

Honoring Veterans One Wreath at a Time

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE...



**2026 Illinois Convention
Raffle Tickets**

Grand Prize \$10,000

Second Prize \$3,000 • Third \$2,000 • Fourth to Tenth \$500

2026 Illinois Purple Heart Raffle
Proceeds go towards veterans assistance programs in Illinois

Grand Prize \$2,000

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Department of Illinois

Fact Sheet

About us

The VFW traces its roots back to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service. Many arrived home sick or wounded. There was no medical care or veterans' pension for them and they were left to care for themselves.

Vision

Ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country.

Mission

To foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans.

Get in Touch

Phone: 217-529-6688

Facebook: VFW State of Illinois

Email: vfwil@vfwil.org

2024/2025 metrics

\$280,230 Service Members Assistance
\$44,676 Military Appreciation Programs

191,825 Total VFW/AUX Volunteer Hours

82 Scholarships and Help A Hero
\$386,918 Awarded Scholarship

1,439 Voice of Democracy Student Participation

209,000 Poppies Distributed

4,288 Patriots Pen Student Participation

46,342 VA Claims Processed
\$102,082,288 Amount Recovered

Did You Know?

34,150 Members as of June 30, 2025

December 11, 1920 Charter Date

2025-2026 State Commander Eugene Blackwell

Click on a title to jump to the full story

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STATE COMMANDER'S CORNER



Eugene Blackwell
Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

Comrades and Auxiliary Members,

The strength of our VFW has always come from our willingness to adapt, to grow, and to support one another in service. We often say that the only bad idea is the one never shared—and that speaks directly to leadership. History teaches us a simple truth: leaders who do not listen rarely succeed.

If our Posts are to remain strong in the years ahead, we must be willing to take an honest look at how we operate and how we prepare for the future. A key part of that future is recruiting and retaining younger Veterans. Without them, we cannot sustain the numbers or the vitality we once enjoyed. That means more than signing up new members; it means listening to their ideas, mentoring them, and giving them real opportunities to lead. It also means making sure that every Veteran who is willing to work is welcomed and empowered to do so.

A powerful lesson in leadership and inclusion can be found in the story of the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion—the “Six Triple Eight.” This unit, the only all-Black, all-female U.S. Army unit to serve overseas during World War II, was given a daunting task: clear years of backlogged mail for soldiers fighting in Europe. Their motto was simple—“No Mail, Low Morale.” Working around the clock and overcoming discrimination and difficult conditions, 855 women sorted and delivered millions of pieces of mail, restoring morale for troops and completing their mission ahead of schedule. Their service was finally recognized with the Congressional Gold Medal.

One of those women was Ruth Ellen Lewis Marshall, a proud member of Benjamin O. Davis VFW Post 311, with Comrade Wallace Braswell serving as her power of attorney. Comrade Marshall transitioned in December 2025. With her passing, we lost more than a comrade—we lost a living piece of history. Her life reminds us that leadership is often quiet and steady: identifying a problem, staying focused on the mission, and lifting morale even in the face of obstacles.

The story of these remarkable women is now reaching a wider audience through The Six Triple Eight movie, currently streaming on Netflix. It tells how these women, despite discrimination and the challenges of war, sorted more than 17 million pieces of mail and ensured that no soldier felt forgotten.

As we remember Comrade Marshall and the legacy of the Six Triple Eight, let us recommit ourselves to building a VFW that truly reflects those values — listening to one another, welcoming all Veterans regardless of age, gender, or background, and preparing the next generation to lead. That is how we honor the past and ensure a strong future for our organization.

Yours in Comradeship,

Eugene Blackwell
Department Commander – Illinois



Illinois VFW News

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|----------------|-------------------|------|-------------|
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| Surgeon | Doug Jameson | 1739 | District 14 |
| Chaplain | Gary Holmes | 342 | District 6 |
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| Inspector | Cathy Stubbs | 7710 | District 14 |
| Jr. Past Cmdr | Maurice Bridges | 4183 | District 14 |
| NCM | Matthew Claussen | 2868 | District 4 |

DISTRICT COMMANDERS

| | | | |
|----|-------------------------|------------|--------------|
| 3 | Zhi Chen | Post 5079 | Chicago |
| 4 | Evamarie Duff | Post 2868 | Brookfield |
| 5 | Mathius Carter | Post 12014 | Crystal Lake |
| 6 | Rob Bland | Post 1461 | Belvidere |
| 7 | David Long | Post 454 | Bloomington |
| 8 | Kenneth Morey | Post 1422 | Bushnell |
| 9 | John Finnegan | Post 5506 | Marseilles |
| 10 | Joshua Seed | Post 755 | Springfield |
| 11 | Rick Hobbs | Post 4495 | Taylorville |
| 12 | Anthony Avers | Post 976 | Troy |
| 13 | Robert Shehorn | Post 2055 | Centralia |
| 14 | Amiee Louer-Wagoner | Post 7710 | New Athens |
| 15 | Clarence Caraker | Post 3455 | Anna |
| 16 | William Browne | Post 311 | Richton Park |
| 17 | James Thorne | Post 7862 | Arcola |
| 18 | Paul Cravens | Post 725 | Mokena |
| 19 | Michaelangelo Di Cosola | Post 5815 | Lombard |

AUXILIARY PRESIDENT'S CORNER



Diane Ahrens
President
Department of Illinois
VFW Auxiliary

What did we do before smart phones, our calendars and GPS? Before 2000 there was a lot of teasing me, because I didn't want a phone, I used a very large Chicago land map book to be able to deliver cakes all around Chicago Land. Twenty five years later I need to look at the calendar on my phone to remind me where I was and when. I receive an address of where I need to be and put it in my phone and off I go, and when it's time to return home I hit the home button. A lot of trust is put into that GPS on my phone, many times over the past few months it has me driving down small county roads in the middle of "No Where", at least I have no clue, but I have no choice but to trust technology and in the middle of a snow storm on a very remote county road I do what ever it tells me. How life has changed so at this moment I am looking at my calendar to remind me where I have been.

I was honored at our Midstate Luncheon, November 15th, the Auxiliaries did a wonderful job, lots of thought and preparation went into everything, I was very blessed. That weekend was a full one, Sunday I was at the 7th District meeting in Bloomington, I was able to spend time with my grandson while in Bloomington. Monday, I was at Danville visiting the VA Illiana Medical Center, Deb Gard was able to give a tour of the cottages and facility then we had lunch with some of the residents.

December 13th, I went to Decatur for the "Brothers after War" seminar, after a normal 3 hour drive became five, but I arrived safely through the snowstorm with the help of GPS. I attended the event at National VFW Convention in Columbus last year, was intrigued and wanted to attend here in Illinois. Honestly, it has made me think a lot, and of course hindsight is 20/20. The documentary is for veterans and their families, workbook and discussions included. I hope to see Illinois host a couple more in 2026-2027 year. Gary Sinise Foundation and Jake Rademacher are taking on the difficult questions and I am thankful, mental health is crucial to our veteran's success.

December 14th I had the honor of reinstating VFW Auxiliary 2055 Centralia, I am always amazed at God's timing, authorization came from National evening of the 11th and I was already scheduled to go to Decatur so what's another hour when I can install officers and reinstate an Auxiliary. Extremely exciting, I believe they will be a great support to VFW Post 2055 veterans and their community. Thank you everyone who stepped up and took officer positions, looking forward to your success.

December 16th, Jesse Brown VA hosted a retirement party for my friend Patrick Gleason, Patrick will be missed however he was always



President Diane Ahrens with Patrick Gleason, who retired Dec. 16 from Jesse Brown VA.

training, leading and making Jesse Brown VA a much better place. I am excited for him to enjoy his retirement.

I have known Patrick for over 10 years, When Roger and I had Piece-A-Cake Bakery people would bring us items to donate to help veterans. Of course, this was way before COVID and we were blessed that Patrick and the Voluntary services at Jesse Brown would take everything we would bring them. Patrick was also instrumental when I began the Female Veteran's Baby Showers, January 2016 at VFW Post 2298 in Dundee.

