

A Leader with a Heart

VFW's new top official is a Gulf War vet who understands that young veterans want to be active and is determined to tap into that energy to position VFW as a community service juggernaut

Sep 13, 2023

If you ask VFW's new Commander-in-Chief to explain how he will make the nation's premier veterans service organization for combat veterans even stronger, he will tell you: more members.

"This past year, VFW has shown membership growth," said Duane Sarmiento of New Jersey. "Our challenge is to continue growing. Membership drives everything in our organization. A strong membership equals a strong VFW."

Sarmiento, a Gold Legacy Life member of VFW Post 5579 in Gibbstown, New Jersey, says that to continue growing, VFW Posts must offer its members action. He recognizes that today's veterans are motivated by active service in their communities and helping their fellow veterans. To engage them and guarantee that they will remain committed to VFW's ideals, Sarmiento says Post leaders must coordinate projects that tap into that energy.

"At the grassroots level, we have to impress upon our Posts the importance of service to their communities," said the Navy veteran of 1991's Persian Gulf War. "We have to get out of the four walls of our Posts."

MEET THE CHALLENGE

Sarmiento's slogan for his year as Chief is "Meet the Challenge." It is a message — and a directive — to VFW leaders at all levels to keep recruiting new members.

"Membership has been challenging over the last few years, but we did show growth last year," he said. "So, it is obvious. To maintain our strong voice in Congress and continue to be a positive force in our communities, we must 'Meet the Challenge' to keep growing."

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Sarmiento says VFW recruiters should focus on “new” members, regardless of age. The Chief noted that with so many National Guard and Reserve units activated since 2001, a huge diverse pool of VFW-eligible veterans is available.

“We’ve been at war for more than 20 years now,” he said. “In my travels as Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief, I remember meeting the ‘Fighting Grandma,’ who told me she earned her VFW eligibility at 55 years old in Iraq. We can, and should be, recruiting members of any age.”

And it is not just post-9/11 veterans that Sarmiento wants to attract. World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War veterans are the foundation of VFW membership and represent the “bedrock” upon which VFW can build future growth.

“We have to make sure that the VFW is relevant to all veterans from all wars,” he said. “Show your communities the programs and work of the VFW. Treat all potential members with respect. And get the families involved in your Post projects.”

NAVY SERVICE IS A ‘FAMILY TRADITION’

New Jersey is home for Sarmiento, and he is the fourth resident of the Garden State to hold VFW’s highest position. He graduated from Paulsboro High School in Paulsboro, New Jersey, near Philadelphia, in 1987. Sarmiento then enlisted in the Navy, which he calls a “family tradition,” in 1988.

“My great-grandfather was in the Navy, my grandfather was in the Navy, my father was in the Navy and I was in the Navy,” he said. “There’s nothing more honorable than serving your country.”

The Chief completed boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes near Chicago. In 1989, he participated in a six-month cruise aboard the USS Wainwright (CG-28), a Belknap-class cruiser, in the Mediterranean Sea.

From August 1990 to May 1992, Sarmiento volunteered to deploy during both Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, also known as the Persian Gulf War. It was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up.

“I remember chipping paint on my ship, which was in the yards in Norfolk, Virginia,” he recalled. “They asked for volunteers, and I remember thinking, ‘I don’t want to miss this.’”

A MEMBER OF THE ADMIRAL’S STAFF

Based in Bahrain, Sarmiento served as an operations specialist aboard the USS La Salle (AGF-3), the flagship for the commander of U.S. Naval Forces, Central Command. Sarmiento was a member of the admiral’s staff, which he called a “great experience,” on the Raleigh-class amphibious transport dock helping the admiral communicate with the other

ships under his command.

“What struck me the most about that experience was that I was part of something bigger than myself,” he recalled. “The coalition of nations that was put together for that fight was amazing.”

During his deployment to the Persian Gulf, Sarmiento reported two important experiences that had a profound impact on his future. First, as a member of the admiral’s staff aboard the La Salle, he received a “30,000-foot-view of war” that he would not have gotten as a regular enlisted sailor. He said it gave him a broader perspective of why he was there.

“The job was to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, not Iraq,” said Sarmiento, who was serving as a petty officer second class at the time. “That was the UN resolution.”

