

Illinois

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VFW

News

JULY 2026



New VFW, Auxiliary Leadership
Convention Highlights

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You are invited to a
Homecoming Celebration for
VFW STATE COMMANDER
ROB BAILEY AND VFW
AUXILIARY STATE PRESIDENT
DANIELLE KRULL

Date: August 8, 2026

Location: VFW Post 9545

323 Old Hickory Rd, New Lenox

Time: 6pm Cocktails, 6:30pm Dinner

Tickets \$25.00 each

To purchase tickets go to vfwil.org

Donation tab, make note

Commander/President Homecoming

Or call 217-529-6688 by July 31st

Illinois VFW News

Click on a title to jump to the full story

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FROM THE STATE COMMANDER

A New Year, A Renewed Mission: A Message from Your State Commander



Robert J. Bailey
Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

Comrades and Auxiliary Members,

Welcome to the start of a brand-new VFW year! As we turn the page and step into this new chapter together, I want to begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to each and every one of you. Because of your dedication, your boots-on-the-ground service, and your unwavering commitment to our fellow veterans, the Department of Illinois continues to be a beacon of support across our great state.

A new year brings a clean slate, fresh energy, and an incredible opportunity to redefine what it means to serve. This year, we aren't just pacing ourselves, we are committing fully to our mission with a shared mindset: All in, All the Time.

Living the Motto: Our Focus for the Year Ahead

"All in, All the Time" isn't just a catchy phrase for a sticker; it's a standard of operation. It means that when a veteran walks through our doors, we give them everything we've got. It means that when our communities look for leadership, the VFW is there to answer the call, completely invested.

As we lock our sights on the horizon, we will be applying this relentless energy to three major objectives:

- **Revitalizing Our Posts:** Our posts are the heart of the VFW. Let's make them welcoming, vibrant hubs. Going "all in" means opening our doors wider to the newest generation of veterans who are searching for the same camaraderie they left behind in uniform.
- **Fierce Advocacy:** From local town halls to Springfield and Washington, D.C., we will be relentless in fighting for the healthcare, benefits, and recognition our veterans have earned. No half-measures.
- **Strengthening the Pack:** The transition from military to civilian life isn't a solo mission. Check in on your comrades. Reach out to the members who haven't been by the post in a while. Let them know we are still standing shoulder-to-shoulder with them.

The March Forward

When we served in the military, we didn't give 50 percent effort, and we didn't only show up when it was convenient. We went all out. Our advocacy and fellowship today demand that very same level of discipline and passion.

The challenges ahead may be significant, but if our service taught us anything, it's how to adapt, overcome, and succeed. I am incredibly honored to lead this department, but the true strength of the Illinois VFW lies in your hands, your posts, and your unwavering support of the Department of Illinois Auxiliary.

Let's make this year one for the history books—filled with service, growth, and unmatched fellowship. Thank you for your continued service to our country, to our veterans, and to the great state of Illinois.

Forward Together—All in, All the Time!



FROM THE AUXILIARY PRESIDENT

Unity, Teamwork, Shared Success: A Message from Your Department President

It is with great honor and excitement that I write to you as your newly installed VFW Auxiliary Department of Illinois President. Being installed this June at the Department of Illinois Convention was a truly meaningful moment—one that reflects not only my journey, but the shared commitment of all of us who serve our veterans, active-duty service members, and their families.

My connection to this organization began long before I officially joined in July 2016. I was raised on the South Side of Chicago, where the VFW was a central part of my childhood. My grandfather, Joe, a proud Korean War veteran, and my grandmother, Ruby, were both deeply involved. Through them, I experienced firsthand the camaraderie, patriotism, and sense of purpose that define this organization. The VFW wasn't just something they belonged to—it was part of who they were, and it became part of who I am.

That connection deepened when I became an Auxiliary member through my husband, Keith, a United States Marine Corps veteran who served in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom. During his deployments, I had the privilege of volunteering at Camp Lejeune with the Marine Corps L.I.N.K.S. program, mentoring spouses and supporting military families, as well as assisting with Family Readiness through Marine Corps Systems Command. Those experiences shaped my understanding of service beyond the uniform and strengthened my commitment to supporting our military community in every way possible.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to serve in various roles at the Post, District, and Department levels. Each position has taught me something new and reinforced one very important truth: we are stronger together.

As I begin my year as your Department President, my focus is simple yet powerful—unity.

Too often, we refer to the VFW and the Auxiliary as if we are separate entities working side by side. While our structures may be distinct, our mission is shared. We serve the same veterans, support the same communities, and uphold the same values of patriotism, service, and dedication. When we operate as one cohesive organization—communicating, collaborating, and supporting one another—we amplify our impact in ways that neither could achieve alone.

This year, I encourage every Post and Auxiliary across Illinois to look for opportunities to strengthen that partnership:

- Work together on programs and events
- Support each other's initiatives
- Share ideas, resources, and successes
- Foster mutual respect and open communication

When we break down unnecessary barriers and truly embrace the idea of “one organization,” we not only grow stronger internally—we become more visible, more effective, and more relevant in our communities.

We have so much to be proud of our history, our resilience, and the countless hours of service given by our members. But our future depends on how well we work together to carry that legacy forward.

I am incredibly proud to serve alongside each of you. Thank you for your dedication, your passion, and your unwavering commitment to those who have served our country.

Let's make this a year defined by unity, teamwork, and shared success.



Danielle Krull

President
Department of Illinois
VFW Auxiliary



THEIR FIGHT. THEIR STORY. OUR VOICE.

Bailey, Krull Elected as Illinois Commander, President of Department VFW, Auxiliary

A U.S. Navy veteran was elected as commander of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars during its 107th Department Convention in Springfield, June 13.

Robert J. "Rob" Bailey, a native of Edgewater, New Jersey, enlisted in the U.S. Navy in October 1996 in Brooklyn, New York. He attended Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, Illinois, and Engineman "A" School at Naval Training Center Great Lakes, graduating in 1997.

Bailey served aboard the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, CVN-72, homeported in Everett, Washington, from 1997 to 2000. While serving in the nuclear reactor department, he trained as a collateral duty Master-at-Arms and completed his tour assigned to the ship's Security Force. In 1998, the Abraham Lincoln deployed to the Persian Gulf in support of Operation Southern Watch, earning the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal and the Meritorious Unit Commendation.

Bailey joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars Montgomery Memorial Post 7452 in 2013, where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life membership. He served as the Post Commander from 2016-2022, earning All-State Post Commander honors five times and earned the distinction of being an All-American Post Commander in 2020. He served in various positions at the District level, including District Commander. He served as the State Inspector in 2022-2023 and as the State Chief of Staff in 2023-2024.

He is a Life Member of the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association 24-2, serving as the Chapter Treasurer



Above, newly elected State Commander Robert J. Bailey takes the oath of office administered by Past Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mihelcic. Below, Past State Commander Eugene Blackwell places the U.S. flag on State Commander-elect Robert J. Bailey's shoulder prior to Bailey taking the oath of office.





Newly installed Department President Danielle Krull with installing officer, Past Department President Ruth Smit-Bigos during the Joint Installation Ceremony June 13 at the VFW Auxiliary's 102nd Annual Auxiliary Convention in Springfield.

since 2019. He is a member of Yorkville American Legion Post 489, The Naval Order of the United States, and a Life Member of AmVets Post 103. He is a Charter Member of Pvt Henry M Hardenbergh, Camp No. 39, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, where he served as the Camp Secretary. He previously served as Treasurer for the Kane County



Past Department President Diane Ahrens is presented with her Past Department President Pin by fellow Marine and District 19 Auxiliary President Victoria Cobbett.

Veterans Assistance Commission Executive Board and as Public Relations Officer for Save A Joe, Inc. Veterans Charities.

Bailey lives in Oswego, Illinois.

Other state officers elected include:

Senior Vice Commander – Ryan Higginbotham-Post 4226-13

Junior Vice Commander – Doug Jameson - Post

1739-14

Quartermaster – Scott Swinford - Post 4186-11

Judge Advocate -Jayson Hoffman - Post 4763-10

Surgeon – Dr. Damon Arnold - Post 311-16

Chaplain - Gary Holmes - Post 342-6

Danielle Krull, the wife of a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and the granddaughter of a Korean Veteran, was elected as the VFW Auxiliary Department President during the organization's annual convention.

Krull, a member of Alsip Auxiliary 450 in Alsip, District 16, was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, IL. She grew up around the VFW, her Grandfather Joe was a Korean War Veteran and was always active in his VFW, alongside her Grandmother Ruby who was active in the Auxiliary.

Her and her family enjoyed the

Christmas parties, the events the VFW offered, and the friendships formed through this organization.

Danielle joined the Auxiliary under the eligibility of her husband Keith who served in the United States Marine Corps and deployed to Afghanistan in 2009 and again in 2011 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. During his deployments Danielle served as a volunteer and mentor for the Marine Corps L.I.N.K.S. (Lifestyle Insights, Networking, Knowledge, and Skills) program aboard Camp Lejeune for spouses and children of active-duty Marines. This was an interactive acculturation program to Marine Corps life and the local installation. Danielle also served as a volunteer in the Marine Corps Systems Command's (MCSC) Family Readiness Program that provided resource information and support services to enhance personal and family readiness during deployments and military life.

Keith highly encouraged Danielle to join the VFW Auxiliary. After joining in July of 2016, Danielle quickly became active at the local, district, and Department levels. During the 2017-2018 year, Danielle was elected Conductress at her home post and Junior Vice President for the 16th District. From 2018-2020 she served as President at her home post and President for the 16th District.



Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars officers, led by newly elected Commander Robert J. Bailey recite the oath of office during installation ceremonies during the 107th annual Department Convention June 13 in Springfield.

During the 2020-2021 year, Danielle was appointed as the Department of Illinois "Buddy" Poppy/VFW National Home for Children Chairman, elected as Conductress for her District, and Senior Vice President at her home post. In 2021-2022 Danielle continued as Conductress for her District, and Sr. Vice President to her home post, as well as newly elected Department Guard. She was also appointed Membership Chairman for the Department of Illinois. In 2022-2023 she served as Department of Illinois Conductress, District Secretary, and Senior Vice President for her home post as well as being appointed as Membership Chairman for the Department of Illinois for a second year! In 2023-2024 Danielle continued through her journey of the Department Chairs and served as the Chaplain as well as well as Senior Vice President for her home post.

Danielle resides in Chicago IL with her husband, and 2 children, Kayleigh and Kennedy. She works as a full-time Account Manager for Design Collective by Cintas in Chicago. In her free time, she loves traveling all over the United States and camping with her family.

Other Department Auxiliary officers elected include:
 Senior Vice President Terry Adams, Leon Richardt Post 6791 Auxiliary, West Chicago, District 19;
 Junior Vice Michael Maruszak, Rhine Post 2729 Auxiliary, Chicago, District 3;
 Chaplain Cathie Cook, Harry E. Anderson Post 9545 Auxiliary, New Lenox, District 18;
 Conductor Carol Shutts, Guthrie Pierce Post 1239 Auxiliary, Beardstown, District 10;
 Guard Adrian Narup, Winthrop Harbor Post 7448 Auxiliary, Winthrop Harbor, District 5



Newly elected Department Auxiliary President Danielle Krull, along with other elected and appointed officers of the Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary recite the oath of office during joint installation ceremonies June 13 in Springfield.



Danielle Krull is escorted into the joint installation ceremony by Nancy Reike June 13.



Past Department President Ruth Smit-Bigos (second from right) begins the Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary installation ceremony June 13 with outgoing Department President Diane Ahrens while Past Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mihelcic and outgoing Department Commander Eugene Blackwell look on.

Danielle's Journey - from Marine Wife...



...to Department of Illinois Auxiliary President





Above, Kayleigh Krull nominating her mom Danielle to the office of Auxiliary President. Left, Ruth Smit-Bigos and daughter Michelle attending in support of Danielle (both from Alsip Post 450 Auxiliary). Below, District 16 (home of Dept President Danielle) participating in the patriotic parade.



*Photos by
Cathy Sullivan*



Clockwise, from top left, Past Department President Ruth Smit-Bigos presents Danielle with the gavel during the installation ceremony. Department Commander Rob and Danielle at the reception. Kayleigh Krull, Danielle's daughter, nominated Danielle, and Danielle's mom Debbie Schergen marking three generations. Missy is Ruby Rotolo, Danielle's grandmother who passed in February would have made 4 generations. Commander Rob and Danielle exchange gifts at the reception at Post 10302.



Skip & Tara's Membership Minute



*By Alonzo "Skip" and Tara Skipper
Department of Illinois VFW and VFW Auxiliary Membership chairmen*

Summer is here, but membership doesn't take a vacation—and neither do we!

We're excited to begin traveling the Department and look forward to visiting Districts 14 and 6 in July. Whether you have questions about the VFW Membership Program or the Auxiliary Membership Program, bring them with you.

These visits are meant to be conversations, not lectures—and we hope to leave with just as many ideas as we bring.

Skip & Tara Trivia

Skip and Tara first met while serving aboard the USS LaSalle (AGF-3). Although they served together in the Navy, they didn't begin dating until after they had both left active duty. Some stories just take time to write themselves.

VFW Members

Summer is not the time to slow down—it's the time to check in.

Now is the perfect opportunity for Buddy Checks. A phone call, a text, or a knock on the door can make all the difference. Those first few visits may feel awkward, but they quickly turn into some of the most meaningful moments you'll have as a member.

We will also be talking more about Sponsor a Veteran during our district visits. We'll walk through

how it works, share ideas from other Posts, and answer any questions you have. If you are thinking it—we guarantee someone else is too, so bring it up.

Auxiliary Members

This year we are keeping membership simple: Mail. Call. Visit.

Three touches. That's it. That's the strategy.

A mailed dues notice starts the conversation. A phone call shows care. A personal visit shows value. It's not complicated—but it is powerful.

Don't forget the Early Bird Challenge! Every district has the opportunity for one Auxiliary to win a Life Membership simply by mailing dues notices and sending me a photo of them being mailed. Email or text is perfect.

Our first Coffee Break Goal is 85 percent by July 15, before everyone heads to Reno. So yes—leave a little of that gambling money behind for dues. 😊 let's Dunkin membership!

We're looking forward to seeing everyone in Districts 14 and 6 this month. Until then, keep reaching out, keep checking in, and keep building the strength of our membership—one conversation at a time.

All in all the time!



Auxiliary membership skit for Danielle "Illinois' Dunkin Membership" during the department convention.

What if We Held an Election and No One Showed Up?

By Fritz Mihelcic, Past Commander in Chief

I had the privilege of administering the election for Junior Vice Commander at our recent state convention. We had three exceptional candidates running and this was the culmination of many months of campaigning across the State.

Illinois VFW has 237 Posts. Sadly, only 109 were eligible to vote for one reason or another. That's only 46 percent of all our Posts. At convention many Posts that did register didn't even show up to vote at all. Out of 237 Posts in the state, only 85 actually voted their delegate strength! There were also individual votes from past department commanders, district commanders, and line officers, but I'm focusing on the Posts themselves here. You read that right, 85 of 237 Posts...that's only 35 percent of the ENTIRE state! Yes, 35 percent of the state's Posts decided this election. That means that SIXTY FIVE PERCENT [65 percent] of Posts that could not vote [or did not vote] left their members unrepresented at the Convention.

Our new Junior Vice Commander is Doug Jameson. The election was fairly processed and followed all the rules. The Official Counter's total was confirmed by each of the individual candidate's counters. There is no doubt in the outcome, it was a majority win with 51 percent of the total votes cast. But the gap between first and second place was so close, that if only a few more Posts had actually been eligible, or if those eligible had actually shown up, the outcome could have been very different.

Many Posts were ineligible by failure to turn in audits or being in arrears for one thing or another. In fact, FIFTY FOUR PERCENT [54 percent] of all our Posts were not even eligible to vote. A majority of Posts were not eligible to even vote! This trend must stop. The members of those ineligible or non-voting Posts were entirely deprived of their representation at the Convention. The leadership of those Posts

failed their members, and the VFW as a whole, by depriving the membership of the right to select their leaders.

Of those Posts that were eligible to vote and registered at convention, THIRTY PERCENT [30 percent] did not even show up to cast their ballots! Why didn't they show? Were they registered and just failed to show up on Saturday afternoon? Did those delegates decide to go to lunch? Sit in the hospitality room? Go sightseeing? The delegates from these Posts had one job...Be participating delegates to the convention.

