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## Meetings

Chapter 120 membership meeting will be held on Thursday, February 2, 2023 at 7:00pm in the Machinists Union Hall, 357 Main St., East Hartford. *State and East Hartford COVID-19 guidelines apply.*

The Board of Directors will meet on Thursday, February 23 at 7:00pm. Call the Chapter office for any changes in schedule. Chapter members are welcomed to attend.

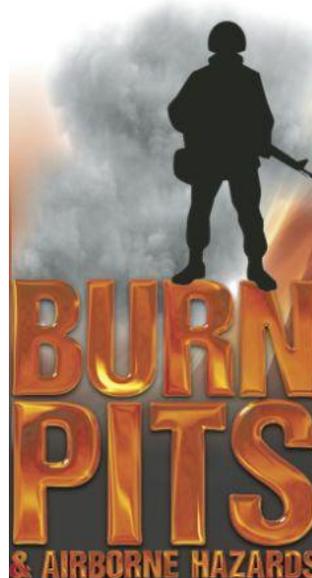
## Notice

**If you have moved or changed your address, PLEASE notify us immediately. Call the Chapter Newsletter Editor at (860) 282-7470, or e-mail the Newsletter Editor at [ctchapter120@aol.com](mailto:ctchapter120@aol.com).**

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*From Connecting Vets*

## New VA webpage helps count number of veterans exposed to toxins



A new webpage has been launched that shows the number of participants in the Department of Veteran Affairs Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pits Registry (AHOBPR) by both state and congressional districts.

The current webpage contains breakouts as of Sept. 12, 2022, for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five other jurisdictions (Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, United States Virgin Islands and Northern Mariana Islands). According to VA, the data will be updated twice each year.

The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act) requires VA to make information public about the number of participants in the registry by state and congressional district.

Signed into law on Aug. 10, 2022, the PACT Act expands health care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances.

The AHOBPR is designed to collect data from eligible veterans and service members about their exposures and health during service. Information provided through this registry helps VA better understand whether long-term health conditions may be related to military exposures.

Eligible participants can complete an online questionnaire and have the option to have a free health evaluation to discuss health concerns regarding military exposures. More than 346,544 participants have joined since the launch of this registry in 2014. 1,828 participants have joined in Connecticut.

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*Chapter/State News*

**Twelve inducted into Connecticut Veterans Hall of Fame**

Twelve men and women were inducted into the 2022 Veterans Hall of Fame on Thursday in a ceremony at the state armory in Hartford.

News 8 Co-Chief Meteorologist, Gil Simmons, a marine veteran himself served as emcee. The Veterans Hall of Fame serves as a way to recognize veterans for their contributions to society after serving their country.

“It means a great deal because I spent a lot of years after I got out of the service in education as a teacher, educator, and principal, and [I’m] now working with veterans at Goodwin University,” Inductee Craig Jordan said. Craig is a Life member of Chapter 120.

The first class of the Connecticut Veterans Hall of Fame was inducted in 2005. The hall of fame is administered and sponsored by the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Affairs, and the Connecticut Military Department on behalf of the Office of the Governor.

“It means a lot to me. I recognize a lot of these people did not come back so that really affects me. I like to make sure they’re not forgotten,” Inductee John Waggoner said. John is a Life member of Chapter 270.

The 12 veterans inducted into the 2022 Veterans Hall of Fame are listed below:

- Edwin Gomes, U.S Army, Bridgeport – Posthumous
- Craig Jordan, U.S. Army, South Windsor
- Alvin Kinsall, U.S. Navy, New London
- Thaddeus Martin, U.S. Air Force, Suffield
- Daniel Matthews, U.S. Marine Corps, Winsted
- James Matthews, U.S. Army Reserve, Winsted
- David Paul McCaffrey U.S. Navy, Somers
- Thomas Olson, U.S. Navy, Noank
- Regina Rush-Kittle, U.S. Marine Corps/Army Reserve, New Haven/Rocky Hill
- John Waggoner, U.S. Navy, Preston
- Ronald Weil, Sr., U.S. Army, Hamden
- Michael Zacchea, U.S. Marine Corps, Brookfield – Posthumous

**Birthday Wishes**

Birthday wishes go to our members born in February. May you have many more!

