



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vanguard

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**Nation's Oldest Known
Veteran Turns 112 — page 10**

Inside: Carey Awards, 4 ☆ Ohio Western Reserve NC, 6 ☆ Golden Age Games, 8

CONTENTS

- Carey Awards 4-5
Erie, Pa., VAMC takes trophy
- New National Cemetery 6
Ohio Western Reserve NC dedicated
- Strategic Plan 7
Five-year course set for VA
- Golden Age Games 8
Topeka, Kan., hosts 14th event
- Oldest Known Veteran 10
VA helps John Painter celebrate his 112th
- NCA Outreach Video 11
"A Sacred Trust" updated
- Employee Orientation 13
New VACO workers learn about One VA

COLUMNS 16-20

On the cover:

Jeff McPeak and Bobbie Patterson, mail clerks at the Murfreesboro, Tenn., VA Medical Center, package hundreds of birthday cards the facility received from all over the country for 112-year-old John Painter, the nation's oldest known veteran. Medical center employees delivered the cards to Painter at a community birthday celebration.

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INTRODUCING

Russell Telander

Russell Telander had just one more assignment left to finish up his bachelor's degree in Business Administration. The instructions were straightforward—conceive a business plan for a product and then see it through to completion.

The Air Force veteran and computer specialist at the Cheyenne, Wyo., VA Regional Office chose a project close to his heart. "Since I work for the VA and love writing poetry, the final project was simple," he said. "I decided to publish a poetry anthology about United States veterans."

He contacted Wyoming poets and asked them to submit original poetry that captures the lives and experiences of veterans and their families. "I collected about 60 poems and even got Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer to write the dedication," he said.

After compiling the poetry, he sought sponsorship to help defer printing costs and collected enough pledges to produce 100 copies of his first anthology, titled, *The Price of Freedom*. He sold every copy, at \$15 each, and donated the proceeds to Voluntary Service at the Cheyenne VA Medical Center.

Spurred by the success of his first anthology, Telander set out to produce a second volume, *The Price of Freedom - Volume II - Unforgotten Heroes*. Once again, he asked Wyoming poets to submit their original works, and this time, he got a much bigger response.

"So many people came to me saying that they had poetry about their father, brother or someone in their family that they'd like to submit," he said.

He had the dedication written by former Wyoming Congressman and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, and sponsors were eager to contribute to his second effort. "Wal-Mart stepped up to help with the costs of printing, and with Kinko's, we were able to produce 300 copies," he said.

To launch his second anthology, Telander held a book signing and dedication on the 4th of July at the Wal-Mart in Cheyenne. On that first day, he sold close to 100 copies, and

has since donated the proceeds from every sale—more than \$2,500—toward the construction of the United States World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

"Because the World War II Memorial is long overdue, I feel this is a wonderful way for people who have thought about contributing to the memorial to do so and receive

something fantastic in return," he noted.

Should we look for a trilogy? Telander says planning is already underway for the third and final anthology, due out in 2002. "The third volume will still be about veterans," he said, "but will center more on the women who served and the spouses who stayed at home and worked for the United States war efforts."

Telander says this is one of the most rewarding things he's ever done, and, in case you were wondering, he got an "A" on the project. To purchase a copy of *The Price of Freedom - Volume II - Unforgotten Heroes*, call Russell Telander at (307) 778-7550 extension 7424. □

By Matt Bristol



Paul Sherbo
Regional Director,
Office of Public Affairs



Some time ago, an aspiring novelist visited the VA Office of Public Affairs (OPA) Regional Office in Denver to get some information for a book she wants to

write. The plot? A Vietnam veteran involved in a gruesome murder ... and I said, "Oh, please."

In the summer of 1998 I wrote an article for our OPA newsletters on the facts versus fiction about veterans. I am far from being the only one who talks about this—I drew all my facts from research done by many much bigger players with far more resources.

I would like to tell you that, courtesy of those studies and research, the media and public image of veterans (and specifically, Vietnam veterans) has turned for the better. I would like to tell you that, but it would not be true. Consider the following items:

■ Courtesy of ABC 20/20, veterans claiming post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are condemned as phonies. As Under Secretary for Benefits Joe Thompson said (in a part of the interview that 20/20 chose not to air), ABC has now added the accusation "charlatan" to mistruths about Vietnam veterans.

■ Last March, National Public Radio contacted the Office of Public Affairs wanting to know how Vietnam veterans have managed trying to assimilate into society.

■ In the January 31, 2000, issue of the *Navy Times*, an opinion piece by Lesa A. McComas refers to the designation of "disabled veteran" as "less a mark of distinction in this country than it is suitable for being written on a piece of cardboard and held by someone standing under a freeway overpass." Notice the image that sprang to McComas' mind,

The Fact of the Matter In Defense of the Veteran

instead of picturing some of our distinguished veterans, such as Senator Robert Kerrey (D-Neb.) or Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.).

■ In April, *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Jon Stenzler posted an inquiry on the Internet, asking for "sources to talk about the thousands of Vietnam veterans who languish away in VA hospitals across the country."

■ Readers exchanged barbs about World War II veterans in two January issues of the *Rocky Mountain News*. Here are some sample comments: "Finally! I'm sick of the drunks from the VFW..." and "When will World War II vets quit asking for more? When the last one is mercifully dead."

Shocking? Should be. But it's also a wake-up call. In VA, we are used to considering and discussing veterans' issues with respect foremost in our minds. We need to wake up to the fact that many people do not share this view—in fact, many are openly annoyed or even angry at the very thought of veterans.

While we in VA have been focusing (appropriately) on our internal issues of pending claims, changes in health care and the budget, we have largely missed a tremendous shift in public opinion—a shift far more dangerous to the future of VA than budget issues. For if the public sees veterans as unworthy of respect, then why would the public want a veterans agency?

Some erosion of public support has already manifested itself. Consider this: Hiring preferences for post-Vietnam veterans expired on December 31, 1999, with hardly a whimper. Now consider who opposes that preference for veterans: federal employee unions (*Army Times*, August 21, 2000). This is not a situation in which a VA employee can take a passive stance. When our veterans are under attack, we must either come to their defense, or find a job in another agency.

Even when our jobs get tough, one of the things to get us fired up again is our mission: to serve veterans. It is a noble cause, and so is proclaiming the truth about them. □

Murphy Named Deputy Under Secretary for Health

Dr. Frances M. Murphy has been named Deputy Under Secretary for Health, the highest



Murphy

position ever held by a woman in VA's health care system. Acting Secretary Hershel Gober announced the appointment in October.

"For the past 14 years I've worked for the VA and nothing has brought me so much satisfaction and pride," said Murphy.

Murphy had been the acting Deputy Under Secretary for Health since February. In this position, she works closely with Under Secretary for Health Dr. Thomas Garthwaite to manage the nation's largest integrated health care system, with more than 1,200 sites of care.

The Rochester, N.Y., native joined VA in 1987 as the assistant chief of the Neurology Service at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center. She also served as director of the Environmental Agents Service, responsible for Gulf War, Agent Orange, mustard gas and radiation health care programs. A board-certified neurologist, Murphy is an Air Force veteran. □

2000 Carey Awards

Employees Praised for Quality Improvements



Director Stephen Lucas (back row, second from right) and associates from the Erie, Pa., VA Medical Center, trophy winner in the 2000 Carey Awards competition, play the role of gourmet chefs as they demonstrate how to mix all the right ingredients necessary for a winning recipe during an information-sharing symposium for Carey Award winners in Washington, D.C.

“Today, it’s about people! Because they’re the ones that make this possible. They’re the ones that make a difference each day in veterans’ lives,” declared Stephen M. Lucas, director of the Erie, Pa., VA Medical Center, after receiving VA’s highest honor for organizational effectiveness, performance and excellence—the Carey Trophy—in the 2000 Robert W. Carey Quality Awards Program. “All our work is accomplished through relationships between our associates, and the stronger those relationships, the stronger we perform.”

At the Erie VAMC, everyone from the executive team to the midnight cleaning crew are considered “associates,” and Lucas credits each one with adopting a philosophy that supports quality, competency, accountability and dedication to an organization where veterans are the first priority. Under that philosophy, Erie’s associates have increased access to care and are serving more

veterans, while decreasing waiting times and bed days of care—quality improvements that launched the medical center into the 94th percentile in low-cost care provision for the entire VA.

According to Lucas, the transformation to a patient-centered, veteran-focused health care delivery

“These awards showcase the pursuit of quality by VA employees, but they are also a bold testament to the quality of VA employees.”

