

# VETERAN JOURNAL

SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED  
JULY 2015



# The DCVA's message



**Raymond L. Zawacki, second from right, Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs, and members of state veterans' groups attend a service by New Jersey's Mission of Honor for the cremains (cremated remains) of American servicemen at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery, Wrightstown, N.J., June 4, 2015. (NJDMAVA photo by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)**

If you're reading this column, what I'm about to describe should be very familiar to you.

It's a weekday morning at a busy shopping mall. But the thrum of activity at the center of the mall falls to a hushed silence as New Jersey Veterans are recognized for their contribution to the freedoms every American enjoys.

It's a Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Medals Ceremony, of course.

Over the course of the past decade, thousands of New Jersey Veterans have been honored for their service in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf as well as Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts. Special recognition is given to those who endured part of their service as a Prisoner of War and those who received the Purple Heart. In the case of the Vietnam Service medal, it's the overdue thank you that many who served in that conflict never received when they came home.

But as you know, the Medal Ceremonies are more than the opportunity for the state to say thank you. The ceremonies are a key component of DMAVA's outreach effort. For a day or two after the ceremony, DMAVA Veterans Service Officers set up in the mall and try to engage as many Veterans as possible to make them aware of important entitlements they've earned because of their service. Most have no idea.

The reason I bring all of this up is the

simple reason that our VSOs can't do it alone. They need help spreading the word to New Jersey's Veterans. And I bring it up in this publication because the men and women who will see this column are the core of one of the most vibrant and active Veterans' communities in the nation.

Whenever DMAVA has asked for your help, you've been there. Members of New Jersey's Congressionally-chartered Veterans organizations selflessly give volunteer hours every year to enrich the lives of the residents of our Memorial Homes and our Veterans Haven North and South. Your generous donations have purchased vehicles that allow a sense of freedom for some of our oldest veterans and computer equipment that helps once homeless veterans re-join the workforce.

I ask now for your help in reaching the vast sea of Veterans who served with honor and distinction but may be missing out on what's owed them. Make them aware that there is a DMAVA Veterans Service Officer working in every county in this state and it's their job to get our Veterans what they deserve.

So when you meet a new Veteran, ask them if they're aware of all that may be owed them. Chances are, they are not. Tell them about us, and you may have done yet another thing in service of your Brother and Sister veterans.

## VETERAN JOURNAL

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### Cover: Strike Zone

**Chief Warrant Officer 2 Alexander M. Mulqueen assists New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home Vineland resident Constance Holden at the Home's bowling alley during the New Jersey National Guard Counterdrug Task Force's annual visit to the Home in Vineland, N.J., Nov. 12, 2014. The CDTF have been visiting the Veterans Homes as part of their veteran outreach program for the last six years. (U.S. Air National Guard Photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)**

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# Organizations hailed as ‘Force Multipliers’

By Master Sgt. David Moore, Joint Force Headquarters Public Affairs

Top leaders from the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs credited Garden State veteran organizations with being a ‘force multiplier’ to help those who have served.

“You are always there when we need you,” said Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, Adjutant General of New Jersey, during the Veterans Commander’s Call, held Sept. 28, 2014, at the New Jersey National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt.

Cunniff said each one of the state’s veteran organizations has contributed to the state department by providing large donations and thousands of volunteer hours.

“If you weren’t here, we could only do one-third of what we do,” he added.

The annual commander’s call rallies leaders from all the veterans organization’s in the state. It provides the organization’s leaders with insight of the state’s veteran services and benefits, as well as insight into the department’s annual activities and future plans. It is traditionally held on the same day as the Governor’s Annual Military Review.

According to the veterans latest report set to be posted Sept. 30, there are 428,396 veterans living in New Jersey, of which 33,369 are women.

At least once a month, the department, known as DMAVA, issues service medals to thank Veterans for their service. The ceremonies are often held in shopping malls for greater public visibility. DMAVA’s veterans’ service officers open information kiosks following the ceremonies and remain for several days to provide Veterans with information about benefits for which they may be entitled.

DMAVA also operates three veteran homes in Paramus, Menlo Park and Vineland, as well as two transitional housing centers in Glen Gardner and Winslow to assist homeless veterans transition back to the workforce.

“We are proud of our veteran homes and the high quality of care. We have a 97 to 98 percent occupancy rate. Your (veteran) organizations involvement really enhances our ability to be successful,” said Raymond L. Zawacki, Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs.

Albert J. Bucchi, Director, Division of Veteran Services, reported on the construction status of the Public Information Cen-



**Raymond L. Zawacki, Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, speaks at the Veterans Commander's Call at the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt, N.J., Sept. 28, 2014. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)**

ter and the main entrance road realignment to the Brig. General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery, North Hanover Township.

He asked veterans leaders to bring information back to their members regarding the realignment and rehabilitation of 20,405 grave sites at the cemetery. The rehabilitation program focuses on six older sections of the cemetery. Markers have sunk or become misaligned in these areas. As part of the program, there will be the installation of a new grid system and irrigation system to stabilize the designated areas.

“We need you to get this information out to your members. The area may become very muddy during the renovation process, but we will work with individuals to visit the area,” Bucchi said.

Bucchi also provided details of some future projects at the cemetery that include updating the facility map which includes recent projects; review burial rates and emerging trends, identify all areas

that can accommodate burial by type and quantity, as well as forecast the probable date when primary burials at the Doyle cemetery will be exhausted and develop a strategy for the timely development of the next department veterans cemetery upon the cessation of primary burials at the Burlington County cemetery.



