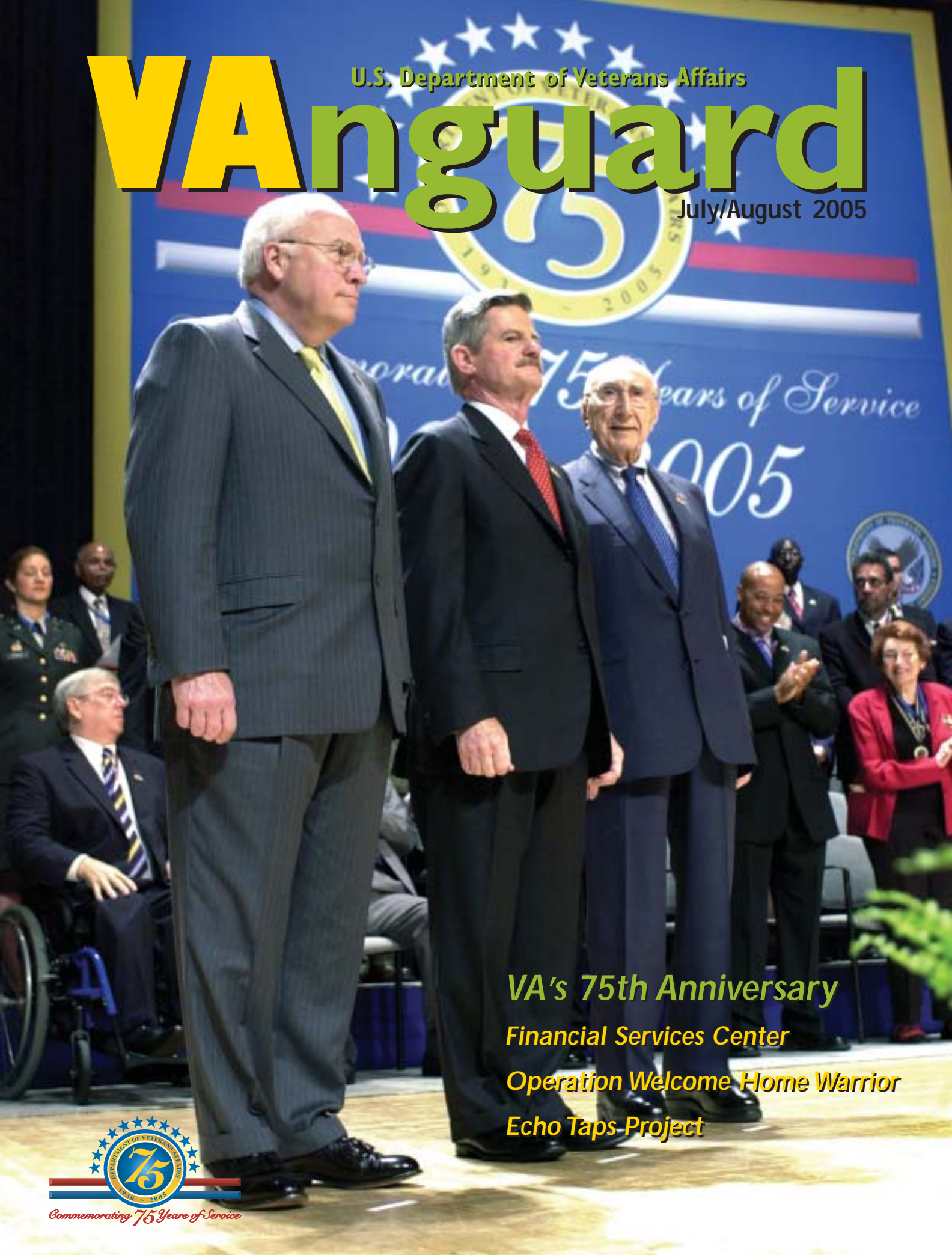


U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

# Vanguard

July/August 2005



*VA's 75th Anniversary  
Financial Services Center  
Operation Welcome Home Warrior  
Echo Taps Project*





**Vanguard**

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 Assistant Editor: Matt Bristol  
 Photo Editor: Robert Turtill  
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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
 810 Vermont Ave., N.W.  
 Washington, D.C. 20420  
 (202) 273-5746  
 E-mail: [vanguard@va.gov](mailto:vanguard@va.gov)  
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**On the cover**

Vice President Dick Cheney shares the stage with Secretary Jim Nicholson and Dr. Michael DeBakey at the celebration kicking off a year-long observance of VA's 75th anniversary. Thousands of veterans, VA employees and other VIPs attended the July 21 ceremony at DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. In his remarks, Cheney commended VA employees for their commitment to serving veterans, telling them, "You can be proud of your association with a vital agency of the United States government." *Photo by Robert Turtill*

### From the Editor

An article published in a recent issue of *Vanguard* prompted feedback from two readers concerned that the story contradicts their facility's boundary policy and hampers their efforts to educate staff on ethical boundaries for relationships with patients. The letters highlight the need for dialogue on this important subject.

A boundary violation occurs when a health care

professional's behavior "goes beyond appropriate professional limits" and generally arises "when a personal interest displaces the professional's primary commitment to the patient's welfare in ways that harm the patient or the patient-clinician relationship," according to a 2003 report issued by the National Ethics Committee of the Veterans Health Administration.

The report provides the framework for VA boundary

policy, but does not establish national policy. Individual medical centers establish policies for their own facilities. Therefore, not all facilities have the same boundary policies. The report is available on the VA Intranet at [vaww1.va.gov/vhaethics/download/Boundaries\\_2003.doc](http://vaww1.va.gov/vhaethics/download/Boundaries_2003.doc).

The report emphasizes that boundary policies focus on protecting the patient and the patient-clinician relationship. Literal application would limit the scope of these policies to clinicians and other health care professionals. The report doesn't specify how hospital administrative or operational staff fit into the equation. But it does emphasize the complex scenarios in which boundary violations occur and how these instances are often open to interpretation.

Boundary policies certainly have their place. Clinicians and other providers clearly should avoid engaging in sexual or financial relationships with patients or their families. But according to the letters sent to *Vanguard*, most boundary violations stem from well-intentioned employees going out of their way to help a veteran or group of veterans. If this is the case, these violations may present opportuni-

ties to make system modifications to better meet veterans' needs.

For more information on boundaries, contact the National Center for Ethics in Health Care at (202) 501-0364 or by e-mail: [vhaethics@hq.med.va.gov](mailto:vhaethics@hq.med.va.gov).

### Correction

In the Medical Advances section of the May/June issue, we stated that the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System was the first in VA to perform carotid artery stenting, in February 2005. Other facilities, including the VA Connecticut Healthcare System and the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, brought to our attention that they began performing the procedure much earlier.



SGT. ANDREW LOVELESS

## Raising Old Glory

Soldiers prepare to hoist Old Glory during a Flag Day observance at the Chalmers P. Wylie VA Outpatient Clinic in Columbus, Ohio. Participating is Matt Francis (right), a budget analyst at the clinic and member of the Ohio Volunteer Infantry Civil War Living History Association. The event gave the public an opportunity to learn about life in the Army through a Civil War encampment and assortment of modern-day gear used by soldiers in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. June 14 marked the 230th anniversary of the U.S. Army.



## We Want to Hear from You

Have a comment on something you've seen in *Vanguard*? We invite reader feedback. Send your comments to [vanguard@va.gov](mailto:vanguard@va.gov). You can also write to us at: *Vanguard*, Office of Public Affairs (80D), Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C., 20420, or fax your letter to (202) 273-6702. Include your name, title and VA facility. We won't be able to publish every letter, but we'll use representative ones. We may need to edit your letter for length or clarity.



## Affirm Your Commitment to Serving Our Veterans

*Lou Ann Atkins*

*Chair, Affirming the Commitment Deployment Task Group  
VHA National Leadership Board Communications Committee*

Top companies everywhere know that satisfied employees are the real heart of the organization. Instilling a sense of pride and commitment are the keys to success in any business. The work environment and salaries are important, but the real motivator for employees is the interaction they have with others and the sense of achievement they feel at the end of the day. Research has shown that highly committed employees are customer-focused, have greater job satisfaction, and are more likely to stay with the organization.

*Affirming the Commitment* is a national Veterans Health Administration (VHA) initiative that will help us better understand and appreciate veterans and their military service, create a culture in which we *own* the VA mission, and make VA a more gratifying place to work by reinforcing the importance of our service. *Affirming the Commitment* is built on the belief that when employees open their hearts to veterans and develop strong relationships with co-workers, their work will be more satisfying and meaningful.

The initiative is a unique program in that it recognizes employees' human spirit and empowers them to add more meaning to each workday. *Affirming the Commitment* will help foster a culture based on employees' commitment and pride in serving veterans.

Most of us spend as much time with co-workers

and patients as we do with our family and friends, yet we sometimes overlook the importance of developing strong relationships in the workplace. When we miss out on these relationships, we forfeit something of what makes life satisfying.

*Affirming the Commitment* acknowledges your inner self and empowers you to take action and make each day of your life count. Random acts of kindness, planning an event to honor someone, or simply listening to one another are all ex-

portunity to help America repay that immeasurable debt. *Affirming the Commitment* encourages us to celebrate veterans each and every day.

How can you affirm your commitment to serving veterans? A wealth of compelling information and materials is available to you on the *Affirming the Commitment* Web site ([vawww.va.gov/atc](http://vawww.va.gov/atc)). The *Affirming the Commitment* video profiles several veterans and their families, as well as VA employees who share their inspirational stories.

some thoughtful stories and insights on how one person can make a difference. If you're planning to invite a veteran to your facility to speak about his or her experiences while serving in the military, the Web site also offers useful preparation tips to help make the event a success.

A world-class health care organization is seeking highly qualified employees to help meet its mission to care for America's heroes. Do you have what it takes to be a member of the team? Affirm

**Research has shown that highly committed employees are customer-focused, have greater job satisfaction, and are more likely to stay with the organization.**

amples of how we make a positive difference in the lives of others. It's the human element—our interaction with others—that makes life more meaningful.

