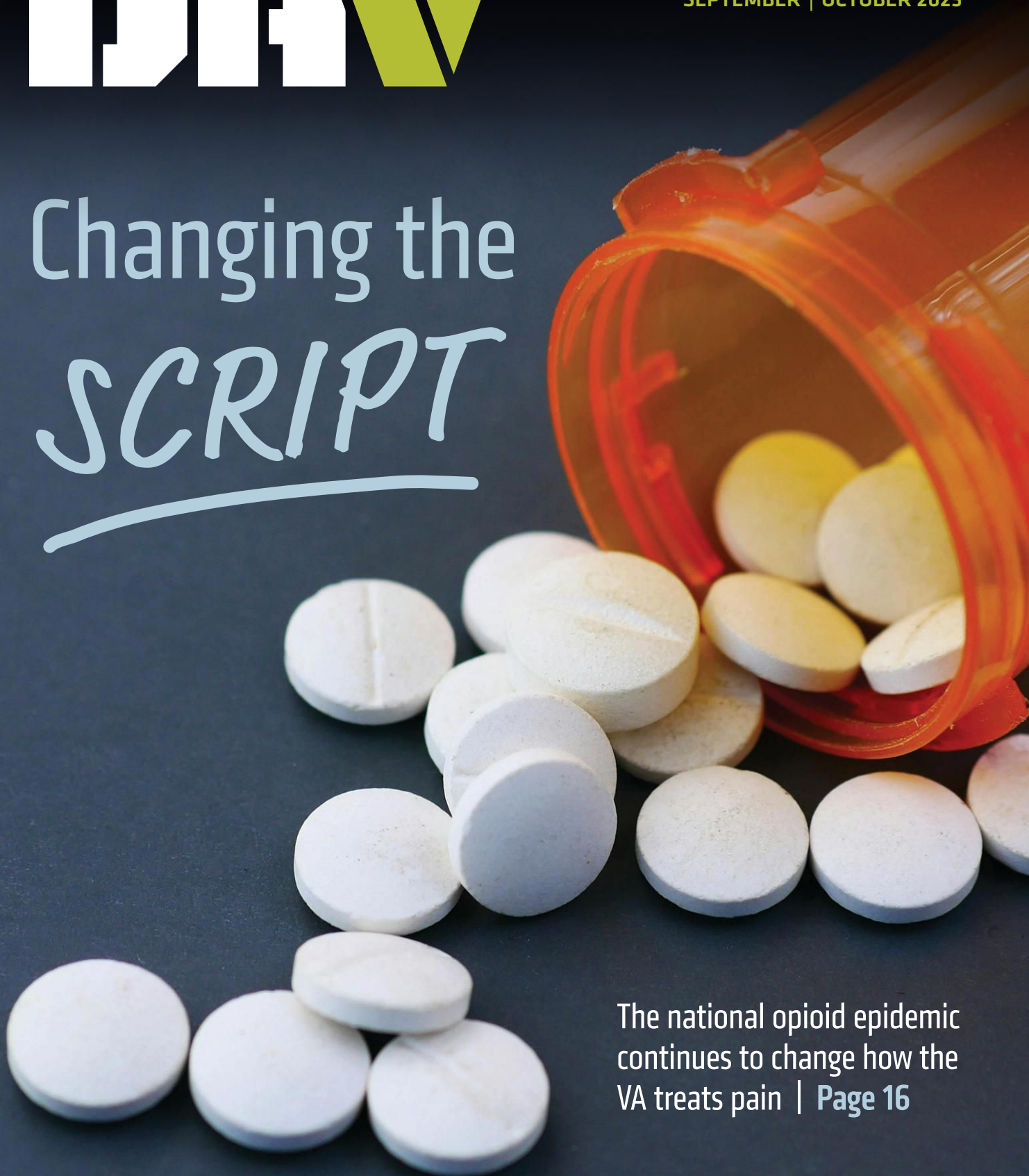




MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2025

Changing the *SCRIPT*



The national opioid epidemic continues to change how the VA treats pain | **Page 16**

40TH

NATIONAL DISABLED
VETERANS
WINTER SPORTS CLINIC

April 4-11
SNOWMASS VILLAGE, COLORADO

2026

wintersportsclinic.org #wintersportsclinic

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They can also be scanned and submitted to alexandre.maitre@va.gov.

**APPLICATION DEADLINE
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VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

The National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic is scheduled to return to the mountains of Colorado in 2026, and interested veterans can now apply to participate.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the event, which is co-presented by DAV and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The 2026 clinic will take place April 4–11 and is a leading resource for 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,” it challenges veterans to grow through sports therapy and rehabilitative, adaptive activities, including Alpine and Nordic skiing, curling, 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. ■

From the NATIONAL COMMANDER COLEMAN NEE



‘Not for ourselves alone’

What the South Boston neighborhood where I grew up lacked in wealth, it made up for in camaraderie and patriotism. At a time when much of the country was either protesting against or completely ignoring those returning from Vietnam, I watched and admired as those who made it home built one of the nation’s first memorials to the 25 friends, heroes and sons of “Southie” who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Witnessing my community honor the fallen had a profound impact on me and illustrated the importance of banding together to accomplish a task bigger than oneself.

Like many of you, I found that military service reinforced that idea. But as we all know, that same service comes with trials and tribulations that can last far beyond our time in uniform. And in transitioning to civilian life, we tend to gain a greater appreciation for being around others who understand and relate to our experiences.

I took that belief with me when I served as the secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans’ Services from 2011 to 2015. When veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan returned home, we didn’t wait for them to contact us for services. We put post-9/11 veterans and qualified peers into the community to network with local agencies and groups to find those who came home and were struggling with the transition.

For over a century, service to our fellow veterans has been the hallmark of DAV, and we’ll continue building on that together in the coming year. But it’s important to remember that service is much more than claims work; it’s conducting outreach to minority veteran communities, volunteering at food pantries to serve veterans living just above the poverty line, or building a wheelchair ramp or doing yard work for a veteran or surviving spouse in need. Literally anything you can do to help a veteran in your community makes a difference because it introduces them to our cause and can be the springboard to becoming an active DAV member.

There’s a passage from Roman statesman Cicero that has guided me since high school: “Not for ourselves alone are we born.” As veterans, we all lived this adage in our younger years through our service to this nation. As DAV members, we must rededicate ourselves to our sacred cause and to each other through service and peer support, for they are the best things we can do to help our brothers and sisters access the resources and benefits they’ve earned.

I am humbled by this honor you’ve bestowed upon me, and I look forward to sharing this journey with you as your national commander. ■

For over a century, service to our fellow veterans has been the hallmark of DAV, and we’ll continue building on that together in the coming year.

CONTENTS



8

Convention recap

If you couldn't make it to the 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Las Vegas, we've got the highlights for you.



16

Cover story

Find out why and how the Department of Veterans Affairs is changing how it treats chronic pain, the leading cause of disability among veterans.



19

'Something's wrong'

It's time to address the hidden brain injuries that are causing veterans' deaths.

- 1 Newly elected DAV National Commander Coleman Nee encourages members to be visible and active in their local communities.
- 5 Learn how pending legislation would support claims sharks and take money out of veterans' pockets.
- 6 As a basic trainee, Kyle Darden witnessed devastating trauma. As a veteran, with help from DAV, he got the care he needed and earned
- 13 National Legislative Director Joy Ilem reflects on the grassroots advocacy and resolutions that drive DAV's mission forward.
- 14 Meet some of the mentors who help veterans and spouses succeed as mission-driven entrepreneurs.
- 22 The fight against veteran suicide is evolving, and technology is creating vital new opportunities to help those who served.
- 24 More than 200 family members met in Omaha, Nebraska, for an update on loved ones missing in action, hoping to one day get answers.

Coleman Nee

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From the NATIONAL ADJUTANT BARRY A. JESINOSKI



A leader's legacy, a new chapter

Everything is revealed through the passage of time. And as we thank an outgoing national commander and welcome a new one into the role, the strength and leadership of both perfectly outline the reason why DAV continues to excel.

Past National Commander Daniel Contreras has left a lasting mark on our beloved organization. His efforts, leading our nearly 1 million members, extend a proud tradition of service and leadership that Dan embodies.

Not only did Dan hold the highest title within DAV, but he has also remained as the Department of California's adjutant and treasurer since 2008—that's true dedication. To some, his willingness and determination to wear these many hats is an achievement. But for those of us who know him, his accomplishments don't stand apart from Dan—they define him.

I've had the pleasure of knowing him for more than 25 years. He first experienced DAV at the chapter and department levels, serving as an anchor to our members. That only increased when he became a national service officer in 2000—continuing his life of service, this time, for his fellow veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

That deep institutional knowledge is what helped make him such an affable spokesperson and representative to carry DAV's torch.

And he has represented DAV with grace, particularly after the wildfires in and around his home of Los Angeles last year and with his wife Teresa's medical battle.

But he doesn't just serve his fellow veterans; he remains a dedicated and loving caregiver to Teresa. That experience uniquely positioned him to convey our message and advocate for veteran caregivers nationwide, including before Congress during our annual mid-winter conference.

On behalf of every veteran who calls DAV home, thank you, Dan. And if I know anything about you, this won't be the last we see or hear of your impact.

When Dan handed over the reins at our national convention in Las Vegas to now-National Commander Coleman Nee, he ensured DAV would have excellent leadership over the next year. Our national commander is no stranger to stewardship. He has been an active vice commander, mentoring his fellow line officers, and his past service as the secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services has provided him with valuable knowledge and understanding of what veterans in this nation have earned and how best to provide it.

And if that's not enough, he comes from a very active chapter in Massachusetts, bringing disabled veterans to Africa's tallest peak—Mount Kilimanjaro. Commander Nee certainly knows the meaning of accepting a challenge and leading it.

DAV is indelibly blessed to have leaders such as these. When you see them at events, online or during a chapter meeting, I hope you'll take a moment to reflect on how you can shape the future of DAV just as they have. ■

DAV Transportation Network

I'm a veteran, a member of DAV and a DAV volunteer driver. Some of these veterans are just happy to have someone to talk to or just be a friend. They need a little help getting to the VA hospitals and clinics. I have, on more than a few occasions, felt ashamed that we as Americans don't do more to help these heroes. **Jim Monahan via Facebook**

Editor's Note: Learn how you can volunteer to drive veterans to their VA appointments at driveforveterans.org.

Veterans make great civilian employees

As a resume writer who's had the honor of working with several veterans transitioning into civilian careers, I found the May/June issue of *DAV Magazine* both powerful and inspiring. It reminds us of the incredible resilience, leadership and innovation veterans bring to every space—whether it's entrepreneurship, advocacy or tech. Grateful for platforms like this that continue to highlight their voices and impact. **Claire Williams, Baltimore, Maryland**

Protecting and strengthening veterans benefits

As a proud Air Force veteran with 40 years of service and multiple deployments, and a life member of DAV, I stand firmly behind efforts to protect and strengthen the benefits veterans have earned. Congress must not reduce, offset or tax veterans benefits—these are not entitlements; they are obligations born from sacrifice. We must also continue advancing policies for toxic-exposed veterans and ensure caregivers receive the full support they deserve. These are essential commitments, not negotiable line

items. Thank you for continuing to fight the good fight on behalf of all veterans. **Rodney Furr, Southampton, Massachusetts**

Paying it forward as a benefits advocate

DAV is the only veterans service organization that helped me with awesome benefits advocates who fought hard for me to get to a 100% rating. I could not have done it without them! I became a life member of DAV as a result and look forward to becoming a service officer in the future to help other veterans the same way that I got help. I am most grateful for DAV. **Lee Brown, via Facebook**

After serving over 20 years in the Army, I realized that my life would be changed forever. I never saw some of the issues coming. Asthma, brain tumor, hearing loss, lichen sclerosis, eosinophilic esophagitis, gastroesophageal reflux disease, horribly painful feet, etc. Fifteen years after my retirement, major health changes surfaced. As I began to think back on the training and exposures I had to hazardous toxins, life became very scary and complicated. Burn pits, contaminated water, exposures to unknown toxins and declining health. It is a horrible way to celebrate a retirement! I have learned the process of filing VA claims through the DAV certification, and I now assist my fellow veterans daily with completing their claims. Thank you, DAV, because you have assisted with changing the

lives of multitudes of veterans.

