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In Service to Their Country

Lon Wagner visits the VA Medical Center in Hampton, Va., to discover what it means to be a veteran.

By Lon Wagner

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It's pretty much any day at the VA Medical Center in Hampton, Va.—and every last parking spot outside the main hospital is filled. Drivers circle, cars idle, waiting for someone to back out.

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The VA Medical Center in Hampton, Va., is full of veterans who lived through important parts of U.S. history.

Wars or conflicts or "operations" have been steady over the past seven or eight decades. Many men have enlisted, or been drafted, and then more and more women joined them. Doctors got better at saving lives from devastating injuries. The War on Terror started—and never ended.

Here, it's all added up to this:

A full parking lot. Full buildings. A construction schedule that can barely keep up.

Suffice to say that here, in Hampton, right on the Chesapeake Bay, right across the water from Norfolk Naval Station, just miles from military strongholds such as Oceana Naval Air Station, Fort Eustis, Little Creek Amphibious Base and too many other bases to name, active-duty soldiers and sailors get familiar with the turf and stick around when they retire.

And the older they get, the more they come here, to the VA Medical Center.

So it is that here a person could walk the halls on any day, introduce himself to anyone, at any time, and find a story.

And if that person introduced himself to enough men and women, enough veterans of the U.S. military, he could piece together a pretty good story. Sure, he could tell many stories of battle heroism, selflessness and sacrifice. He could tell a tale of the changing nature of war—of the shift from hand-to-hand combat to surgical strikes and back to IEDs. But he could also tell a bigger story of race relations, of women's gains toward equality, of the shift from war protesters to the "support the troops" movement.

He could tell, by talking to these veterans, a pretty honest version of the recent history of America.

Brothers in Arms

In one wing, inside a nice but modest office, is Dr. Laurie Lindbloom. Her title is spinal cord injury service chief. Her office is hot.

"It's very warm in here," she says, apologetically, "because a lot of the fellows like it warm."

There's a new clinic being constructed, on the other side of the full parking lot. Lindbloom says the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation New Dawn Outpatient Clinic will be nice—private bedrooms, private bathrooms. In the hallway outside her office, evidence of the demand abounds. Chairs constructed especially for those who can't move their arms or legs or both line the hallway—a dozen sit in a row. Lindbloom says that the VA tries to make it so people can get the care they need as outpatients and live at home as long as possible. But once they move in, usually they're there for good.

"One of our fellows, he's almost 90," she says. "One time I told him, 'Why don't you go home for Christmas?' He said, 'I don't want to go home. Here, I go to the library, I play Bingo, I go fishing … I can't do that stuff at home.'"

Go outside her door, go left past the special chairs and down the hall, and you'll see Eugene Hodge. His electric scooter sports his old car license plate on the back, which says a lot about him: Virginia 628ZN (handicap symbol). Vietnam Veteran. Bronze Star.

Hodge has a mustache, tinted glasses, a plaid shirt and, notably, Champion sports shoes that remain perfectly white—because he can't walk. But he can talk, and when asked, doesn't mind doing so.

Grew up a country boy, in Orange County, Va. Drafted in 1968. Army, E6, staff sergeant, attached to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

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Sure didn't want to be a hero, sure wouldn't use that word on himself even now. Served a complete tour of Vietnam, was on the command track.

"We did night ambushes, combat assaults, called in air support, stuff like that."

He manned a .50-caliber machine gun. He fought for his life in cities most Americans never would have heard of but now know like they know "Philadelphia" or "Seattle." His unit patrolled from Da Nang to Saigon. He was 20 then.

This man who was tough enough to run through a barrage of lead to drag three of his buddies to safety is man enough to keep talking as his eyes fill with water.

What did Hodge do to get the Bronze Star?

"I was just a country boy, so they gave me all the bullets so I could shoot."

Well, I didn't serve, but I know they don't give the Bronze Star for firing a weapon, I thought.

"We were in a firefight. Three of my guys were wounded. I went in and brought them out. Under fire."

