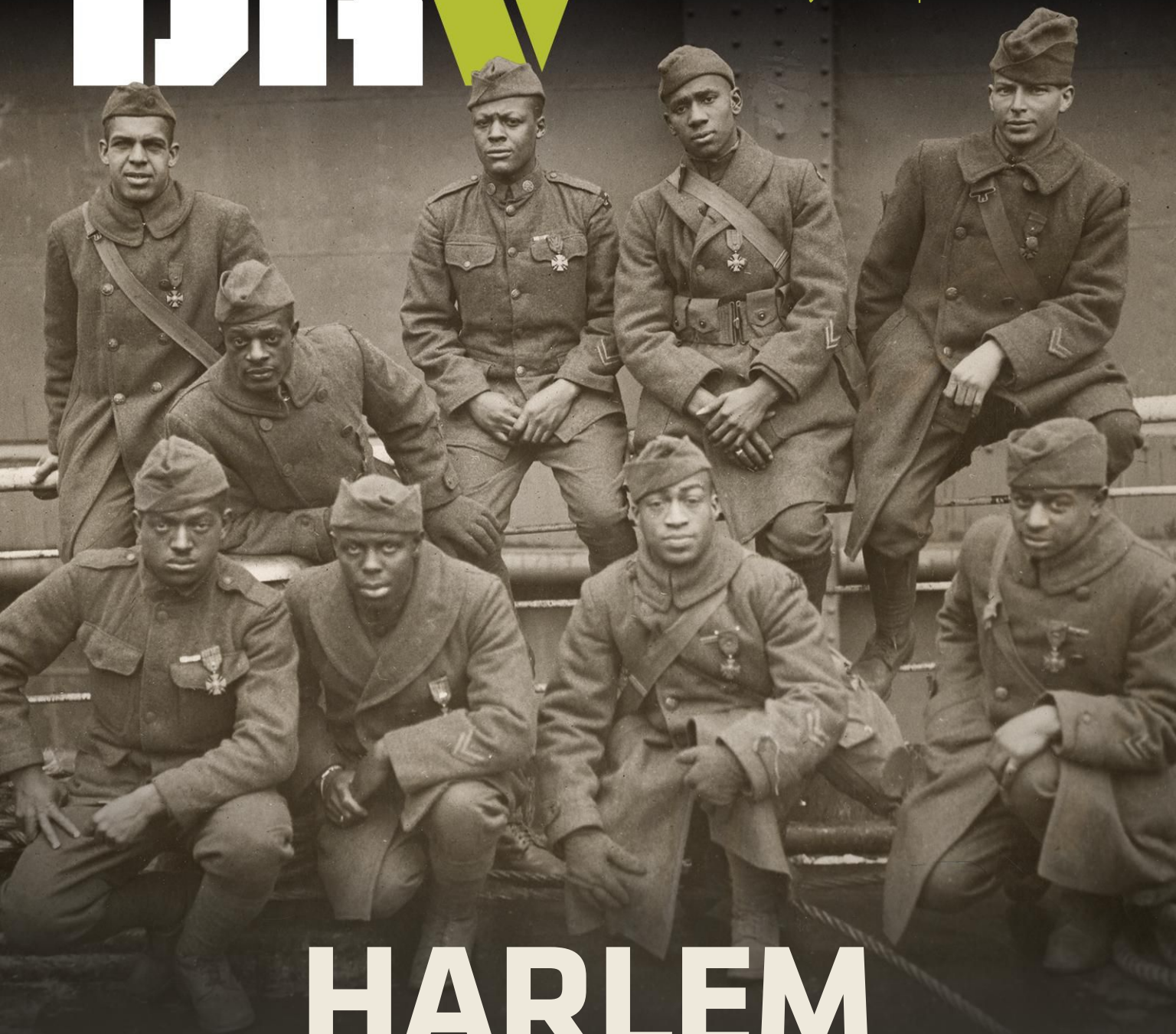


DAV[®]

MAGAZINE

JANUARY | FEBRUARY 2026



HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS

Meet the World War I unit that was under fire for 191 days | Page 18

2026 Mid-Winter Conference

Be a voice for veterans | Feb. 22–25 in Washington, DC

Join the front lines of advocacy for your fellow veterans and let lawmakers know, face-to-face, that their constituents want promises to veterans kept. The 2026 DAV Mid-Winter Conference includes congressional visits, educational opportunities and National Commander Coleman Nee's presentation for the second session of the 119th Congress. ■

For more information, visit

[dav.org/events/
2026-mid-winter-conference](https://dav.org/events/2026-mid-winter-conference)



From the NATIONAL COMMANDER COLEMAN NEE



Advocate for veterans this February

The end of 2025 saw the longest federal government shutdown in history—reminding us once again that political gridlock in Washington is alive and well, and veterans are not immune to the repercussions. That only underlines the importance of our 2026 advocacy efforts to ensure victories for veterans and protect our benefits in the coming year.

With the 119th Congress now in its second session and midterm elections approaching in November, the upcoming 2026 DAV Mid-Winter Conference in Arlington, Virginia, offers one of our best opportunities to show our elected officials and policymakers that veterans' civic engagement is a force to be reckoned with.

We see the work our members do every day in their communities—rolling up their sleeves, sharing their stories and pressing lawmakers for change. Your grassroots advocacy is not just policy talk in Washington but real action by DAV members and supporters to improve veterans' lives.

A prime example of the effectiveness of DAV's advocacy is the inclusion of a finding from our latest report on women veterans, *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness*, in the Building Resources and Access for Veterans' Mental Health Engagement (BRAVE) Act of 2025 (S. 609/H.R. 6024). The report highlights that the Department of Veterans Affairs REACH VET initiative was not considering additional mental health risk factors prevalent among women veterans, including survivors of military sexual trauma and intimate partner violence. The BRAVE Act seeks to rectify this oversight.

We will also continue pushing hard for the passage of the Major Richard Star Act (S. 1032/H.R. 2012). This bipartisan legislation would authorize concurrent receipt of Department of Defense retired pay and VA disability compensation for those injured in a combat zone and medically retired.

Finally, we will continue our advocacy efforts on behalf of the Caring for Survivors Act (S. 611/H.R. 680), which would increase the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) amount from 41% to 55% of the veteran's monthly compensation rate. H.R. 680 would also reduce the existing 10-year eligibility requirement for DIC benefits to five years.

These are just a few pieces of legislation DAV hopes to bring across the finish line, which is why I urge you to join me at this year's mid-winter conference, where I'll present our legislative agenda to Congress and we can coordinate our efforts to ensure our nation's ill and injured veterans and their families receive the benefits they've earned.

I look forward to continuing to serve you as we pursue more victories for veterans. The road won't be easy, but together we will get it done. Let's get to work. ■

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Hard earned

With DAV's help, a 100-year-old Korean War veteran who sustained severe frostbite and other combat wounds finally received the benefits he earned.



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DAV's 2026 critical policy goals help guide members' advocacy efforts and set the tone for a year of positive change for veterans.



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Cover story

The 369th Infantry Regiment—composed entirely of Black soldiers—confronted enemies both at home and abroad during World War I.

Cover photo: National Archives 165-WW-127A-008

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From the NATIONAL ADJUTANT BARRY A. JESINOSKI



Love that never falters

When we launched DAV Caregivers Support just over two years ago, we did so with a simple but principled belief: The people who care for our nation's heroes deserve care and support themselves. These loved ones are often right behind and beside their veterans, quietly providing tireless support physically, emotionally and financially, often without recognition or rest.

Now, DAV is making it easier for them.

This program has become a wellspring of our mission to empower veterans to lead high-quality lives. Through tailored resources built for the challenges caregivers face, we've created a network of thousands of people, reminding these selfless individuals that they're not alone and that a community stands ready to help.

Every day, caregivers across the country help with tasks many of us take for granted, such as preparing meals, providing transportation and offering personal care. Caregivers are spouses, children, siblings, and even close friends and neighbors. The common thread uniting them is love that is deep and lasting even on the hardest days.

With a tried-and-true support program behind them, caregivers and the veterans they love have found reduced stress, improved relationships and greater confidence that they won't have to navigate complex caregiving responsibilities alone.

And the results are clear. Nearly 90% of caregivers enrolled in DAV Caregivers Support have improved or stabilized their depression and stress levels. More than half say they're less likely to burn out after receiving our support. And real-world pressures like time, finances and logistics are eased, helping families maintain stability and quality of life.

DAV Caregivers Support is a two-way street. Not only do those who care for veterans qualify, but so do veterans who care for someone else. And like all of the services DAV provides, it's offered at no cost.

The need for caregiving continues to grow, and so must our commitment. That's why DAV has been instrumental in advocating for change on Capitol Hill. Congress passed the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act just before the holidays in 2024. This effort by DAV, nearly two years in the making, means caregivers will have expanded coverage for nursing home care and increased access to mental health grants.

Caregiving reveals a love that endures through exhaustion, fear and grace. We think we understand love until someone needs all of ours. Our work continues, so if there's a caregiver in your life, send them our way. ■



For more information

To learn more about DAV Caregivers Support or to register, visit davcaregivers.org.

