BVA Announces 78th National Convention
St. Louis, Missouri
Cover Photos: Attendees of the BVA 78th National Convention can take a stroll of fewer than 15 minutes from the Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel to the iconic Gateway Arch and Old Courthouse where Dred Scott sued for his freedom. The 630-foot-tall arch, clad in stainless steel, is the tallest arch in the world and still Missouri’s tallest accessible building. Registration information, along with additional details about the convention city, are highlighted in this issue of The Bulletin.

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President’s Page
by Joseph D. McNeil, Sr.

I hope everything is well with you and yours. It has been a crazy winter for many in this country. We have had plenty to deal with in most areas, some of which has been the frequent, damaging rainstorms and snowstorms. I hope we can persevere and embrace 2023 with all the vigor we can muster.

With the coming of 2023, we as a group are about to embark on our regional and national elections of officers and we need to take a very close look at our leadership. I’ve had numerous conversations with members across the Association and most of them have dealt with issues relating to leadership and election of officers on a local level. Below are just some of the things that have emerged out of the conversations.

Anyone running for office should first ask themselves some hard questions. The first one should be: Why am I running for office? The second should be similar: Do you plan on honestly working in your elected office? Some follow-up questions are these:
1. Are you doing it for personal beliefs?
2. Are you doing it for the accolades?
3. Are you doing it for the need to help others?
4. Can your skill set benefit your group?

All these questions and more are what you need to ask yourself before volunteering.

We are a volunteer organization and we are only as good as the people among us.

Additionally, over the past few years I have been asked a question from members:
“What does it take to be a good leader?”

Now, that is a question for the ages, and we need to first ask ourselves what leadership actually is. How is it defined? Leaders inspire, leaders motivate, leaders train, leaders plan for the future, leaders are mentors, and leaders educate. They can also be micromanagers (dictators) or power-down leaders (democratic).

From the perspective of regional groups, BVA has some groups whose leadership has not changed in years, and which are now stagnant and failing. There are others whose leaders have taken shortcuts to stay in positions and fail to keep the membership informed while conducting social events on the regional group dime.

Joe McNeil and Director of District 1 Wanda Grover prepare to present ceremonial BVA wreath to soldiers from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, also known as “The Old Guard,” at Arlington National Cemetery’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Veterans Day.
Although the bylaws were written for a reason, many of our regional group leaders haven’t taken the time to read them, but they can always find ways to criticize the way business is conducted. Some regional group meetings are more socializing and less business. You cannot conduct a business meeting for the election of officers in a back room of Golden Corral! This is indicative of the inclination to want job titles with no responsibilities.

No one wants to be a leader forever, but often it seems that no one wants to step up and help. So, if something is not going right in your regional group, ask yourself what you have done for your group. It is easy to complain about how someone is leading, especially when you are not doing your part.

If this organization as a whole is to survive, we need to change a few things, starting with holding our leadership and membership accountable when needed.

A regional group cannot survive if the officers elected do not fulfill their responsibilities, or if volunteers are not doing the job they volunteered to do. No one should be in one position forever, so train your replacement, look for new talent, and embrace new ideas. If your heart is in it, you can do it. If you are not satisfied or don’t want to do the job you were elected to do, then do everyone a favor and step down so that someone else who is willing can do the job.

Here’s some food for thought if you plan on making some changes in your life: Start by looking in the mirror first and be honest when you ask this question: “Did I do my best in whatever position I held, or could I have done better?”

Remember these are your regional groups and they are only as good as you make them.

I look forward to seeing some of you at your state or local conventions, or the national convention!

Legislative Update
by Alek Libbin

Before I begin this quarter’s update, here is a brief introduction. I’m Alek C. Libbin, the new Deputy Director of Government Relations for BVA. I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the American University and a Master of Public Policy from the George Washington University.

I have interned twice in the House of Representatives, where I developed relationships with staffers and learned the ropes of Capitol Hill. I was the Executive Director of a political committee and worked as a Research Assistant for a defense consulting firm, where I assisted in leveraging the Department of Defense to implement innovative technology while also assisting our partner lobbying firm’s efforts on Capitol Hill. I’m excited to join BVA and can’t wait to help in every way I can.

As the 117th Congress was winding down in late December, the House and Senate made significant changes to the Auto Grant legislation. The most important changes concern those who have used the grant before and the timing of the grant. This law changes the grant from only once per veteran and authorizes a second grant. Further, the law implements a confusing wait period of 30 years between grants. The wait period itself, however, will disappear in ten years. This means that if you used the Auto Grant 15 years ago, you would be eligible in 2032 but, if you used the grant 25 years ago, you would become eligible in five years. If you use the grant today, you must wait ten years for the second grant because the wait period will have expired. Combined with the special adaptive equipment grant, the Auto Grant allows veterans to gain and maintain access to their own transportation and ensure a higher quality of life.

Another important piece of legislation that passed during the 117th Congress is the Improving Access to the VA Home Loan Benefit Act of 2022. This law requires VA to update regulations, requirements, and guidance related to appraisals for housing loans guaranteed by VA. Part of updating the guidance includes VA now accounting for situations where desktop appraisals provide cost savings for borrowers while a traditional appraisal requirement could cause time delays and jeopardize the completion of a transaction. Veterans should now be able to use the VA Home Loan without fear that red tape may cost them their new home. We thank Representative Mike Bost (R-IL-12), newly named Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, for achieving this breakthrough and for his continued fight for veterans.

With the new 118th Congress comes new priorities and BVA’s continued advocacy on behalf of blinded and low vision veterans. Three of our key priorities worthy of highlighting are the Major Richard Star Act, the GUARD VA Benefits Act, and the Helping Heroes Act.

The Major Richard Star Act affects the more than 42,000 military retirees with combat-related injuries who qualify for
retirement pay from the Department of Defense for their service and for VA disability compensation for injuries acquired in combat with fewer than 20 years of service. The disability pay is currently deducted from retirement pay. The Major Richard Star Act would repeal this unfair offset, allowing disabled veterans to receive both their retirement pay and their disability compensation. We thank Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs Chairman Jon Tester (D-MT) for making this repeal one of his top priorities for the new Congress.

BVA believes that America’s veterans have earned their benefits and deserve them in full. Unfortunately, there are those who seek to use them to fill their own coffers. The process of preparing, submitting, and appealing a claim is a complex maze that requires assistance for many. This has led to a cottage industry that exploits veterans by charging them outrageous fees that ultimately undermine the claim’s benefit. The GUARD VA Benefits Act prevents this by making it a criminal offense to impose on veterans the fees that are unauthorized by VA. This is an important step in protecting our veterans who have already sacrificed more than enough. We thank Representatives Chris Pappas (D-NH-1) and Jake Ellzey (R-TX-6), as well as Senator John Boozman (R-AR), for sponsoring the bills that made this legislation possible.

Disabled veterans face a unique hardship. The Helping Heroes Act seeks to provide assistance and help ease the burden faced by families of these veterans. Approximately 2.3 million children under the age of 18 live in a household with a disabled veteran. This bill would provide grants to local educational agencies to support the needs of veteran-connected students, require VA to collect data on the experiences of disabled veteran families to better identify and understand their needs, establish a Family Support Program to provide supportive services to eligible family members of disabled veterans, and many other important steps in assisting disabled veterans and their families. We acknowledge Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) for her role in introducing the legislation.

As I close this quarter’s update, I believe that this is an appropriate time to reflect on the role of the Blinded Veterans Association as an advocate. The organization is responsible for helping countless veterans navigate the VA system and participate in protecting their own interests on Capitol Hill, with the White House, and with other government entities. We exist to help you, and legislation is, in most cases, the enabling piece that ultimately determines who receives help.

The process of securing veterans’ benefits can be painstaking. While we work to make things simpler with any solutions we can find, legislation itself ensures that changes remain in perpetuity. Even still, such changes are never guaranteed to be lasting and history has shown that progress can be slowed to the point of undoing or nullifying them. BVA will continue to fight for you and ensure that positive change is lasting. We exist for you, and we will never forget the sacrifices made to ensure freedom. We will make certain that the promise of continued assistance and care is never broken.
I extend my warmest of greetings to our members and friends throughout the country as our National Headquarters staff and National Board of Directors continue to navigate the immense challenges that the post-pandemic era now presents to the nonprofit world, especially to Veterans Service Organizations such as BVA.

One could perhaps immediately conclude that my reference to our challenges links directly to, and perhaps only to, those of a financial nature. This is not the case. While BVA’s financial health and strength is an area of vital concern, it is by no means the only challenge that currently weighs upon us.

Our intent and solemn desire is not to simply wade through these challenges but to confront them head-on with practical solutions that will best serve the interests of the national organization and our entire membership.