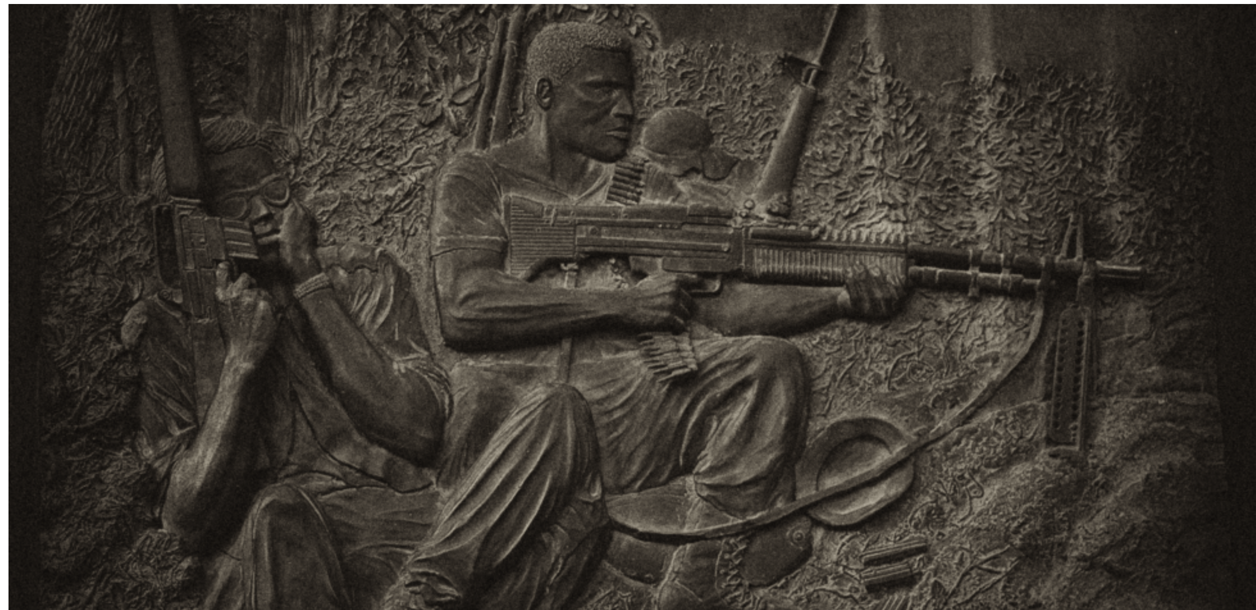
What's it mean to Hodge to be a veteran? He doesn't hesitate.

"The brotherhood of serving, the closeness, is something that … it's probably closer than you are to your real brother at times," he says. "It made me a better person. It gave me a sense of … how do I say this? … being able to trust someone with your life."

This man who was tough enough to run through a barrage of lead to drag three of his buddies to safety is man enough to keep talking as his eyes fill with water.

"The respect that my men had for me is something that I cherish. My captain, who is now a retired colonel, he called me up one day and said in his 30 years in the military, he had never served with a finer non-commissioned officer than myself."

Hodge isn't here, in the electric scooter, because of anything that happened in Vietnam. No, he came home safely. Became a schoolteacher. It was a car accident in 1989 that put him in the scooter.



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In the 21st century, war has evolved to include surgical strikes and IEDs, but the courage of those who serve has remained constant.

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Iwo Jima to Virginia

Two wars previous, of a different race but from the same military branch, and in the same spinal-injury unit, is Willie T. Manning.

Manning rolls into Lindbloom's office, where it is still hot, but not hot enough. He wears a black U.S. Army hat, a beige scarf, a plaid blanket over his legs.

I reach out to shake his hand, and he extends his arm and an apology for his hand. His fingers curl in, permanently.

"It can't straighten out," he says.

He is 93 years old and still remembers the day he was drafted: "the 20th of December, 1942."

> "Right there, we were on top of Suribachi."
>
> —Willie T. Manning

And, oh, was he part of history. He was in "the segregated Army," an all African-American unit responsible for supplies, burials, setting up cemeteries after a battle.

His caregiver has brought with her two photographs: one is of a young, handsome Manning in his Army uniform; another is blurry, grainy, a group of men, on top of a hill, holding a flag pole that looks like … .

"Right there, we were on top of Suribachi. That's me with the hat on."

Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, Japan, the famous photo, U.S. Marines raising the flag. Manning's not in that picture, but one like that.

He and his unit, they sat offshore on a boat for 22 days while the battle for Iwo Jima raged.

