The Bulletin
Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans
Spring 2023

78th National Convention
Downtown St. Louis

Ballpark Village
Cover Photos: Ballpark Village, located just under a mile from the Marriott St. Louis Marriott Grand, will attract attendees of the BVA 78th National Convention for its reputation as the premiere dining and entertainment mecca of the St. Louis Metropolitan Area. Adjacent to this first-ever sports-anchored, multi-phased, mixed-use development is historic Busch Stadium, home of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. The upcoming convention experience is summarized in this issue of The Bulletin. Photo courtesy of Explore St. Louis.

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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.

Fellow Blinded Veterans, Members, and Friends:

After two and a half years of isolation and surviving the most devastating of world crises, we are emerging out of our homes to travel the country to visit with family and friends, and to finally be able to put faces with names we know only from Zoom or Microsoft Teams video calls and meetings.

The Blind Rehabilitation Centers are opening once again, and we can finally take off those pesky masks that we needed to preserve our lives!

We are on the verge of a celebration, that of our 78th National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri! The staff is hard at work to assure a fantastic time for everyone. Last year was great and that means this year will be even better since we can spread our wings out even more. We need every BVA member to go to https://bva.org/national-convention and register. Book your flights early to secure less expensive tickets and hopefully more convenience.

In preparation for the convention, we need to be sure that all regional groups are in good standing, that all reports are turned in, and that all credentials are reviewed and signed by the president of the regional group. Please don’t forget either that delegate credentials must be forwarded on time to District Directors and BVA National Headquarters.

As we did during the pandemic years and then again last year, we will hold town hall sessions leading up to the convention to discuss any bylaw changes or other issues needing to be brought before the membership. If you have any questions in the meantime, please bring them up with your leadership (regional group president or district director).

We will be conducting elections for new national officers and all delegates must be physically present to vote. As a reminder to all regional groups, your delegate represents you and their failure to be present and seated on time to represent you will be them failing you. Just as a preliminary reminder, the doors will be locked during the vote, and no one will be allowed entry once we have begun.

I want to thank all Committee Chairs and the members who have stepped up when called upon to serve. Without your sacrifice of time and effort, we could not have accomplished what we have. I hope you continue to stay involved and support the next president as well. We have considerable talent in this organization, and we must use and channel that talent in the best ways possible.

If you are not called on to help, it is due to an oversight. If such a case occurs, please step up and indicate your availability. We will not turn you away.

To all BVA members, it has been a humbling moment in time and a pleasure serving as your National President. I look forward to seeing you in St. Louis. I have great respect for all of you and your acts of service are worthy of great accolades. See you soon!
Legislative Update
by Alek Libbin

During this first session of the 118th Congress that will run through the end of 2024, BVA will focus on the legislative priorities emphasized in our recent Congressional testimony on March 8. We will also be working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure access to quality care.

The BVA leadership met with more than 25 offices in the House and Senate in the days leading up to the testimony, where we gave detailed and effective information to Members of Congress and their respective staff members. Since that time, we have continued to engage with numerous offices, including, but not limited to, Senators John Cornyn (R-TX) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and the staff of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Congress is about relationships, and the connections we made during the week of the testimony laid the foundation for action. We appreciate the time that those offices spent with us. Their continued support and engagement are critical to needed progress on all our policy goals.

This background leads us to the main topic of this issue’s Update, which is how the testimony is crafted and how the document builds into our overall strategy. We begin putting the testimony together by reviewing our current main goals, our previous testimonies and goals, and our ongoing efforts to bring the two together. We then engage with staff in Congress to find out what their priorities are and come up with a plan to best influence offices and frame our issues.

The testimony is important because it provides a solid reference document that can act as the basis of further engagement. President McNeil’s testimony is also important because it can serve as a gauge of interest for issues. For example, this year most questions asked by the Committee Members related to accessibility and service dog protections. Having this experience allows us to identify which Members are interested in which issues and how to leverage their interest.

Once the testimony and Capitol Hill visits were concluded, the BVA Government Relations Team conducted follow-up meetings on the Hill and fielded questions from Congressional staff. These meetings allow us to guide offices in the direction we
believe to be best and gain further information into the way they think.

For example, a Senator’s staff member inquired about Braille and accessibility issues for VA, asking for BVA’s input and guidance. The chief reason these engagements are important is that while staff are highly knowledgeable, perhaps experts in their field and the government regulations affecting that field, they often lack the narrower subject-matter expertise. It’s akin to a general practitioner knowing how the heart works and a cardiologist knowing how to heal a heart after a heart attack.

These engagements result in various types of actions. An example would be a letter directed to VA signed by several Members of at least one of the two Veterans Affairs Committees. Such letters can refine the language in a bill and increase awareness of the importance of the issue in question both at VA and in Congress. They are also important because they signal to VA the priorities and interests of Congress with respect to an issue and, if a response is requested, that response provides greater clarity into VA’s course and goals. The response also provides Congress with an easy reference on which to base further inquiries, possible support, and requests for corrections.

All these efforts and actions build into BVA’s strategy to produce results in the form of legislation or regulation.

Veterans Service Organization representatives at witness table, additional leaders, and onlookers gathered on March 8 for the annual presentation of legislative priorities by BVA and eight other organizations.
Executive Director’s Message
by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

Until 2016, at least a small handful of our “Greatest Generation” blinded veterans were able to attend the annual convention. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. How we now miss them—their energy, their good cheer, their wisdom, and, perhaps most of all, their loyalty to BVA.

On Memorial Day this year, as we participated in remembrance ceremonies and were honored to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, I thought of our early members who pioneered the organization. I also thought of the World War II veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice and never returned home.

In my column last year at approximately this same time, I mentioned the fact that, despite years of war, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) such as BVA are not growing. Membership in most of these VSOs peaked in the early 1990s but has since faced a sharp decline, even more so during the past ten years with the accelerated loss of so many of our World War II veterans.

My prior column also referenced our younger veterans who, for a variety of reasons, do not face the societal opposition that prevailed in previous eras and do not seek the assistance, protection, and camaraderie of BVA and similar organizations as they once did. Notwithstanding these obstacles and difficult conditions, I expressed optimism that if we strategized and transformed ourselves appropriately, leveraging modern tools and technology, we could still meet the needs and interests of our veterans with sight loss.

Sharing different strategies in our pre-convention virtual meetings last summer and the subsequent passage of the revised bylaws in Washington, DC, was an important step in that process, but there is still much to discuss and accomplish. This year’s national convention is another opportunity to hold those constructive discussions and gain a clearer, more unified vision for BVA’s future.

If you have not already done so, I hope you will consider, or reconsider, attending and participating with your fellow BVA members in our 78th National Convention, now just weeks away. Our regional groups sorely need representation, and we need to hear from these groups through their convention delegates or their individual members who speak for themselves. We need our membership to be actively involved in this process of strategic transformation.

Although the focus of our convention staff will be on making sure that things run smoothly with the business meetings, our Exhibit Hall, and the technological innovators and companies who have generously stepped up to sponsor our events, we hope that our attendees can find time to enjoy the downtown area of St. Louis, which offers an abundance of options for fun and enjoyment both day and night. Please come to the 78th National Convention and take advantage of it all. We look forward to seeing you there August 14-18!
St. Louis Promises Warm Welcome
by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

BVA members and their families who have not yet registered for the 78th National Convention, but who yearn to enjoy a potpourri of dining experiences, cultural and historic sites, a vibrant arts scene, an overflow of parks and recreation areas, and a high-class hotel should book their travel and register for the convention now!

Add to all that the usual camaraderie, an expansive Exhibit Hall with the latest in technology for the blind and low vision, and an opportunity to make a difference in the policy making affecting BVA’s future by attending the business meetings, and you have the recipe for an enjoyable exciting week in the Gateway City.

Official Convention Letter

Pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of Article IX (National Convention) of the BVA National Bylaws, all members of the Blinded Veterans Association are hereby notified that the BVA 78th National Convention will be held at the Marriott St. Louis Grand, 800 Washington Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63101, from Monday, August 14, through Friday, August 18, 2023.

Forest Park, owned by the City of St. Louis, attracts 13 million visitors each year, making it the sixth most visited urban park in the United States. This unique city escape only blocks from the Marriott St. Louis Grand offers 1,300 acres of beautiful landscapes sprinkled with forests, ecosystems, nature reserves, and lakes and streams. A Dual Path system invites both leisurely walks and intense workouts, quiet places to enjoy a picnic and read, and a variety of festivals and events. Visible in the background is the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo courtesy of Explore St. Louis.
The following details are important for attendees to begin planning their trips and weeklong stays in St. Louis, Missouri.

Registration Information

BVA members and guests can register and pay online at https://bva.org/national-convention/, or by contacting Meredith Buono-DaGrossa at mbuonodagrossa@bva.org, or call 202-371-8880, Ext. 304. The deadline to pre-register is July 21, 2023, at 5:00pm (ET).

