

# Veterans Studies Interest Group Listserv

## Issue #48 December 2020

### The Veteran's Creed

1. *I am an American Veteran*
2. *I proudly served my country*
3. *I live the values I learned in the military*
4. *I continue to serve my community, my country and my fellow veterans*
5. *I maintain my physical and mental discipline*
6. *I continue to lead and improve*
7. *I make a difference*
8. *I honor and remember my fallen comrades*

This month's Listserv includes VA Secretary Choice; Anthropology 264: Georgetown University Course on Veterans; VA and COVID-19; "Ponder" Rewards of Military Service; New Army Museum; New Native American Veterans Memorial; Big Data and Suicide; 100,000 Genomes for the Million Veteran Program

### VA Secretary Choice

On December 10th, President-elect Joe Biden announced that Denis McDonough is his choice for Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and it is somewhat of a surprise. McDonough was President Obama's Chief of Staff as well as his Deputy National Security Advisor. However, the nominee is not a veteran (potentially only the second non-veteran in this position) and that has prompted some immediate responses. Joe Chenelly, National Executive Director for AMVETS, the 4th largest veteran service organization said "We were expecting a veteran, maybe a post-9/11 veteran. Maybe a woman veteran or maybe a veteran who knows the VA exceptionally well. We are looking forward to hearing from President-elect Biden on his thinking behind this [nomination](#)." According to Paul Rieckhoff, founder of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America "The idea that Biden couldn't find a qualified candidate among the more than 3 million veterans feels exceptionally [patronizing](#)." On the other hand, David Shulkin, former VA Secretary, opined that "[McDonough] is an experienced leader who has helped [the department] through its toughest days in 2014 and cares deeply about [veterans](#)"

McDonough is well versed in the workings of the nation's capital. He played an important role in cleaning up and restoring trust in VA healthcare after the waitlist scandals of 2014. Part of the clean-up was the Veterans Choice Act, landmark legislation ultimately enacted in 2018 that gave veterans more options in care (see Listserv [#20](#)). McDonough's wife, Kari, cofounded a nonprofit group, Vets Community Connections, which helps veterans and their families develop stronger ties to the [community](#).

A major challenge for the new Secretary will be the transformation of the VA electronic health record to a commercial system for better interoperability with the Department of Defense, an initiative with an 8-10-year time frame.

## **Anthropology 264: Georgetown University Course on Veterans**

Our course “Veterans: Hero, Victim, Threat” given to undergraduates at Georgetown University ended on December 3rd. I described it in [Listservs #45](#). A basic idea of the course was to give students a knowledge set about veterans and then have the student apply that knowledge in anthropology-type interviews with veterans (via zoom in this era).

Anthropology Professor Andy Bickford, (course director) VA chief historian Mike Visconage and I designed the course, and we think it worked out very well. At the end of the course, students had a much-enhanced interest, insight and knowledge about veterans. Throughout the course the discussions with students were most interesting and intellectually stimulating. We are looking forward to further similar endeavors.

## **VA and COVID-19**

### **VA COVID-19 Numbers**

#### **VA COVID-19 Statistics (as of 12/11/20)**

Cumulative Cases	129,845
Active Cases	17,757
Convalescent Cases	106,680
Known Deaths	5,542*

\*82 VA employees have also died of [COVID-19](#)

### **4<sup>th</sup> Mission**

VA's 4<sup>th</sup> Mission is to support state and local civilian health care systems when emergencies such as the pandemic occur. In carrying out that mission, VA has admitted 397 non-veteran patients in 14 states and 1,248 veterans from State Veterans Nursing Homes (institutions which generally have had substantial problems in the pandemic - see [Listserv #43](#)). It has also provided 2,224 staff members to civilian [facilities](#) (all as of 12/4/20).

### **VA Priorities for COVID-19 Vaccine**

VA is also setting its plans for COVID-19 vaccine distribution. Priorities for this endeavor will be along the same lines as CDC has suggested for the population as a whole. First priority will be to essential health care workers involved with patients at VA medical centers. Next will be based on risk - oldest veterans first, particularly those with spinal cord injury and other risk factors, and [minorities](#) who are [disproportionately](#) affected by the virus.

Supplies of vaccine will be very limited. VA so far has ordered 73,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine and another 122,000 doses from [Moderna](#). The Department has about 9 million enrollees and almost 400,000 employees so it will be a while before everyone gets the vaccine.

