

National Commander Barrera, delegates and distinguished guests. Once again, may I say it is an honor to be able to report to you some of the activities and accomplishments on the service and legislative front over the past year.

Before I do that, I would like to thank and commend you, Commander, for the year you have devoted to our mission of service. To say your leadership has been inspirational would fall short of how we all feel. Your leadership has truly inspired us to refocus our energies and commitment. Our profound thanks, not only for this past year, but for your lifetime of service.

Each year I express to you my thanks, respect and admiration for our National Adjutant Art Wilson. And I do so again, but with renewed meaning. The recent past has brought economic chaos to our country, to us individually and collectively as an organization. Under the stewardship of Art Wilson, DAV never faltered in our mission of service. We continued and expanded our programs of service. Art's vision, wisdom and commitment to purpose elevated us above all others.

Art's vision was executed by Rick Patterson, our recently retired Executive Director of National Headquarters. Rick's abilities, creativeness and professionalism allowed us to truly excel from a financial and business perspective, which has placed DAV in a most enviable position. Rick has been a trusted colleague, associate and personal friend for the last 38 years. My thanks and best wishes to Rick and Linda as they embark on the next chapter of their lives.

As children, all of us had heroes and individuals we looked up to, tried to copy and wanted to be like someday. Growing up around Boston, I was an avid fan and follower of the Boston Celtics basketball team. In their heyday, there was none better. From 1956 to 1969, they won 11 World Championships.

The leader of the Celtics was Bill Russell.

I want to take a minute to talk about Bill Russell, his philosophy as a player, a coach, and ultimately as a man.

Russell was the first athlete to win an NCAA Championship, an Olympic Gold Medal and an NBA Championship all in the same year. In his 13 years as a Celtic, he won 11 World Championships and was the NBA's MVP five times. He was the first African American to coach a professional sports team. HBO recognized Russell as the greatest winner of all time, and *Sports Illustrated* named him the Greatest Team Player of the 20th Century.

And it is this last accolade that draws a parallel between Bill Russell and what we do as individual DAV members and as an organization.

Russell was all about his team's success versus his personal success. He repeatedly talks and acts in the team's best interest. This is what we do in the DAV when it comes to service. Russell was all about pride. Celtic Pride. He once said, "satisfied customers are not enough. I want to create Raving Fans." And that's what we have in the veterans community when DAV's name is mentioned – "Raving Fans!"

There's a reason for that – YOU!!!

Everything we do begins and ends with DAV's guiding values.

Service
Quality
Integrity
Leadership

What we do is a team effort. It's DAV Pride. It is that team ego that has placed us at the pinnacle of veterans' affairs.

Volunteers—DAV continues to lead the pack when it comes to not only donated hours, but innovative programs. I would venture to say there is not another volunteer program in the country, let alone in VA circles, that can rival our transportation program. The countless number of veterans who received needed medical care as a result of our program, who otherwise would have gone without, is staggering. All because of you.

Since DAV last convened twelve months ago in Denver, we have had enormous success in

strengthening federal programs and policies supporting disabled veterans.

Our award-winning Stand Up For Veterans initiative begun in 2007 has helped pave the way for some remarkable legislative achievements.

Thanks to DAV's efforts in Washington, and the tremendous grassroots support all of you provide back home, we have taken our success to a new level.

Last October, President Obama signed truly historic legislation, the "Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act", DAV's highest legislative priority.

This law now requires that advance appropriations be provided to VA to ensure sufficient, timely and predictable funding for veterans health care programs. As a result, even though Congress appears headed towards another budget showdown and stalemate, VA hospitals and clinics already have their funding in place for next year.

We had another great victory this past May when President Obama signed the “Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010”. This new law authorizes a comprehensive program of education, training and support for caregivers of disabled veterans.

The law also includes provisions expanding and modernizing health care programs for women veterans, whose needs are often different from their male counterparts.

Of course, none of these successes, accolades or awards could have been accomplished without the work that all of you do back home, but as I said, we can’t rest yet because there is more that needs to be done.

Every DAV member understands the importance of VA’s disability compensation system. Sadly, most of us are also acutely aware of the many problems within that system.

Today, there are more than a million claims for VA benefits awaiting a decision, and that number is growing every week.

Even more troubling than how long it takes is VA's 20 to 30 percent error rate in their decisions.

So that's the bad news; now for some good news.

Congress is more focused on this problem than I have seen them in years.

Veterans organizations are more united to solve this problem than we have been in years.

And the VA seems more open to new and creative solutions than they have been since Jesse Brown was the Secretary for Veterans Affairs.

We need to be very clear about what DAV believes must be accomplished in order to truly solve this problem.

First, it is absolutely crucial that everyone understand that the “backlog” is **NOT** the problem. It is only a symptom of a much larger problem.