Teresa Mitchell Wingate, North Charleston, South Carolina

DAV-backed health care connection act

I wish more people would use the VA for health care. Many don't. I use it and receive OK care. It will only get better if more use it. But it has major issues it needs to fix. It is doing better but not quick enough. This [S. 585, Servicemember to Veteran Health Care Connection Act of 2025] shouldn't be forced. So I don't like the automatic registration, but I agree they should be adequately notified of their eligibility. **Joshua Lawrence, Mississippi**

Veteran of the Year

Kudos to DAV for selecting Ken David as the Disabled American Veteran of the Year. As a member of his chapter and the director for the Trumbull County Veterans Service Commission, I took up the charge for Ken to receive the Medal of Honor he earned for service in Vietnam. But regardless of his overdue recognition for valor, his many, many years of leadership in DAV at the local level earned him the organization's top recognition. And thank you, DAV, for working with the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers. As was the case for Ken, DAV has been a great partner in ways that achieve justice for disabled veterans, their families and survivors. **Herm Breuer, Warren, Ohio**

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

'CHOICE' legislation could be a boon to claim sharks



If HR 3132 is signed into law, unaccredited companies and individuals could charge veterans up to \$12,500 for claims assistance

By Kevin C. Miller

DAV is adamant that no veteran should start the claims process by paying for representation. Veterans have access to accredited representatives from veterans service organizations like DAV who provide knowledgeable, ethical support to ensure veterans receive the benefits they've earned—at no cost.

Federal law currently prohibits charging veterans for assistance with filing their initial disability claim with the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, in recent years, there has been a rise in unaccredited individuals and companies targeting veterans and their families, who may be unfamiliar with the VA system or who are facing tough financial situations, and charging them steep fees for help that's already available to veterans for free.

Without any penalty, many for-profit companies have not only continued this lucrative practice but also begun lobbying federal and state lawmakers to legitimize their business. This brazen disregard for current law, coupled with their aggressive push to dismantle protections, reveals a predatory pattern. They're trying to legislate their way into legitimacy, turning a free service into a lucrative racket at veterans' expense.

"DAV believes this is wrong—period," said DAV National Commander Coleman Nee.

But lobbying efforts have proven successful. In May, the Certified Help Options in Claims Expertise (CHOICE) for Veterans Act (H.R. 3132) was introduced.

"If signed into law, the legislation would allow unaccredited companies and individuals to charge veterans up to \$12,500 for claims assistance, even for small claims that may take just a few hours of work," said DAV National Service Director Scott Hope. "This legislation puts profits before veterans and potentially risks deterring those who need help the most from ever filing a claim.

"This bill is the wrong answer for veterans. Veterans earned their benefits. They shouldn't have to pay to access them."

With over a century of service to America's disabled veterans, DAV and fellow VA-accredited benefits advocates continue to provide no-cost assistance and fight to ensure veterans keep the monetary benefits they have earned.

"DAV encourages veterans advocates to stop H.R.3132 from becoming law," said Nee. "Taking action now is critical to protecting veterans and the integrity of the benefits system. Tell your representative to vote no on H.R. 3132 to make your voice heard. After everything veterans sacrificed, the least we can do is ensure they can access their benefits without a toll." ■



Stay Informed

Take action against the CHOICE for Veterans Act at DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network).



PHOTO BY SGT. ELIZABETH TASKER/U.S. ARMY



Overlooked NO MORE

He was told to move on. A DAV benefits advocate helped him move forward.

By Matt Saintsing

Content Warning: This article contains references to suicide, which some individuals may find distressing.

Kyle Darden was cleaning his weapon in the barracks when a concerned drill sergeant walked in with a somber message: Another Army recruit and his M-4 rifle were missing.

The basic trainees at Fort Benning, Georgia, were divided into platoons to search the area. At the last second, a drill sergeant instructed Darden and others to explore the nearby tree line.

“Halfway through, I started thinking of the worst-case scenarios,” said Darden. “I just swallowed that and went through with it, and I ended up seeing a pair of feet sticking out from the other side of a tree.”

As he approached the feet, he saw that the missing recruit had apparently died by suicide. Darden was six weeks into basic training. Understandably shaken, he was told, “Nothing is going to change.”

“Basically, I had to get over what happened, and people die all the time,” Darden said. “I was told it doesn’t stop anything.”

That was in 2018, the beginning of Darden’s Army career.

Post-traumatic stress disorder took hold and followed him to Fort Bliss, Texas. The nightmares began during his job training to become an M1 Abrams tank maintainer. He sought help only after arriving at his permanent unit, the 1st Armored Division.

He met with Army mental health providers who provided little to no relief. “I just felt like I was looked over,” he said. “Because it was in training and not war.”

But trauma is trauma, and despite a lack of resources or treatment, Army doctors diagnosed him with PTSD. The Army made a chaplain available, whom Darden spoke to for 20 minutes. So when he separated from the Army in 2022, he was still without much understanding, recognition or justice for what he had endured.

Darden submitted a claim with the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2023, which it denied, leaving him crestfallen. “I didn’t know what else to do, so I just kept going about my life, until I was told about DAV,” he added.

In January 2024, he sent a message to the DAV national service office in St. Louis. He then went to see benefits

“ He wasn’t just thankful for the free service we provided, not just getting an error corrected, but sitting there and talking to someone from one vet to another, not just a service officer to a client.”

— Michael Franko, DAV benefits advocate



advocate Michael Franko, who, after reviewing Darden’s file, noticed an error in his claim decision. “Not only was it a clear error, but it was also just hair-pulling in terms of frustration,” said Franko.

The denial was based on a lack of a diagnosis of PTSD, despite Darden receiving one on active duty and confirmed by a VA compensation and pension examiner. The VA also said it couldn’t verify the traumatic event. “I told Kyle, as bad of a situation this is, it’s 100% correctable,” said Franko.

Another error Franko unearthed was a discrepancy with the deceased’s name. The name on the Defense Department’s casualty report was similar to but not exactly the name on the obituary Darden provided.

Franko opted to submit a higher-level review, one of the three main processes that allow a veteran to appeal a VA decision by having a more experienced VA employee review the file. He also requested an informal conference with a VA decision review officer and for the VA to contact Franko, not Darden.

“It’s already a sensitive situation, and I don’t want a VA employee who doesn’t know Kyle from Adam to call and spark some adverse thought,” he explained. “I can speak on behalf of a veteran as somebody who can set aside their emotions.”

That review officer called on May 1, 2025.

With the names, dates of birth and locations the same, Franko proved to the review officer that it was the same

individual. Darden’s claim was approved that day and backdated to November 2023—the month of his original filing.

When Franko called Darden to break the good news, Darden was full of emotion. “He wasn’t just thankful for the free service we provided, not just getting an error corrected, but sitting there and talking to someone from one vet to another, not just a service officer to a client,” added Franko.

Darden is now receiving VA care and seeing a mental health provider every week. “She’s awesome, and I’ve learned a bunch of different techniques,” he said. “If I’m feeling anxious or a lot of anxiety or irritated or agitated, or even if it’s just nightmares, I have learned how to cope with a lot of that.” ■

If you are in crisis, you are not alone. Contact the Veterans Crisis Line for 24-hour confidential support by dialing 988 and then pressing 1. You can also text 838255 or chat online.



ALL IN

2025 national convention highlights DAV members as the critical force behind advocacy and growth

By Brian Buckwalter

From the opening session to the commander's closing remarks, a theme of community and connection ran through the 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Las Vegas—reminding members that unity must be continually renewed, not assumed.

DAV leaders spoke about the organization's accomplishments over the past year while stressing the importance of members being present in their communities and halls of government. They stressed that while technology is useful and vital for outreach, it can't replace the value of face-to-face opportunities and interactions.

Nearly 3,000 DAV and Auxiliary members and their guests attended the convention. They elected new leadership, recognized volunteers and supporters, passed resolutions to establish the organization's legislative agenda, and attended seminars and workshops on the many ways DAV serves ill and injured veterans and their families.

KEEPING OUR PROMISE TO
AMERICAN VETERANS



**"Let's make DAV
unmissable in our
communities."**

*—DAV National
Commander
Coleman Nee*

Purpose-driven leadership

Delegates unanimously elected Coleman Nee as national commander, succeeding Daniel Contreras. Nee, a native of Boston, is a service-disabled veteran of the Marine Corps Reserve, serving from 1986 to 1994.

"I am humbled, I am honored, and I am infused with the spirit that you bring to this organization," Nee said.

Nee is the son of a World War II veteran, and his own military service included a deployment to Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War as a motor transport operator. From 2011 to 2015, he served as secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services, helping create initiatives to increase veterans' access to benefits and support those returning from war. He also served on DAV's National Executive Committee and board of directors from 2017 to 2019.

He is a member of Chapter 3 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and an adviser on DAV's national board of directors.

Nee praised the training, organizational infrastructure and trusted status of DAV but said they can't replace an intentional and present membership that's visible in the community and before lawmakers.

“The greatest strength of this organization is in you, our members,” he said. “Let’s open our doors wider than before. Let’s raise our visibility higher than it’s ever been. Let’s tell our stories with boldness and pride—we should. Not just inside our halls, but outside our walls as well.”

On the march toward 1 million members, Nee said the most successful recruiting tool is creating volunteer opportunities and inviting veterans to continue to serve.

“We’re not going to grow by waiting; we’re only going to grow by doing. New members aren’t hanging around our chapter meeting rooms waiting for us to ask them to join,” he said. “Let’s make DAV unmissable in our communities.”

Outgoing National Commander Contreras, reflecting on his past year meeting and working with members, staff and lawmakers, said he’s seen great progress.

“It’s never been clearer to me that we are in a position to serve more veterans, more families, more caregivers and more survivors than ever before,” Contreras said.

The DAV Auxiliary elected Melissa Pierce as its new national commander, replacing Christopher Easley.

The full list of 2025–2026 national officers is available on Pages 28–29.

When Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Doug Collins spoke to convention attendees, he praised DAV’s leadership and efforts and echoed the organization’s message of grassroots advocacy and bringing other veterans into the fold.

“I need you to go back into your communities, and I need you to help me,” he said. “I need you to find other veterans who may have been left aside—other veterans who don’t have the community and family that you have here at this convention.”

He also spoke of his commitment to simplifying the VA claims process and having a veterans-first approach behind every decision he makes.

“I want a rebirth in how we look at the veteran population in our country,” Collins said. “I’m tired of the veteran population in our country feeling like they have to go and beg or borrow [to] get what they’ve already earned.”

During his report, National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski said it’s DAV’s charge to ensure those promises are kept.

