

Seeing Through Post 1716: A Bigger Picture of VFW in the U.S

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ABSTRACT. *Statistics have proven a decreasing variation of membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars posts across the United States. By looking at Post 1716 in Watsonville, California, specifically, a more general picture of the current situation of VFW in the U.S can be drawn.*

KEYWORDS: *decreasing variation of membership; Post 1716; VFW*

1. Introduction

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) is a nonprofit veterans service organization comprised of eligible veterans and military service members from the active, guard and reserve forces. It has been a second home for Barry From, who served in the Navy as a mechanic on airplanes for over twenty years and later served in the Vietnam War, and Ralph Hernandez, a navy who served in sea duty for four years and later participated in the Vietnam War, ever since they returned home from the Vietnam War to Watsonville, California. Post 1716 helps build friendship among military service members in the surrounding area and serves as a gathering spot for local veterans to share their stories and memories. Even though Post 1716 does not have a guaranteed opening time, they do hold irregularly scheduled activities or parties to enrich the lives of local veterans, like From and Hernandez, as well as banding members together. Posting every event they hold to Facebook, VFW Watsonville organizes activities like Cancer Fundraising Event, Jam Session, Spaghetti Dinner, Chile Cook-off Event, and so on.

Nevertheless, Post 1716 is actually understaffed and no longer well-attended.

One challenge it faces now is the lack of recruitment. As a non-profit organization, the VFW Foundation receives no government funding. Relying on individual donations and corporate sponsorships, the VFW is entirely volunteer-based except for salaried employment in the bar. However, recruiting people---even other vets---to come and help is not easy. Even though VFW Watsonville members are constantly recruiting, passing out membership forms at community events and county fairs, they may have two people signing up to join the Post after an entire week. "We are the few in between here that

keep the doors open,” said Barry From after a deep sigh. From is one of the active service members in Post 1716.

2. Statistics evidence

Statistics prove that From is right. VFW Watsonville was actually initiated in 1929 and now has only 132 members in Post (regardless of active or not)--which are mainly composed of old and retired veterans from WWII, Korean War, and the Vietnam War. In fact, even though the exact membership number could not be offered, the officer in Post 1716 stated that the number of VFW veterans increased to its maximum right after the Vietnam War, but has been decreasing since then. He also mentioned that the drastic decline has been due to the inconvenience of the older veterans transporting themselves to the building and the high rate of them passing away.

3. Interviews and shared stories from other veterans

Another hidden reason for the non-recruitment in Post 1716 is younger veterans' different ways of seeking belonging. Unlike veterans retired from older wars like WWII, Korean War, or Vietnam War, who tend to seek emotional involvement by joining face-to-face communities like VFW after they returned home from the soul-wrenching battlefields, Ralph Hernandez said that “...the veterans nowadays just barely come out of service. They are no older than 25 or 30. They just got married, they got children. They don't have time to come here at the post...The maintenance, the necessities of the Post, it falls on us, the Vietnam vets,” Hernandez glanced around, his eyes tight and worried.

As a military member who served in the U.S Army in 1991, Devin Kleffer, who now works in Monte Vista Christian School as a history teacher, has never actually attended VFW after he left the army. His best friend from childhood who used to work in the Marine Corps does not reach out to other local veterans, either. Being asked about the reasons behind, he said that both of them have families to take care of. In addition, Kleffer stated that even though he can have good conversations with VFW Watsonville, he does not feel compelled to attend veterans activities in the Post. Furthermore, because his service time is much shorter than that of most veterans in VFW who did participate in actual battles and are the “absolute heros”, “We are not worthy in so many ways. We are not part of a combat during our time of service”, said Kleffer.

Chuck Hernandez, who served in the Marine Corps and later went to the Vietnam War, is now a school bus driver in Watsonville. He used to be a member in Post 1716, but it interfered with his job in school so he no longer attends activities there anymore. In addition, Hernandez felt a lack of personal interconnection with this organization. “There was just something missing that I didn't get anything out of it, “ said Hernandez, “maybe that's because some of the guys there were a lot older than me.” Being asked

about his personal opinion toward the membership decrease in Post 1716, Hernandez claimed that unlike WWII veterans who came home with big parades, the Vietnam vets like him encountered protests---especially from students---and were spit on and called “baby killers” when they returned from battlefields. Thus, their insecurity and desire of feeling belonging led to a drastic increase in the VFW membership after those old wars. Regarding those veterans from more modern wars like Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, however, “I don't know if they feel the need [to be in local VFW],” said Hernandez. Because these present vets are from a younger generation, they tend to have different ways to find and get involved in their community, which leads to their absence in local VFWs.

4. Further statistics and chart

In fact, the current situation in VFW Watsonville reflects the general picture of membership in national VFW. As is shown on the Yearly VFW Membership Report provided by the officer in VFW National Headquarter, the data of national VFW veterans increases from 1,101,856 in 1950 to 2,039,680 in 1997---which is the time between The Korean War to The Gulf War. Starting from 1997 to present, the number starts to decline continuously even if there are still wars happening in the U.S. In 2019, the total number is 1,164, 860, which only exceeds the membership in 1950 by only 63,004 new vets. More detailed information can be seen in graph. 1.

Post 1716 already started fixing such negative situation by holding different activities. The officer in VFW Watsonville mentioned in a hopeful tone that they will be holding a county fair and a strawberry festival in surrounding areas in September, 2019, with the goal to attract more members to the Post.

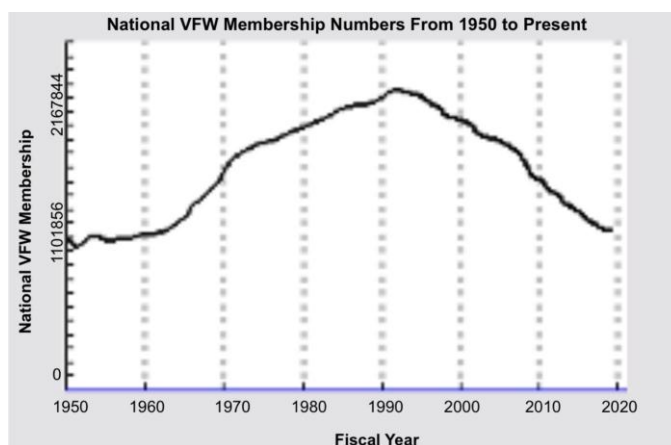


Figure.1 National VFW Membership Numbers From 1950 to Present.

Reference

- [1] About Us. (n.d.) (2019). <https://www.vfw.org/about-us>
- [2] VFW Watsonville Office (2019). 1960 Freedom Blvd, Freedom, California 95019
- [3] VFW National Headquarters (2019). 406 W. 34th Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64111