

The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Autumn 2021

PAUL MIMMS A GUIDING LIGHT TO BLINDED VETERANS



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Cover Photos:

The additional lights that characterize the holiday season, whether on a tree, a city street, or part of a candlelight dinner, connect us to thoughts of persons who have illuminated and brightened our lives through their friendship, service, and sacrifice. One such BVA jewel, an authentic model of servant leadership, is Paul Mimms, longtime member of the Association's Heartland Regional Group. This issue of **The Bulletin** puts forth Paul's knowledge, experience, and foresight as significant lights to guide BVA on its path forward. See pages 6-8 for story and cover details.

VOLUME LXXVI, No. 4
Autumn 2021

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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



Honoring Veterans and their Valor

by Joe McNeil

This is a day set aside to recognize everyone who served this country through peacetime and war.

We also recognize the sacrifices made and

the physical and mental scars we must carry, some of them seen but many also unseen.

We are a brotherhood and sisterhood who carried out a pledge to serve this country.

There are times I ask myself, "What is a veteran on this day and every day?" I come back to these descriptors:

- A veteran is a man or woman who lived up to the oath of office which they took and continues to do so.
- A veteran is a man or woman who chose a way of life, which was service to their country.
- A veteran chooses duty, honor, and courage as a lifestyle.
- A veteran is one who served with honor, respect for country, and reverence for fellow citizens.
- A veteran overlooks another's flaws or imperfections.

In contemplating this topic, I searched out and found a few other descriptions of veterans that didn't come to mind at first, but which describe many of our BVA members. These are:

- A veteran is trustworthy and someone who can be depended on in times of need, even when there are life and death consequences.

- A veteran is able to step up and lead when nobody else can or desires to.
- A veteran makes wise decisions and choices, and is experienced in doing so.
- A veteran is a team player and willing to contribute effort to worthy causes that help others.

As veterans, we look around and sometimes cry at what we see—how our service for country and the freedoms we have ensured are squandered by those who don't appreciate them nor the sacrifices we had to endure.

At the end of the day, a veteran is someone whom the Almighty allowed to continue living, leave active duty, and walk off the battlefield to fight the good fight another day in another arena.

You ask yourself: "Why me? Why am I here as a veteran?" The answer is so very simple: It is because the Almighty is not done with us yet. There is yet a higher purpose for our lives and we need to do the last honorable thing being asked of us. That, of course, is to serve.

Hold your head up high and proudly order your steps according to God's word and will.

Find your purpose in serving, not in simply living a lifestyle.

Remember: Respect your country. Respect your fellow citizen. Respect your family. And, most of all, respect yourself!

May respect and honor be shown to all veterans during this time of year when we traditionally honor them and remember so many of the other blessings that we hold near and dear. I especially honor you, my fellow blinded veterans, thanking you for your service and wishing for you a most joyous and blessed holiday season.



Legislative Update

by Erin McConnell

As the first session of the 117th Congress begins to wind down, BVA's Government Relations Team continues to advocate on behalf of blinded and disabled veterans. Directed by the annual legislative testimony given in March 2020 by past National President Dr. Thomas Zampieri, we have focused our advocacy efforts on several topics that have presented past challenges for blinded veterans.

We held meetings with more than 60 Congressional offices this past spring. In those meetings we stressed the importance of funding for ocular trauma research, a renewable automobile grant, an expansion and restructuring of the Caregiver Program, and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) compliance with Section 508 website accessibility standards and the accessibility reporting requirements set forth in Public Law 116-213, which was passed due to BVA's strong advocacy in 2020.

While the focus of the 117th Congress has been pulled in dozens of directions this session, our team remains optimistic and determined to secure legislative victories for our blinded veterans.

The VA Automobile Grant program currently aids eligible service-connected legally blind veterans with a one-time grant toward the purchase of a vehicle. As of October 1, the grant amount was increased to \$22,355. The aim of current legislation, and a top priority for BVA, is to make this one-time

grant into a renewable grant, usable every ten years.

The Veterans Services Team at BVA has alerted the Government Relations Team to the high number of blinded veterans that are being denied the benefits of the Caregiver Program due to ambiguous eligibility criteria laid out by VA. BVA has raised this issue with several Congressional offices and questioned the reasoning behind VA's denials. Now, caregivers and veterans who have been denied will soon have the opportunity to appeal the decision through the three appeal avenues: a higher-level review, a supplemental claim, or a board review as mandated under the Appeals Modernization Act (AMA). We await further details from VA on AMA's implementation with respect to the Caregiver Program. While still more advocacy most certainly needs to be done, this is a step in the right direction.

Additionally, BVA's continued advocacy and pressure on VA led to the release of the report required by Public Law 116-213 on the accessibility of every VA website, file, and application. The report showed that a shockingly low percentage, approximately 7.7 percent, of all VA websites are fully accessible to the blind. These low numbers, combined with a lack of effort to form remediation plans in light of VA's staggering \$4 billion annual Information Technology budget, demonstrate a lack of interest by VA in 508 accessibility compliance standards. BVA is still in the process of reviewing this report and considering what actions need to be taken to ensure that website accessibility becomes a priority at VA.



Executive Director's Message

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

Season's Greetings to my fellow BVA members and our dedicated volunteers, caregivers, and partners!

It seems impossible to me that I am composing this message to you with Thanksgiving Day already passed and most of 2021 now in my personal rear-view mirror. Time has passed far too quickly this year.

No matter how you celebrate the holiday season, I wish all of you a blessed and joyous one. I likewise wish you and yours health and prosperity for 2022.

As many of our members are aware, 2021 was once again a year of new challenges for us at BVA National Headquarters. There were many hours of troubleshooting, sometimes anticipated in advance but at other times presented to us as surprises that required practical solutions immediately. I am aware of similar challenges that you successfully confronted in your regional groups, in the various BVA committees, in our National Auxiliary, and in some cases with critical issues in your own families.

Some of our challenges as an organization still stem from a global pandemic that remains with us for the foreseeable future. Other challenges relate to the transitions, adaptations, and improvements we consider necessary to carry BVA successfully to its 77th anniversary next March and then into the long-range future.

I believe the challenges and adversity brought us opportunities. For example, even

in the travails of the pandemic several of our regional groups seized opportunities to recognize and commemorate White Cane Day and Veterans Day with activities.

For us at National Headquarters, the challenges, converted into opportunities, included an enjoyable first-ever virtual national convention and now an inspiring group of participants in our recently launched ambassador program. We owe the success of these opportunities to the generosity of sponsors and a willingness of our members to teach and learn new computer skills.

One particularly special and influential individual in 2021 is Paul Mimms, a colleague and friend to so many of us. I direct you to a section in this issue of **The Bulletin** in which we have appropriately highlighted Paul in considerable detail. We have also featured his story on our website and in a direct mail holiday appeal that is now reaching thousands of our potential donors.

Paul Mimms is a genuine BVA treasure—a jewel and a light to the organization. With the knowledge and skills he has acquired over the years, he now assumes a key role in helping BVA remain viable and make the necessary changes for successful transition into the future. He is the role model for BVA's motto, "Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans" in knowing both what to do and how to do it.

May we continue to benefit from the example and understanding that Paul Mimms and so many of the rest of you, our BVA members, exude in your personal lives and in your service to BVA.



Cerner salutes the Service Members, Veterans, and their families who have sacrificed for our nation.

Your service and sacrifice are what makes this country great – we owe you more than thanks, we owe you our freedom.

Cerner is proud to support the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Coast Guard as we develop and deploy the future of health care together.



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OrCam MyEye

“Being able to read. That’s a big thing for me”

New Technology Available Through the VA Increases Independence for Blind Veterans

Veterans who experience low vision or who are legally blind now have a new tool to increase their freedom and ability to handle everyday tasks. Lightweight and designed to be mounted on eyeglasses, it reads text to the user.

OrCam MyEye, a wearable vision assistance tool named by TIME Magazine as a Best Invention of 2019, is now being issued through the Department of Veterans Affairs to those who are eligible.

According to the VA, roughly 130,000 veterans are legally blind, and another one million veterans experience low vision. Blindness is characterized by the inability to see, while low vision includes some sight, but the issue can't be corrected by glasses or surgery. Low vision symptoms can include poor night vision, blurriness, and blind spots.

Veterans of all ages can experience blindness or low vision. In older veterans the conditions are normally age-related. Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan may find their vision loss or low vision tied to blast-

related brain injuries. In fact, the VA estimates that as many as 64 percent of service members with traumatic brain injuries also have a vision problem.

For U.S. Navy retiree Paul Kaminsky, the OrCam MyEye technology greatly enhanced his everyday life. Kaminsky served for 30 years in the Navy and retired as a Commander. In 1982 he was diagnosed with macular degeneration, an incurable eye disease that causes central vision loss. After meeting the eligibility requirements, he was issued the device by the Birmingham Alabama VA Medical Center at no cost.

“It's one of the devices that I sort of waited years for the VA to start issuing,” he said. He was drawn to the device because of its size, accuracy, and convenience; and of all the assistive technology devices he had used in the past, Kaminsky said OrCam Technologies' MyEye is “one of the best.”

Veterans who have VA health coverage and are legally blind or have low vision may be eligible to receive

“I can now pull [out] and read a real book, which is something that I lost the pleasure of doing and turn pages like I used to. That's a big thing for me, being able to read, and feeling the texture of the page again,”

Paul Kaminsky, U.S. Navy retiree

the product **fully funded** by the VA regardless of the age of the veteran or if the condition occurred during active service.

The adaptive technology means a greater amount of freedom and independence for Kaminsky and his fellow veterans experiencing vision loss. “When I'm in the grocery store or Home Depot, I can now find out what is down the aisle,” Kaminsky said. “I can ‘see’ [read] the sign above, hanging from the ceiling, which I could never do.”



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or go to:
orcaml.com

Paul Mimms: A Guiding Light To Blinded Veterans and BVA

by Stuart Nelson

The holiday season is a time of light, both the symbolic light serving as a symbol in the religious commemorations of this time of year and the light we see with our physical eyes—light emanating from a decorated tree, or from a candle on a holiday dinner table, or from an elevated spotlight on popular merchandise in a department store, or even from glittery, colored sparkles on cookies and cakes.