- |                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Vernon Bertrand   | Paul S. Egan        |
| Michael Kane      | Kathryn M. Lechause |
| Richard Linnon    | Robert Longworth    |
| Diana Mello       | George T. Miller    |
| Joseph Rinaldi    | Roger Rowley        |
| Robert Savino     | Francis T. Schulze  |
| Timothy M. Siggia | Joe C. Visco        |



**IMPORTANT NOTICE**

Notifying Chapter 120 of changes to your mailing address and e-mail address is very important if you wish to continue receiving the Chapter newsletter. Over the past few months, several members' newsletters have been returned to us as undeliverable. This means that we will not mail/e-mail future newsletters until a correct address is received.

Please notify the Newsletter Editor of any change of mailing address or e-mail address at ctchapter120@aol.com or leave a voicemail message at 860-282-7470.

## POW/MIA News



From Coronado Eagle & Journal

## The Golden Anniversary of Freedom for Vietnam POWs

Plans are building for an appropriate celebration of the golden anniversary of the return to freedom of the Vietnam POWs. Operation

Homecoming began on February 12,

1973, and continued through April 1973, fifty years ago, with 591 American prisoners returning from horrific conditions in the prison camps. The 2023 celebration on May 22 at the Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda will be the last official reunion although smaller ones will continue in various locations as friends gather to continue to share support for each other. Of the 618 members of the original NAMPOW organization, 304 have died leaving only 314. The remaining members often find it difficult to travel since the average age is mid 80's with some in their 90's. As Captain Jack Ensich says, "The fiftieth reunion seems to be the right time to have the last one."

Ensich, who lives in San Diego with his wife Kathy, was one of the last to be shot down, so one of the last to be released. He was a POW for seven months. He heads the fundraising aspect of the reunion. The Vietnam POW Reunion Foundation has established a way for the public to donate, so that all remaining POWs will be able to attend this final, momentous celebration. Since families will accompany the POWs, the donations will help to offset the cost of the reunion and the expenses for those traveling from various destinations to California. As of October 2022, the Foundation had raised \$11,000 through Pay Pal.

To donate go to [www.nam-pows.org/donate](http://www.nam-pows.org/donate). Instructions for Pay Pal or checks are included. From the website, "NAM-POWs.Inc is a tax-exempt 501 (c) (19) Veterans Corporation recognized by the Internal Revenue Service. Contributions to this organization are tax deductible. Tax Identification Number (TIN) is: 86-0401474."

The reunion will be held at the recently renovated Nixon Presidential Library, which will include the dedication of the new POW section. A replication of the homecoming dinner President and First Lady Nixon hosted for the POWs at the White House in May 1973 will be the centerpiece of the reunion. A similar event was held at the Library for the 40th Anniversary in 2013. At that first White House celebration, which had the largest attendance of any White House event, celebrities like Bob Hope, John Wayne and Tony Orlando gathered to honor those who had endured years of torture for their country.

Besides the welcoming dinner and the simulated White House dinner, the reunion will have daytime tours available to all guests. While the schedule is not firm, plans include a baseball game where the POWs and their families will be acknowledged, a tour of San Juan Capistrano Mission, a barbecue and a

farewell dinner held at the hotel. The library will close one day for docents to give private tours to those attending the reunion.



The first Vietnam POW reunion was held in Dallas, Texas at the Cotton Bowl Stadium soon after the return with Bob Hope and Ross Perot organizing it. Ensich related a familiar story of Hope calling Tony Orlando and asking him to attend and sing his recently released "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree."

Orlando said no one would know the song since the radios were not playing it, and it was not even on the charts. Hope countered with, "You come. They'll know it." He evidently contacted stations, and the public certainly learned the song. The song went on to sell over three million records and was number one on the charts for over four weeks.

Orlando will be at both the Nixon Library White House dinner on Wednesday evening and the Farewell Banquet on Thursday evening. He has been a part of the POWs' annual homecoming reunion since 1973 and was named honorary chairman at the 40th anniversary of the POW homecoming at the Nixon Library in 2013.

