



MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER | DECEMBER 2024



'HOUSE OF HELL'

One Marine reflects on the Second
Battle of Fallujah, 20 years later

Page 20



2025 Mid-Winter Conference

Leading advocates to gather
in Washington, DC, Feb. 23–26

One of the most highly visible demonstrations of DAV's fierce advocacy comes in February during the annual mid-winter conference in Washington, D.C. Each year, hundreds of DAV members and leaders gather to elevate the voices of our community and create meaningful change on Capitol Hill and beyond for veterans and their families.

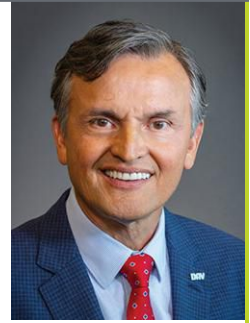
We invite you to lend your voice to the cause and join us Feb. 23–26 at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Virginia, as we confront the most pressing issues affecting veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

You'll stand alongside National Commander Daniel Contreras as he presents DAV's legislative agenda to Congress. You will also have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with your locally elected officials to share our Critical Policy Goals for the 119th congress.

Come join your fellow DAV members and leaders as we lift the voices of America's ill and injured veterans and their families and work to ensure policymakers in Washington listen to their needs. Together, we can achieve our legislative goals and ensure veterans get the benefits and health care they have rightfully earned. ■

For more information, visit
dav.org/events/2025-mid-winter-conference

From the NATIONAL COMMANDER DANIEL CONTRERAS



Going beyond ‘thank you’

Every year around this time, our nation reflects on the heroism and sacrifices of veterans. On Veterans Day, we honor all those who served and recognize the many men and women who were wounded, made ill or injured in service to this country.

At DAV, we believe that “thank you for your service” is more than words—it’s action. It means taking concrete steps to show our appreciation for a veteran’s service to our country.

Our members and volunteers are on the front lines every day, organizing events that galvanize their communities to get involved in helping us keep our promise to America’s veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

We must continue to make our services more accessible to veterans and their families by meeting them where they are. It could be anything from having a conversation at a community event to talking and connecting with a veteran online. Every outreach and engagement opportunity not only matters but can also make a difference in that person’s life.

Whether connecting veterans and their family members through volunteerism at VA facilities, driving veterans to their medical appointments through the DAV Transportation Network, engaging youth through scholarships or recruitment as junior auxiliary members, or helping ensure veterans receive the benefits they have earned, our members and volunteers create meaningful change in their communities daily.

The initiatives our members and volunteers support help create strong, resilient communities where veterans and their families have access to resources that help improve their lives.

Besides being locally active, we must continue to be vocal advocates by ensuring that our elected officials understand critical issues, like the effects of toxic exposure on veterans’ health, the need to strengthen survivor benefits, and continued support for veteran caregivers.

One of the best ways to stay involved is through DAV CAN (Commander’s Action Network). If you haven’t already, I encourage everyone to join at davcan.org. Through DAV CAN, you can stay informed and take action to support federal legislation and policies affecting veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

This year alone, we have taken over 450,000 actions with their elected officials to bolster our advocacy efforts. Remember, protecting veterans benefits starts with you and me. With your help, we will make our voices heard and have an even greater impact in the coming year.

So let’s make sure we continue building off the momentum of Veterans Day and strive to do even more for veterans and their families in the coming year. I can think of no better way to honor their service and sacrifice than by taking action and advocating for their needs. ■

CONTENTS



20

Cover story

Alex Nicoll lost his leg fighting in Fallujah, Iraq. Twenty years later, he reflects about the experience and life since.

Cover photo by Lucian Read



10

A new chance to serve

Learn how Army veteran Dan Werner, who lost his leg in Vietnam, is helping shape the prosthesis technology of the future.



16

Ending the wait

New report catalogs the decades toxic-exposed veterans wait for justice and the need for a new path to access earned care and benefits.

Photo by John Gaps III/Associated Press

- 1 In honor of Veterans Day, National Commander Daniel Contreras shares how you can go beyond “thank you for your service.”
- 6 Vietnam veteran, blind as a result of service, finally gets the life-changing care and benefits he needed in the nick of time.
- 8 A standardized, streamlined onboarding process for volunteer drivers can help grow the DAV Transportation Network.
- 12 DAV talked with Umberto Nardolizzi about his new novel centered on the real-life architect behind Genghis Khan’s military forces.
- 24 Former Marine entrepreneur, law enforcement officer recognized for turning his pain into purpose and serving the greater good.
- 26 Vision for Veterans highlights seven key priorities for presidential and congressional candidates and elected officials.
- 31 The second annual Recon Raider Remembrance Ride honors and builds a community of Marine special ops veterans and Gold Star families.

Daniel Contreras

National Commander

Barry A. Jesinoski

National Adjutant/Publisher

Cody VanBoxel

National Headquarters Executive Director

Daniel J. Clare

Chief Communications and Outreach Officer

Rob Lewis

National Communications Director

Matt Saintsing

Assistant National Communications Director

Kevin C. Miller

Assistant National Communications Director

Jonathan Kaupanger

Associate National Communications Director

Elizabeth Stetler

Associate National Communications Director

Brian Buckwalter

Senior Communications Associate

Elizabeth DePompei

Communications Associate

Doreen Briones

Production Manager

Marissa Coffenberry

Senior Graphic Designer

Karla Sheppard

Senior Graphic Designer

Michelle Bradburn

Graphic Designer



DAV MAGAZINE • NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024

Contact us: dav.org • Toll-Free 877-426-2838 • 860 Dolwick Drive, Erlanger, KY 41018 • feedback@dav.org. Volume 66, Issue 6, DAV Magazine (ISSN 0885-6400). Editorial Office: DAV Magazine, P.O. Box 14301, Cincinnati, OH 45250-0301. Telephone 859-441-7300 or toll-free (877) I AM A VET. Published and circulated bimonthly bulletin by the Disabled American Veterans, a congressionally chartered, nonprofit organization, P.O. Box 14301, Cincinnati, OH 45250-0301. DAV homepage is dav.org. Available on recording for people who are blind or who have physical disabilities that preclude reading printed material. The magazine is mailed free to DAV and Auxiliary members who are paid subscribers. Nonmembers may subscribe for \$15 per year. Periodical postage paid at office of publication, Erlanger, KY 41018, and at additional offices. Printed in the U.S.A. Change of Address: When notifying of a change of address, send former as well as new address, including ZIP code, to: DAV Magazine, DAV National Headquarters, P.O. Box 145550, Cincinnati, OH 45250-5550. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to DAV Magazine, DAV National Headquarters, P.O. Box 145550, Cincinnati, OH 45250-5550.



From the NATIONAL ADJUTANT BARRY A. JESINOSKI



Hope persists, despite MDMA setback

The recent Food and Drug Administration decision to reject MDMA-assisted therapy is unquestionably a loss for veterans. It's been more than 20 years since the FDA cleared a new medication for post-traumatic stress disorder, leaving veterans with less-than-stellar treatment options that many say merely mask the condition.

We can't accept a status quo that's failing far too many. The two FDA-approved medications are not universally effective. While these products can reduce the severity of symptoms, they do not address the foundation of trauma the way effective therapy can.

What's perplexing is that in 2017, the FDA designated MDMA as a "breakthrough therapy." The demonstrated clinical evidence quickly became a beacon of hope for those living with PTSD. In one study involving veterans and first responders, nearly two-thirds of its participants no longer met the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis after receiving the treatment.

However, that encouragement dimmed this year when an FDA advisory committee declined to recommend MDMA-assisted therapy as a viable treatment. While the panelists questioned the science and motivations of the individuals who conducted the research, the experience of those who live with PTSD each day seemed to be a distant afterthought.

Sadly, the FDA adopted the recommendation of the advisory committee, shutting the door on what was once an encouraging medical intervention.

When many people hear MDMA, their mind conjures up disturbing images of addiction, recreational use and abuse. However, we must consider the other part of the equation: therapy. It is the therapy that does the heavy lifting, but discussing the worst days of our lives proves to be an immense challenge. If only there were something that made the hard work of therapy easier. That's the promise of MDMA.

Still, hope remains. While the FDA rejected this treatment, it asked for further study of the safety and efficacy of MDMA-assisted therapy—something DAV strongly supports.

The recent explosion in science regarding psychedelics and their potential healing powers is why our members approved DAV's first-ever psychedelics resolution at our recent national convention in Phoenix. This thoughtful step DAV members took unlocks our ability to push the Department of Veterans Affairs to investigate these compounds and advocate before Congress to make psychedelic treatments available.

When veterans return from service, they deserve world-class health care and the most effective treatment options. Our nation owes a debt to the men and women who served, one that can never be paid in full. But that shouldn't stop us from turning over every stone in the pursuit of finding new answers to PTSD. ■

LETTERS

Local DAV support

Thank you for all that DAV does! Particularly its support of Walter Reed National Medical Center, Fort Belvoir and Marine Corps Base Quantico with the DAV Night Out; driving veterans to and from VA medical appointments; and just being so supportive. **Tom Stallone, Bethesda, Maryland**

Service officers

I stopped in at a local DAV office to introduce myself to their accredited service officers and ask if there is anything I could do to help our local veterans. After talking with them for about 30 minutes, I walked out as a new life member of DAV. I truly appreciate the dedication of the two accredited DAV service officers I met in Pulaski County, Missouri. They are veterans looking out for the best interest of veterans. To all the veterans who are unaware, assistance with filing claims is free through DAV. Don't lose hope; reach out. You don't have to be a member to receive help. **Ric DePontee, Dickson, Missouri**

Agent Orange veterans' survivors

Widows of military members who died because of Agent Orange should receive compensation. The military denied Agent Orange until most of their spouses were dead. When my husband returned from Vietnam at age 27, his health was never the same. At one time, we had the paramedics at our home multiple times a week. The week he died, I read his *DAV Magazine* that was in my mailbox when I returned home from the hospital. His ship

was on the Agent Orange list. He was stationed in Guam. **Diana Mazzola, via Facebook**

Editors note: *Survivors and family members, like veterans, can turn to DAV's no-cost services for assistance with benefits, including Dependency and Indemnity Compensation. Visit benefitsquestions.org to connect with your local advocate.*

National convention

Along with about 3,000 veterans, family members and guests, I attended the last national convention. The Claims Clinic was up and running, and they had the mobile medical units for on-site exams and evaluations. I walked around the resource fair in the convention hall and got to talk with a lot of our amazing VA teammates. DAV has assisted millions of veterans with disability claims and advocated for veterans in so many ways. Thank you for all you do, each and every single day. **Kimberly Mitchell, Senior Advisor, Office of the Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs**

Other toxic exposures

I was part of an international peacekeeping force overseeing the terms of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. We burned human waste in barrels and stirred the waste mix with diesel motor oil and soap powder, creating very toxic fumes. We were told what to do and were ordered to do it. I am hopeful that you can print this in your magazine to shine light on this toxic exposure. **Staff Sgt. John Chinn, London, Kentucky**

Veteran's resiliency

Navy veteran Stephanie Duncan's journey ["Regaining her dignity," May/June issue] is a powerful testament to resilience and the impact of comprehensive support systems. After losing her husband in 2019, Stephanie faced a downward spiral of alcoholism and homelessness. With determination, she sought help from the VA Domiciliary Care for Homeless Veteran Program and connected with DAV at the Homeless Veterans Stand Down. Through their support, she received the benefits she deserved and found the resources to rebuild her life. Today, she is sober, stable and dedicated to giving back to the veteran community as a DAV volunteer.

