Decade of Service – 1960s

In the early 1960s, many Americans believed the nation was at the dawn of a golden age. The charismatic DAV life member John F. Kennedy became President of the United States a year into the decade, but the ‘60s brought enormous challenges for the nation and certainly for DAV.

America was about to enter the longest war in its history to date, and DAV was facing serious financial difficulties while the size of the National Service Officers corps was dwindling.

At the 1960 National Convention, Dale Adams stated, “Many of those [NSOs] who resigned were our best and most talented people. We cannot sit idly by and let this continue if we hope to carry out the main purpose for which this organization was founded.”

Many cities had no representation. The Washington, D.C., office alone had lost seven National Service Officers. Adams consolidated three areas—insurance, veterans benefits and regional operations offices—allowing better utilization of the NSOs’ training.

An additional move brought NSO Charles L. “Chet” Huber to Washington to assist Adams. Huber would eventually become National Legislative Director. Some hard decisions had to be made as Adams moved to increase NSO pay without boosting the organization’s overhead. During more prosperous days, DAV hired secretarial help to assist with the caseload. Now, offices had to be downsized. In order to fill the vacancies of retiring NSOs, DAV started an on-the-job training program. By the following year, only one office was without an NSO.

DAV’s first National Commander, Judge Robert S. Marx, passed away not long after the 1960 Convention. It was a sad moment for DAV. But, as the old order passed away, a new order was taking shape.
Delegates to the 1961 National Convention elected Francis R. Buono, whose tenure as National Commander saw many changes. The most significant change was announced in the June 1962 issue of DAV Magazine: Adjutant John Feighner was retiring, and Dale Adams had been appointed the new National Adjutant.

Adams enlisted in the Army in 1938 and served in the Pacific during World War II. He was discharged in 1944 and came to work for DAV not long after the war. In 1960, he was named National Service Director but went to Cincinnati in 1961 to be Assistant National Adjutant under Feighner.

When Adams took over the adjutancy, DAV was still plagued by scandal and severe financial difficulties. He moved quickly to accomplish his goal of preserving the organization while laying a foundation for the future. When he became National Adjutant in 1962, membership had fallen to around 200,000, but by the time he retired in 1988, membership exceeded 1 million.

Employment became a priority in 1961 when President Kennedy was inaugurated. Featuring the slogan, “Ability—not disability—is what counts,” the October 1962 issue of DAV Magazine gave complete coverage of President Kennedy’s Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped.

Kennedy said, “Utilization of...handicapped persons in productive employment is sound and necessary, both for the contribution handicapped citizens make to our national productivity and for the sense of independence and well-being which they can derive from doing a job. It is fitting that the government, as an employer, should lead the way in selective placement of handicapped persons so as to utilize their skills and abilities.”

Though the involvement in Vietnam was steadily growing, the American public hardly noticed. However, the facts did not escape DAV’s leadership. Dale Adams brought Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jim Lucas to the 1964 National Convention
to tell delegates about the sacrifices America’s young people were making in Vietnam. By 1965, it had become impossible for the public to continue ignoring the war.

DAV obtained a list of those who were discharged, and letters were sent thanking veterans for their service and giving them free one-year memberships. Of particular importance to DAV was making sure these veterans received the full complement of benefits they had earned. Initially, benefits for Vietnam veterans, even those who came home from the war wounded and sick, were not equal to those granted to veterans of World War II.

This angered DAV leaders like Dale Adams, Chet Huber and Cap Hogan, who were determined to bring justice to the new generation of veterans. Their goal began to be realized when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966.

DAV worked hard for passage of this bill, which made newly returned Vietnam veterans eligible for benefits similar to those granted to veterans of World War II and the Korean War.

But DAV also fought for Vietnam veterans. Huber’s legacy was his leadership in the development of legislation that granted the children of 100-percent disabled veterans the same educational benefits as the children of those killed in war. He turned the tide of Congress when he charged that denying these rights was tantamount to the suggestion that children were better off if their parent was killed in war rather than totally disabled.

While care for those who returned home from war sick or wounded has always been the major focus of DAV, the organization has also been greatly concerned with prisoners of war and those missing in action as well. The fate of POW/MIAs took on greater prominence at the end of the Vietnam War.

Returning Vietnam veterans caught the VA medical system by
surprise, and some VA hospitals were subject to criticism in Life magazine and other media. DAV used the publicity to demand significant improvements in VA medical programs across the board.

As the Vietnam War progressed, DAV renewed its NSO training program. It brought newly disabled Vietnam veterans on board, training them to become experts in veterans’ claims. The first of many Vietnam veterans to become a DAV NSO was Arthur H. Wilson, in November 1966. At one time, Vietnam veterans comprised more than 80 percent of DAV’s NSOs.

Adams, whose own son fought in Vietnam, demanded only the best for those returning from the war, and his fellow DAV leaders shared that single-minded commitment.

More than 2.6 million Americans served in Vietnam. There were 58,151 deaths and 303,704 wounded.

In 1966, on the 11th day of the 11th month at 11 a.m., in honor of the World War I veterans who founded DAV, the organization dedicated its new National Headquarters in Cold Spring, Ky., just a few miles south of downtown Cincinnati. National Commander John W. Unger cut the ribbon.

The decision to build a new 115,000-square-foot headquarters on 31 acres had been made in 1964. Several factors prompted the move, including the business taxes DAV had to pay in Ohio. Kentucky had no such tax at the time.

Prior to the move, DAV acquired a Honeywell 200 computer. Huge and slow by current standards, this machine was a modern marvel in its day. It could handle a mailing of 7 million sets of 50 return-address labels in 10 days—a task that took two and a half months manually.

Computerization proved vital in generating fundraising mail and in processing the contributions that came into DAV Headquarters. This was particularly true as the “Idento-Tag”
program, though still DAV’s breadwinner, became less cost-effective in the succeeding years.

In 1967, the program was discontinued and replaced by mailings of return-address labels. The change became necessary after states began issuing annual license stickers to motorists instead of new license plates. Since Idento-Tags were based on new license numbers, the DAV’s annual fundraising effort was rendered obsolete. But, to this day, DAV continues to honor the commitment to return lost keys with Idento-Tags to their owners.