Special attention is also being given to the refrigeration needs for storing the vaccine. VA is gearing up at 73 sites for the -70° storage needed for the Pfizer vaccine, which now has FDA approval, and at 188 sites which can accept the Moderna [vaccine](#), in for FDA review on December 17.

## **“Ponder” Rewards of Military [Service](#)**

Retired Lt. Gen, H.R. McMaster, who served as National Security Advisor in the Trump administration and is now a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, penned a most useful Op-Ed in the Wall Street [Journal](#) on Veteran's Day. For Americans, he said, it may be easy to imagine the hardships associated with military service “such as long separations from family or arduous conditions. However it is more difficult to understand “the less tangible rewards of [service](#).” - being part of a community that has a binding warriors’ ethos which is based on honor, duty, courage, loyalty and self-sacrifice. An effective military unit takes on the qualities of a family and which the person next to you is willing to sacrifice everything. It is a family that is sorely missed when military persons rejoin civilian life.

Veterans also have pride in having “exhibited courage and compassion.” They are both warriors and humanitarians as they engage enemies who have promoted hatred and violence. He ends by saying “Veterans want their fellow citizens to be bound through a sense of common purpose, mutual respect and willingness to sacrifice. Perhaps pondering the rewards of service could help Americans transcend political and social differences, regain confidence in our national character and restore pride in the republic that veterans fought to preserve.” A wonderful sentiment for any day.

## **New Army Museum**

Also, on Veteran's Day, the National Museum of the United States [Army](#) opened its doors [at](#) Fort Belvoir VA. It joins two other military museums in the U.S. - the National World War II Museum in New Orleans and the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg TX.

The museum, which cost \$430 million, reviews the 400-year history of the army in 11 galleries containing pictures, artifacts, weapons, uniforms and diaries. First sights in the museum are “soldiers’ stories” with 7-foot stainless steel pylons each etched with a soldier’s face. The soldiers include the very well known such as Alvin York and Audie Murphy (the nation’s leading medal winner), and also Jarvis Hanks a 14-year-old drummer during the War of 1812 and Andrew Rowan first Lieutenant in the Spanish American war. There are then 6 galleries each providing an overview of a time [period](#).

The Museum’s artifacts include those from citizen militias which started in 1607 and predated the army’s formation in 1775. Among those honored are the Buffalo Soldiers, black troops who were important to the country's westward expansion. The Native Americans they fought are also remembered, including a bonnet with 22 eagle feathers worn by the I-See-O who acted as intermediaries to prevent bloodshed.

There are displays of the Cold War such as one honoring Sharon Lane a nurse who was the only American woman killed by direct enemy action in Vietnam, and a red alert telephone that would have activated soldiers in West Germany. There are displays of IEDs and other artifacts of the present wars. The museum also remembers the Nisei, Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. All-in-all well worth a visit when the pandemic passes.

## **New Native American Veterans Memorial**

Still another Veteran's Day event was the unveiling of the National Native American Veterans [Memorial](#) as part of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American [Indian](#). The Memorial rests adjacent to the museum's grounds by the National Mall. According to Rebecca Trautmann, project curator “We want to raise the profile of Native service members and Native Veterans. It is such an under-recognized story, history and commitment. We’re really hopeful that this memorial [with its] programming and publications will help to tell some of these many different [stories](#).”

Congress first commissioned the memorial in [1994](#) and it honors the various groups of Native Americans who have served the country. Perhaps the most famous were the “code talkers” of World War I and II, who communicated military messages in native tongues that the enemy could not understand. However, it is important to remember that Native Americans have had a much greater role in the military and are said to serve at higher proportions than any other group. Though the data are hard to come by because of the inconsistent way that the military has kept ethnic records, scholars estimate that up to 1/4 of adult American Indian men served in World War I and 44,000 in World War II along with 800 women working in various capacities. Add to that 10,000 who served in Korea and about 42,000 in [Vietnam](#) (1.4% of troops as against 0.65 of the U.S. [population](#)).

The memorial includes a “Warriors Circle of Honor” which was designed by Harvey Pratt, Chief for the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma and a Marine Corps veteran. Meant to be a gathering place as well as a monument of [remembrance](#), the Circle rests on a carved stone drum and is surrounded by walkways and benches. The design required the approval of the many Native American groups and Pratt’s hope is that when they come to the Memorial “... they will think about their family, and the family will think about the Veterans, and this will become a place of [power](#).”



