

The background of the cover is a deep blue. A large, clear glass hourglass is centered vertically. The top bulb of the hourglass is filled with a dark, grainy substance. The bottom bulb is partially filled with a bright blue, textured image that resembles a breast ultrasound scan. A fine stream of white sand is falling from the narrow neck of the hourglass into the bottom bulb.

**DAV<sup>®</sup>**

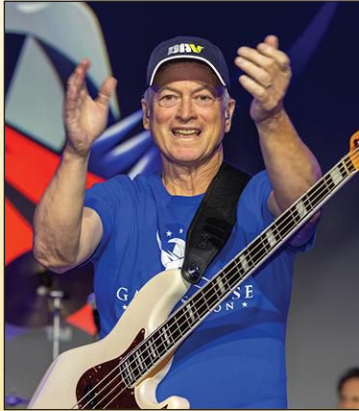
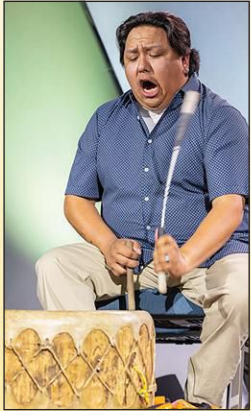
**MAGAZINE**

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2024

# A RACE AGAINST TIME

How DAV-backed  
laws support early  
detection of  
breast cancer

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## From the NATIONAL COMMANDER DANIEL CONTRERAS



### A lifetime of service

**W**hen I enlisted in the United States Army in 1980, I knew that I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself.

The Army's new slogan—"Be all that you can be"—captivated me at the time. And as someone who lived to care for others, I became a medic.

It was not just a job to me but a call to serve. So when I took the Expert Field Medical Test and fell short the first time around, I was heartbroken.

Instead of letting that failure consume me, I used it as motivation to push myself harder at my next opportunity, and as a result, I was among the 12 who graduated out of a starting class of 500 to earn my Expert Field Medical Badge.

That experience taught me many invaluable lessons, but the most valuable one to me was learning how to become a servant leader.

As a servant leader, you prioritize the needs of others over your own. You encourage growth by teaching others to lead and hold yourself accountable for your actions, just as you would for anyone under your command.

When my Army career ended short of the 20-year goal, I thought I might not have the opportunity to be a servant leader again.

But then an old friend and a fellow soldier, Jay Main, reached out to me to see if I needed help with my VA benefits. That encounter reconnected me to the veteran community and reminded me of the sense of camaraderie I experienced in the Army.

Jay offered to help with more than just my VA benefits. He extended the opportunity to serve again, this time under the banner of DAV. In that moment, I rediscovered my sense of purpose and once again was called upon to serve.

An act of service empowers others to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity, and that's exactly what DAV does for veterans, their families and their survivors.

As a proud DAV member and former service officer, I consider it an honor and privilege to serve alongside all of you as your national commander. I promise that I will be a powerful voice for all DAV programs and services and, most importantly, our devoted members.

As I did in the Army, I promise to honor the legacy of something bigger than myself—our beloved organization. I look forward to making a tremendous impact on veterans and their families with all of you in this coming year. ■

**I promise that I will be a powerful voice for all DAV programs and services and, most importantly, our devoted members.**

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#### DAV MAGAZINE • SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2024

Contact us: [dav.org](http://dav.org) • Toll-Free 877-426-2838 • 860 Dolwick Drive, Erlanger, KY 41018 • [feedback@dav.org](mailto:feedback@dav.org). Volume 66, Issue 5, 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](http://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



### Saying farewell to one leader and welcoming another

**D**AV is blessed to have leaders of the highest quality carrying our torch. Top of that list is now-Past National Commander Nancy Espinosa. When she handed the reins over to Commander Dan Contreras at our national convention in Phoenix, she left behind a pioneering legacy of service. Simply put, she is an impeccable example for future national commanders.

Commander Espinosa's unique style of servant leadership and her commitment to advocating for those who historically have been overlooked has left an indelible mark.

The role of DAV national commander is not for the faint of heart, and Commander Espinosa has proven this with her unwavering dedication. Her tenure was marked by numerous achievements, from motivating attendees at the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic and Winter Sports Clinic to sharing her personal story of hardship and hope in DAV's landmark report, *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness*, all while serving as a visible champion and incredibly effective spokesperson.

As the second woman and the first Hispanic woman to hold this esteemed position, Commander Espinosa has blazed a trail for future DAV leaders. Her strength, courage and confidence have been an inspiration to us all, and we are deeply grateful for her selfless contributions to DAV.

As a highly skilled and accomplished leader, she leaves behind impressive shoes to fill, but everyone in DAV should rest assured that Commander Contreras is up to the task. He is a natural caretaker, serving as an Army medic and nurse for 16 years and later as a DAV national service officer and area supervisor. Commander Contreras was ready on day one to continue the hard work, and over the next year, he'll ensure that DAV grows even stronger.

It is bittersweet to say farewell to one leader and welcome another. Saying goodbye is difficult for many reasons, but we wouldn't be the transformative, century-old organization we are without the inspirational and empathetic captains who steer our ship.

As much as our grassroots, DAV wouldn't be what we are today without such thoughtful leaders.

Undoubtedly, those who rise to the position of DAV national commander inspire disabled veterans far and wide.

And let me close with this advice for Commander Contreras: Enjoy the ride. ■

Undoubtedly, those who rise to the position of DAV national commander **inspire disabled veterans far and wide.**

## Women veterans report

The report on women veterans is truly excellent. We recently downloaded it, and we're finding it so valuable. The loss of these brave women to suicide is an absolute tragedy. Thank you for continuing to bring it to light, DAV.  
**Mary Callan, Cardiff, California**

## DAV on PBS

[Air Force] Staff Sgt. Stacy Pearsall's dedication to bringing the stories of our veterans to light is truly commendable. It's crucial that the voices of women veterans are heard and their experiences recognized. The episode of PBS "After Action" with DAV members is a powerful reminder of the strength and resilience of these remarkable individuals. Thank you for your service and for ensuring that no veteran feels invisible.  
**Patrick Tyler, via Facebook**

## Inspired by veteran's journey

In the [March/April issue] article "Thriving after rock bottom," I love Danny Diebold's testimony of overcoming and that DAV was able to assist to keep him housed. Thank you, Danny, for continuing to serve with DAV!  
**Kassandra Benson, Hampton, Virginia**

## Bonds of DAV membership

I love being a part of DAV! The knowledge gained from our senior members is so phenomenal, and the camaraderie is so fulfilling for me. Helping other veterans needs to be a priority.  
**Teresa Wingate, Charleston, South Carolina**

## Member recruitment

The Recruit A Warrior campaign made me want to catch up and see if *DAV Magazine* gave me any materials to sell DAV to my peers.

Let's go and recruit others! It is an election year, so be sure to screen your politicians and let them know about where we stand as veterans. I wish for love, peace and healing.

**Tim Willis Jr., via Facebook**

**Editor's note:** DAV members can easily recruit new members and earn credits through the Recruit A Warrior challenge. Visit [dav.org/warrior](http://dav.org/warrior) to receive your personalized referral link. Members are also invited to enter the DAV Recruiter Rally for a chance to win \$2,500 and travel to the 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Las Vegas Aug. 9–12, 2025. Simply recruit one new member by July 1, 2025, to be entered. Learn more at [dav.org/rally](http://dav.org/rally).

## Gift of volunteering

Volunteering with DAV has not only helped me, but it's also given me the opportunity to help so many other veterans. I am a chapter service officer. Some veterans don't know what DAV is all about, so I take a little extra time to explain what our organization does and invite them to our chapter meetings to check us out. Many veterans are homebound and can't make it into my office to file a claim, so I travel to them. Not only is the veteran thankful but so are their loved ones. My daughters and I also help veterans who are homebound by doing their grocery shopping. We have saved the veterans a lot of money doing this, as the delivery fees are outrageous. My daughters not only help other

veterans but also help me as well. Due to my disabilities, they help me around our home also. They help me with the dishes, laundry, our grocery shopping and all the regular household cleaning. We all love helping other veterans, as it gives us the opportunity to meet new people and hear some great stories.  
**Amy Bahl, Dubuque, Iowa**

## Semper Fi

Don Eck is a DAV lifetime member and benefits advocate for Chapter 66 in Enid, Oklahoma. The talent and willingness he provides for veterans filing their claims would be hard matched. He provides his total loyalty when helping veterans get their benefits and deserves to be recognized.  
**Michael Manley, Ghent, Kentucky**

## DAV Patriot Boot Camp

So grateful for DAV for the Patriot Boot Camp experience we enjoyed in April. When I lost three of my limbs in combat in Afghanistan, I wasn't sure what would become of my life. We started SFH (Still F\*\*\*ing Here) clothing company to inspire survivors like ourselves and to remind the public about the resilience we see in our customers. The mentorship and resources DAV's entrepreneur program provided are just what we needed to take our new mission to the next level. Thanks, DAV, for helping us remind America that veterans of all eras are still bleeping here!  
**Tyler Southern, St. Augustine, Florida**

**WRITE TO US** Please send feedback to DAV Magazine, 860 Dolwick Drive, Erlanger, KY 41018, or via email to [feedback@dav.org](mailto: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.

# LOST in translation



## New legislation would make VA notification letters clearer, less cumbersome

By Matt Saintsing

The Department of Veterans Affairs is charged with not only providing world-class health care, services and benefits to veterans but also keeping them informed. However, too many veterans find VA notice letters difficult to understand, needlessly lengthy and packed with jargon that would challenge the most seasoned code breaker.

But the DAV-backed Clear Communication for Veterans Claims Act (H.R. 7816) would ensure VA notice letters are concise and understandable and they provide sufficient information for veterans to make informed decisions about their claims for VA benefits.

The bill would compel the VA to work with third-party, nonpartisan organizations that would study the notice letters and provide recommendations. It would also require the VA secretary to report to Congress and implement any recommendations.

“VA letters and notices to veterans and their families have become bogged down with legal language,” DAV Deputy National Legislative Director Shane Liermann told lawmakers at an April hearing of the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and

Memorial Affairs. “It is clear that letters are too long, too complex and frustrate veterans attempting to access their earned benefits.”

Lawmakers on the panel agreed. Rep. Morgan Luttrell, who chairs the subcommittee, admitted he struggled to decipher letters he received from the VA.

“The notice letters are supposed to be easy to understand, but the directions are like walking through a maze,” said Luttrell, a retired Navy SEAL.

The VA defended what many say is confusing language in the notifications, with Deputy Chief General Counsel Brian Griffin telling the congressional panel that since claim letters “do get litigated,” they take care to explain their decisions.

But painstaking legal precision comes at a cost for the men and women who served.

“DAV recommends VA take a new look at their letters by concentrating on the language for the reader and not the legal requirements,” Liermann added. “We suggest using focus groups populated with veterans and veterans service organizations to assist in developing language that is understood and clearly conveys information and the intent of the letter.”

The bill cleared the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee in July and is awaiting a vote on the House floor. ■



**Stay Informed**

Join DAV CAN (Commander’s Action Network) at [davcan.org](http://davcan.org) to receive updates on legislation affecting veterans and their families.



# Burned OUT

Caregiving can take an emotional toll. Learn how DAV Caregivers Support can help both caregivers and care receivers.

By Kevin C. Miller

Some family members know that caring for their loved one is predestined, while others are thrust into it. Whether expected or not, the caregiving journey is anything but predictable.

For Darlene Hopper, her experience with her husband, Jesse, a service-connected disabled Army veteran, was both predestined and unexpected.

Jesse's career in the Army ended prematurely because of a tactical vehicle accident. While helping drivers without a clear field of view maneuver around the motor pool, the vehicle Jesse was guiding slipped a gear, causing it to roll back and pin him against another vehicle.

The crushing force from the collision tore his rotator cuff and damaged his shoulder enough to require reconstructive surgery.

"He was just never physically the same after the surgery," said Darlene. "On top of the physical injuries, Jesse had to accept the fact he could not finish his career in the Army, and that was challenging for him."

