

The Bulletin

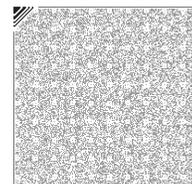
Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans

**BLINDED
VETERANS
ASSOCIATION**
SERVING BLINDED VETERANS SINCE WORLD WAR II

Winter 2021



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Cover Photos:

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has brought its share of adversities to BVA's regional groups throughout the country. Among those meeting the challenges head-on are officers and members of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, highlighted in this issue of **The Bulletin** for extra-mile effort. Pictured in Braille flag presentations, top photo: At left, Regional Group President Tracy Ferro and Gulf Coast Health Care System Director Bryan C. Matthews. Bottom photo, Gary Schoelerman, Joe Burns and guide dog Kendrick, Southeast Louisiana Health Care System Director Fernando Rivera, and Tracy Ferro.

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EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: Stuart Nelson

Associate Editor: Kylie FitzGerald

Design, Pre-Press, and Printing:
Karen Smith Design, Master Print

1101 KING STREET, SUITE 300

ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314

TELEPHONE: 800-669-7079

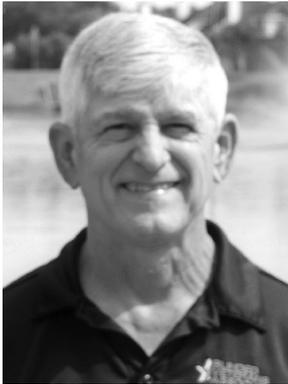
202-371-8880

FAX: 202-371-8258

WEBSITE: <https://bva.org>

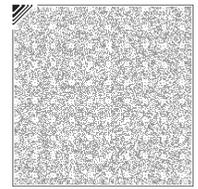
E-MAIL: bva@bva.org

Published quarterly by and for blinded veterans and sent to all blinded veterans without charge. **The Bulletin** informs BVA members about their Association and the issues that affect blinded veterans.



President's Page

by Dr. Thomas Zampieri



As we welcome the spring season, I encourage all of you BVA members and eligible caregivers to obtain the COVID-19

vaccine at your local Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center.

As I compose this message, our Executive Director and Convention Committee are exploring all options regarding the August BVA National Convention. We are seeking the mechanisms by which the national bylaws can be updated to authorize business meetings and elections virtually. BVA must evaluate new strategies and confront the need to redesign our organization in 2021. As we work together in confronting the consistent challenges of COVID-19 and other serious conditions impacting our mission, I ask that we adjust our way of thinking and react wisely to these challenges.

Our national membership has declined by 40 percent since 2013, from nearly 12,000 to approximately 6,700. We must deal with this challenge this year. We need to examine all options since the decline is negatively impacting the viability of many small regional groups that have struggled to find new active members or volunteers to serve as officers. Some have again suggested that we wait to change our bylaws and kick the can down the road for another year. The current majority of the BVA National Board feels that we cannot continue with the same mentality of waiting another year. As a national association we cannot, in the age of decreasing membership, assume that the Visual Impairment Services Teams will recruit new membership for us.

In November, I tasked our Membership/Regional Group Committee with reviewing five key articles in the national bylaws dealing with membership, regional group structure, District Directors, dues, and the National Convention. I also asked them to review the regional group manual in the context of dealing with the challenges now confronting us. The Committee is now diverse, composed of three regional group presidents, three District Directors, and the National Chaplain, all coming from different experiences and perspectives on potential bylaw changes. The Committee will submit its recommendations to the National Board for review in early March and the Board will make recommendations to the delegates at the convention virtually. Various other committees are holding frequent teleconference meetings with key staff regarding these possible changes. As a unified group, BVA should be innovative and adapt to these conditions and circumstances as they relate to our membership challenges.

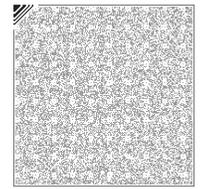
Meanwhile, BVA board members and staff members are working on reducing our operating expenses. We are also exploring how to expand other sources of income from grants, corporate partnerships, foundations, and finding individual donors while increasing our social media following. We must be aware that the pandemic has negatively impacted thousands of other non-profits and BVA, like them, has had a decrease in the normal direct mail donations.

Whatever we do, we must do it together as we discover new and advanced ways to innovate within BVA for the future. I sincerely appreciate our BVA board members and convey special thanks to our BVA staff for their commitment and dedication.



Legislative Update

by Erin McConnell



During the first session of the 117th Congress, BVA will be focusing on ten legislative priorities which we emphasized in our recent Congressional testimony on March 3.

One of the most exciting items BVA will be requesting is that the VA auto grant for service-connected blinded veterans be 100 percent renewable and have a renewal period of every ten years.

VA currently operates 154 medical centers and an additional 850 Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) located in rural areas. Regrettably, access to health care for rural blinded veterans remains an issue, particularly as these veterans age, as their disability worsens, or as they lose their family caregivers. Transportation has become one of the most pressing issues for rural blinded veterans.

Our government relations team recognizes the evolving needs of the growing blinded veteran community. As such, we will be working to ensure that VA implement caregiver benefits for catastrophically “blinded” disabled veterans by modifying the eligibility criteria regarding “Activities of Daily Living”. With these modifications, it is our hope that caregivers for blinded veterans are recognized for their efforts and support. BVA is also working with Congress to have VA recognize all war eras simultaneously by October 1.

Additionally, BVA is working diligently with VA to obtain clarification regarding

the legal definition and interpretation of the following to qualify for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) under 38 CFR §71.20(a) (3). The program requires “the need for supervision, protection, or instruction in order for the individual to maintain personal safety on a daily basis.” Currently, this ambiguous statement causes much confusion likely to result in hundreds, if not thousands, of claims and appeals entering the system.

BVA applauds the bipartisan support women veteran issues received in the 116th Congress and looks forward to that continued support in the 117th. The passage of the Deborah Sampson Act was a great victory for women veterans in the fight for equality of medical care and other VA services and benefits.

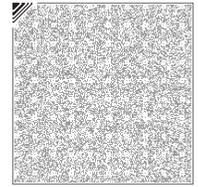
A new addition to BVA’s priorities this year is a request to enact adequate protections for guide dogs and service dogs on federal properties. These protections are to ensure the safety of the animals as well as their veteran handlers. Guide and service dogs are critical to blind, visually impaired, and other disabled veterans working toward regaining lost independence. They assist blind or disabled veterans with mobility, retrieving objects, balance, and several other vital tasks. Training guide and service dogs to perform their duties costs upwards of \$50,000 and can take up to two years to complete. Many prospective guide and service dogs do not complete the training, making successful guide and service dogs (approximately one in ten) incredibly valuable.

Since 2016, there has been an 84 percent spike in reported support animal incidents,

which include urination, defecation, and biting. This additional threat to both veteran and service animal poses health and financial risks as the costly, lengthy, and rigorous training that the animals undergo becomes less apparent to the uninformed public, which perceives as the same the rigorously trained

service animal and the poorly trained support animal.

This is but a condensed listing and description of the ten legislative priorities. For a more complete and comprehensive list, please visit bva.org.



A SHINING LIGHT

by Warner L. Murray

My vision is bright, day and night.
I use my mind, the power of light.

The oath, challenges, and its freedoms
We continue to protect and defend.
The rights of all blinded veterans,
Our dedicated women and men.

Our peer support and communications,
The auxiliary and public relations.
Executive Director, and working staff.
Illustrating leadership by their craft.

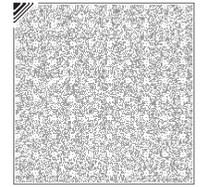
Lifetime members, rejoice inside,
For uplifting veterans, spirit and pride.
Our national officers, and board elect.
Give and deserve, honor and respect.

All these programs help me and you.
Live in peace with red, white, and blue.



Executive Director's Message to Members

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.



As we first learned about COVID-19 and the onset of a worldwide pandemic almost exactly one year ago, the possibility of not being able to gather our BVA membership in the Nation's Capital in person for a festive and historic 75th National Convention was only in the back of our minds.

As all of us know far too well, that mindset began changing quickly after a few short weeks. The concern soon emerged in the forefront of our heads and solutions were quickly needed.

Even after the relatively successful run at putting on the educational sessions last August, hardly did it seem fathomable that an in-person gathering would once again be impossible, this time in "The Gateway to the West," St. Louis, a city so many of us were looking forward to visiting.

Despite all the assumptions, here we are once again in 2021, confronted with the same reality: An in-person convention is not a realistic option for our members and other stakeholders, even amid the prospects of miraculous vaccines and greater knowledge about how the coronavirus is both spread and avoided.

Enter, therefore, plans for a productive and enjoyable BVA 76th National Convention conducted virtually that will be mindful and respectful of our members' needs, conditions, and interests. We are excited about the prospect of putting a virtual convention together and making it work. The concept is unique for us. It will be historic. After all, never before have we done anything like it.

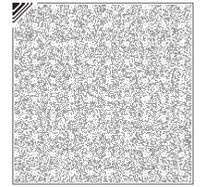
Plans are still very much in their infancy.

We do not know every detail. What we can share is that we will hold actual convention sessions. They will include a wide array of business activities to include election of national officers, bylaws, and breakouts (district caucuses, for example), engagements with our vendors and sponsors, and events typically accompanied by food and drink. Activities may well occur on different days throughout August and even into September, not being confined to a single week or series of consecutive days.

