

Taking the Take Care of America's Veterans Act Fight to the Halls of Congress





Department of Illinois

Fact Sheet

About us

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

Vision

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

Mission

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

Contact Us:

Phone: 217-529-6688

Facebook: VFW State of Illinois

Email: vfwil@vfwil.org

2025/2026 Metrics

\$280,230	Service Members Assistance
\$47,176	Military Appreciation Programs

76,269 Total VFW/AUX Volunteer Hours

86 Scholarships and \$406,918 Awarded	Help a Hero Scholarship
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1,291 Voice of Democracy Student Participation

209,000	Poppies Distributed
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3,391 Patriots Pen Student Participation

503 \$306,336,955	VA Claims Filed New Recoveries
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**Community Service VFW/AUX
Hours 76,204 Donated \$1,377,717
Total (Hours & Dollars) \$4,028,862**

33,451	Members
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December 11, 1920	Charter Date
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2026-2027 State Commander	Robert Bailey
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FROM THE STATE COMMANDER

Standing Strong for Illinois Veterans: All In, All The Time



Robert J. Bailey
Commander
Department of Illinois VFW



Comrades

As we move deeper into this organizational year, our collective commitment to serving Illinois veterans, their families, and our local communities remains absolute. Across the Department of Illinois, our Posts, Districts, and leadership are delivering on the core mission of the Veterans of Foreign Wars every single day by living our core standard: All In, All The Time. Whether providing direct relief to local veterans, organizing community service drives, or championing critical legislative policy, our focus never wavers.

Our advocacy efforts in Springfield and Washington, D.C., demand our total dedication. We are actively tracking legislation and policy decisions that directly impact veteran healthcare access, VA disability benefits, claims processing, and community support networks. Staying engaged with our elected officials ensures that the promises made to our nation's heroes are fully honored. Bringing the "All In, All The Time" mindset to legislative advocacy means every member's voice is leveraged to protect the benefits veterans have earned.

Local Posts serve as the backbone of our organization, bringing energy and dedication to every project. From annual Buddy Poppy donation drives to service officer outreach and youth programs, your work reflects a complete commitment to service.

Post Commanders and Quartermasters are encouraged to submit regular updates, photos, and event recaps to Department publications and our social media team. Showcasing your Post's achievements demonstrates what it truly looks like when a community goes all in for its veterans.

Mark your calendars for upcoming District meetings, recruiter events, and Department events to keep your Post fully aligned with our state-wide mission.

Preserving the legacy and influence of the VFW requires continuous, active outreach. Reaching out to newly discharged service members, engaging post-9/11 veterans, and staying connected with our active members keeps our Department strong.

Remind prospective members of the camaraderie, service networks, and relentless advocacy the VFW offers.

Keep current members engaged by placing them in key committee roles, event leadership positions, and Post activities.

Going "All In, All The Time" isn't just a slogan—it is how we operate. Every member who attends a Post meeting, volunteers for an event, or assists a fellow veteran strengthens our unified front.

Attend District Meetings to stay sharp on Department priorities, procedural updates, and leadership training.

Support Outreach Initiatives by driving local fundraising, support Veteran Service Officers, and build lasting community partnerships.

Spread the Word by sharing Department updates across your local networks to keep veteran advocacy at the forefront of public attention.

Thank you for your unyielding dedication to our fellow veterans, their families, and the Department of Illinois.

FROM THE AUXILIARY PRESIDENT

Members Making A Lifelong Commitment to Auxiliary

As we begin a new VFW Auxiliary year, I am excited by the energy and enthusiasm I am seeing across Illinois. We are off to a great start, and it's clear that our members are ready to make this year a success.

One of the things that has stood out for me is the growing interest in Life Memberships. More members are choosing to make a lifelong commitment to the Auxiliary and the mission we all believe in. Life Membership is a wonderful way to show your dedication and help ensure our organization remains strong for years to come.

We are also welcoming new members into our auxiliary family. Many are joining because of the encouragement and example set by current VFW and Auxiliary members. When family members see the difference we make for veterans, service members, and their families, they want to be a part of it too. Every new member brings fresh ideas, new energy, and new opportunities to serve.

I have recently begun my official visits and have truly enjoyed being out and meeting with our Auxiliaries. It has been great to see so many familiar faces, but it's equally exciting to meet new members who are eager to get involved. One of my favorite parts of every visit is hearing the reports and learning about all the amazing work happening throughout the Department. The passion our chairmen have for their programs is inspiring, and it shows in the work being done in communities across Illinois.

As we continue building momentum, I would also like to encourage bachelor Posts that do not currently have an Auxiliary to consider starting one. An Auxiliary can be a tremendous asset to a Post by providing additional support, volunteers, and community outreach opportunities. Together, Posts and Auxiliaries can strengthen their commitment to veterans and expand the impact they have in their communities.

The excitement and growth we are seeing this year are signs that our future is bright. Let's continue inviting eligible family members to join, encourage members to become Life Members, and look for opportunities to establish new Auxiliaries where they are needed.

Thank you for everything you do to support our veterans, service members, and their families. I look forward to seeing many more of you during my visits and celebrating all that we will accomplish together this year.

Let's keep the momentum going and continue making a difference, one Auxiliary at a time.



Danielle Krull

President
Department of Illinois
VFW Auxiliary



THEIR FIGHT. THEIR STORY. OUR VOICE.

FROM THE SENIOR VICE

We Deserve Better Than Talking Points: Remove Section 108



Ryan Higginbotham
Senior Vice Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

Chairman Mike Bost keeps saying the disability changes in the Take Care of America's Veterans Act are going to happen anyway.

But VA has never officially said that.

That matters to me because Mike Bost is my congressman. I am a disabled veteran, the VFW Department of Illinois Sr. Vice Commander, and one of the people he represents here in southern Illinois.

We deserve better than talking points.

VA proposed changes to tinnitus and sleep apnea ratings in 2022. They were never finalized. Veterans and advocates pushed back through the public rulemaking process, and VA's last official position was that no changes were planned or imminent and that significant revisions would be needed before those proposals could move forward.

Since then, a reporter has said an unnamed VA official told him VA still intends to move ahead with "some" of the changes.

Fine. That's reporting, not an official VA statement.

There is no final rule. No public announcement reversing VA's position. No named official telling veterans these cuts are coming.

So, if Chairman Bost has information showing VA has changed its position, put it on the record.

Veterans should not lose billions in future disability benefits because somebody at VA told a reporter something off the record. More importantly, Congress should not use that as an excuse to make the cuts law.

If VA believes the medical evidence supports changing these ratings, let VA prove it. Publish the evidence. Let veterans and VSOs look at it. Let the public comment. If the proposal is bad, we should be able to fight it.

That is the process. Section 108 skips this process.

Instead, Congress would take reductions VA never finalized and write them directly into law because those reductions produce savings for the rest of the bill. That is not Congress accounting for something inevitable.

Congress would be making it happen.

Chairman Bost also likes to point out that veterans who already have tinnitus or sleep apnea ratings will keep them.

But what about the veteran who files a claim next year? What about the young men or women serving today who become veterans tomorrow?

They count too.

We do not pull the ladder up behind us. The VFW fights in the present for those in the future

TCAVA has provisions I support. A lot of veterans support them. But we should not have to swallow bad policy to get good veterans' legislation.

Chairman Bost knows the difference between a proposed rule and a final rule. He knows the difference between an anonymous source and an official VA position.

He should stop pretending those differences do not matter.

If VA has changed its position, make VA say it publicly.

If VA has the evidence, make VA prove it.

And if these proposals cannot survive the public process, Congress should not rescue them just because the cuts make the math easier.

Chairman Bost, you represent us.

We expect better.

Remove Section 108.



Skip & Tara's Membership Minute



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

We're Brewing Up Membership!

The Auxiliary is currently sitting at 88.74% and we are brewing up some serious membership momentum!

55 of our 129 Auxiliaries participated in Mail & Brew, and I truly believe that participation has been pivotal in getting us moving this year. You mailed the letters – now it's time for the next step.

If you still have members who haven't paid their dues, **give them a call**. Maybe their circumstances have changed. Maybe they've been sick. Maybe that dues letter never made it to them. Or maybe they simply need a reminder that their Auxiliary is thinking about them.

Think of it as an Auxiliary **Buddy Check**.

We also had a great Council of Administration and were able to award 17 Life Memberships! If your Auxiliary received one, make sure you get your member's name to Linda by September 30 so we can get those memberships taken care of.

And remember: **Mail. Call. Visit**. Keep that momentum brewing!

Meanwhile, Skip Has Been Putting on the Miles!

Skip has been burning up the Illinois highways talking membership and Buddy Checks everywhere he goes! He has already visited **Districts 5, 17, and 13** along with Council of Administration, and there is plenty more road ahead.

At the Council of Administration, District 3 earned the coveted **Bragging Rights Eagle Trophy** for taking first place in membership!

On the other end of the leaderboard, **Districts 7 and 16** found themselves tied for the **Dead Ass Last Donkey Trophy**. A coin toss determined who earned the honor of keeping that beauty until our in-person

CofA in February.

The good news about membership standings? They can change quickly. So whether you're holding the eagle, trying to get your hands on it, or desperately trying to get rid of that donkey – keep working those members!

Next Stop: NASCAR!

We are SUPER excited about our upcoming **NASCAR Membership Drive** September 12-13!

This is a huge opportunity to meet veterans and their families, talk about everything the VFW and Auxiliary have to offer, and grow our VFW family.

We can't wait to see what September brings!

Skip & Tara Trivia

Last month you learned that we met aboard the **USS LaSalle (AGF-3)** but didn't start dating until after we left the Navy.

This month, we have MUCH bigger news...

We're finally grandparents!

Hudson Michael arrived August 18, 2026 at 3:26 p.m., weighing 9 lbs. 4 oz.!

We're just a little excited.

Have a membership question or need some help? Don't hesitate to give either of us a call! We're both in the roster book and happy to help.

Keep making those calls, doing those Buddy Checks, reaching out to your members, and talking membership wherever you go.

Skip & Tara

Department of Illinois

VFW & Auxiliary Membership

Let's Dunkin' this membership!

#allinallthetime #vfwil #vfwmembership2627
#keepingupwithkrull #vfwauxiliary
#vfwauxmembership2627

FROM THE STATE SURGEON

The History and Value of Immunizations

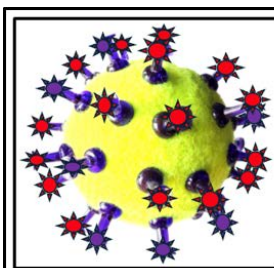


Damon Arnold
Surgeon
Department of Illinois VFW

By Col. Damon T. Arnold, MD, MPH, MA, MSTRM (USARNG - Ret.)

The history of immunizations practices and theory demonstrates why you should consider being vaccinated against infectious diseases. What follows below is an explanation of a bit of history, how vaccinations work, and why you should discuss being vaccinated with your health care provider. You should follow the vaccination schedule indicated if you are pregnant, in your childhood or teenage years, or are obtaining annual or routine vaccinations.

First, a bit of history. Onesimus - an Akan African enslaved by Puritan minister Cotton Mather - taught the technique of variolation (inoculation) in 1716 just before the deadly 1721 Boston smallpox epidemic. This saved hundreds of lives. General George Washington in February 1777 (56 years after Onesimus) ordered the first massive, state-funded immunization campaign in U.S. history. Gen. Washington mandated smallpox variolation for the entire Continental Army. The variolation of the Continental Army dropped the death rate of troops from 20% to 1%. This is credited by many historians as winning the Revolutionary War. In May 1796, English physician Edward Jenner tested the theory that cowpox infection pus could also protect humans from smallpox with less risk. Variolation led the way for the eradication of smallpox and a multitude of global infectious disease threats to humans. Not only have we come a long way as a nation but also as a beacon for the world.



A virus requires an electron microscope to be visualized. You can not see it with your eyes. On the left is a mock image of how it appears with spike proteins jutting from its surface. Deactivated viral components are used in the production of vaccines.

The immune system protects your body from outside invaders, such as bacteria, viruses, and fungus by preventing or limiting the impact of an infection. It is a vicious war machine when it comes to fighting diseases. Once the invader is identified your immune system goes into defense mode. In particular your immune system's white blood cells create antibodies and a host of other chemicals to directly attack and kill the invading organism(s).

Vaccines protect us from these serious and sometimes deadly diseases by preparing and training our bodies to fight potential infections. Vaccines are not effective immediately but take about 7 to 14 days after the vaccination is completed to work. Remember boot camp? When you get a vaccine, your immune system responds by creating the necessary tools and training to fight the potential disease without having to be infected with the actual invading organism first. After vaccination when the body encounters the real invading germ it will already know

how to defeat it. Both inactive viral components and deactivated live viruses are used to make vaccines and is specific to the type of vaccine produced.

The composition of a vaccine includes:

- Water is the main ingredient by volume.
- Active ingredient(s) in a very small amount of and harmless form of the bacteria or virus you are immunizing against.
- Adjuvants, in very small amounts, that create a stronger immune response to the vaccine and pose no significant risk to health (e.g., aluminum naturally found in drinking water at higher levels).
- Manufacturing substances residual in trace amounts of final vaccine of measured as parts per million or billion (e.g., formaldehyde naturally found in our bodies).
- Preservatives and stabilizers which maintain vaccine quality, safe storage, and prevent contamination (e.g., sorbitol, a sugar found naturally in fruit).

Herd immunity applies when a population of cattle or of humans are vaccinated. We have a duty to be vaccinated to protect our community. For example, If only a few people get vaccinated for measles it can then spread to up to 90% of the people in the population. However, if 92% to 94% of the population gets vaccinated against measles the virus has nowhere to go and will not spread to the unprotected 6% to 8%. Just like weapons we encounter on the battle field, viruses change and mutate over time requiring us to receive additional booster shots to help our immune systems to adapt to an unarmored enemy. This works to protects you from serious illness and hospitalization if you do become infected. Veterans know about the extensive immunization schedules we received for deployments and to maintain a healthy fighting force. Remember that recommended vaccinations during pregnancy protect not only the mother but unborn child and newborn.

