

Generation

Paying homage to all veterans

Two stories about veterans were in the news during the week of March 27, the first of which concerned veterans of my generation who fought in the Vietnam War.

Locally, Vietnam War veterans were invited to the Morganton-Burke Senior Center on Wednesday, March 29, from 9-11 a.m. for special recognition of their service. The pancake breakfast was part of a national movement set in motion by a proclamation given by former President Barack Obama in 2012 to honor veterans from that era in history. Losing friends and a loved one to the ravages of that war hits me particularly hard, so I read all the stories.

In the past most states had celebrated "Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day" on March 29 or 30 of each year but, this year, President Donald Trump signed the Vietnam War Veterans Recognition Act of 2017, designating March 29 as the official Vietnam Veterans Day. March 29 had been viewed by many as a more appropri-

ate date because in 1973, the last combat troops were withdrawn from Vietnam and the last prisoners of war held in North Vietnam arrived on American soil. It also is the date President Richard Nixon chose for the first Vietnam Veterans Day in 1974.

I did my part and made a donation to the Paralyzed Veterans of America, but in its thank-you email, the PVA shared statistics that gnawed at my conscience and made my contribution minuscule in what Vietnam Veterans have had to deal with daily. No. 1 was that on a given night, 19,700 Vietnam veterans are homeless, 271,000 have PTSD, 75,000 returned home severely disabled, and zero are eligible for assistance under the VA's Family Caregiver Program.

The PVA and other veterans service organizations are fighting to expand eligibility for the VA Comprehensive Caregiver Program since the program is only available to a veteran seriously injured because of military service on or after Sept. 11, 2001.

I had to read that twice. While the tragedies of 9/11 will be



Peg DeMarco

embedded in every American's brain now and for decades to come, what the PVA had on its website hit home for all veterans: "Congress must eliminate the unjust date of injury requirement and include 'service-connected illness' as a criterion for the program," which in turn will give the majority of veterans' caregivers access to critically needed support services.

Think about it — does it spur enough of you on to write to your government leaders?

The other story had to do with Oscar Davis Jr. Don't know him? I didn't either until I read his story online via *The Fayetteville Observer*.

Mr. Davis, 92, finally received his Purple Heart — 70-plus years late. He had served in the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II and was knocked down by a large piece of shrapnel and

then a falling tree while serving as a radiotelephone operator. With a significant spinal injury, the young paratrooper would spend three weeks paralyzed from the waist down, but would ultimately rejoin his unit.

Davis had long ago been told that he would receive the Purple Heart, but the award paperwork was never signed amid the business of the war.

The official medal ceremony was the culmination of nearly two years of work by the Veterans' Legacy Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Harnett County-based volunteer organization in North Carolina that has helped more than 100 veterans receive military awards owed to them.

According to its website, www.vetslegacy.org, its mission is to honor veterans and their service, celebrate their legacies, and inspire patriotism through historical research involving providing documentation of proof of eligibility for awards that may have never been processed or submitted.

Volunteers scoured an archive

of war reports to find proof of Davis' injuries and the Purple Heart was the latest medal the group had recovered for him. In late 2015, the group helped the World War II veteran receive the Bronze Star and other medals that were long overdue.

From an initial caseload of two to three several years ago, today the Foundation has more than 170 active cases and the number is steadily increasing. Donations are sorely needed for the group of dedicated volunteers to continue its work.

And so, on March 25, 2017, seven decades later, Davis said the medal was worth the wait as Lt. Col. Marcus Wright leaned down to pin it to his jacket.

"This has been some day," Davis said. "I couldn't believe all this was going to happen. I just want to thank the Lord. I'm absolutely honored to be here today."

No, Mr. Davis. We're honored to have read about you and thankful for your service.

Peg DeMarco can be reached at peg.demarco@earthlink.net.