Despite our current challenges, as we approach our mid-winter meetings and annual congressional testimony, I am encouraged by the progress we have made in many areas. Building upon the efforts of the past year, our national team continued the deployment of technological solutions allowing for enhanced stakeholder engagement and improved member service delivery. Our investment in state-of-the-art technological assets enabled us to further refine our operational budgets and strategically align professional staff and external contractors while fully actualizing modern efficiency standards throughout the Association.

I am also heartened by the approaching 78th anniversary of BVA’s founding. The wonder and marvel of 78 years of service to blinded veterans, and now low vision veterans with the recent passage of the revised bylaws last summer, is truly something to recognize and celebrate!

Our founding members and those who joined BVA shortly after the March 28, 1945, meeting at Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital, true pioneers as I see them, had their own set of challenges. In reading our historical records, I doubt that many of us would be willing to change places with them.

As an example, that first meeting occurred in something other than a modern office building of an urban city. The Avon Old Farms campus had been an all-boys residential preparatory school before its conversion for Army use. Its founder, Theodate Pope Riddle, was Connecticut’s first female architect and a friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. For reasons personal and patriotic, Riddle closed the school and leased the property free of charge to the U.S. government.

Our first national office was a desk in the corner of the Gundy Tea Room (a small eatery) in Farmington, Connecticut. Ray Frey, our first National President, wrote that as a proud, new organization, BVA agreed to accept “NO HELP” from any outside source. A paragraph from an article Ray wrote for our 50th anniversary special issue of The Bulletin says this:
“It’s difficult to comprehend how naive we were to believe that we could run the Association on a $20 initiation fee plus $5 of yearly membership dues. When we discovered we couldn’t run BVA on that amount, a special meeting was called in January 1946 at which three changes were made: We decided to abolish the $20 initiation fee and establish a $1 membership fee. Additionally, we decided to accept gifts and donations from nonprofit organizations. And, lastly, we also set up a trust fund within the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB).”

Ray goes on to mention the key individuals and organizations that helped BVA along during those formative years. In addition to holding the trust fund, AFB paid for secretarial assistance, paid a salary for an appointed Chairman and Sighted Advisor (Baynard Kendrick), and financed the printing of the first few issues of The Bulletin. They also provided equipment to foreign blinded veterans on behalf of BVA and allowed the BVA Board of Directors to use the “Helen Keller Room” for weekend meetings in New York City.

Two faithful advisors and morale boosters were Kathern “Kay” Gruber for whom our scholarship program is now named, and Father Thomas Carroll who served as the National Chaplain for 25 years. At the time, Kay was AFB’s Director of Services for the War Blind while Father Carroll was Director of the Catholic Guild for All the Blind in Boston.

Although numbers were limited, BVA had its share of energetic young members in the late 1940s and 1950s. Most of these World War II veterans were still in their 20s or early 30s at the time. Busy with their education, professions, and young families, many of them nonetheless accepted without hesitation voluntary positions in newly formed regional groups.

Our BVA forefathers somehow found the means to not only keep the organization afloat but to successfully advocate on behalf of their fellow blinded veterans in the establishment of effective rehabilitation programs, vibrant regional groups, and national conventions that rejuvenated the membership. Along the way, other generous groups and individuals with pure motives came to the rescue, not to mention magnanimous leaders such as Russ Williams within our own ranks.

Although presented to us on a much different scale and level of complexity, our challenges today are somewhat the same, and we overcome them with the help of trusted advisors, friends, and colleagues in the veteran and blind communities. We depend greatly on the generosity of convention sponsors, professionals in the academic world who willingly share their knowledge and experience, donors willing to answer our direct mail appeals with donations large and small, role models without sight who excel in a long list of adaptive sports programs and competitions, and technological geniuses willing to expend hour upon hour sharing with their fellow veterans the ways to use new technology.

We are grateful for all who assist and support us in fulfilling our mission, including you magnanimous BVA leaders of today who help move us forward. While we certainly need more of you, we acknowledge you whom we do have. Thank you for the support and service you render to your fellow veterans. The tasks are rarely easy, but they are always worth the effort.
A Red Dress Run and Bronze Braille Flags
by Gary Schoelerman

Every year on the second Saturday in August, the New Orleans Hash House Harriers (a local “drinking club” with a running problem) host the Red Dress Run, a charity “run” in what many call the Crescent City. The reason for that nickname for our fair city will be explained in a future Bulletin feature when the subject has more relevance.

The run usually begins in the French Quarter or Marigny Neighborhoods of New Orleans. The exact location of the start is announced only to those who have registered, with the route also kept a secret until the day of the event. The runners, with drinks in hand, continue their designated route through the French Quarter and spend the rest of the day celebrating. I can vouch that a sea of red runs throughout the neighborhood all afternoon and evening!

Due to COVID restrictions, this one-of-a-kind festivity was forced to cancel in 2020 and 2021, but it most assuredly came back with reckless abandon in 2022.

Even if running isn’t really an interest, one can still head down to the appropriate neighborhood, decked out in red, to get in on the fun.

Participants in the Red Dress Run can sign up online on the official website, noh3.org. Registration usually includes donations to local charities, special live music, and beer.

Red Dress Runs aren’t exclusive to New Orleans, but this is the only one that can claim it’s the “biggest little Red Dress event in the world.” With literally thousands turning out in their best red dresses, the annual Red Dress Run is an exciting event you would not want to miss if you were anywhere geographically close to it!

Add outlandish costumes, the previously mentioned music, and a whole lot of alcohol, and you come up with one of the most unique New Orleans 5k-ish events. The run is sponsored and overseen by the New Orleans Hash House Harriers. The Harriers are, in essence, the Executive Board of the run event.

Don’t let that description fool you, however. It isn’t just about the alcohol! The Red Dress Run doubles as a fundraiser. All proceeds from the event go directly to charity. It’s a way to give back to the community. Every year, the event raises money for numerous charities, and 100 percent of what is collected helps fund programs and services that improve the quality of life for those in need.

The New Orleans Red Dress Run traditionally falls on the second Saturday of August. The running begins at 11:30am rain or shine, but the beer starts flowing at 9:30am. In 2022, the route began in Louis Armstrong Park and proceeded through the French Quarter and Marigny Neighborhood.

The run usually puts together a red dress swap for participants who are making return appearances. The Hash House Harriers Haberdashery (defined as a men’s clothing collection) can also outfit you with some of their over-the-top, fun clothing items before you get started.

You must be 21 to participate – no exceptions. Underage bystanders are even prohibited.
Cost for registration can vary depending on how early you sign up and if you want to sign up for related events—such as the Friday Lingerie Run and/or the Sunday Hangover Run. Participants also have the option to give a tax-deductible donation when registering.

BVA Past National President Joe Burns, now treasurer for the BVA Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, is a member of the Hash House Harriers and was their former treasurer and accountant. Joe has run or walked in many of these Red Dress Runs. He says he has a closet filled with red dresses and will be happy to loan them out to anyone in need of one for the next run.

With all that as background, now to the nitty-gritty serious: In 2022, Joe decided to submit a grant request from the regional group to purchase Bronze Braille American Flags and Plaques to be placed in VA Clinics and vision-related businesses in the New Orleans area. In early December, he was notified that we were indeed awarded a grant for the flags.

On January 6, Joe was invited to the Red Dress Banquet (red dress was optional) that was arranged for the volunteers and grant recipients. A few days later, Joe was interviewed at the local radio station for the blind (WRBH). He was asked about his involvement in the Red Dress organization, the Bronze Braille Flags, and how BVA helps blind and low vision veterans. The station management promised to run some already existing BVA Public Service Announcements and Joe promised a Bronze Braille American Flag for the lobby of the station. We believe that more interviews will be coming soon.

The Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, Inc. will be able to place an additional nine or ten Bronze or Acrylic Braille Flags in the New Orleans area at the various VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics, VA retirement homes, and local businesses (WRBH Radio, Lighthouse for the Blind, and City Halls).

Bill Healy, President of the Red Dress Run, reminded Joe to apply for the grant next year. The grants are out there and available. Sometimes we just have to think outside the box and Joe is always thinking outside the box. To further describe the extra effort he puts forth, one could say that Joe thinks outside the box and colors outside the lines!

Thank you very much, Mr. Past National President, regional group treasurer, and Hash House Harrier. Your efforts added BVA to the list of organizations that have benefited from the generosity of those who participate in the Red Dress Run or otherwise support the Hash House Harriers.

As an aside, I tried to somehow secure a photo of our beloved officer, fundraiser, and friend in his red dress, one that could accompany this article. Unfortunately, and not surprising to anyone who may know Joe Burns more than in passing, he would not cooperate with my requests and petitions for that priceless image!
BVA Joins Fellow VSOs In Honoring All Veterans

For the first time in three years due to the worldwide pandemic, BVA National President Joe McNeil and Director of District 1 Wanda Grover represented blinded veterans with the presentation of an organizational wreath at Arlington National Cemetery’s Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Veterans Day.

