



The WARRIOR

VVA San Jacinto Chapter 343 Newsletter

Volume # 17

Issue # 6

July 9, 2017

ARMY * NAVY * MARINES * AIR FORCE * COAST GUARD

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EVENT INFO ▾ AGENDA CONVENTION BUSINESS ▾ AWARDS ▾ REGISTER August 8 - 12, 2017

18TH BIENNIAL NATIONAL CONVENTION

New Orleans, La. August 8 - 12, 2017

REGISTER NOW ▾

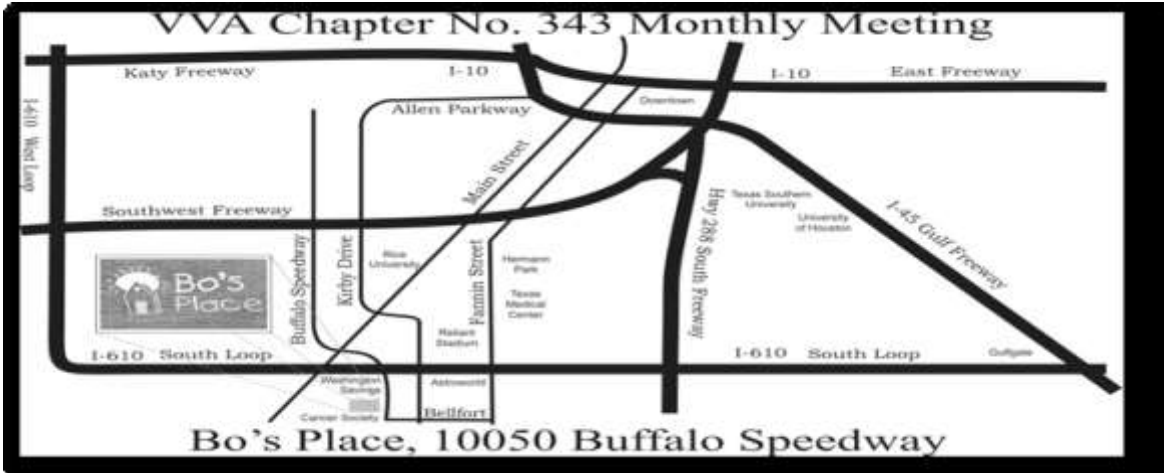
VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Time is running out as the deadline is July 15, 2017 for pre-convention registration. Currently there are 697 delegates registered with a week to go and there are 41 delegates registered from Texas.

There is a new Convention Website up and running. It is more user friendly, better graphics, more information. Check it out at <https://vva.org/national-convention/> or you can access it from the VVA.org page. **Wes Guidry, CMP**

The WARRIOR is published monthly by Vietnam Veterans of America San Jacinto Chapter No. 343, Inc. The content of this newsletter is solely the responsibility of the Editor. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Chapter, its Officers, Directors, Membership or Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. Address correspondence and changes of address to: VVA Chapter No. 343, C/O Editor Bill Meeks, Jr., P.O. Box 310306, Houston, Texas 77231.

Get Involved Today...By Attending the VVA Chapter No. 343's July 14th Meeting on Friday Night 7:30 PM at Bo's Place.....



The facility is gated, all you do is push the button on the entry pedestal, when your call has been answered you state into the speaker box that you are here to attend the meeting and the gate will be opened.

Editor's Update...



'Killed' in Vietnam and buried with comrades, this Marine returned from the dead

Marine Sgt. Ronald Ridgeway of Houston, Texas, once reported by the Marine Corps as killed, is given a hug by Nancy Reagan as then-California Gov. Ronald Reagan looks on. Ridgeway was attending a dinner for former prisoners of war at the Reagans' home on April 11, 1973.

By MICHAEL E. RUANE | The Washington Post | Published: July 8, 2017

HALLETTSVILLE, Texas — Ronald Ridgeway was "killed" in Vietnam on Feb. 25, 1968.

