

VFW MID-WINTER CONFERENCE

Good morning... I would like to thank the Veterans of Foreign Wars and their leadership, ... State Commander George Cain, ... and State Adjutant John Neeves, for the gracious invitation to once again address your noble membership at this annual mid-winter conference.

Two years ago, ... in my capacity as Majority Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, ... I had the distinct honor to stand before you ... as I do today.

After being appointed once again to serve as Majority Chairman of this Committee, ... which is indeed your Committee in the PA House of

Representatives, (pause) ... I am indeed looking forward to once again working with the VFW and the other veterans service organizations, ... toward the common goal of preserving and enhancing the rights of the veteran community.

Last session, the legislature, ... through the committee process and your organization's support and recommendations ... passed legislation which provided a total of \$4 million for the construction of the Pennsylvania Veterans Memorial at Indiantown Gap National Cemetery. This 14-year crusade of honorarium will be brought into fruition on or before Veterans Day, 2001.

On the national level, the PA General Assembly also legislated \$2 million dollars toward the future establishment of the National World War II Memorial in our Nation's Capital. Once again, ... the veteran community spoke ... and the General Assembly listened. (pause)

In regard to the issue of the establishment of a National Veterans Cemetery in Western Pennsylvania, ... your organization was again ... out in front on this important issue ... leading the charge to get the ball rolling. Through your support, House Resolution 30 was adopted, and thus established a site selection committee for the establishment of this much-needed veterans cemetery in western Pennsylvania.

The Site Selection Committee, of which I had the distinct honor of being a member, ... issued its report to the General Assembly last November. The committee report favorably recommended the “Morgan Farm” property in northern Washington County. This site is located just off of Interstate 79 and is approximately 12 miles from the downtown area of Pittsburgh. (pause)

Now, ... this report, ... due to its nature of being a state legislative report to the federal Veterans Administration and the Congress ... does not have direct authority to mandate the establishment of this “National” cemetery.

Therefore, prior to the committee's undertaking, we had the foresight to include the chief architect for VA cemetery construction and design ... as a consultant to the committee. In doing this, ... he was able to fully realize the veteran community's desire for this national cemetery ... coupled with the essential need for such a cemetery.

Overall, his presence in the process validated the actions of the site selection committee ... and thus enabled the VA to agree with the recommendations of the report.

At this point in time, an environmental study is being conducted on this site and ... the purchase procedures are in the beginning stages. Having

already secured VA approval for this cemetery, the next step is to secure federal funding in this year's Congressional budget.

Senator Specter, Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee in Washington, ... is aware of the project, ... and we are very hopeful there will be a budget line-item that will bring this project into completion by 2003 or 2004. (pause)

In the past legislative session, we also were able to legislate an increase in the monthly pension amounts for the state-administered Blinded and Paralyzed Veterans Pension Program. The monthly rate was increased from \$100 to \$150 per month.

As well, the legislature added the Keystone Paralyzed Veterans Association as a voting member of the State Veterans Commission, along with the addition of the AMVETS Executive Director as a non-voting member of this Commission.

Through periodic membership ^{modifications} alterations such as these, the State Veterans Commission will indeed remain a body that is representative of all veterans across our Commonwealth. (pause)

In terms of the upcoming 2001-2002 legislative session, which essentially began this past week, I anticipate that the Committee will examine issues ranging from the unlawful sale of veterans grave markers, which are currently provided by the counties

for the proper display of flags on the graves of veterans, ... to possible legislative focus on the issue of establishing a 7th State Veterans Home in central Pennsylvania. (pause) At this point in time, the Committee is only in the process of receiving legislative proposals, however, I fully expect the Committee to resume its formal activities by mid-February.

Overall, ... I look forward to the continued partnership that has developed between the committee and the VFW, ... along with the partnership formed between all of the veterans service organizations and the General Assembly as a whole. As well, I assure you that Senator Tomlinson, the newly appointed

Chairman of the Senate Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, and I will continue on with the cooperative bond that has been established between the respective House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs.

Together, we all can make good things happen for the entire veteran community of Pennsylvania. A famous scholar once said, ... “Successful agendas are achieved when someone has the foresight ... to see the next step.” I, for one, am a firm believer that the Pennsylvania Department of the Veterans of Foreign Wars ... (pause) ... can see that next step ... and is a voice that should indeed be listened to.

Once again, thank you for inviting me here today to greet you as you partake in yet another important meeting of your statewide body at this mid-winter conference.

Have a great conference ... and, on behalf of the entire General Assembly, ... thank you for all you do for the veteran community of our great Commonwealth.

Each and every one of you are truly to be commended ... for both your honored military service in year's past ... and your current service to your veteran brethren. ... Thank you.