Patrick has left a strong team at Jesse Brown VA, and he will be missed, people will be asking themselves 'what would Patrick do in this situation' for many years to come. Congratulations Patrick, please enjoy your retirement, I look forward to getting together for "Breakfast". Semper Fi

December 22nd, Edward Hines Jr VA, Christmas Caroling with the Frozen Robins, Mike Nowak and crew, six outstanding voices brought lots of cheer and tidings of joy to the veterans and staff. Two hours, we started at the Blind Unit, 9th floor, 2nd floor, main lobby then to Spinal Cord Unit. I am their tour guide, I am a great listener, ask for song requests, don't sing... Christmas was peaceful and I have taken some time to "catch up" and here we are already in January 2026.

The District Voice of Democracy & Patriot's Pen banquets are in full swing, Jan. 10, I get to attend 5th District Banquet, I am excited because I am generally on the road. These banquets are preliminary to our Department Banquet in Springfield, February 7th. I would encourage you to make the trip, you are able to purchase tickets on the VFW IL website. These students represent the next generation and our hope for the future. Our Department C of A is Saturday morning, and we visit Lincoln's Tomb in the afternoon with plenty of time to get ready for the Department Banquet.

National President Lois Callahan's CAFÉ is in Washington DC, February 28, at the Vietnam War Memorial and National Legislative is March 2-3, on Capital Hill.

Now is the time to be talking with local members, elections for our Auxiliaries and also Districts are rabidly approaching. Have you been mentoring potential officers? Our podium book and bylaws answer the questions you may have. Need a podium book? You have access on the vfwauxiliary.org website to read and print what you want to know. There are also Academy classes to attend, knowledge is power...

I look forward to 2026; our Program Chairs are working diligently to finish our year with great success. Our membership team has been working on the retaining, transferring members that are at large, and now we need to really work on new members. Let's finish the next 6 months strong, encouraging one another, practicing forgiveness when we are offended. Learning to be quiet when we are quickened by our Spirit to not say what's on our mind. This is my goal, be positive, of course be Sweet, enjoy life we only receive one day at a time, Thank you for your support and Happy New Year! Semper Fi!

Diane Ahrens

"Life is Sweet Serving our Veterans."



Edward Hines Jr VA, Christmas Caroling with the Frozen Robins, Mike Nowak and crew, six outstanding voices brought lots of cheer and tidings of joy to the veterans and staff, Dec. 22.

FROM THE JUNIOR VICE



Ryan Higginbotham
Junior Vice Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

Happy New Year everyone. I hope you had the chance to celebrate the holiday season with friends and family. I also hope you kept those far from home and those that could not celebrate in your thoughts.

Remember the holiday season is one of the best times to reach out to your membership and let them know how important they are. A simple Christmas card can make an impactful difference. As many of us know, this time of the year can also mean a struggle for many of our comrades. I for one can admit that the winter blues is a very real thing.

Moving forward, we are gearing up for the mid-winter conference on February 6th and 7th, which will consist of our council of administrative meetings and culminating with our 80th Annual Voice of Democracy Banquet. Don't forget to break out your coat & ties or formal wear. I hope everyone can make this special event honoring so many bright young leaders. If you have never been, I highly suggest taking advantage of this opportunity. This is a ticketed event so contact headquarters for more information.

I want to end with the fact that this VFW year is over halfway over. How is your program reporting looking? Have you accomplished goals you set back in June? It's always an uncommon but very realistic vision that after the mid-winter conference things start to move quickly toward State Convention. That means time is not on our side and everyone hates to scramble at the end. Before you know it, you will be opening Post nominations and preparing for your District Conventions.

I end with this quote from Jimmy Buffett:

"It takes no more time to see the good side of life than it takes to see the bad"

National Judge Advocate General to Represent Organization at Illinois' Mid-Winter Conference

National Judge Advocate General Ronald "Ron" Rusakiewicz will represent the national organization during the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars Mid-Winter Conference and Voice of Democracy banquet Feb. 5-8 in Springfield.

Rusakiewicz was elected National Judge Advocate General of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. on Aug. 13, at the 126th VFW National Convention in Columbus, Ohio.

Ron served in the U.S. Army from 1963 to 1966, with the 101st Airborne Division, earning his VFW eligibility serving in Vietnam. In recognition of his service, he received the Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal with bronze service star, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon with Device, Presidential Unit Citation, Valorous Unit Award, Meritorious Unit Commendation,

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation, and the Combat Infantry Badge, among numerous other ribbons and awards.

He joined the VFW in 1967 at Post 9460 in Stratford, Connecticut, where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life membership.

Ron has served

in several elected and appointed positions at the Post, District and Department levels, culminating with his election as the VFW Department of Connecticut Commander from 1991 to 1992, in which he earned the distinction of All-American status. On the national level he has served as Vice Chairman and Chairman of the Legislative and POW-MIA Committees, has served on the Veterans Service Resolutions Committee, the National Council of Administration, and has served numerous terms on the National By-Laws, Manual of Procedure and Ritual Committee. Ron was also elected National Judge Advocate General at the 122nd VFW National Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, serving from 2021 to 2022.

He belongs to the American Legion, the 101st Airborne Association, the 101st Airborne Jump club, the United States Parachute Association, and holds an expert parachuting license issued by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale.

Ron is retired.

He and his wife, Barbara, reside in Milford, Connecticut, and have two grown children.



Ronald Rusakiewicz
National Judge Advocate General



VFW Auxiliary 6632 members Carol Herzog and Cheryl Miller were among family and friends to brave the cold weather at the MidAmerica St. Louis Airport in Mascoutah to welcome home Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry Regiment, Dec. 12. About 550 Soldiers were welcomed home in ceremonies Dec. 6 and Dec. 12 in Rockford and Mascoutah.

Piatt County VFW Commander Named 2025 Illinois County Official of Year

Seth Floyd serves as Piatt County Circuit Clerk

The Illinois Association of County Officials (IACO) has named Seth E. Floyd, Piatt County Circuit Clerk, as the 2025 Illinois County Official of the Year. Floyd received the association's highest honor for leadership and service in county government at the IACO 2025 Fall Conference in Normal, Illinois.

Since his initial election in 2018, Floyd has led significant operational and technological improvements within the Piatt County. These efforts have expanded public access to court services through a redesigned website, a user-friendly mobile app, and a modern digital courthouse display system resulted in savings in upwards of \$600,000 for Piatt County. Beyond his official role, he serves as President of the Piatt County Veterans Assistance Commission, President of the Illinois Association of Court Clerks, and President of the City of Monticello Police and Fire Merit Commission. He also participates in several Illinois Supreme Court and statewide committees.

A lifelong central Illinois resident and U.S. Army Veteran, Floyd has served as Post Commander of Piatt County VFW Post 5346 since 2018. Under his leadership, the Post has earned All-State and All-American Post honors for six consecutive years.



Piatt County Circuit Clerk Seth Floyd, who has served as Commander of Piatt County VFW Post 5346 since 2018, was selected as the 2025 Illinois County Official of the Year.

Providing Meals to Veterans on 14th Anniversary of Iraq War's End

By Rob Bland, District 6 Commander

On Dec. 15, 14 years after the Iraq War officially ended, Illinois VFW District 6 Commander Rob Bland and District 6 Auxiliary President Elizabeth Costa-Bland provided a hot meal for Veterans at Rockford's Veterans Drop-in Center.

Due to below average temperatures, combined with the wind chill and recent snow cover, the warm pizza was a welcome respite for those who needed a hot meal.

The Rockford Veterans Drop-In Center provides a warm place to get out of the weather and a place to enjoy camaraderie with fellow veterans.

At right, District 6 Auxiliary President Elizabeth Costa-Bland and VFW District 6 Commander Rob Bland serving pizza.

Below, Veterans enjoying a movie in the warmth of the building.



Organizations Team Up to Bring Honor Flight to Steger Post 8283 Commander

On Dec. 10, Honor Flight Chicago, Bloom Township Center, and Steger VFW Post 8283 sponsored an Honor Flight Celebration in honor of Steger VFW Post Commander Robert W. Pluskota.

