

A Marine Makes a 'Positive Impact' for Vets and Families

A VFW Service Officer in Idaho relies on compassion and tenacity to win for his clients

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For Bob Smith, a monetary victory he earns for a veteran filing a VA claim is not as important as what the approved claim does for the claimant and his or her family.

For example, one of his most meaningful victories was for a surviving spouse. Smith, a VFW-accredited service officer in Jerome, Idaho, said the spouse was seeking assistance with medications.

“Her husband had passed away about 15 years earlier, and I had asked her if her husband was ever a POW, to which she had responded, ‘Yes,’” Smith said.

Her husband served during World War II and the Korean War. While in Korea, her husband was shot in the leg and captured one week later, according to Smith. In looking at the husband’s death certificate, Smith saw that he died of complications from a heart condition. That being the case, he helped the surviving spouse file a dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) claim, which can be submitted when a veteran dies from a service-connected illness or complication. She heard back from VA in 26 days.

“It was the fastest claim I have ever received back,” Smith said.

But it wasn’t until six weeks after receiving her award letter that the spouse reconnected with Smith. She told him she was “scared” of opening the envelope. They opened it together, according to Smith, for the surviving spouse to discover that she had received \$14,426 — one year’s worth of DIC retro pay compensation.

“They paid her one year, even though he’d been dead for 15 years,” Smith said.

Going forward, she would receive roughly \$1,586 per month, and, Smith said, she would be able to drop her supplemental insurance and enroll in Champ VA.

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“That isn’t the highest monetary award, but it’s the one that made the most impact on a dependent,” said Smith, who remains friends with the spouse to this day.

Smith, who served as a Marine scout sniper during the 1991 Persian Gulf War with the Surveillance Target Acquisition Plt., 3rd Bn., 7th Marines, Task Force Grizzly, has been a state service officer for two years. Previously, he spent five years as the Jerome County, Idaho, service officer and eight years at the Post level with VFW Post 2136 in Twin Falls, Idaho.

Smith said he became a service officer after losing his employment “due to service-connected injuries” and wanted to continue expanding services to veterans in his community. Each time he made the jump to a new service officer position, he said it was simply to reach more veterans.

The most rewarding part of his job is that everything service officers do has a “positive impact” on a claimant, whether that be a veteran, dependent or surviving spouse. However, the most challenging, according to Smith, is battling veteran homelessness — most notably the lack of “adequate housing” and transportation.

The most common cases Smith sees — roughly 80 percent — focus on pensions. That is due to the demographics in Jerome, Idaho, which he said is a “retirement community.” Between himself and one administrative assistant, his office handles roughly 1,200 cases annually.

To anyone just beginning as a service officer, Smith said “going the extra mile” is important.

“There’s always one more thing that we can do to assist veterans and their dependents,” Smith said.

Editor’s note: This is the second in a series of feature articles on VFW’s accredited veterans service officers. In 2019, VFW is commemorating 100 years of existence of its National Veterans Service and National Legislative Service offices in Washington, D.C.

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