



June 23, 2017

**In This Issue:**

- 1. VA Accountability, Whistleblower Protection Act Becomes Law**
- 2. VFW Praised at MIA Family Conference**
- 3. VFW Testifies on the President's Budget**
- 4. GI Bill Tracking Roundtable**
- 5. DHA Executive Council Meeting**
- 6. Joint Chiefs Chairman Shares Concerns**
- 7. VA Announces Building Disposal**
- 8. VA Women Summit Opens Registration**
- 9. Online Exchange Shopping Eligibility to Expand**
- 10. MIA Update**

**1. VA Accountability, Whistleblower Protection Act Becomes Law:** The VFW is saluting President Trump for signing into law today the VFW-championed *Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017*. “Accountability must be a two-way street, and today’s signing now provides VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin the authority to manage his people in a manner expected of all senior executives, public or private,” said VFW National Commander Brian Duffy, who attended the White House signing ceremony along with VFW Adjutant General Bob Wallace and others. “Three years ago, a nationwide crisis in access to care and confidence engulfed the entire VA,” said Duffy. “Weeding out the nonperformers and those whose personal conduct brings doubt and dishonor upon thousands of dedicated employees is essential to restoring the full faith of veterans in their VA,” he said. “Today’s signing will not instantly fix an employee culture of indifference to appointed leadership that took years — if not decades — to fester, but it does send a very loud and unmistakable signal to all employees that maintaining the status quo no longer works for those who have borne the battle,” he said. “Let the healing begin.” The VFW also salutes bill sponsor Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and VA Committee Chairmen Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) and Rep. Dr. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), and their respective ranking members, Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) and Rep. Tim Walz (D-Minn.), for their work in passing a bipartisan, bicameral and comprehensive accountability bill that also provides better protections to whistleblowers. [Watch coverage from the event.](#)

**2. VFW Praised at MIA Family Conference:** “No One Does More for Veterans” was more than just a slogan at this week’s 48th annual meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families in Arlington, Va. The VFW was consistently lauded by both League and government

officials for the unwavering support we bring to the Full Accounting Mission at home and abroad. In his remarks after being presented with the League's Top Distinguished Service Award, VFW Adjutant General Bob Wallace repeated the VFW's real and sincere commitment to MIA family members everywhere, and promised that the VFW will continue to help the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency succeed by pushing the humanitarian aspect of the full accounting mission directly to foreign governments who may still have information pertaining to the fates of many of the nearly 83,000 missing Americans going back to World War II. National POW/MIA Recognition Day this year is Sept. 16. [Order or download copies of the new 2017 POW/MIA poster.](#)

**3. VFW Testifies on the President's Budget:** On Thursday, VFW National Legislative Director Carlos Fuentes testified at the House Veterans' Affairs Health Subcommittee hearing on VA's budget request. Fuentes continued the VFW's strong opposition to a provision in President Trump's budget proposal to cut up to \$22,000 from the annual compensation of severely disabled veterans who receive Individual Unemployability. He also offered the VFW's support for VA's focus on improving access to care for veterans, reducing veteran suicides, women veterans, and veteran homelessness. Members of the subcommittee were concerned that VA has started to reduce the use of the Veterans Choice Program due to budget shortfalls, which may force veterans to wait longer for their care. Subcommittee members also discussed the amount of vacancies at VA medical facilities and VA's ability to fill them. [Watch the hearing or read the testimony.](#)

**4. GI Bill Tracking Roundtable:** On Wednesday, the VFW participated in a roundtable discussion with members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and representatives from the Department of Veterans' Affairs and institutes of higher education. The focus of the meeting was to discuss student veteran outcomes and better ways to track the success of veterans on campuses. The VFW's colleagues at Student Veterans of America have produced a great tracking study called NVEST that shows how successful veterans are in college. Almost 100,000 veterans receive degrees each year, and they complete those degrees faster and with higher GPA's than their civilian counterparts. The Veterans Service Organizations present at the roundtable encouraged VA and higher education representatives to begin tracking student veterans themselves in order to understand how valuable student veterans are. Studies like NVEST show why the GI Bill is such an important tool for veterans and a great return on investment for our country. [Read more about NVEST.](#)

**5. DHA Executive Council Meeting:** On Tuesday, the VFW participated in the quarterly Defense Health Agency (DHA) MSO/VSO Executive Council meeting led by DHA Director, Vice Adm. Raquel C. Bono. The meeting included an update on the TRICARE Dental Program contract transition by senior representatives of United Concordia, and included details on the new Special Needs Program which provides 100% coverage of nitrous oxide for special needs enrollees; newly released changes to increase mental health parity for TRICARE beneficiaries; approval process for laboratory development tests; and highlights from the *Evaluation of the TRICARE Program: Fiscal Year 2017 Report to Congress*. [Read the full report.](#) DHA also released a [new website](#) where beneficiaries can find information on upcoming changes to TRICARE.

