BVA Happenings – December 19, 2025

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Around BVA

BVA Happenings Regrets, Upcoming Holiday Break

BVA Happenings regrets the hampered ability to publish and distribute the newsletter due to technical issues with the Association's website, **BVA.org**. Because each issue features short blurbs that link to additional content on the website blog, the newsletter is dependent on a fully functional website. Today's issue combines this week's content with much of what would have been included last week in a different format.

We apologize for the unfortunate difficulties. They have occurred at an especially inconvenient time given the upcoming holidays in which **BVA Happenings** had not planned to produce an edition on December 26 or January 2. We look forward to resuming production and distribution on Friday, January 9, 2026, with a fully functioning process.

With Holidays Upon Us, a Message of Gratitude and of BVA's Forward Momentum



Dear BVA Members:

As the Interim Executive Director, it is my sincere honor to send you and your families my warmest wishes for a truly Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year! This holiday season offers a crucial moment for reflection, and I am consistently struck by the profound resilience, strength, and courageous spirit I witness across our Blinded Veterans Association community.

Your service and your continued advocacy inspire all of us who have the privilege of supporting you. The light you carry is a beacon. As we look ahead to 2026, let the New Year be marked by unwavering hope, profound peace, and renewed energy. We pledge that BVA will continue to champion your needs, offering dedicated advocacy and peer-inspired mentorship as we strive to better the lives of all who served who now live with sight loss. We thank you for your service and look forward to standing beside you in the year ahead.

— Lea Rowe, Interim Executive Director

In 2025, Hanukkah Observed December 14-22



Image Caption: Image designed by Freepik.

A Belated Happy Hanukkah to BVA members and their families who began their celebration of the holiday this past Sunday. For those unfamiliar, Hanukkah (also spelled Chanukah) is an eight-day Jewish festival of lights that takes place during winter near the end of each calendar year.

The holiday is celebrated by lighting a menorah every night, reciting special prayers, and eating fried foods such as latkes, delicate funnel cakes, and kichels (slightly sweet cookies or crackers). The word Chanukah means “dedication” in Hebrew, and the festival commemorates the rededication of the Holy Temple more than 2,000 years ago by the Macabees.

Season’s Greetings and a Quick Look Back at BVA 78 Years Ago

BVA National Headquarters and the National Board of Directors extend best wishes for a Happy Holiday season. We are aware that many of you, as BVA members, families of veterans with sight loss, and caregivers, are cheerfully engaged in voluntarily serving both one another as well as others within your other spheres of influence. Thank you for your continuous service.

From the very beginning, BVA family seems to have been endowed with the qualities of servant leadership and with great generosity putting others above self. In December 1947, for example, BVA had only 20 months under its belt as an organization. At the time, most of the membership was still recovering from the wounds of war and adjusting to the loss of most, if not all, of their sight. They already had plenty on their collective plates to worry about.

Despite their own adversities, BVA members responded in droves to calls from the national leadership during the holiday season to donate CARE packages (Cooperative American Remittances to Europe, Inc.) to war-torn Europe. The packages consisted of food, blankets, knitting wool, household linen, etc. Some 27 major accredited American overseas relief agencies guaranteed delivery overseas. Each package cost what now would be considered a bargain at $10, but $10 in 1947 would be $166 today!

Hot December Deals Continue at BVA Online Store



The spirit of the holiday season is all about giving. Whether you choose to purchase gifts for family and friends or donate to your favorite charity, "giving feels good." So, why not do both? Shopping at the BVA Store allows you to purchase the perfect gifts for those you love while supporting BVA's mission of providing programs, services, and benefits to our blind and low vision veterans.

December deals are now available on the **BVA Store** to help you check off your holiday shopping list. The greatest gifts received are those that can also offer a return. A portion of all sales are donated back to the Blinded Veterans Association.

The BVA Store is offering a variety of new merchandise with new expedited shipping times for your purchasing pleasure. Enjoy the December deals listed below from December 1-31, 2025.

