

**Presented In Memoriam of Norvell “Van” Coots, M.D., Chair, Clinical Center Research Hospital Board
By James K. Gilman, M.D., CEO, NIH Clinical Center
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Dr. Norvell V. Coots

I am grateful to CCRHB members and to Dr. Schor for giving me a few minutes to memorialize Dr. Coots. I am grateful for all of the expressions of sympathy passed by board members to me, and I will ensure that at an appropriate time that they are passed to Dr. Coots’ wife and children.

I first met Van in August or very early September of 2002 when he signed in at the Army Office of The Surgeon General located then in Falls Church. I had signed in just a few weeks ahead of him. While our offices were not located in the Pentagon, these were Pentagon jobs early in the post 9/11 timeframe and they were brutally taxing. Van had just arrived from Europe, having worked for a boss known to be exceptionally hard on the people who worked for him. Van told me that he had not taken any leave or vacation time in the previous year. Van also told me that he was in the process of getting a divorce and that he was a student in the US Army War College Distance Education program and that he was active in the National Medical Association at the national program level.

I told him that I would see him in a month – that the people who worked for me would not lose the leave or vacation time and he only had 30 days to use his 30 days of leave. In subsequent meetings Van told me that some of the folks in Europe had asked him to return to work on a project there. It became apparent very early that everyone liked having Van on their team and he had difficulty turning them down. (David Baum – mensch) My role became trying to protect him from his tendency to overcommit. I told him to let the folks in Europe know that he was on my team now – I was the coach - and he couldn’t play for anyone else without my okay. If Van had trouble saying no, I would need to do it for him. The sports metaphor of the coach and the team characterized our relationship for almost the next 20 years. Van called me “coach” and I was proud of the title even though he did not really need my help often. We did agree that he probably shouldn’t refer to me as “coach” in CCRHB meetings.

I thought I knew Van pretty well after those initial encounters, but it turned out we had just scratched the surface. I was later to learn a lot more about him. Van received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point but he left West Point after one year. By that time his post-college aspirations had turned to medicine, and he knew that although he was successful academically at West Point that he would not be in the small select group at the top of the class to go straight to medical school after graduation. So, he left West Point and went to Howard University. There are lots of West Point graduates who become general officers during their distinguished careers, but Van is the only West Point dropout I know of who achieved that distinction. Van was admitted to medical school as an undergrad at Howard but didn’t succeed in medical school in his first attempt either. But he never gave up on his dream of becoming a doctor. He kept reapplying to medical school and finally was admitted to the University of

Oklahoma where he received his medical degree. Van decided to become a dermatologist but was initially turned down by the Army training programs in Dermatology. It took a 2-year assignment as a general medical officer in Korea to convince the Army to give him a training slot.

Van was a member of a benevolent order of French knights. Membership required him to have a longitudinal relationship with a charitable cause. Van's cause was an orphanage in Moldova. He visited there occasionally and supported them financially. And Van is the only member of the Army staff who could sell you a Moldovan carpet.

Van's mother died while he was working for me. Her obituary described an extraordinary life of activism in causes related to social justice and community activities. I decided that Van's tendency to overcommit came from his mom. She was quite a lady. I only recently learned a bit about Van's father. He too was active in the African American community in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His medical practice was located near the Greenwood area of Tulsa where one of the worst episodes of racial violence occurred in 1921. Twenty-five years after these horrific events, Van's father was instrumental in the establishing of a chapter of the Urban League in Tulsa.

Doctors often do not make great military staff officers. We are quite accustomed to making decisions without being questioned and we sometimes bristle at the idea that we should have to defend answers of others to those questions. But vetting and defending decisions is the constant activity of all on the Army staff. Van, however, was a great staff officer – incredibly quick-minded, confident without arrogance. He possessed wonderful interpersonal skills, and he was a truly gifted listener. He welcomed the input of others and was as willing to be a team member as he was to be a team leader.

Van struggled a bit during his time working for me. It turned out that the divorce did not remain amicable. He had to take a leave of absence from his War College studies but in true Van Coots fashion, he recovered, graduated from the Army War College with a master's degree in strategic studies and was successful in several command assignments before being selected to be a general officer. He found love again with a lovely woman from South America named Claudia – pronounced Cloudia. Later in life than most of us, Van became a father for the first time to son Max followed by daughter Alexandra.

Van and I re-connected about the time he was retiring from the Army. We communicated a time or two while he was looking for a post-Army job. He didn't need my help. I attended his retirement ceremony at Fort Myer. We had infrequent but meaningful contact during his early years at Holy Cross and my early years here at the NIH Clinical Center.

I confess that when I approached Van 3 years ago and asked him to join the CCRHB, I shamelessly took advantage of our long friendship and his tendency to overcommit. But it was the outgoing chair of the CCRHB, Laura Forese, who really pinpointed Van as the board member she thought should be her successor. Van agreed without reservation. While I had a reservation or two about the appearance of having an old Army buddy as CCRHB chair, I can assure you that

Van would have held me accountable if he or other CCRHB members believed the Clinical Center was entering troubled waters.

Since the last board meeting, I have had the chance to visit with Van in his home in northern Montgomery Co twice. Annie Cichocki, Chief of Nutrition Care at the NIH Clinical Center, is a recently retired US Army Reserve Colonel. Annie was participating in a wedding of another military officer and needed a cavalry saber. When she asked, I told her that I didn't have a saber but I was pretty sure I knew someone who did. I emailed Van and he said he would be happy to lend Annie one of his sabers. He had a selection. I went to Van's house to pick it up and for him to show me his collection of military memorabilia. Van had over 400 swords from all around the world and while swords seemed to be his specialty, he had lots and lots of other stuff as well – all organized and displayed in the lower part of his house in a way that was museum quality. Van knew a lot about everything in his collection and I had a great time looking at it all. The second time I was in Van's home was to return the saber and it was on that occasion when I learned about Van's dad for the first time. Van's father died when he was sixteen while my dad died when I was 18. We found one more thing that we had in common.

When Van talked with me last fall about stepping down from his job with Holy Cross to focus on his health, I asked him whether he had any hobbies to pursue in his retirement. That is when I heard him speak about horseback riding for the first time. Ever the historian, he reminded me that it was the same hobby enjoyed by General George Marshall throughout his career. If there is any consolation about the manner of his death it is that he was doing something that brought him great pleasure.

Last evening, I watched a 45 minute PODCAST in which Van spoke at length about his career. When asked how he would want to be remembered Van said he would like to be remembered as a plodder- someone who occasionally failed but – in the midst of failure – never gave up on himself or departed from the goals he had established for himself. When given a second chance, he was successful. I believe that he received second chances because of the extraordinary people skills evident throughout his life and career.

Thank you for letting me tell you about how special a person Van was. He was a superb leader, a good friend, and he was a great resource to the Clinical Center for the last three years. He will be greatly missed but those of us who knew him well will never forget.

