

National Commander-elect Raymond E. Dempsey, right, receives his cap of leadership from National Commander Robert T. Reynolds following Dempsey's unanimous election.



Raymond Dempsey Elected to Lead DAV; Members Set Priorities for Coming Year

By Thom Wilborn

Pledging to leave no veteran behind, Raymond E. Dempsey was unanimously elected National Commander before 3,200 delegates and guests at the 87th National Convention in Las Vegas, Nev.

“Ensuring no veteran is left behind also means making sure everyone knows how to get needed care,” said Commander Dempsey. “We, as veterans helping veterans, need to aid those who are suffering.”

Sandra Dobmeier of South Dakota was elected Auxiliary National Commander (See page 36 for a full listing of DAV and Auxiliary National Officers.)

The election of National Officers was the final event of the National Convention which showcased the leadership of the DAV as the world’s finest veterans service organization. Sessions broadcast live on the Internet featured messages from presidential candidates Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.).

Dempsey praised Robert T. Reynolds for “a tremendously successful year” as National Commander and acknowledged



that he would be “a tough act to follow.”

Forced to pause for several standing ovations, Dempsey thanked the convention delegates for the opportunity and responsibility to lead the DAV. “I will do all I can to make sure that your efforts—and mine—ensure that no veteran is left behind,” he said.

“I liked the National Commander’s speech,” said David Bolton, Commander of Chapter 20 in Des Moines, Iowa. “He is a powerful speaker and showed a lot of leadership.”

The convention began as then-National Commander Reynolds gave the initial report reviewing his year in office, thrilling the crowd with an entertaining video of his “cross-country ride” from Washington, D.C., to Las Vegas to deliver his powerful report of DAV’s accomplishments during the membership year.

“It is our job to inform and educate members of Congress about the vital issues affecting disabled veterans and their families.” Reynolds told the membership. “All of you have key roles to play in those efforts—to call on our government to stand up for veterans.”

“Throughout this year I have experienced the spirit of the

DAV wherever I went—the spirit of veterans helping veterans, of delivering service to those who have served our nation and their families and of proclaiming the good work that we all do to honor our mission,” he said.

Cautioning against becoming lax in support of the mission, Reynolds said, “If we are not alert, Congress and the Administration can slip back through the looking glass to make bad plans look good.”

Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon H. Mansfield followed with a charge to DAV members to continue their mission of supporting the rights and benefits of disabled veterans and their families.

“In retrospect, our history together makes one thing very clear,” said Mansfield. “Quite simply, you and I bore the sacrifice on foreign battlefields, but also on the ‘No Man’s Land’ of the federal battlefield.”

Mansfield challenged the DAV to protect the rights and benefits of disabled veterans in the future. “I would challenge you to make sure to pay attention to the changes that are coming,” he said. “The challenge is there to make sure, if we make this journey of change, that the bottom line is the reason the VA exists—one simple thing—to take care of veterans, stay in the battle until the end. That’s the goal.”

Outgoing Auxiliary National Commander Kathryn Wiley urged the audience to seize the moment in serving disabled

veterans and their families. “It is crucial to our success,” she said. “The Auxiliary will stand by the DAV to make sure we win the battle for disabled veterans. The future can and will be ours.”

Among convention highlights was the presentation of the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award to Illinois Director of Veterans’ Affairs L. Tammy Duckworth.

Duckworth said the DAV “has made life better for all of us. You made my life today possible even before I was injured.” A major in the Illinois National Guard, she lost both legs and suffered other injuries when a rocket-propelled grenade hit her helicopter in Iraq. “I wasn’t sure if I could live through the day, but I thought that I might be able to survive a minute,” she said recounting her painful recovery. “So I started counting down the minutes, one second at a time. I would just lay there and say to myself, ‘one one-thousand, two one-thousand’ until I got to 60, and then I would start over again.”

During Duckworth’s tenure as Director of Veterans’ Affairs in Illinois, the state has created more than \$70 million in new programs for veterans. “It is Washington that should do more for us,” she said. “With an aging veteran population and a growing need for the younger generation returning severely wounded from combat, the time for assured

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Above, National Commander Robert T. Reynolds presents the Bugle Award to Cleveland investigative reporter Ron Regan for his stories supporting the honor and service of the DAV. Right, Tammy Duckworth addresses the National Convention delegates after receiving the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award. National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson delivers his report on DAV’s outstanding achievements to delegates at the National Convention. Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon H. Mansfield tells DAV members to continue supporting the rights and benefits of disabled veterans and their families.

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[VA] funding is now. The VA should have 100 percent of the funds it needs to care for our veterans.”

“I believe that we want our warriors to be secure in the knowledge that when they are hurt, we will take care of them,” Duckworth said.

The joint opening sessions also included presentations of the Bugle Award to investigative reporter Ron Regan; Outstanding Auxiliary Member of the Year award to Marjorie Fleming; George H. Seal Memorial Trophies to George A. Beadles, Jr., of Chesterfield, Va., and Miriam A. Daley of Arlington, Mass.; and the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarships.