Hidden brain injuries

I'm writing in response to your recent article on hidden brain injuries ("Something's wrong with my head," September/October 2025). Just because no one understood what was causing these issues in the past does not make the claim of injury untrue. This is called a medical discovery. I certainly never considered this possibility (and I have never been a Navy special ops person). However, when presented with the facts, relative to exposure, repetitive impact, etc., the possibility makes perfect sense. In the absence of an alternative explanation, this diagnosis seems absolutely plausible. **Joe Lolley, Hagerstown, Maryland**

This needs immediate, deep attention. My dad sustained a shattered forehead and traumatic brain injury during tank combat in World War II. I watched him deteriorate until he died when I was 10. Our warriors need the best we can give them. **Chris Z., Chicago, Illinois**

Chronic pain

The article "On the 'Bleeding Edge'" (September/October 2025) was no eye-opener to me. The only thing I agree with was the fact that much has changed since the 1990s. The article states that from 2012 to 2022, the number of veterans receiving opioid prescriptions or any other pain meds went from approximately 875,000 to less than 290,000. As with all things with the VA, it tells me there are many veterans in pain. The article implies management and oversight were not conducted over time. In 2013, the VA launched their Opioid Safety Initiative. What this meant for me was less pain relief and more

pain management. I do not want to manage my pain; I want it relieved. Support groups, breathing exercises, counseling, etc., have played a role in managing, but not relieving, the pain. I challenge these so-called experts to try living with pain for 50 years and having a VA doctor say they understand but unfortunately, the VA bureaucracy frowns on pain meds. Any kind of true pain management that results in learning to deal with pain is NOT relieving it. **Michael Littlejohn, Wylie, Texas**

Noncombat trauma

Your article "Overlooked no more" in the September/October 2025 issue is a powerful reminder that trauma isn't limited to combat zones. PTSD can come from any life-altering moment in service. I'm grateful for organizations like DAV and advocates like Michael Franko who fight to make sure veterans are seen, heard and properly cared for. No one should carry that weight alone. **Stephen Manns, Fayetteville, Arkansas**

CHOICE for Veterans Act

I already paid. Not in dollars, but in the currency of my own scars. Every compensation and pension exam was a tollbooth where I had to relive the worst chapters of my service (humiliation, trauma, pain) just to prove what I already carry every day. And now they want to turn claims into a cash register? No thanks! John F. Kennedy once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Well, I did. I served. I sacrificed and I paid in full. Maybe it's time my country stops asking me for receipts. **Steven Denbo, Miami, Florida**

Ketamine therapy

Your article "Guided by Ketamine" (July/August 2025) is very interesting. Is this meant to be a temporary intervention or a therapy that must be repeated at time intervals to maintain progress? Further, does this potentially work on the neuroplasticity of applicable brain regions? I am very curious about the expected duration of effectiveness associated with this ketamine treatment modality. **Craig Frederickson, Olympia, Washington**

Editor's note: Ketamine is typically not a one-time intervention. A single infusion or dose can produce temporary relief, but the effects aren't permanent. Researchers are still uncovering its full potential. But yes, ketamine is neuroplastic, which helps explain why it provides rapid relief.

DAV Patriot Boot Camp

I just finished an incredible experience at DAV Patriot Boot Camp alongside some of the most remarkable veteran leaders in America. I've been a lifetime DAV member since 2014 but didn't really know what to expect since it was my first time doing an in-person business accelerator. Special thanks to the DAV team for putting on an experience that was beyond what I had expected. And I want to personally thank the entire DAV team for all their hard work putting together this three-day event. They mixed the perfect amount of information, classes and mentorship time alongside social and networking opportunities throughout the day and evenings. **Timothy Gick, Washington, D.C.**

WRITE TO US Please send feedback to DAV Magazine, 860 Dolwick Drive, Erlanger, KY 41018, or via email to feedback@dav.org. We also welcome feedback on our social media pages. We regret we are unable to acknowledge every letter due to the volume received. Letters are subject to editing for clarity, style, accuracy, space and propriety. Letters involving claims are referred to DAV's Service Department.

Caregivers need our continued support

14 million Americans caring for veterans are at risk of financial hardship. Congress must pass H.R. 2148/S. 879.



By Kevin C. Miller

Military and veteran caregivers tend to the needs of a loved one who has limitations due to illness, injury or disability sustained during their service. Currently, over 14 million Americans voluntarily fill this essential caregiver role. Many provide 24/7, comprehensive support, which includes managing complex medical needs, coordinating appointments, assisting with daily activities and providing vital mental health support.

This intensive commitment can create a severe financial burden on veteran families. Caregivers often forgo or interrupt careers, leading to lost income, lapsed professional certifications and licenses, depleted retirement savings, and significant barriers to reentering the workforce.

The devastating consequences are clear: One-third of military and veteran caregiving families live at or below the federal poverty line. Food insecurity for those caring for a veteran age 60 or under has reached 40%, and two-thirds of this population struggles to pay their bills. Congress has an obligation to ease this burden by passing the bipartisan Veteran Caregiver, Reeducation, Reemployment, and Retirement Act (H.R. 2148/S. 879).

“This vital legislation would provide essential support by requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs to reimburse eligible caregivers for fees associated with obtaining professional certifications or relicensure necessary for employment, significantly easing their transition back to the workforce,” said Shamala Capizzi, DAV associate national legislative director.

“It would grant access to existing federal employment assistance programs and extend health coverage and

bereavement counseling that caregivers rely on. It would also require a report of the feasibility of establishing a retirement plan or retirement savings option for family caregivers.”

The existing Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, established by Congress in 2012, provides monthly stipends for caregivers of veterans with the most complex needs. However, this essential financial support ends suddenly when a caregiver transitions out of the role, often after their veteran loved one dies.

In moments of profound hardship, grief and life change, these selfless individuals find themselves professionally disadvantaged and without savings to rely on.

“While the VA offers caregiver support to eligible veterans, significant gaps persist,” said DAV National Commander Coleman Nee. “This undeniable need compelled us to create DAV Caregivers Support, which is a lifeline that connects these selfless individuals with the public and private resources they desperately need to navigate the complexities of caregiving and improve their quality of life and that of those under their care.

“It’s now up to our elected officials to do their part and pass H.R. 2148/S. 879, the Veteran Caregiver Reeducation, Reemployment, and Retirement Act, which will help ensure that no caregiver ever faces their journey alone.” ■



Stay informed. To take action on this important bill or other key veterans legislation, join DAV CAN (Commander’s Action Network) at davcan.org.





FROST AND FIRE

He walked into a DAV office for nothing more than an ID card—and walked out with a lifeline

By Matt Saintsing

William Bolden was caught in a firefight with Chinese soldiers when the ice beneath his boots began to crack. Carrying two canisters of .30-caliber ammunition, the Army infantryman suddenly found himself waist-deep in freezing water. The pendulum of combat swung between the biting Korean winter and a relentless enemy.

“The Chinese wouldn’t let me stop and change,” he said. “So my clothes actually freeze-dried on me.”

He remained in the creek until the fighting subsided. Afterward, Bolden visited the unit medic about a persistent blister. “He said, ‘Don’t you know your foot is frozen, man?’” Bolden recalled.

Six flights later, he was recovering at Percy Jones Army Hospital—a recovery center for service members with cold-weather injuries—in aptly named Battle Creek, Michigan.

Every passenger on that flight out of Korea had suffered severe tissue damage after enduring the dead of winter. In addition to frostbite on his upper and lower extremities,

Bolden sustained shrapnel injuries to his left arm and shoulder.

For decades, Bolden—now 100 years old—didn’t receive the veterans benefits he had earned. That changed last year when he reached out to DAV, looking only for an ID card so his wife, Joanna, could shop at a military base commissary. The veteran went in for credentials but came out with a lifeline.

In addition to fighting in the Korean War, Bolden had served in World War II with an all-Black unit that provided critical support to combat troops. As was standard practice in the segregated U.S. military, most Black soldiers were assigned to noncombat and support roles, including transportation and supply.

His unit followed the 1st Cavalry Division to the Philippines to help liberate Manila, the nation’s capital, from Japanese occupation. Bolden was preparing for the invasion of Japan when news arrived that the war had ended. After a four-year break in service, he reenlisted in the Army on June 8, 1950—just 17 days before the Korean War broke out. This time, he served in a desegregated combat unit.

“We found out a soldier is just a soldier,” said Bolden. “There was no difference.”

The trauma he endured on the frozen Korean Peninsula stayed with him. According to Joanna, he sometimes wakes suddenly at night, urging her to get into a foxhole.



“The VA turned him down for PTSD and frostbite, even though both were noted in his discharge record from Korea. So we refiled everything.”

—Danny Soto, DAV benefits advocate

Today, his mobility is limited, and he often relies on a walker to get around.

Bolden filed for veterans benefits for his cold-weather injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder on his own in 2013. The Department of Veterans Affairs denied his claim. Dejected, he and Joanna stopped trying to secure the benefits he’d earned decades earlier.

But after meeting DAV National Service Officer Danny Soto, things began to change.

Once Soto accessed Bolden’s military records, he discovered a glaring mistake. “The VA turned him down for PTSD and frostbite,” said Soto, “even though both were noted in his discharge record from Korea. So we refiled everything.”

Soto stayed in constant contact with VA officials and other offices in DAV’s network to expedite Bolden’s veteran’s claim. In September, Bolden received the news that his claims for frostbite injuries had been approved—transforming life for him and Joanna. Claims for his shrapnel wounds and PTSD remain pending, but Soto is confident DAV will get them across the finish line.

In addition to uncovering the earlier mistake, Soto said Bolden received a subpar compensation and pension exam in 2013. “He didn’t even know he could appeal,” added Soto.

When the approval news arrived, Bolden was in disbelief. “I was astonished,” he said.

