

VETERANS' VOICES®

**Writing as a Courageous,
Healing Act**

By Karl Menninger

**Life Was Simpler When I
Carried a Duffel Bag**

By George S. Kulas

Beating Heart

By Charles Ray Hood

**The Healing Power of
Sharing Your Story**

**VA Office of Mental Health and
Suicide Prevention**

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VeteransVoices.org

DR. KARL MENNINGER
Noted Psychiatrist and Author
IS OUR GUEST EDITOR



VETERANS' VOICES has persistently brought to light some of the thoughts put to paper by our veterans. That wonderful man, our beloved Omar Bradley, urges in his article that every veteran try writing something even though he thinks he can't. I agree. Many people who have become great writers didn't think they could write. And some people try, but get discouraged too easily. There are thoughts in everyone which would be better shared by other people, and one way to do that is to put them in writing. Now it's been made easier for us all. Why not take advantage of the opportunity?

**THE CRITERIA OF
EMOTIONAL MATURITY**

HAVING the ability to deal constructively with reality

HAVING the capacity to adapt to change

HAVING a relative freedom from symptoms that are produced by tensions and anxieties

HAVING the capacity to find more satisfaction in giving than receiving

HAVING the capacity to relate to other people in a consistent manner with mutual satisfaction and helpfulness

HAVING the capacity to sublimate, to direct one's instinctive hostile energy into creative and constructive outlets

HAVING the capacity to love.

William C. Menninger, M.D.
1899-1966

About Dr. Menninger:

Dr. Karl Menninger has been a member of our National Greater Services Committee for years. His new book, "Whatever Became of Sin?" emphasizes the thought that religion should solve many mental problems if the clergy of our country were bolder in speaking out on sin.

Writing as a Courageous, Healing Act

By Karl Menninger

I am not a therapist or a veteran. While doing research for a course I teach on the Vietnam War, I came across memoirs and novels by Vietnam veterans that are outstanding examples of therapeutic writing. These men had to tell their story, as much for them as for an audience.

In his book *The Courage to Write: How Writers Transcend Fear*, Ralph Keyes talks about writing as an act of courage. His discussion of how professional writers have constant anxiety while writing and how they overcome their fear (of being exposed, rejected or ignored) to put their words on paper (or in a computer) sounds in some ways like what I understand to be the feelings of soldiers before going into combat. Just as the combat veteran had to deal with anxiety and fear while serving, he or she may also confront those feelings when starting to write – about their experience, their feelings or their fears.

Overcoming those fears and expressing one's self in writing is an important step in dealing with those emotions. The books of three authors, all of whom are Vietnam veterans, provide outstanding examples of how writing can be used to tell a story and deal with traumatic events.

Karl Marlantes grew up in rural Oregon and went to Yale. He went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. While there, he decided to enlist in the Marines. He served as a second lieutenant in the 4th Marines from October 1968 to October 1969. In the 1990s he was diagnosed with PTSD and started writing a novel. He eventually wrote 1,600 pages. Later, he re-wrote it and reduced it; 35 years after his service, he completed *Matterhorn*, which was published in 2010. The main character is Lt. Mellas, who has a similar background

to the author's: grew up in the Pacific Northwest, enlisted after attending an Ivy League college. The *Matterhorn* is an ammo dump. In the course of the novel, Lt. Mellas' platoon takes and retakes the area, achieving nothing. The novel deals with issues such as the ambivalence of killing, the randomness of survival, the military bureaucracy and the burden of command. This is a novel, so the author is not setting out facts. The thoughts of the main character may be similar to those of the author's, but they are not set out as his thoughts.

Telling one's story in the form of a novel allows the author to be less concerned about the facts as they actually happened and more about the feelings and emotions they wish to examine.

John Musgrave grew up in Independence, Mo., and volunteered for the Marines in 1966. He served in Vietnam with the 1st and 3rd Marine Divisions from 1966 to 1967 and was medically discharged due to his combat injuries. His memoir, *The Education of Corporal John Musgrave*, was published in 2021. He tells his story of his enlistment, training and time in the field. He also tells of his life after discharge. How he came very close to suicide but was saved by the realization that his dog cared about him and how that led to him devoting his life to helping other veterans with similar problems.

Musgrave's memoir is his story with the facts and feelings as he recalls them. Often the process of expressing those feelings on paper (or a computer) is a step toward dealing with them. He has also published volumes of poetry, another form of written expression that could allow persons to express their feelings.

Tim O'Brien grew up in Worthington, Minn. He served in the Army with the 23rd Infantry Division in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. O'Brien has written both a memoir *If I Die In A Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and a novel examining his experience in Vietnam. *The Things They Carried* is a series of connected vignettes about A Company. One of the characters shares some of O'Brien's background, but it's not clear if O'Brien's experiences in Vietnam were that of the fictional characters. O'Brien makes a distinction between happening-truth and story-truth.

Regardless of the type of truth that is in the story, these writings show how veterans can tell their story and in doing so, take an important step in coming to terms with their darkest fears. Tim O'Brien says that stories can save us. Telling that story in whatever way one is able to tell it is the first step toward healing.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Karl Menninger grew up around therapists because his family was part of The Menninger Clinic, a world-famous psychiatric facility that was in Topeka, Kan., from 1925 to 2003 and is now in Houston, Texas.

Mr. Menninger is a lawyer who spent most of his professional career in state and federal government agencies dealing with persons with disabilities. He volunteers at the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Mo.

Veterans' Voices®

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VVWP

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

History

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

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The editors reserve the right to edit copy for grammar, clarity, accuracy, style and length, as well as cultural and personal sensitivities. The editors will not publish AI-generated writing. By submitting writing for the magazine, authors and artists agree to these conditions.

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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A Small Window

By Tanya R. Whitney

VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

A small window to the outside world. Surrounded by hundreds of pounds of metal. Will all this protect me, or will I die inside this tin can, a metal hull of a coffin?

My mind races, scanning the inside of this tin can, watching as my crew members get ready for the coming battle. The tension mounts as we wait. Is it possible an implosion will come before an outside explosion strikes? This small window to the world limits my vision. My point of view is confined to what is directly in front of me. This narrow scope does not allow for mistakes or miscalculations.

The expectation of battle did not include this tin can of death or this war for world domination. Yet when my number came up, I reported as a dutiful son, leaving the farm, with its wide-open spaces, with room to move, able to see the world in 360 degrees. Where one could feel the cool breeze at night through the wide-open window.

My small window now only brings scenes of death and destruction. Images that will never leave or diminish. The savage sights and stomach-churning sounds of men dying, screaming in agony with their last breaths. Fighting machines that now sit smoldering pieces of junk lining the open fields. Do the others see what I see? Are they limited by their small windows? Do their hands tremble on the controls in anticipation or fear?

From the small window, I can tell it is now time. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country. My sister repeated that so many times as she



practiced her typing. Will she see the irony of it? I do, but then I'm the one sitting here in a smoky tin can coming to the aid of my country.

The commander gives the order to flip down the flap on the small window. We can no longer see, literally. I am in the dark, relying on directions and rote memory. The coppery taste of blood on my tongue flows from where I've bitten a hole in my lip. The tin can begins to squeak and groan as I shift the gears. The tracks rumble as they move the tin can across the field in a race for victory. Adjusting the controls as the commander calls out directions, I barely hear the sounds of the gun crew loading the cannon as we charge across the terrain. I move the tin can into position and brace for the recoil. Only time will tell who wins the battle.

Sweat begins to pour down my face as I strive to follow commands. It's a struggle to do what I'm told as the "flight" part of a flight or fight response tries to take control. The battle rages all around as I drive blindly through it. The gun crew loads and re-loads the cannon as fast as it can. We are now firing on the move. The acrid sulfur stench of gunpowder causes my stomach to lurch in an attempt to expel the bile rising into my throat. The call-outs of the commander

over the percussive bangs can hardly be heard.

The heat of the battle is no longer a metaphor. The tin can has become an oven, getting hotter as each minute passes. My mind tells me to open the tiny window. Let in some air, and let out some heat. I reach for the flap but

stop as a sudden jolt rocks the tin can. I'm shifting gears, trying to get it to move, but it doesn't move. Then I switch to reverse, and again nothing. The inside of the tin can is now eerily silent. The commander opens his hatch and rises to look. Amid the pandemonium of the battle, a shot rings out, and he falls back inside. I can't see what has happened to him because I can't move in the tin can. A frantic call out to him brings no response. The crew scrambles to load the cannon again. I flip up the flap. Through the small window, I face death. In slow motion, the round fired from the Panzer flies across the field. Even as the gun crew fires, I know it is too late.

Oddly, I think back to all the tin cans shot off our fence posts back home. Competing with my friends to see how many holes we could put in the cans. How high they would fly up as the impact of the round hit them.

The insidious scream of the Panzer's round grows louder as it closes in on its target. It penetrates the tin can like a dull knife through butter. It ricochets around the tin can before blasting its lethal fragments into our soft flesh. The pain and cries of death are the last things to remember. Now I sit forever in the driver's seat of a World War II Army tank—a tin can filled with holes and a ghost in the hedgerows of France.

Don't Look Down

By Zachary Space
VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

Veterans Day.

The guys and I will shake each other's hands. We'll watch a parade, have a few beers, maybe let off a couple of firecrackers. We're celebrating, not that we're veterans; we're celebrating that we are here. Being here is a big deal. Most of us didn't think that we would. There were nights back then in 1969 that going back to the world seemed too far a reach to hope for. So now that we're here on this day, we will celebrate it remembering the guys that didn't come home.

When we got back people were not nice to us. It was like they wanted to shame us for having served. I told my dad about the homecoming we all got when we first arrived back in the States, how ugly everyone was to us. I felt ashamed yet confused at the same time. I couldn't look anyone in the eye for fear I was being judged as a bad man.

I asked my dad how I should act around those who would insult me. Dad served in World War II with the 10th Mountain Division. His homecoming was so very different from mine. My dad was not a deep man. His life was simple. You do your job, love your family and keep well your faith with God. He was all about respect for others, most of all respecting yourself.

The shock of being degraded for defending my country was as much a hardship as being back in Vietnam.

My dad said, "Don't look down. When anyone tries to make you feel bad about who you are, remember who you really are. There's no shame in being the man who went with other men to protect your homeland. No matter how hard people try to embarrass you or try to blame you for the war, you hold your head up.

"Be proud you did what you thought was right. The small men who ran to hide from what men must do to be free may curse you, but they can never be you. When they stand next to you, they can only look up. Their fear of holding the line against our enemies with men of courage has marked them for who they are. You and the men like you held the gate. You guys will forever be the men they could never be. In their own shame they will call you names to hide who they are. You men can look straight ahead to a future for the people you served. That future is something they cannot see through the frightened eyes of small men. It takes the eyes of good men to see what must be done. Be thankful for having the chance to serve this great nation.

"Be grateful for the good things that have come out of your service. Never forget the sacrifice of those that went before you; it's why you're free. Your life was their gift to you. Don't waste it on things that mean nothing. Use this life to help others be as free as you are. No one can shame you; no one can embarrass you. None of them can ever be the man you are. So, my son, stand tall, and don't look down."

My dad died in 2015. He was a wise and good man. He told me many things. He taught me life lessons like how to live in the woods, how kindness was easy and that love was the secret to a happy life. He was my best pal. I have times when I'm sad or just feel low in spirit about myself or the wrongs of the world. Then dad's words will come back to me in a whisper like a soft breeze in my ear. "Don't look down."

Whenever I go fishing I take something of his with me so dad is always in the boat with me.



Soulmates

By Lawrence W. Langman
VA Medical Center—Portage, IN

Lady, let me know your love,
fire and ice fit like a glove.
Dancing into misty rains,
washing out all the pain.

Dire are things perceived,
hidden calls of what it sees.
When dost hearts prevail,
emotions deem to unveil.

Every time I say your name,
broken hearts leave in vain.
Ages seem to drag on by;
lost in pictures, tears I cry.

Missing you in my recall,
shadows cast on my walls.
I shall seek you when I pass,
a love like ours will ever last.

Hearts shall stay ever sated,
souls entwined always fated.
Holding back tears we feared,
aching for her voice to hear.

Salute to Warriors

By Arthur Ball

—Manchester, NH

Our flag is depicted in so many places:
On buildings, vans, trucks and cars.
Do you stop to think of those faces
That have seen battle's hell or bear war's deepest scars?
Oh, how great a price has been paid
To gain the freedoms we have today!
Yet because of political deals made,
We seem inclined to throw them away.
Brave warriors would turn over in their graves,
If they should view our society today.
I'm sure they would wonder if anything can save
Their beloved U.S. of A!
They were willing to pay the ultimate price
Because they were consumed by a notion
That no good thing is won without sacrifice—
Loyalty, valor and devotion.
Lives just barely begun were cut down in their prime
To provide a better life for me and you.
And the last vision of many, when it became their time,
Was our flag's red, white and blue.
As we pause to remember this last day of May,
And think of those gone before us,
We'll wipe the tears from our eyes, stand tall
and say—our many voices forming one chorus—
“Thanks to all those who have gone off to fight,
Especially those who gave their all.
We salute you for standing for that which is right,
And we honor those who did fall.”
But, as wonderful as this nation may be,
(I think it is the greatest on earth!)
There's another Kingdom of importance to me,
And it has much greater worth!
This kingdom, too, was bought with a price,
And this was Royal Blood that was shed!
The King asked His Son to make this sacrifice;
Then He raised Him from the dead.
Down through the centuries men have suffered and died
Simply for believing the Son's Word.
He spoke with authority that can't be denied,
Describing what he had seen and heard.
From a band of twelve, this army has grown

Continued On Next Column

And reached people from every nation.
Hearts have been prepared and seeds have been sown,
Yielding a crop of many salvations.
As in any war, there is great opposition
To the efforts of evangelists, pastors and such,
Causing many to give their lives for this mission,
Though they've been blessed by the Master's Touch!
And even when there has been no blood spilled,
There are spiritual battles within.
Many warriors' spirits have been killed
Because they weren't prepared to win!
Still today men and women go forth to serve their Lord,
And daily the skirmishes rage.
We've read the outcome—written in God's Word!
He promises victory at the end of this age!
Once more, we thank Him for all He has done,
And we recall our brothers who have gone before,
Who have bravely stood and seen victories won,
even though it was Jesus who has won the war!
“Thanks to all those who have gone off to fight,
Especially those who gave their all.
We salute you for standing for that which is right,
And we honor those who did fall.”

Tolerance

By Nila K. Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

Do we?
Are we doing it still?
If a citizen of the United States cannot speak out
without fear of reprisal, what does that mean?
If a citizen is not respected
simply because he or she holds a different viewpoint,
what does that mean?
If a citizen who holds a different viewpoint is actually treated
as less than, less than the fellow human being he or she is,
less than the citizen of the United States that person is,
less than the equal the law says that person is,
what does that mean?
This means as a nation we need to get back
to the Constitution of the United States of America!

Faces of War

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI



The flicker of light shone for only an instant. The terror on Jim's face was reflected back to John's. These were the faces of war when the gray of dawn broke.

They drove their vehicle into what was left of a village. Houses were flattened, and bodies were strewn about. Some faces slept with the look of peace. Others were twisted with horror.

A small child stared in emptiness as her dead mother held her close. An old man's open eyes peered toward heaven. They seemed to ask "Why?"

As Jim and John stepped from their vehicle, the sudden cracks of an AK-47 cut them down. John died holding his cross near the ambulance. Jim died instantly with the sleep of peace shining on his young and handsome face.

Decades Later

By Dwight D. Jenkins

VA Medical Center—Rensselaer, NY

Rising early, with a head full of nightmares and pain, he slips from the tent silently so as to keep her asleep, deep in her beautiful dreams. They are so different, the early riser and the late talker.

Outside, a full moon stares down at the man in the mirror, reflecting his movements in the play of shadows on the earth below. "Hello moon. I didn't know I missed you so."

He loses a full dimension in the exchange but gains a perspective: neither one is really living. The rhythms of the night and the day have been taken from him, vanished in the passage of time, the sweet artifice of pleasure and pain he was unaware of until the darkness outside lingered far beyond his liking.

"When did it get so dark so long?" He craves embers for breakfast, a reaching heat "When did it get so cold so early?"

Some Government Takeover or Other

By Melvin Brinkley

VA Medical Center—Davis, CA

If once a person indulges in insurrection, they compound this crime with lynching our duly elected representatives. And then they take in a Tiki torch parade some late summer's evening, which inescapably progresses, as sure as death and taxes, to submitting opinion pieces to the local newspapers about why accommodating Transgenders is an abomination, to daily grumbling with a fellow malcontent over coffee about the latest conspiracy contrivance. Once begun upon this downward path of insurrection, you never know where you are to stop. Many an insurrectionist can date their ruin from inciting some government overthrow or other that, perhaps, they thought little of at the time.

He

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

See the waving
Of green prairie grass in the sun.
Who makes it wave?
And when autumn leaves blow
Just like winter pelted snow,
What makes it go?
Who has it so?
He with the breath of life,
Through joy and strife,
Makes it strong and sound.
He turns the world around.
Whether the bleat of a new-born sheep
Or the litter of falling leaves
Or the flutter of wings in the trees,
It's He who blows the breath
And a life-giving breeze.
Spirit gives wind to life everlasting
Like a song that will never end.

An Alcatraz Story

By Gilbert Weiss
—Port Washington, NY

The year is 1958. The first part of the story takes place at Alcatraz, also known as “The Rock,” located in San Francisco Bay, not too far from Fisherman’s Wharf. The story to be told centers on Andrew Kane, the songs he wrote and his family.



Andrew Kane had been in prison for 18 years, leaving behind a wife and a young daughter. He was wrongly accused of participating in a bank robbery where a security guard was killed. While he had nothing to do with the robbery, the judge gave him an 18-year sentence.

Before we go on with the story, it should be noted that Andrew was a talented man. He was a writer of songs and wrote throughout his stay in prison. The years moved along. Later, in his 40s and in prison for all those years, the prison committee re-evaluated Andrew’s case based on past prosecutorial errors. In doing so, they found him not guilty. And so Andrew was finally released. Typically, he was given a stipend to buy food and find lodging.

And so it was that Andrew Kane started to look for work. After several hours, he wandered along the San Francisco waterfront, where he found a job unloading cargo. The waterfront supervisor, Angelo, hired him. They talked for a while. Andrew told Angelo that he had no place to live. Then Angelo told him about a cabin located a few miles north where he could temporarily live.

As it turned out, in this cabin, Andrew spotted a grand old piano. He was thrilled and immediately started playing,

attracting many people, both near and far. Coincidentally, a young woman living nearby heard him play. She loved to sing. She asked him if she could stop by again.

“Of course you can,” said Andrew.

“Judy is my name. What is your name?” she asked.

My name is Andrew. You have a beautiful voice, and I would certainly keep it up.” he said.

“I will,” she responded, “and may I bring my mother?”

“Sure you can,” Andrew said, “and I look forward to meeting her.”

The next day, Judy and her mother arrived. Judy introduced her to Andrew. Both Andrew and her mother did a double take. For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Then her mother said, “When did you get out of Alcatraz?”

“A few days ago,” he said.

Throughout Judy’s young life, her mother had often referred to her father. Judy could

not believe what was going on. Bewildered, she wondered if this could be true, that Andrew was her father?

It was true, and Judy sensed that her mother was still in love with him.

Her mother then said to Andrew, “Why don’t you come and stay at our house, which is not far from here. It’s your house also.”

“Well, the piano is here.” He continued, “I must do some more musical compositions. In about two weeks I will join you and Judy. Please visit. And Judy must continue to sing. She and I can work on some musical compositions.”