"The Marines took Iwo Jima, and the Japs took it back, and the Marines had to retake it, that's why we stayed in the boat so long," he recalls.

His unit was salvage and repair. They repaired shoes, clothes, tents. They waited for bodies that couldn't be repaired, so they dug graves.

"See, in that picture, we were leaning right against the flagstaff there," Manning says. "There's cemeteries on both sides of that mountain."

Manning at one time had earned the rank "T5," a technician's standing equivalent to corporal, but when he was transferred to Wyoming, his sergeant demoted him back to private. He was never sure why. He was told he would have to re-earn his stripes overseas.

So that's what he did.

"It took me the rest of the time to get it back."

Does he think he was demoted because of his race?

"I don't think so," he says.

Courtesy of Willie T. Manning

Manning and his unit on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima.

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Courtesy of Mary Beamer

Mary Beamer trained with the Women's Army Corps and became a combat medic.

The Women Who Served

Mary Beamer wears her veteran status on her sleeve, pins on her blouse ("Don't Forget, I'm a Vet") and on her car: U.S. Women's Army Corp.

Still, in 2011, some assume "veteran" equals "man." If they assume that when, for instance, Beamer gets out of her car, they don't think that for long. And they won't think that again. Verbally, Mary Beamer takes no prisoners.

"Please thank your husband for his service," many have told her.

And she has told them back: "It's *me*. You can thank *me*."

It would have all been different, so different, had she kept her first job. She had just graduated high school in Madison, N.C., and her family was pleased when she landed a job at a local restaurant making hush puppies. But at the same time, she had been to the post office and had picked up some pamphlets about nurses, the Women's Army Corps, and had thought, "Maybe I'll do that."

She only made hush puppies for one day. They signed her up and she went to Winston Salem, N.C., for a physical, and they told her to bring pajamas. This was 1954.

> "It means I did something good for the United States and for the military."
>
> —Mary Beamer

As she sees it now, next thing she knew she was in Charlotte and then Fort Lee, Va., and then Fort Sam Houston in Texas, known as "Home of the Combat Medic," where Beamer went through the program to become a medic.

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"I never really wanted to be a nurse," Beamer said, "but my uncle wanted me to, so he got pissed off, but that's another story."

She did, actually, become a nurse, because if you go through the training for advanced medical technical school, the civilian equivalent is a licensed practical nurse. Back in the '60s, military training for medics was what you call "hands on."

"Do you know how to save a goat?" Beamer asks. "I do."

During training, because this is 2011 and there are modern sensitivities, let's just say that goats ended up with gunshot wounds. The medic had to rush to the goat, and like we have seen in war movies or on *M.A.S.H.*, perform a tracheotomy with nothing more than a ballpoint pen.

"It was a metal pen back then," Beamer says, "you take off the bottom, and … ."

She scrunches her face and makes a jabbing gesture with her arm.

"You have to know where the larynx and pharynx are," she says.

Well, what became of the goats?

"Mine lived," Beamer says, proudly.

This was training for the Vietnam War, though Beamer ended up treating most of the people from that war once they got back home, at Fort Sam Houston. She worked in the burn unit there, treating patients flown back from Vietnam. She remembers that they often soaked the burn victims in tubs filled with Tide detergent, to soften the skin. She thinks that it was the use of waterbeds at Fort Sam—the body contouring of the waterbed helping to keep pressure off the patients' severely burned parts—that led to the mass market boom of waterbeds in the 1970s.

People from the waterbed factory came in one day and were walking around the unit.

"The next thing you know," Beamer says, "the furniture stores were full of them."

Beamer loved working in the burn unit. There, she felt like she was able to minimize the pain of military men who were in the greatest need. But there are psychological aspects of assigning someone that duty for too long.

"I wanted to stay," she says, "but they didn't let you work in the burn unit for more than six months."

During one re-enlistment, she told the Army she wanted to go to Germany, and they said, "We'll see what we can do."

Guten Tag, Stuttgart.

During another, she said she wanted to go to the Far East.

Konnichiwa, Okinawa.

It was in Okinawa that Beamer faced her greatest peril while in the Army, not due to combat but rather a natural disaster. She was there when rain and wind from a typhoon came so hard that it took off a corner of the hospital.

"We slept in the Red Cross room," she remembers, "and when we went to sleep, they warned us to put our shoes up high, not leave them on the floor."

