

The cover of the VA Vanguard magazine features a photograph of five men in suits standing in front of a fountain. The men are arranged in two rows: three in the back and two in the front. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a paved walkway, a fountain with water spraying upwards, and some greenery. The title 'VA Vanguard' is prominently displayed at the top, with 'VA' in yellow and 'anguard' in green. Below the title, the text 'U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' is written in green, and 'July/August 2009' is written in white. At the bottom right, there is a list of featured articles in yellow text.

VA Vanguard

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

July/August 2009

The New GI Bill

Stimulus Projects

VA Online: Wired for Service

Polytrauma Care



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On the cover

Veterans who have enrolled in the Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits program were among the attendees at a celebration rally headlined by President Obama at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., on Aug. 3 to mark the official kick-off of the program. Michael Johnson, second from left, is director of military services for the university. With him are student veterans (left to right) Jonathan Zapien, Jacobo Flores, James E. Martin and Joshua Lawton-Belous. *photo by Robert Turtill*

No National World War I Memorial?

I read the letter in the May/June issue, “WWI Memorial Needs Nation’s Attention,” and the Editor’s Note (page 3) with interest. I expected to see somewhere the mention of the National World War I Memorial located in the middle of Kansas City, Mo.

It may not be located on the National Mall, but a memorial does exist and has a very impressive museum and history all to itself. I wish you would correct the impression that I believe readers came away with that there is not a national memorial honoring those that served in the Great War. Please go to *www.theworldwar.org* and read for yourself.

Dennis L. Cress
IT Specialist
VA Health Resource Center
Topeka, Kan.

There might not be a worthy WWI memorial in Washington, D.C., but you should stop in Kansas City, Mo. The World War I Museum does the entire country proud.

It is an interactive museum with movies, artifacts, and maybe one of the most beautiful settings in the country. Stop by and take a look—there will be a veteran to give you a tour and fill you in on many stories and facts. You won’t be sorry.

Michele Leigh C. Hill
Chief Nurse Anesthetist
Leavenworth campus
VA Eastern Kansas HCS

Although the poor condition of the Washington, D.C., memorial is regrettable, I am happy to report that there is a beautiful National WWI Memorial right in the heart of America—Kansas City, Mo.

The Kansas City Liberty Memorial’s site was dedicated

in 1921 by the wartime leaders of five allied nations: Marshal Ferdinand Foch, of France; Adm. David Beatty, of Great Britain; Gen. Armando Diaz, of Italy; Lt. Gen. Alfonse Jacques, of Belgium; and Gen. John J. Pershing, of the United States. This was the only time in history that these leaders were together in one place.

Featuring a 217-foot tower, the iconic Liberty Memorial was built by the citizens of Kansas City and dedicated in 1926 by President Calvin Coolidge to honor those who served in the defense of liberty. In 1998, the people of Kansas City voted overwhelmingly to pass a half-cent sales tax to fund a major restoration of the historic landmark. And in 2004, Kansas City residents approved a bond issue to construct a world-class museum at Liberty Memorial.

The completely renovated and restored Liberty Memorial and the new 30,000-square-foot museum, which opened on Dec. 2, 2006 (built beneath the existing Liberty Memorial), comprise a national historic landmark that sits on a hill overlooking historic Union Station and Kansas City’s downtown skyline. The National World War I Museum in Kansas City is the first and only American museum solely dedicated to preserving the objects, history and personal experiences of a war whose impact still echoes in our world today.

Dr. Joseph H. Maino
Chief of Optometry
Kansas City VAMC

Editor’s Note: Technically, the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City is designated a “national symbol,” and it is among a number of nationally significant memorials and monuments recognizing

The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Mo., is designated as a “national symbol” recognizing World War I veterans.



COURTESY OF LIBERTY MEMORIAL

World War I veterans, such as one in Indianapolis built shortly after the Kansas City memorial. However, none of them, including the District of Columbia World War I Memorial, is designated the “national memorial.”

Two bills have been introduced in Congress—one to designate the Washington, D.C., World War I Memorial as the national memorial to World War I veterans, and the

other to so designate the Kansas City Liberty Memorial.

Correction

An article in the May/June issue about Randi Woodrow receiving a GEICO Public Service Award (page 36) incorrectly identified her as spearheading the first VA-sponsored National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic in 2008. Woodrow actually headed up the surfing venue at the Clinic.

We Want to Hear from You

Have a comment on something you’ve seen in *Vanguard*? We invite reader feedback. Send your comments to *van-guard@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. 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.



Investing in Veterans: Guaranteed to Pay Dividends

Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs

These days, even Warren Buffett is having trouble finding a safe place to put his money. But here's an investment that's guaranteed to pay dividends for years to come: America's veterans. As stimulus spending, the nation could hardly do better.

Few of us remember that the first GI Bill was intended principally to prevent a post-war depression. Lawmakers passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 less out of gratitude than out of fear—fear that when the war was over, an army of unemployed ex-servicemen would again march on Washington, as the Bonus Army did in 1932.

To keep the peace and spur the economy, Congress offered veterans free tuition, help in buying homes, and a year's worth of unemployment assistance. It turned out to be one of the best single investments the United States has ever made, arguably as important as the Louisiana Purchase.

The American Dream has always included free title to property. Settlers came to this continent to own their own farms, and the veterans of our early wars were rewarded with acreage. The GI Bill updated the American Dream to include home ownership and college education.

Low-interest, no-money-down home loans secured by the Veterans Administration sparked a boom in the construction and manufacturing industries, as veterans left their farms and tenements for new homes in the suburbs, connected by new roads and served by new schools, church-

es and shopping centers.

Free college tuition shattered the notion that higher education was only for the rich, opening new social, economic and intellectual horizons to the humblest veterans. It also prepared a generation of young, highly motivated men and women to take the lead in every field of endeavor—business, science, religion, government, education, and the arts.

Historian Milton Greenberg wrote, "By the time

Free college tuition shattered the notion that higher education was only for the rich, opening new social, economic and intellectual horizons to the humblest veterans.

initial GI Bill eligibility for World War II veterans expired in 1956, the United States was richer by 450,000 trained engineers, 240,000 accountants, 238,000 teachers, 91,000 scientists, 67,000 doctors, 22,000 dentists, and more than a million other college-educated individuals."

Educated by the GI Bill and motivated in part by the bill's incentive to home ownership, the veterans of the Greatest Generation engineered a post-war economic boom that made the United States the world's largest economy, the leader of the free world, and the ultimate victor in the Cold War.

Today's veterans offer the same promise of leadership, which the Post-9/11 GI Bill helps fulfill. The new GI Bill is the most comprehensive educational benefits package offered to veterans since the original one. It provides money for tuition and books, a liv-

ing allowance, and the option to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children.

But veterans need help from colleges and universities. Many veterans haven't taken the usual route to college; they haven't spent the last four years studying for the SAT. They have spent those years risking their lives for those around them, practicing teamwork and self-discipline, and learning the real-world value of peace and freedom.

benefit Aug. 1.

As a nation, we face tremendous uncertainties and challenges—economic, diplomatic, environmental, and social. Our country is at a crossroads, and we need motivated, energetic and highly-educated young people to help us find solutions. We need to find ways, as America has before, to turn adversity into opportunity. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is a very good place to start.

In signing the first GI

Veterans return home with a new appreciation for the blessings the rest of us take for granted. They are more mature than their peers and eager to move on in life. They are accustomed to working hard and making the grade. They have learned to live and work beside others from diverse backgrounds. They have disciplined themselves to accomplishing goals and planning for the future.

Yet all too often schools look only at veterans' standardized test scores or academic records from their previous lives, when they were still just kids. This is both unfair and unwise. We owe our veterans the chance to succeed, and they make the best students.

We can all help by getting the word out to veterans about the need to sign up for the new benefit. VA began accepting applications in May. Eligible veterans who signed up in time begin using the

Bill, President Roosevelt assured veterans that "the American people do not intend to let them down." In the decades since, veterans have proven that they will not let America down. They are well worth our investment. **VA**

Who is Eligible?

The new GI Bill is for veterans who served on active duty after Sept. 10, 2001. The veteran must have served a total of at least 90 days after Sept. 10, 2001, or served at least 30 continuous days on active duty after Sept. 10, 2001, and received a discharge for disability. Most veterans will remain eligible for benefits for 15 years from the date of last discharge or release from active duty of at least 90 continuous days.



The New GI Bill: Renewing Our Compact With Veterans

Patrick W. Dunne
Under Secretary for Benefits

George Washington once said, “The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their country.”

I know every Veterans Benefits Administration employee takes our first President’s words very seriously. We strive to keep that covenant with our veterans every day. In doing so, we keep faith with the American people, who finance and support our mission.

The benefits we deliver to veterans have long-lasting effects. Since the inception of the GI Bill education program in 1944, nearly 22 million veterans have received education and training benefits—and gone on to be leaders in their communities and professions. On Aug. 1, we began yet another chapter in the GI Bill story by launching the Post-9/11 GI Bill education program, the most comprehensive and generous veterans education benefits package since the original GI Bill.

That program represents a renewal of America’s compact with our veterans and rightfully can be called the “new GI Bill.” For VA, and particularly VBA, it posed one of our greatest operational challenges since World War II—to implement an entirely new approach to benefits calculation and payment under intense public scrutiny and expectation in little more than a year.

We did it, with the dedication, hard work and brain

power of thousands of VBA employees; the support and encouragement of Congress, our veterans service organizations, the Department of Defense and numerous other stakeholders; and the leadership of VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki and his vision of a 21st-century VA that is veteran-focused, results-driven and forward-looking.

The new GI Bill education program is truly transformational. It is a paradigm shift in the scope and manner of benefits payment philosophy and process within VBA.

It is veteran-centered, focused on meeting the eligible veteran’s personal goals and needs and covering all educational expenses. It is forward-

looking. This program will carry VA benefits programs into the 21st century and guide our benefits payment system development. Starting in August, a new generation of veterans has their chance to live out their dreams when they receive benefits from a new GI bill designed for the 21st century.

President Obama joined us at VA earlier this year as we celebrated 20 years as a Cabinet-level agency. Speaking of our obligation to veterans, he said, “... when our fellow citizens commit themselves to shed blood for us, that binds our fates with theirs in a way that nothing else can. And in the end, caring for those who

have given their fullest measure of devotion to us—and for their families—is a matter of honor, as a nation and as a people.”

In his words and in his budget, the President has made it clear that caring for our veterans is one of his top priorities. And Secretary Shinseki has pledged to transform VA into a 21st-century organization that meets our President’s and our veterans’ expectations.

As we seek to transform VA over the next five years, we will continually challenge ourselves to find ways of working smarter and more efficiently. We will continue to aggressively leverage the world’s best practices, our knowledge base

the support we provide. Our veterans will measure us by our accomplishments.

As under secretary, my vision is to provide veterans and their families with the highest-quality benefits and services, and to do so by adhering to the highest standards of compassion, commitment, excellence, professionalism, integrity, accountability and stewardship.

We must strive each and every day to fulfill President Lincoln’s promise, “To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan,” by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s veterans.

There are many challeng-

A new generation of veterans has their chance to live out their dreams when they receive benefits from a new GI Bill designed for the 21st century.

and our emerging technology to increase and improve our capabilities to serve veterans. That’s what we did in implementing the new GI Bill education program and will continue to do as we administer that and other benefits for veterans.

It will require transforming VA into an agile, adaptive organization that is capable of leading change. As we focus on producing the best results for veterans, we will always be forward-looking, thinking of how we can do things better for veterans.

At the end of each day, our true measure of success will be the timeliness, the quality and the consistency of

es that lie ahead for VBA. I am confident that our employees possess the experience and leadership to successfully work toward Secretary Shinseki’s vision of a 21st-century VA. [VA](#)

About the New GI Bill

Enacted into law last year, this program authorizes the most extensive educational assistance opportunity since the passage of the original GI Bill in 1944. Veterans began enrolling in the new program on May 1; VA begins distributing tuition payments to schools participating in the program on Aug. 1.

Spending Money the Right Way

VA has been charged with spending \$1.4 billion on projects funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. How is it going?

How hard is it to spend nearly one-and-a-half billion dollars? Easier said than done, if you ask VA Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance Ed Murray.

"It's definitely a lot of work and there's no way my office could have handled it on our own," he said. "We had to solicit the staff offices in the administrations to find out who was appropriate to help and then find the right people that could contribute."

Murray and a host of other VA senior leaders and employees are charged with spending the \$1.4 billion for VA projects funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). They have 24 months to spend the money with no additional personnel, while at the same time provide a level of transparency never before seen in federal government.

"If you would have asked us before we started, we would have said it couldn't be done—we would have been wrong," Murray said. "These projects are an example of how we can pull together to meet goals with the resources we have to get the job done."

Once the team was assembled from VA senior staff, the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration and the National Cemetery Administration, they began working to define the projects with the highest priorities that fell within the Secretary's three areas of concern.

"We had about a month to identify projects and develop a plan," Murray said. "We were looking for projects that fell into one of three categories: patient safety, security of the environment and energy."



ROBERT TURTEL

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance Ed Murray is leading the effort to spend and account for the department's allocation of stimulus money.

The bulk of the projects fell under VHA, which was allotted \$1 billion through ARRA. Of that amount, \$601 million is being used for non-recurring maintenance projects to correct, replace, upgrade and modernize existing infrastructure and utility systems for VA medical centers. VA's team placed an immediate focus on safety, security and infrastructure deficiencies.

A substantial number of energy initiatives are being funded with VHA's remaining \$399 million, which will be used for energy priorities—projects incorporating energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Other major projects or expenditures under ARRA include:

■ VBA will spend about \$150 million to hire 2,293 temporary claims processors; of those, 230 will be devoted to helping with claims submitted for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits beginning Aug. 1.

■ VHA received \$150 million to provide financial assistance to the states to construct or acquire nursing home, domiciliary or adult day health care facilities.

■ The Office of Information & Technology received \$50 million to provide software development, staff, and associated supplies and equipment to support implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Remaining funds will support upgrades to other VBA systems.

■ VBA also received an estimated \$700 million for Veteran Economic Recovery Payments, one-time payments of \$250 to eligible veterans and survivors to help mitigate the effects of the current economy.

■ The Office of Inspector General received \$1 million to audit and investigate applicable VA programs, grants and projects receiving ARRA funds and to perform necessary oversight.

■ NCA received \$50 million for monument and memorial repairs to honor the final resting place of American veterans in its national shrines.

