Newly elected American Legion National Commander Mike Helm wants his fellow Legionnaires to "stay on course" this year to "continue to live and honor the great traditions and values established by our founders nearly a century ago. These policies and traditions that got us here will continue to guide us forward."

Helm was elected national commander on Aug. 28 during the 96th American Legion national convention in Charlotte, N.C. A U.S. Army Rangers veteran and member of Jack Helt Post 313 in Lebanon, Neb., Helm has served as post, county, district, department and national vice commander, and has chaired the National Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation and Foreign Relations commissions. He will use his VA&R experience this year to focus on current issues with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"Under the leadership of our (immediate Past National Commander Dan Dellinger), we have drawn the line in the sand," Helm said. "We say now that the health-care needs of the individual veteran must be met in a timely manner. We say that the VA can do a better job in the claims and appeals process. At the same time, we will continue to seek out answers to what went wrong at the VA and why it went wrong. We know that what happened wasn't an accident or a circumstance. There is an entrenchment in VA that is not helpful to veterans’ health care or compensation. We will find it and get rid of it.

"At the same time, we will continue to support the VA as a national provider of veterans’ health care. We need our VA medical
COMMANDER’S MESSAGE

American Legion Charities needs your support

Each year, the elected American Legion national commander fundraises for a program within the organization that supports veterans, servicemembers and their families. Over the past few years it’s been the Child Welfare Foundation, the Legacy Scholarship Fund, Operation Comfort Warriors and the National Emergency Fund.

As your 2014-2015 American Legion national commander, I have set a goal for the Legion family to raise a combined $4 million for the various Legion charitable programs, rather than focusing on a specific fundraising program, American Legion Charities provides direct support and assistance to veterans, military personnel, families and communities.

Your generous tax-deductible donations help provide: financial assistance to military and veteran families with children at home who are in need; relief for families of veterans who have suffered devastating losses after natural disasters; employment opportunities for transitioning servicemembers through the hosting of job fairs; representation on Capitol Hill to protect military retiree benefits and to ensure quality of life for military members and veterans; and youth an opportunity to participate in one of the Legion's premier youth programs such as Legion Baseball, Boys Nation, Oratorical Contest or Shooting Sports.

I am leaving the choice of fundraising to you. All I ask is that you give. America is paying attention to The American Legion not just because we are right on the issues, but because we are doing these great things in our communities. Many of those charities benefit not only members of the military and veterans, but also their families – which matters. Most veterans believe that the nicest thing you can do for them is to be kind to their families.

The most common request of a soldier who is dying on the battlefield is 'Tell my wife I love her.' Nothing will be appreciated by a veteran more than taking care of his or her family. And that’s exactly what these programs are intended to do. They are intended to support the families of men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our nation.

Learn more about American Legion Charities online: www.legion.org/donate

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 American Legion Family member who obtains three new 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.

www.legion.org/commander/pin
$1 million raised for children of fallen heroes

The 2014 Legacy Ride raised more than $435,000 for the scholarship; more donations poured in during national convention.

By Daniel S. Wheeler

I am proud to say that we recently had the biggest turnout for an American Legion Legacy Run – more than 600 Legion Riders participated in the ninth annual Ride, Aug. 17-21. The Run left Indianapolis, traversed 1,336 miles through eight states and ended in Charlotte, N.C., for the 96th National Convention.

More than $435,000 was raised during the five-day ride for the Legion’s Legacy Scholarship, which benefits children of U.S. military personnel killed since Sept. 11, 2001. Also, more than $510,000 was donated during national convention and a final donation of $53,000 was made by American Legion Charities on the final day of the convention, bringing the total to $1 million.

Top donors included the Department of Minnesota Legion Riders ($87,000), the Department of Wisconsin (more than $70,000), the South Carolina Legion Riders (more than $43,000), the Department of Pennsylvania ($40,000) and Converse (Texas) Post 593 ($32,000).

Since 2006, Legion Riders have raised more than $5 million for the Legacy Scholarship. I’m thankful for our Legion Riders – they make the scholarship possible.

It’s our responsibility to make sure their children have a chance at an education, and that’s why The American Legion Legacy Fund was established. It’s a chance to show our appreciation for those tremendous sacrifices made by our men and women in uniform.

