

Winter 2016

myVA QUARTERLY

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center

Remembering Ralph

Medical center
honors its
namesake's
legacy during his
birth month



VA | Ralph H. Johnson
VA Medical Center
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



FROM THE DIRECTOR

In January each year, all of us here at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center pause to remember the phenomenal life of our hospital's namesake, Private First Class Ralph Henry Johnson, who was born on January 11, 1949. The young Marine later sacrificed his own life by throwing himself upon an active grenade during the conflict in Vietnam, saving several of his military comrades from harm. Pfc. Johnson died heroically on March 5, 1968, and was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Each and every day we honor Ralph's sacrifice and amazing legacy by providing excellent health care to our Veteran patients.

In this issue of myVA Quarterly, you'll hear a first-hand account of Ralph's early life here in Charleston, South Carolina, from his sister, and good friend to our medical center, Helen Richards. You'll also get a close look at the Beaufort National Cemetery in Beaufort, South Carolina, where Ralph is respectfully interred, and learn about the burial benefits available to all Veterans at national cemeteries around the country.

While we take care to continually honor our past, we are also dedicated to moving forward. In our field, that means investing in research aimed at finding new and innovative ways to care for and cure our patients. At the Charleston VA, we have more than 100 talented researchers conducting hundreds of studies and investigating treatments for the unique set of ailments that affect our Veterans. VA principle investigators were instrumental in a recent landmark National Institutes of Health study that revealed the benefits of more aggressive treatment for older patients dealing with high blood pressure. Other researchers are currently studying transcranial magnetic stimulation and its use in treating patients with chronic or debilitating depression. Still more VA investigators are looking into the effectiveness of group motivational interviewing techniques among homeless Veterans. These studies, and the staff conducting them, represent some of VA's most valuable resources and contributions to the community at large. You'll read more about how they're shaping the future of health care as you flip through the pages of this magazine.

In this first issue of 2016, we reflect on a year of record-breaking growth and remember our rich heritage while also keeping our eyes fixed on the horizon and the advancements to come in the new year. Thank you for trusting us with your health care and allowing us to safeguard your well-being now and in the year to come.

Scott R. Isaacks
SCOTT R. ISAACKS, FACHE



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Around the Lowcountry

Charleston VA researchers contribute to landmark NIH blood pressure management study

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

Researchers at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center have contributed to a breakthrough study that could have a significant impact in the treatment of high blood pressure among non-diabetic adults age 50 and older.

Initial results of this landmark clinical trial, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health called the Systolic Blood Pressure Intervention Trial (SPRINT), indicate that more intensive management of high blood pressure, below the commonly recommended blood pressure target, significantly reduces rates of cardiovascular disease and lowers risk of death among patients in this age group. The intervention in this trial, which carefully adjusts the amount or type of blood pressure medication to achieve a target systolic pressure of less than 120 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg), reduced rates of cardiovascular events, such as heart attack and heart failure, as well as stroke, by almost a third and the risk of death by almost a quarter, as compared to the current standard target systolic pressure of less than 140 mm Hg.

"This is very exciting news that could potentially save lives in the future," said Roberto Pisoni, M.D., principle investigator for the study at the Charleston VAMC. "This study shows that a more intensified blood pressure control can be highly beneficial for older hyper-

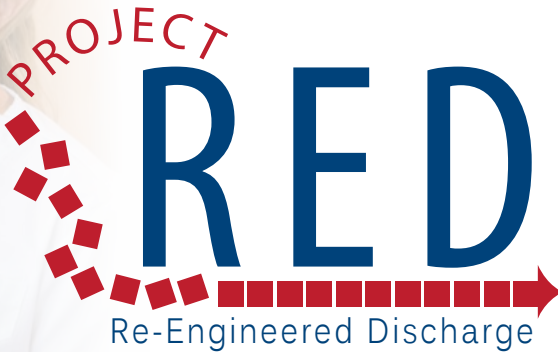
25 percent decrease in mortality as compared to the group on the conventional blood pressure control. The larger trial was actually stopped early based on an interim evaluation of the study, which produced such dramatic results. We continue to see the local participants in the trial here in Charleston and await the published results of the SPRINT trial. The final study will most certainly influence how clinicians treat high blood pressure in patients similar to those we have been following in this trial."

In addition to Pisoni, researchers Jan Basile, M.D., former chief of primary care at Charleston VAMC, and Joseph John, M.D., a Charleston VAMC researcher, have both been key players in the study since it began a few years ago. Basile is quick to recognize the importance of the study but also encourages patients who could benefit from these preliminary results to take caution when considering changes to their own health care.

"Before anyone with hypertension changes their goal for blood pressure reduction or their therapy to achieve that goal, they should speak with their individual primary care clinician as these results still need to be formally published and evaluated by the scientific community," Basile said. "Until then, no changes to the current guidelines will be made. We are cautious, but also thrilled with the results we've seen so far."

