

Episode Four
Bob McDonald - SECVA

Public Service Announcement:

Man: My grandfather served in World War II, spending time with him was the best memories of my life. I became physician at VA because of my grandfather. So I can help others like him. I can't imagine working with better doctors, or a more dedicated staff. I'm fulfilling my life's mission with the help of my team, and thanks to these veterans. I'm proud to be a doctor at VA, and proud to honor my grandfather everyday. Search VA careers for more.

Intro Monologue:

Good morning, everyone, and happy Veterans Day to all of our former Servicemen and women. November 11th is always a special day in our nation as we get to extend our gratitude to all those who have served this great country. I also want to wish my fellow Marines a happy belated birthday. If you have even one Marine friend on Facebook you probably saw a plethora of Marine Corps birthday posts as the Corps celebrated their 241st birthday yesterday.

This is the fourth episode of the podcast and our official launch of the program. I want to thank everyone that has taken the time to listen to our first three episodes. If you have not heard them yet, visit blogs.va.gov or search "This Week at VA" in iTunes to check them out.

Today's episode will recognize a Medal of Honor recipient and feature an interview with Secretary of Department of Veterans Affairs, Robert McDonald. Wrapping up the podcast will be information on an online benefits portal and our Veteran of the Day.

Our first segment is an ode to Medal of Honor recipient, Michael Fitzmaurice. Fitzmaurice is an Army Veteran out of South Dakota. Our team recently had the opportunity to talk with him about his experiences. Before we hear from him, I'd like to share his Medal of Honor citation.

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. Sp4c. Fitzmaurice, 3d Platoon, Troop D, distinguished himself at Khe Sanh. Sp4c. Fitzmaurice and 3 fellow soldiers were occupying a bunker when a company of North Vietnamese sappers infiltrated the area. At the onset of the attack Sp4c. Fitzmaurice observed 3 explosive charges which had been thrown into the bunker by the enemy. Realizing the imminent danger to his comrades, and with complete disregard for his personal safety, he hurled 2 of the charges out of the bunker. He then threw his flak vest and himself over the remaining charge. By this courageous act he absorbed the blast and shielded his fellow-soldiers. Although suffering from serious multiple wounds and partial loss of

sight, he charged out of the bunker, and engaged the enemy until his rifle was damaged by the blast of an enemy hand grenade. While in search of another weapon, Sp4c. Fitzmaurice encountered and overcame an enemy sapper in hand-to-hand combat. Having obtained another weapon, he returned to his original fighting position and inflicted additional casualties on the attacking enemy. Although seriously wounded, Sp4c. Fitzmaurice refused to be medically evacuated, preferring to remain at his post. Sp4c. Fitzmaurice's extraordinary heroism in action at the risk of his life contributed significantly to the successful defense of the position and resulted in saving the lives of a number of his fellow soldiers. These acts of heroism go above and beyond the call of duty, are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflect great credit on Sp4c. Fitzmaurice and the U.S. Army.”

Here is Fitzmaurice’s personal account of his service.

Audio

Interview Intro:

It’s always a privilege to recognize heroes like Fitzmaurice.

The feature interview this week is Army Veteran Bob McDonald. McDonald graduated from West Point in 1975 and served for five years, primarily with 82nd Airborne Division. After separating from the Army in 1980, he joined Procter & Gamble and worked his way up to become the President and CEO in 2009. He retired from Procter & Gamble in 2013 and on July 29, 2014, the U.S. Senate voted 97-0 to confirm McDonald as the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. He was sworn in a day later.

In this interview, Bob talks with us about joining the military, searching for his sense of purpose at Procter & Gamble, his calling to VA, veteran homelessness, outreach to Veterans, and the growth he’s seen in VA. I tried to approach this interview, not as an employee as VA, but as an informed Veteran looking for insight from VA’s top office. I hope you enjoy.

Interview with Bob McDonald:

Timothy L.: Secretary Robert A. McDonald—it will be the only time I say that name, 'cause I know you like to be addressed as Bob.

Bob McD.: Bob, please, yeah.

Timothy L.: Thank you so much for joining me. This is the VA podcast, so it's only appropriate that we have the Secretary of Veteran Affairs on. So thank you so much for joining us.

Bob McD.: No, thank you, Tim, it's great to be with you.