At that moment in time, Andrew thought he would ask Angelo if he could buy the piano.

Angelo said, “For you I’ll make a deal. How about \$100?”

“I’ll buy it,” Andrew said, “and please ship it to the address I will give you.” Andrew reassured himself that he was working and could afford to buy the piano.

So, the piano was shipped to the house. And his wife placed the old but beautiful piano by the window under the skylight in the living room. When Andrew and Judy arrived at the house and saw the piano, both father and daughter were so very happy. While in prison for a long time, Andrew wrote many pieces of fine music. Now that they had a piano, father and daughter could start working together. And so they did.

Several months later, a friend of Judy's arranged for an audition at The Heather Musical Theater in Los Angeles. Excited by the coming audition, Judy and Andrew rehearsed every day.

Finally, they were on their way to the theater. When they arrived there, they entered a large room where they were greeted at the door by a man who introduced himself as Bob, one of the talent agents.

He explained that there were two more agents. "You can see, we have a large stage. Let us begin."

Father and daughter got up on the stage. Andrew went to the piano and Judy to the microphone. Judy began to sing a medley of her father's pieces that he had written over the last 18 years. They performed for about an hour.

Andrew and his daughter were overwhelmed by the applause. The talent agents said, "You got it! You two must be the best we've seen in many years." As one of the judges said, "We believe you will be a hit. We want to represent you. The songs you sing are beautiful." They also said, "You must get your songs copyrighted."

And of course, Bob signed them up to perform in some of the most notable places in Los Angeles.

He said, "You could possibly perform in other cities, like Chicago and New York, and maybe even tour in Europe. What do you think?"

Andrew immediately responded, "We are very excited. I am going to discuss this with my wife and see how she feels about going to Europe." And so it came to be, they were on their way.

Happy Birthday, America

By Arthur Ball
—Manchester, NH

Happy Birthday America!
I am the one who gave you birth,
A unique new concept among the nations of the earth,
One continent where people are allowed to be free.
Your forefathers revered and worshiped me!

Happy Birthday, America!
Now you're two hundred and forty-eight years old,
And around the world your story's been told.
From Plymouth and Jamestown, toward the West Coast,
The westward expansion was guided by my Heavenly Host.

Happy Birthday, America!
Wars and strife, you've endured not a few,
Yet they served to strengthen and unify you.
Freely you received and freely you gave,
Proclaiming liberty to spiritual and literal slaves.

Happy Birthday, America!
Reaching out to others and getting slapped in the face,
I understand! My Son was in a similar place.
Your banner of love has oft been unfurled
As you've sent gospel missionaries all over the world.

Happy Birthday, America!
A great and blessed nation—that's what I created,
Yet now the use of my name is fiercely debated!
I sit here and watch, with a tear in my eye,
As my very existence some would try to deny!

Happy Birthday, America!
My grace and my blessings still abundantly flow
Simply because I love you so.
And I'll not reveal the depth of my pain
While I await you to seek me once again!

Happy Birthday, America!

Love,
Your Heavenly Father

Finding My Peace of Mind

By Boyd Alan Burke
—Canon City, CO



The thought of growing up with a lot of trouble and trying to find yourself can be very hard. The service was somewhat of a change in life never to be forgotten. The fact that you earned your lot while gaining or losing is a fact of life.

The need for personal cleansing can mean asking for help from the right people. They can be hard to find, but it makes all the difference in the world and makes going farther in life much easier.

I can say that going from a private concern to the VA has lifted a lot of black clouds that have haunted me for a long time. The folks there have been very caring. They know how to meet you at the door and make it an uplifting experience.

Finding myself took a little time. They helped me find a hobby that I have been able to stay with for quite some time. It is punch embroidery, which allows me to express myself, and I have enjoyed the many pieces that I have made. Giving them as gifts to those who have helped and supported me is very rewarding.

I picked a needle from those offered me and acquired three others and am now on a journey of enjoyment. I am able to get my threads from second-hand shops, saving a lot of money over the retail outlets.

I find it very relaxing, as it allows me to release my anger and frustration that had built up in the past. It has also cooled the indignation given to me by others, and I no longer look to take my anger out on others. I, like some, have found a way to express my anger while others can't or won't even try.

Understanding that you can find that release is important for you to find peace of mind.

Do You Miss It?

By Tim Brady
—Brookeville, Maryland

Do you miss it?
The salt spray on your face.
Do you miss it?
Sailing off to some new place.
Do you miss it?
The deck heaving beneath your feet.
Do you miss it?
The sea rocking you to sleep.
Remember when those guns swung round
as GQ rang so loud.
Remember how those deck plates shook
as your ship came swinging round.
Do you miss it?
As we headed toward the beach.
Do you miss it?
When the guns began to speak.
Do you miss it?
As the shells began to fly.
Do you miss it?
The thought that you might die.
Remember the call for all flank speed
as the skipper screamed for turns.
Remember the smell of hot, live steam,
trying hard not to get burned.
Do you miss it?
The smell of cordite on your skin.
Do you miss it?
The faces of shipmates,
their trust so dearly earned.
Do you miss it?
When you came through it all OK.
Do you miss it?
Knowing lives were saved that day.
Remember trying to play it cool,
your feelings you tried hard to hide.
Remember writing to your folks,
saying it was really nothing but a pleasure ride.
Do you miss it?
Standing proud in your dress blues.
Do you miss it?
Sometimes, you know, I do.

The Painting

By Matthew Davison
—Long Beach, CA

Imagine a painting come to life!
Imagine a blue/black canvas,
a glittering sky of sky diamonds
reflecting a sea of snow.

The roads are deserted
except for the appearance
of two young human beings
walking hand in hand!

He was a teenage service member
from New York. She was a young member
of the Wakkanai community.
He spoke no Japanese. She no English.
It didn't matter.

They had nothing in common.
They had everything in common.
They were human beings
in love with life.

If you searched the painting,
you might see the word: *Hoteru*.
A place to rest.

The travelers disappeared
from the painting.
Only their humanity remained
along with the hopes of more
moveable paintings to come.



God Has a Sense of Humor

By Louise Eisenbrandt
—Leawood, KS



Otherwise he would not have created basset hounds
with ears that work like a Swiffer, picking up lint and crumbs.
Otherwise he would not have created giraffes
with necks and tongues that allow them to trim
the tallest of trees and rarely suffer from sore throats.
Otherwise he would not have created great blue herons
who are so thin that you can watch their fish dinner
as it finds its way to their stomachs.
Otherwise he would not have created warthogs
with tails that stand straight in the air when they run
and faces that only another warthog could love.
Otherwise he would not have created the albatross
who runs like a 747 on a runway before finally taking flight.
Otherwise he would not have created slugs
that leave slimy trails and squish
if you accidentally find one underfoot.
Otherwise he would not have created baboons
with their hot pink derrieres
and hair-raising calls during the night.
Otherwise he would not have created blue-footed boobies
who, with feet the shade of the midsummer sky,
rock back and forth on one foot
while flapping their wings to impress the ladies.
Otherwise he would not have created penguins
who love the frozen tundra and go without eating
for months on end just to protect their eggs.
Otherwise he would not have created humans
who dye their hair orange, put holes in their noses,
paint their bodies on game day
and think that the animals in the zoo look funny.

Not a Sniff

By Dan Yates
—Blue Springs, MO

In the 1960s and 70s, it was commonplace for small towns across the United States to stay connected with U.S. servicemen and women from their communities by providing them with complimentary subscriptions to the local newspaper. For many, this was a much-valued link to home. For others, the papers were simply discarded as it might take the newspaper two weeks to reach its destination and by then any news was old news, or the service person was simply not connected to his/her hometown.

I was assigned to a small outpost in central Germany in mid-1972 and served there for the next two and a half years. Our barracks consisted of three two-story buildings, each having several one and two-occupancy rooms. I was assigned to a single occupancy room on the second floor in one of the buildings.

There were seven rooms on the second floor in this particular building. Approximately a month after arriving, I received my first hometown newspaper, the *Canton Ledger*, from Canton, Ill. My parents had told me that they contacted the newspaper office and were advised that I would be receiving a complimentary copy of the local paper for as long as I served overseas.

Several other soldiers also received newspapers from their hometowns. We would compare papers, comics, sports sections, etc., and they provided talking points about home despite being a couple thousand miles away.



About a year later I began asking the others for their newspapers after they had finished reading them. Everyone agreed, and I began to accumulate newspapers until I had two stacks, each about three feet high, in a corner of my room. Periodically, someone would ask what I wanted them for, and I'd make up some excuse that satisfied them.

Our jobs sometimes required us to travel to smaller detachments to perform maintenance, testing or modifications on weapon systems. Each trip usually lasted a week, leaving on Monday, returning on Friday. Because we were such a small unit, everyone knew each other well and pranks became a way of life.

In the spring of 1974, one of the guys on my floor, Kevin Thompson, had received orders for such an assignment. Kevin was from Massachusetts, had a heavy New England accent and was an active participant in pranking.

After work on the Monday that he left, I unlocked the door to Kevin's room. This was an easy task as the doors were all keyed with skeleton-style locks and were

easy prey. Then I moved all of the newspapers from my room into the hallway. I went into Kevin's room and unplugged all of the electrical items from their outlets. I began taking each newspaper and after opening each page, I loosely balled it up and threw it in Kevin's room.

Others on the floor saw me and asked what I was doing. I told them that I was going to "paper" Kevin's room, filling it

with newspaper from floor to ceiling and from the back of his room to the door. They thought this was pretty funny and evil at the same time. I then asked each of them to throw a piece or two themselves as this was going to take a while, and any help I could get would be appreciated. Without knowing it, each one of them had just implicated themselves in the prank.

A couple of hours later, I was slowly closing the door to Kevin's room, pushing loosely balled sheets of newspaper into the room as I closed and relocked the door. Then we waited for Friday to see Kevin's face as he tried to get into his room after a long week on the road. The only people aware of what had happened were those of us on the floor.

Thursday afternoon came, and without notice or reason, everyone on the base was escorted to our movie theater and told that Battalion was on base and was in the process of going from room to room, performing a drug raid with the assistance of drug dogs. We were not allowed to leave the theater during the search for drugs.

While everyone groaned, my mind went to Kevin's room and wondered what the

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reaction might be when they tried to open his door. About an hour later the executive officer (XO) walked into the theater and asked for Specialist Thompson to come forward. Since he was not there, the questions began flying. Where is he? Who knew what had happened to his room? Who is responsible for the condition of his room, etc.?

I glanced in the direction of the guys who lived on the floor, and each was as quiet as a mouse, knowing that they couldn't point the finger at me because they had contributed in the smallest of ways and were "party to the crime." Getting no response, the XO left. We were soon released; no drugs were found.

Later that evening in the club, our first sergeant told us that he was part of the search party, and when they opened Thompson's door, it would only open six inches or so. He said that the dog sniffed the paper protruding from the room, and the handler was in shock over what he saw. The first sergeant told us that he did his best to keep a straight face, but knew who lived in the room as well as on the floor and did his best to "play dumb."

A call was placed to the detachment where Thompson was working that week, but of course he had no idea what was going on, so he was no help. When he returned, we had a great laugh. Instead of pranking Kevin, it was our officers, Battalion and the dog that had been pranked.

That was the talk of our outpost for the next week. No one seemed to know who did it. No one had a sniff.

Reflections in the Mirror

By Rhonda Chavez

VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX

When I look in the mirror,
the first thing I see are my sad blue eyes
looking back at me.
Then I see the wrinkles and all the loose skin.
All I can do at that point is simply cringe.
I'm way too hard on myself.
I need to teach myself a lesson
and remind myself that getting older is a blessing.
Some people don't get the chance to grow older.
I need to accept the new me
and not hide under a boulder.
Be proud of who you are
and how far you have come.
You've overcome many obstacles.
You no longer have to be one.

Me

By Rhonda Chavez

VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX

I wore a mask; it was yellow like the sun.
I had rosy cheeks and a smile for everyone.
But on the inside was the thing I couldn't let show,
dark and scribbled just a wild tornado
pretending to be all together,
pretending to be something.
I felt never so afraid to let anybody see me
'cause all I ever wanted was just to belong.
So I had to lose myself just to play, just to play along.
But on the inside I never did feel seen or heard.
So I just stayed quiet and never said a word,
pretending to be all together,
pretending to be something.
I felt never so afraid to let anybody see me.
This is who I wanna be, whatever this is.
This is how I wanna feel and how I want to live
'cause I've got so much love to give.
It's time to let go and forgive me
and stop pretending to be all together,
pretending to be someone I was—never.
I'm not afraid to let anybody see me.
And after all these years, ain't it nice to meet Me?!

Goals on My Joining the Service

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

First and foremost when I joined the Women's Army Corps in 1975, I had every intention of retiring (20 years) by the age of 39.

I joined while I was a senior in high school on the delayed entry program. Thinking back as a 19-year-old, I must've been a pretty determined young lady to set such a goal. The main thing was, I wanted to finish something I started.

I did, however, have a number of other reasons for joining the service. I came from a tiny little town in upstate New York. I was wondering if there was anything else out there for me. This drove me to explore my options. I was told in high school that I was not college material (I did not fit their academic mold.) However, the service did indicate that I might be able to receive an education of some sort, either through training that might be useful after my time in service and/or I might be able to pick up some college credits along the way.

One of my main concerns was not to get stuck in traditional roles, such as being a farmer's wife, having 10 children and running the family farm. I had much bigger plans for myself. The army was not necessarily my first choice; I originally thought of the Peace Corps, wanting to do something good for other people. Then I thought of the Marines, mainly because I liked their uniforms. However, thinking more about it, I just didn't think I was tough enough.

I joined the Army, or I should say, thought I joined the Army. I actually joined the Women's Army Corps, which was completely segregated from the Army

during this time, one step short of being a nun. We were proper young ladies. We were not allowed to be married or have children. If you had already had a child prior to joining the service, you were required to relinquish custody until your time of service was complete. Additionally, if there was some reason you ended up pregnant for any reason you were dishonorably discharged, considered to be not fit for active duty.

However, everything changed in 1978. The Women's Army Corps disbanded this branch of service, and we were equal in every sense of the word. This included my contract with the Women's Army Corps. I was now part of the United States Army. I was asked if I would like to stay in. I had every right to get out because the Army had changed the contract with me, but that would not have fit my original plan. I had only served three of my intended 20 years. Therefore, I changed contracts and continued my journey toward my ultimate goal.

We now trained side by side with our male counterparts, in my case at the Army post office. This is where I met my first love. However, getting married was not necessarily an easy task because I had to get permission from my company commander. I guess that's what is meant by "If the Army wanted you to have a husband, it would've issued you one." We had to go through counseling and get his approval before I could proceed to the altar. This also gave me the opportunity to get out of the service if I desired. Again, I had to sign a new contract to continue my service on to retirement.

Another minor obstacle would come the next couple of years when I got pregnant. They offered me the opportunity to get out

of service AGAIN. But this still did not fit my plan. I want to continue with a husband and with a child.

I had a second child in 1984, and again they asked me did I want to get out because I was pregnant. They really had a hard time transitioning from the old Women's Army Corps, and they really did not know how to treat women in the standardized Army.

I said, "What in the world is wrong with you? Don't you understand I wanna serve my country? I want to retire."

And that exactly is what I did. I ended up being stationed for over 10 years in Germany during the Cold War, providing military intelligence with a detour to Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991.

Within those 20 years, I traveled the world. I found out there was more to see than a little town in upstate New York. I learned life skills that were transferable; I can run a post office from top to bottom. I walked away with an unmatched skill set that helped me be successful in my next mission of becoming a civilian.

Turns out being a spy comes in very handy. I had the opportunity to get an education, I actually completed over 200 hours of college credits while on active duty, and I would complete my bachelor's degree in community human services after retirement.

What did they know? Looks like I was college material after all. Just think what I could have done or been. Nevertheless, I ultimately retired in 1995, just as I had planned, at the age of 39.

Wilderness Solo: My Bond With Nature's Spirit

By Donald Dillman

VA Medical Center—Lincoln, NE

What did I see:

Life, death, wind, trees swaying, grinding one another.
Death supporting life, life supporting death,
new growth, new beginnings, foliage, earth floor with droppings,
brush and flowers, birds, tree breaks, limbs on ground,
flies, mosquitoes, ants and bees.

Aspens and Spruce (pine) growing together
untouched, natural, primitive. God's creation.

What did I feel?

Peace, healing.

In earth's natural home, I am alone with peace, tranquility,
spiritual healing: the purpose of wilderness.

One plant growing next to another,
no pride, no selfishness, no racism, no separation or segregation
because of species, color, size, bush or tree.

All blend harmoniously together; cohesiveness
bonding as brothers in a natural form.

There is no war, animosity, hatred or boundaries of separation.

Male, female—no gender discrimination.

A dead leaf falls to the ground,
blending within the blanket that contains many seedlings,
with dead branches, tree bark and animal remains
that will make up the compost nutrition for new life.

A cycle of reproduction that only you can see
from the experience of being part of the wilderness
and what it means for our own self-healing.

The cycle of life exists in the forest.

What a beautiful creation our Lord has created.

Let's not abuse, destroy or hinder its existence.

Man's contribution is "not to obstruct this natural cycle."
Nature talks to us through the breeze that sways the trees,
the flies that are curious about us,
the ant that crawls on our leg
and the mosquito that wants some food.

There is no stopping the cycle of life that is in the wilderness.
The spirit of the forest talks, sways the branches with its breath,
shines light down for growth, gives rain for the thirsty ground,
making the nutrients for food for our friends—the forest.

Healing by the wilderness—a tree scrapes another,
saying hello, welcome to my forest.

The wind, the breath of life, also says hello.

The fly buzzing says hello.

The forest can supply the needs of our friends,

the animals. Then what more do we need?

Our needs are met with its edible growth, shelter for our abode
and communication with the spirit
that is the Father of the Wilderness.

I finalize my connection with the wilderness spirit
to lie down, looking up.

How amazing to see the canopy of treetops, the sky
and the wind (breath) moving the trees.

I felt a connection; the forest is my friend.

I cried; I did not want to leave.

I will return to my friend again,
remembering the solitude and solo time spent.
Peace, Brother. Live on.

More Than Any Written Rhyme

By Dennis Edward O'Brien

VA Medical Center—Wilkes-Barre, PA

To know you're not a person who forgets
the importance of taking care of our vets.
In this time of the virus, we have seen
what it means to keep their rooms clean.

Housekeeping is more than a job;
for the caring of others, you don't rob.

It's criminal what's going on;
you're one of the ones we count upon.

At the risk of life by yourself, now,
along with the nurses, you know how.

How you care for others in your own way,
you see beyond the sadness of each day.

Before the situation of these times,
your sacrifice is what one finds.

You'll not be forgotten by one and all;
to offer help you never stall.

In all the hospitals, these are trying days;
the front line leaves us all amazed.

You show what it means to love someone's life;
the chaos of it all leaves us questioning strife.

I sing this song of praise for you,
always thankful for all you do.

You're the unsung heroes of our time;
you deserve more than any written rhyme.

Your song I'll sing for you.

The CLSP Party

By Charles Bremicker
—Minneapolis, MN

The Congregate Living Services Program (CLSP) threw a party for the residents of my high rise. It was our holiday party. Thirty people, the same gang that used the community room a lot anyway showed up.

A singer/impersonator entertained us. He was an older, handsome, robust man, with a good head of white hair. His wife sat in the corner as he set up his synthesizer, amplifier, sign and guitar.