Talk to your medical provider about getting the seasonal influenza (flu) and COVID-19 vaccinations as we enter the Fall season. Also consider the vaccinations for pneumonia and shingles. Be the guardian for your family regarding vaccinations. Make sure family members ask their medical providers about the need for required vaccinations such as: Mumps, measles, rubella, polio, tetanus and diphtheria, pertussis, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hemophilus influenzae type B (Hib), rotavirus, HPV, and meningococcal disease. You just may save their life!

Illinois VFW News

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 Bobby Edwards State Adjutant
 Brett Nila Committee Chairman
 Bobby Welch State Historian
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STATE OFFICERS

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Sr. Vice	Ryan Higginbotham	4266	District 13
Jr. Vice	Doug Jameson	1739	District 14
Adjutant	Bobby Edwards	10302	District 10
Judge Advocate	Jayson Hoffman	4763	District 10
Surgeon	Dr. Damon Arnold	311	District 16
Chaplain	David Terrononi	454	District 7
Chief of Staff	David Long	454	District 7
Inspector	Cathy Stubbs	7710	District 14
Jr. Past Cmdr	Eugene Blackwell	311	District 16
NCM	Matthew Claussen	2868	District 4

DISTRICT COMMANDERS

3	Zhi Chen	Post 5079	Chicago
4	Evamarie Duff	Post 2868	Brookfield
5	Mathius Carter	Post 12014	Crystal Lake
6	John Winterton	Post 8739	Oregon
7	Justin Penrod	Post 5520	Champaign
8	Iris Miller	Post 5117	Carthage
9	Scott Heyob	Post 2470	Ottawa
10	Lawrence Miller	Post 11463	Rochester
11	Joseph May	Post 99	Decatur
12	Anthony Avers	Post 976	Troy
13	Benjamin Newborn	Post 9153	Waltonville
14	Jill Schofield	Post 7682	Mascoutah
15	Carmel Owen	Post 9763	Creal Springs
16	Rupert Evans	Post 311	Richton Park
17	James Thorne	Post 7862	Arcola
18	Paul Cravens	Post 725	Mokena
19	Steven Hunter	Post 1197	Batavia



Members of Bourbonnais Post 9961, Bourbonnais, helped with the July Bingo party at the Manteno Veterans Home in Manteno.

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**

VFW
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

Dept of Illinois
Benjamin O Davis Post 311

**EVERYTHING
WE DO, WE DO
FOR VETERANS.**


V F W
NATIONAL
HOME

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)**

Standing Room Only: Uncovering Our Fierce Roots!

If you didn't grab a seat early for the breakout session on Sunday, July 26, you likely found yourself craning your neck from the hallway! National Historian Bobby Welch drew a near standing-room-only crowd for his electrifying lecture on the fiery, grassroots origins of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Far from a dusty history lesson, Welch transported the packed room straight back to the turn of the 20th century. He revealed exactly how a fractured handful of local veterans' societies united to forge the unstoppable powerhouse of advocacy we know today.

The Three Pillars of the VFW

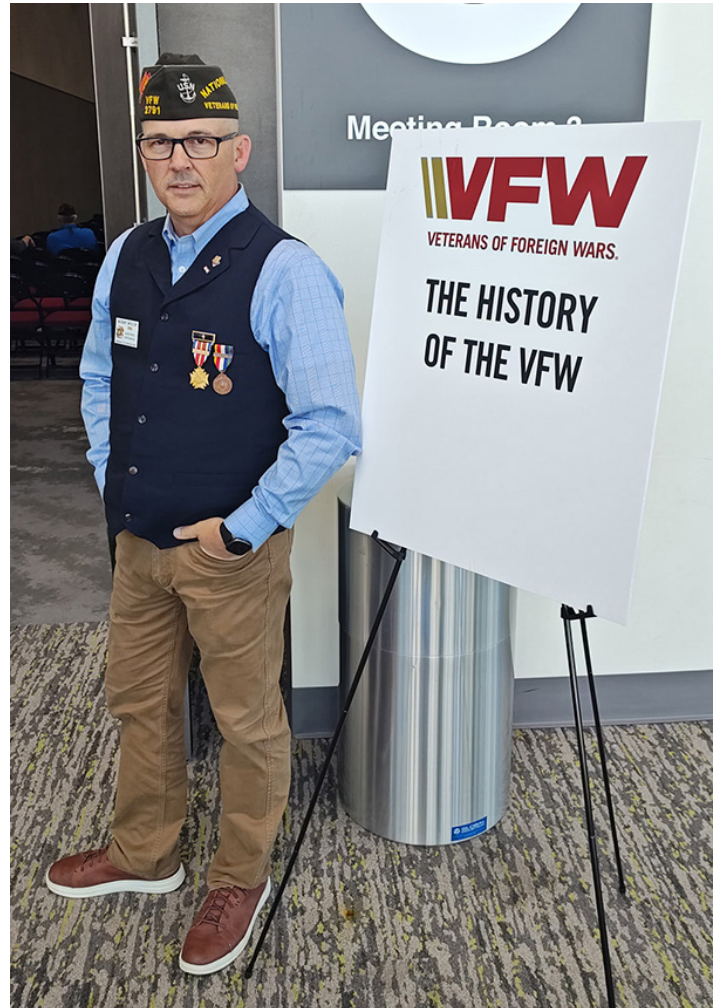
Welch masterfully unpacked the timeline of the three distinct founding societies. Born out of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars, these groups were built by returning soldiers who were desperately seeking camaraderie, proper medical care, and national recognition:

- American Veterans of Foreign Service (Western Branch): Sparked into existence in October 1899 in Columbus, Ohio, by James C. Putnam. Returning from grueling campaigns in Cuba and the Philippines, these veterans realized their shared overseas experiences demanded a bold new brotherhood.
- Colorado Society of the Army of the Philippines: Just two months later, in December 1899, General Irving Hale rallied this society in Denver, Colorado. It was forged by the resilient members of the 1st Colorado Infantry following their grueling return from the battlefields of Manila.
- American Veterans of Foreign Service (Eastern Branch): Operating fiercely out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Captain Robert S. Hansbury launched this dedicated group in 1901. By 1905, they merged with the Ohio branch, amplifying their power and transforming into a truly national force!

A Brilliant Merging of Symbols and Brothers

The absolute highlight of the session was Welch's riveting deep dive into the original membership badges of these three societies. Instead of just pointing to a visual aid, he brought the rich history of our iconic insignia to life!

Each founding group originally wore its regional pride and campaign history right on its chest. The Colorado Society proudly displayed the Cross of Malta, featuring a stylized "8" to honor the Eighth Army Corps. Meanwhile, the Columbus-based AVFS sported a brilliant five-armed cross—each arm representing the five different Army Corps from



National VFW Historian and Department of Illinois Historian Bobby Welch shared the history of the organizations which comprise the Veterans of Foreign Wars during National Convention in Reno, Nevada.

the Spanish-American Campaign—crowned with a striking American eagle clasp.

The true magic happened at the pivotal 1913 encampment in Denver, where these mighty societies officially consolidated into the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. Welch beautifully illustrated how this new national brotherhood refused to leave its history behind. They proudly adopted the Cross of Malta as their official emblem, authorizing Comrades to wear the insignia of their specific Army Corps or branch of service centered on the medallion.

Attendees walked out of the session with way more than a history lesson—they left with a soaring sense of pride that will shine through every time they look at our beloved Cross of Malta.

Historic Milestone for Illinois Veterans as Chicagoland Veterans Campus Hosts Grand Opening

By Bobby Welch

On June 27, the veterans' community of Illinois gathered to celebrate a monumental achievement with the grand opening and official ribbon-cutting of the new Chicagoland Veterans Campus. Located in a historic, 100-year-old schoolhouse at 39 Army Trail Blvd, this expansive new facility represents a unified effort to preserve military history and serve those who have worn the uniform.

Comprised of a military centric library, six independent museums and a Veterans Resource Center, the campus was the brainchild of Comrade Lorenzo Fiorentino, Past Post Commander of River Grove VFW Post No. 5979. A major highlight of the new campus is the Museum of American Fraternal Military Societies. Directed by VFW National Historian Bobby Welch, this unique museum is dedicated to preserving the legacy and artifacts of veteran fraternal organizations. Visitors to the museum will discover a large and meticulously curated VFW section, honoring the heritage, advocacy, and enduring brotherhood of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The grand opening event was a resounding success, bringing together community leaders, historians, and veterans from across the region. Special thanks and sincere appreciation go out to Past State Commander Brett Nila, State Senior Vice Commander Ryan Higginbotham, and State Chaplain David Terrinoni for taking the time to attend the ceremony. Their presence underscored the strong support of the Department of Illinois and highlighted the importance of preserving our shared history for future generations.

The Chicagoland Veterans Campus is poised to become the premier Midwestern destination for military history, education, and veteran community engagement.



National VFW Historian and Department of Illinois VFW Historian Bobby Welch delivers remarks at the grand opening of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison, Illinois.



The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd (left), Village of Addison Mayor Tom Hundley (center) and Chicagoland Veterans Campus Founder and President Lorenzo Fiorentino (right) participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the grand opening of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison, Illinois, June 27.

Retired Army Officer Brings Together Community to Preserve Military History, Strengthen Support for Veterans

Story and photo by Spc. Justin Malone
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

The Illinois National Guard joined veterans, community leaders and supporters June 27 to celebrate the ribbon cutting of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison's historic district, a first-of-its-kind destination that combines military museums, veteran service organizations, community spaces and support resources under one roof.

For Illinois National Guard Adjutant General and Commander of the Illinois National Guard Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the campus represents something larger than a collection of museums — it reflects the military's enduring commitment to serving others long after the uniform comes off.

"Like almost all veterans, when Lorenzo took off the uniform, he found a way to continue to serve others," Boyd said. "He assembled a group of veterans and community members who were also looking for a way to serve, got the broader

community involved, and here we are today."

Founded by Illinois Army National Guard veteran Lorenzo Fiorentino, the Chicagoland Veterans Campus was built on a simple observation. While operating a smaller military museum, Fiorentino noticed that veterans often became more willing to share stories of their service.

"We noticed how many veterans really started opening up," said Fiorentino, who retired as a major. "Families would tell us, 'He's never talked this much about the war,' or 'She's never shared anything about her service.'"

That realization inspired a broader vision, creating a place where veterans and their families could connect not only with history, but also with the people and resources available to help them.

The campus now brings together military museums, veteran service organizations, a veterans history library and resource offices designed to assist servicemembers, veterans and their families.

"The Chicagoland Veterans Campus ties together

our military history, military associations, veteran service organizations, and programs that provide assistance to veterans in a holistic approach to support service members, veterans and their families,” Boyd said.

Among the campus’ most unique features is its Veterans History Library, where service members can preserve photographs, military records and personal stories that might otherwise be lost to time.

“The goal of the library is to archive Soldiers’ stories,” Fiorentino said. “These are the kinds of memories that can disappear over time. We want future generations to be able to learn from them.”

Boyd said preserving those stories serves an important purpose beyond honoring the past.

“Preserving the history and telling the history of our military is important for the future of our military and the defense of our nation,” Boyd said. “Our history inspires the next generation to serve, and it’s important to tell it through as many platforms and mediums as possible.”

That inspiration continues to resonate across Illinois. Boyd noted the Illinois National Guard achieved record enlistments in 2025 and remains on pace to meet its recruiting goals again this year, a testament to young Americans choosing to serve after learning about those who came before them.

Mayor Tom Hundley, a U.S. Navy veteran, welcomed the campus to Addison and praised its mission of supporting veterans beyond military service.

“As a fellow veteran, what makes me most proud is that this is more than a collection of museums,” Hundley said. “Lorenzo and his group are building a community with veteran services and resources — a place where those who have served can come for help and continue to get involved.”



Chicagoland Veterans Campus Founder and President Lorenzo Fiorentino, a retired Illinois Army National Guard major, delivers remarks during the grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Chicagoland Veterans Campus in Addison, Illinois, June 27

Boyd said the people who made the campus possible embody the same values that define military service.

“All the people Lorenzo brought into the mix to pull this together and sustain it day after day is very much a continuation of our military values — honor, duty, commitment and selfless service,” Boyd said.

The opening of the Chicagoland Veterans Campus comes as the nation commemorates the 250th anniversary of American independence, providing a lasting place where military service, community and history come together.

“I am honored to help celebrate the continuation of a mission rooted in the values of our military and our nation,” Boyd said. “This campus will continue serving veterans, their families and future generations for years to come.”

Congratulations TO THE **DEPARTMENT OF ILLINOIS** **ALL-AMERICAN COMMANDERS**



★ DISTRICT COMMANDERS ★

District 4		Evamarie Duff
District 7		David Long
District 9		John Finnegan
District 10		Josh Seed
District 12		Tony Avers
District 13		Bob Shehorn

★ POST COMMANDERS ★

★ Post 311	Aretha Spurlock	★ Post 3455	James Hall
★ Post 342	Gary Holmes	★ Post 3480	Valerie Young
★ Post 454	Donald Crop	★ Post 3579	John Tomzik
★ Post 755	Josh Seed	★ Post 3873	Staci Boyer
★ Post 805	Kipp Reed	★ Post 3878	Dennis Orlikowski
★ Post 976	Barry Budwell	★ Post 4226	Ronald Stephens
★ Post 981	Stewart Abbink	★ Post 4308	Lukas Baca
★ Post 1197	James Reeves	★ Post 4763	Kimberly Yantis
★ Post 1308	Chris Miller	★ Post 5346	Seth Floyd
★ Post 1337	Laura Matuszak	★ Post 5506	John Finnegan
★ Post 1739	Lachelle Stevenson	★ Post 5596	Kenneth Storck
★ Post 1756	William Stauffer	★ Post 5917	Gregory Palmer
★ Post 2202	Dean Moran	★ Post 6632	Clarence Nail
★ Post 2245	Michael Magnetta	★ Post 7186	Brian Beatty
★ Post 2486	Anthony Robert	★ Post 9153	Ryan Shurtz
★ Post 2698	Kenneth Eddy	★ Post 9284	Alexander Brenke
★ Post 2859	Randy Merritt	★ Post 9763	Albert Dagner
★ Post 2868	Shawn Ligeikis	★ Post 11463	Kyle Blumhorst
★ Post 2955	Eugene Mund		

★ ★ ★ **ILLINOIS** ★ ★ ★

VFW
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

My experience at the American Legion National Convention



Ryan Higginbotham
Senior Vice Commander
Department of Illinois VFW

A few weeks ago, myself and a handful of other members from across the country were contacted by Assistant Adjutant General Brian Walker from National Headquarters asking if we would be interested in working a room during the American Legions National Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. The initial details were so the VFW would have a presence during that convention. The first two to volunteer would be asked to go.

