Legionnaires or veterans’ families can honor a loved one this Memorial Day with a limited edition teddy bear from the Vermont Teddy Bear Company.

Wearing a white T-shirt and uniform cap, both featuring The American Legion emblem, the bear can serve as a gift or meaningful keepsake for any Legion member or supporter. The bear’s cap can be personalized with a city, state, district, American Legion post or name of choice.

Twenty percent of proceeds from sales of the bears will be donated to The American Legion to help the organization fulfill its commitment to assist those who have served, and those who are currently serving, in the U.S. Armed Forces, and to promote patriotic values in communities across the nation. The bears can be ordered online by visiting www.VermontTeddyBear.com/Legion or by calling toll-free at 1-800-829-2327.

**Gear up for Flag Day**

Flag Day, observed on June 14, is a perfect time for your post to remind your community about the U.S. flag’s importance and proper etiquette. Pause for the Pledge will take place at 7 p.m. Eastern. Get resources and information: www.legion.org/flag

**Share your story**

Have a post-related story you want to see featured in Dispatch? Email: dispatch@legion.org

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**LEGIONNAIRES URGED TO ENGAGE WITH POST-9/11 VETERANS GROUPS**

National Executive Committee passes resolution calling for Legion posts and departments to work with groups such as Team Rubicon, The Mission Continues and Team Red, White & Blue.

By Andy Romey and Steve B. Brooks

Per a resolution passed during the National Executive Committee’s Spring Meetings, Legion posts and departments are being called upon to embrace and collaborate with Post-9/11 generation-centric veterans groups, such as Team Rubicon, The Mission Continues and Team Red, White & Blue.

Resolution 20, introduced by the Legion’s 100th Anniversary Observance Committee, encourages posts and departments to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with the local branches of these Post-9/11 veterans organizations and other similarly situated organizations such as Student Veterans of America.

“(These) are three effective and innovative Post-9/11 veterans groups that share values similar to those of The American Legion and can play an important part in defining a second-century vision for the organization,” Resolution 20 reads.

Past such collaborations between Legionnaires and members of these groups have provided crucial assistance to communities in need. In 2013, Legionnaires and posts in Colorado collaborated with Team Rubicon members to provide relief to flood victims who were displaced as a result of mass flooding that
COMMANDER’S MESSAGE

This month serves as a time for reflection

Memorial Day, of course, is a time when the nation pauses to remember veterans who have died while serving and protecting America. Their commitment to our country shall never be forgotten. I’m heartened when I see or hear of communities – often led by American Legion posts – coming together to reflect and remember our heroes.

These public celebrations are a great way to honor and remember the men and women we lost. But for many of us, the remembrances are personal and we offer quiet reflections to those we knew and mourn.

Perhaps you remember your battle buddy on Memorial Day.

Or, you honor a father, mother, sibling, spouse, child or cousin on this somber occasion.

Or you might pay tribute to any or all of the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice so that Americans would live in freedom.

Even at this solemn time, there is also hope. Across our great nation, young people with boundless energy, enthusiasm and love of country will be graduating from our armed forces academies. Others will be graduating from high school or college, with eyes focused on joining the military.

My son, Jacob, will be among those graduates this month when he dons the cap and gown at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. I could not be more proud of Jacob, his classmates and others who are committed to a life of service.

We send them off with hugs and kisses, prayers, and perhaps a tear or two. We will worry every minute they are away from us. It’s what parents do.

But we are so proud of their courage, personal sacrifice and commitment. And most of all, we are proud of the way these young men and women will honor the memories of past generations of veterans who came before them.

Mike Helm
National Commander

MEMBERSHIP

National Commander Honor Ribbon

During the 2014-2015 membership year, American Legion National Commander Mike Helm will award his National Commander Honor Ribbon to any American Legion Family that achieves 100 percent membership by June 30, 2015.

For this award, the Legion Family is defined as a post and any combination of an Auxiliary unit, Sons squadron or Legion Riders chapter. Each branch must achieve 100 percent to qualify for the award.

The National Commander Honor Ribbon incentive program will end June 30, 2015, or when supplies are exhausted.