“The fact is that we as a nation have asked a great deal of our veterans,” Jesinoski said. “We’ve sent them into combat and demanded they be capable of inflicting incredible lethality in unimaginable situations. We are called to appeal to the nation’s conscience and make our brothers and sisters who are changed in service whole.”

DAV’s benefits advocates, programs and partnerships help ensure veterans receive the support they need, he said, but it’s incumbent on members using the network



Reflecting on his past year of service, outgoing National Commander Daniel Contreras said that going forward, DAV is in position to help more veterans than ever.



Secretary of Veterans Affairs Doug Collins said his commitment is to have a veterans-first approach in every decision he makes.

of departments and chapters “to provide services and fill gaps so our brothers and sisters do not fall through the cracks.”

Insightful seminars

Much of the convention focused on seminars informing and equipping attendees with valuable tools and information to take back to their chapters.

One of the best-attended seminars was presented by the service and legislative staff. It featured an ask-me-anything format where a panel of DAV leaders answered members’ submitted questions. Topics ranged from handling discharge upgrades to the illegal activities of so-called claim sharks who charge fees to provide VA benefits claims assistance for veterans.

DAV Deputy National Legislative Director Jon Retzer condemned claim sharks’ actions and spoke against the proposed CHOICE for Veterans Act, which would weaken accreditation requirements for VA claims assistance providers and permit fees up to \$12,500 for work that veterans service organizations and other accredited agents offer for free.

“That bill is giving the authority to these predatory agents [and] companies to take advantage of our

vulnerable veterans and veterans who have worked hard for what they have earned,” Retzer said. “The CHOICE for Veterans Act does not protect us. It does not protect our fellow veterans or their family members.”

Another popular seminar featured a panel discussion about the research into the efficacy of psychedelics as a treatment option for veterans experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury.

The conversation featured former NFL player Robert Gallery; former CNN correspondent AnneClaire Stapleton; Dr. Thomas Thompson, vice president of global clinical

development for Otsuka, the seminar’s sponsor; and Justin Carlisle, a Marine veteran.

Gallery, Stapleton and Carlisle have all used psychedelics as part of their treatment and have found them to be life-changing and lifesaving.

“I was seriously dead before I had my psychedelic experience, and that experience woke me up,” Carlisle said. “It awoke me to the possibility of life again.”

Each of them is a vocal advocate for more research into using psychedelics as an effective treatment option. DAV also supports further research.

Thompson said that 10%–30% of people who are treated for depression don’t respond or underrespond to traditional treatment methods.

“This has the potential of a new way—a new frontier—in how we might be able to treat it,” he said.

Recognized service to veterans

The convention was also a time to recognize contributions and accomplishments of DAV members, volunteers and supporters.

Individual recognitions included Medal of Honor recipient Ken David, the longtime adjutant of DAV Chapter 11 in Warren, Ohio. David was recognized as the 2025 Disabled American Veteran of the Year for his dedication to helping other veterans and for the work he does at his local chapter, where he’s a constant presence. In his remarks, he told attendees that he remains committed to doing whatever is needed for other veterans.

“Never, never say no to a fellow veteran, and never, never give up on them,” David said. “Our nation owes a debt of gratitude to anyone who’s served. It’s DAV that follows through on that sacred responsibility and pushes our leaders to do the same.”

Nihar Kummetha, an incoming freshman biomedical student at the University of Pennsylvania, received a \$30,000 DAV Scholarship for his more than 375 hours of volunteer work at his local VA medical facility in Charlotte, North Carolina. He first started volunteering at the VA the summer after his freshman year of high school and has returned every summer since, educating veterans on technology use, providing comfort items to veterans experiencing homelessness and creating a veterans wellness project.

“Listening to veterans’ stories helped me become more empathetic, resilient and truly a better person,” Kummetha said. “I plan to continue volunteering and giving back to veterans at the Philadelphia VA near my university and carrying forward the lessons of empathy, leadership and service that have shaped my journey.”



Nihar Kummetha of North Carolina receives the **2025 DAV Scholarships** top prize of \$30,000.

Additional 2025 DAV Scholarship Winners

\$20,000	Myca Scroggins, Sherwood, Arkansas
\$15,000	Olivia Palutis, Ocean Township, New Jersey
\$10,000	Diya Shah, Greensboro, North Carolina
\$7,500	Akosua Mensah, Charlotte, North Carolina
\$7,500	Jonathan Johnson, Boston, Virginia
\$5,000	Maya Mohan, Palo Alto, California
\$5,000	Bailey Yarberry, Austin, Arkansas
\$5,000	Langston Lilly, Beaver, West Virginia
\$5,000	Briley Nienhueser, Holstein, Nebraska

Bugle Award

DAV recognized television journalist **Craig McKee**, formerly of Cincinnati’s ABC affiliate, for his years of reporting on veterans’ issues and spurring volunteering for veterans in the community.



Former Cincinnati television news reporter Craig McKee was named the 2025 DAV Bugle Award recipient for his yearslong series “Homefront,” highlighting veterans’ issues in the Greater Cincinnati area. An Air Force veteran and DAV member himself, McKee used his platform to advance the interests of veterans and frequently showcased DAV’s volunteer work and programs, including the Transportation Network.

He said it was a sense of duty carried over from his time in uniform to use whatever platform he had to shine a light on those stories.

“When I first heard about receiving this award, I was humbled—frankly, I was a little overwhelmed,” McKee said, “because truthfully, telling veterans’ stories has never, ever been about recognition; it’s been about responsibility.”

Another convention highlight was the pitch competition presented by T-Mobile. In its second year, the competition featured six DAV Patriot Boot Camp alumni who showcased their businesses before a live audience to compete for \$10,000 in non-dilutive funding.

The winner was Army veteran Yusuf Henriques, founder of IndyGeneUS Bio, which collects genetic samples from women and underrepresented populations to build a data bank that helps medical researchers develop more inclusive, effective treatments and drugs. He said the prize money will be used to help build out his company’s website to grow the number of people who send in their samples.

“I’m fortunate that I came out with the win, but any of the contestants could’ve walked away with the win,” Henriques said. “All are doing phenomenal things in different sectors.”

Another veteran celebrating a win at the convention was Luis Cortes, an Army veteran; member of Chapter 114 in Helotes, Texas; and the senior vice commander of the Department of Texas. Cortes won the first-ever DAV Recruiter Rally. The contest was open to any DAV or Auxiliary member who recruited at least one DAV member in the past year. Cortes’ name was randomly drawn from a pool of other eligible recruiters, winning an all-expense paid trip to the convention and \$2,500 in spending money.

Winning the contest was a nice surprise, but Cortes said attending the convention allowed him to hear important information to take back to veterans in his area.

“For me, it’s very personal, because at one point in my life, it was very hard to get my benefits,” Cortes said. “That was a call for me to learn and educate myself about benefits and the law in order to help others not go through the same things that I’ve gone through.”

“Our convention is such an important event each year,”

Jesinoski said. “Yes, we accomplish critical work that will carry us throughout the next year, but it’s also a great opportunity to recommit to each other our dedication to serving our fellow veterans and reminding them they have a home and a family at DAV.” ■



See you in 2026!

The Recruiter Rally will return for the 104th national convention, scheduled for Aug. 1–4, 2026, in Orlando, Florida. Visit dav.org/membership-recruiter-rally to learn how you could win a free trip for two to attend.



Disabled American Veteran of the Year

Medal of Honor recipient and Army veteran Ken David was recognized for his selfless service to his fellow veterans in and around his hometown of Warren, Ohio.



Auxiliary Member of the Year

Larether T. Colbert of College Park, Georgia, was recognized for her tireless work at the Fort McPherson Department of Veterans Affairs Clinic, helping veterans experiencing or at risk for homelessness.

2025 NATIONAL CONVENTION AWARDS



VOLUNTARY SERVICES AWARDS

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

Van Karg, Minnesota

AUXILIARY VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

Hattie Lambert, Virginia

VA NATIONAL CEMETERY ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEE

Jason Guenther, Pennsylvania

VA VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEE

Heather McKibben, Oklahoma

VA VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEE

Stephen Plumb, Vermont

LOCAL VETERANS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Division 1: **Department of Florida**, 413,445 hours

Division 2: **Department of South Carolina**, 475,899 hours

Division 3: **Department of Wisconsin**, 93,809 hours

Division 4: **Department of Nebraska**, 84,079 hours

Division 5: **Department of South Dakota**, 40,484 hours

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT AWARDS

JUDGE ROBERT S. MARX AWARD

Department of North Dakota

GENERAL JONATHAN M. WAINWRIGHT AWARD

Department of Wyoming

TOP MEMBERSHIP RECRUITER AWARDS

Division 1: **Department of New York**

Division 2: **Department of Missouri**

Division 3: **Department of Puerto Rico**

Division 4: **Department of Connecticut**

Division 5: **Department of Wyoming**

TOP MEMBER RECRUITER OF THE YEAR

Scott Burdick, Arizona, recruited 149 new members

TOP NSO RECRUITER OF THE YEAR

Hank A. Myers, Wyoming, recruited 274 new members

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITERS HALL OF FAME

Hank Myers, Wyoming

John Rodriguez, Illinois

Carlo Melone, Illinois

Michael Franko, Missouri

Shannon Sander, New York

Dillon Olson, Missouri

EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEUR AWARDS

PATRIOT EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (LARGE)

Werner Enterprises, Nebraska

PATRIOT EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (MIDSIZE)

NTT Global Data Centers Americas Inc., California

PATRIOT EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR (SMALL)

Artemis ARC, Virginia

DISABLED VETERANS' OUTREACH PROGRAM SPECIALIST

Tiffany Beaubien, New Jersey

LOCAL VETERANS EMPLOYMENT REPRESENTATIVE

Sara Lazarz, Wisconsin



To view or download photos from the 2025 national convention, visit [flickr.com/theDAV](https://www.flickr.com/theDAV).

From the NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

JOY J. ILEM



Grassroots advocacy drives DAV's mission

Observing DAV members in Las Vegas for the 2025 national convention always serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring sacrifices of those who have served. Seeing veterans—who bear the visible and invisible wounds of war—navigate the exhibit hall and seminars, engaging with and learning from one another, truly illustrates the mission of our organization.

But the convention is not just a gathering; it's a critical platform that sets the stage for our organization's legislative priorities, advocating on Capitol Hill and ensuring the issues most important to veterans are heard. The presence of so many service-disabled veterans from different backgrounds, branches and generations highlights the evolving needs of this community.

Our annual resolution process is the backbone of DAV's advocacy. Resolutions are critical for making policy decisions, officially defining our positions on various issues and uniting our members in a common direction.

In 2025, over two-thirds of state departments submitted at least one resolution for consideration at the national convention. This grassroots approach ensures that DAV's legislative priorities remain directly informed by the real-world experiences and needs of veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. Thank you to all the departments that sent in resolutions this year and to members who served on convention committees.

This year, we adopted several powerful new resolutions aimed at expanding toxic-exposure locations; strengthening the coordination of care between the Department of Veterans Affairs, Medicare and Medicaid; providing vouchers or free meals at VA facilities to veterans experiencing homelessness; and expanding caregiver benefits, just to name a few.

While resolutions are adopted annually, many of DAV's legislative priorities are long-standing. This commitment allows for sustained advocacy on complex issues that often take years to address through legislation. If you're a DAV member unfamiliar with the resolution process, we're here to support you and encourage you to learn how you can help. Online training is available at dav.org/about-dav/legislation/legislative-webinars, or scan the QR code at the bottom of this article. Beyond shaping policy through our resolutions, it's vital that we continue to demonstrate our collective strength to elected officials. The simplest way to stay informed about veterans issues and to take action is through DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network). Anyone can join at davcan.org; you don't need to be a DAV member to participate.

