



National Convention Remarks

Executive Director Washington Headquarters Randy Reese
August 4, 2019

National Commander Nixon, National Adjutant Burgess, distinguished guests and delegates to the 98th DAV and Auxiliary National Convention.

I am deeply honored to be here today as Executive Director of DAV's National Service and Legislative Headquarters to deliver my first annual report on our accomplishments over the past year.

Let me begin by thanking my predecessor, Garry Augustine, who retired last year after more than 30 years of working for DAV.

Thanks in large part to Garry's leadership, DAV helped achieve some major legislative victories, including appeals reform, the VA MISSION Act and the caregiver expansion.

I know that Garry, his wife Kelli, and his children Chelsea and Kyle have always considered DAV as their family.

So, on behalf of our DAV family, I want to thank Garry for a lifetime service.

To prepare for my new role working with Congress, the VA and the White House in these highly political and partisan times, I looked for words of wisdom from the past.

50 years ago, comedian and USO performer Bob Hope said, "No one party can fool all of the people all of the time; that's why we have TWO parties."

100 years ago, the late, great Will Rogers said: "the more you observe politics, the more you've got to admit that each party is worse than the other."

But the best advice I got about Congress goes back over 200 years from one of our Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, who advised "Believe none of what you hear and half of what you see."

I'm a big fan of Franklin, who also said, "Beer is proof that God wants us to be happy."

And if you see me later tonight, your happiness is on me!

While we like to have some fun at conventions, we also have important work to do, and I am pleased to report that over the past year that is exactly what we have done.

You probably heard that in January, a Federal Circuit Court case called *Procopio v. Wilkie* ruled that service in Vietnam included service in the territorial seas up to 12 miles offshore --- which would finally allow Blue Water Navy veterans to get health care and benefits for conditions associated with Agent Orange exposure.

Several months later, Congress passed and the President signed the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veteran Act* that extended this even further, up to 90 miles in some locations.

However, just a week after the law was signed, the Department of Veterans Affairs issued a blanket stay on **ALL** Blue Water Navy claims suspending processing until January 2020.

We **STRONGLY** disagree with this stay.

We believe the *Procopio* decision gave the VA authority to begin granting claims **RIGHT NOW** for veterans who served up to 12 miles from shore.

To correct this injustice, we organized a VSO coalition and have called on the Secretary to lift the stay and begin processing and granting claims **NOW** -- because our Vietnam Veterans have waited **LONG ENOUGH!**

I want to stress that anyone who thinks they may be eligible for these benefits --- including survivors of Blue Water Navy veterans --- should contact a DAV Service Officer and file a claim as soon as possible.

Of course, Agent Orange is not the only toxic substance that veterans have been exposed to.

It's well documented that burn pits were used in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the Persian Gulf -- both before and after 9/11.

And as a result, hundreds of thousands of veterans may have been exposed to harmful airborne toxins, though it may take years before the full health consequences are known.

To help them now, DAV has developed an original proposal that would require the VA to recognize anyone who served in a location where active burn pits have been documented and concede that they were exposed to airborne toxins.

This would make it significantly easier for them to prove claims for disability compensation.

I'm pleased to report that we are working with members of Congress to draft legislation that would provide this concession of exposure and hope to introduce it in the fall.

NEVER AGAIN should veterans made ill by toxic exposures be forced to wait **YEARS** for benefits.

Another critically important law being implemented right now is the VA MISSION Act. If this landmark legislation is fully and faithfully implemented, it could strengthen VA health care for millions of ill and injured veterans who rely on VA for their care.

The MISSION Act creates a new and expanded Veterans Community Care Program, gives the VA new tools to strengthen internal care capacity, extends VA's telehealth service across state lines, and offers veterans an urgent care benefit – something DAV proposed and fought for years to achieve.

We do, however, have concerns about VA's new community care access standards, the lack of quality standards for private health care providers and the lack of standards for clinical care coordination for the most severely ill and injured veterans.

