SHE SERVED MAGAZINE

Celebrating Women Veterans



VILLAGERS FOR VETERANS
HELPING VETERANS REGAIN THEIR INDEPENDENCE

26 WOMEN VETERANS SHARING THEIR STORIES FROM THE VILLAGES

AUTHOR EMILY DECICCO WRITES ABOUT ASHLEY'S COTTAGE + VILLAGERS FOR VETERANS

Third Issue Special Edition:
VILLAGERS FOR VETERANS, NOVEMBER 2023



VA Resources for Women

DON'T WAIT ANOTHER DAY TO CALL AND ASK FOR HELP.

Women Veterans Call Center:
855-VA-WOMEN

Veteran Crisis Hotline:
988 (press 1)

Caregiver Support Line:
855-260-3274

VA Benefits Hotline:
1-800-827-1000

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	Letter from the Editor
6	Behind the Lens
7	*Warrior Twins: A Resilient Military Veteran Sister Duo*
8-9	Veteran Kathryn Wilgus
10-11	Veteran Stephanie Gradford
12-13	Veteran Delores Freeburger
14-15	Veteran Noelle Holly
16-17	Veteran Barbara O'Hara
18-19	*Ashley's Cottage written by Emily DeCicco*
20-21	Veteran Charlotte Wilson
22-23	Veteran April Ramirez
24-25	Veteran Quateca Kirksey
26	Outtakes: Take one. Take two. Take three...
27	*Dual Paths of Service: A Mother and Daughter's Distinct Military Journeys*
28-29	Veteran April Keigans
30-31	Veteran Vicki Paul
32-33	Veteran Loretta Forlaw
34-35	*Supporting Veterans in Florida and Beyond written by Emily DeCicco*
36-37	Veteran CJ Forward
38-39	Veteran Kyra Rose
40-41	Veteran Lynn Geiser
42-43	Veteran Mary Greene
44-45	Veteran Melanie Caputo
46-47	Veteran Patricia Pule
48-49	Veteran Yolanda Frazier
50-51	Veteran Carla Yeoman
52-53	Veteran Kimberly Brutsche
54-55	Veteran Norma "Kitten" Van Vechten
56-57	Veteran McKenna McArdle
58-59	Veteran Natalie Vines
60-61	Veteran Suni Berger
62-63	Veteran Terry McArdle
64-65	Veteran Valecia Parker
66-67	Veterans Women Business Directory
68	Donate: How to Support She Served

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HOST A VETERAN PHOTO SHOOT



To host a **She Served** event visit the website: www.sheservedinitiative.org.

General criteria: The space needs to be indoors, and approximately 20x20' in size, with at least an 8' ceiling height (preferably 10') with electrical outlets.

Photoshoot Details: Photoshoots are reserved for female veterans only. Each Veteran will get a 30-minute professional photoshoot. They can bring props or mementos to be used during the session.

As the host you should be aware that each Veteran that wants to participate will need to fill out an intake form of basic information, provide a short biography of their military career and post military life, and provide a clear photo of themselves in uniform (their official service photo is best, but other photos of them in uniform are acceptable if it is clear and in focus so that their face is recognizable). We can comfortably accommodate approximately 10 women a day if the timeslots are scheduled in advance.

Expenses: We do not charge the Veteran or the host a photoshoot fee. However, as you can imagine we do have expenses. We ask the host to provide suitable lodging, air fare and/or reimbursement for gas, and my meals during the photoshoot. Visit **https://sheservedinitiative.org/host-she-served** for all the details then contact us to be a host!

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The She Served Initiative was honored to collaborate with Villagers for Veterans, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in The Villages, Florida. This organization, founded by Marie Bogdonoff, operates as a bridge between the local community and veterans in need. As a 100% volunteer-driven organization, their mission revolves around providing vital support to veterans facing various challenges.

During our collaboration, we had the privilege of meeting ***18 extraordinary women Veterans***, each with a unique and inspiring story. These women came from diverse backgrounds, spanning from Vietnam War veterans to those who served in the more recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We arranged a special and complimentary photoshoot experience for these remarkable women, giving them an opportunity to share their military journeys and their ongoing contributions to their communities.

As you read the stories of these incredible women, we hope you'll find inspiration in their resilience, dedication, and enduring commitment to making a positive impact on the world.

Our hosts, Marie Bogdonoff and the Vice President of Villagers for Veterans, Kathryn Willgus, truly made our stay at the Villages unforgettable. From the excellent accommodations to the highly enjoyable annual Orchid Gala that we had the privilege to attend, this event is something we'll cherish forever. Heartfelt thanks to Marie and Kathryn for their outstanding hospitality!

Martina Schmidt





BEHIND THE LENS:

It takes a village, or a "squad" in this case to put together a magazine. We bring you a sneak peek of the work in progress. **Thank you to everyone that supports our storytelling mission.**











WARRIOR TWINS

KATHRYN AND STEPHANIE:

A Resilient Military Veteran Sister Duo

In a world where shared experiences often shape unique perspectives, the stories of individuals who serve in the military illuminate diverse narratives of duty and sacrifice. Among these narratives, the stories of twin sisters who embarked on a journey within the armed forces stands out as a testament to the intertwining of family bonds and professional service. Their story invites us to consider the ordinary extraordinariness that emerges when familial ties intersect with the profound sense of duty.



Kathryn's twin sister Stephanie served 27+ years in the Army. They are affectionately called Army/Navy Twins. She admits she's always been a big fan of her sister and would like to convey this heartfelt message to her:

"Thank you so much for serving our country the way you did. I am proud to be your twin sister. It was an honor to watch you grow over the years to the mother, sister, daughter, friend and veteran you are today. You may not think of yourself like this but to me, you really are a hero for all women."

When asked about her sister, **Stephanie** fondly expresses: "What I admire most about Kathryn is her strength and commitment to advocate for others. Her selflessness and dedication to serving others makes my Sissy, MY HERO!"

Kathryn

Kathryn Wilgus served in the Army from 1987-1996 as an Operating Room Technician. She then served in the Navy from 2004-2015 as an Operating Room Nurse. Her job allowed her to care for the most severe catastrophic military members in surgery as a nurse or as a technician. She has completed two tours in Afghanistan and received the Defense Meritorious Service Medal as well as the Bronze German Armed Forces Schützenschnur.

Kathryn's most significant highlight of her career as an operating room nurse was the honor of being able to serve those who serve. She also was an operating room nurse mentor, medical training advisor to Afghanistan national nurses, and female engagement team member for Afghanistan women.