“I’m grateful,” added Joanna. “I think he should have received it years ago. After everything he’s been through, he should have had his benefits long before now.” ■



Above: Bolden visits the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was his first visit to the site that honors the service and sacrifice of those who served in the ‘Forgotten War.’



Soto



You could win \$2,500 and a trip to Orlando

Recruit one new DAV member for a chance to snag a special convention prize package

By Jonathan Kaupanger

Your mission is simple: Sign up just one fully paid new DAV member, and you'll instantly be entered to win the ultimate prize package for the 2026 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Orlando, Florida. Think sunshine, community and \$2,500 in spending money—hotel room included. Stop dreaming about a vacation and start recruiting your way to one.

The rules of the contest: Recruit one new paid member between now and June 30, and you'll be automatically entered in the contest. There's only one entry per person, no matter how many new members you recruit. After June 30, we'll hold a drawing at DAV National Headquarters to pick the winner.

"One million members is more than a number—it's a nonnegotiable floor for our legislative strength," said National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "It's what commands attention on Capitol Hill. Let's strip the recruitment goal down to its simplest form: Find one. If every current nonrecruiter brought in just one new member, we don't just secure our advocacy; we exponentially multiply it. Don't worry about the total—worry about the veteran you can personally empower today."

And when you recruit more than one new member, besides being entered in the Recruiter Rally, you'll receive credits to purchase items from the DAV Store and other possible awards! ■



Scan the code or visit
dav.org/membership-recruiter-rally



★ VETERANS DAY HIGHLIGHTS ★

On Veterans Day, Arlington National Cemetery hosted the annual National Veterans Day Observance, a solemn and patriotic ceremony honoring the service and sacrifice of all U.S. armed forces veterans. The event commenced at 11 a.m. with the Presidential Armed Forces Full Honors Wreath-Laying Ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; a deeply moving tradition conducted by a joint service team. This was followed by a program held inside the historic Memorial Amphitheater, featuring a parade of colors that included DAV. National Commander Coleman Nee joined dignitaries on stage at the event, including President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Doug Collins.



Above left: President Trump delivers remarks to a large audience gathered for the annual Veterans Day ceremony at the Memorial Amphitheater. "The greatest monument to their courage is not carved in marble or cast in bronze," said Trump. "It's all around us, an American nation." **Above center:** Commander Nee (left) and Jim Marszalek, since appointed executive director of DAV Washington Headquarters, stand ready with a ceremonial wreath ahead of their tribute at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. **Above right:** Secretary Collins addresses the audience at the Memorial Amphitheater. "Keeping the promises America has made to its veterans is the sole purpose of the Department of Veterans Affairs," said Collins. "I am proud of the work we've done ... placing veterans at the center of everything we do."

A meal with MEANING



Golden Corral's Military Appreciation Night honors veterans and active military members while raising funds for DAV state and local programs

By Nikki Herrmann

With over 350 Golden Corral restaurants participating in the 2025 Military Appreciation Night, DAV members once again turned out in full force to honor veterans and spread the word about the services DAV provides—all while raising money for their departments and chapters.

Among those members was Paul Hermann, department adjutant for Louisiana, who has been involved in the event since 2017. Hermann, who served in the Air Force as an inventory manager, discovered DAV after being medically retired.

"Someone told me about DAV, and they helped me file my claim," he said. "That changed my life. I wouldn't be where I am today without DAV."

His experience led him to dedicate his post-service life to helping others navigate the same process, first as a DAV benefits advocate and later in his current department role.

Each year, Hermann and fellow DAV members set up tables at Golden Corral locations across the nation to greet veterans and share valuable information about DAV's life-changing programs and services.

"It's about getting the DAV name out there and letting veterans know who we are and what we do," he said. "We talk to them about filing claims, benefits, and sometimes even things like getting veteran license plates or hunting licenses. It's all about passing on information."



Herrmann

During the 2025 event, Golden Corral served nearly 180,000 free meals to service members and is on track to raise over \$1 million for DAV. Funds from the event help support department- and chapter-led initiatives, including the DAV Transportation Network, which provides veterans with no-cost rides to Department of Veterans Affairs medical appointments. The program is essential for those without their own means of transportation, especially in rural areas.

Thanks to Golden Corral's dedication to the event over the past 24 years, veterans continue to join together and rekindle the fellowship they experienced during their time in service.

"You get veterans from all branches and eras together, sharing stories and helping one another. That's what it's all about," Hermann said. "It's another way to pay forward the support we once received. Helping even one veteran makes all the difference. That's why we keep showing up—year after year." ■

DAV chapters across the country took part in Golden Corral's Military Appreciation Night, meeting with veterans, raising support for DAV programs, and sharing information about the resources and services available to those who served.



Chapter 6, Puerto Rico



Chapter 121, Texas



Chapter 32, Florida



Chapter 1, Arkansas



Chapter 82, Florida



PHOTO BY CHRIS STEIGER BLUEGRASS PHOTOGRAPHY

MILES OF SUPPORT

DAV 5K unites participants all over the nation to walk, roll, run and ride to support America's veterans

By Nikki Herrmann

When Sue Davis decided to take part in the DAV 5K five years ago, it was simply a chance to do something she loved—running. But when she learned how much money the event raised for veterans, she realized she could do something much more meaningful. What began as a personal challenge became a mission—to honor veterans and raise as much money as possible for DAV's life-changing programs and services.

An avid runner, Davis had discovered the DAV 5K when a friend invited her to join. At the time, she didn't know much about DAV or the services it provides. As the daughter of an Air Force veteran, she quickly recognized the organization's impact.

"These men and women who serve our country don't always get the support they need after their service, and DAV is about making sure they are taken care of," she said.

Last year, Davis teamed up with two friends to maximize fundraising efforts. They ran weekly social media contests and printed flyers with a DAV QR code for local coffee shops and office bulletin boards. Their community rallied behind them, and by race day, they had raised more than \$3,000 and spread awareness about DAV's mission.

"There is always more that can be done to support our nation's veterans," Davis said. "They made the commitment to serve our country, and it's important that we keep our promise to support them to the best of our abilities."

Around 2,500 people participated in the in-person Cincinnati event, but the 5K's reach stretched far beyond, including nearly 1,700 people who participated virtually. For Army veteran Kevin La Salle, head of inclusion and diversity, Americas at AXA XL insurance company, the virtual DAV 5K became a powerful way to rally colleagues across offices and home workspaces.



Sue Davis celebrates after completing the 2025 DAV 5K, proudly displaying her finisher's medal. Davis, who was the top group fundraiser for the 2024 event, continues to champion DAV's mission through her dedication and enthusiasm.



Above left: Susan Ward speaks during the DAV 5K, sharing her experiences as a Marine veteran and the impact DAV has had on her journey after service. Ward served as this year's veteran speaker, helping inspire participants at the event. **Above right:** DAV National Commander Coleman Nee (left), Ward (center) and her husband, Pete (right), gather for a photo before the start of the DAV 5K.

"I wanted to give back and keep our team connected," La Salle said. "We removed obstacles by covering registration fees and encouraged people to share their pages with family and co-workers. Because it was virtual, anyone could walk, roll, run and ride wherever they were and still be part of something bigger."

With more than 270 employees participating across the country and a fundraising total of \$7,125, the event became more than just a race—it became a way to build community and unite around a common mission.

"This was something fun that everyone could enjoy," La Salle said. "We were running and cheering each other on, but what made it special was knowing we were doing it for a good cause—and giving back to those who served."

Marine veteran Susan Ward, this year's speaker at the Cincinnati opening ceremony, offered a different but equally inspiring perspective. A former supply officer who served from 1989 to 1993, Ward started supporting DAV while still on active duty, when she needed to choose a veterans service organization to support financially. After leaving the service, she struggled to find a place where she felt truly valued as a woman veteran.

Years later, after retiring from her civilian career, Ward decided to become more involved with DAV and became a life member. She was still hesitant to attend a chapter meeting because of how she had been treated in the past by others outside of DAV. Repeated invitations from John Plahovinsak, adjutant of Chapter 63 in Cincinnati, convinced her to attend—and she was overwhelmed by the love and support she received.

"They were so welcoming. It chokes me up how much they've embraced me," she said. "Everyone's treated equally, and I feel truly valued."

Her renewed involvement led her to participate in events like the DAV 5K, presented by USAA. Speaking at this year's race gave her a chance to share her story—and highlight how these events strengthen bonds among veterans.

"The 5K reminds us how big our community is and how much support is out there," Ward said. "It shows us we're not alone and that what we've done still matters. Raising awareness for DAV helps ensure more veterans get the help they need." ■

Colleagues from the insurance company Americas at AXA XL meet in Chicago to take part in the DAV Virtual 5K, joining teammates participating from locations across the nation. Their combined support highlights AXA XL's ongoing commitment to honoring America's veterans through the annual walk, roll, run and ride event.





From the NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

JON RETZER

Continuing the fight

I am truly honored to accept the role of national legislative director, furthering my life's dedication to serving veterans and their families. My experience with DAV has been invaluable, and I'm grateful to have learned and grown alongside so many committed colleagues.

When my career with DAV began as a national service officer trainee back in 2003 in St. Paul, Minnesota, I never envisioned leaving the Gopher State. But in 2017, I accepted an appointment at DAV Washington Headquarters as assistant national service director, supporting the oversight of professional national service officers and transition service officers nationwide.