Every year, we honor veterans with activities and celebrations during National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans. We participate in Memorial Day, Veterans Day and Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day programs, and we look for other ways to recognize every veteran's service to our country. As American citizens, we are indebted to our nation's veterans for the sacrifices they made while in uniform to protect the freedoms we enjoy.

At VA, our employees are fortunate to have the op-

The video received an international Award of Excellence in the 2005 Videographer Awards Competition, and a Bronze-level award in the national Omni Award competition, with an overall score of 8.2 on a 10-point scale. The Omni Award is evaluated by a panel of judges from top production companies in the world and recognizes the best video and broadcast productions.

What other tools are available to help you affirm the commitment? Perhaps you can discuss the study materials available on the Web site with your co-workers, or work with your facility's *Affirming the Commitment* liaison to conduct local activities. The booklet on the Web site provides

your commitment today. The rewards will be more far-reaching than you ever imagined. **VA**





## Reflections: A Veteran's Return to Vietnam

*Gordon H. Mansfield  
Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs*

I recently had the honor of being appointed by President Bush as his representative to head the U.S. delegation recognizing the 10th anniversary of the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations, an opportunity to return to Vietnam some 37 years after I last left.

The July 12 event in Hanoi gave me the opportunity to work with veterans who shared similar experiences several decades ago.

The brief visit included meetings with top Vietnamese government officials, U.S. Embassy representatives, American business leaders, and representatives of U.S. veterans service organizations, as well as the Vietnam Veterans Association. The delegation was received by the Vietnamese Foreign Minister and the Vice President of the National Assembly.

I also addressed Ameri-

can and Vietnamese business leaders at the American Chamber of Commerce luncheon. The delegation's visit concluded with a well-attended 10th anniversary event at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Several key issues and themes struck me throughout the visit. Among those was the warm reception I received at all of the events, both as a representative of the Bush administration and as a returning veteran. While we will never forget the past,

we should look to the opportunities of the future.

The normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations has brought about solid achievements across many measures

of international dialogue. In the fields of business, commerce and education, our nations have made the most of existing relationships while establishing new ones that will help foster future endeavors. But we also know there is more to do.

If we are to truly cement a durable alliance worthy of the second decade in our "new beginning," we must together confront economic issues—the commitments stemming from our Bilateral Trade Agreement, Vietnam's

officials indicated the country seemed to be making measured progress in addressing some of these issues.

The country has made economic policy strides, as well. For example, the National Assembly had only recently approved some 15 new laws designed to make their market rules conform to worldwide acceptable guidelines.

While it is recognized that these are newly emerging issues, we will not lose focus on the longstanding

### *The normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations has brought about solid achievements across many measures of international dialogue.*

accession to the World Trade Organization, and the favorable conditions needed for increased U.S. investments in Vietnam.

On another front, we must address health and humanitarian concerns, like HIV/AIDS and avian influenza. We must also encourage the cultural and educational exchanges that have increasingly come to mark our renewed relations.

We must strengthen cooperation on transnational issues like the global fight against terrorism, crime and narcotics, and the growing scourge of human trafficking.

To their credit, Vietnamese officials acknowledged the differences in key policy areas such as human rights and religious freedoms. The Vietnamese government

concerns. It should be noted, therefore, that the Vietnamese pledged to continue their support for the U.S. efforts to account for those missing following the war. And we will press forward to achieve the fullest possible accounting of Americans who remain missing in action, as well as to resolve the full range of other issues that remain from the war.

As Americans we cherish opportunities to learn from the past and move to a better future. I believe we have similar opportunities in our relations with Vietnam. **VA**

*Editor's note: While serving as company commander with the 101st Airborne Division, Deputy Secretary Mansfield sustained a paralyzing spinal cord injury from a gunshot wound during the Tet Offensive of 1968.*



*Deputy Secretary Mansfield receives a gold medallion from Vietnamese National Assembly Vice President Nguyen Phuc Thanh at the National Assembly Building in Hanoi.*



# Meeting the Payroll

ROBERT TURTEL

Ever wonder how your paycheck ends up in your bank account every two weeks? No, it's not magic. These are the dedicated employees who make it happen.

It's a Wednesday morning and a small group of employees in the west wing of the VA Financial Services Center in Austin, Texas, are settled into their cubicles, ready to tackle a humongous task. They have brought lunch and dinner with them and are prepared to work through the night if the need arises. Their mission—which they have

readily accepted—is to ensure that the more than 235,000 VA employees nationwide receive their payroll allotment on payday Friday.

It's an assignment that is repeated every other Wednesday and it impacts every VA employee—from Secretary Nicholson to the most recently hired summer intern.

For more than 35 years now, a

small group of employees, known as the “elite eighteen,” has issued millions of payroll allotments that total in the billions of dollars to hundreds of thousands of recipients.

It's a daunting task that many VA employees take for granted.

“People probably think that one's timekeeper enters their information into an automated system and the station's payroll office takes the input and just like magic their wages appear in their financial institution every other Friday,” said Donna Greenwalt, public affairs officer at the Financial Services Center (FSC) in Austin.

Greenwalt points out that while it may look like magic, it actually takes a lot of hard work and many long hours.

“Our nationwide payroll staff truly is the driving force behind every VA employee receiving their wages on time,” said Rodney Wood, FSC director and retired Air Force general. “They take pride in their work.”

It begins with the payroll staff tracking all of the timecard input from each field site and ensuring they have all of the data from every VA employee.

“We have a two-week cycle. The payroll cycle ends on a Saturday and we expect the first set of timecards to come in on the Monday following. That is when our job actually picks up,” said Julie Hawkins, acting chief of national payroll. “We have until 12:30 p.m. Wednesday to process the payroll, so we're basically tracing timecards. After we close on the payroll we do a sampling of employees' pay to make sure that their gross and net is correct.”

*Above: Earnings and leave statements are printed by the Austin Automation Center, which is co-located with the Financial Services Center. Here, Donald Gober performs a quality check on a folding and sealing machine. The statements are printed, folded and sealed at 135 per minute.*

The payroll staff then authorizes the release of this data into the Personnel and Accounting Integrated Data (PAID) system.

The PAID system generates a payroll that is certified as being good to pay and sends the payroll file to the Department of the Treasury.

Treasury then issues the VA employee paycheck, the PAID system generates the Earnings and Leave Statement, and “like magic” VA employees get their money—on time.

While an estimated 99.9 percent of VA employees are paid electronically, there are a small number of employees who still have checks mailed to them.

“We can’t stress enough the importance of having timecards in on time. That is the key,” said Warren Muller, associate director of nationwide payroll. “If there’s a delay getting the timecards in we run the risk of a crisis situation, working late

into the night and well into the next morning. There have been times when we’ve been here until two in the morning.”

On a good day the team finishes its task by the regular close of business at 4:30 p.m. On other occasions the payroll team has been in the office way past midnight.

“For us, there is no tomorrow. We have to meet our deadline. Otherwise, someone out there is not going to get paid. And we don’t want that so we do the best we can,” said Hawkins. “After all, I know everyone looks forward to payday and we certainly do not want to let anyone down.”

The payroll team is currently one member short—Lori Huey, a member of the National Guard, has been called to active duty.

Holidays, as much as everyone likes them, present a challenge for the payroll staff. It means they have

one less day to do their job; that’s why timecards are requested early.

“Holiday weeks are different from normal weeks because if the holiday falls on a Monday, instead of having two and a half days to run the payroll cycle we now have one and a half days,” said Muller. “If one of those days is spent chasing down timecards and trying to find a hundred or a hundred and fifty thousand timecards, that means we only have a day and a half to test a quarter of a million timecards, a quarter of a million paychecks.”

In addition to payroll, the staff does all of the necessary validations to ensure that employees receive an accurate W-2 form prior to Jan. 31 of each tax year, that all of the federal, state and local taxing authorities get the money they are due, and that all of the allotments each employee selects get executed as specified.

They also handle all of the retirement pay for former VA employees.

But there is so much more the center does for other offices in VA and for other federal agencies. The FSC has much to be proud of, and has won numerous awards, including the GAO Best Practice Award, highlighted in a recent issue of *Government Executive* magazine.

“The FSC provides many other services and expertise to VA that are unseen by most employees,” said Wood. “One example of this ‘behind the scenes’ work the FSC does involves returning value to VA for veterans’ programs. During fiscal year (FY) 2004, the FSC put more than \$30.3 million back into VA’s coffers as a result of the rebate points the FSC earned from pro-



*Julie Hawkins, foreground, acting chief of national payroll, with Financial Services Center employees Beverly R. Poe, background left, and Raquanel Stephens. “For us, there is no tomorrow,” says Hawkins. “We have to meet our deadline. Otherwise, someone out there is not going to get paid.”*



ROBERT TURTEL

*Financial Services Center employees Jerry Hullum, left, and Rosalinda Garcia crunch numbers while John E. Oman works in the background. Left: Rodney Wood is director of the Financial Services Center. "Our nationwide payroll staff really is the driving force behind every VA employee receiving their wages on time," he says. "They take pride in their work."*



ROBERT TURTEL

cessing VA's purchase card transactions daily."

The FSC pays most of the department's vendors, ensures VA and the department's Enterprise Fund Office (EFO) receive clean au-

dit opinions from an independent audit firm (the FSC led VA to its sixth clean audit opinion and EFO to its seventh clean audit opinion this year). This is done by running a robust audit recovery product line, and using the capabilities of a state-of-the-art document management system.

"The FSC is not only a very cost-effective service provider, but is seriously committed to excellence by implementing best practice experiences into our programs and projects so that we can bring the excellence to you," said Wood. "We are proud to be part of VA and proud of the work we do to help the department meet its mission. As we advance into FY 2005, we plan to continue

our commitment to providing our customers with both quality customer service and quality financial products and services. We are confident we will continue to excel in our quest to exceed customers' expectations, and we look forward to the challenges FY 2005 holds in store for us."

