BVA Happenings – May 29, 2026

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Around BVA

At ANC, BVA HQ Honors Those Who Gave All

Photo 1 Caption: Left to right: Lea Rowe, Domonique Lawless, and Richard Lane prepare to present wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Photo 2 Caption: Accompanied by the United States Army Band, Pershing's Own, Country music artist Craig Morgan performs moving rendition of "Soldier" during Arlington National Cemetery's 158th Memorial Day Observance. Photo courtesy of the Department of Veterans Affairs.



Memorial Day 2026 brought BVA members throughout the country to a remembrance of the heroism of those who made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in defense of the nation's freedoms and way of life. Sentiments expressed in virtual meetings and in informal conversations this week revealed that many paid their respects privately, while others participated in public events in their local communities.

At Arlington National Cemetery, just seven miles from BVA National Headquarters, National Executive Director Lea Rowe, National Program Director Domonique Lawless, and National Care Review Coordinator Richard Lane represented BVA in the presentation of an organizational wreath to members of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, also known as "The Old Guard," at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier immediately following the 158th Memorial Day Observance in the adjacent Memorial Amphitheater.



The three also attended the Observance in the Cemetery's Memorial Amphitheater that featured a Special Gold Star Family Reflection by Bill and Karen Vaughn, parents of the late Navy SEAL Aaron Vaughn. The program also included remarks from Medal of Honor Recipient Specialist Five James C. McCloughan, President Donald J. Trump, Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine. Music was provided by the United States Army Band Pershing's Own and soloist Craig Morgan.

"As we observe Memorial Day each year, the weight of the day often leads to reflection on the complex relationship between duty, sacrifice, and the ongoing support owed to those who have served," Lea said. "I was deeply moved by the wreath-laying ceremony at the Cemetery, and it was a powerful honor to witness Craig Morgan's performance, which served as a poignant tribute to those we have lost and a reminder of the enduring strength of the veteran community."

Check Out U.S. Blind Tandem Cycling Connection

Photo Caption: Shawntina Gibson, pictured here with her pilot Nick Resurreccion during her recent five-day biking journey, experienced the joy of tandem biking and immediately desired more. Chuck Miller hopes to see even more BVA members on bikes to experience that same joy.



BVA member Chuck Miller, Florida Regional Group (Gainesville), is also a member of the U.S. Blind Tandem Cycling Connection. He has invited and urged blind and low vision veterans throughout the country to learn more about the organization with the goal of getting more veterans on bicycles and locating pilots for future rides that include veterans. However, a desire to duplicate Shawntina Gibson's 335-mile feat related below is not a requirement!

The mission of the U.S. Blind Tandem Cycling Connection, a nonprofit 501(c)3 corporation, is to increase the participation of individuals who are visually impaired or blind in the exhilarating sport of tandem cycling, which brings a feeling of freedom and sensation of speed. It connects blind and visually impaired cyclists with sighted cyclists; educates people about tandem cycling; disseminates information about cycling clubs, events and opportunities; and addresses the needs of the blind tandem cycling community.

The organization also seeks additional sighted cyclists to experience the satisfaction of captaining tandems and sharing rides. Their vision is that every school for the blind and every major city will support a blind tandem cycling club, and that visually impaired people will cycle regularly, meet new people, join training rides, and compete in events.

The U.S. Blind Tandem Cycling Connection claims that the database of captains and stokers (rear riders, in this case the person with sight loss) is increasing, as is that of potential riders. For more information, or to get in on the biking action in the future, visit the

Connection's website or send an email to info@bva.org. BVA National Headquarters will facilitate communication with Chuck.

An Unforgettable Ride down the GAP Trail

BVA Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group President Shawntina Gibson recently completed what the average person may consider an improbable journey. The tandem bike expedition had been on her "To Do" list for more than two years. The May 8 issue of *BVA Happenings* summarized the undertaking and subsequent accomplishment, promising details to come directly from Shawntina herself later. The details in her own words arrived this week:



Have you ever envisioned the Yellow Mountains? Come with me as I embark on my 335-mile journey along the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) Trail April 30-May 4.