While Kathryn has been a trauma nurse by trade for over twenty years, she also enjoys being a part of organizations bigger than herself that serve veterans in need. She serves as Vice President for Villagers for Veterans that recently opened up Ashley's Cottage and is working on Ashley's House. The Ashley Cottage and House are for homeless women veterans located in Lake County. FL. She is also involved with her local Kiwanis, VFW, AMVETS, American Legion, and the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association.

Kathryn loves to bake and has an Art Institute diploma for Baking and Pastry. She has bungee jumped, skydived, hang glided, ziplined, scuba dived and climbed to the top of the Koln Cathedral. She has ridden in an ultra-light Aircraft, hot air balloon, glider plane, and driven a race car over 180 mph. Basically, she likes extreme activities and adventures off the beaten path.

Kathryn would like the public to acknowledge that women have been serving in the military for over 200 years. To realize that women have been serving their country in battles since the Revolutionary War in 1775 and have not been given the recognition!

For her fellow women Veterans, Kathryn has some sage advice, "Educate Don't Tolerate. Wear something showing your military branch, say something about your service, let the public see our women in service in our community are doing great things. We should not hide our service because many have not "seen" us. Don't let them take away our HONOR. We owe it to the women veterans before us that paved the way to serve and to help the women veterans behind us to shine brighter in the community."






AFGHANISTAN
VETERAN
COMBAT VETS
U.S. NAVY

WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"There is no limit
to what we, as women,
can accomplish."
~ Michelle Obama



Stephanie

Stephanie Gradford was on a full singing scholarship at Miami Dade College when she enlisted in the Army in 1990. After a five-year enlistment, she realized she loved the Army and wanted to use her voice differently, to lead America's daughters and sons.

She served 27 active years, leading and caring for Soldiers and Civilians around the globe, including combat deployments to Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan, all while raising her son and daughter until she retired as a Colonel in 2017. During Stephanie's remarkable service, she earned various medals, including three Bronze Stars.

Today, Stephanie is passionate about family and being there for them. She is the primary caretaker for her mother and the first in line to be there for her grown kids. Her daughter, Raena, is pursuing her Master's Degree in Social Work, and her son, Harien, recently graduated with his Associate of Arts in Zoology. Living with Autism has not slowed him down, as he is pursuing his Bachelor's in Zoology. After retirement, Stephanie joined her twin sister, Kathryn, a Navy Veteran, to advocate for and serve Veterans through Villagers for Veterans and the American Legion.

Stephanie wants the public to know that women Veterans served and sacrificed like our male counterparts and deserve the same respect. Instead of asking if we are wearing our husband's hat, thank us for our service as you would a man.

Stephanie offers this advice to her fellow sister Veterans: "First, give yourself grace while navigating civilian life! As Veterans, we have seen and experienced things that may be difficult not only for us to process or accept but for others. Second, talk to someone. There is no shame in asking for help from family, friends, or professional organizations such as Veterans Affairs, which is committed to advocating for and empowering women Veterans, #BringWomenVeteransHome2VA."

Stephanie has a twin sister who served in the Army and the Navy. Of her sister the says, "What I admire most about my twin sister is her strength and commitment to advocate for others. Her selflessness and dedication to serving others makes my Sissy, MY HERO!"





Delores

Delores Freeburger served in the Women's Army Corps during 1955 and 1956. She provided administrative duties for the G3 Section of the Military District of Washington, DC. Her service period was during one of the rare Post WWII times of peace for the United States, between the Korean War and Vietnam. Delores recalls one of the highlights of her career was delivering correspondence to the White House to Colonel Robert Shultz, Military Aide to President Eisenhower.

Delores says that her biggest takeaway from her military service (other than her husband) was her heartfelt love for our military and a deeper appreciation of our freedom.

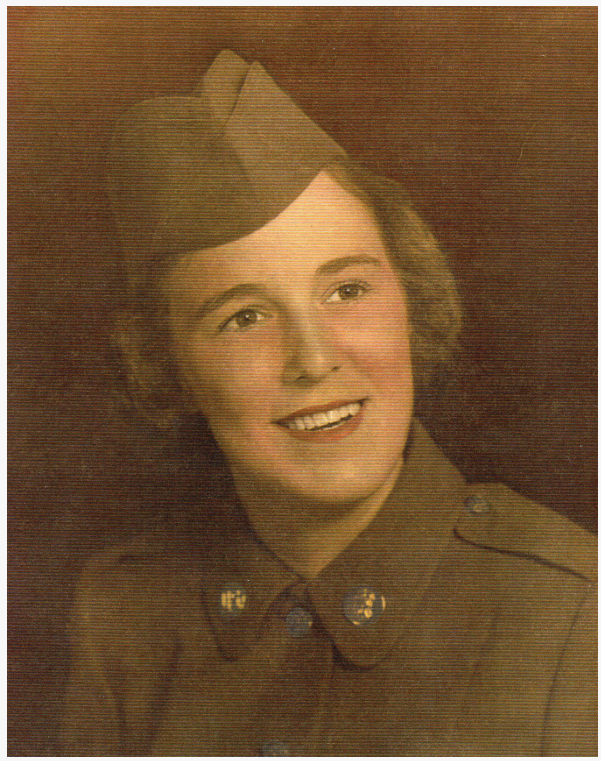
Delores met her husband, "The love of my life", while in the military and they were married for 61 years before he passed in 2017. She and her husband chose not to have children, but she says she has lots of nieces and nephews to spoil her.

After her military service Delores was a Red Cross volunteer for 30 years, and was the Chaplain of the Space Coast Chapter of Women Veterans for 25 years. These days she continues to volunteer and serve others by sewing small quilts and bags for nursing homes and small pillows for breast cancer patients. When she's not doing volunteer work she enjoys gardening and reading.

Delores would like the public to recognize that women veterans were as dedicated as men in serving our country, and should be treated equally.

For her fellow veterans she offers this advice: "When the going gets tough, call an "ole" veteran friend … after a laugh or two the world won't seem so overwhelming. You'll feel better and I bet you'll make her day brighter too."





Celebrating women Veterans is a meaningful way to honor their service, sacrifice and contributions to the military. Here are some ideas for celebrating and showing appreciation:



Write heartfelt thank-you cards or letters expressing your gratitude for their service. You can send these to individual Veterans, or partner with a local Veterans' organization to distribute them.

Connect women Veterans with resources and support services, such as organizations that provide mental health assistance, job placement and housing assistance.


WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"No one can make you feel inferior without your permission."
~ Eleanor Roosevelt



WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"I am, I can, I will, I do."
~ Christine D'Ercole

Noelle

Noelle Holly served in the United States Army and the Navy Reserve for a combined 20 years as a Trauma Nurse. While in the Navy Reserve, she simultaneously served as a professional firefighter in the civilian workforce. Noelle's military service spanned pivotal periods, including the Global War on Terrorism, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Reflecting on her military service, she says that the most significant takeaway from her time in the military is that "service is key."

Currently, Noelle is certified as an International EMT-I working as an RN/EMT for the Utah Disaster Medical Assistance Team Rubicon where she deployed to Nepal, Mozambique, and Poland. This veteran-led international humanitarian organization provides disaster relief to underserved communities. She also specializes in Medical Logistics for Health and Human Services. In her free time, Noelle enjoys cycling and gardening and is passionate about animals.

Noelle has a simple message for the public regarding women Veterans: "We served too."

For her fellow Veterans, she offers this advice: "Continue to serve, just in another capacity; it's what we do best."





If you're a business owner or have the capacity to influence hiring decisions, consider giving preference to women veterans when hiring, or support Veteran-owned businesses through procurement.

DONATIONS:
Make donations to veterans' organizations or charities that support women Veterans. These contributions can help provide essential services and resources.

CELEBRATORY GATHERINGS:
Host gatherings and social events where women Veterans can connect with one another and share their experiences. Create a supportive and welcoming atmosphere.

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS:
Offer mentorship opportunities for women Veterans who are transitioning to civilian life or seeking career guidance. Sharing your knowledge and experience can make a significant impact.

Barbara

Barbara O'Hara served from 1987 until 2018 in the United States Army as a supervisory human resources specialist. She worked as a human resource leader and employee advocate. She managed a multitude of areas of human resource organizational management. Her last assignment was as the Assistant Inspector General (IG) for the U.S. Army Japan. She resolved complaints, planned and executed inspections. She conducted investigations and inquiries, while she directed staff in resolving investigations and inspection reports.

Prior to her service in Japan, she served as the Senior Enlisted Advisor, Soldier Programs and Services Division, The Adjutant General Directorate, U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Fort Knox, KY. During her career, she also served as a Command Sergeant Major and a First Sergeant for the Army Logistics University, Fort Lee, VA.

Barbara supported Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. On several occasions in Baghdad, Iraq, she volunteered on air missions to the hazardous International Zone to ensure that soldiers received the human resources support.

Barbara's most significant takeaway from her military service is in keeping with the challenge of the Adjutant General Corps motto, to "Defend and Serve." She took care of the Army's greatest asset, its people, by always putting them first. To meet this challenge, she often sacrificed her time and resources for others.

Barbara is the proud mother of three sons and 16 grandchildren. She currently works as a high school substitute teacher for Clay County School District. During her free time, Barbara volunteers at her church on the program committee and Trustee board. She is also a member of the American Legion Post 517. She is passionate about spending time with her family and her hobbies which include baking, reading, and photography.

Barbara would like for the public to know that there is no limit to a woman veteran when given an opportunity and the proper tools.

For her fellow women Veterans, Barbara wants you to know, "You are not alone; do not be afraid to seek and use the resources you have earned. Join one of the many clubs and organizations that support women veterans. Asking for help is a sign of strength."





WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Things are only impossible until they're not."
~ Captain Jean-Luc Picard



ASHLEY'S COTTAGE

Filling the **critical** need for female Veterans

WRITTEN BY EMILY DECICCO





Villagers for Veterans (V4V), a small-but-mighty nonprofit based in Villages, Florida, has been honing its resources to address the problematic and rapidly rising number of homeless Female Veterans in the United States.

The 501c3 recently refurbished a 1700 sq ft, three bedroom, three bathroom home to house six Female Veterans facing homelessness.The home is named "Ashley's Cottage" after Lt. Ashley White Stumpf, who was killed in Afghanistan in 2011.

Marie Bogdonoff, President and Founder of Villagers for Veterans began learning about the specific challenges facing Female Veterans back in 2018 when she visited a now-closed transition home for women in Tampa.

"What struck me the most was that this house was in a terrible neighborhood and I totally understood the women's concerns about transportation and their safety when going and coming from the house," said Bogdonoff.

"Many of these women came from abusive relationships or had severe PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder), many as a result of MST (military sexual trauma). I knew then that I would dedicate my efforts to provide a home in a safe area, close to resources that they needed including, a VA, schooling and work opportunities, and accessible transportation."

She landed on V4V's next project and embarked on a fact-finding mission. Bogdonoff even sponsored a mini-documentary and interviewed nearly a dozen Female Veterans who expanded on the variety of unique challenges that women leaving the military face.

She found that existing Veteran service systems did not acknowledge the need for tailored responses based on the experience of women in the U.S. military. For example, she learned that it is nearly impossible for Female Veterans to find comfort or safe refuge in facilities occupied by their male counterparts.

Further, Bogdonoff learned about other obstacles including: an absence of a Female Veteran community and a lack of financial literacy and education. The issues are compounded for women because of cultural stereotypes and the gender pay gap.

That's exactly why Ashley's Cottage includes a fully-furnished study with new computers so that the women will have a quiet place with reliable Wi-fi to help them facilitate working towards the next phase of their life. The home also has laundry, televisions, a kitchen and a dining area for the women to congregate.

The home even has a firepit and overlooks a lake, providing a peaceful atmosphere to help them adjust to their next chapter of life.



"... Ashley's Cottage includes a fully-furnished study with new computers so that the women will have a quiet place with reliable Wi-fi to help them facilitate working towards the next phase of their life. The home also has laundry, televisions, a kitchen and a dining area for the women to congregate."

Ashley's Cottage was especially meaningful for V4V's Vice President, LCDR Kathryn Wilgus, a Retired Navy and Combat Veteran, who had previously been homeless for over a year. She has since dedicated herself to giving back and advocating for equality for Female Veterans.

"I have provided manual labor for weeks in the redesign and repurposing of Ashleys Cottage," said Wilgus. "V4V has inspired other organizations as well as individuals and businesses to give back- the proof is in the support we were given to clean up the cottage and make it beautiful, warm, home for healing and support to move forward- not back."

There is currently one Veteran living in the home. Bogdonoff and Wilgus are currently waiting on referrals for five more women to move into Ashley's Cottage.

"It is my hope that the women journeying through these homes will feel the love, respect and support to move forward with their civilian life in a compassionate and safe way," said Bogdonoff. "The goal is that these homes will be the footprints for many more."



To learn more and donate to Ashley's Cottage click here.
Photography provided by Villagers for Veterans.

WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent."
~ Madeleine Albright



Charlotte

Charlotte Wilson served for 11 years in the Women's Army Corps. She worked as an operating room technician during the Vietnam Era. She would scrub in or circulate and assist surgeons in surgical procedures for service members injured in the war. Within the operating rooms, she witnessed some very dedicated and innovative practices. Due to the nature of the injuries and losses, new procedures were developed and new instruments were created on the spot. Surgeons would go home and create a device and bring it in to be sterilized, and it would be used in surgery. Many of the procedures and instruments that were created to save life and limb are still used today.

Charlotte is the daughter of a World War II veteran who served in the Army Air Force and was stationed in the Australian Bush. After his death, she found his military records and came to realize that like her dad, it was common for WWII Veterans to never speak about the war. She was proud to see that he had received two Bronze Stars and never said a word.

Charlotte is now retired and enjoying life. She is always looking for ways to help empower women as well as her brothers in need. She has volunteered at AIDs Action, Boston Newbury Street Community, Women's Health Care, AIDs Walk, Harbor 2Bay 126 bicycle ride, and is the Home Depot Veteran liaison to beautify the Veteran Hospital (where) and a Women's Veteran Transition Home in the Boston Area. She is involved in Veterans Suicide Prevention, Villagers for Veterans organization, and Ashley's Cottage and House. Finally, she is an active, proud member of both the American Legion and American Legion Riders.

Charlotte is passionate about helping her military Veteran sisters. While she realizes that she may not know everything, she will always find a way to help. Her other passion is her hobby which she calls her "wind therapy," motorcycling. She rides all over the country.

Charlotte wants the public to know that "Women SERVED! We spilled blood and died too, next to our brothers. Acknowledge US ... Help US … Thank US.

Charlotte would love for her fellow Veteran sisters to be aware that everyone has different issues and it is important that we listen to one another's needs. It is important to ensure that women veterans know their benefits and are enrolled with the Veterans Administration. Even though it is a known minefield, seek help in navigating it. Oftentimes, just knowing someone is in your corner regardless, is important and powerful.





April

April Ramirez enlisted in the Air Force in 2001 at 17-years-old, not to be like her parents that served in the Air Force, but to create her own path in a military branch she already loved. She wanted nothing to do with flight lines, knowing that was her dad's territory, so she specialized in Civil Engineering Customer Service.

For six years she was a welcome presence to anyone needing help from the CE shop; answering calls, sharing messages, and helping others navigate through the process of utilizing the services they needed, but looking back, she believes God had different plans for her. In 2006 she deployed to Kyrgyzstan, earning a volunteer medal while leading trips to a local orphanage housing more than 500 children during her time off. After that, she abruptly transitioned from active-duty to the Air Force Reserves and became a paralegal until she retired in May 2022.

While some people want to be "in the know" of every detail in a life, there were times that being a paralegal meant the details were too much. They brought a piece of stress that was hard to know what to do with, all while raising a daughter that was battling cancer.

What her unexpected life challenges led to, was the realization that April's true skill is helping others get rid of their stress and pain by working out the knots in their bodies. She has founded her own clinic, called Wildflower Massage, in Florida, and as a licensed massage therapist she finds joy in watching the anxiety melt away in those around her. She says, "massage truly does help the mind, body and soul," and she believes every person coming in for a massage should adopt her company motto – Leave your stress at the door.

These days she values her family time, and is passionate about church, supporting the community's faith-based drug rehabilitation houses, and standing behind childhood cancer causes.

She would like the public to know that women veterans can come in any shape or size, and being 4'11 she has heard the saying "dynamite comes in little packages" more often than not.

If asked for advice by other women veterans, she would say "don't ever judge a book by it's cover. It shows more strength to ask for help when you are struggling, and always remember you are never alone. There is always someone else who is, or has, gone through a similar battle."





WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at will also change."





WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Life can only be
understood backwards, but
it must be lived forwards."
~ Soren Kierkegaard

Quateca

Quateca Kirksey turned down a full scholarship offer from a Miami college sorority to become a United States Marine. Considering she had no relatives that had ever served in any branch of the military, joining the Marines instead of becoming a sorority girl was straight out of left field. But her dream to be an educator like her mother pulled her towards adopting the Marine Corps moto - Semper Fidelis (always faithful) as her life goal, as she traversed an enlistment that changed her life.

In 1998, she was a Field Radio Operator and Radio Chief deploying to serve in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Inherent Resolve in Kuwait. She was trained in ground electronics maintenance, tactical communications, and air control/anti-air warfare operations ensuring that Marine commanders had full range of military operations. She mastered the regiment of school-houses completing the Sergeant Non-Resident Program, Corporals Leadership Course, Sergeants Course, Senior NCO Career Non-Residents Program, and as a cherry on top of that educational sundae, she completed the Primary Marksmanship Instructor Course.

Staying true to her values because they define her character, Quateca transitioned from the Marines after nine years of service, to wear a different uniform with the Miami Police Department. While raising a daughter and a son, she is the Senior Drill Instructor at the City of Miami Police Academy and serves in the Honor Guard Unit. Her daughter is now on her way to become a Nurse, and her son is a Computer Engineer. With 15 years behind her as a Drill Instructor, she has become an educator in her own right, with an Associate of Science Degree in Accounting, and a Bachelor's Degree in Public Administration tucked in her achievements as well.

