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1. Tell Congress to End the Widow's Tax and Kiddie Tax Now: More than 65,000 surviving military spouses and dependents are unjustly penalized because their loved ones made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. The message these aptly termed “Widow’s Tax” and “Kiddie Tax” sends to service members, veterans, and their families is that our government salutes their service while in uniform, but they cost too much if they die on active duty or from service-connected conditions. The VFW has joined forces with veteran organizations, survivor organizations, and surviving family members to urge Congress to #AxeWidowsTax. [Take action and contact your members of Congress.](#)

2. VFW Testifies on Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act: On Wednesday, the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs held a hearing to discuss H.R. 299, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019*, which would expand care and benefits to veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange in the offshore waters of Vietnam, the Korean DMZ, and in Thailand. Members of the Committee expressed their strong support for Blue Water Navy veterans, despite VA not providing comments on the bill or how it plans to implement the [Procopio v. Wilkie](#) decision because the Department of Justice (DOJ) has requested an additional 30 days to decide whether to oppose the decision. The previous deadline was April 30, 2019. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie has recommended that DOJ not appeal the decision. VFW National Legislative Service Director Carlos Fuentes testified in strong support of H.R. 299 and other legislation that was discussed, such as COLA increases for VA disability compensation, authorizing surviving spouses to continue to receive the Medal of Honor pension, among others. [Watch the hearing.](#) Read the [VFW’s testimony.](#)

3. VFW Testifies on Medicinal Cannabis Research: On Tuesday, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing to discuss medicinal cannabis and suicide prevention legislation. Committee members urged VA to work with Congress to research and expand access to complementary and integrative alternatives to opioids when treating veterans with chronic pain and other comorbid conditions. VFW National Legislative Service Director Carlos Fuentes testified in support of legislation to commission a VA study of veteran patients on the effectiveness of medicinal cannabis for treating chronic pain. The VFW also supported other bills to reduce overmedication and improve suicide prevention efforts. [Watch the hearing](#). Read the [VFW's testimony](#).

4. VFW Testifies on VA's Budget Request: This week, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing to discuss the Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request from VA. VFW National Legislative Service Deputy Director Pat Murray testified before the subcommittee regarding funding levels for some of VA's economic opportunity programs. Alongside Mr. Murray were the Independent Budget co-authors, DAV and PAV. Together, they advocated for increased funding for the GI Bill, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, homeless programs, and Specially Adaptive grant programs. Mr. Murray noted the decrease in funding for VA's education services seems problematic and should remain at current levels or be higher, until full implementation of the Forever GI Bill is accomplished. "We would not want to repeat the failures from this past fall semester, and we think this represents a step backwards in funding," said Murray. Watch the [hearing](#). Read the [Independent Budget recommendations](#).

5. Outdoor Recreation Therapy for Veterans Act Introduced: On Wednesday, Congressmen Chris Smith (R-N.J.) and Adam Smith (D-Wash.) introduced H.R. 2435, the *Outdoor Recreation Therapy for Veterans Act*, to help veterans heal through outdoor recreation. Senators Cortez Masto (D-Nev.) and Daines (R-Mont.) will lead the Senate version. "This bill would rightfully evaluate and remove barriers to access for veterans who would like to use outdoor activities to cope with their service-related illnesses and injuries," said VFW Executive Director Bob Wallace. [Learn more](#).

6. Barriers Impacting Women Veterans' Access to Health Care: Following the launch of the [Women Veterans Task Force](#), the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health held a hearing to discuss the barriers women veterans face when accessing VA health care services. The VFW submitted a statement urging Congress and VA to improve the gender-specific competency of VA health care providers; require VA to continue to improve privacy at women clinics; give women veterans the ability to choose the gender of their health care provider; extend the number of days newborn care is covered by VA; expand the successful VA childcare pilot program; and conduct targeted outreach to women, so no veteran is left to wonder what benefits she is eligible to receive. Read the [VFW's statement](#). Watch the [hearing](#).

7. Tragic Trends: Suicide Prevention Among Veterans: On Monday, the House Committee on Veterans Affairs held a hearing to discuss how to prevent suicides among veterans. The VFW submitted a statement highlighting the efforts of VFW Posts around the world who have participated in [A Day to Change Direction](#), which trains veterans and their families to identify

the [five signs of emotional suffering](#). The VFW also urged Congress and VA to train VA staff to identify and assist veterans in crisis, ensure sufficient resources are available and used for effective VA suicide prevention efforts, exempt those who have worn our nation's uniform and receive urgent or emergent mental health care under VA's humanitarian care authority from having to pay the full cost of such care, expand peer support programs, and conduct research on veterans who die by suicide without contact with the VA health care system. Read the [VFW's statement](#). Watch the [hearing](#).

