



## **MEMORANDUM**

TO: National Officers, National Council of Administration, Department Commanders, Department Senior Vice Commanders, Department Junior Vice Commanders, Department Adjutants, and Past Commanders-in-Chief

FROM: B.J. Lawrence, Commander-in-Chief

DATE: July 9, 2019

RE: 2019 Trip Report to Guam, Philippines, Taiwan and Korea

---

### **Overview**

I departed for the Indo-Pacific on April 12, 2019, to visit U.S. service members, veterans and VFW comrades stationed or residing in Guam, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, as well as our colleagues in the Republic of China on Taiwan. I was accompanied by VFW Director of National Security and Foreign Affairs John Towles. We returned to CONUS April 28, 2019.

As a former soldier who spent the majority of my service on the Korean peninsula, I have remained acutely aware of the current geopolitical situation in the region and the impact it has had on everything from the basing of U.S. troops to the continued search for more than 7,700 Americans who remain missing and unaccounted-for from the Korean War and the Cold War. Some 5,300 of our missing are believed to be inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. As a result, I felt it was imperative to personally visit some of the primary military installations in the country, to include Camp Humphries, the Joint Security Area, the United Nations Command Korea Headquarters, and to speak directly to service members who are protecting the sovereignty of our allies and U.S. interests. Doing so also allowed me to gain an appreciation for what areas that we as an organization need to focus on in terms of defense spending, quality of life, and readiness issues.

Finally, this trip provided an opportunity to visit as many posts in the Indo-Pacific region as possible to show my appreciation for their hard work and dedication to ensuring that the membership goals that I established as your Commander-in-Chief were fulfilled. I am tremendously proud that 49 of our 52 departments exceeded goal, which enabled our VFW to exceed 100 percent in membership for the first time in 27 years.

## **Guam**

The visit began with a windshield tour of Andersen Air Force Base, which provided a firsthand appreciation of the strategic significance of this island. It also raised my awareness of the many challenges that service members, veterans and their families face due to being so isolated from the continental United States.

That evening VFW Post 1509 hosted us to dinner, where I had the opportunity to talk with comrades who were active duty military as well as military retirees and veterans, most of whom were Defense Department civilian employees. Cost of living, military funding, and access to healthcare, especially veterans' health care, were some of the primary concerns.

We talked at length about what our VFW Washington Office was doing to address these issues; the outstanding work that our service officers provide to veterans and their families; and the relevance every member of our great organization can provide to others who have recently transitioned. I also took the opportunity to thank them personally for the tremendous work that they have done concerning membership, and that we need to keep the momentum going.

The next day, I was given a tour of Navy Base Guam by VFW Post 2917 Commander Shawn Watson. The tour included a visit to Submarine Squadron 15 (SUBRON 15) headquarters and training facilities, where I was able to experience the piloting and navigation trainer which simulates piloting a submarine into port, the control operational team trainer which provides new sailors the opportunity to experience what it's like doing a deep dive, and what it's like doing a breach or a fast emergency ascent.

To find out more about SUBRON 15, [click here](#).

That afternoon I was interviewed on "Newstalk K57" by host Phil Guerrero about my observations over the past year as VFW Commander-in-Chief. During the hour-long interview I focused on the importance of service, both in uniform and as a veteran, and how to get involved with the VFW. I also discussed our partnership with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency and talked about how important the Full Accounting mission is to the families of the missing and to our nation as a whole. To hear the full interview, [click here](#).

We departed Guam for the Philippines. Upon our arrival to Manila, we were met by our escort, VFW Department of the Pacific Areas Commander Mike Verville, and proceeded to drive north to Angeles City.

## **Philippines**

The next day began with lunch hosted by VFW Post 2485, then on to the Clark Veterans Cemetery, where I was met by Cemetery Superintendent Tim Pratt.

Mr. Pratt explained that the 20-acre, 12,000-plot cemetery was created between 1947 and 1950 by consolidating headstones, markers and remains from at least four other U.S. military cemeteries. It was located just inside the main gate of Clark Air Base.



*At the Clark Veterans Cemetery, Commander-in-Chief B.J. Lawrence pays his respects to departed Comrade Melvin Troth of VFW Post 2485.*

In June 1991, Mount Pinatubo erupted, which led the U.S. Air Force to evacuate. The damage was so severe that Clark AB was formally transferred to the Philippines in November that year. The cemetery, however, continued to be open for burials after the transfer, even though it, too, had been damaged by the eruption. Between 1994 and 2013, the Philippine Government allowed members of the VFW Post 2485 to restore and maintain the grounds.

In 2014, the upkeep, responsibility and care of the cemetery was officially transferred from VFW Post 2485 to the American Battle Monument Commission, fulfilling VFW National Resolution 431, which was submitted by the VFW Department of the Pacific and approved by delegates attending the 113th National Convention in Reno, Nev. The American Battle Monument Commission, established by Congress in 1923, is the executive agent of American cemeteries and memorials outside the U.S.

To find out more about Clark Veterans Cemetery, [click here](#).

