

Clockwise from right: Sonny Burgess and Jolie Holliday performed during the Opening Ceremonies; Actor Terry Knox received a VVA arts award from President John Rowan for his role in the television series, *Tour of Duty*; Barry Rice and Charlie Hobbs relaxed out front between seminars; Left: Louisiana's Joseph (JD) Soileau, Terry Courville, Mallory Lessard, and Lester Guidry attended Friday morning's POW/MIA Remembrance Ceremony.



Above: Pam Scheffer and Richard Bossardet twisted to the music of Johnny Diamond and the Silver Hubcap Band; Far left: Tyrone Hunter discussed challenges facing the Dallas VAMC; Left: VVA Board members Joe Jennings and Pat Toro talked with President Rowan.

VVA's National Leadership Conference:

Camaraderie and Commitment in Irving

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL KEATING

The words had slipped easily onto the note cards in a loose scrawl. Well, why not? A *60 Minutes* reporter at the top of his game, he was used to asking hard questions and demanding hard answers. He had watched the color guard—groomed and fit young men from the Marine Corps Recruiting Station in Dallas—easily turn sharp, precise corners in a formation led by Old Glory. And he had watched the older men bring in the service flags, their movements rolling but proud.

He had listened attentively to VVA President John Rowan's remarks and AVVA President Nancy Switzer's greeting. Holly Petraeus—the general's wife—discussed the administration's consumer protection program, especially as it applies to veterans. Then President Rowan introduced Steve Kroft and called him up to the stage.

Kroft bounded up the steps, flashed a broad grin, and made a self-deprecating quip about his wispy facial hair. He mentioned that he had only once before spoken about his Vietnam service. Then the words that had slid so easily onto the notecards began to stick in his throat. As he described his own ordeal during and after Vietnam, his eyes welled with tears.

Afterward, the crowd pushed forward to shake his hand or embrace him, exchange a few words or present him with challenge coins: "Welcome home."

"We've seen that before," Rowan said with a slight shake of his head, referring to the successful men who have walked onto the podium at other national VVA events only to

continued on page 45

Top: Wednesday afternoon, VVA President John Rowan addressed the VVA/AVVA Officers' Luncheon; During Opening Ceremonies, everyone, including North Carolina SC President Joe Kristek and Michigan Chapter 154's Steve Bago, clapped cadence as the service flags were brought forward.



Above: During a Saturday morning seminar, Sandy Miller presented an overview on homelessness among veterans; Left: *60 Minutes'* Steve Kroft was inundated by well-wishers following his emotional keynote address.



Clockwise from left: During a Media Seminar, attendees worked in groups to reduce detailed information to a 30-second radio spot; The Marine Corps Recruiting Station in Dallas presented the colors during the Opening Ceremonies; Leadership Conference Committee Chair Pete Peterson congratulated actor Tony Becker, along with Terry Knox, Donna Crowell, and Dan Stenvold; National Treasurer Wayne Reynolds and CFO Joe Sternburg conducted a Wednesday seminar on the duties of state and chapter treasurers, including how to file financial reports and work with the IRS; Center: The Dunne Brothers, Michael and Patrick, one lives in Fla., the other in Calif.—both Vietnam vets and VVA members.



Above: Alan Oates was one of three presenters who discussed current research into Agent Orange and associated toxins, especially as they affect succeeding generations, and possible legislative remedies; Left: Arts awardee Karl Marlantes autographed copies of his epic *Matterhorn* and *What It Is Like to Go to War*.



Below: During an open-microphone session during the Closing Ceremonies, California's Richard Segovia described his reactions to his first VVA conference; Right: The Buckeye State Council's John Stoner attended the VVA/AVVA Officers' Luncheon.



Leadership Conference

Continued from page 42

discover the brotherhood of Vietnam veterans, and both the pain and the sweet comfort that that entails.

The Opening Ceremonies for Vietnam Veterans of America's National Leadership Conference in Irving, Texas—actually the first joint VVA and AVVA conference—had come to an end. The nearly three hundred registered attendees scattered to the first set of seminars. The seminars ran for four days through Saturday morning, on subjects as diverse as hospice and palliative care, the roles and significance of a board of directors, and avoiding burnout. VVA Parliamentarian Mike Swift gave his always-popular run-down on how to use (and manipulate) *Roberts' Rules*. There were seminars on homelessness among America's veterans, how to be an effective secretary, and the challenge of retaining members. An academic overview of current research on Agent Orange, especially its intergenerational effects, was presented along with a discussion of possible legislative remedies. Several speakers contributed to a full day of advanced service officer training, which was videotaped to be used as a teaching tool.

There were seminars on the financial challenges and perils of older veterans, the process of planning meetings and conventions, and a course in basic computer skills. There was even a seminar on *The VVA Veteran* and VVA's state and chapter publications.

That was the listening part. But out in the halls and among the lobby couches, out back and outside the front entrance were the talking areas. And the talk was voluminous and affable and affectionate. Men and women compared their chapters' successes and failures, fundraising schemes that worked or didn't. And there were lots of unsolicited health reports, and many proud grandparents showed recent photos of smiling young faces. And others talked war stories—not braggadocio quasi-fabrications, but clear, sharp stories that sought the affirmation of men with similar stories.

But don't forget the Tuesday night sock hop with music by Johnny Diamond and the Silver Hubcap Band. There were lots of poodle skirts and lots of Elvis wigs. And a twist competition. The music was live and the beer was cold.

continued on next page



Top: Georgia's Spence Davis and Allen Harvey hammed it up during the reception preceding Saturday's banquet; Center: During his seminar, Hubert "Skip" Humphrey III discussed the financial pitfalls, scams, and charlatans challenging older veterans and their families; Bottom: Connie Christensen, John Margowski, and Jacqui Rector at Saturday's reception.



WAYNE GREGORY

Leadership Conference

Continued from previous page

Thursday evening was a barbeque at the Circle R Ranch. You could dress up like a gunslinger or Miss Kitty, or you could sit atop a steer. Listen to music or eat barbeque. In fact, that afternoon had been free, and many took advantage of the time and traveled the short distance to Dallas to shop. Some went to tour the nearby Cowboys' stadium. Others took the pilgrimage to Dealy Plaza and looked out across the grassy knoll.

Yet others remained at the hotel to watch *Bravo! Common Men, Uncommon Valor* in a special showing hosted by filmmakers Ken and Betty Rodgers. The film, a documentary about Bravo 1-26 during the siege of Khe Sanh as described by survivors and supplemented with archival film and still images, was well attended. But nearly a quarter slipped away before it ended. "Too much, too real," one departing veteran sighed.

Saturday night's Awards Banquet was the dress-up affair—an opportunity to look good, not just comfortable. It was an opportunity, too, to honor Karl Marlantes for his Vietnam War epic, *Matterhorn*, and his more recent book, *What It Is Like to Go to War*. Arts awards were also presented to actors Terry Knox, Tony Becker, and Stephen Caffrey, who starred in the three-season television series *Tour of Duty*. A final award was presented to U-Haul for its work for veterans in general and for VVA in particular.

Then, amid leave-taking and hand-shaking and hugs, the Irving Conference started to melt away. By Sunday mid-morning, there were only clusters of folks waiting for airport shuttles while others packed their cars.

Next year VVA's National Convention will be held in Jacksonville, Florida. ■



PAT TORO

Top: During Thursday's outing to the Circle R Ranch, people could sit on steers, eat barbeque, listen to music, or pretend to be gunslingers; Left: During a tour of the Dallas Cowboys' stadium, VVA's assistant events planner Eileen Mitchell posed on the 50-yard line.