

Life Savers Then... Caregivers Now[®]
A First Hand Account of the Founding of the AAPA Veterans Caucus

Authored By
Ken Harbert, PhD, MCCHES, PA-Emeritus, DFAAPA

In the late 1970's and the early 1980's, many veterans began organizing to bring attention to the national priorities and needs of Vietnam veterans. Many organizations began to take shape. I had the great fortune in 1978 to meet some of the early members of the Council of Vietnam Veterans, such as Rusty Lindley and Rick Weidman (who later formed the first chapter of the future Vietnam Veterans of America) and others actively involved, like George Skypeck, Bobby Muller, Mike McWalters, Mary Stout, Lynda Van Devanter, Dave Gorman, Jack Smith and John Terzano. Working together, Bobby Muller, Rick Weidman and John Terzano went on to create the Vietnam Veterans of America which was recognized by congressional charter in 1986.



Artwork by George Skypeck, "Lifesavers then....
Caregivers Now - Medics and Corpsman" commissioned
by Coors Brewing Company, Golden, CO.

Michelle Minion, PA-C (one of my PA students from Alderson Broaddus College) and I provided first-hand health care to the many Vietnam Veterans who were part of the "Vietnam Veteran Vigil" at the site of the future Vietnam Veteran Memorial. This group of vets from around the country lived in a trailer along the future site to make sure no one caused any trouble.

This was a very active time for Vietnam Veterans in Washington, DC and I was fortunate to become active with many of the traditional and non-traditional veteran organizations. My friend Dave Dechant was on the Vietnam Veteran Memorial Fund and introduced me to Jan Scruggs, Bob Doubek and others who were working on the memorial. Dave and I would often visit the memorial site during lunch time as they were building it.

I joined Bobby Muller, John Terzano, Gary Logan, Rick Weidman, Dave Dechant, Lynda Van Devanter and many others at the future site for the Groundbreaking Ceremony. The memorial was dedicated in 1982 and there was a parade formed on the mall which then traveled through downtown Washington; one of the first such gatherings to "Welcome Vietnam Veterans".

As I walked through the massive crowd during the dedication - including veterans sitting in the trees listening to the speakers - I was amazed to meet some old friends from Pittsburgh and San Diego. I even ran into Alan Sams, PA-C, who flew all the way from Atlanta to join the dedication.



Left to Right – Ground breaking at the Vietnam Veteran Memorial and dedication of site in 1982. DAV counselor and myself counseling a veteran during the ground breaking of the memorial later published in “To Heal a Nation” by Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlowin. 1985”.



*Vietnam Women's Memorial
(photo Ken Harbert)*

My friends Lynda Van Devanter, RN, and Diane Carlson Evans, RN, got me involved with the proposed Vietnam Women's Memorial. The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) Veterans Caucus helped support the China Beach dances held in Washington, DC to raise money for the memorial. Later, I was appointed to the foundation's advisory panel so that PAs could be represented. This beautiful bronze statue was created and commissioned by Glenna Goodacre and finally dedicated in 1993.

In 1979 I developed a panel discussion and a CME at Greater Southeast Community Hospital in Washington, DC entitled “Forgotten but not gone - the Vietnam Era Veteran”. During this time I was a PA working with a

psychologist on a group therapy program entitled “Back in the World” a closed systemic behavioral program for Vietnam Veterans and their significant others.

In its formative years, the PA profession struggled with recognizing and honoring corpsmen and medics that had served in Vietnam. After working with a number of veteran groups and seeing how Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was affecting veterans, I brought George Skypeck's artwork to an AAPA conference to allow those who served an opportunity to see the war through the eyes of someone who

served in Vietnam. Skypeck's art told the story many could not tell for themselves. To keep the health care needs of veterans in the forefront, we established a Veterans Special Interest Committee (later to become the Veteran Caucus). Others that joined included: Lonnie Holmes, Doug Conduit, CWO4 Rick Hillegas, Mike Doyle, Capt. Tom Lemley, Richard Currey, Shep Stone, Capt. Larry Russell, Steve Turnipseed, CWO4 John Tissot, Alan Sams and CWO4 Tom Clayton. In 1985 the Caucus was officially recognized by the AAPA and Randy Nielsen became our Academy Representative.

As an official Caucus of the AAPA, veterans could develop a consensus within the PA profession to assist veterans with their health care needs and make others aware of the contributions that Vietnam Veterans made to both the military and civilian health care systems. As a Caucus, we started to establish liaisons with other veteran organizations, legislators, military leaders and those involved in veteran affairs. Later John Padgett and I began a scholarship program to actively encourage veteran PA students to help other veterans become physician assistants and "pay it forward".



Photograph courtesy of the PA History Society, Johns Creek, GA.

I used a poem I had written as our motto "Life Savers Then.... Caregivers Now" © and it still is used today. This poem was written about all the veterans I had met through veteran groups and the incredible heroes I encountered through our profession. Later, George Skypeck used this motto to create a painting to represent corpsmen and medics in Vietnam which was commissioned by the Coors Corporation. Today the motto is prominent on the statue commissioned by Don Pedersen at the University of Utah and its replica at the Stead Center in Durham, North Carolina.

Life Savers Then... Caregivers Now ©

It was night filled of hero stars
Bronze, silver, gold –stars
That lit up the room
Visions – past, present and soon to be future
Walking among warriors new and old
Some in uniform
Some seeing themselves in uniforms of old
Ghostly memories joined them all
Friends, comrades, soul mates filled the screen

There he stands in army green
Once a gentle giant medic
Lugging this comrades on his shoulders
Far above the erupting ground of death
Doing his best under the worst of conditions
Trying, wishing, with all he had
That he could have known more –might have been more

At times all he could offer was himself
Presence, pressure, patience, promises and prayers
But when it came time save those under his care
He never gave up and gave his all and more

A navy corpsman stands silently
Wearing his old caduceus shining brightly now
Worn bronze from age, but never really forgotten
Once he was shrouded in Marine Corps green
Corpsman up, rising to meet the call,
Giving the kiss of the angels
Offering lifesaving breaths while whispering words of comfort
Often resting his head on his Marines chest
Listening for sounds of life, whispering words of hope,
While bullets seem to float by, and sounds of death surrounded him
Memories of offering his body, and at times, his soul as protection for his Marines
For they say him as confessor, father, brother, savior, and protector from harm

Gray haired and older than dirt
An Air Force PJ, quietly taking it all in,
Once adored in jolly jungle green
Trained to do what most others only dream about
Water, mountains, ice and jungle- living for them all
Offering themselves up to their motto "That Other May Live"
Offering service above all else including himself
Not fearing what other mortals dread
But rather trained and living for the odds
Prepared for the worst yet always planning and preparing for the life-saving best outcome

So here they are
Life Savers, confessors of the living and comforters of the dying
Putting themselves in harm's way
Offering hope with morphine to ease the pain
Saying silent prayers to a higher power for one last save

So here they are now
Physician Assistants all
Older yet wiser, second to none
Offering care giving, heart saving, life making
With the respect and knowledge that only those
Who have lived among the thousand-yard stares can ever understand
They work for the living, yet they dream of the dead
They accept, appreciate and understand the preciousness of life
Knowing more than most about that secret of life
Its true meaning, nanosecond by nanosecond
Liking forever past with present

Preserving forever the compassion and passion of lessons learned in the forgotten fogs
of war
For they are now and forever will be our
Lifesavers then... Caregivers now