With representatives of approximately 40 other Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) looking on and eventually laying a similar wreath, the symbolic gesture paying tribute to all veterans capped off a day of memorable activities for BVA in and around a rainy Nation’s Capital.

The laying of the BVA wreath followed the traditional dignitary wreath laying precisely at 11:11am, witnessed by President McNeil and performed on this occasion by Vice President Kamala Harris and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden. Afterward, the Vice President joined Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) National President Jack McManus in addressing veterans and a general public willing to brave intermittent downpours—remnants of Tropical Storm Nicole—in the cemetery’s adjacent Memorial Amphitheater.

McManus, taking the stand first, described the progress VVA has made during its nearly 45-year history in ensuring that all veterans receive the respect and gratitude they so rightly deserve. He cited VVA’s founding principle that “never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.”

“We do know the following adage to be true,” he said. “The willingness with which our young men and women are likely to serve

in any war is directly proportional to how they perceive veterans in the past, and today, are treated and appreciated by the nation.”

Secretary McDonough emphasized the service and sacrifices of veterans in not only putting their lives on the line in war to defend the nation’s ideals and values but in what so many do after returning home. As one example, he described the courage, discipline, and determination of Lieutenant Jack Robinson, known also as Jackie Robinson who broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball.

Other examples the Secretary gave were Lieutenant Neil Armstrong, the first human to set foot on the moon; Corporal Jan Scruggs, who helped open the nation’s hearts to
Vice President Harris also praised the nation’s veterans for their dedication to service both before and after taking off their uniforms.

“You stood as one to protect our democracy and our freedom, but you are now our nurses and firefighters, Little Leagues coaches, and small-business owners, faith leaders and elected officials, mentors, and teachers,” she stated. “Every day, through your life’s work and example, you make America stronger, representing the best of the nation in unwavering courage, unmatched talent, and unshakable devotion.”

Several hours before the ceremonies, Joe McNeil began his Veterans Day before dawn to attend a breakfast for VSO presidents and commanders at the White House. Following the Vice President’s wreath laying, he was seated on the same amphitheater platform as the other dignitaries and introduced as the BVA National President.

With his rain poncho in place and the BVA flag firmly in a harness at his waste, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group Vice President and Washington, DC, resident Lawrence Harrison

Wanda Grover sets to pull the rope connected to The Freedom Bell, sounding loud chimes near Arlington National Cemetery entrance.

the heroic service of Vietnam veterans by creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall; World War II veteran Samuel Kirk, who embraced the needs and challenges of disabled American children; and Specialist-4 Kelly Kennedy, who has related human stories of suffering service members, veterans, and families due to the effects of toxic exposure on the battlefield.

“You see, when the country needs something difficult done, when we need to do the hard thing, the right thing, so often it is veterans who answer the call,” he affirmed. “Whether defending our nation overseas or strengthening the fabric of our communities here at home, their honorable service, your honorable service in uniform sets the example for the rest of the country.”

Veterans Day National Committee Poster created by VA staff member Briana Cummings. See this issue’s Final Thought for more information.
then marched with the flag in the ceremonial Parade of Colors. His friend and fellow veteran, Mike Jenkins, carried the United States flag.

Vietnam Veterans of America, the host organization for the entire day’s events by virtue of their membership on the Veterans Day National Committee to which BVA

Wanda Grover, right, with BVA Director of Member Relations Brigitte Jones in Arlington National Cemetery’s Memorial Amphitheater on Veterans Day 2022.

also belongs, hosted a lunch reception at the Military Women’s Memorial also attended by Joe and Wanda. They were accompanied at the reception and throughout much of the day by BVA Director of Member Relations Brigitte Jones and Director of Public Relations Stuart Nelson.

Did You Know?

• In his 1954 Veterans Day Proclamation, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called for the formation of a Veterans Day National Committee to oversee national planning and coordination of the Veterans Day observance. BVA was one of 25 Veterans Service Organizations invited to join the original full committee. The committee meets three times a year in Washington, DC, to plan Veterans Day activities, including selecting a national Veterans Day poster, recognizing regional observances that serve as model events to honor America’s veterans, and hosting the national ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. The committee also produces a teacher resource guide and distributes it to schools nationwide. The guide includes suggested activities for Veterans Day programs and information for students of all ages.
Gathering in the Gateway City
St. Louis Promises Warm Welcome

Although the winter season is still ever present in many parts of the United States, BVA’s lift-off to the late summer 78th National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri, is already in the books! Ahead now for the National Board of Directors and National Headquarters is a path of planning and preparation leading to a successful August 14-18 gathering at the Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel.

Prospective attendees who are now committed to attend this year’s five-day extravaganza of educational sessions, showcasing of assistive technology, social activities, and official BVA business can complete their registration online for the convention week and book their registration at the BVA rate offered by the Marriott Grand.

Tentatively scheduled are the simultaneous meetings of VA Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) at the same hotel, making possible an effective interchange among Visual Impairment Service Teams, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists, BRS consultants, BVA members and their families, and the newly emerging products, services, and technologies for veterans with vision loss to be in full access via a state-of-the-art Exhibit Hall August 15-16.

Other traditional highlights of the convention week will include welcome orientations, two major business sessions, a Bylaws and Resolutions meeting, offsite trips and activities, a President’s Reception Cocktail Hour and Dinner, Lunch and Learn sessions, a sponsored breakfast or two, the

Located in the heart of historic Forest Park just blocks from the convention hotel, the St. Louis Art Museum is one of the nation’s leading comprehensive art museums with collections from virtually every culture and age. Admission itself is free but the Museum also offers unique shopping and dining experiences to make a visit there more enjoyable. Forest Park was home to the 1904 World’s Fair. Photo courtesy of Explore St. Louis.
Father Thomas J. Carroll Luncheon, and the Awards Banquet. The Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel is offering BVA members and their guests a discounted room rate of $126 per night, not including a 19 percent state and local room tax. To make a reservation, call 877-303-0104 using Code “BLINDED VETS BVA” or visit https://book.passkey.com/e/50368736.

Breakfast at the hotel will be available at the 8th Street Pantry or an onsite, full-service Starbucks. Contemporary American cuisine and cocktails at other mealtimes are featured at Zenia Bar & Grille Restaurant.

Complimentary standard tier Wi-Fi is offered in guest rooms for all Marriott Bonvoy members (to become a member, visit https://www.marriott.com/loyalty.mi). Other amenities include refrigerators in each room and use of a modern fitness center.

The St. Louis Science Center offers more than 700 interactive experiences, the GROW Agricultural Pavilion, McDonnell Planetarium, and an OMNIMAX Theater. It was founded as a planetarium only in 1963 and grew into what it is today. Photo courtesy of Explore St. Louis.

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**BVA 78th Convention Celebration**

_A Poem by Warner L. Murray, New York Regional Group_

My blinded comrades, be of good cheer,  
Our 78th BVA convention is this year.  
The regional groups enjoyed Capitol Hill  
Now we go to Missouri, what a thrill.  
The Blinded Veterans Association once again  
Plans fun activities, continuing the trend.  
Exciting tours, dinners, the arch and more,  
Important BVA business, just like before.  
Executives, Directors, Coordinators, and Staff,  
These officers we elect will facilitate this draft.  
We will stand together, a beacon of light,  
Complete the mission, one force and one fight.  
The New York Regional Group says to you,  
Let’s come and celebrate in beautiful Saint Lou.
Air travelers to St. Louis are encouraged to contact Brenda K. McDaniel, an independent travel consultant and daughter of a BVA member. She can be contacted at 915-204-0101 between 11:00am and 6:30pm Eastern Time or via email at brenda_mcdaniel@sbcglobal.net. Itineraries should be emailed to bva@bva.org after booking so that BVA volunteers can meet arriving convention attendees.

For more information about the Convention, the registration fee, and links to the appropriate forms, visit https://bva.org/national-convention. BVA members needing assistance to complete the process can contact National Headquarters at bva@bva.org or 800-669-7079, Ext. 304.

The World Chess Hall of Fame, located in downtown St. Louis, presents world-class exhibitions that explore the connection of chess to art, culture, and history. Although entry is free of charge, the Hall of Fame accepts donations. It is open Thursday-Tuesday 10am-5pm and Wednesday and Friday 10am-8pm.

Photo courtesy of Explore St. Louis.

Veterans Service Program Update
by Duayne Driscoll

FREE MATTER • BENEFITS MAILBAG
Answering questions pertaining to VA disability Compensation & Pension Benefits

Dear FMBM – My service-connected eye disorder is currently rated at 100 percent and I receive Special Monthly Compensation at the “L” rate based on reduced visual acuity of 5/200 in each eye. Am I eligible for Aid & Attendance benefits? I need the hospital to send someone over to clean my house. My neighbor claimed it just because he checked into a care facility, and he’s in a lot better shape than I am. Sincerely, Messy in Maryland.

