

“The Finish-Line” (A brief history of AMVETS Post 35)

In the beginning, there was the “Finish-Line”, an entrepreneurial effort to create a commercial bar, by two individuals, Earl Phelps and Claude Stiles. Located at the corner of Chestnut and Main, the building had been occupied by a previous business, but they had a small fire in the kitchen area, making the building appear bad and rundown.

The previous occupants were instrumental in causing the City of Crestview to tighten the alcohol ordinance, such that it could not be served within 2000 feet of a school or a church. This location being within the 2000 foot range of the Assembly of God church kept the ‘Finish-Line’ from obtaining a liquor license. The previous occupants, another club, was aware of a sewer line from the building had collapsed, and sewage would on occasion back-up causing a smelly situation. The occupants of that club would then simply go out the back door, walk a few feet to the adjacent building (Wooley Electronics) where the owner lived on the premises, and knock on his door asking to use his facilities. Mr. Wooley then approached the City of Crestview with a complaint, asking that they increase the distance from serving alcohol to a church. The City responded by increasing the distance from 500 to 2000 feet. When the two entrepreneurs applied to the City for a license, they were denied. And so they then began wondering how to recover some of their costs.

Claude Stiles was a member of AMVETS Post 78 in Valparaiso, Florida. He acquired a ‘new post’ application package, found the required ten eligible members or applicants, and applied for a charter. The charter was granted on January 7, 1986....and the new AMVETS Post 35 continued to operate as a ‘bottle club’ for approximately six months. The application allows the new post to choose their own designation as long as it does not already exist within the State or what is known as the Department of Florida. Since the zip code for Crestview was at the time, 32536....the number 36 was requested, but denied since it already existed elsewhere in the State. It was lowered one digit to 35 which stuck.

AMVETS Post 35 Auxiliary was chartered in April 1986.

The sewer problem became intolerable, and so the new post began looking for another location. A new member, Fred C. Bowman, a realtor in North Okaloosa County owned several pieces of property. One being the old Gulf Power Company building at 148 East Woodruff was available through Fred. This new location was larger, the roof did not leak, and although the restroom was some distance in the back, it functioned well. And best of all, Fred rented it to the AMVETS for \$300 per month....\$200 less than the previous location.

Our ‘bottle club’ continued to operate....member/patrons purchasing beer and product from local sources, depositing it in the coolers....and then buying it back from themselves. Operating hours fluctuated up and down....all bartenders were volunteers in the beginning, and membership grew to between 100 and 150.

Jesse “JD” Way, being an employee of the Niceville Cash and Carry hardware store, kept an eye on needs and requirements. He fashioned the first bar of plywood and polyurethane coated bar top. Driving the pieces of the bar together with 3 inch screws, the bar was sturdy and permanent.

Post 35 began to mature by holding fish-fries, steak night and other events. At one point was visited by United States Congressman Earl Hutto who represented this district. He joined Post 35. I think everyone was afraid to check to see if he was even eligible to join. Mr. Hutto was not only a U.S. Representative, but a local TV personality after he retired.

In the Spring of 1988, the members began talking of owning their own property, far enough from town such that they would not be restricted from getting an alcohol license. The search went on for several months. Finally Fred Bowman again came through with another piece of property he owned, with an old ‘trailer’ on it he would let go as well. It was located in the 100 block of John King Road, near the present location, but further east by two lots. There was city water already on the property....and a sewer line was available just across the road.

We drew up a contract for purchase and gave him \$100 earnest money as a deposit. While we waited for the closing to take place, title searches, survey and the necessary papers for closing....another member spotted an adjoining property....with a small building on it.

This property was owned by Mr. Joe Bell of Foxworth Mortgage in Crestview. It was a more level lot also. He had it listed for \$36,100. Our members contacted Mr. Bell to see if his price was flexible. He was offered exactly his selling price, provided he would accept it with zero down, and amortize the payment schedule over 30 years instead of 20 as usual for commercial properties. Our members then asked Fred Bowman again if he would mind our decision not to buy his property. Fred was a good natured individual and agreed. He even returned the deposit.

That same money was given to Joe Bell, and the contract for sale was consummated. Fred Bowman was such a good member, he allowed us to tap onto his city water supply, run a PVC line across the two lots to the new place, and our members applied to the City of Crestview for annexation into the City limits, being contiguous to the city limits and adjacent to George Mack's property next door. Annexation was done to make the sewer and water lines available.

