

# The Bulletin

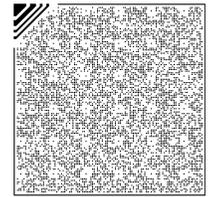
Blinded Veterans Helping Blinded Veterans



**BVA Announces 74th Convention  
to be held in Tulsa, OK.**

See page 6 for details.

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**Cover Photo:** The 11th St. Arkansas River Bridge. Listed in the National Historical Register, this concrete bridge, built in 1916-17, was the reason that Route 66 passed through Tulsa. The first multi-span concrete bridge was built to link the town's western oil refining area with the east, across the Arkansas River.

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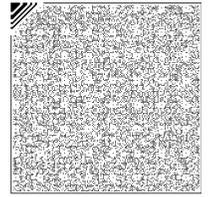
Published bi-monthly by and for blinded veterans, and sent to all blinded veterans without charge. **The Bulletin** informs BVA members about their Association and the issues that affect blinded veterans.

VOLUME LXXIV, No. 1  
 January-February 2019



# President's Page

by Joe Parker



## The Legacy of General Maas

The beginning of a new year is always a good time for reflecting on the past and planning for the future. Many of us will consider personal improvements in the year ahead with the hope that we will stick to them. Some in the year ahead will encounter challenges that may seem insurmountable. In that case, I can think of no better role model to follow than Marine Corps Major General Melvin J. Maas.

The Blinded Veterans Association has an award named after General Maas. The award seeks to honor the individual who has contributed to the positive image of the blind community through his or her professional achievement. It's an award we present each year at our annual convention.

General Maas had a storied career in public service and in the military beginning in World War I. He won the Legion of Merit, the Silver Star, and received the Purple Heart during campaigns in the South Pacific. In 1945, he was wounded by enemy bomb fragments during the battle on Okinawa. These wounds would eventually cause his blindness in 1951.

Despite these wounds he returned to active duty during the Korean war as a member of the Reserve Force Policy Board. When another general remarked that General Maas was probably the only blind general who had ever served on active duty, he quipped:

“Oh no, General, only the first to admit it.”

He was eventually appointed chair of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped where he increased educational and promotional efforts, and under his leadership the committee expanded its functions to help the intellectually disabled find employment.

He was quoted as saying “A handicapped person who lives up to his potential leads a more successful life than the so-called normal person who uses only 50 percent of his capabilities.”

General Maas was able to accomplish much as a military and civilian leader because he stared down adversity. He improvised and adapted himself to overcome his challenges. He dealt with problems head on and fought hard for his causes. As members of BVA, we continue his legacy by recognizing those who accomplish much in their professional lives and demonstrate that adversity can be overcome. In the year ahead, I encourage all of us to remember General Maas and strive to show others that we can overcome any obstacles and achieve success.





## BVA Executive Director Joe Bogart Addresses Members



Happy New Year from Headquarters! Father time keeps ticking away just as we blinded veterans keep moving forward! What will the future hold, we wonder? Only time will truly tell.

And while the future is never certain, we do always work to make it better, brighter, and beautiful. The work of the Blinded Veterans Association is no different. We all work to make sure our organization endures the sands of time to remain the leader in advocacy and support for all veterans living with loss of eyesight. By combining historical wisdom, with the vigor and excitement of the new and unknown, we continue to advance BVA into the next generation.

What has worked in the past may not work for the future, and each generation of veterans views this organization differently and desires outcomes that may be hard to grasp for previous generations. Therefore, we as leaders must work to understand what motivates each generation of veterans in order to best serve them.

And this applies to all stakeholders: members, families, employees, donors, supporters, the VA, and the public. This means we must take into account how the future will affect the interaction between all of these stakeholders that make up the BVA family. Our future depends on our understanding of how the BVA family views our organization and how we advocate, support, work with and work for the entire family.

The coming new year will bring excitements paired with the comfortable familiar. We have new places to visit, and old friends with whom to reminisce. All of us at BVA have much to do in 2019, and I am excited to continue seeing the positive changes and growth within this organization. Remember those philosophical words, “Things are going great, and they’re only getting better... The future’s so bright, I gotta wear shades!” from Timbuk 3 in “The Future’s So Bright.”

So, on behalf of everyone here at Headquarters, may you light up the darkness as we all move into a brighter future for BVA!

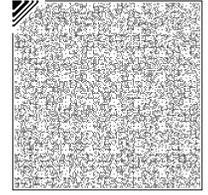
### Did you know?

- Most people who are blind don't know braille. In 2009, National Federation of the Blind cited statistics indicating that only 10 percent of Americans with blindness can read braille. That number has been falling as more people with visual impairments use audio books, voice-recognition software and other technology to read and write. However, the same study found that braille-literate people are more likely to attain higher levels of education and be employed.



# Legislative Update

by Melanie Brunson



## The New Year Brings A New Congress

### *What Changes and What Stays the Same.*

On December 31, 2018, the last session of the current (115th) Congress came to an end. The 116th Congress will begin its work on January 3, 2019. As a result of elections held across the country in November, as well as a record number of retirements by House and Senate members, the new Congress will have a new look. Here's an overview of what we know about them as of this writing.

First, with regard to who's in charge, the biggest change will be in the House of Representatives. Democrats picked up approximately 42 House seats in November, giving them 235 seats, thereby insuring democratic control of that chamber. As the majority party, Democrats will chair all committees and set the legislative agenda for the House. We have learned that the new chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee will be Rep. Mark Takano, D-CA.

Three Democrats who formerly served on the Veterans Affairs Committee will not be returning to the House in the new year, because they retired at the end of the 115th Congress. They include Reps. Elizabeth Esty of CT, Tim Walz of MN and Veto O'Rourke of TX. Other changes that will impact the House Veterans Affairs Committee include the departures of Republican Reps. Mike Coffman of CO,

and Bruce Poliquin who lost their bids for re-election.

In the Senate, Republicans remain in the majority, after a gain of two seats in the November elections. As a result, we don't expect many changes to the composition of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. However, one member of that committee, Senator Dean Heller of Nevada, lost his re-election bid and will not be returning to the Senate. We should have more information about the composition of both committees to share with you in the next BVA Bulletin.

In the meantime, you might be interested to know that sixteen of the newly-elected members of Congress are veterans. These include Rep.-elect Van Taylor (R-TX) who led a 2003 mission in Iraq to evacuate 31 wounded Marines in the Battle of Al Nasiriyah. He was part of a mission to rescue Army soldier Jessica Lynch from behind enemy lines. According to Bloomberg News, this was the first successful U.S. rescue of a prisoner of war since World War II.

We'll keep you posted on the activities of the new Congress, and developments across the federal government as they unfold in the year ahead. Please look for updates in future BVA Bulletins. If you have questions, feel free to contact us at BVA National Headquarters.



## **BVA Announces Tulsa as 74th Convention Site**

Blinded veterans and their families may now begin planning to attend BVA's 74th National Convention in Tulsa, OK. The five-day event will convene on Monday, August 12th, and culminate on Friday, August 16th, 2019.

To make your hotel reservations, please call the Marriott Tulsa Southern Hills at 800-507-1471 and identify yourself as part of BVA's event with the code "GBVA19."

Information on registration and room rates will be available at a later date.

For additional information, visit [www.bva.org/convention](http://www.bva.org/convention).

Major events of the convention already scheduled are:

- National President's Reception and Dinner: August 13th
- Official Business Meetings: August 14-16th
- Father Carroll Memorial Luncheon: August 15th

A special invitation is being extended to all potential exhibitors and sponsors to come to Tulsa.

Registration for the convention will open online in May. If required, an electronic or printed copy of the registration packet can be provided to you. Please contact Krissi Spence-Gilbert at [kspence-gilbert@bva.org](mailto:kspence-gilbert@bva.org) if you require an electronic or print copy of the registration packet.

### **Formal Official Notice**

Pursuant to the provisions of Section 3b of Article IX (National Convention) of the BVA National Bylaws, all members of the Blinded Veterans Association in good standing are hereby notified that the BVA 74th National Convention will be held at the Marriott Tulsa Southern Hills, 1902 E 71st St, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74136, from

Monday, August 12th, through Friday, August 16th, 2019.

