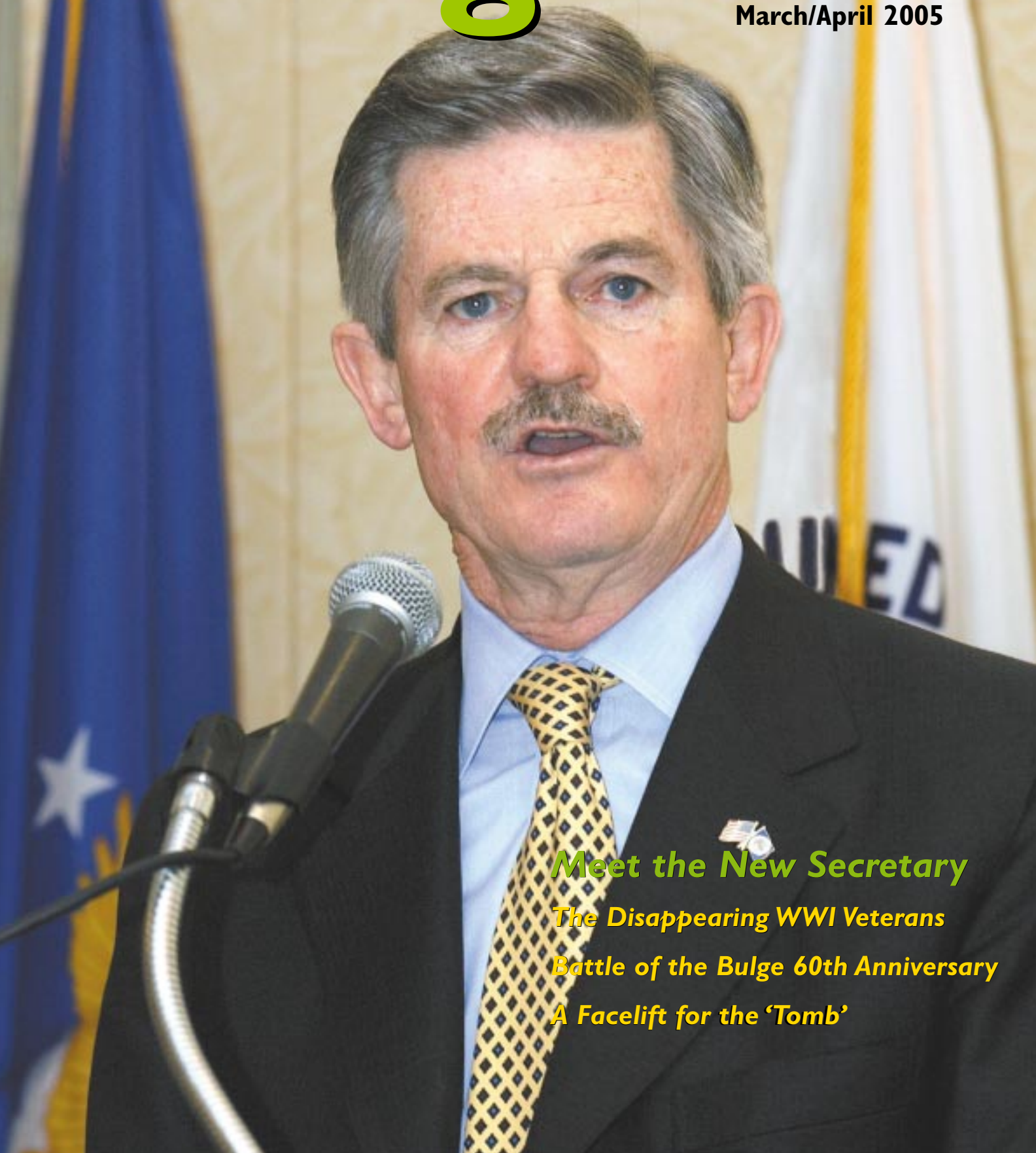


VAanguard

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

March/April 2005



Meet the New Secretary

The Disappearing WWI Veterans

Battle of the Bulge 60th Anniversary

A Facelift for the 'Tomb'



Vanguard

VA's Employee Magazine
 March/April 2005
 Vol. LI, No. 2

Printed on 50% recycled paper

Editor: Lisa Respass
 Assistant Editor: Matt Bristol
 Photo Editor: Robert Turtill
 Published by the Office of Public Affairs (80D)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 810 Vermont Ave., N.W.
 Washington, D.C. 20420
 (202) 273-5746
 E-mail: vanguard@va.gov
www.va.gov/opa/feature/vanguard/index.htm

Features

A Mission of Hope 6
 Hines VA hospital chaplain brings tsunami relief to his native land

The Disappearing WW I Veterans 8
 meet the man who tells the stories they can't

Battle of the Bulge 60th Anniversary 11
 VA doctor shares her account of observances in Europe

Meet the New Secretary 16
 Jim Nicholson sits down with *Vanguard* for a wide-ranging interview

Lucky to be Alive 22
 Salisbury, N.C., VAMC nursing assistant injured in Iraq

A Facelift for the Tomb of the Unknowns 24
 VA partners with the Army to replace 73-year-old monument

Departments

3 Letters
 4 Management Matters
 5 Outlook
 26 Around Headquarters
 28 Introducing
 29 Medical Advances
 30 Have You Heard
 31 Honors and Awards
 32 Heroes



On the cover

Army veteran Jim Nicholson was sworn in as Secretary of Veterans Affairs on Feb. 1. The Iowa native and West Point graduate previously served as U. S. ambassador to the Vatican. He is also a past chairman of the Republican National Committee, and has been a land developer and a lawyer. *photo by Robert Turtill*

Giving Back and Feeling Honored

My nursing career started in 1987 at a large teaching hospital on a surgical floor in Detroit. I stayed on the floor for three years, gaining experience, feeling good about taking care of, doing for, and teaching my patients on a daily basis.

My next career move was to the operating room of

the same hospital. Nursing was definitely different there. My position entailed developing a plan of care and then coordinating and delivering care to patients undergoing operative or other invasive procedures. Each patient is viewed as a unique individual, and the plan of care is provided to meet each patient's specific needs. I continued working in the

operating room for the next 14 years, loving and enjoying my career choice.

Then in 2001 I felt change was needed. I chose to leave the private sector and move to my new position in the Detroit VA Medical Center's operating room. My career will end right across the street from where it began.

The feelings of pride, honor and country run strong among our patients as well as me. I never served in the armed forces but I feel honored to be serving the veterans who have allowed me and my loved ones to rest our heads while our veterans watched over us. No amount of money can compare with

the inner feelings of honor, pride and gratitude that I feel every day taking care of veterans.

My heart is filled with bliss and honor as I talk with them and listen to the stories they share with me—some of pride, others of sorrow—before we go into the operating room. I explain to them that their watch is over and now it's my turn to watch and take care of them as they did for us. I do this freely and with much pride. I thank God daily for the opportunity to serve our veterans. VA nursing is great!

*Dolores Garbacz
Registered Nurse
Detroit VAMC*

Good Work

I am recently employed as a Human Resources specialist at the Dayton, Ohio, VA Medical Center and have been reading your magazine since that time. I wish to commend you and your staff on the excellent diversity of subject matter and professional writing. Keep up the good work.

*Gerald Fields
HR Specialist
Dayton VAMC*



LEE HYEOMA

Honoring a Fallen Soldier

Secretary Jim Nicholson greets the family of Army Spec. Lori Piestewa at a sunrise ceremony honoring her in Phoenix on March 23. The ceremony, held at the base of the mountain named for Piestewa, marked the second anniversary of the ambush of a convoy in Iraq in which she was killed and former Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch was taken prisoner. Lynch is in the background. Piestewa is believed to be the first Native American woman killed while fighting for the U.S. military. For more on VA's new Secretary, turn to page 16.

We Want to Hear from You

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



Making it Easier to Do the Right Thing

Ellen Fox

Director, National Center for Ethics in Health Care

Every day in VHA facilities across the country, patients, their families, and the health care professionals who serve them encounter challenging ethical concerns. We know that VHA practitioners are committed to providing the highest quality of care for their patients, and they view ethics as an essential aspect of quality care.

We also know that they need and want new tools and resources to help them address the ethical challenges they face each day. “IntegratedEthics,” a new national education initiative from the National Center for Ethics in Health Care, is designed to provide those tools and resources.

The IntegratedEthics initiative marries two areas in which VHA is a recognized leader: health care quality and health care ethics. The goal is to help facilities move beyond traditional ethics committees—which in some ways are becoming obsolete—to develop “next generation” ethics programs that infuse awareness of health care ethics throughout the organization at every level.

It is now widely understood that the quality of health care delivery depends not only on the performance of individuals, but also on the design and performance of the systems in which those individuals work. To achieve high quality health care, systems must be designed to facilitate and encourage excellent individual performance.

The same is true for per-

formance in health care ethics. Excellence is not achieved just by bringing together virtuous individuals, but through an effective ethics program that aims to continuously improve ethical health care practices.

To be effective at promoting ethical health care practices, an ethics program must not only respond to ethical concerns on a case-by-case basis, but also must address ethical issues on a systems level, and foster an environment that is conducive to ethical practice. Thus

ity has an ethics consultation service. However, there is great variability across VHA in terms of the knowledge, skills and processes brought to bear in performing ethics consultation. IntegratedEthics provides facilities with a step-by-step approach to ensuring that ethics consultation is of high quality.

Preventive ethics is the second core function of IntegratedEthics. Situations that give rise to ethical concerns can often be avoided by identifying and addressing

on four critical skills, or “compass points:” demonstrating that ethics is a priority, communicating clear expectations for ethical behavior, practicing ethical decision-making, and supporting the facility’s local health care ethics program.

A primary goal of the IntegratedEthics initiative is to improve ethical health care practices across VHA. To accomplish this, the initiative provides a variety of tools and resources for facilities to use, or modify to meet their local needs. Every facility

The IntegratedEthics initiative marries two areas in which VHA is a recognized leader: health care quality and health care ethics.

an IntegratedEthics program integrates three core functions:

- Ethics consultation – responding to ethical concerns in health care.
- Preventive ethics – addressing ethical issues on a systems level.
- Ethical leadership – creating a positive health care ethics environment.

The first core function of IntegratedEthics is ethics consultation, which is widely recognized as an essential part of health care delivery. For example, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations requires hospitals to have in place a mechanism for handling ethical concerns.

Today, every VHA facil-

ity has an ethics consultation service. However, there is great variability across VHA in terms of the knowledge, skills and processes brought to bear in performing ethics consultation. IntegratedEthics provides facilities with a step-by-step approach to ensuring that ethics consultation is of high quality.

Preventive ethics is the second core function of IntegratedEthics. Situations that give rise to ethical concerns can often be avoided by identifying and addressing underlying systems problems. IntegratedEthics’ preventive ethics approach guides facilities through a process that applies principles of continuous quality improvement to identify systems problems that give rise to ethical concerns, to develop strategies to address those problems, and to assess how well those strategies work.

Finally, the third core function is ethical leadership. Leaders play an essential role in fostering an overall environment and culture that supports ethical practice. The ethical leadership component of IntegratedEthics describes practical steps leaders can take to improve their facility’s health care ethics environment. Specifically, it focuses

participating in the initiative develops their own “IntegratedEthics program,” and chooses just how they will carry out the three core functions in their unique setting. The IntegratedEthics initiative will officially launch in July with a demonstration group made up of 29 facilities. The National Center for Ethics in Health Care will support these facilities through workshops, distance learning materials, evaluation tools, an online community, and ongoing technical support.

