

# Destination Rhode Island

## The Ocean State may be the smallest in the U.S., but it offers a plethora of VFW Posts doing great things

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As VFW continues its year-long 125th anniversary celebration, VFW magazine visited Rhode Island in October to highlight four VFW Posts for the “Destination Post Series.” The four featured “Ocean State” VFW Posts were chosen because of the positive impact each has on the communities in which the Posts are located.

### ‘OUR FOCUS IS SERVICE’

On a Monday in October, members of VFW Post 406 gathered on a clear, crisp fall evening on the lawn of the Elks Lodge just steps from the famous Newport, Rhode Island. mansions. That evening, Post Commander Anselm Richards was stopped by a Boy Scout who was heading inside to his meeting. The youth wanted to thank Richards for his service. In turn, Richards presented him with a challenge coin and chatted with him for a few minutes. Turns out, the scout’s dad is a student at the nearby Naval War College.

“Our Post membership is younger and vibrant,” said Richards, an Army veteran who served in Ramadi, Iraq in 2005-2006. “We are [military] officer heavy because of the war college.”

Richards said Post 406 is comprised of former military officers and senior enlisted, making them natural self-starters.

“If I need something done, I turn to Joe, who is a Newport native,” Richards said of Post Junior Vice Commander Joe Kaiser.

Kaiser, a former Army command sergeant major, served in Baghdad from 2005-2006. “Our focus is service,” Kaiser said. “I like to reinforce to veterans how much good they can still do.”

In addition to the Post’s participation in VFW programs, members keep an eye on veterans needing a hand up. For example, when one of the Post’s two female vets lost her apartment to a fire, the Post provided her with funds and helped her sift through the remains of her apartment to gather her belongings.

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A partnership which the Post is proud of is its work with Gold Star Sailing camps for Gold Star teens. Gold Star Sailing was founded by retired Army colonel Patrick Powers.

In 2012, Powers started Gold Star Sailing to mentor Gold Star teenagers with a focus on leadership, teamwork and adventure.

VFW Department of Rhode Island Commander Mark Turner, also a member of Post 406, said it means a lot to support the Gold Star teens.

“We know hard,” Turner said. “We are talking with kids who know hard.”

In support of the camp, the Post partners with the Newport Gulls, a collegiate summer baseball league, in a 50-50 raffle during the 7th inning stretch. Post members work the stands selling raffle chances.

Richards said the last winner donated the winnings back to the Gold Star Sailing Foundation.

#### **‘VFW IS A CALLING’**

While Post 406 is a beacon in the Newport community, it has not always been so. Members sold the Post home in 1984. Then, in 2018, with a handful of members left on its roster, the Post experienced a rebirth. It helped sponsor the Vietnam Traveling Wall, which according to Turner, was a turning point for the Post.

“It was one of the most moving events I have ever seen,” Turner said. “The Post was on its last leg. We went from like four members to 63 today.”

Another community endeavor implemented by the Post involved Island Cemetery in the heart of Newport. Post Adjutant Paul Radion is credited with creating a map showing veterans’ graves within the cemetery. The goal was to make flagging the graves on holidays more efficient and more inclusive.

Radion, an Army vet who served in Baghdad twice, said Post members went from placing 400 U.S. flags to now 1,300. He engages community youth groups to help with the placement of flags.

“To be successful, we have to integrate the community,” Radion said. “Providing leadership in the community is a key component to VFW.”

Incidentally, the cemetery is the resting place of two German soldiers whose bodies were recovered from a submarine sunk during WWII near Newport. Each year, those two soldiers are remembered.

According to Turner, each Memorial Day, the community comes together at an area of Newport known as “The Point” neighborhood. The gathering commemorates those who have lost their lives at sea.

Those in attendance are given a flower to drop into the water, known as the “strewing of the flowers.” Once the strewing is complete, a water cannonade occurs.

Post members agree that not having their own building is a bonus. They hold their monthly meetings and other events at the Elks Lodge in the center of Newport.

“It is a blessing we do not have our own Post home,” said Dean Fraioli, a retired Army lieutenant colonel. “We are forced to go out in the community and engage.”

Fraioli is charged with running the VFW “Buddy”<sup>®</sup> Poppy program. He has static Poppy displays in about 10 locations around town — locations where veterans frequently visit, such as barbershops. The displays have a history of the VFW Buddy Poppy and offer poppies with a place to request a donation.

Vietnam War veteran Bill Farrell said the Post donates coats to veterans at the local senior center. He is a member of the Newport Artillery Company, which also has its own armory at which the Post has held past events.

“I joined the VFW in 1972,” Farrell said. “We’ve done more here in the last five years than all my years before in the VFW.”

The Post is especially proud of its speaker series. With the Naval War College in Newport, the speaker pool is deep. Topics range from the war in Ukraine and global warming to WWII-era Japanese internment camps in California. Local authors are often speakers, which proves popular within the community.

“The VFW is a calling,” Kaiser said. “We have a huge impact on the community. And the opportunity to help families is the best recruiting tool.”