The SPRINT study, which began in the fall of 2009, includes more than 9,300 participants age 50 and older, recruited from about 100 medical centers and clinical practices throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center had 60 patients in the trial and researchers followed each participant for about four years. It is the largest study of its kind to date to examine how maintaining systolic blood pressure at a lower than currently recommended level will impact cardiovascular and kidney diseases. NIH stopped the blood pressure intervention earlier than originally planned in order to quickly disseminate the significant preliminary results.

The primary results of the trial will be published within the next few months.



Project RED decreases patient readmission rates

By Erin Curran, Public Affairs Specialist

Starting in April 2015, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has been implementing Project RED throughout their inpatient wards. Project RED is a Re-Engineered Discharge Process that adopts 11 elements that have proven to decrease re-hospitalization and increase patient satisfaction. This process effectively prepares patients and the families for discharge from the hospital while promoting patient safety for aftercare.

"This process allows our staff to give the Veteran a personalized discharge booklet that is visually appealing, reader friendly and patient-centered," said Patient Flow Nurse Manager Wendy Young. "Project RED has four goals: decrease hospital readmissions, decrease visits to the emergency department post-discharge, better coordination of care between the inpatient wards and the Veteran's primary care team, and increased patient satisfaction."

Project RED was developed by Dr. Brian Jack and his colleagues at the Boston Medical Center. It has received widespread positive recognition throughout the medical community and has been cited and published in many medical journals, including the American Journal of Medical Quality and the American Journal of Nursing.

"Charleston VAMC was the sixth VA medical center to adopt this discharge method," said Young. "To date, only 18 of 152 VA facilities have implemented Project RED and we are proud to be an early adopter."

How it works: the nurse enters information into the Veterans electronic medical record starting at admission. When the Veteran is ready for discharge, the nurse uses the Project RED portal to import the patient's individualized information from the medical record into the discharge booklet. The booklet is printed in color and given to the patient prior to leaving the hospital.

"The booklet is great for our nurses to teach from, easy for the patients to understand, and lists resources throughout the medical center that are available for them, like smoking cessation classes, volunteer transportation network information, and upcoming appointments," said Young. "In addition, each nurse is receiving education on a communication style called Teach Back, where the nurse is trained to ask open-ended questions to the Veteran to ensure they understand their discharge instructions. The training is one of the major improvements here in Charleston from Project RED."

To date, Charleston VAMC has rolled out Project RED in all of its inpatient wards.

Project RED is supported by grants from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the National Institutes of Health National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation, and the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute.

Elements of Project RED

1. Educate the patient about their diagnosis throughout the hospital stay.
2. Make appointments for clinician follow-up and post-discharge testing.
3. Discuss with the patient any tests or studies that have been completed in the hospital and discuss who will be responsible for following up the results.
4. Organize post-discharge services.
5. Confirm the Medication Plan.
6. Reconcile the discharge plan with national guidelines and critical pathways.
7. Review the appropriate steps for what to do if a problem arises.
8. Expedite transmission of the Discharge Résumé (summary) to the doctor or healthcare provider accepting responsibility for the patient's care after discharge, which includes: diagnosis, medications, consultations, test results, and patient's condition at discharge.
9. Assess the degree of understanding by asking the patient to explain in their own words the details of the plan. (Teach Back)
10. Give the patient a written discharge plan at the time of discharge that contains: diagnosis, medications, follow-up, and plan.
11. Provide telephone reinforcement of the discharge plan and problem solving 2-3 days after discharge.





VA helps hundreds of Veterans at STAND Down events

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

Photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and its outpatient clinics in Savannah, Georgia and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina teamed up with local support agencies recently to assist homeless Veterans during their respective Stand Down Against Veteran Homelessness events.

STAND DOWN AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

Assisting Homeless Veterans in Myrtle Beach

The Myrtle Beach Stand Down for Veteran Homelessness was held Sept. 18 and was a huge success—growing in size since its inaugural year last year. The event sprung up out of necessity as key community members realized the need for the service in their area and endeavored to hold their own day of outreach to the homeless.

“This is our second year doing this event,” said Kris Tourtellotte, director of the Veteran’s Welcome Home and Resource Center and co-organizer for the Stand Down. “I’ve been serving Veterans since 1984. I was homeless back in the ‘80s and I had nothing. I love to see the looks on these Vets’ faces who are here getting to food and other resources they need.”

According to Doris Gleason, community outreach director for AARP South Carolina and primary organizer of the Myrtle Beach event, homeless Veterans were given warm-weather gear, access to showers and two hot meals, among other essentials, free of charge. They were also put in contact with the services that could assist them in securing permanent lodging—namely the Department of Housing and Urban Development – VA Supportive Housing Program. Nearly 40 social service agencies were on hand to provide assistance.

The Myrtle Beach Stand Down was sponsored by the Myrtle Beach VA Outpatient Clinic, AARP South Carolina, Veteran’s Welcome Home and Resource Center, Combat Veterans Association, Military Officers Association of America, and Horry Georgetown Technical College.

