



Perris Press Release

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Volunteers Bring Holiday Cheer to Military Veterans

Members of American Legion Post 595 in Perris brightened the holidays for military veterans confined to a hospital in Loma Linda, bringing blankets and scarves, slippers and toiletry items and giving perhaps their greatest gift—time.

The trek to the Jerry L. Pettis Memorial Veterans Medical Center shortly before Christmas has become an annual event for members of the Perris Legion post, who spend months raising funds to purchase the goodies for the former military members.

Former Marine Joanne Evans and her husband, Navy veteran Iral, have made the trip from Perris for more than 20 years.

Evans could not attend this year because she was on City business as she ended her term on the City Council, but the former soldiers are never far from her thoughts.

"We owe these folks a lot," she said. "They fought for our freedom. Today, so many of these veterans have no one to visit them so they spend a lot of time alone. We spend time with them to let them know that we still care."

Members of the Perris post gathered one morning to load up for the trip to Loma Linda. There were robes and blankets, hats and slippers and undergarments, magazines, paperbacks, bananas, apples and oranges and coupon books the veterans could use to purchase goodies from the medical center's commissary. Part of the day's agenda included playing bingo with the veterans, a favorite way to wile away a few hours.

Jim and Jennifer Bieger have made the trip in recent years. To them, it's one of the highlights of their year.

"I believe in this program," said Jim Bieger, a former Marine who is now District Commander of the American Legion in Riverside County. "It puts a smile on guys' faces who don't get to smile very often. I will never not go again."

Jennifer Bieger, a member of Perris' Public Safety Commission, calls the yearly visit "heart-warming and much appreciated."

"It's something we look forward to every year," she said.

Veterans and staff at the VA hospital agree.

"Christmas can be a busy time of the year so we really appreciate the folks from Perris thinking about their fellow veterans," said Natalie Colangelo, a recreational therapist assistant. "It brightens their day."

She said patients at the hospital include World War II, Korean War and Vietnam-era veterans, some being treated for long-term chronic conditions, others living at the hospital because they have no family or have outlived all their relatives. Jesse Sampson, 85, served in the Philippines in World War II. He sums up his service succinctly: "Had a Jeep, drove a Jeep, fired my gun."

He likes receiving visitors like those from Perris.

"We look forward to it," he said. "Thanks for coming."

Vietnam veteran Dan Wendland, 63, said he looks forward to seeing visitors from Perris. In addition to spending time with the shut-ins gathered in a day room, Perris Legionnaires visit individual rooms occupied by those too weak or infirmed to get outside. There, they leave clothing, reading materials and spend time chatting to each person.

"We have a lot of fun," said Wendland, who completed three tours of duty in Vietnam as a Navy salvage diver. "We appreciate the camaraderie."

Navy Special Forces veteran Ronald Miller, 69, said visits from volunteers always brighten his day.

"It provides the world to me," said Miller, who served in Korea and Japan. "It's great, it's great."

Comments like that are music to the ears of Bernie Foley, a Korean War veteran who makes the trip from Perris every year. "Some of these guys are here for life," Foley said. "It's nice to be able to give them a little pleasure before the Christmas holidays."



Jennifer Bieger, a member of the City of Perris Public Safety Commission and American Legion Post 595 in the City, sorts items to be given to veterans hospitalized at the Jerry L. Pettis Memorial Veterans Medical Center during a recent visit.



Jim Bieger, District Commander of the American Legion in Riverside County, shakes hands with World War II veteran Jesse Sampson, who fought in the Philippines.