



Convention Highlights

Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2025
Business Session

VA Secretary Says ‘One Suicide is Too Many’

VA Secretary Doug Collins delivered a rousing message during this morning’s business session. Receiving multiple standing ovations, the Iraq War vet and Air Force Reserve chaplain abandoned the stage to speak on the convention floor with his fellow veterans. Highlighting the changes made to improve VA efficiencies, Collins said: “I’m not committed to a VA that is the same old-same old. Our veterans deserve more.”

The Secretary received enthusiastic applause when he discussed VA’s Community Care program, saying that he is not waiting on Congress to bring it back to veterans. Under this program, veterans can access care through community providers when the VA cannot provide the care needed. “Community Care doctors will take care of you,” Collins said. “We’ve got one job at the VA and that’s taking care of our veterans.”

Collins noted that death by suicide is on the rise, and billions have been spent on this critical issue since 2008, yet nothing has changed. He encouraged VFW members to reach out to their fellow vets by calling, texting or having a cup of coffee with them. “One suicide is too many,” the Secretary concluded. “Can I get somebody to stand up and say, ‘I can help.’ Our veterans deserve so much more. Our greatest assets in this fight are sitting right here in this room. No veteran in this country should have to beg for what they already earned when serving.”

Stephen Simmons, deputy assistant secretary, Defense, Military Community and Family Affairs, urged veterans to visit the Military One Source website, which provides 24/7 service. “Keep spreading the word about this fantastic resource,” he said. He further encouraged VFW members to seek out and engage with new veterans. “A warm connection can make a world of difference,” he concluded.

VFW’s Partners

Kelly McKeague, principal deputy director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, provided an overview of efforts to account for 80,986 missing Americans. (71,884 from WWII; 7,403 from Korean War; 1,566 from the Vietnam War; 126 from the Cold War). McKeague talked of U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. James Calfee who was 26 when he was killed in Laos. His remains were identified on Aug. 8. McKeague, a retired Air Force Reserve Major General, also noted Army 1st Lt. William Hott of Ohio who was killed in the Korean War. His remains were identified on March 18, and he will be buried next to his family in Ohio.

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President and CEO of Student Veterans of America Jared Lyon said that together VFW and the SVA are changing lives. A member of VFW Post 3308 in Tallahassee, Fla., Lyons highlighted the VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program, which provides exemplary student veterans with the opportunity to make their voices heard on Capitol Hill and in their communities. This program has been held annually since 2014. Lyon thanked VFW members for mentoring student veterans saying, "You are our nation's memory and its conscience."

Mike Wilson, executive director of the VFW National Home in Eaton Rapids, Mich., said that despite a century of providing a haven for veterans and their families, the National Home is far from slowing down. "We are not in the endzone celebrating," Wilson said. "We are back in the tunnel getting ready for what comes next because, like VFW, we have been moving, and we are not intent on stopping."

Wilson then introduced this year's Buddy Poppy Child, Lachlan, a 13-year-old seventh grader who enjoys playing the drums and the piano and lives in the New Hampshire house. "If it was not for the VFW Home, I would not have known I was good at all these things, so thank you," said Lachlan, whose father is an Afghanistan War veteran who served six years in the Army.

Twisted X President and CEO Prasad Reddy commended the VFW for the work its members do. "I always prepare a long speech before I get here, but then I get here and I can't speak because I look at all of you, and I can't thank you enough for what you have done," said Reddy, who presented Lipphardt with a \$70,000 donation.

Military Order of the Cootie Supreme Commander Robbie Normand provided an overview of the organization's year, noting they brought in 8,600 new members to VFW. "We've never been stronger," he said. "We are not just numbers but the future leaders of our organization."

Award Recipients and Additional Speakers

VFW Commander-in-Chief Al Lipphardt recognized Grunt Style Foundation President Tim Jensen with the *Commander-in-Chief Gold Medal of Merit* for his advocacy on the *PACT Act*. "The VFW stands for everything we believe in," said Jensen, a member of VFW Post 76 in San Antonio, Texas. "We all raised our hands, did some of the most incredible things in uniform, left behind a lot of good men and women, so do not ever forget we are the true fabric of this country."

VFW Department of Georgia Service Officer Belinda Boldoe was awarded 2025's *John A. Biedrzycki Accredited Service Representative of the Year Award*. An Army veteran of Stone Mountain, Ga., Boldoe assisted more than 2,500 veterans and military families to help to recover more than \$800,000 in earned benefits. "I want to thank the VFW NVS team for equipping me with the necessary knowledge and skills to assist Georgia veterans and their families," Boldoe said.

Tim Smiddy, a teacher from Staunton Ill., won the *Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades K-5. Smiddy, who comes from a military family, created the "Patriots Club," a club that teaches the students of Staunton Elementary School patriotism, community and citizenship. "The reaction from our kids has been unbelievable," said Smiddy. "We had about 88 attendees in 5th grade last year."

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Christie Wingo, a former Boeing engineer who now teaches students science and math at Colorado Springs Christian School in Colorado Springs, Colo., won the *Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades 6-8. Wingo strives to teach her students ways in which science and technology can be used to benefit everyone, from the level of the individual to whole communities. Wingo, who hails from a military family, says the outcomes she focuses on for students are “resilience and grit, both hallmarks of all of the veterans that I’ve known in my life, and the hallmarks of all of you.”

English teacher Nicole Petrosillo of West Milford Township High School in West Milford, N.J., won the *Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for grades 9-12. Petrosillo, who comes from a military family, reinforces the values of patriotism, democracy and citizenship to kids through novels such as *Unbroken*. She encourages teachers everywhere to engage students with the ideas of patriotism, democracy and citizenship, saying, “Those who have served and are still serving shouldn’t just be a passion of mine, it should be a passion of all teachers.”

VFW Foundation chairman and retired Burger King franchisee Mike DeRosa spoke about the VFW's presence among potential investors and thanked those in the audience for making it possible. "You are not only a force multiplier," De Rosa said, "but you are the secret key that gets us into places we can't get into — that's the reputation this organization carries."

DeRosa also presented Burger King franchisee Jordan Drury with a certificate of appreciation for raising \$328,507 on behalf of the VFW Foundation and its programs. Drury, who thanked those in attendance for their military service and their continued work in their communities, added, "We don't do it for recognition. We do it because it is the right thing to do."

Commander-in-Chief Gold Medals of Merit and citations were presented to Jeff Carroll, 2024-2025 Chief of Staff; Victor Letourneaut, 2024-2025 Budget & Finance Chairman; and Greg Stafford, 2024-2025 National Inspector General.

Lipphardt was honored with the Legion of Honor Bronze Medal by VFW National Chaplain Peter Hook on behalf of the Chapel of Four Chaplains.

VFW Programs Director Lynn Rolf announced the Buddy Poppy display winners and added that nearly \$7,000 was raised from the silent auction during the convention for the Return the Favor campaign. Additionally, Rolf said some \$17,000 was raised by the VFW riders in the Howard E. Vander Clute Memorial Ride. The Third Annual VFW Cornhole Tournament raised more than \$29,000 over the weekend, Rolf concluded.

VFW's Southern Conference commanders from the past year presented Chief Lipphardt with a fun gift to commemorate exceeding the 102 percent membership goal. Additionally, the 2024-2025 Department Commanders presented Lipphardt with more than \$6,000 for the One Tribe Foundation, which helps with suicide prevention.

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