

DRAFT ACCEPTANCE SPEECH
FOR
VFW COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF WILLIAM A. “BILL”
THIEN

“What’s Right About The VFW”

July 24, 2013

Good morning and thank you, Comrades ... thank you for this great honor to lead the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. I am truly humbled by your trust. I pledge to do my absolute best to continue bringing our great organization into the 21st Century.

Being elected Commander-in-Chief is a dream come true ... and it’s the direct result of the great support I have received over the years from family, friends and mentors.

First off, I want to thank Past Commanders-in-Chief Richard Eubank, Richard DeNoyer and John Hamilton for welcoming this old sailor into what seemed like a “Marines Only” party for years.

I also want to publicly thank still another Marine—Past Commander-in-Chief Allen “Gunner” Kent, who steps down after eight years of faithful and dedicated service as our Adjutant General. We will miss his smiling face up here ... but know his voice will continue to be heard loud and clear.

I want to congratulate John Stroud from Nevada for moving up the ladder to Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief ... and welcome aboard Big John Biedrzycki from Pennsylvania as your new Junior Vice ... as well as Dave Havelly as my Chief of Staff, and Terry Vance as the Inspector General. They have vast amounts of knowledge and are certainly an asset to the Organization !

I send my warmest centennial congratulations to new Ladies Auxiliary National President Sissy Borel from Louisiana, and to all her officers for what you and your organization do daily for veterans, the troops and their families. No question we are a better Organization because of our Ladies Auxiliary.

To Past Commander-in-Chief Jim Mueller for installing me into office ... Past Commanders-in-Chief Art Fellwock who has been a mentor to me for many years and Past Commander-in-Chief Ed Banas for accepting nomination duties... a special thank you to all

for the leadership and guidance you continue to bring to our great organization. Greg Baker, Indiana's State Commander for your kind words on the nominations second.

To the Big Ten Conference, Department of Indiana, District 8, and my Post 3281 in New Albany ... thank you for your years of friendship and support.

To three mentors who are no longer with us ... former Indiana Department Commanders Dave Cole and Wes Farnsley Post 3281 Commander and 8th District Commander Joe Yost ... thank you, Comrades ... I will never forget the reason why the VFW exists. I suspect they are looking down and wondering what Billy has got himself into now.

To my family down in the front row ... children Denise (not here started a new job), Melissa, Tawnya and John ... son-in-laws Tim, Joe and Ryan ... and grandchildren Kira, Joey, Marissa, Ridge, Johnathon (working) and our newest addition, Claire ... Just over a year old and already she has Grampa wrapped around her little finger.... plus our close friends Mary Lou and Roger Wise ... neighbor Donna Edwards ... and fellow Hoosier and current national commander of the American Legion, Jim Koutz ... my

sincere appreciation to all of you for making this great day even better.

And last but certainly not least ... to my wife, Linda ... thank you the most for your strength, your compassion, your love, and especially your patience. Just one more year and I promise to finally cut the grass and fix the broken stuff around the house.

(pause)

Comrades, I am using this opportunity to preach to the choir about who we are as the nation's oldest and largest war veterans' organization. It is my hope that you take the message to those that are not here or don't fully understand our mission.

I want to reinforce everything that is right about the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States ... and for you—and those watching on the internet via live stream—to spread the word far and wide that the VFW is OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

We were founded in 1899 by returning Soldiers, Sailors and Marines from the Spanish-American War and later, the Philippine Insurrection. These wars represented the first time

America would deploy large numbers of troops to fight on foreign soil.

Our founders returned home to a government that provided no healthcare or rehabilitation programs for their service-connected wounds, injuries or illnesses. So these veterans banded together to create an organization to change the way our nation treats those she sends to war—and 114 years later, our fight still continues.

After the Spanish American War when the troops came home, Teddy Roosevelt gave a farewell address to his Rough Riders—I'll quote part of his address "The world will be kind to you for 10 days. Everything you do will be alright. After that you will be judged by a stricter code. If you prove worthless, you will have been considered spoiled by war!"

