

The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Spring 2022

FEDERAL TRIANGLE

WASHINGTON, DC
SITE OF BVA'S 77TH
NATIONAL CONVENTION



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Cover Photo: Attendees of the BVA 77th National Convention may have occasion during their stay to visit The Federal Triangle, created in the 1930s and still known today as one of the greatest building projects ever undertaken by the U.S. federal government. Located some 12 blocks from the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill, the historic triangular area is formed by four city streets and includes ten large city and federal office buildings. Other points of interest in the District of Columbia, along with details surrounding the upcoming convention, are presented in this issue of **The Bulletin**.

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President's Page

by Joseph D. McNeil, Sr.

On Memorial Day we remember and celebrate the ultimate sacrifice by men and women who have been willing to lay down their lives in the name of peace and freedom. When appropriate on that day, don't forget to bow your head in moments of silence for the departed.

From the days of our early countrymen and women, pursuit of peace and freedom has come with a price—a price paid in blood, sweat, and tears.

This price is not a type of goal to be achieved but something for which many have been willing to offer and sacrifice for principles and ideals. The result is a civilization free from oppression; free from limitations on speech, religion, place of residence, marriage; and free from the fear of government officials knocking on our door to arrest us or, worse yet, kill us for our opinions and beliefs.

We have weathered storm after storm raged against the ideals of the United States Constitution and what the document stands for. Some have disregarded not only the purpose for which these brave souls have sacrificed everything but also the sacrifices themselves. These misguided attitudes and actions are an insult to those who have made such offerings.

Memorial Day is a day set aside for everyone to remember the cost of freedom. The price tag is very high. If there is any doubt about this, please visit our national

memorials. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for example, you will read the 58,000-plus names etched in stone that serve as a testament to the reality of their sacrifice.

If there is any doubt that freedom comes with a price, ask a family member of one who has made that type of sacrifice. Because of what they have done for us, we cannot be simply takers and give nothing back. We must preserve what they have fought for by taking responsibility for our actions and deeds, and by living up to their examples.

We have an obligation to ensure that we do our part to see that freedom lives on! We must vote, we must hold our leaders accountable, and we must ensure that everyone is represented—from the poorest to the wealthiest.

When it comes to voting, we must participate in the process that affects not just national offices but state and local offices as well. We must vote not for career politicians who do not have our best interest at heart but for those who will listen to us and serve us.

At the BVA level, we are at a juncture where being complacent cannot be the norm. We are moving from six districts to four and the selection of each District Director is vital to you as well as to the organization. We need to ask ourselves who will best represent us on the National Board of Directors. District Directors are our voice on the Board, and they must be up for the job.

Historically, we have had low returns on ballots. Look at these ballots as money. Make your money work for you. Return your ballot and make a real difference!



Legislative Update

by James R. Vale

The VA Caregiver Program, known as the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC),

was created by the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 for eligible veterans who served after September 11, 2001. Eligibility was later expanded by Section 161 of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 to include those who served on or prior to May 7, 1975, and a further expansion October 1, 2022, to include veterans from all eras.

VA recently hosted a two-day Caregiver Summit to hear concerns and ideas from stakeholders. At this conference, BVA underscored the challenges blinded veterans face with the ambiguous standards that currently exist in the PCAFC adjudication and appeals process. We stressed the need for a simple bright-line clinical standard of “blindness in both eyes,” defined as 20/200 (or worse), or a field of vision of 5 degrees or less to qualify a blinded veteran for PCAFC. We made it clear that graduation from a VA Blind Rehabilitation Center should NOT have any bearing on PCAFC eligibility determinations.

The battle for VA Caregiver benefits for blinded veterans has just begun, and BVA will be attending future Caregiver Summits and related congressional hearings.

Our Government Relations Team also met in the offices of members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization. Here, we raised our concerns regarding VA 508 accessibility

and emphasized that VA’s new Electronic Health Record must be fully compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. We advocated for the creation of a Chief Accessibility Officer at VA with the responsibility, resources, expertise, and authority to create and develop a full lifecycle solution for accessibility, break down stove piping and other organizational structural barriers, and take charge and spearhead all Section 504/508 accessibility issues for all disabilities across the entire agency. We also requested a minimum \$20 million earmark for accessibility in VA’s IT budget.

Our advocacy efforts are beginning to pay off as we just learned that a \$40 million earmark was put into the Senate version of the next MILCON-VA appropriations bill.

We urge VA to obtain an enterprise license for all screen reader software, which will drive efficiency and cost savings, in contrast to the existing piecemeal licensing approach for its 1,500-plus blind and visually impaired employees. Enterprise licensing is a standard practice at other federal agencies, allowing simplified and more efficient deployment of software updates.

Although our focus is primarily VA Caregiver and 508 related issues, BVA also supports H.R. 7735, the Improving Access to the VA Home Loan Act of 2022, a bill to enhance VA’s home loan program by streamlining the home buying process for veterans and their families. BVA thanks Representative Mike Bost (R-IL-12), Ranking Member on the House Committee, and Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK), a Member of the Senate Committee, for introducing this bill.



Executive Director's Message

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

Passion Gives Energy And a Sense of Purpose, But It Is Not a Strategy

Statistically speaking,
Veterans Service

Organizations (VSOs) such as BVA should be in a period of regeneration, preparing for the growing needs of military families and veterans. The millions of veterans involved in the conflicts that came after 1978—including the wars and conflicts in the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, Kosovo, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and of course Afghanistan and Iraq—will continue to need support today and into the future.

Yet, overall, associations such as BVA are not growing. The trend is quite the opposite. Despite years of war, membership has been declining for decades. Membership in all VSOs peaked in the early 1990s but has since faced a sharp decline. Older veterans have died off, and the end of the draft in the 1970s means that there are fewer veterans. As the 20th century gave way to the 21st, VSOs faced the same problems as other legacy civil society groups: “Gen Xers” and millennials are far less likely to be joiners.

Although the generational differences indeed exist, there is more to the trend than that. Many younger veterans simply fail to see the benefits of VSOs. At a time when veterans do not face the societal opposition that prevailed during prior eras, many young veterans, and in this case blinded veterans, do not see the need to seek the protection and camaraderie of BVA.

In addition, in a time when a few clicks of a mouse can generate an application for

benefits, navigating the paperwork maze is far less daunting. Benefits like the GI Bill, for example, now seem invincible.

Many VSOs once founded on a passion for helping our military families have failed to offer practical and necessary services. They have become duplicative, or just plain have not understood how to sustain a tax-advantaged business. And yes, there should be an emphasis on the word business in our operational model. While BVA is a nonprofit that receives a tax advantage, a solid business-minded strategy and team must be in place, along with excellent fiscal discipline, to keep the doors open. Donations to VSOs were down last year for the 18th year in a row—from .18 percent of all philanthropic giving to .13 percent.

The time for BVA to strategize and transform is now. Passion brings energy and a sense of purpose, but it is not a strategy. By learning from those who are surviving and thriving under difficult conditions, and from those who have failed, leveraging modern tools and technology, I am confident that our Association can still meet today's needs.

Although the number one obstacle to membership appears to be a lack of interest, BVA must embark upon a radical transformation to overcome the perception that we are a group of angry veterans arguing about confusing bylaws. Younger men and women desire something more: they want family and service-oriented opportunities. We must also become more inclusive, welcoming our low-vision brothers and sisters to our family, before it is too late.

Full Throttle Forward to Nation's Capital Convention

by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa and Brigitte Jones

Formal Official Notice and Introduction

Pursuant to the provisions of Section 3b of Article IX (National Convention) of the BVA National Bylaws, all members of the Blinded Veterans Association in good standing are hereby notified that the **BVA 77th National Convention** will be held at the **Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill**, 400 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20001, **from Monday, August 22, through Friday, August 26, 2022.**

The BVA National Convention is back in person! As always, numerous details are important for attendees to begin planning their trips and weeklong stays in Washington, DC.

The following includes information on registration, hotel, and travel. A miscellaneous section of "Frequently Asked Questions" and responses should cover many of the additional subjects of interest and concern.

In the **Around BVA** section of this issue of **The Bulletin**, pp. 26-27, newly appointed Director of Community Relations Joe Bogart offers a few additional insights into the attractions and uniqueness of this year's gathering of blinded veterans and their families.

Registration Information

BVA members can register and pay online at <https://bva.org/national-convention/> or by contacting Meredith at BVA National Headquarters at 202-371-8880, ext. 304, or via email mbuonodagrossa@bva.org. The deadline to pre-register online is **July 28, 2022**, at 5:00pm Eastern Daylight Time.



The Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill offers more than 38,000 square feet of meeting and event space, including the largest ballroom on Capitol Hill. The 838 guest rooms will accommodate blinded veterans, their families, and a large contingent of VA Blind Rehabilitation staff who will attend their own meetings during the convention week.

Hotel Information

The BVA rate at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill is \$145.00 per night (plus a 14.95 percent state and local tax). The property offers complimentary standard WiFi in guest rooms as well as use of its indoor pool and fitness center.

Complimentary airport transportation is available for convention attendees to and from the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) **ONLY**. Details are being worked out and finalized at this time. More information will be presented to BVA members registered at a future date.

While on the hotel property, enjoy Starbucks in the hotel gift shop; breakfast, lunch, and dinner in Article One; or snacks and drinks from the Article One Lounge.

To reserve your room, please use the convention room booking link on the BVA website. You can also call 800-233-1234 and use room block code “G-BVET” to secure the reservation. The room block rate is available from August 21-27, 2022. The deadline to make that reservation at the blocked rate is also **July 28, 2022**.

Travel Information

Since the free shuttle service will be available from only one airport, convention attendees are urged to fly into Reagan National Airport. If traveling by train, Washington Union Station is a mere three blocks from the Hyatt Regency. Volunteers will be on-hand at both Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) and Union Station to assist travelers.

For travel assistance, please contact Brenda K. McDaniel, Independent Travel Consultant and daughter of a BVA member, between 11:00am and 6:30pm EDT. Brenda can be reached at brenda_mcdaniel@sbcglobal.net or 915-204-0101. Should you prefer coordinating your own travel, Brenda has secured a BVA discount with Delta Airlines. When booking, simply use code **NMVNJ**.

