

An inspiring convention



During the 99th DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in Tampa, Florida, delegates elected Vietnam veteran Andy Marshall to serve as national commander.

2021 DAV National Convention included awe-inspiring speakers, election of new national commander

Photos by Steve Poisall/The Gallery Studios

For the first time in two years, DAV and its Auxiliary came together for their national convention. More than 2,200 members and guests gathered in Tampa, Florida, to elect new leadership, including a new national commander; vote on hundreds of resolutions that will touch the lives of veterans nationwide; and enjoy some first-class entertainment with friends, old and new.

One of the principal duties of delegates is the selection of a

new national commander. At the convention's final business session, outgoing Commander Stephen "Butch" Whitehead passed the torch to Andy Marshall, a combat-disabled Army veteran of the Vietnam War.

"I'm truly honored to have been elected to serve beside you as our organization's national commander," said Marshall, a two-time Purple Heart recipient. "Serving the disabled veteran community is undoubtedly a sacred obligation to our members and future generations of veterans that I don't take lightly."

Marshall also thanked his predecessor, who served a nearly unprecedented two-year term—the first for any DAV national commander since World War II—for his dedication and willingness to provide some stability in the face of COVID-19.

"Butch, it has truly been an honor watching you maneuver the challenging last two years with the grace and poise of a true leader," added Marshall. "DAV could not have hoped for a more capable frontman during such uncertain times."

Marshall also recalled how DAV had helped him personally as a disabled veteran.

"This great organization showed me that there were others who have been in my shoes, and through their help and camaraderie, disabled veterans like myself were able to lead fulfilling lives with respect and dignity," he said.

While delivering the commander's report, Whitehead lauded the commitment shown by DAV throughout the pandemic.

"DAV's mission is rooted in service, and when veterans needed us most—as many lost their jobs, fell ill or became isolated in their homes—DAV members, volunteers and staff quickly pivoted to provide the resources necessary to help those in need," said Whitehead.

In one of his last acts as DAV's national commander, Whitehead

mentioned the Department of Veterans Affairs' prominence and responsibility to care for our nation's veterans, particularly during the ongoing pandemic.

"Although the full and lasting impact of this pandemic is not yet clear, we do know there are many issues our nation must stand ready to address," he said. "Health care is chief among them."

In addition to Marshall's election, convention delegates selected other national officers, including Senior Vice Commander Joseph Parsetich, 1st Junior Vice Commander Nancy Espinosa, 2nd Junior Vice Commander Dan Contreras, 3rd Junior Vice Commander Coleman Nee, 4th Junior Vice Commander John Donovan, Judge Advocate Michael Dobmeier and Chaplain Debra Varner.

The DAV Auxiliary elected Lynn Helms Prosser as national commander. Other newly elected leaders include Darlene Spence as senior vice commander, AnnMarie Hurley as 1st junior vice commander, Christopher J. Easley as 2nd junior vice commander, Melissa Pierce as 3rd junior vice commander, Terry Grabowski as 4th junior vice commander, Paula Raymond as judge advocate and Aura-Lee Nicodemus as chaplain.



President Joe Biden sent well-wishes to DAV members via video, noting the need to ensure

veterans have access to the care and benefits they have earned.

Although he could not attend, President Joe Biden delivered remarks to convention attendees via video. He recognized the century of service DAV has provided to veterans of all generations.

“I know you missed celebrating your centennial last year, but you never once stopped advocating for our veterans or helping with their service-connected claims during the entire pandemic,” said Biden. “That was critically important.”

Biden also mentioned the personal connection his family has to the United States military.

“Our son, Beau, deployed to Iraq for a year, and we prayed for his safe return every single day,” he said. “We as a nation must always care for those brave Americans who risk everything and sacrifice so much for our country as well as their families, survivors and caregivers.”

He said his administration would ensure that all veterans have “timely access to world-class health care and the benefits that go with that.”