The sign said, "Bill. A Party of One." He was, indeed, that. He played an electric guitar and accompanied himself on his synthesizer. He had a gentle voice and looked healthy for a man his age.

He knew a lot of Buddy Holly music, and we tapped our feet to "Peggy Sue." I was the only one in the audience who lived my life to the songs he played, but many of us heard them before. "Peggy Sue, Peggy Sue, pretty, pretty Peggy Sue," we sang.

He switched to Frank Sinatra, donning the same style of hat Frank wore onstage, and sang "New York, New York" as we swayed in our chairs. "If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere," we sang. Bill played songs we all sang to.

Sandy, a woman who sought therapy for her anger toward life and won, showed up and coaxed us into clapping along to the music. She was animated; she either loved a party or was embarrassingly overdoing things. We all joined in her infectious spirit. She celebrated her victory over herself wherever she went.



We sang Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline, life has never been so good" and swayed our arms in the air to the music. Bill got us to sing along and do the "Ba, Ba, Ba" part to his prompt. "Neil Diamond?" I asked the man next to me. "How corny can you get?" But we loved it.

Bill took requests, too. I yelled, since I sat in the back of the room, for "Pretty Woman" by Roy Orbison. Bill put on sunglasses, Orbison's trademark, and began singing to the women in the audience. "Pretty woman, the kind I'd like to meet," he sang. He kneeled next to one of our women and crooned to her.

The attention embarrassed the women, but we did not care. He moved from woman to woman, holding his portable microphone and singing to them. "But wait! Is she walking back to me? Yes, she's walking back to me. Pretty woman!" We roared with approval.

He took a request for Johnny Cash and sang "Folsom Prison Blues." He put on a black cowboy hat, Cash's emblem, and sang, "I hear the train a coming; it's rolling 'round the bend. I haven't seen the sunshine, since I don't know when." That's how we

felt about the high rise. "I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die. When I hear that whistle blowing, I hang my head and cry." Some of us, myself included, would die in the high rise.

CLSP put out cookies and apple cider on a table, and I had six oatmeal cookies and two cups of cider. There was a bowl of Chex Mix, too, which we ladled onto our plates. Our CLSP supervisor

handed out little pieces of quiche lorraine, too. I sat at a table with Harvey, who was an opera and ballet buff, but even he enjoyed the singer. "He's very genuine," he said. "Down to earth."

The man sang "Staying Alive" by the Bee Gees, and we began to dance. Sandy started first, always in a celebratory mood, and Gary, a Marine who suffered a brain injury, joined in. Gary was not an inhibited man; he could dance, and he jitterbugged with our CLSP cook, Ellen. She joined him on the dance floor when she saw he had some moves.

They bumped and grinded to the music until they felt they overdid it, and Ellen went back to the corner of the room to watch the rest of us having fun. She loved us, and it was a pleasure for her to see us enjoying each other. She had some moves, too.

I asked Darlene to dance. She was a shy lady whose granddaughter joined us for dinner on occasion. She and I got on the dance floor, held hands and moved around to the music. Neither of us was sure of ourselves. I told Darlene it was years since I had danced. It was years for her, too, she said.

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Cellphone cameras flashed as CLSP employees took pictures of us to show to their bosses, friends or families. I was not sure which. The success of the party guaranteed doing it again next year, and the photos were a basis for a budget request. It was the best party I ever attended and was worth recording with pictures.

Then the singer gave a tribute to veterans. I was a veteran, and this got to me. The music was in remembrance of the Civil War. Bill started with "Dixie," and I wondered how the African-Americans in the audience took it. "I wish I was in the land of cotton," he sang. "Old times there are not forgotten. Look away. Look away. Look away, Dixieland."

I looked at Gloria, an African-American friend of mine, for her reaction. She listened attentively. "In Dixieland, I'll take my stand, to live and die in Dixie." Gloria was born in Mississippi.

Then Bill switched gears to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." He strummed the guitar slowly and gave the music the reverence it deserved. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." I began to weep. I was a Vietnam era veteran and could have died because of this song, I thought.

Our CLSP manager put her hand on my shoulder, rubbed my back and said, "Thank you for your service." Never did these words sound so sweet. Her gentle hand rubbed my back, and I felt a pride in myself I had not felt in years.

Bill pulled a cord on the sign that displayed his name, and an American flag unfolded. It stood prominently behind him. He was unabashedly patriotic, and, at the end of the party, I introduced myself to him as a veteran. His eyes held mine as he shook my hand.

The party ended at dinner time. The singer was with us for an hour, but the afterglow of the party, for some of us, lasted all night. Dinner was a chicken breast and mixed veggies. I plugged in my laptop, began to write, and resumed my life.

When Death Comes Calling

By Louise Eisenbrandt

—Leawood, KS

I surely hope that I get a day or two
to clean off my desk and wipe the kitchen counter tops.
I'd hate to leave a mess.

I would like a bit of dark chocolate,
or, if I'm going anyway, a lot.
It must be accompanied by a well-chilled flute
of the best Prosecco.

I will need time to do a final posting on Facebook,
something casual like, "Goodbye cruel world.
I'm off to check out heaven."

I surely will do an email blast
to each of my contacts with a similar phrase.

I would prefer to die near family and friends,
preferably after completing another exotic trip.
Maybe Patagonia, though dying while in Patagonia
would make getting me back difficult.

I would be ecstatic if one of my books
made the NY bestseller list just before I sign off,
but that's asking for a miracle.

I would need a few minutes to explain to my grieving husband
how to adjust the thermostat in winter
and work the sprinkler system in the summer.

For other aspects of home maintenance,
I have a great handyman and a Rolodex of workmen
from painter to electrician to critter control.

I really must have time to kiss the grandchildren,
review my memorial request
and approve the music and obit photo.

But given time or not, I have no plans to go soon.
It is said that it is better to wear out than to rust,
so I'll keep writing, speaking, loving and giving.
I see no immediate end to my bucket list.

Knee Replacement Roomie from Hell

By Arthur M. Hibner
—Albuquerque, NM

I had the roommate from hell for three days of my stay for a knee replacement at the VA hospital some time ago. He was rude, demanding and self-centered, almost to the degree of being a sociopath.

It started off well enough. He was already in the room when I got out of post op. After the post op people got me settled he introduced himself. “Hi. I’m Michael .”

“Well, I’m Michael Hibner,” I replied, “but it won’t be a problem, as everyone here will call me Arthur.”

We chatted for a while, reviewed our military pedigrees and then, being tired, I signed off for a while.

Before too long, though, I realized there might be a problem. He was loud. And hard to understand. And he assumed that everyone that came in the door was at his command.

Late that afternoon one of the maintenance guys rolled a third bed into the room. Being a four-bed room, I was not surprised by this. But after a few minutes, they rolled it back out.

Michael was still a little groggy from his anesthesia, I guess. Other than snoring and trying to get out of bed and falling down a few times, he wasn’t too noisy. I got a couple of hours sleep; I really didn’t expect more than that anyway. However, I was a little peeved when he turned the TV on at 4 a.m. Did I mention that he was loud? That’s often a sign of not hearing very well. Anyway, he turned the volume way up, even though the TV had a closed caption function.



I’m not sure what surgery he had, but I think it was also knee replacement. Soon after breakfast, our Physical Terrorist showed up with a couple of knee flexing machines and some walkers and went to work. At least she did with me. He was in too much pain for PT. I never saw him use the knee machine or do any PT either. However, any time a nurse came by, he wanted attention...and drugs.

He kept his antics up throughout the day Thursday. Every time someone came into the room he requested attention. It didn’t matter if it was a nurse, an aide, a doctor or a visitor, even if the visitor was mine. Like my wife.

A conversation went thusly:

Michael: “What’s your wife’s name?”

Me: “Priscilla.”

Michael: “Do you think she would do something for me?”

Me: “I imagine she would if she could. But you’ll have to ask her.” A few minutes later Priscilla went over and asked Michael what he needed.

“Could you put my leg in the flex machine for me?”

“Oh heck no.” Priscilla told him. “You need to call your nurse or aide. If I put your leg in that machine and it hurt you, you’d probably sue me.”

All day Thursday Michael called for help. I usually couldn’t hear the conversations, but nurses and aides often came away from his bed with frowns on their faces.

Thursday evening finally came around. I was hoping for a quiet

night but was fairly sure it wasn’t going to happen. I was right. When Michael wasn’t groaning, calling for help and falling down on his way to the bathroom, he was snoring.

In the wee hours of the morning, my nurse came in the room with my meds. I’ve forgotten her name, but she was a sweetheart. She was tiny, probably around a hundred pounds. She was, I’m guessing, in her sixties, and she had a quiet manner of speaking.

And, of course, as soon as she walked in the room, Michael demanded that she come help him. Her response was, in a booming voice I hadn’t heard before:

“No! I’m not your nurse! Use your call button and call YOUR nurse!” She may have been diminutive, but she wasn’t a bit diffident.

Another sleepless night. Again, the TV came on at four in the morning. It looked like Friday was going to be a carbon copy of Thursday. But, good news! Michael told me that he was going to be transferred to a rehab hospital sometime during the day.

So far you’re probably thinking that Michael sounds like a grumpy old man in a lot of pain with very limited people

skills. But Friday afternoon got really weird. About three o'clock Priscilla and I overheard the following exchange:

Michael, to a nurse: "Would you watch me pee in the urinal?"

Nurse: "Uh, no!"

Michael: "It won't bother me."

Nurse, as she's walking out the door: "It would me."

Then about four o'clock an aide came in the room to take my vitals. As she was taking my blood pressure, Michael yelled at her that he needed his urinal emptied. She said she would do so as soon as she finished my vitals. Michael then threw his urinal against the wall, splashing urine on the floor and privacy curtains. It did get the aide's attention and postponed my blood pressure check for a bit.

About five o'clock I heard Michael telling someone that he thought he'd stay in the hospital Friday night and move to the rehab hospital on Saturday.

Instant depression on my part.

However, I guess he didn't tell anyone in authority, because a nurse and a guy with a wheelchair came through the door about six o'clock and rolled up to Michael's bed.

Instant elation on my part.

"Oh," said Michael, "I've decided to wait until tomorrow."

Depression.

"No" said the nurse, "You need to go now. You may not be able to get transportation on the weekend."

Elation.

"Okay," said Michael, "I'll just wait until Monday."

Super depression.

"Nope," said the nurse, "the rehab place may not have a bed for you on Monday. You're going now."

Super elation!

Michael didn't want to sign the discharge papers. He didn't like the wheelchair; it was going to hurt his leg; he needed a different one. But a half hour later they rolled him out the door.

"Michael, *semper fi*." I told him as he was leaving. I didn't like him much, and I do think he had serious mental issues, but he was a fellow vet and had put his time in with the Navy and Marines.

Friday night was blissful. No snoring, no groaning and no TV at four in the morning.

I don't know what I expected of the staff in post op at the VA. I'd only had two stays in hospitals prior to this—once in Long Beach Naval Hospital when I was still in the Navy, and a few years ago at the West Los Angeles VA Hospital. I recall their staffs as being fairly indifferent.

That was not the case at the Albuquerque VA. Every nurse and aide, and even the maintenance people, were extremely helpful and nice. Priscilla says it's because they really liked me. Maybe so, and maybe because Michael was such a stinker, I seemed so low maintenance in comparison and they went out of their way to be nice to me.

I got out of the hospital on Monday. They didn't put another bed in my room until just before I was discharged. I guess they thought I'd paid my dues.

Different Genders

By Rosalie Cooper
—Cuba, NY

We took an oath
The same as you.
To this country
We promised to be true.

All over the world
We traveled far and wide,
By air, land and sea
With you by our side.

In peacetime or wartime,
We were there
To do a job
And do our share.

You get honor and respect
When home you return.
It is honor and respect
That we must earn.

Our genders are different;
Our goals were the same.
Your name is John;
My name is Jane.

Flow of Life

By Tony Nguyen
—Wichita, KS

Enjoy life in all its parody,
Even with unpredicted paths.
Handle with care when in jeopardy;
Be wary that it can splash.

Cherish the times of peace;
Hold it dear to the heart.
Know that no side wins
The cries for those torn apart.

From the violence of war,
Be it children or the old,
Wishing death takes no more.
Forever changed, blood runs cold.

Dark Scar

By Anthony Franco
—Montrose, NY

He put off the trip to DC for years.
When others asked him why, he answered,
“Too busy, don’t have time, can’t get away.”
All the while knowing he’d have to go.
Now for no known reason, he planned his trip well.
Arriving at night, he stood long, alone.
And with the first rays of day, he began to walk the wall.
He walked its length, turned, started back,
slowly reading the names, searching for those left behind,
images of their faces flooding his mind.
Halfway back he stopped
and, from his field jacket,
took his ribbons, medals and dog tags.
And, kneeling, placed them on the ground.
He stood, bowed his head to offer up a silent prayer.
His shoulders began to twitch, his back arched,
he leaned into the wall, placing the palms of his hands
against the dark scar that cut into his soul.
He then cried, the cry so long denied.

I’m Writing From the Trenches

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

My life is at stake.
Let this war be over with for God’s sake.
Let there be no more killing.
Let there be no more blood.
May the bells of freedom
forever close the gates to this flash flood.
The only form of communication,
there were no phone lines,
just handwritten simple letters.
Try to get it through and avoid the mines.
I pray I make it home all in one piece.
Until then, my love,
pray for this war to cease.

Homeless Veteran

By Forrest Everts
—Deering, NH

The sidewalk felt like a bed of rocks
As I climbed into the cardboard box.
It’s not much, but it’s all I need.
I can pick it up and going is no deed.

If I had the money I might get a room.
It would be better than a box, but not a home.
Moving around from place to place
Brings solitude, the only escape from the race.

A church group gave me a cup of coffee today
For friendship and a Bible; they expected no pay.
Everyone else seems to take and want more,
Everything possible to knock you down lower.

I’ve had a few jobs and went off to a war,
Had a lot of ideas that never went far.
So here I am and I hope it won’t rain.
This box is not warm and does not have a drain.

In a couple of months, when it starts to get cold,
I’ll get rid of the cardboard and head down the road.
It’s been said that living is just a test,
And all you can do is hope for the best.

You need to be careful with life on the street;
You’re never quite sure of the people you meet.
For some, life is just a catastrophic event;
Many others never figured out what it meant.

The goals of the young are faded away
As life speeds along with each passing day.
The worn-out and defeated just try to get by,
Struggling through while failing to try.



Poem to My Fallen Warrior Son's Dog

By Leland Gamson
—Marion, IN

Jake, what does an old dog dream about?
Do you dream about when you and Nate
would play soldier in the nearby woods,
him wearing parts of my old Nam uniform,
telling me you two were in the K-9 Corps?
And when he became 18, you would both join up for real?
I could not explain that to him when he turned 18.
You would be too old for the K-9 Corps,
just like I could not explain to a six-year-old
what war is really like.

When his guard unit was called up,
I think he knew what to expect
when he gave you to me for safekeeping.
But that did not stop him from being as eager
to go kick butt as I was when going off to Nam.
Jake, you still get up when you think you hear Nate's truck,
returning him from the Iraq War.
While in the closet, his dress uniform, not aging like you,
Stands ready for him to put on again,
just like you are ready to go trot off
with him again into the woods.

Maybe if enough of Nate's body remained
after the IED blew up his Hummer,
we could have had an open-casket funeral,
and you would have been able to sniff his remains.
And in your dog's way of understanding,
know that he was as dead as the squirrels
that fell from your chase.
Jake, do you know that you are old,
and you are only going to grow older?
And it is only going to get harder for you
to get up and harder for you to smell
what is left of Nate's odor on his uniform?
Do you know that you are going to die?
And that I am going to die soon, too,
because Agent Orange is aging me fast?
So we are the same age now.

Heaven is easy to describe to a dog.
It is a land where you and Nate can run
and explore together deep in lush woods,
swim and climb and leap without pain.
Heaven is a place where you do not need a collar
or a leash, and young men and women do not need dog tags
because nothing is going to run you over or hurt you.
In Heaven, no one gets separated from their unit.
Dogs do not lose their masters,
and parents do not lose their children.

Meet Me in Pittsburgh

By Paul David Gonzales
VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

Meet me in Pittsburgh.
We'll stand atop the highest street,
look down to where three rivers meet.
The barges of coal no longer float the Allegheny;
time has washed them away.
We'll ride the inclined trolley up the mountain,
then back down to town.

The steel mills are vacant now;
the furnaces no longer billow steam,
iron ingots no longer hammered flat.
The city is over that.
We buy our steel from foreign lands,
a trade taken from American hands.
Rails carry the ghost
of mighty trains they once carried.

Hard hats traded for technical headphones,
men left wondering what to do,
no calloused foot to fill those steel toed shoes.
Silent whistles to start the day no longer blew.

Families left without a clue;
steel is no longer the city's glue.
All that was I no longer know.

Meet me in Pittsburgh and help me see
what will never be.

Working to Stay Alive

By Kimberly Green
—Fort Smith, AR

Working to stay alive
When many of my shipmates did die.
Thrown into a sea of oil,
Days floating in the sun, we broiled.
Out of 900 sailors, 316 survived.

Working to stay alive.
No food, no water, surviving the sea swells.
Shark attacks left sailors disemboweled.
A group of 80—soon would be 17—
Survived from that group.
Woe is me.
We wanted to live and not die!

Working to stay alive.
Some went mad and killed themselves,
Praying to God that soon there would be help.
Planes, when they spotted us, saw boys for miles.
Upon rescue, those still alive, did smile.
Surviving the unimaginable and going home
Gave us that drive.

We worked to stay alive.

Take the Keys

By Karen Green
VA Medical Center—Las Vegas, NV

If you see someone who's drunk who intends to drive,
take away their keys. You may save some lives.
So many innocent people are killed
when drunks are on the highway.
Some deaths could be avoided
if someone had taken the drunk's keys away.
The drunk person may get angry
if someone else takes control,
but if you don't, the consequences could take its toll.
If you allow someone to drive
when they had too much to drink,
if they get in an accident, you would feel bad I would think.
When a person is drunk, the alcohol alters their sight.
Their reflexes are slow, and they aren't thinking right.
Don't hesitate to step in and do what's right.
Hopefully, someday the drinking person will see the light.

Today There Is No Reason for a Detour

By Kim Gwinner
VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

The way my demons are affecting me—
Right now, they pretty much are letting me be.
But since they are not bugging me as much,
Is it because I'm keeping my foot on the clutch?
I'm waiting for them to show their nasty faces,
But it feels like they are in cyberspace,
Like they are waiting to attack,
Cruising around in their Cadillac,
Just waiting to meet me on my healing avenue.
If they do, what is it I'm supposed to do?
My avenue is a one way, one lane.
To my soul, it is the main vein.
Today there is no reason for a detour.
I don't want to put the metal to the floor.
I'm wanting to take the scenic route
Because that's what my life should be about.
Stopping when I want to, taking in life's beauty,
That now feels like it's my duty.
There's no foul weather today so I can drive,
Just allowing my soul to be alive.
Breathing freely and making it count—
For this, I can't place any amount.
It's more precious than bars of gold.
Today my soul can't be sold.
I, in the past, have let that happen, sadly.
But in my defense, it happened in a state of being madly.
I know excuses are a dime a dozen these days,
But I pray it's a genuine stage and not a fake phase.
Because of this feeling, I'm enjoying today.
I want to stop on my healing avenue to take time to play,
And to giggle and have a good time.
That is what I'm hoping to find and make it mine.



Love Story

By Rhonda Chavez

VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX

Let me tell you a love story.

