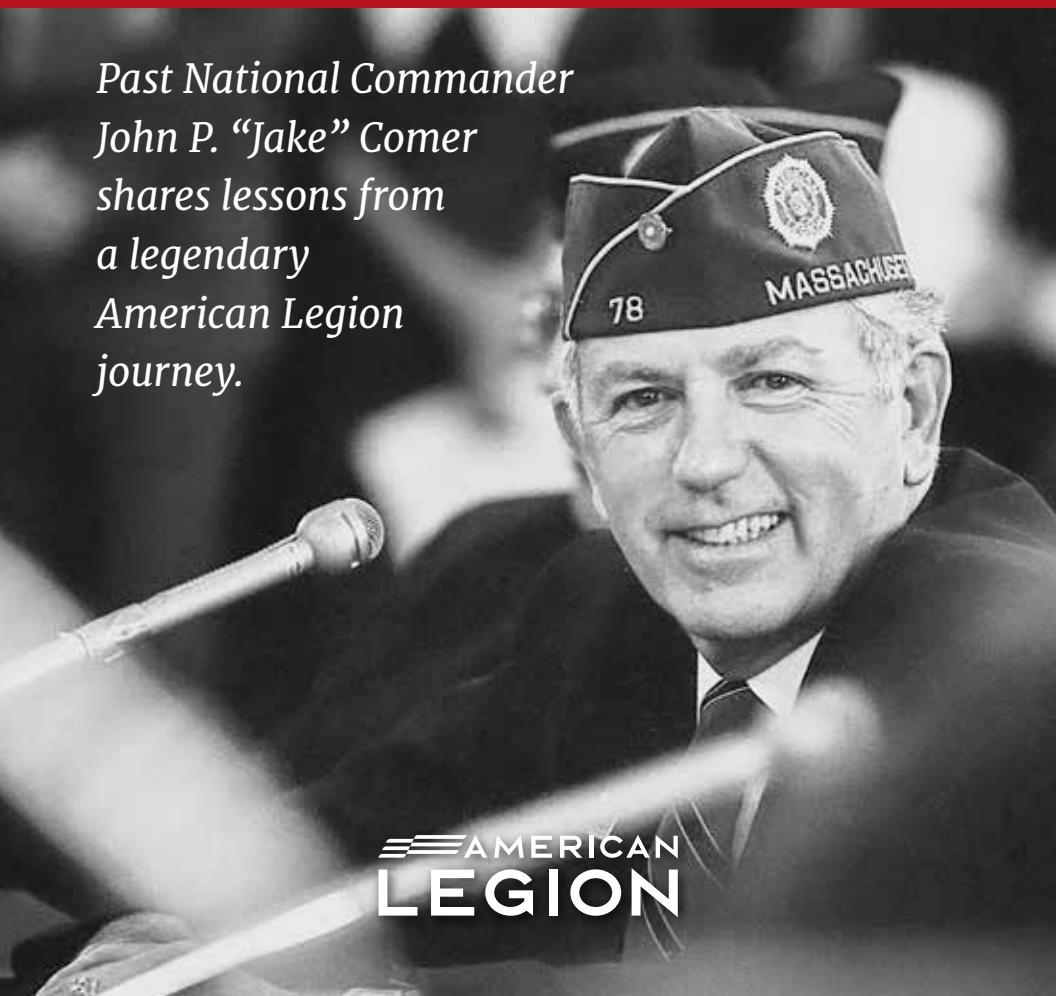
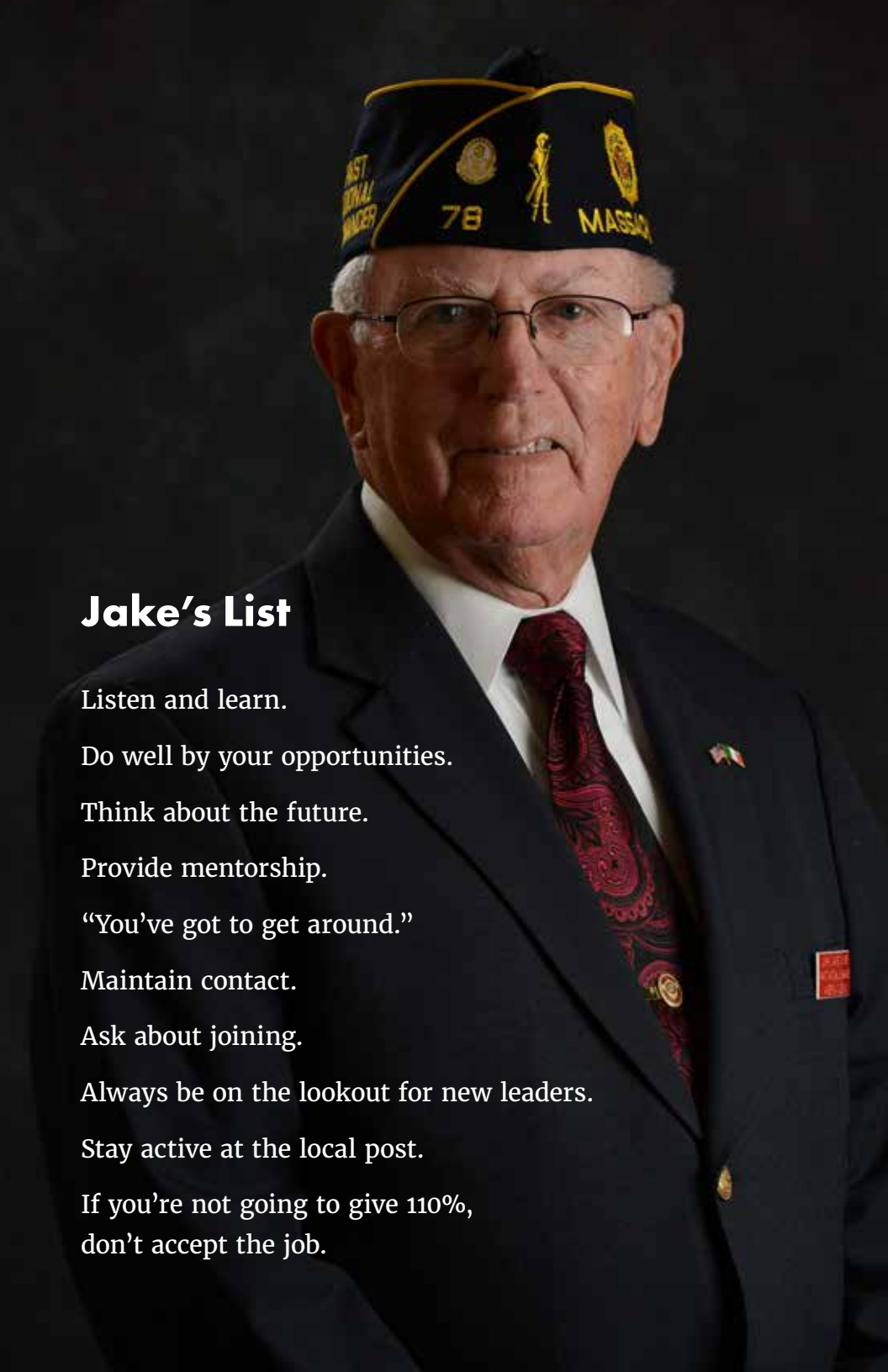
Listening, Learning & Leading

