

# Illinois VFW News

VOL. 63, No. 1

JULY 2025

## State Convention 2025



# Department Commander and President Homecoming

Saturday, August 23, 2025 6:00 p.m.

Tinley Park Convention Center

Tinley Park, Illinois

Dinner tickets \$50.00 each with cash bar

To purchase tickets go to [vfwil.org](https://vfwil.org)

Donation tab, make note

Commander/President Homecoming

Or call 217-529-6688

Tickets will not be available after August 15th.



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# STATE COMMANDER'S COLUMN

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**Eugene Blackwell**  
**Commander**  
**Department of Illinois VFW**

It is truly a pleasure and honor to serve as your Department Commander for 2025-2026. Thank you for placing your trust in me. Congratulations to all comrades who were elected or appointed—I look forward to working with each of you. Together, we'll make this a fun, exciting, and productive year!

Working together makes us stronger. Our post comrades and auxiliary members are all in this together. As I work closely with my auxiliary counterpart, I expect all districts and posts will do the same. By partnering with the auxiliary, we create a force multiplier, expanding our reach and impact as we serve our communities with resilience. A force multiplier allows us to achieve greater effectiveness than our numbers alone would suggest—by leveraging teamwork, skills, and leadership, we can get more done with less. This teamwork helps us recruit new members and exceed our 101% membership goal for the year.

The Commander's Special Projects for this year are twofold. This year, my Commander's Special Projects will support the VFW National Home for Children, which provides critical services and a safe, healthy environment for Veterans, military families, and their children. The first is stocking the new canteen. The National Home is building a canteen to provide everyday items like milk, eggs, toiletries, refreshments, and produce. The nearest town is about 45 minutes away, so this will be a major help to families on campus. The goal is to provide seed money to stock the new canteen with essential items. The second is to partner on a 4-Wheel UTV. In partnership with the auxiliary, we also aim to help purchase a 4-Wheel UTV with a dump box. This vehicle will transport mulch, rock, and landscaping materials, and provide critical support for snow removal—greatly improving campus maintenance.

Keep important dates handy. Please review your leadership manual and the monthly general orders, and mark key dates in your planners now. Don't wait—this year will go by quickly.

Let's work together to reach our membership goal. Remember, the National VFW membership goal for 2025-2026 is 101%. The best time to work on membership is now. We need members to help support our programs, advocate for Veterans, and build camaraderie. Plus, there are some monetary awards for each post who reaches their membership by a certain date.

Thank you all for your service, dedication, and continued work on behalf of Veterans and our communities.

# AUXILIARY PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

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**Diane Ahrens**  
**President**  
**Department of Illinois**  
**VFW Auxiliary**

I am honored to be Illinois's 2025-2026 Department Auxiliary President, and I am looking forward to working with Commander Eugene and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The journey to this season has been full of adventures, meeting members not only in our state but across the Nation.

It was exciting to visit the Veteran Homes and Hospitals, to spend time in our Districts and to see how we do things a little differently yet keep the same rituals and bylaws.

Basic training is the beginning of our Armed Forces, it is designed to teach us to work together, united, marching as one, working toward the same goal, having one another's back, putting others before yourself. The VFW Auxiliary is also based on these same principles, that is why we have our rituals and bylaws, to keep us united, working toward the same goals.

We often lose sight of these goals when our local Auxiliaries and Posts focus only on their local unit, we lose sight that we are part of a much larger and greater purpose than our monthly meeting. Our Auxiliary Presidents and officers need to be encouraged to attend the district meetings and events, this is the starting point to seeing what we are truly about. Information shared from the National and Department level is shared at the District, when no one attends the district meeting the information isn't being passed on, Auxiliaries become stagnant (having no current or flow and often having an unpleasant smell as a consequence.)

Harsh words, yes but how often when we don't keep learning, growing, sharing with one another we create cliques, we forget our why, we just show up.

We are established to be fraternal, patriotic, historical, charitable and educational, to assist the Posts and members of the VFW. We have 10 programs that guide us in how we are to achieve these goals, it is imperative that members step up and take these leadership positions, again this is how we learn, by doing, asking, it makes us stronger.

# Blackwell, Ahrens Elected as Commander, President of Department VFW, Auxiliary

A retired Soldier and a Marine were elected to lead the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary for the 2025-2026 term at the organizations' respective annual conventions June 7.

Eugene Blackwell, who served in the military for more than 30 years and retired from the U.S. Army Reserves in 2014, and Diane Ahrens, who enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps at the age of 21, were elected as Department Commander and Department President respectively.

Both are excited about this new chapter in their lives as they continue to help veterans, albeit in different roles.

"Being elected as Department Commander of the Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars is a profound honor and represents a continued commitment to serve beyond my military career," Blackwell said. "During my 30 years as a commissioned officer, I learned invaluable lessons about leadership, camaraderie, duty, and honor—principles that continue to guide me today."

Ahrens expressed her appreciation to the convention delegates for the trust placed in her to lead the auxiliary.

"I am honored to be Illinois' 2025-2026 Department Auxiliary President, and I am looking forward to working with Commander Eugene and the Veterans of Foreign Wars," Ahrens said. "The journey to this season has been full of adventures, meeting members not only in our state but across the Nation."

Ahrens, of West Dundee, Illinois, joined as a life member of VFW Post 2298 Auxiliary, on the eligibility of her husband Roger, in December 2011.

Roger and Diane served in the Marine Corps; they met at Parris Island Recruit Base, South Carolina, where Roger was a Senior Drill instructor and Diane served as Military Police. Roger had served in Vietnam in 1968, right out of high school and again for the pull out in 1975.

Ahrens served as Auxiliary President 2014-18 at Dundee Post 2298, then as District 5 President 2018-2022.

In June, 2020 she was elected to the office of Department Guard for Illinois and began her journey



Above, newly elected State Commander Eugene Blackwell takes the oath of office administered by Past Commander-in-Chief Fritz Mihelcic. Below, State Commander Eugene Blackwell presents Past State Commander Maurice Bridges with a Past State Commander's Pin.





**Newly installed Department President Diane Ahrens returns the gavel to installing officer, Past Department President Billie Guthals during the Joint Installation Ceremony June 7 at the 106th annual VFW State Convention and the 101st Annual Auxiliary Convention in Springfield.**

through the chairs.

Diane served as VAVS deputy at Edward Hines Jr VA for several years.

Diane began Operation Sweet Life Inc, May 2021 which receives, stores and provides gently used furniture and

household items for veterans transitioning from homelessness.

She operates a 5,200 square foot warehouse in Elgin, Illinois.

Operation Sweet Life Inc., the Auxiliary President's special project for 25-26, collaborates with the VA HUD/VASH system and Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans when they have acquired a place for the veteran, they request furniture, send the moving company, they pick up, deliver, and set up the furniture and create their "Home

**Past Department President Cindy Watters is presented with her Past Department President Pin by husband, and Past Chief of Staff John Watters.**



Sweet Home".

Diane has 4 adult children, 8 grandchildren and many "adopted families", that make her life sweet.

Blackwell earned his Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) eligibility by serving on active duty in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan from December 10, 2008, to September 7, 2009. During his service, Eugene served as an advisor to the Afghan Corps Surgeon, a role that underscored his expertise and dedication.

He joined the U.S. Army Reserves in 1982, before transferring to the Illinois Army National Guard in 1983. He served in the Illinois Army

National Guard until 2009 when he returned to the U.S. Army Reserves, retiring as a Colonel in 2014 after serving more than 30 years in the military.

During his military service, Blackwell served in various capacities including Platoon Commander, Battalion Detachment Commander, Commander of the Health and Dental Clinic, and Battalion Commander.

He joined the VFW in 2009 at Benjamin O. Davis Post 311 in Richton Park where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life membership. He has served as a trustee, Junior Vice Commander, Commander, and Chief of Staff. Under his command, Post 311 earned All American status for the 2013-14 and 2014-15 terms. He has also served as the Junior Vice Commander, Senior Vice Commander, and Commander of District 16. At the state level, he served as the Department Surgeon, Department Junior Vice and Senior Vice Commander.

Nationally, Eugene contributes as a member of the National Bylaws Study Group, appointed by past National Commander Matthew (Fritz) Michelcic in 2020. He is a Centennial Life Member of the VFW National Home, and a member of the Military Order of the Cootie – Pup Tent 42.

Blackwell recently retired from the Department of Veterans Affairs, where he employed at the National Acquisition Center at Hines Veterans Administration, focusing on the contractual cost reduction of pharmaceutical products for federal government agencies.

Blackwell, and his wife of almost 35 years, Mattie, have three adult children and three grandchildren.

# FROM THE SENIOR VICE



**Rob Bailey**  
**Senior Vice Commander**  
**Department of Illinois VFW**

Congratulations to all the newly elected and appointed officers of the Illinois Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars. Special congratulations to Commander Eugene Blackwell, with whom I am excited to serve alongside as we work for you, our members.

As we begin a new year, I would like to take a moment to extend my deepest gratitude to each of you, our veterans and auxiliary members, for your unwavering dedication to service, to our community, and one another.

Commander Blackwell has chosen “Serving our Community with Resilience” as this year’s theme, which aligns perfectly with the mission of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The mission remains as vital today as it was when our organization was founded: to advocate for veterans, foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts, and serve our communities with honor. “Serving our Community with Resilience” is a powerful phrase that communicates strength, commitment, and care.

