

# Welcoming Home “9/11 Veterans”

*By Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary John A. Scocos*

The holiday season has had special meaning for about 40,000 American troops, as by December 31, 2011 virtually all of them have been withdrawn from Iraq and brought home. While the President has pledged continued civilian support for Iraqis, the United States' participation in the war in Iraq is over.

The conflict has been the largest involvement by U.S. troops since the Vietnam War. Vietnam veterans, who fought in an unpopular war, can now do what was not done for them upon their return home – they can help welcome home our newest veterans of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – our “9/11 veterans” – and serve as role models and mentors for them.

One Vietnam veteran who is an example in courage for all of us is Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Gary Wetzel of South Milwaukee, who enlisted in the U.S. Army and while he was still a Private First Class, Wetzel was serving as a door gunner aboard a helicopter in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Assault Helicopter Company that was part of an insertion force. It was on January 8, 1968 near Ap Dong An in the Republic of Vietnam that his helicopter was shot down and the survivors, including Wetzel, were trapped in a landing zone and came under intense and deadly enemy fire. Severely wounded by an explosion which nearly severed his left arm, he continued to man his machine-gun and help other injured soldiers for hours until they were rescued. Wetzel survived his wounds, although his left arm had to be amputated. He was subsequently promoted to Specialist Four and awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.

Gary Wetzel, like others, is humble about his experience but speaks publicly in support of and on behalf of fellow Vietnam War veterans whom he refers to as a “brotherhood.” He has recorded his story in the documentary “Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories.” He participates with other veterans in Honor Rides that pay tribute to those lost during the Vietnam War. The rides also allow citizens to say thank you and wave “welcome home” to the riders. Wetzel is a supporter of programs to help veterans of all eras, such as Dryhootch, a nonprofit dedicated to helping veterans return home, through Peer to Peer counseling at coffee houses providing a place for veterans to reconnect.

Wetzel and other veterans know how important it is that Wisconsinites welcome home the 800-1,000 of our newest veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and that we maintain a community of caring to help them through the transition from serving in the military to readjusting to life in civilian communities.

The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs has a mission to reach out to veterans and their families, to make sure they have quality jobs and education, along with other important necessities like housing, health care, and a support system to help them with reintegration to life back home. All while at the same time managing our department economically and efficiently.

Our goals for 2012, along with the vision of Governor Scott Walker, are to forge ahead and not only ensure veterans continue to receive the finest services and programs possible, but to expand our efforts towards new veterans' successes. Our top priority is assisting veterans in translating their military skills and what value they bring to employers, and connecting them with meaningful jobs, sometimes through the opportunity of pursuing higher education in a particular career field via the Post 9/11 GI Bill or Wisconsin GI Bill.

The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs has been partnering the veterans community, including the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development and the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs, to take action this year – through job fairs, conferences and reintegration sessions with service members and their families – to assist them with their total needs of everyday life and merge in to society successfully as citizens enjoying meaningful lives.

As always, we appreciate the support of the veterans community as we forge ahead in 2012. May a happy and productive year be ahead for us all.