

Stafford, Mills to represent national organizations at 106th VFW, 101st Auxiliary State Conventions



National Veterans of Foreign Wars Inspector General Gregory Stafford, of North Carolina, will represent the national VFW at the 106th Illinois VFW State Convention June 5-8, 2025 in Springfield.



National Junior Vice President of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Auxiliary Donna Mills will represent the national VFW Auxiliary at the 101st Illinois VFW Auxiliary State Convention June 5-8, 2025 in Springfield.

Veterans of Foreign Wars National Inspector General Gregory A. Stafford, and National Auxiliary Junior Vice President Donna Mills will represent the national organizations during the Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and Auxiliary state conventions June 5-8 in Springfield.

Stafford, of Camden, North Carolina, was appointed National Inspector General of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. on Aug. 1, 2024, at the 125th VFW National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky.

He served in the United States Navy from 1983 to 2005, earning his VFW eligibility by serving during Operation Enduring Freedom. In recognition of his service, he received four Navy/Marine Corps Commendation Medals, two Navy Achievement Medals, six Good Conduct Medals, two National Defense Service Medals, and the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, among others.

He joined the VFW in 2008 at Post 6060 in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life membership.

He has served in elected and appointed positions at the Post, District and Department levels, culminating with his election as the VFW Department of North Carolina Commander in 2017.

On the national level, Greg is serving his second term on the Council of Administration, previously serving from 2018 to 2022. He has also served on the National Budget and Finance Committee, the National

Security and Foreign Affairs Committee and as National Aide-de-Camp.

Stafford received his bachelor's degree in history and secondary education from Elizabeth State University in 2009. He is retired.

He is a life member of the VFW National Home, Disabled American Veterans, and the Military Order of the Cootie.

Mills of Hesston, Pennsylvania, was elected to the office of National Junior Vice-President of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) Auxiliary at its 111th Nation-

al Convention in Louisville, Kentucky.

She is now in the fourth of five offices leading to the National Presidency, which she is expected to hold in 2026-2027.

A Life Member of the Standing Stone Auxiliary 1754 in Huntingdon, she has served the organization in many capacities including Auxiliary, District and Department President, National District Council Member, Eastern Conference Membership Coach and Veterans & Family Support National Ambassador.

Mills joined at age 16 on the eligibility of her grandfather, Neal H. Giffin, Sr., who served

in the U.S. Army during World War II.

She is a retired software engineer for Pennsylvania State University where she worked for 28 years.

She spends much of her spare time indulging in her love of computers and computer programming, reading, watching football and creating cross-stitch and embroidery.

Mills is a member of the United Methodist Church, American Legion Auxiliary 24, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks 976, Moose Lodge 223/220 and Military Order of the Cootie Auxiliary (MOCA) 33.

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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

2025 Illinois New Century Drawing

52 Weekly Drawings - July through June

\$100 Prize Each Week - Profits to Charity

**DRAWING AT VFW DEPT. OF ILLINOIS
3300 CONSTITUTION DR., SPRINGFIELD, IL 62711**

State Commander

Maurice Bridges

Veterans and Their Families - We Got You



WOW how time flies!!! Program Committee Chairmen at Council of Administrations meetings give a report about their Program status. At the end of their report, they say, thank you for the appointment, Commander. Well, I would like to say THANK YOU for voting for me and believing in me as your State Commander for the 2024-2025 term. It has been a wonderful year traveling the Illinois highways from south to north and from east to west in this state.

As I pass the torch to the next State Commander, I have a few fond memories that I would like to share with you from this last year. I represented the Department of Illinois as guest speaker at the District 14 Memorial Day event in Red Bud, IL, represented the Department at the Funeral Procession and Graveside Services for TSgt William L.

Leukering who was shot down in a B-17 aircraft over Germany, represented the Department at the Mascoutah Moose Lodge where Comrade Thomas Richardson was awarded the Pilgrim Degree of Merit, represented the Department and was the guest speaker at the Bolingbrook Veterans' Day ceremony, represented the Department at Post 1337 for their Centennial Celebration, represented the Department at the ROTC Awards Ceremony at the University of Illinois Campus in Urbana IL, and most rememberable, represented the Department at the 8th Annual Gold Star Scholarship & Appreciation Banquet in Springfield IL.

Before I continue, I would like to provide a little more about the Gold Star Scholarship. In February 2018, Gold Star Mission began awarding scholarships to individuals ex-

emplifying selfless service, honoring fallen heroes. Funds raised through various events support the Gold Star Mission Scholarship Fund. There are 34 scholarships given out annually. The number 34 represents the initial number of Illinois National Guardsmen who made the ultimate sacrifice. Today the Illinois Gold Star Mission honors all Gold Star Families no matter what branch of service or component, Active Duty, National Guard or Reserve.

Speaking of Scholarships, the VFW National Council of Administration has decided to discontinue the annual Voice of Democracy winners' trip to Washington, D.C. and improve and enhance it with the Founding Forward Spirit of America Youth Leadership program located in Valley Forge Pennsylvania. Therefore, it was an honor to be the last Illinois State Commander to escort the last State of Illinois VOD winner down the axile in the Parade of Winners event at the Washington Conference in D.C. Next years theme (2025-2026) is: "How Are You Showing Patriotism and Support for Our Country?". Note: Next years theme is the same for both Patriot Pen

and VOD.

The month of March was a very busy month. During the first week of March, the State Leadership Team was in Washington DC for the VFW Washington Conference. The VFW Washington Conference is an annual event where Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) members from across the country gather in Washington, D.C., to advocate for veterans' issues. It serves as a platform for VFW leaders and members to meet with congressional representatives, discuss legislative priorities, and push for policy changes that benefit veterans, service members, and their families.

Two weeks after the Washington Conference, the State Leadership Team participated in Illinois Lobby Day in Springfield IL. The big difference in Springfield is the fact that the VFW and other veteran organizations such as the DAV, AMVETS, etc., were teamed up together as one. Being teamed up as one provided veterans and their advocates with opportunities to engage directly with policymakers, ensuring that the voices of Illinois veterans were heard regarding legislation and policies affecting them.

It's not over until it's over. We have until the fiscal year ends on June 30th to continue recruiting new annual, reinstates and life members before this fiscal year ends, so please continue working hard on Membership until then. Congratulations to all the Districts and Post that reach the National goal of 102% and the State goal of 101%. If you were fortunate enough to make All-State, I am looking forward to seeing the All-State District Commanders and the All-State District Quartermasters as well as the All-State Post Commanders and the All-State Post Quartermasters Walk across the stage at the State Convention and be recognized in June in Springfield IL. In addition, if you were fortunate enough to make All-American, I'm also looking forward in seeing the, All-American District Commanders, All-American District Quartermasters, All-American Post Commanders and All-American Post Quartermasters Walk across the stage at the National Convention and be recognized in August in Columbus Ohio

Lastly, I want to thank the incoming State Commander for asking me to take an appointment as the Past Department Commander's Club Member and an appointment as the Veterans Service Committee Member (1st PSC). In closing, I am truly honored to having served as your Department of Illinois State Commander.

It's been a fun ride and remember, "VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES, WE GOT YOU!!!"