About two years ago, I decided I wanted to ride my bike along this incredible trail that would begin in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and ultimately land me in the Georgetown neighborhood of the Nation's Capital. At first, it started as a simple idea between a close friend and me. We planned to backpack the journey together. But over time, it quickly grew into something much bigger. More people in my life wanted to volunteer and become part of the experience, and that's when this journey truly became a team effort.

I then invited another close friend of mine, Joey Martinez, who is visually impaired, to join me in this adventure, and he said, "Yes—absolutely." From there, the process of building our team began.

Since I already owned a tandem bike, I needed to find not only a captain for myself, but also another captain and tandem bike for Joey. At first, this seemed easily accomplished. However, after nearly a year of planning, one of the captains could no longer participate, forcing us to postpone the trip while we searched for a replacement. After a series of interviews, a new captain finally joined the team, and we were back on schedule to accomplish this goal in 2025.



Then, just two days before our launch in Pittsburgh, severe rainstorms caused fallen rocks and major damage along the trail, leaving large portions blocked off. Once again, we had to cancel.

With our schedules quickly filling up, 2026 became the new goal, and we decided to ride during the first week of May. But two weeks before departure, Joey's captain was involved in an accident and could no longer ride. Once again, we found ourselves scrambling at the last minute. Thankfully, we were able to find another captain who wanted to be part of our five-person team.

Finally, everything was coming together. Flights were booked, bike rentals secured, groceries and snacks purchased, trailers picked up, and "Mama Cel" was driving in from Colorado. Aubrey was still hard at work handling menus, logistics, route planning, campsites, and shuttle coordination from point A to point B. This was just a small glimpse into the behind-the-scenes work it took to bring this team together.

Meanwhile, my tandem bike had been shipped to my pilot Nick's house. Ironically, the bike arrived in pieces, so Nick had to rebuild it himself with help from a local bike shop. But at last, everyone was ready to ride.

This became a five-day journey, and every single day brought new challenges completely different from the one before. One thing about riding a bike is that you always look forward, never backward. So, whatever challenges Nick and I faced along the trail, we tackled them with smiles, laughter, critical thinking, and physical strength.

The first half of the trail, especially Day 2, was the most challenging. We rode 50 miles of slow, steep uphill climbing to reach the Continental Divide. Once we reached the top, we were rewarded with 23 miles of downhill riding at nearly 25 miles per hour into the C&O Canal Trail, officially completing the GAP portion of the ride. Altogether, it was a 73-mile day.

Pulling into camp and hearing the other members of our team cheering on Nick and me was more beautiful than words can describe. Their support was deeply felt and appreciated.

Day 3 brought another 72-mile ride, along with one of the most difficult obstacles of the trip—a narrow tunnel that was completely dark, filled with potholes, and barely wide

enough to walk through. We had to get off the tandem bike and carefully walk it through the tunnel. I'd estimate it was nearly half a mile long, and it took us about 20 minutes to safely make it through. Nick not only had to guide the bike but also guide me safely through the darkness. Since he wasn't experienced in guiding visually impaired riders, this short leg of the trip challenged him as well. But together, we kept smiling, stayed positive, and refused to let the delay hold us back. Thankfully, there was also an ice cream stop about 15 miles before camp, and we took the time to enjoy that beautiful moment together.



Day 4 wasn't too bad, only about 65 miles. What kept everyone motivated was knowing we would be staying in an Airbnb that night instead of camping. The thought of hot showers and a great meal waiting for us gave everyone the needed extra push to keep going.

The biggest challenge that day was a detour requiring us to carry the tandem bike up two flights of stairs. Unquestionably, Nick earned his strength badge carrying that bike upstairs while I carefully guided myself using the railing.

Then came the final day, the most exciting day of all. The adrenaline was still running through me, and despite how exhausted my body felt, I couldn't believe I was still pushing forward. The entire five-day ride had been absolutely beautiful, and the scenery along the trail was breathtaking—another factor in keeping me going.



What motivates me most is knowing we are doing something meaningful for others. Having Joey trust me to guide him as my very first veteran was truly an honor. His trust in my biking skills and leadership meant everything to me.