One of the most effective ways we uphold our mission is through our visible and active presence in the communities we call home. Whether it’s raising the flag on Memorial Day, hosting a fundraiser for a local veteran, supporting youth programs, or assisting a neighbor in need, our efforts define the public image of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Every event you support, every person you help, and every program you champion reflect our unwavering commitment to service, not just to our fellow veterans, but to the entire community.

The VFW is not just a place — it’s a presence. A force of good. A beacon of patriotism, unity, and compassion. I encourage every member to stay actively engaged with your post and in the programs that matter most to you—whether that be youth scholarships, community service, veterans’ assistance, legislative advocacy, or buddy checks. Your commitment at the local level is the heartbeat of our organization and the key to our success. In the year ahead, I challenge each Post to grow its community impact by:

- Partnering with local schools, law enforcement, and civic groups.
- Increasing visibility through public ceremonies and events.
- Supporting youth programs such as the Voice of Democracy and Patriots’ Pen.
- Continuing outreach to veterans in need, especially our homeless and elderly comrades.
- Hosting open houses to welcome potential members and the public.

Let us remind our towns, cities, and neighborhoods that the VFW is more than just a veterans’ organization — it is a cornerstone of the community.

This coming year, we should continue to focus on strengthening our posts, increasing membership, supporting our service officers, and enhancing our outreach to fellow veterans in need.

We will also focus on leadership development, transparency, and unity. Our Department is only as strong as the bonds we build within it. Let us strive to lead by example, holding the values of integrity, loyalty, and selfless service in all we do.

The strength of the VFW lies not just in its mission, but in the members who carry it forward. Your ideas matter. And your voice matters. Let’s approach this year with the same resolve that guided us in uniform—with purpose, pride, and the unbreakable bond that makes the VFW a family.

Thank you for your continued service and support. Here’s to a meaningful and mission-driven year ahead.

# FROM THE JUNIOR VICE

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**Ryan Higginbotham**  
**Junior Vice Commander**  
**Department of Illinois VFW**

## Mentorship

Congratulations to all the newly elected and appointed officers throughout the state.

I love this time of year. We are coming off an uplifting state convention which should motivate us all. Just as when our great country elects a new President, we have elected a new state Commander. The first hundred days are just as important for our country as it is for the VFW. Now is an exciting time to get your membership engaged and motivated.

With all the new officers and chairmen, now is a valuable time to talk about mentorship. This is something that has become more relevant in recent years with the influx of eager members taking on vital roles within our department. Whether it be an elected or appointed position we need to give them the best chance to succeed and mentoring them is the way to do it.

Here are a few topics to concentrate on when working with a fellow comrade:

- We need to stray away from using singular pronouns when we can and concentrate on plural ones. Examples: instead of using I, me, my use we, us, and our. No one is above the organization.
- It is important to read your bylaws. You should constantly be referencing them and continuing to educate yourself. If you do not have a copy, you can download one for free from the national website at [VFW.org](http://VFW.org). Do not forget it is just as important to read your department and post bylaws as it is to stay up to date with the national ones as well.
- I know it sounds cliché but there are no stupid questions. Ask questions, whether it is because you do not understand something, or you just want to learn more. Some of the best resources we have are those members that have come before us.
- Remember, observing and paying attention to detail is a profound way to learn especially if you struggle to ask questions.
- At the end of the day this is a volunteer organization. If you are nominated for a position the last thing you are asked is "do you accept this nomination." If you are not willing to put in the work or unable to at this time do not take on a position, it will only hurt you and the organization.

As this year gets underway, I am looking forward to working with all of you and continuing my service as your Department Junior Vice Commander. Remember not only state headquarters, but all the department officers are here to help and aid you.

# FROM THE SURGEON

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**Doug Jameson**  
**Surgeon**  
**Department of Illinois VFW**

It is with a grateful heart that I thank you, Comrades, for the honor and opportunity to serve as your State Surgeon for the 2025-26 VFW year.

As I assume this new role, I'm mindful of both the responsibilities it entails and the collaborative foundation that makes success possible in our organization.

I want to acknowledge my predecessor, whose leadership established a strong framework and culture upon which to build within our Department. To the mentors who invested time in my growth, your guidance helped me navigate both opportunities and setbacks with greater wisdom. You offered candid feedback, and shared lessons from your own experiences. These conversations have shaped my leadership approach and prepared me for increasing responsibility within our organization.

Moving forward, I see both challenges and tremendous potential for new approaches to serve and meet the needs of our evolving Veteran community; a body that is characterized by an aging membership, assimilation of our modern warriors having their own experiences, expanding ranks of women veterans, greater recognition of mental and moral injuries in addition to physical disabilities and medical needs; all in a dynamic environment dominated by information technology, legislative fluidity, and federal budgetary pressures. With this landscape, I pledge to use this platform to serve and advocate for improved access and resources for the health and wellness of all of our Comrades.

My vision for this role centers on five priorities:

- (1) Elevate Veteran suicide prevention efforts;
- (2) Build strategic partnerships and enhance cross-functional collaboration to align our efforts toward shared objectives.
- (3) Provide training and information resources to our membership;
- (4) Promote the importance of enlisting Surgeons at District and Post level; and
- (5) Advocate for legislation to improve access for all our Veterans to mental and physical health care and transitional benefits.

Service has never been about accolades or recognition—it's about the connections we build and the small differences that add up to meaningful change in the lives around us.

Once again Comrades, I thank you for this honor that will serve as motivation to deepen my commitment to our shared goals. I look forward to what we will accomplish together in the coming year. It also reminds me to continually welcome new voices and perspectives into our work. Fresh ideas and energy ensure that our efforts remain relevant and responsive to our evolving needs. If you haven't yet found your place in service as a District or Post Surgeon, VA/VS Representative, or Liaison to a VA Outpatient Clinic or State Veteran Home, please consider this an invitation to join the effort.



The Southwest Illinois Board of REATORS® (SIBR) presented a \$1,500 donation to The Eagle's Nest of St. Clair County at The Joseph Center in East St. Louis on Friday June 6th. SIBR presents a "Real Estate Professional for Veterans (REP4V)" class to provide Real Estate needs and Lending considerations for Active Duty and Veteran clients, and a Military overview for real estate professionals. This program will enable real estate professionals to encourage their military clients to consider membership in Veteran Service Organizations such as the VFW, American Legion, MOAA, etc. In the photo left to right: Tatyana Harriel (SIBR Staff), Will Frost (Evergreen Property Inspectors), Erica Kirk (SIBR CEO), Rick Swain (President, SIBR Board of Directors), John Grissom (Realtor with Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices, VFW Post 805 Life Member & REP4V course instructor), Rod Thompson (VFW Post 805 Legacy Life Member and REP4V Instructor) and Christopher Williams, Jr. (Executive Director, The Eagle's Nest of St. Clair County at The Joseph Center). Not pictured is Cara Srogus (Producing Branch Manager for mortgage and lending services with Rate and REP4V Instructor). Rick Swain's real estate firm, Swain Realty Group with Keller Williams Marquee, offered to host a Thanksgiving Day dinner at the Eagle's Nest. Erica Kirk will inform the SIBR membership about volunteer opportunities at the Eagle's Nest.

## State Convention and Purple Heart Raffle Drawings

### Purple Heart Raffle

Name	City	Amount
Wayne Skopek	Chicago	\$2,000

### Convention Raffle

Name	City	Amount
Michael Forbes	Quincy, Illinois	\$10,000
Joe Stuart	Papillion, Nebraska	\$3,000
Tom Wachtel	Lincoln, Illinois	\$2,000
Celeste Latham	Sandwich, Illinois	\$500
Stanley Hayes	Sandoval, Illinois	\$500
Kenneth Rossing	Sneedville, Tennessee	\$500
Roger McGill	Chicago	\$500
Robert Martin	Champaign	\$500
Donald Zinkan	Bethalto, Illinois	\$500
Sean Flanagan	Riverton, Illinois	\$500

## About the Illinois VFW News

At the June Council of Administration, the Council voted to offer the Illinois VFW News as a digital only product.

The newly formatted Illinois VFW News will be published on the Illinois VFW website ([www.vfwil.org](http://www.vfwil.org)) in July, September, November, January, March, and May.

The deadlines for the Illinois VFW News will be the 15th day of the month preceeding publication month.

All news, photos, items for publication should be emailed to Barb Wilson, Editor, at [barb.wilson2@outlook.com](mailto:barb.wilson2@outlook.com).

# Memorial Service Pays Tribute to Deceased Members





# 106th Annual State Convention Highlights



Convention Chair Rick Frank welcoming remarks.



National Junior Vice President Donna Mills delivering remarks.



Jerry Black representing the VFW National Home.



The Color Guard from Chatham Auburn Post 4763 posting the colors.



National Inspector General Greg Stafford addressing the Joint Opening session.





**1st Place:**  
Villa Park Post 2801,  
District 19



Juan Huerta, Secretary of State's Office, presents commemorative license plates to State Commander Maurice Bridges and Department President Cindy Watters.



**2nd Place:**  
Chatham-Auburn Memorial Post 4763,  
District 10



Certificates of Completion to the State VSOs Zachary Brooks, Charles Johnson, Dick Taylor, Russell Meredith, Gabriela Salgado, and Craig Koch for their participation in the National Veterans Service Accredited Representative Basic Training Conference, held in Annapolis, Maryland, September 22-27, 2024.



**3rd Place:**  
Fox River Post 4600,  
District 5



Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, The Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard with State Commander Maurice Bridges, following Boyd's remarks to the delegates at the Joint Opening session.