Next payday, thank your local payroll staff, and remember the professionals in Austin. As the sign in a payroll specialist's cubicle reads: "We don't believe in miracles. We rely on them." And the folks in Austin have been doing a miraculous job for more than three decades. **VA**

By Ozzie Garza



# Reaching Across the Years

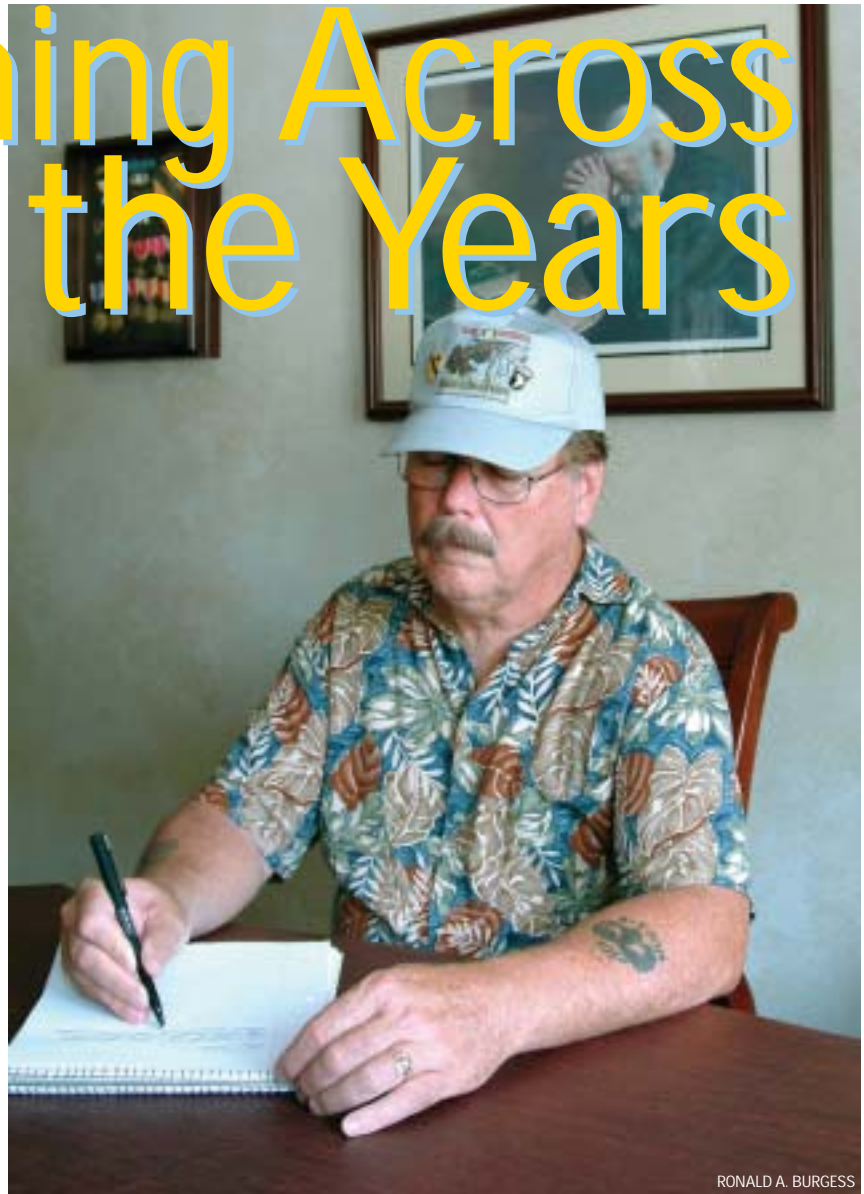
A group of Vietnam veterans in Columbus, Ohio, is sharing their experiences to help today's returning veterans transition back to civilian life.

I've been there and I know what you're going through. That's the message retired Army Capt. Mac McGowan, a patient at the Chalmers P. Wylie VA Outpatient Clinic in Columbus, Ohio, wanted to convey to his young neighbor who had just returned from the war in Iraq.

Though humbly professing to be "not very good with words," the accomplished writer and retired social worker wrote a letter to the young soldier, thanking him for his service and letting him know he had someone he could talk to. Someone who knew what war really looks like, sounds like and feels like years after the final bullets have been shot.

McGowan was an airborne infantryman in Vietnam. He survived the Tet Offensive and countless other battles that didn't earn names or places in the history books. He was wounded and decorated for valor, but his memories aren't always heroic; most, in fact, are tragic.

The simple message McGowan first intended only for his neighbor became much more after he read the letter to his fellow veteran volun-



RONALD A. BURGESS

*The man whose letter started it all: Mac McGowan at home.*

teers at the clinic. A match was struck.

That small flame became a fire, forging a team of VA staff, veteran volunteers and local community members who call their efforts "Operation Welcome Home Warrior." The initiative officially kicked off on April 29 as part of the Columbus VA outpatient clinic's annual volunteer services awards luncheon, but by then the work the team does with returning veterans from the global war on terrorism had been

underway for nearly six months.

## In the beginning

According to Al Burzynski, public affairs officer at the Columbus clinic, Welcome Home Warrior grew from grassroots issues and friendships to the dedicated volunteer team that operates today. As a new public affairs officer in the VA system, Burzynski wanted to learn more about PTSD because it had been such a hot topic in the media. At the same time, he'd been getting



Lloyd Davis, center, and Mac McGowan talk with Sgt. Brett Pyles, of the Ohio National Guard, during a drill held at the Guard armory 90 days after Pyles' unit returned from Iraq.

to know the veteran volunteers at the clinic. One of his new friends, Lloyd Davis, a Vietnam veteran who helped start the team, brought McGowan and his letter to Burzynski's attention. He was struck by the message.

"After reading that wonderful letter, I asked McGowan, Davis and their cohorts from the PTSD support group if they would be willing to speak publicly about PTSD to the media, the clinic's stakeholders, city officials and at public meetings," said Burzynski.

Of course, Burzynski had to speak with McGowan's PTSD group leader, Dr. Terry Carlson, about the support group members doing interviews, but through a series of meetings about ground rules and procedures, McGowan's entire support group became interested in sharing their experiences coping with PTSD and making the transition back home after serving their country.

But their interest wasn't so much in talking to the media. They wanted to go directly to the soldiers. Those who would be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with the disorder were their primary concern.

Rather than being discouraged,

Burzynski saw an opportunity in the different focus of the group and decided to make their testimonies an integral part of his presentations to returning troops. Soon, members of the team were with Burzynski at every event he attended.

### Operation in action

When Dan Law returned from combat duty in Vietnam, his then-girlfriend lived out on a country road. Picking her up at night was an ordeal for him.

"In Vietnam, ambushes were sprung when the foliage was right out to the edge of the road," explained Law, now a member of the Welcome Home Warrior team. "I can remember her panicking because in the dark of night I cut my lights and was going about 60 miles an hour. She asked me, 'What are you doing?' and I replied, 'I'm surviving, what's the matter with you?'"

Decades later, a former Marine who had been out of Iraq for more than a year was having similar problems relating to his wife and mother.

"He was acting different, hard, which wasn't the laid-back man we knew," said Sandra Nading, the Marine's mother. Nading wanted to

help her son, but when she tried to talk with him, he would get edgy and anxious. He often insisted he was fine, that nothing was wrong. Nading grew more concerned. During a visit to the Columbus clinic for her son's ankle injury, Nading met Burzynski, who told her about the Welcome Home Warrior project.

Burzynski suggested that Nading bring her son in for a friendly chat after his medical appointment. While Nading went to get her son, Burzynski invited one of the members of the Welcome Home Warrior group, Chuck Kalb, to come talk with the former Marine. Kalb was eager to meet the young man.

"My son and I were sitting in Al's office when Chuck walked in the door and said, 'You know, I want to thank you for what you did for your country.' He said thank you, but it was more than that," Nading said. "At that moment I could see something had lifted off my son's chest. In just a short talk, Chuck really pulled a lot of stuff out of my son that he didn't even realize he was holding back."

It's the warrior aspect of Welcome Home Warrior that Burzynski believes gives the operation its high level of success. Returning veterans are greeted by older, yet somehow familiar, faces. They attest that eyes that have seen battle can instantly connect across generations to form a bond and a level of trust far beyond what briefings and benefits display booths can achieve.

"VA certainly has wonderful programs and it is the place to go and get help," Law said. "But VA is also a giant system and it can be very intimidating when you first come to it. In the benefit and health care structure, veterans can get the feeling that they are just another number. We provide a face, but more importantly, a story. Our stories will connect with their stories

and let them know they have found someone to get them through.”

The other veteran volunteers on the team share Law's dedication. The group has already been to several Ohio National Guard and Reserve drills, as well as family readiness group functions, and they are reaching out to active duty members and their families in Ohio through the U.S. Army Columbus Recruiting Battalion's Family Support Group and community relations programs to offer their services. They have visited troops on return trips and at every stop, they give their contact numbers freely to new soldiers and encourage the troops to call them anytime. The group's Web site, [www.welcomhomewarrior.org](http://www.welcomhomewarrior.org), features a listing of the team members and their contact information.

“Operation Welcome Home Warrior is like a red carpet for us when we get back,” said former

Army Ranger Eric Allen, one of the veterans helped by the program.

“Having someone who knows what I've been through because he's been there too makes the difference. I've fought in Desert Storm and Somalia, but not until I returned from OIF did I encounter something this kind to veterans.”

The team's approach is meant to bring a new dimension to the seamless transition concept, putting a friendly face with familiar experiences at the forefront of the VA experience for a new veteran, according to Burzynski.

“It's less intrusive in appearance to have these guys speaking than to have a VA guy simply give a benefits briefing when these soldiers come home,” Burzynski said. “If I go up there during an in-brief for returning soldiers and I try to talk about VA, I can always see a little apprehension. But when the words

are coming from volunteers who want to be there and are there on their own time to share their stories and show they care, it makes that returning veteran's transition a little bit easier. Having that connection shows them that not only will the VA care for them as an institution, but they will have a whole group of real people they can turn to who will welcome them into the brotherhood of veterans.”

The Welcome Home Warrior idea has already shown some of its merit as the volunteer group continues to grow and the positive responses keep bringing new soldiers in.

It's the personalized attention that Burzynski and the team members say is the key to their success and what makes the difference to the returning troops. Welcome Home Warrior works like a mentoring program. New veterans



*Members of the Welcome Home Warrior team.*

RONALD A. BURGESS

partner up with a team member and learn how to navigate the rigors of combat stress and make the transition back to civilian life.

