



Convention Highlights

Monday, July 18, 2022
Joint Opening Session

Chief Mihelcic Calls for PACT Act Approval

VFW Commander-in-Chief Matthew M. “Fritz” Mihelcic rallied the crowd in today’s Joint Opening Session when he called for everyone in attendance to contact Sen. Pat Toomey’s (R-Pa.) office and demand he “stand down” with regards to the *Honoring Our PACT Act*. “Every time this bill gets delayed, a veteran dies,” Mihelcic said. “Tell Toomey to stop standing in the way of progress.” A QR code was placed on the overhead screens in the convention hall along with Toomey’s office phone number (1-202-224-4254).

Veterans advocate and comedian Jon Stewart streamed live during the morning session to also urge delegates to contact Toomey’s office to keep this important legislation moving forward. “This has to end,” Stewart said. “We screwed this up with Vietnam vets when it came to Agent Orange. We can’t do that again.”

Mihelcic said that over the last year VFW members increased their number of volunteer hours by 64 percent and financial donations by 95 percent. This equated to an additional \$200 million impacting communities. “We must zero in on staying active in the community, partnering with other organizations, while staying visible and engaging on social media,” he said. “By doing these things, the members will come, and they’ll come because they want in, not because we’ve chased them down.”

He further noted that VFW added nearly 60,000 new advocates to its Action Corps network. That was an increase of 17 percent, surpassing the original goal of 10 percent.

The Chief highlighted VFW’s partnership with Project K-9 Hero to establish VFW’s Military Working Dog Recognition Program. The new program provides citations to all military working dogs. Citations are free of charge and available at the VFW Programs booth in the exhibit hall.

Mihelcic concluded his message by encouraging convention-goers to take the “energy” with which they entered the convention to further the VFW mission. “If you find yourself sitting with people who don’t share the mission and only want to tear it down,” he said. “I urge you, get up and move away. Sit with winners ... the conversation is simply better.”

‘Make it Matter’

In a roar of VFW pride, VFW National Ambassador John Wayne Troxell rallied members in attendance with his energy and passion. Troxell, who spent 38 years in the Army and retired in 2020 after serving as the top senior enlisted advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (SEAC) from 2015 to 2019, praised the organization before calling its members to action. “We as an organization need to make sure we are recruiting the men and women who serve today,” Troxell said. “And we need to allow them to continue to serve and inspire like they did when they were in the military. We need to be there for them.”

Retired Army Gen. Martin Dempsey received *VFW’s Distinguished Service Award*. Dempsey, a West Point graduate who spent 41 years in the Army and held prominent roles such as 37th Army Chief of Staff and

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18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, accepted his award from Mihelcic after a long reading of illustrious career.

“My resume is the byproduct of a lot of years,” said Dempsey, whose service includes deployments for *Operation Desert Storm*, *Operation Desert Shield* and multiple trips to the war zone during *Iraqi Freedom*. “I accept this award on behalf of all the men and women I served with in my many years in the Army.”

A Life member of VFW Post 27 in Germany, Dempsey praised VFW for its active role in advancing the interests of veterans and building camaraderie, as well as its continued support of all active-duty, veterans, their families and local communities.

In recalling the three pillars of VFW’s mission statement verbatim, Dempsey concluded his speech by suggesting a fourth. “My challenge for you today is in helping the younger generations understand why we decided to serve,” Dempsey said. “We must help them understand through interpersonal relations what it means to serve. If you don’t remember anything else I said today, remember this — make it matter.”

Dempsey then presented one of his 29 coins engraved with “Make It Matter” to Mihelcic, who thanked him on behalf of VFW, adding, “General, I assure you that we will make it matter.”

