

A Few Hours at the VA

By Denny Riley

I was recently given the first shot of the COVID-19 vaccine. It was made available to me because the VA is offering it to all veterans in the system who are 75 or older.

Here's how it went: First, I received a phone call from the VA asking when I'd like to schedule a time to get the shot. I picked a specific day at 10:30 a.m. because I already had a CAT scan appointment scheduled for 8:30 a.m. This way, I'd only need to make one trip to the VA.

On the day of my appointment, I also decided to bring my hearing aid charger along for the ride because it hadn't been working. I figured after my two appointments I'd go to the audiology department and see what could be done.

In the end, the CAT scan took only a few minutes. In no time, I was back in the lobby wondering what I was going to do with the almost two hours until I was set to receive my shot. Audiology!

I climbed the stairs to the second floor. The audiology technician was behind the counter. We went into his office, where he fiddled with my charger, saw that it didn't work, threw it in his wastebasket, and handed me a new one.

It was still an hour-and-a-half until my vaccine. What the heck, I thought, you never know. I walked over to the vaccine area.

"Hi," the woman behind the counter said.

"I'm really early," I said.

"That's okay. Name and last four?"

I gave her my name and the last four of my Social Security number. She looked on the sheet, flipped to the second page, put a yellow line through my name, handed me a vaccine information sheet and a form to fill in.

I brought the form back in three minutes and she sent me to an alcove where an informative and pleasant nurse stuck a needle in my shoulder. Then I sat in socially-distanced chair for 15 minutes to see if I had any ill effects. Twice someone came to me and asked how I was doing.

During those 15 minutes, I was able to watch this efficient and effective clinic in action. A steady stream of older vets came in, filled out the form, went to an alcove and were vaccinated. All of it moved along like a well-oiled machine.

When my time was up, I went to another station and made an appointment for my second shot. That's three appointments (plus one scheduled) in less than two hours!

I also picked up a story. The audiology tech guy was the same fella I saw a year ago when I was previously having trouble with the charger. That day, it appeared, he fixed it.

I'd said then, "You made that look easy."

With a challenge in his voice he'd said, "What branch were you in?"

"Air Force."

"That's why!" he'd said. "Marines! I was in the Marines!" and went on to tell me about being a sniper in Iraq."

Today, he said he had no record of me seeing him before. I told him I'd been in a year ago as a walk-in. To prove it I said, "You were in the Marines."

"Yeah," he said forlornly. "My dad was a Marine. I joined trying to please him, trying to be a good son. I shoulda joined the Air Force."