

VFW National Convention - Senators, Young Vets Address Convention

Aug 18, 2008

ORLANDO, Fla. — Sen. Mel Martinez (R-Fla.), the first Cuban-born American elected to the U.S. Senate, expressed his appreciation for his adopted country and those who defend it.

“As an immigrant my admiration for veterans knows no bounds,” said the Orlando native. “I’m immensely grateful for your service. I lived under oppression.” Martinez proudly proclaimed that a VA hospital will be built in Orlando—one of the largest areas in the nation without one—in the “not too distant future.” A member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, he praised spouse/child transferability as a “key aspect” of the new GI Bill.

Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), a six-term senator on the Armed Services Committee, marveled at the medical attention given to wounded troops at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany during a recent trip, which also included Afghanistan. He noted a new procedure in which all troops receive a personal tourniquet that they can apply in emergency situations. “VFW began a tradition 109 years ago of caring for our returning vets,” he said. “Let’s make sure vets have access to health care and benefits.”

Sen. Jim Webb (D-Va.), a member of Post 9274 in Falls Church, Va., received VFW’s Gold Medal of Merit for his sponsorship of the new GI Bill.

“This bill that we collectively brought through Congress was one of the most important pieces of legislation in the last 30 years,” he said. Belying the notion that most volunteers are careerists, Webb noted that 70% of Marines and 75% of soldiers leave at or after the end of their first enlistment.

Also addressing attendees were Paul Rieckhoff, executive director and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and Elizabeth O’Herrin, executive director of Student Veterans of America. Rieckhoff, a 3rd Infantry Division platoon leader in Iraq in 2003, recalled a VFW welcome: “Two Vietnam vets greeted me when I came home. I’ll never forget that,” he said. O’Herrin, an Air Force vet of Iraq, also remembers coming home: “I found myself sitting next to 18-year-olds snapping gum and talking about the latest frat party. I found myself reeling from the transition,” she said.

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Navy Rear Adm. Donna Crisp, commander of the Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), briefed attendees on the quest to find missing Americans. She noted the missing still include: 74,374 from WWII; 8,055 from Korea; 1,755 from Vietnam; and 127 from the Cold War. JPAC comprises 362 personnel, of whom two-thirds are active duty and one-third civilian. It completes 70 operations a year on average. Crisp asked VFW members to track down family reference DNA samples for JPAC.