

FEBRUARY 2020

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HISTORY MONTH

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## 12 BLACK MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS

Since the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898, 39 African-Americans have earned the military's highest valor award, the Medal of Honor. To mark Black History Month, here is the complete list.

BY DAVE SPIVA

### 'I WALKED OUT AS A MODEL'

After serving a tour in Korea as an Army photojournalist and earning a college diploma, Raquel Riley Thomas started her own company. This VFW member is now known as a "leader of the future."

BY ISMAEL RODRIGUEZ JR.



### 30 MILES A DAY TO FIGHT SUICIDE

Iraq War veteran Jeremy Miller became depressed as several members of his company killed themselves after returning home. Rather than become a statistic himself, he walked across the country last year to publicize the epidemic of veterans suicides.

BY NATHAN PETTENGILL



### 'HALF FISH, HALF NUTS'

The men who removed beach obstacles prior to 1945's Battle of Iwo Jima were strong swimmers, courageous and cool under fire. These "frogmen" proved their value in World War II's Pacific Theater and are the forefathers of today's Navy SEALs.

BY DICK CAMP AND SUZANNE POOL CAMP



## FEBRUARY 2020

Vol. 107 No. 5

**COVER PHOTO:** Steve Wojcik, a life member of VFW Post 6550 in Strum, Wis., and Montel Williams, a Navy veteran, attend the "reveal" in October at Wojcik's house in Strum. Williams' show, *Military Makeover with Montel*, provided the wounded Iraq War veteran and his family with an extensive remodel of their home.

(Photo by Caitlyn Martin/Brandstar)

### ON THE COVER

- 24 Home Makeover
- 36 Hockey
- 48 'Frogmen' at Iwo Jima

### IN THIS ISSUE

- 6 Priority Goals
- 20 Joe Orr
- 22 African-American Women Troops
- 38 Iraq War Corpsman Sings
- 40 PTSD River Recovery
- 42 Antelope Hunt
- 46 Park University Valor Medals
- 52 Service Dogs

### IN EVERY ISSUE

- 2 Command Post
- 4 Now Hear This
- 8 Washington Wire
- 54 Better Health
- 55 VFW in Action
- 56 Book Corner
- 57 Reunions & Claims
- 59 Member Benefits
- 60 Vets in Focus



# VFW Celebrates Black History Month



**COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF**  
William "Doc" Schmitz

**V**FW is proud to celebrate Black History Month in February. And while the nation sets aside one month annually to recall the contributions African-Americans have made to the country, that dedication could and should be recognized every day of the year. The fact is, black history is American history.

That commitment is well represented in the nation's military history, too. To underscore that point, you'll notice this issue includes articles covering that legacy back to VFW's founding.

Most prominently, *VFW* magazine readers will see a listing of all black Medal of Honor recipients since the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898. As an organization, VFW wants to make sure that all minority troops who have performed heroically under fire be given full consideration for awards recognizing their exemplary service.

Last October, VFW donated \$70,000 to a private college to further the cause. That school, Park University in Parkville, Mo., will use the money to study all valor awards issued to minority troops. The goal is to make sure that none of them were overlooked for a prestigious award — such as the Medal of Honor — because of their race.

You'll also read in this issue about the only all-black, all-female unit to deploy to Europe during World War II. While more than 100,000 African-Americans served overseas, the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion featured the only black women to earn that distinction. Their hard work in making sure troops received mail from home elevated morale immeasurably.

Carrying on that commitment today is Raquel Riley Thomas. After serving as an Army photojournalist in South Korea, Thomas earned an ROTC scholarship to Hampton University in Virginia. Today, she owns a production company, graces billboards as a commercial model and serves her fellow veterans as a VFW member.

You'll also read about one veteran we could not, regrettably, call a VFW member. Vietnam War veteran Joe Orr, who passed away last year, was denied membership at VFW Posts in Colorado and Texas when he returned from the war.

It's a loss we can never recover, and I'm personally outraged as a fellow Vietnam vet that it occurred in the first place. Unfortunately, we can't make it right with Mr. Orr, but we can make sure it never happens again.

Black veterans, as well as all minority veterans, are welcome in VFW. Anyone who is willing to put on the uniform of the U.S. military, defend the nation and earn a VFW-qualifying award has every right to be a member of our great organization. We want them all to join.



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## STAFF

### PUBLISHER AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Tim Dyhouse

### SENIOR EDITOR

Janie Dyhouse

### ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Dave Spiva

### STAFF WRITER

Ismael Rodriguez Jr.

### ART DIRECTOR

Lauren Goldman

### ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Tina Clark

### ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

**GLM Communications, Inc.**

**Sabrina Camacho**, Vice President of Operations

500 1st Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030

(212) 929-1300 FAX 212-929-9574

Email: [scamacho@glmcommunications.com](mailto:scamacho@glmcommunications.com)

### EDITORIAL OFFICE

Address all communications for publication to:

**The Editor, VFW Magazine**

**406 W. 34th St., Suite 523, Kansas City, MO 64111**

(816) 756-3390; [www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org); [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)

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### VFW OBJECTIVES

**To ensure national security**  
through maximum military strength.

**To speed the rehabilitation**  
of the nation's disabled and needy veterans.

**To assist the widows and orphans**  
and the dependents of disabled and needy veterans.

**To promote Americanism** through education in patriotism and constructive service to the communities in which we live.



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PHOTO BY CARLOS BONGIOANNI/STARS AND STRIPES



President Donald Trump presents the Medal of Honor to Army Master Sgt. Matthew O. Williams of 3rd Special Forces Group on Oct. 30 at the White House. Williams was the second member of his unit to receive the award for their actions during the 2008 Battle of Shok Valley in Afghanistan's Nuristan province.

## Medal of Honor Awarded for Afghanistan Valor

A Green Beret in October became the second member of his detachment to receive the Medal of Honor for his actions during a 2008 firefight in Afghanistan. Master Sgt. Matthew O. Williams of Operational Detachment Alpha 3336 was awarded the nation's highest medal of valor on Oct. 30 at the White House.

Williams, of Boerne, Texas, and his detachment, which was part of C Co., 3rd Bn., 3rd Special Forces Group, were part of an assault team inserted by helicopter on April 6, 2008, into the Shok Valley in Nuristan province, Afghanistan. They were searching for "high-value" targets of the Hezb-e Islami al Gulbadin, a terrorist group aligned with al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Williams, then a weapons sergeant, led a counter-attack up a mountain to relieve the lead portion of the team that was in danger of being overrun. After bringing one casualty down the mountain, Williams climbed back up, reached the lead element, killed several terrorists, re-established communications and continued to help remove casualties.

Later, when the enemy attempted to overrun the casualty collection point lower down the mountain, Williams continued fighting until medevac helicopters arrived.

"That day was one of the worst predicaments of my life at that point," Williams said. "The experience from that has helped me through my whole entire career. Remain level-headed and focus on what needs to happen as opposed to what is happening."

On Oct. 1, 2018, Williams' fellow Green Beret, Ronald J. Shurer II, who served as a medic for the detachment on the mission, also received the Medal of Honor.



PHOTO BY JOE ROSENTHAL/AP

Leathernecks of the 5th Marine Division stand proudly beside the U.S. flag planted atop Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima in February 1945. All surviving veterans of the battle are invited to Arlington, Va., this month to recognize the 75th anniversary.

## Iwo Jima Veterans Invited to Arlington

The Iwo Jima Association of America wants all veterans of the World War II battle and their families to visit Virginia this month. The group is hosting a symposium Feb. 25-29 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Arlington to recognize the 75th anniversary of the pivotal battle.

For more information, contact [rsifuentes@iwojimaassociation.org](mailto:rsifuentes@iwojimaassociation.org) or visit [www.iwojimaassociation.org](http://www.iwojimaassociation.org).

## U.S. Cities Rated on Veterans Appeal

A personal finance website based in Washington, D.C., ranked 100 of America's biggest cities last fall to determine which ones are the best to call home for veterans and their families. The company, WalletHub, compared cities across 20 key indicators of livability, affordability and veteran-friendliness. The factors range from the share of military skill-related jobs to veteran income growth to the availability of VA health facilities.

Listed below are Wallethub's ranking of the 10 best and 10 worst cities for veterans.

### Best Cities for Veterans

1. Tampa, Fla.
2. Austin, Texas
3. Orlando, Fla.
4. Raleigh, N.C.
5. Scottsdale, Ariz.
6. Colorado Springs, Colo.
7. Virginia Beach, Va.
8. Gilbert, Ariz.
9. St. Petersburg, Fla.
10. Jacksonville, Fla.

### Worst Cities for Veterans

91. North Las Vegas, Nev.
92. New Orleans
93. Chicago
94. Toledo, Ohio
95. Philadelphia
96. Indianapolis
97. Memphis, Tenn.
98. Jersey City, N.J.
99. Newark, N.J.
100. Detroit

To view the full report, visit <https://wallethub.com/edu/best-and-worst-cities-for-veterans/8156>.





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## VFW PRIORITY GOALS FOR 2020

# WHERE VFW STANDS ON THE ISSUES

Listed below are VFW's official positions on issues impacting veterans, service members and their families, as well as national defense and homeland security. They are based on national convention resolutions and rated as priorities by direct feedback from VFW members.

### BUDGET

To fully fund programs for veterans, service members and their families, Congress must:

- Reform the dysfunctional federal budget process.
- Authorize VA to receive reimbursements from TRICARE and Medicare.
- Properly fund the POW/MIA full accounting mission.
- Never reduce one veteran's benefits to pay for another.

### HEALTH CARE

To ensure service members and veterans receive timely access to high-quality health care without increasing cost shares, Congress, VA and DOD must:

- Reduce the number of service members and veterans who die by suicide.
- Preserve the integrity of TRICARE.
- Properly implement VA and DOD health IT systems.
- Strengthen care and research for mental health and traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Improve programs and services for women veterans.
- Research and effectively treat health conditions associated with toxic exposures.
- Eliminate co-payment requirements for preventive medicines.
- Research the efficacy of medical cannabis.
- Expand telehealth services.
- Expand nursing home eligibility.

### DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

To ensure veterans and their survivors have timely access to earned benefits, Congress and VA must:

- Properly implement the modernized appeals process.
- Consider treatment of presumptive conditions as a claim for disability compensation.
- Extend Persian Gulf War disability compensation eligibility beyond 2021 and to Afghanistan-theater veterans, and reform the relevant Disability Benefits Questionnaire.
- Establish presumptive disability compensation benefits for hearing loss, tinnitus, TBI, blast survivors, and for health conditions associated with toxic exposures.
- Require VA to accept private medical evidence in lieu of VA examinations.
- Increase burial allowances to account for inflation and include spouses' information on all headstones.
- Authorize more than one adaptive automotive grant for disabled veterans.
- Make VA National Service Life Insurance competitive with private health insurance policies.
- Update regulations and laws governing claims to account for digital claims processing.
- Expand VA wartime benefits to early Vietnam veterans.

- Improve accuracy of disability compensation claims related to military sexual trauma.
- Transfer control of the Mare Island Naval Cemetery to the NCA.

### EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRANSITION ASSISTANCE

To ensure veterans succeed after leaving military service, they must have access to:

- Vocational rehabilitation and employment services throughout their lifetime.
- Timely and improved transition assistance, including access to programs after they leave military service.
- High-quality and sustainable education benefits.
- Strong employment and training programs.
- Small business development opportunities.
- Civilian credentials or academic credit for military training.
- Hiring preferences in the civil service and with large government contractors.
- National veterans treatment court advocates.
- Education and training in new and expanding career fields.
- Affordable housing and wraparound services to avoid homelessness.
- Improved character of discharge review and appeals procedures.

### MILITARY QUALITY OF LIFE

To maintain a quality, comprehensive benefits and retirement package that is the backbone for an all-volunteer force, Congress and DOD must:

- Increase military base pay comparability with private sector wages.
- Protect and improve on-base quality-of-life programs.
- Ensure that military housing is safe and free of toxic substances.
- End the military retirement pay and VA disability compensation offset.
- Eliminate the Survivor Benefit Plan/Dependency and Indemnity Compensation offset.
- Increase the government's Thrift Savings Plan contribution.
- Eliminate sexual assaults in the military.
- Establish the Armed Forces University.
- Ensure equity of benefits for Reserve component service members.
- Improve stability and support for military families.

### NATIONAL SECURITY, FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND POW/MIA

To fully support service members and their mission to fight the war on terrorism, and protect our nation's citizens and interests around the world, Congress and DOD must:

- Expand partnerships with host nations and private/public organizations to achieve the fullest possible accounting of U.S. military personnel missing from all wars.
- Preserve the all-volunteer force.
- Maintain a substantial military presence in the Republic of Korea.



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# President Trump Signs POW/MIA Flag Act into Law

**V**FW officials were present at the White House during the Oval Office signing of the *National POW/MIA Flag Act* by President Donald Trump.

The new law (P.L. 116-67) requires that POW/MIA flags be displayed below the U.S. flag at federal sites around the country. These locations include:

- White House.
- Capitol building.
- World War II Memorial.
- Korean War Veterans Memorial.
- Vietnam Veterans Memorial.
- National cemeteries.
- State Secretary offices.
- Defense Secretary offices.
- VA Secretary offices.
- Selective Service System Director's office.
- Military installations.
- VA medical centers.
- Post offices.

VFW Commander-in-Chief William "Doc" Schmitz said the law will serve as a "daily reminder" of service members still missing in action.

"This is a historic victory for every man and woman who courageously defended this nation and remains unaccounted for," Schmitz said.

In March 2019, Rep. Jack Bergman (R-Mich.), who is a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general, and Rep. Chris Pappas (D-N.H.) introduced the *National POW/*



President Donald Trump, VA Secretary Robert Wilke and other invited individuals, including VFW Washington Office Executive Director B.J. Lawrence, display a POW/MIA flag after Trump signed the *National POW/MIA Flag Act* (S. 693) on Nov. 7 in the Oval Office of the White House. The law requires that POW/MIA flags be displayed below the U.S. flag at federal sites around the country.

*MIA Flag Act* in the House.

"The VFW supported this new law from the very beginning," said VFW Washington Office Executive Director B.J. Lawrence, who attended Trump's bill signing. "We continue to stand firm on our relationship with and dedication to both The National League of POW/MIA Families and the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency."

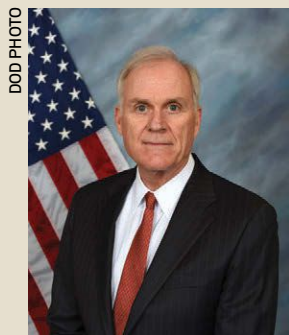
Prior to the law's enactment, the POW/MIA flag was only required to be displayed by the federal government on certain prominent federal properties six days per year: Armed Forces Day,

Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, National POW/MIA Recognition Day and Veterans Day.

Lawrence said the new law is a "huge step" in the right direction.

"Our nation's leaders made a pledge to account for every service member who did not come home," said Lawrence, an Army veteran.

"This is a pledge which also holds true for today's servicemen and women. We must always ensure that if they do fall in battle, they are not forgotten and our nation will do everything in its power to bring them home."



Former Navy Secretary  
Richard Spencer

## Spencer Out as Navy Secretary

Defense Secretary Mark Esper relieved former Navy Secretary Richard Spencer of his position on Nov. 24. Spencer, a Marine Corps aviator who served in 1976-81, had been the Navy's top civilian since August 2017.

President Donald Trump nominated Kenneth Braithwaite, who was serving as ambassador to Norway, for the position shortly after Spencer was removed.

Under Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly assumed Spencer's responsibilities in the interim. Modly was expected to be in

the position until the Senate had confirmed a new secretary.

Braithwaite, a retired Navy Rear Adm. (lower half), served on active duty from 1984 to 1993 and in the Reserve from 1993 until his retirement in 2011. He led the Navy Combat Camera Command during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Braithwaite, who graduated from the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., in 1984, was appointed ambassador to Norway in February 2018.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** about specific legislation or VA benefits, contact VFW's Washington Office at [vfw@vfw.org](mailto:vfw@vfw.org). A member of VFW's National Veterans Service staff will respond as soon as possible.



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## VFW Supports Burn Pit Legislation

VFW-supported legislation that could recognize veterans who were exposed to burn pits during the Global War on Terrorism was introduced Nov. 22 to the Senate.

Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) and Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) introduced *The Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act of 2019 (S. 2950)*. If made into law, it would recognize that veterans who served in certain countries in southwest Asia and east Africa were exposed to more than 45 toxins, chemicals and airborne hazards. Those countries include Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

The bill aims to help veterans prove that any disability or illness resulting from exposure to these environmental hazards occurred

during military service. However, S. 2950 would not grant presumption of service-connected disability to service men and women harmed by exposure to burn pits.

VFW National Legislative Associate Director Matt Doyle said VFW is urging congress to pass *The Veterans Burn Pit Exposure Recognition Act of 2019*.

“It’s a good first step to recognize that veterans who served overseas were exposed to burn pits,” Doyle said. “VFW also is asking Congress to improve how the Defense Department tracks toxic exposures, funds independent research on all environmental hazards in forward-deployed locations and ensures that veterans receive disability benefits and health treatment for illnesses connected to exposure.”



PHOTO BY SENIOR AIRMAN JULIANNE SHOWALTER/DOD

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Air Force Senior Airman Frances Gavalis and Staff Sgt. Candice Zalewski, of the 332nd Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron, toss unserviceable uniform items into a burn pit on March 10, 2008, in Balad, Iraq. *The Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act of 2019* states that veterans who served in certain countries in southwest Asia and east Africa were exposed to more than 45 toxins, chemicals and airborne hazards.