While the Riders generosity shines through the Legacy Run, the 106,000 Riders nationwide also support their fellow veterans and community members by hosting fundraising projects and participating in events. For example, Legion Riders from Livonia, Mich., recently helped lay to rest seven cremated remains of veterans who had been left at a local funeral home for many years. One veteran, Norval Marlett, served in the Spanish-American War in 1898. Nearly 20 Legion Riders escorted the remains to the burial site. In May, Legion Riders from Post 471 in Portsmouth, Ohio, escorted about 157 soldiers from the Ohio Army National Guard’s 1191st Engineer Company to Rickenbacker International Airport in Columbus, Ohio. And Riders from Post 364 in Corpus Christi, Texas, hosted a chili cook-off to support the Legion’s Operation Comfort Warriors program. They raised $500.

Legion Riders also participate in Rolling Thunder, the annual POW/MIA rally in Washington, D.C., over Memorial Day weekend; ceremonial rides to honor fallen military men and women and to protect the sanctity of their funerals from those who would dishonor their memory; local memorial ceremonies and community parades; and more.

Get involved with American Legion Riders by finding a chapter in your area online:

www.legion.org/riders/chapterlocator

Apply to the Legacy Scholarship online:

www.legion.org/scholarships/legacy
facilities because we know it can be and is the best care anywhere if administrated properly. Those calling for the end of the VA and privatization of veterans health care are wrong. We continue to see The American Legion as partners and friends of the VA. We know they can and will do better.”

National security also is on Helm’s radar. “We will also continue our efforts to end illegal immigration,” he said. “It is a national security issue of great importance. Fair and legal immigration is a good thing that has helped build this country into a great nation. Anything else is a constant danger — especially amnesty proposals which seek to reward illegal behavior and penalize those who have waited patiently to immigrate the legal way.”

When it comes to membership growth, Helm said he wants Legionnaires to focus on the four Rs: recruiting, revitalization, renewals and reconnecting. “We will always be about service first, but folks, we can’t provide the programs or the service without the membership,” Helm said. “Practice those four Rs. Recruit every eligible veteran that you come in contact with. Recruit their sons, grandsons, wives, daughters and granddaughters into the American Legion family.

“You don’t need to be near a military base to reconnect with servicemembers. Reserve and guard units have deployed in record numbers since 9/11, and most are eligible for American Legion membership. “Renewal efforts shouldn’t just include those who left your post in the past year, but check back on those who might have left five or even 10 years ago. They might have had a change of heart or simply forgot to renew because nobody was proactive enough to take an interest in them.”

Elected national vice commanders were Doug Haggan, Department of France; Paul O. Sanford, Department of Kansas; Richard W. Neville, Department of North Carolina; William R. Bryant, Department of Virginia; and Gerald L. Jacobs, Department of Nebraska. Also appointed were National Historian Sue Mason, Department of California; National Sergeant-at-Arms Leon Hagan, Department of Nebraska; and National Chaplain Randy Cash, Department of South Carolina.

Exercise your right to vote

American Legion members are encouraged to renew their commitment for continued service to this country by being politically active as individuals and by encouraging all Americans to register and vote in all elections. It was on this premise that the Legion’s “Get Out the Vote” program was initiated shortly after the organization’s inception. Today it is as important as it was in elections past.

The “Get Out the Vote” brochure helps Legionnaires, posts, districts and departments to fully involve themselves in the electoral process by serving as poll volunteers and workers, and by encouraging and assisting others to register and vote.

For example, Legionnaires at Post 13 in Monroe, La., are exercising their right to vote in the midterm elections this fall and encouraging others to do the same by hosting their first “Get Out the Veterans Vote” ceremony on Oct. 5. The event will be held at the post and will feature 13 U.S. flags, a band and speakers such as Department of Louisiana Commander Bill Foley and former state Rep. Kay Kellogg Katz, who will speak on the sacrifices that veterans have made to protect America’s freedom. Post 13 members publicized the event through public service announcements and media releases, and by asking all veterans service organizations in the area to participate.

“Veterans must participate in the political system to get their voices heard,” said Huey O’Neal, a member of Post 13, “‘They served in the military to defend and protect the Constitution and now they must continue to do so by voting. Voting is the responsibility of everyone that loves our country.’

Download The American Legion’s “Get Out the Vote” brochure for free online and begin promoting the importance of voting, especially as midterm elections draw near. Legionnaires can make a difference in voter turnout.

Download the “Get Out the Vote” brochure: www.legion.org/publications

Post 14 in Smyrna, Del.

