

THE AMERICAN LEGION

America's heroes in Loudoun County



Ron Embrey
Adjutant, American
Legion Post 295 -
Middleburg
Vietnam Veteran '68-'69



Matthew Matyuf
Commander, American
Legion Post 150 -
Sterling Park
U.S. Navy '79-'85



Charlie McKinney
Commander, American
Legion Post 2001 -
Ashburn
U.S. Marine Corps, '61-
'70



Sammie Griffith
Commander, American
Legion Post 295 -
Middleburg
U.S. Navy, '66-'70



John Ward
Vice-Commander,
American Legion 16th
District and Post 34 -
Leesburg
U.S. Army, '70-'73



Charlie Kalbaugh
Commander, American
Legion Post 293 -
Purcellville
U.S. Army, '69-'72
Vietnam Veteran

By **ANDREW SHARBEL**
Times-Mirror Staff Writer

Founded nationally in 1919 by veterans returning from World War I, the American Legion has long been a place for those returning from conflicts abroad to share their experiences and give back to their local communities.

While not exclusively a senior organization, it does remain a popular society for older veterans as a way to reach out to the younger generation returning

home from the conflicts in the Middle East.

Loudoun is home to five American Legion posts, each with their own members and priorities.

The Loudoun Times-Mirror sat down with the leadership of the five posts to discuss local veterans, the American Legion and their plans moving forward.

As part of their outreach, the American Legion is well-known for their sponsorship of youth baseball teams.

How are each of your particular posts unique from one another? Do all of the posts have baseball teams?

Charlie McKinney: We don't all have baseball teams. Only two of us have baseball teams.

John Ward: Leesburg and Ashburn are the only two posts with baseball teams. Post 34 Leesburg is also hosting the state baseball tournament next year in Purcellville at Fireman's Field. Everybody in the entire state will be coming here for the state tournament.

Charlie Kalbaugh: While some of us may not have post teams, we do sponsor Little League teams and Boy Scout troops.

McKinney: Boys and Girls State is also a huge deal for us and I think all of us are equally involved in that. We sent a total of 10 kids to that program.

Ward: We sent six girls and six boys to State this year.

Kalbaugh: And we sent eight - five boys and three girls.

What is Boys and Girls state?

Ward: It gives the kids an idea of how government is run. In a way its almost like being in the military because they line them up right off the bus. They create their own little towns, and stuff like that within their group. They have reporters, newspapers, governors and the rest of government. At the end they're running their own towns and it shows how our government system works and what is involved in that.

Kalbaugh: Every year we invite the kids who participated to come back to the post and tell our general membership about their experiences and we get overwhelming responses every year from the girls and the boys about what they learned and the friendships they established. Some of those friendships I have heard have lasted a lifetime. I ran into somebody while I was away and I was

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Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Beverly Denny
American flags and an American Legion flag are displayed at American Legion Post 293 in Purcellville.



Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Beverly Denny

American Legion Post 2001 Commander Charlie McKinney gestures during a discussion with other American Legion members in Purcellville Aug. 30.

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talking about Boys State and somebody said "Well, I went to Boys State and I am still friends with two guys I first met there."

McKinney: What is really impressive is to get a copy of what they do down there, because I looked at it and it doesn't look like they got a minute that's occupied with them not doing something. On the boys side there is always a worry because we don't know if they are going to go out, but these are pretty squared away kids. We only select the cream of the crop.

Matt Matyuf: Boys and Girls State is an opportunity for rising seniors. At Post 150 we work with Potomac Falls High School, Park View High School and Dominion High School. We choose from a pool of candidates and then interview our top selections. We choose them to go off for a week down at Radford University for the boys and Longwood University for the girls.

How does that selection process work?

Ward: We go out and talk to schools, guidance counselors and we try two or three students from each school in Loudoun County. Around the Leesburg area we spoke to Loudoun County High School, Heritage and Tuscarora.

How much do you collaborate together as commanders of your respective posts?

McKinney: Well that is kind of the thing that kicked off this meeting in a

way. The whole concept is we have five posts in the county, but this is the first time the five commanders at any time to my knowledge have ever been in the same room except for a district meeting or a statewide department meeting. I was trying to get people to help each other, like Matt called me a couple of weeks ago for a document for Post Everlasting – when a member passes away – and we were able to come up with a document together that is more meaningful. We are cooperating more on honor flights now as well. For a lot of years you have had a post that is pretty isolated out in Middleburg, a post in Leesburg, and a post here in Purcellville. We are the newest guys on the block in Ashburn as we have only had a post for 13 years. And Middleburg and Purcellville are the only places that have an actual post.