Past National Commander John P. "Jake" Comer shares lessons from a legendary American Legion journey.



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Jake's List

Listen and learn.

Do well by your opportunities.

Think about the future.

Provide mentorship.

"You've got to get around."

Maintain contact.

Ask about joining.

Always be on the lookout for new leaders.

Stay active at the local post.

If you're not going to give 110%,
don't accept the job.



Young Jake Comer (middle)
with two of his siblings
growing up in Dorchester, Mass.



Leadership lessons started early for John P. "Jake" Comer.

"I grew up in the Depression," he explains. "I was born in 1932. My life started in the community of Dorchester, Mass., which is a section of Boston, the second of seven children, and the oldest boy. So, it was easy to be in leadership. My mother had to go and work all day long, and my father was a bricklayer, so they were out of the house a lot. Growing up, my older sister became the mother of the house."

As the elder brother, he assumed his earliest leadership responsibilities, to the family. With their parents working long hours to keep a roof overhead and food on the table, the children had to take care of themselves, and each other, following a strict code of conduct.

"From the time you grow up as a child in an Irish-Catholic home, that type of leadership is instilled in you by your parents. You never talk back to your parents. You never curse. You always listen and do as you're told. They were very tough parents. They had to be, with seven kids."

The siblings were close, leaning on each other, delivering newspapers from an early age, looking for ways to scratch together whatever money they could during lean times. "We would walk back and forth to school every day, and also for lunch. It required us to eat at home by ourselves for lunch. So, I was always helping my sister getting everything ready."

> *"From the time you grow up as a child in an Irish-Catholic home, that type of leadership is instilled in you by your parents."*

Adult mentors outside the home were equally important to kids at that time. The first of those for young Jake – then known as "Jackie" – was a man named Saul Davis, who owned a small service station along the daily route between home and school.

"I was coming by this gas station one day, and the gentleman called to me and said, 'I see you come by here every day to go to school.' And he says, 'I'd like a hot meal, and I only live four houses up the road. Do you think you could go by every day and bring me down my hot meal?'"

"Well, I'll have to check with my mother," the boy told Saul.

"I asked her, and she said, 'Sure.' So, I did that every day. I got paid 25 cents a week. To my mother, that was good. His wife would have a meal ready when I would come by at lunchtime, and I would bring it down to him. I was only 7."

As neighbors did during that time, they looked out for each other. But there was no such thing as a handout. Kids were required to work for anything they got. Every penny mattered. So did every mentor.

Before the age of 10, Jake was hanging around at the garage, talking with Saul and the men who worked there.

"When I was 8 or 9, he had this huge amount of tires that he would roll in and roll out every day from inside his place. He said, 'Could you help me roll these in every night?' My mother said, 'Sure.' So, I got another 25 cents a week for doing that with him."

He continued helping, listening and learning, first steps he later found to be essential for leading.

"Lo and behold, as life went on, I was 14 years of age, and I started working for him in the gas station, pumping gas and changing tires, giving oil changes. And at 16, I managed the place. He had great faith and trust in me because he never had to worry about finances or collecting money at the pump. He knew it was all going to go to him. My mother instilled that in me very early."



Comer enlisted in the Air Force in 1951.

He worked for Saul at the service station until he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1951.

"He must have seen something in me. I really don't know. But it worked. He was an easy boss to work for. He owned the station for many, many years. I remember when I was 16 and had to get my driver's license. So, I said, 'Saul, I've got to be up to get a driver's license next week. How am I going to get there?' The first person that came in that day, he said, 'Take Jake up for his license.' That was Bob Cooper. Up we went, got the license, and got back to work … that was the kind of guy he was."

Children of the Depression learned early that self-sufficiency meant doing well by opportunities, wherever and whenever they might spring up, and taking help when it was offered. Older adults understood that the future depended on young people knowing and embracing such imperatives as a solid work ethic, the value of money and honesty. Saul was

the first of many mentors who instilled in the future American Legion leader an inner compass that would guide him for the rest of his life – in the Air Force, business, civil service, church leadership and as an officer at every level of the nation's largest organization of military veterans.

"I was in leadership," he explains, "when I was very young."

At 93, John P. "Jake" Comer was still in leadership.

