Alfie with Milton D. Till Sr., a World War II Navy veteran. A tireless volunteer in the veterans' community, Till died in 2020 at the age of 92. *State Department of Veterans Affairs*

ALFIE ALVARADO-RAMOS

What Alfie is All About

By John C. Hughes

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Alfie Alvarado-Ramos

"Veterans are the center of everything we do"

She wanted to be a combat medic in Vietnam, but they told her women were barred from the battlefield. The Army sent her to nursing school. Now she's a general in a war with an invisible enemy, a veteran helping veterans. Her name is Lourdes Esther Alvarado-Ramos. That's a lot of names. You can call her "Alfie." Everyone does. Her trademark smile also opens a lot of doors.

Naïve but determined, she was a tiny 18-year-old when she ditched her boyfriend and left Puerto Rico to join the military 50 years ago. She was the first to volunteer for anything, even KP. Her boots were always the shiniest. She aced every test. Within 17 years she was one of the Army's highest-ranking non-commissioned officers in the health-care field—the first female First Sergeant in the Berlin Brigade, and the first female Command Sergeant Major at Madigan Hospital and Fort Lewis. On the way up, she wasn't afraid to make waves, especially when she encountered sexism. The dentist who called her "sweetheart" got drilled.

"I'm Hispanic. I'm female. And I am short!" Alfie says, chuckling now as she remembers the times when she had to draw the line. Back then it was no laughing matter. "When you're vertically challenged and female, sometimes people look at you and think, 'Who is this person to be in command?' But I never backed down." Today, as director of the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, she oversees four nursing homes and an array of programs, from suicide prevention and counseling services to transitional housing for homeless vets and a farm. The State Veterans Cemetery honors former soldiers in their final resting place. Alfie's overriding goal is to keep veterans and their families alive and well. The sign on her desk says, "Start with Yes."

The number of veterans is projected to decline in the next decade. But more of them will have service-related disabilities. And more of them will be women.

Alfie poses with a portrait of herself in 1990 when she was one of the highest ranking NCOs in the U.S. Army. The "I Am Not Invisible" project spotlights the nation's two-million female veterans. *Center for Women Veterans*

Alfie's job—and that of her successors—is going to get harder, not easier, although 2020 was one for the books.

March 2021 marked a year of Covid-19 combat for Alfie and her staff. While nursing homes, assisted living centers, penitentiaries, fraternity houses and other congregate living facilities across the state were being devastated by Covid-19, the VA's nursing homes at Spokane, Walla Walla, Orting and Port Orchard—517 beds in all—were weathering the pandemic with remarkable success until the 2020 holidays. The majority of the 10 residents who had succumbed to the virus in the previous months—all at the Spokane facility—had pre-existing conditions such as COPD, diabetes or arteriosclerosis. Then came an outbreak at Orting, the state's original Soldiers Home, established in 1891. Eight residents there died in the space of a few days. Alfie's staff ramped up what had already been hunkered-down vigilance as vaccinations got under way. "Our communities did us no favors when they let down their guard over the holidays," she says, exasperated. "All of a sudden, the virus hit us like a ton of bricks." Before long, even more virulent variants began popping up.

At this writing on the eve of spring 2021, the fatality toll among veterans and their spouses is 19, plus one staff member at the Walla Walla nursing home. For Alfie, the numbers are more than statistics. "It's heartbreaking. These veterans had served their country on the front lines of wars since the 1940s. To us, they're family. Twenty deaths out of some 500 beds may be statistically good, but one is too many."

Her agency has been a model of transparency throughout the pandemic. "No comment" is not in her vocabulary.

To know how Alfie became who she is, you have to understand her roots.

Puerto Rico is part of the Greater Antilles. *Karl Musser/Wikimedia Commons*

LIKE THE 2.8 MILLION people on the island of her birth, Alfie Alvarado-Ramos is an American citizen. She is also Puerto Rican to the core. She Zooms home every Sunday to check in on her widowed mother, nearly 89, and three siblings.

In a geography quiz, "Where is Puerto Rico?" might baffle most Americans. It's a thousand miles from Miami at the south end of the Bermuda Triangle, and about the size of Connecticut. On maps, the U.S. territory resembles a rib-eye steak marinating in the Caribbean, east of Cuba, Jamaica and Hispaniola, the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Donald J. Trump famously mulled whether he could swap Puerto Rico to Denmark for Greenland. After Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017, the president reportedly told staffers Puerto Ricans are "poor" and the island "dirty." The poverty rate is high there, due to decades of colonial neglect, taxation without representation, $94 billion in damage from the hurricane, and now the Covid-19 pandemic. But Puerto Ricans take great umbrage at the notion their tropical island, with its rich culture, spectacular scenery and historic buildings, is a slum. Alfie was offended by the notion that her beloved country was "a chip to be cashed in without regard to its people."

The oldest of five children, Lourdes Esther Alvarado-Ramos was born in 1953. She grew up in Ponce, Puerto Rico's second-largest municipality. (San Juan, the capital, is on the opposite side of the island). That year saw the largest migration

of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. mainland—74,600. They settled mostly in Florida, New York and New Jersey. In all, 460,000 Puerto Ricans departed in the 1950s, an era marked by militant nationalism and high unemployment. Agriculture was in decline, notably sugar cane plantations. Jennifer Lopez, born in the Bronx to Puerto Rican parents, and Lin-Manuel Miranda of "Hamilton" fame, are offspring of the exodus—"New Ricans," Alfie says, smiling. She observes that most Americans don't know how or why Puerto Rico became an American colony.

Alife at 4. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

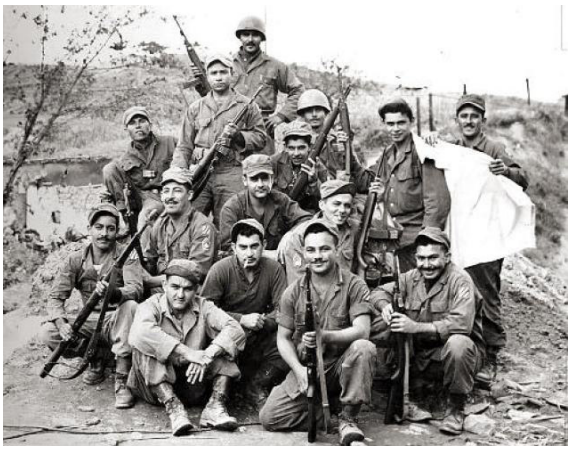
We won it—expropriated might be a better word—in a 10-week war with Spain in 1898. The opening salvo was a mysterious explosion that sank the battleship USS Maine in Havana Harbor, killing 266 sailors, an event ginned up by the Hearst press as "SPANISH TREACHERY!" The U.S. was backing Cuban independence from Spanish colonial rule. The explosion was provocation enough for the saber-rattlers. Some military historians believe it was caused by spontaneous combustion of coal in the bunker next to the ship's munitions. The battle cry became "Remember the Maine!" The most celebrated engagement, the Battle of San Juan Hill, featured future president Theodore Roosevelt leading the charge in a cowboy bandana as his "Rough Riders" subdued clumps of heavily outnumbered but brave Spanish defenders.* The peace treaty ceded Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam to the United States. Mark Twain was among the anti-imperialists who decried the treaty, charging that rather than free the peoples of its newly acquired colonies—especially the Philippines—"we have gone there to conquer, not to redeem…" American businessmen capitalized on Puerto Rico's cheap labor and attractive tax laws.

Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, only to be treated like a poor-relation colony. They've chafed for decades at their status as an American territory, with the dubious official distinction of being a "commonwealth." The territory has its own constitution, but so does "the Commonwealth of Virginia." Go

* "Mr. Dooley," the popular Irish bartender created by American journalist Finley Peter Dunne, quipped in 1900 that Roosevelt's wartime memoir ought to be called "Alone in Cuba."

figure. Alfie puts it this way, "Puerto Ricans can vote in presidential primaries, but not in U.S. general elections. How does that make any sense?" Last November, in the sixth such vote in Puerto Rican history, 52 percent of the island's electorate favored statehood. The non-binding referendum is unlikely to gain traction with the U.S. Congress. "Don't hold your breath," is the way Alfie puts it. Jenniffer González, Puerto Rico's largely powerless congressional delegate—her title is "resident commissioner"—says the island is weary of being treated as a colony. "It's a little bit ironic that the beacon of democracy in the world" has balked for 120 years at "allowing Puerto Ricans to vote for president, to vote in Congress or to even have federal laws apply equally to American citizens on the island," said González, a Republican.

All that notwithstanding, Alfie wants you to know that Puerto Ricans have fought and died for America in every war since their homeland was ceded to the U.S.—18,000 served in World War I, 65,000 in World War II, 61,000 in Korea, 48,000 in Vietnam and thousands more in the Gulf Wars. Three female Puerto Rican soldiers died in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Puerto Rican nurses were members of the first Women's Army Corps unit sent to Vietnam in 1967. Nine Puerto Rican soldiers have received the Medal of Honor.



The Borinqueneers in Korea. *US Army*

When the Korean War erupted in the summer of 1950, Alfie's father had hoped to see combat with the U.S. Army's legendary 65th Infantry Regiment. Some 48,000 Puerto Rican soldiers served with "The Borinqueneers," a nickname derived from Boriquén, the indigenous Taíno Indian name for Puerto Rico, and "Buccaneers." Despite being tarred with insubordination and cowardice by a racist court-martial, the Borinqueneers became one of the most decorated units of the war, "the Hispanic version of the Tuskegee Airmen," as one military historian put it. In 2014, the 65th Infantry Regiment received a belated Congressional Gold Medal in a ceremony at Washington, D.C. "You've earned a hallowed place in our history," President Obama said. Alfie was there, joining Puerto Rico's governor and other territorial dignitaries for what she remembers as "a glorious, long-overdue day."

ALFIE'S PARENTS, Luis "Felito" Alfredo Alvarado and Esther Ramos, met as pen pals through a friend. Felito, a National Guardsman, was called up for active duty after the North Koreans, armed with Soviet-built artillery and tanks, surged across the 38th Parallel and seized Seoul. While his regiment was undergoing training, he secured a pass to visit Esther at Yabucoa, a small city on Puerto Rico's east coast. "In 1951, the second time he went to see her, he asked her to marry him. She said, 'Yes.' And when I came along two years later, I was named Lourdes in honor of the friend who introduced them. That was her first name," Alfie explains.

Alfie's parents, Luis "Felito" Alfredo Alvarado and Esther Ramos, on their wedding day in 1951. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

"My father never made it to Korea before the armistice in 1953. I think it was his biggest disappointment because he was a corporal and all ready to go. He wore his uniform with such pride, including on his wedding day. He kept his mess kit and ate with his U.S. Army-issued fork and spoon practically until the day he died. That pride resonated with me—how he revered that portion of his life when he was doing something important; how he wore that uniform. He didn't talk a lot about his service, but when he did, he just lit up. My mom would talk about how she ironed his uniform and 'starched him up really good.' I remember him shining his brass with care. His shoes were always perfect. As I grew older, I said to myself, 'I want to do that. I want to be in the military.' "

Alife as a self-described mischievous 7-year-old. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

In childhood, Alfie confesses to being "a strong willed, mischievous rebel who didn't listen to anybody. I thought I was the smartest kid on the block. I was a handful. Now that I think about it, my

parents were saints for having endured me—not to mention my brothers and sisters. We fought all the time. But if *you* fought with any of them, I would have your tail!

"Our first house was very rudimentary. Just a rectangular wooden structure on concrete blocks. It was elevated because that's how you'd keep houses cool. That little house was probably 40 years old. With the tropical weather, the wood gets eaten up by termites. It had so many termite holes that we used to stuff newspaper in the planks. We'd be running through the house, and my father would shout, 'Stop running! Just walk!' I know that parents everywhere say that. But in our case it was for our own safety. If you ran too hard your foot might go right through the termite-infested wooden floor. One time my brother went right through the floor, right to his knees. So from then on we ran very softly.

"There were three of us kids back then. We slept together in one full-size bed. That was it. Four rooms: My parents' room; the kids' room, the kitchen and a 'living room' at the front—a little parlor. Thirteen years later my mom and dad had a couple more kids. So it was crowded. And that's just the way it was."

WHEN HER FATHER mustered out of the Army, he began working at a factory that manufactured upscale Florsheim shoes—those classic wingtips—for the U.S. market. Marriage and children (three girls and two boys) ended her mother's plans to pursue nursing. Esther joined her spouse at the shoe factory. "My mother decided to work at a time when women didn't," Alfie remembers. "She wanted to be able to help us make ends meet. My father made enough for the staples of life. If we wanted anything else—clothing, furniture, new linoleum—my mother's wages paid for that. But we were very poor. Their first transportation was a surplus military motorcycle that he got for cheap. When I was born, my father was able to get a surplus 1942 Jeep. That's basically how my parents were: Frugal. They were also incredibly giving people," deeply committed to their Roman Catholic faith.

Alfie, left, with her siblings, Yolanda and Fred, outside their home in Puerto Rico in the 1950s. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Alfie—she was Lourdes back then—was identified early on as a very bright girl. In part because of her parents' standing with the church, she was picked to attend a parochial school tuition free beginning with the seventh grade. Colegio San Con-

rado was operated by the Sisters of Saint Joseph from New York, with Franciscan priests. Her favorite subjects were history, science, Spanish and English. She arrived in middle school with three years of French as well.

"In public elementary school we had special programs because the Secretary of Instruction was extremely progressive. I was selected for what they called 'special grades.' But the problem with the special grades is that if you were not in the special grades you were not special. Years later, I learned that my former public school classmates were so accelerated in their studies that they skipped a grade from middle school to high school. Who knows what would have happened to me had I skipped a grade, too. I was 18 when I graduated from high school in 1971. I probably would not be here speaking with you if I had graduated a year early with my former classmates."

ALFIE HOPED to become a nurse. She had a letter of acceptance from Catholic University of Puerto Rico. "But the federal aid I needed never came through. So I said, 'Well, what do I do now?' I'm not going to work at the sales counter over at Sears or at a factory.' I had a boyfriend named Candido. I was almost ready to get engaged. Suddenly everything seemed so unsettled. At 18, I decided, 'I'm just going to join the U.S. Army because it's time to leave.' So that was that!" She laughs, shrugs and shakes her head, marveling at her own decisiveness.

