

Orland Memorial Post 111

For God and Country

THE POST

Website: www.orlandpost111.org



Volume VIII Issue III

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HAPPY EASTER



SPRING FLING DANCE

4 April 08 from 1800-2230 hrs

Donation: \$10.00 each

Door Prizes

Staring Dave Majestic

to be held at Civic Center

**For More Information contact Jerry Junkas
(708) 214-2135**

FROM THE DESK OF THE COMMANDER

I wish to thank all those who attended Edward Von Clay's services. His family was very grateful for our presence. Do not forget our Dance that is going to be held on 4 April 08 at the Civic Center. For those who attended our last dance had a very good time. Hope to see more of our members at the dance. Do you know of anyone boy who would like to attend Boy's State??? The dates for this event is 7-13 June 08. For more information contact Matt at (708) 308-5369. This May we will be busier the normal. Please try to make some of the events that are coming in May. It would be nice to see some new faces at some of the events.

FROM THE SENIOR VICE COMMANDER

There was a young girl who worked at one of our pancake breakfasts. Her name is Laura Castaneda. She is an advanced honor student at Carl Sandburg. I talked to her and the family about attending a military academy and said I would advocate for her only if she were serious and understood the ramifications plus the obligations and sacrifices involved. I contacted Congresswoman's Biggerts office through the legislative connections I made at a Veterans Task Force Symposium. I wrote a letter to the the Congresswoman on Laura's behalf and lobbied her liaison in charge of these hard to get military academy appointments. I tried to sway her to go to West Point. However her heart was set on attending the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Laura recently received a phone call from Judy Biggert telling her that she was the recipient of a prestigious congressional appointment to the Air Force Academy. Credit must go to Laura for passing all the rigorous standards required. Kudos must go to Judy Biggert for going out of her powerful Dupage base to do this. She is a member of the Hinsdale school district "hall of fame". Our district has many of the higher performing schools in the state. Plus there are many worthy applicants like Laura who desired such an appointment. Although I lobbied hard for Laura it was always under the auspice that "The Men and Women of Orland American Legion Memorial Post 111 was sponsoring her". I believe it was the respect that Judy Biggert has for those of us who have served with honor that had a lot to do with her decision. Not too many American Legion or VFW Posts can claim credit for such a prestigious honor. .

ADJUTANT'S CALL AND CHAPLAINS CORNER

ADJUTANT'S CALL

PLEASE PAY ANY UNPAID DUES ASAP.

Department will be sending out renewal forms on July 1, October 1, 2008, January 10, March 15, and May 1 2009. Often times if you have not yet paid your dues you will get one. Please make sure that any notice you get is addressed back to the Post at P.O. Box 413, Orland Park, Il

Chaplains Corner

Gary Blummer*

Donna Koerner

Maurice Fernandez

POST EVERLASTING

Sgt-At-Arms Jack Bath

Bruce Sindewald

Corwin Funkey

Edward Von Clay

R.I.P. fallen brothers

All our brothers and sisters far from home
and in harm's way and their
loved ones.

**Gail's Husband

The letter below was sent as you can see by Dean to the Department Senior Vice Commander. Dean has basically fought this battle by himself, with minimal support from us (yours truly included). It is time to put aside our personality differences, (Dean and I don't always agree,) and decide who we are. Is our mission in life to dress in blue, wave flags and shoot rifles. As Seinfeld might say "Not that there's anything wrong with that" or is there a higher purpose in our life besides carrying sweatshirts and lap robes (again something nice) to Manteno. Perhaps Dean's frustration which sometimes boils over comes from the fact that he feels we just don't get it or see the issue. The reference to "WE" includes not only Post 111 but all the way up the chain. It's past time to table personalities and see if and how we can help. Can we make this a ground swell Post issue What do YOU think? **YOUR HUMBLE EDITOR**

In addition, with Deans prodding, Phil Kadner SouthtownStar columnist wrote a series of articles relating to this issue. Along with the newspapers editorial. They are reproduced on the following pages with the generous permission of the Managing Editor of the SouthtownStar..

