



March 1, 2019

In This Issue:

- 1. VFW to Deliver Veterans' Voices to Congress**
- 2. VFW National Awards to be Presented at Legislative Conference**
- 3. Watch Legislative Conference Highlights Online**
- 4. VA Announces Expedited Claims for Purple Heart Veterans at Oversight Hearing**
- 5. Secretary Wilkie Testifies Before House Committee**
- 6. Congressional Hearing on Access to VA for Women Veterans**
- 7. MIA Update**

1. VFW to Deliver Veterans' Voices to Congress: More than 500 VFW and VFW Auxiliary members are arriving in the nation's capital this weekend to urge their respective members of Congress to continue improving the programs and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Highlighting the annual legislative conference will be VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence's testimony Wednesday at 10 a.m. before a special joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs in room G-50 of the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Topping his list of VFW legislative priorities is passage of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, a call for full congressional oversight over the implementation of the VA Mission Act of 2018 and the combined VA and Defense Department electronic health record initiative. Other priorities include improving burn pits research and accountability, eliminating the so-called "Widow's Tax," allowing military retirees to receive full retirement pay and disability pay without offset, and expanding and improving VA health care and research programs. [Read the VFW's full list of 2019 Priority Goals.](#)

2. VFW National Awards to be Presented at Legislative Conference: Three national awards will be presented at the legislative conference.

— The 2019 VFW Congressional Award will go to Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Johnny Isakson for securing the passage of numerous VFW legislative priority goals, to include expediting VA employee accountability, modernizing the VA appeals process, Forever GI Bill passage, improving veterans' health care through the VA MISSION Act, and expanding caregiver programs to veterans of all eras.

— The 2019 VFW News Media Award will go to Military Times Deputy Editor Leo Shane, whose reporting helps Congress, the administration, military service members, their families, and all of America to better understand the unique challenges that those involved in our nation's wars encounter both in uniform and afterwards.

— And a \$30,000 scholarship will be awarded to the winner of the annual [VFW Voice of Democracy program](#), a patriotic-themed audio contest that this year judged more than 40,000 high school student entries. The winner will be joined onstage by 2019 VFW Patriot's Pen first-place winner Daniel Rodriguez, a sixth-grade student from Nogales, Ariz., who bested more than 111,000 other middle school students to win the \$5,000 top prize.

3. Watch Legislative Conference Highlights Online: The VFW will again livestream this year's conference. Visit www.vfw.org/VFWDC2019 on Monday at 6 p.m. EST to watch the Voice of Democracy Parade of Winners, and on Wednesday at 2:00 p.m. EST to watch the VFW national commander's congressional testimony. Look for #VFWDC2019 on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), and be sure to visit www.vfw.org/VFWDC2019 for all the latest legislative conference updates beginning Sunday.

4. VA Announces Expedited Claims for Purple Heart Veterans at Oversight Hearing:

On Tuesday, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie and Veterans Health Administration Executive in Charge Dr. Richard Stone testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies on the current improvements to VA customer service, MISSION Act implementation, business transformation, and VA/DOD collaboration. Secretary Wilkie announced that effective in April, VA will provide priority disability benefits claims processing for the initial claims from discharged combat veterans who have been awarded the Purple Heart Medal. Wilkie also said that the state of VA is getting stronger, but there is still an enormous amount of work that needs to be done with veterans' homelessness, opioid safety & reduction efforts, and women's health. [Read the testimony](#) or [watch the hearing](#).

5. Secretary Wilkie Testifies Before House Committee: On Wednesday the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held its first hearing of this Congress to address the future of VA. The name of the hearing was "VA 2030: A Vision for the Future of VA" because Chairman Takano is seeking to look ahead to make improvements within VA over the next decade. At the hearing, VA Secretary Wilkie spoke about the improvements VA has made since his tenure began and how proud he is of his workforce. The topics discussed at the hearing included homelessness, Blue Water Navy veterans, VA infrastructure, women veterans, and many others. The VFW applauds Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe for looking for innovative ways to continue to improve VA and seek to avoid future pitfalls. [Watch the hearing](#).

