VFW Commander Refutes M.T. Columnist

VFW honors Cold War veterans

Nov 30, 2009

Columnist Robert F. Dorr has once again missed the mark regarding the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. ["Some vets still more equal than others," Nov. 16]. His insinuation that we regard Cold War veterans as "second-class citizens" is disingenuous, and the facts reveal a different story altogether.

The VFW is a membership organization that is open to all who currently serve or have served, provided they meet eligibility requirements as established by Congress through public laws. Founded in 1899, the VFW is America's oldest major veterans' organization, and with more than 1.5 million members, we are also her largest organization of combat veterans, an all encompassing category that includes those who went to war as well as those who deployed in support of contingency operations.

All who have deployed into the unknown are forever bound by a common experience — regardless of service, conflict or MOS — and so, too, are our families. It is a "One Team, One Mission" concept that only we who have been there can understand. It is unfortunate that Mr. Dorr continuously refuses to understand this concept and its critical distinction.

He used the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall to say we "betrayed" Cold War veterans because our membership requirements are more exclusive than inclusive, and he cites Korea in trying to validate his point. Had he checked VFW eligibility requirements, he would have discovered that those who served in Korea from the end of World War II forward are eligible. So, too, are those who flew clandestine reconnaissance flights over the former Soviet Union or its satellite states, provided hostile fire or imminent danger pay or an expeditionary medal was awarded.

Mr. Dorr seems to intentionally ignore VFW eligibility requirements, which have always been based on earning a campaign medal. Currently, six campaign medals encompass some 30 military actions, operations and duty stations that constitute the Cold War, to include the

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Berlin Occupation Medal. The award of any one of which conveys VFW eligibility.

Sitting in a missile launch facility or on strip alert in the old days of Strategic Air Command are not qualifiers, but just because someone is not eligible for VFW membership does not lessen our respect for their service. Our nation's defenders serve with honor and dignity where assigned, and the VFW fully values the contributions of every member of the "Team."

On Capitol Hill, some organizations represent officers, others NCOs, or those who are disabled or have lost loved ones. The VFW's membership eligibility is strict because we represent those who have gone into harm's way, as our initial congressional charter was intended.

Cold War veterans are included in every legislative initiative we conduct in Washington. They were among the 95,000 veterans we helped to recoup $1.2 billion in earned compensation and pension from the government last year, regardless of whether they were VFW members. They are among the 88,000 missing American servicemen we are seeking answers on from the governments of Russia, China and Vietnam, and at our most recent annual convention, VFW delegates passed a national resolution that supports the creation of a Cold War Service Medal.

One constant is that all wars end. When that time comes, the focus of the American people and our Congress will begin to fade on those who serve, our wounded and survivors. It is a top VFW priority to ensure a grateful nation does not forget her warriors of past or present, and their families.

Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., a combat wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis., is the commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.