This will become an annual bike ride, and I don't know who my next veteran will be. What I do know is that I will give my all every single time so that they, too, can heal physically, mentally, and spiritually while accomplishing goals they may once have believed were impossible.

This ride is for all those who wanted to—but couldn't.

We love and support every one of our veterans, no matter what physical or mental challenges they may face. We climb together. We ride together. We support one another.

This time that support was for me through 335 miles of awesomeness.

Photo 1 Caption: Through sun and rain, cold and heat, light and darkness, Shawntina and Nick persevered for the better part of five days in safely pursuing their destination.

Photo 2 Caption: Shawntina and Pilot Nick Resurreccion on Day 2 near Mile Marker 60 approaching the town of Confluence, Pennsylvania, on the GAP Trail.

Photo 3 Caption: With the trip nearly complete, 14 miles remaining to be exact, Shawntina and her crew enjoyed scenic Great Falls Park bordering Maryland and Virginia. Left to right, Joey Martinez, Shawntina, and Bike Pilot (for Joey) Tim Quigg. Visible behind the group is the Potomac River.

Photo 4 Caption: Only moments after reaching Mile Marker 0 (Zero), Shawntina basks in both the afternoon DC sunshine and the joy of completing her challenging five-day biking journey.

U.S. Blind Tandem Cycling Connection

Legislative Update: Critical Bills Affecting Veterans Pass House



On May 21, the U.S. House of Representatives passed two major pieces of legislation that directly impact the veteran community: **H.R. 6047** and **H.R. 1041**. For BVA members, these bills address critical issues regarding financial security, caregiving support, and the protection of constitutional rights. Read more for an educational breakdown of what these bills accomplish and what they mean for blinded veterans, their families, and their survivors.

1. H.R. 6047: Sharri Briley and Eric Edmundson Veterans Benefits Expansion Act

This legislation focuses on increasing financial support for catastrophically disabled veterans and the surviving families of those who have passed away due to service-connected conditions. Because severe vision loss often requires comprehensive daily care and significantly alters a household's financial dynamic, this bill introduces several vital updates.

Key Provisions and Impact on Blinded Veterans:

- **Increase in Special Monthly Compensation (SMC):** The bill significantly boosts the monthly benefit rate for the most severely disabled veterans—specifically targeting SMC levels **R1, R2, and T**. For veterans who suffer from complete blindness coupled with other service-connected injuries (such as bilateral limb loss or traumatic brain injuries), this translates to an additional **$10,000 annually**. This critical funding helps cover the rising costs of specialized, round-the-clock, in-home medical care and daily living assistance.
- **Boost to Survivor Benefits (DIC):** Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) is the tax-free, monthly benefit paid to eligible survivors of veterans whose deaths resulted from a service-related injury or illness. When a heavily compensated veteran passes away, their family often faces a steep financial cliff. H.R. 6047 mandates a **1.5 percent rate increase** over the next two years on top of annual regular inflation adjustments. This marks the first major structural adjustment to DIC in decades, providing additional security to over 500,000 surviving spouses and dependents nationwide.
- **Expanded VA Home Loan Eligibility:** The bill reduces the active-duty service requirement for National Guard and Reserve members to qualify for a VA Home Loan from 90 days down to **14 days**, expanding homeownership opportunities to thousands of younger or part-time service members.

2. H.R. 1041: Veterans 2nd Amendment Protection Act

This bill addresses a long-standing administrative issue within the VA regarding the assignment of a financial fiduciary and how it intersects with a veteran's constitutional right to bear arms.

Key Provisions and Impact on Blinded Veterans:

- **Ending Automatic Reporting:** Under policy originating in the 1990s, if a veteran required the assistance of a fiduciary to manage their VA benefits or financial books due to a disability (such as advanced age, cognitive injury, or severe physical and visual limitations), the VA was required to automatically transmit that veteran's personal information to the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). This effectively stripped them of their Second Amendment rights.
- **Restoring Due Process:** H.R. 1041 permanently prohibits the VA from automatically reporting a beneficiary to the NICS database solely because they utilize a financial fiduciary. For a veteran to be flagged, a judge, magistrate, or judicial authority must first rule that the veteran poses an explicit danger to themselves or their community.

