



Roadmap to the Future

The 2023 National Convention: Determining Details of Dissolution and VVA's Legacy

BY MARC LEEPSON; PHOTOS BY KEN WILLIAMSON

The big news that came out of the 20th biennial VVA National Convention in November 2021 was the delegates' forceful dismissal of a resolution that would have opened membership to succeeding generations of veterans. That action cemented the fact that VVA—with membership open only to those who served on active duty during the Vietnam War—would be a “last-man standing” veterans service organization.

At the 21st National Convention, held in hot and humid Orlando, Florida, from August 9-12, the 703 accredited delegates from across the country took further action to define VVA's future. They approved a roadmap for both solidifying the organization's legacy and planning an orderly dissolution.

First, the delegates passed an amendment to VVA's Constitution during the Thursday morning General Session. This amendment authorizes the Board of Directors to develop and implement a strategic dissolution plan within the next two years. This plan will then be submitted to the delegates at the 2025 National Convention. In the afternoon session, the delegates approved a resolution authorizing the Board to establish a Legacy Task Force responsible for working on the dissolution plan.

Top: Delegates displaying their official Convention binders, provided by U-Haul; Left: VVA National President Jack McInnes during the Opening Ceremonies. Opposite page, top: Members of the Virginia delegation; Bottom: Presentation of \$7,150 by the FSC to Project Friendship during Thursday's AVVA Luncheon.

“Don't count us out yet!”

Comment from the floor during Thursday's General Session debate over a resolution to set February 29, 2028, as the date for VVA's dissolution

Then, after a spirited debate, the delegates amended a proposed resolution that initially set February 29, 2028, as the date for VVA's dissolution. The final version, approved by a large majority, calls for VVA's dissolution to occur at a date “to be determined.” This change reflects the sentiment of one delegate during the debate who cautioned, “Don't count us out yet!”

DAY-BY-DAY

After the now-traditional Tuesday evening “Welcome Home” buffet dinner party featuring the Brass Heart Band, the Convention officially commenced with the Wednesday morning Opening Ceremonies. The combined Color Guards from Florida Chapter 1048 in Daytona Beach and Chapter 522 in Pinellas County carried out their duties with aplomb, including the presentation of the service flags, which this year, for the first time, included the Space Force flag. Attendees then heard from Florida State Council Vice President Gary Newman, AVVA President Sharon Hobbs, and Joshua Jacobs, the VA's Undersecretary for Benefits. Jacobs praised VVA for its longstanding veterans advocacy on the national level, proclaiming that we “wrote the play-book” for today's VSOs. He further stated that the recently enacted PACT Act “wouldn't have been passed without VVA's support and leadership.”

Homier Hickam, the best-selling author of the memoir *Rocket Boys* and numerous other books, delivered the Keynote Speech. He spoke about

See CONVENTION on Page 20



2023 VVA Commendation Medal Recipients

Francisco Ivarra
Ted Wilkinson
Carlton Rhodes
Michael Swift
Sandie Wilson
Adolph Gardner

VVA National Awards

Member of the Year

Grant Coates

Chapter of the Year

Metro Denver

Chapter 1106

Chapter Newsletter of the Year

(199 members or less)

The Listening Post

Chapter 35,

Greater Toledo, Ohio

Chapter Newsletter of the Year

(200 or more members)

The Listening Post,

Chapter 196,

Lynchburg, Virginia

State Council

E-Newsletter

of the Year

Florida E-Recon,

Florida State Council

State Council

Website of the Year

VVASC.org

South Carolina

State Council



CONVENTION

Continued from 17

growing up in Coalwood, West Virginia, and writing *Rocket Boys* to leave a legacy for the people who lived and worked in that small coal-mining town during his youth. Discussing his latest book, *Don't Blow Yourself Up*, Hickam described it as a tribute to the men he served with in the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam. He encouraged Vietnam War veterans to tell their own stories to "keep our legacy alive."

After a break, VVA President Jack McManus gave the delegates—and those watching on the first-ever livestream of a VVA Convention session on Facebook—a preview of the goals and planned implementation of the Future of VVA Strategic Plan. Following the lunch break, the rest of the afternoon was devoted to VVA national committee hearings on resolutions, and in the evening, the Regional Caucuses took place, during which those running for national offices fielded questions from delegates.

The Thursday morning General Session began with singer-songwriter John Flynn performing "Deeper Family," a song he crafted for VVA and

Top: Newly elected Officers and Board members following the swearing-in ceremony at Saturday's Awards Banquet. **At right:** from top: Laurel Schaefer-Bozoukoff, Miss America 1972, meeting members on Friday; Carlton Rhodes is awarded the VVA Commendation Medal by National President Jack McManus; Harvey Frost speaks after receiving the VVA Excellence in the Arts Award. **Opposite page,** from top: Homer Hickam, the best-selling author, delivers the Keynote Speech; VVA meeting planner Wes Guldry and VVA Veteran Arts Editor Marc Leppson hosting Saturday night's Awards Banquet; Singer-songwriter John Flynn performing "Deeper Family" prior to Thursday morning's General Session.



performed at the Vietnam War Veterans Day ceremonies on March 29, 2022, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Following this, a short recorded address by President Joe Biden was presented by Jennifer Hunt, a combat-wounded Iraq War veteran and the White House's Director of Veteran Engagement.

