Written by By Tom Hartsock Sun Correspondent
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One of the first lessons learned in the military is that no matter how strong you are, everyone must be able and willing to help each other to be fully successful, regardless of the mission. It is a primary lesson, taught in the morning runs, and encouraged at almost every step of the trainee process. You are only as good as the weakest link in your chain; necessity demands help to operate at a maximum level.

Veterans Helping Veterans believes this philosophy, totally.

Started some 15 years ago by several young (a relative term) veterans who were dissatisfied with help they needed from the Veterans Administration, they formed a weekly coffee get-together to discuss options and to reports on what they had learned of the system.

The group grew rapidly and today numbers as many as 155 on every other Friday, all congregated in Don Diego's Restaurant for a meeting that offers cameraderie, advice, and other help from those who have been where they once were: the military. Not restricted to combat veterans or any particular service, this largest group of Gallup ex-military finds some warmth and solace in the company of those who have been there – before, during, or after their term of service.

David Cuellar is the de facto leader of Vetrans Helping Veterans, though he has a smaller unit nicknamed the A Team that provides most of the assistance any leader needs. He starts every meeting, general or A Team, the same way: the Pledge of Allegiance, a short prayer; and then a rundown of what is going on, not necessarily in any strict order.

That order after the pledge and the prayer is what will be attempted in this column.

A quick run through the sick and disabled members found Robert Peoples on chemo for lung cancer; Steve Starkovich on chemo again; Steven Mahnkee still in VA Hospital since Sept. 28 recovering from an infection of his knee replacement; and the good news that Felix Martinez got his meds changed and is not having multiple seizures every day.

Other good news shared was that John Unale, the brother of Danny Unale, finally received 100 percent compensation after a 15-year battle.

This is a very quiet time on the calendar, but Cuellar was eager to talk about some recent events in the veteran community that happened on Dec. 18, 2015.

Andrew Welch, the director of the VA Hospital in Albuquerque, came to the last general meeting of the year to listen to problems or complaints from several veterans. Welch promised to look into some of the complaints and on some others made immediate demands on his staff to rectify the problems. Included among these was one vet who needed back surgery and another who had been waiting for a CPAP.

From that point, the conversation shifted to a warning to veterans, whether in this particular group or not, to be careful who they pick as a representative for disability and other claims they may have. He was especially adamant that veterans should never sign over a power of attorney to any of these individuals or groups. The information they present may be fraudulent and can result in an even lengthier delay of benefits, or a vastly reduced amount.

The next patriotic holiday is Memorial Day. This year is the tenth anniversary of the pillars next to the County Courthouse being dedicated, and the annual celebration will be slightly larger this year. More planning is in the works and final decisions may not be complete until April.

Without a formal leave of any kind, which is never needed, Cuellar transformed back into his role as an advisor and began counseling a nearby female veteran of Afghanistan. It’s what he does best!

The next general meeting of Veterans Helping Veterans will be on Jan. 15 at Don Diego's, while the next A Team meeting is this Friday, Jan. 8 in the old Fire Dept. building on Second and Maloney. Both meeting begin at 9 am.

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