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by

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Veteran's Odyssey: Combat Trauma and the Long Road to Treatment

(Report from VFW Post 6974)

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Report

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Dedication

I dedicate this report to the veterans, their families, and the ladies auxiliary of Highland Lakes VFW 6974 in Burnet, Texas.

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Abstract

A Veteran's Odyssey: Combat Trauma and the Long Road to Treatment

(Report from VFW Post 6974)

Michael John Bicknell, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Donna DeCesare

Combat veterans often return from war with psychological as well as physical injuries. Armed service members who are bodily injured routinely go to hospitals for treatment, first at military hospitals and later in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system. But those with psychological injuries like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often go years, if not a lifetime, without treatment, in large part because the VA denies their claims with dubious justification. Veterans' service organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and others, as well as state and county governments, have knowledgeable service officers whose job is to help guide veterans through the VA system and through the many appeals that are often needed to get treatment and an adequate disability rating that could result in monetary payments. This report tells the story of one VFW post in Burnet, Texas, its veterans, their families, and how their success in getting treatment for PTSD has positively affected their lives. It has also enabled them, as they recover, to help other veterans seek treatment and win

compensatory disability ratings too. The report focuses on one Vietnam veteran, who four decades after his discharge from the Army came to be treated for PTSD.

Table of Contents

TEXT	1
PHOTOGRAPHS	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY	52
VITA	56

On a road trip one day from his native Ohio to Texas, a thunderstorm rolled overhead and followed Bill Piotrowski's car down the highway. His wife noticed her husband's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, and though she tried to get his attention by tapping his leg and talking softly, he was unresponsive. In Vietnam, he had once driven a jeep crisscrossing the highlands—post-war, the combination of driving in a thunderstorm has become one trigger for his flashbacks. Nancy Keck watched as her husband struggled against the lightning and thunder, transformed now into artillery and firefights. The fear palpable, she tried to return him safely to the present while he drove. He eventually pulled out of it, but this and a similar incident while driving a small school bus—empty of kids—convinced him to change his strategy. He no longer ferries schoolchildren by bus, and he now monitors storms—either driving around them or not driving at all.¹

Piotrowski left Vietnam 40-plus years ago, but it did not leave him. In Vietnam, he was a combat engineer, a position that provided support and protection for the engineers and crews that built and repaired roads and bridges. This qualified him for membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), though he did not look into or join the organization until late in life when he moved to the rural town of Burnet, Texas.²

At the VFW, he met other soldiers who were also chained by the past.

¹ Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 30, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 30, 2011.

² Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

For forty-plus years Piotrowski had managed to push his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the background. He raised four kids; built and ran construction, property management, and courier businesses from Alaska to Ohio; and once in Texas, nearing retirement, he traded supervising others as a manager for working as a non-managerial employee at different public institutions.³

When emotionally or physically injured veterans cannot secure a disability rating from the VA that is sufficient to qualify for the monthly disability stipend that covers basic living expenses, they and their families must face the economic challenges of injury alone. This sometimes causes veterans with PTSD to accept work which may compromise their safety or that of co-workers. In Piotrowski's case, as often happens, there was nothing on paper that might have warned his employers of potential troubles—no official diagnosis or recognition of PTSD as a disability. He had a strong work history, no tax arrears or debt problems, and none of the telltale patterns that often accompany war-related emotional injury—homelessness, substance abuse, or imprisonment.⁴ But even when PTSD does not create acute symptoms that disrupt the external appearances of “normality,” it can run like a generator in the background of someone's life until an external stimulus triggers an overload. Piotrowski had been undiagnosed with masked symptoms for years. Luckily, during the period he drove the Texas school bus no one was hurt. But Piotrowski, now fully aware of his diagnosis, is haunted by an image of wreckage and ruin that might have occurred if he'd had a flashback while driving a bus full of school children.

There were early indications of Piotrowski's PTSD. Not long after he returned from the war, he spent time with his cousin, Judy, whose brother was killed in Vietnam one month into his

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

tour. They went to a Fourth of July celebration and later to see the western *Little Big Horn*, but both triggered flashbacks—the fireworks became enemy rounds sending him running and yelling for others to take cover, and the gunfire in the movie gave rise to panic and visions of past firefights. It was too real, too much like his private war.⁵

While living in Cleveland nearly 10 years ago, Piotrowski received a call from an old Vietnam buddy, a guy who entered the VA Hospital after his tour of duty—and never left. As much as he cared for his old comrade, Piotrowski also knew that this relationship threatened his own sanity, because his friend kept reminding Piotrowski about specific firefights or missile attacks in Vietnam. This direct link was too much for him to handle. Much to his regret today, he severed the friendship. Overwhelming, too, was the time his cousin took him to the traveling Vietnam Memorial in his old neighborhood in Cleveland. His knees buckled at the sight of it, and memories that he'd held back for so long suddenly flooded his mind.⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Triggers for traumatic memories can return a person to the original trauma—in this case war—in ways that non-traumatic memories do not. One example is a flashback, a visceral experience that originates in the limbic system, the older, subcortical part of the human brain that doesn't think but reacts to survive. When Piotrowski has flashbacks, his “body, mind, and soul”⁷ are back in Vietnam. The fear and horrors from his past may also propel his body to act as it once reacted in war. The classic trigger experience for veterans recently returned from combat is the sound of a car backfiring. The ex-soldiers react by throwing themselves to the ground.⁸ Like waking from a dream, some are shaken into awareness of where they actually are and are able to dust-off the embarrassment, while others do not. As Piotrowski puts it when recalling his experiences of such incidents, “I was back. I was back *there*.” And those he was with during the incident that triggered the flashback recall Piotrowski's reaction the same way. They described Piotrowski as “gone.”⁹

Before buying land outside of Bertram, a small village forty miles northwest of Austin, Piotrowski and Keck lived in Burnet, a neighboring town with a population just over 5,000 that spreads out from the crossroads where two minor state highways meet. These rural enclaves west of Austin sit on the northern edge of the Texas Hill Country, an area mostly known for its

⁷ Hoge, Charles. *Once a Warrior Always a Warrior: Navigating the Transition from Combat to Home Including Combat Stress, PTSD, and mTBI* (Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2010), 29-30.

⁸ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011; Moore, August. Interview by author. Digital recording. Marble Falls, TX, February 20, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

⁹ Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, February 12, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

ranch land, its seasonal tourist draw, and its original settlement by German and American immigrants from the 18th to the 19th century that eventually pushed out the native Comanche.¹⁰

Piotrowski would soon be hired for the graveyard shift as a guard at a local jail; Keck would find work in Austin with the IRS. But before they found work, Burnet could be a dull place—a far cry from Cleveland. Fighting off boredom one night, Piotrowski and Keck decided to go play bingo at the VFW. It was their first time entering the place most locals dubbed “The Bingo Hall.” He did not go to seek the company of veterans. He said once that he had spent a lifetime avoiding associations that would remind him of the war, but with the kids raised, no business to run, and few friends, the couple were open to new possibilities.