Your humble Editor

DEAN H. MORRELL

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Dept Sr. Vice Commander,

Bill, I hope you and your wife Mary are in good health. I am sending you the articles that ran in the Southtown Star this past week. 3 are by their most respected award winning investigative journalist Phil Kadner and the fourth is the publishers editorial piece. It took over 30 days for him to conclude his investigation. For 2 years I have fought this fight with very little help and with no muscle from senior command. When I addressed this situation at a district meeting you said "I talk to much". When I identified the legislators responsible "I was too political". I even had to suffer the indignity of having a legislator paraded around as being a hero by Tom Coe after that same representative had voted to remove over 5 million dollars from the 4 VA nursing homes.

I told you that it was not the fault of nurses in this state for the problem. You agreed with the talking points of the Illinois Dept of Veterans Affairs that it was a nursing shortage causing these problems. That is the past. Now is the time for you to show some leadership and muscle on this issue which I know you can. I am asking you to step into the ring and start throwing some punches and show these officials who would put Veterans lives at risk that we are not an "ineffective organization populated by chain smoking men interested in having a few beers who are incapable of standing up for our brethren throughout the state". That is the analysis of a Veteran commenting on our organization when he declined an invitation to join.

With all the issues facing Veterans in this state, from nursing homes, to jobs, homelessness, etc I find it ironic that at a recent district meeting Commanders Coe and Thompson found the time to bitch about not being able to smoke in public places. Their conduct is not a positive reflection on you and I hope you will take steps to put our house in order.

Dean Morrell Sr. Vice Commander & Legislative Liaison Orland Post 111

Vet homes save money as one man dies

March 7, 2008 by Phil Kadner reprinted with permission of the SouthtownStar

Margaret Pieper's husband, Harold, fought with the U.S. Army in World War II, worked for A.E. Staley Manufacturing Co. in Decatur for 40 years, retired to Arizona and eventually died waiting for a bed in an Illinois veterans home. "There wasn't anything at all in Arizona," Mrs. Pieper said. "They didn't have any veterans homes, and I couldn't afford to put him in a private home."

Illinois has four state-run nursing homes for veterans - at Anna, LaSalle, Manteno and Quincy - so it could be said this state does more than most for those who served their country with honor.

But for years, hundreds of beds in those homes sat idle because the state simply failed to hire adequate nursing and support staff.

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs is now embarked on a major nursing recruitment program and is filling as many of those beds as it can.

Much of this activity seems to have occurred since I began working on this story about a month ago.

Even so, veterans affairs only has authorization from the Legislature to staff 89 percent of its room capacity in the homes.

What is that capacity? The department claims 920 beds, although by adding the number of beds listed on its Web site I come up with a number closer to 1,200.

About 100 beds are undergoing remodeling, I was told.

That still leaves a discrepancy of close to 200 unaccounted-for beds that apparently aren't even considered part of the system's capacity.

Although this is a story about Mrs. Pieper and her husband, who died waiting for a bed, it's difficult to understand why that happened unless you accept the explanation of the bureaucrats, which is that 1,000 veterans pass away each day. Stuff happens, I guess. Resources are limited.

But how limited? How are the resources being used? And why can't anyone tell me how many of these veterans on the waiting lists die while waiting?

"My husband didn't want to put a burden on his children," Mrs. Pieper said. "He was a very independent, hard-working man all of his life. We were retired in Tucson when he got sick."

Even when her husband was working, Mrs. Pieper said, she would often live in Arizona from October to April.

But shortly after her husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, he fell and cracked his back. He could not get around without a motorized cart.

Mrs. Pieper sold the home in Tucson and headed back to Illinois. She and her husband waited for a bed to become available in a veterans home.

"I kept calling the home in Quincy, and they just didn't have any beds available for anyone in his condition," Mrs. Pieper said.

Yet, the Quincy home has routinely failed to spend millions of dollars in government money.

In 2003, it failed to spend \$3.3 million; in 2004, \$2 million; in 2005, \$2.5 million; in 2006, \$3.3 million; and in 2007, \$2.3 million.

