

Welcome to the American Legion
FIRST DIVISION
Newsletter



Commander
Gigi Callaway

First Division is Online
at

<http://www.ilfirstdivision.org>

Newsletter for June 2020

First Division Commander Gigi Callaway

June brings us the warmth of summer as we begin to see the opening of our post homes and community. The start may be gradual; however, everyone should be gearing up and planning accordingly.

There are a few items that need your individual and collective attention. First and foremost, the legacy of our organization depends on membership! May 2020, the 1st Division is at 92.05% (at submission of this article.) Department Commander Roy Weber contacted me for a collective push from Bloomington. (That information was sent via email in an early message.) SVC Wayne Fischer has sent message for the final multiple times. The Division's SVC Al Pizarro identified a few Districts and the respective posts that needed the most assistance in the Division. Correspondence was sent directly to those Posts and Districts. Communications were made by the Division Commander and JVC; with regard to this important matter. We still have a few more weeks to finish this year. We are the Fighting First, let us do this!

Secondly, the Department is planning a Legion Family awards ceremony for 100 percent Posts, Squadron and Units. It is in the plan to have this also serve as an opportunity for the Legion Family to kick-off the membership year for 2020-2021. (info found herein)

In past months there has been some amazing events and efforts by legionnaires and posts. Although there has been many, a sampling of them can be seen on the top scroll of website. I urge you to visit our website: www.ilfirstdivision.org. Our webmaster, Past Division Commander, John Los has done a fantastic job. Both John Los and Kendall Bishop (newsletter managing editor), have worked tirelessly, with the variety of items to review for consideration for either the website or newsletter,

particularly in the last few months. Thank you!

Communication from posts and districts remains extremely important. There have been two videos messages; a Memorial Day video; and two boots on the ground communications (via telephone or other means) that deserve recognition. Additionally, the written submissions in the newsletter, from a variety of people (to include our Service Officer Ray Toczek) deserve acknowledgment. Let me preface this by stating these were brought to my attention by just simply sharing that communication.

Special Recognition

Video Message:

Commander Dale Tippet in a message to the 9th District
Department Medical Officer Dr. Don Horn message regarding the virus

Memorial Day Video:

Legionnaire Steve Palmer (can be viewed on our Facebook page)

Boots on the Ground:

Commander Rick Mitchell in messages and communications to the 8th District
Commander Frank Thomas and SVC Harold Toney communications to the 3rd District
(The latter, were both separate and collective efforts)

Well done gentlemen! Well done!

If you have questions, please contact me. (It is best after 6:30 pm, if it is urgent contact Bernie Darmetko, he has my direct line to my office during working hours to connect with me.)

Semper Fortis

For God, Family and Country. Warm regards, *Gigi Callaway*

First Division Sr. Vice Commander Al Pizarro

Hello Fightin' First Division,

I hope everyone is still healthy, strong, staying home and enjoying some of the nice weather. As of Friday May 22nd, the First Division is in 5th place in the Department membership standings at 92.05%. The following are the First Division District standings;

8th District - 12th place - 94.15%

7th District - 15th place - 92.88%

3rd District - 16th place - 92.84%

9th District - 20th place - 91.39%

4th District - 21st place - 90.36%
2nd District - 22nd place - 89.72%
5th District - 23rd place - 89.40%
1st District – Dissolved

The First Division Officers send a sincere Thank You to all those Districts that have increased their percentages and have moved up in the standings. Great Work!!
Thank You!!!!

Please keep practicing and maintaining Social Distancing. Hope to see you all soon.
Take Care.

Respectfully, *Al Pirano*

First Division Jr. Vice Commander Thomas Chambers

I see things loosening up a bit. A couple of posts are having Executive board meetings with social distancing. Life goes on and we all know things will not be normal for a while.

For all of the Commanders and Adjutants, please send in the following forms by the 1st of June.

- ~Post consolidation report.
- ~Post officers certification form. (Even if they are the same as last year)
- ~Chairman reports.
- ~Delegate and alternate forms.

Close of books is June 19th. Remind your members to get their dues in A.S.A.P.

August 1st is right around the corner and next fiscal years dues will be looking you in the face.

As far as different functions and parties go for this year, dates and times will be announced when appropriate.

Have a great summer if you can. Looking forward to seeing you in the future.

Tom Chambers

**VA&R Chairman and Service Officer of the First Division
Raymond P. Toczek**

Well another month has passed and we are starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. These last sixty days or so has reminded me of my first four months in the Army. We only left our barracks for training and never were allowed off base. My first official pass was after four months and it was only 24 hours. That pass was like being given your freedom for the first time.