Unless we address the underlying problems that created the backlog in the first place – the lack of accuracy, accountability, quality control and training – these problems will persist and it is only a matter of when, not if, the backlog returns.

The goal is NOT to eliminate the backlog; rather the goal is to reform and modernize the claims processing system. VA needs to focus on “doing it right the first time.”

Some more good news: VA is aggressively testing ways to reform the claims processing system. More than three dozen pilot programs experimenting with new ways to reorganize their work, modernize their procedures, and streamline the benefits application and approval process.

For the past year, Joe Violante and our legislative team have been meeting with, and testifying before Congress to offer DAV’s

recommendations on claims processing reform. Garry Augustine and his service team have been meeting regularly with VBA officials, sharing ideas from their vast claims experience and from our NSOs. We will continue to do so.

No discussion about Service would be complete or credible without mentioning the outstanding work and commitment accomplished across our nation by our National Service Officers.

Would all NSOs please stand to recognized. Their efforts and expertise are unmatched.

I must also applaud the service and efforts of our Transition Service Officers, Department and Chapter Service Officers. Ladies and gentlemen, please stand.

We will continue expanding our support for reforming the claims processing system through new social media and technologies. Last fall, DAV sponsored the first-ever Virtual March on Washington to call on Congress to reform the disability claims processing system. About 30,000

people registered for that online event, and we had more than 100,000 unique visitors.

Last month, we followed up with the first in a series of Virtual Town Hall meetings, featuring Senator Richard Burr from the Veterans' Affairs Committee. We had over 1,000 people participate live in that online session, and because it is a "virtual" meeting, more than 50,000 people have reviewed it since then.

And we will continue to call on you – our membership – to keep the heat on Congress and the Administration. Over the past year, we have truly accomplished a lot together, and together we can and will do more.

As I was preparing for this year's convention, I thought about the many inspired and inspirational DAV members and volunteers who never seem to tire, and I reflected on why the work DAV does matters so much.

I recalled a story I heard a decade ago that has stuck with me ever since.

It concerned a Korean War veteran named Edward Reeves, who by all rights should have died from the wounds he suffered during fighting around the Chosin Reservoir in Korea.

I'd like to share with you a short excerpt written by Ed Reeves:

“I had been hit by exploding mortar; my legs crippled. For hours, we waited, wounded, in pain – for support to arrive.

“Then, Chinese soldiers stormed the trucks, robbed us, then began to torch the trucks with us still inside. My truck was out of gas and wouldn't ignite, so two of them climbed aboard to finish us off.

“Each fired a shot between the eyes of every American soldier in their path. As I lay there waiting to die, I found out you can still sweat when it's 35 degrees below zero.

“Then it was my turn. The Chinese soldier aimed his gun at my forehead. He fired, no more than three feet away, but somehow, the bullet produced just a scalp wound.

“For the next three days, I lay among my dead buddies, the only one who had survived.

“Then more Chinese came to loot the dead corpses. I kept myself still, until a Chinese soldier felt my body heat. He knew I was alive.

“He and several other Chinese beat me with their rifle butts until they were sure I was dead, then tossed me on a heap of dead bodies.

“‘Jesus, here I come’, I muttered to myself. I was near death, slipping in and out of consciousness, when one of the ‘Ice Marines’ found me.

“I was so bad off that when I reached the hospital in Japan, the doctor told the medic not to bother nursing me, since there was no way I was going to make it.

“I guess the Lord didn’t want me to die on that road, but 400 of my wounded buddies in those trucks didn’t make it.”

Ed Reeves did survive, but his injuries, particularly frostbite, were so severe that doctors had to amputate both his feet and all his fingers.

But as *Time Magazine* wrote at the time, “Ed didn’t want sympathy. He often told his parents: ‘*You count what you’ve got left, not what you’ve lost.*’”

I’m certain that Ed Reeves faced tremendous challenges then and throughout his life, but he found the support and inspiration to keep working and moving forward.

He went on to get married, raise 7 children – two of them Korean adoptees, complete a career as a computer programmer, become a leader in his church – inspiring countless others, all the while remaining an active and proud member of several veterans organization.

Six weeks ago, Ed Reeves passed away.

A small obituary mentioned that he served as a private first class in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, but does not talk of all that Ed went through. It describes his life in a couple of sentence, but not all he accomplished, nor all those he helped and those he inspired.

It is for – and because of – men and women like Ed Reeves, that we can and must find the inspiration to get up every day and continue working to improve the lives of disabled veterans and their families through our mission of service and advocacy.

Let me end where I began with another reference to Bill Russell.

When Bill Russell was the player-coach of the Celtics, he placed a small sign above the locker room door leading out to the famed parquet court. It was simple yet profound. It read:

“The game’s on schedule. We have to play it. We might as well win it.”

Team DAV has a game to play, a game that will continue to affect the lives of countless disabled veterans. I say we go out, play it and, together, win it.