

THE ALABAMA VETERAN



Kay Ivey
Governor

Spring 2018

W. Clyde Marsh
Commissioner



DATES TO REMEMBER

- * Easter
April 1, 2018
- * Tax Day Day
April 17, 2018
- * Administrative Professionals Day
April 26, 2018
- * Armed Forces Day
May 19, 2018
- * Memorial Day
May 28, 2018
- * Flag Day
June 14, 2018

INSIDE THIS EDITION

Legislators Honor Military	2
Meet Your VSO	3
Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home	4
Highs/Lows of the Claims Office	5
VSO Finds Friend	6
Fun at the Homes	7
Federal VA News	8

Commissioner's Corner



I am delighted to announce that our State Veterans Homes are among the best in the nation. The VA must formally recognize and certify a facility as a State Veterans Home and then conduct an annual survey (inspection) to make sure the homes continue to meet VA standards. Three of our homes—Bill Nichols in Alexander City, Col. Robert L. Howard in Pell City and William F. Green in Bay Minette—recently all received zero deficiencies during the yearly federal VA surveys. The Floyd “Tut” Fann Veterans Home will

receive their survey later in the year.

The zero-deficiency survey result means our homes are in compliance in every respect with the rules and regulations that govern skilled nursing facilities set by Bureau of Health Provider Standards and that quality care is being provided. Caring for our veterans is one of the most sacred duties we work to achieve as a state.

On another note, the state of our agency is good and continues to improve. Our department has served veterans and their families for more than 70 years. We hold ourselves personally and professionally accountable to deliver on America's promises to all veterans through courage, conviction and a belief in our core values.

In keeping with our mission to assist veterans, the Headquarters staff met and gathered ideas and inspiration to document how we plan to achieve our vision of ensuring veterans know about all the benefits they are entitled to. This strategic plan sets the stage for the progress we intend to make in serving veterans over the next several years.

Some of our priorities are to continue to provide quality assistance in acquiring earned benefits. This can be accomplished by ensuring that we have adequate manning for all 67 counties in Alabama. In addition to adequate manning, we also must develop and implement an annual training plan. This training will ensure that every employee stays up-to-date on our various procedures. Another priority is to increase public awareness of our department through social media platforms and agency pamphlets. A final priority is to improve our department's technology capability.

These are but a few of our goals for the coming years. More information will be forthcoming as ADVA's strategic plan is finalized.

In closing, I want to remind our VA employees that you are part of something larger than yourself. You are faithful servants to our nation's finest men and women. You provide a priceless service to them and to the State of Alabama. You are making a difference in the lives of Alabama veterans and I am proud of you for your accomplishments.

**ALABAMA
DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS**

STATE COMMISSIONER

W. Clyde Marsh
Wendi Findley—Executive Assistant

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

Michael E. Northcutt

VETERANS HOME PROGRAMS

Kim Justice—Executive Director

CLAIMS DIVISION

Mark Sullivan—Claims Manager

CEMETERY

Tony Ross—Director

FIELD OPERATIONS

Tim Edgil—District I Manager
Rogers Wilson—District II
Manager
Lynda Jenkins—District III
Manager

LOCATION

RSA Union
100 North Union Street, Suite 850
Montgomery, Alabama 36104
Telephone: (334) 242-5077
Fax: (334) 242-5102

MAILING ADDRESS

Department of Veterans Affairs
PO Box 1509
Montgomery, Alabama 36102-1509

INTERNET WEB ADDRESS

Web: www.va.alabama.gov
E-Mail: adva@va.alabama.gov

Comments concerning this newsletter may be directed to the attention of:
Belinda Bazinet
Public Information Officer
E-mail: belinda.bazinet@va.alabama.gov

Alabama Legislators Honor Military

Governor Kay Ivey declared February 15 “Military Appreciation Day” in Alabama, stating that the state celebrates its military not just one day, but all year long.

Gen. Gus Perna, commanding general of the Army Materiel Command on Redstone Arsenal, addressed the legislature on that date. “Alabama doesn’t just talk about supporting the military, it takes action to support the military,” he said. “The result of that support is more than 51,000 people in Alabama either currently serve in the military or work for the DOD as a civilian.

