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1. Joint Congressional Hearing on VFW Legislative Priorities: VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence called for full congressional oversight over the implementation of the *VA MISSION Act of 2018* before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs on Wednesday. The Chief's testimony highlighted the VFW's annual legislative conference in which more than 500 VFW and Auxiliary members came to Washington to push the [VFW's legislative priority goals](#) with their respective members of Congress. Regarding the MISSION Act, Lawrence made it clear the VFW was dissatisfied with the VA's implementation thus far, citing arbitrary and misguided decision-making. "Unlike appeals modernization, VA has elected to largely ignore the views of the nation's largest war veterans' organization when drafting rules to implement the VA MISSION Act," he said. "VA executive leadership should be embarrassed that they have discontinued VA's strong collaborative relationship with the VFW and chosen to make arbitrary decisions without consulting those who most intimately understand VA's mission and the needs of the veterans' community." Other priority issues he testified about were Blue Water Navy veterans, the legacy appeals backlog, veteran's suicide, burn pits, concurrent receipt of retirement pay and service-connected disability compensation, ending the "Widow's Tax," and improving gender-specific care for women veterans, among many others. Video of the testimony is available at vfw.org/VFWDC2019, and the [written version can be accessed here](#).

2. National Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End Veteran Suicide: On Tuesday, VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence joined President Donald J. Trump at the White House for the signing of an executive order that commissions an inter-agency Veteran Wellness, Empowerment, and Suicide Prevention Task Force. The task force will develop a "Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide" that enables cooperation between nation, state, and local services to integrate services for veterans. "Suicide is a serious issue," said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence. "We must do everything possible to save the 20 veterans who take their own lives every day, as well as encourage the 14 of every 20 who are not enrolled in the VA to get enrolled. The VFW agrees that addressing this issue takes a collaborative effort among federal agencies and applauds the creation of a taskforce for that purpose," he said. "The answer to the veterans suicide crisis is not in Washington, but through

increased federal funding and community partnerships everyone can have an impact. Through the VFW Mental Wellness Campaign, VFW Posts throughout the world have been helping to destigmatize mental health by educating veterans and their families on the signs of emotional distress and informing veterans of resources in their local communities. The VFW stands prepared to assist in every way possible.” [Read the executive order.](#) [Watch the signing ceremony.](#)

3. Desert Storm Memorial Site Dedication: The VFW joined with hundreds of veterans and officials to dedicate the site of the new National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial last week at the corner of 23rd Street and Constitution Ave., NW, in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial and near the Vietnam Wall. Special guest speakers were former Vice President and then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, retired Air Force Gen. Chuck Horner, former U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait Ed Gnehm, and current Kuwait Ambassador to the U.S. Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Representing the VFW on the dais were the Memorial Foundation President/CEO Scott Stump, a Life member of the VFW Department of North Carolina, and Kentucky Lt. Gov. Jenean Hampton, a Life member of VFW Post 4075 in Frankfort, Ky. [More about the memorial here.](#)

4. DOD ‘Tenant Bill of Rights’: On Thursday, the three service secretaries and the Joint Chiefs testified before the Senate Committee on Armed Services. The hearing focused on accountability to provide safe military housing and other building infrastructure to service members and their families. To ensure service members and their families have safe and adequate living conditions and proper legal protections, the service secretaries have created a Tenant Bill of Rights. It would provide a major overhaul of the military's two-decade old housing privatization program. Key provisions include: requiring the military to renegotiate contracts with the real estate companies and bondholders who back the deals; will impose new controls on the landlords operating on military bases; allow military base tenants to withhold rent payments from landlords if housing troubles persist; and guarantee tenants' access to housing advocates when they dispute landlords, or allow them to move, at no cost, to "suitable lodging" if repairs aren't made. [Watch the hearing.](#) [Read a draft](#) of the Tenant Bill of Rights.

