

# The Bulletin

Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



Post-Convention 2023

## CELEBRATING AND HONORING VETERANS IN 2023



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**Cover Photos:** The celebrated and long-anticipated BVA 78th National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri, is now history. Nevertheless, memories of the week abound. The gathering of blinded veterans and their families from throughout the country had a bit of everything, both planned and spontaneous. Highlights and noteworthy details of the five-day extravaganza are presented in this issue of **The Bulletin**, which also recaps the organization's recent activities on Veterans Day. See page 20 for additional photo details.

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### EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: STUART NELSON  
Associate Editor: KYLIE FITZGERALD  
Staff Writers: DONALD D. OVERTON, JR.,  
MEREDITH BUONO-DAGROSSA  
Design, Pre-Press, and Printing:  
KAREN SMITH DESIGN,  
THE VOMELA COMPANIES

PO BOX 90770  
WASHINGTON, DC 20090  
TELEPHONE: 800-669-7079  
202-371-8880  
FAX: 202-371-8258  
WEBSITE: **BVA.org**  
E-MAIL: **bva@bva.org**

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# President's Page

by Paul Mimms

statement in my candidate speech was that BVA needed change.

At this point in time and space, change is still needed. I don't pretend to believe that I am the only one who knows what changes need to be made, but I do know that I now have the job of leader of the force that will bring about those changes—if indeed those changes are the will of our membership and other leaders.

It is a foregone conclusion that there is no such thing as a perfect organization. Of course, BVA is nowhere near a perfect organization either. Organizations are always going through stages of change, evolution, and what their members hope will be improvement. Most of those changes for organizations take place because of the environment in which the organization exists.

One observation I have made is that the nature of the environment in which BVA now exists necessitates a multifaceted change. I have believed for years that the BVA leadership would benefit from trying to place more emphasis on the abilities of the membership, their input, and their knowledge, skills, and abilities. I intend to put that into practice as often as I can during my tenure. Just as the organization is not perfect, I don't intend to try to be a perfect president. I will simply do the best I can with the knowledge, skills, abilities, talents, and experience that I can bring to bear.

Some things have already happened that have assured us that this is a time for change, whether we initiate the change or whether we simply respond to certain realities that, out of necessity, force us to change.

One of those realities relates to our national conventions. Simply put, the nature of the economy is such that we will not be able to continue holding conventions in the same manner. They are too expensive with the numbers of attendees we have. The primary reason for that is because it has become too expensive for us to put on a convention at a high-quality hotel property, even with the generous sponsors we have had the past couple of years. This is further exacerbated by the rise in airline fares just to get to the convention, food prices in general, and skyrocketing rates for rooms.

Another change that is happening within our organization is, quite frankly, a decline in the dynamics that help regional groups survive. There was a period during which our recruitment efforts didn't produce much, and the prospective members whom we were seeking did not feel compelled to join.



Joe McNeil formally bestows BVA presidential mantle on newly elected Paul Mimms.

I don't think we (however we define "we" in this context) need to take the blame for veterans not wanting to join. Nevertheless, we may have among us the ability to make the organization look more attractive to prospective members, as well as to the members we already have.

As we move forward, we need to continually check on our financial outlook. One thing that we began to realize during the worldwide pandemic, even more forcefully than before, is that direct mail is not yielding the results it once did. Many past and prospective donors are hanging onto even the \$5 or \$10 that BVA often received from them in the past. Those donations have turned to zeroes while the previous \$50 donations have turned to \$25 or \$10.

The change we need to make in fundraising is to become more competitive when it comes to gaining favor with funding sources. This applies to corporate sources as well as funds that can come from grants. Our staff, therefore, is tasked with doing more at that level of fundraising to try to bring the organization up to a point where we are not facing deficits.

It has been reported that there are 1.1 million blind and low vision veterans in this country. Our membership is hovering around 6,000. That means that there are great opportunities ahead to grow the organization if we can determine how to attract even a tiny segment of that 1.1 million. The primary reason for attracting more members is not so that we will have more money but so that we have more voices speaking up on behalf of the organization and its members, whether it is before Congress or in presenting ourselves to prospective donors. What we look like in terms of numbers has a lot to say about who we are as an organization of blind and low vision veterans. That is just a realistic fact these days.

One recent source of pride is the success of our somewhat new Ambassador program. As a result of this initiative, our veterans are presenting themselves to VA Medical Centers and to the public as trained and educated advocates. I cannot encourage our members enough to think about joining the Ambassador program. We need our members out there who know what it is like to be a blinded veteran, what it takes to help blinded veterans, and how to walk the walk rather than just talk the talk.

Our National Board of Directors, including District Directors, are committed to empowering our membership through the decisions we make. Since we are responsible for the operation of the organization between conventions, as often as possible, we will be transparent in our dealings, public facing in our documentation, and aware of the wishes of the membership as consistently as possible for the sake of the future of the organization.

For us to be aware of those wishes and desires, we need the membership to engage with the District Directors through whatever means is possible. I am not guaranteeing that everything that the membership may come up with or desire will become a reality. However, there is a point at which we, the Board, cannot alone fully discern everything that is necessary for our future. We will be much stronger as a team when that team includes not only the Board but also the membership and the Association's staff.

My job, therefore, as the leader, is to bring all the components of our organization together in a more cohesive unit to work for and attain common goals that will benefit the future of the Blinded Veterans Association. I look forward to serving you the next two years as National President and I hope, by the end of my term, that I have added something to the organization that has made it stronger, from the membership all the way up to the Board and staff.



# Legislative Update

by Alek Libbin

The last few months have been very productive on a chief legislative goal of ours, that of congressional action

on the establishment of a Federal Advisory Committee to work with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Senators Bob Casey (D-PA) and Rick Scott (R-FL) have introduced S. 2516, the Veterans Accessibility Act of 2023. Passage of S. 2516 would establish just such a Committee.

Those who have kept abreast of recent developments know that VA has had trouble implementing Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, ensuring equal access for the blind and visually impaired. VA has failed to adhere to not only Section 508, but also to Sections 501 and 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, the Plain Writing Act, and other federal laws and regulations.

These shortcomings have harmed not only those who use VA services but VA employees as well. For too long, VA has been unable to adequately address the needs of the disabled community, resulting in missed appointments, delayed care, and inability to access resources.

A Federal Advisory Committee would work to resolve this longstanding problem through the creation of a mechanism with stakeholders who know where the problem lies and the authority to gain VA's attention whenever justified.



The VA-guided Veterans Day National Committee assists in the annual planning of national Veterans Day celebrations at Arlington Cemetery and in other locations throughout the country. As an original Committee member and by virtue of its congressional charter, BVA enjoys a significant presence at such events. Pictured here near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier wreath laying, Alek Libbin, far right, joins, left to right, Don Overton, Meredith Buono-DaGrossa, and Duayne Driscoll.

The Committee proposed in the legislation would be comprised of 19 members, 15 of whom could vote. Of the 15 voting members, four would be veterans who are mobility impaired, hearing disabled, visually disabled, and cognitively disabled. Four would be recognized authorities in disability access from law firms, academic institutions, and organizations that advocate for the disabled. Two would be VA employees, one from the VA Section 508 office and the other from the Architectural Accessibility Program.



The remaining five would be nominated by Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) that advocate for veterans with disabilities. The nonvoting members would be the Under Secretary for Health, the Under Secretary for Benefits, the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, and the Chairperson of the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. All members would serve a two-year term and would meet every six months at the behest of the Committee Chairperson.

The VA Secretary would have to consult with and be advised by the Committee on the improvements. This would include accessibility of information, VA benefits and buildings, including the Veterans Community Care Program, and the acquisitions process to ensure that new products are accessible and compliant with regulations. Every 18 months, the Committee would submit a report to the Secretary that would address barriers of access, compliance with the accessibility law, and priorities for accessibility through department procedure and practice as well as new legislation, among other duties. This ensures that the Committee would have a broad scope of knowledge and be able to advise on all areas concerning disability access.

In an ideal world, VA and all public-facing institutions would be made accessible at their inception and continuity of access would be among their top priorities. Unfortunately, this has not occurred, and it appears that VA



A sun-drenched Veterans Day morning at Arlington National Cemetery brought a capacity crowd of nearly 5,000 veterans, their family members, VA officials, and leaders of Veterans Service Organizations to its Memorial Amphitheater.

requires more active involvement to fix a broken system that does not serve those it was meant to serve. We do not doubt VA's commitment to helping veterans and their families, but we do doubt the course they have chosen to do so. We are not alone in this opinion, having been supported by other VSOs.

BVA will be pushing a OneClick Campaign soon. If you would like to support BVA's efforts by educating members of Congress about the vital nature of this proposed legislation that would establish this Committee, please check our weekly **BVA Happenings** and tell others to contact their members of Congress once we begin the campaign.



# Executive Director's Message

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

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Many of our BVA members and their families are probably aware already that October was Blind Awareness Month. Even more are probably aware of the significance of October 15, originally designated in 1964 as White Cane Safety Day.

One of our sister organizations in the blind community prefers to use the term White Cane Awareness Day while Presidential proclamations, VA, and other federal government agencies have more recently adopted “Blind Americans Equality Day” as the preferred terminology.

Many of you at the regional group level participated this year in local activities on or around October 15 that called attention to safety issues for the blind and low vision at VA facilities, schools, or other locations with a public presence. Thank you for your efforts to promote BVA and the organization's service to veterans at these events.

Another important date more recently passed, of course, is Veterans Day, an actual federal holiday always observed on November 11. Although I look forward to this day every year, the holiday seems to gain greater meaning with each Veterans Day that comes and goes. This happens as my friendships and associations with veterans increase.

Our fellow veterans are our heroes, and their service and contributions mean more to me now than ever before as both BVA and VA together expand our outreach and concern from the estimated 120,000 blinded veterans to nearly 1.1 million low vision veterans.

For budget reasons, we set out to do this, at least for now, without additional professional staff or other important resources, but with a dedicated group of trained BVA ambassadors, volunteers, and role models who understand the meaning of dedication and loyalty to a cause.

One such standout role model who attended the 78th National Convention is 93-year-old Army veteran Enrique Sanchez of the Bronx, New York, a Mexican-born naturalized U.S. citizen. Enrique's trip to St. Louis put him at 48 consecutive national conventions attended. For that incomparable achievement and several more, he was more than well deserving of BVA's Circle of Excellence award, announced at the President's Reception and later presented at the Awards Banquet.

While Enrique's mobility may not come as easy as it did just a few years ago, we all sense that he still has the same enthusiasm and desire to serve his fellow veterans that he did when associating with them at his first convention in 1976. One of his greatest triumphs, likely the one that tops them all, was his adjustment to blindness.

“The thing that got me through was joining BVA,” he was quoted as saying in a recent **Bulletin** article. “VA and BVA see to it that we have the necessary tools to work with, that we are always taken care of, and that we are never alone.”

As BVA continues its attempts to keep up with ever-expanding workloads, we must still take time to salute, publicly recognize, and serve veterans like Enrique for their sacrifice, service, and mentorship. Please make doing so a priority in 2024 as never before!

