

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR
VFW COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF MATTHEW “FRITZ” MIHELICIC
122TH VFW NATIONAL CONVENTION
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI
AUGUST 3, 2021**

“The Time Is Now!”

Thank you, comrades, thank you!

I am truly humbled by this honor. Thank you Terry and Bobby for the nomination, and to my Chief from 2013-2014, Past Commander-In-Chief Bill Thien for installing me.

A special thanks to Illinois’ own Past Commander-In-Chief George Cramer – who will not be joining us today.

Comrades, auxiliary members, family and friends, thank you for letting me share a few moments with you as I begin this great journey as **YOUR** VFW Commander in Chief as we shake off the past and rise again to the challenge of this next year.

“The Time is Now”...I chose that theme some time ago but it was truly prophetic. We have been living for almost two years in the grips of a modern Dark Age. We have not been able to get out to our communities; we have not been able to show the world who we are and what we are; we have lost Posts, members, and prospective members.

But my friends, when it comes to reawakening our spirits and beginning a Renaissance within our beloved Veterans of Foreign Wars, I say “The Time Is Now!”

We need to pick up the torch TODAY and shine our light brightly into every corner of the world, far and wide.

Our mission is simple: Let everyone know the VFW is not dead, it is not dying, and after 122 years we are just beginning to hit our stride!

Yes, 122 years. The moniker of this year’s group of state commanders is “Class 122”. I had to veto “Fritz’s Fearless Followers”!

I may wear the chief’s hat, but I represent and serve all of you. It’s not about any individual.

Rather, we decided to show our service and commitment to the Veterans of Foreign Wars by describing who we are in the grand scheme of 122 years of service to America, our service members, our veterans, and their families.

We are the Commanders of Class 122. We will make a difference and we have all pledged to work together at all levels to, once again, show that our service has not fallen off. We are about service my friends, and we all need to be pulling in the right direction.

None of us are here for any individual glory, least of all me! I'm honored to lead the effort, but a leader is only as good as those who are willing to follow that leadership.

I will give you all I have this year and leave nothing on the table. I ask you to do the same.

My second ask of all of you is to not despair over the past.

Since the first coronavirus case reported in the U.S. back in January 2020, it has been a rough 18 months; that much is true. The pandemic took its toll on our families, our friends, our communities, our livelihood, and in some cases, even our faith. Our country has suffered tremendously.

But we cannot wait until the nation fully recovers before we begin to recover ourselves.

When it comes to taking action in spite of our circumstance, I say "The Time Is Now!"

I'm here to proclaim the past is over and the future is ours for the making. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, we will soar to new heights in the coming year.

There's an energy in the air and I know you can all feel it. The fact that we are able to gather here in Kansas City today proves it.

Many Posts around the world have used this "strategic pause" to refurbish their Post homes; others have used the time to re-engage their membership by calling on current and lapsed members.

The simple act of reaching out and offering a human touch has led to several departments reaching 100% and much, much more in their membership...all in a time of COVID restrictions.

I even went to a VFW dinner banquet in Wisconsin recently with 350 people in attendance – a gathering not possible just a few months ago.

If there are those that can do it in the Dark Ages, during the plague of the modern era, think of what we can ALL do, working together, in the coming Renaissance!

It's time to get "Re-blued," get back to our corps values, and "Service" will be the watchword of the coming year.

Yes, membership numbers are important, but we firmly believe that if we increase our service, increase our community involvement, and partner with other organizations, potential members will be knocking on our doors to join with us.

When it comes to embracing this new generation of veterans and their desire for purpose, motivation and leadership through action, I say "The Time Is Now!"

Today's warriors are not content with sitting in meetings or standing next to a bar complaining. They are doers! Give them something to do, be an active part of your community! They will gladly come out to clean the local park because it is a finite commitment, has a clear goal, and it gives them an opportunity to take a selfie doing great things!

Just like social media is truly a force multiplier for communication, this younger generation of veterans could be a force multiplier for our organization.

So if you're out and about "Hashtag Still Serving" in your communities wearing VFW logo ball caps and t-shirts, potential members will see the VFW's presence, its relevancy and they will want to be part of it. They are our future and we need to begin to pass the torch to them.