After leaving the Army, Jesse worked a variety of jobs as a contractor and in the service industry, but his physical and mental health continued to decline. In 2014, he started showing signs of neurocognitive issues, and his doctors at the Department of Veterans Affairs soon diagnosed Jesse with early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's is a progressive disease that involves the deterioration of nerve cells in the brain, which affects thoughts, memory and language. According to the VA, veterans who have sustained a moderate or severe traumatic brain injury or have post-traumatic stress disorder are at a higher risk of developing dementia and/or Alzheimer's.

With that diagnosis, Darlene became a full-time caregiver for her husband.

"As life members of DAV and the Auxiliary, I first reached out to DAV, where a benefits advocate helped us revisit his veteran benefits and file for Individual Unemployability since Jesse could no longer work full time," Darlene said.

In the early stages of the disease, people may need few supportive services, which

Studies have shown  
that over  
**60%**  
of caregivers experience  
symptoms of burnout,  
and most do not know  
where to turn for help.

was the case for the Hoppers. Money was tight, but the additional disability compensation slightly offset the loss of employment income, and thankfully, Jesse had health care through the VA.

As time passed, Darlene continued to care for Jesse and take him to all of his medical appointments. The complexity of his physical ailments, compounded by PTSD and Alzheimer's, took an emotional toll. Darlene experienced fatigue, anxiety and depression—all symptoms of caregiver burnout.

Studies have shown that over 60% of caregivers experience symptoms of burnout, and most do not know where to turn for help. This was no different for Darlene, and living in Montana, resources and help for caregivers can be few and far between.

Undeterred, Darlene continued to look for support for her and her husband both within and outside the VA. Last October, Darlene learned of a new caregiving resource while watching a presentation from the DAV Auxiliary.

The program, DAV Caregivers Support, provides online screening, digital tools and a personalized plan that fit Darlene and Jesse's needs.

"When Darlene first did her initial assessment with us, she had a high acuity and was high risk for burnout," said Terri Nolan, the Hoppers' DAV Caregivers Support specialist. "This meant she needed more frequent touch points and services to help support her."

Jesse had an upcoming back surgery, but his primary care team at the VA was concerned about his mobility and safety at home post-operation. The Hoppers had some large furniture that needed to be removed before they could proceed with the surgery, and with a referral from DAV Caregivers Support, Darlene was connected with a company that was able to assist.

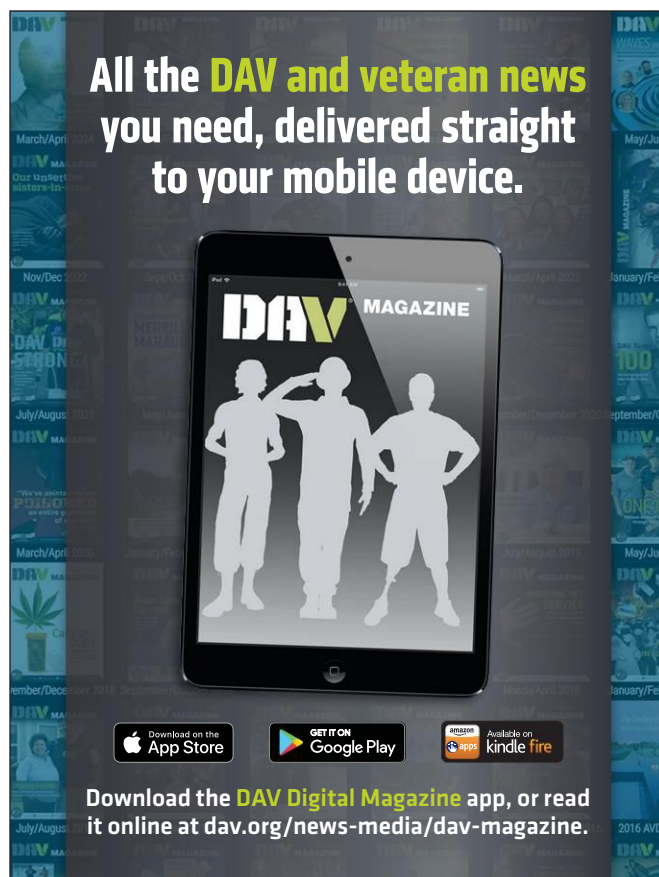
"After we set up the caregiver's personalized plan, it is ever-evolving," Nolan said. "We set up calls about every six weeks to check in and adjust as necessary, but we also informally check in through text as needed."

"I cannot express how wonderful it is to know that, if I need help, all I need to do is reach out by text or call to my care specialist and she will let me know if it's possible and will do anything she can to help," Darlene said. "She is such a blessing to us."

"Caregiving is a noble and often thankless task," said DAV National Service Director Jim Marszalek. "With DAV Caregivers Support, we have the ability to alleviate some of the stresses caregiving can bring, ensure the care receiver can live at home as long as possible and help the caregiver maintain a high quality of life." ■

### For more information

Are you a veteran caregiver or caregiver for a veteran? Learn more about DAV Caregivers Support by visiting [davcaregivers.org](http://davcaregivers.org).



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# VETERAN *influencers*

How online content creators are shaping the conversations around veterans policies, benefits and information that affect you

By Brian Buckwalter

**L**ike many veterans, when Jason left the Marines in 1997, he felt the military's mandatory transition classes left him unprepared to navigate the complex world of veterans benefits.

"[I was] like a deer in headlights," he said. "Not sure where to go. Not sure what to do. Not sure what resources were out there."

At one time, DAV benefits advocates could only attend transition classes when permitted by individual installation commanders. Jason, who asked that his last name not be used to protect his family's privacy, didn't have the chance to hear from a DAV benefits advocate and tried to navigate the process on his own.

His journey—which also included time in the Army National Guard—and its challenges eventually led him to become a state employee working in the veterans benefits arena. Over a decade, he frequently heard stories similar to his about veterans not knowing where to turn to get help.

Jason assisted those he could but had the idea that someone should use YouTube to share veterans benefits information to a broader audience.

He said he just didn't want to be the one to do it.

No one else was doing it either, so he bought a vlogging kit five years ago. He was hesitant to begin, though, so it sat in the corner of his office for two and a half years.

"Then I finally did a video," said Jason. "Once I started, I knew that I couldn't stop because I didn't want to fail. So as soon as I did the first one, I knew I was going to have to have a follow-up and then a follow-up and a follow-up, and it just slowly started to grow to get the word out nationally."

Since Jason published his first video two years ago, his reach has grown steadily; he has more than 115,000 subscribers to his Veterans InfoTap channel on YouTube, and many of his videos get tens of thousands of views or more.

He's no longer alone. Platforms such as YouTube, Spotify and Twitch have ushered in an era when anyone can create content and make it instantly accessible to a global audience with as little as the technology found on a smartphone.

The low barrier to publishing has created an unfathomably crowded online space of entertainment and information sharing. Analysis done by Goldman Sachs Research estimates the online creator space is a \$250 billion industry that could nearly double in the next five years.

Despite the glut of content, some creators—sometimes called influencers—are finding ways to rise above the noise to make their voices heard in niche corners of these platforms to inform and help veterans. Parade Deck, an online network of military and veteran podcasters and content creators, is one of those ways.



*Jason, a veteran and content creator, started Veterans InfoTap as a way to provide information to a broad audience of veterans about VA programs and services.*

“Your stuff is buried in billions of other pieces of content,” said Ricco Player, a retired Marine colonel and Parade Deck’s CEO. “We just provide the platform to amplify what you’re saying.”

Player said helping people discover these niche creators, without having to sift through unwanted noise, facilitates important conversations within these online communities. These conversations can be an important part of the next generation of veterans getting engaged, invested and involved in the work DAV does.

“I think you all lead on policy, and then ... we have the discussion,” Player said. “The more the discussion, the clearer the policies [and] the issues become. ... We want to get someone to the conversation.”

For Jason, the conversations he’s facilitated have garnered a large enough following that he’s now a content creator full time. He posts daily—sometimes several times a day—to his YouTube channel. He’s able to generate some income by offering optional membership tiers to the page.

Similar to Player’s goal for Parade Deck, Jason said he wants to look out for other veterans by providing a baseline understanding of what programs and benefits are available. He doesn’t offer or recommend paid coaching services or claim-filing assistance. Instead, he encourages veterans to go to organizations like DAV for help, which is one reason he is a member.

“What we consistently do is refer veterans to an accredited representative,” he said, noting that in addition to the services being free, accredited representatives’ training and experience ensure people are hearing the right information applicable to their individual circumstances.

DAV, which has long been on YouTube and social media, is expanding its own online presence. One way is through outreach initiatives, such as working with gaming influencers. These creators, who go by names like @HusKerrs and @BaddieStreams, are connected to the military either as veterans themselves or family members of those who served. They use the trust they’ve gained with their audiences to get DAV’s name, mission and services in front of hundreds of thousands of people.

DAV also recently launched a Twitch channel. Twitch is an online platform popular with video gamers who can livestream themselves playing while chatting with their audience. DAV representatives are using this as a way to open up dialogue about DAV’s free programs and services.

“The fact is that these conversations are happening online all the time, whether or not DAV is a part of them,” said Rob Lewis, DAV director of communications. “By joining in, we are tapping into an engaged, informed veteran audience who can better help DAV understand and respond to the issues they are most concerned about. We can also make more veterans aware of how we can help them.”

Jason said he hopes his content doesn’t just add to the conversation but is also a way to get people from the online community involved in the physical community that comes with membership in organizations like DAV. That’s where, he said, veterans can help take care of veterans at the local level.

“It really is a collective. I call it the veterans sphere,” Jason said. “My little sign-off message is ‘If we don’t take care of each other, something went wrong.’” ■

# Meeting veterans



## National commander encourages members to make a difference that will echo for 'generations to come'

By Brian Buckwalter

**M**ore than 2,000 DAV and Auxiliary members and guests gathered in Phoenix for the 2024 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention Aug. 3-6.

Members elected new leadership, recognized volunteers and supporters, passed resolutions to establish the organization's legislative agenda, and attended seminars and workshops to learn about the myriad ways DAV serves ill and injured veterans and their families.

Delegates unanimously elected Daniel Contreras, a service-disabled Army veteran, to take the reins of the organization as DAV's national commander.

Contreras, a member of Chapter 99 in Oxnard, California, said the role is a culmination of a journey that began when he joined the Army in 1980 to answer a lifelong call to help others.

"The idea that we care for our own—that we help people and turn them into people who help others—stayed with me," he said.

*DAV members unanimously elected Army veteran Daniel Contreras as their national commander during the final business session of the convention. Contreras joined DAV in 1999 and is a member of Chapter 99 in Oxnard, California.*

# where they are

The native of Sherman Oaks, California, served 16 years as a combat medic and joined DAV in 1999. He became a DAV benefits advocate in 2000 and a national area supervisor in 2006. He's held positions on the DAV National Executive Committee and the DAV National Service Foundation board of directors. In 2008, he became the Department of California's adjutant and treasurer, roles he still holds.

Contreras encouraged convention attendees to remain steadfast in their support, advocacy and service for all veterans—especially historically underserved populations including women and Native Americans. He acknowledged the challenges DAV faces from a decreasing veteran population that is experiencing growing needs, but he reminded people a growing membership can overcome those challenges through its ability to provide services, meaning and comfort for others.

"Together, we can make a lasting impact and continue to serve our fellow veterans with unwavering dedication and compassion," said Contreras. "Let's inspire others to join in our noble cause, and together, we can make a difference that echoes for generations to come."

As the nation heads full force into an election season, Contreras also reminded attendees to not allow politics and partisan issues to get in the way of the promise DAV keeps to take care of veterans and their families forever changed by service.

"DAV was and is a power broker for veterans. We simply ask our fellow Americans to uphold the promise," he said. "Thank you for making DAV an outlet for your selfless sense of duty. Thank you for serving something bigger than yourselves."

During her report, outgoing National Commander Nancy Espinosa praised DAV and Auxiliary members for their dedication and the advocacy she witnessed at the chapter, state and national levels.

"Having experienced this organization from the ground up, I feel more motivated, inspired and equipped than ever to serve veterans," said Espinosa. "While I fully intend to stay involved in national advocacy, I'm eager to get back to Utah to make my own department and chapter the best they can be."