5. Transition of Service Members and Veterans into the Merchant Marine: On Monday, President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order to “promote employment opportunities for United States military veterans while growing the cadre of trained United States mariners available to meet United States requirements for national and economic security.” The executive order requires the United States Committee on the Marine Transportation System, DOD, and the Department of Homeland Security to streamline credentialing and transition of service members into the Merchant Marines. [Read the executive order.](#)

6. MIA Update: This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced 16 new identifications. Returning home with full military honors are:
-- **Mr. Edward J. Weissenback** an employee of Air America Incorporated, was piloting an Air America C-123K from Udorn Airfield, Kingdom of Thailand, headed for Xienhom District, Xaingnabouli Province, Laos. The aircraft was on a routine resupply mission for the U.S. Agency for International Development and was last heard from when they were northeast of Sayaboury, Laos. Search and rescue efforts were continued through Dec. 31, 1971, but no sign of

the aircraft or the four crewmembers were found. Weissenback was subsequently reported missing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Weissenback.](#)

-- **Mr. Roy F. Townley** an employee of Air America Incorporated, was piloting an Air America C-123K from Udorn Airfield, Kingdom of Thailand, headed for Xienhom District, Xaingnabouli Province, Laos. The aircraft was on a routine resupply mission for the U.S. Agency for International Development and was last heard from when they were northeast of Sayaboury, Laos. Search and rescue efforts were continued through Dec. 31, 1971, but no sign of the aircraft or the four crewmembers were found. Townley was subsequently reported missing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Townley.](#)

-- **Mr. George L. Ritter** an employee of Air America Incorporated, was piloting an Air America C-123K from Udorn Airfield, Kingdom of Thailand, headed for Xienhom District, Xaingnabouli Province, Laos. The aircraft was on a routine resupply mission for the U.S. Agency for International Development and was last heard from when they were northeast of Sayaboury, Laos. Search and rescue efforts were continued through Dec. 31, 1971, but no sign of the aircraft or the four crewmembers were found. Ritter was subsequently reported missing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Ritter.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. John G. Krebs**, was a member of Company L, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. On July 11, 1950, his unit was engaged in combat operations against the North Korean People's Army south of Chonui, South Korea, when he was declared missing in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Krebs.](#)

-- **Army Master Sgt. Charlie J. Mares** was a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division when his unit engaged in combat against the Korean People's Army. Mares was reported missing in action following a battle fought near Kwonbin-ni, South Korea, on July 31, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mares.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Seaman 2nd Class Deward W. Duncan** 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 Jan. 12, 1944, and was reportedly buried the same day in Cemetery #33. Interment services are pending. [Read about Duncan.](#)

-- **Marine Corps. Cpl. Claire E. Goldtrap** was assigned to Company A, 2nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion, 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. Goldtrap died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943, during the first wave of the assault. Interment services are pending. [Read about Goldtrap.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class John O. Morris** was a member of Carrier Aircraft Service Unit (CASU) 17. In November 1943, American units landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands, in an attempt to secure the island. On Dec. 16, 1943, Morris was killed during the test-firing of a machine gun. The weapon accidentally discharged, killing Morris. He was buried on the island, in Cemetery #33. Interment services are pending. [Read about Morris.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Cread E. Shuey** was a member of Battery G, 60th Coast Artillery Regiment, serving in the Philippines, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands. Shuey was among those reported captured, and one of the thousands who were eventually moved to the Cabanatuan POW camp. More than 2,500 POWs perished in this camp during the remaining years of the war. Interment services are pending. [Read about Shuey.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Angelo M. Gabriele** was stationed aboard the USS West Virginia, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The ship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly sink, but not capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 106 crewmen, including Gabriele. Interment services are pending. [Read about Gabriele.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Ernest R. West** 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 West. Interment services are pending. [Read about West.](#)

-- **Navy Ensign Charles M. Stern, Jr.** 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 Stern. Interment services are pending. [Read about Stern.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Hale McKissack** 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 McKissack. Interment services are pending. [Read about McKissack.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Billy J. Johnson** 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 Johnson. Interment services are pending. [Read about Johnson.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Oris V. Brandt** 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 Brandt. Interment services are pending. [Read about Brandt.](#)

-- **Navy Fire Controlman 3rd Class Victor P. Tumlinson** 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 Tumlinson. Interment services are pending. [Read about Tumlinson.](#)

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.