

VFW Carries DOD Budget Fight to Congress

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WASHINGTON — The national legislative committee of America's oldest and largest major war veterans' organization concluded its fall meeting here Wednesday with a direct message to all 535 members of Congress: "Finish Strong for Veterans."

"It's a message to Congress that the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is watching, and so is the entire nation," said VFW National Commander William A. Thien, a Vietnam veteran from Georgetown, Ind.

"The federal government's new fiscal year begins in 11 days, but the Defense Department still doesn't know what their FY 2014 budget will be, or if they will have to operate under the strict rules of another continuing resolution and for how long," he explained. "DOD also faces the mandatory sequester, which more than doubles the \$487 billion in savings that the department is already required to produce over the next decade.

"This is having a perilous impact on military personnel, readiness and training, and on family Quality of Life issues," said Thien. "And the continuing call for a one percent military pay raise, higher healthcare fees for military retirees, and changing the overall military retirement system is bringing additional stress to a military force in transition while it's still fighting a war."

The VFW national commander said finding a workable solution to the budget sequestration topped the list of five critical issues that VFW legislative committee members took to their congressional delegations. "We know it has to be done now," he said, "because 2014 is an election year, which means the attention of the entire House and a third of the Senate will be divided between doing the people's work and getting reelected."

The other four critical issues are protecting victims of sexual assault in the military, offering in-state tuition rates to GI Bill-eligible veterans at public colleges, keeping faith with all Tricare Prime retirees, and passing advance appropriations for all Department of Veterans Affairs programs.

As the 70 legislative committee members were meeting with their members of Congress and their staffs, the VFW national commander met privately with VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, as

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well as with Secretary of the Army John McHugh, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. John Campbell and Sgt. Major of the Army Raymond Chandler; from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Vice Chairman Adm. Sandy Winnefeld, and the senior enlisted advisor to the chairman, Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan Battaglia; from the Navy, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Michael Stevens; and from the Air Force, the assistant vice chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Steven Hoog.

Joining Thien Wednesday afternoon at a Defense POW/MIA Office update briefing by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense “Q” Winfield were VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief John Stroud of Nevada, and Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief John Biedrzycki from Pennsylvania.

“Every military and civilian leader expressed the same concerns about the lack of a FY 2014 defense budget and the impact the continuing sequester is causing to readiness, morale, and to overall mission accomplishment,” said Thien. “We have the world’s best military, but they can’t fight Capitol Hill, which I said was one of the primary reasons the VFW exists. We are their voice in Congress, and we will continue to let legislators know that their failure to pass a budget is having a perilous effect on a military that, despite appearances, is very worried about its ability to respond to a new contingency tasking elsewhere in our troubled world.”

The VFW national commander is now calling on all VFW members and their families to contact their local congressional offices to press their respective senators and representatives to solve the budget issues for the Department of Defense.

“Our fighting force and their families do not need or deserve these congressionally-imposed problems, not while they continue to shoulder 100 percent of a 12-year of war that has not yet ended,” he said. “Congress has a lot of work to do in a very short amount of time, and it all starts with getting rid of sequestration and passing a defense budget now.”