

# A Diamond in the Woods

## VFW summer camp creates lasting memories

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Camp Trotter for Children is perhaps the epitome of idyllic summer camp. Located on the shores of Bills Lake at Newaygo, a 30-minute drive away from Grand Rapids, Mich., the summer camp for children is bustling from dawn until dark six weeks out of the year.

Donated in 1949 by WWI veteran and past VFW Department of Michigan Commander Ralph Trotter (1934-35), the camp was once known as VFW Buddy Poppy Camp. It was, at that time, just a cottage and a dining hall overlooking the lake. In 1960, the camp was renamed VFW Camp Trotter, and in 2012 members wanted to ensure that the priority of the camp was clear and changed the name again to VFW Camp Trotter for Children. Six years ago, a committee of VFW members began the process of renovating the camp. Now Camp Trotter is experiencing a

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renaissance.

Ernie Meyers lives and breathes Camp Trotter. The former Navy corpsman, who served aboard the destroyer USS Ingersoll between 1964 and 1968 with a tour off Vietnam, lights up when he sees the campers playing. Several of them run up to him just to say hello between activities.

“This is our future,” Meyers says, pointing to a group of campers. “These are our future leaders.”

It’s all fun and games for the kids, but it’s serious business for Meyers. The former

Department commander (1998-99) took on the camp 12 years ago, forming a committee. At that time, all of the buildings on the premises were in disrepair. “Nearly condemnable,” Meyers describes the camp prior to renovations.

Meyers helped put together a group of VFW members who loved the camp as much as he does, and got to work renovating and updating the facilities. There is always something to fix or maintain to keep the camp pristine. New this year was a lifeguard stand on the dock.

Dave Reeves got involved at the camp after volunteering to help replace siding on the cabins. A carpenter by trade, Reeves, a Vietnam veteran who served with the 1st Cav Division from 1969-70, finished with the siding and volunteered his time and expertise to rebuild stairs to each of the cabin front doors.

“I’ve got a hand in a little of everything here,” Reeves says. All of the renovations were done to be as maintenance-free as possible: vinyl siding, aluminum trim, weather-resistant wood. “Our next big project will be to replace the floors in the cabins,” Meyers says.

### **Priceless Opportunity**

Ray Lopez, who served with the Marines as a helicopter mechanic in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, calls Camp Trotter “an asset.” As a second-year member of the six-member Department-wide committee, he espouses the importance of the camp not only for VFW but for the community.

“We function as a true committee,” Lopez, the senior vice commander for District 4, says. “We vote on everything, ensuring it’s best for the camp and for the kids.”

Natalie, Lopez’ wife of six years, calls the camp a “real labor of love.” She devotes a lot of her time to helping maintain the yard and play areas before and after the camp season. It’s something, she says, she loves to do.

“It’s rewarding to give back,” she says. “It’s a treat to see the camp filled with kids. It really shows you why our work is important. That’s the reward.”

Michigan Department Commander Paul McIvor echoes the sentiment that the camp is for enriching the lives of children. “You can’t put a price on this set-up,” McIvor said of the camp. “To get kids out of the city, learning things about nature, leaving their electronics behind, doing stuff on their own. That’s why this camp is important.”

Campers—boys and girls ranging in age from 7 to 12 years old—are not allowed to bring along any cell phones, tablets or hand-held gaming systems. The week-long resident camp’s activities are structured as a traditional summer camp would be, including swimming, archery, arts and crafts, hiking, biking and campfires. Additionally, staff is sure to incorporate patriotic learning opportunities when possible. This year, campers had a special

ceremony honoring and remembering the four Marines and one sailor who were murdered in the Islamist terrorist attack in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Every morning, they appoint a color guard to present the flag and say the Pledge of Allegiance. Then a soloist sings the National Anthem. Early in the week, VFW members explain the symbolism behind the POW/MIA table setting. The table stays set in the mess hall for the duration of the week.

Ashton Wentworth, who goes by Luna at camp, is a second-year counselor. She's a junior at Mid-Michigan Community College, studying elementary education, so being a camp counselor during the summer speaks to her interests and helps her build a strong résumé.

"It's a nonstop experience," Wentworth says. "I love working with the kids. I have family in the military. Everyone knows a veteran. We try to build a knowledge base of traditions and teach patriotism. For some campers, this is the first time they've encountered a flag ceremony." For other counselors, this is their first experience with VFW and can be just as enriching as it is for the campers.

"I never went to summer camp," says Alec Beemer, a freshman at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich. He didn't have any interaction with VFW prior to applying as a counselor. "I'm from just up the road from the camp and needed to get out of the house for the summer," he said. But he says this experience has been a positive one, both in getting to work with children and learning how VFW can benefit the community.

Parents can rest assured—the camp is fully licensed and stocked with state-of-the-art medical equipment. It also requires that two licensed and experienced nurses are on the premises at all times. Counselors go through a background check and are fingerprinted before they can be hired. All are trained in CPR and basic first aid, and they each carry a backpack full of first-aid supplies should an accident occur.

"[Camp Trotter] leaves good memories associated with VFW," Meyers says. Additionally, he says, it's also an excellent opportunity to recruit children to participate in VFW youth programs, such as Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen.

"This is our opportunity to teach and promote patriotism," Meyers says. "Children come to camp and meet kids from other cultures. Camp promotes team building, friendship and camaraderie."

