

The following article appeared in LongIslandPress.com

<http://www.longislandpress.com/2011/01/27/soldiers-of-misfortune-thousands-of-long-island-veterans-need-help/7/>

Soldiers of Misfortune: Thousands of Long Island Veterans Need Help

By [Spencer Rumsey](#) on January 27th, 2011



The graduation photo on display in the second floor office of **The Veterans Place**, a reconverted motel in Yaphank, tells only part of the story. Wilkens Young, director of operations for the nonprofit **Suffolk County United Veterans (SCUV)**, stands beaming with pride next to a younger man grinning in a cap and gown after getting his G.E.D. He's not his son—he's a Gulf War veteran whom Young found after he'd been living all winter in the woods near Mastic.

"If you've been in the military," Young says, "a good sleeping bag and a tent is all you need."

Young had served in the Army in 1976, stationed in Germany for two years. Now 54, happily married, a proud father, and a doting grandfather, he understands the problems that had led the younger veteran astray before he got his life together. After Young left the Army, he was "doing all right for a while," living in Bellport, until he "got caught up in the drugs and everything and life just started to deteriorate." Young wound up doing time, a lot of time, in upstate prisons. He'd come out, "get a taste of what sobriety actually was," and then relapse.

But the last prison he was in encouraged him to get an associate's degree in business administration and helped him connect with a veterans program that ultimately led him to John Lynch, chief executive officer of the SCUUV, which runs a rigorous transitional housing program for veterans. Young was homeless, but thanks to Lynch's group, he's now a homeowner and a role model.

"I didn't get it right the first time," Young says. "I didn't get it right the second time. It's only by the grace of God and my own desire and wants that I got it right the third time."

Young has been at SCUUV's shelter since November 2000. This program, which Lynch founded in 1989, is relatively small, with rooms for 24 people at the motel.



Wilkens Young

"I always try to keep one bed open," he says. Half a dozen other houses scattered in Suffolk accommodate about five people each, serving about 65 veterans in all at any one time. The rules are strict for this therapeutic community: No drinking, no drugs, no fighting, and there are curfews. The pressure is on for them to follow Young up the ladder.

"When I sit down and talk with the guys," he explains, "the first thing I tell them is: Listen, I started at the bottom. There's not a job in this place that I haven't done, from washing pots to mopping floors to cutting the grass, to dumping the garbage and driving [the vans]." But the most important message, he says, is telling them that "our job isn't to take care of you. Our job is to help you take care of yourself."

Sadly, for far too many veterans, accomplishing that mission can be almost impossible.

Stop Making Sense



Walter Schmidt

“If I’m 30 or 40 years old,” explains Walter Schmidt, director of veterans services for the Town of Oyster Bay, “I don’t know if I want anybody to know that I’ve been formally diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Because that means I’m a little crazy, and if I’m a little crazy, although I know I’m not supposed to lose my job because of that, I’ve been told that that has happened.”

Countering self-destructive myths like that is part of his job, explains Schmidt, 63, whose exposure to Agent Orange when he served on a Navy gunboat in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam in 1969 ultimately led to diabetes, PTSD, hearing loss and multiple sclerosis, which made him a tetraplegic. His symptoms didn’t appear until 1994, and he’d never used the VA before that.

Today he only has the use of his right hand. As he fishes for a pretzel he dropped on the floor of his Massapequa office, he waves his grip-extender and jokes that he “believes in the five-hour rule.”

A CPA, Schmidt’s been in this role for eight years. Of Long Island’s 13 townships, he says only Oyster Bay has a veterans office.

“Putting my body aside, I know very few able-bodied Vietnam veterans who don’t, in private, admit to having sleeping problems, to having anger-management problems,” he says. “And most of us admit that our personality before we went to Vietnam as opposed to our personality after Vietnam changed. In some cases, dramatically.”

One group that’s sprung up on Long Island, after starting in Los Angeles a couple of years ago, is The Soldiers Project, which provides strictly confidential treatment to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who may have post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems.

“Mental health issues are still stigmatized,” says Susan Cohen, a psychiatric nurse who says she’s lined up 70 volunteer therapists, all licensed mental health professionals, and dozens of nonclinical volunteers. Her group’s services are free, and “there’s no paper trail,” she adds.