VA Secretary Denis McDonough was in attendance and praised his department’s joint ventures with DAV, including the DAV Transportation Network, which takes veterans to and from VA medical appointments. McDonough spoke of William Eferkaln, a DAV member and Army veteran, who benefits from the charity of volunteer drivers, as he has a condition that makes it harder for blood to pump to his brain.



Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough addresses convention attendees, touching on the continued and critical work of DAV throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

“He had safe transportation to VA for a while, but then the service he had been using ended—meaning that he had no way to get to his appointments during the pandemic,” said McDonough. “That’s when he found out about DAV—and began getting rides from your volunteer drivers.”

McDonough commended DAV’s pandemic assistance, which veterans could call upon for emergency financial aid when they hit financial roadblocks due to the pandemic.

“Even as your own families struggled with the economic hardship of the pandemic, you invested your hard-earned dollars in an unemployment relief fund that helped veterans feed their families, pay their bills and stay above water when they feared they might be drowning,” McDonough added, referring to the more than \$2 million DAV provided to veterans and their families throughout the life of the COVID-19 Unemployment Relief Program.

During the joint opening session, DAV presented former Army Green Beret Mike McElhiney with the 2021 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award. One of the first Special Forces soldiers to enter Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, McElhiney lost his right arm when a piece of equipment mistakenly sent his location to an American bomber, which dropped ordnance on his position.

Since then, McElhiney has dedicated his life to advocating for his fellow veterans and currently serves as chief of staff of the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs.

The convention also included an epic performance from the legendary rock band Jefferson Starship during Fun Night, which was sponsored by TriWest. Energy in the room was invigorating, with DAV and Auxiliary members, staff and their families enjoying the rocking tunes that culminated a successful convention.

Other events included seminars to inform and educate veterans on DAV's wide-ranging areas of focus and activities, including legislation, volunteering and women veterans.

Additionally, members sat for a screening of DAV's centennial documentary, "The Battle Never Ends," highlighting organization's origins and century of service to America's veterans.

Dennis Joyner, in his capacity as convention chair, helped put the difficulties of the past two years into perspective.

He remembered his close friends Jim Sursely and Chad Colley. All had served in the Army in Vietnam and were injured in the same year. They were all past disabled veterans of the year and national commanders. He cataloged their experiences and remarked upon the loss he, like so many others, had experienced.

"Until the pandemic, we were three; three soldiers, three triple amputees injured in the same war, in the same year.

Three with many of the same challenges and a shared desire to make life better for our fellow veterans and their families," he said.

"We were a community within the DAV community. We were never alone because, even though we lived apart, we knew we had one another."

Both passed during the pandemic. To make the point that veterans are not alone, he invited Dewey "Doc" Hayes, the medic who saved his life in Vietnam, to the stage.

"If Jim and Chad were with us today, they'd be proud to see us gathered and getting back to the important work that calls us here," he said.

"And they'd want us to get as much done, and have as much fun as possible, with our time together."

"I am immensely proud with how our 99th national convention turned out in Tampa," said DAV National Adjutant Marc Burgess. "This past year has been challenging, to say the least, but everyone at DAV is so thankful for everyone who came out to support their fellow veterans."

The 100th national convention is scheduled to be held Aug. 6-9, 2022, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel Orlando in Orlando, Florida.

Learn more

Download speeches, reports and other information from the 2021 DAV National Convention by going to www.dav.org/events/2021-national-convention. You can also view all of DAV's convention videos on the DAV YouTube Channel at youtube.com/disabledamericanveterans. Photos are available at flickr.com/thedav.

DAV's Day of Inspiration



Navy Cross, and former Army Staff Sgt. Sal Giunta—the first living Medal of Honor recipient from the war in Afghanistan.



Four days after receiving the Navy Cross, he was the guest of first lady Laura Bush at the State of the Union in 2007.

Other Day of Inspiration speakers were retired Air Force Maj. Brian Shul, who is one of just 85 pilots to fly the secretive spy plane and fastest jet aircraft ever built, the SR-71 Blackbird, and author, entrepreneur and former Army Green Beret Larry Broughton.