Dear Messy – Before I can answer your question, we must first discuss what Aid & Attendance (A&A) entails. The A&A benefit does not stand alone as many believe, and it may only be awarded in conjunction with already existing nonservice-connected pension or service-connected compensation benefits. Many care facilities suggest filing A&A claims without knowledge of the requisite underlying award, to no avail. Also, the A&A benefit does not send someone to
your home to help with chores and only pays a higher rate of pension or compensation when awarded. Keep in mind that “pension” always means nonservice-connected, and “compensation” always means service-connected.

While VA disability compensation attempts to “compensate” for occupational impairment suffered by the veteran while serving on active duty, Special Monthly Compensation (SMC) pays additional compensation for more severe disabilities and often exceeds the 100 percent rate. SMC at the “L” rate, your current rating, may be allowed when the claimant has loss or loss of use of the extremities, suffers severe blindness, remains permanently bedridden, or shows a factual need for the assistance of another person in performing the activities of daily living due solely to service-connected disabilities.

The A&A rate for most service-connected veterans is SMC “L” so, in a sense, you are already at the A&A level. However, the A&A rate for service-connected blindness is SMC “M” and there are two ways to get there. The first instance occurs when the level of visual impairment meets or exceeds Light Perception Only (LPO) in both eyes. Unless your vision has worsened to the level of LPO in either eye, your current rating appears to remain accurate.

However, in the second instance, if your service-connected blindness causes a factual need for the assistance of another person in performing the activities of daily living as prescribed by your physician on the appropriate form, then your SMC level could be elevated from “L” to “M”, or the A&A level for blindness. So, the answer to your question is maybe.

Can the blinded veteran who already receives SMC at the “M” rate based on LPO in both eyes receive a higher level of SMC? Remember that SMC ratings must be based on service-connected disabilities only. So, if no other service connection has been established aside from the eye disorder, then “M” would be the maximum in this instance. However, if other comorbid service-connected disabilities exist, the SMC level can increase significantly.

For more information, please contact a BVA National Service Officer at https://bva.org/programs/veteran-service/.

Did You Know?

- Vietnam era Navy veteran Dr. Dennis R. Wyant, Ed.D., Florida Regional Group, is a former BVA National President, National Vice President, National Secretary, and National Field Service Director. Shortly after his election as National President in 1977, he was named Special Assistant to the Administrator of Veterans Affairs (now the position of VA Secretary) in the Jimmy Carter Administration and resigned as National President to avoid a conflict of interest. A year and a half later, Carter nominated Dennis as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans Employment, the top veterans post in the Department of Labor. He was confirmed by the Senate on March 12, 1979, and sworn into office on March 26.
BVA Board Appoints New District 3 Director

Douglas Ingram, Florida Regional Group, has been appointed by the Blinded Veterans Association to serve as the Director of District 3, effective January 25. Accepting the appointment, he will serve out the remainder of the three-year term of office, which began last summer.

Doug was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, at the Naval Air Station Hospital. He grew up in Tallahassee, Florida, where he resides still today. He joined the Navy in 1977 immediately out of high school and was trained as an Operations Specialist, stationing him in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and then Charleston, South Carolina, aboard the USS Aylwin, FF-1081, a Knox Class Frigate.

After four years of service, Doug transferred to the Reserves and began college. He graduated with an Associate Degree from Tallahassee Community College in 1984 and a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the University of South Florida in 1987 while attaining the rank of E-6, Petty Officer First Class.

Doug retired from the Reserves following graduation and began his employment with the State of Florida, reaching the position of Computer Systems Administrator. In 1998, he discovered that he was losing his central vision and was diagnosed with Stargardt Disease. Although he was declared legally blind in 2004 and retired under disability, Doug started a property maintenance company after engaging in some part-time computer consulting.

After some ten years of being legally blind, he began looking for ways to serve in the blind community, discovering in the process the resilience of that community as he joined BVA in 2018 and began working with the Florida Regional Group. He was soon appointed by the Governor of Florida to the Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind to both represent BVA and provide oversight to the State Division of Blind Services.

Doug became the treasurer of the Florida Regional Group in 2022 while accepting invitations to snow ski in Colorado and engage in some ocean kayaking in Key Largo, Florida, with groups now known as Team BVA. He and his wife, Melissa, have been married for 33 years.

Virginia Ceremony Draws Mid-Atlantic BVA Members

Michaun Harrison, president of the Blinded Veterans Association’s Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, and Edd Bond, a member of the regional group from Williamsburg, Virginia, participated in a symbolic flag raising ceremony November 3 at the recently opened downtown City Hall in Manassas Park, Virginia. Michaun also spoke at the event, promoting BVA’s services to veterans with
sight loss and the recent bylaw amendment expanding eligibility for membership. Edd was accompanied by his wife, Wilma Bond.

The event resulted from a resolution put forth by Manassas Park Councilmember Laura Hampton and passed in August by the city’s governing body to honor Veterans Day in 2022. The resolution included a proposal to fly a “Thank You Veterans” flag outside all Manassas Park buildings throughout the month of November. The “Thank You Veterans” flag was the flag raised during the event.

City Manager Laszlo Palko, Mayor Jeanette Rishell, and Councilmember Hampton offered opening remarks followed by brief presentations by representatives of local chapters of Veterans Service Organizations located in Northern Virginia, including Michaun, Ed Ortiz of Disabled American Veterans, American Legion Post 10 Commander David Quimby, and Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7589 Commander Wayne Moore.

Also present were Rose Duval, American Gold Star Mothers, Alexandria Chapter President, and Geambro Hollis, Northern Area Chair of the Virginia Committee of Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.

BVA Officers, Tom Miller Present Newly Named Award

Past BVA Executive Director, Director of Government Relations, and National President Tom Miller personally visited the offices of two Congressional leaders on March 7-8 for the presentation of the Association’s newly named Thomas H. Miller Guiding Legislator of the Year Award in honor of his own advocacy work on behalf of blinded veterans and their families for more than three decades.

The first two recipients of the award were Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Aging, and Representative Mike Bost (R-IL-12), Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Joined by current National President Joe McNeil, National Service Director, Benefits and Policy, Jim Vale, and other Board members, Tom thanked the two Committee Chairmen for their leadership in passing the bipartisan VA Website Accessibility Act two years ago and more recently for their support of a December 2022 report detailing the findings of an 11-month investigation revealing widespread failure across the federal government to ensure that federal technology is accessible for people with disabilities, older adults, and veterans.

Tom served as BVA’s National Secretary from 1979-80, National Vice President from 1981-82, and National President from 1983-84. He was a BVA employee for 26 years as the organization’s Director of Government

Left, Michaun Harrison, with Wilma and Edd Bond at ceremonial flag raising.
Relations and later as Executive Director. For more than eight of those years he served in both roles simultaneously.

**Collaborative BVA Partnership Enhances VA.gov Accessibility**

BVA has long been a strong advocate for accessible information and forms across all VA digital platforms in accordance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Ongoing collaborative efforts have assisted VA in improving the accessibility features of its Health and Benefits Mobile Application, educating veterans, family members, and caregivers about accessibility policies and streamlining the reporting of accessibility barriers.

Passage of the VA Website Accessibility Act of 2019 marked the first of many victories, both large and small for BVA, that have benefited blind and low vision veterans. More recently, the Association successfully campaigned for the creation of a Chief Accessibility Officer position within VA to lead enterprise-wide accessibility solution initiatives. The new position became possible through language included in the 2023 MILCON VA Appropriations Act.

Regular meetings with VA’s Section 508 and Digital Services Teams have resulted in the identification of broken links, an attachment button in “Secure Messaging” that did not function for users of screen readers, accessibility failures in the travel reimbursement portal, and many more. As a result, VA teams have established a new VA Accessibility Webpage that clearly defines accessibility and how to report issues in a clear and concise manner.

Many of the recent improvements followed the results of a report on accessible technology released last December 14 by the Majority Staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging chaired by Senator Robert P. Casey (D-PA). The report formed the basis for separate articles in *The Washington Post* and *The Hill Newspaper* shortly thereafter. The Committee’s report took VA to task for neglecting accessibility issues on its webpages that negatively affect veterans with sight loss. Other federal agencies were not adequately complying with Section 508 either, the Congressional report revealed.

More information about improvements in the VA mobile app and BVA’s role publicized in a recent *Nextgov* article is available at [https://www.nextgov.com/cxo-briefing/2023/01/va-working-add-new-features-its-health-and-benefits-app/382350/](https://www.nextgov.com/cxo-briefing/2023/01/va-working-add-new-features-its-health-and-benefits-app/382350/). To learn more about the meaning of accessibility, VA’s commitment to maintaining it, or to report a problem with any digital communications tool such as the mobile app, visit [https://www.va.gov/accessibility-at-va/](https://www.va.gov/accessibility-at-va/).

