

This Week at VA

Episode #15

Gordon Wallace - Army Veteran, VA Volunteer Services

Hosted by Tim Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] PSA:

Women 1: When my husband came home from Vietnam, he didn't really look into all his VA benefits.

Man 1: But now I got some health issues, and I'm glad VA is there for me.

Male Narrator: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov.

[00:00:16] Music

[00:00:28] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Good Morning everyone, I'm Timothy Lawson. You're listening to *This Week at VA*. Our weekly numbers continue to improve which means our listenership is growing and that you're enjoying our content from week to week. Thank you for sharing with your friends and listening to these powerful stories told by our veterans. When you're finished here today, please consider leaving us a rating and review in the podcatcher of your choice: iTunes, Stitcher, or Google Play. Wednesday marked the 72nd anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge and we will release a special interview we did with World War II veteran Harry Miller. If you haven't gotten a chance to hear that episode, be sure to do that next. Harry is a cool guy and has an impressive record of service. To add a bit to the Battle of the Bulge commemoration, I'm gonna play audio from one of our living history series. This series features four Veterans that served during World War II and the Bulge.

[00:01:16] BATTLE OF THE BULGE AUDIO AND COMMENTARY:

Douglas Dillard (DD): I got promoted to First Sergeant the day before my 19th birthday in C Company in 508 Parachute Regiment. And I had been a bit of an Army brat anyway, so I already made up my mind that I was going to make a career of the military. And I did, you know, for 35 years and I served during the Korean War with a clandestine unit and then in Vietnam with the CIA and MAC-V. I'd always felt dedicated to perform my duty. As I look back on this after 70 years and we go in in December to honor the people that were lost, yeah, it brings back a lot of memories. But it's a way to honor and pay tribute to the people that didn't come back.

Mike Levin (ML): Well, I always have had the feeling that I'm proud that I did my part towards maintaining the freedom of the American people. It was a great thing we all had to do. I'm proud we did it. When I got out of the Army, I went looking for a job and nobody needed any field artillery forward observers. [Laughter] I said, "Come on, I'm well experienced." No forward observers needed.

John Schaffner (JS): All I can think about is I wanted to get a job and chase skirts. I wanted to get a car. I didn't talk about the war until 1986, 40 years later, and that was when I went to my first reunion. But all that period in between, it was all behind me.

Alfred Shehab (AS): Yeah.

JS: My friends that I associated with, I knew, had no idea what I went through.

AS: Oh, I stayed in. We never talked about it. We had other things on our mind. This business of being a hero – I'm not a hero. I was a person that enjoyed the Army all the way through, the bad times and the good times. I also felt that if I wanted to be able to live free when war broke out, there was no question – you had to fight. And that's what I did.

JS: I didn't hear the term "Greatest Generation" for a long time.

AS: I did.

JS: And I never considered myself as anybody special.

DD: I always resented the term “the Greatest Generation” because I’m an amateur historian. I do a lot of research at the archives, the Holocaust Museum, and veterans’ activities. I fought in two other wars and what are we, chopped liver from Korea? Or Vietnam or Afghanistan? And my feeling is that that phrase ought to be changed to say, “the generation of great warriors.” Because these guys, even as I speak today, some of them are still in harm’s way. They do the job just as we did. But I really, if someone comes up to me and says, “Are you a member of the greatest generation?” I’d rather him say, “Are you a World War II veteran?” It means more to me than being categorized in a group, and I just kind of refute it.

AS: Yeah.

JS: Yeah. That was me too.

TL: If you want to hear more of their stories, go to our YouTube channel and choose Living History under our playlists. Today’s featured interview is with Gordon Wallace. We first met Gordon at the VA Pacific Islands Health System in Honolulu. He was playing music in the lobby with a fellow Vietnam Veteran. They strummed on their guitars singing familiar songs providing hospital guests with entertainment. Between songs, Gordon began speaking about his recovery. He talked about returning from Vietnam and being shunned by his family. He wept as he recalled being labeled a “baby killer.” Gordon agreed to join me on the podcast and share more of his story. I think you’ll find his reflections just as powerful and as emotional as I did.

