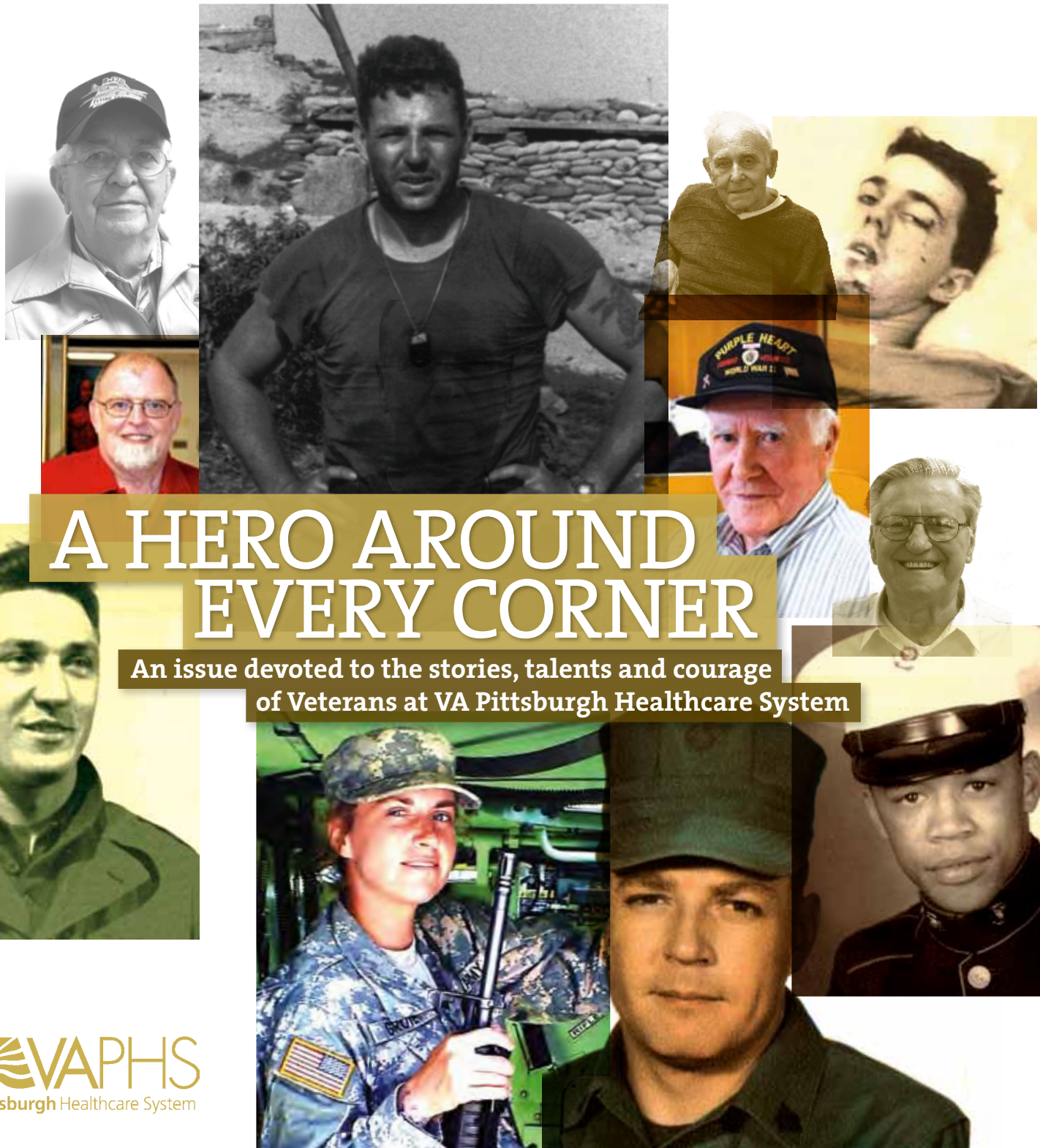
WORKING TOGETHER

{ WINTER 2010 }

PARTNERING IN VETERAN-CENTERED CARE



A HERO AROUND EVERY CORNER

An issue devoted to the stories, talents and courage of Veterans at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

VAPHS
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

Director Terry Gerigk Wolf talks with a Veteran at H.J. Heinz.

To all our partners:

I am excited to report that we recently opened a new **Heroes Hall** on the ground floor of our University Drive facility. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the concept of a heroes hall, it is basically a large room that Veterans can pop into during normal operating hours, often while waiting for transportation or an upcoming appointment. It is a space that—in essence—is all about Veterans.

Two stories in this magazine—John Mogus's MyVA piece (page 6) and the cover series on Purple Heart recipients (page 8; part of a local Boy Scout's project to earn his Eagle Scout Badge!)—are also on display in this new hall. The overlap seemed like a natural fit. This is, after all, the most Veteran-centered issue of *Working Together* that we have ever produced.

How? Well, just flip through this magazine's pages. No matter where you land, you will wind up reading a story that celebrates our Nation's heroes. We spotlight Veterans teeming with creativity (pages 6 and 14). We honor Veterans who have survived—and learned from—their experiences as prisoners of war (page 4) and Veterans who have been injured in action (page 8). The theme of this publication is a familiar one: it is all about Veterans.

