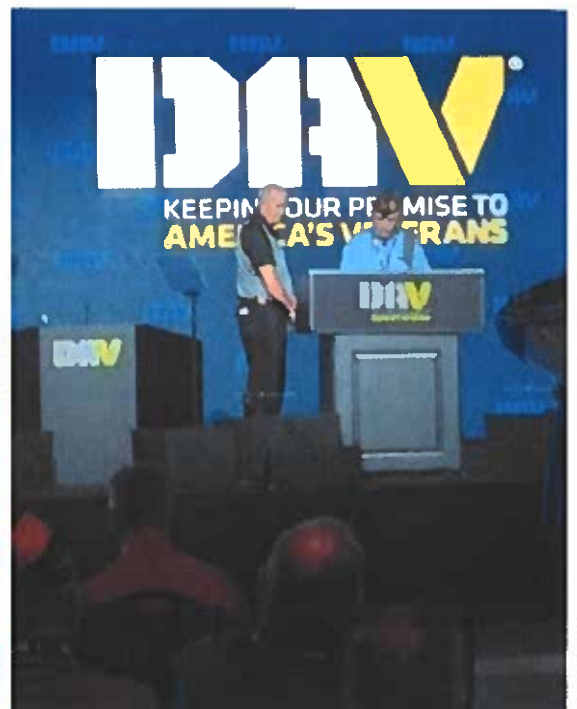




Arkansas Navy veteran elected to lead national veterans organization

Posted on Aug 4, 2026



ERLANGER, Ky. — Service-connected disabled Navy veteran John Donovan was unanimously elected national commander of the nearly 1 million-member DAV (Disabled American Veterans) today at the organization's 104th national convention, held in Orlando, Florida.

"As your National Commander, I promise that you will see me in your chapters and communities. I will listen far more than I speak. I will celebrate your successes, learn from your ideas, and work beside you," Donovan told the audience of over 2,000 DAV members and supporters. "Because leadership in DAV has never been about standing behind a podium. It has always been about standing beside our members, serving together, solving problems together, and moving our mission forward together."

Donovan was elected national senior vice commander at DAV's 2025 national convention in Las Vegas and most recently served as adjutant for the Department of Arkansas and vice chairperson of DAV's national board of directors. He previously served as a National Executive Committee member for District 21 from 2019 to 2021 and served on DAV's national board of directors during that same period.

Throughout his years with DAV, Donovan has remained committed to serving veterans in his community through hands-on volunteerism. He has participated in the DAV 5K every year since its inaugural race, helped organize yard cleanups and wheelchair ramp construction projects, worked with local agencies to support veterans experiencing homelessness, and partnered with food banks to assist veteran families experiencing food insecurity.

Donovan has also been a dedicated advocate for veteran suicide prevention in Arkansas, collaborating with local businesses and veterans organizations to expand awareness, outreach and support for veterans in crisis.

A DAV life member of Chapter 10 in Conway, Arkansas, Donovan begins his term as national commander with a focus on ensuring veterans receive the benefits they have earned, strengthening the Department of Veterans Affairs, supporting caregivers and survivors, and preserving the promises made to those who served.

"Commander Donovan has earned the respect of his fellow veterans at DAV through years of dedicated service," said DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski. "He's nationally revered for his contributions to our cause and will help us tremendously as our community faces our critical legislative priorities."

JOINT OPENING SESSION



2025/2026 National DAV Commander Coleman Nee



DAV National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski

Caregiver Support Seminar



A Good Chaplain



DAV Communications and Outreach Seminar



DAV Inspector General Seminar



DAV Voluntary Services Seminar



DAV Membership Seminar



**VA Deputy Secretary Dr. Paul R. Lawrence
Addresses Convention**



DAV Service & Legislative Seminar



Final Business Session



2025-2026 Year In Review (Transcript)

National Adjutant Barry Jesinoski reflects on an impactful year of DAV supporting veterans, their families and caregivers.

For more than a century, DAV has been woven into the fabric of the United States, a national organization driven by what happens locally.

A legacy of service built by each of you.

The greatest strengths of this organization aren't in our policies and our platforms. The greatest strength of this organization is in you, our members.

Our core and our backbone is our chapters. That spirit's in our vans.

Our strength is in our personal relationships we build with veterans who need someone to believe in them, again.

Belief, a conviction that forms the foundation of our legacy and what drives us forward. This impressive space is the Emery Theater in Cincinnati.

It opened in 1912 and has hosted some of the most recognizable names in modern history. Bette Davis, John Philip Sousa, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr.

But then the theater became neglected.