The work fueled by these resolutions, amplified by the collective strength of DAV CAN, continues to underscore our unwavering commitment to those who have served. Under this powerful, unified voice, we'll continue to drive change and keep our promise to America's veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. ■

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webinar videos.



Been there. Done that.

Meet three mentors who volunteer their time and expertise to help veterans thrive as entrepreneurs

By Elizabeth DePompei

Game changers. Cheat codes. Fail-safes. That's how entrepreneurs and business leaders describe the mentors who helped guide them through the often daunting and lonely journey of founding a business.

The value of mentorship is exponential for founders in the military and veteran community. While their entrepreneurial peers went to business school and learned firsthand from corporate leaders, men and women in uniform—and the spouses who support them—dedicated those years to their country.

That sacrifice is why DAV Patriot Boot Camp offers no-cost education and one-on-one mentorship through three-day cohorts held throughout the year. Program mentors are volunteers, and many say they get as much from the experience as the founders they mentor. Meet three of them, and learn how you can become a program mentor or mentee.



For more information

Learn more about DAV Patriot Boot Camp opportunities and sign up for our newsletter at patriotbootcamp.org. Mentors don't have to have served to serve those who did.



TO TEACH IS TO LEARN



Former Army Ranger **David Reid** is the co-founder of Terra Arma, a high-end, hard-use apparel brand. It's a venture he took on in large part because of the man he calls his No. 1 mentor—acclaimed chef and entrepreneur Robert Irvine of Food Network's "Restaurant: Impossible."

"He's exposed me to a world that I never knew was possible," Reid said, noting that post-military career options can feel limiting. Through Irvine, he witnessed the potential and reward of business ownership and how to succeed.

Now, one of Reid's biggest pieces of advice for founders is to latch onto a mentor—and that could be him. He and Irvine volunteer as mentors for DAV Patriot Boot Camp.

"I find it to be an incredibly rewarding experience," Reid said. "The best way to learn is to teach."

For Reid, Irvine has also set an example of how to mentor others.

"He wants to help wherever he can," Reid said. "The guy will give you his own shirt off his back."

That was proven true when Reid and Irvine teamed up to mentor a military spouse who founded a line of baking mixes. After suggesting a product packaging overhaul, Reid and Irvine offered to provide new designs and delivered within days of the cohort.



TO GIVE BACK



Dr. Arielle Jordan knows what's it like to start down the path of entrepreneurship on your own. Soon after the Army veteran's military career ended unexpectedly, she endured the loss of both her father and daughter.

Jordan took her personal experiences of trauma and grief and turned them into a mission to help others. She's now a licensed therapist, trauma expert, consultant, speaker and author.

But it wasn't until she attended DAV Patriot Boot Camp as a participant that Jordan found a mentor. The two have stayed in touch since, and she credits him with helping her build confidence and advance her vision.

"It's not just about lectures or coming to hear people talk at you. It really is about the mentorship," she said.

As a program alumna, Jordan quickly jumped at the chance to return as a mentor. She also presented a session on mental wellness and leadership, areas she specializes in.

"I felt really honored," she said. "As a veteran, I understand the unique challenges that come with transitioning into entrepreneurship after service. So there's identity shifts, there's imposter syndrome, there's navigating civilian systems, like those kind of things. And being able to support fellow veterans on that journey ... I felt like I'm giving back to a community that has also shaped me."

TO REINVIGORATE



Former Army helicopter pilot **Tim Best** has dedicated his career to helping veterans find new purpose after military service. As CEO of RecruitMilitary for more than a quarter-century, Best has helped empower millions of veterans to find meaningful employment that honors their unique skills and experiences.

DAV partners with RecruitMilitary to host dozens of in-person and virtual job fairs across the country every year. These events are designed specifically for service members, veterans and spouses, matching them with employers who understand their experiences and skills.

Given the two organizations' shared mission to empower veterans, it was only natural for Best to support DAV Patriot Boot Camp as a mentor. Working with and for veterans for so many years has shown him how equipped they are to build successful, impactful businesses.

"DAV Patriot Boot Camp gives them a space to translate those strengths into a startup environment, and I've seen some incredible momentum come from it," Best said. "They solve real problems, build strong teams and create value that lasts."

Like most mentors, Best said he often walks away learning something new and building valuable connections.

"It's reinvigorating every time, and honestly, I probably gain as much from the experience as they do." ■

ON THE 'BLEEDING EDGE'

Decades after the opioid boom, the VA has changed how it addresses veterans' chronic pain

By Elizabeth DePompei



When Army and Coast Guard veteran Dave Riley was prescribed fentanyl patches, the doctor joked that he might one day have to testify in court on the doctor's behalf.

It was the late 1990s and Riley—who would go on to serve as DAV's national commander—had just lost all of his limbs due to a bacterial infection. Left in extreme pain, he was a candidate for fentanyl, a powerful opioid about 100 times more potent than morphine.

Over the next 20 years, Riley rode a nightmare rollercoaster as the medical community embraced opioids as a miracle pain treatment, only to reverse course as it witnessed the dangers of the addictive drugs. Two of Riley's doctors were shut down by law enforcement, and he did, in fact, have to testify in court. Meanwhile, he was terrified of not having his pain properly treated.

"I wish they'd known more," Riley said of his doctors. "But I guess it was an education for them and for me."

Many veterans are familiar with the struggle. Affecting up to 70% of veterans, chronic pain is the leading cause of disability among those who served, and severe pain is 40% more prevalent in veterans than nonveterans.

That put veterans, as Riley said, on the "bleeding edge" of the opioid boom of the '90s and early aughts. While many veterans benefited from opioids, too many suffered from a sometimes-lethal mix of misinformation, irresponsible prescribing practices and nefarious profiteers.

Much has changed since then. The Department of Veterans Affairs touts less dependence on opioid-based treatment, opting for a more holistic approach to pain. But after decades of relying on opioids, making the change is no easy task.

WITHDRAWAL

When Oscar Olguin arrived at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in late 2004, the amputee ward was full. So the 18-year-old, who had just lost his right leg in a suicide car bomb attack in Iraq, stayed with the traumatic brain injury (TBI) patients.

Limb loss and TBIs were the hallmark injuries of that generation of warfighters, and "pain was the glue among all of them," said Dr. Robert Kerns, a pain researcher and clinical psychologist who retired from the VA after 36 years. In those early days, "there was no sparing" of prescribing opioids for pain, Kerns said.

According to the VA, from 2012 to 2022, the number of veterans in its care receiving opioid prescriptions fell by 67%—from nearly 875,000 veterans to less than 290,000.

Before 9/11, pain had started to be viewed as an undertreated epidemic. By 1998, the VA joined the wider medical community and adopted pain as a “fifth vital sign,” forcing providers to appropriately address patients’ pain. Kerns said it became apparent that health professionals weren’t well trained in pain management, and there were few treatment options, leading to an overreliance on opioids, which were thought to be effective and safe—due in no small part to aggressive and unscrupulous marketing tactics by drug manufacturers.

For veterans like Olguin and Riley, there’s little question that opioids were an appropriate line of defense. The problem was in how those prescriptions were monitored and managed over time.

When Olguin moved from the hospital to on-site temporary lodging, he was given 90-day supplies of opioids OxyContin and methadone, among other prescriptions. It was up to Olguin to manage those prescriptions with little to no monitoring.

He followed the instructions on the pill bottles—three times a day, refill when finished, etc. When the methadone ran out, there was no direction to refill, so Olguin thought he was finished with them. Within a couple of days, he was in Walter Reed’s emergency room for severe vomiting, sweating and shaking.

“You’re going through withdrawals,” the doctors told him.

Olguin said withdrawal was the worst he’d ever felt in his life. It would take him about a month to fully recover. After adjusting to walking with a prosthesis, he worked with doctors to get off of all opioids. Meanwhile, he witnessed fellow service members fall prey to the drugs, even while they recovered inside Walter Reed housing.

In the years that followed, opioid prescriptions for wounded service members increased—starting with military doctors and continuing in the VA. In 2004, around 19% of veterans in VA care received opioid prescriptions. By 2012, that number jumped to 33%.

The following year, as the nation reckoned with an opioid crisis that had claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans, the VA launched its Opioid Safety Initiative (OSI), marking a major shift in pain management.

A NEW APPROACH

After more than 30 years in the Army, Sheila Pelletier was riddled with pain, starting in her feet and working up to her knees, back and nearly all of her joints. At times, the pain has left her immobile.

Around 2016, she turned to the VA for help. Her doctor never even suggested opioids. Instead, Pelletier used acupuncture, orthotics and physical therapy and received mental health support related to her pain.

“It’s actually changed my life,” Pelletier said. “Because now I’m not dreading the day. I’m actually looking forward to doing things.”

It’s the kind of whole-health, non-opioid approach to pain that the VA says it now prioritizes. According to the VA, from 2012 to 2022, the number of veterans in its care receiving opioid prescriptions fell by 67%—from nearly 875,000 veterans to less than 290,000.

“We realize nowadays that for chronic pain, [opioids] have great limitations in regard to risks, but also ... in regard to the lack of benefit over time,” said VA National Program Director for Pain Management Dr. Friedhelm Sandbrink.

The VA’s new approach prioritizes interdisciplinary medicine that includes everything from behavioral therapy and meditation to acupuncture and chiropractic care. Today, every VA facility is required to have a



Left: Coast Guard veteran and DAV Past National Commander Dave Riley, who lost all four of his limbs during service, spent decades on a rollercoaster fueled by chronic pain, opioid prescriptions and changing policies. **Right:** While recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center from 2004 to 2005, Oscar Olguin experienced the risks that come with opioid treatment, even in a medical setting.

multidisciplinary pain management team. Additionally, more than 60 sites have an eight-week pain management program, and 23 have a program for more complex pain needs.

Kerns said the VA's commitment to a safer and more effective approach to pain is evident through the Pain Management Collaboratory (PMC), a research partnership between the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense and the VA. The PMC currently manages 16 large-scale trials studying nondrug approaches to pain management, including an automated telehealth option that would be widely accessible.

"It really represents the fact that the field is really dramatically moved on and moved away from the use of opioids," Kerns said.

But it's a move that comes with new challenges.

STAYING VIGILANT

When Riley's first pain doctor was shut down, finding care was life or death.

"I was at such high levels (of fentanyl), I wouldn't have lasted a week (without a) doctor," Riley said, adding that many doctors didn't even want to take him on.

Once his second pain doctor was shuttered, Riley was ready to get off the 20-year rollercoaster and worked with doctors to taper off fentanyl. He's now able to manage his pain without opioids.

But safely tapering long-term users off opioids remains a challenge for providers, in part because research in outcomes is lacking.

"We finally have some science to guide us, but we still need a lot more," Kerns said.

What's clear is that tapering off opioids is a vulnerable time for veterans. Sandbrink pointed to a 2019 VA study that shows an increased risk of overdose death or suicide when patients stop opioids after long-term, high-dose use. A 2022 study further shows that, despite a change in opioid prescribing practices, drug overdose death rates increased more than 54% among veterans between 2010 and 2019, with opioids accounting for more than 93% of deaths.

Conversely, some veterans protest not having access to opioids despite having a legitimate need, ultimately degrading their quality of life.

"This is why it is so important for us to assess appropriately every patient individually," Sandbrink said. "We want to communicate with the veteran that we are really on their side in seeking the best relief of pain, and when we don't utilize opioids, it's not because we don't believe their pain."

