

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR
VFW COMMANDER IN CHIEF DUANE SARMIENTO
124TH VFW NATIONAL CONVENTION
PHOENIX, ARIZONA
JULY 27, 2023

“Meet the Challenge”

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests and comrades. It is an honor to stand before you today as your Commander-in-Chief, in this beautiful city of Phoenix, Arizona, for the 124th National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. I want to express my deepest gratitude for the trust you have placed in me to lead this remarkable organization, and I stand here today as a proud American from the great state of New Jersey, and as a Navy veteran who served his country with pride.

I would like to thank God for His divine providence and direction in my life and pray for His continued guidance.

To the past Commanders-in-Chiefs, especially Past Commanders-In-Chief Lisicki, Wallace, Spera, Schmidt and Lawrence who have mentored and guided me through this process, THANK YOU! As this journey continues, my ears will continue to be open for your words of wisdom and mentoring.

THANK YOU to the Great Eastern Conference for having faith and trust by granting me the opportunity to lead our great organization.

THANK YOU to the Department of New Jersey, particularly New Jersey VFW District 13, and a HUGE THANK YOU to my Post, Anthony T. Calista VFW Post 5579. Your support and confidence in me has never ever waned or failed. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To all the Comrades, Department Officers, both past and present, and to all the members in the respective departments who have offered their support and advice to me as I traveled around the country these last two years – THANK YOU, but more importantly THANK YOU for your friendship. I look forward to continuing those productive conversations with all of you and renewing our friendships again when we see each other during this coming year.

Comrades, while there are going to be some challenges we will face as an organization from the National level all the way down to the post level, I look forward to the opportunity to tackle these things together. With your help, we are going to lead this organization forward for another 124 years. THANK YOU!

I would like to thank my family from the bottom of my heart. Without all of your support, I wouldn't have been able to do anything in the VFW. Please allow me this moment to take time and introduce my family:

My oldest daughter Alexis, it was her dream since she was a little girl to become a nurse. She has fulfilled that dream and has been a registered nurse for the past 9 years. I love you and I am so proud of you.

My middle child Gabrielle, my “Lil Motivator”! She spent five years on active duty with the United States Marine Corps and is currently serving in the Marine Corp Reserve. She is a proud Life Member of VFW Post 5579 in Gibbstown, New Jersey, earning her eligibility having served overseas in support of Operation Inherent Resolve.

My son-in-law Brett, also a Marine Corps veteran and Life Member of VFW Post 5579, earning his eligibility by serving in Afghanistan.

Our grandson Jack Jack, who is the twinkle in all our eyes.

My son Michael who is currently serving in the U.S. Navy. He is a Navy Corpsman serving with Weapons Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, and just recently returned from a 7-month deployment in the Western Pacific.

I want to my whole family, and for understanding all those times in my VFW career that I may have missed something while you were growing up. I love you all.

My wife Ellen, for the 31 years of our marriage, you have been my rock and soul mate. Without you, none of this could have been possible. I love you so much.

Two people who are not here. My mom and dad, who have both passed. My father signed me up to my hometown VFW Post in Gibbstown in 1990 while I was serving in Operation Desert Shield. I know they are looking down on me and I hope I have made them proud. Mom if you are listening, I would like to take this time to say thank you, for saying YES to Dad sometime in June 1968. I was born 9 months later in 1969.

As I look out into this sea of familiar faces, I am reminded of the shared experiences, the sacrifices, and the bonds that have brought us together. We come from different walks of life, but we share a common thread—a deep love for our country and an unwavering dedication to veterans. We are here because we have met challenges that life has thrown at us head-on, large and small, with honor, courage and commitment.

Today, I humbly stand here as a testament to the limitless potential of our great nation and a product of the American dream. As a kid from New Jersey - I never imagined I would be standing here to accept such a prestigious position in one of the most prestigious institutions in our country.

You know, when I enlisted in the Navy, I was looking for adventure and let me tell you, I found it! But you know what else I found? I found the values of honor, duty, and service. It was there that I truly understood the strength that comes from people of different backgrounds united by a common purpose. Throughout my time in the Navy, I witnessed firsthand the power of teamwork and the unbreakable spirit that binds us together as veterans. We endured long hours, sleepless nights, and the weight of responsibility on our shoulders. But through it all, we persevered. Those formative years taught me so much about camaraderie and esprit de corps, it

was only natural for me to join the ranks of the VFW, an organization that means so much to generations of veterans.