Robert Seamus Macpherson, Charlotte, North Carolina

Editor's Note: Watch this video from DAV to learn more about Stephanie Duncan's journey of recovery and perseverance: dav.la/duncan.

Estate gift planning

Richard Coe's story ["Former pilot plans for departure," May/June issue] is such an important reminder. Having those tough conversations about death can be uncomfortable, but it's crucial for our loved ones. Planning ahead can provide peace of mind and support for our families during difficult times. Thank you for sharing this valuable insight! **Diana Garcia, Austin, Texas**

Editor's Note: Free personal estate planning kits can be accessed at davplanmygift.org.

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.

Safe storage saves lives

Veterans would get free ways to keep firearms separate from ammunition in suicide prevention bill

By Matt Saintsing



PHOTO BY ARMAN IST CLASS JAVIER ALVAREZ/U.S. AIR FORCE

Of the 18 veteran deaths by suicide every day, 13 are from a self-inflicted firearm injury, according to a 2023 Department of Veterans Affairs suicide prevention report. Creating time and space between a veteran in crisis and their gun may prove to be lifesaving. That's why DAV is throwing its support behind legislation intended to boost the safe storage of firearms among veterans.

The Lethal Means Safe Storage for Veteran Suicide Prevention Act (S. 4929) would create a grant program to provide veterans with gun safes and firearm lockboxes upon their request. The bill would also mandate that VA and Community Care Network medical providers undergo training on mental health and how to speak with veterans about gun safety.

"With service-based trauma on the rise, we must provide our veterans with as many resources as possible to keep them safe during their most challenging times," said Sen. Angus King of Maine, who introduced the bill in August. "As our veteran community faces some of its greatest hurdles, this bill makes important investments in protecting our country's best asset—its people."

Safe storage of firearms includes locking firearms in a case, unloaded and stored separately from ammunition when not in use. Suicide risk is significantly reduced when guns and ammunition are stored separately, according to a 2005 medical study.

Veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide than nonveterans. In 2021, the most recent year for which data is available, suicide was the second-leading cause of death of veterans under 45.

"Those who purchased and owned firearms were more likely than non-firearm owners to report experiencing thoughts of suicide, and first-time firearm purchasers

were more likely to report suicidal ideation," the 2023 VA report states.

Safe storage of firearms was highlighted in DAV's recent women veterans report, *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness*. Women veterans were found to be three times more likely to die by firearm suicide than their civilian counterparts. More than 50% of all suicide deaths for women veterans were by firearm injury.

To help reduce suicide rates, "candid conversations about secure storage of firearms and the normalization of discussions with veterans" are required, DAV noted in the women veterans report, the first such DAV report to focus on mental health.

Those critical conversations recommended between clinicians and veterans would more likely happen under this bill.

"Every veteran suicide is a tragedy—but a preventable one," said DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem. "There must be a comprehensive approach to reducing veteran suicides, and it begins with frank discussions about how to store firearms safely and a way to do so. The Lethal Means Safe Storage for Veteran Suicide Prevention Act is a welcome step in the right direction."

Are you a veteran in crisis or concerned about one? You're not alone—the Veterans Crisis Line is here for you. You don't have to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to call. **Dial 988 then press 1.** ■



Stay Informed

Stay informed. Join DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) at davcan.org to receive updates on legislation affecting veterans and their families.

A vision of hope

DAV benefits advocate helps blind Vietnam veteran and his family secure life-changing health care and benefits

By Kevin C. Miller

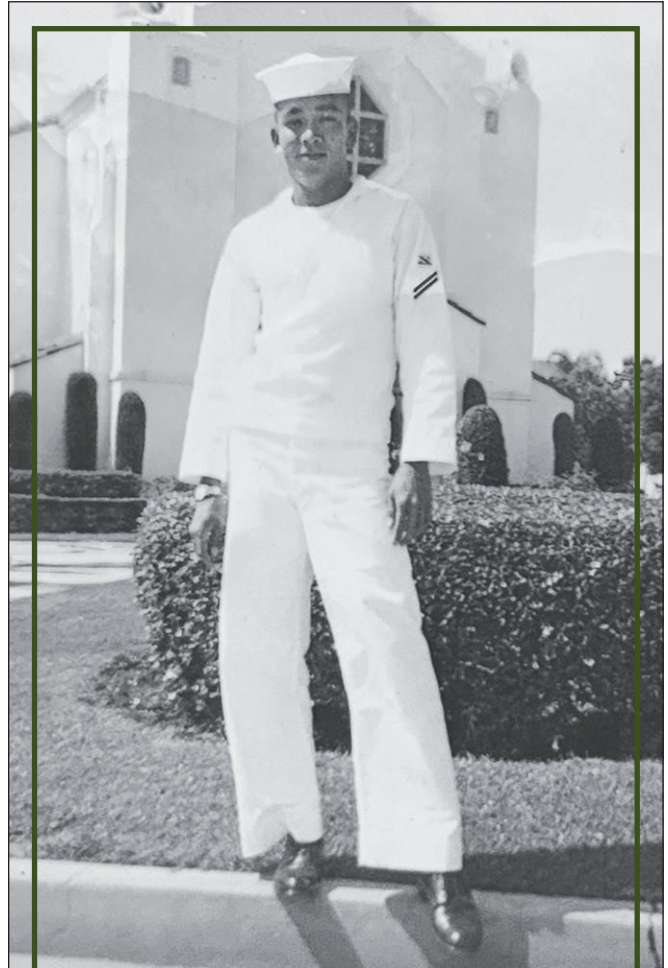
In 2016, Vietnam veteran Jose Flores' eyesight began to degrade, and the complications affected his ability to safely work in the food service industry. The illness forced him to retire, making his wife, Rebecca, both the family's sole source of income and primary caregiver for all of Jose's needs.

"My day starts with preparing Jose's meals, his drinks and organizing his medications, especially his insulin," Rebecca said. "If I don't do these things, Jose would not have a way to take his medications or have enough to eat and drink for the day while I am at work."

As a 22-year Navy retiree, Jose received a pension and used TRICARE for his health care services, but Rebecca needed to accompany him for all his medical appointments at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, a 30-minute drive from their home. She often had to miss work, which made it financially hard for their family.

"It was a struggle, and we are not proud of this, but we had to borrow money from our children to cover expenses like food and rent," Rebecca said. "But we had no other choice, and it was important to learn the cause of Jose's blindness to see how we can manage it, and we discovered it was because of diabetic retinopathy."

Diabetic retinopathy, which is a complication of diabetes that causes vision loss and blindness, is one of the most prevalent ocular problems among Vietnam veterans. Type 2 diabetes mellitus is a presumptive condition for veterans exposed to Agent Orange and other herbicides in Vietnam, and veterans with this



In September 1964, then-Seaman Apprentice Jose Flores stands outside the Catholic church on base, posing for a photo to send to his parents in the Philippines.

condition may be eligible for disability compensation and health care through the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, Jose had never filed for disability compensation or enrolled in VA health care.

"When I retired in 1986, there were no transition assistance programs in place, so I never knew I qualified for veteran benefits," Jose said. "It was not until a friend of ours told us I should be eligible for veterans benefits because of my service in Vietnam."

Several months later, while at another medical appointment, the Floreses relayed their frustrations with their experiences trying to navigate veterans benefits to another recently retired veteran. That veteran empathized with their experience and not only told them where to get help but also walked them over to the DAV office at Walter Reed, where they first met Danny Soto.

“We had struggled for so long, and with his VA benefits, we have been able to pay off our debts and become financially independent again.”

—Rebecca Flores

Soto, a DAV benefits advocate, was very familiar with both military retirement and veterans benefits.

“They were both distraught, so I sat them down and listened to their story,” Soto said. “After hearing them out, I reassured them their claims had merit, and we sat down together and began the process of filing for VA disability compensation.”

The couple had gotten married years after Jose retired, so Rebecca knew little about Jose’s time in the Navy. However, that began to change once Soto pulled Jose’s military records, which revealed that he had been involved in fighting during the 1968 Tet Offensive. He had also taken part in a rescue operation that evacuated 276 American and foreign national refugees from Beirut in June 1976.

“Mr. Flores’ military service was not only honorable but it was heroic,” said Soto. “It is unfortunate that he and his family were unaware of the benefits that he had rightfully earned through his service and sacrifice. I knew that based on his current health and diagnosed conditions that we could get him access to the full spectrum of VA benefits available to him and his family.”

After the initial filing, it took several months before the Floreses would hear about a decision from the VA.

“All of a sudden, one day, a significant amount of money hit our bank account, so I called Mr. Soto, to see if everything was OK,” Rebecca said. “Mr. Soto looked [it] up and informed us that the VA made its decision and that money was our retroactive payment. Jose and I were in disbelief and just started to cry.

“We had struggled financially for so long, and with his VA benefits, we have been able to pay off our debts and become financially independent again.”

Besides VA disability compensation, Soto has helped the couple enroll in VA health care, which has specialized rehabilitation services for blindness and low vision that are not available under TRICARE. He also introduced the couple to DAV Caregivers Support, which provides tailored assistance and resources to caregivers like Rebecca



DAV benefits advocate Danny Soto with Flores and his spouse and caregiver, Rebecca, at the DAV Military Affairs Office at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

to ensure that they have the help to care for themselves and their loved one.

“Mr. Soto has been an absolute godsend to us,” Rebecca said. “Thanks to his assistance, we not only have the help we needed but also have the ability for Jose to go visit family in the Philippines for the first time in over 50 years.”

“We hear this story far too often about veterans and their families not knowing if they qualify for benefits or how to start that process,” said DAV National Service Director Jim Marszalek. “Our benefits advocates are experts in their field who provide first-class service. They will ensure that our veterans and families are connected to not only all VA benefits available to them but other programs like DAV Caregivers Support that have a positive impact on their lives as well.” ■



Learn More Online

If you are a veteran and need assistance with applying for VA health care or disability compensation, please contact your nearest DAV service office by visiting benefitsquestions.org.

Are you a veteran caregiver or caregiver for a veteran? Scan the QR code to learn more about DAV Caregivers Support or visit davcaregivers.org.



