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1. VFW Receives Special U.S. Flag: The director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) presented the VFW one of 55 U.S. flags that draped the 55 transfer cases of American remains when they were repatriated from North Korea to American soil Aug. 1. The flag presentation is a thank you for the VFW's longstanding commitment to bring our fallen home, which included sending a letter to President Trump in advance of the June 12 Singapore Summit to urge him to include the return of American remains as a discussion point with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. "We know for a fact that the reason President Trump brought it to Chairman Kim's attention was because of a strong letter written by the VFW," said DPAA Director Kelly McKeague yesterday, as he presented the flag and photos of the remains repatriation ceremony to VFW Executive Director Bob Wallace. DPAA lists 7,680 missing Americans from the Korean War, with some 5,300 believed to be in North Korea. McKeague said if it weren't for the strong advocacy of the VFW, the MIA issue would not have been a discussion point in Singapore, and more important, the return of the 55 cases of remains would not have happened. [Watch the Facebook Live video.](#)

2. Army Medic to Receive Medal of Honor: The White House announced that former Army medic Staff Sgt. Ronald J. Shurer II will be presented the Medal of Honor on Oct. 1 for fighting his way through an enemy ambush to render aid to wounded Special Forces soldiers and Afghan commandos. On April 6, 2008, his team was navigating its way through Shok Valley in northeastern Afghanistan when a firefight forced his unit into a defensive fighting position. [According to an Army press release](#), Shurer heard that their forward assault element was also pinned down at another location with multiple casualties. He moved through a hail of bullets to reach the pinned-down element, stopped to treat a wounded teammate's neck wound, then spent the next hour fighting across several hundred meters, before finally arriving at the forward

location, where he immediately rendered aid to four critically wounded U.S. soldiers and 10 injured commandos. Soon after, Shurer and his team sergeant were shot at the same time. Despite a gunshot wound to his arm, the medic ran 15 meters through a barrage of gunfire to pull his teammate to cover and rendered care. Moments later, Shurer moved back through heavy fire to help another teammate who had suffered a traumatic amputation to his right leg. Shurer saved the lives of all casualties under his care, to include lowering three critically wounded, non-ambulatory, teammates down a near-vertical 60-foot cliff, while avoiding rounds of enemy gunfire and falling debris caused by numerous air strikes. He was initially awarded the Silver Star, the third-highest award for valor.

3. Health Net Federal Services to Cease Participation in Veterans Choice Program: VA and Health Net Federal Services (HNFS) have elected to end their Patient-Centered Community Care (PC3) and Veterans Choice Program (VCP) contracts effective Sept. 30, 2018. In anticipation of this change, VA medical facilities have already ceased sending new community care authorizations to HNFS. Authorizations already approved by HNFS remain valid and HNFS will continue to assist veterans who need to reschedule appointments for authorized care as long as the new appointment is with the same provider and occurs on or before Sept. 30, 2018. Veterans who wish to change providers or need appointments after Sept. 30 must coordinate appointments through their local VA medical facilities. [Click here to find your nearest VA medical facility.](#) For assistance during this transition, contact the VFW by calling 1-800-VFW-1899 or emailing vfw@vfw.org.

4. VA Secretary Wilkie Testifies before Senate Committee: On Wednesday, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie testified before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs to discuss the progress he has made in his first 60 days. He spoke at length about a variety of topics including implementation of the VFW-supported *VA MISSION Act of 2018*, Blue Water Navy, accountability of wrongdoers, and the department's efforts to modernize its electronic health record. Secretary Wilkie said at the hearing, "the state of VA is better" when describing the department's recent progress. Committee members and Chairman Isakson discussed the need to pass the VFW-supported [H.R. 299, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2018](#). [Watch the hearing](#), which begins at the 14:00-minute.

5. New Rule Changes How VA Calculates Income for Needs-based Benefits: Last week, VA published a [final rule in the Federal Register](#) that will establish a three year look-back period when determining eligibility for income-based benefits, including pension with aid and attendance. The new rule goes into effect on Oct. 18, 2018. It makes several changes, such as increasing the amount of net worth a veteran can have to qualify for pension, and expanding the definition of custodial care to allow veterans to deduct medical expenses for dementia care and third-party care providers. The three year look-back rule is intended to limit asset transfers done solely to qualify for governmental assistance. Such transfers may bar the veteran from receiving pension benefits, until the assets are used for their living expenses. There are some protections in place for veterans to transfer funds without a penalty, such as special needs trusts for the benefit of helpless children and helpless adult children, and trusts where the veteran retains control over the funds. Veterans can also reverse the transfer or buy back the asset in order to avoid the penalty. For questions about VA benefits and assistance with filing a claim, contact a professional, accredited and highly trained [VFW Service Officer near you](#).