In 1924, 18 World War I members of the David C. Harrison American Legion Post 14 in Smyrna, Del., founded the first American Legion ambulance service in the world. The veterans volunteered their time to transport the sick and injured to hospitals in the town of Smyrna and others nearby, such as Wilmington, Dover and Milford. Post 14’s ambulance service is still in operation and is staffed largely by volunteers.

Pictured in the photo is Kelly Polito, a member of Post 14 and a 50-year volunteer for the ambulance service. He used to drive Cadillacs in the 1960s to transport patients.

Share Your Post’s Legacy

Upload photos, print material and videos related to your post’s history on the Legion’s Centennial Celebration web page: www.centennial.legion.org
HONOR & REMEMBRANCE

Jerry Hedrick will always be remembered

By Steve Brooks

American Legion Past National Commander Dan Ludwig first met North Carolina Legionnaire Jerry Hedrick in the late 1980s. A friendship formed later — one that left Ludwig among those mourning the loss of Hedrick, who passed away unexpectedly Aug. 25 during the national convention in Charlotte, N.C.

“The more I had exposure to Jerry, the more I liked Jerry,” Ludwig said. “Jerry Hedrick and I never had a disagreement. The reason he had a big body was because he had such a big heart. He was a team builder, and he loved his wife, his country, The American Legion and everyone in it. He worked hard to include everyone, and he was pretty successful at that.

“He was an amazing man, and he will be missed for a long time by a lot of us.”

Hedrick, a 45-year member of Jim Leonard Post 8 in Lexington, N.C., was a past department commander and had served on the National Executive Committee since 1994. He was a member of the National Advisory Committee to the National Commander from 2005 to 2008 and had served on the National Resolutions Subcommittee since 1997 — the past six as chairman.

Past National Commander Jake Comer, whose tenure leading the organization coincided with Hedrick’s year as department commander, said Hedrick’s work on the Resolutions Subcommittee was critical. “Nothing happens in The American Legion without a resolution,” Comer said. “If we had an issue come up during the national convention or the NEC meetings, we had to depend on Jerry to put the resolution through. He was a stalwart in those types of areas.”

Comer had known Hedrick for four decades and had developed a close friendship with him. “He was just a super, super guy,” Comer said. “He’s really going to be missed.”

A Vietnam War Army veteran, Hedrick worked for the U.S. Postal Service for more than 30 years before retiring. Hedrick also was instrumental in helping Shelby, N.C., become the permanent home of The American Legion Baseball World Series.

“Jerry was Mr. American Legion,” said North Carolina Adjutant Frank Stancil. “I don’t recall any circumstance where you could go to Jerry and not get a solution on anything American Legion. And he was his post’s commander. With all of the things he was involved with on the national level, he was still involved heavily in his own department and in his own post.”

He also was president of the North Carolina National Convention Corporation when he passed away. “One of the things Jerry was happiest about was the success of the party following the (national convention) parade,” Comer said. “That was his idea.

When it comes to replacing Hedrick, “You don’t. You just don’t,” Stancil said. “He just had so much knowledge, and The American Legion was his life.

“He was a like a brother to me. I’ve been adjutant for 12 years, and he’s called me two to three times a day every day during that time. I’m really going to miss those calls.”

Condolences can be sent to his wife, Marie, at 306 Westdale Ave., Lexington, N.C., 27295.

NATIONAL CONVENTION

Legionnaire reunites with soldier he saved in Afghanistan

While serving in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2004, Army Special Forces veteran Roy Wilkins lost his left leg to an improvised explosive device that killed his comrade. He was pulled from the Humvee wreckage, stabilized and transferred to Germany to recover, and he always wondered for the past 10 years who saved his life. On Aug. 25, Wilkins crossed paths with the retired Army trauma nurse who pulled him from the wreckage — Legionnaire Keith Melick of Leavenworth, Kan.

The encounter happened when Melick, a member of Post 23 and the Legion’s Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission, helped deliver Operation Comfort Warriors donations to veterans at the Salisbury (N.C.) VA Medical Center during the Legion’s 96th national convention. Melick began sharing military stories with Wilkins, who was in the VA’s gymnasium, when they both realized their paths had crossed on the battlefield.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” said Wilkins of Winston-Salem, N.C.

Melick was attached to Wilkins’ Special Forces unit during the mission when his Humvee hit the IED. “I am the medic that pulled him out,” Melick said.