We then applied to the City Public Works for a tap onto the sewer line and onto the water line as well. Since the 'tap fees' amounted to nearly \$1,500....our members approached the City Clerk, Mr. Ed Neal, and requested he allow us to make payments for these fees over a period of time. He gave us one year.

Now began the work of preparing this building to house AMVETS Post 35. It was a long hot Summer....and the pressure was on. The pressure being that a Department SEC (State Executive Committee) meeting was being hosted by AMVETS Post 78....with meetings being held at the Holiday Inn (now the Quality Inn) across from the La Rumba Mexican restaurant here in Crestview.

Post 35 had six weeks to clean things up, make all the connections, and to apply and receive our first Division of Alcohol license to sell liquor, beer and wine. I believe I remember the SEC meeting being in October 1988. The license was received from Tallahassee, and was effective September 30thto be renewed each year for a fee of \$400. An additional \$25 also allowed the Post to sell cigarettes provided we purchased them from legitimate distributors. Wal-Mart and Sam's Club are those distributors.

Luther Eddy Paulk was first Chairman of the Board of Trustees, then called "House Committee." Eddy was given the task of stocking the bar. A new bar top was constructed in place by Patrick Vinson, and we opened for business. The SEC arrived, and our members and officers attended the meeting across the highway 85. There was lots of socializing with those members from down state....but we noticed never once was any announcement made that a new AMVETS Post existed right across the street. At days end, it was simply announced there was a bus to carry members and patron south to Post 78. As a counter measure, several of our members simply took 3X5 cards across to the social gatherings, signed the cards and wrote "Good for one free Drink." The first night open, Post 35 was packed with standing room only. Smoke was so thick, it could be cut with a knife. It was a successful SEC for both Posts.

The mortgage payment amounted to \$327.13 while financed through Mr. Joe Bell. However, never was a payment sent to him for he had immediately sold the mortgage to another company, Chrysler Financial Services in Panama City, Florida. We found out that he had discounted his mortgage to \$22,000.

Over the years, many things changed now that we had purchased property and had all the appropriate licenses.

During this time period, several community service events took place; the Auxiliary conducted ice cream socials at Crestview Manor, a congregate living facility for the elderly made from the old County Hospital at the corner of Hwy 85 and U.S. 90.

Birthday parties were held at the Crestview Nursing Home (now called the Parthenon) for some elderly whose families had all but forgotten them.

AMVETS Post 35 was a major participant in the "Old Spanish Trail Festival" at the current Old Spanish Trail Park off Stillwell Avenue for two years. The State of Florida allows licensees to move their alcohol

license for three day periods to support community events. The Post liberally shared their alcohol profits with the Society for the purposes of employing entertainment. One year's share to the Society was \$1500 dollars. After two years, the Society chose to abstain from alcoholic beverages, even though there had been no problems whatever.

Then for several years in a row, as many as 50 members of Post 35 would share 4th of July on the Choctawhatchee Bay in Tom Pride's 70 foot boat. The Post would conduct a pot-luck dinner or picnic on that trip, and then finish the evening anchored in the Bay to watch the fireworks display in Niceville. Commander Jesse "JD" and Dixie Way were married on board Tom's boat on the 4th of July 1989.

Another event in this time period was the twice each year, campouts and canoe trips down the Blackwater River. For those who may not know, the County name; "Okaloosa" is a Creek Indian word for "Blackwater"...hence the Blackwater River along with the Blackwater State Forest north of Baker. These canoe trips were traditionally held on both Memorial Day weekend and Labor Day weekends.

AMVETS Post 35 also initiated the first Veteran's Day parade in downtown Crestview in many years. AMVETS did all the notifications of participants, alignment of units in the parade, and did all the advertising to let the citizens know about it. After the parade, the other veteran's organizations were asked to take the responsibility for the parade in alternating years. They agreed.

