

# VA'S Lack of Service, Discrimination and Ambivalence to Native Americans in Montana and South Dakota

Back in October we went to two locations to provide Veterans Service Officer work to Veterans in the Cheyenne River Lakota and Fort Belknap Nations.

This service was prompted and a commitment was given by the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition after a request from Post Commander of Montana 01, Kim King and after meeting with many members of the Color Guard of the Lakota Akicita in Denver, Colorado in March.

We started off at Cheyenne River in South Dakota which is located at Eagle Butte, SD and were received with some disbelief as we actually turned up as we committed and stated we would. It soon became apparent to the VSOs we brought with us that these Native American Veterans were NOT being serviced effectively or fairly.

We set about filling in claims and Veterans came from far and wide to spend time with the VSOs and to provide stories and paperwork in support of their claims and their past denials. It was an eye opening experience for these VSOs and within a few hours they were aghast at the shameful treatment these Veterans had received. Little did they know more horrific stories were to come when we traveled to Montana.

I called and spoke with John Schneider, Secretary Principi's Liaison for the region based out of Des Moines, Iowa. I informed him that we were in his territory and told him what we were doing.

We informed him that there was NO trust at all with any Veteran of the adjudication process from the VA. He told me to send him a copy of the claims we would file and he would keep an eye on

their progress. We did just that.

I called and spoke with Bill Bishop, Secretary Principi's Liaison for the North West Region and again informed him that we were going to travel into his territory and told him what we were going to do. Again I informed him that there was no trust at all with any Veteran with the adjudication process from the VA.

I spoke with the Director of the VAMC in Fort Harrison, MT and when asked by me about the lack of service and discrimination he stated quite clearly that there were NO problems on any of the Montana Native American Reservations and that the Montana minority affairs person, Buck Richardson handled everything.

I met with Koryn Arnold at the VAMC in Fort Harrison and discussed with her that the claims would be coming through and that we needed them to be kept under focus.

I met with the head of psychiatry Dr. Lanes in Fort Harrison regarding Kim King's connection and treatment and in hindsight I should have requested more time and discussed much more. Dr Lanes seemed very helpful and had Veterans as his focus. I will be sure to rectify this situation during my visit in December.

We will see what their attitude is! I can only wonder what their reaction will be, one of ambivalence and unaccountability or one of let's get this right and put the Veterans FIRST as it should be.

It is quite comical that Kim King was treated as a pest prior to our first visit and then after we completed the VSO work on our second visit at Fort Belknap and we visited Fort Harrison, Buck

Richardson chased him down to offer him a position as a Tribal Veterans Representative. What a change in attitude! He also has offered Mel Doney, The Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition Post Montana 01 Secretary a similar position - strange how this has all happened after our visits.

If nothing else, apart from all the claims we have filed on behalf of Veterans, we have the VA in Montana shook up and one has to ask if they are in a panic, why are they and what have they got to cover their backsides for?

We will follow these claims to ensure a fair and impartial adjudication is given.

In October I had the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition National Executive Director, Nancy Verespy call Secretary Principi's Office to request a meeting with him to discuss this pathetic situation in South Dakota and Montana at the hands of the VA. Finally on the 24th of November SECRETARY PRINCIPI DECLINED any such meeting and one can only assume from this that he is not concerned with this shameful treatment of VETERANS.

The Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition is here with VETERANS first as Our Vision and Mission state and many in South Dakota and Montana have stated we are what the region needs to shake up a system that is not working for Native American Veterans.

REMEMBER VETERANS!

Remember in the last Veteran Leader story "Westward HO" when we traveled to Fort Belknap and were involved in a Buffalo

Feast and Charter presentation, several of the VA staff accepted our invitation to attend, however the Director sent Buck Richardson only to check out who these people were and what were they about. They surely know now who we are and that we are here for VETERANS.

We are setting up United Veterans Beacon Houses in Montana after being requested to do so by Neelima Pradham and Bonnie Parrett of the Fort Harrison VA. As they stated there is a great

need for such programs and we will live up to OUR commitments.

During November we had the opportunity to meet up with Wilbert and Barbara Forbes DAV Maryland and we had brunch with them at the Bolling Air Force Base. It was a great time and very informative. While exiting the mess I came across the following quote we all need to live by:

"Whatever happens to me, it is going to be the result of action not inaction and drifting ..."