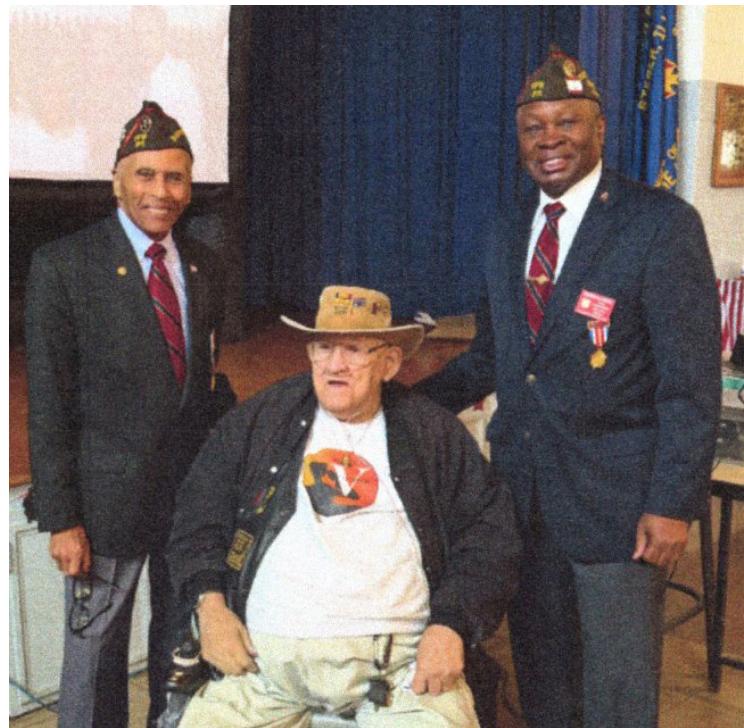
The celebration was a surprise welcome home in honor of Pluskota.

Pluskota entered the Marine Corps in May 1957 and served for over 20 years until his retirement in June 1987.

After his service, Pluskota continued to serve his community as a member of the Steger VFW Post 8283 in various roles. Pluskota became the Steger Post Commander in January 2024.

As Commander, Pluskota (affectionately known as "Gunney"), since he was a gunnery sergeant in the United States Marine Corps.

He is a lifetime VFW member who has improved the morale of the post membership



District 16 Commander Bill Browne, Post 8283 Commander Robert Pluskota, and State Commander Eugene Blackwell.



Steger Post 8283 Commander Robert Pluskota with members of the Bloom Township Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps.

and auxiliary through his initiative to create community relationship with the Village of Steger, elected officials, and veteran organizations.

Pluskota was led into the Steger VFW banquet hall by the Bagpiping Police Military Honor Guard and the Bloom Township JROTC. Kathy Kelly, the Bloom Township Veteran Service Officer was the MC for this celebratory occasion. He was also presented recognition by the Cook County Clerk Monica Gordon. VFW State Commander Eugene Blackwell presented Pluskota with a commendation for his outstanding military service.

Pluskota was recently recommended by the VFW State Commander of his honorary appointment as Assistant Inspector General by the Commander in Chief.

Pluskota was also presented with a quilt of valor focusing on a patriotic theme. The Honor Flight Chicago team presented a book of various accomplishments and medals by Pluskota as a Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt.

Pluskota has been unable to go on Honor Flight Chicago because of his health, so Honor Flight Chicago came to him. He also received a mail call of letters from his family, friends and children thanking him for his service to the country.

***Editor's Note:** Commander Robert Pluskota passed away Dec. 25. Our thoughts and prayers are extended to his family and friends.*



Steger Post 8283 Commander Robert Pluskota thanks everyone for the honors bestowed upon him.



State Commander Eugene Blackwell reads a citation in honor of Steger Post 8283 Commander Robert Pluskota.

Post 2245 takes part in Grayslake High Veterans Day Assembly

Grayslake VFW Post 2245 and American Legion Post 659 were honored to take part in the Grayslake Central High School's Annual Veterans Day Assembly and Breakfast.

Post Commander Mike Magnetta delivered a heartfelt speech reminding everyone of the importance of honoring all who served, especially our Vietnam veterans who paved the way for future generations.

Post members said they are deeply grateful for the continued respect and recognition our Grayslake community shows its veterans and military families.





Members of Bond County Memorial Auxiliary 1377, Greenville, President Deb Marti, Bobbi Suess, Gena Moore and Cheryl Buchanan (who took the picture) rang the Salvation Army bell Dec. 16.



Members of Bond County Memorial Auxiliary 1377, Greenville, President Deb Marti, Bobbi Suess, and Angie Belcher assisted with the Greenville Toys for Joy event.

Capt. Horace Burke Post 3480, Auxiliary Makes Donation of Non-Perishable Items to Eagles Nest



Capt. Horace Burke Post 3480 Auxiliary President Vera Beckwith, left, with Mr. Jones, center, assistant manager of the Eagles Nest and Post 3480 Adjutant Doran "Butch" Beckwith with some of the dry goods the post and auxiliary donated to the Eagles Nest.



The Southern Illinois Social club along with VFW Post 3480 and its Auxiliary donated several boxes of dry goods to the Eagles Nest.



Christmas Carols for Hines' Heroes

Judd Kendall Post 3873 with Naperville Central Students and fellow veteran Mark Jaeger performed Christmas Carols for the heroes at Hines VA Hospital Dec. 9.





Prospect Post 1337, Mount Prospect, member Jim Parker talks on his military experiences to students at Anne Sullivan Elementary School, Prospect Heights on Nov. 7. Photo by Dutch DeGroot

Local Schools and Organizations Honor Mount Prospect Veterans

The 11th Day of November each year has been designated as a day to salute the nation's veterans. In Mount Prospect, Illinois, home town of VFW Post 1337 and its sister organization, American Legion Post 525, many local schools and civic organizations have a long history of sponsoring events to honor our military heroes. One day was simply not sufficient for all of them to participate. This year, in a two-week-long series of special programs, 13 area schools, the Village of Mount Prospect, the Mt. Prospect Park District, and the Zurich Insurance Company enthusiastically welcomed the veterans and thanked them for their service and sacrifices. Space in this article is too limited to adequately describe each event, but the following are deserving of special mention.

On Veterans Day, November 11, Post 1337, Post 525, the Village of Mount Prospect, and the Mt. Prospect Park District co-sponsored

a Veterans Day ceremony.. About 250 local veterans with families and friends attended. They were joined by about 350 students and teachers from three School plus many members of the Village and Park District staff. Included in the program was local soloist, Debbie Schreiner, who led the attendees in several patriotic songs, and the Lions Park School Chorus, who sang the inspiring "United We Stand." The latter performance was so well received that MC, Post 525 Commander Bill Starr, departed from his script and requested an encore. Keynote Speaker, Elizabeth Soto, Superintendent of the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County, and a well-known veterans' advocate, spoke about the many services provided by her organization. The VACCC, dormant until a few years ago, has significantly increased its budget and become the largest VAC in Illinois. After the ceremony concluded, all veteran attendees were



Veterans share their military experiences with students at Robert Frost School, Mount Prospect, Nov. 10. Photo by Dutch DeGroot

treated to a buffet lunch hosted by the Mount Prospect Police Department

On November 10, local veterans were honored at MacArthur Middle School in Prospect Heights. They were welcomed with a breakfast buffet served by students. Up next was a large assembly that included the school's students, teachers, and staff. After a welcome by the school's Principal, its incredibly talented

orchestra, band, and chorus entertained the crowd with many patriotic selections, including the songs of each branch of the US military. This school also participated in last year's Buddy Poppy display contest and was awarded second place. When the first-place winner was unable to attend the National Convention, MacArthur School went in its place and won an Honorable Mention Award.



Students hold an assembly for veterans at Hunting Ridge Elementary School, Palatine, Nov. 11. Photo by Dutch DeGroot

At the Mount Prospect Village Ceremony, Nov. 11, keynote speaker Elizabeth Soto, Superintendent of Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County hosted by the Veterans of Mount Prospect. Students from several schools were bused in to learn the meaning of Veterans Day. Photo by Mike Zarnek

Each of the other events featured some outstanding musical performances, patriotic readings, guest speakers, and many very dedicated students.

More than 25 members of Post 1337 and Post 525 attended one or more of these programs and those described above. All of them were deeply moved by the love, honor, and respect they were



shown by all of the participants.

