

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Veterans Honored With Touching Words, Talk Of Action

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ST. CROIX -- Even on Veterans Day, the men and women who serve seem to be the ones doing all the work. On this island, they are to march hundreds of yards as residents enjoy the entertainment. And when they arrive where dignitaries are stationed, the "eyes right" (or left) command is given as a show of respect to said leaders.

In Frederiksted, the men and women of the Virgin Islands National Guard, along with various other marching bands, put on a display of excellence -- beginning from the Frederiksted Post Office on Fisher Street, moving to King Street and on to the Budhoe Park -- as they paraded in seamless coordination singing army themes. To the onlookers, the servicemen and women beamed with pride, but when the excitement of the day

subsided, stories of neglect of soldiers returning home from battle, and lack of sufficient care for those disabled during war, were brought to the fore. More on that later.

To give up so much for your country and to come home and become homeless, we can't have that. - Chief Warrant Officer Joshua Maynard.

The bandstand in Budhoe Park hosted dignitaries who were to give remarks during the event, including Senate President Neville James, who said the 31st Legislature would not turn down measures aimed at bettering the living conditions of veterans in the territory.

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, who also participated in the march, decried the current non-voting status of the territory's residents, using Virgin Islanders in the armed forces, many of whom have died on the battlefield, as the basis upon which she made her case.

"Virgin Islanders have long been among the first to answer the call of duty -- in some cases even in defense of this nation before we were a part of it," Mrs. Plaskett said. "Yet today, as our men and women deploy and engage in theater, they cannot vote for their commander-in-chief, who ultimately makes the decision to send them there."







































































She also mentioned the lack of benefits for veterans here, and highlighted a measure she recently championed in Washington, D.C. aimed at righting some of the issues, including better job opportunities, and another she supported that makes receiving care less difficult.

"In a territory with greater portion of veterans than many places under the U.S. jurisdiction, the challenges Virgin Islands veterans face in accessing critical benefits is inexcusable," Mrs. Plaskett said. "Earlier this year, I introduced a bill in Congress that would allow small business employers a Work Opportunity Tax Credit for hiring members of the National Guard or Ready Reserve. I have also supported legislation in Congress expanding Veterans Choice Programs, which now allow veterans who leave more than 40 miles away in a straight line from a VA facility, or who face significant delays in scheduling, the opportunity to receive care in their communities at non-VA medical facilities, that would include the entire Virgin Islands."

Yesterday's keynote speaker, [recently named](#) Brigadier General Deborah Howell, stressed the importance of understanding the magnitude of war, which, she contends, would make "us a more caring and inclusive community."

And Governor Kenneth Mapp, who spoke last, echoed Mrs. Plaskett's comments concerning Virgin Islanders as Americans having full access to the benefits associated with being citizens, especially in light of the 100th [Centennial celebrations](#) set to take place in 2017.

"While there will be cause to celebrate, more importantly, there is a time of great reflection as the people of the Virgin Islands and the United States Government, and the people of America, reflect on the last hundred years of the relationship and treatment of Americans and veterans in the U.S. Virgin Islands."

Mr. Mapp, like the other dignitaries, lauded the servicemen and women "who served honorably."

Even so, problems related to local veterans' care persist, and Chief Warrant Officer Joshua Maynard, a pilot in the army who has served over 19 years, highlighted the plights of disabled veterans in the territory, even as he acknowledged that some improvements had been made.

"An area that could definitely get better is when it comes to disabled veterans and the medical care that they get," Mr. Maynard told The Consortium. "But we're hearing talks and we're seeing things moving in a positive direction."

Mr. Maynard, who flies helicopters and planes, and have been deployed to Iraq and America's southwest border with Mexico, and who's flown several missions across the U.S. and Caribbean, said he would serve for at least 10 more years.

But Mr. Maynard again stressed the harsh conditions that some veterans here currently withstand, and applauded the measure that Mrs. Plaskett backed that affords local servicemen and women to receive care in a medical facility in their area.

"Especially soldiers that are deployed. You come back and maybe can't serve anymore, but then you get pushed in the streets -- some of them even end up homeless, and that's rough," Mr. Maynard said. "To give up so much for your country and to come home and become homeless, we can't have that."