**A member of the Jewish War Veterans of New Jersey reviews the NJDMAVA Veterans Benefits Guide during the Commander's Call. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)**



Members of the 116th Assault Helicopter Company in front of the restored UH-1 "Huey" the unit flew during its tour of Vietnam from 1966-1967. (NJDMVA photo by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)

# VIETNAM WAR ICON JOINS CEREMONY

By Sgt. Sherwood Goodenough, 444th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

A workhorse of the Vietnam War reached its final landing zone in time for the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Remembrance Day observance in Holmdel May 7, 2014.

The meticulously restored UH1-D "Huey" helicopter was dedicated at the New Jersey Vietnam Era Museum and Educational Center at a ceremony attended by more than 500 veterans.

The Vietnam veterans who restored the chopper to its former appearance met some of the pilots and crew members from the units that flew the aircraft in Vietnam.

They were joined at the ceremony by Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, The Adjutant General. The guest speaker was Rocky Bleier, a key player on four Super Bowl championship Pittsburgh Steelers teams after spending more than two years recovering

from wounds he sustained as an infantryman in Vietnam.

He recalled the role the Huey still holds in the memories of Vietnam veterans.

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**Your experiences  
are pages of history  
that were not written  
soon enough.  
Tell your stories.**

*Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff  
The Adjutant General*

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"It was a Huey that brought us into country and out of country. It brought us food and supplies. It would hover like a protective mother over the battlefield," Bleier said. "But most importantly. It brought you hope."

As the loud speakers beneath the static display filled the air with the familiar sound of the Huey's turbine-powered twin propellers gaining speed, the eyes and faces of veterans lit up. At the end of the recording, the audience burst into roaring applause as though they had just heard an old friend sing a favorite hymn.

Cunniff acknowledged the shortcomings of the nation in recognizing the returning veterans of Vietnam.

"Your experiences are pages of history that were not written soon enough," he said. "Tell your stories."

Guadagno, herself the mother of a cadet at the United States Air Force Academy, echoed the general's statements, "You had courage and you made sacrifices and we will never forget."

"It may be a little late but this is our way of saying thank you. Thank you for your service and welcome home."



**Menlo gets new bus**  
*At the American Legion convention in Wildwood, State Commander Michael Wilson presented the keys to a new handicapped accessible bus for the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Menlo Park. The bus can transport 12 residents in wheelchairs and the commander's project funded two Hoyer lifts to assist in moving patients at the Menlo Park facility. Wilson's statewide project slogan was "Rich traditions, new ideas" and raised more than \$135,000. (NJDMAVA photo by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)*

# Home gets second bus

*Story and photo by Kryn P. Westhoven, NJDMAVA Public Affairs*

For Bob Salvini it's hard to believe only 16 months have pass since he proposed fund raising to purchase a handicapped accessible bus for the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Paramus. On March 3, 2015, Salvini presented the keys to second bus less than year from the first donation.

With \$7,000 left over and \$10,100 donated by the Rotary International District 7490, the community and veterans service organizations are well on their way to purchasing a third bus.

"We know what the challenge is to provide our fellow veterans with a quality of life...allowing them to get out of the home," said Salvini, Bergen County American Legion commander.



**Bob Salvini, left, Bergen County American Legion commander hands Giulia Kirsch, Supervisor of Recreation, New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Paramus the keys to the second bus donated to the home by the Legion in less than a year.**

The idea to replace the aging buses at the home came after all three were down for repairs and the local American Legion or VFW posts were having a tough time getting residents out of the building.

Nearly a dozen times a month Paramus home veterans are invited out to a dinner, bingo or a shopping trip. The buses can handle up to 16-passengers and the seats fold up to accommodate wheelchairs with the built in lift.

When it comes to veterans helping veterans that caring goes on every day at the three veterans homes run by the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs according to deputy commissioner, Ray Zawacki. "This bus epitomizes that support."

# Honoring our own “Monuments Man”

Story by Tech. Sgt. Armando Vasquez, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

In 1938, Harry Ettlinger, along with his family, fled Germany because of the Nazi’s persecution of Jewish families and settled in Newark, N.J., where he became a U.S. citizen.

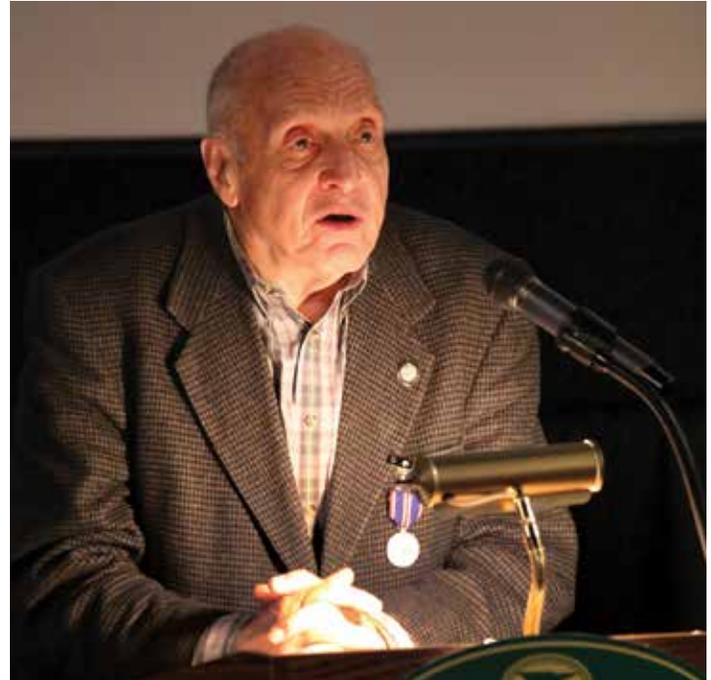
Six years later he had returned to Europe as an infantryman in the U.S. Army with the 99th Infantry Division.