After this Veterans Day, our veterans will gain renewed energy toward completing the mission of the VFW and American Legion-- to provide aid and assistance, as needed, to fellow veterans and to not forget the POW and MIA soldiers, sailors, and airmen who are still serving and sacrificing for America.



Students design a wall display at Robert Frost School, Mount Prospect, Nov. 10. Photo by Dutch DeGroot

Girl Scout Troop 8421 Thanks Bond County Veterans during Veterans Day Luncheon

Girl Scout Troop 8421 handed out homemade cookies and handmade patriotic pinwheels and cards to say 'thank you' to our local veterans at the Bond County Memorial VFW Post 1377 and Auxiliary Veterans Day luncheon. The scouts struck up lots of great conversations and there were many smiles of appreciation. Photos by Jeannette Facer





Post 5979 attends Veterans Appreciation Assembly

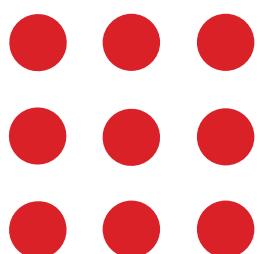
Central Leyden VFW post 5979 members, from left, Barney Dufner, Frank Clause, Richard Wojewnik, and Chuy Segura, at Elmwood Park High School, attending a Veterans Appreciation Assembly on Nov. 7. The assembly provided an opportunity for the veterans to share their military experiences, their significance, and the importance of holding such events at the high school. In addition, recruiters from the Illinois Army National Guard were in attendance, providing students with insights into military service. The post members had the pleasure of meeting exceptional students who were eager to learn about the veterans' military backgrounds. The teachers were outstanding, and the event featured a generous spread of food, including pizzas, sandwiches, and chicken bites.

Print out and share this digital edition of the Illinois VFW News with your post members.



Santa Visits VFW Post 1592

Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus visited Paul McVey Post 1592, Charleston. After a wonderful Christmas dinner, they handed out presents and treat stockings for the excited children.



Veterans Crisis Line

DIAL 988 then **PRESS 1**



Auxiliary 9763 distributes toys to military, southern Illinois children

Here are the 3,208 pieces of toys collected from the Dollar Tree through Operation Home Front. They do this for Christmas and School Supplies each year and this is the fourth year Creal Springs Auxiliary 9763 has collected toys for

military and local kids. Then what's left is taken to Toys for Tots to disperse in other counties. The School Supplies are also dispersed to local schools to supply their cabinets for kids to pick up free of charge as they need them.



725th Transportation Company Fueled European Command During Deployment

By Rob Bland
District 6 Commander

About 160 Soldiers of the Illinois Army National Guard's Machesney Park-based 725th Transportation Company celebrated a deployment to U.S. European Command in which the unit completed more than 93 real-world missions, supported two major multinational exercises, and delivered more than 2.1 million gallons of fuel – all the while making personal and professional improvements in themselves.

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, lauded the unit's Soldiers for their superior performance during the deployment, which lasted from October 2024 to September 2025.

"You all are the new leadership of the Illinois National Guard," Boyd told the Soldiers during the Dec. 13 Welcome Home ceremony at Harlem High School in Machesney Park. "You now have experience deployed in a foreign land," Boyd added. "Take that experience and parlay that experience the rest of your career."

While the 725th Transportation Company carried its guidon forward, the unit was augmented by seven other units in the brigade.

"You quickly molded as a unified team and accomplished amazing things," said Col. Beth Roxworthy, the Commander of the unit's brigade, the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

This welcome home adds another chapter to the unit's lineage:

"Organized in the Illinois Army National Guard at Machesney Park, Illinois at the Alpha Company, 405th Brigade Support Battalion.

Reorganized and redesignated Oct. 1, 2018, from Alpha Company, 405th BSB to the 725th Transportation Company.

From January 26, 2021, through March 31, 2021, the 725th Transportation Company was mobilized to support Operation Capital Response II in Washington D.C.

In 2023, the unit was awarded Runner Up for the prestigious Army Award for Maintenance Excellence (AAME) in the Army National Guard Medium MTOE category.

In 2024, awarded the Army Award for Maintenance Excellence (AAME) in the Army



Spc. Rob Bland, Auxiliary 1461 member, son of District 6 Commander and Post 1461 Commander, stands for recognition for Army Achievement Medal that he received in Poland.



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, addresses the Soldiers and family of the 725th Transportation Company.



Multiple Illinois Army National Guard 725th Transportation Company Soldiers were awarded military medals ranging from Meritorious Service Medals to Army Achievement Medals during the unit's Welcome Home Ceremony, Dec. 13, at Harlem High School in Machesney Park. The unit deployed in support of U.S. European Command from October 2024 to September 2025.



The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, talks about his 2014 deployment with Maj. (retired) Rob Bland (left) as 34th Division Sustainment Brigade Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph Cistaro looks on, during the unit's Welcome Home Ceremony, Dec. 13, at Harlem High School in Machesney Park. Bland's son, Spc. Robert O'Shea Bland, was on the 725th Transportation Company's deployment to European Command. The unit deployed in support of U.S. European Command from October 2024 to September 2025.

National Guard Medium MTOE category." 725th Transportation Company Deployment Ceremony program, Oct. 24, 2024.

The 725th deployed to Poland. The first stop was Fort Hood, Texas in October 2024 for mobilization training. Once they were certified for the mission, they were then deployed in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

"Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR) is the Department of Defense (DOD) operation in the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) area of responsibility to deter Russia's aggression against NATO and to reassure and bolster the alliance in the wake of Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine." Special Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, Operation Atlantic Resolve Including U.S. Government Activities Related to Ukraine, January 1, 2025 – March 31, 2025.

Boyd, a VFW member, was the officiant of the ceremony. He welcomed the Soldiers home after a successful deployment and thanked the families that were in attendance.

"You will remember everyone that you deployed with you on this mission years and years later," Boyd said.

After the welcome home, the unit then held an awards ceremony for the soldiers of the 725th. Those who had not received their awards in Poland were brought up on stage to receive them in front of the group. For those who did receive awards in Poland, they were recognized.

Young Marines Organization participates in Franklin Park Veterans Day Ceremony

Chicago's own Young Marines participated in the Franklin Park Veterans Day ceremony located at the police station.

The four Young Marines in attendance did an awesome job, many folks in Franklin Park, first time meeting the Young Marines.

The Young Marines train out of River Grove American Legion/VFW Post and Franklin Park American Legion Post, both located in Leyden Township.





Helping those less fortunate in the Collinsville community

In an act of Auxiliary Outreach ahead of the holidays, VFW Post 5691 and their Auxiliary in the Department of Illinois donated their time to the Collinsville Food Pantry

to help those in need. They also made a \$2,000 donation (which is not part of the Outreach Program, but is wonderful and appreciated).





Post 3480 teams with 15th Street Baptist Church to Feed East St. Louis Community

Capt. Horace C. Burke Post 3480 Quartermaster Jeannen Flemings and the 15th Street Baptist Church, East St. Louis, provided food for households within the community for upcoming holidays.

This will be an ongoing event with VFW Post 3480's Comrades and 15th Street Baptist Church.

Quartermaster Flemings met Don Arbogast, a Field Artillery veteran, at their Thanksgiving food giveaway.





The Arlington Heights Village board declared November Veterans Month. Shortly before joining the Veterans Assistance Commission of Cook County, Superintendent Elizabeth Soto, Deputy Superintendent Grant Jacobson, Employer Support for Guard & Reserve (ESGR) volunteers Doug Wallace, and Mike Peck watch as Arlington Heights Mayor Jim Tinaglia sign Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve letters of support, Nov. 17.





From left, District 6 Auxiliary President Elizabeth Costa-Bland, Debbie Raethz, Tom Cleland and District 6 Commander Rob Bland.

District 6 Honors Past Presidents, Commanders

By Rob Bland and Elizabeth Costa-Bland

Before the District 6 meeting on November 16th, 2025 the District took time to honor the past District Presidents and Past District Commanders and to celebrate a Past Commander and Past President. This is a ceremony to thank all the Past leaders who have lead the District to this point.