The 18-year-old Marine Corps private first class fell with a bullet to the shoulder during a savage firefight with the enemy outside Khe Sanh. Dozens of Marines, from what came to be called "the ghost patrol," perished there.

At first, Ridgeway was listed as missing in action. Back home in Texas, his old school, Sam Houston High, made an announcement over the intercom. But his mother, Mildred, had a letter from his commanding officer saying there was little hope. And that August, she received a "deeply regret" telegram from the Marines saying he was dead.

On Sept. 10, he was buried in a national cemetery in St. Louis. A tombstone bearing his name and the names of eight others missing from the battle was erected over the grave. His mother went home with a folded American flag. But as his comrades and family mourned, Ron Ridgeway sat in harsh North Vietnamese prisons for five years, often in solitary confinement, mentally at war with his captors and fighting for a life that was technically over.

Last month, almost 50 years after his supposed demise, Ridgeway, 68, a retired supervisor with Veterans Affairs, sat in his home here and recounted for the first time in detail one of the most remarkable stories of the Vietnam War. As the United States marks a half-century since the height of the war in 1967 and '68, his "back-from-the-dead" saga is that of a young man's perseverance through combat, imprisonment and abuse.

He was 17 when he signed up with the Marines in 1967. He was 18 when he was captured, 19 when his funeral was held and 23 when he was released from prison in 1973. "You have to be willing to take it a day at a time," he said. "You have to set in your mind that you're going to survive. You have to believe that they are not going to defeat you, that you're going to win."

About 9:30 on the morning of Feb. 25, Pfc. Ridgeway's four-man fireteam charged an enemy trench line. The curving trench seemed empty when they got there. But as Ridgeway and the others made their way along it, suddenly an enemy grenade dropped in. "We back around the curve," he recalled. "It blows up." "We throw a couple grenades," he said. "We backed off. . . . Then we realized the firing [from Marines] behind us had almost died down to nothing." When they stood up to look around, they saw North Vietnamese soldiers walking through the underbrush toward them. "I guess they thought we were all dead," he said. "We cut loose on them," he recalled. "They were easy targets."

Ridgeway had been part of a platoon of about 45 men sent out from the besieged Khe Sanh combat base, in what was then northern South Vietnam, to find enemy positions, and perhaps capture a prisoner. The enemy's noose around the Marine base had been tightening, with heavy mortar and artillery fire, and the patrol was hazardous. Six thousand Americans were surrounded by 20,000 to 40,000 North Vietnamese soldiers.

On that foggy morning, the patrol's leader, 2nd Lt. Donald Jacques, 20, strayed off course and was drawn into a deadly ambush, Jacques's company commander, Capt. Kenneth Pipes, said. More than two dozen Marines, including Jacques, were killed. One of the Marines in the trench with Ridgeway, James Bruder, 18, of Allentown, Pennsylvania, was cut down as the enemy returned fire, according to author Ray Stubbe's book about Khe Sanh, "Battalion of Kings." "Stitched him across the chest and killed him," Ridgeway remembered.

The fire team leader, Charles Geller, 20, of East St. Louis, Illinois, took a peek, and a bullet creased his forehead, knocking him down. "Everybody's dead," Geller said, according to Stubbe's book. "Everybody behind us is dead. . . . What are we

going to do?" They had to retreat. Geller left first, running back across the field where they had charged, followed by Ridgeway.

The son of a Southern Pacific railroad worker, Ridgeway came from a working-class neighborhood of Houston. He had a younger brother. His parents were divorced. He had left high school and joined the Marines because "I wanted to get away," he recalled. As he and Geller ran to the rear, they came upon Willie Ruff, 20, of Columbia, South Carolina, who was lying on his back with a broken arm. "We were in a hurry," Ridgeway said. "But we stopped. He was wounded."

As Geller knelt beside Ruff, a bullet hit Geller in the face, leaving a terrible wound. Then Ridgeway was struck by a round that went through his shoulder. All three men were now down. "All we could do was lay there and play dead," he said. "We were in the wide open." Ridgeway said he drifted in and out of consciousness. When Geller, who was delirious, got to his knees, the enemy threw a grenade, killing him.

