

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



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

**STATEMENT OF
CHRISTOPHER VEDVICK
NATIONAL COMMANDER**

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

MARCH 8, 2023

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2023 ANNUAL TESTIMONY

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Chairmen Tester and Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, and esteemed Members of the Committees, on behalf of the approximately 50,000 members of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH), it is my honor and privilege to appear before this body to offer our testimony.

As I am sure all of you are aware, the MOPH is a unique organization in that our membership is made up entirely of Veterans who were wounded in combat. First organized in 1932 and chartered by Congress in 1958, the MOPH stands today as the original Veterans Service Organization for Combat Wounded Veterans. I am proud to report our exceptional progress this year as an organization to you today.

The MOPH is proud to give back to our fellow veterans through our robust national programs. They range all the way from providing scholarships, to job training, to advocacy, and volunteering. Certainly, this selfless service by MOPH Patriots epitomizes the phrase "veterans helping veterans."

One of our national programs is our software development training. Last year we partnered with the Redding Software Corporation to provide combat wounded veterans software development training. The Purple Heart recipients are given training, an internship, and at the end of this one-year program the veterans are offered job placement. Helping these combat wounded veterans find

employment as full stack web developers affords them the flexibility they need on their long road to recovery.

The MOPH is working diligently along with other Veteran Service Organizations to reduce Veteran suicide throughout our country. One of our key initiatives each year is to improve mental health services for Veterans. Over the last two years, we have provided peer counseling training, access to resources, and support to veterans struggling with mental health issues, including PTSD and depression. We all share the anguish and tragedy of suicide deaths, just as we do those lost on the fields of battle. Many of us took an oath to our fallen brothers and sisters on the battlefield to continue to save those who made it home with these unseen wounds of war.

Finding a way to live with the loss of a comrade under any circumstances is an issue for all times and is not a generational issue. In the MOPH, all members have the common bond of shedding blood for our nation. Our World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War Veterans have taught Iraq and Afghanistan members how to continue to live their lives after they return from combat. For that we are eternally grateful for their excellent example. As the first National Commander of the MOPH wounded in Afghanistan during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM I can personally attest to how critical it is to have the ability to talk with older combat wounded veterans who have experienced the same trauma and have developed healthy coping skills over the years.

We have a Women Veterans' Issues group that is working with other VSOs and legislators to help our female veterans. We appreciate the support both houses of the legislature have put into this effort. Together, we are able to better address their issues and making lives better for many. What has been exciting for our organization to see is an increase in representation within our own leadership by female Purple Heart recipients. Several states and regions currently have female veterans leading the way.

We continue to serve Veterans and their families through our Scholarship Program. The MOPH grants scholarships to Purple Heart recipients, their spouses, children, and grandchildren each year. This includes surviving family members of Purple Heart recipients who were killed in action. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that an advanced education is made available to them.

This is just a brief overview of the MOPH national programs. It does not even begin to describe the many contributions of what we believe to be the backbone of our organization, our MOPH members.

Organized into 326 Chapters across the nation, they are constantly engaged with their local communities, acting as ambassadors to the general public by participating in civic events and running unique programs. Equally important, they support and encourage one another. MOPH members refer to each other as "Patriot," which is most appropriate, as each of them has shed their blood in defense of our great nation on battlefields around the world.

The Order is making a difference in the lives of young Americans through our example and advocacy for the Constitution while actively supporting the American way of life. Our membership strongly believes in supporting our young leaders and recognizing their demonstrated excellence through our leadership awards that are presented to JROTC and ROTC programs as well as youth programs like the Young Marines, Civil Air Patrol, and the Boy Scouts. There is little doubt that the youth of our great nation benefit from learning the skills of leadership required to serve our country.

The PACT Act and other significant efforts to help veterans in the past year continue to bring all Veteran Service Organizations together. Not one organization can do it all alone. We are thankful for the opportunities to continue to partner with other organizations increasing the collective strength and effect all VSOs are having on the Veteran population.

Speaking for my organization, the MOPH is eternally grateful to both houses of Congress for the recent victory for America's most deserving through the PACT Act. The PACT Act comes at a critical juncture in our history, increasing the throughput of our Vietnam Veterans, as well as Veterans from the Global War on Terror, through our Veterans Affairs facilities.