Terry Gerigk Wolf, FACHE
Director and Chief Executive Officer
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

The new Heroes Hall at University Drive

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VAPHS
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

{ thebragsheet }

Check Out the Newcomers in VA Pittsburgh's Trophy Case

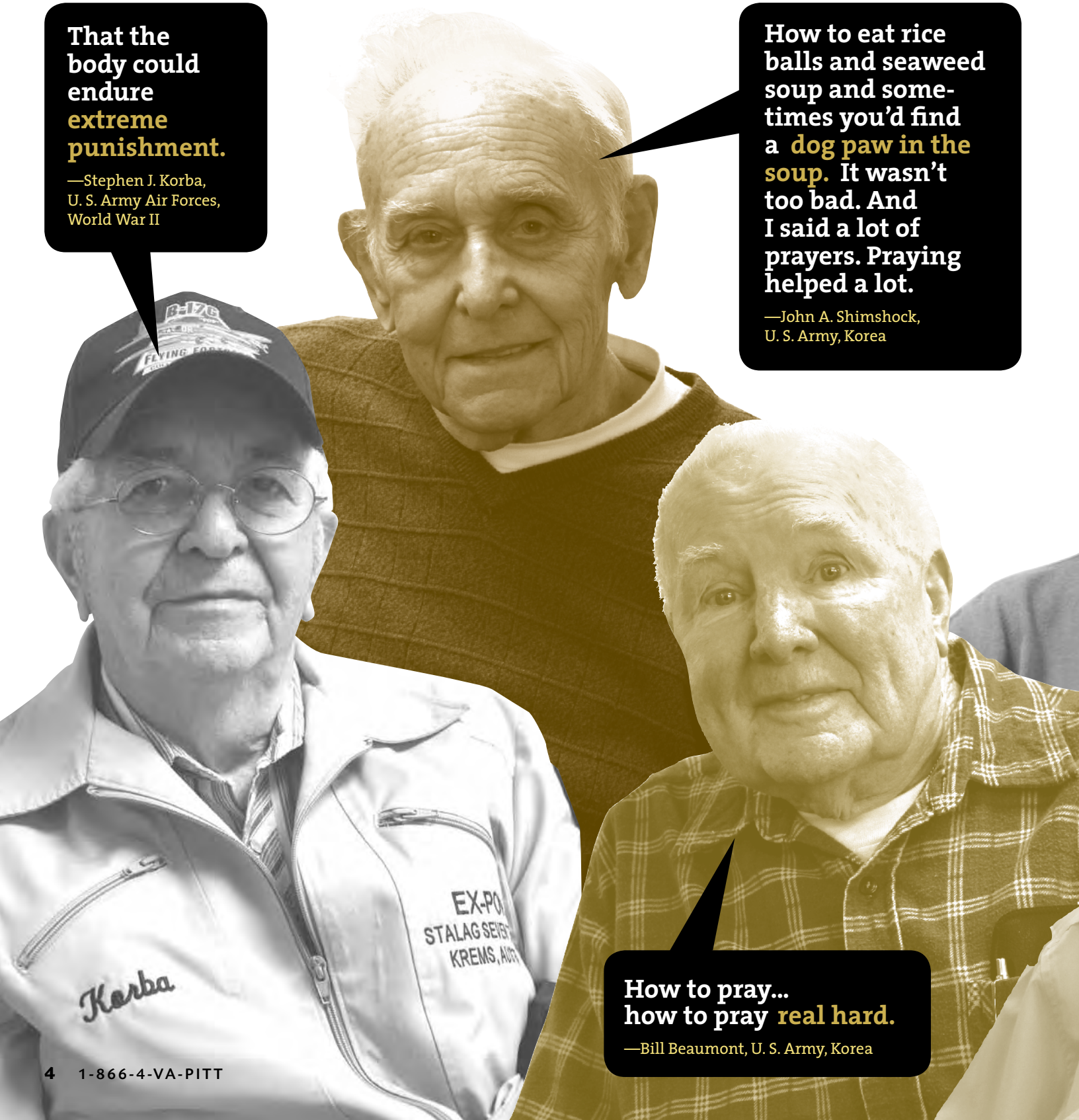
- The Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania recently presented an Achievement Award to VA Pittsburgh's **lung cancer collaborative team** for their work in streamlining patient care.
- Chief of General Medicine **Chester "Bernie" Good** scored a national VA honor—the Advancement of Pharmacy Programs Award—for improving high-quality pharmaceutical care at VAPHS.
- **VAPHS** recently received the American Heart Association's Bronze Award for excelling in treating patients with congestive heart failure.
- VA Secretary Eric Shinseki recognized VAPHS Director **Terry Gerigk Wolf**'s strong support of nursing programs by presenting her with the Award for the Advancement of Nursing Programs earlier this summer.

NURSES' SHELF

- A team of VAPHS nurses, spearheaded by **Karen Harrison**, received one of 10 Nursing Services Innovations Awards, which recognize valuable, nurse-led programs and services throughout the VA.
- Nurses **Tarrah Lopreiato, Stacy Faulkner, Martin Mains, Melanie Erskine** and **Deborah Mitchum** earned Cameos of Caring honors for going above and beyond the call of duty.
- Nurses for **VA Pittsburgh's Dialysis Program** have received the highest honor—five-diamond status—in the Five-Diamond Patient Safety Program, which evaluates patient safety in dialysis units across the country.

{ VAmoment } WHAT

VA Pittsburgh Veterans reflect on the tough lessons they learned as former prisoners of war



That the body could endure extreme punishment.

—Stephen J. Korba, U. S. Army Air Forces, World War II

How to eat rice balls and seaweed soup and sometimes you'd find a dog paw in the soup. It wasn't too bad. And I said a lot of prayers. Praying helped a lot.