Periodic updates regarding the convention will be posted to the convention page within the News and Events section of the BVA website.

### **BVA National Headquarters will host the 74th National Convention**

BVA members in good standing who wish to vote by proxy may request a special proxy form by writing or calling the Administrative Director at BVA National Headquarters no later than 45 days before the opening day of the 74th National Convention. Because the 45th day falls on Saturday, June 29th, the deadline for requesting a proxy form is June 28, 2019.

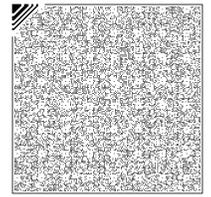
In compliance with Section 2c of Article IX, the proxy form must be completed and returned to BVA National Headquarters (Attn: Administrative Director). To be considered valid, the envelope containing the form must be postmarked no later than 21 days before the opening date of the convention. The due date is therefore July 23rd, 2019.

### **Jones Announces Dates for Required Actions**

Administrative Director Brigitte Jones has announced the following schedule of administrative actions that must be accomplished by regional groups and individuals leading up to the opening of the BVA 74th National Convention in Tulsa on August 12th.

BVA National Headquarters will distribute notices during the month of January regarding nominations for Certificates of Appreciation, the Maas

and Diener Awards, and the David L. Schnair Volunteer Service Award. These actions also occur in compliance with articles within the BVA National Bylaws.



A reminder will be mailed to regional group presidents and secretaries on March 18th regarding the due date for submission of bylaw amendments for consideration at the convention. A mailing to all BVA members in good standing and residing in Districts 3 and 4 will also occur on or before March 18th (150 days leading up to August 12th). The mailing will call for nominations for District Director.

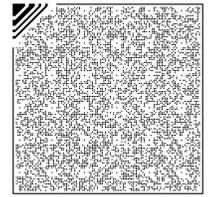
Three copies of the credentials form will also be mailed on April 19th to all regional groups.

Both regional groups and individuals should refer to the following timeline in preparing for the convention. Items listed include actions required by the association's national headquarters, regional groups, and individuals.

Questions can be addressed by calling 800-669-7079. Asterisks indicate actions required by the BVA National Bylaws.

1. March 18\* (no later than 150 days before convention): Mail call for nomination of Directors of Districts 3 and 4 to members in good standing from each of the two districts (Article VI, Section 3d, also published in March-April BVA Bulletin).
2. March 18\*: National Headquarters sends reminders to regional group presidents and secretaries that proposed bylaw amendments to be considered at the 74th National Convention must be postmarked no later than 90 days before the convention (May 15th).

3. April 19\*: Mail credentials forms to regional group presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, and treasurer (three copies each, Article XIV, Section 12c).
4. April 19\*: Nominations for BVA Certificates of Appreciation, the Melvin J. Maas and Irving Diener Awards, and the David L. Schnair Service Award all due at national headquarters.
5. May 6\* :(no earlier than 100 days before convention): Earliest date to mail pre-registration package and official convention notice to potential attendees. Actual 100-day mark before the convention is May 5, which is a Sunday this year, requiring a May 6 mailing.
6. Mid-May\*: 74th National Convention pre-registration package prepared and sent to printer.
7. Mid-May\*: 74th National Convention proxy forms mailed but only by request to national headquarters Administrative Director.
8. May 15\* (no earlier than 90 days before convention): Earliest date to distribute ballots to Districts 3 and 4 (Article VI, Section 3d).
9. May 15 (no later than 90 days before convention): Envelopes containing proposed bylaw amendments must be directed to National Headquarters and postmarked (Article XIX, Section 1b).
10. May 15 (no earlier than 90 days before convention): Earliest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing (Article XIX, Section 1b).
11. May 15 (90 days before convention and 60 days following original mail call referred to above): Nominations for regular elections of Directors of Districts 3 and 4.
12. May 30 (no later than 75 days before convention): Latest date to mail pre-registration official convention notice.
13. June 4 (no later than 70 days before convention): Latest date for national headquarters to mail ballots for regular elections of Directors of Districts 3 and 4 (Article VI, Section 3d).
14. June 15\*: National Headquarters mails annual financial report forms (three copies) to treasurers of regional groups.
15. June 28 (no later than 45 days before convention): Ballots for regular elections of Directors of Districts 3 and 4 due at National Headquarters.
16. June 28 (no later than 45 days before convention): Latest date to mail proposed bylaw amendments to members in good standing.
17. July 5 (no later than 40 days before convention): Regional group meeting notices to elect convention delegates must be mailed to group members. A copy of the notice must also be mailed to national headquarters at the same time it is mailed to the group membership.
18. July 9 (35 days before convention): National Headquarters counts election ballots for regular elections of Directors of Districts 3 and 4.
19. July 23 (21 days before convention): Completed delegate credentials forms and proxy forms must be postmarked no later than midnight.



### **Award Submissions Highlight Convention Preparations**

This year marks 74 years of “Blinded Veterans Serving Blinded Veterans.”

Each year, BVA recognizes at the national convention those who have sacrificed and excelled extraordinarily in their lives. Awards include the Major General Melvin J. Maas Award, the Irving Diener Award, the David L. Schnair Award, and Certificates of Appreciation. These awards were established in order to recognize the honor that these individuals brought to the organization and the effort and dedication that were required to do so.

The Major General Melvin J. Maas Achievement Award was initiated by the late Baynard H. Kendrick, a renowned mystery writer and author of *Lights Out*, the story of a World War II blinded veteran. The award seeks to honor the individual who has contributed to the positive image of the blind community through his/her professional achievement. In honor of Maas, nominations should be individuals who have found success in their employment despite their vision loss and who have also helped other blinded veterans find independence.

Before his death, Maas was quoted in the New York Times: "A handicapped person who lives up to his potential leads a more successful life than the so-called normal person who uses only 50 percent of his capabilities."

Winners of the Maas award are men and women with service connected blindness who have overcome their disability to become independent in their daily living.

The Irving Diener Award was initiated by a former member of the BVA National Advisory Committee who continuously supported BVA. As an individual, Diener sought to empower those who were dedicated to the organization. The award seeks to honor those who have made an outstanding commitment to their BVA

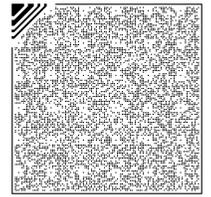
regional group and the organization as a whole rather than for their personal achievements in rehabilitation or employment. Diener saw that by recognizing one individual he was motivating BVA members to focus on helping veterans located close to them geographically.

World War II blinded veteran David L. Schnair was an early member of BVA and a member of the National Board of Directors for more than 40 years, including Director of District 1. During those same years he was a volunteer at the New York City Regional Office. Today, BVA continues to honor David's volunteerism through the Volunteer Service Award. Recipients of this award should be exemplary volunteers locally and/or nationally. They should have an understanding of the VA system and serve as a spokesperson for the needs of all blinded veterans.

The Certificate of Appreciation is in place to acknowledge those who have positively influenced the blinded veteran community and the achievements of its members. To be eligible for this award, the individual cannot be a BVA member or a relative of a BVA member. The award is limited to those in the field of blind rehabilitation who serve veterans with vision loss.

Nominations for each of the aforementioned awards are currently being accepted. All award nominations are due April 19th, 2019. Further information, as well as nomination guidelines and criteria, can be found on the BVA website.

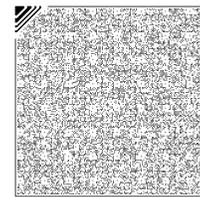
Those selected will be honored at the convention. The venue for the Maas, Diener, and Schnair Awards is the Friday



Awards Banquet, the culminating event of the convention week. The Awards Banquet also recognizes the regional groups who have earned the Gold, Silver, and Bronze Gavels for the past fiscal year.

Certificates of Appreciation are awarded at the Thursday Father Thomas Carroll Memorial Luncheon following the event's keynote address.

