

A day for Veterans



National Commander Butch Whitehead (second from left) places a wreath at Arlington National Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Nationwide events surrounding Veterans Day highlight DAV's dedication to veterans of yesterday, today and tomorrow

Every year, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, a wreath is placed at Arlington National Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The solemn ceremony symbolizes the guns of World War I falling silent more than a century ago and the American public's gratitude for the selfless service and sacrifices made by those who have worn our nation's uniform through the country's 243 years of existence.

But the 2019 ceremonies at our nation's most hallowed ground on a clear, crisp November morning marked more than the annual wreath laying. For DAV, they marked the penultimate event in a weekslong run-up to Veterans Day aimed at increasing awareness to the organization and how it facilitates victories for veterans.

In early October, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) provided a unique training opportunity for a group of DAV members. Former UFC lightweight champion and hall of famer Forrest Griffin hosted a mixed martial arts-inspired workout for DAV ambassador and Army veteran CeCe Mazyck, DAV's 2016 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Bobby Body and Marine Corps veteran Mike Franko at the UFC Performance Institute in Las Vegas.



Commander Whitehead (far right), DAV ambassador CeCe Mazyck (center right) and DAV's 2016 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Bobby Body (far left) with UFC light heavyweight Dominick Reyes (center left) at UFC 244 in New York City.

The trio's visit, which is documented in a six-minute video, showcased the physical and mental injuries disabled veterans

face but, more importantly, how they overcome them through personal fortitude and assistance from DAV.

“It’s very important to me personally, especially being an amputee,” said Body, an Army and Marine Corps veteran who became a world champion bodybuilder after an explosion in Iraq took his leg. “And that’s one of the things I try to instill in other veterans, whether you have a physical or nonphysical disability—you have to persevere.”

Like Body, Franko became a DAV service officer after turning to the organization for assistance with VA benefits.

“It was a life-changing experience getting the assistance from them and the benefits I deserved,” Franko said. “If it wasn’t for DAV, I don’t know if I would be here today.”

If the experience at the performance institute wasn’t enough, UFC invited National Commander Butch Whitehead, Mazyck, Body and other DAV members to UFC 244 at New York City’s Madison Square Garden, where the organization was put front and center during the event’s broadcast.

“UFC did a great job of helping highlight what DAV does for veterans,” said National Communications Director Rob Lewis, who was featured in the video. “They were beyond generous to these amazing disabled veterans, and we hope our partnership goes a long way in showcasing the noble mission of our organization to this demographic of UFC fans.”



Army veteran CeCe Mazyck (front row, right)

on the set of
"The View" for a
panel discussion
focused on
recognizing the
service and
sacrifice of
veterans. The
event, which was
hosted by ESPN,
ABC and The Walt
Disney Company,
was moderated by
co-host of "The
View" Meghan
McCain (standing,
left) and
included retired
Air Force master
sergeant and
ESPY's Pat
Tillman Award
winner Israel Del
Toro (front row,
left), Disney's
diversity and
inclusion manager
and retired Army
Maj. Kevin
Preston (back
row, left), ABC
News
correspondent and
Army Maj.
Stephanie Ramos
(back row,
middle) and ABC

World News
correspondent Bob
Woodruff (back
row, right).

Also in early November, ESPN, ABC and The Walt Disney Company hosted a panel discussion on the set of "The View" around the celebration and recognition of veterans past, present and future. Speakers, including Mazyck, discussed how their military service has affected their lives and careers, as well as challenges and opportunities veterans face as they transition from military to civilian life.

The event gave Mazyck, who became paralyzed from the waist down during a jump training accident in the 82nd Airborne Division, the opportunity to talk about how DAV assisted in her journey. She credited the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, presented each year by DAV and the VA, with being the catalyst for rediscovering her competitive spirit and regaining her self-esteem.

A Paralympian, she has become a 22-time gold medalist at the National Disabled Veterans Wheelchair Games, which is co-sponsored by the VA and Paralyzed Veterans of America, since first attending the winter sports clinic.

"[Adaptive sports] played a big role in my life, in reference to just getting back to who I was," Mazyck explained. "I knew there was a way to move on from [my injury] and become the person I knew I could be."

"CeCe, Bobby and Mike are incredible examples of how disabled veterans can lead successful, meaningful lives after injury," said Whitehead. "Their commitment to their fellow veterans is nothing short of extraordinary."

After laying a wreath on behalf of DAV during the Veterans Day ceremonies at Arlington, the commander joined Minnesota

Military Radio and staff from DAV's Washington headquarters to discuss various veterans issues during a nearly 45-minute show focused exclusively on DAV.

"Thinking of what that wreath represented gave me a chill down my back," Whitehead said afterward. "It wasn't just for all those who gave their lives in defense of this country, but for everyone—yesterday, today and tomorrow—who raised their hand, said, 'Send me,' and will be forever changed because of it."

But for Mazyck, there's no looking back.

"I wouldn't be the person I am today," she said of her service—and her injury. "No regrets."