# A Week in St. Louis Not Soon Forgotten

by Stuart Nelson and Warner Murray

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Four years of anticipation, two years of preparation, and a week of activities designed for stellar legs, healthy appetites, a zest for learning the latest in technology, and an interest in helping to guide the future of the Blinded Veterans Association all came to a halt with the ceremonial lowering of the gavel at the Friday evening Awards Banquet, this year sponsored by Vanda Pharmaceuticals. Attendees also made their way to the much-ballyhooed hospitality suite for a final good-bye to old and new friends. The following provides a snapshot of the activities leading up to that final curtain call.

## Virtual Town Halls Become Convention Springboard

BVA held four virtual sessions dedicated to introducing events and sharing critical information about the impending 78th National Convention to promote the event and encourage participation. The first, held June 6, surpassed expectations for attendance and provided the impetus for several Association members to eventually register and travel to St. Louis.

The next two sessions, scheduled for June 20 and 27, presented proposed bylaw amendments and an opportunity to discuss them with the organization's National Officers. A final session on July 11 again examined the overall content of the convention but in greater detail than it was on June 6. Many issues that had been tentative were resolved in time for the July 11 meeting.

## Critical Sponsor Support Offered Freely, Generously

The convention had many success stories but none more compelling than those emanating from a record number of sponsored meals and activities. Although three sponsors did not purchase booth space, they were an integral part of the convention and crucially important in their support. Major event sponsors in chronological order were:

- Hotel Orientation Using Navigation Technology, conducted by WayAround
- Bow Wow Lounge, sponsored by Waymo and PetsMart of the St. Louis District
- BVA Registration, sponsored by Waymo and PetsMart of the St. Louis District
- Service Dog Walk, sponsored by Waymo and HumanWare
- Rollin' on the Riverboat Cruise, sponsored by Vispero
- Exhibitor and BVA Member Breakfast, sponsored by Bosma
- Missouri Botanical Garden, sponsored by Oracle Health
- Tuesday Lunch and Learn, sponsored by WayAround
- Ambassador Breakfast and Ceremony, sponsored by OrCam
- Wednesday Lunch and Learn, sponsored by Oracle Health
- Flamingo Bowl Dinner and Bowling Event, sponsored by Foreseeable Future Foundation and HumanWare





Eschenbach Optik of America Director of Marketing Timothy Gels, center, recognizes Shawntina Gibson and Enrique Sanchez as the company's Angel Sponsorship recipients for 2023.

- BVA Member Good Morning Breakfast, sponsored by National Association of Blind Merchants
- Father Carroll Luncheon, sponsored by Dot Incorporation
- Awards Banquet, sponsored by Vanda Pharmaceuticals

Two Angel Sponsorships were also awarded by Eschenbach Optik of America to two outstanding BVA members who may have otherwise had difficulty attending the convention—Shawntina Gibson, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, and Enrique Sanchez, New York Regional Group.

## Offsite Visits Offer Taste of St. Louis

Convention attendees experienced the flavor of the Gateway to the West through a variety of activities outside the Marriott St. Louis Grand. In addition to the Monday activities described by Warner Murray below, groups of up to a hundred were treated to informative tours of the Missouri Botanical Garden and the renowned St. Louis Anheuser-Busch Brewery. The visit to the Botanical Garden was sponsored by Oracle Health.



BVA member David Kilde awaits offsite St. Louis tour of Anheuser-Busch Brewery with his mother, Anna Kilde.

Flamingo Bowl, situated just three blocks from the St. Louis Grand, was the site of a Wednesday evening activity composed of midwestern barbecue, bowling, and music. The lively event was made possible by the Foreseeable Future Foundation, HumanWare, and a dedicated cadre of volunteers from the Southern Illinois University (Edwardsville) Army ROTC program.

Although it was not an official convention activity with arranged transportation, rumors spread that several convention attendees made the mile-or-so walk to Busch Memorial Stadium to see the St. Louis Cardinals take

on the New York Mets. The group returned in time to enjoy at least a few minutes in the Hospitality Room.

## **Dedicated Volunteers Provide Needed Assistance**

If calculations are correct, BVA honorary member Margarine “The Busy” Beaman has now completed 33 consecutive years of volunteering and locating local volunteers to assist veterans and their families at the conventions. To all who knew her then and those who know her now, she hasn’t missed a step. Thank you, Margarine, for your continuous service to BVA and, although there is only one Margarine, thank you for locating volunteers who share, at least in part, your enthusiasm and your energy!



Margarine Beaman’s cadre of volunteers in St. Louis included members of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) Army ROTC, pictured with her above. The cadets patiently assisted veterans and their families with food and drink at the August 16 offsite activity in a packed and noisy Flamingo Bowl. They also made an extraordinary effort to engage with convention attendees, learning their names and inquiring about their military service.

## **Happy Barks Emanate From Bow Wow Lounge**

Another first for a national convention was a designated recreation and rest stop for working guide dogs, fittingly named the Bow Wow Lounge.



Chaplain Kenneth Harvey introduces his guide dog to the convention Bow Wow Lounge. Pictured in background are goody bags to be distributed the following day to every registered dog attendee.

The room converted to a lounge, located near convention registration, the Exhibit Hall, and one of two dog relief areas, quickly became an attractive and popular stop for the dogs at various times throughout the week. The lounge came equipped with personalized goodie bags for each of the 16 dogs with their names clearly printed, tasty snacks that were used as rewards, toys, and cushions on which to recline.

## **Exhibit Hall Energy**

“The kind of numbers that have passed through here and the overall atmosphere have been great,” said Paul Kaminsky, Chief Executive Officer of the American Braille





WayAround's Chief Operating Officer Jessica Hipp and Manager/Cofounder Darwin Belt in convention Exhibit Hall.

Flag Project, Inc. "We're really impressed and pleased with the Exhibit Hall this year."

Paul and Walter Peters, the Project's president, occupied one of the 45 booths that were part of this year's exhibits, kicked off by a Tuesday Exhibitor and Member Breakfast sponsored by Bosma. The breakfast allowed time for a few promotional presentations and fostered interaction between members and exhibitors just minutes before the heavily trafficked Exhibit Hall opened for the first time.

## Heartland Hospitality

As the host regional group for the convention, the Heartland Regional Group assumed hosting duties for the Hospitality Suite. As difficult as it would be to match the efforts of the Mid-Atlantic Group in 2022, President Jeanie Murphy and her cast of helpers, including husband Robert, came through in grand style. The suite was well-stocked in a variety of ways, including laughter, camaraderie, and the sharing of information and experiences.

If the setup was not already near perfect, how about those hot dogs? Yes, a BVA

convention Hospitality Suite with hot dogs—and with both cheese and chili as well! This move was absolutely an extra mile one and may have been a historic first. Please nominate the Heartland Regional Group for future hospitality service no matter what the convention destination may be!

## Barb Webb Shares Caregiving Journey



Barb Webb, right, and Cheyenne White, VA Columbia, Missouri Health Care System, described the irony inherent in feeling simultaneously overwhelmed and overjoyed.

children, or, in some cases, parents. She was accompanied by Cheyenne White, Social Worker at the Harry S Truman VA Medical Center (Columbia, Missouri). Cheyenne addressed the group regarding VA resources for caregivers.

Barb was among 30 caregivers nationwide in 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, to be selected by the Elizabeth Dole

Gateway B, the room designated for Barb Webb's "A Caregiver's Heart: Overwhelmed and Overjoyed," filled beyond capacity on Wednesday afternoon. The topic, created by Barb herself as a reflection of her own feelings, experiences, and insights, also resonated with the dozens of caregivers attending the convention with their veteran spouses,



Foundation, Caring for Military Families, as a Caregiver Fellow. Barb's selection to the prestigious group was based on her extensive experience and insight into successful caregiving and her ability to bring attention to the challenges facing America's "hidden heroes"—the spouses, family members, and other loved ones who provide \$14 billion in voluntary care for service members and veterans every year.

"My heart truly has become overwhelmed and overjoyed at the same time," she said, "and I have that feeling today as I assure you that you are never alone as a caregiver."

Barb is the mother of Mark Wilson, also a member of the Heartland Regional Group and a former combat engineer who served two tours of duty as an expert in explosives tasked with locating and disarming improvised explosive devices. Together, Barb and Mark have been regular attendees of BVA national conventions and staunch supporters of the Operation Peer Support initiative and activities at the regional group level. They have also supported BVA through Mark's masterful woodworking craftsmanship, a passion of his both before and after his injuries. Over the years, Mark has professionally produced for BVA many award plaques, signs, and other items.

## **Tech, BRS Updates Highlight Thursday Forum**

The traditional convention forum, a series of presentations leaning more toward the academic and technical sides of topics such as blind rehabilitation, sight restoration, and prosthetic and sensory aids, welcomed as speakers BRS National Program Director Niki Sandlan; the VA Office of Compliance, Risk and Remediation, with representatives

of Vispero, Allyant, and Perigean; Dr. Philip Troyk, Executive Director and Principal Investigator for the IntraCortical Visual Prosthesis Project at the Pritzker Institute of Biomedical Science and Engineering; and a VA Prosthetic Update from Stephen Roberts of Veterans Integrated Service Network 15.

## **Sergeant-At-Arms Inspires Father Carroll Gathering**

Relating his own journey with sight loss and the subsequent realization that he could still do many of the things he loved, BVA Sergeant-At-Arms Brian O'Connell shared with approximately 200 veterans, their families, and caregivers the personal insights that have helped him return to those activities.

The setting was the annual Father Thomas J. Carroll Memorial Luncheon, named for the legendary pioneer in blind rehabilitation and BVA's National Chaplain during the organization's first 25 years.

Even after his glaucoma diagnosis, Brian related, he continued to do the things he'd always done, including driving. In 2014, however, he experienced a pressure spike in his right eye that caused loss of most of his vision in that eye. Then, the same thing occurred in his left eye a year later, causing legal blindness and forcing him to retire from teaching Air Force Junior ROTC and coaching high school baseball.

Locating a community of veterans with similar challenges through BVA, Brian shared the new confidence and hope he quickly regained. He found himself on ski lifts, rediscovered his trumpet-playing days with a local band, and started taking virtual piano lessons. He is now back in the classroom and engaging in many of the recreational, professional, and educational activities he had previously believed would be impossible.

## **Proposed Bylaw Amendments Debated and Determined**

Four bylaw amendments were originally proposed and presented to BVA members, first at the Townhall meetings in late June and again at the convention so that in-person roll call voting could be conducted. Convention delegates and voting members must approve a bylaw change by a two-thirds vote.

The proposed change to Article 6, Section 2 (Elections) was to stagger candidate nominations for District Director so that Districts 1 and 2 would next hold elections in 2025 and Districts 3 and 4 in 2026. Under the existing Section 2, elections for all four districts would occur the same year. The membership voted to adopt the change in the bylaw.

The proposed change to Article 9, Section 3 (Convention) was to allow annual membership meetings and to move to biennial conventions. The membership failed to approve the proposed bylaw amendment.

The proposed change to Article 10 (Dues) was to move from the current \$50 Life Membership (half of the funds going to the life membership fund and the other half to the general fund) to a free membership model, designed to empower the regional groups with increased member participation and apportionment revenue while growing BVA's national membership body. The membership failed to approve the proposed amendment.

The proposed change to Article 17 was to delete the article entirely based on a National Board of Directors vote to sever its relationship and all ties to the BVA Auxiliary. Events leading up to the convention and a subsequent meeting held August 14 resulted in the withdrawal of this proposed bylaw

change. There was no vote for the change on the convention floor and Article 17 remains intact and in force with no other action planned for the foreseeable future.