In 1963, his journey took an unexpectedly significant turn when he joined The American Legion. He soon became adjutant of Thomas J. Roberts Post 78 in West Roxbury, Mass., and within three years was commander. He moved through the chairs to District Vice Commander, Department Commander's Aide, District Commander, Department Vice Commander and Department Commander.

In time, he drew national attention. First appointed to serve on the National Commander's Advisory Committee on Americanism, he was later elected as Alternate National Executive Committeeman and National Executive Committeeman. Twenty-four years after he first donned a blue cap, John P. "Jake" Comer was presented a new red one, that of National Commander. That was Aug. 27, 1987.

His year as the top executive leader for the nation's largest veterans service organization was by no means a final destination. Anything but.

It was just another turning point, one that would allow him to apply all the lessons of his youth, faith, military service, professional career and mentorship experience to

His early mentors imparted to young Jake Comer the irrefutable characteristic of success in any venture: passion

guide hundreds – if not thousands – who would follow in his footsteps as American Legion leaders. His ongoing presence has been felt among the top officers of the organization for nearly 40 years – after his time as national commander had come to an end.

"The important word about everything we do – you can go back to 1919 up to the present and the future – the word is 'leadership.' If you don't have the leadership to continue that greatness that we do for the veteran, for the disabled, for youth, for Americanism, then it's a dead issue. You have to get up and speak on the issues and make changes that are important to the future of the organization. Everything that we do is not to think about the past, but it's to think about the future."

That may have been on the minds of Saul Davis and other childhood mentors, who believed that future prosperity depended on young people like the little boy of the Depression who grew up working, listening and learning at the service station down the street.

Throughout his time as an American Legion leader, Comer has made it his mission to always be mentoring the next generation of veterans to keep the organization strong, active and influential at the community, state, national and even international levels. The son of Irish immigrants and longtime mentor for Foreign and Outlying Departments and Posts of The American Legion (FODPAL), 20-year president of ANAVICUS (Army, Navy and



As longtime president of ANAVICUS, Comer became known for his one-liners from the podium at bi-annual breakfast gatherings.

Air Force Veterans in Canada United States) and beloved host of the group's scholarship breakfasts for many years, ardent supporter of the Sons of The American Legion and ambassador of the organization at every level, his love of the organization's array of purposes, and knowledge about its ways, has made him a treasured resource for those who seek and achieve higher offices. His lessons about the right way to grow in the organization have inspired Legion officers from post historians to national commanders.

When his longtime traveling companion Florence Publicover is asked where Comer's passions reside, she puts it simply: "There's not enough words to say about his love for The American Legion."

In a sense, his early mentors imparted to young Jake Comer the irrefutable characteristic of success in any venture: passion. Many who cared about him when he was young served as beacons through the darkness of the Depression, set a high premium on service to others, discipline, staying connected and, in the case of his first boss, even gave him the name by which he is best known.

"Saul Davis, the owner of the gas station, says to me, 'What is your name?'

"I says, 'Jackie Comer.'

"He said, 'No, no, no. You're 'Jakela,' which is Jewish for 'Jack.' So, he is the one who nicknamed me Jake, and I have been Jake ever since. It caught on in the neighborhood, so that's how I became Jake."

Failure to go by the name that later became synonymous with American Legion leadership cost Comer his first attempt at a district office, he explains. "I lost by four votes because on the ballot was 'John Comer,' and many of my friends couldn't understand why I wasn't running.

"I said, 'I did run.'

"They didn't see the name Jake on the ballot. So, ever since then, my cards and everything I have done, even in the Legion, it's always John P. 'Jake' Comer. Without that quote, people wouldn't know me."

Early on, Jake became known not only by his name but by his presence. A firm believer that American Legion leadership depends greatly on personal networking with members in local posts and districts, he has traveled from meeting to meeting, throughout the Northeast and around the country, even abroad, listening, learning and advising, understanding the triumphs and trials of his fellow veterans, sharing his spirit, and, in so doing, capturing their hearts.

"Jake Comer has probably gone to more Legion functions than anyone I have ever known in my life," explains Paul A. Morin, one of the leaders Comer mentored, who served as National Commander of The American Legion in 2006 and

2007. "And I'm not just talking national. I'm talking back in Massachusetts. Jake Comer would get a call from a post, 'Hey, can you come talk tonight?' He would get in his car and drive to the other end of the state to be at a post meeting to talk. That's what Jake Comer always did. And he continues to do that type of stuff. He does it all. He still does it all."

"You've got to get around," he advises rising leaders in the organization. "You go around to all the posts. You don't take any of them for granted. That's the leadership you have to personify."

As a high school student, Comer did not participate in organized sports, working at the service station most every day. But he kept building on his emerging leadership skills, organizing school activities and dances at Cathedral High School and performing in school plays. He also became adept at something else that would serve him well, once again thanks to a thoughtful adult mentor: a nun, Sister Alfredine.

She taught him how to type.

Sister Alfredine also showed him why it's important to work hard, stay focused, be honest and understand that inattention to detail has consequences. "Tough? Let me tell you, my fingers will tell you that. I got the ruler. Not only the ruler but a thick piece of wood that sent me to the principal's office one time. They hit you off the end of your fingers. That's what hurt the most. I got to learn pretty fast to mind my own business."

By the time he graduated from Cathedral, he was typing 80 words per minute. "She was my inspiration. I always looked up to her and thanked her for the typing abilities. She was a mentor, alright. She was outstanding. Every other course

I took in school didn't help me nearly as much as the typing skills I learned from Sister Alfredine. When I went into the Air Force, they gave you tests to see what you are going to do for four years. They could see right away that I was an accomplished typist."