Ensich recalled fond memories of the night at the first White House POW dinner. The guests were given free rein of the White House, so Ensich and several of the POWs ascended the stairs, explored the Lincoln Bedroom, and proceeded to open a closed hall door, which happened to be President Nixon's study. He was working at his desk, and after they apologized, he simply said, "It's okay, boys, Go on downstairs. I'll be down there shortly."

They hurried downstairs and Ensich met his wife at the bottom of the stairs talking to John Wayne. "He's just standing there, down at the bottom of the stairs, and there's all kinds of stars and everything around, you know, and here we're just walking around the White House just like we owned the place. It was kind of a pretty cool day." Ensich went on to say that it could not happen today with such tight security.

The reunions are a time for the men to renew friendships with those who shared a unique experience and lived through it. Since the Dallas and White House celebrations, reunions have happened regularly to honor the POWs, yearly at first. Ensich referred to the group of POWs as a brotherhood since no American military females were held captive. The Foundation's Mission Statement sums up the goal of the reunions. "Our mission is to honor those who served in Vietnam and became prisoners of war (POW) and to promote an understanding of their experience. They demonstrated the highest levels of leadership and character while enduring the most brutal and unimaginable conditions." The site follows with "They had a simple mission to return with honor. And they did."

## On The Hill



## Bost Selected to Serve as House VA Committee Chairman

On January 10, 2023, Rep. Mike Bost (R-Ill.), the 117th Congress Ranking Member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, released the following statement after he was confirmed by the Republican conference to serve as the 15th Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs for the 118th Congress.

"It is a deep honor to be selected by my colleagues to lead the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs for the 118th Congress. We've made great

progress for veterans and their families over the past few years to put them first and renew trust in the Department. As Chairman, I plan to build on the bipartisan successes of those who came before me. In order to do that, we need to hold the Biden administration accountable and restore regular order. This will help us bring VA into the 21st century with commonsense legislation and oversight for the next generation of warfighters, without leaving behind today's veterans," said Chairman Bost. "Growing up in a military family and then enlisting in the Marine Corps myself, the mission of our Committee has always been personal for me. Serving as Chairman is a responsibility I do not take lightly, and I promise I will not let my veteran community down. Let's get to work."

Chairman Bost also announced the Committee's new Staff Director.

"I want to thank my friend and previous Staff Director, Maria Tripplaar, for her years of service to the Committee and I wish her all the best in her next chapter. I am pleased to announce that Jon Clark will serve as the Committee's new Staff Director," said Chairman Bost. "As the previous Staff Director of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, and a member of the Committee's staff for the last 16 years, Jon has helped members negotiate and send countless pieces of veterans' legislation through both chambers of Congress and to the president's desk. He brings a deep knowledge of veterans' issues, the veteran community, and the legislative and oversight process to the table. I have no doubt that his experience will help me lead the Committee in the right direction as we work to deliver on the pledge we have made to veterans, their families, and their survivors."

Rep. Mark Takano (D-Ca), former chairman, is now the ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

## Veterans Affairs News



## Starting Jan. 17, Veterans in suicidal crisis can go to any VA or non-VA health care facility for free

### emergency health care

Starting Jan. 17, Veterans in acute suicidal crisis will be able to go to any VA or non-VA health care facility for emergency health care at no cost – including inpatient or crisis residential care for up to 30 days and outpatient care for up to 90 days. Veterans do not need to be enrolled in the VA system to use this benefit.

This expansion of care will help prevent Veteran suicide by guaranteeing no cost, world-class care to Veterans in times of crisis. It will also increase access to acute suicide care for up to 9 million Veterans who are not currently enrolled in VA.

Preventing Veteran suicide is VA's top clinical priority and a top priority of the Biden-Harris Administration. This effort is a key part of VA's 10-year National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide and the Biden-Harris administration's plan for Reducing Military and Veteran Suicide. In September, VA released the 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, which showed that Veteran suicides decreased in 2020 for the second year in a row, and that fewer Veterans died by suicide in 2020 than in any year since 2006.

