feelings. In spite of this knowledge

I felt my defenses falling, slipping away. I held her closer to me and she followed my lead like she knew my every thought and welcomed me into her world.

I became faintly aware the music had stopped. We were still moving to our own rhythm. Everyone was walking off the platform with the Band. Neither one of us wanted to break the hold each of us had on the other, for fear of losing the moment. I felt her breath on my face. We stared for several long moments at each other. A wave of feelings and emotions swept over me. Love, Hope, Peace and Beauty, in the Land of the Morning Calm. (Lessons without words) Suddenly another Josan pulled her away and began speaking very fast in their own language. She turned back to me and stretched out her hand touching mine then she was gone, lost in the crowd. Helplessly I stared after her. This wasn't happening, but if it was, why did I feel so alone? Am I to understand Santa's gift was an emotional reminder of Love and Wonder, too briefly felt, but remembered for a lifetime?

Reality and my senses return as I see my friends waving to me. Sp4 Etheredge is ordering another round. Sgt Wilkinson is explaining to a rather intoxicated Josan, "She doesn't know what BIG is." PFC Lamb is agreeing to dance with a girl clearly half his size. PC Hood is passed out on the table. PFC Moore, who must have silently observed all that had happened, (whose grasp of the understatement brims with wit and humor) looks at me and smiles with a friend's compassion and understanding and says, "You know what, this is unusual." What was I just saying about emotional barriers protecting us against serious thought? Must be contagious.

The evening is winding down and the Band is packing up. G.I.s and osans are departing for the village. The bar stools are still full with those waiting for 'last call'. Some of us are heading back to the barracks, carrying PFC Hood as we go. The night air reminds us you can't wear enough clothing to keep out the winds of a Korean winter. The temperature hovers around zero. The recent snow swirls around our feet and crunches under our boots. The curfew sirens sound at midnight and tonight is no exception. We slowly make our way home. Did I say 'Home?' Isn't that the place many of us were pining for tonight? Yes, that's true, but for right now, this is where our friends are, this is family, this is 'home.' I am sure in some future date, some future Christmas, we will look back on these days and events and see the friends we've made, the times we've had and the joy we've felt, with pride and fond remembrance.....

MERRY CHRISTMAS

I Choose Love

Jason Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

In a world of everyone hating
and disrespecting each other's ways,
breaking another's heart is so much
easier to go along with nowadays.
When we know not what they've been through,
While we stomp on another's feelings,
we're so far from the truth.
We close our eyes to the gospel's message
and whom we tear down is living proof.
This evil exercises its dominion.
The devil seems in control
as he sends his little minions to battle,
each and every soul.
I choose love to put them back together,
an umbrella in the rain to stop the madness,
and help each other through their troubling pain.
May God saturate your life,
a refuge through the strife.
I choose to love others and help them in this life.
I choose love to lift up my brothers,
to show them the hope I've found,
how mercy and grace are at their fingertips,
and they surely do abound.
God is as close as their next prayer.
He surely is around; there is another way.
I choose love to brighten up their day,
even when it's hard to do.
I choose love to help them make it through;
I choose love.



Battle-Weary Soldier

By Charles Kesler
VA Medical Center—Dallas, TX

One red flower grows.
Maybe it is blood
or a flower unknown.

Hold this world loosely.
It may vanish
as swift as a deleted email.

Breathe every breath
until there is nothing more
than a bright shining light.

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
sounds, exotic fragrance, new
neighbors. Sunlight pours through
different windows, paints shadows
on fresh canvas. How trashy is that?

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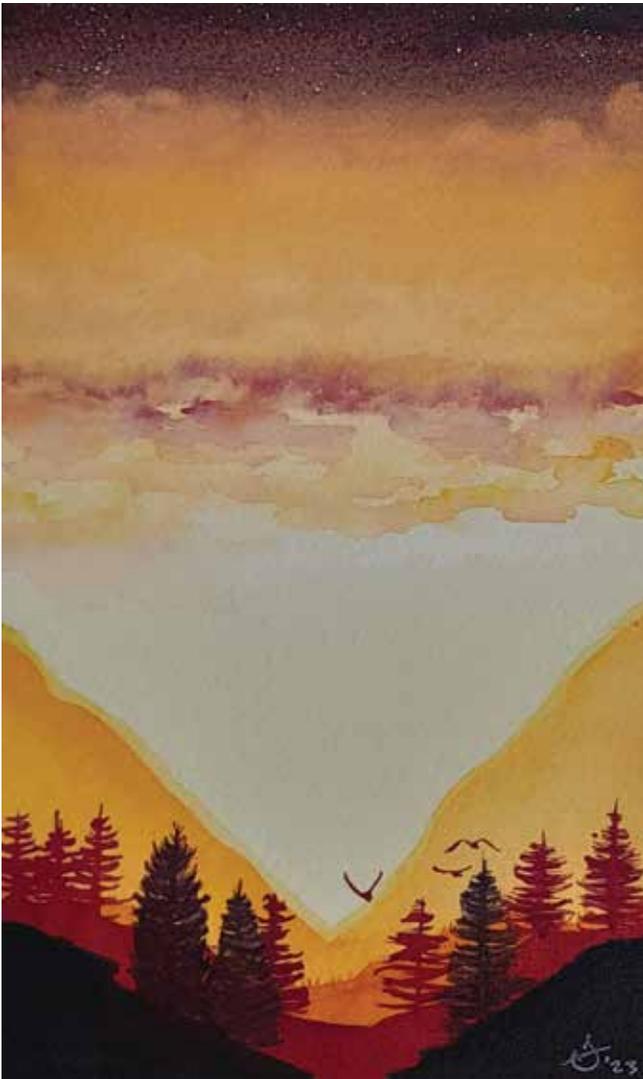
Visual Arts Initiative

Send Us Your Art

Artists and photographers, please submit your art to *Veterans' Voices* for magazine consideration. Robert Rubin, M.D., Ph.D., generously assists the publishers with production costs for this special full-color section of the magazine. He is a retired chief of psychiatry at the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System and is passionate about the healing power of art, including the written word, visual art and even dance!

Our publishers believe that incorporating visual art throughout the pages of *Veterans' Voices* complements VVWP's writing as therapy mission and offers another means of healing through artistic expression. We hope our veteran artists will keep this full-color section filled with art! If you have an original painting, drawing or photograph that would fit within these pages, or if you have original art that would complement a story or poem you are submitting to the editors, please send us that art. Military veterans and active service personnel are eligible for publication in the magazine. See pages 65 and 66 of this issue for Submission Guidelines.

