

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System  
Military Order of the Purple Heart  
7180 Highland Drive 118-VH  
Building 1, Room 6023W  
Pittsburgh, PA 15206

Combat  
Wounded  
Veterans



MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART  
CHAPTER 455

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PURPLE HEART  
NEWSLETTER

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CRASH CLAIMS DAD OF FALLEN SOLDIER

In September 2008 Chapter 455 presented a Purple Heart plaque to Robert Girdano the father of 2nd Lt. Michael Giradano who was Killed-In-Action from a road side bomb in Afghanistan on Aug. 1, 2008.

After his son was killed in Afghanistan, it would have been easy for Bob Girdano to shut himself off to the world, his friend Al Pulice said.

Instead, Girdano, 53, of Kiski walked across the state from Philadelphia to Valley High School with Pulice in July as part of the first PA Hero Walk, which Pulice organized to raise money and awareness for injured soldiers and their families.

At the time, Girdano said it was something his son, Army 2nd Lt. Mike Girando, 23, would have wanted him to do.

About 14 months after his son's death, Bob was

killed in a car crash Saturday Oct. 17, 2009 in Armstrong County.

Pulice, 53, of Murrysville said he and Girdano were going to meet on Oct. 19, to plan for next year's walk. The walk will now be dedicated to him.

"He wanted to show the country that if this happened to you, if you lost a loved one, you can't give up," Pulice said at a memorial to soldiers in Allegheny Township, where he met Bob Girando on Veterans Day 2008. The memorial features a block in Mike Girdano's memory.

The crash happened about 5 p.m. Saturday on Routes 28/66 in Boggs Township, about six miles north of Kittanning. Girdano was a passenger in a car driven by William Weiler Jr. 53, of Mars.

Best buddies growing up, the men were driving south, coming home from a trip to look for a hunting camp site they were thinking about buy-

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## LITTLE GIRL CAN'T LET GO



*Paige Bennethum, 4, holds her daddy's hand as he lines up in formation before heading to Iraq.*

Some things are just not allowed when soldiers are standing in formation. One of them is 4-year old girl.

However, there was no soldier stern enough to pry Paige Bennethum of Laureldale, Pa. from her father as he prepared to leave last July for a year long deployment in Iraq.

Abby Bennethum captured her daughter's emotions in a photograph that she passed along to *the Reading Eagle*, the newspaper in Berks County, Pa. The image immediately captured many other people's emotions.

Army Reserve Staff Sgt. Brett Bennethum was preparing to depart from Fort Dix, N. J., for Iraq, leaving behind his pregnant wife and two little girls. His family was there to see him off. His commanding officer didn't have the heart to tell Paige she had to let go of her daddy.

Sgt. Bennethum, 30, is scheduled to return home next July. Until then, he's transporting supplies across the Iraq border. He serves with the 733rd Transportation Company based in Reading, Pa.

Abby Bennethum said she got pregnant right before her husband left for Iraq. "I've heard of deployment babies, but I never thought I'd be having one," she told the *Reading Eagle*. The cou-

ple's other daughter, Lena, is just 10 months old.

Staff Sgt. Bennethum got a four-day pass so he could spend some quality time with his family and they could make the two-hour trip to Fort Dix to see him off. Almost immediately upon arrival, his commanding officer ordered the soldiers to fall in.

"Gotta go," he told his family. But Paige walked up behind him in formation, grabbed his right hand and would not let go.

"I called her a couple times, but she wouldn't budge, her mother said. She still wishes she was holding her father's hand.

"I just miss my dad right now," Paige told NBC.

## COURT SAYS GI FUNERAL PROTESTS LEGAL

Richmond, Va.—A federal appeals court ruled Thursday that a fundamentalist Kansas church's protest outside the funeral of a Westminister Marine killed in Iraq is protected speech and did not violate the privacy of the service member's family, reversing a lower court's \$5 million award.

The ruling from the 4th U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va., held that the signs and writings of the Westboro Baptist Church, which included anti-gay and anti-military messages, are protected by the First Amendment. The Topeka-based congregation has protested at military funerals across the country.

"Notwithstanding the distasteful and repugnant nature of the words being challenged in these proceedings, we are constrained to conclude that the defendant's signs and [what it has on its Web sites] are constitutionally protected," Circuit Court Judge Robert B. King wrote in the majority opinion.

Margie Jean Phelps, an attorney for Westboro and the daughter of the church's leader, said "it was an absolute shame to have a little church put on trial because of your religious beliefs."

