



## **124<sup>TH</sup> NATIONAL CONVENTION VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS**

# **Convention Highlights**

Monday, July 24, 2023  
Joint Opening Session

### **Suicide Prevention is Topic of Today's Joint Session**

During this morning's Joint Opening Session, VFW Adjutant General Dan West asked that attendees remember the family of Department of Arizona Sr. Vice Commander Mark Short, who died on June 2. An Army veteran, Short was a VFW Certified National Recruiter. "Suicide prevention will remain a top VFW priority for as long as I'm adjutant general," West said.

In a video message, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-Ariz.), also remembered Short, acknowledging that Arizona is mourning his loss and that more needs to be done to prevent suicide. "We need to improve veterans access to care," said Sinema, who sits on the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs.

USAA President and CEO Wayne Peacock spoke of USAA's decades-long relationship with VFW. Peacock introduced the Face the Fight initiative, a suicide awareness campaign featuring a coalition of companies and nonprofits, including VFW, dedicated to veteran suicide prevention. "Veterans suicide requires our urgent attention," Peacock said. "VFW is the leading voice calling on Congress, VA and the [Department of Defense] to work together to reduce the number of service members and veterans who die by suicide."

The Face the Fight coalition claims that the veterans suicide rate is 57 percent higher than the national average. Peacock said that since Sept. 11, 2001, there has been four times more veteran deaths by suicide than the number of combat deaths in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

Peacock told a story about a phone call from a distressed Army National Guard soldier to a USAA member service representative. The soldier reported fraudulent activity on her account, Peacock said, which made her already precarious financial situation even worse. "She went on to say that she was financially destitute and that she was sitting in her car, in her uniform with her loaded 9mm service weapon on her lap," Peacock said. "I know for sure that USAA helped save a life that day." Peacock said USAA member service representatives are now trained to properly respond to those who are in distress.

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In his opening remarks this morning, VFW Commander-in-Chief Timothy Borland recalled that it was “an honor and a privilege” to be present at the White House for the signing of the *PACT Act*, a comprehensive toxic exposure law, in August. Borland said that when President Joe Biden saw his VFW cap, Biden pulled him closer and told him how he believes his son, Beau Biden, died in 2015 due to toxic exposure while he was in the military. “President Biden pointed at his 9-year-old grandson,” Borland said. “He had a tear in his eye.”

Executive Director of VFW’s Washington Office Ryan Gallucci called on all delegates to scan a QR code on the screen to urge lawmakers to pass the *Major Richard Star Act*, which would give veterans full VA compensation, Gallucci thanked the VFW and Auxiliary members for their work in getting the *PACT Act* passed last year. “The VFW won the day,” Gallucci said.

### **‘Tell Your Stories’**

In a roar of VFW pride, VFW National Ambassador John Wayne Troxell rallied members in attendance with his call to action from members of the veterans' organization he deems the most important and influential in the world. A retired Army veteran who served as the third Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Troxell spoke of this year's dip in recruitment numbers across all military factions, urging VFW members to step up and share the gospel of military service with younger generations of Americans. "We have to continue to inspire this younger generation by showing what military service did for you," said Troxell, who authored his memoir, *Surrender or Die!: Reflections of a Combat Leader*, released this year. "Tell your stories and let them hear the good it does to protect your country.

Scott Stump, president and CEO of the National Desert Storm Veterans War Memorial Association provided an update on the national memorial to be built at 2300 Constitution Avenue, NW in the nation’s capital. He said that he hopes the long-awaited memorial will be built and dedicated by the first quarter of 2025. “The end product will be breathtaking,” Stump said. “It will be a phenomenal memorial for those who served.” Stump concluded by asking all attendees to ask their Department headquarters and VFW National Headquarters to donate to the memorial.

The CEO and founder of Twisted X, Prasad Reddy, approached the podium to a standing ovation from VFW members for his continued support of VFW's *Voice of Democracy* and *Patriot's Pen* programs. Opening his remarks by expressing his gratitude to all veterans for protecting American citizens like he and his family, Reddy surprised Borland with a \$50,000 check as a token of his devotion to VFW and its youth programs. "You all write checks without numbers, selflessly, for us living in safety and peace," Reddy said. "The least we can do is write a check with a few numbers to show our gratitude."

Scott Mathis, a regional executive with Humana, presented Borland with \$25,000 for VFW’s National Veterans Service training program. “We understand the value of VFW service officers,” he said. “We thank you for this partnership.” Following Mathis’ remarks, Borland noted that thanks to the VFW and Humana joint *Uniting to Combat Hunger* campaign, 1,233,244 meals have been provided to food insecure veterans and their families.

### **Awards and Other Speakers**

VFW Auxiliary President Jane Reape was awarded the *VFW Gold Medal of Merit and Citation* for her time as president. “I wear this medallion for all the members of the VFW Auxiliary,” Reape said. “Together, we are truly a family. I am proud of the work we have done as one team.”

National *Voice of Democracy* first-place winner Scotland Stewart from Winchester, Tenn., delivered his award-winning essay. Borland presented the high-school junior with the VOD trophy to accompany his \$35,000 *T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship* awarded in March. Stewart represented the Department of Tennessee on behalf of VFW Post 1893 and its Auxiliary in Estill Springs, Tenn.

The Vice Minister of Taiwan’s Veterans Affairs Council Wu Chih-Yang presented Borland with a Gold medal of honor. Borland signed a joint proclamation to continue VFW’s long-standing partnership with the Taiwan Veterans Affairs Council.

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Several Posts were inducted into the Legacy Society: Post 10454 in Airport Cities, Texas, for having 125 Legacy Life members. Post 3522 in Charles Town, W.Va., and Post 6450 in Chester, W.Va., for attaining 50 Legacy Life members. The following nine Posts all tallied 25 Legacy Life members: Post 1446 in Red Lion, Pa.; Post 1785 in Learfield, Pa.; Post 6027 in North East, Md.; Post 6423 in Elsmere, Ky.; Post 6731 in D'Iberville, Miss.; Post 8180 in Korea; Post 9186 in San Antonio, Texas; Post 10010 in East Helena, Mont.; and Post 12146 in Thailand. The Legacy Society includes Posts with at least 25 Legacy Life members on its roster.

“Top Tier” Departments from each conference were announced: South Dakota from the Big 10, Delaware from the Eastern Conference, Washington from the Western Conference and Louisiana from the Southern Conference.

The Conference Membership Trophy, which recognizes the VFW conference with the highest percentage of membership, was once again presented to the Southern Conference.

All-American commanders were recognized at the end of this morning's session when each received their All-American caps and citations. Also recognized were the Triple Crown recipients.

**-The End-**