On their second bingo outing at the VFW, the veterans who ran the game learned that Piotrowski had seen combat, so they invited him to return when they weren’t calling numbers and handing out prizes. Although Piotrowski doesn’t consider himself a joiner, he returned and ended up staying. Keck, who was eligible for membership in the Ladies Auxiliary based on the combat service of her stepsons and father, who served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and World War II, also decided to join. She was pleased both to honor them and to support her husband.¹¹

Many Vietnam veterans fresh from the war found that some of the older men from the Korean and Second World War eras did not openly welcome them at the VFW posts and American Legion halls,¹² even though the national organizations tried to embrace them.¹³ While these same veterans often felt scorned by anti-war protestors on the left in the late 60s and early 70s, those on the right and veterans of older wars could be just as hostile or coldly rejecting.

¹⁰ Noyes, Stanley. *Los Comanches: The Horse People, 1751-1845* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 114-126 and 134-141; “Comanche: Relationship with Settlers,” *Wikipedia*, last modified July 31, 2011, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comanche>.

¹¹ Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, February 12, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

¹² Minton, Henry. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 27, 2011.

¹³ Bottoms, Bill. *The VFW: An Illustrated History of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States* (Rockville: Woodbine House, 1991), 146-147.

Their scorn was not for fighting the wrong fight, but for losing it.¹⁴ Piotrowski's hesitation to join the VFW in earlier times stemmed not from fear of rejection as a Vietnam veteran but rather from his diligent avoidance of war reminders and working long hours while raising his kids. And there was another reason for his early distaste of the VFW. It stemmed from an experience he had in Alaska at one of the canteens a buddy had invited him to soon after he returned from Vietnam. He was flummoxed when he found old and young white veterans bellied up to the bar making racist comments. One thing he learned from Vietnam was that the enemy didn't care about the color of your skin; they killed all Americans alike. U.S. soldiers were all in it together. He left the place figuring he didn't have time for sloppy drinking mixed with old grudges. This first impression of the VFW stayed with him for years.¹⁵

Yet in 2006 with more time on his hands, he was open to the idea of joining a community, so he gave it a try, though he didn't really get involved until a year later—after he was diagnosed with PTSD. After becoming a member of the Highland Lakes VFW 6974 in Burnet, it was fortuitous that Piotrowski got to know fellow Vietnam veteran George Banks, who was filling out a term as the post's service officer, the person in charge of assisting with VA benefit claims. He eventually helped Piotrowski navigate the VA system.

Banks, whose given name is Gum Song, is the son of a Chinese father and an African-American mother and was raised in Camden. His uncles served in the Navy, which required them to work as stevedores and cooks. Being shunted towards menial jobs in the service “makes you bitter,” he said. But Banks did not suffer that fate; he became a medic, or a medical corpsman, in the Army. After basic training he was sent to Ft. Sam Houston where for several

¹⁴ Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 155.

¹⁵ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 30, 2011.

weeks he learned how to patch up people on the battlefield. He was a skilled enlisted soldier, who was also put in charge of other medics upon his arrival in Vietnam.¹⁶

Early in his tour of duty, Banks received a Purple Heart. While serving as a medic for the Garryowen unit with the 5th Battalion of the 7th Cavalry at the border between Cambodia and Vietnam, he took a bullet in the leg. Being a history buff, Banks noted that the Garryowen was George Armstrong Custer's old command, the one that was mostly wiped out at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, a temporary setback for the U.S. in the Indian Wars.¹⁷

Though the injury was not crippling it and his Purple Heart became his ticket out of Vietnam. But Banks garnered no medals for the deeper simmering wound of PTSD, undiagnosed and untreated for nearly 40 years. In describing his PTSD Banks called it “something that I had—I buried it, I just never talked about it, tried not to think about it, and I lived with it.”¹⁸ Banks made a 23 year career of the Army that included his brief stint in Vietnam. During these years, he went from surgical assistant to training canines to taking charge of a tank company with the 31st Engineers Battalion before his decision to retire in 1986. During these years he moved all over the States and to Japan and Germany, where he met his wife.¹⁹

What haunts Banks from Vietnam is different from what stays with Piotrowski. Survivor's guilt is one of the most difficult emotional trauma issues veterans can face: Why did *you* survive when *your* buddy right next to *you* was killed? For Banks this common survivor response has been compounded by that fact that as a medic his mission was to save his fellow soldiers but his job was to repair those able to keep fighting first. “I saw quite a few guys dying

¹⁶ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011.

¹⁷ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, April 30, 2011; “7th Cavalry Regiment (United States): Indian Wars,” *Wikipedia*, last modified August 3, 2011, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7th_Cavalry_Regiment_\(United_States\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7th_Cavalry_Regiment_(United_States)).

¹⁸ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011.

¹⁹ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, April 30, 2011.

and I had to pass by ‘em to go to a guy and patch him up so that he could hold a rifle and keep putting fire out there,” Banks said. “And then once I didn’t have anybody [able to continue the fight,] I could go back to these guys that were dying. Well, quite a few of them died on me. I had to live with that. I lived with that for the longest time. I saw faces. I would have nightmares. You know. And I was in four firefights before I got medevacked back. And I had to live with that each time—over and over and over again.”²⁰

A VA center in Austin was the closest location from his home in Burnet to receive counseling. Banks and his wife Eva had moved to Burnet in 2006 because of its affordable housing two decades after he retired from the Army in nearby Ft. Hood. After “retiring” he worked as a Greyhound bus driver and as a corrections officer for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. He credits the beginning of his emotional recovery to a psychologist who primarily listened. Banks said he was tired of non-combat veterans, but especially counselors, interpreting his experiences for him. Having someone who could listen without judgment was key to his recovery. His therapy eventually tapered down as the acuteness of the pain lessened. One benefit of counseling for him, and eventually for Piotrowski as well, is that he can now help other veterans without feeling overwhelmed by his own memories. “I just feel like I can be more of a help to the other veterans,” Banks said. “Because of what I’ve been through and what I’ve learnt. You know. By no means am I cured—*you’re never cured*. You’re gonna, I’m gonna live with this the rest of my life. But at least I know that I can sit down and help somebody else. You know. I can sit down with any of these guys here.”²¹

Many veterans spend years in denial unwilling or unable to ask for assistance. Eventually, they might find the path to the help they so badly need. Some never do. Most of the

²⁰ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011.

²¹ Ibid.

veterans at post 6974 with PTSD, and those who they ended up helping, needed the assistance of another veteran to make it to the VA Hospital. Often a confidante, such as a veteran's spouse, decides to ask another veteran to help his or her loved one.

Combat veterans often relate to other combat veterans in ways they never will with civilians, including spouses. It makes sense that a family member would ask another veteran to help their loved ones get help they desperately need. The bonds of trust and love that family has with a veteran are often not enough—veterans need someone who, as Piotrowski says, “has walked in their shoes.”²² So, one day in 2008, Keck came to talk with Banks at the VFW. “Me and Nancy were talking one day and she was crying and she says, you know, ‘Bill needs to talk to somebody,’ ” Banks said. “ ‘He’s, you know, he’s having a problem with PTSD.’ You know, ‘He’s still reliving a lot of Vietnam.’ And so I walked up to Bill..., I said, ‘Come on and take a ride with me.’ And he says, ‘Where are we going?’ And I says, ‘Let’s go on up to the VA Hospital and visit some GIs.’ So he went with me and went up there and we talked to GIs on the 5th and the 6th floor. And when we got down to the 1st floor, I said, ‘Bill, let’s go over here. Let’s get you started.’ And Bill didn’t give me no argument. ...I took him up there, we got the card, we got him a doctor, we got him everything in one day. Everything in one day. We got his paperwork started. Did he tell you—he got turned down seven times? And I told him, I says, ‘That’s what the VA *does*. They turn you down because they’re hoping—that veterans will say it’s not worth the paperwork. But you keep fighting and you get it.’ ”²³

²² Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

²³ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011.