In addition to Contreras' election, delegates elected other DAV national officers: Senior Vice Commander

Coleman Nee, 1st Junior Vice Commander John Donovan, 2nd Junior Vice Commander Cynthia Madison, 3rd Junior Vice Commander James Procunier, 4th Junior Vice Commander Glenn Hohman, Judge Advocate Michael Dobmeier and Chaplain Debra Varner Dancer.

The DAV Auxiliary elected Christopher Easley as its new national commander, replacing AnnMarie Hurley. The son of a father who served, Easley grew up with the Auxiliary being a significant part of his life. Inspired by the Barry Manilow song "One Voice," he made the theme of his yearlong tenure "one voice united in service."

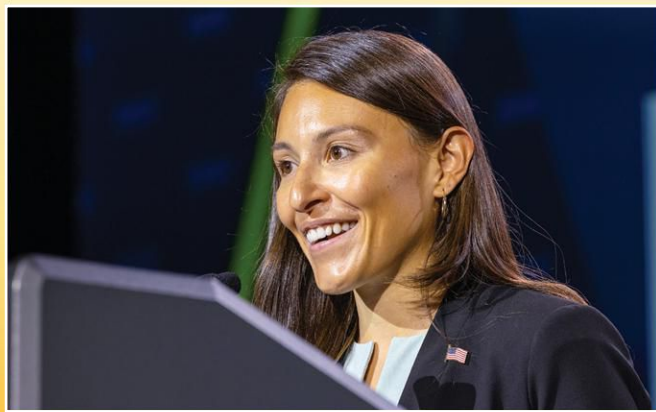
"The song, to me, symbolizes that if we come together and use our one voice united in service, we can make a change and be the shining light needed to guide ourselves and others from the darkness," said Easley.

Other Auxiliary leaders elected were Senior Vice Commander Melissa Pierce, 1st Junior Vice Commander Kathleen Wenthe, 2nd Junior Vice Commander Terry Grabowski, 3rd Junior Vice Commander Carolyn Harris, 4th Junior Vice Commander Jane Casher, Judge Advocate Paula Raymond and National Chaplain Austin Blanton.

## HOLDING LEADERS ACCOUNTABLE

Representatives from President Joe Biden's administration presented during the joint opening session.

Speaking on behalf of the president, Tahina Montoya, who serves as a senior adviser for the White House as a veterans and military engagement liaison and is an Air Force reservist, thanked DAV for the advocacy role its



*Speaking on behalf of President Joe Biden, White House Senior Advisor for Public Engagement Tahina Montoya thanked DAV members for their advocacy and service on behalf of ill and injured veterans.*



members played in improving the lives of ill and injured veterans, their family members and their survivors.

“Our nation owes you and your families a debt of gratitude that we can never fully repay,” Montoya said, reading from the president’s letter. “I have long said that America has many obligations, but only one truly sacred obligation: to prepare those we send into harm’s way and to care for them and their loved ones when they come home.”

After Montoya, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough spoke to convention attendees.

“No one does more for veterans than you. Veterans have no better advocate than you. And [the] VA has no better partner than you,” he said. “You hold us accountable to that sacred obligation that the president talks of.”

McDonough said this accountability was most noticed in DAV’s recent report highlighting the challenges and tailored care needs of women veterans. He praised DAV for the recommendations made in *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness* and committed to integrating the report’s insights into VA programs.

“We’re more determined than ever to providing women veterans with the highest quality, most comprehensive care available, and [the] VA is constantly supporting innovations to deliver that,” said McDonough, noting that 50,000 women veterans enrolled in VA health care last year, the biggest single-year enrollment on record.

## DAV CONVENTION FIRSTS

McDonough also recalled the remarks he made at last year’s convention about bringing more care to more veterans and said this past year continued that trend; the VA is on track to make more than 2.5 million decisions

on claims in 2024. He attributed the increased numbers to the focus the VA has placed on bringing its services to veterans instead of the other way around.

Examples of this include providing mobile VA clinics and using email, text and telemedicine to more easily connect with veterans. A telehealth emergency call program designed to provide veterans with quicker emergency care is in final testing for a nationwide rollout in October.

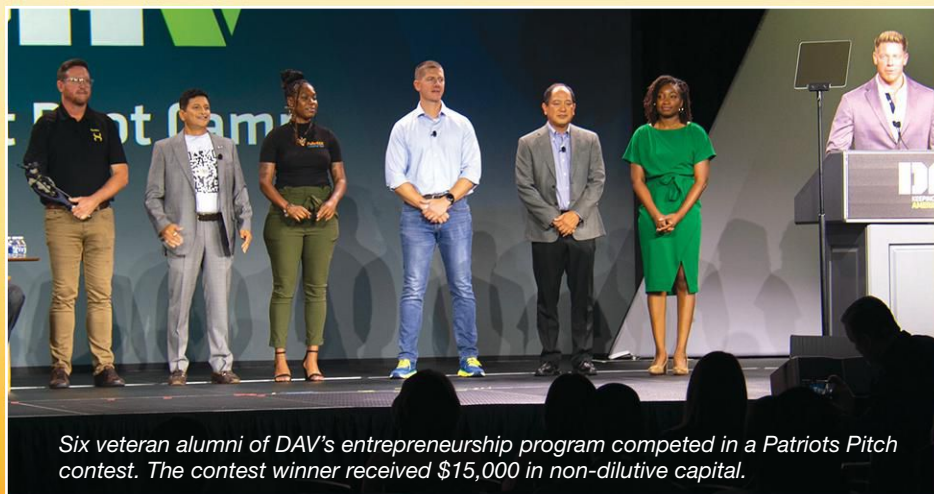
Scott Hope, DAV’s deputy national service director for training, said the VA’s ability to bring its services to veterans was on display in Phoenix. Each year, DAV benefits advocates help attending veterans and those in the community with claims paperwork and powers of attorney. This year, veterans could go through the entire claims process from filing an initial claim to potentially receiving a rating decision during the convention.

“It was pretty amazing,” said Hope.

Once a veteran filed a claim through a benefits advocate, attending VA staff worked to develop the claim. And in a convention first, VA compensation and pension (C&P) exam vendors brought their fully equipped mobile medical units and could do exams for all claims except those that required initial traumatic brain injury screenings. VA staff could take the results from those C&P exams and make a decision on-site.

Hope said the team assisted 262 veterans, filed 103 claims and completed 61 exams. At least nine veterans who filed claims received rating decisions before heading home.

“It was very well received,” said Hope. “To actually get contact that quickly with people who take care of veterans shows that the resources are there to build trust and meet veterans where they are. We’re already working on figuring out how to do this at next year’s convention.”



Another convention first was the DAV Patriots Pitch contest. The hourlong event brought six vetrepreneurs, who are DAV Patriot Boot Camp alumni, to the main stage to make live business pitches and answer judges' questions. The audience then voted on who was most deserving of the \$15,000 prize.

The winner was Marine veteran Jonathan Kuniholm, founder of StumpworX, a company he started to improve arm prosthetic technology.

This convention also commemorated the upcoming 20th anniversary of Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, Iraq. Navy Cross recipient Aubrey McDade, a Marine machine gunner; Jonathan Knauth, a retired Marine combat photographer; Christine Knight, an Army National Guard medic; and Lucian Read, a civilian photographer embedded with the Marines, participated in a moderated discussion on stage.

The Battle in Fallujah is considered the most intense urban fighting the U.S. military has faced since Hue City during the Vietnam War. Each panelist candidly talked about their experiences during the battle and how it affects their lives to this day.

The discussion, as well as a display of Read's, Knauth's and other combat photographers' images from the battle, come ahead of a multimedia project DAV will launch Nov. 1 at fallujahstories.org. The site will share first-person stories of the challenges and victories Fallujah veterans have faced since their experience in 2004.

## RECOGNIZING SERVICE

Other individuals highlighted at the convention include top DAV Scholarship winner Amelia Marcum and Disabled American Veteran of the Year Terry Hillard.

Marcum, a rising senior at Stanford University in California, received a \$30,000 scholarship for her volunteer work developing and writing a Native American veterans resource guide for North Dakota. She is a direct descendant of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and has many relatives who've served, including her grandfather.

"I am passionate about using my education to create economic opportunities for our Native veterans," said Marcum. "Looking ahead, I am excited about the prospect of collaborating directly with DAV to enhance access to VA services, especially for veterans in remote, rural areas."

Hillard, a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War, was honored for his work educating Chicago police, firefighters and emergency medical service workers who've served in our nation's military about VA benefits and the claims process.



**Amelia Marcum** of Denver receives the 2024 DAV Scholarships top prize of \$30,000. She is currently pursuing a degree in economics and international relations from Stanford University in California. Marcum developed and wrote a resource guide for Native American veterans living in North Dakota.

### Additional 2024 DAV Scholarship Winners

|          |                                  |
|----------|----------------------------------|
| \$20,000 | Anushka Kagade, North Carolina   |
| \$15,000 | Zachary Thomase, Arkansas        |
| \$10,000 | Noah Tan, West Virginia          |
| \$7,500  | David Allen, Oklahoma            |
| \$7,500  | Valerie Webster, North Carolina  |
| \$5,000  | Emma Johniken, Texas             |
| \$5,000  | Katrina Campbell, Illinois       |
| \$5,000  | William Graves, Missouri         |
| \$5,000  | Sydney Marker Singhs, Washington |



**Donna Hoffmeier**, senior vice president of strategic communications and advocacy for DAV's long-standing corporate partner **TriWest Healthcare Alliance**, welcomed DAV members and guests to Phoenix, where TriWest is based, and thanked veterans for their service.



**Humana** National Director of Key Relationships **Cara Brown** educated the audience on the company's veteran-focused health care initiatives and continued commitment to supporting veterans through its partnership with DAV.



Retired Maj. Gen. Robert F. Whittle, senior vice president and chief of staff at **USAA**, presented DAV with a \$600,000 donation to further support veterans and their families.



Scott Rumfield and Raymond Allbright from the **Ford Motor Co.** present a check to DAV for \$200,000, representing the cost of five new vehicles for the DAV Transportation Network.



Robert Chisholm, Scott Kilpatrick and Zach Stolz, partners at **Chisholm, Chisholm & Kilpatrick LTD**, present a check to DAV for \$200,000. The law firm began collaborating with DAV in 2008, representing veterans with their appeals before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and the Board of Veterans' Appeals. It's also donated more than \$1.25 million to DAV over the years.

He, along with DAV benefits advocate Carlo Melone, and chapter service officers Eric McLean, Matt Breen and Emily Pecoraro, founded the Chicago Police and Chicago Fire Department Veteran Club. The club's bimonthly meetings started with 50 veterans and have grown to more than 200 first responders who are interested in DAV programs and services.

Hillard, a former Chicago police superintendent, has dealt with health effects from exposure to Agent Orange and contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He said he doesn't want to see any other veterans in first responder roles do what he did and wait to file a claim with the VA.

"My hope is not just a wish, but a call—a call to action. Let's replicate the success of the Chicago model in major cities across the nation," said Hillard. "Wherever veterans are serving their communities, DAV can, and they will, make a difference."

Convention attendees also had opportunities to learn more about specific aspects of DAV's mission. Through seminars and events, they were updated on available services and programs. Many also participated in semiannual committee meetings.

This year marked the 30th anniversary of actor and musician Gary Sinise being recognized by DAV for his portrayal of Lt. Dan Taylor in the Oscar-winning movie "Forrest Gump." Sinise has credited that recognition by then-National Commander Dick Marbes as a major catalyst for his longtime advocacy for disabled veterans.

"So much happened with that film that a lot of things changed for the acting career, but even more importantly to me, it led to my association with the DAV," Sinise said before his performance with the Lt. Dan Band. "We've done some incredible things together. I always say we can never do enough for our veterans and our military families and our first responders, but we can always do a little more."