As she slept, floodwaters rose steadily and came into the hospital—and kept on coming.

"So the next morning," Beamer remembers, "your butt was wet but your shoes were dry."

She sits here, at the VA, telling all these stories, in a beige pants suit decorated with patches and pins proclaiming membership in many military groups. At almost 76, she is trim and peppy and seems like, if asked, she'd board a plane and go put her medic skills back to work without blinking.

Courtesy of Mary Beamer

Beamer was stationed in Germany and Japan during her time in the military.

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For some, military service was a way to support a family.

What's it mean to her to be a veteran?

"To me, it means I did something good for the United States and for the military," Beamer says. "And they taught me a lot of valuable things."

If push came to shove, she could still save a goat.

A Career Soldier

Harold Hoffstaetter joined the Navy in 1955, because "back in those days you had to help your folks out," and his folks were always lining up ways for him to help out. He quit school and enlisted.

Hoffstaetter represents a group of people who are not always thought of first when thinking of military service: joining the military was a way to get paid, support a family. It was a career path, even for an enlisted man, when no other path seemed as certain.

During his 20 years in the service, Hoffstaetter and his wife had eight children.

"The first five were so close I had five teenagers at the same time," Hoffstaetter says. "I still had a little hair on my head when that was over."

In between having children, he went on five Mediterranean deployments on either the USS Saratoga or the USS Forrestal and retired in 1974.

But, as with others, he came through his tours of duty—more or less—without a ding and suffered his worst injuries afterward. He's a paraplegic, a permanent resident at the VA, because of the time he stopped along the highway to help a stranded motorist and got plowed into by a van.

He has a van that he can drive with hand controls, so he drives home every weekend. Like several who live at the VA, or use it for health care, he uses those driving skills to help out.

"I'm a runner for the nursing home," Hoffstaetter says, "so I stay busy all the time—and in between, I play pool and Bingo."

The thing he loves about VA Bingo is that when someone gets a blackout—covering every spot on their card—"they yell obscenities."

Veterans After 9/11

The word "veteran," in the minds of many, came to evoke the elderly men walking proudly in the Memorial Day or Veterans Day parade. In the newspaper or on TV, it seemed that the older the man pictured, the more the picture meant "veteran."

Everything that has happened since Sept. 11, 2001, has changed all that. In fact, now 17 percent of the veterans being treated at this VA are women.

Come to the VA and meet Jennifer Rogers, an 11-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force. As a radio communications specialist, she has served in OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan) and OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom). She was responsible for classified information to aircrews flying in and out of Afghanistan and Iraq.

She was on a base in Japan on Sept. 11, when much about the military, military service and her home country was greatly changed. In fact, on the base that day, Rogers and everyone else was already on lockdown.

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Jennifer Askey

Jennifer Rogers is an 11-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force.

"We were going through a typhoon at the time," she says, "we were not allowed to leave our homes."

By the time she returned to the States, three years had passed. The bases were totally different. At Andrews Air Force Base, entire roads had been rerouted.

She grew up in Maine, but her husband is active duty, and an assignment brought him to Virginia. Rogers has her veteran card and can get health-care service at the VA if and when she needs it, but that's not why she is here every day.

She was here one day and heard about a job. Now, she is associate director for operations, and being a veteran helps her out with the older veterans.

"A lot of the veterans want to walk into the director's office to say their concerns or pay a compliment to the director," Rogers says. "I say, 'You know, sir, you were in the military, you can't just walk into the commanding officer's office and expect to speak to him then and there.'"

Being a veteran, she knows that, too.

And what does that veteran status mean to her?

"You know, I've thought about that a lot, and the only word that comes to me is 'proud,'" Rogers says. "I'm proud to be a veteran, and if it was a little different, I'd still be in, probably.

"I love the fact that I still have a connection to the military."

Courtesy of Lon Wagner

About the Author

Lon Wagner is director of communications for a medical-science company and a freelance writer who lives in Norfolk, Va. He spent more than two decades as a reporter and feature writer for newspapers in the Mid-Atlantic, and his stories won national awards in several top feature-writing competitions. His series about a Navy pilot downed during the first Gulf War was nominated by his newspaper for the Pulitzer Prize. He and his wife have three daughters.

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