Throughout history, our nation has faced countless challenges, both at home and abroad. From the battlefields of World War I and World War II, to the jungles of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Panama, from the deserts of Kuwait, Somalia and Iraq, to the mountains of the Korean Peninsula and Afghanistan, we have always answered the call. We have never faltered in our defense of freedom and demonstrated an unwavering commitment to each other.

But our challenges did not end when we redeployed. For many of us, the real challenge began when we hung up our uniforms. Transitioning back to civilian life can be daunting, and we faced a new set of battles – battles against unemployment, homelessness, and the invisible wounds of war. We have experienced the pain of loss, the sacrifice of separation from our loved ones, and the hardships of readjusting to civilian life. Yet, through it all, we have persevered, because we are a band of brothers and sisters who understand the true meaning of loyalty and service. It is our duty, as veterans, to meet these challenges boldly, not only for ourselves but for our fellow veterans.

The VFW has always been a beacon of hope and support for veterans, and as your Commander-in-Chief, I am committed to continuing that legacy and advancing the mission of the VFW's three key pillars: advocacy, assistance, and camaraderie.

Advocacy lies at the heart of our organization. We must continue to be the voice of all veterans, fighting for their rights, benefits, and recognition they so rightly deserve. We will work tirelessly with lawmakers, government officials, and the public to champion the needs of our veterans, their families, and their communities. We must advocate for better healthcare, mental health support, and employment opportunities for our returning heroes.

Our organization, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, is the shield that guards the rights and benefits of our active-duty troops, it is the shield that guards the rights and benefits to our nation's veterans and families.

This debt doesn't have a price tag, nor do we look for it to be repaid. This is what we stand for, this is who the Veterans of Foreign Wars are and as long as one member still belongs to our beloved organization, we will never stop doing this.

Assistance is a sacred duty we owe to our fellow veterans. We must strive to ensure that every veteran who seeks assistance finds a helping hand and a listening ear within our organization so that no veteran is left behind. Access to quality medical care is not a privilege; it is a fundamental right that our veterans have earned through their service and sacrifice. We must work tirelessly to ensure that our VA hospitals and clinics are adequately staffed, well-funded, and equipped to provide the highest standard of care to our deserving veterans.

We are changing the mindset of the veterans concerning our beloved organization. It's required to make continuing progress so NO ONE will take away our benefits, NO ONE will take away what is due and owed to the 8% of Americans that have served the United States in uniform. WE will NOT be marginalized or become a secondary citizen to some other group. WE

ARE VETERANS WHO SWORE AN OATH TO OUR COUNTRY. WE WROTE THAT BLANK CHECK THAT SAID, “UP TO AND INCLUDING OUR LIFE.” AND WE WILL NEVER BE ASHAMED OF THAT. We will continue to bring our brothers and sisters into our ranks, and we will always fight for veterans’ rights!!

There always seems to be a lot of talk in Washington DC on the National Debt. Politicians on the left and right speak about cutting programs that affect veterans. Make no mistake these are not bullshit entitlements, these are VETERAN BENEFITS that were earned through blood and sweat. THE ONLY NATIONAL DEBT I KNOW, IS THE DEBT TO THE MILLIONS OF Americans who served our country and to millions of Americans buried in cemeteries in the US and in cemeteries from France to the Philippines. That is the NATIONAL DEBT that this country owes to veterans.

As I stand before you as Commander-in-Chief, it is your voice I carry forward. When we fight for benefits on Capitol Hill, it’s not for the 1 million members of the VFW, It’s for the 20 million veterans and active-duty personnel.

Camaraderie is the lifeblood of the VFW. To meet the challenges ahead, we must also foster a sense of unity within our organization and the broader veteran community. We must recognize and celebrate the rich diversity that exists among us. We come from different backgrounds, cultures, and walks of life, but our shared bond as veterans unites us. We must adopt an environment where veterans can find solace, friendship, and understanding. Together, we will build stronger bonds, create lasting memories, and ensure that no veteran ever feels alone or forgotten. The strength of our organization lies in our unity, and we will continue to provide a sense of belonging for all who have served fighting our nation’s wars.

Every year, maintaining and gaining our numbers is a battle. I believe that we will get 102% membership. I know everyone hears the whispers and scuttlebutt – THE VFW IS A DYING ORGANIZATION. Well, that’s a bunch of crap! WE ARE ALIVE AND WELL AND JUST GETTING STARTED! Last year, we came in at over 101%. I set the goal to 102% in membership to show all the shithouse sea lawyers and bar commanders that we, in spite of those types of members, will grow this organization. We can win this battle just as we won victories on the battle fields all over this world. It will take the same dedication, the same devotion and same perseverance. Let it not be said, one year from now that we have failed.