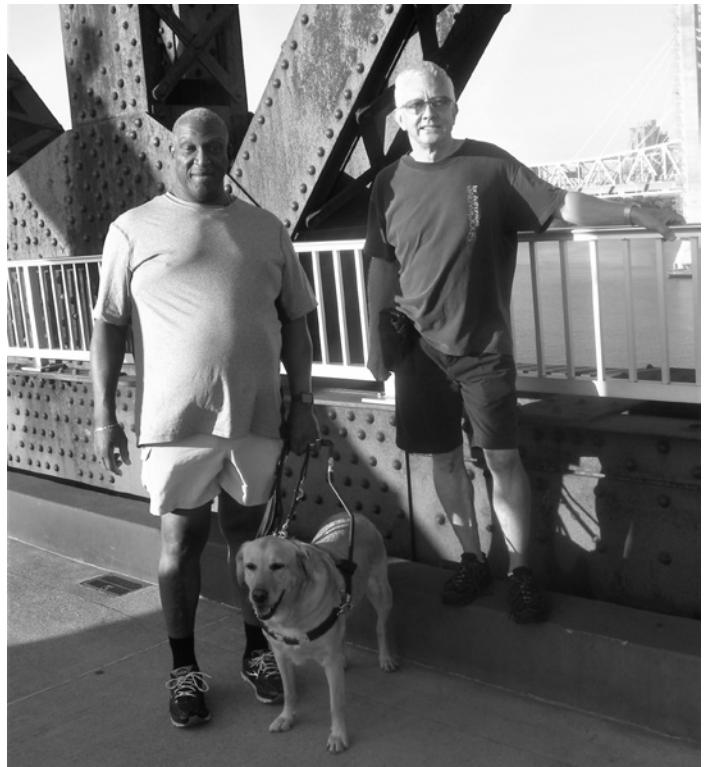
For Navy veteran, longtime BVA member, and Kansas City, Missouri, resident Paul Mimms, the light he sees is the same light he has unselfishly shared for the better part of 40 years, and which he continues to share today with his fellow blinded veterans. For Paul, his fellow veterans are also his colleagues, his advocates, and his friends.

“I am one fortunate enough to see, feel, and benefit from the light Paul shares with me as an important friend and confidant,” said Don Overton. “For me, Paul represents all that is positive or should be positive about BVA.”

Unlike draftees of the 1960s during the Vietnam War, Paul volunteered for military service, enlisting in the Navy in 1966. His plan was never a military career but to fulfill a commitment and return to civilian life.

He was stationed in San Diego for a year and a half before his deployment to Vietnam in January of 1968 aboard the World War II-constructed USS Luzerne County, a ship designed to support amphibious (both land and sea) operations.

One night aboard the ship, on the waters of the Mekong Delta only a couple of months



Paul Mimms, left, with guide dog Brook-Lyn, joined Phil Faris of the Spokane Inland Empire Regional Group on a morning walk during the Association's 70th National Convention in 2015.

into his deployment, Paul had just finished unloading ammunition from the ship when a pulley used to load it into storage swung free, striking his face with force and directly in the left eye.

Dazed and shaken but not unconscious, Paul picked himself up. Although he was alone and only 23 years old, he knew something was not right when a dim light proved to be too much for his eyes. Despite this grim discovery, he was now on a mission

and there could be no diagnosis from an eye doctor for four months when the ship was to dock in Guam.

At the end of those four months, Paul had lost most of his sight in the left eye due to the onset of glaucoma caused by the pulley blow. He received a medical discharge and returned to a former job at a Ford assembly plant in Kansas City. Unfulfilled at the job and now aware that he was a people person first and foremost, Paul worked in the retail industry for a time and then worked his way up to a manager position at a restaurant.

"It was at the restaurant that I believed I'd found my niche because I discovered how much I really cared about other people—both my employees as well as my customers on the other side of the counter," he said.

Unfortunately, the motivation as a successful restaurant manager was soon delivered a blow in 1983 when Paul experienced symptoms of glaucoma in his previously good eye. He had faced a few safety incidents at the restaurant that he describes as more dangerous than any he'd even experienced in Vietnam. He realized he was now not able to see a lone customer approaching the counter with a weapon of any kind and, with the realization that he could not protect himself or his staff, he felt that he needed to resign.

"When I reached acceptance that my sight loss was actually blindness, I went to bed one night feeling that there was no real reason to get up again," he said. "I woke up and drank water, used the bathroom, and went back to bed with my whole thought process being 'why me,' for three entire days."

Paul could easily have found a way to languish for years in the same surroundings and mindset, thinking that blindness had



Paul Mimms, pictured here at a BVA National Convention with LS&S, LLC Vice President of Sales Tomasina Perry, is a technological guru as well as an expert in the art of guide dog handling.

become the deal breaker that had ruined his life. Instead, he awakened after an epiphany of sorts that brought him instead to "why not me" and a new personal mission statement that included all the things he still possessed that blindness could not take away from him.

"My mission became one of appreciating and respecting the gifts that I already possessed—to look beyond blindness unless it could be used as an opportunity to help someone else, and to focus on the blessings and gifts I have to empower others just as I have been empowered in my own life."

Paul said that the gifts he still possessed after blindness were his motivation to become something more than he was, his physical health, his intelligence, his family, and his faith. He views himself “not so much as a blind veteran but as a veteran who happens to be blind, the disability always being secondary to what he does for family, church, community, country, and fellow veterans.

Ever since that momentous epiphany and rising from his bed, Paul Mimms has developed, cultivated, and then shared his gifts through higher education that include a graduate degree; working for and directly with blinded veterans as a Visual Impairment Services Team Coordinator at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center; and as an authority, teacher, counselor, and effective communicator in the areas of SmartHome Technology, Information Technology, and Guide Dog Handling and Care.

BVA is among the many benefactors of the light that emanates from Paul Mimms as a gift without a price tag or a bill. The organization is not, however, the only benefactor—not by any means. Two of his longtime friends in Kansas City extending back to high school, both Vietnam veterans, now credit Paul with intervening in their lives during a particularly dark period.

“They credit me with saving their lives by simply directing them to counseling services through VA,” he said. “I had the knowledge, understanding, and training to get them to the right source of help.”



Paul Mimms, at the time BVA’s National Vice President, orally presented BVA’s legislative priorities for the year before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs on March 14, 2018.

Paul’s light, Don Overton says, is the wisdom and guidance he is sharing with BVA as the Association meets the future as a more service-driven organization, just as Paul himself decided to make service the center of his own life nearly 40 years ago when he arose from the three transformative days in bed. With his historical perspective coupled with an appreciation for younger veterans, his gifts include the connecting links between a vibrant past and the brightness of BVA’s future.

“The links Paul created for himself in his own life, remembering everything he still had after blindness but knowing he yet had much to accomplish, is where BVA finds itself right now,” said Don. “That’s why I look at Paul as a model for how we can modernize our work with a new generation of veterans with vision loss, accomplishing this critical transformation in the very areas in which Paul is so talented and capable—among others, technology, guide dog handling, and the people skills to fellowship and be a true friend to everyone.”

Salmon River Trip Truly Unforgettable

by Joey Martinez

I really don't know where to begin!

My first experience with BVA members and Team River Runner (TRR) was at an Outtasight clinic in Montana, where blind and visually impaired veterans were taught the fundamentals of kayaking. This was my first time kayaking and a very gentle introduction into my first white-water experience.

Fast forward a month and I'm sitting at a campsite on the bank of the Salmon River with 19 other expedition members. Everyone is taking turns introducing themselves to the group while mentioning their various numbers of years of kayaking experience. Then it's my turn to speak... "Hi. My name is Joey. I'm visually impaired aaaannnd... I have six days of kayaking experience..."

My lack of experience in kayaking, honestly, was irrelevant since I received phenomenal fundamentals training by TRR in Montana. On this trip I was also assigned a cadre of rockstar guides. Furthermore, I was kayaking with another veteran on the trip who is completely blind and had kayaked the Grand Canyon. I was surrounded by a wealth of experience!

The first few days were bursting with adventure and fun! I must have swum at least seven times total over the course of many Class 2 and 3 rapids with a single Class 4 sneaking in. To say that I wasn't nervous would be a lie. However, the expedition leader was always there to reassure our confidence in our abilities.

Furthermore, my guides were always on top of every opportunity to teach me something and work on techniques, specifically advanced



Joey Martinez steadily guides himself and his kayak through a series of cascades on the Salmon River, also known as the "The River of No Return" that traverses the mountains of central and eastern Idaho.

techniques in kayaking. Before every technical set of rapids, my guides would discuss the movements while making real time spot maneuver callouts during the actual rapid itself. How they were able to yell over the sound of that turbulent water is beyond me.

As the trip progressed, I took fewer swims until I wasn't swimming at all on Class 3 rapids. This is all due to the stellar guidance and instruction I was receiving from my guides. They were so patient to work with me on advanced kayaking techniques and, if I took a swim, we would take the time to discuss what led to that event and how to prevent it on the next challenge.

Our combined hard work culminated on a set of rapids called "Elk Horn," a class 3+ rapid riddled with rocks and window shading



Flanked by calm waters, Joey nevertheless appears braced and ready for his next river challenge.

holes. This was, by far, hands down my most pleasurable experience of the whole trip! My guides and I were perfectly in sync, making dynamic moves to the left and right as we dodged rocks and holes. I could hear my lead guide making hard directional commands while the tail guide made precision corrections with the occasional “PADDLE PADDLE PADDLE” slipped in. Despite the turbulent sounds of the river crashing over rocks and waves smacking us in the face, I

could hear them very clearly. My team and I crushed the Elk Horn rapids! I cannot express enough the gratitude and love I have for my guides and everything that they did to steer me down that river. As the trip continued, the level of quality training I was receiving was obvious in how we as a team would just crush rapid after rapid.

The foundational and advanced training I received from TRR has granted me a new sense of independence that I otherwise would not have. In addition, they also provided an organic environment for veterans, be it injured or not, to meet and share our experiences in the presence of nature. I hadn’t really spoken of my injuries from my IED blast in years, but I found myself floating on the beautiful Salmon River amongst the valleys and mountains surrounded by veterans and sharing my story. It was truly peaceful and therapeutic. The healing that one can receive in the presence of nature is truly unmatched.

TRR provided this healing for me and for many veterans on this trip. For this I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

Did You Know?

- During the holiday season of 1947, BVA members and their families were asked in **The Bulletin** to remember their post-World War II comrades overseas who, “likewise destined to a life of darkness, are so desperately in need of food and clothing without which they will surely die.” The admonition, more specifically, was to help the people of Europe through a newly formed agency named CARE—Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe, Inc. The CARE packages cost \$10, including delivery. The contents ranged from general food items to blankets, knitting wool, household linen, etc.

