Honor overdue
Russell Seager receives posthumous Purple Heart

BY GARY J. KUNICH

More than five years after Milwaukee VA nurse Russell Seager was killed in a terror­ist attack at Fort Hood, Texas, the medical center joined with the Army to remember a man known for his devotion to Veterans and Soldiers.

Seager, a captain in the Army Reserve and nurse practitioner in the Red Clinic, received a posthumous Purple Heart in a cer­emony at the Matousek Auditorium May 22. His wife, Cynthia; son, Joseph; and father, Vernan, received the awards in his honor.

More than 200 employees and commu­nity members attended the event, including 50 from the Seager family.

Robert Beller, medical center director, said Seager was an inspiration to all those who worked and served with him.

“He represents the best of who we are and represents not only the best of VA, but the best of humanity. As we take Russ’ devotion and compassion for his soldiers, his Veterans, and his fellow man to heart, I hope in some way it all makes us just a little better. It’s truly an honor to honor this great man and his family.”

Seager joined the Army Reserve at 47 and served with the 452nd Combat Support Hospital in Milwaukee. He was killed Nov. 5, 2009, at Fort Hood, while preparing with his unit to deploy to Afghanistan. Another soldier, Maj. Nidal Hasan, opened fire, killing 13 and wounding 31 others.

He and the other Fort Hood shooting victims became eligible for the Purple Heart because of a rider in the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act that expanded eligi­bility for those killed or injured as the result of a terrorist, but all of us as Americans, as well. While there are no words that can resurrect those we lost or completely erase the scars, the awarding of the Purple Heart is an op­portunity to provide a sense of closure for those who were injured or who lost a loved one.

“To Captain Seager’s family and friends who join us today, it is my sincere hope that this ceremony will help in some small way to heal the wounds and pain you have suf­fered with the loss of your loved one.”

Continued on Page 4
See Purple Heart
Purple Heart
Continued from Page 3

The Army held a ceremony April 10 at Fort Hood for those injured and killed. But the Seager family instead requested a ceremony at the Milwaukee VA.

“When I received the call that this honor was going to be presented to me on Russell’s behalf, I knew there was only one place that Russell would want this to happen, and that’s here at the Veterans Affairs hospital,” Cynthia Seager told the audience. “Russell was very proud of the work that was done here and the opportunity he was given to be a part of it.

“I also want to say to the active military and Veterans, thank you so much for your service, but I also want to say to spouses and family members, thank you for your service, too. I know what that means.”

The ceremony included a letter from Rep. Paul Ryan, a congressman from Seager’s 1st district; and a proclamation from Gov. Scott Walker declaring May 22 Russell Seager Day in Wisconsin. Tucker and Beller also presented Gold Star pins to Seager’s immediate family, including his sister, Barbara Prudhomme.

The Army’s 88th Regional Support Command from Tomah, Wisconsin, provided the Color Guard for the event. Capt. Amanda Wojtanowski, a social worker at the Madison VA who deployed with Seager, served as the award presenter. Members of the Military Order of the Purple Heart also served as greeters for the event.

Seager joined the Milwaukee VA staff in April 2008. Jim Bode, Milwaukee VA Primary Care program manager, said Seager’s Army and educator background made him the perfect fit for a new position that integrated mental health with primary care.

“You can say we were blessed or lucky that Russ applied for our position. Russell’s background made him perfect for the job,” he said.

“Russ was very proud of the fact he served his country. His combination as an educator, clinical practitioner and working as an educator in association with the military made him a unique and perfect person for this role. He was our resource for staff on mental health issues. Russ was kind, compassionate, approachable, reliable, knowledgeable, professional, a good communicator and a wonderful colleague.

“He told me on multiple occasions how he loved his job taking care and helping veterans,” Bode added. “He made a positive impact on many of their lives. Russ made Veterans he saw comfortable and they could open up to him. A Veteran told me he had never had a wonderful relationship with a mental health provider before Mr. Seager. Russ embraced our role here as we embraced Russ.

“His last day before leaving for his advance training and deployment, he sent me an e-mail that ended with, ‘I will miss my job so much but I will be back, don’t forget about me.

“We won’t ever forget about you, Russ.”

Traditionally, the Milwaukee VA turns on the water on the historic sculpted fountain across from Old Main during Memorial Day weekend. The day of the ceremony, and throughout Memorial Day, the water was dyed purple in Seager’s honor.