"This year's convention really showcased our members' commitment to meeting veterans where they are," said National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "I remain in awe at the passion and dedication our members have for serving other veterans and for making sure DAV is set up for success in the coming year." ■



### See you in 2025!

The 103rd national convention is scheduled for Aug. 9–12, 2025, in Las Vegas. Scan the QR code or visit [dav.org/membership-recruiter-rally](https://dav.org/membership-recruiter-rally) to learn how you could win a free trip for two to attend.



# 2024 National Convention Award Highlights



## DISABLED AMERICAN VETERAN OF THE YEAR



Marine veteran **Terry Hillard** (center) accepts the 2024 Disabled American Veteran of the Year award with DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski (left) and then-National Commander Nancy Espinosa (right). A former Chicago police superintendent, Hillard was honored for his work in connecting Chicago first responders with their earned Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.

## AUXILIARY OUTSTANDING MEMBER OF THE YEAR



**Millie Moseley** accepts the DAV Auxiliary's Outstanding Member of the Year award from Auxiliary National Adjutant Bunny Clos (left) and then-Auxiliary National Commander AnnMarie Hurley (right) for her work with Auxiliary Unit 44 in Claremore, Oklahoma. "Caring for people is where Millie shines the most," said Hurley. "Her compassion and willingness to do whatever it takes to make a difference is exactly why the Auxiliary is here."





# 2024 National Convention Award Highlights

## MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT AWARDS



### Judge Robert S. Marx Award

**Department of Minnesota:** Adjutant Butch Whitehead accepts the award, which recognizes the department with the highest percentage increase in fully paid life members over goal.



### Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright Award

**Department of Wyoming:** Adjutant Floyd Watson accepts the award, which recognizes the department that closes the year with the largest percentage increase in total new members.



### Top NSO Recruiter of the Year

**John Rodriguez** of the Chicago office recruited 271 new members. Accepted by Robert Nolibertowicz (pictured).



**Top Member Recruiter of the Year**  
**Shannon Sander** of Chapter 15 in New York recruited 185 new members.



**Membership Recruiters Hall of Fame**  
**Craig Barnes** of the Maryland office recruited 129 new members.



### DIVISION I:

**Department of New York** award accepted by Commander Shannon Sander.



### DIVISION II:

**Department of Missouri** award accepted by Adjutant Michael Elmore.



### DIVISION III:

**Department of Maryland** award accepted by Adjutant Tony Chandler.



### DIVISION IV:

**Department of Connecticut** award accepted by Adjutant Al Church.



### DIVISION V:

**Department of Wyoming** award accepted by Adjutant Floyd Watson.

# 2024 National Convention Award Highlights



## VOLUNTEERS OF THE YEAR



### Volunteer of the Year

As a benefits advocate for the DAV Department of Florida, **John Makas** has logged over 5,900 volunteer hours connecting veterans to the VA benefits they've earned. He's the commander of DAV Chapter 4 in New Port Richey, Florida, and a member of DAV Auxiliary Unit 18 in Bradenton, Florida.



### Auxiliary Volunteer of the Year

Over the last 20 years, **Dorothy Robinson** of Munford, Tennessee, has volunteered nearly 1,400 hours helping veterans and their families. She is the adjutant and the VA volunteer representative for DAV Auxiliary Unit 116 in Munford.

## LOCAL VETERANS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AWARDS



### DIVISION I:

**Department of Virginia (243,618 hours)** award accepted by Adjutant Lisa Gregory.



### DIVISION II:

**Department of South Carolina (391,360 hours)** award accepted by Past Commander Thomas Walls.



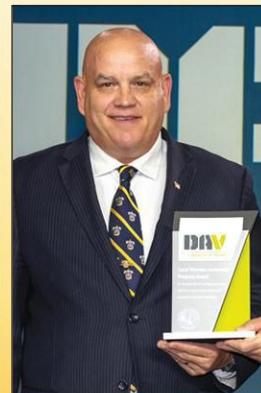
### DIVISION III:

**Department of Wisconsin (77,588 hours)** award accepted by Adjutant John Polk.



### DIVISION IV:

**Department of Nebraska (102,171 hours)** award accepted by Adjutant Jamie Jakub.



### DIVISION V:

**Department of South Dakota (41,926 hours)** award accepted by Adjutant Martin Pennock.



# 2024 National Convention Award Highlights

## ENTREPRENEUR AND EMPLOYMENT AWARDS



### Arthur H. and Mary E. Wilson Award for Top Venture Impacting Veterans

Marine veteran **Joe Smarro** (second from right) was named the 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 community. Smarro, a former San Antonio police officer, founded SolutionPoint+, a crisis-intervention training and consulting firm, in 2017. He and his business partner, Marine veteran Jesse Trevino, accepted the recognition and a \$10,000 check.

## DAV PATRIOT EMPLOYERS OF THE YEAR



### LARGE EMPLOYER: BlueHalo LLC

Senior Director of Advanced Innovations Danny Noles, who is also a Navy veteran, accepts the award. The company offers veteran-centric mentoring and other initiatives, including the Department of Defense SkillBridge Internship Program. More than 1,300 BlueHalo employees identify as veterans, and the company strives to hire 50 veterans every year.



### MIDSIZE EMPLOYER: Aptive

Amelia Poling, director of people operations, accepts the award. A service-disabled, woman-veteran-owned small business, Aptive supports innovative programs across the federal government. Hiring initiatives include veteran recruiters and relocation stipends. About 20% of employees are military community members.



### SMALL EMPLOYER: Arlinghaus Plumbing, Heating & Air Conditioning

Amber Smith, human resources manager, accepts the award. By partnering with various veterans organizations, attending DAV job fairs and offering a no-cost apprenticeship program for candidates without prior experience, Arlinghaus creates a space for veterans to grow with the company.

★ Nominate a company that hires veterans at [patriotemployers.org](https://patriotemployers.org). ★



To view or download photos from the 2024 national convention, visit [flickr.com/theDAV](https://flickr.com/theDAV).



Mammography technician Amanda Shepherd and nurse navigator Candice Phelps consult Air Force veteran Linda Braden before an examination.

# Staying vigilant

Expanded VA access to mammograms could save lives, but patient trust and outreach remain challenges

By Elizabeth DePompei

**R**elief. That was the overwhelming sensation Air Force veteran Krista Jakub felt when she found out the lump in her breast was benign.

Jakub, a DAV chapter service officer and volunteer coordinator in Nebraska, has a family history of breast cancer and has received annual mammograms through the Department of Veterans Affairs since her early 40s.

During a self-exam in February, she felt a lump. Jakub immediately talked to her provider, who ordered a mammogram. When the mammogram didn't find anything, her provider requested an ultrasound for that same day.

"They did find a lump, and then the following week is when I went in to get a biopsy," Jakub said.

It's a scare many women veterans know well. Between 2018 and 2022, there was an annual average of 942 cases of breast cancer among female patients and 89 cases

among male patients within the VA. Research into the overall rate of breast cancer among veterans—both men and women—is limited.

While she waited for the biopsy results, Jakub was referred to an oncologist to get ahead of any potential bad news. At her first appointment with the oncologist, Jakub learned the lump was benign.

"I was overjoyed," she said.

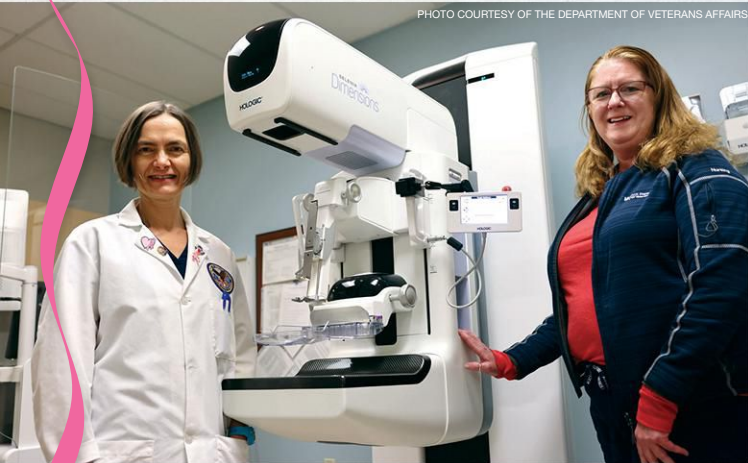
The kind of timely and thorough care Jakub said she received through the VA is the goal for advocates and VA leaders. That's because early and accurate detection of breast cancer has been shown to save and improve lives. And as more women serve in uniform and turn to the VA for their post-military health care, access to high-quality mammograms is more important than ever.

Two DAV-championed laws are getting the VA closer to that ideal, but progress isn't as fast as some would like. As with much of women's health care, resources, outreach and trust remain challenges.

## Expanding access

Enacted into law in June 2022, the Making Advances in Mammography and Medical Options for Veterans (MAMMO) Act called for a three-year pilot program providing tele-screening services. Tele-screenings are meant to improve access to veterans in rural areas or near VA facilities that don't provide in-house mammograms.

## Breast cancer, including male breast cancer, is now considered a presumed service-connected disability for eligible toxic exposures.



**Above:** Dr. Katherine Martin (left), Phoenix VA radiologist and breast imaging service chief, and nurse navigator Candice Phelps show off a mammography machine used daily to perform examinations.



Malloy



Haskell

As of June 2024, 78 out of 157 VA facilities—or less than half—offer in-house mammograms. Dr. Patrick Malloy, the executive director for the VA's National Radiology Program, said that radiology licensing requirements set by the American College of Radiology require mammogram technicians and radiologists to perform a certain number of cases per year to maintain proficiency. To meet those standards, there have to be enough patients—in this case veterans—eligible for those services. Malloy said the National Radiology Program has determined that a facility needs about 3,500 eligible veterans to maintain in-house mammograms.

"It's not the only criteria that we look at," Malloy said. "We do look at the trends in the growth of women veterans at a facility and we do make projections into the future and ... also look at ... if there's any access issues that a facility is having to make a decision on when to activate a new site."

When a VA facility doesn't provide in-house screenings, veterans are referred to community care. The VA estimates that around 40% of mammography screenings are done in the community.

Dr. Sally Haskell, acting chief officer of the VA's Office of Women's Health, said that for many patients, community care is more convenient. That's been the case for Jakub, who said the community care in her area is "top notch."

The downside, Haskell said, is that referring screenings to community care requires more resources.

"It really requires additional staffing for us to make sure that we can appropriately help those patients navigate through the process, get them scheduled, get them to their appointments, get the results back and notify the patients of their results and then ensure that they get the appropriate follow-up care," she said.

All VA sites have a part- or full-time mammography coordinator, Haskell said, but that coordination is sometimes a collateral duty for a single staff member.

With tele-screening services, the mammogram is performed at one site and the results are sent to reading center hubs, aggregating the volume needed to meet licensing requirements. If additional imaging is needed, it would be referred to community care, requiring a higher level of coordination.

As of June 2024, the VA had five tele-screening sites across the country performing more than a combined 400 mammograms a month. Malloy said the VA is looking to add more tele-screening sites in 2025.

The MAMMO Act also expanded access to 3D mammograms, which have been shown to result in better breast cancer detection and decrease the need for additional imaging. Malloy said all of the VA's in-house mammography programs and the five tele-screening sites use 3D mammograms.

### Expanding eligibility

The same day the MAMMO Act became law, so too did the Supporting Expanded Review for Veterans In Combat Environments (SERVICE) Act. The law expands eligibility for mammograms to veterans who served in certain areas with known toxic exposures, such as burn pits, even if the veteran is younger than 45, the recommended age for beginning annual mammograms.

Before toxic-exposed veterans are referred for mammograms, they undergo a templated risk assessment that looks at things like patient history, family history and incidents of toxic exposure. Based on the answers, providers will receive guidance on whether they should order a mammogram or a more detailed assessment.

"It's not completely straightforward, to be honest," Haskell said. "We really try to counsel the patients on the risks and benefits, and then the patient and provider together would make a decision."

Haskell said the VA has estimated around 51,000 veterans are eligible for a breast cancer risk assessment under the SERVICE Act. As of June 2024, providers had reached out to roughly 25,000 of those veterans and offered the risk assessment to around 10,000. About 8,500 of those veterans actually received a risk assessment.

"It's a little slower than we'd like, but we're continuing to push," Haskell said.