Despite the recent obstacles placed in our path, the work of national headquarters continues with a focus on the future. Trainings are now underway for our new ambassador initiative within the Veterans Service Program. Progress on the BVA website is constant and steady. Member engagement is more promising than ever with many of our committees meeting regularly and organizing new initiatives. New approaches to modernizing using contemporary efficiency models are being accepted and shown to be successful for us at national headquarters. We also look forward to working with a new Congress, a new set of legislative priorities, and the reintroduction of OneClick Politics on our website where BVA members can more readily make their voices heard on a national level.

We hope to engage with many more of you soon. Please plan most especially to convene with us in late summer from the comfort of your homes. You will need only your own screen and your own microphone. The upside is that when you wish to speak as you did in person on the convention floor, you will not need to wait for the microphone to be brought to you!

BVA Looks to Virtual 76th



Formal Official Notice

Pursuant to the provisions of Section 3b of Article IX (National Convention) of the BVA National Bylaws, all members of the Blinded Veterans Association in good standing are hereby notified that the BVA 76th National Convention will be a virtual gathering of the BVA leadership, staff, membership, families, and the National Auxiliary.

Convention dates are August 16-20, 2021. Additional updates will follow in a timely manner via email and on the appropriate pages of the national website.

Preparations Underway for First-Ever Virtual Convention

With input from medical professionals, BVA's sister organizations, regional group leaders, and VA, the BVA National Board of Directors has deemed it necessary to hold an unprecedented virtual 76th National Convention hosted by the national headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. Differing from last year's educational sessions only, the 2021 convention will include BVA official business such as elections and consideration of bylaws and resolutions, social events, and district caucuses.

BVA members in good standing who wish to vote by proxy may still do so by writing or calling Administrative Director Brigitte Jones at BVA National Headquarters no later than 45 days before the start of the 76th National Convention. That day falls on Friday, July 2.

In compliance with Section 2c of Article IX, the proxy form must be completed and returned to BVA National Headquarters to the attention of the Administrative Director. To

be considered valid, the envelope containing the form must be postmarked no later than 21 days before the opening date of the convention. Therefore, the due date is Monday, July 26.

Important Dates for Required RG Actions

Brigitte has announced the following schedule of administrative actions that must be achieved by both regional groups and individuals leading up to the convention.

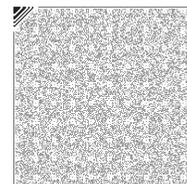
A reminder was mailed to regional group presidents and secretaries on March 19 regarding the due date for submission of bylaw amendments for consideration at the convention. A mailing to all BVA members in good standing and residing in Districts 1 and 2 also occurred on or before Friday, March 19 (150 days leading up to August 16). The mailing called for nominations for District Director.

Three copies of the credentials form will also be mailed on April 19 to all regional groups.

Both regional groups and individuals should refer to the following timeline in preparing for the convention. Items listed include actions required by the national headquarters, regional groups, and individuals.

Questions can be addressed by calling 800-669-7079. Asterisks indicate actions required by the BVA National Bylaws.

- 1. March 19*** (no later than 150 days before convention)—Mail call for nomination of Directors of Districts 1 and 2 to members in good standing from each of the two districts and for the nomination of candidates for the special election to fill the vacancy in District 4 (Article VI, Section 3d).
- 2. March 19***—National headquarters sends reminders to regional group presidents and secretaries that proposed bylaw amendments

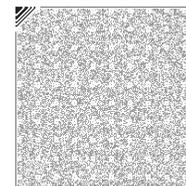


to be considered at the 76th National Convention must be postmarked no later than 90 days prior to the beginning of the event. That date is **May 18**.

3. **April 19***—Mail credentials forms to regional group presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, and treasurers (three copies each, Article XIV, Section 12c).
4. **May 10** (no earlier than 100 days before convention)—Earliest date to mail official notice of the virtual convention to potential convention attendees. Actual 100-day mark before the convention is May 8, which is a Saturday this year, thus requiring a **May 10** mailing.
5. **Mid-May***—76th National Convention pre-registration information prepared at National Headquarters and sent to those who have expressed an interest in attending.
6. **Mid-May***—76th National Convention proxy forms mailed but only by request to Administrative Director Brigitte Jones.
7. **May 18** (no earlier than 90 days before convention)—Earliest date to distribute ballots for the regular election in Districts 1 and 2 and the special election in District 4 (Article VI, Section 3d).
8. **May 18** (no later than 90 days before convention)—Envelopes containing proposed bylaw amendments must be directed to national headquarters and postmarked (Article XIX, Section 1b).
9. **May 18**—Earliest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing (Article XIX, Section 1b).
10. **May 18** (90 days before convention and 60 days following original March 19 mail call referred to in Item 1)—Nominations for regular election of Directors of Districts 1 and 2 and for the special election in District 4.
11. **June 2** (no later than 75 days before convention)—Latest date to mail pre-registration official convention notice.
12. **June 7** (no later than 70 days before convention)—Latest date for national headquarters to mail ballots for regular election of Directors of Districts 1 and 2 and for the special election in District 4 (Article VI, Section 3d).
13. **June 15***—National headquarters mails annual financial report forms (three copies) to treasurers of regional groups.
14. **July 2** (no later than 45 days before convention)—Ballots for regular election of Directors of Districts 1 and 2 due at national headquarters.
15. **July 2** (no later than 40 days before convention)—Latest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing.
16. **July 7** (no later than 40 days before convention)—Regional group meeting notices to elect convention delegates must be mailed to group members. A copy of the notice must also be mailed to national headquarters at the same time it is mailed to the group membership.
17. **July 12** (35 days before convention)—National headquarters counts election ballots for regular election of Directors of Districts 1 and 2 and for the special election in District 4.
18. **July 26** (21 days before convention)—A completed delegate credentials forms and proxy forms must be postmarked no later than midnight.

At 94, World War II Veteran Perseveres in Patriotic Service

by Ed Loudon, President, Ohio Regional Group



This is the story of fellow veteran Joe Gramuglia.

Joe served in World War II as a Merchant Marine and in the Korean War as an Infantryman, earning two Bronze Stars. However, this is not what brought him to my attention or what impressed me. G.I. Joe, whom he has been nicknamed, is a 94-year-old blinded veteran who spends his golden years giving back to his community.

Joe spends his time either calling on his comrades or visiting them at any one of several community gatherings. Since the pandemic hit, however, he hasn't been able to attend such gatherings. Many of them have been cancelled or postponed anyway until it is safe again to gather in person.

The cancellations and stay-at-home orders have not kept Joe from doing what he loves to do. As an outpatient at the Cleveland BRC, he has been learning some of the newest technology to help him in his daily life. He has obtained a reading machine and a video connect tablet, an induction cooktop, and other devices.

Joe continues to engage in his favorite hobby. It is this activity that really caught my attention. This pastime consists of making desktop flags for all veterans he meets as well as those in his community.

Joe told me that he has his grandson cut wood blocks for him. He then sands the blocks, paints them, and drills a hole in the middle in which a U.S. flag of six inches can be placed. He then installs a small coin that has a special inspirational statement. Along



Even a global pandemic won't stop "G.I. Joe" Gramuglia from his labor of love on behalf of fellow veterans in his community.

with this, he personalizes each one of the flags with the name of the person receiving it. For all veterans he includes the person's name, rank, time served, and branch of service.

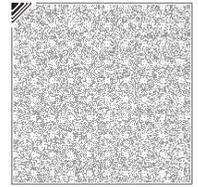
Despite these efforts, this is still not the end! Joe then makes beaded key rings with colors designating the veteran's era of service and the particular campaign. For civilians, the colors are our red, white, and blue national colors. He then hangs these beaded key chains on the flag with a rubber band to secure them in place.

When asked how many he has made, Joe stated



A patriotic red scooter decked with U.S. flags found anywhere in Parma, Ohio, or at the Cleveland BRC, is a sure sign that the driver is “G.I. Joe” Gramuglia.

that it had to be 5,000 or more. He then reverently presents them to each grateful recipient.



If you see Joe tooling around in his community of Parma, Ohio, or at the Cleveland BRC on his red scooter that he nicknamed “Big Red,” get out of his way and give him a shoutout for his amazing patriotism.

I salute you, Joe G., “G.I. Joe,” or should I say “flag man,” for all you do. Your example should encourage us all to continue expanding our horizons as we give back to our fellow man! You are truly a blessing to all of us in the Ohio Regional Group world and the shiniest star I’ve met so far in my life.

A Veteran’s Perspective On Staying Warm

by Tracy Ferro

Humor and Perspective Only A Veteran Can Understand

We all have war stories. Often we will add to them to make them more exciting. Usually, folks who have never walked a mile in our boots, much less tried them on, will not believe what we are telling them. A veteran, however, will listen with understanding even when there may be skepticism. A veteran knows that even stories filled with hoey may contain a particle of truth.

In this case there is no need to sift through the story to find the particle of truth. It contains no hoey. This story is perhaps a little more relevant and meaningful right now to our **Bulletin** readers up north where it is

considerably colder than down here on the Gulf Coast.

The other day I was eating lunch with some of the younger VA employees at the Blind Rehabilitation Center in Biloxi, Mississippi, and we were all lamenting about how cold it was and that none of us much liked cold weather. After discussing ways to stay warm, I flashed back to a day a long time ago in a very cold winter somewhere south of Pine Bluff, Nebraska.