“We deal with the soldiers on a one-on-one basis,” former Army Green Beret Jim Garvey said. “We get their information and we try to find someone on our team who is a perfect fit for them to partner up with. Obviously, I would make a great companion for a Special Forces soldier or a heavy combatant, but I might not be able to relate as well to a medic as one of our other guys can.”

In fact, Garvey shares a special relationship with Allen, who he has taken under his wing. The two combat veterans from different eras periodically meet and speak on the phone.

### Warrior wisdom

The team’s veterans hail from the four service branches and a variety of backgrounds, ranging from medics to explosive ordnance disposal technicians. Each has a story to share and listening ear to spare.

“This is good for the troops and it is good for us. We definitely get the feeling that we have some wisdom to pass on to these young people,” McGowan said. “We’ve been in combat. We’ve been where they are and we have been home longer than they have. We can kind of take them by the hand and lead them down the trails that we’ve been on, make sure they don’t step on the same booby traps we had to trip through going through this.”

The “warrior wisdom” the team hopes to pass on to the new generation of returning troops is all about keeping hope, and just as in war, it relies heavily on the battle buddy system. Troops are encouraged to keep in touch with their fellow returning soldiers, not be afraid to discuss events that happened overseas, and seek VA counseling and care.

Above all, the troops are encouraged to be careful how they react around their families.

“Whenever I’m milling with the GIs, I ask them if they notice anything different about the way their families react to them,” said Davis, team member and former Army sergeant. “It’s almost always a yes. I tell them it’s not really the people [around them] that have changed; it’s the soldier that is not the same. You look at things a lot differently than before you went overseas and got into a combat zone. That really hits home with a lot of troops.”

The team is quick to stress they are not trying to pass themselves off as the sole source of help. They tell troops they are not counselors and are not attempting to position themselves as counselors.

“We are not trying to pose as an alternative to VA counsel, but to bring troops into the VA and let them know there is help here,” McGowan said. “We get the troops comfortable in the VA setting. When they feel comfortable enough, we point them in the right direction for services.”

Burzynski knows what a difference the team is making. He sees examples of it all the time, and he admires what they’re doing. “It takes a lot of courage to stand up in front of a bunch of people and share your life story, especially when you are dealing with this kind of condition,” Burzynski said of the team. “They make this program really work.”

### Spreading the word

Burzynski and the team don’t want their successes in seamless transition to be limited to Columbus. They’d like to see Operation Welcome Home Warrior efforts get started at all VA medical centers.


“There was no difficulty in getting this together, and the benefits for VA and these veterans have been amazing,” Burzynski said. “We

had people that wanted to do it; they were people of action and we got this done. A lot of people ask if there isn’t something already like this out there. The answer, to my knowledge, is no.”

The volunteer veterans of the team are willing to help other facilities start their own teams. “I think every vet that I have talked to has been willing to do something like this,” said Frank Kearney, team member and former Army staff sergeant. “When I got out of the Army it was thank you very much, go figure it out on your own and that was how it was for most of us. We don’t want that to happen now and we can prevent it from happening.”

The team’s mission has resonated just as clearly with those who have already seen the operation’s benefits.

“PTSD is a real syndrome and a real threat because we bring it back to our families, workplaces and communities, and they suffer,” said Allen. “The guys in Welcome Home Warrior give me bearing and help me mold my character back to the old Eric that I want to be. They give me assurance that I’m not the only one and there is help, hope, and with faith, I can come out of this. I can be progressive and positive again. I believe that now and I owe it to them.”

Burzynski believes the success of the Columbus program sends a powerful message to VA employees, too. “We all share the same mission. That mission is taking care of America’s heroes and whatever we can do to assist in that mission is our basic duty,” he said. “Groups like Operation Welcome Home Warrior really help make that mission possible at the personal level. I hope every medical center reads this and wants to start a program just like it.” 

By Ryan Steinbach

# Triumph Over Frightening Odds

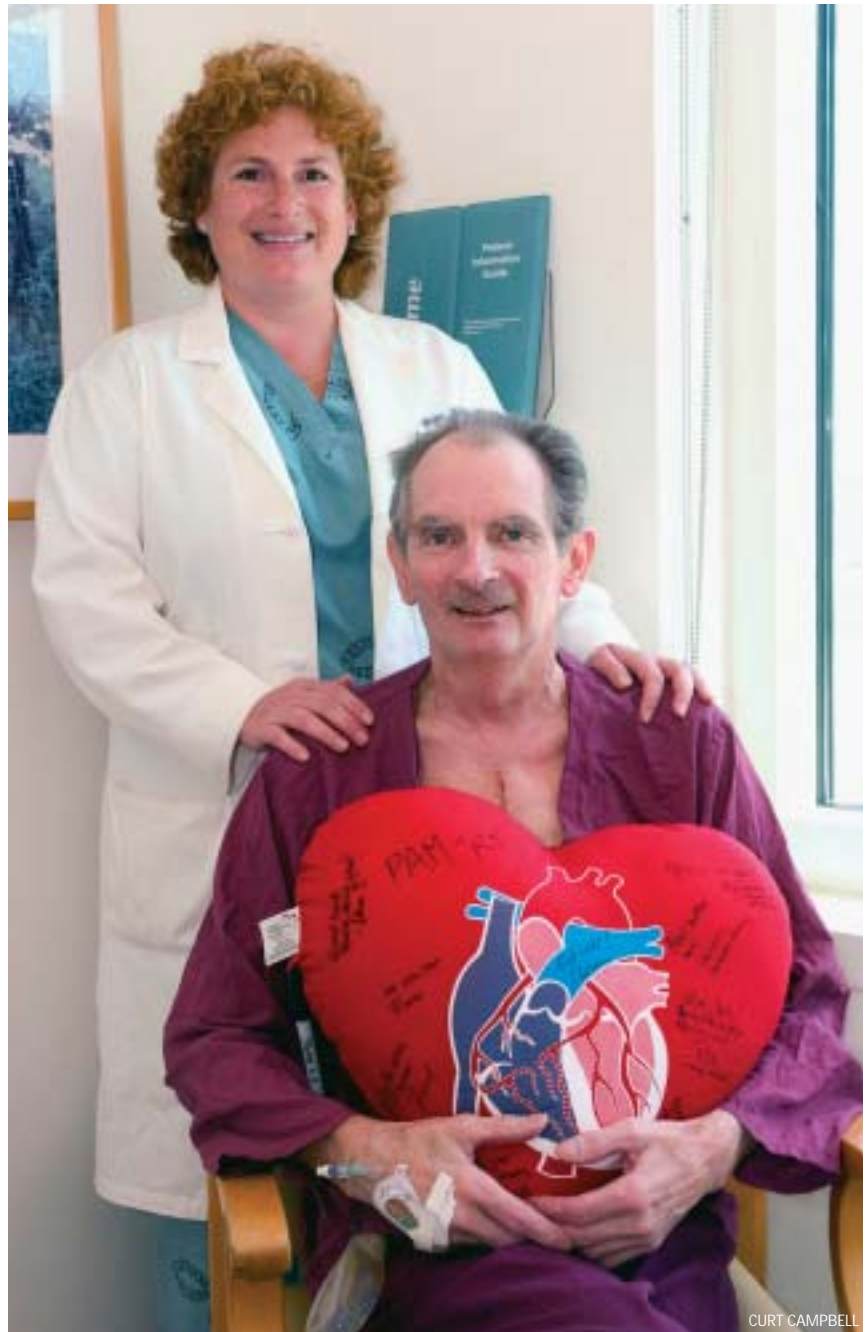
A VA Palo Alto Health Care System surgeon successfully performs a rare and difficult operation to remove a 25-pound tumor from a veteran's liver.

**T**he risk of failure was high. This type of cancer had only been successfully removed once before. But for former Army tank mechanic John F. Frick, whose liver had a 25-pound malignant tumor embedded in it, there were no options.

"I'm a mechanic. I was used to fixing broken things," said Frick. "Now I was broken. I needed someone to fix me and I turned to VA."

Frick, 61, got exactly what he needed, and his doctor and surgical team were overjoyed with their surgical success. Leading Frick's nine-hour surgery on May 12 was Dr. Sherry Wren, chief of general surgery at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System and associate professor of surgery at Stanford University. Her surgical team included three op-

*Right: Dr. Sherry Wren, chief of general surgery at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, visits Army veteran John Frick a couple of weeks after removing his massive tumor during a nine-hour operation.*



CURT CAMPBELL



CHUCK REVEL

*A team of VA Palo Alto Health Care System doctors and nurses, headed up by Chief of General Surgery Sherry Wren, wrestle the cancerous tumor from the liver of veteran John Frick.*

erating room nurses, a perfusionist (who focuses on blood circulation during surgery), two anesthesiologists and three other attending surgeons, featuring one of VA's and the nation's top cardiac surgeons, Dr. Thomas A. Burdon.

"I won't lie to anyone," said Wren, "this was the toughest surgery I've ever done and I wouldn't agree to it until Mr. Frick had written a will. I knew what his odds were. After all, this type of liver surgery had only been done one other time successfully, on a 79-year-old woman in Kansas, and her tumor was much smaller than Mr. Frick's."

Frick had no idea his tumor was so large. It had been a very slow-growing tumor for years, so he just thought he was gaining weight. It wasn't until last winter that his symptoms got so bad that he came to the Palo Alto VA emergency

room. He was given a drug called Gleevac in an effort to reduce the tumor's size. Rather than shrinking, however, it continued to grow at an alarming rate, and yet Frick was losing weight daily.

"The tumor was eating before Mr. Frick was," said Wren. "I knew that without surgery Mr. Frick had only a short time to live."

It was then that Wren decided she had to try to save the veteran's life. She contacted the local blood bank to reserve a large backup supply of blood. She ran tests and studied the results with other doctors. She counseled and educated Frick and his three children. Finally, she put together a team of medical experts rarely seen in a private operating room, which included OR nurses Evie Glasa, Daisy Wong and Susan Johansen; perfusionist Tonya Blodget; anesthesiologists Kevin

Fish and Steve Schaefer; surgeons Burdon, Jim Fann and Basen Safadi; and residents Russel Woo from surgery and Zed Reagan from anesthesia.