"I think we'll gradually get there."

Meanwhile, Haskell said the link between toxic exposure and breast cancer among veterans remains unclear, but that research is ongoing.

Breast cancer, including male breast cancer, is now considered a presumed service-connected disability for eligible toxic exposures.

## Continued vigilance

Jakub said she never misses an annual mammogram and is grateful for the VA.

"I would not go to any other place for my medical care. I've tried [privately purchased] care in the community and it just—I love the VA here," she said.

While many women veterans share that sentiment, others have a hard time trusting a health care system in which they haven't always felt welcomed or safe.

In response to a social media post about the VA's mammography services, Tiffany Koehler, an Army veteran and commander of DAV Chapter 19 in Milwaukee, said she "cannot fathom utilizing the VA for an intimate examination."

"For me, the anxiety comes directly from being in service," Koehler said. "Many of us women, you know, sometimes we were just one of the very few women in our units or a battalion, and just sometimes even walking in the chow hall filled with men and all eyes turn to you and it's just kind of like, you relive those experiences when you walk into a VA."

Koehler added that she experienced military sexual trauma (MST), which can include assault and harassment during service. Of women who use VA health care, 1 in 3 reported having experienced MST. A 2022 report from



Krista  
Jakub

Tiffany  
Koehler

the VA further showed that 25% of women veterans who regularly used VA primary care experienced inappropriate or unwanted comments or behaviors by male veterans on VA grounds.

"Of course, we are very concerned about wanting to make sure that women veterans always feel safe, feel respected, feel like they belong at the VA," Haskell said.

Haskell said the VA works hard on its environment of care to ensure safety and privacy. Providers also practice trauma-informed care that considers that many veterans have complex trauma histories.

"And that's really ensuring that ... all of our employees recognize that patients' trauma can impact how they sort of experience the health care system. And we want to make sure that they always feel that they're in control," Haskell said.

Every VA facility has an MST coordinator to help survivors access care, as well as a women veterans program manager dedicated to advising and advocating for female patients. Additionally, veterans can contact the VA's Women Veterans Call Center at 855-829-6636 for help navigating services.

DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem applauded the significant progress the VA has made in recent years to better serve women veterans and provide quality, comprehensive and gender-specific care.

"DAV celebrates the recent expansions in breast health care and will continue to work alongside [the] VA to ensure women can access timely and potentially lifesaving mammograms," Ilem said. "We will also continue to monitor the implementation of these laws and listen to veterans' experiences to inform our advocacy efforts." ■



### Learn More Online

Learn more about what DAV does for women veterans at [davgov.womenveterans.org](https://davgov.womenveterans.org).

# EXPLORING PSYCHEDELICS ABROAD

Desperate for healing, veterans are increasingly going outside the US for mental health treatment

By Matt Saintsing



**B**lake was in turmoil. He was constantly angry and anxious, but his temper was particularly sharp around his son.

“He was absolutely beautiful and perfect, and I’d get angry that I couldn’t help him,” said Blake, a Marine veteran who asked DAV not to print his real name due to his civilian career.

After welcoming another child, his anger returned with a much shorter fuse. That’s when Blake began researching alternative therapies.

He began with meditation, yoga and exercise to help balance out his feelings. Then Blake saw an advertisement online from an organization called Heroic Hearts.

“I went to the website and found they do retreats for veterans, both ayahuasca and psilocybin,” he said.

A recent explosion of interest has encircled psychedelics and their potential medical use. Psychoactive drugs like psilocybin—the active compound in psychedelic mushrooms—LSD and MDMA have long been Schedule 1 drugs but are now being investigated for their potential healing properties, particularly for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other mental health conditions affecting veterans.

Several studies have linked these compounds with positive results, causing an increase in individuals seeking them to treat their health issues.

“When we see the issue or the friction point, we’re not just going to sit there and provide covering fire,” Blake said. “We’re going to be aggressive, and that’s what I think psychedelic therapy is all about.”

He attended a Heroic Hearts retreat in Jamaica. He is among more than 1,000 veterans and spouses who have reduced or eliminated their PTSD symptoms through Heroic Hearts, according to the organization’s website. Retreats take place in Peru and Mexico, in addition to Jamaica, all countries where psychedelic compounds are permitted.

“My nonprofit shouldn’t exist,” said Jesse Gould, a former Army Ranger who served in Afghanistan and the founder of Heroic Hearts. “There’s something massively wrong with the system that people [are] Google searching for lifesaving care and abandoning free health care through the VA to go to other countries.”

However, that care doesn’t come without potential risks. Psychedelic treatment centers outside the U.S. are not required to adhere to the strict, rigorous guidelines that American medical providers are.

“Because it is in this world where there’s minimal or no regulations, people are sort of on their own to figure that out,” Matthew Johnson, a Johns Hopkins psychedelics researcher, told Salon.

Gould is clear that Heroic Hearts is not administering

“There’s something massively wrong with the system that people [are] Google searching for lifesaving care and abandoning free health care through the VA to go to other countries.”

—Jesse Gould, former Army Ranger and founder of Heroic Hearts

psychedelic substances but connecting veterans with established psychedelic retreat centers that have historical, Indigenous traditions.

“It just indicates how flawed the system is,” he added.

The system hadn’t worked for Blake. He left military service after three combat deployments and fell quickly into drinking and self-medicating. He dropped out of college after three days.

“I sought help with the VA, I sought some outside counseling, but it was never anything that really resonated with me,” Blake said. “I look back, and there’s all these things; it’s like I saw some of the trauma, but I didn’t acknowledge it.”

By the time he booked the trip to Jamaica, Blake was desperate for healing. His psychedelic experience began with breathing exercises and meditation while blindfolded. After ingesting the dose of psilocybin, seemingly never-ending colorful patterns appeared. The visuals were intense, but as the trip proceeded, he removed his blindfold and began thinking of his family.

He felt a chain and imagined himself like the Greek titan Atlas, who crouches underneath a globe that is balanced on his shoulders.

“I felt like I can’t let go, and then all of a sudden, there was just a moment of the weight released, and it was free,” Blake said.

It was a meaningful experience completely different from what he thought, although any long-lasting positive effects remain unknown.

Psilocybin has been designated a “breakthrough therapy” by the Food and Drug Administration. This priority review is granted if preliminary clinical trials indicate safety and effectiveness for major depressive disorder.

Challenges remain not only for would-be patients but also for researchers and companies looking to market psychedelics. In August, MDMA was rejected by the FDA, which had previously granted the chemical as a breakthrough for PTSD. The decision was the first time the FDA considered a Schedule 1 psychedelic for

medical use. It would have been the first new PTSD medication in more than 20 years and would have allowed the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide access to a treatment currently out of reach within the United States.

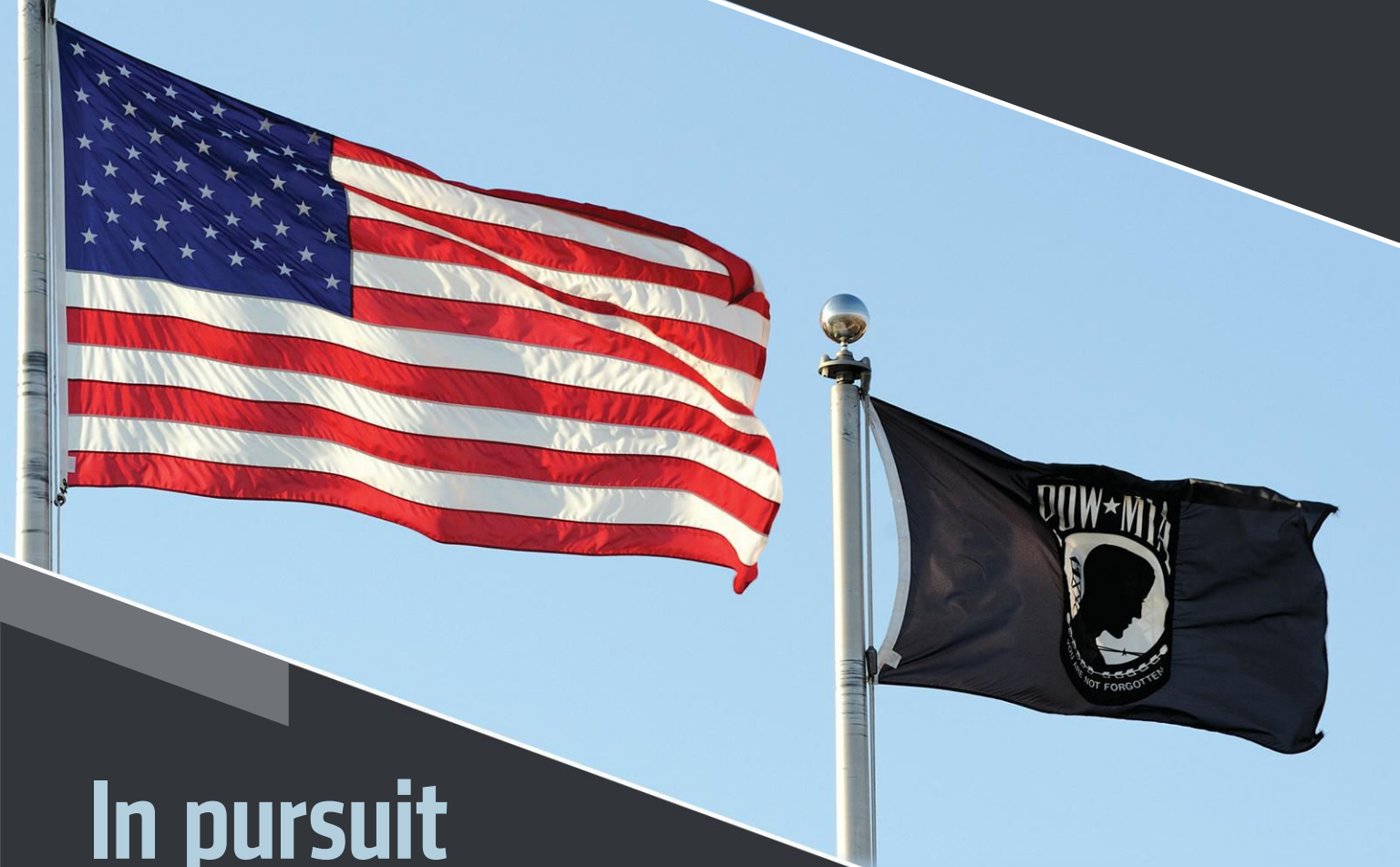
Other studies have supported the benefits of psychedelic use, particularly when paired with a psychological intervention. These compounds can catapult consciousness into an altered state, making research less clear-cut than other medications.

Offering psychedelics as treatment options remains highly restricted or prohibited in many places in the United States. However, laws and policies are evolving, and Heroic Hearts legally conducted its first retreat in the United States earlier this year.

DAV members approved a resolution to support legislation directing the VA to research psychedelics and, if approved, make treatments available for veterans with mental health conditions and traumatic brain injury. ■



Former Army Ranger and Afghanistan War veteran Jesse Gould launched a nonprofit to connect veterans with psychedelic mental health treatments abroad.



# In pursuit of the fullest accounting possible

Q&A with DPAA director sheds light on efforts to bring missing Americans home

By Matt Saintsing

For the past seven years, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Kelly McKeague has led the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), the organization within the Pentagon tasked with providing the fullest possible accounting of missing American service members. The DPAA sends teams to dozens of countries in the hopes of finding, identifying and repatriating American remains to their families.

McKeague is responsible for policy, control and oversight of all aspects of the Department of Defense program to account for missing personnel from past conflicts.

DAV sat down with McKeague earlier this year. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



### **Can you briefly describe the DPAA's mission?**

We as a military, as a nation, sent men and women off into harm's way. When they did not come home, it's that fulfillment of that warrior ethos to never leave a fallen comrade behind. We are the embodiment of that moral promise of searching for, finding, hopefully identifying remains for the purpose of repatriating them to their families.