### **‘PEOPLE LOVE TO SUPPORT THE VFW’**

Located in the small, eclectic neighborhood of Common Fence Point in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, is the revitalized VFW Post 5390. Under the direction of Post Commander Ken Rutter, the Post is flourishing.

“We are the go-to place for residents in this neighborhood,” Rutter said. “We have something going on here all the time, it seems.”

Indeed, a visit to the Post revealed a packed house as members of the Post and its Auxiliary packed kits for homeless veterans. A bustling assembly line was working to place the

essentials into bags. This was followed by trivia night, as the door was revolving with people stopping on their way home from work.

If member Louis DiCarlo happens to be at the Post, he will recite all the state's capitals for you and may name the motto of each state. He is a wealth of knowledge that surely comes in handy on those trivia nights.

"I really enjoy the people here the most," said DiCarlo, an Air Force vet who served in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. "And we always have something happening here."

Until 2023 when the Post had its grand reopening on Veterans Day, it was in a state of disrepair. According to Post Senior Vice Commander Vic Schaefer, the Post is now considered a community hub.

"A highlight of the rededication was the renovation and rededication of the canteen in honor of Staff Sgt. Christopher Potts, a local Iraq War hero who sacrificed his life 20 years ago," Schaefer said. "This tribute ensures Staff Sgt. Potts' legacy is woven into the fabric of our community."

Quartermaster Tim Cathcart moved to the area in 2017 and quickly found a home.

"The VFW and Auxiliary treat special needs people very well," said Cathcart, whose daughter became disabled after a car accident when she was a child. "We are truly a community base."

Cathcart has been in conversations with Yoga for Vets, hoping to offer it at the Post. Currently, Pilates classes are held at the Post. Various groups rent out space at the Post for events to include Coast Guard certification.

The Auxiliary is a key component to the success of the Post, as most VFW members there will say. The Post Auxiliary president is Shauna Jamieson, and she is married to the Auxiliary's Department senior vice president, Scott Jamieson. The Department president, Stephen Doherty, also is a member of the Post.

The Jamiesons are believed to be the Post's first married Auxiliary couple. Scott is in charge of a partnership between the Post and Auxiliary and St. Pauly Textile in New York. A shed placed on the Post's property is used to collect gently used clothing items to be recycled by St. Pauly.

Weekly, a truck comes to load up the clothes. Once a month, the Post receives a direct deposit from the organization averaging \$150-\$200.

"This is really something every VFW could be doing," Scott said. "This is truly one of the

best partnerships. People love to support the VFW.”

Schaefer concurs with the sentiment, adding that collaborative partnerships with local organizations is part of what makes Post 5390 special.

“These collaborations extend the Post’s reach and impact on various community groups and open the doors to additional community support,” Schaefer said. “Veterans and civilians now gather at the Post to participate in a range of events and activities that build stronger community bonds. Alongside groups like the Girl Scouts and the James L. Maher Center, we are working together to foster relationships between veterans and civilians, encouraging collaboration and unity.”

Rutter said the Post is currently facing a challenge. It needs a new fire sprinkler system, and, if it is not installed by the end of 2025, the Post will be shut down. Rutter added that the Post membership is working to raise funds for this expensive endeavor.

“We are here for the community, but we couldn’t do this without the community,” Rutter said. “We do not want to lose the momentum we have going.”

Member John Silvia is one of those community members. A Korean War vet, Silvia has been a VFW member since 1960.

“I like the location of this Post the best,” Silvia said and laughed. “I live six blocks away, and it’s always the place to stop when I’m coming and going. I love to dance and have a good time, and this is the place to do that.”

### **HELPING PEOPLE ‘THE BEST WE CAN’**

The community of Bristol, Rhode Island, is known as America’s Most Patriotic town due its longstanding Independence Day celebration. It is considered the oldest, continuous such celebration in the U.S. The first was held in 1785. The center-line stripes on the main roads are painted red, white and blue.

Along the annual parade route is VFW Post 237. Post Commander Karl Antonevich said the Rhode Island Veterans Home transports its residents to the Post to view the Fourth of July parade from the lawn each year.

On Veterans Day, the Post hosted a food truck at the Veterans Home for residents’ enjoyment, according to Post Senior Vice Commander Joseph Diniz. Also on Veterans Day, the Post annually serves breakfast following the ceremony at the Veterans Memorial in Bristol.

Diniz added that the Post is frequently called upon when there is a need for wheelchairs or walkers. Other VFW Posts in the area have contacted the Bristol Post for these mobility aids.

“We really do try to help people out the best we can,” Diniz said. “We also have a good rapport with community businesses. The local grocery store donates 30-40 turkeys for our turkey drive. We are fortunate that people in Bristol and Warren are so generous.”

Diniz noted that numerous businesses donate items for Post raffles as fundraisers. Post 237 was recently named as the most likeable organization in Bristol.

With its desirable location on Bristol’s Hope Street, VFW Post 237 is a constant hub of activity. In December, a Sip-n-Shop was held at the Post. Vendors set up for the public to come in and shop, and there was a raffle to benefit the Post.

