



SECOND CHANCE FOR VETS

Readjusting to life back in the States is difficult for any veteran who has served in a combat zone, says **Craig McNeil**, a prosecutor in the Dallas County Criminal District Attorney's Office who volunteers as a prosecutor in the Dallas County Veterans Court. For those veterans who return from a combat zone *and* suffer from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or a traumatic brain injury (TBI), life can unwind quickly. "There has been a recognition that those who were deployed



Harris County Veterans Court Judge **Marc Carter**, left, talks about the veterans court during a press conference as U.S. Marine Sgt. Marty Gonzales looks on.

are much more susceptible to PTSD or depression, and that is causing the commission of many offenses [among servicemen and women]," says McNeil, a retired U.S. Army Reserve officer and Iraq veteran.

In 2009, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 1940, which authorized counties to create specialized veterans courts. The courts, which work closely with other vets organizations, such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, are meant to divert vets who have committed nonviolent, minor offenses (those that would likely result in probation in a regular court) from prison to treatment. The first such court was implemented in Houston in December 2009. Several veterans courts exist throughout Texas, including in Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio, with more on the way. Each court has the discretion to prohibit certain offenses in the program. Dallas' court, for example, does not take DWI cases.

Dallas Veterans Court Judge **Michael Snipes** says that while the new courts give vets an opportunity to keep their records clean, completing the program is difficult. "This is not a free pass," Snipes assures. Snipes, an Iraq veteran who served in the U.S. Army Reserve, says that while he wants to assist vets, public safety is of primary concern. "There are many, many gatekeeping roles that are incorporated into the program."

While each county's court is different, there are several criteria a vet must meet before being accepted to the program, including having been honorably discharged or being an active military service member; their service must result from a combat environment or other similar stressful duty; the

service must have caused, in whole or in part, PTSD, a TBI, or other mental disease or defect that contributes in whole or in part to the alleged offense; the court's judge and prosecutor, along with the veteran and the veteran's attorney must agree to participate; and the vet must be diagnosed with PTSD, TBI, or other mental defect by a mental health assessment counselor.

Vets who participate are then required to seek treatment for alcohol or substance abuse addictions, PTSD, TBI, or mental dis-

orders; maintain suitable housing and employment (if possible); and participate in group therapy sessions. The program can take anywhere from six months to five years to complete, however, courts aim for quick completion. Vets who do not abide by their program's rules are removed and sent to jail.

Giving vets an opportunity to complete the program benefits more than the vet, says Harris County Veterans Court Judge **Marc Carter**. The treatment that veterans in the program receive saves counties "hundreds of thousands of treatment dollars while providing the best therapeutic environment — that is an environment where the care providers are specifically trained to assist veterans who suffer from PTSD and TBI."

While still new, Texas' veterans courts have so far proven successful. Carter, a U.S. Army veteran, says his program has accepted 22 veterans since its implementation last year, with only two having to be removed due to severe addiction problems. (Those two were placed in long-term inpatient treatment that the court is not yet set up to offer.) Carter says the veterans courts can be improved with more funding and more doctors and staff so the courts can grow and serve as many vets as possible.

Ultimately, the courts will give a second chance to vets struggling with the difficult situations they faced while serving their country. "It is incredible to see the difference a little compassion can make in someone's life," Carter says. "That is really the idea — to help these men and women that have put country before self. They need just a little help dealing with the trauma of war." ✪



A MARINE LAWYER LOOKS BACK

When San Angelo attorney **Don W. Griffis** was serving in Vietnam, it became second nature to write everything down. “I kept a journal where I recorded the events of interest that happened each day — the sights, the smells, the sounds,” he says. Now, that diary is a book called *Eagle Days: A Marine Legal/Infantry Officer in Vietnam*.

Griffis, a U.S. Marine Corps legal officer and platoon leader from 1968–69 in Vietnam, forgot about the journal, putting it away for almost 40 years. But when a good friend wrote a book about the Vietnam War, Griffis decided to dig out his old diary. “I guess enough time had passed,” he says. “I thought it would be worth my while to go back and reexamine what I wrote while in Vietnam.”

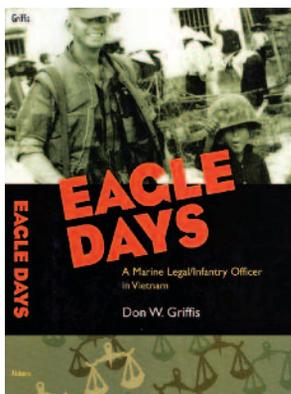
Griffis began to reread and edit his journal, and eventually sent it off to publishers. “I knew that the submission process can take a while,” he says. “After all, *Flags of Our Fathers* [by James Bradley] was sent to 26 publishers before being accepted!” Luckily, Griffis did not have to wait quite that long. The University of Alabama Press, one of four publishers he submitted to, accepted the manuscript. “I was very excited the day I learned the University of Alabama was going to print the book. From there, the opportunities to make connections with men I served with was very rewarding.”

The book has garnered positive feedback from veterans — Griffis has received many letters and phone calls. “It meant a great deal that those veterans read the book,” he says. “And it was important to them because it validated a period in their lives and honored their service.” A sergeant that had been in Griffis’ rifle platoon contacted him, inviting him to a platoon reunion in Tampa. “Once I began looking



Don Griffis, a San Angelo attorney and author of *Eagle Days*.

back at my writing, it occurred to me how many interesting people I’d met in the service and how proud I was to serve with them.”



Eagle Days is a memoir of a tour of duty in Vietnam.

Eagle Days covers everything from the military legal process to combat missions against the Viet Cong. “It was incredible in the Marine Corps,” Griffis says. “We had so much leeway to do things — we would just climb on a cargo aircraft or a helicopter. I was just a tourist observing so much going on around. I got to see a lot of different aspects of human nature.”

At the time he was writing the journal, Griffis had no idea it would ever be published. “If anything, I thought the diary would be something that might be useful to my family in the future,” he says. “But once you come back from serving, you can marry, raise a family, find a job, and people don’t know what you’ve done or where you’ve been. I wanted to tell this story.” ★

TEXAS PEOPLE

James L. Gosdin, senior vice president, chief underwriting counsel, and chief reinsurance counsel for Stewart Title Guaranty Company in Houston, was appointed chair of the Title Insurance and Surveys Committee of the Commercial Real Estate Transactions Group of the American Bar Association Section of Real Property, Trust & Real Estate Law.



Teresa Villaseñor Harris, of the Fowler Law Firm, P.C. in Austin, was this year’s recipient of the Ohtli Medal, the highest honor bestowed by the Mexican government to those outside of Mexico. Harris was recognized for her work providing free legal services and assistance to Mexican immigrants and their children.



The National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers awarded **George P. Parker, Jr.**, of counsel to Bracewell & Giuliani, L.L.P. in San Antonio, its 2010 Champion of Justice Award for his humanitarian pro bono representation of Navajo World War II veterans in obtaining their VA benefits for wartime injuries, including Navajo Code Talker Teddy Draper Sr., who was injured at the Battle of Iwo Jima.



U.S. District Judge **Sam Sparks**, of Austin, received the Sandra Day O’Connor Jurist Award from the American College of Trial Lawyers. The award is given to a state or federal judge who has demonstrated exemplary judicial independence in the performance of his or her duties, sometimes in difficult or dangerous circumstances.

