



**From
Patrick Welch
Director**

It is hard to believe that 2008 is coming to a close, why it seems like yesterday we were all concerned about Y2K issues. For my younger readers that involved all the concern about what would happen to the world's computers on January 1, 2000; planes were going to drop out of the sky, massive power failures would happen and much of the world would come to a standstill. Well, it turned out to be a major non-event.

This holiday edition covers the visit of the USS Freedom to Buffalo, a new organization WNYHeroes, Horizons new veterans facility, an article on what India and China are doing with their Navy's, our Veteran Advocate of the Month and other stuff.

In regard to the Veteran Advocate of the Month, we have added a section on our web page for our readers to submit the name of a person they feel is deserving of recognition for their efforts on behalf of veterans. So if you want to honor someone go to:
http://www.erie.gov/veterans/veterans_advocate.asp

Finally, I want to personally offer my best wishes to everyone for the Happiest of Holidays and a Prosperous and Healthy 2009. When you sit down for your holiday meals with your families, please remember those who will be standing watch at sea; those who will be patrolling on land and those flying in the skies of hostile areas. God Bless the men and women of the United State Armed Forces. Semper Fi



USS Freedom LCS-1 Port Call Buffalo

For two days the USS Freedom made a port call at the Buffalo and Erie County Naval and Military Park and provided thousands of citizens the opportunity to see the US Navy's newest class of warship. Very few Navy ships are built in fresh water ship yards, but the Freedom was completed in Wisconsin and is on its way to the Navy Base in Norfolk, VA. After sea trials the ship will call San Diego its home port. The crew wanted to visit the Anchor Bar and the VA Hospital. The Buffalo Bills players donated tickets for the Monday night football game. For more information on this ship you can go to: <http://www.ussfreedom.org/freedom-facts>



Thanks to the US Navy for providing Buffalo and Erie County this rare chance to see a brand new warship.



Horizon Celebrates New Service For Veterans

*by Susan Mikula Campbell
Niagara Wheatfield Tribune, November 13, 2008*

On Monday, just one day before Veterans Day, Horizon Village on Inducon Drive East in Sanborn held a special ceremony to both honor the men and women who have served this country, and to celebrate the construction of a new facility that will serve veterans injured by war.

Freedom House will not focus on veterans physically injured by bullets and bombs, but for those coming back wounded by mental health and addiction problems.

Horizon Health Services has received more than \$4 million from Gov. David Paterson and the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services for the construction of the 15,000-square-foot, 24-bed, specialized residential drug treatment facility at Horizon Village for Western New York veterans. Ground-breaking for Freedom House is planned for spring of 2009, and an opening is hoped for by fall.

"It's allowing us to expand into a territory of treatment we've never really provided – veteran's special services," said Paige K. Prentice, vice president of residential and medical operations for Horizon Health Services. The Veterans Administration hospital does not provide long-term intensive treatment for these types of problems, Prentice said. Freedom House will provide veterans with better coping skills, "a new lease on life, not just detox," she said.

"We're very thankful to Gov. Paterson and New York state OASAS to have the presence of mind to realize this was going to be a need and fund it," she said.

According to Horizon Health Services, the latest figures show that more than 1.5 million troops have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since the first deployment in 2002. Data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the American Medical Association indicates that as many as 30 percent of the returning veterans will face a serious psychological problem, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and chemical dependency. That number may increase to 50 percent for those with multiple tours of duty or inadequate time between deployments.

Census data indicates there are more than 160,000 civilian veterans in Western New York. OASAS reports indicate that 85 percent of veterans are unable to receive needed addiction treatment because of a lack of services.



The color guard from the Niagara Falls Air Base gets ready to raise the flag near the site of the future Horizon facility that will serve veterans.

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Previous Page)

Among those taking part in Monday's ceremony was Patrick Welch, director of the Erie County Office of Veterans Services. He asked those in the audience who were veterans to raise their hands, and when several did, simply commented, "I'm always humbled in the presence of greatness."

He talked about the veterans who have served the country, even giving their lives, over the years. There are four words any returning veteran wants to hear – "Thank you" and "Welcome home," he said.

Niagara County Legislature Chairman Bill Ross of Wheatfield, who presented a framed citation from the Legislature, said, "As far as I'm concerned, the veterans are the heartbeat of America."

Both Ross and Welch praised the planned Horizon facility, as did Col. James Germain, retired Air Force, now with the 914th Airlift Wing at the Niagara Falls Air Base.

Thanks to facilities such as Freedom House, he said, "veterans coming back with substance abuse addiction problems have the opportunity to help themselves, turn themselves around and save their own lives."

He also saluted all veterans on the eve of Veterans Day, saying, "Because of their bravery and their sacrifice, we can be here today."



Watching the flag raising at the Horizon Village ceremony on Monday, from left, are: Patrick Welch, director, Erie County Office of Veterans Services; Bill Ross, chairman, Niagara County Legislature; Weldon Thomas, chaplain, USAFR 914th Airlift Wing; and Col. James Germain, USAFR, MSC (Ret.), 914th Airlift Wing.