“While that’s impressive, the number I find even more remarkable is the 350,000 veterans who live in Alabama today,” he said. “At one time these 350,000 people served something bigger than themselves and then decided to call this great state home.”

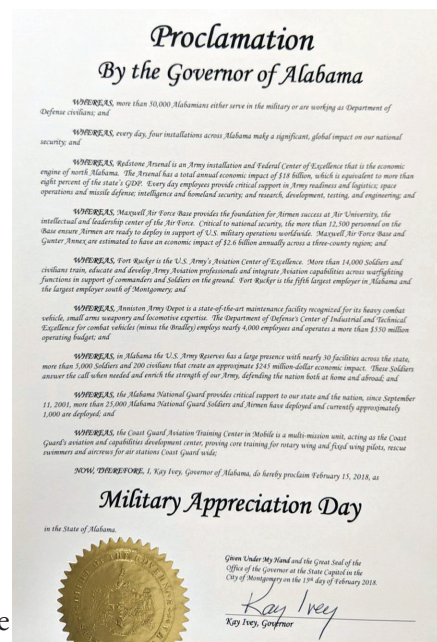
The Senate worked on bills designed to benefit those who have served or are currently serving in our nation’s armed forces. For example, the Veterans Employment Act provides incentives to businesses that hire honorably discharged veterans who are currently unemployed. The bill would ensure that the veterans covered by this incentive program would be hired for full-time jobs. The Parks for Patriots Act would provide free, year-round admission to all Alabama state parks for active military personnel and veterans, including members of the National Guard and Reserves.

“In Alabama we have a deep respect for those who serve our county,” Governor Ivey said. “All around the state I see examples of the fine work these men and women do and it is important to recognize and thank our military members whenever we can.”

“Like all Alabamians, I am thankful for the service of our retired and active military service members,” Senate Pro Tem Del Marsh said. “I am grateful for the opportunity the Legislature has to support the men and women who wear the uniform and serve Alabama and our nation so well.”

Additionally, the House held a “Military and Veterans Day” in the chamber on January 16. “Alabamians are a proud and patriotic people, and our state’s military tradition runs deep in our history, so it is proper that we recognize those who served and fought for our country,” Speaker Mac McCutcheon wrote in a Facebook post. The House honored three Congressional Medal of Honor winners: Command Sergeant Major Bennie Adkins of Opelika, Gary Michael Rose of Huntsville and James Michael Sprayberry of Titus.

Nine of Alabama’s thirty-four State Senators are military veterans.



Meet your VSO

For 15 years Jim McIntire, the DeKalb County veterans service officer (VSO), has helped veterans and their dependents apply for VA benefits, such as compensation and pension. He also assists veterans with education benefits, health care, home loans, fishing license, grave markers, flags, notary service, adding and removing dependents, filing medical expense reports, identification cards and the VA health insurance.

McIntire joined the Air Force in 1979, starting his career in Guam as a bomb loader and electronic repairman on B-52 aircraft. Through the years he worked on many different aircraft at various bases around the world. “The last eight years I was a first sergeant, working directly for the commander over all enlisted troops in the squadron,” he said. Those duties tie into what he does now with the veterans.

“I have helped widows call about their health insurance, helped veterans that are visually impaired read and reply to their mail, fax and copy documents for them, help them find old war buddies, notarize documents for them, and the list goes on,” he said. “We are here to help.”

Jean Harper, the widow of an



Jean Harper gets help with filing a medical report from McIntire.

Army sergeant, came in for help with last year’s medical expense report. “I just want to thank Mr. McIntire for his help in getting me VA benefits,” she said. “I am almost totally blind right now and needed the VA help to pay for a caregiver to assist me. He is so kind and always knows how to help.”

McIntire said that no book, web site, or lawyer can provide a person with everything they need to know to make their claim. “We have one job, one focus, one purpose—the Veteran,” he said. “No other agency can give them this personal, rapid, and accurate assistance for free.”

