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1. VFW Elects New National Leadership: Delegates attending the 120th VFW National Convention in Orlando, Fla., last week elected William J. “Doc” Schmitz as commander-in-chief of the near 1.2 million-member organization. The VFW’s new “Chief” is a Vietnam veteran who served as a Navy corpsman attached to Marine Corps infantry and artillery units. He joined the VFW in 1971 at Post 524 in his hometown of Corning, N.Y., where he has served the VFW in many vital leadership positions at the local, state, and national levels. He takes office during a time of great momentum for the organization, which recently announced its first membership increase in 27 years, enabled 526,000 veterans to recoup a record \$8.3 billion in disability compensation and pension from the VA, fought for the successful passage of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019, and continues to advocate for the fullest possible accounting of more than 82,000 missing and unaccounted-for Americans from our nation’s wars. Doc’s challenge to members and advocates is “Dare to Care,” a call for everyone to help confront the challenges that hinder America’s service members and families from living their best lives. Also elected were Hal J. Roesch II of Hampton, Va., as VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief, and Matthew M. “Fritz” Mihelcic, of Columbia, Ill., as VFW Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief. [Read more.](#)

2. New Executive Director Appointed to Lead VFW Washington Office: B.J. Lawrence, the immediate past VFW national commander, has been appointed to succeed Bob Wallace as the new executive director of the VFW Washington Office. Lawrence, who just last week completed a highly successful one-year tour leading the venerable, 120-year-young national organization, will lead the VFW Washington Office into its second century of legislative advocacy and veterans service work on behalf of the nation’s veterans, service members, and their families. The VFW’s advocacy in Washington is legendary, and has led to the creation of every veteran and military quality of life program signed into law in this century and the last. “I look forward to continuing to improve the lives of our veteran and military communities, and for the VFW to

have an even more respected and sought after voice on Capitol Hill,” said Lawrence. The VFW Washington Office was created in 1919 after World War I veterans began returning to the same government neglect as the VFW’s founders experienced two decades earlier. “And although birthed one century ago,” Lawrence explained, “the important work the VFW Washington Office continues to do is just as important now as it was then. I am honored to accept the torch from Bob, and to continue to build upon the strong traditions of excellence he and his predecessors established in Washington.”

3. 2020 VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship Application is Open: The 2020 VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship is now accepting applications! The program, which is in its sixth year, is for VFW members who attend an accredited institute of higher learning. Ten student veterans will be selected for the semester-long program that focuses on real policy issues faced by veterans, service members, and their families. The highlight of the program is participation in the VFW Legislative Conference, which in the past has included meetings at the White House and with senior officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs and Congress. Those selected also spend time with their VFW Department members on Capitol Hill pushing the VFW’s legislative priorities. Alumni of the program have become more active in all levels of the VFW and changing laws to improve care and benefits for veterans. [Learn more and apply for the fellowship.](#)

4. VFW Life Member Now Secretary of Defense: The Senate last week confirmed former Secretary of the Army Dr. Mark Esper as the new Secretary of Defense. Esper is a retired Army lieutenant colonel and Life member of the VFW Department of Pennsylvania. He is a 1986 West Point graduate who served as an infantry officer with the 101st Airborne Division during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Watch his July 16 Senate Armed Services Committee [confirmation hearing.](#)

5. Korean/Cold War MIA Family Update: The VFW Washington Office attended the Korean/Cold War Family’s annual meeting this week in nearby Arlington, Va. Hosted by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, the purpose was to highlight successes and continuing challenges to locate and recover more than 7,700 unaccounted-for Americans on the Korean Peninsula. Atop the agenda was the lack of movement in reopening DPAA-led recovery operations in North Korea, which the U.S. is trying to keep separate from denuclearization talks. One year ago this week, 55 transfer cases containing the co-mingled remains of perhaps more than 150 Americans returned to U.S. soil. To date, eight have been identified, with another two dozen IDs expected to be announced within a few weeks. The VFW is all-in where it concerns the return of missing and unaccounted-for servicemen, and looks forward to continuing to work with DPAA and the families to bring our troops home. [Learn more about the DPAA mission.](#)

6. Fight to End Widow’s Tax in Jeopardy: *The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020* (NDAA) includes several VFW-supported provisions. One such provision would eliminate the Widow’s Tax, which is a dollar for dollar offset of earned benefits for the surviving spouses of about 65,000 service members and veterans who have made the ultimate sacrifice. In the coming weeks, Senate leadership will meet in conference to resolve the differences between the Senate and House versions and debate final passage. Since the provision to end the Widow

Tax is not in the Senate version of the NDAA, it is in jeopardy of being left out of the final conference agreement. [Contact your Senators and urge them to #AxeWidowsTax this year.](#)

7. Take the Veterans Health Care Survey: Major provisions of the VFW-supported VA *MISSION Act of 2018* were recently implemented, including the new Veterans Community Care Program and other improvements to the way VA delivers care to veterans. To gauge the effectiveness of changes and inform its advocacy, the VFW would like feedback on your experience receiving VA health care. Help the VFW hold VA and Congress accountable for fulfilling their mission to veterans by taking a short survey regarding your preferences when receiving health care. [Take the survey.](#)