Am happy to report that our VA&R office on Taylor St. has been on top of things and other than no face to face interviews we are still responding to voicemail messages (we average 5-6 a day) and e-mails (average 20 per day). Claims are still being submitted electronically, cases reviewed and guidance given where needed. We even have been able to do "virtual" Board of Veterans Appeals hearings from our homes. At a scheduled time we all log into our laptops, the Judge can see me (at home) and the client at their home, can see the Judge. The procedure is working out quite well so far.

With extended access of the VA computer system granted till 9:00 pm we can be flexible and call veterans back in the evening. As mentioned in the last newsletter, we are now able to sign VA claims on the computer, using our mouse, or on our smartphone using our finger.

I know I am preaching to the choir as they say but I have to emphasize again BE SURE YOU HAVE A READABLE COPY OF YOUR DD 214 OR DISCHARGE PAPERS AVAILABLE. Not only available but be sure you tell your spouse, caregiver or best friend where it is in case of death. Currently we have three veterans whose bodies are being held in cold storage at funeral homes awaiting verification of service so they can be buried at Abe Lincoln National Cemetery.

In closing you may still contact us via e-mail or phone (see above) or contact the National Call Center (1-800-827-1000) of the VA. They are open from 7:00 am to 8:00 pm, Monday through Friday. So if you need to change your address, get a form, need a letter for property tax relief or just have a general question please call them. I have been using that number myself lately and they are very helpful.

What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ray Toczek

Department Medical Officer Dr Don Horn May 21, 2020

As we begin to open our communities and get back to normal, please remember this will be a gradual transition. For specific questions check with your local health department. The general guidelines are:

Face Mask/Covering in all public areas when you cannot maintain at least 6 feet of social distancing. They are also required indoors such as grocery stores.

~Face coverings are there to prevent spreading the COVID-19 virus. Remember this virus is spread primarily by respiratory droplets from mouth and nose to someone else when you are talking, coughing, laughing and sneezing.

~Face Masks and Coverings are not meant for children under 2 years of age or anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, incapacitated or unable to remove the mask by themselves without assistance.

~It is possible N95 masks or well fitted prolonged use of a mask may cause dizziness, headaches and tiredness. If this occurs lift your mask when it is safe to do so for a couple minutes.

~Avoid touching your face.

~Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. (If not available use an alcohol based hand sanitizer.)

~Normal routine cleaning with soap and water removes germs and dirt from surfaces. It lowers the risk of spreading COVID-19 infection.

Symptoms of COVID-19 include cough and shortness of breath plus others that you expect to see with the flu like fever, chills, muscle aches, sore throat, headache and alterations in taste or smell. If you have symptoms or believe you have been exposed to COVID-19, please do not leave home. Call your primary care provider for guidance on care and testing. If your symptoms are severe, go the emergency department or call 911.

Please continue perform Buddy Checks and follow-up on our veterans and their families. While we are not out of the woods, we can see the clearing in the distance. We are our brother's keeper and we will not abandon them. Stay Safe, Stay Strong and Reach Out.

ACTIVATED from the Army Reserves for a joint service Arctic exercise, I was assigned to the air reconnaissance section. Although I had recently been promoted, I was feeling rusty, and wanted to get started learning my duties so as not to appear too "green." I confided to the Air Force lieutenant colonel who greeted me that I was anxious to meet the Air Boss right away. "Don't worry, son," he said reassuringly, "the Air Boss is a real professional, knows his stuff cold and works well with his people. Great guy."

"Terrific!" I replied. "What's his name?"

Looking through the roster, the welcoming officer replied, "O'Hara."

"Oh, no," I groaned. "That's me."

--Contributed to "Humor In Uniform" by Col. John E. O'Hara

Goal – 100 % Posts

Fantastic - Congratulations- Awesome!