Cast aside, it fell into disrepair and was nearly forgotten. It was belief that brought it back.

Another local century old institution saw there was still life in these walls. In 2023, the Children's Theatre of Cincinnati bought the space.

They honored the legacy of the Emery Theater's past, restoring the beautiful architecture, preserving the perfect acoustics, and reclaiming it as a space for all to enjoy, while ushering it into the 21st century.

There are many parallels in the origin stories of this theater and DAV. We, too, believe that just because something is broken doesn't mean it can't be fixed.

That nearly forgotten doesn't mean there's no longer a life worth living. We've been rooted in that conviction since our founding.

And over our history, we've adapted to the changing times to best serve and restore veterans.

There's something else in common with DAV and the Children's Theatre. And that's this space.

The Emery Theater was built as part of the Ohio Mechanics Institute.

After World War I, many disabled veterans received vocational training at OMI, finding fellowship and new purpose along the way.

Those same veterans are who our founder Robert S. Marx, shared a Christmas Eve dinner with in 1919.

The idea that became DAV came from that meeting.

They wanted an organization that believed veterans must never be neglected or forgotten.

That after illness or injury, restoration and a new life are possible.

Each member of DAV and its Auxiliary is a testament to this belief. Your work and support of veterans has added to the legacy that began here.

This past year, you took Commander Nee's call to be visible in our hometowns to heart.

Our neighbors saw us mending fences, breaking bread and simply showing up for veterans, during our third annual DAV Community Impact Day in April.

More than 2,000 of you pledged an hour of time to serve veterans.

Throughout the year, our volunteers drove millions of miles for the DAV Transportation Network. They logged hundreds of thousands of hours in VA medical facilities.

And many of you met with veterans at our chapter and Auxiliary unit spaces helping process their claims for benefits and listening to them share their stories.

We had people take to the streets—running, rolling and riding at our DAV 5K live and virtual events.

Funds raised here helped fuel our programs and services, including supporting the backbone of our organization, our National Service Officers and Transition Service Officers.

In 2025, these benefits advocates took more than 3 million actions to advocate for veterans and their families.

In October, we held our annual Homeless Veterans Stand Down at National Headquarters with DAV volunteers, corporate sponsors and our local VA partners.

You see people that, you know, you don't know, that's willing to help you. And that's what America is about.

We supported thousands of caregivers and veterans who provide care to a loved one through DAV Caregivers Support.

This program allows them to access no-cost concierge services to help them thrive in their caregiving role.

Our employment program's virtual and in-person job fairs connected hundreds of companies with thousands of military service members, veterans and their spouses.

So many people in a career transition witnessed the plethora of opportunities available with companies that desire what these job seekers offer.

Have a good day. Thank you.

Here we go.....

For those veterans with an entrepreneurial spirit, DAV Patriot Boot Camp proved to several cohorts to be the catalyst they've been seeking to grow their businesses.

They've been super helpful, both the mentors and participants, in just expanding opportunities. Things that I didn't see.

DAV remained invested in the therapeutic benefits of adaptive sports and recreation.

In September, we once again co-presented the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic in Iowa with the VA.

And in April, we worked with them again to bring the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic to Snowmass, Colorado.

A clinic that celebrated its 40th anniversary this year.

And just before the Super Bowl in February, we hosted the DAV Bowl along with former Oakland Raider Robert Gallery and his foundation Athletes for Care.

Ill and injured veterans teamed up against former NFL players and football influencers for a friendly, yet extremely competitive, game of football.

The event allowed all the athletes to rediscover purpose, resilience and camaraderie.

No matter what, it's just, friends that you didn't know you had, showing up today and really being here.

Through each of you, DAV made its way to the chambers of our state and federal governments. When we put out a call for action, you answered.

Using our Commanders Action Network, you let lawmakers know your position concerning policy that affects ill and injured veterans.

You also took the time to meet face to face with members of Congress, discussing the causes and issues that matter most to all of us.

The VA stands at a crossroads. Let us choose preservation. Let us choose reform. And above all, let us choose to keep the promise to those who have always kept faith with us.

And you supported our commander as he presented DAV's legislative priorities during his congressional testimony at our Mid-Winter Conference.

His message to Congress: Our nation must preserve its promise to veterans while innovating, modernizing and evolving the care it provides.

We also hold ourselves accountable to keeping the promise while seeking ways to innovate and evolve to best help veterans.

I want to take a moment to shout out an organization that's all about supporting our brothers and sisters in uniform the Disabled American Veterans.

We see this through our partnership with Regiment, the nation's largest military veteran gaming community.