1. Purchase a new Limited Edition BVA Holiday Sweatshirt. Unique to BVA, this fun BVA-branded, Santa-themed sweatshirt is available for $25 in adult and youth sizes. Inventory is limited, so shop quickly to get yours!
2. Purchase two (2) items at full price and receive 10 percent off the total price!
3. Purchase two (2) 2026 BVA Ambassadog Calendars/Planners and receive one (1) FREE. This 8½ by 11-inch accessible, large-print, 13-month calendar features our veterans and their guide/service dogs and much more. It is the perfect stocking stuffer.

Visit the BVA Store to take advantage of hot December deals!

BVA Store

BVA Community Mourns Passing of Stalwart Leader and Friend Neil Appleby

Cornelius (Neil) J. Appleby, a devoted advocate of all veterans who tirelessly served his fellow blinded veterans, passed away at his home in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, on December 1. He was 92. Neil was BVA's 34th National President, serving from 2003-05. Prior to his tenure in that position, he served in all three of the other National Officer roles as Treasurer, Secretary, and Vice President.

Accounting also for his position as Immediate Past National President, where he continued to be an active leader, Neil served for ten years on the BVA National Board of Directors.

Notwithstanding his service to BVA at the national level, Neil was perhaps known even more for his service to the membership of BVA of Pennsylvania, the official name of his regional group. Beginning in 1982, he assumed the role of Secretary-Treasurer and relinquished it only sporadically throughout 34 years. He remained in the position until his passing. One of Neil's most significant gifts and contributions to the blinded veterans of today was his instrumental leadership in the creation of the Visual Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) program at the Lebanon VA Medical Center, a pioneering effort that grew rapidly and which now exists in several VA facilities nationwide.

Additional details about Neil Appleby, his dedicated service to his family, community, and BVA, are included in a detailed obituary and the forthcoming issue of The Bulletin.

Neil Appleby Obituary





Image Captions:

Image 1, Left: BVA National Secretary Neil Appleby, second from right, in March 2000 as he visited the office of then Senator Paul Wellstone, a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. Also pictured, left to right: Senator Wellstone, National President Robert L. Smith, 3rd, Director of District 5 George Stocking, National Vice President Joe Burns, and Executive Director Tom Miller.

Image 2, Right: Neil Appleby and daughter Mary Ann enjoy a visit with Chris Robinson of Boundless Assistive Technologies at the BVA 71st National Convention's Exhibit Hall in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on August 24, 2016.

New BVA Member, 99 Years Young, Now in Training at Gulf Coast BRC



Image Caption: Left, Tracy Ferro, with new BVA member James Rush in Gulf Coast BRC cafeteria.

National Vice President Tracy Ferro had the honor of signing up a new member recently. He located the candidate for membership at the Biloxi Campus of the Gulf Coast VA Health Care System's Blind Rehabilitation Center (BRC). The new member is a very special one in this case. James "Jim" Wirt Rush, Sr. of Pensacola, Florida, is one of America's few remaining World War II veterans.

Jim served in the U.S. Navy from 1944-46 and was later recalled for service as an Aerial Gunner in the Korean War during 1950-51. Although not service connected for his vision loss, as a veteran living with blindness he is fully authorized to receive Blind Rehabilitation Services and is now entering the path at the tender age of 99.

Jim is a member of the Greatest Generation, about a hundred of whom we most enthusiastically and reverently praise for their foresight in creating the Blinded Veterans Association and helping it through its formative years upon their return from World War II. We are honored to host, welcome, and accept Mr. Rush into our fold.

BVA National Service Officers are assisting in the filing of Jim's initial claim for benefits with VA. Stay tuned as he has offered to serve as a guest host on a Visions of BVA podcast with Steve Baskis. Jim is prepared to tell his story for the blessing and benefit of all who could benefit from his long years of experience and accumulated wisdom.

Louisiana Golf Course Unveils Braille Flag, Honors BVA Member

Celebrating inclusion and honoring a few local veterans, the Jay & Lionel Hebert Golf Course in Lafayette, Louisiana, today accepted a tactile Braille U.S. flag from BVA's Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group at a noon presentation in the course's clubhouse. The presentation was combined with a recognition ceremony from two veterans from the local community, one of which was Shawntina Gibson, Secretary of the Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group.

