

The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Post-Convention 2022

NEW BEGINNINGS IN NATION'S CAPITAL



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Cover Photos: With virtual conventions now history and two years later than originally slated, members of the Blinded Veterans Association and their families gathered and rejoiced together in person at the Association’s 77th National Convention in the shadow of the United States Capitol Building. Reports and impressions of the historic late summer event are scattered throughout this issue of **The Bulletin**. See page 13 for a more complete description of the photos.

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



President's Page

by Joseph D. McNeil, Sr.

The 77th National Convention opened in grand style after it had been two years since we had gathered as a BVA family. It was truly great

to see old friends and put faces to names and voices I'd been hearing during the past two years via Zoom.

The success of our 2022 convention was due in large part to a great team effort consisting of staff, volunteers, and our members. I thank all our delegates, many of whom overcame travel difficulties and performed their duties well.

I must also mention a dedicated and attentive Hyatt Regency hotel staff who went out of their way to assist all of us in countless ways.

There was plenty of behind-the-scenes work that made this convention enjoyable for both new and seasoned members. Outstanding meals, an organized layout of vendors in the Exhibit Hall, and amazing volunteers do not happen by chance or accident.

As referenced in more detail by Tracy Ferro later in this issue, we could perhaps have picked up and gone home once we had presented the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Monday afternoon. It was emotionally moving to do this with my fellow blinded veterans and the first-ever female Sergeant of the Honor Guard.

Another highlight for me was Tuesday's Ambassador Good Morning Coffee and Breakfast as we recognized, individually, the men and women who successfully completed the Ambassador training. We also heard from

our friends at OrCam who sponsored the event. As leaders of BVA, we cannot be more pleased with the potential and future of the Ambassador program and the breakfast most certainly reinforced the importance of this remarkable initiative.

On Tuesday, a gorgeous summer day in the Nation's Capital, two offsite National Mall tours were also conducted where the World War II, Vietnam Veterans, Lincoln, and Korean War Memorials are situated. Although many of us had stood at these memorials previously, the experience took on new meaning on this occasion, especially with the number of Vietnam War era veterans who were with us.

Other highlights included multiple "Lunch and Learn" events sponsored by Dot Incorporation and Oracle Cerner, the first ever BVA Blackout Bingo competition in the Exhibit Hall with two \$1,400 prizes that covered convention expenses, the traditional Auxiliary Silent Auction, and a bowling and bocce activity with dinner that occurred in the heart of Georgetown.

If these events were not enough to instruct and inspire, there was an additional treat in store for us at the annual Father Carroll Memorial Luncheon on Thursday just past noon. The treat was more than the great food as our beloved Lonnie Bedwell knocked it out of the park with his recounting of a journey described with words—but which had meaning beyond words.

If you couldn't be with us this year, meet with your delegates and get briefed! Next year you can be part of the fun in St. Louis, Missouri. The 77th was great and the 78th promises to be even better.



Legislative Update

by James R. Vale

Veterans for generations have been denied VA compensation for wounds and injuries caused by in-service toxic exposures from burn pits, herbicides (Agent Orange), biochemical agents, and even radiation. After a protracted and controversial legislative fight in Congress, H.R. 3767, known as the Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, was signed into law by President Biden on August 10, 2022.

This landmark legislation is considered one of the largest expansions of health care and benefits for veterans in U.S. history and is projected to cost \$300 billion over ten years to help as many as five million veterans harmed by toxic exposures during military service.

The PACT Act expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for veterans with toxic exposures and veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras. It adds more than 20 new presumptive conditions for burn pits and other toxic exposures. It also adds five more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation exposure.

The requirements of the PACT Act also include mandatory toxic exposure screening to every veteran enrolled in VA health care and provide resources to help VA improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures. For more information, please visit <https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/>.

If you were exposed to toxins in service, you are highly encouraged to apply (or

reapply if you were previously denied) as soon as possible. Survivors of veterans exposed in-service to toxins may also benefit from this expansive legislation. For claims assistance, contact BVA's Veterans Service Program at vsp@bva.org or <https://bva.org/programs/veteran-service/>.

BVA continues to advocate for the AUTO for Veterans Act (S. 444), which now has 15 co-sponsors. Its corresponding bipartisan bill in the House, H.R. 1361, has 68 co-sponsors. If passed into law, this legislation will authorize VA to pay eligible service-connected veterans or service members an additional VA Auto Grant after ten years from issuance of the prior Auto Grant. There is still a shot for this legislation to advance during the "Lame Duck" congressional session that occurs after the November mid-term elections.

Lastly, VA is appealing **Beaudette v. McDonough**, which is the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) decision that allows veterans to appeal VA's Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) eligibility decisions to the Board of Veterans Appeals.

On July 1, the Department of Justice, on behalf of VA, filed their opening brief to appeal the **Beaudette** decision. VA believes the Court's reasoning in **Beaudette** poses a potential threat to VA operations given the potential to impact the Board with appeals of clinical decisions. During this appeal veterans will still be able to appeal their Caregiver eligibility decisions to the Board.

BVA will continue to monitor this appeal given its potential significant impact to other veterans' appellate options under the VA Caregiver program.



Executive Director's Message

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

Reuniting and Looking Ahead

I extend my sincere and warm appreciation to our BVA members who attended the 77th

National Convention and made the event both fun and, at the same time, productive and successful. It was great for us to reunite in some cases and in many others to meet for the first time—all in person, face to face, and without any electronic devices!

The enjoyment we experienced was an explicitly stated goal early on in our Convention Committee meetings beginning last year. I think we succeeded with that, at least to some extent, with our activities outside the Hyatt Regency. In the end, however, it was our member attendees who made those activities enjoyable.

On the more productive side, we acknowledge our generous sponsors and exhibitors, many of whom brought several of their company representatives to the convention, offered giveaways and prizes, and who truly engaged with our membership and the VA professionals attending their Blind Rehabilitation Service conference adjacent to our meetings. Thanks go also to you who supported the Exhibit Hall by participating in Blackout Bingo or simply visiting as many booths as possible.

If our direction at BVA National Headquarters emerging from the global pandemic has not yet become clear to our members, we hope that it soon will be.

At convention, we engaged with one another in enjoyable social and recreational

activities. We also engaged with technology and health-related resources that improve our quality of life. For those who remained an extra day, we engaged in an adaptive sports activity on the Potomac River.

These opportunities to engage are what we hope to expand, and to a loftier level than ever before through TeamBVA—One Vision, One Team, One Fight. That, in a nutshell, is our desired direction. Our newly launched and so-far successful Ambassador, VetTech, and adaptive sports programs have at least pointed us in the right direction and allowed us to see BVA's potential when we proactively engage ourselves in positive causes, hopefully with one another whenever possible.

With the approach of Veterans Day, let us think of ways we might engage a little more and a little more effectively to improve ourselves, our families, and our fellow veterans, most especially our fellow BVA members within our respective regional groups.

If your local area or VA facility is re-initiating Veterans Day events post-pandemic, make plans to attend and participate if possible. It remains one of the best ways to honor other veterans and their service while engaging with the community and sharing your own story.

If nothing else, however, express your thanks sincerely and simply to a fellow veteran. Doing so may not be the most creative way to spend Veterans Day, but it could well be the most effective.

Accordingly, I personally thank each of you for your service to this great nation and for your dedication to the cause of our beloved BVA now 77 years strong.

In Heart of Nation's Capital, BVA Faithful Make Memories

by Stuart Nelson

The BVA 77th National Convention was most assuredly five unforgettable days for the more than 120 blinded veterans, another hundred or so family members and caregivers, the approximately 125 exhibitors and sponsors in 41 booths of the Exhibit Hall, speakers and presenters, and a couple of dozen volunteers when they were needed most.

Add to those numbers the nearly 200 participants in the VA BRS conference occurring simultaneously and the result is a more vibrant Exhibit Hall than perhaps ever before and a Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill buzzing with activity throughout August 22-26.

“I don’t need to pretend to be busy!” said longtime Convention Volunteer Coordinator Margarine Beaman. “There is never a lack of needs and places to be all at once, but the wonderful thing was the quality of our volunteers this year.”

Margarine, referred to by many BVA members as “The Energizer Bunny,” began serving BVA conventions in 1992. She has attended each one since then, missing out on only the two recently postponed because of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic.

Convention events and impressions have been reported and expressed via photo and personal accounts throughout this issue of **The Bulletin**. Future issues will contain additional highlights. For now, a few brief summary items must suffice. A special shoutout and apology goes to the Illinois Regional Group, whose ad for the convention program booklet was inadvertently left out.



Joe McNeil recognizes Blind Veterans UK President Colin Williams with BVA's Lifetime Achievement Award in the form of whiskey barrel head. Colin has fostered the BVA-BVUK friendship from “across the pond” for more than 10 years.

The ad is included in the electronic version of this publication, <https://bva.org/the-bulletin>.

BVA Expands Criteria for Organization Membership

Voting in convention assembled at the 77th National Convention in Washington, DC, on August 26, the organization's membership elected to align its membership policies with VA's Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) Directive 1174, Blind and Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Continuum of Care. The alignment includes any future updates or revisions to Directive 1174.

There were no dissenting votes in the adoption of a newly constructed document



On a sultry, sun-drenched August 23 afternoon, Southeast Texas Chapter President John Lee enjoys a few moments at Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall with daughter Kelly Motts.

containing the Association’s bylaws in their entirety, which includes the criteria for membership in Article 3, Section 1.

Votes were cast through delegates of regional groups in good standing representing blinded veterans across the United States. Individual BVA members who registered for the convention and attended the Closing Business Session cast single votes on their own behalf.

Any person having honorably served, or currently serving in the Armed Forces of the United States, qualifying for VA BRS, is now eligible for membership in BVA. Eligibility verification may be provided by an Optometrist, Ophthalmologist, Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinator, or Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS).

Membership criteria with respect to vision was previously defined as legal blindness with central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the

better eye with the use of a corrective lens and/or a limitation in the field of vision with the widest diameter being no greater than 20 degrees.

Qualifying conditions now include substantial visual impairment and/or low vision defined as significant loss of vision uncorrectable by conventional means such as eyeglasses, contact lenses, medicines, or surgery, negatively impacting the safety of the individual or restricting/impairing one or more Activities of Daily Living.

The National Board of Directors will review and adjudicate the membership status of borderline cases or those in which sight improves to such an extent that they no longer qualify.

VA estimates the number of legally blind veterans at approximately 120,000. The number of low-vision veterans is approximately 1.1 million, thus expanding several-fold the potential BVA membership base.