As he served in Germany during the Korean War as a teletype operator, Sister Alfredine added another important lesson that Comer would apply in the years ahead: maintaining contact. "She always communicated with me when I was in the military. I always looked up to her and always thanked her."

After the Air Force – where he said he received good leadership from his lieutenant in Germany – "I went to work for Western Union, which was doing the same thing I did in the service."

He typed.

He keyed in telegrams of all kinds, to all sorts of people – and of all ages – and handled many that included personal telephone calls. "We'd get a birthday telegram or a congratulations, and I would get on the phone and sing that 'Happy Birthday' verse to whoever got the telegram. One day, I get on the phone and say, 'Is so and so available?'

"They say, 'What do you mean? She's only 1 year old.'

"I say, 'Look, ma'am, this is a telegram made out to her. I don't care how old she is. That's my job.' I had to sing 'Happy Birthday' to this 1-year-old."

Singing telegrams was as natural then to Comer as would be singing Irish ballads in hotel rooms at American Legion conventions in future years.

As he embarked on his professional career, he often made time to stop by the old service station to visit Saul, keeping

that connection alive, and staying in touch with Sister Alfredine.

He did his job so well at Western Union, he was offered a promotion. But taking it would mean moving to New York City. He declined and went to work instead as a door-to-door John Hancock Insurance Co. agent – "hard work," he remembers – before he landed a position as an assistant tax assessor in Quincy, Mass. "Six months later, one of the three full-time assessors retired, and I was appointed full-time assessor. I did that for about 10 years."

Just before he moved his family to Quincy, Comer – by this time married to his wife of 44 years, Eileen – was walking across a square one day and ran into a man with whom he had gone to kindergarten. They caught up fast, and Comer learned that the man had also served in the U.S. military during the Korean War and at the time was commander of American Legion Post 78 in West Roxbury. "He asked me

A big home run

A special honor was in store for the first player to hit a home run in the 1975 American Legion World Series in Rapid City, S.D., in recognition of the program's 50th year. The ball would be retrieved and sent to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. On the first pitch in his first at-bat, second baseman David Perdios of West Quincy, Mass., parked it.

That was the moment John P. "Jake" Comer truly fell in love with American Legion Baseball. Department of Massachusetts Commander at the time, he had arranged travel to the series for the Morrisette Post 294 team, their parents and followers. Then, after Perdios' big hit, he arranged to have that 50th anniversary home run ball delivered to Cooperstown.

about joining. Because of him, I did join. It was the greatest day of my life."

And, like so many enthusiastic and capable young veterans who join an American Legion post, Comer was appointed adjutant within six months. The key reason, he says, can again be traced back to Sister Alfredine. "I could type 80 words per minute."

Married with three children and navigating a career, he carved out the time needed to lead his American Legion post and soon was on the rise in his district and department, as well as the commonwealth itself. His children grew up as members of The American Legion Family, and Eileen was a dues-paying member of the American Legion Auxiliary, but her main involvement in the organization was keeping up with her husband and his many travels, in the Legion and otherwise.

Comer worked for the Massachusetts House Ways and



Morrisette Post 294 team from West Quincy, Mass. during the 1975 Legion Baseball Season. Dave Perdios, front row, third from right.

Means Committee for two years and became connected with state politics, which put him into the company of Rep. John Finnegan of Dorchester, who made the Air Force veteran a member of his successful campaign leadership team.

"Then, an opportunity came to direct public housing in Quincy. The mayor came to me, and said, 'Jake, you'd be perfect for that job. Why don't you apply for it?' So, I did and spent 15 years as the director of public housing."

It was a tall order managing some 9,000 units for low-income and elderly residents. "We were the ninth-largest housing authority in the commonwealth."

As he had done before, he made it a point to do well by the opportunity in front of him.

But none of these career developments deterred Comer from his path in The American Legion.

"It was a World War I post – a good post," he remembers of his first home in the organization. "It didn't have a bar. We had good meetings. We had great camaraderie."

Post 87 leaders mentored him and suggested he run for higher offices in The American Legion. "They taught me a lot." Two in particular – Ralph Hall and Eugene Biagi – "were the two who really started me off."

Unfortunately, despite in-person appearances at posts throughout the region, that was the year he was not elected because voters didn't see the name "Jake" on the ballot. He changed that the next time around. "I ran again the next year and topped the ballot."

He moved from District Commander to Department Vice Commander, collecting more votes than 10 others on the ticket. "They couldn't understand that. They said that's never really happened before."

> *"You've got to get around. You go around to all the posts. You don't take anything for granted. You visit the post, and then when they go to the ballot, they know who you are."*

The newly elected department officer was happy to share his secret. "I said, 'Well, you've got to get around. You go around to all the posts. You don't take anything for granted. You visit the post, and then when they go to the ballot, they know who you are."

Along the way, he received his first white cap, as Aide to the Department Commander, in 1970. In that capacity, he traveled to his first national convention – a truly memorable one – in Portland, Ore., in the tumultuous height of the Nixon administration as Vietnam War protesters threatened to converge on the veterans gathered there. To prevent a confrontation, local authorities scheduled and promoted "Vortex 1: A Biodegradable Festival of Life," a rock concert outside the city where laws on public nudity and narcotics were temporarily suspended. The protesters changed their plans and migrated to the festival location. Nixon did not attend the convention, sending Vice President Spiro T. Agnew instead, and it went on without incident.

That was the first of what would become many national conventions over the next half-century for the eventual National Commander. "At that national convention, I saw a different level from the department and the district, to see how they operate. You get an understanding of what's going on. I really started learning a lot from then on."

Between 1973 and 1975, Comer moved from District Commander to Department of Massachusetts Commander.

His first national appointment – to the Commander's Advisory Committee on Americanism – was followed by a call from prominent Massachusetts Legionnaire Sam Murphy, who urged Comer to run for Alternate National Executive Committeeman. Comer was elected and soon moved on to serve as the NEC representative of his department in 1981. He made the rare move from that office to National Commander six years later.

