



WE HONOR OUR KILLED IN ACTION AND WANT AN ACCOUNTING OR RELEASE OF OUR MISSING IN ACTION OR PRISONERS OF WAR.

Official Newsletter of... "Run For The Wall"... January 2006

**Quarterly Newsletter
" We Ride For Those Who Can't "
January 2006**

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THE EDITOR'S NOTES



First, a reminder to everyone who usually receives notices from me about submitting articles for an upcoming newsletter. If you know that your e-mail address is, or should be, on the list of people I notify and you didn't receive an e-mail from me around December 6 telling you of the deadline for articles, please contact me (judylacey@aol.com). A number of e-mails have been returned undeliverable, so I need to update your e-mail address. Thanks.

There are so many passionate veterans and veteran supporters, and I want to tell you about one such group.

One of RFTW's biggest supporters is Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 785. Many of their members also

participate in RFTW; during recent Runs you may have noticed their VVA van, with Vietnam Veterans on board. Chapter 785 members do a lot of good things for veterans throughout the year, and during RFTW provide bikers with water, fruit, and Snickers on the road to Washington. Last year they also donated \$700 for camping fees for those riders who camp out in the KOA's on their 10-day mission, \$1,000 to the Navajo Nation Indian Schools Immersion Program, and \$1,000 to the Rainelle School in Rainelle, West Virginia. In the past they rode only partway, but they are making plans to go "all the way" in 2006. They anticipate taking one Operation Lift-Off Van all the way to DC and the other van partway, possibly to Window Rock or Angel Fire, to support the bikers with their mission.

I'm proud to know people like the members of VVA 785.

Never Forget,
Judy "Velcro" Lacey

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FROM THE HEAD SHED

By Milo (Nayber) Gordon

President, Run For The Wall

It's Christmas and I am behind the editorial 8 ball again. There is a country song that has a line in it something like this: "If you want to see God laugh, tell him your plans." That has been the story of my last month. I am finally in Southern CA and settling in for the winter. Now it's time to get back to RFTW. We have the overnight stops listed. The coordinators are busy working on the details of each route. My plan is to have it completed and published about the 1st of May. I know that there are riders with GPS systems who want each stop now so that they can program their computers. Well, once you have joined the RFTW route of your choice, at its overnight stop, all you need to do is follow the bike in front of you. You will get to where you need to go, for each stop. We need to know that our published route book is accurate, so we wait until each stop is confirmed and re-checked before we publish to detailed itinerary. Don't bother the Route Coordinator for that information. You will get it when everyone else does. You already know where you are going to join us.

Special Note to all Former Road Guards and Road Guard Captains: The board of directors (BOD) decided to present a special Road Guard Pin for each year that you ride in that position. This recognition will go to each Road Guard from each route. Any former RG and RG Capt. please contact me so that I can arrange presentation. A heartfelt thanks from the BOD on behalf of all participants in RFTW for your selfless sacrifice on our behalf.

That's it for now. I am out here in the sun and warmth of the desert keeping my skills up. Talk with everyone later. I hope that each of you had a blessed Christmas and Happy New Year celebration, or whatever celebration is appropriate to you.

Milo (Nayber) Gordon

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► EVENTS

2005 LONG BEACH VETERANS DAY PARADE

By Wayne Nicholls



On Saturday, November 5, 2005 a pre-parade ceremony was held at the Long Beach Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Changing of the colors was completed by

Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 756 with Paul Verner sounding TAPS on his bugle.

The Long Beach Veterans Day Parade stepped off at 10 a.m. The parade began on Atlantic Avenue at Harding Street and continued down to 56th Street before turning back on Atlantic to Houghton Park.

Positioned in entry 128 was our lone “Gold Star Mother” riding behind “Red Beard” on his Harley-Davidson Ultra Classic. Dee, who is 82 years old and lost two boys to war, enjoys getting a little wind in her face on the back of a motorcycle. “Red Beard” promised Dee a ride on his bike last year during the parade. Dee let us know this year, that she’d like to visit The Wall in 2006.

Entry number 129 was the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 756. The Chapter proudly displayed our banner and carried the colors. Directly behind them were our “Sons and Daughters In Touch.” Members of SDIT carried posters “remembering” their fathers and brothers. It was an honor to have our Sons and Daughters participating in this parade.

Entry number 130 included 36 motorcycles with Run For The Wall. The group was led by a new RFTW banner carried by Debbie Nicholls and Paul Verner. Patrick Armstrong followed the banner with his beautiful display of our American and POW-MIA flags. Harry Parmer, USMC retired, was the “Missing Man Escort.”

After the parade, we were treated to an awesome “Welcome Home Barbeque” at the VFW Post, hosted by VVA, Chapter 756. There, we enjoyed hamburgers and hot dogs with all the fixings. Folks enjoyed stopping by the vendors’ booths as well as the opportunity of visiting one another. It was a wonderful Veterans Day Celebration.

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CRIPPLE CREEK

By Al Larson

I was on the road by dawn with my second love—her name is Valkyrie. We have been through a lot in the last year: two trips around Lake Superior, one trip to California then across the U.S. with my Heroes, rode the Sky Line, then the Blue Ridge Parkway, then Del’s Gap, and now to Cripple Creek Colorado for a reunion of my Heroes.

By now you have figured out that my second love is a motorcycle. She has a 1520cc engine with 6 cylinders, 6 carburetors, and six straight pipes (3 on each side ending behind the rear tires with an outward turn and angle slash at the end). She belongs to the Honda family, and in my opinion she is the finest and fastest bike that was produced through her short life span. This was the answer to Harley when they said that Honda made only plastic bikes. It has more chrome, more speed, and is tougher than any bike deserves. To top it off, it is American made.

Seven hours later I was at Stogie’s house, and the first thing I did was give him a great big hug and welcome him home. No matter how many times these guys meet each other they always welcome each other home. Remember, when they came home there were no parades, no one said to them “Welcome Home”; one day they were in a hole, the next day at an airport in Minneapolis, Chicago, Miami, or New York buying civilian clothes and hiding their uniforms. We did not debrief them—one day killers, the next day law-abiding citizens expected to pick up life where they left off. Some made it out of this situation, others struggled, others just gave up. Those are the ones you see under the bridges with long hair, long beards, and they call them homeless ones. Shame on you, shame on me, shame on the United States of America. Shame on all the Jane Fonda’s of this nation. We did not welcome them home, so now they welcome themselves home every chance they can. They went over there as young boys, trained to kill, told to fill up the black bags, keep up the body count that our government wanted, but not to win the war. Do not attack this village even though they were taking fire from it (that decision should be made in Washington), maybe tomorrow but today just stay low, tomorrow they might not be there so no need to attack, and you might not be killed today.

At 5 a.m. the next day, we met with another Navy man and were off to Cripple Creek, 600 plus miles at 25 mpg, three old men, one Army and two Navy, doing what they wanted to do at age 25. Nine hours later we were at Cripple Creek. We set up the tents at Lost Burro Campgrounds next to a creek that ran all the time we were there. Poncho was already set up. He's an Army guy from Las Vegas. He lives in a motor home, travels around the country, was married six times, which is another trait of the Vietnam veterans—unable to have a lasting relationship. You can't say that he didn't try. This is one of the guys that I roomed with on the "Run." His hair is down below his waist—took him five years to get it that long, neat trimmed beard. He is going to shave his head and donate his locks to "Loving Locks" and he hopes that the locks will go to some child. On the trip he came out of the shower without his shirt, and his chest had so many stitches on it that it reminded me of some of the canvases that were repaired at the shoe shop in Britton. It looked like railroad tracks. I asked him why he carried such a high tent, and his reply was he had to stand up because of all the steel in his body he could not bend very easily, has a hard time getting on his socks, because he has a lot of shrapnel in his body. He has a great sense of humor and I love traveling with him because you never know what is going to happen.

When we went into town that night for supper, there were a lot of bikes there—my estimate would be 35,000 by the time the Rally was over. That night it rained. It was nice lying in the tent curled up in the bag, listening to the rain, but it's heck knocking down the camp in the rain.

Saturday is the big day at the Rally; no cars on the streets, the bikes parked everywhere, the police smile, and no one makes any trouble, even though there are gangs from California that always have friction between them. The vets here are in their late 50's and early 60's; I am one of the older ones at 68; couple of old-timers hobbling around. The corner where the RFTW people hang out is crowded, with everyone hugging and welcoming everyone home, eyes are moist, big bear hugs men with long hair and full beards acting like school kids with each other, each knowing what the other has gone through. John from Iowa is there. He is a fireman, two purple hearts, wanted to go back for more, but they said that he was going home and not to press his luck. Slammer, Cleaner, Topper, Poncho, Pegleg, Gunner Stogie, Greek, Digger, Longhair, RJ, Butcherman, Littlefoot, Firefly, One Arm, Ice Man, Doorgunner, 9 Ball—these are the names of some of the people there. The name often can be connected to their jobs during the war.

At noon the parade starts, cycle after cycle, American flags wave, POW/MIA black flags wave, wave after wave, they come rapping their engines, big smiles on the men's faces, while the ladies on the back seats grit their teeth and hang on. All branches of the services march by, each flying their own flag, thinking that they are the sharpest ones. The Corvettes come down the street and, in my mind, they do not belong. Men with stiff shirts with their blond-haired beauties, in complete contrast to the vets in their Levis, leathers and denim vests, called colors, something that to a biker is almost sacred. The vests (colors) tell the story of what that person is, that he belongs, that he matters, whether it is to a club or to a cause, but it is his way of saying look at me this is what I am. I wear a leather vest, with lots of pockets (a cyclist always needs pockets). My colors are those of Run For The Wall, with patches of all the veterans hospitals I have visited, a patch of my Indian Tribe, POW/MIA patches, my military ribbons, American flag, rides that I have been on, pins that have special meaning to me, and a patch of the Sub on which I served. My vest tells the story of my life. On my first trip to the Wall, I carried Kathy's brother's vest to the Wall. He had just died, and he had served in Vietnam. We wrapped it in plastic and I laid it at the Wall, a place that welcomed him home, a place that he would feel like he belonged. He was with his friends, the ones who understood him, and he was with the men who fought and died for a country that shunned them when they came home. At last he was welcomed home, he was among his friends. That evening after supper we were sitting on the benches that line Cripple Creek's sidewalks, watching people, a pastime that I really enjoy, when down the street comes this Native American, a young man of about 25. He would stop and say words to men as he passed, shaking their hands. His hair was long, black and straight, no hat, hair parted down the center. He stopped in front of me, looked at my Navy Submarine hat, looked at my vest, stepped one step back and bowed at the waist, straightened up, and offered me his hand. I accepted and we shook hands; he looked me in the eyes and said "Thank you for serving." I told him thank you, it was my pleasure and I said we had a lot in common. I showed him my Tribal patch and called him "brother." He then grabbed me off the bench and shook my hand so many ways that I thought I was being ushered into some private ceremony. He stepped back with a smile on his face, and said he had been in Desert Storm, and it was nice to see a fellow warrior. I didn't tell him that all I did aboard ship was to turn knobs and twist handles that controlled the speed of the ship. In my mind

he was the warrior because he had a purple heart on his collar. He was my hero even though I was a lot older. He continued down the street shaking hands until I could no longer see him, lost in the crowd. The man next to me asked what that was all about, and I told him it was a private joke—we do that all the time. I looked away knowing something special had just taken place.