We were then driven to Camp O'Donnell and the Capas National Shrine.

Camp O'Donnell was the destination of Filipino and American soldiers who were taken prisoners after the Battle of Bataan on April 9, 1942. In all, the Japanese took approximately 70,000 prisoners – some 60,000 Filipinos and 9,000 Americans – and forced them to march approximately 96 miles to Camp O'Donnell in what would become known as “The Bataan Death March.” Many soldiers died during the force march, and over 21,500 Allied and Filipino soldiers died following their arrival to Camp O'Donnell.



*A black marble wall is engraved with the names of the Filipinos known to have died during the Death March.*

In 1991, the Philippine Government dedicated some 130 acres where Camp O'Donnell once stood as the Capas National Shrine.

To learn more about Camp O'Donnell and the Capas National Shrine, [click here](#).

The following day, we spent the day in Subic Bay, about 50 miles southwest of Angeles City, to visit VFW Post 11447 so that I could give my personal thanks and appreciation for their support throughout the year.

I was then invited back to VFW Post 2485 so that I could be briefed by Boy Scout Troop 485 on their activities and accomplishments over the past year. During the presentation, I was told about the tremendous work that Troop 485 has been completing in their community and was able to witness firsthand the dedication that these Scouts possess.



*It was my honor and pleasure to participate in the BSA Troop 485 awards ceremony and to talk to them about why what they do is so important to both their community and*

for their continued service to our nation and to their membership recruiting and retention.

At the conclusion of the briefing, I had the honor to present awards to two high-achieving Scouts who were in attendance, and took a few moments to address the Post about the importance of community, public, and civil service.

That night, I attended a dinner hosted by the Department and District Commanders and staff, and all five Post Commanders in the region. I personally thanked each and every one of them the organization, and to congratulate them on

## Taiwan

On Sunday, April 21, we flew to Taipei, Taiwan, and were hosted by the Veterans Affairs Council (VAC) leadership. The following morning we met with Republic of China President Tsai Ing-wen and discussed our long standing partnership and ways that the VFW can help deepen the relationship between our two nations.

Our next stop was to the Taipei Veterans General Hospital, where we received a briefing on traditional Chinese medicine by Dr. Fang Pey Chan. During the discussion I was asked if I would be willing to try acupuncture, and I agreed to it. I am happy to announce that I am still fairly pain free.



*I met with ROC President Tsai Ing-wen and discussed the importance of our long standing friendship and ways that we can help further support their military and veterans community.*

Following our tour, we attended a meeting with the VAC leadership, where I was awarded their Medal of Honor, reserved only for distinguished guests who have contributed significantly to Veterans Affairs. We then received a detailed briefing on their organization and veterans empowerment projects, and discussed ways that we may be able to assist some of their future endeavors.

To read more about my meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen, [click here](#).

## Korea

On April 23, we departed Taipei for Seoul, South Korea. When we arrived, we were greeted by Past District Commander Larry Lyons, who escorted us to our hotel and briefed us on the order of events for the following day.

The next morning we departed for the Demilitarized Zone to receive a tour of the Joint Security Area (JSA) and some of the surrounding historical sites, such as the Mount Dora Observatory and the Third Tunnel of Aggression.

Our first stop was Camp Bonifas, which serves as the headquarters for the United Nations Command Security Battalion. We received a briefing from LTC Sean M. Morrow about the importance of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC) and what it's like to be a soldier stationed along the DMZ.



*Commander-in-Chief Lawrence meets with United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission soldiers north of the Military Demarcation Line.*

The Korean Armistice Agreement is unique in that it is purely a military document. A key feature of the armistice is that no nation is a signatory to the agreement. The commander of the UN forces signed the Agreement on behalf of the unified command, consisting of military forces from 16 UN nations and the Republic of Korea. UNCMAC, which is headquartered in Seoul and Panmunjom, is responsible for supervising the Military Armistice Agreement between North and South Korea along the 150-mile-long DMZ.

From Camp Bonifas, we boarded a bus and made the short journey to the JSA and the Panmunjeom Truce Village where we received a tour of the Inter-Korean Peace House and the conference room where South and North Korean officials recently negotiated the terms of a bilateral agreement. Additionally, I had the honor of walking across the Military Demarcation Line for a very brief visit inside North Korea. As a veteran who spent most of my career patrolling this area during the 1980s, it was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me to be on the other side of the DMZ.

We then hosted soldiers from the United Nations Command Security Battalion for lunch at the Camp Bonifas dining facility to learn of their quality of life concerns and issues, and to let them know how the VFW is representing their interests. Among their top concerns was the air quality along the DMZ, as well as staffing and billeting shortages.



*Commander-in-Chief Lawrence receiving a current situational report from LTC Morrow.*

For more information about UNCMAC and the Joint Security Area, please go to <https://8tharmy.korea.army.mil/uncsb/index.asp>.

We then returned to Seoul to meet U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris, a retired Navy admiral and former commander of the Hawaii-based U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).