Download the form online: www.legion.org/commander/ribbon

MEMBERSHIP

Recruiters to be honored with ‘Stay On Course’ pin

During the 2014-2015 membership year, American Legion National Commander Mike Helm will award his national commander pin to any Legion Family member who obtains three new members or renews five members into the Legion.

A new member is any eligible person joining for the 2015 membership year who was not a member of The American Legion during the 2014 membership year.

Each member listed must be eligible for membership in The American Legion. Forward names of SAL members or Auxiliary members to your detachment or unit for use in their respective incentive programs.

To maintain the integrity of the national commander’s pin incentive program, only one pin will be awarded per individual.

Upon receipt, national membership staff will confirm the names and mail the pin directly to the person who earned it. Commander Helm’s pin incentive program will end June 30, 2015, or when supplies are exhausted.

Download the form online: www.legion.org/commander/pin
The bond of service

Florida’s Post 392 provides camaraderie for all ages of veterans, active-duty military.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

We frequently hear about a generation gap between older veterans, and Post-9/11 veterans and those currently serving. We’re told that those serving now have different interests than those of us who put on the uniform a few decades ago. And we’re told that The American Legion really doesn’t have anything to offer someone serving today or getting ready to transition out of the military.

We know none of that is true. We know that there is a generation-spanning bond that comes from military service. There is a connection, whether you fought in the Battle of the Bulge or the Second Battle of Fallujah.

That connection couldn’t be more evident at Paul W. Airey American Legion Post 392 in Panama City, Fla. The post, which was chartered just six years ago, has dozens of members who either are on active duty or just recently left the military.

And they aren’t just names on a list. They come to post meetings. They’re serving in leadership roles. They volunteer to help with programs and fundraisers. And they share the message, mission and value of The American Legion with their fellow active-duty soldiers.

Legionnaire Mike Kirchof, who helped start the post, is retired from a 38-year career with the Air Force. He actually still lives on Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City, where he routinely suggests base personnel just stop by the post to hang out and relax. He also encourages them to bring their spouses and children.

“Being family oriented and family friendly has increased our membership,” Kirchof said. “You can bring your children down here and you know they’re safe.”

At the post, the active-duty members have discovered a home away from home. Tech. Sgt. George Robinson, 29, says the post gives him a sense of camaraderie he hadn’t felt since he was stationed overseas. He also knows where to turn if he ever needs any kind of help. “I needed something, anybody in this post would step up to help me, without question,” he said.

Robinson’s view of the post is the norm, not the exception. Other members still serving in the military – many still in their 30s – throw out words like “mentoring,” “life lessons” and “support” when they talk about what they get from the post.

It helps that Post 392’s older members aren’t afraid to put the younger members in leadership positions. The post’s historian is 34; the Legion Riders assistant director is 31-year-old Alex Hill, who served in the Air Force from 2003 to 2007.

The younger generation of veterans, and those still serving, want to be a part of something when they join an organization. They want to feel like they’re making a difference. That’s what’s going on at Post 392. New members aren’t being told to sit down and wait their turn to make a difference. They’re getting their shot to make a difference right away.

That is the blueprint for appealing to younger members. Use that common bond of service to show them what the Legion is all about, and then give them a chance to help with that mission. It’s working at Post 392.

To read more about Post 392, go online to www.legion.org/membership/226976/best-people-youre-ever-going-find.
damaged more than 16,000 households in Colorado. Legionnaires and Team Rubicon also worked together to provide disaster aid to the Northeastern Seaboard in the wake of Superstorm Sandy in 2012 and for tornado victims in Oklahoma in 2013.

Legionnaires are encouraged to reach out to Team Red, White & Blue and participate in, or help host, the physical and social activities and volunteer opportunities that Team RW&B coordinates in communities. Legionnaires should also consider participating in community service projects coordinated by The Mission Continues, which seeks to help veterans reintegrate into civilian life through placing them in "platoons" that volunteer and provide community outreach. The platoons welcome participation from veterans of all ages and eras. Legionnaires are encouraged to locate a platoon in their area and ‘serve’ with it.