— Acting Secretary Hershel Gober

system began in 1995 with a business process re-engineering initiative that encouraged associates to work smarter and think creatively. The initiative led to the implementation of several best practices, including the Modified Hospitalist Approach, in which physicians rotate between inpatient and outpatient settings. Judy Zboyovski, administrative assistant to the chief of staff at the

Erie VAMC, said the Modified Hospitalist Approach has been integral in allowing staff to serve more veterans and reduce waiting times, while significantly increasing both patient and physician satisfaction.

Lucas wasn’t alone in praising employees for their role in attaining quality improvement goals. Representatives from each of the organizations honored in the 2000 Robert W. Carey Quality Awards Program cited employees as their keys to success during an information-sharing symposium for Carey Award winners in Washington, D.C. Joseph McCann, deputy assistant director of Insurance at the Philadelphia VA Regional Office and Insurance Center (VAROIC), winner in the Benefits Services category, said, “There’s a sense of pride among our employees and their positive attitude is evident whenever they interact with any of our customers.”

The Philadelphia VAROIC was the first recipient of the Carey Trophy in 1992, when the award program was implemented to honor the memory of Robert W. Carey, the facility’s former director and a champion of quality improvement in the federal government. “His memory still lives in our office,” said McCann. “The forward thinking and initiatives that he started, they’re still in place, and we’re still looking for ways to improve services to our policyholders.” And improving services they are.

When policyholders complained about unanswered telephone calls, the insurance center increased the number of telephone lines and installed an Interactive Voice Response system which now allows the office to handle nearly 4,000 calls each day.

When they grumbled about the length of time it took to track a lost check, the center partnered with the Department of Treasury and, using the Internet, has reduced lost check



Michael D. Adelman, M.D., medical director for primary care at the Erie, Pa., VA Medical Center, and Paula Bauda, a nurse practitioner, discuss telederm technology with a woman veteran. Teledermatology is helping the medical center reduce waiting times and improve service in the Dermatology Clinic.

tracking time from six weeks to five days.

And when policyholders sought to increase the standard \$10,000 coverage amount, the center supported legislation permitting the purchase of additional coverage through dividend reinvestments. The center insures more than five million policyholders for a total of \$485 billion, making it the seventh largest life insurance company in the U.S.

For the third consecutive year, the Florida National Cemetery Complex won honors in the National Cemetery category, and David Wells, the assistant director, credits employees with making it happen. "At each of the cemeteries we operate—Florida, Bay Pines and St. Augustine—employees participate in the planning, goal-setting and daily operation," he said. "And because of that, they know exactly where we're going

figure to grow. Anticipating the increased demand for burial space, a cemetery expansion team undertook a 179-acre project that will provide nearly 50,000 new burial sites for both casketed and cremated remains. The new section opened in July and the team is now working with state authorities and environmental groups on a second 130-acre expansion project.

The cemetery also was honored for implementing an innovative irrigation program that relies on reclaimed wastewater from a nearby state correctional facility instead of the precious Florida aquifers. "Not only are we preserving a valuable resource," joked Bill Blackwelder, an irrigation specialist for the cemetery complex, "but we've also got some of the greenest grass around."

Wallace M. Hopkins, chief executive officer of the Amarillo,

and how we're going to get there. It gives them a sense of pride, dedication and commitment, and that's what we are all about."

The cemetery complex is the third most active in the National Cemetery Administration, averaging nearly 5,000 burials each year, and employees expect that

Texas, VA Health Care System, said open communication played a key role in winning the Health Care category of the 2000 Carey Awards Program. "We have a great deal of informality in our system, and this approach helps facilitate open communication between our employees."

He said when it came time to renovate the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), surgeons and nurses working there were asked to contribute to the redesign process. "It just makes sense to me," he said. "They know best how an ICU should be designed, so why not ask them?" The employee-driven approach to redesigning work areas was a success and has since been extended to renovation projects in the Acute Care, Operating Room, Day Surgery, Medical Arts and Specialty Clinic areas.

Other initiatives in the Amarillo VA Health Care System include a point-based employee incentive program in which annual bonuses are based on the number of points employees acquire throughout the year. Points are earned for participating in facility improvements, identifying unsafe practices, exceeding customer expectations, and other activities.

Amarillo also has an outreach team called the "VA Roadies," made up of medical professionals who volunteer their time to attend health fairs throughout the Texas panhandle providing disease screening and preventive health services to veterans and their families. "The people we see are so appreciative," said Shirley E. Loar, R.N., a nurse manager who helps coordinate the VA Roadies. "And that really gives us a wonderful sense of satisfaction."

The Carey Awards Program highlights organizations within VA that excel in quality management while providing an effective quality transformation model. Ultimately however, employees are the ones responsible for making such transformations possible. Perhaps VA Acting Secretary Hershel Gober captured the essence of the Carey Awards best when, during the awards ceremony, he said, "These awards showcase the pursuit of quality by VA employees, but they are also a bold testament to the quality of VA employees." □

By Matt Bristol

2000 Robert W. Carey Awards

Trophy Winner

Erie, Pa., VA Medical Center

Category Winners

Health Care Amarillo, Texas, VA Health Care System

Benefits Services Philadelphia VA Regional Office & Insurance Center

National Cemeteries Florida National Cemetery Complex

VA Dedicates 119th National Cemetery in Ohio



PHOTO BY LARRY COLBY

Soldiers of History, a Grafton, Ohio-based group that depicts 12 wars in which Americans have fought, presented a pre-ceremony educational program.

Don Nielsen remembered staging a mock funeral a few years ago on the property that was to become the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery (OWRNC).

On Sept. 10, the chair of the OWRNC Advisory Committee rejoiced at years of veterans' advocacy, VA work and politicians' support culminating in the dedication of the 119th VA national cemetery near Rittman. "Finally, I can look out over these hallowed grounds and see proof that our freedom comes at a high price," said the former state president of The Retired Officers Association.

Four years ago, he and fellow northeastern Ohio veterans publicized their frustration with what seemed like a long process to develop the burial site.

Nielsen, committee co-chair J. R. Lance, publicity chair Frank Aleksandrowicz, Medina County veterans service officer Jason McCourt and the rest of the advisory committee helped arrange a program that kept 1,800 people at the patriotic program in spite of steady rain. Their committee fed the workers and participants who prepared the grounds and rehearsed the program,

produced caps with the cemetery name, and arranged for pre-program entertainment from a bagpiper and a military reenactment group.

Because of the strong need to begin burials, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) opened the cemetery for burials three months before the dedication ceremony and completion of all the structures. Some 150 families had held the remains of loved ones to be buried when OWRNC opened.

Located 45 miles south of Cleveland and 20 miles west of Akron, the \$11 million, 274-acre facility will provide 106,000 burial spaces when fully developed. Currently, 65 acres are open with 16,200 gravesites.

In addition to the administration/maintenance building, facilities include a public information center with an automated kiosk for quick grave location, a gazebo topped with a carillon donated by AMVETS, an assembly area, two committal service shelters and a memorial walkway.

Keynoting the ceremony was Acting Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Edward A. Powell, Jr., who described his visit to a national cemetery with his son.

"Ashton wandered through the manicured rows of headstones. The impression on him was immediate and stunning. The dates on far too many of the headstones reflected a life shortened by conflict. The impact of the price paid by the men and women buried there was not lost on him."

Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) and Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) also addressed the crowd. Cemetery Director Jeff Teas, who leads a staff of 10, hosted the event. The program included a jet flyover, color guard, firing detail and taps provided by the Ohio National Guard. The U.S. Air Force Band of Flight from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton provided music.

Aleksandrowicz, a VFW post commander, recruits volunteers to answer questions at the cemetery's public information center. With 50 volunteers scheduled, he hopes to develop a recognition program. And



Rain failed to dampen the spirits of the crowd during the pledge of allegiance.



Ohio small town fondness for town-square gazebos is reflected in Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery's structure. The gazebo near the assembly area supports a carillon and offers a direct view of the public information center near the entrance.



Unveiling the dedicatory plaque were (left to right): Rep. Sherrod Brown, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Robert M. Walker, and Acting Deputy Secretary Edward Powell.

here's the message he likes to hear them deliver: "Everyone honorably discharged from military service is a hero; this is a field of heroes. If you want to be buried with your comrades, regardless of color, beliefs or

medals, this is the place."

Ohio's only other national cemetery is in the southwestern section of Dayton.

