

VA Pittsburgh Health Care System  
Military Order of the Purple Heart  
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## STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

*For Combat Wounded Veterans*  
*“In War there is no substitute for Victory”*

Winter ISSUE 2010

Volume 2 – Issue 2

# PURPLE HEART NEWSLETTER

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### NEW STATE NEWSLETTER UPDATE

The state newsletter will be compiled and circulated on the website by Chapter 455, our offices are located at VA Healthcare System, at 7108 Highland Drive, Bldg. 1, Rm. 6023w, Pittsburgh, PA 15206. The phone number is 412-954-5165 – Fax – 412-954-5171

WEB SITE—[www.mophdepartmentpa.org](http://www.mophdepartmentpa.org)

### WE NEED HELP FOR THE NEWSLETTER!

Your comments are welcomed and appreciated. We welcome you to submit articles for publication. Please no political or religious matters. Your questions and comments will be answered in a timely manner. If you have any pictures of interest we will also include them. We are hoping that all the chapters will precipitate and send articles quarterly to be published. We want to make this newsletter as inter-

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esting as possible, also the Department Newsletter will only be found on the website and it will not be mailed. If you need more information contact Daniel Wilhelm, 5239 Clarwin Ave. Pittsburgh, PA. 15229-2207  
ph# 412 954-5165

### Military Discounts Made Permanent

Although Lowe's home-improvement centers have long offered military personnel a 10% discount during special events, the discounts are now permanent.

The program is being expanded to every day for active duty, reserve, retired, or disabled veterans and their family members. A valid government-issued military ID card is required.

The discount is available on in-stock and special-order purchases of up to \$5000. Excluded are online sales, previous sales and purchases of services or gift cards.

The discount also will be extended to all other military veterans during Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Veterans Day weekends.

## NFL Stars and Vets Support Injured Service Members



*Brig. Gen. Richard Thomas, assistant surgeon general for force protection, left, and former NFL players Rocky Bleier and Eric Hipple pose for a photo in between interviews at the Super Bowl Media Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The men have joined together to raise awareness about the dangers of traumatic brain injuries and mental health issues for service members and NFL players.*

MIAMI (Feb. 2, 2010) Scientist, researchers and former NFL players have joined together to raise awareness about post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and brain injuries, a spokesman for the Defense Department "Real Warriors" program said today.

It is important for everyone to understand the needs of service members returning from combat deployments, Brig. Gen. Richard Thomas, assistant surgeon general for force protection, said during an interview with The Pentagon Channel at the Super Bowl media center in Fort Lauderdale, Fl.

A substantial number of service members returning from deployment have sustained some type of traumatic brain injury, Thomas said.

Thomas was joined by NFL stars Eric Hipple, a former quarterback for the Detroit Lions who is now the outreach coordinator with the University of Michigan Depression Center, and Rocky Bleier, a Purple Heart and Bronze Star recipient and four-time Super Bowl winner.

Bleier has documented the problems he had after re-turning from Vietnam. He noted that both troops who return from war and NFL players who have re-

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tired from football often are reluctant to seek help for problems due to the stigma attached to counseling. Hipple added that when you don't ask for help, problems can get worse.

"Identifying the symptoms early on is huge," Hipple said. He explained that Soldiers develop separation anxiety, which can lead to other issues such as clinical depression. And, he said that many mental health conditions constitute brain injuries, and like physical injuries, they need to be treated to heal.

The impact of the trauma some football players feel is compounded for service members, Bleier said.

"When football is over, you're done," he said. But for those who have served in the military, its "a double trauma."

Former service members have to find a job, "and if they do find a job and they also have these mental health issues, then they have to have supportive work place that will allow them to deal with these issues," Bleier said.

There are vehicles for service members to get help for medical problems, Thomas said, but they "have to initiate the process."

Bleier recommended that one step in the right direction is for service members to take the master resiliency training that is part of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program.

### VETERANS LIFETIME ELECTRONIC FILE

President Obama officially announced the lifetime record program in April 09 to develop a comprehensive digital medical record for every military service member. The record will contain information from both Defense Department health services and VA health services. The program is being implemented in three phases:

- A DOD/VA interagency office has been developing interoperability between DOD and VA medical record systems since 2007. In Oct. 09 VA Chief Information Officer Rodger Baker said the interoperability work has been completed.

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**VETERANS LIFETIME  
ELECTRONIC FILE  
(continued from page 2)**

- In the second phase, DOD and VA health records for about 15 million people will be made available for secure exchange with public and private organizations, including health care providers and insurers through the Nationwide Health Information Network (NHIN). The NHIN is a pilot project sponsored by the Health and Human Services Department to demonstrate national-level secure exchange of health data. The system currently is used by several federal agencies, state and local health agencies, and private providers and insurers. Baker said, "Moving the data to the NHIN is significant because it allows for exchange of medical information with private hospitals and doctors. For example, if a veteran receives treatment by a private doctor, eventually that record will be included in the lifetime record. A true lifetime virtual electronic record has to include the private sector."
- The third and final phase for the system will be developing protocols to securely provide the DOD-VA patient's medical information at the point of care. For example, if a veteran who goes to a private hospital, the goal is that the hospital doctor will be able to access all, or parts of, the veteran's health record. Establishing an exchange at the point of care that can make the medical information available, while still honoring the patient's privacy and consent agreements, securing classified information, and maintaining tight security, is a highly complex problem, he said.