**Deadline Nears for Scholarships, Awards**

BVA’s Kathern F. Gruber scholarship program will award five $2,000 tuition scholarships to spouses, dependent children, and grandchildren of blind and low vision veterans for the upcoming year beginning in the fall. Named for an early pioneer in the field of blind rehabilitation and a friend of BVA over four decades, the Gruber awards are merit-based through an application process and a committee that evaluates the candidates.

BVA’s Awards Program honors annually the extraordinary professional achievements of a blind or low vision veteran, the outstanding level of service of a BVA member to their regional group, and a volunteer who has served blind and low vision veterans with
unusual dedication and enthusiasm. The recognitions are, respectively, the Maas, Diener, and Schnair Awards. The program also recognizes, through an annual Certificate of Appreciation, the professionals who go the extra mile in serving and supporting veterans and their families within VA Blind Rehabilitation Service or other organizations of and for the blind.

For more information about the scholarship program and application materials, as well as nominating materials for the various awards and certificates, due to BVA this year on Friday, April 28, visit https://bva.org/programs/scholarships-awards/.

Executive Director Addresses 8th Military Vision Symposium

A two-day event focused on combat-related eye injuries, one of the most common yet least publicized types of war injuries, kicked off March 2 with opening remarks from BVA Executive Director Donald D. Overton, Jr. (US Army, Ret.).

“Innovation and Unmet Needs for Ocular Injury” was the subject of the 8th Military Vision Symposium March 2-3 in Boston. The program brought together military leaders, clinicians, and scientists with the goal of driving innovative research leading to improved treatment and prevention strategies for combat-related eye injuries. BVA Immediate Past National President Dr. Tom Zampieri also attended and participated in the symposium.

“The program featured some wonderful presentations offering hope for improved outcomes after military ocular trauma,” Don said. “Thank you, Schepens Eye Research Institute of Harvard Medical School, for allowing me the honor and privilege of opening the Military Vision Symposium representing the Blinded Veterans Association.”

Following Don’s remarks were panel discussions, lectures, and lightning speeches encompassing a variety of topics that covered diagnosis, mitigation, and regenerative medicine aspects of eye injuries. The symposium also addressed Department of Defense and National Institutes of Health funding of vision research programs.

“Superhero Shawntina” Emerges in Deep South!

BVA member Shawntina Gibson, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, is on a roll!

In late February, Shawntina earned a score of 98.8 on the Ambassador Training final exam in the midst of learning how to ski and ride a ski bike without running into other blind skiers and trees at a winter sports camp.

To warm up for the ski trip, Shawntina ran a half-marathon in the Aramco Houston Half Marathon on January 15 and is now training for the March 11 Zydeco Marathon in Lafayette, Louisiana, and an Iron Man (Woman) competition in California. Shawntina is also raising a 15-year-old daughter, plans to attend the BVA 78th National Convention, and will return to college next fall.

While training for the Half Marathon, Shawntina asked herself a recurring question: “Why am I doing this?” The answer, she said, is “because I can and have the power inside me to do it—and because persons with disabilities should not be limited in our lives, especially when we have grants and donations to support us.”

In addition to feeling an inner strength, Shawntina is mindful of service outside herself. “I will always continue to serve my
fellow veterans, my community, and my nation,” she said.

**Colorado BVA Officer Sets for IBGA World Championships**

BVA’s own William Mathis, president of the Rocky Mountain Regional Group, has qualified to compete in both the South Africa Blind Golf Open Championships and the International Blind Golf Association (IBGA) World Championships March 26-31 in Cape Town, South Africa.

William, an Army veteran who lost his sight gradually after sustaining a Traumatic Brain Injury during a mortar attack in Iraq in 2011, will represent the United States as he plays against legally blind golfers from across the globe at the renowned Milnerton Golf Club in Cape Town. Championship Officials and golfers alike will stay at the Lagoon Beach Hotel near Milnerton.

Although his injury occurred in 2011, William did not realize he had lost some of his sight until he was driving five months later near Fort Drum, New York, and could not see the signs on the road. He was diagnosed with open-angle glaucoma but remained on active duty until 2013, when he was medically discharged. He was still not declared legally blind for three more years.

Golf was never in William’s DNA, or so that’s what he once believed. He had scarcely ever picked up a club until Central Blind Rehabilitation Center (Hines) Recreational Therapist Melissa Waters convinced him to give the game a try on a course during his rehabilitation training in 2016. William enjoyed himself that day, and it was a turning point. Since then, he’s never looked back but always forward to the next opportunity to excel at a tournament or to teach others what golf has taught him.

“Golf has become an extreme passion for me—my PTSD therapy and a way to give back to something that has helped me so much,” he said. “Totally aside from any of the competition, it’s so much fun and exhilarating just to be out on a course anytime, anywhere.”

Prior to his departure for South Africa, William will compete in the U.S. Blind Golf Association’s U.S. Open March 19-23. BVA National Headquarters hopes to track and report both his scores as well as the intensity of his fun and enjoyment!

**TV Station Salutes Georgia BVA Leader**

Woodrow Fryer, currently the acting president of the Augusta Chapter of the Georgia Regional Group and an active pastor and humanitarian known for his love of his country, received the Salute to Service Award on February 15 from WJBF-TV in Augusta. The award presentation, along with several photos and a video, were the subject of a news report later that evening.

A veteran of the Marine Corps who began losing his sight 15 years ago, Woodrow is constantly seeking people in need to help them in any way possible. Fellow BVA member Trena Huff vouched for Woodrow’s kindness in the news report, pointing out his skill at guiding others to sources of assistance when he cannot provide them himself.

To access the video and printed story, along with a series of photos and a supplemental video of Woodrow elaborating on his philosophy of service, go to [https://www.wjbf.com/salute/](https://www.wjbf.com/salute/).

**High Marks for Recent Initiatives**

BVA’s newest innovations—the Ambassador Program, VetTech, and
the weekly electronic newsletter **BVA Happenings**—have been well received by the BVA membership, VA personnel, and other supporters and stakeholders.

The Ambassador Program, initiated for the first time in September 2021, is now wrapping up its second module with more than 70 percent of the participants passing the final exam. Still remaining are panel interviews and a graduation ceremony via Zoom. BVA Ambassadors are the key liaison between blind and low vision veterans and the Association’s Veterans Service Program. They are volunteers who serve approximately 15 hours per week within a VA blind rehabilitation program to disseminate valuable benefit information and crucial advocacy tips.

**VetTech** consists of Weekly Wednesday Webinars, VetTech Talk, and a VetTech Podcast channel. BVA National Vice President Paul Mimms proposed the establishment of VetTech, which resulted in the initial development of the program and the funding that brought Timothy Hornik, a former District Director, on board as the Director of Special Initiatives. During the soft launch phase from October to December 2022, the 11 webinar sessions averaged 35 attendees but have now grown to an average of 45 attendees. VetTech Talk, originally slated for every other Thursday afternoon, has responded to the demand for weekly sessions.

In September 2022, just three weeks following the BVA 77th National Convention, the Public Relations Team launched **BVA Happenings**, a weekly newsletter containing 8-10 items of interest to BVA members and their families. The first issue was transmitted on September 30. The content includes reports on activities of individuals, regional groups, updates from National Headquarters, pending or signed legislation, and calendar reminders. **BVA Happenings** is transmitted through the email distribution service Constant Contact. **BVA Happenings** is an outgrowth of a monthly newsletter that was initiated in 2009 by the Department of Development and distributed by that department until 2018, when the Public Relations Team assumed responsibility for the newsletter and produced it until March 2020. The newsletter was eliminated at that time in favor of transmitting important messages on demand during the worldwide pandemic.

**BVA Happenings** is sent to more than 3,800 persons in the Constant Contact group and forwarded to hundreds of other professionals in the fields of blind rehabilitation (mostly within the Department of Veterans Affairs), technology for the blind and low vision, and veterans services.

**Bedwell, Cheshire Brace for Upcoming Historic Climbs**

BVA members Lonnie Bedwell, Indiana Regional Group, and Shawn Cheshire, Florida Regional Group, are in the final preparatory stages to climb two of the world’s tallest mountains: Mount Everest and its neighbor Mount Lhotse, the world’s fourth tallest mountain. Scaling Everest and Lhotse on the same expedition has never been done by a blind person, let alone two of them at the same time.

In addition, Shawn’s successful attempt at Mount Everest will make her the first ever blind woman to make the historic climb. The two plan to leave in mid-April with guide teams from Sightless Summits and Choosing to See. They will return in late May.

