Army veteran Mariela Meylan was honored as the 2016 DAV Freedom Award recipient at the 30th annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colo.

Each year, one participant is chosen for the award for outstanding courage and achievement. This honor is bestowed upon the veteran who is an example to all disabled veteran athletes by taking a giant step forward in their rehabilitation process.

“Mariela has selflessly lived as an example to all of us, that disability does not bar the doors to living an active and fulfilling life,” said DAV National Commander Moses A. McIntosh Jr. “Her passion for what life can offer has been contagious all week, and she is very deserving of this recognition.”

(From left) Caregiver Deborah Shore, VA Secretary Bob McDonald, 2016 DAV Freedom Award Recipient Mariela Meylan, DAV National Commander Moses A. McIntosh Jr. and DAV National Director of Voluntary Services John
Kleindienst. Meylan walked up on stage to accept her award using only her cane—a feat she could not have accomplished less than two years ago.

In 2004, Meylan was serving in the U.S. Army on patrol in the Kuwait desert. She was helping three fellow soldiers change a tire on their vehicle when they were struck by a passing vehicle traveling at a high rate of speed. The driver fled, and two of the four soldiers at the scene were killed.

Meylan was immediately evacuated to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, and by the time her family had arrived, she had fallen into a coma, in which she would remain for eight months.

The day after Christmas in 2004, she was transferred to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The doctors advised her parents that Meylan would not survive, but her family knew there was still a lot of fight left in her.

“The doctors wanted to take her off life support,” said her mother, Lisette Meylan. “One day at Walter Reed, a psychologist made sure we knew she would never wake up. I cried that day. Then I thought, what the hell does he know?”

The young soldier proved her mother correct.

After 10 years of physical rehabilitation, therapy and in-home nursing care, Meylan can now walk with the aid of a cane. She is learning to sew, is an avid swimmer, plays piano and enjoys riding horses.

“Her desire to constantly improve is just so intense,” said Deborah Shore, Meylan’s primary caregiver. “It’s amazing to watch her make small steps into giant steps.”
Meylan said while walking her long road to recovery, she had to deal with others who doubted her abilities.

“It’s been very challenging,” she said. “I’ve had a lot of people tell me I can’t do something, but I’ve shown them I can.”