Just as his unit was about to engage in the Battle of the Bulge, he was reassigned as an interpreter because of his fluency in German. Shortly after, he joined the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives section, where he remained for a year and a half. This group, which consisted of 345 individuals representing 13 countries and whose backgrounds included curators, art historians, and museum directors, was responsible for saving, restoring and returning thousands of works of art stolen by the Nazis during World War II, much of it from hiding places where the Nazis planned to destroy it if they lost the war. In doing so, they put their own lives at risk in order to save the artistic and cultural heritage of Europe.

It was an effort worthy of a Hollywood movie.

Seventy years later, on Feb. 24, 2014, the Rockaway, N.J. resident and one of only five surviving members of the famous “Monuments Men” was honored by local officials, the Rockaway Township American Legion Post 344 and the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs at a special screening of the recently released movie “The Monuments Men”.

Ettlinger, still sharp and witty, cracked jokes as he was presented with proclamations by Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen, Senator Joseph Pennachio, Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce and Rockaway Mayor, Michael Dachisen. In addition, Deputy Commissioner of Veterans Affairs Raymond Zawacki



*Harry Ettlinger, one of five living members of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives section, also known as the Monument Men, was honored by local officials and the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Feb. 24, 2014, before the premier showing of the movie “The Monuments Men”. (NJMDAVA photo by Tech. Sgt. Armando Vasquez/Released)*



*Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, right, Supreme Allied Commander, along with Gen. Omar N. Bradley, left, and Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr, inspect art treasures looted by the Nazis and stored in the Merkers salt mine in Germany, April 12, 1945. (Photo courtesy National Archives)*

awarded Ettlinger the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal.

After the accolades and speeches, the more than 300 people present at the ceremony watched “The Monuments Men.” The film tells the story of a group of men and women who in a race against time try to locate and save civilization’s most beautiful and important masterpieces from destruction by Nazi fanatics in the final days of World War II.

“We did it to preserve the world’s culture,” said Ettlinger.

**Shortly we will be fighting our way across the continent of Europe in battles designed to preserve our civilization. . . . in the path of our advance will be found historical monuments and cultural centers which symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve. It is the responsibility of every commander to protect and respect these symbols whenever possible.**

*Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower  
U.S. Army  
May 26, 1944*

# Soarin' at the Home

Story and photo by Mark C. Olsen, NJDMAVA Public Affairs



*John Eickmeyer "flies" while suspended from a Hoyer lift, a device used for moving patients out of beds and onto gurneys, while a Disney video titled "Soarin", which was shot from a hang glider's point of view of various locations in the United States, is played at the Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland Stars and Stripes Movie Theater.*

John Eickmeyer served in the Navy from 1980-84 as an electrician onboard the carrier USS Saratoga. After he got out of the Navy, he answered an ad looking for electricians and did work on high rise sign locations. In 1996, he was diagnosed with progressive multiple sclerosis. Within three years he was confined to a wheelchair.

Eickmeyer, a resident at the Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland, is a quadriplegic as a result of multiple sclerosis.

Eickmeyer's dream is to go skydiving.

"What's the worst that could happen," asked Eickmeyer.

Through the Second Wind Dreams, a nonprofit organization that weaves thousands of dreams at eldercare facilities, Eickmeyer was hoping his dream would be fulfilled. It was not to be: "Skydiving was out of the question, liability, that sort of thing," he said.

Lisa Williams, Vineland's recreation director didn't give up hope on Eickmeyer.

Williams was working on another Second Wind Dream for the Home in conjunction with the Vineland-based Stefano Foundation for Performing Arts. The Foundation has a licensing agreement with Disney which allows them to create shows and venues for disabled individuals who would not be able to travel to Disney to experience the park first hand due to their physical limitations.

"We wanted to bring the experience of Disney here to residents," she said.

Then she found out from Anthony Stefano that his Foundation also has a licensing agreement with Disney to show its video "Soarin".

It all clicked together; skydiving was not an option, but showing a video that is shot from a hang glider's point of view of various locations in the United States was doable. Couple that with suspending Eickmeyer from a Hoyer lift, a device used for moving patients out of beds and onto gurneys, and Eickmeyer would get some of the feel of what it is like to be flying in a hang glider.

"They surprised me last week," said Eickmeyer.

On Oct. 16, the Home's residents were getting a taste of Walt Disney World, which included staff members dressed up as Mickey and Minnie Mouse and Winnie the Pooh, as well as Gloucester County Institute for Technology students were dressed as characters from various Disney movies. The Home rented an electric train and gave the residents trips through the Home's hallways and ground. The final treat was a video showing of Disney World's "Celebrate a Dream Come True Parade" for the residents, many of whom have never been to either Disneyland or Disney World.

"Just to bring that here and see their faces is priceless," said Williams.

At the same time, Eickmeyer's daughter and her family watched as their father was hoisted up on the Hoyer lift in the Home's Stars and Stripes Movie Theater, the lights were dimmed, fans blew on him to create the impression of wind, and Eickmeyer "flew".

"The visuals for soaring were very cool – very lifelike," said Eickmeyer.

Eickmeyer's other Second Wind Dream is to attend an Eagles game.

"I'm still holding out for the Eagles," he said.

# VBA transformed

By retired Lt. Col. Joseph C. Bucco Jr., NJDMAVA Veterans Services

If you are a veteran and have filed a claim for benefits within the past couple of years, you would have noticed there has been a drastic change in the way the VA claims process works.

The Veterans Benefits Administration has been undergoing a major transformation that is people-centric, results-oriented, and a forward-looking integration of solutions that will ensure a total lifelong engagement with Service Members, Veterans, and their families. Here are just a few of the advances in automation that the VBA has instituted to improve claims efficiency and ultimately reduce the time it takes to process a claim for benefits.

