

Donald L. Samuels Unanimously Elected National Commander



National Commander-elect Donald L. Samuels, right, accepts his cap of leadership from National Commander Wallace E. Tyson.

By Thom Wilborn

Promising to “carry out the great traditions of our organization,” Vietnam veteran and retired National Service Officer Donald L. Samuels was elected National Commander at the DAV 90th National Convention in New Orleans, La.

“We will keep our pledge to leave no veteran behind,” he said. “You can count on me to remember our mission.”

Samuels, a combat-disabled Marine Corps veteran, previously served as the Supervisor of the Nashville, Tenn., National Service Office from 1970 until his retirement in 1989. Since then he has served as the Assistant Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs until his retirement earlier this year.

Samuels was wounded leading a ground assault against North Vietnamese regulars. He has two sons, both of whom serve in the Marine Corps. One served in Iraq and Afghanistan and the other is stationed in Italy supporting operations in Libya.

Looking forward to his year as National Commander Samuels promised his best leadership in every duty and urged grassroots membership support for important legislative initiatives. “I need everyone to keep charging forward,” he said. “We need the VA to know that it needs to modernize the claims process. We must lead from the front.”

Samuels also urged members to welcome disabled veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into the DAV. “We need to embrace our youngest generations of veterans,” he said. “The DAV is leading the way, and I am proud to be a part of it.”

The election of National Officers concluded the work of the 90th National Convention, which featured moments of inspiration, triumph, camaraderie among members and rededication to the mission of building better lives for disabled veterans, their families and survivors. (New officers listed on page 22.)

The National Convention got off to a rousing start Saturday, Aug. 6, with a Dixieland band parading through the ballroom. Convention Chairman G. Eddie

Figueron welcomed delegates and guests with the flavor of New Orleans fun, food and things to do, complete with the popular Cajun phrase “let the good times roll.”

Then—National Commander Wallace E. Tyson got the Joint Opening Session down to business with a report on his activities throughout his year, including a warning to members about the future.

“This year’s political debate on federal funding and raising the debt ceiling has brought out some troubling news,” he said. “Some of the proposals being debated directly threaten veterans benefits now and in the future.”

Tyson warned that veterans health care and benefits are in the sights of budget cutters in Washington. “I’m not pointing the finger at any political party or branch of government,” he said. “I am warning you that if we do not stand up smartly and strongly for the benefits earned by our sacrifice, we will be tapped as a source of funding cuts.

“I warn you to be vigilant, to be involved, to be proactive in support of the DAV’s fight for adequate funding,” Tyson said. “We need to let those in Washington know that taking away our earned benefits is not a slam dunk.”

Noting that his year of service as National Commander was ending, Tyson said there is always more to do. “I have served

you as my brothers and sisters,” he said. “I am confident that you, the members of the DAV, are up to any challenge. Any goal is within your reach because of your dedication and commitment.”

Then—Auxiliary National Commander Susan M. Henry noted the expanded advances implemented over the past year. She cited in her report the improved on-line membership applications, information and training materials, e-mail messages and participation in social media.

“I witnessed outstanding work of Auxiliary members volunteering at the VA hospitals and in the transportation network program where we excel beyond any other organization,” she said. “We must continue doing so as that need is as strong today as ever in our lifetimes. It is my greatest wish that we can build upon the momentum we’ve gained these many years to establish and move forward with a greater influence on those whose lives we touch.”

Ford Motor Company Fund Community Relations Manager Lynn Quigley addressed the Convention delegates, announcing a \$200,000 donation to purchase eight new vehicles for the Transportation Network and \$25,000 for the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program.

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Above, Ford Motor Company Fund Community Relations Manager Lynn Quigley, center, presents contributions to then-National Commander Wallace E. Tyson, left, and National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson to support the Transportation Network and the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program.



Above, then-National Commander Tyson presents the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship check to top recipient Jack O'Sullivan. Center, Then-Auxiliary National Commander Susan M. Henry gives her report to the National Convention.