State Senior Vice Commander

Eugene Blackwell



Greetings Comrades

One of the most important activities of the VFW is advocating for Veterans through the legislative process. As a Veterans service organization, we are dedicated to ensuring that Veterans receive and maintain the benefits they have earned. With the leadership of our legislative chairmen, VFW members formed two teams to communicate our concerns to our congressional representatives during the VFW Legislative Conference, held from 2-6 March 2025. Our advocacy focused on six major priorities:

1. Unaddressed Toxic Exposures

The PACT Act established a framework for evaluating toxic exposures and their effects on Veterans. However, transparency and consistent oversight remain critical. The VFW urges Congress to ensure that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) publicly updates the status of its research on presumptive conditions linked to toxic exposures and maintains transparency in its decision-making process.

2. Transition from Service

Transitioning from military to civilian life poses numerous challenges, including health concerns and career changes. VFW supports codifying VA's practice of including accredited claims representatives in Transition Assistance Program

(TAP) classes to ensure service members receive immediate access to their benefits. We urge Congress to pass the TAP Promotion Act to make this initiative permanent.

3. Cracking Down on Predatory Claims Companies

The VFW condemns the unethical actions of predatory claims companies that charge Veterans exorbitant fees for assistance in accessing their benefits. Nine states have already passed laws prohibiting these practices. The VFW calls on Congress to pass federal legislation to eliminate these scams and strengthen the accreditation system.

4. Exploring Alternative PTSD Treatments

Recognizing the need for comprehensive mental health care, the VFW advocates for increased funding and research into innovative PTSD treatments. We urge Congress to support both the Department of Defense and VA in implementing effective, evidence-based therapies beyond traditional pharmaceutical treatments.

5. GI Bill Parity

National Guard and Reserve members deserve equitable education benefits for their service. The VFW calls for the passage of the Guard and Reserve GI Bill Parity Act of 2025 to ensure that all qualifying days of service contribute toward Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility.

6. Retirement and Military Personnel

Disabled Veterans who are Chapter 61 retirees often face unfair financial offsets between their military retirement pay and VA disability compensation. The VFW urges Congress to pass the Major Richard Star Act to correct this injustice and ensure Veterans receive their full earned benefits.

In addition to attending the legislature conference, on March 27, I had the privilege of attending the open house for The Road Home Program, which offers exceptional support and services to Veterans, service members, and their families, all at no cost and regardless of discharge status.

The Road Home Program is dedicated to addressing the complex physical, social, and emotional health needs of Veteran communities nationwide.

Their mission is to build, educate, and maintain resource networks to provide comprehensive mental health care and wellness support. Below are some of the treatment options available to those in need.

Virtual Treatment Options Two-Week Virtual Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

This program provides interactive clinical care through video visits, accessible via phone, tablet, or laptop. Veterans receive the same high-quality care virtually as they would in person. To inquire about care, individuals can fill out the "Inquire About Care" form and ask about the Two-Week Virtual IOP.

Virtual Outpatient Program

Virtual outpatient care consists of weekly video visits, focusing on immediate symptom reduction, long-term mental health recovery, and permanent lifestyle changes. Veterans, service members, and families receive tools and skills to build healthy, productive lives.

In-Person Treatment Options Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP)

This innovative, individualized program condenses six months of therapy into two weeks. Participants engage in individual and group therapy, physical fitness, stress-reduction training, wellness practices, nutritional education, and mindfulness meditation. Veterans and service members receive comprehensive care with all treatment, travel, meals, and lodging covered for both the participant and one support person.

Outpatient Program

In-person outpatient care consists of weekly therapy sessions designed to reduce symptoms, promote long-term mental health recovery, and support lifestyle changes. Participants leave with practical skills and resources to enhance their well-being and strengthen relationships.

The Road Home Program is a valuable resource for Veterans, service members, and their families, providing compassionate, specialized care. For those in need, this program serves as a vital lifeline on the path to recovery and well-being.

Visit our website at:
www.vfwil.org

ILLINOIS VFW NEWS

USPS 008-251

Official Publication of the Department of Illinois

Volume #62 Issue #4

The Illinois VFW News is published four times per year (September, December, March and June) by the Department of Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, 3300 Constitution Dr., Springfield, IL 62711. Periodical postage paid at Springfield, IL and additional office: Stevens Point, WI.

Postmaster: Send address changes to V.F.W. Circulation Department, 406 West 34th Street, Kansas City, MO 64111.

SUBSCRIPTION RATE:

\$1.00 of the annual membership dues paid by each member to a Post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. Department of Illinois, is for a year's subscription to the Illinois VFW News. Subscription rates for non-members is \$2.00 per year, \$5.00 three years.

NEWS COPY & PHOTOS:

Send to Illinois VFW News, 3300 Constitution Dr, Springfield, Illinois 62711 or email to barb.wilson2@outlook.com Deadline is the 1st of the month before above listed publishing months, unless otherwise noted.

NEWSPAPER COMMITTEE:

Laurie Emmer, Chairman; Maurice Bridges; Scott Swinford; and Bobby Welch

Editor: Barbara Wilson
Printer: Berlin Journal Newspapers, Berlin, WI 54923

From Carpenter to Colonel – Eric Smith Retires After 36 Years of Military Service

By Barb Wilson

Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office

Col. Eric Smith of Springfield, a life member of LaFore Lock VFW Post 755, who enlisted as an Army carpenter in 1989, was honored for his 36-year career during a retirement ceremony March 21 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln in Springfield.

“We cannot thank you enough for your service,” said Maj. Gen. (ret.) Eric Little, who served as the officiant for the ceremony. “Thirty-six years is a long time to give to the U.S. Army.”

Little thanked Smith’s family for their support and sacrifice throughout his military service.

“Eric could not have asked for a better support system,” he said. “That is the only way anyone in the military is successful. Thank you all because you don’t get thanked enough. This will be a different chapter for the family as well. Eric’s ready but it’s going to be different.”

Little and Smith first met when each of them joined the Illinois Army National Guard and were assigned to the 744th Engineer Company.

“We have known each other for 36 years,” Little said. “Eric and I joined the 744th Engineers in the same month and year in 1989. We were privates together. Now here we are today. We have worked together almost 36 years. During most of his jobs and most of my jobs, we worked together. You have earned retirement. Good luck on your future endeavors.”

Smith enlisted as a 51B, carpenter/mason, spending eight years as an enlisted Soldier and noncommissioned officer. He enrolled in Officer Candidate School and in August 1998, he was commissioned as a quartermaster officer.

Smith, who most recently served as Commander (forward), 34th Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade in 2024 during the brigade’s deployment to Kuwait, said the 36 years, two months, and three days he served was about 30 years, two months, and 3 days longer than he had anticipated.

“It’s part of life,” he said. “You don’t know where it’s going to take you. It’s been a long, challenging, frustrating, but also rewarding journey.”

Smith said while the ceremony celebrates his career, it’s not just for him.

“This ceremony is to recognize all those who have supported and guided me. The NCOs, officers, civilian coworkers, friends, and family, but mostly Lori, Reegan, and Aysa,” Smith said. “They have given so much over those years. Now it’s time for me to give back as much as I can.”

Smith said he was humbled to be recognized for his military service.

“I’ve experienced a lot of emotions over the last several months as I reflected wearing this uniform for the last day today,” he said. “I’m humbled to be standing up here. The single most contributing factor is the

unconditional support from my family which allowed me to pursue pretty much any endeavor I pursued in this profession.”

Smith thanked his family and friends, including his mother, Candy, for their support throughout his career.

“To my mom, Candy, thank you for your constant unwavering support bearing me a work ethic and to never play victim or make excuses for my failures,” he said. “You instilled in me the desire to move forward regardless of the circumstances.”