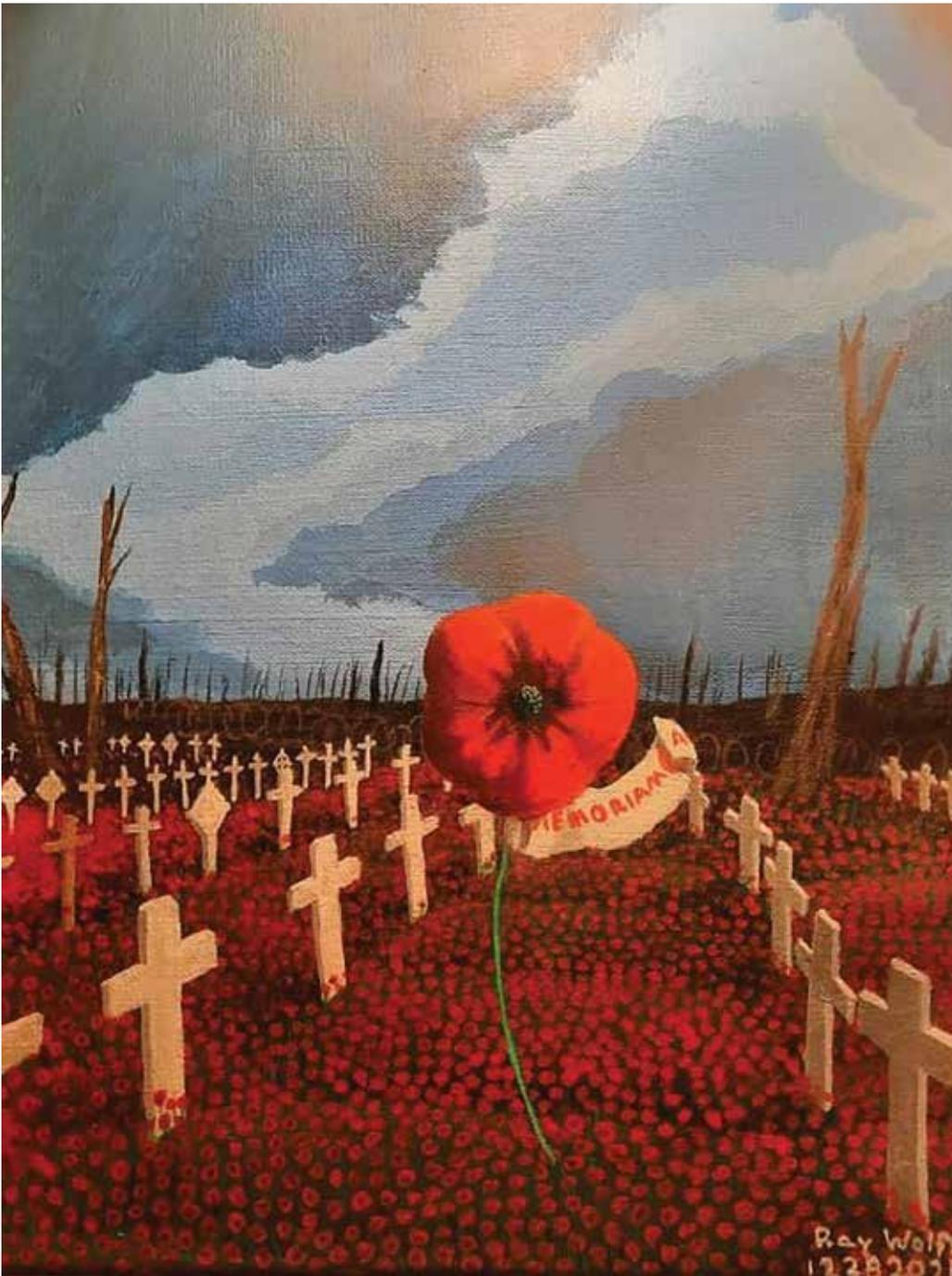
The Editors



A Successful Day
James Franck
— Salem, OR



Last Drink
Daniel Strange
—San Antonio, TX



Artwork

Raymond Wolfe

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY



First Aid Western Style
Daniel Strange
—San Antonio, TX



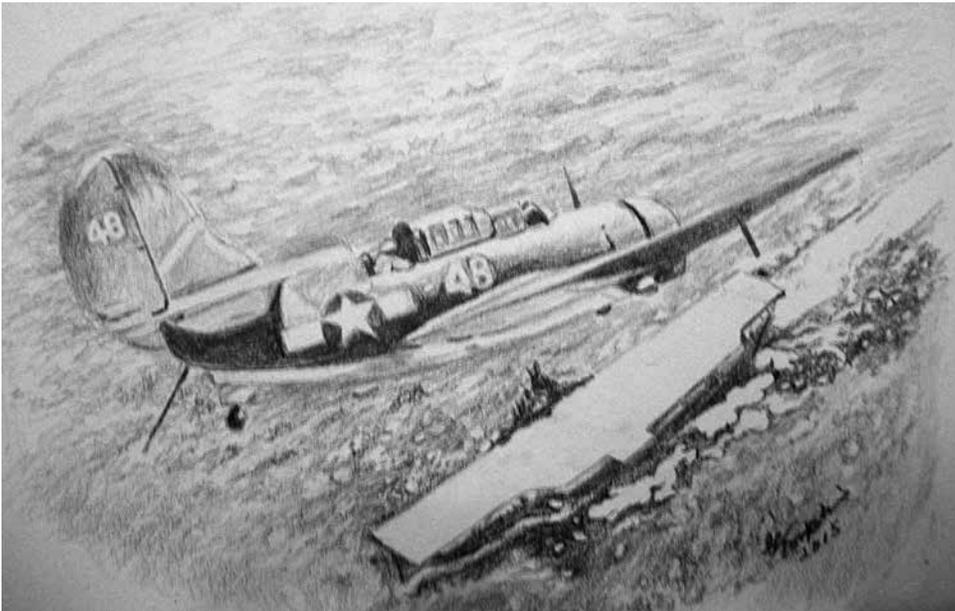
Liberty
William Shepherd
VA Medical Center— Wichita, KS



Winged Freedom
William Shepherd
VA Medical Center— Wichita, KS



In My Arms Safe
Jack Tompkins
— Marshalltown, IA



Overhead
Jack Tompkins
— Marshalltown, IA

Silent Night in Vietnam

By Rick Olson

Fortunately, as cold and strange as it may sound, I had lost my mother nearly two years prior to being deployed to Vietnam.

By the time Christmas 1968 arrived, we had already survived the second Tet offensive, and the near 200,000 Viet Cong who had amassed in the DaNang area for the offensive had either perished or evacuated. The intensity of anticipating the worst had diminished greatly, and it was reasonably quiet and calm as Christmas Eve's sun had long since set for the evening. I had awakened several hours prior to the start of my midnight shift on alert crew status for our F-4 Phantom Gunfighter squadron. I felt a bit groggy from the few beers that I had consumed earlier, celebrating Christmas with a few close "brothers."

As I lay there in the dark, I remembered that it was Christmas Eve, and I began to reflect on "Life in the Moment." Like so many others there, I had recently received a "Dear John" letter. I had not expected my relationship to last, but receiving such a letter during the Christmas season made it seem more dramatic than it truly was. But then, this was the Sixties, and back in the States, the Flower Power movement was reaching its peak and our fellow baby boomers were in their adolescence and living life to the fullest.

Unlike so many other soldiers in Vietnam, I did not have a mother or a father back home constantly worrying about my safety and welfare. I observed so many comrades whose minds were frequently preoccupied with worrying more for their mothers' and fathers' welfare, safety and sanity than they worried for themselves. I was grateful not to have this distraction, while at the same time I was a bit envious of them.

A feeling of loneliness crept over me as I pondered the harsh realities of the war I was immersed in. Many thousands of young men were spending Christmas tonight in a country they hardly knew existed before they were called upon to defend it. Too many



had died already, and so many more were much less fortunate than I on this hallowed night, spending their night crouched in a foxhole or fending off an enemy in the darkness. Back in the States, the anti-war movement was gaining momentum, and somehow it was the individual soldier who was to blame for all the atrocities of this war we had somehow come to be engaged in.

All of this reflection put me in a funk, and I felt the need to get up and about to shake it off. I decided to go in search of anyone who

might still be awake and celebrating Christmas, hoping to fill the time before my shift started. I walked into an adjacent barracks in search of life. The barracks was almost completely dark, save for a patch of light several bunks down from the door. I walked toward the light, and as I approached the bunk area, I could hear the song "Silent Night" begin to play. A soldier, still in his fatigues, was splayed out and sleeping atop the bunk. As he slept, his mouth seemed to be screaming out in despair, and his eyes appeared to be clenched shut, with tears tracking down his murky face. A letter was clenched in his hand, and pictures of his wife and children were strewn across his chest. As "Silent Night" continued to play, I was suddenly overcome with sorrow for this brother's plight. Tears began to roll from my eyes, and this scene was forever etched in my mind.

Twenty years later, my employer had just moved me, my wife and family to a new city in Pennsylvania, where we found ourselves celebrating Christmas Eve mass in a local firehouse. Seating was limited, so my wife seated herself and our beautiful 3-year-old daughter in a folding chair, while I stood holding our sleeping 2-month-old daughter. At some point in the ceremony the choir began to sing "Silent Night." In that moment, the image of that night in Vietnam flashed through my mind, and midway through the song, my tears began to flow.

I was so very aware of how lucky I was, to be home at Christmas, blessed to have such a beautiful baby sleeping in my arms and to

be with my beloved family on this joyous day. Adding to that was the anticipation that my wife and I would soon enjoy the sights and sounds of our oldest daughter as she discovered the presents awaiting her under the Christmas tree.

I was equally aware in that moment that there were countless military personnel in areas around the world shedding tears because they could not be with their loved ones. I cannot listen to the beautiful song “Silent Night” without replaying the image of that night in Vietnam in my mind. This song will forever make me pause to give thanks to our brave and selfless warriors who preserve and protect all that we hold dear.

Due to some very exciting circumstances, my wife and I are blessed this year to have our oldest daughter, her husband, and our only grandson, 16-month old Connor, living with us. Rest assured that if Connor is in my arms at Christmas Eve mass when “Silent Night” begins to play, Grandpa will be having a big cry.

God bless our troops and their families everywhere.

God’s Blanket

By William H. Anderes
—Cresskill, NJ

In the silence of the winter’s night
before the world is awake,
He begins to weave His blanket,
a blanket woven flake by flake.

Though the flakes are billions strong,
no two precisely are the same,
just like the human souls on earth,
two of God’s wonders men proclaim.

As His blanket’s softness deepens,
each bush, tree branch and twig reveal
the beauty they are capable of,
like a church bell’s distant peal.

And everywhere mankind’s ugliness
is covered by God’s Beauty and Grace,
and for a while He wears a knowing smile
before the world becomes once more commonplace.

GLADYS FELD HELZBERG AWARD

The Wall

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

The sun shone bright, glistening
off the coal black marble stones.
Across the field, patriotic music
rang out with disembodied voices
singing along with the military band.

The grizzled man limped slowly
down the sidewalk as I watched.
He brushed off the hands offered
in assistance in the summer heat
until he reached a section of the wall.

He paused and eyed the list of names
carved deep into the wall of the fallen.
The flag whipped silently in the wind
as though recognizing the significance
of the solemn moment happening.

With his battered hat removed,
he lifted his hand against the stone.
His crooked fingers rubbed a name.
The stone was cool in contrast to
the blistering heat baking the day.

He stood and straightened as much
as his hunched-over body would permit.
With a trembling hand, he rendered
a stoic salute and wiped the tears falling
from his stubbled and haggard cheeks.

Without a word, he continued down
the sidewalk stepping around others
paying their respects to the fallen.
I moved to where he stood, reverently
tracing a name with tears in his eyes.

In the reflection of the black marble
I saw a young soldier in uniform.
A soldier in which the dream of serving
was born from the dedicated service and
valor of men and women in Vietnam.

Patriot Flight

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

Patriot Flight Inc. is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization created to honor veterans by flying them to Washington, D.C. to visit and reflect on the memorials erected for their service, sacrifices and remembrances.