National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson’s report to the National Convention provided an overview of the remarkable changes in DAV. “We’re using innovative new tools and programs, creating new and sound programs and building on the public’s trust and support to advance our legislative priorities,” he said.

Wilson said the 2007-2008 membership year has been marked with achievement in every area—service, legislation, voluntary Services, membership and communications. “We have advanced the cause of disabled veterans at every venue, ensuring that those who make our laws and those who live by them always remember the service, dedication and sacrifice of disabled veterans and the members



of the DAV.”

House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner (D-Calif.), speaking at the National Convention’s second business session, stressed the nation’s obligation to veterans. Citing more than 800,000 men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Filner said that 95 percent of the wounded are surviving their injuries. “That means there are more severely injured veterans returning home,” he said. “It is part of the cost of war to deal with the warriors. And we cannot ever forget the veterans from earlier wars.”

“Of course the job will never be done right until the DAV’s goal of assured funding, or mandatory funding, of the health care for our nation’s veterans is put in place,” said Filner. “We have got to have that bill, and we’re going to get that done. We’re going to be united in saying that every young man and woman who comes back from these wars gets all the care, love, attention, honor and dignity that they deserve,” he said.

Filner told the delegates that he had three priorities in Congress: mandatory funding for VA health care, the GI Bill for the 21st century and ending the VA backlog of 800,000 claims. “We need to get that backlog down to where it belongs, and we can do that with more professional and accountable claims adjudicators,” he said.

Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman warned convention delegates that the Dole-Shalala Commission proposal to create an entirely new disability compensation system

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Above, House Veterans Affairs’ Committee Chairman Bob Filner (D-Calif.) tells the National Convention that sufficient, timely and predictable funding for VA health care is one of his legislative priorities. Right, National Commander Robert T. Reynolds, left, and National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson, center, receive a \$200,000 donation from Ford Motor Company Fund President Jim Vella to purchase seven new vehicles for the DAV Transportation Network.



Left, then National Commander Robert T. Reynolds presents the \$15,000 Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship to Crystalyn Whitaker of Shreveport, La. Right, Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman presents his report to the National Convention.



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could mean disaster for disabled veterans. “For the first time, VA disability compensation for service-connected disabilities would be means tested,” he said. “Compensation would be reduced from today’s levels if a veteran overcomes disability, rehabilitates himself and earns a salary or receives Social Security benefits. Forgotten are the sacrifices so few have made for so many.”

Gorman said the proposal is included in two separate pieces of legislation, one in the House and one in the Senate. “The DAV has vigorously opposed these proposals and will continue to do so,” he said. “The answer to fixing the disability system and its absolutely unacceptable backlog of cases is not to throw the current system away and replace it with a new one.”

Gorman also said maintaining the VA’s superb health care system, which is the best in the nation, is providing sufficient, timely and predictable funding as called for in the DAV’s Stand Up for Veterans initiative.



“Over the past 18 years, the VA has received its budget on time only twice,” he said. “That’s a disgrace. You can’t run a business that way. So why does Congress expect the VA health care system can operate that way and, in the process, abandon their responsibility?”

Gorman said it is vital to continue the VA’s excellent health care as a way to honor the service of veterans from the current wars. But he expressed concern that the VA may unwittingly be creating a two-tiered system of benefits—one for the newest generation of veterans and another for veterans of previous wars.

“This is not how it should be,” he said. “We should do all we possibly can to ensure the new veteran receives all the benefits he or she is entitled to in a timely and quality manner. However, it should not be at the expense of other veterans.”

Following his report, Gorman presented the National Commander’s Outstanding VA Employee awards to individuals representing the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, the National Cemetery



Above, Dr. Elizabeth M. Yano, who helped develop VA women’s health research, addresses the National Convention’s Women Veterans Workshop. Center, National Voluntary Services Director Edward E. Hartman, left, and James G. Leahy, Chief Merchandising Officer for the VA Canteen Service, address the Voluntary Services Workshop at the National Convention. Right, Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Benefits Counsel Amanda Meredith answers questions during the Service and Legislative Seminar.

Administration and the Board of Veterans Appeals. (See page 10.) Awards also were presented to outstanding veteran employment representatives and employers who help veterans obtain needed jobs to restore their lives. (See page 27.)

Following the session, a series of seminars and workshops took center stage to give members the latest information on veterans issues.

Reps. Chet Edwards (D-Texas), Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.) and Jon Porter (R-Nev.) advocated improved veterans programs. Edwards and Porter signed the DAV pledge to support sufficient, timely and predictable funding for the VA under the Stand Up for Veterans program. Berkley had been among the first to sign the pledge.

“It is a new day in Congress when it comes to honoring veterans,” said Edwards, the House Military Construction and VA Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman. “By working with the DAV, we are working to ensure the veterans are treated with the dignity they deserve.”

Noting the \$11.8 billion increase in funding for VA over the last two years, Edwards said “veterans deserve and have earned every dime of the funding. The Congress, with the help of the DAV, has passed more funding for VA than any Congress in history.”