It rained again that night, and the next morning we packed up the tents etc., loaded the bikes, Poncho and I went one direction, Stogie and his buddy went another, we went through the ritual of hugging each other and looking away so that no one could see the tears welling in our eyes, and promising to stay in touch. After a couple of hours Poncho and I filled up with gas and had breakfast. He went south and I went north, each giving the other the one finger salute.

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LAS VEGAS WELCOMES HOME VIETNAM VETERANS RFTW Wins Parade Award



Billed as the biggest “Welcome Home” parade ever, the parade staged in Las Vegas on Veteran’s Day was attended by many RFTW participants. Our RFTW participation was organized by Mil Thornton (kudos Mil for a job well done!). Steve “Hawgwash” Hill said “it was a spectacular event honoring the men and women of the Vietnam era. We didn't have the largest contingency, but we made a statement that received a standing ovation from the reviewing stand. The American Flag/POW-MIA Flag proudly waved from the lead bike followed by a full-size pickup with a banner stretched high above that read, ‘RUN FOR THE WALL. We ride for those who can't.’ Following the parade, we were invited to park adjacent to the Moving Wall that was on display in Las Vegas for Veteran's

Day weekend.”

Following is Mil’s report on the event:

The City of Las Vegas, Nevada decided that they wanted to make their annual Aviation Nation Veterans Day event mean something special for the 2005 year. They decided because of the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon that they would officially welcome home the Veterans that served in Vietnam. This was not one of those events put on by Veterans for Veterans. This was truly a community and official local agency that sponsored and took the time to put The Las Vegas Operation Welcome Home. Danny Lopresto from So Cal. started the contact with the parade organizers to allow RFTW to participate. Danny got busy with work and school and passed the torch on to me, also from So. Cal. The organizers were happy to have RFTW and the organizing and planning of RFTW participation was accomplished. The communications were difficult to bring this event to everyone’s attention up to the event time. With so many other Veteran events going on in all the states it was no wonder that the turnout of riders was minimal. There ended up being 12 riders total and 3 trucks. The lead motorcycle was proudly displaying a 5’x 8’ U.S. flag and a 3’x 5’ POW/MIA flag on the back of the bike. Steve Hill, the Nevada RFTW representative, used his pickup truck. If you haven’t seen Steve’s truck it has an awesome paint job of the POW/MIA flag and barbed wire and red, white and blue paint. The truck had a RFTW banner showing our proud attendance. Following up were the other motorcycles and trikes and then the remaining trucks.

The song PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN was being blasted out from the lead motorcycle of the RFTW unit to the crowds that had gathered for this wonderful tribute to the American Vietnam Veterans. There were 120 units in the parade and our group was number 119. We felt proud to be able to bring a close to the parade with such a dedicated and awesome bunch of folks to represent and bring awareness to the cause of the RFTW event each year.

It was sometimes very joyous and other times brought tears to our eyes as we watched the crowd as we passed by and watched as veterans of all wars would stand and salute as we came by and gave the big thumbs up. It felt good to yell

back a big welcome home. This event was accomplished out of love for our veterans and we were proud to be able to participate.

The final hoorah came just a few days ago when a letter was received to find out that out of the 120 units that participated in the parade, the RFTW group impressed the judges in the parade enough that they won one of 8 awards given at the parade. The award was for the Best Non-Military Mobile Unit. Not bad for a small group of dedicated RFTW believers.

The parade will be put on again next year with a different theme. Steve Hill says that he will organize the RFTW participation again, so put this on your calendars for next year.

The rest of the weekend was involved with the Fremont Street party where there were thousands of people watching bands and other activities to honor the Veterans. The Aviation Nation Air show took place over the 3 days of the weekend with the highlight group being the Thunderbirds Air Force Air team. There were many other activities, including the traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall that was set up near the downtown area and Fremont Street Experience. During our visit after the parade on Friday it was clear that this was also a highlight of the event as the line forming to see it was very long and there were many veterans with family and friends taking the time to pay tribute to those brave heroes whose names were etched on the wall.

Ed. note: Thanks to Steve Rieger for this report on one of the Patriot Guard Riders (PGR) recent missions—the funeral in Pomona, CA, of a soldier killed in Iraq. Spc. Sergio Gudino, 22, of Pomona, died in Baghdad on December 25 when an improvised explosive device detonated near his M1A1 tank during combat operations. Gudino was assigned to the 1st Battalion 64th Armor Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, GA. Several RFTW members attended the funeral. See “News” for more info on the Patriot Guard.

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HONORING A FALLEN HERO

By Steve Rieger, Patriot Guard

Saturday morning, January 7, the sun was out, not a cloud to be seen; the sky pure as the soul we were going to return to its maker. I got to Glendale Harley at 8:30 to make sure all was as planned. I was the only non-Harley there, but all made me feel welcome when they heard of our mission. I went to the funeral home, and spoke to the directors; they assured me that the family still wants us there.

At 10:00 about 20 Vietnam Vet riders and some Legacy Vet Riders showed up. I notified them that the funeral didn't start until 1400 so they went for food. When the folks at the Harley shop saw how many riders were there by 10:30 they decided to buy us all donuts, and coffee, and in short order we had 6 boxes of donuts and as much coffee as we needed. Starting about 11:00 more and more riders started coming in, in ones, twos, or in larger groups.

At noon Andy (the RC for this one) and I went over the route, so that he would be familiar with it, and we made some changes in our plans. When we got back to the meeting point, we bought a book, and had everybody sign it. In 10 years, the little child who just lost his dad will not remember us or his dad, but he will forever cherish that book that's filled with messages from 70 average joes who gave a damn. We also took up a collection for the child and came up with a bit more than 500 dollars. All the riders, and all the employees of the Harley shop gave what they could.

At 1330 we all lined up and headed out, it didn't take long to get to the church, and the director set aside parking for us. Going up those hills with our large flags flowing in the breeze made me proud once again to be a member of the PGR. All the cars, and people stopped and paused when we passed them, it seems that they all knew that we had come to escort a pure soul. When we got to the church, the folks there were moved by our thunderous entry. 49 bikes and 80 odd flags of all shapes and sizes makes an impression.

At 1428 the service was over, we all, (about 80 of us) lined the walkway from the church to the hearse on both sides, and when our brother came out with the flag draped over his coffin, attention was called, then we were all called to salute. We held our salute until the coffin was inside the hearse. The Brig. General stood next to me, and he went to attention when “our man” called it and he presented a salute when “our man” called it. He told me afterwards, that us being there brought tears to his eyes.

Once we were told to fall out, we went back to our bikes and escorted our brother all 1492 feet from the church to his burial site. About 300 feet before the burial site, the hearse stopped and we passed it on either side, all with flags on our bikes waving in the breeze. Spc. Gudino's wife was sitting in the car, and broke down as we passed. As we passed our brother on either side, every single one of us had the same thought: here is a man who fought for freedom, and it is our honor to be here.

We once again lined up and stood there in awe, full of respect as our brother was carried up to his burial site. When the honor guard fired the shots each and every one of us shook, and again, and again. When taps was played, we cried, some inside and some out in the open. When the family and friends released those 200 white balloons, we were humbled. And when the flag of our great nation was presented to his wife we were inspired.

About 30 minutes afterwards we presented our book and the collection to Mrs. Gudino, and she thanked us, and cried. Here are 100 people who never met her husband, never met or knew him, yet they cared, they cared enough to take time, stop what they were doing, and came out to respect her husband.

As the coordinator of this event I cannot thank you enough for what you folks did. Men, women, old and young were all there yesterday under one flag, and under one banner. We stood with many different backgrounds, but united in purpose. Military vets, Active Duty, and civilians, but no one counted, we were there to honor a brother. You, my fellow PG riders, are the true inspiration for what makes this nation the greatest.

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► OUR STORIES

I WASN'T THERE BUT I STILL CARE

By Monica L. Sloan, Fredericksburg, VA

I was only 10 years old when the war in Vietnam ended and our troops found their way home, oblivious to the manner in which our Countrymen treated them. An adult now, I am APPALLED. Regardless of a person's views on “war” our troops should ALWAYS be supported. They are following orders, doing what they are told. EVERY Veteran (and active duty military person) has my gracious thanks for the freedom I experience every day. I cannot imagine a life without you all. THANK YOU and WELCOME HOME!

It was May 2004 when my brother, Craig “Sarge” Severance, introduced me to the Run for the Wall family. Craig rode “All the Way” with the Southern Route, broke off at the end of the day in Roanoke, VA, and came to Fredericksburg, VA to pick me up so I could run the “last leg” with him, leaving Woodstock VA that Friday morning, 28 May. This was an experience I will NEVER forget and will ALWAYS cherish. Not only did the group Craig rode with make me feel like I was family and belonged, but they gave me a deeper appreciation of the cause RFTW are fighting for each year and during the course of their cross-county ride.

Craig had talked about making this pilgrimage for several years prior to coming All the Way. Due to family and/or work obligations, 2004 was the first year he was able to do it, although in the past he traveled as far as he could with the group. When we arrived back at my home in Fredericksburg VA at the completion of the Mission, I told my husband, Phil, “we have to buy a motorcycle if for no other reason than to ride with this AWESOME group of

Veterans in support of their cause.” February 2005 came around and I’ll be darned if we did not make the purchase of our 2005 Harley-Davidson Ultra Classic Electra Glide!

We joined the RFTW Family this past May in Roanoke, VA and rode in with them to The Wall. Phil was as touched as I was on my first ride and we’ve made plans to start from the beginning, in Ontario, CA, and ride “All the Way” in 2006. We are so excited to be joining the Family again. May is not coming quick enough for us!

We belong to a local Chapter of Cruiser Club USA (Chapter 29 Northern Virginia) and have a web site. I asked our Web Master not long ago if he would consider adding a link for Run For The Wall so others might learn about this organization. He added the link! Anyone who visits our site (www.ccusanva.org) now will have the opportunity to visit the RFTW site, learn the wonderful things the organization does for our Veterans, and become involved!

Thank you for the wonderful things you do for our Veterans. We need more people like you and the RFTW family in our Country. I hope I can offer education to some in my community and “recruit”!

I just wanted to share with you how much you all, the whole RFTW Family, have touched my life and my heart. Thank you so much for the good you do. We’ll see you in May!!! In the meantime be well, ride safe, and may God bless you and watch over you!

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The following was written for the Monsoon Dispatch by Harry Parmer, Director of Communications for VVA Chapter 785, and RFTW participant. Thanks to Skywalker for passing it along:

THE OLD UNIT

By Michael Bradshaw, Sgt. E-5

E Co.- Recon, 1st/501st Inf., 101st Airborne Div.
I Corps, RVN 1967-1968

Ah yes, the dudes in the old unit. I remember some but not all. Some with faces but no names and some with names but no faces. Then again there are those whose faces and names are forever etched upon your mind, heart and soul.