"Everyone knows that we didn't disrupt a funeral," said Phelps, daughter of the Rev. Fred Phelps Sr. "Our speech, on our signs and our Web sites, is public speech. It's not on private

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## BEIRUT BARRACKS ATTACK REMEMBERED



A U.S. Marine, his leg severely damaged from the explosion that destroyed a Marine base command center, is carried by comrades for emergency medical treatment in Beirut, Lebanon, Oct. 23, 1983.

Quiet commemorations were planned Thursday for the 20th anniversary of the bombing of the U. S. Marine barracks in Beirut the deadliest terrorist attack on Americans prior to Sept. 11.

A truck full of explosives ripped through the Marine barracks on Oct. 23, 1983, killing 241 Marines, sailors and soldiers.

Services were being held at the national Beirut memorial at Camp Lejeune, N. C. Observances include a candlelight vigil and a wreath laying ceremony, with the names of the Beirut victims read by family members and other veterans.

The Marines were in Lebanon as part of an international peacekeeping force trying to stabilize the country, which had been torn by a civil war between Christians—with their ally Israel—and Muslims.

A U. S. contingent entered Lebanon in July 1982 to oversee the departure of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which Israel had invaded to displace. That American detachment left in Sept. 1982, but U. S. forces returned later that month when violence resumed.

In April 1983, the U. S. embassy in Beirut was struck by a 400-pound suicide truck bomb, which killed 63 people, including 17 Americans, and

wiped out the CIA's Middle East bureau.

On Oct. 23, 1983, terrorists hijacked a water delivery truck on its way to the Beirut International Airport Marine barracks and sent another truck, loaded with explosives, in its place.

Ismalal Ascari, an Iranian, drove the 19-ton truck over the barbed wire fence around the barracks, past two guard posts, and into the center of the compound, according to a federal court order issued earlier this year in a case brought by relatives of the victims.

“The resulting explosion was the largest non-nuclear explosion that had ever been detonated on the face of the Earth,” the court order read. It was equal in force to between 15,000 and 21,000 pounds of TNT.

“The force of its impact ripped locked doors from their doorjambes at the nearest building, which was 256 feet away,” read the ruling by U. S. District Court Judge Royce C. Lamberth. “Trees located 370 feet away were shredded and completely exfoliated.”

All the windows at the airport control tower, half a mile away, shattered. A crater eight feet deep was carved into the earth, and 15 feet of rubble was all that remained of the four-story Marine barracks.

“The force of the explosion ripped the building from its foundation. The building then imploded upon itself,” read a Defense Department report on the attack. “Almost all the occupants were crushed or trapped inside the wreckage.”

A U. S. investigation blamed the lax security for allowing the bomber to get into the Marine's compound.

Lamberth ruled in May that Iran was responsible for the attack because of its support of Hezbollah. “It is beyond question that Hezbollah and its agents received massive material and technical support from the Iranian government,” Lamberth wrote.

U. S. troops left Lebanon in February 1984.

NATIONAL PEARL HARBOR  
REMEMBRANCE DAY  
December 7, 2009



Betty James

### 37 YEARS LATER, GIRL IN VIETNAM WAR PHOTO SPREADS HOPE

Even people who aren't old enough to remember the Vietnam War recognize the iconic image of a little girl, naked and covered with napalm burns. Associated Press photographer Nick Ut captured the shot of Kim Phuc Phan Thai (Kim Phuc for short) in 1972, just before helping the 9-year-old girl to a hospital in South Vietnam.

"Sixty-five percent of my body got burned," she told Health Day. "I should be dead." But Kim Phuc is far from it.

Now, nearly four decades later, Kim Phuc is a peace activist, United Nations Goodwill Ambassador and public speaker. She recently [shared her story](#) at a [conference of burn survivors](#) and burn-care specialists in NYC.

Although the 46-year-old mother of two suffered nerve damage and still feels pain from the third-degree burns that covered more than half her body, she expressed a message of hope and optimism even in the face of tremendous suffering. Her story inspired not just doctors at the conference but other burn survivors who were there to find support.

Kim Phuc's burns were so severe that doctors thought she was unlikely to survive, but that wasn't her first concern. "I still remember my thoughts at that moment. [I would be ugly](#) and people would treat me in a different way," she once said. She spent over a year in the hospital and endured numerous surgeries, [almost dying several times](#).