“To my friends, my circle is small,” Smith said. “You have no idea how much I cherish that circle. So many people have impacted my career. Whether you realize it or not, I observed. I learned and I grew from watching you all.”

Smith also thanked his daughters, Reegan and Aysa.

“You are like night and day when it comes to your personalities,” he said. “But you are exactly the same when it comes to your drive and determination. I don’t know what I have done to deserve two great young ladies in my life. You both are better human beings than I ever was. I am immeasurably proud of you both.”

Smith thanked his wife of 32 years, Lori, for her unconditional support throughout his service.

“You’ve been with me and endured 34 of the 36 years I’ve been serving. I owe you so much,” he said. “You are the foundation of the family. The appreciation and love I have for you can never be expressed in words. My successes are yours. I owe you everything.”

“I’ve missed more anniversaries and special occasions I can ever count,” Smith said. “It probably hasn’t hit you yet, but yes, I am with you now 24/7. You three ladies have endured

and sacrificed so much over the years. It’s time now for me to pay that back.”

Smith said the ceremony marks the final chapter of his military career.

“I could not have scripted the last few years of my military career any better than it mapped out,” he said. “From being selected as the Director of Logistics to being promoted to colonel and then selected for brigade command and deploying with the brigade overseas. Those are marks we etch into our helmets and that we dream about.”

Smith, who deployed multiple times throughout his career, shared that during his last deployment, he commanded a team comprised of Soldiers from across the three components, active duty, Army Reserves, and National Guard.

“I can say without a doubt, the Army National Guard, specifically the Illinois Army National Guard is one of the best trained and most ready forces,” he said. “It doesn’t just happen. It’s because of all of you here today. Every assignment I assumed came with its own unique challenges and tested my resolve, but I grew both personally and professionally as a result, which ultimately should be a goal and by-product.”

Smith said he has seen a lot over his 36 years of service.

“I have witnessed some amazing and not so amazing things over the past 36 years,” he said. “Some made me super proud, and some made me want to bury my head in the sand. They were all learning moments. It’s how we react individually and collectively as an organization which defines us.”

Smith shared a letter from a Soldier he served with during the 2024 deployment.

“A Soldier who I served



Col. Eric Smith, of Springfield, thanks family, friends, and coworkers during a retirement ceremony March 21 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln, Springfield. Smith retired from the Illinois Army National Guard after 36 years of military service. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office)

with on deployment sent me a note that I’d like to share. The moments that change us rarely feel extraordinary as they happen. They occur quietly in hallways, through a shared story, or by simply showing up. Their weight only becomes clear in hindsight,” Smith said.

“As you begin this new chapter in retirement, I hope you realize that the weight of your

impact is not measured in medals or accolades, but on the lives, you have shaped and the example you have set,” Smith said. “Leadership like yours does not fade. It creates ripples that endure quietly and profoundly. I am humbled by each one of your family’s sacrifices and I am immeasurably honored to have served with each and every one of you.”

Bloomington Holds Successful Supply Drive

In February, Bloomington VFW Post 7539 held their annual drive to collect move in supplies for the Love our Vets program. These supplies are needed for our homeless vets who are moving into a home environment to get started. This year was a successful program and the post collected more than 1,000 items due to the generosity of the Bloomington community. **Pictured are, from left, Randy Winter, Joe Palmer, Cliff Hall, and a representative from the Jesse Brown VA.**



Eureka Soldier, VFW Member Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel

Jacob Beard, of Eureka, Illinois, a member of Morgan County Post 1379, Jacksonville was promoted to lieutenant colonel in a ceremony March 15 at Heartland Community College in Normal.

Beard, the officer-in-charge of the 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB), headquartered in Normal, enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves in 2005. In 2006, he transferred to the Illinois Army National Guard's 233rd Military Police Company where he became a platoon leader after commissioning from the WIU ROTC program in 2007.

Beard thanked his family for supporting his 20 years of military service.

"I'm very fortunate to have all my family present. After 20 years in the military, you understand that opportunities to have everyone together aren't as frequent as we would like sometimes," he said. "I would like to recognize my wife, Tiffany, for holding down the fort during all the late nights, drill weekends and my many days and months away from home. You are the true hero who puts up with the military and holds our family together when I wasn't there."

"To my children thank you for understanding it doesn't matter



From left, Lena Beard, Max Beard, Kaiona Weber and Mali'a Weber, children of newly promoted Lt. Col. Jacob Beard, officer-in-charge, 404th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, pin his new rank on during a promotion ceremony March 15 at Heartland Community College in Normal, Illinois. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Kaneshia Newport)

when or where we celebrate birthdays, holidays, or special occasions, it just matters that we celebrate them together when we could," he told his daughters, Mali'a, Kaiona and Lena, and son, Max. "I couldn't be prouder of each of you and the great people you have become."

Beard also had a special message for his parents.

"Looking back on it, giving you about 24 hours-notice I was going to MEPS and joining the military may not have been one of my most tactful moves, but looking back, it may not have been such a bad decision," he said. "Thank you for being so supportive throughout my life, even when I took the paths you didn't necessarily agree with."

Beard has held a variety of staff and leadership assignments throughout the Illinois Army National Guard, including platoon leader and executive officer in the 233rd Military Police Company, Assistant Operations Officer for 2nd Battalion, 123rd Field Artillery Regiment, during a 2010 deployment to Sinai, Egypt. After returning from the deploy-

ment, Beard briefly served as a staff officer in the 33rd Military Police Battalion before being selected as Commander of the 333rd Military Police Company.

In 2022, Beard deployed with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 404th MEB to Djibouti, Africa where he served as the Deputy Director of Crisis and Future Operations for Combined Joint Task Force- Horn of Africa. Upon his return from his second deployment to Africa, Beard was assigned as Chief of the Assistance and Investigations Branch within the Illinois National Guard's Office of the Inspector General where he served until 2024, when he was selected as the officer-in-charge of the 404th MEB.

Beard said he didn't get to where he is by himself.

"During this adventure, I've had the absolute pleasure of serving alongside some of the most amazing men and women our country has produced, sometimes in some of the worst environments the world has to offer," he said. "I am here today because of subordinates, peers and leaders who have influenced my actions and decisions."

Beard said he's also learned time is one of the most precious things leaders have.

"It is limited in quantity, so use it wisely," he said. "Ensure you have a plan to accomplish your goals before your time is up, both in your position, career, and in life."

Beard offered some advice to his fellow Soldiers, which he said, could also apply in all parts of life.

"Be aware of how your actions, and even presence, can impact others," he said. "In the absence of guidance, don't be afraid to make up your own. For the junior officers and NCOs present, never let your rank mentally hold you back from getting the job done."

"Always have someone on your staff who will tell you the truth, not just what you want to hear," he said. "Don't be afraid to tactfully share thoughts contrary to that of your boss. Treat your team like family and protect them like your children. Nothing is more powerful than a team based upon trust and shared understanding. Finally, if you do what is right and take care of your people, they will take care of you."

Henry W. Clark's 98th Birthday Celebration

Henry W. Clark, a distinguished World War II veteran who served as an Army Technician Fourth Grade (T-4), recently celebrated a remarkable milestone—his 98th birthday.

Friends, family, and members of the community gathered at Beggars Pizza in Oak Forest on Feb. 22, to honor his life, service, and enduring legacy.