The majority of votes cast resulted in a clear and legal election. On its face, that's a good thing, but when you consider the number of VFW members who were not represented by their delegates, it's disappointing indeed. It is clear that much work needs to be done going forward and it is up to leadership to do this work. That means leadership at every level from Department, to the Districts, and to each individual Post. We must ensure that more posts resolve their issues to ensure that they are eligible to vote at the state conventions, and we must reinforce the fact that showing up and voting is a fundamental responsibility to the members.

It is often said that a house built on a weak foundation will not stand. It is up to the leadership of this Department to lead the way in engaging the posts to get them invested in the idea that they need to [1] be eligible to vote, [2] choose delegates who understand their responsibilities, and [3] that delegates must actually vote to represent their members. Each Post should WANT to represent their members at every Department Convention, after all.

Together we can all do more. Together does NOT mean 35 percent of our Posts deciding the future. We must strive to be "All in All the Time". It isn't just a slogan; it is achievable... and THE TIME IS NOW to build our future!



Julie Hartmann, sponsored by Judd Kendall Post 3873, Naperville, District 19, is a second grade teacher at Beverly Skoff Elementary School..

Teachers of the Year Honored

Three Illinois educators were honored as the Department of Illinois Teachers of the Year during the convention.

Kindergarten-5th Grade

Julie Hartmann, selected as Teacher of the Year in the Kindergarten-5th Grade Category, is a 2nd Grade Teacher at Beverly Skoff Elementary School.

She was sponsored by Judd Kendall Post 3873, District 19.

A devoted teacher with 24 years of experience, Hartmann brings American history and values to life in her classroom. As a proud member of the Fort Payne Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, she extends her passion for patriotism beyond the classroom, actively volunteering to support veterans and honor their sacrifices. Her students learn that we are "the land of the free because of the brave," and she instills in them an appreciation for the freedoms they enjoy and the responsibilities that come with them.

Hartmann's classroom is a place where patriotism

is woven into everyday learning. Her students write a classroom constitution complete with a preamble, send handwritten Christmas cards and thank-you letters to veterans, and create hats and signs to honor fallen heroes for Memorial Day. She takes time to explain the meaning behind every line of the Pledge of Allegiance, ensuring that her young learners understand the importance of honoring our nation each morning with pride and respect.

Each year, Hartmann invites a veteran to speak to her class, giving students an invaluable opportunity to hear first-person stories of service and sacrifice. One especially meaningful moment is when her stepfather, a former Green Beret who served in Vietnam, visits to share his experiences, creating an unforgettable lesson in courage, gratitude and patriotism.

6-8th Grade

The 2025-2026 Teacher of the Year in the 6-8th Grade Category is Timothy Anderson, a Special Education Teacher at Glenn Westlake Middle School. He was sponsored by Lilac Post 5815, District 19.

Anderson creates an environment of safety, empathy and empowerment for students to contribute to class. He stresses guiding principles that shape meaningful lives. He develops strategies to nurture his students to act as themselves.

For the past three years, Anderson has organized the Veterans Day program at his middle school, which honors over 50 veterans. This patriotic program includes the students participating by reading the veterans' military background to over 1,000 students. This year's program included active military personnel speaking to the students from their duty station overseas and allowing the students to ask questions.

He has also participated with

the Post for their Veterans Day program, Poppy Day fundraising, and promotes the Patriot's Pen program at his school. Anderson served as a Captain in Afghanistan with the U.S. Army as a Logistics Officer and uses his military background in promoting the values of respect, community and citizenship in his activities.

9-12th Grade

Maj. Malakia Thomas, selected as the Teacher of the Year in the 9-12th Grade Category, is a teacher at Bolingbrook High School. She was sponsored by Bolingbrook Post 5917, District 18.

Thomas is a distinguished veteran and educator with more than 34 years of combined military and instructional service across the U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force and

Chicago-area public schools. She has a proven record in leadership development. Her philosophy is, "Leadership begins with service."

Her mission as an Air Force JROTC instructor is to prepare students academically, professionally, and morally, to lead with integrity, compassion, and courage. She strives to ensure every cadet graduates with both the confidence to succeed and the commitment to serve.

In her current position, she leads a 115-member AFJROTC Corps promoting citizenship, discipline and service across the school and the local community. She coordinates various events for the cadets' participation with the Bolingbrook VFW and civic leaders, including Veterans Day,



Timothy Anderson, sponsored by Lilac Post 5815, District 19, a Special Education teacher at Glenn Westlake Middle School, Lombard. He was selected as the 2025-2026 Teacher of the Year in the 6-8th Grade Category.



Maj. Malakia Thomas, selected as the Teacher of the Year in the 9-12th Grade Category, is a teacher at Bolingbrook High School. She was sponsored by Bolingbrook Post 5917, District 18. She was unable to attend the state convention and her awards were given to District 18 Junior Vice Commander Gregory Palmer.

Memorial Day, and the Voice of Democracy program. She directs sustained community engagement initiatives totaling more than 3,000 service hours each year, encompassing a Wingman Program focuses on peer mentorship and belonging.

Thomas designed a Leadership Academy, integrating ethics, communication, and accountability workshops for peer-led learning. She serves as a mentor, advocate and life coach to cadets facing academic, personal and financial challenges. She provides scholarship guidance and enlistment preparation. Her teachings focus on ethics, values and character development through fairness, justice and accountability.

Bezazian Honored for Work with Homeless Veterans

Department of Illinois Homeless Veteran chairman Paul Bezazian was presented a certificate from the national organization for his ongoing work to assist Homeless Veterans throughout Illinois during the department convention June 12.

State Commander Eugene Blackwell presented the certificate for Bezazian.

Bezazian has served as the Homeless Veteran chairman for the Department of Illinois for several years, spearheading standdowns, drives to collect items for homeless veterans, and working to ensure our "Missing In America" are provided with the services needed.



Gandara Honored as Veteran Member of Year

George R. Gandara, Commander of Libertyville Memorial Post 8741, was honored as the Department of Illinois Veteran of the Year during the 107th annual Department Convention June 12.

Gandara, a United States Marine Corps and U.S. Army Veteran, also serves as Sergeant-at-Arms and Chaplain for the Veterans Assistance Commission in Lake County. He is an active member of the American Legion, Marine Corps League, AMVETS, and serves in multiple Veterans Assistance Commission roles throughout Lake and Cook Counties.

Over many years of service to veterans, he has had an extraordinary commitment to helping homeless and at-risk veterans. He participates in direct, boots-on-the-ground missions, often during extreme winter conditions – to deliver blankets, sleeping bags, winter clothing, food, water, and emergency supplies to veterans and vulnerable individuals throughout Chicago and Lake counties.

Gandara has been instrumental in developing and distributing winter survival backpacks for homeless veterans. These carefully assembled kits include wool blankets, winter clothing, hygiene items, food, water, flashlights, and hand warmers.

In addition to homeless outreach, Gandara's service includes:

- Twelve consecutive years organizing winter coat, clothing, and non-perishable food drives;
- Coordinating and supporting Toys for Tots collections and distributions;
- Active involvement with Operation Fetch, Midwest Veterans Closet, and regional veteran support networks;
- Service on VFW Honor Guards, providing prayers and ceremonial support;
- Participation in the opening of the Fisher House and patient advocacy efforts at Lovell Federal Health Care Center;
- Advocacy on behalf of veterans before the Cook County Board;
- Participation in the dedication of the Agent Orange Memorial in Des Plaines; and
- Ongoing support of Indigenous veteran ceremonies, pow-wows, and community spiritual services.

Gandara is a Native American Honor Guard member, Talking Circle leaders, Red Road sobriety advocate, and a deeply respected spiritual leader who provides prayer, counsel, and guidance wherever requested.



Department Commander Eugene Blackwell presents George Gandara with a plaque naming him as Veteran Member of the Year during the annual department convention.



George Gandara offers a Native American prayer during the Department of Illinois VFW Convention in Springfield June 12.

Dennis Nelson POW-MIA Award



The Dennis Nelson Memorial plaque is presented to the VFW post that demonstrates the most outstanding POW/MIA Recognition Program within their community. The Carroll P. Foster Post 3455, Anna, District 15, was awarded the 2025-2026 plaque and was accepted by Post Commander James Hall.

Military Order of Foreign Wars

David Terrinoni, Military Order of Foreign Wars, presents State Commander Eugene Blackwell with the Bronze Meritorious Service Medal.



McCullough, Berry Honored as Top Scouts

The 2025-2026 Eagle Scout of the Year is Alexis McCullough, sponsored by Bourbonnais Post 9961, District 7.

McCullough first joined Girl Scouts and in 2020, and transitioned to Scouting America, where she has held leadership positions including, Senior Patrol Leader, Historian, Bugler, and Crew Vice President.

As a Gold Star daughter, her leadership project was erecting a Woody Foundation Gold Star Families Memorial Monument. The monument is a 2-sided tribute made of black granite. The front side is a tribute to Gold Star families and relatives. The back depicts a story through 4 granite panels: Homeland, Family, Patriot, and Sacrifice.

More than \$200,000.00 for the project was raised by contacting local businesses, hosting 12 events, giving over 105 presentations at community events, clubs, organizations, radio interviews, and working with elected officials. The project represents a lasting tribute for Gold Star families in the community.

Her community service includes attending local and state community events while promoting the Miss America opportunity values of scholarship, service, style, and success, Honor Flight Chicago Climb Operation, American Legion Auxiliary, Kankakee Chamber of Commerce, and the American Heart Association Teen of Impact Chicago.

McCullough just completed her senior year at Bradley Bourbonnais Community High School where she participated in choir, orchestra, Students Against Destructive Behavior club, Green Thumb club, and speech team.

Lucy Berry was honored as the Girl Scout of the Year during the department convention.

Sponsored by Roscoe Post 2955, District 6, Berry has been a member of Troop 1398 of Northern Illinois since 2015.

Berry's Gold Award leadership project addressed the critical need for sensory-friendly environments



Scouting Chairman Ron Milton presents District 6 Commander Rob Bland with Girl Scout of the Year Lucy Berry's award during the state convention. Berry was sponsored by Roscoe Post 2955 in Roscoe.

at Camp Winnebago. She designed a "hammock wheel," featuring 13 hammocks with weatherproof storage. The installation team consisted of 16 different volunteers from the High School Trade teacher as a review, camp staff, Girl Scouts community, and local professionals.

She also worked with special education teachers and occupational therapists to develop a training curriculum for camp staff on sensory need. This health workshop is currently being adapted by KinderCare for its summer staff at over 15 camps nationwide.

Her community service includes VetRoll, where she assisted with the snack preparation for VetsRoll trips which supports WWII, Korean War and Vietnam era veteran trips to Washington D.C., Illinois Space Alliance, where she managed hands-on educational activities for the public, Roscoe Community Band and Music events, and the Talcott Free Library.

She attends Hononegah Community High School where she participates in the Renaissance Club, Science Olympiad, Photo club, and is on the soccer and track teams.



Lt. DeAngelo Franklin, center, was honored as the Law Enforcement Officer of the Year during the department convention. Also pictured are, from left, National VFW Adjutant General Dan West, Department of Illinois VFW Safety Chairman Glen Goodrich, State Commander Eugene Blackwell, and Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.

Franklin Honored as Law Enforcement Officer of Year

The 2025-2026 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year was sponsored by Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480, District 14.

Lt. DeAngelo Franklin began his career approximately 30 years ago. He joined the Department in 1994 as a patrol officer and has performed a variety of duties throughout his career. His accomplishments include becoming a Community Policing Officer in the summer of 1994, Drug Abuse Awareness Education, and School Resource Officer in the local schools of East St. Louis, Gang Crime Specialist, DUI and Traffic Enforcement Officer. In

1999, he was awarded the Public Safety Medal of Valor.

One of his notable acts was his sacrifice regarding a local house fire. The fire trapped a family in their home. Fellow officers were overwhelmed by the smoke and had to exit the home for their safety. Without hesitation, Lt. Franklin readily assisted fellow officers and entered the house through the basement, looking for the family. Although he realized it was dangerous, he paced himself and continued searching. He found one of the trapped children, carried the child to safety and handed them off to a firefighter.

DeVore Honored as Emergency Medical Dispatcher of Year

The 2025-2026 Emergency Medical Dispatcher of the Year was sponsored by Taylorville Post 4495, District 11.

Kaci DeVore is a Dispatcher with the Taylorville Police Department. She has an established track record of going above and beyond for the citizens of Taylorville, helping in any way she can, and inspiring others to do the same.

She also leads their social media, while being a full-time dispatcher. Her ability to keep her community

informed, engaged and smiling through content is nothing short of exceptional. Beyond her engaging presence, her compliance with state regulations has brought professionalism and credibility to the Police Department's communications.

Her work has strengthened the Department's connections with the community and played a critical role in building trust and transparency. She is a true asset to the Taylorville Police Department.

Ciella Honored as Paramedic of Year by VFW

The 2025-2026 Paramedic of the Year was sponsored by Bolingbrook Post 5917, District 18.

Frank Cilella consistently demonstrates outstanding clinical proficiency, paired with a calm, reassuring bedside manner that reflects positively on Paramedic profession. He naturally steps into a leadership role during EMS calls, providing steady guidance and confidence to the crew, especially during complicated or high-stress situations.

One notable example occurred this past year when his team responded to a motor vehicle collision that required surgical cricothyrotomy. Cilella performed the procedure flawlessly and without hesitation.

This is a skill many paramedics may never be called to perform in their entire career, yet he executed it with remarkable composure and competence. This incident was just one of the many challenging calls he has handled with stationed with Station 2.

Beyond his clinical excellence, Cilella is committed to continuous improvement. He routinely takes time out of his day to further study, practice and refine his medical skills. Not everyone in the profession possesses a strong passion of the EMS side of the job, but it is clear that he is deeply invested in maintaining his competency and bettering himself.



Frank Cilella, center, was honored as the Department of Illinois VFW Paramedic of the Year during the 2026 Illinois VFW Convention. Cilella, sponsored by Bolingbrook Post 5917 in District 18, was cited for his leadership, clinical proficiency, and a calm, reassuring bedside manner. Pictured with Cilella is, from left, National VFW Adjutant General Dan West, Safety Chairman Glen Goodrich, State Commander Eugene Blackwell, and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.

Valach Honored as VFW Firefighter of Year

The 2025-26 Firefighter of the Year was sponsored by Bolingbrook Post 5917, District 18.

This year, shortly after being newly promoted, Lt. Joe Valach was tested by an extremely complex and challenging fire incident. One that demonstrated his exceptional leadership, tactical decision making, and commitment to the safety of both civilians and his crew.

Joe and his crew responded to a structure fire with reports of victims trapped inside. Upon the arrival of Company 3, Joe efficiently deployed his personnel and directed the advancement of a hose line to the third floor. Moving ahead of this crew, he assessed the conditions and developed an operational plan.

His crew encountered high heat and heavy fire conditions upon entry. Joe immediately initiated a

search and located a victim within the room. He coordinated seamlessly with his team to effectively remove the victim from the structure. Joe then remained inside with another firefighter to continue fire suppression efforts. When his crew reached the air limits, they exited quickly, swapped bottles, and returned to work without hesitation.

While they were in rehab, Joe's crew helped remove another victim from the third floor using a ladder. Joe decisively deployed his personnel to ladder the building and accomplish the rescue. Even after these critical tasks, Joe and his crew continued operating on the third-floor roof area to assist with overhaul and prevent extension. Their efforts were substantial, and Joe's leadership was essential to the successful outcome of the incident.



Lt. Joe Valach, center, was honored as the Law Enforcement Officer of the Year during the department convention. Also pictured are, from left, National VFW Adjutant General Dan West, Department of Illinois VFW Safety Chairman Glen Goodrich, State Commander Eugene Blackwell, and Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.



Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, The Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, delivers remarks during the joint opening session of the Department of Illinois VFW and Auxiliary conventions in Springfield June 12.

Army Leader Thanks VFW Members, Auxiliary for Work on Behalf of Service Members, Veterans

Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, The Assistant Adjutant General – Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, spoke to the delegates of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary at the organization’s annual convention June 12 in Springfield.

Williams, who had returned from visiting Soldiers, shared with the veterans and their families a little about what the Soldiers are doing.

“We have Soldiers serving all around the world and training across this nation,” Williams said. “They are supporting operations around the world that you’ve seen on the news and they are training.”

Williams said he has spent a lot of time talking to Soldiers about the responsibilities they have as the baton of service is passed from one generation of service members to the next.

“I come from a family of service members,” Williams said. “My great grandfather served in World War II and my uncles in Vietnam. When my great grandfather served, he was gone for three years. He didn’t have email, couldn’t pick up the phone to call home, none of that.”