## **Delegates, Voting Members Elect New National Officers**

Culminating the flurry of activity all week in and around the Marriott St. Louis Grand was the Closing Business Meeting election of Paul Mimms, Heartland Regional Group, as the new National President. Convention delegates and other attendees also elected Wade Davis, Houston Regional Group, as the National Vice President, and Tracy Ferro, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, as National Secretary. Joe Bogart of the Gem State Regional Group was elected National Treasurer.

## **Awardees Recognized at Luncheon, Banquet**

Dr. Vaneada "Vee" Harvey, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group, was this year's recipient of the Melvin J. Maas Award for Professional Achievement, BVA's highest honor for a member of the organization. The award, presented at the Friday night banquet, recognizes success in a professional setting outside the work of BVA, especially as the success relates to overcoming the challenges of blindness.

Gary Schoelerman, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group, received the Irving Diener Award for outstanding work and service to the regional group, which has relied on his initiative and drive for many years in the organizing of activities and projects such as the Braille flag donations and dedications, not to mention the perfection with which he performed his secretary responsibilities.



Dr. Vaneada “Vee” Harvey, left, accepts BVA highest membership honor from Paul Mimms. Pictured in background, Master of Ceremonies and VSP Director Duayne Driscoll.



Joe McNeil and Tim Hornik present BVA Certificate of Appreciation to Kelly Golden. Photo courtesy of Wanda Grover.

Tracy Ferro, Louisiana-Mississippi Regional Group and the recently elected National Secretary, has logged hundreds of hours as a BVA volunteer at the Biloxi VA Medical Center the past year, particularly the BRC within the medical center facility. Tracy functions as both a BRC advocate as well as one of the watchdogs guarding them, always assuring that his fellow veterans are well taken care of.

A new Circle of Excellence award was presented to Enrique Sanchez for his example of loyalty to his fellow blinded veterans, especially within the New York Regional



Shawntina Gibson receives coveted Gold Gavel on behalf of Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group.

Group; his effectiveness in working with VA blind rehabilitation personnel; and his perseverance in serving others.

The Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group won this fiscal

year’s Gold Gavel Award for the largest numerical increase in membership. The Silver Gavel Award went to the Alabama Regional Group for the greatest percentage membership increase of any group.

At the Friday Father Carroll Luncheon, Joe McNeil presented Certificates of Appreciation to Shelly Blomstrom, Blind Rehabilitation Specialist, Kansas City VA Medical Center; Dawn Clouse, Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinator, Eastern Kansas Health Care System; Jennifer Ettenger, VIST Coordinator, Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center; Kelly Golden, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS), Albuquerque, New Mexico, VA Medical Center; Samantha Hance, BROS, Kansas City VA Medical Center; and John Majkut, VIST Coordinator, Alexandria, Louisiana, VA Medical Center

## **Impressions and Reflections from Warner Murray**

My time at the BVA 78th National Convention was a wonderful experience. As is often the case when one travels, a few unforeseen challenges came my way.

A small contingency of the New York Regional Group consisting of the treasurer,





Staff members from Platinum Sponsor Dot Incorporation offered camaraderie and moral support during hot and humid Monday Service Dog Walk. Pictured left to right near the renowned St. Louis Arch, Kris Unseok Choi, Mergel Takam, Jessica Lee, and Praise Kim.

secretary, and a life member arrived on Sunday morning at 10:00am via Southwest Airlines. It was a bright, sunny day in St. Louis.

Upon exiting the aircraft, I heard the familiar voice of the welcoming committee led by Margarine Beaman. It felt wonderful to hear her voice and receive the usual assistance typical of every airport arrival heading to a BVA convention.

I had arranged shuttle transportation a few months prior to my arrival. The St. Louis Metro Link known as Call-A-Ride was our means of transportation during the entire convention. The Metro Link shuttle service was on time and prepared for the arrival of blinded veterans. My reservation was for 4-6 members to ride with me.

We arrived at the Marriott St. Louis Grand safe and sound, and with great anticipation for the upcoming week. The bellhop took the

luggage and escorted us to the hotel lobby check-in counter.

The guest room was clean and ready to receive me. It contained all that I had requested: refrigerator, needed air conditioning, and lots of towels. The lighting was sufficient, and there was easy access to the telephone and plenty of closet space with hangers. The bathroom was bright, clean, and had a good assortment of toiletries.

Our first challenge began as we dropped our luggage and got ourselves ready to head to the BVA registration area. We took the elevator to the lobby and asked for assistance to the area provided by the hotel. There was no one specific person assigned to provide that assistance. We did eventually receive some directions that were a bit complicated for first-time blinded veterans. We started out on the elevators, up and down, but at first, we didn't know where to get off! Somehow, we reached the appropriate underground walkway containing some steep inclines and declines.

We walked until a stranger told us to go down some escalators to reach the registration area. I knew we had finally arrived and were safe when I heard the familiar voice of our Meredith say: "Over here, BVA members!"

The Monday Service Dog Walk on a sunny, hot, humid morning to the renowned Gateway Arch National Park attracted a large crowd. The distance was approximately a mile each way. While many walked with their dogs, there were plenty who walked without a dog. Despite the pleasant conversations and stops to rest and take photos, some of us still ran out of energy and needed a ride back! Fortunately, a car or two that had been driven to the convention were dispatched for this very purpose and helped those who needed it.



Left to right, Dr. Vaneada (Vee) Harvey (Mid-Atlantic Regional Group), Marlene Davis-Lilly (Arkansas Regional Group), and Michaun Harrison (Mid-Atlantic Regional Group) display some swagger prior to Father Carroll Luncheon. Photo courtesy of Michaun Harrison.

The wind was back in my sails a few hours later for the most enjoyable outing of the convention, the Rollin' on the Riverboat Cruise, which included dinner. The bus ride to the location was very lively with spirited conversations and lots of laughter. The walk to the boat floating dock was a short distance over some small gravel stones. Our arrival was greeted with a warm welcome and several "thank you for your service" comments. We were seated and served salad right away. A live band entertained the crowd with music

and singing while the main course was being served. The drinks, desserts, and flashing of cameras were nonstop. It was the best dinner cruise I have ever attended at any convention.

My overall opinion of the convention is overwhelmingly positive. Despite some challenges that affected many of us, our membership overcame them with strong grit and pride. Whenever there is true dedication to BVA, that dedication and will to march forward permeates and spreads throughout the membership. Very grateful I am to have been part of the BVA 78th National Convention!

### **HVAC Chairman Mike Bost Extends Congratulations and Welcome**

House Committee on Veterans Affairs (HVAC) Chairman Mike Bost (R-IL-12) officially recognized Paul Mimms on his election as Blinded Veterans Association National President in a letter addressed to him dated September 12, 2023. Chairman Bost thanked Paul for his service on active duty and his continued advocacy on behalf of fellow blind and low vision veterans who have also answered the call to serve.

"This is no small task, but I know that because of your passion and responsibility, BVA will prosper and strengthen its efforts to expand programs and push forward necessary legislation for our veterans in need," the letter stated, referring to Paul's likely upcoming appearance before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees in March 2024 to present BVA's legislative priorities.

# Blinded Veterans Celebrate All Veterans at ANC and Nationwide

BVA National Headquarters represented blind and low vision veterans throughout the country with the presentation of an organizational wreath at Arlington National Cemetery's (ANC) Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Veterans Day. The effort complemented similar Veterans Day activities of blinded veterans and their families in their communities and regional groups.

With representatives of approximately 40 other VSOs looking on and all eventually presenting a similar wreath, the symbolic gesture paying tribute to all veterans capped off a day of memorable activities for BVA in and around a chilly but sun-drenched National Capital Area. Participating in the wreath laying were Executive Director Don Overton, Director of Development Meredith Buono-DaGrossa, National Service Director Duayne Driscoll, and Deputy Director of Government Relations Alek Libbin.

The laying of the BVA wreath followed the traditional dignitary wreath laying precisely at 11:00am, witnessed by Don and Meredith and performed on this occasion by President Joseph R. Biden.

Afterward, the President joined Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough and Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento in addressing veterans and a capacity crowd of approximately 5,000 in the cemetery's adjacent Memorial Amphitheater.

Several hours before the ceremonies, Don began his Veterans Day before dawn to attend a breakfast for VSO presidents or executive directors at the White House. Following the



Left to right, sighted guide Dallas Baugh, U.S. flag bearer Ruth Wallace, sighted guide Bessie Powell, and BVA flag bearer Lawrence Harrison.

President's wreath laying, he was seated on the same amphitheater platform as the other VSO leaders and introduced as the BVA Executive Director.

With the BVA flag firmly in a harness at his waste, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group Vice President and Washington, DC, resident Lawrence Harrison marched with the flag in the ceremonial Parade of Colors with the assistance of sighted guide Bessie Powell. Ruth Wallace, a Northern Virginia blinded veteran who recently learned about and joined BVA, carried the United States flag with the assistance of her father, Dallas Baugh, also a military veteran.

VFW, the host organization for the entire day's events by virtue of its membership on the Veterans Day National Committee to which BVA also belongs, hosted a reception at the Military Women's Memorial. The event was also attended by the BVA contingency following the wreath laying.



# BVA Mourns Passing of Beloved President, Chaplain

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BVA National Headquarters was saddened to learn of the recent deaths of BVA stalwart national leaders, Dr. Roy Kekahuna and Neftali Sanchez.

## National President, 2009-11

Past National President Dr. Roy W. Kekahuna passed away on July 1 in Las Vegas. Roy served BVA in numerous regional group capacities and national offices, culminating with his election in 2009 as National President at the 64th National Convention in Portland, Oregon. Roy and his wife, Laurel, were also the impetus behind the selection and execution of the 66th National Convention in Las Vegas in 2011.

Roy lived a distinguished life filled with a long list of continuous educational and professional achievements, all while overcoming multiple combat disabilities and years of intensive rehabilitation during several paths to physical recovery, earning for him BVA's highest honor, the Melvin J. Maas Award for Professional Achievement at the same convention at which he was elected National President.

Roy was a native Hawaiian, born in Honolulu. At age 18, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a Private E-1. While in the military, Roy spent most of his time with the Special Forces (Green Berets). He also had tours with the 82nd Airborne Division, the STRAC Army Sky Diving Team, the 101st Airborne Division, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, compiling more than 6,000 static line and free fall jumps with those outfits.

As an Army Major, Roy was injured by a booby trap in June 1967 that resulted in



With garrison cap that lends emphasis to his Hawaii roots, Dr. Roy Kekahuna pictured at congressional witness table prior to presenting BVA's 2011 legislative priorities before a joint session of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs.

multiple wounds, including loss of the use of his left arm and near total loss of vision. He also experienced multiple fragment wounds to the stomach, groin, chest, right arm, and face. He was medically retired in 1971 with five tours in Vietnam and five Purple Hearts after spending four years in physical rehabilitation and undergoing 43 surgical procedures.

Using the skills and determination

he learned in the Army, Roy moved forward as he blazed a trail of personal achievements, including completion of a blind rehabilitation course at the Hawaii State Rehabilitation Center, VA blind rehabilitation at Hines, two bachelor's degrees, two master's degrees, and two doctorates. He was the Chief of Voluntary Services with the VA Southern Nevada Health Care System. Roy also worked for the Department of Defense for 15 years and for five years as a Sales Trainer with Sun Life of Canada. As a volunteer, he spent 39 years

with Veterans Helping Veterans, six years as a BVA District Director, and a year at a BVA volunteer office.

