

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY
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Thank you, comrades. What a humbling experience it is to lead the greatest combat veterans' organization in the world. An organization of men and women who witnessed the horrors of war yet returned home more confident and much more compassionate human beings. An organization of family members who endured weeks, months and collective years of 100 percent stress and anxiety while their loved ones were deployed.

We are the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and the VFW Auxiliary, and I am proud to shout from the rooftops that no one does more for veterans, service members and their families than our great organization—NO ONE!

First off, I must mention a few folks who have touched my life both personally and professionally.

I'd like to recognize Past Commanders-in-Chief Big John Biedrzycki from Pennsylvania and Brian Duffy from Kentucky for their leadership, friendship and mentorship. They took the time to care—to train—to mentor—their successor. Thank you, comrades. That tradition will continue.

To new Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief B.J. Lawrence from New Mexico and Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Doc Schmitz of New York ... my heartfelt congratulations to you both. Together we will continue to build upon our 118-year-old pedigree of service to others.

To new Auxiliary President Dee Guillory from Virginia and your line officers ... thank you for what you do daily for veterans, service members and their families everywhere. And to outgoing National President Colette Bishop ... my heartfelt congratulations for leading the Auxiliary through another year of membership growth.

I want to thank both the Adjutant General and the Quartermaster General and your staffs in Kansas City and Washington for working closer together and clearing the way to continue our new One Vision, One Voice, One VFW initiative. Thank you for your continued support, loyalty and service to our great organization

And to Past Commander-in-Chief John Furgess of Tennessee ... thank you, my friend, for installing me.

John was my Chief when I was the Ohio Department Commander from 2004 to 2005. He called his state commanders the Toughriders, a salute to former president and VFW member Teddy Roosevelt's Roughriders. John's charge to us Toughriders was to get over

that San Juan Hill called membership, something we haven't done now in a quarter century—not since 1992, when Bob Wallace was Chief.

We did not make it over that hill, but we came mighty close—99.12 percent. I share that statistic because being 16,000 members short of goal dropped our membership below 1.8 million. While we have since gotten smaller, the need for our programs and services have greatly expanded.

This is why I have instructed my Department commanders that we are charging up that hill again, because membership is the lifeblood of our organization. And with that I want to salute Montana for leading the world, Arizona for 50 straight years of growth, and the 11 other Departments who also grew.

The theme for my year is “Service not Self.” Those three words represent the life I've led for more than four decades.

Like many of you, my life to date has been a journey of experiences, and I just want to take this opportunity to share my story in hopes that you will share your stories with others, too.

As mentioned, I was a Huey crew chief and door gunner stationed in I Corps. I will admit to being somewhat bitter when I returned home, but that has changed—and here's why.

This past March I returned to Southeast Asia on a fact-finding mission to broaden my knowledge of America's Full Accounting Mission, and to learn more of America's security assistance missions overseas. The trip also allowed me to meet many VFW members residing abroad, as well as U.S. Ambassadors and U.S. military assigned to our embassies in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and China.

Landing in Danang was my first time back in 49 years. Back then I was greeted by mortar fire inside 30 minutes. This time it was by a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel who commanded Detachment 2 of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. We took a drive two hours west into the Central Highlands to meet up with an American-led recovery team that was excavating the side of a very steep hill where another young American soldier—a half century earlier—was believed to be after his helicopter was shot down.

Fifteen American servicemen and women and two civilian anthropologists—none of whom were born when that chopper went down—were digging and sweating to help bring a fellow American home to a family they don't know, but who has been waiting 50 years for their son and brother to return home from his war. Those 17 Americans, and all 700 assigned to DPAA, take this mission very personally.

“There but for the Grace of God go I” is a very powerful statement. So like I said, the bitterness is now gone.

Like many of you, when I came home from my war I immersed myself in work and family. Both my parents were active in the VFW, but I personally didn't join until 1983, thanks entirely to a very persistent brother-in-law, John Williams, and with the full encouragement of my loving wife, Mary Lou.

Every success I have had in the VFW starts with them, and then Post 3035 for caring enough to give this young Vietnam Veteran some free rein, then District 2, the Department of Ohio, the Big Ten Conference, and now all of you for your confidence, encouragement and support.

Anyone who has ever risen to any level of leadership in this great organization did not do it alone. Aside from a very supportive family, there are a special few mentors I am indebted too, such as Past Ohio State Commanders "Curly" Miller and George Cox, as well as John Butler and Murray Griffin from my District.

I am a member of several organizations, but the VFW is where my allegiance lies because of our camaraderie, a relevancy that spans generations, and our tremendous national legislative and veterans' service work, and youth and community service programs.

Every member of our organization has walked the talk, and every member of our great Auxiliary has lived the fear of having a loved one downrange. I believe in what the VFW stands for—to take care of veterans, service members and their families—and I am proud to be a part of it, and honored to lead it.

Because of this camaraderie—and the fact that the VFW does so much for so many without asking for anything in return—I am often asked by potential members "What can the VFW do for them?"

My answer is always the same: "Nothing, we've already done it." A better question to ask is what can they do to help continue the VFW's mission of service to others?

Sixteen years ago, no one would have thought it possible for America to fight a nonstop, two-front war for so long without restarting the draft, but we have—they have—and they continue to do so magnificently, which is a testament not only to their patriotism but also to their character.