Reaching out to Savannah Veterans

On Sept. 15 and 16, the Savannah VA Outpatient Clinic, in partnership with Goodwill of the Coastal Empire, assisted more than 400 individuals at its 12th annual Stand Down for Homelessness Resource and Job Fair at the Savannah Civic Center. Attendees at the Stand Down were offered hot meals, haircuts, showers and opportunities for a variety of health screenings. The second day of the event brought employers together with Veterans seeking jobs.

“If you’re a person who is homeless or experiencing difficulties with finances and what you have, it’s very, very difficult to travel by bus to get to all of these services,” said Ruth Keith, social worker at the Savannah VA clinic. “A lot of those services are here that those individuals need and they can do one-stop shopping here.”

The event included a Veteran Listening Forum with Charleston VA Medical Center Director Scott Isaacks and an address from Congressman Buddy Carter.

In addition to the Ralph H. Johnson VAMC and Goodwill of the Coastal Empire, the following community partners were essential to providing all the resources available to Veterans at Stand Down: Savannah Vet Center, American Legion Post 500, Georgia Department of Veterans Services, Georgia Department of Labor, Military Order of the Purple Hearts, Chatham Savannah Authority for the Homeless, and Salvation Army.



A new location for Charleston Stand Down

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center partnered with Goodwill Industries of Lower South Carolina and Palmetto Warrior Connection to host its 16th annual Stand Down Against Veteran Homelessness Oct. 30. The event, traditionally held at Armory Park in North Charleston, moved to a new location this year—the VA Community Resource and Referral Center located at 2424 City Hall Lane in North Charleston.

“We’re holding Stand Down here at the CRRC because we wanted to really showcase this new facility that opened in June,” said Hugh Myrick, Chief of Mental Health at Charleston VAMC. “The annual Stand Down events meet a critical need for our homeless Veterans but we found that it wasn’t enough. We needed to do more. This facility helps us realize that goal—to provide a mini Stand Down every day. Veterans can come here any time and get connected with those who can help them get back on their feet.”

The Charleston event boasted hundreds of volunteers, all of whom worked diligently to provide assistance to more than 375 homeless individuals and people in need, including about 280 Veterans. Those who attended the event were seeking medical care, shelter, clothing, and job assistance, among other things. Basic health care, flu shots, HIV testing, and employment services were in high demand. Goodwill ambassadors provided haircuts and clothing vouchers while volunteers prepared, packed and distributed two hot meals to the participants. The event also included a Listening Forum with Charleston VAMC Director Scott Isaacks.

Help for Homeless Veterans
877-4AID-VET
va.gov/homeless | (877) 424-3838

Area Veterans who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless can visit the CRRC, a VA outpatient clinic or the main medical center in Charleston, where homeless coordinators are ready to help. Veterans and their families may also call 1-877-4AID-VET (1-877-424-3838) to access VA services.



Ralph H. Johnson, a life remembered

Helen Richards, sister of the fallen Marine, remembers his life

By Lanelle W. Strawder, Public Affairs Specialist

While most people know Pfc. Ralph Henry Johnson as the Vietnam War hero, Helen Richards of Summerville, South Carolina, will always remember Johnson as her little brother. Johnson valiantly gave his life by hurling his body on a grenade to protect the lives of his comrades. January 11, 2016, would have marked Johnson's 67th birthday.

Born the fourth of 14 children, Helen Richards remembers her brother as a quiet, reserved boy who was always honest and put others first. He had a keen sense of dedication and responsibility at a young age.

Richards recalls how she and her siblings would spend summers in the country with their grandparents. Each night before bed, their grandfather would have all the children individually recite the Lord's Prayer. But 8-year-old Ralph couldn't get the lines right. Fed up, his grandfather warned him that he'd be in big trouble if he didn't have the prayer memorized by the next night.

That next day, the Johnson children had planned to play baseball, and looked forward to trying to hit Ralph's signature curve balls. But when they reached the

field, Ralph dutifully parked himself beneath a tree with his Bible in hand and did not move for the rest of the day. That evening Ralph volunteered to go first and recited the prayer effortlessly, Richards remembers with pride. Her brother remained a man of faith throughout his life.

Since childhood, Johnson had always admired Servicemembers and wanted to contribute to his country.

"We used to go to the Lincoln Theatre on King near Spring Street," remembers Richards. "Ralph would see the guys in their Marine Corps uniforms and he would say, 'You know what? One day I'm going to wear that uniform.'"

Johnson realized that dream when he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1967.

In January 1968, Johnson was assigned to serve as a Reconnaissance Scout with Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division (Rein), FMF. He spent the day before his departure visiting with family. That night, Richards recalls how she and Johnson stayed up all night laughing and reminiscing about their childhood.

When they realized it was 3 a.m., Johnson asked his sister to wake him up the next morning so that he wouldn't be late for his departure flight.

The next morning both, Johnson and Richards overslept, and the young Marine worried about missing his flight. But Richards flagged down a taxi and made the driver promise to get her brother to the airport in time.