All of the VA Recovery Act dollars will in some way benefit veterans—improving patient care areas, access and facilities, providing direct veteran payments, improving infrastructure and systems, and enhancing national cemeteries.

“Once we collected, vetted and scrubbed the projects, we had to let Congress know what we were going to do and where we were going to do it,” Murray said. “We broke everything down by state and congressional district to show exactly what was being done where, and how much was being budgeted for each project.”

Transparency did not stop at the congressional level. The VA team also created a Web portal where they could post the information and update it on a regular basis so American taxpayers could see exactly where their money was going and how it was being used.

“We have never seen this level of transparency in government,” said Murray. “When they say ‘transparency,’ they mean transparency. And it goes well beyond just showing how much money is being spent.”

In addition to posting the projects and costs online, businesses are also required to report how many jobs were retained or created through their award of a contract for an ARRA project.

“The purpose of ARRA is to put Americans back to work and stimulate the economy,” said Murray. “The

VA is targeting nearly one-quarter of its stimulus funds to investments in clean energy generation and energy conservation, like this solar-powered electricity system at the Dallas VA Medical Center.



BRUCE MORRIS

Administration wants the checks cut as soon as possible to stimulate the economy.”

Murray said VA is doing that as quickly as possible, but things still have to be done right. Projects have to meet one of the three priorities, be properly solicited, competitively bid, and the work must be done to satisfaction before the contractor can be paid.

“We are still required to follow the acquisition process to the letter

and it’s been a challenging task with the additional reporting requirements, but the job is getting done,” he said.

“We have been able to leverage technology to our advantage by using the Electronic Contract Management System. Without it, there is no way we could have the level of accountability and tracking of the recovery process we need.”

Under the guidance of President Obama’s administration, all federal

agencies should buy American when possible, and 100 percent of the projects should be competitively bid. VA is following that guidance and at the same time exceeding its small business and socioeconomic goals. Under executive order, federal agencies have established goals for the amount of contracting dollars they will spend with small businesses owned by groups such as minorities, women and service-disabled veterans.

"While all of our projects are 100 percent competitive, we've found that we can bid some projects among veteran-owned businesses," Murray explained.

"While the project is still competitive, veteran-owned businesses are competing with each other for the project and not other companies. Currently, we are spending about 30 percent with veteran-owned businesses."

VA's goal for doing business with service-disabled small businesses is 7 percent, compared to the 3 percent goal for all federal agencies. To date, VA has awarded nearly 38 percent.

While the department has a handle on spending ARRA funds, with nearly 25 percent of the funds already obligated, the process is in a constant state of flux, with guidance changing weekly and additional reporting measures added to increase transparency. Because of this, VA leadership has been required to work closely with other federal agencies, as well as the White House, to maintain its high level of productivity and transparency.

"We've been working very closely with OMB (Office of Management and Budget) on reporting the financial status of what has been obligated and

disbursed," said Murray. "We highlight these in a report each week and talk with OMB about twice a day."

OMB is not the only player when it comes to VA spending ARRA funds. The department had to work very closely with the Social Security Administration, the Railroad Retirement Board and the Department of the Treasury to make the Veteran Economic Recovery Payments to eligible veterans. VA had to work with each to ensure that duplicate payments weren't being made. More than 1.8 million veterans have received checks totaling more than \$463 million.



Ed Ryan, left, general engineer at the William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center in Columbia, S.C., reviews plans for a stimulus project to install elevators in the facility's primary care addition with Brooks Pollard, engineering technician.

VA Chief of Staff John R. Gingrich also reports VA's recovery status to the President's Cabinet Affairs office on a weekly basis and participates in conference calls every Monday and Thursday with Vice President Joe Biden's staff to discuss Recovery Act programs.

"Every week the reporting process continues to be tweaked and we have done things under ARRA that we have never been required to do before," Murray said. "For example, we have had the Inspector General's Office involved from the beginning to audit and investigate applicable pro-

grams, grants and projects receiving ARRA funds and to perform necessary oversight."

VA has also been very aggressive in releasing information about ARRA publicly. Detailed information about each project has been provided to Congress, the news media and directly to the public through www.va.gov/recovery and www.recovery.gov.

"We are currently developing ways that the public can ask questions about the projects through the Web portal," Murray said. "We also plan to have Webinars for recipient reporting, where the awardees will report the number of jobs retained or created through the recovery projects."

As of July, VA had obligated 25 percent of its ARRA funds and plans to obligate another 20 to 25 percent by the end of the year.

"We would like to have approximately 50 percent of the recovery funds obligated by the end of the year and all of the funds obligated by the end of fiscal year 2010," Murray said.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of

2009 was signed into law by President Obama on Feb. 17 in an unprecedented effort to jumpstart America's economy, create or save millions of jobs, and put a down payment on addressing long-neglected challenges so the country can thrive in the 21st century. VA is obligating the funds to improve benefits and services to veterans, while at the same time stimulating the economy in and around the communities that are home to hundreds of VA facilities and millions of the nation's veterans. **VA**

By Gary Hicks

Wired for Service

VA is reaching and interacting with veterans online.



ED MCKAY

“The VA is finally thinking ‘outside the box’ as we used to say in the Army. The new Web site design is hip and up-to-date to fit our generation of veterans,” Romeo H, an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, typed Feb. 5 into the newly-developed Welcome Home Web site and blog. “I really am pleased that the VA has a presence in the social networking world (i.e., Facebook, etc.). We all use these sites to connect with friends and family, and having the VA there is awesome.”

The Veterans Health Administration is “there” and just about everywhere when it comes to social media on the Internet these days. VHA redesigned its Web site, and veterans can interact with VA on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Second Life, their cell phones, and even battle for benefits in World of Warcraft. O.K., scratch that last one.

“Social media and Web 2.0 are a collection of evolving tools on the Internet that provide more channels and conduits for engaging audiences today,” said Richard “Chip” Harman, associate director of VHA Web Communications. “The Veterans Health Administration has been using a vari-

ety of these tools as additional means to keep America’s veterans aware of how VHA can help them, and learn of their needs.”

From a complete virtual world to an occasional message or “tweet” on their phone, veterans now have VA their way when it comes to communications.

YouTube (www.youtube.com/user/Veteranshealthadmin)

VHA started its own YouTube channel in 2008. YouTube is a video-sharing Web site and the home of many Internet sensations. Because anyone can post a video, and viewers usually rate the videos they like and send them all over the Internet, YouTube also gave birth to the concept of a message becoming viral, which refers to videos being shared to the point that they hit more computers than a virus, which in this case is a good thing.

Now, there are more than 60 VA-generated video clips circulating the Web, including widely-viewed and somewhat viral public service announcements featuring Gary Sinise and Deborah Norville to promote VA’s suicide prevention efforts. With more than 1,000 subscribers already

signed up to receive any new VA video content automatically, YouTube will offer an increasing opportunity to directly inform veterans about VA services available to them. Submissions for VHA’s YouTube channel are handled through VHA Web Communications, but the staff warns that any content created for posting still has to be 508-compliant, or encoded with subtitles for the hearing-impaired.

“When www.usa.gov created a list of federal agencies with YouTube pages, we added more than 600 subscribers,” Harman said. “Every time we add a new video about women veterans, prosthetics research or safe driving, we get a dozen or more new subscribers. It is clear that friends pass along these links, and some of them like what they see and subscribe.”

Facebook (www.facebook.com/VeteransHealth)

Facebook is a social media Web site that provides its members with their own pre-structured Web page, or wall, that provides space to post images, video, links to other Web sites and most typically, brief messages about the subscribing member’s thoughts or life at any given time. Members then become “friends” with other members

through an invite system, which allows members to view their friends' pages or become fans of organizational pages. VHA developed a Facebook page in 2008 and it already has more than 3,300 fans checking in to view photos and information about national and local events.

Generally, VHA Web Communications chooses content from other VA Web sites, but anyone looking to post specific information or promote an event is welcome to send the content to Web Communications as long as there is an accompanying URL. Because most members rely on a central page that simply provides the latest materials posted from every Facebook contact they have made, information posted to Facebook needs to be short and frequent to keep VA on a member's page. Also, because it is an interactive site, any post VA makes is likely to receive a lot of comments that are all open to public view.

"This is a good thing, though," Harman said. "Fans typically comment positively about new content. When comments are negative, we can either engage online, or offer suggestions offline if appropriate."

"But we have found that frequently the other fans respond to negative comments with their own positive comments and experiences

with VHA resources. It is far more effective for fans to see other veterans standing up for VA than for any of us to do it—and it happens a lot more than I would have guessed."

Facilities that want to reach out in their local communities can seek approval through VHA Web Communications to start their own Facebook pages. Currently, five VA medical

Twitter (www.twitter.com/VHAVeterans)

Like Facebook, Twitter is all about staying in touch with subscribers who voluntarily sign up to receive your messages, or "tweets." Unlike Facebook, Twitter only allows text and only 140 characters of text at a time. Messages are brief and always focused on an instant report of what is happening.

VHA's Twitter feed has more than 500 followers, including most of the veterans service organizations. This is important because every "tweet" VA sends out with new information for veterans is also retweeted (shared) through the VSO networks to amplify VA's ability to reach veterans directly with important news about changes in benefits, volunteer opportunities or special events.

Second Life

Since July 2008, VHA has had an information facility in the virtual world of Second Life. Second Life is a three-dimensional virtual

world in the form of a computer game, where users can socialize, connect and create just about anything using voice and text chat features. Subscribers to the free software create an "avatar," or virtual person, with which to explore the virtual world and interact with other members living a literal second life.

In May, VHA launched its own

Twitter, YouTube and Facebook are among the social networking sites VA now has a presence on; right: the YouTube channel was launched last year.



ROBERT TURTIL

centers have started pages, with many more waiting for approval, but permission comes with a warning.

"You have to feed the beast," Harman said. "Social media is a great way to get in touch and stay in touch with veterans, but it only works if the information flow is constant and engaging. This doesn't create the content for you."

island with a variety of facilities for and about veterans, including an art gallery, a memorial garden, and a ski lodge with slopes for adaptive skiing. Veterans visiting the site can view billboards with VHA information, watch VA video clips, and meet other veterans. Future plans will allow veterans to join cultural events and look for other veterans, attend informational seminars on benefits and health care at the island auditorium, or even visit a virtual veterans center for mental health assistance at the island lodge.

“One of the beautiful things about Second Life is that it will allow veterans to explore VA a little from the comfort of their own computer before they decide to walk through a medical center door,” Harman said. “We may even be able to offer assistance to vet-

erans who would otherwise be too shy or overwhelmed to try us at first. This is a tremendous outreach tool with potential for further service.”

Blogs

One of the earliest forms of social media is one of the latest areas in which VHA has branched out to truly embrace veterans and give them a voice in their health care. Some of VHA’s Web sites now include blogs for veterans to engage, most notably the OEF/OIF Web site for returning service members.

A blog, when done correctly, reads like a short letter or editorial from VA to the veteran readers. Underneath the entry, veterans have the ability to comment on what they read. Just like with Facebook, opening the gates of communication to veterans

Who’s Online?

- 60 percent of the visitors to www.va.gov and associated Web sites are veterans.
- 38 percent of the veterans using VA Web sites are under 45.
- 26 percent are using Facebook.
- 5 percent are using Twitter.

means the bad gets posted along with the good, but unlike Facebook, VA has a degree of control over what is posted on a blog. Still, blocking out all negative feedback from a blog is one of the quickest ways to kill it.

“As long as the feedback is on topic, avoids offensive language or personal attacks, we recommend allowing it to post,” Harman said. “Veterans will not participate in a blog that doesn’t seem genuine, and any blog without a single negative comment looks that way. Again, letting the bad comments in also allows other veterans to set the record straight for VA, which is strong witness to other readers, and certainly a welcome read for VA employees too.”

Since the way veterans communicate continues to change, VHA has worked diligently to explore the best avenues to keep wired veterans aware of the services VA can provide. The efforts are noticed in the veteran community and are producing results far beyond outreach. The primary Web site for OEF/OIF veterans, www.oefoif.va.gov, succeeded in providing help for a possibly suicidal veteran after a comment on a blog regarding post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

“This isn’t just about reaching the new generation of veterans returning from the global war on terrorism,” Harman said. “More than 65 percent of the veteran users we’ve identified are over 45. Social media has been embraced by all ages and ranges of people. It only makes sense for VA to embrace it as well.” **VA**

By Ryan Steinbach





CURT CAMPBELL

Chris Downey, an architect with SmithGroup, walks around the exterior of VA's current Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto, Calif., with Tim Langford, chief of the center.

A Unique Perspective on Design for the Blind

Architect's disability helps him create a building that serves the needs of visually-impaired veterans.

It looked like a standard meeting between architectural consultants and VA clinicians to discuss how to build a new blind rehabilitation center at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System—except that sitting at one end of the table was an architect with a white cane who looked more like one of the patients he was working for than a consultant.

Fifteen months ago, Chris Downey was just another architect from Oakland, Calif. Then he developed a benign tumor that slowly encircled the intersection of optic nerves. The tumor began to push the nerves out of position. His eyeballs looked fine, but an MRI revealed a golf ball-sized growth causing blind spots. After extensive surgery and many hopeful days and months, he eventually lost all of his sight.

He accepted blindness right away. What he couldn't accept was being told he needed to look for a new career.

"For architects, being blind is incredibly foreign because the profession is so visually grounded and focused in its techniques and in its imagination," said Downey. "But I learned of a blind architect in Portugal, and that was all I needed to know."

His previous firm fired Downey, but SmithGroup, which was doing a joint venture with Design Partnerships, brought him on to help design a 170,000-square-foot Polytrauma and Blind Rehabilitation Center for VA Palo Alto.

"When I first met Chris, I thought he would be able to teach us a few useful tricks and that would be it," said Eric Meub, vice president of SmithGroup. "Instead, Chris has been able to include the entire team in his learning experience. His input has greatly refined not only the way we think of perception but also how we accommodate the range of sensory abilities. These lessons will certainly enhance the success of VA's Blind Rehabilitation Center."

According to Downey, his

greatest contribution is in the mere act of bringing the perspective of a visually impaired person into the studio on a daily basis as the project evolves. Through this sharing of his perceptions, the entire team could see how he navigated through space, how he learned the environment through the tap of a cane and how he got lost or disoriented in the office as he moved into unfamiliar or confusing spaces.

“Chris has brought a unique perspective to the building design process,” said Katelin Haver, VA Palo Alto facility planner. “He is able to use his disability to assist the design team in creating a building that serves the special needs of visually-impaired veterans. His involvement has helped create an excellent new building for veterans.”