Of course I jumped on the opportunity after clearing the trip with my tribe back home. I knew that my geographical location and outspoken personality was what

led to the invitation. The other VFW member was Wendy Silvera from the Department of Montana as well as Hank Ellis, the Director of the VFW store.

Our priority was simple, represent the Veterans of Foreign Wars in a professional manner and treat everyone we encounter, with the upmost respect.

Our mission was to first interact with veterans, discuss our concerns with the Taking Care of Americas Veteran Act, especially section 108, which covers drastic changes to the current ruling on tinnitus and sleep apnea. We also had a popup store selling VFW merchandise, including our Honor



the Contact t-shirt by Gruntsyle and even potentially recruit new members if the situation arises.

Our goal was to reach as many veterans as we could so they could hear firsthand our concerns with the current legislation on TCVA. There are so many rumors, hearsay, and personal theories floating around social media that many veterans and even members of the public are getting blurred vision.

I was not surprised or caught off guard by any of my encounters. I knew that majority of the veterans I spoke with or even passed on the sidewalk would have the same respect that I showed them. Majority of veterans share the same issues and concerns we have with TCVA and especially section 108.

Our main goal right now is to keep pressure on our elected officials in Washington D.C.

Do you know how your congressman will vote if TCVA comes before the House? Have you expressed your concerns to them?

Let them know we do not support TCVA in its current state. Congress needs to remove section 108 and pass a clean stand-alone Major Richard Star Act.





After a delay, the Department of Illinois VFW and Auxiliary in the hall for the joint opening session during the National VFW Convention in Reno, Nevada.

National Convention Highlights



During the National VFW Convention, VFW Magazine had a chance to speak with Marine and Army veteran Scott Farish, left, Army veteran Richard Kenner, right, and Post 3480 Commander Valerie Young, center, about how pickleball can present veterans with the opportunity to get out and socialize.



Laura Matusak, Commander, Prospect Post 1337 in Mt. Prospect, met National Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore during a break in the activities during the VFW National Convention. During the conversation, Matusak presented Whitmore with a couple of Challenge Coins.



Judd Kendall VFW Post 3873 Commander Staci Boyer was interviewed by the Veterans of Foreign Wars during national convention regarding our Still Serving and Day of Service initiatives along with our VFW voice on Capitol Hill.



Attendees at the VFW National Convention's Women Veterans committee.



Poppy Displays at the VFW National Convention. Left, Capt. Horace G. Burke Post 3480, East St. Louis, and above, Elk Grove Village Post 9284 poppy displays were judged as part of the VFW National Convention Poppy Display contest.

At right, State Senior Vice Commander Ryan Higginbotham and National Council Member Matthew Claussen were among veterans and auxiliary members who ended the first day of the 127th National Convention with a VFW/IW silkie hike around Reno. It included 22 pushups at a firehouse, a visit to Reno Battle Born Post 9211 and some much needed camaraderie.





National Convention Highlights





VFW Press Conference in Washington D.C. Photo provided by Doug Jameson

Veterans Foundation of Illinois, Inc. Serves to Further VFW Mission, Assist Veterans in Need

By Rob Bland

The Veterans Foundation of Illinois, INC is the official foundation for the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars. It was created in 2003 to further the mission of the department and help veterans in need.

The Foundation leadership consists of members elected by the VFW members, several members who are elected by the Foundation leadership and honorary members.

VFW elected members:

Chairmen: Rob Bailey

Senior Vice Chairmen: Ryan Higginbotham

Junior Vice Chairmen: Doug Jameson

Treasure: Scott Swinford

Members voted by the Board

President: Brett Nila

Vice President: Rob Bland

Secretary: Eugene Blackwell

Trustee: David Terrinoni

Trustee: Todd Lathem

Honorary Member: Maurice Bridges and Crystal Grcec

Currently we are looking to round out the Board with seven honorary members that can assist with fundraising, marketing, website skills, social media skills and for those with a passion for helping fellow veterans.

Through our Assistance Review Committee (ARC) we receive requests for assistance from veterans in need. The ARC receives the requests through the VFW State Headquarters, reviews the request, vets the requests, and if assistance is warranted, we assist.

This past year the ARC received a request from a veteran that

needed assistance with a house payment. During the review process the reviewer found out that the veteran had been treated for a mental health issue linked to their service. While they were in the hospital receiving treatment, they were receiving assistance from the Family and Medical Leave Act. When they returned to work, their hours were cut. While they were building back up to working full-time, they needed assistance or their family would be forced out of their house.

The ARC reviewed all the documents and voted to assist the veteran. Veterans often talk about helping a fellow veteran with mental health issues. This was one way that we were able to assist so that a veteran would not be victimized by requesting

and receiving the mental health support that they needed.

This is just one of the several instances this past year that we have assisted individual veterans in need.

We also supported the Department of Illinois VFW leadership. The Board received a short-fused request to support the department leadership team to travel to Washington D.C. to support the National VFW effort to educate our political leadership on the impact of H.R. 9237 the Take

Care of America's Veterans Act on veterans.

The act combined many initiatives to help veterans; it also would cut benefits to future veterans. This was a last-minute request from National VFW to get as many States as possible to show a unified front in opposing the legislation that will cut veterans benefits from future veterans that will serve faithfully in supporting our country.

Illinois was one of 38 States which participated in a Mobilization to the Hill to advocate on behalf of Veterans to educate representatives on the "pay-for" [Section 108] of the Take Care of Veterans Act (H.R. 9237/S.4744). On three days' notice, Commander Rob Bailey, Senior Vice Commander Ryan Higginbotham, and Junior Vice Commander Doug Jameson (and



VFW IL Command Team at the Capital fighting for our Benefits Photo provided by Doug Jameson

National Legislative Committee Member), traveled to Washington D.C. and were able to visit with staff or elected officials of all 17 Representative Districts and both Senators, including a sit-down conversation with sponsor of the Bill and HVAC Chairman Mike Bost. In large measure due to the VFW physical presence on the Hill and more than 50,000 messages sent to Congress through the VFW Action Alert, the bill was withdrawn from a House floor vote and recommitted to the HVAC Committee for consideration.

"We are grateful for the opportunity afforded by the Foundation, honored to have joined our VFW comrades from across the world, and to have directly made an impact to preserve entitled compensation for our nation's current and

future veterans," said Junior Vice Commander Doug Jameson.

"The trip to Washington D.C. to advocate for the benefits that we have earned through our honorable service to the country was one of the most rewarding experiences in my VFW career," said VFW Commander Rob Bailey.

If you feel the call to help your fellow veteran through advocacy, reach out to one of the board members and find out more about how we can work together to help our fellow veterans. Or if you don't have the time and still want to help, you can donate to the VFW Foundation. Your donation will go to help our fellow veterans that need to have a little more assistance to get to the best version of themselves after serving our great country.

Follow us on our Facebook page at: Veterans Foundation of Illinois

Post 311 Conducts Flag Retirement Ceremony

On August 22, 2026 Post 311 Americanism Team conducted a Flag Retirement Ceremony at 22341 Governors Highway, in Richton Park.

Present in the audience was Illinois State Representative (38th Legislative District) Debbie Meyers-Martin, Brian Coleman, Trustee Village of Richton Park (on behalf of the Village of Richton Park President Rick Reinbold), Veterans of Foreign Wars(VFW) 16th District Commander, Dr. Rupert Evans, Sr. and Aretha Spurlock, Post 311 Commander. Guest in the audience included Joseph G. Bertrand Jr., 3rd Ward Alderman of Markham.

The Post 311 Americanism Team was led by Americanism Team Captain Monty Montgomery and members Terah Butler, Sasha Douyon, Anita Granville, Eleanor

Wilson and Carlos Young.

"A U.S. flag retirement ceremony is a solemn, dignified way to dispose of a worn, tattered, or faded American flag. Under the [U.S. Flag Code (4 U.S.C. § 8(k))], when a flag is no longer a fitting emblem for display, it should be destroyed in a respectful manner, preferably by burning or through respectful burial."

You can find out more information on how you can assist VFW Post 311 by visiting us at 22341 Governors Highway, Richton Park or follow us on our FACEBOOK page at Benjamin O. Davis VFW. Don't hesitate to donate towards our efforts of helping needy veterans, their families and contributing towards next year's scholarship awards program via ZELLE to quartermaster@vfwpost311.org.



Post 311 Commander Aretha Spurlock delivers remarks during the Flag Retirement Ceremony.



Post 311 Americanism team raised the flag during the retirement ceremony. They then properly disposed of unservicable flags.



Santa Claus and Team Make Rare Summer Visit Anna as District 15 VFW, Auxiliary Host Christmas in July for Anna Veterans Home

*By Jo Lynn Altvatter
District 15 Auxiliary Secretary
Past Department President*

It may have been the middle of July, but District 15 VFW Posts and Auxiliaries held a Christmas Party for the 50 residents of the Illinois Veterans Home in Anna July 18.

The dining rooms were all decorated with Christmas trees and a piano player was singing Christmas carols.

Dinner was a traditional Christmas dinner. The Department fund for the Anna Veterans Home supplied the turkeys and the District VFW supplied dessert which was fresh fruit and cream pies from Savory and Sweet in Jonesboro (added benefit, they delivered the pies to Anna).

After dinner, Santa, Mrs. Claus and their elves passed out gifts chosen from their personal wish lists which were purchased by the Posts and Auxiliaries.

Kudos to the chefs at the Anna Veterans Home. The food was outstanding, and their entire Staff who were very helpful while we were there.

We were told by their Activities Coordinator and many of the staff that the residents really enjoyed themselves. We really enjoyed being there.

Plans are underway for Christmas in July in 2027.



Santa, Mrs. Claus, and the District 15 Auxiliary Head Elf were joined by VFW and Auxiliary members from throughout District 15 at the Anna Veterans Home for Christmas in July.





Posts and Auxiliaries joined residents at the Anna Veterans Home to celebrate Christmas in July on July 18. Posts and Auxiliaries provided gifts from the residents gift wish list. The staff at the Veterans Home cooked a delicious holiday meal. District 15 Auxiliary purchased the turkeys through the Department of Illinois Auxiliary Anna Veterans Home fund and District 15 VFW provided the desserts.



District 4 Participates in National Night Out at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital

VFW Illinois District 4 was invited to host an informational table at the National Night Out event held at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital. The event was supported by members from across the District, including VFW Posts 2868, 981, 1337, 3579, and 5979. District 5 also had George there to help.

The event was a tremendous success, providing an opportunity to connect with Hines VA employees, patients, Veterans, their families, and community partners. District members answered questions, shared information about VFW programs and services, discussed the VFW's legislative advocacy efforts on behalf of Veterans, and explained how the VFW continues to fight for veterans' benefits, health care, and earned rights at the local, state, and national levels.

Through the generosity of our VFW team, we distributed more than \$140 worth of school supplies, along with snacks, to Hines VA patients and their families. Also Shout out to The Mindful Body



for a donation toward the school supplies we appreciate you.

The event strengthened community partnerships, increased

awareness of the VFW's mission, and allowed us to continue assisting and advocating for those who have served.



Group photo of vendors at the National Night Out at Edwards Hines, Jr. VA hospital Aug. 4.



Johnson Phelps Post 5220 VFW and Auxiliary, Oak Lawn, participated in National Night Out Aux. 4. National Night Out is a national community building campaign which promotes police and community partnerships. Pictured, front row, from left, VFW member, John Howatt, District 3 Auxiliary President and Auxiliary 5220 Vice President Lisa Rivera, Auxiliary members Dinah Guzman Guerrero, Patriotic Instructor, Gayle Bukowski, auxiliary secretary, Kathy Smertene, Treasurer, and Jean Marietta, and Post Commander Tony Smertene. Second row, from left, Auxiliary Trustee Fran Pontrelli, President Linda Krone, Junior Vice President Maureen Luemen, Guard Ann Valchar, and Chaplain Cynthia Scaife.



Hometown Murray Auxiliary 9773 participated in the National Night Out with first responders. The auxiliary's table showcased membership, scholarships, and other contests the auxiliary invites students to participate in.

Collinsville VFW Post Celebrates 80 Years of Service, Unveils New Post Museum

*Story and photos by
Richard Lawrence
VFW 5691 Post Historian*

Collinsville VFW Post 5691 proudly celebrated its 80th Anniversary with an evening honoring the Post's rich history, dedicated members, and lasting commitment to veterans and the Collinsville community July 25.

Following the Pledge of Allegiance, emcee Jenna Ramos welcomed members and guests with opening remarks before the evening's official ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new Post Museum.

The ribbon was cut by current and former Post Commanders Joe Glass, George Cavaletti, and Adam Abdul, officially opening the museum to members and guests. Visitors were then invited to explore exhibits showcasing the history of the Post from its charter in 1946 through today. Displays featured photographs of former



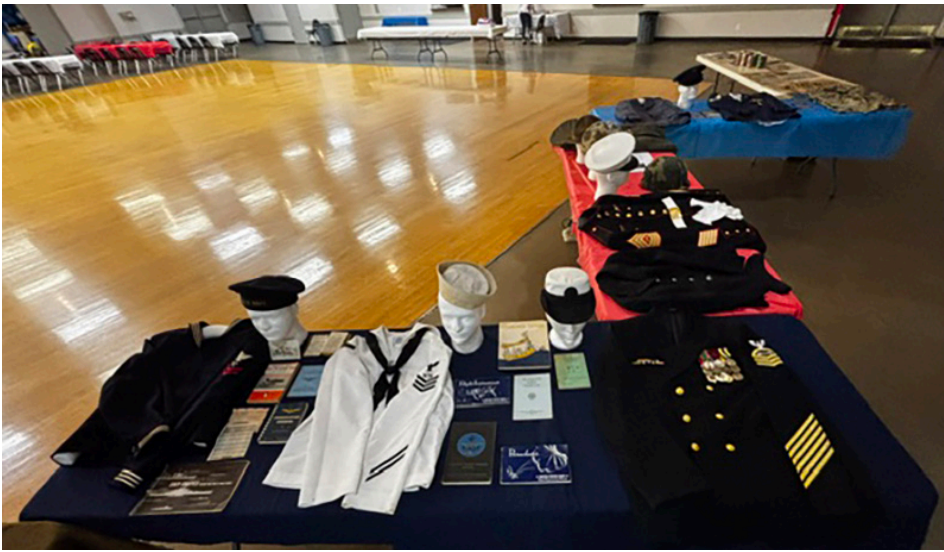
The ribbon was cut by current and former Post Commanders Joe Glass, George Cavaletti, and Adam Abdul, officially opening the museum to members and guests.



