



May 25, 2018

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1. Congress Sends Historic VA MISSION Act to President: On Wednesday, with a vote of 92-5, the Senate overwhelmingly passed S. 2372, the [VA MISSION Act of 2018](#). The VFW thanks the Senators who put veterans first and voted in favor of this important bill, which is the result of bipartisan and bicameral work by members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs to improve VA health care, expand caregiver benefits to pre-9/11 veterans, fix the Choice Program, consolidate VA's confusing community care programs and improve VA's infrastructure to better serve veterans. The bill now heads to the White House. President Trump has announced he will sign it. The VFW thanks its members and supporters who wrote and called their members of Congress. [See how your senators voted.](#) [See how your representative voted.](#)

2. VFW Visits US Naval Academy: On Thursday, VFW Sr. Vice Commander Vincent "B.J." Lawrence and VFW National Security and Foreign Affairs Director John Towles attended an awards ceremony at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. The VFW recognized Midshipman 1st Class Christopher Cantillo for his hard work and dedication by presenting him with a sword on behalf of the organization. The VFW thanks the U.S. Naval academy for the opportunity to attend the ceremony and wishes to extend our sincerest congratulations to the entire graduating class of 2018.

3. DHA MSO/VSO Working Group: On Wednesday, the VFW participated in the monthly Defense Health Agency (DHA) MSO/VSO Working Group led by DHA Deputy Director Guy

Kiyokawa. The meeting provided updates on pediatric services at Womack Army Medical Center, medical treatment records for dependents and an implementation update concerning last year's National Defense Authorization Act. Also discussed was the importance of ensuring that beneficiaries who pay their premiums and fees by credit card have contacted their new regional contractor to ensure that their payment information is correct. Beneficiaries who fail to authorize or update their payment information with their new TRICARE contractor before May 31, 2018, will lose coverage, must wait a full year to re-enroll and will also incur additional enrollment fees. As of May, there were still approximately 16,000 beneficiaries who have failed to update their payment information. If you are unsure of your current payment authorization status, please [contact your regional TRICARE contractor](#).

4. Memorial Day Weekend Activities in Washington: There are a host of activities and events planned for Memorial Day weekend in our nation's capital, May 25-28. The VFW-supported and USAA-sponsored Poppy Wall, located on the southwestern side of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, will be open to the public from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., May 25-28. Those unable to visit the Poppy Wall can visit www.poppyinmemory.com to dedicate a digital poppy to a fallen loved one or as a gesture of appreciation for those who made the ultimate sacrifice. The VFW will also have a benefits information tent set up just east of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, May 26-28. On Monday, VFW Senior Vice Commander Vincent "B.J." Lawrence will lay a wreath during the National Memorial Day Ceremony at [Arlington National Cemetery](#) at 11 a.m. and at the [Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day Ceremony](#) on the National Mall at 1 p.m. Other Memorial Day weekend events include:

- The dress rehearsal for Sunday's [National Memorial Day Concert](#) is on Saturday at 8 p.m. on the west lawn of the Capitol. The concert will be held Sunday evening at 8 p.m. and will air on PBS stations nationwide.
- [Rolling Thunder XXXI](#) begins at noon on Sunday and will travel from the Pentagon past the National Mall to West Potomac Park.
- National Memorial Day ceremonies will also be held Monday at the [National WWII Memorial](#) at 9 a.m. and the Korean War Veterans Memorial at 5 p.m.
- The [National Memorial Day Parade](#) begins Monday at 2 p.m. along Constitution Avenue.

5. Congress Makes Progress on Defense Authorization Bill: This week, the House overwhelmingly passed its version of the Fiscal Year 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The bill would provide a 2.6 percent pay raise for service members and includes many VA priorities, such as:

- Requires DOD to report and conduct outreach on exposure to burn pits.
- Grants disabled veterans access to commissaries and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation facilities.
- Authorizes DOD to issue the Vietnam Service Medal to veterans who participated in Operation End Sweep.
- Requires DOD to design and produce a service medal for veterans exposed to radiation (Atomic Veterans).
- Requires DOD to publish information regarding the housing market around military installations.
- Prevents new mothers who are on active duty from being deployed.

-- Requires an independent review of prosecutions and punishments that target sexual assault survivors, and many more.

The Senate also began consideration of its version of the NDAA under closed hearings. The NDAA now awaits consideration by the full Senate. Stay tuned to the Action Corps Weekly for updates on this important bill.

6. VFW-supported Legislation on Mare Island Naval Cemetery: Senator Dianne Feinstein introduced legislation recently that would require VA to perpetually maintain and care for the Mare Island Naval Cemetery, which has fallen into disrepair since the Mare Island Naval Shipyard was closed in 1996. S. 2881 is a companion to H.R. 5588, which was introduced last month by Representative Mike Thompson who is a Life member of VFW Post 768 in Windsor, Calif. [Read Thompson's bill.](#)

7. Legislative Wrap-up: On Monday, the House passed more than a dozen veterans bills, including several VFW-supported bills, such as H.R. 1972, [VA Billing Accountability Act](#), which authorizes VA to waive copayment requirements when the veteran is not billed in a timely manner; H.R. 4958, [Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2018](#), which would provide a cost-of-living adjustment for VA compensation benefits; and H.R. 4334, [Improving Oversight of Women Veterans' Care Act of 2017](#), which would require VA to submit reports on access to gender-specific care in the community and environment of care standards for women veterans. [Read other bills passed by the House.](#) In addition to the VA MISSION Act, the Senate passed the [Tribal HUD-VASH Act](#) which would ensure Native American veterans are able to access federal rental and housing assistance for homeless and at-risk veterans. The Senate also passed H.R. 4910, the [Veterans Cemetery Benefit Correction Act](#), which would require the Department of the Interior to provide grave liners for veterans buried in National Park Service cemeteries. H.R. 4910 heads to the president's desk. All other bills must be considered by the other chambers of Congress.