I was still somewhat new to the Air Force with only one or two stripes. I was assigned to the 90th Transportation Squadron, 90th Strategic Missile Wing, F.E. Warren Air Force Base, in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

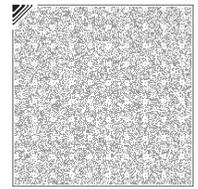
I was the team member of a two-man mobile maintenance team that went out in the missile field and would respond to vehicle breakdowns and go to every Launch Control Facility (LCF) in the two eastern squadron areas. Our job was to also do preventive checks on every vehicle in the field at least once during our three-day tours. It was a tremendous amount of driving and could get pretty boring at times. In the winter, of course, it would be not only boring but sometimes extremely cold.

Our call sign was “Mobile 129” and our truck was identified by the numbers 76c360. It was a Dodge one-ton regular old 4X4 with dual wheels and a big box on the back. These vehicles also had a couple of huge gas tanks because we didn’t want to run out of gas in the middle of nowhere when the wind chill was minus ten degrees.

We nicknamed our team leader Doc Severinsen after the famous trumpeter on **The Tonight Show**. Boy, those were the good old days. His name really was Severinsen but I can’t remember for anything his real first name so Doc it is here. Anheuser-Busch has killed too many brain cells over the years! Anyway, Doc was a really good guy with three stripes. As somebody new to the Air Force and just learning the ropes, I looked up to him.

Being the young team member that I was, I got all the low-level jobs such as fueling the truck. This was done with above-ground gravity tanks. Our truck had a 60-gallon tank in the back and a filler neck that came out the side at the 5½-foot level. With a Gravity Feed System the nozzle would not shut off automatically. One had to listen for the fuel

filling the neck and shut it off accordingly. Otherwise, the tank would “burp” and spew out fuel.

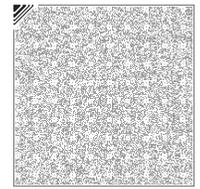


On one cold winter day, with the wind howling somewhere in the 300 mile-per-hour range in that area where only it could, I had to fill the truck. I was so cold and numb that I couldn’t hear a thing except my griping to myself about how cold it was and how cold I was. The tank filled, I shivered, and then it burped and soaked me, my field jacket, and most of my clothes, with gasoline. I was, I feel, justifiably annoyed! Ranting about how cold I was and now covered with gasoline, Doc told me to quit whining and to get used to it since winter was nowhere close to being over. Of course, I continued to gripe.

This is where a veteran’s perspective comes in. Seeing me so cold and moaning about it as much as I was, Doc then reached into his pocket, pulled out his Zippo lighter, and proceeded to light me on fire. Now, a civilian looking on would be horrified and begin using words like cruel, mean, dangerous, and the like. Military personnel, on the other hand, wouldn’t use any such words and maybe no words at all. Even if they wanted to, they couldn’t as they were all laughing hysterically at the young fool who was running around like Richard Pryor! Yeah, I did stop, then dropped, then rolled. I was out of breath too, not out of fear but because I, too, was laughing so hard.

But...at last I got what I wanted and I was now warm!

The Down and Dirty of Getting a Guide Dog—graphic



by Ann Chiappetta

If I were asked by a potential guide dog handler what it is like to train and share life with a guide dog, focused on the grittier aspects, the following is what I would tell them. This document states my thoughts and does not support or endorse a particular guide dog program.

1. Training is physically demanding. Over time, it could put stress on your left arm, shoulder, and hand.
2. You may not wish to wear sandals anymore. Open toe shoes and dog feet don't mix well. You may choose to wear slippers or house shoes instead of being barefoot at home. When chewed, Nyla bones become marked with sharp edges and hurt just as much as stepping on Lego pieces.
3. Dogs, like people, are messy, beginning with drool and progressing through the other possibilities that we can leave to the imagination. The experience is not for the squeamish.
4. Dogs shed and so a lint brush and a good vacuum are all essential for guide dog handlers.
5. Dogs smell when wet. Conversely, dogs tolerate rain gear and booties. Be ready for people to comment on the raincoat and booties when out in public. Did I mention that dogs shed?
6. Most dogs, while trained for good indoor house manners, will revert to being a dog. Don't be

surprised, on occasion, to find a shredded paper towel, a tissue, or even a can or yogurt container licked clean. My second dog chewed a paper napkin to shreds while laying down under the table in a fancy restaurant.

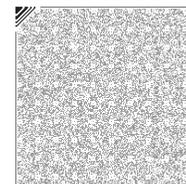
7. Cover all waste cans or it could become a canine snack bin. The same goes for the cat litter box. Remember—dog proofing is like toddler proofing.
8. A crate in your home is like a piece of furniture. Most training programs recommend it. The top of our crate has turned out to be a great place to put the empty food bowls. The toy bin can become a safe place for just about anything.
9. You will need a larger bag or pouch. You are now carrying things for two.
10. Did I mention dog hair?
11. There is other husbandry, ear cleaning, bathing, brushing, and learning how to give a pill to a reluctant dog. Pill pockets work only about 50 percent of the time.
12. There are times when you will need to leave your dog home because it may not be safe, or it could be significantly



stressful. A loud rock concert is one example. Also, if it's too hot or cold for you, it will be just as intolerable for a dog. Therefore, don't lose those cane skills entirely.

13. Finally, there are financial commitments to consider with the cost of food, equipment such as grooming supplies, supplements like fish oil, and the taking care of an occasional ailment or injury. Should you choose to keep your dog after retirement, it will require a handler to administer care and joint and/or other health supplements or medications to an elderly dog. It also means that you will be making the decision to euthanize the dog when the time comes.
14. The emotional journey you will take with your new guide dog will be blessed with twists and turns. Training will challenge and build confidence. The bonding is powerful. Some handlers say it took time to bond with the dog or to become used to the extra attention from the public. Others

say it was getting family, friends, and/or employers to adjust to the dog. Some handlers do not apply for a successor dog until the current dog dies, sharing that it feels disloyal to do so. Many guide dog handlers cannot keep more than a single dog due to restrictions where they live. Other folks transition to a canine successor with a more practical attitude. It's a team effort and an investment in time and energy.



There will be times when your patience is put to the test; being denied entrance to a store or transportation because of your guide dog comes to mind. At these times, being prepared and knowing your rights, keeping in touch with other handlers and/or guide dog user groups, and staying in control are all tools to help with instances of access denial. I hope this document has been helpful and has accomplished what it was meant to achieve: sharing your life with a guide dog requires a good amount of hard work and dedication but it is fulfilling and worth it.

Ann Chiapetta is a writer, consultant, and guest presenter on a handful of subjects and themes, among them the training and working with a guide or service dog.

For more information, see the following:

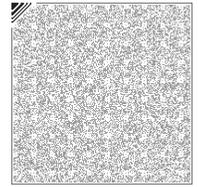
Follow Your Dog: A Story of Love and Trust,
by Ann Chiapetta, <http://www.annchiapetta.com>

The Handbook for the Prospective Guide Dog Handler, by Guide Dog Users, Inc.
<https://www.amazon.com/Handbook-Prospective-Guide-Dog-Handler/dp/1721990275>



Safe and Sane During the Pandemic

by Charles Reynolds



It has now been a year since the pandemic started and the overall review is that this has been a horrible year!

It has been a year since a roll of toilet paper was more precious than gold. It has been a year since going to a birthday party became scarier than going to a camp in Crystal Lake on Friday, the 13th.

We have spent the last year learning what Zoom means and then learning how not to show our underwear on the screen. We have spent so much time in our homes and on our couches and recliners that they now need to be replaced for having exceeded their lifespans.

We may have forgotten what fresh air smells like. We have forgotten how to small talk and have conversations with people outside of our homes.

The biggest issue is that we are not even in the clear just yet. With that established, we need to figure out how to remain safe and sane while perhaps even smiling once in a while.

The first thing is to stop watching 12 hours of news about the pandemic or, for that matter, world news in general. An overload of information can be stressful and can eventually cause our heads to explode.

Second, we need to reach out to those we care about when stressed. It can be helpful to our state of mind. It may be relaxing to know others are going through the same things we are, and it can remind us of what it is like to talk with people.

Third, stay active. There are multiple ways to do this, but we need to stay active physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Accompanied by good eating habits, staying active through sports, a treadmill, or a stationary bike are excellent mechanisms

to get our heart rates up and to prevent our bodies from collecting all of the stress that can negatively affect them. If we take a walk or go for a run, we will not forget how to move. Staying active with groups associated with our churches, our local Dungeons and Dragons chapters, or even online chats all help us. We still have our voices even though those voices may be hiding behind a mask or two. Let people hear that voice. People may be missing you.

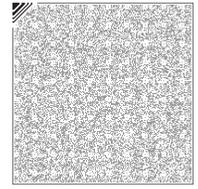
Fourth, remember to maintain some type of routine. Some kids these days have nothing to do so they sleep all day. Try to keep a schedule to keep yourself on track. At some point this will all end and everyone will want to see what the sunlight is like. So, if you get up at 6am, keep doing that. Make time to exercise, meditate, take a break, and eat right. Even if you cannot leave the house, you can still accomplish much through a routine. You will have the energy and motivation to help others through this tough time.

Fifth, in all of the routine, do something different too. Learn a new skill. Pick up painting or take a class online. Keep that brain working. When people ask us, "What did you do during the quarantine," we can say that we learned something or gained a new skill instead of reporting that we watched 20 seasons of **The Bachelor**.

This pandemic will end! It may not end as soon as we would all like but it will end. When that happens, we will all want to go outside to see what is left of the world at amusement parks, ballgames, and restaurants and navigate our way within them. At that time let's make sure we are ready to participate. We want to be safe and sane now so that we are well prepared to tell others how we got through it all.