8. VA Walk-In Community Care: As part of the VFW-supported VA *MISSION Act of 2018*, VA now has a network of urgent care community providers. There are currently 5,000 providers, with VA looking to add an additional 2,000. Urgent care providers can be used for injuries or illnesses that need to be treated immediately but are not life threatening. It is important to note that the eligibility criteria requires that the veteran must be enrolled in the VA health care system and they have to have received care from VA or a VA community provider in the preceding 24 months. The urgent care facility must also be part of VA's contracted network. [Learn more.](#)

9. Border Wall Funding: Last week, the Supreme Court voted 5-4 to allow the Trump Administration to reprogram \$6.1 billion in Department of Defense (DOD) funding to expand the barrier that divides the U.S. and Mexico. The bulk of the funding will be taken from military construction; Overseas Contingency Operations; drug interdiction; and military personnel funds from service member pay and compensation, retirement benefits, food, and moving expenses which were lower than originally budgeted. While there are little details regarding which military construction projects will be impacted, guidance issued by DOD states that no military construction projects that already have been awarded, and no military construction projects with FY 2019 award dates will be impacted. Projects like the \$5.2 million weapons maintenance shop for Anniston Army Depot in Alabama, which was due to be awarded in March 2020, could be cut. Other projects that would be delayed include: a mission training complex at East Camp Grafenwoehr, Germany; a rotary wing apron at Wheeler Army Air Field in Hawaii; and an engineering center at the U.S. Military Academy. [Read the DOD guidance, and see the list of projects that may be impacted.](#)

10. Service Members Killed During Battle of Tarawa Returned: This past month, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced that the remains of at least 22 service members that were killed during the Battle of Tarawa were returned to the U.S. during an Honorable Carry Ceremony at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. During the battle, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded, while the Japanese resistance was virtually annihilated. Service members killed in action were buried where they fell, or placed in large trench burials constructed during and after the battle. These graves were typically marked with improvised markers, such as crosses made from sticks, or an up-turned rifle. Grave sites ranged in size from single isolated burials to large trench burials of more than 100 individuals. [Read the official DPAA press release.](#)

11. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced the identifications of 10 American servicemen who had been missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War, Korean War, and WWII. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

- **Air Force Maj. Neal C. Ward** was a member of the 602nd Special Operations Squadron, as the pilot of an A-1H aircraft, leading a flight of two on an armed reconnaissance mission in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Following four bombing runs, Ward's aircraft was seen being stuck by automatic weapons fire, followed by a large fire and explosion. Ward's wingman was unable to establish contact and did not observe a parachute following the incident. Interment services are pending. [Read about Ward.](#)
- **Army Cpl. Herman R. Phy** was an infantryman assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on July 6, 1953, near Hill 255, Pork Chop Hill, North Korea, when he could not be accounted for by his unit. Interment services are pending. [Read about Phy.](#)
- **Army Cpl. Harold Pearce** was a military policeman assigned to 1st Platoon, 24th Military Police Company, 24th Infantry Division. He was killed in action on July 20, 1950, during his unit's withdrawal from the city of Taejon, South Korea. Due to the hasty withdrawal, his unit was not able to recover his remains. Interment services are pending. [Read about Pearce.](#)
- **Army Pfc. Daniel W. Gerrity** was a member of Headquarters Battery, 2nd Infantry Division, fighting against the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces near Kunu-ri, North Korea. Gerrity was reported missing in action on Nov. 30, 1950, when he could not be accounted for by his unit. Interment services are pending. [Read about Gerrity.](#)
- **Army Maj. Harvey H. Storms** was a member of Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, which was part of the 31st Regimental Combat Team. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 1, 1950, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Interment services are pending. [Read about Storms.](#)
- **Army Pfc. Eugene E. Lochowicz** was a member of Company A, 28th Infantry Regiment, 8th Infantry Division. On Feb. 23, 1945, he went missing while his unit was attempting to cross the Roer River, near Lendersdorf, Germany. The boat Lochowicz was in capsized and his remains could not be recovered. Interment services are pending. [Read about Lochowicz.](#)
- **Army Air Forces 1st Lt. Herschel H. Mattes** was a pilot assigned to the 525th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, 86th Fighter-Bomber Group. On March 6, 1944, his aircraft crashed approximately 2.5 miles from Lake Bracciano, Italy. Prior to the crash, his aircraft was struck by small arms or machine gun fire. His remains could not be recovered following the crash. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mattes.](#)
- **Marine Corps Pfc. Joseph R. Livermore** was a member of Company B, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. In November 1943, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed, and more than 2,000 were wounded during the fighting. Livermore was killed around the third day of the battle, Nov. 22, 1943. Interment services are pending. [Read about Livermore.](#)
- **Army Air Forces Cpl. Walter J. Kellett** was a member of the 17th Pursuit Squadron, 24th Pursuit Group, when he was taken as a prisoner of war by enemy forces and interned at the Cabanatuan Prisoner of War Camp. He was reported to have died July 19, 1942, and was subsequently buried in Grave 312, along with other prisoners who died on that date. Interment services are pending. [Read about Kellett.](#)

-- **Army Pvt. Charlie M. Waid** was a member of the Medical Detachment, 31st Infantry Regiment. Following the Japanese invasion of the Philippines and the fall of Bataan, Waid was taken as a prisoner of war to the Cabanatuan Prisoner of War Camp. He was reported to have died on Nov. 19, 1942, and was subsequently buried in Common Grave 717, along with other prisoners who died that day. Interment services are pending. [Read about Waid.](#)

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>.