Like as not, they were your closest of friends. Having shared with you the special brotherhood of being part of such an elite unit. You worked, ate and played together. You shared your innermost feelings with each other and relished in your triumphs together. Together there were no obstacles too obtrusive; there were no dragons that could not be slain.

Then the dragon came. And it had no face. And it had no name. It was altogether more terrifying than anything you had ever encountered. And it left your close friends and brothers horribly maimed, mutilated and dead all about you. Then with blood still dripping from its wretched claws it reached in and ripped a gigantic hole in your heart and soul.

And after our roles played out in this tragedy of tragedies we each went our various ways to try to heal. To heal not only the wounds of our bodies but also the gaping wounds in our hearts and souls. All these thirty years or more hence we tried to mend ourselves but guilt and shame and anger and contempt and an entire plethora of other emotional stumbling blocks were there to hinder our convalescing.

And although we each gave our solemn oath to forever keep in touch it was a promise we knew would not be fulfilled. Isolation and alienation and quite often drugs of any and all kinds were used to lessen the pain and anxiety of remembering

So we stayed apart these many years and each on his own did the best they could. And yes, some names have faded and some faces have faded but never, NOT EVER the brotherhood we all share.

Whether clear in my mind or faded over time I love all those faces and names of the dudes in the old unit and I have an everlasting respect and brotherhood for any and all who have come face to face with the dragon beast called "COMBAT."

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A CHRISTMAS POEM

By John "Shooter" McCabe

The embers glowed softly, and in their dim light,
I gazed round the room and I cherished the sight.
My wife was asleep, her head on my chest,
My daughter beside me, angelic in rest.

Outside the snow fell, a blanket of white,
Transforming the yard to a winter delight.
The sparkling lights in the tree I believe,
Completed the magic that was Christmas Eve.
My eyelids were heavy, my breathing was deep,
Secure and surrounded by love I would sleep.

In perfect contentment, or so it would seem,
So I slumbered, perhaps I started to dream.
The sound wasn't loud, and it wasn't too near,
But I opened my eyes when it tickled my ear.
Perhaps just a cough, I didn't quite know,
Then the sure sound of footsteps outside in the snow.
My soul gave a tremble, I struggled to hear,
And I crept to the door just to see who was near.

Standing out in the cold and the dark of the night,
A lone figure stood, his face weary and tight.
A soldier, I puzzled, some twenty years old,
Perhaps a Marine, huddled here in the cold.

Alone in the dark, he looked up and smiled,
Standing watch over me, and my wife and my child.
What are you doing? I asked without fear,
Come in this moment, it's freezing out here!
Put down your pack, brush the snow from your sleeve,
You should be at home on a cold Christmas Eve!

For barely a moment I saw his eyes shift,
Away from the cold and the snow blown in drifts.
To the window that danced with a warm fire's light
Then he sighed and he said "Its really all right,
I'm out here by choice. I'm here every night."
"It's my duty to stand at the front of the line,
That separates you from the darkest of times.

“No one had to ask or beg or implore me,
“I'm proud to stand here like my fathers before me.
My Gramps died at 'Pearl' on a day in December,
Then he sighed, "That's a Christmas 'Gram always remembers."
My dad stood his watch in the jungles of 'Nam',
And now it is my turn and so, here I am.

“I've not seen my own son in more than a while,
But my wife sends me pictures, he's sure got her smile.”
Then he bent and he carefully pulled from his bag,
The red, white, and blue... an American flag.
"I can live through the cold and the being alone,
Away from my family, my house and my home.
I can stand at my post through the rain and the sleet,
I can sleep in a foxhole with little to eat.
I can carry the weight of killing another,
Or lay down my life with my sister and brother..
Who stand at the front against any and all,
To ensure for all time that this flag will not fall."
"So go back inside," harbor no fright,
You're family is waiting and I'll be all right."

But isn't there something I can do, at the least,
Give you money, I asked, or prepare you a feast?
It seems all too little for all that you've done,
For being away from your wife and your son.
Then his eye welled a tear that held no regret,
"Just tell us you love us, and never forget.
To fight for our rights back at home while we're gone,
To stand your own watch, no matter how long.
For when we come home, either standing or dead,
To know you remember we fought and we bled.
Is payment enough, and with that we will trust,
That we mattered to you as you mattered to us.”

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A LETTER FROM IRAQ

Editor's note: Evelyn Polizzi and other Blue Star Mothers were really busy this holiday season spreading some cheer with Christmas baskets for Camp Pendleton and Balboa Hospital. Evelyn Polizzi's son, LCPL Ryan Polizzi, reservist, met Tabitha, active duty, when they were both training at Camp Pendleton. They were both deployed in September and are now planning their wedding. Evelyn shared Tabitha's letter with members of VVA Chapter 785, and I know RFTW people will understand and appreciate Tabitha's words, too. Tabitha said she was honored to have us print her letter, and "I'm just glad that there are people out there who really support us!! It's not the most glorifying thing to do, being out here." RFTW wishes Tabitha and Ryan both a safe return home very soon.

Hey Everyone,

I'm sorry I've not been keeping up with my e-mail, phone calls & mail. I recently injured my ankle pretty bad. I spent half a week wearing a sandal and then about another week in a shoe. I'm now in combat boots, but the swelling gets

almost unbearable. Because of this I've been unable to get out to e-mail and such. But lucky me, I am doin' better.

Ry and I have been able to talk since we've been out here via DSN lines at our facilities. We have decided to do the whole JOP thing and for our 1 yr have a big wedding. Hope no one is disappointed. I miss everyone tons. It's been real hard for me lately. I've been getting mail, but laid up in bed a lot. It sux!! But I'm getting there. Just last night Ry came up to my RDF for a detainee transfer. They actually let him come in this time and we got to see each other for a while. It was awesome. I was so excited I was acting like a lil school girl. It kinda felt weird with everyone watching, but I didn't care too much. I LOVE HIM SO MUCH, everyone. I've been amazed by the amount of love and blessings we've received from family and friends. Ya'll are amazing.

And the support for us out here in Iraq has been phenomenal. Thank you!!!! The lil things seem to make the difference here. You catch yourself finding beauty and a lil bit of happiness in a simple sunrise or sunset. The lil birds that chirp every morning at the windows of the cells. The way the sky lights up from a star cluster or when artillery is fired. The silhouette of a Marine walking the tower at dusk. The friends you have to goof around with when you're finally off work. Memories will be made and the pictures will ensure they won't be forgotten.

I know it will be hard for some of you to deal with us when we get back and while we all adjust, but in our hearts we are the same people we were when we left!! We love you. I LOVE YA'LL!!!!!!!!!!!! I miss you too. Keep your heads up. We'll be home soon enough!!!

Always & forever
Tabitha

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ME AND GRANDPA

Written by someone special for an RFTW member

I went for a ride the other day with my grandpa. He's got a big motorcycle that he calls a bike. I have a bike and it don't look like a motorcycle. Grandpas are so funny. As we were riding he would wave at all the other motorcycles that we passed. I guess my grandpa knows a lot of people. We were on his "bike" for two days. We got to a city that he said was our nation's capital. We parked near a big building that has a man sitting in a chair between some big posts. There was a long pool of water with a pencil stuck in the ground at the other end of it. Grandpa wanted to sit on the steps and watch all the people go by. I wanted to go play in the pool but grandpa said it was just for looking at. We sat and talked and laughed at the different things we seen in the clouds. I didn't know that clouds had so many things in them until that day. Then we went for a walk and stopped in front of a big black wall with writing on it. I asked grandpa what it said. He told me that the words were names of the men that died in the war he was in. I don't know when we stopped talking but I think everyone stopped at the same time. There was a man leaning against the wall with his head and my grandpa went over to him and put his hand on the man's arm and said something to him, I couldn't hear him but the man turned around and they hugged. I guess he was a friend of my grandpa's. We walked a little more and my grandpa stopped and just looked at that wall for a long time. I stood in front of him looking at the wall and I could see me standing in front of grandpa. The sun was so bright I could see his face real good. It looked like his cheeks were shining so I turned to see what it was and when I looked up a drop of water fell on my cheek from his. He knelt down beside me and then I knew that he must have loved this person a lot because his face was the same face I seen many times before. Most of the time I would be in bed and my grandpa would be on his knees beside me. He would be talking to God telling Him how much he loves me. His cheeks would always be wet when he kissed me good night. I sure learn a lot from my grandpa. I hope I can be a grandpa some day.

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GHOSTS – THEY EXIST

By Harry P. Parmer

“Mustang” Major, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret)

Vietnam 1966-67

Desert Storm 1990-91

Ghosts ... do they really exist? In our childhood most of us had our own thoughts about things that go bump in the night. As a boy growing up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania I remember the Saturday afternoon matinees that showed scary movies like Dracula and The Werewolf. But after graduating from high school in 1964 I gave little thought about ghosts and scary movies, because I soon found myself facing a very real and scary drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, CA. In the course of the 12 strenuous weeks of boot camp my DI taught me to overcome all of my fears, which enabled me to rationalize that ghosts were nothing more than childhood imagination.

That is until now, some 38 years after serving in Vietnam. Suddenly and unexpectedly, I am now being confronted once again with the thought that ghosts do exist. Not in the sense of Dracula and the Werewolf, but from a persistent and unpredictable manifestation of long suppressed and deep-rooted painful memories of friends lost.

It has been often written that Vietnam Veterans faced a very different experience when they returned from war. America was in social turmoil in the 60s and 70s and unlike other veterans who received welcoming parades and admiring accolades Vietnam Vets returned to the country they so dearly loved only to experience wholesale rejection and disdain. In response most vets went to ground in quiet confusion and disbelief and tried to simply move on with their lives. In some cases, anger, rage, alcohol and drugs were the answer.

I was 20 years old in 1967 when I returned from Vietnam, eager and enthusiastic to get back to living in the "real world." Unlike some I was proud of my service and grateful for the many close friendships that I had made in the Corps. As the years passed I also took pride in being part of the Vietnam generation who had chosen to serve with honor instead of turning tail to Canada or in seeking exemption from serving during this controversial and epic struggle for freedom and independence. But I also realized from the beginning that painful memories existed within me and that I had the burden of guilt in knowing that I was living and some were not. But as the days turned into years and the years turned into decades the pain subsided and then seemed to go away completely. That is until now.

At my workplace last year I was asked to organize a color guard that would be part of a ceremony to remember those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001 and to commemorate and honor American military members now serving in the war against terrorism. In this process I suddenly experienced strong memories of Vietnam ... not of the hours of boredom and hard work or of the intensity of combat, but of the faces of lost friends - their smiles, their tears, their voices. I then began to think as I did as a child that perhaps ghosts really do exist.

More recently I was asked to do a presentation about the POW-MIA flag to a group of community college professors. A few minutes into the presentation I was unexpectedly overwhelmed with emotions. This wasn't the first time I've choked-up in front of a large group of people when talking about veteran's issues, but this particular experience was of intensity that I had not felt before.