There are many rewards to

working as a VSO, he said. “The one that most stands out is getting financial assistance for a widow so she can hire a caregiver or move into assisted living. A benefit without which many would not survive.”

McIntire receives a lot of phone calls and walk-ins. Last year he had a total of 5,269 contacts, and that’s just the ones he recorded. “That equals to 440 a month,” he said. “But people stop us to ask questions when they see us at Walmart, or catch me in the parking lot before I come in or the quick phone calls. I just do not have the time to make a record of all of these. Needless to say, we are busy.”



May 28, 2018

Every year on Memorial Day, the nation remembers those who have died while serving our country.

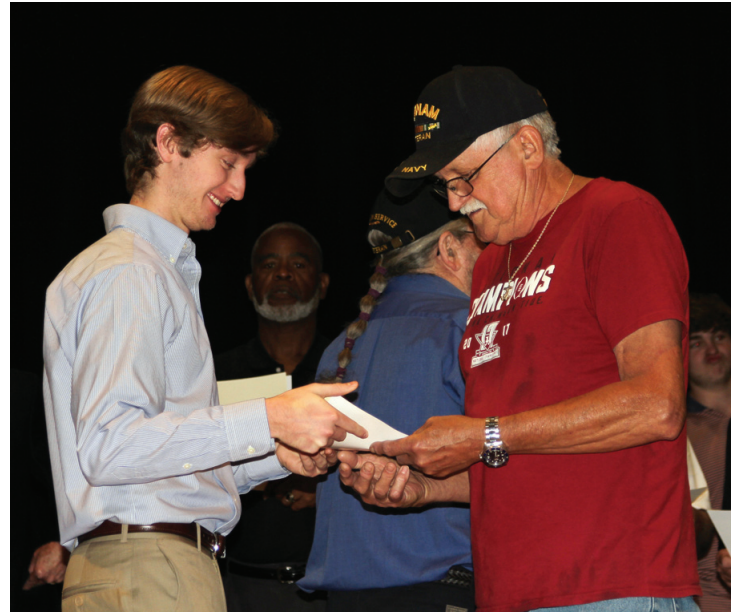
Vietnam Veterans Welcomed Home

Hundreds of Vietnam veterans, their families and members of the community gathered in Auburn on March 29 to welcome home East Alabama’s Vietnam veterans.

National Vietnam Veterans Day—March 29—commemorated the sacrifices of Vietnam veterans and their families. It was a day set aside to honor veterans of the war that defined a generation and continues hold a complicated legacy.

Auburn High School history teacher Dr. Blake Busbin explained that the ceremony offered an opportunity for reflection, remembrance and celebration. It also provided a chance to right the bitter or dismissive reactions so many veterans experienced upon returning to the United States after their tours of duty. Vietnam and Vietnam period veterans were presented with the official 50th anniversary commemoration lapel pin provided by the Department of Defense.

“This ceremony allowed the greater East Alabama region to demonstrate our gratitude for the devotion and sacrifice of those who served during this period,” he said. “The Vietnam War was one of the most consequential events of the twentieth century for America, yet we have not taken the time to honor our veterans who accepted the call for duty regardless of the circumstances of the



Navy veteran James Freeman receives his certificate and lapel pin from an Auburn High student.

time or conflict.”