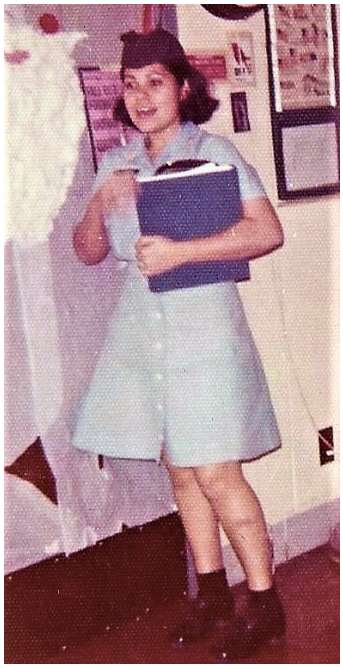
"The stigma then was that if you were joining the military and you were a woman you were either a lesbian or a floozy," Alfie says. She had "not a clue" she would one day come out as gay. And she certainly wasn't a floozy. Her parents and the church had instilled a deep sense of morality.

Alfie needed her parents' permission to enlist. "I said, 'There's no future for me here.' I think they were stunned—especially my Mom. But they never said 'No.' And I was off to see the world." She had never been off the island; never spent the night in a hotel or eaten at a restaurant, "let alone flown on an airplane."

"My adventure started the moment I raised my hand to take the enlistment oath. And my life changed completely. I had no expectations. Zero expectations! I took every day as it came and every day was a surprise. For me it was just the experience of doing all these new things. Now I look back and marvel. When I talk with people about life's opportunities—and for veterans this often means starting over; trying something entirely new—I say that when it comes to new things it's choosing excitement over fear. This is what I unconsciously did by taking in every day and just looking at it as an adventure or something new and not being afraid of it. Even my language barrier. I was not afraid of it."

Her voice is tinged with the lilting cadences of her first language.

Learning a new language is one thing. Using it quite another. Alfie blushed when she discovered some expressions were double entendres. Her Puerto Rican Spanish often prompted giggles from the Mexican-American soldiers she met in basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama. "When you're speaking with someone from Cuba, Mexico or anywhere else in Latin America, people know you are from Puerto Rico because we cut off the S's and the D's from words. Instead of 'usted,' which means 'you,' we say 'ute.' When I began to learn real-world English, I listened closer. I asked for clarification: 'What did you say? What does that mean?' And that helped me a lot in being able to be the person that I am today."



Basic training, 1971. That uniform was so starched it could stand on its own, Alfie says. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Providentially perhaps, her platoon sergeant, Margarita Colon, was Puerto Rican—"I mean like the only other Puerto Rican in the entire battalion. Over the years, I've tried to get a hold of that amazing woman to see if she's still around. I would assume she is because she was probably only five or six years older than me. But I can't find her. I owe her a lot because she didn't cut me any slack. Probably she was harsher on me to toughen me up. I was the only Latina in my company. So, she rode me hard to make sure I would show what I had. I didn't realize that until years later. My focus was on my experience and doing the best I could with anything I got."

Lourdes Esther Alvarado-Ramos became "Alfie" in basic training when her squad leader declared, "Your name is too hard. We're going to have to give you a nickname: 'Alfie!' "

"It was something given to me rather than something I agreed to. If I had been more confident I would have asked for people to call me 'Lou.' But 'Alfie' sticks with people. It's like there's only one!" She snaps her fingers and grins. "It's easy to remember. I think it has served me well for all these years. Back then, however, it was kind of a change from who I really was. Now I guess it fits who I've become. So I don't mind."

ALFIE QUALIFIED for the Army's Academy of Health Sciences at Fort Sam Hous-

ton, Texas. "It was what I really wanted to do," she remembers, "to be able to be a healer. It was also an awesome duty station because San Antonio is largely Latino." Her disappointment was that women were not allowed to continue beyond the three-month course to become combat medics—de facto battlefield doctors. The historical argument was that female medics should not be placed in front-line units because they would "distract" infantry soldiers and not be able to keep up with the physical demands of combat.

"In addition to hospital nursing, we were taught to put on makeup, and schooled on the ladylike social graces," Alfie remembers. "It was almost like a finishing school. I never fired a weapon in basic training. Military women were not given that training. It began to change shortly afterwards." But the prohibition on combat roles remained. In 1976, General William Westmoreland, the former commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, said it was "silly" to allow women to enroll at West Point. "Maybe you could find one woman in 10,000 who could lead in combat," he scoffed," but she would be a freak and we're not running the Military Academy for freaks."

Staff Sergeant Alvarado-Ramos in 1978. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

The ban on women in combat roles was lifted in 2015, another glass ceiling shattered by female soldiers, whose heroism had long since been documented. As combat medics in Iraq and Afghanistan, women have proved resilient under daunting fire, saving many lives. They're front-line soldiers too. "Westmoreland is probably rolling in his grave right now," Alfie says. The cadet corps at the U.S. Military Academy is now 25 percent female, "and a lot of the women are among the top graduating cadets, excelling in their studies, physical fitness, leadership qualities and combat readiness."

The military women of the 1970s, especially in the enlisted ranks, were navigating a man's world replete with blatant chauvinism. "Sexual harassment in the military is still a problem," Alfie says, "but women have made a huge step forward in their roles. They're combat pilots, soldiers, sailors and Marines. One thing hasn't

changed: The military makes people grow up really fast. When mothers are scared that their son or daughter is going to join the military, I usually tell them, 'Don't be afraid. They're going to be opening a whole new world. They're going to be whole different people. And if you're going to be afraid for their safety, well, there are dangers, undeniably. But you could get hit crossing the street or slip and hit your head. So this thing about safety is very overrated.' "

ALFIE WAS DEEPLY disappointed over her failure to make it to Vietnam. She wanted to face danger and show that "healers" are soldiers. She struggled with a strain of survivor's guilt for years. "Sometimes when they said, 'All the Vietnam veterans stand up,' I did not because I felt I was not one of them. But an important part of my work was to deal with the issues of those who returned and to take care of their families. One day I was like, 'Wait a minute! I was part of that war.' So I began to stand up.

"In 1990, during Desert Storm, I was the Command Sergeant Major at Madigan Hospital. I really wanted to go to the Gulf, but my duty was to train and re-train a lot of the National Guard troops to be able to form a new company. There were mixed emotions about that, too."

As she rose steadily through the enlisted ranks, she developed a new appreciation for how essential non-commissioned officers are to the military.* There's an old saying that "Chiefs run the Navy." Alfie says NCOs are the backbone of all the services—from the legendary Sergeant York in World War I to the hard-ass Gunnery Sergeant in "Heartbreak Ridge." "Sometimes senior NCOs will encounter young lieutenants just out of college who think they know a lot," Alfie says. "But when it comes to dealing with people and taking care of the troops, the NCO is the one who gets things done. The sergeants are the caretakers when it comes to training, morale and welfare."