The following are scheduled highlights of the BVA 77th National Convention (still subject to minor changes where necessary):

Monday, August 22

- Registration
- Offsite tour: Arlington National Cemetery and surrounding area

Tuesday, August 23

- Exhibit Hall (9:30am-6:00pm)
- Offsite Tour: National Mall area to include the World War II Memorial, Lincoln and Vietnam Veterans Memorials

- President’s Reception (included in registration fee)

Wednesday, August 24

- Exhibit Hall (9:30am-6:00pm)
- Opening Session with Keynote Speakers and Government Officials
- BVA Business Meetings
- BVA Auxiliary Silent Auction
- Sponsored Lunch and Learn
- Special Interest Group Meetings
- Happy Hour Reception (Exhibit Hall)
- Dine Around

Thursday, August 25

- BVA General Session with VA briefings
- BVA Auxiliary Silent Auction
- Father Carroll Luncheon (included in registration fee)
- District Caucus Meetings
- Offsite Trip: BVA Bowling and Dinner Sponsored by Vanda Pharmaceuticals

Friday, August 26

- Closing Business Meeting
- BVA Auxiliary Business Meeting
- BVA Reception and Awards Banquet (included in registration fee)

Post-Convention Activities-

Saturday, August 27

- Kayaking on the Potomac
- Possible Evening Activity (To Be Determined)

Our most anticipated convention Frequently Asked Questions include the following:

continued

What is the cancellation policy for members?

Registration cancellations can be made until 5:00pm EDT on **Thursday, July 28**, to receive a full refund. Cancellations after July 28 will not receive a refund except on a case-by-case basis and approved by the Board of Directors.

How do I sign up for offsite events, tours, and activities?

Registration for offsite events, tours, and activities will be available online from June 1 through July 31 and at the hotel registration desk during the convention. All activities will have a small administrative fee that is non-refundable.

Do the hotel rooms have refrigerators for my medications?

Yes. All rooms are equipped with a small refrigerator.

Can my regional group still advertise in the convention program?

Yes! We encourage it! BVA Regional Groups and Chapters can advertise by contacting Meredith at BVA National Headquarters and providing their full-page or half-page ad **NO LATER THAN** June 20. Payment must be received at the time of commitment. The regional group discounted price for a full-page ad is \$100 and a half-page ad is \$50.

Is there a shuttle from the airport to the hotel?

Yes! A shuttle will be provided on peak arrival and departure travel days (Sunday, August 21; Monday, August 22; and Saturday, August 27) from Reagan National Airport (DCA) only. Traveling outside of those days or arriving at a different airport may require members to use the Metrorail, Taxi, or Uber/Lyft to travel from the airport to the hotel.

Will the buses and shuttles be wheelchair accessible?

Yes. Please also contact Meredith to ensure that BVA is aware that you will need wheelchair accommodation for offsite trips and airport shuttles.

Will someone meet me at the airport/train station?

Please provide Meredith with your flight information, which will enable volunteers at the airport to meet you and ensure that you board the shuttle in a timely manner.

Is there a dog relief area?

Yes!

Where are the local conveniences such as restaurants, bakeries, and cafes?

Restaurants, Bakeries, and Cafes (less than a ten-minute walk):

- Article One Grill | Inside Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill
- The Ministry | 601 New Jersey Avenue NW | 202-813-3951
- SUNdeVICH | 601 New Jersey Avenue NW | 202-750-8128
- West Wing Café | 300 New Jersey Avenue NW | 202-347-5855
- Sandwiches by Phillip | 440 1st Street NW | 202-525-3602
- Blue Bottle Coffee | 50 Massachusetts Avenue NW | 510-653-3394
- Starbucks | 50 Massachusetts Avenue NW Space T-16 | 202-682-5895

Restaurants and Bars

(less than a 30-minute walk):

- Bistro Bis | 15 E St. NW | 202-661-2700
- The Dubliner (Late Night Hours) | 4 F Street NW | 202-737-3773



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC, consists of two black granite walls, 247 feet in length and polished to a high finish. The walls are etched with the names of service members honored in 104 panels of horizontal rows with regular typeface and spacing. Completed in 1982 in DC's Constitution Gardens as the full memorial, the Wall has since been supplemented with a statue entitled "The Three Soldiers" and the Vietnam Women's Memorial.

- Art & Soul | 415 New Jersey Avenue NW | 202-393-7777
- Charlie Palmer Steak | 101 Constitution Avenue NW | 202-547-8100
- The Capital Grille | 601 Pennsylvania Avenue NW | 202-737-6200
- Fogo de Chao | 1101 Pennsylvania Avenue NW | 202-347-4668
- District Rico | 91 H Street NW | 202-842-5007
- Laos in Town | 250 K Street NE | 202-695-7182

- Indigo | 243 K Street NE | 202-544-4777
- Bistro Cacao | 316 Massachusetts Avenue NE | 202-546-4737
- The Monocle Restaurant | 107 D Street NE | 202-546-4488
- The Rooftop DC | 476 K Street NW, Rooftop Level | 202-695-1800
- RPM Italian | 650 K Street NW | 202-204-4480
- Kinship | 1015 7th Street NW | 202-737-7700

Grocery/Pharmacy/Sundries:

- Grocery/Pharmacy: Walmart (0.4 Miles)
- Grocery: Giant Food (0.8 Miles)
- Pharmacy: Walgreens (0.3 Miles, inside Union Station)
- Pharmacy: CVS (0.5 Miles)
- Class 6: Kogod Liquors (341 Feet)

What is the plan in the event of a fire drill or emergency?

Volunteers and hotel staff will orient members to the emergency exits, stairwells, and assembly areas near their rooms. Any further questions can be answered at the convention by BVA staff.

What meals are included in my registration fee?

- Tuesday evening President's Reception Dinner
- Wednesday Lunch and Learn
- Thursday Father Carroll Luncheon
- Thursday evening Bowling and Dinner
- Friday evening BVA Awards Banquet
- Other meals may be added if and when additional sponsors sign on

What dining options are at the Convention Hotel?

The hotel has an onsite restaurant with breakfast, lunch, and dinner options. We are working with the hotel on possible special menu selections and pricing for convention attendees.

Will there be a nightly Hospitality Suite?

The Hospitality Suite is planned—with limited hours.

What if I have more questions?

For additional questions or concerns, please contact Meredith in the intervening weeks and months ahead. We are excited to celebrate with you once again in person at the BVA 77th National Convention. See you in Washington, DC!

Important Administrative Deadlines For 77th National Convention

June 14 (no later than 70 days before convention)—Latest date for national headquarters to mail ballots for the special election of all District Directors.

June 15—National headquarters mails annual financial report forms (two copies) to treasurers of regional groups.

July 11 (no later than 45 days before convention)—Ballots for special election of District Directors due at national headquarters. The 45-day mark is July 9, which is a Saturday. The due date has been pushed forward two days to accommodate the weekend.

July 14—Regional group meeting notices to elect convention delegates must be mailed to group members. A copy of this notice must also be mailed to national headquarters at the same time.

July 14—Latest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing.

July 19 (35 days before convention)—National headquarters counts ballots for special election of District Directors.

August 2 (21 days before convention)—Completed delegate credentials forms and proxy forms must be postmarked no later than midnight.



Located only five blocks from the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill, the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial is the nation's monument to law enforcement officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. The outdoor memorial is accessible always while the adjacent museum is open to the public 10:00am-5:00pm Fridays and Saturdays. Both venues host frequent events that honor fallen officers and their surviving families.



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Learn more at NSITE.org

NSITE is an enterprise of National Industries for the Blind (NIB), the nation's largest employment resource for people who are blind.

Joe Burns: Loyal BVA Servant Leader

by Stuart Nelson

For many Americans during the past half century or so, Memorial Day weekend has signaled the beginning of summer, celebrated for three days with a full schedule of warm weather activities such as family and neighborhood picnics, pool openings, yard clean-ups, or visits to amusement parks.

The weekend has also become a popular one for discount sales at retail stores and supermarkets.

Memorial Day itself was created to honor and express gratitude for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure the preservation of our freedoms—the sacrifice of their very lives.

For Joe Burns, BVA National President from 2001-03 and still an active member of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, the day is a stirring reminder of the men and women who have sacrificed the last and only thing they had left to give. It is a day on which he chooses to reverently recognize and honor them.

“Everyone can choose how they view and spend their Memorial Day holiday, but to me it’s about remembering the fallen in battle, those who have not returned home and never will, and to take some time to look at the flag and what it means,” he said. “I look at it as an opportunity to refresh my patriotism.”

Joe prefers that his fellow citizens take the time to inwardly revere the sacrifices of veterans rather than acknowledge them with the commonly offered free meal at restaurants on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.



“I don’t need a free sandwich to be appreciated,” he quipped.

Joe understands at least something about sacrifice for what he also gave up while serving as a U.S. Marine Corps First Lieutenant and Company Commander in Vietnam. He joined the Corps in 1968 at age 23 after having already graduated from college the year before with a degree in Petroleum Geology.

Following his training in Officer Candidate School, he was commissioned and sent to Vietnam with the infantry company 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines. He advanced quickly to First Lieutenant and the assignment as Company Commander.

He had been in Vietnam just ten months and 27 days when he struck a North Vietnamese Army landmine while digging a foxhole with a shovel.

Although Joe later regained partial vision in one eye, the blast left him totally blind at the time. After months of recuperation and rehabilitation, he still needed help to get back on his feet, both literally and figuratively.

“Shortly after my discharge from Philadelphia Naval Hospital, I received information from the Blinded Veterans Association saying that the organization was here for me and would be my advocate,” he said. “I needed all the advocacy I could possibly get in those days, and the price was right, so I joined.”

Little did he know at the time the extent to which the advocacy on his behalf would later be paid forward with his own sacrifice of time, talent, and resources to benefit his fellow blinded veterans.

“I went to a regional group meeting early on, probably in 1971,” he said. “It was a room of mostly World War II guys and, although they were accommodating, I just didn’t feel like I had much in common with them.”

For the next 16 years Joe had little contact with BVA aside from the convention announcements and **BVA Bulletins** he received in the mail.

After successfully working several additional years with limited sight in the petroleum industry, he went back to school and took some accounting courses, not knowing for sure where they would lead him.

“I ended up really liking those courses and I got the hang of accounting even more than I had expected,” he said.

Joe earned a Bachelor of Science in Accounting with a 3.97 grade point average. He also became a Certified Public Accountant after again surprising himself by passing every section of the qualifying examination on his first try.