Left to right during site visit to World War II Memorial, seen in background: Walley Guerra, Martin Clark, Gerard Valdez.



At left, Rex Hendricks of American Legion Post 24, and Jerry Krueger, VFW Post 609, spent the better part of the week helping convention attendees get to meetings, activities, and meals. VFW Post 609 Captain Marty Menez was responsible for enlisting the assistance of the Northwestern High School cadets when BVA members were both arriving and departing the Hyatt Regency.



Volunteer Karen Hendricks, American Legion Post 24 of Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, visits with Director of District 2 Brian Harris.



Left to right, Genentech's Darren Lance, Candice Sanders, and Paul Skala with BVA's Meredith Buono-Dagrossa, Don Overton, and Joe Bogart. At far right, Genentech's Gary Bisette and BVA National Sergeant-At-Arms Brian O'Connell.

Award Recipients Honored, Surprised

Longtime convention attendees silently wondered where the event programs were as they filed into the hotel's Regency A Ballroom for the Awards Banquet convention finale. The programs traditionally featured biographies of the three major award winners—Maas, Diener, and Schnair. Some reportedly believed the awards had been forgone or forgotten.

Breaking from tradition, the awards were actually a surprise to each recipient. This year's Maas Award recipient was Dr. Tom Zampieri, BVA's Immediate Past National President and longtime Director of Government Relations. Tom's professional career also included service on active duty as an Army Medic and in the Army National Guard for 21 years. He spent 13 years as a Military Aeromedical Flight Surgeon after graduating from Hahnemann Medical University's Physician Assistant Program.



National President Joe McNeil presents a surprised Immediate Past National President Dr. Tom Zampieri with Maas Award, BVA's most prestigious honor awarded annually.

Michaun Harrison received the Diener Award for outstanding service to her regional group, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group covering the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and Delaware.

Marlene Davis-Lilly of the Arkansas Regional Group was the recipient of the David L. Schnair Award for exceptional voluntary service to blinded veterans. Marlene now matches her dedication as a volunteer with her work as a BVA staff member for the Veterans Service Program.

The Gold Gavel was passed to the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, which added the largest number of new members for Fiscal Year 2022. In second place receiving the Silver Gavel was the Georgia Regional Group.

Other recognitions at the banquet were the Trailblazer Award to Lonnie Bedwell, the Lifetime Service Award to Colin Williamson,

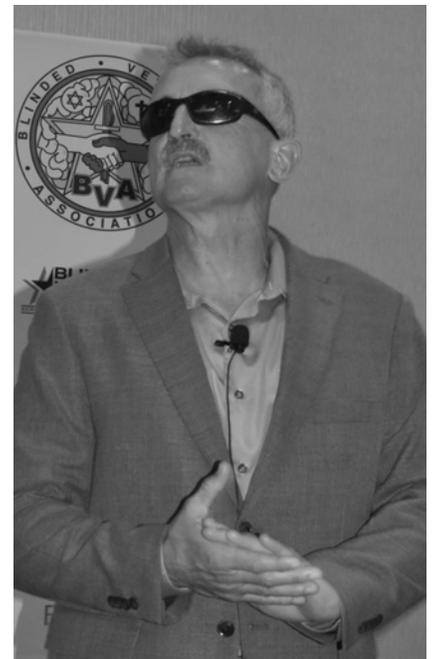
and the Thomas H. Miller Guiding Legislator Awards to Senate Committee on Aging Chairman Bob Casey (D-PA) and House Committee on Veterans Affairs Ranking Member Mike Bost (R-IL-12).

At the Thursday Father Carroll Luncheon, BVA awarded the Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center's (Richmond, Virginia) Visual Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) Program with a Certificate of Appreciation. Present to receive the award were Optometrist Dr. Michael Peterson, Case Manager Sherri Geiger, and Computer Access and Technology Specialist Kim O'Connell.

Lonnie Bedwell Wows Father Carroll Audience

Laughter, tears, and a prolonged standing ovation occurred as Lonnie Bedwell brought the house down with his rousing Father Carroll Luncheon address on Thursday afternoon.

The 2015 National Geographic



Lonnie Bedwell

Adventurer of the Year, motivational speaker, television personality, author, and member of the Indiana Regional Group related the motivation he received from his five-year old daughter, nicknamed "Bug," as she guided him in the mowing of his lawn on a rider mower just weeks after he could no longer

August 2022



The Illinois Regional group salutes BVA



Anthony Woodson, President

Joe Cole, Vice President

Daniel Johnson, Secretary-Treasurer.



BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION

SERVING BLINDED VETERANS SINCE WORLD WAR II

78th National Convention

August 14-18, 2023

Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel
800 Washington Avenue
St. Louis, Missouri 63101



Serving Blinded Veterans Since World War II!

see. She truly believed that he could do it at a time when he felt totally helpless.

“Maybe none of my future adventures would have happened without Bug, and it took me 14 years to tell this story to anyone else—because I just couldn’t get through it without breaking down,” he said.

Lonnie related this and other experiences to the luncheon attendees who may have been struggling with self-confidence and doubt.

“My life is dedicated to others with physical disabilities such as mine—to help them understand what is possible,” he said. “When you’re in this situation you have two choices in life: live in fear and pity or simply live.”

Start Preparing Now for “Gateway to the West”

Mark your calendars, both electronic and hard copies, as reminders for the BVA 78th National Convention at the Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, August 14-18, 2023.

Ideally located in the heart of downtown St. Louis, the Marriott Grand is near Union Train Station, Ballpark Village, the Gateway Arch, the National Blues Museum, Busch Stadium, and dozens of popular restaurants. Hotel amenities include a 24-hour fitness center, an American restaurant and bar, a grab-and-go market, and an on-site coffee shop.

The Heartland Regional Group will host the Monday-Friday, five-day gathering.

Training Service Animals And Autonomous Vehicles

by John Alsterda

What does developing autonomous driving technology have in common with training service dogs? More than you might think!

Fundamentally, guide dogs and the Waymo Driver (what we call our autonomous driving technology) share a similar mission: to make it safe and easy for people to get where they’re going.

During a recent gathering of veterans at Waymo, an employee resource group, we visited Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) and their service-dogs-in-training, including my Canine charge in training, Nathan, to clean up their training center. The dogs gave us their undivided attention and love throughout the day. This powerful capacity that ultimately allows humans to train these incredible animals always touches me, and

this time it got me thinking this: There are many similarities between training a service dog and autonomous driving technology!

Rewarding Behavior

When teaching a service dog a new skill, we reward them with attention and treats when they respond correctly to requests (and gently ignore them for poor behavior). They quickly learn to optimize their behavior for incentives. Training an autonomous system to complete a task follows a similar model.

While we can’t give technology tasty treats and head scratches, we can define a mathematical reward function that assigns positive points to desired behaviors, like staying in a lane, and penalties for behaviors that could be improved, like stopping for too long on a crosswalk. The algorithms optimize,



John Alsterda is a Systems Engineer at Waymo and a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University. He is also a U.S. Navy Reservist and a Warrior Canine Connection Volunteer.

similar to how a dog would, by solving this math problem repeatedly to determine how to get the most rewards and avoid the most penalties.

Encoding a Language

Both dogs and autonomous systems need to understand complex scenarios

without fully understanding human language. Instead, dogs like Nathan can recognize short commands and emotions. We teach dogs complex tasks slowly and iteratively, adding one component at a time until they learn the whole sequence.

The Waymo Driver works in a similar way. It would be overwhelming to code each scenario our autonomous driver has to account for in the real world. Instead, we use algorithms that simplify the world into actions such as stopping at a red light or recognizing when it's safe to proceed.

Simply put: It pays for service dogs and autonomous driving systems to make the right decisions. It's remarkable how certain aspects of learning theory are similar across species and even the development of smart driving technology! With that said, an autonomous driver system is never going to be as good at snuggling as your dog.

Learn more about Waymo at waymo.com.

Did You Know?

- Waymo, the nation's foremost autonomous driving technology company and the Father Carroll Luncheon sponsor at the BVA 77th National Convention, has announced that Los Angeles, California, is its next ride-hailing market.
- "We're deploying a round-the-clock service that provides more accessible and dependable mobility operations to all residents of L.A.," said spokesperson Amanda Zink, who also represented Waymo at the convention. "Everything we've learned over 12 years of autonomous driving has prepared us to serve Angelenos."
- Waymo was formerly known as the Google self-driving car project. In 2012 and 2013, BVA employees at the National Headquarters participated in experimental rides in the Capitol Hill area of Washington, DC, as part of the project.

True Honor

by Tracy Ferro

Many years ago, in a land far, far away, I did as many of us have done throughout the years. I reflected at a very young age about my future and wondered just what I should do with my life. All sorts of ideas went through my head and guidance, opinions, and offers abounded. Like many of us, I chose the military. I asked the Navy and Air Force about their offers, decided that I could only swim about 50 feet and, as I am Italian, feared that sharks might enjoy Italian food a little too much for my liking. Off I went into the Wild Blue Yonder.

I was a scared kid with a full head of thick hair characteristic of that time period. A photo I sent to **The Bulletin** editors was a bit too pixelated and could not be reproduced here, but I know of one thing that happened only a little before the photo was taken: I took an Oath—we all did. As I did so, I still remember the feeling of awe I had. My chest pumped out a little, my breath became a little ragged, and for the first time I realized that there was more to this than what I expected!

I took that oath five more times and each time felt even more honored to be allowed to take on the responsibility that so many expect of our military. Until the very end, I



With Tomb Sentinel Sergeant of the Guard assuring proper decorum, Joe McNeil, Paul Mimms, and Guide Dog Shadow advance to present wreath at Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Behind them six steps, Elizabeth Holmes, Tracy Ferro, and Tomb Sentinel render a brief salute during the presentation. Guards later remarked to the BVA group that they were unaware of any other occasion on which a guide dog participated in a wreath-laying at the Tomb.

never considered that I would become, for the rest of my life, a member of a very small and exclusive club: a club of American veterans.

That honor is something that nobody can take from any of us. We not only laced up the boots but wore them in service to our great nation to be recognized as such.

So, I have been honored to represent and protect our country, retire as a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer, get elected as a BVA regional group officer, and just last year be sworn in as a BVA National Officer. Yeah, I do walk around with my chest pumped out, especially when I'm offered thanks by those who cannot join our little club.

Then, something came about that I never imagined. If I'd been told in advance that it could happen, my only response would have been "Nope, that'll never happen, but it would be awesome if it did."