Spotlighting Additional 76th Convention Sponsors

The Bulletin continues the recent BVA 76th National Convention initiative to feature organizational profiles from each Platinum, Gold, and Silver sponsor of the virtual event this past August. In this issue the spotlight's focus is on Vispero (Gold), The Low Vision Shop (Silver), and Eschenbach Optik of America, Inc. (Silver).

Vispero

Vispero was honored to support the Blinded Veterans Association as part of its 76th Virtual National Convention. Our partnership with key organizations and advocacy groups such as BVA keeps us in the forefront of the low-vision industry.

The vision of the Blinded Veterans Association to better the lives of all who served in the Armed Forces living with sight loss directly aligns with Vispero's own mission to inspire hope, determination, and independence to the visually impaired through our family of brands: Freedom Scientific, Enhanced Vision, Optelec, and TPGi.

Although Vispero itself was officially formed in 2016, the four aforementioned brands share a long, rich history as industry leaders dating back to 1975.

Vispero combines the two Latin words “visio” and “spero” with the visio referring to vision and the spero to hope.

Vispero is the world's leading assistive technology provider for the visually impaired. We develop and deliver innovative solutions for blind and low-vision individuals that help them reach their full potential—to gain an education, obtain employment, succeed in professional careers, and live independently throughout their lives. We are proud to operate in 90 countries worldwide with products localized in more than 24 languages.

At Vispero, it is our goal to play an increasing role for those in need who may

be coping with vision loss and to spread awareness so that optical, electronic video magnification, and speech solutions are readily available. And, for people who feel they have exhausted all their options, we want to be a beacon of light offering useful cutting-edge solutions.

As the prevalence of age-related eye diseases like macular degeneration steadily rises, assistive technology plays an increasingly vital role, resulting in a growing demand for low-vision devices and services. Vispero is uniquely positioned to address these challenges head-on by providing the tools necessary to meet the needs of the low-vision population through a far-reaching distribution network.

Earlier this fall Vispero was selected by McDonald's to assist in providing customers with an accessible kiosk experience. The Vispero JAWS Kiosk solution was subsequently deployed to select McDonald's corporate owned stores and select franchise locations across the country. Creating an accessible and usable kiosk experience for McDonald's customers required an understanding of McDonald's robust self-order kiosk interface and a plan for making the extensive McDonald's menu easily navigable and intuitive for blind customers.

JAWS Kiosk will allow blind and low-vision users the ability to interact with the kiosk by inserting headphones into the headphone jack, located on the navigation pad, which will then navigate the kiosk

screen, reading the content as they move through the application.

Blinded veterans interested in additional information from Vispero can visit <https://vispero.com>. They can also email the company at info@vispero.com or call 727-803-8000 Monday-Friday during the hours of 8:30am until 7:00pm Eastern Time.

The Low Vision Shop

The Low Vision Shop is a one-stop shop for all assistive devices for low vision and blindness, including the latest in wearable technology. We are proud to be the go-to source for best-in-class low vision and blind assistive devices online, in our physical stores in the Baltimore area, South Florida, and New York, and with multiple business-to-business channels.

Our trained professionals help individuals explore the latest advancements in low-vision technology to find the best solutions for their stage of sight loss. We nurture and engage with the sight-loss community through in-house and virtual events, videos, demos, webinars, sponsorships, and social media.

Assistive devices of The Low Vision Shop fall into one of the following subcategories: handheld magnifiers, stand magnifiers, video magnifiers, Max Series eyeglasses, Bluetooth audio sunglasses, absorptive filters, reading glasses, spectacle magnifier, all-in-one solutions, handheld technology, wristbands, home & office, orientation & mobility, and accessible cell phones.

The Low Vision Shop was founded by Bari Azman of Baltimore, Maryland in March 2019. Bari has been connected to the marketing of assistive devices for more than seven years. For more information, please visit <https://TheLowVisionShop.com>.

Eschenbach Optik of America, Inc.

The mission of Eschenbach Optik of America, Inc. is to provide its customers with vision-enhancing products that improve their safety, productivity, independence, and quality of life. It does this by having one of the most comprehensive product lines in the low-vision industry which allows it to serve the broad needs of the visually impaired.

The company's products include hand-held, stand and spectacle magnifiers as well as telescopes, contrast-enhancing filters, and video magnifiers. A number of its products have won prestigious international design awards and the company itself has been recognized as a leader in the low-vision industry having been a past recipient of The Vision Council's Sam Walters Award for innovation in the low-vision industry and the SILMO Gold Award in Low Vision.

Eschenbach serves the visually impaired community not only by designing and manufacturing innovative and high-quality low-vision products, but also by educating and training the eye care and vision rehabilitation professionals that care for those with low vision. The support given to these professionals helps them maximize their ability to find the best solutions for the visually impaired. Eschenbach also supports the Blinded Veterans Association by being an ongoing contributor to the organization's Operation Peer Support Program. Eschenbach has also been a past donor of products to Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH) and Sight Savers America, an organization that supports visually impaired children, and has been a past sponsor of the Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation.

Around BVA

STARS to Host Winter V-I Veterans Camps

Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports (STARS) will hold three Visually Impaired Veterans Camps this winter. Each of the five-day sessions, scheduled for January 9-13, January 23-27, and March 13-17, is open to blind and visually impaired veterans throughout the country.

Each camp, which will feature alpine skiing, Nordic skiing, snowboarding, and snowshoeing, has 15 available slots. Sighted guides and guests are also welcome. If the guest is a disabled veteran, the cost is the same as it is for the blinded veteran. If not, the cost is an additional \$400 for food and lodging.

Blinded veterans attending receive all lodging, meals, in-town transportation, lift tickets, instructors, and ski equipment (the exception being clothing, which can be rented).

Although airfare and an airport shuttle to and from the Steamboat Springs ranch are the responsibility of the participants, there are several available discounts, grants, and BVA Operation Peer Support assistance for this expense.

For additional information about the programs and a link to register, send an email to Lonnie Bedwell at lonnie.r.bedwell@att.net or contact Stuart Nelson at BVA National Headquarters (snelson@bva.org).

STARS provides life-changing experience for injured veterans, having conducted numerous programs for veterans with vision loss. Attendees gain self-esteem,

independence, camaraderie, resilience, and courage through its programs.

November, Veterans Day Bring Momentous Events to NYRG by Warner Murray

For this issue of **The Bulletin**, I've chosen to share some significant events of the New York Regional Group with our national membership. For us in the group, of course, each of these events is meaningful by itself. Put together, however, we believe they are even more powerful in demonstrating the individual worth of our members everywhere and the value of us blinded veterans remaining active in our local communities.

I begin with a sad note about the passing on August 30 of one of our faithful members, Arthur Morris, who was a regular attendee and well known at our national conventions. I feel the need to mention him and the sunset on his life in more than just a line in the **In Remembrance** section of this publication. Arthur was a longtime BVA member who held the regional group positions of president, vice president, and secretary. He was equally as present in the Manhattan blinded veterans support group. Arthur was a dedicated activist for the blind in his community and statewide. His greatest accomplishments may well be his marriage to his wife of 60 years and a daughter.

On a somewhat cheerier note, I mention our beloved BVA life member in The Bronx, Enrique Sanchez, 92 years young on December 20. Enrique and his wife, Laura, had a surprise visit from their son and daughter over the Veterans Day weekend that

meant the world to them. The always chipper Enrique admits to moving a little slower these days, especially having been largely confined during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, Enrique used only a white cane to navigate his way around but now indicates that a wheelchair may be necessary for movement at the upcoming national convention. Enrique believes he has attended 43 consecutive in-person conventions, starting when Jimmy Carter was President. No one but Tom Miller could top him.

Transitioning to another Veterans Day highlight, our own Luther L. Richardson of Brooklyn was inducted into the New York State Veterans Hall of Fame on exactly November 11 at the Penn Wortman Older Adults Center. He was nominated and selected for the honor by New York State Senate District 19 and the presentation was made by his State Senator, Roxanne Persaud. The event, which also honored all veterans and their families for their sacrifice, was also transmitted virtually via Zoom. The Penn Wortman Choir performed a musical tribute.

Last but not least is mention of the New York Veterans Day Parade, always a highlight for our regional group. As big as New York is, blinded veterans have always had a role in the associated events. This year we were mentioned at the ceremony breakfast and luncheons. After a year of dormancy due to the pandemic, the 2021 parade was once again showtime with all of the floats, organizational banners, and military bands playing patriotic hymns. There was no shortage of well-wishers saying “thank you for your service.”

Columbus Chapter Celebrates Birthday of Important Founder by Elizabeth Holmes

The Georgia Regional Group's Columbus Chapter celebrated the 90th birthday of Otis Smith at a local restaurant surrounded by BVA members, family members, and friends. It was a joyous event for two reasons: first, reaching the age of 90 is a grand feat; and second, Otis is one of the original founders of the Columbus Chapter, which occurred in 2003.

Otis Smith was born October 28, 1931 in Midland, Georgia. His grandmother, Edna Smith, and parents, Patsy Smith and Andrew Jackson, raised him to value the important things in life. He attended Meeler Hill and Manor Taylor Elementary Schools and received a GED in later years.

In October of 1951, Otis entered the United States Air Force. He retired after 23 years of honorable service at the rank of Technical Sergeant (E-6). After retirement, Otis attended Columbus Technical College, studying computer science and carpentry.

Daughter Cynthia Golden-Frasier refers to her dad as the “walking, talking GPS!” During our regional group travels with public city transportation, Otis can tell exactly where we are and if the driver is going in the wrong direction. He will offer shortcut directions if the driver seems lost. This is truly amazing



Otis Smith has played a key role in the Columbus Chapter since he helped found it in 2003.

for us to hear Otis shout out “You’re going the wrong way” when he is totally blind.

Otis and Clifford Jones formed the Columbus Chapter on October 15, 2003. For many years, Robert Dorsey was president, Otis was vice president, and Cliff Jones was the treasurer. Today, the Columbus Chapter and Georgia Regional Group as a whole are very strong, thanks in large part to Otis’s capability to hold the chapter together all these years by providing good advice and relying on a remarkable memory.

Otis’s hobbies include carpentry, gardening, listening to music, reading books, fishing, cooking, just to name a few. He is a member of the New Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Lithonia, Georgia. He is blessed with a smile that can melt a woman’s heart.