Ut's photo later [won a Pulitzer Prize](#) and became an international symbol of the agony suffer-

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Chapter 455 Music Therapy Program led by Dan Wilhelm with help from the ladies auxiliary and volunteers with a theme of "The Wizard Of Oz" entertain patients at the VA hospital and the South West Veterans Home for Halloween.



### CHAPTER 455 MEETINGS

Our meetings are held the last Wednesday of the month at the VA Hospital at Highland Drive at 10:00 am sharp. Our office is in building one, 6th floor, room 6023W. Recently we have been having our meetings on the 2nd floor in room 2010W in building one because we have more room. After the meeting a lunch will be provided. If you need more information please call at 412-954-5165 and ask for Jim or Dan.

### CHAPTER 455 PHONE NUMBERS

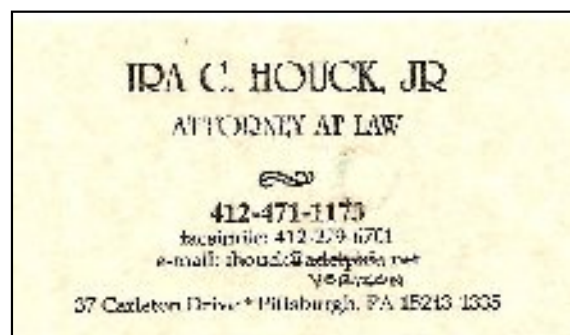
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**BOOSTER'S - JAN. 1, 2009 TO DEC. 31, 2009**

MIKE & VERONICA BLAZEVIK  
ALVIN COLES  
JOHN & CATHERINE COLLINS  
WAYNE DONALDSON  
CHARLES & IRENE HALL  
WILLIAM & LINDA HYSLOP

**SPECIAL BOOSTER'S**

JOHN & CAROLYN ABRAM  
DAVE & JANET ALDEN  
JOHN & JOAN ALDEN  
EDWARD & SUSAN BARKER  
LT. & MRS. GEORGE BIGELOW  
CONRAD BLACK & MARILYN OBRIEN  
ROBERT & FLORENCE BUCHOLTZ  
VANCE & MARGARET CARTER  
DOMINIC & BETTY CERSOSIMO  
PETER CERUSSI  
HARRY CLARK  
JAMES & RENAE COSTABILE  
MICHAEL & MICHELE CUMMINGS  
GREG & BARBARA DALEY  
JOHN & LINDA DENK  
HOWARD & EDNA EICHNER  
RAY & PEARL FRITZ  
LOU & GLORIA GAMBONI  
JOHN & DONNA GOCHNOUR  
SCOTT & MAUREEN HAVELKA  
NICOLE & SHANNON HAVELKA  
EMIL HOSKO  
IRA C. HOUCK JR.  
JOHN & DOROTHY HRIBAR  
GEORGE HUMMER  
LENNY KASUBICK  
JOE & LOIS KENNEY  
BROCK KEPHART  
JAMES & JULEEN KEPHART  
LARRY KUSHNER  
WAYNE & KAREN LAMPING  
LOU & DOLLY LaCIVITA  
JIM & BETSY LANG  
MICHAEL LASKOWSKI JR.

MASSARO CORPORATION  
STEVE MASSARO  
JOE MLINAC & DONNA MADEJA  
OLIVER McCLELLAND  
COL. ALEX & MOLLY McCLINCHIE  
HARRY McCracken  
DARRYL MERRISON  
JAMES PELLA & MICHELE HANSON  
MICHAEL & MICHELE RATWAY  
ERNE & NANCY RIVERS  
STANLEY & MARY ROZANSKI  
JOE & KATHRYN RUKAT  
CHESTER & M. JANE SATTIAUX  
JOE & ANNA MAE SERENKA  
SID & BARBARA SINGER  
ROBERT & PEGGY SMITH  
MARK & NANCY SUTTON  
TERRY & RUTHIE SWIDELL  
LARRY & MARY UPLINGER  
ROBERT & RUTH VANCE  
NICHOLAS VIGLIONE  
ED & JOAN VOGEL  
ED & CHERYL WERLE  
JOHN & PATTY WRIGHT

**UPDATE ON NEWSLETTER**

We still need donations for the 2009 newsletter which will take us through the year 2009. The donations stay the same at \$6.00 which covers postage, ink, labels, seals, paper, and misc. You will be listed as a special booster if you donate \$10.00 or more.

