

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH
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My heartfelt gratitude to all the delegates of this 116th National Convention for the honor, trust and confidence you have placed in me.

I first want to congratulate new Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief (ELECT) Brian Duffy from Kentucky ... new Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief (ELECT) Keith Harman from Ohio ... new VFW Auxiliary National President Francisca Guilford of Alaska ... all your new line officers ... and all our new Department, District and Post leadership.

I also want to recognize a few individuals who have greatly enriched my life and spirit ... given me strength ... and who join in my commitment to serving our nations veterans, service members, and all their families of past, present and future.

I thank Past Commander-in-Chief John Stroud of Nevada and Past Commander-in-Chief Bill Thien of Indiana for welcoming me aboard to their teams.

To the officers and delegates of the Eastern States Conference, and to Past Chiefs Richard DeNoyer, George Lisicki, Ed Banas, John Smart, Bob Wallace, and especially Cliff Olsen and Paul Spera (my installing officer)—thank you for your support, your guidance and your friendship.

Special thanks go to my VFW Post 418 in McKees Rocks, to District 29, all the Pennsylvania Officers, Delegates, Past State Commanders and State Presidents.

And I especially want to recognize Past State Commander Allen Jones and Past State Commander and National Council Member Bob Eiler for their guidance, wisdom and friendship.

One thing great about being elected Commander-in-Chief in your hometown is your family doesn't have to travel very far.

With that I would like to recognize:

- My younger brother Paul and his wife, Louise;
- My youngest brother David and his guest, Kim;

- My sister-in-law JoAnne and her husband, Dr. Gerald Meier; and
- My son John the Third, daughter-in-law, Beth, her parents Richard and Alyce, and to our grandchildren Max and Molly—happy 8th birthday, Max!

And to my partner in this journey we call life, Bette Jean, whose unconditional love and support over the past 46 years of marriage is more than any man could ever deserve, but one I'm certainly smart enough to acknowledge and certainly appreciate. Bette Jean is a Past State President of the Pennsylvania Ladies Auxiliary, and Past National Council Member, and is truly the wind beneath my wings.

And finally, to all the comrades and sisters here and watching online around the world who I have had the extraordinary opportunity to meet and spend time with during my travels these many years, thank you for your kindness and courtesies, and for allowing me to learn and share in your many activities that serve our nation's military and veterans' communities. Thank you very much.

Like many of you, I joined the VFW because someone asked me to join when I came home on leave from Korea in 1969. That someone was a World War II veteran who also happened to be my father-in-law, Jack Kinneman.

I joined because someone dear in my life asked me. I stayed because I found the VFW to be an organization that shares my values of ... Loyalty, Honor and Service.

- Loyalty to country;
- Honor to America's heroes and institutions; and
- Service to our veterans, our military, their families, and our communities and nation.

The VFW supports the tenets of a strong nation that espouses the values of freedom, and the rights of all to pursue a life of fulfillment. We support the rights of individuals to choose their own destinies, limited only by their own personal willingness to work and persevere through hardships.

When I speak about the VFW, I brag about the services we provide to so many, such as:

- Thousands of care packages sent overseas to deployed troops we've never met;
- Supporting first responders during natural disasters at home;
- Promoting patriotism in our schools through Voice of Democracy and Patriots Pen sponsorships;

- Our Adopt-a-Unit programs that help ensure our troops get a proper send-off and equally important, a hearty welcome home;
- The expert assistance provided by our Veterans Service Officers to all honorably-discharged veterans seeking to file or appeal a VA claim; and
- The wise counsel provided by our national and local VFW's to Congress and state houses across the country.

The VFW lifts spirits because we and our families have been there and done that, which is one thought I want you to share with everyone: “If not for the VFW, who?”

- If not for the VFW, who in our communities will help organize and participate in patriotic salutes to our nation and remember those who serve or fell?
- If not for the VFW, who will promote patriotism in our youth?
- If not for the VFW, who will help America’s veterans and troops navigate the complex VA claims system, or ensure their individual needs are properly take care of?
- If not for the VFW, who will give a collective voice on Capitol Hill against all the noise generated by 30,000 registered lobbyists who, other than lip service, don’t have the best interest of veterans, service members and families first on their agendas?

