

The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Spring 2021



HIGHLIGHTING
"THE BUSY
BEAMAN"

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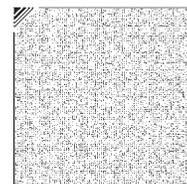


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Cover Photos:

BVA icon Margarine Beaman, known and beloved by all, has given of herself for more than three decades to make BVA national conventions successful. Her voluntary service includes recruiting, motivating, and instructing local volunteers to care for blinded veterans and their families at the annual gatherings. Guest writer Sila Miller captures Margarine’s life of hard work and service in this issue of **The Bulletin**. See complete photo descriptions on page 4. This issue also provides additional information about BVA’s upcoming national convention to be held virtually in August.

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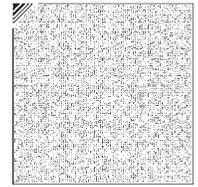
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Published quarterly by and for blinded veterans and sent to all blinded veterans without charge. **The Bulletin** informs BVA members about their Association and the issues that affect blinded veterans.



President's Page

by Dr. Thomas Zampieri



I hope that the arrival of this issue of **The Bulletin** finds each of you well. I encourage you and all my fellow veterans, if you have not already done so, to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine so that you are protected from this dangerous pandemic that is still somewhat with us.

To assure the safety of our members and families, we as the National Board of Directors, in cooperation with VA Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS), have determined to hold a virtual convention in August. As National President during the pandemic, I have found it painful to have to forego a live convention for two consecutive years. Nevertheless, we must take the steps that will safeguard our members. We can then look forward to holding our next convention in the Nation's Capital in August 2022.

The Board and the Executive Director, along with the Convention and Education Committees, are working diligently to organize a variety of educational Zoom sessions, in addition to two BVA business sessions, for this year's virtual convention.

According to the bylaws, we must elect our national officers this year. All national officers are restricted to two-year terms. We encourage all regional groups to either vote for a delegate or have their presidents represent them during the virtual business sessions. Because this is a virtual business meeting, the delegate or officer must submit registrations a minimum of two weeks prior to the first business session.

In addition to a business session for elections on Wednesday, we have recognized the need for changes in the BVA national bylaws to authorize virtual business meetings and elections on a wider scale. Redistricting, policies regarding regional groups, and other articles need updating to reflect the demographic changes across the organization. In order to move forward, we must evaluate new strategies and redesign how we function nationally and at the local regional group level. We can no longer avoid the updating of our bylaws.

As most of us are probably aware, BVA has experienced a significant loss of World War II and Korean War members. This sharp decline will continue over the next two years. The BVA total national membership has declined to its lowest level in more than 30 years, impacting our mission, regional groups, and volunteer efforts. I ask that we adjust and react to these challenges.

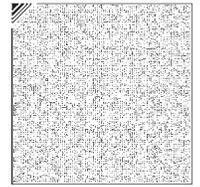
The old claim was that if we just recruited half of the blinded veterans on the Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) rosters, we would not have to change anything. However, the majority of the National Board endorses the recruiting of both low-vision and blinded veterans from the 83,000 now enrolled on those rosters. BRS was recently asked how many visually impaired, low-vision veterans have, in the past three years, progressed to legal blindness. The answer is 8,629. Veterans Health Administration (VHA) enrollees were identified as having a prior diagnosis of low vision before subsequently receiving a diagnosis of legal blindness. Recruiting them early will help them in the adjustment process and develop the peer

relationships they need. It will also make them feel welcome within BVA.

Our Membership and Regional Group Committees have done outstanding work in reviewing many key articles in the BVA national bylaws dealing with membership, regional groups, dues, and the national convention, in addition to their review of the regional group manual. Many of these issues will be voted on in the second virtual business session in August.

The good news is that BVA staff members are working productively and efficiently, making possible the reduction of our deficits substantially the past year.

I sincerely appreciate our BVA Board members who devote several hours each week in volunteer efforts to make a positive impact on the Association. A very special thanks again goes to our BVA staff members for their commitment. Be sure to frequently check the BVA website since it provides us with the most updated information about upcoming events. The convention information will most certainly be at the forefront of such updates in the coming months.



Cover Photo Descriptions

a. (Margarine Beaman with Junior ROTC in Albuquerque)—Margarine with her cadre of volunteers from the 51st Unit of the Junior ROTC of the Albuquerque, New Mexico Public Schools. The unit assisted blinded veterans and their families at the President's Reception. Archive photo taken at BVA 62nd National Convention at Albuquerque's Hyatt Regency Hotel.

b. (Margarine Beaman with White House Background)—Margarine poses behind the White House and its surrounding trees during convention sightseeing visit in the Nation's Capital. She was accompanied on the tour by a busload of attendees of the BVA 65th National Convention.

c. (Margarine Beaman and Airport Employee)—Margarine Beaman makes friends wherever she is, even among airport and transportation personnel who may consider her a little demanding as she looks out for her veterans. Pictured here with Margarine, a now unknown-by-name employee whom she met and befriended at the Buffalo-Niagara International Airport in 2006.

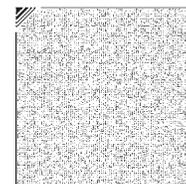
Did You Know?

- New York City has hosted more BVA National Conventions than any other city. The Big Apple's five conventions, none of which occurred after 1975, are rivaled only by the four in Reno, Nevada, all of which have occurred since 1991.



Legislative Update

by James R. Vale



The law under Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Section 3.808, allows veterans with qualifying service-connected conditions to

receive a one-time grant to help pay for the purchase of a vehicle. Qualifying conditions include the “loss, or permanent loss of use, of one or both feet; loss, or permanent loss of use, of one or both hands; permanent vision impairment in both eyes to a certain degree; severe burn injury; or diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).”

The current grant amount is \$21,488 and is adjusted annually on October 1 by a Cost-of-Living Allowance (COLA). Some may ask: Why does a blinded veteran need a car if he or she is unable to drive? Often, there is a family member such as a spouse who can drive the veteran. Having a vehicle increases access by removing transportation barriers to employment and essential services such as groceries and health care. The VA auto grant makes a big difference for blinded veterans who reside in rural areas where public transit is sparse or even non-existent.

Title 38 allows for adaptive equipment (such as hand controls for a veteran who lost a lower limb) every two years, but the auto grant is a one-time grant. Vehicles, especially adaptive cars, are perishable and wear out, often well before 250,000 miles. It does not make sense to have the adaptations without the car. Too many disabled veterans are now facing this precarious situation of having a worn-out adaptive car and need help to continue their mobility and independence.

Following in the footsteps of the Special Adaptive Housing (SAH) grant, which is

now renewable after ten years with restrictions, momentum is building for a renewable auto grant. BVA appreciates the support of Senator Susan Collins (R-ME), who introduced S. 444, the “AUTO for Veterans Act,” authorizing VA to provide eligible veterans with an additional auto grant after ten years from the previous grant. BVA also appreciates the bipartisan support from co-sponsors Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV), John Boozman (R-AR), Roy Blunt (R-MO), Margaret Wood Hassan (D-NH), Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), Christopher Coons (D-DE), Rob Portman (R-OH), and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI).

There is also a corresponding bill in the House of Representatives, H.R. 1361, the “AUTO for Veterans Act” introduced by Representative Daniel Meuser (R-PA-9). At press time, H.R. 1361 had 23 co-sponsors. We are equally grateful for this level of support in the House.

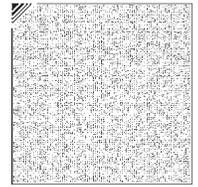
The auto grant bills also have broad support from the Veterans Service Organization (VSO) community, including The American Legion and the VSOs that make up the Independent Budget (Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Veterans of Foreign Wars). We are optimistic about these bills passing and ask for your support. You can help make this happen by educating your members of Congress regarding the importance of these bills to blinded veterans and their families. Knowing the benefits, many of them will likely then support and/or co-sponsor the “AUTO for Veterans Act” (S. 444 or H.R. 1361, as applicable).

Together, we can help “drive” these bills across the finish line!



Executive Director's Message to Members

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.



The Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery is nearing its centennial anniversary. On March 4, 1921, the U.S. Congress approved the burial of an unidentified service member in the plaza of what was, at the time, the newly constructed Memorial Amphitheater on those hallowed grounds.

The unknown soldier brought back from France was interred below a three-level marble tomb eight months later, on November 11, the date that was known at the time as Armistice Day. The site is located just minutes from our BVA National Headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia.

The magnitude of this ultimate sacrifice, for whom not even identification of remains was possible at the time, is at least in part what the Memorial Day holiday is all about. We remember that unknown, unidentified soldier as well as the hundreds of thousands of others who have, in uniform, given their lives in defense of our freedoms.

COVID-19 restrictions altered the Memorial Day activities at Arlington for the second consecutive year. Despite the deviation from longstanding traditions and not being able to go to Arlington National Cemetery in person on Memorial Day, the anniversary of the first Tomb of the Unknowns and the ultimate sacrifices of the past still caught my attention. I thought about all the men and women, past and present, who have been willing to step forward and, at all costs, swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution and laws against all enemies.

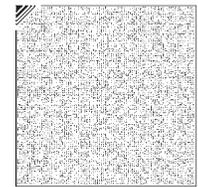
As BVA's Executive Director, I have the privilege of associating daily with a most unique group of men and women who were willing to do just that. Those unique men and women are you. Although you were able to return home, unlike those who gave the ultimate sacrifice, many of you returned after sacrificing your precious sight. Or, perhaps your very challenging loss came later in life, and more gradually, but with many of the same hardships and complexities.

