

# THE ALABAMA VETERAN



Kay Ivey  
Governor

Summer 2019

W. Kent Davis  
Commissioner



## DATES TO REMEMBER

- \* Independence Day  
July 4, 2019
- \* Labor Day  
September 2, 2019
- \* POW/MIA Recognition Day  
September 20, 2019

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### 2nd Annual Women Veteran Health Expo

July 12, 2019  
8 a.m.—4:30 p.m.  
UAB Margaret Cameron  
Spain Auditorium  
620 19<sup>th</sup> Street S., Birmingham

### Come hear from women veterans and experts in the field

Women veterans' health needs, creating responsive organizations, re-integration challenges, suicide prevention, violence against women veterans, maternity care, cancer screenings, heart health, and healthy lifestyle changes



## Commissioner's Corner

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) has experienced a very busy and productive spring season, which continues through the summer. Personally, I have been traveling all around our great state—visiting the veterans homes, the cemetery, district managers, veterans service offices, and our many partners around the state who provide services to veterans. I hope to visit more VSOs in the coming months.

As you all know, we observed Memorial Day on May 27th with numerous ceremonies throughout our great state. Memorial Day is always a solemn occasion, a day when we honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the defense of their country. To those who worked hard to ensure that Memorial Day was focused on its true purpose—honoring our fallen heroes—thank you.

On June 6th, we marked the 75th anniversary of D-Day, a battle that was a decisive blow to the Nazi regime during World War II and advanced the liberation of Europe. An estimated 156,000 American, British and Canadian forces landed on five beaches along a 50-mile stretch of heavily fortified coast of France's Normandy region, resulting in one of the largest amphibious military assaults in history. More than 400,000 Americans gave their lives in the service of their country during World War II with 6,600 casualties on D-Day. The American troops who fought in D-Day were not fighting to liberate their own land. They fought to preserve the free world.

This week, we'll celebrate our nation's Declaration of Independence. Americans have courageously served in the defense of our great nation ever since 1776. It is vital that we continue to work to ensure that our veterans, their families, and survivors receive the care and benefits which they deserve.

Later in the year, the state will culminate its 200th anniversary celebration of becoming the nation's twenty-second state on December 14, 1819. Our department is taking part by honoring the military and veterans history of Alabama as part of the Bicentennial celebrations over the remainder of 2019.

I want to express my appreciation to all of you who serve our veterans and their families. Whether you're in a supervisory role, providing administrative support, or directly helping veterans with claims, your job is important to this department. My goal for us is to continue to provide the best possible assistance to our veterans and their family members. I challenge our leadership, veterans service officers and supporting staff to provide information and service with compassion and conviction—providing that service as we would do for our own family, and in the same vein as if we were on the receiving end of the service. Thank you once again.

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## **Dr. Salls Celebrates 100th Birthday**



Dr. Don Salls gets kisses from members of the Sassy Seniors Sparkling Dancing team. He requested that the dancers come and celebrate his birthday.

**D**r. Don Salls has accomplished much in his century of life. The resident of William F. Green State Veterans Home was born in New Jersey on June 24, 1919. He moved to Alabama after receiving a four-year football scholarship to the University of Alabama in August of 1938. "I took a bus from New York to go to the university. It was a long bus ride, over 1,000 miles," Dr. Salls said. He played fullback and linebacker for the team and received a national championship ring when Alabama defeated Texas A&M in the Cotton Bowl in 1942.

While earning a bachelor of science degree in education, Dr. Salls enrolled in an advanced ROTC program and was commissioned as an infantry officer following graduation. He took part in the liberation of Paris with the 79th Infantry Division in 1944 and was shot in the hand. While being treated for the injury, he discovered that he had spent 60 days in combat with several fractured vertebrae.

Following World War II, he returned to the University of Alabama and earned a master's degree in physical education and then attended New York University and earned a doctorate degree. He then coached at Jacksonville State for 19 years.