The night before the convention officially began the phone rang and President Joe McNeil was on the other end. He asked what I would be doing in the morning and all I could think was that I would do whatever he needed. Then he asked: "Would you like to place a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?" I will admit that right there in my hotel room with my wife sitting nearby, I came to attention, my chest pumped out a little, my breathing slowed a bit, and again the feeling of great honor washed over me as I responded with something to the effect of "Oh, hell yes!" I would have gone through liposuction to fit into a uniform to be able to do that!

Off we went—Joe, Vice President Paul Mimms, Secretary Elizabeth Holmes, and yours truly. We were also accompanied by Paul Mimms' guide dog Shadow, the first ever working dog to present a wreath. As another special honor, we were led by the first female Sergeant of the Guard, Sergeant First Class Chelsea Porterfield.

Paul Mimms told me afterward: "If I die tomorrow, it will be knowing that I lived my life completely!" I couldn't agree more. It is unfortunate that there are many who do not know of the Tomb, or what it stands for, but as veterans I'm not sure you could find one who would not jump at the chance to be so honored.

As a sidenote, many watched as Shadow started doing a little dance up there. Not sure if Paul noticed but, standing directly behind him, I did. One of my greatest fears was forming in my mind as there was no way I could let a dog poop at the Tomb and the only thing I had to catch it with was my hands. The reason you didn't see that on the news is that thankfully he was only dancing because his feet were a little warm.

If you get to the DC area, make sure you check in with BVA National Headquarters as this was an unscheduled event for us. It might be possible for you to represent us performing such an honorable duty and I can only guarantee that you too will pump out your chest a little, have a short breath or two, and walk with a little spring in your step.

To the 3rd Infantry Regiment, The Old Guard, we offer a special thanks for your duty and the honorable service you provide to America's brave Unknown Soldiers.

Cover Photos Description

At top right, first-ever graduating class of BVA Ambassadors gathered with Veterans Service Program staff members Jim Vale, Duayne Driscoll, and Marlene Davis-Lilly for a final photo at the 77th National Convention's Awards Banquet. Tracy Ferro and Elizabeth Holmes also joined the group for the photo.

At lower left and from left to right at Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, Tracy Ferro, Kathy Ferro, Ricardo Gonzales with Guide Dog Sully, and Donna-Sue Sullivan.

At lower right, Joe McNeil presents David L. Schnair Award to a surprised but happy Marlene Davis-Lilly.

LA/MS Supports Conference To Prevent Veteran Suicide

by Gary Schoelerman and Gaylen Bullion

The Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group has been working with the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (LDVA) for the last year. LDVA is the first contact for many Louisiana veterans and they refer veterans to the nearest VA Medical Center or Veterans Service Organization as needed.

LDVA has been inviting us to many of its functions and even sent a representative to the recent BVA National Convention. LDVA also joined the regional group for its World War II Museum tour and the Alexandria VA Medical Center's October 14 celebration and expo on Blind Americans Equality Day (White Cane Day). The regional group plans on nurturing this relationship and hopes to get more additional support for BVA.

On September 9, LDVA held its annual Suicide Prevention Conference and the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group was invited to attend. We asked Gaylen "Gatorbug" Bullion to attend and represent the regional group, and he represented the organization and the regional group very well.

Gatorbug was able to make a few comments on blindness at the conference. We have all become aware of the prevalence of suicide among veterans. We also know that the figures are high among the blind, especially those newly blinded or recently experiencing loss of sight. Gatorbug has a recording of the conference for anyone

desiring information beyond his summary as follows:

Today, people think it's an option to commit suicide if the mood fits. People are glad to turn a "blind eye" if it isn't them. The fact is that this topic should bother all of us. People from all walks of life are thinking that they can't go on and that nobody cares. They think suicide is the only way out. They're wrong! There is a video on YouTube of someone who jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge and lived. He said that the instant that he let go of the rail, he knew he didn't really want to do it, but it was too late! Many people who consider suicide don't want to kill themselves, but they don't know it until it is too late. They also think it won't hurt anyone but them. They are also wrong about that. Look at the lives that are ruined because of it. Fortunately, there are many getting involved now in letting such people know how much they are valued.

The fifth annual suicide prevention summit was held in Baton Rouge at the American Legion, Nicholson Post 38. It was organized by Larry Williams of LDVA and sponsored by the Tulane University Center for Brain Health, which provided lunch for all attendees. River Road Coffee donated fresh coffee throughout the day.

The summit started off great and ended in similar fashion. It was well thought out, perfectly executed, and supported by several participating vendors.

I was overwhelmed to find out how many groups are out there offering help to our veterans who think they can't go on. Special

thanks to Tony Bacala, a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives for District 59 in Ascension Parish, who came to learn what he could about suicide prevention. Several vendors even offer training in what to ask, how to listen, and even what signs to look for. Much of this training is not only for veterans but for first responders and common people (meaning people from all walks of life).

There are people out there who have a problem that we would not believe are in that situation. If you are one who is contemplating suicide or would like to get involved helping those who are, I would tell you this: You CAN make a difference. And, thanks to summits like this, you can find out how. If you would like to get a copy of the summit, please contact Gaylen Bullion of the Louisiana/ Mississippi Regional Group at gatorbug51@gmail.com.

Suicide is a serious problem. Will you be part of the solution?

BVA Offers Input for National Story

Executive Director Don Overton contributed to a **USA Today** article published October 19 and entitled “Blind to Problems: VA’s new medical record system is shutting out visually impaired patients.”

The article, written by Darius Tahir of **Kaiser Health News**, details the potential difficulties the more than a million veterans may encounter as they attempt to use VA’s new digital health record system, developed by Oracle Cerner. Two of the more prevalent issues are that screens do not allow users to zoom in on the text and that screen reader software translating text to speech isn’t compatible.

“None of the systems are accessible to these patients,” Don is quoted as saying.

“As patients often struggle even to log into websites or enter basic information needed to check in for hospital visits, we find that our community stops trying, checks out, and disengages, the end result being dependence on other individuals and giving up independence.”

Because of the problems, the developing VA medical record system has been delayed until June 2023.

Regional Groups Recognize, Share Vital Role of White Cane Safety

Special receptions, programs, and walks commemorating White Cane Awareness Day, now known also as Blind Americans Equality Day, have involved several BVA regional groups in different parts of the country. The activities typically occur at VA medical facilities, state and local government agencies, community centers, shopping centers, schools, and other organizations of and for the blind.



Left to right behind BVA White Cane display in West Los Angeles, BROS Beatriz Sanchez-Fields, Southern California Regional Group 1st Vice President Gary Simpson, President Ken Asam, and Supervisory Blind Rehabilitation Specialist Ted Zadourian.

The official date of October 15, this year falling on a Saturday, moved some of the commemorative events to later in the month. Although complete accounts of all the activities are still not in just yet, the Captain Buddy Spivey Razorback and Southern California Regional Groups have both reported successful participation.

In Arkansas, the State Division of Services for the Blind hosts a program for White Cane Awareness Day. The program consists of various speakers addressing the topic of the white cane. The Central Arkansas Veterans Health Care Services (CAVHS) is usually asked to furnish a veteran to speak. CAVHS, in turn, asked the regional group to provide a speaker. The request was accepted and Treasurer James Lea represented the regional group with a 20-minute informal delivery of “What the Cane Means to Me, a Veteran” that was seen both live and via Zoom.

In the main lobby of the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center, the Southern California Regional Group teamed up with Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist Beatriz Sanchez and Supervisory Blind Rehabilitation Specialist Ted Zadourian at two display tables. The purpose was simply to increase awareness of the importance of the white cane. The target groups were the VA medical staff and veterans visiting the medical center, most of whom were not familiar with the VIST program or BVA. The VIST staff screened several veterans for potential eligibility for the program. The BVA team met a potential new member and is now following up on the lead.

Hornik Joins BVA Staff, Launches VetTech

BVA’s long awaited VetTech program, an idea in the mix of desired initiatives for some

time, lifted off on October 5 with a presentation by OrCam’s Michelle Mendez, National Director of Sales for the United States.

The impetus behind the effort, which consists of a weekly presentation and podcast series that will frequently feature guests, is newly appointed Director of Special Initiatives Timothy Hornik.

Tim is a former BVA Director of District 2 and most recently a staff member of the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto, California. He officially joined BVA on August 22.

Supplementing the VetTech Wednesday presentations are twice monthly VetTech Talk Sessions held on Thursdays at the same 2:00pm Eastern Time start. The link to enter the sessions is the same for the Wednesday and Thursday meetings.

In contrast to the more formal Wednesday presentations, VetTech Talk is community driven, ensuring that content is focused on participants’ questions and goals. The VetTech Team will gather participant suggestions and thoughts in shaping the future of the series.



Tim Hornik and guide dog Barney in BVA office at 77th National Convention.

For more information, contact Tim Hornik at thornik@bva.org or visit <https://bva.org> and link to information on VetTech.

Wade Davis Named Interim Director

A name familiar to many in BVA circles now appears among those of the BVA Board of Directors.

Wade Davis, a resident of LaPorte, Texas, and a recent president of the Greater Houston Regional Group, has been appointed Interim Director of District 4 in the position recently vacated by Kevin Jackson. He will serve in the post until the next District 4 election.

Wade is a U.S. Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. He served in the Army Security Agency with a top-secret security clearance and was honorably discharged on December 28, 1971 as a Sergeant E-5.

Following his discharge from the Army, Wade enrolled in Texas Bible College with a major in Theology. While at the college he met his wife, Brenda. They have two children and five grandchildren.

In 1995, Wade began to lose his sight and was referred to the Texas Commission for the Blind. With the Commission's help he was able to work an additional 13 years. In 2008, his sight loss reached a point at which he could no longer perform his work duties.

Wade joined BVA in 2009 as a member of the Greater Houston Regional Group. In 2010, he attended the VA Southwestern Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC) in Tucson, Arizona, his first experience at a BRC. In 2012, he became the treasurer for the Greater Houston Regional Group. He was elected president of the group in January 2018 and served until January 2022.

Additionally, in 2012 Wade became a volunteer BVA Veterans Service Officer at the Houston VA Medical Center. One year

later, he was named the full-time Veterans Service Officer and continued to be stationed in Houston. In 2015, organizational changes with BVA's National Service Officers offered both him and Brenda the opportunity to work at BVA National Headquarters as Veterans Service Officers, Wade in the BVA office in Alexandria and Brenda at the VA Appeals Management Center in Washington, DC.

In 2016, Wade took on additional responsibilities as the Veterans Care Review Coordinator, doing site inspections of VA's BRCs and VISOR Clinics. He retired from BVA employment in January 2022.