Joined on stage by then President George W. Bush and VA Secretary Anthony Principi, Joe Burns addressed the traditional Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery on a cold and wet November 11, 2002. At left, George Brummell, National Director of the Field Service Program at the time.

“I remember the exam administrators accommodating my vision impairment by putting me in a room by myself and enlarging the text on all the questions and problems I had to work through.”

In 1994, Joe established Joe Burns Accounting Services with a partner and ran the business while at the same time he utilized his knowledge of finances as he served in leadership capacities in the Louisiana Regional Group.

“My involvement in the organization really got off the ground when I met Buddy Spivey and then received the Melvin J. Maas Award

at the 1987 convention in Orlando, but my accounting interest and background was the other thing that got me really engaged with BVA's operations."

Just prior to the 50th anniversary national convention in Washington, DC, in 1995, Joe picked up a written description of the National Treasurer position.

"I read it over, in large print of course, and thought to myself, 'Hey, that's something I think I can do.' I ended up nominating myself at the convention and won with the support of the Florida Regional Group."

Following his term as National Treasurer, Joe was elected National Secretary and National Vice President, serving in those positions from 1997-2001 prior to his election as National President. He later served as a financial consultant nonvoting member of the National Board of Directors for nearly 14 years.



Close friend Roger Villareal with Joe Burns at Veterans Day Marine Corps Band of Brothers reunion in Washington, DC, in early 2000s.

"The awe-inspiring highlight of my two years as the National President had to be sitting next to and speaking from the same podium as the President of the United States and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs at Arlington National Cemetery the year after 9/11, surrounded on all sides by those significant markers representing those who truly gave all," he said.

Joe admits to worrying sometimes that BVA may not always be able to continue helping blinded veterans the same way the organization has for now 77 years. He's seen his share of tough times when spending cuts were necessary, but he remains optimistic about BVA's future.

"I've been motivated in the past, and continue to be, by a dedicated office and field staff, the latter of which is now our Veterans Service Program," he said. "Couple that with our congressional charter and strong relationships on Capitol Hill, and we still have reason to look forward to a bright future."

Unlike those who believe Americans may be forgetting the sacrifices of veterans and the importance of holidays like Memorial Day, Joe is optimistic about that as well.

"The veterans who returned from Iraq and Afghanistan have been treated so much better than those of the past, especially those from the Vietnam era," he said. "That's why I'm upbeat about the work BVA and our sister organizations have done in the past—and will hopefully continue to do long into the future."

Louisiana/Mississippi RG Spreads Braille Flag Cheer

by Gary Schoelerman, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group

Although the weather in the deep south was mild this winter, especially when comparing it with that of our northern brothers and sisters throughout the country, we were tempted to sit on our laurels and do nothing but take in hot drinks by the fireplace.

Fortunately, we were strong willed and did not give in to that temptation!

Some of our members took advantage of VA's Winter Sports Clinic and learned how to ski and snowboard without breaking any bones. Many enjoyed the virtual classes offered by some of the VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers or other virtual learning centers. A few took it upon themselves to get a Bronze Braille American Flag placed in their local Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) or other public high traffic areas.

On February 2, the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, supported by the DeRidder (Louisiana) Lions Club, presented a Bronze Braille American Flag to the DeRidder War Memorial Civic Center in the Beauregard Parish of Louisiana.

This regional group presentation was made more momentous for the group since the civic center is the site of the first off-installation United Service Organization (USO) club in the United States. The center was opened ten days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor on November 27, 1941, at a cost of \$57,480. The facility was the first one built for, and used exclusively by, the USO. It was one of five different sizes of Type A buildings designed by the Quartermaster Corps and designated for USOs.

The DeRidder USO was used for the recreational and spiritual welfare of the Army and Air Force in the area. Workers labored day and night to complete the building and, rather miraculously, it was ready in 39 calendar days to provide the soldiers a home away from home. Dozens of volunteers from DeRidder and the surrounding area aided in letter writing, providing dance partners, or performing kitchen duties for dozens of displaced servicemen.

At that time, the USO facility was open to any enlisted man in "good standing" with no drinking or fighting allowed. Dances were held three nights a week with local girls carefully chaperoned to and from each event. Nobody left with a soldier. It was a place for good, clean fun, and which continued to serve the military through the Korean War.

The building is preserved in its original condition and dances are still held on the original floor. This USO has the distinction of being listed in The National Register of Historic Places.

Near the entrance, a museum has a display honoring 47 young Beauregard Parish men who gave their lives in World War II. We are humbled by the fact that the donated Braille Flag and plaque honoring the veterans who established BVA on March 28, 1945, is now displayed next to the hometown heroes.

Moving 30 miles north from DeRidder, our group presented another flag to the Fort Polk CBOC. Fort Polk is part of the Alexandria, Louisiana, Health Care System serving Leesville and the surrounding communities.



Flanked on both sides by DeRidder, Louisiana, Lions Club members, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group Secretary and DeRidder Lions Club members present Braille Flag to Faith Scott, Director of the DeRidder War Memorial Civic Center.

BVA member Kenneth LeCompte was tireless in his efforts with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), City of Leesville, and St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church's Knights of Columbus to join in sponsoring the flag and plaque at Fort Polk. Ken contacted several organizations, and most were in favor of providing the support. Due to the pandemic, however, they were not meeting or, if they were, they did not have a quorum to authorize the expenditure.

There was also some money left in the John P. Cross Memorial Fund. John's wife, Gloria, told us that John would be honored to have his name on the plaque since he began his career at Fort Polk. John passed away less than a year ago. Present at the flag presentation from BVA were Gloria, Ken, and I. Representing the Alexandria Health Care System were Director Peter Dancy and Public Relations Officer Tammy Arnold. A full representation of staff from the Fort Polk CBOC and

representatives from VFW's Post 3106 and St. Michael the Archangel Knights of Columbus were also in attendance.

"The flag and plaque will be mounted in a place of prominence where all can see and touch it," said Director Dancy, who also noted that of the five CBOCs in his catchment area, only the Jennings CBOC did not have the flag yet. We replied that we were working on filling that void.

On March 16, the East Baton Rouge Lions Club and the Affiliated Blind of Louisiana (ABL) Baton Rouge Chapter joined with the regional group in sponsoring a Braille Flag for the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired (LSVI),

located in Baton Rouge. The campus shares 120 well-manicured acres with the Louisiana School for the Deaf and is located next to the Louisiana State University (LSU) Campus and "Death Valley," the LSU Tigers football stadium.

LSVI usually has between 80 to 120 students of all ages, grades K-12. My wife, Marelle, and I represented the regional group. We were a little early and spent some time under one of their pavilions with our guide, Ms. Blanche Faulk. As we talked with Ms. Faulk, an 8-year-old student named Destany came by. Ms. Faulk introduced us and the child said "Hello, my name is Destany" and held out her hand for a handshake, truly an unusual gesture from someone her age.

We asked Destany if she read Braille. When she said that she did, I led her to the flag that was on one of the picnic tables. I then asked her if she knew what the American flag looked like and she responded: "What is a flag?"

After a brief explanation we guided her around the flag and she asked what the stars and stripes were for. Following that explanation, she started reading the Braille on the flag and realized that it was the Pledge of Allegiance that she recited each day in class.

Shortly after that series of events, Wayne Laird and Zeke Dunaway from the East Baton Rouge Lions Club joined us. Then ABL Baton Rouge Chapter President Shelly Lejeune and Vice President Tommy Murphy arrived. Ms. Faulk and the school's technology specialist, David Eller, along with 15 to 20 students, represented the school. I presented the flag to Ms. Faulk and told the children about BVA, how the Lions Club has supported eye health for more than a hundred years, and how the Lions Club began the use and public recognition of the White Cane to identify the low vision and blind.

I also mentioned ABL as an organization of blind and low vision people who have banded together for support. As we were speaking, Ms. Faulk took the flag to each student to allow them to feel the shape, the identifying marks, and the Braille on the flag. The adults who could see clearly said that it was a delight to watch the children's faces as they felt around the flag, many not knowing before what the U.S. Flag looked like.

Afterward, we spoke with the children further. We asked if they played beep ball or



Left to right: Loria Jackson, Fort Polk CBOC Administrative Officer; Portia Lott, R.N., Clinic Nurse Manager; Kyle Herbert, Grand Knight of St. Michael the Arc Angel Knights of Columbus; BVA member and Grand Knight Kenneth LeCompte; Alexandria, Louisiana VA Medical Center Director Peter Dancy; Gloria Cross; Gary Schoelerman; VFW Post 3106 Commander Paula Baldwin; and VFW Post 3106 Chaplain Jack Bolger.

had a beeping frisbee. Some said they knew what a beep ball was but that they preferred baseball with a beeping ball and had no idea what a beeping frisbee was. After a brief explanation of what it is and what it does, I promised I would get them one. Now all I need to do is find it!

We are all suckers for young well-mannered children, but this place and its children were amazing.

On April 15, the South Baton Rouge CBOC received a flag. The Association of Educators for the Rehabilitation of Blind and Low Vision joined us in the presentation as one of the sponsors. Joe Burns had been trying to present this flag for nearly a year, but postponements occurred due to holidays and outbreaks of COVID-19. Those present that day also included VA Southeast

Louisiana Health Care System Director and Chief Executive Officer Fernando Rivera, a huge BVA supporter who has told us more than once that he wanted to attend all flag presentations in his area.

We are presently working on placing the flags in the Monroe, Jennings, and Slidell CBOCs. We are also attempting to place a flag in the Louisiana Capitol Building. The regional group has also been asked to present a flag to the “National Vietnam War Museum” in Weatherford, Texas, at the Grand Opening on June 25. All **Bulletin** readers everywhere are invited to join Joe and me for the presentation and party.

If your VA facility does not yet have a Bronze Braille American Flag, contact me for information on how to contact your local Veterans Service Organizations and other civilian philanthropic local service organizations in your community about donating to the purchase of a flag (\$500) and the identifying plaque that acknowledges the donors (\$100). As you can see from the last few flags that have been donated, many of the local civilian service organizations are more than willing to give to a flag that will be displayed in their area.

Did You Know?

