

STORIES OF HONOR

Stories of risk, sacrifice, duty and honor.

When a recruiter for the American Legion came knocking on veteran Denise Rohan's door many years ago, he spoke mainly to Rohan's husband, Mike, who also served in the military. When she identified herself as eligible to join, the recruiter told her women typically joined the auxiliary.

Rohan's state commander photo now hangs on the wall at that legion post along with a sign that reads, "She could have been a member of this post. Remember, women are veterans too."

That's not where the Verona resident's service ends: On Aug. 24, 2017, she was elected national commander of America's largest veteran's organization during the 99th American Legion National Convention in Reno, Nevada. Rohan became the first woman ever to hold that post.

Denise joined the U.S. Army in 1974. She began serving with the legion in 1984. Previously she served as commander of Post 333 in Sun Prairie, where she established a Sons of the American Legion squadron and also chartered a Boy Scout troop. Additionally, she previously served as department commander for the state. Rohan served for two years with the quarter master corps, a supply division. Denise explained: "When it was time for me to reenlist, I had gotten married and the Army could not guarantee my husband and I would be stationed together. So I got out and became a military spouse."

The by-laws of the two-million-member service organization states any person who served in any war campaign the U.S. was involved in from December, 1941 to the present is eligible.

"The reality is, when the legion's founders established the legion, it



SEPTEMBER 4-8, 2019

Veterans Memorial Field
(Columbia County Fairgrounds)

PORTAGE, WI

Featuring the largest
American Vietnam
Traveling Tribute Wall



Freedom is not FREE

With Country Singer and
Songwriter from "The Voice"

**September 6
Chris Kroeze**

didn't matter what race, religion or gender you were," Rohan said. "Women have been part of it from the beginning."

However, women haven't always been allowed to serve on the front lines. Women have always served in supporting roles such as nurses and clerical and mechanical work (in some cases they were used as test pilots for fighter planes), and in 1979 enlistment qualifications became the same for men and women. But while women were able to enlist, they were prohibited from combat roles and assignments. In 1994 the U.S. Department of Defense went so far as to ban women from serving in combat. Times have changed, and in 2013 the ban on women serving in combat was finally lifted.

That history has led to a general misunderstanding about how women fit into a field dominated by men.

Rohan said through her time serving in, and learning about the American Legion, she now understands why it may have taken longer for women to be totally accepted into the fold.

"When I traveled what I began to understand is, veterans come back and have personal distress, like PTSD," Rohan said. "We know now how to deal with that. After WWII, Korea, Vietnam – people called it shell shock - but they were told to go to work and get over it. There was no treatment because it wasn't understood."

By default, these men would find commonality at places like legion halls. Rohan said because women weren't always welcome, it may seem discriminatory. But when you look at the culture and history, it is easy to understand how and why it happened.

"(Men) couldn't feel vulnerable in front of a woman," Rohan said.

American Legion halls served as safe places for men to discuss common experiences and feelings. "They could talk to other veterans who understood what they had been through and feel safe to talk amongst each other," Rohan said. "When you put a woman in that mix, it changes the dynamic. But now they understand women do serve in combat and also have those feelings. Times are changing."

Rohan's climb to the top was difficult at best – and not at all planned. The process starts with two full years of campaigning, followed by a year of service as a national commander – if elected. During her year of service, Rohan was only home for 32 days – with the majority of the time off being a 10-day period around Christmas. Even then, she said, she was doing telephone interviews or meetings via Skype.

"It's a huge commitment," Rohan said. "Technically you give up three years. I think it'd hard for some people to think of a woman doing that. And it was – I missed my (family)."

Luckily, because Denise's husband, Mike, also served in the military and is a Legionnaire, he was able to travel with her as her official aide.

"What compelled me to run for National Commander? I kind of don't know how happened," Rohan said. "I wasn't necessarily looking to do it, but I always had a great respect for the legion." After years of volunteering and serving on state and local committees, Rohan was eventually moved into a leadership position by the national organization. "If someone gives you job, you do it to the best of your ability," Rohan said.



As National Legion Commander, Rohan was expected to visit every state in the U.S. as well as posts in foreign countries. "We do have Americans living overseas," Rohan said. Legion posts are also in Paris, France, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Australia, South Korea, Guam and Ireland.

In her role, Rohan met with state governors and secretaries of veterans affairs regarding veteran issues and

how the Legion could assist in getting legislation passed and implemented. More importantly, it was an opportunity for Rohan to get an idea of what veterans' needs are from a local, state and federal standpoint.

Rohan's meetings with state's Adjutant Generals revealed the military's greatest need is family support.

"I remember being incredibly homesick when I was in basic training," Rohan said. "I'd be crying to my mother over the telephone and she somehow talked me through it. She told me the women in my basic training were my new family; that we had to lean on each other. We were sisters now and had to take care of one another."

After Denise and Mike married, they traveled a lot and had to make new friends and establish a new family every place they went.

"When you are married to a person in the military, you are constantly uprooted, have to find a new job, get the kids enrolled in a new school . . . you quickly learn your military family is core."

That's where the Legion's "family first" theme comes from.

"You need to have that understanding with those core people in which you have things in common," Rohan said. "The Legion takes care of families so (the individual serving) can focus on the mission."

Now that she is back home in Verona, Rohan has been spending a lot of time with her family, and getting back to her efforts to further the Legion's mission, teaching kids about the U.S. Constitution, how to respect the American flag and those serving, and making sure kids are healthy and stay active.

"It's the reason I joined the American Legion in the first place; to be part of my community and do grass roots stuff," Rohan said. "Now that I am back home, I am back to taking care of vets and their families, and teaching kids what it means to be American. It's a complete circle."



CELEBRATE. HONOR. REMEMBER.

Discover Wisconsin



Kalahari Resorts & Conventions
Stock + Field of Portage



Cardinal FG