### **What does it mean to provide the fullest accounting possible for those who remain missing or unaccounted for?**

There are currently 82,000 Americans still missing. The fullest possible accounting is doing the research, hopefully finding an area where we can then send a field investigation team to find remains, and then bringing them back to one of two laboratories for the purpose of accounting for them so that they're no longer missing. And, more importantly, returning them to their families for a full military honors burial.

### **How does the DPAA go about finding and locating individuals? Do you have to partner with a host nation?**

We work in 46 different countries all over the world. We are emboldened and beholden to the host nation simply because we need access. Oftentimes, they're affording not only access but assistance. We have a team in Kuwait today that is there working hand in glove with the Kuwaiti Navy. They've been very generous in providing platforms, divers, equipment, fuel and making this Operation Desert Storm mission a success.

### **What can you tell me about the men and women doing this type of work—the teams that are going and recovering, bringing information and remains back?**

The excavation team is made up of 725 individuals: 55% are civilians and the rest are military service members that come from all four branches. We have divers, we have mountaineers, EOD technicians, linguists, medics—basically, everything that you can imagine that you need for a 15-person team to be deployed in a remote, austere area and function over 45 to 60 days.

**In 2018, there were dozens of U.S. remains that were given to us from North Korea. But I have to imagine that North Korea is not the strong partner we like to have. Can you walk me through how this happened?**

I mentioned 46 countries, all of them willingly and responsibly working with the United States, even China. North Korea is one of the exceptions, and it's unfortunate because, of the 7,500 missing from the Korean War, 5,300 are in North Korea.

[When they turned over remains in 2018], they said it was 55 service members. It turned out to be 501 bones, 250 different individuals.

### **What is done at the DPAA laboratories in Hawaii and Nebraska?**

They are the preeminent forensic human skeletal labs in the world, even surpassing FBI's, in my biased view. Utilizing seven lines of evidence, we partner with the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory at Dover.

Your collarbone, your clavicle is as unique as a fingerprint. If the scientists have the chest X-rays that the service member took when they entered the service and we find a clavicle in the field, they've developed this algorithm that sorts all 60,000 X-rays.

The other interesting thing is isotope analysis.

What you ate, what you drank as an infant, as a toddler stays with you for life. It becomes a marker. So, such that if we find a set of remains and we do an isotopic analysis, we can determine, did you grow up in the Midwest? It's a cheaper and faster test than DNA. And oftentimes we can help segregate, if not contribute, to the identification.

### **What else should people know about the DPAA?**

When I first became associated with the mission, I thought, surely 60, 70, 80 years have passed, families have moved on. Absolutely not.

There's a void in mind and heart that follows the family generationally. They know everything about the loss. They know that their grandfather died in battle on this day. But the uncertainty of not having remains leaves an exacerbated grieving.

It's also one where communities become engaged. Veterans come out en masse to pay their tribute to an American hero lost for decades that's now coming home. ■



**Learn More Online**

To learn more about the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, go to [dpaa.mil](https://dpaa.mil).



## DAV Commanders and Adjutants Association gathers to learn, network

**T**he annual DAV Commanders and Adjutants Association orientation was held in July at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky. During the multiday event, dozens of state-level leaders from across the nation learned the tools and proven techniques necessary to enhance their leadership abilities and organizational knowledge.

The annual orientation provides education about DAV programs and services through presentations from national staff. Association members also get the chance to share with each other their best practices and lessons learned. The event is scheduled in early

summer to welcome and educate newly elected commanders and newly appointed leaders in other positions.

“It is crucial that DAV leaders at every level are familiar with our evolving programs and services and how they each support our larger mission,” said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. “The training, networking and resources offered during orientation help prepare new and returning leaders for another year of service in their communities. It’s also a special opportunity to learn from each other and reignite our shared passion for veterans and their families.” ■



**Spread the news!** Send photos of your DAV or Auxiliary news to [production@dav.org](mailto:production@dav.org). Photos should be at least 3 x 5 inches at 300 dpi. Please include a description of the event and 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.

## From the AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER CHRISTOPHER J. EASLEY



### ‘All it takes is one voice’

**T**hank you for electing me to serve as the DAV Auxiliary national commander! It's my highest commitment to be your voice so that we can achieve our shared goals. When we work together as members of one community, with one voice, I know that we can accomplish great things.

Being a part of DAV and the Auxiliary is in my blood.

While my mother was pregnant with me, she experienced labor pains a couple of months before my due date and went to the hospital. At the same time, my grandfather, a World War II Army Air Corps veteran and DAV member, was sick in the same hospital. Tragically, he died while my mother was still having labor pains.

The local DAV commander arrived at the hospital and began helping my grandmother so she could focus on her grief and family. My grandmother always felt she owed DAV for the help and support she received. So, before I was even a month old, she bundled me up and took me to my first DAV meeting.

Although I couldn't officially join the Auxiliary until 2005, I grew up with the DAV Auxiliary in Alamo Unit 5 in San Antonio. Besides taking care of us, the men and women of the DAV chapter and unit also taught me what it means to be an American. They became my family.

That sense of family is what I enjoy most about the Auxiliary. Everywhere I've been in life, the Auxiliary has been there for me, and now it's my turn to give back to my family.

I'm a big fan of music, and since our last national convention, I've had an earworm in my head—a Barry Manilow song from 1979, “One Voice.” This 45-year-old tune is still relevant to the Auxiliary and helps explain how we serve our family of veterans best.

The first few lines of the song talk about hearing one voice, alone in the dark. And how that one voice speaks for others.

The way I see it, the Auxiliary is that one voice. When we welcome someone into our family, our voice grows louder. Our voice has clarity, consistency and constancy. We use our voice for those who can't use their own.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.”

This next year, I plan on using my voice loudly. I hope you will join me. ■

Our voice  
has clarity,  
consistency  
and constancy.  
**We use our  
voice for those  
who can't use  
their own.**

# Running the Election Day engine

Poll workers fill a critical role to keep voting stations open and accessible to veterans



By Brian Buckwalter

**A**s the next national election approaches, an acute shortage of poll workers could make it difficult for some people—including veterans—to vote, negatively affecting DAV's legislative advocacy mission.

The National Conference of State Legislatures reports that the shortages have gotten worse over the years because of issues such as inadequate pay, poll worker harassment and partisan balance requirements.

Poll workers are the engine that powers elections in the United States, and it takes about 1 million people to fill these roles each election cycle, according to Dan Vallone, the director for the 2024 Vet the Vote campaign.

Vet the Vote, which is not affiliated with DAV, is an initiative started in 2022 to recruit veterans to serve in these positions. So far, for the 2024 election cycle, they've recruited more than 135,000 election poll workers from the veterans and military family community, exceeding their original goal of 100,000 volunteers.





Since the U.S. Constitution places the authority to administer elections at the state and local levels, the responsibility to triage poll worker shortages is in the hands of local election officials, often at the county level, Vallone said. These shortages could force officials to close one voting location to properly staff another, making it difficult or impossible for some voters to get to the polls.

“It increases the burden that somebody faces to drive to a polling location to exercise their right as an American to vote,” he said, noting rural areas are among the most affected places.

When veterans aren’t able to vote, DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem said, it can contribute to perpetuating a misguided theory that veterans don’t base their votes on veterans’ issues. This, as DAV Resolution No. 036 notes, could result in lawmakers targeting veterans programs for spending cuts and service reductions.

“Elections have consequences,” Ilem said. “And our ability to advocate for ill and injured veterans rests on our members being able to vote.”

Ilem said when DAV members exercise this right, they strengthen the organization’s broader legislative process that includes DAV resolutions, one-on-one conversations with lawmakers and grassroots advocacy through DAV CAN (Commanders Action Network).

Vallone, who served in the Army, said one solution to address the poll worker shortage is for veterans to sign up to help. Different than a poll watcher, which is a partisan activity, poll workers fill a civic role of staffing voting locations and facilitating the process on election days.

Vallone said veterans are naturally a great fit for the job, in part, because they are more inclined to be civically

## Different than a poll watcher, which is a partisan activity, poll workers fill a civic role of staffing voting locations and facilitating the process on election days.

engaged compared with nonveterans. Also, election officials say they value veterans’ military experience with logistics and leadership and their ability to follow strict protocols.

“It makes elections run so much better,” Vallone said. “People feel more confident in the process.”

Veterans he talks to tell him they’ve found the experience to be fulfilling because it gives them an opportunity to once again serve their communities.

Ilem said any DAV member who wants to serve as a poll worker can but must do so as a private citizen, not as a representative of DAV. Governed by its own constitution and bylaws, DAV

is a nonpolitical and nonpartisan organization and must maintain that integrity so it can continue to serve in the best interests of its members.

“We want to see serving as a poll worker become a civic tradition among the veteran community,” Vallone said, “that this is just something that we do: We step forward after we have completed our military service. We step in and enable our communities to run elections in the highest integrity way possible.”

People interested in serving as poll workers should check with their county’s department of elections for specific requirements and information on how to apply. ■



### For more information

DAV members should review DAV’s election do’s and don’ts for election season guidance at [dav.org/electionyear\\_dosdents\\_2024](https://dav.org/electionyear_dosdents_2024).

Members can also always contact the national legislative team if they have any concerns or questions at [legislativepublic@davmail.org](mailto:legislativepublic@davmail.org).





## From the NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

JOY J. ILEM

### Election year do's and don'ts

**V**eterans have been protecting American freedoms since before the birth of our nation. They've defended democracy and our way of life, which includes our free and fair elections. As service members transition back to civilian life, many aspects of their lives change. But they retain perhaps the most important title of all—citizen.

Voting is a patriotic duty not to be taken lightly. Engaging in the political process ensures that our voices are heard when choosing who can best represent us. With our next election right around the corner, it's an excellent time to revisit your responsibilities as DAV members when you participate in political activities.

First, we urge you to register and vote to support the candidates of your choice. Veterans voted at a higher rate than the general civilian population in 2020, for good reason. When we vote this year, we select representatives, senators and the president—all of whom greatly influence policy related to veterans benefits and health care. Attending rallies, forums and town hall meetings is a superb way to stay engaged and is your absolute right as an American citizen and a wartime-disabled veteran.

However, these activities must be undertaken as individuals and not in the name of DAV.

As members of a century-old, nonpartisan, grassroots veterans service organization, our responsibility is to ensure we don't give the appearance that DAV is supporting a particular candidate over another. Most of us can't hide our disabilities, nor should we, but something as simple as wearing DAV hats and shirts during political activities can cause damage to the organization.

Supporting or opposing a candidate for office in the name of DAV violates our congressional charter, national constitution and bylaws, and the laws and regulations governing DAV's tax-exempt status. Beyond that, it would diminish DAV's overall trust, greatly limiting our effectiveness.

It's no secret that we live in an era of intense political polarization. But it's important to remember that we can lose our good standing as an organization if we wear DAV-branded clothing at partisan political events.

That's not to say we can't engage with candidates for office. DAV members and chapters are encouraged to hold open candidate forums or town hall meetings—just make sure all candidates are invited. This provides an opportunity to learn more about those asking for your vote and directly influence those who may have a say in policy and benefits affecting veterans.

And never forget that while DAV provides free services to all veterans, our legislative goals focus on improving the lives of wartime-disabled veterans, their families and their survivors.

I urge you to get involved, continue carrying our torch and participate in the very system you helped preserve. Just be mindful when you do. ■



To review DAV's election do's and don'ts, scan the QR code or visit [davy.org/electionyear\\_dosdents\\_2024](https://davy.org/electionyear_dosdents_2024).

## VA care and benefits access expanded to some previously denied



■ In April, the Department of Veterans Affairs posted a final rule amending its regulations regarding character of discharge determinations, expanding access to VA care and benefits for some former service members discharged under other-than-honorable conditions or by special court martial.

The VA's new regulation expands access to care and benefits for certain former service members with other-than-honorable and bad-conduct discharges. The VA character of discharge determination does not change the military's characterization of service and has no effect on the former service member's military discharge status. The VA's determination is for VA benefits and services eligibility only.

This opens the door for previously denied service members to reapply for VA benefits and services. If you have been previously denied VA benefits and services because of your discharge status, DAV benefits advocates can help you file for a character of discharge determination. Please contact your nearest DAV service office by visiting [benefitsquestions.org](https://benefitsquestions.org).