6. VA Releases 2016 Veteran Suicide Data: The newest and most recent data for veteran suicide was released by VA on Wednesday, which includes suicide data up to 2016. While there were no statistically significant differences in veteran suicide from 2015 to 2016, there were some varying trends when comparing 2014, 2015 and 2016. Overall, the average number of deaths by suicide is still roughly 20 veterans per day. This recent release also clarifies that the 20 deaths are not strictly for veterans — it is inclusive of veterans, active-duty service members and members of the Guard or Reserve who were never activated. As the number of nonveteran suicide deaths continues to increase within the United States, veteran suicides have remained relatively steady and actually decreased by 202 from 2015 to 2016. The report found a slight increase in death by suicide in veterans ages 18-34. The study's data also maintains that veterans who do not use VA health care are at increased risk of suicide. [Learn more](#) or read the [VA National Suicide Data Report 2005-2016](#).

7. Roundtable on Enewetak Atoll Cleanup: VFW National Legislative Service Director Carlos Fuentes represented the VFW at a House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs roundtable discussion on the health effects experienced by veterans who were exposed to atomic radiation during the Enewetak Atoll Cleanup project. The VFW supports [H.R. 632, the Mark Takai Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act](#), which would expand VA health care and benefits to Enewetak Atoll Cleanup veterans. Subcommittee members and other supporters of H.R. 632 discussed the way forward with DOD and VA officials.

8. Congress Hosts Hearing on Veteran Suicide: The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held its last full committee hearing for the 115th Congress on Thursday. The hearing focused on maximizing effective methods of prevention for veteran suicide and raising awareness for the epidemic. Members of the committee mostly focused their questions on the extensive amount of efforts both within VA and outside the government to eradicate the suicide epidemic, trying to determine which efforts are the most effective. Other topics of conversation included veterans with increased risk of suicide, such as women, survivors of sexual trauma and individuals struggling with dependency or addiction to opioids and benzodiazepines. Read the [VFW's testimony](#) or [watch the hearing](#).

9. TRICARE Retiree Dental Program Update: The current TRICARE Retiree Dental Program (TRDP) will end Dec. 31, 2018, and will be replaced by the Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP) dental coverage options. Vision plans will also be available to eligible TRICARE beneficiaries through FEDVIP. The first opportunity to enroll in FEDVIP is during the 2018 Federal Benefits Open Season, which runs from Nov. 12, 2018, through Dec. 10, 2018 (EST). Coverage begins on Jan. 1, 2019. In general, retired uniformed service members and their families who were eligible for TRDP in 2018 are eligible for FEDVIP dental coverage, and if enrolled in a TRICARE health plan, FEDVIP vision coverage, beginning in 2019. Family members of active-duty uniformed service members who are enrolled in a TRICARE health plan are eligible for FEDVIP vision coverage. [Click here for more information](#).

10. USAF Secretary Discusses Future Initiatives: The VFW was at the National Press Club Wednesday to hear Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson discuss plans to expand the Air Force to counter growing military challenges from Russia and China. Wilson, an Air Force Academy graduate and former National Security Council staffer and congresswoman from New Mexico, commended Congress for being on track to pass a budget that will help her department improve readiness, add 74 new squadrons to the 312 existing ones, and build air power cooperation with allies. She conceded that the Air Force, which has not known peace in the 27 years since Desert Storm ended, is facing a challenge to retain aircrew, especially pilots, during a time of high demand in the civilian sector. Efforts to counter the exodus include improving career choices and reducing overseas deployments. She said she hopes to have 1,400 pilots trained annually under the 2020 budget, up by 300 from two years ago. When asked about the need for a separate branch of the service dedicated to space, Wilson said the U.S. is good at six of the seven arenas concerning space — from global navigation to weather to intelligence. The seventh arena, space superiority, is a problem, she said, and our ability to defend space assets is being challenged. [Read more here.](#)

11. Legislative Wrap-up: Congress passed several important bills this week, including [H.R. 6157](#), which will provide full year funding for the Department of Defense, and the Department of Health and Human Services and includes VFW-supported provisions to ensure DPAA has the resources it needs to fully identify American remains that were recently recovered from North Korea and authority to pay death gratuities during a government shutdown. [S. 3479, the Department of Veterans Affairs Expiring Authorities Act of 2018](#), which will ensure the continuation of important veterans programs that were set to expire Sept. 30. H.R. 6157 and S. 3479 head to the president's desk. The House also passed [H.R. 6398, the Department of Energy Veterans' Health Initiative Act](#), which authorizes the Department of Energy to assist VA in genomic research as part of the [Million Veterans Program](#).