The ceremony starts with a welcome to everyone for coming out and the opening prayer given by State Chaplain, Past District Commander and Post Commander Gary Holmes. The Pledge of Alliance was said as a group and the head table was introduced.

The current Auxiliary District 6 President Elizabeth

Costa-Bland introduced the Past President who was being recognized, Debbie Raethz.

Debbie joined the Auxiliary under her father's service in the Army; he served in World War II and the Korean War. She has been a member for many years, and has held leadership roles for the majority of that time in one fashion or another.

Debbie served as Auxiliary 9759 President from 2008-10 and again from 2017-19. She served as District 6 President in 2013-14 and then from 2015-17. In 2019-21, she also served as the District Senior Vice President.

In 2018-2019, she became the Historian for both Auxiliary 9759 and District 6, which she resumed again for the District

in 2024 to present. Additionally, Debbie was a Trustee for Auxiliary 9759 from 2019 until its closing and also for District 6 in 2021-22 and presently, 2025-26.

In addition to everything else that she does, Debbie currently serves as the President of Auxiliary 342.

Outside of the Auxiliary, Debbie is passionate about spending time with her family and serving Veterans through her work for the past 12 years as a Top of Illinois Stand Down volunteer, including six years as the Secretary for the organization. She also enjoys art and bowling in her free time.

Debbie received a plaque from the District and a leather portfolio from the District



President.

District 6 Commander Rob Bland introduced the VFW Past Commander, Tom Cleland. Tom was chosen for his mentoring of the District Commander and his service to the District. He has an impressive bio that was read.

Tom was drafted into the U.S. Army on Jan. 6, 1969, in

Belvidere. He completed Basic Combat Training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Ord, California. He was then selected to attend Non-Commissioned Officers Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. After successfully completing NCO School and then Jump School,

he was assigned to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for on the job training to complete his NCO School training.

Tom then received orders for Vietnam, where he was assigned to Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, serving

as an Infantry squad leader.

During his service, Tom earned and was awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge, Parachute Wings, Expert Marksmanship Badge - M14 & M16, the Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal, Good Conduct Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal, and National Defense Service Medal.

Upon his discharge from the US Army, Tom returned to his civilian occupations which included employment at Sundstrand Aviation, Ingersoll Milling Machine Company and retiring from the Illinois Department of Agriculture as a Meat and Poultry Inspector in 2014.

Tom joined Roscoe Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2955 in 1990, serving as Junior Vice, Senior Vice, and then three



terms as Post Commander from 1994 – 1997. He has also served his Post as a member of the Board of Directors and the Color Guard for 35 years, as Voice of Democracy/Patriot's Pen Chairman for 30 years and as Post Adjutant for 20 years.

From 2000 – 2001, Tom served as the VFW District 6 Commander. Since then, he has served District 6 as Patriot's Pen Chairman from 2008 – 2014, as Voice of Democracy Chairman from 2014 to the present, and as District Adjutant from 2014 until the present.

At the State and National levels, Tom was appointed National Aide-de-Camp in 2008, and Assistant Inspector General in 2010. He has also served as a member of the State Poppy Display Committee since 2018.

In 2019, he received the Congressional Veterans' Commendation from then U.S. Representative Adam Kinzinger.

Tom continues to serve his community as a member of the Capron United Methodist Church, where he is Lay Leader and secretary

of the Administrative Council. He serves as the Secretary/Treasurer of a local cemetery association. He served on the North Boone School Board for eight years, the last two as President.

Tom is also a member of Rockton American Legion Post 322, and the South Beloit Lions Club.

Tom received a plaque from the District and for his service as Adjutant and an Army pen from the District Commander.

The ceremony was then paused for a meal and comradery. After the meal, District Auxiliary President Elizabeth Costa-Bland and District Commander Rob Bland read the names of the Past Commanders and Past Presidents. A special notation was made for those who were deceased. When a Past President or Past Commander's name was read and they were in the audience, they received a thunderous applause from the District.

The joint ceremony is a small gesture to honor the leaders of the District VFW and Auxiliary and to thank them for all the hard work to get the District to where it is today.



Self Care matters

On Sept. 20 Wounded Warrior Project spearheaded a DIY project hosted by Ms. Jaywana Powell in collaboration with Courage & Grace DIY Decor Studio. Veterans and their families created a customized doormat.



Wrapping with Purpose at the VA

VFW Auxiliary members from District 12 joined other volunteers at the John Cochran VA Medical Center to help wrap presents for veterans.

Representing Alton, was Becky Wilmore and Susan Rolando, and from Collinsville, Mary Monett and Tara Skipper. It was a meaningful day of service, teamwork, and giving back to those who have given so much.

We're proud to support our veterans and grateful for every volunteer who helped bring a little extra joy to the VA.



Illinois Locations Honor Veterans During Wreaths Across America Day

National Wreaths Across America Day took place at 5,598 participating locations nationwide, Dec. 13, including several locations in Illinois.

Millions of volunteers — a third of whom were children — remembered our nation's heroes as they said their names out loud, with the placement of over 3.1 million sponsored veterans' wreaths. At Arlington National Cemetery, over 30,000 volunteers helped place wreaths at 265,000 gravesites.

"The wreaths laid today serve as a powerful gesture that unites communities, families, and even generations. It serves

as an opportunity to learn about the men and women who served and sacrificed to protect our freedom," said Karen Worcester, executive director of Wreaths Across America. "I am in awe of what our volunteers accomplish to remember our nation's service members each year. We extend our gratitude to all of our volunteers nationwide for their commitment to upholding our year-round mission to Remember, Honor, and Teach each and every day."

For centuries, fresh evergreens have been used to symbolize honor and serve as a living tribute, renewed annually. Wreaths Across America believes the tradition

represents a living memorial that honors veterans, active-duty military, and their families. When volunteers say the name of a veteran aloud while placing a wreath, it ensures they live on in our hearts and memories, remembered for years to come.

Wreaths Across America would like to thank the communities, dedicated volunteers, and generous sponsors for supporting those who have protected our freedom and their families. Each person has played a part in the year-long mission to Remember the fallen, Honor those who serve, and Teach the next generation the value of freedom.



Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery blanketed with snow in time for the Wreaths Across America program Dec. 13.



Past 15 District Commander Gary Fravel and District 15 Commander Clarence Caraker pay tribute to Past District 15 Commander Don Cox during the Wreaths Across America program at the Mound City National Cemetery Dec. 13. District 15 sponsors 20 wreaths annually which pay tribute to four deceased Past District Commanders and the rest being placed at gravesites at Mound City. Below, Post 8891 Commander Bobby Gibson, left, and John Bosecker, right participate in the program.



Past District 3 Commander and current Post Commander Jonathan Cooper and Adjutant Roeet Heredia of PFC Ted Stempien VFW Post 8821 honoring departed comrades who were members of the post as well as all departed comrades. Post 8821 purchased 10 wreaths, 6 going to former members and the other 4 going to veterans that did not have one.



Capt. Horace C. Burke Post Commander Valerie Young attended the Wreaths Across America program at Jefferson Barracks. Several organizations were present as well as families of the deceased. Young also visited with Thomas Richardson and Marcena Gunter. Such an humbling experience as always.



District 10 and LaFore Lock Post 755 Commander Josh Seed and members of his family made their annual trip to Camp Butler National Cemetery, Springfield, for the annual Wreaths Across America event. Snow in the area caused the cancellation of the program, but volunteers braved the cold to lay wreaths. Seed's family goes out to honor grandparents on both sides and two of his military brothers who lost their battle and became two of the 22.



Gayle Bukowski, Johnson Phelps Post 5220 Auxiliary, visited Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery to honor her husband, Past District 3 Commander Richard Bukowski.



National Historian Bobby Welch was joined by Alsip Auxiliary 450 members Cathy Sullivan, Department of Illinois Senior Vice President Danielle Krull, and Kayleigh Krull and future Auxiliary member Kennedy Krull. Above right, attendees gather at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery before the Wreaths Across America program Dec. 13.