A community service event for which AMVETS is most proud is the "Meals-on-Wheels." The Okaloosa County Elder Services, headed by Ms. Ruth Lovejoy in Fort Walton Beach is in charge of daily "meals on wheels" for every day of the year...except Thanksgiving and Christmas Days. AMVETS Post 35 some years back, chose to take on this event, while shouldering the entire expense themselves. The purchase of turkeys or hams, whether donated or bought, and all the necessary trimmings to include pumpkin pie for dessert, are prepared, boxed and delivered to as many as 225 persons each year. This is a major effort involving as many as 50 AMVETS or couples for the preparation and delivery. "JD" Way usually does most of the mapping and dividing of the meals and directions. The Thanksgiving meals are traditionally Turkey, while Christmas allows a choice of either Turkey or Ham.

Other community service events include the Ladies making "ditty bags" for patients at the VA Hospital in Gulfport, Mississippi.

During Phil "Tennessee" Davis' time as Programs Officer, he suggested the Post "Adopt-a-Mile" of highway 85 for clean-up. In fact, the Post did adopt two miles....both sides of the highway from I-10 north to the intersection of Ferdon Boulevard and Main Street. The requirement was for clean-up at least once each quarter. The State DOT provided signs, vests, pickup tools and bags. All the Post had to provide was the personnel.

AMVETS Post 35 also developed a tradition of Christmas parties at the Post home to include typically a children's party earlier in the day. Again, "JD" Way has usually played the part of Santa Clause. A Sons of AMVETS Squadron was chartered during this time. Maybe another can remember the exact year.

Another tradition is the annual "St. Valentine's Day" party, with its elected King and Queen for the day. This even is hosted by the Ladies Auxiliary, and is one of their most important money makers for their community service events.

Before the growth near our vicinity, we conducted "Turkey Shoots" in the Fall of each year. This was actually held on the adjoining property, then owned by a different owner than at present. Little by little, the lot was cleared, and the parking area expanded. Riding mowers would chip away at the under growth until one could actually see most of the lot. A 12X28 foot addition was made to the front of the building, expanding the play area for musicians and dancing. The back porch was closed in with security in mind for storage of stock.

What follows is a list of those deceased member from over the years, current as of May 2007;

Outland, Gerald C 1986
 Grandstaff, George U. "Capp" (Father Of The Plumber On Your New Building) 1986
 Fischer, Roger F (Service Officer, Transferred From Post 78) 1988
 Hicks, Douglas W 1989
 Badcock, Lenoard G. 1990
 Baker, Raymond F. 1992
 Marshpund, David L. 1992
 Way, Orelious E. (Father Of Your Immediate Past Commander, 2007) 1992
 Lawrence, Cecil 1993
 Liston, Cecil 1993
 Little, Stanley (Raf) 1993
 Whitehouse, William P. (Partial Namesake Of Post 35) 1993
 Montie, Arnold "Moose" 1994
 Lambert, Joseph 1995
 Jones, Raymond 1996
 Jordon, Roger 1996
 Porter, Walter T. 1996
 Al Porter, (Father To Walter Above, Year Unk.) (Retired Navy Commander)
 Steele, John L. 1996
 Armstrong, Jack 1997
 Just, William 1997
 Rowley, Byrl L 1997
 Wieland, Russ 1997
 Counts, Jr. Harold L. "Butch" (First Post 35 Adjutant And Bar Manager) (Year Unk.)
 Counts, Harold L. Sr 1998
 Fredrick, H.E. 1998
 Frane, Art 1999
 Henry, "Ht" Kieth 2000
 Hritz, Walter G. 2000
 Mcdonald, William 2000
 Parker, Jim 2000
 Givens, Elmer (Father Of Henry Givens) 2001
 Smith, Paul 2001
 Mechtly Iii, Gerald L. "Skip" 2002
 Baker, Tina 2003
 Batten, Robert "Bob The Batman" 2003
 Johnson, Henry Clay 2003
 Bowman, Fred C. (One Of Five Original Mortgage Co-Signers) 2004
 Howell, Jack L. 2004
 Moore, Gilbert "Chuck" (Remains A Permanent Part Of The Foundation) 2004
 Peasley, Leon "Mitch" 2004
 Banks, Ray 2005
 Gentry, Willie D. 2005
 Gilroy, William "Bill" F. 2005
 Lewallen, Ray (Remains A Permanent Part Of The Foundation) 2005
 Boehmer, Karl R. 2006
 Fleetwood Jr., Clifford G. 2006
 Haas, Robert W. 2006
 Labit, Davis J. 2006
 Lisabelle, William P. 2006
 Maddox, Edward G 2006
 Sutton, John F. 2006
 Trepak, Peter 2006
 Wilson, Carl D. 2006

Some have asked where the "Sherman" tank from World War II came from. Prior to coming to AMVETS Post 35, the tank was, parked on the northwest side of Twin Hills Park in downtown Crestview. It had been there for several years, and was assumed to come from the Eglin AFB range support. It was probably a range target at one time in the past. While in the park, many children would

play on and climb over the tank. The City attorney had said there was a certain bit of risk involved whenever the children climbed onto the tank. The City Council voted to remove the tank.