Her first assignment was DeWitt Army Hospital at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. During her first year there she worked in the newborn nursery. That was a joy. "Then I was asked to go into postpartum and start working with adults. That's when I knew I was not cut out to be a nurse! I believe everything happens for a reason.

* Commissioned officers, usually college graduates, hold commissions from the President of the United States. In the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps, their ranks range from Second Lieutenant to four-star General. In the Navy, it's Ensign to Admiral. (Five-star military ranks historically are awarded only during wartime.) Non-commissioned officer ranks begin with corporals, sergeants and junior petty officers. Senior NCOs in the all-volunteer military increasingly are vested with crucial responsibilities. Command Sergeants Major (E-9), Alfie's highest rank, are key aides to colonels and generals. Sergeant Major of the Army is the ultimate enlisted rank in the Army, held by only one enlisted soldier at a time.

You can't get distracted with 'Oh my!' pity parties over things that didn't happen, because many times there's another opportunity right in front of you. Looking back, I'm glad I didn't go through four years of college to become a nurse only to discover I hated it. I became a dental hygienist, which I loved. It's one of the lessons I share with people, especially veterans: If you don't feel what you're doing is what fills you, get out instead of being miserable. We all have choices."

Besides being whip smart, Alfie was identified early on as leadership material because she volunteered for jobs no one else was willing to do, and seized every opportunity for training. A self-described over-achiever, she was "looking for things that would help people and not to get anything in return. It's what I learned from my parents: Be humble, be helpful. After a while, when the plum things came along, like being a recruiter, they called on me. You had to look sharp in your uniform and be a good example. I always wanted my uniform perfect; my shoes spit-shined; my blouse always starched up. That's the kind of thing that gets you noticed. But I didn't do it just to get noticed. I did it because I respected my uniform. I would never have disgraced it. They'd look me over, check my record and go, 'Oh, pick Alfie. She'll get it done!' "

Alfie celebrates a promotion by buying a new "Champagne Edition" 1978 VW Super Beetle convertible. She still has it. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Her salutes are still as crisp as they get.

Fort Belvoir had a Soldier-of-the Month competition. The other women in her outfit said it sounded like too much work. "You had to study like heck because it was a murder board. You had to answer all their tough, intimidating questions. By then, I'd also had training in weapons. I was an expert shot with the pistol and excelled in that competition, too. Then I became proficient with the M16 rifle, and even learned to fire the German-made machine gun, which really kicks you back. That was fun! It was hard for a woman to do men's push-ups, but I could do more than some of the guys. I was the Soldier of the Month for the Women's Company. Then I got the Soldier of the Quarter for the hospital, which included the men. I kept going up, until I was the Soldier of the Post for the year." She even made the All-Army Bowling Team.

There's another important thing you need to know about Alfie: She was never willing to just go along to get along or compromise her morals. Young enlisted women were especially vulnerable to unwanted advances in her era. She has a copy of a recruiting poster depicting a fetching young enlisted woman with a suave, gray-haired officer. She's giving him a document to examine. His fingers are touching her hand. "Girls need generals," is the tagline. "It just sends shivers about the kind of Army I went into," Alfie says. "I didn't let anybody mess with me when it came to that kind of thing. And there was a lot of that going around. In Germany, I was the brand-new First Sergeant of the dental detachment at Berlin. There was a clinic chief, a lieutenant colonel, who oversaw an orthodontics residency. One day we were going from his clinic across the hall into the headquarters. He was right behind me, and he goes, 'Hello, sweetheart.' My reaction was like a scene from The Exorcist. My head practically swiveled 360-degrees. I almost spit pea soup! I spun around and said, 'You can call me 'Top.' You can call me 'First Sergeant.' You can call me 'Alfie.' But don't ever call me 'sweetheart!' " She thumps the table with the palm of her hand. "I never allowed anything like that. I've coached a lot of women to not let that sort of thing get started. If you open the door a crack, it will be wide open and you won't be able to control it. Today we're working with veterans—men and women—who have experienced sexual harassment. A lot of women veterans are now finally telling these stories. Many of them have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress because of enduring so much abuse. Some left the military because of it."

Advertisement from 1969 for The Women's Army Corps. *Smithsonian Institution*

Twenty-five percent of the female veterans seeking VA care between 2008 and 2013 had been diagnosed as victims of active-duty sexual trauma. Harassment rates were higher yet.

Overall, 41 percent of the women who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan had sought medical help at least once at the VA, compared to 22 percent of male vet-

erans. In addition to counseling, the female veterans were seeking birth control, infertility assistance and child-care services. "The old saying was, 'If the Army wanted you to have a baby it would have issued you one,' " Alfie says. "The system has been geared to males. We need to make women veterans more comfortable with the system. I'm encouraged that things are changing, slowly but surely. First of all, there are more women in the military, especially in the command ranks. That always starts turning the tables. The systems for reporting harassment are also better now. But the burden of proof is still on the woman. It's 'He said, she said.' The military is just a slice of society. Women in other professions have endured similar treatment."

ALFIE'S FIRST and most important role model was her mother, "a very strong woman" who taught her important things about decorum and self-respect. "And then there was Sergeant First Class Mary Stringfellow, a matronly African American woman who was amazing!" Alfie remembers fondly. "She was my clinic NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge) when I first became a dental assistant. I was a Specialist 4 at the time. I had just come from Dental Assistant School, and was working with a dentist who was extremely demanding. I did my absolute best to be perfect all of the time. In everything. One day I did something with a mix of dental base that didn't turn out right because of timing. He told the patient, 'Excuse the incompetence of my assistant. She doesn't know what she's doing.' I turned on my heel and left the room. I told Sergeant Stringfellow what had happened. Well, she came storming back into the room and just let him have it. The dentist was a captain; Mary Stringfellow was an NCO. But she declared, 'Don't you ever talk to any of my soldiers like that!' She was an amazing woman. In the morning she'd be standing in the clinic doorway, and if the doctors came in late she'd let 'em have it. The dentist never apologized, but he never talked to me like that ever again. From that incident I learned several things: Number One, you stand up for your people. Protect them and make sure they're taken care of. That sergeant taught me what it meant to take care of the troops. And to not accept injustice or abuse. For her to make that stand—especially as a woman of color during that time—was extraordinary. I'll never forget Mary Stringfellow."

Within four years Alfie had made E-5—a key leadership rank, especially as an influencer for junior soldiers. In the Army's specialist ranks she was a "Spec 5," the equivalent of sergeant. "A key moment was when I was selected to be in charge of the Dental Assistant Course. I was already a dental hygienist, and a Sergeant First Class, the NCO in charge of that program. After that I became the NCOIC of the Dental Hygiene Course at Fort Sam Houston. There were men and women in the

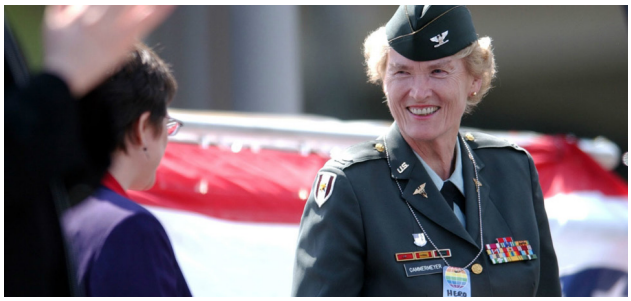
class—actually more men than women, because the dental hygiene specialty was in demand everywhere. I worked hard to ensure people had the skills to pass."