Kerns said another challenge is that many veterans get care through VA-contracted community care providers, which aren't required to have the same opioid-related training or policies as the VA.

DAV Deputy National Legislative Director Jon Retzer said it's about finding the balance between protecting against the risks and ensuring veterans get the quality pain management they need and earned—wherever they get their care.

"Chronic pain is a life-altering condition for many veterans, and each patient deserves individualized treatment that works best for them," Retzer said. "That's why the VA must continue to lead the charge on best practices and oversight and invest in research. While we have a much better understanding of pain management than we did 25 years ago, we must remain vigilant to avoid letting any veteran fall through the cracks." ■



Army veteran Sheila Pelletier's life was turned upside down by chronic pain, but the treatment she received through the VA in recent years changed her life for the better.



Kerns



Sandbrink



‘Something’s wrong with my head’

Hidden brain injuries are killing veterans, and not enough people are talking about it or taking action

By Brian Buckwalter

Trigger warning: This story contains discussions of suicide. For confidential crisis support for veterans and their loved ones, contact the Veterans Crisis Line by dialing 988 then press 1, texting 838255 or chatting online at veteranscrisisline.net.

For many former Navy Special Warfare Combat Crewmen, the experience of delivering Navy SEALs to their destination was one of both pure exhilaration and sheer terror.

The specialized fast boats they operated could reach nearly 60 mph on the ocean. Crews could sustain these high speeds for eight to 16 hours, often under the cover of darkness, slamming into waves every few seconds.

“There were times we went out and it was so violent, each time the boat slammed at full speed, I wondered if we would fully submerge and end up killing someone,” said Anthony Smith, a former Navy boat driver.

In more than a few of those times, Smith swore he’d never go out again.

“But once you get back, you’re with all your brothers, you’d laugh about it, go drink a beer and get ready to do it again,” he said.

Smith said the pure adrenaline rush and the secrecy of taking down bad guys in the middle of the night were too much of a draw for him and many others.

However, the job has taken a permanent toll on operators. To better understand the extent of the injuries, Smith has independently surveyed hundreds of other veterans in the fast boat community—those who’ve operated military boats that can exceed 34 mph—and the results are overwhelming: Nearly all of the respondents claim symptoms consistent with brain injury, including anxiety, depression, sleep apnea, insomnia, testosterone problems, anger and irritability.

“There was an average of 30 comorbidities for these guys that are interconnected with traumatic brain injury,” he said, adding that he has many of the same symptoms. “Brains are destroyed. Bodies are destroyed. They can’t walk. Some of their wives are their caretakers. This is the entire [veteran fast boat operator] community.”

Smith estimates he’s logged about 12,000 hours in fast boats over his 24-year career, and he has the wear-and-tear injuries to prove it; his medical records are thick with instances of spinal injuries, joint surgeries, hearing loss and more. He has a permanent and total disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs. But one thing is notably missing in that rating: brain injury.

When it comes to Smith’s brain, military and VA doctors have concluded there’s nothing wrong, and if there is, they say it’s not correlated to the millions of wave impacts he’s experienced that could, at times,



Anthony Smith is a former Navy fast boat operator who's speaking out about the potential brain injuries caused by repeated wave slamming. He is calling on the Defense Department and the VA to conduct more research into prevention, diagnosis and treatment for them.

exceed 60 times the force of gravity to the head. That's the equivalent of being tackled full force by an NFL football player, a profession where brain injury is a common occupational hazard.

In the world of professional football and other high-contact sports, there have been numerous reports of athletes developing chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a brain injury caused by repeated blows to the head. It's only diagnosable by examining a person's brain after death but comes with a range of symptoms, including memory loss, depression, substance abuse and suicidality.

Fast boat veterans, especially those who've served for multiple deployments like Smith, are displaying similar symptoms. Recent reporting by the New York Times highlights fast boat veterans who died by suicide and at least one who was posthumously diagnosed with CTE.

A June 2025 study published in the American Medical Association's open-access medical journal, JAMA Network Open, concluded that the occupational exposures experienced by Navy fast boat operators, including wave slamming, "may be sufficient to promote or otherwise contribute to the development of CTE."

Smith puts it more bluntly: "Inside our brains is a death sentence."

Smith said for a fast boat community numbered in the thousands, including other branches of service like the Coast Guard, not having a way to get a brain injury diagnosis means that many of the symptoms they present are often written off by military leadership as behavioral issues or something attributed to the community's lifestyle.

They're not the only cohort of veterans raising the warning flag about their injuries and being ignored.

Ryan Larkin was a decorated Navy SEAL who died by suicide a year after he was discharged from service. Before then, he started showing signs that something was wrong—depression, alcohol abuse and mood swings.

His father, Frank Larkin, a Navy SEAL veteran himself and retired Secret Service agent, said his son was treated for all of those symptoms with an endless flow of drugs.

"To me, it was almost like a chemical sedation just to keep him kind of in a state of suspension," he said.

The treatments didn't work, and Ryan kept insisting the issue was deeper.

"He said, 'Nobody's listening to me. Something's wrong with my head,'" Frank recalled, adding that it got to a point where Ryan said, "I'm gonna prove that something's wrong."

Ryan knew he wasn't the only one suffering without being heard, and he made sure before his death that his brain was preserved so it could be examined.

"I don't like what he did. I didn't support what he did. But I've grown to understand," Frank said. "He was concerned about his boys. His guys were hurt."

Ryan's brain was sent to Dr. Daniel Perl, a renowned brain injury expert at the Uniformed Services University's School of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland. Perl is a contributor to the June 2025 CTE study.

What he found in Ryan's brain wasn't CTE but interface astroglial scarring (IAS), a microscopic brain injury that may be linked to repeated blast trauma. It has similar symptoms to CTE and is also currently only diagnosable after death. Ryan's job as a SEAL and special operations trainer frequently exposed him to blast forces, like those from breacher charges and high-caliber weapons.

Like Smith, Ryan's brain injury was never diagnosed even though he had symptoms of one.

Not every fast boat operator has or will develop CTE. Not every special operator will develop IAS. But Dr. Brian Edlow, the co-director of neuroscience at Massachusetts General Hospital and a researcher studying similar brain injuries in special operations forces, said there is mounting evidence that repeated exposure to explosive blasts, blunt head impacts and acceleration g-forces (like wave slamming) is associated with a broad spectrum of cognitive, psychological and physical symptoms.

However, Edlow said there's currently no medical diagnostic code to describe any injury associated with repeated exposure, unlike a TBI, which is the result of a single event. That's a roadblock to getting these injuries recognized and treated.

Another roadblock is that these brain injuries are microscopic, making them undetectable with current brain scan technology.



Ryan Larkin is a Navy SEAL veteran who died by suicide a year after he left the Navy. A postmortem study of his brain revealed microscopic scarring that may be linked to repeated blast trauma and presents symptoms, including depression, mood swings and suicidality.

“If a veteran seeks care for symptoms and they’re told that their brain scans are normal, that doesn’t definitively mean their brain is normal,” Edlow said. “It’s possible there’s a brain injury, but our diagnostic tests are simply not good enough to see it.”

Frank Larkin and Smith are vocal advocates for recognizing these injuries so that other veterans can get the benefits and care they need.

“We’re dealing with a whole population of veterans right now—we don’t even know the real number; 500,000 has been thrown out—of folks that may have some undiagnosed level of traumatic brain injury that may explain some of the invisible wounds that they struggle with every day,” Larkin said. “We haven’t been listening to them, and as a result, all we’re doing is just creating this wake of debris behind us that’s going to last decades.”

Larkin said the Department of Defense and the VA’s failure to listen to veterans and the lack of more aggressive research into the issue constitute institutional betrayal by a system men and women stood on the line to serve.

“And all along, they were told by the system, ‘Hey, we’ll take care of you; we’re not going to leave you behind.’ But unfortunately, that’s what’s happened,” he said.

“We know that military service is inherently a hazardous job,” said Jon Retzer, DAV’s deputy national legislative director. “When veterans speak out about their symptoms, we owe it to them to listen and not diminish their claims. We need to research and understand these types of brain injuries, find ways to prevent them and treat those in need to mitigate any long-term effects.”

Supported by the emerging evidence, the conversation around microscopic brain injuries is starting to shift,

and more people, including lawmakers, are beginning to listen. As research continues, Edlow said that progress in the medical care will be built on a foundation of detection.

“We have to be able to see these brain injuries in people while they’re still alive,” he said. “I genuinely believe we’ll get there. There’s a lot of reason to be optimistic that a reliable diagnostic test is on the horizon.”

A reliable test and deeper understanding would allow for better preventative measures by the DOD, better treatment options, and validation for veterans

who’ve been saying their brain is injured but can’t prove it.

“I have a high degree of confidence that if we’re able to get the diagnostics right on—being able to triage whether this is an injury or strictly a mental health kind of issue or combination of both—we’re going to give a sense of qualification to our veterans,” Larkin said.

Both Larkin and Smith say they are fighting for three main goals: Prevent these injuries in the future; find better treatment for those suffering now; and establish these brain injuries as presumptive, service-connected injuries for certain military occupations.

“We can’t leave these folks behind,” Larkin said. “We have this obligation. We can’t break our promise.” ■



Since Ryan’s death, his father, Frank Larkin, has been advocating for more research that could explain the symptoms of a whole population of veterans he said likely have undiagnosed brain injuries.

HOPE through TECH

AI and data are revolutionizing veteran suicide prevention, offering hope to those who served

By Jonathan Kaupanger

The shadow of suicide is a profound challenge, particularly for veterans. Yet a new era of hope, driven by technological breakthroughs designed to prevent these tragedies, is close. From sophisticated algorithms that pinpoint individuals in crisis to novel therapeutic approaches, the focus is shifting toward proactive, data-driven interventions to protect those who've served our nation.

Traditional means of identifying people at risk of suicide have involved asking questions: Do you have thoughts of suicide? Have you made a plan? However, this approach relies on self-reporting that something is wrong.

According to Dr. Rajeev Ramchand, a research scientist and co-director of the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, we can identify veterans who may be at high risk—before they say a word.

“There is already an enormous amount of data available,” said Ramchand, “and with the proper algorithms and data analysis, you can identify groups of veterans who may be at high risk for suicide.”

Ramchand said the data already exists in health care and other systems.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has been using this data since 2017 through the Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment (REACH VET) initiative. And so far, REACH VET is showing good results but with room for improvement.

A 2022 National Institute of Mental Health study of over 173,000 veterans, mostly men around 51 years old, looked at the REACH VET program. REACH VET uses a special computer tool to find veterans at risk of suicide. This was the first time such a tool has been used in the massive health care system.

Veterans in the program went to more appointments and missed fewer. They were also more likely to create new suicide safety plans. Plus, there were fewer mental health hospital stays and emergency room visits, as well as fewer documented suicide attempts within six months.

However, the program didn't change the number of deaths from suicide or other causes within a six-month period. Overall, the study suggests that putting money into tracking suicide risk, analyzing health data and improving how health care works can greatly improve veterans' health.

This method of prevention looks for the times when a veteran is at risk of suicide, operating under the assertion that suicide risk isn't static but rather changes over time. The patient wears a ring or other biometric feedback device that identifies when their heartbeat is racing.

“We don't know what to do with those time periods yet,” said Ramchand. “There is a recent paper that has some caution that maybe people don't want to be alerted during high-risk times. We have a lot of research to do.”