Shawntina, who served in the U.S. Navy in 2006 and the Army from 2009-2012, shared the stage with Lee Nunley, an Army veteran who served from 1953-58. Both Shawntina and

Nunley were formally honored for their military service and presented with a commemorative American flag by Reggie Guillory, staff member for U.S. Congressman Cleo Fields (D-LA-6).

The initiative was driven by Chris Arceneaux, Head Golf Professional and of the Jay & Lionel Hebert Golf Course, Chief Executive Officer of Generations Sports Management, and Director of the PGA HOPE Veterans Program of the City of Lafayette.

Arceneaux also donated the custom display that will heretofore house the custom display. As a symbol of inclusion, the Braille Flag is a magnificent bronze and acrylic rendering of the American Flag, complete with raised Braille dots to allow for interpretation and reverence through touch. It will be a permanent fixture at the clubhouse, supporting the facility's expanded mission to host inclusive events for the visually impaired.

"Our nation's flag has long served as a unifying symbol, but for too long, those who are blind or visually impaired could experience it only through description," said Vincent Pierre prior to the ceremony. Pierre is the Municipal and Constituent Services Advisor liaison to the Office of the Mayor of Lafayette. "The placement of this tactile flag allows all visitors to personally connect with our nation's most cherished emblem through touch and the universal language of Braille, and we are grateful to BVA for this meaningful gift that will serve our community for generations to come."

A press advisory prior to the event expressed the Jay & Lionel Hebert Golf Course's pride in "taking a tangible step toward creating a welcoming and accessible environment for all veterans and community members."

Catch the Brief "Visions of BVA" December Episode



As exclamation marks are placed at the end of 2025, BVA's podcast **Visions of BVA** shares a brief year-end message of gratitude, reflection, and purpose. Host Steve Baskis thanks listeners for their continued support throughout the year and invites the Blinded Veterans Association community to help shape the conversations ahead.

"This short public service announcement serves as both a call to action and an open invitation to share ideas, stories, and topics for the 2026 season," Steve said. "As we move into the new year, **Visions of BVA** remains committed to independence, connection, and community."

Visions of BVA is a deep dive into the inspiring stores 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**.

As Steve mentions in his call to action in the current podcast, listeners and subscribers of **Visions of BVA** are welcome and encouraged to leave their feedback and share their thoughts with him at **sbaskis@bva.org**, on any aspect of the podcast.

Sensitivity Training Compensates with Huge Dividends



Image Caption: Tracy Ferro thanks Princess Cruise Line Guest Services Representative Francesca Pilgrim for a job well done.

BVA National Vice President Tracy Ferro offers the following observations on the vital importance of sensitivity training as it relates to etiquette in serving and working with the blind and visually impaired:

As members of BVA, we all say thank you to many throughout the course of the day. It is much more heartfelt when those offers of thanks are for recognizing our vision issues and working with us in a respectful and caring manner. When BVA plans the conventions, including offsite visits to museums, shows, or other types of events, we provide sensitivity training beforehand so that we are treated with respect and dignity.

We have all also experienced what it is like to be told to “Go over there” or have suspected that we are being looked at when we hear “Come over here,” or “it’s over there,” or “sign this.” We know it’s frustrating and stressful. We really get annoyed when we are treated like that in locations that work with us all the time, like our doctors’ offices and such. We will tolerate and understand this much more in situations where people with whom we interact with do not often work with the blind and low vision.

We all also recognize how nice it is to feel the respect granted us when we interact with somebody who recognizes our visual issues and offers an arm to guide us instead of grabbing and pulling us, or automatically reads a form for us, or who offers assistance to sign, or lets us know they are there and places a plate full of food in front of us. Placing our drinks in an area that is not in the “knock it over” zone rather than complying with normal decorum is also greatly appreciated.

We all also know what it is like to receive a heartfelt thanks for a job well done, especially when you can recognize the training that took place and the desire to retain and practice

that training. While on a recent trip on Princess Cruise Lines, it was obvious that sensitivity training had taken place with those serving me, but I wasn't sure if it was specifically on the one ship, the result of a family member being blind, or perhaps future career plans. When I asked, I was surprised to learn that sensitivity training is mandatory for all crew members when they join the crew of a new ship. Not only do they receive the training, but they also use it. The dignity and respect practiced by this corporation should be something we experience all day every day in every interaction and every encounter.

