BVA Happenings – May 22, 2026

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Around BVA

Remembering Those Who Sacrificed All and Recognizing Many Now Sacrificing Much

Photo Caption: Every Memorial Day, BVA joins dozens of other Veterans Service Organizations in laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.



As another Memorial Day weekend arrives, the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) remembers and commemorates the valor and ultimate sacrifice of those who have been willing to lay down their lives in the name of freedom and peace. The magnitude of those sacrifices, and the far-reaching impact they have had on their own loved ones and on the nation, can never be downplayed or overstated.

Leaders, staff, and members of BVA express heartfelt gratitude for those who have given all or who have been willing to do so. We acknowledge the men and women, past and present, who have stepped forward and, at all costs and with every inherent risk, sworn an oath to support and defend against all enemies the Constitution, our laws, and our way of life.



Although BVA members of the past 81 years were all able to return home, many of them did so after considerable sacrifice of their own, including but not limited to their loss of sight on the battlefield or later due to a service-connected event or exposure. Without exception, we hear them saying that they would do it all again were they called upon to do so.

Many of these same BVA members now make other types of sacrifice – those of time, energy, and means to serve their fellow BVA members with uplifting counsel, encouragement, and direction, and to promote the interests of the organization that has made a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of veterans. To those who fit this description of a BVA member, thank you for your magnanimous service. We salute you, at the same time wishing you a pleasant and meaningful Memorial Day.

More than a half dozen places in the United States have claimed to be the birthplace of Memorial Day. In October 1864, for instance, three women in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, are said to have decorated the graves of loved ones who died during the Civil War; they then

returned in July 1865, accompanied by many of their fellow citizens for a more general commemoration. A large observance, primarily involving African Americans, occurred in May 1865 in Charleston, South Carolina. Columbus, Mississippi, held a formal observance for both Union and Confederate dead in 1866. In 1868, John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans, promoted a national holiday on May 30 "for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the southern rebellion."

After World War I, when the day came to be observed in honor of those who had died in all U.S. wars, its name changed from Decoration Day to Memorial Day. Since 1971, Memorial Day has been observed on the last Monday in May. Several Southern states also observe a separate day to honor the Confederate dead.

Any Way You Swing It! Thank you, Meta!

Photo Caption: At left and seated behind the golf cart's steering wheel, guide dog Cal appears set to drive Kevin to his next hole at Chester Valley Golf Club in Malvern, Pennsylvania, last week.



"When I lost my sight, I thought I could never play golf again."

It's a sentiment heard often across the visually impaired community, but stories like BVA member Kevin Wilson's are helping change that. With financial support and a pair of Oakley Meta Vanguards, Kevin used the latest accessible technology to confidently compete in last week's PGA HOPE Secretary's Cup. His guide dog, Cal, even helped retrieve a few golf balls along the way.

Kevin's story is just one example of how BVA members are finding creative ways to thrive in adaptive sports. BVA member Dan Kern has developed a golf system all his own, using Apple AirTags and his iPhone with VoiceOver to locate and line up his target. By holding his phone horizontally toward the ground, Dan can gauge distance and direction before taking his swing. To top it off, he even plays with light-up golf balls.

Any way you "swing" it, golf remains possible, and powerful, when accessible tools open the door. For the visually impaired community, innovation is doing more than improving the game; it is expanding opportunity, confidence, and connection on the course.

LA/MS RG Presents Bronze Braille Flag to Rockland, Maine – Yes, Maine!

Photo 1 Caption: Left to right, BROS Donna-Sue Sullivan Dugass, John Majkut, and VIST Coordinator Amy Tague.

Photo 2 Caption: Left, Gary Schoelerman, with BVA member Stanley Munson of nearby Belfast, Maine.



The BVA Louisiana/Mississippi BVA Regional Group, Inc., now has its own version of a traveling squad! Last Friday, regional group member Gary Schoelerman and Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinator John Majkut presented a Bronze Braille American Flag and Plaque to the City of Rockland, Maine. Working mostly virtually and remotely, John resides in Maine while serving as a VIST Coordinator to the veterans in the Alexandria, Louisiana, Health Care System catchment area (Central and Southwest Louisiana).