[00:05:37] Music

[00:05:44] INTERVIEW:

Gordon Wallace (GW): The VA helped me you know.

TL: Yeah.

GW: Yes. They helped me because at the beginning was kind of hard yeah. That to get my benefits, took me over thirty years, why? Because they

never help us Veterans. Vietnam Veterans. Who wasn't welcomed home but was sad that what we did in the war and then we come home and we ask for help and then they don't help us. But that way we get help, see.

TL: Yeah.

GW: See get the other people, some they don't help us. So, no stop see. What I did, I would stop. That's why it took me thirty years. I go, stop. I go, stop. I go, stop. You know, homeless, everything. But then again, you know.

TL: Yeah.

GW: The VA would help me, that's why I come up here every day, you know. You know why? I feel safe. I feel safe and then I get love from over here. You know my friend are Veterans.

TL: Yeah.

GW: ...a good friend yeah. I make them my family because my family don't want me. My brothers and sisters I'm talking about...

TL: Yeah.

GW: ... I'm not talking about my cousins.

TL: Yeah.

GW: My cousins they like me, but my family, my own brothers and sisters, they don't like me because why, because what they think we did in Vietnam. Baby killer they call us them name. I said 'we never do that'. They had kids that carrying the rifle, 11/12 years old. And then they come to blow us up, you know. We had to do what we had to do.

TL: Yeah.

GW: So don't call us that name. So but anyway, I like to tell the Veterans that the VA help you, don't stop. Don't stop. Because you're not alone, you know. I don't care I'm crying.

TL: Yeah, that's fine.

GW: You know why? I talk from my heart that's why. It hurts, yeah, when I talk about it. Suffer. No can sleep because your friends they're all dying here. Penny. I see one mounting off dead bodies, you know. Football field brother. In the seventies, seventy-one. When I got in country, I never know what the smell. I came out of the plane, 'oh what is, what that smell, and I look, oh'. The helicopters like dragonfly's, just dropping dead bodies. Body bags, yeah. I gotta get that out of my mind. Yes, us guys, Americans, you know. And they say the war backing down, you know, seventy-one. But the war wasn't backing down, it was getting worse. It was getting worse. But we had to do what we had to do, you know?

TL: Yeah. You were drafted?

GW: I was drafted...

TL: Um...

GW: ...But I would like to stay after. Like to stay twenty years, you know? But when I came out of the war zone, had prejudice people. But the black, the crypts, and the blood, they don't like their kind too. If you're not in their gang, you out. They'll kill you, or can in Vietnam. Even when I came school field home, I stationed over there. Oh boy, they mob you, you know, and they can kill you. That's why they ask me if I'm prejudice, I'm not prejudice. It's just that, they will kill one local Hawaiian, yeah. My brother said they'll kill one local boy in '64, they'll kill him in the bed because he can shoot pool. And then the guy, the black guy, they bet money, yeah, he taught the guy who can shoot pool, my brother said the friend can shoot pool. Took the guy's paycheck, was only a hundred something yeah. Then they when they sleep, the shovel right in the head. That's why they had drugged about 200 something boys against thousand guys, you know. All mixed race.

Would fight you know, they lost. I tell my brother, 'oh that's why the guy punched my face'. He tell me I'm from Hawaii. And I told him 'Yeah.' He punched me right in my face. I go to shake his hand. I told him ' Yeah I come from Hawaii how's that' boom. Then I have to fight for my life, you know, because he owned the chair I was sitting on. I had to run, you know. I go to war you know. Cause you no can't fight with him. Razor blade, knife, even a comb. I had to run, they catch me two more times. Saturday, came Sunday, they hunt me down.

TL: Where were you in Vietnam?

