

veterans might be so far removed that they didn't know they had benefits coming, let alone how to get them.

He became a veterans service officer. It seemed the natural for him. He met men he hadn't expected to meet.

"I met World War II guys," he said. "One guy in particular, a tough old guy 84 years old. He was gut shot twice, medically discharged, and given a 30 percent disability. He quietly disappeared into the wilds of Alaska. When I met him, he was still flying airplanes. The oldest guy I saw was 90 years old.

He says he doesn't mean to criticize the VA when he says it needs to do outreach. He thinks that if the VA did a credible job of outreach, it would be overwhelmed by the needs of veterans. He thought perhaps a smaller number of people working on a modest scale might be a good place to begin.

Maurice Bailey got together with other veteran pilots—Tom Baird and Joe Stanistreet (no longer with VAO) and Chuck Moore—to talk about the possibility of doing outreach themselves. Bailey had been doing it on his own for a year and asked his friends if they'd like to join him. A fourth later joined the group—Jim Kendall, a photographer and navigator.

From these conversations grew Veterans Aviation Outreach, Inc., three veteran pilots flying their own airplanes to reach people who live "off the road" in a place not known to have many roads. Many of those veterans live in what is described as "survival mode", barely existing, often finding comfort in alcohol, only to have the alcohol lead to unemployment.

From the beginning, Bailey said, trust was the critical factor in the success they've had. Because of his long experience flying around Alaska, he came to know many of the distant veterans. It made a difference when he broached the subject of benefits. By way of illustration, he tells of another veteran who went to a small village where no one came out to greet him. But when Aviation Outreach went to the same place, they signed up 29 people in two days for health care and benefits.

"These guys have seen me around these villages and they trust me," Bailey said. "I know most of them. I know their kids."

Bailey said Moore, with whom he served in Vietnam 38 years ago, is a key player in the effort and the pilot with the most experience.

"He was a young pilot (19) and I was an old man (25)," Bailey said. "He flew gunships. He left the Army and went into the Navy to fly jets. He flies 90 percent of the missions for VAO. At this time he also flies for the State of Alaska. We have three pilots and four airplanes. Chuck owns two airplanes and the other two are owned by Tom Baird and myself."

Tom Baird underscores the importance of trust with the veteran's community.

When I travel in the bush, most contacts are developed by these kinds of relationships," he said. "Once you establish a relationship with an individual as a friend, you end up being steadfast friends. Individual homes are open to one another. Most of the people in this state will stop and give a hand if you need it. We want to reach the unreached who are out of sight and out of mind. These individuals are extremely independent. They like to do things for themselves whether they can or not."

Bailey says the four members of Veterans Aviation Outreach have no grand illusions. They try to do "small stuff." They sign people for VA benefits; they recruit new VVA members. Believing there is strength in numbers, they do what they can to build the veterans community.

They built a wheelchair ramp for a veteran to get in and out of his house. He's 50, Bailey

said, and he'd "given up on life." So they do small things that will enhance that life.

They put in a claim for a veteran suffering from diabetes. It took eight months to settle, but the veteran received \$4,000 in back pay and now gets \$200 a month for the rest of his life.

"He's real happy because now he can buy fuel oil," Bailey said.

Bailey is direct when dealing with veterans, "I try to explain to them, 'Look guys, you're old and you're sick now,'" he said.

Tom Baird said decisions between quantity and quality is always difficult.

"We've run into difficulty making decisions about reaching as many people as we can or making sure those we have contacted are taken care of before we move on," he said. "Because of the difficulties of processing and getting things done, it's looking like we're going to go for quality first. These guys already had been promised the world and gotten nothing, so it makes no sense to go out there if we're not going to be able to do it right."

Maurice Bailey counts his blessings and speaks of a duty to share them.

"Life has been pretty good to me," he said. "I live pretty good. But we're here for more than to just live pretty good. We're here to help people when they need it."

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PILOTS BRING HOPE, HELP TO VETERANS IN ALASKA—VAO: OUTREACH BY 7 VETS INCLUDES FOOD, CLAIMS HELP AND FLIGHTS TO THE DOCTOR

(By Zaz Hollander)

WASILLA—A national veteran's group report released last month highlighted health-care struggles facing Alaska Army National Guard members returning from deployments to rural villages. But news of under-served Bush veterans came as no surprise to Maurice "Mo" Bailey, a Wasilla flight instructor who served as a helicopter flight engineer with the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War.

Several years ago, Bailey and six other veterans—also pilots—took to the skies in their own planes to help veterans living in Western Alaska. All had flown the area for fun, and saw veterans in need of help. In 2003, Bailey created a nonprofit, Veteran's Aviation Outreach, which serves "isolated veterans" in rural or remote parts of western Alaska and elsewhere.

The men mostly help people file for Veterans Administration benefits. But they've also flown out veterans in need of medical care, made sure deceased veterans got flags for their graves, and shared literally tons of moose meat scored from helpful guides.