"Dr. Salls is just a really an example to everyone on how to live life to the fullest," David Roberts, director of activities at the home, said. "He's very witty and enjoys whatever we do. He's a ray of sunshine to everyone."

He has been married to his wife Diane for 32 years. "I was asked at a party in Eutaw how I would feel about dating an older man," she said. "Six weeks later we met in Tuscaloosa, dated for two years and then got married." She makes the 100-mile round trip drive to be with her husband at least three days a week.

When asked about the secret to his long life, Dr. Salls said, "the key to my long life is actually my motto—love life, love your wife, and love the Lord."

# Claims Analysts Help Veterans Receive Deserved Benefits

**A**labama is home to more than 360,000 veterans of U.S. military service. Some served a few years before moving on to the next chapter in their lives. For others, the military became their career for 20 or more years.

Upon leaving the armed services, veterans become eligible for multiple programs, from health care and special loan programs to educational benefits or financial payments for their spouse or children. But it can be a complicated, confusing process to apply for these benefits.

The VA has a system for rating how disabled each veteran is, based on the evidence in the claim, a medical exam, and other information. If the veteran disagrees with all or part of the VA's decision on the claim, they have one year to begin the appeal process.

"Most of the time, when they get to us, they have already filed an appeal through the county VSO," Belinda Pierre, a claims analyst, said. "They are scheduled for a hearing and then we get assigned a hearing."

The hearing is assigned at random and there is no way to tell if you have a winning case until a claims analyst gets assigned the particular case. "Sometimes we do have good ones that we can see that it initially should have been a grant and it's been sitting out there for 7-10 years," she said.

The VA estimates it takes three to seven years on average for veterans to get through the appeals process. After that, the Board of Veterans Appeals has to make a decision which tacks on another one to two years. With a remand, it takes about 10 years. "Claims are remanded to gather more evidence, schedule needed medical exams, request medical opinions, or fix procedural errors created during the adjudication process," Pierre said.

The BVA reviews the entire file and gives specific orders and directions to the appeals management center or to the regional office of what they are looking for or how the exams should be conducted (if it was done wrong the first time). "When the directed actions have been completed the case is returned to the judge at the BVA for a decision," she said.

Once the claims analyst is assigned a hearing, they review the claim to determine the cause of the denial of benefits and see what the veteran needs to be service connected. The department's claims analyst digs into the file to identify items that may have been overlooked, misplaced or misfiled years before. The analyst is also reviewing to ensure that the USDVA properly applied all

relevant laws and regulations to ensure that the veteran's right to due process is preserved.

"Sometimes it may be just a diagnosis. The veteran has to have an issue or an illness or injury that happened while they were on active duty," Frances Kidd, another claims analyst, said. "A lot of the times it's something that could have been solved earlier. It was something that was overlooked and we point the judge in the right direction."

Pierre and Kidd recently helped with several appeals that resulted in large retroactive payments for the veterans. One involved a veteran who came in for a video hearing on tinnitus and hearing loss. "The veteran just came in for better hearing aids because the ones the VA provided weren't very good," Pierre said. The veteran's claim was denied because his records were destroyed in the National Archives and Records Administration fire in 1973.

"We made the argument that it was not the veteran's fault that his records had been destroyed," she continued. "The veteran was an infantryman who had fought in the Korean War, so the presumption was already there that he was exposed to noise. The judge agreed and the veteran was granted \$10,180.20 in retroactive payments for his tinnitus."

The hearing loss claim was remanded for an examination. Once the examination came back, the veteran was granted hearing loss at 100 percent rate on March 7, 2019 with an effective date of May 31, 2011 which resulted in a retroactive payment of \$269,627.67.

Another case involved a veteran's spouse who filed an application for dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC). "She was married to the veteran for 23 years and then they divorced. The veteran died about a month after they remarried," Kidd said.