In 2022, I transitioned into legislative advocacy, joining DAV's legislative team and working to shape policies that make a meaningful impact on the lives of veterans and their families. Over the last few years, I have had the privilege of learning from one of our organization's most dedicated advocates, my predecessor Joy Ilem. In the last decade, thanks to my fellow Army veteran's leadership, we were able to get monumental victories for veterans passed into law, including the VA MISSION Act, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, Deborah Sampson Act and PACT Act.

To say I have my work cut out for me would be an understatement. However, I would not be in the position I am without her mentorship and guidance as a leader. I want to personally thank Joy for her commitment to the veteran community and wish her the best in retirement.

Before joining DAV, I served in the Army infantry and Army National Guard. I pursued my dream of a career in the Army until a debilitating neck and spine injury led to my medical retirement in 1999. I felt my journey of service was over. A few years later, however, joining DAV as a young service officer allowed me to rediscover the meaning of service by helping veterans and their families obtain their earned benefits.

To be a DAV leader is to occupy a position of sacred trust. It is a vocation built on empathy, meticulous diligence and an unshakeable commitment to the principle that no veteran should ever have to fight alone for what they have already earned through sacrifice.

The future of DAV's legislative advocacy will be defined by its sustained, aggressive defense of earned benefits and a proactive push to close the remaining gaps in health care and compensation for disabled veterans of all eras. Our legislative agenda remains a grassroots-driven mission, prioritized by the real-world needs of disabled veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. With your help, we will continue making a difference in their lives. ■

Veterans benefits increase to keep pace with inflation

New cost-of-living adjustment of 2.8% exceeds average increases over past decade

By Kevin C. Miller

The Social Security Administration announced a 2.8% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for 2026. The increase, which is 0.3% higher than the previous year, is designed to ensure benefits keep pace with inflation.

The COLA is calculated annually by the Department of Labor using the Consumer Price Index, which measures changes in the cost of consumer goods and expenses.

Effective Jan. 1, the 2.8% boost will be reflected in monthly checks for eligible veterans, their families and their dependents. The increase applies to all Department of Veterans Affairs benefits, including disability compensation, clothing allowances, and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.

“The financial strain from the rising cost of living in recent years has been significant,” said DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Jim Marszalek. “This COLA is a necessary measure to help curb how inflation has eroded the purchasing power of those earned veterans benefits.”

At 2.8%, the 2026 increase is higher than the previous year’s 2.5% but remains well below other recent high-inflation adjustments of 3.2% (2023), 8.7% (2022) and 5.9% (2021). Still, the new rate is above the average increase of approximately 2.6% over the last decade.

Veterans receiving disability compensation will see an increase this year. VA disability payments will go up about \$4.91 per month for those with a 10% rating and \$107.28 for those rated at 100% who don’t have dependents. ■

To calculate personalized compensation rates, visit our VA compensation calculator at dav.org/disability-calculator.



2026 critical policy goals



DAV advocates for toxic-exposed veterans, concurrent pay, mental health support, and modernizing benefits for veterans and their families

By Kevin C. Miller

For over a century, DAV's critical policy goals have served as a strategic road map, guiding our members to create positive change and achieve long-term success for veterans and their families.

In 2026, DAV is focusing its advocacy across nine key issues.

First and foremost, DAV wants to make the process for filing disability claims and appeals work better for veterans. The Clear Communication for Veterans Claims Act (S. 1311/H.R. 1039) would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to recommend improvements to the letters and notices it sends veterans, and the Veterans Claims Quality Improvement Act (H.R. 3983) would reduce preventable errors by requiring an enhanced quality assurance framework at the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

The enactment of the Honoring our PACT Act of 2022 provided expanded health care and benefits for toxic-exposed veterans—the largest such expansion in a generation. The law improved access to care for millions of veterans, created presumptives for burn pits and other toxic exposures, and established an internal VA process for creating future presumptive conditions. However, the PACT Act lacks adequate accountability measures to ensure timely decisions, leaving many veterans still waiting for recognition of service-connected toxic injuries, including those who served at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) in Uzbekistan, Fort McClellan in Alabama, and other per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS)-contaminated locations. DAV is urging Congress to establish a new framework for toxic-exposure presumptives that includes separate steps for the acknowledgment of exposure events, concession of exposure and presumption of service connection. Additionally, it should enact legislation that directs the VA to expand research, create independent scientific review and establish a veterans advisory commission to ensure prompt, transparent and equitable decisions.

Other policy goals to end the wait for toxic-exposed veterans include passing the FORGOTTEN Veterans Act (S. 2220), which would establish a presumption that certain veterans were exposed to radiation and other

toxins at the Nevada Test and Training Range, and the Veterans Exposed to Toxic PFAS Act (H.R. 3639), which would provide health care and establish presumptive service connection for veterans and dependents exposed to PFAS at military installations.

Reducing veteran suicide remains a key focus for DAV, the VA and Congress. The BRAVE Act (S. 609/H.R. 6024), which includes recommendations from DAV's report *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness*, would strengthen the VA's mental health and suicide prevention efforts by expanding the mental health workforce; modernizing Vet Centers; improving outreach, especially to women veterans; and enhancing coordination of prevention programs.

Although DAV benefits advocates are skilled at navigating the complex VA benefits system, a crucial legislative change is required: The law must be amended to allow the concurrent receipt of earned military retiree pay and veterans benefits. Currently, a combat-disabled veteran is often forced to repay Department of Defense retirement pay before they can even qualify for VA disability payments. The Major Richard Star Act (S. 1032/H.R. 2102) seeks to eliminate this inequitable offset. Furthermore, the Retired Pay Restoration Act (H.R. 303) would allow receipt of both military retired pay based on longevity and veterans' disability compensation rated 40% and below.

Other critical policy goals include modernizing survivor benefits, such as Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) for veterans' survivors. Two instrumental bills—the Love Lives On Act (S. 410/H.R. 1004) and the Caring for Survivors Act (S. 611/H.R. 680)—will do just that. They will eliminate the penalty for a surviving spouse who remarries before age 55 and increase the DIC compensation rate to 55% of a 100%-disabled veteran's compensation, up from 41%.

DAV will also continue to fight to expand comprehensive dental care services to all service-disabled veterans, enhance long-term care by providing assisted living care and increasing caregiver support, sustain the VA health care system, and protect veterans benefits and services from budget caps and offsets.

"When Congress seeks to strengthen the lives of those who served, they rely on DAV's proven leadership and expertise," said DAV National Legislative Director

Jon Retzer. "From pioneering health care solutions to relentlessly closing the gaps in toxic-exposure legislation, DAV's unwavering advocacy is the shield that ensures our nation keeps our promise to every veteran." ■

Objectives

- Make the claims and appeals process work better for veterans.
- Strengthen presumptive policies to ensure toxic-exposed veterans receive earned benefits in a timely manner.
- Eliminate gaps in veterans mental health care and suicide prevention.
- Prevent Congress or the VA from reducing, offsetting or taxing veterans benefits.
- Modernize and strengthen benefits for survivors.
- Expand comprehensive dental care services to all service-disabled veterans.
- Enhance long-term care by providing assisted living and increasing caregiver support.
- Sustain the VA health care system by reforming infrastructure planning and funding mechanisms.
- Protect veterans benefits and services by ending PAYGO offsets and budget caps that cut funding.



Be the voice that veterans rely on. Your dedicated advocacy is required to push these critical policy goals across the finish line. Find out exactly when and how to contact your lawmakers by joining DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) at davcan.org—and help ensure we keep our promise to America's veterans.





'FINEST OF RECORDS'

This Black, American World War I regiment fought longer than any other. They returned home to more battles.

By Elizabeth DePompei

Even the blaring sounds of a 100-piece jazz band turned to whispers in the throngs of cheering Americans who lined New York City's Fifth Avenue on Feb. 17, 1919.

It was the city's first homecoming for troops returning from the Great War. The Sun newspaper described the crowds as "two solid walls of booming, roaring welcomers," and soldiers "decorated with flowers like brides."

The men were the city's own, having originated as the 15th New York National Guard Regiment in Harlem before being shipped off to France as the 369th Infantry Regiment. They quickly gained a reputation for their steadfast fierceness in battle, eventually earning the moniker "the Harlem Hellfighters."

"Theirs is the finest of records," the New York Tribune reported at the time. "Under fire 191 days, they never lost a prisoner or a foot of ground."

But their welcome was a far cry from the regiment's sendoff in 1917 when they were prohibited from marching

in the farewell parade of New York's National Guard because of the color of their skin.

It wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last battle the men of the 369th—composed entirely of Black soldiers under a white commander and mostly white officers—faced on the home front.

They fought racist ideologies and policies to even be allowed to wear the uniform. Once in service, they were often overlooked, disrespected and undermined. Somehow, even sacrificing their bodies and contributing to the Allied victory still wasn't enough to fully realize the rights, esteem and dream of American citizenship.



RED-BLOODED AMERICANS

Black Americans had served in uniform since the Revolutionary War, segregated from their white counterparts and often treated as inferior. Leading up to World War I, those circumstances hadn't changed.

Even in New York, a beacon for Black Americans escaping the post-Civil War South, resistance to Black people serving in uniform persisted. It wasn't until 1913 that legislation allowed for a Black unit in the New York National Guard—but victory was delayed.

"It would be another three years before the actual organization of the 15th New York National Guard would take place because of the resistance of the white New York National Guard," said Jeffrey Sammons, a professor emeritus of history at New York University and co-author of *"Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality."*

A series of events—including a 1916 fight on the Mexican border that depleted New York National Guard troops as World War I raged—finally led to the formation of a Black unit.

