

'Our Big Time Gamers ... Loved the VFW'

The VFW Department of Michigan District 9 junior vice commander ran his fourth annual Combo Con festival last September in hopes of spreading awareness and showing how the VFW is keeping up with the times

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Within a large and darkened nightclub accentuated by the pink glow of neon lights and computer screens, Afghanistan War veteran Hunter DeSander watched as young video gamers and veterans converged in a whirlwind inspired by his fourth annual Combo Con.

The Sept. 23-25, 2022, weekend festival at Wayside Central in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, proved a success for DeSander, who reveled in a soundtrack of incessant keyboard click-clacks, reverberating laughs, shouts and loud waves of “oohs” and “aahs” from about 400 attendees.

“Even though we only made enough to cover expenses after a two-year layoff due to COVID, people loved the cause,” said DeSander, a former VFW Post 4113 commander in St. Johns, Michigan, and current junior vice commander of VFW’s Department of Michigan’s District 9.

A video game enthusiast himself, the 29-year-old DeSander spent most of the weekend pacing from screen to screen, huddle to huddle, eavesdropping on conversations between older veterans and younger gamers, many from different countries, as his vision played out.

For DeSander, whose Combo Con livestream brought an additional 3,000 viewers to watch the action between some 150 gamers competing against one another for cash prizes, the exposure was his unique way of promoting the VFW and what it does for veterans.

All those in attendance virtually and in person joined intermittent games hosted by

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

DeSander throughout the weekend, which included renowned online gamers that came from as far away as Ireland to support the cause.

“I was told many times by spectators that they didn’t think the VFW could do such a thing,” said DeSander, who served as an infantryman in Afghanistan in 2013 with the 2nd Bn., 506th Inf., 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Abn. Div.

“Our big-time gamers, not being from this country, loved the VFW and what it represented enough to genuinely show their love and promote it on their platforms to a global audience.”

Gaming community sensations with gamer names such as Woolie VS, Unrooolie and Super Eye Patch Wolf spent their off -time playing military trivia and mingling with veterans in the audience, many offering them a perspective on what it’s really like to be the characters they use in war games such as Call of Duty.

For Unrooolie, a tenured gaming community persona dating back to the 1990s and whose real name is Kenny O’Brien, the festival’s mission to help veterans is the main reason he continues to come back.

“Many members of the fighter-game community have served in the military,” O’Brien said. “We get a lot of messages from community members that are like, ‘Hey, I’m stationed over here, and we watch your [online video] streams and we watch you play fighting games, and it’s helped us get through tough times.”

‘THIS IS ABOUT LENDING THEIR VOICE TO OURS’

Many of the veterans in attendance served as volunteers helping DeSander run his fourth Combo Con, helping set up and pick up, as well as manning a VFW booth for membership that juxtaposed a row of other booths with collector’s items such as comic books and paintings.

DeSander strategically placed VFW at the helm of the booths, spotlighted to remind gamers that the unique setup of the festival served not just the gaming community but as a connection between them and veterans.

“By bridging the gap with Combo Con, we’re also raising morale for our VFW District and pushing awareness to show that we are keeping up with the times and adapting,” DeSander said.

“Many of us younger veterans feel disenfranchised, and this event proved the community does have the best interest in mind for them.”

Among the veterans helping run the event and spreading awareness, many were Vietnam veterans who did not play video games themselves. For them, the notion of younger

veterans feeling disenfranchised is a familiar one.

“We want to make younger veterans understand why it’s important to belong despite their busy lives,” said Shane Houghton, a Vietnam veteran who served with the 196th Light Infantry Brigade in Danang. “This is about lending their voice to ours in order to keep getting veterans their much-deserved benefits.”

Houghton, a past All-American District 9 commander and current quartermaster at Post 12083 in Iona, Michigan, joined as a volunteer following DeSander’s proposal at a District 9 meeting. The idea of bridging a gap between young civilians and veterans through a unique festival featuring video games, cosplay and comic books seemed enticing.

“It really is an interesting thing to get young people involved to learn something about the VFW,” Houghton said. “This seems like a new and unique way of teaching younger people about our organization and about veterans in their language. And they seemed very appreciative about what we do at VFW.”

Post 4113 life member and Vietnam veteran Gordon Shipley shared a similar sentiment after hours of mingling with the gaming community in attendance. Though Shipley had volunteered for Combo Con in past years, the festival always brings an element of novelty.

“This is a great way to advocate for veterans’ causes, and they have all been very polite and thanked me for my service,” said Shipley, who deployed to the Navy’s Small Craft Repair Facility in Danang from July 1968 to July 1969. “Many of the younger people don’t necessarily know veterans, and this has been a novel opportunity to teach and let them appreciate what veterans go through.”

CHALLENGING PRECONCEIVED IDEAS

DeSander’s efforts throughout the weekend also helped solidify about \$6,000 in fundraising to cover expenses and procure a donation on behalf of District 9 to the Humane Society in Michigan.

But the Afghanistan War veteran stood firm when explaining what he believed the real success of the festival was: his ability to blur the lines between two communities through the use of video games, cosplay, comic books and movies.

A person with pieces of himself placed within the VFW, young veterans’ community and the gaming world alike, DeSander’s perspective sits outside the box of norms.

Already working toward the fifth annual Combo Con next year, DeSander hopes that as his event continues to grow, so will his ability to further unite all communities together.

“There’s mutual acceptance when gaming, as if finding the perfect dance partner,” DeSander

said. “To be relevant in this day and age, we have to keep progressing as an organization. And that’s why I do this. I believe that the rising of the tide brings up all ships.”

This article is featured in the 2023 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.