



# Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 19, 2022

Business Session

## VA Secretary Praises VFW for Advocacy of the PACT Act

VA Secretary Denis McDonough this morning touted the VFW's efforts for its advocacy in working to pass the *Honoring Our PACT Act*, including the more than 6,000 emails that VFW delegates sent to a Republican senator on Monday pushing for its passage. "I know you've put everything you have behind supporting this bill, making it your number one legislative priority," McDonough said. "On behalf of the veterans we serve, thank you." McDonough added that when the *PACT Act* is approved, "hundreds of thousands" of new vets will have access to VA care. It also would authorize 31 new clinics in communities around the country. "Most importantly, this bill will ensure that generations of veterans and their survivors will get the toxic exposure benefits they've earned," he added.

The Secretary also highlighted VA efforts to eradicate homelessness among the veteran population. For example, McDonough said Los Angeles has more homeless veterans than anywhere else in America. Last year, the VA moved 40 veterans from L.A.'s "Veterans Row" into housing. VA staffers also found homes for additional veterans by the end of the year. "This year, we're going to get 38,000 veterans into permanent housing," he said. "In fact, we are halfway there - halfway through the year, halfway through the goal."

McDonough noted that VA's efforts to prevent veterans suicide include the introduction of 988, the new national suicide prevention lifeline, which connects veterans quickly and directly to the Veterans Crisis Line by pressing "1." He added that VA is continuing to offer tele-mental health sessions to veterans who want them. "Suicide prevention is our top clinical priority, bar none," McDonough said. "Together, we're going to keep saving veterans lives and help them not only survive but thrive."

## VFW Has 'Strong' Ties with Like-Minded Groups

Kelly McKeague, director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, provided an overview of efforts to account for some 83,000 missing Americans. (72,324 from World War II; 7,541 from Korea; 1,584 from Vietnam; 126 from the Cold War and six from other conflicts). "These numbers along with the passage of time are the enemies we battle," McKeague said. He thanked VFW for its "strong advocacy" on behalf of the nation's missing. He cited three recent sets of U.S. remains that have been returned: WWII veteran Marine Corps Pvt. William Rambo, Korean War vet Army Capt. Emil Kapaun and Vietnam War vet Navy Cmdr. Paul Charvet. Speaking about Charvet, McKeague said the aviator was shot down and killed on March 21, 1967, just one day before he was to return home. His mother, Blanche, is 101 years old. "Blanche welcomed her son home with profound joy," McKeague said of the return of Charvet's remains.

In praising VFW's active role in nurturing a longstanding relationship with Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Pa., David Harmer, president and CEO of the Foundation, spoke of the relationship's benefits. Through the VFW's Voice of Democracy program, 53 Department winners from across all 50 U.S. states and overseas areas in Europe and the Pacific each summer attend the Freedoms Foundation for on-site U.S. history lessons. "No student should leave Valley Forge without knowing what our veterans have done for our country, and the VFW is our everlasting

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partner in this,” said Harmer, who provided a brief history of the Foundation dating back to its founding in 1949. “Your hope and your faith in our country will be rekindled if you just come up to Valley Forge. And for that, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the VFW.”

On behalf of the Student Veterans of America in Washington, D.C., president and CEO Jared Lyon, a Navy veteran of the Global War on Terrorism, praised the VFW’s symbiotic relationship with his organization. “Since our founding in 2008 our success and ability to meet our mission has been compounded by our relationship with the VFW,” said Lyon, who is a life member of VFW Post 3308 in Tallahassee, Fla. “If this was a state of the union address, I would say the relationship between SVA and VFW is strong.” Lyon also noted several SVA members over the years who have used the organization as a stepping-stone towards providing leadership in government and VFW positions. He concluded with a message for older VFW members. “Let this be a reminder that you are never too old to further your education,” said Lyon, who is 39 and a Ph.D. candidate at Syracuse University in New York.

### **Awards and Other Speakers**

Hal Roesch was awarded the *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation* for his time as 2020-2021 VFW Commander-in-Chief. He commended VFW for its perseverance during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially 2019-2020 VFW Commander-in-Chief William “Doc” Schmitz. “When all other VSOs were hunkering down, we did not,” Roesch said. “You brought us through with flying colors and for that I thank you.”