Williams said thanks to the Illinois National Guard, and the work done by veterans organizations, he was the first to graduate college.

“My education was paid for by the Illinois National Guard. This uniform paid for my college. This flag paid for my college,” he said. “My daughter’s college education was paid for by education benefits I earned and was able to pass down to her, so two generations in my family received an education through my military service.”

Williams said Soldiers join the military for a variety of reasons, but once they take the oath of office, it’s for the same reason – the flag of the United States.

“When I talk to our Soldiers, I want them to put the most they can in for each other and get the most they can out of their service,” he said.

Williams thanked the members of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary for the work they do on behalf of service members and veterans.

“The work you do is positively impacting the lives of service members, veterans and their families,” he said.



Senior Pastor Frederick Nettles, second from right, was honored as the Illinois VFW Clergy of the Year during the organization's state convention June 12. Nettles, sponsored by Rochester Post 11463 in District 10, is pictured with, from left, State Commander Eugene Blackwell, State Chaplain Gary Holmes, and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.

Nettles Named Clergy of Year

Sponsored by Rochester Post 11463, District 10, Senior Pastor Frederick Nettles has exemplified the spirit of public service and community commitment that defines the mission of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. His work reflects not only dedication to his professional responsibilities, but also a deep, personal investment in improving the lives of veterans, their families, and the community.

As a career public servant, Frederick has consistently gone beyond the call of duty to ensure that local, state, and federal systems work efficiently for those who have served our nation. His leadership has been instrumental in advancing programs that address the practical and personal needs of veterans; ranging from access to healthcare and employment

resources to community reintegration and mental health support.

In addition to his career in public service, Frederick serves as the Chaplain for AMVETS Post 94, where he is often called upon to comfort and support veterans and their families during times of illness, loss, or crisis.

Pastor Nettles has also dedicated his time and expertise to mentoring young leaders and advocating for ethical, transparent governance. His steady leadership and compassionate presence continue to inspire peers and community members alike. Whether through direct action, thoughtful advocacy, or hands-on care, he demonstrates the very best of what it means to serve both country and community.



State Senator Michael Hastings, 19th Legislative District, second from right, was selected as the Legislator of the Year by the Department of Illinois VFW during its annual Convention. Hastings, has worked to address housing stability, healthcare access, and economic opportunity.

Hastings Honored as Legislator of Year

Sponsored by Prospect Post 1337, District 4, Senator Michael Hastings is a proud veteran of the U.S. Army.

Having served as enlisted soldier and later as a commissioned officer, his military career included service as an Infantryman and later as a Logistics Officer. His continued service in the Illinois Army National Guard further reflects his lifelong dedication to this nation.

Throughout his tenure, Senator Hastings has supported and advanced legislations aimed at expanding access to veteran services, improving mental health resources, strengthening employment opportunities, and safeguarding veterans from

exploitation. His efforts have contributed to enhancing coordination between state agencies and local Veterans Assistance Commissions, ensuring that critical support reaches veterans and their families more effectively.

A strong advocate for veterans' rights, Senator Hastings has worked to address issues such as housing stability, healthcare access, and economic opportunity. He has also supported initiatives that recognize the unique needs of returning service members, including workforce transition programs and educational benefits. His leadership continues to play a vital role in strengthening Illinois' commitment to those who have served.



State Photographer Arnold Taylor, a founding member of Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park, was honored as the Outstanding Citizen of the Year for his contributions to the Richton Park community.

Taylor Honored as Outstanding Citizen of Year

Arnold Taylor is a founding member of the Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park, Illinois. Since joining the Post in 2012, he has consistently demonstrated exceptional dedication and volunteerism. For every event sponsored by the Post, Comrade Taylor has made himself available to take photographs, capturing memorable moments for participants, attendees, Southland media newspaper, VFW Magazine, and other media outlets.

He also extends his photography services to the village of Richton Park, Rich Township, and other veteran organizations throughout South Suburban-

land. Notably, his efforts are provided free of charge, exemplifying his commitment to service.

Comrade Taylor's contributions go beyond single events. Post 311 and its Auxiliary host at least eight annual events, and his support for additional entities and organizations means he has participated in approximately one event every month since 2012. This dedication amounts to over 1,000 hours of volunteer service, with Comrade Taylor often multiple copies of hardbound picture books as keepsakes for those involved. His actions reflect a remarkable commitment to volunteerism and community duty.

Two Illinois Publications Earn National Awards



National VFW Adjutant General Dan West presents National Publication contest award recipient Marcy Koches with the Bronze Award in the District/Post Publications, Small Frequency Category for the VFW Post 4495 Quarterly newsletter. Also pictured are State Commander Eugene Blackwell and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.

National VFW Adjutant General Dan West presents National Publication contest award recipient Barbara Wilson, Editor, Illinois VFW News, with the Grand Award in the Department Publications, published 1-4 times annually, category. Also pictured are State Commander Eugene Blackwell and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.





Community Relations chairman Steve Eller presents Ron Milton, Belleville Post 1739, District 14, with the Community Recordbooks award.



Americanism chairman Steve Eller presents District 10 Commander Josh Seed with the district's Americanism award for Category 1. Also pictured are State Commander Eugene Blackwell and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.



Americanism chairman Steve Eller presents District 12 Commander Anthony Avers with the district's Americanism award for Category 2. Also pictured are State Commander Eugene Blackwell and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.

District Awards (Checks)

Category 1: District 10, Commander Josh Seed

Category 2: District 12, Commander Anthony Avers

Category 3: District 19, Commander Mike DiCosola



Americanism chairman Steve Eller presents District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steven Hunter with the district's Americanism award for Category 3. Also pictured are State Commander Eugene Blackwell and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford.



Americanism chairman Steve Eller presents Mt. Prospect Post 1337 Commander Laura Matuszak with the post's Americanism award for Category 1.



Americanism chairman Steve Eller presents Highland Post 5694 with the post's Americanism award for Category 2.



Americanism chairman Steve Eller presents Judd Kendall Post 3873 Commander Staci Boyer with the post's Americanism award for Category 3.



Juan Herta, Secretary of State's Office, presents Auxiliary license plates to Department President Diane Ahrens.



Juan Herta, Secretary of State's Office, presents VFW license plates to Department Commander Eugene Blackwell.



Youth Activities Chairman John Davin presents Mt. Prospect Post 1337 Commander Laura Matuszak with a plaque noting the post's sponsorship of Patriot's Pen Champion Michael Sieniawski.



Youth Activities Chairman John Davin presents District 14 Commander Amiee Wagoner with a check for having the highest number of Patriot's Pen entries.



Youth Activities Chairman John Davin presents District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steven Hunter with a plaque honoring the district's distinction of having the most reported hours, dollars, and member participation in the Youth Activities program.



Youth Activities Chairman John Davin presents Dave Darte, Litchfield Post 3912, with the Post's Youth Activities award in Category 1.



Youth Activities Chairman John Davin presents Clarke Christiansen, Harry E. Anderson Post 9545, with the Post's Youth Activities award in Category 2.



Youth Activities Chairman John Davin presents Fox River Post 4600 Commander Mike Kinnerk, with the Post's Youth Activities award in Category 3.



Voice of Democracy Chairman Dave Darte presents District 16 Commander Bill Browne noting idlothian Memorial Post 2580's sponsorship of the State VOD Champion Victoria Negrete.



State Commander Eugene Blackwell presents Mt. Prospect Post 1337 Commander Laura Matuszak with the post's Safety award for Category 1.



Voice of Democracy Chairman Dave Darte presents District 15 Commander Clarence Caraker with a \$100 check as an award for district having the highest number of Voice of Democracy participants.



State Commander Eugene Blackwell presents District 6 Senior Vice Commander John Winterton with Oregon Post 8739's Safety award for Category 2.



Auxiliary President Diane Ahrens, second from right, with, from left, Past National President Virginia Carman, and Auxiliary Chief of Staff Marvie Wisniewski and State Commander Eugene Blackwell.



State Commander Eugene Blackwell presents John H. Kraus Post 454 Commander Don Crop with the post's Safety award for Category 3.

Blackwell Conducts Last Meeting of Term



Left, Department Chief of Staff Bobby Welch, left, and State Adjutant-Quartermaster Scott Swinford present State Commander Eugene Blackwell with a plaque from the 2025-2026 Council of Administration with each member listed.

Below, Blackwell presented Past District Commander pins to six outgoing District Commanders. From left, District 13 Robert Shehorn, District 16 Bill Browne, District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steven Hunter representing outgoing District 19 Commander Michaelangelo Di Cosola, District 6 Commander Rob Bland, District 7 Commander David Long, and District 10 Commander Josh Seed.



Blood Donor, Hospital Awards Presented



Blood Donor Chairman Rob Bland presents Judd Kendall Post 3873 Commander Staci Boyer with the post's Hospital Award in Category 1.



State Surgeon Doug Jameson presents Judd Kendall Post 3873 Commander Staci Boyer with the post's Hospital Award in Category 1.



Blood Donor Chairman Rob Bland presents Roscoe Post 2955, District 6, with the Post's Blood Donor Program award in Category 2.



State Surgeon Doug Jameson presents Elk Grove Village Post 9284 Commander Alexander Brenke with the post's Hospital Award in Category 2.



Blood Donor Chairman Rob Bland presents McHenry Post 4600, District 5, with the Post's Blood Donor Program award in Category 3.



State Surgeon Doug Jameson presents Mt. Prospect Post 1337 Commander Laura Matuszak with the post's Hospital Award in Category 3.

Membership Awards Presented



Membership Chairman Mathius Carter presents Judd Kendall Post 3873 Commander Staci Boyer with the Post Legacy Life award as the post with the greatest increase in Legacy Life memberships during the membership year. The Post increased its Legacy Life members by four.



Membership Chairman Mathius Carter presents District 7 Commander David Long with the Cramer-Soden Award noting the district with the highest numerical increase from the 2024-2025 year to the 2025-2026 year and membership of at least 100 percent. The district increased its membership by 33 members in the membership year.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Stewart Abbink, Post 981, District 4.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Larua Matuszak, Post 1337, District 4.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to John Tomzik, Post 3579, District 4.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Tony Kulavik, Post 540, District 6.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to John Finnegan, Post 5506, District 9.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Josh Seed, District 10, District 10.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Lawrence Miller on behalf of Post 11463, District 10.

2025-2026 All-State Team of District Commanders

District 4 Evamarie Duff, Commander

2025-2026 All-State Team of Post Commanders and Quartermasters

Post	Commander	Quartermaster
District 4		
Post 981	Stewart Abbink	Michael Kolbuk
Post 1337	Laura Matuszak	Matthew Lauck
Post 3579	John Tomzik	Harry Benjamin
District 5		
Post 2486	Anthony Roberti	Tom Rowan
Post 4308	Lukas Baca	Patrick Dunham
District 6		
Post 342	Gary Holmes	Jerome Egilske
Post 540	Anthony Kulavic	Roger Willey
Post 2955	Eugene Mund	Terry Walker
Post 3878	Dennis Orlikowski	Irving Drought
Post 11019	Thomas Dummer	David Christensen
District 7		
Post 454	Donald Crop	Jimmie Waters
District 9		
Post 2470	Scott Heyob	Michael Frost
Post 2602	Chad Bailey	Eric Thurman
Post 4079	Kenneth Olson	Stephen Abel
Post 5506	John Finnegan	Daniel Jackson
Post 5921	Ryan Durbin	Chad Bell
District 10		
Post 755	Josh Seed	Joe Bartley
Post 4763	Kimberly Yantis	Lee Morgan
Post 11463	Kyle Blumhorst	Larry Miller
District 12		
Post 1299	Tim Schultheis	Larry Miller
Post 4528	Thomas Molloy	William Robeen
District 13		
Post 9153	Ryan Shurtz	Ben Newborn
District 14		
Post 805	Darren Hlava	Roger Witek
Post 1739	Lachelle Stevenson	James Page
Post 2698	Kenneth Eddy	Elizabeth Sturgill
Post 3480	Valerie Young	Jeannen Flemings
Post 5596	Kenneth Storck	Steven Elliott
District 15		
Post 9763	Albert Dagner	Bob Owen
District 16		
Post 311	Aretha Spurlock	Arnold Taylor
District 18		
Post 367	Anthony Arellano	James Clausen
Post 725	James Hogan	Paula Graser
District 19		
Post 1197	James Reeves	Bryan Kelsey
Post 3873	Staci Boyer	Phil Maughan



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Tim Schultheis, Post 1299, District 12.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Ryan Shurtz, Post 9153, District 13.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to District 14 Commander Amiee Wagoner on behalf of Lachelle Stevenson, Post 1739, District 14.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Kenneth Eudy, Post 2698, District 14.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Valerie Young, Post 3480, District 14.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Kenneth Storck, Post 5596, District 14.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Albert Dagner, Post 9763, District 15.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to Aretha Spurlock, Post 311, District 16.



All-State Program Chairman Steve Eller presents All-State honors to District 18 Senior Vice Commander Rebecca Ropp on behalf of Post 725, District 18.

Convention Raffle Winners

Grand Prize	\$10,000	Rebecca Ropp
2nd Place	\$3,000	Tim Anderson
3rd Place	\$2,000	Marcy Maughan
4th Place	\$500	Freddie Rocha
5th Place	\$500	Wayne Skopek
6th Place	\$500	Doug Jameson
7th Place	\$500	Pal Bezazian
8th Place	\$500	Larry Carter
9th Place	\$500	Stephen Goodrich
10th Place	\$500	Russ Rieke, Sr.

Purple Heart Raffle

Grand Prize	\$2,000	Adam Abdul
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Poppy Display Results

Place	Category	Winner
1st Place	1A	Post 2729 VFW and Auxiliary*
	1B	Post 9773 VFW and Auxiliary
	2A	Post 1422 VFW and Auxiliary*
	2B	Post 2955 VFW*
	2C	Post 2955 Auxiliary
	3A	Post 9284 VFW*
2nd Place	3B	Post 3480 VFW and Auxiliary*
	1A	Post 540 VFW and Auxiliary*
	1B	Post 5975 VFW and Auxiliary
	2A	Post 5079 VFW and Auxiliary
	2B	Post 7980 VFW and Auxiliary
	3A	Post 1571 VFW and Auxiliary
	3B	Post 7446 VFW and Auxiliary
	*Eligible for National Convention	



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to District 6 Senior Vice Commander John Winterton on behalf of Post 540 for placing second in Category 1A.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to John McGlynn, Post 5975, for placing second in Category 1B.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to District 14 Commander Amiee Wagoner on behalf of Post 3480 for placing first in Category 3B.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to District 8 Senior Vice Commander Ryan Melvin on behalf of Post 1422 and its Auxiliary for placing first in Category 2A.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steven Hunter for Post 7446 placing second in Category 3B.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents Poppy Display awards to District 3 Commander Xi Chen on behalf of Post 2729 for placing first in Category 1A, Post 9773 for placing first in Category 1B, and Post 5079 for placing second in Category 2A.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to District 8 Senior Vice Commander Ryan Melvin on behalf of Post 1571 for placing second in Category 3A.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to Chuck Ingle, for Post 2955 Auxiliary for placing first in Category 2C.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to Tom Cleland, Post 2955 for placing first in Category 2B.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to John Selke, Post 9284, for placing first in Category 3A.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Display award to District 14 Commander Amiee Wagoner on behalf of Post 7980 for placing second in Category 2B.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Program award to District 19 Junior Vice Commander Frank Hernandez, for Post 2838 for having the highest increase in poppy purchases in Category 1.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Program award to Tom Cleland, for Post 2955 for having the highest increase in poppy purchases in Category 2.



Poppy Program Chairman Stephanie Kirksey presents a Poppy Program award to District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steven Hunter, for Post 2801 for having the highest increase in poppy purchases in Category 3.



National Home Chairman Kyna Simpson presents District 19 Senior Vice Commander Steven Hunter with a plaque noting Post 1197 was in the top three posts donating the most money to the VFW National Home.



National Home Chairman Kyna Simpson presents Post 3873 Commander Staci Boyer with a plaque noting Post 3873 was in the top three posts donating the most money to the VFW National Home.



National Home Chairman Kyna Simpson presents District 6 Senior Vice Commander John Winterton with a plaque noting Post 3878 was in the top three posts donating the most money to the VFW National Home.



National Home Chairman Kyna Simpson presents District 13 Chief of Staff Jerry Ash with a certificate noting the District was 100 percent reported in the National Home category.



National Home Chairman Kyna Simpson presents District 14 Commander Amiee Wagoner with a certificate noting the District was 100 percent reported in the National Home category.