The use of biometrics to help combat suicide is complemented by other tools, including sensors placed in a patient's bed to track movement and flag sleep disturbances. Apps tracking the typing cadence on cellphones are also being studied.

Additionally, natural language processing techniques are being used to analyze patient journal entries, therapy transcripts, social media posts and more to identify linguistic cues and warning signs of suicidal intent.

Ramchand said that economic factors should also be more closely studied and analyzed as part of the VA's priority group system to determine eligibility for care.

“We should be looking at things like Medicaid and SNAP eligibility, income tax credits, minimum wage laws—all of these things that kind of reduce the hardship of financial precarity are pretty exciting to explore in the world of suicide prevention,” Ramchand said.

By using existing data, exploring real-time monitoring and integrating social policies that address economic hardship, we can proactively identify and support veterans at risk.

“The future of veteran suicide prevention hinges on these innovative strategies and open dialogue,” said DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem. “Continuing to explore every avenue and angle is necessary for ensuring our nation's veterans receive the comprehensive support they have earned and deserve.” ■



“There is already an enormous amount of data available, and with the proper algorithms and data analysis, you can identify groups of veterans who may be at high risk for suicide.”

—Dr. Rajeev Ramchand



Left: Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency Director Kelly McKeague presents a plaque to Past National Commander Gene Murphy, a disabled Vietnam veteran. **Center and right:** Family members of unaccounted-for American service members from the Vietnam War share stories about their missing loved ones during a remembrance ceremony at the Vietnam War Annual Government Briefing in Omaha, Nebraska, June 26.

A promise, still pursued

Families of the missing gather in Omaha for updates—and hope—from the nation’s top military accounting agency

By Matt Saintsing

In a packed room in late June, more than 200 family members listened as the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) offered updates on their missing loved ones’ cases. The families, representing 141 missing service members from the Vietnam War, gathered in Omaha, Nebraska, which holds a significant place in the hearts of those hoping to receive word that their family members’ remains will return home.

It was the first time the DPAA held its annual government briefing outside of Washington, D.C.

Omaha is just north of Offutt Air Force Base and the DPAA Laboratory—the largest skeletal identification lab in the world. Comprising more than 150 anthropologists, forensic scientists and other personnel, the staff associated with this mission does everything conceivable to provide the fullest accounting possible for those still missing.

2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War and the 40th anniversary of joint recovery operations.

“The reason why Vietnam War accounting is our No. 1 operational priority is that we know the most about it,” said retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Kelly McKeague, director of the DPAA. “The case files are thick.”

The annual briefing serves as a forum for DPAA to meet with families and provide updates on recovery operations. Officials shared crucial information with the meeting’s attendees. They discussed ongoing operations, and the status of missing American service members and reassured families of the U.S. government’s commitment to account for those Vietnam veterans still waiting to come home.

They also shared how scientific advancements improve ongoing recovery operations, including identification and repatriation.

While the Pentagon provided most of the resources, DAV sponsored the host reception.

“I first became aware of the meeting when we were at DAV’s Mid-Winter Conference,” said Marty Pennock, adjutant for the Department of South Dakota and chairman of the DAV POW/MIA Interim Committee. “And I already knew from previous briefings that they were always inviting financial support to help host it.”

A few years ago, Pennock toured the DPAA Laboratory at Offutt, which immediately sparked interest. “We were in awe of what they do to bring our fellow service members home,” he said.

Once he learned that family members would be attending the June meeting, the wheels were set in motion to provide financial support.

The DAV Department of South Dakota and Chapter 1 in Sioux Falls donated \$5,000 to help cover the event costs. A South Dakota DAV contingent made the trek, including Past National Commander Gene Murphy, a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran.

“I’m a firm believer in never leaving anybody behind,” Murphy said. “I remember there were a couple of battles where we couldn’t find two of our guys, but I encourage anybody to sit in their meetings and to support this agency.”

Like Murphy, Pennock was struck by the weight of the family members’ presence. “It hit an emotion for me to listen to everyone,” he said. “There were a lot of tears in the audience.” ■

From the AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER

MELISSA L. PIERCE



New beginnings

I am truly honored to step into this role and eager for the year ahead. Serving alongside each of you is both a privilege and a responsibility I embrace wholeheartedly.

My journey with the DAV Auxiliary is a true family affair, beginning when I was a junior member. Both of my parents, a Vietnam War Marine and a Navy nurse, instilled in me a deep sense of patriotism and service. I'm proud that my own family—my husband, Dan, and our children, Danielle and Justin—are also members, continuing our powerful legacy.

Our work is a heartfelt commitment. Serving veterans with intention means going beyond routine tasks to truly connect with them. It means listening to their stories, acknowledging their sacrifices, and making them feel seen and valued. Let's be purposeful in every interaction, ensuring our veterans feel our genuine appreciation and support.

As a former junior member, I know our Junior's Program is vital. Our junior members, like my own children, learn the importance of volunteerism and civic duty. They are our future leaders, and I encourage you to involve the young people in your lives to help carry on our important work.

Recruiting new members is more vital than ever. Our ability to help veterans and their families depends on the strength of our membership. Let's make it a priority to welcome new faces and new energy into our ranks.

I'm currently a member of Unit 20 in Des Moines, Iowa, where I serve as senior vice commander and volunteer. I've served in many roles at the unit, state and national levels, including as the Department of Iowa adjutant and National Caregiver Initiative chair. As the DAV hospital service coordinator at the Iowa City Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, I've seen firsthand the incredible impact of our work.

Speaking of our work, I want to introduce a challenge for the year ahead: #DAVAImpact250. You'll be seeing this hashtag everywhere around the Auxiliary. As our nation approaches its 250th birthday, let's honor our veterans by collectively making 250 positive impacts. This isn't a solo effort—team up with your family, friends or unit. We should all make a plan and recognize the people who have made this country exceptional.

I look forward to working with all of you to continue our mission of serving our nation's heroes. #DAVAImpact250! ■

Our ability to help veterans and their families depends on the strength of our membership.

Let's make it a priority to welcome new faces and new energy into our ranks.

Assistant Executive Director, Washington Headquarters

■ **Jim Marszalek** was appointed assistant executive director at DAV Washington Headquarters in Washington, D.C., effective Aug. 12.

In this capacity, he will assist in the direction of DAV's legislative and service programs, which provide free benefits assistance to over 200,000 veterans, their family members and their survivors each year. Between Washington Headquarters and all our service offices nationwide, Marszalek will help manage more than 400 professional and support staff.



Marszalek

He'll also assist as a key spokesperson for DAV before Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the White House.

Marszalek, a Marine veteran, was appointed national service director for DAV in August 2013. He began his DAV career in 2001 as a member of Class XI at the DAV National Service Officer Training Academy in Denver. He has served in supervisory roles across the country and was appointed deputy national service director in 2012.

Marszalek is a life member of Chapter 76 in Pittsburgh. He and his spouse, Jillian, reside in Ashburn, Virginia, with their two sons.

National Service Director

■ **Scott Hope** was appointed national service director at DAV Washington Headquarters in Washington, D.C., effective Aug. 12.

In this capacity, Hope will manage all activities of DAV's largest initiative, the National Service Program, which employs approximately 255 professional national service officers, 30 transition service officers and support staff in all our service offices nationwide. These service officers represent veterans and their families with claims for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense.



Hope

Hope, a disabled Army veteran, began his DAV career in 2007 as a national service officer apprentice in Pittsburgh. He was promoted to assistant supervisor in 2009, supervisor in 2011 and national area supervisor in 2014. He had served as deputy national service director for training from 2016 until this current appointment.

Hope served from 1997 to 2005 as a medical specialist and flight medic, with deployments to Bosnia and Honduras and two tours in Iraq.

He is a life member of Chapter 76 in Pittsburgh. He and his spouse, Sandy, and their son, Daxton, live in Laurel, Maryland.

National Membership Director

■ **Lamarr Couser** was appointed national membership director at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, effective Aug. 12.

In this capacity, Couser will oversee DAV's efforts to maintain and engage membership, ensuring the organization has the strength and support needed to fulfill its mission of service and advocacy.

A service-disabled veteran of the Navy and Army National Guard, Couser served in Somalia, Iraq and Kuwait. He retired from the Maryland National Guard in 2014. He joined DAV



Couser

in 2007 as a national service officer apprentice in Baltimore and was later promoted to senior national service officer in Washington, D.C. He supervised the Baltimore office for nine years before becoming assistant national employment director in 2023 and national employment director in 2024.

He is a life member of Chapter 33 in Odenton, Maryland, and previously served as the DAV Department of Maryland commander in 2013 and judge advocate in 2009. He and his spouse, Valencia,

live in Burlington, Kentucky. He has two children and a grandson.

National Employment Director

■ **Jeremy Yost** was appointed national employment director at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, effective Aug. 12.

In this capacity, Yost will lead DAV's nationwide employment initiatives, which empower veterans to achieve economic independence through meaningful careers and business opportunities. He will oversee DAV's hiring events, virtual career fairs and employer partnerships while also guiding the development of online tools and resources that assist transitioning service members, veterans and military spouses. He will work closely with public and



Yost

private sector leaders to ensure veterans have access to job training, upskilling and placement pathways that reflect the modern labor market.

Yost, a combat-disabled Marine veteran, served from 2006 to 2011. This included a deployment to Marjah, Afghanistan. He began his DAV career as a national service officer in Cleveland in 2013 and has held leadership positions in Denver, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. He was appointed assistant national employment director in 2022.

Yost is a life member of Chapter 10 in Fairfax, Virginia. He and his spouse, Tiffany, have a daughter, Kyri.

Associate National Employment Director

■ **Jackie Graham** was appointed associate national employment director at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, effective Aug. 12.

In this capacity, she will support the leadership of the national employment director and help execute DAV's employment initiatives, including job fairs, employer engagement and outreach efforts that connect veterans with meaningful employment opportunities across the country. She will play a key role in expanding DAV's reach and impact among veterans seeking careers and employers seeking to hire veterans.

Graham is a disabled Army veteran who enlisted in 1994 and served over 13 years on active duty and in



Graham

the reserves, including roles as a medic and military police officer.

Before her appointment, Graham supervised the national service office in Montgomery, Alabama. She joined DAV's professional staff as a national service officer apprentice in 2015 and served as a national service officer in Bay Pines, Florida. She has previously served as member of DAV's National Service Advisory Committee and currently serves as senior vice commander of Chapter 9 in Enterprise, Alabama. Graham has been

recognized as the top national service officer recruiter in both the departments of Florida and Alabama.

Graham has a Master of Business Administration from the University of Phoenix. She has two adult children and is the proud grandmother of two young granddaughters.



Stay informed. Follow along with updates to legislation affecting veterans and their families by joining DAV CAN (Commander's Action Network) at davcan.org.



Spread the news! Send photos of your DAV or Auxiliary news to production@dav.org.