Have any questions, comments or suggestions? We want to hear them! Send any and all correspondence to Krissi at [kspence-gilbert@bva.org](mailto:kspence-gilbert@bva.org).



## Operation Peer Support (OPS) News

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*Operation Peer Support (OPS) is a program designed to support the hundreds of men and women who are returning to the U.S. blinded, or experiencing significant visual impairment in connection with their service fighting the Global War on Terror; Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).*



William Murphy takes aim using the SnakeLook smartphone attachment.

### Hunting with Heroes New Hope Foundation

by Christian Smith

The Hunting with Heroes New Hope Foundation gives blinded veterans the chance to participate in the joys of a weekend outdoors. While bonding with the elements of nature and experiencing the fellowship of veterans.

BVA's Operation Peer Support program with the support of Heroes New Hope Foundation hosted William Murphy, BVA member and (Ret.) Sergeant First Class of the United States Marine Corps for an all-inclusive hunting trip before this year's Thanksgiving holiday. From November 16, 2018 through November 20, 2018, Murphy was able to hunt through the assistance of professional guides and the SnakeLook smartphone adapter.

Murphy was also caught on camera driving Heroes New Hope Founder, Scott Goodman on an ATV throughout the campground. "You wanna go down there," Scott said, "You gotta take me." "You have no idea what you're asking me," Murphy replied, "But you do realize you're gonna have to tell me where we're going, right?"

Sunday night the Ladies Auxiliary of the 22nd Post presented the Heroes New Hope Foundation with a heartfelt donation after serving the group dinner to wrap up the adventurous weekend.

Heroes New Hope Foundation, Inc. was formed in 2016 by Scott Goodman. After a successful turkey hunt volunteering with a group of blinded veterans with Blind Endeavors and seeing firsthand the needs of our veterans and their families who have sacrificed so much of themselves for our freedom, Scott decided it was time to give back.

Thanks to Scott Goodman, president of the foundation, and all the great people of Heroes New Hope Foundation that were able to come together to make the event possible.

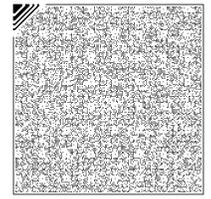
### **U.S. and UK Blinded Veterans explore Tucson, AZ with Project Gemini**

Project Gemini is a yearly collaboration between the members of BVA and the BVUK in order to foster international comraderie. This October, BVA's Operation Peer Support program hosted the event in Tucson, Arizona. Four BVA members (Jeanie Murphy, Kijuan Amey, Scott Scieskinski, and Monaca Gilmore) connected with five BVUK members (Stephen Percival, Andrew Bache, Michael Johnson, Keith Ward, and Colin Williamson) to visit the local VA Blind Rehabilitation Center, go to a firing range, enjoy a round of adaptive golf, take a walking tour with the American Legion of Old Tucson, and experience guided tours of both the International Air and Space museum and the International Wildlife museum.

Scott Scieskinski, the BVA member who was in charge of planning and executing the event, commented on his experience firing an AR-15 at the rifle range; "Nineteen years in the Navy and I had never fired a weapon. Needless

to say, I wasn't exactly the best at it, but it was definitely a lot of fun."

At the International Air and Space museum, BVA member Kijuan Amey was recounted as having been completely enamored with the models of various war-time aircraft, especially the WWII era planes. "He brightened up as soon as he saw those planes—he was seriously geeking out. He was definitely in his element." At only twenty-six years old and newly blinded, it has been difficult for Kijuan to adjust to his new life. Operation Peer Support sponsored him for this event, providing him with the opportunity to experience a whole new community and way of thinking. As Scott Scieskinski said, "Sometimes it's the little things, not the big things, that have the most impact."

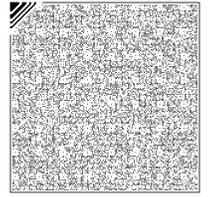


### **Upcoming OPS Events**

Operation Peer Support has partnered with Steamboat Adaptive Recreational Sports (STARS) in Colorado to assist Blinded Veterans Association members to participate in adaptive skiing. The date for this event is January 23, 2019 thru January 27, 2019. This event will host 10 members of the Blinded Veterans Association and 3 sighted guides for the group. The participants and guides consist of the following: Michaun Harrison, Raquel Welch, Lawrence Harrison, Brian Harris, Lonnie Bedwell, Adrian Mohammed, Eric Marts, Daniel Wallace, William Murphy, Carlos Pere, Darlene Pirtle, Amanda Mohammed, and Nicholas Marts.

# District 3 Report

by Vernon Richmond



Vernon Richmond, District 3 Director, and his Guide Dog Rubicon graduate from Guide Dog School.

District 3 of BVA has been very busy in the months this past Fall. All of the regional groups, except for one, celebrated White Cane Day with various activities such as 5K walks, passing out cupcakes, water bottles and pamphlets regarding the Blinded Veterans Association and the purpose of the white cane.

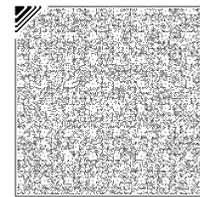
In November, many of our Regional Groups joined in their local veteran's day parades. The regional group presidents are also working on the new year celebration trip to Puerto Rico in 2019. We are hoping to have as many as forty people or more to go.

As for me, I have been busy attending guide dog school at the Southeast Guide Dog School in Florida, Class 271,

where I received a wonderful dog name Rubicon. Upon graduation, Rubicon and I were off to the Arizona Blind Rehabilitation Center where I received training on my OrCam 2.0 eye device.

## Did you know?

- Braille started out as a military code called "night writing." It was developed in 1819 by the French army so soldiers could communicate at night without speaking or using candles. Fifteen-year-old French schoolboy Louis Braille learned about the code, and eventually developed the more usable, streamlined version of the braille alphabet we know today.



## **AT&T and AIRA Partnership Enabled Blinded Veterans to Fully Participate During Monday Night Football**

On November 5, a partnership between the NFL Network, Dallas Cowboys, AT&T, and Aira enabled two members of the Blinded Veterans Association to participate in the Dallas Cowboys Military and Veterans appreciation game on Monday Night Football. Aira provided the missing piece for visually impaired fans, the ability to understand what is happening on the field in real-time. This occurs through the transformative remote assistive technology that connects the blind with a network of certified agents via wearable smart glasses. Agents, serving as visual interpreters for the blind, help users accomplish a wide range of daily tasks and activities - from navigating busy streets to recognizing faces and literally traveling the world. Aira was used throughout various aspects of the game experience, like watching the National Anthem opening game activities, viewing the game, as well as half-time show. Aira even assisted with locating seats, navigating the concessions area, and enjoying other amenities sighted visitors to AT&T stadium take for granted.

The Blinded Veterans Association applauds the Cowboys and AT&T efforts to include blind and visually impaired veterans to partake in the full fan experience by becoming an Aira Access partner. This commitment was kicked off by enabling Retired Army Major Thomas Zampieri and Captain Timothy Hornik to be the first Aira Explorers and BVA

members to test out Aira Access at the stadium.

Timothy remarked, “for far too long us blind NFL fans relied on our partners and neighbors to describe even the most basic elements of the game. The Dallas Cowboys through their Aira Access partnership finally enabled me to fully enjoy the amazing fan experience they make possible each and every home game.”

A media event occurred on Thursday, November 15th, which captured the outcomes from this event. A combination of video footage of Tom and Tim using Aira throughout the game and comments from representatives of Aira and the AT&T demonstrated the importance of Aira in making the world more inclusive for blind and visually impaired Veterans. The video footage was released through social media accounts and news articles by the NFL, AT&T, Aira, and the Blinded Veterans Association.

BVA seeks to help blinded veterans look ahead to the possibilities and opportunities that their lives still present to them. This is done through social activities, counseling, educational forums regarding benefits and rehabilitation, and attending recreational events, updates on vision research and technology. Support is established with both veterans of earlier conflicts and their current military service members returning with penetrating and Traumatic Brain Injury visual disorders.

BVA again appreciates the strong support from AT&T, AIRA, and with the Dallas Cowboys NFL staff for making this possible.