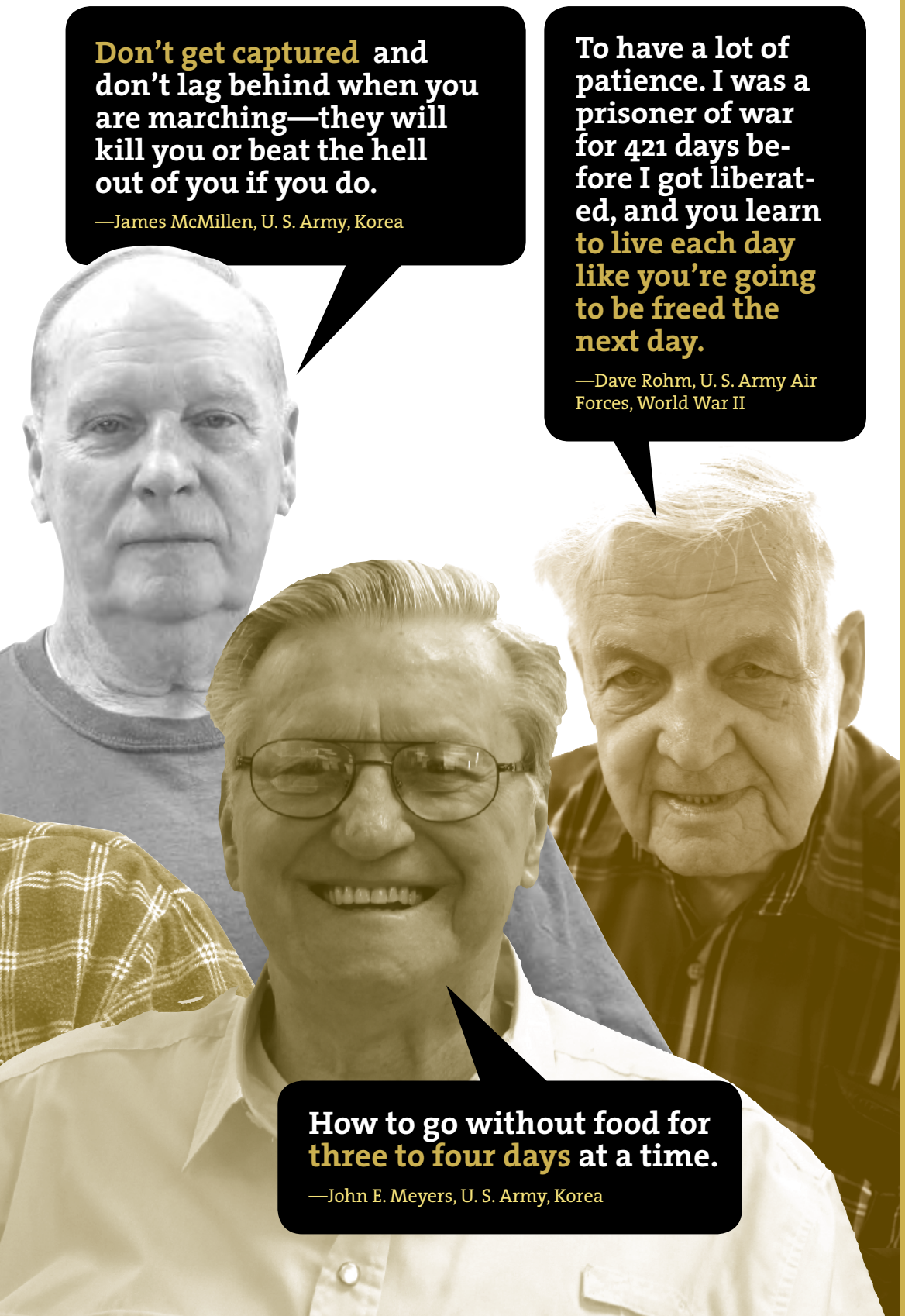
—John A. Shimshock, U. S. Army, Korea

How to pray... how to pray real hard.

—Bill Beaumont, U. S. Army, Korea

I LEARNED...

BY BETHANY MIGA



VAPHS HELPS EX-POWS HEAL

For the past 25 years, VA Pittsburgh has supported a unique program specifically for ex prisoners of war. This program, which draws more than 100 Veterans to the High land Drive campus each month, gives ex POWs a chance to reconnect while receiving primary care tips and behavioral health support.

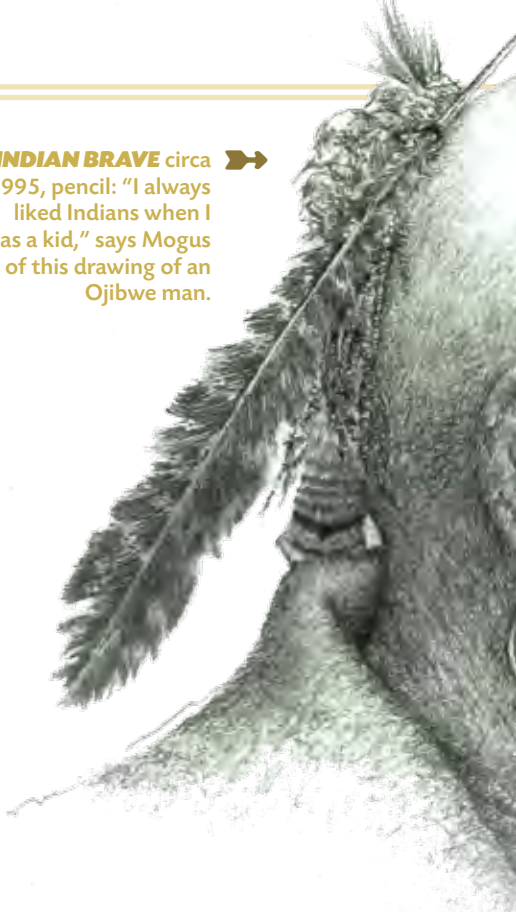
"For many years, these men wouldn't talk about their experi ences and some didn't even acknowledge that they were POWs," says Dr. Bernadette Lauber, the program's coordi nator. "This group has allowed them to be proud of their military experiences."

