

*Acceptance Speech by
VFW Commander-in-Chief Gary Kurpius
107th VFW National Convention
Reno, Nevada
August 31, 2006*

VETERANS FIRST

Comrades ... I am profoundly grateful to the delegates of the 107th National Convention for the honor, trust and confidence you have bestowed on me. I — along with Senior Vice Commander George Lisicki and Junior Vice Commander Glen Gardner — stand here ready to serve.

To Jim Mueller, John Furgess, and all the past chiefs here today — especially past chief and current Adjutant General Gunner Kent for installing me — thank you for your leadership, your guidance, and for your mentorship.

To my Post 9365 in Wasilla and the great Departments of Alaska and Minnesota ... thank you for the years of support and friendship. I also want to extend special thanks to John Minick and Marty Miller from the Alaska Department for what they did for my campaign.

To new National President Linda Meader and all the members of the Ladies Auxiliary ... thank you for what you do daily for the good of this organization. I look forward to working with all of you.

To my very special guests — children Katie, Dustin, Jill and her husband Jamie Yoder, my brother Dennis, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law Jay and Linda Poissant, and their daughter and my niece, Air Force Captain Dana Hattabaugh — thank you all for your love and for your support. You make this day even more special by being here.

And to my wife, Nancy, I want to publicly thank you for your patience, your understanding, and for your love. Without your unconditional support, I would not be here today.

Where's the World War II Generation ... *PLEASE STAND UP!*

Comrades, our nation's population was only 133 million people when we fielded a great military force of 16 million men and women to defeat tyranny on every ocean and on three continents. It came at a tremendous cost of almost 300,000 combat deaths in less than four years. This generation did their duty ... they came home ... and they went about their lives ... and in the process they were directly responsible for the tremendous era of growth and prosperity our nation enjoyed in the second half of the 20th century.

Where's the Korean War Generation ... *PLEASE STAND UP!*

Comrades, our nation's population was 155 million people when we fielded a great military force of almost 6 million men and women to fight Communist aggression on the Korean Peninsula. Theirs is often called "The Forgotten War," but there's nothing forgotten about more than 36,000 deaths in three years of fighting. This generation — many of whom also fought in World War II — this generation did their duty.

Where's the Vietnam War Generation ... *PLEASE STAND UP!*

Comrades, our nation's population was 185 million people when we fielded a great military force of almost 9 million men and women to fight Communist aggression on the Southeast Asian Peninsula ... in a conflict that would last 10 years and consume 58,000 American lives.

Like many of you here, *I am a Vietnam veteran.*

I was drafted ... I served ... and I returned home to a nation embroiled in the bitter politics of the war ... but I am as proud of my military service as anyone else in this room from any other war or conflict *because our generation, too, did its duty.*

I served as a Department Service Officer for 20 years and I have never met anyone who wasn't proud of their military service. Let me repeat that: *I have never met anyone who wasn't proud of their military service.*

I mention this because our nation has now been at war for almost five years against an enemy that wears no uniform ... flies no flag ... and swears allegiance to no country.

I mention this because we are at war against an enemy that hates democracy ... hates a free economy ... hates tolerance ... and hates every freedom that our nation has struggled to achieve in our 230-year history.

I mention this because we are at war against an enemy that hates America and everything we stand for ... and the only thing standing between us and them is *our United States Military.*

Now where's the post-Vietnam Generation ... those who stood watch over Korea ... on ships or on subs ... who served in Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, the first Gulf War, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and now in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq ... *PLEASE STAND UP!*

Comrades, our nation's population is now 300 million people, yet we field the most powerful military in the history of the world with only 2.2 million servicemen and women ... that's less than one percent of the population of America.

General George S. Patton once said, "*I am a soldier ... I fight where I am told, and I win where I fight.*" The general would be very proud of this new generation because they, too, are doing their duty.

Comrades, this new generation represents the future of our country and the future of our great organization ... but what sort of VFW will they inherit if we can't get eligible veterans to join?

More than half of our 2.2 million servicemen and women are already eligible to join the VFW by virtue of their service in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere.

But that number pales in comparison to the 16 million veterans who are also eligible to join us ... that's more than 65 percent of America's living veteran population.

With all of these membership-eligible people, why then did 23 of our 54 Departments fail to reach 100 percent this year?

The answer, unfortunately, is because some of us are stuck in the 1960s or '70s.

Comrades, membership drives everything we do, but we won't get a new generation — or even the older generation — to join us if we don't recognize and adapt to the changing world around us. There has to be something more attractive about the VFW than just the bar. There has to be something that the VFW can provide to the community that makes people want to come to us.

Sixty percent of the new generation is married and most of their spouses work.

They are paying \$400 a month or more for day care when they could be paying an enterprising VFW Post that went through the proper licensing and approvals.

They are also paying \$100 a month or more for fitness center memberships downtown when they could be paying an enterprising VFW Post that opened its own health club.

There are endless ideas for attracting new members or to generate new business, but it all starts with the basic realization that the new generation doesn't need us. I'll repeat that — *the new generation of military members and veterans do not need us. It is us that needs them.*

So what are we going to do to make ourselves more attractive?

With so little free time, if the new generation does get involved in the VFW, they will want to participate in programs that benefit the entire family — but I guarantee you that no one will want to join a VFW health club ... or bring their children to a VFW day care center ... or log-on at a VFW Cyber Café ... as long as smoking is still permitted indoors.

We are a democratic organization that is letting 20 percent of the population tell us that the Post will fail if people can't smoke inside. That's bunk.

I know many VFW members and spouses who will not attend Post meetings or events because of the smoke. I have read many articles about the VFW being the last building in town where indoor smoking is still permitted ... and some members quoted in the newspaper are celebrating as if they just won a great battle against government and social interference.

Comrades, that is not a victory, it is a sad commentary that unfortunately paints all of us with the same brush. American society and the VFW National Office have changed with the times, and so must you if you want your Post to survive. Having your Post join the list of 148 other Posts that either closed or consolidated this past year because of membership problems is not a victory in anyone's book — it's a failure of leadership.

I ask that you take that thought back home with you and remember that *we are a "service organization" first and foremost* — and our future rests with attracting new members who want to believe that the VFW is more than just a bar ... and who want to believe that the VFW is an organization that regards change as a recognition of the future and not a criticism of the past.

Whether our duty station was on the land, sea or in the air, we stood guard on behalf of all Americans, and it's for that reason that the theme for my year will be to support those who did their duty and stood their watch ... the theme for my year will be to put "*Veterans First.*"

Together with our Auxiliaries, the VFW donates millions of volunteer hours and dollars every year in our communities ... but just how much of that time and money went to benefit veterans' programs?

Now I am not asking you to cease your civic responsibilities, but I am asking that you examine their requests and priorities a little more ... and put *Veterans First* programs upfront at least 51 percent of the time.

The perfect example of putting *Veterans First* occurred last year when hurricanes slammed into five states along our Gulf Coast. Our Posts down south — in places named Beauregard, Covington, Addis, Lake Arthur and elsewhere — were too busy caring for those in need to worry about their own personal belongings.

From the Department of California's contribution of \$30,000 to VFW Post 3457 on Saipan's donation of \$5,000, we sent more than \$560,000 to the Departments of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas to help them help other veterans survive and rebuild.

Putting *Veterans First* generates powerful stories in the press and leaves a lasting impression on the people we help — and perhaps those were some of the many reasons why those five Departments all achieved All American status this year.

Some other examples:

In Massachusetts, Ray Roberge took advantage of a state lottery program that awards a new \$1 lottery ticket for every 25 losing tickets that are turned in. It took four months of collecting, but Ray drove up to the State Lottery Commission with 300,000 losing tickets and took 12,000 new ones back to VFW Post 7272 where volunteers began scratching. Their winnings topped \$7,500 and all the money went to support disabled veterans, the VFW's National Home for Children, and Post college scholarship programs.

Arizona Auxiliary member Phyllis Lacey has now volunteered more than 21,000 hours at the VA Medical Center ... that's more than 10 years worth of 40-hour work weeks.

VFW Post 1390 in St. Maries, Idaho, closed its doors recently, but before they merged with another Post, they sold their building and gave \$5,000 checks each to the National Home, to Operation Uplink, and to the local veteran's hospital and county food bank.

Tiny Delaware, the first state to enter the union, is 45th in population and 49th in size, but the Department of Delaware is mighty big when it comes to contributions to Operation Uplink — almost \$200,000 in four years. Delaware also reached All American status this year.

These are powerful stories, and the people we help will never forget about the day someone from the VFW cared enough to make a difference in the life of another.

Membership allows us to accomplish our mission on the home front, but we must never forget those who have gone before us ... and those who will come after us. We must never forget that our mission is to "*Honor the dead by helping the living.*"

Eighty-nine people have served before me as Commander-in-Chief of this great organization, and I guarantee you that the vision they had for leading the VFW involved looking forward, not behind.

Robley Rex, at 105 years young, is our last surviving World War I member. He couldn't make the trip here this year from Louisville, but if he had, he'd tell you stories about the VFW's forefathers who cared enough about the organization to change it to match a changing world.

I know change is difficult ... and none of us like it ... but it is absolutely necessary for the survival and growth of our great organization.

Our nation has been at war for almost five years now. It's a war that continues to impact every town and city in every state and territory ... wherever there are military folks in uniform and family members who await their safe return.

We have to be there for them and those countless others who are standing strong for America at home and abroad.

We have to be there for Peggy Closson of Springfield, Illinois, and other parents who have loved ones deployed. Peggy wore two watches on her wrist—one set to Illinois time and the other to Iraq time — while her son, David, was deployed for a year with his National Guard unit. David is a third-generation VFW life member.

We have to be there for 22-year-old paralyzed Iraqi war veteran Kyle Burleson down in Shreveport, Louisiana. VFW Post 2238 is helping to build him a new \$300,000 dollar home that is wheelchair friendly.

We have to be there for Army master sergeant and All American Post Commander Tim Borland, who you heard from earlier this week, and who's winging his way back to Iraq to finish up his year-long tour.

And we have to be there for Allen George and the rest of his Alabama National Guard unit. Allen left earlier this month for his first deployment to Iraq. He's the son of Stan George from the VFW Washington Office.

From our Posts in the Far East to the East Coast, and from Europe to Latin America and the West Coast, we have to be there for America's veterans, our servicemembers, and for their families.

We have to be there for them on Capitol Hill where there are 32,000 registered lobbyists representing more than 20,000 clients who I guarantee have no interest in helping veterans.

We have to be there to ensure the VA keeps its promise to care for America's veterans of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

We have to be there for our young and not-so-young veterans who are wading through a maze of paperwork just to file a VA claim. Our VFW-certified service officers helped more than 107,000 veterans last year receive almost \$1 billion dollars in earned compensation or pension.

We have to be there for the thousands of unemployed veterans in the 20 to 24-year-old age group, whose unemployment rate of 11 percent is more than twice the national average. We need to use our individual and collective influence to ensure that America's business community hires these intelligent servicemen and women who are looking for jobs today ... and hires the thousands of others once the war ends and they leave military service.

We have to be there for the families of the 88,000 missing and unaccounted-for American servicemen, especially when money is stripped from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's budget in order to fund unrelated operational expenses. *The VFW got that money returned to J-PAC.*

We have to ensure that the VFW Unmet Needs Program is there for military families like Rachele and Steve Marfill, who needed financial assistance while Steve was recuperating at Walter Reed from wounds he received in Iraq from a car bomb explosion.

We have to be there to nurture relationships with large corporations like General Motors, Home Depot and Wal-Mart who want to support our troops and our veterans.

We have to be there to support our 8,507 Posts because they are the VFW's boots-on-ground in every community across this great land.

And, ultimately, we have to be there for the 2.2 million servicemen and women who are now the guardians of this great country and of every freedom we hold dear.

We are the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. We are the nation's oldest major veterans' organization and we are the largest organization of combat veterans in the country.

Within our ranks are the bravest of the brave ... and this new generation knows it. We have to be there for them ... to shake their hand ... to look them in the eye ... and to say thank you for your service ... for your commitment ... and for your sacrifice.

We have to be there to say "*Thank you ... for doing your duty.*"
Comrades, I thank you once again for your faith and for your trust. Thank you.