

VETERANS FOREVER SERVING

Comrades ... I am profoundly grateful to the delegates of the 108th National Convention for the honor, trust and confidence you have bestowed upon me.

Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Glen Gardner ... Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Tom Tradewell ... and I stand ready to serve.

To Gary Kurpius, Jim Mueller, and all the past chiefs here today ... thank you for your leadership and for your guidance.

To new National President Virginia Carman and all the members of the Ladies Auxiliary ... thank you for what you do daily for the good of this great organization.

To my Post 2314 in Carteret ... to my District 8 ... and to the great Department of New Jersey ... thank you for the years of support and encouragement.

Special thanks and appreciation also go out to Bill Goode — my campaign manager and best friend who passed away in April. Bill would have served as my Chief of Staff, so I am dedicating my year to his memory, because I know he continues to watch over me.

I also want to extend special thanks to past chief Bob Wallace for installing me, and to Susan Vander Clute for her years of friendship ... and for representing past chief Howard Vander Clute — my mentor.

To my special guests — my son John and brother Les and family — and to my dear friends, Pierre and Laurie Lamereaux ... Ron and Carol Cuff ... Paul and Cathy Chevalier ... Jerry Noonan ... Chris Bober ... Fred Gasior ... Phil Collura ... Brigadier General Glen Reith, the New Jersey Adjutant General ... and Colonel Steve Abel, the New Jersey Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs ... thank you all for making this day even more special by being here.

And to my wife, Gloria ... I want to thank you for your patience, your understanding, and for your love. You have always been there for me, and I know that without your unconditional support, I would not be here today as the leader of the greatest veterans' organization in the world, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

(pause)

I have been a VFW member for 36 years, and though some may say I have reached the top of the ladder, I want you to know that today is just one more step in a lifetime of service that many of us here have pledged ourselves to.

That's why the theme for my year is "Veterans Forever Serving," because those of us here — along with the countless others back in our Departments and Posts — know that our service to our country and to our fellow Americans did not end when we took off the uniform.

We wake up every morning knowing that we are going to help make a difference in someone else's life. But no matter how hard we try, we also know that more can be accomplished through participation and teamwork — and that's why my Number #1 goal for the year is 100 percent membership.

Many past chiefs have stood before you with similar messages and I will be no different, because the situation continues to get worse with the passing of our World War II and Korean War generations.

Membership drives our boat. It provides strength, direction and influence in the halls of Congress ... in your state capitols and legislatures ... and in our communities. With a strong and active membership, we can accomplish anything. Without it, our great organization will fail, and **THAT WILL NOT HAPPEN ON MY WATCH!**

We have a great challenge before us. Our numbers may not be as large as we once were, but through the election of good leadership, we can make this organization just as strong as it has ever been.

We need leaders who can bring out the best in our members ... leaders who can educate and motivate our membership ... and leaders who are not afraid of change.

I have to be honest with you — as a Vietnam veteran, I was not openly accepted in my Post ... and it wasn't until I became active that I realized I could make a difference.

I became the spokesman for other Vietnam vets at Post meetings, and eventually I became the first Vietnam veteran commander of my Post and then my District.

Today, Vietnam veterans stand proudly beside our combat brothers from previous wars, but I am starting to worry that my generation is now treating current war vets the same as we were first treated.

General Colin Powell once said that leadership is about solving problems ... that the day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them because they have either lost confidence that you can help or have concluded that you do not care. General Powell said either case is a failure of leadership.

What signals are we sending to this new generation? We beat down their doors to get them to join ... we encourage them to run in Post elections ... and then we don't listen to their ideas? That's a sure-fire way to lose membership and participation in my book.

This new generation brings fresh ideas, enthusiasm and optimism back into our Posts, and we absolutely cannot move forward into the VFW of the 21st century without them.

VFW Post 169 Adjutant Brenton Davis of Venango, Pennsylvania, says he has to explain to the young folks that you can join the VFW while still serving in uniform ... and that we're not all just a bunch of old vets sitting around drinking beer.

He stresses our community service and our lobbying efforts to protect and increase our benefits. Brenton is a 23-year-old Iraq war veteran who also runs ultra-marathons to raise thousands of dollars in pledges for hospitalized veterans.

There are hundreds of thousands of Brentons out there who are just itching to get involved, and that's why we must bring the membership back to 100 percent by having membership drives that are 12 months long.

If you need help or some fresh ideas, we had nine recruiters last year who brought in 500 or more new members ... each.

Our Recruiter of the Year — Ed Deissroth of Post No. 477 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania — brought in 1,154 members. I guarantee you that he and the other top recruiters didn't just start recruiting three months ago.

