



# Convention Reignites Commitment to Service

By Thom Wilborn

**A**mid the wounded and recovering city of New Orleans, more than 3,000 disabled veterans, family members and guests at the 86th National Convention declared a renewed commitment to the DAV's mission. As the organization's leadership transferred from Bradley S. Barton to Robert T. Reynolds, it was an event filled with unity and determination to protect and serve those who have sacrificed for our country.

Accepting his unanimous election, National Commander Reynolds outlined in an inspiring address a series of goals to build a future of promise for disabled veterans. "A key element in this plan is a sustained effort through the two years of the 110th Congress seeking federal legislation to make sure that disabled veterans get the full rehabilitation and recovery they need to rebuild their lives."

"We want to make our long-time legislative priority of guaranteed, full-funding for veterans health care a reality," he said. "We are also seeking legislation requiring the VA to move forward in the treatment and research of mild and moderate traumatic brain injury, including a comprehensive screening and treatment program."

"I know you are ready and willing to make a difference and answer the call to action to urge your lawmakers to support the kind of legislative and policy initiatives that we believe are right and necessary," Reynolds said. "Nobody does it better than the DAV when it comes to building a future of promise for today's and tomorrow's disabled veterans and their families."

For the first time, the National Convention was broadcast live over the Web site [www.dav.org](http://www.dav.org). "It was just like being there," said Sandy Resner of Hanover Park, Ill., who couldn't attend with her husband National Executive Committee member Norman J. Resner. "Everything was there!"

"I was inspired to see the intensity of the National Commander," said John W. King II of Chapter 6 in Hampton, Va. "To see him leading our organization with his intensity and desire will ensure our benefits will be protected. He and his National Officers are the people who know what's right, and they have the right and duty to speak up on our behalf. Rob Reynolds will carry the torch."

"This convention and New Orleans have been wonderful for us," said Tim Hedgecock of Chapter 56 in Lawton, Okla. "This is a city that was devastated and came back. It's fitting that all these disabled veterans, who have come back from crushing disabilities, meet here to help the city recover from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina."

The National Convention's Leadership Seminar on Aug. 10, was hosted by National Legislative Director Joseph A. Violante, who discussed how to successfully present constituent issues to members of Congress and their staff to enable DAV to maintain its leadership as the premier veterans



service organization on Capitol Hill.

He said congressional leaders view meetings with their constituents as more productive than meetings with association leaders and officers. “This is an opportunity for DAV to have an impact on Capitol Hill with organized constituent meetings,” said Violante. “Staffers feel meetings with constituents make their jobs easier.”

He emphasized the importance of getting to the point during meetings with congressional leaders and staff, being consistently reliable, following up with requested information and creating sincere relationships.

“Never end your meeting without telling the staffers how they can help,” he said. “That’s the point of the meeting in the first place.”

Convention delegates were treated to a special celebration that evening on the Spanish Plaza adjoining the convention hotel. In an event saluting the DAV-sponsored B-25 *Panchito* and commemorating the 65th anniversary of the Doolittle Raid on Japan during World War II, delegates were awed by the plane, a special fly-over and country music star Aaron Tippin, which also attracted extensive local media coverage.

As the business of the convention began in earnest, Commander Barton expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to serve an “extremely exuberant year.”

“I have seen first-hand the care and compassion of our members and the great successes of our organization’s programs,” he said. “It’s been a year filled with joy, tears, friendship, success and towering moments.”

He praised National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson for being his trusted, supportive advisor. “Without question, Art is a leader of the finest veterans service organization in the world,” said Barton. His confidence, support and strength have been invaluable to me throughout this year.”

Addressing the newest generation of disabled veterans

from wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, Barton said young veterans “need our service and advocacy in action. I am very pleased to tell you the DAV is there, in front of the line, telling their story,” he said.

“All of our successes mean one thing,” he said. “We have much more work to do. If we slack off now, the creeping bureaucracy will again erode our gains. We must be ever vigilant against policies that will mean a loss of our rights and earned benefits.”