# Membership Awards



## Membership Awards (Posts which reached 100% by Feb. 28)

### District 3

Post 2978.....103%  
Post 5079.....101%

### District 4

Post 981.....100%  
Post 5979.....100%

### District 5

Post 12014.....103%

### District 6

Post 1304.....100%  
Post 4857.....100%  
Post 5300.....103%

### District 7

Post 2029.....100%  
Post 2131.....100%  
Post 7535.....100%

Post 8350.....103%

### District 8

Post 143.....101%  
Post 5001.....100%  
Post 5117.....100%  
Post 8078.....100%

### District 9

Post 1232.....102%

Post 4602.....100%  
Post 8324.....100%  
Post 9016.....100%

### District 10

Post 2061.....100%  
Post 6408.....101%  
Post 11463.....112%

### District 11

Post 99.....100%  
Post 730.....104%  
Post 11456.....105%



### District 12

Post 976.....101%  
 Post 1299.....100%  
 Post 1377.....100%  
 Post 5691.....104%  
 Post 6628.....109%

### District 13

Post 9153.....107%

### District 14

Post 1739.....105%  
 Post 3480.....107%

Post 3523.....101%  
 Post 5596.....109%  
 Post 6504.....101%  
 Post 6865.....101%  
 Post 7682.....105%  
 Post 7710.....101%

### District 15

Post 1567.....105%  
 Post 3455.....100%  
 Post 9763.....102%

### District 16

Post 2604.....101%  
 Post 2791.....100%  
 Post 8077.....102%  
 Post 8141.....101%  
 Post 8283.....101%  
 Post 9801.....101%

### District 17

Post 2876.....111%  
 Post 3601.....101%  
 Post 4598.....101%  
 Post 5975.....100%

Post 7862.....100%

### District 18

Post 725.....103%  
 Post 5788.....103%  
 Post 5917.....102%

### District 19

Post 1578.....100%  
 Post 3873.....101%  
 Post 6663.....100%  
 Post 6791.....110%  
 Post 7446.....100%





## All-State Awards



At left, District 14 Commander Doug Jameson is presented with the Cramer-Soden Membership Award noting that District 14 had the highest numerical increase in membership from the previous year.



**Got VFW or Auxiliary News to Share?**  
**The Illinois VFW News is now an online**  
**only publication. Send your News and**  
**Photos of VFW or Auxiliary Events to**  
**Barb Wilson, Editor, Illinois VFW News, at**  
**barb.wilson2@outlook.com**  
**or**  
**bwilson@vfwil.org**

## 2024-2025 All-State Team of District Commanders

District  
District 14

Commander  
Doug Jameson

## 2024-2025 All-State Team of Post Commanders and Quartermasters

Post	Commander	Quartermaster
<i>District 3</i>		
Post 5079	Antonio Munoz	Carlos Alarcon
Post 8821	Jonathan Cooper	Felix Grzelinski
<i>District 4</i>		
Post 2868	Robert Tinson	Theodore Borst
Post 5151	William Lunsford	Patrick Fissette
<i>District 5</i>		
Post 2298	Daniel Pierson	Scott Webb
Post 12014	Josh Deron	Mathius Carter
<i>District 6</i>		
Post 342	Gary Holmes	Eric Willard
Post 1461	Bernadette Bland	Rob Bland
Post 8739	Matthew Alford	Stanley Asp
<i>District 7</i>		
Post 2608	Adam Goetsch	Chuck Roach
<i>District 10</i>		
Post 11463	Kyle Blumhorst	Larry Miller
<i>District 11</i>		
Post 99	Ron Boomer	Jeff Urquhart
Post 5346	Seth Floyd	Gordon Lawrence
<i>District 12</i>		
Post 5691	Alonzo Skipper	Sam Farrah
<i>District 13</i>		
Post 9153	Ryan Shurtz	Ben Newborn
<i>District 14</i>		
Post 805	Kipp Reed	Roger Witek
Post 1739	John Lawson	James Page
Post 2698	Kenneth Eddy	William Epplin
Post 3480	Valerie Young	Jeannen Flemings
Post 5596	David Gladney	Steven Elliott
Post 6504	Michael Douglas	Paul Braun
Post 6865	Michael Shaw	Jeff Britt
Post 7710	Billy Tucker	Cathy Stubbs
<i>District 15</i>		
Post 9763	Albert Dagner	Bob Owen
<i>District 16</i>		
Post 2791	Fred Cagle	Robert Baisa
<i>District 17</i>		
Post 4549	Perry Graves	Butch Spindler
Post 5975	Jeremy Deckard	Jason Edwards
<i>District 18</i>		
Post 725	James Hogan	Paula Graser
Post 5422	Kenneth Piehl	John Ericksen
Post 5917	Gregory Palmer	Herschel Nelson
<i>District 19</i>		
Post 3873	Staci Boyer	Phil Maughan
Post 7446	Randolph Boryscka	Charles Harrell





## Publication Contest Awards



**1st Place Post Publications (5 or more)**  
John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461, Belvidere



**1st Place Post Publications (1-4 times)**  
Chatham Auburn Post 4763, Chatham



**1st Place National Publications, 1-4 times per year**  
Illinois VFW News and 3rd Place Feature Story



**1st Place District Publications**  
District 6



Dale Gibson, sponsored by Malcolm J. Mayo Post 5422, Wilmington, District 18, is a 7th grade Science Teacher at Peotone Junior High School.

# Teachers of the Year Honored

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

## Kindergarten-5th Grade

Tim Smiddy, a 5th grade teacher at Staunton Elementary School in Staunton, founded the "Patriot Club", during which he emphasizes the true meaning of patriotism and reminds students that patriotism is a responsibility and not a choice. Once a year, the Patriot Club works with the local VFW to showcase a program that honors our Country and our past and present Veterans.

Smiddy, sponsored by Staunton Post 1241, Staunton, District 12, spends countless hours procuring uniforms, state and military flags,

and personally makes the flag stands.

The program pays tribute to the United States of America, the United States Military, Veterans and Prisoners of War/Missing in Action. It features a full color guard with ceremonial rifles posting the colors, a full honor guard posting the POW/MIA flag, and the posting of all military branch flags, along with their respective hymns.

This year, Smiddy organized and outfitted an honor guard comprising of sophomore students. The color guard was fully trained in rifle procedures and presented the colors during basketball, football and other sporting games. It should be noted that this is the only color guard in Illinois that doesn't belong

to an ROTC program.

It is because of Smiddy's support of patriotism, military organizations and community projects that he is recognized not only as the Department of Illinois K-5 Category Teacher of the Year, but he is also recognized as the Elementary School winner at the National level.

## 6-8th Grade

Dale Gibson, sponsored by Malcolm J. Mayo Post 5422, Wilmington, District 18, is a 7th grade Science Teacher at Peotone Junior High School.

An educator in the Kankakee and Will County education system for 36 years, Gibson began teaching Science in Kankakee in 1988.

In 2000, he relocated to Peotone Junior High School and began teaching 7th grade Science.

He holds teaching licenses and certifications in biology, botany, general science, zoology and physical science. He mentors students in extracurricular activities as a sponsor of the Ecology Club and participates as a chaperone on educational trips.

When a student's day ends, Gibson's day does not.

He is active with the Peotone Boy Scout Troop 315, where he serves as an Assistant Scout Master. Once a week, he spends two hours with the scouts, mentoring and educating them. During these meetings, several patriotic topics can be discussed for activities that the troop is actively engaged in. These topics range from Color Guard detail to

assisting the scouts in achieving their needed merit badge programs or projects such as Citizenship, Safety, Science and First Aid Sustainability.

### 9-12th Grade

The Teacher of the Year in the 9-12th Grade Category is an 11th Grade AP U.S. Government Teacher at Addison Trail High School. She was sponsored by Addison Post 7446, District 19.

LeVonne Cescolini-Boyer is an 11th grade AP U.S. Government Teacher at Addison Trail High School in Addison.

Sponsored by Addison Post 7446, Addison, District 19, she has taught at Addison Trail High School since 1994. She founded the Addison Trail Veteran Service Organization (ATVSO) in 2022. The ATVSO is youth community organization, whose mission

is to support veterans through various patriotic events and civic outreach. Through her efforts and mentorship, the recruitment of student volunteers has resulted in a 200% increase in youth participation at Post 7446.

LeVonne spearheads Veteran's Day at Addison Trail High School and leads the full-day event, which serves to honor veterans and encourages youth development of patriotic endeavors, which includes assembling a student-led team to provide lunch at Post 7446.

She also manages the "Flags for Addison" program. The program ensures proper flag etiquette with the distribution of flags throughout the community and places over 100 flags at the local cemeteries on Memorial Day, Flag Day, the 4th of July, Patriots Day and Veterans Day.



LeVonne Cescolini-Boyer is an 11th grade AP U.S. Government Teacher at Addison Trail High School in Addison.



**2024-2025 Eagle Scout of the Year is Cooper Merrinette, sponsored by Lilac Post 5815, District 19.**

# Scout of the Year Selected

The 2024-2025 Eagle Scout of the Year is Cooper Merrinette, sponsored by Lilac Post 5815, District 19.

Merrinette began his scouting career in 2014 and currently a member of Troop 99 in Downers Grove.

Cooper's selection of an Eagle Scout Project brought joy and tears to many folks. He was made aware of the unclaimed and abandoned cremated remains of seven military veterans at a funeral home; 3 WWI veterans, 3 WWII veterans, and 1 Korean War veteran. Cooper raised the funds needed to honor

these men who sacrificed so much by fighting for the freedom of our Country.

Planning began in early February and was completed by June and a public memorial service was held. He and his troop spent 500 service hours on this project.

