Denver Mills, Team Leader and Director of the Concord Vet Center in Concord, Calif. insists that: “It’s one of the best kept secrets in the VA,” even though Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Garry Trudeau featured the program in his famous Doonesbury comic strip for nearly a week in December 2005.

With obvious pride in his voice, Mills, a Vietnam combat veteran, is describing the VA’s Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS), also known as the Vet Center Program, which operates a system of 209 community based counseling centers for combat veterans and their families. An additional 23 Vet Centers are set to open within the next two years.

The program was established by Congress in 1979 to counsel and assist the significant number of Vietnam-era veterans who were still experiencing readjustment problems. Over the years, the program was expanded to cover all combat veterans, including those who served in OEF-OIF and subsequent operations within the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Federally activated Reserve and National Guard personnel and their families are also covered by the program.

The stated mission of the Vet Center program is to “welcome home war veterans with honor by providing quality readjustment counseling in a caring manner. Vet Centers understand and appreciate veterans’ war experiences while assisting them and their family members toward a successful post-war adjustment in or near their community.”

Many of the Vet Center personnel are combat veterans themselves. “We pride ourselves,” says Romeo Horvath, OEF/OIF Outreach Coordinator at the Peninsula Vet Center in Redwood City, Calif., “on having staff who are predominantly veterans, although that’s not a requirement. It has helped establish immediate credibility for our veteran clients.”

Vet Centers are located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Because of the highly sensitive and confidential nature of the program, the Vet Centers are located away from VA medical centers, typically in storefront facilities in downtown areas. “And, in remote locations,” Mills reports, “the VA contracts with outside providers, in order to meet the needs of combat veterans and their families who live far from existing facilities.”

**Vet Center Services**

To help combat veterans make a satisfying transition from military to civilian life, the services provided at the Vet Centers cover continued on p. 3
VA National News

VA Medical Centers Extend Hours

In order to provide more health care for more veterans, especially mental health services, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson has directed the 153 medical centers of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to keep their doors open longer.

Although the extra hours apply to many hospital-based programs and services, Nicholson said his decision was based upon a desire to ensure VA’s more than 9,000 mental health professionals are available when veterans need them.

About 5.5 million veterans are expected to seek health care from VA's nationwide system this year, accounting for about 800,000 hospitalizations and 60 million outpatient visits.

Protecting Veterans Against Fraud

Continuing a long-standing campaign to identify and prosecute those who defraud veterans of their rightful benefits, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently highlighted several successes by its Inspector General in investigating people who mishandle the finances of veterans and family members unable to manage their own affairs.

From January 2005 through the first quarter of 2007, VA’s Office of Inspector General investigated 61 cases of alleged fiduciary fraud. Of the 27 people indicted on related charges, 19 have already been convicted. Penalties have included $1.9 million in court-ordered restitution for veterans or their estates, 191 months' imprisonment and 838 months of probation.

To report suspected fraud involving veterans' benefits, other crimes, fraud, waste or mismanagement in the VA, please contact the Office of Inspector General Hotline at 1-800-488-8244 or email at vaoig.hotline@forum.va.gov.

SBA Business Loans for Vets

With many newly discharged veterans considering starting their own businesses, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson praised a new Small Business Administration (SBA) venture to make business ownership easier for all veterans.

The SBA program, called “Patriot Express,” offers a wide variety of assistance to veterans interested in setting up or expanding their own small businesses.

“America’s veterans are a great resource for the private sector,” Nicholson said. “I commend SBA Administrator Steve Preston for his initiative in helping veterans transition back into the private sector.”

Assistance ranges from help writing a business plan and managing a business, to obtaining financing and learning how to export goods. Participants may also qualify for loans between 2.25 percent and 4.75 percent over the prime interest rate.

Patriot Express is open to veterans, reservists and National Guard members, current spouses of eligible personnel, the surviving spouses of service members who die on active duty, or spouses of veterans who die from a service-connected disability.

More information about the SBA program is available at www.sba.gov/patriotexpress.

