

‘No Better Time’ to Give Back

VFW Post members in Washington state are #StillServing by volunteering at USO Northwest

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Since 1941, the USO has stood ready to offer its support to the men and women in the military as well as their families. It requires coordination and hard work of thousands of volunteers worldwide.

Serving the states of Washington and Oregon, USO Northwest is no exception. Annually, it serves more than 118,000 service members. It relies on the generosity of volunteers who are committed to giving their time. Among the more than 400 volunteers at USO Northwest are members of VFW Post 6785 in Kent, Washington, and its at-large Auxiliary members.

According to Post Commander Walter Tanimoto, Post members are #StillServing by offering support to active-duty troops. The Post’s volunteer endeavors at the USO have been ongoing for more than 17 years.

“Time is precious and limited, but that does not stop several Post 6785 members from volunteering,” said Tanimoto, an Iraq War veteran. “They volunteer at the USO Center at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and at other events in support of the USO.”

Volunteer opportunities at USO Northwest range from kitchen duty and food service to cleaning and picking up supplies. The USO has a suite at Cheney Stadium, the home of the minor-league baseball team Tacoma Rainiers. Service members and their families are invited to attend baseball games and sit in the suite for free. VFW members are often on hand to assist in the suite.

Tanimoto said several Post volunteers were on the receiving end of USO hospitality while still in uniform. That has provided the motivation to give back.

“I learned early in my Army career how the USO helps service members and their families,” said Tanimoto, a VFW Gold Legacy Life member. “I experienced how helpful the USO is when traveling from one duty station to the next with my family. I decided there was no better time than now to give back.”

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Tanimoto recalled traveling from Germany with his wife and two young children, who were restless from the long flight. He took his family to a USO Center at the airport.

“We were pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome,” Tanimoto said. “They offered us not only a space to stay while waiting for our next flight, but also services and amenities, including food, entertainment and a place to rest and relax in preparation for the next leg of our journey.”

Tanimoto added that the USO also serves members of the military who are on duty at the airport.

‘GOOD FOR YOUR SOUL’

Among those VFW Post 6785 members volunteering is USO Northwest Executive Director Don Leingang, a Persian Gulf War veteran.

Leingang said he was on Southwest Flight 1248 in December 2005 when it crashed near Chicago’s Midway Airport. After being bused to the terminal, airline and airport employees were handing out snacks and drinks. Also on the scene were USO volunteers.

“For me, the USO is a personal thing,” said Leingang, a VFW Life member. “These volunteers came to help not just the five military members on the flight, but all the passengers onboard. I will never forget the USO Illinois volunteers’ acts of kindness that night.”

Three years later, Leingang was in the process of retiring from the Navy when he interviewed for the position of USO Northwest executive director, a position he was not sure he was going to accept. Two conversations changed his mind.

One of those conversations was with his mother, who told him stories of how his grandfather’s band, which included his father, used to play at USO dances in Tacoma during WWII and the Korean War.

“She said, ‘You should take that job if offered. If you do it for two years, it will be good for your soul,’” Leingang recalled.

That was nearly 15 years ago.

‘A SAFE HAVEN FOR A SAILOR’

As a fourth-generation sailor, Vietnam vet Kenneth “Pepsi” Przepiora comes from a long family line of Navy service. His father, a WWII veteran, was the first to talk about the USO.

“When his ship returned to the states, he would always go to a USO if there was one in that port,” Przepiora said. “It was a safe haven for a sailor, and there was always coffee,

sandwiches, donuts, and other military service members to talk to and find out what's happening in that port of call that would not cost you your entire paycheck.”

Przepiora said he volunteers with the USO to pay back all that was done for him while he was in the Navy. Another reason is one close to his heart.

“When my youngest daughter asked to join the Navy, I was very proud but hesitant to say yes,” Przepiora said. “When I found out she was assigned to a fleet hospital, I thought she would be safe. I made a promise to myself that if she came home in one piece, I would volunteer my time to help other service members at USO Northwest.”

SUPPORTING HONOR FLIGHTS

USO Northwest Center Manager Matt Sult also is a VFW member. He says he enjoys volunteering for trips taking veterans to Washington, D.C., known as Honor Flights, that depart Seattle.

“I want to show my support of my brothers and sisters who served our country,” said Sult, who earned his VFW eligibility in Korea.

Vietnam veteran Scott Eliason was chosen to go on a Puget Sound Honor Flight a few years ago. He traveled to the nation's capital to see the memorials and monuments. That experience led him to volunteer his time for other Honor Flights.

“I feel it is my duty to repay the experience by continuing to volunteer at the USO to support Honor Flights,” Eliason said. “It is a great morale builder to be able to be #StillServing.”

Tanimoto said that VFW volunteers show up early at the airport to see off USO Northwest Honor Flight participants and help them to get where they need to be. Then, when the flight returns to Seattle, VFW is there to greet them with a welcome home party.

Richard Klug, a Vietnam vet and VFW Legacy Life member, said he feels like it is important to be on hand for fellow veterans getting their recognition, which in many cases is long overdue.

“Our veterans, in some cases, were not greeted with much positive fanfare when they returned,” Klug said. “It is gratifying to see America now starting to honor veterans for their sacrifice and service to our country.”

Tanimoto said that VFW Post 6785 also makes an annual donation to USO Northwest.

Visit www.todaysvfw.org to tell us how you are #StillServing.

This article is featured in the 2023 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor of VFW magazine.