

‘The VFW is a Secondary Family’

Families from across the country share how the VFW experience binds them and their love of the nation

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While it is hard to gauge the extent family relationships are intertwined with VFW memberships, it is clear, after talking with members of VFW Posts from New Jersey, North Carolina, Texas, California and as far away as American Samoa, that VFW “family ties” often become VFW “force multipliers.” Here is a look at some of those families.

CARLO AND LEE ANN DAVIS VFW POST 9191, KILLEEN, TEXAS

In October 2019, when Lee Ann Davis — a retired U.S. Army chief warrant officer — took the Post 9191 commander’s gavel from her husband, Carlo Davis — an active-duty Army chief warrant officer — she described the opportunity as “very overwhelming and ... humbling.”

Three years later, Lee Ann, an Iraq War vet, reflected on that initial assessment: “I’ve got to be honest with you, only after I started doing the job did I fully realize just what [it] truly requires,” she said. “That’s when the light bulb came on. I was expecting others to come help me until I realized I had to do it on my own. I was elected and Carlo was deployed.”

Lee Ann said that when she was in need of guidance or information, Carlo was there for her.

“You know,” Carlo said, “because Lee Ann is a combat veteran like me, [this transition] fit like a glove. Not only can she and I do stuff that we’re passionate about, but it also brings us closer together.”

From a broader perspective, the Davises emphasized the importance of family support. It is especially important, they said, for veterans facing PTSD and mental health challenges.

“For veterans who feel they are on an island all by themselves, the VFW is a secondary family that can deliver the support chain,” Carlo said.

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

For the marital tag team, leading Post 9191 represents both prestige and challenges for the couple. Not chartered until May 1959, when it was officially named for Benjamin O. Davis, the first African American general officer in the U.S. armed forces, the facility was originally called “The Colored Veterans of Foreign Wars Post.”

“One thing we’re trying to do right now is get our Post to be an historical landmark in the city of Killeen,” said Carlo, a veteran of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. “At the same time, I believe the VFW should also better recognize our history. Because of racial division, it was not always a good history. But it’s part of our heritage, so let’s not hide that.”

SONNY FATU VA’A, MARIA VA’AIGAFO, WANDA VA’A BAINES, SONNY VA’A JR., CHRISTY VA’A FIELDING, CHRISTOPHER FIELDING, MARY VA’A VFW POST 3391, PAGO PAGO, AMERICAN SAMOA

If the VFW set out to determine the biggest family cohort in a single Post, the Va’a family would make strong contenders for the title.

Maria Brown Va’a-Igafo, the 61-yearold Va’a matriarch, counts a next-generation flock of five: a son, two daughters, a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law. Four are on active duty in the Air Force or Army. Maria earned her VFW eligibility in Korea.

As Maria’s daughter, Wanda Va’a Baines, an Army major, said, it was the death of patriarch Sonny Fatu Va’a, also a member of VFW Post 3391, that convinced the younger generation to consider entering the VFW fold.

“My mom first introduced the VFW to us when she planned to attend the 2015 VFW National Convention in Pittsburgh,” said Wanda, an Iraq and Afghanistan War vet. “I remember very clearly how she informed us of VFW benefits and resources.”

Wanda said the VFW really left a “lasting impression” on the family when it helped the Va’a’s navigate the VA after Sonny’s death in 2013.

“She was very passionate [for] us to become members, so we all attended the 2015 convention to learn more,” Wanda said.

Not only did this sojourn spur new Post 3391 memberships, but it also became family tradition.

“Most of us are on the East Coast [in Maryland, North Carolina and Virginia, with one in-law deployed to Poland] while my mom and non-military siblings are out west.” Wanda said. “We don’t get to see each other 11 months of the year. So we use the annual national conventions as opportunities to have a family reunion, as well as show our patriotic support of VFW.”

NORMAN WIENER, BRIAN WIENER AND COLIN WIENER VFW POST 8098, BRIGANTINE, NEW JERSEY

In June 2020, Brian Wiener — a six-year Navy veteran and now an Atlantic City, New Jersey, firefighter — became commander of the VFW Department of New Jersey.

One of his first acts was appointing his father, Norman Wiener, a Korean War vet, as his chief of staff.

“Not many people get to do that,” said Brian, a Persian Gulf War vet. “We became much, much closer [and] genuinely wanted the best for each other. I would do it all over again if I could.”

A National Guard veteran, Norman took charge of Brian’s daily schedule.

“Sometimes he missed a date,” Norman said.

And, even though Brian was the boss, Norman occasionally stepped in as father.

“But I did it tactfully,” Norman said. “Sometimes he didn’t know it. All in all, we worked together pretty [well].”

Not surprisingly, the Wieners’ inter-generational VFW affiliation — Brian’s son, Colin, an Army officer, also is a member of Post 8098 — entail different perspectives on the VFW.

Brian, 51, understands that Norman, 86, and Colin, 27, have different age and lifestyle agendas.

“My father,” Brian said, “is of a completely different generation than my children. (Brian’s daughter, Breana, serves in the Marine Corps band.) His beliefs and his service are just different than ours. I have a vested interest, not only with my children’s and father’s VFW future, but also my own.”