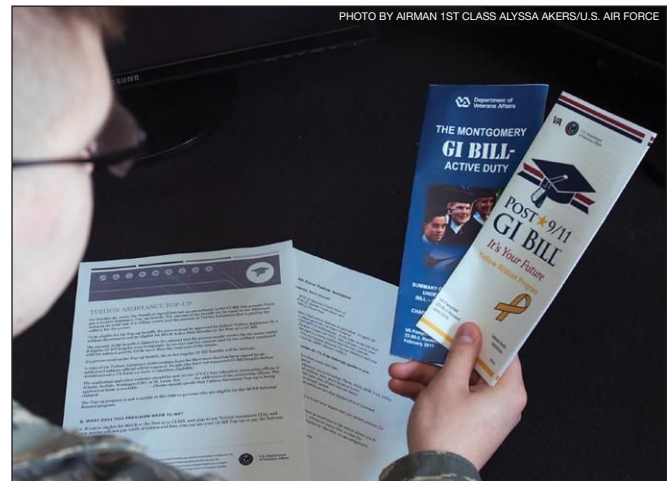
## Veteran wins Supreme Court battle over GI Bill benefits

■ In April, with a 7–2 decision, the Supreme Court ended a nine-year legal battle fought by Army veteran Jim Rudisill, who sued the Department of Veterans Affairs for wrongfully denying him the GI Bill education benefits he earned since he served both before and after 9/11.

The Montgomery GI Bill program, the predecessor to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, offers far less money but still can provide several thousands of dollars to veterans for tuition costs if they paid into the program at the start of their military service.

Currently, the VA makes students give up eligibility for the Montgomery GI Bill when they register to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill. That means once they exhaust the benefit, they cannot receive support from the other program.

Lawyers for Rudisill estimated as many as 1.7 million veterans nationwide could benefit from the ruling, but federal officials have estimated the number to be less than 30,000 individuals.



**Learn More Online**

If you have questions about your education benefits, please contact your nearest DAV service office by visiting [benefitsquestions.org](https://benefitsquestions.org).

## DAV National Officers 2024-2025

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**Daniel Contreras, California\***

Senior Vice Commander

**Coleman Nee, Massachusetts\***

1st Junior Vice Commander

**John Donovan, Arkansas**

2nd Junior Vice Commander

**Cynthia Madison, Virginia**

3rd Junior Vice Commander

**James Procnier, North Carolina**

4th Junior Vice Commander

**Glenn Hohman, Arizona**

National Judge Advocate

**Michael Dobmeier, North Dakota\***

National Chaplain

**Debra Varner Dancer, Alabama**

Past National Commander

**Nancy Espinosa, Utah\*\***



**Front row, from left:** Glenn Hohman, Nancy Espinosa, Daniel Contreras, Debra Varner Dancer **Back row, from left:** James Procnier, John Donovan, Cynthia Madison, Michael Dobmeier, Coleman Nee

\*Board of Directors

†Board of Directors Chairperson

## DAV NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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Francis F. Whitty, Massachusetts

Alt: Deb Olson, Massachusetts

### District 2

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Alt: Shannon L. Sander, New York

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Alt: Lisa Sloan, Vermont

### District 4

Mark Donberger, Delaware

Alt: Ronnie Maeby Sr., Connecticut

### District 5

Leonard M. Johnson, Pennsylvania

Alt: David M. Gui, Pennsylvania

### District 6

Nachee Miller, District of Columbia\*

Alt: Jorge Cruz, Puerto Rico

### District 7

Mary Ann Keckler, Florida

Alt: Thomas Ayala, Florida

### District 8

Michael Lee Harman III, Tennessee

Alt: Barbara Gilliam, Tennessee

### District 9

Leon Booker, Georgia

Alt: Robert Solomon, Georgia

### District 10

Ricky Barenbrugge, Michigan\*

Alt: Lolita Tucker, Michigan

### District 11

Dennis F. Hanneman, Ohio

Alt: James M. Bailey, Ohio

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Alt: Eric Huckaby, Illinois

### District 13

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Alt: Bob Carnagey, Indiana

### District 14

Scott Berndt, Minnesota

Alt: Ellsworth Fields, Minnesota

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David C. Gerke, Missouri\*

Alt: Jamie Jakub, Nebraska

### District 16

Michael Kerr, California

Alt: Enrique Ramos, California

### District 17

Jerry D. Estes, Utah\*

Alt: John Carmona, Colorado

### District 18

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Alt: Ronald Cox, Arizona

### District 19

Brigitte G. Marker, Washington

Alt: Wanda S. Janus, Oregon

### District 20

Paul Shook, Texas

Alt: James Green Jr., Texas

### District 21

VACANT

Alt: Anna Schermer, Oklahoma

## Auxiliary National Officers 2024-2025



**Front row, from left:** Carolyn Harris, Melissa Pierce, Kathleen Wenthe, Paula Raymond  
**Back row, from left:** Austin Blanton, Christopher J. Easley, AnnMarie Hurley, Terry Grabowski

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**Christopher J. Easley, Oklahoma**  
 Senior Vice Commander  
**Melissa L. Pierce, Iowa**  
 1st Junior Vice Commander  
**Kathleen Wenthe, Louisiana**  
 2nd Junior Vice Commander  
**Terry Grabowski, New York**  
 3rd Junior Vice Commander  
**Carolyn F. Harris, Alabama**  
 4th Junior Vice Commander  
**Jane Casher, Kentucky**  
 National Judge Advocate  
**Paula K. Raymond, Illinois**  
 National Chaplain  
**Austin Blanton**  
 Past National Commander  
**AnnMarie Hurley, Massachusetts**

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Janet M. Pratt, Massachusetts

Alt: Nancy J. Ferullo Hoey, Massachusetts

### District 2

Josephine "Nancy" Rivera, New York

Alt: Brandon A. Mott, New York

### District 3

Erin P. O'Brien, Maine

Alt: Karen Rediker, Vermont

### District 4

Linda S. Applegate, New Jersey

Alt: N/A

### District 5

Loretta J. Nosko, Pennsylvania

Alt: Beverly A. Spicer, Pennsylvania

### District 6

Jacque R. DuBose, Maryland

Alt: Amy Bowser, Virginia

### District 7

Amie Raber, Florida

Alt: Rose A. McGinnis, Florida

### District 8

Donald R. Harris, Alabama

Alt: Linda Steadman, Alabama

### District 9

Ann Wilner, South Carolina

Alt: Yvonne Cunningham, South Carolina

### District 10

Kimberly A. Olinger, Michigan

Alt: Anissa M. Rader, Michigan

### District 11

Carol S. Parker-Park, Ohio

Alt: Darlene M. Hanneman, Ohio

### District 12

Karen Eccles, Illinois

Alt: Evelyn Couture, Illinois

### District 13

Terri S. Young, Indiana

Alt: Arthur Frauendorfer, Indiana

### District 14

Nancy A. Berndt, Minnesota

Alt: LeeAnn B. Karg, Minnesota

### District 15

Danny Pierce, Iowa

Alt: Ashley M. Temps, Missouri

### District 16

Joel F. Adema, California

Alt: Deborah Adema, California

### District 17

June Schow, Utah

Alt: Susan Miller, Colorado

### District 18

Holly Mulnix, Arizona

Alt: Jonnie Clairday, Arizona

### District 19

Phyllis "Diane" Mason, Idaho

Alt: Freddie M. White, Idaho

### District 20

Sharon K. Thornton, Texas

Alt: Elaine R. Moreland, Texas

### District 21

Kimberly Stake, Arkansas

Alt: Vera Hendrickson, Arkansas



Burgos

## Deputy Inspector General

■ **Ryan Burgos** was appointed deputy inspector general at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, effective Aug. 6. In this capacity, Burgos will assist the inspector general to ensure compliance with the DAV National Constitution and Bylaws; protect and preserve the integrity and good name of DAV; and ensure compliance for solicitation and fundraising activities conducted by DAV state-level departments, chapters and subordinate entities.

Burgos joined the DAV professional staff as a national service officer apprentice in Hawaii in 2011 and was later promoted to supervise the national service office in Waco, Texas. He was appointed assistant national employment director in 2022 and national employment director in 2023.

A Texas native, Burgos is a service-connected veteran of the Iraq War who served in the Air Force from 2005 to 2007 and the Army from 2007 to 2011. He is a life member of Chapter 19 in Kentucky. He holds a bachelor's degree with a concentration in business management from the University of Phoenix Hawaii campus in Kapolei. Burgos and his spouse, Bonnie-Lee, have three children.



Retzer

## Deputy National Legislative Director for Health

■ **Jon Retzer** was appointed deputy national legislative director for health at DAV Washington Headquarters, effective Aug. 6. In this capacity, Retzer will support DAV's advocacy efforts regarding care provided by the Veterans Health Administration in the Department of Veterans Affairs and work to advance legislation and policies critical to the positive health care outcomes of disabled veterans.

Retzer's DAV career began in 2003 as a national service officer apprentice in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was first promoted to assistant supervisor of the Fort Snelling National Service Office and then to supervisor. In 2017, Retzer was appointed assistant national service director, where he served until his appointment as assistant national legislative director in 2022.

A native of Fridley, Minnesota, Retzer served in the Army infantry from 1991 to 1995 and continued his service with the Army National Guard until his medical separation in 1999. He is a life member of Chapter 39 in Minnesota. He and his spouse, Jan, live in Crofton, Maryland, with their two sons.



Couser

## National Employment Director

■ **Lamarr Couser** was appointed national employment director at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, effective Aug. 6. In this capacity, Couser will lead DAV's efforts to connect veterans with meaningful careers by spearheading the organization's career fair program and assisting with other efforts that promote hiring and connecting veterans with resources and benefits.

Couser joined DAV in 2007 as a national service officer apprentice in Baltimore before becoming a senior national service officer in Washington, D.C., in 2011. He went on to supervise the service office in Baltimore for nine years until being appointed assistant national employment director in 2023.

A service-connected disabled veteran of the Navy, Army National Guard and Army, Couser served in Somalia, Iraq and Kuwait. He retired from the Maryland Army National Guard in 2014. He is a life member of Chapter 33 in Maryland and served as the Department of Maryland judge advocate in 2009 and commander in 2013. He holds a bachelor's degree in communications from the University of Maryland College Park. He and his spouse, Valencia, live in Burlington, Kentucky.

## From the NATIONAL CHAPLAIN DEBRA VARNER DANCER



### Challenges, experiences, opportunities

**A**t one point or another, we've all fallen short of a goal or missed an opportunity. In those moments, when it seems life has too many disappointments, it's easy to have the desire to give up.

But I encourage you to keep trying. Many great opportunities still lie ahead, and fresh starts can be rewarding.

We must face the challenge to start over, learn from past mistakes, and look forward with the hope and mindset of better things to come.

There's something exciting about the newness of starting over. The challenges, experiences, unexpected opportunities and encounters that come with new beginnings can inspire new perspectives and ideas.

As exciting as it can be, starting over takes willingness and courage. I think that's why many young people look forward to leaving high school and going into their next stage of life—whether it's college, the trades or military service. Each path is its own new beginning and a way to demonstrate what we're made of. The journey can unlock inspiration and offer hope that life has many opportunities.

Starting over can also be daunting. It may be helpful to write down the ideas and goals you'd like to accomplish to help you focus and in anticipation of the difficulties ahead. You can lean on those ideas for encouragement or to explore possibilities to do something different.

It's also good to be in community with others. Even if this is difficult for you, I encourage you to seek ways to be present physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually with other people. Everyone's life experiences are different, and wisdom can be found by sharing your story and learning from others.

Many things in life will not remain the same, and you may miss the mark again. That's OK; nothing will ever be perfect. Don't give up! It's just a new opportunity to start over. With time, effort and determination, you'll achieve your goals.

Again, it's not always easy to confront failure, disappointment or pain. In fact, we can easily become comfortable living in avoidance and choosing to live without hope. Because to hope again is scary. If you begin to hope again, you could be disappointed again. If you try to start over, you could fail once more.