"Veterans in suicidal crisis can now receive the free, world-class emergency health care they deserve – no matter where they need it, when they need it, or whether they're enrolled in VA care," said VA Secretary for Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough. "This expansion of care will save Veterans' lives, and there's nothing more important than that."

VA has submitted an interim final rule to the federal register to establish this authority under section 201 of the Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act of 2020. The final policy, which takes effect on Jan. 17, will allow VA to:

- Provide, pay for, or reimburse for treatment of eligible individuals' emergency suicide care, transportation costs, and follow-up care at a VA or non-VA facility for up to 30 days of inpatient care and 90 days of outpatient care.
- Make appropriate referrals for care following the period of emergency suicide care.
- Determine eligibility for other VA services and benefits.
- Refer eligible individuals for appropriate VA programs and benefits following the period of emergency suicide care.

Eligible individuals, regardless of VA enrollment status, are:

- Veterans who were discharged or released from active duty after more than 24 months of active service under conditions other than dishonorable.
- Former members of the armed forces, including reserve service members, who served more than 100 days under a combat exclusion or in support of a contingency operation either directly or by operating an unmanned aerial vehicle from another location who were discharged under conditions other than dishonorable.
- Former members of the armed forces who were the victim of a physical assault of a sexual nature, a battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment while serving in the armed forces.

Over the past year, VA has announced or continued several additional efforts to end Veteran suicide, including establishing 988 (then press 1) as a way for Veterans to quickly connect with caring, qualified crisis support 24/7; proposing a new rule that would reduce or eliminate copayments for Veterans at risk of suicide; conducting an ongoing public outreach effort on firearm suicide prevention and lethal means safety; and leveraging a national Veteran suicide prevention awareness campaign, “Don’t Wait. Reach Out.”

## VA adds several new political appointees

The Department of Veterans Affairs has added several key leaders to the team in recent months, all of whom will help VA serve Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.

### **Jaime A. Areizaga-Soto - Chairman, Board of Veterans’ Appeals:**

A citizen, soldier and Army judge advocate, Areizaga-Soto most recently served as the principal deputy general counsel of the National Guard Bureau. In August 2021, he was promoted to the grade of Brigadier General making him the first Latino JAG general officer in the Armed Forces.

He was mobilized from 2018 to 2021 as the chief of the Army National Guard Trial Defense Service, a 218-soldier strong formation across each of the 54 National Guards.

In the civilian sector, the last two governors of Virginia appointed him as the deputy secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, where he advised Governors McAuliffe and Northam on matters related to the 30 large DOD installations in Virginia and the Commonwealth’s 730,000 Veterans and their military families. Previously, he was appointed by the Obama administration as the senior attorney advisor at USAID’s Office of the General Counsel. He also served as a White House Fellow assigned to the Treasury Department. Areizaga-Soto started his legal career in international law for twelve years with large U.S. law firms, including eight years in Brazil, focusing on cross-border infrastructure project finance.

Originally from Puerto Rico, Areizaga-Soto graduated from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He holds a law degree (juris doctor) and masters in Latin

American studies from Stanford University, a master’s in security and defense from the Inter-American Defense College, and a magister from the National Academy of Political and Strategic Studies of Chile.

**Victor LaGroon - Chief Diversity Officer:** LaGroon is a U.S. Army Veteran who served with the 10th Mountain Division as an intelligence analysis prior to being medically separated in 2006. Most recently, he served as the director of strategic partnerships and alliances for the Division of Health Equity, Department of Population Sciences at City of Hope from 2018-2022.

As the first Chief Diversity Officer at VA, LaGroon is charged with the development of VA’s Inclusive, Diversity, Equity and Access strategy and governance. He leads the development, adoption and implementation of VA-wide I-DEA programs and policies in support of the department’s strategic priorities, enabling accountability and transparency of data, driving results, ensuring the most effective initiatives are in-place and communicating and amplifying the I-DEA message.

### **Henry Montalbano - Strategic Advisor, Office of Enterprise Integration:**

Prior to his time at VA, Montalbano, a U.S. Army Special Forces combat Veteran, focused on Veterans’ issues working across the philanthropic and federal government sectors. After serving as a program officer at the Schultz Family Foundation managing the Veterans grant portfolio, he transitioned to the Office of Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) where he covered defense personnel and Veterans’ issues for the senator who is a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. Montalbano earned a B.A from Williams College and an MBA from the University of Washington.