"We need men in this war effort, and it doesn't matter what color they are," Sammons said of the sentiment at the time.

Thousands of Black men answered the call.

"An awful lot of them were patriotic and were red-blooded Americans who wanted to serve their country," said Krewasky Salter, a retired Army colonel and military historian. "Their motivations for joining were analogous to just about any other American soldier."

But the Black service member who expected to prove his value and patriotism had a unique burden. That burden grew heavier on April 2, 1917, when then-President Woodrow Wilson declared in his address to Congress calling for war, "The world must be made safe for democracy."

Salter said that many Black soldiers thought, "If I continue to show my willingness to fight and die for this country, then perhaps I'm going to reap all of the benefits" of American democracy.

By December 1917, the 369th was in France.

A SLAP IN THE FACE

When Gina McVey recounts the story of the Hellfighters, she tells it like it's old family lore—because it is. As a member of the 369th, her grandfather Lawrence McVey was among the first American infantry soldiers to arrive



Throngs of New Yorkers line Fifth Avenue to welcome home the soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment returning from World War I. But despite their valiant, patriotic service, members of the Black unit continued to face racism and discrimination at home.

in France. But instead of rifles, McVey and his fellow soldiers were given pickaxes and shovels, Salter said. Although the regiment was all volunteer and infantry, it was designated as a draftee unit and given manual labor duties.

"That was kind of a slap in the face," Salter said.

By early 1918, the 369th found their place in the war—under the French flag. Fighting since 1914, France's forces were depleted. There was pressure for the U.S. to supply reinforcements to French command, but Army Gen. John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), had marching orders to maintain the independence and identity of American forces.

"So the African American soldier gave Pershing an out, because he wasn't going to give any of the white soldiers," Salter said. "So he gave the African American soldier."

When Gina McVey started researching the 369th, she came upon a now-infamous letter from AEF headquarters to French forces. In it, the French are advised not to eat with or shake hands with Black soldiers and not to "commend too highly" the Black American troops. The danger, the letter stated, was that contact with the French—who didn't hold the same racist ideologies held in America—would "inspire in Black Americans aspirations which to them [the whites] appear intolerable."

"It broke my heart," McVey said of the letter.

Under French command, the men of the 369th performed their duty, serving in the trenches longer and suffering more casualties than any other American regiment. They participated in important battles, including the deadly Meuse-Argonne Offensive, during which they captured the village of Séchault, and were there for the armistice of Nov. 11, 1918. *(Continued on Page 20)*

Regiment soldier Henry Johnson became the first American ever awarded France's Croix de Guerre military honor after engaging in hand-to-hand combat with an enemy raiding party.

Lawrence McVey received the same French military honor for his courage in leading an attack that resulted in him being injured. According to his application for veterans disability allowance years later, McVey had suffered a gunshot wound to the arm.

"I'm just so proud that he fulfilled his duties to the best of his ability, and they were instrumental in turning the tide of war," Gina McVey said. "Knowing that—all the times people have told us we didn't do anything and we were lazy and we were good for nothing—that we were good for something."

Another 169 members of the 369th received the prestigious Croix de Guerre. Yet at the time, few Black members received formal American honors.

HONOR DELAYED

Once the glory of their welcome home faded, the members of the 369th and other Black regiments were left to deal with racism intensified by the shifting roles brought on by the war.

"One can see in the press that there's a great deal of trepidation, of concern about these guys who have been trained to kill and had been transformed in many ways by their war experience and their interaction with people on a global stage," Sammons said. "So it's essentially, 'how are we going to return Blacks to the status quo after the war?'"

Within months of returning home, the country was seized by the Red Summer of 1919, an outbreak of racial violence across dozens of cities. Over the course of 10 months, an estimated 250 Black Americans were killed. In Arkansas, wounded 369th veteran Leroy Johnston and his three brothers were killed in the Elaine Massacre, the deadliest racial confrontation in that state's history.

It became clear that Wilson's call to make the world safe for democracy didn't apply to Black Americans, even those who fought in its name.

"They need to be honored, because they fought for a country that didn't fight for them."

—Gina McVey



Above: Lawrence McVey, who served with the 369th, was honored with France's Croix de Guerre after leading an attack that left him wounded. Thanks to the efforts of his granddaughter, Gina McVey, the medal now resides at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Then in 1925, the Army War College released a report on the role and value of Black soldiers. In the report, Black Americans were described as "inherently weak in character" and accused of having "failed in the World War."

"This is a devastating document," Sammons said, adding that it institutionalized the denigration of the Black soldier, something that continued into World War II. It wasn't until 1948 that then-President Harry Truman signed an executive order desegregating the U.S. military and mandating equality.

For most of the 369th's Black members, it would take years, even decades, to receive American military honors. McVey received the Purple Heart in 1932. Johnson received the same in 1996, as well as the Medal of Honor in 2015.

In late 2021, the 369th Infantry Regiment was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal—well after its members had died.

"They need to be honored," McVey said, "because they fought for a country that didn't fight for them."

More than a century after the Harlem Hellfighters marched up Fifth Avenue to thunderous cheers, their story still resonates—proof that courage often arrives long before recognition.

As the echoes of that parade fade, the nation can finally hear what was once drowned out: the call to honor all who fought for freedom. ■

A New Year's resolution

Start the new year off strong by taking advantage of DAV's free resources to begin your estate planning

Starting an estate plan is a responsible New Year's resolution that provides peace of mind and protects you and your loved ones. Through DAV's partnership with FreeWill, you can create a comprehensive estate plan that outlines your intentions and protects your legacy.

"Using the FreeWill website [dav.org/freewill] was straightforward, and knowing the significant impact DAV has on veterans made it an easy decision for me," said Army veteran Richard Boettger. "When I read the uplifting stories about what DAV does for disabled veterans who have suffered far worse injuries than I did, I'm reminded that giving to DAV is a good use of my legacy money."

A comprehensive plan includes three elements:

1. Legally binding last will and testament

A will ensures your wishes are met, prevents court battles and reduces family disputes. You can name guardians for your children, make charitable gifts and provide clarity for loved ones during an emotional time. Without a will, state intestacy laws decide how your property is distributed, which may not reflect your intentions.

2. Advance health care directive

An advance health care directive ensures your medical wishes are known and honored if you cannot communicate them. It provides clear guidance during life-threatening situations, prevents family conflict, relieves loved ones of making difficult decisions and ensures you receive care aligned with your values.

3. Durable financial power of attorney

A durable financial power of attorney lets you appoint a trusted agent to manage your finances if you become incapacitated. This avoids costly court proceedings, ensures your financial obligations are met, and keeps your assets properly managed during medical emergencies or cognitive decline. It also helps prevent family disputes and provides peace of mind. ■



Make a legacy gift to DAV through your will or estate plan

For more information about giving to DAV:

- Call 800-216-9802, press 1.
- Email giftplanning@dav.org.
- Return the attached postcard.
- Visit davplanmygift.org.

Did you know you can create a free will by visiting dav.org/freewill?

When completing your legacy gift to DAV, please provide the following to your adviser:

- Legal name:
Disabled American Veterans
- Address: 860 Dolwick Drive,
Erlanger, KY 41018
- Federal tax ID number:
31-0263158

DAV® Guardian Society

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Veterans share how community support and the DAV Homeless Veterans Stand Down offer the chance of new beginnings

By Brian Buckwalter

Below: DAV National Commander Coleman Nee joined more than 200 volunteers at DAV National Headquarters to serve lunch, distribute care bags and connect stand down participants to local resources.



For years, Army veteran Donnie Lionberger was homeless and faced addiction, unemployment and separation from his family.

He said he felt broken down and had nowhere to go when, in August 2022, he reached out to Joseph House, a Cincinnati-based treatment facility for veterans struggling with addiction and homelessness. Joseph House receives support from the DAV Charitable Service Trust.

While at Joseph House, Lionberger attended the annual DAV Homeless Veterans Stand Down for the first time.

In partnership with the Cincinnati Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, DAV hosts the stand down at its national headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, for veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness in the Greater Cincinnati area, connecting them with local programs and resources.

Lionberger credits what he learned from the stand down as being part of his recovery. Since attending in 2022, he's filed VA claims through DAV, connected with the VA to receive care for several medical issues, fixed problems with his service discharge and has been sober for more than three years.

"I love this stand down. It brings veterans in off the streets for a day where they can get the resources they need—every resource in the world is here—that can help them. It's just an awesome thing," he said. "I'm the example of what the [stand down] can do for you."

"We're not just saying, 'Good luck. We'll see you next year at the stand down.' Today's the introduction. The long-term relationship begins now as we help them build their lives."

—Coleman Nee, DAV national commander

More than 200 veterans attended this year's event, which featured more than 60 vendors, including Joseph House.

Several dozen volunteers, many of whom are DAV employees or elected leaders, welcomed participants by serving hot meals, distributing care bags and guiding them through the vendor booths set up throughout the building.

Veterans could access both immediate and long-term resources and support, such as health care screenings, flu shots, haircuts, legal aid, benefits counseling and employment resources.

"We want to break the cycle," said DAV National Commander Coleman Nee. "There's a pathway forward, and we want everyone to know that."

Nee emphasized that the event is meant to be just the beginning of that support.

"We're not just saying, 'Good luck. We'll see you next year at the stand down,'" he said. "Today's the introduction. The long-term relationship begins now as we help them build their lives."

For Michael Angel, that commitment to help and the support offered is a far cry from the isolation he once felt.