Post 540 Dedicates New Flag Pole

By Rob Bland
District 6 Commander

Family, friends and fellow Veterans gathered in the warmth of VFW Post 540 to honor the memory of Past Post Commander Jim Utley. It is Veterans Day and the weather in Dixon, IL had changed. Just days before it was warm but now it was cold with small patches of snow from a storm that had come through. The call was issued, the ceremony would begin in a few minutes, and everyone headed outside for the ceremony.

As everyone shuffled outside, they heard the sharp crack of flags in the bitterly cold wind. The partially sunny skies showed the way as a half circle was created in front of the VFW Post. All the service Flags were present, with the Marine Corps flag having the position of honor next to the new flagpole. When the mass of family, friends and fellow comrades were in position, Commander Kulavic, standing at the podium, started the ceremony to dedicate the flagpole to Jim Utley.

"On behalf of Dixon VFW Post 540, thanks to everyone for being here. I am Post Commander Tony

Kulavic. The purpose of this particular ceremony is special and solemn: we are gathered to dedicate this beautiful new flagpole to the perpetual memory of Jim L. Utley, USMC, 2024-2025 elected VFW Post 540 Commander and a cherished member of our community, a man who served our nation with honor and courage." Commander Kulavic stated as the ceremony started.

Commander Kulavic asked for everyone to rise and either remove their covers or salute as the National Anthem started. After playing the National Anthem, Steve Rios stepped to the podium and said the opening prayer.

After the prayer, Commander Kulavic opened the podium to Jim's wife Jessica to say a few words. Jessica approached the podium and with words that were heart felt and charged with emotion. She said, "First off, I'd like to express my gratitude to and respect for our Veterans, and their dedication and sacrifice on behalf of our country. And thank all of you in attendance as we come together today for these Veterans, and at this specific moment, for my favorite Veteran, Marine Sgt. Jim Utley."

"The Marine's motto is Semper Fidelis, or Semper



New flagpole flying the US Flag in front of VFW Post 540, Dixon.



Jessica Utley remembering United States Marine Corps veteran Sgt. John L Utley.

Fi: always faithful. Jim took this motto to heart as a faithful husband, faithful dad, and faithful friend. Being faithful to Veterans is what brought him to the Dixon VFW. Jim loved this place and the people in it, even the non-Veterans. He was proud of his volunteer work here in support of his fellow Veterans and their causes. The VFW family is amazing, there for you at the drop of a hat, as we experienced firsthand this past January. I am humbled, as Jim would have been, by the generosity and support given to us, his family."

She went on to say, "Jim loved being a Marine and serving his country. Like a lot of Veterans, he didn't talk of his experiences much, but spoke more of the brotherhood of his fellow Marines and his brotherhood with other branches of our military forces. Jim's children, family, and I thank you for this honor to have him memorialized in this brotherhood forever."

As Jessica left the podium, Commander Kulavic stepped back up. He read the inscription of the plaque. "This Flagpole Memorial is in Honor & Remembrance of Jim L. Utley - USMC, VFW Post 540

Commander 2024-2025, THE LEGACY OF HEROES IS A GREAT NAME AND THE INHERITANCE OF A GREAT EXAMPLE- Benjamin Disraeli, Flagpole dedicated by VFW Post 540 November 2025."

Commander Kulavic asked Jessica back up to unveil the memorial plaque. As she unwrapped the plaque, she took a moment to admire the tribute to her husband. As she walked back to her family, everyone was able to see the plaque in its glory for the first time.

Commander Kulavic ordered the flag to be raised and paused at half-staff to symbolize the breath and spirit of our fallen Comrade. The group came to attention and saluted as the flag was raised. When the flag reached its zenith, the combined honor guard rendered the military honor of a 21-gun salute. The three volleys of the salute were heard over the silence of the crowd and the flags flapping in the brisk wind. Then TAPS was played.

Commander Kulavic addressed those that were present, "Let this flagpole and new flag serve as a visible representation of our Post and community's gratitude. Let it remind everyone that the spirit of service and sacrifice, continues to be a gift passed down through generations, by brave men and women like Commander Jim Utley."

Steve Rios gave the closing prayer. The ceremony was complete, Commander Tony invited everyone inside for a warm meal and refreshments. Inside the warmth of the building, comrades, friends and the family of Jim Utley staved off the cold of the Nov. 11 day in northern Illinois.



Memorial Plaque Honoring John L. Utley on the newly dedicated flagpole.



Post 540 Honors Patriot's Pen Champion, Advances Entry to District Judging

Horace F. Ortt Post 540 awarded the winner of the post's Patriot's Pen essay contest for this year. Ayden A. from Reagan Middle School was chosen as the post winner. Ayden submitted an excellent essay addressing the question, "How are you showing patriotism and support for our country?" As the post winner, Ayden's essay won him \$100 and advanced to VFW District 6 to compete against other post winners in the district, and if he wins there will advance to the Department of Illinois and then potentially to National, where he could win a prize up to \$5,000.

District 6 VFW Posts Work to Save Lives, Highlight Importance of Blood Donation

**By Rob Bland
District 6 Commander**

The need for blood is only increasing. According to the Red Cross, 29,000 units of red blood cells are needed each day across the United States. District 6 took time around the Veterans Day remembrances to host blood drives with the Rock River Valley Blood Center.

District 6 collected 156 units of blood which can save as many as 468 lives in the local community.

Five Posts participated: John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461 Belvidere, Post 8739 Oregon, Post 2955 Roscoe, Floyd J. Tilton Post 3878 Rochelle and Moseley Loewe Post 998 Freeport. The District had a combination of drive types, from the blood bus driving to the Post, to setting up in the Post and finally having people travel to the blood center to donate.

The District and Posts were featured in the local news. This was a bonus during the Veterans

Day celebrations to get the VFW name out there for being a leader in the community and giving back.

Blood donations with a blood center such as the Rock River Valley Blood Center truly impacts the local community. This is a true donation of time and our life blood. We report it to the State Headquarters, not just to get a little green square on our dashboard, but to show the impact that we are having in our community.





Thanks to the Department of Illinois John Cochran hospital fund, 50 beautiful robes embroidered with "Health Care for Heroes-VA St. Louis Health Care System" were donated to the Women's Center at John Cochran. Pictured are Mrs. Claus; Marcena Gunter, Chief Ctr. for Development and Civic Engagement; Kathy Rowold, VAVS Hospital Representative for Jefferson Barracks and John Cochran; Sylvia Stephens, Women Veteran Program Specialist; and Mary Lou Rogers, robe vendor.



Santa's Helpers bring joy to Red Bud Garden Place residents

Santa's helpers from VFW Auxiliary 6632 Red Bud, IL (Sr Vice Kathy Rowold and her great nephew Hayden) delivered Christmas cards and reindeer treats to the residents of Red Bud Garden Place including to 104 year old resident and Auxiliary member Verna Caron.



Lilac Post 5815 attends Agent Orange Memorial Dedication

Members of Lilac Post 5815, Lombard, attended the dedication of the Agent Orange Memorial on Oct. 11 at Lake Park in Des Plaines. The memorial was dedicated to all of the Veterans who paid the ultimate price for their exposure to the killer herbicide or who are still suffering from the effects of it.



Post 5815 Donates to Local Food Pantries

Lilac Post 5815 recently presented the first of two donations to each of the five food pantries in Lombard.

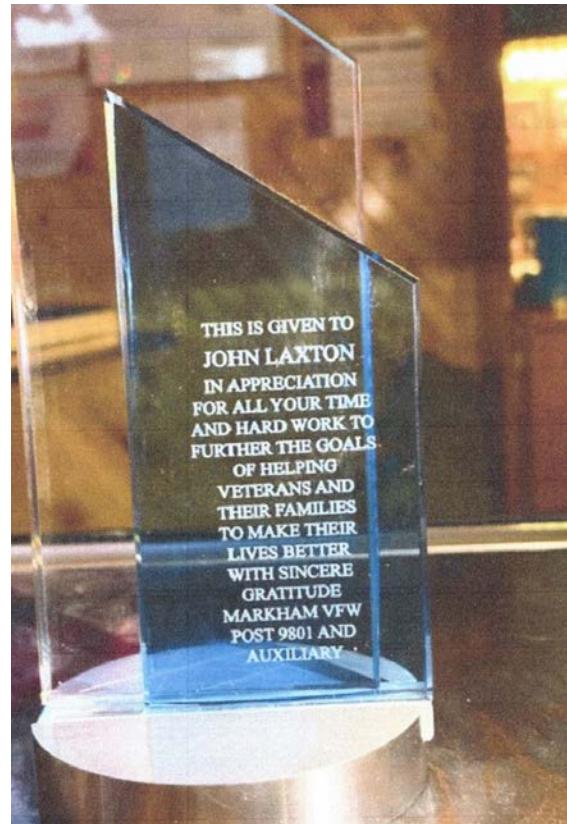


Markham Post 9801 Honors Laxton for helping veterans

At the Markham VFW Post 9801 and Auxiliary Christmas Party Dec. 16, Post Commander Terry McDonald presented John Laxton with an award for his time and hard work furthering the goals of helping veterans and their families.

