

Delegates were feted with beads and horns during the Opening Ceremonies (right). J.D. Soileau (below) applauded Louisiana State Council Terry Courville's welcoming remarks. Once again this year, U-Haul provided the Convention binders.



TOU T BON!

VVA's 18th National Convention in New Orleans



VVA President John Rowan (above) discussed the challenges facing delegates and provided the groundwork for debate. AVVA President Sharon Hobbs talked about her organization's accomplishments and aspirations.

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAEL KEATING

Most veterans of past VVA Conventions have time-embellished tales of late-night wrangling, of Constitutional debates that were long and difficult, sometimes acrimonious and often arcane. The organization was breaking new ground then and writing new roadmaps for veteran activism. Truth be told, they did some serious self-medication, too. But even though the parties might last well into the early morning hours, the delegates were miraculously ready to do it all again the next day.

By comparison, the workings of the 18th National Convention in New Orleans seemed civilized and sane. Debate by and large was confined to regular business hours, and by eleven o'clock the hotels were quiet. The officers ran unopposed and Constitutional changes were updates, not challenges. In many ways, this Convention was the Big Easy.

One thing remained the same, however: the intense pleasure delegates and their spouses took in spending time with each other. Some evenings the din in the lobby of the Marriott became so intense you felt the stone walls were vibrating. But those good vibrations were the shouts and laughter of members bound together in brotherhood.

The Convention spilled across Canal Street. The jaywalkers moved through traffic and dodged streetcars—sometimes in the rain—moving back and forth between the Marriott and the Sheraton, where the Opening Ceremonies were held Wednesday morning, August 9.

Although the room was huge, it just barely contained the 1,200 who attended the ceremonies. That number included the 818 delegates, as well as AVVA members, other spouses, and VVA staff. Louisiana State Council President Terry Courville welcomed the crowd, although his sidekick, J.D. Soileau, shouted to him to speak in English rather than French Creole. VVA President John Rowan gave delegates their marching orders, while an entirely different march—one of New Orleans' famous second lines—danced down the Convention aisles, tossing glass



With elegant professionalism, members of the Color Guard of the Washington Artillery of the Louisiana Army National Guard presented the Colors during the Opening Ceremonies. Afterward, VVA members from Louisiana presented the service flags; delegates stood when their service songs sounded.



Delegates vote (far left) to rename the Veterans Incarcerated Committee. Longtime VVA activist Linda Schwartz (left), who served as VA Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning and previously as Connecticut Commissioner for Veterans Affairs, was warmly welcomed at Friday's Women Veterans Breakfast. Politicians honored (from left): VVA Treasurer Wayne Reynolds, Colo. Rep. Mike Coffman, President John Rowan, Mich. Sen. Gary Peters, Conn. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, Secretary Bill Meeks, and Vice President Marsha Four.



2017-2019 National Officers and Board Members

John Rowan, President
Marsha Four, Vice President
Bill Meeks, Jr., Secretary
Wayne Reynolds, Treasurer

At-Large Board Members

Dottie Barickman
Richard DeLong
Gumersindo Gomez
John Margowski
Charles R. Montgomery, Jr.
Pete Peterson
Dave Simmons
Dan Stenvold
Kerwin Stone
Sandie Wilson

Regional Directors

Skip Hochreich, Region 1
Ted Wilkinson, Region 2
Sara McVicker, Region 3
Spence Davis, Region 4
Tom Burke, Region 5
Bob Grabinski, Region 6
Allen Manuel, Region 7
Francisco F. Ivarra, Region 8
Dick Southern, Region 9

bead necklaces into the crowd while a truncated brass band blared Dixieland tunes.

"I love the optimism," Rowan quipped, "of a 70-year-old who spends \$100 for a life membership."

The keynote speaker was psychologist and PTSD pioneer Charles Figley (See "PTSD & Compassion Fatigue" in the January/February issue), who received the Excellence in the Sciences award at VVA's Tucson Leadership Conference last year. Figley discussed the importance of the homecoming experience. Veterans returning from the war felt changed and that the world around them had changed, too. Three things were necessary for a successful homecoming, Figley said: 1) disengaging from the war; 2) reentering civilian life while integrating military service, and 3) focusing on the future. These three phases, he said, "provided a way back."

Then the Louisiana marshals faced their first big challenge: The room needed to be cleared. Afterward, only credentialed delegates and staff would be allowed on the Convention floor. Local folks—Raymond and Georganell Richard, Perry Lopez, Doc Lessard, and Lester Guidry—had taken over the tasks formerly performed by VVA marshals from Nevada. Initially daunted by the crowds—VVA's largest Convention—they quickly rose to the task.

