

A True Young Veterans Post

A Post in North Carolina currently has nearly a fifth of its members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. And almost all its leaders are vets of those wars, too. Here's what it does to attract and support younger members.

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Not since the Vietnam War has a VFW Post been able to claim as many active-duty members deployed to war zones. Post 8073 in Whiteville, N.C., currently counts nearly 20% of its membership serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. In April 1966, Post 9723 on Okinawa consisted mostly of officers and enlisted men from bases on the island. Membership totaled 2,585.

According to VFW's official membership records as of June 30, 2009, Post 8073 counted 97 paid members. As of September, 19 of them were serving in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

"Most of us are National Guardsmen," Post Commander Paul Spivey said. "We've all been together for so long, and like other young vets, we've seen what VFW does for veterans and the community."

Spivey says that nearly a quarter, or 23, of his Post's members are veterans of either the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. Many, like himself, have served with the North Carolina National Guard's 120th Combined Arms Battalion. Spivey served in Iraq with the unit and was wounded near Tuz in August 2004.

He says young vets like what the Post—and VFW membership—offers them.

"We make them feel welcome when they come to meetings, and we encourage their participation in all Post activities," said the 33-year-old. "They also see their peers in leadership positions and feel comfortable expressing their opinions and thoughts about Post business."

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In addition to Commander Spivey, the Post's senior vice, junior vice, adjutant-quartermaster, service officer and sergeant-at-arms positions are all filled by Iraq War veterans.

Spivey attributes his Post's success in attracting young vets to a "domino" effect.

"They see other young vets getting involved, learning about VFW's mission and want to join, too," he said. "We tell people that VFW is first and foremost a veterans service organization. But we also serve the community, provide youth activities and support legislative action."

Spivey notes that young vets are interested in how VFW helps those with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

"A lot of times they want somebody to confide in," he says, "guys who have been there."

Post member Jimmie McInnis, a Viet-nam War vet, tells young vets that by joining VFW they can help themselves and others dealing with these issues.

"I suffer from PTSD, and it helps me when I talk to other members," said McInnis, who served two tours in Viet-nam with the 3rd Bn., 13th Field Artillery, and the 1st Bn., 27th Inf., 25th Div. "It is good to be able to talk to someone who may be having a hard time. After any war, you need someone who has been through the same things as yourself."

With a membership so closely tied to the current wars, it's no surprise that Post 8073, located some 45 miles west of Wilmington, N.C., in the southeast part of the state, is heavily involved in troop support activities.

"We use all of VFW's National Military Services programs," Spivey said. "We've adopted our local Guard unit before and during deployments, and we continue to support them after they come home. We send care packages, utilize Unmet Needs grants and work closely with the soldiers' families if problems arise during deployments."

Overall, Spivey contends that young vets are not interested in "sitting around telling war stories and drinking beer." He says they would rather get involved in projects and try to make other vets' lives better.

"Young vets are looking to continue their service," Spivey said. "They like the fact that they can serve their brother and sister vets and their communities and have a place where they can talk to people they can relate to."

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