Descriptathon a Hit For Louisiana Veteran

by Gary Schoelerman



In December, Stuart Nelson put out a call for volunteers for something called Descriptathon. You would think that after our military service we should know better than to volunteer for a project to help transcribe a national park brochure into audio format. However, since I enjoy visiting national parks, monuments, and historical sites, a few other BVA members and I joined the UNI Description Project for a three-day “Descriptathon”.

There were a number of different organizations and agencies involved: National Park Service, U.S. Wildlife and Fisheries, Canadian Parks Service, American Council of the Blind, BVA, and many volunteers.

The large group was divided into teams of 5-7 and each team was assigned to a park or site. The team to which I was assigned worked on the Fort Larned National Historic Site, a small fort in Kansas built in the 1860s. The team consisted of three Park Rangers stationed at Fort Larned, a volunteer from Northern Virginia, an American Council of the Blind (ACB) member from Fargo, North Dakota, and me from Southern Louisiana. While those in Kansas and North Dakota were suffering with temperatures of near zero or below, I proudly informed them (but without rubbing it in) that we were at 75 degrees.

The task at hand for the group was to disassemble the brochure and put it in audio form, including a detailed description of the pictures, diagrams, and maps, so that a blind or low-vision person could listen and have the same information as the sighted person reading the brochure.

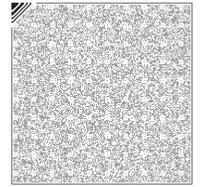
The project required considerable studying to learn how to describe a portrait, pictures, diagrams, and maps for the audio description. The members of ACB and BVA were there to assist in the description and act as consultants and then to act as a judge on other teams’ descriptions.

Overall, it was a great experience and well worth the time that the project took. In three days the group as a whole did about 16 different audio described brochures for our national parks and other sites.

If you have ever been to a park or other location that has brochures and relied on your significant other, a child, or a friend to read them to you, you may be familiar with comments such as, “Oh, here is a picture of the old building,” or “Here is a map of the area.” No other explanation is given and you are left wondering what was really there.

You can download a UNI Description app for a description of more than 100 national parks, monuments, and historical sites. The parks and sites are listed by name or state. The audio description has the full text in audio form plus an audio description of the maps and pictures within the brochure. This is ideal if you are going to a park and want to research it before you go or if you just want to find out about the parks and sites you would like to visit someday.

For more information, go to www.unidescription.org. The motto is “audio describe the world” and the national parks are the first steps.



Regional Group Advances Braille Flag Program

by Gary Schoelerman

On March 28, 1945, a group of approximately 100 blinded war veterans returning from overseas and recuperating at Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital began looking to the future and what life might look for them several years down the road. At that time, things seemed rather bleak as there were no rehabilitative services available through what was then the Veterans Administration.

This group set its sights on changing that outlook and created BVA. They approached General Omar Bradley, the recently appointed VA Director, with a plan to develop and institute a rehabilitation program designed specifically for blinded veterans.

The Association formed was chartered by the United States Congress 13 years later and, to this day, is the only Veterans Service Organization aimed solely at supporting and helping blinded veterans. The accomplishments of this organization over the past 76 years have resulted in the creation of 13 Blind Rehabilitation Centers located throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. BVA works hand in hand with VA to ensure that comprehensive training is available to any veteran who loses vision, regardless of whether the loss is service connected. The long-range goal is the teaching of independence and improvements to one's quality of life.



Following the Braille flag presentation, Debra Gilley received BVA Certificate of Appreciation plaque recognizing her outstanding contributions to blinded veterans and their families.

In 2019, the BVA Louisiana /Mississippi (LA/MS) Regional Group established a goal for itself to place a bronze-raised relief-tactile American flag in every VA Medical Center, Clinic, or other location serving veterans within its two-state region. Multiple Veterans Service Organizations have joined the LA/MS Regional Group in pursuing this goal.

On December 10, 2020, a dedication ceremony was held at the Gulf Coast Blind Rehabilitation Center of the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System (GCVHCS) in Biloxi, Mississippi. The ceremony was broadcast virtually during this COVID-19 era so that all interested BVA members, GCVHCS employees, and guests could attend. LA/MS Regional Group President Tracy Ferro presented a flag to Bryan Matthews, Director of GCVHCS. It was one of two that have now been donated to the health care system.

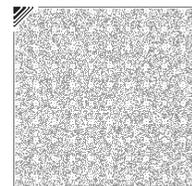
One flag is in the main hospital near the Primary Care area and was donated by the regional group in cooperation with the Eddy Blake Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 3937 of Long Beach, Mississippi, and the Oswald Fayard VFW Post 6731 of D'Iberville, Mississippi. These VFW posts were represented at the ceremony by Ron Oman and Rick Arbogast, respectively. All three organizations, BVA and the two VFW Posts, are recognized with a plaque mounted beside the bronze flag.

The second bronze flag donated by the regional group went to the Gulf Coast BRC for all visually impaired veterans to reflect on what a Blind Rehabilitation Center does and how it positively affects the lives of blinded veterans. The regional group was represented by President Tracy Ferro, Secretary Gary Schoelerman, and members Larry Harper and Maury Lunn.

The BVA LA/MS Regional Group has also donated flags to the New Orleans VA Medical Center, the Alexandria, Louisiana VA Medical Center, the Lafayette VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC), the Jennings, Louisiana Veterans CBOC, and the Alexandria VA Retirement Living Center.

At the same formal ceremony, Tracy formally presented Debra Gilley, Chief of Blind Rehabilitation Service for the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, with a BVA Certificate of Appreciation for her extraordinary service to blinded veterans. Without the pandemic, the certificate would have been presented to her in person by the BVA National President at the 75th National Convention.

Additional Flag Donated To New Orleans Facility by Tracy Ferro



It took a year but we finally got it done, thanks to the persistence of Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group Treasurer and past BVA National President Joe Burns.

Last year, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the regional group was working with the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS), located in New Orleans, to present a Braille flag. February 19, 2021 was the date that all of the hard work seemed to have paid off.

Through the juggernaut of requirements for safe meetings, a smaller presentation than initially hoped for took place in the main lobby of the hospital complex. A fitting background of the American flag, service flags, the Louisiana State Flag, and numerous other flags stood brightly as Joe and his guide dog, Kendrick, made the presentation to Fernando Rivera, Director of SLVHCS. In addition to the Braille flag, Joe also presented a plaque noting all of the organizations that contributed toward this project.

Previously unbeknownst to Joe and Mr. Rivera were the mutual friendships they discovered that they had with other VA and BVA personnel. After the two reminisced for a few moments, Joe presented a short history of BVA and its beginnings. He then spoke of the respect and devotion to the veterans both institutions share. Mr. Rivera spoke on his long history with BVA and the pleasure he gained in working with this special group of veterans. He explained how the plaque and flag would not be just hung on a wall somewhere but would be placed on a mobile

display that could be moved throughout the hospital. This would give occupants of all of the hospital stations the opportunity to become aware of the donation and introduce the organization to veterans, VA employees, and visitors.

Although numbers of guests had to be limited, honored guests included SLVHCS Chief of Ophthalmology Dr. Rebecca Metzinger and VIST Coordinator Darla Pascal. Representing the regional group were President Tracy Ferro, Secretary Gary Schoelerman, Treasurer Burns with his working dog, Kendrick, and spouses.

This is one more step in the regional group's goal to place a Bronze Braille American Flag in every VA Medical Center, every Community Based Outpatient Clinic, and each VA Community Living Center in the region, all of which will increase awareness of both BVA and the rehabilitation programs VA offers to blind and low-vision veterans.

BVA Members, HQ, Mourn Cheryl Gajadhar Passing

December 19 was a most somber day for the scores of family members and friends of Cheryl Lynn Gajadhar as they learned early that morning of her sudden passing following complications from COVID-19. Among Cheryl's many friends were dozens of fellow BVA regional group leaders throughout the country, members of the South Carolina Regional Group she served, and fellow staff at BVA National Headquarters.

"Working with Cheryl was both inspirational and empowering," said Don Overton. "Her 'can-do, never-give-up' attitude ensured success, always rising to and overcoming the challenges before her."

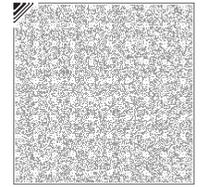
Cheryl had only recently become a BVA staff member, accepting a contract position

as the National Information Technology Specialist and the Webmaster for the national BVA site. She was a regular national convention attendee, attending as both a delegate and regional group officer. She was president of the South Carolina Regional Group for more than 15 years.

She became ill a few days prior to passing as she feverishly worked, quite literally, extended hours at her computer, transforming the BVA site into something attractive to sighted viewers and accessible to the BVA membership.

"I will forever miss our 3am strategic meetings and marathon website deliberations, cherishing at the same time the lessons of positivity that she instilled in me," said Don. "BVA was blessed to have had Cheryl on loan for so long; she was called home far sooner than we wished but continues to shine brightly in the hearts and minds of all who knew her."