The general session introduced delegates to Convention rules, procedures, and expectations, then broke into much smaller committee meetings. Although intended as a forum to discuss resolutions that the committees intended to present to the full body of delegates, some committees had no resolutions to present. That, however, seemed no impediment to discussion and debate.

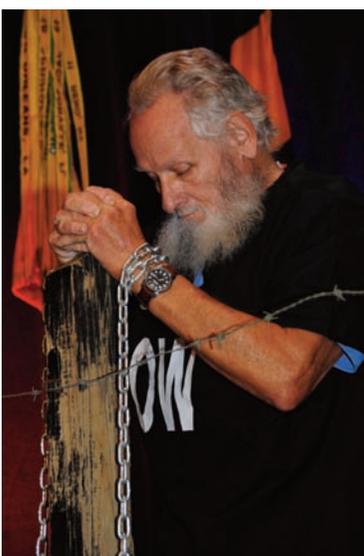
That evening the first caucuses took place. Each region holds its own caucus. Officer and Board candidates run the gauntlet and schedule their appearances. Each caucus has its own way of doing things, but in all of them the candidates appear one at a time to be quizzed by delegates. Some of the questions are serious, others frivolous. Yet others are of the gotcha variety. But the ones that most caused delegates to lean forward concerned the future of the organization.

Those questions remained a background buzz at this 18th National Convention. President Rowan spoke of the choices that faced VVA and the two panels that had been formed. One is examining the possibility of VVA remaining a last-man-standing organization and the wisest ways to eventually close down operations. The other is looking into various ways the organization could evolve and remain viable. The two panels, he said, would present status reports at next year's Leadership Conference. Then, perhaps, some proposals could be brought before Convention delegates in 2019 or '21. Preacher Bob Lewis, the strategic planner overseeing the process, also addressed some of the delegates' concerns.

Still, the future of VVA remained a subject of conversation throughout the week. With an average age of seventy-one, members are increasingly concerned with legacies and completions.

VA Secretary David Shulkin made a video appearance, talking about transparency, preventing fraud and abuse, touting recent accomplishments, and reiterating his commitment to suicide prevention as his top priority.

But it was Acting Deputy Secretary for Veterans Affairs Scott Blackburn who actually took the stage. "How we treat our veterans reflects on younger generations," he said. Blackburn presented a vision of the VA as stronger, better managed, and better able to help veterans. He said the VA will work hard



This year's POW/MIA ceremony was conducted by Independence, Louisiana, Chapter 1052 on Friday morning, August 11.

Constitutional Changes

BY LESLIE DeLONG,
CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE CHAIR

Five constitutional amendments were passed by the delegates at the 18th National Convention. The 2017 VVA Constitution is online at www.vva.org Here's a summary of the changes:

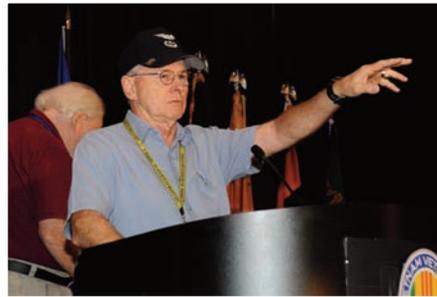
Amendment 01 adds the italicized sentence to Article 1, Section 7, Paragraph C. The paragraph now reads, "The committees shall meet at such times and places as the chair of the committee or the president or national board shall direct. *Committee meetings may be conducted in person or by electronic means as long as each committee member is able to hear and respond simultaneously and can participate, without limitations, in all matters brought before the committee.*"

The amendment allows a national committee to hold an electronic meeting or to have one or more committee members participate electronically in a physical meeting as long as there is a quorum, and all members can hear and speak concurrently on matters brought before them. This amendment does not extend to state council or chapter committee meetings, and it does not apply to any general membership or board meetings of state councils or chapters.

Amendment 04 changes Article II, Section 3, Paragraph B by removing "After written recommendation from the AVVA in the state" and the term "liaison," which is replaced with the italicized words to reflect current AVVA terminology: "The state council shall seat the *elected AVVA representative or the elected AVVA state president* on the state council and/or board of directors, who shall serve as a non-voting special advisor entitled to be heard on all matters." The elected president will be seated if the state AVVA is incorporated; if not incorporated, the elected representative will be seated.