Donations made during the Spring Meetings helped National Commander Michael D. Helm reach his fundraising goal of $4 million. At the 2014 National Convention, Helm issued a challenge to the Legion Family to raise a combined $4 million this year for the Legion’s various charities. Closing in on the goal heading into May, donations made during the Spring Meetings pushed the campaign over the top. The Sons helped hit the goal with a donation of more than $128,000 to the Child Welfare Foundation. Donations will also go to fund Operation Comfort Warriors, the National Emergency Fund, the Legacy Scholarship Fund, Endowment Fund and Soldier’s Wish, as well as the Auxiliary’s Emergency Fund, Spirit of Youth Scholarship Fund, Children of Warriors National Presidents’ Scholarship and the Auxiliary’s Foundation.

"I think setting the goal and opening all the charities to the entire American Legion Family put everybody in that spirit-of-giving mode and maybe (created) a little bit of competition between each other," Helm said. "Not only was it coming together as a family to raise money for American Legion charities, but also an individual, personal competition between departments or posts, Auxiliary units, (SAL) squadrons and (Legion Rider) chapters."

### Ask a Service Officer

**Will I lose my guns, hunting license or carry permit if I receive VA mental health care?**

No. Veterans are not required to give up their guns (Second Amendment rights) in order to get VA mental health care. Only veterans rated incompetent by VA, which means determined unable to manage their VA funds, are subject to the Brady Bill provisions.

When VA makes a decision that a veteran is determined incompetent for VA payment purposes, then the VA is required to report the determination. The term "incompetent," for VA purposes, is reserved for an adult who is deemed unable to manage his or her own financial affairs.

The purpose of VA’s Fiduciary Program is to protect veterans and beneficiaries who are unable to manage their VA benefits through the appointment and oversight of a fiduciary.

The determination that you are unable to manage your VA benefits does not affect your non-VA finances, or your right to vote or contract. You may also request to have your ability to manage your VA benefits be re-evaluated, or to have a new fiduciary appointed, at any time. If you wish a re-evaluation, please submit your request in writing with any supporting medical evidence to the regional office of jurisdiction.

The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act prohibits you from purchasing, possessing, receiving or transporting a firearm or ammunition if you have “been adjudicated as a mental defective or been committed to a mental institution.” VA reports the names of incompetent beneficiaries to the Federal Bureau of Investigations, which then adds the names to a database called the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). Gun dealers must check NICS for the name of a potential buyer before selling him/her a firearm. You may be fined and/or imprisoned if you knowingly violate this law. You may apply to VA for relief of firearms prohibitions imposed by the law by submitting your request to the VA.

### Centennial Celebration Spotlight

**Post 223 in Shippensburg, Pa.**

American Legion Post 223 in Shippensburg, Pa., was charted in 1919. The post has been very good at keeping historical records dating back to its first day of existence. The post’s first honor guard was established in 1919 with six members and was called the Minute Men; the group still performs today at funerals and elsewhere.

**Share Your Post’s Legacy**

Upload photos, print materials and videos related to your post’s history on the Legion’s Centennial Celebration web page:

[www.centennial.legion.org](http://www.centennial.legion.org)
MEMORIAM

Legion ‘champion’ Pete Wheeler passes away

Pete Wheeler, who served as commissioner of the Georgia Department of Veterans Service continuously since 1954, passed away April 21. The World War II Army veteran was a nationally revered expert on veterans benefits and a 59-year member and leader in The American Legion.

"Pete Wheeler is one of our champions … we don’t have anybody else like him," said Randy Goodman, commander of the Legion’s Department of Georgia. “He has served this state for over 60 years and has created an atmosphere where veterans feel welcome to walk into an office to get a claim done. He was the point man for all areas that affect veterans in the state of Georgia, and advised the governor and carried out all the programs.”

Goodman said that Wheeler “started something that has been very helpful to Georgia’s 780,000 veterans. Each year, he holds a veterans ‘supermarket of benefits’ around the state, to inform veterans of their benefits.” One such event drew more than 1,000 veterans. “He has done tremendous work for the veterans of Georgia.”

Thanks to Wheeler’s efforts, Georgia operates two state-supported nursing homes for veterans, one in Augusta and the other in Milledgeville. Each home has the capacity for about 230 residents and Goodman said the cost can essentially be covered by VA aid and attendance benefits. “So the nursing homes that he created, that serve our elderly veterans, that was his own compassion that he gave back to those veterans as they entered their final days. That was one of his greatest accomplishments for Georgia.”

