

Leading the Way

Hospital welcomes new director as praise rolls in from VA leadership.

Man on the Move

Disabled Veteran uses adaptive tools to enjoy an active life.

Winter 2015

my VA QUARTERLY

Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center



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

From the Director



In early November, I had the distinct honor of being appointed the new Director of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. Prior to this, I had served as the hospital's Associate Director beginning in August of 2010, and I spent a brief time overseeing operations as the Interim Director. In the four plus years I have spent here, I have seen this facility grow and excel in ways that truly impress me every day. Now, I am excited to take the helm and lead us into the future of Veteran health care.

Building the VA of the future – a world-class health care system that provides the highest level of patient centered quality care, patient safety, technology and innovations to improve the health of our Veterans whom are often dealing with complex medical conditions – has been the mission of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center for many years. That is the mission that is the heart of our VA and the focus that will continue to guide our entire team as we move forward.

I firmly believe innovation and commitment to excellence defines our medical center. Over the past several months we have improved access to care while experiencing our most rapid growth year for unique patients ever, added more than 200 staff members to provide care and support services, implemented new state-of-the-art technology for improved care, and collaborated together to ensure we make the best ethical decisions and follow sound business practices in your best interest. As we move forward, we will continue to focus on quality, technology, access, ethics, recruiting and retaining the most qualified employees, and patient safety. I sincerely believe that we are improving every day and staying laser-focused on you, our Veteran patients, will ensure that we continue to lead the way for VA health care.

I am optimistic about our future together and I look forward to continuing to provide you with the best possible care available – honoring the promise made to you by the American people, now and in the years to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Scott R. Isaacks".

Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE
Medical Center Director



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To view *myVA* online visit
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Charleston VA welcomes new Director

by Tonya Lobbstael, Public Affairs Officer

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center is pleased to welcome its new Director Scott R. Isaacks, FACHE effective Nov. 2.

Isaacks, who served as associate director at the Charleston VA since 2010, will lead VA's health care delivery to more than 59,000 Veterans in 21 counties along the South Carolina and Georgia coast. As director and chief executive officer, Isaacks will oversee the 144-bed tertiary care medical center that includes a \$20 million research program and six community outpatient clinics located in Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Hinesville, Beaufort, Goose Creek and North Charleston providing primary, mental health and select specialty care. The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, affiliated with the Medical University of South Carolina, is also a major teaching facility providing 90 resident positions, fully accredited resident training programs for pharmacy, optometry and dentistry, a VA Nursing Academy Partnership with MUSC, and training for allied health professionals.

"I am incredibly honored to accept the position as the next director of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center," said Isaacks. "This is one of the best VA medical centers in the country and I look forward to working with our Veterans, community partners, Veteran Service Organizations, and staff to continue our track record of providing the best care anywhere for our nation's heroes."

Isaacks served as interim director since March, leading the Ralph H. Johnson VA

Medical Center to achieve the 5-Star highest possible rating according to VA's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning Value (SAIL) model in the third quarter of fiscal year 2014. Under Isaacks' leadership, the Charleston VA improved from a 3-Star to a 5-Star rating in just two quarters, now ranking the Charleston VA in the top 10 percent of VA medical centers nationwide for quality of care and efficiency.

The Charleston VA is also ranked in the top 10th percentile according to the Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS). HEDIS is an independent review that measures performance of 90 percent of America's health plans and facilities in both the public and private sector on dimensions of care and service.

While the Charleston VA has always been a leader in providing timely care, that track record has continued under Isaacks' leadership with wait times for Primary Care, Mental Health and Specialty Care continuing to improve.

"These achievements demonstrate the excellent care and services that are provided at the Charleston VA for our Veterans on a daily basis," said Isaacks. "They also demonstrate the incredible work that is going on each day at our medical center and the caliber of our staff. I am honored to serve alongside them and look forward to providing the highest quality care and care innovations for our nation's heroes for many years to come."



Top VA officials hail Charleston VA quality of care, Mental Health Research Facility

by Tonya Lobbstaal, Public Affairs Officer | photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer



A researcher demonstrates the use of a device used in transcranial magnetic stimulation to VA Interim Under Secretary for Health Dr. Carolyn Clancy while she tours the facility's new Mental Health Research building Dec. 8.



VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson visits the new Mental Health Research building Dec. 5 prior to the grand opening ceremony.

VA Deputy Secretary The Honorable Sloan Gibson and Interim Under Secretary of Health Dr. Carolyn Clancy visited the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center in early December to learn about quality care best practices here and get a first-hand look at the new Mental Health Research Building that opened on Dec. 8.

“The Charleston VA medical facility ranks among the top 10 percent of healthcare organizations in America,” said Gibson. The facility achieved a 5-Star Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning Value (SAIL) rating in fiscal year 2014, ranking Charleston VAMC in the top 10 percent of VA medical centers nationwide for quality of care and efficiency. The VAMC is also ranked in the top 10th percentile nationally by Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set (HEDIS) which compares public and private sector medical centers.

Gibson also applauded Charleston VAMC for improving wait times for Veterans despite growing its patient population by 7.44 percent in 2014 – the sixth-fastest percent patient growth rate for VAs nationally. Charleston VAMC has added weekend and evening clinics, added 80 new clinical staff, approved approximately 190 more positions, and is hiring in advance of anticipated vacancies to maintain access to care – a plan Gibson recognized as a best practice implemented by Charleston VAMC Director Scott Isaacks.

“Charleston is a hub for mental health care in the Southeast and particularly for what’s called tele-mental health,” he said. Charleston VAMC has some 20 dedicated TMH providers that facilitated 14,000 TMH counseling sessions to Veterans – many of whom were treated via tablet computers from their own homes – in 2014. That is more TMH sessions than any other VA hospital in the country.

Clancy, who served as the keynote speaker for the Mental Health Research Building grand opening ceremony, praised the integration of Mental Health researchers and basic science researchers in the new facility. Research studies in such areas as PTSD, Tele-Mental Health, and repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation are being conducted at the new \$9.9 million 16,000 square foot facility that includes five wet labs and 27 treatment rooms, and three group rooms.

“Last year, we provided specialty mental health services to more than 1.4 million Veterans [nationwide], many with mental health issues related to their combat deployments,” said Clancy. “Understand that these are symptoms and manifestations that we often saw in Veterans of long-ago conflicts that we didn’t have a name for. Now we have a name and are developing treatments.”

More than one million military members are expected to join the ranks of American Veterans over the next few years. Locally, 54 percent of newer VA users have sought care for mental health disorders.

Above: Helen Richards, sister of Pfc. Ralph H. Johnson; Dr. Kathleen Brady, interim associate provost for research at MUSC; Scott Isaacks, Charleston VAMC director; Dr. Carolyn Clancy, VA interim under secretary for health; and Lt. Col. John Litz, commander at the Charleston district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, cut the ceremonial ribbon during a grand opening ceremony for the Charleston VAMC's new Mental Health Research Building Dec. 8.



Tele-ICU technology arrives at Charleston VAMC

by Jennifer Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist
photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer

A new technological system went live Oct. 7 at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center that has the capability to serve as a second set of eyes in intensive care units from more than 600 miles away.

An advanced telehealth program, Tele-ICU uses a combination of technologies such as videoconferencing and electronic medical records to create a link between medical specialists and Veteran patients. It allows for monitoring of Veterans receiving ICU care, even when local providers are out of the room assisting with other critical patients.

“Tele-ICU is a wonderful enhancement of care for us here in Charleston,” said Diane Styk, clinical nurse specialist at the Charleston VAMC. “Studies show a drop in mortality rates among patients in intensive care units equipped with Tele-ICU monitoring.”

Highly trained critical care nurses in Cincinnati staff the Tele-ICU monitoring center 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with critical care physicians available overnight on off shifts and 24 hours a day on weekends. The remote providers have access to bedside clinical data, can assess Veterans through video conferencing technology, and can provide consultative recommendations or directly intervene in patient care as desired by the local ICU staff.



Dr. Florence Hutchinson, Charleston VAMC chief of staff, communicates with the physicians and nurses at the Cincinnati monitoring station during the Go Live event.