National Home Chairman Kyna Simpson presents District 18 Senior Vice Commander Rebecca Ropp with a certificate noting the District was 100 percent reported in the National Home category.

Memorial Service Honors Deceased Members





Patriotic Parade Celebrates Military, America





Four Veterans - One Amazing Story to Tell

May 1, Lake County Honor Flight #30 departed for Washington, D.C. after a heartfelt sendoff at Foss Park Golf Course in North Chicago, where a group of deserving veterans began their journey to visit the memorials built in honor of their service and sacrifice.

Ronald Hill Memorial VFW Post 2245 has been a proud supporter over the years of Lake County Honor Flight, and this particular one is especially meaningful to our VFW family because all four individuals involved are very close to the Post, with Steven and Jessica proudly serving as members.

Vietnam Veteran Paul Ritter was



Vietnam Veteran Paul Ritter and Vietnam Veteran Richard Stevens were part of the Lake County Honor Flight in May.



Four veterans, three generations of service!

escorted by his grandson, Steven Magnetta, a fellow veteran and the Junior Vice Commander of the VFW Post.

Vietnam Veteran Richard Stevens, an American Legion member, was escorted by his daughter, Jessica (Stevens) Magnetta, also a veteran and member of Post 2245.

That means there is a husband-and-wife veteran team serving as guardians for their own grandfather and father during this unforgettable experience! To us, this is what service, family, and legacy are all about.

One generation answered the call to serve our nation, and the next generation followed in their footsteps. That weekend, they walked beside them through the memorials and history they helped shape.

The Post is incredibly proud of Paul, Richard, Steven, and Jessica, and grateful to organizations like Lake County Honor Flight for making moments like this possible for our veterans.



Paul and Steven with Congressman Brad Schneider.



Richard's wife, Cyndy, Jessica's mother! Army wife, Navy mom!



Jessica and Richard getting ready for the sendoff.

A Last-Minute Call Leads to a Lifetime Honor

Story by Tara Skipper

Photos by Claire Bandy

When Alonzo “Skip” Skipper received a phone call informing him that a 99-year-old veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam would be receiving the Freedom 250 Hometown Hero Award, there was one small challenge — the ceremony was only 48 hours away.

Thursday at 1 p.m.?

“Let’s go,” Skip said.

As plans quickly came together, another discovery was made. Robert “Bob” Gill — a veteran whose service spanned three wars and generations of American history — was not a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

That immediately changed.

After confirming through National records, Skip reached out to Department Commander Eugene Blackwell with a simple request: while honoring Bob at the ceremony, could the VFW also present him with a Life Membership? Commander Blackwell immediately responded, “Absolutely.”

The Freedom 250 Hometown



Robert “Bob” Gill — a veteran whose service spanned three wars and generations of American history

Hero Award is a Department of Justice initiative recognizing outstanding community members, law enforcement personnel, and veterans who embody the ideals of liberty, civic service, and sacrifice as the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States.

In just two days, VFW and Auxiliary members rallied together to ensure Bob would receive the recognition he deserved.

Those attending in support of Bob included:

- Russ Rieke, Past State Commander, Department of Illinois VFW
- Warren “Dave” Stout, Past State Commander, Department of Illinois VFW
- Maurice Bridges, Past State Commander, Department of Illinois VFW

- Doug Jameson, Department Surgeon, Department of Illinois VFW
- Amiee Wagoner, District 14 Commander
- Joe Glass, Commander, VFW Post 5691
- Alonzo “Skip” Skipper, Past Commander, VFW Post 5691
- George Cavaletti, Past Commander, VFW Post 5691
- Don Barkley, Benefit Advisor, VFW Post 5691
- Claire Bandy, Honor Guard Member, VFW Post 805
- Gerald Harris, Assistant Chaplain, VFW Post 5691
- Nancy Rieke, Member, VFW Auxiliary Post 5694
- Tara Skipper, Member, VFW Auxiliary Post 5691
- Stacy Jameson, Member, VFW Auxiliary

The ceremony began with the Pledge of Allegiance led by Past State Commander Maurice Bridges, followed by remarks from United States

Attorney Steven D. Weinhoeft.

Weinhoeft spoke passionately about the meaning behind the Freedom 250 initiative and the importance of honoring American heroes whose courage, sacrifice, and dedication protected the freedoms many enjoy today.

He reflected on the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — and reminded those in attendance that freedom is fragile and must continually be defended and preserved by each generation. He also recognized the sacrifices made not only by veterans, but by law enforcement officers, firefighters, and others who dedicate their lives to service.

Then came the story of Robert “Bob” Gill.

Bob joined the Merchant Marine at just 17 years old during



Robert “Bob” Gill delivers remarks to those in attendance.



Robert “Bob” Gill, center, with members of the veteran community who attended the Freedom 250 Award presentation.

World War II. He later worked in the steel mills before reentering military service in 1948. During his distinguished Air Force career, he served as an aircraft mechanic, logged more than 300 combat flight hours during Vietnam, escorted prisoners of war, and participated in the recovery operations connected to the return of the Gemini 7 space capsule. By the time he retired, Bob had achieved the rank of Chief Master Sergeant.

Those in attendance also learned about the enduring love story shared by Bob and his wife Irene, who first met 77 years ago in a two-room schoolhouse in Dow, Illinois.

When Bob addressed the room, he spoke only briefly, saying he was humbled and nearly speechless by the recognition.

The VFW presentation followed.

Skip Skipper, Maurice Bridges, Dave Stout, and Russ Rieke were invited forward. Skip spoke about being humbled and in awe of members of the Greatest Generation and shared that the VFW was honored to present Bob with the gift of a Lifetime Membership. Dave Stout then formally presented the membership



Above, VFW and Auxiliary members gathered to support Robert “Bob” Gill in receiving the Freedom 250 Award. Below, Past Department Commander Russ Reike, Sr. presents Gill with a VFW medal to wear.

certificate.

Maurice Bridges presented Bob with a commemorative challenge coin, while Russ Rieke presented him with a VFW medal to wear.

As the ceremony concluded, members gathered around Bob to shake his hand, thank him for his service, and honor a lifetime dedicated to duty, courage, and love of country.

At 99 years old, Robert Gill continues to represent the very best of America — and the values the VFW stands proudly to defend.



Illinois VFWs, Auxiliaries Join Forces for National Day of Service Events in May

More than 70 Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars posts participated in the Veterans of Foreign Wars 2026 Day of Service. From beautifying Lincoln Park in Red Bud (Post 6632) ahead of the community's America 250 event in August, to conducting a spring clean up for a residential facility in Mount Prospect (Post 1337), veterans and their families came together to serve their communities.

District 10 Prepares Meals for Quincy Home Vets

On May 15, VFW District 10 held its Day of Service at the Illinois Veterans Home in Quincy. Many Posts from across the District came together to support the residents and staff through a variety of volunteer efforts.

Throughout the day, volunteers helped transport residents, prepared meals, and served both residents and staff at the home. It was a meaningful opportunity for our members to give back and show our appreciation for those who have served and those who care for them each day.



District-wide Day of Service Helps Combat Food Insecurity

By Elizabeth Costa-Bland and Rob Bland

In 2024 the USDA Food Security Report estimated that 47.9 million people in the United States are food insecure. That is a polite way to say that they don't know where their next quality meal is coming from. The Veterans Administration estimates that 1 in 9 Veterans between the ages of 18 to 64 are food insecure. So, what can we do about it?

It started with a conversation on the way home from the Rotary International Convention in Calgary Canada, as the Rocky Mountains passed by, we discussed many of the things that stood out at the convention. We had seen many great ideas on how to have an impact in our community, one that stood out was a meal packing event. An event that we would be able to pack whole meals that we are able to hand out to veterans, family members and other community members that were food insecure. Being members of multiple service organizations has allowed us to get ideas from one and use it in another to have a greater impact in our community.

How would we be able to have a greater impact than just our VFW Post and Auxiliary? Let's do it at a District meeting and spread the impact over the entire region! We will do this event during May and it will be our District 6 Day of Service.

At a VFW District meeting, several months before the event, the motion was brought up to spend \$500 to hold a meal packing event. Writing a check was only part of what would be required. The District VFW worked side by side with the District Auxiliary to make sure that we had enough

volunteers to assist with packing the meals. We had our funding and our volunteers. Now we needed the supplies.

Making the Day of Service project happen took a little bit of research and determination but really wasn't that difficult. Originally, we had intended to work with an organization that comes in with all of the ingredients, know-how, and supplies that you need to



Repackaging in the Kitchen.

pack meals that get to stay in your own community. We quickly learned that their minimum financial investment from us far exceeded our budget, so we had to make a decision to figure out how to achieve similar results ourselves or find another idea. At about the same time, Elizabeth won \$200 from the Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary Raffle drawings. We decided to put that money into the project to bring our budget up to \$700 and make the most of our service project.

Some parameters that we set for our meals were:

- the recipient would only need to add water as an ingredient beyond the supplies they received, and
- the meal should be able to be prepared in a microwave if that was the only access someone had. We also wanted to be sure that the meal was reasonably nutritious and low cost to maximize the number of meals we could pack and offer to our veteran community in need.

After coming up with a few meal ideas, we set out to research costs per item and per meal. We did this by visiting our local Woodman's Grocery Store and Walmart, and checking out pricing for items online



Tuna Casserole ingredients.

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at Sam's Club as well. It turned out that most of the items were best priced at Woodman's, which was helpful in keeping ordering supplies simple. Make sure to include supplies such as bags to put the meals in, labels for the bags denoting that it was a donation from the VFW and VFW Auxiliary of District 6, and instruction cards for making the meal in the bag when you are calculating your overall cost. (The instruction cards included microwave or cooking times, amount of water to add, etc.)

The meals we decided to package were a dinner of tuna noodle casserole and a breakfast of biscuits & gravy with peaches. The tuna noodle casserole consisted of a 12.5 oz can tuna, a can of condensed cream of mushroom soup, a box of penne pasta, and a can of green beans (you could also use peas, I just personally hate peas.) The breakfast consisted of one cup of vacuum packed Bisquick mix with three tablespoons of powdered milk (this was so that when they added water it made the proper amount of milk the recipe actually needed), a can of breakfast sausage gravy, and a can of sliced peaches. Make certain if you go with an option that requires repacking an ingredient from bulk to recipe portions that you contact your local health department for guidance. We had access to operate in a licensed/inspected kitchen, someone with a Food Handler manager



Looking down the assembly line.

certificate on-site, wore gloves, and had other kitchen staff requirements covered. We used a vacuum sealer to seal the Bisquick/powdered milk bags shut for sanitation purposes. (NOTE: It would have been very helpful if we had 2 or 3 sealers instead of just 1 since it overheated every 15 or so bags and became the bottleneck of our project waiting for it to cool down enough to proceed again.)

When ordering bulk quantities of canned goods, do not expect that you can just walk into the store and buy it off the shelf. Many stores operate on daily deliveries and "just in time" inventory processes. We contacted the store two weeks before we needed the items with an itemized list of descriptions and quantities. The manager of the ordering department placed the order for us and had everything separated and ready to go on our scheduled pick-up day, making it quick and painless!

A week before the event we sent out a press release to the local TV station in the hope that we would be able to share our story and event. The day before the event, we took a little bit of time to get our talking points ready if the local news showed up. We were pleasantly surprised when a local



Donation to Operation Sweet Life Inc. founder Diane Ahrens, Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary President, District 6 Auxiliary President Elizabeth Costa-Bland, and District 6 VFW Commander Rob Bland.



Breakfast meal biscuits, gravy, and peaches.

news station showed up and the event was on the local news that evening!

When it came time for our District meeting and meal assembly, we had stations along long rows of the table for each ingredient. Each different meal had its own table row to avoid confusion. Participants would grab a bag and walk down the row making sure one of each item was placed in the bag. At the end, they would hand it off to someone who checked that all items needed were there, then they would add an instruction card and a label.

Not all of our volunteers were able to walk back and forth. We ensured that those who had to sit had a position to help. The last station to double check the contents, add the instruction card and label was a great way for them to be part of the team. We ended up packing 95 complete dinners and 66 breakfasts with our \$700 budget.

After the meals were packed, each Post and Auxiliary took enough to help the veterans and their families that needed assistance in their community. We had enough meals from the event to donate to a local food pantry to assist others in the community and we had enough to donate some to Operation Sweet Life Inc.

Operation Sweet Life Inc assists veterans by providing essential home furnishings and resources in order to create their "Home Sweet Home". Every new home needs a meal or two.

Overall, those who helped really enjoyed doing something that felt meaningful and immediately impactful in the community. Some posts and

auxiliaries mentioned duplicating the idea at their posts for a great community service project. As District Commander and District President, we have felt like our purpose at the district level is to instruct and inspire, so hearing those comments definitely made the day a win for everyone involved!



Becky Coulson, Past District 6 Aux President, and Tina Kulavic, incoming District 6 President repackaging in the Kitchen.

VFW Post 1337 Completes its Fifth Consecutive Annual Day of Service Project

The VFW Day of Service project of Post 1337 this year was a Spring Clean Up at a local residential facility in Mount Prospect that houses developmentally disabled adults.

The house is owned by Clearbrook, a well-known and respected local 501c(3) charitable organization that provides a wide variety of health, educational, and social services to children and adults in need.

The project facility is one of Clearbrook's Community 60 Integrated Living Arrangements that strives to offer opportunities to its residents to be as independent as possible in their home and community.

At 9:00 a.m. on project day, several comrades, including Commander Laura Matuszak, Junior Vice Commander Mike Relaz, Service Officer Dutch DeGroot, Adjutant and Project Organizer Jim Parker, and comrades, Jerry Koch, Tom Oshgan, and Patrick Gallagher gathered to do yard maintenance work at the home, that including leaf raking, weed removal,



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flower planting, mulch spreading and tree trimming.

Members of the Arlington Heights Garden Club joined them. Most of the work was completed about 11:00 a.m., followed by the inevitable clean-up and photos and some celebration because finishing the project completed the Post's All-State and All-American requirements for this year.

Post 1337 has a very long history of Community Service. It has participated in the Day of Service (part of the VFW Still Serving campaign) every May since its inception five years ago.

The first project was at the home of a disabled, hospitalized Army Korea veteran whose wife was unable to keep up with maintenance in their large yard. It had an overgrown lawn, and many bushes needed extensive trimming. The most immediate need, however, was a very large backyard tree that was dying and had started to fall over. They took care of the lawn and trimming, then bagged a large volume of debris in short order. The tree was another issue. Several Comrades carefully attacked it with chain saws and, once on the ground, cut it up into large sections. They were hauled to the front yard, where, thanks to its good relationship with the village Public Works Department, loaded them into a large-capacity wood chipper. The veteran's wife, who had been visiting her husband, was astounded to find the tree

was completely gone when she returned.

Last year, the Post project also involved a disabled vet who was unable to keep up with his yard. This time, even more bush and tree trimming was involved. He had a dead tree in his front yard that had recently been removed, but left a large, unsightly stump behind. Fortunately, a comrade owned a stump removal service, and he took care of the matter quickly and efficiently. Other Community Service projects are too numerous to list here.

We can say that so far this year, we have dedicated almost 4,200 hours of such service, and in 2022-2023, Post 1337 was named by VFW National as the Post with the most community service hours (almost 11,000) in the entire world!



Post 1308, Auxiliary Members Clean Portion of Highway Dedicated to Memory of Post Namesake

Members of Russell E. Dunham Memorial Post 1308 conducted a day of service, May 9.

Post and Auxiliary members cleaned up a portion of highway that is named after our Medal of Honor recipient.

Nine members from the post and auxiliary collected six full contractor bags of trash after cleaning close to a half mile of highway. Participating in the cleanup were Chris Miller, Mick Rolando, Dave Fullagher, Denzil Marshall, Becky Wilmore, Greg Davidson, Sue Rolando and others.



Mt. Vernon VFW Partners with Young Marines to Clean, Repair Veteran Headstones in Cemetery

Mike Flanigan Memorial Post 1376 VFW partnered with the Heartland Young Marines of Mt. Vernon, to clean and repair veteran head stones at Atkinson Cemetery in Mt. Vernon, May 2.

The Atkinson Cemetery was established March 11, 1875, by James Atkinson, who granted the land as a community burial ground.

The first recorded burial was in 1843. Veterans of the War of 1812, Civil War, Black Hills War, Spanish American War, World War I, and World War II are buried here.

The cemetery was dedicated as an Illinois State Historical Site on July 9, 2023.

Post 1376 chose this site as their Day of Service project because of the military history of the burials at this site and the location was the perfect size for our post to make the best impact during the project's workday.