I am here before you today with a full heart to express our appreciation to Congress for its invaluable assistance with the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2023, Section 584, "Enhanced Information Related to Awarding of the Purple Heart."

As you are all aware, the Purple Heart is a highly coveted medal that is awarded to our brave service members who have been wounded or killed in combat, spilling their blood in defense of our great nation. For over two centuries, this distinguished award has been a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty.

However, the process of awarding and tracking the Purple Heart has not always been perfect. There have been cases where service members who deserved the medal did not receive it due to bureaucratic complications or administrative errors, or where the medal was awarded but recipient or their families were not aware.

Thanks to the efforts of Congress, these issues have been addressed in Section 584 of the NDAA. This section requires the Department of Defense to maintain an accurate database of all service members who have been wounded or killed in combat, ensuring that the process of tracking the Purple Heart is transparent and fair.

The Military Order of the Purple Heart recognizes the hard work and dedication that went into drafting and passing this legislation. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the members of Congress who worked tirelessly to ensure that the brave men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country receive the recognition they deserve.

We would also like to thank the families of our fallen heroes, whose sacrifices will forever be honored by this important legislation.

As a group, VSOs have collectively supported on-going litigation efforts to bring justice to our Veterans for their injuries. From 1999 through 2015, 3M sold faulty Combat Arms earplugs to the US Military. Service members relied on the company's representations that the earplugs, which were standard issue during the War on Terror, provided them with adequate ear protection in combat settings where they were subjected to noise levels far exceeding those experienced by civilians. 3M knew from its own internal testing that the earplugs were defective but chose not to warn the government or our troops, inflicting

permanent hearing damage on the hundreds of thousands of servicemembers who relied on their product for protection.

Hearing loss and tinnitus degrade the quality of life of those affected. Take, for example, MOPH member First Sergeant Richard Vendl, who suffered near-total hearing loss while using 3M's earplugs during his 25 years of service. Today, First Sergeant Vendl cannot converse without the assistance of hearing aids. Consider Staff Sergeant Marteze Ford, a Purple Heart recipient, whose tinnitus interrupts his work and impacts his personal relationships on a daily basis. Hearing loss and tinnitus also worsen psychological issues many Veterans face, such as insomnia, social isolation, depression, and anxiety. Most significantly for our members, they also exacerbate symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition far too many wounded veterans must grapple with.

Currently, more than 260,000 Veterans are suing 3M in federal court. The company has appealed each one of the 13 verdicts. Last July, 3M attempted to shirk its responsibility entirely by having an all-but-defunct subsidiary declare bankruptcy in an attempt to avoid accountability. We will continue to fight for veterans. The dedicated advocacy efforts of the Order extend to all Veterans, servicemembers, their families, and survivors as a part of our unshakable bond of comradeship. Even with all the good we do; we all recognize that there is much more work to be done.

Veterans from the current era continue to return home, often with battle wounds and other disabilities, and veterans from previous eras increasingly face unique challenges associated with their service as they age. While the MOPH has always been, and will continue to be, the first to stand up for our fellow Purple Heart recipients, our priorities are reflective of the fact that we are staunch advocates for all veterans and their families. With that, on behalf of the Order, I am pleased to present the MOPH legislative agenda for 2023.

MAJOR RICHARD STAR ACT

As the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, I am honored to speak to you today about a piece of legislation that could have a tremendous impact on the lives of wounded veterans.

S. 344, also known as the Major Richard Star Act, is a bill that aims to address a major injustice in our military retirement system. Currently, Veterans who are medically retired due to combat-related injuries receive only a portion of their earned retirement pay.

The Major Richard Star Act seeks to rectify this situation by changing the way that retirement pay is calculated for wounded veterans. If passed, this bill would ensure that Veterans who are medically retired due to combat-related injuries are given the retirement pay they deserve, based on the highest rank they held during their service.

The bill is named in honor of Major Richard Star, a Marine Corps officer who was medically retired due to combat-related injuries after serving multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Major Star was severely wounded in an IED blast, but despite his injuries, he continued to serve his country by working to improve the lives of other wounded veterans.

