



Convention Highlights

Wednesday, July 20, 2022

Business Session

Quadruple Amputee Inspires VFW Members

Retired Army Staff Sgt. Travis Mills delivered a riveting and inspirational message this morning after accepting the 2022 *Beyond the Call Award-Veteran Division for Public Service*. The quadruple amputee lives by the motto “Never Give Up, Never Quit.” While deployed for the third time with the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan on April 10, 2012, Mills was wounded in an IED explosion, which cost him portions of all his limbs. A weapons squad leader, Mills was given the chance to sit out his third deployment – an opportunity he would not entertain. “I said ‘No thank you. I got guys who believe in me, who serve under me, who are my brothers in arms,’” Mills recalled.

Mills is one of only five quadruple amputees from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He works as a free-lance motivational speaker, injecting self-deprecating humor wherever he goes. “I’m excited to be here. Thanks so much for this honor,” Mills said with a sly grin before adding, “I always get nervous in front of everyone and think, ‘I hope I don’t bomb this.’ I see a lot of people checking my legs out so I should let the ladies know that I am married.”

With his wife, Kelsey, Mills founded the Travis Mills Foundation in 2013. It started as a care package program and has grown to a nonprofit with a \$2.5 million operating budget. More than 800 families have received all-inclusive, all-expenses-paid vacations to Maine where they participate in adaptive activities and enjoy much-needed rest and relaxation. “They get to come out and try new things,” Mills said. “We have dads who never rode a bike with their children, who break down and cry when they get a chance to do it on a handcycle. We have spouses who say they have never seen their loved ones, the person they married, since before they deployed, and it has been four years since their injury. Kids cry and say it’s better than Disney World.”

Mills said he will continue giving back. He left the audience with words that have served him well: “Don’t dwell on what happened, just reminisce on it,” he said. “Keep pushing forward to a better future.”

‘We Look Up to the VFW’

In receiving VFW’s 2022 *VFW Beyond the Call Award-Patriotic Division* for her active role as an advocate for veterans through Pin-Ups for Vets, founder Gina Elise told the crowd the award had special significance. “I am so honored to have received this award, and history has been made today because this is the first time VFW has bestowed an award upon a civilian pin-up girl,” she said. Elise, who founded the California-based nonprofit in 2006 and has since donated more than \$100,000 worth of state-of-the-art rehab equipment to VA and military hospitals nationwide, also noted VFW’s impact on veterans as the catalyst for her work. “I am inspired by VFW to do what I do,” Elise said. “I am here to thank you for continuing to set the example in all you do.”

Dr. David Feinberg, CEO of Oracle Cerner, provided an overview of the “largest electronic health record” system in the world. He noted that in a few years, veterans will be able to seamlessly transition between the DoD, VA and

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private care. “We will provide a higher quality of care that is more proactive, more equitable and safer,” he said. In 2018, Cerner signed on with the Department of Veterans Affairs to modernize the electronic health record at VA, allowing easier access to high-quality health care, while simplifying the patient experience. Feinberg said that his appreciation for the veteran community stems from the medical training he and his wife, also a doctor, received at VA hospitals in Los Angeles. “I want to give back and to thank you for your service,” he said.

Andy Wickstrom, president of Henry Repeating Arms, commended VFW for its mission and accomplishments before presenting a \$50,000 check to VFW Commander-in-Chief Matthew M. “Fritz” Mihelcic through Henry’s Guns for Great Causes program. “God bless you, and God bless America,” Wickstrom said.

As Community Engagement Manager of the Military Women’s Memorial in Arlington Cemetery near Washington, D.C., Lachrisa Parker addressed the crowd on behalf of the only military memorial of its kind. “The team at the women’s memorial is just 26 members strong,” said Parker, who joined the Army Reserve in 1990 and spent 28 years in the service before retiring as a master sergeant. “We look up to the VFW, and like you, we epitomize your values at the Military Women’s Memorial.” Parker also rallied all women veterans in the crowd, urging them to stand and be recognized for their service. She encouraged all female vets to register their stories at www.womensmilitarymemorial.org. “It is our mission to educate and honor and continue to serve,” Parker said. “To all women here today, or those who know women veterans, please sign up or register their stories.”

Members from VFW Post 3665 in Raceland, La., received the 2022 *VFW Fred C. Hall Memorial Outstanding Post Special Project Award*. VFW Post 3665 earned the award for supporting its hometown in the aftermath of *Hurricane Ida* in 2021. VFW Post 3665 Commander James Prestenback accepted the award on behalf of the Post members. He said it was “an honor” to accept the award. “This was not possible without Posts across Louisiana, the nation and other veterans’ organizations,” he added.

VFW past-Commander-in-Chief William “Doc” Schmitz presented the *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* to Dan Starks. Starks is the founder and sole investor of the National Museum of Military Vehicles, located near Dubois, Wyo. He also is the owner of the 200 military vehicles housed in a 140,000-square-foot-building. After accepting the award, Starks said the National Museum of Military Vehicles is about “the stories” of veterans. “We want to bridge that gap between people like me who did not serve, with the history and stories of people like you. I want to thank all of you for keeping me safe and keeping our country safe. In turn, I will do what I can to continue to honor you all.”

Past VFW national Chaplain Peter Hook presented Mihelcic with the *Chapel of Four Chaplains Legion of Honor Humanitarian Award* on behalf of the four chaplains who died Feb. 3, 1943, aboard the *USAT Dorchester*.

The Department of Arizona received accolades for 55 years of consecutive membership growth.

The 2021-22 Department commanders presented Mihelcic with multiple gifts.

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