Hotel Information

The BVA room rate at the Marriott St. Louis Grand is $126.00 per night (plus tax). The hotel offers complimentary standard Wi-Fi in guest rooms for all Marriott Bonvoy Members, refrigerators in each room, and use of the well-equipped fitness center.

Convention attendees can enjoy breakfast at the 8th Street Pantry, the onsite full-service Starbucks®, or at Zenia Bar & Grille (contemporary American cuisine and cocktails).

To reserve your room, please use the following hotel booking link: https://book.passkey.com/e/50368736, or call 877-303-0104 and use code “BLINDED VETS BVA.” The hotel will honor the special BVA room rate for stays between August 10-19, 2023, but reservations must be made prior to July 21, 2023.

Travel Information

For travel assistance, please contact Brenda K. McDaniel, Independent Travel Consultant and daughter of a BVA member, between 11:00am and 6:30pm ET. Brenda can be reached at brenda_mcdaniel@sbcglobal.net or call 915-204-0101.

The following are scheduled highlights of the 78th National Convention (subject to change):

BVA convention attendees may wish to explore a nearly three-acre oasis in downtown St. Louis known as Citygarden Sculpture Park. Free of charge to enter, Citygarden is within walking distance of the renowned Gateway Arch. Visitors perusing the area will discover 24 sculptures, a children’s spray and splash area, six rain gardens, and a 180-foot pool and waterfall. Photo courtesy of Explore St. Louis.

Monday, August 14
- Registration
- Service Dog Bow Wow Lounge
- Riverboat Cruise with 3-Course Dinner ($5 offsite registration fee)

Tuesday, August 15
- Exhibitor and BVA Member Breakfast
- Service Dog Bow Wow Lounge
- Exhibit Hall Opens
- Exhibit Hall Bingo
- Missouri Botanical Gardens (morning) and Anheuser-Busch Brewery (afternoon) Tours ($5 offsite registration fee each)
- President’s Reception Dinner
Wednesday, August 16
- Ambassador Ceremony/Coffee
- Service Dog Bow Wow Lounge
- Exhibit Hall
- Exhibit Hall Bingo
- Opening Session
- Business Meetings
- Lunch and Learn
- Special Interest Group Meetings
- Bowling and Dinner at Flamingo Bowl ($5 offsite registration fee)

Thursday, August 17
- General Session
- Service Dog Bow Wow Lounge
- Father Carroll Luncheon
- District Caucus Meetings
- Explore St. Louis (on your own)

Friday, August 18
- Closing Business Meeting
- Service Dog Bow Wow Lounge
- Reception and Awards Banquet

Frequently Asked Questions:
What is the member cancellation policy?
Fully refundable registration cancellations will be honored through July 21, 2023, at 5:00pm (ET).

How do I sign up for offsite events, tours, and activities?
Registration for offsite events, tours, and activities is available online at https://bva.org/national-convention/offsite-activities/registration/, or at the convention registration desk. All offsite activities have a non-refundable $5 registration fee.

Do the hotel rooms have refrigerators for my medications?
Yes. All rooms are equipped with a small refrigerator.

Can my regional group still advertise in the convention program?
Yes! We encourage it! BVA regional groups and chapters can advertise by contacting Meredith and providing their full-page or half-page ad NO LATER THAN June 20, 2023. Payment must be received at the time of commitment. The regional group discounted price for a full-page ad is $100 and a half-page ad is $50.

Will someone meet me at the airport/train station?
Yes. Volunteers will be available to assist BVA members and guests at the airport.

Is there a shuttle from the airport to the hotel?
No. Members should plan to use a taxi or rideshare service for travel to and from the airport and hotel at their own expense.

Is there parking at the hotel?
Hotel parking costs $35 daily, including overnight. SP Parking, 901 Lucas Avenue, just two blocks from the hotel, offers parking for $10 per day. A mobile application can be downloaded through which payment can be made daily without returning to the vehicle. More information is available from SP Parking at https://parking.com or at 314-421-4063.

Will the offsite activity buses be wheelchair accessible?
Yes. Please contact Meredith to ensure that BVA is aware of your need for wheelchair accommodation.
Is there a dog relief area?
Yes! There will be two designated relief areas! New this year is a Service Dog Bow Wow Lounge. Immediately outside that lounge is a door leading to a relief area on Washington Avenue. An additional relief area will be on St. Charles Street closer to the business meeting space.

Will the offsite activity buses be wheelchair accessible?
Yes. Please contact Meredith to ensure that BVA is aware of your need for wheelchair accommodation.

What is the plan in the event of a fire drill or emergency?
Volunteers and hotel staff will orient members to the emergency exits, stairwells, and assembly areas near their rooms. Any further questions can be answered at the convention.

Will there be a hospitality suite?
Yes. Hospitality suite hours will be available at the hotel.

What meals are included in my registration fee?
- Monday evening Riverboat Cruise (dinner)
- Tuesday morning Exhibitor and BVA Member Breakfast (breakfast)
- Tuesday afternoon Lunch and Learn (lunch)
- Tuesday evening President’s Reception Dinner (dinner)
- Wednesday afternoon Lunch and Learn (lunch)
- Wednesday evening Bowling and Dinner (dinner)
- Thursday afternoon Father Carroll Luncheon (lunch)
- Friday evening Awards Reception and Banquet (dinner)

What dining options are available at the hotel?
The hotel has an onsite restaurant with breakfast, lunch, and dinner options.
I Couldn’t Even Believe It Myself!
by Shawntina Gibson

A little more than a year ago the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group talked me into going to an adaptive sports camp promoted by Team BVA. I had never been rock climbing or kayaking before, and I hadn’t ridden a bike in years but, after some thought, I was willing to give it all a try. Very quickly I fell in love with the challenge to mind and body, attending a variety of camps and local challenges ranging from snow skiing to running the Houston Half Marathon.

What I thought was the climax came March 1-5 at Beast Adventure Week in San Diego, only to be matched a month later at the Challenged Athletes Foundation’s Iron Man Triathlon. With a little editing, these accounts come out of my personal journal.

Beast Adventure Week

One of my most fulfilling experiences since delving into adaptive sports, Beast Adventure Week featured a five-day adventure, courtesy of the Blind Stokers Club of San Diego. It was filled with camping, rock climbing, tandem biking, and hiking in and around Joshua Tree National Park and Anza Borrego State Park. Let me tell you, I may have been in California, but this was one snowy, cold adventure, especially for a young girl coming from the south!

Day 1 for me was the most challenging, camping for the first time and trying to sleep outside in Joshua Tree National Park at 32 degrees. Wouldn’t you know also that there was snow on the ground there for the first time in decades! I’m thinking to myself: “I’m not going to make it for four more days outside!”

With assistance from guide Mike Donaldson, Shawntina Gibson makes final preparations for her chillino rock-climbing challenge. The term “chillino” refers to an experience of harmony realized while moving over stone. The climb is on the rock formation that is named Morbid Bound.

The next morning, on Day 2, it was still cold, but the sun eventually came out and I couldn’t think of a more perfect way to start off the adventure than with a rock climbing activity. The team that came in and assisted us was beyond incredible—knowledgeable, prepared with equipment, and with the motivation to get us all started. I needed that motivation because, after all, I considered myself a cyclist and not a rock climber. Throughout the park they had different stations set up with different ability levels. Soon, I was in the intermediate group and then with the advanced climbers, reaching 40 feet high for the first time and literally seeing the world from up top! This gave me the adrenaline and confidence that I really didn’t know I had within myself.
Days 3 and 4 consisted of a trip to Borrego Springs and back. It was there that we did tandem biking and hiking. It was my first time riding that far on a bike. On the way back we caught some uphill winds. I was thinking on my bike: “Why didn’t anyone tell me that it would take almost three hours to cover 20 miles?” This was because the headwinds were so heavy that day. I will tell you, though, quitting was not an option and the margarita at the end made it so worth it all!

Day 5 of this adventure, the final day, was spent hiking in the beautiful desert canyons, experiencing the natural beauty of California that very few experience.

Most of the adaptive sports activities in which I have participated include nice hotels, opportunities to lounge, and fully paid flights. Those are the things that may motivate some veterans to participate. Not this one! I flew out to California on my own dime and slept outside those five days. Waking up and seeing the sun rise and set every day was better than any hotel experience. To add to that, I was able to get up each day and give it my all to this wonderful group that invited me to come out and join them.

Sometimes in life we must move outside of our box and try something new. Although this was not a veteran-focused trip, it was still focused on people with physical disabilities not only having fun but challenging themselves in different ways.

Thanks go to the Blind Stokers Club of California for allowing me to participate all the way from Louisiana and to bond with them. Through nature they showed me another side of what life has to offer.