Two leaders of the organization, Past National Commander Joe Matthews of Texas and longtime member of the NEC Glenn Green of South Dakota, had taken Comer aside and said, "We think you've got what it takes to be National Commander."

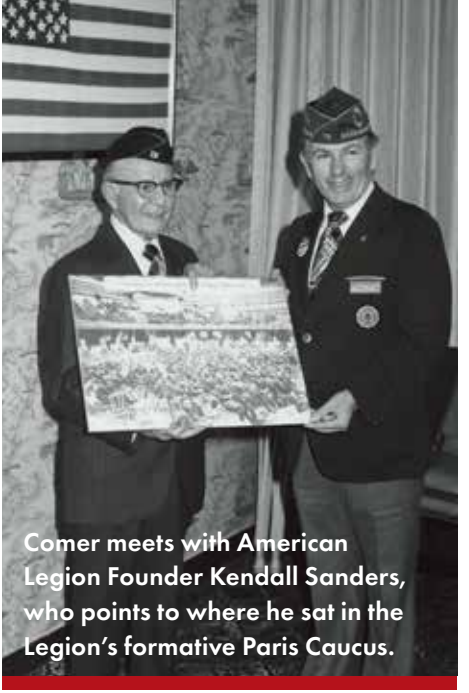
That theory became reality when two of the most influential leaders of the organization's history – E. Roy Stone and Past National Commander John Geiger – called him in for a meeting. Comer was officially in line.

"I had no intention, not even a prayer, of being National Commander. I didn't know what it was all about. Then, I started learning."

Listening and learning always came before speaking and acting for Comer, another attribute he applied habitually in his professional and American Legion careers alike.

And he always made time – somehow – to serve others in the community, especially young people. A board member of the Massachusetts Hospital School for Handicapped Children, he raised more than $3 million for underprivileged children through the Horizons for Youth program, which he started in 1976 when he was Department Commander and continued to serve as chairman for many years.

World War I veteran Butch Kelley, a longtime National



Comer meets with American Legion Founder Kendall Sanders, who points to where he sat in the Legion's formative Paris Caucus.

Vice Commander from Boston, had likewise made opportunities for children a top priority of his long public and American Legion life, having served as City Parks Commissioner in Boston and creating healthy recreational opportunities for young people. Comer made that pillar of The American Legion – children and youth – a centerpiece of his work for the organization.

Another of Kelley's characteristics: he could be found at nearly every national convention, seated in the hotel lobby, enjoying a cigar and holding court with Legionnaires from across the country. Today, Comer does the same thing (although not by design and without cigars) like it was second nature. "I was not really following in his footsteps in that way," Comer explains. "It just happened."

Morin remembered Kelley in a 2007 American Legion Magazine message as one who "treated national figures and blue-cap Legionnaires with equal ease and respect. He was guided by three simple sentences he told me never to forget: 'We are fortunate. God has been good to us. We must always help somebody else.'"

Simple sentences. Enduring effect. Such thinking resonated with Comer.

"Butch Kelley became a close, personal confidante," Comer says. "He nominated me for National Commander … He was

a big, heavy, jovial man. Just an outstanding individual, very respected throughout the national organization."

Kelley had been a mentor for Morin and Comer alike, and now Morin is in a similar capacity at every level of the organization. "I think it is something that is a tradition within Massachusetts," Morin says. "Butch Kelley, a World War I veteran, was the main mentor of Jake Comer. And he mentored me. I was a young Vietnam veteran, and I could do some weird things at weird times, and I always remembered Kelley … like one day a World War II guy giving me some static. Kelley called me over and said, 'Don't worry about it. You tell them to come see me, and I will handle it.' In Massachusetts, we have always had a good mentorship team in place."

No matter the office, Comer says, anytime a leader moves up, "I always assign him a mentor."

PNC Geiger of Illinois and E. Roy Stone of South Carolina made it clear to Comer that leadership in The American Legion involved a continuous search for people to succeed you. "And they always said, you're not going to be able to do it from your home. You've got to be out there." And finding a new leader is only the first step in the process. A true mentor stays connected with that individual throughout his or her own journey. Comer was a natural at that.

And American Legion Past National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger of Virginia, who led the organization in 2013 and 2014, carries that lesson forward. "When I talk to people, the first thing I tell them is, 'Alright, who is your replacement?'" Dellinger says. "'Because you've got to mentor someone to take over for you.' We're not going to continue to grow and sustain ourselves if we don't groom our next leaders. And Jake epitomizes that. I hope I am the same way. I try."



Comer was elected National Commander at the 69th American Legion National Convention, in San Antonio, Texas.

Geiger and Stone knew that. Comer, mentored by them, acted on their counsel, as did so many American Legion leaders in the 1980s and 1990s. "They were great leaders," Comer says. "I think about them to this day."

Whether seated in a hotel lobby and visiting with members as they pass, speaking formally at a post event or just bumping into a Legionnaire in a hallway during a national convention or Washington Conference, "members know they can always stop me and talk to me to get advice," Comer says. "That's the way you should be operating."

In a way, he never stops mentoring.

Leadership in The American Legion can be tricky.

Some who succeed early at a local post occasionally think they can quickly vault to the top of the national organization. No two posts are alike, and neither are their problems and opportunities. It takes personal interaction, especially between young leaders on the rise and more seasoned veterans who understand the complexities of the organization, the distinct nature of each post, and the route to a position of influence on a larger scale. Comer, Morin and Dellinger all preach patience and experience to develop leaders at every level.

Experience, Comer says, produces an essential quality of an American Legion leader. "Character. And with that comes the ability to handle the job. You want someone who will bring respect to The American Legion."