With the goal of influencing changes in Texas law, Wade has worked with the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities in clarifying the definitions of service animals and emotional support animals and how they differ from one another. He has also worked with a work study group to improve guide dog handlers' experiences with Uber.

Wade looks forward to serving on the BVA National Board of Directors and working with the regional groups of District 4.

Mimms, Murphy Present Braille Flags in Kansas

National Vice President Paul Mimms presented a Bronze Braille U.S. flag at the opening of a new VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Kansas City, Kansas, on July 8.

Paul resides in the Kansas City area but a short drive from the new Clinic, which will offer primary care, labs, pharmacies, and both telehealth and behavioral health services.

Present at the ribbon-cutting event was Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs Ranking Member Jerry Moran (R-KS), who recognized as part of the ceremony both the



Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs Ranking Member Jerry Moran (R-KA) made time to approach Paul Mimms and guide dog Shadow as they greeted other dignitaries at summer ribbon cutting.

significance of the Braille Flag as well as Paul Mimms’ service to veterans nationally and within the Heartland Regional Group.

“I appreciate all Mr. Mimms does for veterans in Kansas and across our country, and I look forward to displaying a replica of the Bronze Braille Flag in my office,” Senator Moran said.

The flag presentation was part of the American Braille Flag Project (ABFP), an initiative of Georgia Regional Group member Walt Peters, who served three tours in Vietnam. The mission of the project, now assisted also by Paul Kaminsky, Florida Regional Group and formerly BVA’s Director of District 5, is to assure that a bronze copy of the Braille Flag be located in every VA facility throughout the country and in classrooms where blind and low-vision students can

experience it by a touch of their fingers.

ABFP also made a stop in Eastern Kansas at the Lieutenant General Richard J. Seitz VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic of Junction City, Kansas, on October 14. Heartland Regional Group President Jeanie Murphy and her husband, Robert, Vice President of the National BVA Auxiliary, participated in the ceremony with BVA members Steve Smith and Bob Morin.

The selection of October 14 as the date for the Junction City donation and ceremony was fitting with Blind Americans Equality Day falling on Saturday, October 15.

The American Braille Flag Project’s motto is “Raising the Flag for All to See.” For more information about the project, visit

<https://abfp.us>.

BVA regional groups across the country have supported the ideas and vision behind the project, donating Braille Flags in various VA facilities and educational institutions. The flags are the brainchild of Randolph Cabral and produced by the nonprofit Kansas Braille Transcription Institute which he founded in 1995.



Jeanie Murphy, left, and Sandra Wood, Chaplain of Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary Post 1786 (Manhattan, Kansas), unveil Braille Flag donated by Heartland Regional Group.

Flag Presented at Museum Grand Opening

Gary Schoelerman, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, was one of more than 300 present as the National Vietnam War Museum of Fort Wolters, Texas held its grand opening on June 25. The purpose once again: presentation of one more Bronze Braille U.S. Flag and identifying plaque.

“Because of 104-degree heat at the outdoor ceremony and delays due to problems with the audio, everything was halted early and I was not able to speak before the large group as previously scheduled,” Gary said.

The trip from Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, to the entrance of Fort Wolters in Weatherford, Texas, was not in vain, however, as Gary later presented the flag, plaque, and several dozen BVA brochures to Dr. Jim Messinger, treasurer of the National Vietnam War Museum project and now treasurer of the new museum itself.

Plans for the museum were formalized in 1998 to develop a national venue that would create an atmosphere of learning about the



Left to right at National Vietnam War Museum: Gary Schoelerman, Jim Messinger, Marelle Schoelerman.

Vietnam War era, and engage people of all ages, nationalities, and political points of view.

“Dr. Messinger apologized for not allowing me to present the flag and speak before the crowd, but he was sensitive to those wilting in the heat,” Gary said. “He told me he would find a place of honor in their art gallery to display the flag and plaque.”

Gary compared the opening of the museum to the inauguration in 2000 of the World War II Museum in New Orleans. “At first everything in New Orleans was in a small warehouse with a relatively small number of artifacts, but it is now considered one of the finest museums in the world.”

He also said one of the displays of particular interest to BVA members could well be a monument to the 5,000 military dogs that were left in Vietnam when their handlers were sent home in 1973.

Michaun Harrison Featured In VA Golf Clinic Blog

Michaun Harrison, an enthusiastic participant in nearly everything related to BVA or adaptive sports, was featured in a blog as she enjoyed a variety of recreational events at the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic in Iowa City, Iowa.

A resident of Fredericksburg, Virginia, and a member of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, Michaun attended the Clinic, known previously as the TEE Tournament, for the third time.

The blog focused on Michaun’s ability to draw parallels between life and golf and then apply those parallels.

“If the ball goes off a different way, or my life takes a different turn, I have to figure out how to get back in it and keep swinging,” the blog quoted.

In a round of golf, she said, you need to look at where you're going rather than where you've been and not let the past define you.

Michaun is also an avid kayaker and a current member of the Fredericksburg Chapter of Team River Runner. At the Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, where she has attended four times, she participates in skiing, scuba, snowmobiling, curling, bowling, fishing, archery, and goalball. In addition to the focus on golf at the Golf Clinic, she enjoys the kayaking, horseback riding, fishing, and bowling activities.

Columbus Chapter Walks For PTSD Awareness

The Georgia Regional Group's Columbus Chapter continues to remain active participants in VA and community service events throughout the year.

During June's VA Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Awareness Month, the group participated in a walk stemming from a newly released VA initiative to bring greater awareness to PTSD among veterans.



Top row, left to right: Joe McNeil, Clifford Jones, Jonathan Barron, Jerry Bentley, Elizabeth Holmes, and Bobby Hodge. Bottom row, left to right holding BVA Banner: Sarah and Pat Lidell of The American Legion.

“Any individual or team could submit an event using video or photos, the only stipulation being that the activity last 30 minutes or more,” said Elizabeth Holmes. “The Columbus Chapter opted for a walk on the 2.2-mile Lake Bottom Park track in the heart of Columbus, and we did not allow the hot weather to dampen our spirits as we accomplished our goal!”

Ambassadors Forge Ahead

The second class of BVA Ambassador trainees have now completed more than half of the scheduled Zoom educational sessions and are gearing up to take a final exam and finish other graduation requirements. The final training session will be January 17.

Remaining topics include VHA prosthetics, VA grants, survivor benefits, claims appeals, continuum of care, ethics and responsibilities, and effective advocacy.

The first course was completed last spring. Graduates who were able to attend the national convention were recognized in several meetings and events.

BVA Ambassadors are the key liaison between blind and low-vision veterans and BVA's Veterans Service Program. They serve in key roles in the dissemination of valuable benefits information and crucial advocacy tips to help make the most of VA benefits for blind and low-vision veterans, including access to Visual Impairment Services Teams, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists, Vision Impairment Services in Outpatient Rehabilitation programs, Vision Impairment Centers to Optimize Remaining Sight programs, and residential Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs).

BVA Ambassadors are also volunteers, serving about 15 hours per week at a VA BRC or a Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient program. They accumulate creditable volunteer hours for BVA under the VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement (previously the VA Volunteer Service Program).

Although BVA Ambassadors are not required to be blind or low-vision veterans, the latter have certain advantages as they function in their role. The ideal BVA Ambassador candidates are blind or low-vision veterans who have successfully completed BRC training and can participate in person, either at a BRC (preferred) or at a VA Blind Outpatient program at their local VA Medical Center. The candidate must be able to set the example for others by functioning independently, demonstrating and applying the skills they acquired through their training.

Look for forthcoming details about the third round of Ambassador training.

Waymo Accessibility Network Includes BVA as Inaugural Member

BVA has joined 12 other national nonprofit advocates for people with disabilities as a founding inaugural member of the Waymo Accessibility Network.

Waymo LLC, an American autonomous technology company formerly known as the Google Self-Driving Project, was a key sponsor of the BVA 77th National Convention (Father Carroll Luncheon, August 25).

The official announcement is accessible at <https://blog.waymo.com/2022/10/launching-waymo-accessibility-network.htm>. A **Forbes Magazine** exclusive published October 6 also publicized the launch.

Golf Outing Gives Generously to BVA

BVA was again the fortunate beneficiary of proceeds from the Mark Kline Memorial Golf Outing this past July 30 in Norton, Ohio. The event, now five years strong and still growing, celebrates the life of a contact lens and spectacle frame sales representative who admired veterans so much that he annually participated in the Rolling Thunder motorcycle ride in memory of all MIAs and POWs.

Kline's family and friends, most notably Mark Holaday, Kim Snodgrass, and Rod Snow, organized the annual event in 2018 after his untimely death from a heart attack. The Outing resulted in a \$10,000 donation this year and sizable donations the previous years.

"Mark enjoyed golf and the friendships that it creates, so it was logical to have a golf outing in his name," Snow told the **Norton Post Newspaper** in 2018. "Kim Snodgrass and Mark Holaday spoke with Mark's widow, Terry, and together they agreed that blending golf, optical/vision, and Mark's respect for veterans made the Blinded Veterans Association the logical beneficiary for the proceeds."

BVA expresses a heartfelt thanks for the kindness and support demonstrated by all who are affiliated with the Mark Kline Memorial Golf Outing.

"We have a good time doing this and, being able to honor our friend and assist an incredible organization is icing on the cake," said Mark Holaday following this year's outing.

Mid-Atlantic RG Supports Memorial Brick Program

In late May, the BVA Mid-Atlantic Regional Group purchased bricks in honor of two deceased blinded veterans from Fredericksburg, Virginia, the late Arnold Doty and Harold Miller, as a member of the Fredericksburg Area Veterans Council (FAVC), a group composed of local Veterans Service Organizations.

Arnold was a BVA member and Harold was a blinded veteran co-worker of Arnold's.

More than 25 years ago, a local veteran began doing research on the names listed on the only memorial to veterans in Fredericksburg. The Memorial was dedicated to a handful of World War I veterans. After his research, he realized there were many more not listed from World War I who had died in combat, which was a requirement for a name to be listed.



Michaun Harrison puts finishing touches on brick honoring Arnold J. Doty.



Left to right, Cathy Doty Rowling, Michaun Harrison, and Cindy Doty. Cathy and Cindy are daughters of Arnold Doty, a member of the regional group who passed away five years ago.

In 1999, FAVC approached the City of Fredericksburg with a plan to build a new Fallen Heroes Memorial to include veterans from all eras of service. Once approved, they reached out to corporate and private donors to garner support for a new Fallen Heroes Memorial brick program, a way to honor deceased veterans who passed away after returning home from the battlefields.