Air Force Veteran Frank Kravetz, 87, who was held prisoner of war for five months during World War II, would agree. "You get to speak out and tell your story."

{ myVA }

AN ARTIST'S SECOND ACT

One Veteran's story about giving up his passion—and how VA Pittsburgh helped him find it again BY LAURA MCINTOSH



INDIAN BRAVE circa 1995, pencil: "I always liked Indians when I was a kid," says Mogus of this drawing of an Ojibwe man.

LEFT Mogus as a young soldier. **BELOW** Mogus, at home in August 2010, with his latest drawing.

It is early afternoon. John Mogus sits quietly in his makeshift home studio in Murrysville, Pa. His house is quiet—and quickly swallowed by a dense forest. Mogus, 89, expertly holds a pencil as he sketches; he stares intently at the monitor in front of him. His eyes are not what they used to be.

It is a simple, frustrating truth.

Fifteen years ago, doctors had delivered the harsh news: macular degeneration, an eye disorder that damages the retina and results in a loss of vision. Time moved too fast and so did his disease. Five years later, the World War II Veteran's eyesight had grown so dim—so blurry—that he had to stop doing what he loved most.

"It's my life. Ever since I was a kid, I loved art," recalls Mogus, who had 45-year career as a commercial artist and specialized in drawing and painting portraits and wildlife. Even in retirement, the Veteran stayed busy.

"He worked at his drawing board every day. Every single day," recalls Mogus's daughter, Marilyn, 66.

But when his eyes failed him, "I stopped completely," says Mogus. For five years, he did not dare pick up a pencil. He did not even try to mix paints. "It was very frustrating. People were calling me for portraits, and I couldn't do anything. It was terrible."

In December 2009, the Army Veteran—who at the time was seeing a private optometrist—learned of VA Pittsburgh's Low Vision Clinic. He made an appointment. Sky Sallee, a VAPHS employee who oversees program support for rehabilitation therapy at the clinic, recalls the Veteran's first visit.

"He brought in his paintings. ...You rarely see that, you

rarely see someone bring in what they like to do. And he said, 'This is what I want to do,'" says Sallee. "He seemed very sad that he couldn't do what he really enjoyed."

The visit changed Mogus's life. Thanks to Sallee and the rest of VAPHS's low vision rehabilitation team, the Veteran soon received a desktop video magnifier. The simple device, which can make objects appear more than 60 times closer, enables the artist to see every detail on an LCD screen before him. "It was great. I was pretty excited," says Mogus of receiving the machine. "Now I use it constantly—for reading, writing and drawing."

Follow-up visits to VA Pittsburgh resulted in the Veteran taking home even more assistive devices, such as a talking calculator, a talking watch, a lighted magnifier, and a clever tool that alerts Mogus when to stop pouring coffee into his cup.

Today, the artist uses these gadgets as part of his daily life—brush in hand or not. And now that he is back to doing what he loves, Mogus has no plans to slow down. His latest work is a penciled, snowy scene from the Battle of the Bulge (opposite page, bottom left), which he will donate to a local funeral home. And this year—just a few months shy of his 90th birthday—the Veteran entered a painting into the state's annual "duck stamp" contest.

The Veteran also has pieces in the Bastogne Historical Center in Belgium, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Kansas, and the General George Patton Museum in Kentucky.

"The important thing is that I'm getting back to painting and drawing again," says the Veteran, smiling. "I never thought I would do that...I'm happy to be getting back to that."

TOP TO BOTTOM ***UNTITLED*** 1994, acrylic: Mogus won Florida's annual duck stamp contest (see stamp, inset) with this painting of an American Wigeon. ***CROSSING THE RHINE*** 1992, watercolor: This painting shows the 809th Tank Destroyer Battalion crossing the Rhine River in Germany on March 27, 1945, and hangs in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, Kan. ***PENNSYLVANIA ANGLER*** circa 1997, acrylic: "This is one of my favorite spots," says Mogus of his painted scene, which is inspired by Loyalhanna Creek near Ligonier, Pa.