Timothy L.: So we start every interview with the decision to join the military, 'cause that's what we all have in common but it's still unique to everybody. Tell us about that experience for you.

Bob McD.: Well, my decision to join the military happened very early. I enjoyed playing army as a child and I always knew I wanted to go to West Point. I wanted to lead a life that was a bit different—I wanted to free the people who were not living in free societies. And so I first applied to West Point when I was in sixth grade, I was 11 years old. I wrote my Congressman, and fortunately, the Congressman didn't discourage me. Of course, I couldn't matriculate to West Point as an 11-year-old, but he said, you know, take the test every year and I will take your best score, and of course I got into West Point my junior year and entered in the Class of 1975. That Congressman, who I've thanked since then, was Donald Rumsfeld, but I thanked him for not discouraging a young person whose vision, whose aspiration was to go to West Point.

Timothy L.: Other common factor that we all have is getting out of the military.

Bob McD.: Mm-hm.

Timothy L.: And again, it's a unique experience for every veteran. What was your transition like, coming out of the Army?

Bob McD.: Well, it was during peacetime, so I left the military in 1980. I fortunately had a fantastic commander who saw the tapestry of work I did in the military and awarded me the Meritorious Service Medal. While I was in the military, I'd gotten an MBA at night and on the weekends, and so I started interviewing toward the end of my time, the end of my commitment, and joined the Proctor & Gamble Company. So I left the military effectively on June 4th, 1980 and I joined the Proctor & Gamble Company on June 4th, 1980, so it was relatively seamless.

Timothy L.: Last week's episode, Fred Wellman, ScoutComms's CEO, we were talking about how difficult it is for veterans to maintain work when they first get out. I think it's 45 percent of veterans will quit their first job out of the military within a year.

Bob McD.: Yeah.

Timothy L.: You stayed and rose up the chain. How long was it until Proctor & Gamble fulfilled that sense of purpose that veterans are seeking as soon as they get out of the military?

Bob McD.: It took a while. In fact, I struggled at the very beginning—I often say I was lost for the first two or three years of Proctor & Gamble. I came in—I remember I came into my first brand group. I was on marketing of a new brand called Solo which was a liquid laundry detergent. The brand ended up failing, by the way. Seeing how I thought my career was in question at that point, but I remember coming and saying, “Well, where is the field manual that tells you how the files are arranged in the desk?” And of course, there isn't one in private industry, so it was really hard getting used to it and I worked for an individual who is a dear friend of mine but he was significantly younger than I was and had, obviously, different leadership experience than I did, so the first few years were pretty

tough. I think it was really only about the time I went overseas, particularly when I went to the Philippines in 1991, and I really saw our products making a difference in the lives of the people that use them. I mean, it sounds quaint, maybe, for products like laundry detergent and razor blades and things like that, but I could see firsthand how we were improving the quality of life and that really is what got me back to my purpose, which is really trying to help improve the lives of others.

Timothy L.: I'll ask you the same question when we start about you serving as Sec VA, but as far as Proctor & Gamble goes, what skill sets and discipline did you learn in the Army that contributed most to your success at Proctor & Gamble?

Bob McD.: Well, certainly leadership. I mean, the great benefit of having time in the military service, and for me, time at West Point, was becoming a very deliberate student of leadership, studying leadership, observing leadership, trying to get in touch with what your own leadership is. Particularly when you're in a leadership position at West Point, you're leading peers, and an authoritarian kind of leadership doesn't work when you're leading peers, and so that's a really good incubator to try things and you either succeed or fail. And then certainly leading small units, like leading a platoon, a company, those were all great opportunities to try different things out and, in a sense, form my own leadership philosophy, which I then took into industry with me.

Timothy L.: Something we've learned about so many veterans come out of the military is that many in some way will experience some sort of emotional crisis.

Bob McD.: For sure.

Timothy L.: Did you experience anything like that?

Bob McD.: Absolutely. You join the military because of your sense of purpose, and suddenly when you leave the military, you feel like you've lost that sense of purpose. And while you try to redirect it to other things, you know, you really want to be part of something that's much bigger than yourself. The camaraderie that you have in the military is hard to duplicate in the private sector because in the private sector, you don't face the in extremis circumstances that you do in the military—you're not jumping out of airplanes with parachutes, you're not on a battlefield, and you miss those things. Can you recreate them? Yeah, sure. I mean, every great leader of every great company wants to create that kind of collaboration, that kind of camaraderie, wants to create that kind of sense of purpose. But I joined a company where if I wanted to talk about it in a negative way, I could say, you know, I was selling toilet paper. How does that improve lives? Well, I guess it does, but it just doesn't feel quite the ultimate aspirational mission that saving the world for democracy does.