Col. Raynal C. Bolling 1877-1918

Let us all work together for the betterment and improved quality of life of ALL VETERANS.

The next story will be about further outreach the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition are providing. See You Then!

Peter Forbes,  
National Commander, VVnW, Inc,  
& The Veterans Coalition

## Get involved with a passion

### *Toll Free Numbers For Contacting the VA*

VA Benefits: 1-800-827-1000

- Education • Home Loan • Disability • Medical Care
- Burial • Life Insurance • Sexual Trauma

Life Insurance: 1-800-669-8477

Education (GI Bill): 1-800-442-4551

Health Care Benefits: 1-877-222-8387

Income Verification and Means Testing: 1-800-929-8387

Mammography Helpline: 1-888-492-7844

Gulf War/Agent Orange Helpline: 1-800-749-8387

Status of Headstones and Markers: 1-800-697-6947

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD): 1-800-829-4833

For health care services, contact your nearest VA Medical Facility

## *Report From Robert "Kim" King National Native American Veterans Coordinator*

This was my first trip as the official National Native American Veterans Coordinator for the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition. We traveled to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in Eagle Butte, South Dakota. We spent one week doing claims for the veterans there. We saw 100 people and turned in approximately 80 claims. While there we spoke with the Tribal Chairman on the homeless veteran challenge. We also presented a Global War on Terrorism coin to the family of Sheldon Hawk Eagle, a veteran of the 101st Airborne and tribal member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. He was killed in a Blackhawk crash. The aircraft was shot down in Iraq.

We also participated in a Walk with a Tribal Member who was returning to Iraq. The walk was ten blocks to a service tree called the Tree of Life. Each member of the tribe who is sent to war ties a yellow ribbon on the tree and when they return from war they have another walk and their personally retrieve their ribbon from the tree as a symbol of their return. After each of these events they have a feed and a ceremony for the veteran. The tree of life came about when the war started and the people of the tribe were putting out yellow ribbons. They got together and decided to have this tree in the center of the town in Eagle Butte where they would put yellow ribbons on this tree. The story of the tree is interesting - the tree was cut down, a whole dug and the tree was placed in the center of the town. There are no roots but yet the tree continues to grow and flourish and each person who leaves and then returns has a special ceremony there.

The people we filed claims for on the reservation were very surprised that we would come and do this type of service for them and

a lot of them were cautious. Even when we showed up, even after all of the plans, phone calls and letters back and forth, they still didn't believe we were there when we pulled in in the van with the trailer. Other organizations in the state have not gone out of their way to help these people in this manner.

We were given star quilts from the tribe as a special thank you for our services. There are probably no two star quilts that are identical, either in design or color or in the quilting stitch pattern. The ones made for the military people returning from duty or for those who have done something special for veterans may have eagle feathers on them. A traditional story of the "Give Away" beginning is of the man whose son was gravely ill. The man prayed to the Creator for his son's return to health, promising the Creator that he would show great gratitude if his son were spared. Upon his son's recovery, the man gave away horses, harnesses, farm implements, buggies, tipis and wall tents. People came from miles around to receive these gifts and the man killed several cattle to feed them. Today's Native Americans carry on the tradition of the "Give Away" inspired by the Sioux tradition. The Lakota families are encouraged to remember and honor the elderly, the widows, the orphans and the stranger. We were very honored by these gifts.

After this we left the Cheyenne River Nation at Eagle Butte and we were invited to stop in on our way to attend the Black Hills POW\*WOW. We escorted the outgoing princess of the Cheyenne River Tribe in a giveaway ceremony which is a great honor. We did this with the Lakota Akicita. We also participated in the grand entry at the Black Hills POW\*WOP. We escorted in the new princess along with Senator



Tom Daschle's family members. Jeremiah Simpson carried the VVnW flag and Peter Forbes and I escorted the honored guests while carrying M16 rifles. The Lakota Akicita are members of the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition.

After the grand entry we proceeded on our trip on to Spearfish, South Dakota where we arrived after midnight. (This is really some vacation - at least a lot of people think that it is they should give it a try). The next day we proceeded on to the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana.

