

Halloran Shift to Disperse 'Kindred Soul' Paraplegics

By DON SHEARD

Eddie Gurka's friendship with his fellow paraplegics at Halloran Veterans Hospital, S. I., is about the only thing he has left.

He will never walk.

He can't even sit up.

He is doomed to spend the rest of his life lying face down on a narrow Stryker frame.

He eats lying down. He reads through a slit in the headrest that is his night pillow.

In 1945 he was a 21 year old Navy Pharmacist Mate, 3d class. He was ministering to the wounded Marines on bloody Iwo Jima when a Japanese shrapnel burst severed his spine.

Later his right leg was removed above the knee.

'Military Considerations'

His courage never failed... until today. Now he is a bitter man, bitter and angry that the Veterans Administration is moving him and 86 other paraplegics out of Halloran Hospital.

The men, through their organization, the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association, protested, but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

"Military considerations," was all that Veterans Administration officials would explain. The Air Corps wants the

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facilities being used by New York State at Sampson, N. Y., where elderly mental patients are housed.

The State, short of hospital space, wanted Halloran back, which it leased to the government for a veterans' hospital until Feb. 31, 1952. The paraplegics must be out of Halloran by Feb. 15.

They understand, only too well, "military considerations" but no one can satisfactorily explain to the paraplegics the lack of foresight and planning on the part of the Veterans Administration.

They are dispersing the men, whose common and heart rending affliction has bound them together in a happy club, to hospitals in the Bronx, Massachusetts and Virginia.

"I'm more than depressed. I feel like a bouncing ball with everybody taking a swat at me," he said.

"First it was St. Albans hospital, Then here. Now they want to send me to Cushing Hospital in Framingham, Mass.

'I Want to Stay Here'

His fellow ward mates nodded in silent agreement as Eddie spoke.

"Sure Cushing is a good place, but I want to stay here. My friends are here. Friendship is about all that most of us have left.

"I'm reconciled to spending the rest of my life like this. I don't mind so much any more.

"But now they're taking away the thing we prize the most. That's pretty hard to take," he said.

The order to transfer the men struck without warning several weeks ago. They had been promised that they could stay at Halloran until a permanent center was completed in Manhattan in 1953.

Halloran is being returned to New York State as a hospital for mental patients, who are being moved out of the facilities at Sampson, N. Y., which was requisitioned by the Air Corps because of the national emergency.

Men Feel Abandoned

Eddie's mother, Mrs. Victoria Gurka, lives in Slatersville, R. I. That is one bright spot in a dark picture. She'll be able to visit him more often.

"Why can't we be kept together. They've had all the years since the end of the war to plan something better than this," he charged.

That is the thing that gets the men down the most. Like Eddie, they all feel abandoned, as if some Washington bureaucrat had made a last minute decision and didn't care a whit about demolishing the friendships for which they paid such a tremendous cost; a lifetime in wheelchairs.

"I don't see any reason why we can't stay here under one roof where we belong. If not here there are plenty of other places in New York," he said.

But none compares with Halloran. Even Veterans Administration officials freely admit that. The spacious buildings have generous recreation and rehabilitation facilities.

In the Summer the men can be wheeled around the airy

"I've been bed-ridden now for eight months. I haven't been anywhere or seen anything outside of these halls. I don't care much because my pals are here," said Eddie.

"Why are they taking that away from me?"

Nobody could say Eddie