Timothy L.: I would notice if I didn't have any toilet paper. [LAUGHS]
Bob McD.: Yeah, I know. Well, you're being very practical.
Timothy L.: Yeah.
Bob McD.: The same would be true of mothers and fathers with babies that need Pampers.
Timothy L.: Yeah, exactly.
Bob McD.: One of the things you find as you go around the world, virtually the first product that the poorest consumer uses is laundry detergent.
Timothy L.: Oh, interesting.
Bob McD.: Or soap.
Timothy L.: Yeah.
Bob McD.: You know, they have a bar of soap or they have laundry detergent, they wash their hair, they wash their body, they wash their clothes. That laundry detergent becomes very important to that family because when you walk out of that Nipa hut or wherever you are, Africa, Asia, Russia, wherever, your clothes are the billboard for your family. Family either takes care of each other—you know, whoever does the laundry—or they don't. And then after that initial soap, it's usually a differentiation of soap, maybe a shampoo, a laundry detergent, a bar soap. Other products are way down the line—even today, laundry detergent is probably the fastest-selling item in most grocery stores.
Timothy L.: Right. You were talking about camaraderie.
Bob McD.: Camaraderie.
Timothy L.: I mean, 99 percent of veterans are going to tell you that the one thing they miss the most in the military is camaraderie.
Bob McD.: Absolutely.
Timothy L.: And one thing that I think so many of us miss, and this is not a slight to my colleagues now or the colleagues I've had afterwards, but one thing you can always rely on in the military is no matter how much we like or dislike each other or agree to disagree, when it comes to mission accomplishment, that's something we're all moving towards and we will help each other accomplish that.
Bob McD.: It's the only reason you're there.
Timothy L.: Yeah.
Bob McD.: And that develops a bond of trust, which is very hard to duplicate. You know, I've been very fortunate in this job as secretary where the deputy secretary, Sloan Gibson, who I love and admire, is my West Point classmate. You know, we were seniors together at West Point, we both had roles in the brigade, in the corps of cadets, we lived next to each other our senior year the entire year, and he's been my close personal friend for 40 years. And to be able to do something you love doing, which I love this role of serving veterans, but to be able to do it with somebody you love and somebody you trust is really a blessing.

Timothy L.: The first time you and I met was actually, I think, two years ago at the Student Veterans of America conference. You spoke there and you gave a really great, almost town hall question and answer session where you were very direct with people.

Bob McD.: Right.

Timothy L.: And I got the opportunity to ask you a question and you'd only been in office for a few months at the time and I challenged the VA's willingness to do more outreach to veterans that are either skeptical of VA or don't want to get in front of other veterans and need it.

Bob McD.: Sure.

Timothy L.: So I would like to readdress that question now, now that you have a couple years under your belt here.

Bob McD.: Yeah. No, it's a big issue, it's a big issue. You know, we measure how much veterans trust the VA and it's an important measure to us. Are we satisfying veterans? Are we delivering on our promises to them? And over the last few years, the trust level's gone up by about 12 index points. Nevertheless, we've got a cadre of veterans out there who may have had a bad experience with the VA three years ago, four years ago five years ago—how do we get them to retry the VA now, because it's a different VA? And I think veterans who are using us and veteran service organization members would say it is a different VA now. And so one of the things we've got to do is get the word out it is different. Now, the good news is we've got, for example, more than a million more veterans using our healthcare system than we had in 2010. So that's great, particularly considering the total number of veterans has gone down from like 23 and a half million to like 21 million, but we've got a million more using our system and what we're seeing now is, you know, we're having increases in the number of veterans coming in as we improve care. So as you improve care, the word gets out and more people come in, but we need to work harder at that outreach, and that's one of the things we're doing, is we're asking our health administration to get out there and get people qualified, we're asking the benefits administration to get out there, don't wait for people to come to the office. Even our cemeteries, we're now pre-clearing people to be buried in the cemetery, whereas what we used to do was wait till they died and then the family would have to apply. Well, we're trying to pre-clear people, we're trying to pre-clear people for their benefits, for their healthcare by moving it upstream while they're in the service. We're trying in the healthcare area, we're trying to get ahead of it by doing the C&P exam and other things while they're still in the service so there's no gap in that process, that service can be continuous when they get out.