Roy first learned about BVA in 1993 when he moved from Hawaii to San Diego. VIST Coordinator Bob Kozel invited him to attend a San Diego Regional Group meeting shortly after his move. It was there that he discovered that he was not the only blinded veteran seeking assistance from VA. He was also a life member of six additional Veterans Service Organizations.

Longtime BVA members remember Roy's willingness to do anything that demonstrated his independence. One especially memorable event for many occurred during the Las Vegas convention which he chaired in 2011. Roy hopped in a van for a quick trip to the nearby Stratosphere Hotel with a group of 11 other convention attendees, all of them younger than he at the time. The group was prepped and attired in the Stratosphere's custom jump suits. Shortly thereafter, they received a safety lesson and then rode on an elevator the equivalent of 108 stories upward. Roy and the other jumpers were then connected to a high-speed "descender" and led to the edge of the platform, where they took the final step prior toward plummeting 855 feet to the ground in approximately 15 seconds.

### **National Chaplain, 1979-2011**

Korean War veteran and former BVA National Chaplain of 32 consecutive years (1979-2011), the Reverend Neftali Sanchez, passed away on September 6 from causes incident to age at his home in Grand Terrace, California. He was most recently a member of the Southern California Regional Group and, astonishingly, a BVA member for 68 years.



Chaplain Neftali Sanchez with his sister, Nohemi Marquez, at BVA 71st National Convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Tali, as many knew him, attended 31 conventions as Chaplain, missing only one in 1997 (Reno) and delivering Father Carroll Memorial Luncheon addresses twice—in 1979 and again in 2001.

“It seems unthinkable to contemplate that I served as National Chaplain eight years longer than Father Carroll did,” he said during a telephone interview just prior to the BVA 66th National Convention in 2011 (Las Vegas). “It’s been a long run that I’ve loved, but it’s finally time to give the privilege to another worthy blinded veteran.”

Due to health concerns, Tali could attend only one more convention following his service as National Chaplain. In 2016, he traveled to Milwaukee for the 71st National Convention, where he also attended his very first convention back in 1956.

A 2002 national newspaper release introduced Tali’s story as follows:

“One blinded veteran has taught many Americans how possible it is to overcome great adversity if one does not abandon hope for a bright future and full life. A good

example is Corporal Neftali Sanchez, whose life changed abruptly on July 11, 1953, in Korea when he was only 19 years old.”

The article recounted Tali’s wounding by an exploding grenade while he was on patrol, an event that caused the loss of both his eyes and both his arms below the elbows.

“Coping with so many obvious adversities, Tali was nevertheless relentless in the pursuit of his personal goals,” the feature added.

After completing blind rehabilitation at Hines in 1955, he graduated from Pepperdine University in 1959 and received a Master’s Degree two years later. He attended Bible College and received a Bachelor’s Degree in Theology in 1974.

Tali found out about BVA in 1955 and joined immediately. He served on the National Board of Directors from 1964-69 and was later elected National Chaplain in 1979. He told both the Board and the membership the following year that he would not run for Chaplain again and, because of the politics involved in elections and voting, he voiced his opinion that a National Chaplain should be appointed annually rather than elected. The

Association’s leadership listened to him and agreed with his reasoning. The rest is history as he was reappointed 31 times!

Judging by his many years of involvement and service, of much greater importance for Tali than a position were opportunities for him to serve, particularly to render assistance and support to those who may be climbing the same mountain that he had already successfully climbed.

The explanation for Tali’s service may well be rooted in a November 13, 1953, news article in the **El Paso Post** reporting his injuries in Korea. The article quoted Tali’s mother, who had just visited him for the first time since his return to the states. The place of that meeting was a hospital in San Antonio, Texas.

“If Neftali was discouraged, he never showed it,” she said. “He seemed happy and full of plans for the future.”

The Tali Sanchez described by his mother in 1953 is the same remarkably courageous, positive-thinking BVA member and National Chaplain BVA knew and loved for all but ten years of its 78-year history.

### **Cover Photos:**

Top left, Ruth Wallace and Lawrence Harrison pause outside Arlington National Cemetery’s Memorial Amphitheater after representing BVA in the traditional Parade of Colors at the 70th Annual Veterans Day National Observance.

Top center, Don Overton and Alek Libbin, facing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, present BVA wreath. Accompanying them from behind and partially visible are Meredith Buono-DaGrossa and Duayne Driscoll.

Top right, at BVA 78th National Convention Awards Banquet, Shawntina Gibson accepts Gold Gavel from newly elected National President Paul Mimms.

Bottom photo, BVA faithful willing to endure the heat and humidity of a Missouri summer day gather at renowned St. Louis arch during first-ever convention Service Dog Walk. The Monday morning walk was sponsored by Waymo and HumanWare.



# Frustration Becomes Jubilation: New VA Health and Benefits App

by Tracy Ferro

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Frustration.

When it comes to vision loss and VA, that word could cover a multitude of subjects. I wish to cover just one, along with an ensuing remedy that for me is most dramatic.

The source of the frustration was MyHealtheVet. Perhaps that is all I need to say to this specific audience but, in a nutshell, this innovation has been a disaster for people without sight, leaving a sour taste in our mouths.

There is a group of folks at VA who have taken on the challenge of making things a whole lot better. We met some of them at the convention while others have been involved in Beta Testing with the goal of developing a user-friendly app that is accessible.

Whatever their connection to the development of this mobile application, some well-deserved praise is coming their way for how they set new goals for accessibility and made it happen, thus alleviating frustrations of all kinds for the present and very likely for the future as well.

Although the goal was to develop an app that could be used by a Smartphone, still the wave of the future, the big plan was for all the information to be available after only four clicks. With that in mind, the next step was to move what was or is available from MyHealtheVet to an app for either a phone or tablet. I am not certain how well this worked in the Android world but, for iPhones and iPads, the results have been phenomenal. Taking nothing away from the accomplishment, there is one annoyance that is being worked on and will hopefully be resolved soon.

To better understand where I am coming from, go to the Apple store on your phone and download the “VA Health and Benefits” app. To make doubly sure that it is the right one, there will be a logo of a blue square with “VA” in it. The next step is the setup, which is the problem VA is currently attempting to remove. This problem involves the requirement to use a credentialing service— MyHealtheVet, IDme, DS Login, or Login.gov to verify our status as veterans. Then, of course, comes the two-factor authentication. It’s a pain in the neck but we can do it once and then not have to go through everything again.

Once logged in, we can detect four tabs on the bottom of the screen: Home, Benefits, Health, and Payments.

Select Home first. As we navigate, swiping left to right, the first thing we always encounter is an option button to contact the crisis line. This is self-explanatory. The next buttons are Name and Branch of Service, allowing us to know that we are in the right place. After that are Updates, if any, followed by About VA, Contact VA, Find a VA Location, and COVID Updates. All of these are self-explanatory.

The next tab is for Benefits. This tab will relieve a lot of stress throughout the BVA population. Many of us have open claims and cannot get in touch immediately with the Veterans Service Program folks at BVA National Headquarters. This is because they are super busy handling claims. As it now stands, every time a person wants an update, the National Service Officer (NSO) must take that on and spend time answering a question that is at our fingertips.

If you go to the Benefits tab, there are currently only three selection buttons: Disability Ratings, Claims, and VA Letters and Documents. The Ratings button has all your ratings and percentages for each condition or disability. This information can be very helpful to any qualified NSO to help answer questions.

The Claims button has two selections, one for active claims and one for closed. The contents of those huge envelopes we have received in the past, the ones with all the pages we cannot read and often must take to someone else to read to us, are available right there on a computer screen. VoiceOver or a screen reader will read them aloud to us and we do not have to wait for the mail. With four simple clicks that require less than a minute, we can have our answer, versus waiting for a return call from an NSO. In addition, you can check this every day if you wish.

The last button is the one we need for the tax relief letters, commissary authorizations, proof of service, and more. Depending on the particular need and the information requested, we can filter and tailor-make what appears in the letter. If registering a car, for example, the Department of Motor Vehicles may have us print directly to their printer or send an email to them right there.

The Health Tab is also filled with options that make our lives easier. The first button relates to our VA appointments. Do we want to take a vacation at the last minute but can't remember when that appointment is scheduled? Again, forget the phone, click four times, and you have what you need. The button also has our past appointments so that we can schedule a new one if it is time to do so. Next is the Messages button. This one allows us to send secure messages to nearly anyone within the VA system, but definitely to our Primary Care Manager, VIST Coordinator, Pharmacy, and other vital services. We can add attachments, type a message, or perform

several other functions. These are secure, fast, and reliable. Please try them out!

Next up is the Prescriptions button. Since I do not use Department of Defense (DoD) pharmacies, I do not have anything available through this option. Many of you, however, should be able to view your prescriptions and refill them if available, totally managing the process.

Vaccines are the next option. This button will bring up all the vaccines VA knows about. If I obtain a vaccine at a DoD facility, the information is shared. However, if I get a flu shot at Walgreens, for example, I can take that record into VA and they will upload it for me, or I can send a secure message with that attachment to my Primary Care Manager, and it will be there. This is great if I am traveling out of town and need to show proof. Last up is the COVID updates. This option is very comprehensive and can be reviewed for situational awareness.

The final tab shows Payments. This has any payment that VA has made to us and can help with balancing our physical and mental checkbooks. When showing another individual the benefits of this app, please use some caution. We may not want to show this tab since there are no secondary menus from which to choose. The information just pops up and it may not always be information we wish to show others. One of the biggest updates being worked on right now is the update for travel payments. The goal is to get reimbursements linked to appointments and have payments go through automatically. As with anything else, it must be built and tested first to ensure that another frustration like MyHealthVet does not rear its ugly head again.

Road test this app and you will find that your frustrations have been lowered considerably. The change may end up being so stark that the frustrations quickly turn into jubilation.

# BVA Supports Proposed HHS Update to Law Implementation

by Tim Hornik, BVA Chief of Staff

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The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Civil Rights has proposed an update to the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended. The update directly impacts several key provisions of BVA's legislative priorities regarding the accessibility of medical equipment and devices; rights to self-determination and autonomy in medical decisions; and mandating conformity to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) for all healthcare websites and portals, mobile applications, and self-service kiosks.

This update regarding how individuals with disabilities engage in healthcare-related action is the first one in the 40-year history of Section 504.

BVA is publicly expressing strong support for the proposed update. Although we as blind and low vision veterans have bravely fought for our country, too often our healthcare providers focus on our disability and overlook our capability, denying us our basic right to independently access medical devices and equipment. They make important medical determinations affecting our future and utilize healthcare web portals, mobile applications, and kiosks that lack accessibility to our population. We commend the Biden-Harris Administration for recognizing this deficiency through continuous efforts within the federal government to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion with respect to the various aspects of accessibility.

Previous BVA efforts focused on the implementation of Section 504 and Section

508 within the Department of Veterans Affairs, and HHS's proposed rulemaking builds upon these efforts. After all, it is through BVA's efforts that the Veterans Accessibility Act of 2019 was passed to ensure the appropriate implementation of WCAG throughout VA. Likewise, BVA has advocated with VA's Prosthetic Services and Sensory Aids and Blind Rehabilitation Service to ensure that veterans' preferences for accessibility are accounted for in the selection and issuance of devices issued to veterans. Unfortunately, this is only the first step.