We talked with four Vietnam veterans when we arrived in the area. We could not find any other veterans because the Tribal elections were going on. There were different activities going on with all of the campaigns.

We went to the Big Horn Battlefield where we talked with some young people and found another veteran and asked him to join the VVnW & The Veterans Coalition. After another long day we stayed in Hardin, Montana. Because of the elections there was no facility for us to set up to help veterans file claims so we did what we could by word of mouth and then moved on to Billings, Montana.

We had van trouble so by the time we left there at 11 a.m. we had a call from one of our members in New York that there was a veteran in Lewistown, Montana that needed our services. So we plotted out on the map that we would travel to Lewistown and as we were looking through some of our notes we found that there was an elder lady of the Lakota tribe, a U.S. army nurse who had also served during World War II. She was injured in a truck accident where she was run over and was disabled. She needed our help. We detoured forty miles out of our way to get to Lewistown. We went to Lewistown, took care of the veteran and we also found other Vietnam veterans that we assisted. One of those vets followed the van to the restaurant where we stopped for something to eat and we assisted him there.

We talked to the county sheriff who was also a Vietnam vet. He took us to the lady's house. She lives alone in a handicapped accessible home, is in a wheelchair, 87 years old, and is getting only a 20% disability from the VA. Her son would check on her once a week. She was very satisfied with what she was getting from the VA and didn't realize that because of her injuries she was eligible for more services and possibly a higher percentage rate for compensation. We helped her and hopefully she will get an increase before it is too late.

From there we continued on to Fort Belknap, Montana. We arrived there late in the afternoon and we decided that Peter and the guys would go to Chinook to get their room this is probably the closest hotel but it is 50 miles away from the reservation. The next day we started on filing claims for four days. We saw a 100 plus veterans and of those 100 plus people we got 65 70 claims that were submitted.

We left Fort Belknap on Saturday morning. Peter had made contact with a veteran who was having problems because of mistakes made by the VA when he

was in the hospital. On the way we stopped in Havre, Montana and Jeremiah did a claim for this guy. He couldn't believe that we would go out of our way to help him but then he doesn't know Peter Forbes.

We then went on to Great Falls, Montana where we arrived late in the day. The next morning about the 17th of October Peter took Jeremiah to the airport at 4 a.m. for his trip back to New York.

After that we continued on to Helena, Montana where we arrived at 4 p.m. some vacation! We went to the VA Regional Office in Helena, Montana to talk to Bonnie Parrett. She is the homeless veteran coordinator and we talked to her about the possibility of starting a UVBH in Helena and Harlem and she was very supportive of it and told us it was long overdue and would she would be fully supportive of it. Talked with Koryn Arnold and told her about the claims that would be coming her way from veterans in Montana and South Dakota and she agreed to take personal care of the claims that were submitted so that they would be adjudicated correctly and without discrimination.

After we got done with these meetings, I went over to talk with Dr. Lanes the head of psychiatry in Helena and he after consultation he changed my medication and it seems to be helping me a lot. The fog is lifted and I continue on the medication that is really something for high blood pressure (see more information in the newsletter). We then talked about veterans on Native American reservations in Montana and the lack of services provided by the VA. He seemed to want to help.

After that meeting we left on the long trip to go to Huntington, West Virginia to work on the United Veterans Beacon House there for one week. After working on the house in Huntington, we returned to National Headquarters in Pittston, Pennsylvania. Tired just doesn't describe how we all felt

when we got to Pittston but it was a good tired, a tired that made your soul feel good.

After getting some laundry done I then traveled on to the VA Hospital in New York state to work with the VVnW VSO office to work with Mike Ackerfeld and Jeremiah Simpson where I would work on veterans claims and obtain on-the-job training. I spent two weeks with these people and learned a lot.

Also while I was in New York, I visited the Shinnecock Nation on Long Island and did some outreach for the VVnW and Veterans Coalition and also spent a weekend there as the guest of a Vietnam veteran and his family. I met Susan Soto there. She is a veteran and handles some of the veteran's affairs on the Nation. She is the one who set me up to meet the veteran and his family that I stayed with. He ran Johnnies Smoke Shop and I was their guest. They have connections to the Pawnee Tribe. I participated in a traditional healing sweat to pray for all of the veterans and all of the people that are affected by PTSD. I met Bobby Onco, a LRP, Army Ranger and all of that other good stuff and by his being on the cover of a newspaper during Wounded Knee occupation in 1973 by the American Indian movement he was cut off from the VA compensation that he had been receiving. I will explore this further.