Timothy L.: Yeah. And since we're talking about veterans coming in with the VA system, I think maybe the more challenging question that I had prepared for today is, in the next few years, should America need to go war again or go into some sort of campaign, is VA prepared to take another influx of combat veterans into their system?

Bob McD.: Well, we have to be. We have to be, but I tell you, we struggle because no matter the transformation I lead here, including things like by the end of the year having same-day access at all of our facilities for primary care or, for example, if you're a new veteran, you can sign up for healthcare on the internet or by making a phone call—I don't even need your signature any longer. Those are all important steps, but no matter what I do, I'm still relying on Congress to appropriate the money and pass the laws. Let me give you an example: We've added over four million new completed appointments in the last year versus the previous year for healthcare. That's great—how've we done that? We've added new square footage of space, new clinics. We've added more doctors, more nurses. We've expanded clinic hours in the evenings, on the weekends. But right now, we have 24 new clinics that have already been appropriated—Congress has already given the money for them, but they've not been authorized. So I need Congress to authorize those 24 new clinics to continue to expand services. So my job is I've got to tell them what the requirements are and then they've got to help me by appropriating the money and giving me the authorization to meet the veterans' needs. I can't do without Congress.

Timothy L.: You mention Congress. Something I've heard you reiterate multiple times throughout your career is you didn't expect this position to be so political. How does VA, being a federal department and being tied up in so much politics, how does that benefit and how does that suffer at VA?

Bob McD.: Well, the good news is there's tremendous unanimity in the country, ostensibly in Congress, for veterans. It would be unpopular in the country today to be not for veterans. That's very different than the time I served during the Vietnam era, and so that's the good thing, that's good, everybody claims they're for it. What frankly makes me indignant is when veterans are used as political pawns—they're stood up at rallies behind candidates, candidates talk about how much they care about veterans, and then when you look at their voting record or you look at the fact that they may have medical deferments during Vietnam or some other thing to escape service, you begin to wonder, and oftentimes the criticism I find, sometimes, oftentimes comes from members of Congress who have never served in the military. We've got to find a way to turn this positive feeling into action. That's why we gave Congress about 100 different pieces of legislation that we need for veterans, 40 of

which were new this year. But you know, we've only been able to get a few through, so I've got to find a way to turn this good feelin for veterans into legislation that gets passed. It's a lot of stuff that both sides now agree on—we just can't it through the Congress.

Timothy L.: While I was researching for this podcast, I found a PDF at Proctor & Gamble titled “What I Believe In.”

Bob McD.: Mm-hm.

Timothy L.: Which was ten leadership principles that you believe in.

Bob McD.: Right.

Timothy L.: And the tenth one is “The true test of a leader is the performance of the organization when they are absent or after they depart.”

Bob McD.: Yeah, when the leader's not there.

Timothy L.: Right. Presuming you're stepping out in January, what kind of legacy do you believe you will leave here at VA, and how will we be measuring your leadership a year from now?

Bob McD.: Well, the way I think we ought to measure the leadership of the VA is based on outcomes for veterans. Have we improved the care for veterans? Have we had more completed medical appointments? Have we continued to build capabilities so that more veterans can come into the system? Are we dealing with the disability claim backlog? You know, we've reduced it by 90 percent. Have we ended veteran homelessness? We haven't ended it, but it's down 50 percent and the last year was the year of the biggest decline, 17 percent nationally. But, you know, we've got more to do, and if you measure me on anything, it would be hopefully transforming this organization to put the veteran at the center of everything we do, to look at every issue through the lens of the veteran, not through the lens of the bureaucracy. That's what we've been trying to do.

Timothy L.: Going back to that SVA conference, Vice President Joe Biden also spoke at that conference.

Bob McD.: Yeah, very inspiring speech.

Timothy L.: Yeah, it was one of the better speeches that I had heard throughout this entire administration. But one thing that stood out to me, and I remembered it as soon as we confirmed this interview was, he commented that this job, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, was not one anyone in their right mind would take. But yet you took it, and you were confirmed unanimously in Congress. What is it about this organization and this position that felt so right for you?

