


Welcome to Our Veterans Issue

BY DON DOHERTY



I always look forward to the *Hearing Life* Veterans issue. For one, I am very conscious of the small number of Veterans within HLAA compared to the large number of Veterans leaving active duty and/or returning from deployment. The latest data I was able to find from the PEW Research Center and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) indicates that there are 7.1 million Gulf era Veterans and some 6.8 million Vietnam Veterans. Add to this the number of Veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, our Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard, we soon see very large numbers. Unfortunately, we also see very large numbers of Veterans with hearing loss. The latest statistics point to one of three Veterans returns from the military with some degree of hearing loss. The percentage increases with age and how much the Veteran knows about hearing loss.

For all the great work that the VA does for returning Veterans, there are still gaps in service, particularly in the area of aural rehabilitation. I lost my hearing following exposure to loud noise in Vietnam in 1966-67. I denied the problem for about three years before I was medically evacuated in June 1970 to Philadelphia Naval Hospital, where I was tested and fitted for a hearing aid. What was remarkable at that time is that while we were waiting for our hearing aids to come in, all patients with hearing loss participated in education groups, speechreading classes, and a class called the Psychology of Hearing Loss.

This class was very similar to the aural rehabilitation education provided by most HLAA Chapters. My point is that 50 years ago, aural rehabilitation and education was available and being provided by the military pioneers of the time. Today, the numbers of Veterans needing medical services for hearing loss far exceeds the number of providers able to meet that demand. Other variables, like denial, also come into play. It now takes a Veteran an average of ten years to acknowledge that he or she has a hearing loss and becomes willing to do something about it.

During the HLAA 2018 Convention in Minneapolis, I met with retired U.S. Army 1st Class David Schible, a fellow combat Veteran. We decided to form a national HLAA Veterans group dedicated to helping other Veterans with hearing loss. We had our first meeting at that Minneapolis convention. From that humble beginning we were able to form the HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter. This was the first online chapter meeting in the history of HLAA.

Through the medium of Zoom meetings and with the sponsorship of Starkey Hearing Technologies, we were able to make it happen. We learned early on that there were advantages of accessibility and crossing long distances via technology. It enabled Veterans to meet and engage other Veterans outside of their regular chapter meetings to which they still belonged. Little did we know that we were using a technology that would keep HLAA connected and viable during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The HLAA Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter Members are very strong advocates for helping Veterans who are being released from active duty to ensure they get a discharge audiogram and knowhow to connect with the Department of Veterans Affairs for evaluation of hearing loss. The VA has a program called Solid Start, which is designed to connect Veterans recently separated from service with direct VA benefits and with assistance in getting health care. According to the VA, more than 200,000 Veterans will transition this year via Solid Start.

The VA will follow up with these Veterans three times during their first year as Veterans. The Veterans Across America Virtual Chapter has recommended that HLAA address our proposed advocacy letter to the highest level of the Veterans Administration, recommending that Solid Start follow-up calls include questions about hearing evaluations and/or hearing aids as warranted, along with tinnitus. In this way, we hope to reach more Veterans sooner so that in their transition to civilian life, they get all the help they need to be successful.

How can you help? If you have a Veteran in your chapter who would like to help other Veterans, please email me at dondoherty46@gmail.com, or Carla Beyer-Smolin at chapters@hearingloss.org. We will invite your Veteran to our next virtual meeting.

We have interesting speakers with a focus on areas of interest to Veterans as well as a strong advocacy to help our returning Vets. We may represent fewer than 2% of America's population, but our Veterans have stood tall and worked hard to protect our liberties. Let's be there for them. I hope you enjoy this *Hearing Life* Veterans issue.



Don and wife, Melanie

Semper Fi,
Don Doherty, M.Sgt., USMC (Ret.)