

**Acceptance Speech By
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Service is the path to our future; membership is a byproduct of that service

Thank you, comrades. My sincere gratitude to all the delegates of this 117th National Convention for the honor, trust and confidence you have placed in me.

I want to first congratulate new Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Keith Harman from Ohio ... new Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief B.J. Lawrence from New Mexico ... new Auxiliary National President Collette Bishop from Iowa ... all her line officers ... and a hearty well done to their entire organization for exceeding 100 percent in membership!

I want to thank Past Commanders-in-Chief Big John Biedrzycki from Pennsylvania and John Stroud of Nevada for welcoming me onto their teams.

To Past Adjutant General John Hamilton, Quartermaster General Larry Maher, and Assistant Adjutant General Jerry Newberry for their long and dedicated service.

And to our new Adjutant General Bob Wallace, Quartermaster General Deborah Anderson, and Assistant Adjutant General and new Executive Director of the Kansas City Office Kevin Jones for stepping up to the plate to meet the challenges and opportunities that lay before our great organization.

I also want to recognize a few individuals who gave me strength and greatly enriched my life and spirit ... and who joined in my commitment to serve our nations veterans, her troops, and all their families of past, present and future.

To the late Cooper T. Holt of Tennessee for his early encouragement ... to Billy Ray Cameron of North Carolina for installing me ... and all the Past Commanders-in-Chiefs for their support and mentorship

To my great comrades in the Southern Conference ... especially my new Chief of Staff Carl Kaelin from Kentucky ... and new Inspector General Hal Roesch from Virginia.

To Cookstown Post 6590 in New Jersey ... where I first joined this great organization.

To Garden City Post 120 in New York ... who welcomed me as I transitioned from the Air Force.

To Middletown Post 1170, Kentucky District 6 and the entire Department of Kentucky... where my new job with UPS allowed me to put down roots.

To the love of my life, Jean, and our two children, Tara and Andrew, for helping those roots to grow strong.

And to my mother and father for bringing those roots over from Ireland.

Comrades, two months ago, thanks to the leadership initiative of our Membership Director Bob Crider and his staff, I received a briefing from seven new MBA graduates from Rockhurst University in Kansas City. Their master's project was about the VFW's brand. One of the seven grads was a VFW-eligible veteran who hadn't yet joined because he thought we didn't represent him personally. In other words, he wasn't sold on the VFW brand.

After he was discharged he said he wanted to be part of something big....and wanted to do something cool. It had to be one or the other because dull and boring just didn't cut it.

Then came the branding project and the deep dive into what the VFW is, what we do, and who we do it for. One of his takeaways is the VFW has to brag more—and I wholeheartedly agree—because brand is what the customer thinks not how we perceive ourselves in the mirror.

Now we all know that this great big organization we call the VFW does something very cool, but sadly, most Americans—and especially those who serve in uniform—just don't really know us ... because WE DON'T SHOUT FROM THE ROOFTOPS ENOUGH. Cool things like ...

- Raising nearly \$50 million annually to support our communities;
- Volunteering 9 million REPORTED hours annually to assist others;
- Providing well over \$5 million in grants to help veteran families through emergency financial situations;
- Helping more than 80,000 veterans and transitioning military to receive \$1.5 billion annually in earned compensation and pension from the VA;
- Providing millions in scholarships to veterans, service members, and high school and middle school students;
- Being directly responsible for working with Congress to create, protect and enhance virtually every Quality of Life program that benefits our nation's veterans, service members, and their families;
- And that everything we do is free ... just to pay it forward to all who serve.

THAT'S WHAT A COOL ORGANIZATION DOES. We just need to tell our story more ... to share our stories more ... and to walk the talk.

Belong to something big.
Do something cool.
Brag more.

There are your three takeaways, comrades. We must push a message that the VFW is an organization that has always been rooted in service to others ... that we are an organization of doers ... and an organization comprised of Patriots who returned home from their wars and conflicts as better, more compassionate and confident human beings.

We need to fully leverage all our communication tools to better tell our service story—your story—and the activities of today's VFW. The National Headquarters will soon unveil a new intuitive website, a new mobile app for your smart phones, and a new direction for the VFW magazine that focuses more on what we as an organization do today.

We will also continue to produce more high-quality Public Service Announcements for your use online, and for you to share with local news media outlets and any others who want to help share our stories of service to others.