Along with friends and family, Illinois VFW State Sr. Vice Commander Eugene Blackwell, Illinois VFW District 16 Commander William Browne, and Illinois VFW District 18 Sr. Vice Commander Paul Cravens attended this happy occasion and gave Henry a Service Certificate World War II.

World War II Contributions

Henry W. Clark (T-4) served in the Army during World War II from 05/1945 to 05/1947 in Germany, Europe. Henry was assigned to the 3759th QM Truck Company. Henry drove 1-ton to 10-ton trucks full of diesel



State Senior Vice Commander Eugene Blackwell and District 16 Commander Bill Browne visit with Henry Clark during his 98th birthday celebration.

fuel long-distance in a 10 to 20 vehicle convoy approximately 200 miles. An essential task, as the convoy must be kept safe throughout the entire route. Henry's job involved inspecting the area around them for any potential threats and keeping a keen

eye out for signs of hostile activity. He also checked to make sure that all vehicles were in good working order before beginning their journey. Furthermore, while waiting for the vehicle to be repaired, he was also responsible for keeping everyone safe by



maintaining a secure perimeter around the convoy. He received an honorable discharge, Army of Occupational Medal and World War II Honorary Medal.

Happy 98th birthday, Henry. Your story continues to inspire us all.

<p>Elect Eugene Blackwell State Commander Elect</p>	<p>Elect John McGlynn State Junior Vice Commander Re-Elect</p>	<p>Elect Damon Arnold State Surgeon Elect</p>
<p>Rob Bailey State Senior Vice Commander Elect</p>	<p>Scott Swinford State Quartermaster Re-Elect</p>	<p>Doug Jameson State Surgeon Re-Elect</p>
<p>Ryan Higginbotham State Junior Vice Commander</p>	<p>Jayson Hoffman State Judge Advocate</p>	<p>Gary Holmes State Chaplain</p>

Eleven VFW Members Honored by IDVA as 2025 Leaders



Evamarie Duff

Joshua W. Harris Brookfield Memorial Post 2868, Brookfield

Evamarie Duff, second from right, is a decorated veteran, passionate advocate for women veterans, and an inspiring example of resilience, courage, and determination.

Her military service in the US Army and Illinois Army National Guard from 2002 to 2007 laid the foundation for her future leadership roles and earned her eligibility for the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).

As an 88M Transportation soldier, Evamarie played a critical role in convoy security and transportation operations during her deployment to Camp Buehring, Kuwait, and LSANAconda, Iraq, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Despite facing challenges, including a medical evacuation to Germany and the completion of her military career at Fort Knox, Kentucky, in May 2007, Evamarie's dedication to service and leadership only grew stronger.

After her service, Evamarie joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and became a Life Member of Joshua W Harris Memorial VFW Post 2868 in Illinois in 2018. She has since held various leadership positions, including Post 2868 Junior Vice Commander (2019-2020), Post 2868 Senior Vice Commander (2020-2023), Post 2868 District Commander (2023-2024), District 4 Adjutant (2020-2024), District 4 Senior Vice Commander (2024-current), District 4 Color Guard (2023-current), Department Women Veteran Chairperson (2024-current) - the first to hold this role, Department All-State Chairman (2023-current) and VFW National Women Veteran Committee (2024-current).

Evamarie is also a member of the American Legion, Wounded Warrior Project, Order of the Eastern Star, and Daughters of the American Revolution, and DAV. She serves as an Election Judge in her county, further demonstrating her commitment to public service.

Evamarie's mission is to assist women veterans and provide support and resources to those who have experienced military sexual trauma (MST), as she is a survivor herself. Her leadership and dedication have earned her numerous accolades, including Recognition awards, certificates, National Aide De Camp, and National Special Aide De Camp positions. Evamarie's story is a testament to her unwavering commitment to service, leadership, and making a positive impact in her community. Her journey serves as an inspiration to many, and her continued dedication to women veterans and supporting those affected by MST is a shining example of her character and strength.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.



Kimberly Yantis

Chatham-Auburn Memorial Post 4763, Chatham

Kimberly Yantis, second from right, is a dedicated US Navy Veteran and passionate advocate for veterans, currently serving as the Central Region Supervisor at the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs for the past 5 years.

Before this role, she served for 13 years as the Superintendent at the Sangamon County Veterans Assistance Commission. With over 18 years of experience in supporting veterans in Illinois, she has made a significant impact through her leadership and commitment to improving the lives of those who have served.

Kimberly also proudly serves as the first female Commander of the Chatham-Auburn Memorial VFW, currently in her fifth year of leadership, where she continues to promote camaraderie and advocacy for fellow veterans.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.



Amanda Depew

Belleville Post 1739, Belleville

Amanda Depew, second from left, is a dedicated advocate, leader, and change maker within the veteran community. As a licensed clinical social worker and the Southern Region Outreach, Education, and Community Engagement Specialist for Illinois Joining Forces, Amanda is committed to bridging the gap between veterans and essential resources, ensuring they receive the support they deserve.

A veteran of the U.S. Air Force, Amanda served in Operation Enduring Freedom (2004-2005) as a Munitions Systems Apprentice, where she played a critical role in mission readiness and operational success. Her military experience shaped her passion for veteran advocacy, leading her to focus on suicide prevention, mental health awareness, and increasing access to vital services for veterans and their families.

She is a sought-after speaker, having shared her personal journey of resilience at the Marion VA Suicide Prevention Summit, where she inspired audiences by openly discussing her lived experience with PTSD, addiction, and recovery.

Amanda is an active member of VFW Post 1739 in Belleville and American Legion Post 199 in Edwardsville, further demonstrating her commitment to veteran service organizations and community engagement.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.



Nekohl Johnson

Benjamin O. Davis Post 311, Richton Park

Nekohl Johnson is a veteran of the U.S. Army, an educator, and advocate dedicated to the wholeness and empowerment of women veterans and trauma survivors. With more than 35 years in the clinical laboratory field, she has advanced from laboratory technician to director-level leadership, leveraging her expertise in healthcare, business, and education to create programs that foster healing and growth. As the Founder and President of Where We Meet, Inc., a nonprofit theatre company for veterans and trauma survivors, Nekohl harnesses the power of storytelling and the arts to facilitate healing. She is also the visionary behind Be Whole with Nekohl, a platform that equips women veteran leaders with resources, education, and custom tools to achieve wholeness in all aspects of life.

Nekohl is a health sciences professor in both college and private education sectors, shaping future leaders in healthcare. She is a dedicated veteran community leader, having established multiple Veterans Coffee Chats across Chicagoland, creating safe spaces for veterans to connect, share resources, and support suicide prevention efforts. She serves as the 2025 Ambassador for the Shero Coffee Club, the 16th District Women's Chairperson for VFW Illinois, Assistant to the State Women's Chairperson, and will become the State of Illinois VFW Women's Chairperson in June. Nekohl is also a member of American Legion Post 800 and the National Women Veterans United.

She credits her mother, the strongest person she knows, for teaching her the art of resilience, and her late father, an evangelist, for instilling in her the power of faith and ministry, taking her from church to church throughout her childhood and young adult years. Through leadership, education, and innovative wellness initiatives, she continues to uplift and advocate for women veterans, ensuring they have the support and resources to thrive.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.