## Veterans Benefits Management System

In 2010, then VA Secretary Eric Shinseki established 125 days as the goal to achieve for claims processing. That decision set the wheels in motion to totally transform the VBA into an end-to-end paperless claims processing system. This 125 day goal is now the standard by which the various VA Regional Offices are rated.

The VBA began fielding VBMS in 2012. Prior to that date if a veteran had filed a claim for disability compensation or pension, and wanted to review his or her claim file, they had to schedule an appointment at the local Regional Office. Today, VBMS has made it possible for a claimant to review his or her claim folder right in the veteran service officer's office. This is why it is important for any veteran or claimant

who is attempting to navigate their way through the VA claim process, should use an accredited Veteran Service Officer.

## eBenefits

What is eBenefits? eBenefits is a joint VA/DoD web portal that provides resources and self-service capabilities to Veterans, Service members, and their families to research, access and manage their VA and military benefits and personal information. eBenefits uses secure credentials to allow access to personal information and gives users the ability to perform numerous self-service functions. It also provides a list of links to other sites that provide information about military and veteran benefits. It is an essential way for Veterans, Service members, and their families to receive access to and service from VA and DoD.

eBenefits is accessible at [www.eBenefits.va.gov](http://www.eBenefits.va.gov). Before Veterans can access and use eBenefits they must be listed in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS), and obtain a DS Logon. Service members can access eBenefits with a DS Logon or a Common Access Card (CAC). A DS Logon is a secure identity that is used by the VA and various DoD websites. If you are already registered in DEERS, you are eligible for a DS Logon.

You can register for an eBenefits account online by using the DS Logon Account Registration Wizard. There are two types of registration, Basic and Premium. You will be walked through a series of

questions to assist you in obtaining a Premium Account, which gives you the highest level of access to eBenefits features. With a premium account you can view personal data about yourself in VA and DoD systems, apply for benefits online, check the status of your claim, update your address records, and more.

## Stakeholder Enterprise Portal

The Stakeholder Enterprise Portal is a single, secure entry portal that provides VA partner organizations and external stakeholders, such as State and County Veteran Service Officers, access to the web-based systems they need to assist Veterans, Reservists, members of the National Guard, and their dependents. The SEP combines previously autonomous VA partner organizations such as Compensation Service, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Health Administration Center, and Education Service into a seamless, secure and consistent service. It is basically the Veteran Service Officers counterpart to eBenefits.

So, if you are a veteran you should first enroll in eBenefits. You should then make contact with an accredited veteran service officer. Your service officer will be able to ensure that any documents that are needed by the VBA are submitted timely, and verify that they become part of your electronic claims file. Your VSO can, using SEP and VBMS, keep you informed of your claim status. You will also be doing your part in reducing the claims backlog.

## Vineland Visit

Airman 1st Class Erin Raggio, 177th Fighter Wing, chats with resident Annunciata Laslie as Airmen from 108th Wing and the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, were joined by 47 fourth graders from the Seaview School in Linwood, N.J., for the 14th Annual Holiday "Songfest" at the Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland, N.J., Dec. 9, 2014. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)



# Vet waits 70 years for award

Story and photo by Tech. Sgt. Armando Vasquez, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

Seventy years is a lifetime for some. For a New Jersey Army veteran, that's how long it took for him to finally be awarded a medal he earned during combat in World War II in Italy.

Pfc. John LaPuzz, a Paterson, N.J., native, was wounded by shrapnel on his right shoulder while riding in a 2.5-ton Army truck in Italy. That was in 1944, but because of clerical errors in his military records, LaPuzz never received his Purple Heart, a medal given to those who are wounded or killed, while serving, on or after April 5, 1917, with the U.S. Armed Forces.

***This medal is  
not given, it is  
earned.  
We're not going  
to forget those  
who served  
us.***

*U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr.*

With the help of U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr., and Passaic county veterans service officer, John Harris, LaPuzz who is currently a resident at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Paramus was finally recognized and presented with his Purple Heart at the Home Jan. 17 in front of his son, John Jr., and daughter, Paula Fenimore.

"This medal is not given, it is earned," said Pascrell during the ceremony to honor the 96-year-old LaPuzz. "We're not going to forget those who served us."

And thanks to the relentless effort by his daughter, who provided evidence of his father's injury such as news articles and a Western Union telegram that was sent to LaPuzz's mother on the day he was injured, the Army Board of Review agreed to work on LaPuzz's record and correctly add the Purple Heart to his military awards, which include a Bronze Star Medal.

As LaPuzz was presented with his medal, his son and daughter stood proudly and gratified. "My father is a veteran and a hero," said John Jr.

He has always been very proud of his military service, added Paula.

He had to wait this long for a clerical error to be fixed and for his military service to be finally corrected but it was a wait long overdue.

"Now I can die in peace," said LaPuzz. "I finally got my Purple Heart."





*Veteran's Haven North resident John Hickman, center left, was presented with a vehicle by the Gem Vac Vets at Glenn Gardner, N.J., March 25, 2014.*

The military teaches its service members to never leave a battle buddy behind. It's the camaraderie within the band of brotherhood that ensures that wounded Soldiers are brought home.

John Schembari, a former Marine who served in the 50s, never forgot that.

So when Schembari, a proprietor of Gem Vacuum Inc., in Glenn Gardner, N.J. and a couple of veteran friends started meeting on Tuesdays at a coffee shop to reminisce about the old days, they never expected that their little gathering would grow and develop into a group dedicated to helping fellow veterans who have fallen on hard times.

The conversations and laughter got so loud that they were asked to move their weekly meetings somewhere else, said Schembari. Since most of his customers were veterans who frequented his business; Schembari thought nothing of moving the meetings to his small one-room vacuum shop. And so, Gem Vac Vets was born.

