

‘The Real Deal:’ War Veterans Bring Realism to Battle Re-Enactments

While veterans’ portrayals offer visitors a more authentic look at history, it also provides the vets a new perspective on their own war experiences

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Sitting astride his horse in November 2019 at the “Tank Farm” in Nokesville, Va., U.S. cavalry enthusiast Ron Bingham explained his passion for bringing American military history to life.

“Any day on horseback is a good day,” said Bingham, a member of VFW Post 9808 in Mechanicsville, Va. “I really love hearing people say: ‘I did not know we still had cavalry in World War II.’”

VFW members such as Bingham play a vital volunteer role in preserving the history of America’s foreign wars. Some are trench-burrowing, boondock-tramping battle re-enactors. Others are museum-based living historians of war. Some do impressions of particular individuals.

Others interpret specific units, vessels, expeditions or conflicts. Many diversify. But, as the following glimpses of VFW member-volunteers illustrate, all share a passion for honoring the past while enabling others, especially young heroes of tomorrow, to “look, listen, and touch history.”

Bingham, 61, a retired Army sergeant and now a museum specialist at the U.S. Army Women’s Museum in Fort Lee, Va., typifies the diverse approach.

“The 26th U.S. Cavalry Philippine Scouts is a commemorative mounted group with a love for both horses and cavalry history,” Bingham said. “About a third of our group own horses and many also belong to the Eastern Seaboard Cavalry Association (ESCA), which stages cavalry competitions.”

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The primary focus of Bingham's contingent is the Philippines-based regiment famed for staging the last horse-mounted cavalry charge in U.S. military history against the Japanese on Luzon in 1942.

"Our unit includes Filipino-Americans whose relatives served in the Philippine Scouts," Bingham said. But Bingham's group doesn't confine itself to World War II.

"We also interpret units that served on the Mexican border in 1916 and World War I units in France," Bingham said.

'UNDERSTANDING THEIR OWN WAR'

The Great War's cavalry connection prompted Bingham to join the East Coast Doughboys, originally formed to honor the 100th anniversary of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).

"By getting organized," said Kevin Fitzpatrick, president of the East Coast Doughboys, "we were able to raise the visibility of the World War I Centennial. So we were very busy throughout 2017 and 2018. But, as we got into 2019, the enthusiasm didn't die out. We're growing. It's a fun organization where the goal is to enjoy the hobby and present living history to the public."

Fitzgerald, a Marine Corps veteran, explained that the East Coast Doughboys perform living history impressions at parades or commemorative events at schools, parks and monuments.

"For members who want to fire their weapon, to experience the rigors of life in the trenches or during military encampments, there's the Great War Association (GWA), a re-enactment group with Allied and Central Powers sub-units," Fitzgerald said.

Army Maj. Jared Nichols, currently stationed in Germany as a U.S. Army Europe staff officer, is active in both living history and battle re-enactments.

"I currently belong to the 151e Régiment d'Infanterie de Ligne, and Le Poilu de la Marne, [GWA-affiliated] French World War I units," the 38-year-old said. "But I'm also with the East Coast Doughboys and, before moving overseas, volunteered at the National World War I Museum in Kansas City, Mo."

'PERSPECTIVE AND COMFORT'

Nichols, a member of VFW Post 27 in Wiesbaden, Germany, said he got started in battle re-enactments at age 15.

“I started with the American Civil War,” Nichols said. “I met a lot of Vietnam veterans who used living history to better understand their own war experiences.”

Later, after three deployments to Iraq, including his most recent in 2009-10 as commander of C Co., 1st Bn., 12th Cav Regt., Nichols found himself drawn back to the activity.

“I had a hard time transitioning between the military culture and my offduty life,” he said. “I remembered the Vietnam veterans and thought that if it worked for them, well maybe it could work for me.” Nichols said that “while every conflict is different,” many things are common throughout the history of warfare.

“That gives perspective and comfort,” he added. Another member of the East Coast Doughboys, Henry B. Clemmens, volunteers at the Museum of American Armor on New York’s Long Island. The facility boasts an operational fleet of about 40 World War II-vintage tanks, armored cars, halftracks, jeeps and trucks.

“I serve as a vehicle commander or driver on an armored scout car,” said Clemmons, a 52-year-old police sergeant for the Village of Ocean Beach, N.Y. A life member of VFW Post 291 in Patchogue, N.Y., Clemmons is a multitour Army veteran.

In 1988-89, he served in Korea with the 2nd Bn., 61st Air Defense Regt. He also deployed to Iraq in 2004-05 as a medic with the 306th MP Bn., 18th MP Bde. Once a month, Clemmens and fellow volunteers portray what Kevin Carroll, the Museum of Armor’s community affairs director, likes to call the Armor Experience.