Berwyn, Post 422 at 100.0%	Franklin Park Post 974 at 104.8%
Fred Schweitzer Post 272 at 102.0%	Glenn Maker Post 1160 at 102.3%
Hellenic Post 343 at 100.0%	Jackson Park Post 555 at 100.0%
John H. Shelton Post 838 102.8%	Leroy A. McCullough Post 123 at 211.1%
Lincoln Square Post 473 at 100.0%	Millennium Post 2017 at 112.5%
Orland Memorial Post 111 102.0%	Palos Memorial Post 1993 at 100.0%
Portage Park Post 183 at 104.8%	Posen, Post 990 Post at 102.7%
River Grove Post 335 102.4 %	Riverside Post 488 114.3%
Rogers Park Post 108 at 100.0%	South Shore Post 388 at 100.0%
William McKinley Post 231 at 102.3%	Brig. Gen. Frank C Bacon, Jr Post 2091 at 103.4%
Col. A. L. Brodie Post 1437 at 100%	Howard H. Rhode Post 888 at 100.0%
Markham Manor Post 828 at 105.9%	Olivia J Hooker Post 740 at 103.7%
Wayne-Wright Post 1052 at 100.0%	George L. Giles Post 87 at 101.9%
Milton W Mager Memorial Post 691 at 100.0%	Sauk Village at Post 1259 at 100.0%
Cameron-Butler Post 130 at 100.0%	Dorie Miller Post 915 at 100.0%
Don Varnas Post 42 at 106.0%	Evanston Post 42 at 101.4%
Milton Olive Post 1932 at 100.0%	

Standings at submission

Legion Family Awards Ceremony for 100 percent Posts is being planned for August 9th at noon.
More information will be forthcoming

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<p>Medical Officer & Aide to Commander DR. DON HORN</p>	<p>Historian & Special Adviser WILLIAM COOPER</p>

The Gentleman & Ladies Quarterly: **Always be on time.** Letting the person know you're running late doesn't make it acceptable. Show others you value their time! Plan on arriving 10 to 15 minutes early.

~While serving as chief medical officer at Fort Ritchie in Maryland, I attended a nearby wedding. Since it was a formal affair at a country club, I went in my officer's dress blue uniform. Once at the club, I drove up to the entrance, where the doorman promptly came to the passenger door and assisted my wife out of the car. He then made his way to my side. But before I could get out, he pointed to the other end of the building and said, "The band entrance is that way." —Gordon Van Otteren

~Our base's Army Exchange Service carried a particular brand of underarm deodorant that I liked and bought for years. Then one day I couldn't find it. I asked an employee whether they still carried my deodorant. "No, we don't," she said. "It was always selling out, and I could never keep it in stock. So I quit ordering it."

~It was basic training, and I was seated in the barber chair bemoaning the impending loss of my hair when the barber asked, "Where are you from?" "St. Louis," I grumbled. "Hey, I'm from St. Louis too!" he said. He then asked conspiratorially, "Do you want to keep your sideburns?" I perked up. "Sure!" With that, he revved up the razor, clipped off my sideburns, and gave them to me. As I left the barbershop with sideburns in hand, I heard him ask his next victim, "Where are you from?" "Chicago." "Hey, I'm from Chicago too!"

Ray Toczek and **Cases from the X files.**

Received a call from a concerned veteran. He was at an estate sale and found a silver urn containing the ashes of a veteran along with his bronze star. Seems the vet died 20 years ago and the widow kept those on her mantelpiece. The executor was unable to locate any next-of-kin so he was selling those items. My caller had bought them and took it upon himself to try and locate any relatives. Neighbors on the block remember they had children but they had long ago moved away. We decided to run a classified ad in the local paper seeking information on where the children may have moved to. As it happens, the local High School was having a 40 year reunion and one of the vet's children attended it, saw the article in the paper and made contact. He will have the ashes interred at Abe Lincoln cemetery.

Case closed.

A military base commander called to complain that the weather-forecasting software our company created for them kept reporting unexplainable wind shifts. "Do you know where the sensor is located?" my coworker asked. "Of course," he responded. "It's where we park the helicopters." *Angelo Giordano, Bellevue*

Convention Report

It has been a pleasure and honor to serve the First Division as your representative on the VA&R Commission for the 2019-2020 year as well as one of the two Division service officers. I attended one VA&R meeting (2nd one was canceled) which was held at our Bloomington headquarters. I also attended the Washington D.C. conference this year. New VA benefit law changes continue to be signed into law and every effort was made to get this info to the Division level. From there it is my hope that it filters down to the District and Post levels. Many methods were used; my monthly articles in the Department and Division newsletters, oral presentations before the Division meetings and having handouts available at those meetings. I continue to attend Town Hall meetings at Jesse Brown VA hospital and make our presence known by wearing my cover. I toured, along with Jr. Vice Commander Chambers, the Fisher House at VA Hines hospital. Afterwards helped publicize fundraisers at River Grove 335 and Franklin Park 974. Over \$3,000 in needed supplies were donated. During the summer was at the Edison Park Fest, where the Edison Park Post 541 had a table. I had various handouts available. In the winter I was at the Franklin Park Winter Stand down for homeless and shelter challenged veterans Over 100 vets passed thru the Post that day. They were treated to two hot meals, tons of free clothing and sundry items. I counseled these vets on available VA benefits and took a few claims. Also had a few "fun" raffles and gave away gift cards for Subway and Dunkin Donuts.