The college professors were kind and compassionate, as I stood motionless with embarrassment in front of them unable to talk or to continue with my presentation. One knowledgeable colleague finally stood up and asked if I wanted help in explaining the material that I was trying to present. I could only shake my head yes as I moved to the back of the room.

It is now quite apparent to me, some 38 years later, that I have some old ghosts to deal with. Some call them psychological wounds, but they feel more like spirits to me. I have fond memories of my buddies who sacrificed all in Vietnam. Friends like Harry McGinnis, Stephen Sullivan, and James Rodney Moore, our battalion casualty who is still listed as MIA. A lot of people lost many friends and family in that war but numbers really don't mean too much

in matters like this. When confronting ghosts, one loss is way too many.

I suppose it's long overdue for many Vietnam Veterans to confront their respective ghosts. Personally, I do not fear mine nor do I have any regrets. In fact, remembering now somehow brings a comforting peace when I really think about it. Maybe the ghosts themselves recognize that it is now time for me to face what has festered beneath the surface for far too many years. So, in spite of what I learned in boot camp way back in 1964, I now believe ghosts do exist. They have been with me since Vietnam patiently waiting for the time to come when they would be needed to help me heal.

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Editor's note: This is an article from the Albuquerque Tribune. Norton and Cruzerr are RFTW Central Route participants and F Troop members.

OLD VETERANS GREET NEW VETERANS

By Maggie Shepard, Tribune Reporter

October 10, 2005

Jim Rolfe has organized a team of greeters to give soldiers the reception he and other Vietnam vets never received

When the topic of his Army homecoming from Vietnam surfaces in conversation, Jim "Norton" Rolfe drops the smile from his face.

Rolfe, who's called "Norton" in his circle of Vietnam veteran motorcycle friends, has organized teams of greeters who welcome home soldiers coming through the Sunport International Airport. The effort, which gathers support from close friends and strangers, is a mission in two parts.

Mission, Part 1: Prevention

"Me and Cruzerr were sitting around one night talking about when we came home and we said, 'You know, we can't let that happen again,'" recalled Rolfe, 51.

Rolfe was talking about a conversation last December with his friend Cruz "Cruzerr" Garcia, 55. Both men were drafted into the Army at age 18. Both ride motorcycles in the same community, gathering patches for their faded black leather vests.

Two months after that conversation in Garcia's South Valley home, the duo had grown into a group of about 15 who mobilized to greet Holly Richins, the 20-year-old daughter of Sandra and Tim O'Rear. Forming an aisle lined with American, military and veteran issue flags, the group "whooped and hollered" as the O'Rears escorted the U.S. Navy veteran through the line.

"Holly isn't one to show her emotions. When she saw them, I told her 'I didn't do it. I swear.' And when Norton came and gave her a big hug, she got a tear in her eye," Sandra O'Rear said.

Later, "after her second plate of enchiladas," Richins told her mom how much the waving flags and shouts of "Welcome home, sailor" from the group of leather-clad Vietnam veterans meant to her. "She told me, 'Mom, they gave me something they didn't get and that really, really got to me,'" Sandra O'Rear said.

Mission, Part 2: Redemption

Richins and the other almost 200 soldiers Rolfe has welcomed home have, in turn, helped him and other Vietnam vets

who witness the greetings. "When we came home, there was no such thing as this," Rolfe said. "It was fists and spitting and signs, people calling us `baby killers,'" Garcia said.

Each time the two friends hold American flags and salute to today's soldiers, a bit of the pain from their youth heals. "I didn't expect the healing part of it, really. But it does. It's healing to go down there and make the soldiers feel real special," Rolfe said. It heals passers-by, too.

Rolfe recalled an afternoon at the Sunport greeting his son, Christopher Mueller, who served in the Navy and came home in June 2003.

"There was a man who just hung in the back and when it was over, he came up and shook his hand and said, 'Thanks,'" Rolfe said. Another time, another man who hung in the back throughout a greeting came up to Rolfe with tears in his eyes. A Vietnam vet, the scene had probably moved him the way it moves Rolfe and Garcia.

"We look at these kids coming though and they are the same age as we were," Rolfe said. "It's the welcome home we never got."

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A VIETNAM VETERAN'S DAD

By Wayne Nicholls

I remember the big hug Dad gave me when I returned from Vietnam. I thought at the time; I was too much of a man returning from war to appreciate the tears of joy in his eyes. He embraced me like he never wanted to let me go away again. He missed me.

Dad was 17 when he lied about his age so he could enlist in the Navy during World War II. He tried to be assigned to a war ship, but it never happened. He found out that his Mother had filled out the paperwork listing him as a "sole surviving son". He would never see combat. Later to realize he couldn't provide the same assurance to his two sons.

When I was sent to Vietnam to join the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, Dad feared the worst. He pictured me in all the black and white images beaming in on the television set every night. I tried to assure Dad that I was all right. I'd always kept my letters home as positive as possible. After all, I was in the Artillery and never had it as bad as some of the "Grunts." We always slept on cots in our "two-man hooch" and only slept on the ground during guard duty.

But Dad still worried. He put a map of Vietnam on a wall in his home office. Colored pins would mark the spots that he thought perhaps I was at. In my letters home, I'd try to give an indication of my approximate location; never exact since I was fearful the letter would land in the Viet Cong's hands and tip them off to where we were. Also on the office wall were photos I had sent home along with my first Army Accommodation Medal. His office wall had become a place where he could "connect" with me and shed his tears in privacy along with an occasional prayer for my return safely. I don't know that I appreciated his worry, until today, thirty-five years later.

I saw my Dad today. I hadn't seen him in a long time (although we talk on the telephone weekly). Somehow, Dad got old. His body has begun to frail. His knees are "bone-to-bone"—in pain noticeable by his shortened steps. Often I noticed him staring off into space. I wondered where his thoughts were taking him. We were going to dinner and he insisted that he would drive his big Mercury. Off we went as Dad drove slow in the fast lane; always keeping it well below the speed limit so he would not get a ticket. We almost ran a couple of red lights in our travel. A good excuse would be heard so not to think he just didn't see the traffic light.

Now the son of a man who embraced his child, does not want to let him go. I now fully understand my friends that have lost one or both parents. I now understand the worry of "losing" someone. Within the next weeks, months or

years, I will be faced with the death of my Father. I only hope I can be the example of strength he has always shown me. I pray the Lord will comfort him in his remaining time with us.

I am going to visit my Dad this weekend. I need to share my tears of joy. I need to embrace him like I never want to see him go away again. I will miss him.

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TWO THOUSAND AND COUNTING

Del "Abe" Jones

October 25, 2005

Two thousand of our finest lost
And no matter how you feel
If this war is wrong or right?
All those losses are too real.

Every state in our union
Has lost at least one soul
And most of our possessions
Has added some, to that sad toll.

As part of that wartime cost
Almost fifty women died
As their duty to their country
Stood with the men, by their side.

The first took eighteen months
The second thousand, in one year
There's not a sign of winding down
But, it's getting worse, I fear.

There are fifteen thousand wounded
Many of them maimed for life
Some lost limbs, some, peace of mind
To the waste of wartime's strife.

Thousands of loved ones and friends
Are mourning, aching with that pain
Knowing there are only memories
Of those they'll never see again.

Close to three hundred contractors
"In country" of their own volition
But for those grieving loss at home
It doesn't change the pain's condition.

And, then there are those estimates
Of maybe thirty thousand more
Innocent men, women and kids
Who have passed through Allah's door.

Two and one half years so far
That's at least one thousand each day
And with no ending within sight
I wonder what price we will pay?

Some will argue, it is worth it
And some will say the cost, too high
But I just wonder why, for freedom
So many always have to die?

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► MORE STORIES . . .

A YULE STORY THAT OUGHT TO BE A MOVIE

By Ronnie Polaneczky, from Philadelphia Daily News, December 22, 2005

AND NOW, in time for the holidays, I bring you the best Christmas story you never heard.

It started last Christmas, when Bennett and Vivian Levin were overwhelmed by sadness while listening to radio reports of injured American troops.

"We have to let them know we care," Vivian told Bennett.

So they organized a trip to bring soldiers from Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital to the annual Army-Navy football game in Philly, on Dec. 3.

The cool part is, they created their own train line to do it.

Yes, there are people in this country who actually own real trains. Bennett Levin—native Philly guy, self-made millionaire, and irascible former L&I commish—is one of them. He has three luxury rail cars. Think mahogany paneling, plush seating and white-linen dining areas. He also has two locomotives, which he stores at his Juniata Park train yard. One car, the elegant Pennsylvania, carried John F. Kennedy to the Army-Navy game in 1961 and '62. Later, it carried his brother Bobby's body to D.C. for burial.

"That's a lot of history for one car," says Bennett. He and Vivian wanted to revive a tradition that endured from 1936 to 1975, during which trains carried Army-Navy spectators from around the country directly to the stadium where the annual game is played. The Levins could think of no better passengers to reinstate the ceremonial ride than the wounded men and women recovering at Walter Reed in D.C. and Bethesda, in Maryland.

"We wanted to give them a first-class experience," says Bennett. "Gourmet meals on board, private transportation from the train to the stadium, perfect seats--real hero treatment."

Through the Army War College Foundation, of which he is a trustee, Bennett met with Walter Reed's commanding general, who loved the idea. But Bennett had some ground rules first, all designed to keep the focus on the troops alone: No press on the trip, lest the soldiers' day of pampering devolve into a media circus. No politicians either, because, says Bennett, "I didn't want some idiot making this trip into a campaign photo op." And no Pentagon suits on board, otherwise the soldiers would be too busy saluting superiors to relax.

The general agreed to the conditions, and Bennett realized he had a problem on his hands.

"I had to actually make this thing happen," he laughs. Over the next months, he recruited owners of 15 other sumptuous rail cars from around the country - these people tend to know each other - into lending their vehicles for the day. The name of their temporary train?

The *Liberty Limited*.

Amtrak volunteered to transport the cars to D.C.—where they'd be coupled together for the round-trip ride to Philly—then back to their owners later. Conrail offered to service the Liberty while it was in Philly. And SEPTA drivers would bus the disabled soldiers 200 yards from the train to Lincoln Financial Field, for the game. A benefactor from the War College ponied up 100 seats to the game—on the 50-yard line—and lunch in a hospitality suite. And corporate donors filled, for free and without asking for publicity, goodie bags for attendees: From Woolrich, stadium blankets. From Wal-Mart, digital cameras. From Nikon, field glasses. From GEAR, down jackets. There was booty not just for the soldiers, but for their guests, too, since each was allowed to bring a friend or family member.

The Marines, though, declined the offer. "They voted not to take guests with them, so they could take more Marines," says Levin, choking up at the memory.

Bennett's an emotional guy, so he was worried about how he'd react to meeting the 88 troops and guests at D.C.'s Union Station, where the trip originated. Some GIs were missing limbs. Others were wheelchair-bound or accompanied by medical personnel for the day.