Bob McD.: Well, it's all about purpose. You know, the opportunity to help my brother and sister veterans and to take everything I had learned, whether at West Point or in the Army or 33 years serving five billion consumers on the planet every single day at Proctor & Gamble, take all of that knowledge and bring it to serve, in my opinion, the most important customer, veterans, those who have already earned the right to be served through their service, through their sacrifice. I tend to be a relatively devout person and when I

got the call from the White House, I said, "This is exactly what I would've expected, this is God's plan." He's prepared me in all these different positions, whether it was West Point, the Army, Proctor & Gamble, all these different countries, to now take everything I've learned and bring it to bear for the most important people on the planet, which are the veterans who have preserved the freedom of this country.

Timothy L.: I don't know what's going to happen on Tuesday.

Bob McD.: I don't either.

Timothy L.: I guess we'll see—at the time of this recording, we don't know what's happening on Tuesday. I don't know what happens in January, but I know that sense of purpose isn't going to leave when you leave this office.

Bob McD.: No, it never does. It never does.

Timothy L.: Have you thought about how you're going to fulfill that, either for yourself or continuing your service to veterans?

Bob McD.: You know, I really haven't thought about that, Tim, and the reason I haven't is I don't want to get distracted from getting as much done here as I can. So we've got our heads down. President Obama has talked with us about, you know, running through the tape. We are all—that's an old expression, by the way—but we are all running through the tape to try to get as much done as we can. We committed to every one of our facilities having same-day access for primary care. We have about 150, 160 facilities—we're only about 80 or 90 now, so we've got work to do and I want to make sure we get that work done. I don't want to be distracted by any opportunities in the future. There'll be time for that.

Timothy L.: Sure.

Bob McD.: So my family may want to meet me again.

Timothy L.: [LAUGHS]

Bob McD.: And I probably could use a rest.

Timothy L.: Sure. I saw that "What I Believe In" list of leadership traits cited on there with *Seven Habits of Highly Productive People*, which is a very popular book.

Bob McD.: Yeah, Steven Covey. Great book.

Timothy L.: Here at VA, as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, what habits or routines have you implemented here to ensure that your time is used most efficiently here?

Bob McD.: I tend to be a relatively efficient person. One of the things I've done here, it used to be that the secretary would come in a meeting and you'd have a long presentation of the secretary. What I like to do is have people provide me something to read before I get into the meeting, already have coalesced my thoughts, and then use the time in the meeting to have a discussion about what we need to do. That caught people by surprise, I think, a little bit in the beginning and I think the pace at which we moved in the beginning caught

people by surprise. But I think now we're becoming more and more comfortable to it, so we can do things more quickly and we don't have to be as pedantic about briefings and staff work and all the things that take a lot of time. I can remember when I had an issue with a member of Congress, our organization wanted to do a lot of staff work and I said, "No, I'm just going to pick up the phone and call the person," which I did. Or one time we were over on Capitol Hill and I wanted to go see the chairman of our House committee, Jeff Miller, and we didn't have an appointment—I just walked in his office. But business operates at the speed—i mean, if somebody needs something urgently from our medical system, we should be able to provide it. And we as a business need to operate at that speed to serve veterans, to better serve veterans.

Timothy L.: I think it was a couple years ago you helped do a Point in Time survey in Los Angeles.

Bob McD.: I've done it every year now in Los Angeles, the last two years.

Timothy L.: Tell me about that experience. When I walk by a veteran on the street, I see their sign and I resonate with them a little bit knowing that I came close to homelessness, I have friends that came close to it. As the person who heads the office of the organization meant to take care of them, how does your emotions respond to seeing those signs on those people?

Bob McD.: Yeah. My worst nightmare is being on the street with a homeless person lifting up that blue tarp and seeing somebody I served with. That would be worst nightmare. There's nothing more important that we're doing than eradicating veteran homelessness. The good news is we've made progress, we're down 47 percent since 2010. We dropped it 17 percent in the last year, we dropped it over 30 percent in Los Angeles in the last year, which is the location of the biggest cohort of homeless people. We know how to do it, we know the strategy is housing first, we know getting them the wraparound care, we've hired more case workers to do it, so we know what we're doing and one of the things I'm excited about is around Veterans Day this year, we're doing something called Project Reveille, which is going to be stand-downs in multiple cities around the country simultaneously that will result at the end of the day with a homeless person actually in a home, in a shelter, getting the care they need. So there's just simply nothing more important that we can do than to eliminate homelessness. Those Point in Time counts are tough.