"I've never been to a place like this," he said. "I think it's amazing. We know that there are people who care about us. I'm very happy to be here—very fortunate. There were times I thought there's nobody out there to help me. You feel so alone and abandoned."

After Angel left the Ohio Army National Guard in 2018, he began using prescription medications then methamphetamines.

"It took about three or four years for drugs and alcohol to completely wipe everything from me," Angel said.

He lost his car, his support system and his housing. Then he ended up in jail, where he spent 49 days before receiving a court order remanding him to Joseph House.

Angel was required to stay 90 days but chose to remain longer to take advantage of its programs. He's been sober for almost a year and sees his life heading in a new direction.

"They've taught me a lot," Angel said.

Stories like Angel's and Lionberger's are a hopeful sign of a downward trend in homelessness. Across the country, homelessness among the veteran population is at its lowest numbers on record, according to a report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

DAV National Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst wants to see the trend continue.

"Events like this stand down show veterans that we have a united front with our VA and community partners, and they mean a great deal," he said. "They demonstrate the genuine commitment we have to taking care of those who've served their country. This isn't the only stand down we do within DAV; others happen at departments and chapters across the country.

"But I look forward to the day when they're not necessary. That means we'll have solved the problem."

In addition to being sober, Lionberger now has his own apartment and a job, and he has reunited with his daughter and other family members. He still makes it a point to come back to the stand down every year, not as a participant but to talk with and encourage other veterans.

"I'm a lifetime struggling vet, but I'm on the right course, and I want to see every veteran here on the right course," he said. ■



Army veteran Donnie Lionberger has attended the annual DAV Homeless Veterans Stand Down since 2022. He started attending as a participant but now goes to talk with and support veterans experiencing homelessness. He credits the stand down with being part of his recovery.



Ohio Army National Guard veteran Michael Angel receives a flu shot during the stand down. Vaccines were one of the many services offered by the more than 60 vendors. Participants could also receive free haircuts, connect with legal aid and access benefits counseling.



Reese



Ilem



Leadership transitions in Washington

DAV honors two retiring leaders and welcomes new directors to guide advocacy and service into the organization's next century

In December, with the concurrence of National Commander Coleman Nee, National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski announced leadership transitions in our nation's capital.

Washington Headquarters Executive Director Randy Reese retired after a distinguished 30-year career marked by steadfast devotion to the men and women who served.

An Army combat veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Reese played a pivotal role in shaping DAV's national service and legislative operations, guiding programs that support hundreds of thousands of veterans and their caregivers and survivors each year. His leadership, professionalism and deep personal commitment to DAV's mission have left an enduring impact on the organization and the veteran community.

"From soldier to advocate, my journey has been defined by a simple promise—to show up, stand up and speak up for veterans and their families," Reese said. "If my career stands for anything, I hope it reflects that progress is possible when we honor the

past, embrace change and never stop fighting for those who once fought for us."

Also retiring was National Legislative Director Joy Ilem, whose three decades of service and advocacy have helped secure countless legislative victories and strengthen federal policies that support disabled veterans and their families, including the expansion of benefits for Vietnam-era Blue Water Navy veterans and the passage of the PACT Act, which secured toxic-exposure benefits for veterans of all generations.

Ilem has long been recognized as a highly respected and influential voice on Capitol Hill, known for her expertise, compassion and unwavering dedication. Her work has been central to ensuring America honors its promises to those who served, especially women veterans.

In addition to her participation in women veterans advisory committees, she was instrumental in the passage of the Deborah Sampson Act of 2020. The bill included a number of key provisions, including establishing the Office of Women's Health within the Department of Veterans Affairs and mandating that every VA facility have at least one full- or part-time women's health primary care provider.

Ilem's work has been a crucial part of advocating for equitable care.

"Progress is always being made, but it requires that all women veterans speak up," Ilem said. "We are going to be the drivers of force and change in future generations."

With these retirements, Jesinoski is proud to announce that Assistant Executive Director Jim Marszalek has been appointed to executive director of DAV Washington Headquarters. A Marine veteran, Marszalek has been integral to DAV's leadership team and previously served

as national service director. In that role, he championed critical reforms to the VA claims and appeals systems, including a pivotal advocacy role in passing the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017.

He is admired throughout the organization for his strategic insight, steady leadership and commitment to excellence. His experience and deep understanding of DAV's mission will help ensure a smooth transition and continued momentum in Washington.

Additionally, Deputy National Legislative Director Jon Retzer has been appointed to national legislative director. Retzer, an Army veteran with extensive experience in federal policy and veterans issues, has worked closely with Ilem and the legislative team to advance many of DAV's top priorities.

In previous leadership roles in DAV's service and legislative departments, Retzer composed numerous statements for the record and testified on topics such as VA health care and community care, modernization of VA electronic records, and mental health. He also helped the service department pivot to hybrid operations during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, empowering DAV benefits advocates to continue their vital work safely and effectively.

These leadership changes underscore DAV's commitment to building on a strong foundation as the organization enters its second century of service.

Retzer's promotion ensures continuity as DAV continues its critical advocacy for veterans and their families.

With Retzer assuming the role of national legislative director, Jesinoski has appointed Assistant National Legislative Director Naomi Mathis to serve as deputy

national legislative director.

A combat-disabled Air Force veteran, Mathis has been a key member of DAV's legislative team since her appointment in 2023. Throughout her DAV career, she has worked to advance the needs of her fellow veterans and has been a legislative leader, advocating for critical policies for disabled veterans and their families.

"Randy and Joy have dedicated their lives to ensuring our nation keeps its sacred promise to the men and women who served," Jesinoski said. "Their leadership has made a profound difference, and DAV will forever be grateful for their service."

"I am equally confident that Jim, Jon and Naomi will uphold that legacy as they take on these new roles. They are exceptional leaders who embody our mission and values."

These leadership changes underscore DAV's commitment to building on a strong foundation as the organization enters its second century of service. With deep appreciation for the accomplishments of Reese and Ilem—and full confidence in Marszalek, Retzer and Mathis—DAV remains well positioned to continue advancing its mission and championing the needs of the veteran community for years to come. ■



Marszalek



Retzer



Mathis



From the AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER

MELISSA L. PIERCE

Your service is a force

Happy New Year, Auxiliary family! As the calendar turns to a new year, it's not just a time for personal resolutions; it's a critical moment for us to reaffirm our commitment and serve with intention—especially when it comes to the legislative fight for our veterans and their families.

For us, this isn't just the middle of winter; it's the beginning of the battle for veterans benefits in Washington. The legislative cycle is revving up, and the issues that directly impact the lives of those we serve need our immediate attention and our collective voice.

We are entering a pivotal period where we must stand firm on several key issues. Our focus will be laser-sharp on:

- **Protecting and fully funding the Department of Veterans Affairs:** We must ensure the VA has the resources it needs to provide timely, high-quality care to every veteran who has earned it. We cannot let bureaucratic delays or budget cuts compromise their well-being.
- **Strengthening caregiver support:** The spouses, parents and children who serve as unpaid caregivers are the backbone of our veterans' recovery. We will continue to push for expanded and robust support programs that recognize their sacrifice and provide them with the financial and emotional help they deserve.

This is where you come in. While the DAV legislative team is on the ground in Washington, D.C., your membership is the vital, grassroots force that gives our message power. A single call or letter from a constituent holds immense weight with an elected official. When that single action is multiplied by thousands of dedicated voices from the Auxiliary, we become impossible to ignore.

This year, serving with intention means more than local fundraising or volunteer hours. It means engaging with your elected officials. It means educating them on the real, on-the-ground impact of these policies. Your personal stories, your empathy and your passion are the most effective tools we have to lobby for change. Your membership is not passive; it is power. Use it.

This focus on legislative action is the very core of our mid-winter conference. I encourage every member who can to attend or follow the updates closely.

The conference is where the excitement and purpose of our mission truly comes alive. We'll meet with members of Congress, hear directly from the leaders shaping veterans policy and receive essential training to make our advocacy efforts even more effective. It's a time to feel the collective strength of the Auxiliary, network with your fellow dedicated members, and leave with a renewed and concrete sense of mission.

Let's step into this new year with purpose and intention. The legislative battle for the benefits and dignity of our nation's heroes and their families has already begun, and we are an indispensable part of the fight. ■

DAV national commander testimonial dinner

■ Join DAV National Commander Coleman Nee and DAV and Auxiliary leaders in celebrating legacy, leadership and the enduring call to serve at the annual national commander testimonial April 16–19 in “America’s Hometown,” Plymouth, Massachusetts.

This year’s celebration will proudly honor all of the incredible, hardworking and dedicated DAV leaders and members for their amazing and passionate dedication to our mission. These leaders include Nee, DAV Department of Massachusetts Commander Andrea Gayle-Bennett and DAV Auxiliary State Commander Cindy Leggy—three steadfast advocates for America’s and Massachusetts’ veterans—whose

combined leadership and vision have inspired unity, strengthened chapters locally and nationwide, and carried forward the mission of service with compassion and conviction.

Hotel and booking information can be found at johncarverinn.com or by calling 508-746-7100. Guests must book by March 16 and identify themselves as part of Disabled American Veterans in order to receive the preferred group rates.

Together, all of us embody the strength, unity and purpose that define DAV—past, present and future.

Come celebrate with us for all we have accomplished together.



DAV Auxiliary national commander testimonial dinner

■ DAV Auxiliary National Commander Melissa Pierce’s testimonial dinner is tentatively scheduled in conjunction with the Forget-Me-Not Luncheon on Monday, Aug. 3, during the 2026 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Orlando, Florida.

