

Left: VVA members with Miss Spokane Ashlee Karras after Tuesday's wreath-laying ceremony at the Spokane Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Right: Dr. Elbert Nelson, recipient of VVA's Excellence in the Sciences Award, with fellow Cincinnati Chapter 10 members, including Chapter President Ed Brown, far right.



The 2019 National Convention: VVA's Past,



Above: Resolutions Committee Chair Dick Southern introduced Resolution GA-21, which could rename and reshape VVA. Below: The Blazen Divaz of Coeur d'Alene, with colorful outfits and choreographed moves, enlivened Thursday morning's session.

BY MARC LEEPSON, PHOTOS BY KEN WILLIAMSON

The delegates to VVA's 19th biennial National Convention began arriving in Spokane on Sunday, July 14, three days before the Opening Ceremonies, with many things on their minds. Among them: where to eat outside the hotel, where to get a decent cup of coffee, and how to navigate around downtown Spokane. Oh, and who they would vote for in the Friday Board and Officer elections—not to mention the burning question of the day: the ultimate fate of VVA.

Starting on Thursday, the 668 delegates would debate and then vote on a series of proposed resolutions and constitutional amendments that called, in essence, either for the organization to shut its doors at a fixed future date (perhaps 2028), or to carry on VVA's 41-year legacy in the form of a new organization with a new name.

By the end of the day on Monday, most of the delegates and their spouses and significant others—many of them members of the Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America, which was holding its Convention concurrently—had a good line on getting around in downtown Spokane and had made progress on discovering the best food and beverage options in and near two Convention hotels, the Davenport Grand and the Doubletree.

By the end of the regional caucuses and the committee resolutions hearings on Wednesday, they nearly all had their minds made up about their election choices and how they'd vote on the competing future-of-VVA resolutions and amendments. On Friday, the delegates re-elected John Rowan and Bill Meeks as National President and Secretary, and chose Jack McManus and Tom Burke as VVA's new Treasurer and Vice President. (See complete election returns, page 19.)

As for VVA's future, the delegates were cautiously optimistic. They voted down a proposed VVA constitutional amendment that would have set a shut-down date. Then they voted in favor of a resolution authorizing the Officers and Board of Directors to explore options for a new name for a VVA successor organization. That name would be presented to the delegates at the next Convention in 2021 in Greensboro, North Carolina.

In between the politicking, the Convention floor action, and all the other official events, delegates took time to explore Spokane and palaver with old friends and new colleagues.



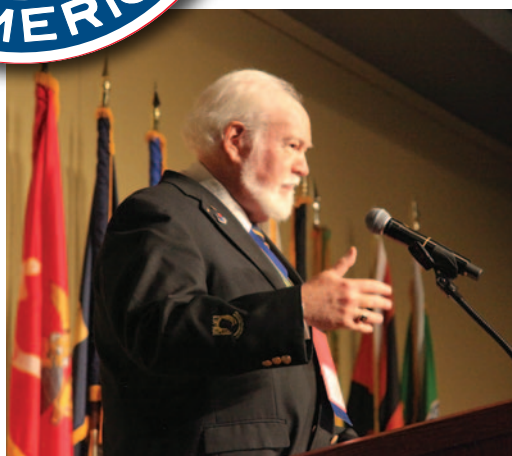
Present, and Future



DAY BY DAY IN SPOKANE

Monday was get-oriented day for delegates and for the phalanx of VVA national staffers who set up the meeting planner's Situation Room, and the Registration, Credentials, and Media offices. Registration began Tuesday morning at 9:00 for pre-registered delegates. Tuesday afternoon many delegates and AVVA members made the short walk from the two Convention hotels over the Spokane River. They walked up a short hill in the lushly landscaped, 100-acre Riverfront Park to the Spokane Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which features a statue of a serviceman sitting serenely in a grove of trees.

National President John Rowan and AVVA President Sharon Hobbs hosted a wreath-laying ceremony honoring the three hundred men from Eastern Washington, North Idaho, Western Montana, and Southern British Columbia who perished in the Vietnam War. The event also included brief remarks from Spokane's Mayor David Condon, Police Chief Craig Meidl, Miss Spokane Ashlee



VVA National President John Rowan addressed the delegates during the Opening Ceremonies, which featured the Fairchild Air Base Color Guard, as well as Gil Calac of the Yakama Nation and Soy Redbird of the Colville Tribe.