Ridgeway said the North Vietnamese then began shooting at Marines who had fallen in front of their trenches. "They're popping the bodies to make sure they're dead," he said. One bullet hit the dirt near him. A second glanced off his helmet and struck him the buttock, he said. "When that hit, it jarred the body," he said. "They figured they got me. Left me for dead and kept working their way down past me." Ridgeway passed out again. When he woke up, it was dark and American artillery was pounding the area. Ruff said he had been hit again and begged Ridgeway not to leave him. Ridgeway said he wouldn't. At some point that night, Ruff died.

Ridgeway was awakened the following morning by someone pulling on his arm. He thought at first it was fellow Marines. But when he looked up, he realized it was a young North Vietnamese soldier trying to pull off his wristwatch. After the firefight, the shattered survivors of the patrol made it back to the combat base, and the dead were left on the battlefield.

A rescue mission was deemed unwise by higher-ups, who feared losing even more men and depleting the base's defenses, according to Pipes, who is now retired and lives in California. In a telephone interview, he said that with binoculars, he could see Marines' bodies strewn on the battlefield. "It was worse than agony," he said. No further patrols outside the combat base were immediately permitted. "We couldn't go get them," he said. "They laid out there for six weeks."

On March 17, he wrote to Ridgeway's mother: "I am sorry that I can offer no tangible basis for hope concerning Ronald's welfare." Finally, on April 6, the Marines were able to return to the battlefield, Pipes said. What was left of the dead was brought back to Khe Sanh's temporary morgue, where Pipes and others went about the grisly task of identifying the dead. "There wasn't much there but bones and shoes and boots . . . [and] dog tags," he said.

In the end, of the 26 missing and presumed killed in action on Feb. 25, remains of all but nine were positively identified, according to Pipes and Stubbe. The unassociated body parts were sent home and placed in two caskets that would be buried beneath a large tombstone bearing the nine names of those unaccounted for, Stubbe said. The day of the funeral at the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery was sunny and cool. Ridgeway's mother attended, and there were flags and solemn honors. A newspaper photographer took pictures.

Far away, in North Vietnam, the rainy season was on, and Ridgeway was in his seventh month as a POW. As he sat alone in his windowless cell beside a wooden bed and the bucket he used for waste, Ridgeway went about creating a "make-believe" life. There was no one to talk to, and he was only allowed out once a day to empty the bucket. So he imagined that he was somewhere else, that he owned a pickup truck, that he had a wife and children, that he would go fishing.

It was a mental exercise, he said, and he found that spending three days in his make-believe world would take up a whole day in solitary. Ridgeway said that by then, his captors considered him a "die-hard reactionary" and all Marines "animals." He hadn't cooperated with his guards. He had lied to interrogators, pretended he was green kid who had never fired his rifle and gave them bogus military information. The startled North Vietnamese soldier had locked and loaded his rifle when he realized Ridgeway was alive that morning.

Ridgeway expected to be killed. "You didn't hear about prisoners being taken," he said. But he was bandaged, fed and marched away, through Laos and into North Vietnam. He spent time in several jungle camps, held in wooden leg stocks, and he eventually wound up in enemy prisons. He got lice, malaria and dysentery and lost 50 pounds. He wore pink-and-gray-striped POW pajamas and rubber sandals, all of which he brought home with him when he was freed. He was beaten with bamboo canes and tied up during interrogations.

One interrogator the Americans named "Cheese" - because he seemed to be the big cheese - was especially cruel. He spoke English and sat up on a high chair as he questioned POWs tied on the floor. When he nodded his head, a guard would strike the prisoner with the bamboo cane. He had a face like a rat, Ridgeway recalled, and was a "mean . . . sadistical son of a b----." Ridgeway said he didn't dwell on the notion that people back home might think he was dead. They would be fine. His job was to survive.

