

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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A Force for Good

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# A NATURAL AFFINITY:



PHOTOS COURTESY CHRISTOPHER MYHAND

## VETERANS AS LAW ENFORCERS

BY JEROME GREER CHANDLER

Service, structure and sacrifice—the same qualities that bond war veterans in combat—underpin policing in America. Veterans form a disproportionate share of these ranks, and to the benefit of the citizens they protect.

ABOVE: Capt. Christopher Myhand of the Apex (N.C.) Police Department developed a specially trained cadre of veteran-officers to help fellow vets in civilian life experiencing crises. Myhand is an Afghanistan and Iraq veteran.

Numbers alone don't begin to tell the story, one of service and shared sacrifice. But statistics do put the affinity between veterans and law enforcement officers in rough perspective.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) latest *Current Population Survey*, some 3.14 million Americans are employed in "protective service occupations" in this country. That includes everything from security guards to firefighters; correctional officers to police officers. Some 20% of them—a full fifth—are veterans when only 12.7% of adults are former military members.

BLS doesn't break down the percentage of police and sheriff's deputies who are vets, but there are 680,000 such officers altogether. Add to that 164,000 detectives and criminal investigators; 126,000 first-line supervisors of police and detectives; 3,000 transit and railroad police; 3,000 conservation agents; and the total is 976,000—just shy of 1 million to police a nation of 320 million sometimes fractious souls.

Woven through the fabric of all those law enforcement uniforms is a strong strand of military camouflage and dress blue. The fit is all but seamless. Some of the reasons why one should give pause to the chorus of those who find satisfaction in vili-fying law enforcement.

## COMMUNITY SERVICE

Michael Willis isn't a veteran, but the national training director for the United States Deputy Sheriff's Association (USDSA) has "a lot of experience training with military operations." What jumps out at him, what confirms the fact vets and cops are cut from the same cloth, is that both "care about their community. They want to give back." A colleague agrees.

"For me, it goes back to service," agrees Capt. Christopher Blair Myhand of the Apex (N.C.) Police Department. Apex is a fast-growing suburb of Raleigh.

Myhand deployed to Afghanistan in 2004 and 2005 with H Co., 3rd Bn., 116th Inf. Regt., 29th Inf. Div., of the Virginia National Guard. That was followed by

a 2009 tour to Iraq with A Co., 1st Bn., 120th Inf. Regt., 30th Heavy Brigade Combat Team (N.C. ANG).

Myhand says, "When I was in the Army I served my nation and was part of something that was bigger than myself. With my police department, I serve my community on a much different scale. But I get that same sense of pride that I'm doing something for someone else."



Iraq vet Jose Mariscal is a project manager for the International Association of Chiefs of Police.



Michael Lloyd (left), a Marine vet of Okinawa, is an officer with the Wichita (Kan.) Police Department.

That "someone else" has a hauntingly familiar ring to it in Apex. Myhand has helped develop a cadre of specially trained officers, military veterans all, to respond to fellow vets in crisis. "Maybe they're in a suicidal moment, acting out through self-medication or have PTSD or TBI-related issues," he says. "The hope is officers make that connection—as a veteran—and establish rapport to break the cycle."

This empathetic outreach was triggered when two of Myhand's officers, both veterans, went on a call where a vet was involved. The officers "helped him out and it worked out great," he says. That led to research, Myhand says, that showed far too many such calls "ended with the veteran being killed by police officers, or a veteran killing the police officer."

He's counting on commonality and camaraderie to make a difference to diffuse the situation. The effort is just beginning in Apex, and Myhand knows he's not going to win every round. "Success for me is when we save one life. Anything beyond that is icing on the cake."

The desire to serve is the common denominator among officers.

"I wanted to do something that was greater than myself," says Jose Mariscal, a project manager for the International Association of Chiefs of Police. He, too, is a veteran, having served in Iraq from March 2003 through March 2004 with D Btry, 2nd Bn., 20th Field Artillery Regt., 4th Inf. Div. He recalls the camaraderie, the brotherhood born of a desire "to do something bigger than yourself," to serve the greater public good.

That ethical outlook translates easily into law enforcement.

Michael Lloyd, a Marine from 1992 through 1997 was stationed on Okinawa and in South Korea. His last unit was Weapons Co., 1st Bn., 2nd Marines.

Now an officer with the Wichita (Kan.) Police Department, Lloyd is a true believer in community policing—an empathetic, hands-on brand of law enforcement that all but embeds officers in a neighborhood to better serve and protect. "I've been working in community policing for 15 years now," he says. "I love working with my community ... being involved with people."