When a Tele-ICU staff member cameras in, the Veteran will see them on a monitor in their room. It’s important to know that the system does not continuously monitor Veterans using video and the video is not recorded. Tele-ICU services will not replace existing bedside staff or services, but only add that additional layer of support to local clinicians providing care to Veteran patients.

“Now ICU really means ‘I see you’,” said Dr. Florence Hutchinson, Charleston VAMC chief of staff. “We’re making sure our critical care patients are fully monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

Tele-ICU is a wonderful example of how the VA is leveraging advanced technologies to provide the highest quality services to Veterans. Our Veterans watched over us during their service. It is our time to watch over them in their time of need.

Navy Veteran golfs his way back from the brink, partial paralysis

story and photos by Meredith A. H. Thomas,
Public Affairs Specialist

Navy Veteran Fred Gutierrez spent Veterans Day this year the same way he spends most of his days lately – on the golf course. This may seem like a pretty common and relaxing pastime for a 59-year-old retiree, but for Gutierrez it's something incredible and an activity that represents a lifetime of struggle.

That's because he is partially paralyzed – unable to effectively use his left arm and leg – and has been that way for nearly two decades.

"There have been so many times when I've literally been in awe watching what he's done," says Gutierrez's golf coach and good friend Rich O'Brien. "It's amazing to see the improvements Fred has made after being paralyzed for the last 17 years."

Gutierrez's love for golf is written all over his face. But the smile he sports on this sunny and unseasonably warm morning on the golf course is a far cry from the anguish the Veteran was



Fred Gutierrez takes a one-armed swing using a specialized club during a round of golf Nov. 11.



Alan Tays, assistant managing editor for GolfChannel.com, Rich O'Brien, golf coach, and Fred Gutierrez, Navy Veteran and partially paralyzed golfer, pose together for a photo during a Veterans Day golf outing at Miler Country Club in Summerville, South Carolina.

experiencing during a particularly dark night several years ago – the night when Gutierrez broke under the constant torment of personal issues and post-traumatic stress disorder and attempted to take his own life.

"It got so bad that I couldn't handle it all anymore," said Gutierrez. "So I put a .38 to my head and pulled the trigger. The bullet went into my brain and left a golf-ball-sized hole in the right hemisphere – in my left brain. After that I was paralyzed on the left side."

Remarkably, the Veteran survived the gunshot wound but was told by doctors that he would likely never walk again.

"It gave me the drive I needed to put in the work," Gutierrez said. "I knew I didn't want that to be my life. I had to do something to get back to normal."

Coming back from the brink meant going through strenuous rehabilitation and also seeking out innovative new treatments for the paralysis and pain, along with the PTSD that had driven him to attempting suicide. That's where the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center came in.

Gutierrez came to the Charleston VAMC in late 2012 and began receiving injections of the botulinum toxin, commonly known as Botox, from Dr. Gonzalo Revuelta, a movement-disorder neurologist at the facility. According to the doctor, the drug helps patients experience relief from chronic pain caused by muscle spasms and tightness. For Gutierrez, the treatments were extremely effective. The Veteran said his pain was cut in half and the spasms in his left arm and leg stopped.

"His treatment is pretty standard," Revuelta says of Gutierrez. "What's really remarkable about him is how far he's taken it. You can do all the injections and medicines and therapy you want, but if that patient doesn't have that resolve to take it to the next step, then it's really not going to go anywhere. Fred has been remarkable in that regard."

Gutierrez did take the next step, and he never looked back. Now he walks independently with the help of a special leg brace. He shuffles a bit but is able to traverse the nearly five-mile golf course regularly on foot.

The Veteran also credits his faith, acupuncture and the exercise he gets through his golf hobby with his continued mobility progress.

Gutierrez's story is one that inspires many of those who meet him. Recently, tales of the Veteran's perseverance caught the attention of Alan Tays, assistant managing editor for the GolfChannel.com and a golfer whose personal struggle with multiple sclerosis has hindered his ability to play. Tays traveled to South Carolina to play a Veterans Day round with Gutierrez and write a feature on the partially paralyzed golfer's success. Inspired by Gutierrez, Tays walked the entire 18-hole course for the first time since his diagnosis in early 2009.