Past Commander Ted Jackson presented a detailed history of one of the oldest VFW Posts in Madison County.



A special moment during the celebration brought together six Post Commanders representing different generations of leadership: Alonzo Skipper, Adam Abdul, Ted Jackson, Tom Markovic, Joe Glass, and George Cavaletti.



Displays featuring many of the Post's historic banners, military uniforms, personal artifacts donated by members, and other memorabilia that helped tell the story of generations of military service.

Post Commanders and Auxiliary Presidents, historical artifacts, and exhibits highlighting the Post's long-standing connection to the Collinsville community.

A special moment during the celebration brought together six Post Commanders representing different generations of leadership:

- Alonzo Skipper
- Adam Abdul
- Ted Jackson
- Tom Markovic
- Joe Glass
- George Cavaletti

The commanders shared stories and memories from their years of service, reflecting on the Post's proud traditions and the friendships formed through decades of service.

Former Commander Ted Jackson presented a detailed history of one of the oldest VFW Posts in Madison County. His presentation traced the Post's journey from its 1946 charter to the present day, highlighting its support of veterans from World War I through today's conflicts and its many years of service to the Collinsville community.

The evening's opening prayer and meal blessing were given by Pastor Gerald Harris, the Post

Assistant Chaplain

Guests were also treated to a spirited performance by the Collinsville Raiders Cheerleaders, who performed a special cheer in honor of our nation's veterans.

Throughout the evening, attendees enjoyed displays featuring many of the Post's historic banners, military uniforms, personal artifacts donated by members, and other memorabilia that helped tell the story of generations of military service.

The celebration also featured a military-themed art show, where community members displayed artwork honoring military service through a variety of artistic styles and mediums.

This memorable evening would not have been possible without the countless hours of planning, hard work, and dedication from our Post and Auxiliary 80th Anniversary Team:

Jenna and Josh Ramos, Connie Ramos, Sara Dupaix, Joe Glass, Joe and Tara Skipper, Shelly Steuart, Juston Bradshaw, Ted and Nancy Jackson, Ray Kicielski, Art and AJ Jalinsky, Laura Mock, and Chris Miller

A special thank you goes to Ameren for its generous lighting donation and to Nailed It Construction and Renovation for the beautiful new shadow boxes and flooring that helped make the museum a reality.

Thank you to everyone who attended, volunteered, donated, and supported this milestone celebration. Together, we honored 80 years of service, remembered those who came before us, and celebrated the bright future of Collinsville VFW Post.



Updated displays featuring photos of Past Commanders and Auxiliary Presidents.

Dwight VFW 2608 is New Home to Unique Artwork

A unique masterpiece now permanently honors local veterans following a special unveiling ceremony at the Dwight VFW Post 2608 on July 10.

The artwork, created by renowned one-of-a-kind artist Joe Everson, was funded by donations and then offered to the VFW to be proudly mounted and displayed at the Beachhead.



GABR President Larry Little

The painting's journey to the VFW began on May 2, when it was successfully auctioned off at the annual Basset Ball. The event is the premier fundraiser for Guardian Angel Basset Rescue (GABR), a Dwight-based non-profit organization dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating, and rehoming hundreds of basset hounds every year. GABR is operated by President Larry Little and his wife, Emmy.

The formal unveiling was jointly conducted by Larry and Dwight VFW Post Commander Adam Goetsch.

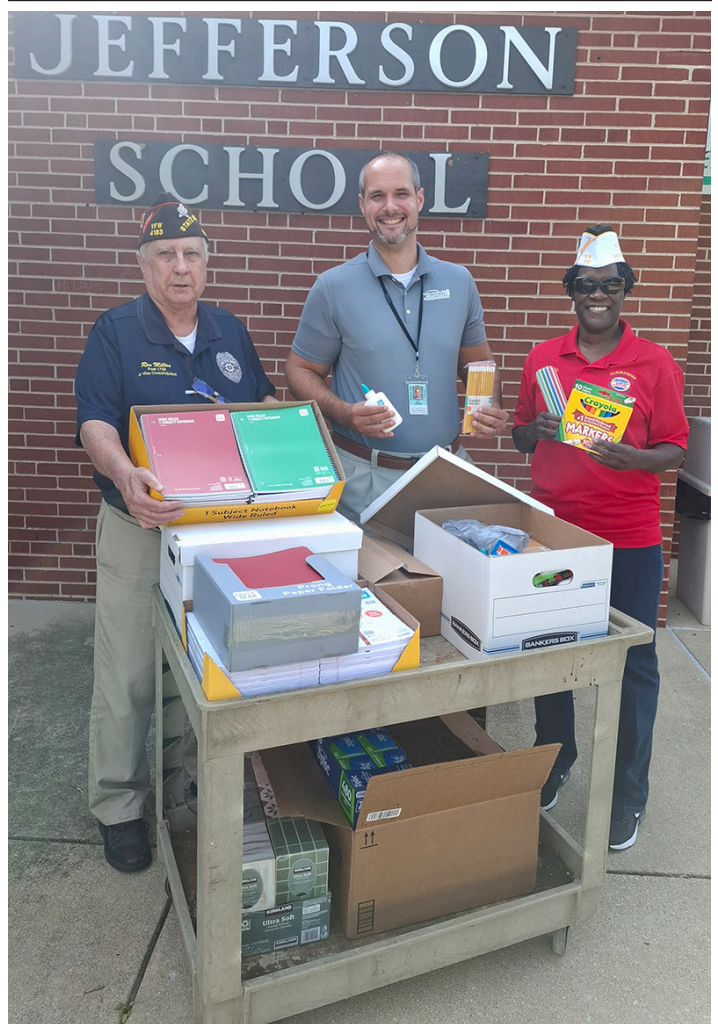
Community generosity directly funded the artwork's acquisition. A commemorative plaque mounted next to the painting features the etched names of the donors who made the purchase possible. Among them, dedicated VFW supporter and friend Rick Nelson personally covered the cost to place more than 50 names on the plaque.

The public can view both the historic painting and the donor plaque at the Dwight VFW Post 2608, located at 506 S. Old Route 66 in Dwight.



Going Back in Time...

District 4 is working with the Village of North Riverside to create a magical day when the time capsule will be unearthed and opened.



Post 1739 Delivers School Supplies

During the months of June and July Belleville Post 1739 collected school supplies for Jefferson Elementary School in Belleville. Post members donated approximately \$800.00 worth of supplies. The supplies will supplement the needs of the school. The supplies were delivered on 12 August. Pictured left to right: R Milton, Adjutant; J Halde, Jefferson School Principal; L Stevenson, Post Commander.



District 4 Auxiliary Reformed

August 30 was an exciting day for the VFW Auxiliary Department of Illinois as District 4 was officially reformed!

A tremendous amount of work went into making this day possible. A special thank you to Evamarie Duff and Diane Ahrens for the hard work they put in leading up to the event.

Marvie Wisniewski was on hand to conduct this historic first meeting, establish the district, and install its newly elected officers:

- President: Greg Burkhardt — Auxiliary 2868
- Sr. Vice President: Mary Mathis — Auxiliary 2868
- Jr. Vice President: Dale Michelic
- Secretary/Treasurer: Diane Ahrens — Auxiliary 9284

Congratulations to the new District 4 officers! We are so excited to see this district growing and moving forward.

Now let's help District 4 GROW!

If you are a VFW member in District 4 and have an eligible family member who is not yet part of the VFW Auxiliary, encourage them to join one of our District 4 Auxiliaries:

- Auxiliary 2868
- Auxiliary 3578
- Auxiliary 7186
- Auxiliary 9284



From left, Past Department President and newly installed District 4 Auxiliary Secretary/Treasurer Diane Ahrens, Department Auxiliary Membership Chair Tara Skipper and District 4 VFW Commander Evamarie Duff.

Let's welcome new members, strengthen these Auxiliaries, and make the newly reformed District 4 stronger than ever!

Their fight. Their story. Our voice.

#VFWAuxiliary #VFWAuxiliaryIllinois
#District4 #MembershipMatters #StrongerTogether
#VeteransAndFamilySupport



Past Department President Marvie Wisniewski administers the oath of office to newly formed District 4 Auxiliary officers.

TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLGAME

VFW Post 2868 Enjoys a Day of Baseball, Family, Comradeship

Sometimes the best way to strengthen our VFW family is simply spending time together.

VFW Post 2868 recently enjoyed a day at the Joliet Slammers game, bringing together veterans, Auxiliary members, and their families for an afternoon of baseball, laughter, and great company. It wasn't about meetings or business – it was about taking time to enjoy each other's company and building the friendships that make our Post so special.

The VFW is more than serving veterans; it's about creating a place where veterans and their families feel welcomed, supported, and connected. Events like this remind us that the camaraderie we built in service doesn't have to end when we take off the uniform. It continues through moments like these, where we can relax, make memories, and enjoy time together.

A huge thank you to everyone



VFW Post 2868 attending the Joliet Slammers game.

who came out and helped make the day such a success. We hope to see even more members, Auxiliary, and families at our next event as

we continue building a stronger VFW family – one event, one conversation, and one veteran at a time.

Post 3480 Visits Hospitalized Veteran

Commander Valerie Young and Commander Janese Jordan completed a hospital visit regarding a veteran in need, June 28.

Commanders Jordan and Young visited Mr. Marcel P. to assess his well-being and address his current concerns.

During the visit, we provided Mr. Marcel P. with resources to assist in his transition from the hospital, along with other pertinent information to support his ongoing needs.



Post 2868, District 4 Invited to Participate in 1244th Transportation Company Family Day

VFW Illinois District 4 and Joshua Harris VFW Post 2868 was honored to be invited by 1st Sgt. Lozada to participate in the 1244th Transportation Company Family Day with the Illinois Army National Guard.

The team hosted an informational table where we had the opportunity to speak directly with Soldiers currently serving and provide valuable information about the VFW, membership eligibility, available resources, benefits, programs, and the support the VFW can provide to service members and their families.

VFW swag was handed out, our always-popular ducks, and female toy Soldiers — a small but meaningful way to make sure our women in uniform are represented too.

Events like this give us an important opportunity to connect with service members before they transition out of the military, build relationships, and show them that the VFW is here for them during their service and long after.

Thank you to 1st Sgt. Lozada and the 1244th Transportation Company for inviting us to be part of their Family Day and allowing us the opportunity to support their Soldiers and families.



District 4 Commander Evamarie Duff and Past District 4 Commander Eric Morales at an information table at the 1244th Transportation Company Family Day.





Hometown Murray Post 9773 Auxiliary setting out school supplies for Operation Homefront Dollar Tree back to school supplies giveaway for the community and those in need.



Highland Post 5694 Auxiliary marched in the Grantfork Parade.

VFW Post 11019 Honors South Beloit Officer Sawyer Kurth

South Beloit Police Officer Sawyer Kurth was honored by VFW Post 11019 as its Post-level Law Enforcement Officer of the Year during the August 17 meeting of the South Beloit City Council.

South Beloit Police Officer Sawyer Kurth was recognized by Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 11019 as its Post-level Law Enforcement Officer of the Year during the South Beloit City Council's regular meeting on Monday, August 17.

Rob McLain, Senior Vice Commander of VFW Post 11019,

presented Kurth with a VFW Certificate of Appreciation recognizing his commitment to the highest ideals of law enforcement and his dedication to maintaining, preserving and protecting the lawful rights of all citizens.

Kurth was nominated for the award by South Beloit Police Chief Adam Truman, who submitted the nomination to VFW Post 11019 in recognition of the officer's outstanding service and accomplishments.

Post 11019 thanked Truman for taking the time to recognize Kurth

and for supporting the VFW's Public Servant Award Program, which honors law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency medical personnel who demonstrate exceptional service to their communities.

The Post plans to advance Kurth's nomination for consideration at the VFW District, Department of Illinois and national levels.

VFW Post 11019 congratulates Officer Kurth and thanks him for his professionalism, integrity and dedicated service to the South Beloit community.



Rob McLain, Senior Vice Commander of VFW Post 11019, presents South Beloit Police Officer Sawyer Kurth with a VFW Certificate of Appreciation recognizing his selection as the Post's Law Enforcement Officer of the Year.

Auxiliary 5691 Hosts Bingo Night for Hospitalized Veterans at Jefferson Barracks

Story by Kathy Rowold
Department of Illinois
VFW Auxiliary VAVS Representative,
Jefferson Barracks
and
Richard Lawrence
Post 5691 Post Historian

The Collinsville VFW Auxiliary Post 5691 hosted a Bingo Night for hospitalized veterans at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, Missouri. It was a wonderful evening filled with fun, fellowship, and laughter – creating great memories

and giving a much-deserved boost in morale to our veterans.

The second Wednesday of every month, Illinois VFW Auxiliary and/or VFW comrades volunteer to generously donate their time to give back to hospitalized veterans at Jefferson Barracks. Sunday bingos can also be scheduled with special permission. These visits provide companionship, entertainment, and a reminder to our veterans that their service and sacrifices are never forgotten.

This ongoing program is made

possible through the dedication of Kathy Rowold, Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary VAVS Representative for Jefferson Barracks, whose efforts help coordinate these opportunities for Auxiliary members and comrades to serve our Veterans.

Thank you to everyone who continues to volunteer their time and help brighten the days of those who have served our country.

Veterans helping veterans – one smile, one game, and one memory at a time!



Rob Hardcastle, Ray Kicielski, and Chris Miller

Recruiting Officer, Combat Veteran Retires After 24 Years of National Guard Service

Maj. Jaclyn Haffer of the Illinois Army National Guard and a member of Lafore Lock VFW Post 755, Springfield, was honored Aug. 21 during a retirement ceremony at the post, marking the culmination of more than 24 years of dedicated military service.