It's not your typical love story. Not like in the movies or the love songs. I learned the hard way, like all of us, that life isn't like that. There are people who think only of themselves and not the damage they do to others. There are people driven by sinister motives who do heinous things. But there are people who endeavor to protect you from dangers you see and from dangers you can't or don't wish to see. There's a love story there. Let me tell you.

In sixth grade, I declared that I was either going to be an FBI agent or a teacher. This was the beginning of a lifelong love affair; even though I didn't know it at the time. Eventually I joined the military serving as military policeman. I earned a bachelor's degree in political science. I left the military and earned a master's degree in teaching history. I worked in education for a few years until 9/11. Duty called, and I entered public service.

As I've gotten older, I've felt guilty for not being there at significant moments in the lives of my family and friends over the years, all while I was away in Asia, South America, Texas, New Jersey and all the other places I've been. But then I think that even when I was there, I didn't say or do enough. I've had to face the fact that I'm not good with people. I'm not good with small talk. I'm horrible with names. My memory is faulty. I can be intense. I often don't know what to say or do in those moments when someone I care about is troubled or suffering.

Then I started to realize that in sixth grade I must have known who I was and how difficult it would be for me to relate one-



on-one with people, even those I loved. If I couldn't emotionally wrap myself around those I cared about to protect them, why don't I find another way to love? So, I joined the military. I became an educator. I entered public service.

I had fallen in love with freedom and the documents that protect it. I fell in love with pieces of paper. With words. With the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence. I was an idealist when I was young, and I've retained much of that love of a better world. But I also realized we have to live in the world that is, and there are and always will be evil people in it.

I've lived on three continents and in five countries. I've ardently studied history. I've learned that we can dream all we want about peace, but there will always be those who disrupt it. It could be on a large scale like Hitler or Bin Laden or a personal level like a jerk who cuts you off in traffic. Sorry to break it to you, but that will never change. That is the price we pay for having free will. The freedom to choose who you are and how you react to life's challenges.

When I was a teacher, I used to start the class by asking my students to respond to a quote. One of the ones I used was from Pink Floyd: "Did you exchange your walk-on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?" Do we focus on building our own

piece of life and concern ourselves solely with those close to us or do we focus on the larger world and the sorrows and challenges it presents?

I chose my walk-on part in the war so that others could focus more on their personal lives and relationships. Possibly because I believed I could serve you

better that way, since I felt I couldn't love person-to-person as well as I wanted to. So, I chose a life of public service. My entire life has been dedicated to loving each and every one of you. By working to protect your lives and your freedom. So that you can exercise your free will, free from oppression. So that you can express yourself freely and peacefully and learn from others who express themselves in like manner. So that you have the opportunity to become the person you want to be, and your children will be free to do so as well.

Since I met my amazing wife, Laura, I've been able to love in a person-to-person way better than I have in the past, but my challenges in that area remain. Hence, my continued fierce devotion to, and defense of, the freedom we enjoy as a result of the wisdom of those flawed but intelligent founders of this nation.

So, to those who ignore my posts, are annoyed by them, as well as those who enjoy them, know that they all really say the same thing: I love you. I'm imperfect. I'm flawed. I haven't done all I wish I had. But I love you. I love that you are free and I want your children and grandchildren to be free. Free to love. Free to think. Free to be flawed. Free to think. Free to learn. Free to grow. Free.

My Navy

By William Propsner
—Albuquerque, NM

This story starts when I was still in high school during my junior year. I had grown up in a Navy family. Watching my dad go off to work in his Navy uniform always impressed me. I looked up to my dad. He was the strength that I wanted. We would go fishing in his homemade boat many times. He even let me drive it alone once while we were in the bay near NAS Pensacola.

I can remember when I was younger, when dad came home from a Far East cruise with his squadron attached to the USS Yorktown. When the ship pulled into North Island, we rushed to see what dad came off the gangway with. We always knew he would bring amazing trinkets from overseas. Mom got her fine china from Japan that year, I think.

I remember the smell of the inside of the carrier when there would be a “family day” cruise on the ship. The smell of diesel and cleaning fluid and hydraulic fluid; mmm, what a wonderful fragrance. To someone with Navy in their blood, the smell was home.

As kids growing up in a Navy family, we had many different schools. I think I was used to it after the third or fourth school change. Especially in the middle of the school year, that I hated. I had to take a lot of school books with me to read and study while in the back seat, so I would not fall behind at the next school. No fun being a kid and having to study on a road trip. I got used to that, too.

So here I was, just turned 17 years old in January of 1971 and I was about to enlist



in the Navy. I was standing next to my dad in an office at Ellyson Field in Pensacola. Dad at the time was the leading chief of the base. And the CO of the base was going to do the honors of swearing me in.

I was so nervous. The only thing that was going through my mind was, “I hope I can make my dad proud of me.” I held up my right hand and repeated what the CO had me repeat. When I was reciting that Oath of Enlistment, I think that was the proudest day of my life. I think I had goose bumps all over.

After saluting the CO and my dad and shaking his hand, I felt that I had done something that would change my life forever. I carried that Oath of Enlistment with me all my life and still abide by it. I finished my junior year in high school and for the summer vacation, where did I go? I went to boot camp in Orlando, Fla.

Boot camp was wonderful; I can't believe I said that. But it was well worth it. Being raised in a Navy family, I already knew what to expect. I kept my nose clean and studied the best I could and tried to adjust. I truly did like the experience—graduating basic and taking my big seabag home, taking a week off then reporting for my first duty assignment after boot camp.

When I joined, I wanted to be an “airdale,” because that was what my dad and my older brother were, in aviation. I did get my aviation green stripes on my uniform. However, the Navy in its infinite wisdom, sent me to a coastal minesweeper, the USS Kingbird.

That should have been my first sign of things to come.

I reported aboard the small ship and tried to be grateful for the duty and future training for sea duty. Unfortunately, the Kingbird quickly became the inevitable “USS Neversail.” The story goes that a year or two earlier, some destroyer CO decided not to use tugs when he brought his ship alongside the Kingbird during bad weather, resulting in the destroyer hitting the wood-framed minesweeper broadside and staving in the main deck just above midship. One could go below deck and in the mess deck, look up, and where the overhead met the port bulkhead, you could see daylight. There was a crack wide enough to stick your hand through. Plus, the boat had a twisted prop shaft.

So for the time that I was stationed aboard this little boat, I stood bilge watches and dog watches and painted and learned some nifty marlinespike. That would definitely come in handy someday.

For my first year in the Navy Reserve, I did a few weekends on the Neversail, and when she was decommissioned, I did my remaining Reserve duty where I was sworn in, Ellyson Field. I couldn't visit my dad while I was on base. He was off on weekends.

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After being a little disappointed with how my Navy career was heading, I decided to 'augment' to the regular Navy, go active duty.

That was the second sign.

When I went to personnel to go regular Navy, they gave me orders to first go to Montgomery, Ala., for who knows what, then I headed back to RTC Orlando. Surprise, surprise. Yes, the Navy sent me back to boot camp. And here I thought that one only had to do boot camp just once.

So, getting off the bus, I headed directly in my clean white uniform to the only barracks that had an OOD. I explained to the guys that I had boot camp over a year ago and I was not there to do it again. I was already serving.

Not knowing what to do, they gave me a bunk. It was 0200, and I was able to sleep until 0500. I reluctantly took my time, not marching, to an early breakfast in the "boot" chow hall. Right after morning chow, I hurried over to the personnel building and explained my situation. The base had no clue what to do with me, so they placed me in temp duty at the base housing area.

Three months later, I was finally on an airplane and headed to NAS Jacksonville, Fla. Dad was stationed there in the late '50s; I was three years old then. I was starting to really get pumped up that I was going to be in aviation school, finally.

Well, letdown number three coming up.

Reporting to the flight surgeon on base, he checked my eyesight. I already knew I was color-blind.

"Son, do you know that you are color-blind?"

"Yes sir, I have known that for many years."

Then he asked what I thought was a really stupid question: "What are you doing here?"

Thinking about it now, my answer was equally dumb. "Going to A school, sir."

"No, you're not. You can't be color-blind and go to A school. The only rate that you can have is either a boilerman or a firefighter."

Thoughts of sweating my ass off in the bowels of a ship in a hot boiler room or burning up in a carrier fire went through my mind. Not knowing what to do, and not getting any advice from anyone who knew, I was devastated. So, for three months I was attached to an office at the main gate of NAS Jax until my orders to report back to NAS Pensacola came through. Worried about my dwindling Navy career became my utmost priority.

However, I didn't know what to do, didn't know who to turn to. I know I should have turned to my father for advice. He was now a master chief and had more years and experience than I would ever have. My thought was he would be disappointed that I couldn't make it.

On base at NAS Pensacola, I was attached first to the offshoot of the Blue Angels and then to the line at Forest Sherman Field. There, I was to waste away parking and fueling aircraft. I felt good that I was finally in aviation, but I was going nowhere. I had not made rate; I had not advanced. It was quickly becoming too late for me. I went to personnel and picked up the study course for E-3 Airman and began to get into the course. One thing led to another, and my mind remained on being a failure and letting everyone down who believed in me.

While at Sherman Field, I had good experiences. I got to go aboard Air Force

Two when Vice President Gerald Ford visited the base. I got to sit and have a drink and a talk with Adm. Alan Shepard when he came on base. I stood damage watch when a hurricane barreled through the base.

Then, the bad day came.

I had put in my request for re-enlistment, and it was denied. I had hoped that being able to re-enlist, I could at least get my courses in and advance like I should have. I tried twice and twice was denied. So, without talking it over with my dad (I know he would have been sad and disappointed that I failed.) I let the time run out and finished my enlistment. Honorable discharge doesn't mean anything when you fail.

After I was discharged, someone told me that I should have gotten an extension. With a one-year extension I could have made rate and stayed in. Now they tell me.

Sometimes I still feel depressed because I failed in my Navy career and surely failed my dad. Dad passed away before I could ever tell him that I was sorry that I disappointed him. When I became a writer, he told me that he was proud that I was a writer. That took away a little of the pain.

I still carry that Oath of Enlistment in my head. I am still and always will be proud that I served honorably and did earn a Good Conduct medal. No one knows that I did not make rate. I will never tell anyone my shame. I don't elaborate on my Navy career, but I tell people that I am a proud veteran. I carry my sadness and shame inside.

My pride is shaking hands of every veteran I see, and when I say "Thank you for your service" and they thank me for mine, it helps. It helps a lot.

When the Tears Don't Come

By Kim Gwinner

VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH

When the tears don't come, in my case, you better run
because the bad emotions are taking charge.
Anger, hate and rage are ready to emerge.
And I'm not at all pretty when they show their ugly heads.

On the inside, a tornado has formed,
and the gut-wrenching has begun.
The ugly monster is ready to take over and to discharge.
The me that I really am is lost as I begin to submerge.
My demons by this point have been fed.

So yes, yes! Tears, please begin to flow,
and release the emotions
that are good, brave and here to save my day,
allowing myself to release my fears as I exhale.
Deep breathing is good until I'm able to regain.

I'm left torn and weak as help I seek
from these negative commotions.
Clouds, please disperse and let me feel the sun's rays
giving me more power to stuff my monsters and demons
in the coffin I nail,
for my tears have completed the task and have released my pain.

What We Can Become

By Allyson Hargrave

—Orem, UT

Suffering through your trials,
we ask ourselves why can't we always be happy?
Why can't everything be peaceful?
Having our embrace, the true colors abound in us.
In our lives
we have every color imaginable.
Throughout our lives
the master's hand takes all these colors
and paints them on our canvas.
Happiness, pain, peace and sorrows.
We are touched by the master's hand,
enduring to the end.
Our lives become a masterpiece.

Beating Heart

By Charles Ray Hood

VA Medical Center—Columbia, MO

Cold Friday night, my world changed.
I held a twig, a speck of a child.
The first time I would be known as Dad.
I stayed up all night just watching him,
willing my love to him.
Every time he would sleep, I would watch.
I couldn't lose him.
I held him to my heart, so he would know me.
I made so many mistakes.

The second time I would be late,
not because I was lazy, but because of duty.
I held him a week later; I longed for him to be strong.
His heart would stop as he slept.
He had a monitor; it kept him awake.
I held him to my heart, so he would know me.
I kept making mistakes.

As my youngest came along, I stayed close.
I wanted to be a part of everything.
Again, I was the first to hold him.
He couldn't breathe, so again I watched.
I held him close to my heart, so I could feel him.
I loved the rhythm of his life.
I held him to my heart, so he would know me.

My God, so many mistakes; life has ups and downs.
At times it feels like a coaster ride.
There are even days when the safety bar is gone.
Hang on and enjoy the time you have.
Many of those I started with are no longer here.
Their car fell from the track and is broken.
Remember the feeling of your hearts beating as one.
Forgive yourself for your mistakes.

Officers' Country

By Gary Jenneke
—Minneapolis, MN

I'll admit it, I chafed under the discipline of military life. I did my duty, carried out my responsibilities, saluted and showed proper respect for officers. I also pushed the boundaries. I just couldn't help myself.

I was a radioman aboard a ship, a rather large ship. The radio shack was in close proximity to the officers' quarters and wardroom. Officers country was off limits to enlisted men, except for radiomen. When on duty we were allowed passage through this sacred territory to deliver messages to officers in the wardroom, in their cabins and as a shortcut to the captain on the bridge. This access gave me a close-up view of the disparity in lifestyles between officers and enlisted personnel.

I understood the rationale for military reasons, but that doesn't mean I liked it. I was young, 19, and I fought back in an immature fashion. During mid-watch, midnight to 0800, a communication officer would be in charge. A junior grade officer randomly picked. A junior grade officer who knew less about communication than us radiomen. A junior grade officer who would not be standing watch with us but would be happily sleeping in his cabin.

We'd have orders that any time an operational message or above came in, we were to wake him. This would happen maybe two or three times a night. I'd have to find the right cabin in a barely lit passageway, pound on the door until he was awake and then wait while he read the message and signed off on it.

So this is when I started playing games. Most of the time an officer would just yell "Come in!" After a while I learned where the light switches were, so I'd knock and then open the door and flip the switch before he had a chance to call out. The sudden change from complete darkness would leave the officer blinking bleary-eyed. Then I'd

hand him the message upside down. I did mention I was immature, right? The officer would blink, rub his eyes and try to focus on an upside down message. Sometimes I'd get an angry glare as the officer turned the message around, but I was pretty good at feigning innocence.

I also learned from scouring through naval etiquette that it was acceptable to salute with your left hand if the right was occupied. We were docked at the base in San Diego. Sometimes, for reasons I don't remember, maybe because of the sensitivity of the message, I would have to hand deliver it to another ship in port. I'd have a small briefcase with a message inside, and I'd carry it in my right hand. That way I'd salute any oncoming officers with my left hand. I'd enjoy the momentary look of confusion on their faces, and one even started to raise his left hand to salute back. I guess I needed those small victories.

But they got me back. One day I had to hand-deliver a message to an old diesel submarine. Once aboard I was escorted down to the officers' mess. Submariners have to be a different breed. Unlike me they couldn't be the least claustrophobic. The passageways were narrow, and there were stacks of batteries everywhere. The mess was about the size of a closet, and four young officers were crowded together in there. I handed the message to the captain, and while he studied it the whole ship suddenly shuddered.

A young ensign looked at me and casually said, "Oh, didn't they tell you? We're heading out to sea."

The startled look of fright on my face was what they were seeking, and they had a good laugh at my expense. I was so relieved when I realized it was a joke that I didn't even care. Chalk one up for the officers.

A Hole in My Heart

By Paul David Gonzales
VA Medical Center—
Albuquerque, NM

There's a crushing pain in my chest,
A piercing pain that denies me rest.

I endure not for me,
But for those who will never be.

Young men and women who died
And paid the ultimate price of war,
Now stand at heaven's door.

Their future is never more.

The evidence of a soldier's presence
Is nothing but a slight residue
Absorbed in the vapor of time.

My heart, that vital organ,
Pumps anguish over our loss.
Each chamber fills with grief
For which there is no relief.

My blood flows like lava
From earth's inner core,
Searing my spirit,
Knowing your physical presence
Is never more.

When the bugle blows its final notes,
Toward heaven your spirit floats.

I dare not question the hand of God,
For in heaven you now trod.

Your destiny was written from the start.
Your absence will forever leave
A hole in my heart.

My Family Tree

By Rhonda Chavez

VA Medical Center—San Antonio, TX

As part of my healing journey from PTSD and trying to deal with the death of several family members within the last few years, I made this family tree.

The roots are growing what I want and need most in my life: courage, learning, seeing the beauty in the world, setting goals and making progress, trusting myself, not being afraid to be me, making things happen, celebrating me and being confident.

The new branches coming up from the roots: encouragement to know that step by step I will make it; even when things get tough, I just stop to reset.

Then we get to the trunk of the tree with growth of branches: my family.

Right in the middle is my heart: my grandson, Desmond. He brings me pure joy. He gave me purpose when I felt I had none. Then there are golden hearts, my sons, Derek and Nathan, with me as the yellow butterfly between them, protecting and loving them. To me they are Precious and Angel because they truly were gifts from God.

Then there are the beautiful, colorful butterflies, my sisters who are still here: Linda, Sheila, Debbie, Maureen and Leslie. Like butterflies, they have gone

through many rebirths. They are forever transforming into something more beautiful within their souls.

Lastly, there are the puzzle pieces with diamonds, the missing pieces of my wildly crazy family: Ma, Dad, Timmy, Denise and David. I put them at the top of the tree for a reason. They are the first to get the light, the sunshine, the rain. They get all that nourishment for the other branches below them, for the rest of us to grow, enrich our lives, learn to be at peace.

Even with those missing pieces, we are still strong and sturdy, still thriving, still holding each other up.

Lost Heroes

By John Tidwell

—Conneaut, OH

There was once a hero, actually there were many.
How did they disappear? Some of us understand.
They died at the crossroads of life.
The veteran lost his empathy,
sent to wards and prisons.
Politicians want them banished.
Trying to resurrect their lives appears hopeless.
They dream nightly of a change in society.
Some of them do not want to stay faceless.
They are the weak, the politicians, the mighty.
Their hearing is closed to the words heroes speak.
They don't listen that the banished were veterans first.
Before the mental change and PTSD hit its peak,
the many were not heroes.
They were just cursed.
Now civilians say, "Thank you for your service."
They presume to think that makes life better.

He Believes Her

By Anthony Franco

—Montrose, NY

He believes her on those days
when he stares right past her,
when life jumps up at something
and knocks him back a thousand yards away.
She waits and when he's back to her,
she says, "C'mon Babe, C'mon Babe.
Give us a hug. Give us a hug."
And whispers and whispers yet again,
"It's OK. It's OK."
Everything will be all right.
Everything will be all right."
And he believes her.
When his demons snap him from his sleep,
leaving him startled and shaken,
she tells him, "It's OK. Everything will be all right."
And he believes her.

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



Solitude

Russell Nelson

— Georgetown, OH

Bird Reflection

Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center— Albany, NY





The Struggle
Russell Nelson
— Georgetown, OH



Mourning
Ty Andrews
— Lincoln, NE



Where are you?
Ty Andrews
— Lincoln, NE



Come Find Me
Wayne, Ince
— Sun City, FL



My Struggle
Wayne Ince
— Sun City, FL



Radio Hero
Forrest Evarts
— Deering, NH

Life Was Simpler When I Carried a Duffel Bag

By George S Kulas
—Fond du Lac, WI

I remember when I started out in the military and life seemed simple. Everything I owned could be carried in my duffel bag. When it was time to move on, my fatigues, underwear, socks, boots, shoes, hats, etc. were all packed into the duffel bag, which was then locked with a padlock. I guess I didn't want anyone stealing any of my stuff. Of course, if a thief wanted to, he could have simply picked up the bag and stolen all of me. Upon arriving at my new location, I took everything out of the duffel bag and placed the contents in a footlocker or wall locker in my area of the barracks, tent or hooch. Sometimes I had a cot to sleep on, sometimes a bunk and sometimes the ground. But it was my area, my home.