During our meeting, we discussed the humanitarian and diplomatic importance of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency mission and the tremendous, positive benefit it has had on the road to reconciliation between the two countries. We also listened to some of the recommendations that he had about the transition from service member to veteran status.

To learn more about the U.S. Embassy in Korea, please [click here](#).

The next morning, we traveled to Camp Humphreys and were met by U.S. Forces-Korea (USFK) Protocol Officer Tracy Hyonsuk, who escorted us to Mr. Henry Stuart, who serves as the deputy to the U.S. Army Garrison (USAG) Humphreys commander.

During our meeting, Mr. Stuart talked about the massive amount of construction that has been underway for the past decade to make room for the consolidation of forces, and many of the challenges facing service members, such as access to reliable child care and convenient medical care, and spouse employment concerns.

To learn more about U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys, [click here](#).

We were then escorted over to the USFK Headquarters building to meet with Army Col. Chad Carroll, a VFW life member and the Director of Public Affairs for USFK and United Nations Command.



*After being out of Korea for decades, it was extremely interesting to listen to Army Col. Chad Carroll describe the many ways in which the area has changed.*

Colonel Carroll explained that USFK is responsible for approximately 23,000 American troops stationed in South Korea (mostly Army and Air Force personnel). He stated that the U.S. routinely conducts joint training with South Korean forces in one form or another every single day, and went on to explain the strategic importance of our relationship with the ROK Army and the part that they play in deterring North Korean aggression.

As a VFW life member, Colonel Carroll acknowledged the importance of our mission and welcomed the opportunity to

continue assisting us in whatever way possible.

I was given an installation tour which included stops at the brand new Post Exchange, commissary, MRW facilities, and enlisted living quarters. I had the opportunity to tour two junior enlisted rooms and talk with the residents who were overall pleased with the quality and location of the quarters.

Afterwards I hosted a lunch for more than a dozen active duty service members. During lunch I talked about the history of the VFW and our many programs, especially, Unmet Needs and the Help a Hero scholarship, as well as the important services that we provide as they transition out of the military.



*1SG Clymans provided an exceptional briefing on the quality of life for service members who are assigned to the barracks.*



*I always look forward to engaging with the men and women who raise their right hand to protect our country and our allies.*

I then listened to the service members describe their quality of life at Camp Humphreys and was relieved to hear many describe their time as the most positive experience they have had while in the military.

We then went back to the USFK Headquarters, where we were met by our escort, Ms. Tracy Hyonsuk, and members of the USFK Honor Guard, who led me on a tour of the executive suite, as well as the recently renovated exhibit in the museum to highlight the return of 55 boxes of U.S. remains from North Korea last year.



*The Korean War exhibit at the USFK Museum.*

As we walked around the exhibit, I explained that of the 7,700 American servicemen missing and unaccounted-for on the Korean peninsula, an estimated 5,300 are reportedly in North Korea. I also talked about how our VFW Washington Office worked tirelessly behind the scenes to

ensure that the agenda between President Trump and the North Korean leader included the return of U.S. remains, and shared with them the VFW's history with the Full Accounting Mission.

To learn more about USFK, [click here](#).

We then departed Camp Humphreys for dinner, which was hosted by VFW Post 10223. I thanked the leadership and comrades for their unwavering commitment to accomplishing our membership goals, and for providing such amazing support to the service members, veterans and families who call South Korea home.

The following day, we departed Seoul for the U.S.

### **Closing Comments**

This trip had two purposes: one was to spend time with the Department of the Pacific Areas so I could personally thank them for their role in making this the best membership recruiting and retention year in nearly three decades; and the other was to spend time with our service members and veterans in the region, and to thank them for their dedication, loyalty and sacrifice.

In Guam, the Philippines, and Korea, I made it a point to go to as many VFW Posts to meet as many VFW comrades as I possibly could. To me, there is no VFW without our members, and I wanted to ensure that everyone knew that, especially those who may never get the chance to go to a national convention. The VFW National Organization appreciates everything that they do.

Meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen and members of her cabinet in Taiwan was truly an honor, and I was beyond humbled when she thanked the VFW for its long-lasting friendship and also for being a great role model for Taiwan in how they should take care of their military veterans. Our close relationship is one that has lasted for decades, and we hope to continue that comradeship for decades more.

Visiting Camp Humphreys and the DMZ to shake hands and interact with the men and women doing the same job I did, long before them, was a very special moment. Being able to share my own story and educate them about what VFW does every single day on their behalf was extremely rewarding, and the open dialogue gave them the opportunity to educate me about what their concerns were in this current operating environment.

Ultimately, I am thankful to have been given the opportunity to make this trip as your Commander-in-Chief, and I recommend that every future Chief follows suit. The more that we engage with the military and veterans communities on their turf, the more that we make it clear to all that no one truly does more for them than the VFW.

A special thanks to the USFK and USINDOPACOM protocol teams, the entire Department of the Pacific Areas, and the men and women stationed in Guam and Korea who willfully put their lives on the line every day so that we can enjoy the quality of life that we have as Americans.

-VFW-