How right he turned out to be!

A PVT was given 2 months pay @ 15.60 per month and the clothes on their back period!

Can you just imagine how tuff tough it was for our forefathers to get our VFW started? 1898-99, the troops coming home from the

Spanish American War. Many were sick and poor, living on the streets and begging for food. That's exactly why there is a Veterans of Foreign Wars.

To the VFW, a nation that creates veterans has a sacred obligation to care for them when they return home. The Veterans of Foreign Wars intends to ensure that America's obligation is kept.

Using that as our guiding principle, the VFW grew to become the most respected and powerful Veterans' Voice inside the White House and Congress, as we advocate on behalf of the interests of 22 million veterans, more than 2 million active-duty military, Guard and Reserve members, and all their families.

This we successfully accomplish in an environment of 30,000 registered lobbyists who represent 20,000 individual clients whose primary interests differ from ours.

You hear us talk often about our legislative record of successes to create, protect and enhance virtually every Quality of Life

program provided by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs.

It was the VFW that got the president to make the Star-Spangled Banner our national anthem. It was the VFW that led the Bonus Army, helped to create the Department of Veterans Affairs, and all the other military and VA quality of life programs that range from improved healthcare and benefits to disability compensation, military pay raises, new GI Bills, traumatic injury insurance, hazardous substance exposure compensation, family caregiver support, and better care and services for women veterans.

What we do on Capitol Hill is one of the many things that's right about the VFW, Comrades, and that message must be reinforced in every member and told to every prospective member.

That's my VFW !

We have far too many military people and veterans who believe that it's the Pentagon or the President or the Congress who are responsible for their military and disability pay

increases or other Quality of Life improvements. We have to tell our story.

You tell them that every new program, pay or benefit that they now enjoy is due to the lobbying we do to create them—and the VFW National Organization didn't do it alone.

Of tremendous assistance are our sister organizations, as well as the grassroots community support provided by tens of thousands of VFW Action Corps members, who most recently forced the military services to reinstate tuition assistance programs.

Your voice also got the proposed Distinguished Warfare Medal eliminated, and I hope your united voice will soon force the Pentagon into keeping the existing military retirement system intact ... to stop pushing a measly one percent military pay increase ... and to quit using military retiree healthcare premiums to balance the Pentagon's budget problems.

Trust me, Comrades, when I tell you how much power a single voting constituent has, when they contact their congressman or senator on VFW business.

Just ask any National Legislative Committee member. The politicians know almost 4,500 VFW and Auxiliary members reside in every Congressional District, plus they know we vote at a higher percentage than the general population.

That is influence and respect we cannot take lightly or abuse.

The VFW Washington Office also trains and oversees our nationwide network of more than 1,200 VA-accredited service representatives, who last year helped 125,000 veterans to recoup an organizational record of \$3.7 billion in compensation and pension from the federal government.

Plus our win rate at the Board of Veterans Appeals that is the highest among all major VSOs, and exceeds lawyer-assisted appeals.

We also expanded our service work to more than 18 of the military's largest installations and regions through a Defense Department program that authorizes our service officers to directly assist transitioning military members with their VA paperwork before they separate or retire.

Plus we expanded this claims assistance through the Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment to assist previously discharged wounded, ill and injured Marines with their VA claims or appeals.

That's the VFW I want to belong to!

And just this year we expanded it again through the Student Veterans of America to assist student-veterans with GI Bill claims or other VA claims on more than 800 college and university campuses across the country ... to include 12 campuses here in Kentucky and 24 across the river in my home state.

Speaking of the SVA, as you may know the VFW and SVA signed a MOU earlier this year at their Conference. It has already paid dividends. In New York for example...Post 2940 in West Seneca, one of the largest post's in New York, the youngest member was 72 and they were having trouble filling key positions. Several Daemen College SVA members was at the SVA conference.

Upon their return and after hearing what the VFW does, they became involved with Post 2940. Thanks to the assistance from Department of New York and Comrade Marlene Roll, over 20 joined the Post and several took Post offices. Marlene also help a officers training program for them.