Most of the stones in the cemetery were cleaned and many were re-leveled or repaired during the project.



Heartland Young Marines leveling a head stone.



Chaplain Bill Hemker weed eating the cemetery grounds.



VFW Member Gary Chesney and Young Marines Lance Cpl. Rivard survey a stone for repair.



Heartland Young Marines repair a cemetery head stone.



Senior Vice Commander Ken Jayne spraying cleaner on veteran head stones.



L-R - Gary Chesney (VFW), Senior Vice Commander Paula Ward, Junior Vice Commander Kenny Jayne (Day of Service Project Lead), YM/Sgt. Aiyanna Verly, YM/LCpl Xavier Silva, YM X/O John Kowalski, YM/LCpl Lucas Rivard, YM T/O Matthew Costello, Chaplain Bill Hemker (VFW).



Elizabeth Costa-Bland, District 6 Auxiliary President and member of Post 1461 Auxiliary, donates during Day of Service.



Rob Bland, District 6 Commander and member of Post 1461, donates blood on Day of Service.

Post 1461 Hosts Blood Drive for Day of Service

Once again for the VFW Day of Service 2026, John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461, Belvidere, held a blood drive with the Rock River Valley Blood Center.

A total of 69 lives were saved with the donation of blood. This brings the Post up to 438 lives saved with 146 units collected over the past five blood drives.

A blood drive is an easy way for the Post to give back to the community. With summer coming up and

increased outdoor activities, it unfortunately means the opportunity for more accidents. More accidents lead to a higher level of blood use at local hospitals. This is in addition to the typical blood usage for surgeries, childbirth, and cancer treatments.

The donation process takes less than an hour and one donation can save up to three lives in the local community.



Members of Sgt. Charles A. Fricke Post 805 and its Auxiliary partnered with the Metro-East chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace to construct beds for local children and families in need.

VFW Post 805 Builds Beds for Local Children During VFW Day of Service

Members of Sgt. Charles A. Fricke VFW Post 805 in O'Fallon demonstrated their continued commitment to community service on May 2, by participating in a Veterans of Foreign Wars Day of Service event in support of the Illinois Metro-East chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace, a nonprofit organization serving Madison and Saint Clair counties.

Post 805 members, family members, and community supporters gathered to build 25 beds from scratch for local children and families in need.

Volunteers worked at a series of stations dedicated to cutting, sanding, drilling, assembling, branding, and staining bed components.

The highly organized event ran from 8 a.m. to noon and was choreographed by Sleep in Heavenly Peace leadership. In addition to volunteering labor, Post 805 previously donated several thousand dollars to help the organization purchase the required building materials upfront. The Post also conducted a community bedding drive leading up to the event, collecting and donating several thousand dollars' worth of new sheets, comforters, and pillows.

"This marks the second consecutive year that Post 805 has selected Sleep in Heavenly Peace as its VFW Day of Service partner," said Darren Hlava, commander of Post 805. "Our membership chose to support Sleep in Heavenly Peace again because everything they do directly benefits children and families in need within our community. It is a highly



Volunteers worked at a series of stations dedicated to cutting, sanding, drilling, assembling, branding, and staining bed components.

professional organization dedicated to its mission that no child sleeps on the floor. We greatly value our partnership and look forward to continuing our collaboration."

Among the volunteers was Carlos, a teenage Rotary International Exchange student hosted by Post 805 Life Members Dave and Sharon Goetsch.

Carlos praised the experience.

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The bed build was choreographed by Sleep in Heavenly Peace leadership. In addition to volunteering labor, Post 805 previously donated several thousand dollars to help the organization purchase the required building materials upfront.

"It is an honor and privilege to work alongside American veterans in support of such a worthwhile cause," he said. "Everyone has been welcoming and kind, and I am certain I will remember this experience for the rest of my life."

Karen Sprinkle, president of the Metro-East chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace, one of 16 chapters throughout Illinois, expressed her appreciation for the partnership.

"We are extremely grateful to the VFW for its continued support," Sprinkle said. "It is inspiring to see veterans demonstrate that a commitment to service does not end when military service concludes—it simply takes on a new form. We truly appreciate this partnership and the positive impact it has on local children and families."

Through projects such as this annual Day of Service, VFW Post 805, chartered in 1921 and currently the largest VFW Post in the State of Illinois, continues to demonstrate its dedication to serving veterans, families, and communities.



Volunteers of all ages participated in the Day of Service event which supported families in need in Madison and St. Clair counties.

Belleville Post Cleans Up Around St. Joseph Center During Day of Service Activities

Post 1739 Belleville Day of Service for 2026 was performed at the Joseph Center, E St Louis. The Joseph Center is a transitional living facility for veterans and provides housing, trauma-informed care, wrap-around services, and support for homeless Veterans in and around the greater St. Louis Metropolitan area to include Missouri and Illinois.

This year our post removed invasive vegetation from the entrance to the facility and provided maintenance to the entrance gate to where it was functional. We also provided lunch for the residents and volunteers. A local Schnucks Market donated the items for lunch.

By participating in the VFW Day of Service, the volunteers demonstrated their appreciation for the sacrifices made by residents and support of the Joseph Center.



Post 2868, Auxiliary Spend Day of Service at Hines VA, Continue Commitment to Veterans

After supporting community outreach earlier in the day, the team visited Hines VA alongside VFW Post 2868 and Auxiliary, continuing our commitment to the residents.

Together, we hosted bingo, provided snacks, and most importantly, spent time with the veterans who call Hines home.

While we are unable to share photos inside the hospital, the impact of these moments is real. Showing up consistently matters. Building trust matters.

What makes this even more important is that the work doesn't stop there.

Time was spent speaking with the Resident Council leadership, and those conversations continue to move forward as we work toward improving care, quality of life, and accountability for the residents.

This is not a one-day effort.

This is not just an activity.

This is ongoing commitment and advocacy.

Even if it is just a few moments of hope that a veteran can get out of their day to know they are cared about or a few moments out of their room to play a game it all matters.

Proud of Joshua Harris VFW Post 2868 and Joshua Harris VFW 2868 Auxiliary for continuing to lead this effort and for never losing sight of the mission.

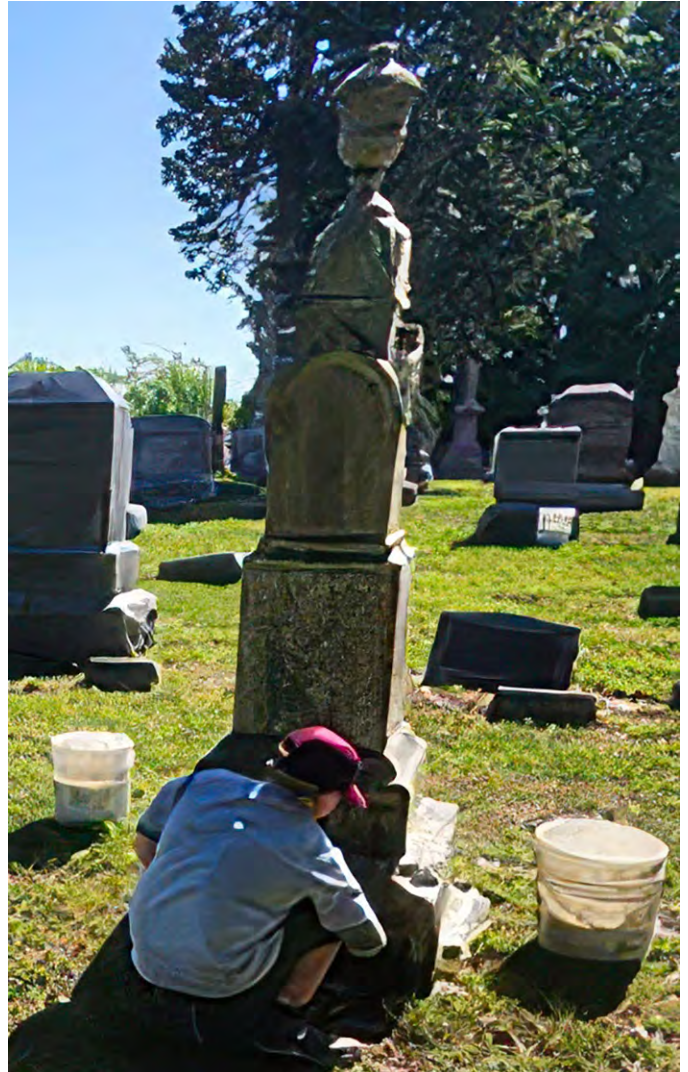


Post 11463 Honors Heroes - One Stone at a Time

Members of Rochester VFW Post 11463, BSA Troop and Pack 40, and Civil Air Patrol Squadron 036 joined together for our VFW Day of Service, cleaning nearly 50 headstones in the oldest part of Rochester Cemetery.

This marks the second year uniting in service and remembrance.

Thank you to everyone who came out and gave their time and energy to help preserve the memories of those who served. Your dedication truly makes a difference!



Post 3873 Co-Hosts Free Military Pet Vaccine Clinic in Naperville During Day of Service

Judd Kendall VFW Post 3873 in Naperville had the honor of co-hosting a Free Military Pet Vaccine Clinic for its Day of Service — and what a day it was.

This event was built on one thing: collaboration.

Organizations, leaders, and volunteers came together with a shared mission—

to serve those who served by caring for what they love most.

In partnership with EarthWise Pet Naperville, Paws of a Veteran, DuPage County Animal Services, DuPage County Veterans Assistance Commission, Paw's for a Cause Vet Care, Countryside Animal Clinic, Vernon Hills Animal Hospital, Hines VA Hospital Outreach, and K9s For Veterans, we created an innovative, all-day event that met veterans where they are.

From free vaccines, microchips, heartworm testing, and nail trims... to real conversations and real solutions—we were able to:

- Connect veterans to resources & claims support
- Answer VFW membership inquiries
- Help navigate housing and food insecurity challenges



Because service doesn't stop when the uniform comes off—it evolves.

The day was powerfully opened by a combined Color Guard from our VFW Post and the Naperville American Legion—setting the tone for a day rooted in purpose.

I'm proud to have helped lead this—but let's be clear—this only works because people show up.

Special recognition to the leaders and volunteers who made it happen:

- Andrea Wendlandt – Paws of a Veteran

- Bruce Mayor – President, DuPage County VAC Board

- Terry Prince – Director, IDVA

- Steven Fixler – Superintendent, DuPage County VAC

- Brittany Michor – Outreach Manager, DuPage County VAC

- EvaMarie Duff – VFW District 4 Commander

- Jordan Holwell – Paws of a Veteran

- Dan Miller – K9s For Veterans

- Jacki Rossi

- Maria Reher

- Dan Bartley

- Laura Ayers Winnie

- Lisa Mendez

- Beverly Macrito

- Liz Czarnecki

Here's the truth — community doesn't build itself. It takes people willing to step up, lean in, and do the work.

We did exactly that.

We didn't just host an event. We made an impact. And we're not done.



At your service and *by your side*

Free Military Pet Vaccine Clinic

EARTHWISE Pet
NUTRITION CENTER & WELLNESS SPA

VFW
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS
Naperville Post 3873

5/3/26
10-2pm
2 Pets Per Household
Vaccines
Free Nail Trimming
VSO | Resources on site

Elanco

SCAN FOR IMPORTANT DETAILS & TO RSVP

790 Royal Saint George Dr.
Suite 111
Naperville, IL 60503

Paws of a Veteran

Veterans Assistance Committee VAC
DuPage County
Serving Veterans and Their Families

FOR VETERANS
A Service Dog for the World

Best Friend

Olney VFW Cleans Civil War Veterans Park

Olney Memorial VFW Post 4226 members began their day of service May 16 in a small park in downtown Olney that many of our own local people are not aware of. This park was dedicated to the Civil War Veterans.

Three members of the Post brought their weed eaters, rakes and landscaping tools. They got a lot of the brush and debris cleared and sidewalks trimmed before thunderstorms set in. They will be back to do more after Memorial Day.

The stone reads: In Civil War Times Men And Boys Met Here At Elliott's Hall And Prepared To Leave For Service. Many Never Returned. Richland Co. Was Among The First In The State To Form A Company And Ranked 6th In The State And Exceeding It's Quota. No Draft Was Required.

Erected 1998 Sponsors Richland Heritage Museum Foundation, Olney Central College, Olney Public Library, Richland County Historical And Genealogical Society.

Olney History: The Civil War brought a great deal of turmoil to the county as there were sympathies for both sides. President Lincoln and Stephen Douglas spoke at separate political rallies in Olney on Sept. 20, 1856. The Olney paper was said to be the first newspaper to endorse President Lincoln. While most citizens rallied around the Union it was necessary to have troops stationed in Olney to enforce the draft as union deserters found refuge among local citizens. Overall, the county was pro-Union and an estimated 1,700 Richland County citizens fought for the Union

in the Civil War. Nearly 1,000 Olney residents served in World War I, and during World War II, Richland County may have been the only Illinois county outside of Cook that provided four generals for the war effort.

The first census of Richland County was in 1850 at which time 4,012 people resided in the county. One hundred years later the 1950 census found a spot north of Olney near Dundas to be the population center of the United States.

Several notable Union military leaders lived in or operated out of Olney:

- Brig. Gen. Eli Boyer – Prominent regional officer commanding Illinois troops.
- Col. John Lynch – Senior officer helping lead volunteer infantry units.
- Lt. Col. John Olney – Officer of the 6th Illinois Cavalry Regiment who led expeditions in the Western Theater.
- Col. John St. John – Field officer hailing from Richland County.

...found at https://www.ci.olney.il.us/visitors/olney_history.php

The Grave of the Unknown Soldier

Early the next morning one member went to Haven Hill Cemetery, which has one grave site for an unknown soldier from 1863. The story behind that is...

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/35676622/unknown-soldier>

The Unknown Soldier buried at Haven Hill Cemetery in Olney, Illinois, is an unidentified Civil War veteran whose burial represents a powerful



Before



After



Before



After

story of community honor and a stand against racial discrimination.

The History and the Mystery

- The Veteran: Local historical lore indicates that the “Unknown Soldier” was a Black Civil War veteran. He passed away in April 1863.
- The Conflict: Upon his death, he was denied burial at his original “home” cemetery solely due to his race.

- The Intervention: When trustees of the local burial grounds heard of this injustice, they openly declared that they would welcome him to rest on the hill at Haven Hill. He was duly buried there with dignity, and the community ensured his final resting place would always be cared for and recognized.

The Campaign for the Monument

For decades, the grave was regularly maintained

but lacked a permanent, formal headstone. [1]

- The Catalyst: Prior to 1987, a local Olney resident named Howard “Red” Lowe became deeply upset that this veteran’s final resting place lacked a proper, respectful marker.

- The Monument: Lowe launched a community fundraising campaign to purchase a headstone. Shortly after, a beautiful stone explicitly carved with “An Unknown Soldier” was erected over the plot.

Modern Legacy

Today, the monument is a central point of pride in the old pioneer section of Haven Hill Cemetery. It serves as the official anchoring location for the community’s annual Memorial Day observances, ensuring that a soldier whose name was lost to time—but whose dignity was defended by the town—is never forgotten.



Before



After

'Rockstar' Chief Warrant Officer Retires After 25 Years of Service in the Illinois Army National Guard

Story and Photos by Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

The year was 2000. The original I-Pod was introduced. Dial up internet was all the rage. The average price for a gallon of gas was \$1.52, MySpace didn't exist yet, and Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jennifer Rosa enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard.

Rosa's 25 years of military service was celebrated with family, friends, and fellow service members at a retirement ceremony at the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team's headquarters in Urbana June 5.

"Twenty-five years in any career doesn't happen by mistake," said Maj. William Troccoli, the 33rd IBCT's administrative officer. "Today is a special day and arguably one of the most important events in any Soldier's career – retirement."

Rosa, a new member of John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461 in Belvidere, enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard in December 2000 as an intelligence analyst and later reclassified as a Human Resources Soldier. She has served in many capacities throughout her career, including her final position as the 33rd's Human Resources technician, a position she's held since 2018.

"She has truly come up through the ranks as a Soldier," Troccoli said. "She enlisted as a Private First Class, rising to the rank of Master Sergeant before receiving an appointment as a Warrant Officer in 2019. She is ending her successful career as a Chief Warrant Officer 3 in the largest brigade in the Illinois Army National Guard."

