

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR
VFW NATIONAL COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF CAROL WHITMORE
126TH VFW NATIONAL CONVENTION
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Good morning, everyone!

First, I would like to thank each one of you for this extraordinary honor. To the entire VFW... and especially Iowa and my Big 10 family!!! Standing here today, surrounded by such incredible people — fellow veterans, families and friends — I am filled with a deep sense of pride and humility. This is not just a recognition of me, but of all the men and women who have served in our armed forces. My special thanks to Commander Al Lipphardt, who gave me guidance, reassurance and words of wisdom. And to every Past Commander in Chief ... thank you for your inspiration, and for paving the path for me and others to follow. My profound gratitude to you all!!!

When I think back on my journey, I am sure it was just like many others — my reality is not necessarily the VFW reality! But I was driven by a sense of duty, a desire to serve something greater than myself. And little did I know that decision would shape me in ways I could never have imagined.

There's a saying in the military: "Leave no one behind." That ethos is more than just a slogan; it's a way of life for veterans. It's about taking care of each other, standing side by side, facing challenges, sharing victories ... and losses alike. I learned early on that we were not just a unit — we were a family. A family bound by our commitment to each other, and to the values we hold close: honor, courage and sacrifice.

As I stand here today, I'm reminded of the countless veterans I've had the privilege of serving with. Each one of them, in their own way, taught me something about resilience, bravery, patience and humility. And each one of them deserves this recognition, too. I carry their stories with me, and I always will.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on the ones who never made it home. To those who made the ultimate sacrifice, we owe them everything. Their courage and selflessness continue to inspire me every day. Their families, too, are deserving of our deepest gratitude and support. The loss of a loved one in service is a pain that never fully heals, and it's something we must never forget.

Veterans share a bond that can't be fully understood by those who haven't walked in our boots. But that doesn't mean we don't carry those who have supported us — our families, our friends, our Auxiliary, and the communities from which we come. To my counterpart, Lois Callahan, and all of the Auxiliary ... we cannot do this without you!!! You are our gorilla glue!!!

And I am so appreciative to do this voyage with you!!! Our families have been our rocks, and our constant support throughout the years. Their unwavering support is often overlooked, but they too deserve our deepest thanks. To my own family ... especially my husband, who stood by me through every challenge, I want to say thank you. Your absolute support has given me the strength to push forward, even on the hardest days. I almost didn't come to this point. As many of you know, my husband has had a major health change, thanks to Agent Orange, and I was going to stop my journey. But he is so smart, he said you not only have to do this because of your father, and my father, but now do this for me! We fight for those who can't!!! We advocate on behalf of everyone who served and needs the support of fellow veterans ... that's what we do!!!

I've learned so much from my time in service and with the VFW. It has shaped me into who I am today in ways both big and small, and prepared me for this odyssey. But the most important lesson I've learned is this: True strength isn't about physical endurance, but about perseverance and resilience!!! It's about standing strong for your brothers and sisters, even when things seem impossible. It's about being honorable, ethical and having your moral compass intact!!!

As we look to the future, I believe that the strength of our veteran community is our greatest asset. We have so much to offer. We have lived through adversity, we have faced challenges that many can't even imagine, and we've come out the other side stronger. It's because of that strength that we are STILL SERVING our communities and our nation.

But as much as we have given, I'm asking you to give more. We need to continue to support one another. We need to ensure that the sacrifices of fellow veterans are never forgotten. We need to advocate for the care and resources that fellow veterans deserve, whether that's in health care, employment, or mental health support. Too many of our brothers and sisters still face hardships when they return home. They deserve better, and it's up to all of us to make sure they receive it. Our mission never stops! It never changes ... it remains taking care of each other!!!!

Through advocacy... our legislative efforts need to be resolute!!! The Richard Starr Act must pass this year!!! This bill was started in 2004, and has repeatedly and shamelessly been voted down!!! Let's get this done already! Honor the contract!!!

Our service officers are the best!!! They are expected to do everything from being a lawyer, doctor and psychologist ... we need to support and utilize them in the best way possible, and ensure our fellow veterans have access to them! They are VA accredited, and their claims assistance services are free!!! Don't Feed the Claim Sharks!!!

And continuing our efforts for the POW/MIA program ... bring them all home, or send us back!!! They deserve the final salute on American soil!!! More than thirty years ago, it was VFW Vietnam War veterans who lead the mission back to the country that cost them so much to extend a hand of peace to their former adversaries. This tremendously brave effort opened U.S. relations with Vietnam and access to the country so DPAA could find and bring home our comrades who

were missing in action. This is all part of why the VFW was founded! We are a force that no one can stop!!! We are the frontline!!!

I stand here today, not just as an individual, but as part of something much larger than myself. As my husband reminded me ... I am not just doing this for him ... but for every veteran who has suffered the effects of war!!! I am part of a community, a brotherhood, a sisterhood that will forever be united by our shared experiences and our love for this great nation. This recognition is not just for me; it is for all of us. And for that, I am deeply grateful.

Finally, I want to say this: To every veteran, every active-duty service member, and every family member who has been part of my journey — thank you. Thank you for your service, your courage, and your steadfast commitment to the veterans of foreign wars and our great nation!

I may be the first veteran to have been elected VFW Commander-in-Chief while wearing a dress ... Dan West, correct me if I'm wrong ... the first female veteran, but I will NOT be the last!!! And as I have said while campaigning ... I am your sister by mud, by blood, by dust, by dirt, by sand, by land, by sea, by air ... I am a veteran first!!!

God bless the VFW. God bless the Auxiliary ... and God bless America! Thank you!