There are regular Bingo nights, steak fry fundraisers and, around Halloween, Trunk or Treating for the kids.

On the Post’s lawn is a memorial to 1st Sgt. Peter Andrew McKenna, a Bristol native who was killed on Aug. 7, 2015, in Kabul, Afghanistan. McKenna was assigned to 1st Bn., 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne). Incidentally, the Bristol Post Office also is named after McKenna.

Diniz said that all materials for the memorial’s garden area to McKenna was donated, including the stone wall.

Antonevich said the Post has been located at its current location, a former church, since 1963. Until about 10 years ago, smoking was a way of life in the Post’s basement canteen.

That ended when Diniz’s daughter asked if he had been smoking after returning from the Post. A nonsmoker, Diniz assured her he had not.

“That is when I decided to campaign for the Post to go non-smoking.” Diniz said. “It wasn’t easy, but we got it accomplished.”

Today, a smoker’s area has been built outside the Post, complete with heat lamps.

“Thank God for Joe and these guys,” Antonevich said. “We are now a non-smoking Post. We had four bucks in the bank when they came in.”

Wally Coelho — former VFW Department of Rhode Island commander — recalled how the Post helped WWII vet Arthur Madeiras. During the vet’s drive-by birthday celebration for his 101st birthday, his three Purple Hearts were stolen.

Madeiras had allowed some people into his home to use the bathroom. His Purple Hearts and other military honors were sitting in his living room.

Coelho, also the president of the Bristol Veterans Council, worked with Sen. Jack Reed’s (D-

R.I.) to get the Purple Hearts replaced and presented to Madeiras a year later.

“He is really quite a guy,” Coelho said of Madeiras. “At 104, he still golfs three days a week and tells it like it is.”

### **A ‘WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE’ POST**

In North Kingstown, Rhode Island, members of VFW Post 152 are well-known in the community. Since they do not have a Post home, Post Commander David Ainslie said all proceeds from Post-sponsored events go back to veterans, the community and the Rhode Island National Guard.

“We are very much connected to the National Guard,” Ainslie said. “We participate in Yellow Ribbon events for the Guard by providing coffee and doughnuts for the send-off events. And Christopher P. Callahan, the Adjutant General of the Rhode Island National Guard, is a member of the Post.”

Post Judge Advocate Eric Dukat, who also is the Department Adjutant and National Council of Administration representative for Rhode Island, said he considers the Post to be “dismounted” from its facility and engaged with its community.

“Community engagement is what makes us who we are,” Dukat said.

“When we get new members, it is because they see us out in the community. We are very welcoming and inclusive.”

Dukat noted that during the Rhode Island National Guard’s annual Carnival for Heroes, the VFW has a school supply drive for the children of uniformed personnel.

“Our current Post adjutant was there with her children, and that is when she signed up to be a member,” said Dukat, who retired from the Navy in 2016 after 29 years of service.

In October, the Post held OktoberVets German Festival and a 5k and a .152k fun run through the historic and picturesque Wickford Village. In 2022, *USA Today* named Wickford Village the Best Historic Town in America.

Race participants ran by art galleries, antique shops, cafes, restaurants, historic churches, colonial homes and gardens. Each received a T-shirt with the race logo, medal and a swag bag.

Following the run, the festival featured live music, a beer garden, vendors and activities for family members. Some of the VFW members donned traditional lederhosen for the event. All proceeds benefited veteran service programs and local community charities.



Ainslie said the event raised more than \$16,000 this year. Another fundraising event the Post endeavored to do was the “Have A Heart Softball” tournament in February.

“The idea was to play in the cold, so vets don’t have to live in the cold,” said Ainslie, an Iraq War vet. “Unfortunately, it was too warm, and we weren’t allowed to play on the fields. It is something we would like to try again.”

Food bank contributions, clothing drives, turkey donations, Buddy Poppy drives and a scholarship program in addition to the Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s pen programs are just some of the ways the Post supports the community, according to Ainslie.

“We are a small Post with 120 members, but we do a lot,” Ainslie said. “I took over as commander 10 years ago, and they keep voting me back in for some reason.”

Ainslie said that at events Post 152 sponsors or is present, he doesn’t talk about membership with non-member vets because they see for themselves what the Post is all about. He added that there is a couple who lives in San Diego and belongs to Post 152. They join the monthly meetings via Zoom.

North Kingstown Post members seem to enjoy the camaraderie they share and are quick to credit one another for the Post’s successes. Ainslie and Dukat both work at the Naval War College just one floor apart. Dukat joked he can hear Ainslie talking on the phone just above his office throughout the day.

“David is like the Energizer bunny,” Dukat said. “He just keeps on going.”

Let us know if your Rhode Island travels take you to any of the Posts featured in this article, such as North Kingstown, which, incidentally, celebrated its 350th anniversary in 2024. Be on the lookout for VFW members helping out and having fun.

*This article is featured in the 2025 January/February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.*