It boils down to a simple premise: Many organizations and government entities mandate sensitivity training, but too often they do not follow through. When they do, please offer them a heartfelt thanks and let them know how much it means to be treated respectfully and with the dignity you deserve. Speak with them and let them know your appreciation for their willingness to implement what they've learned. Share with their leadership the impression they have made so that they can be recognized accordingly.

Too often, too many are too concerned with the bottom line and forget the people they rely on for that bottom line. Let those who serve you know your impressions, offering them their due respect and thanks. If we do this meaningfully, loyalty and respect will grow in both directions.

BVA Welcomes Mike Black to VSP



The BVA Veterans Service Program (VSP) has a new staff member in Michael T. Black, who joined Duayne Driscoll, Marlene Davis-Lilly, and Scott Quinlan earlier this Fall to offer some much-needed relief to a heavily tasked VSP crew.

Mike is a VA Benefits Consultant with 20-plus years of claims experience. He was originally hired as an accredited National Service Officer in March 2007 with AMVETS and the Vietnam Veterans of America. He worked full-time out of the St. Petersburg, Florida, VA Regional Office. During his employment he was promoted several times: to Office Manager, Regional Director, Deputy National Service Director, and National Service Director.

Michael had the Honor of testifying in Front of House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs "Reviewing VA's Implementation of the Pact Act" in May of 2023.

Michael is originally from Tarpon Springs, Florida. He joined the Army in 1981 and retired in 2001. While in the military, Michael was assigned to the following units: 1st Cavalry Division, 101st Airborne Division, 6th Light Infantry Division, and 32 ADACOM Task Force

8/43 Air Defense Artillery. He served as Multi-Channel Communications Non-Commissioned Officer in a Patriot / Hawk Missile battery in Saudi Arabia and Iraq during Operation Desert Shield and the ground invasion during Operation Desert Storm.

Michael's military awards include the Meritorious Service Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Korean Defense Service Medal, and the Southwest Asia Service Medal. During his career, he served in Alaska, South Korea, West Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

Michael received his Associates of Science degree in Business Management from St. Petersburg College. He lives in Florida with his wife Janet. He is a Life Member of AMVETS Post 67 in Clearwater, Florida.

Tennessee BVA Ambassador with Unique Harmonica Talent Offers Free Lessons

David Jones, BVA member and Ambassador from Ooltewah, Tennessee, has offered to share his passion and ability to play the harmonica with any interested BVA member. The lessons can be conducted via Facetime calls or by telephone. According to David, possessing sight is not a requirement for playing the harmonica, which consists of four basic holes that can produce eight different sounds.

David plays in memory of his father and for his brothers, the latter of whom he now shares a musical bond that he did not have when growing up. He has also instructed a great-granddaughter and played for his fellow veteran trainees at the Southeastern Blind Rehabilitation Center in Birmingham, Alabama.

A feature in last summer's **VA News** entitled "Veteran Finds Healing with a Harmonica" described David's connection with BVA and his self-taught proficiency with the harmonical that led him to participate in this past year's Creative Arts Festival. He uses music to tell his story of loss but also of connection. To inquire about possible harmonica lessons, call David at (630) 801-1921 or send him an email at davidw.jones@hotmail.com. The **VA News** feature is still accessible as well.

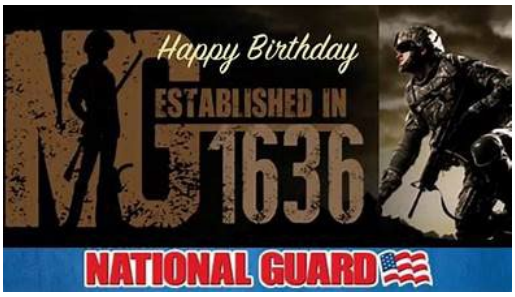
Veteran Finds Healing with a Harmonica

Remember Louis Braille's Birthday and World Braille Day in Early January



World Braille Day, January 4, has been recognized only in the last seven years (2019). The day falls on a Sunday in 2026. It emphasizes the significance of Braille as a vital communication tool for blind and partially sighted individuals, serving to raise awareness about accessibility and the rights of those with visual impairments. World Braille Day seeks to reinforce the importance of inclusivity in society. The selected day is observed out of respect for Louis Braille, born on January 4, 1809. Louis Braille invented the original Braille system in France in 1824 at age 15.

