The American Legion's Department of Indiana approaches its second century of service to the state's veterans with a membership of nearly 90,000 men and women who served during World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Panama/Grenada and Lebanon, and every U.S. military action since Operation Desert Storm and Desert Shield. One Legion program that has zoomed ahead — pun intended — in the last several years is the Indiana American Legion Riders. This group of motorcycle enthusiasts has raised thousands of dollars for children, veterans, wounded service members and Legion scholarship programs. They also provide escorts at military funerals, ride in parades and more.

IN Legionnaires

Col. Harvey Weir Cook was a Legionnaire, a World War I flying ace and a pioneer in commercial aviation who helped develop the air mail service. He died in 1943 during a combat mission in the South Pacific. The Indianapolis International Airport is named in his honor.

Paul V. McNutt was a World War I veteran, governor of Indiana from 1933 to 1937, and commander of both the American Legion state (1926-1927) and national (1928-1929) organizations. The Franklin native was also a presidential contender in 1940. He died in 1955 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Eddie Rickenbacker was also a World War I flying ace — in fact, his record 26 aerial combat victories earned him the nickname “Ace of Aces.” The Ohio native had been involved in the early days of auto racing before turning his attention to the skies, and after the war he became president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, having bought most of its common stock. Rickenbacker was a member of the Aviators Post in New York City. He died in 1973.

Vital help in crisis

In late January 1937, Jeffersonville flooded when the ice-clogged Ohio River crested over the 72-foot levee designed to protect the town. Many buildings were washed away. Towns all along the Ohio River were impacted. But southern Indiana had a group of guardians who sprung into action: American Legion and American Legion Auxiliary members.

The Indiana Department Headquarters appealed over the radio and in a bulletin to posts for relief supplies. More than 1,300 loads of materials soon appeared. Legionnaires patrolled the Ohio River area looking for breaches in the levees and repaired them. They also used boats to evacuate the elderly, disabled and those who were late to escape. Legionnaires teamed with police to augment rescue squads and assist with traffic snarls. With flood waters at their peak, Legionnaires went out in boats of all types to rescue those isolated by the flooding.

The Jeffersonville Legion post was turned into a refuge center, providing shelter and food for the flood victims until the structure collapsed, killing members who remained. Auxiliary members provided countless meals to refugees and relief workers, sometimes under the worst of circumstances.

At the peak of relief efforts, The American Legion took over part of New Albany, Ind., setting up a commissary and first aid station.

American Legion Mall, Indianapolis

The American Legion Mall extends from St. Clair Street to North Street between Meridian and Pennsylvania streets in Indianapolis. The mall gets its name from the Legion's former and current national headquarters buildings, which form the Indiana American Legion Riders.

A state convention of World War Veterans meets and authorizes the formation of the Indiana Branch of The American Legion. Its first two posts are chartered on June 14.
**Home of firsts in the Legion Family**

As of 1921, the Department of Indiana has served as an early adopter of programs and initiatives that have since become fundamental parts of the national organization.

That penchant for early adoption has been in force since the beginning—the department’s initial charter was issued on May 24, 1919, less than one month after the first U.S. caucus of what would become the Legion in St. Louis.

The first Legion national convention was held in Minneapolis in November 1919. On Dec. 6, acting upon authority granted by that convention, the first national application for an American Legion Auxiliary unit was granted to B.E. Connington Unit 34 in Indianapolis. It began with 30 members.

Efforts in which the Department of Indiana took part would bring it even closer to national influence. In the early 1920s, Indianapolis went up against Chicago, New York City and Washington, D.C., for the opportunity to be the home of the national organization—and won. When a national headquarters building was built downtown in the early 1920s, the state organization shared space with it until the national headquarters moved to larger quarters in a new building across the Legion Mall.

The department wouldn’t depart for a building of its own, on the Fort Benjamin Harrison campus, until 2014.

In 1933, soon after its official recognition as a national program at the 1932 National Convention, the first chapter to a Sons of the American Legion squadron in any department went to Bruce P. Robinson Squadron 33 in Indianapolis. Today, the Auxiliary and the Sons combine with the Legion to form the American Legion Family.

In 1944, it was a resolution at the department’s convention that called for a national-level “American Legion College.” To teach new Legionnaires coming out of World War II about the history and workings of the organization, the college, which started in 1946, is still held at National Headquarters each fall.

And leading the way for the organization as a whole has not stopped. The department is regularly the leader in donations to Operation Comfort Warriors, a national Legion program that donates helpful and recreational items to injured servicemembers.

**Did you know?**

The American Legion’s Department of Indiana advertising program brings the Legion’s message to the airwaves and into packed sporting venues. Launched in 2013, the “We Change Lives” campaign has included membership commercials on local radio and television stations, and membership booths at Indianapolis Colts football and Indianapolis Indians baseball games. It even conducted a 33-second digital commercial on Comcast Spotlight with Colts placekicker Adam Vinatieri as the spokesman.

**Post-9/11 IN LEGION**

“After 9/11, a lot of my friends deployed. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve done more for veterans, because I never did any sort of combat.

The American Legion has done so much for the veterans community nationwide. I’d want to be a member of any organization that helps the veterans community like that.

Cedar Lake Post 261 member Jason Zaideman (right), who served in the Army from 1996 to 2000. An example of an active young Indiana veteran, in 2015 he founded a nonprofit Operation Combat Bikeuse—was that endorsed by the American Legion’s Department of Indiana via resolution in 2017. Veterans and first responders suffering from TBI, PTSD and depression learn how to refurbish old motorcycles, which they then get to keep. Students see them building, fabricate, weld and paint, using donated bikes and parts. According to the nonprofit’s website, “all of us here at Operation Combat Bikeuse have lost someone to the after-effects of defending their country and community. We would love nothing more than to help our heroes return to feeling normal again.”

**Contact The American Legion of Indiana**

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**Join The American Legion**

@www.legion.org/join

**Ground is broken on the Indiana Military Veterans Hall of Fame site adjacent to the Department of Indiana headquarters in Lawrence, the department donated the land for the planned construction.**