**Ironman Triathlon**

Here I was on April 1 in Oceanside, California, all set for a 70.3, also known as a Half Ironman. The big day had arrived.

I was assigned to the Operation Rebound Team of the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF). The number 70.3 refers to the total distance in miles covered in the race, which consists of a 1.2-mile swim, a 56-mile bike ride, and a 13.1-mile run. Each of the three segments is half of what it is in a full Ironman Triathlon.

This was still all new to me. I had been a grant recipient for less than a year and had participated only in a Try Challenge six months earlier in San Diego to get a taste of a triathlon. I had been overwhelmed with the love and support CAF shows to veterans and first responders. So, when CAF asked me to participate in the 70.3 as a fundraising event to receive more money for grants, I could not help but say yes! In addition to that, as a blinded veteran who understands the struggles of life and who always wants to do more but is often limited, I really wanted to do it.

Although I started training ten weeks prior to the big day, I was so nervous when that
A Rich History of Service To Fellow Veterans
by Stuart Nelson

With perhaps only a couple of exceptions, I have at my fingertips the hard copy of every issue of The Bulletin since that historic first edition of April 15, 1946. Volume 1, Number 1 was an eight-page newsletter composed on an old typewriter, the copies of which appear to have been produced by a mimeograph machine (for anyone old enough to remember such a process) and then mailed to the members of the newly organized Blinded Veterans Association.

Access to The Bulletin has provided me with some insight into some of the influential figures and important events in BVA’s history that have shaped and brought the organization to where it is today. However, with 78 years to digest and a history that has affected thousands of blinded veterans, I am little more than a novice when it comes to BVA and its rich history, particularly when it comes to the ways in which blinded veterans have been assisted and lifted by their fellow veterans, both individually and institutionally.

Serving as an editor of The Bulletin but still doing so, nevertheless, as that historical novice, I sometimes overlook a milestone—something of real historical significance to BVA. Perhaps never did that fact ring truer for me than it did recently with an email in early May from Dr. Dennis Wyant of the Florida Regional Group, one of the Association’s Past National Presidents. He had first contacted me...
last November and, after reading a small biographical blurb about himself that we included as a “Did You Know” filler in the last issue, he emailed me again.

Dennis reminded me in both messages that the year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of a newly revived and expanded Field Service Program funded through a contract with what was then called the Veterans Administration. The objective, essence, and scope of that program were unprecedented, but it continues today as our Veterans Service Program currently managed by National Service Director Duwayne Driscoll and National Service Officer and BVA member Marlene Davis-Lilly.

“BVA was close to going under financially at the time and the funding we received from the VA contract and then a later grant from the Department of Labor literally saved the organization,” Dennis said.

In January 1973, Dennis was appointed as the National Field Service Director and assumed his duties at BVA National Headquarters, at the time located on DeSales Street Northwest in Washington, DC. Shortly thereafter, upon interviews by an ad hoc committee, three additional Field Service Representatives were selected to serve in various parts of the United States—Don Garner for the Northeast, Buddy Spivey for the Central United States, Robert Utley for the Far West, and Dennis himself for the Southeast Region, Alaska, Hawaii, and any international areas where blinded veterans could be residing.

“Each of us will not only be handling a geographic area but will specialize in certain areas of interest that will complement the goals of the program and our own individual aptitudes and experiences,” Dennis wrote at the time. He went on to elaborate on Buddy’s experience with prosthetic devices and vocational rehabilitation programs, Don’s aptitude with low vision aids, Robert’s legal education and training, and his own knowledge of employment of the disabled.

Because of the demanding nature of the work and the large number of veterans being helped, however, the assignments in the end were strictly geographic, Dennis told me during a recent call. There was really no time to realistically devote to those specialized areas of interest, he said.

The stated objective of the newly revamped program was to seek out blinded veterans throughout the United States to ascertain their needs and to bring them into contact
with VA facilities and local community service agencies to assist them in their total rehabilitation. As unusual as it now seems, funds for the program came from VA through a negotiated contract with BVA in pursuance of this objective.

A native of Missouri and a Vietnam era veteran, Dennis was a 30-year-old father of a young son at the time of his appointment as Director of the program. He was first affected by vision problems in 1966 while in-flight training when one eye developed histoplasmosis, a fungus-like disease that attacks the optic nerve and destroys central vision. Within a year the disease had spread to the second eye, leaving him with peripheral vision only.

As mentioned in the “Did You Know,” Dennis was later elected to the BVA National Board of Directors as National Secretary, National Vice President, and National President. He also served as a Special Assistant to the VA Administrator (now a cabinet position) during the Carter Administration. Despite being very young at the time, he brought a wealth of training and experience to BVA as a former member of the Executive Board of the Dayton Council for the Blind, a delegate to the National Federation of the Blind of Ohio, a member of the Mayor’s and Governor’s Committees on Employment of the Handicapped, and a member of the National Rehabilitation Association.

Dennis earned a Bachelor of Science Degree at Southwest Missouri State University in 1965 prior to losing his sight, a Master of Business Administration from Wright State University in 1972, and a Doctorate in Adult Technical and Vocational Education from the University of Cincinnati shortly thereafter.

Although not funded by the same contract with VA, the Field Service Program continued and expanded even further, eventually reaching seven Representatives and a Director until its recent consolidation and decentralization back to the National Headquarters beginning in 2014.

Did You Know?

- Dennis Wyant’s tenure as Director of the BVA Field Service Program of the 1970s did not come without a few frustrating but nonetheless humorous experiences with federal employees. On one occasion, in a meeting about the employment of disabled veterans, Dennis offered a VA statistic revealing that only about 10 percent of the Vietnam era blinded veterans were working full-time. The meeting moderator informed him that those figures were not relevant because he did not know the number of veterans who were actually seeking employment. Analyzing the remark, Dennis quipped: “I have to say that was surely reassuring because until then I thought the blinded veteran had an employment problem!” On another occasion a federal employee asked Dennis if he ran into many veterans who had been blind from birth! As a Navy flyer, he told the individual that he thought the Air Force may have recruited a few pilots who had been blind since birth but, other than that, he did know of any other veterans in this category who had served in the military!
BVA Honors Fallen at Arlington Cemetery

At patriotic services, parades, and wreath-laying ceremonies, BVA members and their families throughout the country paused on Memorial Day to remember the ultimate sacrifice of the hundreds of thousands of men and women who have given their lives to preserve the nation’s freedoms.

At Arlington National Cemetery a mere 5.4 miles from the Association’s National Headquarters, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group member Lawrence Harrison of Washington, DC, carried the BVA flag in a special “Parade of Colors” witnessed by approximately 5,000 onlookers in the Cemetery’s Memorial Amphitheater. The procession, marching to the music of the “National Emblem March” played by the United States Navy Band, signaled the start of the 155th annual remembrance ceremony. Lawrence was accompanied by his friend Mike Jenkins, who marched with the U.S. Flag, and his sighted guide and pastor, Stan Wright.

Also attending the ceremony were Don Overton and Deputy Director of Government Relations Alek Libbin who, together, presented a BVA wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier following the ceremony. Don and his wife, Peggy, were invited guests at an early morning White House breakfast with representatives of other Veterans Service Organizations. They also witnessed a Presidential wreath-laying as the Official Party of dignitaries arrived.

Addressing the crowd were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, and President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. The Navy Band accompanied the Sea Chanters Chorus in four different numbers: Musical
Interlude, The National Anthem, This Land is Your Land, and God Bless America.

Mission Accomplished on Everest!

Describing Lonnie Bedwell as an extreme sports athlete can never again be adequate now that he and his courageous team from Sightless Summits beat all odds in conquering the summit of Mount Everest. The feat culminated on Monday, May 22, at approximately 4:00pm local time.

“Your disability is a part of you, but it does not define you,” Lonnie once again reiterated upon reaching and touching a small mountain top known only to a handful of other blind persons. “We are able to adapt and do so much more than we think if we simply work together, so let’s get up and go live our lives to their fullest potential.”

Lonnie and the Sightless Summits team faced and endured nearly every type of weather condition and human challenge imaginable as they made their climb, including blowing and drifting snow, frost bite, physical and mental exhaustion, and lack of oxygen at altitudes of 26,000 feet or higher.

Future issues of The Bulletin will detail this incredible journey.

Midwinter Meetings, Testimony Highlight BOD Week in DC

Against all odds and in the most challenging of conditions, Lonnie Bedwell, right, became only the fourth blind person to conquer Mount Everest. Pictured here, his Sightless Summits team at the Everest peak.

With emphasis on safeguarding ocular clinical standards of care, caregiver program clinical standards, compliance with transportation services, protections for guide and service dogs at VA facilities, and improving programs and services for women veterans, Joe McNeil presented BVA’s legislative priorities for the current federal fiscal year at a joint session of the U.S. House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs.