PURPLE HEART HEROES

Local Veterans share their stories of surviving hostile fire

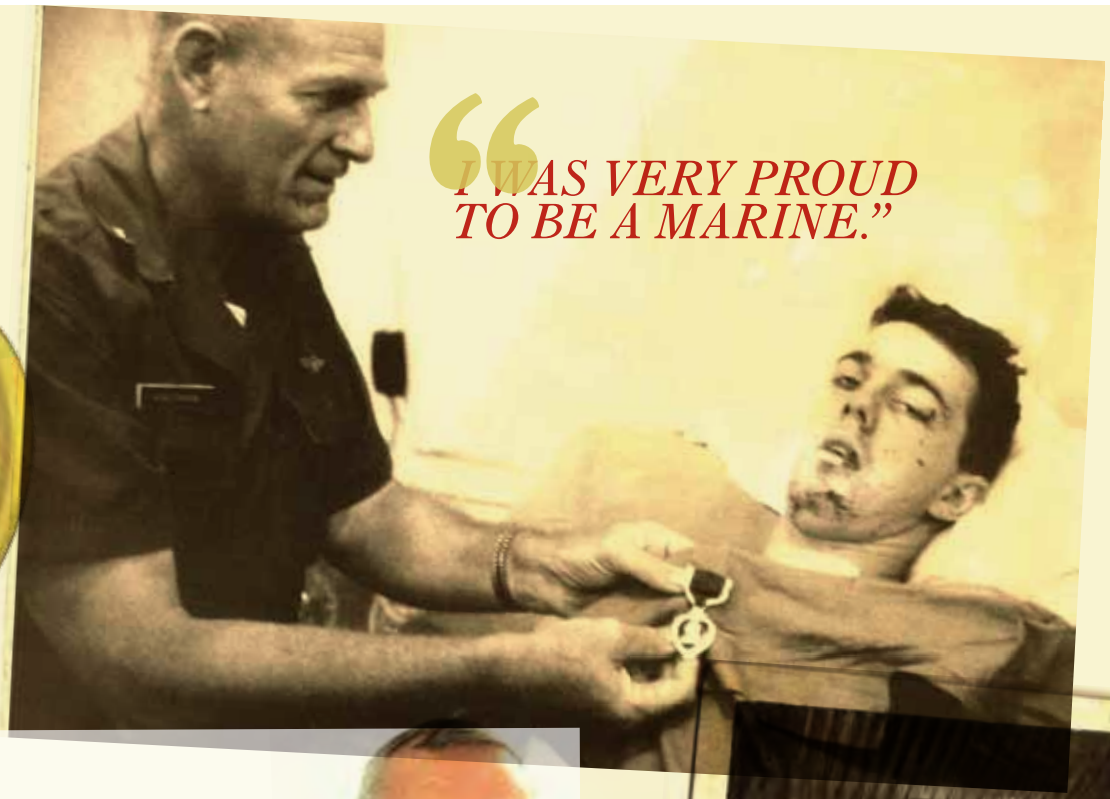
By Brandon Vesely

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In the summer of 2010, Boy Scout **Brandon Vesely** from Plum, Pa., set out to interview Purple Heart recipients as part of his quest to earn his Eagle Scout Badge. The 17-year-old invested more than 100 hours in this project, which resulted in the ensuing seven profiles of Pittsburgh-area Veterans. "I was surprised at how quickly the Veterans opened up to me," recalls Brandon of the interview process. "I now understand the sense of camaraderie felt by these men and women toward their fellow Veterans and the value that they place on their memories and experiences."

ABOUT THE PURPLE HEART MEDAL

General George Washington created the Purple Heart medal—originally called the Badge of Military Merit—in 1782 to recognize service members who had performed a "meritorious action...not only instances of unusual gallantry but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service." General Washington's written explanation of this badge vanished for the next 150 years—and so did the military practice of awarding the medal. In 1932, the government reinstated the honor, which today recognizes servicemen and women who have been wounded or killed due to hostile fire, and called it the Purple Heart medal.



"I WAS VERY PROUD TO BE A MARINE."

James Robert Lang

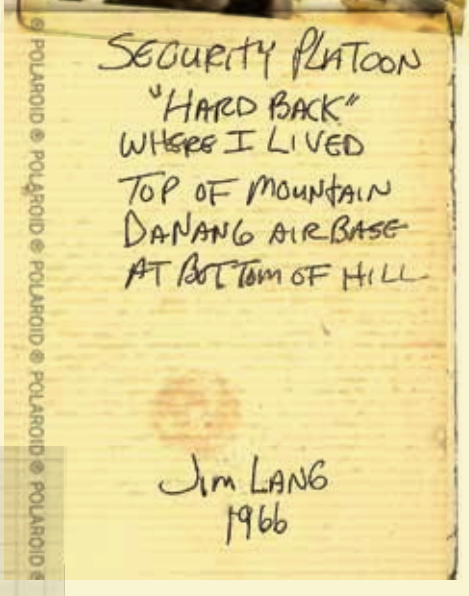
Born Sept. 16, 1946
Vietnam War Veteran
E4 Corporal in the Marine Corps

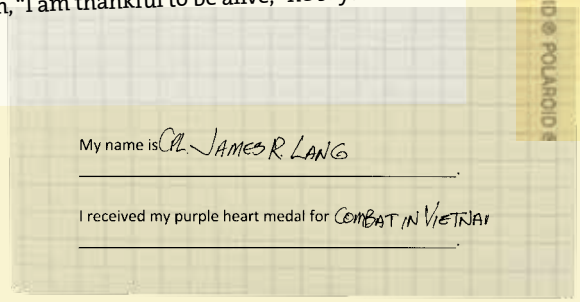
The Army drafted Lang at age 19, but he opted to enlist in the Marine Corps instead. "I was very proud to be a Marine," says the Turtle Creek, Pa., native. On April 6, 1967, Lang—then 20 years old—was on patrol in Vietnam, traveling along a well-known trail, when a hostile mine exploded in front of him.

The resulting blast "blew up my front," recalls Lang, who suffered multiple shrapnel wounds, including a shattered knee, punctured lung, and the use of his right leg.

A helicopter flew the injured Lang from the scene, and the Marine spent 15 months recovering at a naval hospital.

Today, the Veteran is a 14-year volunteer at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, and he serves as the junior vice commander for Chapter 455 of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. And though memories from Lang's time in Vietnam still haunt him, "I am thankful to be alive," he says.