National Convention

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Since 1996, Ford has donated 159 vans, worth more than \$4 million, to the Transportation Network and, through its partnership, the DAV has purchased 2,527 vehicles, worth nearly \$53.4 million, since the program began in 1987.

Harford County Maryland State's Attorney and Vietnam veteran Joseph I. Cassilly was presented the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Award to recognize his triumph over disability and for an inspiring life of leadership.

Cassilly was paralyzed in a fall during a helicopter extraction in Vietnam in 1968. He was climbing a rope ladder carrying an M-60 machine gun and 1,000 rounds of ammunition when the down-draft from the helicopter pulled the ladder from beneath him. He fell 40 feet and landed on the machine gun.

The Army Ranger was 19 when he was left a quadriplegic as a result of the accident. Realizing that a life in law enforcement was no longer possible, Cassilly began an academic career that earned him a law degree.

"The honor of this Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award is deeply moving for me," said Cassilly. "Only in this county have I been able to challenge inequity."

"I thank God for my disability," he said. "Every disabled veteran has it within them to triumph over their

disability. We lead the way for the disabled veterans who follow us."

The dramatic story of service and sacrifice in Afghanistan, told by journalists/filmmakers Sebastian Junger and the late Tim Hetherington earned the Bugle Award, which annually recognizes outstanding journalism that focuses on issues affecting disabled veterans.

Their books, articles and Academy Award-nominated documentary film *Restrepo* tell the heroic story of U.S. forces in the Korengal Valley in defense of Outpost Restrepo. The film is an intimate portrait of the young soldiers who lived and died in the cold, craggy mountain outpost.

Hetherington received the award posthumously. He was killed April 11 by mortar fire in Misrata, Libya, while covering the civil war. In a video message to the convention, Junger told the story of how Hetherington shared the pain of combat with the soldiers he covered. "Tim broke his leg and walked all night to get off a mountain in Afghanistan," he said.

Awards were also presented to Auxiliary Outstanding Member of the Year Valerie Lintz, Seal Memorial Trophy winners J.T. Tate and Ada Perry and Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship top recipient Jack O'Sullivan.

National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson opened the National Convention's first business session with a report on the status of our organization and a video presentation



Then-National Commander Wallace E. Tyson, left, presents the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award to State's Attorney and Vietnam veteran Joseph I. Cassilly of Maryland. Above, 12-year-old McKayla Reese gets the National Convention started with our National Anthem.

looking back on the DAV's achievements in the past year.

He paid tribute to the men and women of the DAV who help make our veterans service organization the envy of the world, including National Service Officers, Transition Service Officers, Department and Chapter Service Officers, volunteers, Transportation Network volunteer drivers, Auxiliary volunteers and membership recruiters.

"We know you all work very hard," Adjutant Wilson said. "What a great group of dedicated folks."

Looking to the future, Wilson said that new members are the lifeblood of our organization and that a new generation of disabled veterans is joining the DAV. "We need their ideas, their strength and their commitment to serving our fellow disabled veterans if our legacy is to endure."

At the same time, he said, our organization cannot forget those veterans who have served our nation in past wars and now have the time and leadership skills to move forward. "Those disabled veterans have decades of experience under their belts," said Wilson. "They are established in life enough to take on greater responsibilities and wise enough to step into leadership roles almost immediately."

The National Adjutant said that the successful year and decades of the DAV are the results of the membership. "Let me stress that none of what we have been able to accomplish would be possible without the continued support and dedication of all of you," Wilson said.

Afterwards, National Membership Director Anthony L. Baskerville reported that age and disability had taken more than 180,000 DAV members over the last five years. "This past year we saw 41,379 members pass, and we sadly can project a loss of 3,000 members per month," he said.

"Never in our history has our need for a united membership been more apparent than it is today," Baskerville said. "As our brave young men and women are engaged in multiple combat tours in two wars, they represent a small percentage of our population that carries a heavy burden in terms of our national defense."