They created wooden engraved urns and attended a woodworking class to construct them. Over \$1,000.00 was raised to cover expenses.

Cooper confirmed the veteran's status of each man by tracking down families to receive approval

for interment at the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery. He set up a public Memorial Service to honor these forgotten veterans and asked local VFW Posts for Honor Guards and a Rifle Team. Floral arrangements were purchased and public officials were asked to participate. The Service was covered by the local press and television stations.

Cooper is a junior at Downers Grove South High School where he demonstrates academic excellence as a member of the National Honor Society.

# Thompson Honored as Law Enforcement Officer of the Year for actions with armed suicidal individual

Richard Thompson, the 2024-2025 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year, heard a patrol radio dispatch for a suicidal individual armed with an AR-15.

Thompson, a school resource officer at Edwardsville Senior High School, was familiar with the address of the individual as it was a student who had recently been experiencing mental difficulties and was not at school.

Officer Thompson had a great rapport with the subject from a prior incident so he had another resource officer cover his duties and he responded to the scene.

Over the next hour, Officer Thompson was able to talk with the student and convince them to put down the weapon, exit the house unharmed and was on the scene to make sure they were transferred safely to receive medical attention.

This could have been a tragic day, but due to the caring and calm

demeanor of Officer Thompson, it ended up being a best case scenario.

Thompson, sponsored by Fisher Weeks Post 1299, District 12, began his career with the Edwardsville Police Department in 2007.

Since that time, Officer Thompson has received the Edwardsville Police Department Life Saving Award, Southern Illinois

Police Chiefs' Award, Officer of the Quarter, and multiple Letters of Appreciation and Commendations.

In 2019, Richard trained to be a School Resource Officer and returned to his alma mater, Edwardsville Senior High School.

Throughout his career, Officer Thompson has served his community above and beyond the expectations set for him.



**Richard Thompson was honored as the 2024-2025 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year for his quick actions involving an armed suicidal individual.**

Mike Lowe, sponsored by John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461, was selected as the 2024-2025 Firefighter of the Year.



## Lowe Selected as Illinois VFW Firefighter of the Year

The 2024-2025 Firefighter of the Year was sponsored by John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461, District 6.

Mike Lowe began volunteering for Boone County 23 years ago at 14 years old, when he joined the Police Explorers Program. During that time, he rose to rank of Sergeant, assisting with numerous community events until he reached the age of 21. At that point he joined the Police Department's Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS) program, dedicating hundreds of hours annually.

In 2014, he became a volunteer firefighter with Boone County District 2 Fire, while working full time. During his time off he volunteers and responds to calls in addition to assisting with PR events, taking care of building maintenance and assisting with IT and Social Media.

Over the past decade he has pursued extensive training, earning certifications in firefighting, Fire Instructor I & II, EMT-B, and CPR/ Emergency Response/First Aid. He also serves as a CPR instructor and is an instructor for the Northern Illinois Training Advisory Board, where he has trained over 370 individuals in CPR and First Aid.

In addition, Lowe has taught courses to over 30 members of Post 1461, Auxiliary and members of Boone County Veterans Club. He waived the fees for the classes taught at Post 1461. After the course, he assisted in getting the AEDs at the Post tested and resupplies. At his own expense, he also provided CPR face shields to all participants.

# Hunter Awarded EMT of the Year

The 2024-2025 Emergency Medical Technician of the Year was sponsored by Oregon Post 8739, District 6.

Gregory Hunter's career in public service began in 1987, when he started out as a police officer for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. After retiring from law enforcement, Gregory joined the Oregon Fire Protection District. In the 5 years since he's been at the Oregon Fire Protection District, he has consistently demonstrated his commitment to excellence and community safety.

In his role, Hunter has gone above and beyond to achieve several

advanced certifications, including Advanced Technician Firefighter, National Registered Emergency Medical Technician, Rope Operations Technical Rescue and Swift Water Rescue Technician.

In May 2023, he was awarded the Medal of Valor by the Oregon Fire Protection District for a dangerous water rescue of a citizen just above the Oregon Dam. Without Hunter's exceptional boat handling skills, this rescue may not have been successful. His bravery and skill during this life-threatening situation exemplifies the highest standards of public service.



Gregory Hunter was honored as the Illinois VFW EMT of the Year during the 106th annual convention in Springfield.



**The Outstanding Governmental Service Award recipient is the Program Specialist for the Illinois Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights Bureau.**

## Yount Presented Outstanding Governmental Service Award

The Outstanding Governmental Service Award recipient is the Program Specialist for the Illinois Attorney General's Military and Veterans Rights Bureau.

Yount brings veterans within the office together in camaraderie, coordinating with veterans' groups outside the office of the Attorney General to commune with veterans outside the office.

For example, in 2023, Yount coordinated with the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs to take residents of the Chicago Veterans' Home on an outing to see a Chicago Dogs baseball game with the Attorney General.

She also routinely travels the state to conduct Military and Veterans Rights presentations. She communicates

regularly with Veterans and Veteran Service Organizations to assist them with various legal issues including compliance with various laws and conducting informal mediation to resolve problems. She plays a key role in developing Bureau literature to educate veterans across the state.

Yount has been an advocate for women veterans at the Attorney General's office, ensuring that recognition and appreciation for Women Veterans is part of the culture.

Yount recommended and spearheaded an Attorney General letter in support of the PACT Act that influenced its passage.

She is a true veteran's advocate and dedicated public servant.

# State Sen. Mark Walker Honored as Illinois VFW State Senator of the Year

The 2024-2025 State Senator of the Year was nominated by Dutch DeGroot, from the 4th District.

State Senator Mark Walker served in the Illinois General Assembly from 2009 to 2011, and again from 2019 through April 2024 representing the 53rd House District.

As a senator of the 27th District, he brings a commitment to improving his community and

helping those in need.

A U.S Army veteran of the Vietnam War, Walker is a dedicated advocate for veterans and service members and has volunteered much of his civic life to helping those experiencing homelessness.

Senator Walker has supported multiple veteran friendly legislation, first as a House Member, and now

as Senator.

The Senator has been instrumental in getting key legislation passed including being a key co-sponsor of SB3479, which addressed the issue of “Claim Sharks” that took advantage of Illinois veterans.

Senator Walker is a true veteran’s advocate and tireless worker toward positive action.



State Sen. Mark Walker was presented with the State Senator of the Year award during the state convention.

# David Draeger Honored as Hometown Heroes of the Year Award Recipient

The 2024-2025 Hometown Heroes of the Year Award recipient is a VFW member and retired service member who provides guidance and mentorship to those battling addiction.

Col. (ret.) David Draeger is a life member of Roscoe Post 2955 in the 6th District. In his 30-year Active Duty career, he has held numerous Company, Field Grade and Senior Command and Staff positions.

He currently serves as the Case Manager- Veterans Navigator for the Rosecrance Health Network. His current mission is to guide Veterans, and their family members, to and through the vast enterprise of Veterans and, Mental Health and Addiction services available in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa.

Draeger is a graduate of the University of Illinois Police Training Institute, and holds both a Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts in Law Enforcement Administration from Western Illinois University.

He also holds a second Master's Degree in Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College.



David Draeger, a life member of Roscoe Post 2955, was honored with Hometown Heroes of the Year award. Draeger is a case manager-veterans navigator for Rosecrance Health Network.

## Community Activities Record Books



**Category 1:**  
New Athens Post 7710,  
District 14



**Category 2:**  
John Hugo Kaiser Post 1461,  
District 6

**Category 3**  
No Entries

## Americanism - District Awards



**Category 1:** District 4,  
Commander Kermit Morales



**Category 2:** District 19,  
Commander Jake Wyatt

**Category 3:** No Winners

## Post Awards

**Category 1:**  
Lawrence J. Cross Post 2602, District 9

**Category 2:**  
Kahokian Memorial Post 5691,  
District 12

**Category 3:**  
Russell E. Dunham Memorial Post 1308,  
District 12



## Safety Awards



### Category 1:

Marty Gollnitz Post 4999, District 9



### Category 2:

Ambraw Post 2244, District 13



### Category 3:

Villa Park Post 2801, District 19

## Hospital



### Category 1:

Prospect Post 1337, District 4



### Category 2:

Stage Depot Post 976, District 12



### Category 3:

Judd Kendall Post 3873, District 19

## Patriot's Pen



Plaque to Ronald Hill Memorial Post 2245,  
District 5, for sponsoring Patriot's Pen  
State Champion Georgia Roscoe



\$100 check to District 15 for having the  
highest number of Patriot's Pen  
participants

## Youth Activities



**Category 1:**  
Lemont 22 Honor Post 5819, District 19



**Category 2:**  
Ambraw Post 2244, District 13



**Category 3:**  
Judd Kendall Post 3873, District 19

## POW-MIA Award



Dennis Nelson Memorial Plaque to  
Prospect Post 1337, District 4

## Voice of Democracy Awards



Plaque to Johnson-Phelps Post 5220,  
District 3 for sponsoring the  
Voice of Democracy State Champion  
Joseph Martinez



\$100 check to District 18, Commander  
Ken Piehl. The District had 176  
students participating in the  
Voice of Democracy program.

