**Arkansas Council of Chapters**

**President’s Report on**

**“Storming the Hill”**

I wish that I could report a wonderful worthwhile experience, but I cannot. I would sum up the trip as disappointing. My wife and I arrived on Monday April 3d midafternoon. Usually the head of the Chapters/Councils would be at the registration desk to greet the guests. Not this time. The only reps were the staffers manning the registration table. I check in expecting to receive a name tag, business cards and a folder of information. All I received was a folder of info. I guess name tags and business cards are too expensive. For those of you that have never been to one of these seminars, the participants are basically the Council and in a few case the Chapter presidents and the full Board of Directors. The Council Presidents have a few meetings the Board have a few meetings and then there are joint meetings.

The Icebreaker buffet and reception was nice. We were welcomed by the VP of the Board of Director Col Anderson.

On April 4th the Partner Presentations were held. This is the answer to increased funding for Chapters. The presenters were: PenFed, MOAA Insurance and MOAA Vacations. DOD State Liaison Office did not show. MOAA Insurance would give a one-time donation of $100.00 to any chapter that agrees to place one of their ads in the monthly newsletter. MOAA Vacations said that on the coast they could organize Chapter meetings and activities on cruise lines. PenFed of course offered personal and organizational financial accounts. USAA did not present but it was mentioned that they are still giving up to $300.00/Chapter and $800.00/Council for special events. The Awards and Gold Bar programs are still there but the Council and Chapters have to foot the bill themselves.

The ”Storming” preparation meetings were good. The two (three) topic were “widows Tax” SBP-DIC Offset, and Sequestration. A third briefing sheet was included on “Prevent Disproportional TRICARE Fee Hikes.” Col Dan Merry, VP Government Relations, gave the storming briefings. He emphasized that the Stormers should focus only on the high points, do not try and explain the initiatives in detail. There was some push back to that approach. The Stormers wanted to know the details not just the Elevator Speech.

I raised the issue with Dan Merry about using the MOAA Councils in conjunction with other Veteran Service Organizations to directly address legislative issues with their Congressman and Senators. I pointed out that the middle of the country has many states (26) that have on average 4 to 6 Congressman and Senators and that direct interaction might be much more effective than wholesale mail outs, postcards, telephone calls and even Storming the Hill. I do not think I made an impression. My take is that MOAA National has a Legislative Engagement Model that they thinks works and is not interested in changing even though it might be cheaper and more effective.

On April 4th at 1:00, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Honorable David J. Shulkin, addressed the Stormers. He went through a list of his priorities. I missed the first two but I think it had to do with the Choice Program. His objective is to expand the Choice program by eliminating the 45 mile limitation and opening up veteran care to any provider. He thought this will improve Veteran care by the veterans voting with their feet and if they do not like the care they are getting at the VA Health Center they can go to any health provider. He acknowledged that this might signal the elimination of the VA health care system to help as we know it. He also spoke of fostering a broad coalition of community groups to help with veteran issues (This was started under Secretary McDonnell as the myVA Communities) The next goals are as follows:

Refocus on Foundational Services (prosthetics, PTSD etc.)

Improve Accountability

Infrastructure Improvements

Improve cooperation between VA/DOD/ and other government agencies

Improve IT infrastructure (VA is still using Cobalt)

Suicide prevention

Improve claims process

Modernize Appeals Process (Need Legislative action to fix)

Part of the Storming Presentations were an update to the “new” website, and new techniques that the Staff is proposing to improve membership. It appeared to me that they are developing these products in a vacuum. They are not seeking any input from the Chapters. I asked after viewing the recruiting video, who was the target and how did it address the target audience. Really did not get an answer. They showed several statistical charts that I will share once I receive the slides.

The actual visits to the Hill went quite well. I was able to visit with 3 of our 6 Principles. Congressman Hill, Congressman Westerman and Senator Boozman made time in their busy schedule to visit with our team (Capt Patrica Cole, Joe Ensenmann and myself). In Congressman Womack’s office we talked to Jessica Powell. She thought the Congressman would be supportive of SBP-DIC Offset repeal but he would have to see the bill and have to consider the cost. In Congressman Crawford office we talked to Abbigail Burgess and James Arnold. They expressed the similar concerns. Senator Cotton is a cosponsor of SBP-DIC legislation. Everyone was in favor of sequestration repeal.

U.S Representative Mike Coffman spoke at the Council Presidents Dinner.

On Thursday April 6th the council presidents met for a working breakfast and Terri Cole the Chapter/Council Director answered questions and took comment for the audience. There were some good best practices discussed and several concerns about the cancellation of paying for the awards program. The rest of the day was geared to discussion and presentations by the MOAA National Staff. Lt Gen Dana Atkins seemed to indicate that he has received considerable feedback about the budgetary cuts and explained why the cuts were necessary. One of the Council members asked a question about access to military bases. Lt Gen Atkins briefly touched on the problem and I followed up with a very strong concern about how the military is systematically removing their contact with the American people. This engendered a response from Gen John Sheehan, the President of the Board, who stated that we have a big problem connecting with the American people. Lt Gen Atkins said that he had a meeting scheduled with Gen Mattis and that he would bring up base access with him.

I was surprised and glad at the Col Marvin J. Harris Communication Awards Ceremony to accept a five star award for Northwest Arkansas MOAA Print Newsletter, edited by CDR Richard “Sam” Sansom.

One thing I did find out about how MOAA National operates. The Board of Directors is the decision making body of the organization. They approve all the financial dealings, the topic for storming the hill etc.