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.

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 flag, which this year, for the first time, included the Space Force flag.

Attendees then heard from Florida State Council Vice President Gary Newman, A VVA 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 playbook” for today’s VSOs. He further stated that the recently enacted PACT Act “wouldn’t have been passed without VVA’s support and leadership.”

Homer Hickam, the best-selling author of the memoir Rocket Boys and numerous other books, delivered the Keynote Speech. He spoke about...
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 who served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War, encouraging 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 office 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 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.

The 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 2023 VVA Awards Banquet.
spoke five words, much of it in ordinary conversation, its shorthand prison. Her photographs and journalism appeared in Life, National Geographic, Cosmopolitan, Reader's Digest, National Geographic, and many other publications.

Chapelle first went to Vietnam in 1963 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 her in 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 Photographers' Association Picture of the Year in 1963.

DEFYING THE STATUS QUO

She is the subject of at least two biographies, 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 as "Honorary Marine." When asked to imagine a combat photojournalist, many envision a man looking war-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. Those traditional gender attitudes held steady 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 Iwo Jima voiced the same idea when he spotted ChapelleImages/chapelle_0218.jpg shortly after the landing and shouted, "Get that woman the hell off the beach!" The prejudice prevailed for years, declaring 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.

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