Barton received a standing ovation as he finished his convention report by calling his year as National Commander “an experience of a lifetime. This past year is a great example of how the DAV truly is a force to be reckoned with.”

Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson, who announced his resignation effective this fall (see page 21), followed with his thanks for many DAV programs that assist and support the VA. The National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, the DAV’s National Service Program, Mobile Service Office Program, Voluntary Services and Transportation Network programs all were highly praised for their accomplishments.

Nicholson acknowledged challenges facing VA health care and claims adjudication, but overall he felt problems are moving toward resolution.

Advances in the screening and treatment of traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, the signature injuries of the current wars, have made the VA the leader in the medical field. He said the VA health care system treats one million patients each week. “Not only is the VA the largest health care provider in the United States, it is also the best.”

Secretary Nicholson said the VA is receiving near record numbers of new claims with as many as 8 to 10 disabilities per claim. “The challenges in compensation and



Left, Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson pays tribute to DAV for its many programs that assist and support veterans. Center, Golden Corral Restaurant Marketing Manager Dolly Mercer thanked the National Convention delegates for a “great partnership” with the DAV. Right, National Commander Bradley S. Barton presents the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Award to Florida State Attorney Norman R. Wolfinger.



pensions are the numbers,” he said. Additional funding to hire more personnel will help, he said, but more money would not solve the problem. The problem, according to Nicholson, is the time it requires to adjudicate claims properly. “I know the frustration is there,” he said, “and we’re working on it.”

Nicholson said there is unprecedented demand on VA cemeteries primarily due the 1,900 World War II veterans who die each day. But he added the resources are available to ensure veterans can have a final resting place in hallowed ground.

Auxiliary National Commander Donna Tanner reported to the convention that unity with the DAV is helping to ensure the full strength of the organization can be used when issues need to be addressed. “When we work together, we shine,” she said.

Ford Motor Company Fund President Jim Vella presented a \$200,000 check to the DAV for the purchase of eight new vehicles for the Transportation Network and donated \$25,000 to the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program.

Since 1996, Ford has donated 125 vehicles worth more than \$3 million to the DAV, and helped to fund 87 scholarships.

Golden Corral Restaurant Marketing Manager Dolly Mercer thanked the National Convention delegates for a “great partnership” with the DAV. Last year, the sponsor of Military Appreciation Monday served 1.5 million free meals to veterans and active duty military and raised \$1.9 million in donations to the DAV. “We just love partnering with you all,” she said. “This year’s Military Appreciation Monday will be Nov. 12. We hope to see you all there.”

The Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Award

was presented to Florida State Attorney Norman R. Wolfinger. Wounded in 1969, while serving with the 1st Air Cavalry Division at Quan Loi, Vietnam, Wolfinger began a long and painful road to recovery. “I was one of the lucky ones who got a second chance for life,” he said.

Wolfinger attended the University of Florida College of Law, earning his law degree and went to work as an assistant state attorney in Florida. He was later elected State-SAttorney for the 18th Judicial Court in Florida, where he continues to serve.

Wolfinger has spent much of his career providing free legal assistance to veterans, advocacy for veterans issues and helping create new programs to serve veterans in distress.

In accepting his recognition, he referred to his “common bond” with disabled veterans, as emotion filled his voice when speaking of those he served with and those who serve our nation today. “Each of you has that same love of country, conviction that our way of life must be preserved and each of us understands that freedom is not free,” Wolfinger said. “Freedom must be fought for, it must be protected and handed on.”

The National Convention presented a series of awards to those who have served the DAV with expertise, honor and dignity. These include the 2007 DAV Bugle Awards which recognize the contributions of those in the media. Bugle Award recipients this year were CBS News Chief Washington Correspondent and host of “Face the Nation” Bob Schieffer



Left, Bradley S. Barton accepts an award recognizing his outstanding performance as National Commander from Auxiliary National Commander Donna Tanner. Right, National Commander Barton, center, and National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson, left, accept a \$25,000 donation from Fort Motor Company Fund President Jim Vella for the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program.



and *CQ Today* reporter Tim Starks.