State officials claim that money for one purpose, such as equipment purchases, can't be used for another purpose, such as nurses' salaries.

But in many of these same years, the Quincy home was saving hundreds of thousands of dollars allocated for "regular positions."

I guess the good news is that this is one government agency that knows how to live within its budget.

The bad news, for Mrs. Pieper, was that she was coping with her husband's illness alone because Quincy didn't have room for him in its dementia unit.

In 2006, the Manteno veterans home failed to spend more than \$500,000 in money appropriated for "regular positions," at the same time veterans officials were claiming they couldn't hire enough nurses to make all of its bed available.

In that same year, the Manteno home failed to spend \$1.8 million that was appropriated. In fact, from 2003 to 2006, it failed to spend more than \$1 million in allocated funds each year.

L. Tammy Duckworth, Illinois' director of veterans affairs, notes that she was not appointed to her post until November 2006.

But her boss, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, was in charge of state government that entire time.

Today, an 80-bed addition to the LaSalle home is waiting to open in 2009.

Will there be enough staff to make all of its beds available?

"I believe we're going to ask for funding at 50 percent of capacity," I was told by a spokeswoman.

Mrs. Pieper, who lost a son in Vietnam, said her husband couldn't eat solid food at the end.

He died at the age of 87.

Ernest Ramirez isn't dancing anymore

March 11, 2008 by Phil Kadner reprinted with permission of the SouthtownStar

When Ernest Ramirez recalls "dancing to slow jazz" with a frail-looking young girl he met at an NCO club in California, his eyes light up with a passion that has not diminished in more than 50 years.

Florence Dempsey, who would become his wife, passed away two years ago at the age of 88. Ernest, who lived with her in Evergreen Park after retiring, isn't doing much dancing these days. He's wheelchair-bound, the toes on his left foot amputated because of a circulatory problem.

Awarded a Bronze Star during World War II, Ramirez is one of hundreds of veterans on a waiting list for the Manteno Veterans Home, which is run by the state.

His house in Evergreen Park has been sold, much of his life savings eaten up to pay for a full-time nurse who cared for Ernest and Florence at home during her final years. What money he has left is being used to finance his stay at the Ridgeland Home, a private nursing facility in Palos Heights where "they take great care of him," according to Ramirez's nephew.

But Ramirez needs to get into that state-run veterans home before his funds run out.

Ramirez was drafted into the Army in 1942. During an interview, it became evident that he would much rather talk about the love of his life, Florence, than the 20 years he spent in the Army.

He does recall "leading a charge up a hill" somewhere in Germany.

"You get the order, and you just gotta go," Ramirez said. "What can you do? Your life is in God's hands at that point. If anything happened, I felt he would be watching over me."

Ramirez survived that charge. It was sometime later that he had a close brush with death.

He and a buddy were sent out on patrol for a German tank that was rumored to be nearby.

"My buddy had a bazooka, and I was loading the projectiles," Ramirez said. "It was winter, and we thought we saw the tank covered in snow. We fired at it twice. You know, a tank runs on treads, and it was our idea to take the treads out.

"Just as we fired a second time, I heard an explosion nearby. My buddy starting shouting, 'I've been hit.' I told him to lie low because the tank was firing at us, and I couldn't see where it was at."

Didn't the two bazooka blasts put the tank out of commission? Ramirez avoids answering the question at first (I'll explain why later).

He waited with his buddy through the night, hoping the Germans would leave, and early the next morning he ran to get help.

"I told him I would be back," Ramirez said. "I told him I would find help."

Ramirez said he ran back to a first aid unit, found a medical corpsman and commandeered a Jeep, and they went back for his buddy.

All returned safely to a German hospital that had been taken over by the U.S. Army.

But what happened to that tank? How did the tank he was trying to blow up end up shooting at him?

"It was a manure wagon," Ramirez finally admitted, laughing out loud. "The handle was sticking up, and from a distance, covered in snow, it looked like a tank. We blew up a manure wagon, and while we were shooting at it, the tank found us." There are more than 1,200 veterans home beds in Illinois and nearly as many aging veterans on a waiting list to get into those homes.