GW: I was up Cambodia, by the river. Three months. We had action up there. And then, they was overrun us, our camp, then we had to move out, run, had to leave our camp. We had orders for the coming down, big 6,000 plus. Mixed Vietcong then, Viennese army, not Viennese army, so we had evacuated our camp. Oh, we left everything, just take your clothes. Then we went down to Long Binh. That's a big camp you know, about 5-7 miles wide, yeah. That's why I don't tell my friends about Long Binh, Long Binh was an R&R, you know. You do your job, I was engineer, but I don't talk my infantry friends, yeah. Because they was in the bushes, snakes, and leeches and you know, they don't take a shower. Because in them, my good friends, oh were so, so rough, sad, was sad. And then we come home, oh hard time. But thank God, the VA give good people you know. They help us, they help me, that's why I got my benefits. In '60, no, 2009 I got my benefits. I fight them, from '60, from '73/'74, I fight them for get benefits. But had hard time.

TL: What was the cause of, like why weren't you getting the benefits you needed?

GW: They said that I nothing wrong with me. I told them I talked to somebody, and I like one job. And they told me to go to the unemployment office, across the street. And it looked alright to me. But my mother said I gotta get help because night time come I doing stuff and she don't like it. I talking to myself in the dark, I drink as well. I never used to be a drinker, you know. I was vegetarian surfer, work in the junkyard, that's all I do. And then when I got drafted, I never come home, right? I had to stop what I was doing cause vegetarian you strong

yeah, you very strong you know, but I had to stop because I never like kill nobody. Not fight, no. Kill. See when we fight, we kill yeah. The rage, that's why I never like hurt nobody. You know when I leave, Hawaii (inaudible) that's why because I get (inaudible) blood, yeah. Irish yeah, and the whites no like us cause we, not the kind (inaudible). But I tell them, see, that we were nice guys, yeah. That's why I move off, move out. They don't like us, they don't like my family. But in a way, I left home 14 years old, so on my own, then I go with my dad, yeah, junkyard yeah, work in a junkyard. Then I got drafted.

TL: How old were you when you got drafted?

GW: I was 18, then came 19 I went. But I love the service, you know, was good, you know. I had job, you know, three meals a day, yeah.

TL: Yeah.

GW: I had friends, I had money, paycheck, you know what I mean? It was good, you don't need money anyways, three meals a day, right? I love the service but I was fighting plenty with the blacks, that's why I got out. I was scared because I don't like dyer. You know what I mean, you fighting, nobody help you.

TL: Yeah. So what happened when you got out?

GW: When I got out, I wasn't supposed to come home. My mother said, she called me one, 'asshole, what I'm doing home'. And I said 'oh I'm out'. And she said 'yeah, what you doing home? You know I had nothing for you. Baby killer.' I said 'What?' Almost fall off. You know me, I walk from Hickam to where I live, yeah, with my duffel bag and I never had money, I sent my money home yeah. I was happy I came home anyway, you know. I kissed the road down Hickam. I walked out there, there's protesting baby killer but I thought they'd stay away from me to come by me, then I reach home and my mother tell me 'oh what you doing home asshole?'. I look at my mother, I love her, yeah. I tell my mother 'Where my bank book then?' She tell me 'No, it's hers'. Cause I used to go surf dollar gas, and she tell me it add up. I said 'what', 'you know you used to surf, you like dollar gas'. You know in the '60's dollar gas was

plenty, yeah. 20 cents a gallon, eh. And she tell me I owe her that, that money. So I was homeless, I live in a car in a junk car. I live by the river. My neighbors feed me, you know, my neighbor they feed me. Then sometimes my sister give me food. Then I go hustle for job, yeah. Clean the neighbor's yard, yeah. Got to hustle, yeah. Got to be strong, yeah. And then my mother said 'Go get help' because nighttime, I changed, yeah. When I drink. The neighbor give me beer. And drink yeah. Then I get money and I go buy it, yeah. But I never know, drinking for die, you know, that's why my mother got scared yeah. Because she heard me talking foreign language, yeah, Vietnamese, yeah. In the bushes. I never know now I was blackout, yeah, they call that blackout.