- BVA is part of a small piece of history at Arlington National Cemetery’s Welcome Center, thanks in large part to the efforts of Immediate Past National President Dr. Tom Zampieri, who at the time was the Association’s Director of Government Relations.
- In the fall of 2007, then Representative Todd Tiahrt of Kansas introduced H.R. 4169, a bill that would place a tactile Braille U.S. Flag at Arlington National Center and greet some 4 million visitors annually. The flag to be used would be donated by the Kansas Braille Transcription Institute, the same organization that had donated flags to national convention attendees in 2006 and 2007 who had recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan.
- Tom reported in the Autumn 2007 **Bulletin** that Tiahrt’s office had, ironically, reached out to him for BVA’s support on the bill. In December, the Department of the Army, with jurisdiction over the Cemetery, contacted Tiahrt’s office to inform him that legislation was not necessary, and that the Army fully supported the placement of the flag. However, a reassessment by the Army determined that legislation really was necessary.
- In conjunction with other legislation and resolutions commemorating National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Week, the House passed H.R. 4169 396-0 on February 14, 2008. Although the bill was never voted on by the Senate, still one more reassessment reversed things yet again. Later that year, the flag became a part of the Welcome Center without completed legislative action or signature by the President.

Volunteering and You

by Tracy Ferro

Do you ever sit there a little bummed out and wonder what your purpose is? It's normal to do that sometimes, and we all go through it occasionally. Even if this is only an occasional mood, what can we really do about it?

On another side of the fence, have you ever asked someone in an official capacity for information, directions, or advice? Was the response useful to you? More than likely, the person was a volunteer of some kind and did indeed provide at least some tidbit of information or help that was of value to you.

Again, returning to you as the source of the help, if you've ever answered a question about your blindness, offered advice on how to use the cane, told someone where to get additional help, lent an ear to the new guy or gal at the Blind Rehabilitation Center, or recruited somebody to BVA, then you've already volunteered, perhaps without really realizing it.

BVA is soon to graduate its first class of Ambassadors. You may have heard that this program is mandatory for volunteers. Although this is not true, Ambassador training certainly does help. Volunteering is a willingness to help, and the Ambassadorship gives you the knowledge to intelligently promote BVA. There are right and wrong ways to do both, however.

First, let's look at volunteering with VA. The easiest way to get involved is to go to your local VA Community Development and Civic Engagement (CDCE) office. You may remember it as the VA Volunteer Services office, as it was previously known. The CDCE is the starting point to get you into the VA information system.

Once you are recognized at VA, a blood test and a background check will be administered. You will then participate in training for a day and receive an identification badge. Following that, all you have to do is show up, let them know how many hours you are donating, and, if it's six hours or more, pick up your meal ticket to have lunch at the canteen if one exists.

Tracking the hours is easy. Please ensure that the hours are allocated to BVA. Doing so shows that you are an active volunteer. It also demonstrates to your local VA and the national office how many hours our organization provides to America's veterans. The hours are applied to the VA volunteer recognition program. On an annual basis, VA recognizes volunteers with special presentations based on the number of hours donated.

If you are also a BVA Ambassador, you will be identified as a trained representative to speak on behalf of BVA. There are limitations on how you can help, of course, and you will have learned what those limitations are during your training. However, whether you are an Ambassador or not, acting in an official VA capacity as a volunteer gives you the legitimacy and legality to be at a VA facility and interact with veterans as an unpaid employee.

Becoming an official volunteer also provides a level of coverage and protections that you will learn about in the VA volunteer training sessions. You will be held to standards of conduct for both VA and BVA, none of which are unrealistic or disagreeable.

So, what if you are not near a VA facility? Is it still possible to volunteer or be a BVA

Ambassador? The answer is a resounding yes. Other likely places at which you can volunteer are the large fraternal national VSOs such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars on the local level. Charitable organizations are another great option. Most of these organizations do not require any specialized training, security clearances, memberships, etc. Those that do have such requirements will likely communicate them at the very beginning of the application process.

If you have completed the Ambassador training, feel free to reach out and look for opportunities to serve. BVA is not the only well-kept secret. The services VA provides to blinded veterans are also far from common knowledge.

Use the Ambassador skills to set up outreach events while working with civilian agencies to spread the word about BVA. Your counterparts in other organizations of and for the blind can present what is available on the civilian side and it will be amazing how much information can be shared. Ask your Visual Impairment Service Team Coordinators and Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists

to come and represent VA at such events if at all possible. They have a requirement for outreach hours too and this can help everyone.

It is critical to remember that you can talk about VA, but you cannot represent this top-level cabinet department in any way. You can, however, represent BVA.

Check with your CDCE office, BVA leadership, or other agencies to develop a successful outreach program and you will soon be volunteering! Before you realize what is happening, you will notice many asking for your advice and guidance. If you haven't gone through the Ambassador training, you'll want to sign up for the next module.

One final benefit of volunteering for now among the many others that exist: You'll also be able to take days off when you want without the worry of having to return to a job. After being gone for a few days, you will want to return to the more meaningful of life's experiences, the ones that attracted you to the volunteer spectrum in the first place.

People work because they must while people volunteer because they want to. What do you want to do?

Receive BVA Email Updates, Choose a Version of The Bulletin

BVA members who may not currently be receiving Association updates via email may request to be added to the listing by sending a request to Kylie Fitzgerald, kfitzgerald@bva.org. The same database of names also receives relevant news about current legislation, technology, and adaptive sports opportunities.

Blinded veterans and their families may also wish to update with Kylie their preferred format of **The Bulletin**, available in print or via email. The email version can be received as a Word document with complete descriptions of photos and graphics or as a PDF that appears identical to the print version.

The aforementioned versions, in addition to professionally recorded audio files, are also available online at <https://bva.org/the-bulletin>. A condensed version of the publication is also available on CD and mailed to interested BVA members.

Consistent with the organization's mission, the print and email versions of **The Bulletin** are available free of charge to all blinded veterans, regardless of membership status.

Around BVA

National Vacancies Filled

BVA National President Joe McNeil announced on May 16 the appointment of Paul Mimms of Kansas City, Missouri, and the Heartland Regional Group to serve as National Vice President for the remainder of a two-year term ending in August 2023.

Joe also announced on the same day the selection of Tonora Lyn Shannon of the Michigan Regional Group to fill the vacancy of National Ombudsman previously occupied by Paul.

Article IV, Section 6 of the BVA National Bylaws authorizes the National Board of Directors to fill vacancies from among BVA members for the position of Vice President by a majority vote of a quorum present at a meeting of the Board called for that purpose.

Paul has previous experience as a BVA National Officer, having served as National Treasurer from 2013-15, National Secretary from 2015-17, and as National Vice President from 2017-18. The current appointment places him in line to be elected the Association's National President at next year's BVA 78th National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri.

Born in Iowa City, Iowa, Paul considers the Kansas City area to be his true home. He graduated from the city's Central High School and returned following both his military service and then again after a career with the VA that took him to West Palm Beach, Florida.

He began working for VA in 1992 at the Kansas City Vet Center and eight years later went to work at the West Palm Beach, Florida, Blind Rehabilitation Center. In 2004, he

became the VA Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) Coordinator at the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center. Upon retirement in 2009, he returned to Kansas City and helped rejuvenate the Missouri Regional Group that he helped initiate as a charter member some 20 years before.

Paul has held most of the possible leadership positions in two regional groups, including the position of state District Director unique to the Florida Regional Group. He is also well known for his technological skills, and a knowledge and a passion for guide dogs, sharing his enthusiasm and expertise on several relevant BVA committees during the past nine years.

Tonora Lyn Shannon is the current Vice President and Secretary of BVA's Michigan Regional Group. She is a Persian Gulf era blinded veteran, serving seven years on active duty. During her service, she was a Data Processor Technician and served aboard Submarine Tenders. She was also stationed at the Ship Intermediate Maintenance Command in Norfolk, Virginia.

Tonora is also a retired VA employee with experience at the John Dingell (Detroit) VA Medical Center, the Ann Arbor VA Medical Center, Palo Alto VA Medical Center, and the North Las Vegas VA Medical Center.

Joe Bogart Appointed To New BVA Post

Effective April 25, Major Joseph Bogart (U.S. Army, Ret) returned to the Blinded Veterans Association to serve his fellow veterans. Although much of his work will be done remotely from his home in Meridian,

Idaho, the role he fills will be influential in BVA's work moving ahead.

Joe describes his own vision of the new opportunity as follows:

Fellow Veterans:

I wish to let you all know that, after two years of R&R, I am recharged, reinvigorated, and ready to serve you all on the BVA Headquarters Team as your Director of Community Relations. While that title can encompass a broad spectrum, there are a few key areas on which I will focus: community outreach, member activities, and Team BVA events.

My role includes working with all the BVA Directors and their teams to grow BVA's relations internally and externally. I will be here to help District Directors and regional groups work with their own communities to help strengthen their local relationships and community awareness. This will involve close work with the BVA Public Relations, Membership, and Development Teams. BVA has a long history of service to all blinded veterans, and I am excited to dive in and help expand that service. This includes, of course, helping members to be active!

Since joining BVA in 2007, I have witnessed members searching for ways to be more active and enjoy recreation. BVA members from local to national levels seek ways to be not just active, but to connect



Newly hired Director of Community Relations Joe Bogart.

with one other. Going forward and working with our volunteer leaders, I will strive to increase local engagement and get our members involved, active, and known in their communities.

A key method for growing that active engagement is through Team BVA!

Team BVA is about getting our members out and active in ways to grow the familial bonds of our little organization. As it was during our time in military service, shared experiences will result in lasting relationships with one another and with our communities.

I will be working with all BVA leaders to help find, coordinate, schedule, and fund members to attend a wide variety of activities for all ages and abilities. So, stay alert for updates on the BVA website and emails for event notifications.

I am motivated to be back working with my BVA family to serve my fellow blinded veterans. It absolutely is and must always be: One Vision! One Team! One Fight!

Flag Presentation Highlights Spokane Inland Empire Work

The emotion and patriotism associated with sharing the Bronze Braille American Flag also hit home for the leadership of the Spokane Inland Empire Regional Group with a donation on March 10 at the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center in Spokane, Washington.

"The Braille flag was presented for the purpose of showing our appreciation to the Medical Center for its care of blinded and low-vision veterans," said regional group president Randy Cantrell.

The event was conducted inside the main entrance of the facility, where the flag has also been permanently placed for display for maximum exposure, attendance, and influence.