In January 1973, he was in North Vietnam's notorious Hanoi Hilton prison when his captors abruptly announced that the POWs were to be freed as part of a peace agreement before the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. When the list of POWs being released became public, Ridgeway's name was on it. Back in Houston, his mother banged on a neighbor's door and said, "Ronnie's alive!" Ron Ridgeway was released on March 16, 1973. He came home, got married and went to college. "I came back in basically one piece," he said. "I came back able to live my life. . . . We went over with a job to do. We did it to the best of our ability. We were lucky enough to come back."

Several months after his return, he and his wife, Marie, went to Jefferson Barracks to see his tombstone, which was later replaced. "It brought back memories," he said. "The loss of life of those that I knew. It was a solemn experience." Carved in the surface were the words "Ambushed Patrol Died in Vietnam Feb. 25, 1968."

Veteran 'Online Exchange' Benefit Being Tested, Is Nearer for Millions



POSTED BY: [TOM PHILPOTT](#) JULY 6, 2017: The last time Forrest Cornelius, 51, shopped in a base exchange was 1989 when he completed his six-year stint in the Marine Corps. He recalls saving 10 to 15 percent on department store goods and that shoppers paid no sales tax.

Last month, Cornelius began to enjoy those advantages again as one of 12,000 or so "beta test" participants for veterans' online exchange shopping, which is to open for millions of honorably discharged veterans on Veterans Day Nov. 11th.

All veterans are being encouraged to take the same first step that Cornelius did by confirming veteran eligibility status at: <https://www.vetverify.org>. It might be a multi-step process if the Defense Manpower Data Center lacks information to verify that a veteran served and received an honorable discharge.

But for Cornelius it went smoothly. He also got an email inviting him to be a test participant and begin to shop immediately through four exchange service portals: www.shopmyexchange.com for Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES); www.mynavyexchange.com for Navy exchanges; www.mymcx.com for Marine Corps stores and www.shopcgx.com for Coast Guard exchanges.

Cornelius said his email invitation was timely. He had lost his sunglasses and the replacement pair of Ray-Bans, priced at a local retail outlet near his Texas home, would cost \$180. In using AAFES online to comparison shop, he found a special sale, \$20 off any pair of sunglasses costing \$100 or more.

“So I got that discount,” he said, “plus it was 10 to 15 percent cheaper than retail, plus tax free, plus free shipping. I wound paying about \$120 total, saving me quite a bit.”

His wife then used his benefit, shopping for undergarments that a major retailer had on sale but were out of stock in sizes and colors she wanted. AAFES had them, and she saved money too, he said. Soon they were buying sportswear for their son. Every item was timely shipped, he said, and arrived three days later.

“It was great. It was super easy. And the vetverify.org process took five minutes. I entered my full name, the last four of my social [security number] and it said ‘You’ve been verified.’”

By early July, 90,000 veterans had attempted to register to exchange shop online starting Nov. 11. Twelve percent of them got invitations to shop immediately. AAFES was monitoring shopping patterns to ensure their online portal and distribution system are ready for waves of new shoppers this fall, said Ana Middleton, president and chief merchandising officer for AAFES.

“My worst fear,” said Middleton, “is a tsunami on November 11th, if everybody decides, ‘Hey, I’m going to check this out’ and they sign on that day” and also at the same moment.

AAFES is building website capacity to allow for 30,000 simultaneous shoppers at any given time. A lot of shoppers “would have to be signing on at that exact same millisecond to stress it out. So yes, I feel that we are sized appropriately.”

Of “beta” veterans shopping, surveys showed their top reason was the tax break. But a surprisingly close second reason, said Middleton, was an appreciation that exchanges support military quality-of-life and base support programs.

Exchange use profits to pay staff salaries, fund store operations and to ensure adequate website capacity but even more profits are distributed to on-base Morale, Welfare and Recreational activities including child development centers, fitness centers, outdoor recreation and, overseas, on-base school lunches.

“Everything is just turned back to our customers,” Middleton said, and “not paying anything to any shareholders” as retail stores must.