The March 8 in-person hearing, held on the House side of Capitol Hill, was the first of its kind since 2020 due to the pandemic. It also included brief presentations in panel format by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Jewish War Veterans, Wounded Warrior Project,
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Military Officers Association, AMVETS, Gold Star Wives, Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers.

A full contingent of staff and the BVA Board of Directors gave Joe a little moral support by lining up perfectly to quickly find seats directly behind him at the witness table. The Board was in town March 5-11 for the annual mid-winter meetings with staff members and others who service the organization. They also visited Congressional offices during the two days leading up to the hearing with nearly 30 appointments divided between two groups.

As always, a written version of the presentation was submitted to Congress in advance and made accessible online by both Congressional Committees and BVA. To become familiar with this year’s comprehensive written testimony document and those dating back to 2016, or to connect to the video stream of this year’s proceedings, visit BVA’s Government Relations page at https://bva.org/government-relations.

**Tom Miller Presents BVA Legislative Award**

Past BVA Executive Director, Director of Government Relations, and National President Tom Miller personally visited the offices of two Congressional leaders in early March on two different days 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 are 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 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.

While working professionally as the Chief of VA Blind Rehabilitation in Waco, Texas, Tom Miller served as BVA’s National Secretary from 1979-80, National Vice President from 1981-82, and National President from 1983-84. He left Waco in 1986 to serve BVA for the next 26 years as the organization’s Director of Government Relations and later as Executive Director. For
more than eight of those years he served in both roles simultaneously.

**Salute to BVA Stalwart:**

**Dr. Robert A. Bottenberg**

Robert A. “Bob” Bottenberg, BVA’s ninth National President and a dedicated member of the Association both nationally and locally for more than 60 years, passed away March 11 in San Antonio, Texas, at the age of 98.

Bob earned Bachelors, Masters, and Ph.D. degrees in psychology, all after losing his sight. In 1947, he organized and served as the Chairman (the title at the time) of the Missouri Regional Group. While earning his Ph.D. at Stanford University, he was active in a regional group in the San Francisco Bay Area and later helped organize the South Texas Regional Group. He held a Board of Directors position from 1953-56 prior to his election as National Vice President.

Fast forward 45 years and many regional group positions later, Bob delivered the Father Carroll Luncheon address at the 57th National Convention in San Antonio, having been well acquainted with the National Chaplain during the latter’s 25 years of service.

At the time he was elected National President at age 34 on July 19, 1958, Bob was employed as a psychologist with the Human Resources Research Center at Lackland Air Force Base. He worked for the Air Force for 37 years.

On August 27 of that same year, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed into law an Act of the 85th Congress formally incorporating the Blinded Veterans Association and granting the organization the Congressional charter it retains today. Bob had participated in what *The Bulletin* at the time described as a massive effort to secure the charter while he was serving as National Vice President.

At one of the last national conventions Bob attended, he described the granting of the charter as one of the most memorable, meaningful, and satisfying memories of his life.

“He was an amazing man, overcoming each obstacle in his path, learning to ski at

In 1972, renowned psychologist Dr. Salvatore G. DiMichael, left, presented Bob Bottenberg with President’s Trophy for Handicapped American of the Year on behalf of the President’s Committee on Employment of the Handicapped. Photo courtesy of Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
the age of 50, a strong swimmer, a carpenter and handyman, and a beloved father of three girls and husband to Dorothy Gene Laffoon Bottenberg for nearly 70 years before her passing in 2016,” his daughter Ann Bottenberg Schindler recounted.

**Bronze Braille Flags Find New Home**

BVA’s Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, led by officers Gary Schoelerman and Joe Burns, presented and donated an American Bronze Braille Flag to WRBH-FM (88.3), a New Orleans radio station for the blind and print impaired, on March 8. The regional group chose WRBH as a tribute to the work they do to keep the sight and print impaired informed.

Having opened its doors in 1980, WRBH has been on the air as a service to the blind and visually print impaired for more than 40 years. Although best known for its popular reading of the news daily at 8:00am, books of fiction, nonfiction, and great literature are also read throughout the day.

In preparation for the presentation, WGNO-TV ran a March 7 news story describing the Braille flag and accompanying plaque that WRBH was to receive the next day and permanently place in the station’s lobby. An interview with Joe, a Past BVA National President (2001-03), also aired on WRBH March 6-7.

The regional group was at it again on March 14, this time at the Lighthouse Louisiana New Orleans headquarters. Several members of the regional group and Lighthouse leadership participated in the presentation.

Then, on March 28, BVA’s Emerald Coast Regional Group was recognized by WEAR-TV in Pensacola, Florida, for the group’s donation of a tactile Bronze Braille American Flag at the VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic.

The donation was unveiled as a recognition and celebration of National Blinded Veterans Day, designated as such 13 years ago through a Congressional resolution and proclamation by President Barack Obama. The flag was installed onto a structural pillar just outside the clinic’s entrance.

Following the ceremony, veterans and their families participated in demonstrations of prosthetic items such as talking watches and magnification devices, a distribution of materials about the variety of blind rehabilitation services within the VA system, and role plays that teach proper etiquette for sighted guides.
Regional group secretary Paul Kaufman described the significance of the Braille flag and the donation to a WEAR-TV reporter. The television outlet covers northwestern Florida and southern Alabama.

**BVA Members Bond With VA Staff at WSC**

BVA members Anthony Woodson of the Illinois Regional Group, Michaun Harrison of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, Robert Byrd, also of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, and Yoneka Trent of the Carolina Regional Group, all of whom are BVA Ambassadors, were among the 79 veterans with a visual impairment who attended the recent National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic (WSC) in Snowmass, Colorado.

“I encourage veterans of all skill levels to attend this life-changing event,” said Anthony, a first-year participant.

The 37th annual WSC, sponsored jointly by VA and Disabled American Veterans and held this year from March 25-April 1, provided approximately 400 total veterans with training and rehabilitation opportunities through adaptive skiing, sled hockey, scuba diving, and rock wall climbing.

In addition to visual impairments, veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries, spinal cord injuries, amputations, and other severe disabilities are challenged to overcome perceived limitations. The theme of WSC is “Miracles on a Mountainside.”

Highlighting the week for Anthony, Michaun, and several others was the work of Barbara Fultz, a Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS) with extensive training and skills in Orientation and Mobility (O&M). She was on staff for the entire week and held special well-attended O&M sessions open to all participants.

“These sessions were very rewarding and beneficial, particularly for first-time attendees,” said Michaun.

Anthony had a similar impression: “Barbara’s addition to the WSC staff for the first time was a real benefit for those with vision impairments. We need to emphasize how important it is for these professionals to be funded and with us at these events.”

WSC Director Teresa Parks agreed with the assessments of the veterans: “We continue to try and improve each year the things we can do better in serving the visually impaired veterans who attend the WSC. We appreciate hearing from them firsthand so we know things that we can do to improve. Our Team Leader Coordinator for the WSC, who is also a BROS, recommended that Barbara Fultz join our team this year. Barbara was amazing and a true asset to our efforts at WSC. We got a lot of great feedback on this addition.”
“In honor of Blinded Veterans Day on March 28, Barbara provided a platform for the attending veterans with sight loss to connect with one another in a meet-and-greet, or ‘fireside chat,’ approved by Teresa Parks,” said Michaun, who spearheaded the meeting and has arranged for a similar meeting to become an annual component of WSC in the future.

“Barbara also shared her expertise and educated the attendees on services offered by VA at the meeting,” she said.

At the same gathering, Robert Byrd informed the group about the importance of H.R. 333 (Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act), encouraging those present to contact their elected legislative representatives to request their support of the bill. Yoneka spoke on behalf of BVA as an organization, providing information and answering questions while also recounting her experience at the BVA annual Congressional testimony the previous month.

General information about the 2024 WSC is already available! Since participant spaces fill up extremely fast, it is never too early to investigate the possibility of attending next year. If interested in participating in WSC’s adaptive sports events or in attending as one of some 700 volunteers, visit https://wintersportsclinic.org.

**Richmond Chapter Commemorates Blinded Veterans Day at VAMC**

BVA extends kudos to members from the Richmond Chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group and a strongly supportive cast from VA as they commemorated Blinded Veterans Day on March 28 at the Richmond, Virginia VA Medical Center.

“It was a very successful and fun-filled day,” said Richmond Chapter member Vaneada S. Harvey, Ph.D., known also as Dr. Vee. “Our chapter president, Stevie Bradley, welcomed us and expressed excitement about the event being what he called a purpose-driven occasion.”

Stevie’s excitement had genuine merit as the well-organized and well-planned occasion was a collaborative effort of Richmond Chapter members and the Medical Center’s Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST), Recreational Therapy Department, and Center for Development and Civic Engagement.

