

VFW Elects Duane Sarmiento as New National Commander

The New Jersey native is the first Filipino American elected to lead the 124-year-old organization

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PHOENIX — Duane Sarmiento of Gibbstown, New Jersey, was elected today as the new national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), a congressionally chartered veterans service organization comprised of approximately 1 million eligible combat veterans and military service members from all six branches of the armed forces.

“Today, I humbly stand here as a testament to the limitless potential of our great nation and a product of the American dream,” said Sarmiento during his acceptance speech. “As a kid from New Jersey, I never imagined I would be standing here to accept such a prestigious position in one of the most prestigious institutions in our country.”

Sarmiento’s election as the VFW’s 115th commander-in-chief occurred at the conclusion of the organization’s 124th National Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. The gathering was the first national convention held there since 2009. More than 10,000 members of the VFW and its Auxiliary converged on the city to conduct the business of the organization, recognize individuals and organizations for excellence and to elect new leadership for the 2023 – 2024 year.

Sarmiento, who is of mixed Filipino and Italian heritage, is the first person of color elected to lead the 124-year-old organization. He delivered remarks to those attending in person at the Phoenix Convention Center and watching via livestreaming video.

“As I look out into this sea of familiar faces, I am reminded of the shared experiences, the sacrifices and the bonds that have brought us together,” said Sarmiento, to the delegates in attendance from all 52 Departments, which includes Europe and Asia. “We come from different walks of life, but we share a common thread — a deep love for our country and an unwavering dedication to veterans.”

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VFW membership eligibility requires honorable service in a war or expedition on foreign soil or in hostile waters. Sarmiento served in the United States Navy from 1988 to 1997, and the United States Naval Reserve from 2002 to 2006, earning his VFW eligibility by serving in Operations Desert Shield/Storm. In recognition of his service, he received the Navy Achievement Medal, Navy Combat Action Ribbon, Navy Good Conduct Medal, the Southwest Asia Service Medal with three campaign stars, the Saudi Arabian Medal for the Liberation of Kuwait, Kuwait Medal for the Liberation of Kuwait and numerous other medals and ribbons. In 2003, he earned the title of the Naval Reserve Center Sailor of the Year at Fort Dix.

“Throughout my time in the Navy, I witnessed firsthand the power of teamwork and the unbreakable spirit that binds us together as veterans,” said Sarmiento. “Those formative years taught me so much about camaraderie and esprit de corps, it was only natural for me to join the ranks of the VFW, an organization that means so much to generations of veterans.”

Sarmiento joined the VFW in 1990 at Post 5579 in Gibbstown, New Jersey, where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life membership. He has served in elected and appointed positions at the Post, District and Department levels, culminating with his election as the VFW Department of New Jersey Commander from 2018 to 2019. On the national level, he served as the VFW Inspector General from 2019 to 2020, and served on the National Security and Foreign Affairs Committee, General Resolutions Committee, and as Special Aide-de-Camp. He is a life member of the Military Order of the Cootie, at Ky-Yi Pup Tent #1 in Delaware.

“By embracing a leadership role within our organization, we can unlock its full potential, empowering the VFW to make an even greater impact on the lives of all veterans,” said Sarmiento. “So, no matter at what level – Post, District or Department – step up, take the lead and you can make a difference in the VFW.”

Though much of his speech was spent touting the programs, work and achievements of the VFW, Sarmiento took time to espouse the value of the members, showing his passion for the fraternal side of the organization.

“We have entrepreneurs who have built successful businesses, educators who have shaped young minds, and community leaders who have made a lasting impact. We have advocates who have fought tirelessly for the rights of veterans, and caregivers who have provided unwavering support to those in need,” said Sarmiento, who retired as a police officer and director of Veterans Affairs in Gloucester County, New Jersey. “I’m here to tell you the most valuable resources to the Veterans of Foreign Wars are you – the members.”

In addition to Sarmiento, other national officers elected were Al Lippardt, a Vietnam War veteran from the Department of Georgia, as Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief, and Carol

Whitmore, an Iraq War veteran from the Department of Iowa, as Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief. The final day of the convention also saw Adjutant General Dan West and Quartermaster General Marc Garduno reconfirmed in their positions.

“Regardless of your pecking order in this organization, keep this in mind – you don’t need a title to lead. You just need to care,” said Sarmiento. “People would rather follow a leader with a heart than a leader with a title.”

Sarmiento resides in Gibbstown, New Jersey with his wife Ellen.

[Watch](#) or [read](#) Sarmiento’s acceptance speech.