Resolved to Consider Change

BY DICK SOUTHERN, RESOLUTIONS COMMITTEE CHAIR

As the retiring chair of the Resolutions Committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the committee chairs, the members, and the delegates who proposed and adopted resolutions in the last four Conventions. I especially want to thank Sharon Hodge for her help and patience over the years. Without Sharon, I would have been lost.

A complete list of resolutions adopted at the 19th Convention is available at www.vva.org. The most important resolution in Spokane, I believe, was MA-XX, which became GA-21. This resolution gives direction to the Officers and Board in planning the future of VVA. GA-21 is our marching order as we head for Greensboro, N.C., in 2021.



GA-21: CHANGING THE NAME OF VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

Issue: Require VVA's leadership to investigate what is required to change Vietnam Veterans of America's name and then open up membership to include all veterans after the Vietnam era.

Background: There has been much discussion over the last fifteen years about VVA being a last-person organization. But no formal vote has been taken. A NO vote on this resolution would make it official.

Resolved, That: Require VVA's Officers and Board of Directors to investigate the requirements to change the name of Vietnam Veterans of America to a name that would entice post-Vietnam era veterans to join the renamed organization and then open up membership to these newer veterans.

The proposed changes would be presented to the delegates at the 2021 Convention for ratification.■

With right hands raised, delegates joined Gil Calac and Soy Redbird as they performed the American Indian honoring song, "We Are One."

Buckeye State Council Chaplain Marty Crawford took the plunge from the world's largest Radio Flyer wagon slide located in Spokane's Riverfront Park.



Karras, and Medal of Honor recipient (and VVA member) Allen Lynch, who would be the keynote speaker at Wednesday morning's Opening Ceremonies.

The annual Tuesday night Welcome Home Party was held at the gleaming, recently expanded and remodeled Convention Center adjacent to both hotels where all the official events took place. It featured the singing impressionist and comedian Larry G. Jones.

The Opening Ceremonies began at 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday in solemnity as two local Native American Vietnam War veterans—Gil Calac of the Yakama Nation and Soy Redbird of the Colville Tribe—slowly walked to the stage in full regalia, along with two Indian women. They offered two honoring songs for veterans, "The Horse Song" and "We Are One," after which VVA National Chaplain Fr. Phil Salois gave the Invocation.

The Color Guard from nearby Fairchild Air Force Base did double duty, presenting both the colors and the service flags. Michelle Wilcox, a member of Southwestern Pennsylvania Chapter 882, singing a capella, led the group in the National Anthem. A half-dozen veterans—employees of the two Convention hotels—led the Pledge of Allegiance. Al Lynch gave a forceful and passionate keynote speech, in which he talked about joining VVA in the 1980s, serving as a veterans service officer, and how VVA members all over the country live up to our motto, "In Service to America."

"We volunteer, we help; that's what we do," Lynch said. And, he added, that work isn't finished. "Some of us don't want to go quietly into





Convention delegates, including Minnesota Chapter 290 delegate Bill Uphoff (left) and Texas Chapter 366 delegate Bill van Syckle, voiced their opinions during hearings on resolutions and constitutional amendments.



VVA member and Medal of Honor recipient Allen Lynch (above) gave the Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremonies. On Thursday Retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark received VVA's first Lifetime Achievement Award.



the night," he said, offering this advice to his fellow VVA members: "Bring younger veterans in, train 'em, and unleash 'em on Congress."

After the ceremonies, Lynch signed dozens of copies of his new autobiography, *From Zero to Hero*, for delegates, AVVA members, and guests. He stayed around the rest of the day talking to his fellow Vietnam War veterans.

Wednesday afternoon and evening were given over to the committee hearings on resolutions and to the regional caucuses. The Convention floor came to life again at 9:00 Thursday morning as the Blazen Divaz woke up the assembled with a spirited dance routine. In addition to the work of the Convention that morning and afternoon, delegates heard from two special guests, Retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark, who received VVA's first Lifetime Achievement Award, and VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, who praised VVA for its leadership in issues such as opioid abuse and suicide prevention.