Cheryl was born in Verdun, France. Shortly thereafter her family moved to South Carolina, where she was educated in the public schools of Horry County and graduated from Conway High School. She joined the U.S. Army following her graduation, where she served proudly as a drill sergeant and a



Drawing on unique talents and personality, Cheryl Lynn Gajadhar dedicated her life to the cause of her blinded veteran friends for nearly 20 years.

logistics officer until her retirement. She then continued her education at Midlands Technical College where she received Associates Degrees in computer science and computer programming. Cheryl worked as a program analyst at the Computer Science Corporation in Blythewood, South Carolina before forming her own company, CNRI Services. As an independent contractor Cheryl became a vendor for the Columbia, South Carolina Health Care System, proudly teaching many disabled veterans how to use computers as a means of overcoming disabilities.

Surviving Cheryl are three children, nine grandchildren, her mother, and six siblings.

“Although she served her country well, Cheryl remained devoted to serving her fellow blinded veterans until her dying day,” said Director of District 3 Monaca Gilmore.

Dog Handler Update

The newest committee of BVA, the BVA Dog Handlers, wishes to congratulate and celebrate BVA and all blinded veterans on March 28, the Congressionally designated National Blinded Veterans Day. However you celebrate, remember Father Thomas J. Carroll, a man ahead of his time with his philosophy and attention to blinded veterans and their well-being. Father Carroll was instrumental in the formation of the Blinded Veterans Association and our BVA Chaplain for many years. If you haven't read his most important book, **Blindness: What it is, What it does, and How to live with it**, it is suggested that you do so – or get it on tape – or have someone read and discuss it with you. You'll be glad you did.

The BVA Dog Handler's Committee invites you to please check out the committee's webpage at www.bva.org/dog-handlers-committee – especially if you have, or are

thinking of getting, a new guide or service dog.

As a special interest group of BVA for several years, we have been doing considerable groundwork to get to where we are today. March 28 is a great day for the BVA Dog Handlers Committee as we kick off a month of celebrating guide (and service) dog awareness by gathering more information about the accredited schools, asking them to share how they serve veterans and maybe some special stories about a veteran, trained dog, or team (we like to call them “partners”).

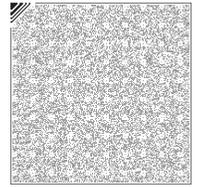
At the end of the month, April 28, we plan to recognize the accredited dog schools with a special thank you for their attention and assistance in partnering a well-trained dog with a blinded veteran who will both benefit from and contribute to a continuing partnership for many years to come.

We also want you to share a special dog partner story with the Dog Handlers – online with Rae Hail, waya@pacifier.com, and Stuart Nelson, snelson@bva.org. If you are not a computer person and can get it written down, please mail it to Stuart Nelson at BVA National Headquarters.

Scholarship Deadline Quickly Approaching

BVA will award seven total higher education scholarships for the 2021-22 academic year, six under the Kathern F. Gruber program umbrella for \$2,000 each and one \$1,000 scholarship in the name of Thomas H. Miller.

The Gruber scholarship program is now in its 38th year. The Miller program, now in its ninth year, requires the same application process and qualifications as the Gruber



awards except for an added emphasis on music and the fine arts. The Scholarship Committee will choose seven total recipients for both awards and two alternates.

Dependent children, grandchildren, and spouses of blinded veterans, and those of active duty blinded service members of the U.S. Armed Forces, are eligible for the scholarships. The veteran must be legally blind and the blindness may be either service connected or nonservice connected. The spouse or parent who qualifies as the blinded veteran does not have to be a BVA member.

Additionally, to be eligible for one of the scholarships, an applicant must have been accepted for admission, or already be enrolled, as a full-time student in an accredited institution of higher education or business, secretarial, or vocational training school.

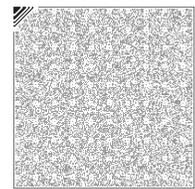
The scholarships are intended to defray a student's educational expenses, including tuition, books, and other academic fees. Scholarship payments will be made by BVA directly to the educational institution.

Scholarships will be awarded on a most highly-qualified basis utilizing the following criteria: answers to questions in the application form; transcripts of high school and/or college records; three letters of reference; a 300-word-essay on the applicant's lifetime educational/career goals and aspirations, and past awards and achievements.

Each scholarship is awarded for one year only and the number of scholarships recipients may receive under each program is limited to four.

Applications for the scholarships may be obtained from **bva.org** or by request via email to: **bjones@bva.org** or by calling 202-371-8880.

To qualify for the 2021-22 academic year, applicants must send completed applications and supporting materials so that they arrive at BVA National Headquarters by **Friday, April 16, 2021**.



Due to time constraints related to processing the applications for the Scholarship Committee's review, applications arriving after the deadline will not be accepted. Incomplete applications will not be submitted to the Scholarship Committee. It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure a complete application.

For more information, please contact Administrative Director Brigitte Jones at 202-371-8880, Ext. 330.

Board Taps Harris for Interim Directorship

Brian Harris, vice president of the Illinois Regional Group, was named interim Director of District 2 on December 2 following the resignation of Tim Hornik. He will complete Tim's term of office, which began in 2018 and will end this summer.



Interim District 2 Director Brian Harris, left, with Tom Zampieri at 71st National Convention (2016) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (archive photo).

Brian is an eight-year veteran of the U.S. Army with three deployments. He was first stationed in Bosnia and later participated in Operation Bright Star in Egypt and Operation Iraqi Freedom before being medically retired as a Corporal in 2005 as a result of a severe stroke. He began losing his vision in 2006 and was diagnosed with Optic Neuritis. He attended the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at Hines in the summer of 2008.

In addition to his regional group responsibilities, Brian has recently served on the Operation Peer Support Committee.

BVA Receives Bosma 2021 Community Partner Award

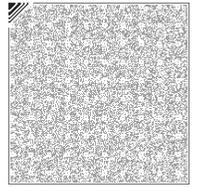
The Blinded Veterans Association is the recipient of this year's Bosma Community Partner Award for its contributions to the blind community of Indiana.

Based in Indianapolis for more than 100 years, Bosma is a nonprofit organization that provides training and employment for the blind and visually impaired.

BVA received the honor at the annual Thomas C. Hasbrook Award Event hosted by the Bosma Visionary Opportunities Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the organization. Hasbrook was elected BVA National President in 1948 and served in that capacity for two years. He was active in BVA for nearly 50 years despite commitments to a business career, state and local politics, and community service. In the summer of 1946 he organized the Indiana Regional Group.

"The Blinded Veterans Association has been a committed partner who has helped to get the word out about not only the products but also the services available to Hoosier veterans with visual impairments," said Bosma President and CEO Jeffrey Mittman, a BVA member himself.

BVA and Bosma have had a longstanding relationship. Last year, the two organizations worked together with legislators on Capitol Hill to pass H.R. 4920, the VA Contracting Preference Consistency Act. Earlier this year, BVA announced its endorsement of Bosma Enterprises' Good Works® Ice Melter.



Blinded Veterans Flourish In STARS VI Challenge

Six blinded veterans from four states spanning the country stepped out of their comfort zones January 24-28 to participate in the Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports (STARS) VI Clinic 2021 in the mountains of Colorado.

The Operation Peer Support group consisting of Rocky Mountain Regional Group president William Mathis (Colorado), Michael Murphy (Colorado), Zach Tidwell (Colorado) Scott Scieszinski (California), Rob Sanchas (Rhode Island), and Yoneka Trent (North Carolina), took on skiing, snowboarding, and ski biking at the Steamboat Springs event.

"On Day 1 tensions were really high with excitement, nervousness, and fear but STARS and VA's Operation Peer Support really hit a homerun with this event, bringing together veterans no matter what the disabilities are," said William. "After a wonderful dinner put on by STARS and a quick briefing of the week, tensions settled and the veterans began doing what we always do to adapt."

William also reported that as the week progressed members of the group demonstrated the true strength they brought with them on top of the growth they experienced during the program through the physical and mental challenges they faced.

"Through all the pain and excitement,



The physical and mental requirements of the STARS VI Clinic brought accomplishment and satisfaction at the Colorado venue.

we began to flourish and let go of our other preoccupations in order to enjoy the moment,” he said. “By the end of Day 3, despite being exhausted, we still had more than enough energy to sit laughing, crying, and sharing as true friends.”

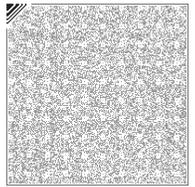
Southeast Texas Chapter Secures Proclamations

In early 2020, BVA regional groups across the country were busy requesting proclamations of their respective states and local municipalities honoring National Blinded Veterans Day on the upcoming March 28, marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of the organization.

Because of the onset of COVID-19 and the subsequent closings of government offices, formal presentations of the proclamations and other recognitions were cancelled. In many cases proclamations were mailed or perhaps never received.

Despite the disappointments last year and the continued difficulty in securing proclamations in 2021, the Southeast Texas Chapter of the Greater Houston Regional Group renewed its efforts this year with a request to the City of Chester, Texas, in

Tyler County. The request was honored and a signed proclamation dated March 1, 2021 from Mayor Floyd Petri was provided to chapter secretary/treasurer Jerry Killion. The proclamation reads:



Whereas, Public Law 111-156, enacted in March 2010 by the 111th Congress in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate with two separate resolutions, designates March 28 each year going forward as National Blinded Veterans Day in recognition of BVA’s efforts to promote the establishment and improvement of rehabilitation services and benefits for America’s blinded veterans. Now, therefore, I, as Mayor Floyd Petri of Chester, Tyler County, Texas, by virtue of the authority vested in me, do hereby proclaim March 28 as “Blind Veterans Day” in the City of Chester, Texas, Tyler County.

The chapter also received a similar proclamation from the City and County of West Orange in early March. Additional proclamations were received as March 28 approached.