- **Retroactive Removal:** The bill also mandates that the VA notify the Attorney General to remove veterans from the NICS list who were previously added strictly because of a financial fiduciary assignment, provided there was no judicial finding of dangerousness.

Why this matters for BVA members: Blindness or severe visual impairment can make navigating complex modern financial systems, writing checks, or balancing accounts highly challenging. Many blinded veterans choose to utilize a fiduciary simply for logistical convenience and administrative support. Asking for assistance with bookkeeping is not a reflection of a veteran's safety or mental stability. H.R. 1041 removes a major barrier to care, ensuring that veterans no longer have to choose between accepting financial management help from the VA and retaining their constitutional rights.

Current Legislative Status

Both bills passed the House on May 21, 2026, with strong backing from major Veteran Service Organizations. To become law, both H.R. 6047 and H.R. 1041 must next be introduced, debated, and passed by the U.S. Senate before being sent to the President's desk for a final signature. BVA will continue to monitor these bills as they move through the legislative process.

Blue Star Mothers of Virginia Offer Generous Gift to BVA

Photo Caption: Left to right, BVA's Domonique Lawless and Michaun Harrison flanked by Blue Star Mothers Mary Kulesa and Teresa Sumners.



On May 19, Domonique Lawless and Michaun Harrison met with Mary Kulesa and Teresa Sumners of the Fredericksburg (Virginia) Chapter of Blue Star Mothers. During the meeting, organization representatives discussed their missions and shared information about programs that support blind and low vision veterans.

Blue Star Mothers is a national, nonpartisan organization made up of mothers, grandmothers, foster mothers, and female legal guardians who have children serving in the military, guard, or reserves, or are veterans. At the conclusion of the meeting, BVA received a donation from Blue Star Mothers (see accompanying photo). BVA is grateful for this

generous support and looks forward to future opportunities to collaborate with Blue Star Mothers.

Keeping It Alive: The Spirit of Global Accessibility Awareness Day



The 15th Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD) on May 21 has come and gone for another year, but accessibility advocates emphasize that it should not end there. Observed annually on the third Thursday of May, GAAD serves as a reminder of the importance of creating inclusive experiences for all to enjoy since more than one billion people worldwide live with a disability that can be an obstacle to accessibility.

Global Accessibility Awareness Day was launched in 2012 by Joe Devon and Jennison Asuncion to encourage more people to talk, think, and learn about digital access and inclusion. The original purpose of GAAD was to get everyone talking, thinking, and learning about digital access for people with different disabilities. The purpose lives on and will continue to gain momentum.

Dennis Deacon is a Strategic digital accessibility leader with more than a decade of experience in accessibility leadership, having guided Fortune 500 companies and global enterprises through accessibility audits, remediation strategies, and inclusive design transformations. Read what he believes about making GAAD a year-round observance.

Beyond Awareness: Keeping Accessibility Momentum Alive After GAAD

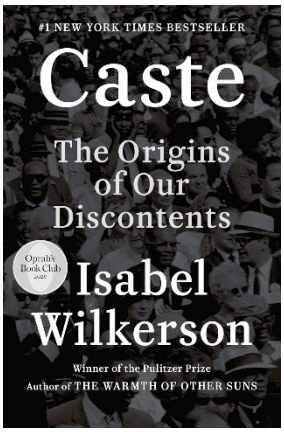
Virtual National Membership Meeting Scheduled for June 18

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.

Book Club Announces June Selection



The BVA Book Club Interest Group has selected the **New York Times** #1 bestseller for 2020, entitled **Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents**, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author and American Journalist Isabel Wilkerson and narrated by Robin Miles. The group will read the audiobook during the next four weeks until the next Zoom group meeting on June 24.

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents can be accessed by blind and low vision veterans who are registered for the services of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, Library of Congress. The Talking Books Braille and Audio Download (BARD) Identifier is DB 100088. Average reading time is 14 hours and 29 minutes.

Caste: The Origins of our Discontents describes racism in the United States as an aspect of a caste system—a society-wide system of social stratification characterized by notions such as hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, and purity. Wilkerson does so by comparing aspects of the experience of American people of color to the caste systems of India and Nazi Germany, and she explores the impact of caste on societies shaped by them and their people.

