

IT WAS A NATIONAL DISGRACE. THE GOVERNMENT HAD SENT A GENERATION OFF TO FIGHT A WAR, BUT SOMEHOW THE POLITICIANS FAILED TO FORESEE THAT MANY WOULD COME HOME WOUNDED AND SICK. YET THE DAY CAME WHEN WORLD WAR I CAME TO AN END—NOVEMBER 11, 1918, AND THE NATION GASPED AS THE DISABLED CAME HOME.

All across our Nation, Americans saw the grim cost of the fighting in Europe. Veterans returned without arms and legs. They were blind, deaf, or mentally ill. Their battle scars told the story of massive, pounding artillery and warfare mechanized to levels no one had ever dreamed possible. Chemical warfare, used extensively during the war, left men with gas-seared lungs, gasping for each breath. Prolonged and chronic illnesses would forever hamper the lives of hundreds of thousands of veterans returning from the horror of rat-filled disease-ridden trenches.

The Yanks saw combat in thirteen major operations of what was then called the Great World War. Their participation in the fighting had tipped the scales in favor of saving Western Civilization. The American soldier paid the price of freedom in both Europe and here at home with his or her blood and well-being.

More than 4.7 million Americans served, and 53,500 sacrificed their lives in combat. Accidents and illnesses, mostly deadly influenza, took the lives of another 63,000. An astonishing 204,000 Americans in uniform were wounded during the war.

Just as the government had not been ready for war, it was poorly prepared to deal with the veterans who returned to our shores after bravely defending the cause of freedom. This was particularly true in the case of those who came home sick and wounded. In less than six months, half of the four million Americans in uniform were released from military service. The post-war national economy was already deeply stressed, but the flood of war veterans looking for jobs or needing medical care made it terribly worse.

Not only was the government at a loss about what to do with those it had sent off to war, it had very little to spend on programs for the veterans. By the time the war in Europe came to an end in 1918, it had drained our country's economic resources, sapping 43 percent of the gross national product.

By the following year, four million Americans were jobless. For the next two years, recession and widespread unemployment crippled the American economy. The veterans of World War I came marching home to a country that was not at all geared up to deal with the aftermath of war.

In 1919, Congress cut job programs to one-fifth of their original budget. With little money to operate, those programs were doomed to failure. Veterans were on their own to fend for themselves.

Recession made finding any job difficult, especially for wounded warriors. Prejudice against handicapped people — even those whose injuries were the direct result of defending our country—kept many capable and qualified, yet disabled veterans from finding work.

Disabled veterans looking for medical help fared little better. There was no single government program like today's Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). No government department or agency could claim overall responsibility for the veterans. Rather, several different agencies were charged with the responsibility for veterans, and coordination between them was extremely inefficient. This caused confusion, and these agencies frequently found themselves working at cross-purposes.

Further, the government required an overwhelming number of forms, and disabled veterans were sent on a paper chase from one agency to the next. Disillusioned veterans often found themselves back where they had started. Confronted by a series of government hurdles, some simply gave up. Our Nation's citizens witnessed war-wounded heroes sitting in the streets with tin cups and signs reading: "Help Me, I'm a Disabled Veteran."

The onset of a horrific epidemic of influenza didn't help matters at all. Bed space in hospitals charged with treating veterans was severely overtaxed by the combined demand created by the flu epidemic and the need to provide medical care for the war wounded. To resolve this, the government contracted for space in private hospitals.

Some disabled veterans were lucky to get cots in the hallways. Others slept on the floor. Far too many were simply turned away.

Some of the more mobile disabled veterans sought opportunity in the Federal Vocational Training program. Getting access to this and other programs again required extensive paperwork. Qualification was based upon financial need, as well as the extent or nature of the disability.

Most of the programs simply weren't what they claimed to be. Funding of these initiatives was skimpy, and overwhelming numbers of veterans swamped available resources. Of the 675,000 who applied for training under the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act, less than half completed training. Of these, 6,600 remained unemployable. A full 345,000 were denied any training at all. The program was terminated in 1928.

The Beginning of the DAV

During the early post-war years, groups of disabled veterans were pulling themselves together in various places across the Nation. Some of these were simply social clubs for veterans still rejoicing in victory and newfound camaraderie. Others raised money and created work to help their brothers in arms who were left without the means to support themselves.

At Cincinnati's Ohio Mechanics Institute (OMI)—a training school for disabled veterans—a group formed the OMI Disabled Soldiers (OMIDS). To make their voices heard, they asked for help from better-known disabled soldiers.

These included Colonel Peter Traub, Commander of Fort Thomas across the river in Kentucky, and Judge-Elect Captain Robert S. Marx of Cincinnati.

An infantry officer, Captain Marx had the distinction of capturing the furthestmost point taken by the American Army prior to the Armistice. On arriving at this point and finding all the officers dead or severely wounded, he took command. On November 10, 1918, in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, just hours before the last shot was fired, a German shell exploded over battalion headquarters, killing three American soldiers and wounding four. Captain Marx was among the injured.

After months in a French hospital, Captain Marx was finally strong enough for the trip home. Soon after returning to his law practice in Cincinnati, he won appointment to the Superior Court of Cincinnati. A man of exceptional ability, he was subsequently elected to that office. Judge Marx was popular enough to be the only Democrat to be elected to office in Ohio in 1919.

Christmas Day, 1919, brought a momentous turning point in the history of veterans' affairs, though it started out as nothing more than a Christmas party hosted by Judge Marx at the request of the local community service agency. Gathered for a dinner at the Sinton Hotel and entertainment at the Lyric Theater were about a hundred disabled veterans. They were spending the holidays away from home, recovering from war wounds, and receiving rehabilitation and vocational training.

The years that followed would show Judge Marx to have a real flair for organizing, a talent that showed up repeatedly as the captain of infantry advanced to become a captain of industry and philanthropy, as well as a leader in the realm of veterans' affairs. Perhaps Judge Marx directed conversation at the party to the topic of doing something about the mess the government had made of its programs for veterans. That was always the belief among the earliest members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), several of whom attended that party.

Whether or not Judge Marx was the first to drop the topic into conversation, all the talk soon turned to the need to form an organization through which disabled veterans could make themselves heard in the halls of government.

Before the evening was out, plans were made for a serious meeting to explore the level of interest in a new organization and to establish a broad outline of its goals. During the first months of 1920, that Christmas dream was transformed into reality. A new organization began to take shape: the Disabled American Veterans of the World War—the DAVWW. Two organized groups laid the initial groundwork. First, the OMIDS were already active as a loosely formed self-help group. More than 400 veterans were receiving vocational training at Ohio Mechanics Institute. As the DAVWW came together, these veterans were represented by Institute President B.M. Treu, Raymond A. Lasance, and F. Sample.

Second was a group of disabled veterans at the University of Cincinnati. They were led by their newspaper editor, Charles C. Quintman, and their war-blinded chaplain, Rabbi Michael Aaronsohn. During the spring of 1920, several meetings were held in Judge Marx's office at the Court House, not far from downtown Cincinnati, and at nearby Memorial Hall, a gathering place for the city's veterans. Judge Marx presented articles of confederation for the DAVWW at an early meeting.

At a May 21, 1920, gathering at Memorial Hall, Judge Marx reported he had been in touch with the War Department. He had learned that 741,000 veterans were eligible for membership in a group for disabled veterans. The seed had been planted.