L. Tammy Duckworth, director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, contends many of those veterans are not in urgent need of a home but are on a list just in case they should need a room.

I think word-of-mouth has spread that it can take a year to get a room, so you better get on a list before you actually need one.

From July to December 2007, the Manteno home admitted no new residents, apparently the result of a negative evaluation by the Hines Veterans Administration Hospital.

Since early February, Manteno has been admitting new residents at a rate of almost one a day.

Yet I'm still getting calls from people whose relatives have been waiting for a year.

Duckworth wants to build a new home in Chicago.

I support that effort, but funds are going to be needed to make that happen. And full funding for the veterans homes that exist has been a problem.

When a buddy's life was on the line, Ernest Ramirez was there. Now that he needs help, who will stand up for him and all the other veterans in need of assistance?

State shortchanges veterans home funding

March 12, 2008 by Phil Kadner reprinted with permission of the SouthtownStar

A new addition to the LaSalle Veterans Home is scheduled to open this summer, but the state is planning to employ only enough staff to make 40 of its 80 beds available.

That's the sort of thing that frustrates hundreds of families who have watched their loved ones wait a year or longer to get a bed in a state-run home.

How much money would it take to open those additional 40 beds?

The state has appropriated \$3.3 million to staff the 40-bed Alzheimer's wing in the LaSalle home, and according to a budget spokesman for the governor, it would cost \$3 million more to make the other 40 beds available for general nursing care.

In a state where the governor recently allocated \$1 million to a school in a burned-out church that may not exist and vowed to find \$40 million to demolish Cole Hall at Northern Illinois University and replace it with a new building, it's difficult to rationalize the lack of funding for veterans homes.

"We currently have a \$750 million budget gap for (fiscal year 2008) and are in a period of economic slowdown," wrote budget spokesman Kelly Quinn in an e-mail. "We wanted to do what we could with the available resources."

If there's a budget shortfall, it exists because Gov. Rod Blagojevich has opposed any tax increase despite evidence that Illinois is running short on money for schools, transportation, veterans homes and other essential services.

In addition, the governor has insisted on creating or expanding health care programs for children and the uninsured - a laudable goal if the state had the money to meet its obligations.

In a news release announcing construction of the LaSalle home's addition in February 2006, Blagojevich said: "The federal government may have turned its back on our veterans by shortchanging them on the disability and health care benefits they've earned, but we are doing things differently in Illinois.

"We owe it to the men and women who bravely put their lives on the line in defense of our freedoms and liberties."

You judge for yourself whether the governor has fulfilled that pledge.

L. Tammy Duckworth, the director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs since 2006, gets rave reviews from Republican and Democratic legislators I've spoken with for improving funding and conditions at the state-run veterans homes.

Yet Duckworth had to settle for a budget proposal in 2009 that funds all veterans homes at only 89 percent of capacity.

Because that's an improvement over past budgets, I can understand why there is a sense of accomplishment in obtaining an increase in veterans-home funding.

But the state's responsibility is to fund 100 percent of the capacity of those homes.

The state runs four veterans homes in Anna, LaSalle, Manteno and Quincy, but Quincy (a four-hour ride from Chicago) is the only one without a waiting list for general nursing care. Even Quincy, however, has a waiting list for Alzheimer's beds.

The new 40-bed Alzheimer's unit at LaSalle will help most of the 50 veterans suffering from the disease who already are on the waiting list, according to state officials.

Still, that's four months away.

Manteno and LaSalle, the two homes closest to the Chicago area, each have waiting lists of 300 for general nursing beds. Duckworth wants to build a veterans home in Chicago, and the governor has appropriated \$15 million for that project in his fiscal year 2009 budget. Duckworth has yet to select a Chicago site, but the idea makes a lot of sense with hundreds of thousands of veterans living in the city.

State Sen. Gary Dahl (R-Peru), whose district includes the LaSalle home, said legislators from both political parties will try to obtain the money to open all 80 beds at LaSalle.