With the cancellation of the state convention there will be no resolutions submitted. However, six have already been prepared for next year.

I have been the editor of a monthly article in the Department newsletter entitled "Did You Know" for over fourteen years now and have received many favorable comments. You can view these articles (back one year) on the Department web site www.illegion.org. On the home page click on "News and Events" and on the drop down menu click on "latest news". Under Quick Links then click on Dept. Newsletters and you can view my last twelve articles. Feel free to copy and paste these articles into your district or post newsletters. Just give credit to Department if you do. These articles have generated lots of interest and over a dozen new claims have been filed. Happy to say many were granted.

I have also co-hosted a quarterly BINGO game at VA Jesse Brown hospital. Post 183, 777, the Fireman's post and 806 were cosponsors. These games are held at 2:00 quarterly on the first Monday of the month. Veteran patients come down from the wards and outpatient clinics to play. We average 30-40 veterans

per game and \$1000+ is given out in prizes and raffle gifts each session. Donations for BINGO are more than welcome and many posts have used monies raised from Poppy sales. Prior to and just after the games I answer questions from the audience on their Veterans Administration benefits. A few claims were started this way.

The former VA&R Director of the Chicago office, Wayne Macejak, is now our part-time Service Officer at Hines. Hours are Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 to 2:00. I am there on Wednesday from 10:00 to 2:00. We are in Room D101 of Building One. Due to COVID19 that office is temporarily closed, but hopefully, by the time this is published, we will be reopened. Our new Department Service Officer is Carolina Contreras who has been working as a Service Officer for several years now. She is fluent in Spanish and will also help female vets with their special claims e.g. Military Sexual Trauma. Through her leadership our office has transitioned to a new computer system called VetPro. We are now able to take certain claims over the telephone and submit them electronically, directly to the VA. This has eliminated 95% of our faxing of documents, which was very time consuming. She also set up electronic signatures of claims so, using our smartphones, we can submit and sign immediately. She also got permission for us to access the VA computers, from home, up to 10:00 pm, every day of the week. With COVID19 forcing us to work from home, this has been invaluable. Speaking of COVID19, the VA Regional Office was closed mid-February and as a result, no walk-ins could be seen and we could not get to our mail in the VA mail room. At first, we thought this would be a major problem, but have developed a work around. Claimants send their mail to us via e-mail attachment to be submitted or we have them mail their evidence directly to the VA. I also made a one-time pick up of our office mail and have sorted through that. We are current. Finally, since no video or personal hearing can be held at the Regional Office, we are now using something similar to Zoom to continue to conduct appeal hearings. I log in on my laptop, the vet on theirs and the Board of Veterans Appeals judge on his or hers. Has worked out great so far. All in all I would say the Chicago office is operating at 95% efficiency.

We also hired a new Service Officer, Johnny Gonzalez. Proudly served in the Army, he is a disabled veteran and knows how the claims process works. He is also fluent in Spanish. The COVID 19 crisis interrupted his Service Officer training but will resume once we get back to normal.

Our 1st Division website is a good place to find current information affecting veterans benefits and programs. Check it out at <http://www.ilfirstdivision.org/>. We have finally added a "tab" entitled Posts to Rent. You can get a drop down

menu listing all the Posts and point-of-contacts for those who rent their halls.

By now most service-connected disabled veterans are aware of the great property tax reduction/exemption but if not, here is what they receive based on their service-connected disabled rating:

Vets rated 30-40%	\$2,500 reduction in assessed value
Vets rated 50-60%	\$5,000 reduction in assessed value
Vets rate 70% or more	NO PROPERTY TAXES!

If you were not aware of this you can contact your property tax office and ask for an amendment to your tax bill for some prior years. This benefit in most respects passes on to the surviving spouse but be sure the spouses name is on the title. As a current Veterans Administration letter will be needed each year when filing veterans are encouraged to sign up for an eBenefits account so they can print out these letters right from home.

There were several major changes in Veterans Administration benefit laws. The first was regarding contaminated water at Camp Lejeune. Several types of cancers and Parkinson's disease can now be considered service-connected in most cases. There was a change in the Bronze Medallion for veterans who purchased headstones for private cemeteries. Veterans who died all the way back to World War I can now have their families order the Medallion to place on these private headstones. And finally veterans can now get official pre-authorization to be buried in a Veterans Administration National Cemetery. This includes their spouse.