Traditionally, top priority is given to World War II survivors along with any other veterans that have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Successive priorities are given to the Korean and, most recently, the Vietnam War veterans. The day trip from Albany to Washington is provided at no cost to the veteran. They are flown back to Albany the same day, where they receive a warm welcome home from the community. Patriot Flight Inc. serves a seven-county area including Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady, Saratoga, Greene, Washington, and Columbia Counties as well as parts of Vermont and Massachusetts.

An honor flight has been on my bucket list for a while but being only 60 and a Gulf War veteran, I did not expect to have the pleasure for a number of years. I am a retired Army sergeant first class. I joined the Woman's Army Corps in 1975 right at the end of the Vietnam era. I served through the Cold War and deployed to Desert Storm. I retired after 20 years of service.

As it turned out, I had the opportunity for this dream to come true sooner than I expected. I was invited to go on the first all-women honor flight in New York State and the second in our nation. There were 27 veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan. Four Gold Star mothers (who lost children serving in the armed forces) and four Blue Star mothers (who have children currently serving) joined. The rest of the 50 total were staff and guardians. The lady assigned to us as guardian



supervised just four responsible adults, who tended to keep track of her.

This activity was sponsored by the Capital District Patriot Flight located in Delmar, N.Y. What an honor it was. The outreach of support from others was so emotional. We started off with a breakfast at the Marriott, which included a color guard posting the colors. As we loaded our bus, the Patriot Guard was there to escort us to the airport as well as a deuce and a half truck to lead the convey. There were crowds of well-wishers lining the way to the airport. We did, however, have to go through the TSA checks just like everyone else.

We were all given pink t-shirts, so it was easier to keep track of us throughout the day. We also

received a teal windbreaker for when we got cold. They even sent me down to the veterans' center so I could get a pair of capris for the trip. We all got a bag filled with goodies, including a coin, and a mail bag full of letters and cards.

When we landed, a fire truck was spraying water in the air; it was their salute. It was very nice of the first responders to come out as well. I have a Facebook friend who was in the Women's Army Corps who happens to live in Maryland and is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She also was there to greet me, along with many others waiting at the gate.

Get this; as we made our way to ground transportation past other gates, people at those gates would stand and applaud us as we went by. Amazing. It was like we were in a parade. There was a group of active-duty personnel studying photojournalism and videography assigned to document our day's activities. It brought me pure joy and pride.

We were on the go from the moment we touched down until we were loaded back on the plane to return home. They provided us a lunch right away, and we were ready. We also had our own photographer with us on the flight who promised a packet of 2,000 photos.

We went on a tour of the Capitol building. The dome was under renovation, but it is a spectacular place. So much marble, so large. As a side note, I would have to say there's too much money spent on the building for the amount of work that actually gets done there, but very interesting. We went to the Mall, with the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument as well as memorials to women veterans and veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. At the World War II monument, they took a group photo. The Korean War monument is just amazing; it is like you are right there with these life-size soldiers on patrol.

We then went to the Changing of the Guard ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. I could watch that ceremony all day long, but by that time it was pouring rain. We did a drive-by around the area and then went by the Pentagon up close. At the Pentagon there is a memorial garden for those who lost their lives in that building as well as those on the plane that crashed into it on Sept. 11, 2001.

My favorite was the women's memorial. There was a woman general there for us to converse with. You can look up your records and learn all about women in military history with displays as well as videos by women who have served. I would like to do a recording; I will add it to my bucket list.

We had a buffet for supper where there were two buses of veterans from other states on their way back to the airport like us. Remember my friend from Facebook who met me at the airport? Well, she came to send me off after a long day of seeing all the sites. This amazing veteran and friend came to see me even though she had terminal cancer.

I hope to go on another flight as a guardian, not only to share my experience but to help others experience this truly amazing, unique and very special opportunity for all veterans, and in particular, women veterans.



How the VFW Saved Christmas

By Rick Olson

VA Medical Center—Lebanon, PA

I was sleeping quite soundly when my telephone cried.
‘Twas a call from dear Santa, said he needed a ride.

Seems his sleigh had been damaged and needed repair,
So he flew down to my Post and he parked it with care.

He had called on his elves to come tend to his sleigh,
And he said, “Hey, Commander, can you help save the day?”

“You see, the soldiers have assembled
with their young girls and boys,
And they’re counting on me to bring my bag full of toys.

“All are present and accounted for
and dressed in their Blues,
So we really must hurry. There is no time to lose.”

When I picked up Santa, well, the magic just started.
And then time quickly passed, and then Santa departed.

‘Twas a really great honor, though, to receive such a call,
And to help Santa give gifts to some big, but most small.

Jail Time for a Very Young Cowboy

When I was a young boy, cowboy TV shows were the rage. There was, of course, the Lone Ranger, his sidekick Tonto and his trusted horse Silver. I spent many a day and untold hours on broomstick horses, where I could routinely be heard mimicking the Lone Ranger as I flicked my trusted wooden steed's invisible reins, shouting "Hi-yo, Silver! Away!"

On par with the Lone Ranger was Roy Rogers, his wife Dale Evans and his treasured horse, Trigger. Of course, there were many other Western stars who fueled my passion to be a six-gun toting cowboy, among them Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, the Cisco Kid, Sheriff Matt Dillon from Gunsmoke, and the cast of Bonanza.

I believe I was approximately five or six years old when this particular story unfolded. As a typical young boy of those times, it was not uncommon to see me roaming the streets of Mandan, N.D., on my broomstick horse, decked out with cowboy boots, cowboy hat, a scarf and a cap shooting six-gun (with holster). Often, I would dub my dog Butchie with the title of Tonto, and we would traverse the streets of Mandan together, searching for citizens in need of our help.

On one particular day, however, I had apparently decided to go "Tonto-less," and Butchie's role reverted to that of a bad guy. I captured the "wanted villain" and took him off to jail (my bedroom) to await the arrival of the judge for trial. I may have secured his

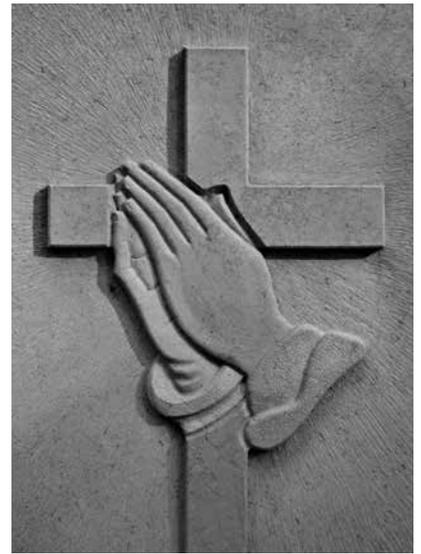
leash to my bedpost, but at the very least I had entrapped him in the bedroom to face judgment.

Later that day when my mom came home from work, she discovered the imprisoned "villain," who was most likely yipping for freedom when she arrived. The Lone Ranger was nowhere to be found, undoubtedly roaming the streets of Mandan to keep other villains at bay. When I finally returned home, my mother was awaiting me with glaring eyes. I believe this incident might have been newsworthy to the nation at large as a "lesson for inhumane treatment of animals."

I was severely reprimanded and was told my actions were so despicable that I would be required to serve "jail time" as punishment. In those days, the rumor was that jailbirds lived only on bread and water. And so it was; my supper for the evening was a piece of bread and a glass of water. I seem to recall that my sentence was to stay in jail for three days on bread and water, and I can tell you that bread and water on that first night made a convincing argument for "going straight" from that day forward.

The rest of the story is hazy, but I suspect that my mother did not have the heart to make me serve my entire "sentence" and that life (including breakfast) returned to normal the next day. I can assure you, however, that I never repeated mistreatment of my dog Butchie or any dogs or pets who came after him.

Would the author of this story please contact the VVWP office or website? VVWP's website has been under construction and somehow when this story was submitted, the author's name was lost. The editors thought the story was both believable and entertaining and we will send the honorarium as soon as we hear from the author. Thank you!



My Lord Jesus Is My Fan

*By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI*

My Lord Jesus, He is my fan.
I put my life
In His precious hand.
My Lord Jesus, He is my hero.
I look up to Him;
He's been by me so.
My Lord Jesus, He is my fan.
I clap my hands
for Him;
He made this old land.
My Lord Jesus, He is my idol.
Looking up to Him,
He'll look after me.
My Lord Jesus, He is my fan.
I put my life
In His precious hand.
My Lord Jesus, He is my hero.
I look up to Him;
He's been by me so.
My Lord Jesus, He is my fan.
He's not just
An ordinary man.
My Lord Jesus, He is my fan.
I clap my hands
for Him:
He made this old land.
My Lord Jesus, He is my fan.

Twenty-Four Notes

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

The three-volley salute is over, its echoes start to fade.
With lips pressed to the bugle, TAPS will now be played.
Twenty-four notes are offered, feelings will be stirred,
veterans snap to attention as those solemn notes are heard.

Life screeches to a halt, no one speaks a word.
Passing cars disappear like the chirp of every bird.
Our hearts will slowly melt, emotions off the chart
as the notes we hear come from the bugler's heart.

Each note has a purpose, like the soldier it salutes.
We see them in their Class A's, or in their jungle boots.
We think that we are strong, our eyes would never leak;
seconds later prove us wrong as a tear rolls down our cheek.

Sixty seconds pass from the first note to the last,
thanking the soldier for being loyal and steadfast.
Swearing to protect their country, men and women both proclaim,
earning the right to say, 'veteran,' when they tell someone their name.