John Hickman, originally from Bricktown, N.J., had fallen on hard times.

Hickman served in the U.S.S. Nimitz as an aviation boatswain mate in the 80s. Recently, the Navy veteran found himself homeless. Fortunately for Hickman, he found Veterans Haven North.

Veterans Haven North, located in Glenn Gardner, is a transitional housing program for veterans that have fallen on hard times. Under the direction of the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Veteran's Haven-North

## Deeds Not Words

*Story and photo by  
Tech. Sgt. Armando Vasquez  
NJDMAVA Public Affairs*

ensures that homeless veterans are treated and cared for in a dignified, compassionate and professional manner. They assist homeless veterans attain an optimal level of independence and aids them in re-acquiring life skills to allow them to live in the community while maintaining their self-sufficiency, dignity and honor.

Hickman has benefited from the services provided to him. He currently has a temporary job at the VA hospital in Lyons and is eager to get a fulltime job and his own home. He utilized the transportation service provided by Vets Haven to get around and to his job.

Vets Haven assists veterans in obtaining a job that will allowed them to sustain themselves. But not having a vehicle to search for jobs or attend interviews, it makes the task a little more difficult, said Hickman.

Gem Vac Vets, who now boasts an unofficial membership of nearly 120 veterans representing all branches of service and time frames, has two mottos: 'Every day is Tuesday' and 'Deeds Not Words'.

The reference to Tuesday is their way of telling fellow veterans that they can get together any day and not just on Tuesdays. The 'Deeds Not Words' is their reference to the group's mission to help their fellow veterans. You see, Gem Vac Vets pays for every good deed out of their own pockets. "To help any veteran we can in any way," said T.C. Landers, a Vietnam War Army veteran and one of three trustees in the group. The other two trustees are Schembari and Bob Stephenson, a Korean War Army veteran.

So pooling their resources, Gem Vac Vets donated a 2002 Honda Accord to Veterans Haven-North. And the lucky recipient of that donation was Hickman, who won the raffle for the vehicle.

As they usually do on Tuesdays, Gem Vac Vets had their group meeting to just have "coffee, cake, brotherhood and lots of laughter," said Schembari. But this meeting was different. The group, which is in the process of filing for a 501(c)(19) – veteran's organization status, met at Veterans Haven North's cafeteria. There, they continued with their tradition of laughing and talking about family, friends and fellow veterans. This meeting gave Hickman an opportunity to personally thank the group for their generosity and to tell them how it has helped him.

Hickman is not married and has no children, but he has family that he hasn't seen since Christmas because of the lack of transportation. With a smile and humble appreciation, Hickman told the group, "I finally got a chance to visit them last week."

# Christmas comes early to Vets Haven

Story and photos by Mark C. Olsen, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

At Veterans Haven South, Christmas came 22 days early.

Thirty volunteers from the Veterans of Foreign Wars – Abscon Post 9462, Hammonton Post 1026 and Brigantine Post 6964 cooked and served dinner and distributed gifts to residents Dec. 3.

“This makes their Christmas a little brighter,” said Stuart McCullen of Post 9462 and event chairman.

McCullen’s involvement began several years ago. During a holiday visit to Vets Haven, he saw a resident playing the piano for his visiting son.

“I saw that young kid with his father who was in the program and have been helping since.”

The State VFW has divided New Jersey so that the southern Posts support Vets Haven South in Winslow, while the northern Posts support Veterans Haven North in Glen Gardner.

Veteran service organizations like the VFW and their volunteer support for New Jersey’s Veterans Transitional Housing Program are a perfect example of the “Force Multipliers in action” that Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, The Adjutant General of New Jersey speaks of. These Force Multipliers augment the support that state provides the residents of the Veterans Transitional Housing Program.

New Jersey has among its homeless population an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 veterans. The residents’ age at Vets Haven South range from 25 to 70. There are several Iraq veterans in the program.

“Veteran service organizations can mentor the residents – veteran to veteran,” said Albert J. Bucchi, Director, Veteran Services, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

“These are good people,” said McCullen. This year, the Posts raised \$1,500,



Hammonton Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1026 Commander John Griffiee, right, serves a resident at Veterans Haven South during the VFW’s annual Christmas Party Dec. 3, 2014.

which members of Post 9462 Ladies Auxiliary used to buy the residents gifts. In addition to receiving a bag of toiletries, each resident picked out a gift from four tables heaped with items ranging from shoes, clothing, gloves to shavers and watches.

Deciding what to buy has been a learning process.

“This is my twelfth year and I’ve seen what is and isn’t a hit,” said Donna Wagner, President, Post 9462 Ladies Auxiliary.

“The men sometimes pick stuff they can give away as gifts.”

Not all residents were able to attend the dinner.

“Some are at their jobs, while others are school,” said Bucchi.

Those who weren’t able to make it, still receive gifts, no one gets left out.

**New Jersey has among its homeless population an estimated 7,000 to 8,000 veterans. The residents’ age at Vets Haven South range from 25 to 70. There are several Iraq veterans in the program.**



A resident at Veterans Haven South chooses a pair of work boots donated by the Hammonton Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1026 during the VFW’s annual Christmas Party.

# Theft brings meaning to Christmas spirit

Story and photos by Mark C. Olsen, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

## I have a Christmas story to tell you.

It began when the Rev. Delwood Williams, the pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Weymouth and members of his congregation decided after Thanksgiving to gather gifts for the residents of the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland.

“This was something that was laid on my heart for the veterans,” said Williams, who served as a sergeant with 11th Army Cavalry in Vietnam from 1967-68.

All went well, parishioners brought in the gifts.

Then on Dec. 3, 2014, someone broke into the church and stole all the gifts.