We're connecting with veterans where they are by combining DAV's longstanding history of advocacy and benefits assistance with Regiment's work fostering mental health and social connection through gaming.

That's where DAV can, can help fill the gap. And in the quest to find healing for all veterans, we're exploring the landscape of the mind, becoming a leading voice advocating for research on psychedelic-assisted therapy.

It's a rapidly changing environment, but we're encouraged by the results we're hearing from veterans who have gone through this type of therapy.

Get this idea of a party drug out and realize, hey no, this is something that is going to save lives.

That's when it's going to change everything. Veterans are going to lead the way in mental health. I honestly believe it.

As DAV explores what's next in healing and recovery for veterans, our core mission remains unchanged, as it has for more than a century.

We will stand beside those who served. Belief forms the foundation of that legacy, and it fuels us to strive for more.

However, in every moment and success DAV has been part of this year, what builds upon that legacy,

what actually drives us forward, is something much greater. You.

You're the ones who hold on to the belief that our nation's ill and injured veterans should never be cast aside or forgotten.

You do whatever it takes to make them whole again. And you're the ones carrying DAV into the future.

DAV Executive Committee 2026–27

- National Commander John F. Donovan, Arkansas
- Sr. Vice Commander James A. Procunier, North Carolina
- 1st. Jr. Vice Commander Glenn Hohman, Arizona
- 2nd Jr. Vice Commander Brenda Reed, Florida
- 3rd Jr. Vice Commander Adam Greathouse, West Virginia
- 4th Jr. Vice Commander Denice Williams, Virginia
- NEC 1st District Debora Olson, Massachusetts
- NEC 2nd District Thomas Wohlrab, New York
- NEC 3rd District Lisa Sloan, Vermont
- NEC 4th District Ronny Maebry, Connecticut
- NEC 5th District William Hines, Pennsylvania
- NEC 6th District Jorge Cruz, Puerto Rico
- NEC 7th District Thomas Ayala, Florida
- NEC 8th District Frederick Varnado, Mississippi
- NEC 9th District Willard Cunningham, South Carolina
- NEC 10th District Brian Fogg, Michigan
- NEC 11th District James Bailey, Ohio
- NEC 12th District Robert Hilliard, Wisconsin
- NEC 13th District George Hall, Kentucky
- NEC 14th District Joe Hall, North Dakota
- NEC 15th District Jamie Jakub, Nebraska
- NEC 16th District Enrique Ramos, California
- NEC 17th District John Carmona, Colorado
- NEC 18th District Carl Forkner, Arizona
- NEC 19th District Vacant
- NEC 20th District Mickey Williams, Texas
- NEC 21st District Danny Oliver, Oklahoma

National Judge Advocate 2026–27

- Michael E. Dobmeier, North Dakota

National Chaplain 2026–27

- Debra Varner-Dancer, Alabama



Notes by A. Morley, Administrative Assistant, Department of South Dakota

During the Opening Session of the DAV & Auxiliary 2026 National Convention, held August 1-4, 2026, Coleman Nee reflected on his time as Commander of DAV and said: “They told me it would be a marathon, not a sprint...But they didn’t tell me you sprint the whole marathon!”

Although a full transcript of his speech will reflect the details, some of his main points included:

- DAV members are always known for their big hearts and volunteer spirit
- The Auxiliary is a force multiplier
- The DAV is not a meeting. A new members’ introduction to DAV should not be watching two guys fighting over a bylaws change.

These are just a few of the points he made, which included an emphasis on testing of psychedelics, the importance of reaching out to Native American Veterans, and how to build support legislatively. He made a particular note of the fact that no bill should be allowed to pass that increased benefits for some by taking them away from others.

An expression of Commander Nee’s leadership style was displayed very clearly in his story about assisting at a Homeless Veterans Stand Down, and choosing to sleep in a cot there, just as the homeless Veterans did.

There were many other speakers, including a representative of Ford, who listed statistics that included 230,000 volunteer driver hours, and 9.1 million miles driven through the DAV Hospital Transportation Program.

During the First Business Session an unofficial total of registrants was listed at 12,145. Speakers thanked their mentors, and reminded attendees that although the political environment may change, the mission of the DAV does not.

“It’s not the hill you capture, it’s the hill you refuse to surrender...”

“Care in the Community is a complement to the VA, not a replacement...”