Haffer, an Iraq combat veteran, most recently served as the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Strength Manager for the Recruiting and Retention Battalion. She was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal during the afternoon ceremony. The award, authorized by Brig.

Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General – Army of the Illinois National Guard and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard, recognizes Haffer's exceptionally meritorious service and leadership across key assignments.

"It can be hard leaving an organization after putting in so much of your time and energy into making it the best you can, but getting to end my career in the Recruiting and Retention Battalion where many Soldiers start their careers has made it a lot easier," Haffer said. "This next generation

has the knowledge and the skills to bring the Illinois Army National Guard to the future and I have no doubt they have everything it takes to be successful."

Haffer's military career began in August 2002 when she enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard as a unit supply specialist. Within two years, she secured her first full-time role as a federal technician in the Property Book Office in Springfield before transitioning to the Active Guard Reserve (AGR) program at the rank of specialist.

In 2007, Haffer deployed to



Col. Bart J. Daly, the former Human Resources Officer of the Illinois National Guard, presents Maj. Jaclyn Haffer with the Meritorious Service Medal during a retirement ceremony at Lafore Lock VFW Post 755.

Iraq with the Springfield-based 3637th Maintenance Company, serving as the unit armorer and administrative noncommissioned officer. Following her return in 2008, she worked as a training NCO and course manager at the 129th Regional Training Institute in Springfield.

After serving as the battalion administrative NCO for the Decatur-based 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion in 2014, Haffer enrolled in Officer Candidate School. She earned her commission as an officer in the Adjutant General Corps in 2016. Her officer career included roles as the administrative officer for the 766th Brigade Engineer Battalion, training officer for the Regional Training Institute, and commander of the 1844th Transportation Company in East St. Louis, Illinois, a command she held for 20 months.

Col. Bart J. Daly, the former Human Resources Officer of the Illinois National Guard, hosted and officiated Haffer's retirement ceremony, which included a presentation of certificates and retirement gifts from Lt. Col. Lance Frail, Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard's Recruiting and Retention Battalion.

Family support was a focal point of the afternoon. Haffer's husband, Chad Haffer, was presented with a certificate of appreciation from the Army Chief of Staff to honor his own unselfish and devoted service during his spouse's career. Additionally, Haffer's father, retired Col. Craig Lowman, delivered the invocation and benediction.

Haffer resides in Springfield with her husband, Chad, and their three children: Tessa, 21; Maria, 7; and Isaac, 3.



Maj. Jaclyn Haffer and Col. Bart Daly.



Bond County Memorial Post 1377 members recently installed a new flag pole in front of the post home. A dedication ceremony will be held once all the upgrades are complete.



Post 3480 Delivers Food to East St. Louis Residents

Commander Janese Jordan of Capt. Horace G. Burke VFW Post 3480 delivered food to local East St. Louis residents, June 3.

Commander Jordan delivered food to a community member and her five children after the mother expressed a need. In addition to delivering food, items were prepared and sorted, and dry goods were presented to two elderly veterans in our community. This effort is ongoing. Commander Jordan is #StillServing.

'The Godfather' Flies into Retirement

Story and photos by

Barbara Wilson

Illinois National Guard Public Affairs

Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens' 42 years of service in the Illinois Army National Guard was celebrated during a retirement ceremony July 16 at the Army Aviation Support Facility (AASF) 2, Decatur.

'The Godfather', a member of John H. Kraus VFW Post 454 in Bloomington, as noted on his flight helmet enlisted in the Illinois Army National in 1983, at the age of 17.

"I was 11 years old when Herb enlisted," said Brig. Gen. Lenny Williams, Assistant Adjutant General - Army and Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard. "From the showing of retirees and former aviators today, only Herb can fill the tarmac and this building on a Thursday in Decatur."

Williams thanked Stevens' family for their support of his

career.

"It takes a village to support a Soldier through 42 years of service," Williams said. "No one in uniform does this without a support structure at home."

Stevens is one of seven Soldiers serving in the Illinois Army National Guard carrying the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 5. Williams put it in perspective for Stevens' family.

"There are 10,000 Soldiers serving in the Illinois Army National Guard," he said. "Chief Warrant Officer 5 is the pinnacle of a career for a Warrant Officer. It's not impossible to make that rank, but it is very challenging."

Throughout his 42 years of service, Stevens served in a variety of aviation positions and locations. He was part of a 50-Soldier detachment that moved from Decatur to start AASF 3 in Peoria. Steven rose to the rank of sergeant and was chosen to attend Warrant Officer Candidate School and flight training in 1990.

After flight school, Stevens was assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment in Peoria. In 1992, Stevens participated in Task Force New Horizons in Panama, and in 1993, he was a UH-1 (Huey) pilot supporting relief efforts during the Mississippi River flood operations.

In 1994, Stevens qualified in the UH-60 Blackhawk, and a UH-60 pilot, participated in Task Force New Horizon missions in Honduras. He then completed the UH-60 Instructor Pilot course in early 2001.

Stevens deployed twice during his four decades of military service. He deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004 to 2005 at Balad Air Base, and a second time from 2008 to 2010.

Upon return from his second deployment he was chosen as the 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment Standardization Pilot and transferred to the headquarters in Peoria. After three



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens, right, State Standardization Pilot and Commander of Army Aviation Support Facility 1 in Kankakee, is joined by Chief Warrant Officer 3 Daniel Wentworth, Illinois Army National Guard Instructor Pilot, on Stevens' final flight July 16 as an Army Aviator in the Illinois Army National Guard.



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens, State Standardization Pilot and Commander of Army Aviation Support Facility 1 in Kankakee, is greeted by his family, including wife, Lynette, and daughters Hanna Stevens and Maggie Dhami, following Stevens' final flight as an Army Aviator July 16 in the Illinois Army National Guard.

years in the position, Stevens was assigned to the C12 fixed wing unit to assist with a deployment in Djibouti, Africa. In early 2015, he returned to the 106th. In 2017, he was selected as the State Aviation Safety Officer in Joint Force Headquarters. Stevens attended Senior Warrant Officer education course and was promoted to Chief Warrant Officer 5 in 2019. In 2019, he became the State Standardization Pilot.

Williams said when he thinks of Stevens, three words come to mind – respect, credibility, and legacy.

“As you get to the end of your career, you begin to ask yourself have I earned the respect of those I lead, do I have credibility with the Soldiers I serve with, and what will my legacy be?” Williams said. “Herb Stevens’ legacy is intact. His legacy is in this room, across this organization, in the retirees who were here today, and his legacy is in the ones he’s advised and mentored coming up behind him in this organization.”

Williams, who with Chief Warrant Officer 5 Thomas Black, Command Chief Warrant Officer

of the Illinois National Guard, joined Stevens on his final flight as an Army aviator earlier in the day, said Stevens talked about the next generation of aviators.

“He didn’t talk about himself, his career or his deployments, but those coming up behind him. Those he’s helped raise in this organization,” Williams said. “That’s Herb’s legacy. Because of the ones he’s raised his legacy will last 20 plus years. There may be a young Chief Warrant Officer 2 right now in the cockpit and they may have 20 more years of flying. They will remember what Herb taught them. That’s generational influence. When you take the uniform off for the last time later today, I want you to know the impact you made on this organization.”

Stevens thanked his family for their support.

“We couldn’t do this without our family,” he said.

Stevens reflected back on his first drill in December 1983 at the AASF in Decatur.

“In December 1983, I stood back there for my first drill,” he said. “Here we are forty two years and eight months later.”

Stevens said his career was defined by two different eras.

“The first 20 years of my career, I was a drilling Soldier,” he said.

“Then September 11 happened. I think the trajectory of our careers

Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens walks through a water cannon salute honoring his final flight as an Army aviator.



changed vastly because of that. The next 22 years of my career were very different."

Stevens said he knew what he wanted to do even before he was old enough to enlist.

"I think I knew when I was 15 years old what I wanted to do," he said. "It was this (helicopter pilot) in one form or another. Who gets to do what they have wanted to do since they were 15 years old for 42 years of their life? I'm grateful to my family for letting me do this."

Stevens, who talks often with young Soldiers and new recruits they will encounter roadblocks and challenges as part of their life.

"Respect, credibility, and legacy are all part of overcoming those challenges," he said. "Whether it's during a deployment or a normal duty day, be that person a commander can count on."

Stevens said he is proud to be part of the Illinois National Guard.

"I appreciate everyone I served with and with those I serve now," he said. "This organization will be successful for the next twenty years and beyond. We have great Soldiers coming in and coming up the ranks."

Stevens thanked his family for their support.

"I want to thank my family for being my support system," he said. "They are the ones who suffered the most during the past 42 years."

Stevens may have flown for the last time as an Army Aviator, but he hasn't put away his flight helmet just yet. In a couple of weeks, Stevens will begin his new job as a medical evacuation pilot for OSF Illinois.



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens performs a flight check before his final flight as an Army aviator.



Chief Warrant Officer 5 Herb Stevens lifts off for his final flight as an Army aviator.

VFW Post 311 Awards \$1,000 Scholarship

Benjamin O. Davis VFW Post 311 announced and held its annual scholarship awards competition from April 1 through June 1, 2026.

On Monday, July 20, 2026, a local area high school graduating student that is the descendant of a veteran was interviewed and awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

VFW Post 311 Commander Aretha Spurlock, Post 311 Scholarship Chairperson Sharee

Porter-Pearce and Scholarship Committee Member Arnold Taylor were present to present the award and take pictures.

The award was presented to JeNya Holmes, graduate of Harold L. Richards High School.

JeNya will be attending the University of Illinois-Chicago in the fall of 2026.

Post 311 will formally recognize the Post past year's

accomplishments, short term goals, scholarship recipients, outstanding members of the post and auxiliary at its 2026 Commander's Ball Dinner on Oct. 24. Tickets are available now by contacting Arnold at taylor1660@hotmail.com or the Post Commander at arethaQM@gmail.com.

Donations are welcome and appreciated.



VFW Post 311 Commander Aretha Spurlock and Post 311 Scholarship Chairperson Sharee Porter-Pearce present JeNya Holmes, graduate of Harold L. Richards High School, a \$1,000 scholarship.



Bond County Memorial Post 1377, Auxiliary Spend Busy Week Serving Community

It was a busy week for Bond County Memorial Post 1377 in early August.

Auxiliary members volunteered to serve the luncheon at Bond County Senior Citizens Center,

Inc. Senior Bingo Day, Aug. 3. Post 1377 provides the hall to them for that day as well. It is always a fun time.

Post and Auxiliary members participated in the Bond County

Fair Parade Aug. 4 along with comrades from American Legion in Pocahontas.

The post's and auxiliary's busy week continued as both organizations met Aug. 5.





Members of Elk Grove Village VFW Post 9284 cut the ribbon in front of their new post home in the Elk Grove Town Center at the southwest corner of Biesterfield and Arlington Heights roads on Saturday, Aug. 15. (Tom Robb/Journal photo)

VFW Post 9284 Members Cut Ribbon On New Home In Elk Grove Village Town Center

*Story and photos by
Tom Robb
Journal & Topics*

Light rain cleared just in time for members of Elk Grove Village VFW Post 9284 to cut the ribbon on their new home at 960 Elk Grove Town Center on Saturday, Aug. 15.

A standing-room-only crowd of about 200 people, including state and district VFW officials along with local trustees and senior staff, gathered for the opening ceremony. The event featured a VFW color guard standing at attention and marching with flags and rifles in the new space.

After the ribbon-cutting, Post 9284 Cmdr. Alexander Brenke welcomed attendees and declared the post open.

"It is my hope to improve



Members of Elk Grove Village VFW Post 9284 stand along a blank white wall saluting during the Pledge of Allegiance at the ribbon-cutting and opening of the new VFW Post 9284 home at 960 Elk Grove Town Center on Saturday, Aug. 15. (Tom Robb/Journal photo)

service to veterans, service to the community and other organizations," Brenke said.

Local and regional leaders praised the post's resilience and central location.

"You faced your own challenges, and you accepted those with gusto," Elk Grove Village Trustee Kathy Jarosch said.

VFW District 4 Cmdr. Evamarie Duff stressed the importance of the new gathering space.

"Opening these doors is more than a place to meet," Duff said. "It's a place for veterans to meet, a place to know that someone has your six."

Past VFW State Cmdr. Brett Nila added that officials were happy to see the post open in the middle of the community.

Last month, members moved items from their former post at 400 E. Devon Ave. into the smaller Town Center location. The move resulted in the closure of the Devon Avenue building's bar and restaurant, both of which were losing money, according to Brenke. He said the move allows for a renewed focus on veteran services.

Unlike the darker Devon Avenue building, the new space



Near the front entrance of the new VFW Post 9284 are two ceremonial displays honoring service members: a Fallen Soldier Battle Cross and a Missing Man Table. (Tom Robb/Journal photo)

features a bright main room with floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides, white walls and floors, a small office, storage space and restrooms.

Near the front entrance, two ceremonial displays honor service members: a Fallen Soldier Battle Cross — composed of boots, a rifle and a helmet — and a Missing Man Table set with traditional symbolic items, including an upside-down glass, a single red flower and an empty chair adorned with a POW/MIA symbol.

While open, the location is not fully complete. Brenke said a mural will be painted on an interior wall, flagpoles will be installed on a grassy area outside, and a new exterior sign is being crafted.

The VFW's relocation was prompted by ComEd's \$7.25 million purchase of two lots at the Devon Avenue site, according to utility spokesman David O'Dowd. ComEd plans to build a large electrical substation on the property.