TL: Yeah.

GW: That's why they would get scared that I would go buy a gun, yeah. And I shoot, yeah. In the bushes.

TL: So when did you first approach the VA for help?

GW: '73, a couple of months later, when I got out. My mother said I gotta get help. Because I was living behind the yard yeah, by the bushes. I don't know where (inaudible). Then I heard, I'm ok. They didn't like help me, for they to surround me the MPs. He said 'you look alright to me', I said 'but I like somebody, I'd like talk to somebody' 'cause I know I wasn't, you know, I never knew it was PTSD. I couldn't sleep that's why it was a nightmare. Tossing, turning. That's why I would turn to (inaudible) to sleep, yeah. Then my friend get drugs, yeah. Marijuana, free yeah, they grow it. Then I started smoking, cause I don't smoke yeah. I was vegetarian surfer, yeah. But when I came home, I never liked surf, nothing, no more feelings. You know you lose your soul, yeah. I left my soul back there, I left my heart, I left everything back there. I never like come home, because why? I wanted to see if I could kill 'em all. I was vegetarian like I said. Yeah, plus I was engineer, I like to do my share of the war. I feel cheating, you know, I feel cheating my friend, or cheating myself, I wasn't fighting in the war, you know, I was engineer, I was on the road yeah. My cousin said 'good thing I never stay, I would have died'. Because you don't care. Cause he stayed five years, he said 'you don't care' 'cause hand to hand combat, then you

gotta play dead, and then go back you know, go back in the bushes again, regroup yeah. He never like stay, I mean he never like come home, he went, they cut you (inaudible), you know. That's what my cousin says. That's why (inaudible). That's why he stay like five years, stay five years. When he say he seen the (inaudible) against the tree, the bamboo spikes, bungee sticks, they sit on top, yeah and then they pull your body, yeah. You're still alive though. And then the guys cut your (inaudible) right off, put it in his mouth. When my cousin see that, he and his friends, they went crazy. They would stay. They were screaming eagles. (inaudible sentence), on the Huey. But when they go for medivac some guy, soldiers, they seen that, oh Jesus, they would jump on the ground. (inaudible) the screaming eagles. They wanted to kill 'em all. 11 guys you know, 11 teen guys you know. Only local boys you know, Hawaiian. They wanted to wipe out. I tell my cousin 'how come you stay too long?' He said he wanted to kill 'em all. But Uncle Sam had shipped them out, they don't come get help you know. Because I spread the news, that's why I volunteer at VA though. I like, I also play music, but I talk to Veteran's for 'Don't stop, just keep on asking for help, they help you'. I tell them don't stop, you know. I said (inaudible). For get help, because they help me, you know, I tell them that they help me before and today is different. They help you today. But you got to talk to the right people.

TL: What services are you getting from the VA right now? When you come here, what do you do?

GW: I go to classes, learn about my health, my medication and about my PTSD. And we do meditation. The meditation good, you know. You get relaxed, and then they talk about how we feel today. They say what we get out of the class. And I tell them oh I like come over here because all the Veteran's get input, yeah. So what they say help me, see? 'Cause I like to learn more how for handle my anger. See I get angry, the PTSD and I get rage when I drive. I like be cool edge, yeah. I cannot go to that person and be like say, 'hey, can you teach me how to be humble how to be cool edge,' yeah. Remember, take a deep breath. Remember that get people that loves you, yeah. They make me, I don't think about that kind of stuff, yeah. But they tell me, try to put that in my head, that you get people that loves you, and you get people care for you. Everything

that you got to think about that, and then I got my benefits. You know, I gotta think that there are no benefits, I get benefits. I can go school, I can go get a house, you know. Things like that, see. Don't think about I don't want nothing. Think about, I love myself. See, when I came home, I never loved myself. You know, cause what we did, yeah. But they teach me how to love myself. That's what I come over here for. They ask me, 'why you come over here every day?' For love. They tell me 'why? You don't get that at home?' No, only me and my wife, my wife love me, but plenty people there is no love. You know, my neighbors where I live, because I'm not from there, they don't like me. They don't like me, cause why? I go on the stage down there one night, my friend know me, 'eh come play' and I would go and play music and then they make trouble to me the husbands, the girls go dance otherwise, 'cause I don't sing Hawaiian yeah. I sing rock, oldies but goodies, you know, love songs. They don't like that.