12. MIA Update: This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced 10 new identifications, and the burial date and location for six previously identified servicemen. Returning home with full military honors are:

-- **Marine Corps Capt. John A. House, II**, 28, of Pelham, N.Y., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Sept. 27, 2018 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. On June 30, 1967, House was the pilot of a CH-46A Sea Knight helicopter, who with three other crew members, was attempting to insert eight members of Company A, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, into hostile territory in Thua Thien-Hue Province, Vietnam. As the helicopter approached the landing zone, it was struck by enemy fire from the surrounding tree line, causing the aircraft to crash, killing House. [Read about House.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Lance Cpl. John D. Killen, III**, 18, of Davenport, Iowa, whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Sept. 27, 2018 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. On June 30, 1967, Killen was aboard a CH-46A Sea Knight helicopter that was struck by enemy fire attempting to insert eight members of Company A, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, into hostile territory in Thua Thien-Hue Province, Vietnam. As the helicopter approached the landing zone, it was struck by enemy fire from the surrounding tree line, causing the aircraft crash, killing Killen. [Read about Killen.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Cpl. Glyn L. Runnels, Jr.**, 21, of Birmingham, Ala., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Sept. 27, 2018 in Arlington National Cemetery, near

Washington, D.C. On June 30, 1967, Runnels was aboard a CH-46A Sea Knight helicopter that was struck by enemy fire attempting to insert eight members of Company A, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, into hostile territory in Thua Thien-Hue Province, Vietnam. As the helicopter approached the landing zone, it was struck by enemy fire from the surrounding tree line, causing the aircraft crash, killing Runnels. [Read about Runnels.](#)

-- **U.S. Air Force Reserve Col. Fredric M. Mellor**, 30, of Cranston, R.I., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Sept. 28, in Exeter, R.I. Mellor was assigned to the 20th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, and on temporary duty with the 15th Reconnaissance Task Force. On Aug. 13, 1965, Mellor was flying the lead RF-101C aircraft in a flight of two on a mission to conduct photo and visual reconnaissance over North Vietnam when his aircraft was shot down. North Vietnamese witnesses claimed they saw or participated in the shoot-down of an American aircraft and the capture and death of its pilot on Aug. 13, 1965. [Read about Mellor.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Reserve Pfc. Merton R. Riser**, 19, of Sanborn, Iowa, whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Sept. 28 in his hometown. Riser was assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Riser died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. [Read about Riser.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Robert V. Young**, 23, of Bushnell, Ill., whose remains were previously identified, September 29 in Bardolph, Ill. Young was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Young. [Read about Young.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Edward M. Jones** was a member of Company D, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, supporting Republic of Korea Army attacks against units of the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces near Hoengsong, South Korea. On Feb. 12, 1951 Jones was reported missing in action when he could not be accounted for by his unit. Interment services are pending. [Read about Jones.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. John W. Martin** was a member of Medical Company, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. In late November 1950, his unit was assembled with South Korean soldiers in the 31st Regimental Combat Team on the east side of the Chosin River, North Korea, when his unit was attacked by Chinese forces. Martin was among more than 1,000 members of the RCT killed or captured in enemy territory and was declared missing Dec. 2, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Martin.](#)

-- **Naval Reserve Seaman 2nd Class Deward W. Duncan, Jr.** was assigned to Aviation, Construction, Ordnance, Repair, Navy Fourteen, Standard Landing Craft Unit 4, when a Japanese air raid on Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Gilbert Islands, dropped a bomb near his tent. Duncan was killed January 12, 1944 and was reportedly buried the same day in Cemetery #33. Interment services are pending. [Read about Duncan.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. Lewis E. Price** was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 109th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division, which moved into the Hürtgen Forest in Germany, to relieve U.S. forces who had been fighting for weeks. The fighting in and around the forest was frequently chaotic, and while details surrounding his loss are sparse, he was reported missing in action as of Nov. 6, 1944 when his reconnaissance patrol failed to return from a mission. Interment services are pending. [Read about Price.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Millard Burk** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Burk. Interment services are pending. [Read about Burk.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class David B. Edmonston** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Edmonston. Interment services are pending. [Read about Edmonston.](#)

-- **Navy Electrician's Mate 3rd Class Merle A. Smith** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Smith. Interment services are pending. [Read about Smith.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Claude O. Gowey** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Gowey. Interment services are pending. [Read about Gowey.](#)

-- **Navy Storekeeper 2nd Class Gerald L. Clayton** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Clayton. Interment services are pending. [Read about Clayton.](#)

-- **Navy Musician 2nd Class Francis E. Dick** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Dick. Interment services are pending. [Read about Dick.](#)

To sign up new veterans' advocates, click here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>.

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to yfwac@vfw.org.