Going the extra mile

A successful DAV Transportation Network starts with putting volunteers first

By Brian Buckwalter

When Karen O'Neal leaves home for her office at the Erie VA Medical Center in Pennsylvania, she likes to say she's going to see her second family.

As the facility's Center for Development and Civic Engagement chief, she's grown close to the corps of volunteers she manages. O'Neal said she sees firsthand how critical they are to the health care mission at her facility.

"I've been blessed to meet some of the most generous and caring people that I've ever known," she said of her volunteers.

Most of the volunteers are drivers for the DAV Transportation Network, which provides no-cost rides

to Department of Veterans Affairs medical appointments for veterans who need them. With 107 drivers and 28 vehicles, Erie's program is one of the largest and most efficient in the country, bringing veterans who live in the tristate region to appointments that can be as far away as Pittsburgh; Cleveland; and Buffalo, New York.

Since DAV started the program in 1987, it's been the source of millions of rides nationally for veterans. In 2018, its drivers gave more than 625,000 rides; however, according to a recent U.S. Government Accountability Office report, that number has since decreased by 50%. (DAV contributed its internal Transportation Network data for this report.)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ERIE VA MEDICAL CENTER



Navy veteran Andrea Place smiles in the driver's seat of an Erie VA Medical Center DAV Transportation Network vehicle. Erie's program is one of the largest and most efficient in the country, with more than 100 drivers and 28 vehicles.

Erie VA Medical Center



Most of this decline is attributed to a drop in volunteers and services because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While volunteer numbers haven't rebounded post-pandemic, the need for the service has.

DAV National Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst said there are several reasons for this, including an aging volunteer pool, recruiting challenges and a complicated onboarding process for volunteers.

"Because each VA medical facility runs its own transportation network, there are inconsistencies in managing the program across the country," Kleindienst said. "Programs like Karen's in Erie have embraced how critical this service is and, in turn, have streamlined and prioritized the volunteer experience, resulting in a robust and healthy program.

"That mentality must spread across the entire VA medical facility network, or we'll continue seeing veterans not get the lifesaving rides they need."

At its 2024 national convention, DAV reaffirmed Resolution 337, which deals specifically with expediting the volunteer application process. Kleindienst said this is a critical first step, noting that it can take several months and several trips to a VA medical facility to complete the process.

"It's an easy fix: standardize the process, then prioritize it," said Kleindienst. "But this must start from the top down. It's got to be a priority for VA leadership if we're going to see widespread change."

O'Neal and her team are building back up toward their pre-pandemic driver number of 160 volunteers. To do this, they've compressed the health physical, bloodwork,

fingerprints for the background check and initial orientation into one trip to the VA medical facility. That alone has mitigated losing people's interest in helping.

"It would turn me off, too, if I was trying to give my free time and you're going to tell me that I have to come back five different times and it's going to take me four months before I can even start," O'Neal said. "I'm sorry, I'll take my time someplace else."

O'Neal said she finds ways to constantly recognize and thank volunteers through luncheons, banquets and awards. She also keeps her drivers engaged by using them for other initiatives, including delivering meal boxes during the holidays to veterans who can't leave their homes.

"I thank God every day for the [volunteer transportation network] program," O'Neal said. "It does nothing but good for our veterans. And access to health care is definitely met by the existence of the program and, of course, our generous volunteers."

Her biggest piece of advice for a successful program: Be flexible.

"Things change every day," O'Neal said. "And if you can alter your program to make it work for your volunteers or your potential volunteer applicants, go that extra mile to make sure they come on board and it's easier on them." ■



Get Involved

To learn more about being a DAV Transportation Network volunteer driver, visit driveforveterans.org or email vavs@dav.org.



A new chance TO SERVE



Dan Werner, a life member of DAV Chapter 116 in Parma, Ohio, was drafted into the Army in 1968 and served in Vietnam, where he was seriously injured by a land mine.



Army veteran Dan Werner, who lost his leg in Vietnam, is helping shape the prosthesis technology of the future

By Elizabeth DePompei

When Dan Werner felt the sensation of his left foot hitting the ground for the first time since 1969, it was “mind blowing.”

“It was just so exciting,” he said. “I never thought I’d feel that again.”

Thanks to the Advanced Platform Technology Center, a Department of Veterans Affairs rehabilitation research and development center in Cleveland, Werner and other veterans are experiencing things they’d long forgotten, often due to a traumatic event.

Werner was just 18 years old when he was drafted into the Army in 1968. After basic and advanced individual training, he got orders to go to Vietnam.

“Thirty days later, I was on a plane,” he said.

The following year, Werner and his unit were doing sweeps in Trảng Bàng in southeast Vietnam. Just as he approached a spot that others had already walked through, a land mine was remotely detonated.

Werner’s leg was amputated below the knee in Vietnam before he was sent to Japan and later to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where he spent a year recovering. The devastation he saw at Walter Reed made him appreciate how much worse his injuries could have been, and he

became determined to not let them hold him back.

“When I finally got a [prosthetic] limb that was fitting pretty good, and they were trying to tell me what I wouldn’t do or shouldn’t do ... I kind of made up my mind that I was going to live life as the fullest that I could,” said Werner, who is a life member of DAV Chapter 116 in Parma, Ohio.

Werner went on to work in construction, had a long career with the United States Postal Service and even discovered water skiing.

“It didn’t hold me up, that’s for sure. It got to the point where I was kind of like a test person for new things,” he said.

About seven years ago, Werner was referred to the VA’s Advanced Platform Technology Center. The center, led by Executive Director Dr. Ronald Triolo, needed participants for a program focused on connecting prosthetic limbs to the nervous system to restore a sense of touch. Werner was “patient zero.”

Here’s how it works: They put sensors in the sole of Werner’s shoe, and pressure signals are transmitted to a stimulator implanted in the back of Werner’s thigh.

That stimulator then activates the sensory nerves connected to the brain.

“We tickle the circuitry that used to carry that information, and he can perceive pressure as if it’s arising from his missing limb,” Triolo said.

Werner has tested out the neuroprosthesis on a balance machine, affectionately called the “shake and bake,” and walked blindfolded along a ladder laid flat on the ground. Triolo said the research shows that the sensors improve balance and confidence.

“Maybe they (program participants) don’t have to think as hard about what we take for granted as a simple act of walking, and they can have conversations while they’re walking, or they can get out in the community

work “breathtaking.” Representing the DAV Department of Ohio, Drost sits on an executive committee that advises the center and helps ensure it pursues interventions that will be of most use to veterans.

Triolo said that input from Drost and other veterans service organizations on the committee has been “invaluable.”

Even more critical to the center’s research are selfless, service-minded veterans like Werner.

“I knew when I started I may not benefit from all this,” Werner said. “But somebody down the road is going to benefit from it, so that’s the reason I do it.”



Through the VA Advanced Platform Technology Center in Cleveland, Werner volunteers to test out new technology, including a device that connects prosthetic limbs to the nervous system to restore sense of touch.

and walk in a crowd without being overly concerned about tripping and falling,” Triolo said.

Triolo also hopes to apply the technology to limb loss due to diabetes, which affects a large population of VA patients.

The neuroprosthesis program illustrates the center’s larger mission: to harness the most recent advances in technology and apply them to new innovations that can affect the health and daily function of disabled veterans. Other programs include innovations in home health monitoring and activity-based neurorehabilitation.

Jake Drost, DAV national service office supervisor in Cleveland, called the breadth and success of the center’s

“It sort of is the ethos of DAV,” Drost said. “And that’s veterans helping veterans.”

Triolo said the center and VA facilities across the country are always looking for volunteers to participate in research and development programs. He encourages veterans to contact their local VA and inquire.

“It’s not a commitment to the nation anymore. They’ve already done that,” Triolo said of the veteran volunteers. “It’s a commitment to ... not only their fellow former service members, but they’re still making contributions to all Americans. Because this technology is going to help a lot of people, not just disabled veterans.” ■

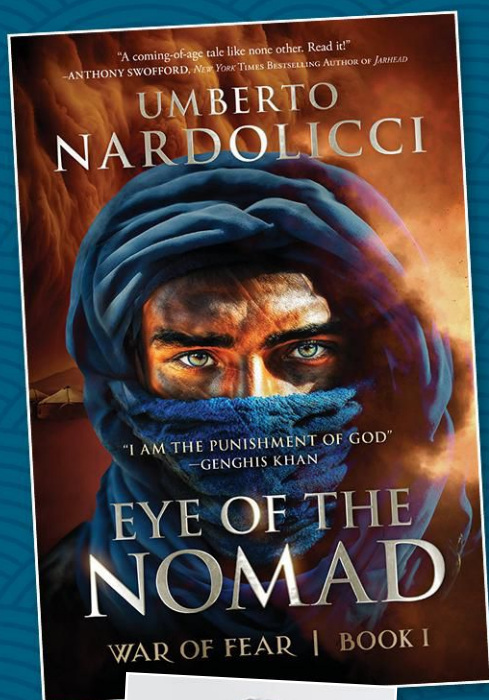


Learn More Online

Learn more about the Advanced Platform Technology Center at aptcenter.research.va.gov.

‘WAR of Fear’

DAV member, supporter takes on Genghis Khan and the original special forces in new novel



Navy veteran and DAV member and supporter Umberto “Nardo” Nardolicci recently finished writing the first book in his “War of Fear” series, titled “Eye of the Nomad.”

This epic work of historic fiction takes readers to the 12th-century Eurasian Steppe to witness the rise of one of the greatest empires in human history. The book is inspired by Yasotay, the real-life architect behind Genghis Khan’s military special forces.

Nardolicci is a successful veteran entrepreneur who has served as mentor and speaker to DAV Patriot Boot Camp cohorts. The son of a DAV member, he’s generously supported DAV and other veteran charities for many years. He recently sat down with DAV to talk about his first novel and the writing process, as well as how his military and civilian careers informed his willingness to take on the challenge of writing a novel.

DAV: Nardo, congratulations on completing the first in what is going to be an awesome series of books. Tell us about “Eye of the Nomad.”

Nardo: “Eye of the Nomad” is a story of one of Genghis Khan’s generals. And the concept is basically that building one of the largest empires in the world isn’t done alone. It’s done with a lot of other people. I mean, any great accomplishment has other people, even though there might be one dominant person. They usually get help, if you will. Yasotay is the main character, and he’s my protagonist. He helped Genghis build his special forces group. They were responsible for doing some of the first psyops operations ever in history. And so that was the reason why I picked that character. I thought it would make for a very entertaining storyline, something that a lot of people don’t know a lot about—12th-, 13th-century Far East Mongolia. China is sort of a unique place in history and a unique time in history.

DAV: You’re a Navy veteran, a disabled veteran, changed in service. What was your inspiration to write “War of Fear”?