## Blinded Veterans Sprint through the Premiere Marathon for Blind and Visually Impaired Runners

On December 2, 11 blinded veterans ran amongst the 48 blind and visually impaired runners during the California International Marathon. Since 2008, U.S. Association of Blind Athletes (USABA) has partnered with Sacramento Running Association to make the California International Marathon (CIM) inclusive for runners with visual impairments. For the last 3 years the Blinded Veterans Association enthusiastically encouraged and sponsored blinded veterans to make the resolution to enhance their fitness and run as part of a marathon relay team or set the CIM as a Boston Marathon qualifier. In total, more than 100 blind runners and guides participated in the race and celebrated the limitless potential afforded through collaboration and camaraderie.



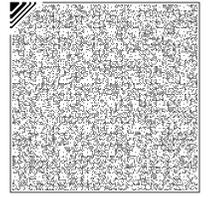
Blinded runner with guide approaches finish line.

Leading the way, 2 veteran runners completed the entire 26.2 mile course, while 9 finished either an 8 mile or 13 mile relay segment. The leading blinded veterans relay team finished the entire course in 4:25.46. Most notable amongst the finishers was Joseph Bogart, BVA Executive Director, who ran with his wife Kristine. As an avid sportsman, Joe was deeply touched by the community atmosphere of the CIM remarking, “Running has been a great way to cope with the trauma of lost eyesight and post-traumatic stress. It is an activity I can do independently on tread mills, or on nearby running tracks that I am familiar with. Having my wife as my primary guide gives us a fun and healthy activity we can do together.

Getting out to run the CIM put us in touch with blind runners that are at the world class level. Seeing all of those people that don't huddle in the dark, but light up their life with camaraderie and activity was inspiring.

I challenge all of our members to participate more in some activity they enjoy like walking, biking, fishing, hiking, rowing or anything else that gets the blood pumping.”

The USABA Marathon National Championships' theme focused on technology for the blind. As the organizer, Richard Hunter brought together Aira, Amazon, and blind advocates to learn and share about the variety of tools available to promote independence. Aira played a tremendous role in this effort by awarding one lucky participant with access to the Aira service for a year and made the entire

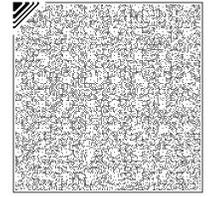


Sacramento County an Aira Access point. Aira even proved they desire to do more for us as Aira's Amy Bernal guided our own Timothy Hornik for the first half of the relay team with Joseph Bogart and Kristine finishing the remaining 13 miles in 4:38:05.

Timothy, as the Director of District 2 stated, "BVA's sponsorship of the USABA Marathon National Championships aligns with our goal to support those with visual impairments identify ways to incorporate fitness into our lives." BVA understands the importance of health and fitness goals in the lives of blinded veterans. Regular exercise promotes positive wellbeing, combats many cardiovascular conditions, aids diabetes management, and reduces feelings of depression and PTSD. Since the blind require volunteers to run, blind running dramatically improves feelings of social isolation through volunteers

serving as guide runners and supporters. BVA offers year round adaptive sporting events through Operation Peer Support programs or in conjunction with partners like Team River Runner throughout the country.

The visual impairment portion of the CIM would not be possible were it not for the efforts of Richard Hunter. Developing Retinitis Pigmentosa while in the Marine Corps, Richard devoted his life towards serving others. Around 2007, he advocated for the visually impaired division of the CIM after participating in the Boston Marathon. The CIM's race directors welcomed the idea and entrusted Richard to its development. What started in 2007 with 2 teams of blind runners evolved to the present day's thriving community of blind running enthusiasts and supporters.



## Members of BVA's Southern Nevada Regional Group bring holiday cheer to Medical Center



Joe Tasby, BVA Southern Nevada Regional Group, brings some holiday cheer to a patient at the VA Southern Nevada Healthcare Medical Center



BVA Southern Nevada Regional Group and family brought some Christmas cheer to veterans. With the help of VASNHS Voluntary Services, they donated gift bags, played music, and handed out handmade blankets.

# How this Blind Soldier Sees the World

by Mary Therese Griffin, Warrior Care and Transition



ARLINGTON, Va. – Since May 13, 2008, retired U.S. Army Spc. Steve Baskis has seen the world from a different perspective. That day, while providing security as a member of the 4th Infantry Division, Baskis was injured from an improvised explosive device. The blast sent shrapnel into his head and every extremity of his body nearly costing him his left arm. Although his arm was spared, Baskis lost some of his hearing, his sense of smell, and his sight.

Now 10 years later, the 32-year-old mountain climbing, kayaking adventurer says a multitude of people helped him find his new normal. That help came from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C. where he began his recovery to Chicago's Edward Hines, Jr.



Steve Baskis on the Mountain top

Veterans Affairs Hospital, the first blind rehabilitation center for veterans that opened its doors in 1945. In Chicago, Baskis had many people help him adjust to his new normal, specifically his Army Wounded Warrior Program advocate, Linda Bronski. “Linda Bronski and a host of others helped me navigate my way through getting my bearings straight,” Baskis said.

Bronski does not see any of her efforts as being necessarily special, she just did what AW2 advocates do, take care of injured soldiers. “I did the blind training and went for walks with him and his blind rehabilitation specialist as he learned to independently navigate [his way] inside and outside the grounds,” Bronski said. “Once he left the hospital, I stayed involved with him. I took him to appointments and took him to a gym where he would be the first veteran in a new program for injured veterans. [I also took] him to his first vocational rehab appointment.” These efforts from Bronski and others, Baskis says, helped him to shape his new self and build his confidence.

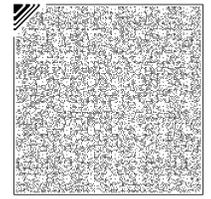
“There is nothing that surprises me in what [Steven] does,” says Bronski. “We had a thing [in our office] of ‘Where’s Steven Baskis?’ (like Where’s Waldo?), because how many people do you call and [each time] they are in another state, another country or another continent?”

Baskis now spends his time doing work for the charity he started and seeing the world he longed to travel before joining the Army, only in a different light

than he planned. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t like being blind, I mean who would?” Baskis said, but he has learned to “embrace the suck” as he says. “I’ve seen more of the world being blind than I ever did sighted.”

From climbing Mount Kilimanjaro to most recently kayaking the Colorado River for 12 days with four other blind veterans, Baskis acknowledges he has done many cool things, but that doesn’t mean everything is always great. “I have my dark thoughts and bad days like everyone else. It is NOT easy,” Baskis

said. “But I remember some things from early on, like the fact that my team leader, who put a picture of his kids on the dash of our vehicle every day, died right next to me. I recognize...I got a second chance.”



Baskis says for him to keep moving is to keep living, something he shares and advises other soldiers and veterans who struggle to do. “Push yourself and challenge yourself and establish your new normal. Anything is possible.”

## **Blinded by War; Rescued by Faith**

by Kyle Perrotti – Courtesy of The Mountaineer

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Despite everything he will never see, Bill Conard lives in the light.

Conard, now 72, lost his sight in Vietnam, and although he was initially overwhelmed by his disability, after accepting his new circumstance and eventually accepting Christ, he has grown to thrive.

### **Getting to Vietnam**

Conard went to Clyde High School but never made it past ninth grade. For the next few years, he worked a number of jobs in Western North Carolina, many of which involved their fair share of manual labor.

“We had to work,” he said. “I had a large family and there wasn’t no playing around.”

Conard volunteered for the Army when he was 20, and on Jan. 3, 1966, he enlisted with his heart set on eventually getting out with retirement pay, buying a tractor

trailer, and hitting the road. He wanted to move west.

After finishing basic training at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, Conard hit the low country in Ft. Polk, Louisiana, for jungle warfare training, which he said was diverse and difficult.

“You had to learn what to do if you got captured and have to survive on your own,” he said.

In July 1966, as just a private first class, Conard went to Vietnam, arriving first in Saigon before shipping over to Bien Hoa.