Left to right in first group: Chris Fortensky, Phil Faris, VIST Coordinator Janessa Rooney, Rae Hail, Patti Hail, and Randy Cantrell. Second group: Medical Center Director Dr. Robert Fischer, Spokane VA Public Affairs Officer Brett Myers, Sue Cantrell (spouse), Kitty Hiner (BVA Auxiliary), Medical Center Associate Director Sarah Boardman, and Deputy Chief of Staff Dr. Monica Blykowski-May.

Rae Hail, treasurer for the regional group and a former Director of District 4, presented a history of the Braille Flag at the brief ceremony, mentioning its original placement at Arlington National Cemetery and now at several VA facilities and other national cemeteries.

Demonstrating the importance of the presentation was the attendance of all four regional group officers: Randy and Rae, vice president Chris Fortensky, and secretary Phil Faris—along with Medical Center Director Dr. Robert Fischer and other top administrators.

Columbus Chapter Witnesses Historic Signing

Georgia Department of Veterans Service Commissioner Patricia Ross invited the Columbus Chapter of the BVA Georgia Regional Group to take part in the signing of

the State of Georgia’s HB (House Bill) 1064 by Governor Brian Kemp.

Eight members of the Chapter attended the event, which occurred April 18 at the National Infantry Museum located just outside Fort Benning, Georgia.

Georgia HB 1064 was a landmark bill exempting from state income tax a portion of military retirement income received from certain military service. Other legislation related to the military and veterans was also signed on the same occasion.

“Governor Kemp took the time to shake our hands and thank us for our service to the country,” said National Secretary Elizabeth Holmes, also a member of the Chapter. “He and the First Lady of Georgia gladly accepted when we asked them to take part in a group photo.”

Liz also said that other dignitaries offered their hands to thank members of the Columbus Chapter for their service.



Bottom row, left to right: Columbus Chapter BVA members Lisa Brooks, Jonathan Barron, Clifford Jones, Otis Smith, and Elizabeth Holmes. Standing, left to right: Eddie Stokes, Ricky Lynn, Georgia First Lady Marty Kemp, Governor Brian Kemp, and BVA National President Joe McNeil.

American Red Cross Partnership Encourages Blood Donations—photo

In keeping with BVA's purpose as a service organization, the Association honored Blinded Veterans Day and its 77th anniversary by initiating a nine-month partnership with the American Red Cross beginning March 28.

BVA's SleevesUp campaign promotes the donating of blood throughout 2022, a year in which the nation's supply has become dangerously low due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization invites its members and their families, its social media followers, and other supporters and stakeholders to visit <https://sleevesup.redcrossblood.org/campaign/blinded-veterans-association-sleevesup/> to learn more about the partnership.



Virginia Beach native Robert L. Byrd, Sr., also a member of the Hampton Chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, demonstrates the ease with which one can donate blood. Robert's donation occurred in April, shortly after the announcement of BVA's partnership with the Red Cross.

Additional information will be forthcoming about opportunities to donate blood at drives that BVA promotes and sponsors at local levels throughout the country from now until December 31. Use hashtag **#BVASLEEVESUP** when sharing on social media.

BVA Mourns Passing of Wedewer, White, Mower

Three of BVA's staunchest of advocates and role models—Donald Wedewer, Ronald White, and Robert Mower— have recently passed away.

Although Don Wedewer passed away on February 7 and his name was included in last issue's **In Remembrance** section, he was not recognized for his life of accomplishments as a double-amputee with total vision loss after combat wounds with the 99th Infantry Division in World War II.

Don was a state and national leader in assisting those with vision loss. Following his recovery, he earned Bachelor's and Master's Degrees from the University of Missouri, leading him to a long list of successful career opportunities and service to nonprofit organizations. In 2002, Don was inducted by the American Printing House for the Blind into the Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field.

Army blinded veteran Ronald White, who passed away March 8, was the BVA National Treasurer from 2006-07. He also served in every leadership position within the New York Regional group. He was the Assistant Coordinator for VA's St. Albans Support Group and president of the Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Center's Alumni Association for six consecutive years. Many BVA members will remember him for his stirring rendition of the National Anthem

and special musical numbers at events of the organization's national conventions. His good friend and fellow New York Regional Group member Warner Murray penned the following in his honor:

Salute our Comrade: Ronald G. White

Our blinded veteran
Has recently passed.
We recognize you,
Sergeant First Class.

This is the moment
We Have a Choice,
To lift his spirit
With our BVA voice.

Rise spirit rise,
We joyfully sing.
Ronald G. White
Received his wings.

Rise spirit Rise
We shout today,
Letting the world know
You came this way.

The Father called
Final Rest for you
In Arlington Cemetery
Under red, white, and blue.

Robert "Bob" Mower, longtime president of the Washington State Regional Group, died April 12. He was also the BVA interim Director of District 4 in 2011-12 and then served a full three-year term from 2012-15.

Bob was known for his demonstrated compassion toward all blinded veterans,

especially members of his regional group, a trait that resulted in consistent growth in the group throughout his tenure as an officer. He was also a professional at initiating BVA's participation in outreach and educational events within the blindness community locally.

High Marks for First Ambassador Class

The first session of the new BVA Ambassador Program is now nearing successful completion with 32 trainees having passed the final examination during the first two weeks of May with scores over 80 percent.

A 26-week virtual course via Zoom began on October 5 of last year and met at midday across four time zones nearly every Tuesday until mid-April. Still remaining as part of the eligibility to become a BVA Ambassador is a panel interview together with program director Jim Vale and Executive Director Don Overton.

"We are hopeful that our candidates to become Ambassadors not only have the knowledge but that they are also able to apply that knowledge to real-life situations, which is the reason for the interviews," said Jim.

Successful candidates will be recognized in a special certificate and polo shirt presentation in a general session of the national convention.

The next module of classes begins July 5 and will run once a week on Tuesdays until mid-January 2023. All blinded veterans are invited and encouraged to participate in the classes. Check <https://bva.org/ambassador-program/> and look for additional announcements on how to sign up.

Calling Blinded Veterans for Audio Description Project

Descriptathon, a University of Hawaii-based federally funded research project that includes partnerships with the U.S. National Park Service, the American Council of the Blind, and Google, is seeking participants from the blinded veteran population for its next virtual event, recently locked in for October 18-20, 2022.

The three-day event focuses on producing audio descriptions for the blind from already printed brochures that the public uses at National Park Service sites and Fish and Wildlife Service sites in the United States and Canada.

According to Brett Oppegaard, Ph.D., Principal Investigator of the UniDescription Project and Associate Professor in the School of Communications at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the efforts of the participants during the three days will make the site brochures accessible, contributing to the greater enjoyment of the sites by those who are not able to read and visualize the materials, including photos and graphics.

Volunteers participate from their homes in different parts of the country. They are joined by teams of park staff and park volunteers to work on the printed piece in a small team environment of 4-6 persons.

“The more the merrier, but please do understand the intensive nature of the Descriptathon—that it covers three days and some significant prep time,” said Dr. Oppegaard.

Other than the time commitment, the only requirement of participants is a good internet connection, a smartphone, and an engaged interest in improving audio description, especially at national parks.

Blinded veterans interested in participating in the upcoming Descriptathon should email Dr. Brett Oppegaard as soon as possible at brett.oppegaard@hawaii.edu.

BVA Recognizes Tomasina Perry

Retiring LS&S Vice President of Sales Tomasina A. Perry was the recipient of BVA’s Lifetime Service Award for her dedication to blinded veterans and the technological innovations that could improve their quality of life.



“Tomasina went the extra mile continually to serve our population, both individually and collectively,” said Pete Davis, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group. “She was not only in every convention exhibit hall spanning two decades but she took a genuine interest in BVA as an organization and in us as her friends.”

BVA National Headquarters mailed the pictured plaque of appreciation to Tomasina in April. Although she is retiring, the Association’s membership, staff, fellow exhibitors, and even her competitors would most assuredly love to see her at future conventions.

March Disability Conference Attracts California Groups

Members of the Southern California and Orange County Charles Register Regional Groups jointly participated in the 37th annual CSUN (California State University Northridge) Assistive Technology Conference held March 14-18 at the Anaheim Marriott Hotel.



Left to right, Eduardo Miranda, Orange County Charles Register Regional Group; Ken Asam and Larry Bustetter, both members of the Southern California Regional Group, at CSUN Technology Conference.

The two regional groups hosted their own booth together and attended a variety of educational sessions at the event, which focuses on and showcases for five days the latest in adaptive technology for the blind, low vision, and other disabilities.

“This is a world class event and well worth the time to attend,” said Director of District 4 Ken Asam. “It is something we look forward to here in California and something from which BVA, as an organization, and our members could really profit and benefit.”

CSUN’s Center on Disabilities is committed to the vision of an inclusive society where people of all abilities have the chance to achieve their goals and experience success. Through training and research, the Center nurtures learning and innovation to improve the world for people with disabilities.

In addition to the annual conference, it also sponsors assistive technology training programs to expand the awareness of professionals and introduce newcomers to the disability field.

Helpful Tips for Enjoying 77th National Convention

by Joe Bogart

Over the years, “younger” members have heard from more “experienced” members about things that used to occur at BVA’s national conventions.

There would certainly be business to take care of, but members would get to know each other more personally while together, taking in the city sites, golfing, or even doing something like skydiving! There is much to be said about fun outings to help us grow the common bonds we already have for having served our country and for living full lives with impaired eyesight.

So, as we finally get back to holding our first face-to-face convention in three years, we are going to balance business with fun, and every day at that! This will include August 27, the day after the lowering of the gavel to officially close the convention.

Monday, August 22, will be arrival day for many members. They will get oriented and pick up their convention packets. This year, try to get in early that morning because the Convention Committee has a tour of Arlington National Cemetery planned for Monday afternoon.

Tuesday, August 23, will be a great day for our members to hit the Exhibit Hall and then head to the National Mall. Half of our attendees will have the whole morning to enjoy the Exhibit Hall while the other half goes on a tour of the mall monuments and memorials. After lunch, they will flip flop the events. Everyone then returns to the hotel in time for the President’s Reception.