"The fact is," said Burdon, "only in VA could you pull together seven physicians and three operating room nurses for nine hours. Few private hospitals or insurance companies would pay for that."

Frick was astounded to find out so much effort had been made for him. "I guess my eight years in the Army really paid off," he said. "I have Dr. Wren on a tall pedestal. I know she saved my life and that she couldn't have done it without the hospital's support. I was treated by an A-1 team in surgery and on the ward. I simply couldn't have gotten better care anywhere." **VA**

*By Kerri Childress*

# Taps Echoing Through the Countryside

Hundreds of brass musicians sign on for a dramatic musical event to draw attention to the shortage of buglers for veteran burials.

**M**ore than 850 buglers and assorted horn players gathered at Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira, N.Y., on Armed Forces Day, May 21. Their mission: to form a 41-mile line between Woodlawn and Bath National Cemeteries and play a cascading rendition of taps between the two cemeteries. The Echo Taps event, sponsored by Bugles Across America, was organized to highlight the need for buglers to play taps at

The Echo Taps event started at 9:30 a.m. with buses taking buglers out to their positions. The route paralleled New York State Routes 352 and 17 and Interstate 86 from Elmira to Bath. At 10:30 a.m., the opening ceremony began at Woodlawn National Cemetery. Richard Wannemacher, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, gave the keynote address.

With the buglers in place from the Woodlawn National Cemetery

among the hundreds of brass musicians lining the roadways along the route. It took more than an hour and a half for taps to ring through the countryside from cemetery to cemetery.

The day ended with a closing ceremony at Bath National Cemetery. Buses picked up the buglers shortly after they played their full rendition of taps and brought them to the ceremony. After U.S. Rep. Randy Kuhl (R-N.Y.) delivered clos-



RICHARD SMALL

*Above and right: The Echo Taps event ended with all 866 brass musicians playing taps in unison on the grounds of Bath National Cemetery.*

veteran burials throughout the country and to raise the visibility of national cemeteries.

Taps, as we know it today, had its origins in the Civil War. Union Gen. Daniel Adams Butterfield is credited with composing the haunting, 24-note melody. It was originally written as the end-of-the-day call for Union troops. Confederate soldiers on the battlefield soon heard the new call and began using it, too. It wasn't long before taps was being played at both Union and Confederate burials.

flagpole to the Bath National Cemetery flagpole, it was time for the performance to begin. The first notes came from Hannah Rose Sollecito, 15, of Baldwinsville, N.Y., a direct descendant of Gen. Butterfield.

On the third note, a second bugler positioned about a tenth of a mile away began playing. This process was repeated again and again



RICHARD SMALL

ing remarks, all 866 musicians played taps again, this time in unison. **VA**

*By Michael Nacincik*

# 75 *Years of Service*

Anniversary kick-off ceremony in Washington, D.C., combines nostalgia, praise, and even a few laughs.

**T**housands of veterans, VA employees and other VIPs packed DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., July 21 to kick off VA's 75th anniversary observance.

There was plenty of nostalgia during the hour-long program, as Secretary Jim Nicholson gave a sweeping overview of the department's historic role in shaping American society. He praised generations of VA employees for giving veterans "the full measure of care, compassion and dignity they deserve."

There were also plenty of laughs as master of ceremonies Adrian Cronauer, the man who inspired the film "Good Morning, Vietnam," joked about the movie and his own military experience.

Cronauer had the audience rolling with his take on the distinguishing characteristics of the military services. The Coast Guard is the smallest branch of service and the Army the largest, he said. The Marines are the most gung-ho and the Navy has the funniest uniforms. The Air Force, well, they're the smartest, according to Cronauer. "Just think about it," he said, "it's the only service where the enlisted send the officers out to battle. 'Go get 'em sir, I'll be here when you get back,'" quipped the Air Force veteran.

Later all jokes were put aside as country music artist Craig Morgan performed a moving tribute to his late grandfather. In the song, titled "God, Family and Country" from his 2003 release "I Love It," Morgan

sings of the values he learned from his grandfather and other members of the Greatest Generation: "His was a generation, that answered without question. They knew they had to win, 'cause they were fighting for ... God, Family and Country."

An Army veteran himself, Morgan said he wanted to perform during the VA anniversary observance to show his support for veterans. "They are the ones responsible for the freedom of this nation and we should never forget that," he said.

Following the performance, Secretary Nicholson spoke about America's commitment to care for its veterans. "No other nation in the world cares for veterans like we do

and I am proud to tell our story and lead this department," he said. "Today, we celebrate 75 years of service to veterans and reaffirm our commitment to them in the decades to come."

A slight pause in the program signaled the arrival of Vice President Dick Cheney, who was introduced by Michael E. DeBakey, M.D., a pioneering cardiovascular surgeon and researcher credited with developing the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) unit concept while serving in the Army during World War II.

The first thing Cheney did when he took the stage was to thank DeBakey. Not for the introduction, but for helping him get his job.



Secretary Jim Nicholson addresses the audience at DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., on July 21.

EMERSON SANDERS





*Master of ceremonies Adrian Cronauer, an Air Force veteran and the inspiration for the film "Good Morning, Vietnam," kept the audience laughing with quips about the movie and his own military experience.*

Cheney said before he was officially nominated as a candidate for Vice President, DeBakey, for whom the Houston VA Medical Center is now named, was called in to review his history of coronary artery disease and certify him fit for duty. "I wouldn't be here today if it hadn't been for his fine endorsement," said Cheney.

The Vice President then spoke of the noble mission of caring for America's veterans—men and women who have "shaped the life of this nation for the better."

He commended the work of VA employees and their commitment to the department's mission. "At its very best, government service involves not just filling a job but keeping a special faith. VA employees understand this very well, and you can be proud of your association with a vital agency of the United States government," said Cheney.


The Vice President's comments weren't lost on employees like Mary Elliott, who facilitates the Business Oversight Board in the Office of Management. "VA is not just another government agency. We're saving lives, saving families, saving

communities," said Elliott, who called the anniversary observance a moving experience.

Robert Volck walked away from the observance with a renewed sense of pride in fulfilling the VA mission. "We all get frustrated from time to time, but this ceremony helped to regroup our enthusiasm and refocus our motivation," said the computer specialist.

Employees in Washington, D.C., weren't the only ones who got to see the anniversary kick-off event. Eileen Chandler, who works in human resources at the Mather, Calif., VA Medical Center near Sacramento, watched it on her computer screen through VA's Content Delivery Network, available at nearly every VA medical facility and coming soon to VA regional offices.

"Watching the program really reinforced why I want to be here at the VA working for veterans ... it was awesome," Chandler said.

The VA 75th anniversary observance will continue throughout the year. Visit [www.75anniversary.va.gov](http://www.75anniversary.va.gov) for more information. 

*By Matt Bristol*

## Veterans from World War I to Iraq Honored

VA's 75th anniversary observance attracted a number of VIPs, including retired Maj. Gen. Patrick H. Brady, who is a Medal of Honor recipient, and former VA Deputy Administrator Everett Alvarez.

But the main attraction was a group of about 45 U.S. veterans who served in every conflict from World War I to the war in Iraq. They gathered at Fort Meyer, Va., early on the morning of July 21, where several spoke with *Vanguard* as they boarded buses destined for Constitution Hall.

Lloyd Brown was 16 years old when he joined the Navy on April 6, 1918. "All the young fellows were going into the service and I didn't want to get left behind. So I lied about my age," he explained. He spent the war aboard the USS *New Hampshire* searching for enemy submarines in the North Atlantic. At 103, he may be one of the youngest World War I veterans alive today.

Standing nearby was Howard Grant, 86, who served with the 9th Cavalry "Buffalo Soldiers" during World War II. He joked about the VA being nearly as old as him and said, "It's good to know [VA is] going to be around for these younger vets."

As the buses departed Fort Meyer and made their way through the rolling hills of Arlington National Cemetery, a police escort cleared a path through the rush-hour traffic leading into Washington, D.C. The veterans were whisked into a side entrance at Constitution Hall and assembled near the main stage where they would be seated.



ROBERT TURTEL

while serving with the 10th Mountain Division in Fallujah, Iraq, and now works in VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs. But in the end, he said it was an experience he'll never forget.

*Left: Secretary Nicholson on stage with veterans representing every conflict from World War I to Iraq.*

Before taking the stage, Vietnam veteran Manuel Granado said he was excited to participate in VA's anniversary. "I've seen tremendous improvement at the VA over the last years. I'm just honored to be a part of this," he said, noting there are a lot of younger veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who are equally deserving of recognition.

Corey McGee is one of those young vets who joined Granado on the stage. "Just to be there in the presence of all those veterans was a little overwhelming," said McGee, who was wounded April 9, 2004,



MICHAEL L. MOORE

*Above: Secretary Nicholson greets veteran Eric Franklin, who works in the National Cemetery Administration in headquarters.*



ROBERT TURTEL

*Left: 103-year-old World War I veteran Lloyd Brown acknowledges the applause of the audience as he is recognized during the ceremony.*

## The Birth of VA



COURTESY HERBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

*President Herbert Hoover and his wife, Lou Henry Hoover, host a garden reception at the White House for wounded veterans on June 27, 1929.*

During the 1928 presidential election, Herbert Hoover promised citizens: “We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land.”

Ironically, the Great Depression hit soon after and Hoover came under tremendous pressure to relieve the economic slump. On April 20, 1929, less than two months after his inauguration, he received a letter from Gen. Frank T. Hines, the director of the Veterans’ Bureau, suggesting the consolidation of all veterans’ activities into one agency. This would improve government efficiency and relieve financial pressure resulting from the Depression.

In Hoover’s December 1929 State of the Union address, he explained: “I am convinced that we will gain in efficiency, economy, and more uniform administration and better definition of national policies

if the Pension Bureau, the National Home for Volunteer Soldiers, and the Veterans’ Bureau are brought together under a single agency.” The Veterans Administration became an independent agency on July 21, 1930, with the signing of Executive Order 5398, “Consolidation and Coordination of Governmental Activities Affecting Veterans.”