**NOTE:**

We are asking our members to submit an outstanding Patriot who has donated a lot of time and energy in helping our veterans.

The Patriots name will be listed in our Department Newsletter which is found on the internet.

We would like to get at least one Patriot for each quarterly state newsletter.

Please submit a picture and a brief history of the Patriot.

**GI BILL UPDATE 69:**

If you have trouble getting your question about GI Bill benefits answered when you call the Veterans Affairs Department's education benefits call center, you are not alone. VA officials acknowledged almost 90% of calls to the Muskogee, Okla., center never connected between Oct. and Dec. They either got a busy signal or a message that the call could not be completed. For those who did get through, about 30% of the calls were terminated before their question was answered, either because the caller hung up or was disconnected. Some of the missed calls were from the same person trying again and again to get through, according to VA sources. They base that possibility on statistics showing that there were 1.1 million attempted calls in Dec. but only about 145,000 calls that ended up connecting with people at the call center. High call volume—about 3.5 million attempted calls from Oct. to Dec.—is largely to blame for the missed calls, but a troubled phone system and staffing decisions also were factors. VA spokeswoman Katie Roberts said a decision to close the call center on Thurs. and Fri. to divert employees to process claims is part of the reason for missed calls. That move came after officials decided that processing a backlog of claims was the highest priority, she said.

The call center remains closed two days a week while VA focuses on processing claims for the spring term, hoping to avoid a repeat of benefits delays that plagued the Post-9/11 GI Bill in its first semester. However, officials hope that blocked and lost calls will decrease simply because the total volume of calls is expected to be less as students and schools become more experienced with the new benefit, and because VA will improve its performance in quickly processing benefits and reducing questions about the status of claims. "We anticipate fewer calls coming into the education call center because fewer veterans will have questions about their claims," Roberts said. "With fewer claims, we will be able to put education call center employees presently being used to process education claims back on the

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### GI BILL UPDATE 69: (continued from page 3)

phones during Thurs. and Fri.” VA is making progress on processing claims, she said. Last fall, the VA was able to process about 2,000 claims a day. That is up to 7,000 claims a day now, she said. Problems with the call center were raised Jan. 21 by Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, DSD., chairwoman of the House Veteran’s Affairs Committee’s economy opportunity panel, who urged VA officials to do something about the problem.

### MARINE DEATHS UNDERSCORE U.S. STRUGGLE



The incident, deadly and tragic as it was, rated only one short sentence on the official NATO website.

The violent deaths of Marine Sergeant Daniel Angus, 28, and Lance Corporal Zachary Smith, 19, on Jan. 24 underscore how quickly things can go from bad to worse in the frontline battle against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Angus was a Marine squad leader on a patrol in the outskirts of Marjah, a Taliban stronghold in Helmand province in what was to have been a routine show of force ahead of a major push weeks away.

The day, however, would turn into one of the bloodiest suffered by the Marines 1st Bat., 6th Reg. since they deployed in Dec. in the first wave of President Obama’s promised surge.

The number of Americans who died last month in the conflict was almost double the number for Jan.

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last year, at 29 compared with 15, according to the casualties.org website, which keeps a running tally.

On Jan. 24, First Lt. Aaron MacLean led his unit on a foot patrol near insurgent bastion Marjah, expected to be the scene of a major offensive this month.

MacLean’s unit is among the 1st Marines outfits sent into Helmand since the surge was announced.

“Suddenly we were taking shots from three sides, they tried to get to our rear but were not successful,” he said, describing the fateful day.

About 30-40 Taliban militants, possibly backed by foreign fighters, ambushed them just as they neared a cluster of homes, he said.

“The day that Daniel and Zachary died, the platoon was in an area which is know to harbor a large number of enemy,” MacLean said during an emotional memorial service rarely seen by the public at a forward operating base.

Angus and Smith were tasked to move to another area and provide cover for Marines flat belied on the dust.

An expert rifleman, Smith was fending off enemy fire when he stepped on a remote-controlled bomb, known as an IED, which threw him yards into the air.

“Without regard for his own safety and shouting for other Marines to watch out for a secondary bomb, Angus rushed to Smith’s side and ordered his men away knowing full well the risk,” he died instantly from the 2nd blast.

Angus, 28 left behind a wife and daughter, and Smith his high school sweetheart whom he just married before deploying.

Both were honored in an emotional ceremony on Jan. 30 and were posthumously awarded the **Purple Heart** for combat heroism.

Their rifles, helmets, boots and dog tags were displayed, as one by one weeping colleagues paid their last respects under the searing noonday sun and a 21-gun salute followed as a mournful Christian hymn played over speakers.

Acknowledging the men’s ultimate sacrifice, Lt. Col. Worth told his men to stick to their mission and celebrate the lives of the two young Marines.