He was assigned to the First Infantry Division, more affectionately known as “The Big Red One” or “The Bloody First,” as a machine gunner, meaning instead of carrying the standard M-16 rifle, he carried an M60, which can devour a 100-round belt of ammunition in a matter of seconds. The gun itself weighs over 20 pounds, but Conard said he never minded hauling it around.

“I never did pay no attention to it,” he said.

While out on search and destroy missions, Conard and crew would spend up to 30 days in the bush. He recalled that he had to use his M60 five times in combat, all against the Viet Cong, but the first time he witnessed the ugliness of war was when a sniper zeroed in on his platoon.

“This boy just hit the ground,” he said, adding that he had a stark realization that day.

“There was some pretty territory I seen over there, but after I got over there, I wish I hadn’t volunteered,” he said.

“I didn’t know what war was like,” he said. “It wasn’t like this cowboys and Indians stuff on the television. It was a different thing. It wasn’t no comic book.”

Eventually, he came to grips with the cruel reality of war and carried out his duties as a machine gunner.

“I thought it’s either me or them, and I had to get over the fear,” he said.

Conard said the terrain made things tougher than anything else. The ground was swampy and wet, the undergrowth thick.

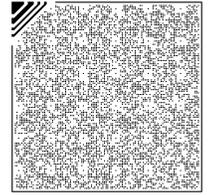
“It was hard to see the enemy, but the enemy could see you,” he said. “I hated it because when they fired on you, you don’t know where it’s coming from, and those little buggers were smart.”

To make matters tougher for Conard, he was frequently in the enemy’s crosshairs.

“Your enemy tries to knock out the machine gunner first,” he said. “They always tried to get your most powerful gun out first. Down in Louisiana, I think they said it was about 70 to 80 seconds is how long a machine gunner lasts normally.”

After a few long missions and a few firefights of varying intensity, Conard lived a day that would inalterably change the course of his life.

## Into the darkness



“The morning of November first, nineteen-hundred and sixty-six, we had to go out six miles and come back on a search and destroy mission,” he said. “That’s when we walked inside a VC basecamp. We didn’t know it was in there. It was just like walking into the trees and everything and heavy brush and bushes and things.”

A vicious firefight ensued. As rounds kicked up dirt and smacked against trees all around Conard, he unloaded ammo belts as fast as he could.

“I shot over 150 rounds, and my gun got hot so it was firing on its own,” he said. “It got jammed up, and I had to change the barrel right fast and keep going.”

But when Conard saw a few soldiers go down near him, he abandoned his weapon to tend to the wounded men. That’s when the 32-pound artillery shells began to rain down. As he was exposed, the explosions went off around him.

“I heard the first one go off, and I heard the second one go off, and the third one got me,” he said. “I was doing medical for a Stinnett feller, and I started to jump back to my machine gun, and that’s when the third came in, and I can’t tell you no more because I was out of it.”

To his knowledge, one of the men he was giving first aid to passed away, but the others survived. For his actions that day, he was awarded a Purple Heart and the Bronze Star with a “V” for valor.

Conard said he likely would have died were it not for his two good friends, Richard Duncan and James Snyder, who carried him to safety. Eventually a

medivac chopper was able to get him out of there.

“They’d lay down their life for me, and if I wouldn’t have gotten hurt, I would have laid my life down for them,” Conard said. “That’s what you take the oath for when you go into the military.”

While all who fought in Vietnam recall their friends from the war fondly, many eventually lose contact, leaving only memories. But Conard, Snyder, and Duncan still keep in contact, and Conard said they even came to his family reunion in 1984.

“They’re like brothers to me,” he said.

The men are so close, they even honored a pact they once made deep in the jungles of Indochina.

“We were just shootin’ the breeze in the jungle,” he said. “We were talking, and I said, I’ll tell you what boys ... when we get married, we’ll name our first boys after one another.”

And that’s exactly what they did.

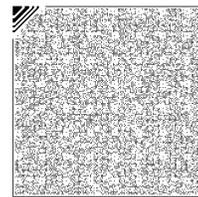
## **A long recovery**

When Conard woke up three weeks later, he was in Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. The first thing he said he noticed was that he had numerous bandages around his face. Then he realized he couldn’t see a thing.

“I asked them how come I couldn’t see, and a major, he just said, ‘you’re blind,’” Conard recalled. “Well, that put me back into shock for three more days. Then when I got where I could talk and understand things again, I was just trying to figure out my injuries.”

Conard said that for a long time, he was in an “igloo bed,” which ensures nothing below the neck is exposed. Along with being blinded, he had a hole in his chest, a

large gash and a fracture on his left leg, a mangled left hand, and an almost entire severed right arm that hasn’t been functional since.



“They just about tore this here arm off,” he said, tapping his right arm with one of the working fingers on his left hand.

Conard spent the next five months in the hospital recovering before he was medically retired from the Army. Next up, he went to the VA hospital in Chicago, where he learned how to cope with life as a blind man.

“I’ll just be honest with you, I didn’t care whether I lived or died then,” he said with a sigh.

It wasn’t until he spoke with a counsellor at the VA hospital that he gained a new perspective.

“He explained to me,” Conard said. “He said, ‘you’re in prison.’ I said, ‘what do you mean?’ He said, ‘when you could see, you weren’t in prison, but now that you’re blind, you got into this prison.’ He meant I had to accept that I was this new person. He gave me a light.”

After a brief stay in Chicago, he returned home to Western North Carolina.

## **Moving forward through faith**

Aside from the day he was hit, there seems to be one other day that will always live on in Conard’s mind. Jan. 14, 1972. “That was the day I gave my life over to the Lord,” he said. “I’d put God in the closet, and I was living in sin,” he added. “But that was all washed away, and because I called on him, I knew I had to change my way of living. If not, I’d be in a worse place than Vietnam.”

There are four Bible verses that have inspired Conard throughout his life:

John 3:16, John 14:1, Acts 16:31 and James 4:14 — all verses he can rattle off from memory.

Through finding God, Conard found himself, and he began to flourish. Along the way, he has been heavily involved in the Waynesville VFW, Hazelwood Lions Club, Blinded Veterans Association and Disabled American Veterans, which, one year, named him the outstanding disabled veteran for North Carolina.

Conard is also a devoted member of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Clyde, where he enjoys singing in the choir. Although he claims he doesn't have much of a voice, he loves singing anywhere and everywhere to anyone and everyone.

"Well, I try to sing," he said humbly.

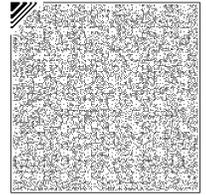
After a brief first marriage gave Conard two children, he married his second wife, Bertha, in 1970, with whom he had two more kids. He stayed with Bertha until she passed away 11 years ago. When asked if being blind made

falling in love difficult, he responded with a quick and confident "no."

While all these things have been important to Conard as he's lived his life, perhaps the thing he enjoys most is swapping antiques. Nary a person walks through his door without having the opportunity to buy, sell, or trade something. While it may seem odd that a blind man so enjoys dealing in goods that can best be analyzed through sight, it doesn't bother him one bit.

"I can still remember what things look like," he said. "I remember what, say, a wheelbarrow or a table looks like. I saw for 20 years before I was blind for 52."

Although life has been a struggle at times for Conard, he has carried on confidently and joyously, despite all the things he'll never see. And that is the definition of faith.



## Chaplain's Corner

by Chaplain Jay McLeod, Rev. PhD.DD

Greetings and blessings to all of you today. I am once again honored to be able to share what God puts in my heart to share with you in this Chaplains Corner. It is always a pleasure to serve and deliver this article to you.

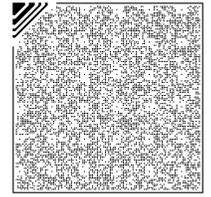
Once again, we find ourselves heading into a new year. I want to congratulate all of you for pushing through 2018. God has put in my heart to speak with you about safety in this new year. It seems we veterans, whether disabled or elderly

have become targets for crimes against us. The rise of fraudulent and violent acts has risen. The FBI reports that the statistics of crimes has determined that there is a national hike and we are the prime targets. So, God has put it in my heart to remind you to be extra careful these days. When people call your phone and ask you for your information do not give it out until you have checked into and verified to whom you are speaking.