Guide Dog Committee Seeks Additional Participation

Membership and participation in the meetings and activities of BVA’s Guide Dog Committee are open to blinded veterans currently teamed with a guide or service dog, former guide dog handlers, and potential guide or service dog training candidates.

Interaction throughout the year is now conducted through a Zoom meeting held on the third Tuesday of each month at 3:00pm Eastern Standard Time.

A premise behind the establishment of BVA’s Guide Dog Committee is that the extraordinary and traumatic experiences responsible for the onset of vision loss by veterans are outside the scope of understanding of members of other guide dog or service dog interest groups.

The intent of the Committee is to act on behalf of veterans with dogs that qualify for

acceptance by VA as the “Dog of Record” being used primarily for amelioration of medical challenges, not intending to include comfort or emotional support for nonmedical reasons.

For more information about the Committee and upcoming meetings, contact Committee Chair Scott Quinlan at scott.quinlan@hotmail.com.

National Convention Prep Off and Running Swiftly

Mark your calendars now to attend BVA’s long anticipated 77th National Convention at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Washington, DC, August 22-26, 2022!

The Convention Committee began preparations for the five-day event with an enthusiastic and optimistic flurry of goals and ideas at its first meeting in October.

“After a two-year hiatus without a live convention, what we are looking for more than anything else is for our BVA members and their families to come to the convention and have a really enjoyable time,” said Convention Chair and National Vice President Danny Wallace. “We will still have a few of the necessary meetings, but our focus will be on outings and things to do outside the Hyatt Regency together as a membership.”

Examples of interest include the opportunity to touch a moon rock, marvel at the Hope Diamond, show grandchildren Dorothy’s slippers, or explore Native American culture—all at the Smithsonian’s 17 Washington area museums. Other treasures like the Gutenberg Bible at the Library of Congress or the Declaration of Independence at the National Archives are other examples of possible interest. Many of the museums and other historic sites are accessible and have tours designed for the visually impaired.

The convention will also take on the same celebratory atmosphere originally planned for BVA's historic 75th anniversary in 2020 but abruptly interrupted two years ago by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gruber, Miller Scholarships Available for 2022-23

BVA will award seven total higher education scholarships for the 2022-23 academic year, six under the Kathern F. Gruber program umbrella for \$2,000 each and one \$1,000 scholarship in the name of Thomas H. Miller.

The Miller program, now in its tenth year, requires the same application process and qualifications as the Gruber awards except for an added emphasis on music and the fine arts. The scholarship committee will choose seven total recipients and two alternates.

The Gruber scholarship program is in its 39th year.

Dependent children, grandchildren, and spouses of blinded veterans, and those of active-duty blinded service members of the U.S. Armed Forces are eligible for the scholarships. The veteran must be legally blind, and the blindness may be either service connected or non-service connected. Membership in BVA by the blinded veteran is not required.

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

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

BVA directly to the educational institution.

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

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

Applications for the scholarships and additional information may be obtained from **BVA.org** or by request via email or telephone to Administrative Director Brigitte Jones, **bjones@bva.org**, 202-371-8880, Ext. 330.

To qualify for the 2022-23 academic year, applicants must send completed applications and supporting materials so that they arrive at BVA National Headquarters by **Friday, April 29, 2022**. Due to time constraints related to processing the applications for the Scholarship Committee's review, applications arriving after the deadline will not be accepted. Incomplete applications will not be submitted to the scholarship committee. It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure a complete application.

Bagpiper Dave Barrett Shares Unique Talent

BVA member, U.S. Coast Guard veteran, and law enforcement veteran Dave Barrett of Haymarket, Virginia, (Mid-Atlantic Regional Group) was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) in 2015. His grandfather had RP, so the diagnosis was not a total surprise to him. Even so, Dave has faced all of the same challenges as he adjusts to vision loss.

Dave continues to work at his federal government civilian day job with U.S. Customs and Border Protection in the field of veteran support. He spends what is left of his available hours raising money for BVA as he “busks” (plays music in the street or another public place for voluntary donations) in specially selected public locations in the Washington, DC metropolitan area with his bagpipes and Irish whistles.

Dave also participates in the weekly sessions of the current BVA Ambassador Training Program. If all that were not enough, Dave also gives private bagpipe and whistle lessons to gifted young student musicians in his local area, one of whom is a high school phenom who accompanied him and played at the recent Virginia Scottish games during Labor Day weekend.

“My sight gets darker as every day passes,” Dave muses on his YouTube channel Vision Piping, “but the trick, really, is to make sure your life doesn’t get darker.”

Dave invites YouTube viewers to share in his busking experiences on behalf of BVA as he gradually experiences additional sight loss. More than ten of his performances can currently be viewed on the channel.

On July 4 of this year, Dave released an album of music entitled “Starting To See—Tunes to Support our Blinded Veterans” to give away with a request for a donation. All proceeds, he has determined, go to BVA. The album includes bagpipes (solo and band), whistles, and song. It is available on CD and also via digital download.

To order a CD with a minimum donation of \$15, use Venmo @VISIONPIPING or <https://Paypal.me/visionpiping> and Dave will send out a CD once he also receives a name and an address in an email to visionpiping@gmail.com.

com or via Facebook Messenger. The album can be downloaded at <https://visionpiping.bandcamp.com/album/starting-to-see>.

Emerald Coast Veterans Revive Autumn Activities

Blinded veterans of the Emerald Coast Regional Group have reinitiated their traditional White Cane Day and Veterans Day



Left to right prior to downtown Pensacola Parade: Pensacola High School Junior ROTC Cadet Shivers, Paul Kaufman, Sighted Guide Euneek Goldsmith-Myrick, Darryl Goldsmith, Anthony Thompson and Pensacola High School Junior ROTC Cadet Moore.

activities after what seemed like a forever hiatus due to COVID-19.

Group members marched in two Veterans Day parades this year, one right after the other in Pensacola and then in Pensacola Beach. It was the first time the group was asked to join the second parade, thus adding a new tradition.

Emerald Coasters gathered at 8:00am in downtown Pensacola and again at 11:00 at the Elks Lodge. The Elks provided lunch and graciously made golf carts available for veterans who could not walk the parade route.

Highlighting the Pensacola parade for the regional group was the voluntary assistance

of Junior ROTC cadets from Pensacola High School, who carried the Emerald Coast banner as the veterans marched.

On White Cane Day, Director of District 5 Darryl Goldsmith, regional group president Anthony Thompson, and secretary Paul Kaufman set up an informational and giveaway table in an open field at an exposition sponsored and hosted by Independence for the Blind of West Florida outside its facility. The event also featured door prizes, a cookout, and an address by Pensacola Mayor Grover Robinson III.

“It was great to get together with other blind persons, both veterans and non-veterans, to learn new things,” said Paul Kaufman. “This was especially the case after nearly two years of this global pandemic that has seemed to squash all social interactions.”

Before the fall season officially took hold, however, Darryl added to the recent activities. He participated in the annual Soldiers on the Water deep-sea fishing tournament on September 19. The run was a success. He was accompanied by BVA Past National Chaplain Charles Brooks of the Florida Regional group. The tournament begins at Harbor Docks in Destin, Florida, and becomes a four-hour journey in the Gulf of Mexico.

Soldiers on the Water serves the local combat wounded with world-class fishing to express gratitude and build camaraderie through a shared passion for the outdoors, the Gulf waters, and the sport of fishing.

Columbus Chapter Unites for White Cane Activity

On October 16, the BVA Columbus Chapter of the Georgia Regional Group, together with two members of the National Federation of the Blind’s Fountain City Chapter, gathered in uptown Columbus to promote White Cane Day, sometimes called White Cane Safety Awareness Day.

Members were prepared to speak, give a brief demonstration on a device of their choice, and hand out information.

“Here we were once again returning to activity by sharing our knowledge of the White Cane as one of the most important tools in the blind or visually impaired person’s toolbox for enhancing the independence and quality of life of the individual,” said Chapter Historian Ricky Lynn.

Graves, Shabazz Efforts Invigorate NJRG

The New Jersey Regional Group, one of BVA’s strongest and largest groups going back to the national organization’s early years, appears to be back on the rise.

Thanks to the efforts of Bill Graves, president, and vice president Mustafaa Shabazz, the group is availing itself of opportunities for outreach and educational activities.

On November 5, Bill made a personal visit to BVA National Headquarters, where he obtained brochures and other promotional materials to display at a VA-sponsored Veterans Day Eve breakfast on November 10 at the East Orange VA Medical Center.

The following Wednesday, November 17, Bill and Mustafaa were given VIP treatment during a tour of Bestwork Industries for the Blind in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. President



Left to right, Mustafaa Shabazz, Jon Katz, and Bill Graves.

and CEO Jon Katz conducted the tour, taking the men to 25 workstations, most of which were managed and/or supervised by a blind employee.

“It was an impressive operation and we learned things on that tour that I knew nothing about before,” said Bill, “the most important of which is that private, not-for-profit organizations like Bestwork are more intent than ever before on hiring as many veterans as possible.”

Bestwork was founded in 1981 with the intent to provide employment opportunities to people who are blind or visually impaired. It began as a small contract workshop that has now evolved into a dynamic organization guided by the principles of lean manufacturing, technology and automation, and the quality management system. Training,

a supportive work environment, state-of-the-art equipment, and strategic partnerships are a high priority.

Bestwork’s core competencies include textile manufacturing, military apparel construction, paper converting, packing, warehouse and distribution, and commercial sewing.

Display Tables Highlight SCRG Outreach

The Southern California Regional Group took advantage of two recent opportunities to share information and reach blinded veterans.

The first of the two, held November 6, was a shared table with the Friendly Valley Veterans Club at the swap meet of the Friendly Valley Country Club. This year’s meet overlooked the golf course, pictured below. Friendly Valley is a 55+ retirement community located in Santa Clarita, California.



BVA promotional material overlooks the beautiful fairway on the first hole at the Friendly Valley Veterans Club in Newhall, California.

The second opportunity came on November 10 at the annual Veterans Day tribute hosted by the Santa Clarita Senior Center. Because the center was closed on November 11, the tribute was held the day prior. BVA's display was located on the reception desk in the main lobby along with the Santa Clarita Veterans Collaborative. Also on display were posters, including a BVA poster, lining the route taken by more than 500 vehicles picking up lunches, compliments of the Senior Center.

