

**MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART
OF THE U.S.A.**



**THE ONLY CONGRESSIONALLY CHARTERED VETERANS ORGANIZATION
EXCLUSIVELY FOR COMBAT-WOUNDED VETERANS**

STATEMENT OF
Robert Olivarez Jr.
NATIONAL COMMANDER





BEFORE A JOINT HEARING OF THE
SENATE AND HOUSE COMMITTEES ON VETERANS
AFFAIRS

February 25, 2024

Chairman Moran, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Blumenthal Ranking Takano, distinguished members of the Veteran Affairs Committee, and esteemed leaders, I am honored and humbled to represent America's Purple Heart Veterans in addressing you today. I would like to begin by congratulating all new members of Congress and expressing my gratitude to those who have returned to serve and enhance the quality of life for our nation's veterans. With our collective efforts, I am confident that the 119th Congress will make significant strides in supporting our nation's heroes.

The 118th Congress passed pivotal legislation, such as the VA Accountability Act, PACT Act and COMPACT Act, which have made substantial improvements in various aspects of veterans' lives. These measures have established a presumptive link between terminal diagnoses resulting from war-related activities, employment, education, digital modernization of VA services, housing, and caregiver support. This foundation will undoubtedly guide our progress during the 119th Congress.

Our nation's veterans answered the call to protect us from the darkest threats the world has to offer. We implore this committee and the rest of Congress to consider passing further legislation that addresses the pressing needs of our veterans. These include:

-  The Military Medals Protection Act: This measure aims to prevent veterans from facing penalties when seeking alternative ways to continue serving our great nation.
-  The National Green Alert Act: This act would provide communities with resources to assist veterans coping with the invisible wounds of war.
-  The Healthy Heroes Act: This act reaffirms our commitment to providing comprehensive care for those who have deployed in defense of the United States.
-  The Fulfilling the Legacy Act: This act ensures mission success in taking care of the warfighter's families, who are often overlooked in our efforts to support veterans.

First, let's address the Military Medals Protection Act. George Washington himself established the Badge of Military Merit, the precursor to today's Purple Heart, recognizing the profound significance of military honors. This act grants the Department of Defense exclusive trademark authority over all military medals, safeguarding them from exploitation and preserving their symbolic value.

Commercializing or misusing these symbols diminishes their essence. The 113th Congress recognized this sacredness when they passed the Stolen Valor Act. Now, let's collaborate to expand their protections and restore all trade and word marks to the DOD, managed by the Institute of Heraldry, ensuring their unimpaired safeguarding.

Second, let's address the National Green Alert Act. The statistics are alarming, with new studies revealing that up to 44 veterans per day succumb to suicide, nearly double the previous estimates. While our AMBER Alert system has saved over 1,100 children and Silver Alerts have a 95% success rate, we lack a comparable system for our at-risk veterans. All first responders need access to the life-saving tools and resources necessary to handle the evolving challenges of decades of war and service to our nation. Wisconsin demonstrated the effectiveness of this concept when they passed H.B. 473-2018. We must expand this crucial legislation nationally to ensure our nation's heroes receive the support they deserve.

Third, the Healthy Heroes Act aims to address the pressing issue of homelessness among veterans. Approximately 33,000 veterans will be sleeping on our streets tonight. A staggering 70% of homeless veterans grapple with substance abuse, while 45% struggle with mental illness. This act introduces revolutionary changes to VA healthcare by embracing alternative treatments, holistic approaches, and comprehensive mental health services. Moreover, dental care, which has been neglected within the VA, is prioritized. Unfortunately, several health conditions have been linked to poor oral health. We cannot continue to address the traumas of the 21st century with outdated solutions.

Finally, the Fulfilling the Legacy Act seeks to rectify a systemic failure that has been affecting veterans' financial security. Consider the story of a 92-year-old Purple Heart recipient who diligently paid Survivor Benefit Plan premiums for decades, only to lose \$50,000 in premiums when his wife passed away. This is not an isolated incident but a clear indication of the need for action. This act modernizes the SBP, ensuring that veterans' investments in their families' futures are protected. Military retirees have already met all the requirements to earn their healthcare benefits, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart opposes any changes to TRICARE For Life that would increase fees and shift costs from the Department of Defense (DoD) to retirees over 65 years of age who rely on TRICARE For Life. The Military Order of the Purple Heart opposes any cuts to veterans disability benefits.