That involvement knows no time clock. "Almost everybody has my cell phone number," he says. "Even when I'm not working [the neighborhood] people can still reach out to me. I think that helps out right there."

The line isn't reserved only for emer-

agencies. It need not be a criminal matter. "They may have a simple question," he says. It's just such stuff that builds bonds between citizens and law enforcement.

Sometimes, service is served up with liberal doses of symbolism. Depending on the circumstances, "wearing the uniform can [provide] a sense of hope in communities that are undergoing a lot of stress because of crime," says New York City Police Department (NYPD) Sgt. Wilem Wong. He's a VFW life member and belongs to Post 1666 in Yonkers.

As an Army reservist, the uniform he wore brought hope to places such as Baghdad, where he was deployed in 2008 with the 308th Civil Affairs Brigade Functional Specialty Team, a unit attached to the XVIII Airborne Corps. Wong

promoted provincial elections, national literacy and economic development.

Whether NYPD blue, or Army camo, the uniform "projects authority to the public," says Wong. "We are a visible extension of the government." And the government that practices prudent policing—be that beat the Bronx or Baghdad—fights forces that rip societies apart. Wong believes citizens of strife-ridden cities, foreign and domestic, just "want to get back to some type of stability."

Veterans are pretty good at establishing stability. Mike Bosak is a retired NYPD supervisor of detectives in the Bronx. From October 1966 through October 1967, he was with the 25th Infantry Division in South Vietnam.

He says being a vet helped him do his job better on the frequently mean streets he patrolled. "It gave me discipline," he says. "It gave me purpose. I knew there was always a reason behind some sort of rule. The NYPD was no different than the Army [in terms of] the types of people and the way things are done." He says the military can serve as superb preparation for a successful career in law enforcement.



Wilem Wong

COURTESY WILEM WONG

The executive director of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA) agrees. Although not a veteran himself, Steve Lenkart contends the percentage of vets within his 26,000-member organization is significant. "Fifty percent seems pretty reasonable," says the former suburban Chicago police officer and Department of Homeland Security director.

Illustrative of the strong affinity veterans have for federal law enforcement agencies is this: 29% of United States



Army vet John Thompson is deputy executive director of the National Association of Sheriffs.

PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN THOMPSON



Hector Dittamo (left), father of Paul (right), is active in the Concerns of Police Survivors.

PHOTOS COURTESY HECTOR DITTAMO

Customs and Border Protection agents are veterans.

FLEOA's members hail from an array of federal agencies—Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration—places where sense of service is ingrained. "It almost haunts you," he says, "this desire to serve others—whether it be your community or your country. It's hard to shake that," even at the end of a very long day spent "seeing the bad side of life."

That desire transcends money. "It's more important than financial gain," says Lenkart. "The average person doesn't have that deep sense of service that people who are attracted to the military, law enforcement and other public service [have]."

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Some slice of that service is born of a common ethical approach to the world, one in which expectations are clear and chains of command unambiguous.

Law enforcement agencies "have an organizational structure like the military," says George Pesta, associate director of the Center for Criminology and Public Policy Research at Florida State University. "That provides some familiarity and comfort to vets coming out. They know what rank is—who's above them and who's below." They also know how to take orders, no trivial trait in today's do-your-own-thing society.

Pesta is no ivory tower academic. He was a Florida National Guardsman, and is also liaison to his college's veterans. As to the affinity between vet and law enforcement officer he says, "The skills line up. There's a lot more camaraderie, teamwork and brotherhood," qualities he asserts, "you can't find in business organizations."

USDSA's Willis believes the military excels in fostering teamwork and discipline. But "a lot of its training is geared toward eliminating the enemy," he points out. Contrast that with law enforcement's emphasis, where "reasonable force, proper use of force" rule.

For a few—specifically some ground combat vets—the transition can be challenging. "Ninety percent of the time, it's fine," says John Thompson, deputy executive director and CEO of the National Association of Sheriffs (NAS). "Guys do extremely well. But it's that 10% [where] law enforcement leaders have to be on their game when they do the selection process."

But that also holds true for selecting candidates from the general population. Like other professions, there will always be some who do not fit the perfect pro-

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file for the position. In most cases, proper training and experience resolves any problems.

Thompson is an Army vet, on active duty from 1973 to 1976. He served as a narcotics dog handler with the 289th MP Company in the Military District of Washington. "When we see failures in law enforcement today," he says, "it's sometimes because officers end up in a bad situation because they don't act properly under stress."