President Hoover considered caring for veterans to be one of the most important functions of government. “The consolidated budget of these services for the present fiscal year amounts to approximately \$800 million, so that the new establishment [VA] becomes one of the most important functions in the government,” the president said. **VA**

VA by the numbers	Then (1930)	Now (2004)
America’s population of living veterans	4.6 million	24.8 million
VA budget	\$786 million	\$63.5 billion
VA personnel	31,500	235,978
Number of VA hospitals	54	157
VA medical budget	\$30 million	\$29.1 billion
Veterans hospitalized at VA facilities	54,000	587,000
Visits by veterans for outpatient clinic care	800,000	54 million
Number of VA regional offices	54	57
Number of veterans or dependents receiving VA compensation or pension benefits	900,000	3.4 million
Amount of disability or pension benefits paid	\$418 million	\$27.6 billion
Number of VA life insurance policies	646,000	7.7 million
Face value of life insurance policies	\$3.3 billion	\$757 billion

# *Celebrating 75 Years ... in he*



ROBERT TURTEL

*The United States Marine Band, also known as "The President's Own," played a patriotic musical prelude at the kick-off ceremony on July 21 at DAR Constitution Hall.*



*The Martinsburg, W.Va., VA Medical Center's 75th anniversary celebration for patients, employees, volunteers and visitors.*

# adquarters and in the field ...



Radio talk show hosts from around the country broadcast live from VA Central Office July 19-21 to raise awareness of the department's 75th anniversary observance. During the event—called a “Radio Row” in the broadcast industry—the program hosts interviewed a number of VA officials. Here, Marc Bernier, who hosts a program on WNDB Radio in Daytona Beach, Fla., interviews Under Secretary for Benefits Daniel L. Cooper.

ROBERT TURTEL



JAMES ROBERTSON

anniversary celebration included an ice cream social for pa-



CHERYL YOST

At the Beckley, W.Va., VA Medical Center, Dr. Patch Adams, above with Beckley VAMC Director G.P. Husson, joined the anniversary festivities. The story of Adams' mission to bring laughter to the practice of medicine was told in a 1998 film starring Robin Williams. Adams and a group of clowns from his Gesundheit! Institute delighted patients, staff and visitors during their visit.



# Breaking Down Barriers

New office aims to improve opportunities for faith-based and community organizations.

**F**aith-based organizations have been cornerstones of communities throughout history. Their services are important to the quality of life in American society. However, accessing federal resources has been difficult for these groups.

Some lack the sophistication to navigate the federal grant-making process. Others find that outdated government regulations make it hard for them to compete for federal grants.

Since 1994, VA has provided competitive grant funding to faith or community-based groups, and state and local governments, for transitional housing and supportive services to homeless veterans.

More than 97 percent of the approximately \$110 million in VA homeless grants awarded this fiscal year has been awarded to faith-based and community organizations. Since 1994, VA has awarded more than \$230 million to more than 500 such organizations through the homeless grant and per diem program, with funding earmarked for everything from transitional housing to meals.

In 2001, President Bush signed an executive order establishing Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in five Cabinet departments—Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Labor and Justice.

The purpose of these centers was “to coordinate agency efforts to eliminate regulatory, contracting and other programmatic obstacles to the participation of faith-based and other community organizations in the provision of social and community services.”

In 2004, the President extended

this initiative to the Department of Veterans Affairs, establishing the VA Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

The center seeks to identify barriers to the participation of faith-based and community organizations in the delivery of social services; coordinate a comprehensive VA effort to incorporate these organizations in department programs; propose initiatives to remove barriers; develop

***“My goal is to make it easier for VA and these organizations to work together to find new ways to serve veterans in every community.”***

pilot programs to increase their participation; and coordinate agency outreach efforts to the faith-based community, according to Darin Selnick, the center’s director.

Selnick previously served as California State commander and National Executive Committee member for the Jewish War Veterans.


The laws governing federal grants to faith-based groups are clear, he explained. “Direct federal funds cannot be used for inherently religious activities and veterans must receive services regardless of their religious affiliation or beliefs. My goal is to make it easier for VA and these organizations to work together to find new ways to serve veterans

in every community.”

There are many partnership opportunities within VA for faith-based and community organizations. Through innovative pilot and demonstration programs, VA is increasing these opportunities and expanding the availability of community services to meet veterans’ needs.

Partnering with faith-based and community groups is nothing new to VA. The VA Voluntary Service pro-

gram, the largest volunteer program in the federal government, has been a critical part of the department for nearly 60 years. More than 350 national and local veterans, civic, and service organizations contributed close to 13 million hours of service and \$40 million in cash or products to VA last year. There are some 93,000 volunteers committed to providing services at virtually all of VA’s field facilities throughout the country.

If your facility or organization has a potential partnering opportunity or wants more information about the VA Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, visit the Web site [www.va.gov/opa/fbci/](http://www.va.gov/opa/fbci/). 

## VA Secretary, Colorado Rockies Players Visit Wounded Soldiers



Secretary Nicholson visits the bedside of a wounded soldier with Colorado Rockies players who were in town for a series against the Washington Nationals.

Even before he was officially confirmed as VA Secretary, Jim Nicholson began visiting wounded soldiers recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

These visits are an emotional experience. The sight of young men and women, their bodies scarred and battered, can quickly overwhelm some. For Secretary

Nicholson, the visits have the opposite effect. "Just being around these soldiers is an inspiration to me," he said during a recent visit.

Secretary Nicholson returned to the military hospital on July 19 accompanied by several players from his favorite Major League Baseball team, the Colorado Rockies, who were in town for a series against the Washington Na-

tionals.

They stopped by the physical therapy room, where about 20 amputees were working out and learning how to walk on artificial limbs. The players moved around the room, speaking to groups of soldiers and thanking them for their military service. Some handed out autographed team hats and T-shirts. Others listened

quietly as the soldiers recounted details of their injuries. The soldiers seemed to enjoy the company. "The visits are good for their spirits," noted Lt. Col. Barbara Springer, chief of Walter Reed's Physical Therapy Service.

The players were also impacted by the visit. Listening to the soldiers' stories and seeing how they handle losing limbs and suffering other devastating injuries gave Rockies pitcher Brian Fuentes a new perspective. "I'm a little awestruck by how well these guys have come to terms with their injuries," he said. "I don't know how I would react in their situation."

After spending about an hour in physical therapy, the visitors met with patients in the occupational therapy room and later moved to the orthopedics ward, where recently wounded amputees were recovering. Later in the evening, several of the soldiers joined Secretary Nicholson in the stands at R.F.K. Stadium to watch the Rockies take on the Nationals. **VA**

## Read All About It: VA Report to Employees

The VA Report to Employees summarizes the department's key accomplishments over the past year in program areas, as well as improvements achieved through results-based management.

The report highlights activities associated with VA's four strategic goals that focus on the delivery of services and benefits to veterans, as well as an enabling goal that addresses cross-cutting activities for effective management of people, communications,

technology and governance. Many of the enabling goal objectives parallel the President's Management Agenda (PMA), implemented to improve the management of the federal government. The report also provides an update of VA activities for each PMA initiative and the department's overall scorecard status recently released by the Office of Management and Budget. For more information about the report, go to [www.va.gov/oppbb/results\\_report.pdf](http://www.va.gov/oppbb/results_report.pdf).



## Good Housekeeping Magazine Honors Dr. Frances Murphy

Dr. Frances M. Murphy, Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Health Policy Coordination, was honored June 15 in Washington, D.C., as one of the recipients of the 2005 Good Housekeeping Award for Women in Government. She received the first-ever Tillie K. Fowler Award, named in honor of the late four-term Florida congresswoman, who was a powerful voice on defense issues.

Already well known for her work to help Gulf War veterans with undiagnosed illnesses, Murphy was recognized with this award for her contributions on behalf of veterans with serious mental illness and her work in transforming mental health service delivery within the Veterans Health Administration.

Murphy represented VA on the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health and was nominated by the commission's chairman, Dr. Michael Hogan. The Good Housekeeping Award for Women in Government is produced in collaboration with the Center for American Women and Politics and is supported by the Ford Foundation and Wyeth. The list of awardees was published in the July issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine.



*Dr. Frances Murphy, right, accepts her award from Ellen Levine, editor-in-chief of Good Housekeeping magazine.*

## Social Work, Audiology Chiefs Honored by Professional Groups

VA's social work and audiology chiefs recently received national honors from professional organizations representing their fields.

The National Association of Social Workers named Jill Manske, VA director of Social Work Service, as the 2005 Social Worker of the Year. She was recognized for her leadership in VA's seamless transition efforts, which put VA social workers at all major military hospitals.

"With her enthusiastic spirit, her creativity and, above all, her dedication to duty, Ms. Manske has improved the services we provide to our nation's veterans," wrote Dr. Jonathan Perlin, Under Secretary for Health, in a letter nominating Manske for the award.

The American Academy of Audiology presented its highest honor, the Career Award, to Lucille B. Beck, Ph.D., director of VA Audiology and Speech Pathology Service. The award recognizes Beck for her many contributions to the field of audiology.

Beck worked for the acceptance of the doctor of audiology degree and for VA patients to have direct access to audiology services. "I am privileged to work for VA," she said, "because VA has allowed me to create a world-class system for comprehensive hearing and rehabilitation programs for veterans." **VA**

## West Point Honors for the Secretary

VA Secretary Jim Nicholson was named one of West Point's 2005 Distinguished Graduates during an award ceremony at the U.S. Military Academy on May 24, right. "I am deeply honored to be recognized by West Point. My years there as a student were among the most important years of my life. They built a foundation for everything I did in my career," said Nicholson, a member of West Point's class of 1961.



## VA Scientists Receive Presidential Honors

President Bush recognized two VA researchers with the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers during a June 13 White House ceremony. It is the federal government's highest honor for rising young researchers. With the award they receive funding over five years to further their research.