AMVETS requested it be given to them, and the City agreed. But the City also said that AMVETS would have to move the tank. Contact was made with the 823rd. Civil Engineering Squadron, "Red Horse" at Hurlburt Field. Could this be a bit of Community Service for the Red Horse Squadron. They agreed, and once the move began, it took less than half a day. It was winched onto a flat-bed low-boy heavy equipment trailer, tied down securely and moved to its present location on AMVETS property. Since being placed there, it has received a new paint job and markings. I am sure it will remain in place until Eglin needs it back.

The Post did survive and prosper, but there were occasional ups and downs. Although the mortgage payment was low, there were occasions when there was not enough money to make it along with all the utility payments too. During those times, we would either 'pass the hat' or ask if the Post Ladies Auxiliary had any money they would like to donate in support.

More recently, Post 35 became more organized, monies were budgeted, and a better accounting was kept of funds and cash on hand. As we approached the end of the mortgage, multiple payments were made...thereby amortizing the balance due more rapidly. Instead of one event per month, we stepped it up to some kind of entertainment each weekend, and at least one food event per month. The membership continued to grow.

With things improving, we began thinking more of a new facility/building. Several members took it upon themselves to present proposed designs. We began searching for contractors...and as soon as enough cash had been accumulated, an architect was hired. The architect's name was Warren Lisenbee, a State of Florida licensed and certified architect. This was required for the design of a commercial building. He was provided a few design parameters to go on. The size of the building was to be 60X80 with a 20X60 covered patio on the back side. Inside the west wall of the building, built-in storage was to be a full 6 foot wide for the entire length of the building. There was to be a "walk-in cooler" inside. Men's and women's restrooms were sized with the appropriate number of fixtures and lavatories in each, mirrors and lighting. The bar was to seat a minimum of 25 barstools, with two serving stations. The bar was to be offset from the north wall enough such that additional tables and seating could be placed. A window was specified to be full 15 feet wide. The south wall was to be partitioned such that a separate meeting room and a second office for the Ladies Auxiliary would be built. The Post's officer for business would be built in the northeast corner of the hall. A 12X30 foot kitchen would be required along the west wall. The main entrance to the building was to be on the west wall between the kitchen and the restrooms. Just beyond to the north would be a service entrance for distributors and stock.

Mr. Lisenbee drew up the plans, and after three or four minor changes, he presented the plans ready for construction. The charge was one dollar per foot, or \$6,000. This provided several copies of the completed plans suitable for a contractor to bid. Several general contractors were asked to bid. Names were Mike Moulton of Moulton's Century 21 Realty...and Robert Cadenhead Contracting. Another was Harrelson Contracting in Baker, Florida.

At the same time, an engineering company was contacted, Southern Engineering Group, owner Kermit George of Crestview, Florida. He was asked to provide the 'site development' for the project. This was to cover land contours, elevations, building location, drainage, utility feeds...and a retention pond for runoff water. This was also to include a preliminary and final survey suitable for the lending institution. The estimated charge for this work would be approximately \$5,000.

At the same time, we began searching for financial support, a lending agency, bank or mortgage company. Three approached in Crestview each required varying numbers of 'co-signer' for any loan asked for. Someone suggested we approach the First National Bank of Florida, Destin branch. They were called and an appointment made for an estimated \$250,000 loan. Coincidentally, the loan officer's name was Justin Woodard...grandson of the former Department Commander, Al Woodard. He had the authority to approve our loan...without 'co-signers' up to his limit of \$250,000 dollars. While awaiting contractors to bid, he was provided a set of the plans, and the completed site development engineering. A final survey would follow at completion. Two of the named contractors chose not to make a bid. The third contractor's bid came in at \$355,000 for a completed building as specified.