I am also asking that if anyone would like to place an ad in the newsletter it will cost \$25.00.

In the upcoming newsletter I would like to put pictures and stories on how our members got their Purple Hearts, so please send in your information.

You will now be able to get the newsletter on the internet and other information about Chapter 455 at [www.chapter455.org](http://www.chapter455.org).

If I forgot to put your name on the booster list or if you need more information please let me know. I will be at the office at 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. on Mon. & Wed. during the month. ph: 412-954-5165. My e-mail address is: [jimersmc22@verizon.net](mailto:jimersmc22@verizon.net) Editor: Jim Lang

## COURT SAYS GI FUNERAL PROTESTS LEGAL (continued from page 2)

matters. It's on public issues, so it's protected."

Sean E. Summers, an attorney for Albert Snyder, of York Pa., the dead Marine's father, said he will appeal the decision to the U. S. Supreme Court.

"The most troubling fact is that it essentially leaves grieving families helpless," said Summers. "There are a lot of people sending their kids over to war, and unfortunately, they're not all coming back. You would think that at least we could offer them dignity and respect."

Summers said that Albert Snyder would not comment on the decision. At trial, Snyder testified, "I had one chance to bury my son, and they took the dignity away from it."

Fred Phelps, two other adults and four children picketed the March 10, 2006, funeral of Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, holding signs that said, "Thank God for dead soldiers," and wrote on the church's Web site that Snyder's parents "taught Matthew to defy his creator."

Matthew Snyder, a 2003 graduate of Westminster High School, was 20 years old and had been in the war zone for less than a month when he was killed in a vehicle accident in Anbar province.

Westboro church members believe soldiers are being killed in Iraq and Afghanistan as punishment for what they say is the nation's tolerance of homosexuality. The church has about 75 members, most of whom are related to Phelps.

Albert Snyder sued Fred Phelps and two of his daughters, Rebecca Phelps, and Shirley Phelps for invasion of privacy and emotional distress.

In Oct. 2007, a federal jury in Baltimore awarded the father nearly \$11 million, ruling that the family's privacy had been invaded. In Feb. 2008, a federal judge reduced the damages from \$10.9 million to \$5 million, citing constitutional concerns of appropriateness.

"The amount was set with a goal, and the goal was to silence us," said Marge Phelps. "In this country, you don't get to claim damage over words you don't agree with...Because we've train-

ed a nation of crybabies doesn't mean we change the law."

## MARINE CORPS PRIDE



There is a flag near the entrance of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington. At its base are the seals of all the services.

Every morning, the Marines from the Marine Barracks at Eight & I polish the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. The other seals have not been touched since the Memorial was built.

Truly a motivational continuance of our motto, "Semper Fidelis."

## A Vietnamese, from refugee to a U. S. Officer

A U. S. military officer who fled Vietnam as a boy was picked up by an American ship will soon visit the country in command of a destroyer, the U. S. Navy said.

Born in the Vietnamese city of Hue, Commander Hung Ba Le and his family were picked up at sea in 1975 by a U. S. naval ship in the closing days of the Vietnam war, the Navy said on its website.

His family settled in Virginia and he later became a U. S. citizen, graduating from the U. S. Naval Academy.

He is due to return to Vietnam in November with his ship, the guided missile destroyer USS Lassen, on a goodwill visit, the Navy said.

Commander Le called the visit a symbol of the friendship between our two nations. The 1st Vietnamese-American to command a U. S. naval ship, Commander Le took over the helm of the US Lassen, which is part of the U. S. 7th Fleet based in Yokosuka, Japan.

## CRASH CLAIMS DAD OF FALLEN SOLDIER (Continued from page 1)

ing in Clarion County, according to Bob Girano's son, Nunzio Girdano, 27, of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

According to state police and the Armstrong County coroner, a 16-year-old girl, whose name was not released, was driving north and lost control of her sport utility vehicle on wet pavement. Her vehicle crossed over the center line and slid sideways into the car carrying Weiler and Bob Girdano. The front of their car hit the passenger side of the SUV.

The coroner said both men died from head and chest injuries. Neither was wearing a seat belt.

The girl suffered a moderate injury, state police said.

Michael Girdano was one of four soldiers killed Aug. 1, 2008, by a homemade bomb in Chowkay Valley area of Afghanistan near the Pakistan border. He was a 2003 graduate of Apollo-Ridge High School and a 2007 graduate of the Military Academy at West Point, N. Y.

