

LOCAL NEWS

Purple Heart veterans gather in Denver for national conference

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William Lobeck of Wisconsin and many others are in Denver for the national convention for the Military Order of the Purple Heart. The scandal at the Department of Veterans Affairs over falsified data about delayed medical appointments is expected to be a major topic at the convention. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

Jim Blaylock received three Purple Hearts and lost his right hand and forearm while serving in the Vietnam War as a rotary wing aviator in the Marine Corps.

On Thursday, which is national Purple Heart Day, Blaylock will be in Denver for the 82nd national convention of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, which runs through Saturday.

“Part of what happens at the national convention is that guys bring forth issues that perhaps we’re not as aware of as we could be,” said Blaylock, president of the Military Order of the Purple Heart Service Foundation, explaining how the organization’s goals often come from the grass roots.

A major topic, he said, will be the scandal at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs over falsified data about delayed medical appointments, which some employees tried to cover up.

At last year’s convention, many members expressed concern about long delays in getting health-care treatment from the VA.

“We recognized as a body that appointments were delayed,” Blaylock said, “but we had no clue that they were strategically delayed.”

John Bircher, who served in Vietnam with Special Forces and was awarded the Purple Heart, agrees.

“It’s going to be a hot issue for our convention,” said Bircher, the group’s spokesman. “We’re anxious to hear what they’re going to say. We’re watching very closely.”

Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Sloan Gibson will address the convention this year.

The Military Order of the Purple Heart, formed in 1932, is the only veteran service organization made up solely of combat veterans wounded in battle while serving in uniform — those who have received Purple Hearts.

“We like the VA,” said Ron Siebels, national commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, who served two tours of duty in Vietnam as an Army NCO and received a Purple Heart for

combat wounds. “All we’re asking is that veterans get what they deserve, and equally.

“If this country is going to send 100,000 people into combat, we want them there when they come back.”

Daunting new issues come into play upon return from battle – including emotional, financial and medical – and they work to help veterans navigate those challenges, he said.

As part of its service program, the Military Order of the Purple Heart helps process veterans’ claims for services from medical care to housing and job training.

In 2013, its officers assisted veterans and their dependents in filing VA claims that resulted in \$316 million of benefits, said Siebels, and its volunteers logged more than 160,500 hours of service at VA medical centers and nursing homes, which the administration valued as worth more than \$3.5 million.

Every year, the organization’s leaders visit members of Congress to present the list of priority issues decided at the annual convention. Currently, key issues include post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries and women veterans.

Last year, in testimony at the joint hearing of the Senate and House committees on Veterans Affairs, Siebels cited a study that showed PTS occurs in about 11 percent to 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, about 10 percent of Desert Storm veterans and approximately 30 percent of Vietnam veterans.

“The study also concluded that traumatic brain injury was the strongest predictor of PTS,” he said.

Another concern is women veterans, one of the fastest-growing segments of the nation’s veteran population.

“Some are single mothers who are focused on putting food on the table for their kids, and they’re not concerned with going to the VA right away,” Siebels said.

Eventually, however, they may show up looking for help, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart wants the country – along with the VA – to be prepared for that.

Many of those attending this week’s convention served in Vietnam. That battle is over, but they’re still fighting.

“The kids in the military today are the sons and daughters of Vietnam veterans,” Bircher said.

“We remember the reception those veterans received when they returned home, and we’re not going to let that happen to our kids.”

The medal

It was established by Gen. George Washington in 1782. It was re-established in 1932 on the 200th anniversary of Washington’s birth and is awarded to service members wounded or killed in combat.

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs