First Desert Storm Veteran Elected VFW National Commander

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. – The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States concluded its 117th National Convention here today by electing Brian Duffy of Louisville, Ky., as its new leader.

His election also introduces a new era for America's oldest and largest war veterans' organization, in that he becomes the first Operation Desert Storm veteran to become the

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VFW commander-in-chief.

Duffy served in the U.S. Air Force as a jet engine mechanic on F-4 Phantom fighter aircraft, and later as a flight engineer aboard C-141 Starlifter transport aircraft. During his service, he deployed in support of several campaigns to include Grenada, Panama, and Operations Desert Shield and Storm in Southwest Asia. Following his military service he would be hired by United Parcel Service as a flight engineer instructor. He would rise through the UPS ranks until he retired in 2014 as assistant chief pilot, having flown worldwide as an instructor/check captain on the Boeing 757 and 767 aircraft.

During his acceptance speech, the new national commander strongly praised the work of the 117-year-old organization and encouraged its members to better educate others on exactly what the VFW does for veterans, service members and their families. He did note, however, that the VFW's modest approach to reaching younger veterans wasn't resonating with a newer generation that clearly identifies with belonging to something big, doing something cool, and touting their accomplishments more.

"This great big organization we call the VFW does something very cool that most Americans—and especially those who serve in uniform—just don't know because we don't shout from the rooftops enough," he said. "Cool things like providing $5.6 million in grants to help nearly 3,900 military and veteran families through emergency financial situations; helping more than 80,000 veterans and transitioning military to receive $1.5 billion in earned compensation and pension from the VA; and providing millions in scholarships to veterans, service members, and high school and middle school students," he said.

Duffy has been a member of the VFW for 33 years. He first joined VFW Post 6590 in Cookstown, N.J., after returning from Grenada in 1983. He later transferred his membership to VFW Post 120 in Garden City Park, N.Y., then to VFW Post 1170 in Middletown, Ky. He served as commander of the VFW Department of Kentucky in 2006, and achieved All-American status at the VFW Post, District and Department levels.

With leadership experience at all levels of the organization, Duffy's tone throughout his remarks was one of experience and optimism for the future.

"We must push a message that the VFW is an organization that has always been rooted in service to others, that we are an organization of doers, and an organization comprised of men and women who returned home from their wars and conflicts as better, more compassionate and confident human beings," he said. "We need your Departments and Posts to turn up the volume and communicate every story—and loudly!"

Among his primary objectives for the ensuing year is heightening the focus of mental health awareness and changing the veteran's narrative—the veteran's brand—which right now has 40 percent of Americans believing half of all veterans are experiencing mental health challenges, and an astounding 92 percent of employers believing veterans need access to mental health care programs.

He said it's no secret that 20 veterans commit suicide every day, but what most folks don't know is only five of those veterans are enrolled in the VA.

"Professional mental health counseling isn't the VFW's forte insomuch as having walked the talk is," he said, calling that powerful relevance to those who deploy and for their families who anxiously await their safe return. He also said it doesn't matter if your war was in Europe, Africa, Asia or the Middle East—or in this century or the last—but that "we were all younger once, and we all came back different in one respect or another, to include thinking no one understood us," he said, which is "why the VFW cannot allow any service member to ever think no one understands them."

During his tenure as national commander, Duffy will log thousands of miles across the U.S. and abroad to promote the veterans' issues and advocate for better quality of life programs

for all veterans, service members and their families.

Also elected were Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Keith E. Harman, of Delphos, Ohio, and Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Vincent “B.J.” Lawrence, of Alamogordo, N.M.