Only two items that I considered luxuries never entered my duffel bag; I wore them almost constantly. One was a Marine Corps ring that looked like real gold when I bought it at the base exchange immediately after I had completed boot camp. I only took the ring off to clean it and my finger of that green stuff. Then it looked good again



for a few days. Unfortunately a corpsman had to cut the ring off after I caught it on a gate while jumping off a truck at Dong Ha, South Vietnam. The mishap ripped off half my finger, but fortunately I still have both the finger and the ring.

The other luxury item was a Seiko chronograph watch I saved for in Vietnam and bought on R&R in Tokyo. It was useful for timing myself when I ran, and it held up at incredible water depths. Even though I didn't swim, it was an interesting feature to brag about. The watch looked sharp and impressive with its large face and numerous buttons and dials.

I remember vividly the night I lost it in a poker game on Okinawa. I had a full

house and thought I was a sure winner, but the hustler raised 10 bucks. I only had five. He said my watch would cover the bet. He turned over four 3s; I turned over the watch, and a lot of pride. It was a long time before I could afford to buy another Seiko, longer before I played poker again.

How things change. Now I'm retired with several pensions. I have a home, two cars and more possessions than I ever thought I would have. What is troubling is that all the possessions I have now don't seem to be enough. There always seems to be something I still want.

I still have the duffel bag. I used it for quite a while to lug softballs and bats to games I coached. I guess I have come a long way from when all I owned were necessities, a watch and a ring. But I often wish I could pack up my duffel bag and go back—back to when life was simple and clear. It was truly the best time of my life.

JOSEPH POSIK AWARD

Noise From Inside the Heart, Mind, Cage

By John Tidwell
—Conneaut, OH

Veterans Voices Writing Project Inc. What does it do for me?

Without an outlet of relief and expression. I would probably sink deeper into depression.

The Noise Inside is screaming loud and clear. Is it me? As my words dance around in my head, the Heart wants to feel peace.

If that is not possible, what else can be said.

I wait, feeling the thoughts. Nothing changes but words on pages, hoping the screaming will cease.

My mind creates the thoughts that swirl around here and there. I must express the

hidden within, quieting the ill thoughts that linger and are hard to bear.

I sit in my cage writing with my tired hand, wondering where to begin. When I do, *Veterans' Voices* sometimes prints, giving me a way out to mentally escape from my society's sins and the private noise within.

Welcome to the Suck

By Korby Lee Rhodes
—Boise, ID

The Marines of 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment are getting restless. We have been in Iraq for three weeks and haven't seen anything. We have spent our whole time in the Corps training for combat. So, with no combat there is no excitement.



The constant days of boring patrols, terrible food and lack of motivation are starting to take their toll on all of us. We have nothing to do out here except watch bootleg movies on our portable DVD players and call home using paid-for phone cards that don't eliminate the six-second delay when you actually make the call.

We in Kilo Company are mostly a mobile unit, which means our patrols are mostly done using Humvees. When we started three weeks ago, the unit was in good spirits and trying to keep it fun. We hooked a Jolly Roger to the fourth Humvee in the caravan and would blare "Ridin'" by Chamillionaire as a sort of a theme song (the lyrics "ridin' dirty" seemed to fit here). That was until the captain got wind of it and put a stop to it. "We are trying to make friends here, not enemies," he said—a statement that made no sense to us bloodthirsty Marines, because we were there to kill, not make friends. The captain didn't understand this.

Some of us have been here before, with some on their third deployment. They are hardened combat veterans of the fiercest fighting of the war so far, in Fallujah, two years earlier. Even they are chomping at the bit. Lance Cpl. Florence, however, has never been here before.

Florence is different than most. He is a security forces Marine, which means he spent his first two years in the Corps guarding nuclear weapons at some base in Washington. That is not infantry work. Any punk can guard nukes.

This is not the main reason that he is so different, though. Most of us make fun of him because he holds tight to his Christian beliefs. Back in the states he doesn't chase women, drink to excess or engage in a lot of the vulgarities that most Marines take part in. Even the ones who claim to be Christians have been corrupted, but not Florence. He is a really good guy, which is something that doesn't fit in a Marine Corps infantry unit. We all think he is soft, too nice to fight. We are not sure how he will react in a combat situation.

There are patrols going out all the time here from Camp Gannon at Husaybah, the tiny village just outside the control point of the base. The captain doesn't like having too many boots on the ground at one time in the town. "Too many targets," he says. The fact is there really isn't a need.

Husaybah is so small you can barely even describe it as a village. It's one of those places you won't see on a map in America. Just some unincorporated town you fly

through on your way to the Grand Canyon, or wherever your next family vacation is. Not that Husaybah is uninhabited. This place is packed with upwards of 4,500 people in just a few blocks. It's like a sardine can but hotter than hell.

But it is still a standard Iraqi village in the traditional sense. Five mosques rise above the rest of the ramshackle buildings to create a sort of skyline. We can see this really well at night from the guard towers at Gannon—the minarets in all their glory backlit by the setting sun, while the smoke of burning trash rises from the ashes. If this was the only view you got to see of Husaybah, you would think it was quaint.

Unfortunately, it is not. Most of the other buildings are falling apart from years of neglect and war. For the buildings that are still fully intact, you could jump from one rooftop to another because they are so close together, which we see the children do from time to time while playing.

Other than the mosques, the only building that is still fully intact is the mudhif. This is the ceremonial house owned by the local sheik to hold weddings, funerals and other important events. It is mostly made of reeds harvested from the nearby Euphrates River. The roof on this one is round, as is the inside. It reminds us of one of those tunnels we would pass through in a haunted house, minus the illusion of spinning and subsequent vertigo. The only opening is the one we go in and out of; the walls have no windows, so it stays relatively dark and cool.

The sheik showed us around when we started our tour a few weeks ago. He had done it for all the previous units as well. There is no sewer system in the village, so water tainted with urine and feces runs rampant throughout. The locals drink it; they have too. Not only is there no sewer system, there is also no running water or filtration. The locals get by with what they have.

The food isn't much better. The meat of choice around here is sheep. They raise them for slaughter on the few farms outside the city. They kill them and hang them in the city market for purchase. They bake in the sun for hours, and the unsold meat is rotten by the end of the day. But they are out there the next day selling the new meat with the old. For some, this is a livelihood, or as close as you can get to one out here.

The most interesting, or maybe more appropriately, most depressing thing here is "Gas Day." You see, there are too many vehicles around here, so the people who own them are only allowed to get gasoline once a week. It is a government rationing program, which doesn't make sense because there is so much oil around here we could take a bath in it. The government runs everything, so whatever it says goes. It is a reminder to all of us at Gannon just how lucky we have it in America.

We are heading out of the gate now, minus the pirate flag and theme music. Just four Humvees—we call them trucks—16 Marines and a desire to see some action. The Humvees are packed tight with enough ammo to destroy a small army, which is the point. They all have four large water jugs, two boxes of MREs, a first aid kit and other necessities in the trunk. The first and fourth trucks are equipped on top with the M240 machine gun. The second one has the M2 50-caliber machine gun (or "ma-deuce" as we call it), while the third truck has the Mark 19 cyclical grenade launcher. They

are getting rusty because they have yet to be used since we have been here. We are all hoping that will change.

The anticipation is overtaking us. In Truck 3, Florence's truck, Huddy listens to the radio and relays the messages. Huddy is the team leader in charge of the four guys in this vehicle. He is a private first class (the second lowest rank in the Corps) because he was insubordinate to officers and has been busted down. The Marines of 3rd Platoon love him, not just because he doesn't take crap, but because he is a hardened war veteran. This is his third tour to Iraq. He has fought in Fallujah and Ramadi and knows how to motivate troops. He is cool under pressure and knows how to coordinate an attack. Everybody under his command listens intently to his instruction.

"It looks like we are heading down by the river," Huddy says. "Company headquarters seems to think there are some smugglers down there, peddling cigarettes and other stuff. This is the time they think they are usually down there. I ain't so sure. We haven't seen them yet. Not sure what gives HQ the idea that they would be there now...bunch of idiots."

As we leave the entry control point of Camp Gannon, the evening prayer call starts playing over the various loudspeakers attached to the mosques for just such a purpose. It is dusk, so we can see and smell the smoke rising up over the town as the residents' burn their trash and bathroom waste. This is the only option they have. There are no trash bins. People have to deal with it on their own.

As we exit the gate, we make a hard left down the road that doubles as the border of Iraq and Syria. We are headed toward the river, just like HQ wants. The Euphrates has the only greenery in this part of the country, soil fertile enough for rice paddies.

But there is some grass, and the river is actually pretty clean for a third world country.

We drive through the last wadi before hitting the area near the river and make a hard right. The ground here is uneven and can give way. We almost lost a truck a couple weeks ago when it veered too close to the river and the front wheel started to slide. We know better now.

"Not sure why they have us come down here," Frenchy says. "This ground is awful. One of these times we are going to get stuck." His real last name is Hebert, but we all just call him Frenchy because nobody can pronounce that crap. We all nod in agreement at his assessment.

The river is about a half mile north of the city and flows west to east. There are very few bridges to cross over. Thus, we focus on patrolling the side we are on, the south side.

Clack, clack, clack—the distinct sound of the enemy's AK-47. It is coming from the south, from where the town is. We can hear the shots whiz by us. Then there is the distinct hiss of an RPG, and another and then another. As we dismount from the trucks and start taking cover on the north side of each vehicle, the first RPG rips through the side of Truck One. The second RPG is high, flying over the head of the gunner in Truck Two, while the third RPG blows up harmlessly several feet behind Truck Four. The machine guns have opened up at this point, peppering the field with fire. We recoup and come up with a strategy to end the firefight.

Cpl. Martinez, the squad leader, starts barking orders from the front. Truck One is completely disabled from the RPG at this point. "Get those guys!" Martinez screams.

We spread out on a line behind the trucks, preparing to rush the field. The AK-47 fire

had stopped by this point. Martinez gives the order for the machine guns to cease, and the rush is on. It doesn't appear that any fire came from the buildings in the distance. This appears to be a coordinated ambush by a small faction of the enemy in the open field. They knew we were coming. Maybe these were smugglers like HQ said. However, they were prepared. How did they know we would be coming this way? They must have been scouting us.

Dusk has turned to night by this point, and we all have to enable our night-vision goggles in order to see any movement in the field.

As the rush across the field continues, Florence sees a figure pop up out of the field just to his right. The figure clearly has a knife in his hand and is going toward Hebert. Florence lifts his weapon and fires three quick shots toward the figure. The third one pierces the man's neck and he goes down, blood spewing out of the hole in his neck.

"Frenchy, you okay?" Florence says as they go to check out the dead man.

"Yeah, I'm good. Nice shot, brother."

"All in day's work buddy."

The rush across the field is complete. An unspent RPG lies a few feet from the man Florence shot. Four enemy bodies in total lie in the field. Three were taken out by the machine guns as indicated by their wounds; the fourth was the one Florence shot. None of them made it. It's clear by the lack of backup that these were the only enemy sent to carry out this attack. They had been tossed to the wolves, knowing full well that they were going to die that day. Four enemy soldiers with limited ammo are not going to take out a squad of Marines. We all turn to head back to the trucks and cordon off the area until the cleanup crew arrives.

"Holy crap, Florence! You smoked that hadji," Huddy says. "How did it feel?"

Florence isn't sure how to answer that. His emotions were all over the place. He went from scared, to mad to...well he didn't really know how he felt. All he knew was that he had taken a life, albeit an enemy one. Should he be happy? He didn't know.

"I feel like I am going to pass out, my adrenaline is flowing so hard," Florence says.

"Don't get used to it," Huddy says. "It only happens the first time. You just get numb to it after a while."

Florence knows this is true coming from Huddy. He just doesn't know how to feel about it.

"Hey! Stop lollygagging and get your asses over here!" Martinez yells. "We got wounded!"

We all run to where Truck One lies in a pile of rubble. The gunner had taken shrapnel to the lower leg when the RPG slammed into the back side of the vehicle. Martinez is bleeding from the back of his neck, and PFC Realmuto, the gunner for Truck One, is lying on the ground when we approach.

"How is everybody? Everybody okay?" Huddy asks.

"No, Muto is dead," says Martinez with tears welling up in his eyes. "Those bastards got him with that RPG."

War is hell, but losing a fellow Marine is the worst.

"THIS..." Huddy says pointing at Muto's body and staring at Florence, "you never get used to. War makes you numb, but death scars you forever."

War makes you numb, but death scars you forever. Florence keeps running that over in his mind. Does he just mean the death

of a fellow Marine? What about when you kill someone? Does their death scar you? Florence just wants this day to be over. He has had enough.

"I already called in our position," Martinez says. "All we can do is wait now. It is going to be a long night. From what HQ said, there are skirmishes everywhere. The cleanup crew may not get here for several hours because of all the fighting. We will just have to hold tight. We are actually in a pretty good spot here. There isn't any place for the hadjis to hide except for that field, and we killed all of them. We should be able to hold our position with no more threat. All gunners mount up, and Huddy, since your truck has the hero of the day, you guys get first watch."

We are all spent but excited. We have finally seen some action, and from what it sounds like there is more on the way. Florence had wasted a guy. We couldn't believe it, honestly. The good little church boy stepped up and killed someone. That makes everyone feel better about him. There will never be a doubt about him again. We can all trust him now.

We had only been back at Gannon a few hours. We had been sitting out there for the better part of a day. It was evening again now, a day after the firefight. As the last faint light of the sun dropped below the skyline of the town, Florence continued to ponder the events of the last 24 hours. He was tired now, just ready to hit the sack, but his brain wouldn't stop racing. He had killed a guy, and he had liked it. What did that mean? Should he feel that way? He needed to reconcile those feelings, and only more war could do that. He couldn't wait for the next fight.

Unbroken

By Wayne Ince

VA Medical Center—Sun City, FL

In a world burdened with scars unseen,
A warrior emerged with a soul that grieved.
An Air Force veteran, strong and true,
But his battles didn't end on the field he knew.

Memories of war, an ever-present storm,
Haunted his mind, left his heart torn.
PTSD had him trapped in a ruthless fight,
Day after day, hiding his emotional plight.

Struggling within, he sought solace in vain,
A soldier's honor, his stoic mask maintained.
Yet behind the facade, the war raged deep.
The nightmares invaded, depriving him of sleep.

Through the wreckage of his soul, he'd roam,
Seeking refuge within the walls of his home.
His mind, a battlefield, flashbacks would rattle,
Echoes of explosions, screams and distant battle.

But within the chaos, a light flickered bright,
A glimmer of hope piercing the darkest night,
A support system, a battalion of love,
Friends, family, guiding him from above.

Therapists, counselors lending understanding hands,
Listening to his struggles, helping him withstand.
Together, they marched forward, his demons defied.
Step by step, inch by inch, they'd turn the tide.

Through art, he found solace, a creative escape,
Painting emotions, words etched on canvas taking shape.
Letters formed poems, a refuge for his voice,
Expressing his anguish, his pain, his poignant choice.

His battle still ongoing, but strength has been found,
United with others on this sacred ground.
An Air Force veteran, a soldier redefined,
Fighting for his peace, his identity to realign.

So let us honor the men and women, resilient and strong,
Who fight a different war where the scars aren't always shown.
For they battle fiercely, both day and night,
An Air Force veteran struggling yet ready to ignite.

The Memorial Wall of the Vietnam War

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center—Milwaukee, WI

Where engraved names are upon the wall,
Love and memories of the soldiers settle in us all.
Ways we remember them are within each mind.
They made the ultimate sacrifice, left all behind.

They had courage and faith in dangerous positions.
We honor them and give them recognition.
Now their names are etched into stone,
Revealing every soldier was never alone.
They fell in battle, defending life and those at home.

Behold their names upon the monument lined across,
Inscribed into the marble over the surface gloss.
We are moved by so very large a loss.
Flowers, close by the monument embossed,
Commemorate the Vietnam War, the ending of the past,
The many missing and prisoners freed at last.

Glancing upon the monument, I have no fear.
My insight is real; my emotions are clear.
While I made a sacrifice at the time,
I was a soldier of the era keeping all in mind.

Seasons

By Michelle Roxanne Johnson

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

A freshness, a new look and lease on life.
A renewed healing and the rebirth of many things.
Seasons remind me of my emotions
and my healing and transforming journey.
Winter: hunkered and isolated.
Spring: rebirth and new beginnings.
Summer: life at its fullest.
Fall: the transformation begins again.

The Hourglass

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

As I sit here staring at an old hourglass,
precious memories fill my mind.
My handsome young reflection smiles back.
Flashes of my life begin to flash before my eyes.
The sand sifts slowly through the portal.
I watch it as it flies.
I remember when I was five
and had stitches put in my thumb
from a busted bottle because I was playing dumb.
I continue to stare intently.
The years of my life slowly sift away.
Age 14 came with my first real date,
the football games I used to play.
My first car came and went,
then high school graduation.
I looked so handsome in my cap and gown.
The time I made the National Dean's List
at Clark State Community College
made me the talk of the town.
The sand keeps sinking into the bottom of the hourglass.
I remember turning my life over to God.
I remember graduating Ohio Christian University
with a Master's and getting applause.
I remember church being such a delight.
The poems were so beautiful that I used to write.
There are many joys but pains, too.
Visions flash before my eyes.
My marriage and honeymoon, I can see so clear,
my wife so beautiful and so dear.
I remember a near-miss accident gripped me with fear,
as the sand through the portal begins to disappear.
Time is so precious. I start to see the later years
with silver in my hair, my retirement,
how I began to age.
I was almost through with life as I turned the next page.
My wife passes away as I mourn at her side.
My visions become blurry; my reflection still resides.
A little old man with no teeth stares back at me, silver hair.
There's the nursing home I was put in till death came to call.
Not much sand left, my time's running short.
I see me with a cane and my body's so frail,
joints popping and cracking, starting to swell.

Continued On Next Column

A little elderly man sits on a bench and rests for a spell
in front of the nursing home he loved so well.
The most terrifying vision I see
is a casket prepared just for me.
I drop the hourglass; it shatters at my feet.
I'm not really ready to go, but I know my life's complete.
I'm in the hospital. This vision is in my head:
a little old fellow they presume as dead.
Eternity's calling and God is my friend.
Angels carry me that God does send.
VA Medical Center—

"Whoa" Is Not Me (Us)

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

We are.
We are women veterans.
We are veterans who served, did you?
We are "United We Stand."
We work well together, support each other, are a team.
We are veterans striving to lead a positive, healthy life.
Maybe,
make a difference to other veterans and their families.
Maybe,
it is a matter of miscommunication.
We don't like non-vets posing as a vet!
We don't like taking and not giving back.
Maybe,
there is a misconception of what (women) veterans are.
Maybe,
we can make a difference to other veterans and their families.
However, do not pigeonhole us.
We are survivors.
Please, we do not wish to be given handouts.
Maybe,
we just need a helping hand or a leg up, if you will.
Or better yet, let me (us) help you and others in need.
We avoid
learned hopelessness at all cost.
Promote education, building skills, coping mechanisms,
good wellness practices.
Exercise when possible and set goals.
Think,
what does tomorrow look like, dream, imagine.
Plan: what is this going to take to make it happen?

