

# VFW National Legislative Conference a Transformational Experience

**Nine student veterans came together on Capitol Hill in March as part of VFW's National Legislative Conference, joining forces for one common goal – to meet with legislators and advocate for veterans' causes**

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The following students are the latest VFW-Student Veterans of America (SVA) fellows to take on that task: Jennifer Hosley, Bradley Ward, Gabriel Snashall, Edward Tjaden, Brian Walker, Ryan Rehberg, Joseph Sacco, Hannah Joyce and Francheska Salazar.

Ward, who served from January – September 2014 with the 302nd MP Co. from Grand Prairie and the 18th Airborne Corps in the Army Reserve, said the week in D.C. was a “transformational experience.”

“The opportunity to connect and openly discuss policy and veteran-related issues with Congressional leaders and department directors was an incredible experience that is certain to prepare me for future work in the field,” Ward said.

For Walker, it was “eye-opening” to witness the work it takes to advocate on behalf of veterans.

“This has given me a much deeper appreciation for the work that is involved, knowing there are many who are fighting for veterans like myself,” said Walker, who served in the Navy aboard the USS

Sacramento from 2001-04, supporting Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Joyce, an Air Force veteran who served in Afghanistan in from 2005-06, attached to the

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Bagram Air Base Medical Joint Force Command, said as veteran advocates, they must “strive to maintain a legitimate seat at the table without losing why we sat down in the first place.”

“Everyone has their perspective, but having the ability to listen, collaborate and act with intention toward a solid solution takes flexibility by everyone involved,” Joyce said.

The fellows also witnessed VFW National Commander-in-Chief Keith Harman testify on VFW’s behalf to Congress.

“I sat right in the front row watching Commander-in-Chief Harman testify on significant issues that negatively affect my community – how Congress needs to push legislation that resolves these issues quickly and efficiently to aid those marginalized veterans,” said Snashall, who served in the Navy aboard the USS Pittsburgh from January 2011 to January 2016 as an Electronic Support Measures Operator and Radio/Telecommunication Supervisor.

### **Making a Difference**

Hosley, who served in the Army from 2007 to 2015 with deployments to South Korea and Kuwait with D Btry, 1st Bn., 44th Air Defense Arty, 69th Air Defense Artillery Bde., 32nd Air and Missile Defense Command, said the experience was “incredibly busy,” but made her feel like she had a “real shot” at making a difference. Similarly, Rehberg, who served in the Army from 2008-09 with the 2nd Bn., 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div., as an infantryman, said his biggest takeaway was that, while difficult, advocating becomes easier through support and guidance.

Sacco, a former sailor who served aboard the USS Bunker Hill from October 2014 to January 2015 as a Cryptologic Technician (Collection), said meeting other veterans who are passionate about helping their own community was inspiring. Salazar, who served in the Navy with Destroyer Squadron 8, attached to the USS Kearsarge and deployed to Port Au Prince, Haiti, from September to October 2008, had a similar experience.

“I loved being surrounded by so many passionate and dedicated advocates all working toward a common goal of making this country better for those who signed a blank check to serve their country,” Salazar said.

The fellowship also provided some of the student veterans, like Tjaden, with renewed determination to bridge the gap between veterans and the community.

“The biggest takeaway was that it was time for me to transition from my work as president of the Washington University SVA to an active member of the O’Fallon, Mo., Post,” said Tjaden, who served in Iraq with the 2nd Bde., 1st Armd. Div., Forward Operating Base Hammer, Camp Liberty and Camp Stryker, in 2008. “I look forward to serving in whatever

role will best help my VFW comrades.”

*This article is featured in the 2018 May/June issue of [Checkpoint](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor, VFW magazine. Photo courtesy of SVA.*