ROBERT TURTEL

*Kevin Volpp, left, and William Grady received the federal government's highest honor for rising young researchers.*

Award recipient William M. Grady, M.D., a gastroenterology researcher with the VA Puget Sound Healthcare System in Seattle, studies the mechanisms of colon cancer, a major cause of cancer deaths among VA's patient population. His lab focuses on how cancer cells in the colon become resistant to a specific growth factor, or protein, in the body that normally suppresses tumors. Grady is an assistant professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine and an investigator at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

The second recipient, Kevin Volpp, M.D., Ph.D., is a staff physician and health services researcher at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center and assistant professor of medicine and healthcare systems at the Wharton School and the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. His research focuses on how economics affects the quality of health care. The issues he has studied include the influence of HMOs on cardiac outcomes; financial incentives to promote smok-

ing cessation; and VA's role in reducing health care disparities.

Grady and Volpp presented their work at a small gathering in VA Central Office prior to the White House ceremony. "I am appreciative of the VA's constant support of my research," said Grady. Volpp's parents, wife and sister accompanied him. "I am honored and proud to be able to work with the VA," he said.

## Helping Wounded Soldiers Land Civilian Jobs

Secretary Jim Nicholson and Maj. Gen. Kenneth L. Farmer Jr., commander of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, recently signed a pact giving severely injured servicemembers practical help landing civilian jobs.

Under the "Vet IT" agreement, VA will offer vocational training and temporary jobs at its Washington headquarters to servicemembers recovering from traumatic injuries at the Army facility. More than 30 Walter Reed patients have already received similar on-the-job experience at VA headquarters since a pilot program began in September 2004. So far, 15 vets have been hired permanently by VA. Looking on at right are three of them (left to right): Matt Braiotta, Eric Franklin and Tristan Wyatt.



EMERSON SANDERS

## Major Thrift Savings Plan Changes Go Into Effect July 1

Major modifications have been made to the current Thrift Savings Plan (TSP), effective July 1. Both Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) and Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) employees are affected by these changes:

- There will be no more TSP open seasons.

- Eligible employees can start, change, stop or resume TSP contributions at any time. (Note: participants who make in-service financial hardship withdrawals may not make TSP contributions for a six-month period

following the withdrawal. Consequently, if such a participant elects to resume TSP contributions, the election cannot be effected for any pay date falling within the non-contribution period.)

- New Lifecycle Funds have been established to help manage your investments.

As a reminder, the current limits for TSP employee contributions are:

- FERS employees may elect to contribute up to 15 percent and CSRS employees up to 10 percent of their base pay in 2005.

- Participants who are

age 50 or older may be eligible to make catch-up contributions, up to an additional \$4,000 in calendar year 2005.

- In 2005, the IRS limit for regular TSP contributions is \$14,000 and for catch-up contributions \$4,000, totaling \$18,000 for tax-deferred TSP contributions.

- Beginning in 2006, the percentage limit of base pay that FERS and CSRS employees can contribute to TSP will be eliminated. Participants will be subject only to the IRS dollar limit.

- In 2006, the IRS limit is \$15,000 for regular contributions and \$5,000 in catch-up contributions, totaling \$20,000 for tax-deferred TSP contributions. Catch-up

contributions will be subject to increases to reflect inflation after 2006.

Employees are encouraged to continue using Employee Express, at [www.employeeexpress.gov](http://www.employeeexpress.gov), when making changes to TSP. Also, remember TSP's new toll-free numbers: 1-TSP-YOU-FRST (1-877-968-3778) and TDD 1-TSP-THRIFT5 (1-877-847-4385) for hearing impaired participants. For further assistance, employees may contact their human resources office; visit the Office of Human Resources Management and Labor Relations' Worklife and Benefits Service Web site at [vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/benefits/tsp.htm](http://vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/benefits/tsp.htm); or explore the TSP Web site at [www.tsp.gov](http://www.tsp.gov). **VA**



ROBERT TURTEL

### Blood Donors Save Lives

Secretary Nicholson participated in a Red Cross blood drive held in VA Central Office on July 20. "Blood donors touch lives and save lives," said Nicholson, who is on the national board of the American Red Cross. "It's a small gift with a huge impact."

### TSP Special Notice

This summer, TSP is introducing five new Lifecycle (L) Funds. With the TSP L Funds, you do not need to have the time, interest or knowledge to manage your TSP account. These new funds will put your investment on autopilot.

The April 2005 *TSP Highlights* article "Investing on Autopilot" provides an explanation of this new concept. This article is available on the TSP Web site at [www.tsp.gov](http://www.tsp.gov).

Each fund will be based on when you anticipate needing the money (your time horizon). You pick the fund that comes closest to your time horizon. The rest of the work will be done for you.

The funds are named for future decades. Your choices are:

- L Fund 2040
- L Fund 2030
- L Fund 2020
- L Fund 2010

- Income Fund (for those who are separated from federal service and withdrawing their accounts).

## Earl Morse

Earl Morse has made it possible for members of the Greatest Generation to see how America has honored them.

The National World War II Memorial was dedicated in 2004 to a generation whose youngest members are around 76 years old. The median age of living U.S. World War II veterans is 82 and more than 1,200 die each day, according to VA estimates.

Morse, a pilot and physician's assistant at the VA community-based outpatient clinic in Springfield, Ohio, didn't want these veterans to pass away without ever visiting the memorial that symbolizes America's appreciation for their sacrifice.

He came up with a plan in May when he and his dad, a Vietnam veteran, decided to rent an airplane to fly to Washington, D.C. The plane had two extra seats, so why not ask a couple of their World War II veteran friends if they'd like to join them for the trip?

On May 21, Morse, his father, and two friends took to the skies for the flight to Washington, D.C. Visiting the war memorials was an emotional experience for his father and friends. Once he saw how the trip impacted them, he knew he was on to something.

When he returned home, Morse met with his fellow pilots at the Aero Club at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton and asked if anyone was interested in flying World War II veterans to Washington, D.C., to visit their memorial. "I asked for volunteer pilots

to help me out, but not just to fly. They had to agree to pay 100 percent of the aircraft rental fee. The veteran was not to pay a penny for anything," he explained. Without hesitating, 11 pilots volunteered.

Morse also looked for a third party to sponsor the

service for the veterans. As the donations mounted, the VFW encouraged Morse to form a nonprofit organization. He called it Honor Flight.

Since the first flight in May, Honor Flight has brought 43 World War II veterans to visit their memo-

organization, Honor Flight is struggling to keep pace with demand. Morse knows he's on to something big, but he doesn't know how long it will last. For the time being, he will continue flying World War II veterans to the nation's capital to visit a memorial that, though it be-




COURTESY EARL MORSE

*Earl Morse, standing left, a physician's assistant at the VA community-based outpatient clinic in Springfield, Ohio, with a group of World War II veterans at the National World War II Memorial on July 9. Since May, a nonprofit group Morse set up has flown more than 40 World War II veterans to the nation's capital to see their memorial. Without his help, these veterans might never have been able to see it.*

initiative. That's when Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1031 of Springfield, Ohio, joined the effort. When word got out about the initiative, people throughout the community began donating money to the VFW post to pay for meals and a shuttle

in Washington, D.C. Honor Flight can transport 16 to 20 veterans a month. However, they received more than 100 applications in July and have a waiting list of more than 230 veterans.

"The program is exploding," said Morse. But as an

longs to them, once seemed impossibly out of reach. For more information on Honor Flight, go to the Web site [www.honorflight.org](http://www.honorflight.org). 

*By Jamie Brauner and Matt Bristol*

### Women's Health Care Similar to Men's at VA

Men and women receive remarkably similar outpatient care at VA medical facilities, according to a study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

The study looked at nine measures of quality care that are equally appropriate for women and men, including pneumonia and influenza vaccinations; colorectal cancer screenings; and eye examinations for diabetics, to determine what percent of VA patients received appro-

Today, women veterans make up approximately 10 percent of VA's patient workload. This percentage is expected to grow in the years ahead as women make up more of the military. Few previous studies have looked at disparities between men and women in ambulatory care settings other than VA's. Several studies, however, have shown that women often receive poorer care after being admitted to hospitals for congestive heart failure, coronary heart disease, and other common medical conditions.

"Quality of Ambulatory Care for Women and Men in the Veterans Affairs Health Care System," is the first to determine that men and women have shared equally in this advancement.

### Vaccine Reduces Shingles Risk

Relief from the painful symptoms of shingles is closer for millions of Americans, thanks to a pioneering study by VA researchers.

Shingles is a nerve and skin infection that afflicts half of the people who live to

age 85. It is caused by a reawakening of the virus that causes chickenpox. The symptoms can last months, or even years. Victims develop painful blisters, and some may suffer permanent nerve damage.

But a new vaccine tested in one of VA's largest medical studies has been shown to significantly lower the risk of contracting shingles and reduce the severity of symptoms. Dr. Michael N. Oxman, an infectious disease specialist at the VA San Diego Health Care System, led the research team that tested the experimental vaccine on 38,546 volunteers at 22 VA medical centers.

The participants, all of whom were age 60 or older and who previously had chickenpox, were randomly administered either the shingles vaccine or a placebo. Those who received the vac-

cine were 51 percent less likely to get shingles. And if they did get shingles, the vaccine dramatically reduced the intensity and duration of their pain.

"I think the results are quite clinically significant," Oxman told *The New York Times*. "There's a major reduction in the overall burden of illness of shingles." The results were reported in the June 2 edition of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

### VA Health Care 'the Best Around'

VA health care was touted as "the best around" in the July 18 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*. "Routinely criticized for decades for in-different care, attacked by Oliver Stone in 'Born on the Fourth of July,' the VA health system has performed major surgery on itself. The care provided to 5.2 million veterans by the nation's largest healthcare system has improved so much that often it is the best around," the article noted.

The article credits much of the turnaround to an organizational culture that emphasizes performance, accountability and safety, all of which are optimized through use of electronic medical records. Other hospital networks, such as Tenet Healthcare Corp., the nation's second-largest for-profit health care system, are now looking at VA as a model of how to run a large health care system, according to the article.

To read more about how VA has become one of America's best health care systems, go to [www.usnews.com/usnews/health/articles/050718/18va.htm](http://www.usnews.com/usnews/health/articles/050718/18va.htm). VA



A recent study found that women, who now make up about 10 percent of VA's patient workload, receive care that is similar to men's.

appropriate care for their gender. Men were more likely to receive appropriate services in five of the nine categories, women in the other four.