I promise that VFW National will do its part, but National can't do this alone.

We need your Departments and Posts to turn up the volume, adjust the squelch, and communicate every story, to include VFW Action Alerts regarding legislation we either want passed or defeated. And if VFW gets maligned in our positions, we will correct that record, too, **AND LOUDLY!**

As it's often said, "It's not bragging if you can back it up."

Comrades, we can back it up, and that's why my rallying cry for the year is "**CLEAR THE WAY!**"

We need to take ownership of our brand and change the community's view of the VFW. Every VFW Post is considered a nest of "heroes," but not always as a "strategic asset" that can be relied upon time and time again as THE go-to patriotic organization, full of willing volunteers who put community and nation above self.

That's a narrative only we can change ... and BRAND ownership has to be embraced at the local Post level

I need you to push the message that the success of the VFW has always been because of our service to others. It is how we pay it forward to every generation who raises their right hand and takes an oath very few have taken.

I need you to embrace social media just as much as you have already embraced smart phone technology.

Why? Because it communicates instantly and allows for instant feedback from our membership and community.

It also allows you to push special projects, such as the Mental Health Awareness program the National President and I are working on this year ... which will include partnering with our nation's leading mental health nonprofits, such as the Give an Hour and OneMind.

It is no secret that 20 veterans commit suicide every day, but what most folks don't know is only five of those veterans are enrolled in the VA.

Professional mental health counseling isn't the VFW's forte insomuch as having walked the talk is. That's powerful relevance, for those who deploy and for their families who anxiously await their safe return ... and it doesn't matter if your war was in Europe, Africa, Asia or the Middle East ... or in this century or the last. We were all younger once, and we all came back different in one respect or another, to include thinking no one understood us.

Comrades, the VFW cannot allow ANY service member to ever think no one understands them, which is why earlier this month I was a panelist at the National Press Club along with representatives of Give an Hour, the George W. Bush Institute, and the global communications and marketing firm Edelman ... to discuss *The Campaign to Change Direction*.

What we are doing is changing the veteran's narrative—call it the veteran's brand—a brand right now that has 40 percent of Americans believing half of all veterans are experiencing mental health challenges ... and an ASTOUNDING 92 PERCENT OF EMPLOYERS believing veterans need access to mental health care programs.

The National President and I will keep you posted as our mission to change the narrative expands, and what you need to be doing at the local level to help.

Comrades, my commitment to you is to double down on our service to others.

Service with a focus and more funding for programs that assist our fellow veterans, our troops and their families. Our service grant programs will be enhanced to help you better execute the mission, and perhaps underwrite future efforts. I will say that those Posts who truly excel will receive national recognition and access to additional grant funding.

But this extra support comes with an entry fee—and that's for your Departments and Posts to get onboard with social media and start communicating your services, your successes, and your best practices. Doing so let's others know that you're part of something big, that you're doing something cool, and that you're sharing your stories.

I will also capitalize on the fact the VFW just elected its first Desert Storm veteran as its commander-in-chief, and that younger VFW leaders are being elected every year to higher and higher offices. Several State Commanders are Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. We also have six women State Commanders this year, too. All are taking their rightful place in the succession of leaders in the history of our great organization.

Comrades, the VFW has a 117-year-old pedigree that means nothing to a new generation of veterans who need to be sold on why we charge dues when newer veteran organizations just harvest emails. I will admit that the public's perception of the VFW has too often been eclipsed by some of these new organizations. Much of their success can be directly attributed to their effective two-way communications, which is why I am pushing technology so much.

We should embrace other new veteran service organizations, and where possible, partner with them, especially those who like getting their hands dirty for the community.

After 15 years of nonstop war, what these younger comrades bring to the table is the need for action, not talk, which is an energy we need to fully embrace and absorb. Historically, most new war specific organizations fade away once their wars end. That is what makes the VFW so unique, because we are built on the rocks of eternity, not the sands of time.

I am proud to be a Gulf War veteran, and I must take this opportunity to thank all Vietnam veterans everywhere for helping America to heal ... for teaching America how to disassociate the politics of war from the warrior fighting it ... and for ensuring my generation got a parade when we returned home.

Comrades, I talk about the future because our organization can no longer operate like we did in the past, and I need not remind you that “service” is why 14 veterans founded this organization in 1899. Service is our product, and “service to others” is why you are here in Charlotte as leaders of our great organization.