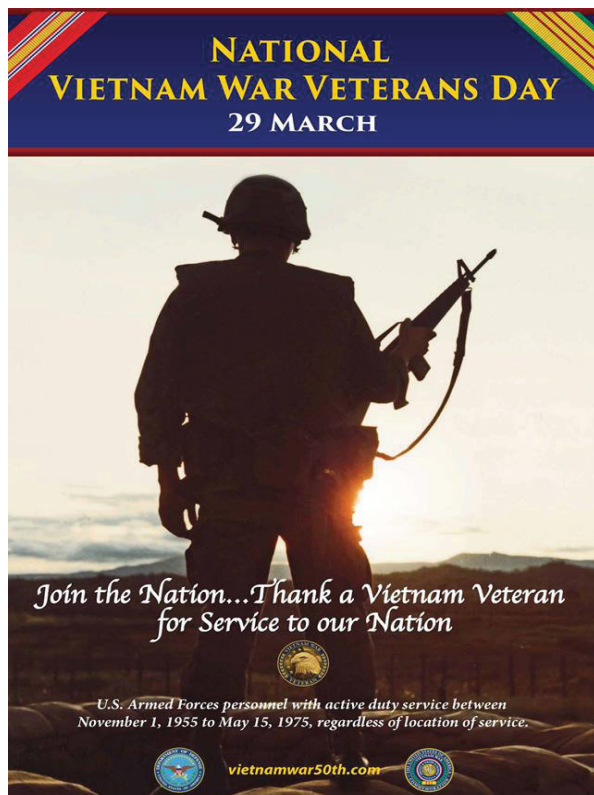
Medal of Honor recipients retired U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie Adkins, an Opelika resident, and retired U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. James Livingston, an Auburn University graduate, shared their reflections on service in the Vietnam War.

Livingstone said that every day, around 500 Vietnam veterans pass away, referencing reports from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. “The impact from the sacrifices and service given by these veterans has enduringly affected those serving today.”

Joe Galloway, a Vietnam War correspondent and co-author of *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*, delivered the keynote address. “It should have happened a half a century ago, but it didn’t,” he said. “There was no welcome home, there was no respect, there was even a disrespect for some people who landed at the wrong airport. And that’s wrong.

“War takes so much from you but gives you the best friends of your life,” he said. “There is no greater bond than that formed in battle. If you survived, you are brothers forever.”

Galloway ended his remarks by welcoming the veterans home, receiving roaring applause. “On behalf of the nation that too often forgets the cost of war and who pays that price, I would like to say, ‘Welcome home. Thank you for your service,’” he said. “God bless you. God keep you and your families.”



Highs, Lows of the Claims Office

by Dan Lawless
Claims Reviewer

Working in the Claims office is full of highs, lows, triumph and heartbreak. I met Mr. Rome around October of 2016 when we represented him in a video hearing. He had multiple issues which I felt he had a good shot of being granted VA compensation. One was a claim for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) based upon his time in service. The other major contention was for Ischemic Heart disease (IHD); I was trying to get the judge to recognize this as presumptive to his time in Thailand.

We represented him as best we could and made a strong argument. The claim then was sent to the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA) in Washington D.C. for a decision. A BVA decision can take about eight to 13 months, assuming the judge doesn't remand the claim back to the regional office for more information such as opinions, exams, private medical records, etc.

Mr. Rome liked the way we represented him and I sympathized with this older veteran. He said it was nice just to have somebody listen to him. He had multiple other issues that were not service connected: the amputation of one of his legs and rotten teeth. Mr. Rome was down on his luck and needed help. I went through his military medical records four or five times looking for anything I could successfully claim. I did submit him for increases on two issues that were granted in a short period of time. That gave him a little help, although not much.

He would call weekly and I thought his calls were more about him wanting to talk with somebody rather than checking on the status of his claims. As the weeks went by, he sounded more desperate. He never said he was suicidal but made several references to being stuck in the house all day with nothing to do but play with his gun. He said his children were too busy for him and only came around if they needed something. I gave him the suicide hotline number and begged him to use it if he needed it. He said he would.

After one such call, I was trying to think of something/anything we could do for this veteran. I turned to Greg Akers, the American Legion State Adjutant. He in turn got in touch with a Legion post near Mr. Rome's residence. A large contingent from this post, along with their Legion Riders, visited Mr. Rome. They cleaned his home and yard, did some modifications for wheelchair access and shopped and spent Thanksgiving with him. They also transported him to the post so he could get out of his house and enjoy fellowship with people he had common interests with. This was a big help and made a difference in his life but they couldn't be there all the time. He was still self-conscious about his teeth, his isolationism and his prosthetic leg which did not fit right and caused sores.