"Many recent studies have shown that the quality of care VA's health care system provides is second to none," said Dr. Jonathan B. Perlin, VA Under Secretary for Health, and one of the study's co-authors. "We are proud to demonstrate that this statement is true for women veterans as well as for men."

The study's lead author, Dr. Ashish K. Jha of the Harvard School of Public Health, believes that the equal care the study has demonstrated may be related to the large strides in health care quality VA has achieved in the past decade. According to a study recently completed by the RAND Corporation, VA patients now receive better care than the average American in 348 separate measures of health care quality.

The new study, titled



JACK WIDMAIER

*Cass Forkin, founder and executive director of Twilight Wish Foundation, presents Philadelphia VAMC nursing home resident Hilda with her wish—a 100th birthday party.*

## Making wishes come true

The Twilight Wish Foundation fulfilled wishes for all 240 veterans in the nursing home at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center during a special Flag Day celebration. The wishes ranged from bingo parties to compact discs, DVD players and televisions. One veteran even got an all-expenses paid trip to Albany, N.Y., for the 50-year reunion of his graduating class at the University of Buffalo. The Twilight Foundation was founded in 2003 to enrich the lives of seniors who have served others. "It was really an incredible effort on their part," said Judi A. Cheary, the hospital's public affairs director. Visit [www.twilightwishfoundation.org](http://www.twilightwishfoundation.org) for more information.

More than 100 VA Maryland Health Care System employees lined the front of the Baltimore VA Medical Center's breezeway to greet Soldier Ride 2005 in July. When the cyclists arrived the crowd erupted with cheers and applause to welcome the veterans bicycling across America to raise funds for the Wounded Warrior Project, which helps veterans severely injured in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world. Director **Dennis H. Smith** presented the riders with an award and, on behalf of the health system's employee association, a check

for \$425. The riders had a quick bite to eat and spent some time visiting with patients before heading on to Philadelphia.

When the elevators went out June 22 at the **John J. Pershing VA Medical Center** in Poplar Bluff, Mo., employees formed a human chain to deliver lunches up the stairwell to patients on the 3rd and 4th floors. All the elevators in the facility's six-floor main building stopped working at mid-morning and didn't return to service until 1 p.m. When lunchtime rolled

around, staff called for volunteers to help deliver the lunches. Employees from throughout the medical center—nurses, housekeepers, clerks, credit union staff, transcribers, business office staff, police, pharmacy staff and others—answered the call. "All of the patients received a warm meal. No trays were spilled, no one was injured and the human chain made deliveries in record time," noted staff assistant **Dewayne Coleman**.

Crisp white uniforms and traditional nurse caps brought a bit of nostalgia to the **El Paso, Texas, VA Health Care System**

during Nurse Appreciation Week in May. The response was so positive that several nurses began wearing them once a week. "It turns out there is a lot of emotion and recognition attached to those white uniforms that lend credibility to the nursing profession," explained nurse executive **Bonnie Baxter**. Baxter also began holding formal "capping" ceremonies for staff members who complete their nursing education. The capping ceremony, once considered a milestone in the profession, fell out of favor in the 1980s. **VA**

## A new American citizen

The VA Palo Alto Health Care System hosted a naturalization ceremony in July for one of its patients—19-year-old Angel Gomez, who was seriously wounded by an improvised explosive device while serving with the U.S. Marines in Iraq. Gomez, who is paralyzed on the right side of his body, raised his left hand to take the oath of citizenship administered by David Still, district director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Gomez is the second Marine to be naturalized at the Palo Alto VA while recovering from combat wounds.



CURT CAMPBELL

*Marine Lance Cpl. Angel Gomez, 19, is sworn in as an American citizen at the VA hospital in Palo Alto, Calif. Behind him are his mother, Antonia, and his father, Paulino, who have been by their son's side since he was injured in Iraq.*

## Birthday honors for volunteer



*The Atlanta VA Medical Center's oldest volunteer, Ginger Goldhammer, enjoys a 99th birthday celebration given in her honor. Two local TV stations featured Goldhammer during their evening newscasts.*

The Atlanta VA Medical Center hosted a birthday party in June for 99-year-old Ginger Goldhammer, who has been volunteering at the medical center for more than 34 years and has accumulated more than 37,000 volunteer hours. "I decided that my life belongs to volunteering," she said. "I wish I could do more." Goldhammer, whose late husband was a concentration camp survivor, came to the United States in 1947.

The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases selected **Kristin L. Nichol, M.D.**, chief of medicine at the **Minneapolis VA Medical Center** and professor of medicine at the University of Minnesota, as the first recipient of the Dr. Charles Merieux Award. The new award recognizes proven excellence in clinical and research activities, and dedication to improving public health. A French humanist and entrepreneur, Merieux was a pioneer in the worldwide struggle to eliminate in-

fectious diseases through immunization.

Several VA health systems were listed among the top 100 "Most Wired" hospitals for 2005, according to a report published in the July issue of *Hospitals & Health Networks*. They are the **Richard L. Roudebush VA Medical Center** in Indianapolis, the **VA Health Care Network Upstate New York** (Albany), the **VA New York/New Jersey Healthcare Network** (VISN 2—the Bronx), and the **VA Palo Alto Health Care System**. The nation's

100 Most Wired hospitals and health systems—those that have invested significantly in health information technology—have lower mortality rates than other hospitals, according to an analysis published with the report.

**Ricky J. Martin**, an administrative officer at the **White City, Ore., VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics**, received a Patriot Award from the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. He was recognized for supporting employees who serve in the National Guard and reserves. **Dalton Maurin**, a vocational rehabilitation therapist at the White City VA and member of the National Guard, nominated Martin for the award.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans se-

lected **Denver Mills** for the 2005 Veterans Affairs Staff Award for his work with homeless veterans. Mills, team leader of the **Concord, Calif., Vet Center**, founded East Bay Stand Down in 1999 to help homeless veterans and their families. The four-day event provides medical attention, legal aid, benefits counseling and a wide variety of other services. In the past four years, the event has helped more than 1,300 homeless veterans.

**John and Agnes Jurek**, both volunteers at the **Minneapolis VA Medical Center**, received the Volunteer Service Award from President Bush on June 17. The couple was recognized for their dedication to volunteering. In addition to their efforts at the VA medical center, they volunteer at their church and hold senior fitness and bingo classes. **VA**

## AMA ethics council appointment

Sharon Douglas, M.D., associate chief of staff for education and ethics at the G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery VA Medical Center in Jackson, Miss., was appointed to the American Medical Association (AMA)'s Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs. Douglas treats veterans at the Jackson VAMC, is a member of the Veterans Health Administration's National Ethics Committee, and is an associate professor of medicine at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. The council maintains and updates the 160-year-old AMA Code of Medical Ethics, widely recognized as the most comprehensive ethics guide for physicians.



*Douglas*

## Good advice that paid off

Diana Withrow, below, a licensed practical nurse with the spinal cord injury home care program at the Augusta, Ga., VA Medical Center, was making a home visit when she noticed that the husband of the patient's caregiver did not look well. When Withrow asked what was wrong, the man complained



that he'd been experiencing "crushing" chest pains for nearly two hours. Withrow took his vital signs and advised him to go to the nearest emergency room because he was displaying symptoms of a heart attack. After initially ignoring her advice, the man was convinced to go to the ER. His wife called the next morning to thank Withrow—her husband had indeed suffered a heart attack and was recuperating after having a stent inserted. "If Diana hadn't talked him into going to the hospital, I might not have my husband now," she said.

During a recent patient outing, **Bath, N.Y., VA Medical Center** employees **Mike Parks** and **Dave Austin** were forced to make a calculated decision to avert tragedy. The engine of their wheelchair bus caught fire, causing a failure of the chairlift, which made a speedy evacuation from the vehicle difficult, if not impossible. Parks and Austin reacted immediately, putting themselves in harm's way as they fought the blaze. Recreation therapist **Matt Leszyk** helped with the patients, providing water and keeping everyone calm as Parks and Austin ensured that the fire

was extinguished.

**VA Hudson Valley Health Care System's Terry Vogt**, assistant chief, Environmental Management Service, received a Civilian Service Medal from the city of Peekskill for his assistance in the apprehension of two violent robbery suspects on April 22. Vogt was honored for putting his own safety aside while providing vital information to the police. He followed the suspects as they fled the crime scene, keeping in contact with authorities until they could get to the alleged criminal's hideout.

**John Ramirez**, a blind rehabilitation specialist from

the **Birmingham, Ala., VA Medical Center**, successfully performed CPR when one of the veterans in his charge became dizzy and passed out during a recreational outing. Ramirez did the breathing and a bystander who happened to be a nurse performed the compressions until paramedics arrived.

**Bay Pines, Fla., VA Medical Center** Environmental Management Service employee **John Sullivan** was working on VA grounds recently when he heard a crash

and turned just in time to see an out-of-control car headed straight for him. Sullivan scrambled out of harm's way, and the vehicle plowed into a stand of bushes. After asking a passerby to summon emergency medical personnel for the driver, Sullivan jumped into the still-running car and forced the transmission into park. He tried to comfort and stabilize the victim to prevent further injury. Once emergency personnel arrived, Sullivan remained at the scene to assist as needed. **VA**

## Co-workers to the rescue

Sylvia Delsa, of the VHA Healthcare Retention & Recruitment Office in New Orleans, received a call from an employee's sister asking if he was at work. She told Delsa that she

had been unable to reach her brother at home, despite repeated attempts. The employee had called in sick the day before, but he hadn't called or reported for work that morning, so a concerned



*Jim Rhoades, Sylvia Delsa and James Washington, left to right, came to the aid of their stricken co-worker.*

Delsa and co-workers James Washington and Jim Rhoades went to the man's home. His car was in the driveway but there was no response to knocks on his door, so Delsa called the police. When they arrived, they were at first hesitant to force entry, but Delsa's persistent alarm that her co-worker might be in trouble just beyond the door convinced the officers to act decisively. Entering the home, they found the man unconscious and near death. He was taken by emergency personnel to a hospital intensive care unit. Thanks to his co-workers' efforts, the employee survived the medical emergency.