The VA denied the claim primarily because she was not married to the veteran for at least one year prior to his death. "The VA was supposed to look at the longest period of marriage, which was 23 years," she said. "It's a shame that she had to go through a long process of filing a claim, then filing an appeal after being denied, when all the VA had to do is look at the first marriage." The veteran's spouse received \$107,774.04 and now receives a monthly check for death benefits.

Being a claims analyst is a very rewarding position for both Pierre and Kidd. "You change lives and you get them the benefits that they've earned. That's our reward," Pierre said. "It doesn't feel like work when you enjoy what you do."

# Annual Ceremony Honors POWs, MIAs



Throughout American history, the men and women of our Armed Forces have selflessly served our country, making tremendous sacrifices to defend our liberty. On National POW/MIA Recognition Day—September 20—we honor all American prisoners of war and pay tribute to those who never returned to their families from the battlefield.

One Alabama man declared missing in action more than 75 years ago finally made it home. According to the Air Force Times, 2nd Lt. Walter B. "Buster" Stone, a pilot in the 350th Fighter Squadron, was killed on Oct. 22, 1943 when his P-47 Thunderbolt aircraft crashed in northern France during a bomber escort mission. Search and recovery operations were not possible because the crash site in northern France was occupied by the Nazis.

In 1990 a French group began excavating a site in a forest in France, where Stone was believed to have crashed.

The group found plane wreckage that matched the lieutenant's aircraft. A recovery team with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) later went to a site based on information from a local resident and found remains and an ID tag for Stone. More remains were found when the site excavation was completed in 2018. DPAA scientists used circumstantial and material evidence to identify Stone's remains.

On May 11, just a few days after what would be his 100th birthday, Lieutenant Stone was finally laid to rest in his family's plot.

There are still over 82,000 missing from wars such as World War II and the Korean War, but our nation keeps looking and tirelessly working to identify those who are found. As demonstrated in the Stone family situation, there is no amount of time that will dispel either the love or pride of family.

A ceremony to mark National POW/MIA Recognition Day will be held September 21 on the south lawn of the State Capitol. The day's events, hosted by the American Legion of Alabama, Rolling Thunder of Alabama and various veterans service organizations, begins at 10:30 a.m. with a motorcycle POW/MIA Honor Ride from the VA Regional office to the capitol.

Our prisoners of war and MIA are certainly not forgotten. This annual program serves to ensure that we never forget all that they and the families who sent them off to war have sacrificed upon the altar of freedom.



A military Honor Guard carries 2nd Lt. Walter Stone to his final resting place in the family plot.

## Service Dog Aids Veteran with PTSD

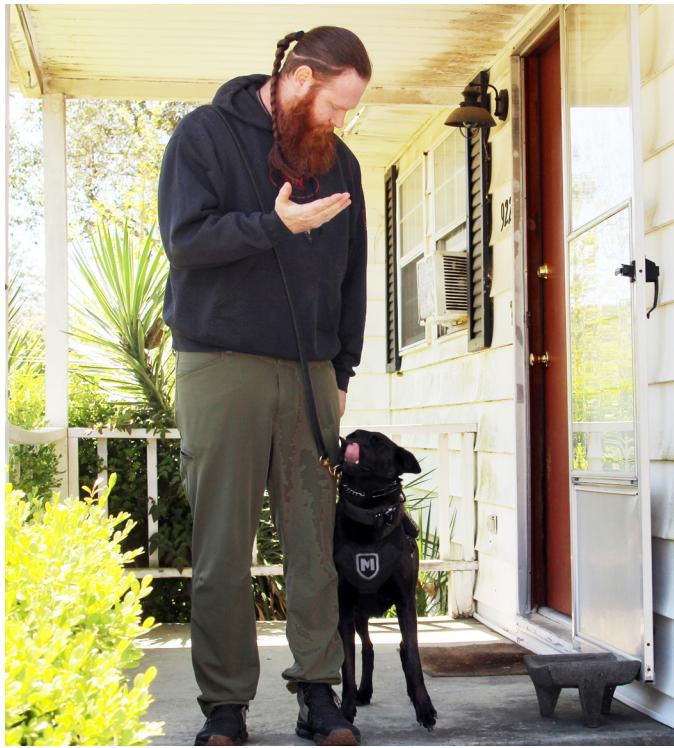
Randal Greeson, a former Marine from Ozark, was struggling with anxiety after serving as a field radio and reconnaissance operations specialist in Iraq from 2004–2005.