“If not for the VFW” is something I hope you will consider deeply, because there are SOME in our great organization—who I believe—have lost focus on why we exist—who think we should be more of a SOCIAL organization—than the veterans SERVICE organization we were created to be.

Less than 3 miles from here is where members of the Veterans of Foreign Service met in 1914 to adopt the name Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Today we meet again in Pittsburgh to take stock of ourselves and to chart our course for the future.

We must rededicate our goals and objectives to the concept of service that was envisioned by our early leaders when they returned home to an America that they felt couldn’t relate to their service, and to a government that was unable and often unwilling to care for their sacrifices.

Not believing anyone can relate has been said by every generation of returning veteran—from our founders’ wars through Iraq, Afghanistan, and every contingency operation or lousy overseas

duty posting in between.

But our founders did something instead of just complain about it. They created an organization that welcomed all who would serve in our wars and conflicts.

They created an organization that would treat current and future generations with dignity and respect, regardless of when or where they served. And they created an organization that would do its part to take care of veterans, service members and their families, and to constantly teach the rest of America about what service to country truly means.

My challenge is what are you going to do to keep their vision alive? My challenge is how are you going to keep their VFW ... our VFW ... and tomorrow's VFW relevant to generations of veterans still to come?

Comrades, this September will mark 14 years since that horrible Tuesday morning when radical Islamist terrorists hijacked four planes and murdered nearly 3,000 Americans in New York City, the Pentagon, and in an open field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, about 80 miles from here.

In the ensuing days and years, well over 3 million men and women would raise their right hands to defend America against a new threat.

In the ensuing days and years, hundreds of nonprofit organizations would also be created to help support the troops, their families, our wounded, or their survivors.

That's why the VFW was created, comrades... to take care of veterans, our troops and their families, but some of these new organizations offered something different ... opportunities to get physically involved in their communities—from building housing for the homeless, to sponsoring environmental cleanups, and staying physically fit through wholesome family sporting events.

And these new organizations provided opportunities without any membership requirement or further obligation to participate in future events. Invitations were extended through social media, and event organizers simply learned to adjust on the fly.

Our founders wrote about entering a new era of Veterans Organizations. That the Old Boy's network or day of Bar Room Commandos has come and gone.

This is where we are losing our relevancy with the new generation. World War II veterans were a generation of joiners, but Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are a generation of doers, who prefer getting their hands dirty instead of discussing things to death in monthly meetings.

I am not suggesting that our by-laws and manual of ritual are out-of-date, but I am suggesting that

successful VFW Posts recognize and adapt. They've learned that in order to catch fish, you have to go where the fish are.

Take VFW Post 1435 in Spokane, Washington, for example. The city sponsors what's billed as the largest 3-on-3-basketball tournament in the world, with 225,000 fans watching 7,000 teams. The Spokane Hoopfest also had a Team VFW in matching jerseys to prove that we can do more than just sponsor Little League teams.

VFW Post 1115 in Hillsville, Virginia, created a "Young Guns" committee, led by a two-tour Iraq vet, to get the Post more actively and physically involved in the community, as well as a way to recruit younger members.

One of the greatest challenges is convincing younger veterans about the value of being a VFW member. We have a proven record of 116 years of service to veterans and veteran advocacy. We are like an insurance policy, that you may never need, but one that will still continue to help those in need.

Take VFW Post 7369 in Naples, Florida, for example. They took it upon themselves to restore part of a civilian cemetery after the graves of nearly 70 veterans were discovered hidden in the underbrush.

The success of America was built on the service and sacrifice of many Americans, but our continued freedom falls squarely on the shoulders of those who wear the uniform. Everyone in the VFW understands that. But unfortunately, as our nation's population continues to increase, and the size of our military continues to shrink, the rest of America doesn't get it.

That's why I need you to continue to tell America's story, so that it's not lost to rewritten history books, by authors who never served—or worse, by authors who just don't care.

Here in Pennsylvania, the saying "Freedom isn't free," means something. My state has the nations fourth largest veterans' population, yet no active-duty installations to speak of. And it has the largest VFW department membership with 87,000 members.