And when it comes to gaining that experience, he argues, every pillar of The American Legion matters. Comer says the best kind of American Legion leader is well versed and experienced in Legislative, Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, Veterans Employment & Education, National Security, Americanism, Children & Youth and Membership.

And no matter what national office one holds in The American Legion, "you must also stay active (as a volunteer) in your local post." As an example, he points to Dellinger of Virginia who frequently "does the cooking at his post. A leader has to be willing to volunteer and work."

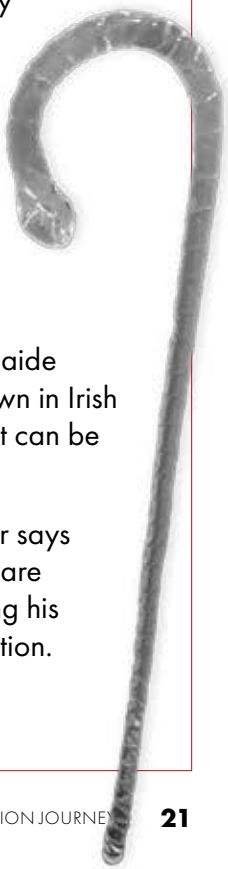
Dellinger explains that the expectation of an American Legion leader can be found in the organization's Officers Guide "where it says you always go back to being a blue-capper, no matter what level you achieve. It's one of those

The Commander's Bowl

During an official visit to the island of his ancestry, National Commander Comer made one stop he will never forget: to Father Francis P. Duffy American Legion Post IR02 in Killarney, Ireland. There, at the post housed inside the Flesk Restaurant, where hundreds of American Legion license plates hang from the walls, he met with representatives of the Waterford Crystal factory, who bestowed a gift like no other to the commander.



"It was a punchbowl, and they told me it was a very special one that they used to make. They said it took about six months to make it and then, when they finished, they broke the mold. They called it the 'Commander's Bowl,' and there is never going to be another one like it. That was very special because both of my parents were born in Ireland."



Post IR02 also presented the commander and his aide another Waterford gift – a crystal shillelagh, known in Irish folklore as either a walking stick or a weapon that can be used in self defense.

Kept at the homes of his son and daughter, Comer says the Commander's Bowl and the crystal shillelagh are some of the most treasured gifts he received during his year leading America's largest veterans organization.

camaraderie things. You're all there together for a common purpose. That purpose is to take care of our veterans, take care of your posts and your communities. You do what you need to do to get things done. If I've got to clean a spill up on a floor, it doesn't matter to me. I'm just an average guy."

The "average guy" follows the long-held principle that rank, tax bracket or social standing are checked at the door in The American Legion, even in leadership.

"There are no mavericks in Jake Comer's world," Morin explains. "You need to know the nuts and bolts of this organization before he is going to bless you to go anywhere. There's no free lunch. You're going to do the work. You're going to understand the organization. You're going to understand the workings of the organization."

The ability to speak fluently on all Legion topics – with a solid understanding of the organization's history – is also important. "Jake is an outstanding orator," Morin says. "Very seldom would you see him read from a speech. It's always from his knowledge, his understanding of the organization, and being able to project that.

"And he always knew how to raise money."

During his year as National Commander, Comer, not surprisingly, put children first among his priorities. He raised more than $1.1 million for The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation. He later led The American Legion campaign to raise more than $1 million to build the Korean War Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

In his official travels, with wife Eileen at his side every step of the way, he would raise funds at hundreds of post and department events – "$10 a handshake," he says with a smile. "(Past National Adjutant) Dan Wheeler tells the story of how



Comer displays a check for $1 million for Child Welfare Foundation at the 1988 American Legion National Convention.

when I would come into Indianapolis, after I had raised a lot of money, and I would just throw it all on the National Adjutant's desk. Bills, checks, coins, what have you."

Comer's fundraising efforts have led to millions of dollars in cash grants to youth-serving organizations through what is now known as the American Legion Child Well-being Foundation. "Children do not make up 100% of our population, but they sure make up 100% of our future," he said in 1988 after his successful campaign for the CWF.

And the Korean War Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., is a stirring reminder to all who visit the nation's capital of the service and sacrifice of the men and women who served during that time, as Comer did.

"The Korean War veterans will be forgotten no more," he said, following the memorial's dedication in 1995.

Service on the Korean War Memorial Board, having been named to that position by President George H.W. Bush, was



Icebreaking in the Soviet Union

On May 9, 1990, the American Legion Post 156 Band from Waltham, Mass., performed in a Victory Parade on Red Square, Moscow, before the complete fall of the Soviet Union. Past National Commander Jake Comer was asked to join the international tour to promote peace between the two Cold War superpowers. There, he was moved to see Russians lined seven-deep, cheering, "Bravo, America!"

They expressed love and appreciation for the freedoms American veterans had fought to achieve, and longed for the same in their homeland.

"It was a historic moment," Comer was quoted as saying in the September 1990 American Legion Magazine. "I've been to 18 countries, to Nicaragua, had an audience with the Pope John Paul II, visited the Oval Office with Presidents Reagan and Bush. I've done everything – but nothing as moving as this."

the second of Comer's White House appointments. The first came during his term as National Commander when President Ronald Reagan personally assigned him the responsibility of reporting findings in Nicaragua from his 1987 tour of Latin America, during the height of the Sandinista–Contra conflict. He has also met twice in the Oval Office with President Donald Trump.

He had come a long way from his days at Saul Davis' service station.

Comer has traveled to all 50 states and 18 foreign countries, spreading The American Legion's message, offering advice and finding facts on the ground. Following his term as the top leader in the organization, he led the Joseph F. Hill American Legion Post 156 Band of Waltham, Mass., to Russia for a Victory Parade in Moscow, a history-making journey as the Cold War was thawing.