The One student Veteran program you will hear about. It basically helps student Veterans navigate the mounds of red tape involved in securing a student veteran educational benefits.

Many thanks to Past Commander in Chief Jim Nier, Director of Programs Dan Parker and Deputy Director of National Legislative Services Ryan Gallucci for their work on this important relationship.

(pause)

I joined VFW Post 3281 in 1971 after I got back from Vietnam because it was the accepted thing to do ... and because there was nothing like a Student Veterans of America chapter around that might have better served my age group.

My Post welcomed me into the fold, but I won't say it was all roses because it was run by World War II vets who were very Old School ... and I was only in my 20s.

Like many of you, I paid my dues to become an active member of my Post. I volunteered at Bingo, recycled cans, helped with building maintenance projects, delivered Christmas baskets, and visited the VA Hospital.

It was a struggle sometimes—being active while raising a young family and working full-time—but many of us younger vets knew that some kind of change was needed in order for the Post to grow ... and grow we did, from 350 members in the 1970s to over a thousand in the 1990s, thanks to a huge influx of Desert Shield and Storm veterans.

But that was 20 years ago and this is now. My question is how does the VFW now need to change in order to better accommodate a new generation of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans along with the post-Vietnam veterans ?

All agree our great organization and all our wonderful programs cannot survive without a huge infusion of Post-9/11 veterans

coupled with veterans from Desert Shield/Storm and many other smaller combat operations since the end of the Vietnam War. Vietnam Veterans are now considered Old School, what are we willing to change to meet this new generation's needs?

The overall theme of this acceptance speech is "What's right about the VFW," but comrades, you know as well as I that there are some Posts out there who aren't pulling their weight ... who wouldn't know the difference between a community service report from a parking ticket ... who might think good publicity is how many times the police show up on a weekend.

Comrades, if your Post or a Post you are aware of, is nothing more than a local bar, then you either need to clean it up or take down the Cross of Malta. It's that simple ... There are way too many good, honest and hard-working Posts out there to let one knuckle head Post ruin all you have accomplished.

After 114 years of service and two decades of declining membership, we absolutely cannot afford to have the VFW's household name associated with anything other than great service work for others.

Seven years ago we had 8,500 Posts. Today we are down to 7,100.

That equates to 1,400 communities who are now less off because there is no VFW to file their claims or help care for their veterans ... to talk to them about patriotism and national service and sacrifice ... to organize local Memorial Day, Independence Day and Veterans Day parades ... to volunteer down at the local VA ... or to award a Patriot's Pen or Voice of Democracy scholarship to a deserving teenager.

Comrades, Vietnam Veterans have a tight hold on the operation of this organization at every level. If we don't loosen our grip and give the younger folks free rein, we are going to choke off their participation ... and we all know where that ship is headed.

We need new leaders like Sylvia Sanchez, a Desert Storm veteran, who last month became the Commander of the Department of Texas ... Renee Simpson, a Bosnia veteran, and the new Commander of the Department of Wisconsin ... and the thousands of other post-Vietnam veterans who are now in positions of leadership to help put the wind back into our sails.

Our job is to help them succeed. We who has the knowledge, experience and understanding of our Organization, have a responsibility and obligation to mentor those future leaders of our Organization.

(pause)

Our new tagline ... ***“No One Does More For Veterans”*** ... is something we accomplish nationally through our legislative and service officer support, and locally by organizing and participating in thousands of community, military and veterans’ outreach events.

This includes:

- Volunteering more than 11 million hours annually at 1,400 VA facilities;
- Awarding \$3 million annually in 7th through 12th grade patriotic scholarship competitions that you support through your Patriotic Pen and Voice of Democracy contributions.

- Providing 7.2 million free telephone connections between deployed personnel and their families;
- Hosting 2 million military and their families at departure and homecoming ceremonies;
- And through the VFW Unmet Needs program, providing \$4.6 million in grants to help more than 3,300 military families through emergency financial situations.

These are just a few of the great things the national office helps to facilitate, but what you folks do locally is truly what we're all about.