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

DAV National Officers 2025-2026

National Commander

Coleman Nee, Massachusetts*

Senior Vice Commander

John Donovan, Arkansas*

1st Junior Vice Commander

James Procnier, North Carolina

2nd Junior Vice Commander

Glenn Hohman, Arizona

3rd Junior Vice Commander

Brenda Reed, Florida

4th Junior Vice Commander

Adam Greathouse, West Virginia

National Judge Advocate

Michael Dobmeier, North Dakota*

National Chaplain

Debra Varner Dancer, Alabama

Past National Commander

Daniel Contreras, California*†



Front row, from left: Glenn Hohman, Brenda Reed, Debra Varner Dancer, Adam Greathouse **Back row, from left:** Daniel Contreras, John Donovan, Coleman Nee, Michael Dobmeier, James Procnier

**Board of Directors*

†Board of Directors Chairperson

DAV NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

District 1

Debora Olson, Massachusetts

Alt: William Egan, Massachusetts

District 2

Michael Martin, New York

Alt: Shannon L. Sander, New York

District 3

Lisa Sloan, Vermont

Alt: Donna Coffin, Rhode Island

District 4

Mark Donberger, Delaware

Alt: Ronnie Maeby Sr., Connecticut

District 5

William Hines, Pennsylvania

Alt: Leonard Johnson, Pennsylvania

District 6

Nachee Miller, District of Columbia*

Alt: Jorge Cruz, Puerto Rico

District 7

Thomas Ayala, Florida*

Alt: Bernard McGuire, Florida

District 8

Michael Lee Harman II, Tennessee

Alt: Barbara Gilliam, Tennessee

District 9

Willard Cunningham, South Carolina

Alt: Monika Lamb, South Carolina

District 10

Ricky Barenbrugge, Michigan*

Alt: Lolita Tucker, Michigan

District 11

James Bailey, Ohio

Alt: David Bilinovich, Ohio

District 12

Alfred C. Reynolds, Illinois

Alt: Donnie Houghland, Illinois

District 13

George Hall, Kentucky

Alt: Lee Ewing, Indiana

District 14

Scott Berndt, Minnesota

Alt: Ellsworth Fields, Minnesota

District 15

Jamie Jakub, Nebraska

Alt: Amy Bahl, Iowa

District 16

Michael Kerr, California

Alt: Enrique Ramos, California

District 17

John Carmona, Colorado

Alt: Eugene Weber, New Mexico

District 18

Donald J. Brown Jr., Hawaii

Alt: Ronald Cox, Arizona

District 19

Harvey Dixon, Idaho

Alt: Ronald Tolman, Idaho

District 20

Paul Shook, Texas

Alt: James Green Jr., Texas

District 21

Danny Oliver, Oklahoma*

Alt: Bobby Plunk, Arkansas

Auxiliary National Officers 2025-2026



Front row, from left: Carolyn Harris, Paula Raymond, Kim Stake, Ann Wilner
Back row, from left: Christopher J. Easley, Kathleen Wenthe, Melissa L. Pierce, Terry Grabowski, Austin Blanton

National Commander
Melissa L. Pierce, Iowa
 Senior Vice Commander
Kathleen Wenthe, Louisiana
 1st Junior Vice Commander
Terry Grabowski, New York
 2nd Junior Vice Commander
Carolyn Harris, Alabama
 3rd Junior Vice Commander
Kim Stake, Arkansas
 4th Junior Vice Commander
Ann Wilner, South Carolina
 National Judge Advocate
Paula Raymond, Illinois
 National Chaplain
Austin Blanton, Arkansas
 Past National Commander
Christopher J. Easley, Oklahoma

AUXILIARY NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

District 1

Nancy Hoey, Massachusetts
 Alt: Kayla Valila, Massachusetts

District 2

Josephine "Nancy" Rivera, New York
 Alt: Brandon A. Mott, New York

District 3

Karen Rediker, Vermont
 Alt: Sally Ann Campagnone, Rhode Island

District 4

Linda S. Applegate, New Jersey
 Alt: N/A

District 5

Laurie A. Stopyra, Arkansas
 Alt: N/A

District 6

Jacque R. DuBose, Maryland
 Alt: Amy Bowser, Virginia

District 7

Rose A. McGinnis, Florida
 Alt: Maria Holloway, Florida

District 8

Donald R. Harris, Alabama
 Alt: Linda Steadman, Alabama

District 9

Felicia M. Evans Walls, South Carolina
 Alt: Beatrice Montague, South Carolina

District 10

Anissa M. Rader, Michigan
 Alt: Christina Alexander, Michigan

District 11

Darlene M. Hanneman, Ohio
 Alt: Diana Pollock, Ohio

District 12

Karen Eccles, Illinois
 Alt: Evelyn Couture, Illinois

District 13

Aundra Lett-Jackson, Kentucky
 Alt: Julia L. Rawlings, Kentucky

District 14

Nancy A. Berndt, Minnesota
 Alt: LeeAnn B. Karg, Minnesota

District 15

Velma Steinman, Missouri
 Alt: Danny W. Pierce, Iowa

District 16

Joel F. Adema, California
 Alt: Deborah Adema, California

District 17

Kathy Phelps, Colorado
 Alt: Leslie A. Mestas, Colorado

District 18

Holly Mulnix, Arizona
 Alt: Jonnie Moore, Arizona

District 19

Karen L. Haltiner, Oregon
 Alt: Freddie M. White, Idaho

District 20

Sharon K. Thornton, Texas
 Alt: Elaine R. Moreland, Texas

District 21

Linda Oliver, Oklahoma
 Alt: Kristy L. Chisum, Oklahoma



From the NATIONAL CHAPLAIN DEBRA VARNER DANCER

A fresh perspective



As we come away from our national convention and look back on DAV's agenda and objectives from 2024–2025, it's important that we continue to progress, even if some tasks remain unfinished.

Unmet goals can leave some people feeling stuck or hopeless. However, we're part of an organization with a clear purpose, and we must continue to move forward with determination. In the year ahead, we must embrace new appointments and challenges with renewed enthusiasm and determination to serve and excel.

It can be challenging when new demands on our giving and serving start to pull us in multiple directions, but we can rise to the occasion.

Whether you're continuing where you left off last year or embarking on a new assignment, now is the perfect time to recommit, renew and refresh.

Recommit yourself to our mission of empowering others with respect and dignity. Then encourage others to join and actively participate in this distinguished organization. We're a team working toward a common goal, and although we've faced numerous challenges, obstacles and trials in the past, we've successfully overcome them and will continue to do so. Our fellow veterans deserve our unified support.

Renew your strength by clarifying your vision for what you desire to see unfold within DAV for the upcoming year. Then connect with others; your hopes and expectations are powerful forces when shared.

Refresh your mind, body and soul. Our important work can take its toll, and you need to pay attention to the signs of burnout in yourself and others. Rest when you need to so you can step up and ease others' burdens when you're reenergized.

With this reset, you're in the right place as a DAV member to accomplish greatness.

You're invited to share your ideas for strengthening the organization and joining its ongoing activities, so envision how you can tap into your strengths, skills and gifts to make a difference. Where do you want to be this time next year? What do you and other team members want to accomplish together?

Hope is powerful. It can provide a vision of a desired outcome, helping reduce discouraging feelings.

With that vision in mind, aim high in setting your goals. Be determined to be the best you can be and know that we are stronger together than apart. Continue to uphold the dedication and commitment to serving, assisting and motivating others to achieve ongoing progress.

With this refreshed perspective, we can all make significant progress for veterans both locally and nationally. ■



U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY ELIZABETH FRASER/ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

VA streamlines process for survivors benefits

■ In May, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced it is streamlining the process of obtaining VA benefits and services for survivors and dependents of deceased veterans and service members.

The new three-pronged approach seeks to eliminate barriers to VA benefits by relocating the VA's Office of Survivors Assistance from the Veterans Benefits Administration to the Office of the VA Secretary, creating a survivor outreach team, and undergoing an enhancement process to increase automation that will expedite and improve the survivors' claims experience.

If you're a survivor or dependent of a deceased veteran or service member and need assistance obtaining VA benefits or services, please contact your nearest DAV service office at benefitsquestions.org.

VA improves access for veterans using community care

■ In May, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced changes that will make it easier for veterans enrolled in VA health care to access community care from non-VA providers, at the department's expense.

Under previous rules, a decision authorizing care from a non-VA provider was jointly made by a veteran and their referring medical provider. A decision on the referral for community care wasn't considered final until it was reviewed by a second VA doctor.

The VA has implemented language from the DAV-supported Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act that removes



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

this extra review step and provides eligible veterans with easier access to community care.

The new, streamlined process for determining the best medical interests for veterans' care will be backed by training for Veterans Health Administration employees to ensure full compliance with the Elizabeth Dole Act.

Death of past national commander

■ Wallace E. “Wally” Tyson, DAV national commander from 2010 to 2011, died July 20, 2025. He was 73.

Tyson, a service-connected disabled Vietnam-era veteran, enlisted in the Army in 1972. He served assignments with the 101st Airborne Division, 1st Armored Division, 37th Transportation Group and 2nd Armored Division. After 14 years of service, he was medically retired as a sergeant first class.

He joined DAV in 1985, serving as a chapter service officer and chapter adjutant before becoming adjutant for the Department of North Carolina in 1989. He was elected to national office in 2005 as the 4th junior vice commander and was elected as DAV’s national commander at the 2010 national convention in Atlanta.

During his term, Tyson championed DAV’s ongoing advocacy to support advance appropriations for veterans benefits and health care at a time when lawmakers considered making cuts.



Tyson

In addition to his national leadership, Tyson served as a member of the National Executive and Finance committees (1997–1999), chairman of the National Finance Committee (1998–1999), four years on the Interim Committee on Constitution and Bylaws, president of the State Commanders and Adjutants Association (2002–2003), and as a member of the National Service Foundation board of directors (2004–2006).

Tyson also served as president of the North Carolina Veterans Council and was named the North Carolina Disabled Veteran of the Year in 1995. The following year, he received the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the highest civilian honor bestowed by the governor of North Carolina.

He is survived by his wife, Joan, and a son and two grandchildren.

“Wally will be remembered as a steadfast leader who never wavered in his commitment to his fellow veterans,” said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. “Our thoughts and prayers are with Joan and the Tyson family. May he rest in peace.”

Death of retired NSO

■ Marion Shoemake, a retired national service officer with more than a quarter century of service to his fellow veterans through DAV, died June 2. He was 77.

Shoemake enlisted in the Army in 1967, serving on active duty until his honorable discharge as a sergeant in 1971. The following year, he was hired as a DAV national service officer apprentice.

Over the next 26 years, Shoemake held positions as a national service officer before being promoted to assistant supervisor and later supervisor in DAV’s national service



Shoemake

office in Columbia, South Carolina. He went on to lead offices in the Pentagon and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He retired as an assistant supervisor on March 31, 1998.

Shoemake was a proud member of DAV Chapter 10 in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is survived by his wife of over 57 years, Brenda, and their two daughters, Joyce Quattrin and Candace Shaw. He also leaves behind four grandchildren, two great-grandchildren and a sister.

DAV grieves along with Shoemake’s family and the countless veterans and families he served through our sacred cause. May he rest in peace.

Death of DAV benefits advocate

■ James Galliher, a former supervisor of the DAV national service office in San Diego, died May 30, 2025. He was 74.

Galliher, a Marine veteran, enlisted in 1969. He served on active duty until 1975. Following a break in service, Galliher joined the Navy in 1982, serving until 1998.

In 2001, he found DAV and was hired as a transition service officer. Three years later, he became the national service office supervisor



Galliher

in San Diego—a position he held until retiring from DAV in April 2021.

Galliher was a proud member of DAV Chapter 2 in San Diego.

He is survived by his wife, Samantha.

“James dedicated his life to his fellow disabled veterans, and we are thankful for his many years of service,” said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. “He was a fierce veterans advocate, but to those who knew him, he was our dear friend. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family. May he rest in peace.”

Death of past NSF board president

■ Gary P. Burns, past president of the National Service Foundation (NSF) board of directors, died Aug. 15, 2025. He was 81.