**6. Joint Chiefs Chairman Shares Concerns:** The VFW was present at the National Press Club on Monday to hear the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford, answer an hour's worth of audience questions ranging from the current state of today's military to defeating terrorism abroad. Also discussed were threats posed by Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Syria and cyber, and the need to modernize our nuclear arsenal. He said America needs to prepare for a long fight against terrorism, because it will not end with the defeat of ISIS. He said that fight will require a multi-country effort to stop the flow of foreign fighters, eliminate outside funding, and a change the in narrative, as more battlefield successes will help stem the flow of manpower and financing. Regarding our own forces, he said the U.S. needs a military that is politically, fiscally and militarily sustainable for the long fight — a fight in which America's strategy abroad is to drive down the violence so that local forces can assume control of their own security. [Read more and watch video of the discussion.](#)

**7. VA Announces Building Disposal:** VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin on Tuesday announced a plan to dispose of 430 vacant or near-vacant buildings within 24 months, either by demolition or transfer to the federal government's property manager, the General Services Administration. The secretary first mentioned eliminating some 1,100 vacant or underutilized buildings last month. The 430 identified buildings average more than 60 years old, and currently cost taxpayers more than \$7 million annually to maintain. "We owe it to the American taxpayer to apply as much of our funding as possible to helping veterans," he said. "Maintaining vacant buildings, including close to 100 from the Revolutionary War and Civil War, makes no sense." Approximately 780 other buildings are under review. The secretary also said the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) will freeze its nationwide footprint by leasing or by eliminating office space. He said this initiative is made possible due to a robust telework program and the digitization of claim files. VA estimates this action will save taxpayers an additional \$15.7 million annually, for a total of close to \$23 million in combined annual savings. The VFW supports eliminating wasteful spending on vacant and underutilized building, but will monitor implementation of this plan to ensure it does not impact delivery of care and services for veterans. Specifically, the proposal to freeze VBA's footprint must not limit the VFW and other Veterans Service Organization representatives' ability to provide claims assistance services inside VBA buildings. [Read more about the VA plan.](#)

**8. VA Women Summit Opens Registration:** The Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Women Veterans is hosting a Women Veterans Summit in Houston, August 25-26. Information on health care and benefits will be widely discussed. Topics such as culture change and gender-specific care will be hosted on panels and many partnering organizations will host exhibits. VFW staff will participate in panel discussions on women veterans, as well as at an exhibit. [Learn more or register for the summit.](#)

**9. Online Exchange Shopping Eligibility to Expand:** Beginning Veterans Day 2017, almost 13 million honorably discharged veterans will be permitted to shop online at all four military exchanges, but you have to first register with VetVerify.org, which will use Defense Manpower Data Center records to verify eligibility. On Veterans Day, eligible veterans will be able to shop online by logging on to the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, Navy Exchange, Marine Corps Exchange, and Coast Guard Exchange websites at, respectively, shopmyexchange.com,

mynavyexchange.com, mymcx.com and shopcgx.com. Military exchange shopping is tax-free, plus your patronage helps to return more than \$300 million annually to support on-base morale, welfare and recreation programs. [Verify your eligibility.](#)

**10. MIA Update:** The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains of fourteen Americans who had been missing in action from WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Army Pvt. Gene J. Appleby**, 30, of Columbus, Ohio, was buried June 22 in Coshocton, Ohio. Appleby was a member of Company A, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. On Sept. 17, 1944, Appleby parachuted onto a drop zone north of Groesbeek, the Netherlands, as part of Operation Market-Garden. As the soldiers rallied, Appleby was reportedly struck by enemy fire and, following the attack, was listed as missing in action. [Read about Appleby.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Billie J. Jimerson**, 19, of Kerens, Texas, will be buried June 23 in Portland, Ore. Jimerson was a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. In late November 1950, his unit engaged with enemy forces near Anju, North Korea. Jimerson could not be accounted for after the battle and was declared missing in action as of Nov. 28, 1950. [Read about Jimerson.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class George A. Coke**, 18, of Arlington, Texas, will be buried June 24 in his hometown. Coke was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Coke was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. [Read about Coke.](#)