The center plans to evaluate and modify the program materials before making IntegratedEthics available to all VHA facilities next year. **VA**



Caring for Wounded OIF/OEF Veterans

Jonathan B. Perlin, M.D.
Acting Under Secretary for Health

With our nation at war, the single most important challenge facing the Veterans Health Administration today is ensuring that service-members and veterans who have been wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) receive the best health care available anywhere. VHA has no higher calling, no greater mission, than this.

In carrying out that mission, however, we must always remember that true care goes beyond technically sufficient health services. It means providing care with compassion and dignity to veterans and their families, coordinating every possible service and support activity they need, and restoring them to their rightful place in our society.

That is an imposing challenge. Modern body armor and medical care have enabled combat veterans to survive severe traumatic injuries that formerly would have been fatal. As a result, we in VHA must help veterans face physical and emotional challenges that are new to us as well as them.

Fortunately, we have four VA medical centers that are showing the way for us to meet that challenge. VHA employees in Minneapolis, Palo Alto, Richmond and Tampa—where we have special polytrauma programs—are pioneering new approaches to treatment that will ensure we can deliver outstanding, state-of-the-art

care to severely wounded veterans and their families throughout our system.

In the near future, wounded OIF/OEF veterans and their families will be greeted on admission to each of these facilities by a facility employee who will provide a full welcome package, including orientation material on the hospital and the surrounding area, as well as coupons or other vouchers for goods, services and incidentals. And this will be only the beginning of service aimed at meeting every need of the veteran and the family.

Soon after these new patients are admitted, facility directors and other top hospital staff will introduce themselves, as will Chaplain Service, Voluntary Service

where they can get immediate answers to their questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And they will arrange for routine family meetings, at which the patient's status and progress will be reviewed, any changes to our treatment plan will be discussed, and questions will be answered.

Each of our medical centers will coordinate care across traditional disciplinary lines, with the patient's most important clinical need determining which service takes the lead and coordinates all services involved in the patient's care.

Finally, at each of these facilities, employees will work together to consider what patients and their families may need while patients

to identify local residents who would proudly house families of combat-injured patients, and to identify hotels, restaurants, grocery stores, car services, movie theaters and other businesses willing to donate services to this most worthy group of their fellow citizens.

Many of these new procedures are already in place at some or all of our polytrauma centers. Soon, they will all be in place and operational. And one day, in the not too distant future, we will provide this level of service to every veteran it is VHA's privilege to serve.

Abraham Lincoln, in his great wisdom, not only charged our nation with caring for those who have borne the battle, he charged it with

Modern body armor and medical care have enabled combat veterans to survive severe traumatic injuries that formerly would have been fatal.

and Readjustment Counseling Service employees.

Perhaps most importantly, however, each of these facilities will assign case managers from our Social Work Service to every service-member and veteran in our care. They will meet with our patients and their families on the day they are admitted to explain our plan for their care and to answer any questions they may have.

They will offer patients and their families a single contact telephone number,

are hospitalized. This will include, at a minimum, making sure that families have transportation, meals, and safe and convenient lodging.

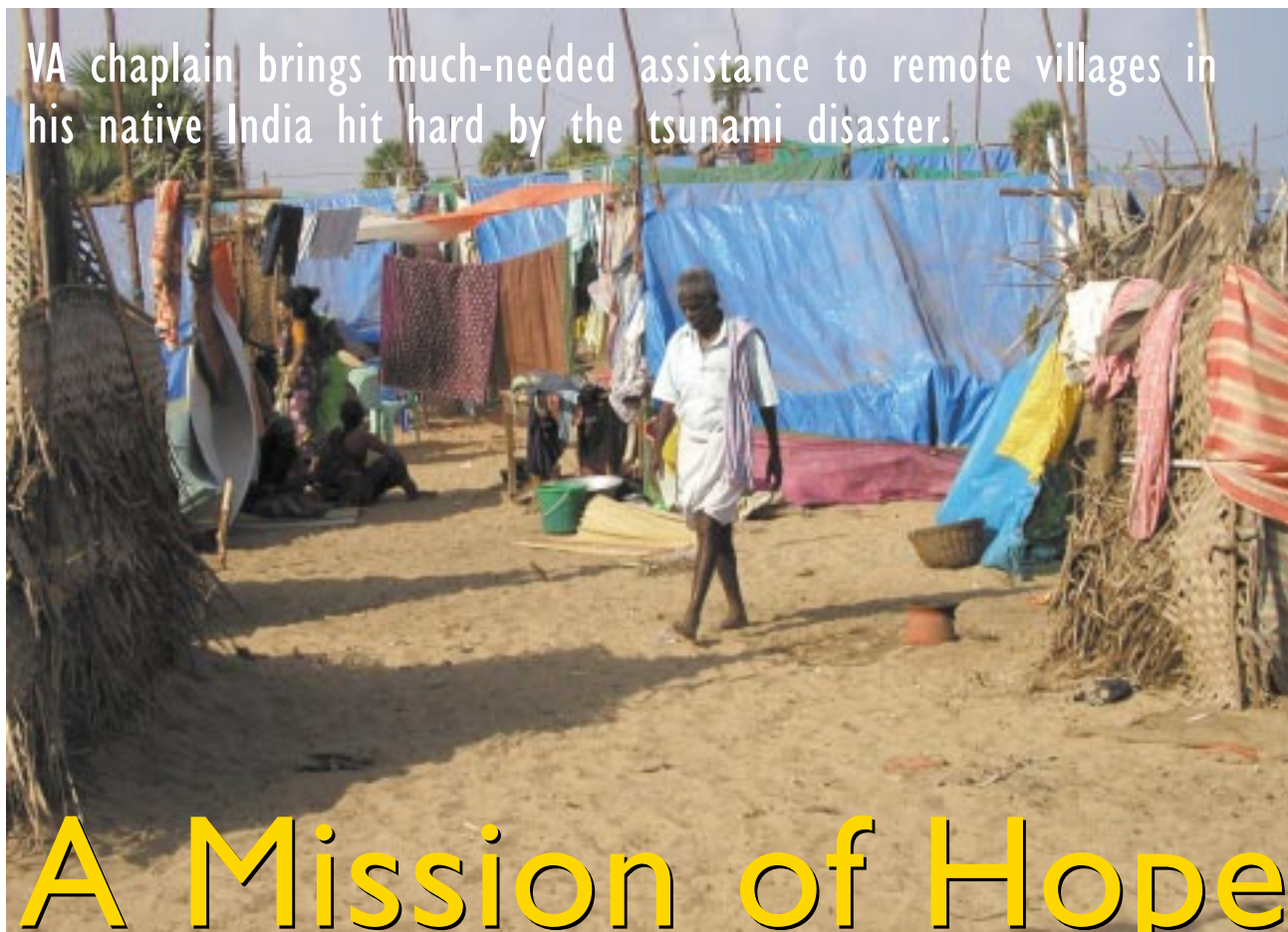
For example, Voluntary Service will work with local veterans service organizations

caring for the families as well. It is our duty to uphold Lincoln's pledge not only to veterans, but also to their loved ones. And we will do so in a manner that would make him—and all Americans—proud. **VA**

Fast Fact

VA's four existing traumatic brain injury centers have been expanded to treat patients for multiple complex injuries. These four polytrauma centers are in Minneapolis, Palo Alto, Richmond and Tampa.

VA chaplain brings much-needed assistance to remote villages in his native India hit hard by the tsunami disaster.



A Mission of Hope

COURTESY OF BEN CHINNAPPAN

Providing emotional support and guidance to veterans who have experienced great loss or tragedy is part of a VA chaplain's job description. Visiting the victims of the tsunami disaster and offering them this same kind of assistance in their time of need was the experience of a lifetime for Father Benjamin Chinnappan, a chaplain at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in suburban Chicago.

"Father Ben," as he is called by Hines staff and patients, was born and raised in southern India, an area hit hard by the tsunami disaster. When he heard about the disaster on Dec. 26, he immediately sprang into action, organizing a humanitarian relief mission to remote villages in India affected by the tragedy.

"I had a hard time sleeping or eating when I heard about what was

going on in India," he said. "Over 2,000 people were killed in the diocese where I used to work. I knew I had to go there in person and offer my support to the people."

Father Ben spent long hours gathering supplies and organizing volunteers to assist him on his trip to India. He planned to leave a little over three weeks after the tsunami struck and aimed most of his efforts at supporting the people with medicines, comfort and counseling, and other critical supplies. As word of his mission spread, a number of Hines employees donated money to his cause. He was particularly impressed with the generosity of a local veteran.

"I spoke about the tsunami at Mass one day and later a veteran approached me in the canteen," Father Ben recalled. "He told me that he



JERRY MALONEY

Ben Chinnappan and his group distributed medicine and supplies to displaced families in India (top).

felt moved to contribute to the cause and gave me a check for a hundred dollars to go to the cause. I knew that he could ill afford to give this money, but he insisted. He is truly an example of a generous soul."

When Father Ben and his group arrived in India, they were immediately struck by the intensity of the

loss there. "The magnitude of this disaster really is beyond description," he said. "Hundreds of people are living in refugee camps with two families crammed into every tent. The people are so traumatized by the tragedy that many of the fishermen are unable to even go near the ocean."

Father Ben and his group traveled to several extremely remote villages that had so far not been recipients of much international aid. The group distributed donated medicine, cooking supplies, food and other essential items to people in need. Most importantly, however, Father Ben and his volunteers stressed to the people they visited that they were not alone in their grief and loss.

"There is no greater contribution than being there in person to share in the pain that these people have endured," he said. "We spent long hours listening to the children tell us what happened to them that day and what has happened to them since the tragedy. Just listening to them is an affirmation of their losses."

In addition to distributing medicine and essential supplies to hundreds of displaced families in the region, Father Ben and his group made a special effort to reach out to the children who were affected by the tsunami. They purchased school bags, school uniforms and Beanie Babies for hundreds of children and gathered the kids together to give them a forum to talk about their losses and feelings about the tragedy.

"One little boy told us how he and his mother had to run for their lives when the tsunami hit," Father

Ben said. "They were forced to leave their elderly grandmother behind and she was badly injured. The boy was deeply traumatized by the whole thing and wanted to tell us all about it. When we heard these kinds of stories, we were speechless."

Although he was deeply affected by seeing firsthand the devastating effects of the tsunami, Father Ben noticed a number of positive things in India. "As a result of this tragedy, people of all religions, economic backgrounds and ways of life have come together. It was amazing to see how the tragedy has brought



The aid workers led by Chinnappan made a special effort to reach out to children. Here, he holds a backpack full of toys as a boy makes his choice.

these groups together in a way that I've never seen before."

In addition, Father Ben was impressed with the priorities of the people who lost their homes, livelihood and friends in the disaster. "They didn't complain about lacking basic needs like bathroom facilities, running water or food. All they wanted was a little assistance getting back to work so they can support themselves with dignity."

Father Ben has a history of reaching out to the people in his homeland. In 2000 he established

an organization called Dalit Solidarity, aimed at supporting the children in the lower castes in India. He established an orphanage for these children where they can receive an education and financial assistance. His organization also sponsors yearly trips to the area by nurse practitioners to conduct first aid classes for remote villages far from hospitals and clinics.

