

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR  
VFW COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF VINCENT “B.J.” LAWRENCE  
119TH VFW NATIONAL CONVENTION  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI  
JULY 25, 2018**

**“Make It Happen!”**

Thank you, comrades, thank you!

I am truly humbled by this honor, and I pledge that together we can make this great big organization we love even greater ... and bigger ... and more influential ... and starting now!

I was planning to spend the next five hours thanking everyone by-name who has influenced me at every level of this great organization, but my daughters said “*Oh, Dad, please don’t!*”

So out of respect of their wishes, I will thank Past Commander-in-Chief Tom Pouliot of Montana for nominating and installing me ... Past Commander-in-Chief Ed Banas of Connecticut for the second ... and congratulate new Chief of Staff Jerry Herker ... Inspector General Charlie Shoemaker ... and Budget Chairman Tim Peters.

I will also say I would not be standing here today if it were not for the great support of my VFW Post 7686 in Alamogordo, District 3, the Department of New Mexico, the Western Conference, and now you delegates attending the 119th VFW National Convention. Thank you!

I also guarantee you that I would not be here if it were not for the love, support and patience of my family. My two daughters—Tianna and Kaidyn—my two sons, Marine Corps veteran Frederick and Army veteran Christopher who couldn’t join us today—and most especially my wife, Mary. I love you all!

Comrades, my theme for the year is “**Make It Happen.**” In this room are the core leaders that have enabled the VFW to thrive for almost 119 years and the VFW Auxiliary for 104.

You are our tip of the spear. You adopt military units, support their annual awards programs, sponsor deployment and welcome home ceremonies, and do so much more.

When schools want a veteran to talk about patriotism, they call the VFW, because we have life experiences that need to be shared, as well as invitations for middle and high school students to compete in our annual Patriot’s Pen and Voice of Democracy competitions.

When churches and shelters seek help for homeless veterans, they call the VFW, because we have the local, regional and state contacts to provide a hand-up to these veterans.

When communities want someone to organize and lead a patriotic parade, they call the VFW, because they know we will get the job done.

This will be even more important over the coming year as we salute the centennial of the end of World War I ... the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landing ... the 65th commemoration of the Korean War Armistice ... the continuation of the Vietnam 50th commemoration ... the 35th anniversary of the Grenada invasion ... and the 15th anniversary of the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

And when disaster strikes, they look to the VFW for strength, such as this year's Fred C. Hall Award winner. VFW Post 12160 stayed open as a critical distribution point and food kitchen after their community just northwest of Corpus Christi was inundated by two hurricanes last year.

And Post 3830 on the Big Island of Hawaii continues to be a steady source of strength and support for veterans and their families who have lost everything under an unstoppable lava flow.

Comrades, you are the tip of the spear because you make it happen both locally and nationally.

A number of you have attended the VFW Washington Conference where you actively engage with your elected officials in their Capitol Hill offices. You also engage with them in their district offices. You help influence law by being a part of our 300,000-member Action Corps that can reach every member of Congress or zero in on just one particular member of the House or Senate.

You help us to create law, to make good laws better, and to help defeat the bad. You make a difference because you **"Make It Happen."**

I recognize all that you do, and so do your chair officers and our national staff. I just ask that you share our sincere appreciation with your Departments, Districts, Posts and members.

Comrades, I want to congratulate my new teammates ... Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief William "Doc" Schmitz from New York ... Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Hal Roesch from Virginia ... VFW Auxiliary National President Sandi Kriebel from Maryland and all her line officers ... and our incoming VFW Adjutant General Kevin Jones.

I also applaud Immediate Past Commander-in-Chief Keith Harman for his superb leadership in ensuring Congress understood the VFW's continued call to eliminate sequestration, and to restore the faith of veterans in their VA.

Those two critical issues continue to be VFW Priority Goals because the military can't properly train and fight without predictable funding ... and the VA can't ensure timely access to quality care without the necessary funding and leadership to fix what's broken ... and to hold employees accountable for their actions or inaction.