"They made it easy to be with them," he says. "They were all smiles on the ride to Philly. Not an ounce of self-pity from any of them. They're so full of life and determination." At the stadium, the troops reveled in the game, recalls Bennett. Not even Army's lopsided loss to Navy could deflate the group's rollicking mood. Afterward, it was back to the train and yet another gourmet meal—heroes get hungry, says Levin—before returning to Walter Reed and Bethesda.

"The day was spectacular," says Levin. "It was all about these kids. It was awesome to be part of it."

The most poignant moment for the Levins was when 11 Marines hugged them goodbye, then sang them the Marine Hymn on the platform at Union Station.

"One of the guys was blind, but he said, 'I can't see you, but man, you must be f---ing beautiful!' " says Bennett. "I got a lump so big in my throat, I couldn't even answer him."

It's been three weeks, but the Levins and their guests are still feeling the day's love.

"My Christmas came early," says Levin, who is Jewish and who loves the Christmas season. "I can't describe the feeling in the air."

Maybe it was hope.

As one guest wrote in a thank-you note to Bennett and Vivian, "The fond memories generated last Saturday will sustain us all—whatever the future may bring."

God bless the Levins.

And bless the troops, every one.

► NEWS

SCRUGGS RECEIVES LANDMINE REMOVAL AWARD

Washington, D.C.—Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund President and Founder Jan C. Scruggs was honored with the First Lavang Award, presented by Vietnam Dream for Success during an award ceremony at the French Embassy on January 9. He was being honored with the award for his work in landmine removal in Vietnam.

Scruggs was a wounded and decorated veteran of the Vietnam War, having served in the 199th Light Infantry Brigade of the U.S. Army. He is perhaps best known for conceiving of the idea to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., as a tribute to all who served during the longest war in American history.

Scruggs launched the effort in 1979 with \$2,800 of his own money and eventually persuaded Congress to provide a site on the National Mall near the Lincoln Memorial.

As president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the nonprofit organization set up to build and maintain the Memorial, Scruggs headed up the effort that raised \$8.4 million and saw the Memorial completed in two years. It was dedicated on Nov. 13, 1982.

Since the dedication of The Wall, the Memorial Fund, under Scruggs' direction, has branched out into a variety of educational and humanitarian endeavors. Foremost among these is Project RENEW™, a humanitarian program aimed at eliminating the more than 350,000 tons of unexploded ordnance left in Vietnam and improving the lives of landmine victims. Created in 2000 in partnership with the Quang Tri Province People's Committee, Project RENEW™ has: removed and destroyed 4,243 mines, grenades, bombs and other types of ordnance at 428 marked sites and returned 14,923 square meters of safe land to the local people; used television, radio and Mobile Child-to-Child teams to bring mine risk education to the surrounding communities; upgraded the health systems for 40 community medical stations and gave first-aid training to over 450 health care workers; and provided orthotic or prosthetic devices to 91 disabled people; provided vocational training and income generation through a mushroom farming project to 150 victim families.

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NO ANSWER ON STATUS OF CAPTURED GI

By Lolita C. Baldor, AP

WASHINGTON (Nov. 5) - Carolyn and Keith Maupin walked into the Pentagon Friday hoping for any new bits of information about their son, who was captured by insurgents near Baghdad more than 18 months ago. They left after more than two hours, saying defense officials assured them the military is continuing to search for Army Reserve Sgt. Keith "Matt" Maupin. But they got no definitive answer to the question that haunts them most: Is he still alive?

"Even though you see a smile, your heart still aches," Carolyn Maupin told a reporter after the meeting, as she and her husband visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, both wearing pins bearing a photo of their son.

Surrounded by journalists and escorted by two Army officials, Keith Maupin - wearing a POW-MIA hat - said he believes "they'll find something soon. They'll find him." He said he and his wife went to the somber Vietnam Wall because, "There are 50,000 names on that wall, and I just wanted to say thanks."

The Maupins met with Lt. Gen. James L. Campbell, the Director of the Army Staff, as well as officials from the Casualty Assistance Office and the Joint Personnel Recovery Office. They also had a video conference call with senior officers in Iraq, including officials from U.S. Central Command. Asked whether they learned anything new, they said nothing.

"We will not discuss the specifics of the update because it is an ongoing operation and saying anything could be detrimental to Matt's safe return and the safety of those involved in the search," they said in a written statement.

The statement continued, "It has been more than 18 months since he was captured, and we pray every day for him and the soldiers who continue to search for him. We ask the American people to do the same."

Army officials said Friday that Sgt. Maupin's status remains unchanged, and he is still considered captured. He is the only soldier who is missing or currently considered captured in the Iraq War. The officials who met with the Maupins were expected to provide the family with more details of the ongoing search for their son, including reports that a Fort Drum, N.Y.-based Army unit spent seven hours Saturday searching for his body in the Abu Ghraib area west of Baghdad.

The Batavia, Ohio, soldier has been missing since April 9, 2004, when his fuel truck convoy was ambushed by insurgents west of Baghdad after leaving camp. He was 20 at the time. A week later, Arab television network Al-Jazeera released a videotape showing Maupin sitting on the floor surrounded by five masked men holding automatic rifles. That June, Al-Jazeera released another tape purporting to show a U.S. soldier being shot. But the dark and grainy tape showed only the back of the victim's head and did not show the actual shooting. The Army ruled it was inconclusive.

The Maupins said Friday's meeting—which also included a private lunch in the Pentagon—was helpful, and showed the Army is following leads on their son's whereabouts. And it seems other Ohio residents are also following the progress. As the Maupins walked near the Vietnam Memorial, they were greeted by Jeffrey and Courtney Neal, who were visiting Washington, D.C., from Harrison, Ohio.

"We're praying for you guys, hang in there," Jeffrey Neal told the Maupins, as the couples embraced.

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U.S. ID'S REMAINS FROM 1968 VIETNAM ATTACK

By **ROBERT BURNS**, AP Military Writer *Thu Dec 8, 5:43 PM ET*

WASHINGTON - Nearly four decades after 11 American servicemen were killed by North Vietnamese commandos at a secret radar site in Laos, U.S. investigators have made the first identification of remains—with the help of two of the commandos.

The breakthrough is one of the most remarkable achievements in the U.S. military's decades-long effort to find and identify the remains of hundreds of U.S. servicemen missing in action from the Vietnam War. Yet the recovery and identification of the remains of Air Force Tech. Sgt. Patrick L. Shannon, of Owasso, Okla., also created a new mystery. On the mountain ledge where his remains were found, U.S. investigators discovered boots, clothing fragments, and other personal items that indicated that some of the other missing Americans had been on the same ledge. None has been seen or heard from since the attack. Eight of the 19 Americans at the radar site when it was attacked in the early morning of March 11, 1968 were rescued several hours later by CIA helicopters. One of the eight died en route to a base in Thailand.

The capture of the mountain facility marked the start of a major communist offensive in then-neutral Laos. The CIA said in a 1995 study of the episode that it was the beginning of the end for the noncommunist forces in Laos, which today is one of the world's last communist countries—and one of its poorest.

Larry Greer, a spokesman for the Defense POW-MIA Office, said U.S. investigators plan to return to the area, although no date has been set. The area is in Houaphan Province, about 25 miles from the provincial capital of

Samneua, then a stronghold of the communist Pathet Lao and a gateway between Laos and North Vietnam. In 1966, the U.S. installed a navigation radar atop Phou Pha Thi mountain, above a landing site known as Lima Site 85. In 1967, it was upgraded with a bombing-control radar to direct U.S. bombers to their targets in North Vietnam. The site was guarded by about 1,000 local Hmong troops advised by CIA paramilitary officers. The Americans who operated the site were known as Circuit Riders, Air Force technicians operating under civilian cover. The 1995 CIA study said the men proved to be no match for the North Vietnamese commando team that attacked the site, apparently by scaling a 5,600-foot ridge line to reach the radar site.

With the help of the Vietnamese government, two of the commandos were located, interviewed, and taken to Lima Site 85 with U.S. investigators in March 2003. The two showed the investigators three places atop the mountain where they said that after overrunning and killing the Americans, they threw the bodies off the cliff. The investigators then threw mannequins off the cliff at each of those three locations and videotaped the path of the mannequins from a helicopter hovering nearby. That led them to the ledge, about 540 feet below the radar site, where they found human remains later identified as those of Shannon.

"It's a miracle, it's amazing news," said Pamela Shannon, 48, of Oklahoma City, who regards her father as a hero—a 13-year Air Force veteran who was 30 years old at the time he was killed. She said her family was notified of the identification the day before Thanksgiving. "It was a great holiday. It was shocking," she said in a telephone interview. Greer said the investigators also found several personal items on the ledge, including boots, survival vests, a canteen and clothing fragments that indicated the presence of all least three other Americans besides Shannon. It has not been possible to tell from those personal items which Americans they belonged to, Greer said. DNA matching was used to identify Shannon's remains, Greer said. The remains will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors.

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VA TO PARTNER WITH U.S. OLYMPIC COMMITTEE TO QUALIFY DISABLED VETERANS FOR PARALYMPICS

Disabled veteran athletes can now set their sights even higher and become eligible to compete in some of the nation's premiere athletic venues thanks to an agreement between the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

"This is a tremendous opportunity for America's disabled veterans to excel and compete in elite level athletic competition," said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "The agreement between VA and the U.S. Olympic Committee will further inspire disabled veteran athletes to reach their fullest potential in sports competition."

Under the terms of the agreement signed today, participants in VA's National Veterans Wheelchair Games and the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic will now be able to qualify for positions on the prestigious U.S. Paralympic Team and the U.S. Paralympic National Teams.

The Memorandum of Understanding between VA and the Olympic Committee means the department's marquee sporting events for disabled veterans can now serve as a pipeline in providing competitors for American Paralympic teams engaged in national and international competition.

"The United States Olympic Committee is honored to have the opportunity to serve those who have given selflessly and courageously to our country as members of the Armed Forces," said USOC Chief Executive Officer Jim Scherr. "The Paralympic movement began after World War II as a way to assist in the rehabilitation of injured military personnel. This new partnership between the USOC and VA will ensure that these efforts continue, and will provide new opportunities for our veterans."

Headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colo., U.S. Paralympics is a division of the USOC and was formed in May 2001 with the goal of enhancing programs, obtaining funding and providing competitive opportunities for athletes with physical disabilities to participate in Paralympic sports. Its mission is to be the world leader in the Paralympic movement and to promote excellence in the lives of all people with physical disabilities.

The VA Winter Sports Clinic is co-sponsored by VA and Disabled American Veterans. It is an annual rehabilitation program open to all U.S. military veterans with spinal cord injuries or diseases, visual impairments, certain neurological conditions, orthopedic amputations or other disabilities, who receive care at any VA health care facility.

VA's Wheelchair Games are presented by VA and Paralyzed Veterans of America, and are open to all U.S. military veterans who use wheelchairs for sports competition after having suffered spinal cord injuries, certain neurological conditions, amputations or other mobility impairments.

For more information, contact Richard Olague, public affairs specialist, VA Office of Public Affairs 202-273-4814; Darryl Seibel, chief communications officer (719) 866-4531, or Beth Bourgeois, communications manager (719) 866-2039, U.S. Paralympics.