VISN 21 Vet Center Locations

Reno Vet Center
1155 W. 4th Street, Ste. 101
Reno, NV 89503

Fresno Vet Center
3636 North 1st Street, Ste. 112
Fresno, CA 93726-6818

Hilo Vet Center
120 Keawe Street, Ste. 201
Hilo, HI 96720-2812

Honolulu Vet Center
1680 Kapiolani Blvd., Ste. F
Honolulu, HI 96814-3700

Kauai Vet Center
3367 Kuhio Highway, Ste. 101
Lihue, HI 96766-1061

Kona Vet Center
Pottery Terrace, Fern Bldg., Ste. 415
75-5995 Kuakini Highway
Kailua-Kona, HI 96740-2126

Maui Vet Center
Ting Bldg., 35 Lunalilo St., Ste. 101
Wailuku, HI 96793-2523

Guam Vet Center
Reflection Center
Suite 210, 222 Chalan Santo Papa
Hagatna, Guam (USA) 96910-5172

Chico Vet Center
280 Cohasset Road, Ste. 100
Chico, CA 95926

Concord Vet Center
1899 Clayton Road, Ste. 140
Concord, CA 94520-2541

Oakland Vet Center
1504 Franklin Street, Ste. 200
Oakland, CA 94612-4123

Sacramento Vet Center
1111 Howe Avenue, Ste. 390
Sacramento, CA 95325-8541

Peninsula Vet Center
2946 Broadway Street
Redwood City, CA 94062-1594

San Jose Vet Center
278 North Second Street
San Jose, CA 95112-4017

Santa Cruz Vet Center
1350 41st Avenue, Ste. 102
Capitola, CA 95010

Eureka Vet Center
2830 G Street
Eureka, CA 95501-0831

Northbay Vet Center
6225 State Farm Drive, Ste. 101
Rohnert Park, CA 94928-5007

San Francisco Vet Center
505 Polk Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

2 Veterans’ health matters
VA Brings Mental Health Programs to Primary Care Settings

Addressing a special mental health forum with the top VA clinicians and researchers, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson has announced plans to begin locating some of the Department’s mental health programs closer to places where primary care is provided.

“Given the reluctance of some veterans to talk about emotional problems, increasing our mental health presence in primary care settings will give veterans a familiar venue in which to receive care – without actually going to an identified mental health clinic,” he said.

“The wounds of war are not always the result of explosions and rocket fire,” he added. “They can sometimes be unseen and cloaked in silence. If left untreated, they can be just as lethal.”

Focusing on PTSD
VA is a world leader in treatment and research concerning post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The Department’s National Center for PTSD is internationally recognized for its research into PTSD, other combat-related mental health issues and non-combat mental health trauma. Each VA medical center has a PTSD Clinical Team or a specialist who focuses on the treatment of PTSD.

Acknowledging that VA officials expect to see increasing numbers of newly returned combat veterans with PTSD and other mental health issues, Nicholson also announced plans to begin a series of regional conferences about providing mental health care to veterans with “our partners at the state, local and community levels.”

Recent expansion of the Department’s mental health services include:

- Greater availability of “telemental health” programs, which treated about 20,000 patients last year;
- Integrating mental health services into geriatric programs;
- Adding psychologists and social workers to the staffs of VA’s polytrauma centers;
- Increasing the number of Vet Centers from 209 to 232;
- Adding 100 new combat veterans to run outreach programs to their former comrades.

“As the newest generation of combat veterans returns home, we want to ensure that we’re providing them the very best in mental health care and treatment possible. They deserve nothing less,” Nicholson said.

www.visn21.med.va.gov

“Best Kept Secrets”

continued from p. 1

a wide range, including:

- individual, group and marital/family counseling;
- bereavement counseling;
- medical referrals;
- assistance in applying for VA Benefits;
- employment counseling, guidance and referral;
- alcohol/drug assessments;
- information and referral to community resources;
- military sexual trauma counseling and referral;
- and outreach and community education.

Horvath, an Iraq War veteran himself, explains: “We specialize in readjustment counseling for combat veterans, and also offer therapy for victims of sexual trauma during their military service, and bereavement counseling for family members who have lost a loved one during combat. All our services are free and highly confidential.”

When asked how combat veterans can make initial contact with their nearest Vet Center, Denver Mills offered this advice: “Visit the Vet Center website, www.vetcenter.va.gov, and click on ‘Find a Facility,’ or call the regional office of the Readjustment Counseling Service at 707-686-2988.”