## Blood Program Awards



**Category 1:**  
Arnold-Heath Memorial Post 5151,  
District 4



**Category 2:**  
Roscoe Post 2955, District 6



**Category 3:**  
Russell E. Dunham Memorial  
Post 1308,  
District 12

## Poppy Program Awards



### Category 1:

Bartlett Post 11018, District 19 (+3,500)



### Category 2:

Batavia Overseas Post 1197, District 19  
(+6,500)



### Category 3:

Bremen Post 2791, District 16 (+4,000)



### Special Citation

Harry E. Anderson Post 9545,  
District 18

## Poppy Display Awards







Department President Cindy Watters visited the Illinois VFW State Convention business session Saturday, June 7. She thanked the VFW members for their service to the nation, both during their military service and after. She also thanked the VFW members for a memorable year of service with State Commander Maurice Bridges. Joining Watters during her visit to the business session was National Auxiliary Junior Vice President Donna Mills, the national representative for the Auxiliary convention, Past National President Collette Bishop, and State Chief of Staff John Watters.

## VFW National Home Awards



District 3,  
Commander Jonathan Cooper



Elk Grove Village Post 9284, District 4  
(\$3,650)



District 13, Commander Bob Shehorn



Batavia Overseas Post 1197,  
District 19 (\$10,000)



District 14, Commander Doug Jameson



Judd Kendall Post 3873, District 19  
(\$30,221)

## Poppy Display



**Got VFW or Auxiliary News to Share?**  
The Illinois VFW News is now an online only publication. Send your News and Photos of VFW or Auxiliary Events to Barb Wilson, Editor, Illinois VFW News, at [barb.wilson2@outlook.com](mailto:barb.wilson2@outlook.com) or [bwilson@vfwil.org](mailto:bwilson@vfwil.org)



## Vendor Booths



## Auxiliary Convention Highlights



### District President of the Year

#### 1st place

Victoria Cobbett, District 19

#### 2nd place

Lori Crites, District 15

#### 3rd place

Laura Knackstedt, District 12





Behesha Doan, Founder and Training Director of "This Able Veteran" explained the organization and demonstrated with "Able" how they train their Service Dogs. President Cindy Watters presented the organization with a check in the amount of \$23,632.01 from the auxiliary members.

State Commander Maurice Bridges visited the Auxiliary Department Convention business session Saturday, June 7. He presented President Cindy Watters a gift and she presented him one in return.





## Department of Illinois VFW Auxiliary Circle of Excellence

### District 3

2729, 5079, 9773

### District 5

4600, 7448

### District 6

2955

### District 7

8350

### District 8

1422, 1571, 5083, 8078, 8890

### District 9

4079, 4668

### District 10

1239, 1379, 4763, 6408, 10302

### District 11

99, 4495, 4829

### District 12

976, 1377, 5691, 5694

### District 13

2244, 3999, 4226, 4535, 8222, 9153

### District 14

513, 1177, 2698, 3480, 3523, 6504, 6632,  
6865, 7682, 7710

### District 15

1301, 1567, 3479, 4753, 9763

### District 16

450, 2791

### District 17

1592, 1769, 2876, 4549, 4598, 5762,  
7862

### District 18

5422

### District 19

1197, 2164, 2801, 3873, 5815, 5819,  
6791, 7446, 8081, 11018



**Auxiliary President Cindy Watters is escorted into the VFW business session by Officer of the Day Jeff Britt.**

**Below, the Hospital Chairman, VAVS representatives, deputies and associates, are introduced to the Auxiliary convention delegates.**



**Chaplain Terry Adams conducted our Memorial Service to honor our 969 members who passed away this year including Past National President Mary Sears 1991-1992 and Past Department Presidents Donna Walker 2007-2008 and Beverly Beyer 2010-2011. Maureen Hayden gave the Memorial Address.**





Scholarships were presented to Love Lloyd, graduate of Lincoln- Way East High School, Taryn Mack, graduate of IC Catholic Prep High School and Skye Williams, graduate of Southland College Prep Charter High School.

## VFW Post 311 Awards Two \$1,000 Scholarships

Benjamin O. Davis VFW Post 311 announced and held its annual scholarship awards competition from April 1, 2025, through June 1, 2025.

On Monday, June 30, 2025, three local area high school graduating students that are descendants of veterans were interviewed and awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

VFW Post 311 Commander Aretha Spurlock, Post 311 Scholarship Chairperson Sharee Porter-Pearce, Scholarship Committee Members Sasha Douyon, and

Arnold Taylor were present to present the awards and take pictures.

Awards were presented to Love Lloyd, graduate of Lincoln- Way East High School, Taryn Mack, graduate of IC Catholic Prep High School and Skye Williams, graduate of Southland College Prep Charter High School. Love will be attending the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, Taryn will be attending North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University,

Greensboro, NC and Skye will be attending Illinois College, Jacksonville, IL.

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 2025 Commander's Ball Dinner on August 9, 2025. Tickets are available now by contacting Arnold at [taylor1660@hotmail.com](mailto:taylor1660@hotmail.com) or the Post Commander at [arethaqm@gmail.com](mailto:arethaqm@gmail.com). Donations are welcome and appreciated.



District 14 announced it's Scout of the Year at its annual District Convention. Kyle L of Troop 5 Scott AFB, was sponsored by Belleville VFW Post 1739. Pictured are from left, District Commander Doug Jameson, Department Commander Maurice Bridges, Kyle, and Ron Milton, District and Department Scouting Chairman.



**Flag Holder at Battlehawks Game**  
Commander Valerie Young, Post 3480, East St. Louis, representing the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Mission Continues and Sisters in Service, served as a flag holder at the April 26 St. Louis Battlehawks game. The game was broadcast on ESPN. She also had her photo taken with Archie.



# Post 1739 cleans area around Eagles Nest

Belleville VFW Post 1739 performed their Day of Service at the Eagles Nest of St Clair County, in East St. Louis.

A team of eighteen volunteers consisting of VFW Post members, family members, and friends of the VFW came together to remove invasive vegetation from the Eagles Nest property line. Despite of the rain the task of vegetation removal was complete and afterwards the Post provided lunch for the workers, staff, and residents of the Eagles Nest.

The Eagles Nest is a 26-bed transitional housing center that affords practical services for homeless male veterans striving for self-sufficiency and is located at 5020 State Street, East St. Louis.



Volunteers from Post 1739 worked to remove invasive vegetation from the Eagles Nest property line in East St. Louis. The Eagles Nest is a 26-bed transitional housing center that affords practical services for homeless male veterans striving for self-sufficiency



## Curtis Becomes New Commander of 126th Security Forces Squadron

Capt. Jacob Curtis assumed command of the Illinois Air National Guard's 126th Security Forces Squadron, based at Scott AFB, May 4.

Curtis enlisted in the Illinois Air National Guard in September, 2001 and was commissioned in November, 2019.

Curtis is a traditional member of the Illinois National Guard and is the Deputy Division Chief, Directorate of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance and Cyber Effects Operations, Air Mobility Command.

He is an Adjunct Professor of Cyber Security at Webster University and is also Vice Chairman of the Board of Scott Credit Union.

Curtis is a life member of Scott Post 4183, Scott AFB.

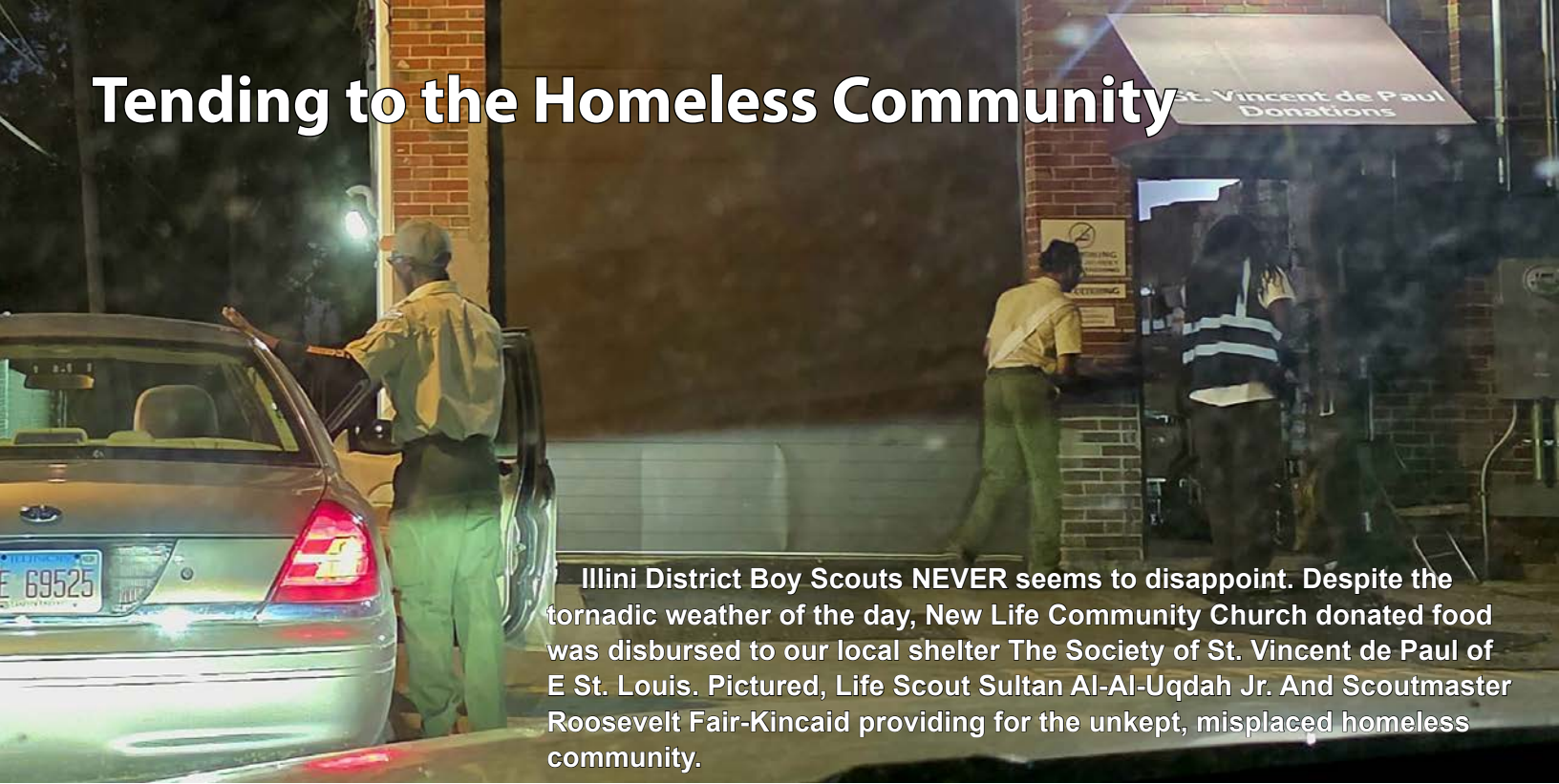
**At left, Capt. Jacob Curtis, right, salutes Col. Michael Mihalik, Commander, 126th Air Refueling Wing Mission Support Group, after assuming command of the 126th Security Forces Squadron.**