We each need to take a hard look within ourselves and determine if we still have the same heart we had when we joined this organization. Do we have the same motivation that helped us, and members throughout our 124-year history, reach out to prospective members and invite them to join our ranks? Just as early members of the VFW more than 100 years ago looked at those recently returned WW I doughboys as the future of the organization, we too must extend a welcoming hand to today’s generation of veterans. It is through their involvement that we can infuse fresh perspectives and energy into our fraternity.

But we can’t just focus on recruiting alone. We need to focus on cultivating leadership among our existing members. By embracing a leadership role within our organization, we can unlock its full potential, empowering the VFW to make an even greater impact on the lives of all

veterans. We also need to encourage participation in all of our programs. The VFW has some outstanding programs, but as it stands right now, we are lucky if we get AT BEST 50% participation from our Posts. This can all be attributed to a lack of leadership and a lack of motivation. So, no matter at what level – Post, District or Department – step up, take the lead and YOU can make a difference in the VFW.

Furthermore, it is vital that we continue to promote the values of patriotism and citizenship among our youth. We must educate the next generation about the sacrifices made by our veterans and instill in them a deep sense of gratitude. Through programs such as the VFW's Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen, we can inspire young minds to understand the true cost of freedom and encourage them to be active participants in our democracy.

But above all, we must never forget the solemn duty we have to honor the fallen. We will continue to support the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, continue advocating for their funding so they can give the fullest account of our missing service members, and we must continue to ensure that the families waiting for their loved ones to come home receive the support they need. To our Gold Star families, please know that we are forever indebted to you. Your loved ones who have made the ultimate sacrifice will never be forgotten, and we will work to preserve their legacies, ensuring they will live on through our collective memory.

Comrades, 2022 was a successful year for the VFW, but our work is far from over. As veterans, we understand that challenges will always be a part of life. The world is constantly evolving, and we must be ready to adapt and meet the challenges that lie ahead. We must continue to advocate for the needs of our veterans, ensuring that they receive the support and care they deserve. We must stand up for our active-duty service members and their families, recognizing the sacrifices they make every day. And we must continue to be a force for good in our communities, leading by example and showing our fellow citizens what it means to be a veteran and what true patriotism looks like. We have faced challenges before, and we have overcome them with courage and resilience. Today, we stand at the threshold of a new year's worth of new challenges, but I have no doubt that we will rise to meet them, just as we have always done.

Regardless of your pecking order in this organization, keep this in mind - you don't need a title to lead. You just need to care. People would rather follow a leader with a heart than a leader with a title. I put this on the back of my medallion to remind all of us of what is important. So let us embrace our role as leaders, mentors, and advocates for our fellow veterans. Together, we will continue to build a stronger, more united community of veterans who meet the challenge with unwavering resolve.

Comrades, today as I stand before you, I see a room filled with individuals who have met the challenge in their own unique ways. So, ask yourselves this question – what is the most valuable resource to the Veterans of Foreign Wars? Is it our thousands of brick-and-mortar Posts around the world? Our headquarter buildings in Kansas City and Washington D.C.? Our long-standing and well-known programs? I'm here to tell you - **THE MOST VALUABLE RESOURCES TO THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS ARE YOU – THE MEMBERS.** We

have entrepreneurs who have built successful businesses, educators who have shaped young minds, and community leaders who have made a lasting impact. We have advocates who have fought tirelessly for the rights of veterans, and caregivers who have provided unwavering support to those in need. Without all of you this organization would be nothing but empty buildings and programs that go unused. **YOU ARE THE MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE IN OUR ORGANIZATION AND NOBODY AND I MEAN NOBODY WILL EVER TELL YOU DIFFERENT!** Each and every one of you has made a difference, and for that, I salute you.

But know this - no matter how brilliant a person is, no matter how hardworking, no matter how much they love the VFW, that person is only one person. But if we unite, like what we've seen in the storied history of our organization, if we face crisis, a difficulty or problem, **WE FACE IT TOGETHER** and we as veterans and members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars will fight and overcome any issue presented.

Thank you for the honor of serving as your Commander-in-Chief. God bless you all, God bless our service men and women around the world, God bless the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and May God Always bless the United States of America!