As if all these sacrifices were not enough, many of you, with the support, assistance, and involvement of your families, now sacrifice your time, energies, and means to serve your fellow blinded veterans with uplifting counsel, encouragement, and direction, and to promote the interests of the organization that represents you. I personally honor and appreciate those efforts more than you can know.

I look forward to connecting with as many of you as possible, members and friends alike, at our upcoming virtual national convention. It will be a most memorable and historic week for us as we organize something truly novel for BVA. Our early members 76 years ago could scarcely have envisioned the organization's longevity and resilience, let alone a national convention to be enjoyed via computer screen or mobile device in one's own home.

There will be advance training and instruction on joining and navigating the virtual sessions, so please take advantage of the wonders of technology and do not be intimidated by them! Seek out registration information in this issue of **The Bulletin** and join with us in August.

A Virtual Launch for BVA's 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.

The BVA National Board of Directors has determined that an in-person national convention is still not in the best interest of BVA members at this stage of the global pandemic.

Convention dates remain **August 16-20, 2021**. Registration is now open for the five-day event using a form that can be downloaded from **bva.org**, by request to **bva@bva.org**, or by calling 202-371-8880. Forms must be completed and received by BVA National Headquarters by **August 9**. Major activities include official business meetings, a Father Carroll presentation, vendor presentations, and education sessions. There is no cost for convention registration.

Additional updates will follow in a timely manner via email and on the appropriate pages of **bva.org**.

Full Steam Ahead for First-Ever Virtual Gathering

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 nearly exclusive educational sessions, the 76th National Convention will include social events, district caucuses, and a meeting to consider new bylaw amendments only. There will be no proposed resolutions to consider or adopt this year.

BVA members in good standing who wish to exercise their right to vote may do by registering in advance. If not attending, members may vote by proxy 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, Attn: Brigitte Jones. To be considered valid, the envelope containing the form must be postmarked no later than 21 days before the opening date of the convention. The due date is therefore **Monday, July 26**. The official National Headquarters Proxy Form and Credentials Form shall be the only forms recognized at the National Convention.

Upcoming Deadlines Requiring RG Actions

Brigitte has also 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.

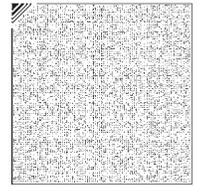
Two copies of the credentials form were also mailed on April 19 to all regional groups.

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. **June 15***— National headquarters mails annual financial report forms (three copies) to treasurers of regional groups.
2. **July 2** (no later than 45 days before convention)—Ballots for regular elections of Directors of Districts 1 and 2 due at national headquarters.

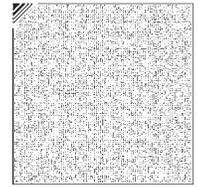
3. **July 2** (no later than 45 days before convention)—Latest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing.
4. **July 7** (no later than 40 days before convention)—Regional group meeting notices to elect convention delegates must be mailed to group members. A copy of the notice must also be mailed to national headquarters at the same time it is mailed to the group membership.
5. **July 12** (35 days before convention)—National headquarters counts election ballots for regular elections of Directors of Districts 1 and 2.
6. **July 26** (21 days before convention)—Completed delegate credentials forms and proxy forms must be postmarked no later than midnight.



Proceedings of the BVA 76th National Convention will originate in homes and offices across the United States. The events will be accessible anywhere in the world via Zoom and by telephone. BVA National Headquarters, pictured above both inside and outside the building, will host all meetings and activities from its historic Old Town Alexandria, Virginia location. BVA moved to its current headquarters site in October 2019.

Installing Zoom on a Computer for BVA Virtual Convention

by Kevin Jackson and Brian Harris



One way of participating in the upcoming BVA Virtual Convention is by installing the Zoom platform to your personal computer. Please follow these steps to install Zoom:

1. Go to the following website: **Zoom.us**.
2. Use your tab key or mouse to select “Sign up, it is Free”.
3. Navigate through the boxes entering required personal information.
4. Click the “Continue” button at the bottom of the page.
5. Create a “User ID” and “Password”.
6. Accept the “Terms of Service”.
7. Click the “Sign-Up” button.
8. Click on the “Activate Zoom” button (this will send a confirmation notice to your email address).
9. Check your email and click on the “Activate Zoom” button.
10. Enter “User ID” and “Password” (the ones you created in Step 5).
11. Click the “Captcha” box (indicating you are not a robot).
12. Click on the “Continue” button.

Congratulations! You are now ready to participate in the BVA Virtual Convention. When you receive an invitation via email from BVA with the Zoom link information to enter one of the virtual sessions, simply click on the link and it will take you to the virtual session being conducted.

Here are some Windows Zoom keystrokes:

- Alt + A to mute or unmute your microphone.
- Alt + V to turn your video on and off.
- Alt + H to type into the chat box where you can enter a question or provide input.
- Alt + Y to raise your hand so the moderator can recognize that you have a question or would like to provide input.

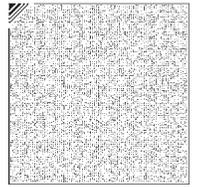
Here are some Mac Zoom keystrokes:

- Cmd + Shift + A to mute or unmute your microphone.
- Cmd + Shift + V to turn your video on and off.
- Cmd + Shift + H to type into the chat box where you can enter a question or provide input.
- Option + Y to raise your hand so the moderator can recognize that you have a question or would like to provide input.

The National Board of Directors will also be hosting Zoom education sessions prior to the start of the Virtual Convention to provide additional assistance and keystrokes. Please monitor **bva.org** and your email for more details.

The Busy Beaman: Our BVA Jewell from Texas

by Sila Miller



Born at home on a working ranch in Hilda, Mason County, Texas, Lone Star State Dynamo Margarine Gaynell Geistweidt-Beaman begins our early morning interview by declaring:

“I was sick every day for the first seven years of my life because I had a birth defect. At that time, doctors believed they had to wait until I was seven to do the surgery. Of course, today they would operate immediately. I was tiny—all of 28 pounds, but following surgery I became a balloon by gaining weight from everything. And, after those seven years, I haven’t been sick a day!”

In that small farming and ranching community of Hilda, the Geistweidt family raised cattle, hogs, chickens, turkeys, sheep for wool, and goats for mohair fabric.

“We had to shear them every year,” Margarine explained, referring to the sheep and goats.

She continued:

“Then we had Jersey Cows we milked. We sold cream, butter, and milk and had a separator that I still have. We always butchered too. As a little girl, I didn’t know you could buy stuff in the stores. Once in a while, on Sundays, we might buy bakers’ bread or get a 50-pound block of ice and make homemade ice cream. Neighbors would come over. We’d kill eight or so hogs and calves and in deer season we’d kill deer to make homemade sausage, bacon, and ham. My grandfather from Switzerland would make those big round balls of Swiss cheese. They weighed 50 pounds apiece! I still make Swiss



Two “Austinites”, Kevin Jackson, currently BVA’s Director of District 6, and Margarine Beaman at 71st National Convention (2016) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

cheese. And we always had a big garden. In our area, everybody always shared. I still do. Whatever I have, I share with somebody. Right now, if I bake cookies, I might eat one, but you’ll see no more in my house because they’ll all be given away. I don’t need more than one. I’ve always liked to bake. I still bake strawberry nut bread and give to auctions. In fact, I baked 24 loaves this last year that were donated to auctions—most benefited the blind or visually impaired. I bake snickerdoodle cookies, cream puffs, and jelly rolls with my homemade grape or plum jelly.

“We worked in the fields and the first thing I learned was to drive a tractor. You never missed school because, if you did, you had to work in the field. So, I always had perfect attendance.”

With those quick connecting dots from her life to the present, the BVA faithful who have known and loved Margarine Beaman—volunteer coordinator extraordinaire, honorary BVA member, the convention “energizer bunny” as she is sometimes affectionately described, and best friend to blinded veterans and their families—now have the context to her life that has truly made her who she is and what she has done for BVA. Such a framework explains much but that doesn’t mean there isn’t much more. Here is another small piece:

“I live in a house that’s more than a hundred years old and I’m busy restoring it. I’ve redone the floors, painted, and replaced windows, and still I’m not finished. I enjoy doing everything! That’s the problem. I drive people crazy because I’ve always got six or seven things going. I’ve got some bulldozing work going and I’ve got some old farm equipment I’m giving to a pioneer farm for a display. You wanna come and help me?”

Following her high school graduation, Margarine began attending Texas Lutheran College in Seguin, one of the oldest towns



Margarine is always at home with her volunteers and veterans, even while dealing with the challenges and stresses inherent in her responsibilities at BVA’s national conventions.

in Texas. Lacking funding to complete her studies at that time as an accounting major, she had to drop out to go to work but later obtained her diploma and taught night classes at Conlee’s College of Cosmetology. She established the first financial aid office for Conlee’s in the 1960s as Pell Grants became a reality for students to go to college. In addition, she consulted for six business colleges in Texas and did audits of financial aid accounts in other states.

Following her graduation, Margarine found her way to Austin, the only place her parents would allow her to go because she had an aunt who lived nearby.

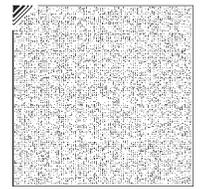
“It was hard to get a job when the only experience you really had was in the fields,” Margarine said of the time. “You could have a good work ethic, but experience was still really important.”

Eventually, she was offered a job at the historic Driskill Hotel for a starting monthly salary of \$175. The offer was subsequently reduced to \$165.

“To me, that was hardly anything even back then because my rent was \$100 a month but, I thought, I really need a job and all I know how to do is drive a tractor,” she said.

Margarine took the job and began working her way up the corporate ladder to a sales position and later to become the comptroller. It was there that her preparation for future hotel experiences with the disabled, especially those with vision loss, first began.