Jill Henry

John H. Kraus Post 454, Bloomington

Jill Henry, second from right, started her Army with her acceptance into the Walter Reed Army Institute of Nursing Program at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. in 1973. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing followed by commissioning into the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) in 1977, she quickly specialized in Intensive Care Nursing. Following six years of ICU nursing, Jill served in a multitude of locations including Washington, D.C., Texas (x3), Georgia (x2), Kentucky and Hawaii with a deployment to Saudi Arabia with the 15th Evacuation Hospital during Operation Desert Shield/Operation Desert Storm.

Jill was an organizing founder of Operation HerStory which was the first All-female Veterans Flight from the state of Illinois to Washington, D.C. in 2021. Jill is a member of her local VFW and American Legion Posts where she is member of the Honor Guard on the flag folding team. She won Legionnaire of the Year for 2021-2022 and was a nominee for Central Illinois Remarkable Women in 2023.

In 2017, she became an Illinois Ambassador for the Military Women's Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery where her role is to encourage and assist women veterans in registering their legacy of service to the nation.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.



Rose Connolly

Lafare Lock Post 755, Springfield

Rose Connolly, a Milwaukee native, served in the U.S. Air Force from 1972 to 1995, primarily as an administrator with four years as an instructor.

She has been deeply involved in veterans' organizations, holding leadership and lifetime memberships in groups such as the Air Force Sergeants Association, American Legion, VFW, AmVets, and Catholic War Veterans, where she also serves as a historian and webmaster.

Her contributions to veterans' causes have earned her numerous accolades, including Illinois Veteran of the Month (March 2011) and the 2022 DAR Outstanding Service for Veterans Award. She was also recognized as one of 25 Illinois Women Veterans Leaders of 2025. An active volunteer, Rose participates in Camp Butler Wreaths Across America, serves as Chaplain for the Interveterans Council of Sangamon County, and is a Veterans Assistance Commission board member. She is passionate about history, working as an interpreter at state historic sites and giving presentations on military history, including the WWI Hello Girls and Civil War reenactments. Beyond her advocacy and historical work, Rose is a dedicated therapy dog handler, training her dogs, Amber and Sophie, through the Alliance of Therapy Dogs. She also actively supports Land of Lincoln Honor Flight and is currently learning American Sign Language to expand her outreach. Her two sons, Sean and Alan, both former Marines, continue the family tradition of service by working at Veterans Centers.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.

— See Women Veterans —
Continued on Page 8

Photos by Julian Calderon

Chatham Soldier Joins in Celebrating Vietnam Veterans

Illinois Army National Guard Lt. Col. Casey Kline, of Chatham, Commander, 33rd Military Police Battalion, and a member of told the approximately 20 Vietnam Veterans they set the example and blazed the trail for future generations of veterans during the annual Vietnam Veteran appreciation dinner at the Chatham-Auburn Memorial Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4763 in Chatham, March 29.

"You did the tough jobs, the thankless jobs, and oftentimes the unseen jobs," Kline said. "But you did what needed to be done."

Kline told the veterans to be proud of what they did during their military service.

"The military is a big machine with lots of pieces. Every single individual from the small unit to the large unit is critical," he said. "If they weren't critical, they wouldn't be there."

Kline said many years ago while attending a veteran's event, he met an individual who was very proud of what he did in the military.

"The veteran told me he was a cook with a rifle company," he said. "That's what he did. He cooked. But every time the guys came in they always had a hot meal waiting for them. I think we can all relate how much a cup of hot coffee or eggs mean."

Kline asked the Vietnam veterans to continue to engage with people out in the community.

"Eleven percent of recruits don't have a military connection," he said. "It's getting to be a little bit of a family business. We've all be in the situation being somewhere wearing

something that identifies us as a veteran. A lot of time it starts a conversation with someone who may be considering national service. Help us by continuing to engage those individuals considering service."

Kline thanked the Vietnam veterans for their service.

"Thank you for what you have done, and for what you will continue to do for us in the veteran community," he said.

Jayson Hoffman, a Iraq veteran of the Illinois Army National Guard, who serves as the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars' State Judge Advocate, said he was recently in Washington, D.C. and a friend asked what it was like when someone says thank you (for

your service) to you.

"No one has ever asked me how it makes me feel. When I was younger, it made me feel weird, like I didn't deserve it," Hoffman said during his welcome remarks. "Then I joined the VFW and made a ton of Vietnam veteran friends. I listened to their stories about their reception when they got home and the work they put in teaching the country they can hate the war, but not hate the warfighter. I get thanked because of you guys."

Hoffman said it doesn't make him feel weird to be thanked for his service now.

"It makes me feel real proud," he said.

Event coordinator Freddy

Rocha said he has a special place in his heart for Vietnam veterans.

"I was mentored by a Vietnam veteran without even knowing it," he said. "He told me that I was messing up fast and picking up speed. He's the one who got my life on track."

"Not only did you welcome me home but also my son, who is also a combat veteran," Rocha said. "You welcomed him home the same way I was welcomed home and that makes it very personal to me."



Lt. Col. Casey Kline, of Chatham, Commander, 33rd Military Police Battalion, thanks Vietnam Veterans for their service during the Vietnam Veterans Appreciation Dinner March 29 at Chatham-Auburn Memorial Post 4763 in Chatham.



Lt. Col. Casey Kline, of Chatham, Commander, 33rd Military Police Battalion, with some of the Vietnam Veterans in attendance at the annual Vietnam Veteran Appreciation Dinner March 29 at the Chatham-Auburn Memorial Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4763 in Chatham.

Olney Post 4226 pays tribute to Vietnam KIAs from Olney

On March 29, Olney Memorial Post 4226 conducted a Vietnam War Veteran Commemoration ceremony.

A signed proclamation designates March 29 as the annual observance of the last American troops from Vietnam. The 50th anniversary was March 29, 2023.

Seven U.S. service members who listed Olney as their home of record were killed in action during Vietnam.



The Olney VFW Post 4226 firing squad fires a volley during the ceremony.



Above, Olney VFW Post Commander, Ron Stephens places a rose on the memorial in memory of the service members from the Olney area who were killed in action in Vietnam.

Top right, Don Graham plays the bugle during the memorial tribute.

Right, Maj. (ret.) Michael Gasperini, United States Marine Corps, delivers the keynote address during the ceremony.





Vietnam Veterans from the Naperville area marked the 52nd anniversary of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam during a ceremony March 29.

Judd Kendall Post Marks Anniversary of Vietnam Troops Withdrawal

March 29 marked the 52nd anniversary of the departure of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Judd Kendall VFW 3873 hosted a program honoring all who served in the U.S. military

during the Vietnam War. This was the fourth year honoring this memorable occasion. This program was not just limited to those that served in Vietnam, but to "All Who

Served" our Great Country during the Vietnam War. In addition, VFW 3873 recognized the "11 Naperville Fallen" as they each paid the ultimate price to protect our

freedoms, and we recognized all the men and women that paid the ultimate price because of their service in Vietnam. Additionally, a wreath was laid at the Veterans Park wall

and after that, Service was moved to the "Gold Star Family Memorial" to lay a wreath at our Memorial in honor of all that paid the "Ultimate Sacrifice" while serving in All Wars.



The Joint Color Guard from Naperville marked the 52nd anniversary of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam during a ceremony March 29.



Woodstock Honors McHenry County Vietnam Veterans

Members of Woodstock Post 5040 joined American Legion Post 412, and McHenry County Government members to honor McHenry County Vietnam Veterans during the Vietnam War Veterans Day services.