A member of James T. Rayle Post 123 in Lexington, Ga., Wheeler was a recipient of The American Legion Gold Honor Medal. American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm said that Wheeler was known throughout the organization as a tireless veterans advocate, “serving Georgia veterans, assuring care and assistance to all. He will be greatly missed, but his legacy will ensure the continued care of all veterans in need.”

“He was a champion for every issue that we had for helping veterans,” said Dale Barnett of Georgia, the national commander’s representative on the Legion’s Legislative Commission. “He always said, ‘What’s good for veterans, I’m all for.’ He lived to work for the veteran.”

Did you know?

- The American Legion Department of California can claim the most National Oratorical contest champions – eight – since the program began in 1938. The Department of Maryland has had six winners, and the departments of Illinois, New York and Texas have had five winners each.

www.legion.org/oratorical
**Florida youth wins Oratorical championship**

Florida’s Geeta Minocha captured first place April 12 in The American Legion 78th Annual High School Oratorical Scholarship Program – “A Constitutional Speech Contest.” A senior from Vanguard High School in Ocala, Fla., Minocha earned an $18,000 college scholarship and an all-expense paid trip to the Legion’s national convention in Baltimore.

Minocha, sponsored by Ocala Memorial Post 27, won for her prepared oration, “Our Greatest Honor,” and for her assigned oration on the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted American women the right to vote.

Rowan Macwan, a high school junior from Naperville, Ill., earned a $16,000 college scholarship with a second-place finish, while Emma Skahill, a senior from Earlham, Iowa, earned a $14,000 scholarship and finished third.

“This will provide me an outlet to pursue really my career, my dreams, my passion,” Minocha said. “Paying for (college) was always a huge concern for me, so now that I have at least a scholarship to help me out, I’m a bit at more at ease with myself and my family about that. (And) I think it’s given me a lot of confidence in myself. It’s a sort of this realization that I can do what I put my mind to.”

In her prepared oration, Minocha said the Constitution was not a document that could have declared George Washington a king, but was instead a document “remodeling the government of the United States.” In her assigned oration, Minocha said that while the 19th Amendment paved the way for progress, more work remained. “We must continue to fight for a society in which every citizen is treated equally,” she said.

**DATELINE: CAPITOL HILL**

**Military construction, VA funding gets preliminary approval**

On April 30, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 2029, the Fiscal Year 2016 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill by a vote of 255-163, sending the measure to the Senate. The legislation contains funding to house, train and equip military personnel; provide housing and services to military families and help maintain base infrastructure; and for programs under the jurisdiction of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Total Military Construction funding is $7.7 billion – an increase of $904 million above fiscal 2015 and $755 million less than the president’s request. This includes funds for large and small construction, and renovation projects on military bases. Of the amount provided $532 million is for Overseas Contingency Operations. Specific provisions of interest to The American Legion include:

- **Military Family Housing** – $1.4 billion for construction, operation and maintenance of military family housing. This is $223 million above fiscal 2015 and the same as the president’s budget request. The funding is for 1.3 million military families currently served by the program.
- **Military Medical Facilities** – $607 million for construction and alterations for new or existing military medical facilities, an increase of $121 million above fiscal 2015.
- **VA Medical Services** - $48.6 billion providing for 6.9 million patients. Within this total, funding includes: $7.5 billion in mental health care services; $6.7 billion in homeless veterans treatment, services, housing and job training; $250 million in rural health initiatives; $232 million for traumatic brain injury treatment; and $144 million in suicide-prevention activities.
- **VA Electronic Health Record** - $233 million for modernization of the VA electronic health record system. To help ensure veterans get proper care through the timely and accurate exchange of medical data between VA, DoD, and the private sector, the bill includes language restricting funding until the VA demonstrates progress on the system’s functionality and interoperability.
- **Disability Claims Processing Backlog** - $290 million for the paperless claims processing system, $141 million for digital scanning of health records and $26 million for centralized mail. The legislation continues reporting requirements to track each regional office’s performance on claims processing, and includes funding to support 770 new staff to tackle claims appeals and other needs to reduce the outrageous claims backlog.