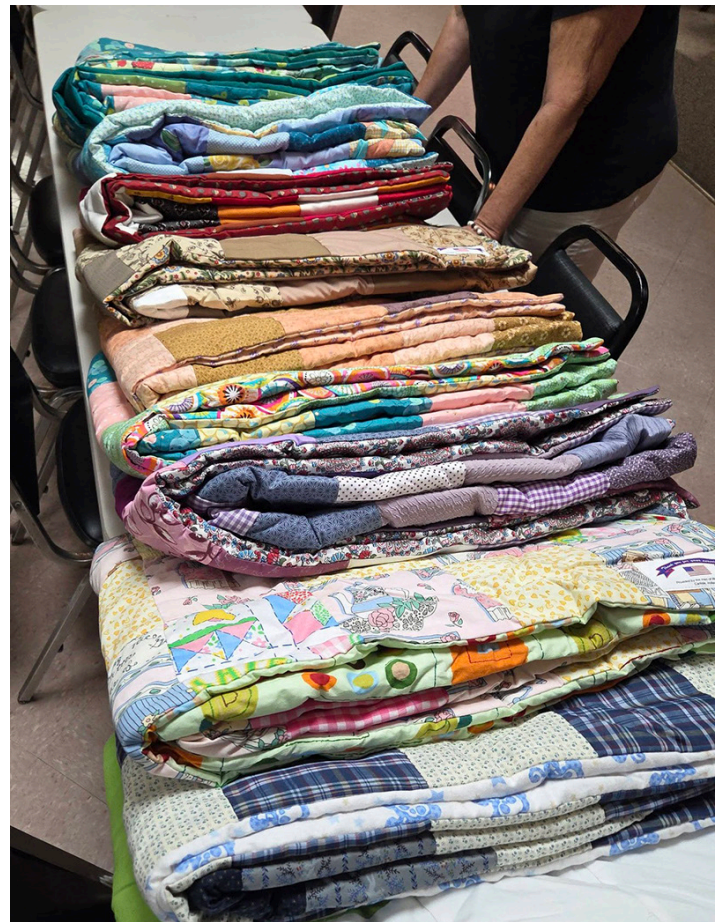


A standing-room-only crowd, estimated at about 200, fills the new VFW Post 9284 home at a ribbon-cutting and opening of the new post at 960 Elk Grove Town Center on Saturday, Aug. 15. (Tom Robb/Journal photo)

Wabash Correctional Center Donates Quilts to Post 2244 for Nursing Home Bound Veterans



Wabash Valley Correction Facility, Carlisle, Indiana, donated Ambrow Post 2244 with 60 quilts for distribution to our nursing home bound Veterans for their warmth and comfort.





Standing room only for State Commander Rob Bailey's first Council of Administration meeting Aug. 7 in Joliet.

Illinois VFW Conducts Department Business



District 4 Commander Evamarie Duff received her All-State District Commander hat during the Council of Administration meeting. District 4, and Duff, was the only All-State District during the 2025-2026 year.



State Commander Rob Bailey presents Junior Past State Commander Eugene Blackwell with a Past Department Commander pin.

HAVE YOU PLANNED YOUR POST OR DISTRICT BUDDY POPPY PROGRAM FOR THIS YEAR?

Now's the Time to:

- Plan your Post or District Buddy Poppy Program.
- Determine the amount of Buddy Poppies needed for:
 - Buddy Poppy Distribution
 - Buddy Poppy display(s)
- Place an Order through Department Headquarters

HONOR ★ SUPPORT ★ REMEMBER





The 2026-2027 Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary District Presidents.

2026-2027 Department Auxiliary Officers

The 2026-2027 Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary line officers.



Krull Visits VA Hospitals



Department of Illinois VFW Legislative Co-Chairman John Lawson brief the Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary Council of Administration in August on the Take Care of America's Veterans Act.



VAVS rep Mercie Woolfolk, Hospital Chairman Laura Knackstedt, Dept President Danielle Krull & VAVS deputy Shirley Vega at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital, Aug. 6.



Department Auxiliary President Danielle Krull presents Department Commander Rob Bailey with a replica of his logo during the Joint Commander and President homecoming in Joliet.



VAVS rep Joanne York, Dept President Danielle Krull and Hospital Chairman Laura Knackstedt at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, Aug. 6.



Dept Hospital Chairman Laura Knackstedt, Dept President Danielle Krull and Wisconsin Auxiliary President Charlene Cobb at Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center.

New Pins for Jefferson Barracks Bowling Alley



The bowling alley at Jefferson Barracks received 90 new bowling pins compliments of Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary. Accepting the donation from VAVS Representative Kathy Rowold and Deputy Emma Sue Wienhoff are Marcena Gunter, Chief-Center for Development & Civic Engagement and Christina Brown, Recreation Therapist Supervisor at JB.



Purrfect Pet for Jefferson Barracks Residents

Thanks to Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary Jefferson Barracks hospital program donations, JB received their first robotic pet!

Some of the residents have allergies and others are not stable enough to leave them alone with a visiting dog or cat so this robotic pet feels like and makes sounds like the real thing! It helps relieve anxiety and calm the patients.

The hospital is excited to have a cat naming contest with the veterans.



Accepting the pet cat from Kat, VAVS Representative for JB, were Marcena Gunter, Chief Center for Development & Civic Engagement; Candace Ifabiyi, Medical Ctr Director; and Dr Albina Riley, Assistant Director.



Chicagoland Young Marines salute after they place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery.

Young Marines Visit Washington, D.C.

Chicagoland Young Marines visited Washington, D.C. Aug. 6-9.

The Chicagoland Young Marines are part of Leyden Township VFW Post 5979.

Out of 34 Young Marines in the unit, 18 Young Marines attended with several adult volunteers. The Young Marines are ages eight years old through 18.

The highlights of the visit included:

- **Wreath-Laying Ceremony:** Four Young Marines — YM Staff Sergeant Tobin Munoz, YM Sgt Josephine Lyons, YM Lance Corporal Jett Hoffman, and YM Lance Corporal Dax Pedregosa — placed a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

- **Promotions:** Three Young Marines were promoted in the main lobby of the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Virginia. Maj. Gen. (ret.) James W. Lukeman was passing by and kindly agreed to perform the promotions.



Young Marines place a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery.



Three Young Marines were promoted in the main lobby of the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Virginia. Maj. Gen. (ret.) James W. Luke-man performed the promotions.



Col. Gina Stramaglio, a member of Elk Grove VFW Post 9284, received a Proclamation marking July 4, 2026 as “Gina Stramaglio Day” in honor of her promotion from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel. Mayor Craig Johnson and the Village Board of Trustees presented the Proclamation after Colonel Stramaglio spoke at the re dedication of the Elk Grove Cemetery. Stramaglio is pictured with VFW Post 9284’s Commander Alexander G. Brenke and Fire Chief Richard Mikel.



Medal of Honor Hero: Army Cpl. Jake Alex

By David Vergun

Army Cpl. Jake Alex earned the Medal of Honor for extraordinary courage while leading his men forward under heavy fire during the Battle of Amiens in World War I.

Alex was born Angelko Alex Mandushich July 13, 1887, in Streska, near Prizren, in the Kosovo Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire, present-day Kosovo. He was of ethnic Serbian descent, born to Sava A. Mandushich and Savka Sosevich. He married Valinka Mandushich, per the 1930 U.S. census. They had two daughters and a son.

Alex immigrated to the United States, sailing from Bremen, Germany, about June 1912, according to his 1919 form requesting naturalization and a passport, and changed his name to Jake Alex.

He enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard on April 27, 1917, just weeks after the United States entered World War I, April 6, 1917.

On the day Alex earned the Medal of Honor, Aug. 9, 1918, he was assigned to Company H, 131st Infantry Regiment, 33rd Infantry Division, at Chipilly Ridge, France, about 75 miles north of Paris.

His citation reads that at a critical point in the fighting, when the platoon commander and all the noncommissioned officers of his platoon become casualties, he took command and led the men forward until the advance was stopped by enemy machine-gun fire.

Alex then advanced alone for about 30 yards in the face of intense enemy fire and attacked the machine-gun nest. He killed five enemy soldiers with his bayonet, and when it broke, he

used the butt of his rifle to smash the enemy. During the fighting, he captured 15 prisoners.

The action at Chipilly Ridge occurred during the Battle of Amiens, which took place Aug. 8-11, 1918. Alex and the rest of the 33rd Infantry Division would later fight in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the Second Battle of the Somme and the Battle of Saint-Mihiel.

The Medal of Honor was presented to Alex on April 22, 1919, in Ettelbruck, Luxembourg, by Army Gen. John J. Pershing, who commanded the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I.

Alex was honorably discharged from the Army on June 4, 1919, as a sergeant. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen Sept. 16, 1919.

After returning from the war, he worked for a time at the Morris & Co. meat-packing plant in Chicago, where the employees referred to him as Sgt. Jake. The 1930 U.S. census lists Alex as a construction foreman in Cook County, Illinois, and it also lists the value of his home at \$1,800.

In 1931, Alex, who was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was invited by the Illinois governor to attend an address by President Herbert Hoover at the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield, Illinois, which he accepted.

Alex retired from the Chicago municipal water department in 1954. In December 1958, the Disabled American Veterans of Illinois presented him with a color television. Most people had black-and-white televisions at that time.

He died Aug. 28, 1959, and was buried at the Serbian Orthodox Cemetery and Monastery of Saint Sava in Libertyville, Illinois.



Cpl. Jake Alex earned the Medal of Honor for World War I actions at Chipilly Ridge, Aug. 8-11, 1918.



The Think Tank (Duane Hisel, Jayson Hoffman, Clarke Christiansen, Bobby Welch, and Ryan Higginbotham) present Department Commander Rob Bailey with a blanket during the Joint Commander and President Homecoming celebration in Joliet.



National VFW Chief of Staff Adam Wallace delivers remarks to the attendees of the VFW Council of Administration in August.



Past Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mihelcic and National Chief of Staff Adam Wallace present the Commander's Warrant to Department Commander Rob Bailey during the homecoming.

District 5 Hosts Annual Commander's Picnic



District 5 Post 7448 held our Annual Commander's Picnic Aug 1st. Special guest National Ambassador Kim McWilliams joined us along with other District 5 post and auxiliary members. Together with the community of Winthrop Harbor \$5000 was raised for a local veteran needing a ramp to get in and out of his home.



New Flag Raised at Ogden Manor



Naperville VFW Post 3873 conducted a flag raising at Ogden Manor. When the Post got there, someone had untied the knot and almost pulled the line totally out of the pulley system.

Thanks to the Naperville Fire Department who came out and rescued the proverbial cat in the tree with one of their ladder trucks. The flag has been duly raised, and the community there was very appreciative of the effort to make it happen!



Happy Birthday to America



Judd Kendall VFW Post 3873, Naperville, celebrated America's 250th anniversary July 3 as members placed hundreds of flags around the VFW. Led by Post Commander Staci Boyer, along with combined color guard with American Legion Post 43, along with Post 3873 VFW and Auxiliary members, the Post honored America's 250th birthday. (Photos by Jim Hoch)



BROTHERHOOD BORN IN BATTLE

Veterans Reflect on Role in 2013 Defense of Forward Operating Base Ghazni

***What Began as 'Normal' Day for
Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers
in Afghanistan Ends with 6-Hour
Battle as Taliban Insurgents Attack
Forward Operating Base Ghazni***

***By Barbara Wilson
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs***

***An old adage describes a normal day in war as
"months of boredom punctuated by moments of terror."***

Such can be said of Aug. 28, 2013, when Taliban forces attacked Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ghazni, Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device packed with approximately two-tons of explosives to breach the east perimeter of the base, allowing suicide bombers onto the FOB. Throughout the six-hour attack, U.S., Polish, and Afghan forces endured indirect fire from rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire.

Continued on Page 60

A plume of smoke rises in the air following an attack by insurgents at Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, Aug. 28, 2013.



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers serving as Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 display an Illinois state flag during the team's Freedom Salute event in early 2014. August 28 marked the 13th anniversary of a Taliban attack on the base on which 16 members of the Illinois Army National Guard's Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 were deployed alongside Polish Land Forces.

Sixteen Soldiers from the Illinois Army National Guard deployed to FOB Ghazni in 2013 as part of Bilateral Embedded Staff Team (BEST A-11). BEST missions allowed Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers to train and deploy side-by-side with their Polish counterparts.

For Col. Chris Lawson, Command Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards, 1st Sgt. Johnny O'Brien, Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy Buttram, and Capt. Tristan Myers, Aug. 28, 2013, started out as just a normal day in Afghanistan. Until it wasn't.

"There were no real indicators something was going to happen," Edwards said.

Edwards, a member of Menard County Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6871 in Petersburg, Illinois, and Polish Army Brig. Gen. Marek Sokolowski, the commander of Task Force White Eagle at FOB Ghazni, began their day at the Tactical Operations Center, each going through paperwork and checking their computers. Lawson began his day in meetings, first with the 101st Airborne Division, and later with

the Polish Army staff. Buttram began his workday at the training, education and simulations office going over the day's work plans. Myers, the battle captain, began his day in the TOC receiving the overnight update from night battle captain Master Sgt. Marcus Cox. O'Brien, a member of Horace F. Ortt Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 540 in Dixon, Illinois, as the FOB's 'mayor,' started his day on a conference call working to secure needed items.

"The only thing typical about any given day was that there was nothing typical about any given day in Afghanistan," Myers said.

Shortly before the attack, Lawson was in his room changing clothes to go workout. Edwards was at the dentist's office, accompanying Sokolowski to his appointment. Buttram was in the operations shack showing Soldiers how to get to the materials yard on the base map. At some point around midday, Myers did something he rarely did - he left the TOC.

"It was almost a weird day in the respect I left the TOC midday," said Myers. "Major Jesse Wright

“The only thing typical about any given day was that there was nothing typical about any given day in Afghanistan.”

Capt. Tristan Myers
BEST A-11 Battle Captain

called me over to his office to discuss an upcoming operation.”

At about 4 p.m. the ‘normal’ day turned into anything but normal as an explosion tore a 100-foot hole in the FOB’s perimeter wall, allowing Taliban insurgents access to FOB Ghazni.

“I’m sitting in a chair leaned up against a wall while the dentist is working on the general’s teeth. We’re just sitting there, laughing and bullshitting like we always do, and suddenly a horrific boom goes off and knocks me off my stool,” Edwards said. “General Sokolowski and I look at each other, and our thoughts were ‘this had to happen just right outside’. Both of us run out the front door to see where this hole is. There’s nothing near us but as I look around, I tell him it’s near the Copperhead Compound where the unmanned aerial vehicles are kept.”

The two jumped into the general’s vehicle and

started toward the TOC to manage things.

Meanwhile, Buttram found himself on the floor in the operations shack from the blast. He checked to make sure he and the other Soldiers in his office were okay.

