

Convention Highlights

Monday, July 22, 2019
Joint Opening

Secretary of State Says ‘Diplomacy ... Saves Lives’

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was the headline speaker at today’s Joint Opening session. As America’s “chief diplomat,” he said that “when diplomacy is done well, it saves lives. When it’s practiced wrong, it causes serious problems.” For that reason, he said the Trump Administration has actively engaged North Korea, while at the same time “maintaining pressure” on the Communist nation. Pompeo, who served as CIA director in 2017-18, said that strategy compelled North Korea to turn over 55 sets of remains following President Trump’s summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last year in Singapore.

During those talks, Pompeo said he worked with a counterpart from North Korea. “He was perplexed that this was the first item we wanted to talk about,” Pompeo said. “Every one of you understands why, and we will continue to work towards this until every one of the fallen heroes’ remains have returned to the United States.”

Pompeo also noted that the U.S. relationship with Israel is “stronger than it’s ever been” and the Trump Administration has “restored friendships long neglected in Eastern Europe.” Pompeo, a 1986 West Point graduate who finished first in his class, served as an armor officer with the 2nd Sqdn., 7th Cav, 4th Inf. Div., in Germany. “Seeing you all here this morning reminded me of that joy,” he said.

Pompeo, a former U.S. congressman from Kansas from 2011 to 2017, told the crowd that he honors all veterans by “telling the world” that the U.S. military is “a force for good.” He added that VFW members “fought for things that deserve to be defended. You fought so we might endure, and we’ll never apologize for that.”

In closing, Pompeo, who was the first Secretary of State to address delegates at a VFW convention in more than 50 years, asked VFW members to continue serving their communities, by mentoring, visiting elderly neighbors and helping family members struggling with mental illness or addiction issues. Pompeo said: “If you keep serving, you will be a force multiplier and we’ll be serving right alongside you.”

Award Recipients Honored

Ken Fisher, chairman and CEO of the Fisher House Foundation was awarded VFW’s *James E. Van Zandt Citizenship Award* in recognition for supporting the families of wounded, ill and injured servicemen and women. The network of 84 Fisher Houses throughout the U.S., Germany and the United Kingdom has provided “millions of nights” of free lodging to 370,000 military families, saving them a total of some \$450 million. “This is not charity,” Fisher said. “It’s our responsibility to our nation’s veterans and military.”

Mike Eshenbaugh accepted the *VFW Accredited Service Representative of the Year Award*. A member of Post 4709 in Conroe, Texas, Eshenbaugh has provided consultations for more than 1,500 veterans in his four years.

-More-

Retired Navy Adm. Michelle Howard accepted VFW's *Armed Forces Award*. The first female four-star admiral and the first African-American woman to command a U.S. Navy ship, Howard said she believes "diversity is about aspiring to new heights." She encouraged VFW members to continue being role models. "Veterans represent the backbone and strength of America," she concluded.

The Department of Arizona received accolades for 52 consecutive years of membership growth.

Bobbie Schamens of Meadowview Intermediate School in Sparta, Wis.; Anne Martin of Earl E. Williams Middle School in Tracy, Calif.; and Kevin Allen Wagner of Carlisle High School in Carlisle, Pa., each received the *Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award* for working to instill patriotism in their students.

Post 10555 Commander Susan Johnson accepted the *Fred C. Hall Memorial Outstanding Post Special Project Award* on behalf of the Panama City Beach, Fla., Post, which acted as a temporary supply distribution point in the wake of *Hurricane Michael* in 2018.

National VFW Auxiliary President Sandi Kriebel received the *VFW Gold Medal of Merit and Citation*. Past VFW Commander-in-Chief Keith Harman accepted a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation*. VFW's National Home for Children Executive Director Patrice Greene also received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation* for her 30 years working for the home in Eaton Rapids, Mich.

Twisted X Boots Named Title Sponsor of Youth Essay Contests

President and CEO of Twisted X Boots, Prasad Reddy, presented VFW with a \$100,000 check, making his company title sponsor for the Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen youth essay contests. Reddy, a native of India, said he first heard about VFW's youth programs six years ago and didn't hesitate when the opportunity arose to be the sponsor. "What better way to teach our children patriotic values and democracy," Reddy said. Twisted X sells a line of patriotic, VFW-inspired boots.

Speakers Give Accolades, Updates and Donations

Rep. Val Demings (D-Fla.) of Florida's 10th Congressional District welcomed VFW members to Orlando. "The United States of America is the greatest country in the world because of the service of men and women who live and die to protect our country," Demings said. Noting that Florida has 6,295 Gold Star families, Demings said "we must end the widow's tax." She also said it's time to end the 15-year "use it or lose it" clause in the *Forever GI Bill*.