Never forget
Crowd braves rain for annual Memorial Day ceremony

BY GARY J. KUNICH

More than 1,300 Veterans, family members and those in the community paid tribute to America’s war dead during a damp and solemn Memorial Day ceremony at Wood National Cemetery.

“We gave all of you a taste of Vietnam with the rain,” Joe Campbell joked with the crowd during his speech.

This year included a special tribute to Vietnam Veterans in honor of the 50th anniversary of the war. A special nod of thanks was also given to the Milwaukee American Legion Band for performing at the annual Memorial Day event for seven decades.

Theresa Thomas from Wood National Cemetery welcomed the crowd and paid homage to the people buried in more
Vietnam Veteran tells harrowing tale that drives home meaning behind Memorial Day

BY GARY J. KUNICH

Joe Campbell had four days and a wake-up left before he was supposed to leave Vietnam.

‘It was Feb. 12, right after the Tet Offensive, and on Feb. 7, I had four and a wake-up, and my fellow Vets know what that is,’ he told the crowd at the Milwaukee VA Memorial Day ceremony. ‘The wake-up was the important one.’

‘But my company commander came to me on Feb. 7 and said, Campbell, you got two hours to get out of here. You are going home.’

‘Oh my God, I was happy,’ Campbell said. ‘But I knew I was going, but I was going home.’

‘It wasn’t until years later when the Vietnam Wall was unveiled in Washington, D.C., that he found out why.

‘They had a web site you could go on, and the 58,000 of my brothers who paid the ultimate sacrifice ... I love the freedom we have and I thank the VA for providing this wonderful, glorious day to commemorate and remember not only our fallen, but those of us who lived, knowing their spirits are alive in us, because of you.’

Campbell spoke to the capacity crowd as part of the special tribute on the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War, and said society as well as the veterans who have served, have learned a lot through the years. He said never again will one generation of Veterans forget another, and society must look out for those who come home.

‘Vietnam is sometimes referred to as a war we wished we could forget. But the war we wished we could forget, but the war we wished we could forget, but the Vietnam Vet (can’t forget), what with the wonderful welcome home we got.

‘They loved us! They gave us the finger and said we were number one! They just couldn’t thank us enough. Many of us went into what I call a bunker. Just get over it, get away from it and leave it alone. I guess we’ve learned from that. Those of us who made it – that’s us here – have an obligation to build again and teach others what we know. And then we can try, with what’s left of our life, to find the goodness and meaning to this life.’

Check out the excerpt of Campbell’s emotional remarks on facebook.com/milwaukeeva.

One prayer for the road road

25th Annual Bike Blessing combines food, fun and fellowship

More than 100 Veteran bikers and family members roared into the Milwaukee VA June 6 so the Revs. Norm Oswald and Daniel Fitten could lay hands and bless them and their bikes.

The 25th Annual Bike Blessing to honor Vietnam Veterans attracted one of the biggest crowds in years with young and old alike coming for the prayer service and blessing, followed by free food, music and fellowship.

Oswald, a VA chaplain better known as Father Norm, started the event a quarter century ago to reach out to Vietnam Veterans and encourage them to come to the medical center to get their care. It has since expanded to include all Veterans of all eras, and this year had the biggest increase in Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans.

‘Thought I should come out and support this,’ said Iraq Veteran Matt Staube. ‘(The Vietnam veterans) cleared the way for a lot of younger Veterans to have the opportunities we have today. They weren’t going to just go quietly and just fold in.’

Stephen “Gray Fox” Courina, who represents the Vietnam Veterans Bike Club, and other groups donated more than $2,000 to the chaplain’s fund at the event.

That money 100 percent goes right back to the Veterans

The Rev. Dan Fitten, chief of chaplains, provides a blessing for one of more than 125 bikers who showed up for the annual event.

‘Death is a thing that all of us are going to face, and that’s why we do it,’ he said. ‘There is no overhead, the administration doesn’t take it, and it doesn’t go to the ivory tower. If a Veteran needs a bus ticket or clean clothes, it comes directly from that.’

Courina said it’s important to include more Veterans in the event.

‘They’re the next generation and they need to continue on with this legacy,’ he said.

Oswald, who retired earlier this year, came back especially for this event.

“We gather again to celebrate the goodness in all of your hearts and souls,” he said at the prayer service.

He recounted a story from his first parish more than 40 years ago when a biker was killed by a drunk driver. More than 500 bikers showed up at the church to pay respects, which scared the community and with our youth.”

“We gather again to celebrate the goodness in all of your hearts and souls,” he said at the prayer service.

