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1. VFW Hosts VSO Leadership Conference: VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence hosted a successful leadership conference at the VFW Washington Office this week. He was joined by the leadership of the American Legion, AMVETS, Vietnam Veterans of America, Disabled Veterans of America and Paralyzed Veterans of America. The purpose of the conference was to share areas of mutual concern as they pertain to taking care of veterans, service members and their families from all generations, and to discuss individual organizational goals and priorities for the new year. A press conference immediately followed. That Tuesday would be Day 25 of the partial government shutdown was an unfortunate coincidence, but it did provide “us an opportunity to recognize the United States Coast Guard, which is very much impacted by this shutdown, as well as 800,000 other federal employees, a third of whom are veterans,” said Lawrence. “Federal government employees missed their first paycheck last Friday. On Tuesday, more than 41,000 active-duty Coast Guardsmen missed theirs. We do not want anyone to miss a second, which is why the VFW calls upon the Administration and Congress to reach an agreement that takes care of our Coast Guard and the hundreds of thousands of other dedicated employees whose daily job is to help the rest of America sleep better at night.”

2. Pay Our Coast Guard: The federal government has been in a partial shutdown for more than three weeks because Congress and the administration cannot reach an agreement on border protection. The Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense have full-year appropriations and are not directly impacted by the shutdown. However, the U.S. Coast Guard and more than 150,000 veterans who are federal employees are very much impacted by the shutdown. [Tell Congress and the White House to pay our Coast Guard and end this harmful shutdown.](#)

3. Shutdown Not Affecting TRICARE Despite Missed Payments: This week the Defense Health Agency (DHA) stated that as a result of the partial government shutdown, allotments used by some TRICARE patients to pay enrollment fees and dental premiums had not been processed through the U.S. Coast Guard pay center. DHA has since released guidance to members of the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Public Health Service, the commissioned corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, family members, and survivors assuring them that any beneficiary who falls into the aforementioned categories that pays through allotment won't be disenrolled for nonpayment, and that no action is required at this time. TRICARE is not impacted by the shutdown and will continue to process claims. [Learn more here.](#)

4. Independent Budget Releases VA Roadmap for 116th Congress: The VFW yesterday, along with coauthors Disabled American Veterans and Paralyzed Veterans of America, released [The Independent Budget Veterans Agenda for the 116th Congress](#), which contains policy recommendations to ensure that VA remains fully funded and capable of carrying out its mission to serve veterans and their families both now and in the future. The Independent Budget is a roadmap for Congress, VA and the Administration to navigate critical veteran issues in the areas of benefits, health care, infrastructure, education, employment, training and memorial concerns facing veterans and their families. The three partnering organizations have coauthored The Independent Budget for more than 30 years. "Ensuring veterans are able to achieve their post-military educational goals has never been more important, so the Independent Budget VSOs will hold VA and Congress accountable for the proper implementation of the Forever GI Bill," said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence. The Independent Budget is being delivered to congressional leaders and VA, and is now [available for the public to read online.](#)

5. DHA MSO/VSO Roundtable: On Wednesday, the VFW participated in the monthly Defense Health Agency (DHA) MSO/VSO roundtable led by DHA Deputy Director Guy Kiyokawa. The briefing included an overview and update of the TRICARE implementation in the East and West, an update regarding TRICARE pharmacy formulary restructuring, a discussion regarding any impact that the FEDVIP implementation may have as a result of the government shutdown, an overview on the next round of TRICARE reforms, and a briefing on next generation 3-D mammography. [Contact the VFW](#) if you have encountered issues receiving care after the recent changes.

6. Burn Pit Legislation Introduced: This week Representatives Tulsi Gabbard and Brian Mast, along with Senators Amy Klobuchar and Dan Sullivan, introduced the VFW-supported *Burn Pit Accountability Act* to help add service members and veterans to the burn pit registry. The bipartisan bill would improve how DOD and VA track, treat, and prevent the harmful impacts of burn pits. [Learn more about the bill.](#)

7. Mare Island Legislation Reintroduced: This week, Congressman Mike Thompson and Senator Dianne Feinstein reintroduced VFW-supported legislation to transfer ownership and maintenance of the Mare Island Naval Cemetery in Vallejo, Calif., to VA. The final resting place for more than 800 veterans, including three Medal of Honor recipients, has fallen into disrepair after the Mare Island Navy Shipyard was closed. The VFW-supported legislation would ensure Mare Island Naval Cemetery is restored and maintained as a national shrine. [Learn more about Mare Island.](#)

8. VA Million Veteran Program Tops 725,000 Enrollees: The results of most nationwide opinion surveys are based on just a few thousand respondents. The VA's Million Veteran Program is different, and that's why they want to enroll 1 million veterans to help researchers understand what illnesses might be associated with where and when veterans served. The goal of the voluntary research program is to partner with VA-enrolled veterans to study how genes affect health by safely collecting and storing blood samples and health information. The large sample population will then allow researchers to better study diseases like diabetes and cancer, and military-related illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. [Learn more.](#)

9. January is Mental Wellness Month: January is National Mental Wellness Month. Occasional feelings of sadness are part of normal life, but it is important to know when to seek help if emotions continue for extended periods of time or are associated with feelings of hopelessness and despair. VA provides an online screening test through [MyHealtheVet](#). The 10-question test does not require you to have an account or to log in. The test also provides pop-up information for individuals who are at high risk of suicide. The clinical results are available with directions to print, if desired. [Take the test.](#)

10. VA Announces Community Support, Caregiver Partnership: VA announced a new partnership CaringBridge this week to better connect veterans and their caregivers with their local communities. CaringBridge, a global nonprofit focused on social networking, provides personal websites that are free and secure as a platform for veterans and their families to assist in communicating with others. This platform is set up in the form of a private, online journal. CaringBridge has launched a website specific for veterans, current service members, and their families. Learn more about [CaringBridge's support for military families on health journeys.](#)

11. MIA Update: This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced four new identifications. Returning home with full military honors are:

-- **Naval Reserve Lt. Richard C. Lannom** was a bombardier-navigator aboard an A-6A Intruder assigned to Attack Squadron Three Five, USS Enterprise. On March 1, 1968, during a night strike mission over North Vietnam, contact with Lannom's aircraft was lost and his plane did not return to the ship. An extensive search was conducted with negative results. Based on this information, Lannom and his pilot were declared missing in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Lannom.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces Sgt. John Kalausich** was a member of the 642nd Bombardment Squadron, 409th Bombardment Group, 9th Bombardment Division, 9th Air Force. On March 21, 1945, Kalausich was aboard an A-26B when it was hit by anti-aircraft fire and went missing during a combat mission from Couvron, France, to Dülmen, Germany. Kalausich's aircraft had been participating in the interdiction campaign to obstruct German troop movements in preparation for the Allied crossing of the Rhine River on March 23, 1945. Interment services are pending. [Read about Kalausich.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces Sgt. Vernon L. Hamilton** was a member of the 642nd Bombardment Squadron, 409th Bombardment Group, 9th Bombardment Division, 9th Air Force. On March 21, 1945, Hamilton was aboard an A-26B when it was hit by anti-aircraft fire and went missing during a combat mission from Couvron, France, to Dülmen, Germany. Hamilton's aircraft had been participating in the interdiction campaign to obstruct German troop movements in

preparation for the Allied crossing of the Rhine River on March 23, 1945. Interment services are pending. [Read about Hamilton.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Grant C. Cook** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Cook. Interment services are pending. [Read about Cook.](#)

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.