Johnie Webb, deputy director, Outreach and Communications, for the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, received the *VFW Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit*. Webb, who has spent four decades working to recover more than 82,000 missing and unaccounted-for American troops, spoke of VFW’s significant help, as well as his plans to retire at year’s end. “Our success over the years could not have been done without the great support of each one of you representing the great organization of VFW,” said Webb, a life member of VFW Post 970 in Honolulu, Hawaii. “While I am retiring at the end of the year as a public servant, I plan to continue my active support for the VFW and advocacy on behalf of the POW/MIA Accounting Agency.”

Former Marine Corps Cpl. Alexandria Nowak received the *VFW In the Fox Hole Award (Active-Duty Troop)* for her actions on Sept. 20, 2019, in Escondido, Calif. While driving to pick up her daughter, Nowak, then on active duty, witnessed a vehicle crash on Interstate 15. Nowak rescued two uninjured children – a four-month-old and a nine-month-old – from the automobile. Nowak then attended to their mother, but to reach the woman, Nowak had to tear through the vehicle’s shattered windshield. The Marine realized the mother had a nearly severed arm. Nowak then ran to her own vehicle to retrieve a tourniquet she applied to the injured woman. First responders who later arrived at the scene credited Nowak for saving the woman’s life. “This woman needed help,” Nowak said. “And because of my Marine Corps training, I knew exactly what I needed to do. For that, I’m very thankful.” Nowak added that she was grateful for being invited to the VFW National Convention to receive her award. “It is a true honor to be awarded this in front of my brothers- and sisters-in-arms,” she said.

The troops of Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., also known as “8th & I,” earned the *VFW In the Fox Hole Award (Active-Duty Unit)*. On-duty Marines on Nov. 7, 2020, heard an emergency call on a radio that a woman riding a scooter was struck by a vehicle outside of the barracks’ security gate. The woman was run over by the vehicle and was trapped underneath. Marines of 8th & I ran to the woman’s aid, then conceived a plan to lift the vehicle off the woman by borrowing vehicle jacks from drivers. The Marines then lifted the vehicle off the woman. After first responders arrived at the scene, the troops supported the emergency workers by controlling the crowd and securing the area. Marine Corps Sgt. Major Jesse Dorsey accepted the award on behalf of the “Oldest Post of the Corps.” The barracks sergeant major said he is proud of what the “Devil Dogs” did to earn the award. “There is another generation behind us that is going to continue to do great things for this great nation,” Dorsey said. He added that receiving the award was “truly a privilege and an honor” for his Marines.

Lisa Russell received *VFW’s Smart/Maher National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for her efforts in ensuring her students at East Elementary School in Mountain Home, Idaho, understand the values of patriotism, citizenship and community service. A daughter, wife and mother of Navy and Air Force veterans, Russell’s devotion to veterans and their history of sacrifice and honor remains the foundation of her teaching philosophy that has

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impacted many young students. “It means so much to me to be honored by this group of heroes, and it is inspiring to me how much you have given during your military service and your continued service to our country,” Russell said. “I have the privilege of working in the best school district, and I can tell you that in our town, made up of mostly military families, we believe in the motto — ‘One town, One team,’ and we sure do love our military.”

Three individuals were awarded the *John A. Biedrzycki Accredited Service Representative of the Year Award*. They are: Department of Utah Service Officer Wendy Griffin (2020), Service Officer Nadine Newman from Yakima, Wash., (2021) and Director of the St. Paul (Minnesota) VFW Claims Office Jon Gohn (2022).

VFW National Home Executive Director Mike Wilson spoke to delegates about the upcoming 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Home in 2025. He encouraged VFW members to stop by the National Home booth in the exhibit hall to pick up a copy of the strategic plan for the Eaton Rapids, Mich., home over the next 100 years. “Kids should be kids,” Wilson said. “Children should not suffer. We want them to enjoy their childhood.” Wilson further noted that 20 percent of all National Home employees are veterans. Joining Wilson was Buddy Poppy Girl Aurora, who is 8 and lives on the campus with her parents and three siblings. Wilson presented VFW Commander-in-Chief Matthew M. “Fritz” Mihelcic with a certificate for a brick at the Home as well as a coin and a hand-crafted gift from National Home employees. The Department of Vermont presented Wilson with a check for \$10,835.

VFW Military Order of the Cooties Supreme Commander Olin L. Parks spoke to convention attendees. He said the Military Order of the Cooties had gained more than 5,200 members in the past year. Parks thanked VFW members for their support during his year as Supreme Commander.

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