At more than \$100,000 over our expectations, Mr. Harrelson was anxious to get started on the project. He was told we were waiting for other bids to compare.

We called the architect again and asked if he could make some adjustments for us to lower the estimated costs. He was told to modify the building by eliminating the kitchen, the second office and the separate meeting room....but to keep the same number of fixtures in each of the restrooms for future growth. This change reduced the size of the building from 6000 square feet to 4200 under the roof. A reduction of 1800 square feet. As it would seem all was coming together at the same time....the hurricane season was fast approaching. Along came "Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne." Each crossing the state of Florida.

Our loan for \$250,000 was approved, but now there were no general contractors available to do the work. The prices would go up. AMVETS met and decided to attempt to do the job themselves. The City permitting department said that if we were attempting to build a single family dwelling, we could be our own general contractor. However, since it would be a commercial building, we must get a general contractor qualified to do commercial buildings.

Phil Bowman, son of Fred C. Bowman named earlier agreed to sell the use of his license for a fee of \$15,000....made in four separate installments of \$3,750 following receipt of permits, completion of the foundation slab, building erected and dried in, and at completion of the entire building, the old structure demolished and disposed of.

One of AMVETS members, Paul Orosco of Young's Contracting was the first supervisor of construction. He brought in heavy earth moving equipment to begin the job, first by constructing the retention pond on the back side of the building location. Southern Engineering sent one of their crews to site the building according to the pre-determined plan. The stakes were placed and the squared. Foundation footers dug with the help of several members.

Mr. Grandstaff of Grandstaff Plumbing in Crestview placed all the necessary roughed in plumbing pipe in accordance with the architect's plan.

Paul Orosco provided company equipment, tripod and level for determining the level of the slab to be, and all bracing reinforced. Reinker Concrete company of Crestview gave AMVETS a reduced price for the concrete, as well as being exempt from the sales tax. After all the compacting and settling of the soil under the slab, wire and reinforcing steel was placed and tied down. Dollies or cradles to hold the tie-down "J" bolts exactly during the pour. In this area, the AMVETS building must meet state hurricane wind requirements of 130 mph. There were two pours. One for the main slab for the building, and the second for 1200 square foot of "patio" on the back.

Paul Orosco is in the business of concrete foundations and retention ponds....and he gave AMVETS a professional job.

The steel building had been ordered from General Steel Corporation of Arvada, Colorado approximately three months earlier. Upon its arrival, another local benefactor, Mr. Carry Huff of Bayou Mechanical Co. across John King Road volunteered his crane and operator to off-load the building kit. All parts of the kit were laid out in an order of need, and an inventory of part numbers taken.

David Lobb, an AMVETS member and employee of Phil Bowman Industries would be the job supervisor for the second phase of erecting the building. David garnered a crew of hard-hat construction workers, and began erecting red-iron steel. As each vertical column went up and squared, braces were placed and joined with tensioning rods to also square the entire building. Heavy steel beams were lifted into place with another vintage crane from Phil Bowman's company. The crane was operated by Bob Johnson, an AMVETS member and employee of Phil Bowman.

David Lobb was getting behind with his regular work, and so was replaced by Ken Henninger, also an AMVETS member and former general contractor. He completed the top iron structure of the building, tensioning rods, and installation of insulation and siding over the entire building. General Steel Corporation failed to send us door frames and steel doors we ordered, we were reimbursed for the shortage. This caused us to purchase these materials from a local door company in Niceville. The

price included installation.

An outside roofing crew was hired to complete the roof and insulation. This contractor had to show proof of insurance and necessary 'workman's compensation' coverage. Our members although willing to climb to the top and complete the job, were inexperienced at such a danger level.

A second crew of six AMVETS from Post 12 in Pensacola, led by Drew Rains and Joe Flynn, arrived with all material on hand, and began partitioning the entire interior as well as framing the outside wall interiors. This portion was done in its entirety in one single weekend....although some finish work was required to follow-up and 'Some' adjustments had to be made. The plumbing rough-in was slightly different than the partitioning floor plan. While the framing was being accomplished, Jim Kaim, a member was installing the walk-in cooler, which had been temporarily stored at Ron Clark's paint shop off east Hwy 90 in Crestview. It is worth mentioning that prior to the concrete pour for the slab, a three inch layer of Styrofoam sheeting was placed below the pour. This served as an insulation below our 12X12X8 foot refrigeration cooler. The cooler was placed in such a way the glass display door was inside the bar area. The cooler was made operational and tested. Jim found the compressor size was insufficient for continuous operation, and had to be upgraded and replaced.

