

CHAPTER 7

CHANGING OF THE GUARD



You have honored me by making me the first African-American veteran to serve as National Commander of one of the 'Big Three' veterans' organizations. . . . As I see it, this is an important step in recognizing the sacrifices that minority veterans have made for their country. It shows. . . that the DAV really means what it says when fighting for the rights and benefits of all disabled veterans.

~ Paul L. Thompson ~

FOR MANY YEARS AFTER THE VIETNAM WAR, VETERANS OF THE CONFLICT WERE DENIED THE FULL MEASURE OF HONOR THEY HAD EARNED FOR THE SERVICE THEY HAD RENDERED TO THEIR COUNTRY. BUT TO BE SURE, THESE VETERANS WERE SEEN AS HEROES BY THE DAV, AND THOSE WHO CAME HOME DISABLED FOUND HONOR AND A HOME WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION'S RANKS.

The influx of new members created by the Vietnam War swelled the DAV's numbers past the 353,000-member milestone in 1970, and soared to 427,000 by 1972. To mark the DAV's 50 years in 1970, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp commemorating the DAV's 50th anniversary.

In August 1971, the organization ended its year-long anniversary celebration at the Detroit Hilton Hotel. In a coincidence of numbers, the actual site of the DAV's first National Convention was only 50 yards away.

FIELD SERVICE UNITS AT THE STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS



As the DAV celebrated its golden anniversary, it also offered its gratitude to the Auxiliary, which would mark its 50th anniversary two years after the DAV. The Auxiliary had steadfastly stood at the DAV's side through the years, assisting in the DAV's mission, offering a special understanding of veterans' families, contacting legislators, and helping in so many other ways.

Also in 1970, new leaders emerged. National Adjutant Adams appointed John J. Keller as National Service Director and Jack Feighner as Deputy National Service Director, both charged with recruiting and training a new generation of disabled veterans from the Vietnam War. The mission of the DAV was growing as the war was coming to an end.

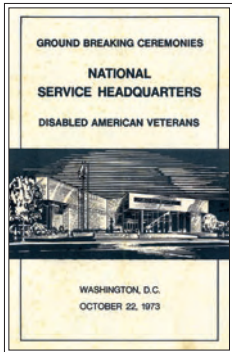
Keller was a World War II veteran who was stationed at Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941. He later served in several campaigns throughout the Pacific during the war and was medically discharged after incurring a severe back injury and contracting malaria. Keller joined the DAV in November 1945 and served from 1947 to 1964 as the National Service Office Supervisor in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. He attended Wilkes College in Wilkes-Barre and George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He also completed the National Service Officers' training course at The American University in Washington, D.C., in May, 1946. Keller was instrumental as the DAV extended its outreach to our Nation's veterans.

This extended outreach became apparent in 1974 when a caravan of six new motor homes, converted to serve as rolling offices, pulled out of National Headquarters, kicking off the Field Service Unit (FSU) program. In one of the most impressive outreach programs ever mounted by the DAV, these offices on wheels enabled NSOs to take their services to the suburbs and rural areas of America, often distant from the DAV's National Service Offices.

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FIELD SERVICE UNITS ON THE ROAD





GROUND BREAKING FOR THE NATIONAL SERVICE AND LEGISLATIVE HEADQUARTERS, 1973

Soon the FSU fleet was increased to 18 vans. Over a 19-year period, they brought the DAV's service to 608,000 veterans and members of their families before the program was retired in 1993.

The DAV emblem was displayed on each FSU. They traveled the United States, visiting nearly every community. Two National Service Officers aboard would assist disabled veterans with their claims, and the units attracted a great deal of public recognition as well.

As America celebrated its bicentennial in 1976, the DAV proudly opened its new National Service & Legislative Headquarters in Washington, D.C. On March 4 of that

750 people attended the grand opening, including President Gerald Ford, who addressed the group. DAV leadership also changed when Keller retired as National Service Director and was replaced by Norman B. "Gabby" Hartnett, who had been serving as the DAV's Employment Director.

The DAV saw two major legislative victories in 1978. A serious threat to veterans' preference in federal employment was defeated, and a drive to saddle the VA with a particularly meager budget was halted. Also of importance was the return of Veterans Day to November 11, rather than scheduling the holiday as part of a three-day weekend.

In 1976, the DAV also funded the groundbreaking Forgotten Warrior Project, which first defined the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among war veterans. Vietnam veterans were experiencing serious post-war problems at the time, and the DAV hoped the new study would make it impossible for Congress, the VA, and the American public to continue ignoring what was going on.

However, when Congress and the VA failed to act on the findings of the project, the DAV initiated its own Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program.

"THE THREE SOLDIERS" STATUES BY FREDERICK HART AT THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON, D.C.



BY MARCH 1979, THE DAV HAD REACHED A NEW MILESTONE OF 600,000 MEMBERS. HAVING ACHIEVED THIS FIGURE, DAV STRENGTH WAS IMPRESSIVE BY ANY STANDARD. OF THE 2.2 MILLION DISABLED VETERANS ELIGIBLE FOR MEMBERSHIP, MORE THAN ONE-FOURTH WERE DAV MEMBERS.

Fortunately, this DAV-sponsored study and the DAV's clinical outreach work spurred other research that forced the government to realize the psychological impact of war on veterans of Vietnam and all wars. When that finally happened, the DAV Vietnam Veterans Outreach Program was already there to serve as an effective treatment model to be adopted by the VA's Vet Center program.

By March 1979, the DAV had reached a new milestone of 600,000 members. Having achieved this figure, DAV strength was impressive by any standard. Of the 2.2 million disabled veterans eligible for membership, more than one-fourth were DAV members.

In recognition of its newest members, the DAV spearheaded the observance of Vietnam Era Veterans Week, May 28–June 3, 1979. Conferences were held at George Washington University with President Jimmy Carter addressing the group. The DAV honored the Vietnam Era veterans with a separate observance for the entire month of May.

At the same time, a topic of vital importance to many recent veterans, Agent Orange, was beginning to attract attention. The DAV was taken aback, however, when it learned that a VA committee formed to study the effects of Agent Orange included no Vietnam veterans. The DAV raised objections and realized a victory as a combat-disabled Vietnam veteran was named to the group.

THE VIETNAM WOMEN'S MEMORIAL, DESIGNED BY GLENNA GOODACRE