In 2005, they filed benefit claims on behalf of six Naknek veterans. The next year, they flew a rural resident to Anchorage for emergency medical care, a visit that also resulted in diagnoses—and later treatment—of diabetes and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Now 69, Bailey last year received the Governor's Veterans Advocacy Award for his "outstanding volunteer service."

He talked about the flying outreach group during a recent conversation.

Q. Why did you start?

A. Seeing the conditions that many veterans are in. Me and the rest of the pilots used to fly to western Alaska. We saw that people would have medical problems and some people in some cases died, leaving huge debts. Had they known they had benefits, the VA would have taken care of that. It's mostly information: these people are clueless. Once you're released from the military, you are not tracked, updated.

Q. Why western Alaska?

A. We were retired, just kind of goofing around (and flying the area). They're all

combat pilots—the rest of the guys are. I'm not. We were all in Vietnam together. All of us are retired from the military, looking at our brothers and sisters and saying, "Well, what can we do?" We didn't set out to do this, trust me. We were enjoying our retirement, our grandchildren.

Q. Can you give me some specifics of the kind of outreach you do?

A. We've been to all villages up and down the Kvichak River and Lake Iliamna. We found out veterans had been buried without flags. We decided that was totally unacceptable.

Q. Where was that?

A. It was in Newhalen on Lake Iliamna. We came back and went around to organizations such as the VFW. We got flags at the Wasilla Vet Center. We took flags out to make sure that people who had died recently, they received flags they hadn't gotten before and we left flags there so they could have them to take to six surrounding villages. That was last year.

Q. What about more recently?

A. We help veterans, no matter where. Last month, a guy was on dialysis. He had to come into Wasilla three times a week. He lived in Sutton. His house was not sanitized, broken pipes. We took a couple ladies out, cleaned the house, took a plumber out to fix pipes for water, built a handicapped ramp. Now he's able to do his dialysis at home.

Q. Where does the money come from?

A. Most of it comes out of our pockets. Sometimes people give fundraisers, spaghetti dinners, garage sales, cookie bakes or whatever. We do lots of stuff. I tell you what, I'm not just bragging, I'm really proud. We've had a heckuva impact doing things for people, little things that (otherwise) people, they got to paperwork it to death.

We just gave away 2,100 pounds of moose meat. We do it every year, have a deal with guides in Healy. They bring Lower 48's on hunts. They want horns. We want meat. We caravan a couple of trucks, pick up the meat and have it processed. The neediest people get it first. Valley veterans. Actually, we sent meat to the Bush—400 pounds last year to Naknek. Last week we also bought two freezers for needy veterans and filled both up with meat.

Q. How many veterans do you serve?

A. I just started tracking that. We see and help maybe two veterans a week. On a large scale, like the meat giveaway, it's to 50 to 60 people. Out in the Bush, we file claims for people with disabilities, illnesses. We do a little bit of everything.

Q. Where's the next trip?

A. Dillingham. Hopefully (early November). We'd like to have a gathering there. We had 600 people last spring at a Wasilla Airport gathering, with a barbecue and a band . . . We had World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan vets.

What made it so amazing was that these young guys that just returned from Iraq and Afghanistan were able to communicate and talk to guys that was in World War II. A lot of those guys won't be around here next year.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey is recognized.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CUBA TRAVEL BAN

Mr. MENENDEZ. I have come to the floor many times to speak out about the Castro regime's abuses of the Cuban people. Today, I come to the floor once again, this time in strong opposition to any attempt in this Chamber to pass any bill that in any way lifts or lessens the travel ban on Cuba. I wish to make it absolutely clear that I will oppose and filibuster, if I need to, any effort to ease regulations that stand to enrich a regime that denies its own people basic human rights. I do not want to obstruct the business of this Chamber, but I know my colleagues on both sides of the aisle are well aware of how deeply I feel about freeing the people of Cuba from the repressive regime under which they have suffered for too long.

The fact is, the big corporate interests behind this misguided attempt to weaken the travel ban could not care less whether the Cuban people are free. They care only about opening a new market and increasing their bottom line. This is about the color of money, not the desire for freedom.

The very fact that a travel bill has moved through the House Agriculture Committee makes one wonder why American agricultural interests would even care about tourist travel to Cuba. One can only assume it is about generating increased tourism dollars for the Castro regime to buy more agricultural products. That would only serve to enrich the regime and do absolutely nothing to bring democracy to the island.

Let's be clear. Those who believe that increasing travel will magically breed democracy in Cuba are simply dead wrong. For years, the world has been traveling to Cuba and nothing has changed. Millions of tourists from democratic nations have visited Havana, and the Castro regime has not loosened its iron grip on its people. It has not ended its repressive policies. It has not stopped imprisoning and brutally abusing prodemocracy forces.