The cost of inaction extends beyond monetary losses; it involves the loss of lives, shattered families, and broken promises. Each day, 44 families tragically lose a veteran to suicide due to our delay. Every night, 33,000 veterans who valiantly defended our nation find themselves sleeping on our streets. Moreover, countless military families face financial insecurity annually due to outdated benefit systems. Continuing to allow companies to profit while simultaneously penalizing the warriors who earned these prestigious awards diminishes the sacrifices made by our nation's warriors. These four acts represent more than mere policy changes; they embody our sacred moral obligation to those who have served.

From protecting the symbols of their sacrifice to saving lives in crisis, from revolutionizing their healthcare to securing their families' futures, each piece of legislation addresses critical gaps in our support for veterans. As George Washington rightly recognized the importance of honoring those who served under him, we too must recognize our duty to today's veterans. The 119th Congress holds the opportunity and the obligation to transform how America cares for its heroes.

Which of you is ready to answer the call of our nation's heroes, as they did to defend our freedom and way of life? Let us set aside party politics and focus on the pressing issue at hand. The Military Order of the Purple Heart is seeking your support on the aforementioned acts.



Robert Olivarez Jr. was elected National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart in 2024 at the 91st National Convention in Orlando, Florida. Born in December 1980 on Whidbey Island Naval Station Oak Harbor, Washington, and raised in Mount Vernon, Washington, Commander Olivarez graduated from Mt. Vernon High School in 1999. He subsequently joined the Marine Corps in 2000, serving as an Infantryman.

Commander Olivarez served approximately eight years on active duty, participating in multiple deployments under Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. During his second deployment to Iraq in July 2004, while assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, then-Sergeant Olivarez, the team leader of a Heavy Gun Team in the 2nd Truck, was struck by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device). Despite sustaining injuries, Sergeant Olivarez quickly assessed his team, providing buddy aid and requesting the deployment of a Medivac to evacuate his severely injured comrades. Afterward, he ensured the safe extraction of his team members via Medivac. Sergeant Olivarez remained behind to provide medical assistance and help the other Marines evacuate the threat area, prioritizing the well-being of all Marines and preventing any further injuries. Sergeant Olivarez's actions were a testament to his bravery and dedication, as he risked his own safety to ensure the safety of his team and the mission of restoring peace to the region.

After several combat deployments, Commander Olivarez's service in the Marine Corps has been recognized with numerous accolades, including the Purple Heart, Navy Marine Corps Commendation Medal, two Navy Marine Corps Achievement Medals, multiple Meritorious Unit Commendations, and a Presidential Unit Citation. Additionally, he has received numerous other awards throughout his tenure in the Marine Corps. Following his service, Commander Olivarez was granted an honorable discharge in 2008 and returned to his residence in Washington State.

Currently residing in Marysville, Washington, with his fiancée, Rebecca, Commander Olivarez is a proud father of six children: Robert, Jayden, Isaiah, Juliet, Kaylyn, and Savannah. His eldest son, Robert, has embarked on his own journey, starting a family and bestowing the title of "Grandfather" upon Commander Olivarez. Jayden has enlisted in the United States Navy and intends to pursue a career as a Navy Corpsman. The remaining children are still pursuing their education and eagerly anticipate the future.

Commander Olivarez, a dedicated family man and veteran advocate, has dedicated his life to supporting those who have served their country. After attending a veteran's funeral in 2010 and witnessing the inadequate honors bestowed upon the deceased during their service, he joined the Military of the Purple Heart. Since then, he has committed his time to providing assistance to combat-wounded veterans and their families.

Robert, now a veteran himself, has returned to the Veteran Community and started volunteering to help combat-wounded veterans and their families. He has worked with several organizations, including the Military Order of the Purple Heart, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Marine Corps League, American Legion, and Vietnam Veterans of America.

In 2018, Robert hosted the National Convention in Spokane, Washington, and since then, he has made it his mission to facilitate collaboration among veteran service organizations to enhance the quality of life for veterans after military service.