

VFW Welcomes Home Iraq Vets

Obligation to 'pay it forward' keeps organization relevant

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WASHINGTON — With the war in Iraq officially over, the national commander of America's oldest and largest major combat veterans' organization is now urging his membership to redouble their efforts to welcome home this new generation of warrior, and to offer to serve as mentors through their transition to civilian status.

"Coming home is easy, the next step isn't because the checklists are gone," said Richard L. DeNoyer, the national commander of the 2 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries. "Whether you return to college — thanks to the Post-9/11 GI Bill that the VFW was instrumental in getting passed — or use your benefits to learn trades, obtain professional licenses or just jump right into employment, I want everyone to know that the VFW has your back."

DeNoyer, a retired Marine and Vietnam combat veteran from Middleton, Mass., said the greatest guidance VFW members can provide is perspective, since every VFW member once returned home from their wars and has successfully moved on with their lives. He also said VFW families are also a rich source of "how to" advice, since they all experienced the anxiety that came from sending a loved one to war.

Another key VFW resource is its nationwide network of service officers, who last year helped 96,000 disabled veterans to recoup \$1.4 billion in earned compensation and pension from the Department of Veterans Affairs. This free service also extends to more than a dozen active-duty military installations through a Defense Department Benefits Delivery at Discharge program that allows VFW service officers to help transitioning service members with their VA claims paperwork prior to separating or retirement.

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These service officers, as well as VFW legislative efforts on Capitol Hill, are also there for the families of the fallen and almost 32,230 wounded, to help ensure survivor benefits, as well as VA healthcare programs and services, are fully funded, accessible and available.

The end of the Iraq war fulfills a campaign promise by President Obama, but with almost 100,000 troops still stationed in Afghanistan, the war on terrorism is far from finished, which means the VFW's veterans' service, legislative and grassroots troop support programs are even more important

DeNoyer is now asking all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to join the ranks of the VFW to help "pay it forward" for future generations of warriors.

"The VFW has survived over the past 112 years because of our relevance to each ensuing generation of warrior," he said. "This is due to the common thread of war that easily unites 85-year-old Iwo Jima veterans with 25-year-old Fallujah veterans, and which amplifies our obligation to make things even better for the next generation to follow in our footsteps."