Troccoli said Rosa has been the muscle behind five large brigade



Lt. Col. Russell Hayes, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team executive officer, presents Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jennifer Rosa with a framed miniature flag of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team "Golden Cross" during a retirement ceremony June 5 at the brigade headquarters in Urbana. Rosa retired from the Illinois Army National Guard after 25 years of service, the last seven years as a Warrant Officer.

mobilizations to the Middle East as well as numerous overseas training missions and state activations.

In 2026, Rosa received the Colonel Robert L. Manning award from the Adjutant General Corps' Regimental Association for her contributions and influence on the Corps' mission. Manning was the 29th Chief of the Adjutant General's Corps, Commandant of the Adjutant General School, Chief of Army Bands, and President of the Adjutant General's Corps Regimental Association. The AGCRA Achievement Medal was renamed after Manning in 2013 to recognize his significant contributions to the Association.

"The award was well deserved,"

Troccoli said.

He thanked Rosa's family, including her husband, Leosvaldo, daughter, Alana, and sons, Paolo and Sebastian, for allowing the Illinois Army National Guard to borrow Rosa for the past 25 years.

"To her parents, Sandra and David, Chief is a rockstar," he said. "I am sure you are very proud of her accomplishments."

Lt. Col. Russell Hayes, the 33rd's officer in charge and executive officer, also thanked Rosa's family.

"The military asks a great deal of our servicemembers, but it demands as much from our families," Hayes said. "From deployments, long training

missions, and late-night telephone calls, our families keep the homefront secure. Thank you for your unwavering support and congratulations on having Jennifer back."

Hayes said Rosa has had a successful career.

"The Illinois Army National Guard has 9,950 Soldiers with about 10 percent of that serving in the Active Guard and Reserve Program," Hayes said. "Of those 49 rise to the rank of Master Sergeant. And only 22 Warrant Officers serve in the AGR program."

Hayes said Rosa is one of the best warrant officers he has worked with during his career.

"She embodies everything a Warrant officer is, a subject matter expert and a professional," he said. "It is safe to say she has had a positive impact on thousands of Soldiers during her 25 years of service."

Hayes thanked Rosa for her service.

"As you hang up the uniform and begin this next chapter of your life, know the impact you have had on Soldiers will be felt long after you walk out the door," he said.

Troccoli said Rosa's retirement on the eve of the 82nd anniversary of D-Day wasn't by happenstance.

"This painting of the beach landings behind me here on the wall perfectly represents what the D-Day experience must have felt like for those Soldiers – the unknown, the fear, and above all else, the determination to accomplish the mission," he said. "Chief as you approach the eve of your own unknown and fearful journey into retirement, I have no doubt you will do wonderful things as you step into your next chapter."

Rosa said the ceremony wasn't only a celebration of her military career, but it signifies the closing of one chapter and the beginning of another.

"The first chapter began before I was born," Rosa said, noting her mother, Sandra Rivera served in the Illinois National Guard before transitioning to the U.S. Air Force active component in the early 1980s. "My father was active-duty Air Force before transitioning to the New York National Guard where he retired after more than 20 years of active service."

Rosa noted the proximity of the Northwest Armory in Chicago and her participation in the Army JROTC in High School was probably part of the reason she enlisted in the Army.

"Even after attending JROTC camp in 1999 at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, I still enlisted in the Army," she said.

She said despite Troccoli's glowing review, her military career wasn't perfect.

"I won't say it was marred by imperfections, but marked by humanity," she said. "There may have been some personal obstacles that diverted attention but that's just how it goes sometimes."

Rosa pointed out that less than one percent of the U.S. population is actively serving in any component of the military.

"Of that one percent, less than 20 percent are women and less than 10 percent of women make it to retirement," she said. "Based on those statistics, two one hundredths of a percent of the general population are women military retirees. I've been fortunate to know some of those women and now I'm honored to join them."

Rosa said 25 years in any one organization is a long time.

"I don't have the rest of my life figured out yet, but I know there is a rest of my life," she said. "I want the rest of my life to start as soon as possible."

Rosa said people see one Soldier retire, but they don't see the family who served alongside



Newly retired Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jennifer Rosa is moved by the standing ovation received during the reading of her retirement order. Rosa, a new member of John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461 in Belvidere, retired after 25 years of military service.

that Soldier. Rosa took the time to thank her family for their support.

"To my husband, my true north, thank you for every sacrifice, every adjustment, every time you carried the load so I could do my job. I love you," she said. "To my children, I give you a compass as a reminder that while my military journey is ending, your journey is just beginning. Wherever life takes you, lead with courage and integrity."

Belvidere Officer Retires from the Illinois Army National Guard After 25 Years of Selfless Service

By Sgt. G. Alejandro Valdes
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

The Illinois Army National Guard recognized the 25-year military career of Lt. Col. Bernadette Bland of Belvidere, a veteran of two overseas deployments and multiple domestic emergency missions, during a ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy Auditorium on Camp Lincoln in Springfield May 3.

Bland, a member and Post Commander of John Hugo Kaiser VFW Post 1461 in Belvidere, deployed twice in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. She deployed to Djibouti in 2001-2002 as a maintenance platoon leader in the 94th Maintenance Company. She also deployed in 2014 to Kuwait as the Chief Supply and Services Officer for the 108th Sustainment Brigade. In 2005 she deployed as a member of Joint Task Force Katrina, providing humanitarian relief in the Gulf Coast region and in 2020 she was activated for the Illinois response to COVID-19. She has also served on numerous overseas training exercises including multiple missions to Africa and Europe.

"I went to Africa five times," she said. "What other part-time lets you do that?"

Bland's military career was an adventure from the start. Bland began her career by commissioning as an ordnance officer through ROTC at Lewis University in May 2001. Her first day of active duty after commissioning was Sept. 10, 2001. "The next day, of course, everything changed for everyone in the military," she said. "Eight days later I was in Djibouti (Africa)."

Djibouti was as hot as...well, Africa. And the U.S. military didn't



Lt. Col. Bernadette Bland of Belvidere, with her sons, Sgt. Rob Bland and Kevin Bland, after her retirement ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy Auditorium on Camp Lincoln in Springfield on May 3. Bland served for more than 25 years including multiple overseas deployments and training missions. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Davanh Sanamixay, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs).

have the military infrastructure there that they do today - for example, air conditioning. "It was hot and miserable for all of us and that was a leadership challenge. But as a unit we learned to 'embrace the suck' and became a tighter unit as a result," Bland said.

Years later, on a training mission with the National Guard in Botswana, Bland learned it can get cold at night in Africa. It was 20-degrees Fahrenheit - and the female tents had no heat. "I was cold, all the time," she said. That was until high winds blew away the female tents. "At that point we were so close to the end of the exercise that the decision was made not to put the tents back up," she said. The females were

dispersed throughout the camp for the remaining days. Bland was placed in a room next to the kitchen. "It was heated and for the first time during the exercise I could sleep."

Bland said the U.S. Army taught her to "Hunt the Good Stuff" long before it became part of the Army's official resilience training. She also learned to "listen to and actually get to know" her Soldiers. "One of my Soldiers taught me how to weld," she said. That was a highlight for her and the Soldier, who would often bring it up when they talked later.

Her career in the Illinois Army National Guard started at the 108th Maintenance Battalion where she served as the Personnel Officer,

Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment Commander and Logistics Officer. Further assignments included Host Nation Support Officer in the 108th Sustainment Brigade, Operations Officer of the 405th Brigade Support Battalion, Chief Supply and Services Officer of the 108th Sustainment Brigade, Support Operations Officer for the 232nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion and several positions in Joint Force Headquarters culminating with her role as the Joint Logistics Officer for the Illinois National Guard.

"So, my first meeting with her, I fired her," said Col. Tim Newman, the Joint Strategy, Plans, and Policies Officer for the Illinois National Guard. "I fired her and made her the service support operations officer. That means that



Lt. Col. Bernadette Bland of Belvidere, holds her Honorable Discharge from the U.S. Army with Col. Timothy Newman during her ceremony at the Illinois Military Academy Auditorium on Camp Lincoln in Springfield on May 3. Bland served for more than 25 years including multiple overseas deployments and training missions. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Davanh Samixay, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs).

instead of writing the orders she was managing all classes of supply except fuel and ammo."

Newman said putting Bland in that position was a blessing as she was on top of her game and the

top major of the 10 that were in his section.

Her awards and decorations include Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Army Achievement Medal, Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal, Armed Forces Service Medal, Humanitarian Service Medal, Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, Meritorious Unit Commendation, many other federal and state awards and the Ordnance Corps Order of Samuel Sharpe award. She is branch qualified in Ordnance and Logistics and holds a Bachelor of Science in Aviation Administration and a Master of Business Administration from Lewis University.

"It's been great serving with you," Newman said. "Your legacy of what you've done for the Illinois Guard lives in the Soldiers, officers, and NCOs that you've mentored, taught, and coached."

Newman quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." He added that Bland has "left that trail, and that can be seen in your son picking up the uniform and following in your footsteps."

Bland lives in Belvidere with her two sons; Kevin and Rob. Rob currently serves as a noncommissioned officer in the Illinois Army National Guard's Rock Falls-based 1644th Transportation Company.

Deadlines for Illinois VFW News

The next issue of the Illinois VFW News magazine will be published on the department's website the first (full) week of September (on or about Labor Day).

The deadline to submit news, photos, and other items of interest to the VFW Illinois community will be Aug. 15.

Items can be emailed to Editor Barb Wilson at barb.wilson2@outlook.com



The newly elected officers of Kahokian Memorial Post 5691 are installed by Past Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mihelcic.

New Officers Installed at Kahokian Memorial Post

*Story and Photos by
Richard Lawrence
Post 5691 Historian*

On May 6, Collinsville VFW Post 5691 during its usual post meeting agenda items also installed its newly elected officers for the 2026-2027 year.

Past National Commander-In-Chief Fritz Mihelcic swore in a new member and the newly elected officers, which included passing of the Gavel from outgoing Commander Joe Glass to the newly elected Commander Adam Abdul.

Doug Jameson, who was running for State Junior Vice Commander, shared his thoughts and opinions regarding the future of the VFW, and reflecting on our proud and patriotic past.

The post was introduced to Disabled American Veterans Veteran Service Officer Brian Hoedebeck from DAV Chapter 35, who will be at the post on select Tuesdays to assist veterans with claims and benefits.





Commander-in-Chief Mihelcic presents Alonzo "Skip" Skipper, Kahokian Memorial Post 5691 Past Commander, with a limited-edition VFW membership badge, one of only 100 created, which he hands out to well-deserving VFW members. The medal was first created in the 1920's for WWI VFW members to wear, signifying honorable service in a foreign war, campaign, or expedition. (Photo by Richard Lawrence)



50 Years of Dedicated Service

Bruce Anderson of VFW John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461, Belvidere, the Post's Judge Advocate, received a Certificate of Appreciation for 50 years of serving on the Post Honor Guard. He is the post's subject matter expert for the Honor Guard and has trained generations of veterans on how to provide the last salute honoring our deceased veterans and to support family members as they mourn the loss of their loved ones. Pictured from left, Levell Kepner, Post Benefits Advisor, Bruce Anderson receiving certificate from District 6 Commander Rob Bland and District 6 Auxiliary President Elizabeth Costa-Bland.

Illinois is "Keen" on Kyna!

*Endorsed by
Dept of IL
VFW and Aux
*IL Dist 16
Quartermaster
*Post 311 Sr Vice
Cmdr



*IL National
Home Chair/
VoD Co-Chair
since 2022
*Childcare
Entrepreneur
*Retired Public
School Teacher

**Elect Kyna Simpson for
National Home Board Trustee
District 8 (IL, IN, MO, KY)
Aug 19 - Sept 17, 2026**



National Home Life Members:

Board Trustee Elections

Aug 19 - Sept 17, 2026

Life Members will receive a ballot if the National Home has a valid email address or a phone number which accepts text messages.

All elections are held via electronic ballot

and are sent by text or email to each District's registered Life Member.

To correct/update information, call

1-866-483-9642

or visit <https://vfwnationalhome.org/contact/> and use the dropdown menu.

Not a National Home Life Member?

Join Today!

<https://vfwnationalhome.org/support/life-membership/#options>

Illinois is "Keen" on Kyna!

**Elect Kyna Simpson for
National Home Board Trustee
District 8 (IL, IN, MO, KY)**

Belleville Post Pauses to Remember Those Who Died in Service to Nation

VFW Post 1739 in Belleville led the Memorial Day Parade with the Post Color Guard and hosted the Memorial Day ceremony to honor and remember the men and women who gave their lives in service to the United States.

Community members gathered to pay tribute through remarks, patriotic observances, and a moment of remembrance. Belleville Mayor Jenny Gain Meyer provided opening remarks with Belleville East High School playing the National Anthem.

Scouts from Belleville Scouting units Troop 9, Ship 9 and Pack 1 assisted with the Color Guard and handed out flags to the spectators.

The guest speaker was U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Erika Kitchen from the 375th Fire Protection Services, based at Scott Air Force Base.



From left, Staff Sgt. Erika Kitchen, Belleville Mayor Jenny Gain Meyer, and Post 1739 Commander Lachelle Stevenson.



VFW Post 1739 in Belleville led the Memorial Day Parade with the Post Color Guard.

Capt. Horace G. Burke Post, Auxiliary Conducts Annual Memorial Day Ceremony

Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480 and Auxiliary in East St. Louis conducted their 2026 Memorial Day Program May 25.

During this event, we also celebrated our Post's Founders Month, marking 90 years since our establishment on May 24, 1936.

A special highlight of the program included Eagle Scout, Sultan Aluqdah from the Illini District and our Post gifting and posting a new flag for the Mary Brown Center.

It was a privilege to honor and remember our fallen soldiers and their immense sacrifice for our country. We were also honored to help educate the general public on the origins of Memorial Day. We are deeply grateful to the community for your continued support and would like to extend a special thank you to the Mary Brown Center for the use of their facility.

After 90 years of service, we look forward to serving East Saint Louis and the surrounding areas for another 90 years.



Commander Valerie Young delivers remarks during the ceremony.



Members raise the flag following the Memorial Day ceremony.



Post Members render a salute during the ceremony held at the Mary Brown Center.

Rochester Community Pauses to Remember Sacrifice on Memorial Day

The Rochester, Illinois, community gathered May 25 at the Rochester Cemetery to pay tribute to the men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom.

"We are gathered to remember those who lost their lives in defense of our great nation and the ideals espoused in our constitution," said guest speaker Col. Elizabeth Roxworthy, Chief of Staff of the Illinois Department of Military Affairs, and the J-5 Directorate for Strategy, Plans and Policy as a traditional member of the Illinois National Guard. "This marks our nation's 250th anniversary. It is a monumental milestone, but we could not celebrate two and a half centuries of freedom without also honoring those who sacrificed their lives to birth, nurture, and advance our free republic."

The ceremony, hosted by Rochester Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 11463, also featured a welcome address from Rochester Village President Stacia Munroe.

"I am honored to stand alongside so many who understand the meaning of service, sacrifice, and patriotism," she said. "As we gather today with family and friends, it is important we remember this holiday exists. The freedoms we enjoy today did not come without a cost. It was courage, sacrifice, and devotion

to something greater than oneself.

Roxworthy said as children, Memorial Day was viewed as the unofficial start of summer.

"As adults, we understand the true weight of today," she said. "Today is a day to pause, to reflect, and to remember the cost of freedoms that too many of us often forget or take for granted. The price of freedom, and the guarantee to live according to our individual choices and values, is paid by the men and women who step forward to serve our nation in uniform."

Roxworthy said the Rochester community understands the cost of freedom deeply.

"We lost Cpl. James Palmatier in Iraq in 2005, and Cpl. James Chad Young in Afghanistan in 2010," she said. "To the Gold Star families and friends of these two heroes and to the loved ones of all our fallen, thank you."

"Thank you for your strength, your courage, and your selflessness," she said. "Most of us who serve, do so with distinction, proudly doing our part before returning to our civilian lives. But the rest served with extraordinary valor, giving their last effort and their final breath to preserve our liberty."

In the 25 years since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, 256 service members from Illinois lost their lives serving our nation. Of those, 34 served in the Illinois National Guard.

"Behind every name etched into a stone monument and behind every folded flag is a story," she said. "A son or daughter, a parent, a friend, a life interrupted and a future never fully realized. The fact we are gathered here freely is proof their service mattered and their sacrifice was significant."

Behind every fallen service member is loved ones who must carry on.

"There are families who bear the polarity of pride and grief at the exact same time," Roxworthy said. "Their resilience deserves our recognition and



Veterans from the Inter-Veterans Burial Detail of Sangamon County salute during the posting of the colors at the Rochester, Illinois, Memorial Day observance at the Rochester Cemetery May 25.