## Honoring Elk Grove Village Youth

Elk Grove Village Post 9284 Commander Alexander G. Brenke presented a Patriot Pen Winners Plaque to District 54, Margaret Mead Jr. High School recently. Pictured are, from left, Principal Scott Ross, Commander Alexander G. Brenke, 2024 Patriot Pen Winner Chase P. Reabe, and Post 9284 and District 4 Teacher of the Year Mark Fletcher, who teaches social studies. In addition, the post also presented a Patriot's Pen Winners Plaque to CCSD 59 and Voice of Democracy Plaques to District 211 James B. Conant High School and District 214 Elk Grove High School.

# Tending to the Homeless Community



Illini District Boy Scouts NEVER seems to disappoint. Despite the tornadic weather of the day, New Life Community Church donated food was disbursed to our local shelter The Society of St. Vincent de Paul of E St. Louis. Pictured, Life Scout Sultan Al-Al-Uqdah Jr. And Scoutmaster Roosevelt Fair-Kincaid providing for the unkept, misplaced homeless community.



## ***Honoring the Memory of Nation's Fallen***

The 2025 Belleville Memorial Day Parade was led by members of Belleville VFW Post 1739 Color Guard and culminated at the Walnut Hill Cemetery where the Memorial Day Ceremony was held. The ceremony was represented by Veteran Organizations from Belleville, Swansea, and Freeburg. Belleville West High School Marching Maroons under the direction of Michael Pond-Jones provided a Patriotic Medley. The guest speaker for the ceremony was Matthew "Fritz" Mihelcic, the 113th VFW Commander-in-Chief and a member of Sparta Post 2698.





## Capt. Horace Burke Post 3480 Honors Memory of Fallen During Annual Memorial Day Program

Memorial Day - A day in which we honor the fallen.

VFW Post 3480 and Auxiliary had a successful Memorial Day program.

As part of the Americanism program, our flags (U.S. flags and Military Branch Flags) were placed on the exterior and interior of the building, focusing on our patriotism to our country and honoring those before us. We displayed our POW/MIA table and provided appropriate prayer and saluted accordingly.

We had our recruitment table and poppy Display. Applications for the VFW post was displayed as well as necessary requirements to join the VFW.





During the Memorial Day program Commander Young did a call to action, inviting the community of veterans and family of veterans to join the post/ Auxiliary.

Capt. Horace G Burke VFW Post 3480 turned 89 on May 24. The Post was chartered in 1936.



Commander Valerie Young invites the community of veterans and families to consider joining the VFW or the Auxiliary.

At right, President Vera Beckwith delivers remarks during the Memorial Day program.

# Post 5691 Holds Solemn Remembrance in Honor of Those Who Died in Defense of Country

Kahokian Memorial Post 5691, joined by its Auxiliary, and American Legion Post 365 honored those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country at the annual Memorial Day ceremony in Collinsville May 26.

"Today we gather not for a day off, nor simply the start of summer, but for a solemn remembrance," said Sgt. 1st Class (ret.) Robert E. Schultz, the ceremony's keynote speaker. "We remember the brave men and women who died defending our nation, protecting the freedoms and values we cherish."

Schultz, a member of Post 5691, told the audience the sacrifices made by these men and women are just abstract concepts.

"They are the very fabric of our society. The freedom to speak our minds, to worship as we choose, to pursue our dreams. These freedoms were bought and paid for with their lives," he said.

The ceremony opened with prayer and music performed by the Collinsville High School band.

Members of the Auxiliary read names of VFW members and Auxiliary members who passed away this year.

Post and Auxiliary members also placed flowers and laid a wreath in memory.



# Rhine Post 2729 Remembers Fallen Comrades From Past Wars during Memorial Day Ceremony

Commander Charles Johnson and members of Chicago, Rhine Post 2729 held a Memorial Day Service on May 26, honoring our fallen Comrades from previous wars.

Johnson addressed our Post and citizens from the surrounding community, a wreath was placed at a graveside representing our fallen comrades in arms followed by a 21 gun salute and the playing of taps to honor our never forgotten fallen Veterans.

Our neighboring community looks forward to participating in our annual Memorial Day Service.



**A Wreath is placed during Rhine Post 2729's Memorial Day ceremony in Chicago.**



# Olney Post 4226 Conducts Annual Memorial Day Procession, Remembrance Ceremony

Members of Olney Memorial VFW Post 4226 planned and organized the Annual Memorial Day procession and program.

The day began with several organizations assisting in setting up the area at Haven Hill Cemetery. Groups lined up at VFW Post 4226 and stepping off at approximately 10:45 a.m. for the 0.8 mile stretch to the cemetery. The procession was led by the VFW Color Guard, followed by VFW members, VFW Auxiliary members, Olney American Legion members, The Award-Winning Richland County High School Band, Future Farmers of America (FFA) members, and three groups of Scouts!

Master of Ceremonies Past Post Commander, JD Hubbard opened the ceremony at 11 a.m. at Haven Hill. Singer Dylan Reed sang our National Anthem.

Invocation was given by the Exalted Ruler of Olney Elks Lodge # 926, Victor Colwell. Followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

Richland County High School

Band played a medley of military branch songs, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marines. Current Post #4226 Commander, Ron Stephens assisted JD Hubbard in the laying of a single rose upon the POW/MIA chair followed by a slow salute and prayer.

Nine organizations presented a wreath to honor our fallen. Olney VFW, The Olney American Legion Post #30, Olney Memorial VFW Post 4226 Auxiliary, Sons of the American Legion Post 30, Richland County Sheriff's Department, City of Olney Mayor, The Olney Police Department, Olney Fire Department, Olney Elks Lodge 926.

Hubbard then introduced the guest speaker, Dick Clark.

Roll call of the deceased followed with Post Chaplain



**Keynote Speaker Dick Clark delivers remarks during the Memorial Day program.**

Kenneth Schanda, Sr. reading the names of our deceased veterans and VFW Post Auxiliary President, Tim Anderson tolling the bell.



**The rifle team fires the first of three volleys to honor departed veterans.**

Hubbard then asked the Honor Guard Captain to ready his squad for the firing of three volleys to honor and salute our departed veterans. Following the volleys Bugler Don Graham played TAPS.

The program ended with Rolling Thunder Illinois Chapter 3 President, Tony Schmidt giving the Benediction.

Closing remarks were given by John JD Hubbard.



**Victor Colwell, Exalted Ruler of the Olney Elks Lodge 926 delivers the invocation.**



**Tony Schmidt, President, Rolling Thunder Illinois Chapter 3, delivers the benediction.**



**The VFW Color Guard leads the Memorial Day procession.**



**The Memorial Day procession to Haven Hill Cemetery.**

# Fonseca Promoted to Brigadier General, Appointed Director of ILNG Joint Staff

*Story and Photos by 2nd Lt. Trenton Fouche, Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office*

Surrounded by family, friends, and fellow Soldiers, Col. Jorge M. Fonseca, a life member of Bolingbrook VFW Post 5917, was promoted to brigadier general and appointed as the Illinois National Guard's next Director of the Joint Staff during a formal ceremony in Chicago June 21 that honored his decades of service and sacrifice.

Born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and raised in Chicago's Little Village, Brig. Gen. Fonseca has dedicated more than 30 years to public service. He began his military journey as an enlisted combat medic in the U.S. Army Reserve and commissioned as a Medical Service Corps officer in 1996 through the Illinois Army National Guard Officer Candidate School. Since then, Fonseca has served with distinction in multiple leadership roles, including three overseas combat deployments and assignments across the Intelligence Community and law enforcement.

"Jorge Fonseca is an authentic leader of character who has had success leading large, multi-national, joint, dynamic, and complex organizations," said Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, Assistant Adjutant General – Army, Illinois National Guard. "His national, international,

combatant command, incident command, and law enforcement networks uniquely position him to excel as our next Director of the Joint Staff."

The pinning of Fonseca's new rank was performed by his wife Andrea and their daughters.

Reflecting on his new role, Brig. Gen. Fonseca said, "I am honored to represent my family, my community, and the Illinois National Guard as the Director of the Joint Staff. Serving in the U.S. military has opened countless doors for me and my family, shaping our lives in extraordinary ways."