Lawrenceville Honors Vietnam Vets

Veterans and family members from the Lawrenceville area held a ceremony March 29 to mark Vietnam Veterans Day. March 29 marks the anniversary of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Two U.S. service members who listed Lawrenceville as their homes of record were killed in action while serving in Vietnam.



Women Veterans

Continued from Page 5



Alejandra Hernandez

Crystal Lake Memorial Post 12014, Crystal Lake

Alejandra Hernandez, second from left, served in the United States Marine Corps for four years a Food Service Specialist with Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune Headquarters and Marine Support Squadron 272 Marine Corps Air Station New River, North Carolina. She deployed in 2007 to Kuwait, Camp Al Asad, and Camp TQ Air Base.

She is a member of the American Veterans for Equal Rights Chapter in Chicago and the Chapter Secretary. Lastly, she is the President of the Women Marines Association, IL-4 MAJGEN Angela Salinas Chapter.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.

Tammy Duckworth

Tioga Post 2149, Wood Dale

Senator Tammy Duckworth is an Iraq War Veteran, Purple Heart recipient and former Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs who was among the first handful of Army women to fly combat missions during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Duckworth served in the Reserve Forces for 23 years before retiring from the Illinois Army National Guard at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 2014. She was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2016 after representing Illinois's Eighth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives for two terms.



In 2004, Duckworth was deployed to Iraq as a Blackhawk helicopter pilot for the Illinois Army National Guard. On Nov. 12, 2004, her helicopter was hit by an RPG and she lost her legs and partial use of her right arm. Senator Duckworth spent the next year recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where she quickly became an advocate for her fellow Soldiers.

After she recovered, she became Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, where she helped create a tax credit for employers that hire Veterans, established a first-in-the-nation 24/7 Veterans crisis hotline and developed innovative programs to improve Veterans' access to housing and health care.

In 2009, President Obama appointed Duckworth as an Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs, where she worked to help end Veteran homelessness, address the unique challenges faced by female as well as Native American Veterans and create the Office of Online Communications to improve the VA's accessibility for all generations of veterans.

In the U.S. House, Duckworth was an advocate for working families and job creation, introducing bills like her bipartisan Friendly Airports for Mothers (FAM) Act—which is now law—to ensure new mothers have access to safe, clean and accessible lactation rooms when traveling through airports and helping lead passage of legislation that enhanced efforts to track and reduce Veteran suicides. She also passed her Troop Talent Act to help returning Veterans find jobs in the private sector and worked to cut waste and fraud at the Pentagon and throughout government.

As Senator, Duckworth is helping lead the charge to protect reproductive freedoms—including the IVF treatments that millions of American families, like her own, rely on to start and grow their families—and fully restore the protections of Roe v. Wade. She also continues her lifelong mission of supporting, protecting and keeping the promises we've made to our Veterans as well as ensuring that we stand fully behind the troops our nation sends into danger overseas. As a member of the Armed Services Committee, the Foreign Relations Committee and the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Duckworth who has dedicated her life to serving America's service members and Veterans, has continued building her strong record of leadership on national security and foreign policy issues, including successfully working to strengthen our relations with Indo-Pacific nations and improving security in the region and around the globe, all while also securing significant international investments in Illinois.



Tyra Oliver

Benjamin O. Davis Post 311, Richton Park

Tyra Oliver, second from right, is an accomplished Clinical Social Worker and U.S. Army Reserves Major with more than 28 years of experience and 13 years, respectively as a Behavioral Health Officer working for the Medical Brigade offering behavioral health support to units in our echelon.

Tyra provides mental health support to service members in both the deployed and garrison settings. She has worked at UIC Women's Clinic and Inpatient Mother-Baby unit providing effective therapy services, addressing trauma and crisis intervention. Tyra serves at Jesse Brown VA as the Outpatient Palliative Care and Hematology/Oncology Senior Social Worker.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.

Elisabeth Pennix

Member at Large, Department of Illinois

Elisabeth Pennix began her practice of law in the U.S. Navy JAG Corps in 2004.

She served for 8 years on active military duty including a deployment to Iraq during the surge of forces in 2006-2007 and a Reserve deployment to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba with the Military Commissions from 2015-2016.



Since joining the Navy Reserves in 2011, Elisabeth has worked in various full-time civilian roles: as General Counsel for the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, as Assistant Chief Counsel with the Department of Homeland Security, and since 2021, she has been the Deputy General Counsel at Sloan Global Holdings.

In her continued service in the Navy Reserves, Elisabeth is a Captain, Appellate Judge, and is currently recalled to active duty as the Staff Judge Advocate for the Regional Reserve command at Great Lakes.

Elisabeth is actively engaged with multiple non-profit organizations, including one she co-founded, Operation HerStory, which is dedicated to honoring women who served in the U.S. military. She also serves on the Board for the Pritzker Military Museum & Library (PMML), on the Board for the Navy League, Chicago Council, and is an active member of Business Executives for National Security (BENS).



A house call of a different kind

When a veteran is unable to go to the Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480 in East St. Louis to be sworn in, Commander Valerie Young and Quartermaster Jeanen Flemings make house calls. That's right, the two will travel to the veteran's home, a safe environment for the veteran. The two made a house call to Purple Heart recipient Earl Haynes to welcome him to the VFW Post 3480 family.



Milana Herman

Ross Pearson Post 5149, Rockford

Milana Herman, second from right, is a dedicated and impactful leader, deeply committed to serving veterans and fostering success within the community.

A former U.S. Army Personnel Administrative Support Specialist, Milana served active duty from 1989 to 1994 and continued in the reserves until 1997. Today, she brings her leadership skills to Rock Valley College, where she serves as the Program Manager for Student Employment/Veterans Affairs. In this role, Milana goes beyond the traditional duties, advising the RVC Veterans Club and ensuring that veterans are supported in their academic journey.

In addition to her work at Rock Valley College, Milana is a passionate advocate for women veterans, making substantial contributions to the visibility and support of their unique needs.

She actively participates in the National Women Veterans United Rockford Chapter, is a member of VFW Ross Pearson Post 5149 and serves on the Advisory Board for the Vet Center. One of her proudest accomplishments is her involvement in the short film Take Your Own Notes, where her story is shared, alongside those of other women veterans, highlighting their sacrifices and invaluable service to their country.

Milana's resilience in overcoming the challenges she faced as a woman in the military has made her a trailblazer for others. Her educational journey, which includes a Bachelor's in Psychology from Northern Illinois University and a Master's in Organizational Leadership from Judson University, further underscores her commitment to personal growth and empowering others.

Milana's unwavering belief in every individual's potential continues to inspire and uplift those around her.

Also pictured, from left, Margo Watson, Senior Program Manager, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Karen Hernandez, Director, Chicago Veterans Organization, and Terry Prince, Director, IDVA.

Corrections



3rd Place: Terry L. McKinney Memorial Award - Thaylee Dunaway, a 12th grade student at Edwards County High School in Albion, is the recipient of the Terry L. McKinney Memorial Scholarship Award in the amount of \$1,250.00. Dunaway, the District 13 champion, was sponsored by Edwards County Memorial Post 8222 and Auxiliary in Albion.



Riley Doyle, a 12th grade student at Rochelle Township High School in Rochelle, is the recipient of the Sharon L. Edwards Memorial Runner-Up Award in the amount of \$300.00. Doyle, the District 6 champion, was sponsored by Oregon Post 8739 in Oregon.