Burns, a service-connected disabled Vietnam veteran, enlisted in the Army in 1967 and served with the 1st of the 327th Infantry, Company C, 101st Airborne Division. He was wounded in action on April 21, 1968, in the A Sầu Valley of Vietnam and was medically retired as a sergeant in 1969.

He joined DAV's professional staff in 1970 as a national service officer in Togus, Maine. Burns went on to serve as a supervisor in White River Junction, Vermont, and later returned to Togus, where he remained until his retirement in 2000. A life member of Chapter 1 in Augusta, Maine, he held numerous chapter and department roles, including commander of the Department of Maine in 1978.

Burns was first elected to the NSF board of directors in 1996 before becoming president in 2001, a role he held



Burns

until 2013. As president, he guided efforts to ensure disabled veterans and their families received lasting support through DAV programs and services. He also oversaw the Columbia Trust, which provides grants to various DAV service programs.

DAV's mission was also deeply personal to Burns. Following the death of his daughter, Chrisanne, he established the Chrisanne M. Burns Memorial fund—now a tribute—which remains one of the largest in NSF history and

a lasting testament to his devotion to veterans and their families.

He is survived by his wife, Carolyn, two sons and seven grandchildren.

"Gary will be remembered for his lifelong dedication to veterans, his tireless service to DAV and his love for his community," said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "His legacy lives on in the countless lives he touched. Our deepest condolences are with Carolyn and the Burns family."



Held in July at DAV National Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, the annual DAV Commanders and Adjutants Association orientation brought dozens of state-level leaders together to provide them with the tools and techniques needed to improve their skills and organizational knowledge.

Throughout the orientation, national staff led presentations on DAV programs and services. The event also offered a chance for attendees to share best practices and lessons learned with one another. Scheduled in the early summer, the orientation welcomes and educates

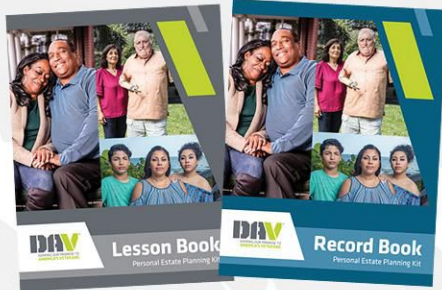


newly elected state commanders and leaders in other positions.

"Our programs and services are always changing, and it's essential that DAV leaders everywhere understand how they all connect to our main mission," said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "This orientation provides the training, networking and tools that equip both new and returning leaders for the year ahead. It's also a unique chance to learn from one another and renew our dedication to veterans and their families."

Creating a legacy that protects you, your family and DAV

Whether you call it gift planning, estate planning, legacy planning or any other term, please know that DAV has resources available to help you create a plan that protects your family and loved ones, lessens your tax burdens, and builds an impactful legacy that will help ensure the future of your family and our nation's veterans.



LEGACY PLANNING KIT

The Lesson Book shows you the steps to get started creating a plan to protect you and your family. The Record Book helps you keep all your important information in one place.



STOCK GIVING

By donating appreciated assets that you've held for more than a year, you can save on capital gains taxes and get a charitable deduction for the full value of your gift.



[FREEWILL.COM/DAV](https://www.freewill.com/dav)

You can use this no-cost online platform to create a legally binding last will and testament specific to the requirements of the state you live in.



BENEFICIARY DESIGNATIONS

Each institution has a specific process for naming beneficiaries (primary and secondary). You could also consider naming DAV as a beneficiary as a potential tax savings.



QUALIFIED CHARITABLE DISTRIBUTION—IRA

By making this type of donation directly to DAV, at age 70 1/2 or older, you remain in a tax bracket you're comfortable with and avoid adding any ordinary income.



CHARITABLE GIFT ANNUITY

A gift that pays you for a lifetime! This type of donation (\$10,000 or more) over age 60 can provide you with regular payments for life and allow DAV to further our mission.

Contact a gift planning expert
at **800-216-9802, press 1**,
or email giftplanning@dav.org.



To learn about more ways
to give, scan the QR code or
visit davplanmygift.org.



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REUNIONS

ARMY

57TH ASSAULT HELICOPTER COMPANY Sept. 24-28, Branson, MO, Contact: James Carriere, Ph: 701-866-6091, Email: james.carriere@icloud.com, Web: 57thahc.com
864TH ENGINEER BATTALION "PACEMAKERS" (ALL ERAS) Oct. 1-5, Indianapolis, IN, Contact: B. Haag, Ph: 317-225-1772, Email: bhaag@gmail.com

NAVY

LSM/LSMR (ALL SHIPS/ALL YEARS) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Angela D'Aloisio, Ph: 803-865-5665, Email: support@nehemiahcommunications.com, Web: uslst.org
US LST ASSOCIATION Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Angela D'Aloisio, Ph: 803-865-5665, Email: support@nehemiahcommunications.com, Web: uslst.org
USS BARNSTABLE COUNTY (LST-1197) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Scott Gulbransen, Ph: 352-339-0605, Email: scott.gulbransen@yahoo.com, Web: uslst.org
USS CLAMAGORE (SS-343) Oct. 20-24, Myrtle Beach, SC, Contact: Jim Griffin, Ph: 850-865-2766, Email: realbiggem@cox.net, Web: cvanews.org
USS FORRESTAL (CVA/CV/AVT-59, ALL AIR GROUPS) Sept. 30-Oct. 4, Wilmington, NC, Contact: Bill Solt, Ph: 321-362-5806, Email: sisbill@aol.com, Web: ussforrestal.org
USS JEROME COUNTY (LST-848) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Dennis Hager, Ph: 410-474-9072, Email: dennishager@comcast.net, Web: uslst.org
USS LITCHFIELD COUNTY (LST-901) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Don Lerche, Ph: 309-530-8710, Email: donlerche@yahoo.com, Web: uslst.org
USS PARK COUNTY (LST-1077) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Mike Kempf, Ph: 317-490-4229, koby.43@icloud.com, Web: uslst.org

USS REEVES (DLG/CG-24) Oct. 13-17, Pensacola, FL, Contact: Tom Bailey, Ph: 719-647-2872, Email: tombailey@ussreeves.net, Web: ussreeves.net/reunions.html
USS SAGINAW (LST-1188) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Angela D'Aloisio, Ph: 803-865-5665, Email: support@nehemiahcommunications.com, Web: uslst.org
USS SUTTER COUNTY (LST-1150) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Guy Simmons, Ph: 978-476-3895, Email: guysimmons@aol.com, Web: uslst.org
USS VANCE (DE/DER-387, W-487) Oct. 5-10, Fredericksburg, TX, Contact: Jim Ensey, Ph: 410-442-9839, Email: jimensey69@gmail.com, Web: ussvance.com
USS VERNON COUNTY (LST-1161) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Steve Malloy, Ph: 360-286-9008, Email: skcmret@comcast.net, Web: uslst.org
USS WEXFORD COUNTY (LST-1168) Oct. 13-16, Charleston, SC, Contact: Larry Condra, Ph: 314-604-5221, larrygeec@netscape.net, Web: uslst.org

MARINES

26TH MARINES ASSOCIATION Sept. 25-28, Chelsea, MA, Contact: Lawrence McCartney, Ph: 419-340-6155, Email: e9m0291@yahoo.com, Web: 26thmarines.org
COMPANY K, 3RD BATTALION, 7TH MARINE REGIMENT (VIETNAM, ALL ERAS) Oct. 16-20, St. Augustine, FL, Contact: Bill Gerke, Ph: 631-433-8575, Email: msggerke@aol.com.

AIR FORCE

AIR FORCE ENGINEERS, RED HORSE AND PRIME BEEF (PAST AND PRESENT) Oct. 14-17, Las Vegas, NV, Contact: Randy Eckert, Ph: 717-269-3914, Email: reckert@rhpba.com, Web: rhpba.com
ALL CAM RANH BAY AIR BASE VIETNAM VETERANS Sept. 25-28, Louisville, KY, Contact: Diana Westphal, Ph: 920-609-5672, Email: dicancook@gmail.com, Web: facebook.com/groups/156407821446646

INQUIRIES

- Searching for two individuals who have knowledge of an injury I received during training. They are 1st Lt. Jim Crawford and Capt. George Peachee. Injury was at Fort Benning, GA. School was Infantry Officer Advanced Course; graduated July 1987. Contact: Harold Beal, Ph: 765-461-8627, Email: heb1203@gmail.com
- Seeking former members of the 158th Aviation Battalion and the 5th Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, Fort Campbell, KY, for our next reunion, to be held during Week of the Eagles, May or June 2026. Official date will be published when closer. Contact: Master Sgt. (Retired) Frank C. Irons, Ph: 906-420-6411, Email: fciron52@yahoo.com
- Searching for lost photos. I was in the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) 2-3-5 in October 1969. I was medevaced for a wound and sent to the hospital in Da Nang in early October 1969. My gear was sent to 2nd CAP Headquarters in Hoi An. When I returned from the hospital, I found that my gear had been pillaged and around 60 photos with the negatives were missing from my gear. They included photos of me shooting the M16 and M60 and of all the Marines in my CAP unit. Searching for the person who took these photos. I am willing to pay a reward and no hard feeling if they are returned. I am also searching for a photo taken on Fire Base Maxwell in February 1969, I was in 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, mortar crew. I jumped in an ammo bunker during a mortar attack. An 82 mm mortar round hit the top of the bunker and blew the top off. I somehow survived. I was out of film at this time and borrowed a fellow Marine's camera to take a photo of the bunker. However, he was wounded before I was able to get the photo. I have been searching for this photo for 50 years. The photo shows metal airplane landing strip bent in a V in front of the bunker with most of the top blown off. Contact: Herbert Jackson, Ph: 760-408-4985, Email: hwjackson1@outlook.com

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VIRTUAL
Veterans Day
Weekend
Nov. 8-11, 2025





TUESDAY, NOV. 11

SAME TRADITION, NEW NIGHT

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

The annual event you love now has a new night. Golden Corral's 24th annual Military Appreciation Night is returning this year on Veterans Day, Tuesday, Nov. 11, from 4 p.m. to close. Once again, Golden Corral restaurants nationwide will welcome all former or current U.S. service members for a free buffet and beverage.

Military Appreciation Night is Golden Corral's way to show appreciation to those who have served and sacrificed. Thanks to Golden Corral's long-standing commitment, DAV chapters and departments have raised over \$20.5 million as a result of the annual event. Additionally, nearly 6.7 million complimentary meals have been provided by Golden Corral restaurants. By moving the event to coincide with Veterans Day, they hope to serve as many members of the military community as possible.



Share your evening! Send photos of your chapter or department at a Military Appreciation Night event to production@dav.org by Nov. 14, and your photo could be selected for the January/February 2026 edition of *DAV Magazine*.

FALL FASHIONS PERFECT FOR LAYERING



**Ladies' Harlow
Terry Pullover**
Natural
S-2XL | \$51

**French Terry
Button Pullover**
Natural
S-XL | \$55

**Long-Sleeve
Eagle Tee**
Black
S-XL | \$27
2XL-4XL | \$29

Sueded Cap
Olive | \$18

**Rothco Vintage
Veteran Low Pro Cap**
Coyote Brown | \$27

Eagle Tee
Heathered Tan
S-XL | \$25
2XL-4XL | \$28

Pocket Eagle Tee
Tan
S-XL | \$26
2XL-4XL | \$28

Ladies' Eagle Tee
Black
S-XL | \$25
2XL-4XL | \$27

Valet Keychain | \$7



Place your order at davstore.org