



*Photo A. Wilderness Road Amateur Radio Club antennas soar alongside American and POW/MIA flags outside the American Legion Post 46 building in Danville, Kentucky. (Photos by Schelly Stone/The American Legion)*

*How a Kentucky amateur radio club found a new beginning via its local American Legion post, and how the two groups joined forces to benefit each other and their community.*

## Amateur Radio + American Legion = Everybody Wins

**BY LAURA EDWARDS\***

**A**cross the United States, a community that has an amateur radio club probably also has an American Legion post in or near it. And as one Kentucky club discovered, the local American Legion post is a great place to look for collaboration, assistance, and more (*Photo A*).

Boyle American Legion Post 46 in Danville, Kentucky, was first chartered in October 1919. The American Legion is a federally chartered veterans organization, first conceived in

Paris in March of that year by a group of World War I veterans still stationed in Europe. Once the veterans returned home, the organization grew by leaps and bounds — and more than 4,000 of the local American Legion posts chartered by the end of 1920 (such as Post 46) are still active in their communities today.

The American Legion stands on four pillars of emphasis: Veterans affairs and rehabilitation, national security, Americanism, and children and youth. All of these pillars are most expressed through acts of service by posts and individual Legionnaires alike, to servicemembers, veterans and

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their families, and the community as a whole. One aspect of national security The American Legion has always emphasized is disaster preparedness, and an important part of that is emergency communications — “when all else fails.” In the 1930s, the American Legion National Security Commission actively encouraged local posts to start amateur radio groups to aid in civil defense. In the 1950s, The American Legion published its own instructional course, and the American Legion Amateur Radio Network was on the air across the country.

In 2010, a resolution passed by the decision-making National Executive Committee — “The American Legion Role in Homeland Security” — urged a renewed focus on efforts to help keep communities safe, including via amateur radio. The American Legion Amateur Radio Club (TALARC) was established the next spring. Since then, it has overseen the formation of about 40 clubs in posts across the country, each with its own callsign. TALARC has a club room in the basement of American Legion National Headquarters in Indianapolis, where — under callsign K9TAL — it conducts special nets for Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and the organization’s birthday in March. (It also sends out QSL certificates to contacts, and welcomes new voices.) In all, TALARC boasts about 4,000 members nationwide, and the number continues to grow.

### A Call to Action

Post 46 Commander Tony Cromwell, KB4TC, a Vietnam War Air Force veteran, a ham for over 40 years and a member of TALARC, had the 2010 call to action in mind when he heard about the series of events that had led Danville’s local amateur radio club to lose its home. The Wilderness Road Amateur Radio Club, WRARC (*Photo B*), was formed in 1960. According to member Mike May, KF4FMQ, the club first met at Centre College in Danville, and then at the Boyle County courthouse. About 10 years ago, it moved into the local Red Cross building and operated from there until early 2017, when the club lost its space with little notice. Wilderness Road, a big player in regional and even state weather-spotting, was essentially homeless for several months. Member Doug Collins, KA4SWT, comments that “enthusiasm for the club dropped” during that time.

While Wilderness Road was focused on retaining its place in the community, Cromwell was focused on regaining Post 46’s place. He found out about the former’s situation and reached out to see how the post could help. As he put it in a story submitted to The American Legion’s national website in April 2017, “As commander, I recognized the ability of my post to host this organization, gain membership, and advance everyone’s mission. There were no losers, just winners. Inaction equated to dereliction of duty.”

That ability was well stated: Post 46 sits on a 6-acre parcel outside Danville. The post building is largely composed of one giant warehouse-like space, with some enclosed rooms along the edge of the building. Into one of those rooms went the equipment of the Wilderness Road club. And according to George Coomer, KM4QOY, a Persian Gulf Army veteran and one of the several Wilderness Road members who are also Legionnaires (*Photo C*), “things got a lot brighter.”

### Growth for Both Club and Post

Since gaining its new home, Coomer says, the club has grown in both the size of its membership and the activities it’s able to put on. One immediate benefit is the location. The previous lodgings were less than accessible to all the club’s members, but according to member Chris Galbreath,



*Photo B. The Wilderness Road Amateur Radio Club sign is as well traveled as the club itself, and now hangs outside the club room in the Post 46 building.*



*Photo C. George Coomer, KM4QOY, operates the Wilderness Road club’s station equipment.*

KG4UQL, “Now we have people who can come in and see the radio room” (*Photo D*). Another is a bigger pool of potential members — several Legionnaire hams who did not belong to Wilderness Road do now.

And that member pool goes both ways. Coomer’s story of American Legion membership started when he lived in another state. When he moved to Kentucky, he didn’t renew that membership ... until Post 46 took in Wilderness Road. Now he’s one of the leaders of the post’s amateur radio efforts. Zenah Teater, KK4IYY, a Vietnam War Navy veteran who has been a member since the early 1980s — even serving as a bugler in his previous post’s honor guard — switched his membership to Post 46 after the move. “It worked out good for me,” he says. “Everyone’s kind and friendly.” He feels there is more intercommunication and intermixing than before.

“It’s been great,” adds Bill Waldschmidt, W9WA. “It somehow gave us a burst of energy.” Like Coomer, Waldschmidt hadn’t renewed his membership (in the Sons of The American Legion, for boys and men whose parents or grandparents served in the U.S. military and are eligible for Legion membership) from another state, but has since switched to Post 46.