The Memorial was dedicated on Veterans Day in 2008 and currently has almost 400 names of those who died in all periods of war. Bricks line the pathway in front of the Memorial and the walkway in front of the flagpole, which is the site of the original World War I Memorial.

Is Your Heart a Precious Friend, A Casual Friend, or Your Enemy?

by Paschal Baute

**If you have a healthy heart, you have a healthy life.
When you have a healthy life, you have hope.
And that is everything. — An Arabian proverb
Heart disease is a sedentary, food-borne illness. — Cardiologist**

Bad news first:

Fact: The leading cause of death today in the USA is heart disease or heart failure, occurring at 64.5 years of age on average. Moreover, in one out of five cases, no warning happens. Heart failure can be a silent killer. Your heart cannot be up to the lifelong task of continuing healthy functioning unless you have decided it is your precious friend to respect and honor daily.

Good news:

In the Bible, the heart is cited 826 times, according to the Strong Concordance. This term stands for the inner part of a person. “Heart” refers to the entire inner self, the driving force behind our personality. In other words, our inner self is what is being described when we say “she has a good heart” or “he has a great heart.” However, we begin with biological considerations to understand the urgency of heart care in today’s internet world.

The best news is that your heart health is between your ears, including your attitude and appreciation for all that it does. Let’s proceed with some concrete facts.

First, consider the incredible, exquisite machine your heart is. Not much bigger than your closed fist, weighing only 9-12 ounces and tucked in the safest position in your body

immediately under your sternum in the middle of your chest, your heart beats approximately 78 times per minute, unceasingly, incessantly, with hardly ever a pause in its four-chamber ceaseless rhythm.

Your heart serves some 600 muscles, 300 joints, 26 feet of your intestine, 76 organs, and a million microscopic sphincter muscles. It powers 11 complex organ systems such as your liver, which is the in-house automatic pharmacy, delivering chemicals, removing toxins, and storing energy. It fuels some 50 billion neurons in your brain and a total of 76 trillion cells overall. By the way, your brain is the most bloodthirsty of all the organs, requiring 20 percent of your blood although it weighs only a couple of pounds. Your lungs use 400 million tiny cells to get rid of the waste products, carbon dioxide, and refuel your entire body with oxygen.

The heart pumps 100,000 times each day to deliver 2,000 gallons of blood. With so many needs for fuel over an average lifetime, your heart will deliver a million barrels of blood, which is equivalent to four super tankers. That is how much work your precious heart does if you treat it right.

“The best medicine for your heart is at the end of your fork,” said one cardiologist, frustrated with the dietary choices of so many of his patients. A good case can be made that

poor eating choices are the primary cause of cardiac disease. It may be harder to give up that extra cookie than to go outside and take your daily regular walk. Certainly, both eating choices and exercise are major contributors to our astonishing death rate from heart failure. If you have any doubt, you can look around and see for yourself the high rate of obesity among men, women, and children of all ages.

Even if you are careful with appropriate diet, lifestyle, and stress management, you may not live long or healthy without regular exercise. If you exercise occasionally, that much is still better than none, but a vital key secret to heart health is regular cardio exercise.

As we age, our heart does not slow down but slowly shrinks in size, losing precious cells. We cannot make it work more by sitting on the couch or in front of the computer. Moreover, we know that frequent exercise is also a remedy and a cure for Type 2 Diabetes. Exercise also helps control weight, energizes the immune system, and stimulates brain cells with mood-lifting hormones. Such natural endorphin highs could be a splendid contribution to mental health.

During the past ten years, I have lost ten friends, all about my age. None of them had any regular exercise routine, not even walking. My heart, less than one percent of my body weight, does all the work to keep me going and well. I hope to do better.

So, your heart needs regular exercise, without question, to feel young, vital, and strong. My context: Now going on 94 years of age, I was lucky at age 15 to fall in love with cross country running, which was my needed escape from too much awareness of the conflict between my parents, my bedroom being next to theirs. That running,

with my expansive imagination, also fueled my lifelong passion to stretch the envelope, to choose the difficult over the easy and to challenge myself. So, I have run or swam all my life. I see myself as a miracle of serendipity with setbacks becoming new doorways.

Recommended amounts, in general, are at least 150 minutes a week of moderate exercise, or 120 minutes of cardiovascular exercise. I am currently swimming three times each week for a total of about two hours. This includes some sprinting during my swimming in order to send fresh neurons into my brain and immune system. On rest days from swimming, I have devised an easy chair regime of 12 exercises for legs and arms.

I must admit that one of the reasons why my wife at 89 and I, pushing 94, are so active mentally and physically is that we have been on ski lifts together well more than a thousand times. My longevity, I confess, is being blessed with marrying an adventurous, outdoor-oriented, farm girl accustomed to working from dawn to dusk.

As you consider whether to make that incredible little heart of yours a precious friend, do not presume to add any big new change without conferring with your family or primary care physician. By the way, VA provides regular recreational sports programs for veterans with sight loss.

It is never too late to start. My son-in-law at age 54 just received a double lung transplant after three months in the hospital. He had to start from scratch, one breath and one small step at a time. Now, weeks later, he is strong enough to drive himself to physical therapy. It's never too late when you start small!

You have only one heart. It determines how long and how healthy you will live. Make sure

it knows how much you love and care for it. Prevention is better and easier to accomplish than a cure.

Your heart will love you and keep performing when you ask it to do a little more each day to stay stronger by regular exercise.

Last word: Your heart is your most precious friend. Let this friend know that fact by some appropriate loving. If you treasure your heart, you will always have reason for hope.

Blinded veteran Paschal Baute writes about resilience, wellness, gratitude, and grace in both print and eBook. He was honored to be inducted into the Kentucky Veterans Hall of Fame Honor Roll, Class of 2018, for outstanding military and community service. The commendation reads in part: “Mr. Paschal Baute... service to his communities is voluminous, a testament to his love of God and an insatiable passion to help others, even after being diagnosed by VA as ‘catastrophically disabled’ (legally blind).”

Did You Know?

- BVA’s Veterans Service Program is hiring for the full-time position of National Service Officer (NSO).
- Acting under the general supervision of the Director of the Veterans Service Program, the NSO provides fellow veterans and their families with claims assistance and expertise in the area of state, local, and federal benefits while serving as a role model for successfully adjusting to sight loss through blind rehabilitation training. The NSO counsels veterans to obtain employment and encourages them to utilize their skills to retain maximum independence and self-esteem.
- The successful candidate will develop working relationships with applicable government departments and agencies at all levels.
- For a general statement about the opportunity, a detailed job description, and instructions on how to apply, visit <https://bva.org/employment>.

Additional Accessibility Options for Reading The Bulletin

Readers of the last few 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.





TeamBVA Buzz

by Joe Bogart

Taking on the Potomac

Greetings Teammates! This quarter's report covers TeamBVA's first scheduled event of

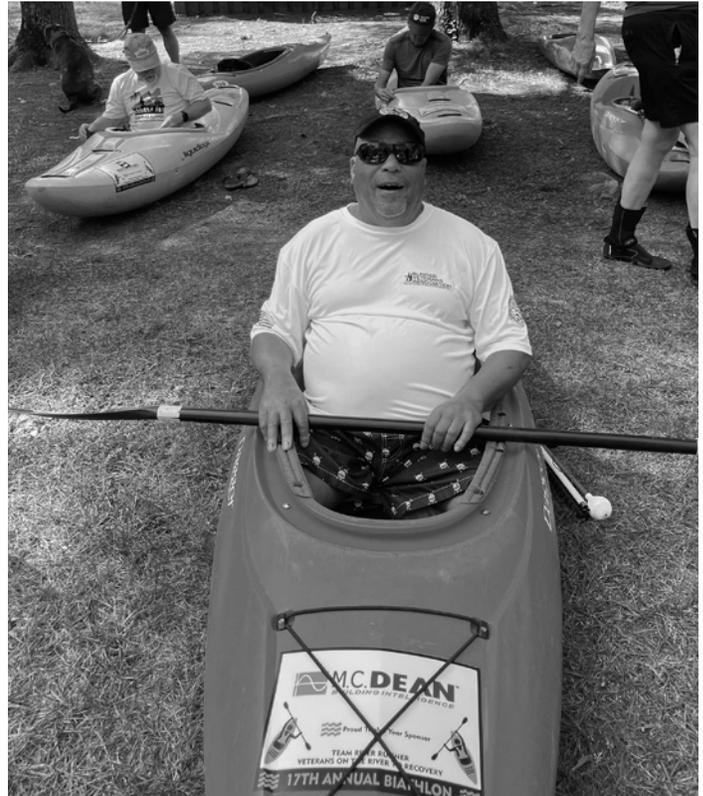
the fiscal year and upcoming events that all members are eligible to attend.

Our first event of the 2022-23 fiscal year was a flat-water kayaking event hosted by our friends at Team River Runner (TRR). We had a powerful paddling day at Riley's Lock, a pleasant traverse on a gently flowing wide section of the Potomac River in Maryland following our amazing BVA 77th National Convention in Washington, DC.

As our 28 BVA members and family members unloaded the bus, TRR Founder Joe Mornini and his team issued the required safety briefings and personal flotation vests. He also fitted all paddlers for kayaks and assigned guides to each. Because we had several first-time kayakers attending, the adjustments and land instruction took some time. Not everyone had the Colorado River on their kayaking resume like Brian Harris and Lonnie Bedwell.

Soon enough, however, it was time to launch the boats from the dock with a specialized roller system that allowed new and experienced paddlers alike to ease into the water. As the kayakers found their balance, instructors and guides quickly took on the charge and the fun began!

BVA member at-large and National Judge Advocate Stephen Butler remarked that it was his "first time ever squeezing into a small



Notwithstanding several past adaptive sports experiences, including scuba diving, Emerald Coast Regional Group member Darryl Goldsmith has an expression of awe as he anticipates kayaking on the Potomac River with fellow national convention attendees. Photo courtesy of Michaun Harrison.

one-person kayak." After completing his first experience paddling, Stephen was inspired.

"Participating in adaptive activities [like kayaking] reminds me that I can live a normal life," he said. "It helps me feel like a part of the community and not just a burden on the community."

Tracy Ferro was accompanied by his wife, Kathy, for their first time ever kayaking. Almost in unison, the Ferros exclaimed that "it was really fun to try something new that

we have never tried before, and we cannot wait to do it again!”