TL: If there's any, you know, Veteran's listening, you know, a lot of Veteran's don't trust the VA right now because of the problems that have happened, and what they see in the news. But clearly, you had some similar, you had problems with the VA that a lot of Veteran's have.

GW: Yes.

TL: But, you got your benefits and now you use VA and it's benefiting you.

GW: Yes.

TL: You know, how, what would you say to encourage Veteran's if they've had wrong done to them by the VA, why should they give it another try?

GW: Because you can benefit, because we need help, that's why. For your PTSD, they gonna give you your benefits, you know. Cause we don't have any money, I don't own money, I never had money. I don't get job. You was in war. I say 'yeah, Vietnam' Oh. Soon as you tell them you was in war, they don't like hire you. Who would hire, who would give me money? The VA, the VA would give me life, the VA would help me.

That's why I love the VA. You know? I don't stop come over here. That's why I volunteer my service for the Veteran's, for the VA. I help the Veteran's over here, I talk to them, for don't stop. I tell them where for going, you know, I go to the E wing, ask for help, you know. We can help, lawyers too, they get people down there.

TL: Yeah.

GW: Good people. But don't stop over there because this person did to you. That's what people, that's what Veteran's do. That's what I was doing. I went to the wrong people. That's why I stopped and took me over thirty years. Because I never had any help from anybody, that's why it took me that long. But when I came over here, oh they help me, my cousin helped me, my friend would help me, Veterans. They told me how for get help, they take me over there to the office, they sit down in the office with me. 'Gus, Gus, don't talk about you got mouth from the Blacks, talk about, you got ambushed on the road', and I don't like talk about that 'cause I was dying.

TL: Yeah.

GW: That's where they kill yeah. That's where my first kill was, yeah. Maybe almost don't make home, yeah. So that's why I don't talk about it, that's why I never get help because I never talk about that one, yeah. I don't like talk about that one yeah. Because when I was in class, the PTSD class, the guy tease me, I was crying yeah. Then the Veteran thought 'What crybaby, where you was?' I told him I was with (inaudible). He said 'oh you was with the Wyami's (sp?), the girls. And he used the F-word, yeah. So I said 'F' you, you know, don't 'F' me. He started to rush me. Attack me inside of class. The PTSD class, that I went to (inaudible words). Good thing my friend would block him, yeah. He know me, yeah. He told me don't do that to the boss, you know. I said to our guy, 'I'm sorry but don't do that to me'. When I get scared, I get scared, you know. I told him that. I'm a survivor, you know. I don't fight you know. I'm a survivor. I don't tell him I can't fight, you know. I just tell him I'm scared. I'm scared for fight, I don't like tell him I can, yeah. Because we love here, we gotta take care of ourselves, we

Veteran's. But now he quits, I told the counselor I like a one on one. That way if I cry, I don't like them tease me, yeah.

TL: Yeah.

GW: Because when I bring back my stuff, I shake everything, you know. My friends dying, yeah. That's what hurt me too, yeah. My good friends, yeah. We take care of each other, yeah, even though there was when (inaudible), Hawaiian, black, I don't care. We all was together, you know. I tell him I love you, you know. I use the word love, I tell him I love you but he use the F-word. That's why I came on my own, yeah. I was alone a long time when I came home. I don't have any people, I only have Veterans. When I meet Veteran's, they are my friends, yeah.

TL: Mhmm.

GW: You make me laugh, you're my friend. You're my best friend. [Laughter.] But thank you for this interview, you know, brother.

TL: Gordon, thank you so much for sharing your story.