## VA Issues New Housing Allowances for Post 9/11 GI Bill

VA changed its monthly housing allowances (MHA) given to students who are receiving the *Post-9/11 GI Bill* on Dec. 1. The new allowances are based on the standard basic housing allowance for E-5s with dependents.

A student’s MHA is based on his or her school’s campus location, and rates are based on the date the GI Bill is used, according to VA. To get an MHA estimate, students can visit [www.va.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool](http://www.va.gov/gi-bill-comparison-tool).

Students who need assistance with their GI Bill benefits can contact VA’s Education Call Center at 1-888-442-4551 on weekdays 8 a.m.-7 p.m., Eastern time. They also can contact VA through social media, including Facebook, [www.facebook.com/gibilleducation](https://www.facebook.com/gibilleducation), and Twitter, @VAVetBenefits.

## VFW Encourages Blue Water Veterans to File VA Claim

At the beginning of the year, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-23)* went into effect. The law restores VA benefits to Vietnam War blue water sailors (those who served aboard ships off the coast of Vietnam) who had their disability eligibility arbitrarily taken away by VA in 2002. Those veterans also could be eligible for retroactive benefits.

The *Blue Water Navy Veterans Act of 2019* also requires VA to contact veterans who filed a disability claim that originally was denied.

“This long-overdue legislation has the potential to truly change lives,” VFW National Veterans Service Director Ryan Gallucci said.

VFW encourages veterans who served in or off the coast of Vietnam or Thailand to contact a VFW service officer to discuss whether they are eligible to file a VA claim for Agent Orange exposure. Visit [www.vfw.org/nvs](http://www.vfw.org/nvs) to find a nearby VFW service officer.

### 14 PRESUMPTIVE CONDITIONS

To qualify for Agent Orange-related benefits, a veteran must have one or more of the 14 conditions VA presumes to have been caused by exposure to the defoliant, which are:

- Chronic B-cell Leukemia.
- Hodgkin’s Disease.
- Multiple Myeloma.
- Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.
- Prostate Cancer.
- Respiratory Cancers.
- Soft Tissue Sarcomas.
- AL Amyloidosis.
- Chloracne.
- Diabetes Mellitus Type 2.
- Ischemic Heart Disease.
- Parkinson’s Disease.
- Early-onset Peripheral Neuropathy.
- Porphyria Cutanea Tarda.





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An unidentified soldier of the 12th Armored Division stands guard over a group of German POWs in April 1945. A fellow member of the 12th AD, Army Sgt. 1st Class Edward A. Carter Jr., earned the Medal of Honor for his actions during a battle on March 23, 1945, near Speyer, Germany.

# VFW HONORS AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS

A total of 39 African-American veterans have earned the Medal of Honor during VFW-qualifying actions, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. Here are some details on the recipients.

**BY DAVE SPIVA**

**M**ore than 3,500 service members have earned the nation's highest military decoration. But of those, only 92 have been black men, according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

The Medal of Honor (MOH) is an award that dates back to the Civil War. The first African-

American service member who earned the prestigious award was Army Sgt. William H. Carney, a man born a slave in 1840 in Norfolk, Va., according to the Department of Defense.

Attached to C Co., 54th Massachusetts Colored Inf. Regt., Carney earned the MOH for his actions on July 18, 1864, during a battle at Fort Wagner on



Morris Island, S.C. A battle narrative recalls that his unit's color guard was shot, and Carney took it upon himself to catch the flag and not let it touch the ground. He is believed to have carried the flag throughout the battle without letting it touch the ground, even when he was wounded. Carney was later presented with the Medal of Honor on May 23, 1900.

Delays in presenting African-Americans their earned Medals of Honor have been common throughout American history. In the early 1990s, the Army worked with Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., to determine if any racial disparity was present during the process of considering Medals of Honor for black troops.

The investigation determined that seven African-American soldiers should have received the Medal of Honor during World War II. Those seven men are 1st Lt. Vernon J. Baker, Staff Sgt. Edward A. Carter Jr., 1st Lt. John R. Fox, Pfc. Willy F.

James Jr., Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers, Maj. Charles L. Thomas and Pvt. George Watson.

During a ceremony on Jan. 12, 1997, at the White House, all men were awarded the Medal of Honor by President Bill Clinton. Baker was the only living recipient at the time of the ceremony.

As of November 2019, the most recent African-American service member to receive the Medal of Honor was Marine Sgt. Major John L. Canley for his actions during the Battle of Hue in January-February 1968 in the Vietnam War. Canley was presented the award by President Donald Trump during a ceremony on Oct. 17, 2018, at the White House.

Visit [www.vfw.org/media-and-events/vfw-magazine/](http://www.vfw.org/media-and-events/vfw-magazine/) to read an article about Canley in the March 2019 issue of VFW magazine.

Here is a list of the 39 African-American men who have earned the Medal of Honor during VFW-qualifying actions.

## SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

### ARMY

**Sgt. Maj. Edward L. Baker Jr.**

10th Cav Regt.

July 1, 1898

Santiago, Cuba

Left cover to rescue a wounded soldier from drowning.

**Pvt. Dennis Bell**

H Troop, 10th Cav Regt.

June 30, 1898

Cuba

Voluntarily went ashore to aid in rescue of troops.

**Pvt. Fitz Lee**

M Troop, 10th Cav Regt.

June 30, 1898

Cuba

Voluntarily went ashore to aid in rescue of troops.

**Pvt. William H. Thompkins**

G Troop, 10th Cav Regt.

June 30, 1898

Cuba

Voluntarily went ashore to aid in rescue of troops.

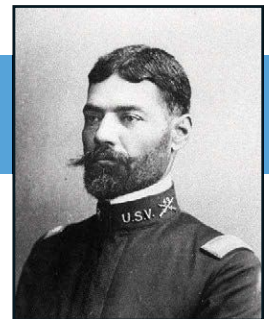
**Pvt. George H. Wanton**

M Troop, 10th Cav Regt.

June 30, 1898

Cuba

Voluntarily went ashore to aid in rescue of troops.



**Sgt. Maj. Edward L. Baker Jr.**

### NAVY

**Fireman 1st Class Robert Penn**

USS Iowa (BB-4)

July 20, 1898

Off Santiago, Cuba

Stopped a fire during a boiler accident.

## WORLD WAR I

### ARMY

**Cpl. Freddie Stowers\***

C Co., 371st Inf. Regt., 93rd Div.

Sept. 28, 1918

Champagne-Marne, France

Urged squad to fight after wounded by machine-gun fire.

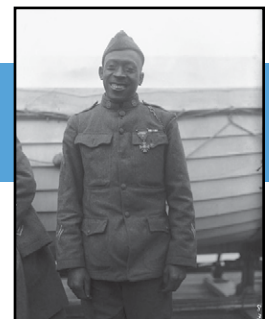
**Pvt. Henry Johnson\*\***

C Co., 369th Inf. Regt., 93rd Div.

May 14, 1918

Argonne Forest, France

Prevented wounded soldier from being taken prisoner and fought with only a knife.



**Pvt. Henry Johnson**

## WORLD WAR II

### ARMY

**1st Lt. Vernon J. Baker**

Weapons Plt., C Co., 1st Bn., 370th Inf. Regt., 92nd Inf. Div.

April 5-6, 1945

Viareggio, Italy

Killed nine enemy soldiers and eliminated three machine-gun positions.

**Staff Sgt. Edward A. Carter Jr.\*\***

56th Armd. Inf. Bn., 12th Armd. Div.

March 23, 1945

Speyer, Germany

While wounded, killed six and captured two Germans.

**1st Lt. John R. Fox\***

598th FA Bn., 366th Inf. Regt., 92nd Inf. Div.

Dec. 26, 1944

Sommocolonia, Italy

Caused the deaths of about 100 German troops.

**Pfc. Willy F. James Jr.\***

G Co., 413th Inf. Regt., 104th Inf. Div.

April 7, 1945

Lippoldsberg, Germany

Volunteered to scout German positions and took the point in a counter attack.

**Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers\***

A Co., 761st Tank Bn.

Nov. 15-19, 1944

Guebling, France

Directed tank fire at enemy positions, while wounded.

**Maj. Charles L. Thomas\*\***

C Co., 614th Tank Destroyer Bn., 411th Inf. Regt., 103rd Inf. Div.

Dec. 14, 1944

Climbach, France

Directed soldiers of C Company to fight enemy forces, while wounded.

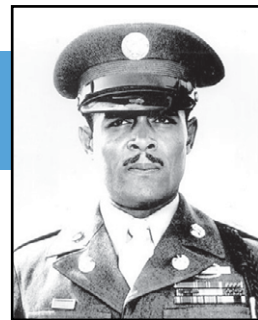
**Pvt. George Watson\***

2nd Bn., 29th Quartermaster Regt.

March 8, 1943

Porloch Harbor, New Guinea

Saved soldiers who could not swim after transport ship was attacked by bombers.



Staff Sgt. Edward A. Carter Jr.

## KOREAN WAR

### ARMY

**Sgt. Cornelius H. Charlton\***

C Co., 1st Bn., 24th Inf. Regt., 25th Inf. Div.

June 2, 1951

Chipo-ri, Korea

Killed six Chinese soldiers and destroyed two enemy positions.

**Pfc. William Thompson\***

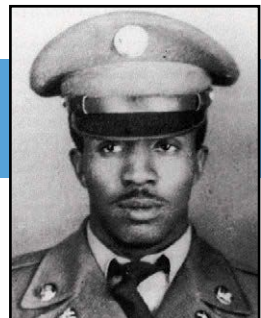
M Co., 3rd Bn., 24th Inf. Regt.,

25th Inf. Div.

Aug. 6, 1950

Haman, Korea

Killed countless enemy troops, while wounded.



Pfc. William Thompson

## VIETNAM WAR

### ARMY

**Sgt. 1st Class Webster Anderson**

A Btry., 2nd Bn., 320th Arty Regt., 101st Abn. Inf. Div.

Oct. 15, 1967

Tam Ky, Vietnam

Directed unit to fight while being wounded by several grenades.

**Sgt. 1st Class Eugene Ashley Jr.\***

Detachment A-101, C Co.,

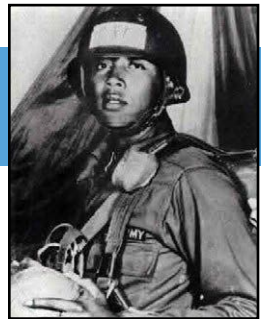
5th Special Forces Grp.,

1st Special Forces

Feb. 6-7, 1968

Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam

Led assault in attempt to save other troops.



Pfc. Milton L. Olive III



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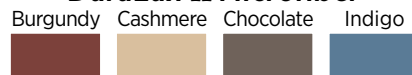
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## **Sgt. 1st Class William M. Bryany\***

A Co., 5th Special Forces Grp., 1st Special Forces  
March 24, 1969  
Long Khánh Province, Vietnam  
Directed attacks against enemy, while wounded.

## **Spec. 6 Lawrence Joel**

1st Bn., 503rd Inf. Regt., 173rd Abn. Bde.  
Nov. 8, 1965  
Binh Duong Province, Vietnam  
While wounded, defied orders to treat wounded soldiers.

## **Spec. 5 Dwight H. Johnson**

B Co., 1st Bn., 69th Armor Regt., 4th Inf. Div.  
Jan. 15, 1968  
Dak To, Vietnam  
Killed several enemy troops, which saved fellow soldiers.

## **Pfc. Garfield M. Langhorn\***

C Trp., 7th Sqdn., 17th Cav Regt., 1st Avn. Bde.  
Jan. 15, 1969  
Pleiku, Vietnam  
Threw himself on enemy grenade to protect wounded soldiers.

## **Sgt. Matthew Leonard\***

Co. B, 1st Bn., 16th Inf. Regt., 1st Inf. Div.  
Feb. 28, 1967  
Suoi Da, Vietnam  
Commanded men and charged an enemy machine gun, while wounded.

## **Sgt. Donald R. Long\***

C Trp., 1st Sqdn., 4th Cav Regt., 1st Inf. Div.  
June 30, 1966  
Binh Long province, Vietnam  
Threw himself on enemy grenade to save eight fellow troops.

## **Staff Sgt. Melvin Morris^**

3rd Co., 3rd Bn., IV Mobile Strike Force  
Sept. 17, 1969  
Chi Lang, Vietnam  
Led advance to recover a fallen sergeant and destroyed four enemy bunkers, while wounded.

## **Pfc. Milton L. Olive III\***

3rd Plt., B Co., 2nd Bn., 503rd Inf. Regt., 173rd Abn. Bde.  
October 22, 1965  
Phu Cuong, Vietnam  
Threw himself on enemy grenade to protect fellow troops.

## **Capt. Riley Pitts\***

C Co., 2nd Bn., 27th Inf. Regt., 25th Inf. Div.  
Oct. 31, 1967  
Ap Dong, Vietnam  
Threw himself on grenade that did not explode. Pitts was later killed in the battle.

## **Lt. Col. Charles C. Rogers**

1st Bn., 5th FA Regt.  
Nov. 1, 1968  
Tay Ninh Province, Vietnam  
Led soldiers to defend a forward fire support base, while wounded.

## **1st Lt. Ruppert L. Sargent\***

B Co., 4th Bn., 9th Inf. Regt., 25th Inf. Div.  
March 15, 1967  
Hau Nghia Province, Vietnam  
Threw himself on two enemy grenades, saving lives of fellow troops.

## **Spec. 5 Clarence E. Sasser^**

3rd Bn., 60th Inf. Regt., 9th Inf. Div.  
Jan. 10, 1968  
Ding Tuong Province, Vietnam  
While wounded, faced enemy fire while treating wounded troops.

## **Staff Sgt. Clifford C. Sims\***

D Co., 2nd Bn., 501st Inf. Regt., 101st Abn. Div.  
Feb. 21, 1968  
Hue, Vietnam  
Threw himself on a booby trap, saving fellow troops.

## **1st Lt. John E. Warren Jr.\***

C Co., 2nd Bn., 22nd Inf. Regt., 25th Inf. Div.  
Jan. 14, 1969  
Tay Ninh Province, Vietnam  
Threw himself on an enemy grenade, saving fellow troops.

## MARINE CORPS

### **Pfc. James Anderson Jr.\***

2nd Plt., Fox Co., 2nd Bn., 3rd Marines, 3rd Marine Div.  
Feb. 28, 1967  
Cam Lo, Vietnam  
Threw himself on an enemy grenade, saving fellow troops.

### **Pfc. Oscar P. Austin\***

Echo Co., 2nd Bn., 7th Marines, 1st Marine Div.  
Da Nang, Vietnam  
Feb. 23, 1969  
Threw himself on an enemy grenade, saving a fellow Marine.

### **Gunnery Sgt. John L. Canley^**

Alpha Co., 1st Bn., 1st Marines  
Jan. 31-Feb. 6, 1968  
Hue, Vietnam  
Led attacks against the enemy and faced enemy fire to carry wounded Marines to safety.

### **Sgt. Rodney M. Davis\***

2nd Plt., Bravo Co., 1st Bn., 5th Marines, 1st Marine Div.  
Sept. 6, 1967  
Quang Nam Province, Vietnam  
Threw himself on an enemy grenade, saving fellow troops.

### **Pfc. Robert H. Jenkins Jr.\***

Charlie Co., 3rd Reconnaissance Bn., 3rd Marine Div.  
March 5, 1969  
Quang Tri Province, Vietnam  
Threw himself on a fellow Marine to shield him from enemy grenade.

### **Pfc. Ralph H. Johnson\***

Alpha Co., 1st Reconnaissance Bn., 1st Marine Div.  
March 5, 1968  
Quang Nam Province, Vietnam  
Threw himself on an enemy grenade, saving a fellow Marine.

\*KIA, earned posthumously

\*\*Earned posthumously (not KIA)

^Living recipient (as of November 2019)

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A former Army captain set her sights on a career as a fashion photographer. She's now a successful entrepreneur in Washington, D.C.



BY ISMAEL RODRIGUEZ JR.

Raquel Riley Thomas poses for a Georgina Vaughn Las Vegas photoshoot in August. Thomas is an entrepreneur and owner of An Officer and a Gentlewoman.

# AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEWOMAN

**F**rom an ordnance officer in the Army to becoming a commercial model, pageant queen, entrepreneur and iconoclastic fashion guru, the evolution of Raquel Riley Thomas is endless.

The former Army captain parlayed a set of skills earned throughout a nine-year tenure in the military into management of a multi-purpose production company dubbed An Officer and Gentlewoman, LLC.

The origins of her company, which currently administers beauty pageants, fashion advice and TV castings, dates back to 1990, when Thomas followed the footsteps of her mother and grandmother by enlisting in the Army.

"Running a successful company with many subsidiaries takes a special degree of commitment, patience, loyalty and

kindness," Thomas said. "I learned a lot of those disciplines in the military."

Thomas, a 1998 graduate of Hampton University in Virginia, served as a photojournalist during her first five years in the Army, a seed that later sprouted into a successful photography career following an honorable discharge in 2002.

"I enlisted as a photojournalist first, and then I went into ROTC and became an officer," Thomas said. "With that already in my background, I started my own photography business after the military and began shooting swimsuit editorials, celebrity headshots and models for promo books."

She then struck uncharted territory, becoming the first African-American woman to photograph *Jet* magazine centerfolds for nine years — another

avenue paving the way for a world-class modeling career.

Thomas, a slim, 5-foot-9-inch woman with features carved from a centerfold, walked into the Elite Modeling Agency studios in Atlanta hoping to get on a photographer's referral list, but left with a modeling deal instead.