Some of the important goals of DAV:

- Eliminate penalty for Veteran spouse survivor remarriage
- Increased DIC for survivors
- Pass the Richard Starr Act
- Reform Federal policies – Burn Pits
- Focus on improving the claims process through simplification, and eliminating penalties – The struggle for benefits should not be harder than the service that earned it.
- Long Term Care Support
- VA Dental for all
- Remember that Veterans benefits are not partisan or ideological

DAV POW/MIA SEMINAR



Jennifer Lawrence, Principal Deputy Director at DPAA

On August 2nd the DAV POW/MIA Seminar was held, led by Chairperson Marty Pennock. Chairperson Pennock presented the POW-MIA Reference Guide, “...a guide to creating initiatives and getting results.” [POW-MIA ReferenceGuide.pdf](#). The updated publication took years to research and assemble, and is an invaluable resource.

The keynote speaker at the seminar was Principal Deputy Director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) Jennifer Lawrence. Deputy Director Lawrence acknowledged the contribution Marty Pennock has made to DPAA, as well as the efforts of Justin Hart.

In her remarks she emphasized the need to meet the promise to never leave a fellow warrior behind. Over 80,000 POW/MIA are still missing, but 38,602 can still be recovered, in partnership with 54 other nations. A transcript of her speech is filled with other important information about the DPAA and their mission, a mission that will not end, regardless of the passage of time.

Quotes she used that I found particular touching and pertinent were:

“We leave you our deaths...Give them their meaning.” - *From Archibald MacLeish's poem The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak*

“Time will not dim the glory of their deeds...” – *A phrase coined by General John J. Pershing*

Lawrence then introduced the next presenter, the niece of US Army Captain Willibald Bianchi, whose remains were identified on August 11, 2025.

His niece, Carolyn Smith, spoke with emotion and humor, wonder and gratitude about her Uncle Bill, and the efforts of the DPAA in identifying him so many years after his death.

Below is Captain Bianchi's obituary:



Captain Willibald "Bill" Charles Bianchi was born on March 12, 1915, in New Ulm, Minnesota, the son of Joseph and Caroline "Carrie" (Eibner) Bianchi. He was the second child and only son in the family, growing up alongside his sisters Josephine, Magdalene, Jermain (Germaine), and Mary Louise.

Bill was raised on a 73-acre poultry farm south of New Ulm, where hard work was a daily expectation. He helped his father with farm chores that included milking cows and tending to chickens and turkeys. While Bill was still in high school, his father was tragically killed in an accident on the family farm. As a result, Bill left school to assume responsibility for operating the farm and supporting his mother and sisters. He later completed his high school education through the University of Minnesota Farm School in St. Paul.

At the age of 21, Bill enrolled at South Dakota State University in Brookings, majoring in animal science. While at SDSU, he was deeply involved in the Army ROTC program, attaining the rank of cadet major, and also played on the university's football team. He worked his way through college cleaning classrooms, maintaining furnaces, and working in the college print shop. Fellow students nicknamed him "Medals," a reference to his ROTC uniform, which he wore often, both out of necessity and pride. He graduated in 1940, and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Army. Eager to serve, he requested foreign duty in hopes of seeing action as soon as possible.

In April of 1941, Bill was sent to the Philippines, where he served with the U.S. Army's 45th Infantry Regiment, Philippine Scouts. His early duties included training Filipino soldiers, a task in which he excelled. Under his leadership, raw recruits were transformed into disciplined and determined jungle fighters. Along with other officers of the first American expeditionary force of World War II, Bill worked against time and limited resources to prepare defenses against the advancing Japanese military.

As Japanese forces landed and advanced toward Manila, American and Filipino troops were forced into a fighting retreat onto the Bataan Peninsula. Lacking adequate equipment, aircraft, and armor, these early defenders of Bataan held the line while the United States mobilized for war. They were, in many respects, the pioneers of the American ground war in the Pacific.

On February 3, 1942, near Bagac in the Province of Bataan, then-First Lieutenant Bianchi distinguished himself in combat during the engagement known as the Toul River Pocket. When a rifle platoon was ordered to eliminate two heavily fortified enemy machine gun nests, Bianchi voluntarily advanced with the lead elements. Early in the action, he was wounded by two bullets through his left hand. Refusing first aid, he discarded his rifle and continued fighting with a pistol. He located one machine gun position and personally silenced it with grenades. Wounded a second time by two machine gun bullets through the chest muscles, he then climbed atop an American tank, manned its anti-aircraft machine gun, and fired into strongly held enemy positions until a

third severe wound knocked him completely off the tank. His actions weakened the Japanese defenses enough that they were later captured with little or no additional loss of life.

For his bravery and valor above and beyond the call of duty, Bill was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. After a brief recovery period of just one month, he returned to active duty and was promoted to Captain.