Take, for example, his advice on the selection of flooring materials. In

a typical interior design, color is used to indicate significant transitions in space. That approach would not work for the seeing-impaired. So for this project, Downey worked with interior designers to put together a pallet of materials based not only on the visual qualities, but also on the tactile and audible composition so that it can be perceived with the touch of a cane.

The team even developed embossed (tactile) architectural prints with Braille text to share with clients who would otherwise rely on strictly verbal presentations of the design. “This is very exciting to me and we are continuing to develop this technology to equally engage and involve all staff and veterans’ groups regardless of their sight or visual impairment,” said Downey.

Prior to working on this project, Downey was trying to figure out how he could stay in the profession of ar-

chitecture by finding some tools, technologies or tasks that would let him work around his blindness. “That was a real head-scratcher that has little in the way of precedence in the architectural world,” he said.

“Now I feel like I have the opportunity to work because of my blindness,” Downey said. “My disability is leading me into an architectural experience that is totally focused on helping others. Oddly enough, I’m quite confident that I’ll end up having a greater architectural impact than I ever could have imagined in my prior practice.

“It’s not easy and I have a long way to go, but the chance to work on VA’s Western Blind Rehabilitation Center has opened the door to the meaningful career that I always wanted and aspired to.” **VA**

By Kerri Childress



CURT CAMPBELL

Architect Chris Downey meets with staff at VA’s Western Blind Rehabilitation Center to discuss plans for the new center.

A 'Dash' of Mandatory Training

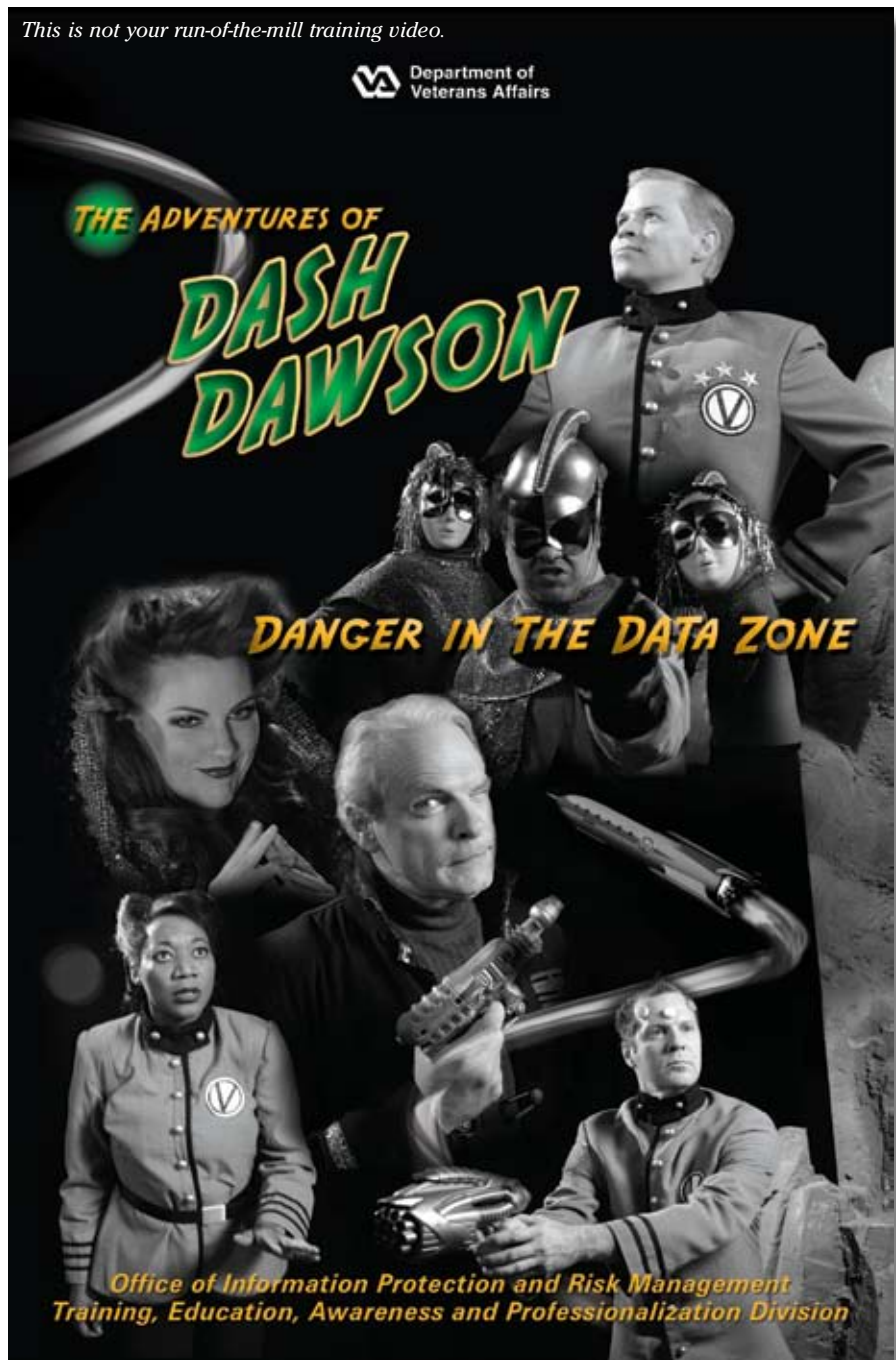
Can a government training film really be both educational and entertaining?

“Through the farthest reaches of outer space to the infinite corners of micro space,” VA’s Employee Education System and Training Education Awareness and Professionalization, the training division of the Office of Information Protection and Risk Management, have milked a galaxy of sci-fi cinema clichés to create the most exciting, retro, battle-the-bad-guy piece of mandatory education to grace the video screen.

As word spreads, and training deadlines come due, VA audiences around the nation will be lining up to sit back and take their information security awareness medicine with their microwave popcorn. When the house lights come up, voices might call for “more mandatory training!” That is, as long as the course is charted by Dash Dawson.

“The Adventures of Dash Dawson: Danger in the Data Zone” takes its place among such government training film favorites as “Duck and

This is not your run-of-the-mill training video.



PHOTOGRAPHY-KATIE CONNETTE/POSTER DESIGN-JOSEPH RADFORD

Cover,” “Sex Hygiene” and “Uncratering and Assembly of the P-47 Thunderbolt Airplane.” This episode of Dash Dawson could draw in midnight madness crowds of other government agency viewers starved for information security tips.

Join us now as we go back in time for the inspiration of the characters and story. Back to the great, the mediocre and the downright awful sci-fi

cinema and Saturday morning serials of yesteryear. Produced as homage rather than a parody of the genre of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, “The Adventures of Dash Dawson: Danger in the Data Zone” goes beyond mere over-acting and cliché-driven dialogue punctuated by special effects a high school sophomore on a budget with a slightly used fire extinguisher would drool over. And these elements are

precisely where its charm lies.

The mission of the crew of the spaceship Galahad, our mission, is to “patrol the Data Zone and keep it safe from attack.” “The Adventures of Dash Dawson: Danger in the Data Zone” has it all: Battle scenes in (cyber) space, fisticuffs, Greek mythological references, really bad costumes and hot-lipped villainesses. But along with over-the-top drama and slapstick comedy, Dash Dawson serves up a message management says we can all use.

The project’s concept was a collaborative effort. “It was a lot of hard work by a group of very talented individuals,” said Jim Haines, who is responsible for TEAP’s video production and graphic design in Falling Waters, W.Va., and served as technical advisor for the film. “We built an entire spaceship interior as well as the models for the action scenes. We wanted to make it an entertaining piece to avoid what we call the ‘snooze factor’—that time when an employee turns into a zombie while watching a training film. Maybe they’ll come back just to enjoy the production value, and who knows, they might pick up more information as a result.”

Repeated viewings reveal little elements that executive producer Andrew Stephens, of EES in Salt Lake City, discreetly used to keep audience attention at its peak. “Oh, you mean the army surplus radios and the Pennsylvania agricultural scale on the bridge? That was to keep costs down,” said Stephens. “We also used a lot of VA-owned production equipment, editing systems and personnel to avoid a great deal of expense.”

Haines added that the program was written and produced without specific reference to VA so that it can be used by other federal agencies, saving taxpayer dollars.

When we meet our dimpled hero, Dash Dawson (Tim “Buster” Hall) has just been promoted from cadet to V-fleet’s newest information security officer. With Boy Scout enthusiasm and perfect white teeth, he constantly

warns crewmembers about appropriate ways to protect information, including the need to use strong and unshared passwords and keep equipment safe: “There could be an alien virus on board or an alien life form like the data worms of Gamma Nine!”

Character development borrows liberally from contemporary sci-fi culture. “Star Trek” fans don’t have to look hard to see familiar characters such as Uhura-like communications officer Naomi Waters (Yolanda Wood), who is devastated by the disappearance of her brother Jim, commander of the Aurora, which was snatched by evil Empress Luxor’s (Amber Woody) Mirror Men somewhere in the Data Zone. And there is the Data-like Lt. Bolt (Joel Bishop), the blind weapons and navigation officer who has “many other talents,” quick reflexes and the ability to show emotion not being among them.

As 21st-century VA employees, we can relate to the often fallible, always pompous Adm. Thomas Alten (Michael Flynn), “one of the finest military minds to serve mankind.” As “planet Earth’s best hope,” Alten is plucked from 200 years in hyper-sleep, perhaps placed there to save on FTE. He is our conduit from the still-infant digital world to the future, and like a lot of us, he becomes a veritable treasure trove of information for enemies to use. We learn, as he does, how to protect information.

By the end of this mini-epic, VA employees will have completed training documents dangling in front of them (when the program is viewed at approved venues), and our heroes will have saved the day: “We’ve stopped you for now, Luxor.” But the audience is warned that she, or others, will try again, and soon: “But if all the officers of V-fleet (that’s us) stay on our toes, we can keep stopping you!”

As the final frames flicker on the screen, the narrator reminds us of these important tactical tips:

- Know your ISO and report any incidents at once.

- Protect confidentiality of everyone in the Data Zone.
- No unauthorized usage of VA equipment.
- Keep equipment secure—that goes for thumb drives particularly.
- Use strong passwords and don’t share them with anyone.
- Beware of social engineering. Don’t be lulled into bringing strange items or persons onto your computer.

When the Rules of Behavior form is signed, verification of training is documented. “The Adventures of Dash Dawson: Danger in the Data Zone” is one of two modalities that can be used to fulfill annual information security training requirements. It must be shown in an organized presentation by a facility ISO to receive full credit through the Learning Management System. You bring the popcorn. Mandatory training—this won’t hurt a bit. **VA**

By Robert Turtill

Dash Flash

“The Adventures of Dash Dawson: Danger in the Data Zone” has received a Cine Golden Eagle Award for Cinematography and two Bronze Telly Awards in the categories of Art Direction and Videography/Cinematography.

The Cine Golden Eagle Award recognizes excellence in the production of film, television and new media. The Dash Dawson video competed against nearly 1,000 entries in 32 categories. The Telly Awards honor the best local, regional and cable television commercials and programs, as well as the finest video and film productions. The Dash Dawson video competed against more than 14,000 entries from all 50 states and five continents.

For more information on “The Adventures of Dash Dawson: Danger in the Data Zone” video, contact your local information security officer.

Finding a 'New Normal'

VA's polytrauma system of care has grown and evolved to rehabilitate veterans with life-altering injuries.

Jim Vandenheuvél's life hung in the balance after an improvised explosive device struck his Humvee while he was on patrol with his National Guard unit in Iraq in 2002.

The blast struck the driver's side, lifting the Humvee and knocking it into a nearby ditch. He remembered looking around and seeing that the driver had been killed. His left femur was shattered; his left leg was dangling. He had a severe head wound. Vandenheuvél was not sure he was going to make it.

He would not remember anything after that until six months later at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. "They were almost certain that I was going to be a bed patient the rest of my life," he recalled.

Now, five years after undergoing surgery and extensive rehabilitation in VA's polytrauma system of care, Vandenheuvél is going to college and snowboarding.

Kara Wooten, a single mother of a now 3-year-old son, saw the Army as an opportunity, a fresh start, when she joined in 2002. But her future changed drastically after she was exposed to blasts from IEDs while serving in Iraq.

The last blast in July 2007 knocked her out and she had to be medevaced to a field hospital. After undergoing therapy at the VA polytrauma rehabilitation center in Palo Alto, Calif., Wooten returned to her Kentucky home, where she continues

rehabilitation and spends time reconnecting with her son, Julian.

Shane Nault turned 19 in basic training. He celebrated his 20th birthday in Iraq. He was struck by an IED on May 8, 2007, while on patrol in Baghdad. His face was broken; only the lower part of his jaw was still completely intact. The medic on the scene kept him alive.

He was sent to Landstuhl Army Regional Medical Center in Germany the following day. He arrived at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., on May 10. His family recalled people there saying they did not think he was going to live.

After a number of operations and extensive rehabilitation, Nault celebrated his 21st birthday at VA's polytrauma rehabilitation center in Minneapolis. He will never see again. His speech is improving, but he may never be able to carry on an extensive conversation. He lives in an accessible house with his family in Wisconsin, where he continues to progress in learning to take care of himself.

Vandenheuvél, Wooten and Nault are in different stages of recovery after undergoing polytrauma/traumatic brain injury rehabilitation tailored to their specific needs. Their determination and desire to recover from their wounds provide inspiration to all and testify to the effectiveness of a new system of polytrauma care that has grown and evolved within VA.

Hundreds of veterans, active duty troops, reservists and guard members

faced with life-altering challenges have received care and undergone rehabilitation and therapy at the more than 100 centers in VA's polytrauma system of care.

Those with the most severe injuries are referred from a military treatment facility run by the Department of Defense to one of four VA polytrauma rehabilitation centers, in Richmond, Va., Tampa, Fla., Minneapolis and Palo Alto.

Those with less severe injuries are referred from military treatment facilities, or other DoD or community providers, and obtain care and treatment at any medical facility in VA's polytrauma care system. It is a tiered system comprised of four components designed to balance access and expertise: polytrauma rehabilitation centers; polytrauma network sites; polytrauma support clinic teams; and polytrauma points of contact.

The four regional rehabilitation centers provide care for those with the most intense needs and severe injuries. The 21 network sites provide care for individuals who are medically stable but still require the support of a full rehabilitation team based at a complex medical center.

The support clinic teams are typically at smaller VA facilities. They have a fully dedicated rehabilitation team, but may not have all medical and surgical support services. VA sites in more rural areas have dedicated care managers who help connect patients with the care they need.