In 1987 and again in 1994, VA identified the Cleveland area as one of 10 metropolitan areas of the country in greatest need of burial space for veterans. NCA is planning to build national cemeteries at the remaining sites on the list that are unserved, including Oklahoma City, where a site at Fort Sill, Okla., has been

acquired and a contract awarded for master plan development; Atlanta, Detroit, Miami, Pittsburgh and Sacramento, Calif. □

By Jo Schuda

Five-Year Plan Sets a Strategic Direction for VA

VA sent a five-year plan to Congress on September 29 designed to reaffirm the Department's commitment to meeting the needs of a changing veteran population through adherence to strategic goals and objectives touching every VA employee. The Department of Veterans Affairs Strategic Plan 2001-2006 articulates the mission, vision and strategic direction of the Department over the next five years. It is the centerpiece of VA's strategic management process.

At the core of the plan are VA's four strategic goals and one enabling goal that encompass the range of services VA provides to veterans. These strategic goals, in turn, are broken down to specific objectives tied to "outcome measures" that establish performance targets in all service areas. These performance targets set management expectations that extend throughout the Department and touch every employee. VA's goals include:

Strategic Goal 1 – Restore the capability of disabled veterans to the greatest extent possible, and improve the quality of their lives and that of their families.

Strategic Goal 2 – Ensure a smooth transition for veterans from active military service to civilian life.

Strategic Goal 3 – Honor and serve veterans in life and memorialize them in death for their sacrifices on behalf of the nation.

Strategic Goal 4 – Contribute to the public health, socioeconomic well-being and history of the nation.

Enabling Goal – Create an environment that fosters the delivery of One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through effective communication and management of people, technology, business processes, and financial resources.

While the first four strategic goals focus on meeting veterans' needs through specific VA programs and services, the final enabling goal represents crosscutting activities that enable all VA organizations and programs to carry out the VA mission. Many of these functions are transparent to veterans and their families, but critical to VA managers and employees, such as internal processes, communications, and workforce assets.

In addition to chapters covering

each of the strategic goals and their objectives, the 90-page document includes sections describing the veteran population, an overview of VA's organization and the assumptions upon which the plan is based.

Other documents support the strategic plan. The Annual Performance Report identifies near-term goals that support the strategic plan's long-term goals. The Annual Accountability Report, along with the performance report, documents the Department's performance as measured against the strategic plan's performance objectives. The VA Annual Budget describes how resources are allocated to accomplish the Department's strategic goals.

An employee guide to the VA Strategic Plan, the Employee Strategic Plan, will soon be released to provide an overview explaining the plan's relevance to employees and how their work fits into the plan's broader organizational goals.

For more information about the VA Strategic Plan, contact Gary Steinberg, DAS for Planning and Evaluation, (202) 273-5068, or Curt Marshall, Director of the Strategic Planning Service, (202) 273-7522. □

Veterans Make Golden Memories in Kansas



Beverly Smith, an 80-year-old World War II veteran and winner of the Most Inspirational Athlete Award, scales the rock-climbing wall.

Just as top athletes from around the world gathered in Sydney, Australia, for the 2000 Summer Olympics, more than 400 "golden age" athletes from across the nation descended on a sweltering Topeka, Kan., to face off in heated competition at the 14th National Veterans Golden Age Games.

Many had waited all year for this moment, and though hopeful of taking the gold medal in their event, they were also eager to visit with old friends and share memories of past years' Games. Smiles and laughter were the standard greeting as athletes recounted previous triumphs, both on and off the playing field.

When Houston Brummit, winner of the 1999 George Gangi Most Inspirational Athlete Award, lit the ceremonial torch, announcing, "Let the Games begin," the anticipation spilled over as athletes, volunteers and staff voiced their approval with exuberant cheers and a hearty applause. They were ready.

Army veteran Bernard Gibson was ready to showcase his skills in the table tennis competition. He won a silver medal in 1998, his first year at the Games, and vowed to win the

gold in '99—and he did. A birthday pushed him into a different age category this year, but he was intent on a repeat performance. "I jump rope, do 200 sit-ups every night and lift weights in the morning," declared the Washington, D.C., native. Gibson takes his training just as seriously as he played his game, and he swept the 65-69 age group en route to winning his second gold medal. "A lot of people think that after you've had a triple bypass that's the end, but that's not the case," he explained. "Participating in the Golden Age Games has been a celebration of life."

At 80 years of age, World War II Navy veteran Beverly Smith is a picture of health and vitality who truly exemplifies the celebratory spirit of the Games. During one of the alternate activities, she stood confidently before a towering 25-foot rock-climbing wall and braced herself for the task ahead. By the time she reached the top, chants of "Go, Beverly!" resounded throughout the hall.

Her unwavering spirit proved inspirational to all and at the end of the week, the former longtime employee of the Northport, N.Y., VA Medical Center was named the 2000 Most Inspirational Athlete Award winner. "I hope the Games continue forever, because lots of older veterans don't have anything like this to look forward to," she said. "I think it's one of the best things VA has ever done."

World War II veteran Oliver Harris, of Keithville, La., had such a good time while attending his first Games in Geneva, N.Y., last year that after returning home, he encouraged his kid brother Clyde, a Korean War veteran, to attend. "When I got back from the Games, I told Clyde what a great time it was and said that I thought he'd enjoy it," Oliver recalled.

And enjoy it he did. "It's doubled all of what Oliver said," admitted Clyde, an Air Force veteran from Fort Worth, Texas. "It's kind of like a sunset—you just can't find the words to describe it, you need to see it with your own eyes." The two hope to return to the Games next year and



Robert Messier, a World War II veteran from Annapolis, Md., receives congratulations during the swimming competition from Paula Gorman, Voluntary Service, Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center, and his son, Robert Messier, Jr.



Teresa Parks, recreation therapist at the Grand Junction, Colo., VA Medical Center, and Daniel T. Bence, visual impairment coordinator at the Togus, Me., VA Medical Center, time Lawrence Scarcella, a World War II Army veteran from Northport, N.Y., as he competes in bicycling.

Waco VARO Employees Assist Bosnian Peacekeepers



The U.S. Army Hospital at Camp Eagle in Tuzla, Bosnia.

VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) recently teamed up on a groundbreaking initiative to provide VA benefits briefings and pre-separation rating decisions to peacekeeping forces in Bosnia. Two Waco, Texas, VA Regional Office employees traveled to Bosnia in August to assist Texas Army National Guard troops at Camp Eagle in Tuzla.

Their effort marked the first time that the combination of services provided through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Pre-Discharge Program were available in Bosnia, and the first time both types of services were provided to National Guard or reserve soldiers before they returned home and left active duty. It's also believed to be the first time that a VA team has been sent into a combat theater to take and rate claims through the Pre-Discharge Program, and the first time since the Vietnam era that a VA team has conducted benefits briefings in a combat theater.

Dan Howard, a Waco VA Regional Office rating specialist and field section coach, and Frank Scott, military services coordinator, spent more than a week in Bosnia assisting the 800-member 49th Armored Division of the Texas Army National Guard participating in Task Force Eagle as part of the United Nations peacekeeping mission. Units were informed about scheduled TAP briefings and personal interviews to discuss VA benefits through the Army's Intranet.

Scott gave seven TAP briefings to

more than 250 Texas National Guard soldiers. Howard evaluated the service medical records of more than 130 soldiers to determine their eligibility for VA disability compensation. He often reviewed the soldiers' medical records and informally discussed the

proposed rating decisions during his initial meeting with them. Service-connected disabilities were established for 28 soldiers.

Scott and Howard took their unique assignment in stride. "I think these soldiers deserved the extra effort we made to serve them," said Scott. "Thousands of land mines are still active in the area. The troops were essentially confined to the base, and had to be armed at all times."

Both praised the support they received from personnel at Camp Eagle. "It was no easy task," said Scott. "In many cases, the soldiers we needed to see were performing combat patrols, perimeter defenses and airfield protection."

DoD supplied meals, lodging and ground transportation for Howard

and Scott during their visit, as well as military flights between Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany and Camp Eagle. Work space and equipment were provided at Camp Eagle, in a location they shared with the American Red Cross.

And when the Guard members returned home to Fort Hood, Texas, from Bosnia last month, Scott and Tracey Smith, a veterans service representative at the Waco VA Regional Office, were on hand to provide follow-up transition assistance. They answered questions about VA benefits, and helped Guard members complete applications for VA home loan certificates of eligibility, and medical and dental care. They also obtained copies of service discharges (DD-214s) for the Guard members Howard had identified in Bosnia as being eligible for disability compensation, and Howard is now expediting the processing of their claims.

Scott said that many of the Guard members they assisted both in Bosnia and back in Texas knew little about VA benefits. "Many of the Guard members had been too busy in their civilian lives to check into their potential eligibility for VA benefits," he said. "If [they] had processed out without receiving our transition assistance and pre-discharge services, many of them might not have received the benefits to which they're entitled." □

Golden Age Games (cont.)

bring along their youngest brother, Theodore, who served two tours with the U.S. Army Special Forces in Vietnam.

