

‘There’s No Better Feeling in the World’

As a VFW-accredited service officer with the state of Idaho, Joe Riener’s days can be demanding, but for him, it is worth it

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Each workday, Joe Riener, 55, commutes 54 miles roundtrip from his home in Cottonwood, Idaho, with his wife Angie, to the North Central Idaho Office of Veterans Advocacy in nearby Lewiston.

“The drive isn’t bad,” he said. “It gives my mind the time to spin up for the day and wind down at the end of it.”

As a VFW-accredited service officer with the state of Idaho, Riener’s days can be demanding, but for him, it is worth it.

“I describe my work as the most miserable job I’ve ever loved!” he said. “I get to help so many diverse and wonderful people, but I’m never done and never caught up.”

Although his responsibilities vary, the goal remains the same — to ensure veterans receive the support they earned through their service. For some, it can be as simple as providing the VA crisis line phone number.

Riener recalled, “After handing it out to one veteran, he called back weeks later to thank me for saving his life. I was truly humbled.”

More often, Riener helps veterans enroll in VA health care or file claims to receive compensation for service-connected conditions. If a claim has been denied, Riener will help prepare and file an appeal.

For some veterans without service-connected conditions — those who served in a war, are over the age of 65, are considered low income or have high medical expenses — Riener helps them file for a non-service-connected pension.

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He also conducts outreach services in eight surrounding counties to assist remote veterans and visits other veteran service organizations to inform them on benefits, news and issues. Regardless of the task, Riener is determined to help veterans work through complex processes.

“The bottom line is, veterans’ benefits are included throughout 38 Code of Federal Regulations, which amounts to several thousand pages of law,” he explained. “The state of Idaho, as well as the VFW, does not want veterans navigating that mess on their own.”

Having gone through the claims process himself, Riener understands the value of a knowledgeable advocate. After a 20-year career in the Air Force, during which Riener earned four National Defense Service ribbons, he looked to the VFW for assistance.

“When I retired, a very dedicated VFW Service Officer took the time to go through all 400+ pages of my military medical service treatment record and helped file my VA compensation claim,” said Riener.

The experience had a lasting impact.

“I was very impressed by my VFW Service Officer’s dedication and never forgot what he did to help me. I got to know the local VSO and told him to let me know if he ever retired. When he did, he forwarded me the job posting, and I applied.” said Riener.

Since being hired in 2016, Riener has taken every chance he gets to provide veterans the same level of support he received years ago.

“As a VFW Service Officer, there are so many opportunities to change the lives of veterans and their families,” he said. “Being a crew member on Air Force jets and flying the air refueling boom was a major accomplishment, but it pales in comparison to seeing a smile or a grateful tear from a veteran who didn’t believe anyone cared or could help.”

For veterans seeking assistance, Riener has two pieces of advice: do your best to obtain and organize all medical and travel paperwork, and trust that your VFW Service Officer has your best interest at heart.

“I encourage veterans to ask for everything, but also, to listen to the answers from your VFW Service Officer — we’re on your side,” he insists. “The key element to a favorable claim is a cooperative and patient veteran, especially one with good documentation!”

Although each day presents new challenges and the job is far from easy, Riener cherishes it.

“Helping veterans is a huge responsibility,” he said. “But when it goes well, there’s no better feeling in the world, and the appreciation of veterans and their families is a reward beyond

description. It's pretty amazing work.”

Learn more about the VFW's [National Veterans Service \(NVS\) program](#).