DOD

Shane Nault's family was told that he was not likely to survive the injuries he suffered in an IED explosion while on patrol in Iraq.

VA's polytrauma telehealth network supports rehabilitation efforts across the entire system. It provides remote clinical and educational services through state-of-the-art multi-point videoconferencing capabilities.

This ensures that polytrauma and TBI expertise is available throughout the system and that care is provided at locations and times that are convenient to the patient. Through the telehealth network, for example, a veteran living in rural Georgia can receive a needed consultation by videoconferencing with a rehabilitation specialist at the polytrauma center in Tampa.

Coordination of care for these veterans and service members is ensured through a network of social work and nurse case managers. Every

patient treated in a VA polytrauma program is assigned a case manager who coordinates care, identifies resources for emerging medical, psychosocial or rehabilitation problems, and provides psychosocial support and education.

Inpatient rehabilitation is only the beginning of a long road toward recovery for polytrauma patients. An extensive continuum of care is vital to enabling patients to achieve the highest level of function possible.

The cornerstone of the VA continuum of care is the interdisciplinary team that works together in the assessment, planning and implementation of a patient's care. Each VA rehabilitation professional has specific skills and knowledge gained through first-hand experience, education and

clinical training.

These professionals are licensed and certified within their discipline and receive additional training in specific treatment areas for polytrauma and TBI. Members of the interdisciplinary team include: a physician specializing in physical medicine and rehabilitation (physiatrist); rehabilitation nurse; neuropsychologist; rehabilitation psychologist; physical therapist; kinesiologist; occupational therapist; speech-language pathologist; social worker; recreation therapist; and a military liaison.

The polytrauma patients coming to VA today are highly trained people who were in the best shape of their lives and were very active before they were injured. The primary goal for rehabilitation is to return them to full,

Right: Kara Wooten works with vision rehabilitation specialist Paul Koons while undergoing therapy at the polytrauma center in Palo Alto, Calif.; below: Jim Vandenhuevel snowboarding at the 2008 National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. When he arrived at the polytrauma center in Minneapolis for rehabilitation, he couldn't walk.

active, independent lives. In addition to returning to work and school, these patients want to play basketball, ride bikes, go hiking and swimming, increase their endurance and build their muscles.

While they cannot do many of these activities the way they used to, rehabilitation therapy programs provide ways for them to take part in and perform active tasks while helping them regain their basic motor, cognitive and self-care skills and adjust to their limitations.

Success for veterans such as Vandenhuevel, Wooten and Nault often comes in very small steps. But through the combined application of different therapies, small steps can lead to big changes.

Vandenhuevel's mother, Mary Alden, recalled that after four months in intensive care, the family did not know from one day to the next whether he was going to make it.

When he arrived at the VA medical center in Minneapolis, he could not walk. "I was learning to walk," Vandenhuevel said, recalling the physical therapy he underwent. "Occupational therapy—they worked a lot with managing the day. Speech—you know, getting me thinking with my mind, getting that all in order."

He began to make progress. He could walk with some assistance. Then he started getting up and going to the bathroom on his own.



COURTESY OF EES

"It was like all these different stages of a child growing up from a baby to crawling to talking, walking and feeding themselves," said Alden.

It has been a long road back, but Vandenhuevel now leads an active life. He shares a home with his mother, living in the basement, where he has his own bedroom and bathroom. He has a girlfriend and he just finished his first year of college.

"I'm doing visual photography," Vandenhuevel said. "There's so much beauty out there that nobody notices."

He goes skiing and snowboarding, and has taken part in the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. VA therapists consider him a model for disabled sports. Through sheer determination, he exceeded all expectations. "Things have somewhat gotten back to normal," his mother said. "But it's a new normal."

Vandenhuevel still faces challenges. He has memory problems and does not manage his own finances. He receives therapy to help with interpersonal skills, such as interacting with others. But he is living proof that people who have had traumatic brain injury can live an active, full life.



VA WINTER SPORTS CLINIC PHOTOGRAPHY TEAM

Vandenhuevel benefited from VA's interdisciplinary approach by going through a variety of TBI recovery programs. So did Wooten.

After being exposed to seven IED blasts, Wooten thought she had only a minor concussion. Then came severe headaches.

"Little did I know that even though [the blasts] were small, every time your brain is exposed to a blast

wave like that it does affect it, and it starts to compound after you've been hit by so many," Wooten said. "It's kind of like what a boxer gets after being in the ring for too long."

When she arrived at the polytrauma rehabilitation center in Palo Alto, she was struggling. "She was stumbling and falling," recalled her mother, Julia Spalding. "She could not complete a sentence. You'd ask her a question, and maybe 20 minutes later you'd have an answer. The doctors asked me, 'what is it that you want?' And I said, my child is in there, and I want her back."

Wooten went through aggressive therapy five days a week, including occupational, recreational, visual and cognitive. She performed tasks ranging from putting away dishes to playing basketball and painting by numbers.

"My goal was just to get better," Wooten said. "That's always been my goal. I just want to get better, be able to go outside and play with my son, take care of him."

After working hard and undergoing a full course of rehabilitation, she returned home. She is now able to play with her child and conduct a conversation the way she used to before being wounded. She still goes to the hospital for physical therapy.

When she reunited with her son, he asked her about the patch she now wears over one eye. "Are you a pirate?" he asked. "Yeah," she said, "I'm a pirate." Her son wanted his own eye patch to wear, so she gave him one of hers.

Each day presents Wooten with a new challenge as she continues physical therapy. "All I have to do is walk down the hall and look into that room and see that little boy in there and I know that it's all very necessary," she said. "It's worth it and it's going to pay off."

Spalding said she knows her daughter is very strong. "My hope for her is that somehow she's able to heal. Part of my job is to remind her

that this is not going to happen in six weeks. And it may not happen in six months. And you will never be the person that you were before, but it doesn't mean you can't go on from here."

When Nault arrived at the National Naval Medical Center on a medevac flight from Landstuhl, he was semi-comatose. He was placed in the intensive care unit and fed through a tube. His head was as big as a basketball. His parents and brother were only able to recognize him by the freckles on his face and by his feet. His family was told he might not survive.

Although confined to bed, it wasn't long before he started receiving the full complement of rehabilitation therapies. Doctors noticed he had incredible resilience and a drive to succeed. Many patients with severe TBI have trouble performing simple tasks such as feeding themselves, but Nault was soon able to do that.

At first he could not sit up straight in his wheelchair. But 11 months and 11 days after he was wounded, he left the center and was able to sit atop a horse.

He had great difficulty speaking. After weeks of speech therapy, there was not a dry eye in the hospital when he was able to repeat what the nurses taught him to say: "I love you, Mom."

His family built a ranch-style accessible house with wood floors and wide doorways and a roll-in shower. He has an exercise machine on the first floor and can go anywhere in the house. His sisters, Amanda and Courtney, help take care of him.

"I think he's speaking more," said his father, Mike. "He seems to be more alert. He smiles a lot more."

"Shane's home in body," Mike Nault said. "He'll not see again. His cognitive skills are never going to be what they were. Will he walk again? We hope!"

When Nault first went home to Eau Claire, Wis., citizens gave him a welcome home parade. Motorcycles


and convoys drove past, and people lined the roads. A group on a bridge held up a sign: "Welcome Home, Thank You for Your Service."

The VA polytrauma care system used by Vandenheuvel, Wooten and Nault includes a shared system of medical information, communication and care management, including access to transition patient advocates, VA professional staff who often travel with patients and help them obtain care.

Extensive support for families is also available, and the care is structured to meet the needs of young patients and their families. The polytrauma rehabilitation services provided are unique to VA and will be there as long as they are needed, which for most polytrauma patients means throughout their lives.

For her part, Wooten plans to keep working and making progress. "I'm a hundred and fifty percent better than I was," she said. "Still, I have a long way to go—a long, long way to go to get back to where I was."

Mike Nault said the family is happy to have Shane there with them every day. "Still, the best day of our lives is every morning waking up and being able to go in that room and say, 'Good morning, Shane.' And he holds his hand out, and we do our handshake. And I'll say something silly, and he gets a grin on his face, and we go from there."

Vandenheuvel recalled being inspired when he saw a veteran who had no legs or hands ski behind a boat. "It's amazing what people can do with any kind of injury," he said. "And there's hope. There's always hope." 

By Barbara Sigford, M.D.

Editor's Note: Dr. Sigford is the national program director for physical medicine and rehabilitation. The information about Vandenheuvel, Wooten and Nault was taken from the VA video "The Face Behind the File: The Long Road Back," produced by the Employee Education System. Bill Outlaw contributed to this article.

Launching the New GI Bill

VAward sat down with Education Service Director Keith Wilson to find out what it took to get the complex new education benefits program up and running.

Q: What has the response been to the Post-9/11 GI Bill since VA began processing applications from veterans for certification on May 1?

A: May 1, when we began accepting applications for eligibility certifications, was the first event that future users of the benefit experienced. The response was strong. We specifically started that process for the fall enrollment because what we would like to see people do is apply for that benefit early so we can make that eligibility determination well before the time the schools start to provide their enrollment certifications. It was an effort to meet the needs of the customers—the veterans—who wanted to know if they were eligible and to allow us to manage our workflow internally so we could deliver the benefit as smoothly and quickly as possible.

Q: How did pre-certification go; did it test your system?

A: In some ways it was a test, at least a test for part of the system. However, the core issue is paying benefits, which we can't do until August 1. But it did allow our new staff of 760 additional claims examiners to begin cutting their teeth on this new work well before the crunch time caused by the fall enrollment.

Q: When did you actually begin planning and preparing to launch this new program?

A: The first meeting was held on March 20, 2008, which was several months before the bill was actually signed into law on June 30, 2008. That meeting consisted of gathering about 20 people in a room from various elements within VA headquarters—education service, finance and operations, IT—and getting folks to start thinking along the lines of “the train is leaving the station, we’re going to be responsible for implementing this; what do we need to do?” From that first meeting of 20 people, there are now literally thousands of people engaged in this effort, but it all began at that March meeting.



ROBERT TURTEL

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is “a fundamental shift in the way we administer our education programs,” said Keith Wilson.

Q: Even as you met, the legislation was being formulated and changed. How did you keep up with it?

A: One of the most important things we had in place even before this came about was a very effective relationship with staff and members on Capitol Hill. When there were changes and things going on with the legislation, we had good information about what we could expect to imple-



ROBERT TURTI

President Obama speaks at a celebration rally for the new GI Bill at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., on Aug. 3. With him are (left to right): VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki; Jim Miller, a Marine Corps veteran who has enrolled in the Post-9/11 GI Bill program; Vice President Joe Biden; Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.), leading congressional sponsor of the bill; and former senator John W. Warner (R-Va.), a co-sponsor of the bill.

ment. That was one of the most effective tools we had coming out of the gate.

What we very quickly started putting into place was a governance structure. We knew this would be huge. We knew that organizationally we didn't have much experience in standing up something this major, especially with the level of scrutiny we were sure to get from stakeholders. So that's the first thing we did, creating the structure in which to manage all these efforts. Where would the decisions be made and at what level? What would be the process to get information to those people who would be making the decisions?

Q: What was the biggest challenge you faced in gearing up for the new program?

A: Keeping a sense of humor. I mean that seriously. Something of this magnitude is going to involve a lot more people than you can ever anticipate. Regardless of how thoroughly you think you have planned, you invariably underestimate, and one thing you will always have is a lot of people who are willing to help. The problem is there are many that believe they can define what kind of help we need; sometimes that was positive, sometimes not. That's why I said keeping a sense of humor was important.

But for the actual implementation, the biggest challenge has always been maintaining focus as the groups of people involved expanded. You need to keep re-messaging

that core issue that what we're doing is paying benefits on August 1 and we're doing it in a 13-month timeframe starting from nothing. You have to continually hammer home the message of "yes, we realize a lot of things aren't going to be perfect, but we can live with those as long as checks go out on August 1." The challenge was to keep everyone focused on August 1 payments.

Q: How does the new GI Bill program differ from previous VA education benefits programs?

A: It's a fundamental shift in the way we administer our education programs. The thing that makes this program so good for veterans is the flexibility it allows because the payment structure is geared to actual costs. But those very pieces that make it flexible and appealing to the veteran are the things that make it complex and challenging for us. We are administering a program now that has a payment structure that allows every single payment to be different based on the unique situation of the veteran. What are the housing expenses in a specific locale? What are the tuition and fee charges at a specific school based on the exact courses taken, the course load, charges within that state?

There are literally hundreds of variables that go into these decisions and that is very different from the way we've administered programs in the past. By and large, the other programs we administer, which are still out there, are flat-rate payments to individuals and the student makes the

decision on how they will use that benefit. The Post-9/11 GI Bill reflects a very complex society and complex education community, and there is no way you can account for those complexities without having a complex program.

Q: Where are the claims actually processed?

A: Post-9/11 GI Bill claims are all processed in one of four regional processing offices, located in Buffalo, Atlanta, St. Louis and Muskogee (Okla.). The location of where a veteran's claim is processed depends on where that person is going to school.

Q: How long does it take to process a claim under the new GI Bill?

A: Ultimately, that's the \$64,000 question, and there are some variables that have to be accounted for when you answer it. First of all, it's highly dependent on when the individual applies for benefits. Our core processing work is very seasonal in nature. We get a lot of work immediately prior to and during the fall enrollment period. That happens again but to a lesser degree during the spring enrollment, and we normally have a pre-summer spike, as well.

So we've got three large spikes in our workload and we are staffed to allow us, to some degree, to marshal our resources during those periods in terms of managing overtime. But if somebody applies at the peak of the fall enrollment period, it's going to take them longer to get a decision than it is if they apply in mid-November when we have largely worked through that fall enrollment. That process is why we began accepting claims for eligibility determination on May 1. We wanted to take care of as much of that work as possible prior to the fall enrollment. Having said all that, our goal for processing original claims on average in 2009 is 24 days.

Q: So the point to make for veterans is to get their application for benefits in as soon as possible?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Will pre-enrollment certification continue after this year?

A: We will be doing it on a continuing basis because this is a new program and eligibility has to be established for this program as with all of our other programs. The difference this year is that the vast majority of the folks who will be using the new benefit initially are those who are already going to school under one of our other education programs. We've already done an initial eligibility determination for those individuals but for a different benefit program.

So as those folks transfer over into the new GI Bill program, we're going to have a huge amount of new eligibility determination that we will have to complete. That will change in future years because at that point the only

new folks coming into the program will be those separating from service. It's that big bulk of original determinations that is a challenge to get through this fall.