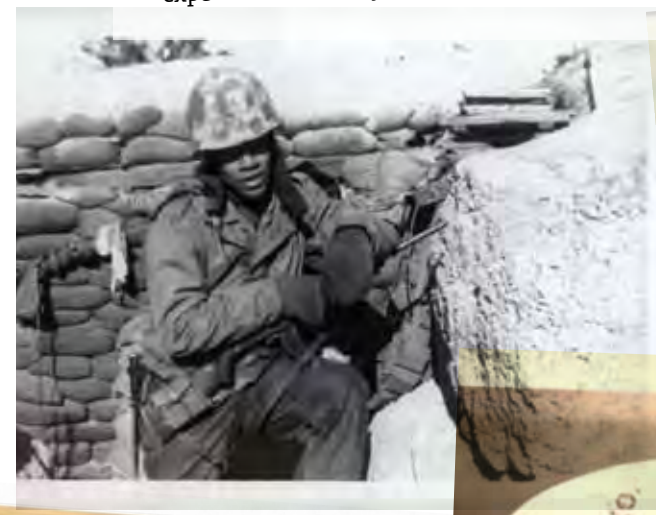
"I KNEW SOMETHING WAS WRONG, BUT I DIDN'T WANT TO BE PULLED AWAY FROM MY UNIT."

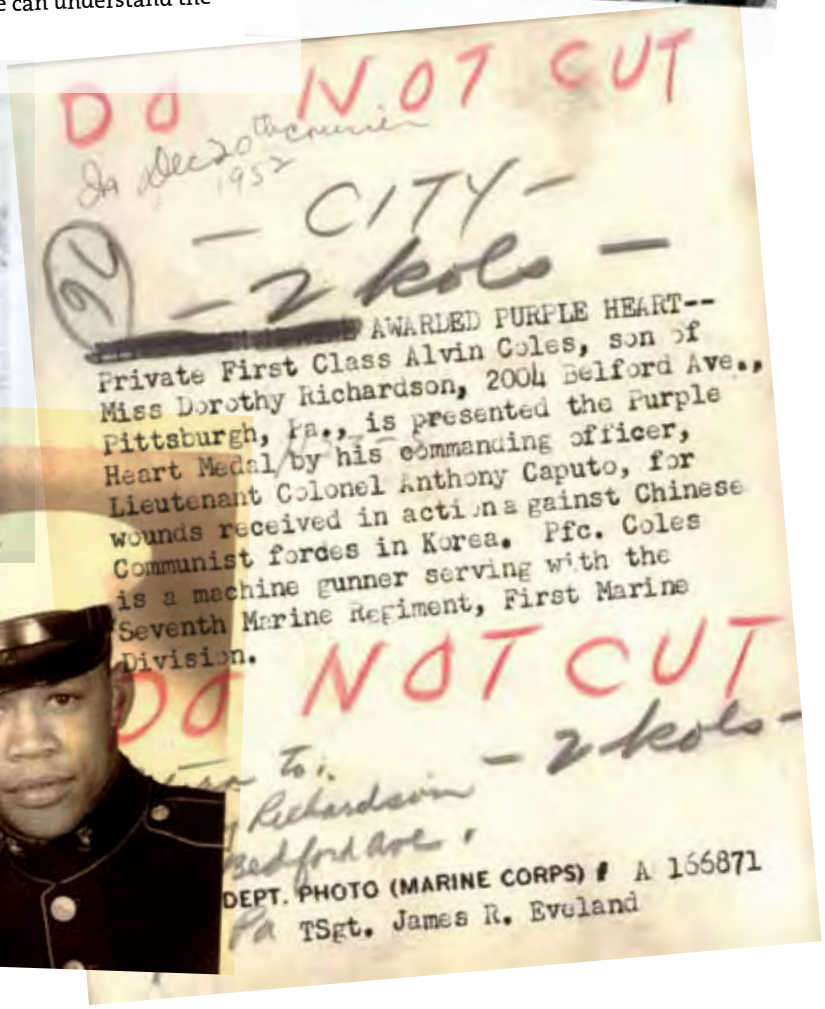
Alvin Coles

Born March 8, 1932
Korean War Veteran
Corporal in the U.S. Marine Corps

In late October 1952, a compression grenade struck then 20-year-old Coles and knocked him out cold. The corporal—who is reluctant to discuss the details of the incident even today—was admitted to a hospital to recover, and when he came to, "I knew something was wrong, but I didn't want to be pulled away from my unit."

After a week of rest, Coles learned that he had earned a Purple Heart medal for his injury. Today, the Veteran keeps his Purple Heart medal in a special display case in his house in Penn Hills, Pa., and he is an active member of the Greater Pittsburgh chapter of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Coles says that he enjoys spending time with other Purple Heart recipients because he feels that he can understand the experiences that they have endured.





DO NOT CUT

In Dec 20th courier 1952

— CITY —

— 2 kols —

[redacted] AWARDED PURPLE HEART--

Private First Class Alvin Coles, son of Miss Dorothy Richardson, 2004 Belford Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa., is presented the Purple Heart Medal by his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Caputo, for wounds received in action against Chinese Communist forces in Korea. Pfc. Coles is a machine gunner serving with the Seventh Marine Regiment, First Marine Division.