MARG Members Drawn to Fredericksburg 11-11 Events

Three members of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group (MARG) were active participants in Veterans Day events, including a walking procession and a subsequent ceremony, in the downtown area of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

The events, organized by the Fredericksburg Area Veterans Council (FAVC), sparked the interest of regional group president Michaun Harrison, herself a resident of Fredericksburg, and she invited members of her group to participate.

Hardy Alexander and Ralph King accepted the invitation and walked with Michaun six-tenths of a mile in the procession in near perfect weather carrying the BVA banner and adorned in their "Support BVA.org" performance shirts and BVA garrison caps. Hardy's brother Jerry Alexander (U.S. Army, Ret.) also walked in the procession as a sighted guide.

Ralph and Hardy laid the MARG BVA wreath at the Memorial site.

"This was a special time for Ralph," said Michaun. "He had not been out of the house or participated in any events in the last year after losing the remainder of his sight to glaucoma."



Michaun Harrison and Allison Hickey, President and CEO of All In Solutions, LLC, and VA's Under Secretary for Benefits from 2011 until 2015.

Michaun had previously participated in the BVA National Headquarters wreath laying at Arlington National Cemetery but had not been involved in her hometown event until this year.

"Many of our members live a great distance away from Fredericksburg so transportation was a major factor," said Michaun.

Hardy and Jerry live in Hampton, a 2½-hour drive from Fredericksburg, and Ralph lives in Stafford, still 20 minutes from Fredericksburg.

"They all came to my house, and we rode together from there with Jerry as our driver," she said. "Jerry was a blessing."

Anticipating the event and ordering the wreath was not without its stresses for Michaun, who had also contacted National Headquarters about wreaths in the Washington, DC, area.

"I was concerned for Hardy and Ralph since they have no sight and, other than Jerry, we did not have any trained sighted guides to

accompany us, and a fall or other injury would have been devastating,” she said. “I wanted to ensure that we represented MARG and BVA with dignity, decency, and professionalism.”

More than 300 people attended the ceremony with guest speaker Brig. Gen. Allison A. Hickey, USAF (Ret), former VA Undersecretary for Benefits and current President and CEO of All In Solutions, LLC, of Fredericksburg.

“A touching moment for me was when General Hickey referenced me and what I do for veterans—‘take a call, make a call, and jump into action’—in her speech,” Michaun said.

General Hickey had been directed to Michaun earlier by Lisa Gregory, past Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Chapter 7 commander and the current National Adjutant.

Lunch was provided at the Fredericksburg lodge of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

“At the end of a long day physically, mentally, and emotionally, I was so proud to have the opportunity to represent blinded veterans, BVA, the Women Veterans Group, and DAV in a positive light,” said Michaun. “I am sure this was the start of something new and am grateful and blessed to have the will, support, and BVA family that believes in me and cares enough about the organization to see this event through.”

As if all those activities were still not enough for one day, Michaun finally ended the day by completing the last leg of the DAV 5K on her recumbent tandem bike. She sent in a photo of herself on the bike with Warrior Pond in the background. The photo took first place for “Most Patriotic,” resulting in a certificate, a gift card, a scarf, and a performance shirt.

“Don’t Focus on Why Me” Details Recovery, Resilience

In the spring of 2017, Durham, North Carolina, native Kijuan Amey had everything going for him. At 25, the future looked promising. He had already served several years as an inflight Refueling Specialist in the U.S. Air Force and had advanced to the rank of Staff Sergeant (E-5). He had just one year left in a Bachelor’s Degree program at DeVry University in Computer Information Systems.

On an otherwise beautiful May 5 evening, Kijuan was heading home on his motorcycle to pack his bags for a weekend trip after some contemplative moments at his favorite lake. Suddenly, a Honda Accord pulled directly in front of him with no space for a safe stop.

Kijuan’s journey the past four-and-a-half years is one filled with adventure and courage. **The Bulletin** will relate his story in greater detail in a future issue but, until that time, his bestselling autobiography **Don’t Focus on Why Me** is an inspirational read. The book is available via Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

SETX Honors Fellow Veterans

The Southeast Texas (SETX) Chapter of the Greater Houston Regional Group celebrated Veterans Day and the end-of-the-year holidays together this year with a festive luncheon on November 11 at Pappadiaux’s Seafood Kitchen in Beaumont.

Ten SETX members, two Greater Houston members outside the chapter, four veteran guests, and 14 spouses or companions attended.

“The atmosphere was geared to Veterans Day, being that we held it on the very holiday, but we added the other holiday spirit by distributing gift bags to the veteran attendees,” said chapter secretary/treasurer Jerry Killion.

SETX decided to combine the two activities for reasons involving both cost and travel convenience for the membership. The arrangement worked so well that it may happen again the same way next year.

"We plan to make this an annual event and preparations are already underway to make November 11, 2022 even better," said chapter president John Lee. "March 28, Blinded Veterans Day, is the next big event in the forefront for the chapter."

John also treated the guests to a Veterans Day tribute, which included background on BVA's beginnings. There were also remarks from Past National President Tom Zampieri.

Jerry said the event was a welcome one for chapter members after so long without physical interaction.

"The mood was upbeat, the camaraderie was great, and we received many expressions of thanks for organizing this," he added. "We needed it."

MARG, Richmond Chapter Lose Amazing WWII Stalwart

World War II veteran James Jackson, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group (MARG) together with his son Clyde for 18 years, passed away November 6. James celebrated his 98th birthday this past August 7.

"Mr. James was a gem," said regional group president Michauen Harrison, recognizing the void that now remains within both the Richmond Chapter and MARG.

Michauen's comment is supported by a quote in a feature story for **The Bulletin** composed by Clyde almost exactly one year ago.

"When the time came for James to join BVA as a legally blind veteran, he was happy

to do so. For now, James continues to bring both good humor and joy not only to his chapter and regional group but also to his family and all who know him."

Longtime regional group leader Herb Patterson represented the group in expressing the sadness its members feel.

"James was a strong supporter of the Richmond Chapter, attending almost all the regional group meetings and arriving at the medical center for most of our events," said Herb. "I called him Pop, and Pop will be missed."

BVA of Tennessee Hosts Impressive Fall Activities

Members of the Tennessee Regional Group celebrated the opportunity to meet and work together in person with three autumn activities in the outdoors.

On October 9, the group hosted a service project at its meeting place at the Memphis Athletic Ministries Park Golf Course to rake leaves, clear a walking path for the public, and pick up trash along the fence. The group publicized the event and received community support.

"We were astounded and very thankful by the number of people who came out to help us," said regional group president Terry Richardson.

A second event occurred October 15 in the same location in honor of White Cane Day. The occasion was a photo opportunity in which regional group members brought their white canes, their U.S. flags, and their military flags to wave in the air. Due to the rainy and windy weather, the waving was somewhat limited.

On November 11, several community members again joined together with BVA

members, this time to assist them with an old-fashioned game of corn hole.

“We showed them our version of how Veterans Day should be properly celebrated, in this case with the corn hole,” Terry said. “Our members were filled with pride that day in having their bravery and service acknowledged, and in being able to share their feelings with the community.”

Feldman BVAA Funds Support Students

The Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary (BVAA) will award two \$2,000 Renee Feldman scholarships and one \$1,000 scholarship for the 2022-23 academic year. The annual scholarships are open to the spouses or children of blinded veterans.

Membership in BVA by the blinded veteran is not required.

To be eligible for a Feldman scholarship, applicants must have been accepted at the school of their choice. The institution in question may be a vocational school, community college, four-year college, or university.

The fees for the awards in all cases are paid directly to the school and are intended to defray the cost of tuition, books, and general fees.

The application process for the scholarships includes supplying information about previous academic achievement, a statement of present goals and plans, a 300-word essay, and letters of reference. Completed application packets must be received no later than January 31, 2022.

For details and to request an application, visit <https://www.nbvaa.org/educational-benefits-for-veterans.html>, or contact

Scholarship Chair Sherry Nelson at 479-414-2996, or billcounter3338@aol.com.

First-Day Issue Stamps from 1981 Discovered, Passed on to BVA

BVA members whose original membership predates 1981 may recall that the United States Postal Service (USPS) issued a special commemorative stamped envelope (Size #6) to recognize and honor blinded veterans that year.

Richard “Smitty” Smith, a friend and colleague of now deceased BVA member John Fales who was instrumental in BVA’s inclusion in the first-day cover series, mailed them to BVA National Headquarters.

The envelope contains a Braille overprint for the first time in U.S. postal history. The overprint is located in the top right corner of the envelope. Three envelope styles are also overprinted with a special cachet, or printed design, and the fourth is a philatelic numismatic cover with an elongated commemorative penny. Above the Braille are the words: “Remember the Blinded Veteran.” The price of the envelopes was 18 cents, the same price as a first-class stamp in 1981.

USPS gifted hundreds of souvenir envelopes to BVA with the first-day cancellation of August 13, 1981. Fales still had a large personal collection of the envelopes when he passed away three years ago. Thanks to Smitty, BVA now has approximately 70 of each of the envelopes designed with the special cachets. The cover with the penny is the only one missing.

Please contact Stuart Nelson at National Headquarters to receive a free copy of one or all of the three souvenir envelopes.

Bulletin Editor the Beneficiary of Museum Visit with MARG President by Stuart Nelson

As editor of **The Bulletin**, I prefer not to write in first person with anything I may write. The focus should be on our BVA members, what they are doing, and their views on issues and events. Occasionally, there is an exception. In this case I became, if only slightly, a part of the story and not the reporter exclusively.

As I receive notices about upcoming, in-person regional group meetings or support group meetings, I often wish I could attend one here and there. Ironically, there are not many members of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group in the Washington, DC, area. Hence, the group meetings have typically taken place over the years in Virginia cities such as Hampton, Fredericksburg, and Richmond, all more than an hour from home and the National Headquarters.

On September 22, members of the MARG received a message from president Michauan Harrison. She told the group that she had spoken with Ariel Waldman, coordinator for the At Ease Accessibility Program of the National Museum of the United States Army located adjacent to Fort Belvoir here in Northern Virginia. Visits to the Museum, dedicated during the pandemic, have been largely restricted to school groups.

Michauan sent me a copy of the message, which outlined a special Saturday, October 9, 7:30am tour of the museum, and asked me if I'd like to accompany the group. I jumped at the opportunity for some photo opportunities of the regional group at a location less than 25 minutes from my home, especially when the date was so close to White Cane Day. For Michauan, the distance was closer to a full hour on a Saturday morning, but she told me

she would still be bringing the regional group banner with her.

