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A Funky Look at the Impact of Abandoned Landmines in Afghanistan

**Comic Strip Character Takes on Real-Life Mission to War Zone with Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF)
VVAF's iMMAP Team Steps Into Uncharted Territory With "Funky Winkerbean" Comic Strip Debut**



Washington, June 28, 2005 – Wally and Becky Winkerbean, creations of cartoonist **Tom Batiuk**, will journey to Afghanistan to join VVAF's Information Management and Mine Action Program (iMMAP) on a mine-clearing mission. In a two-month "Funky Winkerbean" story line that begins on July 4, 2005, Batiuk's comic strip explores the all-too-real consequences of post-conflict environments: abandoned landmines and unexploded ordnance.

The cartoon, which is distributed today by King Features Syndicate, has already begun to set the stage for the July 4th launch date. Strip character Wally, a veteran of the war in Afghanistan, who is troubled by his previous experiences there, announces his intent to return to this country to "find some closure" for himself and chart minefields for clearing. Wally introduced VVAF by name on May 15 – officially marking the organization's debut in this unique venue – and will officially start work with VVAF's iMMAP landmine project on Sunday, July 11.

Abandoned landmines and unexploded ordnance continue to pose a serious threat to the lives and welfare of the Afghan population by preventing access to key facilities, blocking major supply routes, hindering transportation of humanitarian aid to at-risk populations, and preventing the return of refugees, internally displaced persons and refugees to their communities. Following the coalition bombing of Afghanistan in Fall 2001, VVAF's iMMAP became instrumental to post-war reconstruction efforts by working closely with such groups as the United Nations and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and implemented a landmine and unexploded ordnance survey there.

In researching landmine clearance and developing the Afghan backdrop to this storyline, Batiuk consulted extensively with **Joseph Donahue, Program Director of VVAF's iMMAP** and an army Special Forces veteran with more than 20 years of military and humanitarian relief experience. Donahue provided technical information from VVAF's iMMAP surveys, photographs, and even handheld films of Donahue's trips to Afghanistan and Iraq. Some readers intimately involved in landmine clearance or with Afghanistan may find some areas that fall shy of reality or make light of serious issues.

"My job is to present stories that will interest and engage newspaper readers," Batiuk said. "I first became aware of VVAF when I attended one of the concerts they staged to help raise public awareness of the global landmine tragedy. I'll admit, I went for the music, but I left with a new

understanding of the issues — and the key to a creative challenge in my comic strip, ‘Funky Winkerbean.’

“Wally, one of my ‘Funky’ characters, had recently returned from a tour of duty in Afghanistan, and I had been seeking a way to return that story to center stage,” Batiuk said. “I’ve long felt that comics, because of their daily presence in our lives, should be more reflective of the world at large. Past experience with similar stories has shown me that the comics form is indeed capable of shouldering the weight of mature expression, and it’s a very special gift of comics to be able to mix reality and fiction seamlessly. Having Wally go back to Afghanistan as part of a team surveying the landmine fields was a natural outgrowth of my character’s development.”

“Destruction doesn’t end when our troops pull out of a war. We’re fortunate to have people like Tom wanting to convey that reality,” Donahue said. “This special comic strip series provides a unique opportunity to get the message out to a public that is unlikely to see that the consequences of war require dedicated humanitarian assistance through services like our own, not only because of their effect on victims of conflict and local populations, but also on our own military personnel.”

In June, VVAF’s iMMAP was nominated as a finalist for this year’s Development Gateway Award for its unique application of information-sharing practices and standards to advance relief and development efforts in post-conflict, emergency and development environments around the world, VVAF’s iMMAP provides technical assistance in identifying landmine clearance and other public health priorities in post-war environments.

Batiuk’s “Funky Winkerbean” was a finalist at this year’s National Cartoonists Society’s 59th Annual Reuben Awards in Scottsdale, Ariz. The popular comic strip Funky Winkerbean made its debut on the comics pages in 1972, and today appears in more than 400 newspapers worldwide. The cartoonist not only entertains teenagers and adults alike with his portrayal of the students and faculty at Westview High, but has earned high marks for his sensitive treatment of important social and educational issues.

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About VVAF

VVAF is an international humanitarian organization that addresses the causes, conduct and consequences of war through programs of advocacy and service to victims of conflict. VVAF co-founded and coordinated the phenomenal global campaign to ban landmines, which was awarded the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to galvanize more than half of the world’s countries to sign a treaty eradicating the use of antipersonnel landmines.

For 25 years, VVAF has implemented and sustained unique programming, which continues to aid hundreds of thousands of men, women and children around the world through reconciliation, advocacy, rehabilitation, relief and reconstruction. For more information on VVAF and its programs, please visit: www.vvaf.org.

About King Features Syndicate

King Features Syndicate is a member of Hearst Entertainment and Syndication Group, an operating group of The Hearst Corporation, which includes the company’s cable network partnerships, television programming activities and newspaper syndication and merchandise licensing operations. King Features is the world’s premier distributor of comics, columns, editorial cartoons, puzzles and games, distributing some 150 features to nearly 5,000 newspapers around the globe. It is one of the

largest and most experienced organizations in merchandise licensing. For more information on “Funky Winkerbean,” please visit www.kingfeatures.com

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