"I think every legislator in Springfield, well, just about every one, understands that we need to do this for our veterans," Dahl said.

I don't think this is going to get done unless veterans write and phone their lawmakers.

In a 2009 proposed state budget of about \$58 billion, that \$3 million represents about one one-thousandth of 1 percent. Balance that in the books against the lives of 40 veterans.

Survivor of Stalag 17 wants to say thanks

March 19, 2008 by Phil Kadner reprinted with permission of the SouthtownStar

"Yesterday's news" are the words Peter Athanis uses to describe the stuff that movies are made of.

"I just called to ask you to write about my dentist," insisted Athanis, an 89-year-old Tinley Park resident. "He took care of me when I had nowhere else to turn. At no cost to me, he restored my entire mouth. I just thought someone who did a good deed like that for a veteran should be recognized."

The dentist's name is Jack Sasso, and he has offices in Palos Heights.

But I wanted to know about the man who called me. The old fellow who happened to mention he had once been a POW, prisoner of war.

How did that happen?

"The B-17 I was in (a bomber known as the Flying Fortress in World War II) was shot down, and I was captured,"

Athanis said. "I really want to talk about my dentist. He's a great guy."

Shot down? Where was your plane when it was shot down?

"We were flying over Berlin," Athanis said.

How were you shot down? By artillery or fighter planes?

"Fighter planes," he said.

Was anyone killed?

"Two of our guys were shot. The bombardier and the navigator were killed. Six of us survived."

And just how did you survive?

"I was the flight engineer, I sat right behind the pilot and co-pilot, and when the plane caught fire I put the plane on automatic pilot and we bailed out."

The plane caught fire?

"Yeah. It exploded shortly after we bailed out."

And did the Germans continue firing at you on the way down?

"Well, we had been given training and were told not to pull the chord on our parachutes until the very last minute to avoid becoming targets," Athanis said. "That's what I did."

Upon hitting the ground, Athanis used a language translation booklet he had been given and tried to talk to workers in the farm field where he landed.

"I was asking them to hide me, but they were too scared," Athanis said. "I knew the fighter pilots were reporting where we had landed so the Germans would be looking for those of us that had bailed out."

Athanis hid in a haystack. He was captured.

What happened next?

"I was sent to Stalag 17B, near Krems, Austria," Athanis said. "I spent a year there."

Stalag 17 was made famous by a movie of the same name starring William Holden. But that was a movie.

Here's a description of Stalag 17B by the Military Intelligence Service in 1945:

"The beds in the barracks were triple-decked and each tier had four compartments with one man to a compartment, making a total of 12 men in each group. Each single barrack had a stove to supply heat and cooking facilities for approximately 200 men. The fuel ration for the week was 54 pounds of coal. Because of the lack of heating and an insufficient number of blankets, the men slept two to a bunk for added warmth ..."

An average daily menu would contain the following, according to the report:

Three potatoes, 1 cup of soup, 22 grams of bread, a half cup of ersatz coffee, 3 grams of margarine.

When Red Cross supplies arrived in camp, the German authorities reduced their portion of the meal ration.

After finding some more information about Stalag 17B on the Internet, I telephoned Athanis, and we had a second conversation. I asked him how he was liberated from the prison camp. "We were marched out," he said.

Just how long was that march?

"A few days, as I recall. It was a long time ago."

Could it have been an 18-day march?

"Yes, it might have been." On April 8, 1945, 4,000 POWs at Stalag 17B began an 18-day march of 281 miles.

Here's how one Web site described that:

"Red Cross parcels were issued to each man in sufficient amounts to last about seven days ... At the end of the day they were forced to bivouac in open fields, regardless of the weather. On three occasions the men were quartered in cow barns."

Asked to elaborate, Athanis said, "That's yesterday's news."

Once again, he requested that I publicly acknowledge his dentist.

So here's to Jack Sasso, D.D.S. Thank you for helping a veteran.

And here's to Peter Athanis, not "yesterday's news" but living history.

He is a member of a generation the like of which we never will see again.