Extreme sports athlete Lonnie, BVA’s Father Carroll Luncheon speaker at the 77th
Lonnie Bedwell, left, and Sightless Summits enthusiast Michael Neal demonstrate their exhilaration at Denali Summit June 19, 2022, following a year of planning and 11 days of the climb. Next up for Lonnie: Everest and Lhotse.

National Convention, was named National Geographic 2015 Adventurer of the Year. He has kayaked some of the most challenging whitewater in the world and is responsible for the first blind descents of Africa’s renowned Zambezi River and West Virginia’s Gauley River. Lonnie is best known for the first blind descent of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon with a team of boaters assembled by Team River Runner. Last year, Lonnie successfully climbed Denali with a team from Sightless Summits.

Shawn has been a member of BVA since last September. She joined the U.S. Army in 1994 and served as a helicopter armament systems mechanic for eight years. Following her years in the service, she became an EMT-Paramedic, and in 2009, during a snowstorm, she slipped while treating a patient in an ambulance and sustained a traumatic brain injury that resulted in total loss of vision. The introduction to para-sports ignited her competitive spirit and helped her confront her blindness. She is the founder of the previously mentioned nonprofit organization Choosing to See.

Regional Group Chooses March 28 to Donate Flag

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Outpatient Clinic in Pensacola, Florida, will receive a Bronze Braille American Flag from the Emerald Coast Regional Group in recognition of National Blinded Veterans Day. “This flag will be installed onto one of the columns directly outside the entrance of the clinic,” said Pensacola Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinator Alyssa Lucas, organizer of the live event.

Following the flag presentation, veterans and their families will participate in demonstrations of prosthetic items such as talking watches and magnification devices, distribution of materials about the variety of blind rehabilitation services within the VA system, and role plays that teach proper etiquette for sighted guides.

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.
Now Hiring—Like Everyone Else
by Tracy Ferro

Make no mistake about it—the pay is horrible, but the rewards are great!

No, I’m not suggesting re-enlisting or commissioning. We have all been there and done that. We are all also very aware of how frustrating it can be to need a little help and to struggle for or, worse yet, beg for that help.

All of us have heard of the five stages of dealing with tragedies and setbacks: denial, blaming, bargaining, depression, and, finally, acceptance. I tell newly blinded folks to just sit in the boat and learn how to be blind while the rest of us row that boat. We will eventually hand you an oar and ask you to help the next guy in. Having met so many blinded veterans over the years, I cannot think of one that did not appreciate a little friendly understanding from someone who has walked the walk.

So, what does this all have to do with being hired? I will answer that momentarily!

Many, both among our membership and outside of BVA, have now heard of our Ambassador Program. We are the envy of other organizations because of this relatively new initiative. Our hard work is paying off. The Ambassador Program may not be for you and that is okay. However, make no mistake—the education one receives in this program is of benefit to us as individuals and, at the same time, of perhaps unlimited potential worth to those we might help sooner or later.

After all that, what if you truly feel that the Ambassador Program is still not for you?

The alternative is to simply volunteer in any way possible. Never discount the thought or motivation to do so. You do not have to be an Ambassador to volunteer at your local VA. You do not even have to physically be at a VA facility to volunteer but can perform many functions from home. You can also check out the needs of your local post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, your church, or a yacht or ski club.

Whenever you speak about BVA or VA, or whenever you lend an ear or offer solace to another veteran, you are volunteering. Welfare checks over the phone, stuffing envelopes for your Visual Impairment Services Team, or handing out coffee with the VA Volunteer Services folks all qualify as volunteering. It may be true that they won’t let us drive the vans, but we can help with scheduling them and communicating those schedules to our fellow veterans.

So much of what we do counts as volunteerism and should be credited to BVA as service hours. This is a huge help to our organization and costs you nothing. Additionally, if you volunteer more than six hours a day, you should receive a meal ticket for the canteen. Local awards programs also reward veterans for the number of hours spent volunteering. The camaraderie and the rewarding feeling we experience by helping others, in the spotlight or from the backroom, is worth every minute.

Call your local VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement (CDCE) office, your regional group leadership, or me, Tracy Ferro (228-229-5046). You can also visit https://www.volunteer.va.gov/ to learn more.

Editor’s Note: In addition to his responsibilities as BVA National Treasurer, Tracy Ferro is the BVA representative on the VA National Advisory Committee of the CDCE.
Thinking and Looking Ahead to St. Louis

By Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

It’s next to impossible to think that my second convention season has arrived! During the past few months, I have had time to reflect on the 77th National Convention—not only the week we spent together in Washington, DC, but the many things that transpired during the weeks and months leading up to the Convention. Now that many of us are in that preparatory phase once again, my thoughts and hopes are directed toward bringing renewed energy and ideas, not to mention increased participation, to BVA’s 78th.

St. Louis, Missouri, is a wonderful venue for a BVA National Convention! The vibrant arts scene, sports, shopping, dining, and other nightlife are unmatched. In its own way, this Convention is one for the history books. Ironically, after 78 years and six previous gatherings in the Washington, DC, Metro area, five in New York City, four in Miami Beach, four in Reno, and three in Greater Los Angeles, we are going to St. Louis for the first time ever.

Although convention planning can be a daunting task, it is very rewarding for me to be able to give something back to our blind and low vision members. Planning also allows me the opportunity to connect with our sponsors, VA staff, and to make sure all attendees are actively engaged. Personal relationships are my favorite part of being in the development field. To me, relationship building is the most essential and rewarding part of coordinating an event.

Last year, I was able to speak with exhibitors, sponsors, and members and then connect with them in DC. In addition, engaging with our full staff and learning more about their responsibilities and activities, coupled with my involvement in putting the schedule together, have also allowed me to move into 2023 with greater insights into new revenue expansion.

The primary goal of conventions is to have a little fun and enjoyment while establishing a foundation of valuable relationships that will continue into year-round engagement. As I delve deeper into my planning, that goal is always at the forefront of my mind. Providing our blind and low vision veterans and our corporate partners with an opportunity to connect while learning and creating is what sets our organization apart and will sustain us as we move into the future.

As always, I am here to answer any questions that may arise. In addition to our traditional highlights and the potential for “Lunch and Learn” events and sponsored breakfasts, we are working on a new Bow Wow Lounge as a respite area for our canine hero service dogs. We have also implemented new and updated sponsorship packages which will hopefully bring a more increased flow of revenue to help support BVA and its mission. Please stay tuned as we share more details.

Now that planning is underway, I encourage BVA members to register at https://bva.org/national-convention and to begin making travel arrangements as soon as possible!
Deer Hunting Again After 13 Years
by Henry Johns

Blinded veteran Chuck Smith of Morgan’s Point Resort, Texas, lost his sight 13 years ago from cancer. Although he could no longer shoot a rifle, he still looked forward to hunting trips. He went along and helped clean the harvested deer and cook the meals.

Those who haven’t experienced or been exposed to hunting may not be able to relate to Chuck’s desire to continue going on such trips when he can no longer just pick up a rifle or even see one. The benefits of hunting, however, run deep and include a spiritual connection with the land, wildlife, mankind, and all aspects of nature.

With the concept of “Whole Health” playing such a significant part in several VA publicity campaigns the past few years, it is worth asserting that hunting is good “Whole Health” recreational therapy for the mind, body, and soul. Whole health centers around “what matters to the veteran, not what is the matter with the veteran,” and hunting does matter to thousands of veterans out there.

Hunting is an activity that engages the mind in planning, coordinating, preparing clothing and equipment, and communicating with others about a planned shared experience weeks or maybe even months in advance of the actual hunt. The experience itself builds special memories and opportunities for future joyful storytelling of adventures past. It provides the comfort food of shared memories. Sitting in a deer stand for hours, experiencing the daybreak or stalking across a field, either alone or with friends or family, can take a veteran with sight loss a million miles away from problems and troubling issues of the day.

This past deer season, Chuck was able to go back in time, at least to some extent. He found himself doing something he used to do as a sighted hunter. This occurred when his friends surprised him with an adaptive rifle scope clip-on for blind and low vision hunters that they had learned about online. The adaptive device allows a spotter to see on a remote display everything in the rifle scope’s field of view. In that manner, the spotter can direct the blind shooter holding the rifle to target up, or down, or to the left, or to the right, before firing.

Although Chuck did not have much confidence that such a device would work, nor did he totally understand how it operated, he approached it with the same willingness he fought in Desert Storm as a Marine and the same willingness that he possesses now to use every resource at his disposal in an effort to live as independently as possible as a blinded veteran.

The first stop for Chuck, still skeptical, was the range. To the surprise of everyone present, he hit dead center on the target every time! The next morning, he climbed into a deer stand for the first time in 13 years with two friends. With his friend’s daughter as the spotter to assist him, a buck came within range. She whispered: “Up, down, left, right, now go for it.” As the shot was fired, so did the screams of excitement ring out in the deer stand as his first deer in 13 years, one he never thought he would be able to harvest again,
dropped in its tracks. This proud blind Marine said the experience almost brought him to tears. Overcome with emotion, he insisted on dragging his buck back to the truck himself. “This device gives the visually impaired independence because we are totally independent with the rifle,” Chuck later said. “Nobody but the visually impaired person touches it.”