“It hurt me, but it made me stronger,” said Williams.

The police detectives made little headway in the case so they asked Williams if they could tell the media about the theft and maybe some information would come in that could help them solve the case.

Williams agreed and the story was carried on the local TV stations and in the newspapers.

The story was picked up by national media and word spread.

Then the donations came in, more than \$1,000 from across the United States.

“It came from their hearts,” said Williams.



*The Reverend Delwood Williams, right, of the Mount Zion Baptist Church of Weymouth, N.J., presents New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland resident William Nixon, left, with a gift Dec. 23, 2014. The church had set up collection of donated gifts for the veterans that were stolen on Dec. 3, 2014. The resulting media attention brought in donations that enabled the church to buy even more gifts for the residents.*

So instead of getting a few gifts for the residents, the church parishioners were able to get gifts for all 300 residents. They went out and bought blankets, hats, pajamas, scarves and toiletries.

On Dec. 23, all the gifts were bagged and set up on three rows of tables in the Home’s auditorium.

“Every penny we received – here it is,” said Williams.

After the residents and staff arrived, Williams, along with members of his congregation led them in singing Christmas carols. Then the gifts were distributed.

“We don’t want to forget the veterans,” said Jewel Williams, the pastor’s wife.



*Jewel Williams of Mount Zion Baptist Church holds a selection of blankets for Veterans Home resident Louise Ferla to pick from.*



*Mount Zion parishioner Heather Alexander, right, presents gifts to residents at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland.*

# Homeless vet meets guardian angel in subway station

Story and photo by  
Tech. Sgt. Armando Vasquez  
NJDMAVA Public Affairs



He doesn't know why she spotted him in the crowded dining concourse at Grand Central Station in New York City. But the Army veteran is grateful that she did on that cold day in February of 2013.

There were thousands of commuters in the Station as he waited for a train to go back to New Jersey after having visited his sister, said Charles Degerick. "She approached me and asked me if I was OK. She said I looked lonely and needed someone to talk to."

Degerick was homeless. But the concerned person didn't know that at that time.

Having a cup of coffee with her at the station, Degerick explained his current status and how he got there.

After Superstorm Sandy hit New Jersey, many people were left homeless. Degerick was one of them. He was living with friends when the Superstorm destroyed their home.

Degerick had always been involved with veteran organizations, helping out in any way that he could. But now he was the one that needed help.

So when she told him she knew of an organization that could help him, he said he was skeptical. But what choice did he have? So, he gave her his information and let fate take its course.

"You have to put your pride in your pocket," said Degerick.

And because of that encounter at Grand Central Station, Degerick's situation was brought to the attention of Sean VanLew, superintendent of Veteran's Haven North.

VanLew, armed with a photo that the good samaritan had taken of Degerick, went looking for him at the station the next day. He found him and brought him back to the Haven's Glen Gardner, N.J., location.

Under the direction of the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Veteran's Haven North ensures that homeless veterans are treated and cared for in a dignified, compassionate and professional manner. They assist them in attaining an optimal level of independence and re-acquiring life skills to allow them to live in the community while maintaining their self-sufficiency, dignity and honor.

Degerick hears people complain about things in life, but he is grateful for being at Veteran's Haven and the help he receives from the staff. He wishes he could stay there for forever, but understands that Vets Haven is a transitional stepping stone to independence.

He submitted several dozen applications for senior citizens housing and is waiting for approval. But as he tells his story about that chance encounter last year, he thanks his lucky stars for meeting her. Because if he hadn't, he might still be alone and homeless.

"She is my guardian angel," said Degerick.

# DOYLE PROJECTS MOVE AHEAD

Photos by Kryn P. Westhoven, NJDMAVA Public Affairs



The Public Information Center at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery is starting to take shape. A \$2.9 million Veterans Administration grant is funding the 2,000 square foot structure that will have a funeral honor guard office with coordination area for funeral corteges, gravesite locator and new restrooms. Several thousand feet of roadway will be repaved. A new

**During the last three years the VA has provided more than \$17.5 million for improvements.**

main entrance is also part of the project.

During the last three years, the VA has provided more than \$17.5 million for improvements.

The realignment of 20,405 grave markers and the extension of the irrigation system to other areas at the cemetery has begun. A separate \$7.7 million VA grant will fund general refurbishment to include new sod on 29 acres of burial fields.



# Voices of Valor

Story and photos by Staff Sgt. Nicholas P. Young, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

I walked into Veteran's Haven North on a Wednesday spring night, camera equipment in hand to document what was described to me as music therapy.



**A resident of Veteran's Haven North in Glen Gardner, N.J., looks over the lyrics to the song "Moving On", which was created by himself and fellow veterans during an eight week session of Voices of Valor.**

The session had already started when I opened the door to the café and the sounds of smooth jazz filled the room. The only other audible sounds were the click of my camera and a young woman softly instructing the participants to relax and breathe deeply. As I looked around the room I saw the weathered faces of veterans whom had fallen on hard times. The paths that led these former service members to Veterans Haven North vary from person to person, but tonight they all converged on one common ground, their love of music.

They are all participating in a session of the Voices of Valor program, which is a part of a larger organization called Music for All Seasons started by Rena Fruchter and her husband Brian Dallow in 1991. According to Dallow, Voices of Valor's primary goal

is, "To reach as many veterans as we possibly can and to try to address some of the relatively serious issues that many of these veterans are returning with, the invisible wounds of war." The Voices of Valor program conducts eight weekly sessions, facilitated by professional musicians, in which the veterans share their stories and experiences to reach the end goal of creating a song that expresses the collective emotion of the group.