Q: You've said many times that the new GI Bill claims process needs to be participatory. What do you mean?

A: The issue that makes this program so flexible for individuals and such a good program for them is that it accounts for all of the individual variables concerning tuition, housing allowances and fees. It is important for any user to understand that this is one of four education programs we administer, and depending on the variables in each person's life, this new program may or may not be the best program for him or her. It's important that veterans participate in the process because moving from an existing program into the Post-9/11 GI Bill requires an irrevocable election. Once that decision is made to give up an existing education benefit to move to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, it's a one-way ride.

It's very important that individuals take into account all these variables, know the benefits inside and out, work with VA. We have a staff of education counselors at our call center in Muskogee (1-888-GIBILL-1) that are ready to work with veterans and help them through the ins and outs of all our programs.

What It Took to Bring the New GI Bill to Life

In less than 13 months, the Veterans Benefits Administration:

- Hired and trained 760 new employees.
- Added 55,906 square feet of new office space.
- Drafted and published 359 pages of new regulations, created and provided 77 informational policy/advisory documents, and published 1,500 pages of training material.
- Conducted well over 100 outreach and training events at schools, military installations, and other stakeholder venues.
- Entered into 3,498 Yellow Ribbon agreements with 1,165 schools to help fund veterans' educational costs.
- Certified eligibility for new GI Bill education benefits for more than 150,000 veterans.
- Modified 10 existing IT systems, seven educational and three financial.
- Developed, tested, and deployed a new IT system to calculate and store information to support new GI Bill claims adjudication.
- Began development of a new "rules-based" automated processing system to support better efficiency, improved timeliness, and improved quality in new GI Bill benefit delivery.

Strong Response to Yellow Ribbon Program

More than 1,100 colleges, universities and schools across the country have entered into Yellow Ribbon program agreements with VA to improve financial aid for veterans seeking higher educations and better careers.

"The Post-9/11 GI Bill is an important part of fulfilling our promise to the men and women who have served our country so honorably," said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. "Implementing this landmark legislation and providing even more veterans with a quality education is a top priority for VA. We are grateful so many schools are joining us as partners in this unprecedented effort."

Troy University, headquartered in Alabama, was one of the many schools eager to partner with VA to provide enhanced benefits to veterans attending one of its many campuses or online.

"Troy University has a long, rich history of service to the U.S. military and military veterans and we believe the Yellow Ribbon program is a natural continuation of that commitment," said Director of University Relations Tom Davis. "We were among the first universities in our state to announce our participation in this program."

The Post-9/11 GI Bill pays up to the highest public in-state undergraduate tuition and fees; veterans that choose to attend a private institution, graduate school or an out-of-state school with higher fees will get a break by attending schools participating in the Yellow Ribbon program. Under the program, schools can contribute up to 50 percent of expenses exceeding the highest allowable amount and VA will

match the additional funding for eligible students.

Provisions of the program include payments for tuition and fees, housing, and a books and supplies stipend. Benefits are payable for training pursued on or after Aug. 1. The tuition and fee benefit is paid directly to the school.

To date, VA has entered into more than 3,400 agreements with schools across the country, including Ivy League powerhouses Harvard and Yale, and schools like Troy that offer a variety of programs to meet the needs of returning veterans, such as online classes.

"Currently, Troy University serves more than 1,400 students online through GoArmy.com/Army Continuing Education Services," said Davis, who is also a member of Troy's Military Affairs Education Council. "The administrators of eCampus, our distance-learning division, believe that online education will be a popular option for veterans, spouses and dependents who qualify for benefits under the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.

"Convenience is the key to distance learning's popularity. And it gives veterans more options. Specifically, it allows them to take advantage of education benefits without necessarily having to live within commuting distance of a college or university. That's a big plus."

To receive the housing stipend, eligible veterans must enroll in at least one "in-residence" class.

For information on specific schools participating in the Yellow Ribbon program, go to www.gibill.va.gov/GI_Bill_Info/CH33/YRP/YRP_List.htm.

Q: What are the different ways a veteran can apply for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits?

A: We encourage them to apply online. The easiest way to apply is to go to the GI Bill Web page (www.gibill.va.gov) and apply via the link indicated there. That feeds the information electronically and immediately to us, and it's the best way for us to manage the workload. A veteran can fill out a hardcopy application at any VA office and send that to us, as well.

Q: How were you able to implement this admittedly complex new program without a new automation system?

A: That's one of the biggest challenges we've had. Getting back to the complexity of the new program's payment structure, VA's existing payment system could not be modified in the time available to account for all those variables, so we were required to set up in the short term an interim system that allows us to process claims. We came up with an augmented manual process by which claims examiners make eligibility determinations with a new Post-9/11 GI Bill database and then take the information stored

in that database and manually enter it into our benefits delivery network for payment of the benefits.

We did have to make some changes to our benefits delivery network, as well. So essentially what we did is stand up a new database to be our repository and then made minimal changes to the benefits delivery network that will get us by until we stand up a new payment system. We will have a completely new Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits payment system by December 2010.

Q: What question do you get most about this new program?

A: Why is it so complex? That's easily the most-asked question. The complexity is by design in some respects. It's a simple concept to say that we're going to pay for a veteran's education. It sounds straightforward. But what has to be accounted for is the complexity in society and the complexity in the educational system. We have students at 6,800 locations around the world. We have to take into account the costs of pursuing an education in every one of those locations and all the cost variables of each program offered. That is the paradigm shift. That is why it is com-

plex. It is complex by design and that can be a disadvantage if someone is looking for an easy answer.

Q: What other advice do you have for veterans enrolling in school under the new GI Bill? You mentioned apply for benefits as early as possible and do it online.

A: Make sure you get the best information available. Go to our Web site. Contact our call center or a benefits counselor. Contact your school official if you're enrolled in school. And make sure you've got all your questions answered *before* you apply to VA for your benefit. That application for Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits is the irrevocable election. Get your answers to your questions before you apply for the benefit.

It's important for folks to understand that the factors that have to be considered are more than just monetary. There's a natural curiosity about what the benefit amount will be under the different educational programs, but there are non-monetary benefits that should be considered. For instance, under the Post-9/11 GI Bill the veteran has a 15-year delimiting date; under the Montgomery GI Bill they only have a 10-year delimiting date, and the transfer of eligibility provisions is another factor. It's more than just looking at what the amount of the payment will be.

Q: How has the Yellow Ribbon school matching fund program worked?

A: We certainly had a strong response from schools interested in participating. About 1,100 schools have signed up, which accounts for more than 3,400 separate agreements. We can't really say how it's working because payments haven't begun. The process of bringing schools into the program has gone fairly well. There were many questions from the schools that we had to answer and issues to clarify—their obligations, how we would pay them—but very strong participation for a first-year program.

Q: A unique aspect of the Post-9/11 GI Bill program is the transferability of a veteran's eligibility to a spouse or immediate family member. How does that work?

A: We are just at the point where we are starting to get applications for that part of the benefit. The transfer of eligibility portion of this program has been very well received. What it does is allow those individuals who are members of the armed forces since August 1, 2009, to transfer eligibility for benefits to their spouses and children. The key is being a member of the armed forces on August 1, 2009. If somebody is completely separated from service, including the selected reserve, they are not going to be eligible for that portion of the new GI Bill. Those folks in service on August 1 are required to have served six years in the armed forces and agreed to serve an additional four years to transfer all or part of their benefits to their dependents.

It's a two-step process: first, the eligibility determina-

tion for that program is made by the Department of Defense. Once eligibility has been established by DoD, then the individual will come to us at VA and apply for the benefit in the exact same way as any veteran.

Q: What have you and VBA learned from the new GI Bill implementation so far?

A: The first take-away is regardless of how prepared you think you are and regardless of how much you think you understand the impact of something of this magnitude, you have underestimated. I think the most important message is make sure you have a good understanding of your own organization's strengths and weaknesses and monitor that constantly and very aggressively put in place mechanisms to address any weaknesses.


The second take-away: don't be afraid of asking for help from wherever it may come. Ultimately, VA is going to succeed in standing this up, but it will not be solely a VA effort. We are highly dependent on a lot of our stakeholders to make this happen, starting with the veterans themselves, the school certifying officials, and the state approving agencies. People in every organizational element you can think of in VA have had a part in our success. You've got to involve all of those people from the get-go and manage all of their desires, their expectations and their resources if you're going to get all these moving parts to fit together.

Q: Now that it's "all over," what's next?

A: In some respects, August 1 is just going to be another day for us. August 1 is important because it's the day we can begin paying benefits. But from an internal workload perspective and what we need to do to make this program a long-term success, August 1 is going to be just another day.

We have got every bit as much work over the next year, the next two years, as we've had over the last year. We need to continue to manage all of these moving pieces as aggressively as we have so far.

Q: What should VA employees understand about the new GI Bill?

A: The thing to keep in mind is that regardless of what we had to do to make this work, the important factor is that the contract our society has had with its veterans has been renewed. There's a reason this program was designed along the lines of the original World War II GI Bill. Doing that, I believe, is an acknowledgement that society understands the obligation it has to veterans and is willing to stand up and meet that obligation just as it did at the end of World War II. We would expect that this bill will have the same impact on its participants as the World War II GI Bill did. Every one of us in VA had a part in that, and that's exciting. 

A New Gold Standard

World War II veterans compete for fun and glory at the 23rd National Veterans Golden Age Games.

Walking across the massive expanse of the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Center, an older gentleman stopped by a display of photographs of men and women in military uniforms. Many of the photos were black and white, or faded with age. A sign identified the display as the “Wall of Heroes” at the 23rd National Veterans Golden Age Games, which took place June 1-5 in Birmingham, Ala.

“Young lady,” said the man sporting a ball cap to a passerby, “can you help me find a clip for my picture?”

He held a photo of himself taken some 64 years earlier that showed a young, vibrant man in uniform. The man was James Waddell, an 87-year-old Army Air Corps veteran from Philadelphia. Waddell competed in his seventh Golden Age Games this year.

This annual event is for U.S. military veterans 55 and older, and is the largest sports and recreation competition of its kind in the world. The Games are designed to improve quality of life for all older veterans, including those with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Since 2004, through a partnership with the National Senior Games Association, a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee, the Golden Age Games have been a qualifier for the National Senior Games.

At this year’s event, hosted

by the Birmingham VA Medical Center, the spotlight was on the 44 World War II veterans participating, since the Games fell around the 65th anniversary of D-Day. Waddell was among those veterans, having served as an air base engineer with the 847th Air Aviation.

His two younger brothers, Cornelius and Jesse, now both deceased, followed him into the military, and all three were sent to fight in the war. Waddell remembers his time in

the military vividly, recalling that he served exactly three years, six months and two days.

During his trip home, Waddell was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was not expected to recover. “I never knew that I wasn’t expected to recover, so I just kept on living,” he said.

Waddell’s experiences during World War II left him with a deep respect for the veterans in non-combat roles who worked feverishly behind the scenes to ensure that those who

had to fight were adequately prepared for the mission ahead of them. His brother Cornelius was a supply runner, part of an operation known as the “Red Ball Express,” providing vital equipment to assist in the ongoing war efforts. Waddell described the tireless efforts of these mostly African-American men as pivotal to the success of Gen. George S. Patton’s advance across France that ultimately forced a German retreat from the country.

Waddell also recognizes the contributions that women made during the war. He explained in detail how pilots of the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron often transported planes from the U.S. to England, and trained the male pilots to fly the B-29 Superfortress.

More than 64 years later, Waddell enjoys a quiet life and thrives on helping other veterans through his volunteer service at the VA medical



William Trumbly, 87, of Norman, Okla., arrived at a special gathering of World War II veterans clad in his full dress Army uniform.

VA GOLDEN AGE GAMES PHOTOGRAPHY TEAM

James Waddell, 87, an Army Air Corps veteran from Philadelphia, served as an air base engineer during World War II.



VA GOLDEN AGE GAMES PHOTOGRAPHY TEAM

center in Philadelphia, where he also receives his own health care. He helps veterans file claims and locate military records.

“There have only been four claims that I assisted with that have ever been denied,” he said proudly.

Waddell began competing in the Golden Age Games in 1998 and relishes the competition and the chance to socialize with other veterans. He has medaled twice in croquet, taking home the silver in 2008 and the gold this year. He has already made plans to attend the 2010 Games in Des Moines, Iowa.

Another World War II veteran looking forward to next year’s event is William Trumbly, 87, from Norman, Okla. Clad in his full dress Army uniform, he walked proudly into a special gathering of the WWII veterans where Gen. Patton’s grandson was a guest speaker.

This was Trumbly’s first year participating in the Golden Age Games. He said the Games “helped me stay active, meet comrades, gain better health and muscle tone and have a better quality of life. I hope to continue competing for as long as I am able.”

He competed in several events, including golf, bowling and discus, which earned him a gold medal. Trumbly got a lot of attention during the Games because of his military service during World War II, especially his involvement with

soldier from certain death by stopping the soldier from retrieving a dead German soldier’s pistol.

Trumbly recalls noticing that the body was not in a natural position. It looked as if the soldier was ready for burial—lain straight out with his hands folded over his chest. A search of the body led to the grim discovery that the German soldier was booby-trapped with a grenade underneath his folded hands.

Trumbly was wounded in combat during the Battle of the Bulge while assisting a fellow soldier after his gun jammed. This episode was later chronicled in the book *Krinkelt-Rocherath: The Battle for the Twin Villages*, by William C.C. Cavanaugh. The night he was injured, he took refuge in the village of Krinkelt-Rocherath, where some local villagers took him in.

He was stationed in Europe for 15 months during the war and rose quickly through the ranks, ending his military career as a lieutenant. For his service to the country, he was awarded



Wayne Field, 83, of Colorado Springs, Colo., was wounded in combat during World War II while running across a field to take a German village.

VA GOLDEN AGE GAMES PHOTOGRAPHY TEAM

Normandy.

At the age of 22, he arrived in Normandy 10 days after D-Day as a replacement officer and led his regiment on the beach. They won the Battle of Hill 192 in less than a day, and he saved himself and a fellow

several medals, including a Presidential Unit Citation, Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

Five years ago, Trumbly and his wife went to visit the village of Krinkelt-Rocherath, and he returned to the very home where he took refuge

nearly 60 years before. He was able to introduce his wife to the little girl, now a grown woman, who still lived in the house. Like many veterans, Trumbly was unable to speak about his combat experiences for many years. Through events like the Golden Age Games, he is now able to find opportunities to meet other veterans and share the bonds of camaraderie.