This new adaptive rifle scope attachment for hunting and shooting sports, the Digital Crosshairs 1000A Adaptive Clip-On, has been issued to qualifying blind and low vision veterans by a VA Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC) in support of recreational therapy treatment plans. The veteran does not have to be totally blind like Chuck to qualify. Low vision that prevents a veteran from easily targeting a gun for recreational hunting or shooting sports may also qualify.

An evaluation done by the BRC in Augusta, Georgia, has recommended this “adaptive recreational equipment” for issuance as an adaptive device for recreational hunting and shooting sports. The VA BRC defines adaptive recreational equipment as, “an item designed to compensate for loss of physical, sensory, or cognitive function and when necessary for the veteran to actively and regularly participate in a sport, recreation, or leisure activity to achieve the veteran’s rehabilitation goals as documented in the medical record.”

To date, several of these devices have been issued to veterans for recreational therapy by the VA BRC, American Lake Division, in Tacoma, Washington. As an adaptive recreational therapy device, it is charged to “Medical Appropriation” with a typical justification by a Recreational Therapist stating something like the following:

“This equipment serves as a direct and active component of the veteran’s medical treatment and rehabilitation. The adaptive aid will allow the veteran to maintain independence and safety during participation in leisure and recreation activity of interest. The camera looks through the scope and displays a 4.3-inch color LCD display as well as the option for a 7-inch display which can be viewed by the veteran or individual assisting the veteran. The scope camera system allows the veteran to be more mobile as the battery system is secured to the stock of the equipment.”

Hunting and shooting sports are a natural ingredient when it comes to a recreational health plan for many disabled veterans. What better therapy is there for a disabled veteran that grew up hunting than to get back in the woods with family and close friends to participate in recreational hunting and shooting sports?

Many disabled veterans are left behind when there is a hunting trip or outing. The general assumption is that they can’t go along due to blindness, limited vision, or a mobility disability. The Digital Crosshairs 1000A Adaptive Scope Clip-On is another 21st century technological innovation that leaves in the dustheap still another assumption about what veterans with sight loss can and cannot do!

Henry Johns is the founder and chief innovator of Digital FOV, an entrepreneurial venture centered on digital night vision and digital visual equipment for hunters, outdoor activities, the auto industry, boating, protective services personnel, and adaptive equipment for the disabled.
Chaplain’s Corner
by Dr. Ron Lester

As we find ourselves at the beginning of 2023, I feel compelled to ask: Where did last year go?

I refer especially to the last four months of the year once the national convention was in the annals of history. Just contemplate all the things that occurred in that window of time: Veterans Day, such a great time to remember all our veterans who have served to give us the freedom we have in this country; Thanksgiving, such a great time to look back on our life and be grateful, or gather with friends and family to have fellowship; and the religious holidays of December and early January that hopefully filled us with some good cheer and useful reflection.

In the fall of 1966, I was in Vietnam missing friends and family. The guy that I had worked with for two years, and who was my bunkmate, got shipped home in October for health reasons. So, on Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and all the other holidays that year, I was just counting the days until January 11, 1967. When that day came, I could go home to see my sweetheart and ask her to marry me. We got married on June 9 of that year.

Despite the anticipation leading up to my proposal and eventual wedding day, I was very lonely during that waiting time! Being out there by myself without friends, family, and my bunkmate made for a difficult fall season. This personal experience of many years ago seems to have relevance now as I am aware that many of us have had that overwhelming feeling of loneliness these last few years. There are times when we truly believe that no one cares about us.

One of the best ways I have found to break that loneliness is to start singing songs and just start saying “I am alive and well” even when I don’t feel like it! There is power in song and in what is true.

This all reminds me of the story of Dave Roever. If you haven’t heard of Dave and his account of being burned beyond recognition from a grenade explosion accident in Vietnam, you should go listen to some of his music and sermons. In 2005 in Hawaii at a Thanksgiving dinner for our military, I sat and listened to Dave’s story. What inspiration his stories are!

One story that sticks out the most to me was when Dave gets his guitar out and begins to play and sing…and the feeling of great joy floods His spirit! Through his own music he finally breaks that loneliness and the fear that no one loves him after the burns all over his face and hands.

What an amazing story.

Above all, when loneliness and despair hit, we need to turn to the scriptures. There are so many stories about men and women who needed encouragement and God provided it to them! There are also many stories, especially in the Psalms, about giving thanks to God despite our feelings and circumstances. He is good and with us even in the hardest of times.

May God’s blessing be upon you this year and may we give thanks to the Almighty! Thanks to our veterans for all they do.
Why I Meditate
by Paschal Baute

I meditate because it makes my life easier and gives me more control over my time. I also like the peace, the stillness, and the relaxation that accompanies meditation. I am now spending more time meditating than I used to because of the many new benefits I am experiencing as a result.

Meditation is good for my heart, my digestive system, my immune system, and for all the functions of my body. It slows me down. I can live more fully in the present without rehearsing regrets. I have more control over my reactive brain. As I develop the power of a more observing self, I discover a greater number of positive choices available to me each day. I react less to stress in my environment. In other words, I have more control over my feelings and reactions. I live more focused and centered on the things that really matter.

Meditation is not new to me. For some 20 years, I hosted and led a meditation group replay in my home. I organized and led community workshops in spiritual growth. I have been practicing the deep breathing of “mindful meditation” for many years.

Only in the last few years have I arrived at what I now regard to be the best of all my practices with the book The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle, as well as by listening occasionally to the podcasts that use the same title. I am now practicing this mindful presence much of my day and have developed tricks for signals to hook me into my observing self.

What I like about this method is that it fits perfectly with my religious beliefs about the power of unconditional love and unbounded grace from God. It is encouraging to make this discovery. I have reason to believe that this method is not inconsistent with the beliefs of many persons and denominations, even when basic beliefs about the nature of God are so widely diverse.

Filled with sensory stimuli that make me more self-aware, the meditative state is the most relaxing, healthy, peaceful, and resilient place for me to be. I can state with conviction that this practice has brought many dividends.

While practicing meditation, I am more organized in my self-care, more able to stick to my own self-care rules, more able to concentrate and remember, more able to be helpful around the house, and more able to accomplish what I set out to do with less distraction and interruption.

Perhaps best of all, my meditation allows me to live with a profound sense of gratitude and to remember to utter those powerful words “thank you” every chance I can to those around me. Research has shown this to be the most powerful phrase in maintaining positive relationships.

My meditation has become a lifeline to my sanity, to the grace of a Supreme Being, and to maintaining my lifestyle. It is a place for deep and profound refreshment. It is nourishment for my soul.
Amazon Terminates AmazonSmile

Amazon announced in mid-January that the AmazonSmile program would be discontinued as of February 20. As a result, BVA is seeking opportunities with other revenue sources to generate at least the same or greater support than that generated by AmazonSmile.

Amazon introduced AmazonSmile in 2013 as it set out to expand its Prime membership business, enabling customers to designate 0.5 percent of the price of eligible purchases to the charity of their choice. There was no additional cost for customers to donate. The open policy inspired more than a million charities to sign up, including BVA. Many of the Association’s loyal supporters made regular donations to BVA through AmazonSmile.

“MVP” Still Available On Demand and Digitally

On the streets of Hollywood, a recently retired NFL player is saved from scandal by a homeless veteran suffering from PTSD. With their glory days behind them both, the two men bond in search of true purpose and identity.

Inspired by actual events, the film MVP, directed by former Green Beret and NFL player Nate Boyer and produced by Silvester Stallone, dramatizes the relationships between athletes and military veterans.

Although MVP was released in theaters last September, it is now available for viewing using other media. The movie’s trailer is accessible on YouTube via an internet search engine. For the MVP website, visit https://www.filmrise-screenings.com/mvp.

New Documentary Inspires Research

The VA Center for Women Veterans has released a heartfelt, emotional documentary in partnership with the Million Veteran Program to motivate veterans, especially women veterans, to join its research program studying how genes, lifestyle, military experiences, and exposures can affect veteran health and wellness.

The documentary features former Director of Michigan Veterans Affairs Zaneta Adams as she shares her journey of hope and resilience after a debilitating service-related injury and her subsequent desire to give back, this time through research. To view the documentary or the two-minute trailer via YouTube, search online for Women Veterans: Millions Like Us.

Maximum VGLI Coverage Increased March 1

Veterans eligible to purchase additional Veterans Group Life Insurance (VGLI) coverage saw an increase in the maximum of such coverage beginning March 1, 2023. The increase, the first since 2005, was made possible by passage of S. 2794, the Supporting Families of the Fallen Act, on October 17, 2022.