Now, sometimes I wonder; those who lament our dependence on foreign oil because it enriches regimes and terrorist states such as Iran should not have a double standard when it comes to enriching a brutal dictatorship such as Cuba right here in our own backyard.

How coincidental that suddenly, now that the Congress is considering lifting a travel ban, the Castro regime is hoping the world will believe it will release 52 prisoners of conscience. Well, let's set the record straight. Many people are wrongly under the impression—wrongly, reading and watching media reports—that 52 political prisoners have already been released and are free in Cuba. The fact is, only about seven have been released, and forcibly—forcibly—deported from their country—another human rights violation—instead of allowing them to stay and peacefully advocate for change within their own country.

So even when the regime releases people whose simple crime was trying

to peacefully create change in their country and who get imprisoned for years for that peaceful act, then when they are released, they are released only with the understanding that they will be deported out of their country so they can no longer be advocates, peaceful advocates, for civil society and democratic change. Imagine if those of us who are Americans could be arrested simply because we disagreed with the government, sought to peacefully change it, and then ultimately, after being arrested for years, were deported to some other country in the world.

The remaining 47 prisoners are set to be released but not now, not tomorrow, not next week, not even next month, but sometime during the next 3 to 4 months, we are told—or so the regime says.

According to reports in the Miami Herald, nine of those prisoners have said they will refuse to leave for Spain if released, and many who were released and forcibly deported to Madrid have vowed to continue their activism in exile. They have told reporters they feel the shock of being forced to leave their country. Omar Rodriguez Saludes told a reporter he feels "like I was still in prison. I left behind part of my family. I still feel like I have the cuffs on my hands."

The released men said conditions in the prison were horrendous. They shared their cells with rats. Diseases infested the prison. And they told of inmates trying to kill themselves or do themselves bodily harm because of the squalid prison conditions they were forced to endure. Remember, these are political prisoners, not people who committed common crimes.

Julion Cesar Galvez, one of the dissidents, told reporters:

The hygiene and health conditions in prisons in Cuba are not terrible—they're worse than terrible. We had to live with rats and cockroaches and excrement. It's not a lie.

Galvez, a 66-year-old journalist who was sentenced to 15 years simply because of what he sought to write, 15 years of his life in these horrible prisons, said:

There were outbreaks of dengue fever and tuberculosis.

He said there were more than 1,500 prisoners in the prison in Villa Clars—40 prisoners to a cell measuring 32 square feet.

Another prisoner, Norman Hernandez, said:

The prisoners are tired of demanding their rights . . . They lose all hope. They lose their desire to live, and they try to hurt themselves so they will get attended to.

These men were lucky to be released, but they will not give up. They will continue to tell their stories, and they will continue to fight for freedom for all Cubans.

It took the regime one night in March to arrest these 52 people—one night. That scooped up 52 people who were peacefully advocating for change in their own country. So we might ask ourselves: If it took you one night to

arrest 52 political prisoners, why will it take 4 months to release all of them?

It is not a coincidence that during the next 3 or 4 months, there will be Members of the Congress who will be looking to provide the Castro regime with billions of dollars of added tourism revenue. It is not a coincidence that in September, the European Union will once again deliberate the wisdom of its remaining sanctions. The nagging question that lingers in my mind is, Will the 47 ever see the light of day or will they be forcibly deported from their country and another 52 arrested overnight to take their place?

It is possible the regime will never release them because they do not want the world to see them because of the torture to which they have been subjected. Here is one of those prisoners. Last month, a man named Ariel Sigler was released from a Cuban prison on the verge of death. He was a 250-pound amateur boxer. You see him there in great health. This is the picture of his release—a 100-pound paraplegic. A 100-pound paraplegic. He did nothing to deserve that set of consequences.

Last month, the regime once again refused to let the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture visit the island, which, in my own view, speaks volumes about the conditions of the thousands of Cubans who have been imprisoned.

When you oppose the Castro regime, you are called dangerous, and there is a charge of dangerousness. Thousands of Cubans have been sent to Castro's prisons because of dangerousness. That is dangerousness: simply opposing the regime and seeking change in your home country—and for other trumped-up political charges.

If that is what is happening to the 200 internationally recognized and known political prisoners, then how much worse must it be for the thousands of anonymous political prisoners who have not been reported because they fall under the charge of dangerousness?

According to the State Department:

The total number of detainees is unknown because the government does not disclose such information and keeps its prisons off limits to human rights organizations and international human rights monitors.

Again according to the State Department:

One human rights organization lists more than 200 political prisoners currently detained in Cuba in addition to as many as 5,000 people sentenced for dangerousness.

Yet, in the face of this repression, some Members want to provide the Castro regime with its No. 1 source of income: tourism. This is not about travel; this is about rewarding a repressive regime. We already have hundreds of thousands of Americans who travel to Cuba for family, education, or humanitarian reasons under our existing law. But tourism to Cuba is a natural resource, akin to providing refined petroleum products to a country such as Iran. It is reported that 2.5 million