He recounted a story from his first parish more than 40 years ago when a biker was killed by a drunk driver. More than 500 bikers showed up at the church to pay respects, which scared the community and with our youth.”

The question we should consider today is, ‘How do we carry everything they did, provided better opportunities for their family, fellow Americans, and future generations. The question we should consider today is, ‘How do we carry the legacy of our heroes in providing a better tomorrow for our community?’

He said it’s crucial to mentor children and young adults in the community, to pass on knowledge learned from older generations.

“There are plenty of opportunities for us to contribute and lead in our community, if we listen with the purpose to learn, we all can find a way to make a difference in our community and with our youth.”

Continued on Page 8

See Prayer

Old Main and Miller Park overlook rows of bikes lined up in the Spinal Cord Injury parking lot for the June 6 bike blessing, which was followed by free food and music.
PHOTO FEATURE

PHOTOS (Clockwise from top): The Rev. Norman Oswald, the former chief of chaplains, provides a blessing. Although he retired earlier this year, Oswald came back especially for the event he helped create. Stephen “Gray Fox” Courina, a member of the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club, speaks during the prayer service. Following the blessing, bikers gathered at the Spinal Cord Injury lot for free food provided by AMVETS and musical entertainment by East to West.

PHOTO FEATURE

PHOTOS (From top): A volunteer from Nova Tech School carries a bundle of flags through Wood National Cemetery. He was one of many volunteers who came by to decorate all 39,000-plus graves with an American flag during Memorial Day. Jim McLain, medical center associate director, stands with Mark and Marlene Brewer during the May 15 patient recognition ceremony. Both were given recognition by staff for working together for a healthier lifestyle. Mark and his wife took part in the Smoking Cessation Program and have been cigarette-free since April 2014. Troy Freund carries hundreds of dollars in donations raised by #MKEcosplay5k fundraiser run to collect donations for Veterans Milwaukee VA.

Prayer

Continued from Page 7

older priest who was about 70 years old.

“They’re going to wreck the church! They’re going to wreck the church!” the older priest worried.

And I told him, ‘Relax, Joe, just relax,’” Oswald said. “But people have certain impressions when they don’t get to know people.

“Now I’m approaching 70. I’ve gotten to know all of you and you scare me!” he said to a big laugh. “But you scare me because you are so generous with your time and donations. You know it’s never been about a hand out, but a hand up.”

Following the prayer service, each biker received a special blessing, a penlight and commemorative bike blessing pin. Then they made their way to the Spinal Cord Injury Center for free food by AMVETS and two hours of rock music by the VA Jam Band, East to West.

“Now that’s what we do,” said Candy Endres, from the AMVETS Auxiliary. “We give back to the Veterans and make sure they are taken care of.”

And that made all the difference for the Veterans who showed up for the blessing.

“I think this is a good way to educate people on some of the things VA has to offer,” said Veteran Kristy Ludin. “And what’s better than getting the Big Guy on your side when you’re on your bike?”

In and Around the Milwaukee VA

PHOTOS (From top): A volunteer from Nova Tech School carries a bundle of flags through Wood National Cemetery. He was one of many volunteers who came by to decorate all 39,000-plus graves with an American flag during Memorial Day. Jim McLain, medical center associate director, stands with Mark and Marlene Brewer during the May 15 patient recognition ceremony. Both were given recognition by staff for working together for a healthier lifestyle. Mark and his wife took part in the Smoking Cessation Program and have been cigarette-free since April 2014. Troy Freund carries hundreds of dollars in donations raised by #MKEcosplay5k fundraiser run to collect donations for Veterans Milwaukee VA.
In and Around the Milwaukee VA

PHOTOS (Clockwise from top): Members of the Wauwatosa West High School’s band booster board deliver a truckload of donations in late May for homeless Veterans. In the summer of 2014, Tosa West Band performed at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii near the USS Arizona. After the trip, the band held a fundraiser concert for homeless Veterans where audience members would bring donations as admission. Greg Kassin from Facility Management replaces the slats on benches around Lake Wheeler. Employees are all smiles after strolling the grounds during the annual VA2K event to encourage healthy habits and bring in donations for homeless Veterans. A cameraman captures a tree planting in the historic district in mid-May. The Milwaukee Brewers donated 150 trees for the Hank Aaron Trail and throughout the VA campus.