"Aren't you going to tell me goodbye?" Richards asked as her brother loaded his duffle bag into the car.

"I'm not going to tell you goodbye because I'll see you when I get back," Johnson replied.

It was the last time Richards spoke to her brother.

"When I got the message that Ralph had hurled himself onto the grenade, it didn't come as a surprise. He was always giving of himself," Richards said. "Ralph wasn't selfish. His life speaks to that."

Since his death, Pfc. Johnson has been posthumously awarded with the nation's highest military decoration, the Congressional Medal of Honor. He has received several other honors, including the Purple Heart, the National Defense Service Medal, and the Vietnam Service Medal with two bronze stars. In 1991, the Charleston VA Medical Center became the Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in his honor. Johnson is buried in the Beaufort National Cemetery in South Carolina.

Richards says she always knew her brother would be someone special. Johnson lived a life of humility and conviction. He touched the lives of those he met and his character shone through until the day he died.

Ralph's birthday and the upcoming anniversary of his death is difficult for Richards because it brings back so many memories. She used to wonder what would have happened if they had overslept that morning, or if she'd never hailed that cab. But now she says she's taught herself not to worry about what could have been, and to focus on the good memories.

"I'm just thankful for the life that he lived and grateful for the time that we all had together as sisters and brothers."

Today, Richards volunteers regularly at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in honor of her younger brother. She gives him a wave and a smile as she walks past his portrait in the hospital lobby. She likes to think he's looking back at her and smiling.

Above: Helen Richards stands in front of the portrait of Pfc. Johnson that is currently on display in the lobby of the medical center. Below: Photos of Pfc. Johnson from his time in service, pictured with fellow Marine Alex Colvin at right. The dog tag pictured is displayed at the Congressional Medal of Honor Museum at Patriot's Point in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.



Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer



Photo provided by Veteran Alex Colvin



Photo by Veteran Brian Parker



Elizabeth Santa Ana, Ph.D., demonstrates a group therapy session for a research study aimed at helping homeless Veterans struggling with substance abuse. Photo by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer

Veterans needed for research treatment study

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

Researchers at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center are currently seeking participants to voluntarily enroll in a research study comparing two types of treatment for Veterans with a substance use problem who are currently receiving care through the VA Homeless Program or homeless and not yet involved in VA homeless services.

Eligible Veteran participants will attend one of two groups: a motivational enhancement group therapy, called the Self-Change Program, which is a treatment group designed to enhance motivation to make a healthier change around using substances by exploring personal goals, values, and strengths for making a change; or an informative life skills educational group therapy, which is a treatment group that will explore topics designed to enhance home stability, including home maintenance, budgeting for financial success, and exploring avenues for resolving life issues.

According to Elizabeth Santa Ana, Ph.D., evidence-based training program coordinator for the VISN 7 Homeless Program and principle investigator of the study, “substance use problems among Veterans in the homeless program is an issue that creates a major risk factor for worsening psychopathology and housing instability.”

“Recent data suggest that homeless Veterans with substance use problems represent one of the largest and most chronic groups of psychiatric patients treated in the VA health care system,” Santa Ana said. “Conservative estimates show at least 60 percent of Veterans are admitted into VA housing with a substance use disorder and approximately 50 percent have both alcohol and drug use disorders.”

Santa Ana hopes that the Charleston VAMC study that enrolls homeless Veterans with substance use problems will provide evidence that group motivational interviewing (GMI) results in a reduction of substance use among participants and also leads to greater community participation among those involved in the study.

“This enhanced focus on social inclusion in the community setting in GMI stems from research showing that engaging in healthy social behaviors fosters a sense of ‘belongingness’ within one’s community, which can reduce depression and positively impact substance use behavior,” said Santa Ana.

The study will recruit 186 volunteer participants within three locations: the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in Charleston, South Carolina, the Myrtle Beach VA Outpatient Clinic in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and the Savannah VA Outpatient Clinic in Savannah, Georgia.

Veterans taking part in the study will be involved for six months and may be compensated up to \$300 for their participation.

Interested Veterans should contact the project coordinators at 843-577-5011, ext. 5310 or 5553 for further information or to request a screening for potential enrollment.

VA researchers use magnetic stimulation to treat depression

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist



Navy Veteran Percy Jones receives magnetic stimulation treatments through a VA research trial focused on combating depression and anxiety.

Spend any amount of time at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and you’ll get to know Navy Veteran Percy Jones. Jones, now employed as a housekeeper at the hospital, goes about his daily duties sporting a bright, wide smile and interacts joyfully with staff and patients while making his rounds. But his disposition wasn’t always so sunny.

“At one time, I was having an awful lot of problems isolating myself,” Jones remembers. “I got angry easily and I was always very nervous. I couldn’t sleep. I started drinking too much. It got to the point where I was suicidal. I just didn’t want to live.”