Pennsylvania, as you know, is our largest Department, with almost 124,000 members, but they have recruiting challenges just like everybody else. That's why they and every other Department should be zeroing in on the million and a half current war veterans.

We must work with our Guard and Reserve units in our backyards ... and find those active-duty folks at their installations or when they come home on leave.

Post 7534 in Duck Creek, Wisconsin, teamed with local military recruiters to host a meeting for 100 new recruits before they left for basic training. The meeting was informative — what's basic like and what's serving in a combat zone like — but it also showed these young men and women that the VFW cares about them and their families ... and that will translate into membership down the road.

The National Office has implemented a plan to recruit at least 150,000 new and/or reinstated members this year. I challenge each and every one of you to exceed your goals, and I want you — the true movers and shakers within the VFW — to take decisive action within your own Departments and Districts and Posts.

A MIP membership is good, but without ongoing personal contact and encouragement, you will lose that member at the end of the year. If your contact is hesitant to join your Post for whatever reason, encourage him or

her to become a Member At Large. We must concentrate on boosting membership in all areas if we are to reach our goals.

The entire organization is now on Direct Dues, so we must work with the National Office to collect dues from delinquent members and not wait for reminders to be sent in the mail.

We must take care of our ill veterans, those with financial problems, and our military on active duty. Use your Post relief funds to ensure their memberships do not expire for reasons beyond their control.

If you need help, call National ... or one of the 27 All-American Departments ... or 32 All-American Districts or 96 All-American Posts. This will be the year our National Organization goes over the top ... **AND WE CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN!**

(pause)

We must also continue to make our Posts more family friendly to encourage membership growth and participation. Our Posts started as family-oriented places, but that focus has been lost through the years.

We will continue to encourage all Posts to go smoke-free for the health and safety of our members, their families, and our employees.

Now ... before you go running back and telling everyone that Lisicki said this or Lisicki said that ... I want you to call Quartermaster Larry Soper of VFW Post 4206 in Melbourne, Florida.

His Post voted to go smoke-free earlier this year and they are now seeing an increase in membership and a huge upswing in participation ... to include members from other Posts.

Comrades, the smoking issue should not define who we are as an organization, and I should not have to remind you that 80 percent of the general population does not smoke ... and the great majority of this new generation of warriors we are trying to recruit **DOES NOT SMOKE.**

(pause)

Our strength is in our membership numbers ... and those with vibrant memberships know that magic can happen.

Take for example Post 4190 in Decatur, Alabama ... they are raising money to help the family of wounded Iraqi veteran Freddy Meyers, who is recuperating at a VA Medical Center in Virginia from gunshot wounds to the head.

The Department of Hawaii just donated 4,000 phone cards to the 25th Infantry Division Stryker Brigade.

The Department of Maryland raised more than \$26,000 to send 120 recovering wounded from Walter Reed — and their families and nurses — to Ocean City for a three-day, two-night beach weekend.

And the Department of Ohio and its Posts have raised tens of thousands of dollars for Unmet Needs and the Honor Flight program that flies aging World War II veterans to Washington to see their national memorial.

What they and many others continue to do on behalf of our great organization is noteworthy because they are making a difference in the lives of others ... their efforts are being publicized ... and our communities and nation are taking notice.

That's why a strong and active membership is so important ... it helps us to positively impact the lives of others on a grand scale.

A strong membership also strengthens our efforts on Capitol Hill, where it's often said if you want your voice to be heard, you'd better bring a crowd.

Our government knows that the VFW has no hidden agenda. Our entire focus is on the proper care of our veterans, service members and their families ... and for the safety and security of the United States of America through strong national defense and homeland security programs.

We helped to secure an historic increase in the VA budget that is \$6 billion more than the previous year, and which includes more money for the early identification and treatment of the two signature wounds of this war: Traumatic Brain Injuries and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The money also funds the hiring of 1,000 new adjudicators to help reduce the huge backlog of more than 830,000 claims.

We demanded accountability from those ultimately responsible for the substandard outpatient housing debacle at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and called for the inspection of Defense Department and VA healthcare facilities nationwide to ensure similar problems were not happening elsewhere.

And we helped to ensure the passage of an emergency war funding bill that omitted unrealistic troop withdrawal timelines but retained milestones for the Iraqi government to reach.

Our efforts on Capitol Hill and at the state level are so important that I have added 19 new members to the National Legislative Committee to assist ongoing efforts in those states with huge veteran populations and large delegations in Congress.