Besides discounts and tax breaks, AAFES online promises a price match.

“If we are not the lowest price — say you found a vacuum cleaner below our price at Walmart — you can challenge our price and we will match it,” she said.

Shoppers will find prices particularly attractive on certain items like premium running shoes and children’s clothing. Profit margins on electronics are narrow everywhere so exchange prices “are close to comparable,” Middleton said.

Exchange services aren’t sure how many veterans ultimately will shop online. AAFES will be pleased if one to two million do so, Middleton said, though “we probably don’t need that many” to declare the effort a success.

In its business plan, as leading advocate for opening exchanges online to veterans, AAFES estimated that its annual sales would climb by \$185 million to \$525 million and earnings would increase by \$18 million to \$72 million, easing budget pressure on Army and Air Force, which have had to divert more and more appropriated dollars to family support programs as on-base store sales have been hit by force drawdowns and store closures overseas.

Veterans with only Reserve or National Guard experience have asked if they too will be viewed as “veterans” for online shopping. That remains unclear. Last December, Congress did bestow honorary “veteran” status on Reserve and National Guard retirees who completed careers of drill time but had not completed an active duty period under Title 10 to meet the legal definition of “veteran” and receive a DD-214 “Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty.”

Reserve retirees 60 and older do have exchange shopping privileges. But what about Reserve and Guard veterans who didn’t retiree or didn’t receive a DD-214? Here’s what AAFES could tell us:

“The litmus test for access to the veterans online shopping benefit resides with each veteran’s electronic records. All honorably discharged veterans, according to official government sources such as the Defense Manpower Data Center, are considered authorized to shop military exchanges online via the veterans online shopping benefit. Veterans can confirm their eligibility by visiting VetVerify.org.”

Veterans who do shop online, said Middleton, will find products “competitively priced. Are we across the board lower than everybody? No.”

Beta shoppers so far have focused, as expected, on “male-dominated” categories such as electronics, running shoes and sports apparel. Baby care, children’s clothing and cosmetics, however, also are selling briskly.

“The reality is [married couples] share in the purchase-making decisions,” Middleton said. “It’s like if I had a Costco card, and my husband didn’t — would he still want to make buying decisions with me if I came home and said, ‘Hey there’s a great price on a TV?’ Probably. But this benefit is afforded to the (veteran) military member...If your spouse is using your password we have no way of knowing.”

Merchandise selection is wider online than in base stores. The only goods veterans are barred from purchasing are military uniform items.

Exchanges are delighted to be offering this new benefit, Middleton said, particularly to so many veterans who didn’t get to enjoy it more while serving.

"The sad reality is so many of these kids went to basic [training] and then to war, so their recollection of who we are is a Coke and bag of chips in a war zone. Do they have an understanding of the breadth of products we sell?"
Soon, many more of them will.

APPLICATION FOR VVA MEMBERSHIP

(Return to: Vietnam Veterans of America San Jacinto Chapter No. 343, P.O. Box 310306, Houston, Texas 77231)

Name _____ **Sex** _____ **Date of Birth** _____

Address _____

City _____ **State** _____ **Zip** _____ **Chapter No. 343**

Home Phone () _____ **Work Phone** () _____

E-mail _____

Type: ___ Individual member – 1 year @ \$20 ___ Individual member – 3 years @ \$50

Life member: ___ \$100

___ Incarcerated Veterans (IVI) \$0: TDCJ # _____ or ___ Incarcerated Veteran Associate (IVA) \$7: TDCJ # _____

___ Associate member – 1 year @ \$20

Payment Method: ___ Check ___ Money Order ___ Credit Card (Visa, Master Card, American Express, Discover)

Credit Card Number _____ **Exp. Date** _____

Signature _____

Eligibility: Membership is open to U.S. armed forces veterans who served on active duty (for other than training purposes) in the Republic of Vietnam between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975, or in any duty location between August 5, 1964 and May 7, 1975.

New members and new life members must submit a copy of their DD-214 along with this application and dues payment.