Gutierrez now frequently participates in charity golf events benefiting Folds of Honor, a charity that offers educational scholarships and support to the families of those who have been killed or disabled while serving in the military.

Leaving limitations in the dust: Veteran pushes boundaries with help from prosthetics

by Laura Valentine & Meredith A. H. Thomas, Public Affairs Specialists
photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer

December 26, 1983 was the day Marine Corps Veteran David Bradbury's life changed forever. He and some friends were enjoying a crisp New Hampshire winter day of snow sledding when a terrible tumble left Bradbury paralyzed from the waist down. Bradbury spent the next few months in recovery and physical rehabilitation at the Manchester VA. His spinal cord injury prompted him to reevaluate his life and ambitions.

"I knew I couldn't return to the manual labor world I was used to, because of my disability. From here on out, I'd be working from a desk. So I took advantage and enrolled myself in a local college and focused on my education," said Bradbury.

He began studying at the New Hampshire Technical Institute and stayed close to friends and family for the next nine years. His family and friends helped him throughout his recovery and transition to a life demanding prosthetic aids. They also helped him regain his freedom and independence.

"I was still in a body cast when my brother asked me if I wanted to go for a motorcycle ride. Of course I said yes, but how?" Bradbury reminisced, "My brother sat behind me and operated the foot controls while I worked the hand controls. I knew at that point that I would find a way to ride motorcycles again." Bradbury, a motorcycle enthusiast since age seven, and his brother created a custom trike that allowed him to ride independently again.

After completing his associate degree in New Hampshire, Bradbury moved to South Florida and completed a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in health administration. Shortly after finishing his education, he became the Government Relations Director for the Florida chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America advocating for America's Veterans.

One of Bradbury's first stops in Florida was enrolling in the VA healthcare system. The West Palm Beach and the Miami VA medical centers assisted him with purchasing his first wheelchair-accessible conversion van and also issued him a primary and backup wheelchair, and an ergometer, which is a stationary hand cycle that sits on a wheelchair-accessible table for cardio exercise. He also received a hand-operated cycle which he uses regularly for exercise when the weather is nice.

"Getting involved with the VA sports clinics opened my eyes to the different equipment that was available to Veterans," Bradbury said. "They [sports clinics] also provided me with a sense of comradery that I thought I had lost after leaving the Corps and getting injured." While attending the National Veterans Wheelchair games, Bradbury has also participated in events such as weightlifting and track and field activities, softball and basketball.

Bradbury participated in the Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colorado for 11 years. He started on the Miami Team, who sported jerseys with pink flamingos. ➔

Marine Corps Veteran David Bradbury serves Veteran patients in his role as chief of prosthetics at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center. A sledding accident in the '80s left Bradbury paralyzed from the waist down. Above, Bradbury wheels himself into his wheelchair accessible conversion van. He credits the services and assistance he's received through the VA with helping him lead an active life following his accident.



He played ice hockey, downhill alpine skiing and even fly fishing on the Colorado River. His New England upbringing helped him catch on fast to the adaptive skiing device and by the third year he was selected to participate on the advanced skills team.

“Competing in the various sporting events showed me that I was only limited by what I wasn’t willing to try,” said Bradbury.

Most recently Bradbury jumped at the opportunity to learn adaptive golf at the Legends Golf Course on Parris Island. He said he picked it up fast because of his billiard experience in the past.

“It was a unique experience because I actually stood upright for the first time in 20 years,” expressed Bradbury.

The Lowcountry Adaptive Golf Experience outfitted Bradbury in a ParaGolfer cart which is a three-wheeled, single-person vehicle that is both a caddy and assistance device.

Hard work, dedication and a positive attitude led Bradbury to become the Chief of Prosthetics at Ralph H. Johnson VAMC. He’s an active member of the American Legion, the Augusta Warrior Project and his church. He also enjoys fishing, live music and motorcycle trips with friends and family.