Her painstaking preparation and leadership charisma were noticed. Her students knew their stuff. Meantime, on evenings and weekends she was reading voluminously and challenging college courses through the Regents External Degree Program offered by the University of the State of New York. "I did most of my bachelor's degree by just reading the books and taking the equivalency tests. Classroom attendance isn't required. I already had an associate's degree from Baylor University from my dental hygienist expanded duties course. I could do fillings, extractions, adjust orthodontics. I was able to do all those things, including impressions taken by the doctor. I loved it. The military places a high premium on self-improvement. There's a world of opportunity if you're willing to work hard."

BY 23 ALFIE had discovered something surprising, yet wonderfully liberating, about herself: She was gay. She had seriously considered becoming engaged to the boyfriend she'd left behind in Puerto Rico. Life being more like a jigsaw puzzle than a box of chocolates, the pieces had slowly slipped into place. "When I was discovering that side of me, I saw the witch-hunts when people were turning on others—especially women, for being gay. I saw capable, dedicated people being discharged from the Army. As I progressed in the ranks I had the opportunity to influence some of these decisions and protect people. My commanders, for the most part, knew I was gay. It was something I never hid. But I never flaunted it either. It was just who I was. The biggest excuse the military had is that if you were gay they said you could be blackmailed and turned against your country. I always told myself that if it ever happened to me, I'd be the first one to say, 'I've been contacted. I've been compromised.' And I would have voluntarily left the military. I think the fact that I worked in the medical field meant things were a bit different, because in medicine it's not about the machismo or the toughness. It's about care—about caring for others. So a lot of these professions have a higher percentage of LGBTQ—many nurses, for instance. Most of my bosses—male and female—knew I was gay. They looked past that. They didn't ask and I didn't tell. They just let me be me. At Fort Sam Houston, I went to a military parade with my then-significant other. We sat together. The next day, I was in my boss's office. That was Dr. Leo Rouse, a wonderful African American colonel. 'I want to ask you something,' he said. 'Your friend was wearing a ring just like yours.' I smiled and said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'OK!' and that was it. He was a very good man. He taught me class and discretion, how to conduct myself. He retired just

a couple of years ago as the dean of the dental school at Howard University."*

All this was before the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" directive issued by President Bill Clinton in 1993. In purported practice, the directive no longer banned gay people from the military. "It was a look-the-other way rule," Alfie says, "and a positive step because it tempered the witch-hunts. Clinton would have shown more courage if he had stepped all the way up and ended the ban outright. But if you don't have the support of the commanders—the big four stars at the top of the chain of command—like President Obama did, it's hard to get the military to change course. From time to time I connect with Colonel Margarethe Cammermeyer, the Washington National Guard nurse discharged from the military in 1992 after she revealed she was a lesbian. She returned to duty after winning a court case and has worked tirelessly to overturn discrimination against LGBTQ people in the military. She is one of my heroes." (Glenn Close portrayed Cammermeyer in the 1995 television film, "Serving in Silence.")



Colonel Cammermeyer. *Lesbiannews.com*

"Today, at JBLM (Joint Base Lewis-McChord) there are same-sex couples living in family housing," Alfie notes, heartened that President Biden has lifted the ban on transgender people serving in the military. "We've come a long way, but lately there's a resurgence of prejudice. People have been given permission to be their ugly selves, maintaining it's an abomination to be gay, even though a lot of these people have family members who are gay and ought to understand this is something you don't choose. It's undeniable, however, that we're breaking barriers. My counterpart in Oregon is gay. She was an officer in the military. My counterpart in California, a retired colonel, is gay. So it's becoming fairly commonplace. I'm no longer a unicorn."

Alfie and her spouse, San Juanita "Juani" Flores, married in 2015. They've been adventurous peas in a pod for 38 years. Flores, a nurse, joined the military after they became a couple and advanced to lieutenant colonel as an intensive care

* Dr. Rouse, the first African American president of the board of the American Dental Education Association, received the association's 2020 Distinguished Service Award. He often quoted a mentor of his own, Professor Howard Hendricks at Dallas Theological Seminary, who said, "The measure of you as a leader is not what you do, but what others do because of what you do."

Alfie and her spouse, San Juanita "Juani" Flores. Married in 2015, they've been together for 38 years. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

specialist. Flores is of Mexican descent. The pair look so much alike they're sometimes mistaken for sisters. They love backpacking, river rafting and RV-ing. Dogs in tow, their all-female hiking club has theme outings. Once, it decamped to Ocean Shores in tie-died T-shirts, go-go tunics and rose-colored granny glasses. "We have fun!" Alfie declares. She and Juani still have the pampered 1978 "Champagne Edition" VW Super Beetle convertible Alfie bought brand new when she was promoted to Staff Sergeant.

ON THE WAY UP, ALFIE was selected for myriad career-development and leadership schools. She reached the top of the enlisted ranks, E-9, in just 17 years. "I was at the Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, when they made the announcements," she remembers. "My selection was met with resentment by some of the guys who had been in the Army longer than me. They were still E8's, and I made not only the E9 but also the Command Sergeant Major list. When you win that promotion, you're now in command. You work with the Commanding General. My father was extremely proud."

With her proud dad when she was promoted to Master Sergeant in 1987. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Next stop was Tacoma. In 1990 she became the first female Troop Command Sergeant Major at Joint Base-Lewis McChord—and the first female Sergeant Major at Madigan Army Medical Center and Fort Lewis. By 1992, however, the military was downsizing after Desert Storm. "I felt I could not take care of my troops the way I wanted to take care of them. That was what mattered most. Also, it was not fun anymore." Her goal was to become the first female Sergeant Major of the Army Medical Department's NCO Academy. When she saw

that wasn't in the cards, she was 39, with a world of potential new opportunities. "It was time to go." She resolved to weigh her options for a year. Then, as president of the Sergeants Major Association at JBLM, she heard from a retired member that the State Department of Veterans Affairs had an opening for the associate administrator for the Soldiers Home at Orting.

The interview with the administrator went well. And when she met the director of the agency she knew she wanted the job. A.J. "Beau" Bergeron, a retired Army colonel from JBLM, "was such an amazing man!" Alfie remembers. "He was a Vietnam combat veteran from Louisiana with a booming voice. They called him the 'Ragin' Cajun.' He and I immediately hit it off. He liked my military record and what I said about standing up for my troops. But he warned, 'You have to compete for the job. I cannot just appoint you.' Well, I didn't know squat about administering a nursing home. But I studied hard—kind of like all those college courses I had challenged to get my degree. I got the administrator handbook and learned it from front to back. I passed muster in all the interviews and got the position."