Sometimes a PTSD diagnosis may hinder a promotion if one’s still in the service, she says. Unlike the VA, her group also treats the soldier’s family members. So far, Cohen’s group has been getting about two or three veterans a month seeking her group’s treatment.

The calls are coming in from the soldiers' mothers, grandmothers, wives and girlfriends. "They often recognize the soldier's got a problem before he does," she explains.

A typical phone call, Cohen says, goes something like this: "My husband or my boyfriend is back from Iraq. He sleeps all day, and he gets very angry if I try to talk to him. He's not doing the things he used to do."

Cohen says her group is part of the Veterans Health Alliance on Long Island, and she praises the VA for working with the community and the Department of Defense for recognizing that some soldiers may be suffering from invisible wounds that require special attention before the problem takes a serious turn.

The reputation of the VA has waxed and waned over the years. Frank Amalfitano, executive director of United Veterans Beacon House, said after his father died at the Northport facility in 1978, he wouldn't talk about the place.

Life During Wartime

The Battle of Long Island is an historical chapter from the Revolutionary War, but there is a war still being fought here just the same. It's the battle to bring peace to the veterans who return from duty and find no comfort of home, or if they do have a place to live, they find that they've brought the war home within them.

Sometimes the casualties can be the veterans themselves, or their families, their spouses and their lovers. The soldiers may survive their mission but succumb to alcohol and substance abuse off-duty. Some may be walking around with symptoms that go untreated for decades until suddenly their own bodies turn against them, like those who were exposed to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange in Vietnam. Veterans of the Gulf War and our military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan may be suffering from traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorders—invisible wounds that require serious attention but can only be determined by those skilled practitioners who know the signs.

Long Island reportedly boasts one of the highest concentrations of veterans in the nation, second to San Diego, and between 2,000 and 11,000 of them are estimated as currently homeless. There had been as many as 174,000 veterans living here but a figure revised in 2010 pegs the total at fewer than 153,000 because the survivors of World War II, who helped put Long Island's suburbs on the map, are dying off at a rate of 11,000 a day nationwide.

Tragically, Vietnam vets may not outlast the veterans who fought years before them in Korea. According to a 1987 study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, these soldiers seem to have a death rate 1.5 times higher than those who didn't serve "in country"—in Vietnam itself. Last fall, President Barack Obama's new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, announced that his department would conduct a three-year follow-up study to see if an unusual "die-off" is still occurring.

The Department of Veterans Affairs had changed its name from the Veterans Administration in 1989. But the idea of honoring our soldiers' service has deep roots in our country, going back to when the Pilgrims decided to aid those who were disabled while defending the fledgling colony from the Pequot Indians. From that small start has grown one of the largest bureaucracies in our nation for the benefit of veterans of World War II, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, and the All-Volunteer Force, which includes Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation New Dawn (with new names to come, no doubt, as other missions arise).

Here, the most well-known facility is the Northport VA Medical Center, down the road from the Northport Middle School in Suffolk County. The VA also runs three small centers in Babylon, Plainview (*which is about to be moved to the Nassau University Medical Center*) and Woodhaven. The VA plans to open a new facility in Riverhead this spring to better serve veterans on the East End. Right now, a veteran in Riverhead without a car would have to take a four-hour bus ride to arrive in time for an early morning appointment at the Northport VA.

Long Islanders who serve today are primarily in the U.S. Army Reserves and the National Guard. Unlike past conflicts, they repeat their tours of duty, sometimes three or four times. By contrast, soldiers in Vietnam, particularly those who were drafted, only did one.

Because LI lacks a military base like Fort Drum, to the west of the Adirondacks, the Island's men and women in uniform have to rely on their neighbors for support, and many of their neighbors don't even know they're away.

Studies have shown that soldiers doing more tours increase their risks of injury as well as PTSD, traumatic brain injury and other problems. But thanks to recent rules changes by the VA, those conditions eligible for medical coverage now include hairy cell leukemia, Parkinson's disease and ischemic heart disease along with diabetes and a dozen other diseases. Veterans who were in combat zones can now claim benefits for PTSD without having to prove that they were involved in a traumatic incident 40 or more years ago—they just need the recommendation of a licensed mental health professional.

