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December 2018

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Recommended Citation

Stroupe, Phil, "VFW Still At Odds With VA Integration" (2018). *Clippings*. 223.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jws_clip/223

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VFW Still At Odds With VA Integration

By PHIL STROUPE

The proper place to register complaints about integration of patients at the Jackson Veterans Administration hospital is at the White House in Washington, D.C.

That's what A. W. Woolford, manager of the 554 bed Jackson VA Center, told the Council of Administration of the Mississippi Veterans of Foreign Wars here Sunday.

Woolford, at the invitation of State VFW Commander Sidney Russell Jr. of Grenada, appeared before the governing body of VFW here Sunday and spoke for 30 minutes on the controversy growing out of integration of patients.

"Integration of patients is a federal policy," Woolford, a former Virginia farm boy, said. "I'm on the federal payroll to carry out federal orders, and I'll carry out those orders or get off the federal payroll."

Commander Russell said following the Woolford talk, "This does not end the issue. We have asked Sen. Eastland and Congressman Williams to look into the matter."

Russell said a sense of resentment pervaded the VFW audience following the meeting and that veterans were still dissatisfied with the situation.

Woolford indicated that patients at the hospital received proper care as a result of the 1954 integration order, and were not given the best of care before that time simply because the two races were segregated.

Russell said Mississippi combat veterans who writhe in pain and anguish on hospital beds from wounds sustained in defense of the nation deeply resent federal policy in the matter.

Woolford said the policy began under former President Harry Truman in 1946 and has accelerated its pace under President Eisenhower.

"My predecessor, who was a native Mississippian had the same policy, and anybody who is sent here in the future as manager of the hospital will have the same federal policy."

He compared it to a complaint from a corporal or a sergeant about the army's pay system. "There's just not much you can do about it."

Woolford reviewed the entire controversy which arose when a Vicksburg white man complained that his wife was offered a room in a ward shared by Negro and white men.

Challenges Patient

"I'm sure that whatever Mrs. (R.G.) Beckwith said was said in good faith," Woolford said. "But she was in a highly nervous state and some of the things she said are inaccurate. There's no question about that. This is not an attack on her veracity, but it shows a lack of observation."

Woolford said Mrs. Beckwith "was in a room where there were

some Negro patients nearby. The room had a door and curtains. She couldn't see anybody unless she leaned out of the bed and peeped under the curtain."

Woolford made these main points in his talk:

1) To separate white and Negro patients would amount to running two hospitals.

2) If there's a vacant bed and an applicant for the bed, the patient will be put in the bed without regard to race or color or location of the bed.

3) A separate ward for all-female patients is out of the question. Only 22 women patients were treated at the hospital last year.

4) Use of plywood partitions to separate women would add to fire hazard.

As to the statement attributed to Woolford that "the hospital is more concerned with integration of patients than it is with treatment of the sick, Woolford answered:

Patient Care

"Our one interest is the care of patients. Patient integration is a community interest, not a hospital matter. It hasn't occurred to us in years."

In answer to a suggestion that the state furnish hospital care for white veterans who oppose integration, Woolford advised that any such plan be announced soon.

Woolford said any such plan for a state hospital for veterans should be made quickly "so the federal government can adjust its building plans, and leave no vacant beds in a new proposed VA hospital in Jackson."

Congress recently approved suf-

ficient funds for the planning stage for a new VA hospital to be built here near the University Medical Center.

Commander Russell directed three key questions to Woolford at the meeting:

Russell: "Mr. Woolford, have you had VA officials from Washington here checking to see if the integration order is in effect at the VA Hospital?"

Woolford: "Yes, very definitely."

Russell: "Mr. Woolford, have there been any NAACP officials checking on the integration order at the VA Hospital here?"

Woolford: "No, not to my knowledge."

Russell: "Mr. Woolford, have you or your staff ever instructed ward personnel as to the placement of patients within a ward?"

Woolford: "No, where there's a bed and a patient for it, that's where the patient will be assigned."

Woolford brought along his private secretary to record verbatim every word he said to the VFW. On the other hand, the VFW had its own private secretary to likewise record the proceedings.

Woolford said, "I didn't expect this large audience. I thought we were going to sit around a table with a half dozen or so people to discuss the matter informally."

He said, however, he shifted his thinking and made some detailed notes at breakfast Sunday morning to guide his talk to the VFW.

The 150 VFW members who attended made up the governing body of the 12,000 - member organization in Mississippi.

VA and VFW Chiefs Meet



A. W. Woolford, left, manager of 554-bed Jackson Veterans Administration Hospital, greets Sidney W. Russell Jr. of Grenada, state commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, at a meeting here Sunday to discuss the patient integration policy at the hospital. (Staff photo by Phil Stroupe.)