“My theory is, if you have an issue or concern, you figure out how to build a bridge and get over it,” said Bradbury.

“I can’t” has never been part of Bradbury’s vocabulary. The Prosthetics and Sensory Aids Service at the VA ensures that all Veterans living with physical impairments can do just that, live life.



David Bradbury, chief of prosthetics at the Charleston VAMC, demonstrates some of the various prosthetic aids available to Veterans who require them.

It's in the mail: Choice Cards distributed to Veterans

by Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Public Affairs Staff

The Department of Veterans Affairs began mailing Veterans Choice Cards Nov. 17 to Veterans currently waiting more than 30 days from their preferred date or the date that is medically determined by their physician for an appointment at a VA facility.

“VA continues to focus on implementation of this new temporary benefit so that Veterans receive the timely quality care they need in a way that reduces confusion and inefficiencies,” said Secretary Robert A. McDonald, who penned an open letter to Veterans announcing the implementation of the Choice Card program.

The Choice Program is a new, temporary benefit that allows some

Veterans to receive health care in their communities rather than waiting for a VA appointment or traveling to a VA facility. The first round of cards along with a letter explaining the program was issued on Nov. 5 to Veterans who are eligible based on their place of residence. VA is now engaging in the next phase of its rollout –eligibility explanation letters are being sent to Veterans waiting more than 30 days from their preferred date to be seen or considered medically necessary by their physician.

To improve service delivery, VA has prioritized efforts to accelerate Veterans off of wait lists and into clinics through the Accelerated Care Initiative begun over the summer. Through this initiative, VA medical centers have

increased access to care inside and outside of VA, added more clinic hours and work days, deployed mobile medical units and shared their best practices from VA's high-performing facilities throughout the organization.

VA is America's largest integrated health care system with over 1,700 sites of care, serving approximately 9 million Veterans enrolled in health care services. The Choice Program is part of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, enacted in early August, to enable VA to meet the demand for Veterans' health care in the short-term.

For more information about the Choice Program, call 1-866-606-8198 or visit <http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/>.

QUICK FACTS ABOUT YOUR VETERANS CHOICE CARD

VISIT WWW.VA.GOV/OPA/CHOICEACT/ FOR MORE INFORMATION.

Before your Veterans Choice Card can be used, you must first meet the following test of eligibility for Choice Card benefits. If, after following Step 1 of the test you are not eligible for benefits, just hold on to your Card - you do not need to call us.

TO FIND OUT IF YOU'RE ELIGIBLE:

STEP
1

PERSONALLY ASSESS YOUR ELIGIBILITY FOR CHOICE CARD BENEFITS.

Before you call us, ask yourself these four simple questions:

- 1) Have you been told by your local VA medical facility that you will need to wait more than 30 days from your preferred date or the date medically determined by your physician? **OR**
- 2) Is your current residence more than 40 miles from the closest VA health care facility? **OR**
- 3) Do you need to travel by plane or boat to the VA medical facility closest to your home? **OR**
- 4) Does a geographic challenge, such as extensive distances around water or other geologic formations, such as mountains, present a significant travel hardship?

STEP
2

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be eligible to use your Choice Card. **VERIFY YOUR ELIGIBILITY by calling 866-606-8198.**

When you call us, please be prepared to provide us with any other health insurance coverage you have, such as employer or union-provided health plans, so we can assess coverage responsibilities.

IMPORTANT: If you do not receive approval, you may be responsible for some or all of the costs of the non-VA treatment you receive.

NOT ELIGIBLE RIGHT NOW? NO NEED TO DO ANYTHING! JUST KEEP YOUR CARD!

If you are not eligible to use the Choice Card right now, keep your card in a safe and convenient location. There is no need to call us.

Significant National Improvements this Fall

- Scheduling more than 1.2 million more appointments in the past four months than in the same period last year. In total, VA medical centers have scheduled over 19 million Veteran appointments from June to Oct. 1, 2014;
- Reducing the national new patient Primary Care wait time by 18 percent;
- Completing 98 percent of appointments within 30 days of the Veterans' preferred date, or the date determined to be medically necessary by a physician;
- Authorizing 1.1 million non-VA care authorizations, a 47-percent increase over the same period last year; and
- Increasing the amount of time providers could deliver care to Veterans by increasing the amount of clinic hours in primary and specialty care and through adding weekend and evening clinics at our medical centers.