8. Hearing on the Feres Doctrine: On Tuesday, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel held a hearing to discuss policy changes to the Feres Doctrine. Created by the Supreme Court in the 1950s, the Feres Doctrine prevents active-duty service members from suing the federal government for medical malpractice. Special Forces Green Beret SFC Richard Stayskal told the committee that he was misdiagnosed three separate times for lung cancer by military doctors. He was never informed by military medical personnel of the condition despite numerous medical scans that documented his tumor. The VFW is working closely with members of Congress to rectify the Feres Doctrine. [Watch the hearing](#)

9. DOD Releases 2018 Sexual Assault Data: On Thursday, DOD released its 2018 report on sexual assault in the military. The report estimated that 20,500 service members — 13,000 women and 7,500 men — across the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and the National Guard experienced “contact or penetrative sexual assault” while serving in the military in 2018. These results are a sharp increase from the 14,900 service members who reported similar experiences in the 2016 report. Additionally, the report revealed that roughly one in five women who experienced sexual harassment while serving also experienced sexual assault, even when controlling for pay, service and deployment status. [Learn more or read the report](#).

10. Senate Confirms New AFRICOM Commander: Army Gen. Stephen Townsend was confirmed Monday in the Senate to take command of [U.S. Africa Command](#), which is one of six Department of Defense geographic combatant commands. Townsend, who currently commands the [Army's Training and Doctrine Command](#), was commissioned into the infantry upon graduating from North Georgia College in 1982. His operational experience includes Grenada, Panama and Haiti, as well as leading 3-2 Stryker Brigade, Task Force Arrowhead, in Iraq during “the surge.” He also served four tours in Afghanistan, culminating in commanding the 10th Mountain Division, and most recently led all U.S. and multi-national troops fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as commander of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve. [Read Townsend's bio](#).

11. New Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Selected: Sgt. Maj. Troy E. Black has been selected to replace retiring Sgt. Maj. Ronald L. Green later this summer as the next Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps. Black now serves as the sergeant major of Manpower and Reserve Affairs. He enlisted in 1988 and has served as sergeant major of the Officer Candidates School, the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit and 1st Marine Logistics Group. He also deployed for Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. [Read more](#).

12. World War I Valor Medals Review Act: Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) have introduced legislation that would allow the World War One Centennial Commission Valor Medals Review Task Force to conduct a systematic review of 150 minority World War I veterans. The veterans were potentially denied the Medal of Honor due to racial bias. Rep. French Hill (R-Ark.) and Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver (D-Mo.) have introduced the House version of the [World War I Valor Medals Review Act](#). [Learn more or read the bill](#).

13. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced the identifications of five American servicemen who had been missing and unaccounted-for from WWII and the Korean War. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Army Pfc. Herschel M. Riggs** was a member of Headquarters Company, 19th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, involved in combat actions against North Korean forces near Taejon, South Korea. Riggs was declared missing in action on July 16, 1950, when he could not be accounted for by his unit. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Riggs here](#).

-- **Army Cpl. Ralph L. Bennett** was a member of Headquarters Company, 209th Engineer Combat Battalion, as an engineer in the China-Burma-India Theater. On June 13, 1944, Bennett's battalion fought in the siege of the Myitkyina, Burma, after successfully taking the airfield west of Myitkyina from Japanese control. Bennett was reported to have been killed during the battle. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Bennett here](#).

-- **Army Sgt. 1st Class Elden C. Justus** was a member of Headquarters Battery, 57th Field Artillery Battalion, 7th Infantry Division, which was a part of the 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT). In late November 1950, the 31st RCT deployed east of the Chosin Reservoir where it was engaged by overwhelming numbers of Chinese forces who were there supporting North Korea. Justus could not be accounted for by his unit at the end of the battle. He was reported missing in action as of Dec. 6, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Justus here](#).

-- **Army Pfc. Sterling Geary, Jr.** was a member of Company B, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, which was engaged in battle with the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces in North Korea. He was declared missing in action on Nov. 27, 1951, when he could not be accounted for by his unit following fighting at Hill 234 and Tong-dong Village, North Korea. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Geary here](#).

-- **Navy Fireman 3rd Class Jasper L. Pue** was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which capsized after sustaining multiple torpedo hits as it was moored off Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmembers, including Pue. Interment services are pending. [Read more about Pue here](#).

To sign up new veterans' advocates, visit: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>.

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to vfwac@vfw.org.

To view this week's and previous editions, visit: <http://www.vfw.org/actioncorpsweekly>.