Built in 1886 as the showplace of a wealthy landowner, the Driskill Hotel in Austin is a landmark of legendary Texas hospitality. The property is complete with a Lyndon Baines Johnson suite that pays tribute to the former President and First Lady, who used the Driskill as their headquarters while



campaigning and later were frequent visitors. Margarine got the phone lines ready for Johnson's staff to communicate with the press. At the hotel, she also met Lucille Ball, John Wayne, and James Arness who played the character of Matt Dillon for 20 years in the legendary TV series **Gunsmoke**.

Changing gears in Margarine style, she again revealed her work ethic.

"I had five jobs at one time. I don't really know why but I've always liked to be busy. There was a travel agency bond in the hotel, and they needed someone to help with foreign currency translation for proper recording and billing, so I did that job for them. Then there was an attorney who needed someone on Saturdays, so I worked for him. Then there was Bond Television Sales and Service. I kept their books for about ten years at night. Then I worked at Conlee's College of Cosmetology and sewed for other people making bridesmaid dresses. So, I was busy. That was all while I was still working at The Driskill. I eventually changed from doing all those jobs and started doing volunteer work."

Margarine met her husband, Robert (Bob) Beaman, while, easy to guess, she was working. A friend who owned a motel was very ill and, in Margarine's "I've gotta do something about this" way, she was helping out on weekends. The motel had a little restaurant onsite and Bob, also a friend of the owner, frequently ate there. One day while he was dining, they began talking and the rest is history.

Margarine summarizes that history:

"I've got two sons, Ron and Richard, three foster kids, 11 grandkids and 24 great-grandkids, so I stay pretty busy everywhere."

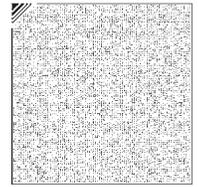
Bob began his 23-year military career in the Navy and retired as a Master Sergeant from the Air Force. He served in both Korea

and Vietnam. In August 1955, he was responsible for taking the **USS Lexington** ship out of mothballs from World War II and putting it back into service. Sadly, Bob passed away in 2013.

"We would have been married 50 years this year," she said.

Following his retirement, Bob and Margarine started a scrap metal business that Margarine managed until just a few years back. Ever the helper, Margarine still puts her seamstress skills to good use, teaching quilting and making quilts for others.

"Before the pandemic, we'd made 18 quilts for homeless veterans who got housing. So, this past year on Veterans Day, four of my students came and we donated those quilts. It was a real tearjerker, between seeing my students for the first time since the pandemic and working together for those veterans. Right now, I don't have room to walk around my house because I have quilts laying in different places to see how they look spread out."



Margarine and Freddie Edwards, Indiana Regional Group, pose together behind the White House during sightseeing activities at the 65th National Convention (2010) held in Arlington, Virginia.

Margarine's involvement with the blind community began in December 1979 while eavesdropping on a conversation at the Austin airport between a blind man around 40 years old and a sighted young man asking how long he had been blind. The blind man responded:

"Seven years."

He went on to say that the first year he had lost his job, the second year he lost his family through divorce, and the seventh year he went to the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center in Austin to learn Braille and independent living skills such as cooking and sewing. This was his first trip home in a year. The sighted man asked him as he was getting on the plane if he would have a job when he got home. The blind man replied that he did not know what was in store for him.

"I knew I had to do something for this guy," Margarine emphatically stated. She continued:

"The Commission for the Blind thought I was crazy for wanting to create independence and accessibility for the blind. This made me go around the Commission and I got in touch with Frankie Sawyer, who taught Braille at the School for the Blind. I asked her what she thought of a Braille mall directory. This got her so excited because she always wanted one and, together, we marched off to the mall. That first visit to the mall taught me a lot about airflow, noise levels, etc."

Then came tedious negotiations with reluctant managers who voiced fear of "a bunch of blind people coming to shop" and the associated liability. The hesitation was no match as Margarine summarily informed the mall management that blind people already shopped there every day. She was soon successful in convincing them to partner with her. Thus, the Braille shopping mall directory became a reality.

"In July 1980, we did Braille instructions

for the first mall directory in the world and the news coverage was awesome with many great articles and media

events," she recalled. "By October 1980, the first Braille on an Automatic Teller Machine was unveiled, which created worldwide attention originating with the American Bankers Association."

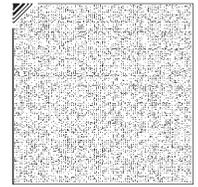
The all-volunteer group eventually created Braille for thousands of ATMs in about 15 different languages.

Remembering a major media event related to the volunteer brailleing, Margarine said that although the day of the event was rainy and "otherwise nasty", it was another turning point in a life marked by results.

"I stopped to pick up a blind friend and her guide dog before heading over. Betty had this huge German Shepherd, and he was soaked! I asked her where the dog would sit and she said 'oh, on the floor in front.' After getting in my car, that dog shook himself all over me before lying down at her feet. I said: 'Oh my goodness, if the media isn't there, it's all over! I've gone through all this, so they'd better be there!'"

Be there they were and, in 1982, Margarine's group of volunteers was recognized with a prestigious national Community Improvement Award that had 9,000 other entries. The accomplishment lent awareness to the work and the Braille projects took off, expanding to trail information and the marking of elevators, hotel rooms, and vending machines. Eagle Scout projects also emerged.

"We did something in almost every state and many countries, including Canada, Japan, and Malaysia," she said. "We also now make signs with large-sized numbers for the people with low vision, starting out with six-inch



numbers, then going to eight, and now we're using ten-inch numbers."

Margarine muses further on her experience with Braille:

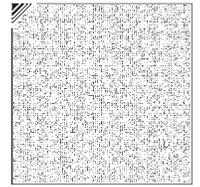
"In the beginning, Frankie did the Braille. Then I learned Braille through the Library of Congress. I've taught classes in Braille and converted into Braille some books and other material for churches and bank statements for banks. We started out with a Braille writer and now I'm on my third Braille embosser, I think.

"In 1981, I attended the American Council of the Blind (ACB) of Texas convention and noticed that the exit door had an alarm, which went off several times that day. When the newspaper reporter came to cover the convention and asked me how it was going, I mentioned that if those people who made the alarms would make them accessible, it would solve this problem. Well, someone from the company read this in the paper and called me to come to their factory and, from then on, they have raised and Braille signage on those alarms.

"I first got involved with ACB in 1982 when we did the accessibility for the national convention. We put up Braille elevator numbers, Braille on vending machines, guest room doors, restroom signage, restaurant menus, etc. Now I proofread new signage for hotels hosting ACB conventions. If it has 30 floors, I walk every floor and every stairwell. I did that for many years for ACB until 2020. Did you know that we find that about 10 percent of Braille signs are incorrect?"

In the late 1980s, BVA National Treasurer Carl Foley of the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana (O-K-I) Regional Group and a member of ACB told the BVA National Board of Directors: "We need this lady!"

So, in 1990, Margarine began her now 31 years of service to blinded veterans at the BVA 45th National Convention at the Kennedy Plaza Hotel in Providence, Rhode Island.



"This has become a larger task every year to review all guest room doors to make sure they have the correct number and Braille match, to put Braille on vending machines, to ensure that exits are accessible, to confirm that the steps have contrast, and much more," she explained.

In 2014, the BVA Board recognized Margarine's service with an honorary life membership, a token of her years of devotion to the Association's individual members and their families, dozens of staff members that include several Convention Coordinators, and to her relationships with airport and hotel staffs throughout the country. She's the first one sought out at each convention hotel if she didn't already meet them at the airport.

Washington, DC resident Harry Bell ordered an annual cake to be delivered to each convention hotel in Margarine's name, whether he was there or not, until he passed away some six years ago. Although she singles out Harry for the cakes, there are others like him too numerous to mention who attempt to show similar appreciation.

Suffice to say, it would not be overly far-fetched to believe that a primary motivation for registering and attending national conventions for many BVA members, spouses, and other family members would be the opportunity to see and talk with Margarine.

"I recently gathered everything for BVA that I had, which was many boxes, and shipped it all to Stuart Nelson at the national office," said Margarine, again moving to another topic.



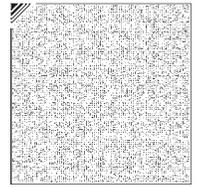
Harry Bell, originator of the annual cake addressed and delivered to Margarine at several convention hotels over the years, sits for a meal with her at the 61st National Convention in Buffalo, New York.

She described the materials she shipped with this:

“A lot of the people there now don’t know who these people in pictures are and what they contributed, or what they did in the Service. So, this will give them an opportunity to look at that history. I take pictures at every convention, so I have lots. One of the guys always brings a little bitty dog on a leash. He only has light perception, I think. He got engaged to one of the blinded veterans at the 2019 convention and I captured the moment with a picture. I just found it and I’m getting ready to send it to Stuart. I’m still looking for more BVA history as I go through things.”

Margarine has won many local, state, national, and international awards for her work with the blind and visually impaired. She has raised something approximating a million dollars through her work with different organizations. She received the Migel Medal, considered the highest honor in the blindness field, from the American Foundation for the Blind in 1992. Established

in 1937, the award honors those whose dedication and achievements have significantly improved the lives of people with vision loss. She is in good company with past award recipients such as Helen Keller, Ray Kurzweil, and former Iowa Senator Tom Harkin.



For several years, Margarine helped with the International Blind Sports program that eventually sanctioned the blind to be at the Paralympics.

The topic again shifted to the many hats she wears in the world of volunteerism.

“Yep, last year, when they were placing campaign signs in yards, the sign they placed in mine said over 2,000 volunteer hours. I volunteer with The President Johnson Library and Texas State History Museums, the Rotary Club, and with Blind/Visually Impaired Veterans of the American Council of the Blind. I serve on the board of a charter school and I’m treasurer for three organizations. So, I’m busy.”