Hosted this year by the VA Heartland Network and the VA Eastern Kansas Healthcare System, the Golden Age Games are open to all U.S. military veterans, age 55 and older, who are currently receiving care at a VA medical facility. Participants this year ranged in age from 55 to 89. The number of Vietnam combat veterans continued to rise this year, to 27, and a lone Gulf War veteran rounded out the competition.

As the Games drew to a close, competitors put on their hard-earned

medals and gathered at the closing ceremony to celebrate an exciting week. Among the crowd were local heroes like Glenn Sheridan from the Topeka VAMC. This was Sheridan's fifth appearance at the Games and he relishes the opportunity to visit with friends he's made over the years. "It's something you just can't put a value on," the combat-wounded veteran of World War II and Korea asserted.

The 2001 Games will be hosted by the VA North Texas Health Care System (VANTHCS), June 9-15, in Duncanville, Texas. □

By Matt Bristol

Oldest Known Veteran Celebrates 112th Birthday



Granddaughter-in-law Patsy Green assists John Painter as he arrives for his 112th birthday celebration. Green's granddaughter, Amber White, is in the background.



Painter's daughter, Doris Potts, and Roland Moore, director of the VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System, look on as Painter's son-in-law, Calvin Potts, shows Painter a hand-crafted belt buckle presented to him by employees of the Murfreesboro VAMC.

Most of us can't even imagine living to the age of 100, much less 12 years past the century mark. But for World War I veteran John George Painter, imagination became reality on September 20, 2000, when he celebrated his 112th birthday.

A life that touches three centuries is remarkable enough, but Painter also holds another amazing distinction—he's the oldest veteran known to VA. Born in 1888, he entered the Army at age 29 to fight in World War I. He drove a field artillery wagon loaded with ammunition until an honorable discharge in 1919 allowed him to resume his life as a farmer and blacksmith in rural Tennessee. He married his childhood sweetheart, and they had two daughters, one of whom is still living.

The Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs discovered Painter two years ago while conducting a search for the oldest veteran in each county of the state. Then living with his daughter in the community of Mt. Juliet, Painter was the oldest veteran the state Department of Veterans Affairs found. A French Legion of Honor medal recognizing his World War I service soon followed, as did an invitation to serve as co-Grand Marshal of Nashville's 1998 Veterans Day Parade. A search of VA records later revealed that Painter is the nation's oldest veteran with an active claims folder.

Painter is no stranger to the Murfreesboro VA Medical Center.

He has spent time there for respite care while family caretakers took breaks. So when his grandson Dannie Green and wife Patsy—with whom Painter now lives—began planning a community celebration for his 112th birthday, his friends from the Murfreesboro VAMC were invited to attend.

Hundreds gathered in Mt. Juliet for the birthday celebration. Local World War II veteran Pleas Copas drove Painter to the party in a vintage Model A Ford. Assisted only by a walker, Painter doffed his hat to greet family, friends and strangers who stopped to wish him well and shake his hand.

Two Murfreesboro VAMC employees presented gifts they created for Painter on behalf of the medical center. Jason Johnston, a cytology technician and artisan

blacksmith in his spare time, created a full-size metal replica of the Veterans Honor™ Rose that he mounted on a plaque bearing the VA seal and an inscription.

Kinesiotherapist Pete Semich, a knife maker and craftsman, created a belt buckle made of elk antler. His wife, a wildlife artist, painted a bald eagle on the buckle. Robert Malcom, a food service worker at the Dublin, Ga., VA Medical Center, drove 900 miles round trip to present that medical center's gift to Painter—a painting by a well-known Georgia artist.

A broadcast e-mail message informed all VA employees of the celebration for Painter, and invited them to send birthday cards. Hundreds arrived from all over the nation and were delivered to Painter by the Murfreesboro VAMC. □

French Veterans Honor American Counterparts

French veterans organizations want to bridge the gap between French veterans and their American counterparts with a special recognition program for American combat veterans. The Federation Andre Maginot, formed in 1888, and the Confederation Europeenne des anciens Combattants, formed in 1953, are seeking American veterans who served during any Allied operations, including the Korean War, Vietnam War, and Desert Storm and Desert Shield, to give them a special medal and certificate recognizing their wartime service.

The organizations will publish the names of those honored in a special issue of their magazine "Alliance." Veterans and groups interested in receiving this recognition can write to the following address to receive an application with additional information: International Alliance of Combatants, 310 Gledridge Road, Key Biscayne, Fla. 33149.

'Hollywood' Comes to Quantico National Cemetery

When NCA staff decided to update an outdated public outreach video, they wanted to take a fresh approach to communicating NCA's mission and services.



Equipment, props, and support personnel are right next to the actors as scenes are filmed.

The usually serene grounds of Quantico National Cemetery, located 30 miles south of the Washington, D.C., area in the Virginia countryside, became a bustling video set for two days last August.

For 12 hours each day, the scene at the cemetery was no different from what you would find at any Hollywood set. Sound technicians, camera operators, a scene manager, a scriptwriter, lighting technicians, a make-up artist, truckloads of equipment, actors, a producer and a director all converged on the cemetery to film dramatic scenes for a new version of "A Sacred Trust: The Story of the National Cemetery Administration," NCA's public outreach video.

When NCA staff decided to produce this second edition of "A Sacred Trust," they wanted to take a fresh approach to communicating NCA's mission and services. So rather than explaining VA burial and memorial benefits through a narrator, the new film uses dramatic scenes and interviews with NCA employees to tell the story.

The storyline of the script follows a family as they receive the full range of burial and memorial benefits from

NCA after the death of a veteran family member. The funeral is followed in its entirety from the time it enters the national cemetery until several weeks later. In this new version of the video, information about NCA policies and benefits comes out through the interaction of characters in the story and through the interviews with NCA employees.

To add realism, the Department of Defense (DoD) and Mountcastle Funeral Home, a local Virginia funeral home, provided additional support during taping of the dramatic scenes. DoD provided two service members to depict DoD's two-person military funeral honors, including the flag folding and presentation.

"It was important that we depict military honors correctly because we wanted to accurately portray what most veterans can expect during a funeral and support DoD's program," said Rick Arndt, chief of NCA's Management Outreach Division. Mountcastle Funeral Home provided the hearse and casket used during the shooting and staff members played themselves in several scenes.

Prior to taping at Quantico, the video crew was busy shooting

background footage (b-roll) and conducting interviews with NCA employees at other national cemeteries for use in the video.

The National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona, National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (Hawaii), Tahoma, Wash., Culpeper, Va., and Long Island National Cemeteries were all chosen for their unique backgrounds. "We wanted to show a sampling of the diverse topography, architecture and history of the 119 cemeteries currently in the system," said Arndt.

The new program, which was produced by the Veterans Health Administration's Employee Education System, will be available in a variety of formats. There have been many improvements in video technology recently and NCA wanted to make the most out of those advancements. One form of distribution will be the standard VHS videotape, but the video also will be available in the relatively new Digital VideoDisk (DVD) format.

All of the footage was shot in Digital Betacam format. One of the advantages of digital technology is that there is no degradation of quality in storage or when transferring to different media. NCA can easily re-use the digital footage for updates or new projects in the future.

Using the DVD format allowed NCA to produce three versions on a single DVD: the original, closed-caption, and Spanish-language. In the future, some of the digital footage will be linked to NCA's Web site, www.cem.va.gov, allowing visitors to the site to choose between watching selected video scenes or reading about the benefits they are interested in.

"A Sacred Trust" will mostly be used at conventions, meetings and trade shows for public, governmental and veterans outreach. However, NCA also plans to broadcast the video occasionally on the VA Knowledge Network, VA's digital satellite network, which will go online this month. Watch your local listings for an opportunity to see the new video on the Knowledge Network. □

By Michael Nacincik
NCA, VA Central Office

Health Insurance Premium Conversion Program Takes Effect

VA employees saw an increase in their take-home pay last month as health insurance premiums were paid for the first time with pre-tax dollars.

The increase is a result of the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) premium conversion program. In the past, agencies deducted health premiums after federal income taxes were paid. Beginning with the first full pay period in October, though, premium allotments are taken out before taxes.

The premium allotments are not subject to income tax, Medicare or Social Security taxes, so less tax is withheld and paychecks are larger.

The average increase in pay is about \$434 per year (or \$16.69 for a two-week pay period), according to Office of Personnel Management (OPM) officials. They explain, however, that actual increases depend upon the cost of individual health insurance plans and the employee's tax bracket.