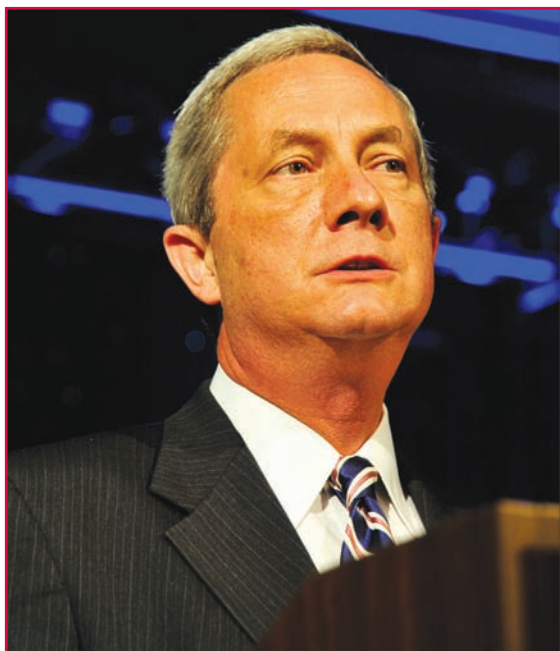
However, DAV recruiters exceeded their membership goals by nearly 3,000 life members, and National Service Officers added more than 12,000 new partial and full life members. "NSOs, TSOs and hardworking members throughout this organization helped boost our 2010-2011 membership to 1,221,944," Baskerville said.

Washington Headquarters Executive Director Barry Jesinoski opened the convention's second business session on Aug. 8 with a report on the success of legislative and service programs.

"We have worked hard this past year to ensure that thoughtful and beneficial proposals to enhance current services are properly considered and acted upon," said Jesinoski. "Concurrently, the DAV has worked equally hard against the passage of ill-advised recommendations such as those to balance the budget on the backs of disabled veterans and their families."



Left: Washington Headquarters Executive Director Barry A. Jesinoski presents his report on service and legislative affairs to the National Convention. Above, Seal Memorial Trophy winners J.T. Tate, center, and Ada Perry, right.



Left, Project Executive Barry Owenby updates convention delegates on the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. Above, Then-National Commander Wallace E. Tyson, left, and National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson, right, make a presentation of appreciation to Downey McGrath Group Chairman Thomas J. Downey for the firm's significant contributions of service, skills and expertise toward the construction of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

He said one of the primary issues facing disabled veterans is the outdated and dysfunctional claims system. More than one million claims were submitted to the VA last year, the most ever, but the number of new and reopened claims grows at an even faster rate. "The number of claims pending longer than the VA's target of 125 days grew to nearly a half million over the past six months, that's a 60 percent increase since the beginning of this year," said Jesinoski.

"The true and overarching problems at the Veterans Benefits Administration are quality and accuracy," he said. "To achieve real and lasting success, the VBA must focus on creating a modern, paperless benefit claims-processing system designed to decide each claim right the first time."

Jesinoski said new legislative challenges are always coming. "We will once again need to rely on the powerful grassroots advocacy of DAV members nationwide," he said.

REPORT FROM NEW ORLEANS

"We remain optimistic that working together we can make significant progress toward a system in which disabled veterans' claims are done right the first time."

Following his report, Jesinoski presented Outstanding VA Employee Awards to Nashville, Tenn., Regional Office Assistant Veterans Service Center Manager Shelley Mullins; Cincinnati, Ohio, VA medical center Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Supervisor Peggy Lehman; and Holly, Mich., Great Lakes National Cemetery foreman John Shilling.

Looking to the future, convention delegates received an encouraging update on the construction of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial from Project Executive Barry Owenby, who said that construction on the street work surrounding the memorial may begin as early as this fall.

The memorial, within sight of the U.S. Capitol Building and legislative offices, will be visited by swelling crowds when it is completed. It is a tribute to the courage and sacrifice of veterans from all wars.

