

New Chief Vows to ‘Make it Happen’

One of VFW’s youngest commanders-in-chief in the past several years, B.J. Lawrence, of New Mexico, wants to energize the organization starting at the grassroots level

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VFW’s newest commander-in-chief is a man who wants to get things done, sooner rather than later. His experiences as an artilleryman in Korea and an undercover police officer in New Mexico, as well as his rapid rise through VFW’s ranks, underscore his leadership philosophy.

“I believe in more action and less talk,” Lawrence said. “And this all comes back to membership recruiting. We know what the plan is, now we have to execute it. That’s why I chose ‘Make it Happen’ as my slogan.”

To attract veterans of the post-9/11 generation, Lawrence said VFW members must do a better job of spreading the message about the organization’s reasons for existing.

“We’ve come a long way on reaching those vets,” he said. “What we need to do better is simply tell our story about the wonderful things we do for veterans and our communities. Young vets are interested in participating in projects where they believe they are making a difference.”

Lawrence said being a veteran who came of age in the 1980s puts him in a unique position. He’s been influenced by examples set by older vets and wants to pass on that knowledge to younger vets, a group with which he believes he has great rapport. He said it gives him “the needed sense of balance” to be successful in his tenure as Chief.

“I believe I can work with all generations,” the 52-year-old said. “Being involved with VFW for almost 20 years now, I understand the needs of our older veterans. I also can relate to our younger veterans and what they want. I want to hear their points of view and their visions for the future of the organization.”

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As VFW transitions to younger leadership at all levels, Lawrence wants to make sure that all veterans feel welcome.

“Our membership is not only getting younger but more diverse every day,” he noted. “When young vets join a Post, they might feel like they want to shape it to fit their goals. That’s wonderful. We want them engaged, but we don’t want anyone excluded.”

“I tell Post commanders to make all their members feel involved. The military and VFW are made up of veterans from all walks of life. It’s imperative that we make all feel comfortable when they’re in a VFW Post.”

A FAMILY HISTORY OF MILITARY SERVICE

Lawrence’s motivation to join the military came from his father, a World War II veteran.

“I wanted to continue my family’s history of service,” he said. “When I was growing up, my father took me to my first VFW Post. My brother, Patrick, served in the military, too. He was on active duty in the Air Force when he died of a brain tumor.”

The Chief enlisted in the Army’s delayed-entry program while still in high school and entered service immediately after graduating in May 1983. He took basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas.

From the end of 1983 through much of 1984, Pfc. Lawrence served at Camp Stanley, South Korea, with C Btry., 2nd Bn., 61st Air Defense Artillery. He worked as a crew member on a Chaparral air defense missile system.

“One of the highlights of my tour was participating in Team Spirit, a series of exercises with the South Korean military,” he said. “The South Korean soldiers I worked with looked to the Americans as true allies and brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Another highlight during my time was getting to attend a USO show when they came over for Christmas.”

After his stint in Korea, Lawrence transferred back to Fort Bliss. He served there as a sergeant with the 4th Bn., 1st Air Defense Artillery Bde. In Texas, he coordinated nuclear, biological and chemical training for his battalion in the event of a chemical attack.

“What I remember most about that duty was the gas chamber training for new recruits,” he recalled. “Instead of being gassed, I got to see it from the other side.”

Lawrence was at Fort Bliss from 1985 until he was discharged on March 18, 1986. He said the training and experience he gained in the military helped shape him as a person.

“No. 1 and foremost, it gave me discipline,” he said. “It made me more organized and also put me in better physical shape. It also gave me more confidence to make decisions and improved my communication skills.”

FIREMAN, PARAMEDIC, POLICE OFFICER

Soon after his discharge, Lawrence ventured into the civilian world. Determined to become a public servant, he began training with the Alamogordo (N.M.) Department of Public Safety and earned his firefighter certification in August 1986. Two months later, he became a certified emergency medical technician.

The next year, on March 20, 1987, he graduated from the New Mexico State Law Enforcement Academy and was certified as a police officer.

In 1988, he began a two-year stint as an undercover narcotics agent with the New Mexico Interagency Narcotics Task Force. He then worked as a private investigator from 1990-99. After that, he joined the Tularosa (N.M.) Police Department for two years.