Fortunately, Jones heard about a national research study being conducted at the Charleston VA, which utilized a non-invasive technique called transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to treat depression among Veterans. Jones signed up straightaway and soon after began receiving treatments—one 30-minute session, five days per week, for six straight weeks. Jones would come in during his lunch break and relax in a chair while researchers used a magnet to stimu-

late his prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for emotions and mood regulation. The results were almost immediate.

“In the first week and a half I could feel a difference,” Jones said. “I started realizing that I was myself again.”

And many Veterans in the study have had similar experiences. According to Dr. Mark George, principle investigator for the three-year study, so far about 60 percent of the patients in the trial have reached a state of remission with their depression.

“We stimulate this certain part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, and if we do that for several weeks, we can get people un-depressed,” George explains.

Through the TMS treatment, which George himself invented in the 1990s, the researcher hopes to help Veterans struggling with crippling depression and suicidal thoughts once again lead happy and productive lives.

“You see people, like Percy, who get their lives back through this treatment,” George said. “I have to pinch myself. It’s a dream.”

Charleston is one of eight medical centers in the country currently testing the effectiveness of TMS in the treatment of depression. Researchers say the study will end in spring of 2016 and more Veteran participants are needed. Jones regularly recommends the treatment to other Veterans he knows that are experiencing similar symptoms and he credits TMS for his new outlook.

“It was just like a door opening,” Jones said, beaming. “I started smiling more and sleeping again. I would say the treatment suppressed my depression and anxiety enough for me to be me.”



Photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer



eBenefits

My Gateway to Benefit Information

eBenefits is a joint VA/DOD web portal that provides a central location where wounded warriors, Veterans, service members, their families and their caretakers can access benefits-related information.

Top Q&A: eBenefits & Veterans Benefits Administration Claims

What can I do in eBenefits?

Some of the features within eBenefits allow Veterans and Servicemembers to access official military personnel documents, view the status of their disability compensation claim, transfer entitlement of Post-9/11 GI Bill to eligible dependents (Servicemembers only), and register for and update direct deposit information for certain benefits.

How do I access eBenefits?

eBenefits is located at www.ebenefits.va.gov. Before Veterans can access and use eBenefits they must be listed in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) and obtain a DS Logon. Servicemembers can access eBenefits with a DS Logon or Common Access Card (CAC). They can choose from two levels of registration, DS Logon Level 1 (Basic) and DS Logon Level 2 (Premium). Note: If Veterans attempt to register and are informed they have no DEERS record, VA will first need to verify their military service and add them to DEERS. All VA Regional Offices have staff familiar with procedures for adding a Veteran to DEERS.

What is a DS Logon?

A DS Logon is a secure identity (username and password) that is used by various Department of Defense (DOD) and VA websites, including eBenefits. If you are already registered in DEERS, you are eligible for a DS Logon. Once you have a DS Logon, it's valid for the rest of your life.

How do I register for an eBenefits account?

You can register for an eBenefits account online using the eBenefits DS Logon Account Registration Wizard. There are two types of registration, Basic and Premium. You will be walked through a series of questions to assist you in obtaining a Premium eBenefits Account, which gives you the highest level of access to eBenefits features. With a Premium Account you can view personal data about yourself in VA and DOD systems, apply for benefits online, check the status of your claims, update your address records, and more. To get a Premium eBenefits Account, you must verify your identity.

Many people will be able to verify their identity online by answering a few security questions. Servicemembers may verify

their identity online by using their CAC. Military retirees may verify their identity online using their Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) Logon. For those unable to verify their identity online, you will instantly receive a Basic Account. A Basic eBenefits Account lets you customize the site and access information you enter into eBenefits yourself; however, you cannot see your personal information in VA or DOD systems. However, there are other options available to you. Veterans in receipt of VA benefits via direct deposit may have their identity verified by calling 1-800-827-1000 and selecting option 7. Others may need to visit a VA Regional Office or TriCare Service Center to have their identities verified in person.

How can I check the status of my pending claim?

You can use the eBenefits portal to check the status of your claim online if you are an eBenefits Premium (Level 2) account holder. To determine the status of your pending claim, login to your eBenefits account (<https://www.ebenefits.va.gov>) and select My eBenefits. On the "Compensation" tab, select Compensation & Pension Claims Status to view your claim

status. You can also call 1-800-827-1000 and follow the recorded instructions, or you can contact VA and fill out the Ask A Question form. If you are not an eBenefits account holder, visit the eBenefits Registration page at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/> for information on how to establish an account.

What is acceptable proof of military service?

If you are still serving on regular active duty, you must include an original statement of service signed by, or by direction of, the adjutant, personnel officer, or commander of your unit or higher headquarters which identifies you and your social security number, and provides your date of entry on your current active duty period and the duration of any time lost. If you were discharged from regular active duty after January 1, 1950, a copy of DD Form 214, Certificate of Release or Discharge From Active Duty should be included with your VA Form 26-1880. If you were discharged after October 1, 1979, DD Form 214 copy 4 should be included.

How can I obtain proof of military service?