Matyuf: We have had that opportunity back during the Loudoun County Fair. We could cooperate together and our post was curious and wanted to get out in the public during SterlingFest where we set up, handed out pamphlets and talked to the people. So we thought about going into the Loudoun County Fair and when I contacted them they said 'well sure we would love to have you' and they waived the \$300 fee to set up there, so we scrambled and put things together and spent the whole week up there with a booth for information and each post took a night manning it during the evening.

Ward: That was the first time the five posts have worked together on any event in recent history.

Kalbaugh: I really think we have always had our own posts and done our own things, but the impetus of doing things jointly stems from the Legion Riders and getting that for Loudoun

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Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Beverly Denny

American Legion Post 293 Commander Charlie Kalbaugh listens during a discussion at his Purcellville post Aug. 30.



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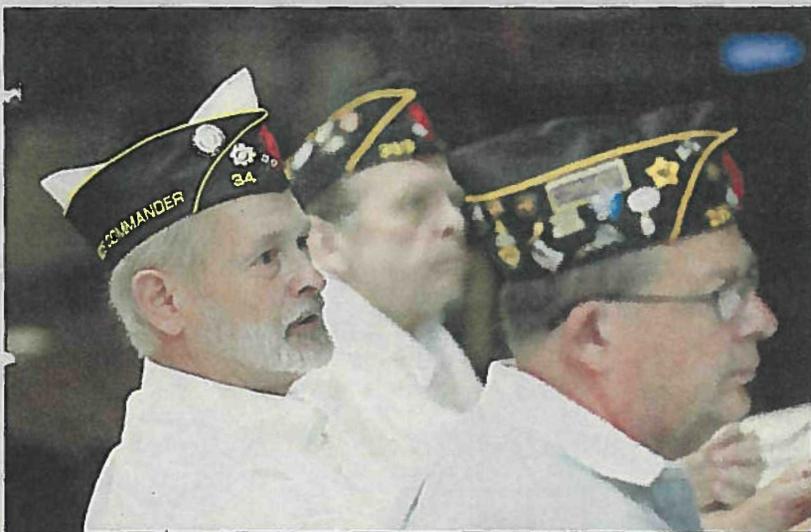
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Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Beverly Denny

American Legion 16th District and Post 34 Vice-Commander John Ward, left, participates in a discussion with other members of the American Legion Aug. 30.

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County. Once they got their charter that was a bonding thing amongst the posts because it is the American Legion

Riders of Loudoun County, which is all of us. Communication has always been the key and when you go to a Riders meeting, it's a younger crowd, but they always have an agenda and they seem eager to do something and they have fun doing it.

What kind of changes have you seen from the World War II leadership of the American Legion to the Vietnam Era leadership?

McKinney: I know most of our membership served during Vietnam. We have a handful that served during Korea and one left who served during World War II.

Ward: The only post I am aware of that still has a large World War II contingent is the Middleburg post. Most of their members are World War II and it is run by World War II guys. I went and helped them do a cookout this past summer and there was a couple of guys in their eighties out there cooking hamburgers, hot dogs and stuff like that. Me and Sam were the young guys in the group and you go to the meeting and one guy is 92 or 93 years old and another guy is 88 or 89.

Sammie Griffith: We can't seem to get the guys from Iraq or Afghanistan. I don't know. They don't seem to be interested.

What kind of outreach are you doing with that new generation?

Matyuf: Two years ago in Sterling, we sort of had this passing of the torch and the 50-year-olds took over from the 80-year-olds. And we are hopefully moving into this outreach stuff. That is what the events like SterlingFest and the Loudoun County Fair are so we can attract the younger fellas into it. I know myself, it took me awhile to get into a Legion even though my father and father-in-law were both Legion members. You have children you're raising and I spent a lot of nights sitting the bleachers of Park View High School cheering them on in sports and finally they grew up, so I know that is a challenge for families coming out of the service. That is why we are emphasizing the Boys and Girls State, that we are involved in the community that way.

McKinney: The Legion Riders are a great thing as well because as it was pointed out earlier, they are younger and more aggressive. We would love to get the guys that served in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the problem is soldiers are coming back, trying to get a family started, starting college, getting a new job or whatever and I know in my case I didn't join any Marine Corps organizations until the 1990s. I didn't get into the Legion until three or four years ago.

What has been your experience being there for servicemembers when they return from overseas?

McKinney: For those guys they can't just talk about with anybody. If you haven't been there and haven't done it they are not really comfortable talking about those sort of things. That is why the Legion is a draw for them to join and our generation didn't like to talk about that sort of stuff

either. Only with each other. I think particularly with the number of guys severely wounded was something we haven't experienced on that scale before. We saw a little of it in Korea, a whole lot more of it in Vietnam because of the distance from the battlefield to triage.