The group from this session, "Soldiers of Fortune" focused their song on getting beyond their past issues, and chose the very fitting title of "Moving On." Melissa Guttman, the lyricist facilitator for this session said, "Every session is different, it's the song they need at that session...the themes are often related in terms of moving forward in their life, but they all have different angles based on what part of the story they choose to tell and what they're personally going through at the moment."

The hardest part about the process is getting the veterans to

open up and share. The producer of this session, Benny Harrison said it is "important to earn their trust, and they'll come with us on the ride." I watched as the group threw out ideas, brainstormed and sang what they'd come up with. Being that I was amongst fellow veterans that also shared my passion for music, I couldn't help but to chime in and join them in the writing process.



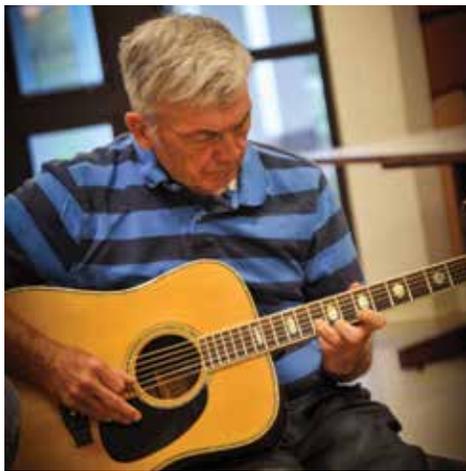
**Veteran's Haven North resident, Geraldine Grob sings the song "Moving On" at Kaleidoscope Sound Recording Studio, Union City, N.J.**

The facilitators found out about my own musical accomplishments as a lyricist and asked me to create a verse to fill in a breakdown section of the song. Over the course of my documentation I got to know the veterans in the group, and drew my inspiration from them in order to add to their story.

During the seventh session, we all went to the recording studio, and it was truly magical. From the time they started warming up to the wrap up, those weathered faces lit up with youthful exuberance. I thought about the few weeks prior and the initial idea that I was documenting music therapy, but this was so much more. It was downright amazing to watch the power of music work through these beleaguered souls.

The final listen was like a hot cup of coffee, and the smiles in the room were the cream and sugar. Even though it was after midnight, I could feel the energy level raise and overall sense of accomplishment in the air.

The final listen was like a hot cup of coffee, and the smiles in the room were the cream and sugar. Even though it was after midnight, I could feel the energy level raise and overall sense of accomplishment in the air.



**William Melton, a resident of Veteran's Haven North plays his guitar as fellow veteran participants sing during an eight week session of Voices of Valor.**



**Veteran's Haven North residents pose for a group photo after recording their song "Moving On" at Kaleidoscope Sound Recording Studio, Union City, N.J. From left to right; Rena Fruchter, Co-Founder of Music For All Seasons; Daniel Wagoner, Frank Ignico, William Melton, Anthony Clark, Anthony Jones, Laura Blaine, administration - Veterans Haven North; Gary Fuller, Melissa Guttman, Musician Facilitator- Voices of Valor; Brian F. Dallow, Founder of Music For All Seasons; Benny Harrison, Musician Facilitator-Voices of Valor; Geraldine Grob and Staff Sgt. Nicholas Young.**

# Volunteers are the heart of homes

Story and photo by Kryn P. Westhoven, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

Walk into any of the three veterans and you immediately notice that while they look like commercial long-term care facilities, there's something very different.

The difference? The sense of community and comradery that stems from volunteers who donated more than 70,000 hours to the homes in 2014.

Those volunteers and organizations were honored at luncheons this month, celebrating more than \$1.8 million man hours saved. The money donated to home residents eclipses two million dollars when the monetary and donated goods are included.

"You can't pay someone to have the compassion that a volunteer has...it comes from the heart and volunteers have big hearts," said Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, The Adjutant General, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

"The biggest difference is the programs our volunteers provide and thank you for that," added Cunniff, who addressed the volunteer's at all three events statewide.

It was the 35th annual event for the Menlo Park home volunteers.

William O'Brien, president of the homes resident council, spoke heartfelt words of gratitude to the more than 225 volunteers and organizations that come out to be with the residents.

In Paramus Giulia Kirsch, Paramus, recreation department supervisor, summed up how the staff feels about the volunteer support. "Our residents tell us all the time how much you mean to them, how your friendship has brighten their days."

"Your post trip is the one they look forward to, your bingo game is the reason they stay in the multi-purpose room all day," added Kirsch.

The volunteers at the Paramus bingo games feel like winners too. "The satisfaction that you have when they win, especially, they perk up it is really nice for them," said Rich Lambert, Vet-



*Betty Waters of Vineland, second from left, is presented the Volunteer of the Year Award for her service to the residents of the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland by, left to right, Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, The Adjutant General; Ray Zawacki, Deputy Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and Steven Ferrari, Director of Veterans' Healthcare Services during the Home's annual luncheon April 22, 2015. Dozens of volunteers and organizations were recognized at the luncheon.*

erans of Foreign Wars Post 6699 in Paramus.

At the Vineland home, the Shekinah Masonic Temple of Millville was honored as group of the year for their efforts in

recruiting other volunteers, running bingo games and conducting fellowship services for nearly a decade.

"We had to move our church services to the auditorium because we had more and more people attending," said Boris Reissek, Vineland home chief executive officer, as he spoke of their efforts.

Reissek next presented project of the year honors to Boscov's department store for the annual Christmas Dreams program that has provided 1,200 gifts to residents the last four years.

When it came to the volunteer of the year, Reissek spoke about how Betty Waters

made a significant impact on the residents in a distinctive way, interacting with veterans with limited family contact.

"She treats the residents like they are an old friend," said Reissek.