In his remarks, Gen. Clark, the former commanding general of NATO who served as a 1st Infantry Division company commander in Vietnam, told delegates that he was "honored to be here and awed by what [VVA has] done over the last thirty years, which is astonishing." He went on to say that he was "very humbled" to achieve the award "because there are a lot more people that did a lot more than I did in Vietnam. They suffered a lot more than I did. It means a lot to me; you are my brothers."

Gen. Clark spoke with affection about the men who served under him in Vietnam in 1969. When he first met them, he said, some "had 'FTA' written on their helmets. Some of them had been smoking dope. They were white, black, brown, and in that instant they were my brothers. I've carried that with me for the rest of my life."

Friday morning began early, with the 7:00 a.m. POW/MIA ceremony. The election voting ran from 9:00 to 10:30; as did the AVVA voting. The General Session reconvened at 11:00 and went until late afternoon, with a break for lunch.

Elections Committee Chair Scott DeArman announced the results on the Convention floor on Saturday morning, and the new 2019-21 VVA Board of Directors met after the conclusion of brief Closing Ceremonies.

The last event of the Convention before the Saturday night Awards Banquet was a well-attended 2:00 p.m. presentation by Scott Levins, the director of the National Military Personnel Records Center

Constitutional Amendments at Spokane

BY LESIE DeLONG, CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE CHAIR

Nine Proposed Constitutional Amendments came to the floor during the 19th Biennial Convention in Spokane. The proposed amendments, the actions taken by the delegates, and the implications for VVA are discussed below.

Proposed Amendment 1 (Adopted) struck the word "annual" from Article 1 National Provisions, Section 3, paragraph A. Annual dues have been eliminated in favor of life membership; therefore, this word was deleted from the Constitution.

Proposed Amendment 2 (Adopted). Two years ago, references to AVVA elected presidents and representatives in Articles 2 and 3 of the VVA Constitution were updated to reflect changes in the titles of these positions within AVVA chapters and state associations or organizations. This amendment updated the information in Article 1 National Provisions, Section 4, paragraph J to reflect the same changes by replacing the entire paragraph. This paragraph now reads:

The national board shall seat the national president of the Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. (AVVA) on the national board to serve as a non-voting special advisor entitled to be heard on each matter brought before the national board.

Proposed Amendment 3 (Rejected). Article 1 National Provisions, Section 6, paragraph C 1: delete words describing how the number of delegates is determined for chapters with twenty-five or more members and insert "no more than two members entitled to vote." Had this amendment been adopted, each chapter with twenty-five or more members would have been authorized only two voting delegates at the biennial Conventions.

Proposed Amendments 4 and 5 (Rejected by standing count, 231 to 437). These proposed amendments would have added a dissolution section authorizing the National Officers and Board to manage the legal dissolution of the national corporation to occur on or about December 31, 2028, to Article 1 National Provisions.

Proposed Amendment 6 (Rejected) would have eliminated the state councils' right to determine how the number of chapter delegates is determined (Article 2 State Provisions, Section 3, paragraph A 1) by restricting each chapter to two delegates.

Proposed Amendment 7 (Adopted) makes it compulsory for chapters to seat the elected AVVA chapter president or elected chapter representative on the VVA chapter board of directors and to allow this individual to speak on all matters that come before the chapter board (Article 3 Chapter Provisions, Section 5, paragraph K) in accord with national and state provisions. The incorporation status of the AVVA entity has no bearing on this requirement. If the AVVA chapter has no elected president or representative, the VVA chapter is exempted from this constitutional provision.

Proposed Amendment 8 (Adopted as amended): Article 3 Chapter Provisions, Section 6, paragraph A, states the authorized officer positions on the chapter level. Prior to the Convention only the secretary and treasurer positions could be combined. This amendment allows more flexibility by adding the following

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at the National Archives in St. Louis. Levins spoke about the ways the National Archives helps Vietnam War veterans and took many questions from VVA members in attendance.

The Awards Banquet ended the Convention. Meeting Planner Wes Guidry and VVA *Veteran Arts* Editor Marc Leepson emceed the event. Dinner literally was spiced up with small bottles of VVA-labeled Tabasco sauce courtesy of the McIlhenny Co., which sent similar bottles and a tongue-in-cheek hot saucy-heavy cookbook to the troops in Vietnam.



