

VFW Elects First Female Commander-in-Chief

Iraq War vet says leading the VFW is about merit, not gender

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Carol Whitmore of Iowa made VFW history in August when she was elected as the first female VFW Commander-in-Chief. Incidentally, she also is the first Iowan to hold the top position.

A member of VFW Post 9127 in Des Moines, Iowa, Whitmore hopes her gender takes a backseat to the pressing needs of the nation's veterans — needs VFW prioritizes with regularity. With that in mind, it is little wonder Whitmore's slogan: "For Veterans, By Veterans," is meant for all veterans.

"I am a veteran who happens to be a female," Whitmore said. "The position of VFW Commander-in-Chief should always be about merit regardless of whether the person holding it is a man or a woman."

Whitmore said during her tenure as Chief that she wants to focus on carrying out the original mission of the VFW.

"It is what we should all be doing," she added. "And that is truly making a difference and an impact on our fellow veterans' lives."

'LITERALLY THE CAMARADERIE'

A spur-of-the-moment decision in 1977 started Whitmore on the path to her own veteran status. With one year of community college and two years at the University of Northern Iowa under her belt, Whitmore ran out of money for college.

"I did not want a big debt," she recalled. "So I walked into an Army recruiter's office. It was literally that quick of a decision for me. They said, 'You have three years of college, yes, come on in!' Joining was initially about college but became about country. It was literally

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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

the camaraderie and serving my country. That is what kept me in for 36 years.”

Whitmore will tell you that she followed in the footsteps of both her 6-foot-4-inch farmer father who was an Army MP in Germany during WWII, as well as her 5-foot-4-inch mother, who was a nurse.

While Whitmore did not intend on staying in the Army for so long, she did so with the hope of one day getting to deploy.

“It wasn’t until I had more than 30 years that I got to deploy,” she said. “My last hope of deployment finally happened. I turned 55 years old in Iraq.”

The Chief said she did not feel like she had truly served until she was deployed to Balad Air Base in Iraq in 2010 with the 103rd Expeditionary Sustainment Command. While Whitmore had been mobilized quite a bit stateside and also in Central America, this deployment was a first, and for her, long overdue.

“I felt like I had not done my duty,” she added. “This was a logistics type unit, something I had never done. They needed one medical person to go with them, and I was it.”

In Iraq, Whitmore said she was “very fortunate,” as it was toward the end of the war. Her responsibility was to process reports regarding disease and injuries within her command.

“It was not a lot of big medical care,” she said. “However, keeping track of people is still important. I also consider myself fortunate to have been on an Air Force base because they take very good care of their people.”

Whitmore returned home in 2011 and retired with 36 years of military service in 2013.

‘THEY NEVER QUESTIONED THAT I WAS A VETERAN’

While Whitmore’s husband, Brad, had long been a VFW Life member, she did not know that much about the organization other than she was not eligible until her Iraq deployment.

That all changed when a fellow nurse invited Whitmore to stop in and check out Post 9127 in Des Moines.

“I became a Life member immediately,” Whitmore said. “It was such a good experience walking through those doors and the way people welcomed me. They never questioned that I was a veteran. To me, that was the pivotal moment of joining because they didn’t assume that I had not served.”

From that moment on, Whitmore was an active VFW member serving first as a Post trustee and then adjutant. For many years, she served as adjutant while Brad was the

quartermaster.

Today, she maintains her Gold Legacy Life membership at the Post where she first began.

She held positions at VFW's District and Department levels, which put her on the road to becoming the first female commander in the history of the VFW Department of Iowa in 2018. As Department commander, she earned All-American honors.

On the national level, Whitmore has served on the Legislative Committee, the General Resolutions Committee and on the National Council of Administration from 2019 to 2023.

'BRING THEM ALL HOME'

Whitmore said that advocacy, the work of VFW Accredited Service Officers and the POW/MIA mission are the focus of her year as Chief.

"I think it is important to get back to what our original mission is," she said. "Programs are wonderful, and they keep us going, but we were not founded on programs. We were founded on advocacy, sitting on the D.C. steps. VFW's National Legislative Service is where we get our business done, and that is how we best take care of our fellow veterans."

Specifically, Whitmore noted VFW's ongoing fight against so-called "claim sharks," who make it a practice to rob veterans of their earned benefits.

Another priority is the Major Richard Star Act, which would benefit those medically retired with less than 20 years. Getting it approved is a legislative initiative that Whitmore said VFW will continue to put its full might behind.

"We need to continue our work on Capitol Hill to make sure veterans are not taken advantage of and that they are given the benefits that we were all promised and deserve," she said. "VFW makes one of the biggest impacts on Capitol Hill — more than any other organization."

Reflecting on her official VFW visit to Vietnam last year to observe the work of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Whitmore said her eyes and heart were "re-opened" to what the families of the missing deserve.

"We need to bring everyone home," she said of the more than 83,000 Americans still unaccounted for. "I know it's been said many times, but let's bring them all home. These families need and deserve closure."

'A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE'

Whitmore reiterated that while her year as Chief should not be about gender, she does

believe more female vets will take notice and join the VFW and vie for top leadership positions.

“Women need to feel they belong here if they are eligible,” Whitmore said. “There are so many out there who feel undervalued and underappreciated and under voiced in a lot of different aspects. I am hopeful that they see that anybody who feels undervalued as a veteran should belong.”

Whitmore said part of the reason she became a nurse is that she enjoys taking care of people. In her position at the helm of the organization, she will work to make sure her fellow veterans have the lives they deserve.

She also believes that her status as VFW’s first female Commander-in-Chief is something the organization’s founders would support.

“Getting to go back to the VFW National Convention in Columbus, Ohio, where it all began is pretty special,” Whitmore concluded. “I hope the founders would say, ‘Okay, this is a good change.’ It should never be, ‘It’s about time there’s a female commander-in-chief.’ It should be about this is a change, a different perspective about what the VFW is and what the VFW looks like now and in the future.”

This article is featured in the 2025 September/October issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.