“Our veterans are entitled to the best,” said Berkley. “That’s the least we can do when veterans come home. Do we really want to balance the budget on the lost arms and legs of our veterans?”

Porter supported additional research and funds for programs dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and

traumatic brain injuries, which have become the signature injuries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And he supported the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project so that the stories of our nation’s veterans are preserved for posterity.

Porter praised the DAV for its care and support for veterans. He said the DAV is due a great deal of credit for a new VA medical center in Las Vegas and nursing home improvements.

A videotaped message from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) called for expanded concurrent receipt of military longevity retirement pay and disability compensation, VA budget increases, improvements to TriCare and passage of the Wounded Warriors Act.

The Service and Legislative Seminar featured professional staff from the VA and Congress who answered questions from the delegates concerning programs and legislation. Other seminars and workshops addressed membership, voluntary services, communications, women veterans and POW/MIAs.

National Membership Director Anthony L. Baskerville reported to the convention that efforts to sustain the DAV membership are bringing in more veterans from the current wars and most recent conflicts. “This is accomplished through the creation and dissemination of membership applications and brochures, and the implementation of direct mail campaigns to prospective members,” he said.

“The recruitment and retention of members is essential to ensure the future of the DAV and its programs of service,”



Above, Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.) tells the National Convention’s Benefits Protect Team Workshop that veterans deserve the best services possible, Right, National Legislative Director Joseph A. Violante, left, holds the DAV pledge to Stand Up for Veterans signed by Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Texas), right.



said Baskerville. "In the near future, we will see increased involvement in new avenues that reach out to the public and encourage more veterans to become involved in our important cause."

On the convention's last day, reports on the National Service Foundation and Charitable Service Trust were given to delegates, followed by donations totaling \$142,420 from Departments, Chapters and individual members to the Columbia Trust and the Perpetual Rehabilitation Fund.

When the convention work ended, delegates were treated to an evening of food and music at the introduction of National Officers. It was one of three special nights, including Fun Night with dancing and entertainment and the National Commander's reception.

As convention delegates headed homeward, they carried with them a wealth of information, knowledge and renewed

spirit to begin the DAV's new year and perhaps hummed a few bars of "Rocky Mountain High" in anticipation of the 88th National Convention in Denver, Colo., Aug. 22-25, 2009. ☉



National Service Director Randy Reese, left, and Gary Burns, right, President of the National Service Foundation, present the Pacesetter Award for Togus Maine to National Area Supervisor James Marszalek.

Judy Hezlep Reappointed DAVA National Adjutant

At this year's DAV and DAVA National Convention, Auxiliary members saw a changing of the guard. For the first time in more than 20 years, an incoming DAV Auxiliary National Commander appointed an Auxiliary National Adjutant not named Maria Tedrow.

With Tedrow on hand to see the baton officially passed, newly elected Auxiliary Commander Sandy Dobmeier appointed Judy Hezlep to her first full term as Auxiliary National Adjutant.

"Judy has the wisdom, dedication and willingness to persevere needed by the Auxiliary," said DAV Auxiliary National Commander Sandy Dobmeier. "I'm excited to be the



National Commander who has the honor to appoint Judy to her first full term as Auxiliary National Adjutant."

Hezlep has held various leadership positions at the National, State and Unit level, but her most recent appointment is the opportunity of a lifetime.

"It's truly an honor to be entrusted with this position of leadership within the Auxiliary," Hezlep said. "I've learned the ropes from the best. I am proud to be named as Maria's successor."

Hezlep took over the reins as Auxiliary National Adjutant after Tedrow retired in April. She was hired by the DAVA as a clerk typist in 1965 and worked her way up to Assistant National Adjutant in 1986. Hezlep said she also learned about leadership from Tedrow's predecessor, Kit Seale Feighner.

Hezlep said she has seen many changes in her more than 30 years with the



DAVA. No change had more of an effect on the organization than when the Auxiliary began accepting men in 2005. (Males under 18 are also accepted as junior members.)

"It was a difficult transition in many ways, but we are seeing men fill in leadership roles left empty by declining membership," Hezlep said. "The change has blessed the Auxiliary with more members."

Membership decline is one of the most difficult challenges facing Hezlep as leader of the DAVA, but she insists she is ready to lead her organization in turning around the shrink-

ing member rolls.

"The potential is out there. We just have to give it more effort, be creative and create synergies with the DAV," Hezlep said. "We don't have any sort of fundraising in the Auxiliary. We need those membership dues in order to remain active, vital and ready to assist the DAV with its mission of care and compassion for disabled veterans and their families."

Hezlep is a charter member of Clermont County Auxiliary Unit 63 in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is eligible for membership in the Auxiliary through her late grandfather, George Rogers, a disabled World War I veteran.

"Judy will bring a wealth of experience to her new role at the head of the DAV Auxiliary," said DAV National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. "The DAV's mission is greatly aided by our Auxiliary, and I know this support will be as strong as ever with Judy leading the way."