Georgia RG Highlights World War II Veteran

The Georgia Regional Group has also proudly submitted information on a World War II veteran within its ranks, the oldest member of the regional group family.

Jerrell L McNutt, 94, has been legally blind for the past eight years. He was drafted into the Army at the age of 18 on April 7, 1945 just as the war ended and what would be, coincidentally, ten days after the founding of the Blinded Veterans Association. Jerrell trained as an Infantryman at Camp Gordon, Georgia, near Augusta. His infantry training focused on Japanese warfare.

In February 1946, Jerrell was sent to Camp Reese in Pusan, Korea. The camp was

an abandoned Japanese camp and General Douglas MacArthur sent U.S. troops to gather up all Japanese soldiers and ship them back to Japan to liberate the Korean people. While stationed at Camp Reese, Jerrell earned the Browning Automatic Rifle Badge. He also earned his GED (General Equivalency Diploma) and learned to speak two languages, Korean and Japanese. He returned to the United States on December 12, 1946.

After his discharge, Jerrell earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree and two Masters Degrees, along with three years of special training qualifying him to teach at the graduate level in Theo Ministries, which he did for 55 years. He also served as a chaplain at the Tuskegee, Alabama VA Medical Center from 1978 to 2005.

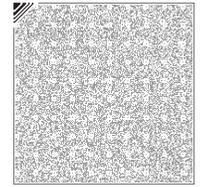
Jerrell moved to Georgia in 2015 to be with his daughter, Linda Jones, as his caregiver. He has three children, six grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. He is the youngest of ten children consisting of seven boys and three girls. All of his brothers served during World War II.

Bulletin Seeks Readers' Top Ten

Legendary television talk show host David Letterman entered millions of homes for well over three decades. Although his popular "The Late Show" ended in 2015, his most famous segment of all, the nightly Top Ten List, will forever be remembered by his viewers.

The Bulletin seeks to revive the Top 10 list among its readers. Beginning with this issue and continuing in those of the future, readers will be asked to submit their own "Top 10" on a noncontroversial, nonpartisan, and nonreligious subject. An objective team of evaluators will rate submissions for humor and creativity. Winners' names will be announced in the subsequent **Bulletin**.

Readers may submit a full ten items but can also submit fewer.



For this first Top Ten, please submit your **Top Ten Outdoor Springtime Activities** to Stuart Nelson at snelson@bva.org by **Friday, April 16**. Submissions can also be called into Stuart at 202-371-8882.

Prophetic Words 75 Years Ago

The **BVA Bulletin** of November 1946, at the time a monthly publication, reprinted a commendation to the 18-month-old Blinded Veterans Association from the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind, Inc. The salute, which also included a statement about BVA's future, was originally published in the Pennsylvania organization's magazine **The Seer**.

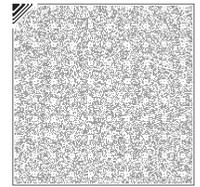
The comments in the September 1946 issue of **The Seer** referred first to a listing of the Blinded Veterans Association's aims and objectives presented by Ray Frey at BVA's 1st National Convention. Frey was BVA's first National President and a native Pennsylvanian. The short blurb in **The Seer** is headlined "The Seer Sees" and reads as follows:

The Seer sees in Lieutenant Frey's statement of the aims and objectives of the Blinded Veterans Association a sincere, direct exposition of that honored group of World War II veterans' future ambitions in their own behalf. **The Seer** has nothing but admiration for this group of men who gave so much in defense of their country, our country. May this fine organization of blinded veterans enjoy a long, prosperous future and warrant the same measure of devotion and approbation 10 years, yes, and 50 years, from now. If each member serves his country in civilian life as well as he did in the Service, the future of the BVA is assured.



Auxiliary's View

by Patricia Hail, BVAA Reporter
(and Past National President)



Independence

You have asked questions regarding your blindness; found truthful and satisfactory answers; learned useful skills, including mobility; and have enough of your dignity back so that you are ready to “step out” and “face the world”. There will be setbacks, but you can persevere. Remember back to your childhood and the story “The Little Engine That Could”? He kept at it, and finally accomplished his goal. You can too. Good Luck and Congratulations!

Your current level of **independence** is great; now you can “see” part of the world. What does that do for you? Want to do more? Most do. We tend to expand our horizons on a regular basis. At an early level of blindness, learning and becoming proficient with your mobility skills is a major achievement. You can drop the arm-leading and step out on your own in familiar territory. You may need directions but with mapping and practice you get around quite well in unfamiliar territory. Congratulations!

You learn independent living skills for your particular situation. That gives both you and your significant other more freedom. Soon you'll be identifying projects you'd like to try. Oops! You run into roadblocks; what's next? You ASK. Initially a family member is easiest to ask. You have appropriately used a good resource, reaching another level of independence and will later expand your

resource bank. Congratulations!

We start with some kind of computer assisted technology. When we master that, the next thought is: “But I'd like to do blank; how can I do it?” Your VIST, BROS, VISOR, or BRC probably have some ideas. Now you're ready to advance your independence with technology. Congratulations!



Are you beginning to see the little steps involved in the bigger steps toward greater independence? One more advancement – not for everyone – but something to consider is a **guide dog**. Hmm! More independence, more recognition, and more safety. Also, more responsibility. Ask your Primary Care Team if they feel a guide dog would be right for you – and you for the guide dog. If their answer is yes, make sure that this is written in your VA charts and then go for it!

Thankfully, the International Guide Dog Foundation's (IGDF) accredited schools have been raising and training guide dogs for years. How do you know where to go, what to consider, and what to do? The answers are in self-checklists, interesting information, and a growing number of stories on <https://bva.org/doghandlers>. For ADI-accredited schools for service dogs, visit <https://assistancedogsinternational.org/resources/member-search>.

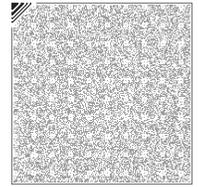
If you still have questions, the BVA Dog Handlers Committee members listed on the BVA website will be happy to help you on

your road to becoming a handler of a dog that fits the criteria to be a VA “Dog of Record.”

Remember:

- You are now at a level of independence that allows you to make your own choices.
- There is a process, and the process must be followed.

When that process is completed, you and your dog partner are a team; a team that is as close and independent as you make it. That achievement, to many, is true **INDEPENDENCE!**



Veterans Service Program Update

by James R. Vale

Specially Adapted Housing

In response to the passage of Public Law 116-154, known as the Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019, the VA Compensation Service recently mailed “Duty to Assist” letters to 5,400 potentially eligible veterans for the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant. Veterans with “blindness in both eyes” may now be eligible. The SAH grant is now \$100,896 and is usually increased by an annual Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA).

The law no longer requires loss of use of a limb for blinded veterans to qualify for the SAH grant, but what exactly qualifies as “blindness in both eyes” for the purpose of SAH grant eligibility?

The answer to that question can be complicated but, according to guidance from VA Central Office, the following service connection ratings qualify: (1) Anatomical loss of both eyes; (2) No more than light perception in both eyes; (3) Anatomical loss

of one eye when service connection is rated at 70 percent or greater; (4) No more than light perception in one eye when rated at that same 70 percent or greater; (5) Vision in one eye of 5/200 (1.5/60) when rated at 70 percent or greater; (6) Visual acuity in one eye of 10/200 (3/60) or better when rated at 70 percent or greater; and (7) Visual field defects when rated at 70 percent or greater. If you meet any of the preceding categories and were previously denied the SAH grant, you should consider reapplying while reaching out to one of our National Service Officers (NSOs) for assistance.

We are often asked about an annual grant quota since the new legislation increased the annual grant limit from 30 to 125 grants per year for post-9/11 veterans who have a loss of limb. This limit applies only to post 9/11 veterans who have lost a limb. It does not apply to most blinded veterans who are eligible for a grant.

When SAH grant eligibility was expanded to include blinded veterans, blindness was removed as a qualifier for the much smaller \$20,000 Special Housing Adaptation

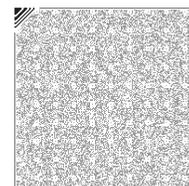
(SHA) grant. Although the SHA grant is not going away, blinded veterans with no other qualifying disabilities are no longer eligible for it. Prior use of the SHA grant under the old rules does not affect eligibility for the new SAH as they are separate grant programs. One does not take away from or offset the other.

You do not have to go it alone when applying for the SAH grant. The hallmarks of the SAH program are individual attention and personalized service. Once grant eligibility is established by a VA Regional Office, each eligible veteran is assigned a VA SAH Agent who works closely with that veteran, the family of the veteran, and the veteran's selected builder throughout the grant administration process.

The assigned SAH Agent can help identify which eligible adaptations are needed to make the veteran's home safer and more adaptive

to the disabilities. The most common adaptations approved for blinded veterans are those that **improve lighting** (such as additional light fixtures), **reduce glare** (window tinting, blinds, and window shades), and **improve safety** (intercom and alarm systems, smart devices, and low-tech devices such as additional handrails, sliding cabinet doors, and sometimes even ramps). There is much to consider when figuring out what is best for each veteran's unique situation. The best resource for planning is your SAH Grant Agent.

For more information on VA grants or to download the SAH Handbook for Design, visit the SAH grant landing page as follows: <https://www.va.gov/housing-assistance/disability-housing-grants/>.



Did You Know?

BVA's first National Headquarters in 1945 was limited to a desk in a corner of an establishment called the Gundy Tee Room in Farmington, Connecticut.

