

Honor Military Heroes Says Chief

Sep 21, 2009

Commander-in-Chief Tommy Tradewell says now is the time to act to ensure that a strong VA health care system is in place for future veterans.

In Vietnam in October 1967, from the DMZ to the Mekong River Delta, U.S. forces were heavily engaged with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The area between Duc Pho and Chu Lai in I Corps was no exception to the fighting.

Sent to Vietnam as part of the ongoing troop build-up was a young specialist 5 named Tommy Tradewell, who had been training intensely at Ft. Hood, Texas, for the past year. Before his tour was up “in-country,” he would accumulate a wealth of experiences that influenced his later life in a variety of ways.

One of those lasting legacies was a genuine appreciation for the courage demonstrated by fellow soldiers. And after visiting today’s troops, he felt a special need to direct VFW efforts at them. So not surprisingly, the Chief adopted *Honoring Our Military Heroes* as his motto. “The Citizen-Soldier Statue at VFW National Headquarters in Kansas City is inspiring in this regard, showing veterans actively concerned for the welfare of those still serving in uniform,” he says.

First on the Agenda

In this vein, Tradewell sees making sure former service personnel can count on VA benefits long-term. “A top priority is guaranteeing VA money is properly allocated—overseeing how and where funds are spent,” he stresses. “A first step in this direction is for the VA to hire qualified employees.”

As a former Army engineer, Tradewell has a special place in his heart for GIs responsible for dealing with and confronting the deadly improvised explosive devices (IEDs) all too common on the roads of Afghanistan and Iraq.

“Equipment must be adaptable to conditions on the ground,” the Chief firmly believes. “A new, more nimble all-terrain Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle is especially essential in Afghanistan to stand up to roadside bombs. VFW can certainly campaign for such an ATV.” (In July, the Pentagon announced it was buying 5,244 new armored vehicles specially adapted to Afghanistan.)

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Caring for the needs of those currently on duty, of course, has been paramount for the past eight years. VFW members have worked hand-in-hand with ongoing military programs. Tradewell points out that the Marines' Wounded Warrior Regiment that contacts every Purple Heart recipient is a prime example of how these young veterans are being cared for.

"All VFW Departments are doing a good job with homecomings and supporting military families that have spouses overseas," he says.

Outreach to All Veterans Critical

There's no question about it, mass membership organizations are facing some trying times in the first decade of the 21st century. That's precisely why stabilizing the numbers is so important. "We must hold the line at 1.5 million or more members," the Chief emphasizes.

"Recruiters will have to work harder than ever before. And efforts at all levels of the organization designed to retain members will have to be refined and improved. But in the end, this is mostly the responsibility of the local Post."

All means and methods of outreach must be used. "While we certainly will never abandon our tried and true communications to get our story out, taking full advantage of all the new technology is vital, too," he said. "Working with the mainstream mass media can be difficult, but it is essential that VFW's role in passing landmark legislation like the new GI Bill be publicized."

Though the emphasis has been on the young of late, we overlook the core potential pool of members at our own peril. "In the past," Tradewell points out, "VFW missed opportunities with Vietnam veterans. But now we can redouble our efforts to recruit them." Vietnam vets are currently the organization's single largest member component: 554,000, or some 37% of total members. And they comprise the greatest single pool of potential members.

In the Beginning

As a Vietnam vet, the Chief can certainly identify with that age group. Drafted at 19 in 1966, he spent his first year of service in intensive engineer training at Ft. Hood, Texas. He shipped overseas aboard the *USNS Gordon* with the 198th Light Infantry Brigade, which became part of the Americal (23rd) Division in I Corps.

He arrived in-country in October 1967 with the 555th Engineer Company. It and his later unit—B Company, 26th Engineer Battalion—swept for mines along Highway 1 between Duc Pho and Chu Lai. As a demolition specialist, his was a risky business that left lasting memories. At a landing zone on a hilltop clearing on March 23, 1968, Tradewell underwent a profound experience.

That night, a mortar round hit around him and several unit members. Three men were killed in action, and Tradewell was wounded. Though the wound did not require medical care, it rated a Purple Heart. “Surviving Tet 1968 was an experience I will never forget,” he says. “I consider every day after March 23 a gift of life.”

Discharged from the Army in September 1968 upon his return from Vietnam, Tradewell went right to work the following month for Briggs & Stratton Corp., in Milwaukee as a quality technician. His job entailed programming machines to measure and report calibrations for gauges. During this time, he received an associate’s degree in industrial safety from Waukesha County Technical College in Pewaukee in 1974.

After 31 years on the job there, he moved on in December 1999 to Western Industrial, also based in that city, working there until 2003. His last career move was to G&V Machining Co., in Ixonia, retiring from that position in 2007.

VFW as an Avocation

The Chief’s ascent in the chair offices was preceded by 39 years of VFW experience. Joining Post 6498 in Milwaukee immediately upon returning home, Tradewell immersed himself in the organization. Memories of his three friends killed in Vietnam and a desire to do something for the families of veterans motivated him to join.

Recalling that Post’s honor guard marching on holidays, veteran-teachers and the influence of his father-in-law all contributed to that decision, too. Becoming a part of the state honor guard in 1988, he has marched in the Loyalty Day Parade ever since.

By the 1990s, he was moving through the leadership ranks achieving All-State Post commander (1993-94), All-State District 5 commander (1995-96) and Department commander (1999-2000). An inspector general in 2001-02, he went on to represent District 11 on the National Council of Administration (2003-05).

Various committee assignments—National Security, POW-MIA, Budget & Finance, Scholarship Recognition and Youth Development—provided a well-rounded picture of organizational activities. Though they all proved valuable, the Chief particularly liked the latter because he had been a longtime Boy Scout leader.

A favorite pastime is being a member of the Combat Veterans Motor-cycle Association. And in 1995, his local unit of the Association of Brothers Against Totalitarian Enactments (which opposes restrictions on bike owners) built and left as a gift a Harley-Davidson motorcycle at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

A Dyed-in-the-Wool Milwaukeeite

Born and raised in the same home city as that famed “bike” manufacturer, Trade-well has

strong family roots in the Near North Side of the “Genuine American City.” Growing up in a family of three brothers and three sisters, he attended a Catholic parochial school. His father, an employee of Briggs & Stratton, served stateside during WWII. Two of his brothers served in the Marines and Air Force.

The Chief married his high school sweetheart, Sharon, on Aug. 27, 1966. They have two sons, Thomas, Jr. (42) and Gary(37). Their grandchildren total five. All family members reside in Wisconsin.

Tradewell’s close connections to community combined with his Vietnam service serve him well as far as identifying with potential new members. “Because of my personal experiences, I can relate to returning Afghani–stan and Iraq vets,” he says. “A lot of them don’t really understand VFW, so it is my mission as Chief to help them grasp what we have to offer.”

Recruiting and especially retaining younger members is tough. “Most are still too young to be planting roots—they are moving around and finding their niche in life, and children are understandably their priority,” Tradewell adds. “Never–theless, recruiters have to be aggressive in knocking on doors. Without personal contact, it is hard to rekindle the spirit of comradeship left behind in the service.”

But there is more. “They must be convinced of the good value inherent in VFW membership,” the Chief stresses. “They are already benefitting as an individual because of what VFW has already done and what we are doing for their families. Just witness our efforts on behalf of the new GI Bill and those of National Military Services.”

The Chief offers this parting thought: “For 110 years, we have been doing good deeds. Now it is more important than ever to have a strong, solid VA health care system in place. Ten years from now when young veterans need it most, older vets won’t be here to guarantee it. This is the time to take action to assure a secure future for VA medical care.”

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