Banks was speaking from experience. He started with a 10% disability award from the VA in 1986 but is now registered as 100% unemployable due to physical and mental wounds from his time in Vietnam.²⁴

When veterans who have been psychologically injured from war get to know other veterans who are suffering from the same difficulties, they sometimes find guidance and assistance they didn't necessarily expect. U.S. Army veteran Michael Chapasko, 27, who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, found a second home at the VFW. After military service he had a daughter with his girlfriend. At the time, he moved to live with her in Burnet County following a stint at nearby Ft. Hood. He began working in pest control, twice found himself jailed for domestic assault,²⁵ and was required to take mandatory anger management classes. "They train you to be a warrior," he said of his time in the military. "And that training never really goes away. So you have a hard time dealing with that part of your life, that old training not going away, and your not forgetting about it can lead to anger issues.... When I was in basic training, they used to tell me to use my anger as a weapon, to make myself stronger, and a lot of the time after I got out of the military I was still having problems with aggression. And I would use that and it ended up being a majorly negative part of my life. And, it's—it's cost me a lot: my family."²⁶

Chapasko says that Banks and Piotrowski "dragged" him to the VA Hospital to get him started in the system. It's how Piotrowski describes his own first step on the journey to recovery. Being dragged rather than going willingly is many veterans' way of saving face. It's also an indication of how resistant many veterans are to initiating treatment for psychological injuries. In his book *Once a Warrior Always a Warrior*, Dr. Charles Hoge, a retired colonel from the U.S.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Chapasko, Michael. Phone interview by author. July 10, 2011.

²⁶ Chapasko, Michael. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 13, 2011.

Army and a leading researcher and contributor to the literature on mental health problems resulting from war, writes about reasons veterans resist treatment: First, veterans fear discussing wartime trauma “will open up a Pandora’s box and they’ll lose control.” Second, soldiers fear therapists “won’t understand or relate to what they’ve experienced, and they will judge them for things that happened.” Third, “they will be perceived as weak or treated differently by others if they admit to having a problem.” He adds, “Although views of mental health problems are changing, there are still pervasive beliefs in the larger society that these problems reflect a personal failure or weakness of character.”²⁷

Through the VA system, Chapasko is now seeing a counselor and a psychiatrist and is taking Zoloft to help with depression. He has also cycled through various medications for nightmares, because each drug he has tried seems to deaden his senses too much. He still hasn’t found one with tolerable side effects.²⁸

His nightmares began when he returned stateside. He began seeing faces of buddies killed, and battle scenes replayed like movies in his mind. He goes to counseling twice a month: “I’m talking about a lot of how to deal with the guilt of things I’ve done while in combat and how to forgive myself. Like they’ve told me a lot of the times: it’s not my fault for the things we’ve done—it was our job. It was our duty to do what we did.” Part of what they did was to provide coordinates for missile launches where civilians and military targets often coexisted.²⁹ On a different assignment, his job was to protect convoys that collected munitions for disposal. He said they were trained not to take chances when children or others threw rocks or other

²⁷ Hoge, Charles. *Once a Warrior Always a Warrior: Navigating the Transition from Combat to Home Including Combat Stress, PTSD, and mTBI* (Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2010), 172-173.

²⁸ Chapasko, Michael. Phone interview by author. July 10, 2011.

²⁹ Chapasko, Michael. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 13, 2011.

foreign objects—mostly they shot first and asked questions later, he said, because their priority was to protect the convoy. A grenade could fly as easily as a rock.³⁰

³⁰ Chapasko, Michael. Phone interview by author. July 10, 2011.

There are two major contingents in the VFW: the veterans themselves and their spouses or families. “The Veterans of Foreign Wars are not a bunch of old codgers that get together and tell war stories and get drunk. I suppose they could be. Maybe in some instances they are,” Keck said. “But more they are a tremendous support group for each other. And no matter where you have fought for your country or what horrors you have seen, when you come home you need to have the camaraderie, I think, of being able to speak with someone who has lived the same sort of thing. And while the wives try as hard as we know how to understand and support and care for the loved ones that come home—whether it be a father, certainly the husband, the son—we can’t understand that, we really can’t. All we can do is be there. The guys that have gone through it need to be together, because the healing is only when you share.”³¹

Keck married Piotrowski in 2000 knowing that he had problems. Her philosophy on his struggle is one of resolve and acceptance: “Well, you love the people that you love, whether it’s a husband, a father, a son. You also love your country.” She says she feels safe knowing he would never let any harm come to her—a protectiveness that she attributes to his combat experience. Marrying Piotrowski—her fourth husband—is, according to Keck, one of the best decisions of her life. She feels this way in part because he helped to save her life—sticking by her as she battled back from a major illness—through surgeries, a coma, and intense physical therapy. He also turned over the family truck-courier business to their daughter in order to move from Cleveland to a warmer and drier climate in Texas for Keck’s health.³²

Like many spouses of military combat veterans, she learned about PTSD by witnessing Piotrowski’s symptoms. Many veterans and their families and friends, especially from the

³¹ Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, February 12, 2011.

³² Ibid.

Vietnam era, learn about PTSD piecemeal over time. “Anyone that ever asks me for help will get it, because I’ve lived it so many times,” Keck said. “But yet, I’m so fortunate, because my family, while my father was wounded, visibly wounded, my husband has PTSD, my elder son definitely has PTSD. We have found our way to the Veterans Administration hospitals, and the support they have lent us has been tremendous. And the support that we have gotten from comrades that my husband has at the VFW has also been tremendous. One of them is the reason that Bill made it to the VA in the first place, and Bill is the reason our elder son made it to the VA. And Bill is also the reason my daughter’s father, my ex-husband, made it to the VA. So the Veterans Administration hospital is really, really trying. And for the most part they are [all] doing very well.”³³ Most of the veterans and their family members interviewed are generally satisfied with the quality of care they receive at the VA but are dismayed with the burden of paperwork and lengthy appeals needed to acquire or to improve their disability rating.³⁴

On a trip to Ohio, Piotrowski talked with his son’s wife, Sarah, and she let him know his son, Alex, was having problems related to his service as a sergeant in Iraq. Piotrowski went out to the garage where his son was working on a car. He could tell that his son was suffering. “I told him, I said—‘Are you aware of what is available to you? You are not asking for anything that is not already in place. All you have to do is to know where to go.’ I said, ‘Don’t wait 40 years. Don’t do that. Go in there now.’ And he, um, he suffers from what I think is PTSD.”³⁵

Another reason veterans avoid treatment is that they believe that someone else deserves help more than they do. Even those suffering severe psychological pain may sacrifice their own

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011; Chapasko, Michael. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 13, 2011; Keck, Nancy Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, February 12, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

³⁵ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

wellbeing for this belief. Whatever the individual reason, it's difficult for many to seek relief.³⁶ Piotrowski said of his son, "And he kept putting it off and putting it off. So we got to a point where we were leaving Ohio to come back to Texas and it was the very last day. We're loading up the car, and I get a call from my son [Alex], and he says, 'Dad,' you know, '*I'm ready.*' And we went." They got his paperwork started at the Cleveland VA Hospital.³⁷

Just a few years earlier, it was not likely that Piotrowski could have guided his son successfully to the VA. Over the years, the VA had held no appeal and he had no faith in the solution of psychiatric and therapeutic care. Had he not started therapy, talking with another veteran about his or her PTSD or war experiences could have unearthed what he had tried for so long to bury.