The Joint Staff oversees all domestic operations in Illinois and



**Newly promoted Brig. Gen. Jorge Fonseca delivers remarks at his promotion ceremony June 21 in Chicago.**



**Brig. Gen. Jorge M. Fonseca, newly appointed Director of the Joint Staff for the Illinois National Guard, enters the auditorium for his promotion ceremony June 21, 2025, at the Kedzie Armory in Chicago. Fonseca, a native of Chicago's Little Village and a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, was promoted during a ceremony attended by family, friends, and fellow service members.**

advises the Adjutant General on joint matters concerning more than 13,000 Soldiers and Airmen. Fonseca replaces Brig. Gen. Justin Osberg, who was selected for a new assignment with U.S. Forces Korea.

In addition to his military career, Fonseca serves as a sergeant in the Illinois State Police's Criminal Investigation Division. He was named to the Illinois Governor's Honor 200 list in 2018, recognizing veterans whose service goes above and beyond the call of duty.

The ceremony concluded with the Army Song and a sense of pride and unity among those present, as the Illinois National Guard welcomed its newest general officer, a leader shaped by service, sacrifice, and a deep commitment to his community and country.

"This promotion isn't just about me, it's about everyone who was here along the way," Fonseca said. "I will continue to serve with honor, represent our communities with pride, and mentor the next generation of leaders in uniform."



**Brig. Gen. Jorge M. Fonseca embraces his mother and presents her with a bouquet of roses during his promotion ceremony.**



**Brig. Gen. Jorge M. Fonseca is pinned by his wife, Andrea Fonseca, and one of their daughters during his promotion ceremony June 21, 2025, at the Kedzie Armory in Chicago.**



**Brig. Gen. Jorge M. Fonseca and his wife, Andrea Fonseca, unfurl his one-star flag during his promotion ceremony June 21, 2025, at the Kedzie Armory in Chicago, as Command Sgt. Maj. Michael R. Kelly, State Command Sergeant Major of the Illinois Army National Guard, looks on.**

# Osberg Promoted to Major General

Justin Osberg of Geneva, Illinois, a life member of the Department of Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars, was promoted to Major General on June 7 at Cantigny Park in Wheaton with his spouse, Jessica, and two youngest children, 7-year-old Evan and 4-year-old Juliana, pinning his second star on his Army dress uniform.

Maj. Gen. Osberg was selected as the Deputy, Combined Rear Area Coordinator, Combined Forces Command, U.S. Forces Korea, United States Indo-Pacific Command, in February paving the way for his promotion near the 1st Infantry Division Museum in Cantigny Park.

Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, presided over Osberg's promotion and administered his Oath of Office. Boyd thanked Osberg's family and the fellow Veterans. "Without our family, our support network, we – all the men and women in uniform – can't do what we need to do," Boyd said.

General Osberg has a joyous nature and knows how to get things done, Boyd said. "He is always smiling, and everyone is always laughing around him. But when it is time to get serious, he gets to business."

When Osberg was the Illinois Army National Guard's Deputy Assistant Adjutant General, he was put in charge of a task force to confront harmful behaviors such as sexual harassment and sexual assault. "It was a difficult



**Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Gen. Justin Osberg watches as his son, 7-year-old Evan, and daughter, 4-year-old Juliana, pin his second star on his uniform with help from his spouse, Jessica, during the general's promotion ceremony, June 7, in Cantigny Park in Wheaton.**

assignment, and he leaned on his civilian experience as a project manager," Boyd said. The task force helped the Illinois National Guard confront these harmful behaviors. "People now know that if you are going to commit these harmful behaviors such as sexual assault or sexual harassment, you are not going to be standing in our formation anymore."

Osberg said that being part of the Illinois National Guard has enriched his life with experiences, opportunities and, most importantly, relationships. He recalled his Army Basic Training experience. "We were all different with different childhood experiences," he said. "Being

with them, learning about their lives, taught me empathy and perspective. We had the benefit of going through the same challenging experience and becoming a team."

In his new position, he is responsible for the Korean rear area under the 2nd Infantry Division/Republic of Korea – U.S. Combined Division. The 2nd Infantry Division deters aggression and maintains peace on the Korean Peninsula; and if deterrence fails, "Fight Tonight" in support of the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance. General Osberg also coordinates with the U.S. 8th Army.

General Osberg was appointed

as the Director of the Joint Staff for the Illinois National Guard in February 2024 overseeing the Illinois National Guard's domestic operations and international relationships. He previously served as the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General - Army. He has had a long and distinguished career in the Illinois Army National Guard holding key command and staff positions including command of the Chicago-based 108th Sustainment Brigade, which has since been redesignated as the 34th Division Sustainment Brigade.

General Osberg is also a combat veteran with two tours in Iraq and one tour in Afghanistan where he served as a key advisor to coalition forces including the Illinois National Guard State Partnership Program partner, Poland. He joined the Army in 1993 as a CH-47 Medium Helicopter Mechanic with the Illinois Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 106th Aviation Regiment and now has 32 years of service. He attended the Illinois Army National Guard's Officer Candidate School and received his commission in August 1997 as an Army Signal Corps Officer.

In his civilian career, he is a Senior Manager for Ernst & Young, LLP where he is responsible for consulting company executives in change management.

"I am incredibly grateful to both my family and to my civilian employer for their support of my military career," Osberg said. "Without the support of both, I could not continue to serve my state and nation for so long."

Maj. Gen. Boyd said that Brig. Gen. Osberg is a great

example of how a traditional Illinois National Guard Soldier can excel in both military and civilian careers. "It takes commitment, the support of families and the support of employers. Being part of the Illinois National Guard can also enhance family life and civilian careers in addition to the education and financial benefits of service," General Boyd said. "I am personally grateful for General Osberg's advice, friendship of many years and for the example he has set for the 13,000 Illinois National Guard Soldiers and Airmen."

General Osberg was awarded the Legion of Merit twice and the

Bronze Star Medal twice. He has numerous other awards and decorations including the Polish Army Medal (Bronze) awarded by the Polish Armed Forces. He was also awarded the Combat Action Badge meaning he engaged the enemy in direct combat.

General Osberg is a native of Arlington Heights, Illinois. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Finance from the University of Illinois and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Illinois. He lives in Geneva, Illinois, with his spouse, Jessica and has three daughters, Chloe, Ava, Juliana, and a son, Evan.



**Illinois Army National Guard Maj. Gen. Justin Osberg and his spouse, Jessica, unfurl his Two-Star General Officer Flag during Osberg's promotion ceremony, June 7, in Cantigny Park in Wheaton, Ill. Osberg is the Deputy, Combined Rear Area Coordinator, Combined Forces Command, U.S. Forces Korea, United States Indo-Pacific Command.**

# Retiring Lincoln's Challenge Academy Director Led With Vision and Passion

Lincoln's Challenge Academy Director Maurice Rochelle, a life member of Lafore Lock Post 755 in Springfield, understands the Cadets who enter the academy are looking for direction, a new start, and a way to change their lives for the better.

He lived it. Rochelle grew up in the 'Wild 100s' on the South Side of Chicago. "When I was young, I had temper and an attitude. I would not listen to most people."

Rochelle retired June 23 after three years of leading the academy. He leaves the academy with better educational and vocational programs. In 2024, Lincoln's Challenge Academy earned national academic accreditation for the high school credit program and added various high school credit classes. Rochelle also oversaw the addition of three vocational training programs and put several policies and initiatives in place to improve the Cadet experience during the residential program.

"LCA has become a better organization administratively and academically under Maurice Rochelle's leadership," said Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard.

"Under his passionate leadership and vision, the academy added vocational programs and improved the curriculum. He focused on the Cadets and dedicated himself to improving the



**Maj. Gen. Rodney Boyd, the Adjutant General of Illinois and Commander of the Illinois National Guard, awards the Illinois Distinguished Service Medal to Col. (retired) Maurice Rochelle during Rochelle's retirement ceremony as Lincoln's Challenge Academy Director June 23 at the LCA campus in Rantoul, Illinois.**

academy for their benefit. Maurice believed in every young man and woman who hoped to change their life for the better."

Rochelle is an ordained Christian minister, and said his faith gives him his passion and guidance. "Jesus rescued me from my ways in the hood ... I went from the streets of Chicago to serving nearly 40 years in the Illinois Army National Guard and retiring as a colonel."

Rochelle said he drew from his experience growing up, being mentored, serving in the community, and, most of all his faith, when working with the LCA cadets. He encouraged cadets to grow and develop holistically during their time in Lincoln's Challenge Academy. That includes

developing their faith, no matter what religious background they come from.

He built bridges between Lincoln's Challenge Academy and faith communities including a local mosque, a Catholic Church, Spanish-speaking churches, and others who could help the cadets find meaning and purpose within their religious backgrounds.

"I've been down this road they're traveling, and I can give them the directions to a better future to avoid the bumps, potholes, and dead ends. I've been through a lot, and I can help Cadets achieve the greatness they're destined for. I believe each and every one of us are created to achieve some form of greatness. We all have a greater purpose

and finding it is what helps makes us become the best versions of ourselves. These cadets are the future of this nation, and we are teaching them a foundation to build upon now.”

Almost four years ago, retired Col. Maurice Rochelle came to Lincoln’s Challenge Academy as the Deputy of Operations following 39 years in the Illinois Army National Guard. After only a few months as a Deputy Director, he would take the reins and become Program Director in May 2022.

Rochelle oversaw the graduation of more than 600 Cadets, awarded more than 170 GEDs and 30 high school diplomas, and coordinated nearly 30,000 hours of community service. Thirty-one Cadets and one staff member enlisted in the military under Rochelle tutelage. More than 150 cadets (25 percent) and some staff also achieved milestones within their religious backgrounds, such as

baptisms and confirmations, during Rochelle’s tenure as LCA Director.