Through his organization, Father Ben is still raising money for the victims of the tsunami and plans another trip to India in September. His main goal is to come up with

enough money to help fishermen in the area buy fishing boats and nets so they can get back to work.

Since his return to the United States and his job at Hines, Father Ben has been besieged with requests from fellow VA employees, patients and the community to share his experiences. He has a remarkable collection of photos and many fascinating stories to tell about the places he visited and the people he met.

"The people we met were touched that

we came all the way from the United States to bring messages of hope and caring," he said. "In return, we were inspired by their dignity, determination and faith in the future. It was a very rewarding but painful experience." **VA**

By Maureen Dyman

Editor's Note: To find out more about Father Ben's mission or to donate to his cause, go to www.dalitsolidarity.org or write to: Dalit Solidarity Inc., P.O. Box 112, Hines, IL 60141.

Meet the man who tells the stories they can't.

The Disappearing WWI Veterans

Just when things were winding down for Bob Johnson, a group of 90-something veterans turned his life around. Johnson's "second life" began in 1990 at his Air Force retirement ceremony capping a 21-year career.

Johnson invited his longtime neighbor, Jack, to the ceremony. Jack was a World War I veteran, but Johnson really didn't know much about his service. It was a subject that just never came up.

A couple of weeks after that ceremony, Jack invited Johnson to a quarterly district meeting of Veterans of WWI of the USA. Johnson didn't even realize that World War I veterans had their own organization. But he went, and was amazed at what he found.

"There were 10 to 15 men attending at that time and they were *all* in their mid-90s," Johnson recalled. "They were struggling to keep the minutes of the meeting and do the bookwork, and asked if I would like to help. How could I say no?"

That was the beginning. Soon the group made him an honorary member, and it was only a matter of time before Johnson had a new voluntary career.

"I realized these were our most senior veterans in need of help and assistance. That started me on a mission to help them in whatever way I could," Johnson explained.

He went to many of the California World War I veterans' annual conventions, but by the mid-1990s the number of active members had diminished significantly. As a result, the conventions ended because there were not enough of the old guys left and those who were left were too frail to travel. By 1996, his neighbor Jack ended up being the "last man standing" of his barracks (a term used by WWI veterans groups in the same way that "post" or "chapter" is used by more recent groups) before he died at age 100.

Highest Honors from France

Johnson learned the French government wanted to award the Legion of Honor medal, their highest honor, to American World War I veterans who served in France. Knowing that there must be more World War I veterans out there, Johnson went to the French Consulate in Los Angeles and offered to help them find as many as he could in California.

On Nov. 11, 1998 (the 80th an-

niversary of the World War I Armistice), the French government, through their consulates, started awarding the medals. Approximately 25 were awarded around the country on that day.

The activity received a lot of publicity, prompting people to call the consulates asking about their own grandfathers, fathers or uncles who had also served in World War I. By this time, the consulate in Los Angeles knew Johnson well enough that they would call him when a new inquiry came in.

His role was to visit the family, assist them with the application forms for the medal, and help coordinate a ceremony. Since 1998, with Johnson's tireless assistance, the French government has awarded 55 of these medals to California veterans.

It was during that first busy year of award presentations that Johnson began working with the Los Angeles VA Regional Office of Public Affairs in coordinating media releases for the ceremonies. Word of Johnson's good work spread and he began helping the French consulate in San Francisco, as well. He traveled back and forth helping to locate World War I veterans and arrange medal



COURTESY OF BOB JOHNSON

Bob Johnson with the Guinness-certified “world’s oldest man” and World War I veteran Emiliano Mercado del Toro, 113, wearing his 75th Anniversary Commemorative Medal in Puerto Rico last November.

presentation ceremonies. There was no pay or reimbursement.

“It’s a labor of love,” he explained. “No one was doing this and I had the flexibility and time to do it. We needed to find them and give them their deserved recognition.” It became his passion.

Remarkable Stories

Having spent so much time with these veterans and being a part of their lives, Johnson is a valuable conduit in keeping the stories of these brave men alive. He’s learned a lot from these “living histories.”

Many of the stories make interesting historical footnotes. One combat veteran, Lucius Perkins,

who died at age 105, told Johnson such a story. Perkins worked in communications in the Army. He was on a break from his duties one day when an Army captain came by and asked if he was familiar with communications. When Perkins said yes, the captain told him he needed a communications man in his outfit. Perkins ended up moving over to support the captain’s outfit (an artillery unit) and got a promotion out of it. The captain turned out to be Harry S. Truman.

Another veteran Johnson found was still living in the log cabin he built in the 1930s near Sacramento. He also found that many veterans had lied about their age to get into

the war.

“It was pretty common,” Johnson said. “I ran into many veterans who were actually underage when they went into the Army. [The war] was looked at as an opportunity. Their spirit of patriotism was extraordinary.”

Johnson became very close to a Canadian veteran named Clifford Holliday who lived nearby.

“He enlisted when he was just 16 as a bugle boy but ended up in the battle trenches in France before he turned 17,” explained Johnson. “This was in 1914 before the U.S. got involved in the war. The trench war early on was horrible, with millions of soldiers killed on each side.

Clifford served in the trenches for almost two years in some very difficult times. He was wounded twice. In one particular engagement, his battalion strength started at 1,200 as they tried to take a hill. Only 300 came back.”

Holliday, who had become a kind of surrogate grandfather to Johnson, passed away about a year ago at the age of 105.

“It was fascinating to talk with someone who had seen so much in the development of this country,” recalled Johnson. “Through Clifford, I learned a lot. It made me more compassionate realizing what these people went through and the difficult times they had compared to what we have today.”

The most recent addition to Johnson’s repertoire of good deeds for World War I veterans happened earlier this year. News from Puerto Rico about a 113-year-old veteran reached Johnson through family

members living there. He knew he had to go there and meet the veteran, Emiliano Mercado del Toro, in person.

“I was trying to find him and was having trouble. A few days before I was scheduled to go back to California, we found him. I called, visited him and his family.” Johnson can’t help smiling as he recalls the meeting. “It was pretty amazing to meet someone that old—the oldest living man—and veteran.”

Within three days back in L.A., Johnson was in touch with the Guinness Book of World Records and started the application process for Mercado del Toro. It took a series of documents to prove he was who he said he was—Guinness has a rigorous standard for accurate verification. One of the documents was a letter from VA verifying his birth date. The process took two months, with Johnson working as liaison between the family and Guinness.

On Jan. 17, Guinness certified Emiliano Mercado del Toro as the world’s oldest man and announced it to the world. Johnson went back to Puerto Rico to present the certificate on Jan. 28 with much media attention.

“It was probably the highlight of my life,” said Johnson, “to be able to personally present a Guinness world record certificate to the oldest documented living man and to have been involved in getting him certified. The family was very grateful.”

Dwindling Numbers

It’s hard to know exactly how many World War I veterans are left, but Johnson estimates there are about 30. The numbers are dwindling so fast that in another two years, there may be none.

Unfortunately, not everyone knows the sacrifices these men made, and Johnson dedicated much of his life to bringing their stories to the public. Asked what he’s going to do once all the World War I veterans are gone, Johnson didn’t miss a beat.

“I am beginning to get involved with World War II veterans,” he said with a laugh. “I just started a project over the last six to eight months to identify any World War II veterans who received the Medal of Honor for heroism in France and were not nominated to receive the French Legion of Honor. I found six so far and most are already in process.”

Had it not been for his old neighbor Jack opening his eyes, he probably would never have gotten involved with these veterans.

“It really was a bit of fate,” Johnson said. “It was an extraordinary opportunity to share their lives and it’s a very important legacy we can’t let our younger generations forget.” VA




FELIX RODRIGUEZ

Veterans groups joined VA and local officials at a ceremony honoring Emiliano Mercado del Toro of Puerto Rico as the nation’s oldest veteran this past January in Vega Baja, where he lives with a niece. Here, Mayor Edgar Santana presents him with a key to the city. Though nearly blind due to cataracts, Mercado del Toro immediately recognized the voice of VA nurse Rosa Arroyo, who cared for him almost 20 years ago. “He was a funny and talkative patient,” she recalled.

By Susan Fishbein

Battle of the Bulge 60th Anniversary

‘I’ll not forget you ... Never. Never. Never.’



Ardennes Forest near St. Vith, Belgium.

The immense firs towered overhead, their crowns obscured by fog. In the late afternoon, golden shafts of light “like lances pierced the mist,” in the words of the old Civil War song. These woods, though, were not the tall pines of Georgia battlefields, or the oaks and maples of Tennessee; they were the dark evergreen forest of the Ardennes, a region in eastern Belgium and Luxembourg of small towns, tiny villages, hills and deep gorges.

Standing in the dark under the giants, we could see a depression in the ground. Then another. And another and another. Sixty years of forest duff had softened the contours but could not obscure the purpose of these lesions in the forest floor. The

cold was damp and penetrating as we stood there shivering. How to imagine the thoughts of a 19-year-old American soldier as he dug a desperate shelter against the cold of that terrible winter and the deadly shower of shrapnel and splintered timber that fell under assault from German 88s?

For the last 12 years I’ve been a doctor at the William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center in Columbia, S.C., where time and again I’ve had the opportunity to learn history as it was lived by the men and women of the armed forces of this country.

I’m also the daughter of a World War II aviator. My father was a pilot and squadron commander with the 448th Bomb Group, flying out of

England with the Eighth Air Force. On June 20, 1944, his B-24 was brought down by flak. He survived and was interned at Stalag Luft III, the camp made famous by the movie “The Great Escape.” As Air Force brats in the 1950s and 60s, my brothers and sister and I enjoyed the excitement of many moves, and the experience of living in Great Britain 16 years after Dad crossed the North Sea on his last wartime mission.

A Journey of Remembrance and Recognition

Many of the old soldiers in my clinic fought in the great conflict known as the Battle of the Bulge, which Europeans call the Battle of the Ardennes. Along the German frontier the Ardennes extends from

the area around Elsenborn in the north in Belgium southward to Echternach near Luxembourg City. In December 1944 this line was thinly guarded by Allied forces, as it was not suspected that Hitler's armies would attempt an advance here. But the territory of the Ardennes is well known to students of history as a pathway for invading armies: in 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm's troops pushed their way through here, as did Erwin Rommel in 1940.

At 5:30 on the gray, foggy morning of Dec. 16, 1944, the assembled German armies began shelling Allied positions along the Ardennes front. Sixty years later citizens of towns such as St. Vith, Bullingen, Houffalize, Vianden, Beaufort and Echternach, all brutalized by those armies, gathered to greet the cold dawn with remembrance.

This Night Vigil is now held every year, but the observance of 2004 was special. According to the Web site of the Association des Musees de la Bataille des Ardennes (AMBA), the first commemorations of the Battle of the Bulge began in 1984 when veterans began to return to the Ardennes in large numbers to see the battlegrounds of their youth. In 2004, AMBA recognized that "this may well be the last occasion for a meaningful large-scale event in the presence of veterans and witnesses of the 'Bulge.'"

In December, members of the organization Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge (VBOB) embarked on a journey of remembrance and recognition back to the hills and valleys that had been so bloodily disputed 60 years ago. I had the privilege of joining them.