In addition, the increase in pay will be short-lived for most, an OPM official said, as the cost of health insurance is expected to increase significantly in January. In fact, the FEHB premium conversion program was devised as part of a "balancing act" to help offset the rising cost of

health benefits, according to OPM Director Janice R. Lachance.

In the coming year, premiums for Health Maintenance Organizations will increase an average of 8.5 percent, while fee-for-service plans will see an average increase of 10.9 percent, OPM officials said.

"We chose to raise premiums across the program, rather than reduce benefits," Lachance said. "Keeping health care affordable, while maintaining a comprehensive benefits package, is a delicate balancing act."

Participating in the premium conversion program is automatic for eligible employees. No action need be taken unless an employee wants to opt out of the conversion program. Then a waiver must be submitted to the local personnel office.

OPM officials said the option not to participate in the program is there because the conversion will reduce Social Security payments slightly upon retirement. For the vast majority of employees, though, the immediate tax benefits will be several times greater than the potential amount lost later in Social Security payments, officials said. □



VA Hosts Two-Day White House Forum

VA hosted a two-day White House Forum on Technologies for Successful Aging at Central Office last month. Panels of experts from both government and the private sector gathered to discuss how new technologies can improve the independence, mobility, security and health of aging Americans.

The forum's goal was to identify collaborative, technology transfer, and technology development and deployment opportunities for government, industry and academic communities that will bridge the "digital divide," or barriers that prevent the elderly and those with disabilities from fully utilizing emerging technologies.

That work has a sense of urgency. The number of seniors in the United States is expected to increase from more than 33 million today, to 53 million in 2020 and 77 million by 2040. By 2023, the demographic profile of the entire nation will be similar to the profile in Florida today.

Technologies that help to meet the challenges of aging, both for individuals and the nation as a whole, will be increasingly valuable as the shift in demographics continues this century. VA faces a particular challenge in this area, with a population of nine million veterans now over age 65.

VA's Rehabilitation and Development Service in the Office of Research and Development played a major role in the White House Forum. More than 200



Dr. Neal Lane, director of the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy, and VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Thomas Garthwaite listen as Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala speaks at the White House Forum on Technologies for Successful Aging at VA headquarters.

VA researchers are working to advance the health care needs of veterans with disabilities, and nine Rehabilitation Research and Development Centers of Excellence located at VA facilities around the country are studying specific aspects of aging and disability research. □

New VACO Employees Get First One VA Orientation



Marcelle Habbion, a program analyst in VACO's Office of Policy & Planning, talks with new headquarters employees about the VACO credit union. Habbion serves on the credit union's board of directors.

They came from different backgrounds. Some right out of college, others transferring from VA field offices or other federal agencies. But all had one thing in common—they were new to VA Central Office (VACO) and had come to the first One VA New Employee Orientation to learn about employee benefits and how the three VA administrative branches work together in accomplishing a common goal—to care for veterans.

Marilyn Buckler, an employee development specialist in the Office of Human Resources Management who planned the orientation, opened by asking why it is important to operate as One VA. Gulf War veteran Paul Sullivan, who joined VBA's Data Management Office this summer, answered, "Because veterans see VA as one agency, not individual branches." Other veterans in the room agreed and several shared their personal experiences in receiving VA education and medical benefits.

Later, they listened as VHA Management Support Office Director Tom Hogan, Deputy Director of VBA's Loan Guaranty Service Judy Caden, and NCA's Deputy Under Secretary for Operations Roger Rapp discussed the functions of their administrations and how they correspond to the VA mission. There

were also presentations on security, employee assistance, equal opportunity and other topics.

Stefan Coleman, a legal assistant in the Office of the General Counsel who graduated from Maryland Eastern Shore University in May and joined VA in July, said he got a lot out of the orientation. "You hear so much about the different departments in the agency but never really get to see them," he said. "So it was a good opportunity to hear about their

mission and how it ties into One VA ... it makes you feel like part of a huge team."

Robin Checketts, who joined VBA's Office of Resource Management last April, agreed. "My supervisors told me how VA was made up of different branches, but it was interesting to hear about them from the people in charge, to hear their perspective," she noted. A May 1999 graduate of Arizona State University, Checketts moved to Washington in January to begin her career. Why did she choose VA? "My father had done some consulting for VA and he said there were good people working here and that there was lots of opportunity for growth."

Buckler said the orientation is scheduled to be held quarterly and she encourages new employees, or those wishing to reacquaint themselves with benefits and services available to them, to attend. She is also planning site visits to the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center, VA Regional Office and Quantico National Cemetery. "We want VA to be an employer of choice, and getting new employees off on the right foot—with a clear understanding of our mission and the benefits they are entitled to as federal employees—is an important step," she said. □

By Matt Bristol

A Graying Work Force

Figures from the Office of Personnel Management show the federal work force is aging. The average age of a federal employee is now about 45. Around 15 percent of the federal civilian work force is currently eligible for regular retirement, and if you add in those who will become eligible within the next five years, the figure rises to roughly 40 or 50 percent of the federal work force. At VA, about one-third of the work force was over the age of 50 and eligible for retirement in 1999. More than one-half of VA's senior managers responsible for administering benefits will be eligible for retirement in two years.

All three VA administrations are equally affected by the challenges presented by the potential loss of a significant number of experienced employees over the next few years. To address the problem, Acting Secretary Hershel Gober has created a steering committee to review the skills of the current work force, the requirements and skills of the future work force, work force trends, recruitment and retention strategies, and to study the impact of technology. The strategy that comes out of this process will be the road map for building VA's future.

Traumatized Veterans Find Healing Through Art

Ten years ago, Cameron Fox, then a nurse at the Jackson, Miss., VA Medical Center, began a therapeutic art program with one patient, a few supplies, and a lot of hope for the men and women who have served our country.

This past summer, that art program celebrated a milestone when works by the veterans in the program were shown at the Southern Breeze Gallery in Jackson. In the past, the group of veterans has shown their work at other public venues, such as the medical center and other area hospitals. But this was the first showing at a private art gallery.

"That's why we were so excited about it," said Fox, a retired VA employee who continues as the program's artistic director. "To be in this gallery is quite exciting."

The works displayed in the exhibit were created as part of a



Congressman Ronnie Shows, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, welcomes guests to the opening of "Impressions," an art exhibit of works by veterans treated at the Jackson, Miss., VA Medical Center.

program co-sponsored by VA and VSA arts, a non-profit organization formerly known as Very Special Arts. VSA is supported by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

"We're very proud of our veterans," said Bruce Triplett, acting director of the Jackson VA Medical Center. "The program helps their recovery. It's money well spent."

Glenn Sanford, owner of the Southern Breeze Gallery, said the show was a great success. "It was a very worthy cause," he said. "[The veterans] needed a place to show their work. People need to know about what they are doing."

Jackie Drennan, a Navy veteran and the group's artist-in-residence, said the group has become like a family over the years. And art, said Fox, has given the group of veterans an opportunity to open themselves up to the world.

"People who have been traumatized in some way tend to narrow their experiences in life," said Fox. "They don't have a wide range of experiences. Art opens your awareness to life, to emotion, to letting more things into your life."

Mississippi Congressman Ronnie Shows, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, co-sponsored the exhibit's opening. □

Child Care Subsidy Program Set to Begin Soon



Eligible VA employees will soon be able to apply for subsidies to help offset child care costs.

Acting Secretary Hershel Gober directed that a child care subsidy

begin for VA employees on January 1, 2001. "Child care programs are important for our employees," Gober said. "A child care subsidy will help retain quality VA employees and recruit future talent to VA. As this year ends, VA wants to be able to say thanks to our dedicated employees."

Maxcine Sterling, project executive for the VA Child Care Subsidy Assistance Program, explained that VA has a number of options in establishing a subsidy program. She said the recently enacted Public Law 106-55, section 643, permits federal agencies for the very first time to assist employees with child care tuition costs.

The subsidy program is designed to help VA employees who meet the eligibility criteria reduce their child care costs. The VA child care subsidy

is based on family income and the costs of child care. To qualify, VA employees (full or part-time) must:

- Have a total family income below \$52,000;
- Claim the child on their income tax returns; and
- Place the child in a licensed day care, home care or after care program.

The subsidy can be used at any licensed center the employee chooses. Although the child care subsidy will be given in addition to the employee's salary, these funds will be taxed as income. The child care subsidy is not automatic. To qualify to receive these benefits, employees must apply. Human Resources Offices will distribute details and applications and are local points of contact for the program. □

21 VA Employees Receive Presidential Rank Awards

VA's Nora E. Egan, VBA Deputy Under Secretary for Management, W. Todd Grams, Acting Assistant Secretary for Management, and Stanley R. Sindair, Dean of the VA Learning University, were among 53



Egan

career members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) selected to receive the 2000 Presidential Rank Award of Distinguished Executive.