"I will have to UBER all the way from Fredericksburg," Michauan told the group. "But I think this is a great way to advertise BVA and celebrate White Cane Day."

Driving into the museum at 7:20 and a little confused by the Fort Belvoir security, I saw Michauan at an entry point to the road up to the museum. It was not the way we had planned to meet, but a call to Ms. Waldman confirmed the final three-minute route.

Learning from Michauan that other members of the regional group were not able to attend, I accompanied her through security and we checked in for what was to be one of the most fulfilling museum visits I have experienced. The tour consisted of three knowledgeable guides and the two of us. The depictions, sound effects, and detailed explanations were truly astounding.

At the end of our 90-minute tour, we were approached by the Museum's Public Affairs Officer, one of the persons largely responsible for the accessibility program and the Museum's outreach to the disability community. She said her dad used to work for BVA! This, of course, led us to ask out her name and the name of her father. It was Susan Smullen-Fazakerley, daughter of Major General Richard G. Fazakerley, an employee of BVA's Field Service Program in the late 1980s and the organization's 30th National President from 1995 until 1997. Of course, I had once been told of Susan's role at the Museum, but it had all been forgotten.

A huge expression of gratitude to Michauan for arranging my unforgettable, personalized tour of the National Museum of the U.S. Army! And, to other members of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, a future visit to the Museum is an absolute must!



Auxiliary's View

by Patricia Hail

Seeking a BVA World in Confluence

Each of us should remember our responsibility as a

BVA or BVAA member and participant – to respect others (Blinded Veterans “Helping” Blinded Veterans) and to be accountable for our own actions, words, and associates. Our rights cease when we infringe on the rights of others. Most of us prefer our “Worlds in Confluence” – where we can all, as BVA and BVAA members, equally possess the freedoms encompassed in Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness without fear.

Returning to the final paragraph of my previous **Auxiliary's View** in the summer issue of **The Bulletin**, several points continue to remain important to me.

First, the references to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. The Declaration states the purposes for beginning our new country, including the freedoms we enjoy as individuals and our right to possess them. The Constitution sets out the plans for governing our country, including a system of checks and balances, States’ rights, and the first ten amendments referred to as the Bill of Rights which spell out some of our individual rights. Later amendments have clarified the original Constitution to satisfy evolving societal norms, equality, and rights. These, and other documents, form the foundation of our country.

A subsequent point of importance is that our rights cease when we infringe on the

rights of others. What does that mean? It means that if we wish to keep our rights, we have the responsibility to respect the rights of others, whose rights are equal to ours. That is why we have laws—to punish those who infringe, as in case of a thief who steals from another individual.

Blinded veterans are part of a larger group of blind persons who regard their right to dignity as one of the most valued liberties they possess. Being dishonest or disrespectful to those who are blind strips their dignity away, just as a thief commits a burglary to take away material possessions. This is why our laws hold that it is illegal to take another’s life, liberty (dignity and property), and pursuit of happiness.

There are many low-vision and blind persons within BVA. The less sight one has, the more important or valuable is the individual’s dignity. BVA members should be preserving the Right to Dignity of blind and visually impaired individuals everywhere.

Next is to be accountable for our own actions, words, and associates. We must choose our associates carefully. Do we all honor others’ freedoms and rights? Do we also tell the truth and follow up appropriately with words and actions? It is our responsibility to be accountable in all we say and do, first for ourselves and then as an organization.

Lastly (you will note the word finally was not used; much more could be said on this subject), the word and concept of respect. Synonyms for respect include account (as



in accountability), admiration (often for the office or positive accomplishments, even if not the individual), appreciation, consideration, esteem, estimation, favor, regard, etc. But, prior to cultivating these virtues toward others, we must respect ourselves, love ourselves, be confident, and learn to communicate appropriately. We must not say anything about someone that we would not say to their face. We must treat others as we would have them treat us by being kind, honest, and trustworthy. Yes, we all make mistakes, but having respect by doing what is right with responsibility and accountability can mend a lot of “oopsies.”

Remember that the character of an individual is determined by what that individual does, especially when they believe no one is looking.

Remember the BVA motto: Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans. That means respecting, assisting, communicating, honoring others' rights, etc.

Let us, as blinded veterans and supporters, each choose to first help each other, our fellow blinded veterans. We are strongest when we act of one accord following all the guidelines, bylaws, and constitutions that have come before us with the strength of wisdom and respect for one another and the good of all.

Out of Darkness, Light Emerges

by Paschal Baute

How my Blindness, with VA response, Is the Best Thing That Happened To Me during the Past Ten Years

I could never have imagined what blessings a severe handicap could bring. My blindness was gradual until, in 2010, it was pronounced “legal.”

I discovered a year later that I qualified for VA residential blind rehabilitation training. So, I arrived at what is now known as the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at Hines in 2012 for my first of four training sessions. After a month of training on the computer, enabled by much empathy and professionalism, I was sent home with a new computer, a larger screen monitor, and a printer.

I was overwhelmed with gratitude as all of it was packed up in front of me.

I came home to Lexington, Kentucky, where my ever-loving wife had set up a corner in the dining room so I would not need to go up and down the stairs to where my own computer desk had been. I now had newly acquired word processing skills and equipment to go along with the writing and journaling skills I had used in submissions to popular and professional publications throughout my life.

What else was I to do now but write about this awesome life I had had?

That life began with a troubled childhood consisting of problems with authority and running away from home three times by age 12. Then there were five car accidents, setbacks brought on by my own stupidity, boxing championships and other sports competition, and enlistment in the U.S. Army at the start of the Cold War.

My Army career began on Guam as an athletic director in Special Services. Distance running had been my therapy since age 15 when my parents' marriage became conflicted and I could hear everything with my bedroom next to theirs. Beginning with daily meditation on Guam, I was pursued by the Hound of Heaven to follow Christ completely until I surrendered to a life of poverty, obedience, and chastity in a Benedictine monastery that conducted a college prep school.

Yes, as I faced my life after Hines, I also looked back at a life filled with risk taking, a life filled with pushing the envelope in terms of actions I could get away with, a life of serendipity, and a life of amazing grace.

Again, what else was I to do but write, and with my own life as the frame of reference for such writing?

At about that time, I heard of a famous writer who began his writing day at 4:00am and wrote until noon. Trained as a monk for 16 years, I thought: "I can do that!" So, for 20 months I did that, enabling my first book since Hines: a 30-chapter memoir for my veteran community with a lesson in resilience in each chapter.

Since I have always been a passionate dream catcher, writing for my veteran community soon became my passion and my ministry. Self-publishing has been my venue and, while it places all the formatting

burden on the author, it is much more efficient than dealing with an agent and a publisher. Therefore, I have learned to format both print and eBook versions.

I do not know how many books I have at Amazon, Apple, or Barnes and Noble. I do not keep count. Each is another special flower offered to the universe. It is my positive addiction and I have some favorites, in this order: **Resilience of a Dream Catcher, Blind Veterans Coping with Loss, Celtic Grace—Thin Places, Living with Gratitude, Secrets of Intimacy, Laughing at My Perfectionism, and The Art of Dealing Positively with Negative Feelings.**

When people ask how I am able to write some 30 books, I reply that it is a secret tied to grace and my guardian angel. However, it is my blindness and Hines which have blessed me. I live daily with "awesome," which is now the title of my next book since I have been inspired by the awesome journeys of so many friends and veterans.

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow." In addition, I could do none of this without the loving support of my wife of some 53 years.

Who can guess what happens when a setback is gracefully embraced? There might be an angel or angels of many kinds involved. One small piece of my childhood Catholic faith that I have preserved is a belief in angels and guardian angels, as the above narrative suggests.

"Oh, Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here. Ever this day be at my side, to light, to guard, to rule, and to guide."

Education, Entertainment Through Victor Reader Stream

by Mike Taylor, Florida Regional Group

While moving through my favorites on the “Internet Radio” tool bar of my Victor Reader Stream (VRS), a press conference broadcast on C-SPAN caught my attention. General Richard Clark, Commander of Special Operations, was answering questions. General Clark’s answer to a reporter’s question, “What do you listen to when working out?” was two podcasts: “What It Takes,” from the Academy of Achievement, and “Softcat” from The U.S. Special Operations Command.

Since signing up for these podcasts, I have become a regular listener. Additionally, I learned of a third podcast, “World News with BK.” BK shares his opinions of the news he reads but be forewarned that his language can get salty.

You can bounce around on the VRS as programing or your mood changes. By adding “Favorites,” it is easy to go to and from different sports, news, or other types of broadcasting. During a broadcast of the “Grand Ole Opry,” I bounced back and forth between a book and the show. In many ways, it puts users of the VRS on par with operators of television remotes.

My main purpose is to point out the many sources of information and entertainment available on these easy to learn and use devices. Once you get started, it becomes obvious why many blinded veterans keep them in almost constant use.

The Reference’s Bookshelf allows you to look up items on Wikipedia or Wicktionary. Some of these articles can get lengthy. It is possible to save the article on the Reference

Bookshelf, or move it to store on the SD Card. The National Library Service (NLS) Bard Bookshelf allows books downloaded from Bard to be read or transferred to the SD Card. Other materials such as magazines, music, musical instruction, and lectures are also available. New materials are constantly being added from NLS, State Libraries, and now other countries.

The Podcast Bookshelf offers newly released items to be added when the VRS has an internet connection. The default is for three issues of a podcast to be downloaded. Once an issue of one podcast has been deleted, or moved, new ones can be added. If you sign up for many podcasts, it can keep you busy while getting informed and being entertained.

It is possible to add bookshelves for “Newsline,” “BookShare,” and other sources of information. However, the VRS has limits. For example, it does not have an internet browser.

There are services accessible with smart devices that are beyond the capability of the VRS. Many blinded veterans choose the simplicity of operating the VRS for listening to books and other programs.

Additionally, the VRS is a digital recorder. Pressing the record button on the right side of the VRS enables us to record notes or internet radio programs. The quality of the recordings with the built-in microphone is quite good. In the 2021 era of still rapidly advancing technology, I continue to find great satisfaction and enjoyment from the marvels of the Victor Reader Stream.



Veterans Service Program Update

by James R. Vale

The VA Auto Grant

It is well known in the veteran community that veterans can receive compensation for their service-connected

injuries. Many veterans and their families, however, may not be aware that VA provides a one-time \$22,355 grant for the purchase of an automobile.