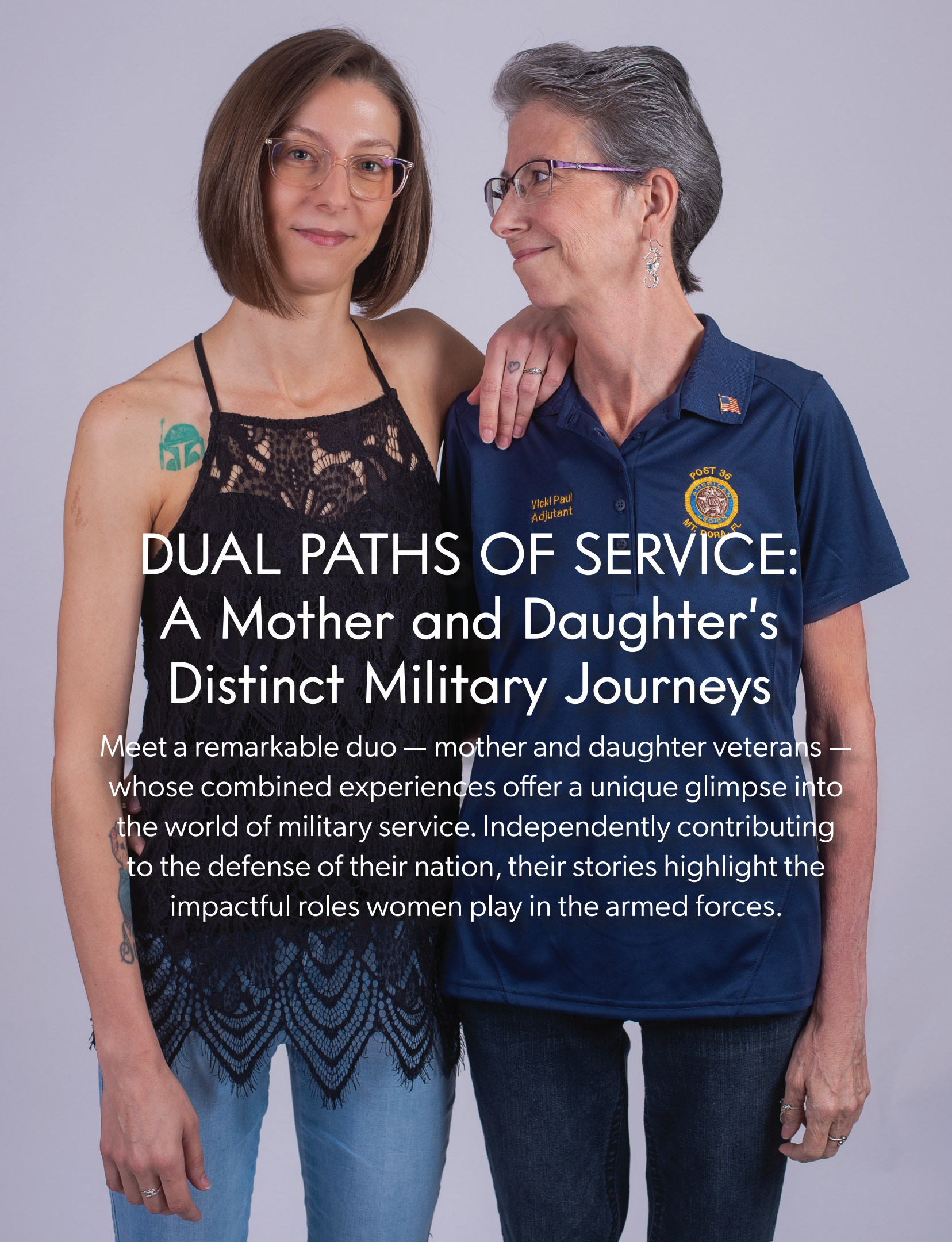
Travelling and working out are two of the hobbies she enjoys, and uses every opportunity available to help the public know that women veterans are caring and committed in ways that are uniquely inspirational to others. With a calm resolve after nearly 30 years of serving this country, she leans on a quote by Soren Kierkegaard to explain the life she is living. "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

If asked by other women Veterans, she would say, "Understand more about yourself and the world around you, you will be able to make better decisions moving forward because of it. Your faith, family and health must come first. Decisions made while in uniform will have a major impact on your post-military life."






TAKE ONE. TAKE TWO.
TAKE THREE...
35
Vicki Paul
Adjutant
SKILTON
COMBAT VETS
ASSOCIATION
Woman Veteran
27



DUAL PATHS OF SERVICE: A Mother and Daughter's Distinct Military Journeys

Meet a remarkable duo — mother and daughter veterans — whose combined experiences offer a unique glimpse into the world of military service. Independently contributing to the defense of their nation, their stories highlight the impactful roles women play in the armed forces.

April

April Keigans served in the United States Marine Corps from 2006 - 2009 as an aviation supply technician. She assisted the helicopter squadrons by ensuring proper supply chain, replacement, delivery, training, and inventory of aviation supplies. She also assisted in training all new Marines and prepared many for deployments.

April received the Global War of Terrorism Medal, National Defense Service Medal, and a letter of appreciation. She feels that her time in service developed leadership abilities, teamwork, resilience, and responsibility. Her time in service grew her love of country and her desire to defend and fight for what is right.

Military service is a proud tradition within April's family, with her mother Vicki and all seven of Vicki's siblings having served in the United States Navy. April, in her characteristic spirit of individuality, decided to chart her own course by enlisting in the Marines. This has led to a lighthearted and camaraderie-filled rivalry between the two branches of the armed forces, fostering a unique bond between mother and daughter.

April has been married to her childhood sweetheart for 15 years. They have two beautiful children and live in the same area that she and her husband grew up in.

April has been a real estate transaction coordinator for more than 10 years. She has worked with two teams and one global brokerage in that time and has helped each expand and grow.

Regarding her passions or hobbies, April states, "I'm pretty simple...I'm artistic and enjoy drawing, painting, crafting. Taking time to reconnect with nature at the springs, on the beach, or on a nice trail is something I enjoy as well."

April knows that women veterans are the most amazing people in this world. The public should know this as well. She further declares that women veterans are some of the strongest, most resilient, intelligent, clever, beautiful and driven beings on the planet. Often, they protect their country while also protecting the family they are raising. They serve their country while also combating inner and outer demons both on home soil and abroad. She believes that their ability to adapt and overcome nearly anything is a sight to behold and should be cherished and respected to the highest degree.

For her fellow Veteran sisters, April encourages all to remember to love yourself. She acknowledges that things can get hard but with a little love and grace for yourself, they can get better.





WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"If you're not growing,
you're dying."
~ William S. Burrough





WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Knowledge is power -
share the wealth!
Go Navy!"

Vicki

Vicki Paul served in the United States Navy from 1980-1994 as an Aviation Boatswain's Mate Aircraft Handler Chief Petty Officer, with Airware designation - ABHC(AW). Her job consisted of handling aircraft fires. Notably, she was also the first female instructor in the Navy for her designation ABH. She taught A and C school which involved firefighting techniques/movement of aircraft on both Navy ships and on Naval bases.

Vicki served in Desert Storm/Desert Shield earning many medals including the Navy Achievement, Good Conduct Award, Overseas Service, National Defense Service, and the Navy Meritorious. Her most significant takeaway from her service was the fact that "everyone was your brother or sister no matter where you were stationed." The comradery and the feeling that all were in it together has stuck with her.