8. Hearing on Creation of VA Administration on Economic Opportunity: On Wednesday, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing to review a proposed restructuring of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Currently, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) oversees all economic opportunity benefits, such as the GI Bill, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program, the Transition Assistance Program and the Home Loan Guarantee program. The proposed restructuring would keep the compensation and pension portion of VBA as is, and create a new division within VA that would oversee economic opportunity and transition programs. Subcommittee Chairman Jodey Arrington sees the value in exploring this restructuring if it would highlight and expand on certain benefits and programs that do not get enough attention within VA. The VFW supports H.R. 5644, the *VET OPP Act*, which would transfer critical benefits programs into the new Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. [Watch the hearing](#) or [read the bill text.](#)

9. Hearing on VA VISN Restructuring: The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing on Tuesday to assess the governance structure of VA's Veterans Integrated Services Networks (VISN). VA currently has 18 VISNs which were designed in 1995 to decentralize the Veterans Health Administration's budgetary, planning and decision-making functions to promote

accountability and improve oversight of daily facility operations. Chairman Phil Roe, M.D., discussed the alarming failure by the VISNs and VA's Central Office to resolve problems at local medical facilities. [Watch the hearing](#) or [read the VA Inspector General's testimony](#).

10. Military Appreciation Month Discounts: Walgreens will be offering a [20 percent discount](#) for military service members, veterans, and their families on May 28. Other stores, restaurants and attractions are also offering free meals and discounts throughout the month of May. [Check here for a list of just a few](#).

11. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced identification and burial updates for 11 American service members who had been missing in action from Korea and WWII. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Army Pfc. Willie E. Blue**, 19, of New Orleans, whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 29 in Dallas. Blue was a member of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. In August 1950, his unit was defending the Naktong Bulge portion of the Pusan Perimeter. Blue was admitted to the 2nd Clearing Station, 2nd Medical Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division in Yong-san, South Korea. After admission, Blue could not be accounted for. When no additional records could be found showing his disposition and the 8076th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital could not provide any information, the Department of the Army declared him deceased on March 3, 1954. [Read about Blue](#).

-- **Navy Reserve Pharmacist's Mate 2nd Class Thomas J. Murphy**, 22, of Greencastle, Ind., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 28 in Hamilton, Ohio. Murphy was assigned to Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, Fleet Marine Force. On Nov. 20, 1943, Murphy's unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll against stiff Japanese resistance. Murphy was killed on the first day of the battle, one of approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors killed in the intense fighting. [Read about Murphy](#).

-- **Marine Corps Pfc. Jack H. Krieger**, 28, of Larned, Kan., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 28 in his hometown. Krieger was assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 18th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force. On Nov. 20, 1943, Krieger's unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll against stiff Japanese resistance. Krieger died on the first day of the battle, one of approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors killed in the intense fighting. [Read about Krieger](#).

-- **Marine Corps Pfc. Francis E. Drake Jr.**, 20, of Framingham, Mass., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 25 in Springfield, Mass. Drake was a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division. On Oct. 9, 1942, Drake's unit participated in the main offensive action in the Battle of Guadalcanal. Drake was killed during the two-month long battle and buried atop Hill 73 with two other Marines. [Read about Drake](#).

-- **Navy Radioman 2nd Class Walter H. Backman**, 22, of Wilton, N.D., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 28 in Batavia, Ill. Backman 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. [Read about Backman](#).

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Edward F. Slapikas**, 26, of Wanamie, Pa., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried June 2 in his hometown. Slapikas 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. [Read about Slapikas.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Eugene W. Yost** was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. In September 1950, his unit participated in a defense of the Pusan Perimeter, a large defensive line west and north of Pusan, South Korea. Yost was reported to have been killed in action on Sept. 3, 1950, but his remains could not be located following the battle. Interment services are pending. [Read about Yost.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. John W. Hall** a member of Headquarters Battery, 503rd Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division. In late November 1950, Hall's unit received orders to move from Kunu-ri to Sunchon, North Korea through an area known as "The Gauntlet." Hall was reported missing in action on Dec. 1, 1950, in the vicinity of Somindong, North Korea. Interment services are pending. [Read about Hall.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. DeMaret M. Kirtley** was a member of Battery A, 57th Field Artillery Battalion, 31st Regimental Combat Team, 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. Kirtley was among more than 1,000 members of the RCT killed or captured in enemy territory and was declared missing on Dec. 6, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Kirtley.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Joseph Akers** was a member of Company C, 803rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, participating in intense fighting in the Hürtgen Forest. On Nov. 25, 1944, his company was deployed as direct-fire support of American infantrymen attacking the town of Grosshau. The M10 tank destroyer Akers occupied was knocked out in the fighting. He was killed during the battle, though his status was initially listed as missing in action. On Dec. 21, 1944, his status was amended to killed in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Akers.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class Carl Nichols** 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. Interment services are pending. [Read about Nichols.](#)

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.