National Adjutant Wilson opened the afternoon business session with a report of the caring and compassionate activities of the DAV, especially in support of the newest generation of disabled veterans.

“If we take a hard look at the statistics for Iraq and Afghanistan, we see that while it is a blessing that so many survive their wounds, the extent of their injuries only increases our responsibility to provide them with the best service, the best medical care and most timely adjudication of VA claims that the best nation on earth can offer,” he said.

“We who have sacrificed for our country have been given the responsibility of ensuring that the integrity of our nation remains intact,” Wilson said. “And we are resolved to continue our essential struggle to build better lives for them and their families.”

Part of that struggle, Wilson said, is to continue to oppose any policy that would undermine the services veterans deserve and to “reject any initiative that would take money out of our veterans’ pockets by allowing fee-based attorney services in the VA’s administrative claims process.”

The National Convention opened its second day with remarks from USO President and CEO Edward A. Powell, Jr., who commended the DAV for being good supporters and staunch partners. “We are bookends on the same shelf,” said Powell. “We take care of the military at the beginning and you care of those who need it the most after their service. And that is a remarkable and extraordinary achievement.”

Disabled Veterans’ LIFE Memorial Foundation Executive Director Victor Biggs told convention delegates that \$20 million in commitments and pledges had been received for the planned American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, about one-third of the amount needed. He said that major corporations and philanthropic organizations are now being asked to step forward to support the memorial. “We’re

grateful for all the DAV and Auxiliary has done to sustain our efforts,” he said.

Foundation Project Executive William B. Owenby said that ground-breaking for the memorial is tentatively set for 2009. “We have a ways to go, but I want to assure you we are on the road to finally and completely establishing this memorial for disabled veterans,” he said.

Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman presented a stirring report on DAV activities in Washington, including the “Stand Up for Veterans” campaign, to protect the rights and benefits of disabled veterans.

Gorman said the assistance being given by the DAV to those returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has far surpassed any other organization. “They are taking the first steps that each of us has taken,” he said. “We had the DAV with us, and now it is our turn to be there for them. It has been heartwarming duty for us, and one we will continue.”

Gorman noted that some recommendations in the President’s Commission on Care for America’s Returning Wounded Warriors—the so-called Dole-Shalala commission—pose a threat to disability and other VA benefits.

“Most of the recommendations are positive and, not surprisingly, are already being addressed by the VA,” said Gorman. “But perhaps the most troubling is an ill-advised recommendation for the wholesale overhaul of the VA disability evaluation and compensation system. That recommendation would establish a separate, complicated system of adjudication only for those with combat-related injuries based on two separate factors—loss of earnings and quality-

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*Left, National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson accepts a hug from artist Kaziah Hancock following her recognition for painting the images of fallen service members in her Portraits of Heroes collection. Right, National Commander Bradley S. Barton, left, presents a \$15,000 check to Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Volunteer Scholarship winner Jamiya Harris.*



## Convention

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of-life issues—instead of the structured disability compensation system now in use that collectively considers both factors. It is only a short leap to replacing the compensation system which now applies to all veterans.”

Gorman also noted the first Senate Veterans Affairs’ Committee hearing on mandatory funding of VA health care. “We have long sought a permanent solution for funding VA health care to guarantee veterans will have a dependable, quality, viable and accessible system now and for the foreseeable future,” he said.

“Our message to Congress is simple—without reform, we see no prospect for improvement in the current budget structure,” said Gorman. “Funding inadequacies and delays have become the norm every year and, without reform, will continue to the detriment of veterans.”

“We shouldn’t have to do battle every single year in order for Congress to do the right thing,” said Gorman. “Can’t we, once and for all, come to the moral realization that as the richest nation on earth, and a nation at war, we have no greater obligation than to care for our wounded and disabled? Now is the time to stand up for vets, and Washington is about to feel the power of our Stand Up for Vets campaign.”