The Garden of Eden

By Gene Allen Groner
—Independence, MO

Of all the gardens that I've ever known,
'Tis the Garden of Eden that's my favorite home.
It lives near the meadow by trees and a stream.
There I leave all my cares and I take all my dreams.
It's my heavenly home and everything there
Is peaceful and calm and the weather is fair.
If the day has given me sorrow or stress,
I travel the road to the place I love best
Where I know I can find, near the trees and stream,
My home waiting there calmly for me and my dreams.
If you like, you can join me as I travel afar,
And together we'll stay there out under the stars.
We can linger awhile, maybe spend a few days
Under blue skies above and the sun on our faces.
We can mosey along past the woods and the stream
And talk about things we see in our dreams
Of laughter and joy and days filled with love
In that wonderful garden sent from heaven above.
We can stay there awhile, for a day, maybe more
Just passing the time counting rocks on the shore.
In my Garden of Eden time is endless, you see,
and whenever you want to, you can go there with me.

Sirens

By Lynn A. Norton
—Leawood, KS

Serenity is fractured on my woodland
hike. Firetrucks trumpet shrill warnings.
Hidden coyotes answer the alarm in
unison: harmonize, embellish, add haunting:
notes to the piercing chorus. Their cries
betray secret lairs, confess to bloody
feathers, smashed eggs, gnawed bones
littering the trail and forest floor.

Like spiders in the attic, coyotes go
unnoticed until spotted prowling,
browsing domestic menu items. *Small
mammals: all you can eat while supplies
last. Open all night. Dine in or carry out.*
Cartoon antics belie the coyote's true nature.
Always a hunter, poacher, scavenger.
Never a trusted companion, cuddly pet.

Love Is...

By Gene Allen Groner
—Independence, MO

Love is the way, the way to wholeness,
Offering hope and happiness,
Helping veterans of every faith.
Love is God
And loving a neighbor as one's self,
Creating goodness and mercy,
Bringing peace to people everywhere.
Love is Allah,
One of his Divine names.
Love is part of all creation
With mercy encompassing everything.
Love is Buddha,
Nourishing spiritual freedom,
Creating a religion of peace,
Also known as a Path of Love.
Let us love one another. Amen.

The Space of Enemies and Foes

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

Be wary of strangers and ordinary Joes.
If you count friends on your fingers and toes,
you're building a row of many associates,
not the space for enemies and foes.
It shouldn't matter—business big, gig or pro.
It's your title; it's who you know.
To live simply for dough
is the goal of enemies and foes.
The ladder of success presents obstacles
where choices could discern the logical.
For the "fan of man" downstairs,
everyone needs to be fair.
Try to grow from inside,
challenge yourself, have your own pride.
God wants us to know ourselves well,
to examine closely, to strive and excel.
Anyone from any nation shall reap and sow
from the space taken by enemies and foes.

Heroes

By Lawrence W. Langman
—Portage, IN

She cries at night, medals in hand,
times once spent with her man.
He was her rock, her foundation;
Without him, she's lost motivation.

He went afar to another shore;
he was all soldier to his core.
Understanding the reasons why,
she holds back the tears in her eyes.

He would always leave, then return,
letters sent, yet always concerned.
Lost in thoughts, out windows she stares;
her mind often caused nightmares.

A knock at the door in morning came;
two men approached, heart aflame.
Into a fog her mind dragged her in;
worlds spinning round, sorrow begins.

Words they did speak barely heard,
hands just shook as lines just blurred.
Waiting, wanting this moment to cease,
blood pressure rises. It never decreased.

They tell her he died saving another;
a young kid survived to hold his mother.
She always knew he was her hero.
Taps starts to play, firing 21 to zero.



The Angry Gardener

By Dwight D. Jenkins
—Rensselaer, NY

Carried along like a broken stick in a swollen stream,
I don't know my name, but at least I'm clean
as the ripples wash over my skin.
The Tigris, the Nile, the Normans Kill.
It's all the same to Him.
Listen: His word whispers warnings from the dirty hands
I see weeding pink and purpling flowers.

It's not my fault, of course. It's ours.
The Corps grew an angry gardener
in their hothouse of powers,
a man pulling weeds with unequaled gore,
driving Jen's sweet little spade into enemy roots
like a bayonet's blade,
swearing like a sailor on a ship bound for war.

Let the tares you have sown
grow alongside the wheat,
lest you injure the good
you have grown and would keep.

But I am a rebel son with a bulldozer hoe,
a shotgun rake and an undertow.
So back to the stream I must go.

Birds of War

By Donald Dillman
VA Medical Center—Lincoln, NE

They hover in the treetops,
seeking their prey in silence.
The view of a target is spotted.
Orders to wait are given; time is tense.

As darkness surrounds the night sky,
the gunner zeroes in as the target is stalked.
Movement triggers the watcher's eye.
He seeks the moment; the rounds are launched.

The team successfully scores another attack.
Completing its mission, they fly to another destination.
Stealthily through the night, they return back
while the Birds of War hover.

They bring peace to a nation.

Reminiscing Army Basic Training

By Jim Barker
—Keaau, HI

July 31, 1969.

It was almost “the merriest of times” for two fresh, naïve Iowa college undergrads arriving at H23 Company, Fort Ord, Calif. Initiation to U.S. Army life began at the Reception Station, where everyone received a “Yul Brenner” haircut and shave. As this was still the “Haight Ashbury” era, it was amazing to watch new recruits walk into one end of the tonsorial building, only to emerge unrecognizable after the shearing.



abbreviated food rations trimmed to force the more obese trainees to drop pounds, much to the dismay of the growling stomachs of the rest of us.

Ultimately, in fealty to some of the training slogans like “take the initiative,” a few of us embarked on night forays for leftovers in the cans behind the mess hall. The following day, the guardian mess sergeant may have wondered how his prized cans had lost so much volume overnight.

With no time to lose, we were all marched about frenetically by sergeants with voices about five octaves above normal speech. Then came the introduction to the wardrobe of khaki and “Lincoln” green. Everyone received a literal taste of “KP” (kitchen duty) and late night “fire watch,” even though there were no cigarette butts on the premises.

A comic memory of military life through the “Beetle Bailey” cartoon series was the image of peeling potatoes. True to form, this writer found himself commissioned and seated on a barrel, peeling an even larger barrel of spuds by day number two.

The sworn duty of the seasoned cadre was to whip into physical and mental toughness our motley population of 250 trainees. Many had been drafted from sundry social environments that nearly defied cultural anthropological definition. As we were all “fresh meat,” with virtually no knowledge of military protocol, the first basic training day was a total baptism at the mercy of the cadre. The realization dawned that personal freedom had become erased, and we were now the property of the U.S. military.

Being physically fit from a summer of rigorous irrigation work in Idaho’s Snake River valley, my twin brother Ron and I had somewhat of a survivalist edge. However, my first mistake was addressing the company commander as “sergeant,” rather than “captain, sir.” The result was 25 push-ups. Shortly after that, I realized that visibility could be a detriment, as one could be easily scapegoated and a recipient of an avalanche of corrective verbal and physical surprises.

A favorite punishment for miscreant trainees was to have them lie on their backs, arms and legs pointed skyward, confessing sins they had yet to commit. This experience was titled “the dying cockroach.”

Part of the process of creating fitness and group obedience was making all trainees crawl around the company grounds. To add spice to these events, sometimes all were ordered to place their foot lockers on their heads and tour the company perimeter. The physical regime was constantly demanding, and meal times became increasingly

One of the most dreaded activities was the “low crawl.” Twin brother Ron quickly became tagged as one of the swiftest crawlers, along with trainee Kawakami (dubbed “kamakazi”) for his speed like a gator doused with Louisiana hot sauce. This duo could slither in equal fashion to the excitement of observing drill instructors, leaving the other trainees far behind.

Many were often motivated by the able DI’s shiny boot. At one session, Sgt. Clifton was in charge of the timing. In the intensity of watching the two “speed demons” going nose-to-nose, he completely forgot to time the other flight of trainees. The solution: they were all ordered to re-crawl the course. The ensuing orchestra of grunts and groans must have rivaled the best strains of Wagnerian classics to the widening smile under sarge’s broad-brimmed Smokey the Bear sombrero.

Postscript: On the final marksman test, we two outdoorsy twins shot “expert” with M-14 and M-16 rifles, and this author scored 500 on the physical proficiency test, the only perfect score in the brigade.

Jenuati

By Charles Ray Hood

VA Medical Center—Columbia, MO

We met in turmoil in a driveway.
I told you to be angry with me
as it would come sooner or later.
You just laughed and dragonflies saw us.

Years later you married my son and became a daughter.
You were as close as any daughter could be;
we were alike in many ways.
We fished, I taught you to shoot, we enjoyed art.

Later you called me and said your family of two
would now be three. I was the first call.
Then you stayed with us to learn from us for two weeks.
We had parented different, believed different,
but you trusted us.

Later, we would talk about God and your disbelief.
I told you God had not moved; He still loved you.
We talked about your life and choices you had made,
good and bad.

You traveled with my boys and scared me
beyond measure.
Oregon was such a long way away.
I could not be there if you fell;
I was so happy when you came home safe.

You then took a job two states away; you would be gone.
My boys would stay.
My worry was no less till I heard you were safe.
I know what my mom went through during Desert Storm.

You made it home, got a position close by.
At least I knew how to get there.
Then January 2, 2023, came.

My son called; there were no dragonflies.
I will never hold my daughter again.
My grandson doesn't get to hear his mama again.
She is gone forever; I can't even drive that road.

We don't know what happened, what she did wrong,
if she did anything wrong.
Someday, I hope to ask God to show me
that moment in time.

There will never be another Jenny.
She was special beyond measure.
God, please hold her in your arms.

VFW Auxiliary

By Rosalie Cooper

—Cuba, NY

Men and women have gone to war
Through the Army, Navy or Marine Corps,
The Air Force, Coast Guard and Space Force, too.
Defending the Constitution is what they do.

Family members left at home
Worry about them in a war zone.
Some return to where they're from,
While others may succumb.

Family members then want to do more
For their loved ones who went to war.
They band together: sisters and brothers,
Sons, daughters, fathers and mothers.

Men and women then unite
To help their veterans with their fight
When they go to Capitol Hill
To endorse a veterans' bill.

The pledge of allegiance they do teach
To every child they can reach.
They teach children and adults, too,
To honor our flag, the red, white and blue.

Continued On Next Column

Roll Out the Barrels

By C. L. Nemeth

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM



Have you ever gotten into a situation that could have been disastrous, only to come out of it unscathed?

I was down in Roswell, N.M., on a service call for a customer. I noticed that he had a large amount of 55-gallon plastic drums behind his workshop. I dealt in cleaning chemicals and was always short of drums. “Take all you want” was the reply when I asked about the drums.

My truck had a service body that was 12 feet long but narrow in the bed due to the built-in storage compartments on the sides. I could only place two drums side by side laying down. I put 10 drums on the bed floor. I had a large tool box that took up the room for one drum. Then I stacked drums on top until I had a load of 23 drums. I tied them down with nylon straps and left for another service call in Santa Rosa.

By the time I completed that call, it was dark. I left the east side of Santa Rosa and headed west on I-40. The Pecos River ran directly through the center of town, north to south. I-40 curves to the northwest and starts downhill to cross the river. Then it rises again and continues west. I had checked the load of drums before I started for home. All seemed in order.

I had a habit of watching my mirror for traffic behind me. As I crossed the river, I glanced at the side mirror. What I saw was

black plastic drums all over both lanes of the interstate. Some were bonking into the air, others rolling merrily along. I pulled to the side as quickly as I could, leapt out of the cab and began running back to where the drums were still cavorting on the pavement.

To my horror, a semi was coming down the hill to the bridge. I started heaving drums off the road, but one persisted in bouncing down the road. The semi slowed, and the drum hit the front of the truck, causing no apparent damage. The driver was laughing as he drove on.

Luckily no other traffic appeared before I was able to round up all the drums and put them on the right side of the pavement. I spent the better part of an hour carrying drums to the truck, then re-loading and tying them down. Needless to say, I was watching the road ahead and glancing at the mirrors all the way home. I made it home without further incident. Instead of heading for my home as I had planned, I drove directly to the shop and unloaded my load.

When I think about what could have happened had there been cars and trucks heading in both directions with bouncing and rolling drums on the road, I still shudder. My guardian angel was with me, no doubt.

From the Warrior Within

By David R. Marchant

VA Medical Center—Salt Lake City, UT

My mind often drifts
to that moment in time
where I lost the man
I'm trying hard to find.

The battle had started,
then the chaos soon followed.
Forced to bury my fears,
trying to rescue the fallen.

No matter my efforts
I couldn't save them all.
Their faces haunt my dreams;
it's hard to let go.

That was the day
where who I was disappeared.
I left him on the battlefield
along with all my tears.

I've worked so hard
to find that man again.
Facing the pain has taken courage
from the warrior within.

Perhaps the journey isn't
about finding that man.
Just let go of the memories
and accept who I am.

The lessons I've learned
have helped me move forward.
Given me the chance to help
save the lives of others.

Requiem for a Tet Survivor

By Larry Decker
—Ballwin, MO

1968

Cpl. Clayton Deckard Lawrence, known as Clay to his Marine friends, was promoted quickly during his tour in Vietnam. He was looked up to by peers and superior officers alike for his bravery and ferocity in a combat zone. Having come to Vietnam in January, he learned his craft during the infamous Tet Offensive. He also learned something else that was to haunt him the rest of his life. He learned to hate people enough to want to hurt them and kill them. This was not something to be unlearned easily, but without the proper therapy it could grow into a thing worse than the most aggressive cancer. One incident stood out in Clay's tour of duty: the time that a Vietnamese civilian (if any of those people could be identified as such) threw a can of gasoline at him and set him on fire. This Vietnamese was considered by Clay to be his friend, and they talked together often when Clay saw him. The man's name was Nguyen Van Houg, and Clay ended up killing the man (or, in his words "wasting the gook.") He survived without any long-term disability or disfigurement, but after that incident his favorite expression was "the only good gook is a dead gook."

1969

When Clay finally boarded a plane in Da Nang to leave Vietnam, he had been newly promoted to sergeant. After arriving on Okinawa, he spent the next 35 days there in Camp Smedley Butler awaiting transportation back to the United States. When he landed at the El Toro Marine Air Station in California and touched



the ground of his home country again, he was at first ecstatic to have survived Vietnam and be back home. But then, as he received his orders and was told that he would get 30 days leave and an air ticket home, he was cautioned not to interact with demonstrators at the airport in Los Angeles. "What demonstrators?," Clay asked. "The peaceniks," the processing sergeant told him. "If you get into a fight with them you will probably end up in the brig." "What kind of bullshit is this?," Clay shouted. "Political bullshit, Marine," the sergeant told him. "I just got back from Nam six months ago. Don't you remember? Life sucks and then you die anyway. Welcome home."

At the airport in L.A., Clay got into a fight with demonstrators, but the police broke it up and let him board his plane home. When he landed and met his wife at the airport, they embraced and kissed, but in the background, he heard demonstrators yelling "Baby killers!" As he and his wife walked to the parking lot, he thought, "What the f... is this all about?"

1970

The last year that Clay and his wife spent in the Marine Corps was not pleasant because

of Clay's difficulty adjusting to the stateside military and getting along with people around him. He was not used to the stateside spit and polish and related everything he encountered to the "way we did it in Nam." He spent his last year as sergeant of the guard (24 hours on/24 hours off) or as a brig chaser. He was at first assigned to train young Marines, but after two incidents in which he hit a young Marine, he was relegated to duties that

"kept him out of trouble." In August 1970, Clay was discharged from the Marine Corps under honorable conditions and got a job in a foundry as an electrician. Clay still had adjustment problems with civilian life; he would be ready to fight at the least perceived insult. References to the still ongoing Vietnam War would sometimes throw him into a fit of rage. The worst of these fits happened during a news broadcast when Clay and his wife were having dinner with a group of friends. A small band of National Guardsmen was trying to protect property at Kent State University, Ohio, from peace demonstrators. The television was on in the adjacent room, and it was announced that the demonstrators were throwing things at the guardsmen. Clay got up and ran into the other room and shouted at the television, "Shoot the bastards, God dammit! Shoot them all." Then, when the guardsmen lost their control and actually fired on the demonstrators, Clay totally lost his control, "That's it! Kill the mother f...ers! Kill them all!" It took his wife and several of their friends an hour to calm him down. Never again would his wife and friends look at him in the same way; they all were afraid of him from that day forward.

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1975

Clay continued to have trouble with his peers and had picked up the habit of drinking more than he used to when he was younger. He did not drink on the job, but he drank a bit more than just “socially.” One day at work in April, a man was talking about the end of the Vietnam War and how it was a waste of all the lives of the men that fought there. Clay started to argue with the man and said, “You never served, you f...ing coward. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” The man got into Clay’s face and said, “Right, just what I would expect from another crazy Vietnam veteran.” This was too much for Clay and he kept hitting the man until several of his co-workers grabbed him and restrained him until the police arrived. The man he hit did not press charges, but, not for the last time, Clay lost his job. After four months of unemployment, Clay went to work in a steel foundry known for recruiting its employees from the ranks of the previously incarcerated. Clay now began to drink on the job, as his new peer group did.

1989

After losing his job at the steel foundry, due to participation in a fight that included a number of his on-the-job drinking buddies, Clay took a job at an aluminum foundry where there were fewer ex-cons but plenty of on-the-job drinkers and dope smokers. He told his wife, as he always did when he was fired, that he quit the job to better himself, but she was all too familiar with his habit of concealing the truth. His relationship with his wife was not the best, but it could still be said that they loved each other. It was his wife’s suggestion that he should go to college at night to earn a degree. He enrolled in a local college in a curriculum that would lead him to a degree in computer science. He could only take two courses each semester and still keep working, but against the odds, Clay graduated seven years later with a bachelor of science in computer science,

graduating summa cum laude no less. He eventually left the foundry and got a job as an engineer with a local food processing company. Although he was good at his job, it required him to travel a lot, and his drinking continued. Also, he was known as a man with a short temper and was regarded warily by his associates. When his wife asked him to leave this job, spend more time at home and seek help from the VA for some of his problems, he would become angry. He told his wife that he was not a crazy Vietnam veteran with PTSD and that he did not need help with problems that were everyone else’s fault. He drank, he insisted, but he was not a drunk. He had an anger problem but said he could control it. Over the years he had become proficient in the art of lying, not only to his wife, not only to his employers and friends, but also to himself.

1998

Clay was asked to leave the food processing company, not for his drinking, not because of a poor work record, but because people had become afraid to be around him. He still refused to seek help as his wife begged him to do over and over again. He did however become self-employed by starting a business as an independent consulting engineering contractor. He was good at this and was able to easily acquire clients. However, he traveled more often but was able to restrict his drinking to the hotels he lived in after work. When he was home, he argued with his wife, and their relationship deteriorated. On the other hand, since he worked for different places all the time, he was able to keep a job for a short time before moving to another. Therefore, he did not stay in one place long enough to become an irritant. He made a few friends but lost more than he made.