Request Pertaining to Military Records, is used to apply for proof of military service regardless of whether you served on regular active duty or in the selected reserves. This request form is NOT processed by VA. Rather, Standard Form 180 is completed and mailed to the appropriate custodian of military service records. To find a VA Form, go to <http://www.va.gov/vaforms> and perform the forms search.

How long will it take to receive a decision on my compensation claim?

The length of time it takes to receive a decision depends on several factors, such as the complexity of your disability(ies), the number of disabilities you claim, and the availability of evidence needed to decide your claim. Currently most claims are being processed within six months, but can take longer in complex claims.

What is the Veterans Benefits Administration Regional Office?

The Columbia VA Regional Office (RO) administers VA benefits and services to Veterans in South Carolina and across the nation. More than 64 percent of the staff at the RO are also Veterans while the remaining 36 percent of the staff also know it's an honor to serve our nation's Veterans each day.

Each month, Columbia RO's Veteran Service Center employees pay more than \$120 million in disability benefits to more than 90,000 South Carolina Veterans and family members. Additionally, the Columbia RO Fiduciary Hub employees assist more than 30,000 seriously disabled Veterans and their payees in their homes across South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida to provide personal assistance and ensure financial protections for Veterans are in place. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Counselors on staff are currently assisting 3,000 South Carolina Veterans in obtaining employment and other personalized services to best adapt to their service-connected disabilities or transition from active duty to employment. The Columbia National Call Center helps nearly 3,000 Veterans and family members each day by phone.

Veterans can also seek claims-related assistance from our accredited Veteran Service Organization partners such as state SC Division of Veterans' Affairs, American Legion, American Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of Purple Heart, Paralyzed Veterans of America or Veterans of Foreign Wars.



Leanne Weldin
Director, Columbia Regional Office

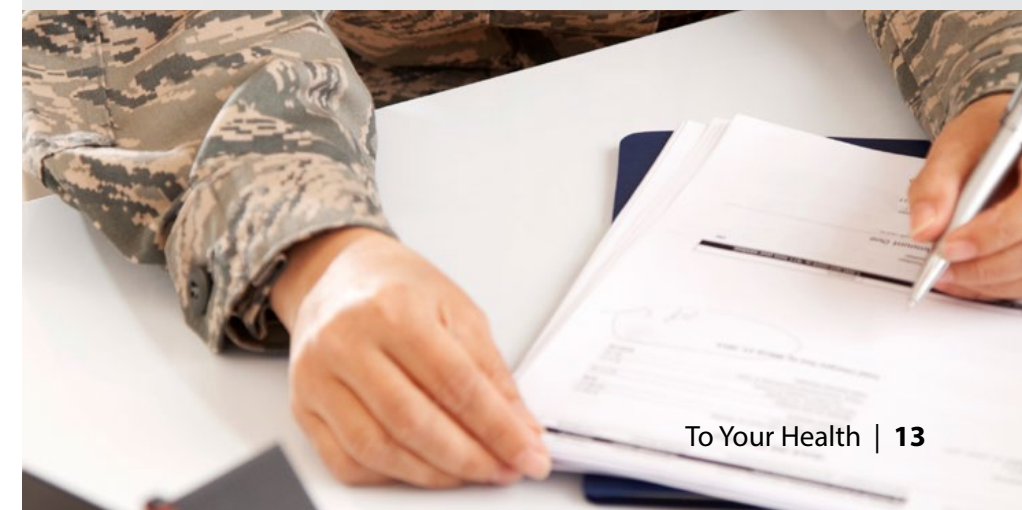
Veterans can contact the Regional Office at:

Columbia VA RO
6437 Garners Ferry Rd
Columbia, SC 29209

Phone: 800-827-1000
Fax: 844-531-7818

File claims online at www.va.gov by setting up an eBenefits account.

Email the RO by following the prompts through "Contact Us" at www.va.gov or go directly to <https://iris.custhelp.com/>.



Hallowed Ground: Veterans find eternal rest at Beaufort National Cemetery

By Meredith A. Hagen, Lead Public Affairs Specialist

Positioned in a prominent location near the front of Beaufort National Cemetery's (BNC) 41 acres of sprawling southern landscape in Beaufort, South Carolina, lies the final burial place of Medal of Honor recipient Pfc. Ralph H. Johnson, treasured namesake of the Charleston VA Medical Center. Established in 1863, the Beaufort cemetery is one the of the nation's 13 original national cemeteries. Johnson is buried alongside more than 21 thousand fellow Servicemembers and their families—many dating back to the Civil War.

"This is truly sacred ground," said BNC Director Craig Arsell. "Ralph, and all of the honored Veterans interred here, rest among their brothers and sisters in arms, protected by the wide branches of these ancient oak trees. I could think of no better place for their eternal rest."

Burial at any of the VA's 133 national cemeteries is just one of the many benefits provided by the VA as a final act of service to deceased Veterans. Additional benefits include opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care of the grave-site, a government headstone or marker, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate—all offered at no cost to the family. Spouses and eligible dependents may also be buried in a national cemetery with their Veteran and benefit from perpetual care and inscription on the Veteran's headstone. In some cases, Veterans may be eligible for monetary burial allowances to assist with the cost of making final arrangements.