"When I sat down to show one of their bookers my photos, she said, 'You have beautiful photography, however, you are absolutely gorgeous,'" Thomas recalled. "I was completely thrown by her statement, but at the end of the day I walked out as a model."

Since that encounter at Elite Modeling, Thomas' likeness has graced international billboards for commercial juggernauts that include Coca-Cola and Delta Air Lines.





Raquel Riley Thomas, left, sits among a group of soldiers as an Army corporal in 1995 in Teague, South Korea. Thomas was stationed at Camp Walker, South Korea, from 1994-95. The VFW member served as an Army photojournalist.

The shared success in photography and modeling geared Thomas for another segue — beauty pageants.

Thomas' competitive nature coupled with her daughter Maria's questions about perceived beauty propelled her to the top of the industry in just two years.

"My daughter had asked me why princesses in her favorite movies and shows didn't look like her," Thomas said. "I gave her a B.S. answer at first, but it stuck in the back of my heart."

A few months later, Thomas snatched her opportunity at a proper answer while watching a national beauty pageant show alongside her daughter.

"I told myself at that moment that if there weren't any princesses like her, then I would be one," Thomas said. "I did my research and signed up for the Mrs. Maryland America, a pageant for married women."

Thomas won Mrs. Maryland 2010, moving her up for contention in the Mrs. America national pageant in 2011, where she earned the honor of being the first African-American to finish as 1st Runner-Up.

"It had been like 40-plus years, and I had been the first African-American woman to win runner-up," Thomas said. "I was very proud of being able to break some barriers there."

Thomas' accomplishment rippled, and in 2014, the Mrs. America pageant saw its first African-American winner, a testament to the influence that had sparked the creation of An Officer and Gentlewoman in 2011. The former Army officer learned later just how significant that accomplishment had been.

"It was an interesting thing," Thomas added. "I recently had lunch with her (Austen Williams), and she said to me

'Raquel, what you don't understand is that you cracked the ceiling for me to get through.' I just broke down because that just meant a lot."

Thomas stepped off the platform and went behind the scenes, using An Officer and Gentlewoman as a platform to run her own pageants and help more young women follow their dreams of being beauty queens.

With the rapid growth of her production company since 2011, Thomas, too, continued evolving and recently added to her entrepreneurial spirit by acquiring a certificate of completion from Harvard Business School's online program.

She currently resides near her headquarters in Washington, D.C., where a separate career as a philanthropist and supporter of veterans remains unabated. Thomas donates portions of the pageant proceeds yearly to military-focused charities such as Luke's Wings and VETSports.

The accrued success in civilian life and philanthropic nature has earned her distinction as "Leader of the Future" by *Ebony* magazine. It also warranted recognition from the Library of Congress under the Veterans History Project in 2015.

"That was one of the most humbling moments of my life," she said. "When you leave the military, you think people forget about you. So being rewarded for your time there is very special." ☆

EMAIL [irodriguez@vfw.org](mailto:irodriguez@vfw.org)

## TRACKING THOMAS' MILITARY TIMELINE

1990

Thomas enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1990.

1994

She was stationed at Camp Walker, South Korea, from 1994-95.

1995

Thomas earned an ROTC scholarship to Hampton University in Virginia, where she attended from 1995-98 and graduated with distinguished honors.

1998

She returned to the Army from 1998-2002 as an ordnance officer before being promoted to captain. She was honorably discharged in 2002.

2002





PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLAYTON NEVILLE/WBAP

**LEFT:** Joe Orr served in the Army during the Vietnam War. He said when he returned home, VFW Posts in two different states turned him away due to his skin color.

**BELOW:** Vietnam War Army veteran Joe Orr served as a sheriff's deputy in Grayson and Collin counties in Texas. Orr retired and lived the rest of his life in north Texas.

## VFW MOURNS THE LOSS OF A POTENTIAL MEMBER

*A Texas Vietnam War veteran said he was wrongfully discriminated against in the late 1960s at VFW Posts because of his race. The now-deceased veteran said those events caused him to shun membership.*

**BY DAVE SPIVA**

**A**n African-American Vietnam War veteran said he was discriminated against because of his race by VFW Posts in Colorado and Texas after returning home from his tour.

Joe Orr, who unfortunately passed away in October 2019, told a reporter, Clayton Neville of WBAP 820 AM in Fort Worth, Texas, that he enjoyed his time in the Army. The Vietnam War veteran said during the February 2019 interview that he was denied membership at more than one VFW Post in the late 1960s.

"I was rejected," said Orr. "And why? Because of my color. They told me that."

Orr described his treatment at the VFW Posts as "terrible" and that he never thought anything like that would happen to him.

"I was a war veteran, and my record was clean," Orr said. "I just thought it was a disgrace."

A Texas native, Orr served as a sheriff's deputy for Grayson and Collin counties in the northern part of the state. He is believed to be the first African-American deputy to serve the Collin County Sheriff's Office. In his last days, Orr resided at his home near Whitewright, Texas, with family members, according to WBAP.




During his interview, Orr said that he would always remember the discrimination he encountered at VFW Posts after returning home.

"I just think [VFW] owes me and other black soldiers an apology," Orr told WBAP. "And I want other soldiers to know what happened to us."

Last year, VFW Membership Director Rick Butler sent a letter, along with a VFW medalion, to Orr. In the letter, Butler apologized to the Vietnam War veteran and said that VFW "missed out" on having Orr as a member of the nation's largest organization of overseas war veterans.

"The loss of Orr not getting into the VFW back in the day was not really his loss," Butler said. "It was our loss for not getting to have a good leader."

VFW Adjutant General Kevin Jones said that any instance of local discrimination throughout VFW's 120-year history is not keeping with the values of the organization.

"We honor and value the service of every veteran who has fought for our great country," Jones said. "We want them all to be VFW members." 

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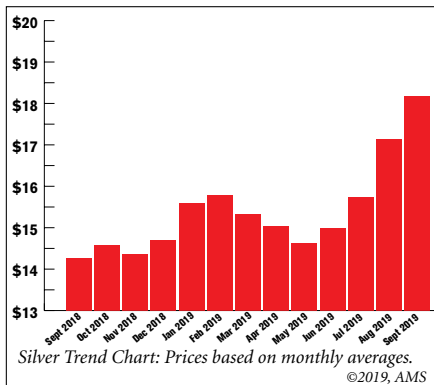
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U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTO



**Women's Army Corps Maj. Charity Adams (forefront), 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion commander, and Army Capt. Abbie Noel Campbell, 6888th executive officer, inspect the first soldiers from the unit to arrive in England on Feb. 15, 1945. The only all-African-American Women's Army Corps unit sent to Europe during World War II, the 6888th was responsible for clearing years' worth of backlogged mail in both England and France.**

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN TROOPS BOOSTED WWII MORALE

*A group of nearly 900 black women made sure U.S. troops in Europe got their mail in 1945. They made history as the only all-women, African-American U.S. unit to deploy to Europe in World War II.*

**BY JANIE DYHOUSE**

**A**nyone who has served overseas away from family and friends knows the power of a letter from home. But toward the end of WWII, there was a two-year backlog of mail for U.S. troops, Red Cross and uniformed civilian specialists serving in Europe.

Led by Army Maj. Charity Adams, the nearly 900-strong 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) had a motto: "No mail, low morale."

In February 1945, the "Six-Triple Eight," as it was known, went to England becoming the first and only all-black WAC unit to be sent overseas during WWII.

Lena King, who was with the 6888th, said the mail was stacked nearly to the top of the hangar in Birmingham, England. The women worked three shifts a day, seven days a week to make sure the mail reached troops in the field.

"They had asked if we could get it done in about six months," King told CBS News in November. "We were able to get it done in three months."

By the time they were done, they had processed 17 million pieces of mail and were off to France to work their magic there, as well.

The women of the 6888th worked on sorting the mail in Europe until March 1946.

When the women returned home, however, there were no parades or special recognition. Retired Army Col. Edna Cummings hopes to see the 6888th recognized with a Congressional Gold Medal.

"During a time when they were denied basic liberties as Americans, they still wanted to serve the United States," Cummings told CBS News.

As such, the identical bills *S. 633* and *H.R. 3138* — "Six Triple Eight" Congressional Gold Medal Act of 2019 — have been introduced in the Senate and House, respectively.

On Nov. 30, 2018, a monument to these women was dedicated at the Buffalo Soldier Commemorative Area on Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

Furthermore, on March 15, 2016, the U.S. Army Women's Foundation inducted the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion into the Army Women's Hall of Fame.

"Servicemen want their mail," King said. "That's a morale booster. That made me feel good that I had done my part."

✉ [EMAIL:jdyhouse@vfw.org](mailto:EMAIL:jdyhouse@vfw.org)

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Navy veteran and host of Lifetime Network's *Military Makeover with Montel*, Montel Williams, with VFW Post 2204 Commander Randy Engness at the home of Steve Wojcik in Strum, Wis., on Oct. 3. The Wojcik family home got a makeover, thanks, in part, to the efforts of volunteers such as Engness. The Navy vet took eight days of vacation to help, even though he had never met the Wojciks before.

# VETERANS HELPING VETERANS ON REALITY TV SHOW

A WOUNDED IRAQ WAR VETERAN AND HIS FAMILY WERE  
THE SURPRISED RECIPIENTS OF A HOME MAKEOVER. HIS  
FELLOW VFW MEMBERS PITCHED IN TO HELP.

BY JANIE DYHOUSE

**R**andy Engness took eight days of vacation at the end of September to help a family he had never met. As commander of VFW Post 2204 in Rice Lake, Wis., Engness learned at the Wojcik family in Strum, Wis., about an hour away. They were going to be featured on the Lifetime Network's *Military Makeover with Montel*.

During a typical season, the television show helps six veterans and their families by renovating their homes. However, the show's success relies, in part, on donations from businesses and volunteers' help.

"I heard about this opportunity at our VFW District meeting," Engness said. "They were in need of skilled and gener-

al labor. Having done electrical work for eight years in the past, I decided to volunteer for this."

Engness worked 10 days straight at the Wojcik home and put in more than 100 hours of labor, plus another 22 hours of driving back and forth. Some nights he was too tired to make the drive home and put himself up in a hotel.

Running new electrical circuits, changing out light fixtures, switches and outlets were just some of the duties Engness fulfilled. He said while it was interesting to see what reality TV is really like, it was hard to get a lot accomplished during filming.

"It felt good to help a fellow veteran and

his family," said Engness, who served in the Navy from 1983-89. "Through this experience of coming together with other volunteers to work for a common goal, I was rewarded with making many new friends and tight bonds with fellow veterans."

And Engness wasn't alone. According to Terri Wojcik, the wife of veteran Steve Wojcik, they were told by the show's producers that their project was the first to have such an amazing turnout of volunteers.

"Everybody in Strum helps each other out," said Terri, a mom of three daughters. "Everyone knows each other or knows of each other. We were told that the show has never had so many volunteers, but



The stars of the Lifetime Network's *Military Makeover with Montel* rally the crowd of volunteers as they prepare for the family of veteran Steve Wojcik to return to their newly remodeled home in Strum, Wis., on Oct. 3. The show's cast includes (from left): WWE star Lacey Evans, Ryan Stanley, Montel Williams, Art Edmonds and Jennifer Bertrand.



PHOTO BY CAITLYN MARTIN/BRANDSTAR

especially skilled volunteers.”

Post 6550 Commander Steve Ebert and Sr. Vice Commander Jerry Knudtson were two of the Strum VFW volunteers on site.

“It was a great honor to do this for Steve with everything he went through,” Ebert said. “A lot of us members showed up from around the state to help.”

Knudtson said the Post has just a little over 100 members so it was good to see so many show up.

“Steve’s a very humble guy and doesn’t like a lot of attention on himself,” Knudtson said, adding that the *Military Makeover* honoree also is a VFW member at Post 6550.

## ‘DIE-HARD’ PACKERS FANS

When Steve, Terri and their daughters — Alyca, 19; Amberlee, 16; and Alyson, 13 — moved out of their home and relocated to a campground for 10 days, they had no idea what to expect upon their return.

Led by J-Dog Junk Removal, volunteers showed up to remove everything from the home so the remodel could begin.

After the family found out they had been chosen for the show, they were asked to do online surveys about their



Iraq War veteran Steve Wojcik with his wife, Terri, and their three daughters (from left) Alyson, Amberlee and Alyca, experience a private tour of Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis., last September. The Wojciks were treated to many surprises while their home was being remodeled for the reality TV show *Military Makeover with Montel*. The self-proclaimed “die-hard” Green Bay Packers fans also received tickets to a game.

PHOTO BY CAITLYN MARTIN/BRANDSTAR





**LEFT:** Employees of J-Dog Junk Removal work on the landscaping at the home of veteran Steve Wojcik last September. J-Dog also led the crew of volunteers that emptied the Wojcik home so that the remodeling could begin for the TV show *Military Makeover with Montel*.

**BELOW:** Veterans came from around Wisconsin to greet the family of VFW Post 6550 member Steve Wojcik as they returned to their newly remodeled home in Strum, Wis., last October. The home was featured on the Lifetime Network's *Military Makeover with Montel*.

preferences. And days before the Wojciks temporarily left their home, show hosts Jennifer Bertrand and Art Edmonds came out to do a walk-through with the family.

While a new roof and siding was installed and walls were being knocked down and put back up again at the Wojcik residence, the family was treated to several surprises.

Self-proclaimed “die-hard” Green Bay Packers fans, the Wojcik family was given a personal tour of Lambeau Field and presented tickets to a game. Steve said he has season tickets through his grandmother, Janet Kelly, but it’s only four tickets, which means someone gets left behind.

“It’s always a no-win choice as to who goes to the game,” said Steve, who served in the Marine Corps from 1994-98 and





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later with the Army Reserve in Iraq. “To be able to go to a Packers game with Terri and all the girls was another memory that will last a lifetime. This was the first time I was able to take a tour. To be on the field and touch the ‘Frozen Tundra’ (a nickname for the field’s turf), that should be on every Packer fans’ bucket list.”

Before the game, the family was at Anduzzi’s Sports Club, where former Green Bay Packer Gilbert Brown surprised them by taking their order. Brown invited the Wojciks to his tailgate party where Steve was recognized on stage for his military service.

## OUTPOURING OF GIFTS

Another surprise, Terri and daughters were flown to Norfolk, Va., for a week-end shopping spree at Simon Premium Outlets. Not only did Under Armour provide gift cards for shopping, Terri said, the sports apparel company also stocked their closets with apparel before the family returned to their remodeled home.

Steve received a new crossbow for hunting from Barnett Crossbows and also a year’s membership to Planet Fitness. And Edvest gave the family \$10,000 to invest in their children’s higher education needs.

At a ceremony at the nearby Highgrounds Veterans Memorial Park in Neillsville, Wis., it was announced that Fairway Independent Mortgage provided a service animal to Steve, who was wounded by an IED on Sept. 6, 2004, near Baghdad. (It will take some time before Steve receives his service animal.)

The Highgrounds ceremony was to dedicate a stone to 21-year-old

The Wojcik family return to their home in Strum, Wis., on Oct. 3, following 10 days away to allow the crew of *Military Makeover with Montel* to give their home a remodel. A new roof and siding were among the many features updated for the wounded Iraq War veteran’s home.



Devin Grella from Medina, Ohio. Grella was a friend of Steve’s who served alongside him in Iraq with the 706th Transportation Company from Mansfield, Ohio, and was killed in the same IED blast that wounded Steve.

Terri said when Steve came home from Iraq, he started drinking a lot and became isolated, not wanting to talk or even drive.

It stemmed from the loss of Grella as much as his own wounds, which cause him severe back, shoulder and neck pain to this day.

“I would be lying if I said I hadn’t contemplated suicide,” Steve told Montel Williams during the taping of *Military Makeover with Montel*.

Steve, who is a Wisconsin State Trooper, had two spinal fusion procedures in 2017 to help with his pain.

“We have been very blessed by my husband being able to come back from war,” Terri said.

## ‘ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY’

When the family returned to their home on Oct. 3, they were overwhelmed by



## FAMILY HOME OF PARKLAND SHOOTING VICTIM GETS MAKEOVER

On Feb. 14 — the two-year anniversary of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. — the makeover of the home of Debra Hixon in Hollywood, Fla., will air on Lifetime.

Hixon is the widow of Chris Hixon, the athletic director who tried to disarm the shooter two years ago. He was one of 17 people killed by a former student in 2018.

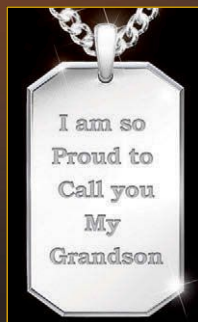
Chris served 27 years in the Navy, including a deployment in the Persian Gulf War. Hixon’s son, Tom, is in the Marine Corps, and her younger son, Corey, has special needs. The show will air on Lifetime TV on Feb. 14 at 7:30 a.m. EST.

**LEFT:** *Military Makeover* host Montel Williams congratulates Debra Hixon in Hollywood, Fla., last July. Hixon’s husband, a Gulf War vet, was killed in the 2018 Parkland, Fla., high school shooting.