Both Mills and Horvath invite and strongly encourage combat veterans and their families to visit their local Vet Center. In Horvath’s words: “We offer a relaxed atmosphere, with plenty of smiles for everyone.”
VA Central California HCs Patients have Preferred Parking

Gone are the days of circling the parking lots until a parking space opens up at the VA Medical Center in Fresno. Gone also are veterans arriving late for their clinic appointments due to parking. On May 21, a new parking policy was implemented, allowing veterans and visitors to park in the southwest parking lot without competition from our staff. Parking Lot ‘B’ is now available for patients and visitors only.

In a collaborative agreement with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE Local 2654), employees and volunteers can no longer park weekdays in Parking Lot ‘B’ before 2:30 p.m., giving preference to veterans and visitors for priority parking for appointments.

Director Al Perry said, “The staff is pleased to provide this convenience. Patients can now find a parking space any time they arrive. Veterans have access to shuttle services too, as volunteers take them to the main entrance and back again.”

Employees and volunteers can still find plenty of parking in the remaining parking lots, including a newly leased lot a block away. The new lot is protected by security personnel, and escort service is provided in two new street-approved shuttle vans.

Polytrauma Support Services Now Offered at VANCHCS

VA Northern California Health Care System (VANCHCS) was recently designated as a Polytrauma Support Clinic Team (PSCT) site. The designation is a part of the Polytrauma System of Care within VHA, a multi-level system designed to balance the needs of our combat-injured veterans requiring highly specialized care with their needs for local access to life-long rehabilitation care.

As a PSCT site, VANCHS is able to receive veterans who are moving from one level of care to another and help them access local services closer to home.

The PSCT designation also means the team is able to screen, evaluate and treat possible traumatic brain injury (TBI), a common form of injury in OEF/OIF veterans. VA has mandated that all OEF/OIF combat veterans be screened for TBI, and a screening process has been launched at VANCHCS.

Another benefit for our veterans is the neurocognitive research program at the Martinez OPC. Located in a busy clinical setting, it provides a unique opportunity for collaboration between researchers and clinicians, enabling new treatments for combat veterans diagnosed with TBI and other brain injuries.

Iraq Veterans Receive Purple Hearts

In a recent ceremony, VA Secretary Jim Nicholson and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger presented Purple Hearts to the following four soldiers injured in Iraq, who are being treated at VA Palo Alto Health Care System's brain injury unit:

Army Sgt. William Glass, on his second tour in Iraq when an IED exploded, sending shrapnel all over his body, including his head. He has lost an eye, has had major surgery on his right arm and hand, and is being treated for traumatic brain injury.

Army Sgt. Paul Gregory, on his second tour in Iraq when a car bomb exploded in Baghdad, leaving him with multiple injuries, including traumatic brain injury.

National Guardsman Sgt. Brett Miller, riding in a Humvee on an Iraqi highway when a bomb exploded nearby, leaving him with multiple injuries. He has also been treated for brain injury and PTSD.

Army Staff Sergeant Jay Wilkerson, when two rocket-propelled grenades exploded in his Humvee outside Fallujah, badly injuring him and killing his best friend, Robert Hernandez. For his heroism, SSgt. Wilkerson was also awarded a Bronze Star.
On July 21, 2007, the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) participated in the dedication of the VA's newest Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Pago Pago, American Samoa. Dignitaries on hand included: American Samoa’s Governor, the Honorable Togiola Tulafono; Samoa’s U.S. Congressman, the Honorable Eni F.H. Faleomavaega; PIHCS Director Dr. James Hastings; VISN 21 Director Dr. Robert Wiebe; and Ms. Judy Daley, VISN Quality Management Officer.

Approximately 250 veterans and their families attended, and music was provided by a 100-voice choir and 30-member band. The clinic will provide primary care, mental health and ancillary support services during regular business hours (Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.). The initial staff consists of Thomas Rath, M.D., Leslie Quinley, R.N., B.S.N., and Terry Donahue, Medical Support Assistant. Recruitments are underway for a licensed practical nurse, a social worker and a psychiatrist; a pharmacist will be joining the staff within the coming months as well.

American Samoa’s veterans have waited for many years for the VA to come to town, and they were not disappointed. The building was granted to the VA by the U.S. Army Reserve and completely renovated in order to provide top-notch health care for local veterans and DoD personnel.