Eighteen other VA employees are among 287 senior federal executives

honored with the Meritorious Executive Award.

They are: John H. Baffa, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Security and Law Enforcement; Lucille Beck, Ph.D., Director, Audiology and Speech Pathology, VHA; Kenneth J. Clark, Director, VISN 22 (Long Beach, Calif.); Ellen DeGeorge-Smith,

Director, Augusta, Ga., VA Medical Center; Jonathan H. Gardner, Director, Tucson, Ariz., VA Medical Center;

Sanford M. Garfunkel, Director, Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center; Gerard P. Husson, Director, Beckley, W. Va., VA Medical Center; Dennis Kordyak, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Financial Policy; Stewart Liff, Director, Los Angeles VA Regional Office; Patricia A. McKlem, Director, VA Northern Arizona Health Care System; Jerry McRae, Director, Portland, Ore., VA Regional Office; William D.



Grams

Montague, Director, Cleveland, Ohio, VA Medical Center; Maryann Musumeci, Director, Bronx, N.Y., VA Medical Center; Robert A. Perreault, Director, Charleston, S.C.,



Sindair

VA Medical Center; Roger R. Rapp, NCA Deputy Under Secretary for Operations; Michael Slachta, Jr., Assistant Inspector General for Auditing; Phillip P. Tho-

mas, Director, VA Greater Los Angeles Health Care System; and Billy M. Valentine, Director, Shreveport, La., VA Medical Center.

Presidential Rank Award winners are singled out for their leadership abilities and their accomplishments in vital programs such as health, commerce, environment, human resources and defense.

Only one percent of the approximately 6,000 career SES members receive the Distinguished Executive Award each year, and five percent receive the Meritorious Executive Award. □

Olin E. Teague Award



Members of the Teague Award-winning team from the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center are: (standing, left to right) William R. Ekstrom, Charles P. Vasile, Richard E. Ludt, Patrick J. Ryan, Paul R. Thomas, and Scott S. Johnson; (seated, left to right) Candace Thelen, Miriam Emanuel, Julie A. Hazan and Jennifer Christina Smith.

A team from the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in the

Palo Alto, Calif., VA Health Care System received the 2000 Olin E. Teague Award for developing the first training program for low vision blinded veterans with ambulatory problems to be integrated into a standard Blind Rehabilitation program.

The team's training program uses both the power scooter and the long cane to provide increased

mobility for blinded veterans with limited ambulatory capabilities.

"The people on this team are all

therapists with a regular caseload of patients—they worked on this project around their regularly scheduled appointments," explained William R. Ekstrom, director of the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center. "And when they found out about the award nomination, it was a real surprise. They were very appreciative of being recognized for their work." The team members work in the center's Orientation & Mobility Section.

VA established the award in honor of the late Olin E. Teague, a highly decorated combat-disabled veteran of World War II, to recognize the work of an employee or team of employees whose achievements are extraordinarily beneficial to the rehabilitation of war-injured veterans. The award was presented during a Capitol Hill ceremony in September. □



Loss of Brain Cells May Cause Narcolepsy

Imagine falling asleep uncontrollably throughout the day, only to toss and turn all night. The condition is called narcolepsy and it's a debilitating, lifelong disease that affects about one in every 2,000 Americans. Current therapies to treat the disease rely on the use of amphetamines and other stimulants that do not completely reverse the symptoms and usually produce unwanted side effects. And until now, that was the only option.

But all that could change thanks to a new study led by Jerome Siegel, Ph.D., a neurobiology researcher at the Sepulveda, Calif., VA Medical Center and professor of psychiatry at UCLA. The study identifies a loss of brain cells that make a chemical called "hypocretin" as perhaps being responsible for narcolepsy. The discovery confirms the potential for new therapies aimed at restoring the hypocretin messaging system in the brain and controlling the sleep disorder.

Published in the September issue of the journal *Neuron*, the study found that narcoleptics' brains had up to 95 percent fewer hypocretin neurons than found in normal brains. The neurons, or nerve cells, are located in the hypothalamus and synthesize the neurotransmitter hypocretin. "This is the first picture we have of what's wrong in the brains of people with narcolepsy," said Siegel.

In the study, funded by VA's Medical Research Service and the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, Siegel and his team of researchers analyzed 16 human brains—12 from normal adults, and four from people whose medical records revealed a diagnosis of narcolepsy. They discovered that the narcoleptic brains had 85 to 95 percent fewer hypocretin neurons. Siegel believes the loss of these neurons may stem from an autoimmune attack by the body or the sensitivity of the cells to certain environmental or biological toxins.

San Francisco VAMC Researchers Examine Effects of Estrogen on Cognitive Decline

Taking estrogen after menopause may help women avoid cognitive decline, according to a new study conducted by researchers at the San Francisco VA Medical Center and the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). "There are a number of ways in which estrogen may be protective in the brain," says Kristine Yaffe, M.D., chief of geriatric psychiatry at the San Francisco VAMC and assistant professor of psychiatry, neurology and epidemiology at UCSF. She says these include stimulation of brain cell growth, influencing chemicals that transmit messages in the brain, and helping to protect against the damage caused by stroke.

Earlier research was unable to make such an association, because the vast majority of estrogen studied was bound to a protein and therefore unable to penetrate the protective barrier between the bloodstream and the brain. "Estrogen that is bound to protein is not as biologically active and cannot exert its effect

whereas the loosely-bound and free forms can," explained Yaffe. In this new study, the research team measured how estrogen that was loosely bound or free of other proteins would affect the brain.

They began by measuring the levels of a specific estrogen molecule, estradiol, in 425 women over the age of 65. They then gave the women tests to measure their cognitive ability—memory, attention, language, calculation. That was six years ago. Follow-up tests showed that women in the study with the highest free estrogen levels were 70 percent less likely to have experienced cognitive decline during that six-year period compared with those women who had lower estrogen levels. "Estrogen looks like it's really protecting against cognitive decline," said Yaffe. The cognitive decline may be a precursor to Alzheimer's disease, although the study did not make that clinical assessment, she added.

VA Upstate New York Researchers Advocate Improvements in End-of-Life Care

In a September 27 news analysis appearing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, researchers from the VA Health Care Network Upstate New York suggest that end-of-life conversations should be a routine and structured part of health care to allow critically ill patients to die according to their own values and wishes. The researchers call for the development of a new health care role emphasizing advanced illness care, additional physician training, and community awareness programs to help doctors, patients and caregivers with end-of-life discussions. "We need to train all health care practitioners in standard communication models for conversations at the end of life," said lead author Daniel R. Tobin, M.D., of the Albany division of the VA Health Care Network Upstate New York.

In their review, Tobin, along with co-author Dale G. Larson, Ph.D., of Santa Clara University, pointed to recent studies that show patients are dying in unrelieved pain after long hospital stays and intensive care, their preferences for life-sustaining treatments are not adequately discussed or documented, and referrals for hospice or home care occur too late or not at all. They believe several barriers are responsible.

First, some patients with an advanced illness avoid end-of-life conversations to conceal their pain and feelings of self-blame, anger, loss or fear. Physicians may avoid end-of-life conversations for several reasons, including: a fear of being the bearer of bad news and causing emotional pain; unfamiliarity with advance directive laws; their view that death is an enemy to be defeated; anticipation of disagreements with the patient; medical or legal concerns; or feeling threatened by such discussion in general. Finally, the authors suggest that barriers are caused by the health care system in general. End-of-life discussions are not a routine aspect of health care and physicians are not compensated for psychosocial conversations. Complicating matters, patients may receive treatment at a variety of health care delivery sites, where responsibility for end-of-life discussions is not clear.

The authors believe the development of a new health care professional, working under a physician's direction, could effectively orchestrate and document end-of-life care conversations. The VA Health Care Network Upstate New York has such a model program. The authors recommend randomized trials to examine new approaches and models for enhancing end-of-life conversations. □

HAVE you heard

Bill Goodman, a volunteer at the Nashville campus of the VA Tennessee Valley Health Care System, attended a ceremony in Clarksville, Tenn., where retired Republic of Korea Army Major Choi Seung-Woo presented local Korean War veterans with medals commemorating the 50th anniversary of the war. Goodman is a Korean War veteran and received his medal at the event. He also knew that two primary care nurses at the Nashville facility were unable to attend and wanted the medals in honor of their deceased fathers who had

served in Korea. Goodman explained the situation to Seung-Woo, who then provided him with two additional medals. Goodman later presented the medals to nurses Terri Burns and Patty Johnson, who were truly touched by his thoughtfulness.