“Visitors are ‘embedded’ in a rifle squad in post-D-Day France,” Carroll said. “Outfitted in helmets and battle jackets, they climb aboard one of our vintage transport vehicles. Then, surrounded by living historians and armored vehicles, they head to ‘France’ [in adjoining parkland] for encounters with the ‘enemy.’ All of it is historically accurate.”

WAR VETS ADD AUTHENTICITY

Immersive World War II history also is the specialty of two Texas-based VFW members. Bill Sultenfuss, 71, is a retired Marine Corps lieutenant colonel who belongs to VFW Post 688 in Boerne, Texas, and Kyle Perz, 35, is a member of VFW Post 76 in San Antonio. Both volunteer in ‘Company K,’ the living history detachment at the National Museum of the Pacific War in Fredericksburg, Texas.

“As part of the museum’s combat assault team, I show visitors how a World War II Marine really spoke, acted and performed,” said Sultenfuss, a Vietnam War veteran and 20-year museum volunteer. “Most people have no clue about lives during World War II and the Depression Era. We send a message about those in the Greatest Generation.”

Perz, an Army medic currently serving in the Army Reserve with Ft. Sam Houston's 3rd Medical Training Brigade, has been a living history volunteer for nearly three years.

"I am a flamethrower operator," Perz said. "Aside from a few safety modifications, the equipment is identical to what the Army and Marine Corps used in the Pacific."

Sultenfuss added that "the flamethrower doesn't shoot blanks. It's a 2,000-degree flame."

Jeff Copsetta, the museum's living history coordinator, said that the facility's living history program doesn't portray particular battles but rather what the battlefields in the Pacific might have been like.

"We use the same type of equipment and vehicles," he said. "We have some of the same vegetation on the battlefield. And we use the same tactics as the Army and Marines."

"When we land on the beach, the Marines come from the visitors' right, and the Army lands from the visitors' left. We take beachhead trenches no more than 15 feet from the front row of our covered amphitheater. The public almost moves with us, looking at the battlefield with the same view."

BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE

While the history portrayed by Bingham, Nichols, Clemmens, Sultenfuss and Perz can be physically demanding, VFW volunteers long retired from marching, flying or sailing remain active.

For example, Rich Koone, 64, a retired Army captain, understands that Company K, like any military unit, moves on its stomach.

"I develop the menu, purchase and cook the food and serve it to the 60-70 volunteers who participate in weekend programs," said Koone, the Pacific War Museum's education director and member of VFW Post 7105 in Fredericksburg. "Many are veterans and I enjoy their company."

The same enthusiasm and spirit motivate 80-year-old Rudolph "Rudy" Shappee. A retired Navy chief warrant officer and life member of VFW Post 10580 in Warrenton, Ore., Shappee has logged almost 18,000 volunteer hours at San Diego's USS Midway Museum.

"When I first heard that the Midway was coming to San Diego," Shappee said. "I immediately found out what I could do to help bring its story alive for our civilian population."

Shappee keeps busy at the museum. In the past, he has helped restore the ship, maintain aircraft and build exhibits.

Now, calling on expertise from a second career in middle- and high-school education, he develops local school programs in navigation and maritime security.

“I can work when and where needed,” Shappee explained, “then go on vacation.”

Each of these VFW members has a personal take on their volunteer experience. “We bring Army history alive and close up,” Bingham said. Perz said his participation is important for his family. “My grandfathers both fought in the Pacific, one on Guadalcanal, another aboard USS Essex (CV-9),” he noted.

“My daughter will never know my grandfathers, but I can say to her, “This is why your great-grandfathers volunteered and where they fought.” And, as Shappee said, “Where else can you tell the same sea story and your audience is hanging spellbound?”

Beyond reaping personal satisfaction, these VFW members deliver value, according to the Museum of Armor’s Kevin Carroll. “Veterans like Hank Clemmens bring organizational skills, maturity and understanding of military traditions,” Carroll said. “They act as models for non-veteran volunteers.” The National Museum of the Pacific War’s Copsetta, an Army veteran, concurred.

“Veterans like Bill and Kyle are really the backbone,” Copsetta said. “They know the military atmosphere. They understand how the chain of command works and what it means to take initiative. They are really the driving force within Company K.”

Fitzpatrick particularly admired Nichols’ impact on the East Coast Doughboys. “When Jared led us, you knew he was the real deal,” Fitzpatrick said. “He just had that gravitas, that carriage. You really felt like you would follow him into the trenches.”

This article is featured in the April 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by David Sears. Sears, a Vietnam War Navy vet and VFW member in New Jersey, is a frequent contributor to VFW magazine.