Still another of her accomplishments was the establishment of a Role Model Fair that began at a low-income school and soon blossomed to ten other schools. The initiative has been going strong for some 21 years. Margarine described its progress:

“Every day, you’d hear how bad that school was. It wasn’t bad, it’s just that nobody gave them a chance—it was very low income. So, I said: ‘I gotta do something about that.’ I brought in 60-75 people—we had firefighters, police officers, the mounted horse guard, the Coast Guard, 18-wheeler truckdrivers, the mayor, presidents of companies, and even someone from the Governor’s office, and of course, we had media coverage. The students got to meet with the role models and ask questions. Mentors were also involved. We

brought in an afternoon snack program and started a GED class at the community college free for the parents. That was when computers were really getting started so IBM came out and taught the parents about computers. That school became the highest recognized one in the community.”

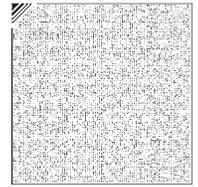
Since its inception, the Role Model Fair has benefited more than 10,000 students. Recognizing that success, a bank manager approached Margarine with an idea he’d been trying to make a reality for more than five years: a “mini-tropolis”—a virtual city in a school to teach money management. With her contacts, Margarine made quick work of this:

“They had a grocery store, a bank, a television station—all kinds of things. The kids learned how to do everything. They’d get bonus points and on Fridays they had the store open. They could shop, write a check, or save their money.”

Barely stopping for breath, she continued:

“Last year, The Austin Police Operation Santa decided we couldn’t give toys because of the pandemic but should give gift cards. So, between September and December, we had to raise \$800,000. We raised it! We got the last one on December 23 and 20,000 children received a \$25 gift card while 10,000 families received gift cards for food. Most of that money was raised totally by volunteers. When you have a board or committee of any kind, you have about 10 percent who work and 90 percent who watch. On the first day they were allowing people to pick up cards, the media was there, and someone asked how much more we needed to raise. I said that we needed \$50,000. Well, the Moody foundation must have heard because they called and said: ‘We heard you need about \$50,000 and we’ll donate.’ Of course, many others made sizable donations but that was the final one needed.”

Margarine stopped to lament at one of the things that actually causes her some stress and frustration, if that is possible.



Until now, it seemed that nothing could.

“This Zoom, it’s killing me. Where, before, you had a meeting on a certain day of the month, with Zoom people feel like we can meet every day! I just can’t be everywhere at the same time!”

More believable, based on everything else that describes her, is how she copes with that frustration:

“You know how I get rid of my stress? In the summer and spring, I mow my lawn or cut wood and in the autumn I rake leaves. I raked more than 100 bags of leaves in the fall! Yep, I have two chain saws, a pruning saw, and loppers. I’ve been clearing brush from around my trees, and I raise a garden – it’s never ending.”

Stopping for a second, she implored: “I wanna know—how do people stay uninvolved and have a content day? People who just sit there and watch TV. I don’t know how they do it. I’d shoot my TV!”

No stranger to some hard times, Margarine related losing almost everything to a tornado.

“They’re just material things. So now material possessions don’t hold much value for me anymore. But, if you never had that experience, you don’t know.”

Margarine divides her time between Mason and Austin, 120 miles apart.

“When I’m at the ranch, I don’t have cell phone service, TV, or Internet. It’s out in the middle of nowhere. The closest town from where I live is 30 miles. We have longhorns and other breeds of cattle, and we have coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, feral hogs, and rattlesnakes. You have to be a sharpshooter, or you don’t live out here. When

people see you in the city, they don't realize that you're a different person—you play a different role when you're in the country. The country and city are just like night and day. You ask kids: 'Where does milk come from?' They'll say it comes from the store."

Margarine welcomes children to the ranch in hopes of teaching them about animals, nature, and hard, honest work. She helps them paint, water plants, and anything else that constitutes productive work.

Plugging in a few final, previously unmentioned facts and analyses, she concluded:

"One thing in life leads to another and then to another. I played trumpet and French horn in high school and in a dance band after moving to Austin. I've never been retired. I closed the scrap metal business about five years back because the kids didn't want to do it with me anymore, but I still have my accounting and consulting business. If it can be done, we can do it. There's always some way you can figure out how to get it done. You just be the best that you can."

At the writing of this feature story, Texas was experiencing one of the worst storms in 30 years. I couldn't resist including this message from Margarine during that time because it so embodies her rise-above, can-do attitude:

"Hi. The weather got worse with ice, and I never got the vaccine. I am stranded with snow and ice in the hill country of Texas until next Tuesday. No TV or radio but hope to connect to someone's WiFi. Oven even went out and had just given my wood stove away but know how to build a fire outside. Camping in the snow. With the cold, all wild animals come close to the house and growl. This gives me a chance to make a quilt. Take care in sunny Florida, Margarine."

And then the following as we wrapped up our interview of well over an hour:

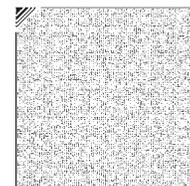
"This is your last chance. If you lose the tape or it didn't record, it's all over. I think and talk fast, and I even slowed down for you."

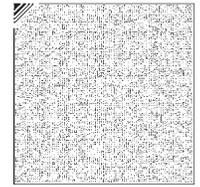
She was joking with all of that but perhaps not totally, and **Bulletin** readers can be sure that I most certainly doublechecked to make sure that the trusty red light was still on.

While many people hope and wish to make a mark on the world and help others, this BVA jewel and jewel of the hill country, this "Busy Beaman", doesn't just wish. She figures out the best way, then dives in with her contacts, talents, time, and heart! Her insatiable curiosity, intense interest in the people around her, sincere desire to help, and an amazing capacity to network all contribute to Margarine's incredible life and offer the context for her involvement with BVA, ACB, and countless other fortunate organizations.

When my friend Mike Taylor offered me the challenge of interviewing and spotlighting this jewel, he challenged me to keep the article to 500 words. Now at 4,083 words, I've likely not even scratched the surface of the giving and caring and doing of Margarine Beaman, but it's been nonetheless my true honor trying. Oh, but that this world had even just a few more like her!

Sila Miller is an aspiring writer who hopes to someday complete her memoir. She is a lifelong advocate and a member of the Florida Council of the Blind. She works for the Florida Division of Blind Services as a Conflict Resolution and Outreach Consultant. Sila loves nothing better than unveiling the beautiful gifts of those about whom she is allowed to write.





LA/MS Flag Presentations Highlight BVA Pandemic Activity Nationwide

During the past year, BVA's Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group has offered up a sure model for how a charitable service organization can stay active and engaged in the community even during a pandemic.

In late 2019, the group formulated a goal to present a bronze Braille American flag to the Gulf Coast Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC) in Biloxi, Mississippi. The flag could be placed in the lobby of the BRC and would be accompanied by a plaque listing BVA's founding World War II veterans. The idea had enough merit that it motivated the regional group to decide on two other locations to present the flag: the VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) in Biloxi and New Orleans.

The perfect date was set for the presentation in Biloxi—March 28, 2020, the milestone anniversary, to the day, of BVA's founding. Since the cost of the flags is \$400 each, the group needed financial support, which it received from fellow Veterans Service Organizations who were named co-donors on the plaques.

According to regional group secretary Gary Schoelerman, everything else was going great for the Biloxi presentation. They had approval from the VAMC Director, the Head of Volunteer Services, and the Interior Decorator. The dates, while not exactly March 28, were set for March 26 in Biloxi and March 27 in New Orleans. All they needed to do now was dress up, present the flags, and smile for the cameras!

As in every great plan, Murphy's Law takes over to one extent or another.



Left to right at Baton Rouge CBOC, Southeast Louisiana VA Health Care System Director Fernando Rivera, BVA member Gaylen Bullion, Baton Rouge CBOC Chief Daniel Kasprzyk, CBOC staff member Ladonnis Evans, and BVA members Benjamin Miles and Gary Schoelerman.

“In this case, the plan went out the window as soon as the first shot was fired and the shot, of course, was COVID-19,” Gary recounted.

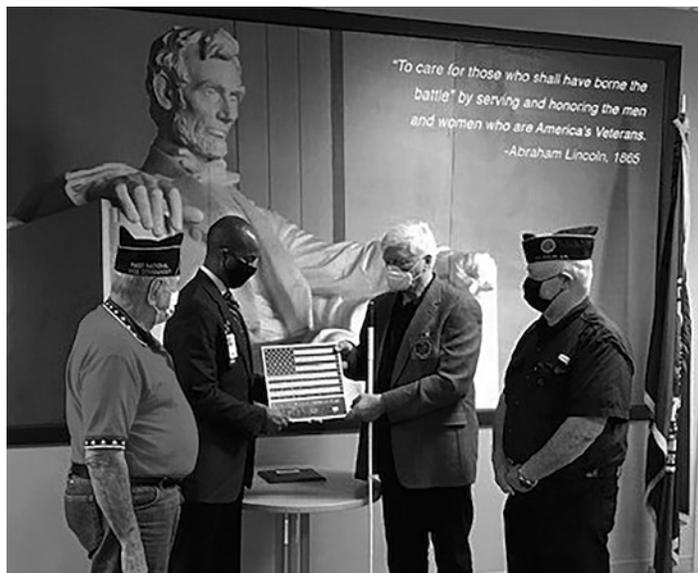
The regional group watched all the facilities close at least partially, which locked the group out entirely. Still, everything was going to be okay. The pandemic would be over in a few weeks and the VA facilities would soon reopen.

A few weeks turned into months. In the meantime, the group looked at the possibility of also donating flags to the three other VAMCs within its borders—the hospitals in Alexandria and Shreveport, Louisiana, and one in Jackson, Mississippi.