BVA is currently attempting to keep these efforts moving forward. Implementation of the HHS update will most certainly have a positive impact that is desperately needed as we still receive reports from our members that both VA and community healthcare providers are issuing to veterans with sight loss only inaccessible Constant Positive Air Pressure (CPAP) devices due to the lack of accessible options on the market. Additionally, constant monitoring of glucometers remains problematic for blind individuals. Without pressure from HHS upon the greater healthcare world, this will remain the status quo.

If you have experienced barriers in accessing appropriate healthcare services, or have been ignored by your healthcare team, or have received only inaccessible devices, send an email today to [info@bva.org](mailto:info@bva.org) and tell us your story. Through your feedback we will continue to challenge the healthcare sector to become more accessible to blind and low vision veterans.



## National Board Appoints New District Directors

Mike Cook, Arkansas Regional Group, and Randy Cantrell, Spokane Inland Empire Regional Group, are the newly named Directors of Districts 2 and 4, respectively.

District 2 is comprised of the following states: Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. District 4 includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming.

A Vietnam veteran of the U.S. Air Force, Mike was a Civil Air Patrol Leadership Aerospace Graduate and began his service as a Cadet at age 13. Upon completion of flight training, he earned his private pilot license on his 17th birthday and his commercial pilot certificate on his 18th birthday. He was a professor of astronomy while serving as a Federal Inspector (U.S. Civil Service). He is the current secretary of the Buddy Spivey Razorback (Arkansas) Regional Group.

A veteran of the U.S. Navy with deployments as a jet aircraft troubleshooter on the U.S.S. Oriskany and the U.S.S. Ranger, Randy is the immediate past president of his regional group. He recently successfully completed the BVA Ambassador Training Program and is now functioning in the official capacity of an Ambassador at the VA Medical Center in Spokane, Washington.

## Effective Recruiting Brings New Members

by Teresa Galgano

We are thrilled to share some fantastic news with our membership: The Blinded Veterans Association family is growing stronger than ever! We are proud to announce that 46 remarkable individuals have recently joined our esteemed organization, and their commitment to our mission is truly inspiring. We also thank our BVA Ambassadors and other recruiters who are volunteering at VA facilities and spreading the word about the Association.

Our recruiters during the recent two months have included Tracy Ferro, Kevin Jackson, Donna-Sue Sullivan, Michaun Harrison, Yoneka Trent, Elizabeth Holmes, William Graves, Eduardo Miranda, Jeanie Murphy, Kenneth Asam, Keith Tackett, Vernon Humphrey, and Stephen Butler.

Our new members come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, most of them serving during the Vietnam Era. We are still signing up members who served during World War II. Incidentally, the membership fee for World War II veterans has been waived.

The list of new members is available to our dedicated District Directors, who play a vital role in connecting with and supporting our members in various regions across the country. At BVA we take immense pride in the sense of camaraderie and support that our members offer one another.

With these 46 recent additions, we are not only growing our numbers but also expanding

the network of support available to all our members. Together, we continue to champion the rights and well-being of blind and low vision veterans, ensuring they receive the care and recognition they both deserve and have rightly earned.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our new members for choosing to be part of the BVA family. Your presence strengthens our collective voice and empowers us to make a lasting impact on the lives of blinded veterans across the nation.

As we welcome our new members with open arms, let us all continue to work together to honor the sacrifices of our blind and low vision veterans. Let us make a meaningful difference in one another's lives. The future is bright for the Blinded Veterans Association, thanks to members like you who stand with us in our mission.

## **Media Spotlights BVA Members In Tennessee and Arizona**

Two BVA members recently captured the attention of their local television news media. The focus in both cases is their demonstrated persistence to lead active, productive lives despite losing their sight.

Vietnam veteran Edward Collins, Tennessee Regional Group, was featured October 26 on WBIR-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee, in a segment entitled "Service and Sacrifice: Blind but Ambitious."

James Malone, an at-large BVA member from Tempe, Arizona, with only a trace of remaining vision, has been developing his archery skills the past year, thanks to personal motivation and the recreational therapy program at the Phoenix VA Medical Center. The ABC-TV 15 report out of Phoenix on October 31 also referred to both James'

routine on a tandem bicycle with his wife and his desire to take up skiing for the first time this winter.

## **Ambassadors Conduct Veteran Buddy Checks**

Supporting VA's National Buddy Check Week October 9-14, BVA continued with the effort throughout the month of October via the Association's two graduating classes of Ambassadors. It included a check on well-being and an offer of support.

Ambassadors are trained blind and low vision volunteers who are passionate about helping other veterans. They are reaching out by phone or email simply to check in and provide information about BVA resources and services when appropriate. The Buddy Check is not a solicitation call. Its purpose is to offer support and friendship.

National Buddy Check Week is a nationwide campaign conducted annually. It is supported and promoted by VA, encouraging veterans to connect or reconnect with their veteran friends – just to check in. The campaign's origin is The STRONG Veterans Act of 2022, which addresses mental health care provided by VA. It contains 27 sections requiring VA to work collaboratively with the Indian Health Service and other partners.

VA's Buddy Check Week also builds on the success of the American Legion's Buddy Check program and the Veteran Wellness Alliance's Get Involved program.

## **Blind Americans Equality Day Celebration a Hit in DC**

It may have been Halloween but members of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group and staff of the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center's Vision Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) Clinic had their



Left to right at Blind Americans Equality Day event: VISOR Clinic Supervisor Deidre Dockery, MS CRC, Mid-Atlantic Regional Group Baltimore Chapter President Harvey Guary, Wanda Grover, and Jim Vale. Photo courtesy of Lawrence Harrison.

minds on an equally important but different theme as they made their way to an all-day October 31 event promoting awareness of the White Cane and care of our nation's blind and low vision veterans.

Some 20 attendees from the regional group were encouraged to attend the event. They were motivated by the following invitation: "Join Us in the Journey toward a Brighter Future—Where Vision Knows No Bounds." Also collaborating with the VISOR Clinic and the regional group were the Veterans Benefits Association, the Vision Center of Excellence, Suicide Prevention, and Chaplain Services.

The event kicked off with a White Cane Walk at the medical center entrance. It

also included the debut of a national VA video entitled "Beyond the Uniform" featuring a local veteran from the National Capital Region, lunch, a presentation on Compensation and Pension, and an opportunity to meet for a benefits review with a Veterans Benefits Claim Officer.

## White Cane Noteworthiness Highlighted in Idaho, Georgia

In Idaho, two members of the Gem State Regional Group set up a display table on October 15 (Sunday) in the town of Emmett 30 miles northwest of Boise.

Additionally, with the coordinating support and assistance of VIST Coordinator Travis Wilson, the group landed the following day at the Boise VA Medical Center, where they interacted with passersby at a table containing information on White Cane Day, BVA, VA BRS, and the five monthly support group meetings that the regional groups host in various locations in the Treasure Valley and Magic Valley of Idaho. Travis made a note of



Left to right at Boise, Idaho, VA Medical Center, Rick Griffin, Chuck Knapp, and Joe Bogart promote the importance of White Cane safety awareness. Photo courtesy of Joe Bogart.



names of the persons who may be eligible for services due to their sight loss.

On Sunday in the State of Georgia, BVA Augusta Chapter members took part in a White Cane Day exhibit with the target audience being those not familiar with blinded veterans or BVA. The exhibit was assembled at the Augusta Blind Rehabilitation Center. The facility promoted White Cane awareness while at the same time providing information about available in-person and telehealth services, mobility and orientation, life skills, assistive technology, and much more. Also supporting the Augusta Chapter booth were Walton Options International, National Federation of the Blind, American Council of the Blind, and the Department of Georgia Veterans of Foreign Wars District 7.

### **BVA Members Join HQ Staff**

Blinded U.S. Army veterans and BVA members Teresa Galgano and Scott Quinlan have been appointed to new positions of responsibility with BVA National Headquarters, Don Overton announced back in July. Teresa assumes the role of BVA Director of Member Relations while Scott serves with the Association's Veterans Service Program as a National Service Officer.

A resident of Fort Myers, Florida, Teresa began working for BVA this past March as a Strategic Advisor, focusing on program development and social media. She is a former high school Junior Army ROTC instructor and Program Director. She was also a Professor of Military Science during her Army service. Teresa earned a Bachelor's Degree in Agricultural Economics from Cornell University and a Master's Degree in Educational Technology from Webster University. She is currently completing a second Master's Degree in



At 78th National Convention registration desk, newly appointed Director of Member Relations Teresa Galgano assists Randy Talleur, Heartland Regional Group, with convention name badge.

Mass Communication/Social Media from the University of Florida. Teresa's volunteer service includes tenure as Board Secretary of the General James Dozier Scholarship Fund, an initiative to raise money to support the Lee County, Florida, Junior ROTC program and fund scholarships for students entering university ROTC programs or a Service Academy.

Scott, a resident of Fountain Valley, California, is known for his many passions and activities despite being totally blind due to Diabetic Retinopathy. He joined the Army at age 19 and served for six years immediately before the first Gulf War. Despite his adversities and challenges, Scott returned to school, earning a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and a Master's Degree in Social Work. He served for a short time as a BVA Field Service Representative and has been a Peer Counselor at the Braille Institute, a volunteer at the Long Beach VA Blind Rehabilitation Center, and a member of the Board of Directors of Lions Sight & Hearing

Foundation of Southern California. He is a longtime member of the Huntington Beach Lions Club.

## **Executive Director Reacts to Airline Service Dog Dilemmas**

Don Overton was quoted in a **Washington Post** investigative report on August 28 that highlighted the difficulty in keeping fake service animals off planes while at the same time assuring that all legally blind persons with trained guide dogs are allowed to fly.

The article reported on the increased difficulty in taking guide dogs onto flights since new Department of Transportation rules took effect in January 2021. The original intent of the regulations, however, was to help blind air travelers by cracking down on a rise in passengers passing off untrained pets as service or emotional support animals. To read the full article, including Don's comment about traveling with a guide dog, visit <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/08/28/airline-regulations-service-animals/>.

## **BVA Advocacy Efforts Spur Waymo Thank You**

BVA recently supported Waymo's efforts to operate in the City of San Francisco. The service is a fully autonomous ride-hailing operation enabling people with disabilities to move more freely and less expensively than

they would using other ride-hailing services. The vehicles are fully capable of self-driving without a driver present and have, up until now, logged more than a million miles without a single accident-related death, injury, or at-fault accident.

On August 10, just four days before the opening of the 78th National Convention, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) voted 3-1 after a six-hour hearing to allow Waymo to operate its driverless vehicles in San Francisco at any hour of the day throughout the city of San Francisco.

The win is a huge one for both Waymo and the vast amount of funding that has gone into developing the technology in recent years.

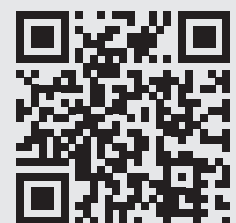
Prior to the vote, citizens were able to express their opinion and leave a comment. BVA prepared a letter for **BVA Happenings** readers to send to the CPUC, advocating that Waymo be granted a permit to operate in San Francisco. The Association also joined other disability advocacy groups in signing an open letter penned to the CPUC expressing approval for the restrictions to be lifted.