DO NOT CUT

— 2 kols —

To: Richardson
Bedford Ave.
Pa

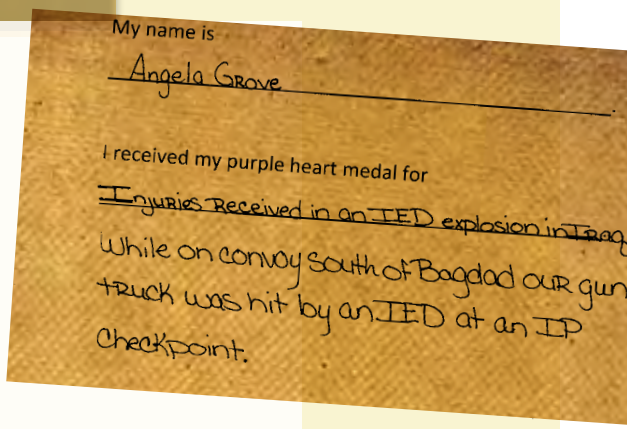
DEPT. PHOTO (MARINE CORPS) # A 166871

TSgt. James R. Eveland

My name is Alvin B. Coles

I received my purple heart medal for Wounds received on Oct. 26 1952

"I REMEMBER BEING DISORIENTED AND ANGRY BECAUSE THEY HAD ATTACKED."


My name is
Angela Grove
I received my purple heart medal for
Injuries Received in an IED explosion in Iraq
While on convoy south of Bagdad our gun
truck was hit by an IED at an IP
Checkpoint.

Angela Grove

Born Oct. 5, 1975
Operation Iraqi Freedom Veteran
Specialist in the U.S. Army

It was before dawn on July 17, 2007, when Grove's Humvee—the middle vehicle in a convoy—rolled through a small Iraqi town south of Baghdad. The Dayton, Pa., resident recalls watching people outside, running along the nearby rooftops, and signal flares sending an ominous, red ribbon of light through the darkness.

"They like to split up the convoy and then attack it and take it...they were obviously doing something," Grove says of the shadowy figures outside.

She was right. Moments later, an improvised explosive device struck the Humvee. "We were going pretty fast when it hit," the Veteran recalls. Fellow passengers pulled Grove from her spot in the vehicle's armored turret. "I remember being disoriented and angry because they had attacked."

The Humvee, still in one piece, sped to safety. A field medic later checked the soldier for injuries and confirmed that she had suffered a broken wrist in the attack.

Weeks would pass before Grove realized the full, physical toll of that night. Doctors eventually diagnosed the soldier with a long list of ailments, including traumatic brain injury, hearing loss, a dislocated jaw, torn foot ligaments and thoracic spine factures. Her wrist was shattered and eventually required surgery.

Exactly one month after the blast, Grove received her Purple Heart medal. "I was surprised," she recalls. "It's a great honor."

"YOU NEVER GROW CLOSER TO ANYONE THAN SOMEONE YOU'RE IN CONFLICT WITH."

Herman Hardy

Born Nov. 10, 1948
Vietnam War Veteran
E3 Corporal in the U.S. Marine Corps

Drafted at age 19, Hardy worked as a radio operator, calling in air strikes from his base in the northern tip of South Vietnam. In June 1969—just 23 days shy of his tour wrapping up—the Marine was eating his lunch when the North Vietnamese attacked. Hardy tried to escape the fire, but a self-propelled rocket struck him from behind.

His air-lift to safety—and additional medical help—did not go smoothly. The enemy shot down the helicopter carrying the wounded Marine, who was further injured by flying shrapnel from the crash.

During his tour, Hardy forged a tight bond with his fellow service members. "As a Marine, you didn't want to let down the person next to you... you never grow closer to anyone than someone you're in conflict with."

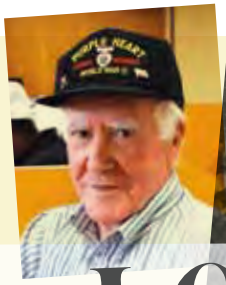
Today, the Pittsburgh resident volunteers at the VA. He keeps his Purple Heart medal in its original box, and he credits his military service for his success as a student and his successful run as student government president in college. The military, says Hardy, led him to be confident, focused and disciplined.

It is his goal to return to Vietnam before he dies.

ABOUT THE MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

The Military Order of the Purple Heart is a national organization, with local chapters across the country, which seeks to connect and attend to the needs of Purple Heart recipients. Learn more about the organization—including membership requirements—by visiting the Greater Pittsburgh Chapter 455 of the Military Order of the Purple Heart at **www.mophchapter455.org**.

"SOMEBODY, WHILE I WAS IN THE HOSPITAL, CAME AND HUNG IT AROUND MY NECK."
—Carr, referring to his Purple Heart



William J. Carr

Born Sept. 12, 1924, World War II Veteran, Infantry Sergeant in the U.S. Army

In 1943, Carr, then a high school senior, enlisted in the service alongside a few of his friends—and even ended up serving with a few of them in the 324th Infantry Regiment. His fellow soldiers called him "The Kid."

While on tour in Europe, the 19-year old and his company were advancing upon German troops when the air exploded in artillery fire. An artillery shell detonated nearby, wounding both of the soldier's legs.

His valor did not go unrecognized. "Somebody, while I was in the hospital, came and hung it around my neck," recalls Carr, referring to his Purple Heart medal. The Greensburg native received additional decorations throughout his military career, including the Army's Bronze Star, which honors "heroic or meritorious achievement or service."

Paul Sager

Born Dec. 13, 1935, Vietnam War Veteran, Platoon Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps

"I WAS PROUD TO FIGHT FOR MY COUNTRY, AND IF I HAD TO DO IT OVER AGAIN, I WOULD DO IT AGAIN."

Enemy fire erupted as Sager's regiment cleared a landing zone in the middle of the jungle. The then 31-year-old Sager did not know what hit him—literally. "I never made it to my fighting hole. I hit the ground and all of a sudden something hit me in the shoulder, in my left shoulder. I don't know whether a mosquito bit me or I got hit by a baseball bat," he recalls.

