A conference of giants

At the halfway point of his tenure leading DAV through its centennial year, National Commander Butch Whitehead shared with members a quote from Sir Isaac Newton to summarize his experience at the helm of the organization: “If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.”

“You—the DAV members in this room and more than a million across the nation—are those giants,” he told a roomful of dedicated veteran advocates who converged from across the nation for the 2020 Mid-Winter Conference of the State Commanders and Adjutants Association, held in late February in Arlington, Va. “You are the ones using our collective voice to advocate for America’s veterans and their families. And right now, this week, across the river in our nation’s capital—there’s no better time or place to use our strength to push Congress to do the right thing by those who’ve sacrificed.
“Keep up the good work, and go be a giant for your fellow veterans,” he concluded.

DAV and Auxiliary members took that charge to heart, holding dozens of meetings focused on the organization’s key legislative priorities and advocacy efforts before taking DAV’s message to Capitol Hill and speaking directly with members of Congress and their staffs.

Throughout the four-day conference, participants discussed recognizing toxic exposures among veterans, including burn pits and Agent Orange; fully and faithfully implementing the VA MISSION Act; addressing gaps and inequities in programs and health services for women veterans; improving benefits for spouses and survivors of disabled veterans; and strengthening veterans mental health care and suicide prevention programs.

At the event’s opening session, Dr. Paul Lawrence, undersecretary for benefits for the Department of Veterans Affairs, spoke about the priorities and budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs as well as the long-standing cooperative relationship between the Veterans Benefits Administration and DAV.

“Thank you for the things you do—advocating for Blue Water Navy, not only for benefits but for the extra money we need to administer the benefits; advocating for our women veterans; and, finally, for your work with claims,” said Lawrence. “Veterans write us and say, ‘I’m having problems with my claims.’ And then we go and investigate and they’re doing it themselves. We encourage them to ‘please contact someone at DAV. They understand this and can help you.’”

Attendees also heard from Dr. Barbara Van Dahlen, executive director of the President’s Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS), who spoke about how the program focuses on community integration, research and implementation strategies to prevent veteran suicide.
“Suicide is a combination of a lot of different factors,” Van Dahlen explained. “About 30 things need to go wrong simultaneously. If we can intervene in any one of those, we might save someone’s life. But this work happens at the community level. That’s why we need all of you, and that’s why DAV will be a critical partner as we move forward.”

Throughout the conference DAV also honored several dedicated veterans advocates for their outstanding efforts and achievements on behalf of the men and women who served.

“The recipients of this year’s advocacy awards have illustrated an unmatched commitment to fighting for the best interests of veterans and their families,” said Whitehead. “Veterans are a nonpartisan issue, and these honorees worked tirelessly to ensure our nation keeps its promises to our nation’s heroes.”

Sen. Sherrod Brown, a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, received the Veterans’ Champion award; Sen. Dan Sullivan received the Outstanding Senate Legislator of the Year award; Rep. Julia Brownley received the Outstanding House Legislator of the Year award; and Dr. Richard Stone of the VA’s Veterans Health Administration received the Outstanding Federal Executive of the Year award.

VA Under Secretary for Benefits Dr. Paul Lawrence spoke on behalf of the VA secretary at the
Commanders and Adjutants Opening Session at the 2020 Mid-Winter Conference. Lawrence provided an update on the VA MISSION Act and Electronic Health Record and described how the VA is modernizing to acquire supplies and medicines faster and cheaper.

The conference peaked on Feb. 25, when Whitehead testified before a special joint session of the Senate and House Veterans’ Affairs Committees. Veterans and supporters packed the caucus room to maximum capacity in the Dirksen Senate Office Building for the hearing.

In his testimony, Whitehead detailed the aftermath of suffering a traumatic brain injury as a result of mortar attacks while deployed to Iraq in 2007.

“When I returned home several months later, I was still dealing with physical, psychological and emotional injuries—but not knowing quite how to deal with these challenges,” he explained. “I soon discovered that my VA providers understood me and the military injuries I suffered better than any health care system in the world—and since then, I’ve chosen to receive all of my care from the VA.

“The VA was there for me when I needed it. Now, we must all work together to make sure the VA is there for future generations,” he implored lawmakers.

The commander then methodically explained DAV’s critical legislative priorities to the joint session, beginning with
the need for Congress to override VA Secretary Robert Wilkie’s decision to delay adding four pending Agent Orange presumptive conditions until the end of this year.

“This decision ignores the fact that the National Academy of Medicine has already reviewed dozens of studies on multiple occasions over many years. In every case, it was concluded that these diseases are associated with Agent Orange. We don’t need to wait for any more studies,” said Whitehead. “If the VA will not take the right action, then, in the name of justice, you must. Our Vietnam veterans have waited long enough.”

The commander then advocated for the passage of the Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act. The legislation, which was conceptualized by DAV, would formally concede that veterans who served near burn pits were exposed to harmful chemicals and toxins. Such recognition would make it easier to prove direct service connection.

“We ask all of you to support this legislation, S. 2950, so that veterans suffering from burn pit exposures do not have to wait decades for justice, like the Vietnam generation before them,” said Whitehead.

Before concluding with a plea for Congress to enact the Deborah Sampson Act, a comprehensive piece of legislation that ensures women have access to high-quality, gender-sensitive and specialized health care services to the same extent as their male peers, Whitehead noted that DAV and our Independent Budget partners—Veterans of Foreign Wars and Paralyzed Veterans of America—had recently issued an interim progress report on implementation of the VA MISSION Act.

“Of the 26 recommendations that we made to guide implementation of the law, only one has been fulfilled,” Whitehead informed lawmakers. He also noted that the VA’s failure to meet the MISSION Act’s Oct. 1, 2019, deadline to expand the caregiver program to pre-9/11 veterans was a major
disappointment for the organization.

“Despite having 16 months to prepare, the VA failed to implement the required IT solution and delayed the expansion until later this summer at the earliest. This is simply unacceptable. We call on Congress to take whatever actions are necessary to mandate that the VA end the delay and begin the caregiver expansion.”

Just as he opened the week with a quote from Sir Isaac Newton, Whitehead ended his testimony with another quote, this time from President Theodore Roosevelt: “Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.”

“To me, that prize is being part of the long and storied tradition of DAV,” said Whitehead, “one that I know will continue to flourish for the next 100 years.”

**Storming the Hill**

Members of the Department of Arizona met with Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, who serves on the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.
Sen. Tammy Duckworth, an Army veteran and double amputee of the Iraq War, shares a laugh while meeting with advocates from the Department of Illinois. Duckworth is a DAV life member and the organization’s 2008 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

Members of the Department of Indiana met with Sen. Todd Young to discuss ways lawmakers on Capitol Hill can help disabled veterans.