

# The Man in the Hall

*by Gordon Perkinson and Christine Barnes*

*There on the beaches of Normandy I began to reflect on the wonders of these ordinary people whose lives were laced with the markings of greatness. At a time in their lives when their days and nights should have been filled with innocent adventure, love, and the lessons of the workaday world, they were fighting in the most primitive conditions possible across the bloodied landscape of France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, and the coral islands of the Pacific. They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. They succeeded on every front. They won the war; they saved the world.*

Tom Brokaw

*The Greatest Generation*

We arrived on the beautiful, neatly groomed campus of White River Junction VA Hospital. There was the usual sense of anticipation: What will we accomplish today? What a wonderful opportunity it is to engage our veterans, staff and visitors! Often we have what I refer to as just 'regular' visits, greeting patients and staff and letting them meet Lizzie. But today would be different.

My Therapy Dog, Lizzie, and I got out of the car. After brushing her, attaching her collar, vest, bandanna and VA badge, we walked to the main building where I signed in, then proceeded to the hospital and began our rounds which usually take about 2 hours.

Lizzie and I entered one of the medical/surgical wings. Sitting in a wheelchair was an older Veteran, in his mid-nineties, an indication of the challenging time he served our country. As we walked closer, we could see the old soldier was somewhat compromised, silent, head down and not engaged in any way. I asked the staff if it was permissible to take the man's hand and put it on Lizzie. I was given the okay, and I placed his hand gently on her head.

At first, he seemed not to notice. Then slowly, he began to realize something was under his hand. Gently, softly, he started to smooth the hair on Lizzie's head, still with his own head bowed, and no further response. Lizzie sat still and patiently by his side.

After about a minute the aged Vet's chest started to shake, and he began to weep. While still slowly stroking her head, silent tears flowed slowly down his weathered cheeks. When he finally looked up, first at Lizzie, then at me, slowly, very slowly, he shared with us a peaceful, warm smile.

Now, in what must be his final years, this gentle man continues to touch us all with his story and his life.

A smile came to my face as well, then a tear, as I was moved by the privilege of sharing this peace with him.

....and the reason for this remarkable change in the old soldier's perception at this time? A dog. A brief but compelling moment for him, from us, in gratitude for his journey all those many years ago.

***America, home of the free because of the brave.***