But some veterans don't want that diagnosis.

"I wouldn't mention the VA to anybody," says Amalfitano, who served in the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam in 1968. "Today, I would recommend it to everybody."

But only 35,000 of Long Island's veterans have registered for the benefits they've earned and the coverage they deserve.

The Department of Defense has estimated that 40 percent of the 160,000 veterans returning from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in the next several years may have post-traumatic stress disorder and/or traumatic brain injury.

"It takes a psychiatrist to separate the two," says Amalfitano. If a soldier is riding in a Humvee and survives a roadside bombing, he says, the explosion may still cause a concussion that "can make your brain rattle" and cause a chemical imbalance that produces a medical condition.

Another critical distinction is between post-traumatic stress and PTSD.

“If I’m getting shot at, I’m under stress in a combat situation,” he explains. “But if I experience something horrific—the guy next to me got shot—and I’m having reoccurring nightmares or I’m walking down the street and all of a sudden I’m in the battlefield, that’s PTSD.

“I tip my hat for the VA and the DOD recognizing that,” he adds.

The numbers of those being treated bear that out.

“From what we know, of the veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who have used the VA, about 38 percent report some kind of mental health issue, not just PTSD diagnosis,” says John Javis, director of special projects for the Mental Health Association of Nassau County and chairman of the Veterans Health Alliance of Long Island. “Some 17 percent report some drug or alcohol-related problem. Another 11 percent had traumatic brain injury. We also know that veterans have twice the suicide risks than non-veterans, and that nationwide some 18 veterans a day commit suicide.”



Pat Yngstrom

Pat Yngstrom, director of the Nassau Veterans Service Agency, knows the suicidal type.

“They don’t work and play well with other people,” he explains. “They sit in their rooms at night thinking about...crazy stuff.”

Yngstrom, now 61, who grew up in Valley Stream and served in Vietnam in 1971. He became the director of the county agency last March.

“I know guys who got into counseling for the first time five years ago and they got home from Vietnam in 1968,” he says. “They’re divorced. Some of them are alcoholics. A lot of them are dead due to some kind of substance abuse. We lost 58,491 people in combat, and we’ve had over 100,000 Vietnam veterans commit suicide since the end of the war. Nationwide.”

Yngstrom still gets animated when he recalls how he was treated after leaving Vietnam for good in 1971, where he’d been stationed with the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne about three miles from the demilitarized zone.

“When I came home, I stepped off the plane at the Seattle Tacoma airport, and a young lady walked up to me and four other veterans and called me ‘a baby-killer’ and spit in my face,” he says. “That was my welcome home.”

He also can recall how his first three job interviews went after his military service.

“I was told by Sears, Mobil and Shell that they didn’t hire murderers. Right to my face. Guys who never met each other,” says Yngstrom, with a smile. He ended up working for Con Edison.

“My older brother was in Korea,” Yngstrom tells the *Press*, “and he says, ‘We were forgotten, and you got spit at. I don’t know which one is worse!’”

In 1986 Yngstrom had a stroke. Now he’s being treated for diabetes, which he didn’t develop until 2001, but under the VA rules, he’s covered because it’s one of the “statutorily presumptive illnesses” caused by Agent Orange.

“I changed my whole lifestyle, but it took a stroke to do it,” he explains. “My doctor told me that if I didn’t start talking about stuff like this that when it came time to walk my daughter down the aisle, my brother would be walking her down the aisle because I wouldn’t be here.”

His daughter is getting married next month. “And I will be there,” he says adamantly, shooting a wistful glance at the ceiling. “You heard that, right?”

Like his counterpart, Tom Ronayne, director of Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency, Yngstrom is devoted to making sure that our Long Island veterans get all they’re entitled to.

“This little agency right here brought in over \$4 million in compensation and pension payments to citizens of Nassau County to spend in Nassau County,” says Yngstrom. “That’s the most we ever brought in. The year before it was \$1.5 million.”