Owenby said that the mission of the memorial is to "educate the public on your service and sacrifice, to bring attention to your needs and ensure that you receive respect and honor for your service to our country."

"Since the very beginning, in 1998, the DAV has been a driving force behind the memorial. And I am very proud and honored to announce that the DAV is the largest donor to the memorial," Owenby said.

"We have been, and will be, both persistent and relentless in delivering to America a memorial that honors and bears witness to those who have borne the deepest wounds and scars of war – America's disabled veterans," Owenby said.

Following the presentation, Adju-

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tant Wilson explained that the DAV and the Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation have been working on the planned memorial for 14 years. "The standard for building a memorial in Washington, D.C., is 18 years," he said. "So we are ahead of schedule."

Wilson and Commander Tyson made a presentation of appreciation to The Downey McGrath Group Chairman Thomas J. Downey and President Raymond J. McGrath for their significant contributions of service, skills and expertise towards the construction of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

"Their contributions in support of the memorial have been invaluable and they are truly deserving of the highest accolades for their service on behalf of our nation's disabled veterans," Adjutant Wilson said.

"We are honored to play a small role in paying you back," Downey said in thanking disabled veterans for their service and sacrifice for our nation.

Following the business sessions, delegates attended a series of informative and educational workshops that included the Benefits Protection Team and seminars on Service and Legislation, Voluntary Services, Women Veterans, Membership, Communications and POW/MIAs.

At the Service and Legislative Seminar, VA officials and key congressional staff members provided information and responded to delegates questions concerning VA benefits and services. The Voluntary Services Seminar looked at

DAV programs that serve disabled veterans in VA hospitals and in the Transportation Network.

VA Women Veterans Health Care Group Chief Consultant Patricia Hayes discussed improved services at the Women Veterans Seminar, including gender-specific health care and Women Veterans Program Managers at VA medical facilities. Dr. Elizabeth Yano from the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System provided details of 18 newly released VA research reports on women's health issues.

VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, the keynote speaker at the third business session on Tuesday, Aug. 9, outlined the Administration's new steps to offset the high unemployment rate among veterans. Prior to the National Convention plans were announced in Washington, D.C., to offer tax credits for companies that hire returning veterans and offer training projects to help service members transition from the military to the civilian workforce.

"These are tough economic times," said Shinseki. "That has been especially true for veterans. As of June of this year, one million veterans remain unemployed, and the jobless rate for post 9/11 veterans is 13.3 percent, a particularly hard hit generation."

"As troops return from Iraq and Afghanistan, an additional one million service members are projected to leave the military between 2011 and 2016," he said.

The tax credit program is expected to cost \$120 million over two years with a goal of 100,000 veterans or spouses getting private sector jobs

by 2013.

Shinseki also expressed confidence that new pilot programs for claims processing will begin meeting VA's goal of processing claims in 125 days or less with a 98 percent accuracy rate in 2012. He also said that the number of homeless veterans had been reduced to 60,000 as of June 12. "We are committed to ending veterans homelessness by 2015," he said.

A major concern is possible future cuts in VA appropriations. "While there may be some adjustment to the 2012 budget request before Congress, veterans remain a high priority," Shinseki said. "What we have to be careful of is that 'mission accomplished' doesn't mean a drop in the VA budget."

The National Convention again filled delegates with a renewed sense of purpose in support of disabled veterans. Each member received the latest information regarding the activities of the DAV and its issues on every front. Heading home, they felt the honor of their purpose as part of the finest veterans service organization in the world.

"It is difficult to be here and not feel the energy and privilege we have to serve disabled veterans," said Adjutant Wilson. "The accomplishments of our members, the direction for the future and the united aspirations of us all permeate the convention. We have our work laid out before us, and we know the path to success. And each member is determined to do their best for their brothers and sisters who have served after us."

The 91st National Convention will be held Aug. 4-7, 2012, at Bally's Las Vegas Hotel in Las Vegas, Nev. 