Wednesday, August 24, will begin with our opening ceremony held with the VA Blind Rehabilitation Service personnel



The World War II Memorial, an absolute “must see” for convention attendees, honors the service of 16 million members of the Armed Forces, the genuine support of millions on the home front, and the ultimate sacrifice of 405,399 American lives. On May 29, 2004, a four-day “grand reunion” of veterans on the National Mall culminated in the dedication of this majestic tribute to the truly Greatest Generation.

in attendance. It will be followed by our Opening Business Session. After a hard day of business, members will attend a joint reception hosted at the Exhibit Hall to mingle and thank our wonderful exhibitors.

Thursday, August 25, will find BVA members again attending to business, this time with Director of VA Blind Rehabilitation Service Niki Sandlan and her team. Niki’s session will be followed by the always enjoyable Father Carroll Luncheon. That afternoon, after business is conducted, members will have the chance to enjoy bowling and dinner as part of the Team BVA Program.

Friday, August 26, will be a big day, and perhaps a memorable one. Members will hold

the Closing Business Session. Key voting and new business will occur at that session. We will then prepare for the closing Awards Banquet and a wrap-up. We hope, however, that it won’t be goodbye for everyone just yet.

Saturday, August 27, will see Team River Runner, in coordination with BVA, host blind kayaking on the historic Potomac River! There will be plenty of assistance and volunteers on hand for our blinded veterans who have never been in a kayak before. That evening, the Washington Nationals are hosting Cleveland. At press time, although BVA does not have anything locked down, rest assured it is being worked on!

Oh, and do not forget, the Hyatt Regency is within easy walking distance to the Capitol, Supreme Court, the Library of Congress, and the Senate and House Office Buildings!

So, what are you waiting for? Make reservations today and let’s all meet up in our Nation’s Capital!



“Wisdom 4 Blinded Veterans” Launches

A new informational portal consisting of free online resources available to blind and visually impaired veterans was unveiled on May 1 by two BVA members.

Wisdom 4 Blinded Veterans, a service of the nonprofit Wisdom 4 The Blind, Inc. initiated by Florida blinded veterans Ben Keeley and Doug Cram, is dedicated to assisting blinded veterans and their caregivers with a compilation of critical information not previously available in one location and so close to their fingertips.

“We’ve created Wisdom for Blinded Veterans at <https://w4bv.org> to share knowledge that can help make people’s lives easier and more fulfilled,” said Ben Keeley, Executive Director of the initiative. “I have felt the need to keep sightless individuals informed about a variety of topics, including those that can diminish their challenges, so I developed a resource to meet this demand.”

Topics included in the portal are upcoming events, tools, news, fitness, sports, travel, user groups, VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers, training, BVA updates, support groups, and a VIST Coordinator/BROS contact listing. They can be accessed from personal computers, tablets, smartphones, and Amazon’s Alexa using tools such as browsers, dictations, and readers.

“Things are off to a fast start and will fill a real demand in the veteran community,” said Ben. “We expect it to grow and become more valuable as time moves on.”

He also emphasized the importance of hard work from the team along with feedback and support from the portal’s subscribers and an advisory board that includes OrCam’s Michelle Mendez and OrCam itself as a sponsor of the initiative.

“Unfortunately, during military service or after, some veterans lose some or all their sight,” said Ben. “There is a lot of existing technology, resources, and knowledge out there that can make a blind person’s life easier if it can be readily located and used, and that is exactly what we are trying to provide.”

At press time, Wisdom 4 Blinded Veterans had already produced five podcasts hosted by either Ben or Doug. In early June, Ben conducted an hour-long interview with Executive Director Don Overton as part of his series “Vision of a Veteran.” The interview, which focuses on Don’s personal journey as a blinded veteran as well as the challenges and issues facing BVA post COVID-19 pandemic, is now available for listening here. Don also addresses the significance of the upcoming national convention in Washington, DC, and the need for BVA to adapt to the changes in demographics of blinded veterans.

Drop in anytime also to the new Wisdom 4 The Blind Radio. The medium is an internet streaming radio station that one can access at any time from any device. It can be accessed via w4bv.org.

Future versions of the portal will include one for blind children and another to help parents and/or their caregivers.



Auxiliary's View

by Patricia Hail

The purpose of the BVA Auxiliary (BVAA) and its membership is to aid the Blinded Veterans Association in whatever

fashion the organization is able. This occurs as family members, friends, and caregivers of blinded veterans develop a deeper interest in BVA and its mission. Just as BVA seeks to preserve and strengthen a spirit of fellowship among its members so that they may give mutual aid and assistance to one another, BVAA hopes to attain the same goal.

The **Auxiliary's View** of these past couple of years has attempted "mini-articles" that would be thought provoking and stimulate its readers toward acceptance of the blindness of the veteran, moving toward independence, all the while being fully aware of our blinded veterans and how we can assist them.

We began with education and knowledge about one aspect of blindness and then additional aspects, gradually sharing our experiences and expertise with others and moving on to advocacy for our blinded veterans and BVA.

The knowledge we have gained and shared is part of the advocacy we all share through BVA and BVAA nationally. As a whole, this advocacy helps each of us grow. It also strengthens the relationships among BVA, VA, and the U.S. Congress.

Where does this education and knowledge originate? The answer is simple: In our homes and with our families, caregivers, and close friends. However, it can also begin in our regional groups, the lifeblood of BVA!

Now that we are getting out of our homes more as the nature of the pandemic changes, the more active we can be in a regional group and the more we will want to do. It is time to put into practice all that we have been wanting and learning to do while we were restricted by aspects and mandates associated with COVID-19.



Without active regional groups, the national Blinded Veterans Association cannot fulfill its obligation to our blinded veterans. Why not? Because active members in sufficient numbers are necessary and constitute the reasons for BVA's existence.

To our veterans, I would ask: Who is the person, or persons, closest to you who have helped keep you going during the past two years? That same party is probably encouraging you to get back in touch with your life as well by smelling the fresh, clean air of spring and by getting back in touch with your friends. Remember that this person close to you has been as cooped up as you have been.

Look back at the last part of the first sentence of this article. It says that BVAA is also important to "preserve and strengthen a spirit of fellowship among Auxiliary members so that they may give mutual aid and assistance to one another." Oops! Did you know about that? You do now!

Therefore, give these Auxiliary members the same opportunity that they have been giving you. When you go to your regional

group meetings, encourage your special family member/caregiver to break away and go to another table and visit with their counterparts so that they can support and share with one another. BVAA exists for them so that they can continue to support you with a smile on their face and encouragement in their hearts. Have them become members of BVAA and help them to form an Auxiliary regional group so that your own BVA regional group can become even stronger.

What does the formation of a BVAA regional group involve, and how can you help? Easy! Go to www.nbvaa.org and find the startup packet for a new BVAA regional group. It contains the following information:

1. Five or more BVAA members are required (applications are part of the startup packet).
2. A set of bylaws (sample bylaws are with the packet).
3. An organizational meeting in which the bylaws are adopted and officers are elected.
4. Minutes of the organizational meeting.
5. Written request to become a BVAA regional group. The name of the group and its geographical area should be the same as the BVA regional group with which it is associated.
6. A roster of the group membership with officers noted.

BVAA needs a “shot in the arm,” just as BVA does. Similarly, as the regional groups are the lifeblood of BVA, so it is with BVAA.

It also follows that BVA regional groups with associated BVAA regional Groups are more active and better for the blinded veterans, their loved ones, and BVA as a whole.

BVA, BVAA, and your regional groups need you, your trust, your positive attitude, and your willingness to share. Remember that, as a member, you have the strongest voice. Please use it for the good of **your** BVA family.

As you may imagine, the BVA family has been good **to** my husband, W. Rae Hail, and to me – and good **for** us, too. We have grown, and we have had many opportunities to share with many of you. Thank you for giving us that privilege!

Like Rae, who has had several guide dogs, likes to say: “Each dog is not only well trained as a guide, but is also trustworthy, loyal, and so very special in its own way.” The bond with the dog is loving, respectful, and strong. These special service animals have been a very important part of his and our lives. Saying goodbye to an old friend is the hardest thing in the world to do.

With the BVA family, the goodbye is equally difficult. We would like to thank everyone for their support. I would like to thank **The Bulletin** editors for their encouragement, friendship, and leadership, allowing me to share my thoughts with you on these pages. Thanks to all of you for your service as well.



Veterans Service Program Update

by Duayne Driscoll

I have eaten your bread and salt,
I have drunk your water and wine,
The deaths ye died I have watched beside,
And the lives that ye led were mine.

--from *Departmental Ditties* by Rudyard Kipling

As we remembered and honored our fallen comrades this Memorial Day recently passed, let us be thankful for their service and pray that their legacy endures.

As Kipling suggests, only another veteran truly understands the military experience, and from this idea sprang the various VSOs with the overriding theme of veterans helping veterans.

Many organizations like BVA exist by way of congressional charter for the purpose of providing disability claims assistance before VA. This charter requires the VSO to provide representation free of charge regardless of the claimant's membership status in the organization. In other words, representation by a congressionally chartered VSO does not require membership in the organization.

While all VSOs seek to assist claimants, the similarity ends there—and with wild variance. Some VSOs do not bear the stipulations imposed by congressional charter and may require membership before accepting claims representation. Other VSOs may place priority on claims for veterans of a particular era to the exclusion of all others. Further, many claims are submitted on behalf of VSOs by service officers who work for local governments. Aside from these operational differences, we also find divergent philosophies in pursuing claims and appeals.

Many service officers employ the shotgun effect, throwing out as many issues as possible and hoping for a grant of service connection. They file the claim first and then try to obtain supporting evidence along the way. Sometimes this works, only accidentally, and service officers can prove how hard they've been working by the sheer number of claims filed. However, by filing a claim with no supporting evidence, the claimant comes from a position of weakness. Perhaps by luck the regional office requests a Compensation and Pension examination in such a claim, but then we find ourselves at the mercy of the VA examiner. This path can run into many dead ends and leads to increased numbers of resource-consuming appeals.

We would much rather submit a claim for service connection that contains the elements for a successful outcome, consisting generally of a current clinical diagnosis linked to an event in service by a solid medical nexus opinion. This straight-line approach increases about tenfold the chance of a positive decision.

Further, successful claims at the local level naturally reduce the rate of appeal because we got it right the first time. So, we are able to spend less time on appeals that should have been granted in the first instance and focus on appeals with more substance as determined on a case-by-case basis.