Pulice said Bob Girdano's wife, Cynthia Girdano, was devastated by her husband's death.

"She said Bob is going to get to see Michael before me," he said.

A retired Navy officer, Bob Girdano worked as a plasterer for the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System at Highland Drive.

While many people took part in July's walk, Bob Girdano and Pulice were the only ones to walk every mile, every step over 14 days. Pulice said he got to know the man much better in that time. Pulice said during the walk, Bob Girdano would sometimes go off by himself and say he was talking with Mike.

In addition to Mike and Nunzio, the Girdanos have a daughter, Tina Girando, 22, of Kansas, who is in the Air Force.

Mike's death took a toll, Nunzion Girdano said.

"At first it was real stressful. It was for all of us," he said. "I also think my dad knew he had two other kids and a wife, and he had to be strong."

Nunzio Girdano said his father will be buried at Plum Creek Cemetery in Plum, next to Mike.

## "A GRATEFUL NATION" FOR ANOTHER AMERICAN HERO 2 Lt. Michael Girdano



## 37 YEARS LATER, GIRL IN VIETNAM WAR PHOTO SPREADS HOPE (continued from page 4)

ed by both sides during the Vietnam War. An entire book, ["The Girl in the Picture"](#) was written about the power of the image, which helped turn the tide of public opinion.

### Love Is More Powerful Than Napalm

She has publicly [forgiven an American pilot](#) who helped plan the bombing that scarred her as a child—she credits forgiveness with helping her turn the corner from victim to advocate. "Napalm is very powerful, but faith, [forgiveness and love are much more powerful,](#)" she has said.

For all Kim Phuc has been through, she has managed to find a silver lining: "The pain I consider as my protection. It humbles me, and helps me to never take my life for granted," she told Health Day. "And to share my story."



## SPOILED ROTTEN

This letter was first published in the Williamsburg Gazette and contributed by James Pella a member of Chapter 455.

I was embarrassed to read that President Clinton and members of the Congress have said that the older generation must learn to sacrifice as other generations have done. I knew that eventually someone would ferret out our dirty little secret. We have lived the "Life of Riley."

During the depression, we lived it up dancing to the tune of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Many could choose to dine at one of the country's fabulous soup kitchens, often joined by parents and siblings.

Then came World War II, and our cup was really filled to overflowing. We had a chance to bask on the beaches of Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. We had the chance to visit the capitals of Europe and visit such scenic spots as Bastogne, Malmady and Monte Cassino. One of the most exhilarating strolls was from Bataan to the famous Japanese resorts, laughing referred to as death camps. The good time really rolled to those lucky enough to be on the beaches of Normandy for the boating and swimming on that pleasant day in June 1944. Even luckier were those who won prize holiday cruises on a sleek gray ship to such fun-filled spots as Midway, the Solomons and Murmansk.

Instead of asking, "What can you do for your country?" an indulgent government let us fritter away our youth wandering through lush jungles in Burma and New Guinea.

Yes, it's all true. We are pampered and spoiled rotten. We never did learn what sacrifice meant. My generation is old, Mr. President and members of Congress. Please punish us for our failings, so that we might learn the true meaning of "Duty, Honor and Country."

Willard S. Gilley,  
22 Magruder Lane,  
Williamsburg, VA.

## DOOR OPENS TO HEALTH CLAIMS TIED TO AGENT ORANGE



*In 2003, a ceremony in Washington honored hundreds of Vietnam Veterans whose deaths were attributed to ailments related to their service.*

Under rules to be proposed in Oct. 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs plans to add Parkinson's disease, Ischemic Heart disease, and Hairy-cell leukemia to the growing list of illnesses presumed to have been caused by Agent Orange, the toxic defoliant used widely in Vietnam.

The proposal will make it substantially easier for thousands of veterans to claim that those ailments were the direct result of their service in Vietnam, thereby smoothing the way for them to receive monthly disability checks and health care services from the department.

The new policy will apply to some 2.1 million veterans who set foot in Vietnam during the war, including those who came after the military stopped using Agent Orange in 1970. It will not apply to sailors on deep-water ships, though the department plans to study the effects of Agent Orange on the Navy.

## Pittsburgh MOPH New Service Officer

The acting Service Officer Christopher Jenkins office is in the Federal Building in downtown Pittsburgh, the phone number is 412-395-6252.

The hours are from 8:00 am until 4:00 pm Monday thru Friday.