**You can't pay  
someone to have  
the compassion that  
a volunteer has...  
it comes from the  
heart and volunteers  
have big hearts.**

*Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff  
The Adjutant General*

# A casual conversation leads to compensation

By Kryn P. Westhoven, NJDMAVA Public Affairs

If you are wearing a hat or shirt proclaiming you are a veteran and Bill McDonnell sees you, be prepared for a conversation about your VA benefits. These impromptu discussions have led to more than a few veterans receiving compensation they didn't know was owed to them.

The long time New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (NJDMAVA) veterans' service officer has had beneficial conversations at grocery stores, a theater lobby and at his local laundromat while cleaning his comforters, that's where he met Walter Stridick.

The former Mount Laurel resident was wearing a ball cap that said "US Navy, World War II." That was McDonnell's signal to start a conversation.

"He told me that he had heart problems at the end of World War II and that he had been getting a check from VA since end of World War II," said McDonnell. Based on the monthly payment McDonnell knew the veteran was around a 30 percent disability rating. "We have to put you in for an increase, you must be much worse after all these years."

A few days later, McDonnell met Stridick at the local library, one of the many times he has left his Lawrenceville office to assist a veteran or spouse. They completed the paperwork for an increase in

the service connected heart problems. "We also opened claims for hearing loss and for tinnitus (ringing in the ears)," added McDonnell.

Within six months, the VA had already given Stridick brand new hearing aids and he was absolutely thrilled about that according to McDonnell. The VA also doubled Stridick's rating for heart disease from 30 to 60 percent, while at the same time boosting the hearing loss rating from 50 to 70 percent.

With Stridick's overall disability rating increasing to 70 percent, McDonnell filed for Individual Unemployability for the veteran. One year later Stridick received the letter from the VA saying he was 100 percent disabled and received a back payment of more than \$40,000.

The 100 percent service connected rating also qualified the World War II veteran for a total exemption from New Jersey State Property Taxes. Stridick's spouse qualified for health care benefits through the VA's CHAMPVA program because of the upgraded disability rating.

"Had we not met...this would not have occurred at all," said Stridick in a thank you letter he wrote to McDonnell. "Please know it is impossible to express my deepest gratitude for all you did for me."

To think it all started with a simple conversation about a hat.

## Ground broken

*A ground breaking ceremony was held at the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Holmdel, N.J., May 3, 2015, left to right, Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, The Adjutant General of New Jersey; Raymond Zawacki, Deputy Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs; Helen Gurbisz, New Jersey Gold Star Family Monument Foundation; Army Support Activity-Fort Dix Command Sgt. Maj. Rick Anderson and Ken Gurbisz, break ground for the Gold Star Monument. Parents of fallen Army Capt. James Gurbisz, Ken and Helen Gurbisz were selected to lead the effort to build the monument by the New Jersey Run for the Fallen board of trustees. Ken Gurbisz said the monument will not only serve to honor the families of the fallen, but also to educate New Jersey residents about the sacrifices Gold Star family members have made. The monument will serve as a place of remembrance and reflection for those who have lost loved ones in service to the nation. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Bill Addison/Released)*



# NJDMAVA OUTREACH SCHEDULE

### Sept. 12: Veterans Health and Wellness Expo

10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Centre State Hospital – Freehold

Auditorium #1 & 2

901 W. Main Street, Freehold, NJ 07728

### Oct. 6 - 8: Veterans Outreach Campaign and Medal Ceremony

10 a.m. - 8 p.m.

DMAVA medal ceremony Oct. 6 at 11 a.m., (Lord & Taylor Court)

Moorestown Mall

400 Route 38, Moorestown, NJ, 08057

### Nov. 4: Medal Ceremony At Farmers Insurance Company

11 a.m.

Farmers New Jersey Headquarters in Cherry Hill

951 Haddonfield Ave., 2nd Floor, Suite B, Cherry Hill, NJ 08002



## Commanders Call

*Al Bucchi, Director, Veterans' Services, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, discusses the new NJDMAVA Veterans' Benefit Guide to veterans statewide during the Veterans Commanders Call at Veterans Haven North in Glen Gardner, N.J., April 23, 2015. Nearly three dozen senior leaders of Veteran Service Organizations came to the meeting for briefings ranging from health care to homeless transitional housing. (NJDMAVA photo by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)*



## The fallen honored at cemetery

*New Jersey Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, the Adjutant General of New Jersey, joined the New Jersey National Guard leadership and more than a dozen veterans' organizations to honor New Jersey's fallen at the State Memorial Day ceremony at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery in North Hanover Township, N.J., May 23, 2015. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)*



## Soldiers honor veterans

A New Jersey Army National Guard Soldier assists a veteran to the viewing area prior to the annual Military Review at the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt, N.J., Sept. 28, 2014. The Military Review is a 122-year-old tradition that allows governors – the commander-in-chief of the state militia – the opportunity to review the Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)

## A hand up

Airman 1st Class Taylor Binet, 177th Medical Group, New Jersey Air National Guard, draws a blood sample during the South Jersey Stand Down at the National Guard Armory, Cherry Hill on Sept. 26. Nearly 200 homeless veterans took advantage of access to healthcare, mental health screening, substance abuse counseling, social services (food stamps and unemployment), legal services, religious counseling, a hot meal, a haircut and winter clothing. The New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and the Stand Down of South Jersey Committee, Inc. co-hosted the annual event. (NJDMAVA photo by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)



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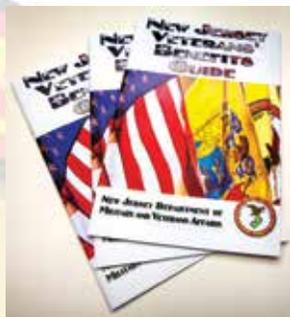
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[www.state.nj.us/military/veterans/index.html](http://www.state.nj.us/military/veterans/index.html)