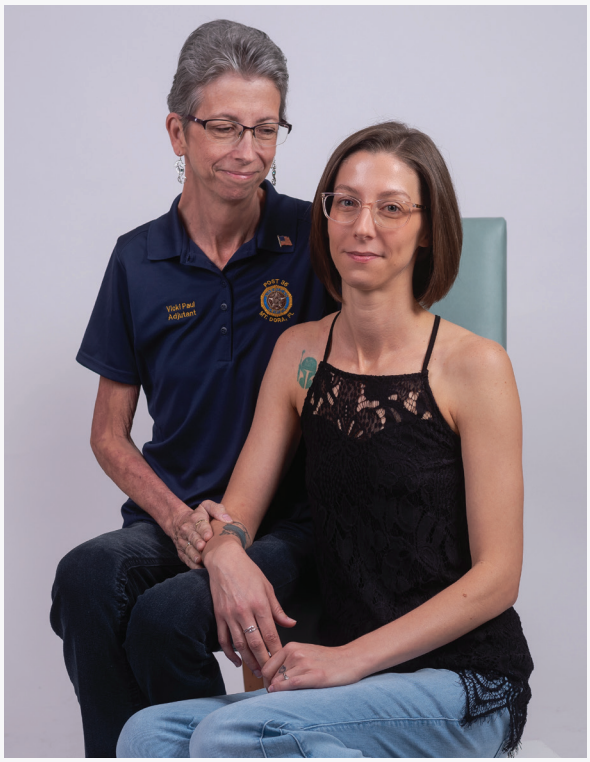
Vicki is the youngest of eight siblings all of which served in the United States Navy. While on active duty, Vicki welcomed her daughter April into the world, which led to her honorable discharge from the Navy. April, embodying her mother's spirit, chose to follow in her mother's footsteps, but with a slight twist—she opted to join the Marine Corps instead of the Navy. This familial decision sparked a friendly and ongoing rivalry between Vicki, a proud Navy veteran, and April, her Marine Corps enthusiast daughter.

She had her daughter April, while in the service prompting her discharge from the Navy. Her daughter April decided to follow in her mothers foot steps … well almost. Keeping with her independent spirit she inherited from her mom April decided to joining the Marine Coprs instead or her Navy. Both enjoy a friendly back and forth rivalry between Navy and Marines.

Currently, Vicki works as the Managing Director for Striking Effects Promotions; an embroidery, screen printing, promotional products and awards company located in Mount Dora, Florida. Vicki is also the Adjutant for the American Legion Post 35 in Mount Dora, Florida. Her passions are all about supporting her fellow Veterans.

Vicki would like the public to know that as women, we have served with honor and pride just like our male counterparts. Many of us have led the way to make stronger and brighter futures for women in all jobs of the military. Many have become leaders in our government. We are just trying to do our best and keep climbing to new heights!

To her sister Veterans, Vicki wants you to remember that the rules in your civilian life are not the same as they were during your military life. She implores you to listen, think, and then speak. Also, "for God's Sake - if you see something wrong - TELL SOMEONE!"





Loretta

Loretta Forlaw's remarkable journey spans over three decades of service in the United States Army Nurse Corps. As a registered nurse, she provided essential clinical care to service members and their families. She also supported and conducted medical research. Loretta was an integral part of the team.

During her remarkable 30 + year military career, Loretta served as a nurse in Phu Bai Vietnam from 1968 to 1969 with the 85 EVAC and also served through the Iraq War and part of the war in Afghanistan as part of the U.S. Army Voluntary Recall Program. She retired as the Chief of Clinical Nursing for Tripler Army Medical Center and received the Legion of Merit award upon her retirement.

Loretta talks about her time in Vietnam in the Hometown Heros podcast that aired in 2022 as part of the National Vietnam War Veterans Day, https://www.hometownheroesradio.com/national-vietnam-war-veterans-day/

Loretta served as a nurse in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and also served through the Iraq War and part of the War in Afghanistan. She retired as the Chief of Clinical Nursing for Tripler Army Medical Center and received the Legion of Merit award upon her retirement.

Loretta's biggest take away from her time in the Army was that people are very brave, and can live their values while caring for many others in the world. Loretta feels "blessed and grateful" for all of the family and friends around her. She's affectionately known as "Aunt Lori" to all of their children. She is honored to have some of her closest friends for more than fifty years.

Loretta keeps busy volunteering for many organizations such as the University of Central Florida College of Medicine reviewing grants and continuing education offerings, as a Neighborhood Nurse, and as the Director of Community Service for her local VFW Post in Apopka/Altamonte Springs, Florida. She serves on many veteran committees.

Loretta is passionate about getting Veterans the care they deserve for themselves and their families, and works to help them overcome the many bureaucratic challenges they can face.

For the public, Loretta would like to remind them that women Veterans were, and still are, there for them. We serve our country and deserve respect. She asks to "please encourage your sisters, daughters, and female friends to consider serving their country in the military."

Loretta would like to tell her fellow women veterans "You don't have to be alone. Reach out to help, and to be helped, and you will find friends."







WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Correction does much,
but encouragement
does more."
~ Johann Wolfgang
von Geothe

VILLAGES FOR VETERANS

Supporting Veterans in Florida and beyond

WRITTEN BY EMILY DECICCO

When it comes to helping Veterans, one nonprofit based in the Villages, Florida, is making a meaningful impact for its local Veteran community and beyond. Enter Villagers for Veterans (V4V), a 501c3 nonprofit that began in 2014 after its Founder and President, Marie Bogdonoff, visited Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.



"I knew that I needed to do something as I realized that many of these kids would need assistance for life," said Bogdonoff. "Driving home from DC I knew that I now had a mission: to support America's Veterans in any way possible."

Support she did! Bogdonoff went full steam ahead, stepped-up, and created V4V. The 100% volunteer organization focuses its resources on four specialized areas to assist Veterans. Those areas include: mobility and independence, sponsorship of service dogs and equine therapy, Veterans in need and female Veterans.

On the mobility and independence front, V4V has sponsored 35 mobility vehicles and all-terrain chairs to date. The organization has also helped nearly 40 Veterans-in-crisis. V4V has done this by: housing them in hotels, paying for dental procedures, purchasing appliances, assistance in paying electric bills, car payments, and minor house repairs, to name a few.

V4V has also taken on the task of helping Veterans receive service dogs and has already sponsored 16 with the 17th planned for this December. The work V4V does in collaboration with other nonprofits was even featured in a Fox News article and video to highlight their dedication to help pair Veterans with service dogs.

In 2020 V4V proudly held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the completion of a brand new smart home that it sponsored. They built it for Sgt. Pam Kelly, who suffered a paralyzing accident in 2002 working sling load operations for the U.S. Army. That's when the 37-year-old instantly became a quadriplegic when one of the helicopter's cables snapped, and the load fell on her. She has been permanently paralyzed since then and has only very limited use of one arm.