The new BLUE WATER NAVY VETERANS ACT was signed into law and the VA started processing claims on January 1st. It allows any active duty member who served on a vessel that was within 12 miles of Vietnam, to be eligible for Agent Orange benefits as if they had boots on the ground. We have seen many grants and some are quite impressive. In fact, I got my biggest grant in the 47 years as a veterans advocate. He received \$355,000.00 in the mail back in March. At first he thought it was \$35,000 but his lady friend pointed out he didn't see the extra zeros. But I surely can't take all the credit. I may start the claim and help gather evidence but behind the scenes, we have a great support staff that makes sure that claim and evidence gets date stamped and submitted to the proper place in a timely manner.

I continue to push our comrades to take advantage of both the eBenefits and the Myhealthvet websites. There are very useful tools and one can check their

claims and appeals or e-mail questions to their doctor. The veterans scratch off lotto tickets are still being sold by the State of Illinois and your Department benefits in part from their sales. This year, the ticket is called "White Ice."

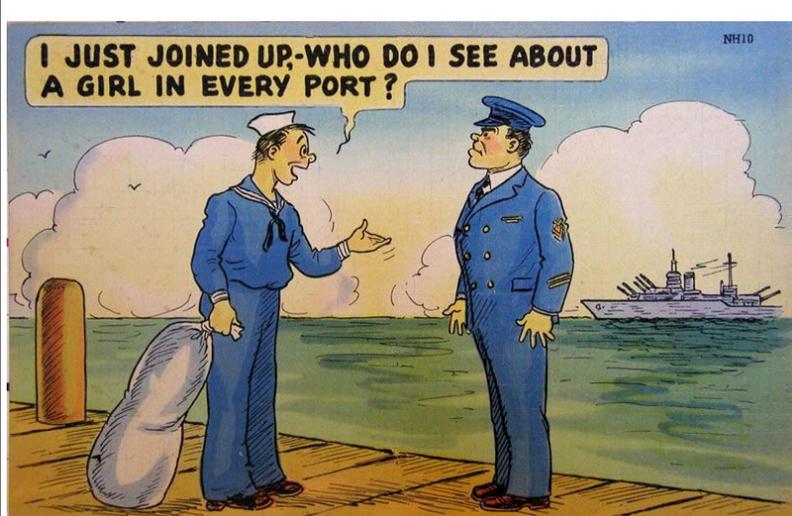
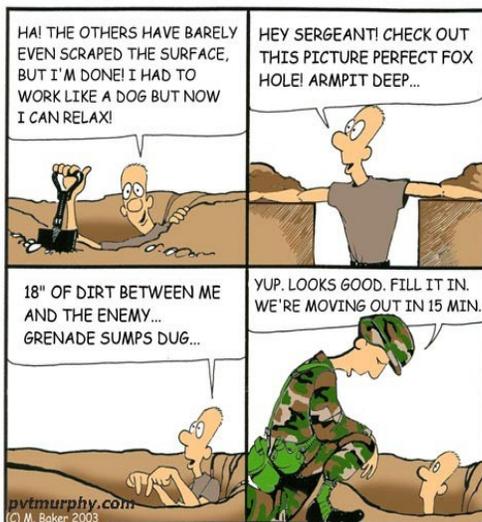
The 9th District e-mail blast is working extremely well and over 200 members in that District have signed up for it. They changed from using AOL to Mailchimp. In the last 12 months over 250 separate e-mails have been sent. It is an extremely good tool for getting veterans' information out in a timely manner. Other districts are encouraged to set one up.

I am also very happy to see that traffic from our local post Service Officers has picked up. I have received many more calls and e-mails this year than the last 3 years combined. A special shout out to the Commanders and Service Officers of Tinley Park Post 615 and Des Plaines Post 36. They have truly helped several of their members get the much deserved benefits from the VA. Keep those calls and e-mails coming.

In closing, I wish to thank Commander Gigi Callaway for letting me serve as chairman, on the VA&R committee and as one of the Division Service Officers. If you should have any comments or concerns regarding this report or a question on any VA benefit program, please call our office at 312-980-4266 or e-mail me: Raymond.Toczek@va.gov.

Ray Toczek

PLEASE LET OUR WEBMASTER, JOHN LOS, KNOW IF THERE ARE ANY CHANGES IN HALL RENTAL INFORMATION POSTED ON OUR WEBSITE





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