The dedication, attended by the family and friends of John and Mellisa (John's wife) Majkut, and representatives of the City of Rockland and the American Legion, took place at the Rockland American Legion Post 1 Military Service Wall. The flag was dedicated to Melissa's memory. She passed away on May 5, 2024.



Richard Vargas, American Legion Post 1 Adjunct, led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance, and John Majkut thanked everyone for attending and spoke of his departed wife. He then called on Gary to explain the tactile Braille Flag. Gary presented a brief history of BVA, the Braille Flag, and how the regional group became involved in placing nearly 80 Braille Flags, mostly in southern Louisiana, a few in Mississippi, one in Texas at the National Vietnam War Museum, and memorial flags in Iowa and now one in Maine.

Gary was followed by Rockland City Councilwoman Penny York, who gave her thanks to Melissa posthumously for all the work she had performed as a volunteer in and around Rockland. York was followed by Amy Tague, VIST Coordinator at the Augusta VA Medical Center. Tague explained her duties as the lone VIST Coordinator for the entire State of Maine.

Several other friends of Mellisa from all parts of Maine related their friendship with her, ending with an emotional tribute from her father, Richard Lowe. Her stepmother, Marilyn

Graham, attended as well. Also present was Melissa's son, River Bailey, and BVA member Stanley Munson from Belfast, Maine, located 30 miles to the north of Rockland.

John Majkut is currently the only virtual VIST Coordinator in the VA system.

"It may seem a little strange that his work is 2,000 miles from his office, but it works very well using phone, text, email, FaceTime, and video," said Gary.

Louisiana was represented in Maine by Gary and his wife, Marelle, and Alexandria Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist Donna-Sue Sullivan Dugass and her husband, Jude.

The Bronze Braille American Flag and Plaque were donated by John's friends in Louisiana and the BVA members in the Alexandria VAHS catchment area. It was sent to him shortly after his wife's death, but there was some indecision as to where it would be placed: the American Legion Post, City Hall, or John's sailboat.

"It appears that although the presentation was at the American Legion post, City Hall has won on that decision," said Gary.

On May 18, former BVA National President and current LA/MS Regional Group Treasurer Joe Burns presented an acrylic Braille American Flag and Plaque mounted on a finished board to the St. Bernard Parish Library in Chalmette, LA. The flag and plaque were sponsored by a grant from the noh3.inc "Red Dress Run" of New Orleans. During the past four years, the regional group has received nearly $10,000 in Grants from the New Orleans community event known as the "Red Dress Run". These grants have been designated for Braille Flags to be placed in highly visible locations in southeast Louisiana, mostly in public libraries and other locations such as the Louisiana Governor's Mansion, the New Orleans Lighthouse for the Blind, and several VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinics.

The next Red Dress Run is scheduled for August 8. The word is now out, and more LA/MS Regional Group members than ever before will be entered in the RACE with most walking about two blocks in their red dresses and then returning to Armstrong Park and wait for the real runners to finish and get in line for the free buffet with food and drinks—sodas, water, and beer—supplied by local New Orleans restaurants. Joe is hoping to get more visually impaired veterans to join him so that he can get a larger grant and place more flags! Remember Joe's motto: "Ya'll come and join us and pass a good time in 'Nawlins' (New Orleans)."

Recognizing Mental Health Awareness Month



Despite the approach of the end of the month, **BVA Happenings** has not overlooked the importance of Mental Health Awareness Month. The designation has been observed throughout May in the United States since 1949, honoring the courage of millions of Americans living with mental health conditions, celebrating the families and professionals who support them, and reducing the stigma surrounding mental health treatment.

The magnitude of what many veterans have experienced in service to the nation frequently affects aspects of our mental health. The impact is both natural and inevitable. Effects include conditions such as anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Resources produced by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are readily available online to strengthen mental health. A variety of self-help courses are also available. For veterans in crisis or their concerned loved ones, dial 988 and press 1, or text 838255 to reach the Veteran Crisis Line.