Spouses, families, and organizations such as the VFW can be essential for the veteran's acceptance of help. Piotrowski remembers taking his son Alex to treatment: "His wife packed us a couple of big lunches that you could feed a small army, and we went. And I watched him, and he went through the process. And I remember when someone took me that way. And I just talked to him not more than thirty minutes ago, and, uh, he's—he's learning more about what's going on. He's actually sitting in, in sessions with other vets, and he's surprised that he's not the only one. You know. So, maybe if nothing else I helped another vet there, you know.... Passing it forward."³⁸

³⁶ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011; Minton, Henry. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 27, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

³⁷ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

³⁸ Ibid.

Bill Piotrowski did not return with a Purple Heart, the medal awarded to those physically injured or killed in war. The mark left on Piotrowski is not a lesion like that of an amputee or a burn victim. His wounds, as his wife Nancy Keck says, are not visible like the scars she saw on her father's back when he returned from World War II.³⁹ Piotrowski's wounds are of an internal, visceral nature. In addition to counseling and medication, the VA has offered Piotrowski residence in the psychiatric ward of its hospital in Temple, Texas. Nonetheless they have turned down his claim of disability for PTSD twice. In other words, the VA offered him treatment, while denying him the monetary award connected to a disability rating. After 3.5 years and six appeals based mainly on his physical disabilities, he managed to go from a 60% disability rating to 100% with "unemployability."⁴⁰

Piotrowski still has one outstanding appeal, his second for PTSD and his eighth in all, which he filed citing a new ruling⁴¹ from the Obama administration, that relaxed the veteran's burden-of-proof when trying to prove psychological disability before the VA.⁴² For those veterans who *persist* in applying for disability, being turned down several times has become an expected part of the process. But many veterans don't realize this. Hearing that it is impossible to win a claim, many do not attempt to access benefits. For those who persevere, it can, as it has for Piotrowski, lead to recognition of wounds, to disability payments, and to health care coverage, with all expenses paid.

³⁹ Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, February 12, 2011.

⁴⁰ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

⁴¹ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 30, 2011.

⁴² Cable News Network Wire, "Feds Roll Out New PTSD Benefits for Veterans," *CNN Politics*, July 12, 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-07-12/politics/veterans.ptsd_1_ptsd-michael-walcoff-post-traumatic-stress-disorder?s=PM:POLITICS. Accessed June 26, 2011.

What stays with a soldier after war varies from person to person, experience to experience. The deaths of Vietnamese villagers haunt Piotrowski today, both those he witnessed as a bystander and those who were killed in actions he fought in.

Piotrowski talked about his first six months in-country: It was in 1968 when he was 18 years old and with the 35th Engineers stationed at Quy Nhon in the central highlands of Vietnam. “During that time I was convinced that we were wearing the white hats. Everything we did was for the right, ’cuz we knew what we were doing and had an objective,” he said. “And then as we went out on the different kind of patrols, you would go through the country ... and I began to come up on, you know, villages.... And I would look into these kid’s eyes, and I’d look into these, especially the older villagers, and we were looking for Vietcong, which came in all ages. But what really struck me was the fear, the fear that was in these eyes when we came in, and then it dawned on me that, you know—*they’re afraid of us*. They’re afraid of what we’ll do. Or how, what we think of them. Or the fact that they’re mad that we’re even here. You know. And I thought, ‘You know what? Are we wearing the white hats here? We came a long way to pick a fight.’ But I thought, ‘Well you know, that’s just a moment, and um, it’s just probably my interpretation and God knows I don’t have the big picture and hoping that our leaders do.’”⁴³

Tim O’Brien, an author who writes novels about his experiences as an infantryman in Vietnam, served in an area known to American troops as Pinkville, the area that contained the village of My Lai, notorious for the massacre of its civilians by U.S. troops. He said he couldn’t

⁴³ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

help thinking that Americans created more enemies than they killed. Every stray bullet that killed someone's child recruited more soldiers or people loyal to the resistance.⁴⁴

“You’ve got to remember, we had a tremendous amount of firepower,” Piotrowski said. “So, ah, if you got, ah, a round come in from that direction—and whether it was a village or whatever—you concentrate all of your firepower in that direction. And my God, you end up going in there, and you find out that it was one sniper in a little village that shot at you. You burned that village down. You killed everything there. Dogs and everything.... Everything was dead. What kind of sense is that? But, that’s the reaction, you know. It’s not fair.” Later in the interview he said: “What’s scary is when it doesn’t bother you. That’s not good. When you can be responsible ... and it doesn’t bother you.... And I think that’s why towards the very end I was even pulled out of the field by wiser people.”⁴⁵

After Vietnam the military changed the way they rotated troops in and out of service. In Vietnam, service members were viewed largely as individual, interchangeable parts to be swapped out at will. A soldier would ship in and out alone. In subsequent wars, the soldiers rotated in and out as part of units.⁴⁶ When Piotrowski’s time was up, he boarded a plane for Seattle with other GI’s from other units doing the same thing. For Piotrowski it was a plane full of strangers, no buddies around to rehash experiences or traumas, either on the plane or back in the States.

A week-long debriefing can’t undo years of training and combat experiences, and that is roughly what a Vietnam veteran got to transition back to civilian life. As Piotrowski reflects:

⁴⁴ O’Brien, Tim. Interview by *American Experience* and the producers *My Lai*, November 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/interview/mylai-obrien/>.

⁴⁵ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, March 13, 2011.

⁴⁶ Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 198.

“We ask a lot of our soldiers to go to war and then we ask a lot for them to come back. ‘And, OK, forget all of that now. We need you to, you know, now go on to the assembly line at the Chevy plant [like] nothing ever happened.’ ” The transition between war and civilian life happens quickly. “How would you like to have spent all of that time in Vietnam, come back, be sittin’ on the couch drinkin’ a beer and watchin’ Vietnam on TV. And goin’, wow this is really kinda weird. Now I’m watching Vietnam on TV. Because everybody seemed to—what they knew was what they saw on TV. And now I’m sitting there watching it on TV. And I had a moment where I said, ‘Maybe I ought to go back in. Go back over.’ Fortunately, I never did that.”⁴⁷

The military puts extensive amounts of time, energy, and money into training men and women to become battle ready, to become soldiers. The predicament for Piotrowski and many others was the success of this training. The military trained them to fulfill a mission and to survive, but the effect spilled over: “Now we’re back in the civilian world now and that’s when they do debriefing,” Piotrowski said. “And debriefing is simply a big ass room, ah, where people are telling you, ‘Ah, now don’t do these things any more. OK ... I know we trained you how to do this and that’s how you survived, but you know what? You’re debriefing now—we don’t do that any more. So that’s it. We’ve told you—we can now move on.’ It doesn’t work.” He had a week in Ft. Lewis just south of Seattle, and then Piotrowski was discharged from the Army and flew home to Cleveland.⁴⁸

When he landed in Cleveland, his mother and stepfather were there to greet him. They did not spot him in the crowd that deplaned—they were looking for a man in uniform, but he had left the uniform along with his medals hanging in the airplane’s bathroom.