BVA Sergeant-At-Arms Talks "Reconnecting with Possibility" in Newly Produced Podcast

BVA
VISIONS
OF BVA

"Flying Blind: Brian O'Connell on Service, Vision Loss, Teaching, and Finding Purpose Again" is the subject of a compelling June episode of **Visions of BVA**, scheduled for release this coming Monday, June 1, at 3:00am Eastern Time.

In the new episode, Steve sits with Lieutenant Colonel Brian O'Connell, USAF (Ret.), a former B-52 navigator and electronic warfare officer whose life of service has continued long after his Air Force career, including his current run as the BVA National Sergeant-At-Arms and master trumpeter at recent National Conventions.

Brian shares how Glaucoma gradually changed his vision and independence, how VA blind rehabilitation programs and services, coupled with 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 Junior ROTC instructor, Brian reflects on the principles of leadership, resilience, and identity while at the same time attaining fulfillment through music, adaptive sports, and helping his students learn about and take advantage of opportunities they previously believed to be beyond their reach.

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

Calvin aka "Cal" Tosses the Harness



Woof! Thanks for letting me spend the month of May sharing my best tips, wag-worthy "tails," and a few of my own paw-some adventures. It's been one busy, exciting month for me and my veteran, Kevin—and let me tell you, my tail has barely stopped wagging!

Now, BVA may not be the folks who train or place guide dogs, but they sure know how to roll out the red carpet for dogs like me once we're teamed up with our veterans. From legislative advocacy and awareness materials to trading cards and fun features like the Ambassadog Scoop Series, they make sure that every hardworking guide dog gets a chance to shine. And, as the saying goes for us in the dog world, every dog deserves their day!

Now it's time for me to pass the harness over to June's Ambassadog, who is Othello. This top dog proudly guides BVA Member Calvin down in Tennessee. And, here's a funny little sniff of confusion: Othello's human and I myself have the very same name! Be sure to tune in next week to meet this tail-thumping new team.

VA Insider

New Mental Health Therapy Trial Announced

VA announced earlier this week a new clinical trial involving veterans that will analyze the safety and efficacy of drug-assisted therapy known as MDMA, short for methylenedioxymethamphetamine. The medication was developed for the treatment of severe mental health disorders, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and alcoholism.

The new VA testing comes after President Trump's recent Presidential Executive Order entitled "Accelerating Medical Treatments for Serious Mental Illness," which encourages increased clinical trial participation and more innovative research models and drug approvals for psychedelic drugs.

A May 26 press release provides additional details.

VA Launches MDMA-Assisted Mental Health Therapy

Secretary Collins Says EHR Upgrades Now Successful but Must Go Faster

Unlike past crises with the Electronic Health Record (EHR), the only problem now with the current rollout is that the process cannot go fast enough, Secretary Doug Collins told two Congressional panels last week.

Appearing at VA's budget hearings with the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs on May 20 and before a House Appropriations Subcommittee on May 21, Secretary Collins said that the formerly assailed EHR system upgrades are now "actually working" to the extent that people are clamoring for them.

"My biggest problem right now is that I have executive directors calling me up and saying, 'can we move up on the list?'" he told the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies. "This is key for them, not only to do their work internally, but also their community care aspects and talking to other VA hospitals."

Secretary Collins and VA are seeking an astounding $4.2 billion to modernize the EHR, an $840 million or nearly 25 percent increase from last year's level of 3.4 billion. VA Chief Financial Officer Richard Topping told the Senate Committee that each site costs approximately $65 million to update, not including the cost of the program.

Source: Fedscoop.com

Next Week's Events

VetTech and Educational Series

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

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

From BVA National Program Director Domonique Lawless: Don't miss VetTechs's exciting June VetTech and Education webinar series focused on VoiceOver. Beginning with next week's session, VetTech will launch a month of learning, with a focus on essential navigation gestures, strategies for training the human brain to process what VoiceOver is saying, and the key differences between Siri, VoiceOver, and Voice Control. Whether you are brand new to the iPhone or a seasoned user looking to sharpen your skills, these engaging sessions will offer practical tips and something valuable for everyone.