Self-Help Courses on Mental Health Topics

Accessing VA Mental Health Care

Virtual National Membership Meeting Scheduled for June 18

BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION
SERVING BLINDED VETERANS SINCE WORLD WAR II

Pursuant to a provision of the BVA Congressional Charter requiring an annual meeting of the BVA membership, the Association's National Board of Directors and National Headquarters will host a virtual National Membership Meeting on Thursday, June 18, 2026. All BVA members are invited and urged to attend. The meeting via Zoom will occur in the current time slot of the National Board of Directors Town Hall at 3:00pm Eastern Time (third Thursday) using the same Zoom link and other joining information.

Stay tuned and be on the lookout in the next few weeks for additional details in **BVA Happenings**, the **BVA Bulletin**, and standalone Constant Contact email blasts to all BVA members.

Catch Latest "Visions of BVA," Look for Compelling New Episode Beginning June 1

If you haven't already done so, check out "Seeing through Sound: Real-World Independence with Meta Ray-Ban Smart Glasses," the latest episode of **Visions of BVA** that became available on May 1. In the episode, podcast host Steve Baskis shares a real-world, experience-driven look at the Meta Ray-Ban smart glasses from the perspective of a blinded veteran.

From everyday use and entertainment to reading, communication, live translation, and object recognition, Steve describes how the glasses perform in actual situations.

During the current episode, listeners hear audio demonstrations that highlight how the glasses respond in real time. Steve also explores how the product works alongside tools and apps such as Be My Eyes, Aira, and OOrion, and where they fit into the broader ecosystem of assistive technology. The episode provides an open-minded look at both the strengths and limitations of the glasses and how they can enhance independence when used as part of a larger toolkit.

The June episode, scheduled for release at 3:00am Eastern Time on June 1, is entitled "Flying Blind: Brian O'Connell on Service, Vision Loss, Teaching, and Finding Purpose Again." In this episode, Steve speaks with Lt. Col. Brian O'Connell, USAF (Ret.), a former B-52 navigator and electronic warfare officer whose life of service continued long after his Air Force career.

Brian shares how Glaucoma gradually changed his vision and independence, how blind rehabilitation and the Blinded Veterans Association helped him reconnect with possibility, and how adaptive sports, music, mentorship, and teaching helped him rediscover purpose and confidence.

From flying in cramped B-52 cockpits to returning to the classroom as a legally blind JROTC instructor, Brian reflects on leadership, resilience, identity, adaptive sports, music, and helping students become aware and take advantage of the opportunities they never thought possible.

Visions of BVA is a deep dive into the inspiring stories of the organization and its members, accounts of resilience, and the achievements of blind and low vision veterans. Each episode features interviews, discussions on life-changing technology, and a glimpse into

the BVA community. The episodes are all available via Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube.

Ambassadog Scoop Series Courtesy of Waymo

Cal's Trails and "Tails"



I serve as a "Beacon of Light" for my veteran, Kevin (Daddy). My guiding light shines through darkness, confusion, and uncertainty to inspire his confidence and show a safe path forward. This week, I would like to share two fun examples of this.

Did you know that in 2022 Dad and I became the first human and dog to trek the entire 9/11 National Memorial Trail! Our 1,300-mile journey was not only a recreational outlet but also allowed for reflection and supported our physical and mental health.

Here's another fun "tail" for me to relate this week: I double as a lifeguard at night! That's right—you cannot keep your head underwater for long, or I will immediately take you to shore. I am a sidekick supernova amplifying teamwork, courage, and determination. Together, with my veteran, we are unstoppable.

Ways to Give

Kenneth Mitchell Joins the BVA Visionary Challenge



Memorial Day is a time to honor those who gave their lives in service. One powerful way to do that is by supporting blind and low vision veterans as they build lives of greater independence and purpose. BVA Visionaries, our community of monthly donors, help make that possible.

To deepen that impact, BVA is proud to launch the Visionary Challenge: To welcome 100 monthly givers by June 30. Every new Visionary helps expand critical support for blind and low vision veterans. Join us and make a lasting difference.

This month, we are proud to feature BVA Visionary and Director of District 3 Kenneth “Ken” Mitchell. Ken shares a simple but powerful message on the importance of monthly giving: “We the people with the most investment must be part of the solution.”

