

Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 23, 2019
Business Meeting

VA Secretary Calls Rate of Veterans Suicide a ‘National Tragedy’

Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie told VFW members that suicide prevention is President Donald Trump’s No. 1 veterans priority. He noted that 20 veterans commit suicide each day and that half of those are more than 50 years old, most of whom are Vietnam vets. “We only see six of those 20 at the VA,” Wilkie said. He commended VFW for getting behind the PREVENTS Task Force, created in March to end veterans suicide.

Since Oct. 1, the VA has screened 900,000 vets for mental health issues. “Our country will not get anywhere on veterans suicide until we have a national suicide conversation,” Wilkie said. “If we do not talk about mental health, addiction and homelessness, we will never get a handle on veterans suicide.”

Wilkie reported that the VA has reduced its opioid prescriptions by 50 percent. Instead, he said, they are looking at alternative therapies such as yoga, *tai chi* and acupuncture.

Wilkie touted the new *MISSION Act*, a law that provides veterans the option of using VA-approved private urgent care when VA facilities are not easily accessible. He mentioned a veteran from Kansas who was relieved that he no longer had to drive two hours to be seen at the VA for a sore throat. “It is VA’s job to fit the needs of veterans, not the job of veterans to fit the needs of VA’s bureaucracy,” Wilkie said. “Veterans want to go where people understand the culture and speak the language.”

Wilkie said on the first day of the *MISSION Act*’s implementation on June 6, that VA received 44,000 calls. Most of the callers, he said, were inquiring about using private doctors for urgent care matters. “Vets choose VA because that is where they want to be,” he said. Wilkie added that 89.7 percent of VA patients are satisfied with their care.

The secretary noted the changing demographics of today’s veterans, saying that 10 percent of VA-treated vets are women. In the next few years, he expects that number to be 20 percent. Female vets are more likely to receive breast and cervical cancer screenings than those in the private sector, he added.

The *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-23)* goes into effect Jan. 1, 2020. Wilkie encouraged all those “blue water” Navy vets, those who served off the coast of Vietnam, to get their paperwork in order now so that they will be ready to file in January. In the meantime, VA is focused on training its staff on how to process the claims.

In concluding his speech, Wilkie reviewed his three main points and praised VFW for its advocacy.

“Blue water, *MISSION Act*, veterans’ approval, these are your victories,” Wilkie said. “They don’t belong to any President – they don’t belong to any federal department. I am grateful to the VFW, not only for strengthening our work at VA, but because you deliver something else to veterans that is not ours to give – a community that exists outside our federal government; a community that cares about veterans when they return.”

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Awardees Help Families and Those at Risk

Chairman of the board of the National League of POW/MIA Families Ann Mills-Griffith received the *VFW Americanism Award*. A life member of VFW Post Auxiliary 341 in Arlington, Va., Mills-Griffith was recognized for her 50 years of dedication to the families of U.S. missing military members. Mills-Griffith's brother, James Mills, was buried four weeks ago in Arlington National Cemetery after being missing-in-action since Sept. 21, 1966. "None of us ever believed we would find him," said Mills-Griffith, who made her first trip to Vietnam in 1982. "Uncertainty has been the motivating factor all these decades."

A *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* was presented to Kelly McKeague, director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). The retired Air Force Reserve major general said the U.S. has a "sacred obligation and moral imperative," to ensure the remains of all U.S. service personnel killed overseas are returned to American soil. "There are (more than) 82,000 unaccounted for," McKeague said. "Every single one of them has a unique story and those stories are why we at DPAA are not deterred."

Steven Lewis, president of U.S. Restaurants Inc., received a *VFW Certificate of Appreciation* for his 32 Burger King stores' support of VFW's *Unmet Needs* program. More than \$164,000 has been donated by Lewis' stores to the program, which provides assistance to active-duty troops and veterans facing financial difficulties. After announcing he would donate \$1,000 each to the National World War I Memorial and the National Desert Storm War Memorial, Lewis said: "I'm so lucky to be an American, and I'm so lucky to have served our great country."