On April 9, 1942, following the fall of Bataan, Captain Bianchi was captured by Japanese forces along with approximately 75,000 American and Filipino soldiers. After being held without food or water for 24 hours, the prisoners were forced onto the infamous 65-mile Bataan Death March. Despite suffering from hunger, dehydration, heat, and disease, Bianchi was repeatedly seen helping fellow prisoners, encouraging them, and preventing many from being killed by their captors.

Captain Bianchi was imprisoned at several camps, including Camp O'Donnell, Cabanatuan, and later Bilibid Prison in Luzon. Conditions worsened with each transfer. Prisoners endured starvation diets, forced labor, lack of medical care, and unsanitary living conditions. Throughout his captivity, Bianchi earned a reputation as a caregiver and advocate. He bartered with guards to obtain food from Japanese mess halls and helped distribute rations fairly, refusing to favor himself or others. Numerous fellow prisoners later wrote to his mother, crediting Bill with saving their lives.

In October 1944, Bianchi was transferred to Bilibid Prison, and in December was loaded onto the Japanese transport ship Oryoku Maru. After that ship was sunk, he was transferred to another unmarked prison ship anchored off Formosa. On the morning of January 9, 1945, an American aircraft, unaware that Allied prisoners of war were aboard, dropped a bomb into the ship's hold. Captain Bianchi was killed instantly. He was 29 years old. Fellow prisoners believed he was likely assisting the sick at the time of his death.

The Congressional Medal of Honor was presented to his mother, Carrie Bianchi, on June 7, 1946, at Fort Snelling in Minnesota. He remains the only Medal of Honor recipient from New Ulm and the only soldier from Brown County to receive the nation's highest award for valor during World War II.

For decades, Captain Bianchi was buried as an unknown at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu and was memorialized on the Walls of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery. Through advances in forensic science and DNA analysis, his remains were positively identified on August 11, 2025, finally allowing him to be brought home.

Captain Willibald "Bill" Charles Bianchi never married and left no direct descendants. His legacy has been preserved by his sisters and their families, who donated his Medal of Honor and other decorations to the Brown County Historical Society. The City of New Ulm honored him by naming Bianchi Drive in 1955, and the local American Legion Post was renamed Seifert-Bianchi Post #132 in his honor. South Dakota State University has also memorialized him through scholarships and monuments bearing his name.

Captain Bianchi's life stands as a testament to courage, selflessness, and unwavering character. He was a hero in battle, a protector in captivity, and a symbol of sacrifice whose story will continue to inspire generations. Blessed be his memory.

The Seminar room was full to overflowing, with even the Department Commander unable to enter due to space limitations. Note to organizers: We need a bigger room! Several attendees spoke about their own experiences with DPAA, and it was a very moving seminar.

The Convention Business Sessions were conducted (see Convention Agenda) with reports from Legislation and Veterans rights, to Hospital and Voluntary Services, General Resolutions and Membership, and Charitable Service Trust among others, with Mark Burgess describing \$18,000,000.00 in grant distributions. He emphasized that 95 cents of every dollar goes toward grants, and that the Charitable Service Trust has a 4 Star Charity Rating.

An item that caught my attention under the General Resolutions and Membership umbrella was the note that suspensions and dissolutions of DAV Chapters due to AFR not being completed *cannot* be appealed, which I find surprising.

There were many other sessions, presentations and seminars than those I mentioned, and although I do not have detailed notes for all, the following sessions are currently available on video on the DAV Website at: <https://www.dav.org/events/2026-national-convention/>

[DAV & Auxiliary Joint Opening Business Session](#)

[National Headquarters Executive Director's Report](#)

[National Adjutant's Report](#)

[DAV Service and Legislation Seminar](#)

[Washington Headquarters Executive Director's Report](#)

[National Commander's Report](#)

[Meet the Patriots Pitch Winner](#)

[DAV 2025 – 2026 Year in Review](#)

[2026 Disabled American Veteran of the Year – Sam Juan](#)

[2026 DAV Top Scholarship Recipient – Noah Omura](#)

[First Business Session](#)

[Second Business Session](#)

[Ibogaine-Assisted Therapy: Hope, Evidence and the Road Ahead](#)

[PTSD Treatment Breakthroughs](#)

[DAV: Results Speak Louder Than Words](#)

[DAV: Quiet Strength, Powerful Impact for Veterans](#)

[Bryan Hubbard of Americans for Ibogaine](#)

Further information, including photos, is available on the DAV Facebook page, and other social media platforms. It was an honor to be able to assist DAV Department of South Dakota at the convention, and I learned a great deal about the overall operation of DAV National, which will be beneficial in my work.

Thank you