Savannah VA art class motivates, encourages Veterans

story and photos by Jennifer Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist

Approximately 12 years ago, Savannah VA Clinic Registered Nurse, Dink Weed, began coordination with the Savannah Department of Leisure Services to create a special art therapy group for Veterans.

Today, this therapy group has morphed into an opportunity for Veterans to participate in a creative activity that is Veteran centric and allows each Veteran to participate at their own pace.

Weed currently serves as mentor and advisor to the Savannah Veterans Art Group and liaison with local community resources. Along with John Baker, peer support specialist

After a car accident Martin's physical therapist suggested art to help in his recovery. Art allowed him to transcend any pain and regret. His mindset



changed from disability to ability and at 70 years of age, he is still creating. Martin says he has Veterans come up to him weekly thanking him for giving his time to them and he says he thanks them right back.

"I had physical and emotional challenges and I needed to be uplifted. Art was that therapy for me," said Martin. This is why Martin says he feels a connection with these Veterans who are, like he once was, looking for an outlet in which to calm nerves and meet others who shared these feelings.

Lawrence Brown, Army and National Guard Veteran, has been involved with the art group for almost three years. He and approximately ten other Veterans meet once a week for the art group and enjoy painting and bonding.

"I couldn't paint a straight line," said Brown about his artistic abilities before joining the art group. "My cousin had a few pieces of art hanging in a museum and I was impressed. I decided I wanted to be involved in something like that."

Brown said he doesn't just paint during the class, but also at home. He says it helps keep his nerves calm.



Weed has coordinated with Harry DeLorme, senior curator of education at the Telfair Museum of Art, to have Veterans of the Savannah VA Clinic display their art creations in the annual "I Have Marks" exhibit that takes place every December. The "I Have Marks" exhibit celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

The Veterans also discussed and agreed they want to represent the Charleston VAMC and enter their paintings for consideration in the 2015 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. The date has yet to be determined, but the Veterans art group is excited to be involved.

"The main goal of this group therapy is creative enjoyment and continued social fellowship which promotes wellness, recovery, function, meaning, and quality of life," said Baker. "To be part of this therapy group and to enter their artwork into exhibits means the world to them."

at the Savannah VA Clinic and local Savannah artist, Kenneth Martin, Veterans are given one-on-one teaching and advice on their art projects.

Martin began volunteering his time and talent to the group in 2011 and had no idea how great of an impact their love of art would have on Veteran patients.

"Every human has a need to express themselves and art allows some to do that," said Martin. "I hear people say all the time, 'I cannot draw or paint' and I tell them that they most certainly can. Everyone can. We must find what motivates and encourages us."

Displayed above are a number of art pieces painted during the Savannah Clinic's Veteran Art Group by Veterans Peter Herzog (left), Lawrence Brown (right) and fellow group members. Artist Kenneth Martin is also shown giving artistic tips and tricks to Lawrence Brown.



Saying Thanks:

story and photos by Meredith A. H. Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center celebrated Veterans Day with a parade that marched through the Market District of downtown Charleston Nov. 8. The 2014 Veterans Day Parade endeavored to honor the Lowcountry heroes of every generation who selflessly served in our nation's military during times of peace or war.

This year's parade attracted more than 1,100 participants from nearly 50 different groups and included a flyover by a C-17 Globemaster III piloted by Airmen from the 315th Airlift Wing based out of Joint Base Charleston. Multiple motorcycle groups, historic military vehicles, Veterans Service Organization floats, high school marching units, and two marching bands wowed the crowds that lined Market Street.

The parade featured Emerson Beach, Navy Veteran and Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center volunteer, who served as grand marshal for the festivities.

Distinguished guests included Veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Following the parade, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center hosted a cookout with the help of volunteers and food items donated in part by Lowcountry Star Tour and Riding Chapter 264 and Palmetto Warrior Connection to celebrate the success of the event and show appreciation for all participating Veterans.

