

American Legion, VFW stand the test of time

By Heather M. Lightner

Veterans Day. It's a time for all American's to honor the soldiers who unselfishly serve this country in order to keep us safe and free. This year on Veterans Day, as always, two groups, the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars will do their part to recognize the sacrifices our troops make.

Chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic, mutual-help, war-time veterans group, the American Legion community-service organization now numbers nearly three million members, both male and female, located in nearly 15,000 American Legion Posts worldwide. These posts are organized into 55 Departments — with one representing each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, France, Mexico, and the Philippines.

The American Legion's national headquarters is located in Indianapolis, Ind., the organization also has additional offices in Washington, D.C. Though thousands of volunteers serve within their local communities and also participate in the Legion's national commissions and committees, the national organization also has a regular full-time staff of about 300 employees.

Jamestown, like many communities, is home to an American Legion post. According to Jamestown resident and former American Legion Commander Eddie Morinho, the Jamestown chapter of the Legion started right after World War I, in 1919. Originally called the Jamestown Legion Post, the post was renamed the Arnold-Zweir Post 22 in 1946, in honor of the first

two Jamestown men to die during World War II.

Morinho, who is one of the founding members of the post in town, recently received a citation from the National Commander in Indianapolis for "dedicated services and sixty-one years of continued service."

A veteran of the U.S. Army Air Corps (now known as the Air Force) during WWII, Morinho served three years in the Corps and ended his military service at the rank of acting first sergeant. He was crew chief and flight engineer of B17 aircraft. He says Legion membership now stands at about 59 members and is mainly comprised of WWII veterans. It has gone down over the years. "Membership at one time was really up there, but we're losing a lot — they're all passing away," explains Morinho. Recently, however, the post gained four new members. "Old fellows moving back and rejoining," Morinho said.

The American Legion is about community service; the organization supports troops and veterans, promotes Americanism, helps those who are in need, and is involved with the welfare of children. In Jamestown, the Legion sponsors the Americanism award, an award given to one graduating eighth-grade boy and girl, nominated for outstanding character and contributions. Recently, the Jamestown post



sent care packages to the troops in Iraq. One member has a son transporting troops out of Quonset, and he agreed to transport the care packages, which contained toiletries and personal items. "Everything they were short of," said Morinho.

One of the things the American Legion prides itself on is the celebration of national holidays: Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Victory Day, and Pearl Harbor Day. Memorial Day is one holiday the Legion goes all out for, decorating every Jamestown veteran's grave with an American flag with the help of the Jamestown VFW. "It's quite something," says current American Legion Commander Bob Edgar, an Air Force veteran who served during the Vietnam War and has been involved with the Legion for 20 years. "I'm a lot younger than most of these guys — there are like 80-year-old guys putting up flags." According to Edgar, the members put up more than four hundred flags in three cemeteries last Memorial Day.

The Legion participates in the yearly Memorial Day parade through town and memorial service at Veterans Memorial Square. A similar service is held at the same location each Veteran's Day. On Monday, American flags that once adorned the caskets of deceased Jamestown veterans will be flown at the waterfront beginning at 7 a.m., followed by a flags ceremony

at eleven to honor the dead. The flags, originally given to veterans' families by Congress, were donated to the American Legion and VFW for the ceremony. A short speech by VFW Commander Bruce Livingston, a retired Marine colonel, will be given during the ceremony.

The VFW can be traced back to 1899, when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service. Many soldiers returning home from both conflicts had been wounded or were sick and without medical care or veterans' pensions. Left without any resources, some of the veterans banded together and formed a number of organizations, which would later become known as the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW). Chapters of the VFW were formed in Ohio, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. Soon afterwards a number of new chapters were formed all over the country, with membership growing from 5,000 in 1915 to almost 200,000 by 1936.

Over the years, the VFW has been instrumental in many important movements supporting veterans, including the creation of the Veterans Administration, the GI Bill of Rights, and the development of the national cemetery system. The organization also fought for compensation for Vietnam vets exposed to Agent Orange and for veterans diagnosed with Gulf War Syndrome; the VFW has also worked tirelessly to improve VA medical center services for women veterans.

In 2001, the organization dedicated Centennial Plaza as a tribute to service and country and helped fund the creation of the Vietnam, Korean War, World

War II, and Women in Military Service memorials. The VFW, in 2005, became the first veterans' organization to contribute to a new Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial, which is being constructed in Washington, D.C., and is expected to open in 2010.

Every year, VFW members and Auxiliary contribute more than 13 million hours of volunteerism in the community. The organization participates in Make A Difference Day and National Volunteer Week, and generously gives \$2.5 million to high school students in the form of college scholarships.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, with its auxiliaries, includes 2.4 million members in approximately 9,000 Posts worldwide. The mission of the VFW: "to honor the dead by helping the living" through veterans' service, community service, national security, and a strong national defense.

Jamestown VFW Senior Vice Commander Amy Vigers, a former commander, served five years in the Army and Air Force (Army Air Corps) during WWII. She left the military as a corporal and spent 19 months overseas and 19 months in the states during her time of military service.

Vigers says members of the VFW contribute a significant amount of time and energy to the community in the form of volunteer work. "Members do a lot of volunteer work, particularly in Jamestown," explains Vigers. "Three or four members of both the VFW and the American Legion work on the EMS corps in Jamestown. Some work in the Senior Center doing volunteer work there."

In addition to their volunteer efforts, the VFW also gives to those they feel are in need of help. Each year, the VFW gives two \$50 savings bonds to students demonstrating scholastic excellence.

Members of the local VFW chapter are unsure of when the post was created, but say it has been part of Jamestown for at least 50 years. Because the Jamestown VFW only has about 23 members, most of which are veterans of WWII, the organization works closely with the American Legion to do such things as placing flags in Jamestown cemeteries on Memorial Day and hanging the flags of deceased veterans at the waterfront during holidays, just as they will be this Saturday on Veterans Day and, hopefully, for many years to come.

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