2008

After working as a consultant for many years and continuing his drinking and his hyper-defensive attitude, which he always

blamed on the legacy of Tet, Clay ruined what was left of his life. He came home one weekend and got into an argument with his wife. During this aggressive confrontation, Clay hit the love of his life and knocked her down. His wife was not the type of person to let this pass, but it can be said that for over 40 years she had stuck by her man in good times and bad. She had him charged with domestic abuse, and a merciful judge sentenced Clay to two years’ probation. Although his wife did not leave him, things would never be the same. Clay was very bitter about the charges his wife brought against him; after all, again, it was not his fault. Like most things after Vietnam, it was always somebody else’s fault. Clay did notice something that, had he understood it the right way, could have turned his attitude around. His wife had bought him a hat that displayed ‘Vietnam Vet’ on the front. Whenever he encountered people, wearing the hat, they would often say, “Thank you for your service.” Sometimes they would even shake his hand. Clay would think to himself, “What’s going on? Has everyone had a change of heart? Have I acted like an asshole all these years and all of the misery in my life was my fault after all? NO!! NO!! I know you’re out there somewhere Houn, waiting for me to drop my guard. Well, f... you. I’m ready for you this time.”

2010

Right before Clay was to finish his probation, he got into another argument with his wife. This time it was because she begged him to get help before he destroyed himself. He flew into one of his old rages, and this time he not only struck his wife, he put her in the hospital. As an encore, Clay got into a fist fight with the arresting officers and injured one of them severely. This time the marriage ended in divorce. The judge was not lenient after this case, and Clay ended up spending three years in jail. The judge commented sarcastically at the trial, “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

2013

Clay, at 66, was no longer able to work and lived in a one room flat by himself, existing on some savings and his Social Security. He spent his days at a bar near where he lived, drinking mostly beer. He was known among the regulars as that “crabby old Vietnam vet.” He would sit for hours, reliving the Tet Offensive again and cursing and swearing at people on the bar’s television. Most of the bar’s customers considered him an eccentric character who was enjoyable to watch because you never knew what he would do next. From the people outside the bar, the reaction to him was not as charitable. He was considered a dangerous old man by his neighbors, and children were not allowed anywhere near him. At the end of 2020 he became unable to care for himself and was put into a veterans’ home.

2025

One day, a few years after Clay was admitted to the home, a group of school children visited the veterans before Memorial Day. When some of them saw Clay sitting in a wheelchair in a corner by himself, they went over to him and said in unison, “Thank you for your service, sir.” Clay glanced at them and thought to himself, “What’s this? They are thanking me and not calling me a killer or a mercenary. Is this real? NO!! You are behind it aren’t you Houng. You’re getting ready to throw the gasoline. I’m no fool. F... me once, shame on you. F... me twice, shame on ME!”

As Clay gripped the arm rests of his wheelchair tightly, he scowled at the children. “Don’t bother Mr. Lawrence, children,” said the nurse nearby. “He is not right in the head, but it was nice of you to thank him, because deep in his heart I know he appreciates it.”

“Houng, where are you, I know you’re there.” Clay sighed.

“Who is he talking to, nurse?” a child asked.

“A person named Houng, honey,” the nurse answered. “No one knows who he or she was, but they must have been important to Mr. Lawrence.”

At 10 p.m., right before Clay Lawrence’s birthday, his heart was failing, and the nurses called for the veterans’ home chaplain. Rev. McKinley rushed to Clay’s bedside so that he could be with him before he passed. As Clay took his last breath, he gasped, “Houng....are you there?” And then Clay passed away.

The chaplain made the sign of the cross and said gently, “God bless you, brother. May you find the peace with the Lord you didn’t find in life.”

Then Chaplain McKinley looked at the two nurses and quietly spoke, “And, let us not forget: thank you for your service, Sgt. Lawrence.”



Day I Died

By Daniel Paicopulos
—San Diego, CA

I died that day long ago,
very far from home.
I lived that day as well,
seemingly unready for
what’s next. My mother’s
light came to tell
me to return, my time yet
incomplete, my tasks
not filled in full.
This life’s final pace
was not for me, hovering
then, above my mortal shell,
though self would have it so.
This turn required more.

I died that day long ago,
thought I was going home,
not sad, no fear, no swell
of clinging
to what’s here. From tunnel
bright, a chiming bell,
calling my reunion
to the work undone.
Time enough remained
for service and, yes,
pain, as well, for lessons
still to master before
this life’s final peace
brings an end to war.



The C-ration Cookbook

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

As a career infantry soldier, I was fortunate to have served all over the world. The American G.I. has a history of being inventive when it comes to improving the basic comforts of life while in the field or in combat.

C-rations were boxed canned meals comprised of various meat, vegetable and assorted desserts. Pork and beans were a special treat. Desserts consisted of crackers, chocolate, fruit cake, fruit cocktail, etc. Also included was a pack of toilet paper, several cigarettes and two pieces of Chicklet gum.

For the purpose of this offering, I will address my tour of duty in Vietnam. I had the honor and privilege to serve in a long-range recon unit and a 101st Airborne Division ranger company as a sniper. We operated in six-man teams far into enemy territory to conduct various types of missions. We did eat C-rats when in the rear area and when we were too lazy to go to the mess hall or could do better.

The problem with C-rations in combat were many. They added extra weight to a 60-plus-pound rucksack. When cooked in the field, the enemy might smell what you were cooking and become an uninvited guest. The empty cans were used as improvised weapons and booby traps against us. These concerns were widely ignored by most larger units since there were few alternatives.

In our unit, we took the best of the C-rat offerings—crackers, cheddar cheese and the small cans of peaches and such—with us. We either brought the empty cans back or buried them. For our main meals, we carried dehydrated creations that we added hot water to. We heated

them using a pinch of C-4 explosive that burned super hot and fast. If you stepped on it to put it out you could possibly blow your foot off. These meals would stay warm using body heat, then we would take a few bites when it was safe. Like C-rats, these meals were pretty bland until G.I. ingenuity took over.

Many a package from a loving mom or wife contained socks, beef jerky and various taste enhancers. More important than a recent picture of Fido were bottles of A.I. sauce, Heinz 57 and Tobasco sauce along with small bottles of spices we couldn't even pronounce.

I have seen boys, not yet men, who have been in the jungle for 90 days hunting the enemy, sit around a fire making gourmet meals out of C-ration ingredients. The recipe was simple: Add this, add that, taste, repeat if needed.

Relationships are like C-rations:

- When opened, they contain some things we like and some we don't.
- They can become extra baggage such as old affairs or past mistakes, if we let them.
- Things left behind can be used to hurt others; things buried should stay buried.
- You try the things you like and improve on them, remembering that tastes change.
- The best meal made is one shared with a friend.

C-rations are like old values, rare to find but most endearing to those who remember them. Both my daughters ate C-rations as infants, and they are so much better for it.

TH NORTON AWARD:
EDITOR'S CHOICE

Voyage of the Supremacist

By David Ludlow
VA Medical Center—Buffalo, NY

Behind his face,
there lies a place

we hoped was in the past.

But he is young,
he's much too young

to spread the web of hate he casts.

Oh, he was taught, too,
taught young to hate you.

It's an education that lasts.

As he grows and turns corners,
he schemes to make mourners.

Cold thoughts fill the sails of his mast,
for he kills when he sails;
his home port should be jail.

His ship must be sunk and sunk fast.





To a Vet

By William Shepherd
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

I may not know the sacrifices you have made or the love you have shown to our country so that all who live here could be free. Because of veterans like you, there are many things you could have done. But no, you joined the fighting force and laid your life on the line to defend Americans so others could be free and have the right to pray and pledge allegiance to the flag of the greatest country in the world. To honor a vet is my right, and I'm proud to stand next to you, to know you and call you by your first name. Thanks.

MARGARET SALLY KEACH MEMORIAL AWARD

Veterans' Voices—Part of My Recovery

By Scott Sjostrand
—Hallock, MN

Veterans' Voices, part of my recovery.
Writing poetry is very therapeutic
for me and other veterans.
When it arrives, I read it excitedly!
There are many talented vets!
When I occasionally receive an award,
I write more 'til the sun sets.
My poems are selling individually now.
Wow!
Supplements my income,
Glad I learned how to read and write.
It literally pays not to be dumb.
My health problems
took a few decades to recover from.
Now, I'm better. My mom and dad's poetic son.

I Stand at the Wall

By Zachery Space
VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

My eyes are full of tears; my mouth is dry.
I can't hear the people around me.
I only hear the voices of the dead.
They call me; they pull at me.
They are mute to all who pass by.
Only I and the men like me
can hear them cry out for justice.
On my heart are engraved these words:
My Shame, My Honor, My Evil, My Redemption,
My Lost Way, My Journey Home.
I knew them, I touched them,
I cried for them, I'm broken by them.
I honor them and those in our shared
constant battle with PTSD,
the unseen wounds of the heart and mind.
There are no Purple Hearts for us.
Our casualty in this is being forgotten.
No one speaks of it; no one sees us.
We are left to care for each other.
We are in Group; we are our only support.
We served for you.
"Thank You for Your Service" is a small thing to say,
but it carries a big message.
You didn't forget.
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall—come see it and remember.
We were the best America had; we served 1954-1975.

So This Is Memorial Day

By Paul J. Nyerick
—Granby, CT

So, this is Memorial Day. More than 58,300 names etched on that black granite wall must be remembered and honored for their ultimate sacrifice. Our nation, in lockstep, has finally recognized our suffering and has come to grips with the nightmare known as Vietnam.

I can't remember the names of those Marines who died in the mountains and jungles, fighting for Lima 3/7, except for Jessie. It would be hard to forget Jessie because besides dying, Jessie unselfishly protected his platoon from harm and was awarded the Medal of Honor. His picture hangs in the Marine Corps Museum, alongside those other Marines who were honored for extraordinary valor.

Many more combatants delayed dying, but mark my words, Vietnam killed and is still killing us at an alarming rate. I am remembering personal friends of mine who are relegated to a footnote to the ever-changing list of casualties from those horrific, confusing times. We were not prepared for the dilemma caused by the consequences of what was thrust into our delicate moral upbringing.

Two Marine friends of mine gave up the ghost last week—Kurt W. and Marty T. Kurt struggled with a glut of ailments, including PTSD caused from exposure to what were the horrors of war thrust upon us at an early age. He had been dealing with diabetes, failing kidneys and pain from all sides.

Marty dropped dead between sentences. His sudden demise, witnessed by his wife of 49 years, dissolved a lifetime of love. It all came home when a Marine presented her with a flag. That vision put in perspective the finality that will come to all of us.

I also must remember some of my friends who prematurely came to their end in many different ways from the same source. Suicide, substance abuse and diseases all link that war.

Army vet Andy L., my roommate when we came home, ate a Smith and Wesson pill that disconnected his brain in the driver's seat of his pristine Austin Healy 3000. After the deed, it wasn't so pretty. Andy was riddled with shame and couldn't live with accidentally killing one of his platoon members in a frenetic firefight. Chalk up another casualty to the fog of war.

My dear Marine friend Jack M. couldn't cope with civilization, so he gassed himself in his mother's garage, floating away into oblivion. Jack was on a downward spiral into the cavernous pit of addiction. Lifestyle choices took the lives of so many of my other dear friends. Marine Joe M. didn't want anything to do with American values. He lived outside the norm until he was catapulted from his Harley through the windshield of an oncoming car.

Army soldier Jimmy V. had no concept of reality and like so many others slowly numbed himself to death.

Marine Rick B. valiantly tried to fit in with the rest of society but couldn't escape the horror of being one of the few survivors of one the war's bloodiest battles. This highly decorated hero couldn't understand why he survived. He lived with his guilt until the day they took him off his respirator.

These friends of mine died before there was mention of a new disorder called PTSD. I truly believe some of them would still be on this planet if they lived long enough to get the help they needed.

Other friends of mine died from the invisible scourge of Monsanto's Agent Orange, Blue or whatever those diabolical fiends called that slap in the face. They unceremoniously turned that beautiful country into a wasteland. To this day, the Vietnamese people as well as we who distributed tickets of death wait until the grim reaper pays us a final visit. None of us deserves this fate.

Navy Corpsman Roland (Doc) T., Marine Lenny C., Marine Buzz H.; Army vets Mike S., John D. and Frank A., members of our Arts Council, all died of cancer. All of them were in therapy for PTSD-related afflictions. The irony is they thought the war was over for them, or at least they were coping with decades of anguish.

I would be remiss if I didn't honor the man who made the ultimate sacrifice saving my life. In a split second between life and death, ARVN interpreter Lt. Tam pushed me from harm's way, thus taking the full blast from an incoming artillery projectile. This Vietnamese hero, who wasn't just a gook, gave me a second chance at life. Without his selfless act, my name would be scratched into that wall for all posterity to mourn.

So, this is Memorial Day, let us not forget the sacrifices of the men and women who gave their all for this country, right or wrong. We must also honor those of us who may fall from the still lingering dangers ready to unceremoniously snuff us out. I am grateful I survived, but it saddens me that a new generation has to repeat what we so long have tried to forget. I am worried that our present political leaders are clueless or could care less about the lives lost over their bottom line.



Tiny (Joe)

By John L. Swainston

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

It took five pairs of socks to make the height limit
to join the Army.
Joe was thin and short.
Issued the smallest size uniform and it was too big.
Joe cut it down.
Joe's brother was KIA in Nam.
Joe joined and volunteered to go to Nam—revenge.
He was thirty-six. He managed Basic and AIT.
Except for running, Joe walked fast, always last.
Two days after finishing AIT, at his request,
he was shipped off to Nam and an Infantry Unit.
It took less than a couple of weeks
and Joe was given his nickname: Tiny.
He didn't like it, but it stuck.
At the end of the first month,
Tiny was called into the Command Tent.
The CO had a new assignment for him—Tunnel Rat.
He was issued a M1917 revolver, a bayonet, a flashlight
and explosives (before entering a tunnel).
On one of Tiny's tunnel raids,
the squad was accompanied by Vietnamese soldiers.
Tiny dropped down and everyone could hear
the sounds of gunfire.
When Tiny's head poked up,
the Vietnamese soldiers were shouting.
None of the others could understand them,
so they asked.
That day Tiny got his new nickname: Dragon Slayer.

*NOTE: Seven months later the Dragon Slayer ended
when Joe was caught in a tunnel trap. Seriously wounded,
he was sent home with a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star and others.
Joe, dead this year of cancer. Agent Orange related.*

Paint Me a River

By LoLeta Totton

—Mitchell, SD

Paint me a river with your imagination.
Let it be heartfelt with inspiration.
Paint me a river with your soul.
Hold me tight if I spin out of control.
Paint me a river with your eyes,
so beautiful, calming and wise.
Paint me a river with your tears.
Let them flow to wash away my fears.
Paint me a river with your hands,
gliding on my canvas as I stand.
Paint me a river with your arms.
Let them hold me and do me no harm.
Paint me a river with your feet,
dancing with me to the beautiful beat.
He said, "Now your river has been painted.
One of beauty I have created."
She said, "Show me your true colors
behind this presentation.
I await for you to give me the translation."
He said, "Imagination, soul, eyes, tears,
hands, arms and feet,
combine them all together,
and your painting is complete."

Look at This Life

By Scott Sjostrand

—Hallock, MN

Look at this life, so filled with inspiration.
Look at the service, so filled with dedication.
Feel this heart, so beaten and so battered.
Please pray for me, so hurting and so tattered.
I don't know much, but I know I love God,
And that may be all I need to know.
I don't know much, but I know I need Him,
So my life may grow.
I'm recovering ever so slowly;
I am one of the many lonely.
The past still hurts, but is gradually fading.
Through troubled waters I've been wading.
I praise God each and every day!

On the Way to Dodge

By William Shepherd
VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS



The cowboys are tired at the end of the day.

We signed up for this cattle drive, and I guess it must be about the 40th day. It's been good weather for most of the time, some rain, but it was welcome when it came. The wind and rain washed the dust off us and the cattle.

We are all ready to eat and have some coffee. We sit around the fire and tell our tall tales we have had on other drives. Billy Joe can tell a story that holds our attention all through the first cup of coffee. Yes, we all go along on his adventures for hours. Put another log on the fire, someone says, and get some sleep.

Morning comes early on a cattle drive. The next thing I know, the sun is up, and I smell the coffee that always helps get me up and on my way to saddle up my horse. We are driving the cattle another 20 miles today. I'm looking forward to seeing Dodge City soon,

We all are well. That's a cowboy's life.

My Dad Saved Me

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

When I was 10 years old,
our family and I went to the beach in Oxnard, California.
My dad had me in an inner tube and was right beside me.
I slipped through the middle of the inner tube,
and all I remember is the ocean water bubbling all around me
as my dad was searching for me in the water.
He saved me in the nick of time.
He pulled me out of the ocean water
and brought me back to land.
I was so relieved and happy that my dad saved me.

Veteran's Dream

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

Yes.
Veteran's dream.
The dreams arrive in the dark
of the night
even though they are not wanted.

They cannot be avoided.
They are not normal dreams:
Walking through a forest.
Sailing the ocean.
Fishing with a grandparent.
Riding a horse or motorcycle.
Finding your true love.

No, not normal dreams at all.
Why?
Because they are:

Nightmares.

One, Two, Challenge

By Trina 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.

Valentine, Oh, Valentine

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Valentine, Oh, Valentine, why do you hide from me?
Your love is my objective; I'll be your guarantee.
I've studied all the books, never missed a class
on how to be a gentleman. I've even gone to mass.

I'll emphasize your assets, overlook your faults.
When you put on weight, won't mention all those malts.
I'll treat you with respect each and every date
as I think of all the money I save because you're late.

I won't critique your clothes, ask how much you spent
on your latest outfit. Was its prior life a tent?
To stroke your jet-black hair will be my one desire.
All the while I'm thinking, it could double as barbed wire.

Your hazel eyes are special; I'd look at them a lot.
Never would I mention the fact that they're bloodshot.
When I hold your hand, I'll know that I have scored.
I'll never have to buy another emery board.

When we get to snuggle and I whisper in your ear,
I promise not to ask, "What do you have in here?"
I'll long to hear your voice, any time or any place,
just one octave lower. I'm sure you'd be a bass.
Should your chin be home to a hair or maybe three,
I swear I'll never ask if you've started a goatee.

So, Valentine, Oh, Valentine, why do you hide from me?
I'm sure you will appreciate my wit and repartee.
My words forever gentle, never filled with starch.
So why do all the girls always long for March?



BVL AWARD

A Long Time Ago in a Land Far Away

By Glen Zimmerman

—Appleton, WI

A long time ago
In a land far away,
Young men became soldiers
As fear ruled the day.

We were in a dense jungle,
In a place called, Nam.
Only twelve months before
We had dates for the prom.

Our country called
And ordered us to go
To a land we'd never seen
And a war we didn't know.

We fought day and night
In the rain and the heat
As politicians back home
Worked to ensure our defeat.

And when it was all over,
Thousands were dead.
Their names now engraved
In a black granite bed.

Those who returned
Weren't hailed by a band.
There were no thanks,
No crowds at hand.

Although we were willing
And proud to serve,
We came home to an injustice
We didn't deserve.

With no one to talk to,
Many couldn't cope.
Friends wouldn't listen;
Some lost all hope.

Many lost their jobs,
And some lived outside.
Others found it easier
To just choose suicide.

Each day I thank God
For making it this far,
For family and for friends
Who helped heal the scars.

And now I pay tribute to all
Whose names have been saved
On the black granite wall
Where they now are engraved.

And I pray we never forget
What "The Wall" has to say
About a long time ago
In a land far away.

WOSL MEMBERS' APPRECIATION AWARD

Congress

By Kenny C. Trujillo

VA Medical Center—Las Vegas, NV

Why is Congress so dysfunctional and childish?
They are at war with one another.
Congress, get it together or our nation
will become in default.
Congress is supposed to be the backbone
of our nation.
Congress, do your job so we all can move forward.
Congress, love one another so we can be great again.