Nardo: I came across an article in an armed forces journal, actually, that was specifically addressing special forces and one of the first special forces groups ever, which was the Mangoday from Genghis Khan’s army. And I just found this whole story of Yasotay very fascinating. I did a lot of research on

it. I wasn't able to come up with a lot. There's not really a lot out there. And, well, the main reason is, is because the culture didn't even have a written word back then. Genghis Khan commissioned a group to come up with the Mongolian written word. And the first work that had ever been produced was produced after his death. We're talking about a large group of illiterate people that grew into this massive empire. It's the largest contiguous empire ever. So it's pretty impressive what they were able to accomplish.

DAV: And tell us more about Yasotay. What drives him, like what makes him relatable? And do you think that there's something about him that reflects challenges that people face today?

Nardo: I do. And I think that one of the biggest challenges we face today is knowledge wielded without wisdom can be dangerous. And I think we're seeing that now with some of the concerns that we have with some of the newer technologies with [artificial intelligence] and so forth. And the story of Yasotay is about a learned man that goes to this group of illiterate nomads and he helps them in war tactics and strategy and in planning and so forth. And he brings more of structure to the operation, if you will. And that's sort of the premise behind the book itself ... that he then, after he helps create this war machine, learns to regret it and grows to regret it.

DAV: One of the illiterate people you were talking about is central to the story with Yasotay. How did you put them together? And what do you think readers take away from that?

Nardo: The dynamic between Yasotay and Genghis was that they were friends. Yasotay helped him out initially and began to work with him and then grew and realized what he has done through some difficult times of his own. Realized, you know, what he was part of he didn't want to be part of anymore. And so that's sort of the story behind Yasotay as he grows to regret his involvement because of the carnage that is ensued by Genghis and his groups.

DAV: How do you balance that need to hold on to readers, give them a really fun journey, but also deal with deeper themes, purpose,

identity, rites of passage. How do you do all of those things?

Nardo: One of the things I did was hire an editor who was a Mongolian historian. And he read through the book and gave me feedback. Actually, I believe he's connected with the University of London or Cambridge, so he's got a good background in history and specifically Mongolian history. I thought that was important to have that as an integral part of the story. I tried to do my best to make the historical events current within the book. So the things that are happening are actually happening. For instance, in the second book, and that's the one I'm working on now, the city of Zhongdu is destroyed and over a million people are killed. Genghis took over a number of cities, and they were pretty brutal. I've worked to have a balance between the facts of the history, and also, we don't want it to be a horror story, right? We wanted to be entertaining. And so, there's certainly a balance to strike there.

DAV: I know a lot of people around the shop who we've talked to have read the book. They feel like this is like a movie or a series of films.

Nardo: I've had a number of people say that same thing. I think it, probably, I've done my best to put it on paper. But I think in my mind, I see it as a movie too. You know, it's just one of those things that I think it would lend itself well to being on the big screen.

DAV: What do you hope the book accomplishes?

Nardo: Well, the big thing, obviously, is to entertain. It's a historical fiction book, and it's entertainment. Number two, I would really like to get across that message that I was speaking to earlier with regards to knowledge and wisdom and how knowledge applied without wisdom can be dangerous. And I think we're living in that world today. And so, I think there's a message there to speak to. And then thirdly, I'd like to be able to, if we can get the book to be successful, or the series to be successful, that we could generate some revenue for veterans. And that all proceeds are going to be donated to veterans causes. I do a lot from a philanthropy point of view with regards to veterans.

(Continued on next page)



DAV: Did you feel like you were connecting in some way with symbolic elements in the story, based on your experiences?

Nardo: That's a big part of the storyline, right? Especially with the first book, because you've got this young man who's been raised in this one environment, in a royal palace as part of the Jin Empire. And he leaves that environment and goes into a totally different environment, which is a massive change to him, these illiterate nomads that basically live traveling from place to place. And so, for my main character, change is an integral part of what he's going through here. It's part of his growing-up stage. I guess that change is something that we all go through, right? In some way, shape or form. Certainly, us in the military, we've gone through that time and again, where you're getting stationed from one place to the next; or a new job; or whatever the case may be. So change is an important aspect, and you have to be able to learn to deal with it. And that's one of the things that my main character does is he learns to deal with it.

DAV: I know we ask you all the time to mentor entrepreneurs. Do you have any advice for people who want to write a book? Your multi-decade rabbit hole has come up with something incredible. What do you tell someone else who wants to do the same thing?

Nardo: I think that the first bit of advice would be to start writing. My background is in engineering. I'm a system engineer. I worked at Johns Hopkins University for a number of years after the military. I worked there for five years, and then I started my own engineering firm. So I live a very structured approach to work. And my structured approach

to writing a book was to come up with that outline and come up with a basic plot, theme and my main characters. I spent a lot more time researching than writing. And so, I guess if someone is going to write a book, one of the books I'd recommend you to read is "Save the Cat" by Blake Snyder. It sounds like an unusual name, but it's a fantastic book that helps people that have never written a book before really come up with the structure and how best to make sure that you're not just spending a lot of time writing stuff that won't be interesting. I'm a firm believer in doing the research necessary to do it. But there's a lot of books out there too.

DAV: Anything else?

Nardo: No, we're excited about it and we're excited about working with DAV. When you write a book, you're competing with everyone who's ever written a book before, from Hemingway on down. There are so many hours in a day that a reader is going to read. So you're competing with all the great works out there. And so, you need to bring your A game. And I've been fortunate enough to have a great team to work with, and DAV included. And I thank you guys very much for everything you've done to help me with this book. We're going to have it in Audible, in e-book, on Kindle and on Amazon. And a hardback and paperback. We're going to release the paperback sometime next year, but the hardback is going to be coming out on Veterans Day 2024, along with the Audible and the e-book. We're excited about it. ■



For more information

To learn more about the book, visit waroffear.com.

From the NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR JIM MARSZALEK



Helping tomorrow's veterans today

When a service member's time in uniform ends, they can be thrown into a world defined by challenging questions. How do I find a job? Should I go to school? Where do I want to live? With seemingly endless uncertainties emerging at every turn, it's easy to let the complexity of applying for VA benefits fall to the side.

However, just as DAV national service officers are experts in securing benefits for veterans, our transition service officers (TSOs) help future veterans navigate the murky waters of VA disability claims.

While we meet with veterans in the community, at events or online, there is no replacement for being able to get in front of separating service members to tell them what DAV does and how we can help.

The TSO program began in 2001 when DAV had to foster close relationships on military installations. DAV built it from the ground up, and since then, we've worked to find ways to become a stop for transitioning service members. DAV TSOs are covering nearly 100 military bases nationwide, ready to help.

The Department of Veterans Affairs recently expanded access to accredited representatives from organizations like DAV to participate in service members' out-processing. Having that opportunity is a significant change, one DAV does not take lightly. Working so closely with those who sacrificed so much for our nation is a privilege.

I cannot overstate the advantage our separating service members have by filing disability compensation claims while still in service. Seamless access to the medical records and examination offices available on base is worth its weight in gold regarding VA benefits. DAV is known for the first-rate service we offer the men and women who serve, but the true benefit of working with a TSO is that DAV can provide better, more prompt service.

Like everything we do for veterans, their families and their survivors, any help any service member receives from any TSO is always free of charge. That principle has never been more apparent than when considering "claim sharks," entities that illegally charge exorbitant fees for little work that often results in what was free all along.

For many, hearing from a prepared TSO about their benefits will be the first time they learn about or interact with DAV. That first positive experience is vital and serves us well as those transitioning service members sing the praises of the help they've received, thanks to DAV.

DAV is ready to assist all veterans wherever they are on their transition journey. To find a DAV service officer, including TSOs, visit benefitsquestions.org. ■

DAV TSOs are covering nearly 100 military bases nationwide, ready to help.



PHOTOS BY (LEFT TO RIGHT) U.S. ARMY, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; TECH. SGT. DAVID MCLEOD/U.S. AIR FORCE; SGT. ANTHONY L. ORTIZ/U.S. MARINE CORPS

ENDING THE WAIT

DAV and MOAA offer a blueprint for reforming how the VA and Congress care for veterans made ill by toxic exposures

By Elizabeth DePompei and Kevin C. Miller

Six years ago, retired Army Lt. Col. Gary Sauer was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a type of blood cancer. He had no family history of cancer, and testing confirmed he wasn't genetically predisposed.

But over his 22-year military career, Sauer—who was also diagnosed with a rare kidney disease—served at numerous installations known to have the presence of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

These synthetic “forever chemicals” are found in everything from clothing to cookware. With enough exposure, PFAS have been shown to cause cancer, thyroid disease, reproductive problems and other health issues.

“It’s a disease that can just be monitored and treated,” Sauer said of his cancer diagnosis. “But you know, at the end of the day, it may result in losing my life over it.”

Although the Department of Defense recognizes more than 700 U.S. military sites known or likely to be contaminated with PFAS, the Department of Veterans Affairs doesn’t concede PFAS exposure to those who served at any of those locations.

That means affected veterans must prove their individual exposures and convince the VA the exposures caused their illnesses in order to receive benefits.

It’s a burden too many toxic-exposed veterans—including those with life-threatening illnesses—have to carry. A new report from DAV and MOAA (Military Officers Association of America) reveals that, on average, these veterans have to wait more than 30 years to get access to the full range of health care and benefits they are owed and need. Some die before that ever happens.

In *Ending the Wait for Toxic-Exposed Veterans*, DAV and MOAA offer a blueprint for reforming how the VA and Congress handle service-related toxic exposures and the illnesses associated with them.

“While the PACT Act of 2022 helped millions of toxic-exposure veterans, it did not address all known military toxic exposures, nor did it ensure that future generations will have timely access to their earned health care and benefits,” said DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Randy Reese.

In the case of PFAS exposure, adopting the recommendations in DAV and MOAA's report would remove many of the evidentiary, financial and political obstacles that prevent the VA and Congress from creating presumptives. But PFAS is just one example from more than a century of toxic exposures affecting countless veterans. (See the infographic on Pages 18–19.)

'DENIED AGAIN'

For nearly four years, David Crete provided operational security at Tonopah Test Range (TTR), a highly classified weapons testing site in Nevada, until a knee injury forced him to transfer to Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas. According to the Department of Energy, weapons testing conducted at TTR has caused radiological and chemical contamination of the soils.

"Shortly after arriving at Nellis, I started experiencing pulmonary issues," Crete said. "I developed pneumonia. Military doctors diagnosed me with asthma and eventually sent me on my way, but I continued to have respiratory issues."

After leaving the Air Force, Crete filed for disability compensation from the VA and received a 10% rating for his asthma, but chronic bronchitis continued to cause him problems. It's become a regular part of his life, recurring at least twice a year and lasting anywhere from two weeks to two months at a time.

In 1984, President Reagan signed the Veterans' Dioxin and Radiation Compensation Standards Act to ensure veterans and their survivors received compensation for disabilities or deaths related to exposure to ionizing

radiation during atmospheric nuclear testing or the occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

However, many veterans served at locations that have yet to be recognized for atmospheric nuclear testing, and others who had radiation exposure as a result of their military occupation or due to leaks or equipment malfunctions still have difficulty proving their exposure meets the dose estimate requirements to receive VA benefits.