GW: [Sniffles] I know.

TL: I know it's emotional,...

GW: Yeah.

TL: ...I know that there's a lot to share but I really appreciate you opening up and I know...

GW: Sorry I cry, you know, no problem, you know. I don't care I cry, you know, because that's what it is, bro, you know.

TL: Yeah.

GW: The truth, you know. The truth hurts, but that's the way it goes, you know. I like the Veterans know out there, the brothers out there, you're not alone. We're all together, brother. And we got love out there, us

Veteran's love each other, yeah. I make them my family that's why, yeah. When we go in classes, they come hug you, yeah. That's what we like, yeah.

TL: Yeah.

GW: That's what we miss, yeah. That hug, yeah. That sharing and caring, yeah. That's why I come up here, you know. I tell them I get plenty love up here. They good friends, you know. Just don't stop coming, yeah. But thank you, brother.

TL: Thank you, Gordon.

GW: Thank you. [Sniffles]

TL: And I know you didn't hear it when you came home, so welcome home.

GW: Thank you, my brother. God bless you for sharing, caring, and taking this interview with me.

TL: Of course.

GW: And share to the world, yeah. Aloha my brother (Hawaiian phrase). Thank you...

TL: Thank you.

GW: ... and God Bless you.

[00:28:41] Music

[00:28:45] PSA:

Male 1: Getting out of the military, I was missing this camaraderie.

Male 2: It's frustrating when you try to talk to people that don't understand.

- Women 1:** I would be talking but I wasn't there with them.
- Women 2:** You just feel so alone.
- Male 3:** I still had the anger, I still had the addictions. But we didn't talk about that.
- Women 3:** It came to a point where I was like, 'Okay I really need to talk to somebody about this.'
- Male 4:** Family more or less encouraged me to you know, go to the VA, you're a Veteran, see what they can do to help you.
- Women 4:** When you have family, friends. When you have the facilities like the VA and the Vet Center, it gives me, it gives other encouragement to keep moving forward.
- Male 5:** It's okay to go get help. It's okay to talk to people. Because it takes true strength to ask for help.
- Male 6:** Talking with other Veteran's was the best method for learning the roadmap to success.
- Male Narrator:** Hear Veteran's real stories of strength and recovery, at maketheconnection.net.

[00:29:45] Music

[00:29:48] CLOSING MONOLOGUE

- TL:** Gordon mentioned the power of his group therapy and how connected he is to those Veterans. He is definitely not alone in that. I spoke with many Veterans that find the group atmosphere to be very comforting and therapeutic. A friend of mine once told me about a group he was in. The leader was a Vietnam Vet and the attendees were Iraq and

Afghanistan Veterans. They said that they all had enough in common to speak to each other but enough differences to learn from each other's unique service. Many VA medical centers offer group sessions like this and I know most Vet centers do, too. Check with your local facility to see what is available and give it a shot. Whether or not you feel like you truly need it, there's a chance that a Veteran like Gordon can benefit from meeting and connecting with you.

Today's Veteran of the Day is Navy Veteran, Eugene Cernan. He attended flight training and became a Naval aviator in 1958. After his time in the Navy, he became an astronaut and was selected among the third group of NASA astronauts to participate in the Gemini and Apollo Programs. Gene passed away on January 16th of this year. We honor his service. To read Gene's full write up and to learn how you can nominate your own Veteran of the Day, visit blogs.va.gov. That wraps up episode 15. Thank you for taking the time to listen. I know there are a lot of options out there for entertainment, so I appreciate you spending your time here with me and listening to these amazing Veterans. If you'd like me to answer a question on the podcast, tweet us [@DeptVetAffairs](https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs) (Link to the VA Twitter page) or myself [@TimLawson21](https://twitter.com/TimLawson21) (Link to Tim Lawson's Instagram page) using #VAPodcast or email us at newmedia@va.gov. And be sure to catch up on more stories from the Veteran community at our blog, blogs.va.gov. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:31:27] Music