Timothy L.: Yeah.

Bob McD.: They're really tough. Because I've had cases in Los Angeles where I've asked people, you know, if they're a veteran and they say yes and I discover they're not, you know. So they're really tough. They're really tough, and your heart goes out to every single person. You know, one of the things that creates homelessness is a

gap between military service and becoming a veteran and getting your VA disability claims handled or healthcare. And so by moving upstream with the Department of Defense and making sure veterans, service members, get signed up early, even before they become veterans, becomes critically important. We don't want that gap. The other thing that becomes an indicator of homelessness is when a veteran gets involved with the judicial system and it might be resulting in incarceration. So veteran treatment courts—you know, we now have over 400 veteran treatment courts in the country. Five years ago, we had zero. Veteran treatment courts are a great thing where the veteran working with the judge and prosecutor gets the case worker from the VA, get the wraparound services, and if they stay on the program, they don't go to jail, and that's an off-ramp for homelessness. So these are the kinds of things we're trying to do to make sure we reduce the number of homeless but we also don't add to it.

Timothy L.: One of the biggest struggles that—and this sort of relates to one of the first questions on outreach—one of the struggles a lot of veterans have is the concept of the VA, whether they're open to it or not, seems so overwhelming.

Bob McD.: Yeah.

Timothy L.: Even myself, an employee of VA, I still wouldn't know where to start. Over the couple years, how have you seen the push of the information in helping the veteran understand the process of the things they need to go through—you know, when you first came onboard versus where we are now—how have you seen that improve?

Bob McD.: Well, first thing we did was we trained every employee in what is the VA, because oftentimes in the past if you went to a person in the hospital administration, they wouldn't know anything about benefits, wouldn't know who to connect you to. And so we put together a training course called VA 101 that every new employee gets trained in and every employee gets trained in so people will know how to direct people. Secondly, we've gone from a myriad of websites that all required different usernames and passwords to one called Vets.gov, so I would encourage every listener to go to Vets.gov—that's a great place to start, it's a great place to plug in, we're building capability in that. We've added a plethora of 1-800 numbers—we're going to one that we'll be launching after Veterans Day. You can now sign up for healthcare online or by phone, you don't have to sign any paperwork. So we're always trying to make it easier for people to get connected and through those connections get into the system. You may recall in September of 2014 at my first national press conference, I gave out my cell phone number and my email address. So I still get calls from veterans every day, I still get emails from veterans every day. I answer them or a team of people

I have that work with me answer them, so if anybody has trouble getting connected, the last resort is just email me, which is easy: bob.mcdonald@va.gov, it's my name.

Timothy L.: Yeah. I've actually on one occasion managing the Twitter handle, there was someone who was upset that none of the numbers were working for them, and I actually DMed them saying, "This is Bob McDonald's number, the Secretary of VA—someone will respond to your query." And they never responded back to me, which usually means that they got what they were looking for.

Bob McD.: Yeah, well, in the beginning I would get over 100 contacts a day always asking for help. Today I now get less than that, significantly less than that, and about a third or a third to a half on any given day are "Thank you for helping me."

Timothy L.: Yeah.

Bob McD.: You know, I got an email last night from a gentleman who was living in Thailand, he had served in Vietnam in the Air Force and he was coming back to the United States, he wanted to sign up for VA healthcare. We got him connected immediately; we discovered he had Stage 4 cancer.

Timothy L.: Wow.

Bob McD.: We immediately got him signed up for his benefits in case something were to happen, because he suffered from Agent Orange exposure. And we got him the healthcare he needed and he wrote me last night just saying how much he appreciated everything that we did for him and how quickly we did it. Those are the emails, those are the phone calls that make what we do every day worthwhile.

Timothy L.: Do you think the VA will ever get to a place where the good stories will outweigh the bad and the public perception will be that the VA is effective?