We know that it requires the citizenry to secure and maintain the blessings of liberty for themselves, their families and their nation. We know that patriotism is not a short demonstration on the Fourth of July—it's a lifelong commitment. America may have its faults, but no country has done more for the world than the United States. We are a shining example to those who desire to live in freedom and opportunity.

I also need YOU to continue telling the VFW's story of loyalty, honor and service ... how we were

founded to serve others ... and how we will continue to extend a helping hand to all veterans, service members and their families.

And don't forget to recognize the work of our own volunteers as well as others. That's why we present national awards during convention, and that's why you should recognize excellence in your own communities—especially local VA hospital volunteers, who often touch more lives in a day than others do in a lifetime.

Never pass up the opportunity to give a hearty thank you from the VFW, and never pass up the opportunity let people know that **THE VFW STANDS FOR A STRONG AMERICA!**

Serving others is my Number #1 goal, but right behind that is a strong and vibrant membership.

A strong membership opens doors in Washington, not just because you are veterans, but also because you vote—in every congressional district.

We may not always vote for the same candidate, but every candidate knows where we stand on national defense and veterans issues.

As I previously mentioned, we compete in Washington against 30,000 registered lobbyists who see the world differently. That's why a strong and engaged membership is so important—on Capitol Hill and in your state legislatures.

I wish to congratulate the 17 departments who exceeded 100 percent in membership this past year. I also wish to salute the seven women veterans who will serve as Department Commanders in the coming year. I encourage all of you to reconsider how you can and must evolve to maintain your relevancy in this new millennium.

I need everyone to reflect on the future of our VFW, and the challenges that our nation faces. First and foremost, our overseas conflicts are not over, and our government faces a return to mandatory sequestration that threatens not only our nation's readiness and security, but every military quality of life program the VFW helped to create.

I hope that my year as Commander-in-Chief will be remembered as a year of renewing our pledge to the VFW's commitment of service.

We need membership to stay strong to support our numerous programs, and to remain relevant in Congress and to America. We also need Departments, Districts and Posts to create more opportunities that better serve our nation's veterans and military communities.

Here in Pittsburgh the VFW teamed up with academia, industry, and the nonprofit world to create

“Pittsburgh Hires Veterans.” I hope many of you took the opportunity to visit their convention booth.

The idea behind “Pittsburgh Hires Veterans” is simple: We match veterans who are seeking jobs and careers with employers. Companies who—at last count—have hundreds of vacancies in manufacturing. WHAT WE AREN’T DOING IN PITTSBURGH is relying on the federal government to solve local issues.

I also highly encourage you to reinvest in the VFW programs and services that benefit veterans, service members and their families. Yes, some of us can generate large sums of money that greatly benefit local communities. All I ask is for you to remember the VFW’s charities, after all charity begins at home.

In closing, I would be remiss if I didn’t rededicate our support to the government’s Full Accounting Mission, to the families of all 83,000 American MIAs, and to the dedicated troops and DoD civilians who perform these investigations and recoveries in some of the most arduous places on earth.

I had the opportunity to visit with many of them earlier this year in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, and I still cannot adequately express my pride in their commitment to return America’s fallen to their families.

Comrades, THAT’S MY VFW—a VFW that is recognized for the great work we do, whether it’s championing veterans issues on Capitol Hill or simply shaking the hands of American MIA searchers at the bottom of a muddy Vietnamese mountain in a torrential downpour.

What our founders knew a century ago has not changed—action, not words, will lead the way for our great organization. I ask all of you to reach out to your friends, families and communities, and have them join us in a recommitment to our nation—and to a new generation of young men and women who serve her.

SOMEONE has to be America’s conscience to keep patriotism and the history of our great country alive. SOMEONE has to ensure we are strong, safe and secure, AND SOMEONE has to make sure our nation’s commitments to those who serve her in uniform never fail.

With your support, comrades, I am proud to say **THAT SOMEONE!** will be the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. May God Bless our great country and our great organization. And remember, No one does more for veterans than the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

Thank You!