

VETERANS IN THE CLASSROOM HISTORY IN THE FIRST PERSON

A Program of the National Americanism Commission, The American Legion

The American Legion believes that our military veterans are living textbooks of American History. Their accounts of experiences in a uniform of the United States Armed Forces should be preserved and shared with others, especially with students in America's schools.

Veterans in the Classroom is, as the name implies, an initiative spearheaded by The American Legion to organize a nationwide effort to connect veterans with schools and ultimately put them in the classrooms. In so doing, students learn firsthand from the veterans about the horrors of war, life in the military and how the service of America's veterans affected their lives and the lives of others.



The American Legion founders knew the importance of remembering our country's involvement in wars and armed conflicts by including in the Preamble to The American Legion Constitution the words "... To preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars." The founders hoped that

by remembering foreign policy mistakes, future wars could be avoided.

Veterans of service in the United States Armed Forces have participated in many monumental events or have been eyewitnesses to them, thus putting them in a unique position to help students to learn and appreciate the sacrifices and achievements of America's service men and women. Firsthand accounts add the perspective of being there, of learning from those who actually fought the battles with their lives on the line.

Veterans in the Classroom became a national initiative in May 2002, when the National Executive Committee of The American Legion passed Resolution 33, titled "Veterans in the Classroom." The resolution establishes the program, gives it a name and encourages departments to develop a registry of speakers from its membership to speak before school groups and other youth organizations. It also authorizes the National Americanism Commission to develop resource materials and to prepare and distribute instructional literature.

President George W. Bush drew attention to the veterans and school relationship in a visit to Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville, Maryland, in November 2001. During that visit, the President outlined plans for the Lessons of Liberty initiative, an inter-agency cooperative effort of the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Education. Its objectives were similar to those of The American Legion's *Veterans in the Classroom* but were mainly activities centered around Veterans Day, November 11. The Legion's program promotes a school and

veteran cooperative relationship throughout the year.

Having a *Veterans in the Classroom* program in the schools helps both The American Legion and the school(s). It can provide the local post with a venue to promote youth program participation, provide an opportunity to share scholarship information and to instruct on flag history and/or respect. In short, it creates opportunity to cultivate a relationship between post and school, something that has, at times, been elusive.

In schools where the program has become established, veterans sometimes take on celebrity status. Students gain a greater respect and understanding of the veterans' sacrifices and commitment to service. It also allows students to focus on the true meaning of patriotism as they study real issues of America's history.

The interaction of veterans and students is an interaction of two generations of Americans, without the slant of media moguls and textbook academicians. Veterans who fought on the battlefields of Europe, in Vietnam, Korea, and the Persian Gulf will give students a better understanding of the sacrifices our armed forces are making today by reflecting on their lives in past wars.

Starting a Program

To organize a *Veterans in the Classroom* program, either the post or the school must take the initiative to forge a relationship. That association can be built around a Veterans Day or Memorial Day observance and then carried on to the next level with appearances in the classrooms throughout the school year.

The initial program can be built around the award winning video program "America's Veterans," which was developed and produced by the Center for Educational Resources for The American Legion. This 23-minute program addresses subjects that include: who are veterans; how and why we honor veterans;

what we can learn from the lives of veterans; and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

The video program comes with a comprehensive "teacher's guide" along with a volunteer classroom presenter outline. The video and its accompanying materials are available from American Legion Flag and Emblem Sales at www.emblem.legion.org.

Representatives of the local American Legion post should visit with school officials, specifically those educators who teach American History. Discuss how local veterans can contribute to the students' understanding of military service and its historical implications. This meeting is important in that both parties can use the occasion to voice their concerns, their objectives and set guidelines for meeting their goals.

After the ground rules are established, presenters can be contacted and a database developed that would connect specific historical incidents with those veterans who may have served in that theater or at that time in history. Veterans who have spoken to students in the classroom describe the experience as a rewarding and personally satisfying experience. They share many kinds of stories about their military training, combat, and both humorous and serious stories about life in another era and in another land.

Following are suggested activities that may be included in a *Veterans in the Classroom* program.

Elementary/Middle School Students

- Explain what a veteran is, why veterans deserve recognition, and speak about those serving today in the military. This would also be an opportunity to talk about The American Legion, its purposes and what programs it sponsors. This would be a good introductory session before moving on to ...

