Decade of Service – 1970s

Every year leading up to DAV’s 100th anniversary in 2020, the September/October issue of DAV Magazine will chronicle a decade in our organization’s history. This year’s installment provides some historical background and highlights of important issues and events that affected disabled veterans and their families during the 1970s.

The 1970s brought positive change for the already storied organization. DAV welcomed many new faces, innovatively increased who could receive assistance, laid out the post-traumatic stress epidemic and took up the charge to ensure veterans exposed to Agent Orange received the care and benefits they, their families and survivors deserved.

As the Vietnam War drew down, DAV grew exponentially. The men and women leaving the military during this controversial war were systemically denied the full measure of honor they had earned. But they were rightfully seen as heroes by DAV, who welcomed them home to the organization’s ranks.

Vietnam veterans swelled the DAV’s rolls past 353,000 members in 1970 and to 427,000 by 1972.

The U.S. Postal Service marked DAV’s 50th anniversary in 1970 by issuing a stamp commemorating the DAV’s half-century of veterans serving veterans. DAV celebrated its birthday right up to the 1971 National Convention, which was held at the Detroit Hilton Hotel—just 50 yards from the actual site of DAV’s first National Convention.

As DAV celebrated its golden anniversary, it also offered its gratitude to the Auxiliary, which marked its 50th anniversary two years later. The Auxiliary had steadfastly stood at DAV’s side through the years, assisting in DAV’s mission, offering a special understanding of veterans’ families, contacting legislators and helping in so many other ways.
Also in 1970, new leaders emerged. National Adjutant Dale Adams appointed John J. Keller as National Service Director. Keller was charged with recruiting and training a new generation of disabled veterans from the Vietnam War, as the organization’s mission was growing while the war was coming to an end.

Keller was a World War II veteran, stationed at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack on Dec. 7, 1941. He later served throughout the Pacific during the war and was medically discharged after incurring a severe back injury and contracting malaria.

In his new role with DAV, he was focused on extending DAV’s services to underserved veterans. In 1974, under his direction, a caravan of six new motor homes, converted to serve as rolling offices, pulled out of National Headquarters, kicking off the Field Service Unit program. In one of the most impressive outreach programs ever mounted by DAV, these offices on wheels enabled National Service Officers (NSOs) to take their services to the suburbs and rural areas of America, often distant from DAV’s National Service Offices.

Soon that fleet had increased to 18 vans. The DAV emblem was displayed on the vehicles as they traveled the United States visiting thousands of communities. Two NSOs aboard would assist disabled veterans with their claims, and the units attracted a great deal of public recognition as well.

Over a 19-year period, they brought DAV’s no-cost services to 608,000 veterans and members of their families before the program was retired in 1993 and reinstituted a few years later as DAV’s Mobile Service Office program.

As America celebrated its bicentennial in 1976, DAV opened its National Service & Legislative Headquarters in Washington, D.C. On March 4, 750 people attended the grand opening, including President Gerald Ford, who addressed the group. DAV
leadership in Washington soon shifted hands, with Keller retiring as National Service Director to be replaced by Norman B. "Gabby" Hartnett, who had been serving as the organization’s Employment Director.

DAV saw two major legislative victories in 1978. A serious threat to veterans preference in federal employment was defeated, and a drive to saddle the VA with a particularly meager budget was halted in its tracks. Also of importance was the return of Veterans Day to Nov. 11, rather than scheduling the holiday as part of a three-day weekend.

In 1976, DAV also funded the groundbreaking Forgotten Warrior Project, which first defined the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among war veterans.

Vietnam veterans were experiencing serious postwar problems at the time. DAV hoped the new study would make it impossible for Congress, the VA and the American public to ignore what was going on.

When Congress and the VA failed to act on the findings of the project, DAV initiated its own Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program. Fortunately, this DAV-sponsored study and DAV’s clinical outreach work spurred other research that forced the government to realize the psychological impact of war on veterans of Vietnam and all wars.

When that finally happened, the DAV Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program was already there to serve as an effective treatment model to be adopted by the VA’s VetCenter program.

By March 1979, DAV reached a new milestone of 600,000 members. Having achieved this figure, DAV’s strength was impressive by any standard. Of the 2.2 million disabled veterans eligible for membership, more than one-fourth were DAV members.

In recognition of its newest members, DAV spearheaded the observance of Vietnam-era Veterans Week, May 28–June 3, 1979.
Conferences were held at George Washington University with President Jimmy Carter addressing the group. DAV honored the Vietnam-era veterans with a separate observance for the entire month of May.

At the same time, an aforementioned topic of vital importance to many recent veterans, Agent Orange exposure, was beginning to attract attention. DAV was taken aback when it learned that a VA committee formed to study the effects of Agent Orange included no Vietnam veterans. DAV raised objections and realized a victory when a combat-disabled Vietnam veteran was named to the group.

With many new members and leaders, DAV closed out the ’70s prepared to continue its fight into the second half of its first century, especially for those suffering because of Agent Orange and PTSD.