If they are a legitimate company calling, they shouldn't mind giving you their information and letting you check

them out. Even if it means them having to call you back. I make it a practice not to give out any information to phone callers without first vetting them. I find that the ones who are legitimate welcome the vetting process. I have been told to remind you that even though we are adults and have been through a lot, using the buddy system while traveling and shopping can keep you safe. The older we become nowadays, we are not respected like we used to be. Criminals today, see us as easy prey or an over qualified victim. My wife and I make a habit out of praying before we get on the road to go anywhere. We never go anywhere without letting the other know where we are going, also when

we get there and depart to come home. Put in place some safety checks and make them part of your daily living. Just like when you were active duty in another country using the buddy system. If you are not married it doesn't hurt to check in with a friend or family member. The older we get, we seem to think we have to fight for independence as a way to hang on to our youth. Let me tell you today that you have earned the right to be important enough to check in with those who worry about you. Adopt another veteran who may not have someone. Stay safe and be encouraged in the Lord.



## Auxiliary's View

by Edna Kirksey Dixon

As we begin a new year let's go back to the basics – what is the Auxiliary's purpose:

“To aid BVA in whatever fashion we are able; to develop and encourage a deeper interest in the Blinded Veterans Association by family members and friends; to preserve and develop a spirit of fellowship among Auxiliary members so that they may give mutual aid and assistance to one another.”

For our New Year's resolutions let us begin the year by pledging ourselves to be more understanding of others, not judging until we have all the facts and just being kinder to ourselves and others. I know this is hard. They say if you want to know what is going on in your pastor's life listen to what he is

preaching. So I guess that is true for me also. This has been a year when I have prayed for forgiveness, understanding and help in not judging others. The hard part is forgiving myself. Do you have a problem with forgiving yourself? God forgave us when we asked but we don't seem to be able to do the same for ourselves. We keep berating ourselves – be kind to YOU this new year.

The BVAA National Board's wish is for more BVAA attendees at the 2019 Convention. The 2019 location is Tulsa, Oklahoma, a wonderful location and a beautiful area. Please plan to come a day or two early and travel around the city and maybe even visit one of the Native American Villages.

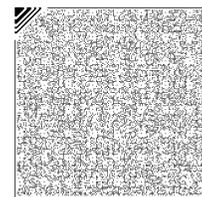
When you and your veteran arrive at the convention be sure to check for the

BVAA schedule so you may attend as many of our meetings as possible. The programs for the past five years have been interesting, informative and apply to all of us as caregivers. Our beloved presenter, “Valarie Duffy” has retired, but we are hoping that she will continue to come and share her wisdom with the BVAA.

If you have a special area of interest you would like to have featured in the program please feel free to call or email me. Your input will help our Vice-President, Pat Stancliff plan the programs for 2019.

An inspirational story that sums up my feelings: I was in Dollar Tree last night and there was a lady and two kids behind me in the LONG line. One was a big kid, one was a toddler. The bigger one had a pack of glow sticks and the baby was screaming for them so the Mom opened the pack and gave him one, which stopped his tears. He walked around with it smiling, but then the bigger boy took it and the baby started screaming again. Just as the Mom was about to fuss at the older child, he bent the glow stick and handed it back to the baby. As we walked outside at the same time, the baby noticed that the stick

was now glowing and his brother said “I had to break it so you could get the full effect from it.” I almost ran because I could hear Spirit/God saying to me, “I had to break you to show you why I created you. You had to go through it so you could fulfill your purpose.” That little baby was happy just swinging that “unbroken” glow stick around in the air because he didn’t understand what it was created to do - which was “glow”. There are some people who will be content just “being” but some of us who are guided to illuminate the path for others have to be “broken”. We have to get sick. We have to lose a job. Some will go through divorce or other trials. We may have to bury our spouse, parents, best friend, or our child. In those moments of desperation, we are being broken, but when the breaking is done, we will then be able to see the reason for which we were created. So when you see us glowing just know that we have been broken, but as we were healing, we stepped into our light so we can shine upon this earth!



## From the Field Staff

by Claudia Belk

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### Understanding a Claim for Clear and Unmistakable Error (CUE)

Sometimes rating decisions have errors which a veteran appeals. While an appeal might change the original rating decision, veterans believe that a clear and unmistakable error has been made.

A CUE claim is very unique and not common. Determining if a claim meets the criteria for clear and unmistakable error, the claim must meet the following requirements per 38 CFR 20.140 subsection O Rule 1403:

(a) *General*. Clear and unmistakable error is a very specific and rare kind

of error. It is the kind of error, of fact or of law, that when called to the attention of later reviewers compels the conclusion, to which reasonable minds could not differ, that the result would have been manifestly different but for the error. Generally, either the correct facts, as they were known at the time, were not before the Board, or the statutory and regulatory provisions extant at the time were incorrectly applied.

(b) *Record to be reviewed -*

(1) *General.* Review for clear and unmistakable error in a prior Board decision must be based on the record and the law that existed when that decision was made.

(2) *Special rule for Board decisions issued on or after July 21, 1992.*

For a Board decision issued on or after July 21, 1992, the record that existed when that decision was made includes relevant documents possessed by the Department of Veterans Affairs not later than 90 days before such record was transferred to the Board for review in reaching that decision, provided that the documents could reasonably be expected to be part of the record.

(c) *Errors that constitute clear and unmistakable error.* To warrant revision of a Board decision on the grounds of clear and unmistakable error, there must have been an error in the Board's adjudication of the appeal which, had it not been made, would have manifestly changed the outcome when it was made. If it is not absolutely clear that a different result would have ensued, the error complained of cannot be clear and unmistakable.

(d) *Examples of situations that are not clear and unmistakable error -*

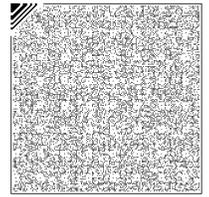
(1) Changed diagnosis. A new medical diagnosis that "corrects" an earlier diagnosis considered in a Board decision.

(2) Duty to assist. The Secretary's failure to fulfill the duty to assist.

(3) Evaluation of evidence. A disagreement as to how the facts were weighed or evaluated.

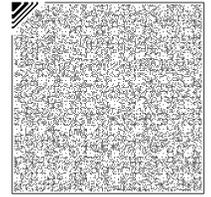
(e) *Change in interpretation.* Clear and unmistakable error does not include the otherwise correct application of a statute or regulation where, subsequent to the Board decision challenged, there has been a change in the interpretation of the statute or regulation.

While CUE claims are rare, the key is to look at the original rating decision and examine the evidence used at the time of the rating decision, and what the law was at that time. This can be challenging when VA regulations change very frequently, but these mistakes do happen from time to time. If you believe you might have a CUE, you will need to carefully review the regulation of what defines a CUE prior to filing. It is best to have a Veteran Service Officer or Claims Agent review your case prior to filing a CUE claim.



**Did you know?**

- In some countries there are specific textures (tactile pavements) in the sidewalks that blind people can sense with their canes and use for guidance. These are especially useful near crosswalks and metros.



## **Blinded Veterans Association Announces Scholarships Open For 2019-2020 Academic Year**

For this 36th year of the program, the 2019-2020 academic year of the Kathern F. Gruber Scholarship Program, there will be six (6) scholarships awarded for \$2,000 each. The Thomas H. Miller Scholarship Program, now in its 7th year, will award one (1) scholarship in the amount of \$1,000. Therefore, there will be a total of seven (7) recipients and two alternates chosen by the BVA Scholarship Committee.

Dependent children, grandchildren, and spouses of blinded veterans to include Active Duty blinded service members of the U.S. Armed Forces are eligible for the scholarships. The veteran must be legally blind; the blindness may either be service-connected or non-service connected. The veteran need not be a member of the Blinded Veterans Association. Additionally, to be eligible for the scholarship, an applicant must have been accepted for admission, or already be enrolled, as a full-time student in an accredited institution of higher education, or business, secretarial or vocational training school.