Many of these same benefits apply to Veterans wishing to be buried in a private cemetery as well, though these do not extend to the Veteran's spouse or dependents.

"The topic can sometimes make people uncomfortable but it's important to make preparations ahead of time," said Arsell. "Make sure that you outline your wishes to be buried at a national cemetery in your will and provide a copy of your DD Form 214 to at least two individuals. This document makes it easier to verify eligibility for burial benefits. These simple steps can save time and heartache during an already stressful and emotional time."

The National Cemetery Scheduling Office in St. Louis, Missouri, is responsible for determining a Veteran's eligibility for burial in a national cemetery. According to Arsell, Veterans can pre-verify their eligibility for burial benefits by calling 1-800-535-1117 and providing the appropriate discharge paperwork. Veterans may also email NCA.Scheduling@va.gov.

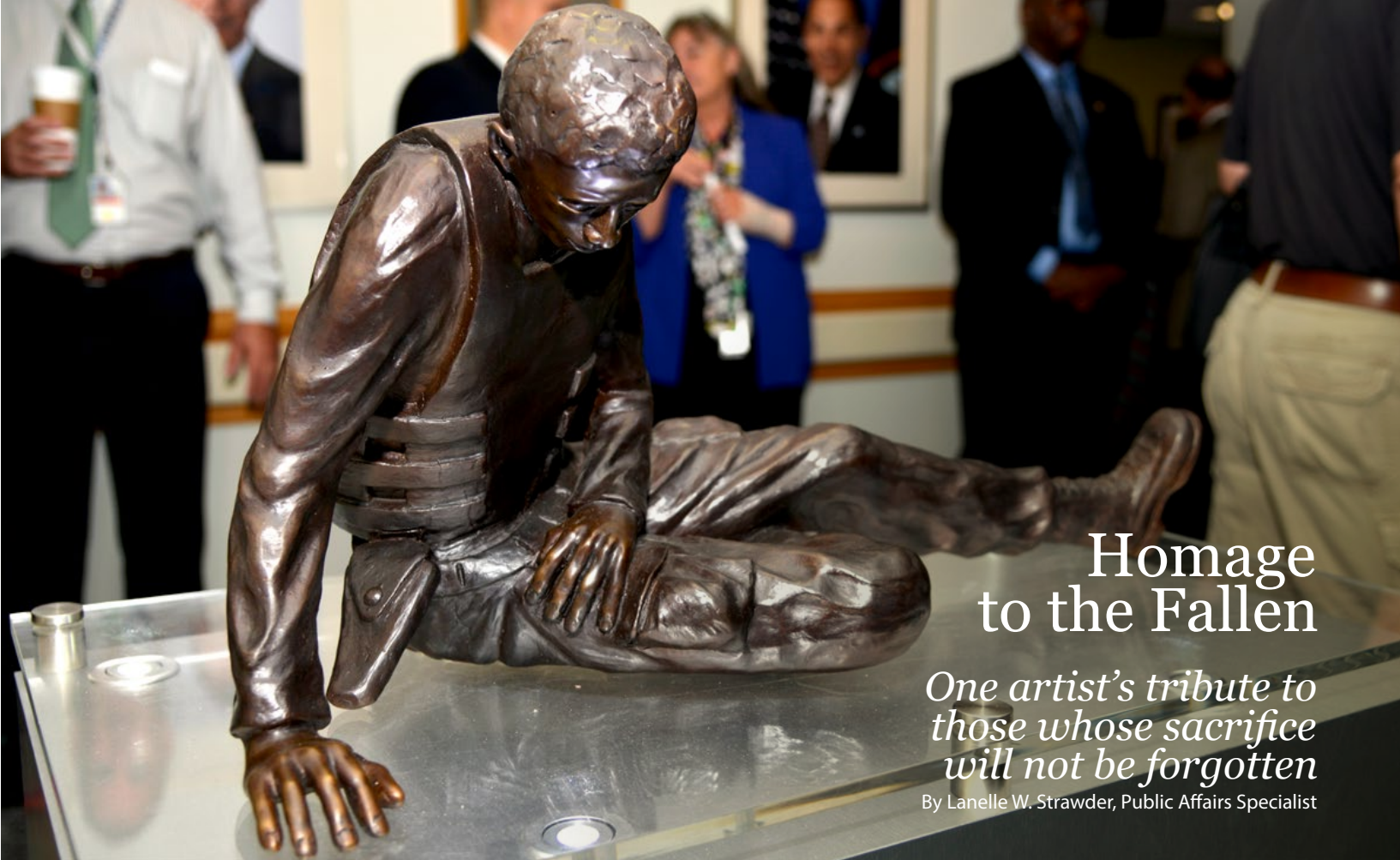
In response to growing demand, the Beaufort National Cemetery recently completed an expansion project, which officially opened on Veterans Day 2015. The addition created more than 2,500 casketed burial plots and 1,000 cremation sites. According to Arsell, the completed project will provide close to 30 more years of interment space for area Veterans.