**Alberto Ramos - Chief Speechwriter:** Ramos is a U.S. Naval Academy alum and Navy Veteran who served 12 years as a submarine officer. Following his transition from active duty, he completed a non-partisan White House Fellowship at the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation. Most recently, Ramos led candidate recruitment at New Politics, supporting Veterans and national service alumni interested in transitioning to politics. A proud native of Las Vegas, Nevada, he volunteers extensively with several organizations dedicated to serving Veterans and causes related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Ramos also holds an MPP from the University of Chicago.

As these new leaders join the department, there are four individuals who have left VA.

“We want to express our sincerest appreciation for Raphael Chavez-Fernandez, deputy assistant secretary, Intergovernmental Affairs; Saif Khan, attorney advisor, Office of General Counsel; Kimberly McClain, PhD, deputy assistant secretary, Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs and Catherine C. Mitrano, acting general counsel, Office of General Counsel,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “Their great work was critical to helping VA serve Veterans. We wish them all the best in their future endeavors.”



Lee said the VA is also using machine learning to identify at-risk veterans in need of care, and connect them with providers. “We can reach out to their providers and their caregivers and clinical support for those at-risk veterans. It really changes the paradigm, so we’re not waiting for a veteran to call us, but we actually can reach out to them, and maybe save them,” she said.

To improve the treatment of veterans, the VA is also rolling out a health data analytics platform, and using the platform to test use cases where emerging technology can improve health care.

Vega said that, for example, evidence shows AI algorithms, after viewing millions of chest X-rays and CT scans, can help augment a radiologist’s ability to detect and diagnose conditions.

“What it can detect is slight changes or variations in those pixels that the human eye can’t see,” Vega said. “We’ve handled the screening front. Now we can use these tools to improve and enhance our ability to diagnose. And then in the future, that precision component will give us the ability to better treat [veterans].”

VA officials said the agency has come a long way in the past few years to improving coordination and cooperation across its operations.

Vega said the VA’s cloud environment in AWS and Azure allows VA researchers and clinicians to run models and testing, and gain access to large sets of data. He said the cloud environment also provides greater visibility into the agency’s research and development.

“We actually now look at projects as they’re moving through the lifecycle together, and can better understand, does this or should this be something that’s scaled in production? It’s not me telling IT or IT saying ‘no.’ It’s actually us working collaboratively to move projects into production at scale,” Vega said.

That cloud infrastructure, he added, has led to greater coordination across the agency.

“You would think that putting those layers would just be more bureaucracy, but instead of it being just us at each other — ‘No, you can’t do this,’ and ‘Well, I need to do this — it’s a lot tighter collaboration, because it’s happening at the onset. And I think we’re seeing products, and there’s a few that come to mind, that have actually scaled across the enterprise much more timely,” Vega said.

Don Carter, VA’s Director of IT Acquisition Strategy and Vendor Management Office, said the VA has shown improvement in coordinating its IT acquisitions agency wide since Congress passed the Federal Information Technology Acquisition Reform Act (FITARA) more than eight years ago.

“We’ve gotten a lot better where we can coordinate this organization. And that also helps us when we look at what our customers need, and also when we look at the vendors. So if a vendor comes in, they have a specific product ... we reach out

to our partners in VHA, and VBA – ‘We have this person coming in. Would you like to listen, to see what we have?’” Carter said.

*From Military.com*

## **The World's First Therapy Dog Was a World War II Pacific Veteran**



Rocky River Reservation is a woodland park located just outside of Cleveland. Inside the park, visitors will find a statue of a small Yorkshire Terrier sitting inside a World War II-era GI helmet. This statue marks the final resting place of Smoky, a combat veteran and frequent visitor to military hospitals in the Pacific Theater of World War II.

Smoky was a mascot, personal pet and perhaps the world's first emotional support dog for wounded troops. Her gravesite and marker, built by a Vietnam veteran and unveiled in 2005, is dedicated to the animals of all wars who made life easier while supporting their comrades in arms.