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*Keep faith beside you always,  
It will guide you every day.  
Know that strength comes from above,  
And you will find your way.*

*Let yourself be humble,  
And remember to be kind.  
When you have respect for others,  
True friendships you will find.*

*Have dignity and honor,  
And be proud of all you do.  
Confidence will take you toward  
A future that waits for you.*

*The world is filled with choices—  
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*And so, I cannot wait to see  
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Because you are my grandson,  
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**Amberlee Wojcik receives her Girl Scout Gold Award from Karmen Lemke, CEO of Girl Scouts of the Northwestern Great Lakes, on Sept. 29 in Strum, Wis. The award presentation was featured on *Military Makeover with Montel* since the Wojcik family home was undergoing a makeover, thanks to the cast and crew of the reality TV show. For her Gold Award project, Amberlee worked with VFW Post 6550 Commander Steve Ebert to raise money and build a pavilion at Strum Veteran Tribute Park. Ebert said Amberlee put in more than 30 hours and helped with excavating, cement work and setting the poles. The Gold Award is the highest honor a Girl Scout can receive.**

what they found.

"My reaction was 'Oh my gosh, it's clean,'" Terri said and laughed. "As a family of five with two dogs, our house is definitely lived in. My favorite part of the remodel is the hallway closet. Everyone who worked on the home signed inside the closet with a Sharpie."

For Steve, the best part of the home reveal was his family's reaction to it all.

"Watching their faces while they walked around the house was the best," Steve said. "Those are the priceless memories I will take from this wonderful gift my family has received."

Terri said a veteran helping with the remodel later told her that he was able to work through his own problems just by helping.

"This has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Terri said. "But we don't live our lives with the anticipation of getting what we did. We just live our lives to do good unto others."

Steve said while some may find it odd, his favorite surprise was having Nexen

Tires donate winter and summer tires for all of the family vehicles.

"Knowing how important good tires are during inclement weather, it really puts my mind at ease knowing my girls have great tires on their vehicles," Steve said.

### MILITARY MAKEOVER CAST VETERANS

For Williams, who spent 22 years in the military, the best part of hosting *Military Makeover* is meeting with veterans and their families.

"In the end, it is all about families and spending time with the families," said Williams, who has been with the show since 2018. "We have a bond and shared experiences. Just spending time talking is what I treasure."

Williams said that he may have retired from the Navy, but that he never took off his uniform. He said that helping military families isn't optional for those who have served. It's expected.

"For me, *Military Makeover* began in earnest while I was in the hospital recovering from a stroke," said Williams, who

enlisted in the Marines and served from 1974-76, before getting accepted into the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. "I signed the contract in the hospital, and getting to host this show was one of the many things that motivated me to push so hard in my recovery. I saw the show as an opportunity to not only help military families but inspire others to do the same."

Another cast member and military veteran is World Wrestling Entertainment superstar Lacey Evans, a former Marine Corps sergeant who was based at Parris Island, S.C.

Evans said that as a veteran, she jumped at the opportunity to be part of *Military Makeover*.

"It means everything to me," Evans said. "I know firsthand not just what the veteran goes through, but the family as well. The family serves, and it motivates me to do as much as I can."

If you want to watch the transformation of the Wojcik home, visit [www.militarymakeover.tv](http://www.militarymakeover.tv) or [www.brandstar.tv](http://www.brandstar.tv). 📺

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# IRAQ VET WALKS ACROSS AMERICA

To draw attention to suicide awareness among the veteran population, this former soldier trekked on foot from coast to coast.

BY NATHAN PETTINGILL

## WHAT WAS IN MILLER'S CART?

As he walked across America, Iraq veteran Jeremy Miller hitched himself to a customized aluminum cart that contained all his essential goods, including:

- Tent
- Sleeping bag
- Change of clothes
- Backup pair of shoes
- 15 days worth of backpacker meals
- Cooking stove
- Small pot for cooking
- Small lantern
- iPad for holding video conversations with his 4-year-old son, watching films or reading books
- Cell phone
- Solar panel to charge electronic gear
- 7-gallon water jug
- Camping stool
- Rain jacket
- Baby wipes
- Protein snacks
- Men's one-a-day vitamins
- Turmeric powder capsules
- Sunscreen
- Bug spray
- Rope
- Repair tools for his cart
- Knives

Iraq War veteran Jeremy Miller walks along U.S. Highway 24 on Sept. 25 last year near Lawrence, Kan., before stopping at VFW Post 852. Miller walked from coast to coast in 2019 to raise awareness of the rate of veteran suicide.





**T**he midpoint of Jeremy Miller's cross-country walk last year was perhaps the sweetest.

As the sun began to set on Sept. 25 in Lawrence, Kan., he stepped into VFW Post 852 and was met by a crowd of about 25 people. They were ready for him with a cold beer, a meal of cheeseburger and fries and loud applause to honor this veteran and his solo cross-country walk to raise awareness of veteran suicides.

Enlisting in the Army in 2006, Miller deployed with the Army Reserve's 391st Engineer Company to Iraq in 2011. He modestly described that mission as "just looking for bombs on the side of the road."

Miller said they were fortunate in that all survived and made it home. The deaths came after they returned, he added.

"It was out of nowhere," Miller said.

One of the first to take his own life was the company's joker, someone who had always lightened the situation for others.

Then the 391st lost another, then "three, then four guys," according to Miller.

And one day, in early 2019, Miller decided it was his turn. There was a truck, a cliff and an end to his pain.

Miller doesn't know why, but for some reason, he didn't give into the instinct that would have made him another VA statistic. According to the federal agency, about 20 U.S. veterans take their own lives every day.

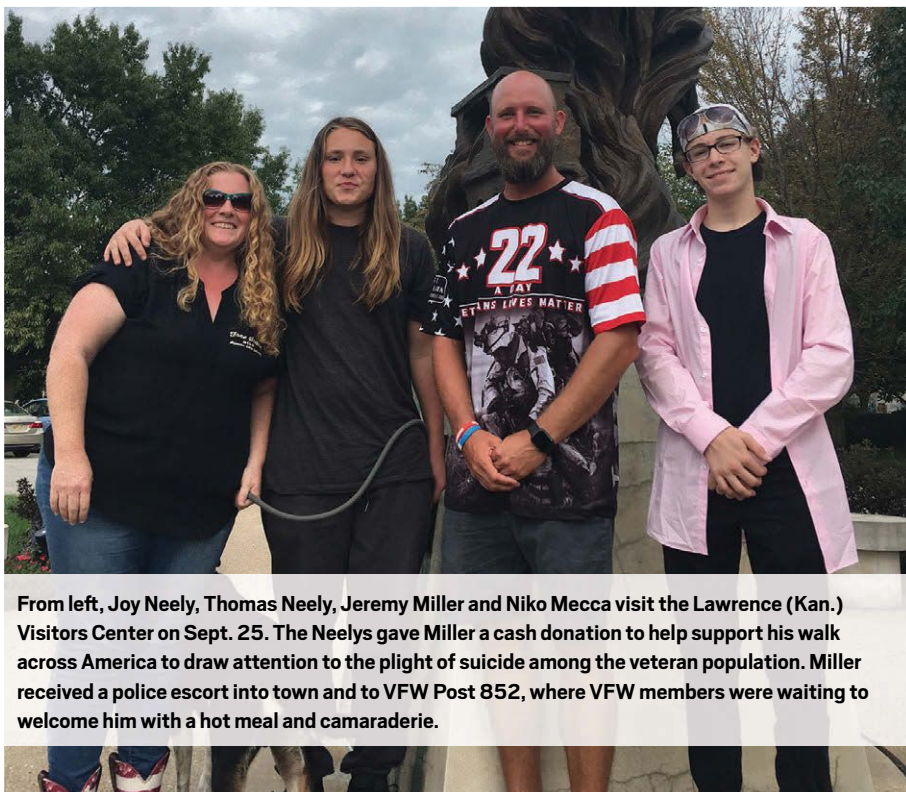
Instead, he sought help from a long list of prescriptions, and he hastily assembled a plan to cross the U.S. by foot. The trek would start in Crescent City, Calif. and end at Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, with the goal of raising awareness about veteran suicides.

For Miller, the physical activity would ensure that he did not become a statistic himself.

## VFW POST SUPPORTIVE

It was a daunting task. He set off with bad knees and not much practice.

"I've gone rock climbing, but I hadn't done anything for distance," Miller said. "No training to walk 30 miles a day."



**From left, Joy Neely, Thomas Neely, Jeremy Miller and Niko Mecca visit the Lawrence (Kan.) Visitors Center on Sept. 25. The Neelys gave Miller a cash donation to help support his walk across America to draw attention to the plight of suicide among the veteran population. Miller received a police escort into town and to VFW Post 852, where VFW members were waiting to welcome him with a hot meal and camaraderie.**

But his body responded. Before he crossed through California, Miller noticed the anti-depressants were passing out of his system, and he felt fine about that.

As he progressed up to Idaho and back down to Colorado, people began learning of his journey and greeted him in greater and greater numbers.

At the VFW in Lawrence, Post Commander Vernon Russell honored Miller with a short speech. Miller thanked each person and talked about his walk. But most importantly, he listened.

Miller's presence at Post 852, which has the toll-free phone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline hung on its wall, got members talking about suicide and PTSD, themes Miller said are "still a giant stigma" in America.

"This type of personal connection makes it, more likely, easier for others to seek help," Post 852 volunteer bartender Cassie Gillmore said of Miller's visit. "I'm proud of him for honoring the struggles of so many."

Miller concluded his journey in December when he reached Arlington National Cemetery. ★

**EMAIL** [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)

*Nathan Pettingill is a freelance writer based in Lawrence, Kan.*

## GIFTS ALONG THE WAY

As Jeremy Miller encountered groups and individuals along his route, he received encouragement in many ways, some practical, some quirky, but all welcome to Miller, who began his journey with no formal organization underwriting or supporting him.

One of the most significant came in Burlington, Colo., when VFW Post 6491 Commander Duane Hitchcock and his wife hosted Miller for the evening and noted the sorry state of the cart that Miller was using to haul his goods.

The next day, Hitchcock, who also happens to be the owner of an agricultural manufacturing firm, began customizing a cart frame of lightweight aluminum and durable wheelchair wheels for Miller to haul his water and gear. A few days later, he caught up with Miller and switched out the cart.

Crossing into Kansas, firefighters in Salina gave Miller a pair of backup shoes. Two days before reaching Lawrence, Miller was put up in a "Wizard of Oz"-themed hotel room in Wamego. The night before that, he was treated to Taco Tuesday in Topeka.

When Miller arrived in Lawrence, a police honor escort guided him through traffic and to a small crowd of well-wishers, some who handed him cash for his immediate expenses along with their gratitude for his awareness project.





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# Hemp Gummies Shown To Relieve Discomfort

**Hemp Gummies offer users fast acting relief from joint and muscle discomfort that's absolutely delicious; now available in the U.S. without a prescription**

For millions battling daily discomfort, this news couldn't be more exciting.

A new relief extract found in hemp is available across the nation and can be purchased without a prescription.

And the best part, it comes to users in the form of a tasty gummy bear.

So you can say goodbye to pills, needles, and creams!

**Hemp Gummies**, contains pure concentrated doses of hemp extract, which can help relieve joint discomfort along with general muscle aches and soreness.

It also calms, relaxes, and eases tension all over the body.

Exciting new scientific research shows that hemp extract contains special relief molecules called cannabinoids which bind to receptor sites in the brain and body. When taken orally, hemp extract activates these receptors, and soothing comfort begins to take form.

## Available Across the Nation

Recent developments, like the **US Farm Bill**, allow **Hemp Gummies** to be sold in the U.S. without a prescription. And since it can't get you high it's flying off the shelves.

"Most people have no idea that pure hemp extract, like **Hemp Gummies**, can be purchased. And that's because it contains no THC," explains Dr. Joe Wezensky, who sits on the scientific board at Medici Quest.

"Instead, it's bursting with special relief compounds called cannabinoids. These cannabinoids target special receptor sites all over the body but are most prominent in the brain."

"This system of cannabinoids and the receptors that they bind to are called the Endocannabinoid System and science is just now unlocking its amazing medical potential"

"In fact, the initial research has been so impressive that hemp extract is now patented by the US Government (patent #6,630,507)."

"It's also being used by athletes in the NFL, MMA among other physically demanding sports as a safe alternative."

## Clearing Up the Confusion Around Hemp

One of the biggest mistakes people make when talking about hemp extract is mixing it up with marijuana.

Although the two fall under the same plant category, cannabis sativa, they have completely different effects on the body.

Remarkably, hemp extract is available in the U.S. and can't get you high (ever!). That's because there is no THC in it, the chemical that makes you feel "buzzed".

"Although you can't get high from **Hemp Gummies**, you can start feeling the effective relief," explains Wezensky.

"Most people have very low cannabinoid levels, which is why they constantly ache. **Hemp Gummies** boosts cannabinoid levels extremely fast, helping relieve lingering joint discomfort ...muscle tension...and general soreness. It also eases stress and elicits amazing relaxation without feeling impaired. And what most people really love is they're delicious and so easy to take on the go.

## How it Works

Clinical studies show that cannabinoids and the receptors that they bind to are found all over your body.

However, they are most concentrated in your brain. That's why it has such a profound impact on how you feel, especially your level of comfort.

These cannabinoids and their receptors work like "lock and key" and bind to each other triggering important biological processes.

### Hemp Extract, like **Hemp Gummies**, may help users with...

- Aching joints
- Cramping
- Stress
- Leg and foot discomfort
- Sore muscles
- Restlessness
- Sleep problems

## Keeps Your Body Balanced...

The incredible impact cannabinoids have on your health is directly related to the primary goal of your Endocannabinoid System, which is to maintain a balance in the body, a physiological state known as homeostasis.

Research shows that maintaining this balance is a key to vitality and healthy bodily function.

The cannabinoids found in **Hemp Gummies**, hemp extract, replenish your levels quickly, easing discomfort over the entire body.

Plus, by keeping your body in balance (homeostasis), **Hemp Gummies** also helps to relieve stress and tension...improve sleep... and even promote relaxation and calmness.

## Not Yet Sold in Stores

Hemp extract that is derived from industrial hemp, like **Hemp Gummies**, is available nation-



**A GUMMY A DAY TO KEEP ALL YOUR ACHES AWAY:** *Hemp Gummies a 10 milligram dose of Hemp Extract that works all day to keep you comfortable.*

wide. However, several major pharmaceutical companies are currently testing hemp extract in clinical settings, which means it may require a prescription in the future. It's advised to get **Hemp Gummies** while you can.

## Taking All the Risk Off Consumers

A large percentage of men and women using **Hemp Gummies** experience truly amazing results. That's why it's now being sold with a guarantee that goes way beyond the industry standard.

"We can only make this guarantee because we are 100% certain our customers will be satisfied," says Wezensky. We want to take full risk off consumers. So in addition to offering substantial discounts for first time customers, we also make them a huge promise that ensures they don't have to risk a cent."

Here's how it works: Take **Hemp Gummies** exactly as directed and you must be thrilled with the results! Otherwise, simply return the empty bottles within 90 days. Then, the company will refund your money plus give you an extra \$10 for having tried the product.

## Where To Find Hemp Gummies

This is the official nationwide release of **Hemp Gummies** hemp extract. And so, the company is offering a special discount supply to anyone who calls within the next 48 hours.

An Order Hotline has been set up for local readers to call. This gives everyone an equal chance to try **Hemp Gummies** hemp extract.

Starting at 7.00AM today, the discount offer will be available for 48 hours. All you have to do is call TOLL FREE at 1-800-796-6183. The company will do the rest.

Important: Due to hemp extracts growing popularity and recent media exposure, phone lines are often busy. If you call and do not immediately get through, please be patient and call back.



# HEALING THROUGH HOCKEY

**The Pittsburgh Warriors, comprised of wounded veterans, use hockey as an outlet to bond and heal physical and mental wounds from their time in the military.**

**BY ISMAEL RODRIGUEZ JR.**

There's an icy sanctuary for honorably discharged and disabled veterans in the blossoming community of Cranberry Township in Pittsburgh.

Within the confines of an ice rink at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Lemieux Sports Complex, veterans who skate for the Pittsburgh Warriors get a dose of active therapy, the kind that provides a competitive, fast-paced alternative to a clinical setting with health care specialists.

For Air Force veteran Richard J. Betler and retired Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer David G. Jackel II of VFW Post 914 in West Mifflin, Pa., the camaraderie of teamwork and execution engrained in the fabric of hockey also offers a comforting familiarity.

"It's personally given me that sense of teamwork and brotherhood back," said Jackel, who served on ships supporting *Operation Southern Watch* and *Operation Enduring Freedom*. "I was in the service for 20 years, and that's not something you can just forget, so playing hockey has helped bring that back for me."

Betler, who served with the 455th

Squadron in Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2009 and 2011, echoed a similar sentiment, adding that hockey helped mimic the level of unselfish teamwork he experienced in the Air Force.

"It's given me something to focus on," Betler said. "I play goaltender, and that position takes a lot of discipline and organization. My responsibility is to my teammates, my airmen, my battle buddies. Like the Air Force, it's a team I'm proud to represent."

## NATIONAL CHAMPS IN VEGAS

The Pittsburgh Warriors belong to the USA Hockey Warrior Program, joining a wide non-profit network of veteran-based teams from across the country created to help alleviate the physical and mental scars of military service through hockey.

The 16 teams currently participating in the Warriors Hockey league play a lengthy season, which includes two national festivals each year that split into four different tiers.

For the Pittsburgh Warriors, the 2019 season culminated with them hoisting one of the USA Hockey Warrior Classic titles in Las Vegas in October.

"We played out of tier four, but a banner's a banner," said Jackel, who plays right wing and serves as an alternate captain for Pittsburgh. "This was my second festival and I loved it. It's awesome just being around so many other veterans from different cities, knowing that all of us get to heal together."

In true underdog fashion, the Pittsburgh Warriors rallied back from a slow start to the tournament, winning the championship against the Las Vegas Warriors, 3-2, after scoring three consecutive goals in the final period.