An amendment to the VA portion of the bill was introduced by Rep. David Price, D-N.C., and adopted on voice vote; it adds $15 million in funds for VA medical research, offset by a reduction in VA information technology funds.
MEMBERSHIP INCENTIVES AND AWARDS

POST EXCELLENCE AWARD CONTINUES

The Post Excellence Award program honors posts that show excellence in membership participation, youth activities, community service, and support to veterans and U.S. troops.

Criteria
- **Membership.** Post membership must be at least one member more than the previous year. A post officer must attend district meetings.
- **Youth activities.** The post must sponsor and actively participate in at least one primary youth program: Boys State, Legion Baseball, Oratorical Contest, Boy Scouts of America or Junior Shooting Sports.
- **Community service.** The post must organize a community service project that involves members of the Legion, Auxiliary or Sons of The American Legion. A monetary donation may only be one part of a project.
- **Service to troops or veterans.** The post must organize a project supporting troops or veterans (for example, Family Support Network or Operation Comfort Warriors) that involves members of the Legion, Auxiliary or SAL outside the post. A monetary donation may only be one part of a project.

Certification. District commanders must certify posts as having fulfilled the four specified criteria, and submit a list of the post’s name, number, address and commander’s name to department headquarters. If possible, accompany with copies of press releases submitted to local media that raise awareness for the projects and enhance the Legion’s public image.

Awards. Each qualifying post, as well as district commanders whose districts have at least 50 percent of posts reach certification, will receive a certificate of recognition.

GOLD BRIGADE AWARD

Legionnaires who recruit 50 or more new members (transfers do not count as new members) into The American Legion by the May target date will qualify for enrollment in The American Legion’s elite Gold Brigade. These Legionnaires will be awarded unique gifts that designate affiliation with the Gold Brigade of The American Legion. The gifts awarded to a Gold Brigader will depend on the number of times he/she has qualified for this award.

First time Gold Brigade members receive a Gold Brigade patch, a special Gold Brigade cap pin, a Gold Brigade certificate, and a designer jacket or polo shirt or sweater with a Gold Brigade logo.

Second time (or more) Gold Brigade members receive a Gold Brigade patch and certificate, a hash mark for a jacket sleeve, and a designer jacket or polo shirt or sweater with a Gold Brigade logo.

A Gold Brigader who has won the award for five consecutive years is eligible for a distinctive Gold Brigade blazer. A Legionnaire may only qualify once every five years.

A Gold Brigader who has earned the award for at least six consecutive years or more is eligible for a $150 check and a Legion cap with the inscription "Master Recruiter."

Awards. Each qualifying post, as well as district commanders whose districts have at least 50 percent of posts reach certification, will receive a certificate of recognition.

Note: Department adjutants must submit all Gold Brigade certification forms on pages 20-22 to National Headquarters by the last day of May.

A MESSAGE FROM MEMBERSHIP

“*When things don’t go right the first time, our first inclination is to change everything and start all over. This is the wrong approach to use. We must stay the course. We cannot continue to place so much time and effort on just those things that didn’t go as well as expected. That time would be best served looking at the successes we have had and building on them.*”
Doolittle Raiders give Congressional Medal to museum

Exactly 73 years after the daring Doolittle Raiders’ assault on Tokyo, the last two surviving members presented the group’s Congressional Gold Medal to the National Museum of the United States Air Force on April 18.

Retired Lt. Col. Dick Cole, 99, gave the medal to the museum’s director in a ceremony at the museum near Dayton, Ohio. “We want to thank Congress for enacting and presenting the Congressional Gold Medal to the Tokyo Raiders this day,” said Cole, one of the two remaining Raiders. “We are honored to accept this prestigious and most appreciated award.”

The medal, the highest civilian honor Congress can give on behalf of the American people, arrived in a ceremonial B-25 flight. It was awarded to the Raiders in May of last year.

“We proudly hand over our Congressional Gold Medal to (museum director retired Lt. Gen.) Jack Hudson, who we trust will respectfully guard it and have it securely displayed ... for the world to see and appreciate,” Cole said.

The group’s medal will join the museum’s diorama that depicts the legendary raid.