Sixteen Vietnam veterans are now receiving benefits thanks to the One VA collaborative efforts of the Indianapolis, Ind., VA Medical Center's Tumor Registry and the Indianapolis VA Regional Office staff. The registry, started in January

1994, maintains a database of all cancer patients diagnosed or treated at the facility. With the assistance of the Indianapolis VARO, Vietnam veterans were identified from the registry in an effort to determine if they had one of the cancers associated with exposure to Agent Orange and presumed by law to be service-connected. Those veterans who had not filed for service-connected disability based on their cancer diagnosis were contacted and provided assistance in filing a claim.

The Warriors, a Native American veterans group at the Oklahoma City, Okla., VA Medical Center, sponsored an Honor Dance this summer to show their appreciation for the medical center's leadership in serving Native American veterans. More than 20 tribes participated in the ceremony, which included traditional Native American singing, dancing, food, art and crafts.

Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Robert M. Walker welcomed more than 2,000 people to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii for a memorial ceremony in honor of seven Asian-American soldiers from World War II who were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor and are interred in the cemetery. Many of the men were Hawaiian citizens and Americans of Japanese ancestry who served in the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team and were awarded the Medal of Honor following a review of World War II records.

The Veterans Outreach Program, a collaborative effort between the New Mexico VA Health Care System and Albuquerque's Health Care for

the Homeless Project, is identifying veterans who are unaware of their eligibility for VA services and helping them gain access to those services and hopefully make a successful return to the community. Health Care for the Homeless staff estimate they assist about 1,000 veterans a year, approximately half of which are unable to access care at VA because of their transient lifestyles. Under this collaborative effort, these veterans will now be referred to the Veterans Outreach Program where they can receive medical and mental health assessments, enroll in VA programs, learn about disease prevention, and participate in an extensive vocational rehabilitation program.

A 14,000-pound boulder with a memorial plaque was placed at the heart of the Fort Snelling (Minn.) National Cemetery as a monument honoring the all-volunteer Memorial Rifle Squad, which has rendered the final salute to deceased veterans buried there since 1979. The squad was the first of its kind in the National Cemetery Administration and became a model for memorial rifle squads across the nation.

Seeking to learn more about the relationship between diabetes and heart attacks, 20 VA medical centers across the country will conduct a study of 1,700 patients in a seven-year research project. The American Diabetes Association has approved the study to examine whether control of blood sugar levels reduces the risk of heart attack or stroke. The study is open to any eligible veteran who can commit to visiting a VA facility every six weeks during the study. □

A Place to Call Home



Gerard Bartasavich, a loan specialist at the Cleveland, Ohio, VA Regional Office, was one of many VA volunteers to donate their time and services to help build a house for the Greater Cleveland Habitat for Humanity.

In addition to framing the walls, hanging drywall, installing kitchen cabinets and bathroom flooring, Bartasavich also spent his weekends and evenings making special accessories for the home's new owners. He constructed a picnic table and a swing for the front porch that will surely be enjoyed by the family with five children who will soon be moving into their very first home.

HONORS and awards



Richard F. Lockey, M.D., chief of Allergy and Immunology at the James A. Haley Veterans Hospital in Tampa, Fla., and professor of Medicine, Pediatrics and Public Health at the University of South Florida College of Medicine, was named "Medalist, Year 2000" by the Florida Academy of Sciences. Lockey's selection for the award was based on his outstanding work in scientific research, his activities in the dissemination of scientific knowledge, and his extensive service to the community. His current research includes studies on indoor and soybean allergens, the genetics of asthma and allergic diseases, and the effects on viral infections in invitro and invivo models of asthma.

David Y. Graham, M.D., chief of Gastroenterology at the Houston VA Medical Center and professor of medicine, molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine, received first-place honors in the 2000 Frank Brown Berry Prize in Federal Medicine for his landmark work in the detection and treatment of *H. pylori* infection, the cause of peptic ulcer disease suffered by millions worldwide. Graham developed the first non-invasive breath test for the diagnosis of active *H. pylori* infection, and with his research team, has identified therapies most likely to cure this debilitating infection.

The Electronic Government Team and Saba, a worldwide provider of soft-

ware and systems, presented the first E-Learning Award to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Dr. George Wolohojian, director of Employee Development and Training, accepted the award at the National Press Club on behalf of VBA. VBA was recognized for its leadership in implementing E-Learning initiatives.

VA's Chief Public Health and Environmental Hazards Officer, Dr. Susan Mather, presented **Blanca V. Faber**, the Women Veterans Coordinator at the Bronx, N.Y., VA Medical Center, with the first Women Veterans Coordinator of the New Millennium Recognition Award during the national Women's Clinical Update. Faber was cited for exemplary performance in ensuring care is readily accessible to women veterans, establishing gender-specific programs, and maintaining community networks.

Internationally renowned VA researcher and pioneer of cardiovascular medicine **Edward D. Freis, M.D.**, received the first annual Stevo Julius Award for Education in Hypertension for his role in revolutionizing the treatment of high blood pressure. Freis is credited with designing the first double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled study of drug efficacy in hypertension back in 1971. Prior to the study, physicians and scientists believed that there was no point in lowering blood pressure, since hypertension was considered to be a symptom of underlying

vascular disease and not the cause of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and other complications of hypertension. Freis served as chief of the Hypertension Research Clinic at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center from 1955-97 and is professor emeritus at Georgetown University School of Medicine. At 88, he is still professionally active and visits with staff and patients at the Washington, D.C., VAMC.

The Disabled American Veterans named the **Saginaw, Mich., VA Medical Center** "Outstanding Large Employer of the Year" for taking significant steps to hire disabled veterans. During the past 30 months, the number of disabled veterans working at the medical center has more than doubled, going from 21 to 44. In addition, for the first six months of fiscal year 2000, 51 percent of all new hires at the facility were veterans.

The **New Mexico VA Health Care System's Diabetes Outpatient Education Group Program** was recognized by the American Diabetes Association (ADA) for achieving the national standards for diabetes self-management education for the third consecutive time. The program initially received the three-year ADA certification in 1994 and is the only VA facility in the southwest and western regions of the country to receive this honor.

Larry Franklin, a physician assistant with the VA North Texas Health Care System, received the 2000 Physician Assistant Award from the Association of Military Surgeons of the U.S. A veteran of both Vietnam and Desert Storm and a Major in the U.S. Army Reserve, Franklin is the primary health care provider for the 224-bed

domiciliary at the Bonham, Texas, VA Medical Center.

Dexter Hood, a Benefits Administration supervisor and ex-Prisoner of War coordinator at the Charleston, S.C., VA Medical Center, was awarded an Order of the Silver Crescent from the Office of the Governor for his dedication and commitment to South Carolina's veterans.

The **Tuscaloosa, Ala., VA Medical Center** received the Very Involved Partner and Decade of Excellence awards during the 2000 Chamber of Commerce Adopt-A-School Awards Program in recognition of the facility's efforts and accomplishments as an adopt-a-school partner with Arcadia Elementary School. **Donna Channell**, who along with **Rebecca Meyer**, coordinates the Adopt-A-School Program, noted, "Many employees have given generously of their time to make this program a success and are helping to provide a brighter future for the children of the community."

VA's Women Veterans Health Program was selected as a Bronze Winner of the 2000 Wyeth-Ayerst HERA Award for demonstrating leadership in women and children's health. The annual award is given in the spirit of Hera, an ancient Greek goddess who was considered a divine protectress of women and children. Women veteran coordinators are located at each VA medical center and as a result of their efforts, the number of women veterans enrolled for VA health care has risen by more than 50 percent since 1992.

Dennis L. Stevens, M.D., Ph.D., chief of Infectious Diseases at the Boise, Idaho, VA Medical Center and professor of medicine at the

University of Washington School of Medicine, received the 2000 Society Citation Award from the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA). "Dr. Stevens is known as one of the world's foremost authorities on toxins of gram-positive bacteria," said Catherine M. Wilfert, M.D., IDSA president.

The Hawaiian Electric Company Inc. presented the Honolulu VA Medical and Regional Office Center with the "Energy Project of the Year" award during the 2000 Energy Efficiency Awards Ceremony in Honolulu. The Honolulu facility was cited for energy efficiency, economic concerns, innovation, operation and maintenance, and will receive a \$76,600 rebate from the electric company for their efforts.

Lee J. Sanders, chief of Podiatry at the Lebanon, Pa., VA Medical Center, was installed as the President of the Health Care and Education Office of the American Diabetes Association. Sanders, whose career has been dedicated to the prevention of foot amputations in diabetic patients, is the first podiatrist ever to hold the position. In recognition of his many achievements, an endowment in his name is being established by the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio.