All the award winners—Morris Montgomery representing McIlhenny; Cincinnati Chapter 10 member Dr. Elbert Nelson (for Excellence in the Sciences); two former Goldiggers, Nancy Bonetti Ray and Kathryn Kalaijian (for Entertaining the Troops in Vietnam); and actor and former Marine Jim Beaver (for Excellence in the Arts)—made gracious acceptance speeches. Then, around 9:30, the evening and VVA's 19th Convention ended.

Next up: the National Leadership & Education Conference next summer in Dayton, Ohio. ■

Left: Washington State Director of Veterans Affairs Lourdes "Alfie" Alvarado Ramos received the Minority Affairs Committee's Diversity Award. Below: Liz Kelley, who received the VVA Award for Entertaining the Troops in Vietnam in 2016, cheered on fellow former Goldiggers at the Saturday night Awards Banquet



THE VVA EXCELLENCE IN THE ARTS AWARD

Jim Beaver's Acceptance Speech

I hope this isn't a trick or some sort of belated court-martial.

When the British government attempted to raise money in the Second World War by cutting funding for the arts, Winston Churchill was famously quoted as saying, "If you deny support for the arts, then what are we fighting for?"

Study after study has shown that children who are consistently exposed to the arts in school have SAT scores one hundred points higher on average than those who aren't. They have higher GPAs and lower drop-out rates. They are twice as likely to receive a college degree.

Cities with high art and culture levels show an 18 percent decrease in serious crime, 14 percent lower child abuse, and a 5 percent decrease in obesity. Oh, and, of course, the arts show us how to be human in the best sense, how to love and be brave and withstand hardship.

They show us beauty that lifts our spirits; they give us respite from the difficulties of life; allow us to share laughter and sorrow and adventures and the simple uplift of the soul. They warn us of how we might go wrong, and show us ways to make things right. If you've ever seen *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *True Grit*, or looked at Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, or listened to a Beethoven sonata or the Beatles' "Yesterday," if you've ever read *The Grapes of Wrath* or *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, you know what I mean.

The arts show us how to be better people, how to support one another, how to live up to what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." If I were going to receive an award from Vietnam Veterans of America, I could not be prouder than that it is for my participation in the arts.

My four slightly older buddies Greg Turner, Lon Smith, Robert Carlyle, and Jerry Cooper all joined the Marines in 1967. I was stuck in high school for another year, and they bombarded me, the runt of the litter, with letters warning me, "Whatever you do, don't join the Marines!" So immediately after graduating in 1968, of course I joined the Marines.

I didn't have too bad a time of it. I went to Vietnam in June of 1970 as a radioman, and I probably spent more time repairing radios than carrying them. The closest I came to a Purple Heart was a wound I received from an idiot from Corbin, Kentucky,



who tried to stab a rat in the perimeter bunker and bayoneted me instead. My year in country gave me far more boredom and far less terror than it did some folks. Its biggest effect was to lift my political awareness and my conviction that if America stands for anything, it must stand for truth, justice, and compassion. It is through the arts that I have sought to serve that conviction.

Going to Vietnam, it turns out, was a great career move. I owe my career in Hollywood to being a Vietnam vet. My first jobs there were writing TV episodes about the war on shows like *Tour of Duty* and [HBO's] *Vietnam War Stories*. My big break as an actor came playing a Vietnam vet in Norman Jewison's brilliant film about veterans, *In Country*.

I am extraordinarily proud of the work I've been allowed to do in *Deadwood*, *Supernatural*, *Justified*, *Breaking Bad*, and

all those other shows and films. But nothing I have done as an actor or as a screenwriter has made me as proud as I am of being a Vietnam veteran and to have served alongside the people represented here in this room.

While I was in Vietnam, I ran into a boot camp buddy who turned pale when he saw me. "We heard you were dead!" Turns out it was another fellow with the same name. In fact, there were two other fellows with the same name.

My given name is James, and when I visit the memorial Wall in Washington, I look for the names of those two other James Beavers. I wonder what their lives would have been like, what they would have meant to the world. And I wonder what the world would be like if it actually were my name on The Wall.

And each time, I rededicate myself to making the life I was given, the life those two fellows had taken from them, worthy of those "better angels" Lincoln talked about.

I don't just make movies for fun and money. I like fun and money, but I work as an artist in order to do some little part in making a world where memorials to casualties of war are unnecessary.

That my brothers and sisters in arms of this organization have chosen to recognize my part in that fight fills me with gratitude and humility. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Welcome home. ■