Like Trumbly, 83-year-old Wayne Field, of Colorado Springs, Colo., was also wounded in World War II and received a Purple Heart for his bravery in the face of battle. Field served in the Army infantry and was injured in combat while running across a field to take a German village.

After World War II, Field went on to fight in the Korean and Vietnam wars, but WWII proved to have the most profound effect on him. He had great respect for the soldiers and commanders who fought during WWII, especially Gen. Patton.

"I believe that Patton was the best general the U.S. has ever had," said Field. "Patton had no tact, but who needs tact! He knew how to win wars with the lowest number of casualties."

Field is an established athlete, having competed in the Senior Olympics, but he found the opportunity to compete against his fellow veterans fascinating. He began attending the Golden Age Games in 1991 and is also a regular competitor in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games as well as the National Senior Games.

This year at the Golden Age Games, Field medaled in all of his events, earning gold medals for table tennis and swimming, in the 50-yard backstroke and freestyle events, and a bronze medal for bowling. But it isn't the medals that keep Field coming back—the friendships made at the Games are the most important benefit for him.

"Winning medals is like adding

frosting to the cake," said Field. "The Games have the nicest people competing and volunteering, and give me an incentive to exercise by practicing for my events. Regular exercise is good for my mind, body and spirit. I started swimming at the age of 55 and could barely make it 25 yards. Now, I have won more than 250 medals in swimming."

These sentiments are often shared by many of the veterans participating in the Golden Age Games, like



Richard Frost, 86, a Navy veteran from Chula Vista, Calif., fought in the Pacific Theatre of World War II.

VA GOLDEN AGE GAMES PHOTOGRAPHY TEAM

first-timer John Carter. Carter, 87, is a Birmingham local and another World War II veteran. Carter came to the Games with his wife, Fran, whom he met after his return from the war in 1945.

Carter served as a paratrooper for more than three years with the 63rd Infantry Division and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces, where Fran worked as a "Rosie the Riveter" on the B-29 Superfortress. They have enjoyed wedded bliss for 63 years and find great enjoyment

speaking to civic clubs and schools. When they do, both don the same uniforms they wore during the war—Carter in his paratrooper jumpsuit and his wife in her coveralls.

Though the D-Day anniversary drew more attention to the veterans at the Golden Age Games who fought in the European Theatre, some competitors, like Richard Frost, fought in the Pacific Theatre during the war. Frost, an 86-year-old Navy veteran from Chula Vista, Calif., was a decorated officer during his military service; he was second officer in command on the USS Ammen, a destroyer. He said he was best known for "stomping kamikazes for the Navy," and claims to have shot down 23 of them. He also takes credit for being the first officer sent to view the destruction in Nagasaki, Japan.

This was Frost's fourth consecutive year competing in the Golden Age Games. "The Games help me keep an active interest in my favorite sport—table tennis," said Frost. He won a silver medal this year in the event and also competed in shuffleboard.

After returning home from the war, Frost remained busy, becoming a CEO, entrepreneur and author. Frost published his book, *When Crisis Strikes*, with Xlibris Publishing, where he stayed on as the director of a Junior Achievement chapter for several years.

Frost hopes to remain active in the Golden Age Games in the years to come and looks forward to continuing to face any challenges that come his way.

The National Veterans Golden Age Games are co-sponsored by VA, Help Hospitalized Veterans and Veterans Canteen Service. For more information, go to www.veteransgold-agenames.va.gov. VA

By Kelly Shreves



Leaders of the allied nations gathered at the American military cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer on June 6 for the official anniversary ceremony. On the stage, from left: President Barack Obama, Britain's Prince Charles, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

65th Anniversary of D-Day: France Remembers

CRYSTAL ETRIDGE

France honors its World War II liberators with ceremony, celebration and remembrance.

The 65th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy was marked by four days of shared honor, ceremony, celebration and remembrance. The invasion of June 6, 1944, began the allies' liberation of Western Europe, leading to the end of World War II on the continent. Over this long weekend, as it has for 65 years, France welcomed its American, Canadian and British liberators as heroes and remembered their sacrifices.

But along with the remembrances and celebrations came the sad realization that this might be the last chance to meet and thank those who did nothing less than save the civilized world. For veterans now in their 80s and 90s, international travel is particularly hard, and their return to the beaches, battlefields, liberated towns and cemeteries becomes less likely.

Formal events began on Friday, June 5, in Paris, with a ceremony bestowing the French Legion of Honor on 50 allied soldiers of the D-Day landings and the war in Europe. The Americans had been flown in and hosted by the French government and the U.S. State Department. VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, along with World War II veteran and former Senator Bob Dole, his wife, former Senator Elizabeth Dole, and Susan Eisenhower, granddaughter of Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, escorted the aged U.S. and British veterans to the ceremonies.

The affair was held in the huge open-air courtyard of Les Invalides, a complex of buildings holding military museums, burial crypts of French notables, and a hospital and retirement

home for French soldiers. The event was one of continental pomp and circumstance, with trumpets of military bands echoing off the deep cobblestones, inner walls and magnificent columns of the 17th-century structure.

A reception followed in the adjacent garden. A musical quartet played popular melodies from the 1940s as veterans, family members, dignitaries, the media and others, including film star Tom Hanks, mingled for conversation and photos.

As the ceremony continued in Paris, 86-year-old Jim Norene, of Hepner, Ore., a D-Day veteran of the 101st Airborne Division, visited the American cemetery above Omaha Beach one last time; that night, he died in his sleep.

The official D-Day anniversary ceremony was held at that bluff-top

cemetery on Saturday, June 6. That morning buses ferried the official parties from their hotels to Gare St. Lazare, where they were met by yet another military band whose music filled the station as guests walked a red carpet leading to their private train cars.

Hundreds of buses met the ceremony-bound at Caen train station and other locations to complete the last hour of the trip to the coast. All along the way, international media, which had been reporting on the veterans for days, as well as an HBO film crew covering the "Band of Brothers" veterans, interviewed veterans and other passengers.

President Obama's visit to France had brought heightened security to the Normandy region. Yes, "the Americans have invaded again," grumbled inconvenienced D-Day visitors and locals alike. More than 30 square miles of roads were closed to traffic the night before and would remain closed for the day. No vehicles, save the convoys of buses, were on the highways, and every bridge or intersection passed was patrolled by heavily armed Gendarmerie.

Despite these security precautions, hundreds of French citizens stood out in front of their houses and farmhouse gates, cheering and waving American flags and hand-written banners welcoming veterans en route to the cemetery.

"When you are 4 or 5 years old, and your parents and grandparents tell you about this, it sticks with you," Benoit Noel, 42, a D-Day museum administrator, told a *Washington Post* reporter. "Everybody in Normandy remembers the landing. We know what the Americans did for us. We haven't forgotten."

The cemetery ceremony was simultaneously translated in French and English, as speeches praised the bravery of the allied soldiers facing an

"unimaginable hell." French warships patrolled offshore, protecting and honoring the proceedings. The commemoration concluded with a 21-gun salute and a multi-national jet flyover.

Sunday, June 7, was a full day of celebration, with music, dancing and more ceremonies in Sainte-Mère-Église. Here and at numerous battle sites around France, thousands of WWII re-enactors make their appearance each June. These French men and women, often unable to speak a word of English, authentically fashion themselves into WWII Americans of all ranks and services. In this way, they pay homage to their heroes and relive an unforgettable chapter in French history.



VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki congratulates French Legion of Honor recipient Louis J. Venditti, of South Chicago Heights, Ill.

ROBERT TURTEL

Celebrants reveled together, beer flowing, the air thick with 1940s jazz, and smoke from the grilling of sausage sandwiches sold on every corner. The gray smoke muted the colorful town, and for a moment one could picture a black and white photo taken 65 years earlier, showing the same streets in war-torn ruin.

Earlier in the day, 700 U.S., British, French and German military paratroopers jumped into the sky outside this rural town, which had been one of the U.S. Airborne troops' original invasion objectives. In the afternoon, C-130 transport planes saluted the U.S. veterans as they buzzed the central square, breathtakingly close to the church steeple where a military man-

nequin and parachute dangle to commemorate the U.S. troops who fought and died, and ultimately liberated the town by the end of D-Day.

Here and there, American WWII veterans, still trim in their uniforms, were invariably recognized and surrounded by those who wanted to meet them, shake their hand, have a picture taken, and thank them. Parents whispered to their children, explaining that these men, and their many fallen comrades, came from America and saved their country.

Following a parade of the multinational paratroop force into the center of Sainte-Mère-Église, a somber presentation was given by the town to honor its liberators. A thousand townspeople and visitors, many Americans among them, crowded as close to the stage as possible, held back by a low gate. In contrast, the area before the stage held 50 or so white chairs, almost all of them empty, but for a handful of aged veterans.

One commemoration official noted that "2008 was a particularly cruel year, taking away some of the most faithful friends among you. May they rest in peace and remain in our memories and our hearts. We know that for many of you, this will be the last time you will make a return trip to Normandy, but we promise that you, your children, your grandchildren and all of your fellow citizens will always be welcomed here with the same warmth, friendship and brotherhood that we have had the honor and privilege to welcome you with today."

By Monday evening, back at the bluff-top cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach at Colleville-sur-Mer, closing time neared. Remaining visitors roamed the acres as workmen tore down the stage, scaffolding and decks that held nearly 9,000 attendees two days earlier.

It was time to bring down the billowing American flag, which flew over the immaculate fields lined with rows containing 9,387 small white grave-stones. Each stone is inscribed with name, place and date of birth, military service and last day that marked a soldier's life. English, French, Americans, even Germans, wandered about, each

humble yet proud, slightly trembling with emotion, Gray stood there for a few moments, gazing down at the flag he held gently in his hands, thinking thoughts known only to him.

Finally he found his voice and said to the attendants beside him, "You take such good care of us here. Will you always take care of us?" He

ing the man who served on my right, and the man who served on my left," said Gray, who receives care at the Chalmers P. Wylie VA Ambulatory Care Center in Columbus, Ohio. Now, 65 years later, he was standing alone with the U.S. flag lowered at the cemetery that evening, surrounded by the graves of American men and women, but mostly boys, who did not survive the war.

As the flag ceremony was taking place, a crowd of French civilians and re-enactors drew near to pay their respects to a national savior, the only remaining WWII GI on the cemetery grounds. They waited their turn to give thanks for what he and all the comrades he represented had done so many years ago.

French admiration and gratitude were not just for Gray. They were for every American WWII veteran that could be found that weekend. But there were not many left to find. The anniversary will also fall on a weekend next year, and perhaps some will



D. Zane Schlemmer, 84, of Kaneohe, Hawaii, signs an autograph in Sainte-Mère-Eglise, one of the towns that U.S. Airborne troops liberated.

examining a piece of their cultural history.

Two French cemetery employees proceeded to the flagpole to exercise their evening duties of lowering the U.S. flag. As they walked to their positions, they turned to an elderly gentleman wearing a dated but still handsome U.S. Army uniform and asked if he'd like to assist them.

It was a silent, almost personal ceremony between the three. They removed the flag from the pole and began the careful folding, until it was tucked into a triangle of stars.

The job done, the man thanked the two women as they respectfully handed the flag to him to hold. The man in uniform was D-Day veteran Marion C. Gray, 90, of Groveport, Ohio, who served as a combat medic with the 29th Infantry Division. He came ashore with the first wave of assault troops and was wounded twice that day. Looking fit and soldierly,



Marion C. Gray was invited to help lower the U.S. flag flying over the American cemetery above Omaha Beach. He joined the Army the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

gestured discreetly around him, inquiring on behalf of his fallen comrades. "Oh yes, sir, we will always, always take care of all of you," they replied. Gray smiled, breaking the solemnity of the moment.

"I came today with hopes of find-

return to Normandy. But wherever a commemoration is held, it will be very sad indeed, without the presence of those American heroes who paid the price for all who live free. **VA**

By Crystal Ettridge and Robert Turtill

Memorial Day 2009

Supporting Veterans: A Steakhouse Salute

Vietnam veteran Joe Hickey is one of those Americans who say we can never do enough for those who put on a military uniform to serve this nation. Now one of the owners of the Bobby Van's steakhouse chain, Hickey backs up his words with his wallet and his business.

On Sunday, May 24, in conjunction with Memorial Day activities, Hickey opened the doors of his two Washington, D.C., eateries to more than 1,400 veterans—most disabled and hospitalized—and their families.

Busloads came from local installations including the D.C. VA Medical Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Fort Meade, Quantico Marine Corps Base, Fort Belvoir, Fort McNair and Bethesda Naval Hospital.

A couple hundred riders from Rolling Thunder, part of the thousands in town for the annual Memorial Day motorcycle ride around the National Mall, pulled up to the doors of both restaurants to visit with veterans.

Hickey treated everyone who came to a free steak lunch with all the trimmings, including beverages. He even fed the graduating class of the Naval Academy when the Secretary of the Navy called unexpectedly to ask if he could bring them over. That depleted the stock in the kitchens of the two restaurants, so Hickey could not open for business on Monday, Memorial Day.

"It's not about what we spent or how hard we worked," Hickey said. "We're going to be doing this for the next 50 years ... Veterans Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day. We want to honor our veterans."

Rudi Gresham, senior advisor to the under secretary for health, and Max Collier, with the Office of the

Secretary, were key organizers of the event. They worked closely with Veterans Health Administration leadership, Hickey and other supporters in the community to plan the Memorial Day salute.

"We began planning in March and designed it as a VA outreach program that, if successful in Washington, could serve as a template for similar community-based events across the country," Gresham said.

More than 30 VA volunteers, led by Gresham and Collier, assisted Hickey's staff in greeting the veterans, helping their escorts and putting together gift bags for all attendees.



Bob Feller, Robert Duvall and Ross Perot (left to right) greet riders from Rolling Thunder at they arrive at Bobby Van's restaurant.

Terrance O'Sullivan, a retired treasurer of the Laborers' International Union of North America, or LIUNA, brought clothes and other gifts from the organization to put in the gift bags. One of LIUNA's primary missions is to help veterans find jobs and encourage employers to hire them through the Helmets to Hardhats program.

Making the day extra special were appearances by billionaire businessman H. Ross Perot, Academy Award-winning actor Robert Duvall, and Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller. Veterans and their family members were

thrilled with the opportunity to meet the three celebrities. Perot, Duvall and Feller stayed at the two restaurants for most of the day, talking and sharing stories with the veterans.