On Dec. 16, those old veterans who were able tumbled out of warm beds at the hotel Ol Fosse d'Outh in Houffalize, Belgium, our headquarters for most of the trip, climbed into a big blue bus provided by the



Top: Reenactors and U.S. veterans of the Battle of the Bulge share a moment near Wiltz, Luxembourg. Above: A veteran salutes his flag during remembrance ceremonies in Clervaux, Luxembourg.

Belgian Air Force, and were driven to the village of Villers-la-Bonne-Eau, near the famous town of Bastogne. My journal reads: "4:30 a.m. – We're loading the bus with old soldiers to ride to Bastogne to stand in the cold on this starry night to remember that morning so long ago."

As they arrived, the veterans were greeted by citizens young and old, uniformed Belgian soldiers, reenactors in World War II battle gear, and a phalanx of cameras and reporters. A heavily bundled woman standing next to me tried to take notes during the speeches, but her pen froze up. I handed her a pencil.

“Merci,” she said, and scribbled away.

Photographers held their cameras high as dignitaries gave speeches and the veterans laid wreaths before a monument to the infantry divisions that had fought in that area. The stillness of the early morning was shattered by a 21-gun salute; the sharp smell of gunpowder drifted down through the frigid air.

After the ceremonies, the local citizens invited the Americans to the village hall for refreshments, but somehow no one remembered to provide directions to our Portuguese driver. So our huge bus spent the next 30 minutes wandering along tiny roads in the dark, trundling through pastures and farmyards along the way. Our hosts waited patiently, keeping the coffee and croissants warm, assured that the Yanks would find their way as they had 60 years before.

The anniversary of the German attack was remembered in Luxembourg City at the Hamm Cemetery later in the day. The ground had been liberated in 1944 by the U.S. 5th Armored Division, and was established as a military cemetery by the American Battle Monuments Commission that same year. The Grand Ducal government of Luxembourg grants the use of the property without charge. Most of the 5,076 American dead interred there lost their lives in the Ardennes, in the fighting east of the Rhine, or in the skies above.

After the speeches, the national anthem, and a 21-gun cannonade, I walked through the graves with a veteran of the 7th Corps Artillery. During the war he had been a 155mm howitzer gunner. When he came home he became a teacher. Together we crunched across the hoarfrost and stood before several crosses bearing the words: “Here rests in honored glory a comrade in arms known but to God.” Then we

ascended the rise to a single cross set above and slightly apart from the rest. The inscription read: “George S. Patton.”

In December 1944 the Third Army, commanded by Gen. George Patton, was preparing to advance east against the enemy in the Saar. Initially, the U.S. high command was not convinced of the magnitude of the German aggression along the Ardennes front to the north. But by Dec. 19 the Supreme Allied Commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, finally recognized the threat and met with his senior officers. Eisenhower asked Patton how soon he could swing his troops around and drive to Bastogne. Patton confidently replied, “As soon as you’re through with me.” Three days later Patton launched his at-

statue, a copy of his monument at West Point, stands on a high bluff overlooking the city. There the general grips his field glasses in both hands, preparing to scan the defile for enemy movements. In Bastogne, Patton’s stern face in bas-relief guards a memorial park on the Arlon road near the edge of town. In Luxembourg City, a plaque marks Patton’s headquarters; in Arlon a stone has been placed in honor of “Le General Patton.”

And scattered around the countryside are memorials to American divisions too numerous to count.

‘Nuts Day’

Long before World War II, the city of Bastogne celebrated “Nuts Day” as a fair for unemployed farmhands and servants to find work for



A Sherman tank rolls into Bastogne during Nuts Day celebrations.

tack, freeing town after town as his divisions pushed north.

In Belgium and Luxembourg, George Patton has become a secular saint. In the town of Ettelbruck, which was liberated by the Third Army on Christmas Day, there is a museum dedicated to him. His

the coming year. Successful young men would celebrate by purchasing expensive treats such as walnuts, which they would offer to young women as a demonstration of their financial stability. Now this tradition is celebrated annually by the ceremonial throwing of little bags of walnuts

from the balcony of city hall. In a curious confluence of events, the story of the Screaming Eagles, the 101st Airborne Division, has for 60 years been associated with “nuts” in a different context.

On Dec. 18, “Nuts Day,” the VBOB tour buses pulled up to the Patton Memorial Park. Veterans and their families spilled out onto the snowy streets to meet a parade of American soldiers and sailors carrying flags of the 50 states, followed by partisans and veteran Belgian soldiers of World War II. The U.S. troops marched the flags into the park and stood in the aching cold while more speeches were offered. Afterwards a mob of townspeople, reenactors, veterans and the young Americans made for McAuliffe Square in the center of town.

One of my patients, a veteran of the 101st Airborne who had fought on the perimeter of Bastogne in the village of Longchamps, long ago gave me a copy of Gen. Anthony McAuliffe’s Christmas letter to his troops. In his note, the general told his soldiers of the ultimatum sent by the Germans to “the U.S.A. commander of the encircled town of Bastogne,” demanding his “honorable surrender,” without which the German artillery was prepared “to annihilate the U.S.A. troops in and near Bastogne.” McAuliffe’s tart response is legend: “To the German Commander: NUTS! The American Com-

mander.” The besieged city did not fall.

On this Nuts Day 60 years later the town threw a party for its liberators. After the parade and speeches in town, the veterans were driven around the outskirts of Bastogne and shown U.S. Army Headquarters and the site of the much-needed 1944 drop of ammunition and supplies.



The Belgian 5th Fusiliers march in Bastogne on Nuts Day.

Then they were taken to the Mardasson Memorial outside of town.

This 40-foot tall star-shaped monument, bearing the names of the 48 states and the names and symbols of the U.S. divisions that fought in Belgium and Luxembourg, was inaugurated five years after the war as a symbol of the gratitude of

the people of Belgium. The veterans were escorted onto the grounds for a ceremony attended by Belgium’s King Albert II, J. Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Marine Corps Gen. James Jones, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstad, the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Tom Korologos, and other dignitaries.

After the ceremony, everyone came back to town for the party at city hall. Hundreds of citizens waving Belgian and American flags lined the streets outside, braving falling temperatures, snow and wind. Upstairs, we could watch through the windows as Bastogne dramatized the encirclement with flashing lights and reenactors dressed as German and American soldiers driving tanks, military trucks and Jeeps up and down the main street. Pushing their way through the crowd, waiters carried around trays of food and champagne. Even packages of walnuts were passed out in the old tradition. The king himself honored the veterans with a medal.

A Hero’s Welcome

It was astonishing to see the feelings the people of Belgium and Luxembourg expressed towards the old warriors. Many veterans flew from Washington to Belgium free of charge on a Belgian Army Air Bus. Everywhere they went they were besieged for stories and autographs. Newspapers and television covered every ceremony.

Throughout their tour they

were accompanied by a Belgian Army medic, a non-commissioned officer, and two representatives of the Belgian Embassy in Washington. Belgian soldiers loaded and unloaded their bags, ferrying them back and forth on military trucks. Highway traffic was pushed aside by Belgian police on motorcycles, and on the day of departure for the States, Belgian Army vehicles flashing blue lights cleared a hole for the buses through rush-hour traffic in Brussels.

Most touching were the children. After a church service in Houffalize, schoolchildren, “les enfants,” read speeches they had prepared: “Monsieur le veteran. Freedom came calling. I am dying. You came from across the sea to suffer and die in our Ardennes forests. And you came and saved us.” In Bastogne children held signs reading, “We thank you for peace, freedom and democracy you gave us back sixty years ago.” Parents told us that they teach their children to care for the graves of the Allied soldiers who died for their freedom.

A month after the German offensive began, and thousands of lives later, the 11th Armored Division drove into Houffalize, linking up with the First Army’s 2nd Armored Division, cutting off the German “bulge.” Two days later the Third Army crossed the Sauer River. Clervaux fell to the Americans on Jan. 25. By the end of the month, the German armies had been pushed back and the Allies prepared to invade the Fatherland. The war was near an end.

‘Ghost Front’

Denise Oger, a member of the Center of Research and Information on the Battle of the Ardennes, which helps veterans and their families locate memorials and old battlefields, spent a day driving me around the area known as the Northern

Shoulder. We visited the town of Malmedy, the nearby site at the Baugez Crossroads where the 1st SS Panzer Battalion murdered 86 U.S. POWs, and Ligneuville, where the SS shot another eight surrendered Americans. We drove up to the Schnee Eifel and to the sector that had been defended by the unfortunate 106th Division.

The 106th, the Golden Lions, had been activated at Fort Jackson, S.C., in 1943. Although this division had been properly trained in the States, as a newly formed unit its members were subject to reassignment to divisions already fighting in Europe. As a result, 60 percent of its enlisted men were pulled out before the 106th shipped out. The losses were made up with assorted soldiers gathered here and there, and included men pulled out of colleges where they had been sent as members of the Army Specialized Training Program.

When the 106th relieved the 2nd Division in the Ardennes, its inexperienced men were told they would be defending a “Ghost Front,” and that no German intrusions were expected. But two weeks after the untried division stepped onto European shores, and five days after being deployed along a 21-mile line in the Schnee Eifel, the German armies attacked.

After three horrific days of desperate fighting against an overwhelming enemy, the Golden Lions lost 500 men killed, more than twice that number wounded, and 7,000 captured or missing. As we gazed across the Losheim Gap into Germany, trying to imagine the sight of armies advancing through the darkness six decades before, I thought about the soldiers of the 106th and their courageous attempt to defend the undefendable.

Denise was 8 years old during the winter of 1944-45. Now, she donates her time to driving Americans