“Many of the organizations supporting us financially in this effort wanted a flag at their local Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) rather than paying for one

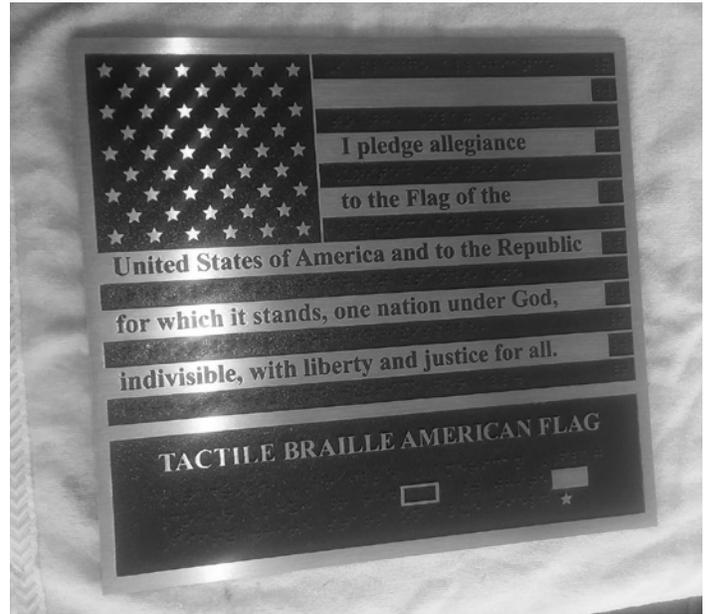
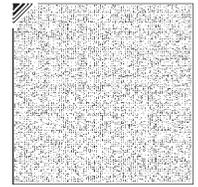
for a VAMC that was more than 100 miles away,” Gary said. “Being the accommodating regional group that we are, we told them it would be no problem.”

In October 2020, restrictions were lifted, at least somewhat, and the group was able to present a flag and a plaque to the Lafayette, Louisiana CBOC on October 15. The date was selected out of deference to White Cane Day. That event was followed by an outdoor presentation to the Alexandria VAMC and another at the VAMC’s Veterans Community Living Center. In December, a presentation at the Biloxi VAMC finally came to fruition at both the medical facility as well as the BRC. In February, the flag and plaque were presented at the New Orleans VAMC followed by presentations in Jackson on March 25 and Shreveport on March 26, two days before BVA’s 76th anniversary and a full year after the proposed first donation.



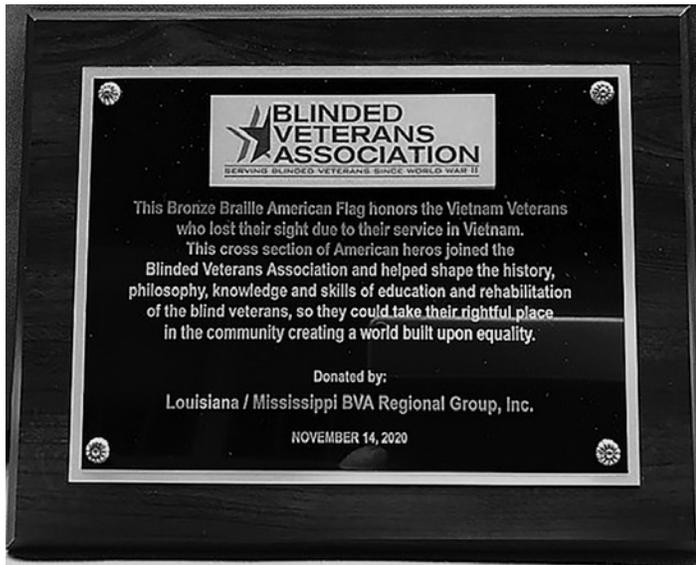
Flanked by American Legion Post 179 members Russell Henry (far left) and Brian Thibodeaux (far right), Gary Schoelerman presents bronze Braille flag to Alexandria, Louisiana VA Health Care System Director Peter Dancy at Lake Charles CBOC.

“It has been an interesting journey over the last year with the COVID restrictions and only being able to contact the medical centers by phone and email but, with the help of the VISTs, all went smoothly in the end,” Gary observed.



Bronze Braille flag prototype now being presented by LA/MS Regional Group to VA facilities throughout Louisiana and Mississippi.

Now that the regional group satisfied its original goal to have a Braille flag in each medical center, attention was turned to having BVA’s name alongside a Braille flag in every CBOC and Veterans Nursing Home in the same two states. With many of the regional group members connected with other VSOs or civilian service organizations, the way was paved to obtain additional financial help to purchase the flags. Organizations generously donating toward the mission included the Lions Clubs, Randolph-Sheppard Blind Vendors, Affiliated Blind of Louisiana, and several chapters of The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American



BVA plaques that are donated with the flags pay tribute to Vietnam era veterans who have lost their sight.

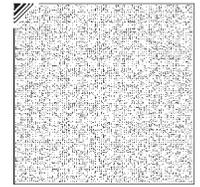
Veterans, and Vietnam Veterans of America.

On April 28, regional group members Benjamin Miles of Baker, Louisiana, and Gaylen Bullion of Prarieville, Louisiana joined Gary in presenting still another flag and plaque at the Baton Rouge CBOC to Clinic Chief Dr. Daniel Kasprzyk, who said he would display the flag in the lobby of the facility's eye clinic.

Gary took the opportunity at the presentation to remind the VA staff of opportunities VA provides blind and low vision veterans since many, even those who work in eye clinics, are not always aware of the VA BRCs or other services provided to veterans with vision problems. They are also not aware that a fundamental premise of VA BRS is that there are no age limits to a better quality of life. Tyrhond White, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist in Baton Rouge, also reinforced those comments in speaking to the eye clinic staff.

On May 7, the regional group joined forces with Sulfur, Louisiana American Legion Post

179 to donate a flag and plaque to the Lake Charles CBOC, which was severely damaged after two major hurricanes, floods, and an ice storm in the middle of a global pandemic. Alexandria VA Health Care System Director Peter Dancy accepted the donation. Local television station KPLC, its market area in southwest Louisiana, covered the event and reported it on the evening news.



District Director Clarifies Membership Designations

by Kevin Jackson

There has been some ongoing confusion regarding the proper designation of BVA members within our national database. Headquarters staff have been working tirelessly to clean up and confirm the accuracy of our membership records, no easy feat considering that multiple databases were migrated into a new state-of-the-art system.

Prior systems had applied a designation of “inactive” for the names to which a member designation could not be validated. These names may have been associated with individuals that contacted BVA for some reason or other but never applied or qualified for membership. Upon contacting these individuals, headquarters staff were asked to remove their information from our database.

The term “inactive” member should not be used when requesting regional group membership mailing labels from headquarters staff. This classification of members does not exist in our new database, nor does it exist in our bylaws.

Regional groups should simply request membership mailing labels, which will be comprised of “verified” member mailing addresses for the groups. Additionally, the membership mailing labels are what BVA

National Headquarters uses to compute annual apportionment checks. Therefore, maintaining accurate and updated member contact information is critical for all BVA regional groups. Our regional groups will also receive a membership roster when requesting membership mailing labels. The membership roster contains members of the regional group with “verified” addresses, as well as members we are unable to contact. Regional groups should compare the membership mailing labels and membership roster to identify members who require updated contact information. Again, this can and will impact annual apportionments.

When BVA National Headquarters receives “Return to Sender, Addressee Unknown” mailings, the membership team attempts to contact the member via telephone and/or email. If the team is unable to establish contact, the member is marked “Do Not Mail” and removed from the regional group membership mailing labels. The member will remain on the regional group membership roster, but no further action will be taken until a “verified” mailing address is received, or until the member is identified as deceased.

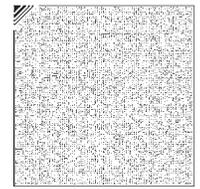
To assist in maintaining accurate regional group records, please indicate the purpose of all membership mailing label requests (annual meeting announcement, holiday mailing, newsletter, etc.) when contacting headquarters.

Thank you for your efforts in working with our members to ensure that they receive timely communications from both your regional group and our headquarters staff.

BVA HQ Facilitates Spring Virtual Sessions for Members

BVA National Headquarters recently coordinated two Facebook Live presentations

and a Zoom session featuring both BVA members and two of the organization’s technology partners.



On April 28, Florida Regional Group Vice President Orlando Bemby appeared on an hour-long virtual Facebook Live program with representatives of OrCam. Orlando shared highlights of his military journey, the circumstances and experiences surrounding his vision loss, and how he has utilized the OrCam MyEye technology in daily activities in order to remain active, self-reliant, and goal oriented.

On May 18, a similar program featured Southern California Regional Group President Ken Asam. It was scheduled two weeks before Memorial Day to provide BVA and OrCam with an opportunity to pay tribute to those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country.

The presentations with both veterans also emphasized the importance of overcoming the challenges and stresses of daily living activities following sight loss that can often prevent the attainment of personal goals and aspirations.

On May 12, Florida Vision Technology Founder and CEO Lesa Berg Kretschmer and Speech and Braille Training Manager Jose Cintron presented a webinar via the Zoom platform. The webinar focused on Envision Glasses as a means for the blind and visually impaired to “hear what they wish to see.” The glasses empower the visually impaired to become more independent by speaking out about the world around them.

All three events were free and open to all BVA members, their families, and interested VA officials and staff. Future similar events are very much on the horizon.

First Ever WVG Retreat Offers Resources, Renewal

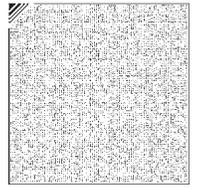
Camaraderie, helpful information, and a brief escape from stress are but a sample of what participants gleaned from the first of its kind Women's Veteran Group virtual retreat held March 4-5 via Zoom.