During the convention week, Waymo expressed thanks for the BVA effort as follows:

On behalf of the entire Waymo team, we want to take a moment to extend our heartfelt gratitude for your unwavering advocacy these last few weeks and months as we work

### **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.



together to make our community safer and more accessible. Your generosity of time and tireless support have made a true impact, and we are so fortunate to partner with you.

Your dedication to serving our country's service members is inspiring, and your efforts have undoubtedly played a crucial role in raising awareness and fostering understanding about the transformative benefits of autonomous driving technology. Thank you for being a steadfast advocate, a beacon of insight, and a driving force behind positive change in the community.

Once again, thank you for your invaluable contributions throughout this lengthy permit process. We are excited to continue collaborating in more fun and powerful ways!

**Amanda, Heather, Rachel, Suz, Stefania and the rest of the Waymo team ♥**

### **Red Dress Runners Grant Supports Braille Flag Donations**

Every year on the second Saturday in August, the New Orleans Hash House Harriers, who claim to be organized as a "local drinking club with a running problem," host the Red Dress Run, a charity "run" in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

Thanks to application materials submitted by former BVA National President and Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group member Joe Burns, also a member of the Red Dress Runners himself, a generous grant was awarded to the group in 2022 for the purchase of bronze and acrylic Braille flags for WRBH, a New Orleans radio station dedicated to the blind and visually impaired. Joe and fellow regional group member Gary Schoelerman made the presentation on March 8.

Other flag donations made possible by the grant occurred at the New Orleans Lighthouse

for the Blind and VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics in the Louisiana cities of Hammond, Slidell, Houma, and Franklin. Plans are also in place for donations to the New Orleans Crippled Children's Hospital and the New Orleans City Hall.

The Red Dress Runners charity event this year was held on August 12 just prior to the BVA 78th National Convention. Joe and his guide dog participated for the second consecutive year. All in wild garb, joining Joe were Yoneka Trent, Vice President of the Carolina Regional Group; Yoneka's guide dog; and Shawntina Gibson, Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group.

Check out the **no3h.org** Facebook page or Google 'Red Dress Run' to access a few humorous visuals, Gary recommends.

Gary also said that the regional group would soon be applying for still another grant to accommodate the many locations for which they still hope to place more Braille flags and plaques, while at the same time taking advantage of opportunities to promote BVA.

### **Successful Golf Outing Offers Appreciated Support**

BVA was again the fortunate beneficiary of proceeds from the Mark Kline Memorial Golf Outing this past July 29 in Norton, Ohio. The event, now six years in the making and still expanding, celebrates the life of a contact lens and spectacle frame sales representative who admired veterans so much that he annually participated in the Rolling Thunder motorcycle ride in memory of all MIAs and POWs.

Mark Kline's family and friends, most notably Mark Holaday, Kim Snodgrass, and Rod Snow, organized the annual event in 2018 after his untimely death from a heart attack.



The event resulted in an \$8,000 donation this year, despite unusually trying weather conditions. There were sizable donations in previous years as well.

“We contended this year with our largest attendance to date but also our first bad weather occurrence in six years as it rained hard several times during the round,” said Mark Holaday. “That impacted our ability to display our auction items, and we lost some attendees after the weather moved in, but those fabulous individuals who did stay supported BVA very nicely.”

The golf tournament has a unique founding and history that have blossomed somewhat miraculously over six years.

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

Sincerely honored by the donation, the BVA Board of Directors expresses a heartfelt thanks for the kindness and support demonstrated by all who have remained affiliated in any way with the Mark Kline Memorial Golf Outing.

### **Schoelerman, Burns Relate Wall Tactile Experience on Podcast**

Gary Schoelerman and Joe Burns of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group were interviewed in the early summer for an award-winning local radio program and podcast entitled **The Tactile Traveler** that began airing on Apple Podcasts on August 1 and will

eventually be broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR) and other outlets and platforms.

The subject of the podcast was “Visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall” during which both veterans recounted their tactile experiences and the emotions the experiences evoked at the Wall.

**The Tactile Traveler** is the brainchild of semi-retired career journalist Nick Isenberg, who hosts the program, which appears on Apple Podcasts on the first Tuesday of every month. Isenberg seeks to “empower blind people to see the world and help sighted people see the world in a new way.” The show is now in its fifth season.

### **BVA Applauds Airline Actions**

United Airlines recently began rolling out Braille placards for both seat numbers and lavatories on their aircraft, national media outlets began reporting this week. The move is one that Don Overton believes will make air travel much more comfortable and peaceful for blind and low vision veterans while, at the same time, increasing the efficiency involved in seating passengers and helping them locate the lavatories.

“Traveling by air is accompanied by occasional frustration and stress to even the most experienced of flyers, but the lack of information and assistance for a person with sight loss can turn into a real ordeal,” said Don. “The Braille numbers and other basic information that can soon be accessed by touch will decrease our dependency on others and allow the flight crew to focus on their major responsibilities to all passengers.”

United expects the accessibility features to be available across its mainline fleet by late 2026, part of its plan to further overhaul its aircraft to help the carrier be more inclusive and welcoming for all travelers.

United's Chief Customer Officer Linda Jojo told **USA TODAY** that the changes are simple for the time being—Braille immediately above the seat and then inside and outside the lavatories.

## **BVA Recognizes Milestone 75th Anniversary at Hines**

BVA Chief of Staff Tim Hornik composed a brief historical summary, found immediately below, of the Association's role in the early beginnings of the first VA Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC), which officially opened on July 4, 1948, at the Hines, Illinois VA Medical Center. The Center held an open house and reception on July 20 commemorating the significance of 75 years of service to blinded veterans at the facility. Director of District 2 at the time Brian Harris, and Illinois Regional Group President Anthony Woodson represented BVA at the event.

One of BVA's earliest priorities was to advocate for a BRC. At the time, World War II combat blinded veterans sensed the importance and value of the programs at Valley Forge and Avon Old Farms. However, with the end of the war, BVA recognized that a more comprehensive system of care needed to be established within the newly formed Veterans Administration. Otherwise, blinded veterans who wanted to learn how to live with their sight loss would be limited to the fragmented systems of state and nonprofit services for the blind. In 1947, BVA adopted resolutions calling for the establishment of a BRC. The organization worked closely with VA to make this a reality.

The Central Blind Rehabilitation Center, as it later became officially known, was a groundbreaking facility. It offered a wide range of services, including orientation and

mobility training, communication skills training, activities of daily living training, and vocational rehabilitation. The Center also provided counseling and support services to help blinded veterans adjust to their new reality. Linking these modalities together, the congregate setting encouraged veterans to process the lessons learned together through peer support.

This first BRC was an immediate success, and it helped to pave the way for the development of others across the country. BVA has continued to play a leading role in the evolution of VA blind rehabilitation services that go far beyond the inpatient centers. The organization has advocated for increased funding for rehabilitation programs, and it has helped to develop new and innovative rehabilitation techniques. BVA has also worked to raise awareness of the challenges faced by blinded veterans, and to ensure that they have access to the services they need.

Today, there are 13 comprehensive residential BRCs in the VA healthcare system. Additionally, approximately 160 VIST Coordinators provide VA's lifelong case management care. Rounding out the BRS Continuum of Care are the BROS Rehabilitation Services, VISOR, and the intermediate and advanced low vision clinics.

The future of blind rehabilitation is bright. With the continued support of organizations like BVA, blinded veterans will have the opportunity to live independent and fulfilling lives.

## **VetTech and VetTech Talk Still Strong after Full Year**

An old saying and cliché that remains popular is that time flies when one is either

having fun or is too busy to worry about what to do with any spare moments.

Such is most assuredly the case for Tim Hornik in planning and carrying out the VetTech Weekly Wednesday Webinars and VetTech Talk, which completed their respective anniversaries on October 4-5. The same could well be said for the loyal and faithful participants who regularly spend their Wednesday and Thursday afternoons listening to and talking technology for the blind and low vision.

Upcoming VetTech topics and scheduled activities are regularly communicated via the weekly **BVA Happenings** electronic newsletter and through a Monday or Tuesday reminder the following week just before the session. Recent VetTech topics include the National Library Service Talking Books Program, exciting updates to OrCam products, the Be My Eyes mobile application, iOS 17.1, and recent innovations to JAWS, Fusion, and ZoomText 2024.

## Atlanta BVA Chapter Both Active and Giving

Members of the Atlanta Chapter of the BVA Georgia Regional Group proactively serve others rather than wait for others to help them, continually extending themselves to remain active in their urban community.

Back on June 24, the Chapter completed its spring sock drive for the Atlanta Center for Self Sufficiency (ACSS), which serves homeless veterans and those at risk for homelessness as one of its most important functions. Bravid Harris, the Center's Veteran Outreach Specialist, was on hand to receive the donation of 297 pairs for the veterans ACSS serves. It was the second project on which the Atlanta Chapter had partnered with ACSS.



Wayne Lawson, left, and William Jackson following last summer's 10K Peachtree Road Race in Atlanta.

On Independence Day, Chapter Secretary William Jackson and Wayne Lawson put their preparation and conditioning to the test by completing the **Atlanta Journal Constitution** 10K Peachtree Road Race. Accompanied by guide Doug Smith, USAF (Ret.), and Naeemah Lawson, Wayne's daughter, the duo completed the race in just under two hours.

"There are many things blinded veterans may not be able to do, but we can all maximize what we can still do, and walking is something Wayne and I can still do," said William following the event.

The two plan to make participation an annual event and invite all Georgia Regional Group members, families, and friends to join them.

On October 28, the Chapter closed its fall blanket drive. Victoria Hilliard and Bravid Harris of the ACSS Veteran Outreach Team accepted the 94 blankets, 28 coats, and ten pairs of socks collected during the drive.

"We want to give a special thanks to the Chapter's family members and friends who



assisted us in this endeavor,” said William. “Their support made all the difference.”

## **Milestone Birthdays for BVA Centenarians**

BVA National Headquarters joins the Illinois Regional Group in sending congratulations and best wishes to Navy veteran Eugene J. Baltes of River Forest, Illinois, on still another milestone birthday earlier in the fall. The regional group expresses gratitude for his service, longevity, and desire to affiliate with BVA.

Gene was born on October 29, 1914, making this recent birthday his 109th. Although not surprising, it is still noteworthy that Gene is the oldest BVA member not only currently but the oldest member ever in BVA’s almost 79-year history.

Gene began his military career in November 1941 just weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Following his discharge, he worked 18 years for the U.S. Postal Service. His years in retirement have been spent traveling, playing golf, and supporting his church.

Gene repeats his advice frequently for a long and healthy life, which is to never smoke and never drink!

No less remarkable is that Louisiana-Mississippi Regional Group member Earl Forstall, born in 1919, turned 104 years old on September 23. The regional group maintains contact with Earl and reported his birthday in its recent monthly newsletter.

## **Mimms Presents Braille Flag during Iowa Multipurpose Visit**

On October 13, BVA National President Paul Mimms presented a Braille flag at the Iowa City VA Medical Center, just 37 miles northeast of where he attended Washington High School in Iowa as a freshman before his family moved to Kansas City, Missouri.

Paul’s trip to the Hawkeye State last month also included attendance at the 60th high school reunion of what was then the freshman class at the school.

