

the MONROE COUNTY BUZZ

MONDAY
March 12, 2022

VOLUME XVIII ISSUE 057

Madisonville • Vonore • Tellico Plains • Sweetwater

Veterans Court Shepherds Eight Justice Involved Veterans Criminal Charges Dismissed, Errors Corrected, Lives Straightened Out



Lucas Boring

"You fight for the guy beside you."
General Sessions and Veterans Court
Judge Dwaine Thomas said on Wednesday.
His topic was military service.



Thomas sat in his usual seat on the bench in Room One of the county justice center prepared to hand forth sentences not of punishment but for forgiveness for eight "justice-involved veterans," a clean dismissal of past misdeeds.

Of that number, there were seven present to graduate from Monroe County's Veterans Court. The eighth reportedly conducting military maneuvers which had forbidden him to travel in from out of state.

The program, vet court, a rigorous six-month-plus endeavor involving weekly communication with an experienced Vet to Vet Tennessee mentor combined with specialist veteran psychologic examination and therapy, random substance testing when needed, and a desire to change, to better oneself, was not



Page 2 – The Buzz

described as an easy process by one of the graduates named Tim. *"It takes a lot of pride to tell your problems. It wasn't easy,"* he said.

Wednesday's graduation was the culmination of half a year's work and each man's effort – JIVs (justice-involved veterans) mentors, legal teams, psychologists, friends, family – *"to fight for the guy beside them."* *"Mission accomplished"* began proceedings. In reverse order, each veteran addressed the bench after his graduation had been announced.

Ian: *"The opportunity brought itself to light in a negative way. I'm doing everything I can to keep a positive mindset on restarting or reinventing myself."*

Glen: *"Thank you for the opportunity. It allowed me to keep my license and take care of my disabled parents."*

Boston: *"Bob set me straight quite a few times. The program has given me the opportunity to get my life back."* Bob is a mentor and Boston said he intended to join a wildlife resources agency.

Lucas: *"You gave me a chance. I needed it. It's not a cakewalk."* Mentor Michael: *"One of my best guys."* Lucas is a contracted School Resource Officer and a professional cage fighter.

Nelson, a tough case, graduating but remains in regular communications with therapist and mentor *"Allowed me to understand why I -. They get it."* A friend of Nelson present for the ceremony thanked the program, Vet to Vet Tennessee mentors, Judge Thomas, *"You brought the Nelson I know back."*

Robert, in his seventies: *"I was shocked when I found out they had a veterans court. It gave me hope, our country will heal."*

And Tim: *"The hurdles I'm dealing with due to another county is just that, but here they take care of you. But it's on you. You have to make the effort. It opened my eyes that I needed help when I didn't think I did."*

"Look around you," president of the mentorship group Vet to Vet Tennessee Ed Junod said. *"Most of us are old. We may not be here tomorrow."*

Considering becoming a mentor, were his words to the graduated veterans, each who received in addition to a certificate a Challenge Coin "to lay upon their hearts in reflection if they felt themselves slipping" and unique *"You're Worth It"* dog tag imprinted on a World War II machine operated by Monroe County Veterans Service Officer Andy Boyd, who was instrumental in facilitating and coordinating the ceremony.

In aside, the graduates' charges stemmed from Bradley, McMinn, and Rhea counties. Bradley and McMinn's judiciary agreed to transfer charges to Monroe County so its unique veterans court could *"straighten things out"* and give back to veterans who had served and sacrificed for their country. Mentioned before, Tim still faces the consequences of his Rhea County run-in, a county *"not friendly to veterans"* someone pointed out. Tim said that besides the two identical charges from McMinn and Rhea he had never been in trouble before.