

Convention Highlights

Sunday, July 21, 2019
Memorial Service

VFW Member Recalls Iraq War Loss During Memorial Service

A VFW member who served in the Iraq War recalled at today's memorial service how the death and funeral of a fellow airman who died in the conflict left a lasting impression about the meaning of Memorial Day.

Derek Blumke, a member of VFW Post 423 in Ann Arbor, Mich., and co-founder of Student Veterans of America, recalled the sacrifice of Air Force Staff Sgt. Casey Crate, who died on Memorial Day in 2005 during an air crash near Baghdad. He said he remembered another airman ask him, "Did you hear about Casey? He's gone, bro."

Blumke, who was serving with Crate in the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, recalled that during the 21-gun salute at Crate's funeral at Hurlburt Field in Florida, "each shot ripped through me. Until Casey's death, I never realized why old men marched in parades and took it so seriously. I understand now why older vets were always so stoic."

While attending the University of Michigan, Blumke, who graduated in 2010 with degrees in psychology and political science, said he worked with VFW Washington Office Executive Director Bob Wallace to pass 2008's *Post 9/11 GI Bill*. VFW and the Student Veterans of America established a formal partnership in 2013.

Blumke said that Crate's death was "crushing" and that he wanted to make a difference in the lives of fellow veterans. "These losses must be worth something," said the veteran of three deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Blumke, who noted that VA prescribed him "a dozen drugs" after his service, said that he personally determined and verified with VFW and American Legion fact checkers that veterans who received VA care were 32 percent more likely to commit suicide. VA reported in 2018 that of the 20 veterans who commit suicide daily, on average, six had used VA health care within the last year of their life, while the other 14 had not.

During the memorial service, three former VFW and Auxiliary leaders who died in the past year were remembered at today's memorial service. Past VFW Commander-in-Chief John S. Staum (1985-86) died Sept. 23, 2018, and John M. "Jack" Carney (1992-93) died Jan. 1, 2019. Past National Auxiliary President Rosemary Mazer, who died June 5, 2019, led the Auxiliary from 1986 to 1987.

VFW Auxiliary National Chaplain Jean Hamil provided the invocation, while past VFW National Chaplain James Gray delivered the benediction. Led by VFW National Chaplain Charlene Cobb, VFW and Auxiliary national officers carried out the memorial ritual and symbolic tributes.

VFW Auxiliary National Assistant Soloist Willa Watts sang the National Anthem, "Wind Beneath My Wings," "I'll Never Love Again" and the veterans' version of "Hallelujah." Michael Carlson, a 15-year-old Boy Scout, performed "Taps." VFW national sergeants-at-arms escorted Gold Star family members before the ceremony.

-The End-