“For a brief moment, everything was disoriented. My instinct was to check myself for injuries,” Buttram said. “I looked around the room and made sure everyone else was okay before moving to the operations shack door.”

In the S-3 shop, the next thing Myers remembered was picking himself up off the floor.

“There’s a loud explosion, and suddenly I’m on the floor, my head is ringing, I have tunnel vision, and I look over and see Dan and Jesse,” Myers said. “I think Jesse’s up at this point and he’s yelling asking if I’m okay.”

Lawson said he was in his room changing into



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers, along with Polish Land Forces, Afghan National Army Soldiers, and tenant units deployed to Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, work to reconstruct a perimeter wall and seal a breach caused when Taliban insurgents blew up a truck filled with explosives Aug. 28, 2013. Sixteen Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan as Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 alongside Polish Land Forces when the attack occurred.

workout clothes when the percussion lifted the roof off his building.

"The blast knocked me down and blew the doors off mine and Sergeant Major Edwards' rooms," Lawson said. "I don't know how long I was out because when I got off the ground, all I heard outside was gunfire."

As Edwards and Sokolowski headed toward the TOC, they saw smoke rising into the air.

"There's several rocket propelled grenades being launched into the FOB now," Edwards said. "We stop and jump out of the general's vehicle. A Polish Soldier runs by. The general grabs him, takes his rifle and body armor and throws it on and sends the Polish Soldier back to safety."

In the operations shack, Buttram opens the door and said it was white outside.

"I yelled outside to see if anyone was hurt," he said. "I realized I needed to gear up, so I grabbed my battle rattle. By then the dust cloud began to clear and I could see a massive mushroom cloud rising at the rear of the base."

Elsewhere on FOB Ghazni, O'Brien was caught by surprise.

"Once they called FOB Con Black, I grabbed Polish Army Captain Guaus' Body Armor and threw it on," he said. "My body armor was in my room. I had my 9mm sidearm but was wishing I had a long rifle at that time."

O'Brien said at least he had a firearm.

"We started hearing booms, explosions, and gunfire. The gunfire seemed like it was coming from everywhere. It was all around us," he said.

O'Brien described the moment as confusing.

"It was like 'what is going on right now?'" he said. "Captain Guaus came back to grab his stuff, so I took off his body armor."

From inside the S-3 shop, Myers said the first assumption was that a rocket had struck nearby. He stumbled through the door and looked across the courtyard.

"I saw a massive mushroom cloud, five or six stories high," Myers said. "It was the largest one I've ever seen. My first instinct was to run toward the blast. I enlisted as an infantryman and everything in me said to move toward the breach and fill the gap."

Instead, he forced himself to turn right and run back into the TOC. It went against his training and



An aerial view of Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan. August 28 marks the 13th anniversary of a Taliban attack on the base on which 16 members of the Illinois Army National Guard's Bilateral Embedded Staff Team A-11 were deployed alongside Polish Land Forces.



A Blackhawk helicopter provides aerial support above Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan.

instinct, and he said he carried shame for not running directly to the breach. Only later did he understand that the TOC was where he needed to be.

"As the battle captain, my role was not to fight at the breach but to coordinate the defense of the FOB and help save lives across the base," he said.

As Buttram exited the operations shack, the white cloud began to dissipate.

"Gunfire began erupting across the base," Buttram said. "Most of the gunfire seemed to be coming from the direction of the explosion. We could hear gunfire from several other directions across the installation."

"We started moving toward the blast site when Myers' voice came across the base loudspeaker 'FOB Con Black. I repeat FOB Con Black. Enemy are inside the base,'" Buttram said. "We realized the situation had escalated drastically. We were no longer just responding to an explosion, enemy fighters had breached the base perimeter."

"General Sokolowski and I headed toward the outer perimeter of where Copperhead is," Edwards said. "As we get there, an insurgent is laying on the ground just outside the compound. We engage and neutralize him."

Edwards said that outside the compound is a runway that goes out with three or four containers on the left side.

"General Sokolowski and I are looking in that direction and as we do, another insurgent comes around the end of the containers running toward us,"

he said. "We engage him and he falls."

Edwards said they engaged and neutralized three insurgents.

"I look behind me at the five-gallon fuel cans behind us in the tent," Edwards said. "One has a bullet hole in it and fuel is pouring out. I grab the general and tell him we have to go as I tell him about the fuel leak."

"All I had was my 9mm sidearm," he said. "As soon as I engaged the third insurgent, I noticed my slide had locked back. I was out of ammunition. I dropped the magazine and as I reached down, I realized I wasn't wearing my body armor just my Army uniform. I thought 'now what do I do?'"

Edwards said he told Sokolowski he's out of ammunition and a U.S. Navy lieutenant commander offered Edwards his rifle.

As they head to the TOC, they meet up with O'Brien.

"I met up with Sergeant Major Edwards between where I was and the TOC where he was headed," O'Brien said. "We needed to get an accountability for all of the BEST Soldiers. There was one we hadn't heard from yet and communication was terrible. Not everyone had cell phones, we didn't have radios, and that made it difficult to get in contact with everyone on the spur of the moment."

O'Brien and Edwards set out to locate the unaccounted-for Soldier.

"I'm walking with Sergeant Major Edwards and I told him I really wish I had my stuff with me," O'Brien said. "He hands me an M4. Our equipment had close combat optic or advanced combat optical gunsight for sites. The M4 he handed me didn't have anything. I ask him where he got this."

O'Brien said Edwards tells him how he came in possession of the M4.

While O'Brien and Edwards were looking for the Soldier, they went to O'Brien's room where he grabbed his body armor and M4. It was there the two found the Soldier, on the roof in a defensive position.

"I remember walking around with the sergeant major who was very big on checking on everyone and making sure they were where they needed to be," O'Brien said.

Lawson said he didn't know how long he was out before getting up off the ground.



Illinois Army National Guard Soldiers who served alongside Polish Land Forces, Afghan National Army Soldiers, and other U.S. troops, pause for a group photo just days after Taliban insurgents attacked Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, Aug. 28, 2013.

"All I heard was gunfire outside," he said. "I grabbed my weapon, locked and loaded, and went out the back door because that's where the explosion came from."

Lawson said as soon as he exited the building, there were rockets coming into the base.

"We had a bunch of holes from rockets and grenade launchers on the back of our building," he said. "We found out later those were coming from suicide bombers that had come in and were outfitted with grenade launchers and incendiary accelerants. They had ropes with cans around their neck where they can put on buildings and light them on fire."

Lawson said he headed toward the TOC and an RPG came in front of him where the first of the 10th Mountain Division Headquarters was at.

"They have what's called CHIGOs. They are split units, an

air conditioner and a heater," he said. "That RPG hit that CHIGO and blew it up. I hit the ground and waited. I'm like, 'okay, I'm alright,' and get up."

Lawson said he kept running to the TOC and was thankful the base had running passwords.

"Everyone on the FOB has weapons in the ready and you're running around corners," he said. "So you'd run around a corner and have muzzles in your face because they didn't know if you're a good guy or bad guy. I'm glad we had it because I probably used it 20 times with people staring me down with their weapons. They know me, but when you're frightened that happens."

Edwards said he and Sokolowski got in the general's vehicle and headed toward the TOC.

"We get to the TOC where you can get a better idea of what's going on from the video

screens," Edwards said. "There was a huge plume of fire and smoke that enveloped the area at Copperhead."

Edwards said it's important to note Sokolowski was to the left of him during the engagements.

"We get to the TOC and I look over at General Sokolowski and he had a rip in the sleeve of his uniform with some blood," Edwards said. "The general had caught a piece of buckshot in his shoulder. When the second insurgent we engaged fell, he detonated his vest. His vest was filled with buckshot. When the vest detonates buckshot goes everywhere and the general got hit in the arm. I feel fortunate that being right there, I didn't get injured."

Edwards was fortunate indeed.

Buttram said FOB Ghazni was laid out like a maze, built from HESCO barriers. Because of the layout there wasn't a straight path to the blast site, and we had to maneuver through the base to reach it.

"As we moved through the FOB, we could hear multiple explosions nearby," Buttram said. "Those were RPG strikes fired by Taliban fighters attacking the base from multiple directions. As we reached an opening near the helicopter runway, another RPG struck a drone fuel pod, causing it to explode and catch fire. That way was blocked."

Buttram said the three navigated through the dining facility supply area.

"While moving through that area, two additional RPGs struck food supply containers causing additional fires," he said. "We quickly extinguished them and continued pushing toward the blast site."

When they reached an opening that gave a clear view of the perimeter, they could see the scale of the damage.

"There was a massive breach about 100 feet long in the barrier wall," Buttram said. "The breach was caused by a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device from a jingle truck. A jingle truck is just a cargo truck. But in Afghanistan, they decorate everything. They had decorations on that truck with little metal things that jingle. We called them jingle trucks. This guy had pulled up right next to the base wall, got out and he detonated it from the front. When it detonated it had pulverized 100 feet of sand, which is thousands of cubic tons of sand."

Buttram said the truck had been loaded with approximately 4,000 lbs. of explosives.

He described the barrier walls measuring about seven feet tall, seven feet wide, and seven feet thick. The wall was constructed with two barriers at the base and a second single layer stacked across the top.

As they assessed the breach, Buttram said Wisniewski turned to him and said 'that hole needs to be fixed. Do you think you can find a way to close it up?'

"During the past five months on FOB Ghazni, I had built relationships with several tenant units across the base," Buttram said. "Because of those connections, I knew immediately what needed to be done. I shared my plan with Major Wisniewski. Master Sergeant Foster and I set out on foot across the base to gather manpower and equipment."

Buttram said they stopped at three different units, coordinating support and directing Soldiers to assist with rebuilding the wall.

"The biggest challenge was none of the units had heavy equipment to fill the barriers with sand," he said. "My last stop was the local national equipment motor pool, where construction equipment was stored. The yard housed dozers, excavators, forklifts, and most importantly - a front loader."

Buttram said he got into the front loader and his heart sank as he realized there were no keys.

"There were no keys, but two bare wires were hanging down," he said. "I held my breath, touched the wires together and the engine fired up. I thought 'well today I'm going to steal a front loader.' I drove it



A view from inside Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan.

to the meetup site and as a unit went to the wall."

Buttram said part of the problem to figure out was how to fill the enormous crater in the ground.

"We couldn't put the walls there because it wouldn't do anything," he said. "I used the front loader and filled it as much as I could then we built a wall parallel to the crater. We didn't fill in the gap, but making a bubble with the barrier walls."

Buttram said over the next four hours, more than two dozen American and Polish Soldiers worked together under fire to construct a parallel wall behind the destroyed section of the perimeter, as they endured intermittent direct and indirect fire from small arms and RPGs.

"We had to hunker down and keep working," he said. "We finally got to the point where we had a wall we know was at least going to prevent people from just running in. Between the temporary wall or beginning of that new wall, we finally got to the point while we were not breathing easy, we were in a better spot."

Buttram said the team was told later it was the most coordinated attack to date in the war on a base.

"The attack included the VBIED, about 15 suicide bombers and another 60 or more RPG strikes on the base," he said.

Buttram described the actions of the servicemembers working to rebuild the perimeter wall as heroic.

"Within about 45 minutes of us identifying the

“ I need to get back to my five-year-old daughter. She doesn’t need to hear stories of me. She needs to know me.”

1st Sgt. Johnny O’Brien
BEST A-11 First Sergeant

gigantic breach in the wall, we were rebuilding,” he said. “Everyone pushed so hard, pushed themselves and each other to work hard. It was so inspiring to see that teamwork.”

“My initial reaction was ‘is this real’? Is this really happening?” Buttram said. “That went away quickly. As we were running through the base, there was a young private just walking around scared to death. He came up to me and asked what do I do? I gave him a sector. Told him we know enemy is on the base. I need you to watch here to here. If you see anyone come through you have to take care of them.

“That calmness gave him a purpose,” Buttram said. “When we found out there was enemy on the base, you revert to your military training. What do I do is not part of the thought process at that point. Your training is engrained. It’s in there.”

Buttram said from his vantage point, staying calm and working as a team were the most heroic things

his team did that day.

“As we were making our way through the base toward the breach, there were explosives. There were RPGs,” he said. “It would have been easy to say ‘I can’t do this today’, turn around and go the other way. But for us, this is happening. This is bad and we just kept going.

“Each of those two dozen Soldiers putting together that wall were heroes that day as well,” he said. “We were under the continuous threat of indirect fire. We would stop long enough to be safe but we kept going. They showed no fear. They just did their job.”

Buttram said the deployment changed him.

“When I left the United States, I was one person and when I came home I was someone else,” he said. “Not because of what happened, but because of the people I served with. We were relying on each other to get the job done. They made me stronger and I made them stronger.”



U.S. forces inspect a crater in a road outside FOB Ghazni.

Buttram described the teamwork demonstrated while the team rebuilt the wall was “at a level he’d not seen before.”

“Usually when you’re working with a lot of people, it gets a little diluted or too much is happening,” he said. “But between myself, Sergeant O’Brien who met me at the wall, and Derek my Polish counterpart, we were really instructing the whole piece. We weren’t instructing step by step. It was ‘we gotta get that wall up guys’. No babysitting anyone. Everyone got in there and did it while feeding off each other’s energy.”

Lawson said during the attack, the insurgents blew up an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).

“We had a unit operating UAVs and they kept an abundance of fuel used to fuel their drones,” Lawson said. “An RPG made a direct hit on it, blew it up and it was on fire. I ran into General Sokolowski and Sergeant Major Edwards who I found out later were at the point where the insurgents were coming in. We went to the TOC and the general said we got to get on this. At that point, there are multiple fires on the base. At that point I don’t know where we’re at or what buildings are structurally unsafe to occupy, like the mess hall.”

Lawson said at that point, the three of them went to the Polish fire brigade.

“We find out that more than two-thirds of their Soldiers are going home in three days,” he said. “The fire chief asks for volunteers but no one under the age of 25, which makes the Soldiers younger than 25 years old mad. He changed that to only volunteers and the fire brigade rallied to extinguish the three fires.”

Once the fires were extinguished, Lawson said the fire brigade Soldiers joined in rebuilding the perimeter wall.

Lawson said that while most of BEST A-11 were working to secure the base, one Soldier was orchestrating the fight from within the TOC.