For Eddie Miranda of the Charles Register Regional Group, the TRR event was his second time ever in a kayak. When asked what doing adaptive sports activities like kayaking means to him, Eddie quickly answered:

“It means raising the bar, going through the wall, or over the wall. It means that having blindness does not define me. Adaptive activities allow me to do the activities I did before. I was big into competitive sports and felt I had lost that.”

For intermediate kayaker Michaun Harrison of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, adaptive activities like kayaking “gives mental stimulation and makes me feel like I am living again. It helps remind me that even though we have visual impairments, we don’t have to stop and limit our activities. We can live a normal, productive, and quality life as we do the things we used to do.”

After a couple hours of instruction and paddling that included both some capsizing and some wading in the shallow, cool waters of Riley’s Lock, it was chow time. As our excited and damp kayakers chatted about their experiences, they enjoyed a delicious meal from Mission BBQ Restaurant, complete with all the trimmings. The meal came to us courtesy of our friends at the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

BVA members do not have to wait until our next convention to do something fun and adaptive like kayaking with Team River Runner. TRR has chapters across the United States, and they host events for disabled veterans of all kayaking ability levels. Just go to <https://teamriverrunner.org> to find a chapter near you!

If you are nervous about getting back into sports and recreational activities after sight loss, Eddie Miranda has some advice:

“Take a baby step at first. Try something that requires very little faith and trust in other people. For me, it was easy. I could have gone rafting down a lazy river. Once I got a small taste, the spirit in me made me want to take a bigger bite!”

Tracy Ferro’s advice was blunt as usual:

“Just do it! People are amazed that we can use the iPhone. I know blind people that drive race cars. The possibilities are endless if we just have the drive and desire. And blindness sucks, but eyesight is just a convenience. You don’t lose your vision just because you go blind.”

Stephen Butler points to an imaginary scene:

“You see that little kid chasing that ball over there—what makes him better than us? We can do anything we put our minds to!”

Michaun Harrison summed it all up nicely: “As blinded veterans, we have to go out and lead by example.”

So, let’s all get out and lead other blinded veterans by example! Let’s continue to go through that wall or over it and not let blindness define us!

Upcoming TeamBVA Events

Do you want to get active? Here are some upcoming adaptive events that TeamBVA has scheduled.

An enduring requirement for all events is that the attendee be able to travel independently using suitable assistance methods for the selected mode of travel. The following trips are co-sponsored with Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports (STARS) and attendees are selected and referred by TeamBVA.

Registration is open, with priority going to those who have never attended a STARS Ski and Ride event. Send an email to Joe Bogart at teambva@bva.org and copy Lonnie Bedwell at lonnie.r.bedwell@att.net. Once selected, prospective attendees will be given a link to complete their registration.

Blind and Low-Vision Veterans Ski and Ride:

#1: Dates: January 22–January 26, 2023

(normally best for first timers)

#2: Dates: February 5–February 9, 2023

#3: Dates: March 5–March 9, 2023

- Cost: A \$100 deposit is required from all veterans, which will be returned upon completion of the camp and a survey.
- Lodging: Participants will be staying at the STARS Ranch for the duration of their trip.
- Space for family members is limited. Cost is \$399 per family member. This

covers accommodations, breakfast and dinner daily, and daily transportation to and from the resort. Please include in your email that you wish to bring a family member.

- Meals: Breakfast, snacks, and dinner are included.
- Registration: To register for any STARS event, send an email to teambva@bva.org and include your name, address, phone number, and skiing experience. Indicate if you have ever attended a STARS Ski event.
- Not Included: Airfare transportation or travel expenses to and from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, are not currently included for prior attendees. First-time attendees may have travel reimbursed by BVA only after attending the event. Additional opportunities will soon be posted on the BVA website under Programs < TeamBVA < Events.



Mid-Atlantic Regional Group members Lawrence Harrison (Washington, DC), Michaun Harrison (Fredericksburg, Virginia), and Harvey Guary (Baltimore, Maryland) relax indoors after an invigorating STARS program day on the Colorado ski slopes last March.



Veterans Service Program Update

by James R. Vale

In 2010, the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act established a Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family

Caregivers (PCAFC) of eligible veterans who “...have a serious injury incurred or aggravated in the line of duty in the active military, naval, or air service on or after September 11, 2001.”

PCAFC provides benefits such as training, respite care, counseling, technical support, beneficiary travel, access to health care (if qualified) through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA), and a monthly stipend. The PCAFC legislation was a great start, but it did not include veterans who served prior to September 11, 2001.

In 2018, the VA MISSION Act expanded PCAFC eligibility to Family Caregivers of eligible veterans who incurred or aggravated a serious injury in the line of duty prior to September 11, 2001, but not all at once. The expansion began a phased approach that started with veterans who served prior to May 7, 1975, establishing new benefits for designated Primary Family Caregivers of eligible veterans. It made further changes affecting program eligibility and VA’s evaluation of PCAFC applications. These changes took effect October 1, 2020.

Last year, on September 22, 2021, through regulatory changes, VA extended PCAFC eligibility by one year for certain veterans and their family caregivers. This included categories for legacy participants, legacy applicants, and their family caregivers. A monthly stipend is part of this extension.

For eligibility purposes, a legacy participant is defined as a veteran or service member who was participating in PCAFC as of September 30, 2020, and a legacy applicant is a veteran or service member who applied for PCAFC before October 1, 2020, and who was accepted into the program on or after October 1, 2020.

The final group in this phase-in period are veterans who served after May 7, 1975, but before September 11, 2021. This last group’s service period becomes qualifying service starting October 1, 2022.

This year, on September 14, 2022, VA again submitted to the Federal Register an interim final rule extending PCAFC eligibility for certain veterans and their family caregivers through September 30, 2025. What this means is that legacy participants, legacy applicants, and their family caregivers will have their eligibility extended by three years to September 30, 2025.

If your PCAFC claim is denied, you can file up to two clinical appeals through the patient advocate’s office at your VA Medical Center. Under the Appeals Modernization Act, you can now file a Higher-Level Review (HLR) with no new evidence, or a Supplemental Claim with new and relevant evidence. You can file a clinical appeal, HLR, or Supplemental Claim in any order, but the final option for an appeal is with the Board of Veterans Appeals, which makes the final agency decision for VA.

The rules for PCAFC eligibility can be confusing, especially with these specific expansion changes. If you have questions, or for more information, email the BVA Veterans Service Program at vsp@bva.org, or call the VA Caregiver Support Line at 855-260-3274.



A Development Model For BVA's Future

by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

Now that the challenges of the BVA 77th National Convention have passed and the autumn season is upon us, I have a little time and some **Bulletin** space to reflect upon all that I have absorbed in my first year as the Director of Development with BVA. I have also conducted a mental review of my much anticipated first convention. It has been an action-packed and exciting ride thus far.

After passing through the first phase of this journey, I now have a better understanding of our organization. I am very excited to bring forth new ideas to not only improve future conventions, but also create a sustaining development model for BVA's future.

For you who were able to make it to Washington, DC, the convention was hopefully a happy reunion after a two-year hiatus. For me it was an introduction to members, exhibitors and sponsors, VA staff, and our Board of Directors.

Essentially, the term Development in the context of nonprofit organizations is about revenue but, more importantly, it is all about relationships. The convention allowed me to actively engage with the following segments of people and learn about their motivations in partnering with BVA.

Engaging with you, our members, greatly increased my understanding of your remarkable journeys and the stories behind them. Many of these stories are nothing short of heroic. When appropriate, these sources of inspiration can and should be shared with

those who may otherwise never hear them but who are motivated to support you who have given so much to preserve the freedom and way of life we continue to enjoy as Americans. We understand that not all stories are comfortably shared and worthy of public consumption but please consider many of your experiences to be the genuine treasures that they most certainly are.

Engaging with our convention sponsors, most of whom were also exhibitors, has allowed me to understand their business goals and how we can best partner with them by aligning their goals with ours. The goal is to build year-round partnerships so that they become more than a distant relationship that visits us at an event once a year. Our hope is that these sources of support become part of the BVA family.

Engaging at the convention with our full staff and learning more about their responsibilities and activities, coupled with my involvement in putting the schedule together, gave me greater insight into new sources of possible engagement and revenue expansion in the immediate future. I am referring specifically to the new Ambassador and VetTech training programs, TeamBVA, the Care Review initiative, and scholarships.

A primary goal of the 77th convention was to have a little fun and enjoyment, but it also helped us establish valuable relationships and a foundation on which we can begin building a successful development model. Witnessing how it all unfolds moving forward will be tremendously exciting.



Chaplain's Corner

by Dr. Ron Lester

This past summer somewhat reminded me of the summer of 1964 in Oklahoma. I was working for an air conditioning company that was installing add-ons for their heating units. My job was to wrap a vapor seal around the ducts in the attics.

For me in Arizona this summer, it was just like it was in Oklahoma that year. Temperatures topped a hundred degrees every day. In Oklahoma that summer, we had 21 days of 105 degrees.

I remember asking God at the time if the conditions in those attics were what hell was like. It was a logical question because the attic fans would finally come on when the temperature reached 140! I was so miserable. I wondered if what I was doing then was to be my job for the rest of my life. My body was dehydrated every day, and I soon knew it was time to change my direction.

It seemed that God was directing me to go by the draft board to see just where I stood. One day, something told me I should talk to the Air Force recruiter, but most of my concern was my number on the draft board.

I already knew that I did not want to go into the Army, Navy, or the Marines. I know that each of you has your favorite branch of service and that I'm inevitably inviting controversy. I did speak with that aforementioned recruiter and chose the Air Force, with God directing my steps to my first assignment at Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico!

I had gone to church all my life and I knew the verses in Psalm 37:4-5 and Proverbs 3:4-5. I knew even at that time that God would direct our steps and that he would

direct mine. It is sometimes useful to look back, asking ourselves how our experiences have shaped us into the people we are today. Romans 5:3-4 says: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

As I have grown older and hopefully wiser, I now think more often about the direction God leads each of us. I see that that God intervenes on our behalf through divine protection and divine appointments. He also gives us divine connections, sometimes through someone who offers us an encouraging word or puts in a good word for us. He can direct every step of our lives even when we don't always realize it!

As you feel the physical heat of a summer sun, probably not again until 2023, or as you feel the heat inherent in life's challenges and obligations, please think to give thanks to God for that air-conditioned office or home that is nice and cool. In addition, think back on the times God has directed your every step. Just as we've been blessed and directed, let us bless and direct someone else today as instruments in God's hands.



Of Note

Scammers Use PACT Act To Target Innocent Veterans

According to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act) will be the largest expansion of veterans benefits in history.

