

What is the VFW?

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As I talk to some of my peers that are either still on active duty or recently separated from the Army and tell them I am volunteering at the VFW, they commonly respond by asking, “So what are you doing? Sitting around drinking beer?”

This is still a common misconception that many young veterans who’ve served in Iraq and Afghanistan have of the organization. I was also one of them until I became an active member. At one point in the VFW’s history, it was one of the few places where veterans could go and talk to other veterans about some of the experiences they had in Europe, the Pacific, Korea, Vietnam and a host of other countries scattered throughout the world. There weren’t any clinics, doctors or other official support networks established that focused on the mental trauma experienced by veterans.

The VFW is much more than a place for fellowship with other veterans or to connect with previous generations that have answered our Nation’s call to duty. Many veterans and members of the armed services don’t know how active and supportive the VFW is for those of us who have served or are serving our country overseas.

I’ve learned that the VFW was the main veteran’s service organization that ensured the passage of the new Post-9/11 GI Bill. This new GI Bill will benefit us veterans and our families for years to come. Veterans can now return from fighting in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the ability to go back to school full-time, even with a family, and then re-enter the work force. I never knew about the tremendous amount of work and commitment it took the VFW to get the bill passed in Congress.

One of the most important components of the VFW is that it assists wounded and disabled veterans in receiving the VA benefits they deserve. I had no idea about the complexities involved when determining the category of a wounded or disabled veteran. I quickly learned that the VFW has an entire department dedicated to assisting veterans navigating the VA bureaucratic process, which might otherwise overwhelm a young returning soldier or even a hardened NCO. The VFW has Field Representatives throughout the country and scattered around the world specifically to assist veterans once they leave the military.

When I put one of the NCOs whom I used to work with in touch with one of the Field Representatives, he was shocked that the VFW had programs like this. I must admit, so was I.

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The VFW makes sure that the veteran is never taken for granted and provides the assistance needed when he or she does not know where to turn.

Of course none of this would be possible without the grassroots membership of individual veterans that join their local VFW post. Many young Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are reluctant to join the VFW for various reasons. I say to them, "Go and join!" There are many local posts that are active in their local communities and do a variety of community service and sponsor programs that promote further service to our Nation. Where else will you find a group of individuals welcoming you at 2 o'clock in the morning when your plane arrives at the airport in the States for R&R or as you are coming home from deployment?

If only older veterans compose the VFW, then who will change and evolve the VFW to meet the needs of our generation or future challenges? Who will greet the next generation when they come home from serving the United States overseas? We must take the torch from the older veterans and bear the responsibility to take care of our fellow veterans and continue community service.

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