Links in a Chain

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

The land, the trees and the water
we take until there's nothing left.
Man's lust and greed grow
without thought of his impact on nature.
The animals, the birds and the fish
we displace heedless of the numbers.
Decimating populations in our egotism
without regard to their impact on us.
The threatened, vulnerable, endangered
are labels we tag the plants and animals
we are driving to extinction with our need
to take more than is necessary.
The destruction, razing, mutilation
of their natural habitat and ecosystems
are tied to their demise as one by one
they vanish from the land and oceans.
Every living creature has a certain place
in the natural world like links in a chain.
When one breaks, the chain is weakened
until no longer capable of binding us as one.
The downfall of our human species is tied
to the vanishing environments of nature.
Their loss echoes across our concrete jungles
as we continue our arrogant need for progress.

The Mask

By Michelle Roxanne Johnson
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

The world sees a painted picture of me,
a mask that has two sides.
One shows me confident in my abilities,
bold in my output and fearlessly powerful
in my leadership.
Strong in every aspect,
as I am a warrior who will not quit,
or so they think.
The other side of the mask
that no one else sees is the true me,
sad, confused, scared, broken, unseen and voiceless.
The absolute truest form of who I really am.
I am a warrior still,
but one who waits silently for my masks to merge,
and I can become whole.
I am beautifully broken and secretly scarred.

Conundrum

By Daniel Paicopulos
—San Diego, CA

Through nights, dark and deep,
there are many who fret,
unable to sleep,
and one aches for them. Yet
for others, it's the reverse,
the struggle of night,
an opposite curse,
one hurtful, with fright.
It's the nature, you see,
the battle for some,
those with PTSD,
whose morning can't come
soon enough to be free
of the nightmares and pain,
the frustration dreams,
the panic again.
And as good as it seems,
waking still won't avail
because you know what they say,
"It's a life sentence, this PTSD jail,
during the night or the day."

Full Frontal About Oral and Anal

By CJ Reeves
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

We owe a great debt to our friend, Dr. Freud,
for keeping both Oral and Anal from void,
be it a painful cavity or bothersome hemorrhoid.

To that end, he gave us fixations by name:
Oral or Anal, not two of the same.
And off to the Dentist we go and we came.

There's oral fixation starting up top,
and anal fixation; where does it stop?
Go any farther and you'll need a mop.

It's said the best Dentist of all, you see,
Anal, his oral fixation should be.
This would certainly help my teeth and me.

Dance of the Flowers

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

The Daisy did her dance
and just by chance,
the Lilly curtsied down,
but not all the way down to the ground.
The Tulip two-lipped his song.
He too had strung along.
The Iris was a tenor,
the straw boss of the band.
He was ever grateful to give them all a hand.
And the band was filled with flowers
in sun or April showers.
They'd played saxophone
in January to June.
The Posies played violins.
They were not Rosies nor the Rose.
The Rose played saxophone.
But he was not alone.
The Violet played viola.
One inhibited Peony
was a downright meany.
He demeaned the Dandelion,
who's the big boss over all the band,
which is best in all the land.
And they didn't dance in the day
like they were making gold or hay.
They painted all through the night.
When goblins take flight,
they danced into the rising sun
and wouldn't end that fun
until what comes due—
the sweet morning dew.
And they'll sleep away the day
to wait for their next night of play.

If I Could Be With Tera

By Michael Pride Young

—Fond du Lac, WI

Tera, if I could be with her,
I would thank God for her every day.
Her lovely smile, her pretty dress,
she's as cute as she can be.
She works and cleans for Gilbertson's Cleaners.
How about a clean life with Tera, Lord?
It's a tough old world out there
in the midst of a world with so many people.
Lord, only a very few people find true happiness and love.

If I could be with Tera,
I would thank God for her every day.
Her lovely smile, her pretty dress,
she's as cute as she can be
in the cheers of good times and sadness of bad times.
I'd bring Tera roses in good and bad times.
The thought of Tera is a wonderful country and western song.
No matter how this country and western song turns out,
I am a winner to know Tera.

Grinned Like a Little Kid

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

I felt it in the shower and let out an anxious groan.
So, without delay, got the doctor on the phone.
Blood work was complete and surgery would follow.
Waiting brought another lump, one that I would swallow.
I had friends go through this; for me it was a first.
While I was optimistic, loved ones feared the worst.
“Big C” has a reputation and delivers fear,
but I said, “Don't worry. I'm going to beat this, Dear.”
Quiet and reticent, never one to brag,
I owned many things, although not one white flag.
Enduring rounds of chemo and radiation's heat,
months later I stood before them.
Cancer had been beat.
Follow-up was required; the worst was in the rearview.
I expressed my thanks to the doctor and his crew.
At home I bowed my bald head, grinned like a little kid.
With tears of joy I said,
“Thank you, Lord, for everything you did.”

I Like Being President

By Michael Pride Young
—Fond du Lac, WI

I like being president and having all the power, I do.
Talking and shaking hands with the world's people.
Talking, mingling and working with my White House staff.
Agreeing and disagreeing with members of Congress.
Fighting and making up with the House of Representatives.
I'm the President and I want things to go my way, every day.
Social Security, veterans, taxes, jobs, foreign affairs
are on my mind. I sure like my White House,
and, Man, I sure cherish that Air Force One!

I like being President and having all the power, I do.
Time out for the First Lady, spending time with the family.
It's time to play with Tony now; he's my dog and pet, too.

I like being President and having all the power, I do.
Now I'm in the Oval Office getting ready
for a White House speech.
Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. I signed a new bill today
That will guarantee Social Security and veterans benefits to all!
People are clapping hands and applauding the President!
Thank you, thank you, thank you very much.
This year I plan to create and save three million jobs.
Wage and price controls, asking our workers to work harder.
Stopping the flow of illegal immigrants, cutting taxes,
Hiring less cops, building less prisons, educating the ideology.

I like being President and having all the power, I do.
Several new members were appointed to my Cabinet today.
I am pleased to welcome them aboard.
I like being President and having all the power, I do.

My Thoughts

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

These are my thoughts.
They are mine alone.
You cannot change or alter them
with your childish whims.
I have lived twice in your lifetime
in a single year,
have endured pain you cannot imagine
in your sheltered world.
Experience has taught me
when to laugh and when to cry.
Your immature mind
cannot fathom the realities of the world.
You stand there
with your know-it-all attitude and selfish ego,
telling me I have to change,
yet you have no justification to impart.
I have lived and been a piece of history,
am a part of what has brought you
to where you are today,
your freedom, though you spit and curse at me.
You cannot think for yourself,
for you have been brainwashed by the very souls
you believe to be infallible and truthful.
You do not see that one day
it will all come down around you,
that you have been duped
and lied to all along by those whom you worship.
When the battle starts
and you have to choose sides,
will you choose wisely?
Probably not, for you will not be able
to admit how misguided you were.
These are my thoughts,
and I make no excuses for what I think or feel.
I have earned the right to be me
and challenge you to live as I have lived.
This is my home and family, my world.
I have fought for my country and freedom.
I will die to protect them from your ignorance.
My thoughts: you will run in fear and panic.

Thoughts

By C. L. Nemeth

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

I have no claim to being an experienced mourner. Yes, I too have had a loss befall me. I don't know just what I should do or say to ease your soul. But maybe this will help.



When we lose a friend, a dear companion, we always think about missing that person in the days to come. But maybe we should instead recall the joy that person gave to our lives. Ought we not be thankful to have had this person, even for a short while? Have they not given a quality to our life that would not be there without their presence?

It seems to me that if you love someone so completely, you would say to yourself, "That was good. Now how do I celebrate this?" Would it not be a great tribute to want to do it again? Would you not want this person to go on had it been you that

left? Should we not recall the good and be thankful that we had this good in our life?

As I near the exit door of my life, I more and more recall the good that I had, and I want to just be happy now. Yes, I miss my family and my good friends that have gone ahead. It is

given to me to be among the last to leave. Should I not be thankful for those I knew and still know? Now I will be happy with my memories and relish each day.

The Never-ending Vow

By James Janssen

VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

From the humble beginnings of our forefathers to the last descendant in our long line of brotherhood, we vowed to defend our fellow Americans from all enemies foreign and domestic. It was a vow to preserve freedom and the inherent right for all to enjoy their pursuit of happiness and manner of life.



With vigilance and determination, we continue to stand at the border of freedom and tyranny to insure the ongoing continuum of peace without prejudice as defined by the U.S. Constitution. We stand proud, and we stand with resolve in our hearts and in our minds as veterans and as warriors.

We stand with outstretched arms for our wounded veteran brothers and sisters, supporting their needs as they recover from their physical maladies. We encourage and support our dear veterans

suffering from PTSD and other mental issues, letting them know they are not alone.

May each affected veteran know hope and brighter days are ahead as each one journeys the path of recovery. We stand with our heads bowed for our fallen warriors who paid the ultimate price fighting to preserve freedom, never to be forgotten but always to be honored in the highest regard. We render a special salute and cherish their unselfish sacrifice burned into our memories forever.

“People think that it’s painting your feelings and playing with arts and crafts, but it’s deeper than that,” Mike explains. “You’re addressing repressed memories; you’re addressing pain and trauma visually instead of verbally.”

His therapists — behavioral health professionals — were trained to see and read what a patient puts on canvas, enhancing the interactions and understandings between them. Putting all of this on canvas also furthered his healing in a tangible way. “I’m able to face this issue in my life, on my own time, with my hands, with my eyes,” Mike says. “I can take it out of me and I can set this thing on the shelf. It doesn’t have to control me anymore.”

Mike continues to paint in shared activities with his wife and children and in paintings done on commission, such as artwork that strives to relay emotions and feelings that are attached to military service. “A lot of people interact with that. They can relate to that,” he says.

La Wanda, a U.S. Navy veteran, represents a different way of sharing her experiences and feelings — not through artistic expression, but through direct and personal

discussion. When she sits down to help other veterans as a volunteer mentor in a drug treatment court program, she likes to start by telling her story.

“I will fully disclose anything and everything about me when it comes to helping another veteran,” says La Wanda, who served from 1985 to 1997.

La Wanda shares her journey — the one that’s taken her from partying to substance misuse, an other-than-honorable discharge and finally confronting addiction and anger. She finds that it helps to break the ice and chip away at any walls that someone else might be putting up.

“Sometimes, it’s almost like you could see their demeanor change, and they’re like: ‘Wow. Why would a total stranger tell me that?’”

The answer: She needs the truth from them in return. That’s how she can really help, as a mentor, as someone working with veterans as part of a drug court team. La Wanda opens up to help other veterans find their voice.

The drug treatment court programs are for veterans and others who are facing legal

trouble because of substance abuse and other mental health issues. These programs provide an alternative to jail time, offering support systems instead.

La Wanda gives program participants hope by telling her whole story — not only the challenges but also how she overcame them. How she finally sought help when a friend told her, “You are no longer welcome in my home until you can do something about this.” How the 12-step fellowship program worked for her. Why veterans who misuse substances should connect to services at VA, and why they should believe they can find a path to healing.

“All veterans that suffer from a disease — that think they’re alone — I need them to know they’re not alone,” she says. “We let them know, ‘Hey, I did it. You can do it too.’ It’s probably one of the most gratifying, fulfilling things I’ve ever done.”

On MakeTheConnection.net, these three veterans, and hundreds more, share stories about their mental health challenges and how they overcame them with mental health support.

MAKE THE CONNECTION

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.



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

Chuck Nemeth, Albuquerque, N.M., wrote, “I am pleased that you find my humble writings are of some value.” He endorsed his award check and returned it to *Veterans’ Voices* as a donation.



James D. Allen, San Antonio, Texas, expressed his pleasure at his conversation with the office administrator, Jeanne, as he ordered a subscription to *Veterans’ Voices*. He hopes to write for the magazine in the future. He is still active at age 82.



VVWP president Sheryl Liddle met **Richard Dunshee**, Nampa, Idaho, and he wrote, “I was considering submitting an article about the Air Force missile community.” He commented about his aircraft squadron and his desire to write.



“Thanks *Veterans’ Voices* for publishing our deepest love of poetry and artwork. This is how we share our love and understanding of what we have gone through as the healing takes place, due to what many of our soldiers have gone through. Many of us are still mending our broken hearts and spirits. We are longing to fit into society once again,” wrote **Kenny Trujillo**, Las Vegas, Nev.



Barbara J. Davidson, New York, N.Y., says, “After 31 stimulating years as a social worker at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in the Bronx, N.Y., I finally retired in 2023. I am gratified to have encouraged a colleague who was willing to take over my Narrative Therapy Writing Group... Your magazine becomes more and more beautiful and I continue to enjoy reading each issue.”



Ron Stokes, Philadelphia, Pa., “I am very disappointed in your publication of the poem, “Drop the Gun, Cop.” I’m a Nam

vet (589th Combat Engineers, Song Pha, Republic of Vietnam, 1970) and upon my return home I became a Philly cop and served 27 years. Was Michael Pride Young ever a soldier? This is an angry man. What if we replaced the term ‘cop’ with ‘soldier?’ Did he rape? Did he rob? Did he shoot people in the back? Did he kill an unarmed person? Did he choke anyone? He has a right to his opinion, but I sure wouldn’t want him serving with me. This is the most disgusting piece I have read. Y’all should be ashamed for allowing this to see the light of day.”

Editors’ Note: Every writer is reminded on page 3 of each issue, “The opinions expressed in the stories and poems published in Veterans’ Voices are not necessarily those of the publisher, editors or sponsors.”



Because of concern for fraudulent behavior impacting veterans, their families and caregivers, the VA has a new site www.va.gov/VSAFE launched to combat fraud, scams and predatory practices. This site also houses educational videos and provides veterans with avenues for reporting fraud through VHA’s Office of Integrity & Compliance Helpline at 866-842-4357 (VHA-HELP) and VA’s Benefits Hotline at 1-800-827-1000.



Several VAMCs have written to *Veterans’ Voices* with thanks for providing patients with copies of the magazine. They include: **Joyce Kuwae**, chief, Center for Development & Civic Engagement at the CMC in Philadelphia, Pa.; **Katie Maxon**, chief, Voluntary Service at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, Iron Mountain, Mich.; **Ruann Handy**, Beckley, W. Va., Medical Center; **Denise L. Cunningham**, Topeka VA Eastern Kansas HCS; and **Barbara Forsha**, executive director, Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center, Clarksburg, W. Va.

Thank You



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

– VVWP Board of Directors

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Tina Hacker, Leawood, Kan.

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Kansas City, Mo.

VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.

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 the office uses to mail author award checks and several were returned 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.

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 <https://veteransvoices.org/register/>
- or www.veteransvoices.org and select Registration.

Once on the page, complete the registration form by typing your name, username, password, email and other profile information. If you don't have an email, please use one from a relative or friend. Now click Register and you will be directed to a login page. Log in by entering your username and password that you just set up.

Once you have successfully logged in, go to the MAKE A NEW SUBMISSION section of your account page and click BROWSE AND UPLOAD. Now select whether you want to submit prose, poetry or artwork. Once selected, fill out the title of your submission and upload your submission. For writing, we accept Word files (doc or docx) or text files (txt). For artwork, we accept jpg. You can also submit a picture that supports your writing using the Choose File button. (Please be mindful of the size of your files as our website has sizing limits in place for all uploads.)

Click UPLOAD TO *VETERANS' VOICES*. When your submission is successfully uploaded, you will be redirected back to your account page where the submission will be listed under the YOUR SUBMISSIONS section. To review, download or remove your submission, click REVIEW OR DOWNLOAD TO YOUR COMPUTER under your submission entry. You cannot make edits to your submission, but you can re-upload by clicking the Remove and Upload Again button.

Guidelines for Local Contests.

Writing contests can encourage others to write. Announce such contests through publications and bulletin boards at VAMCs or writing groups. 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 or (816) 701-6844

Mail Submission Sample.

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

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.

I certify that this is my own work created without copying or using AI.

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!

Each issue of *Veterans' Voices* includes a special section featuring art from military veterans. Robert Rubin, M.D., Ph.D., a military veteran and retired V.A. staff psychiatrist, is the inspiration for this initiative. Experience has shown him that 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 your drawings, paintings and photographs, following the Submission Guidelines below and help fill the pages of *Veterans' Voices* with colorful art!

Instructions for Artwork Submissions

For more than 70 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!

- Art entries must be submitted as a digital file or originals sent by U.S. mail.
- All art must be original (no copying or use of AI) 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
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Online or By Mail

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



The Healing Power of Sharing Your Story

From the VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

There are many ways for veterans to share stories of their time in service, the challenges they may have faced during and after, and the feelings these experiences engender.

For Sarge, this sharing has taken the form of poetry and music; for Mike, it has meant putting paintbrush to canvas, and for La Wanda, it has involved mentoring veterans experiencing challenges with substance misuse. In sharing their stories — first personally in therapy, then more broadly through artistic expression or mentoring — they have promoted their own healing and inspired other veterans to do the same.

Sarge finished his service in the U.S. Army after three tours from 1966 to 1968 in Vietnam, where he served mainly as an infantry squad leader. In his *Make the Connection* interview, he recounts how his feelings about his experiences manifested themselves in survivor guilt, memory loss, night sweats, hypervigilance, reckless behavior, angry outbursts, and more.

Seeking help from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Sarge was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and began treatment. But Sarge struggled to disclose his experiences and feelings in detail, so he found a new way to open up and make therapy more effective.

“I found that writing things down that I couldn’t really talk about made it easier on me,” Sarge recalls.

Sarge kept writing, expanding the scope to include more topics, and “was kind of shocked to find out that it all came out rhyming.” Over time, he had filled a book with thoughts like these:

Sometimes he’s a monster and out of control.

She knows it’s really not him.

It’s a part of his mind that can never come home

From the jungle he carries within.

Sarge turned some of the poetry into blues songs. He released CDs, performed in front of more than 30,000 people and heard his music used in documentaries on PTSD. He continues to share his words with veterans who understand and appreciate them through blues shows that incorporate his poetry, war stories and songs. Sarge — whose survivor guilt had once led him to believe he “should’ve died in Vietnam” — says this has given him a new sense of purpose.

“It’s the most beautiful medicine I ever got for PTSD,” Sarge says. “It’s just so healing.”

Mike, a U.S. Army veteran, found a different artistic and therapeutic outlet.

Mike joined the Army in 2004, first serving in Iraq and in Afghanistan about a decade later when a rocket attack sprayed shrapnel into his leg and jaw. After physically recovering from surgery, he came home in 2015 a changed person mentally — easily agitated, more detached, his senses often overwhelmed by sight, sound and light.

After reaching out for mental health support, Mike was diagnosed with traumatic brain injury and PTSD. He tried therapies that have worked for other veterans, but he found it difficult to vocalize what he was going through. VA worked with Mike on finding the right approach for him.

That’s how he discovered art therapy.

“I had done talk therapy before,” Mike says. “I didn’t like it. I was supposed to go into this place and talk to this strange person and I can tell them my deepest, darkest things. But in art therapy, I didn’t have to talk. If something was bothering me, I just had to figure out how to say it in paint.”

Continued On Page 61



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NATIONAL VETERANS **CREATIVE ARTS** COMPETITION

The National Veterans Creative Arts Festival celebrates the artistic skills and accomplishments of Veterans enrolled for care at VA medical facilities across the country. Check with your local VA for 2024 competition details.

Email: Arts4Vets@va.gov

Website: www.creativeartsfestival.va.gov



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