“What was great about BEST A-11 is there wasn’t anyone who was a duplicate version of another teammate,” Lawson said. “Captain Tristan Myers had the toughest experience. He was one of our youngest officers and as battle captain, had one of the most difficult jobs in a difficult environment. When scary things happen in the TOC, it goes Polish. By that I mean the Polish staff starts speaking Polish. The demand for information also skyrockets and Tristan was never shaken.”

Lawson said when the announcement came over the speaker system the base was under attack; it was Myers who made the announcement.

“FOB Con Black, get to your fighting positions, get ready to defend at all costs,” he said. “I remember thinking this is real. I didn’t know it was Tristan’s job



Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter presents the Bronze Star Medal for valor to Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards Sept. 15, 2013, on Forward Operating Base Ghazni. Edwards was recognized for his actions during an insurgent attack Aug. 28, 2013, on the base. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Les Long)

to give announcements when we’re being attacked.”

Lawson said once things slowed down, Myers wouldn’t leave the TOC.

“I’m like Tristan, we’ve got Marcus for the night shift,” he said. “You need to get some sleep. But none of us slept for 48 hours.”

Myers believed the decision to run to the TOC reflected something Sokolowski had seen in him when he was selected as the battle captain during training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

“If I was not in the TOC, then no one was coordinating the defense, answering questions or directing the response,” he said.

When Myers reached the TOC, the room was in disarray. Monitors and indicators used to maintain the battle space were offline. Doors had been blown off buildings.

“The first thing I say is get me some flipping eyes on the breach. I’m talking a little bit in Polish, asking them to get a monitor up. Phones are ringing, radios are chattering, and everything’s all happening at once,” Myers said.

Once he saw enough to understand the threat, he moved to the public address system and issued the alert of FOB Condition Black – the highest threat level. The FOB was under attack, the perimeter had been breached, and insurgents were attempting to overrun the base.



Myers told his Polish counterparts to contact the Afghan National Army to establish an outer cordon immediately. With the breach still active and the number of insurgents uncertain, he needed friendly forces outside the perimeter and clear communication to avoid confusion.

The Afghan forces responded quickly, moving to establish the outer cordon. Because the situation was confusing and fast-moving, Myers later used the loud speaker to make it clear Afghan Army forces were outside the FOB and should not be mistaken for the attackers.

At the same time, Myers said attackers were also moving on the west side of the FOB. Multiple vehicles pulled up near the hotel complex and people began unloading weapons, including RPGs. They did not appear to realize a Polish sniper team was already positioned there, watching the activity unfold.

The sniper team waited until the final person unloaded the last piece of equipment, then shot them all, ending the western prong of the attack before it could begin.

Buttram said the attack on FOB Ghazni brought the members of BEST A-11 close.

"We all experienced something that no one should ever have to experience, but it did. It happened to us," he said. "You always wonder what if something

extreme happens? How am I going to handle it? We all handled it extremely well. I know what Sergeant Foster and I did, running around and getting all those things. I know what that felt like, but everyone has their own story. Everyone experienced the attack their own way."

Buttram said the group didn't talk about it a lot initially.

"It wasn't until a couple of weeks later Sergeant Major Edwards and I were sitting out back and really started talking about it," Buttram said. "That was the first time I think he talked about his experience that day. By that time, I had developed a strong friendship with a lot of the guys there, but I had an extraordinary relationship with Sergeant Major Edwards."

Buttram said he couldn't have that conversation at that level with the other team members.

"My connections with those guys are different," Buttram said. "They are my best friends but in different ways. I don't see them every day. But when we say we'll give our life for anyone out there. There's not a day in time when we wouldn't do anything for those guys."

Buttram, who received a Bronze Star partly for his actions that day, said one of the other awards he received meant more to him.

"I was awarded a Navy Achievement Medal," he said. "First Sergeant O'Brien and I were each awarded the medal by the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy in recognition of the things we did. That one holds a special place because as a Soldier in the Army, cross-service awards don't happen very often."

Buttram said training was the key to the deployment's success and the team's actions during the attack.

"It's leadership," Buttram said. "It's the people you serve with. I'd go anywhere with General Lawson. When I got a chance to meet him in recruiting, he motivated us to change as people really blew me away. When I was selected to serve under his command during the 2013 deployment, that same power came from him. He drove strength into us every day."

Buttram said the attack was worrisome for the families at home.

"When the attack occurred our families were notified," Buttram said. "They were aware the base was under attack. We were going through all of these things and the next morning when I had a chance to regroup, I fired up the computer and just do a quick 'hey how's it going?' She'd been up for the last 12 hours, not knowing if her husband is alive or dead."

Buttram said at that moment he realized what families go through when loved ones deploy.

"It's not just that person who deploys," he said.

"Families deploy as well. She took care of the house. She did things she never did before. She was proud of it and I was proud of her for it. But it was that moment you know she had been facing the unknown. She was there with family and friends wondering what's happening. When I finally got a chance to talk to her and tell her things were good, I could see the relief on her face. She had been through her own type of battle. They all did, all the spouses of the BEST team."

As small teams, the Soldiers serving on BEST missions wear multiple hats.

"My role on the BEST mission was to descope or reduce the size of the base," Buttram said. "It turned into a handoff mission to the Afghan National Army. One month I was looking for different places to tear down or restructure. The next month I was building up a compound for the Afghan National Army."

Buttram said he wasn't sure what to make of the attack initially.

"The very first thing I thought as the attack started was is this real?" he said. "I can still remember my thought process was, this happened but it feels like a dream. I feel like I'm in a movie right now. Is this really happening? That went away quickly."

Buttram said the deployment changed him.

"I'm a better person. I'm a stronger person. It took some time to react with me when I got back home. I wouldn't change it. From a Soldier perspective I got a chance to prove to myself I could do it and that felt good," he said. "I've been in leadership roles most of my career, both in the military and my civilian career. I've always had the ability to talk to people. It was always difficult for me to say no a lot of times. I didn't have the same backbone that maybe other people did. When I came home, I definitely had more backbone. My wife said I left a girl and came back a man."

O'Brien said the first thing he thought when the assault started was 'holy moly'.

"The initial push by the insurgents was crazy," O'Brien said. "Holy cow, this is real."

O'Brien said walking around with Edwards seeing the different unexploded RPGs and the craters was chaos. But weighing heavy on his mind was getting home to his five-year-old daughter.

"If I got to go, I'm going to go like this," he said. "My thoughts were I need to get back to my five-year-old daughter. She doesn't need to hear stories of me. She needs to know me."

While O'Brien said he didn't witness acts of heroism, he heard a few heroic stories.

"The things that stand out in my mind are Sergeant Buttram stealing the front loader, and

putting out fires behind the dining facility," O'Brien said. "I saw Sergeant Major Edwards was eliminating the threats of suicide bombers running onto the base. Those are some things I heard firsthand because of my teammates."

"As we go on, we hear about Staff Sergeant Michael Ollis who was killed. It was a big deal because he was killed shielding a Polish officer," he said. "What was he doing? Come to find out he was just in transit. I think he was supposed to leave the next morning to go to Bagram and then go home."

O'Brien said that's an inspiring story because it shows true brotherhood.

"It doesn't matter. Team up with a Polish counterpart that you just met," he said. "No language needed, just a common goal. Stop the threat and save lives."

Edwards said in his view Buttram was one of the battle's heroes.

"We're still under attack and we have an exposed perimeter wall that anyone could walk through," Edwards said. "He grabbed up a crew, including Polish, Afghan and American Soldiers, local nationals and orchestrated the rebuilding of the wall. He was like, 'we're not quitting until this wall's put back together'. He and his group worked through the night, building that wall back up to where we had a defensive wall. In my view, that was heroic."

O'Brien said the brotherhood forged in battle has brought the team closer.



The mess hall at Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, reopened about a month after the attack.

"Knowing everyone was doing what they were supposed to do throughout the night just brought us all closer together," he said. "Not everyone gets to experience something like that. Those who do, the people who you are with, the bond is forever. It's never going to be broken."

Edwards agreed.

"You develop a bond with these guys that is going to be forever," he said. "They all did the right things at the right times, stepping up. When you go through something like that together you develop a closeness. We're scattered everywhere but at a moment's notice I could call any one of those guys and say I need help, they would call the others and all be here. The same goes if any of them called me. It's not out of anything more than we've been through something together."

O'Brien said of the military medals and accolades he received for his actions that day, the most important one is the Afghan Star awarded by the Polish Army.

"All 16 members of the BEST mission received them," he said. "I didn't really know the importance of it until Staff Sergeant Ollis' family was presented one. This is a big deal."

O'Brien said he hopes BEST A-11 is remembered in history for their accomplishments.

"We did what we needed to do," he said. "We built an international bond that's forever. It's solid and will never be broken. The international friendships that are there are phenomenal but knowing that we played a key part in the FOB Ghazni defense is all you can really ask for."

Edwards said the events which happen during combat answer a lot of questions in any Soldier's mind.

"Every soldier who hasn't experienced actual combat has questions which always sits in the back of their mind. We all ask ourselves am I the guy? Would I step up whenever needed?," he said. "What happened that day answered in my mind of who I am and if I'm the Soldier who would step up whenever it's needed," he said. "It changed my outlook a lot on things after I got home about what's important. There's a lot of things people think are important but when you experience something like that, you realize what is truly important."

Edwards said he is thankful for the experience.

"As bad as it sounds, I'm thankful for the experience," he said. "I'm thankful I had the chance to be the guy who was at the breach to help do the little



Damage inside Forward Operating Base Ghazni, Afghanistan, caused by daily shelling from Taliban insurgents.

bit I did. I'm fortunate in so many ways. I came home unscathed and mostly undamaged."

Lawson said one of the first things following the initial blast which ran through his mind was training works.

"I know I probably had a concussion, but there was stuff to do," he said. "I automatically was doing it without even thinking about it. The other thing is I was proud of our leadership. General Sokolowski and Sergeant Major Edwards led from the front resulting in the general's injury. They say Soldiers do things no one else wants to do. You have dead insurgents on base. Someone has to pick them up. It's up to the base Soldiers to take care of this."

Lawson said one of his biggest challenges following the attack was keeping Soldiers' minds on the mission.

"Keeping the team together, not distracted, because you don't know what is going to happen any given day," he said. "We would have a team huddle every Sunday. You had to stay in your team's heads and you had to be able to maintain a brotherhood where you could tease each other but also make behavioral corrections."

Lawson said he needed accountability of the team after the initial blast.

"You have to know where all your people are," he said. "Some people can get this information quickly, some can't. If you're at the gym and you're attacked, you go find cover. They're not getting out of that cover until the all clear is given. We're not going to

“I’m thankful I had the chance to be the guy who was at the breach to help do the little bit I did.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards

BEST A-11 Command Sergeant Major

give an all clear until the base is clear. You then had to go find people. Accountability was my first order of business.”

Lawson said accountability was a challenge because of the dynamic of the team.

“The team is organized for all of them to be independent,” Lawson said. “They’re one deep so not necessarily out as a buddy team. They’re out handling their business, so they’re all over the base. We had accountability on all but one of the Soldiers. I’m out back talking to the sergeant major and I hear someone say ‘sir’. I look up and he’s in a fighting position on top of the roof. He said I figured I needed to get a fighting position so he just picked it. It took us a couple of hours to find him.”

Lawson said he’s proud of the heroic actions taken by the team that day.

“Sergeant Major Edwards responded to the suicide bombers without his M4 carbine,” Lawson said. “A Navy lieutenant also credits Sergeant Major Edwards for saving the lives of the people in his unit personally.”

Lawson also credits Chief Warrant Officer 3 Michael Clemens for running toward the gunfire.

“Chief Clemens, who was probably close to 60, ran to the gunfire as well with his weapon,” Lawson said.

He said the two Soldiers who most impressed him were Myers and Cox.

“The two I’m most impressed with were Tristan Myers and Marcus Cox. I think Tristan knew more Polish than Marcus, but when all this happened the TOC goes Polish immediately,” he said. “There’s no one speaking English so having to translate because the Polish didn’t want to take to explain it. Tristan and Marcus had a difficult time because everyone wanted information right then. Everything slowed down so much because of the language barrier.”

Lawson said he’s proud of the brotherhood formed as a result of the deployment.

“I’m proud of the pre-mobilization training because I can look back and say we made some strong connections during that time with our Polish counterparts,” he said. “During, and after, the attack, everyone got in where they fit and were doing things

they weren’t asked to do. They were willing to risk their own life to do this. You can’t not get emotional about it. You have all these people who when it came time to do your very best in the most stressful of situations just got it and did it. We laughed. We cried. I couldn’t have been blessed with a better team.”

Lawson makes it a point to stay connected with the members of the team.

Myers said he sought out serving on the BEST mission.

Myers said as an intelligence officer, he thought he would be assigned to the intelligence shop, and get to have a really cool experience working with Polish intelligence section.

Myers said during training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Sokolowski selected him to serve as the battle captain.

“Being a battle captain in the operations world, but having an intel background, I always looked at things with intel shaded glasses,” he said. “There was always talk of this grand attack that was going to happen on FOB Ghazni. FOB Ghazni was a very high profile target. We didn’t just take it with a grain of salt, but there was so much noise we did the best we could with the intel that we had. With all of my intel training I’ve had, there’s always this joke of when the talking stops, when the noise stops and things get quiet, that’s when the attack is going to happen. I won’t say that was the exact case in this instance, because even that morning we had reports of attacks coming. It’s one of my one of my regrets as an intel officer, I couldn’t see it coming. That’s been my entire job as a commissioned officer.”

Myers said even after 13 years, the team gets together as much as possible.

“I’m one of the younger guys on the team,” he said. “I’ve got younger kids so I haven’t been able to attend as much as I would like. But even without the attack, just because of the things we experienced as a team, it was a huge bonding experience anyway. Those are relationships that are going to last for a lifetime. When we get together, we have a good time. We have a few drinks to celebrate our brotherhood, the good times and sometimes the hard times.”

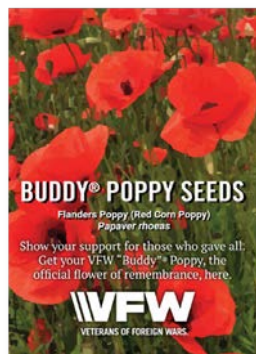


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