"That was amazing," Betler said. "We had lost our first couple of games but really dug deep to come out and still win it. It's the best hockey I've ever played in my life — the closest we'll ever get to the NHL stage, and that's special."

Betler, who recalled visiting Las Vegas on three separate occasions without having much time to scavenge for places to sightsee while in the Air Force, admitted that his plans to quench such curiosity didn't pan out.

"I had been there three times, and each time I had seen The Strip in passing," Betler said of a stretch on South Las



**LEFT:** Retired Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer David G. Jackel II skates in October during a Pittsburgh Warriors hockey game at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Lemieux Sports Complex in Pennsylvania.

**TOP RIGHT:** The Pittsburgh Warriors pose for a photo in October in Las Vegas after winning the 2019 Tier IV Warrior Classic title against the Las Vegas Warriors.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Air Force veteran Richard J. Betler defends the goal during a Pittsburgh Warriors game.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID G. JACKEL II

Vegas Boulevard that contains a saturated portion of the city's casinos and hotels. "I always wanted to go do stuff in and around The Strip, but our team trip in October turned out to be all hockey and little Vegas. And you know what? I loved it."

### 'EVEN THE WIVES COME OUT'

The Warriors travel well, often through a unique affiliation with the National Hockey League's Pittsburgh Penguins via the Hockey Sticks Together Foundation. The program helps the team fund equipment, uniforms, travel and lodging for games and festivals each season.

The Pittsburgh Warriors also remain heavily involved in the community, serving as guiding hands for the youth as well as being loud advocates for veteran affairs around Pittsburgh.

"Even the wives come out and help," Betler added. "They have their own clan and support us during games, helping us out in the community and in every way they possibly can."

Betler and Jackel, in particular, remain strong advocates for veteran affairs in the community of West Mifflin, about 10 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, on behalf of VFW Post 914.

Jackel, who serves as a volunteer firefighter in West Mifflin, organizes community events, such as the Memorial Day services at Mitchell Paige Park in West Mifflin.

"We try to volunteer and help out as much as we can," Jackel said. "We just want to help as many veterans as we can, getting our name out there to maybe reach some who haven't learned about the opportunities to heal together."

Betler, a VA employee, participates in an array of veteran fundraisers. He's also active with the local Disabled American



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID G. JACKEL II

Veterans chapter.

For Betler, the Pittsburgh Warriors program and his continuous volunteer work in the community on behalf of veterans is an attempt at reaching a cusp.

"I believe it's about achieving a full circle," Betler said. "Playing hockey with other veterans has helped me transition alongside people who understand what I've been through. And in turn, I believe it's my duty to help other veterans make that transition. Helping one another has been very rewarding."

In order to qualify for participation on a team in the USA Hockey Warrior Program, candidates must provide a VA disability letter as well as proper discharge documentation noted on a DD 214 form.

For veterans who don't qualify or aren't interested in hockey, the opportunities to heal together and interact with one another aren't limited as a VFW member.

Post 914, for example, offers an array of activities for veterans to bond, while encouraging members to remain active in the community.

"Joining the VFW is often a gateway to activities where veterans can interact and help each other," said Michael P. Mauer, a VFW life member and public affairs officer for the Department of Pennsylvania's District 29. "Hockey is certainly big here in Pittsburgh, but for veterans who lack the skills to compete on the ice, there are many other activities VFW Post 914 does that reflect well on our standing in the community."

Post 914 earned its status as an All-State Post by actively promoting scholarship programs that include the Voice of Democracy and Patriot's Pen. The Post has also supported youth programs that include athletics, scouting and the West Mifflin Area Senior High School Air Force JROTC.

"Our Post was recognized on Aug. 29 by West Mifflin Mayor Chris Kelly as the borough's Group of the Year," Mauer added. "That award shows not just what we can do together as a VFW Post, but as a community."



**EMAIL** [irodriguez@vfw.org](mailto:irodriguez@vfw.org)





A member of VFW Post 6507 in Chassell, Mich., Jeff Hauswirth performs with his guitar during a photoshoot in 2019. Last year, Hauswirth released his EP *Forever 29*. Hauswirth said he hopes his music will “help others” and raise money for military and veterans’ organizations.

*A retired Navy corpsman last year released his first music project, Forever 29. He said the recording is dedicated to a fellow corpsman who died in 2006 during their deployment to Iraq.*

BY DAVE SPIVA

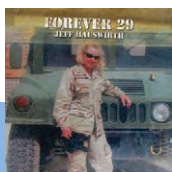
Jeff Hauswirth, a member of VFW Post 6507 in Chassell, Mich., said he was a “late bloomer” when it came to being a musician.

“On a whim, when I was on active duty stationed at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital, a guy was leaving and asked me if I wanted to buy his guitar and amp,” said Hauswirth, a retired Navy corpsman. “Me being a compulsive 19-year-old, I bought it.”

After his purchase sat in his room for a few days, Hauswirth decided to call his brother, Mike, for advice on how to play. Mike, a professional musician who goes by the name Michael Hozz, hand-wrote Hauswirth’s first lesson. Hauswirth said his brother transcribed “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” by Poison, the first song he ever played.

“I never played before that, but I had always been a closet poet,” Hauswirth said. “I always loved writing.”

## HONORING A FALLEN CORPSMAN



Hauswirth is an Iraq War veteran who served with Naval

Mobile Construction Battalion 25 in 2006. He was in the Navy Reserve at the time but was called to active duty for the overseas deployment.

Being a leading petty officer, Hauswirth was in charge of a team of corpsmen, including Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Jaime Jaenke. She was killed on June 5, 2006, when her Humvee was hit by an IED in Iraq’s Al Anbar province.

“I feel personally responsible for her death,” Hauswirth said. “I was the one who recommended for her to go on that convoy team.”

Jaenke’s death inspired Hauswirth to write the song “Ballad of Jamie” later that year. Years later, he wrote and recorded the song “Forever 29,” which became the name of his first project.

## INSPIRATION TO RECORD MUSIC

Last year on April 26, Hauswirth released his extended play (EP) recording *Forever 29*, which took more than 12 years to come to fruition. The process for recording the EP didn’t begin until 2018.

Hauswirth participated in the Veterans Entrepreneurship Program at the

University of Tennessee-Chattanooga in 2017. While in the program, he spoke to a woman who introduced him to people who could help him record music. Hauswirth said that inspired him to write new songs, and he recorded his music at a studio in Old Hickory, Tenn., about 12 miles northeast of Nashville.

“I followed the music, so to speak,” Hauswirth said.

Hauswirth added the recording process for the EP was difficult and “emotionally draining” since the process reminded him of his 2006 deployment.

“As hard as it was, I wanted to get my message out so it could help others,” Hauswirth said of the recording process. “I know I’m not the only person who has gone overseas and lost friends.”

Hauswirth said he is working with the USO and that 25 percent of the proceeds from his EP’s first-year sales will be donated to the organization.

“I don’t expect to be a millionaire,” Hauswirth said. “But I do want to raise money to help military veterans. That’s what’s important to me.”

✉ EMAIL [dspiva@vfw.org](mailto:dspiva@vfw.org)

Jeff Hauswirth’s EP *Forever 29* is available on iTunes and Amazon Music. The cover features Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Jaime Jaenke, who died during a 2006 IED attack in Iraq.

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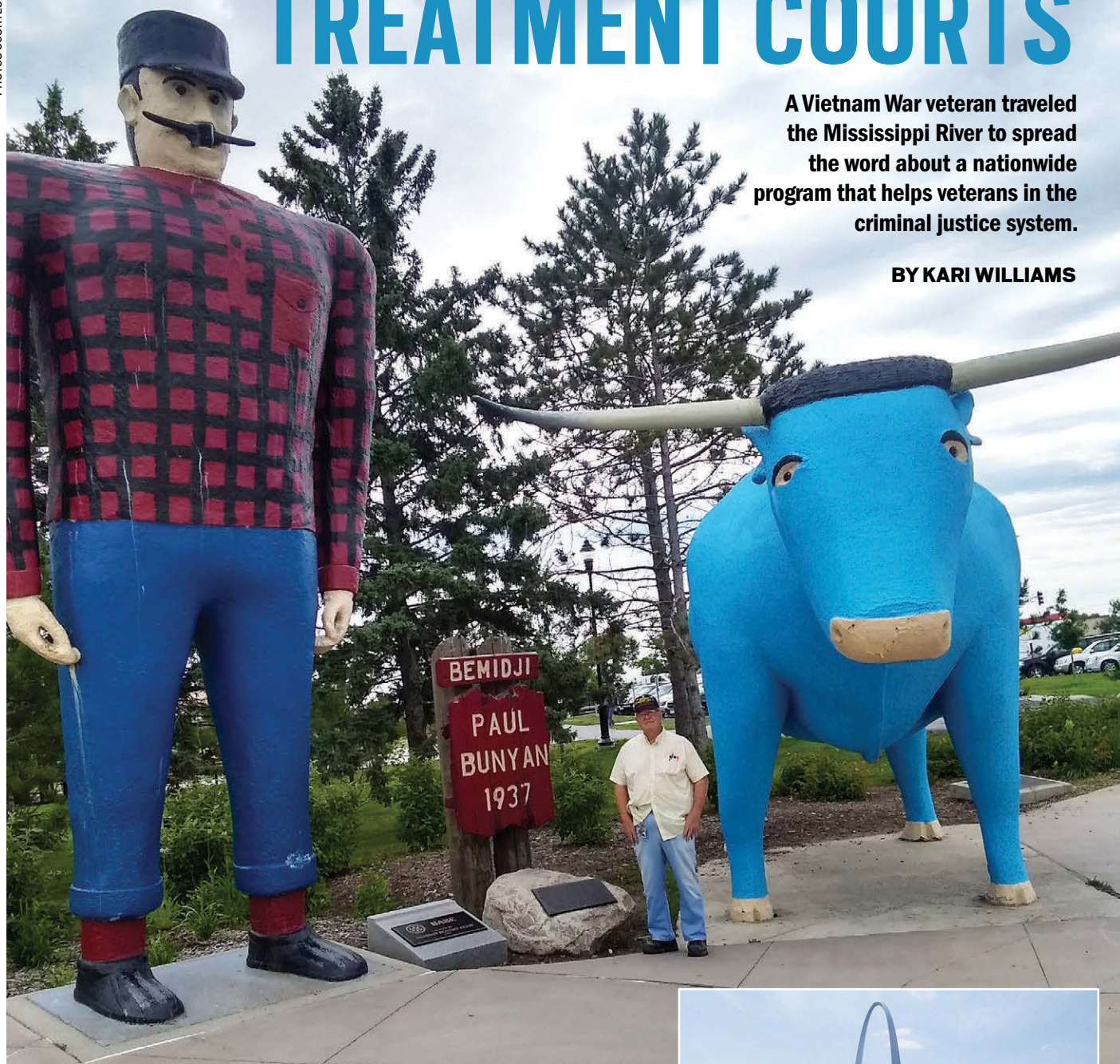
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# RIVER TRIP BUOYS AWARENESS OF TREATMENT COURTS

A Vietnam War veteran traveled the Mississippi River to spread the word about a nationwide program that helps veterans in the criminal justice system.

BY KARI WILLIAMS



Vietnam veteran Howard Jenkins admires statues last July in Bemidji, Minn., at the Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox monument. Jenkins was preparing to voyage down the Mississippi River.

INSET: Vietnam veteran Howard Jenkins approaches St. Louis, on the Mississippi River last summer on his journey from Minnesota to New Orleans. Jenkins, a volunteer at a vets treatment court, spent two months on the river.





**V**ietnam War veteran Howard Jenkins spent six months renovating a pontoon boat — adding a bunk bed, shower and sink — in preparation for the second leg of an expedition down the Mississippi River. His goal: to raise awareness of veteran treatment courts.

“I could go out on the street and ask 100 people, and 99 people wouldn’t know [about treatment courts],” said Jenkins, who served in Vietnam in 1970-71 with the 1st Bn., 92nd FA, as a field artillery fire control Marine.

Veteran treatment courts began in 2008 in Buffalo, N.Y., and are modeled after drug and mental health treatment courts, according to the National Center for State Courts. They give veterans who committed a non-violent crime a chance at rehabilitation instead of jail time. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of treatment courts and “veterans dockets” increased from 168 to 461, according to a VA report.

## ‘ATTENTION’ FOR VETERANS

Jenkins departed Knoxville, Tenn., for Minnesota’s Lake Itasca on July 13, with traveling companion Eric Hilemon. The first leg of the trip down the Mississippi was completed in a canoe because of the shallow river terrain, according to Jenkins. He switched to his pontoon boat in St. Paul, Minn. Jenkins traveled to New Orleans, then returned to Knoxville.

“This is going to be special in this respect,” Jenkins said. “The whole purpose of this is to get attention. If people don’t see me, I’m wasting my time.”

Jenkins’ mission is something that he believes in “very deeply,” according to Frank Vollmer, a fellow Vietnam War veteran and mentor coordinator at the Knox County (Tenn.) Veteran Treatment Court. Vollmer learned in December of Jenkins’ plan to travel the Mississippi to raise awareness for veteran treatment courts.

“That’s Howard,” said Vollmer, a member of VFW Post 3380 in Dandridge, Tenn. “If Howard finds something that he believes in and wants to do, if he can get help that’s good, but if he’s got to do it on his own, he’s not afraid to take on gestures or efforts like these to promote the various programs for veterans.”

If “veteran treatment court” becomes

a household term, Jenkins said he will have accomplished what he set out to do — help his fellow veterans, some of whom also might have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

About two years after returning from Vietnam, Jenkins said, he started experiencing PTSD symptoms. He did not receive an official diagnosis from the VA until 2005.

“Sometimes it takes three or four years before it bothers people,”

Jenkins said, “and I basically suffered with it for 35 years, until I went to the VA.”

Jenkins said that in his role with fire-direction control (FDC) in Vietnam, he heard stories that the FDC was the first location the Viet Cong wanted to “take out” because that area controls the radios.

“I’d always worry about what I would do if they came to the FDC and threw a satchel charge into there,” Jenkins said.

One day after an attack, he said, a satchel charge was located in an unexploded ordnance area, and VC were heading toward the FDC until a soldier shot him.

“Nobody knows why things like that happen, but that just blew my mind,” Jenkins said. “That’s what I think caused it. It was first thinking about that and then the reality of the possibility [of being attacked].”

## TENNESSEE’S TREATMENT COURTS

Vollmer said that Knoxville’s veteran treatment court was established in December 2016. Vollmer and Jenkins both became certified peer recovery specialists through the state of Tennessee and volunteer at the court. The Vietnam vets met through a program for veterans who have PTSD and continued working together at the treatment court.



**Eric Hilemon, left, prepares to get in the canoe that would take him and Howard Jenkins down the most shallow part of the Mississippi River, while Jenkins speaks with reporters. The duo traveled the Mississippi from Minnesota to New Orleans to raise awareness of veteran treatment courts.**

“We’re trying to also get courts established in Sevier County [Tenn.], and not all counties have courts with enough [of a] veteran population to have a court in each county,” said Vollmer, who served in Vietnam from 1967-68 with the Air Force’s 6924th Security Sqdn. in DaNang as an intelligence analyst.

However, Vollmer said that Knoxville judge Chuck Cerny agreed to take veterans from counties where such a court does not exist. The first veteran to graduate from the Knoxville program was from Memphis, according to Vollmer.

“After a year’s probation and graduation, his record for the charges that had been placed against him were reduced to a misdemeanor rather than a felony,” Vollmer said. “And he’s had no relapses since then. We still check with each other now and then.”

Veteran treatment courts, according to Vollmer, are a “great” opportunity for veterans to have second, and sometimes third, chances. He said Jenkins’ trip is a “good effort” to publicize the courts and make civilians aware of the program.

“I think there’s fewer individuals going into the military now, and we want to keep this program out in front of the public,” Vollmer said.

✱  
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# FOUR DISABLED VETERANS

*VFW and a Montana outfitter provided these Vietnam War veterans with a once-in-a-lifetime antelope hunting trip in October.*

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**STORY AND PHOTO  
BY DAVE SPIVA**



**EDWIN OHMANN**

VFW Post 9433, Rosemount, Minn.  
Army | 1970-71 | Vietnam War  
3rd Bn., 187th Inf. Regt., 101st Abn. Div.



**BARRY JOHNS**

VFW Post 3303, Newcomerstown, Ohio  
Marine Corps | 1968-69 | Vietnam War  
Charlie Co., 1st Bn., 5th Marines



# HUNT ON THE GREAT PLAINS

**F**our wounded veterans participated in the 37th annual VFW Magazine-Doonan Gulch Outfitters Disabled Veterans Antelope Hunt this past October near Broadus, Mont. Since 1982, Russ and Carol Greenwood, owners of Doonan Gulch Outfitters, have hosted VFW members for Montana's antelope season. The Greenwoods annually sponsor one of the hunters. VFW pays the expenses for the other three, plus travel costs for all four. ★

**EMAIL** [dspiva@vfw.org](mailto:dspiva@vfw.org)

(From left to right) Edwin Ohmann, Barry Johns, Larry Haskett and David Thomas, all Vietnam War veterans, participated in the 2019 VFW magazine-Doonan Gulch Outfitters Disabled Veterans Antelope Hunt in October near Broadus, Mont. The event marked the 37th year of the hunt.



## LARRY HASKETT

VFW Post 6242, Beloit, Kan.  
Army | 1966-67 | Vietnam War  
C Co., 1st Bn., 26th Inf. Regt., 1st Inf. Div.