To this list, VASNHCS is pleased to add the VA Lahontan Valley Outpatient Clinic, located in Fallon, Nev., which will serve six rural counties located east of Reno: Churchill, Eureka, Lander, Lyon, Mineral, and Pershing, and constitute an approximate 60-minute radius of travel from Fallon.

The clinic will provide primary care, mental health and ancillary support services during regular business hours (Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.). The initial staff consists of Thomas Rath, M.D., Leslie Quinley, R.N., B.S.N., and Terry Donahue, Medical Support Assistant. Recruitments are underway for a licensed practical nurse, a social worker and a psychiatrist; a pharmacist will be joining the staff within the coming months as well.

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The VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System’s market includes 21 counties in northern Nevada and northeastern California, with approximately 120,000 veterans. The following sites support this market: VA Medical Center in Reno, VA Sierra Foothills Outpatient Clinic in Auburn, Calif., and the VA Carson Valley Outpatient Clinic in Minden, Nev.

The San Francisco VA Medical Center is committed to providing medical care and counseling services for returning service members. The Medical Center provides state-of-the-art health care in a variety of areas specifically related to combat experience. As part of its commitment to returning combat veterans, the center has created the “OEF/OIF Integrated Health Care Clinic,” designed specifically to meet the health care needs of returning veterans.

Health care services include: Primary Care, Mental Health Services and Social Work Services, all co-located to allow for a one-stop health care experience. During the patients’ first visit to this clinic, they have the opportunity to meet with a primary care provider for a comprehensive health exam, see a mental health professional and discuss readjustment experiences, as well as discuss any post-deployment needs with an OEF/OIF Case Manager.

This unique clinic concept was created specifically for returning combat veterans, in an attempt to consolidate care in one clinic area, and to better meet the needs and expectations of returning veterans. For more information, please contact Polly Rose, LCSW, Combat Veteran Coordinator, at: 415-221-4810, ext. 4405.
We regret to announce the recent passing of veteran Pillsbury spokesman Pop-N-Fresh Doughboy. His death was attributed to a severe yeast infection and trauma complications from repeated pokes in the belly.

Doughboy was buried in a lightly greased coffin, and the gravesite was piled high with flours. Dozens of celebrities were on hand, including Mrs. Butterworth, Hungry Jack, the California Raisins, Betty Crocker, the Hostess Twinkies, and Captain Crunch.

In her eulogy, Aunt Jemima described Doughboy as “a man who never knew how much he was kneaded.” Doughboy rose quickly in business, but his later life was filled with turnovers. Not a very smart cookie, he wasted much of his dough on half-baked schemes. A crusty old man, and a little flaky at times, he was nevertheless considered a positive roll model for millions.

Doughboy is survived by his wife Play Dough, his son John Dough, and two daughters, Jane Dough and Cookie Dough, plus one in the oven. He is also survived by his elderly father, Pop Tart. The funeral was held at 3:50 for about 20 minutes.
Earlier this year, a New York area businessman named Andy Powers read of a New Jersey group that had launched a “Take a Vet Fishing Day” program. He liked the idea and invited a few local veterans and active duty personnel to join him for a day of fishing on his boat. It was a big success, so Powers started a web site: www.takeavetfishing.org. The idea spread quickly and today, boat owners and operators all across the nation have posted invitations to veterans. One sample: “I would love to help those who help me be free to fish.”

To check on fishing opportunities in your area, visit the web site and click on “Operation Take a Vet Fishing.”

For the past 21 years, U.S. Navy veteran Joe Velasquez has been an enthusiastic participant and frequent medal winner at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. The 27th annual event, held during June in Milwaukee, attracted more than 500 veterans with physical disabilities, who participated in 17 events. Velasquez, who lives in Turlock, Calif., competed in table tennis, slalom, bowling, swimming and nine-ball, winning four gold medals.

Known affectionately as “Rollin’ Joe,” the 58-year-old Navy veteran, a member of the Palo Alto Pacific Coasters wheelchair team, was named the 2007 Spirit of the Games winner. Recalling the first time he participated, he says: “The Games saved me. I was depressed from my injury, but I left those first Games a new person with a new extended family. This was my new life.”