His team established the routes that the group could take and performed raids. It was a high stress environment and he was always worried about things. “Everything culminated—the constant explosions and not knowing if there was an IED [improvised explosive device] under the piece of road or was it just a torn up road,” he said.

After returning home, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and was on numerous medications. “My doctor had left the VA Clinic and I didn’t have a doctor for two years,” he said. “I tried to get back in and the clinic told me that they were full. I went to Dothan and they told me the same thing.”

He called Doreen, a local veterans service officer, and within a week he had an appointment with a new primary care doctor. “She takes care of any kind of issue and has been very, very helpful getting me into where I need to go,” he said. “She is probably the best help of anyone that I have seen through the VA.”

After getting the help he needed, he decided to try to get a service dog. “I saw some video of people with



Greeson gives a command to his service dog Berlin.

service dogs. I tried to get the VA to sign off for me to qualify to get a dog from Service Dogs of Alabama,” he said. “I had everything in order but needed a letter from a doctor to get the dog. The VA wouldn’t sign off on the letter because the doctor said that they were still testing the use of dogs.”

Greeson decided to look for another route to get a dog. “A guy who used to work with me on Fort Rucker was training dogs for Rebuilding Warriors,” he said. “I got in touch with him and provided him all the info they needed and they donated Berlin to me.”

Berlin is a four-year-old Belgium Malinois, a breed commonly used for police and military work due to their energy, intelligence, and drive. The breed is known for its loyalty to its owner and its strong urge to work.

Berlin has had a lot of training. Before Greeson received her about a year ago, she went to a double amputee who didn’t want her. Berlin went back into training for two or three years and was exposed to many different situations. She is not spooked by anything.

“I did about two weeks of training with me, her and the trainer. When they felt that I was ready, they allowed me to take her home,” he said. “We’d meet every day to train some more until they were confident that I knew how to do the commands and knew how to do everything. It worked out really, really well. She’s been a great dog.”

She helps by doing “grounding.” It may be nothing more than a paw stepping on his shoe, but the Gulf War veteran feels it and finds comfort in it. “If my mind has wandered off, she’ll lean into me to change my focus and get my mind back to where it needs to be. If I get hyper vigilant—constantly looking around—she’ll do something to get my focus back to normal,” Greeson said. “If a car backfires or there is some other loud noise, she’ll nudge me or put her paw on my foot to divert my attention and help me get through it.”

When she has her gear on she is a totally different dog than when she is not working. “She is very smart; as soon as her collar and vest go on, she knows that she is working. When we are just relaxing at home, she is just a regular dog and a big baby,” he said. “Still, if she sees me getting upset or irritated, she’ll come up and calm me down.”

Berlin goes everywhere that Greeson does and has been a great help. “I never used to leave the house except to work before I got Berlin. Now I feel free to go places,” he said. “I have really noticed the difference since I got her. I don’t know where I’d be without her.”

## Meet Your VSO

Rochelle Osbourn has been the veterans service officer (VSO) for the Cleburne and Randolph Counties for 12 ½ years.

She served 19 ½ years with the Air Force and the Air National Guard before medically retiring. The former master sergeant served as the noncommissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC) of training at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, Georgia. That job, along with her previous positions of budget analyst and orderly room NCOIC, prepared her for the mounds of paperwork she handles now.

"I enjoy my job as the VSO because it allows me to help the veterans of my county and, hopefully, make some kind of difference," she said.

Osbourn plans to retire in February 2020 to tackle a lot of projects at home and care for her 83-year-old mother.



Veterans, family members and the general public gathered at Bill Nichols State Veterans Home for a Memorial Day ceremony.