### **All in the Family**

Camp Trotter is a family affair. Meyers' wife, Jan, fundraises with her VFW Auxiliary. "She knew it was a lot of work, but she didn't know how much work until she retired and saw this side of running camp," Meyers said of Jan. Now she runs just as hard as he does, often driving the 110 miles from their home in Charlotte, Mich., to the camp in Newaygo.

Denise Arnold, president of her VFW Post Auxiliary, has a long history with the camp as well. Her father, a WWII veteran and VFW member, was attached to the camp. All of her nieces and nephews went to summer camp there. And after her father passed away, her family donated a dodge ball pit to the camp in his honor.

As a nurse, Arnold started her involvement at the camp by teaching first aid and CPR to the counselors. That led to a job as the resident nurse, and in 2012 she took over as camp director.

“This is a diamond in the woods,” she says. “I say I want to go on summer vacation, but I’m on vacation every day here.”

Arnold was made for this work. Her passion is clear as she bounces from speaking to a worried parent on the phone to singing camp songs around the fire with the kids. Her husband, Chris—known as Fix-it Felix around camp—helps cut arts and crafts supplies and generally fixes anything in need of repair on the property. Her son, Aaron, also steps in when anyone needs a hand.

In truth, the phones never stop ringing. Both Arnold and Meyers are always connected—be it a concerned parent, a group hoping to register new campers, or VFW members looking for ways to donate time or resources.

The 2015 camping season was a banner year for Camp Trotter. Some 415 children were able to attend—the most in the camp’s history.

“Our motto is never tell a kid no [regarding admission to the camp],” says Reeves, who has served on the committee for six years. Reeves remembers attending summer camp himself as a child, and says he loves knowing that “this is something they will never forget.” Reeves is a member of Post 6695 in Plymouth, Mich., and says his Post is always quick to give to the cause. “We hustle the money some way,” Reeves said. “Or somewhere down the line, we come through.”

This year, some 60 campers were from inner city Detroit, and a number of those were sponsored by Post 4553 in Detroit. Often, this camp experience is the first time many of those children have ever interacted with nature.

Camp Trotter also is where many kids living at the VFW National Home for Children in Eaton Rapids, Mich., spend a week.

According to Meyers, approximately 76 scholarships were awarded this year to campers across the state so that children from families who might not be able to afford the \$200 fee may go to camp.

If recent history is any indication, this camp really does create a legacy for the children who attend. One former camper had so much fun, and was so grateful to VFW for sponsoring her, that she did her own fundraising to ensure she could go again. And the Post had enough money to sponsor a different child.

Alexzandria Matlock has attended camp five years in a row. She started at 7 years old, and next summer will be the last year she's eligible to attend. What keeps her coming back'

"I learn a lot," Matlock says. "I've learned to treat others the way I want to be treated, how to have fun and to not argue." She says each year she makes new friends, whom she keeps in touch with after camp is over. She hopes she can return as a counselor when she turns 18. Matlock's father is a VFW member and she's part of the Junior Girls, affiliated with the VFW Auxiliary.

"I love being able to support the community and participate in fundraisers," Matlock says of the Auxiliary.

### **Getting Money Out of a Stone**

The Department of Michigan is very giving. Meyers and the Camp Trotter committee work hard to ensure the camp will continue to run. It's self-sufficient through donations from Posts across the state, as well as a few from around the country.

"We bust our tails," says Deb Hanes, Department of Michigan VFW Auxiliary president. "Everyone pitches in, but we can get money out of a stone if we have to." That isn't to say the camp doesn't appreciate everything it gets. The committee provides wish lists to Posts and Auxiliaries so members can donate items for the children.

The committee hosts a golf outing each year, generally preceding veteran training seminars, which are held at the camp. The golf event typically raises around \$10,000 and helps take a bite out of many of the operational expenses of the camp, which costs on average \$100,000 per year to maintain.

"We just never quit," Meyers says of the committee. "Our volunteers are relentless." Meyers says often he will receive applications for children requesting scholarships to attend camp. Then he will call Posts in that area and ask if they are willing to sponsor a camper. More often than not, the Post is particularly willing to chip in. Meyers also relies on volunteers to keep the camp looking nice. They have a clean-up weekend in May, and a family day in August.

"It's open to all vets and anyone who wants to come," Meyers says. "It's where we get a lot of potential campers. We provide food and family activities."

After the children have left camp, the Department of Michigan opens the camp space to the

public to rent for long weekends, family reunions or retreats. Meyers says they are currently working to implement a program that would allow wounded veterans to stay free of charge.

“They can stay in the director’s cabin over a long weekend,” Meyers says. “It’s a nice getaway and a great way for VFW to give back. We take care of our people.”

The camp welcomes children from all states, not just Michigan.

To learn more about Camp Trotter, contact Ernie Meyers at [emeyers76@att.net](mailto:emeyers76@att.net), write to the camp at VFW Camp Trotter for Children, 5566 86th Street, Newaygo, MI 49337, call (231) 652-7241 or visit [www.vfwcamptrrotterfoundation.org](http://www.vfwcamptrrotterfoundation.org).

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*Photo caption: Campers at VFW Camp Trotter for Children in Michigan work together to stand on a tree stump in July 2015.*