⁴⁷ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 30, 2011.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

“But, uh, that was my little way. I was done. You know, I was done,” he said. It was “more of a cleansing for me. It was something that I felt was right to do. Something I needed to do. I didn’t want to look back. Because we didn’t do a lot of things right.” A little later he added, “I made a quiet statement. I would never deface the uniform. I would never throw it out there and burn it or something like that or stomp on it or something like that. I would never—I’m not doing this for other people. I don’t need the notoriety. It was a quiet protest.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

On May 10, 2011, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled largely in favor of veterans against the VA in *Veterans for Common Sense v. Eric K. Shinseki*. The decision censures two of the three wings within the VA, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Veterans Health Benefits (VHB) for allowing unnecessary delays in claims processing. Those delays stall the VA's rulings on a veteran's disability ratings, which in turn results in deferred monetary assistance and health care benefits, often with devastating consequences: "Veterans who return home from war suffering from psychological maladies are entitled by law to disability benefits to sustain themselves and their families as they regain their health. Yet it takes an average of more than four years for a veteran to fully adjudicate a claim for benefits. During that time many claims are mooted by death."⁵⁰ By death, the judges are referring primarily to the high rate of suicide among veterans. They cited a 2008 RAND study that found "18.5 percent of U.S. Service members who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan currently have PTSD, and that 300,000 service members now deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan 'currently suffer PTSD or major depression.' Delays in the treatment of PTSD can lead to alcoholism, drug addiction, homelessness, anti-social behavior, or suicide." They cite the VA's own Katz Suicide Study of February 2006 that found suicide among veterans to be "approximately 3.2 times higher than among the general population," which translates into 18 suicides per day and 1000 attempts per month for America's 25 million veterans.⁵¹

While the 6,570 estimated suicides per year is an appalling number, the remaining approximately 300,000 U.S. veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffering from serious mental health problems also have needs to be addressed. The suicide-prevention measures will

⁵⁰ *Veterans for Common Sense v. Eric K. Shinseki*, No. 08-16728, <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/us/veterans-v-Shinseki.pdf> (9th Cir. May 10, 2011), 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

not alleviate the suffering of the vast majority of returning veterans. The lower court found that “approximately 85,450 veterans remained on VHA waiting lists for mental health services.” The Ninth Circuit panel estimated that this is a conservative number due to the method and criteria used to count those waiting.⁵² The majority opinion held that there was no acceptable reason for the VA’s delay in administering health care to veterans.⁵³

Judge Stephen Reinhardt wrote scathingly for the majority: “There comes a time when the political branches have so completely and chronically failed to respect the People’s constitutional rights that the courts must be willing to enforce them. We have reached that unfortunate point with respect to veterans who are suffering from the hidden, or not hidden, wounds of war. The VA’s unchecked incompetence has gone on long enough; no more veterans should be compelled to agonize or perish while the government fails to perform its obligations. Having chosen to honor and provide for our veterans by guaranteeing them the mental health care and other critical benefits to which they are entitled, the government may not deprive them of that support through unchallengeable and interminable delays. Because the VA continues to deny veterans what they have been promised without affording them the process due to them under the Constitution, our duty is to compel the agency to provide the procedural safeguards that will ensure their rights. When the stakes are so high for so many, we must, with whatever reluctance, fulfill our obligation to take this extraordinary step.”⁵⁴

Most news reports and other studies focus on veterans from the current wars. This makes sense but begs the question: If the administration of mental health care has been this poor for veterans in an era when PTSD is a household acronym, what about the Vietnam veteran for whom PTSD was first designated? These veterans had an even greater uphill battle. From the

⁵² Ibid., 16.

⁵³ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

1990 book *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*: “The results are striking. A disturbingly large proportion of Vietnam theater veterans have PTSD today. For many who developed the disorder two decades ago, time has not brought relief, and problems compound in work and interpersonal function. For those whose nightmares, flashbacks, and startle reactions are as intense today as they were on their return, the war is not over. Only the scene of the battlefield has shifted—from the outer to the inner world.”⁵⁵

Three major studies have attempted to answer the question of the lasting mental health impact on Vietnam veterans: The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) in 1988, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Vietnam Experience Study in 1988, and the Psychological Risks of Vietnam for U.S. Veterans study led by Bruce P. Dohrenwend and published in the journal *Science* in 2006. The NVVRS and Dohrenwend studies found that significant numbers of veterans who had experienced PTSD at some point continued to suffer from it, while the CDC study indicated a much smaller sample of veterans still with PTSD than the others. Because the Dohrenwend study used more up-to-date methodological factors and criteria than did the NVVRS, it found fewer veterans still suffering from PTSD than did the NVVRS. The Dohrenwend study was unique in that it removed the potential for self-reporting bias by using military records in place of interviews to analyze the possibility of a soldier encountering war zone stressors. Critics of the NVVRS speculated that the higher numbers of people found to report PTSD set against the lower numbers of veterans who actually served in a direct combat role meant that many veterans were lying about having a mental disorder to attain disability payments. The Dohrenwend study helped to dispel this notion by examining

⁵⁵ Kulka, Richard A., William E. Schlenger, John A. Fairbank, Richard L. Hough, B. Kathleen Jordan, Charles R. Marmar, Daniel S. Weiss, and with a chapter by David A. Grady. *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990), 51.

aggregates of data that also included a sample of the former NVVRS participants and found through researching veterans' accounts of traumatizing factors that these veterans almost never falsified claims of mental health problems based upon their service in Vietnam. It also disproved the prevailing assumption that a soldier must be in a direct-combat role in order to attain PTSD or other war-related mental health problems.⁵⁶

This new finding was followed a few years later by President Obama's order, effective July 13, 2010, that the VA relax its requirement that veterans provide detailed proof of events that caused or contributed to the onset of their mental health problems. Many veterans saw the requirement as an unreasonable burden that was difficult to prove, especially years after the fact. Before Obama's order they had been required to record and document painful memories that many of them had worked hard to forget. The medical forms required names of witnesses, dates, and specific locations of the battles fought. Later these claims were often turned down or only partially accepted, thus requiring multiple submissions or appeals, taking years.⁵⁷

Cutting the red tape could substantially improve the lives of veterans in other ways, while reducing future medical expenses. Several studies have demonstrated that PTSD and delayed treatment of it can cause physical ailments. On June 23, 2011, researchers presented new studies at the Northern California Institute for Research and Education's conference "The Brain at War" on "Post-Traumatic Stress and the Body." The conference was co-hosted by the San Francisco VA, the Department of Defense, and the University of California at San Francisco. From the conference guide's booklet: "A growing body of evidence confirms that post-traumatic stress is associated with increased risk of dementia, heart disease, immune dysfunction, and other

⁵⁶ DeNoon, Daniel J. "Fewer Vietnam Vets Suffer From PTSD," *CBSNews: HealthWatch for WebMD*, February 11, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/08/17/health/webmd/main1908799.shtml>. Accessed June 28, 2011.