## DAVID THOMAS

VFW Post 1888, Trenton, Mich.  
Marine Corps | 1970-71 | Vietnam War  
Golf Co., 2nd Bn., 5th Marines



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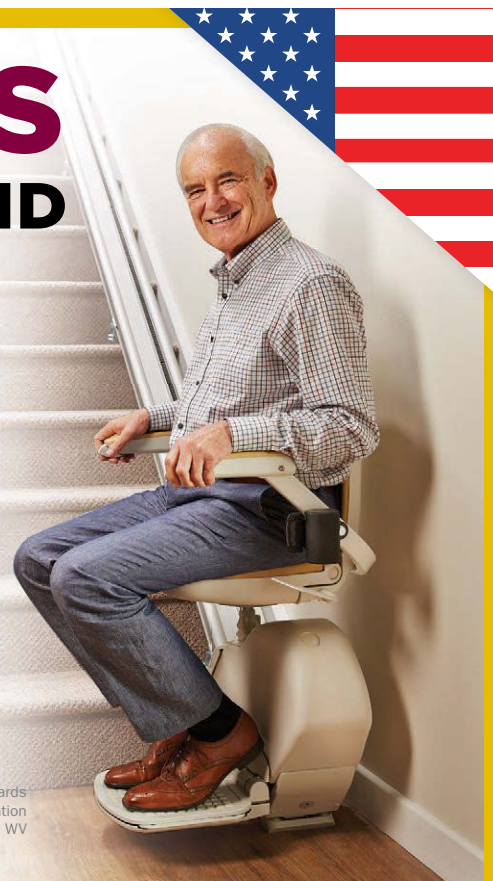
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# The Vietnam Veterans Tribute Thompson

## HONORING ALL THOSE WHO SERVED IN VIETNAM

Our men and women came from all over the country, from all walks of life, to fight for freedom on the other side of the world. They served with honor, dignity, and courage. All gave some, some gave all, and many are still missing and unaccounted for. As a nation, we owe all of our Vietnam Veterans a debt that can never be repaid.

Nothing about the Vietnam War was easy. Those who were there remember the swampy grasslands, rice paddies, dense jungles, the heat and an elusive enemy; a war that took place halfway around the world in a country divided by decades of bitter history.

Few generations faced a more daunting challenge than those who fought in Southeast Asia. Few generations are more deserving of our gratitude and respect. To honor all those who served in Vietnam, America Remembers presents the **Vietnam Veterans Tribute Thompson**. Craftsmen commissioned specifically for this project by America Remembers decorate each Thompson in elegant 24-karat gold artwork on a mirror-polished nickel-decorated receiver. Issued in an exclusive limited edition of only 1,000 Tributes, this handsome firearm captures the courage and sacrifice of all those who fought for freedom in Vietnam.

The Tribute is a working semi-automatic Thompson submachine gun in caliber .45 ACP, one of the most memorable American infantry weapons of all time. Like many dedicated Americans, the Thompson served proudly in Vietnam. We've taken this combat-tested classic and transformed it into a work of art. The result is a stunning presentation firearm that will stand as a testament and lasting Tribute to all Vietnam veterans.

### The Thompson: An American Original

Vietnam was considered the "last great war" for the Tommy Gun. Though it saw less use than in previous wars, it was a popular weapon for American and South Vietnamese soldiers. The Thompson was a "warhorse" which was relied on for its superior stopping power and dependability.

Like the dedicated American warriors who served in Vietnam, the Thompson served proudly in Vietnam, continuing a tradition of excellence first established during WWII, and later in Korea. This stunning presentation firearm is a lasting tribute to all of America's veterans and links them forever in time with their brothers-in-arms who fought earlier wars.

We know there will never be another American-made firearm like the Thompson submachine gun. And there will never be more dedicated men and women than those who bravely served their country in Vietnam.

Much like the generations of warriors who came before, those who served with valor in Vietnam deserve their place in American history.

They didn't hesitate to put their lives on the line and give up everything in defense of our liberty and freedom. Some made the ultimate sacrifice. Others returned home to a divided nation. All of them deserve our gratitude.

During the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vietnam War, there has been a strong interest in firearm Tributes honoring those who served in Vietnam. Demand for this Tribute is expected to be strong. Order now to guarantee your place in the edition. We will arrange delivery through the licensed firearms dealer of your choice (not available in CA, CT, MD, NY). If for any reason you are not completely satisfied with your Tribute, you may return it in original, unfired condition within 30 days for a complete and courteous refund.

### Honor Vietnam Veterans With This Exclusive Offer

If you are a veteran who answered the call to duty in Vietnam, or if you wish to honor your father, husband, brother, friend or other family member, the Vietnam Veterans Tribute Thompson is sure to become a cherished addition to your collection. Order today to secure your Tribute honoring those who proudly served our nation in Vietnam.

▼ Both sides of the receiver feature emblems that honor Vietnam War veterans. The banner reads: "A Grateful Nation Remembers," and inside the oval is a lone American soldier, the distinctive silhouette of Vietnam and a pair of U.S. military helicopters. The emblem on the right side is framed with a banner reading: "Vietnam Veterans Tribute Thompson".

▼ Left side of the receiver features a soldier with his M60 machine gun--nicknamed "The Pig" for its hefty size. The M60 unleashed a fury of firepower on the enemy. Also featured is a M48-A3 Patton tank providing cover as troops enter a village. The M48 was a workhorse during the Vietnam War.

▲ Right side also features a soldier scanning the distance for enemy movement. A pair of M48 tanks make their way on the ground while the sky is abuzz with helicopters, which played such an important role during the Vietnam War. On the far end of the receiver, you'll find a Marine and his M16. Along with the Huey, the legendary M16 has become a symbol of combat service in Vietnam. Introduced to the battlefield in 1964, the M16 was a lightweight assault rifle that proved invaluable in jungle firefights. Right side features an image of the iconic Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal presented by Republic of Vietnam to members of the United States military who completed at least six months of duty in the war, with a frame reading: "Vietnam War - All Gave Some, Some Gave All." Below it you'll find a banner that reads: "Lest We Forget."

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# 'A REAL OPPORTUNITY TO HELP MAKE HISTORY'

*A \$70,000 grant from VFW to a private university is helping a research team study valor awards bestowed during World War I. The effort could result in an upgrade of awards presented to minority veterans.*

BY KELLY GIBSON

**P**ark University's Chief Advancement Officer Nathan Marticke says the school's dedication to veterans runs deeply.

"It's in the DNA of our university," Marticke said.

It's evident in the number of service members who earn degrees from the private, non-profit university located in Parkville, Mo., about 15 miles northwest of Kansas City. According to Marticke, some 67 percent of students at Park are service members, veterans or family members. That dedication to veterans extends to the work being done by the George S. Robb Centre (British spelling) for the Study of the Great War.

In November 2019, VFW National

to help make history right here."

Marticke said Park University and VFW share a strong commitment to improving the lives of veterans.

"This grant is a demonstration of a true partnership in support of veterans, no matter how long ago the service and valor occurred," Marticke said. "The Robb Centre cannot do this alone, and we absolutely need strong partners like the VFW."

## REVIEWING MINORITY VETERANS' RECORDS

The project, which officially started in 2018 as a collaborative task force in conjunction with the WWI Centennial Commission, is spearheaded by Timothy Westcott. He is the director of the Centre and a Marine

Corps veteran, who served with the 3rd Bn., 3rd Marines, 9th Marine Div., from 1980-88. The aim of the project as it stands today is identifying WWI veterans who may have qualified for the Medal of Honor, but were passed over for commendation due to race or ethnicity.

"The task force includes a team of historians and researchers to begin a systemat-

ic examination of service members who were not recommended for the Medal of Honor during World War I, despite seemingly deserving acts," Westcott said. "The Valor Medals Review Project is reviewing records of African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, Jewish American, and Native American service members."

Westcott says the review initiative is slated to run for seven to 10 years, and that it is funded by donations from

individuals and organizations to "maintain flexibility" in research.

Researchers at the Centre work to locate living descendants of the veterans to gather more data about service histories and military engagements that might qualify the vets for further commendation. Researchers also work with groups and organizations to identify life beyond service for these veterans — including their jobs following military service and degrees earned.

"This work ... becomes highly emotional as we look into each man's personal life," said Ashlyn Weber, senior research analyst with the Centre. "As we slowly begin to find out who they were, it is harder to let them go at the end [of their research]. In many cases, we are the first in 75-100 years to look through their service records, and in the course of the weeks or months dedicated to them, they become alive again."

Once the team has compiled this data, they compare it to current standards for receiving the Medal of Honor.

For senior military analyst and Army veteran Josh Weston, his participation in this project is both a professional passion and a personal endeavor.

"I plan to see this project through to the end and hope to not only honor these service members, but raise awareness of how past injustices continue to affect the present in ways that we don't often notice and show that it is never too late to bring justification for those who are deserving," said Weston. He served with the 551st MP Co., and the 561st MP Co., 716th MP Bn., 16th MP Bde., 101st Abn. Div. Weston was medically discharged prior to his unit's deployment to Baghdad in 2008-09.

"It is important to do what I can to continue to support my military brethren no matter how long ago they served, because veteran support has no expiration date," Weston said.

✦ **EMAIL** [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)

*Kelly Gibson is a freelance writer based in Lawrence, Kan.*



PHOTO BY MICHAEL EDSON/VFW

**Park University President Greg Gunderson accepts a \$70,000 donation from VFW Commander-in-Chief William "Doc" Schmitz on Nov. 6 at VFW National Headquarters in Kansas City, Mo. Gunderson's school is using the grant to conduct the Valor Medals Review, which is evaluating for possible upgrade valor medals received by U.S. minority troops during World War I.**

Headquarters gave the Centre a \$70,000 grant to assist with the Valor Medals Project, a re-evaluation and possible upgrade of valor medals presented to Doughboys during and after WWI.

"The VFW is proud to support this important initiative," said VFW Commander-in-Chief William J. "Doc" Schmitz. "These men served their country unequivocally and so their recognition should also come without condition or exception. We have a real opportunity



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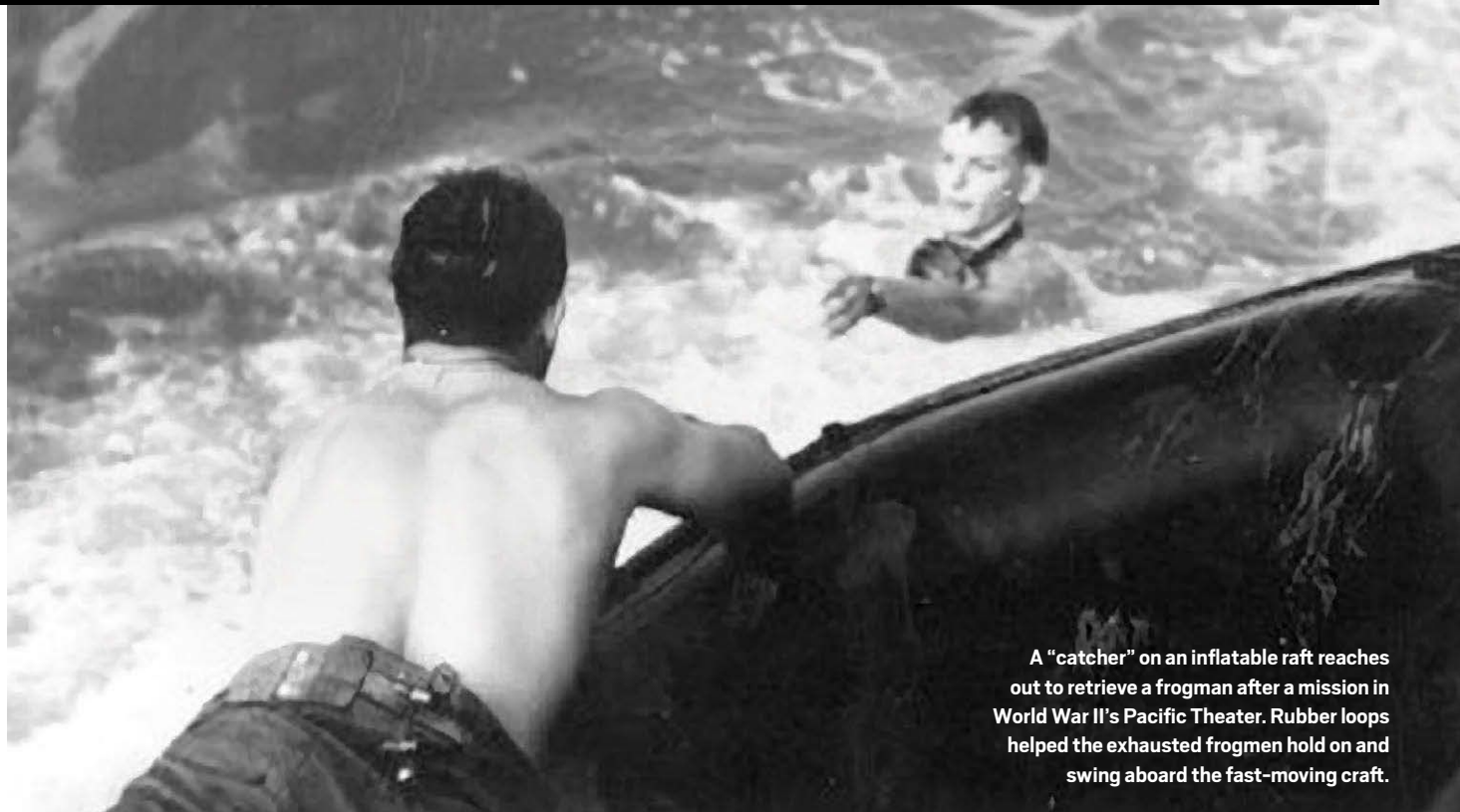
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# FROGMEN

## WERE THE FIRST ON IWO JIMA

U.S. NAVY PHOTO



A "catcher" on an inflatable raft reaches out to retrieve a frogman after a mission in World War II's Pacific Theater. Rubber loops helped the exhausted frogmen hold on and swing aboard the fast-moving craft.

In response to the "unacceptable" numbers of Marines killed in November 1943's Battle of Tarawa, Navy leaders ordered the creation of nine underwater demolition teams to clear the path for future amphibious landings in the Pacific Theater of World War II. These "frogmen," as they were known, were the first U.S. troops to land on Iwo Jima in February 1945.

**BY DICK CAMP AND  
SUZANNE POOL CAMP**

**B**y the time they had targeted Iwo Jima in their island-hopping campaign toward Tokyo, Navy leaders had decided that "frogmen" would lead the way in amphibious landings. These volunteer sailors were specially trained and possessed "physical strength, endurance, swimming ability, courage, coolness and good judgment."

They began probing the Iwo Jima beaches on Feb. 17, 1945 — two days before the main invasion. Four underwater demolition teams (UDTs) — 12, 13, 14 and 15 — comprising about 100 swimmers were dropped off by small boats called Landing Craft, Personnel Ramped (LCPRs) within 700 yards of the beach.

The frogmen swam to the shore to

gather intelligence about beach and surf conditions, clear all mines and obstacles, gather sand samples in small tobacco sacks and take note of Japanese defenses.

A group of 22 Marines from the 5th Reconnaissance Detachment were assigned to accompany the teams to take photographs of the beach.

Team 12 was responsible for Red Beach One and Two; Team 13, Green Beach One; Team 14, Yellow Beach One and Two; and Team 15, Blue Beach One and Two.

The teams had an hour to complete their mission before being picked up and returned to their High-Speed Transport ships, or APDs.

The second part of the mission was to reconnoiter the western beaches in the late afternoon.





An LCPR (Landing Craft, Personnel Ramped) carries frogmen and a seven-man IBS (Inflatable Boat Small) to their drop-off point during a World War II mission in the Pacific Theater. Preceding the Battle of Iwo Jima, frogmen exited the LCPRs about 700 yards offshore and swam the rest of the way in.

### 'SYNCHRONIZE WATCHES. MUSTER ON THE FANTAIL'

On the morning of Feb. 17, the swimmers prepared for the mission.

They coated their faces, shoulders and arms with grey-blue paint as camouflage and cocoa butter or heavy grease to ward off the chilly 59-degree water temperature. They traveled light — swim trunks, face masks, fins and Ka-Bar combat knives. Other equipment included Tetryl (explosives) demolition packs, mine detectors, markers to record observations and devices for determining water depth.

A member of Team 15 recalled exactly how their mission began with orders over the loud speaker: "Synchronize watches. Muster on the fantail," according to *A History of UDT 15*.

Then the LCPRs were lowered from the APDs, the teams boarded and they headed for the beach. A total of 12 LCI (infantry landing craft) gunboats were assigned to cover the UDTs by bombard-

ing the beaches with gunfire and rockets.

The LCIs came under withering fire, according to unidentified participants in *A History of UDT 15*.

"Gunfire splashed all around us, mortars and heavy shells, which doused us," a frogman later reported. "The noise even underwater was deafening, and the metal falling around was terrifying. The idea was to run a chart of the beach to determine its slope. We were also looking for obstacles and mines."

Several men crept up on the beach to get samples of the coarse sand.

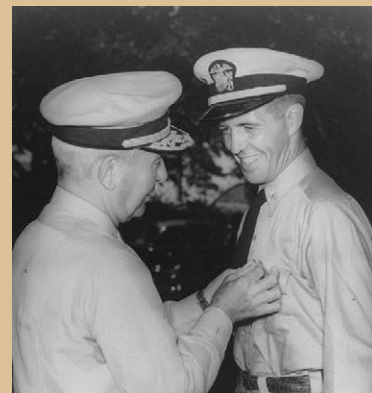
"We took a little fire doing that, but we got our samples and swam back out," another frogman noted.