A year later the administrator at Orting left. Alfie was now in charge, clearly on the way up. Next stop, in 1997, was overseeing the Veterans Home at Port Orchard, the largest of the VA's four facilities.* The administrator there had been fired for sexually harassing staff. Bergeron was also out. Investigators said there was no evidence the director was involved in the harassment. They asserted, however, that he should have done more to investigate the allegations. "Colonel Bergeron fell on his sword," Alfie says, "betrayed by someone he had trusted. It was a sad day for the VA all around." Her fondest memory of working with Bergeron was the day two Army surplus tanks arrived, one for the grounds at Orting, the other for Port Orchard. "He had managed to get them donated. So he put on his old tanker's uniform and drove them into position himself." The colonel went on to help the Army mobilize its Stryker Brigades for service in Iraq and was a dedicated advocate for veterans until his death at 74 in 2018 of complications from Parkinson's disease. It was fitting that the great old soldier died at the Veterans

Colonel A.J. "Beau" Bergeron. *Mountainviewtacoma.com*

* In 1915, the Post Office at the Veterans Home near Port Orchard was dubbed Retsil in honor of Governor Ernest Lister. It's his last name spelled backward.

Home at Port Orchard, Alfie says.

All of the state's nursing homes for veterans are Medicare and Medicaid certified, with 97 beds at Orting, 240 at Port Orchard, 100 at Spokane and 80 at Walla Walla. They are open to honorably-discharged military veterans, their spouses or widows, and Gold Star parents who have lost a child serving in the military. Veterans with 70 to 100 percent service-connected disabilities may have their care paid by the federal VA.

AFTER HER STINT at Port Orchard, Alfie became the agency's director of veterans services. Next, chief operating officer. Then she moved up to deputy director to John Lee, a former Command Sergeant Major and Vietnam combat veteran. "He was a mentor," Alfie says, her admiration palpable. "John was the eternal optimist. I've always been upbeat, but he taught me that optimism is contagious."

With Governor Chris Gregoire in 2010. The governor's spouse, Vietnam veteran Mike Gregoire, is in the background. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

She was selected for Harvard University's Kennedy School Executive Training Program, and the Executive Management Program at the University of Washington.

"In 2012, when John Lee decided to retire, he promoted my appointment with the veterans' community, saying 'This person needs to be the next director of Veterans Affairs. She's going to do you proud.' " Jay Inslee didn't need convincing. The newly-elected governor had met the deputy director during his years in Congress as Alfie pressed for more federal funding for veterans' programs. "My appointment was one of the first five he announced before he even took office," she says. "He called us the 'Fab 5.' Only one other of us is still around—Joel Sacks from Labor & Industries, an amazing person.

"I serve at the pleasure of the governor, as a member of his cabinet. He's a great boss. I would not be in this position if I was not convinced he has a big heart for veterans. He cares. Sometimes it will be 10 o'clock at night and I'll get a call. 'Hey, Alfie, this is Jay! I need for you to talk to somebody. This veteran is having a

Members of the South Korean Army greet Alfie with crisp salutes on her visit to the Republic of Korea in 2018. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

problem.' Instead of having a staff member call, the governor calls. It's that kind of relationship."

As a Latina and prominent member of the LGBTQ community, Alfie is also a key player in the Inslee administration's efforts to enhance equity in government agencies.

ALFIE BELIEVES attitudes toward the military "took a tight turn for the better" during Operation Desert Storm, the 1991 campaign to expel Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army from Kuwait, our oil-exporting ally. "Until then, the Vietnam veteran was still largely unappreciated," she says. "Men who served during that era still bitterly remember what it was like to be called a 'baby killer.' And military women were also subjected to abuse. In 1972, I was a young Private First Class, going through the Dallas airport, heading home to see my family for the first time since I entered the Army. I was proud to be wearing my uniform. Suddenly a man sized me up and

Presenting an "Ambassador for Peace Medal" to a Korean War veteran in Kennewick on behalf of the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in 2018. *Washington Department of Veterans Affairs*

goes, 'You whore!' I didn't know what a whore was—and that was a good thing because if I had I would have slapped him silly. I thought to myself, 'That doesn't sound very nice' and kept on walking."

Desert Storm ushered in a new era of combat—with body armor, GPS devices and drones. Yet it was also old-fashioned warfare, house-to-house, village-by-village. An improvised explosive device along a dust-choked road could inflict horrific injuries.

The Gulf War soldiers deployed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the troops engaged in our ongoing missions in Afghanistan and Iraq are part of an all-volunteer military, including the National Guard. "Those troops have seen multiple deployments," Alfie emphasizes. "The stress on soldiers and their families is unprecedented. It's impossible to overstate the physical and emotional impact of repeated deployments, especially for the combat veterans. We have a lot of veterans whose bodies are 15-20 years older than their ages because the equipment they're carrying is so heavy. This is especially so for female soldiers. The Kevlar vest that would fit me is almost 12 pounds. Then you put on that high-tech helmet and the night-vision goggles. You're carrying sophisticated weapons. The musculoskeletal injuries our service members are suffering have major implications for the future.

"The new awareness of PTSD and the life-changing impact of catastrophic injuries, plus the chilling increase in suicide by soldiers and veterans, inspired a lot

of Americans to remember what happened to the Vietnam vet—and not to let it happen to anybody else," Alfie continues. "Desert Storm prepared us to look at post 9/11—being able to make sure society did not confuse politics with the warrior," Alfie says. "In other words, don't blame the warriors for political decisions. When you separate the politics from the warrior, that's when you get the true 'Thank you for your service.' There's a new sea of good will that helps us assist not only our veterans but also their families.

"The problem right now is that the military is having recruitment issues. So they're enlisting recruits with young families. They're being told, 'We're going to take care of you.' What the enlistees don't know is that lower ranks don't receive all of the benefits. Child care may cost them additional money. All of a sudden, it will be hard to be able to pay the bills. The wife or the spouse has to work, or they have to get a second job to be able to make ends meet. There's a new normal every time they leave and come back from a deployment—sometimes to greet a new child. The divorce rate among younger veterans is about 70 percent. We need to make sure that our veterans have family-wage jobs." Alfie heads a Military Transition Council that partners with active-duty military leadership in every branch, from JBLM to the Northwest Navy Region; the federal Department of Labor, Small Business Administration and VA, as well as the state Employment Security Department and workforce coalitions. "We're striving to get upstream inside the military bases so when somebody decides to stay in Washington State we're able to provide services early enough to avoid those issues that tax our social-services networks. Our goal is to create a strong takeoff from active duty to a soft landing in the civilian world.

AROUND 5,000 SOLDIERS and airmen are discharged from Joint Base Lewis-McChord each year. For generations now, a substantial number stay, drawn by the state's natural beauty, outdoor activities and temperate climate. A 2018 study—the most definitive available at this writing—enumerated 569,300 veterans in our state.* Of those, 14,200 served in World War II; 32,000 in Korea; 187,700 in Vietnam, and 236,300 during the Gulf era. Veterans' family members account for 2 million Washingtonians. The state is also home to some 61,000 active-duty military and 18,000 members of the National Guard and reserves. Each of these numbers is a person. Likely you know many of them.

* In 2020, U.S. News & World Report ranked Washington ninth in the nation in percentage of veterans (at 8.9 percent). South Carolina was tenth, Maine eighth, Nevada seventh, Delaware sixth, Idaho fifth, Wyoming fourth, Virginia third, Montana second, and Alaska first at 10.7 percent. In raw numbers, California ranks Number One, with 1.8 million veterans.

