

# Paying It Forward

Veterans incarcerated paying back and paying forward

A good friend, author, and Vietnam veteran (medic) said in his most recent book, *36 Years and a Wakeup*, that he didn't regret going to Nam. What he regretted were the choices he made after returning home. Incarcerated vets have those same regrets, but while they are paying back their debt to society, many of them are paying it forward in any number of ways.



### Clinton Correctional Facility

In the summer of 2009, a veteran wrote to me about a program that he and other veterans of Clinton Correctional Facility, in Dannemora, New York, undertook to honor the four thousand three hundred and forty-two troops killed in action since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) – otherwise known as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They came up with a concept called Going the Distance. Every runner/walker, 189 in total, would be asked to complete over six thousand miles as a “memorial” to our fallen heroes. The project was successfully completed in just ten weeks.

### Holman Correctional Facility

The Holman Vets Group of Alabama pays it forward by sending their craft works to Veterans Incarcerated Chapter (IVG) #261 in Lima, Ohio. In turn, this chapter sponsored a poker run to help battered women. The Holman Vets also took part in the Operation Smile, Toys for Tots, and Stamps for Soldiers projects with other IVGs. They have regularly sent craft items to the “Jesus Wept Ministry” in Texas, and support an orphanage in Costa Rica, as well as a school for blind children in India. Wallets crafted

from calf skin are donated to VA hospitals in Massachusetts and New York. This group also supports the Vets Freedom Mission and Chaplain Browder's Prison Crusade, along with the Mission of Faith in Washington.

### San Quentin State Prison

The Vietnam Veterans Group of San Quentin, California, has been in operation since 1987. Most of their good works are achieved through fund-raising activities. Every Christmas, one of the vets dresses up as Santa, and distributes toys to the children of the incarcerated, in the prison waiting room. Since 1990, there has been a scholarship program funded by food sales. Family members of the veterans group are eligible to apply for college scholarships. The group is also involved in reaching out to and educating adolescents who are at risk. “Operation Mom” makes up care packages of food, hygiene products, clothing items, and letters to our deployed veterans. “Tabs for Tots” collects can tabs to assist families of children with cancer.

### Many more

These are just a few examples of how veterans incarcerated are paying it forward, while they pay back their debt to society. There are many more veteran incarcerated groups in many more prisons, who are making similar contributions.

We need to recognize their service during war time and their continuing service during incarceration. They may have made bad choices after returning from service, but they're making the right choices now, and they deserve our respect. We must ensure that they are never forgotten. ★

### Pay It Forward – What's It Mean?

The concept was described by Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to Benjamin Webb dated April 22, 1784: “I do not pretend to give such a Sum; I only lend it to you. When you [...] meet with another honest Man in similar Distress, you must pay me by lending this Sum to him; enjoining him to discharge the Debt by a like operation, when he shall be able, and shall meet with another opportunity. I hope it may thus go thro' many hands, before it meets with a Knave that will stop its Progress. This is a trick of mine for doing a deal of good with a little money.”

## Got PTSD? Blame Your Genes.

By now we all know about PTSD. In fact, some of us know so much about it from first-hand experience, that we can definitely be considered experts. The acronym, PTSD, tells us right away that the condition is trauma related. And many Vietnam veterans who suffer from PTSD can relate the condition to trauma experienced during their time in Vietnam. But so far, none of us really know why this happens. Why have some veterans suffered for decades with their PTSD, while others who went through the same experiences, are going on with their lives with no problems? A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* says that there is a strong link between PTSD and a mutation in a gene that regulates stress. The study also found that childhood trauma appears to make brain cells more sensitive to stress hormones for the rest of their lives. Maybe some day we'll find the answer. Meanwhile, research continues.

