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18

Battle Buddies of Oklahoma

A Program

To Help

Incarcerated Veterans

*Vet in
Spotlight + ?*

12

Battle Buddies of Oklahoma

What is it?

A program developed by Rita Aragon, Maj. Gen. (ret), former State Secretary of Veteran Affairs and currently the special assistant to the Governor. The program is endorsed by Governor Mary Fallin, Former Director of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Justin Jones, Current Director of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Robert Patton, The Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of Oklahoma, Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association of Oklahoma and other service organizations.

When and How was it Started?

The program was started in November of 2012 by Rita Aragon, Maj. Gen. (ret), State Secretary of Veteran Affairs with a goal of helping veterans not return to a correctional facility at a minimal cost to taxpayers.

Secretary Aragon, Maj. Gen (ret) has a vision and believes that our incarcerated veterans who took an oath to defend our country so others could be free. Some made a mistake because of issues that they could not deal with and they may have been placed in an environment that became uncomfortable for them because of being in a combat zone for 52 consecutive weeks, 365 days a year, 8,760 hours and 525,000 minutes. Most combat veterans, especially Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan veterans witnessed events that few believe and most will say never happened. Some of these veterans have a difficult time dealing with their return to the “real world” and , as a result, some either resort to their combat experience when certain events occur or they result to self-medication in an effort to “forget”.

Secretary Aragon, Maj. Gen. (ret) realizes that our military, current and former, took an oath to defend their country and preserve our freedom and that that oath has no expiration date.

The Disabled American Veterans have a philosophy of “Veterans Helping Veterans” and our Vietnam Veterans believe that “Never Again Will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another”.

Primary Purpose:

- 1) Encourage offenders to “offer” inside assistance and encouragement to other veterans in an effort to create pride and purpose in all veterans.
- 2) Assign a veteran to be a mentor and guide to the veteran offender upon release from the Department of Corrections.
- 3) Assist the veteran offender in applying for benefits that have been earned.
- 4) Encourage each prison to form a veterans group and to encourage the group to initiate a *project* for the benefit veterans, the prison, and the community.

Who are Battle Buddies?

Battle Buddies are veterans who believe in helping veterans . . . period.

They come from all walks of life and they believe in our men and women who served in the military and in the fact that some incarcerated veterans were victims of serving in a combat zone where there no longer is a differentiation between “front” and “rear” lines. Some are in law enforcement, some are students, some are/were in the medical field, *but most are former military men and women who work in various fields and believe in helping veterans.*

What do Battle Buddies do?

- 1) Offer support, listen and try to help.
- 2) Assist the released veteran integrate back into his/her community through involvement in veteran organizations, a religious community, and in being involved in the community which they live.
- 3) Point the released veteran in a direction to help themselves.
- 4) Assist the veteran in registering with the Department of Veteran Affairs in order obtain eligible benefits that were earned.
- 5) Be a support to assist the veteran in receiving the help that is needed.
- 6) Are “up front” with each veteran and they expect and demand the same in return.

What Battle Buddies will NOT do?

- I. Baby sit a released veteran
- II. Be a “go-between” between the veteran and his/her parole office and/or warden
- III. Provide the released veteran with money and/or a house over their head
- IV. Be a taxi service
- V. Carry letters either to or from third parties
- VI. Communicate with friends and/or relatives for anyone who is incarcerated
- VII. Violate laws for the benefit of an incarcerated veteran

Enrollment:

At the current time there are in excess of seven hundred ten (710) former military members who are incarcerated enrolled in the Battle Buddy program and their sentences range from life without parole to 2 years of incarceration.

What has been Accomplished to Date?

- Through the efforts of Rita Aragon, Maj. Gen. (ret), State Secretary of Veteran Affairs there is a provisional driver’s license which allows released incarcerated veterans the ability to drive to and from either work or school until such time as all fines and court costs are satisfied.
- Veterans groups have been formed in order for veterans to talk among themselves and inaugurate projects to instill a sense of pride and honor among the veterans. Some of the projects by the veterans to date are:
 - a) Crocheting an American flag Afghan for the Oklahoma families of fallen soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan..
 - b) Crocheting lap blankets for veterans confined to wheel chairs.
 - c) Raising in excess of 1,400 lbs of vegetables for the homeless families and homeless veterans
 - d) Planting and maintain a memorial garden to honor all veterans who gave their life for our country.
 - e) Raising and lowering of colors on a daily basis by an honor guard
 - f) Growing food for homeless
 - g) Building decorations for local high school events
 - h) Painting murals on the walls in various facilities to honor our military

- Establishing a program between the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Corrections whereby medical personnel for the Department of Veteran Affairs will come to each prison on a periodic basis for the purpose of performing Compensation and Pension Examinations.
- Developed and implemented a policy with the Pardon and Parole Board whereby Battle Buddies will identify any veteran offender appearing before the board for either parole or pardon as a veteran of the U.S. Military enrolled in the Battle Buddy program in an effort to demonstrate to members of the board that the veteran offender is working to improve his/her lifestyle. The Board may also stipulate that the veteran offender remain enrolled in the Battle Buddy program for a specified period of time.
- A contact list of potential employers who will employ a felon has been developed to assist the veteran about to be released in obtaining gainful employment.

