

Young vets renovate last New Orleans VFW post

Posted 11/25/2011 6:54 AM ET

[E-mail](#) | [Save](#) | [Print](#)

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The last remaining Veterans of Foreign Wars post in New Orleans has fallen into disrepair since Hurricane Katrina displaced the city's aging veterans, but a group of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is renovating the post.

The Times-Picayune reports (<http://bit.ly/rxRsI8>) that VFW Post No. 8973 sits at the corner of Lyons and Annunciation in what was once a neighborhood grocery store. The wooden threshold crumbles from rot. A portion of the drop ceiling in the kitchen has collapsed, and the flooring in the main hall is a mix of bare concrete and bland tile. Some of the vinyl siding outside is peeling away.

"It's a building with good bones and a good history, and we see a lot of potential," said Marshall Hevron, a lawyer and former Marine who drove a light-armored vehicle during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He is one of a group of about two dozen veterans pitching in to renovate the building.

Several years ago, Louisiana had about 24,000 VFW members, said Fred Wesley of New Iberia, the state commander. While the number has dropped to about 16,000, southeast Louisiana still has about 20 VFW posts. Like New Orleans, posts in St. Martinville and Franklin are being revived with the new veterans, Wesley said.

Founded in the wake of World War II, VFW No. 8973 once comprised a brotherhood of men who saw battles ranging from Japan's 1941 attack at Pearl Harbor to the 1944 D-Day invasion of Nazi-held France. But as veterans died or were displaced by Katrina, the post, like others in the New Orleans area, was threatened with extinction.

"It's a renewal of person and place," said said Dylan Tete, a former Army officer who led soldiers in the 2003 Iraq invasion and is the city's deputy mayor for public safety.

Created in the wake of the Spanish-American War in 1899, the VFW is among myriad organizations set aside for military veterans, but one whose membership is restricted to those who have seen battle. The VFW nationally has a history of serving as a voice for veterans' needs.

Hevron and Tete envision the same at the local level for the Alfred E. Flynn Post, named for a New Orleanian killed during World War II.

"We don't want to sit around and drink beer and talk about the old days," Tete said. "We want to actually do something."

The VFW post has owned the former grocery at Lyons and Annunciation since the 1980s, Hevron said. The old store has a two-floor apartment building attached, which they plan to renovate and use as transitional housing for veterans at below-market rates, particularly when the new Veterans Administration hospital opens in New Orleans. They envision a law clinic where they can help veterans access benefits. They are reaching out to homeless veterans, Hevron said.

"They don't want to just come in and sit off to the side and not do anything," said Cecil Murphy, a retired Marine sergeant major who saw action in Korea and Vietnam and who, at 80, is the oldest member of the post. "They want to get right in the middle and get involved. I'm impressed."

Hevron joined the post in 2005, after returning to New Orleans from Washington, D.C., where he worked on U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu's staff. At the time, the post had about five members, and he was the youngest of a group he admits didn't have much interest in what he had to say. But as the organization is seeing nationally, the older veterans are dying. Now Hevron, the post commander, is seeking new blood to replace what he calls the "Old Guard," and he is reaching out through an Internet site and a Facebook page.

"We have lost a lot of vets because World War II veterans are dying," said Precilla Wilkewitz of Baton Rouge, the VFW state adjutant/quartermaster who was in the Army in Vietnam. "We see the younger ones. They have families. They have things to do, but they're still joining so they can make life better for all veterans coming back."

Reviving the post means making it relevant to the new generation of war veterans.

"I think it's up to us to make the organization more nimble and more attractive to returning veterans," Hevron said.

Copyright 2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.