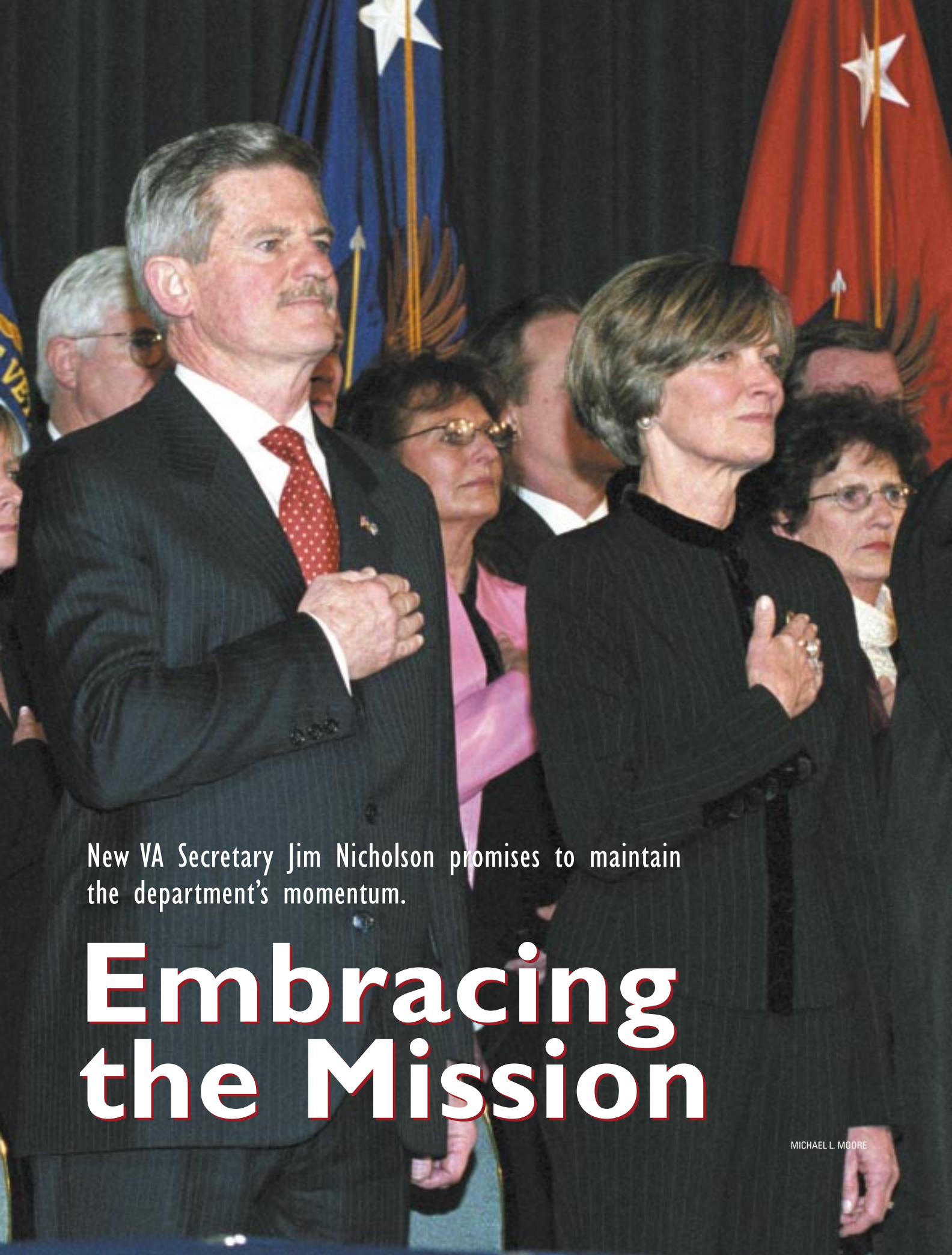
At the Hamm Cemetery in Luxembourg City, children thank American soldiers for freeing their country from tyranny.

around the Ardennes. After the party with the King of Belgium, I walked out of city hall into the snowy street to watch the parade of tanks pass by.

Denise was waiting, and presented me with a guidebook of “Memory Routes” of the Battle of the Bulge. On the frontpiece she wrote some words for my patients back home, expressing the emotions of the citizens of the two nations: “To all the veterans who are not able to come to Belgium. Many thanks for our liberation. I’ll not forget you ... Never. Never. Never.” VA

Story and photos by Lynn Hunter Hackett, M.D.

Editor’s Note: This article was originally published in *The State newspaper, Columbia, S.C.*

A group of people, including men and women in formal attire, are standing in a line. They have their hands over their hearts, suggesting a solemn ceremony or a moment of reflection. In the background, there are flags, including the United States flag and a red flag with a white star. The scene is set against a dark background.

New VA Secretary Jim Nicholson promises to maintain the department's momentum.

Embracing the Mission

MICHAEL L. MOORE

Jim Nicholson signed over the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See on Jan. 31 and was sworn in as VA Secretary on Feb. 1. Four days later he found himself rolling out the President's \$70 billion fiscal year 2006 budget proposal for the department. So much for easing into the job. But Jim Nicholson has never looked for the easy way. His professed beliefs in hard work, faith and the value of public service have marked his success in military, business, political and diplomatic leadership roles. Now, as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, he is throwing himself into serving America's veterans with the same discipline and focus that helped him rise from a childhood scarred by poverty. Secretary Nicholson sat down with *Vanguard* in his office overlooking the White House on March 11 to talk about his background, his leadership style, and what he hopes to accomplish in his new job.

You often speak about the challenges you and your family faced when you were growing up on a tenant farm in rural Iowa. How did that experience shape you?

I think it taught me the value of perseverance. We did, for a number of years, have very difficult conditions. My father was a very serious alcoholic and my mother tried to keep the family together. There were seven kids in our family and she always used to say to us during dire times when we did not have enough to eat, sometimes nothing to eat, "If you kids will just hang in there and study hard and work hard and pray hard, you can still do well in life because that's America."

She believed in that very strongly, and we followed her advice and were able to do well. All seven of the kids went to college and several of us have post-graduate degrees. I think the lesson for me was the importance of persevering, and it's a very personal thing. I also believe strongly in the power of prayer. Just don't give up. If there's something you really want, if you have a goal, work at it and if you are inclined, pray for it too and you will be surprised.

You went on to graduate from West Point and serve eight years on active duty, including combat duty in Vietnam, and then 22 years in the Army reserve.

How has your military background prepared you for your new job as head of VA?

Well, I think my military background prepared me for the rest of my life, and certainly for my responsibilities as Secretary of the VA. I think the experience at West Point has been the most defining of my sets of experiences in life. At West Point, they do a lot of amazing things. They imbue you with a sense of duty to your

Opposite: Nicholson with wife Suzanne and family members at his formal swearing-in ceremony in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 18.

country, to your community.

They instill a discipline and a sense of organization such that you become a pretty good time manager, perforce because you're kept so busy there, especially if you're active in sports, which I was.

Also, you really get to be pretty good at focusing your energy on the job at hand.

And that combination, I think, served me very well in the Army, in law school, practicing law, in business, in politics, and in everything else I've done since.



Nicholson as a West Point cadet.

What inspires your pursuit of public service? Where does your drive to serve come from?

I think two things. Again, at West Point, the motto is "Duty, Honor, Country" and it's kind of an intangible thing as you're going through that four-year experience, but it really does mark you. When you leave that place, you really do feel an obligation of service.

The other component of it is the old Biblical admonition, "To whom much is given, much is expected." While I started out with a hardscrabble life, I've had a lot of good fortune and good breaks, and I feel like I need to give back and help others enjoy some of the op-

portunities that I've had because of people who have gone before me and set the table for me.

How would you describe your leadership style?

I really have never spent very much time analyzing that, but I think my leadership style is one of setting goals and then organizing to accomplish the mission inherent in those goals. I try to bring good people together and manage them in a collegial way, soliciting their input into decisions, but making the final decisions, and expecting people to be loyal and committed to those decisions once made. I delegate everything I can, and then let people do their jobs, but let them know they are accountable, and finally, I believe in thanking and recognizing people when they are working hard and doing a good job. You just can't thank people who are dedicated to their jobs enough.

Who has influenced you most as a leader?

I've had the good fortune to experience several different people in my career who have influenced me. One of the earliest was my high school football coach. He had a profound influence on me. He was an All-American football player who was drafted in the middle of his col-

lege football career. He went off to World War II and contracted rheumatic fever and was never able to play football again. But he became a coach, and his leadership style profoundly affected me, because he was an absolute expert at what he did. He knew football cold, and while he was demanding, he was also totally supportive. Our football team my senior year was undefeated, and it was because of his exceptional leadership of a bunch of ragtag kids who became very good because of his leadership.

And then I served with several Army officers who were just wonderful models. Then during my practice of law, I had a partner who really helped shape my life. He taught me a lot because of his expertise and his sense of responsibility to his clients and to his community. A combination of people like that influenced me greatly.

You most recently served as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. What did you accomplish in that position that you're most proud of?

It's probably for others to decide what I accomplished as the ambassador for three and a half years. But there's something that I do feel very good about, which is the progress that I think we made in convincing the Holy



The Secretary makes a point during his interview with Vanguard in his office on March 11.

ROBERT TURTILL



During a visit to the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center in Phoenix on March 22, Nicholson presents the Secretary's Volunteer Service Award to Louise Ellis, recognizing her for 33 years of service.

See and the many other countries that are also accredited there of what the United States really stands for, what its values are and what its priorities are.

I'll illustrate. The number one priority of the United States as iterated in its statement of national security policy is to enhance human dignity. It's not to be the military juggernaut of our time, or the economic juggernaut, or the technological. It's to enhance human dignity. The translation of that is that we are interested in elevating the condition of life for men and women everywhere. Our President has taken a leadership role in these areas, like trafficking of human beings, religious freedom, HIV/AIDS, and hunger. We really heightened the awareness, sensitivity and involvement on these human dignity issues, leaving the correct impression that the United States is very serious about them and they're a priority. That feels pretty good.

During your Senate confirmation hearing, you admitted having limited experience with VA before your nomination. You've been on a steep learning curve since then. What are you doing to learn about VA and your new job?

I'm doing a lot of things. One of the precipitators of a very sharp learning curve is the budget and the budget hearings we've been going through. They have been dif-

ficult but fortuitous. They've caused me to study and really concentrate and learn in a short time a great deal about this wonderful, vast, multi-faceted organization called the VA because I had to lead our testimony in both the House and Senate authorizing committees and now in the appropriations process.

Another thing I'm doing is getting out there. I've been to medical centers, a regional office and a cemetery in the five weeks I've been here. I've spoken at VSO winter meetings, attended their receptions, received the VSO leadership and taken them to the White House to meet the President. I've been getting briefings here by the three administrations

and staff offices. So it's been an intense period of learning but I still have a lot to learn.

Your older brother, Jack, recently left the position of VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs and now heads the American Battle Monuments Commission. Did he give you any advice or share any experiences from his time at VA that you think will be helpful?

We had several good discussions about VA and he related his very positive experiences and warm view of the organization, the people, and his gratitude for having served here. He was particularly expansive about the Memorial Affairs portfolio. His insights were very useful, and his service here was outstanding.

You and your brother are not the only members of your family serving the nation. Tell us more about that.

Our father was a World War II veteran. My brother and I are both combat veterans of Vietnam. My son is a veteran. His son is a colonel on active duty, and we have three other nephews who are lieutenant colonels, two of them in the Army and the other in the Air Force. So we have a big tradition of military service in our family.

Can you tell us a bit about what your goals and priori-



At his formal swearing-in ceremony, held at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce near VA headquarters, the oath of office was administered to the Secretary by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, right, with Nicholson and wife Suzanne.

ties will be as Secretary of Veterans Affairs?

First and foremost, I'll follow the old saying "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I think I inherited the leadership of a wonderful organization doing tremendous things. We just had two glowing reports about our Veterans Health Administration, the RAND report, and the report from the *Washington Monthly* magazine. There was also just an article from the Toronto newspaper [*The Globe and Mail*] saying the model for fixing the broken Canadian health care system should be the American veterans health system.

So I think my predecessors have turned this big ship in the right direction and into the 21st century and have done a wonderful job. I now want to keep it moving forward and improve it. However, one of the main priorities that I have is to make the American people more aware of the VA. I'm convinced that they do not know and thus do not value what a terrific organization this is. It is bigger than the United States Marine Corps; its budget is bigger than, I think, 26 states combined. It is doing wonderful things for over 5 million veterans who are patients of our health system and is providing benefits to millions of veterans who are beneficiaries of our benefits system. We run one of the biggest life insur-

ance companies in America, one of the biggest mortgage insurance companies, and a very large educational and research component.

Yet, this is not well known. There is not this general transcendent awareness of what a great thing we have here. The American people, because they value our veterans so highly, have invested largely in this agency to take care of them. The VA is really doing a good job, but many people do not know that and they deserve to know.

This year is the 75th anniversary of the VA. What better time to create a commemorative program to make people more aware. It's important on many levels. It's important for the employees to feel they are better known and better appreciated by their fellow Americans. It's the dedication that we have to our veterans that keeps most people here. It's also important for the American people to know what they're getting for their money, because they are spending a lot of money on veterans and veterans affairs. And it's very important for the veterans to know more about their own VA. I am convinced that we are very under-known, and thus under-valued, and I want to change that because we deserve to be well-known and well-appreciated.