Bob McD.: Oh, there's no doubt in my mind. I see some of that turning right now. If you look at the unanimity that we have found amongst the veteran service organizations we've been working with, some of the members of Congress, there's always—as I said earlier—there's always an opposition party and there's ideologues in that opposition party that are more about their next election and then criticizing the party that's in power versus trying to be part of the solution. But I see that turning already, and as I said, the numbers suggest the trust in the VA has gone up 12 index points, so the number suggest that it's happening as well.

Timothy L.: I don't want to take up too much more of your time.

Bob McD.: No, it's great to talk to you.

Timothy L.: Yeah, absolutely. Just as you're crossing the tape, as you said earlier—running through the tape, I'm sorry.

Bob McD.: Yeah.

Timothy L.: What is in the forefront? What are you trying to close out? What are you trying to accomplish? What are you hoping to leave behind as your legacy?

Bob McD.: Well, it goes back to your comment about my tenth leadership leaf of how the organization performs when you're not there. My friend Jim Collins, who I think's one of the best business authors in the world, writes about leadership as building a clock, not telling time. I hope what I've done here so far is built a clock and that that clock will continue to run so other people can tell time. What that means is, is caring for veterans one veteran at a time. And hopefully, if you do that one veteran at a time, by the time you're finished, you'll be up to about 21 million. It reminds me of a story that I often use: Loren Eiseley told the story about an old man on a beachfront picking up starfish. The starfish had washed up on the beach and there was concern that they would die in the sun and there were thousands of them, and a young man walked up and he saw this old man picking up these starfish and throwing them back in the sea. And the young man said to the old man, "Old man, what are you doing?" He said, "Well, you can see I'm picking up starfish and throwing them back in the sea. If I don't do that, they'll die." And he said, "But you look on this beach, there're thousands of starfish—how can you possibly make a difference? You can't pick up thousands of starfish before they die." And the old man picked up the starfish and looked at it and said, "You know what? It makes a difference to this one." What I'm trying to do and what I'm trying to get every VA employee to do is to recognize every single day we have the blessing, we have the opportunity to make a difference for at least one person. And when we go home at night, quality of our day is measured in the number of people that we have helped or the number of people we've assisted. And hopefully over all the employees of the VA, over 300,000, all the locations, and all the time we're together, you know, we'll make a big difference.

Timothy L.: Secretary McDonald, thank you so much for joining me here.

Bob McD.: Thank you, Tim. Great to be with you.

Timothy L.: Most importantly, thank you for your service to our country, both in the Army and as Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Bob McD.: Well, thank you for yours in the Marine Corps

Public Service Announcement:

Kids: I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.

Man 1: We grew up together. We believed in something bigger than ourselves. The military took me to one side of the world, her to the other. And even though she was always the strong one, when we caught up years later I found out she had fallen on hard times. It was her call to make, but doing it together made all the difference.

Man 2: As a police officer, when I see homeless vets on my route, I always think to myself “We both swore an oath to protect our way of life, to protect our community.” With VA’s hotline for homeless vets I can get them connected with help, help to get them back on their feet again.

Narrator: VA’s round the clock hotline can put veterans who are homeless in touch with resources and support they earned through their military service. You have the power to help a veteran facing homelessness. Go to VA.gov/homeless to print your wallet card. For veterans that are homeless or on the brink of homelessness, call 877-424-3838

Post-interview monologue:

Secretary McDonald mentioned the website Vets.gov. Vets.gov enables Veterans to discover, apply for, track, and manage the benefits they have earned and is becoming VA’s single, public facing transactional website. Vets.gov is still a work in progress, and is being developed incrementally to ensure that feedback from Veterans drives the design and features of the site. Vets.gov features resources such as a GI Bill comparison tool, a facility locator and links to information on disability benefits, education benefits, employment services, and health care.

Veteran of the Day

Every day we spotlight a unique Veteran as Veteran of the Day. Today, being Veterans Day, we couldn’t choose just one. So, on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs, I would like to thank each and every one of our military veterans for their service and honor you all as our Veteran of the Day.

That’s it for Veterans Day podcast. I want to thank you all for listening. I know there are a lot of options out there for entertainment so I appreciate you for spending your time with me. If you have any feedback or questions you’d like to have answered on the show, please Tweet them to us using #VApodcast or emailing us newmedia@va.gov.

Be sure to visit Facebook.com/VeteransAffairs for more stories from our community. I’m Timothy Lawson, signing off.