"It really comes down to selection... you have to make sure [applicants] have the right mindset, that they're emotionally intelligent enough to handle that type of position."

That said, the vast majority of veterans not only fit well, they hold the promise of becoming first-rate law enforcement officers.

The Department of Justice certainly saw it that way in 2012 when its Office of Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) plowed \$111 million into the program, funding more than 600 new law enforcement positions for veterans and saving an additional 200, which had been lost to budget cuts, or were in danger of being axed.

All the "Vets-to-Cops" hiring grants were slated to fund military veterans who had served at least 180 days since Sept. 11, 2001. Among the cities accepting funds were Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; Atlanta; Los Angeles; Akron, Ohio; and Tacoma, Wash.

The transition from vet to cop isn't automatic—no plug-and-play proposition. But it does offer law enforcement agencies at all levels of government an opportunity to tap into a relatively ready source of experienced manpower.

## SOCIETAL SACRIFICE

There's a decidedly uncommon denominator at work when it comes to sacrifice. By definition, both the armed forces and law enforcement are called on to make it. "Their willingness to put [it all] on the line is second to none," says the IACP's Mariscal, a VFW member. "It takes a special person" to serve and protect, be it country or community.

Paul Dittamo, 32, was such a person, an officer of the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia.

He died on Oct. 30, 2010, in the line of duty in an auto accident. He wasn't a vet, but his now 74-year-old father Hector is. Hector served as a helicopter door gunner with a "Shotgun Platoon" of the 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam (Soc Trang) in 1964, earning a Purple Heart.

Dittamo understands what it means to serve. He also possesses an all-too-intimate understanding of sacrifice. The DC chapter president of Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.), Dittamo, wife Theresa and their family fashioned a living, breathing memorial to

Suddenly, "someone from the Army gets on the plane, just back from the Middle East, and passengers stand up clapping and put the soldier in first class. To see that change ... I've felt it both ways."

The military and law enforcement: a pair of professions, linked inextricably, yet light years apart when it comes to present public perceptions. Such is the tenor of our times.

Michael Willis sounds a clearer note, one that puts the bond between vets and their law enforcement brethren in perspective. And it runs counter to media-

## "THERE ARE SOME REAL SIMILARITIES that distinguish police work and military service from pretty much all other vocations."

—JIM PASCO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE FRATERNAL ORDER OF POLICE

their son. Each year, in suburban Prince William County, Va., they help mount a mammoth half-day-long holiday feast for local law enforcement. It is called simply "Paul's Christmas Dinner."

Modeled after a similar effort in nearby DC, "we started it in 2011," says Dittamo. "We've got neighbors and friends and people from church, the Knights of Columbus, who help us out—not just in serving, but in providing whatever we need for the dinner." On- as well as off-duty officers are welcome, and they come to the tune of some 300 hungry cops.

Sacrifice follows other paths, too, where societal slights take the place of physical and emotional wounds. When John Thompson was in the Army during the immediate post-Vietnam era of the 1970s and wore his uniform, "People would give you the dirty look, just stare you down."

"Then the day that I was discharged and put the police department uniform on, my first day walking the street, the business owners were welcoming me in. There was just a whole different air of respect that you got as a police officer."

Fast-forward 40 years to this era of angst we now inhabit, one in which the phrase "law and order" is somehow suddenly odious. Thompson is on a plane, wearing his NAS polo shirt. It's emblazoned with a star. He begins to "get these dirty looks" from some passengers.

marinated culture: "You have people who are not doing this for fame and fortune and glory" he says. "They are doing it because they care about their communities ... and in making the world a better place."

Jim Pasco, executive director of the 325,000-member Fraternal Order of Police, seconds Willis' sentiments. "There are some real similarities that distinguish police work and military service from pretty much all other vocations," he says. "First and foremost, there's the discipline level. There's a chain of command. There are expectations and understandings at every level that are similar as to who's responsible for what, and who's responsible for making them do it."

And there is an essential element that unites vets and cops, according to the U.S. Army Transportation Corps vet (1965-67). "There's that almost indescribable sense of loyalty to your buddy—the guy next to you in the line—that's unique to men and women who have risked, or are risking, their lives for a cause." ❖

**E-MAIL** [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)  
**JERRY CHANDLER** is a frequent contributor to VFW magazine. He served in Vietnam as a medic and is a college journalism professor in Alabama. A high school classmate of his, Bexar County (Texas) Deputy Sheriff Vincent Walker was shot and killed on Feb. 2, 1973. This article is a special tribute to him.