VFWs Look to Attract Younger Veterans

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by Adrian Hill

Veterans of Foreign Wars, or more commonly known as VFWs, began in 1899, when veterans of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection founded local groups to foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. Today, there are over 6,700 VFWs worldwide. But like many fraternal organizations, the future of the VFW depends largely on its ability to attract younger members. Army veteran, and Wright State student, Adrian Hill has today’s Veterans’ Voices story.

Air Force veteran Butch Hansen is the commander of the Huber Heights VFW Post 3283. He began as a member but took on a leadership role so that he could become more actively involved in helping other veterans.

"They don't know where to go," he says. "They come home and if they're discharged, they're thrown on the street and they put their hands up and say, 'Okay, what am I going to do now?' They don't know where to go to get the help because the people aren't telling them. They give them a bunch of pamphlets and that's not going to help them when they're discharged in California and their home is Ohio."

But these days many younger veterans don’t think that a VFW is for them. Butch disagrees. It's not all about war stories. And, no, you don't have to drink to come to the VFW.

"Well, I've heard a lot of, 'I'm not going to join the VFW because there's a bunch of old people there that just sit around and tell war stories and when I was overseas I had enough war stories and I don't want to hear no more.' That's not what we're about. Many, many years ago, maybe. In today's society with the younger people that are coming into the VFW, it's not happening like that at all. There's more interaction with the young crowd and the older guys. The old guys like to talk to the young guys. The young guys like to talk to the old guys. It's not all about war stories. And, no, you don't have to drink to come to the VFW. I have several people at my VFW that don't drink, and they love the place."

The first post that I really got involved in was the one Butch commands in Huber Heights, and I think that there's definitely value in just having a place to hang out with different veterans. I've come to a couple of different events the VFW hosts, like Philly Cheesesteak night, and just sitting there talking with the other guys and hanging out and having a good time is fun, and I find a lot of value in that.
"Well, veterans have got to have a place to go," says Butch. "There’s a lot of people stationed throughout the country that come back to Dayton and they’re looking for a place that’s comfortable to them."

Butch has been very successful in recruiting younger veterans. This year, his post 3283 had the most new members in the state of Ohio, many of which are post 9/11 veterans.

"If another post doesn’t have younger veterans then who are they going to look forward to lead their post down the road, five, ten, fifteen years down the road," he says. "Because how many World War II vets do we have left anymore? Very few, less than one million. And we’re losing hundreds of them every day. And then how many Vietnam vets are we losing everyday? And so forth, and so forth. So that cycle just continues. For any VFW, or any fraternal organization to survive, it survives on people coming through the door, and that’s not always an easy task. We go out and we do membership drives in the community. If a city is having a parade, we’ll put up a membership tent. Anybody who invites us, or wants, or allows us to put up a membership tent, whether it’s in front of WalMart or not, we’ll stand there all day with our membership tent to gain members."

Butch commands his VFW to be a valuable resource to veterans, regardless of their age or the conflict in which they served.

"I don’t think the needs for post-9/11 veterans are different than World War II veterans," he says. "I have several times had veterans come into my post, or even members in my post that needed help to put food on his table. I write him a check, or I go shopping with him, I pay for their food, we shake hands, he comes back and says, “Man, you help me through a whole week just by giving me that meal. And for me that’s... it gets you somewhere and it’s hard but getting them over the hill, and in the right direction just gives you a great feeling."

Veterans Voices is produced in collaboration with the Veteran and Military Center at Wright State University. Funding for this series comes from Ohio Humanities.

Photo:
caption: Butch Hansen (left) and Adrian Hill
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