During this same time period, Ken Henninger, also had to leave the job, and was replaced by John Porter. John and Jerry Lachman, both members of the Post were already working on the interior, specifically the bar. John was asked if he could complete the job. The heating and air conditioning contractor arrived on site and began preliminary ducting all his work.

Bob Meyers and Billy Gravidonni worked to add additional framing materials between the studding. The Electrical Contractor, Crestview Electric, owner John Milligan's people arrived on site and began their work of wiring the entire building. Bob and Billy with much help from other members completed the dry-wall all around, and had a spackle finish done to the wall prior to painting. A special crew from Eglin AFB Civil Engineering sent a small crew of young airmen for training purposes to install the 'suspended ceiling' following Bob and Billy's installation of the 'grid work'.

Johnny Hughes of Florida Glass in Crestview framed and installed the double paned window on the north wall overlooking the patio area.

When the patio concrete was poured, a small stoop was also poured at the front door. The finish was a special finish simulating 'slate', and acid stained for its best look.

A mansard overhang was constructed over the bar area by John Porter and Jerry Lachman, uniquely shaped to hold two large LED TV screens, one on each side of the bar. A third and like sized LED TV was mounted on the east wall between the pool table area and the Karaoke stage area. This one is wired in such a way that it can double as a Karaoke monitor. A wired public address (PA) system is built into the ceiling of the hall, with controls in the store room behind the bar. Two other LED moving message signs are mounted on opposite walls, both east and west. A larger LED traveling message sign is mounted at the entrance to the AMVETS property. It stands on an eight foot pole with a lighted AMVETS logo sign identifying Post 35 above the LED.

Since over the life span of Post 35, the Post has been robbed or broken into several times, it was decided to install a security system, in the form of a small closed circuit TV monitor with two cameras. One camera is mounted on the outside of the building scanning the parking lot area, while the second camera is mounted inside the foyer area, so the bartenders can see who is ringing the door entry button. There are also 'motion detector' units inside the building, and the system is monitored by a security company who will report or notify us of any irregularities after hours.

The City of Crestview's Planning and Permitting Department required AMVETS to complete 'all' work before occupancy. That included finishing the parking lot, landscaping and sod as specified, and razing the old building and clearing the lot. The Post's aim for occupancy was to be in by the 4th of July 2006. In fact, the 'end of construction' party took place on that date. John Porter worked with a paving contractor who paved the parking area with 4000 psi concrete. A sprinkler system was installed. And due to a "glitch" the slab was poured 18 inches too low, thereby requiring a 'lift station' be installed. Mr. Grandstaff's plumber finished installing all fixtures in the restrooms, and behind the bar. He also installed a 'tankless' gas water heater on the outside of the west wall, just south of the service

entry. Restroom partitions were purchased locally and Bob and Billy installed them in each of the restrooms. They also constructed the railing on the outside around the patio. Jesse "JD" Way purchased a nice stainless steel gas grill for the patio....and Lynn and Larry Mobley constructed the brick base to hold this 'drop-in' style grill.

Worthy of mention, is that two of our former members, "Chuck" Moore and Ray Lewallen have their cremated remains imbedded in the concrete slab below the building patio. A marble plaque will soon be installed to commemorate this fact.

A gate was cut in the railing around the patio to allow for access on the east side without having to climb the rail.

Tim Critcher had suggested we build a small play yard for children, to be completed on the west side of the patio.

Suzy Orosco, bar manager and AMVETS member accomplished the plantings on the front (south) side of the building.

Her husband, Paul brought his employers equipment from work to tear down the old building.

Sometime during the first half of the year 2007, a new ancillary organization of this Post, the "AMVETS Riders" was chartered with its first President, Donald Lee. Others may join either with or without the benefit of ownership of a bike, but if you choose to ride with the club, your bike must be capable of Interstate Highway speeds, and you must be a member of AMVETS Post 35.

Bruce R. Hoon
Public Relations Officer
Charter Member for Life
On this day, May 30, 2007