This was the case with Crete's claim, so when the PACT Act was signed in August 2021, he tried to refile for disability compensation for his various health conditions based on toxic exposure. However, the VA doesn't currently recognize TTR as a toxic-exposure location, so all of his claims were denied.

The recommendations and findings in DAV and MOAA's report, if adopted, could help Crete, Sauer and future generations of veterans whose toxic exposures aren't yet recognized, acknowledged or conceded by the VA or DOD.

Like Sauer, Crete has become a staunch advocate for his fellow veterans made ill by toxic exposures.

"Too many men and women who have served in the military have suffered because our government has not recognized our exposure, and our hope is to finally receive the recognition and justice for the injuries and illnesses that occurred from toxic exposure in service," Crete said. ■



Learn More Online

Read the full report, including DAV and MOAA's recommendations, at endingthewait.org.

GARY SAUER

Army veteran

PFAS



DAVID CRETE

Air Force veteran

RADIATION



A CENTURY OF MILITARY TOXIC EXPOSURES AND PRESUMPTIVES

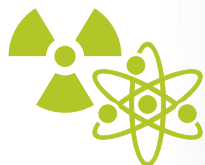
Military toxic exposures have been part of warfare for thousands of years; however, the modern history of toxic exposures dates back to World War I when there was the first wide-scale usage of chemical weapons. For over a century, American service members have been exposed to dozens of toxic substances, both while deployed abroad and stationed at home. In response, Congress has passed laws and the VA has enacted regulations to create presumptives that make it easier for veterans to access health care and benefits; however, it can take many years from the time of the exposure to the creation of a presumptive.

BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

EXPOSURES

Chemical Warfare

The first large-scale use of chemical weapons occurred during World War I, when mustard gas, tear gas and chlorine were utilized, resulting in more than 1 million casualties, including an estimated 72,000 American service members.



Fort McClellan Toxins

Opened during World War I, Fort McClellan, Alabama, hosted the Army's Chemical Corps for decades, before finally closing in 1999. The VA has noted that potential toxic exposures may have included radioactive compounds, chemical warfare agents and airborne PCBs.



Mustard Gas Testing

During World War II, more than 60,000 service members were involved in military testing on the effects of mustard gas and lewisite exposure, as well as the effectiveness of new equipment to protect against these toxins.



Camp Lejeune

For almost four decades, service members and civilians living or working at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, were exposed to drinking water contaminated with industrial solvents, benzene and other chemicals.

Atomic Veterans

Following the atomic bomb detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, more than 250,000 service members were involved in cleanup and occupation activities in Japan. Over the next two decades, 400,000 more service members were exposed to atmospheric nuclear tests.

World War I
1917 to 1918

World War II
1941 to 1945

Korean War
1950 to 1953

PRESUMPTIVES

Chronic Diseases and Chronic Constitutional Diseases (1921)

Following World War I, the federal Veterans' Bureau—precursor to the VA—established the first presumptives for “chronic diseases,” including tuberculosis and neuropsychiatric disease, as well as “chronic constitutional diseases,” including anemia, diabetes and leukemia.

Tropical Diseases (1945)

Following World War II, the Veterans Administration created a presumptive for “tropical diseases,” which initially included malaria, a disease contracted by many service members who served in the Pacific theater, and was later expanded to include cholera, dysentery and yellow fever.

Former Prisoners of War (1970)

Congress passed legislation (P.L. 91-376) creating a new presumptive for former prisoners of war who served during World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars, which initially covered beriberi, malnutrition, psychosis and five other diseases.



Agent Orange

Approximately 20 million gallons of herbicides—including Agent Orange—were sprayed over Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos between 1962 and 1971 to defoliate the jungles, exposing millions of service members to dioxin and other toxins in Agent Orange.



PFAS-Contaminated Water

PFAS, known as “forever chemicals,” have been used by the military in firefighting foams on bases for decades. PFAS is also found in many other military, industrial and household products, potentially contaminating water on over 700 military bases.

Persian Gulf War (PGW) Exposures

Millions of PGW veterans were exposed to oil-well fires, depleted uranium, insecticides, burn pits and possibly nerve agents, as well as sand and dust particles.



Burn Pits and Airborne Hazards

During the first Gulf War, and in the post-9/11 wars, millions of service members were exposed to toxic fumes from open-air burn pits that contained jet fuel, paints and solvents, petroleum, munitions and unexploded ordnance, and medical and human waste.

K2 Toxins

Over 15,000 service members were deployed to Karshi-Khanabad, known as K2, a former Soviet air base in Uzbekistan, and were exposed to enriched and depleted uranium, asbestos, jet fuel and lead-based paint.

Vietnam War
1962 to 1973

Persian Gulf War
1990 to 1991

Afghanistan and Iraq Wars
2001 to 2021

Atomic Veterans (1985)

The Veterans Administration promulgated regulations to create a presumptive for “atomic veterans” involved in the cleanup and occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, and later expanded it to include service members involved in atmospheric nuclear testing and other radiation risk activities.

Agent Orange Act of 1991

Congress created a presumptive for exposure to Agent Orange for veterans who later became ill with cancers and other diseases. The law also created a new process to evaluate additional diseases using independent assessments from the Institute of Medicine.

Persian Gulf War Benefits Act of 1998

Congress established a presumptive for Gulf War veterans suffering from common symptoms but unknown conditions. The VA later added “undiagnosed illness,” “chronic multisymptom illness,” and “chronic fatigue syndrome” to the presumptive.

Camp Lejeune Contaminated Water (2017)

The VA promulgated regulations creating a new presumptive for service members stationed at Camp Lejeune between 1953 and 1987. It included Parkinson’s disease and seven cancers.

Honoring our PACT Act of 2022

The PACT Act provided the largest expansion of health care and benefits for toxic-exposed veterans in a generation. It created a new presumptive for burn pits and other airborne hazards for veterans of the first Gulf War and the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.



TO HELL AND

One Marine's reflections of Fallujah 20 years later

By Brian Buckwalter | Photos by Lucian Read

CONTENT WARNING: This story contains frank descriptions of urban combat that may be disturbing for some readers.



Marine veteran Alex Nicoll remembers Fallujah, Iraq, as a dead city.

When he and others from Company K, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, stepped foot inside the “City of Mosques” in early November 2004, nearly all of the residents were gone. Leaflets dropped by U.S. forces warned of an impending attack and told them to get out. Most listened.

Anyone remaining—estimates put the number between 3,000 and 4,500 extremists—was considered an enemy combatant. They hid in buildings, knew every nook and cranny of the city, and could move silently through a network of tunnels or across rooftops connected by ladders.

“It was so quiet at times that it was just, like, you know it’s going to get crazy. Because once it gets quiet, it means they’re waiting,” Nicoll said.

Seven months earlier, U.S. forces had stormed into Fallujah for the first time to carry out Operation Valiant Resolve—a hasty response to insurgents ambushing, burning and then hanging four U.S. Blackwater civilian contractors from a bridge over the Euphrates River.

U.S. forces took over a third of the city before turning the operation over to the 1,100-person Fallujah Brigade, a Sunni security force, at the urging of the Iraqi government. Not long after, the brigade dissolved and the soldiers turned their weapons over to the insurgents. Twenty-seven U.S. service members died in the first battle.

But allowing Fallujah to remain an insurgent safe haven and base of operations for both Iraqi and foreign extremists jeopardized the future of the country. A second operation was needed.

This time, the drafted plan called for the largest urban assault on a city since the Vietnam War—12,000 personnel from all military branches and Iraqi security forces were tapped to be the attacking force.

The prevailing hope was that the feints and raids the Marines had been doing since September would lead to political negotiations and a settlement instead of a fight. There was little appetite for a large-scale urban conflict.

Those hoped-for negotiations never came to fruition. On Nov. 8, 2004, Operation Phantom Fury began.



Alex Nicoll’s story is featured on fallujahstories.org, a DAV website dedicated to remembering the Second Battle of Fallujah and the impact it had on veterans’ lives. Visit to hear more about his journey and those of several other veterans of the battle.

'HOUSE OF HELL'

The assault brought on by U.S. forces was swift and overwhelming. In a city of over 2,000 city blocks covering 25 square kilometers, the majority of the fighting happened over the course of only a couple of weeks.

Nicoll, who was a private first class during the battle, said 3/1 was the most urban-combat-experienced infantry battalion in the Marine Corps at the time and specifically selected for this operation. Atypically, this was its members' third deployment together and their second to Iraq; stop-loss orders kept much of the unit intact.

"I don't know if it's happened too many times in history that people got to be that close for so many years before you get into combat," Nicoll said.

They knew what they were doing, trusted each other and were ready to fight.

"It's pretty impressive when rules of engagement are thrown out the window, the wall of lead that comes with Marines," said Nicoll. "I'm glad I got to see that. For a just reason or not? That's debatable. But it's irrelevant, too. We got to be a part of Marines being unleashed."

Five days into the assault, on Nov. 13, Nicoll's squad was on patrol in the southwestern part of the city. He had just come out of an abandoned Iraqi shop with a pack of cigarettes when a call for help came over the radio.

A firefight had broken out in a nearby house. Injured Marines were trapped inside. Nicoll's squad ran toward the building with 1st Sgt. Brad Kasal, a senior enlisted Marine from another company, joining them.

Where they stood would become known as the "House of Hell."

The only way they could get to the injured Marines was to run through an open room covered by fire from above by insurgents. They ran through the kill zone to where the other Marines were.

Cpl. Robert Mitchell, Nicoll's squad leader and a close friend, started providing first aid to the injured Marines while Nicoll and Kasal focused on helping kill the rest of the enemy fighters in the house. But this meant they had to go back through the open room. As they ran through the room for cover in a stairwell closet, insurgents opened fire.

Nicoll said bullets rained down on them from the second story. He got hit in the left leg and once in the chest. Kasal got hit several times in his legs, too. An insurgent then threw a grenade at them. Kasal grabbed Nicoll and pulled him in, shielding Nicoll with his body to protect him from the blast while absorbing the shrapnel with his own body.

According to Nicoll's recollection, that's when Mitchell came running to where they were—across the same kill zone—and started ripping Nicoll's gear off. His body armor had stopped the bullet from piercing his chest, but the impact fractured all his ribs and punctured a lung. He was having trouble breathing.

"Once you can't take a breath, there's really no pain," Nicoll said. "You know, every part of your body is, like, just pulling for that last breath."

Mitchell put a tourniquet on Nicoll's leg and continued treating the two Marines' other wounds. As he did, an

Iraqi insurgent lying in the room who they thought was dead took a breath and reached for his weapon. Mitchell saw him, but his own rifle had been damaged by enemy fire. All he had was his combat knife.