Sadly, Major Star passed away in 2013, but his legacy lives on through this important piece of legislation. The Major Richard Star Act has bipartisan support in Congress and has been endorsed by numerous Veterans organizations, including the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

As an organization that represents the interests of wounded Veterans, we believe that this bill is essential to ensuring that our nation's heroes receive the support and recognition they deserve. We urge Congress to pass this bill and to honor the sacrifices of those who have served our country by providing them with the retirement pay they have earned.

Military Sexual Trauma

Military sexual trauma, or MST, has been an ongoing problem in the United States military for far too long. The women who serve our country have been subjected to unthinkable acts of sexual assault and harassment, and the trauma they face can last a lifetime.

These women have sacrificed for our country, and it is our duty to provide them with the care and benefits they deserve. Unfortunately, many female veterans who have experienced MST have had difficulty accessing the care they need. They

have reported difficulty getting mental health services, seeking help from the VA, and even experiencing homelessness.

The Deborah Sampson Act was the right step forward into ensuring that the VA must address this issue and improved the VA's ability to care for these women. The VA has made strides in recent years to improve care for female Veterans, but there is still much work to be done. We must invest in programs that reduce the stigma of MST and also provide specialized care for female veterans who have experienced MST, especially in rural areas.

Lastly, we must do more to prevent MST from occurring in the first place. We need to continue to strengthen the reporting and investigation processes and ensure that those who commit acts of sexual assault and harassment are held accountable for their actions.

VETS Safe Travel Act

The VETS Safe Travel Act, also known as S. 2280, is a piece of legislation that is currently being considered in Congress, and is vital for the well-being of our nation's Veterans.

As you may know, veterans often face unique challenges when traveling, especially those with service-related disabilities. Despite their sacrifices for our country, they are not always given the same level of care and support that they deserve when they travel. This is where the VETS Safe Travel Act comes in.

This bill would require the Department of Homeland Security to develop and implement a training program for Transportation Security Administration (TSA) personnel to better recognize and understand the needs of Veterans with disabilities. It would also require the TSA to establish a process for expedited screening for Veterans who have a service-connected disability rating. These measures are crucial for ensuring that our Veterans can travel safely and with dignity. We owe it to them to provide the support they need, and the VETS Safe Travel Act is a significant step in the right direction. As the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, I have seen firsthand the sacrifices that our veterans have made. Many of them have suffered injuries that have left them with disabilities, and they deserve to be treated with the utmost respect and care.

I urge Congress to pass the VETS Safe Travel Act and show our Veterans that we are committed to supporting them in every way possible. It is the least we can do for those who have given so much for our country.

Chairmen Tester and Bost, Ranking Members Moran and Takano, this concludes my statement. I thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the MOPH, and I look forward to answering any questions you or other Committee members may have.

Yours in Patriotism,

Christopher Vedvick
National Commander

Disclosure of Federal Grants and Contracts:

The Military Order of the Purple Heart (MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART) does not currently receive, nor has MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART ever received any federal money for grants or contracts.





Christopher Vedvick National Commander

Christopher J. Vedvick is the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, elected in 2022 at the 89th National Convention in Rapid City, SD.

Commander Vedvick was raised in Jacksonville Beach, Florida and joined the Army in 2000, serving as an Airborne Infantryman. On Vedvick's first deployment in 2002 with the 82nd Airborne Division, he was wounded by three hand grenades while engaged in a 4-hour firefight with al-Qaeda in Khowst, Afghanistan. All three of the grenades landed within six feet of Christopher and inflicted major damage to the left side of his body.

After several surgeries and exhaustive rehabilitation Vedvick remained undaunted and was able to remain in the Army deploying another six more times. Through Commander Vedvick's distinguished career he earned several awards to include 2 Bronze Stars, the Purple Heart, and a Meritorious Service Medal. He retired honorably in 2016 and currently resides in Saint Augustine, Florida where he raises his three children Lorelai, Evelyn, and Archer alone after the loss of his beautiful wife Tiffany in 2021.

Christopher began volunteering to assist combat wounded veterans and their families while he was still on active duty through his work with the Military Order of the Purple Heart. While serving within the Military Order of the Purple Heart he became the first post 9/11 veteran to serve as the Department Commander for the state of Florida and is the first veteran wounded in Afghanistan during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM to serve as the National Commander of the MOPH.