⁵⁷ Bowser, Betty Ann. "Rules Change for Vets' PTSD Benefits." *PBS NewsHour* video, 12:14. July 12, 2010. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/july-dec10/ptsd_07-12.html. Accessed July 2, 2011.

diseases of aging. The damage done to young warriors today might not manifest for years or even decades.”⁵⁸ Researchers found the incidence of dementia for veterans with PTSD was four percent higher than for veterans who had not suffered PTSD. Heart disease proved to be more prevalent as was “co-occurring mental health diagnoses such as depression (53 percent), anxiety disorder (29 percent), adjustment disorder (26 percent), or alcohol use disorder (22 percent).”⁵⁹

According to a 2010 study conducted by the Center for Imaging and Neurodegenerative Disease (CIND), there is “an association between PTSD and changes to the hippocampus,” a part of the brain “associated with memory and stress.” The study found that “the hippocampus was about six percent smaller on average in veterans with current chronic PTSD than in veterans who had recovered from PTSD.” Dr. Bridgette Apfel, the lead researcher finds two options for assessing the results: either PTSD causes the hippocampus to shrink and then grows back to its normal size upon recovery, or people with PTSD who have smaller hippocampuses to start with and are less likely as a result to recover from this mental illness. She said there is evidence to support the first hypothesis. “ ‘We know from animal studies that hippocampal volume can change. If some animals are exposed to stress, their hippocampal volume will shrink and then recover later in the absence of stress. This gives hope that, in people, hippocampal damage in PTSD is reversible once they have recovered.’ ”

CIND director Dr. Michael Weiner said the study “ ‘adds to the general body of knowledge that PTSD is associated with significant changes in the brain, and is thus a biological disorder.’ ”

”⁶⁰ Scientists have also begun finding biomarkers for PTSD, anatomical changes to the body that occur in people with this disorder, which can be used to empirically determine the existence of

⁵⁸ Northern California Institute for Research and Education, *Brain at War* conference, June 23, 2011, Preparing for the Future of Veterans Health: “Post-Traumatic Stress and the Body,” Introduction, page 3.

http://www.ncire.org/pdfs/BAW_Book_2011.pdf. Accessed July 9, 2011.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

post-traumatic stress in a patient.⁶¹ Such findings may bode well for veterans trying to prove to the VA that they suffer from PTSD.

⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

In addition to psychological injury, veterans must also contend with physical ailments generated by the psychological ones. These compounding problems do not aid the veteran who needs to wend through the VA's labyrinthine system. This process requires patience, know-how, paperwork savvy, and the right temperament—and many who suffer from “psychological injuries,” as prominent war trauma psychiatrist Jonathan Shay prefers to call PTSD,⁶² can't or won't muster the strength and resources to do so.⁶³ Piotrowski has some qualities in his favor that many others don't—some college, a head for business, a wife who has administered businesses, the support of his VFW chapter,⁶⁴ and the assistance of a Texas Veterans Commission counselor at the VA. While he credits the VFW with getting him to the VA in the first place, he credits the TVC counselor as his indispensable guide to acquiring an accurate disability rating at the VA.⁶⁵

A twofold function of the state-funded Texas Veterans Commission is, first, to help Texans with the paperwork that the VA requires of veterans seeking a disability rating, and, second, should the veterans not get the rating they think they deserve, to help them appeal the VA's decision. Like some non-profit veterans service organizations, such as the American Legion and the VFW, TVC has offices at major VA Hospitals. Because of this, some people might assume that TVC counselors are part of the VA system, but they are not.⁶⁶

Piotrowski said of Stephen Hanlon, his TVC counselor: “This guy was terrific, because my appeals went over three years.... I had a lot of roadblocks.” Piotrowski had started his

⁶² Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 4.

⁶³ Hull, Anne and Dana Priest. “A Wife's Battle,” *Washington Post* series “Walter Reed and Beyond,” October 14, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/walter-reed/index.html>.

⁶⁴ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

⁶⁵ Piotrowski, William. Phone interview by author. July 9, 2011.

⁶⁶ *Texas Veterans Commission* website, <http://www.tvc.state.tx.us/>. Accessed July 7, 2011.

disability claim on his own with the usual difficulties. While recovering from surgery for Agent Orange-related prostate cancer at the VA hospital in Temple, he paid a visit to Hanlon. From that day forward, Hanlon worked with Piotrowski on his appeals. “A counselor will word it in a way that it seems to get through a lot of channels,” Piotrowski said. “It doesn’t get kicked back. And they have a way of looking at the form and they’ll say to you, ‘Well, you know, if you don’t put this down or if you don’t make this clear, they will shoot back to you and you’ve lost eight months.’ So what a counselor does is ... they help you with the wording and everything, but it’s your story.”⁶⁷

There are many entities, including non-profit organizations, state agencies, and local offices, that expend resources to help veterans through the federal VA system. Non-profits such as the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and more have service officers at their local organizations and often paid employees in offices at VA hospitals. County commissions also sometimes appoint counselors to do the same job as the state TVC counselor. In those counties, veterans can seek help from either counselor. Although it’s somewhat duplicative, it’s done because it’s in the state and local government’s best interest to see that federal benefits are awarded to their resident veterans so they don’t end up depending on state and local services.

Burnet County’s Veterans Service Officer Chuck Carraway, who is also an elected county constable, wrote this about his job in an email: “I take between 8-20 calls a day from veterans, or their widows. I have about 4-5 face-to-face meetings with vets daily. This part time position is not part time, and hasn’t been for a while. It just pays part time. I probably spend as much time answering questions and finding evidence for already filed claims, as I do starting

⁶⁷ Piotrowski, William. Phone interview by author. July 9, 2011.

new claims. Seems like if a vet files his own claims first, then when he hears back from the VA about all the evidence they need to prove the claim, then I hear from them, and do the internet searches, and write the letters to buddies, and locate those buddies, who can confirm some things the vet alleges happened to him in service. So, there is lots to doing this job well.... Then there's pensions, then there's education and loans, and DIC [dependents indemnity compensation] and widow's pension."⁶⁸

Undeterred, TVC developed two pilot projects to help speed up the application and appeals process for veterans and their families: one with the VA and a subsequent one funded by a grant from Texas Governor Rick Perry's office. The first lasted from June 2008 to January 2009. The second started after November 2009 and expired in July 2011. TVC requested \$300,000 to continue the successful program from the fiscally conservative and cash-strapped Texas Legislative Budget Board, but to no avail.⁶⁹

The first of TVC's pilot programs was called the Development Assistance Pilot Project, or DAPP, and the second, the Claims Processing Assistance Teams, or CPAT. Both programs essentially did what the TVC counselors and county service officers do, just in a more concentrated form—they helped veterans package their applications to meet the VA's standards. When these teams were able to contact the veteran or widow and get their assistance, TVC asserts that DAPP and CPAT shortened the average 132-day claim application process to 11 days. These counselors acted as advocates for the applicants and appellants.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Carraway, Chuck. Email message to author, July 8, 2011.