Each participant in the retreat had the opportunity to address concerns relating to equality in health care for women veterans during the **"Her Tea Time"** session. Another highlight was the enjoyment of sharing military experiences during the **"Rep Your Branch"** session.

Other sessions included Women Empowerment, Karaoke, Healthy Living

(Yoga), Music Therapy (**Freedom Sings USA**), and Snip, Nip, and Chat.

"The WVG enjoyed a very impactful retreat that allowed members of the group to strengthen their camaraderie, share resources, learn from one another, develop ideas for fundraising and their next retreat, and ensure that awareness of BVA occurs within its respective communities throughout the country," said WVG Chair and Director of District 3 Monaca Gilmore. "The WVG Committee would like to offer a heartfelt thanks to all participants and guest instructors."



Members of the Women's Veteran Group, miles apart physically and joining the Zoom meeting from their homes throughout the country, make connections at the premier Women's Veteran Group Virtual Retreat held in early March. Photo courtesy of Monaca Gilmore.

National Treasurer Reflections on Memorial Day and a Beloved Friend

Editor's Note: As preparations were made for publication of this issue of *The Bulletin*, BVA National Treasurer Elizabeth Holmes submitted her thoughts on two timely subjects.

IN MEMORY OF 12 YOUNG HISPANIC SOLDIERS ON MEMORIAL DAY

Everyone remembers but tries not to remember the summer of 1968 in South Chicago, Illinois. The names of 12 young men were inscribed on a marble monument paying tribute to their service to our country. The monument is situated across the street from their hometown parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

Our parish suffered this loss and later became known as the parish with the greatest number of Vietnam War casualties than any other Catholic parish in the United States.

During the years that have passed, my brother has told me that one of the "Cervantes brothers" was going to ask me out when he returned home. A plan and a date tragically unfulfilled.

I try to visit my old parish on the far southeast side of Chicago and the memorial site of the friends lost to war. I pay homage to all of them.

The stone there is etched with this inscription: **We owe so much to so few.**

IN REMEMBRANCE OF AGENT 86

The 1960s came back to life as we discussed and planned the upcoming 2017 Georgia Regional Group State Convention. With late night phone calls came a series of ideas in which GRG president Jesse Jay Jones, Jr. became Agent 86 (from **Get Smart**) and I Agent 99. We were in sync.

In August 2017, Jesse and I attended a soccer camp at Clemson University and together were awarded the "E" and "F" licenses to coach youths up to the age of 15. We received a Clemson orange football jersey and of course our numbers were 86 and 99.

My friend passed away on April 2. I will greatly miss him, his antics, and our ability to work together in accomplishing **The Mission**.

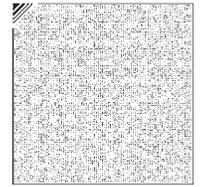
Jesse was born in Brooklyn, New York on July 9, 1958. Everyone called him Jay. His vivacious and "life of the party" personality formed long before he was a BVA member. As a musician at heart, he formed a band in high school called The Outer Limits. Jesse was the trumpet player. At age 19, he joined the U.S. Army as an infantryman.

Jesse joined the Blinded Veterans Association in 2010, soon after losing much of his sight. He later becoming the Georgia Regional Group president and performed in that role very successfully until his illness kept him from fulfilling his duties. As president, he kept all members active and full of spirit. During the 2017 state convention, Jesse wanted to do a comedy act in which he portrayed Geraldine (Flip Wilson's character). That was an evening no one could forget.

Jesse was also known for his talent on the piano. Anytime he found a piano, he had to sit and play. He loved to perform.

Jesse married Dublin Chapter president Bonita Chappell in May 2020. It was love at first sight.

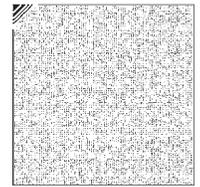
His parents preceded him in death. He had two sisters and two brothers.





Auxiliary's View

by Patricia Hail



Again, congratulations on your **acceptance** of the skills and challenges you have faced as a blinded veteran and your newfound **independence** and **dignity**. The more challenges you accept, the more you will find a growing independence and, with the two, a new sense of dignity. Keep at it!

We all know that the world in which we live is run by sighted people. Just think about it: How many people do you know who are blind, and even more specifically, who are the blinded veterans in positions of power and influence? Statistically, the numbers are very small and, in reality, are most likely even smaller than that.

Many companies, organizations, and even medical and social services, if they are large enough, will hire a “token blind” person for a “less than influential” position or they may hire another disabled person just to say they don’t discriminate. However, their acceptance and consideration of the blinded veteran are difficult to identify; the world of the blinded veteran has just collided with the world of the sighted. Oops! Now what happens? Often our new-found dignity takes a tumble or even a crash. You have been mistreated as a viable member of our society.

Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and look at this as an opportunity to **educate**, maybe even **advocate**. Show them how really good you are. You have served your country – have they? You have overcome the loss (to

whatever degree and manner) of a very important sense – have they? You have been trained, educated, or otherwise learned some very important skills both before and after your sight diminished. Your knowledge, skills, and attitude have grown in a very positive manner. YOU have the ability to help turn the Collision of the Worlds into a Confluence of Worlds. Collisions usually have the connotation of crashes; a **confluence** is a coming together and moving forward.



Let’s compare people to drops of water. When enough drops of water come together, they become a trickle. More drops of water may become a small stream, then a creek, then a river. They flow together and become greater than they once were. The place where two rivers come together is called a confluence; then the rivers proceed as one down the channel. You as a blinded veteran can share your experiences with a sighted person. This is also called education, or a confluence of knowledge and ideas. Most sighted people are grateful for the knowledge you share and can then share it with others as opportunities arise.

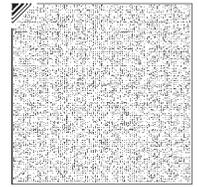
Now, let’s look forward to our Blinded Veterans Association’s 76th National Convention and the Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary’s 44th Convention this August, our second virtual convention. At our meetings and sessions there will be many ideas shared, knowledge gained, and education (learning) going on. Our conventions will be a Confluence of Worlds –

way more than just blind and sighted. Please be sure to register and check out the meetings and sessions.

BVA, BVAA, family members, and caregivers in particular: Please join us for the **BVAA Confluence of Worlds** sessions. We have several hot topics and plan to do some

additional sessions in the fall for those topics we'd like to share but for which there is no room in the August timetable.

Remember to always stand tall, educate, and keep your dignity. You have earned it.



Veterans Service Program Update

by Duayne Driscoll

The world of VA disability compensation claims orbits the twin stars of code and regulation. No benefit escapes their gravity, and the law lays everything out neatly. The universe operates in perfect harmony, providing the building blocks for a good life to those who gave their all.

That is until Darth VA-duh came along and tried to fool us with arcane language and seemingly conflicting regulations, capriciously denying those life-giving benefits. Staring down a death star of bureaucracy, a cadre of rebel fighters rose up to defend their comrades smitten by the dark side.

Our best weapon in the fight is the very force of regulation governing the evil empire. Sometimes, however, the force can cause confusion to the uninitiated. We will go over one of the more troubling concepts here: combined ratings.

Also known as VA math, or fuzzy math, the combined ratings table has probably caused more angst than any other regulation. The table starts out by telling us that 10 plus 10 equals 19, so we know right away that something is not right. Obviously, VA-duh

does not simply add these numbers together.

I have heard a number of different explanations over the years, and everything can be reduced to an algebraic equation. But, I never truly understood the concept until someone explained it to me in terms of food (one of my favorite topics).

To begin, imagine yourself as a pie (a round one, not one of those cobblers). You're a whole pie, or 100 percent. Let's say you get a disability rating of 50 percent for hearing loss, so half the pie is gone, and half the pie is still there in the pan.

Then, you get another 50 percent rating for another disability, sleep apnea. That 50 percent comes off the pie that is left in the pan. In this way, 50 plus 50 equals 75 (or, one-half of one-half is what is left in the pan, .25).

Let's imagine you were awarded yet another separate 50 percent for PTSD, which comes off the quarter of pie left in the pan (one-half of one-fourth). So, now you have three 50 percent ratings, which adds up to 150 percent when added together. This should give you a total rating, right? Nope. Even four separate 50 percent ratings fall short of a total combined evaluation.

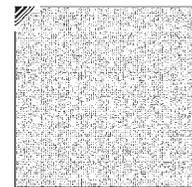
Three separate 50 percent ratings combine to 88 percent (which gets rounded up to 90 percent). You would still need another separate 60 percent rating to get a raw score of 95, which would be rounded up to 100 percent.

So, the higher your combined evaluation goes, the harder it is to get to the next level. There is always a little piece of pie left in the pan, and you cannot say it's all gone until only 5 percent or less remains.

But that is not the end of the story. The force has given us an extra weapon in the combined ratings fight – the bilateral factor.

This adds 10 percent to the combined ratings for disease or injury of both arms, or both legs, or paired skeletal muscles. Application of the bilateral factor often results in the next higher level of compensation.

Please contact BVA's Veterans Service Program for more information. We pledge to carry on the battle against Darth VA-duh until all blinded veterans and their survivors and dependents receive the benefits earned by honorable military service. May the force of regulation be with you!



Chaplain's Corner

By Dr. Ron Lester

It's Time for a Turnaround

Lately, so much has been on my mind. With all the things that are taking place in our world and in our personal lives, I think we all need some change.

It seems that as I have gotten older, things I used to handle have become a real challenge. Add to that the fact that life seldom goes as we expect it to. I am feeling these things more after recently spending 21 days in the hospital during January and February for high blood pressure. During those 21 days, the doctors tried all kinds of medicines to bring down the pressure. I know I am not alone in these trials as many of you have the same kinds of problems. In the midst of looming troubles, I want to encourage you to do what this king

from the Old Testament did.

