

Ensuring That Veterans Are Respected For Their Service

Interview with Veterans of Foreign Wars National Commander Brian Duffy Images courtesy of Veterans of Foreign Wars

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Over the centuries millions of Irish people left these shores. Many went on to become leading business, political and community leaders. One such emigrant is Louth native, Brian Duffy, National Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) – the United States oldest veterans organisation. Taking time out of his busy schedule, we spoke to Brian about his service and the work carried out by the VFW.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars is the United States' largest and oldest major war veterans organisation. Founded in 1899, and chartered by Congress in 1936, the VFW is comprised entirely of eligible veterans and military service members from the active, Guard and Reserve forces. With nearly 1.7 million VFW and Auxiliary members located in more than 6,500 Posts worldwide, the nonprofit veterans service organisation is proud to proclaim, 'NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS'. Their mission is to: foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans. The VFW aims to ensure that veterans are respected for their service, and always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognised for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of the United States.

Brian was born in Castlering, Co. Louth, just outside Dundalk, to parents Bernard Duffy and the late Rose Kirk Duffy. His family emigrated to the United States in June 1959, when the future VFW National Commander was just one year old. Growing up in New York City Brian developed a keen sense of patriotism from both his parents. 'They worked hard and were able to provide a comfortable living - my service was an easy choice,' Brian told us.

Brian served in the U.S. Air Force as a jet engine mechanic on F-4 Phantom fighter aircraft,

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and later as a flight engineer aboard C-141 Starlifter transport aircraft. During his service, he deployed in support of several campaigns including Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, and Operations Desert Shield/Storm in Iraq 1990-1991. Recollecting on his service Brian said, 'During the Gulf War, our crew was tasked as one of two aircraft to repatriate the former Prisoners of War. Our call sign was "Freedom 2". Having grown up in New York, I was honoured to walk the Canyon of Heroes during the victory parade in honour of the Gulf War'.

Other Irish emigrants served alongside Brian too. 'Yes, in fact there were two Irishmen who served in my squadron; Brendan Fahy and John Boyd,' Brian recalled, 'The Irish have always been a big part of America's armed forces. I pay tribute to that fact by dubbing my VFW leadership team as "the Irish Brigade"'.

His military decorations include the Air Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Southwest Asia Service Medal, and the Kuwait Liberation Medal.

Following his Air Force service, Brian was employed by several airlines as a flight engineer instructor. He moved to 'The Bluegrass State' of Kentucky in 1988 after joining United Parcel Service (UPS) Airlines as a flight engineer instructor. Rising through the ranks, he retired in 2014 as assistant chief pilot with UPS, having flown worldwide as an instructor/check captain on Boeing 757 and 767 aircraft.

Brian first joined the VFW upon his return from Grenada in 1983, joining VFW Post 6590, Cookstown, New Jersey. He later transferred his membership to VFW Post 120 in Garden City Park, New York, then to VFW Post 1170 in Middletown, Kentucky, in 1989. Brian explained why he joined the VFW: 'Again, service and patriotism were big parts of my upbringing - the VFW is a service organisation that embodies patriotism and enhancing communities, it was a natural fit for me'. He served as Commander of the VFW Department of Kentucky in 2006, and achieved All- American status at the VFW Post, District and Department levels.

Last July, in Charlotte, North Carolina, Brian was elected Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars at the 117th National Convention, becoming the veterans organisations first Desert Storm National Commander.

During his acceptance speech, the new National Commander strongly praised the work of the 117-year-old organisation and encouraged its members to: 'better educate others on exactly what the VFW does for veterans, service members and their families'. He noted, however, that the VFW's modest approach to reaching younger veterans wasn't resonating with a newer generation that clearly identifies with belonging to something big, doing something cool, and touting their accomplishments more. "This great big organization we call the VFW does something very cool that most Americans— and especially those who

serve in uniform—just don't know because we don't shout from the rooftops enough', Brian said during his acceptance address, 'Cool things like providing \$5.6 million in grants to help nearly 3,900 military and veteran families through emergency financial situations; helping more than 80,000 veterans and transitioning military to receive \$1.5 billion in earned compensation and pension from the VA (Dept. of Veterans Affairs); and providing millions in scholarships to veterans, service members, and high school and middle school students'.