Then one day several months later, the magic happened! The judge saw things our way and granted Mr. Rome everything on his claim; he now had a 100 percent overall rating with all the benefits that come with it. I think I was more excited that the veteran. We discussed getting his life back on track—insurance, psychological counseling, new dental implants, a new prosthetic leg, possibly a handicapped modified vehicle and setting up a budget. This was possibly the best day of my career. Unfortunately, it was followed less than two weeks later with one of the worst.

I called to check on Mr. Rome to see about getting his appointments set up. I hadn't heard from him that week which was a little odd but I thought he was busy getting his life together. His daughter answered and told me that he had passed away—from natural causes, not suicide—the day prior. I believe he died knowing there were people who cared. However, it still gets to me how hard we worked and how his life was turning a corner in a very positive way. Then he was gone before he could truly enjoy it.

But, that's the job. You shake your head in disbelief, sarcastically laugh about the irony—then turn your attention to seeing who else you can help.

*The veterans name was changed just as a precaution.

VSO Finds a Friend and Makes History

Candace Reppond, the Cullman County assistant veterans service officer, recently found a new friend and made history in Alabama. She became the first female veteran in the state to get a service dog from Service Dogs Alabama (<http://www.servicedogsalabama.com/>).

The Army veteran was deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan from 2013–14. She was the primary noncommissioned officer (NCO) in charge of the Company Intelligence Support Team (COIST), watching over three different systems to track enemy movements, actions and miscellaneous information that could be a hazard to the company. Reppond said things haven't been easy since her deployment.

In the Army, "I had a purpose; I had a mission that I knew I had to accomplish every single day. I felt important," she said. Her husband noticed a change but thought it as simply adjusting back to civilian life. It would be 2016 before he recognized that possible permanent damage has been done.

Reppond was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to a military trauma. "The

feelings a person has after they have been violated are almost indescribable. After the shock wears off, there is an automatic sense of anger that creeps over you simply because someone of a higher rank thought they could actually get away with what they did (in my circumstance)," she said.

Her psychiatrist recommended that she get a dog. She researched and found Service Dogs of Alabama, a nonprofit organization that specifically provides dogs for Alabama residents. She had to raise 50 percent of Chance's price in order to receive him. The organization then matches that amount. Businesses in the city of Cullman came together and raised the money as a way to give back to one of their veterans.

She received Chance on March 10. "This date was extremely important to me as it is the anniversary date of my Mom passing away from cancer when I was 17. I did not take the opportunity to tell her that I love her or even a goodbye that last evening she was alive," she said. "I've never been able to forgive myself and that causes a great deal of the trauma/issues that I now face."

The Chocolate Lab's primary duty is to ensure that Reppond keeps her anxiety level down. "From the moment that I first saw and touched him, I felt a tremendous amount of pressure lift off of me," she said.

He is able to recognize when her anxiety levels are raised and will distract her by either nudging or leaning his whole body on her. "When I am out in public, he will automatically switch positions to where he is scanning in front of me as well as behind me so I do not have to keep looking around. He has close to 60 commands that he knows to include sounding an alarm (barking) and even nudging me to get up if I fall."

He goes everywhere with her—work, stores and restaurants. "Most of the vets that I work with have been happy to see the dog in the office. I guess like me, there's a sense of comfort that comes with having a dog by your side," she said. "I've had several veterans stop in the office simply because they wanted to meet him and share their stories. Not only has Chance been a blessing to me, but perhaps he is helping the veterans and families that come in as well."



Fun at the Homes



Mr. Guy Sellers turned 100 years old on February 28, 2018. His children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren joined him for a birthday lunch at City Market in Pell City to celebrate his big day.



John and Mary Ann Oulton celebrate Valentine's Day at the Tut Fann State Veterans Home.

VA Launches Telehealth Program for Rural Vets with PTSD

With a focus on improving access to mental health care for veterans living in rural areas, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced it has launched a pilot telehealth program that will give rural veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) remote access to psychotherapy and related services.

VA's Office of Rural Health, in partnership with VA's Quality Enhancement Research Initiative, is supporting the Telemedicine Outreach for PTSD (TOP) program to deliver therapy and other care through phone and interactive video contact.

