

From: President, NWFMOA

2 June, 2021

Subject: Trip Report; Annual FCoC Convention

TO: NWFMOA Board of Directors and Members

From 13 through 17 May, I traveled to Sarasota FL to represent the Northwest Florida Military Officers Association (NWFMOA) at the annual state convention of the Florida Council of Chapters (FCoC) of the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA). The convention was held at the Westin Hotel in downtown Sarasota. An invoice for travel and hotel expenses will be provided to the Board of Directors.

I drove to and from the convention, arriving the day before the convention began and departing the day after the convention concluded. This allowed me to complete the long drive more safely, with minimum time pressure regarding my arrival, and allowing more time for meals and rest stops to maintain my alertness during the drive.

Key events and highlights of the convention are as follows:

Convention activities began with registration and an informal reception during the afternoon and evening of Friday, 14 May.

Other convention business began with a breakfast meeting on 15 May, with Major General James Hartsell, USMC, as the main speaker. Hartsell said the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs is playing a key role in making Florida “the most veteran-friendly state in the United States.” He stated that problems currently facing many veterans include healthcare issues, homelessness, and suicide, as well as veterans who sometimes need assistance making the transition from active military duty to civilian life. He said there are approximately 500,000 Vietnam veterans, and about 164,000 female veterans, in Florida, most of whom are doing well, while some need assistance. He added that some female veterans have a difficult time thinking of themselves as veterans rather than in their civilian roles as wives, mothers, employees or business owners, etc. Many veterans, male or female, find it difficult to ask for help when they need it, possibly because military culture has always stressed personal strength, courage and self-reliance. In addition, he said, Vietnam veterans sometimes distrust the federal government or its programs. Regarding some favorable trends, Hartsell said that Florida currently has fewer homeless veterans than most other states, and the American Legion has recently changed its policy to accept membership of veterans who did not serve directly in combat.

Hartsell gave special recognition to Florida State Representative Pat Maney, who is a member of NWFMOA, for his work in creating special veteran’s courts to help steer veterans who run afoul of the law toward treatment programs rather than incarceration when possible. He also said there is a need for mentors – experienced veterans who can assist other veterans, with such

things as transitioning to civilian life, making claims for healthcare and other assistance, or other help as needed.

On the afternoon of 15 May, members were given an update on issues facing surviving spouses of deceased veterans. Local chapters of MOAA are encouraged to serve as points of contact for spouses in need of help and as liaisons between such spouses and the Department of Veterans Affairs and other helping agencies. Surviving spouses are considered regular, not auxiliary, members of MOAA, and are eligible for basic, premium, and life memberships.

Upon learning of the death of a member, local chapters should initiate contact with the surviving spouse to help inform them of benefits available, provide assistance if necessary and possible, and encourage the surviving spouse to take an active, and perhaps leadership, role in the affairs of the local chapter. MOAA has a Surviving Spouse Excellence Award, for which chapters may apply each year using the form on the MOAA website. Deadline for annual applications is June 1.

Advice offered to surviving spouses begins with the importance of planning ahead, before the death of a veteran. This involves heart-to-heart discussions between the veteran, spouse, and children, preparation of wills, and arrangement of bank account and property ownership to make it easy for a surviving spouse to gain access to family assets after a veteran's death. Other preparations include gathering birth certificates, property deeds, and other key documents in a central place known to one's spouse, children, and likely executor. Keeping secrets from one another about such things as property ownership, bank accounts, or passwords is a bad idea. Families in which the husband or wife has a prior spouse should take this into account in their planning process. MOAA offers a surviving spouse planning guide.

When a veteran dies, the surviving spouse should obtain as many certified copies of the death certificate as possible, as each agency with which they must deal is likely to require a certified copy to process claims. The MOAA Foundation offers a variety of services to help surviving spouses, and local chapters can help such spouses gain access to help.

The morning of 15 May also included the FCoC annual business meeting, during which NWFMOA member Nick Marotta took over from fellow NWFMOA member Scott Berry as Area Vice President of the FCoC. Berry has already filed his own report with NWFMOA regarding the convention.

Next year's FCoC convention is planned to take place in Palm Beach, and will include a casino night on Friday to raise funds for the FCoC and the MOAA Foundation.