One international journey, however, stands apart for the lifelong Catholic.



Comer met with Pope John Paul II during his visit to the Department of Italy.

Comer was granted a personal audience with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. They spoke of the ways in which The American Legion strives for world peace. They talked about Central America. They discussed the good work the Legion does for those less fortunate.

The Pope stopped him at one moment in the conversation.



Comer backstage at the 1988 National Convention with President Ronald Reagan.

"The Pope said, 'Commander, what is the significance of your red cap?'"

Comer thought for a moment and quipped. "'I'm kind of surprised you don't know. I'm one of your cardinals. Don't you recognize me?'

"He busted out laughing."

Comer reflects on the important people he has known over the years and keeps it all in perspective. "Most of my family attended the national convention in San Antonio when I was elected, and Louisville when I went out of office. My mother was there with me in Louisville. It was exciting for her to be on the stage there with Bush, Reagan and (presidential candidate Michael) Dukakis. They all came and spoke at our national convention that year."

But it was a moment sometime after the convention when the hard-working Depression-era mother of seven revealed who was her star on that stage. "At church one Sunday, she was sitting there with the ladies, and they said, 'You must have had a great experience at those conventions, meeting the president and all. Imagine, you met President Reagan. You met President Bush. What did you think about all that?'

"She looked them in the eye, and she says, 'What do you think about my Jack?'"

The American Legion Family – the Legion, Sons of The American Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary – are all equally important in Comer's orbit.

In 1987, Nicole Paustian of Iowa was just 16 years old and had been named Honorary National Junior President of the American Legion Auxiliary at the national convention in San Antonio. That's when she met Comer, the incoming National Commander, and Eileen.

"He took me under his wing," she says, recalling Comer's attendance the next year at her Junior American Legion Auxiliary Conference. "With that strong Bostonian accent, he had a commanding presence – with just a look and that voice. After that, we would always interact, at every meeting. He was always there for me."

As Paustian – later Nicole Clapp – continued her service and leadership in the American Legion Auxiliary, she deeply appreciated the connection with a man who she thought of as more than a mentor. "He would always check in to see how I was doing. Did I ever need anything? He was there to help."



Comer in 1987 with American Legion Auxiliary Honorary National Junior President Nicole Paustian and Auxiliary National President Pearl M. Behrend.

As the years passed, and she moved into American Legion Auxiliary national offices before she was elected National President in 2019, Comer became "like family. He and Flo became like a second set of parents for me."

"Flo" is Florence Publicover, a 75-year member of the American Legion Auxiliary and a leader/mentor in the organization of similar stature. She was a close friend and traveling companion of Comer for more than 14 years.

Eileen, who traveled around the world with Comer during his year as National Commander, passed away in 2000. After more than four decades on the Legion superhighway, she built close relationships alongside her husband, across the country. "She was the only wife of a National Commander who traveled the whole year," Comer says. "She was only home 21 days. They all came to know Eileen well, and she knew The American Legion well. She was very close with everyone at National Headquarters, and she loved them."

American Legion members and leaders flew in from across the country to attend her memorial service.

Comer's second wife, American Legion Auxiliary Past National President Elsie Bailey of New Jersey, passed away

in 2012. They had lived in New Jersey until her death, at which time Jake Comer came home to Massachusetts and, in the years ahead, reacquainted himself with Flo, a longtime ally in the purposes of The American Legion Family. "She had been a member 20 years before I joined," he explains.

"Kind of a funny story … in San Antonio, in 1987, my mother was in the national convention parade in a horsedrawn carriage. My daughter thought she needed someone to sit with her during the parade, and do you know who was chosen? Flo. She was very active in the American Legion Auxiliary then, as she is now."

"We both love both organizations," Flo says. "We have a common bond … The American Legion Family."

Through his first 93 years, Jake Comer only stayed overnight in a hospital once and used a scooter to get around only when needed at big national American Legion meetings/gatherings or baseball tournaments. Dellinger, one of the

In Flanders Field

Past National Commander John P. "Jake" Comer has recited it hundreds of times. In 2018, the American Legion Media & Communications Division asked him to step into the recording studio and do it once more. Comer's recitation of "In Flanders Fields" by Canadian Army doctor Lt. Col. John McCrae went on to receive more than 312,000 views – and growing – on Facebook.





Well into his 90s, Comer continued to mentor generations of scholarship recipients and youth program participants.

many Past National Commanders Comer has mentored, is continuously impressed. "Even though he is older, his enthusiasm is remarkable. His mind is as sharp as it can be, still. I know people 15 years younger who can't remember their last names, it seems like."

The travel schedule is a little grueling for anyone, let alone for a man in his 90s – Washington every spring, two NEC meetings in Indianapolis a year, the American Legion World Series in North Carolina, the national convention, department conventions and events in Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts and elsewhere. All the appearances and activities, however, have been a key to longevity through the years, Comer says.

At Clapp's installation to serve as National President of the American Legion Auxiliary, Comer joined her – "I've known her since she was 16!" he takes delight in saying – onstage

as a video of the Past National Commander's recitation of "In Flanders Fields" was played on the big screen. The red poppy, official flower of the Legion and the Auxiliary, symbol of military remembrance and veteran respect that Canadian Lt. John McCrae made famous with his 1915 poem, is a connection they share, one that transcends the generations.

Jake and Flo also surprised Clapp when they showed up unannounced at two of Clapp's official department visits as President, which delighted her. He would also invite her each year to join him as a guest at ANAVICUS breakfasts during national conventions and include her in other activities. To this day, they continue to exchange calls, emails and text messages. It's all about maintaining connection. "It's really been a wonderful friendship that turned into family," the Past American Legion Auxiliary National President says.