Like Ohio VFW Posts 3035 and 5803, who raised \$40,000 in donations and generators to help New York VFW Posts 260 in Broad Channel and 5199 in Rockaway Beach that were severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy last October.

Like VFW Post 3819 in Reno, Nevada, who donated \$35,000 to the VFW Foundation in February to continue all these great troop support programs.

Or VFW Post 308 in Newtown, Connecticut ... their community took a tremendous blow last December, so they raised more than \$10,000 for the families and first responders—and then did it again in May to help fellow VFW members and other tornado victims in Moore, Oklahoma.

That's my VFW and I hope it's yours also!

These are just a few examples from thousands of similar acts by VFW members and Posts taking care of others.

These are also just a few examples about all that's right about the VFW ... about how a congressionally-chartered veterans' service organization serves those who faithfully serve our nation.

(pause)

Every returning war veteran inherits a solemn duty to make things better for following generations, and for 114 years, your Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States continues to lead the fight to ensure that a nation that creates veterans takes care of them when they return home.

This is what is right about the VFW, and it is this message that you have to communicate with potential members. By joining us today, you help the VFW continue its fight on Capitol Hill and in every state legislature.

With your help, the VFW can continue our veteran and military support programs.

And by joining us today, it will ensure that there will be a VFW for generations of new war veterans to come.

Right now, less than one percent of the population serves in uniform ... and only about eight percent of the population has ever worn the uniform.

That's why a strong and vibrant VFW and a Ladies Auxiliary is so important.

Look around the room right now and ask yourself one question ... If not me ... if not us ... who?

Comrades and sisters, this is our VFW, and everything about our organization is great. Yes, we have challenges, but very few things in life are worse than witnessing war, or feeling hopeless when our warriors return home changed.

What the VFW has helped to create over the past 114 years is the envy of the world, and that's why this national convention may have seemed like an international convention.

Only at the VFW National Convention will you meet military veterans from Russia, its former Soviet bloc allies, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam—countries we allied with during World War II but who would become our enemies during Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War.

And if I've been asked once I've been asked a thousand times ... Why are they here? To learn how we take care of our veterans.

And in return, we want their governments to help provide more information regarding our 83,000 missing and unaccounted-for servicemen from our nation's wars.

We visit these countries and tell them that every year, but showing someone is always more important than telling them.

Our support to bring our fallen home is unquestionable, as is our support to their families who continue to burn a candle of hope that one day—soon—their loved one will finally return from their wars.

If we can help to bring closure to one family of our missing, then all our efforts and energy is well worth it. If it were your mom or dad, brother or sister or son or daughter, wouldn't you want the VFW assisting in efforts to bring them home?

What makes the Veterans of Foreign Wars great is the quality of our people who unselfishly dare to make a personal difference in the lives of fellow comrades, communities and nation.

That caring for others, Comrades, is what makes the VFW so great ... and I hope you continue to spread the word to everyone.

In closing,

Our Organization has had many notables—Generals Bradley-
McArthur—Pershing—Patton--Westmoreland
Admirals Coontz-Nimitz

Presidents—Kennedy—Truman—Roosevelt--Bush Sr.—Ford—
Eisenhower—Nixon—Johnson

MOH recipients Alvin York and Audie Murphy
Among others

That was great for the Veterans of Foreign Wars to have such distinguished Americans on the roles, but us that have not made such an elite and high profile list, please know that you are the engine that makes the VFW and it's Ladies aux. what it was in the past, what it is now and what it will be in the future. You are the indeed VFW's soldiers.

It's your work, dedication, your love for the Veterans and families, active duty defenders and their families that's important. I don't know if the organization found you or you

found the organization, either way I'm glad you have dedicated your time and talents to the organization and I'm proud of each and every one you in this room.

We may not be as young as we once were, as thin as we once were or as healthy as we once were, but we are as dedicated to taking care of our veterans and their families as we ever were!!!!

God bless each and every one of you, our Organization and the greatest country on the face of this earth, The United States of America!! Thank you