Don't fall into that trap! Be persistent in your pursuit of your dreams. The courage to start over in the face of adversity will ultimately lead to your success. ■



Everyone's life experiences are different, and **wisdom can be found by sharing your story and learning from others.**



*Richard Boettger (left) celebrates with American author and long-distance swimmer Diana Nyad (right) on the 10-year anniversary of her iconic swim from Cuba to Key West, Florida.*

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

**For more information about giving to DAV:**

- Call 800-216-9802, press 1.
- Email [giftplanning@dav.org](mailto:giftplanning@dav.org).
- Return the attached postcard.
- Visit [davplanmygift.org](http://davplanmygift.org).

Did you know you can create a free will by visiting [freewill.com/dav](http://freewill.com/dav)?

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

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



# Army veteran plans for future

## Former soldier prepares estate through personal philanthropy

**D**AV member Richard Boettger, who served as a Russian language specialist in the Army, saw his planned military career come to an early end when he sustained a knee injury during basic training.

The career-ending injury is common among military members—10 times that of civilians, according to some studies. For the Michigan native, the loss was hard to take.

“I blew out my knee, which prevented me from going into any kind of special forces,” he said. “I got an early discharge, gave up my security clearance and went into other things. I eventually went to the VA hospital and got an operation, but it didn’t fully fix my knee.”

Reflecting on his journey, Boettger acknowledges the pivotal role the VA and DAV played in enhancing his quality of life through exceptional medical care and support services.

“I have had such extraordinarily good care from the VA with my medical care that it really enhanced the quality of my life,” said Boettger.

He also became a DAV member and learned about the FreeWill website.

“Using the FreeWill website was straightforward, and knowing the significant impact DAV has on veterans made it an easy decision for me,” he said, highlighting the importance of supporting organizations that provide critical programs and services to veterans at no cost.

Having such an accessible resource was a relief to Boettger. He used to pay thousands of dollars making updates to his will. FreeWill took that stress away and gave him the time to not only make sure his family is provided for but also support the causes he is passionate about.

“When I read the uplifting stories about what DAV does for disabled veterans who have suffered far worse injuries than I did, I’m reminded that giving to DAV is a good use of my legacy money.”

Join Boettger in his efforts by leaving your own lasting legacy for our nation’s heroes. Donate to DAV through your will, living trusts, beneficiary designations, memorials and endowed gifts. The complete list of gift planning resources is on DAV’s website at [davplanmygift.org](http://davplanmygift.org). You can also take advantage of DAV’s partnership with FreeWill and create a no-cost will, trust or legacy in 20 minutes at [freewill.com/dav](http://freewill.com/dav).

Through his philanthropy and advocacy, Boettger aims to inspire others to follow suit and include DAV in their wills. By leaving a legacy that supports veterans, individuals can ensure the sacrifices made by those who served are recognized and honored for generations to come. ■



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NATIONAL DISABLED  
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2025



**MARCH 30–APRIL 5**  
SNOWMASS VILLAGE, COLORADO

## APPLY NOW

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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](mailto: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. ■



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## REUNIONS

### ARMY

**1ST BATTALION, 40TH FIELD ARTILLERY REGIMENT (VIETNAM)** Sept. 22–27, Nashville, TN, Contact: James Bishop, Ph: 209-952-0535, Email: james@jabishop.com  
**864TH ENGINEER BATTALION “PACEMAKERS” (WORLD WAR II-PRESENT)** Oct. 23–27, Charleston, SC, Contact: R. Honderd, Ph: 573-855-4054, Email: rhonderd136@gmail.com  
**DUSTERS, QUADS, SEARCHLIGHTS, VULCANS AND HAWK (VIETNAM)** Nov. 8–12, Washington, DC, Contact: Bruce Geiger, Ph: 914-576-1050, Email: bmgeiger@aol.com, Web: ndqsa.com  
**OV-1 MOHAWK ASSOCIATION** Oct. 16–20, Fort Worth, TX, Contact: Alan Summers, Email: gatorn10c@gmail.com, Web: ov-1mohawkassociation.com

### NAVY

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF NAVAL PHOTOGRAPHY (REUNION CRUISE)** Oct. 18–21, Port Canaveral, FL, Contact: Bill Solt, Ph: 321-362-5806, Web: navyphoto.net/wp/2024-navy-photographers-cruise  
**NAVAL MOBILE CONSTRUCTION BATTALION 3 ASSOCIATION** Oct. 17–20, Colorado Springs, CO, Contact: Dennis Strecker, Email: seabee6568@gmail.com  
**USS CONCORD (AFS-5)** Sept. 25–29, Norfolk, VA, Contact: Sherry or Carly, Ph: 719-380-1412, Email: sherry.acompleteunion@gmail.com or carly.acompleteunion@gmail.com, Web: ussconcord.org, acompleteunion.com/uss-concord  
**USS CORRY (DD/DDR-817)** Oct. 24–27, Charleston, SC, Contact: Samuel Moore, Ph: 843-509-0586, Email: samuel\_moore@bellsouth.net, Web: usscorrydd817.org  
**USS FORRESTAL (CVA/CV/AVT-59) AND ALL AIR GROUPS** Oct. 29–Nov. 2, Pensacola, FL, Contact: Bill Solt, Ph: 321-362-5806, Web: ussforrestal.org

**USS PATRICK HENRY (SSBN-599)** Oct. 3–6, San Antonio, TX, Contact: Ron Pelletier or Chairman Dale Dietz, Ph: 434-944-4134, Email: rpelle9011@aol.com  
**USS ROCHESTER (CA-124)** Oct. 7–11, Savannah, GA, Contact: Pete Russell, Ph: 703-509-5721, Email: peterussell@cox.net, Web: communityassociations.net/ca124/  
**USS SARATOGA (CV/CVA-60)** Oct. 2–6, Jacksonville, FL, Contact: Mark Kikta, Ph: 202-262-1294, Email: mdkikta@msn.com, Web: uss-saratoga.com

### MARINES

**26TH MARINES ASSOCIATION** Sept. 26–30, Saint Augustine, FL, Contact: Larry McCartney, Ph: 419-340-6155, Email: chair.26thmarines@gmail.com, Web: www.26thMarines.org  
**COMPANY G, 2ND BATTALION, 7TH MARINE REGIMENT (1965–1970)** Sept. 18–22, Tucson, AZ, Contact: Travis Skaggs, Ph: 775-291-6813, Email: tskaggs6@email.com  
**BATTERY W (MORTAR), 2ND BATTALION, 12TH MARINES (VIETNAM 1966–69)** Nov. 11–17, Las Vegas, NV, Contact: Henry Ortiz, Ph: 949-874-3636, Email: ortizwood@yahoo.com, Web: usmcwhiskey1-12.org

### INQUIRIES

- Searching for Robert D. Martinez, Alberto Perez and anyone else who was stationed at MCAS New River, Jacksonville, NC, in Crash Rescue MOS 7051, 1975–79. Contact: Sal “JuJu” Jubera, Email: afd\_bomblero@yahoo.com
- Searching for someone to assist with AO problems between June 1969 and July 1970, stationed at Kimpo AB, Korea, 10 miles from DMZ. Contact: Vince Trujillo, Email: vt6770@q.com
- Searching for Felix Mendoza, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, Cu Chi, Vietnam, 1967–68. Contact: David Harper, Ph: 812-629-5265

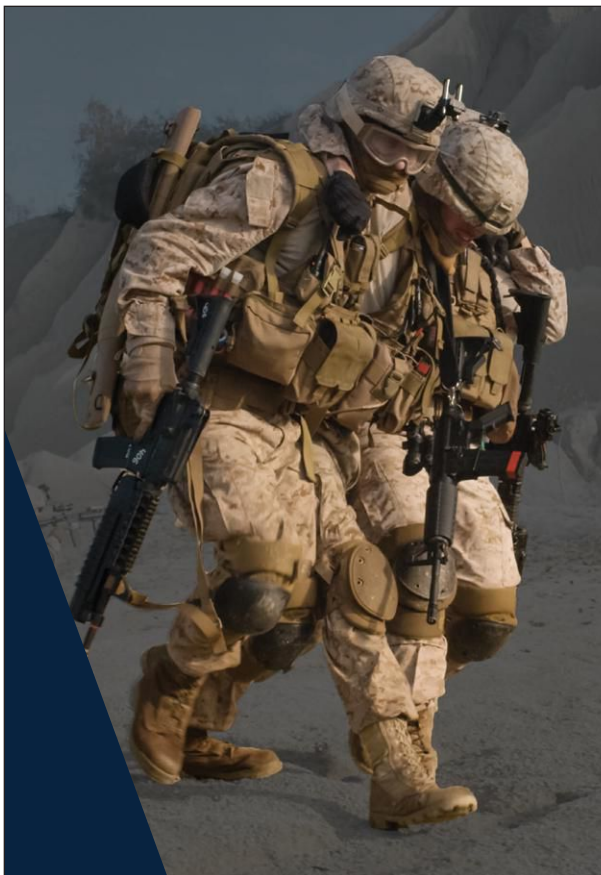
- Searching for the owner or relative of a World War II dog tag. The information on the dog tag is the following: Abner C. Smith, 34492023 T43 (tetanus), 1103 Middle St, Knoxville, TN, 734-347-7496, Former Fleet Marine Force Corpsman, 1st Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment. Contact: Robert Cohen, Email: robert\_w\_cohen@hotmail.com
- Searching for Capt. Ann Kline, Keesler AFB, MS, Legal Office, 1986–89. I was first sergeant, 3380th Air Mobility Squadron, Senior Master Sgt. Mike Moore. Contact: Mike Moore, Email: mikesonba@gmail.com
- Searching for anyone who graduated from Platoon 329, Parris Island, beginning Dec. 7, 1966, and completed training March 2, 1967. Contact: Former Sgt. Thomas Payne, Ellijay, GA 30540, Ph: 706-635-4540, Email: corap@ectnow.com
- Searching for anyone who served with 2nd Battalion, 5th Field Artillery Regiment, 1959 and later, at Babenhausen, Hesse, Germany. Contact: Chaplain Albert Hinojosa, Ph: 210-426-7986

### 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](mailto:feedback@dav.org).

### PLANNING A REUNION?

Send the details to [feedback@dav.org](mailto:feedback@dav.org). Submissions must be received at least six months before the event date.





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[warriorsclub@dav.org](mailto:warriorsclub@dav.org)  
[dav.org/warriorsclub](http://dav.org/warriorsclub)





**MONDAY, NOV. 11**

## **Military Appreciation Night is back**

DAV and Golden Corral have partnered again for Military Appreciation Night on Veterans Day

Golden Corral's annual Military Appreciation Night is returning this year on Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, from 4 p.m. to close. Golden Corral restaurants nationwide will welcome all current U.S. service members, military retirees and veterans for a free buffet and beverage.

DAV chapters and departments have raised over \$19.5 million in Golden Corral restaurants since 2001 as a result of the annual event. Additionally, more than 6 million complimentary meals have been provided by Golden Corral restaurants. Military Appreciation Night is Golden Corral's way to honor and say thank you to those who have served and sacrificed for our country. For more information, visit [GoldenCorral.com/Military-Appreciation](https://GoldenCorral.com/Military-Appreciation).



**Share your evening!** Send photos of your chapter or department at a Military Appreciation Night event to [production@dav.org](mailto:production@dav.org) by Nov. 15, and your photo could be selected for the January/February 2025 edition of *DAV Magazine*.

# Stylish New FALL FASHIONS

## Beach Washed Long Sleeve Pocket Tee

Merlot  
S-XL | \$23  
2XL-4XL | \$26

## Realtree Performance Long Sleeve Tee

Olive Drab/Realtree  
S-XL | \$34  
2XL-4XL | \$37

## Terra Arma Camo Cap | \$36



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## Lightweight Full Zip Windbreaker

Black Camo  
S-XL | \$38  
2XL-3XL | \$41

## Ladies' Open Front Cardigan Sweater

Birch  
S-XL | \$57  
2XL-4XL | \$59

## Leatherette Coaster Set of 6

Grey | \$23

## DAV Life Member Hat

Navy/Khaki  
\$29

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