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State can't answer questions on veterans homes

March 10, 2008 reprinted with permission of the Managing Editor of the SouthtownStar

THE ISSUE: The state runs four veterans homes. And while the quality of care is very good, far too few beds are being used. State officials tell the SouthtownStar's columnist Phil Kadner they can't answer many of his questions.

WE SAY: The few answers the state has provided are inadequate.

"If you were to ask most state legislators if they would want to help veterans, they would say 'yes' without hesitation. Then if you were to ask them why Illinois ranks 47th or 48th out of all the states in providing for veterans, they would look at you with a blank face."

Those are the words of Dean Morrell, senior vice commander and legislative liaison for Orland Memorial American Legion Post 111, speaking to SouthtownStar columnist Phil Kadner, who chronicled the woeful underuse of Illinois veterans homes in a series of columns that concluded Sunday.

"When I looked at the veterans home in Manteno, which had 340 beds, and discovered that 80 of those beds were sitting empty while more than 300 veterans were on waiting lists, I couldn't understand how the situation could be allowed to exist," Morrell said. "Then they told me they couldn't get nurses to staff the home."

"Well, what are you doing to get nurses? You can't tell me that in this great country there are no nurses willing to work in a home for veterans."

What Morrell says gets right to the point.

Illinois runs four nursing homes for veterans in Anna, LaSalle, Manteno and Quincy. For years, however, hundreds of beds for veterans have gone unclaimed because the state failed to hire adequate nursing and support staff.

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs claims 920 beds are available, though we count close to 1,200. The state claims 100 beds are unavailable because of remodeling efforts. That leaves about 200 unaccounted for. And the state declines to say how many veterans are on a waiting list for those beds, playing word games by calling it a "preapproved or preadmissions list" and claiming many of those who are invited to live at the homes decline.

Kadner's reporting also found that Illinois veterans homes were given more money than they spent from 2003 to 2007.

In 2006, the Manteno home failed to spend \$1.8 million of its appropriation. From 2003 to 2006, it held onto more than \$1 million. The home in Quincy, failed to spend \$3.3 million in its budget for 2003; \$2 million in 2004; \$2.5 million in 2005; \$3.3 million in 2006; and \$2.3 million in 2007.

L. Tammy Duckworth, a popular Army veteran appointed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich to run the Department of Veterans Affairs, says money can only be spent on equipment, not staffing. There just isn't enough money for nurses, the state claims, and nurses are just hard to come by these days.

Abass Wane, who represents the veterans home nurses on behalf of the Illinois Nurses Association, also gets right to the point in summing up the state's point of view.

"That's crap," she told Kadner, saying the state declined to take her up on her offer to help get word out to nurses about jobs at the veterans homes.

The 80-bed addition to the LaSalle home, pegged to open in 2009, is only going to be funded at 50 percent capacity, according to the state, because that's all the funding the Department of Veterans Affairs is going to seek.

What we're getting in Kadner's columns is straight talk from people trying to get the state to step up and make the best possible use of its veterans homes - and double-talk from the state in trying to explain away why it's failing Illinois veterans.

Kadner also reports the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs has begun a major nursing recruitment program and is trying to fill as many beds as it can - but those efforts only began after Kadner began his scrutiny of the department.

That's too late for Margaret Pieper's husband, Harold, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease and a fractured back and tried for two years to get into the Quincy veterans home. She cared for her husband for years - alone - until he died at 87 years of age, unable at the end even to eat solid food.

EVENTS ON THE HORIZON.

EVENTS TO COME

- April 4, 2008 Dance 6 to 10:30 PM
Orland Park Civic Center
- April 21, 2008 Post Officers Meeting
8 PM at Veterans Center
- April 30, 2008 General Membership Meeting
8PM Veterans Center
- May 3 and 4 Civil War Reenactment
details coming
- May— Heroes Day at Christian Hill
School
- May 17 Trip to Museum in Rantoul
- May— 22, 23, 24 Poppy Days
- May 26 Memorial Day at cemetery
and Civic Center
- May 29 to June 1 Orland Days
- June 1 Orland Days Parade



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