The scholarships are intended to be used to defray a student's educational expenses, including tuition, books, and other academic fees. Scholarship payments will be made by BVA directly to the educational institution.

Application for the scholarships may be obtained from our website: [www.bva.org/service/html](http://www.bva.org/service/html). Requests can also be made by email to: [dpetty@bva.org](mailto:dpetty@bva.org) or

by mailing your request to: Blinded Veterans Association, 125 N. West Street, 3rd Floor, Alexandria, VA 22314.

Completed applications and supporting materials must be returned to BVA no later than Friday, April 19, 2019, to qualify for the 2019-2020 academic year scholarship program. Due to time constraints related to processing the applications for the scholarship committee's review, applications arriving subsequent to the aforementioned deadline WILL NOT be accepted. Incomplete applications will not be submitted to the scholarship committee. It is the responsibility of the applicant, not BVA to ensure a complete application.

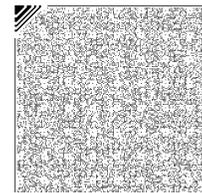
Scholarships will be awarded on a "most-highly-qualified" basis utilizing the following criteria: answers to questions in the application form; transcripts of high school and /or college records; three letters of reference; and a 300-word essay on the applicant's post-education, lifetime career goals, and aspirations.

Each scholarship is awarded for one year only. Applicants are advised that the number of scholarships a recipient may receive under each program will be limited to four (4).

For more information please visit our website: [www.bva.org](http://www.bva.org) or contact our Scholarship Coordinator: Brigitte Jones – 202-371-8880 Ext.330

# Message from a VIST Coordinator

by Valerie Duffy



*Valerie Duffy VIST from Boise, ID, served with BVA for 27 years. She has been a speaker for the BVAA Ladies group for the past 4 or 5 years.*

In three weeks, I will be crossing into uncharted territory—the land of retirement. It is not without a lot of mixed emotions. I've had the honor and privilege of serving our nation's visually impaired veterans for 35 years, with a total of 37 years federal service. It's been a really great gig that I will deeply miss. Along the way, I have met many memorable veterans and their families. Veterans I have served were Bataan and Pearl Harbor survivors, ex-POWs, "tunnel rats", bronze and silver star recipients, and a variety of grunts, salty dogs, jarheads, flyboys and coasties. I also learned many life lessons over the years. "Risks expand your horizons." I never saw myself as much of a risk taker, but when I asked my family in 1995 to move to Boise, I saw only possibilities and hoped they would too. By taking that step, we found our forever home in Boise and the beautiful Northwest. I often speak in term of risk taking when I work with the veterans. "Trust me," I'd say, "take a chance and fly out to our VA blind rehab center by yourself. Plan to spend 6 weeks with people you don't know, but who are experts in their field. It'll be life changing!" Or, "let's go to Houston, Buffalo, Iowa City (or some other far-flung destination) so you can compete with other blind vets in bowling, horseshoes, shuffleboard or golf!" Or, "have you ever done any public speaking? It'll be fun! Did I mention that your audience is third graders?" Not every veteran was able to take me up on these, sometimes, cockamamie ideas. But those

who did learned lessons which fostered their self-confidence and independence despite their vision loss. And they learned the most valuable lesson of being able to laugh at themselves.

"Honor everyone's life story." I've met vets who have lived through the Depression, the Dustbowl, grew up desperately poor or living the life of riley, coming from all walks of life: cowboys, farmers, doctors, truck drivers, the list goes on and on. One WWI veteran was an auto mechanic for the Wright Brothers! He was quick to point out that he worked on their cars, not their planes. Some endured the loss of a spouse, a child or faced their own end of life issues. Their personal life lessons which they brought to the table helped me understand how they would meet, and handle, this challenge of vision loss and how I could best serve them.



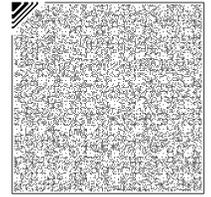
Valerie Duffy VIST from Boise, ID.

“Ask for help.” I’m sure that my career as a Visual Impairment Coordinator wouldn’t have been so successful if I didn’t have the Boise VA colleagues who stood ready to help. A quick call or email to the right person here asking for help with a veteran’s problem yielded an equally quick response to get the issue resolved. And a special heartfelt thanks to my Team Boise partner, Barbara. Her expertise in the field of blind rehab offers so many of our visually impaired vets something that they felt they had lost: hope. You all have made me look good over the years!

“Service creates meaning.” My career at the VA has been one of life-long service. The VA motto is taken from Abraham Lincoln’s 2nd inaugural speech: “To care for him (and her) who shall have borne the battle...” I am fortunate that in my role at the hospital I make an impact on veterans’ lives. First by just affirming that they are dealing with a really lousy situation: vision loss. As we sit with that notion, I hear their worries and concerns. The future appears bleak, emotions can run from fear

to anger to depression, and sometimes even the simplest of routine tasks now seem impossible. It’s then I offer, “OK, let’s start out with figuring out what you need to carry on and then we’ll craft a game plan. From here on out, we’ll work on this together.” Easing someone’s burden has brought meaning to my life. As I go into retirement, I know that I need to make a game plan too. My life’s lessons will carry me into this wonderful next chapter of my life. I will continue to look for meaning, offer to help those in need, see risk taking as opportunity making and remain eternally grateful that I had one of the best jobs anyone could ask for! Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and all the best for 2019!

To the veterans, their families and my VA family, THANK YOU for helping me have my dream job. You are the best! I am honored and proud to know each and every one of you. Your pal, Val.



## Former BVA Administrative Director Celebrates 80th Birthday

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Lieutenant Colonel John K. Williams, USMC (Ret’d), Fairfax Station, VA., former BVA Administrative Director, celebrated his 80th birthday on Sunday, July 29, in a rather unusual way. He invited approximately 100 of his family, close friends, fellow Marines, select members of his church congregation and his neighbors who live on his street to his party.

He rented an open-sided/open-ended white tent and had it erected over his

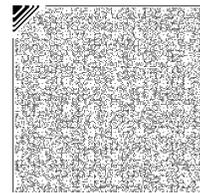
driveway at his home, and then had an appropriate number of tables and chairs placed under the tent and in his garage. He bought a keg of Blue Moon beer and placed it in the aisle between tables and chairs under the tent. The party was scheduled from 2:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. However, the party lasted well into the evening hours as everyone was having a great deal of fun. If volume is any indicator of success, then the party was a

great success as the party-goers managed to empty the entire keg of Blue Moon. Williams had a large Marine Corps birthday cake, and the traditional Marine Corps birthday cake-cutting ceremony. The first piece of cake went to an 89-year old member of Williams' church congregation. The second, third, and fourth pieces of cake went to two young sisters, two young brothers, and a young brother and sister, respectively, all under the age of five years young.

To celebrate the occasion, Williams wore a World War I – vintage U.S. Marine Corps field uniform with breeches trousers, lower leg coverings (called puttees), a brown Sam Brown belt with his ceremonial Marine Corps dress sword, and an authentic World War I Marine Corps doughboy helmet with a hand-painted emblem for the 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment on the front. This helmet had a medium-sized “ding” on the top where it had been hit by a piece of shrapnel from an artillery round which actually penetrated the helmet.

In addition, Williams wore eight authentic World War I - vintage French military medals which he had collected as part of his Marine Corps World War I military memorabilia collection. He additionally wore a Silver Star (with gold star denoting a second award) and a Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal. He also wore two 1915 - vintage Marine Corps marksmanship badges. Williams portrayed a fictitious Marine Corps 1st Lieutenant Maynard W. Drake, 96th Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Brigade, American Expeditionary Force, France.