Also because when you're treating 5 million people, dealing with something so important and personal and intimate as their own health, on any given day you're going to have something a little bit out of kilter. If all the American people hear are these incidental, individual negative occurrences without this larger, big picture positive awareness, then they're not going to have the kind of justified appreciation for this agency.

You mentioned that you've already visited several VA field facilities. Do you plan to do a lot of traveling to facilities?

The answer is yes, of course, I'll be doing a considerable amount of traveling because we have 158 hospitals, 854 clinics, 57 regional offices and 120 cemeteries. And probably every member of Congress has something in their district from the VA, and they're gracious with their invitations to come and visit. We also have a CARES process, which is the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services, underway, and I want to go visit the facilities that are in that process, those being repositioned, those being proposed for new facilities. It's just what you do in a job like this where you have a command. You go visit your command. You go visit your hospitals, your regional offices and your cemeteries—your troops in the field.

What, if anything, has surprised you about VA?

The biggest surprise to me is just how big this agency is and what huge and divergent responsibilities it has. Responsibilities to provide state-of-the-art medical care to millions of veterans who deserve it and are eligible and need it, and to provide benefits and life insurance and mortgages and education and burial benefits. So the realization of the scale and multi-faceted part of it, with disciplines that don't necessarily relate to each other, but come under the VA canopy, was a surprise.

Some veterans service organizations and members of Congress have criticized the administration's fiscal year 2006 budget proposal for VA as being inadequate. How would you characterize the President's proposed budget?

It's a good budget. It's a record budget. We've had increases of 47 percent over the last four fiscal years, and this one levels out more. It's a pause, if you will, but it has in there what we need to get the job done. So I feel comfortable with the budget.

Will the implementation of CARES be affected by this budget proposal?

Yes, CARES will be affected by this budget because it has \$750 million in it to move CARES forward.

As you know, providing returning servicemembers a seamless transition from military to civilian life is a top priority at VA. How do you plan to keep the department moving forward on that initiative?

That is a top priority because it should be. We need to see that our returning men and women from the active force and the reserve and Guard forces are made aware of all the benefits that they're eligible for, and they need to know how to access them. So we're working closely with the Department of Defense through the Joint Executive Council. We have put people out in the field at the major military hospitals. We have people at all of the major points of return and re-deployment. We've had people on aircraft carriers that were returning home. We have done mailings and given briefings to hundreds of thousands of returnees. The returning members of the National Guard and reserve are the biggest challenge because they often come back to CONUS and return immediately to their home communities and their civilian jobs. They are entitled to VA health care and other benefits and we want them to know that.

We also now have this new plan to give our returnees, through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program, a physical exam and an evaluation during their separation from the active force. We examine them to see if they have disabilities as a result of their service, and try to adjudicate then and there, from a claims point of view. Our goal is to get that done at the time that they're going through their separation.

Concerns have been raised recently about possible regional disparities in disability compensation awards to veterans. How do you plan to address this issue?

That is another priority, and it is being addressed through the Inspector General's office. In fact, I had a briefing today from the Inspector General and a progress report on that, and it is well underway.

During testimony at your confirmation hearing, you mentioned that you plan to focus much of your attention on the department's work force. Is there any special message you'd like to offer VA employees?

I would like to thank them for their dedicated service to veterans. I've been out and met with doctors and nurses and many other people and I ask, "Why do you work at the VA, and how are we able to keep you at the VA?" The common denominator in the answer from all of those different kinds of people is, "I'm here because we serve veterans." And I thank them for that and compliment them for that. It is noble work that we do here at the VA and those of us who are healthy and able-bodied are lucky and privileged to be able to work here for the people who keep us free. **VA**

Lucky to be Alive

A Salisbury, N.C., VA Medical Center nursing assistant was injured in a roadside attack during his second tour of duty in Iraq.

Michael T. Black doesn't remember much about the roadside attack that nearly took his life in Iraq. And maybe that's a good thing. "They tell me it's best that I don't remember," he said hesitantly.

What he does know he learned through conversations with other soldiers who were with him on the highway to Baghdad when insurgents attacked their convoy. After listening to their accounts, Black has reached this conclusion—he's lucky to be alive. "If I hadn't got out [of the truck] when I did, I'd probably be dead," he said.

Black, a nursing assistant at the Salisbury, N.C., VA Medical Center, talked about his experiences in Iraq during a Feb. 25 telephone conversation. The impact of the roadside attack was evident in his voice, which remained somber and reflective as he spoke of his personal struggle to balance the need to know what happened with his desire to move on and forget about it.

How do you move past something you can't remember? "I try not to think about it too much," he said. "I mean I know I was there, but I don't remember much about it. It's almost like a dream, but it was for real."

His journey to Iraq began when he joined the National Guard in April 2001 at the age of 42. It was his second stint in the Army. He had previously served on active duty from 1977 to 1980.

Black trained as a truck driver

and was assigned to the North Carolina Army National Guard's 1454th Transportation Company based in Concord, N.C. His unit was activated in February 2003 to transport military supplies from bases in Kuwait to the front lines in Iraq.

He spent four months in theater

but was sent home in June 2003 for family medical reasons. He was deactivated in September and went back to work at the VA hospital in October. But the Army wasn't quite ready to let him go. Two months later he was reassigned to the 1450th Transportation Company,



LUKE W. THOMPSON

Michael T. Black, a nursing assistant on the geriatrics unit at the Salisbury, N.C., VA Medical Center, is back at work after recovering from wounds sustained when his convoy was attacked in Iraq. He has worked at the Salisbury VAMC since 1998.

based in nearby Lenoir, N.C., and mobilized for active duty. He was going back to war.

After refresher training at Fort Stewart, Ga., the unit deployed to Camp Arlington in Kuwait in March 2004. Black served as a supply clerk and spent most of his time within the relative safety of the military compound. Within a couple

“Some stuff, well, they tell me I just don’t need to remember.”

of months, however, he got tired of desk duty and volunteered to join a 30-vehicle convoy heading north to Baghdad.

The convoy left Camp Arlington on the morning of May 18, 2004. Black was riding shotgun in a truck used to tow disabled vehicles. He wore his Kevlar helmet and body armor, and carried an M16 rifle as they barreled north on the dusty highway known as Main Supply Route Tampa.

The ride was mostly uneventful. But everything changed when they left the highway and entered Baghdad. A burning vehicle blocked the road as they exited the off-ramp. The convoy was forced to stop.

Black anxiously gripped his weapon as the driver pulled to the side of the road. “I knew we had to set the perimeter so I was ready to go,” he said.

As Black opened the door and leapt to the ground, the earth seemed to rise up to meet him. A deafening explosion rocked the truck, shattering glass and ripping metal. His final memory is of stumbling forward and falling to the ground. “Some stuff, well, they tell me I just don’t need to remember,” he said quietly.

He woke up lying in a hospital bed in Baghdad. A day or two later, he was medically evacuated to Germany and then to Walter Reed

Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Finally, he was transferred to Fort Gordon, Ga., where he could be closer to his family.

Black doesn’t know whether his truck hit a land mine, a roadside bomb or got hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. Whatever it was, it was big. Six other soldiers were wounded in the blast. And Black

suffered shrapnel wounds over much of his body, including his eye.

Five months after the attack, he returned to his job at the VA hospital, where he has worked since 1998.

Nance said when Black first came back to work, he wasn’t sure if he could do his job anymore. She told him it was OK, but to give it a try. “Everyone has just been so supportive. I think he’s done extremely well, maybe even surprised himself,” she said.

Black is the fourth VA employee wounded in combat in Iraq. The other three are: Dr. Ken Lee, chief of spinal cord injury at the Milwaukee VAMC, who was wounded in a suicide car bombing in Baghdad in September 2004; Susan Sonnheim, a nurse from the Milwaukee VAMC, who was wounded by an improvised explosive device in Baghdad in September 2003; and Dr. Robert Frame, chief of



Black stands beside a military vehicle while deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Note the steel plate welded to the driver's door. He was wounded after volunteering for a convoy mission to Baghdad.

“We were so glad to see him again because everyone was worried. We prayed for him and thought about him every day,” said Shelia Nance, nurse manager on Black’s unit.

VHA Dental Service in Washington, D.C., who was wounded in a Baghdad ambush in April 2003. **VA**

By Matt Bristol



ROBIN COOPER

A Facelift for the Tomb of the Unknowns

VA partners with the Army to replace the 73-year-old monument.

Last November, VA and the Department of the Army signed a joint agreement to replace the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. The main part of the Tomb, crafted from a 55-ton block of solid marble, has stood adjacent to the Memorial Amphitheater overlooking Washington, D.C., since 1932.

The 73-year-old monument is being replaced because of two large cracks that travel completely around the Tomb.

Because the Tomb of the Unknowns is considered a government headstone, the Army asked VA—through the National Cemetery Administration—to acquire an identical replacement. NCA will solicit, award, and fund the contracts to create the replacement Tomb, including procurement of the stone, sculpting the marble, and transporting the new Tomb to Arlington.

The original Tomb came from Yule Quarry in Colorado. It was designed by Lorimer Rich and sculpted

by Thomas Hudson Jones.

The Tomb consists of seven pieces of marble—the sub-base (four), base, die and cap. VA will replace only the base, die and cap. The die is the main part that most people think of as the Tomb; it includes the north and south faces with wreaths, the west face with the words “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God,” and the east face with the three Greek figures representing Peace, Victory, and Valor.



ROBIN COOPER

Opposite: Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery; cracks are visible running around the die. Above: Employees from Direct Dimensions Inc. perform laser scans of the Tomb. Right: Three-dimensional model of the east face of the Tomb shows the three Greek figures Peace, Victory, and Valor, commemorative of the spirit of the Allies in World War I.




DIRECT DIMENSIONS INC.

Since the drawings used to create the original Tomb were lost, one of the first steps in the replacement process was to create a blueprint of the Tomb. The Army turned to Direct Dimensions Inc., of Maryland, to capture digital images of the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Using the latest technology, Direct Dimensions recorded the precise specifications of the Tomb. Rather than using video or photographs to create two-dimensional images, laser scanners were used to create an exact three-dimensional model. The scanning picked up barely visible marks and details that video and photographs don't.

The three-dimensional model replaces the original blueprints. Not only will the information be used in

contracting for the sculpting of the Tomb, it will also help with the actual sculpting. The three-dimensional model will be loaded into computer-assisted milling machines that use lasers to do the initial sculpting to within 1 inch of specifications. Then sculptors will complete the finished work by hand.

NCA estimates it will take 18 months before the replacement Tomb is ready for delivery to Arlington National Cemetery. The original Tomb will be donated to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 

By Michael Nacincik

Tentative Timeline

- Signing of VA/Department of the Army Memorandum of Understanding (November 2004)
- Digital mapping of existing Tomb (December 2004/January 2005)
- Solicitation of replacement contract to purchase marble (closed Feb. 15, 2005)
- NCA visits quarries to evaluate bids (late February/early March 2005)
- Awarding of the contract for three marble blocks (mid-March/early April 2005)
- Removal and transportation of the marble blocks from the quarry to storage facility, if necessary (late April 2005)
- Solicitation of contract to sculpt new Tomb (late March 2005)
- Awarding of contract to sculpt new Tomb (late April 2005)
- Transportation of the marble block from the quarry or storage facility to sculpting location (late April/early May 2005)
- Sculpting of new Tomb completed (August/September 2006)
- Transportation to Arlington National Cemetery (September/October 2006)
- Removal/installation at Arlington National Cemetery (September/October 2006)
- Relocation of old Tomb to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (September/October 2006)

White House Seeks \$70.8 Billion Budget for VA in FY 2006

Flanked by senior VA leadership in headquarters on Feb. 7, Secretary Jim Nicholson announced the Bush administration's request for a record \$70.8 billion budget for fiscal year 2006.