"If my father, a retired Navy admiral, were here today, he would bow and say 'bravo' to the veterans here today," said Duvall, an Army veteran. "I do it in his stead in memory of him."

Perot has spent millions in support of active duty troops, and for memorials, monuments and medical care for veterans. "We can never do too much," he said. "There is always more we can do."

Feller was in town to throw out the first pitch at the Washington Nationals baseball game that day. He said nothing could have kept him from spending time with the veterans and taking the opportunity to remember his Navy comrades in the Pacific during World War II.

"I saw a lot of brave men die doing what had to be done," said Feller, who still holds the record for throwing the fastest-ever pitch on radar—108 miles per hour. "I learned that heroes don't return from war, survivors do."

Dr. Gerald Cross, acting under secretary for health, said the event did exactly what Gresham and Collier intended.

"The Bobby Van's steakhouse Memorial Day event reflected the broad community support that our veterans deserve," he said. "I hope the concept takes hold, and that other communities across the nation sponsor similar events to demonstrate appreciation for our veterans." **VA**

By Ken McKinnon

Bar Code Medication Administration: A Decade of Innovation

Genius is at work every day at VA medical centers across the country. It can strike while helping a homeless veteran or simply by putting people before paperwork.

“Genius is the ability to put into effect what is on your mind,” writer F. Scott Fitzgerald once said.

Like many success stories at VA, great ideas are often born in the field and serve as the basis for innovation within the department. No one knows when or where inspiration will strike.

For Sue Kinnick, then a registered nurse at the Colmery-O’Neil VA Medical Center in Topeka, Kan., her ground-breaking idea occurred during a very innocuous moment in 1994 while returning a rental car. Seeing the rental car employee scan a bar code located in the trunk of the car was all it took for Kinnick.

“Why can’t we deliver medications in a similar fashion?” was her immediate thought.

Through her ceaseless dedication to improving health care safety for the nation’s

veterans, Kinnick’s innovative idea, but more importantly, her ability to articulate what was on her mind, morphed into a prototype medication verification and administration documentation system.

The system was designed to reduce and potentially eliminate medication errors throughout VA. The prototype’s success led to the development of the Bar Code Medication Administration software.

In August 1999, BCMA version 1.0 was deployed to all VA medical centers. To date, more than 1.3 billion doses have been documented as administered using BCMA.

Ten years later, VA celebrates the BCMA revolution.

“BCMA is so revolutionary because it uses point of care bar code scanning technology to provide a safety net for veterans receiving medications as inpatients,” said Chris Tucker, director of the Veterans Health Administration’s Bar Code Resource Office in Topeka.

Tucker explained that since the majority of medica-



The Bar Code Medication Administration system ensures that veterans receive the correct medication ordered, at the right dose, and at the appropriate time.

tion errors occur at the point of administration, the positive patient identification features of the BCMA software ensure that veterans receive the correct medication ordered, in the right dose, at the appropriate time. All of this critical information is captured using the BCMA software and is accessible to anyone providing care to the veteran through VA’s electronic health record system.

What began as one VA employee’s stroke of genius is now an integrated and widely accepted process not only in

the government health care arena, but in the private health care sector as well. In the future, veterans will see this same technology replicated for outpatient clinic medication administration.

“This is the next step and one that is being considered for development,” said Tucker. In addition, the safety net features of positive patient identification are being expanded to other clinical areas to reduce errors with lab specimen collection and blood administration processes using bar code scanning technology. **VA**

VA Committed to Preventing and Resolving Data Breach Incidents

Information protection is not a passing fad, but a lasting reality. Data breaches, or losses of sensitive personal information, are on the rise. In 2008, data breaches were up 50 percent from the previous year, exposing the records of at least 35 million Americans, as reported by the Identity Theft Resource Center.

In response to this startling trend and several high-profile data breaches within VA, the Office of Information and Technology put robust

processes and policies in place to prevent security and privacy incidents and respond quickly to those that occur.

VA is taking unprecedented steps to prevent data breaches and the exposure of sensitive personal information. The department uses information protection best practices including governance, tools and technology, and training to ensure employees and contractors have what they need to secure all personal information.

To develop a stronger governance structure for a more strategic approach to information protection, VA leadership created the Incident Response Governance Board. The board is charged with reviewing incident trends and assigning resources appropriately to reduce the occurrence of incidents within the department.

The board also focuses on providing policy direction based on security incident trends, reducing adverse im-

pacts, and seeing that resolution is prompt and consistent. A broad representation from across VA serves on the board, helping to prioritize the response to security incidents.

VA uses impressive new tools and technology to visually represent reported incidents nationwide. By understanding trends in the data, leadership can make informed decisions to prevent future incidents. This capability provides leadership with near real-time situational awareness for improved



Risk Management and Incident Response's Martin DeLeo and Jonelle Lewis use tools to examine security incidents across VA.

decision-making and risk management.

"Having a team of experts in place to resolve and respond to incidents is groundbreaking for the federal government," said K. Adair Martinez, deputy assistant secretary for information protection and risk management.

To educate employees about the importance individuals play in information protection, VA's annual de-

partment-wide Information Protection Awareness Week features interactive events, displays and booths designed to provide tips and best practices for protecting sensitive information.

Training employees to protect sensitive information is crucial. All employees and contractors are required to take annual information security and privacy training. Staff with significant security

responsibilities are required to take more comprehensive VA security training specific to an individual's job duties.

Responding to security and privacy incidents is a top priority for VA. A team of experts within OI&T monitors, manages and mitigates security and privacy incidents through a robust incident response process to reduce the risk of data compromise. The team brings together cross-functional support to triage and quickly resolve the incidents. The staff's diverse skills in health care, information technology, security, privacy and project management allow them to respond to and resolve various types of incidents.

"When reviewing and mitigating incidents, we want to ensure that the best interests of the veteran are always front and center," said Kathryn Maginnis, associate deputy assistant secretary for risk management and incident response.

VA is also among the

first federal agencies to offer ongoing consumer credit protection services to better serve and protect potentially impacted veterans and their families. The department can move quickly to provide credit protection services to individuals who need them to reduce the impact of identity theft. Monitoring services identify abnormal changes in identity information that are indicative of identity theft, sending alerts to the potentially affected person.

The world is only getting more connected and complex, presenting new challenges for data protection. VA is prepared to respond to these challenges by understanding and adhering to industry best practices, monitoring incident trends, and striving to continuously improve the methods used to protect information.

"Protecting the identity safety of our veterans is the cornerstone of achieving the gold standard in information security," said Martinez. **VA**

TSA Employees' Spirit of Public Service Supports Veterans in Need

In the spirit of public service, VA and the Transportation Security Administration have worked together to create a unique partnership benefiting veterans. At New York's Albany International Airport, TSA has been the inspiration for other airports across the country to transfer clothing from their uniform supply to veterans in need.

"The partnership between our federal agencies is an excellent example of cooperation and responsible reuse of resources to help a very worthy population—our homeless and needy veterans," said Bob Hawes, Voluntary Service manager for the Syracuse VA Medical Center.

TSA Albany Administrative Officer Ray Stevens and his team have been working with their VA medical center partners in New York to provide hundreds of TSA jackets, sweaters, pants and shirts to veterans who may be homeless or out of work. Because of their efforts, 35 airports across the country have now begun working with their local VA medical centers to transfer new or lightly used articles of clothing from their uniform supply (minus the Department of Homeland Security insignia patches).

In upstate New York, the heavy jackets were much needed and the navy blue pants were appropriate for jobless



Transportation Security Officer Kim Herrera and Administrative Officer Ray Stevens, both of TSA Albany, remove a patch from clothing to transfer it to VA. Looking on are Bob Hawes, Voluntary Service manager at the Syracuse VAMC, Karen Covey, volunteer manager at the Albany VAMC, and Peter Potter, public affairs officer at the Albany VAMC.

DOUG MYERS

veterans to wear when going on job interviews.

"Our clothing program has greatly benefited from the

jackets and parkas these last years," said Volunteer Manager Karen Covey of the Samuel

continued on page 34

Dr. Marcia Hall

The staff and veterans of the VA Roseburg (Ore.) Healthcare System know Dr. Marcia Hall as the facility's women veterans program manager and trauma counselor. In that role, she spearheads the facility's center that treats female veterans who were sexually assaulted while on active duty, known as military sexual trauma. In her spare time, she also teaches self-defense.

But what most don't know is that Hall has been fighting for women's rights for more than 30 years. She is credited with setting the stage for future world and Olympic champions as well as being a champion for strong young women eager to prove themselves as athletes. In fact, she's a recent inductee into the Taekwondo Hall of Fame in Teaneck, N.J.

Nicknamed the "first lady of taekwondo," Hall was a pioneer in the sport. As a new mother living in San Francisco in the early 1970s, she enrolled in a martial arts class to learn how to protect herself. She soon was hooked. Hall loved the mental and physical aspects of the sport, which challenged her competitive nature.

After winning her local, state, regional, national, and

single-elimination rounds, Hall qualified as a member of the first U.S. national women's team. In 1978, Hall, then 21, arrived at the World Games in Seoul, South Korea, the birthplace of taekwondo. This was the first time women were allowed to compete internationally, and Hall, along with her eight female teammates, were up against some tough competition.

Skinny, blonde and unassuming, she was often underestimated by her competitors. Hall was able to score points with her roundhouse kicks, coordination skills and extreme discipline. In her final match, she competed against the Korean national champion. A few solid kicks scored her vital points and she won gold. Her win made her the first American, male or female, to win a gold medal in taekwondo at an international competition.

Over the next few years, Hall continued training and expanding her expertise. She received her black belt in shoto kan karate, a style of Japanese martial arts that emphasizes balance of kicking and striking techniques. She later went on to receive her third-degree black belt in taekwondo and instructor's rank.



COURTESY OF DR. MARCIA HALL

Dr. Marcia Hall, a trauma therapist with the VA Roseburg Healthcare System, was recently inducted into the Taekwondo Hall of Fame.

In 1980, Hall decided that she had achieved her goals in competition. She wanted to focus on her family, her career, and go back to school.

Now 52, Hall still practices taekwondo as a hobby, and in April, she rejoined her former teammates in New Jersey for the Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Named North American Pioneer Taekwondo Champion, Hall was honored to be a part of history.

"It's really humbling to look back and realize the significance of being on the first

women's team and the contribution it made for women athletes," she said. "With women competing in such a combative sport, it was the antithesis of socially accepted behavior for women."

Hall began working at VA Roseburg as a military sexual trauma counselor in 1996, and was asked to start the women's trauma recovery program because of her experience with trauma survivors as a mental health professional and a registered nurse. **VA**
By Amanda Hester

TSA cont.

S. Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany. "We were so happy to give them to veterans to keep them warmer during the winter months."

"The official TSA transfer of clothing is yet another example of TSA employee volunteerism, commitment to their community, and support of an authorized inter-agency personal asset transfer program that benefits both veterans and taxpayers in the wise and pru-

dent use of public funds," said Stevens.

Transportation Security Officer Mary Winne was one of the original members of the Albany team that put the otherwise unneeded TSA clothing to good use.

Winne and her co-workers would often use break and even personal time to remove DHS and TSA patches from the clothing items to prepare them to be transferred to VA.

"We're doing a little for those men and women who have done a lot for us and our country," said Winne of her team's efforts.

The Transportation Security Administration was formed immediately following the tragedies of Sept. 11. TSA is a component of the Department of Homeland Security and is responsible for security of the nation's transportation systems.

Working with state, local and regional partners, TSA oversees security for the highways, railroads, buses, mass transit systems, ports and the 450 U.S. airports. The agency employs approximately 50,000 people from Alaska to Puerto Rico to ensure travels by plane, train, automobile or ferry are safe and secure. To learn more about the Transportation Security Administration, visit www.tsa.gov. **VA**

VA Launches 10-Year Study of 60,000 New Veterans

VA has initiated a large, long-term study to look carefully at a broad array of health issues that may affect Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans and their counterparts who served during the same time period. The department's "National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans" will begin with 30,000 veterans deployed to OEF/OIF and 30,000 comparison veterans who were not deployed.

"This study will help us understand the health problems of our newest generation of combat veterans," said Dr. Gerald M. Cross, VA's acting under secretary for health.

"The findings will help us plan more effectively to provide the best care possible for these deserving veterans."

The study will include veterans who served in each branch of service, representing active duty, reserve and National Guard members. Women will be over-sampled to make sure they are represented and will comprise 20 percent of the study, or 12,000 women. A combination of mail surveys, online surveys, telephone interviews, and in-person physical evaluations will be used to collect data from the veterans.

The study will compare the deployed and non-deployed veterans in terms of chronic medical conditions, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological conditions, general health perceptions, reproductive health, pregnancy outcomes, functional status, use of health care, behavioral risk factors (smoking, drinking, seatbelt use, speeding, motorcycle helmet use and sexual behavior), and VA disability compensation. VA has contracted with an independent veteran-owned research firm, HMS Technologies Inc., to collect the data.



VA's "National Health Study for a New Generation of U.S. Veterans" will look at a broad array of health issues that may affect OEF/OIF veterans and their counterparts who served during the same period.

DOD

VA Study Shows People Suffering from Psoriasis at Increased Risk for Cardiovascular Disease and Death

People with psoriasis are at an increased risk for cardiovascular disease and death, VA researchers found in a study published in the June issue of the *Archives of Dermatology*.

Psoriasis is a skin disease that affects nearly 3 percent of the world's population, including 7 million Americans.

The research, based on data from the Miami VA Medical Center, compared 3,236 people suffering from psoriasis to 2,500 people without the disease. The results showed a 98 percent higher occurrence of peripheral arterial disease, a 78 percent higher rate of heart disease, and a 70 percent increased chance of stroke in those with

psoriasis than in those without the disease.

"In and of itself, psoriasis imparts a risk of cardiac disease, stroke and peripheral arterial disease," study co-author Dr. Robert S. Kirsner, vice chairman of dermatology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, told *HealthDay*.

"Psoriasis imposes the same level of risk as high blood lipids and smoking."

The increased risk appears to come from chronic inflammation associated with psoriasis, which damages blood vessels. The researchers believe the evidence uncovered by the data indicates that doctors treating people with psoriasis

should take a close look at their cardiovascular health.

"First, psoriasis patients and their physicians need to be aware that they are at higher risk, and because of this they need to be aggressively screened and treated for vascular disease."

Second, Kirsner said in an interview with *heartwire*, "there is some evidence that treating psoriasis might lower this risk: Ten years ago, we used to tell patients who had psoriasis who didn't want to be treated, 'that's fine, it's your decision,' but now that may not be true, and if you don't treat psoriasis, it could be like not treating high blood pressure or diabetes."