Laxton's father, a World War II veteran, was a charter member of Markham VFW Post 9801, his mother served as Auxiliary President, and his brother, a Vietnam Veteran, served as Commander of the Lemont VFW.

Laxton was the first president of the Men's Auxiliary, but was involved in helping Veterans years before. Gilkey Windows, which Laxton works for, has helped the post by giving him time off when needed and they also financially back the post's projects.



District 16 Posts Collect Groceries for Otto Square Veteran Housing

Several posts in District 16 collected groceries for the Otto Square Veteran housing on Nov. 7.

These groceries came from VFW Bremen Post 2791 and Markham VFW Post 9801.

The food was collected at the District 16 meeting and sent over to Otto Square Veteran housing.

Otto Square Veteran housing is a four-story building in Chicago Height, IL. There are currently 70 plus veterans in the new building that open in October 2024.

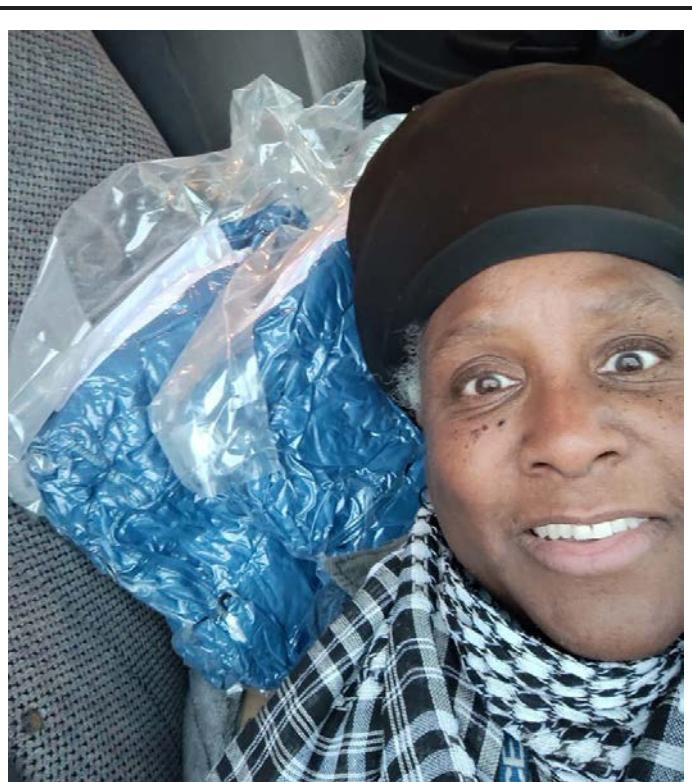






Olney VFW Color Guard leads Olney Halloween Parade

Pictured are VFW Member, Steve Patterson, Junior Vice Commander Jason Zollars, Post Commander Ron Stephens, and Past Post Commander John 'JD' Hubbard.



Delivering Warmth One Bag at a Time

Capt. Horace C. Burke Post 3480 Senior Vice Commander Jay Jordan made house calls in the East St. Louis community delivering sleeping bags to those in need during the cold weather.





Hines VA, Clinics Hosts Micro Food Pantries

A reminder for those in need! Hines VA and all associated clinics have micro food pantries available. If you need assistance, please visit any location.

Don't forget! The main campus also hosts a weekly food pantry in the Auditorium every Thursday (except the fifth Thursday of the month and federal holidays) from 10 a.m. - noon.

For donation inquiries, reach out to HinesCDCEService@va.gov. Let's support each other!



Lilac Post 5815 participated in the Village of Lombard's Veterans Day ceremonies on Nov. 11 in the Village Hall.



Serving Those Who Serve - Illinois VFW Provides USO Holiday Support

Bright and early, members of the VFW family were honored to assist the USO at the airport, welcoming boot camp soldiers from Fort Leonard Wood as they headed home for their holiday block leave. Volunteers from the Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars included Past Department Commander Maurice Bridges; State Inspector Cathy Stubbs; All-State Chairman Steve Eller; District 14 Commander Amiee Wagoner; District 12 Junior Vice Commander Alonzo "Skip" Skipper; District 12 Auxiliary Senior Vice President Tara Skipper; and Auxiliary Member Cari Wagoner. It was a privilege to show these soldiers appreciation, support, and a warm send-off as they reunite with their families. We are proud to stand with the USO and grateful for the opportunity to serve those who serve our nation.



Veterans Appreciation Holiday Luncheon at Morton College

District 4 Color Guard had the honor of performing at the Veterans Appreciation Holiday Luncheon at Morton College. It was a pleasure to see our friends Elizabeth Soto, Grant Jacobson, and Frank Gutierrez from the VACCC and connect with our friends, State Senator Mike Porfirio, and State Senator Javier Cervantez. This event provided a wonderful opportunity to engage with fellow veterans and explore potential collaborations with other organizations in the future. It was truly a remarkable event dedicated to honoring our veterans.

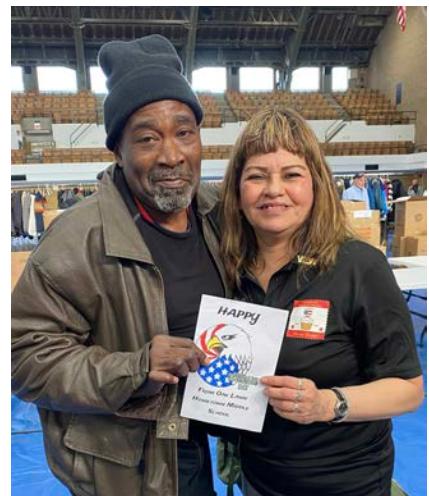


Auxiliary 5220 Participates in Veterans Winter Standdown at National Guard Armory

On Nov. 14, members of the Johnson-Phelps VFW Auxiliary Post 5220 in Oak Lawn participated in the Veterans Winter Stand Down at the Illinois National Guard Armory on North Kedzie in Chicago,

District 3 Auxiliary Senior Vice President and Aux 5220 President Lisa Rivera with Department of Illinois VFW and District 3 Homeless Veterans Chairman Paul Bezazzian.

The Veterans Day cards were made by the students of the Oak Lawn-Hometown Middle School in Oak Lawn.



Pack and Give Back Event Successful

Our Veterans Day Pack and Give Back was a complete success. The love, unity, and service shown over these two days reminded us what community truly looks like. We packed 80 care bags and delivered them hand-to-hand, heart-to-heart to the veterans of Otto Veterans Square.

To everyone who came, served, donated, encouraged, packed, lifted, organized, supported, and stood in the gap – thank you.

Deep gratitude to our partners and participants:

American Legion Post 800

Help at Home

Local Color Art Studio

Where We Meet, Inc.
VOA Suicide Prevention Team
VFW Post 311 – Benjamin O. Davis
M.A.D. (Making A Difference)
IDVA – Illinois Department of
Veterans Affairs
Forest Park Vet Center
And a very special
acknowledgment to 3 Vets is a Charm

–
Be Whole with Nekohl • Female
Veterans of Illinois • Shero Coffee
Club

A personal shout-out to Kimyada
Wellington (Female Veterans of
Illinois) – because volunteerism is
your ministry. You introduced Pack

and Give Back to Chicago years ago
and have continued to live this work
out loud.

Thank you, Tamiko, for planting
this seed and giving us the spirit of
giving that continues to grow and
impact so many.