*Photo D. Wilderness Road Club / American Legion members wear customized baseball caps from the Legion's Emblem Sales Division, featuring their callsigns and the American Legion emblem in the center.*

This has been a true union of entities: Wilderness Road is a post-sponsored organization, rather than a post-owned club. The difference means the club has kept its callsign, assets, by-laws, officers, and nonprofit status, rather than being absorbed into and reconstituted within the post.

Earl Belcher, Post 46's senior vice commander, is a Vietnam War Air Force veteran, a former commander of the post and the person who recruited Cromwell into it several years ago. He credits the latter for the move: As commander himself, Cromwell "got the wheels rolling" to move the club. "He jumped at the idea," notes Belcher, who also stresses how Wilderness Road has helped the post in large ways as well. The club has helped the post refocus itself on supporting the community, and is helping build the post's standing in it; before the move, "we were about ready to lock the place up." Wilderness Road members have gone so far as to set up a dual website for the club and post (<[www.wrarc.com](http://www.wrarc.com)>) that gets lots of traffic.

With its location secure, Wilderness Road has been able to grow its own community service, including assisting at the annual Bourbon Chase, a 24-hour relay race that goes through Danville twice. Club member Janie Taylor, KI6SER, explains that a club member had the idea to set hams ahead of the relay point, take note of bib numbers, and announce them to the switch point. But the end result was even bigger:



*Photo E. Teenager David Lamb, KN4QAG, is a familiar face in the Wilderness Road club room.*

### Find Your Local Legion

If you are interested in finding a post near your club with which to discuss joining forces, the first step is the "Find a Post" button on the main American Legion website, <[www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org)>. You can enter your city, state, ZIP code and search radius, and find a list of posts near you. If you would like to know what posts in your state may already be active in amateur radio, go to <[www.legion.org/departments](http://www.legion.org/departments)> for links to the state organizations, as well as a quick-hit directory. The state headquarters should have more information.

The main TALARC page can be found at <[www.legion.org/hamradio](http://www.legion.org/hamradio)>. It includes introductions to both the club and amateur radio in general; resources to start or grow a club at a post; and a net schedule and archive of reports. The 1950s instructional course can be viewed at <[bit.ly/2M4YsVe](http://bit.ly/2M4YsVe)>.

The hams were a mile away from the relay point, which provided enough lead time for them to announce bib numbers and times to contacts at the point, who used a special software program to project the information onto a 10X20 screen containing up to 36 competitors. Taylor says their efforts were "impressive to the people who organized and ran the Chase. It was a great way to demonstrate what amateur radio can do." She says the focus of the club goes in waves between community service and contesting, with the social factor always underlying.

For his part, Cromwell says the results of the move have "exceeded my expectations." To him, Wilderness Road and Post 46 coming together has demonstrated the synergy possible in such a model: "Everybody wins." He had drawn up a list of desired objectives for the "union," and finds that they've been well fulfilled. On the membership side, the post received a trophy from the state American Legion organization for the largest increase in a Sons squadron (their equivalent of a post) — many of those new Sons are Wilderness Road members. And the club members make a habit of showing up for post events, from membership meetings to Thanksgiving potlucks. The union made it into the local newspaper — and the college-age reporter later showed up at one of the licensing classes the club conducts at the post. (Cromwell says most testing sessions end up with a new member for the club,

post or both.) Drawing from the increased foot traffic, Post 46 is in the process of starting a chapter of the American Legion Riders, a highly popular motorcycle group within the national organization. Cromwell also cites the club's running of the monthly TALARC D-Star net from its room, the only TALARC net to actually emanate from a post. (It's the first Monday of the month at 7 p.m. Eastern, on Reflector 56C.) Post service officer and retired Department of Veterans Affairs employee Gene Klaus takes part, giving out information and answering questions about VA benefits over the air. Wilderness Road members even provide general electrical and electronic support to the post facility.

Another point of praise Cromwell has for the Wilderness Road union is that it is getting more young people interested in the club — and hopefully the post as well. Teenager David Lamb, KN4QAG (*Photo E*), is a next-door neighbor of Taylor. He is a new licensee who got into amateur radio through the Boy Scouts, and wants to stay involved. He is already adept with the club's equipment, and is interested in both communication and the science behind it.

According to Cromwell, other American Legion posts in Kentucky are looking at the example set by Post 46 and Wilderness Road, for possible implementation in their own communities. The post will mark its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, and the club will be “key” to the celebration, especially “the public piece,” he says. Everything is being considered, from special call-signs and QSLs to satellite installations. That brings up the word that possibly best describes Wilderness Road's impact on Post 46: *Visibility*. It is a word very much on the mind of The American Legion at every level, as it approaches the close of the 15-month Centennial Celebration window that started last August and will wrap up on Veterans Day, November 11.

The emphasis of the celebration is twofold, on communicating — and then implementing — both the Legion's legacy of past service and its vision for the next century of service. American Legion posts across the country have taken this to heart, and amateur radio clubs that reach out to their local post may well find a group of people ready to commit space, money, people power, or whatever else is needed to continue serving wherever they are needed.

Coomer sums up Wilderness Road's experience thus: “We never knew how good we were going to have it.”