Predatory individuals and companies, real or fictitious, are taking advantage of new opportunities to commit fraud with an increase in PACT Act-related phishing (email), vishing (phone), and social media scams targeting veterans to access their PACT Act benefits or submit claims on their behalf. Multiple veterans are known to have been contacted by such parties during the past 60 days through cold calls, emails, or text messages.

VA was recently notified about law firms targeting veterans who were stationed at Camp Lejeune. The firms are pressuring veterans to sign contracts allowing the attorneys to represent them in federal lawsuits. Contact information for the veterans is likely obtained through the Camp Lejeune registry or other public registries.

Aggressive tactics used include emails outlining a sense of urgency and the need to act immediately, advertising for lawsuit support with no initial fees unless the suit is won, amplification of false information about the Camp Lejeune crisis on social media and television, asking veterans to sign contracts requiring access to medical records and demanding a large percentage of the total amount recovered for veterans.

VBA has launched a communications campaign to spread awareness of PACT Act best practices, fraud tactics, and prevention strategies. The specifics and most recent information are available at VBA's social media profiles (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube). They include the following tips:

- Do not provide personal, benefits, medical, or financial details online or over the phone. Federal agencies will not contact you unless you make a request.
- Do not click on online ads or engage with social media that appear suspicious.
- Check for “**https://**” at the start of all website addresses.
- Enable multi-factor authentication on all accounts.
- Work with veteran service providers you already know—such as the BVA Veterans Service Program.
- Report any suspected fraud to **reportfraud.ftc.gov**, **vaighotline@va.gov**, or call 800-488-8244.

Process Simplified for Medical Debt Relief

In early March 2022, the White House announced an effort toward reducing financial hardship for veterans by simplifying the process by which they can apply for medical debt relief.

Three months later the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) launched a simplified application process allowing easier access to

the debt relief veterans may need. The process was supplemented by an online application option last month at <https://www.va.gov/manage-va-debt>.

Veterans may still apply for medical debt relief in their local facilities' revenue office or by calling the Health Resource Center at 866-400-1238 Monday-Friday, 8am-8pm Eastern Time.

A VA Form 5655 must still be used to apply for medical debt relief no matter which application method is used. The form is available online and at VA facility revenue offices.

Patient statements are mailed monthly but can also be accessed online via <https://www.va.gov/manage-va-debt>.

AI Lends New Insight into Traumatic Brain Injury

Newfound Artificial Intelligence (AI) models are now providing federal agencies with the means to apply a range of data inputs to better understand the origins of Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs) and how to help patients recover from their long-term impacts.

Speaking at the 2022 BRAIN Summit, VA representatives outlined how cutting-edge technologies such as AI and machine learning are providing newfound insight into neurological injury.

TBI is a hallmark battlefield injury of America's Post 9/11 conflicts since enemy combatants have made extensive use of improvised explosives that inflict a high rate of cranial damage. In the early 2000s, TBI was also linked to effects on the optic nerve.

Finding ways to better understand and treat TBI has become a priority for VA researchers and the Department of Defense (DoD), especially since the condition manifests an

array of symptoms that can vary considerably and often overlap with other conditions such as psychological trauma and vision loss.

The efforts are still in their infancy and currently undergoing significant expansion in both outside collaboration and sophistication. One of the more promising studies, the LIMBIC Phenotype study, links DoD combat theater and health systems data with VA health system data to identify risk factors and create more personalized forms of treatment for veterans living with TBI.

"The goal of this study is to provide a foundation for AI," said VA Research Scientist Mary Jo Pugh. "It's a longitudinal study that links DoD and VA data for more than 2.5 million Post-9/11 veterans."

Data sources of health care and patient history will be merged into machine-learning models that will hopefully shed greater light into the nature of TBI and its relationship to both physical and mental health conditions.

New VA Grant Funding To Help Homeless Veterans

VA has awarded \$137 million in grants through its Supportive Service for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program to help veterans and their families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The new grant awards, announced on September 13, supplement the previous Fiscal Year 2022 SSVF grants, increase the number of veterans who are eligible for SSVF assistance, and allow 150 nonprofit organization grantees to expand on existing services for veterans and their families.

VA has placed more than 22,000 homeless veterans into permanent housing in 2022. The goal for the year is 38,000 permanent housing placements.

“It’s our job to remove the barriers that stand between homeless veterans and the home they need and deserve, including rising rental costs, cumbersome rental processes, and more,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “These grant funds will empower our trusted VA partners to help homeless and at-risk veterans through the entire housing process—from identifying a home to affording it to making it their own.”

During FY 2021, SSVF served 114,175 participants, including 80,049 veterans and 19,266 children.

Father Carroll Biography Now in Talking Book Format

Caution, Blind Priest Driving: The Story of Father Thomas J. Carroll, Changing the Public’s Perception of Blindness, by Rachel Ethier Rosenbaum, has recently become available to BVA members and their families via Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD), a service of the National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Print Disabled.

Father Carroll served as BVA’s first National Chaplain from 1946 until his untimely death in 1971. He was a pioneer in the field of blind rehabilitation and instrumental in the inauguration of the Hines Blind Center in 1948. He is one of only 32 members of the American Printing House for the Blind Hall of Fame.

Notwithstanding the humorous title of the book, Father Carroll was not blind himself. In BVA circles he was known for stirring speeches and frequent counseling sessions, utilizing both his professional training and innate sensitivity in assisting blinded veterans to understand their potential for productive and meaningful lives. Chapter 6 of the book,

entitled “The Birth of the Blinded Veterans Association and Hines Hospital,” further reveals the important role BVA played in Father Carroll’s life.

Despite knowing Father Carroll personally and special access to his writings through her 33 years as Executive Director of the Carroll Center for the Blind, Rosenbaum researched his life for more than eight years. In 2014, she attended the BVA 69th National Convention in Reno, Nevada, to interview BVA members who had met Father Carroll personally.

NLS and its resources fall under the jurisdiction of the Library of Congress. It is a free braille and talking book library service for people with temporary or permanent low vision, blindness, or a physical, perceptual, or reading disability that prevents them from using regular print materials. Through a national network of cooperating libraries, NLS circulates books and magazines in braille or audio formats that are instantly downloadable to a personal device or delivered by mail free of charge.

To access the book or for more information on how to qualify for BARD services, visit <https://nlsbard.loc.gov/nlsbardprod/login/NLS>.

Military Hymn Download Available for Veterans Day

Planners for the services, ceremonies, and observances of Veterans Day this year have a new resource to consider: a military hymn entitled “Ever Faithful to the Call.” The hymn can be reviewed and downloaded free for nonprofit or personal use at www.everfaithfultothecall.com.

Composer Tom Lough turned to chaplains, veterans, family members, widows, and church music professionals for their ideas and

suggestions in the hymn's development. Field testing of the hymn in late 2021 provided additional feedback for the final revisions.

Lough invites military units, religious denominations, and civic organizations to consider incorporating it into their Veterans Day observances.

The four verses of the hymn were sung recently as part of an organ recital in the

West Point Cadet Chapel at the United States Military Academy.

"I feel that this hymn has the potential for widespread use in military and civilian settings for Veterans Day and other occasions as well," said Craig Williams, West Point Chapel Organist.

Convention Reflections

By Warner L. Murray

The Blinded Veterans Association's 77th National Convention was truly a historic event. It all commenced at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill in our Nation's Capital. The destination was a wonderful one befitting this longstanding organization.

I was greeted warmly upon arrival. The assistance I received from all the hotel staff I encountered was polite, kind, and courteous. They were cognizant and knowledgeable about the BVA members' visual challenges.

The BVA registration area was on the lobby level and accessible. I arrived on August 21, which was Sunday afternoon. I was greeted at the registration desk by the executives, coordinators, directors, and other staff. My heart felt joy to hear old and new voices welcoming my attendance. I received my convention program package, membership credentials, and some vital verbal information.

The Hyatt Regency's lobby and atrium high above were very spacious. The high ceiling was accompanied by a slightly tinted glass that allowed the bright sunlight to enter. Adjacent to the lobby was an open bar and dining



Warner Murray, New York Regional Group, at Awards Banquet finale.

area with no doors to maneuver. It was very accessible to the blind and low vision.

It was the first convention for many of our members, but it felt almost brand new to me also after two years on the virtual platform. This BVA convention was well organized. The effective planning of tours, events, and learning sessions made them exciting.

The trip to Arlington National Cemetery on the first day was a noble deed as we recognized and paid our respects to fallen comrades. Our elected National Officers

performed their ceremonious duty of laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I felt a sense of joy when a retired schoolteacher read my poem for my fallen comrades. It was an opportunity for me to personally pay my respects through my written words. We veterans must keep alive the bravery and other qualities of those who have passed on.

The Tuesday Lunch and Learn for the members, sponsored by Dot, was enlightening, informative, and engaging. The lunch had a unique taste to the palate, and I was grateful, personally, for the special entree for diabetics and vegetarians.

The official opening day of business on Wednesday was as it is usually: laughter and chatting among members just before the gavel struck. One of the main issues on the agenda to be voted on by the membership was the revision of the National Bylaws.

The dine around, the bowling, and the visit to the National Mall were truly appreciated by the membership. I enjoyed the fun planned activities immensely.

The hospitality suite was a reminder of other late-night, camaraderie-promoting events I've enjoyed during my life. The room attracted both old and new members. The presentation of the drinks and finger foods was professional, thanks to the care demonstrated by our Mid-Atlantic Regional Group sponsors.

The grand finale was the Awards Banquet. Cocktails were served prior to the festivities. The banquet hall decor was classy. The formal table arrangements, with their pristine clear glasses of water and shining silverware,

were elegant. A filet mignon main entrée highlighted this beautiful dinner. The awards and gifts lifted the spirits of the membership. They were presented so that no one was left out of the anticipation of who would next be recognized.

The final episode of the banquet was a photography session orchestrated by the Director of Public Relations that allowed National Officers to be photographed. The background for the pictures was an object better known as a Step and Repeat filled with images of the BVA logo and emblem. A few of us slipped in among the National Officers as discreetly as we could to get our pictures taken too.

As the banquet hall suddenly went from chaos to quiet, Mr. Adam Johnson, a representative of a company named CLUSIV, interviewed me for a few minutes on camera. I was asked how BVA has helped me with mobility, technology, and personal support challenges. The second question related to the book I wrote for my comrades. He asked what inspired me to write a book entitled **We Served America** and what challenges I encountered to get the manuscript published.