When Bogdonoff first met Sgt. Kelly, she knew she had to do everything in her power to help give back to a soldier that had already given so much for her country.

"I knew that Pam could gain great independence in this community and that she would have unconditional love and support," said Bogdonoff.

Fundraising for the handicapped-accessible, smart home began in January 2018. Sgt. Kelly's state-of-the-art home includes Smart Bluetooth technology, giving Sgt. Kelly the ability to access everything, from lighting to appliances, through verbal commands via Siri and her iPad. Custom-built finishes have been adapted specifically for the wheelchair-bound Kelly and to accommodate the use of her left arm, with a sidewalk that will provide for a rear emergency exit and a wide driveway that will allow for Kelly to be loaded into a specially fitted van.

When it comes to Female Veterans, V4V has been tirelessly working on "Ashley's House," a transition home that is being built to manage and hone in on the needs of Florida's Female Veterans facing homelessness. V4V acquired land for "Ashley's House" in 2021 and it is slated to open in 2024. The name honors Lt. Ashley White Stumpf, who was killed in Afghanistan in 2011.

After purchasing the land for "Ashley's House", the group took the opportunity to renovate "Ashley's Cottage". The three bedroom house is enabling V4V to jumpstart the

VILLAGERS FOR VETERANS
HELPING VETERANS REGAIN THEIR INDEPENDENCE

To learn more about Villagers for Veterans visit www.villagersforveterans.org/





organization's female transition program as "Ashley's House" is being built. Bogdonoff explained that the renovated home is enabling V4V to learn the ropes and help the community's female Veterans in the most effective ways possible.

One article is not sufficient to list all of the events that Bogdonoff sponsors. V4V has been holding a multitude of fund-raisers each year, including: concerts, raffles, dances, and its annual "Orchid Gala" to honor Female Veterans – all undertakings critical for gaining donors and celebrating Veterans.

If you want to learn more, or help V4V, check out their website and give them a follow on YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook!

Photographs courtesy of Villagers for Veterans.





WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Tomorrow will likely come for a long time and you get to choose what that day will look like."

CJ

CJ Forward served as a Quartermaster in the United States Navy from 1995 to 1999 and in the Army National Guard from 2000 to 2002. After her Navy training and a brief shore duty, she was stationed on the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Nimitz as a Quartermaster. She completed a world tour in March 1998 with a change in homeport to Newport News, Virginia. Following the completion of her active duty enlistment with the Navy, she enlisted in the Army National Guard as a Counterintelligence Agent.

CJ recalls that her most significant takeaways during her time in the service were her dedication to her passions, loyalty to her patriotism, and the importance of teamwork and collaboration. After CJ completed her military service, she worked for over 15 years in various roles in corporate America. Today, she is a small business owner and realtor serving the greater Central and North Central Florida areas. She enjoys helping her customers achieve the American dream of owning a home.

CJ has been happily married for 10 years and has an 8-year-old son, Jett, as well as two dogs, Duke and Bo. In her spare time, she enjoys running, spending quality time with friends, cheering on her son in flag football and basketball, and vacationing in the mountains with her family.

In addition to running her real estate business, CJ has launched a HomeTown Heroes program where she and her vendors accept nominations from the public for their favorite hometown hero. She also volunteers in various capacities at the local elementary school. She says she is passionate about helping others, making a difference, her patriotism, her health and fitness, and her son's achievements.

CJ would like the public to know about women veterans that "as women, we carry a high level of personal pride, discipline, bravery, and a willingness to take on whatever is needed to complete a mission. And in many cases, those are real-life values and tasks."

For her fellow Veterans in transition, she offers this advice: "Take advantage of all the available resources. Use professionals to help with resumes and networking, but first, know who you are to the core, what makes you tick on the inside, and what you are good at ... including the small things."





Kyra

Kyra Rose served in the United States Army from 1979 to 1997. She had a diverse range of roles while serving in the military, including working in food services, serving as a prison guard and operating as a truck driver. She proudly supported Operation Desert Shield/Desert Strom.

While serving, she received recognition for her dedication and service, earning various medals and commendations. One of her proudest moments was contributing to Operation Desert Shield/ Desert Storm, where she played a vital role in supporting our troops overseas.

Her military service taught her the value of traveling and forming deep and lasting friendships. It broadened her horizons and helped her appreciate the world's diversity.

Kyra is happily married to a fellow Veteran, and they have one daughter, two stepsons, and five wonderful grandchildren. In her retirement, she continues to give back to the community by volunteering as a firefighter with the local fire department.

Kyra is passionate about assisting fellow Veterans with navigating the challenges they face with the VA. It's a way for her to give back and support those who have served. In her free time Kyra loves to read.

Kyra would like to public to realize that women veterans are a vital part of our nation's history and present. We proudly served our country, and it's important for the public to recognize and appreciate our contributions. We wear our hats with pride, and no, its not our husbands!

For her fellow Veterans Kyra has this advice: "Don't give up or give in. You can achieve anything you set your mind to. Your service has equipped you with the strength and resilience to overcome any obstacle. Keep pushing forward, and you'll continue to make a difference in your own life and the lives of others."







WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"I feel blessed with serving my country and my community."

WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Giving hope to military women, gives hope to military families."



Lynn

Lynn Geiser served for 11 years in the Army National Guard and on Active Duty as a Transportation Driver (88M) Her duties involved ensuring the safe and timely transport of personnel and equipment, which was crucial to supporting various military operations and training exercises. She is most proud of is her service from 2000 to 2004 at Fort Benning, where she was assigned to the 1/29th Infantry Unit. During this time, her unit played a vital role in supporting schools such as the Ranger battalion, and professional development schools for enlisted and officers.

Lynn is retired from the military and now devotes most of her time to running a nonprofit organization called Hope4Veterans. As the founder of Hope4Veterans, her main responsibilities include overseeing the organization's operations and programs, which are dedicated to providing support and assistance to veterans, particularly military women, as they transition into civilian life.

Lynn has a wonderful family that includes three kids, three dogs, and a supportive spouse.

She wants the public to know that women veterans are not alone. Each woman's journey and passion is unique, and it's important to recognize and respect the diversity of experiences and contributions that women have made and continue to make in the military.

Her advice to fellow women transitioning to civilian life is to remember that when women work together, we empower each other. If you ever feel isolated or down during your transition, reach out to a military sister. They understand your experiences and can provide the support and camaraderie you need to navigate this new chapter in your life.