This assistance is known as the VA Automobile Grant and is available for veterans and service members with qualifying disabilities. VA funds approximately 2,000 auto grants annually. The Department also provides grants for adaptive equipment to modify a vehicle for a disability.

In essence, to qualify due to blindness or vision loss the applicant must be at least legally blind and be service connected for the blindness. Per 38 C.F.R. § 3.808, the veteran or service member must have one of the following conditions: 1) loss, or permanent loss of use, of one or both feet, 2) loss, or permanent loss of use, of one or both hands; 3) permanent decreased vision in both eyes: 20/200 vision or less in the better eye with glasses, or greater than 20/200 vision but with a visual field defect that has reduced peripheral vision to 20 degrees or less in the better eye, 4) a severe burn injury, 5) Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), or 6) Ankylosis in one or both knees or hips. In this latter case the qualification is for an adaptive equipment grant only.

Until self-driving, fully autonomous vehicles are perfected, why would a blinded

veteran who cannot drive need an auto grant? If ever asked this question, an appropriate response may be: "Why do drive-through ATMs have Braille?"

All jokes aside, although a blinded veteran cannot drive, there may be a spouse or other family member who can drive for the blinded veteran. Not everyone lives in an area with accessible public transit or paratransit. Ride share services like Uber and Lyft are convenient but can also be prohibitively expensive. Getting to VA medical appointments can be a challenge as there are limits to VA-provided transportation. If there is a driver, having an automobile makes getting to and from employment or health care for the blinded veteran easier, safer, and more convenient, especially during this unprecedented pandemic era.

How does a veteran apply for the VA auto grant? Patience and attention to detail are necessary as the grant process is a multi-step one.

In Step 1, Sections I and II on VA Form 21-4502, "Application for Automobile or Other Conveyance and Adaptive Equipment" (under 38 U.S.C. 3901-3904, July 2021 version) are completed and Box 16 is signed by the veteran. Service officers holding Power of Attorney (POA) cannot sign for the veteran on this form. The form must then be submitted to the Veterans Benefits Administration for processing.

In Step 2, the auto grant is treated as a claim and can take up to 125 days to be adjudicated by a VA Regional Office (VARO) Veteran Service Center (VSC). The

adjudication will produce a rating decision. The claim can then be processed by any one of VA's 56 VAROs, which will verify the veteran's eligibility and certify in Section III that the veteran has never used the grant. The VARO will then mail the form back to the veteran.

Step 3 entails the veteran taking the VARO/VSC-certified 21-4502 form to a vehicle seller, such as a car dealer, and negotiating a purchase. The seller completes Section IV and the veteran signs box 33A in this section. The seller or the veteran mails or faxes Form 21-4502 and the sales contract to the veteran's Regional Office of Jurisdiction (ROJ), which should be identified in the VA notification letter that was sent with the VARO/VSC-certified 21-4502.

Step 4 is the approval or denial by the ROJ's Finance Division (not the VSC), which will search VA's finance records and databases to see if the auto grant has ever been paid to the veteran. If no prior grant payment is found, the ROJ Finance Division will authorize the grant payment.

Step 5 occurs when the check is mailed from the VA Finance Center in Austin, Texas to the seller, not the veteran.

The five-step process can be a long one with several potential pitfalls and pain points. Sometimes the VARO will deny the claim if it sees in the claims file a prior rating decision granting eligibility to the auto grant. However, simply being found eligible on a prior VA rating decision is not the same thing as VA cutting the check. In this situation it will most likely be necessary to file an appeal.

It is important to know that VA will pay only the cash due in the sales contract—up to the full amount of the VA auto grant amount. If the cash due is less than the grant amount,

VA will pay the cash due with the veteran forfeiting the difference. It is crucial that the cash due amount be equal to or greater than the full grant amount to avoid any forfeiture of grant funds. The grant amount is updated annually with a Cost-of-Living Adjustment applied on October 1 (the first day of the new federal fiscal year). Last year the grant was \$21,488. This year it was increased to \$22,355.

One might ask which grant amount is used for an application submitted before October 1 and awarded after that date. The answer is the grant amount in place at the time the ROJ Finance Office authorizes the grant check. To see the current grant amount, visit <https://www.va.gov/disability/compensation-rates/special-benefit-allowance-rates/>.

In these crazy times of supply chain shortages affecting the availability of vehicles at auto dealers, it is best to apply for the auto grant well in advance of any vehicle purchase. Doing so will shave off the 125-day wait for a rating decision and a VARO-certified 21-4502.

To avoid pitfalls, it is best to work with a BVA National Service Officer (NSO) to ensure that the most current version of the 21-4502 is filled out completely and correctly. The NSO can also monitor the progress of the claim and, if needed, intervene with the VARO and ROJ when the claim goes off track. For cases involving severe hardship, the NSO can assist with expediting the claim.

Blinded veterans and/or family members with questions about the auto grant should contact the BVA Veterans Service Program.

New Director of Development Addresses BVA Constituency

by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself as the newly appointed Director of Development with the Blinded Veterans Association. I bring with me more than 20 years of development experience working with many nonprofit organizations to increase awareness and raise revenue through cause marketing and relationship building. I am honored to be part of the BVA family.

I look forward to meeting in person as many of our members as possible at the BVA 77th National Convention in our Nation's Capital next August. I am equally excited to witness the reunions among all of you at that gathering. With the worldwide pandemic that has so tried our patience and resilience, the opportunity to reunite has been far too long in the making. We are all hopeful and optimistic that 2022 will bring us back together in a wonderful city and at a great venue.

Notwithstanding the frustrations of the past two years for all of us, I have also observed during my brief tenure that BVA communication channels allow for enjoyable telephone conversations and virtual meetings. I hope that perhaps our paths will cross before next August and that I will already be acquainted with you when we meet in Washington.

It is that time of year when we gather around the table with our families and friends to pause and reflect on the things for which we are most thankful. The holiday season has always been my favorite time of year. I love the decorations and of course the food, but

more importantly I look for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others around me. This year, I am truly thankful for the privilege to work with BVA friends and donors who are committed to empowering blinded veterans.

The holiday season also finds us in a position to honor the past and look towards the future. It allows us to not only be thankful for our blessings, but to set goals for the future while empowering others to do the same. I can't help but feel inspired by Navy Veteran and BVA member Paul Mimms' quote in our holiday fundraising appeal:

"My mission became one of appreciating and respecting the gifts that I already possessed—to look beyond blindness unless it could be used as an opportunity to help someone else, and to focus on the blessings and gifts I have to empower others just as I have been empowered in my own life."

I take these words of inspiration to heart as I embark on my new journey with BVA. My goals are simple but hopefully impactful—to make a difference in the lives of our blinded veterans by building meaningful relationships and increasing awareness and revenue for the organization. I hope to use my knowledge and professional experience to help guide our veterans throughout the year and into a brighter future.

Happy Holidays to you and yours and blessings for a healthy and fruitful new year.



Chaplain's Corner

by Dr. Ron Lester

I was meditating this morning and thinking about the best Thanksgiving I ever had as a child.

In 1957, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving Day, several of my uncles, aunts, and all the cousins came over. All the men and boys went hunting for squirrels as that year we had the best pecan crop ever and the squirrels knew it. There were more than 300 pecan trees, and they were just full of squirrels.

It just so happened that 1957 was the year I got my first gun: a single shot 22-caliber rifle, and I could not hit anything no matter how hard I tried. My dad and the uncles killed 29 squirrels that morning, and that afternoon we cleaned those squirrels right up.

The next morning was Thanksgiving Day and all the aunts were cooking up all those squirrels! That was the only Thanksgiving Day I can remember as a child, and for good reason: there were three platters piled high with squirrel meat. Some of the kids would not eat the meat until they were told that it was chicken. Dad offered one of the best prayers of thanksgiving because that year we'd had so much flooding that we lost all of the crops except the pecan trees.

I look back now and cry because of the pain Mom and Dad went through that year. They were expecting such great things to come from the crops, and it was devastating for those plans to be wiped out from all the flooding in Oklahoma.

I know many of us have had great plans literally swept away as if by a flood these last

two years. It can truly be difficult to pick up and go on.

Even with the devastation that can come with farm life and life in general, there are so many things for which I am thankful—from my childhood and beyond. Being able to play outside all day long, playing baseball, riding bikes with my friends—those things are all joyful memories. Then, as an adult, joining the military and returning from the war, raising a family, seeing grandkids come along... I know I am truly grateful.

Sometimes, looking back on life, it is hard to believe that we have made it this far. I believe it is because of our faith in God and the Words from the Bible.

In the Old Testament there are many verses about being thankful and giving thanks to God despite our circumstances! Psalm 107, Verse 1 in the New International Version reads: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." The rest of the 107th Psalm goes on to talk about the many hardships God's people have faced: experiences entailing being hungry and thirsty, being in great trouble and distress, or being cast into prison, enduring great storms, or even drawing near to death itself! Yet, the writer of this Psalm decides to start by giving thanks.

So, if you have had a hard time this year, think back and see if there were some good times in your life for which you can be sincerely and earnestly grateful. Give God thanks for those memories. Smile when



thinking about them and be grateful for the freedom that has brought them. Oftentimes we end up in a better place than we might have expected and much of that can be from being positive and thankful as we go. Even as we go through hard times, we should still be thanking God for always being faithful and never leaving us throughout our lives.

As we think about the season of giving during these upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, it is a great time for you and me to give to another. It will make us feel so much better to selflessly give what we can.

If you really believe that you have nothing to give, think about an old friend or two and give them a call. I know many of us have lost many friends over the years and it can be comforting to just think of the good times.

My challenge to you in these next months is to smile a little more, find a kind word to speak to people, and give out a little more. You will find that you will be blessed as they return to you the same. From Joyce Meyer: "You cannot have a positive life and a negative mind."

May God's blessing be upon you.

Of Note

Robotic Cane with 3D Camera To Facilitate Indoor Navigation

A recent study co-funded by the National Institutes of Health's National Eye Institute (NEI) and the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIBIB) has resulted in the development of a robotic cane equipped with a color 3D camera, an inertial measurement sensor, and its own on-board computer.

News about the technology was announced in a release prepared and distributed by NEI on September 8. Details of the updated design were published in the **IEEE/CAA Journal of Automática Sinica**.

The device could offer blind and visually impaired users a way to more safely and effectively navigate indoors. When paired with a building's architectural drawing, the cane can accurately guide a user to a desired location with sensory and auditory cues, in the process helping the user avoid obstacles

like boxes, cords or cables, furniture, and overhangs.