The samples were needed to determine if the beach would support vehicles. As later discovered, it did not and caused congestion when many vehicles bogged down in the coarse sand.

At 11:55 a.m., as LCPRs raced along the beach line at 16 knots, the pickup started. The "catchers" snagged the tired swimmers with a rubber ring.

"We hooked their arms and swung them aboard," recalled one sailor.

The frogmen suffered only one fatality. Motor Machinist's Mate 3rd Class



NATIONAL ARCHIVES PHOTO

### 'HALF FISH, HALF NUTS'

Navy Rear Adm. Draper Laurence Kauffman, considered the "godfather" of the Navy's elite SEALs, organized the Navy's first demolition units with Seabee volunteers, called Navy Combat Demolition Units (NCDUs). In early 1944, their name was changed to Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs), but they became better known as frogmen who were, according to a common Navy expression, "half fish and half nuts."

**ABOVE:** Navy Rear Adm. James L. Kauffman, presents his son, then-Lt. Cmdr. Draper L. Kauffman, with a gold star on Sept. 1, 1944, at Pearl Harbor. The younger Kauffman, considered the "godfather" of the Navy SEALs, received the award in lieu of a second Navy Cross for heroism under fire during the U.S. invasion of the Marianas Islands.



Frank W. Sumpter was shot in the head and died later of his wounds.

## RELAXATION TURNS TO TRAGEDY

Because the LCIs had taken such a severe beating suffering 30 percent casualties to their crews with one craft sunk and 11 damaged, U.S. commanders decided that the afternoon mission would be supported by battleships and air. The mission went smoothly, unlike the morning session.

The swimmers were able to accomplish

their afternoon tasks without casualties. As the swimmers reached the drop-off point, one of the support planes laid a smoke screen the length of the beach.

"We could see the gun emplacements on the beach," said Arthur D. Hettema, a Seabee and member of Team 15. "After several surface dives to look for possible electric cables connected to mines, we swam to the breaker line."

At the end of their mission, the UDTs returned to their respective ships. For Team 15 that was *USS Blessman* (APD-48), a former destroyer escort.

On the evening of Feb. 17, the mess hall of the *Blessman* was filled with crewmen and frogmen relaxing after their stressful encounter with Japanese artillery. Some were playing cards, while others were drinking coffee or writing letters.

Suddenly around 9:21 p.m., a prowling Japanese aircraft spotted the luminescent wake of the *Blessman* and released a bomb, which penetrated through the deck, destroying the mess hall, galley and number one engine room. It left a 40-by-60-foot hole in the main deck.

Disoriented by the resulting fire and smoke, the men struggled to escape from below deck. About 11 p.m., the *USS Gilmer* (APD-11) arrived to prevent the fire from detonating the tons of explosives on board and to assist with the casualties.

A total of 40 troops were killed, including 15 frogmen, and at least 34 were wounded. The dead were buried at sea as the captain read the burial rites.

Three officers received Bronze Stars for their courageous evacuation of the wounded in spite of imminent danger of fire reaching the explosives.

According to the after-action report written by H. F. Brooks, the frogmen at Iwo Jima "were gallant under the mortar and small-arms fire as they made their reconnaissance right up to the water's edge. All exhibited an eagerness to carry out their mission." ★

EMAIL [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)

*Richard "Dick" Camp and his wife, Suzanne, reside in Fredericksburg, Va. Richard, a former Marine who served in Vietnam, is the author of 16 books.*



U.S. MARINE CORPS PHOTO

## MONTANA HIGHWAY NAMED FOR IWO JIMA MARINE

A Native American who was killed while serving as a Marine in the Battle of Iwo Jima is the namesake for a portion of a Montana highway. U.S. Highway 93 between mile markers 7 and 9 is now known as the Louis Charles Charlo Memorial Highway.

Charlo, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes, grew up near the highway. Pfc. Charlo was serving with the 28th Marines, 5th Marine Div., on Feb. 23, 1945, when he helped secure a U.S. flag atop Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima. Charlo was killed on March 2 trying to rescue Pvt. Ed McLaughlin, who was wounded in an area known as the Meat Grinder. Charlo and McLaughlin were both killed just 21 feet from safety, according to Montana *House Bill 717*, which authorized the highway naming. The highway was dedicated Sept. 26 last year.

**ABOVE: Marine Pfc. Louis Charles Charlo is the namesake for a portion of U.S. Highway 93 in Montana. Charlo was killed on March 2, 1945, at the Battle of Iwo Jima.**

## MARINE CORPS IDENTIFIES IWO JIMA FLAG RAISER

After nearly 75 years of being misidentified, a World War II Marine who was part of the iconic flag raising on Iwo Jima during the pivotal battle there has had his record corrected. Marine Cpl. Harold "Pie" Keller — not Marine Pfc. Rene Gagnon, as long believed — was among the six men who hoisted the U.S. flag atop Mt. Suribachi as the battle raged below.

With the help of the FBI, the Marine Corps concluded that Keller is in the famous photo shot by Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press on Feb. 23, 1945. The Marine Corps announced its decision last year on Oct. 17.

"Regardless of who was in the photograph, each and every Marine who set foot on Iwo Jima, or supported the effort from the sea and air around the island is, and always will be, a part of our Corps' cherished history," the Marine Corps announced in a statement.



PHOTO BY JOE ROSENTHAL/AP

**Leathernecks of the 28th Marines, 5th Marine Div., raise the Stars and Stripes on Mt. Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima on Feb. 23, 1945. In October, the Marine Corps announced that Cpl. Harold "Pie" Keller was one of the six Marines and had been misidentified for nearly 75 years.**

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*A VFW member and veterinarian in Arkansas pairs vets with service dogs. The canine companionship helps veterans alleviate their PTSD symptoms and often produces “remarkable” changes in vets’ lives.*



**BY JANIE DYHOUSE**

# SERVICE DOGS PROVIDE COMFORT TO VETERANS

Persian Gulf War veteran Eddie Gunter and his service dog, Star, at Gunter's college graduation from Arkansas Tech University in May 2017. The university provided Star with her own graduation cap and gown for the ceremony. Gunter, who has PTSD from his time in the military, says Star has changed his life.



“This is the best thing I have ever done in my life.  
I’m going to see this through.”

Dr. Bob Zepecki, founder of DAVK-9

**E**ddie Gunter remembers the day he first met Star in 2013. The pair locked eyes and, according to Gunter, it was love at first sight.

He told the volunteer working the rehab rescue pet adoption area in front of Petco in Hot Springs, Ark.: “That’s my dog.”

Gunter, a former Army medic and 1991 Persian Gulf War vet, was on his second go-around for in-patient PTSD therapy at the Eugene J. Towbin VA in North Little Rock. The first time, he didn’t make it through the program and said that it “didn’t work out too well.” He was struggling with alcoholism in addition to his PTSD.

But on his second try, Gunter was introduced to VA’s service dog program. He met Charlie, a service dog that was allowed to roam the floor where Gunter was staying. The duo immediately bonded.

“The doctor said there was a difference in me during my stay the second time compared to the first time,” said Gunter, who served with the Arkansas National Guard at Camp Doha in Kuwait. “He attributed it to the time I had spent with Charlie.”

Dr. Bob Zepecki, a veterinarian in Hot Springs, arranged to have Charlie at the VA. A Vietnam War-era vet, Zepecki knew the calming benefits dogs have around people suffering from PTSD.

As Gunter neared the end of his treatment program, Zepecki let him take Charlie with him to Petco for an animal adoption event. That’s where Gunter met Star, and his life changed.

“[Star’s] story is one of the saddest you could ever imagine,” Gunter said. “She was chained up under a trailer house with a litter of puppies. Now she’s my princess. She went from the outhouse to the penthouse.”

After Gunter was enrolled in Zepecki’s DAVK-9 program, he got Star certified as a service dog. For the first few years,

she went everywhere with him. When Gunter went back to college at Arkansas Tech University — he had started there in 1987 but dropped out — Star went with him. And when Gunter graduated with a degree in psychology, Star was at his side wearing a graduation cap and gown.

The Gulf War vet now is one class and one internship away from having a second degree, this one in rehabilitation science.

“I went to school to learn about

PHOTO COURTESY OF EDDIE GUNTER



**Persian Gulf War veteran Eddie Gunter with his service dog Star in 2013 after he adopted her. Gunter worked with Dr. Bob Zepecki’s DAVK-9 program to certify Star. She has alleviated Gunter’s PTSD symptoms.**

myself,” Gunter said. “I just got tired of sitting in a doctor’s office. And who knows? I might be able to help someone else in the future.”

Star still goes out with Gunter, but his PTSD symptoms have improved enough that he doesn’t always take her with him.

“She is pretty popular,” Gunter said. “And she’s a perfect animal. When I get upset, she tugs on me and just looks at me a certain way.”

## ‘THE BEST THING I HAVE EVER DONE’

Zepecki, or Dr. Bob, as he’s known to most, has since helped more than 260 veterans certify their pets as service animals since he started with Gunter and Star.

He makes monthly presentations to PTSD patients at the VA in North Little Rock.

“Dogs give veterans some self-worth because they have to care for [the animals],” said Zepecki, who served in the Air Force and was stationed in Pakistan from 1967-68. “When a veteran thinks a dog can help, that is really the first independent decision the vet has made.”

Zepecki, a 1965 Air Force Academy graduate, said the certification process is not difficult nor is it expensive. If a veteran already has a dog, that dog can be certified. If not, Zepecki recommends adopting a dog more than nine months old. He said lab mixes like Star are generally the best.

For “about \$150,” depending on where a veteran lives in the country, Petco or PetSmart has a basic behavior program for dogs. Once completed, a certificate of obedience is awarded.

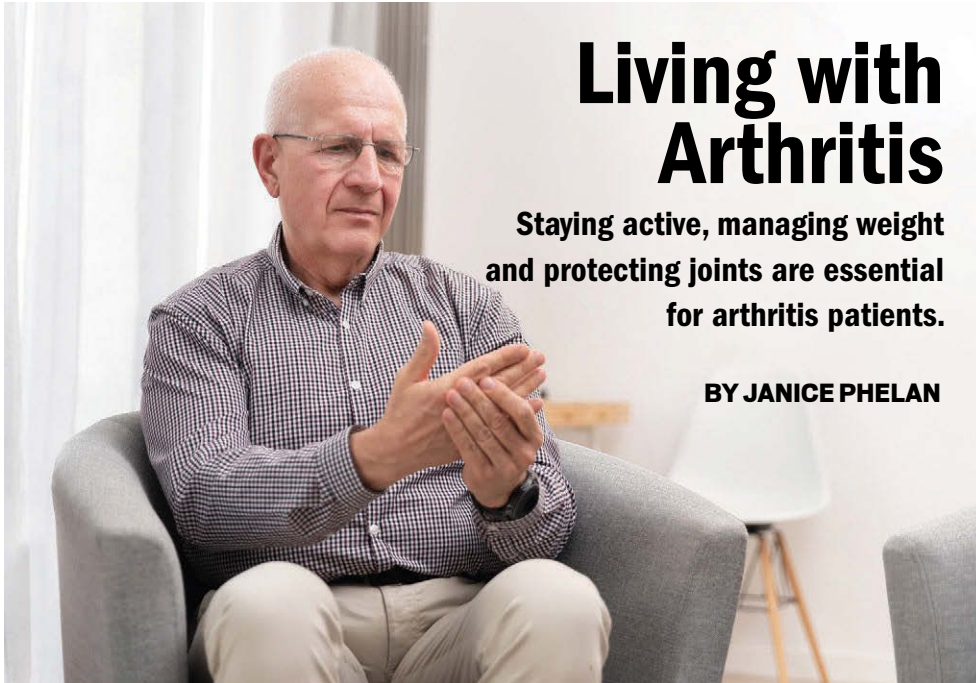
If a vet is not in the Arkansas area for Zepecki to see in person, he or she must ask someone to video a walk with their service dog through a store or other public place. That video and the certificate is sent to Zepecki, who then deems whether or not the dog can be certified.

A member of Post 10483 in Hot Springs Village, Zepecki said that he believes what service dogs do for veterans is “a miracle.” He added that many veterans have come back to visit him after they are once again feeling good about life.

“The changes in their lives have been remarkable,” Zepecki said. “This is the best thing I have ever done in my life. I’m going to see this through.”

✪  
EMAIL [jdyhouse@vfw.org](mailto:jdyhouse@vfw.org)





# Living with Arthritis

**Staying active, managing weight and protecting joints are essential for arthritis patients.**

**BY JANICE PHELAN**

**A**rthritis impacts close to 53 million adults and 300,000 children in the U.S., and is a leading cause of disability. People with arthritis can benefit from being well-informed about their condition, working with their health care professionals and focusing on exercise and diet.

Osteoarthritis is the most common form and causes pain when cartilage – the slick, cushioning surface on bones – wears away. Without cartilage, bone rubs against bone, resulting in pain, stiffness and swelling.

“It’s important to understand that there are more than 100 types of arthritis,” said Marcy O’Koon, senior director of consumer health at the Arthritis Foundation. “Osteoarthritis is generally a mechanical problem due to a damaged joint. Other types, like rheumatoid arthritis and psoriatic arthritis, are inflammatory and systemic.”

All types of arthritis benefit from physical activity, weight management, joint protection and maintaining a balance of rest and activity, O’Koon added.

“Regular physical activity is essential for people with arthritis,” O’Koon said. “Joint pain can make people want to move less, but movement actually helps with pain and stiffness.”

Losing excess weight lightens the load on joints in the lower body, meaning less

pain and easier movement.

“Every pound of excess weight equals 3 to 4 pounds of pressure on your knees,” O’Koon said. “But the effects of being overweight go beyond the weight-bearing joints.”

Research has shown that even joints in the hand are affected by excess body weight, she added.

“Body weight has a systemic effect on your organs, like your heart, but also your joints,” O’Koon said.

In addition to losing weight to reduce stress on joints and performing low-impact exercise to keep the joints moving, individuals with osteoarthritis may want to consider taking supplements, after consulting with their doctor, said Dr. Hoang Dinh, Medicare director at Humana and board certified in internal medicine and rheumatology.

“Some patients have found success with alternative treatments like acupuncture, massage and meditation,” Dinh added.

For rheumatoid arthritis, physicians often recommend trying disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) that stop the inflammation from destroying the joint, Dinh said.

“There are many different types of DMARDs, including pills, weekly to monthly injections and intravenous (through the veins) drugs,” he said.

“However, these drugs can suppress your immune system and increase your risk for infection.”

People with osteoarthritis have a number of over-the-counter medication options from which to choose.

“These include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen and naproxen,” Dinh said. “Paraffin wax bath and capsaicin are other treatment alternatives. For those who need stronger medication, there are prescription-strength pain medications and NSAIDs.

“Finally, surgical treatment can be considered for those who have certain types of severe arthritis and failed conservative therapies.”

Individuals with arthritis and their families are encouraged to be well-informed about the condition as well as arthritis advocacy.

“The power of people to make a difference is incredible,” O’Koon said. “The Arthritis Foundation has people mobilized across the states and on a federal level advocating for improved access to arthritis care and treatment.”

To learn more about advocacy, visit <https://www.arthritis.org/advocate>. ★

**EMAIL** [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)

*Janice Phelan is a freelance writer based in Lee’s Summit, Mo.*

# 'We've Wanted this for so Long'

**Members at a Missouri Post finally have their own Post home. As a result, it is drawing members from nearby towns.**

**BY JANIE DYHOUSE**



For 30 years, the members of Post 6278 in Lawson, Mo., met at Lawson Bible Church or at the city hall. That all changed in May 2019 when they held their first meeting in their newly built Post home on the town's main street across from the city park and town square.

According to Post Commander Jeff Bye, when the local grocery store owner, Rick Thomas, decided to close the store a few years ago, he donated it to the VFW.

Bye said the building in the town of Lawson, some 30 miles northeast of Kansas City, was in "rough" shape, so they decided to demolish it and start from scratch.

"It took us two years and four months from start to completion," said Bye, who has been the Post commander for 22 years. "I think a lot of these guys never thought they would see us get our own Post home."

One such vet is Roy Cheek, a WWII airman whose plane was shot down over the Netherlands during the war. He evaded capture for 11 months and was able to make his way to Brussels and eventually on to Paris before joining his unit in London.

A lifelong resident of the town of 2,300, Cheek is a regular at the meetings and even represents the Post in parades.

"It's just so nice to finally have a place where we can all meet," Cheek said.

Members of the newly built VFW Post 6278 in Lawson, Mo., gather in October prior to the town's homecoming parade. Pictured are (front row) R.E. Holtz, Bob Wickum and Roy Cheek; (back row) Post Commander Jeff Bye, Dave Frazier, Ray Hill, Bruce Roberts and Post Quartermaster Robert Ninnig. The facility is a former grocery store that the owner donated.

"We've wanted this for so long. It just means a lot to us."

Before construction could begin, members found out it would cost \$58,000 to bring down the former structure. The money was donated by Post Quartermaster Robert Ninnig in honor of his son, Army Reservist Johnathan Ninnig, who died Sept. 7, 2016. The younger Ninnig's SGLI (servicemember's group life insurance) paid for the demolition.

"I know my son would have wanted to help the Post," said Ninnig, who has been quartermaster since 2006. "Other members also donated money and labor. We only had to take out a small loan from the bank. In the end, everyone had a hand in everything."

The Post does not have a bar and meets on Saturday mornings — both reasons that draw members from towns all around. Currently, the Post has more than 200 members.

While the basement is used to store things such as motor scooters, walkers and hospital beds, it's also a bit of a "man cave," according to Bye.