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Thanks to John "Shooter" McCabe for passing this along:

SOLDIERS "ENHANCED" BY BATTLE Mental health experts increasingly interested in 'post-traumatic growth'

By Michael E. Ruane, The Washington Post
Nov. 26, 2005

WASHINGTON - As Hilbert Caesar told his harrowing war story one night recently in the living room of his apartment, he patted the artificial limb sticking from a leg of his business suit. "This, right here," he said, "this is a minor setback."

Eighteen months after Caesar's right leg was mangled by a roadside bomb near Baghdad, and after weeks of coming to terms with what he thought was the end of his life, the former Army staff sergeant believes he has emerged a richer person -- wiser, more compassionate and more appreciative of life.

Asked whether he would endure it all again, he replied: "The guys I served with were awesome guys. I would go through it again—for the guys that I served with. Yes. Absolutely. I wouldn't change it for the world."

Although the shattering psychological impact of war is well known, experts have become increasingly interested in those who emerge from combat feeling enhanced. Some psychiatrists and psychologists believe that those soldiers have experienced a phenomenon known as "post-traumatic growth," or "adversarial" growth .

Although war left him with a leg of plastic and steel, Caesar, 28, of Silver Spring, appears to be among those who return home with psyche intact and a sense that they are in some mysterious way improved.

"I'm the same person," he said, "but I'm a different person now."

Combat's potential to inflict psychic wounds has been recognized as far back as the ancient Greeks, but so has its ability to exhilarate, intoxicate and instruct those who experience it, experts say.

"If you think about all of the heroes and heroines in cultures across the world . . . all of them, in one sense or another, faced some sort of a dragon," said Matthew J. Friedman, director of the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and a professor of psychiatry at Dartmouth Medical School. "The transformation from that encounter has been celebrated from antiquity."

University of North Carolina psychologists Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, who have studied post-traumatic growth for 20 years, said they are careful in describing what occurs.

"We're talking about a positive change that comes about as a result of the struggle with something very difficult," Calhoun said. "It's not just some automatic outcome of a bad thing."

Calhoun said their studies suggest that for growth to occur the trauma must be severe. "We tend to use the metaphor of an earthquake."

He said the person first ponders the details of what happened. "And then there's a much more abstract process of finding some higher meaning . . . in what has transpired," he said.

Tedeschi said there can be feelings of spiritual development, improved relationships, a sense of personal strength, a better appreciation of life and new interests and priorities.

Both men stressed that growth is not necessarily a goal, nor is trauma "good." Calhoun said: "Post-traumatic growth occurs in the context of . . . suffering. We hope everybody who goes to Iraq comes back safe and sound and doesn't have any traumas to grow from."

Although scientists continue to worry about war's impact on mental health, experts say research now shows that most people exposed to combat and other traumatic events do not develop chronic mental health problems.

"It used to be thought that virtually everybody who experienced these kinds of catastrophic events would go on to develop" PTSD symptoms, said Lt. Col. Charles C. Engel Jr., a psychiatrist at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. "That was kind of a post-Vietnam War assumption. What we've learned over time is that probably, on average, really about two-thirds to three-fourths don't develop PTSD."

Friedman, of Dartmouth, said that research on the issue has not been that extensive and that the "deleterious" effects of trauma have received the most attention.

But that is changing. "The whole field, in the last four years, has shifted to a certain extent [to focus on] resilience, on human potential," he said.

Friedman said studies of World War II veterans often showed that they valued the experience, even though they had serious post-combat stress: "Yes, I've suffered," he said men would report, "but I wouldn't have given up this experience for anything in the world. The things I experienced have made me a better man today."

Studies of Vietnam War POWs have shown similar sentiments. One study, in 1980, found that 61 percent of American POWs in North Vietnam believed their experience was ultimately beneficial.

Tom McNish, a former Air Force pilot who was a prisoner in North Vietnam for six years, said: "There is no question in my mind that the experience I had in Vietnam has had an overall very positive effect on my life. But I don't recommend it for anybody else. And I don't want to have to do it again."

Wounded veterans of the Iraq war say similar things. Adam Replogle, 25, of Wellington, Colorado, a former Army sergeant and tank gunner who lost his left hand and the vision in his left eye in a battle in Karbala in 2004, said that he still has ups and downs but that after his experience in Iraq, not much worries him.

"Sometimes it takes people a lifetime to realize what it's all about and what's important and what's not," he said. "And you go through something like this and it grows you up a little bit and makes you realize that stuff a lot earlier in life."

Caesar, a native of Guyana who grew up in New York City, was a six-year Army veteran and a section chief in a field artillery unit in Iraq. He was in charge of a long-range, self-propelled 155mm howitzer—a huge vehicle with treads that resembles a tank.

He was out on patrol in the self-propelled gun when the explosion occurred April 18, 2004. When the black smoke cleared, he looked down at his leg. It was flipped backward and "just dangling by the skin," he said. "It was severed at three different places in the knee. The bone was splintered in different places. I knew there was no way they could put that back together."

He tried to hand his machine gun to a comrade but realized it was bent. He could hear gunfire and yelled for the hatches to be closed. He thought: "Oh, man. This is it. My life is over."

But it wasn't. The insurgents who staged the ambush melted away. He was medevaced to safety, and six days after the attack, he arrived at Walter Reed.

There, he was all right, except when he was alone. Then he would worry about the pain -- and the future. He was an athlete but realized that he might never run again. He wondered how women would react to a man with an amputated leg. It was depressing. Again, he said he would think, "My life is over."

A few days after he reached Walter Reed, he got more bad news: Eight men from his platoon had been killed by a car bomb in Baghdad. They were men he knew. One, in particular, had been a role model. "I was really devastated," he said.

Not all mental health experts believe in post-traumatic growth. Some think such positive attitudes simply stem from individual resilience or a natural course of psychological recovery.

George Bonnano, a psychologist at Teachers College, Columbia University, is skeptical of the growth theory. He said such reactions to trauma are better explained by personal resilience.

"I'm saying most people are able to maintain equilibrium pretty well after a traumatic event," he said. In addition, "it's fine to just recover," he said. "Bad things happen, and we get over them. We get better, and we put it behind us, and we move on."

In the weeks after his arrival at Walter Reed, Caesar met other severely injured soldiers and heard stories about their recoveries. "You start to build your confidence up," he said. "You start to shift focus."

"I'm a positive person," he said. "I try to look for the best. It could be worse. I lost a few friends out there. I made it back with just one missing limb, and I'm grateful for that. I'm thankful for just being here. Period."

At the same time, he said, he believes that he has changed. "It makes me appreciate life a whole lot more. I'm looking forward to settling down, having a family."

Caesar said he has a friend who lost both arms in the war. Caesar said his friend once told him: "I would give anything to lose a leg. I would give both of my legs to have one of my arms" to be able to hold a child someday, should he ever become a father.

"Things like that make you think," Caesar said. "I can't complain. I haven't lost enough to complain."

Since being wounded, Caesar became a U.S. citizen last year, participated in three marathons using a racing wheelchair that he pedals with his hands, left the Army in January and landed a job with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

His leg still bothers him, and he walks with a pronounced limp. At times, the opaque plastic socket of his artificial limb, which fits over his stump, lacerates his skin. The stump hurts when the thigh bone pokes against the skin. And he still gets down when he thinks about his dead buddies.

"It was a long journey back," he said. "I'm still not fully there. I'm still not 100 percent. I'm never going to be 100 percent. But at the same time, I can get as close to it as possible."

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FOR VETS CONSIDERING APPEALS

Thanks to VVA Chapter 785 President Greg Young for the following important information:

For all vets out there considering appeals, this is a great tip and a great research site for the Board of Veterans Appeals. www.va.gov/vbs/bva.

First go to the bottom left side on this page and click on search decisions. This will take you to a page where you can search specific disabilities and the year. It will give you info on these claims and how the BVA reaches decisions. It is helpful and could assist you if you are filing NOD on claims and how to add lay evidence to strengthen your claim.

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NO ACROSS-THE-BOARD REVIEW OF PTSD CASES

WASHINGTON (Nov. 10, 2005) - The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will not review the files of 72,000 veterans currently receiving disability compensation for post-traumatic stress disorder, the Department's secretary announced today.

On May 19, 2005, VA's Inspector General reported on an examination of the files of a sample of 2,100 randomly selected veterans with disability ratings for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The IG cited insufficient documentation in the files and a dramatic increase in veterans filing for disability compensation for post-traumatic stress disorder since 1999.

"We have now just completed our own careful review of those 2,100 files cited in the IG's report," said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "The problems with these files appear to be administrative in nature, such as missing documents, and not fraud."

"In the absence of evidence of fraud, we're not going to put our veterans through the anxiety of a widespread review of their disability claims," Nicholson said. "Instead, we're going to improve our training for VA personnel who handle disability claims and toughen administrative oversight."

"Not all combat wounds are caused by bullets and shrapnel," Nicholson added. "We have a commitment to ensure veterans with PTSD receive compassionate, world-class health care and appropriate disability compensation determinations."

To view and download VA news release, please visit the following Internet address: <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel>.

VA CONTINUES COMMITMENT TO GULF WAR VETS

WASHINGTON (December 13, 2005) - A recent funding increase for research related to illnesses affecting some veterans of the Gulf War—and the establishment of research treatment centers and a pilot program that partners VA with a prominent Texas medical center in studying such illnesses--drew praise today from Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary R. James Nicholson.

The funding increase for Gulf War illness research, the new research treatment centers and the creation of the pilot program at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas were measures incorporated into the 2006 VA budget by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas). The budget was recently approved by Congress and signed by President Bush.

"VA is committed to further investigating the unique health care needs of Gulf War veterans, and the establishment of research treatment centers, including this pilot program, will help the department answer the questions that remain on this important issue," said Nicholson.

Nicholson specifically noted Hutchison's efforts in establishing the pilot program at the medical center, which is already conducting leading research on various illnesses affecting veterans of the Gulf War.

Under the terms of the VA budget for 2006, \$15 million per year for five years has been earmarked for specific research on Gulf War veterans' illnesses.

Ailments ranging from fatigue, weakness and respiratory problems to sleep disturbances, skin rashes, and persistent headaches are among the illnesses reported by some veterans who took part in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. Some studies have shown that these health care problems and other illnesses have been reported by Gulf War veterans at rates that significantly exceed those reported by veterans who served in other eras.

The funding earmarked in VA's budget for research on Gulf War veterans' illnesses allows the department to expand upon 12 research projects it announced earlier this year. Those projects—which are scheduled to begin in 2006 and will focus on enhancing understanding and treatment of illness affecting Gulf War veterans—also pursue the ultimate goal of better addressing any potential long-term health effects that might be connected with Gulf War-related exposures.

VA, GSA SIGN AGREEMENT FOR VETERANS' BUSINESSES

WASHINGTON (Nov. 4, 2005) - The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the General Services Administration (GSA) have signed a formal agreement expanding GSA's efforts for businesses that are owned by veterans, especially service-disabled veterans.

