



December 13, 2024

## WEEKLY GRASSROOTS NEWSLETTER

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact Congress to request support for the *Housing Unhoused Disabled Veterans Act!* This bill would exempt veterans' disability benefits from counting towards their income when determining their eligibility for housing assistance through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Disability compensation is counted as income when determining eligibility for housing assistance programs through HUD. As a result, many disabled veterans are priced out of these programs because of their disability benefits. *The American Legion supports this legislation, and we appreciate all the emails you have sent so far. Go to the [Action Center](#) to quickly email a letter of support to your Senators.*

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click [here](#) to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

The American Legion's legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress is available online. To review our priorities, you can check out our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

## MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

**February 22-26, 2025** – The American Legion's 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Washington Conference will be held at the Washington Hilton Hotel. This conference provides an opportunity for Legionnaires to meet with their respective lawmakers and hear from members of Congress and VA leadership. The National Commander will also address attendees on legislative priorities during the National Commander's Rally. More details, such as agendas and schedules, will be updated [here](#).

## HIGHEST AWARD CONGRESS CAN BESTOW GOING TO REVERED VIETNAM POW EVERETT ALVAREZ

*This article's original publication can be found [here](#).*



A Vietnam prisoner of war who spent years in captivity in the prison camp they dubbed the Hanoi Hilton and whose story was closely followed by the American public is set to be honored by Congress.

For his grit under interrogation, and for his unbending commitment to survive the prison ordeal and "return with honor," retired Navy Cmdr. Everett Alvarez is slated for the highest award lawmakers can bestow -- the Congressional Gold Medal.

By unanimous consent Wednesday, the Senate passed the bill to award the medal to the 86-year-old Alvarez, following on a unanimous vote in the House last week.

The bill to add Alvarez' name to the list of those who have received the Congressional Gold Medal -- ranging from George Washington and Winston Churchill to Frank Sinatra and the Wright Brothers -- now goes to the White House for President Joe Biden's signature.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., who sponsored the Gold Medal bill in the House, said in a statement that in tough times the nation can "look to the service and sacrifice of those like Cmdr. Everett Alvarez Jr. to remind and inspire us as to what it takes for our nation to endure."

Panetta had a special interest in passage of the bill. His father, former Defense Secretary and CIA Director Leon Panetta, was a member of the class of 1960 with Alvarez at Santa Clara University.

"Cmdr. Alvarez is an American hero who served as an inspiring source of hope for other prisoners of war during his time in Vietnam," said Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., who sponsored the bill in the Senate.

Alvarez was captured on Aug. 5, 1964, while flying a mission over North Vietnam in his A-4 Skyhawk as part of Operation Pierce Arrow. In interviews over the years with Military.com and other outlets, he detailed how he was shot down when "the sky turned black with flak" after he had strafed North Vietnamese patrol boats over majestic Ha Long Bay, now one of Vietnam's major tourist attractions.

Then, "a sudden burst jarred my plane. A sickening feeling crept over me as I tried to control my aircraft. Smoke filled the cockpit, and every warning light lit up."

He keyed his mic: "I'm on fire! I'm out of control!"

Alvarez fought to regain control to allow him to eject, but before punching out, he keyed the mic again: "I'm getting out! I'll see you guys later!"

His first thought after hitting the water was to swim to one of the outcroppings in the bay and possibly hide under the brush, but shots fired from a patrol boat kicked up the water around him and a bullet grazed his elbow. He was quickly hauled aboard the patrol boat, where his captors immediately began trying to interrogate him.

Alvarez, the grandson of Mexican immigrants, instinctively resisted. He replied in Spanish -- "No entiendo [I don't understand]." He would later tell Military.com, "I don't know why I did that -- seemed like a good idea at the time."

Alvarez was the first U.S. aviator to be captured and would spend eight and a half years as a prisoner -- the first 13 months of it in solitary confinement in a 7-by-7-foot cell. He was the second-longest held POW in U.S. military history after Army Capt. Floyd Thompson, who was held for almost nine years after the aircraft he was riding in was shot down in March 1964.

After 3,113 days of captivity, Alvarez was released on Feb. 12, 1973, as part of the Operation Homecoming wherein all U.S. prisoners, including then-Lt. Cmdr. John McCain, who also flew the A-4 Skyhawk and was shot down in October 1967, were sent home.

In 2016, McCain, who became a Republican senator from Arizona and unsuccessfully ran for president twice, spoke to the example Alvarez set for other POWs in presenting him with the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Lifetime Achievement Award.