The FY 2006 budget proposal calls for \$33.4 billion in discretionary funding, mostly for health care, and \$37.4 billion in mandatory funding, mostly for compensation, pension and other benefit programs. While it's the leanest VA budget in recent years, with an overall increase of less than 3 percent, Secretary Nicholson pointed to record increases of 47 percent over the previous four years.

"This budget proposal guarantees that the department will be able to care for those veterans who count on us the most," said the Secretary.

Among the highlights:

- Continuation of the priority to work closely with the Department of Defense to provide timely, high-quality services to servicemembers



Secretary Jim Nicholson announces the administration's FY 2006 budget proposal for VA at a news conference in headquarters on Feb. 7.

ROBERT TURTLIL

returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

- VA will be able to care for more than 5.2 million patients in FY 2006.

- \$750 million for the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services, or CARES, program. Includes funding

for 28 new outpatient clinics, design work for new medical facilities in Biloxi, Miss., and Fayetteville, Ark., and five major construction projects in Las Vegas, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Gainesville, Fla., and Anchorage, Alaska.

- Continuation of the larg-

est expansion of the national cemetery system since the Civil War, with funds for six new national cemeteries.

For complete details on the FY 2006 budget proposal, click on "Hot Topics" on the VA Web site at www.va.gov. **VA**

VA Joins in Uniting Americans in Remembrance of Memorial Day

On May 30 at 3 p.m. local time, Major League Baseball games will stop, Amtrak train whistles will blast across the nation and hundreds of other nationwide participants will ask Americans to pause for the Memorial Day National Moment of Remembrance. Established by an act of Congress, the "Moment" honors those who died in service to the nation.

Other participants include veterans service organi-

zations, NASCAR, military installations, schools and universities, hospitals, shopping malls, national parks and airports.

All citizens, alone or with family and friends, wherever they may be at 3 p.m., are asked to pause for a moment of reflection and rededication to giving something back to their country in memory of the nation's fallen. The goal is to put "Memorial" back into Me-

morial Day. A Gallup poll revealed that only 28 percent of Americans know the meaning of this holiday.

"We want Americans to contemplate those things that bind us together. We want every child to say, 'I know why I am free and I know who died for my freedom,'" said Carmella LaSpada, director of the White House Commission on Remembrance.

"The legacy of those

who died to keep this country free—from the Revolutionary War to the present—is something that strengthens and unites us."

Congress passed a law in 2000 establishing The White House Commission on Remembrance. Its purpose is to promote the Moment and the values of Memorial Day by acts of remembrance throughout the year. VA is partnering with the commission in this cause. **VA**

Thrift Savings Plan Open Season Runs April 15-June 30

It's that time again! The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) open season begins April 15 and ends June 30. TSP is a retirement savings and investment plan for federal employees. Participation in TSP offers you the opportunity to save for retirement and defer income taxes on these savings.

During the TSP open season, eligible employees may elect to enroll, change, or terminate their contributions. This open season, FERS employees may elect to contribute up to 15 percent and CSRS employees up to 10 percent of their basic pay each pay period. The 2005 Internal Revenue Service elective deferral limit is \$14,000.

If you are, or will be, age 50 or older during the 2005 calendar year and you are already contributing the maximum amount in regular TSP contributions, you may be eligible to make additional catch-up contributions of up

to \$4,000 in 2005. You can sign up for catch-up contributions at any time, but you must make a new election each calendar year.

Employees are encouraged to make open season elections through Employee Express at www.employeeexpress.gov.

As a TSP participant, you can invest in any one or a combination of the following five investment funds:

■ G Fund (Government Securities Investment Fund)

■ F Fund (Fixed Income Index Investment Fund)

■ C Fund (Common Stock Index Investment Fund)


■ I Fund (International Stock Index Investment Fund)

■ S Fund (Small Capitalization Stock Index Investment Fund)

Open season is a good time to review your investment choices and rebalance your account to match your retirement savings goals. You can rebalance by making

interfund transfers, contribution allocations, or a combination of the two. You may make your contribution allocations or interfund transfer at any time using:

■ The TSP Web site (www.tsp.gov); or

■ The Thriftline: 1-TSP-YOU-FIRST (1-877-968-3778), or TDD 1-TSP-THRIFT5 (1-877-847-4385) for hearing impaired participants; or
 ■ Form TSP-50, Investment Allocation. 

The American Veteran Debuts

The American Veteran is a new half-hour video news magazine designed to inform veterans, their families and their communities about the services and benefits they have earned through their service to America and to recognize and honor that service. This program is produced by the VA Office of Public Affairs and the VA Learning University/Employee Education System video production team. It is being broadcast by the Pentagon Channel, a 24/7 operation that reaches all U.S. armed forces personnel and is carried by many domestic cable outlets. *The American Veteran* also is being streamed on the VA Web site, and broadcast internally on the VA Knowledge Network.



ROBERT TURTIL

A Visit from the Chairman

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Larry Craig (R-Idaho) came to headquarters on Feb. 9 to visit with VA employees. The senator, who was named chairman of the committee in January, said he wanted to get their input on improving care and benefits for veterans, and on how the committee and Congress can better assist VA in serving veterans. Sen. Craig spent a few hours in the building, and took time to field questions from employees in the Omar Bradley conference room in the Secretary's office suite, above.

TSP Special Notice

Effective July 1, 2005, the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board will implement Public Law 108-469, which eliminates the TSP open seasons and the restrictions on contribution elections tied to them.

As of that date, participants may make TSP contribution elections at any time. Your local Human Resources office will be providing additional information in the coming months.

To find out more about the TSP program, contact your local HR office or visit the Office of Human Resources Management and Labor Relations Worklife and Benefits Service's Web site at vaww1.va.gov/ohrm/Benefits/Benefits.htm and the TSP Web site at www.tsp.gov.

Carolyn Clark

We hear a lot about seamless transition efforts these days. VA employees across the country have embraced the concept by developing unique ways to serve our newest generation of combat veterans.

Their enthusiasm is justified. Could there be a mission nobler than healing the broken bodies of young men and women who suffer devastating injuries in service to country?

But the war-wounded aren't the only ones affected by their injuries. Spouses, parents and children must learn to cope with the reality that their loved one may never be the same. Nowhere is this more evident than inside VA's four traumatic brain injury centers, located in Tampa, Richmond, Palo Alto and Minneapolis.

Carolyn M. Clark, public affairs officer at the James A. Haley VA Hospital in Tampa, got a firsthand feel for the impact of brain injuries when the hospital received its first Iraqi Freedom patient in April 2003—a special ops soldier who had been shot in the back of the head.

He arrived on a Friday evening accompanied by the wife of a friend with whom he was serving in Iraq. Prior to his deployment he had designated her as his health care surrogate in case anything happened to him.

Clark met them at the hospital to help with the admission. She then drove the young woman to a nearby Holiday Inn, because at that time the hospital had no formal system to house family members or surrogates. Before leaving, she gave the



ARTHUR L. NELSON

Tampa VA Hospital public affairs officer Carolyn Clark (center) with Jeanette Blackmon (left) and Diana Herrick, whose husbands are being treated at the hospital after suffering combat wounds. Clark opened her home to the families of wounded servicemembers at the start of the war in Iraq.

woman her business card and told her to call if she ever needed anything.

A few weeks later she called. She had gone home to take care of a few things but was now planning a return trip to Tampa. She wanted to know if Clark could recommend a good hotel close to the hospital. "If you want, you can stay with me," Clark answered.

So began one woman's efforts to touch the lives of patients' families and loved ones. "I saw a need, and in my own small way, I wanted to help," explained Clark.

As the war ground on, her home became their refuge. She let families stay with her on five separate occasions, including letting one couple stay in her house while she was out of town. One night, she whipped up a home-cooked meal of baked chicken, steamed vegetables and pumpkin pie for three

young women with loved ones on the brain injury unit.

"They had gone through so much and I just wanted to do something to show them they're not alone," Clark said.

She often went beyond the basics of food and shelter. When she found out one patient had received a weekend pass, she met him and his wife at the hospital, drove them to the Florida Aquarium and paid their way for a dolphin eco-tour. Later she picked them up and treated them to dinner at Outback Steakhouse.

Patient advocate Keith W. Ziegler heard about Clark's efforts while speaking with a patient's wife. "I asked where she was staying and she said 'at Carolyn's,'" Ziegler recalled. "I said to myself, 'That's what we're here for.' We're not a faceless bureaucracy—we care and

we're here to help."

Later, when Ziegler heard *VAnguard* was looking for "exceptional acts of kindness" by VA employees, he sent an e-mail message describing Clark's efforts.

"Carolyn ... never boasts or calls attention to herself," he wrote. "But I think actions like these deserve more than a pat on the back. These actions make me proud to be an American." We think many would agree. **VA**

By Matt Bristol

Editor's note: Construction on a new Fisher House at the Tampa VA Hospital is scheduled to be completed next year. Until then, a coalition of volunteers has formed the "Haley House" at a local hotel, offering free rooms and breakfast, unlimited shuttle service, and complimentary local phone calls for the families of veterans on the spinal cord and brain injury units.

VA scientists and researchers nationwide celebrate VA Research Week March 27–April 2. In this installment of Medical Advances, *VAnguard* takes a closer look at VA's Office of Research and Development (R&D).

R&D Structure

The R&D office oversees four distinct services, each with its own world-renowned research centers.

The Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development Service explores basic biological or physiological principles in humans or animals, such as investigations of tissues, blood or other biologic specimens. This is a new service, created through a reorganization of the former Medical Research Service, led by director Dr. Tim O'Leary.

The Clinical Science Research and Development Service focuses on interventional and effectiveness studies, clinical, epidemiological and technological studies. This is also a new service created through reorganization of the former Medical Research Service and Cooperative Studies Program. Dr. Brian Schuster was recently appointed service director.

The Health Services Research and Development Service pursues research at the interface of health care systems, patients and health care outcomes. This service underscores all aspects of VA health care, specifically quality, access, patient outcomes and health care costs. Its mission is to advance knowledge and promote innovations that improve the health and care of veterans and the nation.

Finally, the Rehabilitation Research and Develop-

ment (Rehab R&D) Service focuses on improving the quality of life of impaired and disabled veterans through the full spectrum of research, from approved rehabilitation research projects through evaluation and technology transfer to final clinical application.

Emerging Research Topics

The war in Iraq has drawn attention to prosthetics research. About 180 soldiers who lost limbs in Iraq have been treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, according to a Nov. 18, 2004, *Associated Press* report. As a result, VA has made prosthetics research a priority in the department's 2005 research agenda.

VA partnered with the Department of Defense and Walter Reed to study ways to improve the care of returning amputees. Investigators have proposed studies that will: compare prosthetic designs, define standards of function, evaluate psychological issues faced by returning service personnel, determine psychosocial issues that challenge successful reintegration, and initiate longitudinal studies to be carried out as the injured soldiers transition from active duty to VA care.