According to Dr. Vee, BVA information, T-shirts, and hats were onsite and available for purchase throughout the event, and several BVA applications were provided to prospective members. VIST Coordinator Sherri Geiger was pleased with the way
The event exemplified resilience and determination of blinded veterans while Optometrist Dr. Michael Peterson enjoyed what seemed to be a higher morale than usual of his blinded and low vision patients on this special day.

“We had a wonderful time, and it was a great way of bringing attention to the blinded veterans here at the Richmond VA Medical Center,” Sherri later said.

Chief Recreational Therapist Sharron Hicks kicked it all off with a reading of House Resolution 80 from the 111th Congress, issued in March 2010 and signed by President Barack Obama just two weeks later on April 7—now 13 years ago to the day. Besides acknowledging BVA’s humble beginnings and storied history, the resolution calls on all Americans to remember blinded veterans on March 28 in future years.

“The highlight of the day was the scavenger hunt,” said Dr. Vee. “In a word, it was awesome.”

Planned and organized by rehabilitation services team members Greg Chittum and Sara Jennings, the hunt creatively encouraged friendly competition while affording those who participated the opportunity to sharpen their navigation skills. The activity involved teams of 2-3 blind or low vision veterans sent out on a timed journey to see who could follow clues and instructions with the goal of locating street signs at various locations throughout the hospital.

“Our Richmond members can’t say enough about the experience of spending time reconnecting, reaching out to potential new members, and enjoying the spirit of competition together through the scavenger hunt challenge,” said Dr. Vee. “Stevie closed the event by telling us it was a big win!”

BVA Board of Directors Names New National Chaplain

Kennith Harvey of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group is BVA’s newly named National Chaplain. The Board of Directors and membership thank outgoing Chaplain Dr. Ron Lester for his outstanding service these past four years.

Chaplain Harvey is a retired U.S. Army First Sergeant, having served 28 years as a topographic mapping expert. He was medically retired due to a Traumatic Brain Injury and several other injuries resulting from a tragic accident. He was one of the first soldiers to receive care for TBI trauma at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. His faith and strength allowed him to successfully complete his career at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Chaplain Harvey was also recently elected as the Post Commander for American Legion Varina Post 233 in Henrico, Virginia. He supports youth and senior groups but spends extra time as a mentor with troubled juveniles. He is also a published author and poet. He remains active in training service dogs, engaging in adaptive sports, and assisting fellow veterans as a certified Whole Health peer specialist.

Chaplain Harvey is a member of the National Association of Professional Christian Ministers. He is also affiliated with the American Association of Christian Counselors. He is married to Dr. Vee Harvey, also an active BVA member.

“We learn new ideas and grow as one,” he said. “My vision and mission are to present relevance to being inclusive and open to all church and religious affiliations of our BVA members.”
Alexandria, Virginia Dentist Offers Unexpected Generous Support

Dr. Heejo Han, an experienced Alexandria, Virginia dentist with a unique approach to serving his patients, recently opened his own dental practice with his wife, Amelia, after years of working in a corporately owned setting. Dr. Han has offered to partner with BVA as a sponsor of future recreational rehabilitation activities and to donate $5 to the organization for each new patient he receives in the foreseeable future.

Dr. Han and BVA are essentially neighbors! The practice is a 13-minute drive and 3.4 miles from BVA National Headquarters. To access a recent article published in the locally based Zebra Press about Dr. Han’s new practice and long-held philosophy and values, visit thezebra.org/2023/03/10/kenmore-family-dental-care-in-alexandria-puts-patient-fears-aside-both-physical-and-financial/.

Southern Cal Creates Own Version of March Madness

Southern California Regional Group president Ken Asam reports that despite a slow and late arrival of spring this year to the lower portion of the Golden State, his fellow veterans were motivated to “spring into action” with their own version of March Madness.

First, it was off to the Anaheim Marriott Hotel in their own backyard for the 38th Annual CSUN (California State University, Northridge) Assistive Technology Conference, held this year March 13-17. The conference is internationally recognized as the premier event in the field that brings together technology and persons with disabilities.

During his two-day visit at the conference, Ken reviewed more than 100 exhibits of products and services for the disabled, many of which focused on the blind and low vision. Products that most caught his attention were:

• No-jab graphite folding canes that eliminate those “gut shots.”
• All-terrain canes that are designed for navigation on a rough surface.
• Walk signals that make every pedestrian traffic light accessible. An iPhone app will illuminate the phone’s screen with a red or a green to reflect the light’s “Walk” or “Don’t Walk” signal.
• JAWS for kiosks, such as those placed in McDonald’s establishments, creating self-service experiences that can be accessible to all.
• RealSam Pocket Phones—a single button, voice-controlled device that is ideal for less technologically-savvy individuals.
• Gemini Super Print, which prints Braille and ink text simultaneously on parallel lines on the same page with a single pass through the printer.

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.
Next on the calendar for the regional group was a March 25-26 BVA display in front of the local Stater Bros. Market (Saturday and Sunday) located in Santa Clarita. The venue was selected because Santa Clarita has the highest percentage of veterans of any city in California. The objectives of the exhibit were three-fold:

• Increase community awareness of BVA.
• Recruit new members of the Association.
• Raise funds for the Southern California Regional Group.

“We made use of the Bronze Braille American Flag to gain the attention of many, including that of a 6-year-old boy who donated $2 after learning about the flag,” Ken said. “It wasn’t our largest donation, but we considered it our best one.”

Ken also recounts conversing with a woman who donated to BVA last November when the group had set up a similar exhibit. “She told me we’d given her the information about where to purchase a Braille flag and that she had purchased two, one of which went to her visually impaired father who was overjoyed to receive it.”

On March 28, the regional group put up the display at the Santa Clarita Valley Senior Center in commemoration of National Blinded Veterans Day. The center, which serves hundreds of older veterans, is ranked one of the best senior centers in the country.

On March 29, interested regional group members attended a luncheon commemorating National Vietnam War Veterans Day.

Hornik Praises VA for Accessibility Advancements

VA continues to make important strides when it comes to designing accessible digital products, demonstrated in presentations in mid-June’s 2023 digital.gov Government UX Summit in which user feedback and testing were deemed to be paramount in delivering improvements, a belief BVA has supported for many years and further voiced by BVA Chief of Staff Tim Hornik.

During a session of the Summit titled “Accessibility Research in Action: VA’s Health and Benefits Mobile App,” VA Contractor and Staff Researcher Elizabeth Straghalis emphasized the need to consider the user experience early and often when designing digital products.

Tim is a longtime vocal advocate of user testing of VA products for accessibility. He now focuses that support on behalf of blinded veterans and BVA. Following the Summit, he commended VA for recent positive changes reflecting a greater commitment to accessibility.

“These advancements that we’ve championed for so long have enabled our constituents to access vital VA resources, information, and benefits,” he said. “BVA remains vigilant in its advocacy efforts and continues to collaborate with VA’s Office of Information Technology, Section 508 Team, and Digital Services Teams to prevent and resolve accessibility barriers.”

Tim reiterated BVA’s position that digital products and services that are truly accessible to everyone, regardless of their disability, constitute a fundamental right. “User testing is a powerful tool that can help us achieve this goal,” he said. “As Ms. Straghalis attested, by involving users continually we can create digital products that are inclusive and accessible to all.”
Greetings from the Veterans Service Program! Marlene and I have been speaking with many of you over the telephone and we cannot wait to meet you in person at the BVA 78th National Convention this August.

We will have a service office set up all week to provide status of claims and appeals for those we represent. We will also have benefits counseling for all. If you wish for a review of your claim, we must be designated as your accredited representative beforehand. To request representation from BVA, please visit https://bva.org/programs/veteran-service/ and scroll toward the bottom to find the intake form. Once submitted, we will contact you and proceed from there. It is a very easy process, and we even have software that allows you to sign with your finger on any touch-screen device or Smartphone.

One of the things we may want to talk about are possible claims under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022, also known as the Honoring our PACT Act of 2022 but more commonly referred to as simply the PACT Act. Signed by President Biden on August 10, 2022, Public Law 117-168 contains nearly 60 pages broken down into nine distinct titles addressing health care eligibility expansion, exposures screening, research, resources, records, and workforce improvement.

For claiming VA disability compensation benefits, we are interested mostly in the addition of more than 20 new “presumptive” conditions related to toxic exposures in service as well as new places where VA concedes that exposure occurred. The term “presumptive” means VA presumes the condition is related to service if it is on the list.

Once exposure is conceded, the claimant needs only to present a diagnosis of a disability to constitute a successful claim. Service connection may be allowed for many respiratory disorders for Gulf War and Post-9/11 veterans. Examples of these disorders are asthma, bronchitis, sinusitis, COPD, and more. There are also several cancers presumed to be related to such exposures, including brain cancer, kidney cancer, respiratory cancer, and even melanoma.