The New York Regional Group gives thanks to all responsible within the BVA family for putting together the past three conventions, two virtual and one live. I'm sure each one had its challenges, but the live convention required so much more planning and care. Accordingly, we were all rewarded that much more in 2022.

The national conventions are in good hands. The 78th cannot come soon enough.

BVA 77th Convention

This historic event, what a treat,
Old, new members, ready to greet.
Long time coming, for face to face,
Hyatt Regency, a wonderful place.

Executives, coordinators, directors, staff,
Organized and created, this perfect draft.
Meetings, conferences, fun activities too,
Bowling, kayaking, tours, more to do.

There're many choices, for night on the town,
Choose your eatery, for the dine around.
Arlington Cemetery, our mission of pride,
Lay a wreath at Tomb, for soldiers who died.

The membership appreciates the atmosphere,
Let's carry the momentum to the 78th year.
I say to my comrades make this pact true,
Help your regional group be counted in St. Lou.



With Sergeant-At-Arms Brian O'Connell as the lead, airmen from nearby Joint Base Andrews served as the Honor Guard, flawlessly executing the posting of the Colors at the August 26 convention Awards Banquet finale. Pictured left to right, Senior Airmen Kalala, Walker, Tejada, and Calderón.

Veterans' Burial Benefits

by Kenneth Asam, Southern California Regional Group

There is an overwhelming amount of information available on veterans' burial benefits. Although this subject is not one which most of us would wish to read about and research regularly, I think there is general agreement that it is an important one.

The first step in taking advantage of this VA benefit is to complete **VA Form 40-1007**, "Application for Burial in a VA National Cemetery," for both the veteran and spouse. This can be processed in advance and, when done so, greatly simplifies the process when either of the two passes away.

I also recommend that you have available **VA Form 27-2008**, "Request for Burial Flag."

To locate a VA form, go to **va.gov/find-forms** and enter the form number in the search box or perform a Google search using the following: VA Forms_ - ____ (form number).

The list of burial benefits is both extensive and comprehensive. They include: 1) Burial in a National Cemetery, 2) Burial Headstones and Memorials, 3) Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC), 4) Burial Flags, 5) Reimbursement of Burial Expenses, 6) Burial Allowance, 7) Death under Authorized VA Admissions, 8) Veteran Cemeteries by Other Agencies, 9) State and Tribal Cemeteries, and 10) Unclaimed Veterans' Remains.

The following are VA burial resources that help us better understand our benefits:

1) "**Planning Your Legacy**" **VA Survivors and Burial Kit, VA Pamphlet 27-18-1** is a very useful publication and may be obtained by going to **https://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/docs/VASurvivorsKit.pdf**.

- 2) VA Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents, and Survivors, 2021 **https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book/2021_Federal_Benefits_for_Veterans_Dependents_and_survivors.pdf**.
- 3) Although most of this reading audience is obviously not currently residing in California nor a part of my own regional group, an online resource entitled **California Veterans Resource Book (CALVET)** contains information about VA at the national level. Located at **https://www.calvet.ca.gov/VetServices/Pages/Burial-Benefits.aspx**, this resource has sections on state cemeteries, eligibility determination, VA National Cemeteries, burial benefits, the military funeral honors program, burial and plot interment allowance, and headstones/markers.
- 4) The online **Dignity Memorial Provider** presents "10 Important Facts about your VA Burial Benefits." A link is available to the document at: **https://www.dignitymemorial.com/plan-funeral-cremation/veterans/va-death-benefits**.

Be certain that you have on file a copy of your **DD-214**, "Armed Forces of the United States Report of Transfer or Discharge." This is a required document when applying for all VA benefits. If you do not have a copy of your DD-214, you may apply for a copy at **https://va.gov**. If you have a problem securing this document, help is available from VA, especially your VIST Coordinator, or BVA'S Veterans Service Program.

Extra Mile TLC By Scout Volunteers

Thank you to BVA National Headquarters for hosting an in-person convention after three long years. I don't know if I'll be making any more conventions, for the years are catching up on me. I am now 93 and this was my 44th or 45th convention in a row except for the COVID years. I was sponsored in 1976 to come for the first time and haven't missed one since.

Thank you also to Kylie FitzGerald on the BVA Public Relations Team for posting our photo on BVA's Facebook page.

We had a very good time despite having to spend a night and close to 24 hours at the DC VA Medical Center. We appreciate the concern everyone had for us. Fortunately, it was not as serious as some thought it might be and we were back the next day.

We had a second adventure at the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport as we were going home. It was a bad experience at first that quickly turned to good.

The volunteers, boys and adult leaders from Scout Troop 301, were with us when I tried to pay to check my luggage for the flight to New York. There were three boys and a girl with their dad, I believe. My credit card was declined for \$130 because of a couple of holds that had been placed on it during the week. The ticket agent would not accept cash from my wife, Laura, and said that a valid credit card was required. We had no other credit card with us and quickly we felt desperate.

Immediately upon hearing this near disaster, the dad of the youngsters pulled out his credit card and made the payment for us. He said: "Here, this is no problem, and we can use my card for this." Fortunately, we were able to pay him for the transaction, but it took some coaxing for him to accept our



Nothing can keep Enrique Sanchez and Laura Sanchez from enjoying a BVA National Convention — not age, inconvenience, or even an unexpected night at the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center. The couple has attended more consecutive conventions together than any other, now numbering more than four decades.

cash. Had we allowed him to do so, he would have been totally willing to pay for it all after already volunteering several hours at the airport for our BVA members.

Viva Scouting and viva our BVA volunteers!

Enrique Sanchez
New York Regional Group
45-Year National Convention Veteran
Northwestern JROTC Cadets



Troop 301 of Alexandria, Virginia, chartered by Veterans of Foreign War Post 609, will forever hold a special place in the hearts of Enrique and Laura.

Photo courtesy of Margarine Beaman.



William Michael “Mike” Cook and guide dog Cameron, Arkansas Regional Group, made the rounds on many fronts throughout the convention week, actively participating in meetings, serenading a few of the exhibitors, and enjoying the company of hotel staff and guests. Pictured here with Mike and Cameron is Kate Sullivan, Senior Sales Manager at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill.

Photo courtesy of Jerry Krueger, Commander, VFW Post 609, Alexandria, Virginia.

Indispensable Service

On a steamy Sunday afternoon, a week before school started, six Northwestern Navy Junior ROTC cadets met their instructor at Union Station in Washington, DC. They were there to greet veterans arriving for your annual convention.

As veterans from all military branches guided themselves with their canes and sometimes service dogs off their trains and onto the platforms, cadets called out their names to intercept them. Each cadet introduced themselves and offered to escort the veterans to their hotel just a few blocks away.

After the long journey, the veterans appreciated the friendly welcome and a chance to stretch their legs. In small groups, the cadets gathered up luggage and led their veterans through the great hall of Union Station and onto the DC streets toward the Hyatt Regency.

There, they made sure they got checked in and settled in their rooms.

Over the course of many hours, cadets moved continuously between greeting 16 veterans at Union Station and helping about 30 others they met in the lobby of the hotel. With each new greeting, cadets listened and learned about life as a blinded service member—how they learned to move safely down a sidewalk or up a staircase. They heard stories about their years of service and sacrifice for their country.

For some cadets, this was the first time hearing such firsthand accounts. And, although the veterans expressed extreme appreciation for the cadets' acts of service that day, it was the cadets who were most impacted by the experience; they insisted that their instructor confirm that everyone had arrived, and they wanted to check the platform again to avoid leaving a veteran behind. They asked if they could come back to assist at the convention that week (unfortunately, this was not possible).

In those few hours, Northwestern High School's NJROTC cadets were needed, appreciated, and motivated through their experience of service to others. In fact, five cadets returned after the weeklong conference to escort many blinded veterans back to Union Station to board their trains heading home. We look forward to seeing what more great experiences Northwestern NJROTC cadets have this school year!

Sgt. Major Efrem Wilson
Naval Science Instructor
Northwestern High School Junior ROTC, Hyattsville, Maryland



Still on their summer break one more week, the Navy Junior ROTC program of Northwestern High School (Hyattsville, Maryland), offered valuable assistance during the first two days of the convention. Left to right, Brian Deleon, Rodner Guevara, Margarine Beaman, Kimberly Melgar, and Sgt. Maj. Efrem Wilson, USMC, Ret.

In Remembrance

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

Carolina R.G.

Gretchen Wilson

Charles Register R.G.

James Hughes

Connecticut R.G.

James Denio

Florida R.G.

Joseph Celli

John Hammond

George Jaquith

John Lange

William McDavid

John Novak

Gary Nyberg

John Phillips

Gem State R.G.

Curtis McCormick

George Satter

John Sikma

Georgia R.G.

Douglas Brooks

Greater Houston R.G.

Lamar Knighton

Heartland R.G.

Frances England

Illinois R.G.

Cortez Broadnax

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.

Morris Brown

John Erickson

Hugh Skinner

Mid-Atlantic R.G.

Kenneth Croft

New Hampshire R.G.

Lois Weber

New Mexico R.G.

Ernest Martinez

Daniel Sandoval

Dwight Simpson

Ohio R.G.

Herbert Carlson

Harry McFall

O-K-I R.G.

Russell Cook

Pennsylvania R.G.

David Boyd

Allen Miller

Puerto Rico R.G.

Francisco Roig

Southern California R.G.

Charles Gardner

Southern Nevada R.G.

William Shaw

South Texas R.G.

Jerry Hogan

Dianna Horton

BVA Members At-Large

(No R.G. Affiliation)

Gilbert Rocha



Jose Rivera Barris, Puerto Rico Regional Group Convention Delegate and the new Director of District 3, stands atop a hill overlooking Washington, DC, during visit to Arlington National Cemetery. Partially visible in the distant background slightly right is the Cemetery's renowned Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Photo courtesy of Michaun Harrison.

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Domestic Mail Manual Sec. 703.5.1-2

Final Thought

In 2021, VA launched a “Federal Supremacy Project” aimed at establishing national standards of practice for 50 categories of health professionals, including ophthalmologists and other eye care specialists.

The purpose of the project is to create continuity and consistency across all VA facilities to care for veterans without undue hindrance from state licensure, registration, certification, and other requirements at the state level.

On September 22, Rebecca Hyder (second from right), Director, Federal Affairs, American Academy of Ophthalmology, and Jeff Miller (far right), former Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs and now with public strategy firm Mercury, visited BVA National Headquarters for a briefing on the status of the project.

Central to the discussion with Jim Vale (far left) and Don Overton was BVA’s potential support and collaboration of the project and AAO’s efforts to ensure that America’s veterans receive the highest quality of eye care services within VHA.