VFW Illinois, Auxiliary Host Successful “Supporting Our Veteran Sisters” Event

Department of Illinois VFW and Auxiliary presented an event designed to support and empower women veterans throughout the state March 30.

The “Supporting Our Veteran Sisters” Resource and Networking Event, held at Collinsville VFW Post 5691, drew approximately 100 veterans and 35 vendors from Northern and Southern Illinois.

Organized by Evamarie Duff, VFW Illinois State Women Veteran Chairperson, and Amiee Wagoner, Assistant VFW Illinois State Women Veteran Chairperson, with assistance from the VFW Auxiliary from VFW Collinsville 5691, the event aimed to provide a platform for women veterans to connect with essential resources, services, and networking opportunities.

The overwhelming response demonstrated the critical need for such initiatives and the VFW Illinois Department’s commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by women veterans. Throughout the day, attendees had access to a diverse range of vendors offering services such as healthcare, education, employment, mental wellness support, equine therapy, golfing, 6 VA departments, WWP-Chicago, got your 6 dog, and innovative medical devices like NeuroLumen.

“We’re thrilled with the outcome of this event,” said Evamarie Duff, VFW Illinois State Women Veteran Chairperson. “My mission has always been to provide help to others, as I know firsthand the challenges of finding support in underserved areas of Illinois.”

The event provided a safe space for women veterans to share their experiences, build camaraderie, and forge lasting connections. The VFW Illinois Department is dedicated to continuing its support for women veterans through future events and initiatives.

Event Highlights:

- Approximately 100 women veterans received resource help
- 35 vendors from Northern and Southern Illinois participated
- Essential resources and services were provided

• Networking opportunities facilitated connections among attendees and vendors

The VFW Illinois Department Women Veteran team, led by Chair Evamarie Duff and Assistant Amiee Wagoner, extends its gratitude to all vendors, volunteers, and attendees who made this event possible. Your support and participation are invaluable in our mission to serve women veterans.



Vendors start to set up resource tables at the Supporting Our Veteran Sisters resource and networking event at the Collinsville VFW Post 5691.



Illinois Attorney General’s Office vendor booth.

District 6 Honors Those Who Are No Longer With Us

By Rob Bland

In a combined ceremony the VFW District 6 and its Auxiliary came together to honor the memory of the VFW and Auxiliary members who are no longer with us.

This solemn ceremony was led by 6th District Chaplain John Tuttle. During the ceremony, District Commander Bob Coulter and District President Becky Coulson read the roll call of members who passed in the last year.

After the roll call, the Commander and President lit a candle. Around the candle were laid flowers; a red flower to symbolize the zeal our of our departed comrades, a white flower as a token of purity and a blue flower for our sincere respect for all of the departed comrades. A wreath was then laid next to the flowers as a symbol of eternity.

To close this ceremony a combined Honor Guard from VFW Post 8739 Oregon, VFW Post 1461 Belvidere, Auxiliary

1461 Belvidere and VFW Post 342 Rockford. The Honor Guard consisting of bugler District Service Officer David Draeger VFW Post 342, District 3 year Trustee John Winterton Post 8739, Americanism Chair Tina West Post 8739, District Junior Vice Commander Matt Alford Post 8739, District Chaplain John Tuttle Post 8739, District Auxiliary Senior Vice President Beth Costa-Bland Auxiliary 1461 and District Senior Vice Commander Rob Bland Post 1461.



District 6 Commander Bob Coulter salutes the fallen.



District 6 Auxiliary President Becky Coulson salutes the fallen.



District 6 Honor Guard render a salute during the playing of Taps.



State Commander Maurice Bridges talks with attendees.



State Commander Maurice Bridges and Amiee Wagoner, Assistant VFW Illinois State Women Veteran Chairperson talk with an attendee.



State Commander Maurice Bridges with, from left, Evamarie Duff, State Women Veterans Chairperson, Nancy O’Connell, State Chief of Staff, Amiee Wagoner, Assistant Women Veterans Chairperson, and Tara Skipper, a veteran of the U.S. Navy, and member of the Collinsville Post 5691 Auxiliary.

VFW, Auxiliary take the fight for Veterans Benefits to Capital Hill



Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky Staff Member, IL 9th District



Congressman Bill Foster, IL 11th District



William Dwyer, Congresswoman Robin Kelly Staff Member, IL 2nd District



Brandon Manbahal, Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi Staff Member, IL 8th District



Congresswoman Robin Kelly, IL 2nd District



William Miles, Congressman Danny Davis Staff Member, IL 7th District



Congressman Mike Bost, IL 12th District



Congressman Sean Casten, IL 12th District



Congressman Mike Quigley, IL 5th District

Veterans Organizations Meet with Legislators in Springfield

Veterans Lobby Day at the State Capitol was a success! There was demonstrated unity among the Veteran Service Organizations in Illinois. We strengthened our relationships with State Legislators while advocating for our common agenda of veterans' legislative priorities. We are grateful for the support of so many of our legislators, including Dan Swanson, Katie Stuart, Kevin Schmidt, Jason Plummer, Erica Conway Harriss, Brandun Schweizer, David Friess, Matt Hanson, and Sharon Chung.



VFW Auxiliary

Auxiliary President

Cindy Watters



As this will be my final communication, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for the support you have provided throughout this year. I am immensely proud of the joint project Maurice and I initiated—Backpacks for Homeless Veterans. This project has the potential to make a significant difference in the lives of so many veterans, and I am confident that they deeply appreciate the generosity and efforts of the

organizations. I am deeply grateful to so many of you for all that you have done for me this year. Your support and dedication mean more than words can express, and I truly appreciate each and every one of you.

This year has been an outstanding success for the Auxiliary. Through our efforts in working the programs, making generous donations, volunteering in hospitals and homes, and assisting in equipping the newly built Otto Veterans Square with

living essentials for their new apartments, we have made a profound impact.

Our commitment to serving Veterans and their families is unwavering and continuous, as we don't have starting and ending dates. We are striving to recruit new members to join our mission to help replenish our ranks and ensure the continued growth of our organization.

On that note, is your family a member of the Auxiliary? Your spouse, children, parents, siblings, or grandchildren are all

eligible for membership. A gift of membership is invaluable. Currently, Life Membership is the most advantageous option, especially considering the rising costs due to inflation. Life memberships are likely to increase soon, and annual memberships are continually becoming more expensive.

Membership in the Auxiliary is a meaningful way to honor our Veterans, honoring YOU!

I'm looking forward to seeing all of you soon.

Auxiliary Membership

Kathy Rowold & Mary Lee



Although the 2024-2025 program year is coming to an end, recruiting new members must not end. While the VFW and the Auxiliary are experiencing declines in membership and closures of Posts and Auxiliaries, the strength of our organizations depends on each of us continuing to commit to recruiting new members. Recruiting 16-25 year old members brings new ideas and support which is vital to keeping our organizations alive and growing.

'Strength in numbers' is a significant statement when it

comes to supporting the rights and benefits of Veterans and their families. We need the strength of our membership not only in our communities but more importantly, when we engage with lawmakers to protect and award the benefits of our past and current Veterans who continue to fight for our country.

While we continue to recruit new members, we must also remember to show our appreciation to our current members. Showing appreciation comes in many forms—not just monetary. A simple "thank you for all you

do" goes a long way in acknowledging the member's dedication and support of our organization.

The Department of Illinois Auxiliary is celebrating 100 years of service this year. With your support and recruiting efforts, the Auxiliary will continue to grow and be an example of our commitment to our Veterans and the United States of America!