The tiny Yorkshire Terrier was first found in the jungles of New Guinea in March 1944. Allied forces from the United States, Britain, Australia and the Netherlands had been fighting on the island since the Japanese first invaded in 1942. By 1944, the tide had turned against the Japanese, but fighting was still fierce.

An American GI named Ed Downey was in New Guinea working to move a Jeep out of some mud when he heard a whimper from a nearby foxhole. Downey retrieved the pup from the hole and kept it, but not for long. Looking to get back into a poker game, he sold Smoky to Cpl. William A. Wynne for two Australian pounds, the equivalent of \$6.44, around \$109 in today’s dollars.

Wynne knew how to train dogs from his pre-war work at home in Cleveland. She weighed four pounds and was only seven inches tall, but the corporal found the tiny dog to be "uncommonly adventurous, tough, and smart." She would need it; she survived 18 straight months of World War II combat.

Like many soldiers, Smoky's discipline helped keep the little pup alive. She learned more than 200 hand signals and commands. She ate C-rations, slept in Wynne's tent and was

carried in his backpack wherever he went. As a member of the 5th Air Force's 26th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron, this meant Smoky survived more than 150 Japanese air raids in New Guinea and flew 12 rescue and photo reconnaissance missions.

Smoky's resilience extended to life aboard ship. She survived Japanese kamikaze attacks, a typhoon on Okinawa and even managed to warn Wynne of an incoming attack while aboard a landing craft. An attack on his LST (landing ship, tank) that day killed the eight men standing near him, but Smoky had warned Wynne to take cover.

Her most important contribution came when the 26th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron was sent to Lingayen Gulf, Luzon during the U.S. invasion of the Philippines in January 1945. The unit was constructing an airbase under heavy enemy bomb attacks and needed to run a cable through a 70-foot long pipe that was only eight inches in diameter.

The effort would have required work crews to dig up the taxiway around 40 American aircraft over the course of three days. In that time, they would have been constantly exposed to incoming enemy attacks. It also would have closed the runway for the duration. They tied the wire to Smoky's collar and sent her through the pipe, completing the task in minutes instead of days.

What Smoky learned during her combat career also provided entertainment for the troops and the wounded in hospitals all around the Pacific Theater. One day, Wynne saw an ad in Yank Magazine, the Army's weekly publication for U.S. troops, looking for the best unit mascot. He took a photo of Smoky in his GI helmet and sent it in. She would be crowned "Champion Mascot in the Southwest Pacific Area."

When the war ended, all U.S. troops were ordered to leave their animals before coming home. Wynne wasn't about to abandon Smoky. He smuggled her to the United States in a bag meant for his oxygen mask. When he returned to Cleveland, they brought Smoky's wartime hospital act to veterans' hospitals stateside until 1954.

Smoky died in February 1957 at age 14, and Wynne buried her in a World War II .30 caliber ammunition box in Rocky River Reservation. For the next 50 years, it remained unmarked until Vietnam veteran Jim Strand, who knew where Smoky lay, began raising money to build the monument that marks the site today.

Strand recreated the image of Smoky in Wynne's helmet, the photo that won her the mascot championship, and dedicated the memorial to "Dogs of All Wars." At age 74, William Wynne, who became a photojournalist after the war, penned a 1996 book about Smoky, called "Yorkie Doodle Dandy: A Memoir." Wynne died in 2021 at age 99.

The Smoky story doesn't end there. The next year, Smoky became one of the first war dogs to be awarded the Animals in War & Peace Distinguished Service Medal for her World War II service as a mascot, pal and the world's first therapy dog.

**Newsletter articles/ stories/photos**

Any articles, stories and/or photos submitted for the newsletter must be received by the "cut off" date for any given month. Photos must be accompanied by text which describes the event, names, dates and any other pertinent facts so our readers understand the story behind the photo(s). The newsletter editor will announce the "cut off" dates at each Chapter meeting. The "cut off" date for our March 2023 newsletter is 17 February 2023. Due to space availability, the editor reserves the right to include or not include photos for a given month.

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