Guard Anniversary, Recent Terrorist Tragedy, Serve as Reminders of Dedication



The National Guard considered itself 389 years old last Saturday, December 13! Some would ask how such could be possible when the United States is embarking on the celebration of only its 250th birthday in 2026. That's a difference of 139 years. How could the National Guard be 139 years older than the country itself?

The detailed answer, coupled with the death of Army Specialist Sarah Beckstrom and the critical wounding of Sergeant Andrew Wolfe on a Washington, DC downtown street on November 26, remind us of the selfless devotion of the current Guard and their equivalents of the past. Both Beckstrom and Wolfe were among the youngest members of the West Virginia National Guard, on duty to patrol the Nation's Capital to minimize violent crime when they were ambushed.

The National Guard's history dates to December 13, 1636, when the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court, the colony's legislature, organized the North, South, and East regiments from the independent militia in 14 villages around Boston to better defend the colony.

The colonists had adopted the English militia system that obligated all males between the ages of 16 and 60 to possess arms and participate in the defense of the community. They drilled once a week and provided guard details each evening to sound the alarm in case of attack.

The growing threat of the Pequot Indians to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, however, required the militia to be in a high state of readiness. The organization of the three increased the efficiency and responsiveness of the militia.

Today, the descendants of these first regiments—the 181st Infantry, the 182nd Infantry, the 101st Field Artillery, and the 101st Engineer Battalion of the Massachusetts Army National Guard—share the distinction of being the U.S. military's oldest units.

Other states and Puerto Rico claim earlier militia heritages, but none of their current force structures have continuous lineage to their early units.

While it was a stroke of the pen that created the force, men bearing arms in a field in 1637 have become the enduring symbol of the Guard's birth. That representation comes from a 1984 painting, "The First Muster," which is part of the National Guard Heritage Series.

The artwork depicts men in 17th century military attire training with their muskets on the drill field in Salem, about 20 miles outside Boston, sometime the year after the order from the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court, their men holding long pikes stand in the image's background. The training assembly even attracts a curious feline.

Militia units in the region spanning Salem, Saugus, Ipswich, and Newbury formed for the first time as the East Regiment, explained in the accompanying video.

To mark the Guard's birthday each year, many state joint force headquarters and deployed units overseas hold cake-cutting ceremonies. The National Guard Association of the United States (NGUSA) and the National Guard Bureau (NGB) will host a shared reception for the Guard's birthday on December 16 on Capitol Hill. Gen. Steve Nordhaus, the NGB chief, and retired Maj. Gen. Francis M. McGinn, the NGAUS president, are scheduled to speak. Many Guard supporters in the House and Senate are expected to attend.

VIDEO: The Minuteman Minute: The First Muster – Birth of the National Guard

Wreaths Cover Cemetery Landscapes Nationwide

More than 5,600 locations nationwide participated in this year's Wreaths Across America on December 13. Thousands of Americans descended on cemeteries throughout the country to assist in the laying of holiday wreaths at the grave markers of the nation's veterans.

The year-round purpose of Wreaths of America is three-fold: First, to remember individual veterans among the millions who rest in honored glory. Second, to openly honor them by providing volunteer opportunities for those interested in leading a sponsorship group or coordinating a ceremony location. Third, to teach family, friends, co-workers, and organizations the importance of remembering and honoring those who have served in defense of the nation.