THANK YOU for all you do!



District 14 Commander Doug Jameson recognizes Dr. Kareem Mateen, East St. Louis, as a Teacher of the Year, Grades 9-12. Dr. Mateen was sponsored by Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480, East St. Louis. This is the first educator of the year award from the post.

Organizations Come Together to Fight Homeless Veterans Crisis

By Rob Bland

It takes a community to fight the homeless veteran crisis.

The homeless veteran crisis is not only going out and finding those veterans who are living on the street, but those who are couch surfing and those who are struggling and could become homeless without a little support.

The Veteran Drop-in Center in Rockford is a place that helps veterans from all walks of life, and they are not in the fight alone.

The 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development took a snapshot of the homeless population.

One day of capturing the amount of homelessness in the United States showed that the total homeless veterans were reported to be 32,882. The report categorized the homeless veterans that were counted into two groups: those who were in some type of shelter or shelter program and those that were unsheltered. The unsheltered, or those that were living on the street numbered 13,851, while the sheltered were 19,031. This was just a snapshot of one day and of those that were

reported.

The report did not cover those veterans who are couch surfing and counting people on the street is much harder and can be inaccurate. The number of homeless veterans is sure to be higher than reported.

The fight to end the veteran homeless crisis seems impossible, but partnering with an organization such as the Rotary, it will not be.

The Rotary is used to impossible missions, the main mission of the Rotary is to end Polio in the world. The fight started in 1979 and has been going on ever since. The Rotary is close to ending Polio in the world, only two countries still have polio outbreaks, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The World Health Organization is estimating that with the efforts of the Rotary that Polio will be eradicated in the next few years.

The Loves Park Rotary Club, Windsor Pizza in Loves Park, VFW Post 1461 and the Veterans Drop-in Center came together to provide one meal for veterans. One meal does not sound like much, but when you are struggling it can be a lifesaver. One organization working with others to provide one meal a month will change the life of

someone that is struggling.

Rob Bland, a member of the Loves Park Rotary Club and a VFW member of Post 1461 in Belvidere, presented a check for \$500 to the Veterans Drop In Center from the Loves Park Rotary Club.

So just as with the Rotary's fight end Polio, in order to end the homeless veteran crisis, it will take a team of organization working together and bringing different skills to the table to accomplish the mission. As you look at the problems in

your community, look at the other organizations that you can partner with to increase community resilience for the homeless veterans, struggling veterans and others that need our support.



From left, Rob Bland VFW Post 1461, Lana McCants VFW Post 342, Shiela Sidebottom, Jesse Olson and Sean West VFW Post 342.

Remembrance Ceremony Marks 34th Anniversary of Desert Storm's End

By Barb Wilson

Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office

Illinois Army National Guard Lt. Col. Michael Barton, of Greenview, and life member of Jerry Celletti Post 5418 in Rock Falls, was 12 years old when the Persian Gulf War, known as Operation Desert Storm, started in 1991.

"I remember when the conflict broke out, I bought a copy of each edition of newspaper our gas station had," said Barton, who delivered the keynote address during the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs' annual Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony Feb. 28 at the Illinois State Military Museum. "I still have those newspapers today."

February 28 marked the 34th anniversary of the end of the 100-hour ground war, in which coalition forces defeated the Iraqi Army, the fourth largest military in the world, and liberated Kuwait.

Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard's Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, said that while 43 days is a small amount of time when compared to other military operations, "Desert Storm demonstrated our vast military strengths, the methods used to build up power in the Persian Gulf region wasn't something quite seen since World War II."

"The rally of the international community to enlist the service of 38 other nations as one united coalition has become the standard we strive for today," he said.

More than 600,000 American service members deployed to Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Desert Shield, including approximately 1,370 Illinois National Guard Soldiers and Airmen.

"Eleven Army units and Air Wings were sent to support Desert Storm," Barton said. "The fathers of two of my classmates serving in the Illinois National Guard were sent 'over there.' We shared that experience. Then just five years

and one day later, Feb. 29, 1996, I enlisted into the same unit and served with their dads."

Barton said growing up in a rural community in the late 1980s and early 1990s, cable television wasn't as widely available as it is today. As cable television made its way into rural communities, came the advent of the 24-hour news cycle, and the world was able to watch Desert Storm play out on international television.

"I remember my family had just recently gotten cable television," he said. "Living in a rural community at that time, it really wasn't a thing. During that time, the relative new concept of the 24-hour news cycle came to be with networks like CNN broadcasting Desert Storm in real time. The entire world witnessed our strength in action."

Barton said he would come home after school and get the latest updates.

"I would immediately switch on the cable news to receive the latest updates," he said. "My family would eat around the television, just watching. We watched strike after strike, the Patriot missiles intercepting Iraqi SCUD missiles. It consumed my afternoon and evenings until bedtime."

But, Barton said, what was showcased during Desert Storm and continues to be the strength of our military is the people.

"It's the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guard personnel serving that always has been and always will be the strength of our military," he said. "The videos shown of our servicemembers in Desert Storm showcased the level of morale, professionalism, and fitness of our servicemembers. They were ready to engage with the fourth largest Army in the world, the Iraqi Army."

Barton said it was watching Desert Storm unfold on television which inspired him to enlist.

"The dedication and eagerness of the men and women serving then to defend freedom and represent the United States against a tyrant and his Army, inspired me



Lt. Col. Michael Barton, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Illinois Army National Guard, shares a story of watching Desert Storm unfold on cable television during the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs' Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony Feb. 28 at the Illinois State Military Museum, and how, as a young boy of 12-years-old, he would turn on the cable news immediately after school to receive the latest updates. (Photos by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office)



Rose Connelly, a volunteer with the Illinois State Military Museum, places a yellow rose in remembrance of a service member from Illinois who died during Operation Desert Storm at the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs' annual Operation Desert Storm Remembrance Ceremony Feb. 28 at the museum.

and countless others and continues to inspire us today," he said. "Our forces made quick work of Iraqi forces, and we demonstrated our technological might to the rest of the world."

Barton said compared to earlier conflicts, the precision targeting used during Desert Storm was considered antiseptic.

"No matter how swift our military actions are, they are never antiseptic," he said. "War is personal. War is costly. No one prays for peace more than those who serve and those impacted by our service. More than 300 American service members died during Op-

eration Desert Storm and Desert Shield, including 18 service members from Illinois, represented by their dog tags here."

Barton said as Americans we must continue to celebrate the effort and achievements of those who served and sacrificed to bring liberation and victory during Desert Storm.

"We must honor the families who lost loved ones in service to our nation and whose lives were forever changed," he said. "It is our duty as President Lincoln prompted us to 'care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan'."

VFW, American Legion, St. Clair County VAC conduct Fireside Chat with Sen. Duckworth, Rep. Budzinski at Scott

What a wonderful afternoon at Scott VFW Post 4183.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion and the St. Clair County Veterans' Affairs Commission held a Veterans Fireside Chat with the honorable U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, a member of the Senate Veterans Committee, and U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

The Veterans Fireside Chat took place outside Scott AFB at VFW Post 4183 in Belleville, on March 30.

In attendance were veterans from the community including VFW 4183 Post Commander Seth Miller, who was the moderator, VFW State Commander Maurice Bridges Sr., American Legion 5th Division Commander James "Jim" Page, and St. Clair County Veterans' Affairs Commission (VAC) President and St. Clair County VAC Superintendent John Lawson.