After this I left New York on November 10th and went via Amtrak to Washington, D.C. for the Veterans Day Activities. We worked at an information stand for the VVnW & The Veterans Coalition and attended the ceremonies at the Wall.

On November 12th, along with other members of the VVnW & The Veterans Coalition, we visited Bethesda Naval Hospital to see the Marines that were hospitalized there from Iraq. It was a very emotional event as we talked to the wounded Marines.

We gave them a thank you hat and a card thanking them for the sacrifices for our country. I also gave them a special blessing with a special eagle feather that I carry with me while I travel. This eagle feather has been on Memorial relay runs honoring veterans. At one time in 1996 it was on a Memorial run from the Canyon Creek Battlefield to the Custer Battlefield approximately 100 miles. This eagle feather was on a ride that started in Montana to support the victims of 9-11 Montana rides for America. This eagle feather spent three days tied to the horse that I was riding while participating in this ride. It has also been in Baghdad from November 2003 thru April 2004 by my nephew Specialist Mike King who was wounded in action in February, 2004. This eagle feather is a special tool for me to use.

We went back to Huntington, West Virginia to work on the UVBH for one more week. This is my second week working on a UVBH I didn't have any skills at anything when I first got to the house and I finally found out that I made a pretty good pack mule. I could carry two five gallons of paint from the first to the third floor carry sheetrock and all of the other materials that it takes when you are rebuilding a house from the ground floor to the third floor. It was a learning experience for me to be working with people who really care for veterans. I worked with a carpenter who was a homeless veteran. I learned a lot from him, tore a bathroom completely out, installed pipes, helped to lay a tile floor, rolled that floor, painted and on and on to a finished project that will look a hundred percent better when it gets done. Now I know from working with other veterans the dedication that they have to put these things together. We are working for homeless veterans but it also rewarding that our time is donated time and we are volunteers. We are fed, we slept and showered in the UVBH and all we got were meals. All our

services would be worth \$20-\$50 per hour. I would like anybody else, some of the other people who hold high offices in other posts and people in other organizations, I would like to have them come for a week and work with us to see what we are really doing. It gives you a really good feeling to put out your sweat and manual labor into a project for the positive. Any one of us is just two paychecks from being homeless - anyone in America is not too far from being homeless.

We left Huntington exhausted but feeling that we accomplished a great deal. We went back to Washington, D.C. to drop off Loy Smith from Louisiana. We had quite a mixture of people working on the project.

We then went on to Norfolk, Virginia where we presented a charter to Post VA-05 in Norfolk. Lawrence Collins is the commander there and has been working hard to get the post to this point. We were also looking for support and a building so that we can get another UVBH going down there because there is a large homeless veteran population and there is a great need for a UVBH there. We could help a lot of homeless veterans there. We could help a lot of veterans to get back on their feet, get their claims filed and eventually get back to their families.

After the charter presentation we went back to Pittston, Pennsylvania, the International Headquarters of the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition where I spent a few days working in the National Office. The experience of working in the National Office found me doing many different things answering the phone, following up on claims we filed in Montana and South Dakota, stringing the Christmas lights on the building, loading the trailer, making dream catchers and on and on.

I celebrated Thanksgiving with Peter Forbes and Nancy Verespy and their family and

friends. I did a blessing before the dinner. A friend was in attendance and she has cancer. She has been desperately waiting for her white cell count to go up so when we passed around my eagle feather she asked that her counts would go so that her treatments could proceed. She didn't say anything about what she prayed for. The next day she called and told us that when she went back to the hospital her counts were good and her treatments could proceed. She credited her prayer with the eagle feather. I was very thankful that I could spend my time with my friends at Thanksgiving.