Gary J. Young, Ph.D., senior researcher at VA's Health Research and Development Service's Management Decision and Research Center in Boston, was appointed to a 14-member panel for the National Academy of Social Insurance (NASI) to study issues related to reforming Medicare. The panel is part of NASI's "Restructuring Medicare for

the Long Term project" and will focus on the fundamental restructuring necessary to provide Medicare benefits to retiring Baby Boomers.

Pastor William Nolte and members of the Fresno First Baptist Church presented the prestigious Heart for the City Award to the VA Central California Health Care System (VACCHCS) during a Sunday service attended by more than 500 church members and broadcast on local public television. Presented annually to organizations that make significant contributions to the community, the Heart for the City Award was accepted by Alan S. Perry, director of the VACCHCS.

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) presented Dr. Subhash Bhatia, chief of Psychiatry at the Omaha, Neb., VA Medical Center, with the 2000 Exemplary Psychiatrist Award during the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in Chicago. Since 1991, NAMI has presented the award to psychiatrists who have made significant contributions in serving people with mental illnesses.

Ken Thacker, chief of the Fire Department at the Knoxville, Iowa, VA Medical Center, received the Iowa Federal Executive Council's Presidential Award for Federal Employee of the Year 2000 for excelling as the VISN 14 (Lincoln, Neb.) Life Safety Manager for VA facilities in Iowa, Western Illinois and Nebraska. He provided oversight and consultation for the life safety programs of VA facilities throughout the VISN in preparation for on-site inspections covering standards set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administra-

tion, National Fire Protection Association and the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. His work contributed to significant decreases in occupational injuries and lost time claim rates.

Basil Varkey, M.D., a pulmonologist at the Milwaukee, Wis., VA Medical Center, was selected as the first recipient of the Roger C. Bone Advances in End-of-Life Care Award by the Chest Foundation of the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP). The award recognizes ACCP members who have shown leadership in end-of-life care through advocacy, clinical practice, communication, counseling, education, community outreach and research. Varkey will represent ACCP at the International Conference on Ethics in Medicine in Israel this month.

Saul Josman, R.N., a staff nurse at the Augusta, Ga., VA Medical Center, was elected to a four-year term on the American Nurses Association (ANA)'s Congress on Nursing Practice and Economics (CNPE). As a member of the CNPE, his responsibilities will include developing policy alternatives essential to the mission of the ANA, addressing concerns related to equal opportunity and human rights, ethics, nursing education, research and other programmatic initiatives.

David Valeton, a respiratory therapist at the Shreveport, La., VA Medical Center, was one of only 35 martial arts assistant coaches from the United States invited to attend the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia. The Olympic Development Committee of New Orleans chose Valeton based on his more than 20 years of

accomplishments as teacher, mentor, and competitor in the field. In 1998, he won Best in the U.S. in multi-style martial arts in the 35 and older division, and is the oldest person ever to win in that category. Locally, Valeton coaches a small, elite group of young adults preparing for Olympic competition.

The Gallup Community Based Outpatient Clinic, one of five clinics associated with the Albuquerque, N.M., VA Medical Center, received the Department Appreciation Award from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Department of New Mexico, in recognition of the outstanding service the clinic provides to disabled veterans. Marion Bell, administrative officer at the clinic, accepted the award on behalf of the clinic at the state DAV banquet. Also, Loraine Begay, a social service representative at the clinic, received a certificate of appreciation from the New Mexico DAV. For the past five years, on every other Tuesday, Begay has driven 50 miles to the town of Grants to serve veterans at the Department of Human Services Center, provide home visits to patients and to conduct other outreach activities.

Dr. Nelda P. Wray, chief of General Medicine at the Houston VA Medical Center and chief of Health Services Research in the Department of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, has been appointed to the National Advisory Committee of the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program by the president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Wray was a pioneer in developing strategies using administrative databases that make it easier to draw inferences on cost, quality and effectiveness of health care. □

HEROES



During her flight from Memphis, Tenn., to Washington, D.C., **Valleda Crump, R.N.**, a nurse at the **Houston VA Medical Center**, came to the rescue of an ailing passenger who was having difficulty breathing and then suddenly lost consciousness. With the assistance of a doctor who also happened to be on the flight, Crump administered oxygen and monitored the patient's pulse and blood pressure for the remainder of the flight. She then stayed with the passenger until an ambulance arrived to transport the victim to a nearby hospital. She was rewarded with a round of applause from the plane's crew and other passengers as well as a letter of appreciation from airline executives.



James Miller and John Lucas, domiciliary patients at the **Martinsburg, W. Va., VA Medical Center**, were walking across the facility's athletic field where a group of children were practicing soccer when they noticed a strange sight. A man was crouched down near the children and appeared to be tying his shoelaces while yelling at the ground. As they got closer to the man, Miller and Lucas realized he was kneeling over a child, repeatedly calling his name. Sensing a medical emergency, Miller told Lucas to run to the nearby VA Fire Department building and summon help while he checked for the child's pulse. Finding no pulse, he immediately began administering CPR. VA Fire and Security personnel

arrived within minutes and transported the child to the Emergency Room where he recovered.



While attending a football game in Little Rock, Ark., several employees of the **Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System** came to the aid of a man who collapsed as he was leaving the stadium. **Nikki Harper and Jan VanHise**, registered nurses who work in the Operating Room, and **Alan Jarrett**, social worker, rendered medical assistance until paramedics arrived and then accompanied the victim's friends to a local emergency room where they initiated efforts to locate the victim's family.



As wildfires raged through parts of the country this summer, two cemetery caretakers from the **Black Hills, S.D., National Cemetery** did their part to avert a disaster in their neighborhood by containing a small brush fire that threatened to spread into a full-fledged forest fire. **Dale Ondrizek and Mylan Charles** were working in the cemetery when they noticed smoke rising from a grassy area just outside the cemetery grounds. Using their hand-held radios, they called the cemetery's front office to report the fire, then raced to the scene. The two managed to contain the fire, preventing it from spreading to nearby oak and ponderosa trees, and held the flames in check until

the **Sturgis Fire Department** arrived.



VA Police Officer William K. Hansen, of the **Phoenix, Ariz., VA Medical Center**, was on exterior foot patrol in the **Ambulatory Care Clinic** when he saw an elderly veteran who appeared to be choking. He immediately performed the **Heimlich Maneuver** and cleared a piece of a sandwich from the veteran's airway. Since that time, whenever the veteran sees **Officer Hansen**, he always thanks him.



When **Mary Cowell, R.N.**, a nurse supervisor at the **Chula Vista Clinic** in the **VA San Diego Healthcare System**, saw a construction worker fall several stories and land on a section of scaffolding, she raced up two stories of the scaffolding and found the man unresponsive. She immediately began administering CPR, and through her efforts, the victim had regained consciousness by the time paramedics arrived.



Robin Rickard, a registered nurse at the **Dayton, Ohio, VA Medical Center**, was driving to work one day when she noticed a car coming up behind her at a high rate of speed. Though **Rickard** and the other car's driver were traveling in a no-passing zone on that stretch of the road, the driver passed her on a curve, barely missing her car. But the driver lost control of the car and slammed into a tree. Looking in her rearview mirror, **Rickard** saw the car burst into flames. She immediately hit the brakes and turned around to see if she could help. The

driver, a 16-year-old student, was in critical condition. **Rickard** began CPR, but sadly, the teenager's injuries were too massive and he passed away as she comforted him. About a week later, **Rickard** visited the victim's family and spoke with them about the accident. The boy's mother was grateful that someone like her was with her son in his final moments.



When her nephew appeared at her front door one Saturday afternoon saying someone at the tennis court needed help, **Cheryl Gilmore**, clinic coordinator at the **Montrose campus** of the **VA Hudson Valley Health Care System**, raced to the scene to see how she could help. The victim, also a VA employee, seemed to be suffering the symptoms of a heart attack and was having trouble breathing. **Gilmore** immediately began CPR and continued until paramedics arrived. Witnesses say had it not been for **Gilmore's** actions, the victim would not be alive today.



The fast actions of three men helped save the life of a veteran who collapsed in front of the triage entrance at the **Nashville campus** of the **VA Tennessee Valley Health Care System**. **Stanley Brown**, triage unit technician, **Bill Goodman**, long-time volunteer, and **Robert Owens**, a contract employee, came to the veteran's aid when they saw him become short of breath and turn blue in the face. They picked the man up and carried him inside where medical staff quickly converged on the patient as he was facing a serious situation. Due to their quick actions, the veteran's life was saved. □