"With his rifle inoperable, he drew his combat knife, stabbed the insurgent, and eliminated him instantly," reads Mitchell's Navy Cross award citation from the incident.

Nicoll said the moment was much more gruesome than the citation's description; even as his life faded, he turned his head away when Mitchell went in for the kill.

"I hope that's the single-most ruthless act of violence I'll ever have to witness," Nicoll said. "It was about as hard as it gets."



Cpl. Robert Mitchell (center) confers with a platoon mate before he, 1st Sgt. Brad Kasal (left) and Pfc. Alex Nicoll (not pictured) push forward into a building—later called "House of Hell" by Company K, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment—on Nov. 13, 2004, during the Second Battle of Fallujah. All three Marines were subsequently wounded in the house.



THE AFTERMATH

Mitchell, who was also wounded inside the house, was able to coordinate evacuation of all the wounded before Marines used demolition charges and leveled the house.

What happened inside the House of Hell that day instantly became an indelible part of Marine Corps history and lore. Tactically, the lessons learned from the ambush changed the way Marines conduct urban assaults on houses.

Nicoll, who was medically evacuated out of Iraq, had to have his left leg amputated below the knee and began a long journey of recovery.

His attitude inside Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., was positive. His father was by his side. Nicoll praised his therapist and his care team, and he enjoyed the attention from the media and military leadership who visited.

But once he left the hospital, he said he found himself retired at 23 years old with no transferable skills and nothing to do. He became nomadic and reclusive, living in the woods, feeling worthless and disconnected.

"I went years thinking I'm never going to be a part of anything like that. I'm never going to be as good at anything than I was at combat," said Nicoll. "I felt like I had already served my purpose, which is a horrible way to look at it. But that's how I looked at it for a while."

Members of Company K rush to evacuate Nicoll to safety while he bleeds from gunshot wounds to his left leg, which is later amputated below the knee.

Nicoll said it took about 15 years before he discovered the trades and refund purpose in his life. He now works as a motorcycle mechanic.

He also races motorcycles—calling his home's garage world headquarters for One Foot in the Grave Racing—saying the adrenaline rush is a needed reminder that he's not invincible.

Nicoll said he finds comfort in having regular contact with Marines he served with. He lives near several of them and vows to never live more than an hour from at least one of them. Mitchell visits at least once a year. They all regularly check in on each other.

"You're never going to get those buddies again," Nicoll said.

Reflecting on his experiences in Fallujah 20 years later, he said he's almost at the point where he'll have lived more of his life as an amputee than with two legs, but it's normal to him now. He's been through every emotion about the war itself, but has no regrets.

"I got to be in combat and do exactly what we trained to do, and we did it," Nicoll said. "And we did it well." ■

Marine veteran Joe Smarro was named the 2024 recipient of DAV's Arthur H. and Mary E. Wilson Top Venture Impacting Veterans Award, which recognizes veterans turned entrepreneurs who are making positive, lasting effects in their field.



FROM SURVIVAL TO SAVING LIVES

Marine veteran Joe Smarro turned his pain into purpose and became an entrepreneur along the way

By Elizabeth DePompei

Permanently inked on the inside of Joe Smarro's upper right arm is a Latin phrase: "amor fati."
"Love your fate."

For Smarro, the founder of a business aimed at saving lives through crisis intervention, it's become easier to embrace fate—even the parts he says he wished never happened—because ultimately, it's led him to a fulfilling, meaningful career. And that career made him the 2024 recipient of DAV's Arthur H. and Mary E. Wilson Top Venture Impacting Veterans Award.

But the road there was anything but smooth. Growing up in upstate New York, Smarro was subjected to abuse at home. By his senior year of high school, he became a father and was faced with a responsibility he was

ill-equipped to navigate. As "a matter of survival," he decided to join the military.

Smarro enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2000 and became a fiscal chief for a battalion in an infantry unit at Camp Horno in Southern California. The following year, 9/11 happened.

"They took my credit card away, gave me my rifle, and there I go to the front lines," Smarro said.

Smarro deployed first to Afghanistan and later as part of the initial push into Iraq. It was that convoy from Kuwait into Iraq that sticks with him.

"It was that first couple hours of things I'll never forget, and also what told me that this is going to be a long deployment," he said.

Smarro and his unit traveled in soft-back Humvees, slowly making their way toward a village they were told was all enemy. In the dark of night and fog of war, miscommunication resulted in his unit shooting in the direction of Marines trying to clear the village. Smarro still doesn't know whether any Marines died from friendly fire.

"They never told us anything. And then it was just business as normal, keep going," he said. "And then I remember the sun came out that first morning and just

“This is just learning how to talk to people effectively, learning how to de-escalate a person in crisis, which is what every call is, essentially. Why are we not doing more of this?”

— Joe Smarro

seeing the amount of carnage, vehicles blown up, bodies burnt to the roadway, to vehicles.”

After a four-year enlistment, Smarro was just happy to have survived. But for the following decade, he said, his life was a mess as he struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation.

After the military, Smarro joined the San Antonio Police Department, the “path of least resistance.” Years later, he attended crisis intervention training, which emphasized communication and de-escalation.

“I went through that training and it was like, wow, this is what police work should be like,” Smarro said. “This is just learning how to talk to people effectively, learning how to de-escalate a person in crisis, which is what every call is, essentially. Why are we not doing more of this?”

A few years later, Smarro applied to be on the department’s newly created mental health unit. The unit, and Smarro’s knack for crisis intervention, became so acclaimed that they were featured in the HBO documentary “Ernie & Joe: Crisis Cops.”

As Smarro became a go-to expert, colleagues encouraged him to start his own consulting firm. When a fellow Marine veteran told him about an entrepreneurship bootcamp for veterans through the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Smarro finally took the leap.

“I left there on fire,” Smarro said.

By 2017, he had founded SolutionPoint+, a firm dedicated to providing crisis intervention training for first responders, with mental wellness at the forefront. Once the business took off, Smarro retired from the police department.

Now, SolutionPoint+ provides training and consulting across the country. In addition to working with law enforcement, the company works with school systems and is hoping to expand into health care. As the company grows, Smarro and his business partner, Marine veteran Jesse Trevino, have made it a point to hire other veterans.

In recognition of the positive impact Smarro and SolutionPoint+ have made on communities across the



Smarro and his business partner, Marine veteran Jesse Trevino, accepted a \$10,000 award during the 2024 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Phoenix. Smarro founded SolutionPoint+, a crisis intervention training and consulting firm, in 2017.

country, Smarro and Trevino were invited to the 2024 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Phoenix, where they accepted a \$10,000 award.

“Joe represents the incredible potential of those who served to become impactful, change-making entrepreneurs,” said Nick Brophy, director of DAV Patriot Boot Camp for veterans turned entrepreneurs. “It was an honor to recognize the work he and Jesse are doing, and we look forward to watching SolutionPoint+ grow.”

Smarro credits his military service for preparing him to succeed in crisis intervention and to start his own business. Not only has it given him a new purpose that improves and saves lives, but it’s also helped him understand his own mental health struggles and led him to get help.

“Look, if it’s happening to you, it’s happening for you,” Smarro said of life’s trials. “And you can either hold the pain or learn the lesson.

“I’d rather learn the lesson.” ■



For more information

Contact Smarro at joesmarro.com and learn more about his business at solutionpointplus.com.

A ‘Vision for Veterans’

DAV informs political candidates about issues facing those who served

By Kevin C. Miller

As everyone is well aware, another election season has come to a close, and it's no secret that this Congress is among the least productive since the Great Depression. Yet, of the only 34 bills passed in the 118th Congress' first year, seven were laws supported by DAV resolutions, which showcases DAV's successful advocacy.

Since the start of the current congressional term, DAV has reviewed 411 bills on veterans legislation, provided 31 expert witness testimonies and testified on 173 veterans bills. Additionally, members and supporters have taken over 1.1 million actions through DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) to support our legislative advocacy.

“For DAV and our supporters—it is imperative to be well informed about issues that directly impact our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families,” DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem said. “A new congressional term offers a

fresh start and an opportunity to reinforce the positions our members want us to advocate for.”

In August 2024, DAV released an updated Vision for Veterans, establishing seven priority issues for the 2024 elections intended to help presidential and congressional candidates, as well as currently elected officials, understand the most pressing issues facing the veteran community and offer a series of concrete solutions to address them.

Separate from DAV's critical policy goals, which go into more detail about our specific legislative priorities, Vision for Veterans is a high-level outlook based on over a century of expertise and advocacy. The document reflects the feedback from over 1 million DAV and Auxiliary members. These targeted advocacy efforts have had significant results for veterans. The historic passage of the Honoring our PACT Act, the Wounded Warrior Access Act and Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act are just a few substantial accomplishments.

Our Vision for Veterans document includes informative issue briefs and seven recommendations to support current and future generations of veterans.

First, we want to make sure lawmakers do not reduce, offset or tax veterans benefits. Second, we call on them to strengthen Dependency and Indemnity Compensation to better support veterans' survivors. Third, we want Congress to make dental care a health care benefit for all service-disabled veterans. Fourth, we call for providing assisted-living care options for all service-disabled veterans. Fifth, while life-changing toxic-exposure legislation—the PACT ACT—was enacted, work still needs to be done to reform the process for creating toxic-exposure presumptives so that future generations of veterans don't have to wait decades for benefits and health care they need and deserve. Sixth, it is imperative that Congress and the Department of Veterans Affairs create a new planning



and funding mechanism for modernizing the VA's aging infrastructure. And seventh, we want to end Congressional PAYGO rules and budget caps that lead to cuts in veterans benefits and programs; we should never balance the budget on the backs of veterans.

"At DAV, we have long understood the importance of putting substantive policy recommendations in front of our elected officials," said DAV National Commander Daniel Contreras. "The Vision for Veterans offers our elected officials and candidates an opportunity to hear directly from disabled veterans, their families and their survivors and ensure that their needs remain at the forefront of all their minds as they make decisions that impact the future of our community."

In fall, DAV Benefits Protection Team leaders and member leaders nationwide began reaching out and meeting with candidates running for Congress and the presidency to share what the future for America's veterans and their families should look like. DAV's Vision for Veterans is crucial for candidates and lawmakers seeking office—acting as a guide for their decision-making and reminding them to always keep veterans' interests in mind.

We look forward to engaging on these vital policies that will change the lives of our nation's ill and injured veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. ■



Remember, protecting veterans benefits starts with you. The best way to stay informed and take action to advocate for impactful change is to be a part of DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) at davcan.org. Help us keep our promise to America's veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors by signing up for our alerts. We will send you important updates on legislation and policies and let you know how you can take action.





