A daughter’s duty

Denise Scheiderer (left), made it her mission to ensure her father, John Pavel (right), a Marine Corps veteran who served as a frontline infantryman during the Korean War, received VA compensation and dental benefits.

DAV, daughter of twice-wounded Korean War veteran fight for dental benefits

Of the more than 9 million veterans served by the Department of Veterans Affairs, roughly 500,000 are eligible for VA-provided dental care. Disabled Korean War veteran John Pavel, unfortunately, was not among them.

Pavel’s daughter, Denise Scheiderer, describes her father’s dentures as “rolling around his mouth like a lozenge.” But to her surprise, when she tried to book a VA dental appointment for him in 2013, she discovered he was ineligible for such benefits.

“That’s when I found out he was only 20% service-connected,” said Scheiderer. “I couldn’t believe it since they took his teeth out at the VA when he was hospitalized.”
To see a VA dentist, a veteran must either have a service-connected dental disability, be a former prisoner of war (POW) or have a 100% disability rating. Even though Scheiderer’s dad is a twice-combat-wounded, 89-year-old Korean War veteran, he doesn’t fall into any of those categories.

Seeing the loose dentures, on top of the lifetime of physical, emotional and mental scars of war her dad carries with him, Scheiderer made it her mission to ensure her father could see a VA dentist.

Pavel was drafted into the Marine Corps in 1951, serving as an infantryman on the front lines on the Korean Peninsula. On Aug. 12, 1952, just three days into the Battle of Bunker Hill, artillery and mortar rounds fell on his position. He suffered a concussion and shrapnel wounds but was returned to duty six days later. Pavel earned his second Purple Heart less than a month later when his element was again the target of indirect enemy fire.

He remained unconscious for three days following the attack.

“It’s a miracle he made it home,” said Scheiderer.

Growing up, she rarely heard her father speak of his time in combat. Later in life, he recalled getting frostbite while crossing through Korean rice paddies, and told the story of seeing his radioman die in front of him one day before the other Marine was due to rotate back to the United States. She said her father still struggles with what he witnessed more than 67 years ago.

“He internalized everything,” she added. “He has such high anxiety about everything, he would be fine one minute and the next he would explode.”

Pavel’s health took a turn for the worse in recent years. He suffered a stroke in 2011, which now makes talking a
challenge. After being hospitalized for pneumonia in 2013, Pavel moved in with Scheiderer in Lexington, Ky., and she resigned from her job to become his full-time caregiver. At the advice of VA physicians, she filed paperwork to increase his VA rating. Though successful and despite his history of service-connected injuries, he still fell short of the full 100% and the dental benefits they were ultimately seeking.

“I fought harder for him to get what I knew he deserved,” she added.

Pavel’s condition continued to decline, and around-the-clock caregiving duties became more difficult without the necessary adapted housing amenities. VA compensation was more important than ever to help ensure his quality of life, so Scheiderer reached out to the DAV national service office in Cleveland, connecting with National Service Officer Andrew Dilbeck.

“Talking to her, you can tell she was just looking at ways to help her dad,” said Dilbeck.

When Dilbeck reviewed the VA file, he saw that Pavel was not only entitled to 100% disability but was due five years of retroactive pay as well. When Scheiderer received the good news, it was almost unbelievable. “I was blown away,” she said. “I never thought he would be compensated the way that he was.”

Pavel, who typically shies away from showing much emotion, smiled wide, threw his arms up in the air, and shouted, “Oh, praise God!” Scheiderer recalled. “He was very excited and said, ‘It’s about time.’”

“He’s 89, and Denise said she didn’t know if he’s ever going to see this,” said Dilbeck. “I could hear him in the background and could tell he was very excited.”

Most importantly, Pavel has already had a dental consultation thanks to his newly instated VA dental benefits. And
Scheiderer has already booked an appointment to fix her father’s dentures, finally.