The BVA Veterans Service Program (VSP) employs a “Best and Most” philosophy of claims representation and, with the resources available, remains dedicated to providing the best free claims service to the greatest number of blinded veterans possible according to our charter and regardless of membership status.

The flip side of the coin is that BVA membership does not guarantee representation. Accordingly, we sometimes refer claimants to other resources better suited to both of our needs. Please contact the BVA VSP for more information.



My First Convention

by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

Memorial Day weekend and the official beginning of summer on June 21 marked a now short countdown of sorts to the long-anticipated annual BVA event that was placed on hiatus for two years.

I refer, of course, to the upcoming BVA 77th National Convention in Washington, DC. It will be a reunion in which so many of us have hoped to participate ever since that wooden gavel brought a close to the last in-person gathering BVA held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in August 2019.

With COVID-19 and all its tribulations in our rearview mirror (hopefully), we look forward to making up for lost time this year and next in the same two wonderful venues originally planned for 2020 and 2021.

As many of our **Bulletin** readers already know, I am new to the BVA National Convention scene this year. Although I have never attended the event, I am “all in” as far as the planning and execution are concerned, and I could not be happier or more excited to be a part of the unique features that make the

organization’s national conventions what they are.

Many of your happy reunions with one another will be happy first encounters for me. I sincerely look forward to meeting you and doing everything possible to make the convention experience an enjoyable one for everyone.

Despite everything I’d heard about the challenges involved, I had no idea what to expect as I began to delve into the planning and organizing of the convention week. It’s truly an overwhelming undertaking that requires special skill sets and unique insights as activities are organized for you who have experienced sight loss. As one of my recent phone contacts, a former staff member and blinded veteran heavily involved in the planning of many conventions, told me: “Few if any have any idea of what’s involved in planning these conventions.”

Little by little, thanks to many helpers and advisors with BVA’s best interests at heart, I’m internally processing and factoring in the seemingly millions of extra things we need to consider in our planning when it comes to meeting space, food and drink, ground

transportation, exhibitors and sponsors, staff and volunteer assignments, speakers, specific events both inside and outside of the Hyatt Regency—not to mention the training and orientation needed for the hotel staff in accommodating our members and their families.

I'm forever grateful to those of you who have taken the time, or will do so soon, to fill me in on a few of those millions of things. I've learned so much more about the historical nature of these conventions, and so much

more about all of you, than I ever imagined or thought possible.

We forge ahead with what we hope will be adequate preparation for this magnificent gathering of blinded veterans. Then, come August 22-26, we will sit back and watch what unfolds during the real ride. Get set for a wild ride—and, referencing the famous painter and television host Bob Ross, thank you for your patience with the inevitable happy accidents!



Reserve your space to go kayaking on the historic Potomac River on August 27!

Conditions permitting, and they should permit in late summer, Team River Runner will once again host a kayaking activity much like the one on the Illinois River at the 74th National Convention in 2019, pictured here. Check the convention page on the BVA website or contact Meredith for periodic updates and to register.



Chaplain's Corner

by Dr. Ron Lester

It is springtime, so what are you seeing through your window?

You may have heard the account of two gentlemen, both quite ill, who ended up in the same room of a hospital. One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon so that fluid could be drained from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window. The second man had to spend all his time flat on his back.

Every afternoon, when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would talk about the colors of the flowers and the majesty of the trees outside. He also mentioned ducks, swans, and butterflies, as well as children sailing their model boats and young lovers walking arm in arm.

The man nearer to the hospital hallway enjoyed the picturesque descriptions. He looked forward to them. One morning, however, his roommate was gone. He asked the nurse where he was. She sadly said that he passed away in his sleep during the night.

Expecting a marvelous view, he asked the nurse if she could move him to the window and open the curtain. To his great surprise and dismay, the only thing visible outside the window was a brick wall. Confused, he asked the nurse what his friend could possibly have been looking at.

"Did he never tell you that he was totally blind?" she replied.

Although the blind man's physical vision was gone, he saw things that some of us never see—a friend's need for happiness and a way to offer that happiness the best he could.

Sometimes it seems that life just throws hard times our way over and over. When we get through one, here comes another! It can be difficult to find both the hope to keep going and the beauty that is there for the taking.

All that stated, even as you struggle from one trial to the next, you have the choice to see with your mind and heart. Motivational speaker and author Wayne Dyer has said: "Change the way you look at things and the things you look at will change."

Amid the difficulties I face, I try to see how beautiful things are every single day. I get up and say what a beautiful day this is! It is springtime, time to see all that Creator God has given to us.

"When you walk through the storm, hold your head up high, and don't be afraid of the dark! At the end of the storm is a golden sky, and the sweet silver song of a lark!"—Rodgers and Hammerstein in *Carousel*.

This past Memorial Day, I hope we remembered solemnly those who have sacrificed so much to give us the freedom to enjoy the beauty around us.



Thank You for Your Service—With a Great Job

by Ed Henkler

I served at the very tail end of the Vietnam era. No one was thanking me or others for their service. I can remember being told not to wear my uniform on liberty for fear of attacks. Happily, we live in a very different world now. Being thanked for your service has become completely commonplace. Maybe even expected.

But actions speak so much louder than words. Don't just thank me for my service. Tangibly thank me with a great job. Are you underemployed or perhaps even unemployed? Have you heard of the Great Resignation? From now until the end of 2027, there are projected to be more than 500 million jobs opened, 400 million hires, and close to 390 million employee separations. That's a combination of approximately 1.3 billion touchpoints in the employee life cycle; and it represents a huge opportunity. Especially for veterans, who have clearly demonstrated employer loyalty and a willingness to work hard.

Does either one of these stories sound familiar?

Story #1: A female veteran transitioned after nine years in data management and security. Despite her supervisory experience and technical expertise, she was told she could only be an administrative employee. When she asked why that would be her ceiling, she was told that no one really understood what the military did. The second story will confirm that.

Story #2: A transportation company wanted to hire an Operations Manager. Three candidates were proposed. Each one had 20+ years of military service. One was involved in

aircraft carrier operations. The second was a Marine with expertise in amphibious landings. The third spent his time in Army logistics. The hiring manager said none were fits because they didn't have DOT experience. What? Of course, they didn't. They were career military. They were also exceptionally well-qualified candidates in every other way.

So, what's the answer?

It starts with things you can do. Veterans are proven commodities. Recruiters and employers often view them as more reliable and loyal. With so many people changing jobs, emphasize your demonstrated loyalty, working in challenging environments, often for modest compensation. How about military spouses? Perhaps you stayed home to raise a family? Or maybe that means you're a multi-tasker, deeply experienced in managing conflicting priorities and occasional conflicts. Maybe you're a veteran with disabilities. That makes you even more deserving of thanks for your service. It also means you're creative, innovative, and undaunted by the daily challenges of an inaccessible world.

One other thing you can do is register with Veteran Tax Credits (<https://www.veterantaxcredits.com/>). The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) program (<https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit>) started during World War II as an incentive for employers to hire veterans. It has since expanded to ten target groups including veterans, long-term unemployed (possibly a fit for military spouses), and people with disabilities. The tax credits vary from \$1,200 to \$9,600 and

they might differentiate you from an equally qualified candidate who isn't in one of the WOTC target groups. Many employers don't claim these credits so you can also make them aware of a revenue-generating solution. Veteran Tax Credits only charges 15 percent of the tax credit while serving as a completely outsourced solution. You're not just bringing them great skills. You're saving them money.

How do I find military-friendly employers?

Veterans ASCEND (<https://www.veteransascend.com/>) does all the work for you. It is a woman, veteran-owned company. It matches you with military-friendly employers based on your skills (not your resume), compensation, and location. Since a transitioning veteran gets one last final move for a year after transitioning, you just need to find companies in locations to which you're willing to relocate. How do you know they're military friendly? This is a novel process so if they're registered, it means they've already made an emotional commitment. They're also paying for access to the database, so they're financially committed. It's not a guarantee but certainly is a good start.

Veterans ASCEND will evolve into Talents ASCEND this summer and include modules for veterans, military spouses, people with disabilities, recent graduates, and even the formerly incarcerated. They're already working with 60+ companies. Many are smaller and regional but there are also large companies such as the American Red Cross and Procter & Gamble, and the list keeps expanding.

How about veterans with disabilities?

For this audience, I'll make it even more specific to veterans and military spouses who are blind or visually impaired. You've already read that Talents ASCEND includes

candidates with disabilities. NSITE (<https://nsite.org/>) is another option. They help anyone who is blind or visually impaired. They are also very veteran friendly and invite veterans with any type of disability to register. As with the other programs above, registration is free.

NSITE connects job candidates with employers who believe in the business value of employing people with disabilities. They offer contractor roles that can lead to full-time employment. They also offer full-time positions. Starting as a contractor may not be your dream but it can be a way to convince an employer of the qualities you bring.

Many employers express a willingness to employ people who are blind, but they struggle to understand what jobs someone who is blind can do. My answer is almost anything, as I wrote in this blog post (<https://theblindguide.com/what-types-jobs-can-blind-people-do/>). Starting as a contractor shifts the focus to your abilities rather than your disabilities.

One other opportunity

If you are a veteran or dependent who is blind or visually impaired, VA is looking for volunteers to test the usability of its new apps and websites before mainstream launch. You can register at Veterans Usability Study (<https://veteranusability.us/>) and please mention **The Blind Guide**.

About The Blind Guide

Ed Henkler is a social entrepreneur who is passionate about improving the quality of life and employability of people who are blind or visually impaired. He believes there is a business ROI to hiring people with disabilities. He works with several companies that focus on increasing the meaningful employment of people with disabilities.

Of Note

VA History Webpage: A True Treasure Trove

Veterans, their families, and any history buff intrigued by the rich history of the Department of Veterans Affairs, known as the Veterans Administration before 1988 when the agency became a cabinet-level department of the Executive Branch of the federal government, now have a wealth of information at their fingertips.

The main webpage, <https://www.va.gov/history/> contains a growing list of features, content, and multimedia that dive into the VA story and the history of VA's services to those who served.

The VA History subpage is the general history of VA as well as the heritage of each distinct VA Administration and names dating back as far as the American colonies. The team of historians has untangled the lineage and provided it in a chronological format.

The VA Features subpage covers the people, accomplishments, and moments that illustrate VA's evolution, along with links to specific stories. Feature content is added every week or two and can be emailed to interested parties who sign up for the free VA History subscription service.