# Veterans Homes and Cemetery Host Memorial Day Programs

**M**emorial Day is all about honoring the men and women who paid the ultimate price for our peace and freedom.

Veterans and members of the public gathered to honor all war veterans during special ceremonies at the Bill Nichols and Colonel Robert L. Howard State Veterans Homes and the State Veterans Memorial Cemetery.

Before that special day, dozens of Boy and Girl Scouts representing several troops gathered at the cemetery to place flags at the graves. "The cost of our

freedom came at a high price," U.S. Air Force CMSgt. Michael Wester said at the ceremony at Bill Nichols. "We honor them and carry on the legacy of service of those great Americans."

The annual tribute included a bell rung for each Bill Nichols veteran who died in the past year, wreath presentations honoring service members who died in all American wars, a 21-gun salute by the Alexander City Police Honor Guard and the solemn tones of "Taps."

Right: Boy Scouts place flags on the graves at the cemetery.

Bottom Left: TSgt. Adrian Devore presents a carnation to Frank Harris in honor of his uncle William Wilkinson at Bill Nichols.

Bottom Right: Veterans at Colonel Howard listen to a speech.



# VA Launches New Health Care Options under MISSION Act

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) launched its new and improved Veterans Community Care Program on June 6, 2019, implementing portions of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (MISSION Act), which both ends the Veterans Choice Program and establishes a new Veterans Community Care Program.

The MISSION Act will strengthen the nationwide VA Health Care System by empowering veterans with more health care options.

“The changes not only improve our ability to provide the health care veterans need, but also when and where they need it,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “It will also put veterans at the center of their care and offer options, including expanded telehealth and urgent care, so they can find the balance in the system that is right for them.”

Under the new Veterans Community Care Program, veterans can work with their VA health care provider or other VA staff to see if they are eligible to receive community care based on new criteria. Eligibility for community care does not require a veteran to receive that care in the community; Veterans can still choose to have VA provide their care.

The VA MISSION Act:

- Strengthens VA’s ability to recruit and retain clinicians.
- Authorizes “[Anywhere to Anywhere](#)” telehealth across state lines.
- Empowers veterans with increased access to community care.
- Establishes a new urgent care benefit that eligible veterans can access through VA’s network of urgent care providers in the community.

For more information, visit [www.missionact.va.gov](http://www.missionact.va.gov).

## VA Health Care Facilities to go Smoke-Free

WASHINGTON — As part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) commitment to provide excellent health care for Veterans, the department will implement a new policy restricting smoking by patients, visitors, volunteers, contractors and vendors at its health care facilities by October.

Although VA has historically permitted smoking in designated areas, there is growing evidence that smoking and exposure to secondhand and thirdhand smoke creates significant medical risks, and risks to safety and direct patient care that are inconsistent with medical requirements and limitations. Accordingly, VA’s Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has collaborated with key stakeholders to update and recertify the policy to be consistent with the department’s commitment to Veterans and the community.

A recent VA survey revealed that approximately 85 percent of responding facility leadership support smoke-free campuses, and this new policy for patients, visitors, volunteers, contractors and vendors allows VA to ensure the health and well-being of VA staff, patients and the

public.

“We are not alone in recognizing the importance of creating a smoke-free campus,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “As of 2014, 4,000 health care facilities and four national health care systems in the U.S. have implemented smoke-free grounds. This policy change coincides with additional VHA efforts to help us become the provider of choice for Veterans and the reason why Veterans will ChooseVA.”

VHA’s new smoke-free policy applies to cigarettes, cigars, pipes, any other combustion of tobacco and non-Federal Drug Administration approved electronic nicotine delivery systems, including but not limited to electronic or e-cigarettes, vape pens or e-cigars.

To learn more about health risks associated with smoking, visit the Surgeon General’s website at <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/tobacco/index.html> or <https://smokefree.gov/>.

VHA has extensive resources and programs to assist Veterans in their smoke-free journey. They can be found at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/>.