"Working here is like walking through history every day," Arsell said. "We all take great pride in caring for this place because it is our humble way of honoring those who have served our country. It is our goal to create a pristine place for our nation's fallen Servicemembers to rest peacefully."

To learn more about VA burial benefits and eligibility, visit www.cem.va.gov.



Photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer



Homage to the Fallen

One artist's tribute to those whose sacrifice will not be forgotten

By Lanelle W. Strawder, Public Affairs Specialist

The front courtyard of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center was filled to capacity on the morning of Nov. 10. Though rain showers had threatened just moments before, the sun shone through as area Veterans, patients, and VA administrative officials and employees gathered to witness the unveiling of a sculpture donated to the Charleston VA Medical Center.

At 27 inches long and 14 inches high, the bronze sculpture depicts a dying Marine in the moments before his death. Local Vietnam Veteran and artist Dr. Edward Byrd fashioned the piece after Private First Class Dennis Lee Lobbezoo, a 19-year-old former patient of his who died in battle in 1968. Byrd portrays Lobbezoo leaning to his side, felled by an unseen blow.

Byrd's sculpture serves as a reminder of the harsh reality of combat—a reality in which Pfc. Lobbezoo, Pfc. Ralph H. Johnson, and countless other Servicemembers have laid down their lives to protect our nation's freedoms. Byrd hopes that viewers of the sculpture will remember that the price of freedom is not free.

The sculpture's installation and unveiling at the Charleston VAMC was timely, as the day marked the 240th birthday of the United States Marine Corps and fell just one day shy of Veterans Day. Special guest Sloan D. Gibson, Deputy Secretary of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, attended the dedication ceremony and brought remarks for the occasion.

Other notable guests included Medal of Honor recipient Major General James E. Livingston, USMC (Ret.), and Helen Richards, sister of Medal of Honor Recipient Pfc. Ralph H. Johnson, USMC, the Charleston VAMC's namesake. Officials from Joint Base Charleston, the U.S. Coast Guard Sector Charleston and representatives from both South Carolina Senate offices were also in attendance.

Charleston VA proudly accepted the distinguished work of art. It is displayed prominently in the medical center lobby, placed just feet away from the portrait of Ralph H. Johnson.

Byrd, the retired neurosurgeon-turned-sculptor of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, spoke of the weeks in 1968 he had spent treating Lobbezoo and the unforgettable impression the young Marine's good-natured personality and high-minded sense of duty had left on him. Byrd was devastated when he learned his young patient was killed in action a few months later and vowed that he would one day honor the fallen Marine.

Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Sloan D. Gibson provides the key-note address at the sculpture dedication ceremony. Dr. Byrd is seated behind him.



Photos by David L. Jones, Visual Information Specialist



Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center
109 Bee Street
Charleston, SC 29401

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Important VA Phone Numbers

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll-free **1-888-878-6884**
TTY: 843-789-6888

Telephone Advice Line

843-789-6400 or toll-free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need medical advice from their primary care provider or have questions about their medications can call the TAP line Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Scheduling an Appointment

843-789-6500 or toll-free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need to schedule, cancel or reschedule an appointment for all primary care clinics including Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Beaufort, Trident, and Goose Creek can call Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line

843-577-5011 or toll-free at **1-888-878-6884**

Veterans who need to request a refill of a prescription or check the status of refills can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Have your social security number and prescription numbers ready when calling.

VA Benefits (other than health care)

1-800-827-1000

Veterans who need information on VA benefits including VA pension and compensation, home loans, and education can call the VA Regional Office.

Billing Questions

1-866-258-2772

Veterans who have questions about a bill received from the Charleston VA Medical Center can call the VA Revenue Center.

Veterans Crisis Line

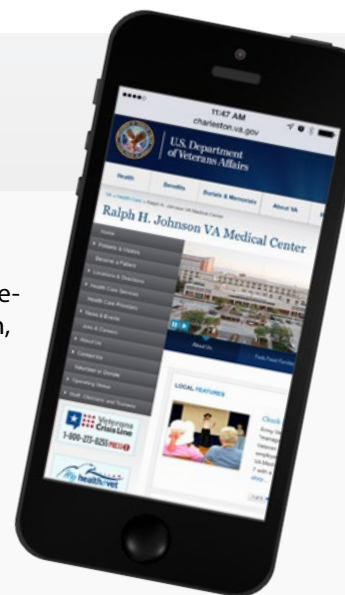
1-800-273-TALK (8255), Press 1 for Veterans

Veterans can call the Veterans Crisis Line to talk to trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week or visit **www.veteranscrisisline.net**

My HealtheVet

www.myhealth.va.gov

Veterans can manage their health by logging onto My HealtheVet, which offers access to Veteran health benefits and services.



For more information on VA related topics, visit www.charleston.va.gov. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

