

Celebrating the Greatest Generation during the pandemic

**Prasad R. Padala MD, MS, FACHE^{1,2,3,4} | Ramona L. Rhodes MD, AGSF^{1,3} |
Lana M. Brown PhD¹ | Kalpana P. Padala MD, MS, AGSF^{1,3}**

¹Geriatric Research Education, and Clinical Center (GRECC), Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System (CAVHS), Little Rock, Arkansas, USA

²Department of Psychiatry, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), Little Rock, Arkansas, USA

³Department of Geriatrics, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), Little Rock, Arkansas, USA

⁴Baptist Health-UAMS Medical Education Program, Little Rock, Arkansas, USA

“The Greatest Generation,” a term coined by the famous journalist Tom Brokaw, describes those who came of age during the Great Depression, many of whom went on to fight in World War II. Brokaw wrote that these people did not fight for fame or recognition but rather because it was “the right thing to do.”¹ The Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System (CAVHS) has a special way of celebrating the World War II Veterans. A commemorative coin is presented to the World War II Veteran in an informal ceremony during their visit to CAVHS, and ample time is provided to listen to their life story and celebrate their service. In 2019, just under 400,000 of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II were still alive; the subject of our story is one of these heroes. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly places persons aged 65 years and older at high risk for infection and its physical and emotional sequelae.^{2,3} While their comorbidities place them at high risk for COVID infection, the public health preventive measures may further isolate this generation.⁴ Because of COVID-19 precautions, CAVHS could not celebrate the service of some of our WWII-era Veterans in-person compared to pre-COVID times.

One such coining ceremony was carefully planned to celebrate 96-year-old World War II Veteran Irunes Johnson from Holly Grove, Arkansas. Mr Johnson joined the army on March 30, 1944 at the age of 18. He completed his basic training in Louisiana and served in Germany, Indochina, and Camp Lucky Strike, France. He drove a 6 × 6 truck during General Dwight D. Eisenhower's final drive across the Rhine and into the heart of Germany. Mr Johnson happily shared his story during the ceremony and said that the 6 × 6 “deuce-and-a-half” was such a valuable piece of equipment that General Eisenhower regarded it as “one of the six most vital”

U.S. vehicles to win the war. It has been referred to as one of the most important trucks of World War II, and the 6 × 6 became known as the “workhorse of the Army.” Mr Johnson earned two bronze stars for Roe and Rhine River crossings, a Good Conduct Medal, and a marksmanship badge. He reminisced about the time he lost his medals in a house fire. He enjoyed the attention given to him by the coining ceremony team and said it was a welcome change from his recent “lonely” routine (Figure 1).

“He is one of the best dads and men in the world!” said his daughter while sharing his story. A hardworking man throughout his life, he farmed cotton and soybeans while working full time at the Producer's Rice Mill in Stuttgart, AR. He worked there for a total of 31 years. He supported and provided for his family of 14 children. He was very active at his church until the pandemic. He drove himself to church every Sunday morning and reviewed the sermon after the preacher ministered. He cooked for his wife and took care of her until she passed away in 2016. He continued to live alone in Holly Grove after her death. He now cares for four small kittens after their mother disappeared. He enjoys fixing a bowl of milk with a little bread in it for them in their eating spot in the yard. His daughter talked about his tough love and said that he was teaching them to learn to follow him to where they should eat. One of the kittens was a little slow to catch on apparently, but she got it eventually. At 96, he still cooks, cleans, does his own laundry, does lawn work, and maintains a garden. He loves watching sports. And enjoys frying, then eating catfish and buffalo fish.

Humanity should not take a backseat during the pandemic. Unfortunately, it is taking a backseat as our patients cannot see us smile behind our masks or read

FIGURE 1 Mr Johnson, a WWII Veteran, receiving a special commemorative coin from Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System (CAVHS) Geriatrics and Extended Care Service team. The photograph depicts the patient in the center and the interdisciplinary medical team consisting of MD, APRN, SW, RN, MSA, and trainees behind him to provide support along with his daughter. Everyone is masked and doing the best they can to combat the COVID-19 pandemic

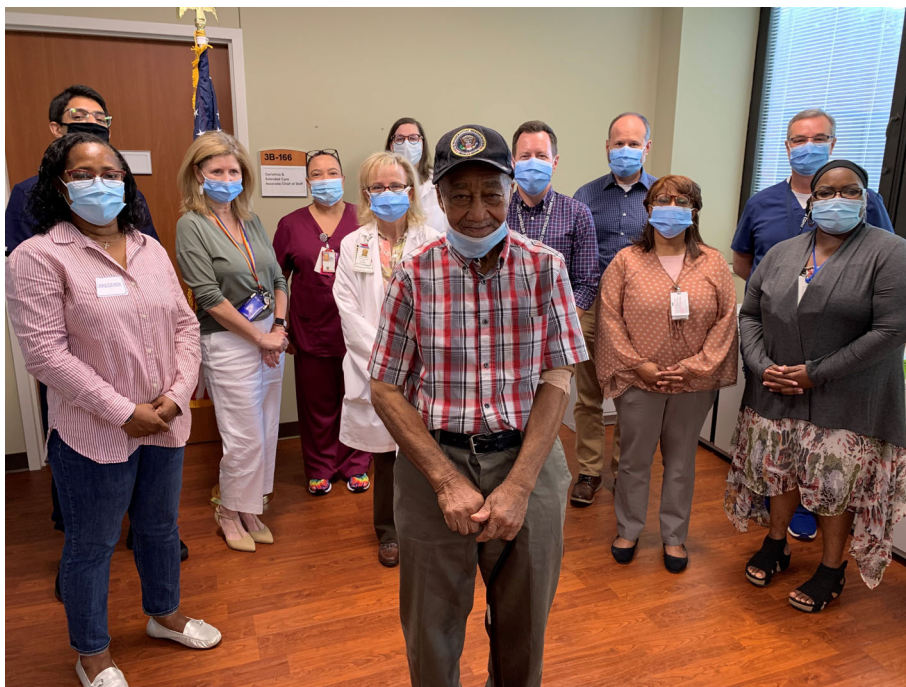


FIGURE 2 Commemorative coin from the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System

our lips as they struggle to hear us. Veteran care and recognition should remain a high priority at CAVHS even during the COVID-19 pandemic. World War II Veterans like Ironoes Johnson deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated for their service to our country. The presentation of a commemorative coin is one way for CAVHS to show our gratitude to our Veterans. These ceremonies, small steps to regain humanity in medicine, not only benefit our Veterans during these tough times but also allow the Veteran healthcare staff to reflect on the importance of providing exceptional care to our nations' heroes (Figure 2).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no financial conflicts of interest or personal conflict of interest relevant to the submitted manuscript for any authors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have contributed significantly to the paper and approve the final version. Detailed author contributions are as follows: **Prasad Padala:** conceptualization, obtaining permissions from the Office of Public Affairs, patient and caregiver interview, and manuscript preparation; **Ramona Rhodes:** conceptualization, and critical review of the manuscript; **Lana Brown:** conceptualization, and critical review of the manuscript; **Kalpana Padala:** conceptualization, patient and caregiver interview, and critical review of the manuscript.

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