A highlight of the National Convention were informative and illuminating workshops designed to give members vital, up-to-date information on issues that affect them. The workshops and seminars addressed a variety of important issues including membership, communications, voluntary services, women veterans and POW/MIA information.

At the Service and Legislative Seminar a panel of legislative and VA officials responded to the concerns of delegates. Among the responses from panelists were:

- Hearings on full funding for VA health care will continue in the fall—House Veterans Affairs’ Committee Democratic Chief Counsel David Tucker;

- 185,000 disability claims have been received by the VA from veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and VA is concurrently adjudicating multiple disability claims—VA Compensation and Pension Service Director Bradley Mayes;

- Continuing Resolutions are not the way the VA should be funded and more thought is warranted on the Dole-Shalala commission report’s recommendations on disability benefits—Senate Veterans Affairs’ Committee Majority Counsel Dahlia Melendrez;

- Proposed rules allowing attorneys to charge fees for claims representation is not yet in effect. The regulations call for reasonable fees to avoid attorney windfalls—VA Assistant General Counsel Richard Hipolit.

“These were excellent workshops,” said retired NSO Paul G. Derossett of Chapter 72 in Darlington, S.C. “The Benefits Protection Team Workshop presented information in a way the average delegate can understand.”

“These were very informative meetings,” said Francis C. Milam of Chapter 1 in Atlanta, Ga. “We learned a lot about what’s going on in Washington. The Stand Up for Vets program is daring and has a lot of substance. It sets an example of our service to veterans.”

The National Convention returned to business on Tuesday, Aug. 4, with reports by National Service Foundation

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*Left, Volunteer driver Joseph P. Trzaska, San Diego, and Ford Motor Company Fund’s Lynn Quigley enjoy their time at the National Convention. Right, National Commander Bradley S. Barton accepts a presentation from the National Order of the Trench Rats, Paul Bailey, right, and Al Sorrentino, left, during the National Convention.*

## Convention

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President Gary Burns and Charitable Service Trust Chairman Richard Marbes. Both Burns and Marbes cited the increased demand on the two funds created by the needs of nearly 200,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

“These demands are expected to double in the next few years,” said Marbes. Despite the increased demand, Burns said that the National Service Foundation is capable of meeting the needs of returning service members and of all veterans. “In this crisis, you and I can take pride that the Disabled American Veterans is heading the vanguard for change,” he said.

Following their reports, scores of delegates formed a long line to make donations to the Foundation, Trust, Colorado Trust and American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. The donations totaled \$98,200 for the National Service Foundation, \$10,180 for the Charitable Service Trust, \$81,600 for the Colorado Trust and \$13,200 for the memorial.

The convention resumed in the afternoon with the nomination and election of Nationals Officers who will lead the DAV for the next year (see page 28). Later that evening, delegates got the chance to meet all the new National Officers during an introduction ceremony and sumptuous dinner to

culminate another successful National Convention.

It was during the introduction of National Officers that the General Electric Foundation announced a two-year grant of \$1.5 million for the Transition Assistance Program.

“The GE Foundation is honored to share in DAV’s mission of hope to communities where disabled veterans and their families live,” said Foundation President Robert Corcoran. “This will ensure that our nation’s youngest, most vulnerable veterans receive all benefits and services they earned through military service,” said Corcoran. After five days of reports, awards, workshops, seminars, dancing and dining, members packed their bags for home. “This was my first National Convention,” said Mendez. “Overall, I thought it was inspiring.”

“I just get a terrific kick out of being together,” said Lloyd W. Kurrasch of Chapter 96 in Panasoffkee, Fla. “I’ve been coming here for 12 years, and I love being here with my fellow disabled veterans. They’ve been through the same stuff as me. We’re all disabled and we had a great time. Hey, when do we go to Las Vegas?”



National Commander Robert T. Reynolds, left, and National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson, right, receive a two-year grant of \$1.5 million for the Transition Assistance Program from General Electric Foundation President Robert Corcoran.



Robert T. Reynolds receives his National Commander’s pin from outgoing National Commander Bradley S. Barton.