Brian added that he has a special interest in the legislative end of veterans’ affairs, which complements the interests of the rest of his family.

“We would all like to be taken care of as veterans,” he said. “That remains the same [even though] the work that we put into it differs.”

BOBBI SHEETS, DAVE SHEETS AND BILL SANDERS VFW POST 6365, LOCUST, NORTH CAROLINA

For Bobbi Sheets, North Carolina VFW District 12 commander, family connections have made Post 6365 a recruiting and financial juggernaut.

When Bobbi first joined the VFW in 1990 — three years into a 13-year Air Force career as an

airdrop loadmaster and instructor — she assumed the Post was a bar outside the base gate.

“When I got here to North Carolina [after discharge], I transferred my membership right away [but] it took me 13 years to walk into the Post,” said Bobbi, who earned her VFW eligibility in Panama.

One day, though, Bobbi received a phone call inviting her to a meeting.

“What time does the bar open?” she asked, only to learn there was no bar because the Post was in a dry county.

Intrigued, Bobbi attended the meeting, only to find herself elected Post chaplain.

“I thought, ‘Oh Lord, I am the least likely person to ever be a chaplain,’” she said.

It was not until she attended the 2016 VFW National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, that Bobbi finally got “the big picture of what the VFW actually did.”

Once Bobbi moved up to Post 6365’s top leadership role — unexpectedly when her predecessor stepped down — she marshalled her untapped strength and began recruiting.

“If I filled the need that veterans have, they would join,” she said. “We even started Zoom communications to reach our shut-ins, deployed reservists and even people who left the area but still wanted to be involved.”

Post 6365 also benefits from the work of Bobbi’s spouse, Dave Sheets, an Air Force retiree who earned his eligibility on Grenada.

“My husband is the Post quartermaster,” Bobbi said. “He takes care of all the financials and keeps me focused on the numbers. He’s also the adjutant. He’ll give me a list [telling me] to ‘text these people, they need to pay.’”

Bobbi’s brother, Bill Sanders, another Air Force retiree who meets via Zoom from Ohio, chips in. Bill’s membership eligibility came from his time in Bosnia.

“He has really honed [my] writing skills,” said Bobbi, who often emails Bill drafts of VFW communications for his review and comment.

According to the figures, the Sheets and Sanders families have made a positive impact on the Post.

“We started my tenure with 19 [members],” Bobbi said. “We’re [now] at 95 people. We didn’t originally have a big bank account. Now we have five figures. We’ve done a lot.”

DAWN AND JACK NAPIER
POST 9561, HOOPA, CALIFORNIA;
KEVIN DALGLEISH
VFW POST 1872, LOWER LAKE, CALIFORNIA

For Dawn “Dusty” Napier, a Native American and member of the Kurak Tribe, leaving home for a Navy career meant leaving behind her family and indigenous heritage.

Returning 30 years later — retired as a senior chief in radio communications — Dusty found herself disconnected from two extended families — military comradeship and the Kurak Tribe.

“Had I not gone off to serve,” said Dusty, a Persian Gulf War vet, “I likely would have been active in restoration of tribal ceremonies and language. Since being back home, I’ve attended Kurak ceremonies, but reintegration has been slow.”

In Dusty’s view, VFW efforts to connect with “native veteran brothers and sisters” face daunting hurdles. To some tribal members, for example, VA and even veteran service organizations represent a government they do not trust.

Dusty said that for the most part, Native American veterans prefer having their health care provided by the Indian Health Service instead of VA.

As VFW Department of California commander, Dusty encourages VFW Posts to partner with their tribes.

Meanwhile, Dusty and her husband, Jack — a Navy retiree and Desert Storm vet — relish their reconnection with military camaraderie. Her brother, Kevin Dalglish, is a member of a different VFW Post.

“I’m putting my energies into the VFW, a tight-knit association that bonds my husband and me together as family,” Dusty said.

If you have multiple family members who are veterans within the VFW ranks, [send us a photo](#). We may use it on VFW magazine’s Facebook page.

This article is featured in the 2022 August issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by David Sears is a Vietnam War veteran and VFW member in New Jersey.

Picture captions:

Top row, left: Brian Wiener (far right) appointed his father, Norman (far left) as his chief of staff when Brian became the Department of New Jersey commander in 2020. Father and son are members of VFW Post 8098 in Brigantine, New Jersey, as is Brian’s son,

Colin, also pictured. Brian's daughter, Breana, is also pictured in her Marine Corps band uniform.

Top row, middle: Carlo and Lee Ann Davis of VFW Post 9191 in Killeen, Texas, believe that the VFW is a secondary family that delivers an important support chain.

Top row, right: Husband and wife duo Jack and Dawn "Dusty" Napier of VFW Post 9561 in Hoopa, California, said they cherish the VFW as it keeps them connected with a sense of military camaraderie. Bottom row, left: Bobbi and Dave Sheets work together as husband and wife at VFW Post 6365 in Locust, North Carolina.

Bottom row, right: The Va'a family of VFW Post 3391 in Pago Pago, American Samoa, counts multiple family members involved in the VFW.