Ambassadog Scoop Series Courtesy of Waymo

Introducing December Ambassadog "G"



My name is "G" and I currently guide BVA member and Army veteran Arsenio (Dad). My dad served tours in Germany and Korea and earned the rank of Staff Sergeant. When his military career ended, he worked for 25 years as an X-ray technician. At that point, Dad's sight started to deteriorate, and he lost his central vision. In 2015, he was diagnosed with Leber Hereditary Optic Neuropathy (LHON). It was a very devastating diagnosis; however, Dad began educating himself on his condition and made it a priority to maintain his independence.

Here's where I come in. Dad and I were introduced at Southeastern Guide Dogs (now Dogs Inc). We became best friends and since that moment, I have not left his side. I am honored to serve as December's Ambassadog and will be bringing you a few "tails" throughout the month.

Ways to Give

Most Powerful Gifts Can Often Come from Surprising Places



As you plan your year-end giving, consider donating appreciated stock, giving from your IRA (if you are 70.5 or older), making a Donor-Advised Fund grant, or even contributing cryptocurrency to the Blinded Veterans Association. These noncash gifts are not only impactful but can also offer meaningful tax advantages, such as reducing your taxable income and avoiding capital gains tax.

Learn more about how to give smarter this season and support blind and low vision veterans by clicking the button below. Thank you for being a part of the BVA family.

Tax-Smart gifts - Planned Giving - Blinded Veterans Association

VA Insider

VHA Reorganization Launched

With goals of improving health care for Veterans, empowering local hospital directors, eliminating duplicative layers of bureaucracy and ensuring consistent application of VA policies across all department medical facilities, VA announced in a press advisory on December 15 its intent to reorganize the management structure of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

VA officials were scheduled to provide official congressional notification of this intent on December 16. Precise organizational and personnel changes, which will occur during the next 18-24 months, will be announced in early 2026.

Multiple independent reviews from VA's Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office and others have underscored the need for reorganizing VHA. Those reviews highlighted governance weaknesses and how the organization's management structure is rife with middle managers who have overlapping responsibilities, slowing decision making and creating unnecessary burdens to serving veterans.

VHA's reorganization will incorporate this feedback by reducing duplicative management layers and putting the right people in the right places without reducing staff.

GROVEHub Seeks to Connect Veteran and Caregiver with Researcher

VA's Growing Rural Outreach through Veteran Engagement Center (**GROVEHub**), in collaboration with the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Rural Health and VA Health Services Research, is offering veterans and their caregivers opportunities to bring their wisdom, individual knowledge, and practical experience to help improve VA health care through collaboration with VA researchers.

The relationships may include individual partnerships, regular engagement group meetings with researchers, or helping with other research activities to ensure that VA is putting veterans first.

GROVEHub's Engagement and Partnership Opportunities webpage lists projects of interest with additional information. Interested parties can reach out via email to determine if the project is a good fit for them. The page can be shared with others who may also be interested. In addition, selected videos and articles are also available to explore why this type of engagement is important in conducting research.

Process Simplified for Women Needing VA Gynecology Appointments

VA announced last week that women veterans can now schedule appointments directly with VA gynecology providers without a referral from a Primary Care Provider (PCP). The new, streamlined process took effect on December 4 and eliminates the previous requirement for a PCP referral to access VA gynecology care. Instead, enrolled women veterans can schedule an appointment directly with a VA gynecology specialist if they choose.

According to VA Secretary Doug Collins, the change will better serve the more a million women veterans who are enrolled in VA health care.

"This is what it looks like when VA is focused on putting veterans first," he said. "By relentlessly focusing on customer service and convenience, we are building a department that works better for the men and women we are charged with serving."

Upcoming Virtual Events

VetTech and Educational Series

Cancelled December 24, 2025 (Wednesday), 3:00pm (Eastern Time)

VetTech will not be held next week due to the Christmas holiday.

December 31, 2025 (Wednesday), 3:00pm (Eastern Time)

VetTech will conduct an open-ended session for interested parties wishing to interact informally on topics related to technology for the blind and low vision. A meeting reminder will be distributed the day prior (December 30).

Book Club Meeting

Cencelled December 24, 2025 (Wednesday), 7:00pm (Eastern Time)

The Book Club will not be held next week or this month at all, due to the Christmas holiday. The next session will be January 28, 2026. A meeting reminder will be distributed the day prior (January 27).