- Flag Education. Elementary/middle school is probably the best age group for learning about the proper display, respect and care of the U.S. Flag. Publications such as *Let's Be Right on Flag Etiquette*, *the U.S. Flag Code*, a 20-minute DVD and learning package titled *For Which It Stands*, and several educational comics are available from American Legion Flag and Emblem Sales to help with this activity. This program may also include the subject of ...
- Citizenship. What makes a good citizen? What obligations does a citizen have to his or her government? Teachers may prepare the students by having them read books on the subject, or learn about outstanding leaders, past and present. The educational comic book *Light of Liberty* addresses the subject and is available from American Legion Flag and Emblem Sales.
- Elementary and Middle School students may "adopt a veteran." Students can interview a veteran and learn when, where, why and how he or she served their country. This would be an appropriate time to ask "did any of your family serve in the military?" Are they members of The American Legion? No? Here's a membership application and my card.

High School Students

- Students in high school are about the same age as those that served or are currently serving in the United States Armed Forces. Consequently, this is a good audience to explain the role of the military in today's society and why the military is important to safeguarding our liberties and our way of life. This is an appropriate subject to cover on the first meeting of students and presenter.
- The veteran should speak on their military service. When and where did they serve? What did they do? Compare their service to the depiction in television and movie war stories. What values did they learn from their experiences? How did their service

influence their sense of patriotism and citizenship? Encourage voter registration, mentoring and community service.

- Involve students in the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress. Congress created the program in 2000 to preserve the accounts of men and women involved in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars. The Folklife Center of the Library of Congress is capturing the information and documents for future generations. Details are available from the Library of Congress website at: www.loc.gov/vets.
- Talk about opportunities that are offered to young people by The American Legion. Encourage participation in programs like the Oratorical Contest, Shooting Sports, American Legion Boys State and Auxiliary Girls State, Baseball, Junior Law Cadet and state and local Legion youth programs.
- Do you want the students' attention? Mention money. Mention *Need A Lift?*, The American Legion's scholarships and financial aid electronic publication. This can be a separate presentation before a class or at a Career Night program at the school. Have *Need A Lift?* CD's available for the students and the teachers. Copies of *Need A Lift?* may be purchased from American Legion Flag and Emblem Sales or viewed online at www.needalift.org.

Tens of millions of Americans have served in the Armed Forces of the United States during the past century and hundreds of thousands have given their lives for our nation. It goes without saying that the contributions and the sacrifices made by these men and women who served have been vital in maintaining our freedoms and our way of life.

The all-volunteer Armed Forces has resulted in a sharp decline in the number of American families with connections and familiarity with today's armed services. Because of this, young people are not aware

today of the contributions made by those who serve in uniform. The American Legion hopes to change that with *Veterans in the Classroom*.

Veterans in the Classroom... is an activity of the National Americanism Commission of The American Legion, established in May 2002 as a result of the adoption of NEC Resolution 33. It reads:

WHEREAS, President George W. Bush has encouraged our Nation's schools to invite veterans into their classrooms to talk about their experiences in the armed forces of the United States; and

WHEREAS, The National Executive Committee of the American Legion passed Resolution 48 titled "Veterans Day" at its meeting on May 7-8, 1997, that urged all American Legion posts to cooperate with their local schools in providing speakers for Veterans Day observances; and

WHEREAS, Veterans have participated in many monumental events while in the service of our country or have been eyewitnesses to them, thus putting them in a unique position to help students to learn and appreciate the sacrifices and achievements of America's military service men and women; and

WHEREAS, The Preamble to The American Legion's Constitution encourages Legionnaires "... to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the great wars;" and

WHEREAS, The American Legion's commitment to education is well documented in its Policy on Education and other mandated positions; and

WHEREAS, The liaison between American Legion posts and schools in their communities will benefit both entities and provide a means for the Post to promote its programs among the teachers and students; and

WHEREAS, Involvement in the Veterans in the Classroom program by active duty service

men and women and National Guard members and reservists provides membership opportunities for American Legion recruiters; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, By the National Executive Committee of The American Legion in regular meeting assembled in Indianapolis, Indiana, May 8-9, 2002, That The American Legion encourage Departments to develop a registry of speakers from its membership to speak on their military service experiences to school groups and other youth organizations; and, be it further

RESOLVED, That this program be referred to as "Veterans in the Classrooms"; and, be it finally

RESOLVED, That the National Americanism Commission shall administer the "Veterans in the Classroom" program to include the publication and distribution of instructional literature and the development of program resource materials.

Veterans in the Classroom

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