The PACT Act also provides new Agent Orange presumptives and places of exposure for Vietnam veterans: hypertension and monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS).

Further, VA will now concede exposures at any US or Royal Thai military base in Thailand, or with service in Laos, parts of Cambodia, Guam, American Samoa, and Johnston Atoll during the requisite time.

VA has been processing PACT Act compensation claims since January, but they started rolling in soon after the law was passed last year. One thing to be aware of: Any PACT Act claim received by August 9, 2023, if granted, will receive an effective date of August 10, 2022!

Many other presumptives exist. If you believe you have a disease related to in-service environmental exposures and it does not appear on the list of presumptives, the bar is set a little higher and the claim will require a good medical nexus opinion linking the condition to the exposure. Please consult your Service Officer for more information and assistance.
Ways to Give
by Meredith Buono-DaGrossa

The modern concept of “Development” is about creating a solid foundation of support for a nonprofit organization for years to come. It is the process of developing relationships with donors for long-term benefit.

Applying these principles to BVA, every gift matters and not only provides an opportunity to create a meaningful relationship with our donors, but also supports the committed, ongoing services we provide to our blind and low vision veterans.

BVA’s Development Team is currently working on communicating donation options to current and prospective donors. We will be launching a new and improved “Ways To Give” section on BVA.org. Be sure to visit our site in June to learn more or email me at mbuonodagrossa@bva.org. For the moment, here is a preview of options from which an individual can choose to support BVA’s mission and work both now and in the future.

**Become a BVA Visionary**

BVA Visionaries are a special team of loyal and dedicated supporters who make recurring monthly donations. Choose a monthly amount to help the organization carry out its mission in support of America’s blind and low vision military veterans.

**Make a One-Time Donation**

Your generosity will help further our service as ambassadors and mentors for all veterans and their families who, each day, are confronting the challenges of sight loss.

**Memorial and Tribute Gifts**

Honor a loved one’s legacy by making a gift in their memory. You will support our nation’s blind and low vision veterans, giving them hope for a brighter future while simultaneously remembering someone near and dear.

**Planned Giving**

Plan a gift to make a long-term impact on the life of a blind or low vision veteran. BVA offers our supporters a variety of ways to consider planning their gifts. By choosing the right gift, you can benefit BVA and fulfill your own long-term financial goals. Planned gifts include bequests, charitable remainder trusts, revocable living trusts, and assets to give.

**Corporate Giving**

Corporate Sponsorships provide an excellent way to contribute, become involved, and show your workforce, customers, and community that you care about our nation’s heroes. Point-of-sale campaigns, matching gifts, and employee giving are great ways for your company to make an impact.

**Social Media Fundraising**

Facebook makes it easy to set up fundraising events in honor of your birthday, a memorial gift, or just because you want to help. Visit https://www.facebook.com/fundraisers/ to set up a fundraiser for BVA in just a couple of steps.

**Donate Your Car**

BVA is a listed non-profit with CAREASY.org, a 501(c)3 organization that makes it simple for you to donate your car to your favorite nonprofit organization. To donate
Chaplain’s Corner
A Step Back and a Fond Farewell
by Dr. Ron Lester

As I look back on the last few years as the National Chaplain, it is hard to believe the things that happened during that time. I believe that if it had not been for God and for the kind words from the book of Proverbs 25:11, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver,” I wouldn’t have made it this far!

As I step down from this responsibility and move on to what is next, I find myself looking for those welcome and needed words of encouragement. I turned 78 years old in May, which of course means that BVA was founded the same year I was born, if you can believe that one.

Our founders and early pioneers stepped up to the plate to do what they had to do. The recorded history we have in our old Bulletins of those veterans and their families reveals an energy and a drive to be independently productive and prosperous in their lives. Although we do not know the intricacies of their conversations and interactions, we do know that the BVA leadership, with the guidance of Chaplain Father Thomas Carroll, emphasized the importance of dignity and the pursuit of lofty goals with honor and class.

In 1991, I interviewed a World War II veteran who was totally blind and worked as a VA Service Officer. As we talked, I learned that, in the beginning, he stayed home while the wife was at work. He stayed home and raised their four children and changed many diapers. He told me that at times a couple of those babies born not too far apart would have such an explosion that they both had to get into the bathtub at the same time to clean up! The story was so funny that we laughed until it hurt.

Our talk encouraged me so much that it was like gathering apples of gold—it sustained me!

RoundUp
This mobile app allows donors to connect their debit or credit card(s) and round up their purchases to the nearest dollar, donating to the nonprofit of their choice. It is easy to set up and control the amount you are donating each month. Sign up by going to RoundUpApp.com and selecting the Blinded Veterans Association as the recipient of your donations.

Venmo
Make your tax-deductible donation to BVA via your Venmo account by sending money to @blindedveterans.

your car, visit CAREASY.org or call 855-500-RIDE (7433) and choose the Blinded Veterans Association as the recipient of the donation.
As we look at this year, we can look at the beautiful golden arches and memories of which we are all blessed to be a part. We can look back in joy so that we can speak kind words to each other and build each other up while giving God thanks!

An unfortunate incident producing a story from minister and best-selling author Randy Alcorn was originally reported on April 17, 2012, by Reuters. The story demonstrates that God has seen us at our worst and still loves us. I leave it with you as a blessing, along with Isaiah 66:13, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” God bless you all and finish well in all you do.

The Crystal Ball
What is your most embarrassing moment? In 2012, the visiting father of a University of Alabama football player bumped into a table and shattered the $30,000 Waterford crystal American Football Coaches Association trophy. No one knows who was most mortified, the man who did it or his son, the Crimson Tide player. Out of mercy, their names were never revealed, but it was reportedly a very embarrassing fumble.

God knows every time we bobble the ball, lose yardage, or get sacked. He doesn’t need any replays. He sees every step, knows every slip, and experiences with us every victory or defeat. Yet He still loves us. We can be fully transparent with Him because there is nothing we can hide. He comforts us like a loving mother. Leave your mistakes with the Master and toss your trophies at His feet. Learning to do that is a game changer.

God has seen us at our worst and still loves us. God bless you all and finish well in all you do.

A Self-Introduction and “Outreach with Inclusion”
by Kennith Harvey

Our Father’s blessing to all national, regional, and chapter chaplains and to BVA members seeking spiritual guidance and service through inclusiveness within our organization! No religious beliefs are ignored!

As your newly appointed National Chaplain and Spiritual Outreach Committee Chair, I believe it fitting to share what is possible in life by providing an introduction.

Dr. Vaneada Harvey, my lovely wife; mother Evelyn Harvey-Johnson; father Julius Harvey, Jr; five siblings; daughters Cherie Harvey-Musa and Kendra Harvey; eight grandchildren and four godchildren—they are the reasons I experienced 28 years of extraordinary military service until my retirement, required due to several injuries, including a Traumatic Brain Injury.

My challenges as a disabled veteran include living with the pain that accompanies them while attempting to exhibit a pleasing spirit, and to demonstrate that our spiritual Father who gave us all breath has given us the gift to do more for others. He reminds us in time
of discord to lead through prayer, to reset our azimuth, and to follow his footprints in the sand!

My compass now directs me to serve the Blinded Veterans Association with the opportunity having become possible by this organizational family. The journey to this point has consisted of a culmination of experiences with good versus evil that has shaped me for this appointment. As suggested throughout the Bible, we should be a reflection of our elders, at the same time upholding family values. All that I am and yet to become starts with our family values.

Our spiritual leader, The Father, has led me on this awesome journey! It is important to serve the BVA National President, Vice President, and other members of the Board of Directors with gratitude for appointing me to these responsibilities.

I have had a close connection with The Father as a child rooted in the church, through studies with the National Association of Christian Ministers, Liberty University, and many continuing education programs that support spiritual growth.

Life is a “box of chocolates” although storms brew around us and over me as I write this introduction. It is your strength and mine to never give up and continue to live! Brokenness is God’s way of telling us all to slow down before we fall down. It is one of many tools through which He whispers to us as a means of embracing our needs.

Although my calling has everything to do with my experience in Walk With Thee Baptist Ministries, also referred to as a Church Without Walls, it is my vision and mission to be inclusive and make BVA open to all religions.

As the National Chaplain and Spiritual Outreach Committee Chair, I understand the words “Spiritual Outreach” to mean community, growth, and inclusiveness. No one is left behind—no matter their religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Outreach means opening our mind, body, and soul.

How do we learn about other religions without inclusion and how do we bring about inclusion? Answer: Spiritual Outreach and open doors, allowing those with different walks to ….. walk in!

We learn innovative ideas and grow as one. As it was meant in the beginning, our oasis is Heaven, a realm some earnestly seek while others only entertain the thought and the wealth of his knowledge!