"Our researchers have worked diligently in recent years to establish the safety and efficacy of PTSD psychotherapy delivered remotely, ensuring Veterans will get the same quality of PTSD care as if they were in a doctor's office at a VA medical center," said VA Secretary David Shulkin. "We are excited to see this program help greater numbers of veterans living in rural areas and pleased that it will save them time and effort to get to a VA facility that is far from their homes."

Dr. John Fortney, a research health scientist at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, Washington, is leading the project.

"Long travel distances to urban areas can be a major barrier to care for rural veterans," Fortney said. "In a prior trial, we were able to use telehealth technologies

successfully to engage veterans in evidence-based, trauma-focused therapy without their having to travel to a distant VA medical center."

To date, more than 500 rural veterans who are not receiving specialty PTSD care have enrolled in the study. The participants may choose between the two main forms of evidence-based, trauma-focused psychotherapy used in VA: cognitive processing therapy and prolonged exposure therapy.

Veterans participating in the program receive frequent phone calls from a care manager who helps them access services provided by off-site psychiatrists and psychologists. The psychotherapy is delivered via interactive video from a VA medical center to a community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC) or to the veteran's home. The telephone care manager also monitors the Veterans' progress and helps them overcome barriers to care.

The program includes 12 CBOCs across the nation in Charleston, South Carolina; Iowa City, Iowa; Little Rock, Arkansas; Denver, Colorado; San Diego, California; and Seattle. The results, which will be available in 2020, will lay the groundwork for national implementation of the TOP program.

To learn more about VA research on PTSD, visit www.research.va.gov/topics/ptsd.cfm

Just Be There

We all can play a role in preventing suicide, but many people don't know how to support a veteran or service member in their life who's going through a difficult time.

Join the U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Defense in letting people know that preventing suicide starts with this simple act of support: ***Be There.***

Helping someone feel included and supported can make a big difference during a challenging time. And it doesn't require a grand gesture or complicated task. A simple act of kindness can help someone feel less alone.

Small actions of support—calling an old friend, checking in on a neighbor, cooking dinner for a relative or inviting a colleague on a walk—are thoughtful ways to show you care. Similarly, encouraging veterans and service members to take time for themselves and to focus on their own health and wellness can have a big impact.

Then, start the conversation.

Being there for someone can be easy, but starting a conversation about your concerns for that person or broaching the subject of suicide can seem much more difficult. The most important thing is to show genuine, heartfelt support for someone going through a rough period. People may worry about what to say, fear that they will make matters worse, or think that special training is required to safely raise the subject (it's not).

When talking about a possible suicide risk or a life crisis, try to keep these best practices in mind:

- Remain calm.
- Listen more than you speak.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Act with confidence.
- Don't argue.

- Use open body language.
- Limit questions to casual information-gathering.
- Use supportive and encouraging comments.
- Be as honest and upfront as possible.

Before you start a conversation, do some research to find out what suicide prevention and mental health resources are available. Veterans and their families can contact their local VA Medical Center to find counseling, treatment centers, and customized support for any life challenge.

Know when a crisis needs immediate action.

Everyone also should be aware of the [signs of crisis](#), which require **immediate** attention from a medical or mental health professional:

- Thinking about hurting or killing oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself
- Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse or the dangerous use of weapons

If you notice these signs in yourself or a Veteran loved one, **call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1, chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](#), or text to 838255** to get confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.



VA Pensions can Provide Financial Support

Did you know VA offers a pension for eligible wartime veterans who have limited or no income?

This needs-based tax-free monetary benefit helps eligible veterans and their families cope with financial challenges by providing supplemental income.

To qualify, veterans must meet minimum service requirements and also be:

1. Age 65 or older, OR
2. Totally and permanently disabled, OR
3. A patient in a nursing home receiving skilled nursing care, OR
4. Receiving Social Security Disability Insurance, OR
5. Receiving Supplemental Security Income

Veterans who are housebound or require the aid of another person to perform daily activities may qualify for pension at an increased rate.

To learn more and apply, visit [Explore.VA.gov](#)