Blinded veterans who use GPS devices outdoors are aware of the applications that can provide navigation assistance with potential obstacles such as crosswalks. Until now, however, large spaces inside buildings have been a major challenge. Incorporating building floorplans helped until long distances resulted in the build-up of inaccuracies in the user's location.

To help correct this issue, researchers added a color depth camera to the system. Using infrared light, much like a mobile phone's front-facing camera, the system can determine the distance between the cane and other physical objects, including the floor, features like doorways and walls, and furniture. Using this information, along with data from an inertial sensor, the cane's onboard computer can map the user's precise location to the existing architectural drawing or floorplan,

while also alerting the user to obstacles in their path.

While not yet market ready due to its larger than normal size and heavier than usual weight, look forward to the introduction of a more modern white cane in the not too distant future.

Max Cleland Was True BVA Friend and Advocate

Disabled Vietnam War veteran Joseph Maxwell “Max” Cleland, a former VA Administrator and one-term U.S. Senator from Georgia during 1997-2003, died at his home in Atlanta from congestive heart failure on November 9. He was 79.

Cleland also served as Georgia Secretary of State from 1983 until 1996 and as a Georgia state senator from 1971 to 1975.

Cleland was an Army captain in Vietnam on April 3, 1968, when he lost both legs and an arm in a grenade explosion near Khe Sanh. Before Vietnam, Cleland had been an accomplished college swimmer and basketball player standing at 6-foot-2 and beginning to develop an interest in politics, which he successfully pursued at age 28, just three years after his injuries.

Cleland had already earned a Bachelor’s Degree from Stetson University and a Master’s Degree from Emory University before entering the Army as a Communications Officer and later qualifying as a paratrooper. He volunteered for duty in Vietnam.

“Max Cleland was one of the most remarkable persons I have ever met in my life,” former Georgia Governor Roy Barnes is quoted following his passing. “I will miss his laughter and good cheer, his optimism in the face of tragedy, and his courage to persevere.”

Some 12 years before VA became a department and the top position a Secretary,



Standing at left, BVA National President Ron Miller with Max Cleland in November 1978.

Cleland was nominated at age 34 as the Administrator of Veterans Affairs by President Jimmy Carter. He was the youngest person and first Vietnam veteran to be nominated for the post. He won quick and unanimous approval by the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and was confirmed by the full Senate minutes later.

As the VA Administrator during Dr. Ronald L. Miller’s terms as BVA National President and later as a member of the Senate VA Committee, Cleland was a strong advocate for both BVA’s legislative priorities and VA services for blinded veterans, hosting BVA’s legislative committee in meetings on Capitol Hill and co-sponsoring legislation.

Following an unsuccessful run for a second term in the Senate, Cleland was appointed

Secretary of the American Battle Monuments Commission by President Barack Obama, where he served for eight years throughout Obama's two terms as President. He retired permanently in early 2017.

VA Releases New Strategy to Secure Veteran Information

A newly published cybersecurity strategy aimed at protecting against exposure of veterans' personal information or the corruption of critical data was released by VA on November 4.

The strategy outlines five goals focused on maintaining a robust and resilient technology environment that advances VA's mission, including:

- Securing and protecting VA and veteran information.
- Protecting information systems and assets.
- Leveraging innovation to strengthen cybersecurity.
- Enhancing cybersecurity through partnerships and information sharing.
- Empowering the VA mission through cybersecurity risk management.

"As we continue to rapidly advance technology across VA, this strategy provides an agile framework to address the challenges of today and adapt to the technologies and threats of tomorrow," said Secretary McDonough. "This comprehensive approach practices accountability and transparency while remaining hypervigilant of cyberthreats—charting a course for success at the individual and enterprise levels."

Scholar Says Disability Drives Innovation for All

Catherine Kudlick, Director of the Longmore Institute on Disability at San Francisco State University, has concluded

that technologies developed by or for people with disabilities have inevitably improved the quality of life for everyone and continue to do so.

In an October 14 **New York Times** "On Tech" report by Shira Ovide, Dr. Kudlick begins with the example of audiobooks, first developed primarily for the blind but which found their way to popularity after World War II in the form of cassette tapes, compact disks, and now smartphone apps that make listening to books more convenient than reading them.

Ovide references Robert Irwin, former Executive Director of the American Foundation for the Blind, for spearheading a program in the 1930s to develop gramophone records of narrators reading books out loud. Back then, only 10-20 percent of Americans who were blind, including blinded veterans from World War I, could read Braille. The U.S. government helped fund record players for the blind and low vision and Talking Books on records were soon distributed through public libraries.

Hearing aids have a similar evolution, having been one of the earliest commercial proving grounds for the computer chips that are now in everything from fighter jets to an average refrigerator. Likewise, curb cuts in sidewalks were developed for people who use wheelchairs but proved useful for many other people.

This history, Ovide says, flips the script on how the average person imagines product design. While smartphones were a technology designed for the general population and then, by adaptation or accident, also became useful for people with disabilities, other technologies that are widely used today exist because of people with disabilities.

Silicon Valley inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil developed multiple technologies,

including Optical Character Recognition (OCR) used in the K-NFB readers publicized at BVA national conventions a decade ago and which became forerunners to Siri. Screen readers are also descendants of Kurzweil's design that scan digital text and speak it aloud or convert it into Braille, a technology that has made both Talking Books and audiobooks a little less popular among the blind and visually impaired.

Ovide concludes that it feels only appropriate that one technology initially designed for blind people has been at least partially crowded out by another that has even greater use, productivity, and enjoyment for them.

COLA Increase Is Largest in Decades

The annual Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) will increase by 5.9 percent on January 1, the largest increase since 1983 and an adjustment that has averaged approximately 1.5 percent for the last ten years.

The increase means that many retired and disabled veterans will receive a bump in pay between \$10 and \$90 per month. Specifically, disabled veterans will see their checks raised by an average of \$8.50 per month for each 10 percent of disability. VA is required by law to

alter disability payment rates by that amount.

The adjustment is a response to an expected rise in the rate of inflation, which is determined by the Consumer Price Index, published by the Department of Labor to compare the costs of certain goods and services today with the same goods and services of previous years.

Proposed Settlement Reached in Eyebobs Class Action Lawsuit

Parties to a lawsuit involving eyewear online store Eyebobs, LLC have reached a settlement, a notice dated and sent to BVA on October 28 revealed.

Murphy v. Eyebobs, LLC, No1:21-cv-00017, alleged that Eyebobs violated the American Disabilities Act by failing to take the necessary steps to ensure that its online store did not discriminate against blind or visually impaired consumers who use screen reader auxiliary aids to access digital content.

Under the settlement, Eyebobs, LLC agreed to take additional steps to make its website and any new website or mobile application it develops or acquires accessible to screen reader users.

For a more complete summary of the terms of the proposed settlement, visit <https://www.eyebobsADAsettlement.com>.

Additional Accessibility Options for Reading The Bulletin

Readers of the print version of this issue of **The Bulletin** may have noticed the absence of Voiceye codes in the top right-hand corner of each page, a feature that has been a part of each issue since Spring 2014.

With fast-changing technology, BVA is researching better options for a PDF read aloud app and other mobile accessibility choices. Recommendations will be forthcoming in future **Bulletin** issues. Please share with us any that work effectively for you. In the meantime, the QR code at right will take readers directly to **The Bulletin** page on the BVA website, where current and past issues are accessible in PDF, Word, and audio format.





A Tribute to Veterans And Veterans Day

by Warner Murray

These words are written to recognize you, The Veterans.

A Veteran for Life

America the beautiful, land of the free
I served my country, now I can't see
I heed the call, when nation in need
Defend America, our armed forces' creed
I took the oath, with honor and pride
Many other soldiers, served and died
The contract was made, we knew the price
Freedom and democracy, we give our life
The American soldier, and all veterans too
We served well, under red, white and blue

Veterans Day

On this Veterans Day,
I make this pledge.

To salute all Veterans,
Who've served and died.
Show them my respect,
With honor and pride.

I thank the Veterans,
For their service and deed,
In protecting America,
No fortune or greed.

I recognized your journey,
The challenges you bear.
From Veteran to Veteran.
Nothing less than fair.

To help disabled Veterans,
Is housing and healthcare.
Not temp support systems,
Like shelter and welfare.

Give Veterans their promise,
The silver and gold.
Not metals and words,
Raise their spirit and soul.

They paid their dues,
In blood, sweat and tears.
Let's uplift the Veterans,
For their remaining years.

These are the tangibles,
All Americans can do.
Stand for democracy,
Under red, white, and blue.

In Remembrance

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

Alabama R.G.

D. Michael Lewis

Cape Cod and the Islands R.G.

Jack Crowley

Florida R.G.

William James

Robert Sprague

Gem State R.G.

Bert Strom

Georgia R.G.

Jerrell McNutt

Illinois R.G.

Raymond Naujokas

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

James Crawford

Randy Farrell

John Oyster

Aaron Stampley

Mid-Atlantic R.G.

James Jackson

Midwest North R.G.

William Polich

New Mexico R.G.

Robert Rodriguez

New York R.G.

Arthur Morris

Ohio R.G.

Robert Sciplin

Oklahoma R.G.

James Day

Pennsylvania R.G.

Larry Mattes

Rocky Mountain R.G.

Lorenzo Tenorio

Russell Wood

South Carolina R.G.

Glenn Forrest

Southern California R.G.

Earl Moore

Fernando Torres

Spokane Inland Empire

R.G.

Billy Bangs

Wisconsin R.G.

Sylvester Regan

BVA Members At-Large

(No Regional Group

Affiliation)

Jose Duran

Steve Ellis

Joseph Fina



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Final Thought

A generous telephone call to BVA National Headquarters from Pastor John Cole desiring to recognize area veterans after his Sunday service on November 14 resulted in VIP treatment for James and Claudia Baldwin.

The couple accepted the invitation and made an hour-long trek from Silver Spring, Maryland, to Alexandria, Virginia, some 15 minutes from BVA National Headquarters to attend services of the Rose Hill Baptist Church. The services were followed by a meal catered by the popular Mission Barbecue honoring them and some ten other veterans in attendance.

“This was a truly magnificent gesture to recognize all of us in this way when they didn’t even know who we were before today,” Claudia said.

Pictured here, left to right in the church’s chapel, spouse Martha Cole, Claudia Baldwin, James Baldwin, and Pastor John Cole.