Community involvement is a top priority for Velasquez, a member of nine veterans’ service organizations, and chairman of the California VFW Wheelchair Games, a post he has held for 13 years.

Next Year’s Event
The 28th annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games will be held July 25-29 in Omaha, Nebraska, hosted by the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System (VA NWIHCS), and the Great Plains Chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. And “Rollin’ Joe” Velasquez has an encouraging word for other veterans who might want to consider taking part: “They’re the best form of rehabilitation for everyone involved, whether that’s the athletes, volunteers or the fans, because with these Games, everybody wins.”

While reading the last Health Matters newsletter (Volume 2, 2007), I was particularly taken with Jon-Nolan Paresa’s child salute article, your feature story on the front page. I’d like to share a similar experience I had during World War II.

I was home on leave from Parachute Jump School, just prior to going overseas to join the 101st Airborne Division. While standing outside the Greyhound depot in San Rafael, Calif., I noticed a little boy and a pretty woman step out of a cab. The woman was walking toward me when suddenly she stopped, looked at me and said, “Oh, Dear.” Then she looked down.

I followed her eyes and saw her little boy, about three years old, standing in front of me saluting. I immediately snapped to attention and gave that little guy the best “Highball” I had. His mother thanked me for honoring his salute. She told me his daddy was a soldier who taught him to salute, and now he salutes every serviceman he meets. I told her, “Ma’am, I’m honored, and I want you to know I don’t even give generals that good of a salute.”

I have always cherished that incident in my fondest memories.

~ Ken Ross
Where to find us!

VA MEDICAL CENTER
SAN FRANCISCO
4150 Clement Street
San Francisco, CA 94121-1588
(415) 221-4810

VA DOWNTOWN S.F. VA OPC
401 3rd Street
San Francisco, CA 94107
(415) 551-7300

VA EUREKA OPC
1001 Sloat Lane
Eureka, CA 95501
(707) 442-5335

VA SAN BRUNO OPC
10535 Hospital Way
San Bruno, CA 94066
(650) 553-8000

VA SANTA ROSA OPC
3315 Chanate Road
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
(707) 570-3855

VA UKIAH OPC
630 Kings Court
Ukiah, CA 95482
(707) 468-7700

VA NORTHERN CALIFORNIA HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

VA MARTINEZ OPC
150 Muir Road
Martinez, CA 94553
(925) 372-2000

VA MEDICAL CENTER SACRAMENTO
10555 Hospital Way
Sacramento, CA 95655
(916) 843-7000

VA REDDING OPC
351 Hartnell Avenue
Redding, CA 96002
(530) 226-7555

VA CHICO OPC
280 Cohasset Road
Chico, CA 95926
(530) 879-5000

VA MCCLELLAN OPC
5342 Dudley Boulevard
McClellan Park, CA 95652-1074
(916) 561-7400

VA SIERRA NEVADA HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

VA SAN JOSE OPC
80 Great Oaks Boulevard
San Jose, CA 95119
(408) 363-3011

VA SONORA OPC
1974 Greenery Road
Sonora, CA 95370
(209) 588-2600

VA CENTRAL CALIFORNIA HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

VA MAUI OPC
203 Ho'ohana Street, Suite 303
Kahului, HI 96732
(808) 871-2454

VA Hilo OPC
1285 Wainanuenue Ave., Suite 211
Hilo, HI 96720
(808) 933-5781

VA KONA CBOC
75-377 Hualalai Road
Kailua-Kona, HI 96740
(808) 329-0774

VA KAUAI OPC
3-3367 Kuhio Hwy, Suite 200
Lihue, HI 96766
(808) 246-0497

VA GUAM CLINIC
US Naval Hospital
Wing E-200, Box 7608
Agana Heights, GU 96919
(671) 472-7250

VA AMERICAN SAMOA CBOC
Old Army Reserve Building
Pago Pago, American Samoa 96799
(684) 699-3730

VA PACIFIC ISLANDS HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

VA PTSD RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM
459 Patterson Road
Honolulu, HI 96819
(808) 433-0004

VA REGIONAL OFFICE & OUTPATIENT CENTER
MANILA
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
PSC 501
FPO, AP 96515-1100
(011) 684-523-6300