Next, delegates turned their attention to the proposed VVA constitutional amendments. The afternoon session was consumed entirely with reading and acting on the proposed resolutions, including setting the date for VVA's dissolution, and additional regional caucuses were held that evening.

VVA's traditional Friday POW/MIA ceremony commenced at 7:00 a.m. in the hotel. Delegates began to line up for voting in the biennial national elections well before the doors opened at 9:00 a.m. That afternoon, a Chapel of Four Chaplains induction ceremony unfolded on the Convention floor. The Friday night celebration included a

See ELECTION on Page 39

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Bill Meeks

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Wayne Reynolds

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Dennis Howland

Richard Lindbeck

Charlie Montgomery

Dan Stenvold

Siege Williams

Sandie Wilson

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Region 2

Ted Wilkinson

Region 3

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CHAPELLE

Continued from 24

spent five weeks, much of it in solitary confinement, in a Budapest prison. Her photographs and journalism appeared in *Life*, *National Observer*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*, and many other publications. Chapelle first went to Vietnam in 1961 when the American public was still being reassured that our military involvement was strictly in an advisory capacity. When she captured the image of a Marine with a machine gun at the ready in a helicopter doorway, later published in *National Geographic*, it put the lie to the official version that U.S. forces in Vietnam were non-combatant "advisers."

Chapelle received the Overseas Press Club's George Polk Award in 1962 for her Vietnam War photos and coverage, and the now-historic image of the door gunner was the National Press Photographer's Association Picture of the Year in 1963.

DEFYING THE STATUS QUO

Never famous in her lifetime beyond the world of war correspondents, the last decade has seen growing recognition of Chapelle's importance. The Wisconsin Historical Society maintains an archive with more than 40,000 of her photographs, letters, and books. Her combat photography can be seen in print and online in many books, archives, and collections, going back to her groundbreaking photos from the Pacific Theatre in World War II.

She is the subject of at least two biographies, and the Milwaukee Public Television 2015 documentary, *Behind the Pearl Earrings: The Story*

of Dickey Chapelle, *Combat Photojournalist*. Her life and career were celebrated at the 2017 Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association banquet where she was named an "Honorary Marine."

When asked to imagine a combat photojournalist, many envision a man looking as weary and sweat-stained as the troops he is embedded with. Few visualize a woman in that role, mainly because women were long locked out of combat photojournalism.

These traditional gender attitudes held sway for many years, at one point reflected in a question put to Dickey Chapelle in the midst of a military operation: "What's a woman doing out here?" A Marine commander on two Jims voiced the same idea when he spotted Chapelle shortly after the landing and shouted, "Get that woman the hell off the beach!"

The prejudice prevailed for years, dictating that a war correspondent was a role no woman could or should involve herself with. It took women like Dickey Chapelle to defy the status quo, both by insisting on being in the heart of the action no matter the danger, as well as by finding and recording the humanity that persists in the midst of war's chaos and confusion.

Dickey Chapelle was intense and dynamic, five feet tall, never without her trademark pearl earrings and cat-eye glasses under an Australian-style bush hat. She reportedly could out-shout a drill sergeant, and was a close friend of several senior commanders in Vietnam, even talking wartime strategy with some of them.

But through it all, under the havoc of war, Chapelle always understood her central mission. It fueled the vitality and mastery in her work and was reflected in her working dictum: "The picture is your reason for being."

ELECTION

Continued from 19

dinner buffet and a spirited performance by Beate-mania USA, an early Beatles tribute band.

Saturday morning's final General Session opened with the announcement of the election results by Elections Committee Chair Scott DeArman. President Jack McManus, Vice President Tom Burke, and Secretary Bill Meeks were re-elected, while Wayne Reynolds was elected as Treasurer. (Complete election results can be found on Page 19.) The newly elected Board conducted its inaugural meeting after the short session concluded.

The Saturday Night Awards Banquet, co-emceed by Meeting Planner Wes Gurdy and myself, provided a grand conclusion to the four-day Convention. VVA bestowed several key honors, including the President's Award for Supporting America's Veterans to Evan Williams Bourbon for its American-Made Heroes program, and the 2023 In Service to America Award to U-Haul International for its long-standing support of VVA.

Jan Scruggs, the Vietnam War veteran who spearheaded the effort to construct the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the Nation's Capital, was honored with the VVA Lifetime Achievement Award. Harvey Pratt, an artist, sculptor, and Marine Vietnam veteran renowned for creating the National Native Americans Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., received the VVA Excellence in the Arts Award. Additionally, Laurel Schaefer-Bozoucoff, Miss America 1972, was presented with the President's Award for Entertaining the Troops in Vietnam.

The Convention's final official act was the swearing-in of the new Board and Officers, performed by former VVA President John Rowan. With that, the 21st VVA National Convention was in the record books. ♦

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