The overall death rate for those with psoriasis was 86 percent higher than for those without the disease. In the 20 years covered by the study, 19.6 percent of those with psoriasis died, compared to 9.9 percent of those without the disease.

"We also confirmed a previous finding—that patients with psoriasis had a higher mortality" than controls, and this was true even after they controlled for cardiovascular disease, Kirsner told *WebMd*.

Patients with psoriasis were more likely to be diagnosed with atherosclerosis, ischemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, and peripheral arterial disease. [VA](#)

Famous World War II 'Kissing Sailor' Donates Poster to Houston VA Medical Center

On Aug. 14, 1945, American sailor Glenn McDuffie was photographed in a passionate embrace with a young nurse as news of the end of World War II broke. The iconic image, entitled "VJ Day in Times Square," was taken for *Life* magazine by famed photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt. Courtesy of McDuffie, that famous image now hangs, in poster form, at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston.

On June 16, McDuffie, 81, a Houston resident, visited the facility to donate the signed poster. Sixty-four years later, McDuffie still remembers crossing through Times Square to switch trains on his way to a girlfriend's home in Brooklyn. "I ran out into the street, jumping and hollering, and that nurse was standing in the middle of Times Square. She heard me and turned around and held her arms out like that. And that is when I went over and kissed her," McDuffie recalled.



Glenn McDuffie autographing copies of the famous photo, with Yolanda Trevino, program support clerk at the Houston VAMC.

New Replacement VA Regional Office Dedicated in Downtown New Orleans

Under Secretary for Benefits Patrick W. Dunne was in New Orleans on June 12 to help dedicate the new 65,000-square-foot VA regional office located downtown. "We're proud to be part of the New Orleans community, and this new office will support veterans throughout the state, ensuring they receive the ben-

efits they earned from military service," Dunne said before joining a gathering of VA employees, veterans service organization members and local government officials. The New Orleans VA Regional Office was closed for almost four months after the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. The follow-

ing December, the VARO reopened in temporary quarters in Gretna, La. In June 2006, portions of the operation moved back to original office space in downtown New Orleans. All operations are now located in the new space that covers five floors of a renovated office building in the Central Business District.

Indianapolis VA Regional Office Co-Hosts Annual Job Fair

The third annual "Operation: Hire a Hoosier Vet" job fair was held April 22 at Stout Field in Indianapolis. The all-day career fair, co-sponsored by the Indianapolis VA Regional Office, brought together almost 2,000 veteran and active-duty job seekers and 75 employers, 20 educational institutions and 17 veterans services providers. This year's event was larger than previous fairs, primarily due to the recent return of more than 3,500 Indiana National Guard, reserve and regular military troops from overseas deployments.

The event was enhanced by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, a contributor to a number of veteran-related activities throughout Indiana, and partnerships with the Roudebush VA Medical Center, the Department of Labor, and Indiana University. The VARO also timed the announcement of their open positions to coincide with the job fair, including 30 newly formed Recovery Act positions.

In Memoriam: Medal of Honor Recipient, VA Employee George E. Wahlen

The George E. Wahlen VA Medical Center in Salt Lake City lost its namesake and humble hero on the first Friday in June. Medal of Honor recipient Wahlen died June 5 after an extended illness at the age of 84.

He earned the Medal of Honor as a Navy corpsman at the battle of Iwo Jima, where he was credited with saving dozens of lives under heavy fire. He was injured on three separate occasions, but refused to leave the battlefield. Many who witnessed his heroics remain dumbfounded that he survived. President Harry S. Truman presented the Medal of Honor to Wahlen in 1945.

He later re-enlisted in the Army, where he served during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. He retired a highly decorated officer with the rank of major. He then went on to a career with the Veterans Benefits Administration, where he continued to serve his fellow veterans for 14 years. In 2004, President George W. Bush signed legislation authorizing the naming of the George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salt Lake City. As federal buildings cannot bear the name of a living person, Congress approved special legislation allowing for an exemption in the case of Wahlen.



Wahlen

Britain's Prince Harry Visits VA's Manhattan Campus

On his first formal visit to the U.S., His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Wales was hosted at the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System's Manhattan campus on May 29. After being greeted by Director John Donnellan and VISN 3 Director Michael Sabo, Prince Harry, as he is commonly known, met with Clinical Psychologist Michael Kramer, Ph.D., for a briefing and demonstration of VA's virtual reality therapy, an effective treatment option for post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers.

The prince then toured the prosthetics lab, where amputee Paul Yarbrough, a Gulf War veteran, demonstrated the DEKA arm, an advanced artificial limb currently being tested in the lab. Later, OEF/OIF veterans met with Prince Harry, who served in Afghanistan, in a private roundtable discussion to share war experiences. Afterwards, the prince spoke with many of the campus's veterans and staff and posed for photos next to the facility's Wounded Warrior statue.



Gulf War veteran Paul Yarbrough gave Prince Harry a demonstration of an advanced artificial arm being tested at the prosthetics lab.

LAMEL HINTON



WILLIAM JUNIPHER

Patient April Goodwin with (left to right): Jon Palks, supervisor, Recreation Therapy; Fernando O. Rivera, medical center director; John Feight, executive director, the Foundation for Hospital Art; and Linda Odierno, wife of Gen. Ray Odierno.

Great American Paintfest Unites Soldiers in Iraq With Hospitalized Veterans in D.C.

Active-duty soldiers serving in Iraq and hospitalized veterans in Washington, D.C., were recently united for a common mission—painting 40 pre-drawn, color-coded designs on canvas to produce “The American Flag and Eagle” for the Great American Paintfest. Co-sponsored by the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center and the Foundation for Hospital Art, the finished canvases, once assembled, will measure 16 by 7 feet and will be prominently displayed in the medical center.

On July 4, Gen. Ray Odierno, commanding general of the multi-national forces in Iraq, and his soldiers joined (via video) more than 100 volunteers, veterans and staff members, including Odierno's wife, Linda, who gathered in the atrium of the D.C. VAMC to begin painting. “Several hospitalized veterans were able to paint portions of the canvases from their hospital rooms,” said Jon Palks, supervisor, Recreation Therapy. This year, more than 30 hospitals across the nation participated in their own Paintfests.

50th Anniversary Proves Memorable for Couple on Lebanon VA's Hospice Unit

On the hospice unit of Pennsylvania's Lebanon VA Medical Center, Robert and Fay Dabashinsky faced the probability that they would not be able to celebrate their 50th anniversary in Hawaii as planned due to his declining health. But to their surprise, the hospice staff brought Hawaii to them.

To the couple's delight, the hospice unit's halls were converted into a Hawaiian welcome strip, with staff dressed in Hawaiian garments on hand to greet them with leis. The veteran's bedroom was decorated in a beach theme, with original trinkets overnighted from Hawaii's welcome center. Grilled steaks, donated by staff, were served with fruit kabobs, umbrella-topped non-alcoholic drinks, and slices of Hawaiian wedding cake baked by another hospice employee. Photos were taken and the couple was presented with a 50th anniversary photo album along with a DVD commemorating the day. The veteran passed away a few weeks after the event. [VA](#)



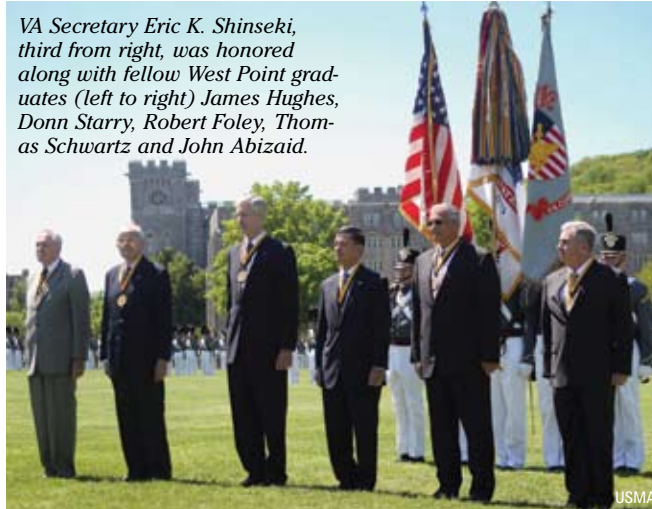
DOUGLAS WAGNER

When Robert and Fay Dabashinsky couldn't celebrate their 50th anniversary in Hawaii, the staff brought Hawaii to them.

West Point Honors Secretary Shinseki

The West Point Association of Graduates honored six distinguished graduates, including VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, during an alumni exercise and review ceremony in May. The committee selected retired Gen. John P. Abizaid, retired Lt. Gen. Robert F. Foley, retired Air Force Lt. Gen. James D. Hughes, retired Gen. Thomas A. Schwartz, retired Gen. Eric K. Shinseki and retired Gen. Donn A. Starry as this year's distinguished graduates. The distinguished graduate honor was first awarded in 1992. Awardees are nominated by presidents of West Point societies and U.S. Military Academy classes and are chosen by an Association of Graduates committee.

Shinseki is a 1965 graduate of West Point who received two Purple Hearts in Vietnam, and commanded an armored cavalry squadron, an armored brigade and the 1st Cavalry Division. In 1997, he was promoted to general, and later became the 34th Army Chief of Staff.



VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, third from right, was honored along with fellow West Point graduates (left to right) James Hughes, Donn Starry, Robert Foley, Thomas Schwartz and John Abizaid.

Salt Lake City Rheumatologist Receives Top Academic Award

Grant W. Cannon, M.D., associate chief of staff for academic affiliation at the George E. Whalen VA Medical Center in Salt Lake City, is the 2008 recipient of the David M. Worthen Award for Academic Excellence. This award is the highest recognition given by the Veterans Health Administration for contri-

butions to VA's education mission.

Cannon attended the University of Utah from undergraduate to medical school, internal medicine residency and rheumatology fellowship. He now holds the rank of professor of medicine at the Utah School of Medicine, and is a full-time VA physician.

He has long recognized the close relationship between the curriculum of the affiliate's training programs and the quality of care provided by trainees when they rotate to VA. He has been a leader in the development of curriculum offered by the affiliate, serving as course master for three medical school courses.



Burns

St. Louis VA Regional Office Employee Named Minority Veterans Coordinator of the Year

The VA Center for Minority Veterans selected Mario Burns as the Veterans Benefits Administration Minority Veterans Program Coordinator of the Year. Burns is a veterans service representative at the St. Louis VA Regional Office.

Burns developed an operating plan and tracking and trending report used by minority veterans coordinators nationwide. He served as a presenter on the new tracking procedures at the recent Minority Veterans Coordinator Seminar. He also created an outreach letter and brochure that he sends to churches and organizations throughout the state to reach minority veterans who need assistance with VA benefits. He works with VA medical centers and vet centers to coordinate outreach opportunities and offer assistance to veterans and their families.

NAMI Honors Mental Health Official Ira Katz

Dr. Ira Katz, deputy chief patient care services officer for mental health, has been named recipient of the National Alliance on Mental Illness's Veterans Council Dedication to Veterans Mental Health Care Award. Katz received his award at NAMI's national conference, held in San Francisco July 6-9.

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots advocacy organization for people with mental illness and their families.

In announcing the prestigious award, NAMI noted that despite criticism in the media following reports of increased suicides among veterans, Katz worked tirelessly behind the scenes to launch VA's first-ever suicide prevention initiative, including a nationwide crisis hotline that has intervened in thousands of potential suicides by veterans.

NAMI noted that Katz spearheaded VA-wide approval of dramatic reform of its mental health programs to embrace recovery principles. "All veterans receiving mental health care in the VA are better served today because of the work of Dr. Ira Katz," NAMI said in its statement about the award.

Acquisition Academy Receives Prestigious Award for Excellence

The VA Acquisition Academy, based in Frederick, Md., has been honored by the Chief Acquisition Officers Council for its Internship School. The academy is the recipient of the CAO Council's 2009 Team Acquisition Excellence Award. The CAO Council's Excellence Awards recognize teams or individuals that have demonstrated excellence in acquisition management. The VAAA received the team award in recognition of the Internship School's contributions, distinguished performance, and outstanding service within VA.

"We are honored to accept this prestigious award," said VAAA Chancellor Lisa Doyle. "Our academy will instill competencies—the technical, interpersonal, and leadership skills—that will allow our students to succeed as acquisition professionals."

The VAAA Internship School differs from most traditional acquisition intern programs through its holistic approach and emphasis on leadership, interpersonal communication skills development, and the camaraderie created by team activities built into the program. The Internship School opened in September 2008 with an inaugural class of 30 interns. The three-year paid internship starts at the GS-7 level and has promotion potential to the GS-12 level upon successful graduation from the program. To learn more, visit www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov.



Left to right: VA Acquisition Academy Internship School Vice-Chancellor Melissa Starinsky, Chancellor Lisa Doyle, and Dr. Karen A. Pica, from the Office of Federal Procurement Policy.



Left to right: Drs. Lourdes Heuermann, Janelle Sellers and Jeremy McIntyre with University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Pharmacy Dean Courtney Fletcher.

education and training. In addition, the award recognizes the recipients for exemplifying the professional values and standards of a model pharmacy practitioner.

The three UNMC alumni are clinical pharmacists at the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System clinic in Grand Island. They typically teach 30 students a year at the VA clinic. The residency program is accredited by the American Society of Health System Pharmacists and is currently in its fourth year. **VA**

Houston VA Nurse Receives University Doctoral Student Award

Jane A. Anderson, Ph.D., associate director of the Stroke Center at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, is the 2008-2009 recipient of the Outstanding Texas Woman's University Doctoral Student Award.

Anderson received her award in April at the Honors Convocation held in Denton, Texas. The prestigious award is presented to one doctoral student for excellence in scholarship and service.

The title of Anderson's dissertation was "Final Phase Alpha Testing of the Self-management TO Prevent (STOP) Stroke Tool." This work reflects her knowledge in the clinical area of neurology, expertise in informatics, in-depth understanding of tests and measurements, and highlights her leadership and management abilities.

Texas Woman's University is a research-intensive university. The goal of the Ph.D. program in nursing is to develop nurse scholars who contribute to the profession. Scholars are those nursing leaders who discover, integrate, apply and disseminate knowledge to promote the health of society.



Memorial Day 2009

As part of a school project, Miya Goodwin, 13, a 7th-grader at Horace Mann Middle School in Little Rock, Ark., places flags on gravesites at the Little Rock National Cemetery on May 22 in preparation for Memorial Day.