Dream big, get out of your box, commit to making the hard right choices instead of the easy wrong ones. Be inclusive, not exclusive. Talk less and execute more. Find ways to say “yes” more than “no.”

Reach out to Student Veterans of America, which now has 1,300 chapters on college and university campuses everywhere.

If you have a military installation in your backyard, make sure your Post sponsors on-base awards programs.

In the military world, visibility is everything, so being invited to these events, gives you an opportunity to give your best two-minute elevator pitch to an attentive crowd who identifies with belonging to something big, doing something cool, and is unafraid to brag when it is true.

Comrades, I want to again congratulate our great Auxiliary for exceeding 100 percent in membership, as well as our 22 Departments, 71 Districts and 272 Posts who also exceeded their leadership goals.

Along with recruiting new members we should also take a lesson from the business world as it pertains to bringing back customers, or in our case, reinstating former members.

Selling to former customers is normally easier than acquiring new ones, with success rates historically ranging from 20 to 40 percent, but that's often contingent on finding out why they left in the first place. The ONLY way to do this is to ask them ... with the full expectation of getting an earful back in response.

How many Post or Department Commanders and Adjutants ask former members why they didn't renew their membership? How many explained that if they didn't like one Post they could transfer to another, or go Member at Large?

Perhaps joining the social media world might communicate a message of progress back to former members, as well as advertise your accomplishments and new volunteer opportunities to serve others.

Comrades, I pledge to do everything on my end to turn the tide—and the first thing I am doing is listening more ... like to that young veteran from Rockhurst University ... Kenneth Stowell ... who I am proud to say is now a new member of VFW Post 7356 in Parkville, Missouri.

I first became a member of VFW Post 6590 in Cookstown, New Jersey, because it had a robust troop support program for the nearby Air Force, Army and Navy installations. The camaraderie within the Post kept me coming back, and the mentorship of Post leaders like Bobby Hacker and Donnie Wine increased my awareness of the VFW's "Service First" mission.

In my case it was the energy of knowing that every hand I shook was from another great American Patriot. I wanted to meet the men and women who served in every American war or conflict going back in my history books.

And I wanted to meet their families, too, and ask how they were doing, and if there was anything the VFW could do to assist. I wanted to hear their stories and share mine.

I wanted to join something bigger than myself ... and I did.

I wanted to do something cool ... and I am doing something very cool.

And I wanted to keep sharing my story ... and your story of continued service to our great nation.

I strongly believe that service is the path to our future ... and that increased membership will be a welcomed organic byproduct of our service to others.

Replenishing our ranks is even more important if we are to keep beating back the efforts of politicians, pundits, and politically-motivated organizations who want to dismantle and privatize VA health care, with some even proposing that veterans be charged for their service-connected care. To that the VFW says HELL NO!

Election year or no election year, I promise you that the VFW will not stand still as politicians who don't use the VA health care system—much less who never served—try to dictate when and where veterans can receive care!

We have collected direct feedback from more than 20,000 veterans and their message is clear: "Improve, don't dismantle the VA health care system."

Before I conclude, I want to again thank the City of Charlotte and its Convention Center for the fantastic hospitality, and to Convention Committee Chairmen Past Commander-in-Chief Billy Ray Cameron and Past North Carolina Department Commander Jack Goin for an outstanding job. How about another round of applause!

Comrades, the eyes of the nation were upon us this week as we heard from both presidential candidates. What we heard were mostly all the right things:

- About properly taking care of veterans, service members and their families;
- About fixing the VA;
- And about the internal and external challenges and threats our nation faces.

Comrades, between now and November you are going to hear many promises from many candidates running for every public office. No matter your party or your ideology, I encourage you to make your positions known to all your candidates.

Let them know that OUR VFW cares about the safety and security of our nation, her people, and our allies... and that ending sequestration is must!

Let them know that eliminating or outsourcing the VA is a nonstarter!

Make sure they know the VFW is a nonpartisan organization, but not to misconstrue our neutrality as an opportunity to malign us.

Let them know that Veterans Matter and Veterans Vote!

And let them know that No One—and I repeat—No One Does More for Veterans than OUR VFW!

Again, thank you for this great honor. God Bless our great organization, our men and women in uniform, their families, and the United States of America.

Now let's start bragging! Thank you!

-VFW-