In early 1946, the BVA Board of Directors determined that since the newly established Blinded Veterans Association was a national organization, its headquarters should be in New York City, where the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) donated its Helen Keller Room for weekend BVA Board meetings every three months and set up a trust fund for BVA.

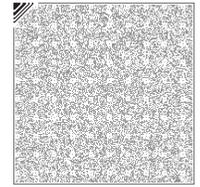
In addition, AFB paid a modest salary to BVA's first employee (Baynard Kendrick), and for the printing of the first few issues of the **BVA Bulletin**. AFB also donated equipment to blinded veterans in other World War II allied countries on BVA's behalf. Although significant financial help came shortly thereafter from additional sources, it was AFB that helped BVA remain afloat during the first critical weeks and months following March 28, 1945.

BVA extends best wishes to AFB during this, its centennial year of life-changing initiatives benefiting the blind and visually impaired. May the next 100 be equally successful.



Chaplain's Corner

by Dr. Ron Lester



Don't Leave Me Hanging

Recently I was reading an amazing story

in **Reader's Digest** about Second Lieutenant Walter Osipoff's magnificent air rescue. An experienced soldier and parachuter, Osipoff had jumped at least 20 times before the fateful day. This day started just like any other but, through a handful of unfortunate events, Osipoff's chute tore just before he jumped and wrapped itself around the tail of the plane! Osipoff was left, harness and lines wrapped around his leg—sustaining a couple of fractured ribs and vertebrae—hanging about 15 feet from the tail of the plane in midair for 33 minutes!

I can imagine in all of those fretful, painstaking minutes he was crying out, "Don't leave me hanging!"

A heroic, almost impossible rescue was performed and Osipoff, after recovering for about six months, soon returned to parachuting, not letting that time of doubt, fear, or waiting keep him from what he loved to do.

I remember one Sunday we were sitting in a church service with our son Robbie when he was two years old. Out of nowhere, little Robbie stood up on the pew and started running back and forth! I quickly told him to sit down and be quiet but, being only two and having a great time, he kept running back and forth. I managed to grab a hold of him and was going to take him out into the hall for a spanking. Halfway down the aisle (just when our pastor was really getting into his sermon), Robbie yelled at the top of his lungs, "Somebody help me!"

The pastor lost his train of thought and started laughing, and so did the church! I was so embarrassed but still took him out of the service. Much to my dismay, the pastor never forgot that day nor the incident.

I think, much like Robbie did that day, we all have our times we cry out, "Don't leave me hanging!" or "Somebody help me!"

Life has a way of throwing complications at us each and every day. Some of those complications we expect while others come as a complete surprise. The question isn't if we will have these things come our way. The question is how we will respond. As we navigate our way in this increasingly complicated world, we would do well to remember that God is not powerless to help.

It sometimes seems that God just leaves us hanging. At least I know I start to feel that way once in a while. It seems we think we know where we are supposed to be or what we are supposed to do; then God just leaves us waiting around! We wonder how we are supposed to get where we're going or how we're going to take the next step. We pray, asking God to lead us and show us what to do in this journey of life! It is so easy to get caught up in the moment or in the worry, thinking that we are praying and God is not hearing us.

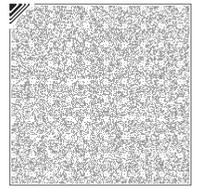
Sometimes it seems like God is quiet for a little while, but we are to keep on pressing forward in truth and love. We are to be a light and a good witness to the world around us, remembering that God said He will never leave us or forsake us!

Praise God that He is faithful and with us every moment, even when we think He isn't.



Winter Reader's Corner

By Mike Taylor



If you are a reader who enjoys naval action adventures, the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled's Braille and Audio Download (BARD) has some excellent titles available.

If you haven't read all 14 of C.S. Forester's "Hornblower Saga Series", they are the favorites of many. Ernest Hemmingway is often quoted as having said: "I recommend Forester to all my friends that can read."

The series begins with *Mr. Midshipman Hornblower* (DB26915). In this first volume, Hornblower's intellect, inspiration, and willful determination are demonstrated through a series of episodes.

Life in the British Royal Navy in the days of wooden sailing ships was difficult. Cramped quarters that were often shared with fleas and mice, not to mention bullying from other midshipmen, was the norm. How anyone could survive, never mind succeed under such conditions, is difficult to understand. Through a narrative that will keep you listening, Hornblower overcomes to advance to lieutenant in *Lieutenant Hornblower* (DB14756).

Recently, BARD posted more books by Forester: *Greyhound* (DB100833), 1955, originally published as *The Good Shepherd*. This book takes the reader through two days during World War II. A U.S. Navy destroyer, *Captain*, is responsible for escorting a convoy through a German submarine wolfpack.

Every decision he makes is critical and every minute survived precious. With this title, Forester proves that he is unequalled at writing nail-biting, white-knuckle adventure stories such as these:

Last Nine Days of the Bismarck (DB09183), 1959

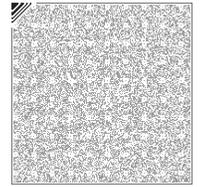
A dramatic reconstruction of the hunt-and-chase that developed in 1941 when Britain gambled on pursuing and destroying the Bismarck, Hitler's largest and deadliest battleship.

The Gun (DB101186), 1933

Defeated Spanish forces retreat from the French, leaving behind a large bronze cannon. Two years later, partisan forces find the gun and determine to use it in their fight against the French. But they must transport it a hundred miles across mountains to the front line. This novel contains violence and some strong language.

Rifleman Dodd (DB101199), 1932

While this short novel takes place on land, it was written by a master. Rifleman Matthew Dodd, member of the Rifle Brigade of the Light Division, is cut off from his comrades as they cover Wellington's retreat at Torres Vedras. As he works to reunite with them, he encounters a band of French soldiers and engages. Violence and some strong language.



NRTC Seeks Assistance with Access Technology Study

The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC) at Mississippi State University is recruiting persons with blindness or low vision (age 21+) who are working or are interested in working to be part of a five-year study about Access Technology (AT) use, particularly in the workplace. Some questions to which the Center seeks answers are:

- What access technology do you most commonly use?
- How do you decide whether to use a specific access technology?
- What are your technology challenges?
- What tools do you need that aren't currently available?

Long-term participation will involve completing multiple surveys to help determine how access technology use is changing over time. The surveys seek the participants' thoughts and experiences, not simply short answers.

Benefits to participating blinded veterans and the greater community of veterans with some degree of vision loss include:

- Being able to help identify gaps in access technology—what is needed but not available, which is exactly what NRTC technology company partners such as Microsoft, Google, OrCam, Vispero, and Aira are interested in!
- Contributing to constructive recommendations for Access Technology

users, Visual Reality professionals, Access Technology specialists, and employers.

- Access to survey results.
- A small gift card after completing each survey.

Interested veterans with vision loss can complete a pre-screening survey online at <https://www.blind.msstate.edu/news/2021/01/nrtc-recruiting-participants-access-technology-study> or by calling 662-325-2001 for a telephone screening. Please contact Michele McDonnall (m.mcdonnall@msstate.edu) or Emily Damm (edamm@colled.msstate.edu) with questions.

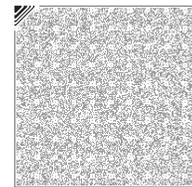
Plans in Motion for 2021 Iowa City TEE Tournament

Following the 2020 pandemic hiatus, the National Disabled Veterans TEE (Training, Exposure, Experience) Tournament is tentatively slated for a triumphant return September 12-17, 2021.

The venue of the TEE Tournament consists of golf courses, lodging facilities, and other recreational outlets in the Iowa City, Iowa area.

The program, originally initiated in 1994 by blinded veterans and VA BRS officials, is now a VA national event. It provides an adaptive golf and rehabilitation program for veterans with visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, limb loss, spinal cord injuries, and other disabilities.

The application deadline for participation is May 1. Veterans interested in participating can locate additional information at www.veteranstee.org.



Loyal Supporter Was Part of BVA Family

It is with deep sadness that the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group announces the loss of one of its friends and advocates. On January 30, Helen Russell passed away. What makes her so special to some of us is not the fact that she was a blinded veteran. She was not, in fact, a blinded veteran but her husband, Oscar, was.

I never had the honor of meeting Oscar and I'm not sure how many BVA members remember him since he passed away before I lost my vision. I did have the honor of meeting with and enjoying Helen's company. She was a blast, always assisting BVA and blinded veterans with a strong desire to serve. What really made her special is that she could have dropped all connections with BVA when she lost Oscar, but she chose to stay involved as much as her health would allow.

She had a kind heart and was always willing to listen and share a story of either her own or her beloved Oscar.

My point is to remind us that a life member's surviving spouse is a part of our family and we should encourage their involvement in what we do. These spouses are not just Uber drivers or caregivers but part of the BVA family. Without support and help from them, can we honestly say we would be where we are now? Please remember that they too need our support as much as we need theirs.

You are missed, Helen, but you are now once again dancing with Oscar.

Tracy Ferro

Biloxi, Mississippi

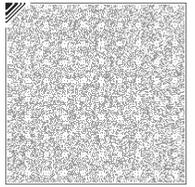
Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group

Bruce Davis: He Made a Difference

One of the early hires of the VIST Program was Bruce Davis, a friend to blinded veterans who was always supportive of BVA. Bruce has decided to retire after working with blinded veterans at the Gainesville VA Medical Center for 38 years. Bruce's veteran clients and many others will miss this exceptional servant leader. Bruce's clients describe his service as "above and beyond the call of duty." The Gainesville-Ocala area in Bruce's charge included The Villages.