Individuals under 60 years of age with $400,000 in coverage are now able to purchase more coverage in $25,000 increments up to the new $500,000 limit. This additional coverage is available without medical underwriting during specified coverage anniversary periods. Those eligible should have received mailed notifications of this coverage opportunity. For more information about eligibility, the benefits of VGLI, and updated rates, visit https://www.va.gov/life-insurance/options-eligibility/vgli/.
PACT Act Claims Processing Moves Rapidly Forward

In early January, VA began processing regular claims under The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act. The law, believed to be the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history, compensates veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances during military service.

Leading up to January 1, VA finalized decisions on PACT Act claims filed by veterans who self-identified as terminally ill. This group will continue to receive priority, together with veterans with cancer, veterans experiencing homelessness, veterans older than 85 years old, veterans experiencing financial hardship, and Medal of Honor and Purple Heart recipients.

For more information about the PACT Act and how to file a claim, go to https://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/. Prospective claimants may also contact the BVA Veterans Service Program at vsp@bva.org or by completing an intake form at https://bva.org/programs/veteran-service/.

With new opportunities for expanded health care and benefits to veterans, VA warns against scammers who also see an opportunity to commit fraud against them. For a list of dos and don’ts in avoiding scams related to the PACT Act and others, visit https://www.oprm.va.gov/docs/PACT-Act-Scams.pdf.

Bestwork Industries for the Blind Seeks Veterans for Employment

Bestwork Industries for the Blind located in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, is seeking to hire veterans who are blind or visually impaired.

Bestwork Industries was founded in 1981 by Vincenzo James “Jim” Varsaci, a BVA founding member present at the organization’s first meeting at Avon Old Farms Army Convalescent Hospital on March 28, 1945, while he recuperated from combat injuries during World War II.

Bestwork is now the largest employer in the state of New Jersey for persons who are legally blind. Full-time and part-time opportunities are available in the following areas: kitting, packaging, document scanning and imaging, and sewing. The company is a competitive, integrated environment offering industry wages and opportunities for upward mobility.

To learn how to apply and more, contact Maurice Tyndell at MTyndell@bestworkindustries.org, or at 856-424-2510, Ext. 213. To learn more about the organization, go to https://bestworkindustries.org/.

Large-Scale Overhaul for Former BVUK Facility

The future of one of Brighton, England’s most prominent landmarks, the former residential training and rehabilitation center of Blind Veterans UK (previously St Dunstan’s) in the small community of Ovingdean for 83 years, is still undecided for the time being.

A developer had hoped to win permission for a revamp of the site into 64 homes with a movie theater, gym, and swimming pool to the tune of 36 million British pounds. However, staunch opposition in the name of a more affordable housing project expressed by Bridget Fishleigh, a member of the Brighton and Hove City Council, put the future on hold once again. Fishleigh blasted the plan for luxury homes at a meeting of the South
Downs National Park Authority’s planning committee on December 8 of last year.

Blind Veterans UK vacated the huge complex nearly a year and a half ago. The shared history of BVA and Blind Veterans UK has been a mutually beneficial one since 1945 but perhaps even more so since 2011 with the advent of the joint Project Gemini-Operation Peer Support exchange initiative between the two organizations. The exchanges included visits by many BVA members to the now empty Brighton center.

Additional information about the fate of the renowned Brighton campus will be shared with Bulletin readers in future issues.

**Partnership Seeks Veterans to Mentor Youth with Sight Loss**

The Travis Manion Foundation (TMF) and Metrolina Association for the Blind (MAB) have announced a unique partnership to identify veterans with vision loss who could become youth mentors through the “Character Does Matter” program hosted by TMF.

Using a research-based curriculum designed specifically for youth audiences, the Character Does Matter program is founded on positive psychology and provides the framework for mentorship for youth and a renewed sense of purpose and camaraderie for veterans and survivors. From that curriculum TMF provides the necessary training, support, and materials for mentors at no cost.

Character Does Matter mentors build relationships with youth, helping them to develop character and leadership through day-long or multi-day experiences, including team-building exercises, group discussions, and experiential learning challenges.

Veterans with sight loss who are interested in the call to mentor younger individuals should contact Dana Draa at ddraa@mabnc.org. To learn more about the partnering organizations, click https://www.travismanion.org for TMF and https://www.mabnc.org for MAB.

**VA Updates 1959 Mission Statement**

VA announced on March 16 an updated version of its 1959 mission statement that is now inclusive of all who have served in the nation’s military.

The new mission statement is: “To fulfill President Lincoln’s promise to care for those who have served in our nation’s military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors.” The statement also acknowledges the importance of women veterans, who now number more than 600,000 and constitute the fastest growing cohort of veterans. It also recognizes the millions of veterans who did not serve in combat.

**Goals Announced to Eliminate Veteran Homelessness**

VA vowed during the month of March to place at least 38,000 veterans currently experiencing homelessness into permanent housing during 2023.

The Department also hopes to ensure that at least 95 percent of the veterans housed in 2023 do not return to homelessness. A third goal is for VA to ensure that at least 90 percent of those who do return to homelessness be rehoused or on a path to rehousing by the end of 2023.

“We are making real progress in the fight to end veteran homelessness, but even one veteran experiencing homelessness is one too many,” said Secretary McDonough. “We will not rest until every veteran has a safe, stable place to call home in this country they fought to defend.”
In Remembrance
The Blinded Veterans Association deeply regrets the passing of the following blinded veterans.

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<tr>
<th>Regional Group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Connecticut R.G.</td>
<td>Michael Terek</td>
<td>San Diego R.G.</td>
<td>Peter Scott</td>
<td>BVA Member At Large</td>
<td>(No Regional Group Affiliation)</td>
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<td>Florida R.G.</td>
<td>Dennis Babini</td>
<td>South Texas R.G.</td>
<td>Jose Cotto</td>
<td>Sharon Malone of Chandler, Arizona</td>
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<td>Dorothy Large</td>
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<td>Jose Molina</td>
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<td>Alvin Morgan</td>
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<td>Greater Houston R.G.</td>
<td>Joe Lewis</td>
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<td>Michael Nicholas</td>
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<td>Charles Query</td>
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<td>Clarence Sims</td>
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<td>Heartland R.G.</td>
<td>Keith Hudson</td>
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<td>Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.</td>
<td>Thomas Witcher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stanley Yasko</td>
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<td>Mid-Atlantic R.G.</td>
<td>Robert Zettler</td>
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<td>Midwest North R.G.</td>
<td>Clyde McCaskey</td>
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<td>New Jersey R.G.</td>
<td>John Peles</td>
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<td>Rocky Mountain R.G.</td>
<td>Roberto Chavez</td>
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Veterans Day 2022 at Arlington National Cemetery was a wet one that included a handful of brief but impactful torrential downpours throughout the procession of flags, the dignitary speeches, and the VSO wreath laying. Successfully braving the elements while representing BVA were National Officers Joe McNeil and Wanda Grover and flag bearers Lawrence Harrison and Mike Jenkins.
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Vice President – PAUL MIMMS, Kansas City, MO
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Director District 4 – WADE DAVIS, LaPorte, TX
Immediate Past National President – DR. THOMAS ZAMPIERI, Pearland, TX
Sergeant-At-Arms – BRIAN O’CONNELL, Greenville, SC
National Chaplain – DR. RON LESTER, Tucson, AZ
National Ombudsman – TONORA LYN SHANNON, St. Clair Shores, MI
National Judge Advocate – STEPHEN BUTLER, Temple, TX

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Vice President – ROBERT MURPHY, Manhattan, KS
Secretary – SUSAN CANTRELL, Spokane, WA
Treasurer – BENJAMIN HOLMES, Midland, GA
Reporter – LAURA KABATT-KENNEDY, Anchorage, AK
Chaplain – ROXIE WILLIAMS, Las Vegas, NV

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Director of Veterans Benefits – DUAYNE DRISCOLL
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Director of Communications – KYLIE FITZGERALD
Each year, the Veterans Day National Committee of which BVA is a member chooses a commemorative Veterans Day poster from designs submitted by artists nationwide for the annual VA Veterans Day Poster Contest. The winning design is displayed in all VA facilities, military installations, and municipal buildings across the country. It is also the cover of the official program for the annual November 11 ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery (see earlier entry BVA Joins Fellow VSOs in Honoring All Veterans beginning on page 11).

Last year’s winner was Briana Cummings, pictured here with Joe McNeil at the Veterans Day Reception hosted by Vietnam Veterans of America. At the time of the artwork’s selection, Cummings was a Visual Information Specialist at the Erie, Pennsylvania VA Medical Center. She is now a VA Public Affairs Specialist.