Twenty-four notes so heavy, that many cannot stand
played by one lone bugler, not an orchestra or band.
As the last note slowly wanes our energy is gone,
but the memory of our veteran, forever will live on.

My Marthanne

By William H. Anderes

—Cresskill, NJ

Every moment of every day I think of you—
Your laughter, your smiling eyes, your loving touch.
And then I turn. Were you there? I'm not sure.
I only know my love for you is more than much.
A melodic Chopin—my Marthanne.

Each day that passes brings memories of you—
Your beauty, your soft voice, your flowing grace.
And then I turn. Were you there? I'm not sure.
But haven't I just kissed the tears from your face
To comfort you as best I can—my Marthanne.

Every evening I recall our happy times together.
You are my life, my love, the icing on my angel cake.
And then I turn. Were you there? I'm not sure.
Left are just my precious memories and a heart that aches.
My sweet marzipan—my Marthanne.

I'll bide my time, sadly, here without you,
But your presence will be always with me everywhere.
And when I turn, are you there? I can't be sure
Until we are at last "Together In God's Care."
Since our love began—my Marthanne.

A Wishing Well

Anthony Phillips

—Las Vegas, NV

A wishing well and a thousand nights of dreams.
What can you see in a thousand dreams?
Wishing wells, floating out to sea.
One by one, dreams fade away.
I ask the question, "Are you the dreamer or the dream?"
Who will I become in this waking dream?
Inside the mind, a child awakens from their summer sleep.
The child looks east and then to the west.
I am looking for the last picture of true selves.
Engaged in a conversation about the last dream, "Who will I become in the waking world?"
A silent whisper responds, "Someone with purpose, someone with pride."



Christmas 2022

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

'Twas a couple nights before Christmas,
Nothing tiring except a Bomb Cyclone,
Wait one OVER!
The mouse is awake and on the move.
He enters his room,
Climbs up onto his bed, sleeps.
The mouse nibbles on some crumbs
He ate as snacks in bed.
This 72-year-old mouse looks up.
What's this?
A shadowbox hangs on the wall.
The mouse reads and sees clearly:
SGT Rich Wangard USAF-RET.
834th Air Division Nam 1969 and 1970.
The contents remain the most important thing
To the man who sleeps.
The mouse stops eating! He looks and looks.
The mouse is comfortable in this humble house,
Wonders what did this guy do?
The medals are bright, the badges perfect.
All on black velvet.
Now, in a couple days, this man has nowhere to go.
The storm rages outside,
The Bomb Cyclone with 60 mph winds,
Feet of snow,
Lasting days, not allowing movement,
With wind chills minus 50 degrees.
That storm is nothing
Compared to the storm that rages
Inside the man that sleeps!
The mouse does not know that;
He is just comfortable like his friends.
The man has nowhere to go on Christmas.
He will have dinner with his faithful and loving wife
Who picked up the pieces when he came home
After giving his all to his brothers three times.
Retired USAF at 20! Shattered!Gone! His own world!
To escape the unescapable!
Memories, brothers lost, all the heroes!
The mouse thinks the shadowbox is beautiful.

He crawls off the bed and back downstairs.
He shares with his mate
For even he knows Christmas is coming.
Time to be kind, giving, and nice.
The man is riding out the storm outside with much sleep.
He is old.

Our Lives Matter

Janice Walker

VA Medical Center—Dublin, GA

From a tiny newborn baby
To the life of misery suffering defeat,
From the one that gave his best to that one,
Prosperous, happy and abundantly blessed.
Each life is precious in our creator's eyes.
This is my belief.
This I now realize from children's innocence at play,
From newlyweds' joy at our own joyous wedding day,
From victory to those feeling defeated.
These do not lie wasted or lost.
God's in your life with you.
What a priceless cost is each soul;
each soul is valuable and precious.
Each life is special.
Each life—who can measure the value?
Each life measures glory to glory.
To those not quite yet awakened, stumbling in the dark,
Our life matters.
We are special eternal children of a loving God.



The Winning Spirit of Kindness

By Terrance Hammons

“Eight feet,” said the meet official.

“Coach, that’s a personal record. Let’s go!” shouted the athlete.

This typical interaction between athlete and coach at a track meet took an unexpected twist. The coach and athlete were not from the same school, and their camaraderie unfolded during a high-stakes district championship.

At the start of my second year as head track coach, the staff and I believed we had a great chance to win the district championship. With the talent on our team and the fierce competition throughout the district, the coaching staff anticipated a closely contested event that would probably be decided between us and our bitter rivals.

The previous year, I noticed no school had entered an athlete to compete in the pole vault. Determined to seize an advantage, I assigned one of our best young coaches to explore the intricacies of the pole vault, intending to have at least two athletes ready for the district championship.

Our dedicated coach surpassed expectations, diligently learning the nuances of the pole vault. However, during the district championship, I discovered we were the lone school with a pole vault scheme. Most schools entered some poor inexperienced vaulters in hopes of securing a few extra points.

To no one’s surprise, our outstanding young coach was coaching his heart out. What was shocking was that our pole vault coach was not just coaching our athletes; he offered guidance to every vaulter, regardless of their school. While none of the athletes were true vaulters, they competed with the selfless guidance of this extraordinary coach, driven by a desire to help their respective schools.

The anticipated tightly contested championship never materialized as our school emerged victorious without needing the pole vault points. However, the meet’s outcome took a backseat to our pole vault coach’s remarkable display of kindness.



During that district championship, that young coach showed us the value of kindness. Imagine the moral courage it must have taken for that coach to act as he did. His actions that day could have cost us the championship, but he believed that showing unmitigated kindness to every athlete competing in the pole vault was the greater good.

As a coach, I grappled with balancing kindness and love with the toughness required for high-level competition.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once offered valuable insight, stating, “Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the figure of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be tough.”

My ultimate mission was to shape exceptional young men and women through athletics. The late Rev. Billy Graham once said, “A coach will impact more people in a year than the average person will in their lifetime.”

Kindness benefits not only others but also ourselves. Scientific studies have shown that acts of kindness release oxytocin, sometimes called the love hormone. This hormone helps regulate mood, lowers stress levels and increases empathy, self-esteem and compassion.

Moreover, kindness has positive physical effects, such as lowering blood pressure, reducing cortisol (a stress hormone) and relieving aches and pains. These benefits can be derived from acts of kindness toward others or ourselves. Even witnessing a kind act can have a profound impact.

The lesson taught by that young coach extends far beyond the pole vault pit. He exemplified the importance of standing up for what is right and the power of kindness. It would have been much easier for him to focus solely on coaching our athletes and disregarding others. However, he chose a different path, and everyone involved, including coaches, athletes and witnesses, benefited from his selfless acts of kindness.

My Cherie Amour

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Sitting by the window, quietly I prayed,
staring at the bed where my love had nightly laid.
Memory after memory danced within my head,
Some before, some after, the day that we were wed.

The youngest of the kids, her parents taught her well.
When it came to life, she clearly did excel.
She was shy and quiet, very unassuming.
Then one day it happened, this lady started blooming.

Her attributes were many, highlighted by her smile.
Not a selfish bone within her, that was not her style.
She brought joy and laughter to everyone she met.
When it came to love, she never was in debt.

According to the chart she wasn't very tall,
but this woman's heart made her taller than them all.
Should it rain when we're together, this I truly know,
that when the storm would pass, she was my rainbow.

So, as I sit and stare at the bed across the room,
I detect the fragrance of her favorite perfume.
In my heart I know she'll ne'er walk through that door.
Heaven is her new home, my *Cherie Amour*.



Hate Can

By Norman L. Jones

VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

Hate is a moment; hate doesn't last.
Hate is a torment of the past.
Hate is disgust; hate destroys your needs.
Hate is true; hate is pain.
Hate has no rules; hate is insane.
Hate is anger; hate is rage.
Hate is danger; hate turns the page.
Hate stops believin'; hate is wrath.
Hate is a demon of false path.
Hate is worthless; hate weighs you down.
Hate is useless; hate has no bounds.
Hate is a sign; hate is greed.
Hate is in mankind; hate is a bad seed.
Hate is from above; hate is sin.
Hate has no love; hate can never win.
Hate has no goal; hate can doom your soul.

Just End Up Being Friends

By Raymond Gallegos

VA Medical Center—Myrtle Beach, SC

I'll tell you
just how I feel.
I won't tell you
if it's fake or for real,
but I needed someone
just for the night.
I'll take you with some loose ends,
then treat you like a lover,
but just end up being friends.
Your tears started
to rake your face,
but the scars inside
were already in place.

Meanwhile, 54 Years Later

By Rich Wangard
—Appleton, WI

What is it like to be so afraid and scared that you actually shake?

You are 19 with responsibilities few can imagine. Another sergeant, a brother, comes and puts his arm around you, offers the liquid courage you so desperately need and says, “It’s OK man, have a pull.”

We were the jokes of all the Marines and Army — Air Force wussies that had hot chow all the time, went in their swimming pools after playing tennis. We always had that liquid courage, for we “had it made.”

We ignored it all, because those Marines and soldiers whom we resupplied (sometimes with liquid courage) were never on a medivac flight of a C-130A flying for a hospital at Cam Ron Bay, Da Nang or Tan Son Nhut. They never saw the holes in our planes or our own losses – airmen, the second most losses in Nam after the Army.