Vision for VETERANS for the 119th Congress

1. Do Not Reduce, Offset, or Tax Veterans Disability Benefits
2. Strengthen DIC Support for Survivors of Disabled Veterans
3. Make Dental Care a Health Benefit for All Service-Disabled Veterans
4. Provide Assisted-Living Care Options for Service-Disabled Veterans
5. Reform the Process for Creating Toxic-Exposure Presumptives
6. Create New Planning and Funding Mechanisms for VA Infrastructure
7. Exempt All Veterans Programs, Benefits and Services From PAYGO and Budget Caps



Scan the QR code to
download your copy of
the Vision for Veterans.



Benefits access expands for K2 veterans

■ On Aug. 9, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced several steps to expand access to VA benefits for veterans who served at Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) in Uzbekistan after Sept. 11, 2001, as well as their survivors.

The VA plans to take steps to make chronic multisymptom illness a presumptive condition for K2 veterans and recognize exposures at K2 as toxic-exposure risk activities. The VA will also ensure that toxic exposures are fully taken into account when processing K2 veterans' claims and conduct pre-decisional review of K2 claims.

Additionally, all veterans who served at K2 are already eligible to enroll in VA health care—without needing to apply for disability compensation first.

Approximately 16,000 veterans served at K2, and the VA is already conducting extensive outreach to this population and its survivors. If you are a



PHOTO BY MARK JACKSON

K2 veteran or a surviving family member of a K2 veteran and need assistance with applying for VA health care, disability compensation or survivor benefits, please contact your nearest DAV service office by visiting benefitsquestions.org.

More veterans get housing assistance

■ In August, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced a new set of policy changes that will help more disabled veterans receive housing assistance under the HUD-Department of Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH)



program and will improve their access to supportive housing developments.

Before this change, service-connected disability benefits were considered income when determining eligibility for certain supportive housing developments—causing some veterans to exceed the income threshold for these programs.

The HUD-VASH program is a vital resource to house veterans experiencing homelessness. It pairs HUD rental assistance, provided through housing vouchers targeted to veterans experiencing homelessness, with VA case management and other supportive services.

“We [at DAV] had previously heard complaints about housing voucher denials from our membership,” said Marquis Barefield, assistant national legislative director. “Our members will be pleased to hear about this positive change in housing assistance for veterans experiencing homelessness.”

From the AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER CHRISTOPHER J. EASLEY



Make a difference this season

When I was a kid, you didn't really hear anything about Christmas until after Thanksgiving. Now, here in the U.S., the season starts months earlier. Twelve percent of Americans—the overachievers maybe—start their shopping in September, and another 12% finish before the end of summer. Even with an early start, is there ever really enough time during the last few months of the year?

It's easy to let the daily holiday stress consume us with the lack of money and time or the overwhelming seasonal commercialism. "A Christmas Carol" author Charles Dickens said, "Reflect on your present blessings—of which every man has many—not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some." Because of his own family's experiences with debtors' prison, Dickens had a lifelong devotion to helping the underserved. He hoped his holiday story would "help open the hearts of the prosperous and powerful towards the poor and powerless."

In Auxiliary terms, we call that "making a difference." We make our difference through local units and the programs they support. Programs like adopting veterans and their families for a special holiday, supporting back-to-school needs for the kids of those who are deployed, and supporting caregivers with anything and everything. If you or your unit wants help standing up any of these programs, email us at dava@dav.org. We'll get you the help and support you need so you can begin helping and supporting others.

The need doesn't end there. Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals, clinics and nursing homes can all use your help this holiday season. The best part of volunteering during this time of year is building a sense of community and spreading happiness with every little thing you do for others. If you'd like to help, go to auxiliary.dav.org/volunteer for more information.

Mr. Dickens also once said, "No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another." This winter, lightening others' burdens may seem like a big task, but you can do something that isn't too overwhelming: Recruit a new member! The dues generated from each new member go directly to help those who need it by funding our programs. Not only that, new members come with new ideas and energy, which will invigorate the Auxiliary for many years to come. ■

The best part of volunteering during this time of year is **building a sense of community and spreading happiness** with every little thing you do for others.

A gift that pays you income

while helping your fellow veterans!

Charitable gift annuity donors receive generous fixed payments for life, largely tax-free; a charitable income tax deduction for those who itemize; and DAV Guardian Society recognition.

Gift annuity requirements

- \$10,000 minimum gift
- Up to two annuitants (payment recipients)
- Minimum age 60; no maximum age

For more information

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

SAMPLE ONE-LIFE RATES

Age	Rate	Age	Rate
60	4.9%	80	7.6%
65	5.4%	85	8.7%
70	5.9%	90+	9.7%
75	6.6%		

Please call for all one- and two-life rates.



Jill Remick (right) with Air Force veteran and DAV Past National Commander Dick Marbes at the DAV 5K in Cincinnati.

The season of **GIVING BACK**

Jill Remick, DAV's 2024 Philanthropist of the Year and a retired emergency room nurse, has long been passionate about supporting disabled veterans. As a nurse, she frequently encountered veterans in need, which resulted in her developing a deep commitment to their care and well-being.

"I want to do so much more while I still have the health and physical ability to do it," she said. "I think veterans don't get the credit they deserve, and I'm just driven to ensure they get help."

Remick shared that when she first started giving to DAV over 40 years ago, it was just dollars at a time. However, over the years, as her giving has increased, she has become more involved with DAV.

One of her most fulfilling experiences has been volunteering at the DAV 5K events. The 5K is extra special to Remick because of the relationship she has built with service-disabled Air Force veteran and DAV Past National Commander Dick Marbes, a veteran who lost his leg in military service. Marbes' courage and motivation during the 5K have served as powerful reminders to Remick of why she supports DAV and the importance of aiding those who have made significant sacrifices.

"He is a tremendous inspiration to me," she said. "He reminds me of why I give back. I want veterans to have the mental and physical health care they need."

This giving season, consider joining Remick in her mission of supporting our nation's heroes by taking advantage of one of DAV's giving options, such as donating stock, cash, charitable gift annuities or other assets.

To get more information on how you can make your gift, email giftplanning@dav.org. ■

RIDING TO REMEMBER

Second annual Recon Raider Remembrance Ride honors and builds community for MARSOC veterans and Gold Star families

By Rob Lewis

In a moment of honor and grief inside the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis, the purpose for the second annual Recon Raider Remembrance Ride, or R4, was made clear.

His voice cracking, event organizer and former Force Reconnaissance Marine and Raider Keith Waldrop introduced Gracen Arslanbas, the widow of Sgt. Colin Arslanbas, a Reconnaissance Marine.

“Gracen is one of the most recent Gold Star family members. She just recently lost her husband. As you can see, she is carrying his child,” said Waldrop, gesturing to the young widow, then in her third trimester of pregnancy.

Gathering himself as he hugged Arslanbas, Waldrop asked all of the participants to form a line to come through and greet her.

“It’s really special that this was held here to honor everybody’s sacrifice,” said Arslanbas, whose husband was killed in a training accident in April. “But for (Colin) and this year especially ... thank you so much.”

Baby Margot Arslanbas will be born into a community of Marine Corps Reconnaissance and Raider veterans; fellow Gold Star families; and supporters from nonprofits including DAV, the Marine Reconnaissance Foundation and Marine Raider Foundation. The second annual motorcycle ride was organized by Waldrop, who owns Asymmetric Solutions, a company that has taken part in DAV Patriot Boot Camp.

With a DAV vehicle leading the way, kickstands went up on that cool August morning to start a ride that took participants on a commemorative journey from Washington, Missouri, to Jefferson Barracks and back. Each rider, whether a veteran, active service member or civilian supporter, was assigned a bracelet representing a fallen Marine Raider or Reconnaissance Marine. These bracelets, worn throughout the ride, served as poignant



Top: R4 ends in a procession of motorcycles at the Town and Country Fair in Washington, Missouri. **Above:** (From Left) Gold Star family members Kathleen Leach, Gracen Arslanbas and Tab Leach and event organizer Keith Waldrop of Asymmetric Solutions.

reminders of the sacrifices of those whose lives were cut short in the line of duty.

After the visit to the cemetery, riders stopped at nearby Gateway Harley-Davidson, where veterans and family members had the opportunity to speak with a DAV benefits advocate.

One of the riders who participated in R4 was Tab Leach, father of Marine Raider Talon Leach, who was killed in an airplane crash while on a training mission in Mississippi in 2017. Tab said the ride offered him the chance to connect with the Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) community, including veterans and organizations supporting them. He said it’s the strength of this community that has helped ease his pain.

“Instead of one Marine son, I’ve got 30,” he said. “That’s really been a blessing in my life.” ■



From the NATIONAL CHAPLAIN DEBRA VARNER DANCER

Courage and honor



In the heart of every service member and veteran lies courage that is often unseen and unappreciated.

We honor and pay tribute to that courage when we celebrate Veterans Day. It is a time to recognize the selflessness, sacrifice and unwavering commitment of the men and women who've served and are still serving in our armed forces to protect our freedom and democracy.

This courage is not just about facing the enemy on the battlefield. It's also about making the decision to leave behind family, friends and the comforts of home to serve our country. It's about the willingness of someone to put their life on the line, knowing that they may not return. This is a sacrifice that is beyond measure, a sacrifice that is valiant in every sense of the word.

Consider the young men and women who enlist in the military; they know that they are stepping into a world of uncertainty, a world where the comforts of civilian life are replaced by the harsh realities of military service. They know that they could face challenges and hardships that most people can only imagine. Yet they make this choice willingly, driven by a sense of duty and a desire to serve.

And when veterans come home, they continue to serve. Veterans bring valuable skills and experiences, such as leadership, teamwork and problem-solving, that make a difference in their communities and their workplaces.

Gratitude is a common theme in celebrating Veterans Day. We should encourage and express our appreciation for the sacrifices veterans have made through our own prayers, acts of kindness and support of veteran-focused organizations. We must recognize and acknowledge the contributions made by all veterans and those who are currently serving.

Many of us know all too well that the sacrifices veterans have made are not just physical—they're also emotional and psychological. Many carry the weight of their experiences with them, often long after their service has ended. They may struggle with the memories of what they have seen and done. They may bear the scars of physical injuries as well as the invisible wounds of post-traumatic stress. Yet they carry these burdens with a quiet dignity, a testament to their strength and resilience.

As comrades, we pledge out of a deep sense of patriotism and a commitment to the ideals of freedom and justice. We serve not for personal gain but for the greater good.

We serve because we believe in the values that our country stands for and are willing to fight to protect those values. We give honor where honor is due. We live out the values of honor, integrity and service in a way that few do. We embody the virtues that we hold dear, and we do so with humility and grace. ■

Win a FREE, round-trip ticket for two to Vegas



Hit the jackpot at DAV's Recruiter Rally

By Jonathan Kaupanger

DAV's Recruiter Rally is now underway, and anyone who recruits at least one paid member has a chance to win a trip, which includes \$2,500 in spending money and a hotel room in Las Vegas, for the 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention.