⁶⁹ McGhee, Duncan (Texas Veterans Commission public information officer). Phone interview with author, July 8, 2011.

⁷⁰ "Texas Veterans Commission assists VA to reduce disability claims backlog," *Texas Veterans Commission* website, November 23, 2009, http://www.tvc.state.tx.us/images/uploads/media_and_news/pr_tvc_helps_va_claims.pdf.

Piotrowski did not know Chuck Carroway, or that counties had veteran service officers, until his appeals had run their course.⁷¹ Though many veterans turn to the county service officers, for various reasons Piotrowski would need the VFW to find his way to the VA for mental health services.

⁷¹ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 30, 2011.

VFW Highland Lakes Post 6974 in Burnet reports 52 veterans on the books and is thus on the lower end of the membership rolls in Texas. In VFW District 14 of Texas, Burnet has a handful more members than does tiny Westphalia, an unincorporated German-immigrant community south of Waco and east of Temple. This district, however, has some of the largest membership rolls in Texas—Post 9191 and 9192 in Killeen with 792 and 511 each, Post 8577 in Copperas Cove with 754, and Post 3892 in Harker Heights with 954—all three border Ft. Hood, one of the largest military bases in the U.S. In Texas, there are 25 districts and 362 posts for a total of 81,586 members.⁷² One knock against the VFW that is perhaps true of many non-profit organizations, such as religious congregations, is that the rolls are filled largely by retirees, who have more time on their hands to volunteer. In the Texas VFW, over 20,000 members are 81 or older, another 20,000 are 66-80, while more than 17,000 are 55-65. 13,000 are below the age of 54.⁷³

The national VFW membership numbers mirror the ones from Texas. Over 460,000 members are 80 or older, while over 230,000 are 70-79, and roughly 430,000 are 60-69. The number of members ages 59 and below is close to 296,000. The total number of paid members as of June 30, 2011 is 1,445,557.⁷⁴

The VFW's demographics are mirrored by other veterans' organizations, but they still manage noteworthy accomplishments. In an email requesting what percentage of veterans used veterans service organizations (VSO) for assistance in applying for VA benefits, a spokesman for the VA replied: "Of the 3.28 million beneficiaries currently receiving compensation, 74 percent

⁷² *Texas Veterans of Foreign Wars* website, <http://www.vfwkc.org/memstats/DepartmentStats.asp?option=All&state=45>. Accessed July 10, 2011.

⁷³ West, Dan (Texas VFW assistant state adjutant). E-mail message to author, July 7, 2011.

⁷⁴ Clausen, Matthew (VFW membership director). Email message to author, July 13, 2011.

are represented by a POA [power of attorney]. These POAs include Veterans Service Organizations and Veterans Service Officers. Of the 74 percent, 52 percent are represented by one of the ‘big six’ VSOs – American Legion, AMVets, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veterans of America.”⁷⁵

One problem that the aging demographic data reveals is the difficulty for the VFW in keeping younger veterans and their families interested and active in their organization. Veterans from the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are in just as much, if not greater, need of the kinds of support that a service organization can provide. Veterans like Banks and Piotrowski recognize this and invite younger veterans and their families to assume roles of greater responsibility and influence in the organization. Ex-marine Dan West, a state-level officer for the Texas VFW, agrees with this approach. He chided a group of mostly old-timers who gathered in an Austin hotel for the statewide convention one Saturday morning last January and attempted to wake them up with stats about the impending doom of the VFW. The old-timers who carry the bulk of the members are dying off, he said, and those who were left were letting their fear and selfishness supersede the mission. He accused them of viewing the VFW as “their possession.” He said there was a fear of young or new people implementing fresh ideas or taking the reins, fear of trying new strategies for finding new members. He also sees in many posts fear of allowing a child-friendly environment as well as a fear (or scorn and derision) for veterans from wars deemed less important, such as the Persian Gulf War. He sees these attitudes especially among older white members, who are reluctant to open the doors to veterans of other races or ethnicities or the latest minority, the female combat vet. He urged VFW members to

⁷⁵ Morin, Mikea (Veterans Affairs management analyst, Houston Regional Office), email message to author, July 8, 2011.

embrace the Internet and social media—to create basic websites and Facebook profiles for their posts—to bait the hook for the fish they need to catch.⁷⁶

Texas VFW Commander Wayne DePute, a large, soft-spoken man, later added to West’s critique at the same convention: “We are going straight down the tubes.... We’re recruiting, but not retaining.”⁷⁷

It’s possible that not all is lost for the VFW, if there are more posts like the one in Burnet. Unbeknownst to the new leadership at the 6974, they were already fashioning themselves after West’s inclusive and innovative model and seeing their numbers steadily increase, partly as a result of these efforts. While they might not currently have many members compared to posts closer to larger towns or cities, they are active in the community. Doing charitable works in the Burnet county area is a major motivation. Often the members work on campaigns to assist underprivileged kids, participating in a fundraising and gift drive for Santa’s Helpers, a collaborative effort with the Burnet County Sheriff’s Department. They also make small donations to support the Boys and Girls Clubs, and they focus on helping seniors by hosting free bingo games at a local nursing home. Doing good deeds helps ease some of trauma’s burden by seeing good come from one’s actions, instead of the misery and suffering created during war, and often upon their return. It also makes them known in the community as a positive force and so helps them to draw new members.⁷⁸

While the VFW members support each other, many of their activities are focused toward the larger community and not simply to benefit veterans: “If we stopped doing the things we’ve

⁷⁶ Texas VFW Mid-Winter Conference, at Austin, TX, January 29, 2011, “Social Media” session, Dan West presenter. Notes by author.

⁷⁷ DePute, Wayne (Texas Veterans of Foreign Wars president), comment in conference hall to a group of people with author present, January 29, 2011.

⁷⁸ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011; Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, February 12, 2011; Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

done for the people,” said Piotrowski, “I wouldn’t be part of the VFW. I really wouldn’t. I’m not, I’m not real big on telling war stories. I’m not real big on, you know, pointing out”—he drums up false swagger for effect—“ ‘Yeah, I’m a combat vet, and you know, all tha— ’ That’s, that’s not it.”

