

MOAA Surviving Spouse Virtual Chapter  
MINUTES  
Chapter Meeting, 17 May 2021

Contact: [mssvc02@gmail.com](mailto:mssvc02@gmail.com)

Attendance: 42, by Zoom

Recorded by Zoom, available for download at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/i2qki0zhjf17soi/AAAwmzTZPlDslFZZslcJjHva?dl=0>

Members introduced themselves and chatted informally as they joined the meeting.

Micki Costello called the meeting to order at 1:006 PM EST. After leading the chapter in the Pledge of Allegiance, Micki reminded the attendees of the purposes of the chapter:

- \*Provide information and exchange ideas
- \*Find solutions to problems or issues affecting surviving spouses
- \*Be a resource for surviving spouses
- \*Reach out to younger surviving spouses and to those living where MOAA chapters are not available
- \*Be an enhancement to regular chapters—the virtual chapter does not take the place of a regular MOAA chapter.

Barb Smith reported on membership of the Surviving Spouse Virtual Chapter. There are 161 members from 32 states. There are no members from the 5 New England States. Vivianne Wersel offered to reach out to the Gold Star wives of New York. Ann Smith suggested the Virtual Chapter reach out directly to MOAA chapters.

Pat Green reported there were 4 at the surviving spouse break-out session at the northeast area regional training, April 31 – May1. Pat spoke about the virtual chapter at the Florida convention last week. Estherose Heyman attended training and gave Pat accolades for the presentation. Nora Dunham plans to give a presentation tentatively scheduled in Arizona in January about preparation for loss.

Micki introduced Jan Lorette from Lebanon, Ohio to speak on her experiences processing benefits and health care claims involving Agent Orange-related issues. While sharing the deep frustrations of her journey through the claims process, Jan also shared some important and useful information she learned. Jan's husband served in the Navy. He was in Viet Nam in 1972. He later developed prostate cancer and died in 2017. He did not have a disability rating at the time of his death. Jan had to prove his death was service connected in order to qualify for DIC.

Jan pointed out there is a difference between health services and benefits. Be sure your service member/veteran/retiree looks into health services. The medical record can be important evidence of service-connection. Service-connected disability rating is also important for the individuals' benefits, but for the survivor's benefits. VSO's (Veteran Service Officers) with MOAA, American Legion, VFW and other veterans groups, as well as county and state veterans' agencies can be very helpful in navigating the claims process. Reach out to them.

With regard to Viet Nam service, there are two things needed to prove service connection: 1) service in country during a specified time frame, as shown on discharge papers, DD214 or other documents; 2) a qualifying disease.

Be aware of the Agent Orange Registry and other toxic agent research programs.

Also be aware that MOAA's current Advocacy in Action campaign includes addressing Comprehensive Toxic Exposure Reform.

DIC claims forms and detailed information are available on line. Be aware of the Fully Developed Claim. VSO's can help with this paperwork.

Jan ultimately was successful in getting DIC. Contact her for more information and encouragement.

Gail Joyce introduced the second speaker of the day: Denise Caldon Sorkness, author of Stall, Deny, Hope They Die—VA's Unwritten Policy: The Story of One Widow's 19-Year Battle with the VA. Denise shared her on-going struggle (now 24 years) with the VA to qualify for DIC. Denise's husband served in Viet Nam in the Navy in 1968. He was diagnosed in 1987 with Non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and agent orange presumptive disease. He also developed serious psychological problems due to his illness and medications, the result of which was that he and Denise separated. When he died in 1996 from service-connected agent orange disease, another woman filed for DIC using falsified documents to assert her claim.

Denise recounted her journey through claims, Boards of Appeal, dealing with attorneys, private meetings with congress members, unenforced Judicial rulings. Denise gave her presentation with her phone close by, as she is still waiting to receive a call reporting on her latest appeal at any moment.

Following the presentations, there was general Q&A and discussion about these two women's journeys.

#### General Closing Discussion

For those interested in a little RV camaraderie there is a military RV group. More information at [smartrving.org](http://smartrving.org)

Next Virtual Training, is August 27 & 28, targeting the Midwest, but all are welcome.

Gail announced a job opening in Congress for Gold Star family members. She will send out a flyer.

Micki asked if anyone would be willing to work on a Newsletter for the Virtual Chapter.

Next meeting will be June 15, 2021 – an informal “Happy Hour” meeting at 5PM EST.

Gail reminded us all: “Tell your story!” Please encourage eligible surviving spouses in your areas to become members of the Virtual Chapter.

Meeting adjourned at 1310 EST.

Respectfully submitted,  
Barbara Bowman  
Recording Secretary