

VFW Starts to Cater to Female Vets

By Matthew Daneman, USA TODAY

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BUFFALO — Margaret Roll is used to standing out in a crowd.

The former Army reservist joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1991 shortly after returning from a deployment in the Middle East during the Gulf War. She quickly found that attracting fellow female military veterans to the male-dominated VFW was no easy task.

As Roll rose through the VFW ranks, and post after post asked her for advice on attracting female members, she decided a different approach was needed.

“I thought the only way to bring them in was give them a post of their own,” says Roll, chief of staff for New York state’s VFW and female vets chairwoman for the national VFW.

So Roll organized what has become the nation’s only VFW post targeting the needs of women.

Men wear their military backgrounds literally on their sleeves — jackets or hats showing their veteran statuses, Roll says.

“Not in the female world. A lot of them didn’t even know they were veterans and eligible for the VFW,” says Roll, 46, of Alden, N.Y. “A lot of them shifted gears when they came back — ‘I’m a mom; I’m a businesswoman.’ ”

The VFW has a membership of 1.6 million, with most typically being men ages 60 and up, says Jerry Newberry, VFW director of communications.

Most of the VFW’s 7,500 posts are filled with retired men, so “their needs and issues are a lot different than the new veteran of a foreign war,” says Renee DeRouche, 46, of Orchard Park, N.Y., and commander of VFW Post 12097.

“Our age range for our post is late 20s to mid-40s for the most part,” says DeRouche, who has spent 27 years full- and part-time in the U.S. Army, Army Reserves and National Guard, including time in the Middle East as part of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. “Everybody’s still working. Some of them have little kids. So the needs become a little different.”

Thirty-four women and eight men were charter members of VFW Post 12097, launched last July. Today it has 49 members, 40 of them women.

“We’re really focused not just on female issues but the younger veteran issues,” says post member, Josh Schreck, 29, of Hamburg, N.Y. “The retirees aren’t worried about educational benefits and vocational rehab. That’s our daily lives.”

Schreck joined the post after his wife, Leonora, who was injured in Iraq while in the Army, became interested in joining.

The post meets once a month in another VFW post’s hall in suburban Buffalo. Its aim, members say, is to serve both as a social setting for female and male veterans and as an advocate for their particular needs.

“A lot of female veterans coming out of service don’t realize they have access to the VA (*Veterans Affairs Department*),” says former Army reservist Debra Post, 48, of Holland, N.Y. “We provide the information for them and where to go.”

With post members young enough to still be deployed overseas, it hopes to provide support to family members left behind, DeRouche said.

The Buffalo post is the second one started by women. The first was founded in 1995 in Topeka by female National Guard members who served in the Persian Gulf during the Gulf War. The post is now defunct, but lasted about six years, says Darrell Bencken, former Kansas state quartermaster. "I think people moved, they got out of the Guard, and there just wasn't enough to maintain it," says Bencken of Topeka. "But it lasted, it wasn't a flash in the pan."

Women account for roughly 208,000 of the 1.4 million active duty personnel, Pentagon spokeswoman Eileen Lainez says. As of January, 25,000 women were deployed supporting military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since the U.S. began Iraqi and Afghanistan operations, 260,000 women have been deployed in support of those operations, Lainez says.

The VFW does know how many members are women. But as they play a growing role in the nation's military, the organization expects to see more posts started by women and more women playing leadership roles, Newberry says.

"We faced the same challenge with our time when we came back from Vietnam, it's history repeating itself," Newberry says.