A "History of VA in 100 Objects Exhibit" is also a subpage. The exhibit relates the history of the nation's efforts to honor and reward veterans for their service by spotlighting individual objects that illuminate key parts of the story. The objects span the centuries, from the earliest laws governing disability claims for Revolutionary War soldiers to the latest medical gear to protect VA workers and

veterans from the COVID-19 pandemic. The exhibit is being published serially throughout 2022, with new entries appearing every Thursday at the rate of two per week.

VA historians continue to tell VA's story across a variety of platforms as hosts or guest speakers. Links to these videos and podcasts are available on the main webpage.

In addition to all the virtual resources, the National VA History Center (NVAHC) is the forthcoming museum and archival center for all things historical in the VA mission. It will be located on the Dayton, Ohio, VA Medical Center campus, itself a designated National Historic Landmark.

While the idea of NVAHC is not new, recent actions to make it a reality indeed are new. Ceremonies marking its official establishment—and the start of renovation work on two historic buildings to house the collection—were held in August 2020. The public opening is not expected for several years but links to information about the multi-faceted steps that go into establishing a museum and collection are available on the NVAHC subpage.

New FCC Program Helps Veterans Connect

Veterans who are struggling to afford internet service may soon find that a new Federal Communications Commission (FCC) program can put fast and reliable service within financial reach.

The FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) provides a discount of up to \$30 per month that can be used toward broadband service for eligible households

and up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. Qualifying households may also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers.

Additionally, 20 leading internet providers will offer ACP-eligible households a high-speed internet plan for no more than \$30 per month. Eligible families who pair their ACP benefit with one of these plans can receive high-speed internet at no cost.

To find out if you qualify or to sign up, go to the White House's "Get Internet" site, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/getinternet>, or visit the Affordable Connectivity Program through an approved carrier by visiting www.fcc.gov/ACP, or by calling 877-384-2575.

Approximately 2.5 million veterans are eligible for the program. Eligibility depends on meeting at least one of the following criteria:

- Has an income that is at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.
- Participates in certain assistance programs, such as Veterans Pension, Survivor Benefit Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or Lifeline.
- Participates in Tribal specific programs, such as Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.
- Is approved to receive benefits under the free and reduced-price school lunch program or the school breakfast program,

including through the USDA Community Eligibility Provision.

- Received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year.
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating broadband carrier's existing low-income program.

Volunteers "Carry the Load" during Cross Country Trek

Volunteers organized by Carry The Load, in conjunction with VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA), visited 50 national cemeteries during a 20,000-mile stretch along five separate routes and groups covering 48 states.

The effort, known as "Memorial May," saw five groups converge on Memorial Day weekend for a final rally in Dallas, Texas, that began on April 28. This was the fifth year that VA and the nonprofit organization Carry The Load have joined forces to honor veterans and service members interred in national cemeteries across the country.

Throughout the 32-day Memorial May campaign, marchers frequently carry signs, banners, and flags honoring a service member, veteran, or first responder.

Carry The Load provides active ways to connect Americans to the sacrifices of the nation's military, veterans, first responders, and their families.

NCA has shared videos and photographs of the cemetery visits on NCA's Facebook and Twitter pages at <https://www.facebook.com/NationalCemeteries> and at <https://www.twitter.com/VANatCemeteries>, respectively.

VA Whole Health Initiative Takes Center Stage in April

VA rolled out a series of new helps and other resources for veterans during April's Whole Health Month.

Whole Health is VA's cutting-edge approach to care that supports individual health and well-being. It centers around what matters to veterans, not what is the matter with them, and means that a health team must get to know individuals as persons before working with them to develop a personalized health plan based on values, needs, and goals.

Whole Health empowers people through mindful awareness and self-care, recognizing the fundamental importance of healthy nutrition, activity, sleep, relationships, surroundings, personal development, energy and flexibility, the spirit and the soul, and the many other areas of life that contribute to health and wholeness.

Whole Health supports patient-centered, proactive, whole-person care. Conventional testing and treatment are combined with complementary and integrative health

strategies such as yoga, tai chi, and acupuncture.

To learn more about taking on a Whole Health lifestyle, tap into VA Whole Health resources and personal assistance at <https://va.gov/wholehealth>.

Grandpa's White Cane

James (Jim) Hoxie, a member of the Midwest North Regional Group and a resident of Spearfish, South Dakota, is the author of **Grandpa's White Cane**, a children's book published in late 2020 about learning to use a white cane.

The illustrations in his book are photographic images of his hometown with caricature overlays. In the book, Jim relates the gradual decline of his vision as "many steps into the darkness" followed by the joy of gaining confidence with his changed abilities.

In 2017, Jim received white cane training at the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at Hines.

The book is available on Amazon in both paperback and hardcover. It is free for Kindle Unlimited Users.

Did You Know?

- The last BVA convention held in the Washington, DC area occurred August 24-28, 2010 at the Marriott Crystal Gateway Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. Ironically, the 2010 convention was just a few miles from BVA's current headquarters in Alexandria while this year's hotel venue is located but eight blocks from the building that housed BVA's National Headquarters from 1988 until early 2015.
- Following that historic gathering marking 65 years of BVA history, then Executive Director Tom Miller reflected on its significance.
- "This convention was still one more milestone that links veterans of today with those of yesteryear," he said. "Considering the challenges BVA has faced during those 65 years, its longevity and continued ability to serve blinded veterans become increasingly significant with each passing year."

Letters to the Editor

Canes for the Blind Variations

My dad, Cyrus (Cy) Minor, is a Korean War veteran and a member of the BVA Florida Regional Group. He met Tracy Ferro at the VA Blind Rehabilitation Center in Biloxi and we previously passed the following information on to him also.

It is surprising that many people, me included, had/have no idea what the different colors in canes actually mean, at least beyond the white in all of the canes. My sister, Cheryl, shared a post on Facebook about the meaning of the colors after my dad asked her to share the important safety factors involved in knowing the difference between canes for the totally blind, canes for persons with low vision, and canes for deaf-blind pedestrians.

This is what Cheryl posted:

- A completely white cane or stick means that the user is completely blind and has no usable vision.
- A white cane or stick with a red bottom means that the user has low but some usable vision.
- A white- and red-stripped cane or stick means that the user is totally blind and/or deaf.

Cheryl indicated in her post that because my dad is sight and hearing impaired, it has come to his attention that many people are unaware or do not know the difference between these canes, leaving many with disabilities at risk of getting hit by a car.

The safety of everyone who depends on these canes is therefore at risk because of the many who are unaware of these safety-coded objects.

A more detailed description of the different canes can be found in a very informative article put out by the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired at

<https://www.cabvi.org/articles/what-are-the-different-types-of-white-canes/>.

Donna Marie Spiers
Point Washington, Florida

Bulletin Content Not Representative of All

I receive and read **The Bulletin** each and every issue from front to back. I can only see one paragraph at a time on a page due to Retinitis Pigmentosa tunnel vision.

The articles concerning fellow blinded veterans who have the courage to step out of the “comfort zone” and continue life after blindness is frustrating for us who can’t “deal.”

I’m one of those people who can’t get out of the “pity pot.”

I’ve been to a VA Blind Rehabilitation Center and classes, but it doesn’t help the depressing, devastating loss. Add to that the constant thoughts of how life “could be” if I could still “see.” Losing the ability to drive, to travel to “see” new places, and to go shopping without a big hassle are things that all our blinded veterans can understand and relate to.

Every blinded veteran is not a ray of sunshine or motivated to “step out and fail.” Therefore, your articles don’t relate. **The Bulletin** is ALWAYS so positive that I wonder where the people are who can’t get past the negative.

Helen Fowler
North Carolina Regional Group

Additional Accessibility Options for Reading The Bulletin

Readers of the last couple of issues may have noticed the absence of the Voiceye codes in the top right corner of each page. With the codes no longer available to BVA, 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.



In Remembrance

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

Alabama R.G.

Frank Marquette

Arizona Central/North R.G.

Richard Briggs

Cape Cod and the Islands R.G.

Agnes Burridge

Charles Register/Orange County R.G.

Richard Hubbell

Florida R.G.

William Altork
James Beckman
Felix Bernabela
Margaret Carpenter
John Egrie
Williams Langhardt
Ray Lever
Donald Therrell
John Thomas

Gem State R.G.

John McNeff
William Wennstrom

Greater Houston R.G.

Juana Kiesert
Jerry Myers

Illinois R.G.

Nathaniel Epps

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

Billy Hollingsworth
Reave Laborde

Massachusetts R.G.

Lawrence Humphries

Mid-Atlantic R.G.

William Chetelat

New Hampshire R.G.

William Carnes
Charles Martin
Warren Tripp
Edward Webber

New Jersey R.G.

Donald Perlman

New York R.G.

Ronald White

North Carolina R.G.

Billy Ennis

Ohio R.G.

Sylvester Houston
Roy Knight

Pennsylvania R.G.

Paul Moatz

Puerto Rico R.G.

Vicente Rodriguez Casas

Rocky Mountain R.G.

David Gerwig
James Gueck

San Diego R.G.

Robert Houston

Southern Arizona R.G.

Thomas Simms

Southern California R.G.

Veronica Cotariu
John Hasse

Spokane Inland Empire R.G.

Joseph Reedy

Washington R.G.

Robert Mower
Michelle Tuengel

At-large Members with no R.G. Affiliation

LeRoy Keenan
Gerald Riegert
James Van Mun



Plan to visit Arlington National Cemetery with fellow blinded veterans, their families, and other guests at the BVA 77th National Convention. Two groups are tentatively scheduled for the Monday, August 22 tour as the convention gets underway. The Cemetery's 639 acres of hallowed ground constitute the nation's most sacred shrine.

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Final Thought

Attendees of the BVA 77th National Convention should seriously consider a visit to the cobblestone streets of Georgetown, Washington, DC's oldest neighborhood. In fact, an optional evening activity in Georgetown is tentatively scheduled for blinded veterans and their guests during the convention week.

Founded in 1751, the Georgetown waterfront is home to the best fine art galleries of the Nation's Capital. The area also features its most historic bars, tastiest food, and several stylish boutiques.



A college town atmosphere and culture with 30-plus design showrooms and stores also attract thousands of out-of-town daily visitors to Georgetown throughout the year.