"America's veterans are a national treasure, a pool of trained, motivated, reliable entrepreneurs," said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "They're looking for a helping hand, not a hand-out."

The agreement signed between the two federal agencies commits GSA to place additional emphasis upon programs for veteran-owned businesses and businesses owned by service-disabled veterans.

In 1999, Congress passed legislation urging all federal agencies to strive toward awarding 3 percent of their

contracts—by value—to service-disabled, veteran-owned small businesses.

Among other features, the agreement commits VA and GSA to co-sponsor eight regional conferences for veteran businesses in the coming year, with participation by the Small Business Administration and other federal agencies. The first will be held Nov. 7-8 in Kansas City, Mo.

VA's efforts on behalf of veteran-owned businesses are overseen by the Department's Center for Veterans Enterprise (CVE). Further information about VA's programs for veteran-owned businesses is available on CVE's Internet Web site at <http://www.vetbiz.gov>. GSA's activities on behalf of service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses are located at <http://www.gsa.gov>.

To view and download VA news release, please visit the following Internet address:
<http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel>.

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HEADS ROLL AT VA

By Bob Nichols, Project Censored Award Winner

Preventive Psychiatry E-Newsletter charged Monday that the reason Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi stepped down earlier this month was the growing scandal surrounding the use of uranium munitions in the Iraq War. Writing in Preventive Psychiatry E-Newsletter No. 169, Arthur N. Bernklau, executive director of Veterans for Constitutional Law in New York, stated, “The real reason for Mr. Principi’s departure was really never given, however a special report published by eminent scientist Leuren Moret naming depleted uranium as the definitive cause of the ‘Gulf War Syndrome’ has fed a growing scandal about the continued use of uranium munitions by the US Military.”

Bernklau continued, “This malady (from uranium munitions), that thousands of our military have suffered and died from, has finally been identified as the cause of this sickness, eliminating the guessing. The terrible truth is now being revealed.”

He added, “Out of the 580,400 soldiers who served in GW1 (the first Gulf War), of them, 11,000 are now dead! By the year 2000, there were 325,000 on Permanent Medical Disability. This astounding number of ‘Disabled Vets’ means that a decade later, 56% of those soldiers who served have some form of permanent medical problems!” The disability rate for the wars of the last century was 5 percent; it was higher, 10 percent, in Vietnam.

“The VA Secretary (Principi) was aware of this fact as far back as 2000,” wrote Bernklau. “He, and the Bush administration have been hiding these facts, but now, thanks to Moret’s report, (it) ... is far too big to hide or to cover up!”

“Terry Jamison, Public Affairs Specialist, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, Department of Veterans Affairs, at the VA Central Office, recently reported that ‘Gulf Era Veterans’ now on medical disability, since 1991, number 518,739 Veterans,” said Bernklau.

“The long-term effects have revealed that DU (uranium oxide) is a virtual death sentence,” stated Bernklau. “Marion Fulk, a nuclear physical chemist, who retired from the Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Weapons Lab, and was also involved with the Manhattan Project, interprets the new and rapid malignancies in the soldiers (from the 2003 Iraq War) as ‘spectacular ... and a matter of concern!’”

When asked if the main purpose of using DU was for “destroying things and killing people,” Fulk was more specific: “I would say it is the perfect weapon for killing lots of people!”

Principi could not be reached for comment prior to deadline.

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PAYMENTS FOR TRAUMATIC INJURIES BEGIN UNDER NEW VA PROGRAM

WASHINGTON (December 20, 2005) - American troops and their families now have more financial security, thanks to the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) new Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance Traumatic Injury Protection (TSGLI) program. Prudential Financial Inc., the insurer under the program, began making payments under this new program.

The TSGLI payments, ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000, are made to service members who have suffered certain traumatic injuries while on active duty.

The new insurance program became effective December 1, 2005, and is designed to provide financial help to military families through extended periods of medical care and healing. Benefits are also payable retroactively to October 7, 2001 for service members and veterans who suffered certain traumatic injuries while serving in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"Injured service members should be able to focus on their recovery and adjustment back to military or civilian life, as well as spending time with their families," said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "This new insurance program will help families focus on what's most important without having to worry about financial difficulties."

Officials with VA and the Department of Defense are continually working to identify eligible service members and veterans. Nicholson urged veterans with eligibility questions to visit VA's website at www.insurance.va.gov or to call the Office of Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance at 1-800-419-1473 for more information.

The Department of Veterans Affairs administers one of the largest insurance programs in the United States, providing coverage for active duty and reserve military personnel, veterans, and their families, supervising programs that include more than seven-and-a-half million policies with a face value of more than \$1.1 trillion of insurance benefits.

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VA ADDS NEARLY 2 MILLION RECORDS TO ONLINE GRAVESITE LOCATOR

WASHINGTON (December 22, 2005) - The burial locations of more than 5 million veterans for whom the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has provided grave markers are now available on the Internet, as well as the information inscribed on the markers.

Online since April 2004, the nationwide gravesite locator <http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov> helps veterans' families, former comrades-in-arms, and others find the graves of veterans.

VA recently added 1.9 million records for veterans buried primarily in private cemeteries to its database. The gravesite locator previously carried records on 3 million veterans buried in VA national cemeteries since the Civil War, and in state veterans cemeteries and Arlington National Cemetery since 1999.

"The expansion of this innovative program continues VA's commitment to using Internet technology to fulfill the important mission of memorializing our nation's veterans," said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of

Veterans Affairs. "By adding records to our online database, VA also helps families research their genealogy and ensures that future generations of Americans will be able to honor these veterans for their service."

The new records date from January 1997, the earliest time for which electronic records exist. The information comes from applications made for these veterans' headstones or markers. Beyond the 5 million records now available, VA continues to add approximately 1,000 new records to the database each day.

Last year, VA furnished nearly 369,000 inscribed headstones and markers for veterans' graves worldwide.

Internet users only need to provide the last name of the deceased veteran or dependent. Typically, the information available includes name, birth and death dates, rank, branch of service and the address and phone number of the cemetery.

Veterans whose discharges are other than dishonorable, their spouses and dependent children may be buried in a national cemetery, regardless of where they live. No advance reservations are made. VA provides perpetual care, as well as a headstone or marker, a burial flag and a memorial certificate to survivors.

Information on VA burial benefits can be obtained from national cemetery offices, from a VA Web site at <http://www.cem.va.gov/> or by calling VA regional offices toll-free at 1-800-827-1000.

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ROLLING THUNDER COMES TO CALIFORNIA

By LEROY STANDISH, Daily Press Staff Writer

ADELANTO—The Rolling Thunder, a national prisoner of war/missing in action/veterans' advocacy group, is getting its first California chapter.

Joy Jeannette, who believes her brother could be still alive in Vietnam, is taking the fledgling California chapter through the chartering process. A resident of Adelanto, Jeannette has been holding meetings at her home and working to create more Rolling Thunder chapters throughout the Golden State.

The Rolling Thunder, founded in 1995, is a veteran's organization open to anyone who wants to join. Members don't have to have a motorcycle, just a yearning to assist veterans

"Each of us are affected by the military, whether it be a neighbor, a brother, a sister or a cousin, each of us are affected by the military," Jeannette said. "We're here to serve (veterans) no matter what the problem is we might not be able to help them, but we will find someone who can."

"It is good that we are finally on the West Coast," Artie Muller, Rolling Thunder national executive director, said. "The more states we cover the more power we have for what we are fighting the government for."

Rolling Thunder had its first motorcycle run in 1988, seven years before it was officially founded, Muller said. It is now a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and has more than 50,000 members across the nation. The group lobbies elected representatives for military veteran's benefits and also keeps the pressure on Washington, D.C., to continue searching foreign lands for POWs and MIAs. "They write them off too easy you know," Muller said.

Jeannette's road to membership in the Rolling Thunder began after her brother was reportedly killed in Vietnam in 1967. Because of several irregularities during the funeral, information she has gotten over the years from other veterans and a gut feeling, she suspects her brother may be alive.

So far, the Adelanto chapter of the Rolling Thunder has 25 members. It is also forming a Junior Rolling Thunder after the first of the year. It has already had a few motorcycle runs and plans a cross-country run to Washington, D.C., in May. To raise funds for the fledgling chapter it is raffling off a 2006 Harley Davidson Soft Tail, donated by Victorville Harley Davidson.

To learn more about the organization, call 246-2928. To learn more about the national organization of the Rolling Thunder log on to www.rollingthunder1.com.

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PATRIOT GUARD RIDERS

A new organization has recently formed for the purpose of attending funerals and memorial services for service members and providing support and comfort to the families while shielding them from anti-war protestors.

According to the website:

“The Patriot Guard Riders is an amalgamation of riders from across the nation. We have one thing in common besides motorcycles. We have an unwavering respect for those who risk their very lives for America’s freedom and security. If you share this respect, please join us.

We don’t care what you ride, what your political views are, or whether you’re a "hawk" or a "dove". It is not a requirement that you be a veteran. It doesn't matter where you're from or what your income is. You don't even have to ride. The only prerequisite is Respect.

Our mission is to attend the funeral services of fallen American military heroes. Each mission we undertake has two basic objectives.

1. Show our sincere respect for our fallen heroes, their families, and their communities.
2. Protect the mourning family and friends from interruptions created by any protestor or group of protestors.

We accomplish the latter through strictly legal and non-violent means.”

The group started in early August of 2005 with the American Legion Riders Chapter 136 from Kansas. They were appalled to hear that a fallen hero’s memory was being tarnished by misguided religious zealots who were protesting at funerals. They decided to do something about it. At the ALR 136 August meeting, the director appointed members to form a committee to strategize and form a battle plan to combat Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church.

When they heard that the WBC was going to protest at the Funeral of Sgt. John Doles in Chelsea, Oklahoma, they established a Mission Statement, which included getting the families permission and contacting Law Enforcement and other Motorcycle Groups in Oklahoma. They agreed that their ultimate goal was to get veterans and motorcycle organizations involved in every state so that each state could handle the situation internally and not rely on other states to do the job. They were very successful in mustering riders to honor Sgt. Doles and limiting the intrusion by the WBC.

After the Chelsea Mission, the Kansas American Legion Riders wanted all Motorcycle Groups/ Organizations to be recognized. On October 18, 2005, the Patriot Guard name was established and was announced on October 27 to the 100 + motorcyclists present at the Tonganoxie Mission to Honor Spc Lucas Frantz.

Following the missions in South Haven, KS and a later ride in Edmond, OK, Jeff “Twister” Brown, from Broken

Arrow, OK, decided to do more than just ride. He saw a need to get a strong nationwide communications and recruiting program in place. He contacted the original AL riders in Kansas and told them of his plans. They openly shared their experiences, suggestions, and encouragement. Within a matter of days, Brown had formed the Patriot Guard Riders and began a nationwide campaign to garner support.

Similarly, after a mission ride in Greeley, CO, Hugh Knaus and Jason "Waldo" Wallin answered the call of the newly formed Patriot Guard Riders, becoming the national webmaster and communications director, respectively. Within a matter of days, a mission statement was refined and a website was built, rebuilt, and launched. A call immediately went out to individual riders and groups across the nation to join and ride with the PGR. State Captains were recruited to work more closely with the members in their area.