Other upcoming events include a leadership forum in Orlando to be held 7-8 January, and a conference at Fort Benning, Georgia, in October, which will include a live airborne operations demonstration on 13 October, and a golf tournament the following day, as well as a tour of the Civil War Maritime Museum, the US Army infantry Museum, and an Oktoberfest celebration. Guest speakers may include Herschel Walker.

Information about these events is available on the MOAA and FCoC websites.

A briefing was also given about recent improvements to the FCoC website. The website includes pages for each chapter, which chapters are responsible for maintaining. Members may edit their own profiles on the webpage, including their images, and may change their passwords from the initial default password given when they register. The website includes a user guide and other resources for chapter leaders. Further information about the website may be obtained by sending an email to jhsnyder41@gmail.com.

A briefing on national and Florida legislative affairs was given by Lieut. Col. Steve Murray, USAF (Ret), of the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Service Office. He said that the volume of mail sent to federal and state legislators is important in influencing their votes on veteran's issues. He said that Members of Congress literally weigh their mail, and keep a count of emails regarding each legislative issue. He also said that the Florida state capitol is once again open for visitors, with masks optional.

Murray said that MOAA played a key role in getting Tri-Care for Life enacted, and in obtaining a Florida homestead property tax discount for veterans, and helping surviving spouses of veterans keep that discount after their veteran has died.

He said that the most recent 60 day session of the Florida legislature is now ended, and the legislature passed a budget of \$101.5 billion. He added that the legislature holds "committee weeks" during September and October each year to plan and prepare for the coming formal session. This can be a key time to communicate with legislators regarding veteran's issues. Typically, he said, less than 1/10 of bills proposed to the legislature are actually passed and signed by the governor, thus becoming law. During the past legislative session, he said, more than 3,000 bills were considered.

Among bills passed was the expansion of a telephone 211 crisis center for the coordination of veteran's care, statewide expansion of veterans courts, and the Skill Bridge Initiative, a program to attract skilled veterans into Florida. Also passed were improvements for veteran's preferences in hiring, and credit for military training and education.

Murray and the FDVA can be reached at (727) 319-7440 or 7408, or by email at vso@fdva.state.fl.us.

The Cape Canaveral chapter gave a briefing on recruiting and retention, based on their own successful program. Some of their suggestions for recruiting and retaining members of MOAA chapters include maintaining clear information on chapter websites about the purpose and activities of the chapter and why people should join, establishing favorable relationships with local media for publishing press releases concerning upcoming events and activities, having a chapter contact plan for members who do not renew their membership, and encouraging chapter members to carry applications on their persons or in their cars, to provide to current or former military officers they meet who might be interested in joining. Other useful ideas include membership and information drives, special events related to Vietnam veterans, encouraging members to bring fellow officers as guests to chapter meetings and events, and using local media to maintain community awareness of MOAA, it's purposes and activities.

The convention also included a briefing on committee modules available on the national MOAA website. To make use of such modules, one may open the MOAA website, then follow links to Chapter Leaders, Training Video, and Committee Modules. Further information may be obtained by phone at 1- (800) 234-6622, or by email at chapters@moaa.org.

A special highlight of the convention was receiving awards to be presented to NWFMOA members Dave Parisot and Fred Westfall, which will be presented to them during the June 3 meeting of the NWFMOA. I was also provided medals to be given to deserving Junior ROTC cadets.

Primary speaker during the Military Ball Saturday evening was MOAA President Dana T. Atkins, Lt. Gen., USAF (Ret). His remarks included a brief mention that he has received many queries from MOAA members about new national policies aimed at eliminating “extremism” from the ranks of the military, and about training programs regarding racism and racial equity. Atkins said that the national MOAA organization is not taking sides on these issues, preferring to stick to lobbying the federal government in favor of veterans benefits. He added, however, that some local chapters may be acting on their own regarding the above issues, but did not provide details.

On Sunday, 16 May, the convention concluded with a memorial service for Florida MOAA members who have died during the past year.

Written summaries of all presentations given during the convention have been posted on the FCoC website.

Michael D. Griffith

Michael D. Griffith, Major, USAF (Ret)

President, Northwest Florida Military Officers Association

michaeldgriffith@cox.net (850) 830-8772