Veterans rights remains the top priority of this organization, and we still have a big job ahead of us to assure that we have a strong and properly funded VA system to support our veterans of the past, present and future.

The new GI Bill for the 21st Century must be finalized and passed into law to give today's warrior the opportunity to further their education. We will continue to fight for better Quality of Life programs for our military and

their families ... and we will continue to fight for veterans who are struggling through the maze of VA claims forms.

Last year more than 800 of our VFW-accredited service officers helped 97,000 veterans to recover \$1 billion in compensation and pension benefits from VA. We also represented more than 5,600 veterans and survivors at the Board of Veterans Appeals in Washington.

This we do as a free service for all veterans. So when the VFW speaks, the Administration and the 535 members of Congress know that we are speaking on behalf of all of America's 24 million veterans, all of her 2.2 million service members, and all of our families.

A strong membership tells those in Washington that our nation's veterans ... our military ... our spouses ... and our adult-aged children add up to 75 million Americans ... or one-fourth of the total population of this great country. A strong membership gives us a big stick that no elected official can ignore.

Regardless of which candidates you support, I want you to remember that as we enter this new Presidential and Congressional campaign season.

(pause)

We must sometimes be reminded that this is an organization of mostly volunteers. We must also never forget to thank them — a simple acknowledgement during a Post meeting or in the local newspaper is worth its weight in gold.

Danny Shannon leads a weekly group counseling session for current war veterans dealing with PTSD at his VFW Post 8195 in West Park, Florida.

Past Department of Vermont Commander Ira Coutermarsh exceeded 45,500 volunteer hours at the White River Junction VA Medical Center.

Up in Macomb County, Michigan, Auxiliary members from eleven different Posts got together and clipped 1.5 million Campbell's Soup product labels so that the VFW National Home could receive its fourth minivan under the Campbell's Labels for Education program.

There are literally thousands of acts of kindness and support the troop functions occurring daily around our nation. And these acts are getting recognized in the press and by a corporate world that also wants to help.

Pennsylvania-based Harleysville Insurance donated \$21,000 dollars to Operation Uplink. The phone card program has now distributed more than 8.5 million phone cards worth almost 130 million minutes to deployed military personnel and those recuperating from their wounds in our nation's hospitals.

AT&T just donated \$50,000 to strengthen our veterans' service officer program ... and Vermont American Tools enabled our Unmet Needs

program to distribute \$1.5 million dollars to help 1,100 military families through emergency financial situations.

We must continue to work on our VFW Core Programs in our Departments ... and I encourage you to continue with the many unique programs you have even if they are not national programs anymore.

I am pleased to announce that the Scouting Program has been reinstated on the national level, because Scouting is an important program that instills Americanism and patriotism in our youth.

We must continue to support our military and their families using whatever means available, like our Operation Uplink, Unmet Needs, and Military Assistance Programs. We must continue to support the needs of the families of our deployed troops ... whether it is financial or just moral support.

The VFW needs to be there for them when our troops are deployed and visible when they return home. And we must continue to be there for the families of our 88,000 missing and unaccounted-for service members.

(pause)

Veterans have always been important to me, and today, after being at war for almost six years, I hope the nation recognizes our importance ... and the fact that all of us come back changed — mostly for the better.

Next month, we await the assessment that our field commander and U.S. ambassador to Iraq will present to the President and to the nation. We, as an organization, have urged patience and have supported the strategy that combines ongoing security efforts with new diplomatic and economic initiatives.

I know that the war in Iraq has divided our organization as much as it has the country, but I will tell you that if our troops in the field have hope, then we as an organization must have hope ... because the alternative is despair, and my generation and my country must never go down that road again.

President Kennedy said the path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards and that the cost of freedom is always high ... but that there was one path that we would never choose ... and that is the path of surrender or submission.

We who have seen the horrors of war know the sacrifices that today's warriors and their families are making to keep this nation free and our enemies at bay.

It is our obligation as this nation's largest organization of war veterans to constantly remind others that **FREEDOM IS NOT FREE!**

Comrades ... in closing ... a great sacrifice continues to be made on behalf of a nation that seems to be forgetting that the world is a very dangerous and very unpredictable place.

As veterans forever serving, it is our duty to remind those who would forget that there would not be a United States of America without the service and sacrifice of the men and women who wear the uniform.

It is our duty to ensure our nation honors its commitment to care for those who have borne the battle.

And as members of the greatest veterans' organization in the world, it is our sacred duty to ensure the continued growth, vitality and relevance of the Veterans of Foreign Wars far into the 21st century.

Thank you.

-vfw-

(Current as of Aug. 10, 2007)