All this time later I toss and turn trying to get to sleep. The faces appear, the demons come, and I immediately call the only person I can. My riding partner of 13 years. My brother, one of the few people I can relate to and with. Another Nam vet who did it all, who was Army with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. A true American hero who understood all about the Air Force and how many times air cover saved his entire company.

Try call sign Specter and see what happens. Eight miniguns all firing at once at a rate of 3,000 rounds a minute laying waste in less than 30 seconds to an area bigger than a football field. He knows. No swimming pools or tennis courts; no nothing.

Just so scared you shake as bullets whiz through your aircraft as you attempt a landing on dirt to resupply or do a medivac. No medals, except the only one that counted — the Vietnam Service Medal (VSM) — because you showed up.

I know I am being tough on my brothers but after 54 years of taking all their jokes, it gets a little stale, and I can’t and won’t be quiet anymore. I owe too many other airmen.

So please, my brothers, don’t make fun anymore, for you will trigger me, and I have enough triggers. I don’t know if 100 percent PTSD is enough to convince you, but you all know what I am talking about. The VSM is enough for me and any Nam vet because we all showed up and went through that hell on earth all doing jobs nobody wanted. You guys are the only ones I can relate to and with, so please give this wussy a break.

Changing Before the New Year

By John E. Jones
VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

Communicating every day,
we learn all we can.
Within the future is growing
every child, woman and man.
We’re curious about changes;
they settle in our minds.
People work to be better,
together all the time.
Throughout the seasons,
we pursue a goal.
As the year moves to its end,
we’re given knowledge foretold.
While others try again,
following a routine every day,
we’re encouraged to overcome
our difficult ways.
Strengthened by faith,
proceeding without fear,
we look within our souls,
reach into the new year.
We find our leaders
helping along the way
the people in despair
every single day.
Life is being eased
day and night.
As the world turns,
we do what’s right.

Typist: Marybeth Matthews



Poof! Just Like That

By Melvin Brinkley
—Davis, CA

In the summer of 1970, our church built a “Christian” high school. My girlfriend’s parents decided to send her to this new, all white, private school. I, on the other hand, decided to stay with the public-school program in spite of the fact that I would have to go to another public school because the politicians, in their infinite wisdom, had decided to rezone school districts in the entire county.

They did this to get a disproportionate number of whites in one district and a disproportionate number of Blacks in another district. The state of Virginia was in the throes of integration that year. I don’t know why, but I naively thought going to a mostly Black high school would be fine. Exciting. Maybe. My girlfriend and I discovered we were on two different paths in life. Our budding romance ended. Poof! Just like that.

In my new school I represented a 12 percent minority. The first time a black student came to my home, my dad met him with a pistol in hand. I managed to position myself between them so that my school chum could make a quick getaway. Word of that sort of drama got around fast in high school. No other students, white or Black, ever came to visit me after that. My social life dried up after that. Poof! Just like that.

Calvin, a Black fellow 10th grader, invited me to look at a book in our homeroom soon after my dad’s “discouragement” of visitors. Desperate for any hint of friendship, I readily agreed. After he had flipped through a few pages, I said in a shocked voice, “I didn’t have anything to do with any of this” and backed away.

What terrified me the most about Calvin’s book were all the photos of white people grinning for the camera, evidently confident that any evidence of them at the scene of an ongoing murder — a lynching — would never be used against them in a court of law. I learned later that of the 4,467 documented lynchings in the United States between 1883 and 1941, only a very few people were charged, and most of those were acquitted or given light sentences from all-white juries, which was the standard composition of a jury back then. That’s when I realized that I had been taught a carefully redacted version of U.S. history. The people responsible for my education had purposefully left out or glossed over the uncomfortable — for them, at least — parts. Poof! Just like that.

While watching the Jan. 6, 2021, riot and seeing that hangman’s scaffold and noose in front of our nation’s Capitol building, I vividly remembered Calvin’s book. It occurred to me that if that mob had found its targets, then we would have seen something similar to the photos in Calvin’s book on the news that night, except this time our nation’s Capitol would have been the background, and some of our duly elected officials would be hanging above a grinning lynch mob. America’s experiment with democracy might have ended right there and then. Poof! Just like that.

That riot also reminded me of the time I was deployed to the former Republic of Yugoslavia in 1995. More than 7,000 Muslims were slaughtered by Serbs in Srebrenica during my deployment. It unnerved me how ironic my title was at the time: peacekeeper. There was no peace to keep since the Serbian leader continually encouraged his all-too-eager followers to annihilate their perceived enemies. Eventually he was brought to justice, but it took several years to hold him accountable for his advocacy of “ethnic cleansing” — a clinically sounding but cold-blooded phrase for mass murder. He destroyed his country, which ultimately resulted in his own demise. Poof! Just like that.

The oath required to join the U.S. military centers on an ideal: “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Kings demand absolute obedience, which is exactly what the designers of our government wanted to avoid. They knew that “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for all American citizens would be lost under an authoritarian ruler. Poof! Just like that.

Looking back over the decades, the best educational moment that ever happened to me was that day when Calvin showed me his book and then left me alone to draw my own conclusions. I bought a copy of Calvin’s book the other day and gave it to my daughter. As a university professor, she uses it in her lectures about urban planning.

I firmly believe, based on all of my life’s experiences, that if we don’t teach our children about our nation’s history and all its best and worst moments and how the rule of law must be applied evenly and justly for all American citizens, then we will lose something more precious than ourselves and our constitutional republic. Poof! Just like that.

I Didn't Know You

LoLeta Totton
—Mitchell, SD

I didn't know you, but I know Linden was your name.
I didn't know you, but I know the 4th child you became.
I didn't know you, but I know you were born in '24.
I didn't know you, but I know you died in '44.
I didn't know you, but I know into service two brothers went.
I didn't know you, but I know to Italy you were sent.
I didn't know you, but I know we both raised our hand.
I didn't know you, but I know we both served Uncle Sam.
I didn't know you, but I know you answered the call.
I didn't know you, but I know you took the fall.
I didn't know you, but I know you did what you vowed.
I didn't know you, but I know your family was so proud.
I didn't know you, but I know an unknown soldier you are.
I didn't know you, but I know you were lost from afar.
I didn't know you, but I know you were awarded a Bronze Star.
I didn't know you, but I know your achievements were above par.
I didn't know you, but I know you were awarded the Purple Heart.
I didn't know you, but I know you were among many who took part.
I didn't know you, but I know your mother suffered unbearable grief.
I didn't know you, but I know your mother wrote the government in disbelief.
I didn't know you, but I know a Gold Star Mother she became.
I didn't know you, but I know your mother was never the same.
I didn't know you, but I know you were my uncle and I am your niece.
I didn't know you, but I know you are at peace.



Chronic Pain

By Lawrence W. Langman
—Portage, IN

We feel in awe of those who strive,
against one's struggles to stay alive.
We push on through existing pains,
against the frigid cold constraints.
We brace for sudden bleak despairs,
against those evils that dare impair.
We seek solace from those that leer,
against our eyes swollen from tears.
We seek out small and trivial tasks,
against the times when pain comes back.
We toss and turn in our beds at night,
against nightmares of our eerie plight.
We hold on dear to whom we desire,
against those sheets of constant fire.
We wake again running on fumes,
against our bodies when life resumes.
We grab a hold and strap on in,
against the odds we pretend again.

Harvest Time

By Dwight D. Jenkins
—Rensselaer, NY

I want to see the living hands of God
In the world of deadly men,
Calloused hands with broken fingers
Clutching roses stemmed in thorns,
Arms extended, shaking.
I want to see the pale hands of men,
Smashed and casted white, helpless
In Eden's perfect garden rows,
Amputations waiting.
The furrows are deeply dug
With stumps of human will
Remaining.

Land of the Brave

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

As my eyes scan over the tombstones
on the local graves,
I notice little white crosses and American flags,
the bravest of the brave.
I thank my lucky stars that I'm still here today,
standing on American soil
and enjoying the American way.
Many vets have gone before me;
many are still here today.
Many will boast of their battle scars and stories,
not at a loss for words to say.
Some have injuries that plague them.
They gave their all in their own special way.
On the battlefields, I envision how they fought
to advance our liberty there,
and how our freedom had been bought.
I can still see bombs a-bursting in the air
to protect our freedom that all of us do share.
The blood of vets has covered the bill
and paved the way.
Some have PTSD where the battle is still real
to this day
'cause freedom isn't free.
Our land's so precious to us all
as far as eyes can see.
The price is so high and death is real,
but the many brave rise to fight,
and win battles with their zeal.
Now we stand in honor, our hands upon our breasts,
countless ceremonies to put our men to rest.
Some died on the land; some died on the sea.
But many gave their all
and many still fight to keep our freedom free.



Festival of Lights

By Robert J. Brumfield

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Celebrate!
Once again, the temple is cleansed.
History written in the blood of the Maccabees.
Annually we light the menorah from our abundance.
Never again the sanctuary devoid of incense.
Under the canopy, we now can be wed,
Keep the children with the Dreidel entertained.
Knowing the enemy, we were victorious.
A maiden with cheese brought down the Syrians.
Happily, now we stand united.

BVL AWARD

Korean Hills

By Donald Chase

VA Medical Center—Brockton, MA

The rugged battlefield in Korea
contained many hills with well-known names.
Deadly fighting took place on their slopes,
but sometimes all in vain.

Jackson Heights was such a place,
where a lot of blood was spilled.
The end result was many deaths,
and the enemy controlling the hill.