Amendment 05 follows Amendment 04 by making the same terminology updates at the chapter level, Article III, Section 5, Paragraph K: "The chapter should seat the *elected AVVA representative or the elected AVVA chapter president* on the chapter board, who shall serve as a non-voting special advisor to the chapter board on matters of particular concern to AVVA members."

Amendments 06 and 07 affect Appendix II by changing the name of the Veterans Incarcerated Committee and expanding its purview to include veterans treatment courts. Paragraph M of Appendix II now reads: "The *Veterans Incarcerated and in the Justice System Committee* shall develop advocacy programs of awareness with regard to the special needs of veterans who are presently or formerly incarcerated. The committee shall work with various state and federal agencies to develop programs to assist in the rehabilitation of incarcerated veterans and to promote and assist in the creation of veterans treatment courts throughout the country."



Debate during the Veterans Health Care Committee meeting (above, far left) was sometimes heated. Angola Chapter 689 President Danny Sermon (above, middle) was the only incarcerated delegate. Elections Chair Scott DeArman (above) provided updates on the candidate roster: While VVA held its Convention, AVVA had its own. The AVVA luncheon (left) was packed—the best attended ever. After revising its bylaws, AVVA elections were held Friday.

The Commendation Medal, VA's highest award, was presented by John Rowan to two men and two women at the New Orleans Convention:

- Sandy Miller
- Deborah Williams
- Larry Frazee
- Tom Meinhardt

The second highest award, The Achievement Medal, was presented to the following people:

- Gordon C. Lane
- William Martin
- Pater A. Bronstad
- Kate O'Hare-Palmer
- Lou Nunez
- Larry Mills
- John H. Riling III

to “regain the trust of veterans,” and he “wants decisive changes” in the department. When he declared, “Privatization is not the answer,” the assembly erupted in applause.

Blackburn, however, is the Acting Secretary, and last June President Trump nominated his replacement.

Three of Dean Martin's Goldiggers—Jackie Chidsey, Paula Cinko, and Rosie Cox Gitlin—arrived early and fluttered among the delegates, their charm and admiration of the Vietnam War troops captivating all they met. The three had traveled with Bob Hope to Vietnam, and all remain marked by those goodwill trips. Each would be honored at the concluding banquet with a President's Award for Supporting the Troops in Vietnam.

On the floor of the Convention, the business of the organization took place with surprising ease. The Constitutional amendment process was overseen by Committee Chair Leslie DeLong. Only one amendment provoked any protracted debate: the proposed renaming of the Veterans Incarcerated Committee to the Veterans in Justice Committee.

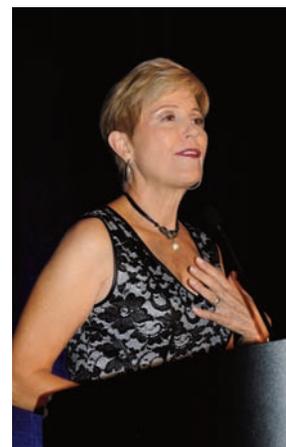
Some rose in favor and talked about the importance of Veterans Courts. Others objected, including longtime veterans advocate Ron Adams and Danny Sermon, who is incarcerated at the Louisiana State Prison and is the president of VVA Chapter 689 in Angola. Sermon was the only incarcerated delegate at the Convention—and only the second incarcerated member to serve as a delegate.

Both men considered the name change a betrayal of VVA's historical outreach to “veterans incarcerated,” where even the phrase emphasizes veterans first and incarceration as secondary. Both feared a shift away from advocacy for those already incarcerated. Ultimately, after much debate and some parliamentary fancy footwork, delegates approved a new name: Veterans Incarcerated and in the Justice System Committee.

Resolutions, under the direction of Dick Southern, went along smoothly. All the committee chairs, in turn, presented their resolutions. Most were dealt with expeditiously.

The other business, of course, was politics, which was also easier than usual. The Officers ran unopposed. The At-Large field, however, was crowded. An additional two candidates running from the floor brought the total to twenty people for the ten At-Large seats. More than half of the Regional Director seats were challenged, and in more than half of those races the incumbents were unseated.

VVA turned once again this year to the League of Women Voters to conduct the elections. Half an hour before the polls opened, the line



Although the lines wrapped through the Marriott's second floor, VVA's elections (top) proceeded without a hitch. Run by the League of Women Voters and managed by the Elections Committee and the Louisiana Marshals, the polls opened promptly and delegates marked their ballots and deposited them in boxes marked by region. Three of the Goldiggers who toured with Bob Hope in Vietnam were honored Saturday night with plaques (from left): Jackie Chidsey, Paula Cinko, and Rosie Cox Gitlin.