From 2002-10, he returned to work as a private investigator. In 2010, he opened his own firm, Lawrence Investigations, and closed that in 2015.

“My military training was invaluable to me in my role as a law enforcement officer and private investigator,” he said. “Much like the experience I gained as a soldier, it helped form me as a person.”

PAYING BACK HIS POST

While working for the Tularosa Police Department in 2000, Lawrence joined VFW Post 7686 in Alamogordo, N.M. It was an experience that made him an immediate fan of the organization.

“I was helping out with a Toys for Tots drive at a community event one day,” he recalled, “and a VFW Post member invited me to a meeting. When I showed up, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I was eligible for VFW membership. The members also were having a drawing for a life membership, and my name was selected.”

Because of that, Lawrence said he felt as if he “owed something” to the Post.

“Once I joined, there was no looking back,” he said. “I got involved with activities and Post committees.”

One of those committees helped homeless veterans, which included hosting an annual Thanksgiving dinner for them. The Chief said the experience had a profound effect on him.

“It humbled me,” Lawrence said. “I saw the dedication of our members. It was inspiring to see people come together for one cause. We got the community to help, and we really touched lives. It was a tremendous sense of accomplishment.”

His VFW leadership career began soon afterward. In 2003, he was elected commander of

Post 7686. He held that position again in 2010-11.

He led New Mexico as Department commander in 2007-08 and served as the state's District 3 commander in 2009-10. He shone in these positions, earning the coveted status of All-American "triple crown" commander (attaining 100 percent membership at all three levels) in 2010.

Lawrence also represented District 15 on VFW's Council of Administration in 2009-11 and later served as New Mexico's assistant adjutant/quartermaster from 2012-15.

He said this experience gave him the required grassroots-level knowledge that a commander-in-chief needs to be effective.

"It taught me what our members do in the field," Lawrence said. "Be it school presentations, hospital visits or distributing Buddy Poppies, these activities demonstrated to me how important VFW is at the local level. We should never forget that serving the military, veterans or our communities starts at the Post level."

GUIDING VFW IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

As VFW's top leader, Chief Lawrence said he plans to focus on the organization's priority goals during his tenure. He will emphasize issues such as timely access to VA health care, the distribution of private care to supplement VA's services, confirmation of a new VA secretary, ending sequestration and the full accounting of U.S. troops still listed as missing from World War II forward.

As a Korea service veteran, Lawrence is particularly interested in the recent U.S.-North Korea agreement and how that could jumpstart the resumption of remains recovery operations in that country.

"As of July 16 of this year, a total of 7,699 American troops were still listed as missing from the Korean War," he said. "That includes an estimated 5,300 in North Korea. In addition, 111 of the 126 missing from the Cold War are in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula. There is still much work to do to ensure that we recover and identify them all. This is a top priority for VFW and for me personally, as well. I look forward to working with the Trump Administration and the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency and providing any support we can."

The Chief added that as an organization, VFW must always be mindful of what's going on in the world and how to respond.

"We must be ready to adapt to new realities and uncertainties," Lawrence said. "Our mission never changes but the logistics of accomplishing that mission can change. We must always be prepared to do what's best for veterans."

And as all VFW commanders know, the best method of accomplishing their goals is with the help of a robust membership. The Chief said that increasing membership and attracting new members are big reasons he chose “Make it Happen” for his theme.

“Our voice is important on Capitol Hill,” Lawrence said. “The bigger our membership, the louder the voice. We always must be in a favorable position to advocate for our military and veterans. A top priority will be sustaining that strong voice with a large, active membership.”

To increase membership and be in tune with today’s veterans, the Chief said VFW should reflect the demographics of the U.S. military in the 21st century. The key to that, he said, is for Post members to heartily welcome their brothers- and sisters-in-arms and their families when they walk through the doors and make them feel appreciated.

“VFW is made up of veterans from all walks of life,” he said. “We all share the common ground of military service. We’re here to help all vets, young and old, male and female. Everyone has something to offer.”

The article is featured in the September 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Tim Dyhouse](#), editor-in-chief, VFW magazine. Photo by Susan McSpadden.