PHOTO FEATURE

Kayleen’s Kitchen

By Kayleen Wichlinski
Registered Dietitian

In VA, we love any reason to proudly display our red, white, and blue. With summer approaching, we also gear up for patriotic holidays – especially Independence Day! I am sure you have recipes for flag cakes, white chocolate-dipped strawberries, and berry salads. For an easy and nutritious addition to your holiday parties, try a berry yogurt parfait. Fresh fruit and yogurt pair well together for a healthy snack or dessert.

Low-fat yogurt is a food that plays a natural role in boosting your immune system. It also helps to keep your bones strong. Many yogurts contain Vitamin D, which combined with sunlight, plays an antimicrobial role and boosts your natural immune system. It fights off colds, flus and some autoimmune diseases.

Made from fermented milk, yogurt contains friendly bacteria known as probiotics which occur naturally in your gut. Probiotics from yogurt fight bad microorganisms in your gut to help digest food and boost immunity. Read yogurt labels to look for probiotics, or live active cultures, like Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium.

Though calcium in yogurt is also good for healthy bones, yogurt has also been linked to lowering blood pressure. High calcium foods like yogurt have been found to lower systolic (top number) blood pressure.

Whether you are trying to lower blood pressure, improve gut function or boost immunity, yogurt can be a great addition to your daily food repertoire. Add yogurt to smoothies, exchange sour cream for plain yogurt in savory dishes, or add to fruit for a healthy patriotic celebration!

Recipe of the Month

Patriotic Yogurt Parfaits

Serves: 2

Ingredients:
- 2 6 oz. containers of vanilla or honey Greek yogurt
- 1 cup fresh strawberries, diced
- ½ cup fresh blueberries
- 2 Tbsp. granola (optional)

Directions:
1. In a 12 oz. wide-rimmed glass, place ¼ cup strawberries. Carefully add 3 oz. yogurt on top of berries.
2. Layer ¼ cup blueberries.
3. Carefully add remaining 3 oz. of yogurt on top of berries. Top with ¼ cup blueberries.
4. Sprinkle with 1 Tablespoon granola (optional).
5. Repeat recipe with second glass.
Employee of the Month
May 2015

Tiffany Phelps
Training Specialist

According to the nomination: Tiffany exercised tremendous ability in her position and can tackle tasks that come her way. She volunteered to serve as interim program manager for several months and is an excellent representative of VA and its values of serving Veterans.

In Service
Congratulations to the following Clement J. Zablocki VA employees who reached career milestones in June 2015:

- **10 Years**
  - Lindsay Bertrandt
  - Catherine Bjork
  - Kelly Gildner
  - Trina L Haeffel
  - Mark A Kissee
  - Jessie L Malcore
  - Camille Robinson
  - Michelle Rotgers

- **15 Years**
  - Cindy Schrank
  - Anthony Smith
  - Brandon Stayner
  - Krystal Wick
  - David Canevit
  - Roberta De Weese
  - John Hayes

- **20 Years**
  - Kathryn Korth
  - Colleen Timpano
  - Tracy Arnold
  - Hedako Cooper-Williams
  - Mary Jo Dejanovich
  - Brenda Henderson-Washington
  - Lester Kickhaver, Jr.

- **25 Years**
  - Yalila Barron
  - Holly Jacobson
  - James Konkol
  - Mariabel Loo
  - Troy Martinson
  - April Old Coyote
  - Ann Rosenthal
  - Bonnie Schlinder-Delap
  - Lori Wentland

- **30 Years**
  - Kathryn Epping
  - Angela F Garza
  - Elizabeth Henry
  - Gregory Jakus
  - Gretchen Kohler
  - Jill Lepine
  - Carol Parker

- **35 Years**
  - Joan Lenga
  - Patti Ratkowski
  - Georgiann Schneider
  - Gordon Telford
  - William Wenninger

- **40 Years**
  - Lois Gillespie
  - John Johnson
  - Ivory Lewis
  - Gloria Whatley

If you could ask any person any question...

- **Michael Keelan:** I would ask Elvis if as a little boy he would believe one day there would be 10,000 people dressed like him daily.

- **Don Mitchell:** If I die, I’ll ask God, “Why ticks?” They’ve got to be the most useless thing on Earth.

- **Michael Schmierer:** I would ask Public Affairs why this is the first time I’m in this newsletter. I’m a celebrity.

- **Al White:** I would ask Eric Buchmann in FM how he grew a fabulous beard. It’s a gift to the employees here. I work with him all day, walk up and down the halls with him, and he gets compliments wherever he goes.