Outpost Tom and Outpost Dick
were places of much less fame.
Yet there, too, men suffered and died
when shells came down like rain.

Outpost Harry was a critical hill,
one to be held at all costs.
And so men went to their Maker
to ensure it would not be lost.

History books on the Korean War
will have a paragraph that tells
about the men who defended Outpost Harry,
and how they defended it well.

Through the Windowpane

By Robert J. Brumfield

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Icicles on eaves,
blanketed roofs glisten white.
Inside always warm.

Enshrouded in snow,
the earth beneath soundly sleeps.
Then the equinox.

Yule logs are burning;
stockings hang on the mantel.
Wait for Nicholas.

There's a frozen lake
forming winter's solid crust,
bravely walked on first.

Sled tracks everywhere,
children making snow angels.
Hot cocoa awaits.

In dead of winter
both flora and fauna sleep,
awaken in spring.

WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

Tipping Point

By Billie Johnston

—Hutchinson, KS

He doesn't rest at night.
He wanders the rooms while she sleeps.
She doesn't understand. Neither does he.
She reaches for him when she wakes and feels alone
under the same roof.
He's not there. She sits on their bed and sobs.
His worst days are the Fourth of July
and Cinco de Mayo.
They both suffer from his fevers.
They are almost at the tipping point.
How much longer?

Farewell Dance

By Donald Chase

VA Medical Center—Brockton, MA

The dance floor was crowded and all looked so gay
as the dancers glided 'round while the musicians played.
The ladies seemed to sparkle and each nodded, "Hello,"
caught up in the magic of the evening's warm glow.

That happy festive mood brought forth the smiles,
for cares were forgotten, at least for a while.
'Twas a night for enjoyment, a time to share dreams,
so easily filling the mind in the orange moonbeams.

Upon the lateness of the hour, the gathering began to thin,
with most deftly hiding the churning feelings within.
This dance had been special and its meaning very clear:
a last night of togetherness for all those held dear.

The non-dancers on the sidelines had also taken part,
although there were many hiding tears in their hearts.
For the aftermath of the evening meant sorrowful goodbyes as
soldiers went off to war, leaving wives home to cry.

There's a Blue Star in My Window Tonight

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

On a background of white
In my window tonight,
There's a blue star shining and bright,
A symbol of freedom, everything right
For a lad who has given his all in this fight.

There's a blue star in my window tonight.
It was put there with love and care
For a lad, young and brave, who marched away.
We wait for his homecoming some day.

There's a blue star in my window tonight
And the blue star will never grow dim.
I know he'll be true to the red, white and blue.
The star in my window is for him.

I Am But One White Rose

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I am but one of the chosen White Roses.
We will make a dozen.
Two White Roses are a pair, a duo.
But we are one.
When another joins, we make a trio of beauty
with a firm formation.
Our next White Rose forms our heart,
our fourth Chakra, if you will.
With the fifth White Rose,
we become a shining light,
a start to our journey home.
Our sixth female veteran
supplies the next White Rose
to symbolize that we are almost there.
(A half circle complete.)
The seventh White Rose gives us luck
to make it home to American soil.
The eighth White Rose
is the number of horses
to bring us to our final resting place.
This marble form is so pure and strong.
There are more White Roses
that will form the required dozen.
We were created from another
“Never Forget” rose.
We were once sturdy and strong;
we were and are loved by our families, our country.
We are home in Arlington.
We will remain with this tomb of the unknown soldier
to blanket the fallen, preserve them in time.



You'll Be Blessed

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

There are days in life you're going to feel like a mess.
But every day you get to live, you'll be blessed
By the little things you might not see or do.
Please know that you are loved, if even by a few.

Turn It Around and Regroup

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

They say that life's a bitch and then you die.
I now say life rocks and thank God that I'm still alive.
There are many sorrows, pain and emotions.
And, believe me, there are no magic potions.

I once believed I'd be better off dead
Because of the things inside my head.
Everyone and everything turned against me,
Including myself. Now that is easy to see.

I didn't know any better; I was going with the crowd.
As you can imagine, I was not very proud,
For they were the people who hurt me bad.
Now I can only shake my head and feel sad.

I know now that they needed help.
I was playing with the cards I was dealt.
But with professional help and peer support groups,
I've been able to turn it around and regroup.

I was given a second and third life, too.
But I'm living my best life since I grew.
I'm still mentally challenged and that's okay.
And I feel stronger and stronger every day.

Life is what you make of it.
Sit and think of yours for a bit.
What is it you really want to do?
Now get up, take the first step and move.

Strings

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

Seventy-eight years ago my father stood at a gate
not believing his eyes.
The condition of these people
gave him the shakes.

A living walking skeleton.
My father had never seen
this living being
motioning to his canteen.

As my father bent down,
he gave this human a drink.
“Live, live, I live.”
His hollowed eyes never giving a blink.

One living out of the dead
my father had seen.
He never spoke about it
for speaking about it turned him green.

It was in the latter years
Of my father’s life
when he started to talk about it,
telling only his wife.

After my father died,
my mother went through my father’s things.
In a tiny green chest all by itself
was a note with two strings.



Opening the note
her hands did tremble.
Reading the words made her cry
for the strings were a Jewish symbol.

“To my friend:
who kept me alive,
giving me a drink of water on that day
that helped me survive.
These strings reflect Jewish faith,
a symbol of love I give to you
for you saved the life of this and many other Jews.
Myself and all others who lived
declare you to be worthy and righteous.
A place in Heaven,
for you and your fellow servicemen are so deserving.”

My father kept this all these years,
keeping this memory to himself.
We hold hands as we remember my father,
as we place the letter and strings upon our shelf.

Birds of Prey

By Paul David Gonzales
VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

I saw the Hueys penetrating the horizon
just as the sun was arisin’.
The blades were a blur causing quite a stir
on the canopy below.
The rice patties rippled with the downdraft’s flow.

Like birds of prey those Hueys came,
their skids like talons hanging down.
Those 60 cal’s spit rounds of fire
like two wings of a blazing inferno.

Each one swooped down for a pass,
peppering the tall elephant grass.
The enemy was on the run,
another day of wartime fun.

There was no laughter before or after,
just another day watchin’ the sun go down.

When the Chips Are Down

By James Janssen

VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS



How do we describe pain in word form? And is there a difference between emotional pain and PTSD pain? Reckon it doesn't matter.

What seems to matter is getting down in the trenches in an attempt to describe a typical PTSD event. I could cite the societal definition of PTSD but would rather just settle on one word: HELL!

It's brought about by some unwanted trigger stemming from a thought, memory, event or action leading to continuous hopelessness. And depending on a more serious factor, there's the acceleration of a downward emotional spiral caused by multiple triggers from past traumas with similar fuses.

Tie a number of firecrackers together, and all will explode. It is commonly said by many sources that complex PTSD fits this description. Perhaps so but not necessarily. Even one single event can have a devastating effect, such as thoughts of suicide or the desire to carry it out.

Suffice it to say it is always recommended in seemingly hopeless situations to immediately call 911 or the Veterans Crisis Line for help.

My very best wishes for all of my brothers and sisters. Take good care.

The Last Snowfall

By Gene Groner

VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

The last lovely snowfall of winter—
What a beautiful sight to see!
The earth is wonderfully covered
With a blanket of snow shining brilliantly.

Bright sunshine on the glistening snow—
Could anything be more glorious?
Whitecaps are covering the evergreens
And the treetops are magically wondrous.

The sun is starting to melt the snow now
And warming the day up nicely.
The circle of life is coming around;
Soon we'll see signs of spring once again.

The last snowfall of winter—
What a marvelous sight to see!
Magical and majestic, the world is all aglow.
How great and awesome our Creator must be.

*O LORD, our Lord, How majestic and glorious
and excellent is Your name in all the earth!*
Psalm 8:1

My Town

By Jeffrey Saarela

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

If you come to the UP* you will never go back
to where you are from.
Take a look around; with all the beaches,
you will have fun.
If you seek a pleasant peninsula,
look around 'cause you will surely have fun.
There are a lot of bike trails and places to hike.
If you want, you can hike or ride your bike.
If you seek a pleasant peninsula,
look around 'cause life here is great,
And we live in a wonderful state.
Well, that's all I have to sing,
And it has a beautiful ring.

*Upper Peninsula

Why I Write

By Gene Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ



I began writing after months of prayer, asking my heavenly Father to please give me his vision of something that would ignite my passion once again, like the passion I felt during the 10 years I helped raise funds and build houses with Habitat for Humanity.

I prayed, “Dear Lord, please show me what I can do to feel this passion once again, and I will give you all the honor and glory.”

On my knees every night I continued to pray this way for many weeks, and finally it came to me on the 41st day of prayer. I can’t explain how it happened, but in my heart God planted the seed that began to grow and develop into my passion for writing.

Not just any writing, though. I found the passion to write about my lifetime of experience with God, his son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Once I began to write, the Lord continually blessed and directed my efforts. As I took the first step, He took my hand and led me forward on the journey.

It’s as though I am traveling and moving forward toward the “Tree of Life.” With each step I take on the journey, I get closer and closer. It has become the most exciting endeavor of my life. I pray that every child of God will feel the passion and the vision He has for each one of us and know the unspeakable love of our heavenly Father for all of His children.

Talking Squirrels

By Gene Groner
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

Don’t you love to watch them run and play,
Having fun in the sun on a cold winter’s day.
A springtime delight, what a show they display,
Digging and hiding nuts so they will stay.