Details about accommodations and the event are forthcoming. Check auxiliary.dav.org for updates.



Let's make **APRIL 4** a day that speaks louder than words.

DAV Community Impact Day

A nationwide movement is underway to show veterans how much they matter. When you pledge your time at communityimpactday.org, you're showing that simple acts of gratitude and service can have a profound effect on people's lives.

It's a chance to come together as a community — DAV members, families and friends of veterans are all welcome and encouraged to get involved.

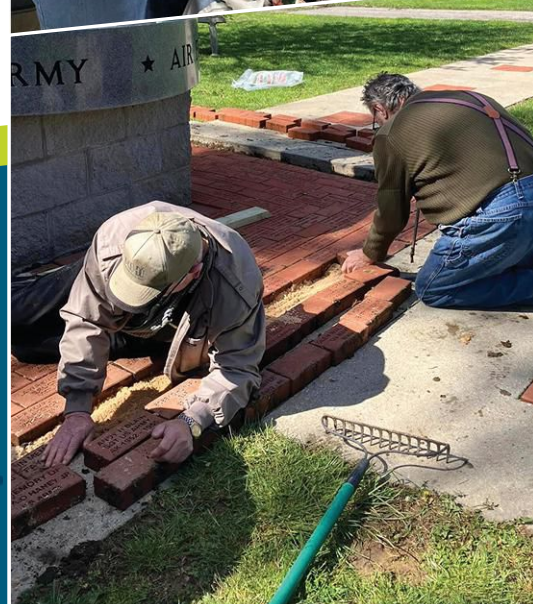
Even an hour can make a difference.

Register today, and we'll send you ideas for meaningful ways to give back, along with information on how to connect with others in your area.

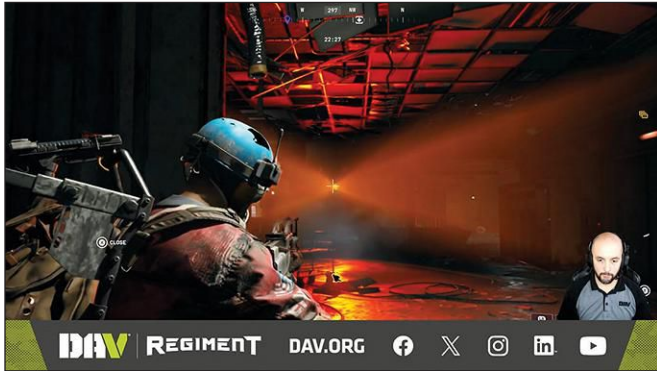
Because "thank you for your service" is more than just words. **It's action.**



APRIL 4, 2026
communityimpactday.org



Gamers: Stream for DAV on Twitch



■ Join DAV's community where gaming meets service. We're harnessing the immense power of Twitch to connect with veterans and their families in new, dynamic ways. Our channel offers a diverse lineup, including veterans news; critical legislative updates; and exclusive interviews with lawmakers, policymakers and subject matter experts.

During our community gaming streams, DAV members take the lead, playing their favorite games while connecting with a vast online audience—many of whom are new to DAV's mission. This is a powerful, organic way for you to personally highlight the great work and impact being made every day at the department and chapter levels.

We are looking for you! DAV is actively seeking members interested in streaming on our Twitch channel.

And get this: Your time livestreaming for DAV can be recorded as LVAP (Local Veterans Assistance Program) hours, making this a unique and impactful way to showcase your community service.



Learn More Online

To learn more about DAV gaming and livestreaming and to become a streamer for DAV, visit dav.org/dav-gaming-and-livestreaming.

Protections extended for grandfathered veterans, caregivers

■ On Nov. 20, 2025, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced a final rule extending the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) for “legacy” veterans and their caregivers through Sept. 30, 2028.

Under this extension, legacy participants and applicants will remain eligible for PCAFC and will not experience a reduction in their monthly stipend based on reassessment for an additional three years, except under limited circumstances.

Who qualifies?

- **Legacy participants:** Veterans or service members whose caregivers were approved or designated by the VA as of Sept. 30, 2020.
- **Legacy applicants:** Veterans or service members who applied for PCAFC before Oct. 1, 2020, and were accepted into the program on or after that date. (Note: The primary caregiver must remain the same individual named in the application).



More information

For more information about VA Caregiver Program, visit caregiver.va.gov. For questions or assistance in applying for the program, please contact your nearest DAV service office at benefitsquestions.org.



From the NATIONAL CHAPLAIN DEBRA VARNER DANCER

Heart of service



At the heart of service is the gift of sacrifice we give to others. When we serve, we embody compassion, humility and love. True service is not about recognition or reward but about making a difference—no matter how small—in someone else's life. May we remember that every act of kindness has the power to ripple outward and inspire others.

To serve is to answer a higher calling. It's a commitment to step beyond our own needs and extend a hand to those in need. Whether through performing acts of charity, lending a listening ear or simply being present for someone, service reflects the best of humanity. Let us strive to serve with integrity, grace and an open heart.

When we serve others, we receive gifts in return: purpose and connection. Helping others unites us as we bridge divisions, foster understanding and remind ourselves of our shared humanity.

When we collectively lean into service, we build stronger communities. This allows space for people to feel valued and supported as they heal. May we all find joy and fulfillment in this and in knowing that we're bringing light into the world.

When we serve in DAV's name, we reaffirm our promise to provide a lifetime of support to our fellow veterans and their families. We look out for each other and help strengthen all generations within our ranks. We project pride in our service. We share our love of our country. We demonstrate enduring devotion to helping our fellow veterans.

Our service is strong because we are strong in our diversity. Our individual backgrounds, experiences and gifts bring different perspectives and ideas to the table. We must continue to celebrate and embrace these differences. There can be disagreements without disrespect; let us help one another overcome the obstacles before us.

Service provides stability. As we progress into the new year, it's inevitable that we'll face various challenges. Some may affect us personally, while others could affect our families or friends. Our service within DAV may be the very thing that will help get us back on track.

Our mission statement is our call to action. Our core values of integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect and excellence are our North Star. By empowering our fellow veterans and helping them realize their lives after injury or illness in service aren't over, we remind each other that we must look out for each other.

And the beautiful thing about the gift of service is that it never runs out. There's always capacity for more. We welcome others to join us—together, we are stronger.

If you need ideas or to connect with volunteer opportunities, please visit volunteerforveterans.org. ■

Death of DAV benefits advocate

■ Mark Winn, a former supervisor of the DAV national service office in New York City and the National Appeals Office in Washington, D.C., died Nov. 19, 2025. He was 74.

Winn, a Marine veteran, enlisted in 1968 and served in Vietnam, where he was seriously wounded. He remained on active duty until 1970.

He began his DAV career in 1972 as a national service officer apprentice in San Francisco.

After concluding his initial tenure, he returned to the organization in 1979, serving with DAV in Houston and San Antonio and with the National Appeals Office in Washington, D.C.



Winn

In 1985, he transferred to the national service office in New York City, where he served as an assistant supervisor. Three years later, he became the supervisor of that office. He returned to Washington in 1996 as the supervisor of the National Appeals Office. Winn retired from DAV in December 2000 as an NSO in San Antonio.

He was a proud member of DAV Chapter 17 in Universal City, Texas.

“Mark leaves behind a legacy of serving his fellow disabled veterans, and we are

thankful for his many years of service,” said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. “He was a stalwart veterans advocate and a master at his craft. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family. May he rest in peace.”

He is survived by his wife, Linda; his brother, James; and his children, Danell and Erin.

DAV Honor Garden

A living monument to our nation's heroes

We invite you to honor a veteran and be part of the historic DAV Honor Garden monument with the purchase of a commemorative brick. **Order today.**

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SALUTES OUR PARTNERS

DAV salutes our 2025 partners for their commitment to our nation's veterans. With their generous support, DAV is able to make life-changing differences in the lives of disabled veterans and their families.

If your company is interested in becoming a partner, please contact partners@dav.org.



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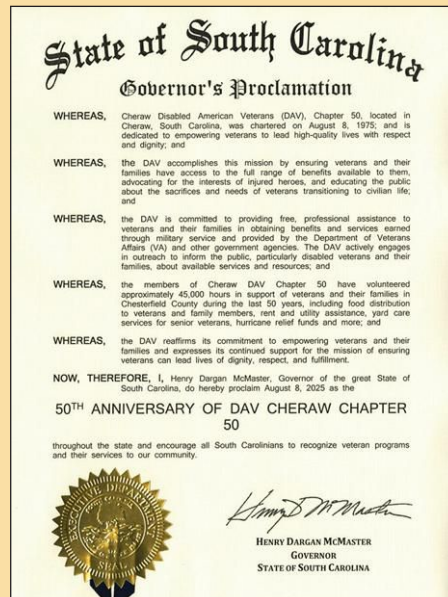


CHAPTER & DEPARTMENT



Giving back: DAV chapter boosts VAMC Augusta's transport ability

One year after Hurricane Helene, the Augusta, Georgia, community demonstrated its compassion by having DAV donate a new van to the Augusta VA Medical Center, significantly boosting the facility's transportation services for veterans needing rides to critical medical appointments through the DAV Transportation Network.



South Carolina's Chapter 50 celebrates 50 years

DAV Chapter 50 in Cheraw, South Carolina, celebrated its 50th anniversary on Oct. 11, 2025, commemorating five decades of providing free assistance to veterans and their families. They officially recognized the milestone with state and federal proclamations and a program honoring past leaders.