It's too early to determine whether the MISSION Act will ultimately prove successful. That's why we will soon be launching a new survey to help us learn what veterans think about the VA's new approach to community care.

Rest assured that DAV will continue fighting to give the VA all the resources it needs so that **NO** veteran has to wait too long, or travel too far, for the care they need and deserve.

A critical part of the MISSION Act was the expansion of the VA's comprehensive caregiver assistance program to caregivers of veterans severely injured prior to 9/11 --- something DAV has long advocated for.

Unfortunately, it now appears that the VA will **NOT** expand the program this coming October as the law clearly intended, because it has not yet upgraded its caregiver IT system.

We are extremely disappointed that 14 months after the law passed, the VA is still not ready.

The VA and Congress must find an expedited solution to ensure that family caregivers of veterans from Vietnam, Korea and World War II finally get access to these life-changing benefits.

And we haven't forgotten about those severely disabled veterans who do not qualify for caregiver benefits because their disabilities are the result of illnesses -- rather than injuries -- and we will continue advocating until **EVERY** family caregiver of a severely disabled veteran is equally honored and supported.

DAV is also working closely with a coalition of veterans, military and survivor organizations to pass legislation to end the so-called widow's tax.

Today, Survivor Benefit Program – or SBP – insurance is offset by Dependency and Indemnity Compensation – or DIC – benefits, which is simply unfair.

The Widow's Tax legislation already has over 360 cosponsors in the House and over 70 cosponsors in the Senate and -- with your help -- we hope to **finally end** the widow's tax.

DAV continues to make progress removing barriers that prevent women veterans from fully accessing all of their VA benefits and services.

Last September, DAV issued the report, “Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead,” our second comprehensive look at the challenges facing women veterans as they transition back to civilian life.

The report contains 52 key recommendations to strengthen gender-specific health care, benefits and transition services.

In February, DAV was pleased to help introduce the Deborah Sampson Act, which contains a number of our recommendations.

And we intend to keep pushing this and other women veterans legislation until **everyone** who served has equitable access to high-quality benefits and health care – **regardless of gender**.

Service to veterans is the heart of what we do, and DAV is unparalleled in this mission.

With almost 4,000 total National, Transition, Department, Chapter and County Service Officers, DAV was able to file over 200,000 new claims last year -- helping veterans and their families obtain more than \$20 billion dollars in new and retroactive benefits.

DAV has also been at the forefront of the effort to modernize the claims processing system and has been the leading VSO when it comes to paperless claims.

Over the past year, we filed 160,000 claims electronically – more than any other VSO – speeding up processing times and getting veterans their compensation more quickly.

The number one reason for our success in representing veterans is our dedication to training.

DAV’s Structured and Continuing Training Program is the **BEST** in the business.

We also train and certify Department and Chapter Service Officers, with over 2,500 certified DSOs and CSOs currently assisting veterans and family members.

If you are a National, Transition, Department or Chapter Service Officer, I would ask you to please stand or raise you your hand. Let’s give them a big round of applause for the work they do.

Finally, I want to talk about DAV’s Disaster Relief Program which helps thousands of veterans and their families after natural disasters and other emergencies. Over the past year, DAV provided \$1.2 million dollars to support more than 3,500 veterans impacted by hurricanes, tornados, floods and even a volcano.

[**Hurricane Florence video**](#)

As I look back over the past year, and really my entire career with DAV, I am reminded – and inspired – by the words of basketball legend Michael Jordan, someone who knew a thing or six about victories.

He said, “Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen.”

That’s what I think of when I think about DAV. That’s why we have been and will continue to be successful, because **YOU** continue to “make it happen.”

From our Commanders and Adjutants, to our Benefit Protection Team Leaders, to our Commanders Action Network, to our DAV members and Auxiliary --
– **YOU** are the foundation upon which all of our victories are built – and I see many more victories ahead.

So, thank you and may God continue to Bless the work you do and DAV.

Commander Nixon, that completes my report to the Convention.