Placing a wreath at military cemetery in Busan. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Here, as across America, the veteran population is in decline—from 26.4 million nationwide in 2000 to 19.5 million in 2020. The projection for 2048 is 13.6 million. The U.S. Census Bureau also notes: "The number of female veterans is on the rise and Post 9/11 veterans have the highest rate of service-connected disability compared to any other group of veterans." Declining numbers, in other words, do not necessarily equate to declining challenges. "Among veterans who had a service-connected disability, Post-9/11 veterans had a 39 percent chance of having a disability rating of 70 percent or more—significantly higher than for veterans from other periods," according to the Census Bureau's analysts.

The Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs partners with JBLM's Career Skills Program and veterans' groups, notably the American Legion, to help newly discharged soldiers find civilian jobs. Many have skills that translate easily to civilian life, not to mention admirable self-discipline. "They're team players," Alfie says. Often, however, they need help with writing a resume, networking or prepar-

ing for an interview.

The pandemic hastened the State VA's sense of urgency. "We're not the only game in town," Alfie emphasizes. "There are other great organizations that reach out to veterans in the same way." Covid-19 has created huge challenges for the department. Some programs will need a jump-start when the virus is under control.

The Washington Soldiers Home at Orting. *Washington Department of Veterans Affairs*

At the Washington Soldiers Home near Orting in the Puyallup Valley, the Department of Veterans Affairs has gone back to its roots, literally and figuratively. "We're running a farm!" Alfie declares. "The Soldiers Home was constructed to house Union Army veterans who went all over the place after the Civil War. The way they sustained the place was growing their own food. Now we have half-acre lots at Orting for veterans who want to get into the business of farming."

FOR SOME VETERANS, life itself is barely sustainable, day to day. There were 1,585 homeless vets in Washington in 2019. The year before, the rate here was the fourth highest in the nation. The VA's outreach to homeless veterans includes transitional housing at Orting and Port Orchard, 130 beds in all.

Many homeless vets had pre-existing mental-health issues that were exacerbated by combat, Alfie says. "The structure of the military allowed them to be successful, but when they left active duty and faced the uncertainties of civilian life—layoffs, evictions, fractured relationships—many of them began to have serious emotional problems, including despair and depression; issues with law enforcement. A lot of troubled Vietnam veterans burned their bridges with their families. They served their country and were honorably discharged, but now they're not able to pay the rent. They need to get a job. They've lost their mojo as far as being able to do well in an interview. This is what our programs do. Getting them the help they need is the first step. Transitional housing gives them a sense of dignity and structure to get a fresh start. So we're helping people get on the straight and narrow; start making some money. Move out and move on. I can almost tell you that any person holding a cardboard 'I'm a homeless veteran' sign on some drizzly intersection nine out of 10 times is not a vet. Veterans don't do that."

U.S. Senator Patty Murray, whose father was a disabled World War II veteran, has been a tireless advocate for veterans, their families and caregivers as a member of the subcommittee on Veterans Affairs. "Through her help, and the grace of God, we've been able to get our grants renewed time and time again because our programs are doing so well," Alfie says. "But in situations like the pandemic, with so much need, there's always the risk that grants are going to go away. Now, with a new administration and more leverage in Congress, Senator Murray will have even more power to help veterans."

With U.S. Senator Patty Murray, a key member of the subcommittee on Veterans Affairs. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

SUICIDE—contrary to the theme song for "M*A*S*H"—is anything but painless. The Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs partners with the State Health Department, the military and veterans groups to offer counseling and peer-to-peer intervention. The State VA's suicide prevention coordinator, Codie Garza, has a master's degree in public health and an intensely personal perspective: Her spouse is active-duty Army. "He has lost too many of his close brothers in the last decade," Garza says. "His story is far from unique, and that's heartbreaking."

Between 2015 and 2019, veterans accounted for 1,059 of the 5,353 suicides in Washington, about 20 percent of the total. Firearms—a key component of military training—were involved in about 68 percent of the veteran suicides here. Nationally, nearly 18 veterans take their own lives every day. A diagnosis of PTSD is prevalent in postmortems. Even more so for the active-duty Army, which saw a 30 percent increase in deaths by suicide in 2020. In all, 498 active-duty military died by suicide in 2019. Young enlisted troops are the Pentagon's primary concern, USA Today reported. "They account for 43 percent of the military population but 61 percent of deaths by suicide."

Young enlisted troops who survive the stressors of active-duty—soul-sapping multiple deployments into combat zones—are mustering out into a tumultuous civilian world. The pandemic and political polarization have heightened anxiety and depression, according to mental-health clinicians. Many Americans are self-medicating their stress and sleeplessness with alcohol and drugs. Veterans are

Accepting a $50,000 Puyallup Tribe donation to the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, one of the Seahawks' 2018 "charity partners." *Washington Department of Veterans Affairs*

among the most vulnerable.

Well-coordinated prevention projects in our state may be reducing the risk. In the first three quarters of 2020, the State Department of Health saw "no discernable upward trend, maybe even a slight decrease in suicide deaths." But Codie Garza echoes the cautionary note sounded by the Health Department's Dr. Kira Mauseth: "The risk of suicide, depression and hopelessness, as well as substance use, are historically at their highest during this phase of any disaster." In other words, loneliness can be lethal. Social isolation, job cutbacks, the specter of eviction, even the frustrating scramble to secure Covid-19 vaccinations, boost the danger of self-harm.

Garza calls the VA's outreach "upstream prevention"—addressing risk factors before they reach the rapids. Isolation, frustration and "perceived burdensomeness," as Garza puts it, are all potential catalysts for self-harm, especially if a veteran has suffered PTSD or another debilitating combat injury. Professional and peer-group counseling are important interventions. "Simply sending a text or making a phone call to a fellow service member or veteran can save a life," Garza says. "Letting them know you are thinking about them can make them feel less isolated, less alone. It

also conveys that you are a safe person to talk with if they are in crisis." Dr. Mauseth says it is "absolutely OK" to ask someone if they're thinking about harming themselves. "Asking about it does not increase risk. It is actually a really helpful thing."

The VA maintains a Veterans Crisis Line (1-800-273-8255, press 1) and a text feature (838255) that has saved many lives. (We called and texted the number and were mightily impressed with the counselors' professionalism.)

Alfie says the military increasingly is coming to grips with the downside of inculcating a macho culture. "Army of One," "Army Strong," "the Few, the Proud, the Marines," are all intended to build esprit de corps, she says. "Unfortunately, if you're hurting inside and no longer feel strong, you can begin to think you're weak—no longer a warrior—and that if you ask for help you're weaker yet. That's what we're trying to combat with suicide prevention programs. An injury to one is an injury to all, especially for veterans and service members. If a discouraged veteran is considering an irreversible act, we all have the potential to help by caring—by reaching out."