Comments for Wardens:

“Since the visit by Battle Buddy volunteers, the veterans here have formed a veterans group that has continuous projects. Their first project was to paint a mural on a wall in the visiting room honoring all branches of the military. These men now walk with their heads held high and they have a new meaning in their life. The Battle Buddies that visited that day were honest and from what I have seen and heard, they “walk the walk” and they have instilled pride in our veterans here.”

“This program has brought a noticeable change in the veterans in my yard and forming a veterans group was the best thing that happened here in some time.”

“Because of Battle Buddies and because of our veterans, my yard has experienced a reduction in violence of 8% and the veterans have taken charge and they are showing that they can do something to affect the lives of others and to change themselves.”

“I have veterans in my yard who have done a 180 degree turn since the visit by the Battle Buddy volunteers and they are showing others that it is a good feeling to do something for other people in the community. “

Comments by Incarcerated Veterans:

- “This is the first time in 33 years that I have had the opportunity to salute my flag. I want to thank the Battle Buddy program for giving me this opportunity.”
- “For the first time in 5 years I feel like there is someone to give me support that I don’t get in here and I welcome the chance to become a part of a veterans group and to start programs to help us and others. Thank you.”.
- “You were the best thing that ever happened to me in along time. Meeting the LADY General has given me real hope and I now have a purpose in life. The lifestyle of being part of the callers group is past and I no longer want to live like that. It was a special day in my life when the General shook my hand because I never thought I was good enough for a General to shake my hand to speak to me. Thank all of you and as you say, use guys”.
- When they told me a General was to talk to me and that the General wanted to meet me I figured they were lying to me again but it was time away from the house. When we saw the General we were amazed that someone with the rank of General would come all the way here to talk to us and

to meet me. The General shook my hand, me – a convict, it was something I will never forget; they didn't shake my hand in Iraq and no officer ever shook my hand. That shaking my hand has made a difference in the way I now look at life and I will never forget the General when she said, "When you get out of here I want you to go to church and talk to God" and I want you to know that I talk to God every day. Tell the General that in Iraq it is still a latrine or head but we are just happy to be done before they burn that stuff. I just hope the 3 of you are not coming to talk because the General is here but that guy we said he was in prison, well we talked around and a guy knows him so we know he is for real and don't bull ___ us and that is nice to no".

- "It was an honor and a privilege to hear General Aragon speak to us because it tells me that there is hope and that we are not forgotten. I want to personally thank you for your time, your support, and your kindness to us vets who are sometimes ignored. I want you to know that we look forward to forming a group because as Ron said, "veterans will talk to veterans before they talk to anyone else".
- "I actually felt proud to salute my flag for the 1st time in 4 years. Being a veteran of Iraq I made a mistake when I got home and I am paying the price but it is good to know that we are not forgotten and that we do have an actual General who cares and that she has a staff that is willing to help us".
- "Thank you and DOC for not forgetting us and for letting us do something to be proud of. Something as small as planting flowers makes me proud to be a part of a veterans group and I no longer walk with my head down".
- "Back in Southeast Asia we would pick out a unique feature of the terrain and call it a rally point that a grunt could move to and where he knew support would be. We've got a rally point and we haven't had one in a long, long time but now we have support and someone who understands us, someone who is going to point us in the right direction. Thank you for having our backs, thank you for caring, for being our rally point".
- "This letter is to let you know my appreciation for what you have done in helping myself and others. This letter is through the warden and I will never forget when that Major General told me that they would be able to help me. This has helped me with my attitude towards life that others will reach out and try to support me as well as others who are here. I just want to express how important it is to me how being treated with respect and like a real serviceman helps me."
- "What an honor to salute my flag again and to be proud that I served my country. For the first time in 6 years I went to my house and cried because someone remembers that I served my country, that I went to Iraq. Yea, I made a mistake when I came back from Iraq and I had a hard time dealing with people and the bullshit and I am paying for my mistake. Now there is someone who understands another combat veteran, another veteran who I can talk to".
- "It was an honor for me to salute my flag with my brothers and sister and I am thankful for this program because they have helped me more than anyone knows".
- "I can't believe a General came to talk to a bunch of prisoners and actually answered our questions. I liked the fact that she told some to stop being a pansy and to suck it up. We needed to here that from someone other than DOC".

- “This program is a blessing to all of us because we were told that we were not eligible for any benefits and that our families were not eligible for anything. It is just nice to know that you believe in helping other veteran and it is an honor to salute my flag”.

The majority of the veterans served in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Dessert Storm, and the Gulf War. There are Silver Star recipients, Bronze Star recipients, Combat Infantry Bade recipients, Cross of Gallantry recipients, and others in prison today. If we would have had the programs ‘back then’ that we have now some of our veterans would not be in prison. We know that some veterans receive a harsher sentence than non-veterans because of their military training.