"Whenever I'd start feeling sorry for myself, I'd think about Ev and how long he had been there and all that he had been through, and I would feel a lot less sorry," McCain said at the event. "He had a record of steadfast resistance and strength, and we not only admired him, we revered him."

After his release, Alvarez completed 20 years in the Navy, earned a law degree, formed a technology company, and also served as deputy director of both the Peace Corps and what was then the Veterans Administration.

On Nov. 13, 1982, Alvarez represented the Reagan administration at the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorials, which at the time listed the names of more than 57,900 U.S. service members who were killed in that divisive conflict.

In 2022 on the 40th anniversary of the memorial's dedication, Alvarez reflected on his initial doubts about the design of the shiny black concrete wall listing the names and how the public would react.

"Oh yeah, I had concerns. It was a tumultuous time," Alvarez told Military.com, but "I changed my view" on the memorial as he "realized how it affected the public," and what it would mean to future generations.

He watched as veterans came forward to touch the names of those they knew and "what struck me was the tremendous outpouring of the people, the veterans that came for the dedication and their families," he said. "That was heartwarming. It is, I would have to say, very therapeutic in a way for a lot of people."

## **IN A SURPRISE, GOP PANEL RECOMMENDS MAST TO LEAD FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

*The article's original publication can be found [here](#).*

The House Republican Steering Committee on Monday in a surprise vote recommended Rep. Brian Mast of Florida, an Army veteran known for his sharp tongue and grievance politics, to be the next chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the office of Speaker Mike Johnson confirmed.

Mast, a Ukraine aid opponent, has had sharp disagreements with ranking member Gregory W. Meeks, D-N.Y., during business meetings. He was a late entrant in the

race for the gavel, beating out three more senior members to win a contest whose results surprised watchers.

"I'm very, very surprised. I'm floored. I did not expect this and I did not speak to anyone that did," said a former Republican congressional aide following the vote, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue.

For the last two years, Mast has led the panel's Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee, which outgoing committee Chairman Michael McCaul, R-Texas, brought back in the 118th Congress to enhance GOP efforts to probe the Biden administration.

Mast's nomination for House Foreign Affairs leader could be a tacit acknowledgment by the Steering Committee that the Florida delegation's desire to have a committee chair from their state was merited given the state's association with President-elect Donald Trump.

Florida Republicans on the Steering Committee on Monday touted Mast's nomination for Foreign Affairs leader.

"His unwavering commitment to defending American values and confronting America's enemies, honed through his service and sacrifice on the battlefield, sets him apart as a powerful advocate for our country," Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart, who also leads the House State-Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, Vern Buchanan and Byron Donalds said in a joint statement. "This is an honor for our state, and we were proud to advocate for him in this powerful position."

The full House Republican Conference will vote early next year on approval of all of the Steering Committee's chair recommendations. The choices are nearly always backed by the party.

McCaul congratulated Mast on Monday.

"With the world on fire, the House Foreign Affairs Committee is more important than ever. And I have no doubt Congressman Mast — a distinguished combat veteran and experienced member of this committee — will serve the nation well in this role, as he sacrificed in Afghanistan," McCaul said in a statement. McCaul is leaving the post because of party limits on terms for leaders and opted not to seek a waiver.

Mast beat out three competitors — Middle East subcommittee Chairman Joe Wilson of South Carolina, House Foreign Affairs Vice Chair Ann Wagner of Missouri, and former House Oversight committee Chairman Darrell Issa of California. All three come from the more traditionally dominant internationalist branch of the Republican Party.

For his multiple votes against security assistance to Ukraine, Mast was given an “F” grade in the GOP congressional report card compiled by Republicans for Ukraine, an advocacy effort that aims to shore up conservative lawmaker support for Ukraine.

Mast has also been an outspoken backer of the controversial nomination of former Democratic Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, now a Republican, to be the director of national intelligence in the incoming Trump administration.

Gabbard’s past willingness to minimize the war crimes of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad— who this weekend fled his country for Russia after a lightning-quick offensive through the country by rebels — as well as to echo Kremlin talking points against Ukraine, have caused alarm among Russia hawks and Ukraine defenders.

And even as other competitors for the Foreign Affairs gavel, particularly Issa, had their own well-earned reputations for partisanship, Mast stands apart for repeatedly tangling — in often heated and personal ways — with Meeks.

At committee markups in the last year, Meeks called out Mast — a who previously volunteered with the Israeli Defense Forces — for using language that the Democrat said was dehumanizing toward the Palestinians.