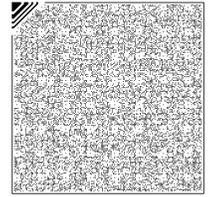
According to Williams, the wearing of this uniform was to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the famous Battle of Belleau Wood in which the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments made a name for themselves. Belleau Wood was a heavily-wooded hunting preserves approximately 50 miles northwest of Paris, France which stood between the German advance and the Allied lines. In a bloody and ferocious battle during June of 1918, which lasted 26 days, the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments finally halted the German advance on Paris and evicted the Germans from Belleau Wood. Belleau Wood was subsequently re-named Bois de la Brigade de Marines by the French Government which awarded the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments the Croix-de-Guerre Award for the tenacity and ferociousness which they exhibited during the battle. The Croix-de-Guerre Award includes a red and green braided fourragere which all members of these two regiments are authorized to wear in perpetuity. Williams' uniform included this fourragere.



Williams served as the BVA Administrative Director from 2 January 1990 to 31 March 2004. He is originally from Nokomis, Illinois, and graduated from Nokomis Township High School with the class of 1956. Williams earned a Bachelor of Science degree in industrial personnel from Southern Illinois University in 1962. He joined the United States Marine Corps on 17 September 1962 at Quantico, Virginia where he attended the 33rd Officer Candidate Course, graduating on 1 December 1962. He then attended The Basic School

(Class 3-63), graduating in June of 1963. Williams faithfully served 27 years of continuous active duty in the Marine Corps, including two combat tours of

duty in the Republic of Vietnam. He retired from the Marine Corps on 1 July 1989.



## Groundbreaking Memoir on American Disability History and Overcoming Adversity

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*Music From The Heart* releases: **GRIT - A Family Memoir on Adversity and Triumph**, by BVA member Jeff Moyer, writer and recipient of awards for both songwriting and disability history documentary production.

“GRIT” tells the monumental story of the Moyer family’s struggle overcoming multiple disabilities and institutionalization beginning before the Disability Rights Movement changed the American landscape; and Jeff Moyer’s role as the troubadour of that movement. In 1954, Mark Moyer, Jeff’s little brother, was born with a severe cognitive disability. Two weeks before age five, Jeff began to lose his vision due to a mis-diagnosed and denied, rare retinal disease. “GRIT” follows the concomitant stories of Mark’s suffering - from age eight, within state institutions and Jeff’s progressive blindness and maturation as an advocate leader within the Disability Rights Movement.

It is far from a tale of misery; it is the story of how the Moyer family overcame their multiple disabling losses through tenacious advocacy, resilience, courage and profound shifts in consciousness. Jeff tells their stories with compassion, empathy, and humor. Moyer rose to roles of national importance including, assistive technology evaluator for both

the Veterans Administration and the National Science Foundation, songwriter and music-based curriculum developer, documentarian, assistive technology program pioneer, and minstrel who took his message of the wholeness and equality of all people to the NPR airwaves as “Morning Edition” commentator, and performances within 47 states and internationally.

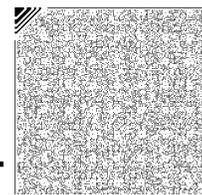
*The book is available on Amazon and at [www.jeffmoyer.com](http://www.jeffmoyer.com).*

### Did you know?

- During one of the first nuclear weapon tests in New Mexico (trinity) a blind woman named Georgia Green saw a bright flash... from 50 miles away.
- Guide dogs can’t tell if the walk signal is red or green so visually impaired people must rely on auditory cues to cross the road. If a car is coming, however, their guide dog will refuse to move.

# VA's Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program Improves Service to Veterans

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program has made significant improvements in disability claim processing over the past year, with most service members who submitted claims through the program receiving decisions within 30 days of discharge.

BDD allows service members to file a claim for disability between 90 and 180 days prior to discharge from active duty, which provides time for paperwork review and medical exams prior to leaving.

"This is an important program for our service members as they transition to veteran status," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "The faster we can connect our veterans with the benefits they deserve, the smoother their transition."

In fiscal year (FY) 2018, the full year of the revamped program, more than 36,000 service members submitted claims through BDD and about 53 percent of completed claims received a decision on their claim within 30 days. In the first month of FY 2019, 3,437 claims were completed with 57.7 percent completed within 30 days.

Throughout FY 2018, the program made continuous improvements, which include:

- Expanding BDD claim review from two locations, to processing at any regional office
- Enhanced software partnerships with the Department of Defense to improve record transfers

- Additional claim training and performance standards for military service coordinators.

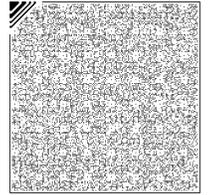
By participating in BDD, service members ensure that their disability medical exams become part of their service treatment record and that service connection for their conditions may be established as early as possible. Medical conditions can get worse over time and establishing eligibility at discharge may make it is easier to increase disability ratings in the future.

For more information on the BDD program, visit [www.benefits.va.gov/predischarge/claims-predischarge-benefits-delivery-at-discharge.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/predischarge/claims-predischarge-benefits-delivery-at-discharge.asp).

## Did you know?

- There's a braille "Olympics." It's the annual Braille Challenge for students who are blind, sponsored by the Los Angeles-based Braille Institute. More than 1,400 students from the U.S. and Canada test their braille skills in categories like reading comprehension, proofreading and spelling. Winners in each age group walk away with monetary prizes – and braille bragging rights for a year.

# In Remembrance



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

## **Florida R.G.**

Kenneth DeSomer  
Ford Berger  
Richard P. Luchesi  
Robert Hammer  
Alfred T. Mignone  
Rick D. Calissi  
Lindon J. Lindsey

## **Hawaii R.G.**

Dennis Matsumoto

## **GEM State R.G.**

Robert Lee Eden  
Donald B. Wilson

## **Heartland R.G.**

Luther Diserens  
Jow Joseph  
William Perry  
Marlin B. Dailey

## **Illinois R.G.**

Harrison R. Payson

## **Louisiana R.G.**

Thomas O. Carpenter

## **Massachusetts R.G.**

James J. Belhumeur  
Horace Edwards

## **Michigan R.G.**

Jake L. Mills

## **Mid-Atlantic R.G.**

John T. Blacknall  
Clyde A. Compton

## **NAT-Military Bases & NO State R.G.**

James Albert A. King

## **NAT-Military Bases & I R.G.**

James Albert A. King  
**North Carolina R.G.**  
Warren O. Bristow

## **Northern California R.G.**

George R. Durand  
Charles G. Wilson

## **New York R.G.**

Michael Laberge  
William Feinberg  
Hector Class

## **Oregon Columbia R.G.**

Robert G. Schaffran

## **Ohio Kentucky Indiana R.G.**

William D. McDermitt

## **Ohio Kentucky Indiana R.G.**

William D. McDermitt

## **Orange County R.G.**

Wilfred A. Francia

## **Pennsylvania RG.**

Salvatore Cavallaro  
Frederick D. Thompson  
Richard M. Shaner  
Charles A. McCarthy

## **Rio Grande R.G.**

Bill Case  
Morris Friedell

## **Rocky Mountain R.G.**

Marvin I. Malk

## **Southern California R.G.**

Joseph G. KinKaid

## **Southern Nevada/Silver R.G.**

Freddie L. Dawson

## **Washington R.G.**

Michael T. Santos-Boyd  
Robert C. Tweit

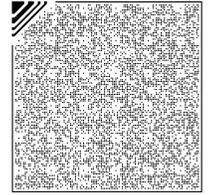
## **Western Mountaineer R.G.**

Reynold Johnson  
Donald B. Carlson  
William F. Albright

## **Wisconsin R.G.**

LaVerne H. Mahloch

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125 N. West Street, 3rd Floor  
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## Final Thought



HONORING ALL WHO SERVED

On Veteran's Day, as always, BVA members paid homage to those who sacrificed their lives for our Nation. The day was sunny but cold in the morning. The air was crisp and the sky a pale blue. The ceremony was regal as the Secretary of the VA, Wilkie spoke about the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One and the men and women who gave their

lives to make the world a better place. More than 115,000 Americans were killed and 200,000 were wounded between the time the U.S. joined the fight in April 1917 and its end on 11 November 1918. One hundred years to the day, BVA paid the ultimate respect to these heroes and to all those who gave the ultimate gift so others might live in peace and enjoy the security they have provided.