Our new military is the most powerful and most intelligent in history, but they don't know what the VFW brings to the fight because we don't brag enough. They don't know that our great organization is responsible for the passage of every military and veteran Quality of Life program created in this century and last. They don't know that the VFW has:

- Helped veterans recoup \$7 billion in earned VA benefits, to include \$1.2 billion in new claims over the past year;
- That our VFW Posts contribute nearly \$50 million annually to support local community service projects;

- That the VFW and Auxiliary donate nearly 9 million volunteer hours annually;
- That over the past 13 years—and with the support of Burger King—almost \$7.5 million in Unmet Needs financial assistance grants has helped more than 4,300 military and veteran families;
- That we annually award approximately \$3.3 million to some 170,000 middle and high school students participating in our Patriot's Pen and Voice of Democracy competitions;
- That with the support of SportClips, we have awarded more than \$3.6 million in scholarships over the past three years to help more than 800 veterans and service members achieve a college degree;
- And what they really don't know is we do it all for free—no membership required.

With all of those ongoing accomplishments and programs, why wouldn't every eligible service member and veteran want to be part of a great big organization that does so many cool things for others?

One reason is we don't brag enough. Another is we are not educating military commanders and their senior enlisted advisors. In the military, nothing is important until your commander or first sergeant tells you it's important.

We need to maximize every opportunity to get on base, and to not show up emptyhanded. If you are fortunate to have an active-duty or National Guard or Reserve installation or unit in your backyard, you need to show your importance through unit adoptions and by supporting annual service member of the year awards.

The power of recognition is contagious. Showing up at an annual awards banquet with a VFW plaque and dinner for two someplace nice will get you an opportunity to tell our story—to brag on who we are, what we do and who we do it for. And along with honoring the best of the best, you'll also be educating all those current and future commanders and first sergeants about what we bring to the fight.

It's your Post, it's your programs. Just make sure they know we have their backs before shoving a membership application in their hands. And if they do join, please listen and act on their suggestions, just like my Post did for me. Very few things in life are worse than to be ignored—and for a membership organization to do that is the kiss of death.

Another way Posts can keep their members engaged is by communicating with them either through print or electronic newsletters, and by having up-to-date websites and Facebook pages. Communicating is essential to letting your members know what your Post is doing and how they can help, as well as to inform your community and hopefully potential members who want to be part of something big, do something cool, and have their collective efforts recognized.

The VFW touches lives every day through our great legislative work on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures around the county. By the great work our VFW service officers do for

veterans, service members and their families. Through our Veterans and Military Assistance Programs, Unmet Needs, and youth and veterans scholarships. And by being the go-to volunteer patriotic organization in our communities.

Along with serving others, we have to crank up the volume to eliminate sequestration.

Ending sequestration has been the VFW's top legislative priority ever since a failed congressional budget agreement created it in 2011. I have listened to our Washington Office talk about the effect it is having on our military. I have read about those impacts in our VFW magazine as well as in other magazines.

Two years ago I met with U.S. officials and military assigned to in Belgium and Germany. At every location I asked what effect the sequester was having on their operations, and their answers were exactly what our Washington Office and magazine had been saying all along—our military is tired of doing more with less troops, less training, less equipment and reduced Quality of Life programs.

And just recently in Southeast Asia, budget uncertainty and the impact of 30 consecutive continuing resolutions forced the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency to cancel planned excavations.

Comrades, the world has NOT become a better or safer place in the six years since sequestration was created. In fact, it is far more dangerous, and definitely more unpredictable. That's why the VFW has to engage more loudly!

Sequestration MUST end! If we can do that, then every commander and first sergeant will know EXACTLY what the VFW brings to the fight.

"Service not Self" is my theme because that's the person I am. For nearly 25 years I worked for Fruehauf Trailer Company. For 20 of those years I was involved in the labor union, first as union steward, then as a member of the bargaining committee, and later as president. At each level either I—or we as a committee—were there to represent our fellow union members. To arbitrate grievances, negotiate labor agreements to improve wages, benefits and working conditions. It was always about what could be done in the best interest of our fellow workers.

In July 1991, I made a career change and became a country veterans service officer for the next 20 years. My philosophy didn't change. When a veteran or family member came into our office, it was about them. How could we help? What could we do for them that would make a difference in their lives? Which is exactly the same thing that our great organization does. We make a difference. We touch lives—every day.

We must continue to engage at the local level, to encourage our Posts to bring in mental health professionals, and to open our doors to the community. Mental health is not a dirty word, and ignoring it can be devastating to families and communities.

My support of veterans, service members and their families is endless, as must be our organization's push to eliminate sequestration, to fully fund the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, to demand better leadership, management and accountability from the VA, and to help reduce the veteran suicide crisis to zero.

In closing I want to recognize my own personal VFW Family, who I hope will continue to forgive me for missing ball games, birthdays, school activities, and just simple, quiet meals at home.

My VFW comrade brother-in-law John Williams was unable to join us here, but I'm glad his wife Earline and daughter Linda Engle are here ... as are my two sisters, Jan Jenkins and Sharon Carmean ... my daughter, Keri, her husband Brad and their two children, Tanner and Tyler ... and my son, Adam, and his three children, Zachary, Danielle and Chase ... nine of whom are Auxiliary life members.

And last but certainly not least, the love of my life, my wife and Auxiliary life member Mary Lou.

Mary Lou, you and the kids have made this incredible journey possible by your love, your encouragement, and most definitely by your support. Three hundred sixty-five more days and I promise you won't have to cut the grass anymore.

Comrades, Auxiliary members and guests ... we are ONE VFW, and I am truly honored to lead you into a new year of service to others. Together WE WILL make a positive difference in the lives of others. Together WE WILL make the VFW stronger and more relevant inside the White House, the Pentagon, on Capitol Hill, and in every community across this great nation. And together WE WILL have fun doing it!

May God continue to Bless our veterans, our service members, our families, and our United States of America. Thank you!

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