They’ll find them again when the snow starts to fall
And the young ones are hungry,
And to old ones they call,
“Please bring us some nuts
To our tree, if you will, so we won’t be so hungry.
We might even fall.

“We’re especially fond of the hickory nuts,
But the oak’s, they will do if you don’t mind at all.
We hope we don’t have to ask you again,
For surely we’ll perish from our tummy’s great pain.

“Little ones, big ones, they all taste the same.
Squirrels beg for the nuts, and they call them by name.
Big nuts, little nuts, any nuts at all—
Just bring us the nuts or we surely will fall.
We don’t want to perish. We know you’ll come through.
In time for the spring, the nuts we will chew.”

SALLY-SUE HUGHES AWARD NO. 3 OF 3

Vietnam Dreams

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

Yes—the dreams.
They do not seem to come
as often.
They still arrive even though
not wanted.

They are not dreams.
They are nightmares.

Hot Dogs and Sabres

By Charles Ray Hood

VA Medical Center—Columbia, MO

She stood head down, not wanting to be seen.
Hot dogs and soda were sold to pay for others to have fun.
She had flowing black hair and a lovely smile.
Sweet as honeysuckle and much more fragile.

He was arrogant and strong, a leader among men.
His sabre was gleaming in the sun and even shined
under stadium lights.
Tonight was Homecoming; neither of them were King or Queen.
Thought he would guard them on their walk.

She didn't even see him, but he saw her.
He even told his best friend,
"I'll marry her someday.
I'll marry her someday."

They dated for a year but he was still a boy,
not grown in his mind as he looked in body.
She began to see who he was on the inside
and he became scared.
So walk away he did, making sure she would hate him.

Life went on, time marched by, he married another.
But she wasn't the girl he was in love with.
She wasn't the girl selling hot dogs.
He just wanted to be her sabre bearer.

July, 1990, Kuwait is attacked.
Patriot is called up to serve; his battery will be the first to go.
He calls her to say, "I'm sorry."
He asks nothing in return; he just wants her to know, "I'm sorry."

She doesn't accuse or berate; both would be deserved,
but just says, "Come home; be safe."
She forgave his stupidity and foolishness.
She wrote to him and helped keep him sane.

On his return they become one.
Two are one; two become three in a year.
Three will become four and then five by the third year.
Saudi never left their home,
but her love fought harder than any war.

It has now been thirty-two years
since we walked down the aisle.
Not all years were great, but many were fantastic.
October 21st is the day hot dogs and sabres came together
to make ripples in the pond of life.

The sabre is a little bit rusty now.
The shy young girl is now bold and strong,
but just as beautiful.
The three babies are grown, independent,
and just as strong as their mama.

Last Wish

By Lawrence W. Langman

—Portage, IN

I sit here, a dreamer upon a stone,
pondering vastness of being alone.
Watching the heavenly stars above,
contemplating life's things thereof.
Night turns to day as this axis turns;
love turns to hate when an ego spurns.
The tides ebb and the rivers now flow;
hearts will break as strength grows.
Knowledge is power, food for thought;
honor and pride are skills to be taught.
A shooting star streaks through skies
as I ponder a wish through open eyes.
So many things in need of this wish—
people and nations deserving such bliss.
I seek inside for answers to my query
as my eyes become heavy and weary.
As a light bulb appears above my head,
ideas of grandeur and fears I do dread.
As my head grew heavier and lights fade,
I made my decision, heavy heart weighed.
I wished for all minds to be at eternal rest,
either dead or alive. This was my final request.



What's Scary

By James William Miller
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

With our toil and sweat and tears,
Christmas is coming.
That reminds me of this:
A man in an aisle
alone was shopping
in that aisle.
It was not known if
there were other
shoppers in the grocery store.
But a little boy came
up to the man he didn't know,
and reached out for the man's hand.
The little boy said,
"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,
are you ready to go?"
Rose Kennedy said,
"Be good to your children.
You never know who they will grow up to be."

One, Two, Challenge

By Trina M. Mioner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

Giving of yourself—
Start the morning
Exercising the spirit
With meditation and thanksgiving.
God is not an afterthought;
She is a priority.
Remember to play;
Play replenishes
Like a breath of fresh air,
Like a cool drink of water.
It is good.
Duplicating and recreating
The beauty of the universe.
Challenge one:
Seek God.
Experience the joy of giving.
Challenge two:
Allow the joy of play
To permeate.

Insight

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

The people should not have
A representative who has less wisdom
Than that of a jackass, donkey, imbecile, or fool.
Nor should they have one
With less intelligence than that of a snail,
No pun intended for creatures of God.
We expect more from political leaders;
We expect a greater display of intelligence
From our fellow human beings.
No political leader
Should be one spreading alternative truth
Which is basically a lie.
No political leader should be spreading
Division among its citizens
By means of
Hatred,
By means of
One being superior over another,
One being outclassed by another,
One living in sickness, disease and poverty,
One living within insect- and rodent-affected areas.
Any political leader
Taking actions such as these
Doesn't help and assist their citizens,
But divides them, degrades them, punishes them
For their economic condition.
Such a political leader
Does not value the office
They have been appointed to.
Beware citizens! Take off your blinders!
Don't be razzle-dazzled!
A political leader such as this
Is only thinking of themselves
And their close associates.
You may reap some benefits
From this action.
But watch closely; pay careful attention
For the actions
From this political leader
Will do you great harm,
Ultimately destroying you
By the great power
You have entrusted them over you.

Scotty, the Retired Veteran

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

Scotty, the retired veteran, was labeled as “mentally ill.”
All of the psychiatrists tried to make him take a pill.
When he refused to do so, they forced upon him injections,
locked him away in isolation, away from healthcare inspections.
Instead of erupting in anger, he asked for paper and pen.
Endless tests and observation wearied him over the years.
When he eventually returned home,
he comforted himself with tobacco and beers.
He became an alcoholic, misunderstood in every way.
He wanted his normal life back;
he’d often fold his hands and pray.
Rumors about him were abundant;
he wanted to prove them wrong,
so he decided to write this catchy Rudolph reindeer song.

Then one fall, unexpectedly, his brother came to live.
Scotty said he’d take care of him and he loved to give.
Now he’s no longer lonely; he quit drinking and smoking, too!
They are both rebuilding their lives, often helping others, too.
How do you get rid of a label that you do not agree with?
During this Christmas season, that would be a cherished gift.

Note: To be sung to the rhythm of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

I’m Not

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

I’m not a monkey if you please;
I don’t swing at all or at ease
On a far-away high trapeze.

So if I sneeze
And begin to wheeze,
It’s only the autumn leaves
As they flutter in the breeze.

The Manger

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

A manger in the countryside,
a peaceful site chosen by God and blessed.
Humble? Perfect!
God, Mary and Joseph did all the rest.
A bright star, shining in the heavens above,
guided them with God’s love.
Jesus, the Savior, was born in a barn.
Like my mom used to ask me
when I forgot to close the front door. I meant no harm.
There actually may have been a little drummer boy
who also grew up poor in an observant home.
To play music for the Savior, he was willing to roam.
Then came the moment: Jesus Christ was laid on the straw.
All of creation, animals included, watched in awe!
The Savior was born, lived and died.
He’ll return shortly; open the doors to your heart—wide!

To Prancer

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

My little proud Prancer
With feet like a dancer,
Through turmoil and strife,
Was the joy of my life.

There was never a bird
Nor a bunny she shooed
That wasn’t a good meal
To be cooked and stewed.

But, as time flew by,
A glaze came into her eye.
She was no longer an eagle,
My proud prancing Beagle.

And yet in my heart
We’re never apart,
My little proud Prancer
Who danced like dancer.

U.S. Infantry Soldier

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

The most fearless fighting machine
ever devised by mankind.
Such a soldier will never waver;
he will never stop fighting.
To surrender is incomprehensible;
it's not part and never will be
in his vocabulary. He trains to fight.
Anticipates killing, eradicating, annihilating,
completely decimating the enemy
by any means necessary.
Peace is always preferred by every soldier,
but war brings all who oppose us
only two choices: surrender
or face mass destruction with extreme prejudice.
There can be no other way,
not for the Infantry Soldier.
That is the dilemma for many of us
who have been in the infantry.
It's difficult for most of us,
turning off the killing machine.
The killer Instinct remains with us
for the rest of our lives.
I'd rather die on my feet with a M16 in my hands
than to ever surrender to any foe.
This is my motto; this is my life until I die.
A word for the wise:
never violate an Infantry Soldier.
You may never live to regret it.

We Must Remember

By CJ Reeves
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

We must always remember
That Jesus knows best
When he takes our loved ones
Where they will find rest.

Confused by a Muse

By Lynn A. Norton
—Leawood, KS

What is this shuttered place, devoid
of shadow, reflection. Cloaked from
the blaze that illuminates worlds?

*You're inside my head. Darkness
helps me think, create. Owls and cats
need flashlights here. Who are you?*

*I am a literary muse, one who
inspires, encourages writers to hew
their visions with word and phrase.*

It's an honor to be visited by a muse.
But you may have come to the wrong
address. I'm a sculptor, not a writer.

You have much in common. Each
is aroused by compelling ideas,
makes preliminary sketches, renders
raw material until images emerge.

That's an interesting comparison. I'm
intrigued but feel like a little kid with
a new bicycle. How do I learn to ride it?