2 Chronicles 20:2-3.

Then there came some that told Jehoshaphat, saying, "A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, from Syria; and they are in Hazazon Tamar (which is En-Gedi). And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah."

"I've had it! I'm not going to take it anymore! Enough is enough!"

Have you ever caught yourself making such statements? I know I have. The time when you finally reach the end—that situation which makes you determined you are not going to sit idly by while your life goes down the tube!



I believe many of you have reached that point right now. There is indeed cause to examine how we can obtain a turnaround in your life and mine. I fully believe it is time to turn PANIC into PRAISE, WORRY into WORSHIP, and FEAR into FAITH!

“Just how do I do that?” You may be asking yourself that question as so many others are.

Sometimes we may feel like King Jehoshaphat. We feel surrounded, helpless, inadequate, and fearful. We suddenly find ourselves in a panic. What does that get you? It causes you to think irrationally and make foolish mistakes.

This is a time when we need to do what this king did. He recognized his own insufficiency and sought God, encouraging his people to do the same. They joined together in fasting and prayer and God brought the answer!

God gave a certain man among them a Word from the Lord (2 Chronicles 20:14-17). The king listened to the advice of God and took action. He did something no one would have considered doing, which brought the desired results.

He turned PANIC into PRAISE, he turned WORRY into WORSHIP, and he turned FEAR into FAITH!



He sent the choir ahead of the troops so that they could praise and worship God for fighting their battle for them. They gave thanks before the battle began and then worshipped the Lord for the victory. THEY did not fight! The enemy was defeated, and they cleaned up the spoils!

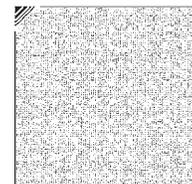
We can do that too! We need to admit our own shortcomings, acknowledge what God has done for us through our Lord, and begin to praise and worship Him and give thanks for the victory in our Lord! Put on the garment of praise in exchange for the spirit of heaviness! We need to remind ourselves of who we are and of Whose we are and let God bring our turnaround!

Did You Know?

- BVA remembers Dr. George Stocking, who served as a member of the BVA Board of Directors for some 40 years as a National Officer, District Director, and a member of the National Legislative Committee. A resident of Miami, Florida, for most of his adult life, Dr. Stocking first became acquainted with and joined BVA in the 1960s. He held a number of offices within the Florida Regional Group prior to being elected to a national office, including secretary and president. He was instrumental in the founding of several other regional groups in the southeastern United States. He was BVA's National Vice President from 1977 to 1979, National President from 1979 to 1981, and returned to his regional group service from 2014 until his passing in August 2018. “His ability to encourage and inspire a genuine passion for the work and mission of BVA was always impressive,” said former Executive Director Tom Miller. “Few in the history of BVA have given as much to our organization and its success as Dr. George Stocking.”

How Well Am I Managing My Self-Care?

by Paschal Baute, Ed.D.



Perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves is not “How are my back, knees, heart, diabetes, or whatever, but rather, “How am I doing with my self-care? How am I managing my responsibility to keep myself healthy?”

The recent VA Whole Health Initiative has as its major aim to get veterans to accept responsibility for their own health condition. This is a bold and noble goal but without any examples or measures offered. Shockingly, VA does not inquire about self-care. After receiving some 20 years of VA care, this has never been asked of me.

To ask this question means that I am aware of my primary duty to care for myself—to not depend upon others for my wellness, my health, or my meds. It is to recognize that I alone must decide what my attitude will be toward my physical, social, and mental needs.

My VA caregivers tell me that about 50 percent of all veterans have some type of grievance, anger, gripe, or distrust. Could it be that some veterans are expecting VA to make them well or keep them healthy? Could it be that their negative attitude is hurting their self-care?

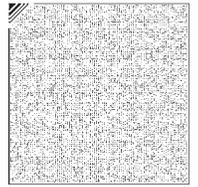
When grievance becomes addictive, self-care becomes accidental. My experience in four different rehabilitation training gigs is that those with regular anger were addicted to their grievances. As such, there is no way they would listen to advice on self-care.

Here are the questions I should be asking to help measure my whole health self-care:

1. Is my sleeping good enough? Am I getting the recommended 7-9 hours, perhaps getting a nap at or near the midday mark? We know now that good sleep is needed for clear thinking.
2. Am I eating right, many veggies and fruits like grandma always said, and not too much fast food?
3. Am I getting enough exercise, not sitting for long periods without getting up to walk? Recommended is walking 20 minutes each day or three 30-minute cardio workouts per week.
4. Do I appreciate my family and my caregivers, regularly showing affection and love?
5. Do I have some hobby, some interest, or “work” to help get me out of bed each morning?
6. Am I caring for my teeth and gums, brushing and flossing regularly?
7. Do I have a social life, connect regularly by social media with family members, friends, knowing that social contact is needed for good mental health?
8. Am I conscientious in managing my pills and other recommended health practices?
9. Do I live with some sense of wonder and curiosity, keeping my mind alert and lively?
10. If blessed with the gift of faith, do I start my coffee with “Thank you, Lord,” and hopefully find moments of grace during the day?

In my book, **Blind Veterans Coping with Loss**, I ask 32 blind veterans where they find hope and meaning. They beautifully express 12 self-care values. Most strikingly, however, they realize that each veteran creates the outlook and attitude with which they live. Could this example of blinded veteran self-care behavior be the role model missing for the VA whole health goal? If so, this would be an encouraging gift to the entire VA community.

Paschal Baute, a member of the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Group, writes books for his veteran community with themes of resilience, gratitude, and wellness. Titles may be found at Amazon books and include many free eBooks.



Sources of Potential Help In Starting a Business

by Kelli Brewer

Entrepreneurship is a great option for veterans, but only 4.5 percent of those who have served since 9/11 have gone on to start their own business. When compared to the 49.7 percent and 40 percent of service members who created businesses after World War II and the Korean War, respectively, the 4.5 percent figure is astounding.

If your life ambitions include opening your own business, you should not let loss of vision, or any other obstacle for that matter, stop you from doing so. This is especially true when there are so many valuable tools and resources to help you get started. Here are just a few that could be helpful:

Online Resources

In the technological age, it is feasible to start a business online. One of the first steps you should take when setting up your business is to choose the right entity. For most entrepreneurs, this will mean creating a Limited Liability Company (LLC), which can be done online without too much difficulty.

Like a corporation, an LLC is a separate and distinct legal entity. This means that an LLC can have its own tax identification number and bank account. The primary advantage of an LLC is that its owners have “limited liability”, meaning that under most circumstances the owners are not personally liable for the debts of the LLC.

Each state has its own set of rules for LLCs so check yours before you fill out any online forms. Aside from being less time-consuming, using an online LLC business tool will also help you avoid legal fees.

Accessibility Tools

Whether you’re setting up an LLC or using an online business plan template, it also helps to have the right tools that will make content accessible. Screen readers definitely constitute one of those tools, as do so many of the other VA-issued products and rehabilitation training you have experienced.

VA Loans and Grants

You may need some extra cash to help you

get your business up and running. Fortunately, there are VA loans meant specifically for entrepreneurs. You can visit the VA website to determine if you are eligible for any of these loan programs.

Grant Programs are an available possibility as well. The benefit of using grants rather than loans, of course, is that the recipients do not have to repay a grant at all while loans are typically accompanied by an obligation to pay back with interest.

Nonprofit and Business Help

Although VA is a great place for blinded veterans to seek help when starting a new business, there are also other assistance programs available from a variety of government and nonprofit organizations. For example, you can register your business through Small Business Administration programs for disabled veterans to gain access to even more help. There are reputable nonprofits out there dedicated to help veteran entrepreneurs fulfill their business goals.

Franchises and Side Gigs

Perhaps you are just looking to dip your toe into the business world. If so, a side hustle

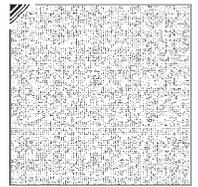
(<https://militaryconnection.com/blog/5-business-ideas-veterans-can-pursue-today>)

may be a perfect fit for you.

Speaking of being fit and fitness, there could be some veterans with vision loss out there who could put all the fitness hours they have racked up while in the Service to use as a fitness instructor. You could even carve out a niche helping veterans and other persons with disabilities stay in shape. If you have more time and startup funding to dedicate to a business, starting a franchise could also be a good idea.

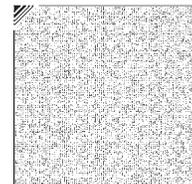
As a former member of the Armed Forces, you already have what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur. Perseverance, discipline, and dedication are all such important skills. Combine these traits with the tools and resources above and you will be well on your way to making your dreams of owning a business come true!

Kelli Brewer is a co-creator of Deploycare.org, a site that offers support to service members and their families.



Did You Know?

- Raymond T. Frey, BVA's first National President and one of 80-100 blinded veterans in attendance at the inaugural meeting of the organization on March 28, 1945 at Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital, authored "BVA—The Formative Years." The article was composed for a special issue of the **BVA Bulletin** published in 1995 for the Association's 50th anniversary. "Strong regional groups across the country," he wrote, "added impetus to our formative years." Regional groups were later described in brochures and other promotional materials as the backbone of the organization. The first regional group was formed in Baltimore, Maryland, with Irv Schloss as "Chairman". Frey went on to describe the contributions of Irv Schloss as **Bulletin** editor, Executive Director, and his work with Major General Melvin J. Maas and National President Robert Bottenberg in securing the Congressional Charter in 1958.