❶ A C-17 assigned to the 315th Airlift Wing at Joint Base Charleston performs a flyover during the parade. *Photo courtesy of Sgt. Brian Calhoun.*

❷ A trumpet player with the 246th South Carolina Air National Guard Army Band marches during the parade.

❸ Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center Assistant Director, Felissa Koernig, addresses the crowd prior to the start of the parade. She is joined by special guest Capt. Tim Sparks, deputy commander of Joint Base Charleston, and his wife, Brenda.

❹ James Shumard, Lowcountry Star Touring and Riding Chapter 264 Veterans representative, presents the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center with a special Tuskegee Airmen memorial shadow box to Charleston VAMC Assistant Director Felissa Koernig and Voluntary Service Chief Fred Lesinski.

❺ Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center staff and their guests celebrate Veterans Day by riding the facility's float during the parade.

❻ Navy Veteran Emerson Beach waves to the crowd in his official capacity as grand marshal of the 2014 Veterans Day Parade.

❼ Veterans and guests are treated to a barbeque lunch provided by Lowcountry Star and Palmetto Warrior at the medical center following the festivities.

❽ More than 100 motorcycle riders representing Lowcountry Star Chapter 264, Buffalo Soldiers Cavalry Scouts, Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 780, Green Knights Chapter 37, Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, and the American Legion Riders Chapter 179 rode together during the parade.

Charleston Veterans Day Parade honors service



5



6



7



8



Stand Down expands reach, celebrates fifteen years

by Meredith A. H. Thomas & Jennifer Stripling, Public Affairs Specialists

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center partnered with Goodwill Industries and to host its annual Stand Down Against Homeless Oct. 31 at North Charleston's Armory Park. This marks the fifteenth year that organizers have brought care and assistance to homeless Veterans and other needy individuals in the Charleston area. Additionally, this was the first year that Stand Down events were held at three strategic communities in the facility's service area: Charleston, Savannah and Myrtle Beach.

The Charleston event boasted more than 300 volunteers, all of whom worked diligently to provide assistance to almost 1,000 homeless persons and people in need, including nearly 350 Veterans. Those who attended the event were seeking medical care, shelter, clothing, and job assistance, among other things. Basic health care, dental screenings, 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.

This year, the Charleston Stand Down was condensed from its traditional two-day format into a one-day event in order to maximize resources. The addition of a third Stand Down location in Myrtle Beach ensured that Veterans needing assistance were able to find it close to home.

A first for Myrtle Beach

The Myrtle Beach Stand Down was held Sept. 19 and was largely successful in this, its inaugural 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.

"We've been talking about doing an event like this here for years," said Kris Tourtellotte, director of the Veteran's Welcome Home and Resource Center and co-organizer for the Stand Down. "We decided to hold this now

because the cold weather is coming up and we wanted Veterans to know what is available for them through these agencies and the VA."

According to Doris Gleason, community outreach director for AARP South Carolina and primary organizer of the Myrtle Beach event, 25 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.

Overall, the Myrtle Beach Stand Down, which was sponsored by the VA community based outpatient clinic, AARP, Palmetto Goodwill, Veterans Welcome Home and Resource Center, and the Myrtle Beach Harley-Davidson, served more than 150 individuals in need of clothing, food and other basic necessities.

Savannah extends a helping hand

The Savannah CBOC assisted over 600 individuals at its eleventh Stand Down for Homelessness Resource and Job Fair held Sept. 16. Attendees were offered hot meals, haircuts, showers and opportunities for a variety of health screenings.

"Traditionally, the Homeless Authority sees Veterans from the Vietnam era, however, more and more Veterans from the Gulf and Afghanistan conflicts are presenting for various services," said Jan Bass, marketing director at Goodwill of the Coastal Empire.

The Savannah Stand Down is funded in part by Goodwill of the Coastal Empire, Inc. Operation Open Doors, The United States Department of Veterans Affairs, The Chatham-Savannah Authority for the Homeless, and The Salvation Army.