The other important event during his deployment was meeting his future wife, Ellen, in Bahrain. She was working as a flight attendant for Gulf Air.

“That’s why I stayed for so long,” said Sarmiento, explaining his nearly two-year-long deployment. “I was only supposed to be there for six months, but I ended up being there for about a year and nine months.”

In 1994, Sarmiento also served aboard the USS Briscoe (DD-977), a Spruance-class destroyer, during a deployment to the Mediterranean and Red seas.

9/11 WAS A CALL TO REJOIN

In 2002, the Chief enlisted in the Naval Reserve in response to the 9/11 attacks.

“As an American, my heart was hurting,” he recalled. “That sense to serve came back over me. I wanted to get back in because I felt I had something to offer.”

While based at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in 2003, the Chief earned the title of Junior Sailor of the Year for his “hard work and dedication to the unit’s mission.” Overall, his Navy service provided him with skills he would use daily in his civilian life.

“My military service taught me the Navy’s core values of honor, courage and commitment,” he said. “That has shaped me as a person. I used that experience when I was a police officer, when I was the director of veterans affairs in New Jersey and everything I did afterward.”

After leaving the active-duty Navy in 1997 as a petty officer second class (he was promoted to petty officer first class while in the Naval Reserve), Sarmiento joined the Greenwich Township (New Jersey) Police Department as an officer. He worked there from 1998-2006 and then joined the Gloucester County (New Jersey) Sheriff’s Department, where he retired

from in 2011.

In 2011, he was named the director of Veterans Affairs for Gloucester County, a position he held until leaving in 2021 to devote his full attention to the VFW.

“The discipline I learned in the Navy was directly applicable to my work as a police officer,” he said. “I also learned in the Navy how to work effectively with people who have different backgrounds. You learn management and how to deal with people.”

IMPRESSED BY VFW’S ‘VASTNESS’

In 1990, the Chief joined Post 5579 while he was deployed during the Gulf War with the Navy.

“My father, a Korean War veteran who was a member of the Post, signed me up,” said Sarmiento, who also is a life member of both VFW’s Military Order of the Cootie and VFW’s National Home in Eaton Rapids, Michigan.

The Chief was first elected Post commander, a position he would hold four times, in 2000. He has served at all levels of the organization (see sidebar on p. 15), accumulating the information he would need serving as VFW’s top official.

“I was able to experience the fraternal and administrative functions of the VFW,” he said. “At each level, I learned a little bit more. By the time I reached the position of national inspector general, I was able to see the vastness of the VFW.”

“People ask me, ‘What is the best thing about VFW?’ and, for me, it is how big we are, yet all working toward the same goal. You can go to Oregon or Florida or Hawaii and it is the same mindset of working our core values. They might do it a little differently in different areas, but the goal is the same.”

While he was the Department of New Jersey commander in 2018-19, Sarmiento started a program called the Veterans Assistance Program. It provides veterans and their families in need with financial help, which the Chief calls a “hand-up” instead of a hand-out.

“I am proud that it still continues to this day with current New Jersey commanders,” he said. “It is the right thing to do, and it is available to all veterans, not just VFW members.”

‘ALWAYS’ A VETERANS ADVOCATE

Duane and Ellen were married in January 1992. They have three children: Alexis, Gabrielle and Michael. Alexis is a registered nurse and, along with Ellen, a member of the Auxiliary at Post 5579.

Gabrielle and her husband, Brett, are Marine Corps veterans and both are VFW Life members at Post 5579. Michael is on active duty as a Navy corpsman attached to Weapons Company, 2nd Bn., 4th Marines, making him a fifth-generation Sarmiento to serve in the Navy. The Sarmientos have one grandson, Jaxson.

As he prepares to embark on his tenure leading the VFW, Sarmiento remains humble.

“Unless I am at some type of formal function that demands it, I don’t even want people to call me ‘Chief,’” he said. “I was Duane before I got here, I’m Duane now and I’ll be Duane after I leave.”

He also wants all VFW members to know he is committed to them.

“One thing I never forgot is where I came from,” he said. “I know what it is like to sweep the floors at my Post and restock the pull tabs. I can relate to the average member at a Post because I am still an average member, just with a title. I am and always will be an advocate for the people who have served our nation.”

This article is featured in the 2023 September issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Tim Dyhouse](#), editor-in-chief for the VFW magazine.