Marine Corps Toys for Tots



The holidays are a time for giving. It is why I take great pleasure in highlighting the Marine Corps Toys for Tots Foundation in this month's newsletter. Though Thanksgiving is over, this is one organization that veterans throughout Erie County should still be thankful for. The Toys for Tots foundation originated in 1947 with the purpose of collecting new unwrapped gifts and donating them to the children and parents who cannot afford to purchase them. It is a nationwide effort coordinated by the U.S. Marines. The Erie County Veterans Service Agency is designated as a drop-off location for those who are interested in donating a toy or a gift for a family in need. There will also be Marines and volunteers at local malls. To find out more you may call (716) 885-6529 and press option "2". You may also call our office at (716) 858-6363 and ask for Sergio or e-mail me at sergio.rodriguez@erie.gov with any questions. For all of those who are home for the Holidays, please do not forget of those who are *homeless* for the Holidays. Next month, I will be discussing the homeless veterans epidemic in our region and the rest of our nation.

Cheers to you and may you have a happy, happy Christmas! :)

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Veterans Cold War Property Tax Exemption Bill

County Executive Chris Collins signed into law the Veterans Cold War Property Tax Exemption Bill unanimously approved by the Erie County Legislature on November 25, 2008.

This very important piece of veterans' legislation will provide property tax relief to those who served our country during the Cold War time period and have not previously been eligible for these benefits.

Secretary Peake Announces Travel Reimbursement Increases for Eligible Veterans

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced today that eligible veterans will see an increase in the mileage reimbursement they receive for travel to VA facilities for medical care.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake announced today that he will use his authority to raise the mileage reimbursement from the 28.5 cents per mile to 41.5 cents per mile for all eligible veterans.

"We owe it to our veterans to give them the best care possible," said Peake. "The increase will once again provide assistance to our veterans, especially in these difficult economic times, to help offset gasoline costs and to assist veterans with access to the VA's world-class health system."

Congress, which mandates such increases, recently provided funding to VA to increase the reimbursement rate, which goes into effect on November 17, 2008. Service connected veterans, veterans receiving VA pensions, and veterans with low incomes are eligible for the reimbursement.

"As I have travelled the country and spoken with many of our veterans, they have expressed the need for such an increase," added Peake. "We are pleased to be able to provide them with the increase needed and we will continue to work with our veterans to ensure they receive the quality care they need."



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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Media Relations

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News Release

DAV Clothing for Vets in Need

If you know a veteran who is in need of winter clothing, please come to the DAV Clothing Room or Transportation area located at the Buffalo VA Hospital on 3495 Bailey Ave on the first floor inside the outpatient clinic area. This clothing room is open Monday through Friday 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM.

Interested parties must be accompanied by a representative. Please bring a form showing veteran status. Contact Richard Kloc at (716) 862-7291 or a volunteer at (716) 862-5010 for details. Only veterans in need should apply.

Donations are graciously accepted!



Gorshkov May Be Ready By 2012

NEW DELHI, Nov. 17: The Indian Navy's Russian built aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov being refitted at Sevmash shipyard is likely to be commissioned into the Navy in early 2012 as several trials are to be completed. The two sides have been carrying on negotiations on the price for over a year with India not keen to pay for what it considers unreasonable escalation that has nearly doubled the cost. The sale of the 45,000-ton Kiev Class aircraft which is to be named INS Vikramaditya replacing INS Viraat is one of Russia's largest individual military deals.

"The trials have already begun at the Sevmash shipyard in Arctic Russia and the process to launch it into water has begun. Water is being filled in the dock at the shipyard for the last few days and is likely to take over a week," sources said here today. "As regards delivery and commissioning, it all depends on these tests and whether they prove that the aircraft carrier is fit enough to be made operational. Though the major refurbishing work of the aircraft carrier is over, what is left is fine tuning of the machinery. After being launched into the water, there will be machinery trials, basin trials and sea trials conducted on the platform which will take another one and a half years," the sources said.

According to the agreement, it covers modernization of the ship and equipping it with modern weaponry, including the MiG-29K Fulcrum aircraft, Ka-27 Helix-A and Ka-31 Helix-B anti-submarine helicopters. Indian Navy pilots are currently undergoing training in Russia for MiG-29K. Sources indicated that the delay has forced India to undertake another refit of Viraat and keep it in service till the new aircraft carrier is made operational. The original price for the refurbishment of the Gorshkov was \$1.5 billion while the building of a Gorshkov type carrier today would cost about \$4 billion, and take eight years. The Admiral Gorshkov entered service in 1987 but was deactivated in 1996. (STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE 17 NOV 08)

For information on the possibility of the Chinese building or acquiring an aircraft carrier, read the *New York Times'* article by Andrew Jacobs entitled: [General Hints China's Navy Wants to Add Carrier](#) (NEW YORK TIMES 17 NOV 08) or the *London Times'* article by Mure Dickie and Martin Dickson in Beijing: [China Hints at Aircraft Carrier Project](#).