Ed Sandrick, director of Humana’s Veteran Channel, provided a recap of the 10-year partnership between Humana and VFW. He specifically noted the efforts to end food insecurity through the *Uniting to Combat Hunger* initiative. “This year alone, we provided 1 million meals, doubling our goal,” said Sandrick, a Life member of VFW Post 3873 in Naperville, Ill. Sandrick recognized Humana’s veteran community engagement team members in attendance before presenting \$25,000 checks to both *Unmet Needs* and VFW’s *National Veterans Service*.

Kimberly Mingo, vice president of government sales and business strategy at Philips Healthcare, provided an overview of Project ATLAS, a partnership that provides equipment for telehealth appointments for veterans in rural areas. Mingo, whose father is an Army veteran, noted that one-third of veterans enrolled in the VA live in rural areas. “You shouldn’t worry about where a provider is located in order to get service,” Mingo said. With Project ATLAS, pods are located at VFW Posts in remote areas in locations such as Montana, California, Pennsylvania and most recently, Emporia, Kan. “It takes all of us reaching out to improve health care for our most rural veterans,” Mingo said. “Every American, particularly veterans, deserve the right to a healthy life regardless of their location.”

Life member of the VFW Department of Texas John Bird, USAA’s military affairs senior vice president, said more than 11 years ago his company and VFW formed an alliance with the shared common goal of supporting veterans and their families. “We work together as a force of good,” Bird said. “We are committed to have a lasting and meaningful impact in our communities.” USAA, which was founded 100 years ago, is one of the top sponsors of this year’s VFW National Convention.

Clayton Smith, Twisted X senior director of sales, spoke at the Joint Opening Session. Twisted X, a footwear company based in Decatur, Texas, is the title sponsor of VFW’s Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen programs. Smith said Twisted X believes every business has a responsibility to serve its community and added Twisted X has the duty to help veterans. “Every day, service members write a blank check for us,” Smith said. “For us, to write a check with a few zeros on it doesn’t compare to what veterans have done for us.”

Awards and Other Speakers

Christiana D. Bardsley received the new VFW “*In the Foxhole*” Award (*Reserve/National Guard*) for her work as an intelligence analyst with the 143rd Airlift Wing of the Rhode Island Air National Guard. Noting that her father, grandfathers and great-grandfathers all served in the military, Bardsley commended VFW members for their service. “I thank you for inspiring me to be where I am today,” she said.

VFW Auxiliary President Jean Hamil was awarded the VFW *Gold Medal of Merit and Citation* for her time as president. She noted the VFW Auxiliary added more than 28,000 members this past year. “Our membership has done better than we had imagined,” Hamil said. “We ended with a 92 percent retention rate.”

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National Voice of Democracy first-place winner Daniela Mare from New York delivered her award-winning essay. Mihelcic presented the high-school junior with the VOD trophy to accompany her \$30,000 *T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship* awarded in April. Mare represented the Department of New York on behalf of VFW Post 9486 and its Auxiliary in Lake Ronkonkoma, N.Y.

Missouri Gov. Michael Parson, an Army veteran who served six years in the Military Police Corps from 1975-81, addressed delegates and fellow veterans with words of affirmation for their dedication, sacrifice and continued service to America. "You name it, I've been through it, but my military service prepared me for it," said Parson, who also served 22 years as a sheriff in Polk County, Mo. "Now it is up to us to keep the American Dream alive, so I urge you to make sure we pass down the American Dream to those next generations."

Kansas City, Mo., Mayor Quinton Lucas (D), attended the convention and welcomed all VFW and Auxiliary members to the city. Lucas said he has "worked hard" to improve the lives of veterans and military in the city. "As I sit here today with all of you, I think of the history and the impact that the Veterans of Foreign Wars has had on Kansas City, and of course, our entire country," Lucas said. "The decisions you have made here at these national conventions have immensely supported veterans and our communities."

All-American commanders were recognized at the end of this morning's session when each received their All-American caps and citations. Also recognized were the Triple Crown recipients, Conference winners, Conference Cup winner, Recruiter of the Year, Elite Recruiter as well as the Legacy awards.

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