Try composing your thoughts in forms
like haiku. Wield pen and tablet
as chisel and rasp. Sculpt contours,
flourishes in language as your medium.

my pen carves poems
pliable as clay
or rigid as stone



Hello, Goodbye

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

To say hello takes but a minute, maybe even less.
To say goodbye can take forever, this I must confess.
I met him back in Basic Training; he said his name was Phil.
We suffered through the heat and dust, courtesy Fort Sill.

The DI said, “From this day forth, he’ll be your battle buddy.”
He had a southern drawl and his face was square and ruddy.
He came from Alabama; his dog could hunt and track.
By the time we finished Basic, I knew he had my back.

After schooling we shipped out to Afghanistan.
We became inseparable in the fight against T-Man.
When we had some down time, we’d talk into the night.
First Sergeant often said that we were “drumhead tight.”

One day while doing recon, I heard a sniper’s round.
A second later I turned around, saw Phil hit the ground.
We knew that this could happen, but not to him or me.
I escorted his body home, still not twenty-three.

The ceremony’s over; his family has gone,
but I’m still there the next day, chilled by the morning dawn.
For hours I did my best to say goodbye to Phil.
Perhaps I’ll just make friends with the fact I never will.



Make It Stop

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

I want my life to stop hurting me.
All I feel is pain, heartache, misery, anxiety
and suffering.

Day after day every day,
depression, anger and hopelessness,
self-doubt, worthlessness and fear.
Make it stop. Please just make it stop!
I want to rid the demons in my head.
Satan has crept in and infiltrated my mind.
I don’t want anyone’s sympathy;
all I want is for it to stop.

Too many memories, too many thoughts
all tangled up.
What is this huge mess?
Things moving forward from my past.
I don’t know how much longer I can last.
Now stop, just stop. I just want to shut down;
I don’t want to think anymore.
It’s just all too much.
I can’t keep taking it; it must end.
Stop, I beg you.

This cannot be normal, can it? Wait—why not?
I’m not crazy; truly I’m not. No, I’m not.
Make it stop. That’s all it will take.
I want to go back before the memories
and all of these thoughts, before all of this mess,
before I was forced to leave normal,
before I lost my sanity, before I went crazy.
No, I’m not crazy, not at all crazy. No! No!
Don’t do this; just don’t think.
Clear my mind.

Stop! Just stop. Please make it all stop!

That Energizer Bunny Don't Have Squat on Me

By Richard Wangard
VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

And Going And Going And Going And Going!
Let's see! Who is the enemy?
Men, women or children?
Flying without weapons, dirt strips,
Waiting on parts as Army guys treat me like Gold!
Oh, so what! The officers never got their booze!
Stitched again by 762 x 39.
Nobody hit except the 80 on board
As we flew for the hospitals!
No, no, that Bunny can kiss my ass!
Home? What home?
Hated, discrimination, garbage, humiliated.
All we had was each other!
Three million of us. Now 600,000 left!
See chemicals did us up! Agent Orange,
Not pot or morphine.
Screw off bunny! I will run you right over!
I got an HD on my desk,
A picture of my riding partner and me!
Wayne, first Cav, Infantry.
Purple Heart and Bronze star he has!
'67 and '68. Me later, '69 and '70.
We ride our PTSD off! Look out, Bunny!
We '75 and '72 still going strong! Inseparable brothers!
With the ability to take your drum
And put it where the sun don't shine! Old?
Ha Ha Ha Ha!
After what we went through? Are you kidding?
We talk every day!
So pound your drum bunny! We got your back!
You're part of America—a battery marvel!
Know what a battery of 175 millimeters can do?
So light up some kid's toy this Christmas!
And Go Go Go!
These old 'Nam vets got the home front
So you can do your thing!
Just remember you don't have squat on us!
And Going And Going And Going!

To My Very Special Friend, Betty

By Diane Wasden
VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

There are no wheelchairs, canes or roller aids
in Heaven.

There's no need for you to use them there.
You can leave them at the Golden Gates.
No longer will your body ache.

You'll be walking and skipping
and, believe it or not, even running, too.
You'll see loved ones that you haven't seen
in such a very long time.
In your mind you thought that they forgot you.
No longer will you feel sorrow, pain and suffering
that have caused you so much grief.

I can't wait for the day we'll be walking and enjoying
God's Golden Streets.
Betty, I'll wait for you. I hope you wait for me.

No, there are no wheelchairs, canes or roller aids
in Heaven, Betty.
It's a place that sets your mind and body free.
Just one touch of the Master's hand
can erase all the entanglements
that you feel inside and out!

Just keep yourself moving along.
Tomorrow's a brand new day to pray.
Keep Jesus in your heart
and your eyes on the cross.
And when that day shall come
and Jesus reaches His hand out to you,
don't be afraid. You're blessed.

When you reach the Golden Gates,
drop that cane with all the other wheelchairs,
canes and roller aids.
Why? Because there aren't any in Heaven!
Welcome to God's Heavenly Home!

Mail Call

The VA Secretary, Denis McDonough, announced the launching of a new VA site, www.va.gov/VSAFE, to combat fraud, scams and predatory practices. The website provides veterans with educational videos and avenues for reporting fraud through the VHA's Office of Integrity & Compliance Helpline, 866-842-4357 (VHA-HELP) and VA's Benefits Hotline, 1-800-827-1000.



Katie Maxon, Chief of Voluntary Service at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, Iron Mountain, Mich., thanked *Veterans' Voices* for copies of the magazine for residents of their Community Living Center. "They love to read the submissions from fellow veterans," she said.



On behalf of the Topeka VA Eastern Kansas HCS patients and staff, **Denise L. Cunningham**, wrote to extend appreciation to *Veterans' Voices* for the magazines for veterans to enjoy.



Matt Davison, Long Beach, Calif., writes, I was just thinking about *Veterans' Voices*, and lo and behold, the latest magazine arrived in the mail. I am so moved by the recognition and inspiration you offer veterans by providing an outlet for self-expression. Those of you associated with the magazine are a blessing who need to be recognized for the joy and fulfillment you provide those who served. As for myself, I'm busy getting book reviews and reader comments for my new book, *Lost & Found*. The Vietnam Veterans of America gave a good review...and reader comments have been good as well. Thanks for the magazine and for all you do. Editor's note: Matt is a regular contributor to *Veterans' Voices*.

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 last 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.

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 \$10,000 or more

Gifts of \$3,000 or more

Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.

Gifts of \$2,000 or more

Gifts of \$1,000 or more

Carol Habgood, San Antonio, Texas

Lynn Mackle, Palm Beach, Fla.

Gifts of \$500 or more

Gifts of \$300 or more

Chris Iliff, Overland Park, Kan.

Gifts of \$200 or more

WAC Veterans 33, Northern Virginia

Rich Wangard, Neenah, Wis.

Dan Yates, Blue Springs, Mo.

Gifts of \$100 or more

DAV Auxiliary, State, Dept. of Alabama, Prattville

Lynn Norton, Leawood, Kan.

Dominic J. Palmieri, Syracuse, N.Y.

VFW Auxiliary 2673, Cody, Wyo.

VFW Auxiliary 7687, Chesapeake City, Md,

VFW Auxiliary, 8586, Perrysville, Ohio.

VFW Auxiliary 10624, Mt. Pleasant, S. C.

Marianne Watson, Wheatland, 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.

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

Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



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

Instructions for Writing Submissions.

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

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

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

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

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

Guidelines for Local Contests.

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

SUBMIT ONLINE:

www.veteransvoices.org

SUBMIT BY MAIL:

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

QUESTIONS:

support@veteransvoices.org
(816) 701-6844

Mail Submission Sample.

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

Author Name _____

VAMC Name _____

VAMC City, State, Zip Code _____

Author's Permanent Street Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

Branch of Service _____

Conflict or Era _____

Approximate dates served _____

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

Date Submitted to *Veterans' Voices* _____

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

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

Writing Aide: _____

Typist: _____

Heal Through Visual Art

Watch for your artwork in a future issue!

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

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

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

Instructions for Artwork Submissions

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

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



Submit Today!
For a Future Issue

Calling for
Photographs,
Drawings and
Paintings



Artwork Submissions

Online or By Mail

www.veteransvoices.org

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

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

Clarion Award Winner

The magazine, published by the Veterans Voices Writing Project (VVWP) since 1952, is this year's winner of a Clarion Award from the Association for Women in Communications. *Veterans' Voices* took first place in the category of External Magazines – 100,000 or less circulation. The Clarion is a 50-year-old national award program with over 100 categories.

Sheryl Liddle, president of the VVWP Board, said, "The judges acknowledged the *Veterans' Voices* publication as being representative of what the Clarion Awards stand for – excellence in clear, concise communication."

The two organizations share a historical link. Theta Sigma Phi was the original name of the Association for Women in Communications. In 1946 when Elizabeth Fontaine began the VVWP program for veterans, she and other women who helped her were Theta Sigma Phi members. In 1952, Margaret Sally Keach and Gladys Feld Helzberg were also Theta Sigma Phi members among the group of women who helped them begin publishing *Veterans' Voices*.

"We at Veterans Voices Writing Project are thrilled that an organization with a shared history has now honored *Veterans' Voices* with this Clarion Award," Liddle said.



Veterans' Voices magazine has added a prestigious national award to its growing list of honors.

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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816-701-6844 | www.veteransvoices.org





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Write to the editors, so we can
share your letters in Mail Call.

VeteransVoices.org

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