Retired Army Brig. Gen. Jack Hammond was presented a *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* for his role as executive director of Home Base. A partnership between the Boston Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital, Home Base is dedicated to helping veterans and service members struggling with the "invisible wounds" of war. Hammond, who commanded troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan, said he's lost more friends to suicide than the troops he led in combat. So far, Home Base has helped 20,000 veterans, active-duty military and families. Some 18 months of therapy is compressed into 14 days and it's free-of-charge. The program has even flown a vet in from as far away as Okinawa, Japan. "The suicide epidemic continues to grow," Hammond said. "Each of us has the potential to save a life." Noting that half of all veterans own a firearm, he urged attendees to help struggling friends by asking those friends to turn over their firearms until they are in a better place mentally.

Blind, Double Amputee Vet Inspires

Matthew Bradford, the first blind, double-amputee in the history of the Marine Corps to re-enlist, gave an inspiring and motivating speech. Serving with the 3rd Marine Division in Haditha, Iraq, Bradford lost both legs and his eyesight on Jan. 18, 2007, after an IED detonated under him. After three weeks in a coma, Bradford's father explained to his son exactly what happened. "I was crushed," Bradford said. "I was devastated. I didn't want to live anymore. I just stopped eating." Another Marine at Bethesda Naval Medical Center befriended Bradford, who adopted a new outlook.

Determined, Bradford set a goal to re-enlist in the Marines. Five months after being wounded, Bradford was walking on prosthetics. He went to a blind school to learn Braille, among other things. From July 2010 to July 2012, he was assigned to Wounded Warrior Battalion East, Camp Lejeune, N.C. In 2011, Bradford went to Iraq on a closure trip. "That trip gave me the opportunity to leave that country on my own two feet," he said.

The husband and father of three said he may be blind, but his vision in life is 20/20. "The Lord above was looking out for me," Bradford said. "He already had my next mission mapped out. If I can inspire and motivate one person each day, I'm doing my mission."

Speakers Offer Overview of Memorials, Partnerships

Retired Air Force Gen. Chuck Horner, a member of the board of directors for the National Desert Storm War Memorial, talked of the importance of getting the memorial to Gulf War vets built. Known as the "architect" for one of the most successful air assaults in U.S. history, Horner used his experiences from two tours in Vietnam to help ensure the liberation of Kuwait. He noted that after 1991's Persian Gulf War, the United States had a sense of "euphoria," and that people thanked him for his service. "I think that war restored our nation's faith in our military," the life member of VFW's Department of Florida said. "More importantly, it restored our nation's faith in itself." Horner received a \$30,000 donation from the VFW Department of Georgia and its Auxiliary.

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**120TH NATIONAL
CONVENTION**



VFW Quartermaster General Debra Anderson, who serves as a National World War I Centennial commissioner, provided convention attendees an overview of the National World War I Memorial. The site of the bronze 58-foot-long structure will be located in Washington, D.C.'s Pershing Park near the White House and the National Mall. Ground work will begin this year. She urged VFW Posts to become AEF Memorial Corps Posts. "Your support is so important," said Anderson, one of five VFW members on the commission.

Jared Lyon, president and CEO of Student Veterans America (SVA), thanked VFW for its partnership with SVA, adding, "With VFW, student veterans will never go alone." The member of Post 3308 in Tallahassee, Fla., said the *GI Bill* is important because student veterans have higher GPAs and higher graduation rates than non-veterans. He added that 74 percent of all veterans attend college within a year of departing the military.

President and CEO of the National Veterans Memorial and Museum Michael Ferriter provided an overview of the memorial located in Columbus, Ohio. The retired Army lieutenant general said 14 display areas trace vets from 1775 to present day. Having served in Mogadishu, Somalia, and three tours in Iraq, Ferriter said the museum's goal is to educate America about veterans. "This is your safe rally area," Ferriter said of the museum. "Come and visit."

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