On Sunday we left for Montana on our way to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe to present the post charter for SD-01. While there we were checking out buildings and things for a UVBH, and a wet shelter for veterans on the street because of alcohol or drugs or just nowhere to go. We were also looking at the possibility of getting a women's UVBH on the reservation. While there Peter and I participated in a ceremonial sweat lodge to pray for VVnW, for the new posts, for the post members and also for the members of the VVnW & The Veterans Coalition National and all its membership. We prayed for unity and strength for the VVnW & The Veterans Coalition. We prayed for people that are trying to destroy the VVnW & the Veterans Coalition.

While we were in there praying one of my prayers was that I don't have the strength to hate people, I don't have the strength to have any enemies, but I do pray for people like that. I pray for people who hold a lot of hate. I pray for people that have enemies. I pray for people who think they are my enemies. The reason I pray this way is so that I can be strong and they can be strong with the hope that one day they will take all of their negative energy and put it into something positive. I pray that one day they will eventually come back and put all of their negativity and hate to some positive so that the

VVnW will grow stronger. I pray that they would be a force in the future for all of our veterans all over the world all the new veterans that are being made every day in Iraq. Every day people are wounded, every day we get new veterans.

My travels started on the 29th of September, 2004 and I have been with the National Commander and other people since that time and on a daily basis and on my travels through many states for many miles but all of these travels 90% of the veterans that we run into in other states veterans didn't know that VVnW & The Veterans Coalition existed and because of the trailer and all of the advertisements we have on our vehicles there are a lot of people who now know we exist. The program of putting the orange bags together is a real help. We make people know of the Military Support Packages for the troops.

I would like to thank Peter Forbes, the National Commander of the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition for encouraging me to start a post in 2002. It took a long time to get it going and we got our charger in 2004. I was asked by the National Commander and other people in the VVnW & Coalition what can the organization do for the Native American? How can we help the Native American?

After our trip to the Denver March POW\*WOW we picked up approximately 100 members from the Cheyenne River Tribe. I contacted Peter Forbes, the National Commander and told him that I would like to do claims on the Indian reservation. Per capita, Native Americans served more than any other ethnic group and per capita they are the most underserved veterans in the United States. With the National Board members giving Peter Forbes and others the okay to go west and do these claims they were able to see

first-hand how underserved these people are. This would fill a need that Indians have.

We did two reservations 160 claims there are nine nations in South Dakota and if we went to these other reservations we could pick up at least 50-60 claims at each place. We just didn't have time to do any more on this trip. We filled a need that no one else was willing to work on.

In the state of Montana they have what they call Tribal Veteran Representatives (TVR) right out of the regional office run by Buck Richardson who started in approximately in 2001. My experience with the TVR program is we have two tribal members, Virginia Cochran and George Snell who is a Vietnam vet, that were appointed by the Tribal Council to be the representatives for veterans. Four or five claims were successfully administered by these people and the VA came to Fort Belknap from Washington, DC in early 2002 or 2003 and they talked about how successful these people were, how much they appreciated them and what a good job they were doing.

After the VVnW & The Veterans Coalition came through and got these 60-70 claims the heat is on now on the Minority Coordinator at the VA regional office because so many claims were put in the VVnW. The secretary of MT-01, Mel Doney whose husband was a Vietnam Veteran who died in a car accident in 2003, has agreed to be the secretary for MT-01. While I was out traveling and getting my experience, the TVR program has asked Mel to become a TVR for Fort Belknap so I think because of what I did because of the VVnW visit and claims taking, the people within the TVR are trying to take my secretary away from the post and I am not really sure what they are trying to do. What is the point? They must be threatened by the

VVnW & the Veterans Coalition. During my visit to the Fort Harrison VA I was also approached by Buck Richardson and offered a position as a TVR.

Also, when we were leaving Eagle Butte, South Dakota there was a notice in the Diamond A café on December 8th that the American Legion was putting on a deal for veterans benefits forum. Benefits, disability compensation, pension, burial benefits, DIOC, health care enrollment, service connection, claims processing and more would be covered and refreshments would be served. We got even the Legion moving in a positive way!

By the Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc. & The Veterans Coalition making its presence in Indian Country we finally, after quite a few years, got an organization that is going to get something done! Peter Forbes was the driving force for this to happen. We are getting something done. I have no ill feelings toward any other organization such as the VA or other organization but if they would do half as much as we did or even a quarter as much as we did maybe we could get some things done here. Get some people taken care of, get some people off the streets.