His deputy, Scott Castillo, who runs the “Welcome Back Warriors” project for returning vets, says that he’s just gotten a Vietnam veteran a \$100,000 medical reimbursement award to treat his Parkinson’s disease—the largest award Castillo had ever seen.

Getting the word out to the veterans can be a daunting challenge, Yngstrom and other advocates say. One thing groups like his does is help organize a “veterans stand-down” twice a year in Nassau and once in Suffolk. Last November, 230 veterans, many of them homeless, came to the New York State Armory in Freeport, where they met with service providers from a wide array of agencies besides the VA. There were also legal services, health screenings, free haircuts, showers, a full-course meal and “enough clothing to open up a Macy’s,” he adds.

And because the clothing is top drawer, Yngstrom says some unscrupulous people have tried to take advantage of the donors’ generosity. But the “phonies” are easy to spot, he says. For one thing, these guys don’t know their service number, something “you never forget,” says Yngstrom, who recounts how one man in 50s and “dressed to the nines,” showed up at a stand-down to get into the clothing area but hemmed and hawed when pressed for his number.

“The guy goes, ‘Oh, man, come on! I did service back in the ‘80s!’ I say, ‘Your service number should be very recognizable to you.’ He still didn’t get it. So I said, ‘Let’s take a walk.’”

Yngstrom led him outside, past the Channel 12 camera crew that had been recording the exchange. “I said to him, ‘You’re not a veteran. If I ever see you again at one of my stand-downs, look down.’ I had my jump-boots on, steel-tips. I say, ‘This boot is going to be so far up your ass that you’re going to be chewing on my shoe laces. Now get out of here.’”

But don’t get Yngstrom wrong. “My rule is that if they’re not a veteran but they look they’re in raggedy clothes and they haven’t eaten, let them in. I’m not turning anybody away who looks like they’re half dead.”

The next Nassau stand-down will be set up this summer. Northport VA plans to hold one in October.

This Is Not My Beautiful House

Though the figures vary depending on whose definition of homelessness you use, there are between 2,000 and 11,000 homeless veterans on Long Island right now. They’re sleeping on couches, in cars, in abandoned buildings and even in the wooded sections of the median strip of the Northern State Parkway.

“We go out and count them every year,” Yngstrom says. “I can tell you there are pockets of veterans along the parkways because I’ve walked into some of these places and been told to forget I was there! So, I say, ‘OK, if that’s what you want.’”

According to advocates for homeless veterans, there are more than 200 units of transitional housing run by a loose consortium of groups like the United Veterans Beacon House, Suffolk County United Veterans, Family & Children’s Association and the Interfaith Nutrition Network. And Long Island could use more, but finding locations is an uphill battle.

“People ride around in SUVs with stickers that say, ‘Support Our Troops,’ but when a group home or a transitional home for vets is proposed for their neighborhood, they turn out in opposition,” says Jim Smith, a member of the Veterans Health Alliance of Long Island, which includes more than 70 providers of veterans services. Through his church group, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset, Smith helped organize a conference to raise awareness of veterans’ needs in November.

“Vietnam vets are sort of riding the coattails of the public’s love for the current troops,” says Smith, who’s also a member of Veterans for Peace. “Whereas the Vietnam vets years ago were derided and criticized, these days people are realizing that they were just part of the green machine that went and did their jobs, so they’re receiving more respect in general.”

Frank Amalfitano of United Veterans Beacon House, based in Bay Shore, runs a transitional housing program that can accommodate up to 115 veterans who’ve suffered from drug, alcohol and PTSD problems. “I don’t sell it to the neighborhood—I prove it to the community,” he says. “I’ve been to community board meetings where the neighbors are all up in arms,” he recalls. “When they hear the words ‘sober house,’ they think of drugs and alcohol, and they think ‘crack house.’ They don’t know what’s going on in there.”

His houses, two in Nassau and 14 in Suffolk, have strict rules of conduct, with house managers and case managers, too.

“Initially we used to take people right off the street and house them, but it’s too unstable. I have to think of the safety of the community and our residents,” Amalfitano says. “It’s one and the same.”

Generally, his residents have come from Salvation Army’s homeless shelter program at the Northport VA where they’ve been treated initially.