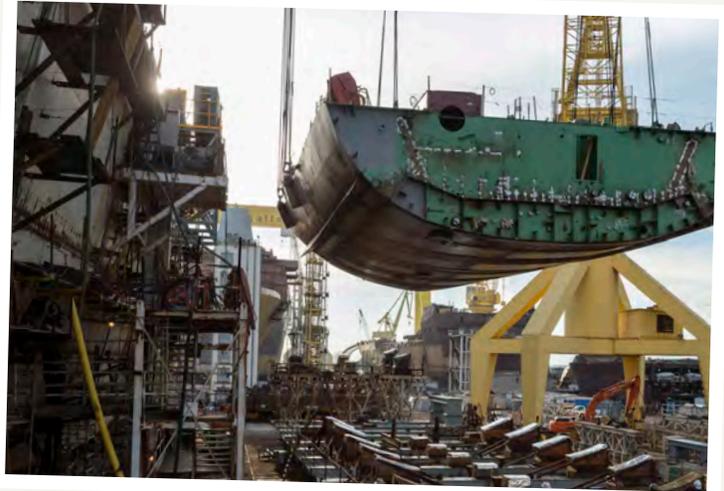
Ingalls lays keel for Navy destroyer Ralph Johnson

by Jennifer Stripling, Public Affairs Specialist

Huntington Ingalls Industries' Ingalls Shipbuilding division authenticated the keel for their 30th Aegis guided missile destroyer, Ralph Johnson (DDG 114), Sept. 23. The DDG 114 is named to honor Marine Corps Pfc. Ralph Henry Johnson, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions that saved others during the Vietnam War.

“As we remember Private Johnson’s courage, we realize that every time the men and women of Ingalls Shipbuilding start construction on another destroyer, they build a living, lasting reminder of either the courage, or the leadership or the intellectual contribution of the very best the Navy-Marine Corps team has had to offer,” said Capt. Mark Vandroff, the Navy’s DDG 51 program manager.

Ralph Johnson is 26 percent complete and is scheduled to be delivered in 2017.



courtesy photo



Medal of Honor recipient visits VAMC

by Meredith A. H. Thomas, Public Affairs Specialist | photos by James Arrowood, Medical Photographer

Medal of Honor recipient, Gary Beikirch, spent time Oct. 22 sharing his story and visiting with Veterans at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center as a way to honor their service to our country.

“I’m just an ordinary guy,” Beikirch said. “The medal is what is special. I received this for doing what I was trained to do. Those of us who wear this medal, wear it for all the men and women who served.”

Beikirch, an Army Veteran, was awarded the medal in October 1972 for displaying selfless acts of valor and saving several lives during his deployment to the Kontum Province of Vietnam in 1970. He is one of just 79 living recipients of the Medal of Honor – the highest military award bestowed upon service members by Congress.

Beikirch came to the hospital as part of The Citadel’s annual Leadership Day – a dedicated day of volunteerism and community outreach for more than 400 students at the school – and was accompanied by a couple dozen cadets, who spent time conversing with Veterans, handing out refreshments, and performing service projects around the facility. This was the second year that Citadel cadets brought a Medal

of Honor recipient to the Charleston VAMC and it’s a tradition the military college hopes to continue.

According to Tyler Woolum, service learning and civic engagement coordinator for The Citadel’s Krause Center for Leadership and Ethics, Beikirch’s bravery and commitment to service was a major influence in the school’s decision to organize the Leadership Day four years ago.

“Mr. Beikirch has said that ‘in order to lead you first have to serve,’” explained Woolum. “We really took that to heart and built this program on that premise. That’s why it’s really great to have him here with us today, visiting with Veterans. It ties this all together – brings it full circle.”

Beikirch shook hands and mingled with Veterans in the hospital’s main lobby and then took a trip to 4B North to make special visits to patients there.

“It’s a humbling experience spending time with Veterans here,” he said. “But it’s also energizing. There’s a sense of comradery that comes from sharing this medal with those who know what it is to commit to something more important than themselves. I’m always happy to do it.”



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 or
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,
7 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 HealthVet

www.myhealth.va.gov
Veterans can manage their health by logging onto
My HealthVet, 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.