Clapp notes that a lot can be learned from the kind of leadership Comer has spent decades cultivating from seeds that were planted in the Depression. "It's respect. It's knowing you've got each other's back when you need each other, and you're always there. Staying true to your roots is very important. Common courtesy. Loyalty. I truly believe that generation did it right. And I think other generations have things to learn from that."

"People had to rely on each other," says Flo, born the same year as Jake. "Even if they got aggravated at each other, which they will, people have to depend on each other."

And while she appreciates Comer's comfort with communication in the digital era, Clapp says she has learned from the Past National Commander that it's often best to simply make personal contact. "When something is really important, you either pick up the phone or have a face-to-face conversation," she explains.

That's a lesson those who grew up long ago understand well. "That generation still has so much yet to give. Their bodies may be failing them, but their minds are sharp. I would never question something he would say to me."

Now in his 90s, Comer continues to advise up-and-coming leaders throughout the American Legion Family. He still goes to the FODPAL breakfast every year. He can be found at the National Convention, Washington Conference or at the Fall or Spring Meetings of the NEC in the lobby, seated in a chair, visiting with members of all ages who pass his way. He attends official department visits of National Presidents and National Commanders alike.

At the American Legion World Series in Shelby, N.C., Comer for many years kept his own score sheet, following every inning, paying careful attention to the way in which the young men were making the most of the opportunity before them. He never played baseball or knew much about it until he became involved in The American Legion, which sparked a love for the sport that continues to this day; he has served for 13 years on the board of directors for Cleveland County American Legion World Series, Inc., in Shelby.

As an executive leader in the series – which has produced record-breaking attendance year after year and a global audience via ESPN – he never forgets the greater purposes of the program.

At the American Legion World Series in 2025, he recited – from heart – the Code of Sportsmanship on the diamond, before a record-breaking crowd, sharing a message that runs deeper than the game itself, one that harkens to the era in which he was raised.



Comer attends The American Legion World Series each year, throwing out first pitches, reciting the Code of Sportsmanship and greeting members of the military, like the Army Golden Knights parachute team.

I will keep the rules
Keep faith with my teammates
Keep my temper
Keep myself fit
Keep pride under in victory
Keep a sound soul, a clean mind and a healthy body

That code, written just a few years before Comer was born, speaks to a set of values that perhaps gets lost too often today. His own children were raised in The American Legion Family and went on to have successful careers in leadership. He now has eight grandchildren and eight great grandchildren, all of whom have in their blood a sense of individual obligation to community, state and nation, as well as a healthy respect for their elders.

"It goes back to my days as a child," Comer says. "It goes back to my days with Saul Davis and the gas station. Changing tires, lying on the ground in very, very cold

weather, putting on chains in the snow at 12 years of age … yeah, you must never forget the people you are associated with, no matter how far back."

And, importantly, nothing can be taken for granted.

"I came into the post without any knowledge of the Legion and never thinking about a future of leadership. Then, all of a sudden, it was thrust on me as post adjutant. Six months later, I ran for vice commander of my post. It was comme si, comme ca."

All along, he had no expectation of where it would lead. Every office, every step in the journey, had a purpose that would come into focus in due time – through listening and



A name that will never be forgotten

At the 105th American Legion National Convention, in New Orleans, Past National Commander John P. "Jake" Comer was brought to tears when the National Executive Committee voted to rename the historic NEC Room in Indianapolis in his honor.

learning – a point he makes to all who seek positions of influence in the nation's largest organization of U.S. military veterans.

He ends nearly every speech he gives in an American Legion setting with a Chinese proverb that reflects the importance he places on connection.

When we hear, we forget. When we see, we remember. When we do, we understand.

Following such words of wisdom, he says, can help prepare any American Legion leader to accept the next responsibility, no matter what it is. "When they tap you on the shoulder, you'd better be ready, and then be ready to move ahead.



It wasn't until I was in the department that I could see a different future, when I started running for national offices. Some people come in with the idea that they are going to go straight ahead, right to the top. That wasn't my case. I was just one lucky guy."

Something more sets him apart, Dellinger says. "It's his heart. It's red, white and blue. And it's all Legion. That's where his heart is. He is just an amazing person who wants to see this organization succeed, just like all of us do. He's in a spot – and I'm in a spot, too – where if we can get people to buy into The American Legion wholeheartedly, that's what you need. You can't have people come in and in two years turn around and leave and expect the organization to be good. He's got that institutional knowledge. Now with 45 years of my own, I'm in a position where I can help mentor younger people. I'll get calls and answer those, just like Jake does. We're there to make sure that they succeed because if they succeed, then The American Legion succeeds."

It takes wholeheartedness, Past National Commander Morin would agree. "If you're not going to do the job right, don't accept it. Every responsibility you accept within the organization – if you're not going to give it 110%, don't accept it. Another thing: don't talk because you want to vibrate. Talk when there is a necessity to talk. And whatever you're involved with, whether it's a committee or a commission, or as an officer, know what your responsibility is, and accept it.

"It's a philosophy that Jake has ingrained in me – that we have been given leadership in this organization, and it's our responsibility to make sure we leave it better than we found it, for the next generation."

JOHN P. "JAKE" COMER
AMERICAN LEGION NATIONAL COMMANDER 1987-88



Listening, Learning & Leading

Past National Commander John P. "Jake" Comer shares lessons from a legendary American Legion journey.

"Working with him, alongside him the last 10 years, have been probably the best 10 years of my life. He's taught me a lot ... he is a true mentor. I just know that 24/7, he's a Legionnaire, and he's the greatest Legionnaire. I don't know what's in his veins, but whatever it is he should distribute it to us all because we all could learn from it."

American Legion Past National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger *at the 2024 National Executive Committee meeting in New Orleans where a resolution was passed naming the NEC room at National Headquarters in honor of John P. "Jake" Comer*

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