For more information on becoming a BVA Visionary, send an email to mbuonodagrossa@bva.org.

VA Insider

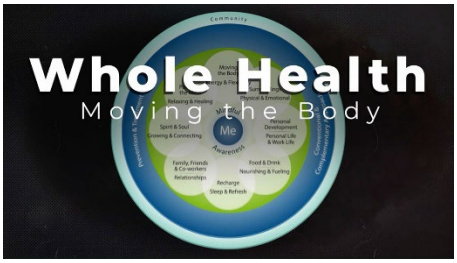
CMS Report Gives VAMCs Highest Ratings Ever

VA announced earlier this week that 78 percent of its Medical Centers (VAMCs) that recently received an Overall Hospital Quality Star Rating also earned four of five stars in the latest annual report of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The percentage is the highest since CMS first started rating VA facilities in 2023. VA accounted for nearly 15 percent of all five-star rated hospitals in the 2026 report.

The new report marks the fourth consecutive year that VA facilities have outperformed non-VA facilities and the second year in a row that no VAMC received a one-star rating. A May 18 media release offers additional details about the contents of the report.

VA Hospitals Earn Record-High Quality Ratings in 2026 CMS Report

Explore Ways to “Move the Body” Toward the Achievement of Whole Health



The Whole Health theme for May has been “Moving the Body for your Whole Health.” The focus has rested on the role moving the body plays in improving mental and physical well-being, highlighting digital resources such as videos and webpages that communicate the benefits of an active lifestyle, as well as some of the ways veterans can get started.

Moving the body carries a wealth of benefits for veterans’ Whole Health. An active lifestyle can reduce fatigue and improve sleep, decrease anxiety and depression, and promote brain health. It can also drastically decrease inflammation and the risk of developing chronic health conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.

The Whole Health Initiative suggests several ways to move the body, depending on what results veterans would like to emphasize, whether it be improving flexibility, balance, range of motion, mind-body connection, or something else. These include the following five:

- Tai chi and Qigong
- Yoga
- Aerobics
- Strength training
- Music and Movement Exercises.

Check out the available services, such as complementary and integrative health therapies, at your local VA facility.

Complementary and Integrative Health Overview

"Freedom 250" Theme Underlies Memorial Day Events at VA National Cemeteries



Memorial Day ceremonies occur this weekend at more than 130 VA National Cemeteries across the country. Most of the ceremonies are planned for Monday, Memorial Day itself. Start times vary widely.

"Memorial May" is the tagline for the series of events this year. The theme at front and center of the activities is "Freedom 250" with a focus on the known 20 Revolutionary War veterans interred in VA National Cemeteries and an additional 24 for whom there are existing "In Memory of" markers. More than 4,000 Revolutionary War veterans are buried in private cemeteries.

VA's National Cemetery Administration is once again collaborating with the Carry the Load initiative, the Travis Manion Foundation, and Victory for Veterans in making the local events possible. Refer to the May 7 VA press release (button below) and check out the appropriate links for additional details about specific locations for the events. A state-by-state list of many of the events has also been compiled by Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA).

VA, Nonprofits Team Up to Honor Veterans during "Memorial May"

VVA State-by-State Listing of Memorial Day Events

Next Week's Events

VetTech and Educational Series

Date and Time: May 27 (Wednesday), 3:00pm Eastern Time

Meeting ID: 873 9159 8202**, Passcode:** 1958

The session will explore the advancement of AI and its impact on the lives of blind and vision impaired people. Qualified panelists look forward to sharing their experiences and discussing how blind individuals are using both blindness-specific and off-the-shelf AI products in their personal and professional lives. Don't miss this engaging conversation on innovation, accessibility, and real-world application.

Book Club Interest Group

Date and Time: May 27 (Wednesday), 7:00pm Eastern Time

Meeting ID: 886 4475 0288**, Passcode:** 1945

Attendees will review **Sycamore Row**, the 2013 bestselling legal thriller novel by John Grisham and narrated by David Hartley-Margolin, assigned to the group five weeks ago to read during the last part of April and most of May. Group leader Anthony Woodson will also introduce the work for June that was selected at last month's meeting. The book is **Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent,** by Isabel Wilkerson.