In addition to suicide prevention, the State VA's Counseling and Wellness program offers PTSD and bereavement counseling. Other specialists help veterans and their family members secure state and federal benefits and entitlements, including disability compensation, pensions and health care. Veterans enrolling in college for the first time—often a daunting experience, especially for older vets—receive moral support from the "Vet Corps." Funded through an AmeriCorps grant, the program provides peer mentors to help ease the transition. The grant also provides training and support for college staff and faculty to increase their awareness of student veterans' needs. A Veterans Conservation Corps program offers vets opportunities to volunteer or participate in internships for natural-resource projects. The project was founded in 2005 as a way to honor the memory of a Vietnam veteran who found healing and purpose by participating in a restoration project along the Duwamish River.

The pandemic has complicated and intensified the State VA's outreach. In a virtual world some things are virtually impossible. But Alfie takes great pride in her nimble staff.

IN MARCH of 2020 when one of the first reported outbreaks of the coronavirus in the U.S. ravaged a nursing home at Kirkland in suburban Seattle, neither the governor nor his director of Veterans Affairs imagined just how virulent the pandemic would become—or that a year later they still would be grappling with controversial life-or-death issues, such as wearing a mask, following social-distancing recommen-

dations and getting vaccinated. As immediate past president of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, Alfie has touched base often with her peers. They're dealing with a crisis more deadly than war. Teamwork has never been more essential. On Alfie's watch, each day begins with a situational report—a virtual war-room at the VA's Olympia headquarters—with staff around the state providing the latest reports on Covid-19 tests, infections, vaccinations and other prevention measures. "The phrase 'due diligence' has never been more apt," Alfie says.

David Puente Jr., Alfie's deputy director, joined the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2020 after 28 years with Labor & Industries. During his Army years he was a sergeant with the Criminal Investigation Command. "When I took this job, we were making the rounds at the Capitol during the legislative session. People in the hallways were going, 'It's Alfie! Hey, Alfie!' Everyone knows her. She's passionate, compassionate and humorous—hilarious, in fact. She always says we're a chain of support, not a chain of command." Puente characterizes the director as a great listener. Her response to the pandemic has italicized her calm yet decisive nature. "She wants feedback, takes it all in and makes good, sound decisions based on the data that's being presented. She's a strong advocate not only for veterans but for state agencies in general. She gets things done. That sign on her desk—'Start with yes'—isn't some empty promise. It means 'Let's figure out how to make it happen now.' "

That's Alfie overboard, rafting near Leavenworth in 2015. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Rudy Lopez, director of the Washington State Veterans Cemetery at Medical Lake near Spokane, was one of the highest-ranking non-commissioned officers in the U.S. Air Force before joining the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2013. He shares Puente's view that Alfie's open-minded ebullience and zeal for helping others spring from her humble beginnings. Lopez, the soft-spoken son of a Navy veteran, grew up in a West Texas town that was 96.8 percent Hispanic. He found his niche and a sense of purpose in the military as a pharmacy technician. Alfie's story is the Puerto Rican version, he says. "She's all about empowering and trusting her people—doing a great job for those who have served their country. We get phenomenal support from her and her leadership staff. She's a strategic thinker and planner, always looking to the horizon for opportunities."

With Governor Jay Inslee in 2014. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Governor Inslee calls her "a dynamo," adding: "Everybody she comes in contact with has spring in their step. Alfie is a leader who does that for people. Some people have that magic. Her accomplishments are legion, especially the transition council at JBLM, which has been so successful in helping our veterans move to civilian life. And what she's done for our veterans at our skilled nursing homes is amazing for quality and concern. Alfie was one of the original members of our team, and she's still at it eight years later, giving it 24/7. She's just an uplifting person—a real treasure."

Alfie plays a key role in the governor's mission to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in state government and encourage the private sector to follow suit. "Because of my heritage and life experiences, these issues are vitally important to me," Alfie explains. "When I first went in the Army, I volunteered to be a race relations discussion leader. I was young but I absolutely understood what needed to be done. That was the 1970s, a time of upheaval. The military, like civilian society, was dealing with significant issues around race. In combat, the unity was there. Soldiers understand what it means to have one another's backs. It is a life-or-death issue. But when they came back from Vietnam, the prejudiced upbringing of many service members resurfaced. The biases, discrimination and outright racism bubbled up and threatened to boil over. The military—especially the Army—realized it had to do more to promote diversity and understanding. It needed to bring the temperature down on race relations. So in addition to my medical field rotations I became a discussion leader. Those were formative years for me. When I came into state government in the 1990s I took a long, hard look at what the state was doing to foster diversity and joined the Governor's Affirmative Action Policy Committee." Before long she was the committee's chairman. Then in 1998 a citizens' initiative, I-200, effectively curtailed affirmative action. "That was a huge setback," Alfie says. "Our committee faded away. Now comes Jay Inslee, who is committed to diversity,

equity and inclusion with even more vigor in his third term. We're still handicapped by I-200, but we're making strides."

Alfie is the "madrina" (Spanish for godmother) for the Latino Leadership Network, a state employee resource group. Its mission is to support and inspire the Latino workforce in state government. "We're here to build connections within state government and recruit more Latinos to consider careers in public service," Alfie explains. "It's networking and outreach rolled into one. This is one of my passions."

Alfie and Juani, right, with Alfie's family in Puerto Rico. Sadly, her father was suffering from Alzheimer's and died not long afterward. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Alfie and Juani, her spouse, also volunteer with OneAmerica, a Seattle-based group that helps immigrants and refugees become citizens. "It can be a daunting process—the paperwork, the tests—especially with language barriers," Alfie says. "But it's so satisfying to help someone become an American citizen and participate in democracy by learning the issues and voting. This is a nation of immigrants. When the time comes that I leave state government, this project is something I will volunteer for forever."

THE ONGOING CHALLENGE TODAY for Alfie Alvarado-Ramos and her team at the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs is multi-faceted and multi-generational. The median age of military veterans in 2018 was 65. Post 9/11 veterans are the youngest, with a median age of 37. Vietnam-era veterans are around 71. World War II vets are now at least 93. An estimated 296 of them died today. And 296 will die tomorrow—and the day after tomorrow. Sixteen-million Americans fought in World War II. About 300,000 made it to Veterans Day, 2020, the 75th anniversary of our victory in Europe. Some struggled to stand at attention in their walkers as "Taps" echoed across cemeteries. Before the pandemic, the Veterans Administration estimated the toll at 245 a day. At the rate we're going, we'll lose the last one well before 2044, as originally projected.

So many stories. So little time. And, heartbreakingly for Alfie, her staff and VA nursing home workers from sea to shining sea, so many old soldiers are dying without their families at their sides. Eight out of 10 Covid-19 deaths in America

Alfie joins in the fun as the Seahawks visit the Spokane Veterans Home on June 25, 2016. *Washington Department of Veterans Affairs*

have been among the elderly.

"We're not giving up," Alfie says. "Our job is to protect and serve those who served. It's a sacred duty. Colonel Bergeron taught me to always keep my eye on the ball. And in this case the ball is the veteran. They are the center of everything we do."

John C. Hughes
Legacy Washington
March 2021

Alfie on a climbing expedition to Mount Townsend in the Olympics. *Alvarado-Ramos family collection*

Alfie Alvarado-Ramos Source Notes

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