The growth has been phenomenal. Within a week their membership included many riders from associations like the VFW, American Legion, Rolling Thunder, ABATE, Combat Vets Motorcycle Association, Intruder Alert, Leathernecks Motorcycle Club, and almost five hundred individual riders. To the credit of Hugh and "Waldo," the PGR website had received almost 566,000 hits in the first two weeks! Patriots from all over America and several foreign countries responded. Emails were pouring in from people wanting to support and join the newly formed PGR.

The Patriot Guard Riders already have 3,930 members, as of January 9. There is still a need for State Captains for many states. If you would like to be a part of this group that honors our fallen heroes and protects their families, contact <http://patriotguard.org>.

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► TAPS

Steven Neal, Vietnam vet, RFTW participant, Chief Park Ranger, and VVA Chapter 756 member, died November 20 of a heart attack. He was laid to rest at Riverside National Cemetery following a procession of law enforcement and RFTW members. RFTW was also invited to escort Steven's body from the mortuary to the church service and to participate in a final hand salute at RNC.

Wayne Nicholls was his best and oldest friend, and Wayne pays tribute to Steven here.

A TRIBUTE TO MY FRIEND

Steven and I became friends in 1959 when we played Little League Baseball. I was 10 years old. Steven was 12. Steven took me home to Ferro Street and introduced me to his family: Sonny, Lou, Ginger, and Joyce. A few years down the road would come Pam and Dale. I shared a wonderful relationship with the entire family.

In the 1960s, Steven and I had paper-routes delivering newspapers for the Long Beach Independent/Press-Telegram. I remember finishing my route early on several occasions and helping Steve deliver his last few papers. A few years later, we worked together at "Kiddie Land," a small amusement park in Long Beach. Steven would be my "boss" and lead me around, teaching me how to run the ferris wheel and merry-go-round. He never let me drive the train. He loved being the "Engineer." I knew then, that Steven would be a good businessman and leader. He had a 1953 Chevy. Whenever we went "cruising" somehow he could always calculate my share of the gas money.

Steven was dating Cathy in the late '60s. I knew I had a great relationship with them when they took me on one of their dates. We went to a drive-in movie. I had the back seat all to myself. I was honored when Steven asked me to be his "best man." I stood proudly beside him when he and Cathy were married in the County Courthouse. Shortly thereafter, Steven answered the call to serve his country and enlisted in the U.S. Army. Once again Steven would lead the way and headed off to Vietnam.

In 1969 I was drafted. Steve and Cathy would come to Fort Ord to visit me. On my way to Vietnam, I spent an evening with them in Oakland, CA. In the 1970s we managed to get together for a few motorcycle rides. However, now we were both married, had families and different priorities.

In 1999 Debbie and I moved back to Long Beach. I was so pleased to make contact with Steven. I was impressed that he was the Chief Park Ranger. It seemed like the perfect job for my "business minded leader".

In 2000, Steven bought a new Harley-Davidson. It didn't take much encouragement from Steven and I purchased mine in 2002. In 2003 we went on a ride called "Tribute to the Toughest" honoring America's veterans. This ride began in Port Hueneme and ended at the Los Angeles VA Hospital. It was there we learned about "Run For The Wall" and we both agreed that we wanted to participate.

In 2004, Steven and I, along with my brother-in-law (Terry Byrnes) traveled from Ontario, CA to Washington, DC with Run For The Wall. It was our "healing journey." When we got to Washington, Steven told me that he was proud to be a Vietnam Veteran and said to me "Welcome Home."

I've been riding with Steven almost every weekend during long or short rides and special events. We've traveled many miles together and shared motel rooms. When we rode, Steven would lead, keeping a watchful eye in the mirror to make sure I was behind him. Our most recent ride was a little over a week ago. We rode to Laughlin, Nevada, for a Veterans Celebration presented by the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 785 and hosted by the Ramada Express. We had a wonderful time. Steven was so moved by the presentation that he sent a beautiful thank you card to the Chapter President.

And now, my Steven has taken his final ride home.

He is leading the way.

And he knows that someday, I will follow.

I loved him.

The morning of the day Steven passed, we had breakfast together. One of our conversations was about the 2006 RFTW. Steven and I were "FNGs" in 2004 when we went "all the way" with the Central Route. This year, we participated with the Central Route as far as the New Mexico/Colorado border before heading back home. In our conversation Sunday, Steven was looking forward to the 2006 RFTW and planned to ride "all the way" with the Southern Route. He had just ordered a new 2006 Ultra Classic Police Edition especially for the Run.

In 2006, I will be honored to ride with Steven's widow Cathy and their three sons during the Run For The Wall. The boys will take turns proudly riding Steven's Road King Classic. We will be going "all the way" with the Central Route, as Steven's family wants to follow the journey that he took across America.

We look forward to our participation in the 2006 RFTW and the support of our RFTW Family.

Wayne Nicholls, Vietnam Veteran '70
B 2/40 - 199th Light Infantry Brigade
Riding In Memory of Steven H. Neal

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► **THE LIGHT SIDE**

Saw something funny on the RFTW Message Board: Big Daddy and 20 other bikers showed up at a veteran's funeral in Greensburg to help protect the family from the now-famous religious group that has been demonstrating at vets' funerals. The bikers had American and POW flags on their bikes. Some lady called the police and said they were flying a pirate flag!

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► NOTES AND TIDBITS

“BIKERS OF BAGHDAD” TO JOIN 2006 RFTW

By Don “9-Ball” Morris (Southern Route Coordinator)



A few months ago I received an e-mail from Major Jason Craft, who was stationed in Iraq. He told me about a group of soldiers he was involved with who called themselves "Bikers of Baghdad." Many of them would be home by next May and they wanted to know if they could do the "Run" with us. Well, obviously the answer was a resounding "yes!" I forwarded the information to Mike "Tanker" McDole, CR Coordinator, along with several other folks from our Leadership Teams. Some would go CR and some would go SR. They were immediately sent Run pins and Run DVDs from this year and a group of us decided they needed RFTW t-shirts. The picture above shows a few of them

standing under Saddam's famous swords with their "Run For The Wall" t-shirts on. The “Bikers of Baghdad” patch for their vests was made by our own Janice Wentworth, Southern Route State Coordinator for East Texas. She made the patches and mailed them to the soldiers in a couple of weeks.

This experience reminded me that one of these days we Vietnam Vets are either going to have to turn this over to a younger group of Veterans or there are going to be a lot of trikes going down the highway. Let's look for these brave men and women this year and give them the kind of "Welcome Home" they deserve.



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NOTE: Following is an email from Raytheon employee Dwight Stevens to Don “9-Ball” Morris, RFTW Southern Route Coordinator:

RFTW HAS IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Don - I wanted to let you know that the 2005 "Run For The Wall" has been recognized by Raytheon Company as a contributor to the success of the "One Company" initiative. It is an effort to bring together the employees of both California and Texas into one company, referred to as the "One Company" Initiative. While this is not part of what we do, or why we do it, it is nevertheless an example of the impact the RFTW has had on our society.

The RFTW riders from the Raytheon sites of El Segundo, California, and McKinney, Texas were featured today at the All Hands Meeting here in Texas. It is important for you to know that RFTW has impacted our society in ways that maybe you cannot see. It has even captured the attention of Corporate America. I am very proud to have played a part in this effort in 2005, and look forward to being a part in 2006.

Thank you for the opportunity to ride with RFTW, and to be a part of an organization that REALLY does make a difference!!!

MISSING MAN

The Central Route Missing Man Formation slots are filling fast. If you are interested in riding one of the remaining slots, or would like information on riding in the formation, please contact Mark "Straightarrow" Rittermeyer at missingman@hishighway.com, or 863-816-9898, ASAP. I appreciate those who have volunteered to date, but we need to fill the remaining slots.

CHAPLAINS NEEDED

Dear Family - As you know and have read, we are putting together a Chaplain's Corps that will be taking care of whatever business is needed in case of emergencies. I still need 3-4 people to step up and take on this role of Chaplain. This is a position that is very rewarding, not something to be taken lightly. God will bless those that bless others. Let me know if you are interested ... Pointman (homquat@yahoo.com)

TIPS FOR RFTW CAMPERS

By John "Ice Scout" King, Jr.

NOTE: John sent this advice in response to questions from a first-time RFTW camper:

Well, for what it's worth, my experience has been that traveling lighter is both a good thing and a difficult challenge. Each year, when I get home and unload, I am surprised to find things I never used. Less stuff to deal with is a good thing!!

Perhaps because my natural tendency is to load up with more, I take pleasure in lightening the load on the bike. Clothing and personal items are a good place to cut back. There are always plenty of t-shirts available along the way and starting with old, disposable jeans is a good trick. You really don't need that much. And if I can get a shower in the morning, those 3-day-old socks are tolerable.

Some of us carry a pharmacy. Instead of the pill bottles and boxes, consider packing your daily meds in small heat shrunk plastic bags. Takes a bit of work, but sure reduces wasted space.

Weather in May is unpredictable and hypothermia is real. Rain and cold are the worst threats. Because the leathers and the raingear take a lot of room, you will need to cut back elsewhere. Consider under-armor or silk long-johns along with sock and glove liners. Small efficiencies are helpful. So is some thought about what level of discomfort we are willing to tolerate. In the end, I try to get all the clothing into one bag. Much easier to load and unload the bike that way.

Gear for the machine is another place to examine. How many of those tools do you really need? One year, I found I had 3 tire repair kits stashed in different places! Empty the bike and cull the tools out; perhaps 2 vice grips instead of 3? Can I live without the laptop and e-mail for three weeks? You bet!!

I don't camp, so I can't suggest more than the same general approach. We all have different comfort levels and so does the motorcycle. The more we load up, the more we are asking of the machine. In the end, it comes down to weight

and volume. Think about how you will configure the load. Heavy things should be low and near the bike's center of gravity. Big packs/bags on the back will surely affect handling, especially in strong winds. Redundant fasteners, be they bungees or nets or ropes are a good idea.

Well, there you go. Hope this was helpful. We are only 4 1/2 months out. As we descend into the heart of winter, stay focused on that eastward turn and rolling that throttle on.

...and don't forget the cell phone charger.

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HELP ON FREEWAY A PHONE CALL AWAY

Did you know that you can now call 3-9-9 on your cell phone if you're stranded on a Los Angeles County freeway? This new, non-emergency roadside assistance cell phone number can be used to call the Auto Club or Metro Freeway Service Patrol. This number does not replace 9-1-1 for medical, fire, or law enforcement response.

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WELCOME HOME

Welcome home soldier,
the circle's now complete;
the time has come to lay your head
and rest your weary feet.

I'm sorry in your journey
that you have walked alone;
that's why I'm standing here today
to tell you "Welcome Home".

The place that we are standing on
is sacred ground indeed;
it is no coincidence that
you and I should meet.

Rudy Ann Gunneson-Poling

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