He says that if he can’t appease the neighbors, he’ll discontinue a particular location. “One was in Jamaica. I thought I was going to get lynched,” he says with a shrug. “I was working with the church. But the community didn’t want us there. I had the same response in Rockaway Park. I saw school teachers jump up tables, screaming to get us out of their community. A year later, the same people were asking us to open another house. We proved ourselves. What had made us stay in there was one neighbor who had gotten up at the first meeting and said, ‘Listen, I’ve been living in this neighborhood for a number of years, and that house next to me was a crack house. These people came in, cleaned it up, and now it’s a safe, clean residence.’ As far as they knew, the rumor was we had a bunch of drug addicts and alcoholics and people who are crazy, and they all wanted them out of there.”

Ricky Ham, one of Beacon House’s case managers, took this reporter to one of their smaller transitional houses. Ham, 54, served in the Army from 1979 to 1985. Born in Brooklyn and now living in Babylon, he says, “I joined because I really wanted to go. You could call it patriotism, or you could call it just being part of the United States.”

This place is a well-maintained, two-story house with a fenced-off backyard, within walking distance of a train station.

Inside was a formerly homeless Vietnam veteran who had served in the Navy but asked to remain nameless. He had just returned from a counseling program at the VA.

“I lost a brother and that’s what caused me to start drinking even more,” he says. “Me and my wife, we separated because of my problem drinking. She said, ‘That’s it.’ Which I understood,” he says, with a noticeable sadness in his eyes.

He left two children behind and ultimately ended up in the hospital in need of a liver operation. Now that he’s on the mend, he’s been sober for “six months,” and is touch with his wife. “I need to get myself together, and the only way I could do that is by staying away from my old place.”

At this Beacon House, there’s a pay phone by the back door, and a stockpile of food in the pantry in the basement. On the fridge is a list of cooking schedules and household chores. Near the coffeemaker is an embellished poster that reads: “With enough coffee anything is possible!”

The man we met, who’s in his mid-50s, is the third oldest resident of this particular house. “We come from all different places. All different wars,” he says. “A lot of the guys have trauma, PTSD.” What do they have in common? “Being a veteran, that’s what it is, you know. That’s what we got. We’re together.”

On our way out, Rickey Ham reminds the man that he'll be back later that night for the weekly house meeting. "Any situations that come up within the house, that's where I come in," Ham tells the *Press*.

"To a lot of our residents," says Amalfitano in his office, "we're not the institution; we're the family."

Amalfitano, 63, says he takes his job home with him "24-7," and adds, "I'm tired, man!" Asked what he'd like to see, he sighs. "I believe there's a need for more permanent, affordable housing. That is the piece of the mission that I haven't accomplished on my watch."

Mary Joesten of the Faith Mission Outreach Center in Freeport has high hopes that the New York Veterans Advocacy Group, which she co-chairs, will soon be able to announce plans that it's secured a building in Nassau to house 80 homeless vets and provide them with the services they need to get back on their feet. On her six-person advisory board are Nassau County Executive Ed Mangano and former Sen. Alfonse D'Amato.

"Our mission," reads the group's press release, "is to establish comprehensive transitional housing offering physical health care, a medically managed evaluation program, psychiatric help when needed and safe housing under one roof."

Joesten tells the *Press* they have a building in mind but won't disclose the locale until the sale is finalized. The initial cost would run more than \$1 million. Nassau's veterans would benefit from having a centralized location, Joesten says, because the Northport VA "is good for Suffolk" and the VA facility on the St. Albans campus is "good for Queens."

"What I'm proposing will save taxpayers' money as well as save the veterans' lives," Joesten explains.

Rickey Ham, case manager of United Veterans Beacon House, sees it this way: "We're in the business of saving veterans' lives, man. That is the bottom line."

"This is an all-volunteer Army," says Yngstrom of Nassau County Veterans Services. "They went to fight for us on their own. They're coming home, and they're getting snubbed by people. On Election Day everybody loves them. Everybody loves them in this county, but [they say,] 'You can't put up a facility in my backyard because I have children!' Hello?! That could be your child coming back! You know what I'm saying? We need to take care of the people who took care of us."