Girl Scouts Troop honors New York DAV chapter
DAV Chapter 190 in Lake Grove, New York, was recently honored by Suffolk County Girl Scouts Troop #592 for their generous support of Operation: Cookie. The chapter purchased Girl Scout cookies to be shipped to U.S. service members stationed overseas as a taste of home. The Girl Scouts presented a certificate of appreciation to Chapter 190, recognizing the chapter's commitment to supporting and honoring those who serve our nation. Pictured (L-R): Chapter 190 Junior Vice Commander Jorge Garcia, members of Girl Scout Troop 592, and Chapter 190 Commander Bob Smith.



Celebrating 20 Years of the Polytrauma Center

From left, Department of Florida Commander John Cornish, volunteer Mary Ann Keckler and DAV National 3rd Junior Vice Commander Brenda Reed attended the 20th anniversary celebration of the Polytrauma Center at James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa, Florida. During the event, DAV was recognized for its long-standing leadership in advancing care, awareness and adaptive programs for veterans with complex, life-altering injuries, as well as its role in helping bring national attention to blast trauma and the establishment of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Polytrauma System of Care. Keckler, a dedicated DAV leader and advocate for veterans and their families with more than 15,500 lifetime volunteer hours, died in December. Her legacy as a caregiver and supporter of her fellow veterans created a lasting impact in Florida and throughout DAV.

REUNIONS

ARMY

173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE ASSOCIATION June 16-22, Rapid City, ND, Contact: Kimberly Hubbard, Ph: 619-884-9571, Email: kimberly@essential-lodging.com, Web: skysoldier.net/rapidcityreunion

NAVY

USS ALBEMARLE (AV-5) May 2-6, Corpus Christi, TX, Contact: Steve Nye, Ph: 508-372-9024, Email: sm820@yahoo.com

MARINES

USMC WEATHER SERVICE (METOC) June 14-18, Binghamton, NY, Contact: Dave Englert, Ph: 812-630-2099, Email: englerd@psci.net, or Kathy Donham, Ph: 252-342-8459, Email: kathy.donham@hotmail.com

ALL SERVICES

VIETNAM HELICOPTER CREW MEMBERS ASSOCIATION

Aug. 12-16, Albuquerque, NM, Contact: Jim Sheridan, Ph: 901-850-0500, Email: vhcmaed@sprynet.com

INQUIRIES

- Searching for seven men I trained with as dog handlers. We trained for 70 days before flying to Da Nang, Vietnam, in either November or December 1971 or 1972. I lost contact with them and would like to reconnect. Contact: Ricky Gryder, Mail: David Wade Correctional Center, 670 Bell Hill Road, Homer, LA 71040

- Searching for a fellow Marine I served with as "pointman," also known as Sunny from Cincinnati. I was injured in the bush and medevaced to Japan. All of my property from Vietnam was lost. Contact: Dwight Johnson, Email: flamepoint959@outlook.com

- Searching for anyone serving with Dr. Harold A Decker, U.S. Public Health Service, on the USS Hope in Saigon Bay or up the Saigon River (assisting the French surgeons) during the late 1950s or early 1960s. Contact: Bill Decker, Email: billdecker2001@gmail.com

- Searching for a copy of "The Lucifer Patch: Flying With the 'Lucky 13th,' Korea 1955-1956" by Bertram Brent. Or searching for information on how to buy a copy of this book. This book is about the author's time in Uijeongbu, Korea, in 1955-1956. Contact: Arnold Davis, Ph: 865-712-1744, Email: arnoldralphdavis@gmail.com

- Searching for five men who were hit with a hand grenade on April 16, 1970, in Phước Vinh, Vietnam. We were in Company C, 31st Engineer Battalion (Combat). Contact: Timothy Hogan, Email: mehogan333@comcast.net

- Searching for someone who owns a duffel bag with the name M.L. Pringle 16 088 611. Where it came from and how I got it is unknown. My training sites were Fort Jackson, SC, for basic and Fort Gordon, GA, for MP school. My duty stations were Torii Station, Okinawa, and Helemano Station, HI. If the owner is alive, I would like to get the bag to him; if deceased, to his family. Contact: Bill Brogan, Email: designadv62@comcast.net

- Searching for anyone who served with Gary Carr in the 7th Ordnance Company 1965-1966 in Korea. Contact: Gary Carr, Ph: 304-472-6099

- Searching for Mark Cushman, originally from Portland, OR. Served in 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, Berlin Brigade, in 1976-1978, assigned to the battalion motor pool. Contact: Daniel Lara, Ph: 509-631-0313, Email: dandam007@gmail.com

- Searching for fellow Army soldiers who served at Fort McClelland in Anniston, AL, 1964-1966 in the 69th Chemical Company. Need information regarding pending VA claim. Contact: Gerard (Jerry) Millen, Ph: 530-570-1293 or 530-934-5566, Email: gmmillen4@gmail.com

- Searching for anyone who was in Platoon 3013, MCRD Parris Island, in July 1967. Contact: Harry Hopwood, Ph: 352-284-6386, Email: harryhopwood02@gmail.com

- Searching for Barry G. Grafe. We did basic training at Fort Sill, OK, in late 1987. He was in the California National Guard. Contact: Andrew Panday, Ph: 504-722-2248, Email: panday_andrew@yahoo.com

- Searching for Capt. Owen Hadley, Owen. First served as enlisted in Battery C, 5th Battalion, 41st Field Artillery Regiment, at Fort Knox, KY, during 1987-1988. He became an officer, went to Germany and married a German woman. Hadley is from Laurel, MS. Contact: Andrew Panday, Ph: 504-722-2248, Email: panday_andrew@yahoo.com

PLANNING A REUNION?

We welcome submissions from our readers for reunions and inquiries. Email the details to feedback@dav.org. Submissions must be received at least six months before the event date and are subject to editing for clarity, style, accuracy, space and propriety.

Adventure awaits ★ at Camp Corral ★

The no-cost camp encourages the children of injured or fallen veterans and service members to 'Just B Kids'

For the 14th year, DAV-supported program Camp Corral will return this summer to bring joy, fun and support to the children of those who served and sacrificed. From June through August, Camp Corral will host 23 weeklong summer camps across the country for children ages 8 to 15 who have a parent who is a disabled veteran or who died in service.

DAV proudly champions Camp Corral's mission to empower children who share in the sacrifices of military service. Through DAV's Just B Kids scholarship program, over 7,700 children of ill, injured or fallen veterans and service members have attended Camp Corral programs at no cost to their families. This special camp gives children the chance to "Just B Kids" while making friends, learning coping skills and creating memories that last a lifetime.

"We began our partnership with Camp Corral to help expand this incredible program supporting veterans and their families," said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "Children of disabled or fallen veterans face unique challenges and sacrifices due to their parent's service. We're grateful for Camp Corral's dedication to providing children from across the country the joy of a week away at camp."

As a national leader in educational resources, research and advocacy related to the challenges faced by wounded, ill and fallen military service members' children—many of whom take on caregiving roles within their families—Camp Corral partners with DAV to build life skills, resilience and independence.

To see the full camp schedule, visit campcorral.org/camps. ■

APPLY TODAY! The application period opens Jan. 14. Mark your calendars; spots fill up quickly. To learn more about the Just B Kids scholarship program at Camp Corral, visit justbkids.org.



2026 Camp Corral Schedule

LOCATION	CITY	STATE	DATES
Triangle Y Ranch Camp	Oracle	AZ	June 14–19
Camp Holiday Trails	Charlottesville	VA	June 21–26
YMCA Camp Carson	Princeton	IN	June 28–July 3
YMCA Camp Gorham	Eagle Bay	NY	June 28–July 3
YMCA Camp Hanes	King	NC	June 28–July 3
Eastern 4-H Center	Columbia	NC	June 28–July 3
YMCA Camp Manitou-Lin	Middleville	MI	June 28–July 3
Camp Southern Ground	Fayetteville	GA	June 28–July 3
Camp Wood YMCA	Elmdale	KS	June 28–July 4
4-H Memorial Camp	Monticello	IL	July 5–10
YMCA Camp Cullen	Trinity	TX	July 12–17
YMCA Camp Winona	DeLeon Springs	FL	July 12–17
YMCA Camp Seymour	Gig Harbor	WA	July 19–24
Camp Southern Ground	Fayetteville	GA	July 19–24
WE Skelton 4-H Camp	Wirtz	VA	July 19–24
YMCA Camp Classen	Davis	OK	July 19–25
Camp Cole	Eastover	SC	July 26–31
YMCA Camp Conrad Weiser	Reinholds	PA	July 26–31
YMCA Camp Shady Brook	Deckers	CO	July 26–31
Camp Lakotah	Wautoma	WI	July 26–31
YMCA Camp Marston	Julian	CA	Aug. 2–7
YMCA Camp Weaver	Greensboro	NC	Aug. 2–7
YMCA Camp Ernst	Burlington	KY	Aug. 2–8

Schedule is subject to change. Visit campcorral.org for updates.



justbkids.org





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Burgundy
or Black
S-XL \$31
2XL-4XL \$34



Snapback Cap Light Blue | \$26



Men's Fleece Hoodie

Oxford Grey
S-XL \$69
2XL-3XL \$71



Men's Fleece Jogger

Oxford Grey
S-3XL \$57



Dri Duck Braxton Cap Grey/Black | \$23



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and Blue
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Commando Watch
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\$98



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