A brief sketch of Paul’s life, his work with veterans, his recent election as BVA National President, and his Iowa visit are featured in an October 11 article by Cheryl Allen in the **Washington County News**, a local newspaper of his childhood hometown. Visit <https://www.thenews-ia.com> and type “Paul Mimms” using the site’s “Search” field.

### **Did You Know?**

- During the holiday season of 1947, BVA members and their families helped the people of war-torn Europe through CARE, an acronym for “Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe, Inc.” CARE sent millions of packages from the U.S. for delivery to friends, relatives, and specified groups or persons in Europe. The initiative was a government-approved service composed of 27 relief agencies. CARE packages at the time cost \$10 (in today’s currency \$138) and options for contents included nonperishable food items, blankets, knitting wool, and household linen. BVA members were encouraged to send packages whenever possible to a blinded veteran in a foreign country.

Source: December 1947 **BVA Bulletin**

# Auxiliary's View

by Robert Murphy

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Greetings from beautiful Kansas! We recently returned from the BVA 78th National Convention in St. Louis. It was a wonderful week filled with information and camaraderie. Although I have been to only two previous conventions, the turnout and support for the BVA Auxiliary (BVAA) was the largest I had seen yet.

The newly elected BVAA Board of Directors is up and running, looking forward to a great year ahead. Consistent with a custom of the recent past, the officers and their hometowns are listed on the inside back cover of each print version of **The Bulletin** and at the beginning of the audio recordings and email versions. Future **Auxiliary's View** columns will most often come from Hurtis Lilly.

Additionally, we now have an appointed Chaplain who is not listed with the other elected offices—Roxie Williams of Las Vegas, Nevada. Since this year finds us in a rebuilding phase, we found it imperative to leave the convention with at least the Bylaws Committee and the Membership Committee in place. We thank them and many more for their willingness to serve!

Our initial goals are to get organized, compliant, and consistent in our communications with one another. Look for Zoom meetings soon for the purpose of getting acquainted with members from around the country. We are also planning on handpicked special guests to inform and encourage us as caregivers.

Let us reflect on our BVAA mission as stated in the preamble to our bylaws, last updated in 2006 and approved as an official

document by then BVA National President Larry Belote and Executive Director Tom Miller:

We, as members of the National Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary, in order to aid the Blinded Veterans Association in whatever fashion we are able, and to develop a deeper and more widespread interest in that organization among family members and friends, and to preserve and strengthen a spirit of fellowship among Auxiliary members so that they may give mutual aid and assistance to one another, do adopt and establish these bylaws.

During this period of transition for us, a brief history lesson is also in order! At a meeting at BVA National Headquarters in Washington, DC, on November 19, 1976, the BVA Executive Committee, acting on behalf of the National Board of Directors, sanctioned the beginning of the organizational process for a BVA Auxiliary. The meeting followed a discussion at the 31st National Convention in Philadelphia three months earlier in which BVA members and their spouses strongly supported a National Auxiliary and Auxiliary regional groups that would support each BVA regional group.

Leading the effort with the greatest enthusiasm was Renee Feldman, wife of blinded veteran Leon Feldman. Renee served as BVAA's first National President and the person for whom the Auxiliary scholarship would later be named. BVAA received its first charter in early 1977 and, under Renee's direction, held a full scale of popular meetings at the BVA 32nd National Convention in Washington, DC.



# Veterans Service Program Update

by Duayne Driscoll

The Veterans Service Program (VSP) represents veterans of each era with every imaginable illness and injury, many related to service and going well beyond vision loss. Blinded veterans have endured injuries related to severe conditions and disease related to environmental exposures, including every kind of presumptive. While we specialize in claims related to visual impairment, the VSP provides well-rounded representation in all areas of VA compensation and pension benefits.

Some blinded veterans have also suffered Military Sexual Trauma (MST) in service, causing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

A successful claim of entitlement to service connection for PTSD consists of three elements. First, the claimant must present a clear, clinical, and current diagnosis. This means they must seek treatment, which can be inside or outside of VA. No diagnosis means no disability and nothing to claim. If the diagnosis is something other than PTSD, or if the PTSD was treated in service, the theory of entitlement would then change from what is outlined here.

Secondly, the diagnosis must be linked to a stressor suffered on active duty. In other words, the incident in service caused the current condition and not something else. Most often, this comes from the VA Compensation & Pension examiner.

Finally, the stressor must be verified. For combat veterans, the stressor is conceded

when the DD-214 shows an award denoting combat, such as Purple Heart.

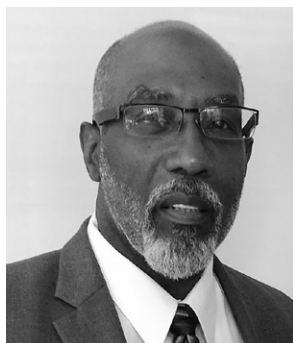
Some years ago, the standards were relaxed to allow the examiner to link the diagnosis to a general fear of enemy action rather than a specific stressor, and in those cases the stressor is also conceded.

However, many MST-related claims of entitlement to service connection for PTSD get denied because the stressor cannot be verified. Often, the victim was so embarrassed about being sexually assaulted that it went unreported, especially for victims of a male-on-male assault. Or, perhaps the victim's complaints were covered up and never recorded. Maybe the old paper file got lost or pertinent documents were never added to the file. The regional office must deny the claim when there is a lack of supporting evidence.

There is still hope! Sometimes, we can scrutinize from the service personnel records that something happened. When a service member has 4.0 evals and then, suddenly, drops into the unsatisfactory range, that's a sign. Going AWOL after getting a Good Conduct Medal could mean something. All these little things add up and can point to something unseen.

Often, we know these claims will be denied when we file them, and this is a rare exception to our practice of only filing claims when there is supporting evidence. We will try to resolve the claim locally, and failing that, appeal to the Board of Veterans Appeals where the claimant can offer sworn testimony which becomes evidence sufficient to place the claim in a "Relative Equipoise" status. This means the evidence is equally for and against, which goes in the claimant's favor.





## Chaplain's Corner

by Kenneth Harvey

### For Just a Moment

Our Creator asks  
for our spirit for Just

a Moment. That moment may be when one appears to be broken and life is challenging. It can be a moment when family, extended family, and friends share their woes! Life is filled with unexpected mischief, and it is then that we need the guidance of our Creator—for Just a Moment.

The gist of my comments here is to remind us that alignment requires constant self-inventory. For Just a Moment, there is an opportunity for the Blinded Veterans Association's leadership and its members to blend, bend, and not worry whether our gift is sacred! Follow the footprints in the sand, for Just a Moment.

The BVA National Chaplain/Multi-Faith Group Chair, out of observations at the 78th National Convention, suggests a hope for new membership growth and new interaction while navigating change. Spiritual outreach to our BVA members through this new Multi-Faith Group is Cupid's arrow, penetrating our hearts.

For Just a Moment, I met at the convention two BVA members enlightened by purpose. A member shared with me her desire to do more for our organization while, for Just a Moment, explaining the need to be seen. I felt the impact of that experience.

Another member shared with me the picture of a sparrow resting in the palms of hands. She also shared her meaning of how this art helped a close friend through the COVID-19 crisis. For Just a Moment, we guide ourselves

to happiness through chaos!

Many others spoke with me at the convention—for Just for a Moment they were pleased by the opportunity, and the difference was made as I listened to their concerns.

BVA's light represents our will to work, recruit, and share. Our aim is to accept and respect one another! My moments throughout the convention allowed me to support our will to disagree while we also entertain a will to accept change!

Good news: The Creator already knows and understands our belief systems. For Just a Moment, I pause to learn from the membership and to reach out to the community!

As the National Chaplain, I request your attention "for Just a Moment" to get to know you all! Take a moment to assist me to serve you and do the same for all appointed chaplains throughout all the regional groups and chapters.

We are disabled veterans, challenged additionally by our knowledge that active forces around the globe threaten us. Many of us are challenged also to maintain our rights to be part of a free society. BVA represents our support system, without judgment. Listen and then lead!

For Just a Moment, silence your spirit to honor those currently serving, the POWS/MIAS, and the families throughout our communities who give and who are surrendered to an unknown journey! We



stand together with them, if only for Just a Moment.

Although Labor Day will have long passed upon release of this article, it is worthy of mention. The American workers represent strength, prosperity, and well-being secured by being able to serve—for Just a Moment. Labor Day honors our will to learn how to survive. We will not surrender, not even for Just a Moment!

I hear your word “change.” It is possible that faith and grace toward that end begin with us all!

BVA’s National Chaplain and regional group chaplains are the lampposts leading to spiritual growth. Allow me, for Just a Moment in time, to seed spiritual growth!

## Harboring Grudges: Is There a Remedy?

by Paschal Baute

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**“In this house we do not provide free rent to bad stuff.”**

This principle, also an admonition, has served as a practical guide for me in coping professionally with a host of family relationships. This includes issues faced as a Navy Chaplain. Some form of this concept has doubtless worked its way into millions of homes across the world at one time or another. The phrase is a useful teaching tool for parents attempting to keep their children from bringing home with them harmful worldly influences that can quickly wear out their welcome.

We examine how, personally, our relationships in the workplace and even in our society go bad. Holding grudges is both common and destructive. What is to be done about it? I address the bad stuff of grudges and lasting bitterness—how to avoid their invasion into our lives and, if they do find their way in, how to get rid of them.

First, don’t be excessively stressed over them. For example, family drama is inevitable because we are naturally and easily caught

up in finding fault, thinking that we got the short end of something. As a family therapist, I found that the withholding of angry feelings was common. The most important rule for aging well is a refusal to accept any grudge against us. We must understand that many prefer feelings to facts, fantasizing within their ego that their grudge is somehow going to hurt us. The grudge is entirely self-generated and self-justified. Moreover, once continued, the grudge becomes addictive and searches for additional justification. The longer held, the more impossible the change.

By not stressing over a grudge, I do not mean that we should never accept negative feedback or criticism about ourselves. Part of a healthy, ongoing relationship is that we will be upfront about feelings and not store those that are hurtful. Having heard the complaints of many hundreds of couples, it is my assessment that grudges, and grudge holding, are the number one cause of marriage failure. We can go from one divorce to the next without realizing that it is our self-generated grudge holding that is the root cause. In

my 80,000 hours of listening as a therapist, I found that most people are unwilling to develop an observing self that can understand and manage their defensive ego.

I remember one husband who refused to accept any negative criticism or feedback from his wife, over many years telling her that if she did not like it, she could leave. He was forcing her to store her feelings. After 20 years of marriage, she finally decided that leaving was the best option. He was devastated but there was no hope at that point. She had built a mountain of pain that was far too huge to get rid of.

I have known several veterans whose grudge-held anger hounded their lives. One blinded veteran sitting beside me at a dining table at a residential BRC was already angry with many things and was prepared to add additional layers to that anger as other negatives inevitably came his way. George (not his real name) confided to several of us that his wife was always angry toward him, demonstrating that his anger was not operating in a vacuum. If we had not been so shocked when George stood up during a meal to angrily challenge a veteran across the table from him, demanding that they step outside and duke it out, the rest of us could have said: “If you do that, George, where will you park your guide dog?”