I have to give shout-outs to the 2,933 Posts, 194 Districts and 24 Departments who met the membership challenge and grew—with Oregon leading the world!

National ended the year at 98.36 percent, but given past performances, I see being just short of goal as a positive because it means that we can recruit ... that we can retain ... and that we are communicating more with our members and with those who might want to join us.

I ask for your continued commitment this coming year because we will need it if we are going to keep the doors of Congress, the White House and Pentagon open.

Along with calling for an end to sequestration and fixing the VA, we also need to help open the door to North Korea.

There are nearly 7,700 American MIAs on the Korean Peninsula, with an estimated 5,300 in the North. American-led recovery teams stopped going there in 2005 due to team safety and security reasons. Another opportunity presented itself seven years later, but again the plans were shelved because the North accelerated their underground nuclear and ballistic missile testing.

There were only four bullet points from the June 12th summit between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and the fourth bullet—to commit to recovering remains and to immediately repatriate those already identified—was the result of a VFW letter to the president beforehand.

Let me foot stomp that again because it bears repeating: No other organization—not veteran, not military, not the families of our missing—no other organization except your VFW made that happen.

I proudly served in South Korea where war with the North could still happen at a moment's notice. Almost 1.8 million Americans served in-theater during the war, with 36,000 dying in three brutal years of fighting. More than 7,100 would be captured, where some 40 percent would die in captivity.

I think about our Korean War veterans often, and I salute every one of them for their service, their sacrifice, and their role in making our country—and our VFW—so great..

It has been 65 years since the Armistice. The potential for Peace on the Peninsula in the macro sense has to be on denuclearizing the North. But to the families of our 7,700 missing, their macro view of the world begins at home, where for six decades they have been asking questions that have mostly gone unanswered.

Comrades, it was the VFW that helped to normalize relations with Vietnam, when our senior leaders starting going there in 1991 to push the humanitarian aspect of the Full Accounting Mission. And that's exactly what we need to do with North Korea.

I want them to see the VFW as an advocate for the families of the missing, not as government bureaucrats or diplomats. They need to see that the VFW only has one agenda item, and that's for the fullest possible accounting of missing Americans on the Korean Peninsula.

And should the door re-open for American-led recovery teams, we will push Congress to ensure that any increase in mission requirements is met with a corresponding increase in mission funding. We cannot and will not allow our government to stop or delay the recovery of remains in one part of the world just to go to another. Yes, we will make that happen.

We will also help our government obtain more family DNA reference samples on the hope that more remains from the Korean War will be coming home.

Family DNA currently on file only accounts for 91 percent of Korean War missing and 85 percent of Cold War losses. We have to do better than that, and that's why I ask all VFW and Auxiliary members to seek out the relatives of our missing in your communities—regardless of conflict—and request they provide a DNA sample on the hope that the next person recovered is their long-lost loved one.

My father—like many of yours—was a World War II veteran and VFW member who came home from his war. But many did not return. In fact, there are more than 82,000 Americans still listed as missing and unaccounted-for going back to the beginning of World War II.

We will not find them all due to the realities of war—catastrophic explosions, overwater losses and disappearing off radar scopes—but returning our fallen is a sacred commitment to never leave a fallen comrade on the battlefield. And the message this government mission sends to those serving in harm's way today—and to their families—has to be most comforting.

Comrades, the VFW is all-in when it comes to supporting America's Full Accounting Mission. That's because it's in our DNA.

Almost a century ago, in September 1918, some 5,000 U.S. troops landed in north Russia as part of an allied intervention into the Russian Civil War. They withdrew in August 1919 with a casualty rate that included almost 150 battle deaths and more than 80 more from disease, primarily Spanish Influenza.

Some 125 American dead were left behind—buried—but not recovered in the subsequent years because America did not recognize—or want to deal with—the Soviets. In 1929, your VFW stepped up as an agent of the U.S. Government and brought our boys home.