Monthly Premiums Decrease for TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS)

Effective Jan. 1, 2009, TRICARE will reduce the rates for TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS). Monthly premiums for TRS individual coverage will drop 44% from \$81.00 to \$47.51, and TRS family coverage will drop 29% from \$253.00 to \$180.17.

To view the entire news release visit:
<http://www.tricare.mil/pressroom/news.aspx?fid=480>

The POC for all TriCare enrollment questions is the TriCare website located at this link:
<http://www.tricare.mil/>



What is TRICARE?

TRICARE is the health care program serving active duty service members, National Guard and Reserve members, retirees, their families, survivors and certain former spouses worldwide.

As a major component of the [Military Health System](#), TRICARE brings together the health care resources of the uniformed services and supplements them with networks of civilian health care professionals, institutions, pharmacies and suppliers to provide access to high-quality health care services while maintaining the capability to support military operations.

What is TRS?

Established in 2005, TRS is a premium-based health plan for National Guard and Reserve personnel available for purchase by members of the Selected Reserve who are not eligible for or enrolled in Federal Employee Health Benefit plans.

TRS provides a health plan option to members of the Selected Reserve and their families when they are not on active duty status. The TRS plan delivers coverage similar to TRICARE Standard and Extra to eligible members who purchase the coverage and pay monthly premiums. TRS also features

Veterans Advocate of the Month— Virginia Opalka

This month's Veterans Advocate of the Month award goes to ***Virginia Opalka***.

Virginia has been with the Erie County Veterans Service Agency since the end of 2007. She is employed through Supportive Services. Unfortunately, the term period agreement has come up and she will be leaving us in January.

Virginia has been instrumental to our agency and her hard work and dedication has not gone unnoticed. She helped ease the transition process for our new staff when we took over in February and showed us the way.

She is enthusiastic and passionate about helping veterans. If your department or agency is in need of a hard working administrative assistant, Virginia is the one that you have been looking for.

We will miss her greatly and wish her the very best in all of her future endeavors.



WNY Organization Developed to Assist Veterans

WNYHeroes.org was developed in late 2007 after Founder, Dionne Kane read an article in the Buffalo News titled "Wars Deepest Wounds". With her brother and godson serving in Iraq and a loss of a good friend SSG. Aram J. Bass in 2005, Kane was inspired to do something.

The one soldier in the article who stood out most to Kane was Chris Kreiger, now President of WNYHeroes.org. Kreiger served in Iraq in 2003-2004. He returned home in 2004 and continued working as an EMT and caring for his wife and two children. Due to injuries from his service, Kreiger required surgeries. While struggling with his disabilities Kreiger lost his home". I cannot believe a man goes to war and returns home to care for his family and because of his injuries loses everything", says Kane. Kane knows that WNY cares for its service members. "One thing many soldiers are unaware of is we are all here waiting for them. They are not alone in their endeavor. We all care", says Kane.

WNYHeroes.org helps WNY service members most severely injured with specialty adapted homes, financial assistance for the disabled, employment services and more. Kane explains, "We do not want to see any veterans fight their country after already serving their country. They should come home and be assisted to get their lives back on track."

WNYHeroes.org works with local and national non-profits to assist WNY Veterans. "We have identified the critical needs of veterans and reached out to organizations which address these needs." says Kane. WNYHeroes.org is also a resource tool for veterans and lists all known community current events. And WNYHeroes.org isn't just for those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, the organization also helps veterans from all eras.

In early 2008, Kreiger was sent to VA to the Veterans Hospital polytrauma brain injury cen-

ter where his seizures were brought under control and other injuries were cared for. Kreiger says "I was treated like a King. They even took care of my eye sight." Although Kreiger continues to suffer seizures from his injuries he jumped on board with WNYHeroes.org. He shares the same passion as Kane. His brother also served in Iraq and is stationed in Alaska. Kreiger is also the Sr. Vice Commander of Iraq War Veterans Org (IWVO) and now a Chapter Service Officer with the DAV. Kane adds, "WNYHeroes.org team is being developed with the veteran in mind. The team is comprised of veterans, military families and community leaders dedicated to making a difference for WNY Veterans."

Kane also emphasizes, "WNYHeroes.org cannot be a success without help from the community. WNYHeroes.org is a portal for all to come together to help our veterans. Corporations, volunteers, community leaders, athletes, musicians, universities, schools, organizations and individuals can now come together in one place to make a difference to WNY Veterans. We have already had a tremendous outpouring by the community to help, but this is really just the beginning of something great", says Kane.



★ WNYHeroes.org

Mission Statement of Erie County Veterans Services

To insure that every veteran in the county is registered in the VA System and is fully aware of all the benefits that they have earned.

To make veterans an economic force in education, employment and business development.



Please distribute this newsletter to your email distribution list.
Anyone who would like to receive this each month can email patrick.welch@erie.gov

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IT TAKES THE COURAGE AND
STRENGTH OF A WARRIOR TO
ASK FOR HELP...

If you're in an emotional crisis,
call 1-800-273-TALK (Press "1" for Veterans)
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org