Circle of Honor at the National Native American Veterans [Memorial](#)

## **Big Data and Suicide**

“Big data” And “Artificial Intelligence” are watchwords of our computer age. By analyzing the voluminous medical information that we all generate and applying Artificial Intelligence techniques, we can come up with insights never before possible. Dr Marion Goodman, a psychiatrist at the Bronx VA Medical Center has been applying these techniques to suicide data. Under her direction, the VA has produced a program called “Reach Vet” which uses algorithms design from these data to identify high risk suicide [veterans](#).

The approach is the first of its kind to be used in this way and the jury is still out on its effectiveness and what social and financial costs will be attendant. According to many experts this project will be a critical test of big data systems. Will they be effective? Will they have a high rate of “false positives” and identify individuals who are not at high risk and therefore apply a stigma that could be harmful to them?

The VA’s algorithm updates constantly, and names may be added or dropped from the list as the days go by. The important point is that it is a “warning sign, not a [prognosis](#).” When a person is identified, a suicide safety plan kicks in - guns and ammunition are to be stored separately, photos of loved ones made visible and the phone numbers of friends, social workers and suicide hotlines easily on hand.

Analysis is based on the VA's database of thousands of previous suicides dating to 2008. The computer combs through voluminous facts including age, marital status, diagnosis, prescriptions to determine factors associated with suicide risk, 61 an all. It then produces a composite score for each person. According to John McCarthy, of the VA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, those who score at the top 0.1% are about 40 times more likely to die of suicide than the average person.

Initial results from this program find a higher use of medical services by veterans identified at high risk but results on suicide prevention are not yet in. Still, the experience of being identified is striking. For example, Barry, a Vietnam veteran with known psychiatric problems was contacted and dubious about a computer “telling me something like [this](#)” While he is doing well now, he knows how quickly things can turn dark and is fine with the program.

## **100,000 Genomes for the Million Veteran Program**

The Million Veteran Program, developed under my leadership at the VA research program, is the world's largest genomic database. It has now reached an important landmark in “genetic sequencing.” Genetic sequencing is the central scientific technique to determine a person's genetic makeup. According to the Personalis, the company contracted by VA to provide genetic sequencing, the 100,000<sup>th</sup> sequenced genome has been delivered to the [Department](#).

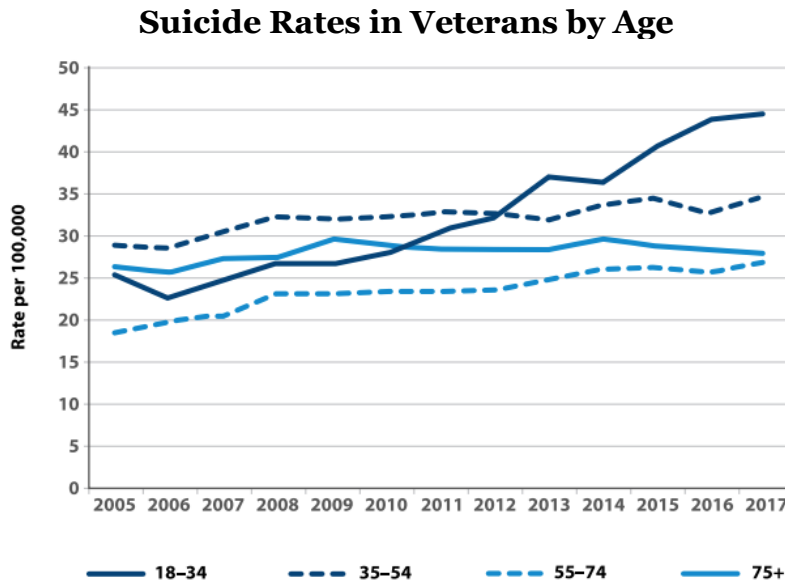
The Million Veteran Program will provide essential links between genes and human health and will also be crucial in the development of new drugs and other techniques to cure a wide variety of now incurable diseases. There are now over 825,000 [participants](#)

in the Million Veteran Program and there are expected to be over 2 million when it reaches its completion.

Happy Holidays and stay well!

Joel Kupersmith, M.D.  
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Professor of Medicine

## Stats Section



Suicide rate by age in veterans from 2005-2017. Note the alarming uptick in suicides in the 18-34-year-old age group. From [VA](#).