Illinois Army National Guard Col. Elizabeth Roxworthy delivers the keynote address during the Rochester Memorial Day service.

support.” Roxworthy said we must also recognize the families of service members who served and returned home.

“Just last year in 2025, more than 2,500 members of the Illinois National Guard were deployed outside of the United States,” she said. “They could not have focused so clearly on their mission without unwavering support at home. So beyond today and beyond this event, how do we truly honor our veterans, those who continue to serve, and those we have lost?”

She offered five ways to show support.

“First, we remember,” she said. “We speak their names, learn their stories, visit memorials, attend ceremonies, and teach our younger generations why this day matters.”

Roxworthy said we must support our veteran community.

“Reach out to a veteran in your community, listen to their experiences, and acknowledge their service,” he said. “Support the organizations that provide assistance to veterans and military families.”

A third way to show support is to show up, said Roxworthy.

“We show up for military families, those who endure long separations, uncertain futures, and in some cases, unimaginable loss,” she said. “Offering practical help, friendship, and community can make a world of difference.”

She said we must live in a manner to be worthy of their sacrifice.

“That means striving to be engaged citizens, contributing positively to our neighborhoods, and upholding the democratic values of our nation so many gave their lives to protect,” she said. “We must also commit to be participants in the cause of freedom. It takes all our effort to correct and clear the course of freedom for future generations.”

Roxworthy said that Memorial Day is not only about loss, but it is also about legacy.

“This day is about the legacy of courage, of sacrifice, and of a nation shaped by those willing to give everything for it,” she said. “For this legacy to persist for another 250 years, we must never forget those who served and sacrificed. We must honor them with our words, our time, and our actions. We must do all of this to be worthy of their sacrifice and of the freedoms they defended.”



Participants in the Rochester Memorial Day ceremony gather for a group photo at the Rochester Cemetery.

Memorial week reflections

As Memorial Day weekend comes to a close, I find myself incredibly humbled and grateful — not only for the overwhelming support shown throughout our community events, ceremonies, wreath layings, flag placements, and parade... but for the deeper meaning behind every single moment.

Memorial Day is not simply a long weekend or the unofficial start of summer. It is a sacred time of remembrance. A time to pause. To reflect. To honor the brave men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country and our freedoms.

Over the past week, members of our VFW and our Auxiliary, the American Legion, students from NNHS, NCHS, Nequa Valley and WVHS, YMSL, local Boy Scouts, volunteers, families, and community members came together to place thousands of flags throughout our cemeteries. As each flag was placed, every veteran's name was read aloud and every grave was saluted in honor of their sacrifice and service. Quiet moments like those matter. They remind us that behind every name is a story, a family, a life given in service to something greater than self.

Thank you to everyone who stood with us throughout Memorial Week and during today's incredible Naperville Memorial Day Parade. The turnout from this community was absolutely amazing and deeply moving. Naperville continues to show what it means to truly honor and remember.

A special thank you to Leo Jaime and the Memorial Day Parade Committee for the tremendous amount of work, coordination, and heart that goes into making these ceremonies and events possible year after year. Your dedication to honoring our fallen and serving this community does not go unnoticed.

Special thanks as well to the Great Lakes RTC Band and



Choir for their outstanding performances and patriotic spirit throughout the ceremonies. Thank you to the Kendall cooks, volunteers, and our Auxiliary for providing an incredible luncheon for nearly 200 attendees following the parade and ceremonies. Your hard work and dedication helped create meaningful fellowship and community connection after a day filled with reflection and remembrance.

I also want to recognize and thank the State American Legion Oratorical winner for the truly outstanding guest speech given during the final ceremony. Your words were powerful, heartfelt, and beautifully delivered. You represented the next generation with grace, patriotism, and deep respect for those we honor today.

Thank you again to every volunteer, organization, student group, veteran, family member, and community leader who gave their time, effort, and heart this past week. We could not do this without you.

Memorial Day reminds us that freedom has never been free — and remembrance is not passive. It requires us to show up, to speak their names, to tell their stories, and to ensure their sacrifice is never forgotten.

“Honor is not found in words alone. It lives in the moments we choose to remember, the stories we continue to tell, and the actions we take to ensure sacrifice is never forgotten.”

– Staci Boyer,
Commander, VFW Post 3873



MEMORIAL DAY



Collinsville Veterans Organizations Hold Annual Memorial Day Ceremony

On May 25, Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary, along with American Legion, held their annual Memorial Day service to honor and commemorate the comrades of the United States Armed Forces who answered duty's last call.



Jenna Ramos

Post Commander Joe Glass opened the ceremony with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Following the pledge, the National Anthem was performed by post member Jenna Ramos.

The invocation was delivered by Post Chaplain Ted Jackson.

Following the prayer, the memorial ceremonial tradition exchange took place between the Commander, Chaplain, and Senior Vice Commander.

Jessie Hoskins, Commander of the American Legion, then read a message of condolences.

Auxiliary President Christina Steuart recited the poem In Flanders Field. Following the reading, the Post Commander and Auxiliary President read the names of members who had passed away since the last Memorial Day service.

Auxiliary Chaplain Terri Digirolamo offered a message of hope to inspire comrades during the solemn ceremony.

The floral ceremony followed, beginning with Chaplain Ted Jackson placing red flowers symbolizing the zeal of departed comrades in upholding brotherhood, truth, and justice.



The placing of the memorial tributes.

Past Commander George Cavaletti then placed white flowers as a token of purity and affection for departed comrades. Post Commander Joe Glass followed with blue flowers from nature's bosom in token of sincere respect for all departed comrades.

Finally, Auxiliary President Christina Steuart placed the memorial wreath as a symbol of eternity. Its colors spoke of everlasting life, while the deeds of military members on land, sea, and air remain immortalized in the hearts of a grateful people.

Those attending the ceremony were treated to a compilation of military service songs from the award winning Collinsville High School Band. Veterans from each branch stood to be recognized as their service song was played.



MEMORIAL DAY

Guest speaker Larry Miller, retired U.S. Air Force and member of Veterans of Foreign Wars, spoke about his father's service in Guam during World War II working with B-29 bombers. Miller has served since 2019 as chairman of the B-29 Wings of the Marianas organization, which honors the veterans who flew, maintained, and supported the B-29 Superfortress during WWII while remembering the crew members who never returned home.



Larry Miller delivers key note remarks.

Following Miller's remarks, the Post Honor Guard performed a rifle salute and the playing of taps.

Honor Guard members included Don Digirolamo, Ron Bloomberg, Alonzo Skip Skipper, Randy McFarland, Ed Justin, Gary Dykman, and Carl Randolph.



Taps is performed during the ceremony.

Taps was performed by Scott Burns and Richard Actor.

Closing benediction was given by American Legion Chaplain Deborah West.

Following the ceremony, guests were treated to a light lunch prepared by the Post Auxiliary.



The Post Honor Guard fires a volley during the rifle salute.

Arlington Post Awards Wally Luettschwager Memorial, Bob Henderson Scholarships

Arlington Post 981 has awarded the 2026 Wally Luettschwager Memorial Scholarship Grant and the Bob Henderson Scholarship to Ryan Antonucci and Chelsea McGowan respectively. Both scholarships were worth \$3,000 apiece.

Ryan Antonucci is a resident of Arlington Heights and will graduate from Hersey High School this May. His grandfather was a Korean War veteran. He was varsity captain for the BGHW combined hockey team, played varsity lacrosse and was on the frosh/soph golf team for 2 years. He was Editor-In-Chief of the daily Hersey Dispatch digital newscast as well as a content contributor. Apart from school he

volunteers at the Lutheran Nursing Home on a weekly basis. He was sponsored to go to Georgia to document a home building effort by A Soldier's Journey Home charity for a homeless veteran and his footage is now used for their fundraising. Ryan will be attending Syracuse University in the fall.

Chelsea McGowan, a resident of Mount Prospect, will graduate from Prospect High School this May. Her grandfather was a Vietnam veteran. She played tennis for 4 years and soccer for two. She served as Editor-In-Chief of the school yearbook and a mentor for special needs classes. Outside of school Chelsea raised

funds and built Books on My Block little library boxes in local mobile home communities. She will be attending University of Colorado in August.

Wally Luettschwager and Bob Henderson were Army Korean War veterans and Post 981 members. Bob received a Purple Heart for wounds received. Wally was a life-long resident of Arlington Heights, Illinois who came home and was an active member of Post 981 for over 60 years in many capacities including Commander. His bequest funds the annual award given in his honor. Lynn Munson, Bob's daughter, donated in Bob's memory to support his scholarship.



Arlington Post 981 presents the 2026 Wally Luettschwager Memorial Scholarship Grant and the Bob Henderson Scholarship respectively to Ryan Antonucci and Chelsea McGowan. Each scholarship awarded was \$3,000. Wally Luettschwager and Bob Henderson were Army Korean War veterans and Post 981 members.



Ambraw Post 2244 Awards Annual Scholarships

Ambraw Post 2244 in Lawrenceville recently announced the recipients of their 2025-2026 Academic and Vocational Scholarship winners. Scholarships are awarded to outstanding students in the local school districts. Above, Post Senior Vice Commander Gerald Weidner presents Red Hill High School students Matilyn Foster and Kenna Thacke with Academic Scholarships. Below, at Lawrenceville High School, Eleni Hunt was awarded the Academic Scholarship and Drew Seitzinger was awarded the Vocational Scholarship.



New VFW Year Brings Changes to Patriot's Pen Voice of Democracy Programs at State Level

***By Rob Bland
Youth Activities Chairman***

With the start of the new Veterans of Foreign Wars year, we also have the new Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen year.

There are some exciting changes to the programs this year.

First big change, State HQ will no longer be accepting a donation in the programs to get credit on the dashboard for All-State. A post must submit applications in both categories to their District to get credit on the dashboard.

This year's theme is "What a Veteran Taught Me About America". It is the same for both the Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen and we are excited to see the students' essays this year.

For those who are just stepping into a leadership role at the Post level this year for the programs, just a reminder that the Voice of Democracy program is for grades 9th -12th and the Patriot's Pen program is for grades 6th -8th grades. Work with your local schools and home schools to get students involved.

We are continuing to use Scholars App for the upcoming year. To view more information, visit the VFW IL YouTube channel and watch David Darte's video on VOD & PP: What You Need To Know. https://www.youtube.com/@VFW_Illinois. The Commander's Leadership Manual for 2026-2027 also has the guidance for both programs for the year. There will also be updates in the States General Orders.

If you have questions, please reach out to the

team:

Voice of Democracy Chairman: David Darte at ddarte@yahoo.com

Youth Activities Chairman: Rob Bland at Robert.b.bland@outlook.com

Scholars App Team: Kyna Simpson at fog4kat@me.com or David Long at sgtlongdis7@gmail.com

The Voice of Democracy, Patriot's Pen and Scholars App Team are excited for the upcoming year and look forward to seeing the great essays that our Nation's youth produce.



12 Future Military Leaders Receive VFW ROTC Awards During Tri-Service Honors Day at U of I

On April 23, 2026, State Senior Vice Commander Rob Bailey attended the Tri-Service ROTC Honors Day Ceremony at the University of Illinois.

He presented 12 ROTC awards to our future military leaders



VFW Post 11019 Hosts Veterans Information Event

By Rob McLain

VFW Post 11019 in South Beloit, Illinois, hosted a very successful Veterans Information Session, bringing together veterans, service organizations, and community partners for an evening focused on resources, connection, and support.

The event featured presentations from the VFW Foundation, followed by representatives from the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Assistance Commission, and the Veteran Leadership Team. Each organization shared valuable information about benefits, programs, and services available to veterans and their families.

Following the presentations, veterans had the opportunity to meet one-on-one with Veterans Service Officers and partner organizations to ask questions, receive guidance, and begin working through benefit-related concerns. Several veterans also took applications for membership, showing the continued importance of keeping veterans connected to organizations that serve and support them.

Post Commander Tom Dummer expressed his appreciation to all who attended and to the presenters who helped make the event possible. He also invited veterans who are not currently part of a veteran service organization to come and take part in what VFW Post 11019 is doing in the South Beloit community.

The previous Veterans Information Session was held in September, and after speaking with several members of leadership, it is clear that this type of event could be a great model for other



Rob McLain introducing the next speaker.



Dave Dragger of the Veterans Leadership Team.

posts as well. Several members of VFW Post 11019 would be glad to support similar events at other posts so more veterans and their families can be reached, informed, and connected with the help they need.

The evening was a strong

reminder that when veteran organizations work together, veterans benefit. VFW Post 11019 remains committed to serving veterans, strengthening community partnerships, and helping connect those who served with the resources they have earned.

VFW Post 5691, Auxiliary Donate \$1,000 to USO

*Story by Richard Lawrence
Kahokian Memorial Post 5691 Historian*

Members of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5691 and its Auxiliary, Collinsville, recently presented a \$1,000 donation to the James S. McDonnell USO. The funds were raised exclusively through dances held at the post throughout the year.

The donation will help support the USO's mission of serving active-duty military personnel, retirees, and their families by providing a welcoming place to rest and relax while traveling through the St. Louis area. The USO also assists recruits traveling to and from Fort Leonard Wood, particularly during the Christmas holiday season.



Pictured from left, Jen Ramos, Ted Jackson, Terri Digirolamo, Yvette Summy, Joe Glass, Don Digirolamo, and Lou Cassidy.



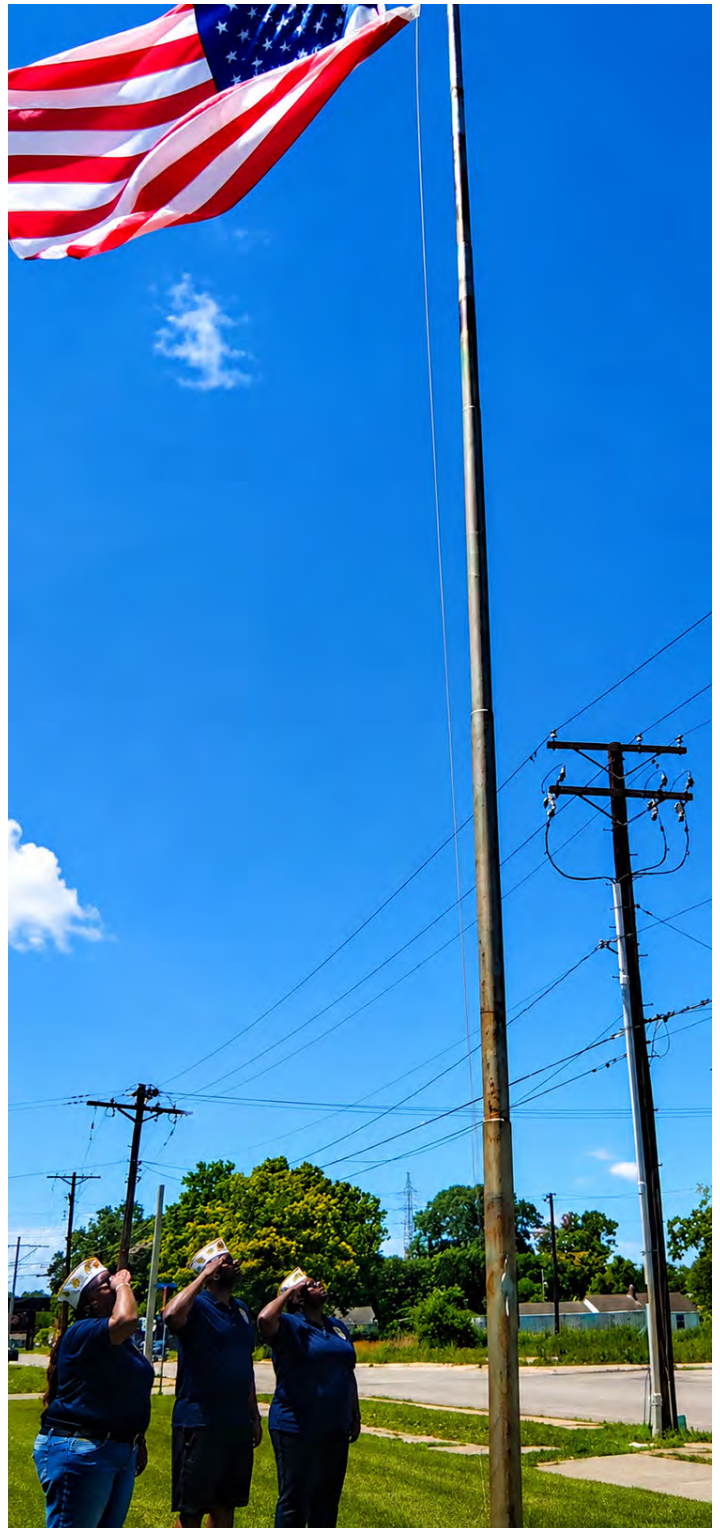
Giving Back

During the recent Kahokian Memorial Post 5691 meeting, the post donated a handicap-accessible van (which wasn't being used by the Post) to the Eagle's Nest of St. Clair County. Commander Joe Glass presented the keys to Jake Hoftiezer, Executive Director of Eagle's Nest of St. Clair County, a nonprofit that helps homeless veterans in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The van will enable them to continue the transportation of their mission.