Rochelle said the last three years has been a significant milestone in his life and career. Helping youth find purpose and direction while gaining education and life skills has been a way to give back and influence the future generation.

“It’s been an awarding time,” said Rochelle. “It’s not always easy working with youth. Unteaching bad habits and re-aligning them to think bigger so they have the confidence to achieve. We accomplish this by changes in the operations of the academy addressing the needs of education, life skills, and character development with discipline and a military structure.”

As Rochelle prepares to retire, he feels confident in the program the future director will receive and continue to build on to the legacy of LCA.

“The academy and the outstanding staff have so much support and assistance to offer to our youth,” said Rochelle. “The future of LCA is bright. The academy has been an important chapter in the lives of more than 16,000 thousand graduates, the families, and communities they are a part of. I know the future Directors will continue to make LCA a premier academy.”

Rochelle said he will miss his time as Director, but LCA will always have a place in his heart as he will continue to advocate for the program after his retirement.

“This place has been a huge part of my life,” said Rochelle, “I know this was God’s plan for me to be here, and help add to the legacy of LCA, and help the young men and women through life lessons, faith, and helping them be the best them they can be. I plan to still be connected to LCA and help it to be the best version it can be.”



**Lincoln’s Challenge Academy Director Maurice Rochelle is set to retire after three years of leading the Rantoul based life skills and education program.**



**Arlington Post 981 has awarded the 2025 Wally Luettschwager Memorial Scholarship Grant and the Bob Henderson Scholarship to Paige Hall and Matt Louis respectively**

## Post 981 Awards Annual Scholarships

Arlington Post 981 has awarded the 2025 Wally Luettschwager Memorial Scholarship Grant and the Bob Henderson Scholarship to Paige Hall and Matt Louis respectively. Both scholarships were worth \$3,000 each.

Paige Hall, a resident of Mount Prospect, graduated from Prospect High School this May. She is looking to major in psychology and business at university this fall, intending to become a therapist. While at Prospect she played soccer, serving as captain as well as leading Operation Snowball which helps teens avoid alcohol, tobacco and drugs. As part of the school's leadership council she helped raise over \$8,000 to benefit Folds of Honor, which provides support to children of disabled and fallen veterans. Her grandfather served in the Air Force in Vietnam.

Matt Louis is a resident of Barrington and graduated in 2025 from Barrington High School. He played volleyball and was an entrepreneurship leader. Before high school he started a successful

mowing service and in high school he created a business which manages media social campaigns for medical practices. He will be attending M.I.T. in the fall majoring in business with a concentration in entrepreneurship. One grandfather served in the Army as a Nuclear Defense Specialist, while his other grandfather served at a Nike Base in Homewood.

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

# Chicagoland Joins National Stage with First-Ever Women Veterans Engage Participation Event

History was made as the Chicagoland area proudly joined Women Veterans Engage for the very first time.

Held at VFW Post 311 in Richton Park, the event was part of a larger national movement, with over 800 attendees participating across the country via livestream from 20 different cities.

Co-hosted by 3 Vets is a Charm—Army Veterans Melissa Farmer-Hill (a Richton Park resident), Nekohl Johnson,

and Kimyada Wellington—the Chicagoland event welcomed over 50 in-person guests for a powerful afternoon of connection, purpose, and celebration.

The highlight of the day was an inspiring keynote by Joyce Abbott, the real-life educator who inspired the hit series Abbott Elementary. Vendors, volunteers, and community supporters added to the vibrant atmosphere, showing up to honor and uplift the voices of women Veterans.

Rick Reinbold, President of the Village of Richton Park, attended in support of the local effort, while Trustee Cynthia Butler proudly contributed as an event sponsor.

“This moment was big for us. To be one of 20 cities represented and to see Chicagoland included in a national broadcast—it’s a huge step forward in recognizing the power of our women Veterans and we look forward to doing it again next year,” said Melissa Farmer-Hill.



Pictured, from left, is Nekohl Johnson, Kimyada Wellington, Mayor Rick Reinbold, Village of Richton Park, Melissa Farmer-Hill, and VFW Post 311 Commander Aretha Spurlock.

**Firefighter Scott Scherer was selected as the Post 2244 Firefighter of the Year.**



## **Ambraw Post 2244 Honors First Responders during Annual Memorial Day Program**

Ambraw Post 2244, Lawrenceville, honored its local first responders of the year during the post's annual Memorial Day program.

### **Paramedic of the Year**

Carrie Hough was honored as the Post 2244 Paramedic of the Year.

Hough has shown extraordinary dedication, skill, and compassion in delivering lifesaving care to those in need. With unwavering commitment to patient safety and emergency response, she has gone above and beyond in the field of emergency medical services, ensuring individuals receive the highest quality care in their most critical moments.

Among her many accomplishments, Hough played a crucial role in responding to 486 emergency calls to 911, provided training to other paramedics and coordinated a fundraiser that produced funding required to purchase valuable equipment for the county. Her expertise, quick thinking, and calm presence have saved lives and strengthened the trust between first responders and the community.

Through her commitment to excellence, mentorship of fellow paramedics, and compassionate approach to patient care, Hough has made a lasting impact on the field of emergency medicine. She embodies integrity,

resilience, and service, making her a deserving recipient of this honor.

### **Police Officer of the Year**

Officer Brandon Sapp was honored as the Post 2244 Police Officer of the Year.

Sapp has exemplified unwavering dedication, professionalism, and courage in the line of duty. With a commitment to serving and protecting the community, he has gone above and beyond to ensure safety, uphold justice, and foster trust between law enforcement and the public.

He has served in many roles in his career, including radio operator, corrections officer, patrolman, and a platform instructor for rapid deployment, high risk traffic stops, and firearms. He has been recognized by multiple organizations for safety, valor, and as the 2024 Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 510 Officer of the Year.

Through exemplary leadership, outstanding investigative work, and a compassionate approach to policing, Sapp has made a lasting impact. Whether responding to emergencies, mentoring fellow officers, or engaging with community initiatives, his efforts have strengthened public safety and community relations.

**Carrie Hough was honored as the Post 2244 Paramedic of the Year.**



Sapp embodies the values of integrity, service, and excellence, making him a deserving recipient of this honor.

#### **Firefighter of the Year**

Firefighter Scott Scherer was selected as the Post 2244 Firefighter of the Year.

In announcing his selection, Post leaders noted he has demonstrated exceptional bravery, dedication, and service in protecting lives and property. With unwavering commitment to the community he has gone above and beyond in the call of duty, embodying the highest standards of firefighting and emergency

response.

Through Scherer's courage in hazardous situations, leadership in critical moments, and compassion in assisting those in need, he has made a profound impact. Whether responding to emergencies, mentoring colleagues, or engaging in community outreach, Scherer's efforts have strengthened public safety and trust.

Scherer exemplifies integrity, resilience, and excellence, making him a deserving recipient of the award. His dedication inspires fellow firefighters and serves as a shining example of heroism.



**Officer Brandon Sapp was honored as the Post 2244 Police Officer of the Year.**



Members of VFW Post 3480 were in attendance at the State Convention as the Post's poppy display placed second in the Poppy Display contest in their category. The Poppy Display qualified for judging at National Convention, a first in the 89-history of the post. In addition, Commander Valerie Young and Quartermaster Jeannan Flemings were able to visit with Past State Commander Maurice Bridges and newly-installed State Commander Eugene Blackwell.

### *Post 3480 Commander Honored as 2025 Veteran Leader of Year*

**Capt. Horace Burke Post 3480 Commander Valerie Young** was recently honored by Celebrate Saint Louis as Veteran of the Year for her dedicated service as a VFW Commander and inspiring leader in the community. In addition to the plaque, Young was coined by the Mayor of Saint Louis.



# Longtime Post 4724 Voice of Democracy Chairman Steps Down After Nearly 60 Years

An educator in Illinois for about 24 years, Dimitri Beres, a life member of Archie Miles Post 4724 in Elmwood, Illinois, has been a familiar face in the community for decades – both as an educator and as the chairman of the Post’s Voice of Democracy program – a position he’s held since 1966.

But due to health reasons, Beres is stepping down as the post chairman and relocating to an assisted living facility.

“I got involved in the Voice of Democracy program as an educator in Elmwood,” he said. “I taught a speech class and English. I would assign the essay to all my students.”

Beres said he told his students they didn’t have to speak the party line in writing an essay, and that’s okay. “The assignment was to write a good speech,” he said. “And the only way they would flunk my class would be to not complete assignments.”

He said most students wrote positive essays. “This is a very patriotic community,” he said.

Beres, a Korean Defense veteran, served in the

U.S. Army and was stationed in Korea in 1965.

“I tried out for a musical entertainment group called the 2nd Division Chorus,” he said. “We toured the country by bus performing concerts in Enlisted Members Clubs, and Officers Clubs. I got to see the entire country.”


Beres’ involvement with the Voice of Democracy program dates back to even before he was an educator in Elmwood.

“I participated in the program during high school,” he said. “My brother won at the state level in 1950.”

Beres said he’ll miss watching the Elmwood students advance through the competition the most.

“We’ve had two state champions from Elmwood in the last couple of decades,” he said. “Sadly, participation isn’t what it used to be. Educators are not making it an assignment so in some locations, you get two or three essays.”

Beres said if he had a magic wand, he’d go back in time and tell the Vietnam Veterans to get involved so the program doesn’t die.



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