The rules of the contest are simple: Recruit one new paid member between now and June 30, 2025, to be automatically entered into the contest. There's only one entry per recruiter, no matter how many new members you recruit. After June 30, 2025, we'll hold a random drawing at DAV National Headquarters to pick the winner. The drawing will be broadcast live on DAV's social media channels.

"Just imagine if only 1% of our members not currently recruiting would sign up just one new member each year. We would add over 10,000 new DAV members over and above our current numbers recruited annually," said National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "That would help tremendously in ensuring our membership remains at nearly 1 million members, which lends us significant legislative influence on Capitol Hill when fighting for the interests of our brothers- and sisters-in-arms."

PRO TIPS ON ENLISTING NEW MEMBERS FROM A DAV SUPER RECRUITER

Selling a membership isn't easy for everyone. Selling anything is challenging for some people because it involves emotional empathy toward the potential buyer. But according to one DAV "super recruiter," empathy is your superpower when selling a DAV membership.

"There might be one issue you're focused on, that you're passionate about; share that part of your passion," said Shannon Sander, a service officer for the Department of New York who's recruited 172 members so far this year. "Let people know what DAV is fighting for that affects

you and your family. Let them know what it was that made you join DAV."

One of the hardest parts of selling something is the potential rejection. People, in general, don't like hearing no because it feels like a limitation on their desires or plans. But not Sander.

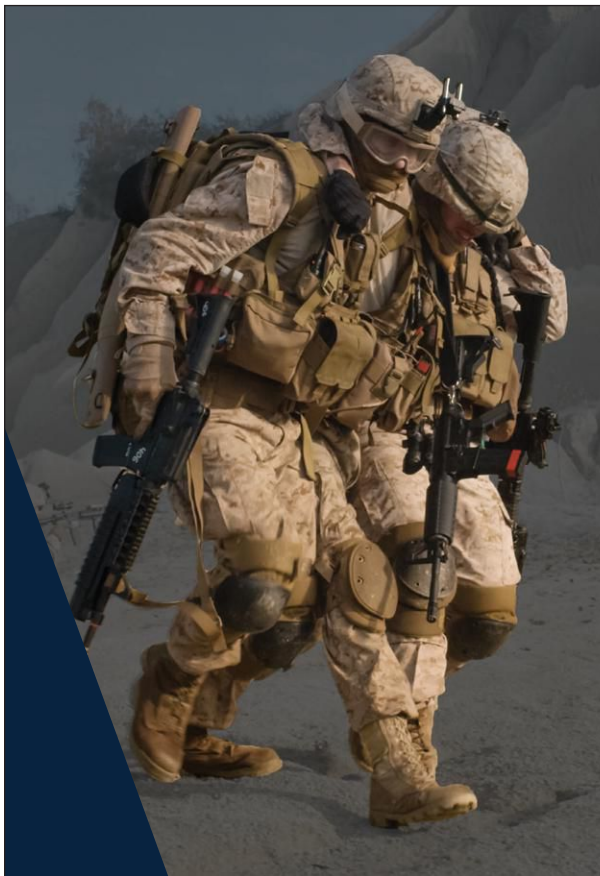
"I take no as a maybe," she said. "Because when I give them the information, and my reason for joining DAV, the 'no' right there turns into a maybe. Maybe they need to go home and talk to their spouse. Maybe they're too embarrassed to say they don't have a job right now. I never look at that no as a solid no to membership."

The final tip from Sander involves money, or rather, how to ask for it.

"Don't pressure people to pay our dues all at once," she said. "Often, disabled veterans are living on Department of Veterans Affairs disability compensation, and they have other bills. Remind them that they can take time to pay it because DAV understands that a lot of disabled veterans don't have top paying jobs and they need more time to pay off a membership." ■

Guidance for recruiting new DAV members is available at dov.org under Member Resources. Click on the Publicity tile to find our recruitment resources, available in digital, print and video formats.







Your fellow veterans need you

Pledge your support to your brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Become a part of this elite club for DAV life members and receive a metal membership card. A monthly gift of \$21 or more is all it takes.

For more information:
Toll-free: 833-829-7066
warriorsclub@dav.org
dav.org/warriorsclub



NOW ACCEPTING REAL ESTATE DONATIONS

TO SUPPORT VETERANS





If you have a real estate asset costing you money or not being utilized and you want to put the equity to good use, donating it is a great way to support disabled veterans. You may even claim a significant tax deduction!

Learn more:
DAV.ORG/REAL-ESTATE-DONATION
or call 844-277-HOME (4663)



YOUR CAR DONATION SUPPORTS VETERANS



Help the brave men and women who served by donating any car, truck, RV or boat, and you could qualify for a tax deduction.

Always offering free vehicle pickup

855-510-5437 | dav.org/car



SERVING **THE MILITARY** **COMMUNITY**

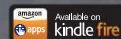
For 100 years and counting.



usaa.com/join

Membership eligibility and product restrictions apply and are subject to change. USAA means United Services Automobile Association and its affiliates. No Department of Defense or government agency endorsement. © 2024 USAA. 6198900.0124

All the **DAV** and veteran news you need,
delivered straight to your mobile device.



Download the **DAV Digital Magazine** app, or read it online
at dav.org/news-media/dav-magazine.

REUNIONS

ARMY

3RD PLATOON, 501ST MILITARY POLICE COMPANY, BAMBERG, GERMANY (1990-93) July 11-18, 2026, Alaskan Cruise, Contact: SFC Robert Howard, Ph: 407-412-1443, Email: rehoward305@yahoo.com

MARINES

COMPANY H, 2ND BATTALION, 7TH MARINE REGIMENT (VIETNAM, 1965-70) May 29-June 1, Des Moines, IA, Contact: Jerry Moorehead, Ph: 515-999-2690, Email: gmoorehead@msn.com

INQUIRIES

- Searching for anyone with relatives in the 4614 Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron during the early 1960s, Peterson Field, CO, who may have served with my father, Staff Sgt. Abraham L. Baker, or have any pics from that time. Contact: René Baker, Ph: 480-570-5822, Email: blkstar_98_98@yahoo.com

- Searching for Nathan Gerard Broussard, Fort Polk, LA, 1987-90. Contact: Joe Najjar, Email: joenajar@icloud.com
- Searching for hands from USCGC Cape Wash (WPB-95310), home port Monterey, CA, 1970-71. Contact: GM2 Rich, Ph: 920-944-9136, Email: girc715@gmail.com
- Searching for Christopher Reed from Chicago, IL, served in 3rd Platoon, 501st Military Police Company, Bamberg, Germany, 1990-93. Contact: Sgt. 1st Class Robert Howard, Ph: 407-412-1443, Email: rehoward305@yahoo.com
- Searching for decommissioning crew members of USS Barracuda (SST-3), decommissioned in 1973, especially those crew members who attended the decommissioning party held at a rental house in Isle of Palms, SC. Contact: Steven Jonn, Ph: 360-434-4791, Email: jonn@telebyte.com

REUNION STORIES

DAV is interested in stories about veterans who connected via the Reunions section of *DAV Magazine*. If you have a story you would like to share, please email feedback@dav.org.

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



Spread the news! Send photos of your DAV or Auxiliary news to production@dav.org. To be considered for publication, photographs should be at least 3 x 5 inches at a resolution of 300 dpi. Submissions should also include a description of the event, along with the names of those pictured, when applicable. In most cases, submissions are published in the order in which they are received but are subject to editing for clarity, style, accuracy, space and propriety.

39th ANNUAL
NATIONAL DISABLED
VETERANS
WINTER SPORTS CLINIC

2025



MARCH 30–APRIL 5
SNOWMASS VILLAGE, COLORADO

APPLY NOW

Applications are available
at wintersportsclinic.org and
must be completely filled out
and properly signed.

Applications should be mailed to:
VA Western Colorado HCS
Teresa Parks/WSC
2121 North Ave.
Grand Junction, CO 81501

They can also be scanned and
submitted to teresa.parks@va.gov.

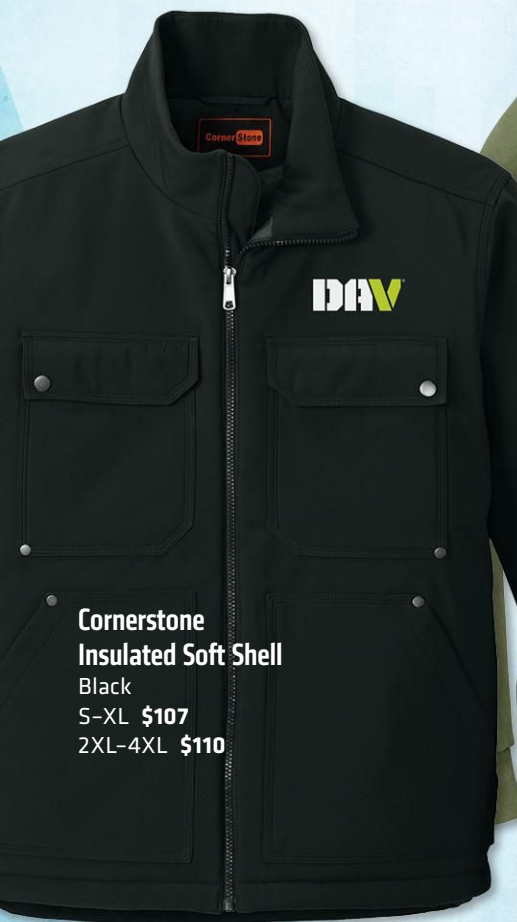
**APPLICATION DEADLINE
IS NOV. 30, 2024**

The National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic is scheduled to return to the mountains of Colorado in 2025, and interested veterans can now submit an application to participate.

The annual event, co-presented by DAV and the Department of Veterans Affairs, will take place March 30–April 5. The clinic is a leader in adaptive winter sports instruction for disabled veterans, promoting world-class health care at a one-of-a-kind rehabilitative event. Known as “Miracles on a Mountainside,” the clinic offers veterans opportunities for self-development and challenge through sports therapy and rehabilitative, adaptive activities including Alpine and Nordic skiing, rock climbing, sled hockey and scuba diving.

Participation is open to U.S. military veterans with qualifying disabilities such as spinal cord injuries, orthopedic amputation, blindness or low vision, and certain neurological conditions. Veterans who currently have inpatient or outpatient status at VA medical facilities will have first priority. ■

Cozy up with some new DAV SWAG FOR THE HOLIDAYS



**Cornerstone
Insulated Soft Shell**
Black
S-XL \$107
2XL-4XL \$110



**Flag Dog Tag
Fleece Crew**
Olive Green
S-XL \$42
2XL-4XL \$45



**Classic Long Sleeve
Pocket Polo**
Navy, Black
S-XL \$35
2XL-4XL \$38



**DAV Custom
Beanie**
\$13



**Skullcandy
Bluetooth
Speaker**
Black | \$49

**LED Flashlight
with Built-In
Tool Set | \$33**



**Ogio
Street Pack**
Duck Brown
\$87

Place your order now at davstore.org