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1. Beyond the Call Award: On Wednesday, the VFW presented U.S. Air Force Senior Master Sergeant (Retired) Jeremy Kitzhaber with the VFW's "Beyond the Call" Award. Kitzhaber served 22 years in the Air Force and now serves as the legislative committee chairman for VFW Post 63 in Boise, Idaho. Kitzhaber played an instrumental role in the fight to eliminate the unjust Widow's Tax. Jeremy worked on ending the Widow's Tax while fighting his own health battle with Pseudomyxoma Peritonei from his exposure to radiological, chemical, and biological hazards while serving our country. [Watch the ceremony.](#)

2. VFW Testifies at Economic Opportunity Legislative Hearing: On Wednesday, VFW National Legislative Service Deputy Director Pat Murray testified before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding pending legislation on issues such as S.T.E.M. eligibility extension, GI Bill comparison tool, and VA auto grants, to name a few. At the hearing Murray stated, "Ultimately, the VFW would like to see VA's auto grant program available for veterans to use for each new lease of a vehicle, or every five years, whichever comes first." [Watch the hearing.](#)

3. Legislation Introduced to Establish a Presumption for Blast Exposure: Last Thursday, Representative Nydia Velazquez (D-N.Y.) introduced VFW-supported H.R. 5739, the *Blast Exposure Protection Act of 2020*. This important legislation would establish a presumption of service-connection for disabilities associated with blast exposures, which will make it easier for veterans to prove that health conditions are related to their military service. "Traumatic brain injury and other conditions associated with blast exposure are very serious health issues," stated VFW National Legislative Service Associate Director Matthew Doyle. "Many service members go untreated for blast injuries while in service, which makes it difficult to prove that these conditions were caused by an event in service. The VFW is proud to support the *Blast Exposure Protection Act of 2020*, which would ensure that veterans who were exposed to blasts during military service receive the care and benefits they desperately need." The VFW thanks Rep.

Velazquez for introducing this legislation and for her efforts to expand disability benefits for veterans. [Learn more](#).

4. House Holds Joint Hearing on Military Sexual Trauma: On Wednesday, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittees on Health, and Oversight and Investigations, held a joint hearing to discuss how VA supports survivors of military sexual trauma (MST). Survivors of MST often exhibit symptoms associated with PTSD, such as anxiety, sleeplessness, intrusive thoughts, agitation, and an inability to concentrate. Many survivors of MST do not report their assaults to their commanders or medical professionals, which makes it difficult to develop a claim for VA benefits. At the hearing, Ranking Member Jack Bergman (R-Mich.) stated, "We need to make sure that veterans applying for benefits for MST related conditions are treated with dignity and evaluated fairly." [Watch the hearing](#).

5. Senate Holds Oversight Hearing on VA Community Care: On Wednesday, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee held a [hearing](#) on the implementation of VA's Community Care Network (CCN) program and MISSION Act requirements. Testifying were senior leaders of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the CEOs of both CCN providers. While all witnesses testified that the implementation of CCN is progressing smoothly, questions were raised about the speed at which providers are being reimbursed and the backlog of provider payments on VA's books. VA is working on new processes to speed turnaround time for reimbursements and expects to be caught up by the fall. The issue was raised that CCN contracts do not reflect MISSION Act standards for community care as the contracts were awarded prior to the MISSION Act's passage into law. VA pledged to move toward MISSION Act standards in the CCN program and the contractors both testified that they strive to meet the MISSION Act's more stringent standards for access and timeliness. The VFW will continue to monitor the implementation and [advocate for changes](#) where necessary. If you have had positive or negative experiences with VA health care, including the Community Care Networks or the MISSION Act, share your experiences through the VFW's VA Health Care Watch by [email](#) or phone at 1.800.VFW.1899.

6. Student Veterans May Receive Financial Relief: VA has recently implemented Sections 107 and 501 of the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017*, commonly referred to as the Forever GI Bill. The law requires student veterans to receive their monthly housing allowance based on the zip code of the school where they actually take the majority of their classes, not the zip code for the main campus. This change could cause student veteran's monthly housing allowance to be decreased. VA is offering impacted individuals the opportunity to apply for one-time relief to help with the transition to a lower rate. Those affected will need to fill out [VA Form 22-10204](#), and submit the form through the [Ask a Question Portal](#), or mail the form to the [Regional Processing Office of Jurisdiction](#), or call the Education Call Center at 1.888.442.4551.

7. VA Transitioning to New Electronic Health Record System: In May 2018, VA began a 10-year effort to migrate veteran health data into a modern electronic health record that will give VA providers secure access to patients' complete medical histories from the time they enter military service through transition to veteran status. How VA's Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) effort will affect each individual veteran depends on two primary

factors: whether their military records already exist in a digital form, and when EHRM is being implemented in their region. VA will begin deploying its new system in March at select VA medical facilities in the Pacific Northwest, and will install the system nationwide over the next several years.

8. Meeting in Atlanta on Water Contamination at Camp Lejeune: The [Agency for Toxic Substances and Diseases Registry \(ATSDR\)](#), a federal public health agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is holding a Camp Lejeune Community Assistance Panel meeting for anyone who was at Camp Lejeune, N. C., from 1953-1987. The meeting is scheduled Feb. 13, 2020, at 9 a.m. EST, and will address the ongoing research regarding water contamination discovered at the installation in 1982. [Learn more.](#)

9. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced three new identifications, and three burial updates for service members who have been missing and unaccounted-for from WWII and the Korean War. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **U.S. Marine Corps Pfc. Royal L. Waltz**, 20, was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 18th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, which 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. Waltz died between the first and second day of the battle, Nov. 20-21, 1943. Interment services are pending. [Read about Waltz.](#)

-- **U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Cpl. Oscar E. Koskela**, 22, was a member of Headquarters Company, 29th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, when American forces participated in the battle for Saipan, part of a larger operation to secure the Mariana Islands. Koskela reportedly sustained wounds in combat and was taken onboard the USS Solace for treatment. He died onboard the ship on June 18, 1944. Interment services are pending. [Read about Koskela.](#)

-- **U.S. Navy Chief Machinist's Mate Lada Smisek**, 42, served at the Naval Ammunition Depot and Submarine Base in Cavite, Philippine Islands, when Japanese forces invaded. Intense fighting continued until the surrender of the Bataan peninsula on April 9, 1942, and of Corregidor Island on May 6, 1942. Smisek was among those reported captured after the surrender of Corregidor and held at the Cabanatuan POW camp. Interment services are pending. [Read about Smisek.](#)

-- **U.S. Navy Fireman 1st Class Hadley I. Heavin**, 23, of Baxter Springs, Kansas, was assigned to the battleship USS West Virginia, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 106 crewmen, including Heavin. He will be buried May 23, 2020, in his hometown. [Read about Heavin.](#)

-- **U.S. Navy Fireman 1st Class Rex E. Wise**, 21, of South Haven, Kansas, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Wise. He will be buried April 22, 2020, in Braman, Oklahoma. [Read about Wise.](#)

-- **U.S. Army Cpl. Arthur C. Ramirez**, 19, of Pima, Arizona, was a member of Battery B, 57th Field Artillery Battalion, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 6, 1950, when enemy forces attacked his unit near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. His remains

could not be recovered following the attack. Ramirez will be buried March 19, 2020, in Marana, Arizona. [Read about Ramirez.](#)

To sign up new veterans' advocates, visit: <https://votervoice.net/VFW/register>.

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.

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