I know there is a lot of attention on the current conflict veterans these days and rightfully so.

As we end our nearly 20-year war in Afghanistan, we as a nation owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to the hundreds of thousands of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen who served over the years in the conflict – including 2,420 killed and almost 20-thousand wounded – who sacrificed so much and successfully kept Al-Qaeda from planning and executing another 9/11 attack on American soil since 2001.

To all our brothers and sisters-in-arms who served with honor, valor, and distinction during Operations Enduring Freedom and Resolute Support, we say "Thank you" and "Welcome Home."

Please join me in a show of appreciation for these brave men and women. (*Applause*)

Just as we honor our veterans from the past 20 years, we must not...we cannot...forget all of the living veterans who brought us to this point in our history.

There are many eligible veterans still from World War II and forward who we need to recruit. Korea, Viet Nam, the Pop-Up Conflicts, Desert Storm, Somalia, the Balkans....The VFW is a big tent and we welcome everyone!

It matters not what War or Conflict you were in, what branch, or where you were deployed...if you served and are eligible we want you to be part of us....everyone wants to be part of something bigger than themselves. The VFW offers you that.

Why the need to continue pushing membership? Because the average age of our VFW members is 69 years old and we are teetering on falling below the one-million-member mark. If we go below that, Congress may decide to stop listening to us when it comes to veterans' benefits and legislation.

We were founded on these two things and we cannot let a falling membership deprive all veterans of the powerful voice we have on Capitol Hill. When the VFW speaks, Congress listens, and it needs to stay that way.

If we do not keep that loud voice we will be lost in the sea of whispers along with many of the lesser known veterans groups.

Class 122 has simply said: Not on my watch!

When it comes to strengthening our voice in our nation's capital, I say "The Time Is Now!"

We must continue to press Congress and the administration on issues like toxic exposure, VA claims, and transition assistance. We will leverage every testimony, every engagement, every meeting, every phone call, and even YOU, members of our Action Corps, to get our point across; we will not be ignored.

We need to take back the narrative about the veteran community. We need to declare that we are patriotic beyond our politics, committed to our Constitution, dedicated to our democracy, and resolute toward our republic.

We promise you this...the Veterans of Foreign Wars will finish stronger at the end of the year and we will ensure Congress hears us roar!

Friends, I know this next point is going to hurt some of you, so here it goes. We are no longer in the 20th Century.

Flip phones, modems, computers with 5 ¼ floppy drives? Those are in the museum of forgotten technology. We are firmly in the 21st century.

COVID over the last 18 months has shown us that we can actually have meetings and conduct business virtually...If only I had purchased stock in Zoom a while ago!

That said, the genie is out of the bottle and won't be pushed back.

When it comes embracing new and emerging technologies to carry our message and tell our story, I say "The Time Is Now!"

As I said earlier, Social media is a force multiplier. I've said that twice now because it is the reality of the time we live in. We need to do more to tell the world what we, the VFW, do on a daily basis. It's not bragging if it's the truth!

Email has been around for almost 30 years, and platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been around for 14 and 17 years respectively.

You might disagree, but I've seen too many faces buried in smart phones for too many years...everyone is looking at social media. We must get on that wagon and get on it now.

Social media is the cheapest way to get the word out...it's FREE! If you don't know how to use it, if you're not comfortable with it yet, trust me there are plenty of members and potential

members at our Posts that are. Let them be your social media gurus and they will be posting about everything you are doing.

And, the beauty of Social Media is that you don't have to do all the work yourselves. Through our national accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, on our website and through our podcast, our communications teams in KC and DC put out a great deal of shareable information almost daily.

All you have to do is follow it, share it, and your people will get it instantly. It doesn't get any easier or cheaper.

To paraphrase Oscar Goldman, "We have the technology. We can make our communication better than it was. Better... stronger... faster." There's your Six-Million Dollar quote for the day!

In conclusion, [that means it is time to wake up for those of you in the back], the mission of Class 122 is simple: Show the world we are alive and vibrant, bring all of our Posts into the 21st century by showcasing what we do and do well, and welcome all those eligible to be part of the greatest combat veterans organization the world has ever known.

"The Time Is Now" comrades, now let's get to it!

Thank you!

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