Recent VA Research Advances

The following studies represent VA research findings published in January 2005. For more on VA research efforts, visit the R&D service's Web site at www.va.gov/resdev.

Colon Cancer Screening Method "Worthless:" A test commonly used by doctors to screen for colon cancer has

proved "worthless," according to VA researcher and gastroenterologist David Lieberman, M.D., who led a study involving 2,665 veterans at 13 VA medical centers.

The study tested the validity of the digital fecal occult blood test (FOBT), in which doctors obtain a single sample of stool as part of a rectal exam and check it for hidden traces of blood,

search, more attention is being focused on how primary-care physicians screen for colorectal cancer. This study was published in the Jan. 18 issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Fiber-Rich Diet Wards Off Heartburn: Eating more fiber and less fat may mean less heartburn, according to a VA study of 371 volunteers



ROBERT TURTEL

Dr. Stephan Fihn is the acting chief of VA's Office of Research and Development. The R&D office oversees four distinct services.

which could signal the presence of cancer or precancerous polyps. In addition to this test, the study volunteers completed a more rigorous six-sample FOBT, providing stool samples from home. They also received a full colonoscopy, the gold standard for diagnosing colon problems.

The colonoscopies revealed that 284 men had serious polyps. The single-sample FOBT detected only 5 percent of them, versus 24 percent for the six-sample FOBT.

As a result of the re-

in Houston. Those with diets higher in fiber and lower in fat were less likely to suffer chronic heartburn and regurgitation of food, or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

Although fiber has long been lauded for its role in heart and colon health, the study was among the first to suggest that fiber may offer further digestive benefits. The VA study was one of the most comprehensive analyses yet of how diet affects GERD. The findings appear in the January 2005 issue of the journal *Gut*. **VA**

Presidential kudos for volunteer

Fran Rickers, a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary and volunteer at the Fargo, N.D., VA Medical Center since 1977, received the President's Volunteer Service Award on Feb. 3 from President George W. Bush. Rickers greeted the President, right, at Hector International Airport as Air Force One taxied to a halt. "I want to thank you for setting such a good example," Bush told Rickers before addressing the rest of the crowd.



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO

The Association of VA Social Workers partnered with the Veterans of Foreign Wars to provide telephone cards to approximately 850 VA employees called to active duty as members of the Army Reserve or National Guard. The association's executive committee came up with the idea and contacted VFW's Operation Uplink, which provided the calling cards. The cards were mailed just in time for the holidays. In January, the association donated \$3,000 to VFW to show its appreciation.

Some special children got a special valentine surprise when nearly 30 employees from the Chillicothe, Ohio, VA Medical Center

and their family members got Valentine's Day haircuts for Locks of Love, a non-profit organization that provides hairpieces to needy children under the age of 18 who suffer from medical hair loss. Engineering Service's Tom Osborne organized the event. "I've wanted to do this for a long time, and I wanted to challenge other VA employees to get involved," he said.

Talk about attitude! There's plenty of it and it's all positive at the VA Eastern Kansas Health Care System, where employees proclaimed "Yes I Can" throughout the month of February in conjunction with the National Salute to Hospitalized Veter-

ans. They wore buttons emblazoned with the phrase "Yes I Can" to make it clear to all veterans and their family members that VA employees care about their needs and are here to help.

A group of employees at the Newark VA Regional Office is making blankets in their spare time and giving them to area veterans as part of a project called Blankets of Love. Angela Marie Casey, a veterans service representative, started the project in October 2004 as a way to thank veterans for their service. Since then, she and her colleagues have crocheted 94 blankets. On Dec. 20, they gave 37 blankets to homeless veterans living in six transitional homes run by the VA

New Jersey Health Care System. The next day, they donated another 55 blankets to veterans living at the Menlo Park Veterans Nursing Home.

The first two veterans ever treated at the Lebanon, Pa., VA Medical Center returned to the hospital Feb. 15 to cut the ceremonial ribbon opening five completely renovated inpatient units. The multimillion-dollar renovation was the first major facelift since the hospital opened in 1947. Among the upgrades are wider hallways and larger patient rooms that offer more privacy. About 100 employees, volunteers, veterans and local and state government representatives attended the event. VA

Seattle's spiritual experience



JOSEPH MATTHEWS

From left: VA Puget Sound Health Care System's chief of Chaplain Service Fred Rietema walks the labyrinth with chaplains Steve Spencer, Tom Park and Chris Morton.

Chaplains at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle have introduced a spiritual labyrinth for patients and employees to explore the healing power of moving meditation. Walking the portable canvas labyrinth is said to promote spirituality, introspection and emotional health, according to chaplain Chris Morton. Currently, mental health providers are using the labyrinth to help patients with grief, trauma and addiction.

Honored for excellence



LAURA BISHOP

Stan Johnson, left, with Jerry Molnar, associate director of the Tomah VAMC, who nominated Johnson for the award.

Stan Johnson, director of the Tomah, Wis., VA Medical Center—currently serving as acting director of the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago—received the American Hospital Association's Federal Health Care Executive Award for Excellence during the American College of Healthcare Executives Congress, held March 14-17 in Chicago.

Johnson has served as director of the Tomah VAMC for 10 years. He was recognized for leading the medical center through a major reorganization. "I'm fortunate to work with an incredible group of people. This is recognition for [Network 12 and Tomah staff]. You can have ideas, but if you don't have the people, it doesn't get done," he told the *Tomah Journal*.

Members of the Memorial Services Detachment from the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas, were guests of honor at the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge annual awards dinner on Nov. 4, 2004. The detachment is made up of volunteers who provide military funeral honors for veterans. They have provided more than 16,000 burial honors since forming in 1991. The Freedoms Foundation is a nonprofit organization headquartered in Valley Forge, Pa., dedicated to teaching young people the principles upon which America was founded.

Two nurses from the San Francisco VA Medical

Center made the cover of *NurseWeek* magazine. Martha "Marti" Buffum, associate chief nurse for research, appeared on the cover of the Jan. 31 issue of the national magazine in a tribute to nurse researchers. Her research focuses on better health outcomes for patients. Past studies include achieving and maintaining sobriety, managing pain in patients with dementia, and staff wellness and stress reduction. Registered nurse Mimi Haberfeld made the cover of the Jan. 17 Mountain West edition. She collaborates with Buffum on the VA Nursing Outcomes Database.

Jennifer Kelly, a volunteer at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in Chicago, was

selected to receive the VA Voluntary Service's James H. Parke Memorial Fund Youth Scholarship Award. Kelly is a dedicated volunteer who has logged 1,017 volunteer hours over the past six years. Her grandfather, Chester Olszewski, is a longtime volunteer at the facility. "Volunteering has been an incredibly influential part of my life and has helped me to grow and become a strong, confident, well-rounded person," said Kelly.

The Disabled American Veterans presented the Order of the Silver Rose award to Dr. Patrick Litle, a psychologist at the VA outpatient clinics in Ventnor and Vineland, N.J., both part of the Wilmington, Del., VA Medical Center. The Order of the Silver Rose is an organization established to recognize American service-

members exposed to Agent Orange in a combat zone. Litle is the first VA employee to receive the award. He was recognized for making a difference in the lives of veterans. The award is generally presented to military personnel who have been exposed to Agent Orange.

The VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System recently received two of the Nevada Governor's Awards for Performance Excellence. The judging was done by the Nevada Quality Alliance, using criteria based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. The health system received the Trailblazer Award for achieving notable performance results, as well as the Nevada Award for Community Support for building and maintaining relationships with community organizations. VA

Committed to education

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, along with Indianapolis Colts defensive end Shawn King, presented the Florida African American Education Alliance 2004 Community Leader of the Year Award to Tia Jefferson, right, a computer instructor at the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System in Lake City, Fla. She received the award Jan. 17 in recognition of her commitment to education in her community. A graduate of Florida A&M University, Jefferson has tutored children for the last 15 years and was cited as an exceptional mentor.



DAVE GOULD

A real-life medical emergency



JUDY FOWLER-ARGO

An emergency preparedness drill turned into a real-life drama recently at the James H. Quillen VA Medical Center in Mountain Home, Tenn. During the drill, Lisa Fair, above left, an emergency room nurse at the medical center, realized that Ann Pope, above right, the Voluntary Service volunteer playing a victim, really did need immediate medical attention—her blood pressure was elevated to 259/133. Pope was stabilized by the medical center’s emergency room triage staff and later admitted to a private hospital for treatment.

Michael Santillo, a police officer at the Northport, N.Y., VA Medical Center, recently received a letter of commendation from the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force for bravely subduing a drunken and unruly passenger intent on assaulting a Southwest Airlines flight crew during a flight. Santillo and an off-duty N.Y.C. police officer subdued the passenger until the plane landed and law enforcement authorities escorted him away.

Several staff members were eating lunch together in a break area at the West Palm Beach, Fla., VA Medical Center when one member of the group suddenly grabbed his throat, giving the

universal sign for choking. Remaining calm, Caroline Fermin, a medical supply technician, administered the Heimlich Maneuver, which dislodged the piece of apple that was stuck in her co-worker’s throat.

Charles Parnell was recently honored for what became a caregiver role-reversal at the Durham, N.C., VA Medical Center. Parnell, a long-term resident of the extended care and rehabilitation center, was seated in the doorway of his room when he saw an evening tour staff nurse collapse into unconsciousness on the floor. Recognizing the emergency situation, Parnell yelled for help until nursing staff arrived. At

the ceremony, which was attended by his daughters, Parnell was praised by staff as a hero whose actions saved their co-worker’s life.

The Atlanta VA Medical Center police recently received a report that a possibly suicidal patient was sitting high up on the ledge of the facility’s parking deck. Officers were immediately dispatched to the garage, where they discovered the troubled veteran, who seemed intent on jumping. VA Police Chief Jeffrey Garrett talked at length with the patient, trying to persuade her to voluntarily come down from her dangerous perch. Yet she persisted in leaning forward, threatening to jump. In an instant,

Garrett gave the signal to Officer Jerry Wellons and Sgt. Elbert James, who rushed to grab the patient, pulling her to safety.

Two dietary aide workers from the American Lake VA Medical Center in Tacoma, Wash., recently teamed up to save the life of a veteran. During a morning meal, alert 20-year employee **Louise Ackerman** became aware that a patient was choking, unable to speak, breathe or swallow. She immediately called for assistance and was joined by co-worker **Stephan Jancasz**, who assessed the situation and immediately performed the Heimlich Maneuver, dislodging the obstruction from the patient’s throat. VA

A speedy and brave response

Mike Hiatt, below, a health technician at the Kansas City, Mo., VA Medical Center, placed the safety of patients and co-workers above his own recently by fighting a fire that had engulfed a patient’s bed. A cigarette hidden under linen by the patient was to blame for the flames. Hiatt grabbed the burning bed sheet covering the patient and extinguished the fire. Both patients in the room were on oxygen, but only the one who had hidden the cigarette sustained an injury (non life-threatening). Hiatt also suffered minor injuries, but called his actions “no big deal.” Hiatt was assisted that night by Betty Clemons, R.N., Teresa Adams, R.N., Donna James, health technician, and Sandy Leonard, R.N., all of whom reacted with speed and courage.



JIM SPAW