

Local woman to lead vets board

Hardin 1st female to preside over Ala. veterans affairs

BY DON FLETCHER • PROGRESS STAFF WRITER • APRIL 16, 2011



If Dee Hardin were a Wild West gunfighter, the handle of her pistol would be filled with notches.

Hardin, a Prattville resident and one of the U.S. Air Force's first Master Sergeants, would have a notch for her status as the first female to serve as commander of American Legion Post 122, her home post; and she'd have one for her service as the first female commanding officer of the Alabama Department of American Legion. Hardin wasn't the first woman to earn an appointment to the Alabama Board of Veterans Affairs, but more notches would result from her becoming the board's first female deputy vice-chair (in 2009), and her selection this month as the first female ever appointed to serve as vice chair, the board's presiding officer.

The governor actually serves as chairman of the veterans affairs board, but does not attend meetings unless there is an emergency situation that requires his or her attention or input.

"My entire experience serving on the state board of veterans affairs has been most humbling," the body's new vice-chair said. "When I stop and think that we not only represent the approximately 420,000 veterans in this state, but also give their families peace of mind that the veterans are getting the benefits they have earned, I am extremely proud."

Jack Donovan, a member of Post 122, said he was proud of Hardin's accomplishments, each of which he said she earned through her advocacy for and work on behalf of the state's veterans.

"This is a wonderful accomplishment for Dee and a great thing for the American Legion," Donovan said. "She is dedicated to veterans, there is no doubt about that. She has done, and I feel she will continue to do, a tremendous amount of work for all veterans."

Hardin, who is an environmentalist with the Alabama Department of Public Health, said her board duties would have no effect on her job, that she would use personal leave and other compensatory time to attend meetings that are held during the normal work week.

She said her main objectives were to work with elected officials to push for "legislation that would have a positive effect on veterans," along with seeing that two major veteran-related projects -- the Col. Robert I. Howard State Veterans Home and the Alabama State Veterans' Cemetery -- are completed as scheduled.

The new vice-chair said she would continue to be an outspoken advocate for all veterans, but would also give a voice to the increasing number of women who are taking up arms for their country.

"Considering the number of women now serving in the military, I guess it would be a significant point that I am a woman," she said. "I think their unique needs must be met. The American Legion conducted a survey of women veterans, and their chief complaints were the lack of professionalism, compassion and privacy at VA hospitals, when they are there for female examinations."

She said she would also take up the plight of a new class of female veteran, women who have suffered sexual abuse or attacks -- from enemy soldiers or from their own comrades.

"We hear a lot of news about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder associated with combat, but it has also been diagnosed for women who have experienced sexual trauma while serving their country," said Hardin. "The VA hospitals are geared for the combat PTSD, but tend to shy away from the sexual trauma PTSD."

Hardin's new position was the result of a unanimous vote of her peers, who are representatives of American Ex-Prisoners of War, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Military Order of the Purple Heart and Vietnam Veterans of America.

She said the unanimous support of her fellow board members, each of whom she said is totally dedicated to the cause of veterans, indicated that each felt she was the person to lead the state's effort on behalf of its former servicemen and servicewomen.

"The current state board of veterans affairs reflects the diversity of the veterans in this state," she explained. "They're a group of folks that genuinely care about what happens to the veterans of this state. Their vote was an indication of the confidence they have in me to continue to take us forward and realize our goals of providing the best services to those veterans."