Matyuf: I think our challenge with that is exposure because they are not just going to come and knock on our door here. Plus a lot of us don't have a physical location either. It is getting out there so they know we exist and that we can assist them with resources to help them with things like Veterans Affairs processing. It is really going to be on our part to be aggressive to get our faces out there so they can remember who we are and what we can do for them. We are just going to have to keep getting on the streets to make ourselves available and be our own recruiters.

Ward: The more you get your name out there the more people are familiar with you. Whether its baseball, Boys and Girls State or other things it gets more people exposed to the Legion and lets them know they are there, they are willing to help people and for our 100th anniversary in 2019, we want to be 3 million members strong so there is going to be a greater push towards that goal in the coming years. It already is the largest veterans organization in the United States as I understand it.

Kalbaugh: When I came back from Vietnam I shunned the Legion and other organizations like it after getting out of the service and I went back to work because I didn't want to talk about anything. I just wanted to put it all behind me and forget about it. It took me many years to want to just get out and talk and share experiences and the Legion was there to provide that for me.

What is your involvement with the wounded warriors and the Wounded Warrior Project?

Griffith: Our post has been up to Blumont for the Boulder Crest Retreat and made ourselves available to them. If they would like someone to talk to or anything else we will be there for them and their families. We will do anything for them.

McKinney: We read about them in the newspaper and we wanted to be a part of that so I called up Ken Falke and five or six of us went up there and sat down with him and got the whole story and a tour and I presented him with a pretty handsome check, which was the largest sum we have ever donated. Now, they are our annual contribution. We try to give them \$1,000 dollars a year at least. As far as in the community, we had a sergeant major who fell off a ladder right after he retired and they were unable to

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pay their mortgage so we happily stepped in for a couple months to help them with their mortgage. The way we leave it is you pay us back when you can if you can. He is a veteran and we take care of ours.

Are you starting to see more female members with the increase in women in the military?

Ward: We have two at our post and it is the wife and daughter of one of the other members.

McKinney: We have three women in our post, but they don't come to meetings. One came to one meeting. The other two joined but they don't come to meetings.

Matyuf: We also have several ladies in our post. One of them is now holding an officer position as the adjutant so we need to attract them also.

McKinney: We want to start one of these auxiliary units for our women. They don't have to be veterans to join that. But none of our wives are interested in doing that.

Griffith: We will take women veterans that is not a problem at all.

Matyuf: The involvement really needs to be with the Legion also. There are requirements to be Legion members and many more women do qualify for that. The auxiliary has its own special function with us, but we also need women veterans within the ranks of the Legion and welcoming them at the tables of the officers and leaders they are.

Kalbaugh: We have four or five possibly six female legionnaires now. One of which is also the president of the auxiliary. We encourage everyone especially youth and females to join us.

What are some of the programs besides Boys and Girls State and American Legion Baseball that you and your posts are involved in?



Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Beverly Denny

American Legion Post 150 Commander Matthew Matyuf, center, participates in a discussion with other members of the American Legion Aug. 30.

McKinney: Well, here is the problem. And is a big problem and ties into what John said a minute ago. By 2019, we want to reach 3 million members and we have been close to it before as I understand it. The question is how do you get that. Well you look down at the single individual post and most of them are struggling. We don't have a lot of money. We use our dues money and for every one of these programs you take on you're spending money. That means you have to raise the money somewhere. Then if you get the money it is all about man power. Do you have someone who is willing to honcho that program 24/7 to make it work. Like the oratorial program starts in January and it is over by March.

Matyuf: But with that program you have to start planting the seeds at the beginning of the school year with the different groups that would handle that. For

Boys and Girls State we would like to send as many kids as we possibly can, but it is quite pricey – about \$300 per student – to send them to State and we do that program with no cost to the families.

Kalbaugh: I agree with Charlie. First of all it's funds and some of them don't cost a lot of money, but for my post the biggest thing is volunteerism and manpower. We may have about 10 percent of our membership actively participating. But year-after-year those 10 are looking for some back up. Other programs we have are kids nights and a Halloween safety night where we do the kids fingerprints. We are also looking to start a shooters club. We had someone else step up and be our publications officer so that has helped.

What is the most fun thing about the American Legion?

Ward: Camaraderie with the people.

McKinney: The guys in the post really. Secondly, for me anyway, is the honor flights. Honor flights are transporting veterans from around the country to D.C. to reflect and visit their memorials. It kind of gets to you a little bit and I have a tremendous amount of respect for those guys.

Matyuf: For me it is the Memorial Day ceremony in Sterling because I remember standing on the sidewalk and watching it and now being involved with it the last few years. Putting that on is a tribute to veterans in the community and to Sterling Park itself. It is quite an honor honestly. Also getting involved with the Park View Service Club and in December they do a wreath laying at Arlington Cemetery. They asked the Loudoun Riders to be their escort so we escorted them to Arlington on the motorcycles. It was quite cold, but that is a minor nuisance with being involved with the children and community events like that.



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