Nathan Naylor, vice president of veteran healthcare for Philips North America, discussed Project Atlas, which provides telehealth opportunities at VFW Posts in Montana, Pennsylvania and California. "These locations provide those in rural areas with a convenient, secure and private environment where they can talk with their doctors from the convenience of a VFW Post."

Tri-West President and CEO David McIntyre announced that within two weeks of today, 92 percent of all veterans eligible for urgent care will have access to such care within a 30-minute drive of their homes. "We are making sure our footprint is everywhere footprints exist," he said. In recognizing VFW Assistant Adjutant General and Washington Office Executive Director Bob Wallace, McIntyre presented VFW with a \$50,000 donation to benefit the VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program, which allows 10 student vets to advocate for specific veterans-related causes on Capitol Hill each year during VFW's Legislative Conference.

Humana's vice president and deputy chief medical officer, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Worthe S. Holt Jr., discussed the joint *Uniting to Combat Hunger* campaign, noting that food insecurity is a "serious societal" problem which leads to "poor health." With the VFW, Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida and the Society of St. Andrew, Humana has provided 300,000 meals and 2,000 bottles of water to Florida residents.

Joe Torres, senior affinity account manager with USAA thanked VFW, saying it was an "honor" to partner with the veterans organization. USAA is sponsoring tonight's "Made it Happen" membership celebration.

-More-

Unmet Needs recipient and Iraq War vet Chris Blevins thanked VFW for “singlehandedly changing the course” of his life. With his family living in a hotel room he couldn’t pay for, Blevins said he was in the darkest moment of his life, ready to kill himself in the parking lot of the hotel when he looked up and saw his fiancée holding their son. She told him he had received a check from VFW’s *Unmet Needs* program. “VFW gave me back to my family,” Blevins said. “I’m eternally grateful and there’s no way I can possibly pay that back.”

The Howard E. Vander Clute Jr. Memorial Ride brought in \$33,000 for the VFW Programs Department, which included \$19,000 from the Department of Virginia riders.

Representatives from the VFW National Home for Children in Eaton Rapids, Mich., spoke and introduced 2019 Buddy Poppy Child Brooklyn Hekman. Also in attendance was Marie Strefling, the 2008 Buddy Poppy Child. Having received her master’s degree, Strefling is now a homeowner and CPA in Michigan. “You provided me a childhood I otherwise would not have had,” Strefling said. “I could not be more thankful.”

Christine Troll, national Voice of Democracy winner, presented her winning essay.

‘Made it Happen’ Celebration a Success

Tonight, VFW members celebrated the organization’s success in achieving 100 percent membership for the first time in 27 years. All-American caps were presented to 49 Department, 145 District and 463 Post commanders. Triple Crown awards were presented to 12 commanders. Triple Crown awardees are those commanders who have received All-American status at the Post, District and Department levels.

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief Richard Eubank (2010-11) became the first leader in VFW’s history to earn Triple Crown status twice, and he did so in two Departments. The first time was in 2000 with the Department of California. The member of Post 9448 in Veneta, Ore., earned Triple Crown status today after attaining All-American for his District. “For those who allowed me to have this great honor, thank you very much,” Eubank said.

“Top Tier” Departments from each conference were announced: Montana from the Western Conference, Missouri from the Big 10, Maryland from Eastern and Texas from the Southern Conference.

A new award this year, the Conference Membership Trophy was presented to the Western Conference. Top recruiters Carlo Davis from Texas and Tim Peters from Montana were recognized.

The 2019 *National Recruiter of the Year* was presented to Mark Short with the Department of Arizona for his recruitment of 543 members.

Two Posts were inducted into the Legacy Society: Post 6311 in Manteca, Calif., for having 100 Legacy Life members and Post 7234 in Ocean View, Del., for recording 25 Legacy Life members. The Legacy Society includes Posts with at least 25 Legacy Life members on its roster.

Commander-in-Chief B.J. Lawrence gave special recognition to WWII veteran Raymond O’Brien with Post 529 in Somerville, Mass. During a Post visit, Lawrence noticed the vet’s All-American cap from 1959-60 was “aged and weathered.” That cap had been presented to O’Brien by former WWII vet, VFW member and U.S. President John F. Kennedy. Lawrence presented the Navy vet with a new All-American cap with the 1959-60 dates. “Seeing him in that hat reminded me of our tradition of setting and achieving goals,” Lawrence said.

Lawrence noted that VFW went above its recruiting goal by hitting more than 102 percent. “It’s been a hell of a year, and you made it happen,” he said. “We will continue to grow for many years.”

-The End-