Wilkins said the last words Melick spoke to him were, “I am not going to leave your side.” To hear those words again, Melick got choked up and asked Wilkins if he was a Legionnaire. He is not, and Melick vowed to pay his dues for the next year. “I take care of you from start to finish,” Melick said.

See photos of the reunion:
Did you know?

During the 96th American Legion national convention in Charlotte, N.C.:

- More than 600 Veterans Personal Essential Kits were filled by American Legion family members during the convention and distributed to veterans at Community Link – a non-profit organization that has been assisting homeless veterans throughout North Carolina since 1929. Grant money from The Home Depot Foundation paid for the items, working with Good360, a nationwide non-profit organization that builds corporate relationships in order to raise funds and deliver goods to people in need. The American Legion Veterans Employment and Education Division helped coordinate the effort so the kits could be distributed.

- The American Legion’s National Emergency Fund received more than $270,000 in donations on the convention floor, including $66,000 from the Department of New York; $50,000 from the Department of Ohio; and $40,000 from the Department of Pennsylvania. A donation of $10,000 was also given by Fifth Third Bank. For the year, more than $735,000 was raised for NEF – immediate Past National Commander Dan Dellinger’s fundraising project.

- The American Legion’s Operation Comfort Warriors program purchased $10,000 worth of comfort items and gift cards for veterans at the Salisbury (N.C.) VA Medical Center. The items included clothing, toiletries, cleaning supplies, snacks, water and more. Also, $72,000 was donated to OCW during convention.

- The Home Depot Foundation, which has provided more than $81 million in grants for building projects that benefit veterans over the last three years, is dedicating $1 million for American Legion projects, working through Team Depot. Legionnaires are encouraged to contact their local Home Depot stores and ask for the Team Depot captains who can assist with grant applications. For more information, Legion members can visit: www.homedepotfoundation.org/

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MADE IN THE USA
A MESSAGE FROM MEMBERSHIP

“On average, The American Legion loses 10 to 13 percent of its membership annually from non-renewals. That means every year we have to recruit 10 to 13 percent of our total membership over again just to break even. In a culture of growth, it becomes incredibly hard to recruit existing members over and over again and at the same time recruit new members to show growth. If we focus on retention, and we cut the non-renewal rate down, then new members will add to our overall number and add to our culture of growth as we move toward our 100-year anniversary.”

Learn more about membership messages from watching American Legion videos online: www.legion.org/recruiting

BIG TWELVE COMPETITION

The Big Twelve Competition recognizes departments that meet or exceed their pledged membership goal percentage by the March target date. The percentage does not include members gained through DMS.

The competition is broken down into six categories. The winner in each category will be reimbursed for computer equipment purchases of up to $2,000, while the runners-up in each category will be reimbursed for computer equipment purchases of up to $1,000.

The six categories in the Big Twelve Competition are:

- Category I – departments of 100,000 or more members
- Category II – departments of 70,000-99,999 members
- Category III – departments of 40,000-69,999 members
- Category IV – departments of 25,000-39,999 members
- Category V – departments of 10,000-24,999 members
- Category VI – departments of 9,999 or fewer members

Read more about the Big Twelve Competition by downloading the online National Membership Points Award Manual publication located under Internal Affairs.

www.legion.org/publications

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.

www.legion.org/commander/postexcellence
T-shirt sells Legion membership

When past American Legion Department of Idaho Commander Rolland Adams wasn’t sporting a suit and tie during Legion business travels, he wore his favorite T-shirt – a Marine veteran shirt featuring the Legion emblem and the message, “Still Serving America.” Adams said his branch of service shirt sells Legion membership because it attracts questions.

“I like that it has the branch of service on it and The American Legion emblem,” Adams said. “I dress exactly like this a lot.”

Adams said no other shirt that he owns attracts Legion membership questions like his American Legion Marine veteran shirt, saying he has signed up several members and left many other people with membership applications and information booklets about the Legion.

“At gas stations and traveling around Idaho as department commander, someone would start talking to me because they saw that I am a Marine,” Adams said. “I give everyone membership applications or sign them up on the spot.”

The T-shirts, sold through American Legion Emblem Sales, are available for Army, Marine, Navy and Air Force veterans.

Purchase your T-shirt for $10.95 online and begin attracting Legion membership: www.emblem.legion.org/Page-33/products/1160/

Do you have a membership story to share? Please email it to: dispatch@legion.org