My Favorite No Pay Job

Almost twenty-five years ago, I developed Cataracts, and the Veterans Administration told me I could have them removed and new lenses for both eyes installed by them. One hitch: I needed to get to the Miami VA hospital and the South Florida eye clinic on my own. I was nearly blind, so I couldn’t drive there. I went to my local outpatient clinic and queried the transportation office but was told they only had vans going north to Bay Pines Hospital near Clearwater. The DAV (Disabled American Veterans) was trying to organize a van to Miami.

Several months passed while I kept my son, Chris, in the back seat to call out the traffic lights. He was a great prankster and often called out green when it was red. He corrected his little joke in time, but I was still unhappy. I never had an accident until early one morning when I hit the back end of an improperly lit garbage truck: no injury and very little damage.

Then the DAV rep called and said they found a ‘sucker,’ I mean a volunteer, to drive their van, on an as-needed basis, to the Miami eye clinic. The retired Marine Corps Captain drove me there five times for each eye, totaling ten times. It was a miracle. The sky was blue again, and I could see the green lights alone. But that was when my gratitude overwhelmed my good sense. I told Cap’n Skinner I would drive their van if my eyes improved.

I could not think of a good enough reason to rescind my offer, so I and the Cap’n alternated driving. At four thirty a.m., we got up, drove to the VA, checked the van, and cleaned the interior. Occasionally, another department would use those vans, but they never cleaned or fueled them. The transports quickly became a huge hit, and some weeks, we drove three times, and I drove two, then switched the following week. I was told the Cap’n was stricter than I was, but over time, I realized that the Vets would take advantage, if possible.

On the seventy-five-mile stretch called ‘Alligator Alley, ’ it was difficult for the driver to remain awake. All the passengers would be sound asleep when we hit the west-end toll booth, but one would always wake up as we approached one of the two rest stops and beg to use a bathroom break. After a few trips, I noticed a few, or just one, would go in; the rest would remain by the van and smoke. After loading them back up and traveling twenty-five more miles, another rest stop request would be made. Two each way.

The Cap’n and I made a pact that only one break each way, and we had several written complaints filed against us. I caught one angry nicotine addict intentionally peeing on the floor one morning and had him banned. Others wanted to argue politics or drink cheap wine on the way. Many showed up with a rickety bicycle loaded with every item they owned. They were the shelter vets living in the Salvation Army or YMCA or under a bridge. Most were up too early for their complimentary breakfast. Sometimes, they pooled their change to buy a single breakfast meal when I stopped for my second cup of coffee at Micky-D’s. Each took a bite, passed it around, and argued about cream or no cream in the coffee. They wolfed it down under the “No Food in the Van” sign.

On many occasions, I bought more than one morning meal, but when I turned in a voucher request, all I got was a smile and a shake of the head, but there was always the obligatory, ‘Thank you for your service.’ A few vets cleaned up their mess, but most left their trash. That was alright if they weren’t cranks. In military terms, a crank is a service person who can’t be pleased. They usually carried every paper medical record and appeal in a folder. The better ones had a manilla enveloped that closed at both ends. Most others had the open-end kind and could drop a thousand pages everywhere. Every conversation started with, “The VA is fucking me over so bad.” There was never a thank you on either end.

My career lasted almost two years before the VA eventually took over from the DAV, and everything changed. The DAV was a loose outfit that petitioned the service clubs for the money to buy the vans, purchase the gas, and do the maintenance. The VA bought the driver's lunch in Miami, about a dollar short of anything good. Still, it was rewarding, like the good old days. But some VA bureaucrat decided to fold the DAV service into their group, and trouble began. For instance, under the DAV, we took anyone standing in the parking lot at five-thirty in the morning who wanted to go and had an appointment.

Under the new VA rules, only Vets who signed up through the poorly manned VA transportation office could ride. It took us old-time volunteers a while to adapt. We were all threatened with dismissal from a non-paying job, primarily for hauling unverified vets, even though, once in Miami, they all checked out. Their excuse was that they couldn’t access a phone when the office was open or forgot to call. I was threatened with termination twice. Go figure.

At the same time, the Miami Hospital was expanding into its parking lot, so spaces were at a premium. The vans from various outpatient clinics around South Florida had to park a half mile away from the entrance and, for a short time, were forbidden to drop off patients at the front door. The Federal VA Police chased away many drivers. If you got a ticket from them, you had to go somewhere in the panhandle to fight it.

My solution was to park in the valet parking lot. At first, I gave the valets a few bucks, parked myself, unloaded, and then moved off to the back, back lot. But the VA administration noticed my scam and wrote a nasty note to the Bay Pines transportation office, and once again, I was warned.

Unbeknownst to me, someone kept a file on me, and a ‘rider’ came along one morning. I made it to the hospital by eight-thirty that morning and back by four-thirty; many older vets needed to make the second sitting at their nursing home. I may have exceeded the speed limit slightly, taken whoever needed a ride, bought a couple of breakfast meals, and made only one comfort stop each way. I cleaned and gassed the van, and the ‘rider’ handed me my dismissal notice. I shed one tear and then went to happy hour.

Several attempts were made to ‘rehire’ me over the next year, but eventually, they gave up. I wasn’t invited to the driver’s Christmas party anymore, as if I ever went. But I miss the vets, even the cranks!