Making it happen is what our VFW has been all about for 119 years.

Our **Veterans Service** assistance is second to none, helping more than a half-million wounded, ill and injured veterans to receive nearly \$8 billion dollars in VA compensation and pension every year. This nationwide cadre of nearly 2,000 VFW-trained and VA-accredited service officers includes representation on two dozen active-duty military installations where we help transitioning troops file their claims before they separate or retire.

Our **National Veterans Service** work began almost a century ago—in 1919—as the result of returning World War I veterans facing the same government neglect as our founders did two decades earlier.

Our **National Legislative Service** also began lobbying Congress for veterans' benefits almost a century ago, and since then, our fingerprints have been all over every major piece of quality of life legislation to be passed into law in this century and last. This includes testifying before Congress almost 40 times last year, and countless hours meeting with members and their staff to help create better programs to serve veterans, service members and their families.

**VFW Programs** is helping thousands of families in emergency assistance, helping young veterans and service members to finish college, inspiring our youth through patriotic scholarship competitions, and supporting local unit adoptions and a multitude of military and family assistance projects.

The **VFW Foundation**, which earlier this month received a top 4-Star rating from Charity Navigator, is a key to much of our success. It's been said many times that everything the VFW wants costs money. That is 100 percent true, but so is the fact that everything the VFW wants is for someone else.

That, comrades, is a soundbite worth sharing and repeating: Everything the VFW wants costs money, but everything the VFW wants is for someone else. That's why we do veterans service work. That's why we lobby Congress, and that's why we have so many programs that support our veteran and military communities where they reside.

Our major sponsors like USAA, Humana, Burger King, SportClips, Inside R-X, Twisted X Brands and Henry Rifles just don't show up on our doorstep with bags of cash for no reason. They want to be a part of our mission to take care of veterans, service members and their families, and we are very grateful for their continuing commitment and their generosity.

Comrades, it's been said that only optimists succeed in this world because pessimists are never anything more than spectators. And I agree. And that's why my slogan is "**Make It Happen.**"

I want you to go back to your Departments, Districts and Post meetings and ask if they are making things happen or just sitting around waiting for someone else to take responsibility.

Comrades, there's an energy in this organization that's just chomping at the bit to be released. It comes from a younger generation that wants to get their hands dirty out in their communities, and it comes from an older generation who knows that the way we did things in the past no longer works, but whose experience and knowledge remains invaluable.

I pledge to you that National has your back, and in this year of making things happen we are also putting a new emphasis on supporting Posts first. I've been where you're at. I've seen new policies and directives come down from National that just don't make sense. Well that stops now.

The first thing we're doing is reducing annual membership expiration dates from 365 days a year to just 12—to reflect the number of months. I need quartermasters focused on the business at hand, not spending all their time doing daily membership reports.

We are also distributing hardbound guidebooks to District and Post commanders, quartermasters and trustees. And we are going to be more focused on Post development and revitalization. In fact, we already have 18 new Posts about to be chartered in 12 Departments since the first of July.

Comrades, your National Organization exists to serve veterans, service members and their families, but it also exists to serve you and our Posts, too, because you are the tip of our spear. If there is anything I, your chair officers, or the National Headquarters and Washington Office staff can do to help you make things happen, please don't hesitate to ask.

Every day is Veterans Day in our great VFW because you care enough to help make a difference in the lives of others every day. I could not be more proud of our great organization, and I am truly honored to help lead it.

One year from now when we storm Orlando, Florida, for our 120th the National Convention, we are going to do so with our heads held high ... we are going to do so as a proud organization ... as an accomplished organization ... and as a successful organization!

Why? Because when we storm Orlando we are going to do so as an organization that has achieved over 100 percent in membership for the first time in 27 years!

Comrades, we have one vision and one voice because we are one VFW!  
Now ... together ... let's **"Make It Happen!"**

Thank you!

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