To all BVA staff, leaders, and members: We are representatives of and recruiters for the Blinded Veterans Association with plenty of room to grow! As your National Chaplain, I believe that spiritual leadership is my responsibility—to define our Father’s purpose and how that purpose intertwines with BVA’s vision for the future.

Our Father forgives us no matter what we do! Pray! Our Way Forward with Our Father!
Coping with Loneliness
by Paschal Baute

“In the twilight of our lives, we will be measured by love.”
—John of the Cross

Americans across generations are spending more time alone. In 2021, more reported experiencing “serious loneliness.” This is not an isolated behavior.

“Close personal relationships are the ‘one crucial factor’ that stands out for the consistency and power of its ties to physical health, mental health, and longevity,” a recent Wall Street Journal article reported.

Blinded, disabled, and aging veterans with their caregivers have a regular challenge in coping with loneliness as friends and family members pass away. COVID-19 has isolated us even more.

I will use my 93 years, 54 years of marriage, and about 50,000 hours of listening to make suggestions for our veteran community, caregivers, and families of veterans with sight loss.

One caution, please: I used to tell all my clients in therapy to not accept anything I say on face value or because it comes from this supposedly wise Dr. Baute. This would be wrong both for you and for me. Everyone must find their own way, their own True North. Therefore, I told them all that they must consult their pillow twice, and two days before using any idea of mine. That was so it was no longer my idea but theirs. They acted because they decided that the idea suited them and not just me. I state the same here. My ideas may not be yours, but—

1. Be thoughtful and generous to family, caregivers, and the family network and friends. Research shows that the phrase “thank you” is the magic word and sustains happy relationships. Show every day that you care for some person. When you love someone, you never stop caring or being considerate. We live in a world where this phrase and even acknowledgement of emails are widely neglected, yet today we have many ways to stay connected that we did not have a generation ago.

2. Loneliness is a choice. We make many choices every day. When those choices do not include some form of connecting with others, we are choosing social isolation. It is no one else’s job to care for our social health. When we prefer cellphone games, television viewing, reading, or any other hobby to the exclusion of connecting with others, we are then choosing loneliness.

3. We can begin to realize that we create our own world, the reality we live within, by our choices, positive or negative. I have a friend who constantly uses the negative and he finds it every day. We can ask ourselves what our habitual mood is. People who are anxious, or sad, or angry will find reasons to be such, which will justify their feelings. We find what we are looking for and justification for whatever our mood is. So, to recognize this is the first necessary step.
to avoid being our own worst enemy. An important question is: How much free rent do I want to give to bad stuff?

4. We have much research today on happiness, well-being, and longevity. There is ample research that shows us that the single most important key to long-range happiness is social relationships. If we want to avoid loneliness, we must make an investment in our social relationships—connecting by using however many of the traditional or more modern electronic means we have today at our disposal.

5. We naturally use our reactive brand, finding fault and blame that easily focuses on the negative. We may have neglected social skills because of gaming habits that came out of the separation required by COVID. We easily excuse ourselves from reaching out. In our current situation, we must rid ourselves of mistrust and fear, which is the white noise in our background. We must risk connecting.

6. We may still retain a mistrust in organized religion. However, many churches today have social programs, classes, services, or other events that are interactive and even fun. These can help us think more reflectively about ourselves.

7. Have a regular schedule for your self-care activities: Sleep well, eat right, and drink enough water. Self-care as we get older needs to be a regular preoccupation as we will quickly neglect some aspect of our well-being if we are not paying close attention.

8. Some regular cardiovascular exercise, even that of walking, is necessary for your heart, your immune system, your brain, and your digestive system. Keep moving.

9. It is important for longevity and positivity to have a purpose in life, something which can get us out of bed on the right side—some hobby, some unfinished project, or some other way to contribute to our community or to others.

And, last:

10. Undertaking some reflection about our reactive brain can work in our favor in calming us from our worries and our regrets. Developing a more thoughtful, reflective, and prayerful self in the face of mistrust, fear, and insanity is also vital to our mental health and longevity. For myself, I also find a religious teaching, one about both grace and love being free and unbounded, to be a guide to my own True North.

Three themes have emerged from these extraneous ideas: Remain active mentally and physically. Take responsibility for your social life and be willing to nurture several relationships. Become reflective about the chatter you allow between your ears.

Grace and grit find hope around every corner.
Of Note

Hines to Celebrate 75-Year Anniversary

BVA members and their families are invited to attend in person the 75th anniversary commemoration of the Central Blind Rehabilitation Center at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital, Building 113. The event, scheduled for Thursday, July 20, 11:00am-2:00pm, will feature an open house, tours, distinguished guests, and light refreshments.

The opening of the Hines facility on July 4, 1948, was as much a milestone in BVA’s early history as it was for VA. The organization’s founders and leaders, supported by National Chaplain and Rehabilitation Professional Father Thomas Carroll, pushed for quick approval and construction of the center, which continues to serve hundreds of veterans annually with a broad range of rehabilitation, education, and research/technology programs.

Parties interested in attending the celebration should RSVP no later than July 13, 2023, to HinesPublicAffairs@va.gov.

VA Observes NCA’s 50th Birthday

VA’s National Cemetery Administration (NCA) manages 155 national cemeteries in 42 states. Memorial Day ceremonies will be conducted this year in more than 130 of them. NCA also provides headstones, markers, medallions, and Presidential Memorial Certificates for qualified veterans.

While not officially designated as NCA until 1998, its administrative birthday is 1973 when Congress passed the National Cemeteries Act creating an agency within the then Veterans Administration to oversee the national cemetery system dating back to the American Civil War. Some BVA members may be unaware of the burial benefits for which they are eligible. For information about the criteria for burial in a national cemetery, visit va.gov/burials-memorials/eligibility/.

Get Care Now with VA Health Chat

VA’s Office of Connected Care has announced a new mobile app that allows veterans, wherever they are, to exchange text messages with a VA health care team. The platform is a user-friendly one in which veterans can receive virtual health care from caring staff.

Functions include medical advice regarding minor illnesses or injuries such as congestion, rashes, or stomach aches. Also possible are the scheduling of appointments, questions about prescriptions or refilling them, and deliberations about whether the veteran should be seen in person.

Veterans can chat with a VA Health Care professional Monday through Friday, from 8:00am until 4:00pm in most locations. Some locations are available 24/7. For a secure experience, it is necessary to log in with VA-supported credentials using the My HealtheVet Premium, the DS login, or the ID.me account.

To use the new service, download the VA Health Chat app from the VA Mobile app store, the Apple App Store, or the Google Play store. For additional details about the app and a list of locations offering health chats nationwide, visit https://mobile.va.gov/app/ va-health-chat.
Looking Again at Presumptive Toxic Exposure Eligibility

Under the PACT Act, VA has expanded the list of health conditions that are now believed to be caused by exposure to hazardous substances. A new update helps generations of veterans, and their survivors, receive the care and benefits they have earned and deserve. Veterans with a presumptive condition do not need to prove that their service caused the condition. They need only to meet the service requirements for the presumption. For more information about eligibility for such benefits, visit https://news.va.gov/116593/accessing-toxic-exposure-health-care-benefits/.

VA Mobile App Adds Feature

The VA Health and Benefits Mobile Application added last month a Prescription Refill feature allowing veterans to conveniently view, refill, and check the status of their VA-dispensed prescriptions from their mobile devices. As is the case with each new feature, existing users must download the latest version of the app to gain access to the Prescription Refill function. If veterans do not see the prescriptions feature in the Health Care tab after they download the latest version, they should completely close the app and open it again.

Adding Rx Refill makes the VA Health and Benefits mobile app more useful and multifunctional for the more than a million veterans who have downloaded and are using the mobile app, or who will do so in the future. The Health and Benefits mobile app is VA’s official, all-in-one, on-the-go, easy-to-use, accessible, on-demand app enabling veterans to manage both their VA health care and their benefits services from their fingertips.

For more information about the mobile app, or to simply download it, go to https://mobile.va.gov/app/va-health-and-benefits.

DHA Relaunches PTSD Toolkit

The Defense Health Agency (DHA) has again launched for public use online its Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) awareness Toolkit. Contributing to the 2023 materials developed by DHA were its Behavioral Health Clinical Management Team and Psychological Health Center of Excellence.

Although the timing coincided with PTSD Awareness Day and the launch of a corresponding campaign on June 27, the toolkit is intended to support PTSD awareness year-round. The graphics, videos, social media copy, and articles featured in the toolkit are evergreen (something that retains its freshness, interest, or popularity).

The theme for the campaign is Reach out, get help, get better with a goal to raise awareness that PTSD is a mental health condition that can develop after exposure to traumatic events such as threat of injury, death, a serious accident, combat, assault, natural disaster, or abuse, and that it can happen to anyone.