Over the past year Brian has encouraged VFW members to let people know that the VFW is an organisation that has always been rooted in service to others, an organisation of doers, and an organisation comprised of men and women who 'returned home from their wars and conflicts as better, more compassionate and confident human beings'.

One of Brian's primary objectives, and a huge challenge for veterans organisations, is heightening the focus of mental health awareness and changing the veteran's narrative—the veteran's brand—which right now has 40% of Americans believing half of all veterans are experiencing mental health challenges, and an astounding 92% of employers believing veterans need access to mental health care programs. Brian explained: 'it's no secret that 20 veterans commit suicide every day, but what most folks don't know is only six of those veterans are enrolled with the VA. Professional mental health counselling isn't the VFW's forte inasmuch as having walked the talk. It doesn't matter if your war was in Europe, Africa, Asia or the Middle East—or in this century or the last—but that we were all younger once, and we all came back different in one respect or another, thinking no one understood us. This is why the VFW cannot allow any service member to ever think no one understands them'.

During his tenure as National Commander, Brian Duffy logged thousands of miles across the U.S. and abroad to promoting the veterans' issues and advocating for better quality of life programs for all veterans, service members and their families. He also visited Ireland in October 2016, to meet with U.S. Marines stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Dublin, as well as with Irish military veterans groups.

Another overseas visit took Brian to Tây Ninh City in Vietnam, which is home to the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons. This is the host organisation for all U.S. Investigation and Recovery Operations in Vietnam. During his trip, Brian visited an excavation site near the Cambodian border. The recovery mission that was taking place was for a reconnaissance aircraft and its two crew, that went missing on September 26th, 1967. Brian said that visiting the site and watching the U.S. military and civilian personnel perform their work was an experience he will never forget: 'All ranks and branches of our military worked together with the Vietnamese authorities to hopefully find the remains of the two missing American service members. The methodical manner in which the work was done, overseen by an anthropologist, was just remarkable. The worldwide work of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) is truly a story that cannot be over told. The

fact that the U.S. military never leaves a service member behind says so much about our nation's values. I have always supported the Missing In Action mission, but my knowledge and appreciation of what they do daily to bring our missing home has grown exponentially. Truly an incredible experience'.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars is always reaching out across the world encouraging veterans and service personnel to become members. 'We have a very active VFW presence in many parts of Europe, with several VFW Posts in Germany, England, Italy and France. We are hopeful to establish a VFW Post in Ireland when we reach the requisite number of qualified veterans. Those interested in joining a new post in Ireland, or an existing one in Europe or in the U.S., should contact our membership director at RButler@vfw.org', Brian said.

A new VFW National Commander will be sworn in this August. We asked Brian what was it like to be National Commander of the VFW? 'Representing 1.7 million members of the VFW and Auxiliary has been quite an honour. Every day, I approach the task with a keen sense of responsibility and respect for the proud history, and purpose of the organization'.

Brian is also a member of the Irish Catholic Fraternal Organization, and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Father Abram J Ryan, Division #1, in Louisville. His Honor Flight activities were recognised by the Kentucky Aviation Hall of Fame, the Kentucky Derby Festival as the 2009 'Thunderator', and was a recipient of the 2011 (Louisville) WLKY 'Bell Award' for community volunteerism. In 2012, Brian was the recipient of President Barack Obama's Volunteer Service Award after being nominated by UPS to recognise his numerous volunteer activities.

Brian is a Gold Legacy Life member of the VFW, and is a member of the VFW National Home for Children, Military Order of the Cootie, American Legion and AMVETS (American Vets). He and his wife, Jean, who served three terms as Auxiliary President to VFW Post 1170, reside in Louisville, and have two adult children.

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