And we extend our appreciation to
Commander Bill Brown, 16th District,
VFW Commander. Thank you for
sharing the need – once we knew, we
moved. And the need was met.

This is how we show up.

This is how we serve.

This is community in motion.

Together, we serve our veterans –
with dignity, respect, and love.





Olney Post 4226 Honor Guard fires a volley during the post's Veterans Day ceremony.

Olney Celebrates Veterans During Ceremony



Top left: VFW Post 4226 Quartermaster Michael Bertin, a United States Marine Corps veteran of Operation Desert Storm, delivers the keynote address at the Olney Post 4226 Veterans Day ceremony.



Above right: Students from Future Farmers of America joined Olney Post 4226 during the Veterans Day ceremony.

Right: Those in attendance at the Olney Post 4226 Veterans Day ceremony recite the Pledge of Allegiance during the ceremony.



Rock Falls Life Member Promoted to Colonel

A Purple Heart recipient and life member of Jerry Celletti Post 5418 in Rock Falls was promoted to the rank of colonel in a ceremony Dec. 5 at the Illinois Military Academy on Camp Lincoln, Springfield.

"This moment is all too surreal for me," said Lt. Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard's Military Personnel Officer, while thanking his family for their support. "Thank you to my family for all your love, support, and faithful understanding that although you didn't volunteer to serve because I voluntold you, but nonetheless you had to bear the same uncertainty and struggles my 29 years of service have through at you."

Barton enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in 1996 as a Heavy Wheel Vehicle Mechanic assigned to the 1644th Transportation Company in Rock Falls. He attained the rank of staff sergeant before receiving a direct commission in 2006. Throughout his career he has served in multiple command and staff positions including Commander, 1644th Transportation Company; Commander of the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, and executive officer, 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

"Thank you to Kelly, Myleigh, Rhett, Bryer, and Scarlett, and the rest of the Barton family, for taking part in this momentous occasion," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams,



The family of newly promoted Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard Military Personnel Officer, including wife, Kelli, son, Rhett, and daughters Bryer and Scarlett, affix colonel rank to his uniform during a promotion ceremony Dec. 5 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office)

Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "You have a lot to be proud of in the service and accomplishments of literally one of the best officers I have served with."

Williams said three things come to mind when describing Barton.

"Mike always places our Soldiers and their families

above himself," Williams said. "He is genuine. He is the same officer around junior enlisted Soldiers as he is our senior leaders. He does not change character based on the audience. He is true to himself as a leader because his number one priority is always our people."

"Some officers are proficient at both leadership and staff assignments," Williams said.

"Some are great at one or the other. The select few are great at both. Mike is that breed of officer. Mike, you continue being you because our people deserve great leadership."

Barton said his time at the 1644th is the reason behind 29 years of service.

"My time there made me want to keep wearing the uniform," he said. "It made me want to be a better Soldier and it taught me how to be a leader."

He said he is truly grateful for the noncommissioned officers he served with, both as an enlisted Soldier and as an officer.

"The NCO Corps is the best and will always be anchored in my heart," he said. "I've always said an NCO will be present at one hundred percent of training events or combat missions."

Barton also thanked civilian employees.

"You all bring so much to bear which enables the success of the Illinois National Guard," he said. "Without you what we do isn't possible."

Barton said leaders don't get to decide their legacy in the organization.

"I don't get to decide my legacy," he said. "Those I served with or led along the way decide my legacy. I try to be a humble servant who got the people part right. I haven't always gotten the people part right, but I've tried to every day."

Barton credits his faith as his guiding light.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required," he said. "From

the one who has been entrusted much, more will be expected. Basically, if we're given blessings, we're expected to be servant leaders and serve others."

Barton said no one makes it to this point in their career without making mistakes and without receiving multiple chances.

"As leaders we all need to remember that in our approach with Soldiers," he said. "It's my ultimate responsibility to see them succeed. Success of the individual leads to the success of the team, squad, platoon, company, battalion, command, state, and ultimately our nation."

He said leaders are entrusted with the nation's greatest resources and that's its people.

"They are the sons and daughters of the United States of America. Employ them, empower them, and hold them accountable, when necessary," he said. "Do so however while giving your Soldiers the model of a firm, fair, and consistent leader."

Barton urged fellow Soldiers to train to standards.

"The standard you walk by is the standard you set," he said. "Don't cut corners in training. If you cut corners in training, you may be inclined to cut corners in your greatest moment of need," he said.



Newly promoted Col. Michael Barton, the Illinois Army National Guard Military Personnel Officer, thanks family, friends and fellow Soldiers for their support throughout his career. Barton was promoted in a ceremony Dec. 5 at the Illinois Military Academy, Camp Lincoln, Springfield. (U.S. Army photo by Barbara Wilson, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office)

"Don't let cutting corners lead to a Soldier's worst day in the Army."

Barton said whether Soldiers realize it or not, they are ambassadors.

"You may not have wanted to be an ambassador, but you are," he said. "As soon as you raised your right hand, you said I want to be an ambassador. You are an ambassador to the United States, to the U.S. Army, to the unit you serve, and lastly your name. Go out and do the right thing. Take care of yourself and your troops."



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

2026 ILLINOIS CONVENTION RAFFLE

Please help our Illinois veterans in need, especially during these trying times.

Dear Comrades and VFW Supporters,

We greatly appreciate your past support of our programs!

At this time, we want to invite you to participate in our 2026 State Convention and Purple Heart Raffles. Thanks to supporters like you, the funds raised through the 2025 Convention and Purple Heart Raffles enabled the Illinois VFW State Headquarters to provide emergency financial assistance and needed services to veterans and military as well as their families throughout Illinois.

Now even more than ever, as veterans struggle to recover from financial hardship, it is important we have the funds available to assist veterans throughout Illinois. By including the optional donation of \$5 per ticket, \$25 for six tickets, or \$50 for all twelve tickets, you will help carry on our time-honored tradition of providing financial assistance and needed services to our veterans and military as well as their families.

The State Convention and Purple Heart Raffles provide you a chance to win a share of the more than \$20,000 in prizes. Your tickets will give you a chance to win one of the eleven monetary prizes. Your help and support is truly needed. Every single gift is vital and so appreciated by all of us and by those we serve.

If you would like to include an additional donation, your generosity will be put to work immediately to assist veterans in Illinois.

On Saturday, June 13, 2026, winners will be randomly selected for the following:

\$10,000 Grand Prize • \$3,000 Second Prize • \$2,000 Third Prize

\$500 Awarded to Fourth through Tenth Place Winners

Purple Heart Raffle - \$2,000 Grand Prize

If you have any questions – or would like to request more tickets, please contact VFW State Headquarters at (217) 529-6688.

Eugene Blackwell
Commander

DEPARTMENT HEADQUARTERS

3300 Constitution Drive, Springfield, Illinois 62711

Phone: (217) 529-6688 Fax: (217) 546-3415 E-mail: vfwil@vfwil.org



2026 Illinois Purple Heart Raffle

*Proceeds go towards veterans
assistance programs in Illinois*

Grand Prize \$2,000

2026 Illinois Purple Heart Raffle

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Email _____

Phone _____

License No. 2025-00200

DRAWING AT VFW STATE CONVENTION

ON JUNE 13, 2026 IN SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

NEED NOT BE PRESENT TO WIN

Ticket Cost: \$5.00 each

No Purchase Necessary

License No. 2025-00200

2026 Illinois Purple Heart Raffle

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Email _____

Phone _____

License No. 2025-00200



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

2026 Illinois Convention Raffle

Grand Prize \$10,000

Second Prize \$3,000 • Third Prize \$2,000 • Fourth to Tenth \$500

DRAWING AT VFW STATE CONVENTION JUNE 13, 2026 IN SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

2026 Illinois Convention Raffle

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City/State/Zip _____

Email _____

Phone _____

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District 4 Posts Hosts Sailors for Thanksgiving

It is a longstanding tradition for posts in District 4 to host recruits from Great Lakes Naval Base for Thanksgiving. Mount Prospect VFW Post 1337 and Joshua W. Harris Brookfield Memorial VFW Post 2868 hosted the sailors.