My multiple BRC experiences found other examples. “Another piece of s---,” the blind veteran announced each time he lifted the cover to his food tray. He did this without exception! Then, he would pick at the so-called s--- for five or ten minutes before getting up to leave. We were certain he had another source of food because he hardly ever ate anything. He also never engaged in any table conversation. I eventually picked up my

tray and moved to another table. He was an intimidating, negative presence for our meals.

Another veteran I knew for many years began collecting grievances at an early age. He had a hoard of grudges and was always ready to find fault with others in some way, shape, or form. He never made any attempt to maintain a friendship, so he was a loner. He died of a stroke and heart attack in his early age 70s, due, in my opinion, to his lifetime of collecting grudges. So insecure was he that the only way he could feel okay was to find fault in others.

Several years ago, I undertook a personal survey of the VA Blind Rehabilitation Service professionals with whom I could communicate to discover how many veterans came to them with a negative attitude. The responses ranged from 10 percent to 90 percent, with the average being right around 50 percent. This means that roughly half of all veterans with sight loss are dealing with grudges. The more grudges there are, the more crooked the world is perceived to be and the more damage we do to ourselves.

## **Preventing and Overcoming**

A healthy relationship will welcome feedback and even criticism because the parties are all flawed, imperfect human beings. Anyone can misinterpret, step on another’s toes, and cause hurt without even realizing they are doing so. But, once the feedback is stated and accepted, it should remain there forever. There is no benefit in regurgitating it.

Therapists invented a word for re-living and regurgitating bad stuff—catastrophizing. For a relationship to be healthy, it is imperative that grudges be placed in the unacceptable category. If they are not, grudge holders are



simply reminding themselves of the hurt and giving free rent to the feeling which will, over time, magnify it and make it larger in the mind than it really is. Grudge holding can now be a form of “gaslighting” if there is open anger toward another person without an adequate explanation for that anger.

What do we do when someone holds a grudge against us? Properly, we should tell the party in question that we take no responsibility whatsoever for their grudge holding. They have created it, and they are maintaining it. We may need to remind them that their continued focus on their view of what happened may not be the real facts of the situation. Even if their view is correct, they should own up to the responsibility to face us with their thoughts and feelings rather than holding and sucking on them. If they choose the latter, this is, in fact, an adult pout and self-justified sulking, a meanness employed to control another. It can be compared to a child sulking for attention.

Returning to our own tendency to hold a grudge, we must be aware that the flaw has no redemptive healthy effect. It tends to make us more negative about our past. Too often people will say something like: “I cannot forgive because I cannot forget.” It is true that we cannot forgive as long as we allow the hurt to be reviewed in our brain and our heart, but forgiving is not simply forgetting. It is also to refuse, repeatedly, to give the negative thought any space between our ears. When we stop giving it energy, it soon ceases to have any energy and we do not need or want it any longer, nor is it part of the healthy functioning of our heart.

We can let things go by refusing to give them any attention. They will then slowly retreat and subside in our memory bank. We

have an observing self that can refuse to listen to our ego-driven reactive brains. This is what learning to meditate is all about.

Grudges can also be termed resentment collecting, a holding of anger in a passive-aggressive manner. They affect physical, mental, and emotional health. Research has shown that those who engage in holding grudges are habitually cutting off years of their own lives and perhaps those of others as they also can backstab, enabling a climate of mistrust and hatefulness.

### **Personal Observations: Where We Are Headed**

For me, at age 94, fortunately married nearly 55 years and blessed with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, I take no responsibility for anyone’s grudges. Admittedly, I was not a perfect parent. No parents are perfect but, like so many others, I did the best I could at the time. Therefore, this emotional past is behind and even dead to me. I have no regrets because I did the best I could at the time. The rest is forever gone by free and unbounded grace.

If we are deeply wounded, profoundly hurt, or even traumatized by family relationships or experiences with romantic love or faith relationships, mindful prayer and thoughtful consideration in that case need to be undertaken for ourselves, not for the sake of the other person.

What then is my takeaway from 50 years of listening to personal problems tied to grudges? My answer is that grudge holding is natural, universal, inevitable, and now very pertinent to our national situation. There is massive grudge holding, with feelings being preferred over alternative facts by many millions of Americans who seek conspiracies

to justify the grudge holding. Each year brings record-breaking totals of teenagers engaging in violence and committing suicide despite increases in mental health help. We are a nation in crisis. Grudge holding so greatly energizes mistrust, fear, hate, and violence. Can we not recognize this and do something more about it?

Blind (no pun intended) grudge holding, for me, is the primary source of our distrustful climate. Our democracy is based on mutual trust. Grudge holding undermines trust and the give-and-take of healthy relationships.

This is a poison for any society. Our nation cannot continue to be healthy if the consistent spread of widespread grudge holding continues. Is there any chance this country can wake up to what is happening to destroy the mutual trust necessary for our democracy? The remedy must lie with each of us!

### **Addendum: Parents' Prayer**

Lord, help me to live long enough to become the same problem to my children as they once were to me. This is my "pay-it-forward" for all besieged, imperfect parents. Amen.



# Of Note

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## Netflix Limited Series Now Available for Viewing

**All the Light We Cannot See**, an American drama limited series developed for Netflix, was released on November 2. The four part-series, based on Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize winning, best-seller novel that carries the same name, follows the stories of two teenagers—a blind French girl named Marie-Laure and a German soldier named Werner—whose paths cross in enemy-occupied France during World War II.

The story behind **All the Light We Cannot See** has the blind Marie-Laure Leblanc (actress Aria Mia Loberti) taking refuge with her father and reclusive uncle in St. Malo, France, and Werner (actor Louis Hoffman), a brilliant teenager with an expertise in radio who is enlisted by Hitler's regime. The two teens together share a secret connection that will become a beacon of light that leads them through the horrors of World War II.

For more information about the series, or to join Netflix to view **All the Light We Cannot See**, visit <https://www.netflix.com/title/81083008>.

## UBER's Service Animal and Assistive Device Policy

State and federal laws generally restrict transportation providers such as taxicabs and UBER drivers from denying service to riders because of their service animals. In the case of UBER, the company's Service Animal and Assistive Device Policy goes a step further, stating that riders with service animals are

not required to pay cleaning fees for hair or shedding during the trip.

A veteran attendee at a recent BVA Dog Handler's Group meeting recounted to the group a personal experience in which this aspect of the policy was violated by his driver, prompting a request by the Committee to post the full text of the policy on the BVA website. Read the document at <https://bva.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/UBERs-Service-Animal-and-Assistive-Device-Policy.pdf>.

## Update Contact Info Via BVA Website

BVA National Headquarters receives a substantial amount of return mail from the U.S. Postal Service, primarily from mailings of the print version of the quarterly **Bulletin**. The database also contains outdated telephone numbers that are often difficult to correct. BVA members can now update their address and other contact information via **BVA.org**.

The process is a simple one, accomplished on a webpage containing fillable fields in which the updated information can be typed. Format preferences for **The Bulletin** can also be updated on the same page with an opportunity to check any or all preferred options. To go directly to the page to make updates, visit <https://bva.org/membership/update-member-record/>.

BVA members can also call the Public Relations Team at 202-371-8880, Ext. 316, or send a simple email message to [info@bva.org](mailto:info@bva.org), indicating their preference for an email version (Word and/or PDF), a print copy, or both.



# In Remembrance

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

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**Arkansas R.G.**

Alan Brayboy  
Carroll Henbest  
Eddie Jackson

**Cape Cod and the Islands  
R.G.**

Lois Langhans

**Carolina R.G.**

Robert Bridges  
Charlie Davis

**Charles Register R.G.**

Charles Strauss

**Connecticut R.G.**

Robert Harriman

**Florida R.G.**

Herbert Gray  
Harry Martin  
Franz Staugler

**Gem State R.G.**

Robert Brodesser  
Douglas Owsley

**Heartland R.G.**

Lowell Dodd  
Jeff Thompson

**Indiana R.G.**

Jack Caudill  
Edwin Krull  
Jerry Morrison

**Louisiana/Mississippi R.G.**

Jack LeBlanc  
James Rogers

**Mid-Atlantic R.G.**

Carl Dorrance

**Midwest North R.G.**

Henry Aaby

**New Hampshire R.G.**

Walter Paquette

**New Jersey**

Andrew Barna  
Clarence Jones

**New Mexico R.G.**

Linda Galindo

**Ohio R.G.**

Richard Lee Bird  
James Browning  
Jasper Devine  
Walter Parks  
Tony Petrilla  
Jose Sandoval

**Pennsylvania R.G.**

Richard Green

**Puerto Rico R.G.**

Andres Carrasco Cruz  
Frank Ortiz Malavett  
Ortis Rosario  
George Young Allen

**Rio Grande R.G.**

Eduardo Artalejo  
James Carlile  
Thomas Carrier  
Wallace Erickson

**Rocky Mountain R.G.**

Silas Coleman

**Southern California R.G.**

Neftali Sanchez

**Southern Nevada R.G.**

Roy Kekahuna  
Paul Roach  
Joe Tasby

**Washington Regional  
Group**

Lucille Daniel

**At-Large BVA Member, no  
Regional Group Affiliation**

David Potter  
(Fresno, California)

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Vice President – **WADE DAVIS**, LaPorte, TX  
Secretary – **TRACY FERRO**, Biloxi, MS  
Treasurer – **JOSEPH BOGART**, Meridian, ID  
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Director District 2 – **RANDY CANTRELL**, Spokane, WA  
Director District 3 – **DOUGLAS INGRAM**, Tallahassee, FL  
Director District 4 – **MIKE COOK**, Clinton, AR  
Immediate Past National President – **JOSEPH D. MCNEIL, SR.**  
Sergeant-At-Arms – **BRIAN O’CONNELL**, Greenville, SC  
National Chaplain – **KENNITH HARVEY**, Henrico, VA  
National Ombudsman – **TONORA LYN SHANNON**, St. Clair Shores, MI  
National Judge Advocate – **STEPHEN BUTLER**, Temple, TX

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Vice President – **SHERRI BATES**, Tulsa, OK  
Secretary – **BENJAMIN HOLMES**, Midland, GA  
Treasurer – **KARIN MYRON**, St. George, KS  
Reporter – **HURTIS LILLY**, Pine Bluff, AR

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Deputy Director of Government Relations – **ALEK LIBBIN**  
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**Please Return to:**

BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION  
PO Box 90770  
Washington, DC 20090

**FREE MATTER FOR  
THE BLIND OR  
HANDICAPPED**

**CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED**

Handle as **FIRST-CLASS MAIL**  
Domestic Mail Manual Sec. 703.5.1-2

## Final Thought

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Navigating a hotel like the Marriott St. Louis Grand with its hundreds of guest rooms, along with meeting rooms numbering more than a dozen occupying an entire city block, is an inconvenience for the perfectly sighted. For the blind and low vision without a constant sighted guide, the task can seem near impossible.

WayAround to the rescue!

Convention attendees such as Larry Harper of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group is pictured here at right with Jessica Hipp, WayAround's Chief Operating Officer. Jessica helped Larry download an application to his mobile device that could guide him to nearly every BVA 78th National Convention event within the hotel.

A Silver Sponsor at the convention, WayAround hosted and made a presentation at the Tuesday Lunch and Learn. Jessica and her colleagues also greeted a large cadre of interested visitors who stopped for an explanation of wayfinding technology at Booth 305 of the Exhibit Hall.