6. Congressional Hearing on Access to VA for Women Veterans: The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies held a hearing on Thursday regarding women veterans' access to VA. Those who testified included Chief Consultant VA Women's Health Services Dr. Patricia Hayes and VA National Mental Health Director for Family Services, Women's Mental Health and Military Sexual Trauma Dr. Susan McCutcheon. VA focused on the rapid increase of 500,000 women who use VA and how it is enhancing its services. VA has worked to expand gender-specific training, advocacy and program managers, and increased access in rural communities. VA stated the top problem it repeatedly encounters is the ability to maintain providers with gender-specific expertise. Further details were given on gender-specific primary care, gynecology, maternity care, infertility and adoption reimbursement services, mental health services, military sexual trauma services, and child care. VA also discussed efforts to expand the Women Veteran Call Center and mammogram sites, and to improve their quality of care while eliminating barriers. Dr. Hayes concluded her testimony with, "VA continues to make significant strides in enhancing the language, practice, and culture of the Department to be more inclusive of women veterans. These gains would not have been possible without consistent congressional commitment in the form of

both attention and financial resources. It is critical that we continue to move forward with the current momentum and preserve the gains made thus far.” [Read the testimony](#) or [watch the hearing](#).

7. MIA Update: This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced 12 new identifications. Returning home with full military honors are:

-- **Navy Reserve Journalist 3rd Class Raul A. Guerra** was a passenger on board an E-1B Tracer, en route from Chu Lai Air Base to the aircraft carrier USS Oriskany. On Oct. 8, 1967, radar contact with the aircraft was lost, and adverse weather hampered subsequent search efforts. Wreckage was spotted along a mountainside approximately 11 miles northwest of Da Nang. Because of the location and presence of hostile forces, ground recovery could not be conducted. Guerra, as well as the four other service members on board, were declared killed in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Guerra](#).

-- **Army Cpl. Benjamin W. Scott** Company M, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. In July 1950, his unit was engaged in combat actions against the North Korean forces in the vicinity of Choch’iwon, South Korea. Scott was declared missing in action on July 12, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Scott](#).

-- **Army Capt. Rufus J. Hyman** was an infantry officer with Company A, 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. In July 1950, his unit was engaged in combat actions against the North Korean forces in the vicinity of Kwonbin-ni, South Korea. Hyman was declared missing in action on July 30, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Hyman](#).

-- **Army Pfc. James C. Williams** Medical Company, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, when he was killed in action near Taejon, South Korea. On July 20, 1950, eye witnesses stated that Williams was killed while trying to transport patients from the Taejon Air Strip. Despite multiple attempts to recover Williams’ remains, he was declared non-recoverable on Jan. 16, 1956. Interment services are pending. [Read about Williams](#).

-- **Army Cpl. Stephen P. Nemeč** was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. In late 1950 his unit was engaged in heavy fighting against the Chinese People’s Volunteer Forces at Turtle Head’s Bend, near the village of Unsan, North Korea. Nemeč was killed in action on Nov. 2, 1950, and was buried at United Nation’s Military Cemetery (UNMC) Pyongyang. Interment services are pending. [Read about Nemeč](#).

-- **Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Carl M. Shaffer** was a member of the 38th Bombardment Squadron, 30th Bombardment Group, stationed at Hawkins Field, Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Gilbert Islands, when the B-24J bomber aircraft he was aboard crashed into Tarawa lagoon shortly after takeoff. Shaffer and the nine other servicemen aboard the aircraft were killed. Interment services are pending. [Read about Shaffer](#).

-- **Army Air Forces 1st Lt. Burleigh E. Curtis** was a member of the 377th Fighter Squadron, 362nd Fighter Group, piloting a P-47D aircraft on a dive-bomb attack near Briouze, France, when his plane crashed. Witnesses reported that he was not seen bailing out of the aircraft prior to the crash. Interment services are pending. [Read about Curtis](#).

-- **Navy Reserve Seaman 2nd Class Ira N. Slaton** was stationed aboard the USS Colorado, which was moored approximately 3,200 yards from the shore of Tinian Island, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Early in the morning, the USS Colorado came under attack by a concealed Japanese shore battery. From the attack, four crewmen were declared missing in action, and 39 personnel were killed, including Slaton. Interment services are pending. [Read about Slaton](#).

-- **Army Pfc. Clifford M. Mills** was a member of the 319th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, which participated in Operation Market Garden, the invasion of the German-occupied Netherlands. On Sept. 18, 1944, Mills was reported missing in action in the vicinity of Wyler and Zyfflich, Germany. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mills.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Walter B. Stone** was a pilot in the 350th Fighter Squadron, 353rd Fighter Group, VIII U.S. Fighter Command. On Oct. 22, 1943, Stone was killed when his P-47 Thunderbolt aircraft crashed in northern France during a bomber escort mission. Because France was enemy-occupied territory at the time of the crash, search and recovery operations were not possible. Interment services are pending. [Read about Stone.](#)

-- **Navy Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Archie T. Miles** 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 Miles. Interment services are pending. [Read about Miles.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class David B. Edmonston** 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 Edmonston. Interment services are pending. [Read about Edmonston.](#)

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 vfwac@vfw.org.