Resource Guide Highlights Tomb Commemoration

Arlington National Cemetery has published the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier Centennial Resource Guide,” a one-stop resource for official Department of Defense and Arlington National Cemetery news and information regarding the commemorative program and events that remember the interment of the unknown soldier in 1921.

“The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier stands, physically and symbolically, at the heart of the cemetery—and the heart of the nation,” said Karen Durham-Aguilera, Executive Director of the Office of Army Cemeteries, Army National Military Cemeteries, Arlington National Cemetery.

The illustrated guide of 41 pages will be updated regularly throughout the year. It contains historic photos, a program of events, media request forms, frequently asked questions, key messages, feature stories, and other stakeholder information for use or reprint.

On November 11, 1921, the United States laid to rest a fallen American hero. In combat, he lost not only his life but also his identity. Originally interred in France, where he fell in battle, the World War I Unknown Soldier was returned home to be buried in a tomb at Arlington National Cemetery, “his remains known only to God.”

Other locations for the tomb were considered, but Congress decided on Arlington, the nation’s premier military cemetery, as the place to construct a tomb in which to bury the Unknown and enshrine the

memory of all those who have given their lives in service to the United States.

“Since 1921, the Tomb has been a place to honor service and sacrifice,” said Cemetery Superintendent Charles R. Alexander. “It has been—and continues to be—both a site of mourning and a site of commemoration.”

A PDF version of the Guide is accessible at <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/TUS-100>.

New Website Capabilities Help Honor Fallen Veterans

Ahead of Memorial Day 2021, the National Cemetery Administration upgraded the features of the Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM) website. Aside from a fresh look, better usability, and more ways to submit content, VLM visitors may now upload photos, biographical summaries of a veteran’s life, and historical documents such as award citations, letters, and newspaper clippings.

The Veterans Legacy Memorial website is the nation’s first digital platform dedicated entirely to the memory of the 3.7 million veterans interred in VA national cemeteries. It was launched in 2019 to give every veteran his or her own dedicated webpage. The site also includes headstone photographs and mapped locations for most veterans, with additional content provided daily.

During the past year, more than 9,000 tributes have been shared on veterans’ VLM pages, some very personal. For many families, friends, and fellow veterans, VLM has become a means to express the impact a veteran has had on the life of a family member or friend, long after military service

has concluded. All material submitted to VLM is reviewed by Veterans Legacy Memorial administrators before being posted to the site to ensure dignity and decorum consistent with VA national cemetery standards.

For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial site or to submit content, visit <https://www.va.gov/remember>.

VA to Expand Benefits For Toxic Exposure Conditions

VA will begin to implement provisions of the William M. Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 by adding three conditions related to exposure to Agent Orange.

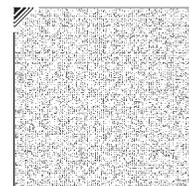
The conditions are bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, and Parkinsonism.

Implementation is based on provisions of court orders related to *Nehmer vs. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*. Vietnam veterans and their families who previously filed and were denied benefits for one of the three presumptive conditions will have their cases automatically reviewed without the need to refile a claim.

Rulemaking is also being initiated to consider adding asthma, rhinitis, and sinusitis to the list of chronic disabilities based on an association with military service in the Southwest Asian Theater of Operations (Persian Gulf), Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan during the covered periods of conflict. The Department will send letters and conduct other broad outreach efforts to reach impacted veterans and encourage them to participate in the rulemaking process.

“VA is establishing a holistic approach to determining toxic exposure presumption going forward,” said Secretary Denis McDonough. “We are moving out smartly in initiating action to consider these and other

potential new presumptions, grounded in science and in keeping with my authority as Secretary of VA.”



VA Retraining Assistance Program Helps Veterans with Employment

For veterans who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, VA has launched the Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP) as part of its continued effort to support veterans seeking retraining and economic opportunities in response to the effects of the pandemic.

VRRAP provides up to 12 months of tuition, fee, and monthly housing allowance payments, based on post-9/11 GI benefits, to qualifying veterans seeking training for employment in a high-demand occupation. The program was enacted on March 11, part of the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package.

As of May 28, 324 training providers and educational institutions had been approved for VRRAP retraining assistance.

For information on the six specific eligibility requirements, visit <https://www.va.gov/education/other-va-education-benefits/veteran-rapid-retraining-assistance/>, or call 888-442-4551 Monday to Friday between 7am and 6pm Central Time.

Restrictions Lifted at Cemeteries, Safety Precautions Adjusted

VA’s National Cemetery Administration has announced the lifting of all restrictions on gathering sizes at committal and memorial services in all 155 national cemeteries across the country, effective May 26 leading up to Memorial Day five days later.

The adjustments are conditioned upon visitors being fully vaccinated against

COVID-19. They lift all requirements on the wearing of masks, social distancing, and group size. Individuals not vaccinated are expected to continue wearing masks and avoiding crowds.

Large-scale events typically held over Memorial Day weekend were still not held at the sites this year because of ongoing worries about mass gatherings. Individuals and families planning on visiting the cemeteries, however, have resumed activities under the same protocols that existed before the pandemic began.

Limitations on numbers of persons permitted to attend committal and memorial services had been in place since June 9, 2020. Prior to that, for a brief period, only direct interments occurred at the cemeteries.

Film Festival Program for Blind Continues Workshop Series

International virtual workshops throughout 2021 leading up to the “blindDance Film Festival” on November 11 in Baltimore, Maryland, continue to seek blind and visually impaired persons interested in filmmaking.

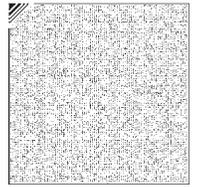
The series, held on the last Wednesday of every month and entitled “Filmmaking and Storytelling,” is hosted by Morton Bonde, legally blind Senior Art Director of the Lego Group. The overriding theme of the workshops held throughout the year addresses the question, “Can you make films if you are blind?” Bonde and Ben Fox are the co-founders of both the workshops and the film festival program.

The sessions provide a gathering place for updates and live announcements for a growing group of filmmakers who are either blind or supporters of the blindDance Film Festival, the first ever film festival by the blind but for the world.

The workshop on June 30 will address documentary films and discovering stories through interview questions.

On July 28, the workshop title is “Script Writing: Storytelling through Dialogue.” The August 25 class will feature the reading of short scripts of five minutes as part of a contest.

For more information about the workshops or how to submit a film for the festival competition, visit blinddance.org.

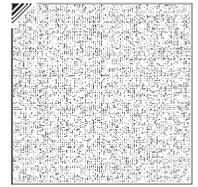


Did You Know?

- The affirmations on page 4 that New York City has hosted more BVA National Conventions than any other city, and that Reno is a close second, are literally true but only by technicality. Although Washington, DC was the host city in 1949, 1977, and 1981, convention attendees also arrived in adjacent Arlington, Virginia, five minutes across the Potomac River, in both 1995 and 2010, for the 50th and 65th anniversary gatherings, respectively. Most of the activities outside the hotel in 1995 and 2010 would have been much the same even had the hotel been situated in the District of Columbia. Next year’s 77th National Convention at the Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill Hotel, the original site of the planned 75th gathering canceled by COVID-19 last year, will be the fourth BVA convention in Washington, DC proper and the sixth within 15 minutes of all the others in either DC or Virginia.

In Remembrance

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



Florida R.G.

Kenneth Anderson
Richard Hoffman
Larry Mills
Troy Randall
Gloria Wilson

Georgia R.G.

Jesse Jones

Heartland R.G.

Clifford Harris
William Latka
Edward B. Tomlinson

Illinois R.G.

Larry Lapczynski

Indiana R.G.

George Nagy

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

John Cross
Burn Simonson

Mid-Atlantic R.G.

Charles Butler
David Thompson

Midwest North R.G.

Robert Erikson

New Mexico R.G.

David Grisham
Paul Vigil

Northern California R.G.

Dennie Baugh
Ray Cesaretti

Pennsylvania R.G.

Howard Firestine
William Hunsicker
Larry Thompson

San Diego R.G.

Alfred Gutierrez
Lewis Whisenhunt

Utah R.G.

Blaine Carling

Wisconsin R.G.

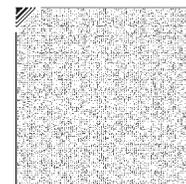
George M. Shannon

BVA Members At-Large (No Regional Group Affiliation)

James Johnson (Kentucky)
Raymond Trevino
(Veterans Home, Northern California)
Lawrence Williams
(British Columbia, Canada)



The Centennial of the burial of the World War I Unknown Soldier mentioned in other sections of this issue of **The Bulletin** gives cause for reflection on the thousands of sacrifices willingly offered to preserve freedom. New York Congressman Hamilton Fish, original author of the legislation establishing the Tomb in 1921, believed that the edifice had universal meaning for all conflicts and could serve to unify all Americans.



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BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
1101 King Street, Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314

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Domestic Mail Manual Sec. 703.5.1-2

Final Thought

Among the many unexpected consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, BVA National Headquarters and regional groups alike have been limited in recognizing those who have served blinded veterans with extra distinction during the past year.

Many such recognitions have been put on hold.

Fortunately, a few exceptions have emerged rather quickly. On May 11, for example, BVA of Pennsylvania President William Albert (middle) and Past President/Current Secretary Wanda Grover (left) presented Lebanon, Pennsylvania VA Optometry Clinic Intern Dr. Tracy Lukasiewicz with a Braille U.S. flag as she completed her residency at Lebanon and planned her departure. Tracy's supervisor, Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine Kevin Wolford, also appeared for the presentation.

"Dr. Tracy has played an intricate part in the eye health of this area's blinded veterans, and her care for them at the medical center has been outstanding," Wanda said. "We wish her nothing but the best in her future endeavors."