An emphasis of the campaign is that effective treatments can help people who are experiencing PTSD, and that service members and members of the military community who may be affected should reach out, get help, and get better.

The PTSD toolkit is accessible online at https://health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/MHS-Toolkits/Toolkits/Mental-Health/PTSD-Awareness.
Reimbursements for VA Travel

BVA members and other veterans with sight loss may not be aware that VA travel reimbursements pay back eligible veterans and caregivers for mileage and other travel expenses to and from approved health care appointments.

On September 30, 2016, President Barack Obama signed legislation for which BVA had advocated for years that gave VA the statutory authority to provide travel benefits to catastrophically disabled, nonservice-connected blind and visually impaired veterans seeking rehabilitation services at VA facilities. Additional information about eligibility and the process of creating and getting help with a claim for travel reimbursements of all varieties is available through a search at myhealth.va.gov.

VA Updates 1959 Mission Statement, Recognizes Commitment to All

VA announced in mid-March 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.

Community Coalitions and VA Work Together to End Suicide

VA announced on May 18 its partnership with more than a thousand local community coalitions engaged in ending veteran suicide. The coalitions, established through VA’s Public Health Model for Suicide Prevention, now reach more than 7.5 million veterans nationwide.

By combining community coalitions with clinical intervention strategies as outlined in VA’s National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, these coalitions help reduce the risk of suicide by providing veterans with tailored resources and direct support in the communities where they work and live.

“One suicide will always be one too many, and it will take all of us, working together, to end veteran suicide,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “We are working with these coalitions to support veterans at risk of suicide all across America, combining VA’s clinical expertise with on-the-ground community interventions to save lives.”

Bulletin Format Preferences Requested

BVA currently produces The Bulletin in five formats: 1) print version, 2) professionally narrated audio version available online at https://bva.org/the-bulletin, 3) narrated email version (Word document) also available online, 4) PDF email version also available online, an exact replica of the print version appearing on the screen just as it appears on paper, and 5) condensed audio version on a Compact Disk.

If you are not receiving the version or versions you may wish to receive, please send an email to info@bva.org or dial 202-371-8882. Except for those receiving a CD recording, BVA members wishing to receive multiple versions may do so.
Letters to the Editor

Kudos to Liberty Bell, National Park Service

Recently, my wife, Marelle, and I were traveling and visited Philadelphia (the one in Pennsylvania, not the small town in Mississippi). It is a great place to visit with amazing history.

While doing all the touristy things, we visited the hall where the Liberty Bell is located. This site is part of the National Park Service. Experiencing the Liberty Bell has been number one on my wish list for some time.

As it is in many other places these days, we had to go through security. Once I was cleared for entry and extended my white cane, one of the rangers approached me and offered me the exhibit information in Braille. I politely declined and responded that my wife would read it all to me, and that doing it that way would be faster. However, this offer still impressed me greatly because it was the first National Park site at which I had been offered anything in Braille.

We looked at some of the introductory information and, as we walked toward the Bell, another ranger came up and asked: “Would you like to touch the Bell?” She told us that they have a program that offers the visually impaired a chance to “see” the Bell with their fingers.

“Of course, I would like to touch the Bell,” I replied. I’m sure my face lit up as I said that.

The lady then gave me a pair of white gloves to wear and led me through the crowd to another ranger next to the ropes, who led me to the Bell and guided my hand to the giant crack and explained how they had tried to patch it by first drilling small holes at the end of the splintering cracks. She then explained the large straps across the crack of the Bell.

The same ranger then guided my hand to the top of the Bell and showed me the inscription that comes from Leviticus in the Old Testament: “Proclaim Liberty To All the Land and To All the Inhabitants thereof.” She showed me the large rods that held up the Bell and explained the history of various other nicks and bumps. She then asked if we would like to have a picture taken in front of the Bell. Before I could answer, Marelle was next to me, posing for our picture. This was truly a unique and awe-inspiring experience that will be long remembered by me but also by all the jealous sighted people who were standing on the other side of the ropes!

It is unfortunate that more of the National Park historical sites do not offer their information in Braille and, when possible, allow us to see different artifacts through touch. Sure, those of us with some sight have goggles and glasses to help bring items in to view so that we can get a better idea of what is in front of us, but there is nothing quite like touching those items!

Gary Schoelerman
Breaux Bridge, Louisiana
Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group
Father Carroll Biography Proves Great Read for BVA Members

I just finished reading Caution, Blind Priest Driving: The Story of Father Thomas J. Carroll, Changing the Public’s Perception of Blindness, by Rachel Rosenbaum. The book is available on Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) from the National Library Service Talking Books Program.

I never met Father Carroll personally. He passed away six years before I became involved with BVA as a Board member and then an employee for 26 years. However, having learned of his tremendous influence as a pioneer scholar and practitioner in the field of blind rehabilitation after World War II, not to mention his importance in BVA’s history as our first National Chaplain for 25 years, I found the book to be a fascinating account of an amazing life and definitely worth reading by any BVA member interested in how VA blind rehabilitation programs and our own organization became what they are today. The book does, in fact, contain an entire chapter on BVA.

The book’s back cover contains a 2016 quote by Dr. Richard M. Jackson, Associate Professor and Senior Research Scientist at Boston College’s Lynch School of Education and Human Development: “Father Carroll is to Blindness what Freud is to Psychiatry.” Based on my knowledge of Father Carroll and his wealth of insight and knowledge, I wholeheartedly agree with the statement. His own book Blindness: What it Is, What it Does, and How to Live with It, was revolutionary by itself.

The author of the biography, Rachel Rosenbaum, not only knew Father Carroll personally but had access to some 15 file cabinets filled with journals, writings, and official documents and records pertaining to his leadership. This was possible by virtue of her position as Executive Director (Father Carroll’s successor) for 33 years at the Carroll Center for the Blind, named in his honor after his sudden passing in 1971. The original organization, founded and named by Father Carroll himself, was previously known as the Catholic Guild for All the Blind. Even with all the resources at her disposal to write the book, including her personal experiences, she still spent the better part of ten years in careful research to put it all together.

One of the things I had not been aware of previously, but that I learned from the biography, was that Father Carroll’s emphasis on professionalism in the field of blind rehabilitation resulted in the establishment and development of training programs, specifically in orientation and mobility, at the university level. His work in this area has had a major impact on the quality of VA services for blinded veterans.

The humorous title of the book, ironically, hits close to home. It is taken from a joke played on Father Carroll by some blinded veterans at Avon Old Farms during the 1944-46 timeframe. Knowing that he traveled to and from Boston weekly, the veterans arranged to have the warning “Caution, Blind Priest Driving” attached to the rear bumper of his car.

Thomas H. Miller
Mid-Atlantic Regional Group
Past National President, 1983-84
BVA Staff, 1986-2012
In Remembrance

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

Arkansas R.G.
James Allen

Cape Cod and the Islands R.G.
Ann Gillis
Edward Hudson

Carolina R.G.
Josef Weiss

Florida R.G.
David Carr
Charles Deckert
Christian March
Paul Shannon

Gem State R.G.
Kenneth Jones
Mary Sampica

Heartland R.G.
Daniel Bradley
Michael Glynn
Jerald Jonas

Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.
Tolley East
John Wallace
Adolf Wesselhöft

Mid-Atlantic R.G.
John Braggs
Bernard Dowell
Donald Hammond
Freddie Nash

New York R.G.
Paul Gotham
Robert Simon

Pennsylvania R.G.
Stewart Hughes
James Maddox
Harry Nenninger
David Sanchez

South Texas Group:
Robert Bottenberg

Utah R.G.
Thomas Louisiana

Washington Regional Group:
Roland Blais
Rufus Reed
Delbert Restau
Dale Stol
Sara Stoney

At-Large BVA Member with No Regional Group Affiliation:
William Kurtz

Memorial Day 2023 Recognition to the Fallen
by Warner L. Murray

We served America when country in need
Equal justice for all, our steadfast creed.
Salute the comrades with joy and cheer
The voices of gratitude, let them hear.
Our sincere appreciation when patriots say
Thank you for serving, this Memorial Day.
Women and men have sacrificed their all
Democracy, justice, the great freedom wall.
We stand together, a mighty force of one
United States military is second to none.
Love, respect, and honor, is given to you
the noblest deed to the red, white, and blue.
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Deputy Director of Government Relations – ALEK LIBBIN
The mission of the BVA Women Veterans Group (WVG) is to serve and support women members of the Association through awareness and advocacy efforts that positively affect their health and welfare.

Pictured here at last year’s 77th National Convention, the WVG holds a monthly virtual meeting with frequent guest speakers and interactive tasks. The more extensive undertakings of the group include hiking a portion of the Appalachian Trail and a virtual retreat in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women veterans attending the 78th National Convention can anticipate a late afternoon in-person meeting on August 16 at the Marriott St. Louis Grand. Look for details in the convention program booklet!