

Where Have All the Young Men Gone?

The above music lyrics, inspired by an old Russian folk song, were written and published by singer-songwriter Pete Seeger in 1955 and recorded by Seeger in 1960. It was covered and made famous by the popular singing trio *Peter, Paul and Mary* in 1962. Virtually every “baby-boomer” will remember this very popular Vietnam War protest song of the 1960s.

VFW and American Legion members are looking at one another these days and asking themselves this question: “*Where have all the young men gone?*” They are *not* asking the question to protest anything, but rather, are genuinely wondering where all our young veterans in Atmore and Brewton and Escambia County at large have gone.

According to the “most recent U. S. Census data, Escambia County has an estimated 2200 to 2500 military veterans living within its boundaries” (ChatGPT). Between our local VFW and American Legion posts here in Atmore (*the only military veterans’ posts in Escambia County*) we have approximately 100 members on our rolls between us, with an estimated twenty members attending meetings and participating regularly. A few are members of both organizations.

So, let’s crunch the numbers, shall we? This means that of all the Bonafide veterans at large in Escambia County, Alabama (2200-2500), only 4-4½ percent feel any sentimentality or compulsion to join these venerated veteran’s organizations. And further, of that 4-4½ percent who *are* official members, less than 20 percent of these care enough about our causes to actually participate.

This phenomenon is not happening just in our Escambia County, Alabama veteran’s organizations. It is happening all across the nation. Our recruiting calls seem to be falling upon deaf ears. I dare say that if our recruiting does not improve, it is only a matter of time before our ranks diminish to a level where there is no one left to serve and our posts are closed for failure to meet National and State By-Laws..

In our Post recruiting activities we encounter many objections from veterans who do not desire to join our ranks and serve. Some who served with us in previous times terminated their memberships over acrid disagreements with presiding officers or other fellow members, vowing never, never to return. These angry, hard-hearted recalcitrants seize every opportunity to criticize and demean their former beloved comrades to everyone they know.

Many non-member veterans say they do not have time to serve in the VFW or the American Legion. They say they are too old and tired, too busy with their families, their jobs, their churches and other more important and cherished activities and avocations, like hunting and fishing or watching Monday Night Football, for example. Others posit cynical questions like, “So, what do you fellows do besides meet together monthly to fight and disagree and get drunk together at your precious VFW canteens and tell old war stories to one another? Alas, such heathen behavior does not appeal to me.”

I completely understand all these objections! These are all valid concerns and I have heard variations of them from hundreds of veterans who refrain from joining our ranks. I cannot defend the scourge of alcohol among veterans and non-veterans alike (I can report, however, that our Atmore Post 7016 is a non-alcoholic post). I also cannot contend with the accusation that veterans ranks are filled with opinionated, cantankerous, disagreeable old soldiers. My old friend and Alabama Winemaker, the late retired US Marine Corps Colonel Jim Eddins, often retorted to his religious critics, "Everyone knows the U. S. Marine Corps was founded in 1775 in a bar called Tuns Tavern. When our founding fathers decided to recruit a cadre of elite fighting men,' joked Colonel Eddins, "they did not look in the churches. They looked in the bars!"

Veterans share a special kind of bond and camaraderie that non-veterans cannot possibly understand. They have been toughened and tempered by the fires of military training, by the tough-love of their Commanders and Sergeants, and often by the death and carnage they experience in combat. No, veterans are not always sweet souls, but they *are* brave and patriotic and they have fought our wars and suffered wounds and death. Thousands of disabled veterans today receive medical and disability awards because of the lobbying of lawmakers by the VFW and the American Legion. Thousands of hours are contributed every year by the VFW and the American Legion on school and college scholarships and awards for student patriotism. Community First Responders are recognized from our police and Fire Departments and excellence is recognized from our Teachers. Special ceremonies are presented each year in all of our towns and communities to honor our veterans and our active duty military members, both the dead and the living. So what if veterans sometimes drink and cuss and fight a little too much! In my book, they abide just a little below God's angels. What do veterans do? A lot!

We veterans of Atmore's VFW Post 7016 invite our fellow angels to join us. To find out how to join the VFW just visit our Post website at www.vfw7016.org and read all about us. We also invite our non-veteran supporters who enjoy the American freedoms our veterans fought for to visit our website at www.vfw7016.org to find out how you can help us. Remember, if you are a spouse, a child, a parent or other family member you may be eligible to join our ranks through our Atmore VFW Post 7016 Auxiliary. Check out our website at www.vfw7016.org to find out how.

Lloyd Albritton is a U. S. Marine Corps veteran who served overseas in the Vietnam War. He is the Commander of Atmore's VFW Post 7016. Veterans interested in joining the VFW may call or text Lloyd at (850)281-3233 or email him at cmd@vfw7016.org for more information. Visit our post website at www.vfw7016.org to join, make a donation or purchase a ticket in our great raffle.