"This is a place where the members can just come down and hang out," said Bye, a Persian Gulf War vet who has earned All-American status three times. "We are so involved in the community. People know they can come to us when there is a need."

A large kitchen is off the main hall as is a private meeting room for the VFW Auxiliary members.

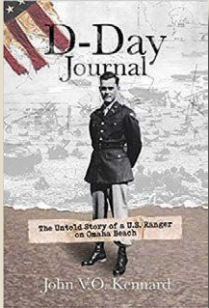
Bye, who works at Ford Motor Company in Claycomo, Mo., said the veterans committee of UAW Local 249 of Ford built the ramp for the Post. Furthermore, the Post received a \$10,000 Home Depot grant.

"If it weren't for Jeff, none of this would have happened," Vietnam vet Bruce Roberts said. "We've been very blessed."

EMAIL [jdyhouse@vfw.org](mailto:jdyhouse@vfw.org) ★



## STAFF PICK



### ***D-Day Journal: The Untold Story of a U.S. Ranger on Omaha Beach***

By John V.O. Kennard

On the morning of June 6, 1944, 22-year-old Army Lt. Frank Kennard led a Ranger cannon platoon onto Omaha Beach, losing his equipment and half his men. He and his seven remaining soldiers went on to overcome enormous odds to achieve their objective at Pointe du Hoc. This book, written by Kennard, is a journal of the 2nd Ranger Battalion in World War II. *D-Day Journal* also includes oral histories of four other members of the 2nd Ranger Battalion. *Koehler*

### ***When We Came Home: How The Vietnam War Changed Those Who Served***

By Jack McCabe, VFW Post 3579, Niles, Ill.

Author Jack McCabe interviewed more than 150 Vietnam veterans for this book. They describe how their lives were changed by the war and how they were received when they came home. Many struggled to reclaim their places in civilian life. The horrors and shock of war were compounded by hostile receptions from people and the organizations that should have provided support. *OddInt*

### ***Bear: A Chance Meeting Turns into a Lifetime Friendship***

By Arthur H. Barnes, VFW Post 1585, Bellingham, Wash.

This fictional tale for children is about Marine Col. Kirk Rodgers, who finds himself suddenly facing retirement after he was wounded in combat in Afghanistan. One final assignment offers him enough pay to finance his dream — a wildlife sanctuary. Just as he's about to move into his newly completed home, Kirk has a chance meeting with an orphaned black bear cub that changes both of their lives forever. *Fideli*

### ***2D Surgical Hospital: An Khe to Chu Lai South Vietnam***

By Lorna Griess, VFW Post 10125, Rancho Cordova, Calif.

This Vietnam War memoir is about living and working in a mobile Army surgical hospital, or MASH, in South Vietnam. The author, retired Col. Lorna Griess of the Army Nurse Corps, writes about the hospital and its patients, as well as how she and other troops coped with less-than-ideal circumstances and the emotional highs and lows that were part of everyday life in the Vietnam War. *Xlibris*

### ***Ordinary People: Extraordinary Heroes — Afghanistan and Iraq: The Face of War***

By Will G. Merrill Jr., VFW Post 2391, Saint Augustine, Fla.

Technology has changed the way people see wars forever. Even with innovation, individual stories of many of those fighting still get left behind in the war zone. This book is a collection of stories about the valor of the men and women who protect this country from all threats. The author, Will Merrill, interviewed 33 individuals to tell soldiers' stories of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. *CreateSpace*

### ***Tiger Bravo's War***

By Rick St. John, VFW Department of Georgia

Subtitled, "An epic year with an elite airborne rifle company in the 101st Airborne Division's 'Wandering Warriors,' at the height of the Vietnam War," this book follows a band of young paratroopers during their first year of combat in Vietnam. Thirty of these soldiers would be killed in action, and collectively, the group earned 150 Purple Hearts. *Tiger Bravo's War* also is about everyday life in a war zone and the strange, often harsh — yet sometimes beautiful — tropical environment where the war was fought. *Currahee*

### ***Battle Damage Assessment***

By Brian Parker, VFW Department of Maryland

In the unforgiving countryside of eastern Afghanistan, Pvt. Tyson York is dealing with extreme boredom, betrayal from the homefront and complacency when he's thrust into a situation with improbable odds of survival. York is changed irreparably when he is wounded in combat and witnesses its true horrors. After he returns from the war, he seeks help to cope with his altered emotional state. *Battle Damage Assessment* is a fictional story inspired by real events set in Afghanistan, as well as the U.S. after Tyson's return. *CreateSpace*

### ***The Brave Badria***

By Matthew Wilson, VFW Post 516, Farmingdale, N.Y., and illustrated by Jonathan Brown

The past decade of war is not easy to explain to a child. Veterans are even more eager to find a way to share their perspective with their children. *The Brave Badria* follows the adventures of a young, courageous Afghan girl. Using the wonderment and mysticism of a Middle Eastern "tall tale" and familiar themes of bullying, this book makes complex subjects accessible to a child. *CreateSpace*

VFW magazine's "Book Corner" features select books written by VFW members. If you have written a book or an e-book bearing an ISBN or ASIN, contact the magazine for guidelines at [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org) or by mail at: VFW magazine, *Book Corner*, 406 W. 34th Street, Suite 523, Kansas City, MO 64111. The subject of the book must relate to the military or veterans.



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### AIR FORCE

48th Tactical Hospital Squadron Assoc.: Bill Giussi  
(831) 708-4041; [bgiussi@gmail.com](mailto:bgiussi@gmail.com)

### ARMY

65th Inf. Div. Assoc.: Sybil Ream (412) 217-0728;  
<http://65thdiv.com>

B Trp., 7th Sqdn., 17th Air Cav: Buddy Harp (573) 470-0395;  
[buddyharp@yahoo.com](mailto:buddyharp@yahoo.com)

Officer Candidate Schools Alumni Assoc.: Dan Johnson  
(402) 981-1072; VP-Admin@ocsalumni.org

### MARINES

Alpha Co., 1st Bn., 5th Marines, 1st Marine Div., All Wars: Vince Rios  
(817) 847-9954; [vrmarine@msn.com](mailto:vrmarine@msn.com)

I Co., 3rd Bn., 7th Marines, 1st Marine Div., All Wars and Peacetime:  
Dennis Deibert (717) 652-1695;  
[dennisdeibert8901@comcast.net](mailto:dennisdeibert8901@comcast.net)

TBS Class, 6-70, Fox Co.: Tom Kanasky (203) 366-3153;  
[tkanasky@earthlink.net](mailto:tkanasky@earthlink.net)

### NAVY

MCBU 302: Tom Vandenberg (509) 520-5396;  
[peggiev@pocketnet.com](mailto:peggiev@pocketnet.com)

USS Bluefish SSN-675/SS-222: John Wittenstrom  
(910) 638-1716; [jwittenstrom@nc.rr.com](mailto:jwittenstrom@nc.rr.com)

USS Cochrane DDG-21, 1988-91, Decommissioning Crew:  
James M. Haitsch (267) 615-1737; [jmhaitsch@hotmail.com](mailto:jmhaitsch@hotmail.com)

USS Donner LSD-20: Dennis Heimbach (610) 775-7539;  
[dennisheimb@gmail.com](mailto:dennisheimb@gmail.com)

USS Dubuque LPD-8: Lawrence Parker (812) 228-7260;  
[ussdbq8reunion@yahoo.com](mailto:ussdbq8reunion@yahoo.com)

USS Maddox DD-731/DD-622: Dennis Stokhaug  
(414) 702-4878; [maddox64@aol.com](mailto:maddox64@aol.com)

USS Macdonough DLG-8/DDG39: Gerald Turner (724) 375-0108;  
[turner\\_320@comcast.net](mailto:turner_320@comcast.net)

USS Rich DD/DDE 820: Nick Tomasi (269) 353-8810;  
[reunion2020@ussrich.org](mailto:reunion2020@ussrich.org)

USS Taylor DD/DDE-468: James O'Neill (804) 212-8911;  
[oneillfalm@aol.com](mailto:oneillfalm@aol.com)

USS Yosemite AD-19: Bill Krug (352) 419-6620;  
<https://USSyosemite.net/2020>

USS Beatty DD-756: Royce L. Smith (256) 442-6833;  
[roycesmith116@comcast.net](mailto:roycesmith116@comcast.net)

### PROPOSED

1st Bn., 9th Marines: Danny-Boy Crawford (205) 577-1480;  
[dannyboyre317@gmail.com](mailto:dannyboyre317@gmail.com)

USS Vancouver LPD-2: Danny-Boy Crawford (205) 577-1480;  
[dannyboyre317@gmail.com](mailto:dannyboyre317@gmail.com)

340th/361st Public Affairs Detachment & 311th Military History  
Detachment: George Michaels (609) 802-2182;  
[geomichaels@aol.com](mailto:geomichaels@aol.com)

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#### Air Force

9th Field Maint. Sqdn., 9th Reconnaissance Wing, Beale AFB, Calif., 1978 – Seeking anyone who witnessed hydraulic fluid from a KC135 tanker hitting me in the face. My eyes were rinsed out and bandaged at the base hospital. Robert F. Dawson (951) 204-9818  
[dawsonr477@gmail.com](mailto:dawsonr477@gmail.com)

388th Supply Co. PACAF and College Eye, 9/24/1969-9/24/1970 – Seeking anyone stationed at Korat RTAFB who can substantiate an Agent Orange claim. I have been denied for diabetes mellitus, hypothyroidism and tinnitus. Bobby R. Griffin (561) 755-2463 [captainmorgan598@gmail.com](mailto:captainmorgan598@gmail.com)

#### Army

24th Inf. Div., 34th Regt., H Co., 105 Plt., Nightmare Range, South Korea, Dec. 2, 1955 – Seeking anyone who served with Capt. Shulenberg, Sgt. Todd, & Lt. Colby-platoon leaders to substantiate me going over a 100-foot cliff as a jeep driver on guard duty during maneuvers causing injuries and a broken arm. Dayton Davis (269) 544-0171

Ft. Knox, KY, June-Aug. 1960, Korea Jan. 1961-May 1962, Ft. Riley, KS., Jun. 1962-May 1963 – Seeking anyone to substantiate a hearing loss claim. Richard Scott (989) 293-9809

HQ Co., Ascom Depot, Korea, Jan. 1963-Feb. 1964 – Seeking anyone to substantiate repeated exposure to Agent Orange causing respiratory damage and diabetes. Richard P. Veenhuis (708) 334-4856 [rveenhuis#1@aol.com](mailto:rveenhuis#1@aol.com)

#### Marines

Minefield Maint., Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, 1982-83 – Seeking anyone with MFM from defoliant sprayed on fields before rehab. Keith M. Jacks (812) 201-3908 [kjacks6161@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kjacks6161@sbcglobal.net)

#### Navy

USS Baya, AGSS-318, 1959-62/1965-68 – Seeking any shipmate who remembers the Radiation Control Team of the USS Nereus AS-17 removing radiation material from finches locker after a yard period to substantiate a kidney cancer claim. Also, our sugar stored in the Forward Engine Room got contaminated by diesel fuel on a trip to Alaska. LaVern MacLaird (619) 469-1428

USS Bon Homme Richard, Korea, 1952-56 – Seeking anyone to substantiate a claim for 2 spots of actinic keratosis cancer. Robert W. Avery (715) 488-2343



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## Reducing Auto and Home Insurance Costs



Insurance increases are happening across the industry. Since 2008, the cost of auto insurance has risen faster than the rate of inflation and is expected to increase even more this year.

For homeowners, it seems insurance and property taxes rise each year, too. Here's a look at some key factors contributing to these trends.

### WHY ARE AUTO INSURANCE COSTS RISING?

Two of the most significant factors contributing to rising auto insurance costs are increased traffic and rising industry costs. Here are a few others:

- **Cars on the road** — Because of a strong economy, there are more cars on the road logging more miles, increasing the likelihood of accidents.
- **Distracted drivers** — The widespread usage of smartphones and in-car technology has caused more drivers to be distracted by things other than the road while driving.
- **Bodywork** — Since 2008, consumers have been buying more new vehicles. Along with these new pricier vehicles comes higher repair costs.
- **Medical costs** — As you've probably noticed, medical expenses also are on the rise. This means higher medical bills from bodily injury claims.

### WHAT ABOUT HOME INSURANCE COSTS?

Increased home insurance costs can be attributed mostly to extreme weather events and inflation.

- **Extreme weather events** — As more wildfires, windstorms, hur-

ricanes, floods and other damaging events occur, insurance companies are spending more to clean up the damage and restore customers' property. As the frequency of these severe weather events increase, insurance companies have to increase their rates in order to pay claims.

- **Inflation** — Insurance companies must raise the cost of coverage to keep up with the increasing cost to repair or rebuild homes.
- **Age of your home** — Older homes have a greater need for repair and maintenance, and therefore might require a higher insurance cost.

### HERE'S HOW YOU CAN SAVE MONEY

Here are a few tips on saving money on auto and home insurance despite the rising costs:

**Shop around:** When renewal time comes around, don't automatically renew. Shop around for a better deal from other carriers every couple of years. In most states, bundling policies results in savings.

**Use discounts:** Many drivers don't know they qualify for several discounts. Depending on the carrier, these discounts can include bundling, accident forgiveness, being a safe driver, installing a security system in the home or making a home more disaster resistant.

**Maintain your car and home:** Stay on top of repairs to try and avoid accidents and claims. While common sense, these tips can be the best way to help keep insurance costs low.

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# 'Mrs. Wisconsin' is a 'Beacon of Hope' for Veterans

**Kim Galske enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1995. Since then she has assisted fellow veterans in a variety of roles, including as a beauty pageant winner.**

**BY KARI WILLIAMS**

**K**im Galske has taken the values instilled in her as a Marine and transferred them to the pageant stage. From the moment she donned the crown as Mrs. Wisconsin, it became the “veterans” crown.

“It is a beacon of hope for veterans who don’t have a voice, the ones who didn’t come home,” said Galske, who served in the Marine Corps from 1996

“some really amazing young women” who volunteered in their communities. Those interactions prompted Galske to question how she herself was contributing. Then she discovered the Mrs. United States Pageant, a division of the United States National Pageants for married women 21 years old or older.

In 2018, Galske earned the distinction of Mrs. Fond Du Lac County and was a runner-up for the state title. Over the course of the following year, Galske worked hard to “make a bigger impact” in her hometown.

“The U.S. pageant system stands for being the light,” Galske said. “So be the light in your community. Be the light in the groups you’re a part of.”

The following year, Galske competed against eight women and took the crown.

“[The Marine Corps] prepared me for so many things I never would have expected my life to have been,” Galske said.

## FROM THE MARINES TO CIVILIAN LIFE

Galske joined the Marine Corps in 1995. She grew up in southern Arizona and did not have a “strong core” for a family. The Marine Corps Reserves Center in Tucson, Ariz., was located across the street from her middle school.

From the experience of seeing Marines on a regular basis, Galske said, she wanted to have a family like the Marine Corps.

“I knew that at 14 years old, I was going to join the Marines,” said Galske, who served on active duty at Camp Pendleton in California from 1996-2001.

Currently a religious affairs specialist in the Wisconsin National Guard, Galske said that in her transition back to civilian life, she held more than a dozen jobs between 2001 and 2008 and moved to “many different states.” By 2008, Galske said, she was homeless with a 6-year-old child.

A friend in Wisconsin helped her find resources to get “back on her feet.” She then secured a job, a vehicle and housing and went on to manage an investment company and would later



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIM GALSKE

transition to entrepreneurship.

“I really had to try to figure out life again,” Galske said.

During that time, she said, she vowed to help veterans if she ever had the opportunity to do so.

“I didn’t know what that looked like at the time, I was just trying to survive,” Galske said. “It took about five years before I could finally move forward in helping other people.”

In 2017, Galske became Salute the Troop’s executive director. She said her experience as a veteran — not just a Marine — has helped her in that role.

“It’s not about you,” Galske said. “They teach you selflessness the moment you walk in the door. As vets, no matter who we are, we want to help.”

In her work at Salute the Troops, she has connected with Gordon Shultz, past commander at VFW Post 9202 in Germantown, Wis. He has become a “dear friend,” according to Galske, and has helped her meet Korean War and Vietnam War veterans.

Her personal experiences from the Marine Corps have helped her connect with other vets, including those with combat experience.

“I have definitely seen things, too, as an MP in the Marine Corps that are traumatic, just as they have injuries, [whether that be] psychological or physical,” Galske said. ✦

EMAIL [magazine@vfw.org](mailto:magazine@vfw.org)



**Kim Galske is a Marine Corps veteran who served from 1996-2001. She was named Mrs. Wisconsin in 2019 and has used that platform to champion veteran causes in the state.**

to 2001 and earned the Mrs. Wisconsin title in 2019.

She said she uses the crown not only to make veterans aware of Salute the Troops Wisconsin, where she is the executive director, but for “every other veteran organization” and non-veteran groups that want to be involved in the military community.

## BECOMING MRS. WISCONSIN

About six years ago, Galske said, she was asked to be a sponsor for the Miss Wisconsin pageant, where she met

PHOTO COURTESY OF KIM GALSKE



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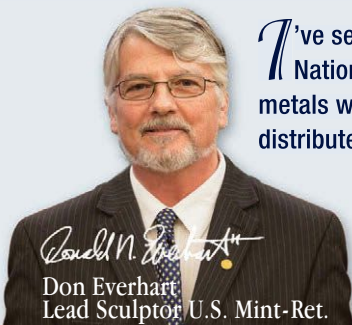
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