He added, “I’ll go to the socials, and that’s where you normally sit around, and you don’t necessarily talk about the VFW but talk about what you’ve seen and all of that. But after awhile I’m, I’m not really into that. But if we stopped *helping*, bringing in and helping vets in the community, I wouldn’t be part of it. What do I need to do? I’m not trying to impress anybody.”⁷⁹

Banks explains their camaraderie this way: “We understand each other. We know what each other went through. We know that ... war is hell. And you gonna have different experiences. Two people could be walking side by side and when you ask them the story, you get two different stories. But, they’re gonna feel the same hurt. That’s the key thing is,” Banks continued momentarily searching for words before he added, “the hurt. You know. It’s there.”⁸⁰

Although the VFW provides emotional support to suffering veterans, it is much more than a refuge for people with PTSD. At the post in Burnet, roughly seven of the 20 or so active veterans from Vietnam and later wars currently contend with PTSD.⁸¹

Post 6974 is multi-generational, encompassing veterans and their families with service experiences from World War II to Korea to Vietnam to the Persian Gulf War to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Until their recent deaths, this VFW also provided a home for ex-Air Force pilot Jimmy Jackson, who was a POW in the Korean War⁸² and to ex-Marine Billy Franklin, who

⁷⁹ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

⁸⁰ Banks, George. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 12, 2011.

⁸¹ Banks, George. Phone interview by author. July 11, 2011.

⁸² Ibid.

served in smaller conflicts or military actions such as the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁸³ And plenty of members are able-bodied survivors who escaped combat injury, including two surviving World War II veterans August “Gus” Moore, an Army infantryman in Europe towards the end of the war⁸⁴ and L.J. Henderson, a Navy ship-to-shore troop transport driver.⁸⁵ Most would say they were changed by their combat experiences under fire. Vietnam War U.S. Air Force veteran James “Lobo” Grunden spoke from experience and his observation of comrades that military life tends to put extra strain on marriages—from long deployments, if nothing else.⁸⁶ He like Moore ended up getting a divorce as a result of service in war zones.⁸⁷ In addition to these burdens, Henry Minton added that even the threat of coming under fire or of potentially facing chemical or biological attack can create enduring post-war stresses, if not PTSD. The possibility of death day-after-day has a cumulative negative impact on these soldiers.⁸⁸

Keck insists that it is hard for these men to feel like men while carrying the pain from war inside of them. Crying, for some, is a necessary release. She said of the VFW: “It’s acceptable here, but not in society.”⁸⁹

Shay also writes about the need for what he calls “communalization of trauma.” He envisions a more open society that formally grieves with the veteran after war in a ceremony of the type done in other societies for warriors.⁹⁰ While this is an unlikely scenario in most communities in the United States, the VFW can be one such place that honors the dead and the sacrifices made by survivors with ritual. The VFW keeps many rituals in place. They remember

⁸³ Franklin, Diane. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 19, 2011.

⁸⁴ Moore, August. Interview by author. Digital recording. Marble Falls, TX, February 20, 2011.

⁸⁵ Henderson, L.J. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 20, 2011.

⁸⁶ Grunden, James. Conversation with author in Grunden’s pickup truck at Ft. Hood, TX. November 29, 2010.

⁸⁷ Ibid; Moore, August. Interview by author. Digital recording. Marble Falls, TX, February 20, 2011.

⁸⁸ Minton, Henry. Interview by author. Digital recording. Burnet, TX, February 27, 2011.

⁸⁹ Keck, Nancy. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, April 20, 2011.

⁹⁰ Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 194.

the fallen, the MIA's and POW's, and veterans' orphans. They come together for the families of those sick and dying, and they turn out for memorial services and funerals. It's also a place where combat veterans can talk and listen to one another in an informal, non-therapeutic setting.

The VFW, Piotrowski feels, can do much good. "And to me it's not just the vets. I do everything I do with the VFW here, not just for the vets; they don't have to be a vet," Piotrowski said. "No, no, they can be family, they can be, you know, intertwined, all of that, because if that vet is in that house—that family is suffering. And if that vet is not seeking help, everyone else is suffering. I don't care how old you are or whatever, if you're connected somehow, you are going to feel that. So the big deal to me is, uh, to be very grateful that everything I've been through and seen and done. All of that. And we all have—I can now give back. Big. That's a big thing. I can give back.... God knows I've done a lot of bad things. Maybe the Lord will look at that and go—'You were never really too bright, but you did seem to spend a portion of your life givin' back.'"⁹¹

⁹¹ Piotrowski, William. Interview by author. Digital recording. Bertram, TX, January 31, 2011.

Photographs: Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6974

The photographs in this collection depict the veterans of Highland Lakes VFW Post 6974, their families, and the Ladies Auxiliary. Their post is in Burnet, Texas, 55 miles northwest of Austin.



VFW Chaplain and Iraqi Freedom veteran Michael Chapasko touches up sign lettering that advertises post 6974's twice weekly bingo nights. Thanksgiving Day, 2010.



William "Bill" Piotrowski, VFW Post 6974 senior vice commander, is walking outside the hall. Burnet, Texas. March 1, 2011.



Bill Piotrowski and his wife, Nancy Keck, close down VFW 6974 after a day spent delivering gift stockings to troops at nearby Ft. Hood and to veterans in the Temple VA's hospice ward. November 29, 2010.



Bill Piotrowski with his dog, "Mac," at his home near Bertram, Texas. November 29, 2010.



Veterans reciting the “Pledge of Allegiance” at the start of the post’s monthly business meeting. January 4, 2010.



Persian Gulf War veteran and post Quartermaster J.P. Wright, answers a question from Vietnam veteran and VFW member James “Lobo” Grunden during the monthly business meeting. January 4, 2011.



World War II veterans and VFW Trustees: L.J. Henderson (left), Navy veteran of the Pacific theater, and August "Gus" Moore (right), Army veteran of the European theater, talk in a group before the monthly business meeting. January 4, 2010.



World War II veteran August "Gus" Moore is recuperating from a respiratory illness in Seton hospital, Round Rock, Texas. He is visited by his daughter, Lynn Oliver Laurinavicius, George Banks, Eva Banks (off-camera), Bill Piotrowski and his daughter Sarah (off-camera). February 8, 2011.



Members of VFW 6974 give support to the family of Vietnam veteran Thomas Pearson during a service for him at the Clement-Wilcox Funeral Home in Burnet, Texas. VFW Chaplain Michael Chapasko (left) and VFW Ladies Auxiliary President Nancy Keck (right) sit in the back and listen to the eulogy. January 26, 2011.



VFW Chaplain Michael Chapasko says a few words during the graveside service of local Vietnam veteran Thomas Pearson at Pebble Mound Cemetery outside of Burnet, Texas. January 26, 2011.



The Central Texas Patriot Guard Riders stand in at the funeral of local Vietnam veteran Thomas Pearson at the Pebble Mound Cemetery outside of Burnet, Texas. January 26, 2011.



Thanksgiving Day 2010: Post 6974 hosts a free dinner open to the community. James “Lobo” Grunden and other veterans serve dinner to Grunden’s family, who is visiting from El Paso.



George Banks, Vietnam veteran and VFW 6974 commander, talks to the veterans and the Ladies Auxiliary members at the post before the beginning of their monthly business meeting. March 1, 2011.



Swearing in new members at the Ladies Auxiliary's monthly business meeting. Left to right: Tonya Minton, Andrea Hale, and Joyce Snodgrass. March 1, 2011.



Swearing in officers at VFW 6974's monthly business meeting. Left to right: James "Lobo" Grunden (hand visible only), J.P. Wright, Bill Piotrowski, George Banks, Michael Chapasko, Lori Greco, Mike Greco, and Henry Minton (off-camera). May 3, 2011.

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Vita

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