Bruce did his work with calm and poise, never seeming to get flustered. Once Bruce determined a goal, results were certain to follow. Bruce pioneered techniques for assisting blinded veterans. The effectiveness of his practices was recognized and Bruce trained other VIST Coordinators to develop their skills to serve their clients.

In the early days of the VIST Program these specially trained social workers became effective and efficient in helping blinded veterans, mostly through trial and error.



One of the things discovered to work well was the setting up of multiple appointments in one day by the VIST Coordinator. Having five or more appointments during a single visit to the medical center greatly helped blinded veterans by reducing their travel.

The Florida Regional Group has traditionally held annual meetings in a number of towns across Florida. The Ocala meeting that was organized primarily by Bruce always had the best attendance. Additionally, Bruce located funding for an annual off-shore fishing trip. These two activities and many more that he arranged were not required but to us were bonus activities that were much appreciated.

Bruce was recognized as one of the very best at matching available benefits with the needs of his clients. He leaves behind many blinded veterans with whom he worked directly and others that benefited from his example. There are scores of blinded veterans in Florida and beyond who are grateful for his lengthy and excellent service.

Mike Taylor

Fleming Isle, Florida

Florida Regional Group

Regional Group Leader Addresses Membership Issue

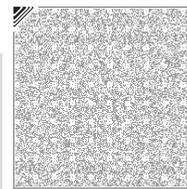
Many of us are aware of the membership situation currently occurring at BVA. Due to a situation in the past, BVA has three categories of membership. I have no first-hand information regarding how this came about, but I do know that sometime in the past, when member fees were staggered according to age, you could apply for membership and pay annual dues (amount unknown) until you paid the amount required for life membership. Unfortunately, from what I can deduce, no one ever followed up on these applicants to ensure that they paid as required. The staggered fee schedule was changed in 2016. As a result, no further fees were collected.

In addition, many veterans were recruited and were not asked to pay dues. John Woodcock, our regional group president, and I can attest to this. I was told that I did not need to pay any dues. I could just be an “inactive” member. So, this is how we have members who paid full dues, members who paid partial dues, and members who paid no dues at all.

Sometime in the past year or so, the group member lists were changed to a spreadsheet format. All groups received three member lists and three sets of mailing labels matching the three categories. I inquired as to why the partial pay members were now called “lapsed,” and the “inactive” members were now listed as “nonmembers”. I began to protest, asking why the three categories. I gleaned a little information here and there and, as I understand it, this is what happened:

No one at BVA National Headquarters or within the regional group reminded inactive members or partial dues-paying members that they owed a payment or payments. Moreover, applications for membership were received by our headquarters without

continued



payment of any dues. For some reason these applications were processed and applicants were listed as “inactive”.

The problem rests not with these applicants but with a policy or lack thereof. Frankly, this is the only organization I know of that does not insist on dues up front. I’m truly not blaming anyone and am simply trying to help the organization come up with a solution. My proposed solution is based on the premise that, just as a landlord could likely not collect rent that had been due for several months or years, the same is true for the dues of these inactive and partial-paying members.

My proposed solution is also based on the loss of so many of our World War II and Korean War veterans. World War II veterans were given free honorary membership at some point. So, why not, now, award active membership to the veterans who paid some or none? At \$25 for dues today, the chances of getting these veterans to pay now, after all their years as members, are slim. I feel that we would realize more benefit by letting them stay as permanent members than by trying to collect their money and then dropping them if they didn’t or couldn’t pay.

Speaking for our group, we have a good number of “lapsed members” and “nonmembers” who participate regularly in our activities. How would you feel if someone suddenly called you a nonmember? If you referred to me that way after my years of supposed membership, I guarantee that you would never get \$25 from me.

I understand that this matter will be taken up at this year’s convention. If you feel as I do, I ask you to contact your regional group officers, your District Director, and National Officers to make your feelings known.

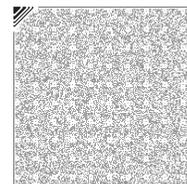
This matter could be resolved in short order. All that is needed is our determination that it be done.

Charles Nemeth
Albuquerque, New Mexico
New Mexico Regional Group

National Headquarters Response:

On behalf of BVA National HQ, I would like to take this opportunity to thank New Mexico Regional Group Secretary/Treasurer Chuck Nemeth for his continued leadership and ongoing support of our organization. Chuck has worked tirelessly to improve the operations of his regional group, as have our national staff. There were a multitude of challenges facing our team regarding the membership data but, working alongside one another (National Officers, District Directors, regional groups, and chapters), we’ve completed the necessary data migrations to the new membership system and continue to fine-tune each individual member record. This has been a long overdue process but, as anyone that has undertaken such a challenge can attest, it is well worth the effort. These data processes will enable the

continued



organization to make informed leadership decisions as well as equip the membership with the critically important information required to intelligently deliberate forthcoming bylaw amendment considerations.

While the project is not fully complete at the writing of this issue of **The Bulletin**, we are well within our projected timelines for completion. The final phase of the project will require a team effort so please be prepared to work alongside your various leadership teams to assist and support the headquarters staff as needed. Together, we will continue to improve our organizational operations while epitomizing our motto of “Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans.”

Donald Overton
BVA Executive Director

NY Member Commends Endurance, New Horizons

I write to you, comrades, as this Blinded Veterans Association has now been in existence for nearly 76 years. We are on the way to new horizons. We are soldiers who understand what it is to have daily challenges that we overcome with our power of mind.

We don't have the sight we once had but we forever do have our vision. I would like us to continue to stand together and represent unity. Representing the red, white, and blue has a united force of one in purpose. We need each other as veterans—veterans helping veterans—to achieve our goals and to achieve the ultimate dream of making this precious land the greatest it can ever be. With our freedoms rooted in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution, which are also the lifeline of our bylaws, we shall live in freedom forever.

Our life members in the regional groups, the regional groups themselves, the National Board, and the staff have worked together over a long period of time to make this organization the best it can be and to set the direction of our movement forward at this time.

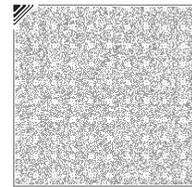
The Executive Director, Mr. Overton, has navigated the course. The National President, Dr. Zampieri, the Vice President, Mr. McNeil, and the Director of Public Relations, Mr. Nelson, are knowledgeable, enlightened, and keep the membership abreast and well informed of all pertinent information. We thank our directors and executives for their due diligence.

Whatever branch of service, whether male or female, we are all in this together. Let us keep this organization tight at the seams with pride in the organization's trustworthiness, integrity, and tenacity. We have accomplished many goals spanning the 76 years. Let's keep up the good work and continue to believe in this number one organization, the Blinded Veterans Association.

Warner Murray
New York, New York
New York Regional Group

In Remembrance

The Blinded Veterans Association deeply regrets the deaths of the following blinded veterans.



Florida R.G.

Kenneth Anderson
Theodore April
Calvin Ellis
Charles Hutzler
Mamerto Luzarraga
Sidney Trager
Robert Zellers

Georgia R.G.

Hugh Brown
Harry Conroy

Heartland R.G.

David Bell

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

Burn Simonson
Billy Tannenhill

Massachusetts R.G.

Erwin Levine

Mid-Atlantic R.G.

Donald Anderson
David Holland
Jeanette McGann

New Jersey R.G.

Joseph Leal

New Mexico R.G.

Kathryn Grant
Gus Henley
John Lowder
Charles McCrea
Charles Mullins

Dale Smith

Norman Street
Lloyd Ulery
Arnold Wagner
George Wheeler
John Winneberger

New York R.G.

Monty LaHanko
Clayton Royer

Northern California R.G.

Marvin Yap

Ohio R.G.

Robert Elving

Pennsylvania R.G.

Justin Benson

Puerto Rico R.G.

Benjamin Nieves Moralez

San Diego R.G.

John Barnhart
Jayne Hendricks

South Carolina R.G.

Cheryl Gajadhar

Southern Arizona R.G.

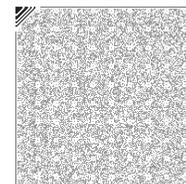
Forrest Lee Wood

Southern California R.G.

Lois Morrissey

BVA Members At-Large (No Regional Group Affiliation)

Eldon Woods



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Director District 4 – **RAE HAIL**, Deer Park, WA
Director District 5 – **DARRYL GOLDSMITH**, Pensacola, FL
Director District 6 – **KEVIN JACKSON**, Austin, TX
Sergeant-At-Arms – **KENNAN HORN**, Edmond, OK
National Chaplain – **DR. RON LESTER**, Tucson, AZ

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Vice President – **EDNA KIRKSEY-DIXON**, Bay Minette, AL
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Final Thought

“I will work tirelessly to build and restore VA’s trust as the premier agency for ensuring the well-being of America’s veterans,” said newly nominated VA Secretary Denis McDonough during his January 27 Senate confirmation hearing.

Pictured here, McDonough was Chief Deputy National Security Advisor and later White House Chief of Staff in the Obama Administration. He promised during the hearing to utilize his federal government experience in navigating the federal bureaucracy and his passion for serving veterans to improve services on a national level. He takes over a cabinet-level department with a \$243 billion budget.

“There is no more sacred obligation or undertaking than to uphold our promises to our veterans, whether they came home decades ago or days ago,” he said.

Photo courtesy of VA Public Affairs.