Record Number of Messages Sent to Congress

Nearly 13,600 advocates have already joined the VFW's campaign urging Congress to remove disability compensation offsets from the Take Care of America's Veterans Act (H.R.9237/S.4744), generating a record of more than 46,800 messages to lawmakers nationwide.

More than half of those advocates are taking action with the VFW for the first time, demonstrating that veterans, families and supporters across the country are united in one message: veterans should not be asked to fund veterans' benefits.



Honoring Old Glory

On June 14, under the leadership of Incoming Commander Janese Jordan, the members of VFW Post 3480 celebrated Flag Day at the Mary Brown Center in East St. Louis. During the event, Comrades conducted a ceremony to retire the previous flag and replace it with a new one. Once the new flag was properly raised, the Comrades saluted the colors to honor the occasion.



VFW Post Gifts Two Tents to Scout Troop

Elk Grove Village Post 9284 presented Scout Troop 196 with two Coleman tent on May 4. They were gifts to thank the Scouts for respectfully retiring U.S. flags from residents of Elk Grove Village. Pictured, from left, Robert Royce, Art Ellingsen, John L. Selke, Jim Burrows, scouts in tent, Commander Al Brenke, Richard Oas, Ken Hoving, and Auxiliary President Carmen Oas.

VFW Defends Longstanding Tradition of Political Satire While Opposing Cuts to Veterans' Earned Benefits

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) reaffirmed its opposition to Section 108 of the proposed Take Care of America's Veterans Act and defended its longstanding tradition of using political satire to advocate for veterans.

"For more than 125 years, the VFW has been a fearless advocate for veterans, speaking plainly when elected officials propose policies that threaten the benefits generations of service members have earned through sacrifice," said VFW National Commander Carol Whitmore. "Our opposition to Section 108 reflects that longstanding commitment. Veterans' benefits are not funding sources or bargaining chips for Congress while they scrounge to score political points."

While the VFW supports many of the bill's underlying goals, it strongly opposes Section 108 because it would reduce future veterans' disability compensation to pay for other veterans' programs. Disability compensation is not a government spending program to be trimmed when convenient. It is earned compensation for injuries and illnesses incurred through military service. Veterans should never be asked to finance new initiatives with benefits they earned through their sacrifice.

The VFW also opposes using projected reductions in Title 38 disability compensation to finance separate Title 10 military retirement obligations. The organiza-

tion continues to support passage of a clean and complete Major Richard Star Act, but believes Congress should fulfill that obligation without reducing earned disability benefits for current or future veterans.

Since its introduction in the fall of 2025, the firing squad illustration has become a recognizable symbol of the VFW's ongoing Honor The Contract campaign. It is political satire that depicts bureaucrats and their pundits figuratively taking aim at veterans by proposing cuts to their earned disability benefits in order to save money or fund other initiatives. Despite House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Mike Bost's unprecedented and unacceptable accusations in a recent statement, the image is not a depiction of violence. It is a symbolic representation of the consequences veterans face when Congress targets the benefits they earned through their service. It is also protected First Amendment speech. Political cartoons, symbolism, satire and hyperbole have been part of American public discourse since the founding of our Nation. They remain among the most recognized forms of protected political expression because they communicate ideas through symbolism rather than literal depiction. Americans are free to disagree with the VFW's message, but disagreement with protected political expression does not transform satire into vi-

- See HONOR THE CONTRACT on Page 93 -

HONOR THE CONTRACT

Continued from Page 92

olence. Even Chairman Bost at one time agreed with this premise:

"Free speech is foundational to democracy and the American way of life. That's why servicemembers and veterans have fought and died for it for 245 years," said Bost on October 13, 2021, during opening remarks of a committee hearing on violent extremism. "Free speech must be protected. I will oppose any effort to restrict it. It is every veteran's right to have an opinion – even one I find radical."

The political illustration is also rooted in the VFW's own history. The use of satirical political cartoons was commonplace in early 20th century magazines, and the VFW regularly published works of illustrators' satire to convey the unjust ways America's veterans were being treated by the government. The current artwork is a modern interpretation of illustrations published in the VFW's Foreign Service magazine in 1933 and again in VFW magazine in 1956. Sadly, what veterans were experiencing decades ago is the same thing occurring today, which is why the illustration in question remains so relevant.

The VFW has consistently used this imagery in official advocacy before Congress and in public communications. The illustration appeared prominently in the organization's October 2025 response to a series of Washington Post articles that characterized veterans' disability benefits as loopholes to exploit. VFW Washington Office Executive Director Ryan Gallucci presented the historic and modern illustrations during his testimony before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs last October. Whitmore, along with VFW members in attendance, wore buttons displaying the illustration during her testimony before a Joint Congressional Veterans' Affairs committee this past March.

"The VFW has never apologized for forcefully defending veterans and we are not about to start now," said Whitmore. "Political cartoons have long been part of American public discourse because they communicate difficult truths in memorable ways. When bureaucrats take aim at veterans' earned disability benefits, we will continue to use every tool available to ensure veterans' voices are heard."

The VFW urges Congress to remove Section 108 from the Take Care of America's Veterans Act, preserve the integrity of the disability rating system and pass veterans' priorities without reducing earned disability compensation. America's obligation to disabled veterans is not negotiable and should never be treated as a source of savings to pay for other legislation.

The VFW remains committed to working with lawmakers who seek to improve care and benefits for veterans. However, the organization will continue to oppose any proposal that weakens the commitments America has made to those who answered the nation's call.



Past Chief Ray Soden Honored by VFW

Past Commander-in-Chief George Cramer, Past Department Auxiliary President Maureen Hayden, and Department Auxiliary Junior Vice President Terry Adams placed a wreath at the gravesite of Past Commander-in-Chief Ray Soden on behalf of the Veterans of Foreign Wars on Memorial Day.



It Takes a Village to Feed a Community

On June 4, Jeannen Flemings, Quartermaster of Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 and the 15th Street Baptist Church of East St. Louis completed their weekly food run to Bloomington. Upon their return to East St. Louis, the food items were sorted and disbursed to the community. This effort provided meals for many households, and it truly takes a village to make this happen.



Post 3480, Auxiliary Donate Washer, Dryer set to Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School in East St. Louis

In early June 2026, VFW Post 3480 and the Auxiliary donated a brand-new washer and dryer set to Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School located in East Saint Louis, IL. The units were delivered by STL Metro Appliances and presented by Commander Valerie Young.



Rain Moves Poppy Day in Olney to Following Weekend

A dozen members of Post 4226 showed up for our "Poppy Day Rain Date" as we were rained (Thunderstorm-ed out) the previous weekend.

We had obtained a permit to stand in the street at a main intersection the week prior but did not have the time to go to the City Council to get a new one approved for this weekend.

I spoke with our City Clerk and she said, "Let me call you back." She called back in 5 minutes stating that she had polled all the Council members and they all voted "YES" to extend our previous permit to this weekend!! Sometimes living in a small town has its Perks!!

The first shift of 4 members worked the intersection from 10 a.m. to noon. (Several of these members are aged 75-80 years old!!!!) The second shift (also four members) from noon to 2 p.m.

Meanwhile one of our 84 year old Marines and his wife (Jerry and Ann Harper) were stationed at the local Rural King. They were there from 10 a.m. to noon. They were relieved by Post Commander Ron Stephens and Honor Guard Captain Richard Clark, who stayed until 2 p.m.

Then all members brought their donations back to the post, sorted and straightened all the bills and counted it to be ready for deposit.



An Interview with My Mentor

Time Together Taught Me Many Things About Rick Frank

By Rob Bland

I have been honored to drive one of my VFW mentors to District, Council of Administration meetings and State Conventions.

During all those hours driving in the car, my wife, Elizabeth Costa-Bland, and I have been able to pick success in the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

I first met Rick Frank at my first Post meeting. I had come back from a tour in Iraq and happened to stop by the VFW and see what it was about. The Commander, Greg Kelm, was there the day I walked in and explained what they did, invited me to the next meeting and gave me a membership application. I filled out the application, turned it in and said I would be at the next meeting.

I was joining John Hugo Kaiser VFW Post 1461. In 1939, the Post was started along with the Boone County Veterans Club. Today the post is the only VFW Post in Boone County, IL. It still has an active Auxiliary.

When I showed up for the meeting, Rick Frank introduced himself to me and we spoke briefly. This was a greeting I would see repeatedly over the years. Rick would introduce himself to new members at their first meeting. It was years of watching and learning that I eventually was elected to a leadership position. During this time, I learned from Rick. Then the day came that Rick would step down from the Quartermaster role. I was honored when he asked if I would be interested in the role. The next election I was voted in as Quartermaster and Rick has always been there to mentor me and when I have questions



Rick Frank presenting a certificate to Keith Bodey on his 80th birthday. (Photo by Elizabeth Costa-Bland)



Rick Frank receiving plaque from Phil Maughan and Bob Coulter. (Photo by Matthew Alford)

to answer them for me. He also mentored me as I took on roles as a District Commander and State Committee Chair.

I had always known Rick as a great Quartermaster and knowledgeable, but I had no idea what he had done in the VFW. My first glimpse was when he called me a couple of months after being elected as the Quartermaster and asked if I could get into the OMS system as the Quartermaster. The OMS system is used to enter information on new members and update information on existing members, a key function for the Quartermaster. I had not received anything yet. Rick said, "Let me make a call and see what I can do." Less than five minutes later I got a call from the National VFW and I was able to get into the OMS systems. When I would go to State or District meetings that Rick was not at, so many of our fellow Comrades would come up to me and ask about Rick and to pass on their regards.

I later found out that Rick had served the VFW in many roles: He became a member of John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States of America in 1970 and served as Post Junior Vice, Senior Vice and Commander for two terms, achieving All-State Commander in both terms; he has also served his Post in various elected and

appointed offices, including 3rd, 2nd and 1st year Trustee and has served many years as chairman of the Post's Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen, Adjutant, Quartermaster and chairman of many programs.

Rick has served the District 6 State of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars in various elected

and appointed offices, including, 3rd- 2nd- and 1st-year Trustee, Judge Advocate, Community Service Chairman, District Junior Vice, Senior Vice, and Commander and selected as the Captain of the All-State Team of District Commanders and was selected as the first ever All-American District Commander of the VFW Illinois District 6. He also served many years as the chairman of the District Voice of Democracy speech competition for high school students.

He has served the State of Illinois in the following elected offices: Big Ten Conference Delegate, Junior Vice, Senior Vice and Commander (earning All-American State Commander honors). He also served as President and Treasurer of the Past State Commander's Club and State Adjutant-Quartermaster.

Rick has served as VFW National Assistant Inspector General and on several VFW National committees, including: VFW National Finance and Internal Affairs Committee (three times), VFW National By-Laws, Ritual and Manual of Procedures Committee (twelve times); VFW National Youth Activities Committee as Vice Chairman; VFW National Voice of Democracy Committee; VFW National Security Committee (three times); VFW National Veterans Employment & Training Committee (three times), Vice Chairman (two times); VFW National Strategic Planning Committee; VFW National Homeless Veterans Committee as Vice Chairman; VFW National Buddy Poppy Committee; VFW National Citizenship, Education & Community Service Committee, VFW National General Resolutions Committee (three times) and was a member of the National VFW Strategic Planning committee for several years. He was elected to a two-year term on the VFW National Council of Administration and selected to serve on the VFW National Budget Committee both years. Rick was elected Vice Chairman of the VFW Big Ten Conference in 2006



Rick Frank sitting between John Darley and Greg Kelm of Post 1461. (Photo by Elizabeth Costa-Bland)

and was elected as Chairman in 2007.

Rick started his military journey, like many in his day, arriving at the Induction Station. There, he started a lifelong friendship with Tom Cleland. Tom would eventually join the Roscoe VFW Post 2955.

During our long rides to various meetings together, I would ask Rick many

questions. Here are some of them:

What was your role in military? Rick said, "I was a desk supervisor for the MPs in Korea." On Jan. 23, 1968 the North Koreans captured the USS Pueblo. The capture of the USS Pueblo brought new tension between North Korea, South Korea and the United States.

"My whole graduating class was scheduled to go to Vietnam, but we went to Korea because of the USS Pueblo incident."

The USS Pueblo is registered by the Naval Vessel



Rick Frank addressing a State Convention. (Photo by Elizabeth Costa-Bland)

Register as an Environmental Research Ship. It was captured by the North Koreans in 1968 along with her crew. The USS Pueblo is listed as active, in commission on the NVR website. This incident caused more tension in an already tumultuous region. The Vietnam War had been going on for several years and would have many more to go.

Rick would finish his time in the Army and come back to Belvidere.

How did you get involved with the VFW? "I walked in and joined, I was never invited," said Rick.

"Everyone seemed to get along, they were friendly and I stayed. We were a World War I Post so we did not have as many issues with Vietnam Veterans returning and not being welcomed. The World War I guys welcomed the World War II guys and that set the precedence."

What are some issues you see now? "Fewer helpers but many things that need to be done. As our membership dwindles and gets older the number of tasks to be a successful part of the community are still there."

What made you decide to get into leadership positions? "I was asked by the Commander to chair the Community Service Committee. If I am going to take a job, I'm going to take it seriously. I was convinced to run for the Post Junior Vice to block someone else from being elected. He only showed up to the election and I never saw him after that. At District, I ran for Junior Vice because the old guys said I could not get elected."

If you could go back and change one thing you did in the VFW, what would it be and why? "No regrets, I had the best people behind me on every level. I have so many awards that were made possible by other people."

What is something that you look back on and take great pride in while you were in the VFW? "State All American Commander, had 106% membership. All three years Jr Vice, Senior Vice and Commander, we made All American, I was proud that we maintained excellence."

What is some advice that you would give older

members of the VFW that have been around a long time? "You need to welcome and mentor younger members. These are combat Veterans who have as much right to be there as you do. Give them a job so they feel needed and wanted."

What is some advice that you would give to the younger members that are just joining the VFW? "Listen to everyone and then sort it out."

If you could go back and give yourself one piece of advice when you first joined, what would that one thing be? "Pay attention. You may be in a

leader sooner than you think. When I was the Senior Vice at the Post, my Commander was sick. One of the other Veterans told me to, 'Pay attention. You may be the Commander sooner than you think'. So, I paid attention."

How important is the Auxiliary to you? "I learned so much from the Ladies while I was scrubbing pots and pans at the VFW. These were World War I wives, and I would help during meals. I would listen as they talked about the different programs. I was lucky at every level to have a great Auxiliary

President."

What are some things that you want people to remember about you? "I am a Christian, if God can save someone like me then here is hope for everyone. I am a people person, and I have dedicated my entire life to helping people. I was always happy to serve people, my community and my country. I left the world a better place, at least the parts that I touched."

When we arrive at a meeting, right away Rick is busy. People would come up to him and see how he was doing and sometimes for a piece of advice. He made sure to check in with the State Headquarters office staff; Erin, Heather, and Crystal to see if they need anything. They are glue that keeps the State VFW running between the events.

After so many long meetings and a lot of miles, I have been honored that my wife and I were able to spend so much time with one of my mentors and friends.



Rob Bland, Elizabeth Costa Bland and Rick Frank enjoying a quiet moment during a State Convention. (Photo by Rob Bland)



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Back



Front

MEN'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY T-SHIRT

Navy blue 100% preshrunk cotton. Screened design on back. VFW logo screened left chest. U.S. flag screened left sleeve. Imported; decorated in the USA. 7499 S-3XL \$24.00



LADIES' 250TH ANNIVERSARY V-NECK T-SHIRT

Navy blue 100% preshrunk cotton. Screened design on front. VFW logo screened right sleeve. Imported; decorated in the USA. 7450 S-3XL \$24.00

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1776 FLAG CAP Five-panel, structured, with hook-and-loop closure. Woven loop label on closure "EST 1899" for the year the VFW was founded. Imported; decorated in the USA. 7201 \$20.00

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