Mast, who wore an IDF uniform to the Capitol in the days following the Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attack on Israel by the Palestinian militant group Hamas, has accused all Palestinians of being implicit supporters of terrorism and has said Palestinian boys in the Gaza Strip under the age of 18 should not be considered civilians under the international laws of war.

“He and Mr. Meeks have had some pretty publicly heated exchanges. I don’t know if other steering members know that,” said the former GOP staffer. “I don’t know how closely they pay attention to that.”

House Foreign Affairs operations have traditionally been run on a fairly bipartisan basis due to the long-running belief on both sides of the aisle that U.S. national security is enhanced when Congress is viewed abroad to be fairly united on key matters of foreign policy.

Mast's ascent to the Foreign Affairs gavel would further solidify the role that Floridians are poised to play in key national security roles starting next year. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., is Trump's choice to become secretary of State and is expected to be confirmed. Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Fla., who is on House Foreign Affairs, is Trump's choice to become national security adviser.

## **ELIZABETH DOLE ACT UPDATES**

Yesterday, December 12, the Senate passed via UC S. 141, the Dole Act. The reason for the change was because the bill needed some technical changes, which does not affect the bill's CBO score. The Senate opted to send us its own version instead of the HR version because Senate Republicans want to avoid using an HR shell that could be repurposed for messaging related to the "HR bill." This strategy allows the Senate to consider proposed amendments and address any concerns about the bill's content before potentially voting to approve or reject it. In summary, Senate Republicans are trying to prevent the Veterans' bill from becoming overloaded with unrelated provisions. The plan is to take up the bill next week with more information to follow.

## **LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK**

To recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

### **Marquis Palmer, California**

Marquis, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

This week, Marquis attended a meeting with Congressman Mark Takano's Veterans Affairs liaison, Ignacio Romero. This meeting aimed to discuss and establish the new restructuring of the Veterans Advisory Committee. During this meeting, they were able to outline the committee's mission, purpose, and function. The purpose of the committee will be to aid and assist in advising legislation while strategically focusing on Veterans issues. Furthermore, the committee will be the prime contact and attendees in hosting future Town Halls while disseminating information on Legislation to their respective communities/organizations. This group shall consist of no more than 9 members with a Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Secretary. Marquis believes this will be essential to ensuring the Legislative needs/goals of the American Legion will be discussed and worked on regularly. The first meeting is scheduled for the 1st week of the upcoming year.

*Thank you, Marquis, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion's legislative priorities.*



If you have made a Grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email us at [grassroots@legion.org](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) with the details.

## GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on ***The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military?*** Check out our [information papers](#) in the [Legislative Toolkit](#). This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!



As part of our ongoing Grassroots efforts, LegDiv staff is available to provide **Grassroots Training** tailored to the hosting Department's needs. If you are interested in hosting a Grassroots training event, please contact [grassroots@legion.org](mailto:grassroots@legion.org) or [ejohnson@legion.org](mailto:ejohnson@legion.org).

You can find relevant legislation and the Legion's stance on them in the [key legislation section of VoterVoice](#).

***Register for Action Alerts today at  
<https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register>***



## **UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS**

As of 9:00 am on Friday, December 5, the following hearings are scheduled:

- December 17, 2:30 PM: House Veterans Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health Legislative Hearing -- *H.R. 214 Veterans' True Choice Act of 2023 (Rep. Greg Steube); H.R. 3176 Veterans Health Care Freedom Act (Rep. Andy Biggs); H.R. 5287 Veterans Access to Direct Primary Care Act (Rep. Chip Roy); H.R. 8481 Emergency Community Care Notification Time Adjustment Act of 2024 (Rep. Brian Mast); H.R. 10012 To amend title 38, United States Code, to include eyeglass lens fittings in the category of medical services authorized to be furnished to veterans under the Veterans Community Care Program, and for other purposes (Rep. Celeste Maloy); H.R. 9924 What Works for Preventing Veteran Suicide Act (Rep. Greg Landsman); H.R. 8347 Improving Menopause Care for Veterans Act (Rep. Julia Brownley); H.R. 6333 Veterans Emergency Care Reimbursement Act (Rep. Debbie Dingell); Discussion Draft Supporting Medical Students and VA Workforce Act (Rep. Mark Takano); H.R. 10267 Complete the Mission Act of 2024 (Rep. Mike Bost).*"
- December 18, 10:15 AM: House Veterans Affairs Committee, Full Committee Oversight Hearing -- *Restoring Congressional Power over VA After Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo.*

HVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Calendar Home | House Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)

SVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)

HASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – House Armed Services Committee](#)

SASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

[View The American Legion Legislative Handbook Here](#)