A medic wrapped the Marine's shoulder, and shortly after the firing stopped, a medical evacuation helicopter transported Sager to Phu Bai base near Da Nang in South Vietnam. The sergeant earned a Purple Heart medal for his wounds—his second of the tour—but he would never return to the combat field again. "I was proud to fight for my country, and if I had to do it over again, I would do it again," the Verona, Pa., resident recalls.

"THE BUNKER CAVED IN, AND I WAS BURIED UNDER THERE FOR MORE THAN TWO HOURS. THEY HAD TO DIG ME OUT."

David H. Hoover

Born Nov. 12, 1947, Vietnam War Veteran, E5 Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps

On Aug. 3, 1968, Hoover had just returned to Con Thien, Vietnam, to begin a second tour with his unit, the 1st Marine Division. "We were sitting in the bunker, I was getting reacquainted with the guys, and we took a direct hit," the New Castle, Pa., resident recalls. "The bunker caved in, and I was buried under there for more than two hours. They had to dig me out."

Hoover lay "buried alive" with his leg severely broken and pinned down by a heavy beam. Ultimately, the Veteran was airlifted back to a naval hospital in Maryland, and he spent six months recovering from the blast.

Thirty-five years later—after learning from a VA employee that he had qualified for the honor—Hoover received his Purple Heart medal. "I am proud to be a Purple Heart recipient," says the Veteran. "It shows that you gave your all for your country."

{ VAshowcase }

A CELEBRATION

This fall, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System hosted its third annual All About Art show. The juried event gives Veterans—especially men and women coping with behavioral health issues—a chance to change gears and get creative. Participants can compete in a variety of categories, including sculpture, crafts, poetry and photography. BY ARIN GENCER

Frank Johnson
BRANCH **Marines**
CATEGORY **Painting**
TITLE OF WORK **Tupac**
AGE **53**

Johnson—an experienced sculptor—tried his hand at painting for this portrait of deceased rapper Tupac Shakur. "When I can take something that has no real value and then turn it into something with a lot of value, it just fascinates me," he says.

THE POWER OF ART

Janice Galanter, who directs the All About Art show and VAPHS's Mental Health Intensive Case Management Program, weighs in on how Veterans can benefit from tapping into their artistic talents

Q Why is art beneficial to a person's health?
Galanter "It's healing because it's all about the Veteran as a person. We never use the word patient in connection with our exhibit because, in this setting, they are not patients; they're just artists, which is an identity people can have at every level—including the person who paints by numbers and the person that is Michelangelo."

OF TALENT

Veterans show off their creative side at VA Pittsburgh's annual art contest

1ST

3RD

Suzan Ragan
BRANCH **Army**
CATEGORY **Drawing**
TITLE OF WORK **Centurion**
AGE **61**

A fan of ancient Rome, Ragan credits the movie "Gladiator" as a source of inspiration for her pastel drawing, which snagged third-place honors at the show. "It's a real outlet for me," she says of her art hobby. "It actually just brings me joy, sheer joy. I can totally lose myself in it."

Richard Sobek
BRANCH **Army**
CATEGORY **Drawing**
TITLE OF WORK **Squirrel No. 8**
AGE **62**

Sobek's drawing portrays what the former commercial artist knows best: the creatures he often sees in his backyard. "Just to complete a piece is a reward for me," the Vietnam Veteran says. "It's so beneficial to take your mind off your problems."

1ST

Charlie Seay Jr.
BRANCH **Army**
CATEGORY **Photography**
TITLE OF WORK **Mud Bowl**
AGE **63**

Seay snapped this scene during his great nephew's muddy football game. "What brought my eye to it was the guy's pink hat, and I liked his expression.... They get really serious—and it's just a game." As for photography in general: "It relaxes me," Seay says.

Q Why does VAPHS put on the art show?
Galanter "It's an opportunity for Veterans to connect at a very universal level and to express their passions and make observations about the world around them. It also gives them an identity other than as a person who has a mental illness."

{ haveyouheard? }

16% of all VA chaplains are women.

VAPHS Chaplain Bridges Gender Gaps

Mary Q. Browne—the spiritual care coordinator for VAPHS's Healthy Women's Center—is one of just 120 female VA chaplains nationwide. "Women's military experiences are very different than men's," says Browne, an ordained minister and licensed clinical social worker. "It is an honor for me to serve the spiritual needs of our female Veterans."

Needed: 3,000 Volunteers!

The National Veterans Wheelchair Games are coming to Pittsburgh Aug. 1-6, 2011. The event, which draws more than 500 competitors each year, is a great way to give back to Veterans and the community. Interested in volunteering? Contact Rick Kiehn at 412-954-4582 or visit www.pittsburgh.va.gov/NVWG

Attention, Vietnam Veterans.

If you were exposed to herbicides during your time of service, and you have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, ischemic heart disease and/or a B-cell leukemia, you may now be eligible to receive additional benefits. To file your claim, visit www.fasttrack.va.gov

Help Researchers Help America's Heroes

Veterans: do your part to help advance medical breakthroughs by participating in VA research! Volunteering for a study will not impact your medical benefits. Call 412-954-5381 to learn more.

MEDAL MOMENT

WHO: JESUS RODRIGUEZ JR., AN OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM VETERAN

Rodriguez received his **Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal** while serving on a drug-eradication taskforce in Arizona and New Mexico. The bronze medal, with its fouled anchor and corner stars, is modeled after the Secretary of the Navy's flag and signifies "meritorious service or achievement." "I was one of two men in my unit to receive this medal," recalls Rodriguez, a Marine. "It's an honor, but I was just doing my job."

WORKING TOGETHER

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We'd Like to Hear From You

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VAPHS
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System