-- **Navy Gunner's Mate 1st Class Arthur C. Neuenschwander**, 33, of Fessenden, N.D., will be buried June 24 in his hometown. Neuenschwander was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Neuenschwander was one of 429 crewmen to be killed in the attack. [Read about Neuenschwander.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Leslie R. Sutton**, 24, of Rochelle, Ga., will be buried June 24 in his hometown. Sutton was assigned to Battery C, 99th Field Artillery Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division. Shortly after Sutton's unit received orders to take over positions occupied by the 11th and 12th Republic of Korea Army Regiments in the northwest region of North Korea, in the vicinity of Unsan, they were attacked by Chinese forces and forced to withdraw. Sutton was reported missing in action on Nov. 2, 1950. [Read about Sutton.](#)

-- **Machinist's Mate 1st Class Earl R. Melton**, 24, of Lakewood, N.J., will be buried June 28, in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. Melton was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Melton was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. [Read about Melton.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces Pvt. Harold S. Hirschi**, 29, of Oklahoma City, will be buried June 28, in Andersonville, Ga. Hirschi was assigned to Headquarters Squadron, 19th Bombardment Group, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands. American forces on Corregidor Island fought intensely until they were forced to surrender on May 6, 1942. Hirschi was captured and transferred to Cabanatuan POW camp. He was admitted to the Camp hospital for illness, where he died on Nov. 19, 1942. [Read about Hirschi.](#)

-- **Air Force Col. Patrick H. Wood**, 36, of Kansas City, Mo., will be buried June 28 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. On Feb. 6, 1967, pilot Wood and three crewmembers flew an HH-3E on a recovery mission over North Vietnam. They successfully

recovered one individual before the aircraft was hit by enemy fire and crashed. Wood was declared missing in action. [Read about Wood.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Pfc. Ray James** was assigned to Company F, 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division. James' unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll on Nov. 20, 1943, against stiff Japanese resistance. James was killed on the first day of the battle. Interment services are pending. [Read about James.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Pvt. Archie W. Newell** was assigned to Company C, 2nd Tank Battalion, 2nd Marine Division. Newell's unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll on Nov. 20, 1943, against stiff Japanese resistance. Newell was killed on the first day of the battle. Interment services are pending. [Read about Newell.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Pfc. George B. Murray** was assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines Regiment, 2nd Marine Division. Murray's unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll on Nov. 20, 1943, against stiff Japanese resistance. Murray was killed on the first day of the battle. Interment services are pending. [Read about Murray.](#)

-- **Army Staff Sgt. Gerald L. Jacobsen** was a member of the 134th Infantry Regiment, 35th Infantry Division. On July 15, 1944, Jacobsen's unit participated in the siege of Saint-Lô, France. Jacobsen and another service member were manning a mortar compound post near La Forge, approximately two kilometers northeast of Saint-Lô, when they went missing. Jacobsen was subsequently declared deceased as of July 16, 1945. Interment services are pending. [Read about Jacobsen.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces 1st Lt. George W. Betchley** was a member of the 429th Bombardment Squadron, 2nd Bombardment Group, 15th Air Force. On March 22, 1945, Betchley served as navigator on a B-17G Flying Fortress, carrying a crew of 10 on a bombing mission targeting the Ruhland oil refinery near Schwarzhede, Germany. After two of its engines and the left wing were reportedly damaged by German fighters and anti-aircraft fire, the plane crashed in southwest Poland. Eight crewmembers, including Betchley, were not recovered following the crash. Betchley was declared missing in action as of March 22, 1945, but his status was later amended to killed in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Betchley.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. Albert E. Atkins** was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team. His unit attacked enemy forces near Mae-Bong, South Korea, on May 23, 1951, in an attempt to secure Hill 911. As the company prepared to assault the hill, Atkins and two other soldiers from his company were reported missing in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Atkins.](#)

To sign up new veterans' advocates, click here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>.

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to [vfwac@vfw.org](mailto:vfwac@vfw.org).