Women Veterans have played an integral role in the armed forces throughout history, yet their contributions and sacrifices often go unrecognized. These brave individuals have shown unwavering dedication and resilience, serving their country with honor and distinction.

From the Revolutionary War to the modern conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, women have donned uniforms, taking on a wide range of roles. They've served as combat medics, fighter pilots, intelligence officers, engineers, and in countless other positions, showcasing their versatility and commitment to the military's mission.

Mary

Mary Greene served in the Army Reserves from 1979 to 1985. Her role as a Medical Laboratory Specialist involved drawing and testing blood work, a task familiar to civilian labs. However, what set her military service apart was the manual testing skills she acquired, essential for field hospitals with limited computer equipment. During her service, Mary achieved the NCO I and NCO 2 ribbons, recognizing her dedication and leadership.

Mary served during the Cold War, a time without active conflict. Her military experience taught her that she can overcome any challenge she sets her mind to and highlighted the importance of unity among her fellow servicewomen.

Hailing from a military family, Mary's connection to the armed forces runs deep. Her father and mother both served in the Navy during WWII. Her mother had a significant role as a Code Breaker. Mary was married to a United States Marine who served during the Vietnam War. Sadly, her husband passed away just after their 41st anniversary, leaving behind a daughter, Georgianna, and three cherished grandchildren.

Due to complications from Rheumatoid Arthritis, Mary transitioned from her medical career. She worked as a Certified Dialysis Technician for 15 years and had previously been a Medical Secretary/Receptionist.

In her post-military life, Mary has been active in her community. She was a member of her city's Library Board, Charter Review Board, and County Planning and Advisory Board. An advocate for healthcare, she represented the Arthritis Foundation and patients in Washington, D.C., and Tallahassee. Mary also volunteered with Rolling Readers Space Coast and earned recognition for her work with the National Kidney Foundation.

Mary's passions include reading, advocating for healthcare, and artistic pursuits such as drawing, painting, and jewelry making. Her favorite quote by Maya Angelou, "I have found that among other benefits, GIVING liberates the soul of the giver," reflects her commitment to giving back.

She wants the public to recognize that women Veterans exist and can be a tremendous asset. Her advice to fellow women transitioning to civilian life is to persist and seek help when needed, emphasizing the strong support network among sisters in arms.

Mary Greene's story embodies resilience, service, and community involvement. Her diverse experiences and dedication to various causes have left a positive impact on her community and the lives she has touched.







WORDS TO LIVE BY:

" I have found that among other benefits, GIVING liberates the soul of the giver. Maya Angelou

WORDS TO LIVE BY:
" I'm thankful for my struggle, because without it I wouldn't have stumbled across my strength."
~ Alex Elle



Melanie

Melanie Caputo served in the United States Navy for five years as a Hospital Corpman. She describes the job as similar to a Medic, EMT, and LPN all combined into one. She provided medical care for Navy personnel in the field to clean, treat, and dress wounds, perform minor surgeries, draw blood, and administer injections. When assigned to a base hospital the care was also extended to active-duty dependents, Veterans, and retired personnel.

Melanie says that her biggest takeaway from her military service was the "lifelong friends that I made while serving, and the ability to make new friends with other Veterans."

She still serves her fellow veterans and her community with her involvement in her local American Legion Post where she is a Post Officer and a District Officer. She says she is passionate about the American Legion and the programs and causes that they support. Melanie lives with her three "super sweet" cocker spaniels and loves spending time with her friends and her "awesome" Legion family. When she's not volunteering she enjoys riding her motorcycle, reading, and says she loves to karaoke.

For the public Melanie believes that they should know that women veterans are not so much women Veterans, as we are simply Veterans that happen to be women. "We are no more special, or more average, than any other Veteran. We deserve the same acknowledgement, recognition, and appreciation as all veterans."

To her fellow women veterans Melanie suggests that first they take a moment and "breathe." "Appreciate the different ways people do things" and "be proud of your service."

Lastly, she suggests joining a Veteran's organization – "it helps."





In the aftermath of their service, women Veterans often confront different issues than their male counterparts. They may struggle with access to healthcare, mental health support, and reintegration into civilian life. Recognizing these challenges, society and the government have made efforts to improve services and support systems for women veterans, ensuring they receive the care and opportunities they deserve.

Women veterans represent the epitome of courage, commitment and resilience. They've demonstrated that gender is no barrier to serving one's country with honor.

Patricia

Patricia Pule served for 20 years in the United States Air Force in the Human Resources organization. She began her career as a Finance Specialist but then cross-trained into Personnel where she was responsible for the management of military personnel records. As the Air Force transitioned to computerized records, she transitioned as well, and ultimately became a Personnel Systems Data Manager.

Patricia has been married for over 35 years to a fellow Air Force Veteran that she met while serving. After her retirement from the Air Force, Patricia worked as a data quality manager supporting electronic and communication equipment repairs for the Army during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Since her retirement Patricia has always been actively involved in the American Legion. She has served as the Post Commander for a Post in Pennsylvania and has served as a Post Chaplain and District Chaplain in Florida. She continues to be involved in Legion programs that recognize and provide support for Veterans.

Patricia is also very involved in her local county animal shelter where she often acts as foster parent for kittens and cats. She also volunteers with her church to provide food, supplies, and financial support for the less fortunate, both locally and around the world. When she's not volunteering Patricia enjoys collecting seashells and reading.

Patricia would like the public to know that a woman Veteran is no different than a man Veteran. We join because we love our country, we believe in the ideals our country stands for, and we believe those ideals are worth protecting.

For her fellow women Veterans she has this advice, "be proud of who you are, be proud of what you have accomplished and stand tall always."

As we honor all Veterans, let's ensure that the unique experiences and contributions of women Veterans are acknowledged and celebrated, not just on Veterans Day but every day.







WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"This too shall pass."

Yolanda

Yolanda Frazier served in the United States Army from August, 1987 to October, 1993 and from March, 2000 to December, 2016 as a Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Acquisition Officer. As such, she was part of the Army branch that specifically defends against the threat of biological and chemical weapons, "dirty bombs", and weapons of mass destruction. She supported the War in Afghanistan as well as Operation Enduring Freedom.

Yolandas most significant take away from her military service was her opportunity to serve her nation for 30 years alongside great officers, non commission officers and DOD civilians who were dedicated and committed to their mission. She thrived supporting the chaplain and sharing the word of God through a women's ministry to Uganda and Pakistan Christians.

Yolanda and her husband Carl have been happily married for over 19 years. As ministers, they are dedicated to teaching and serving families in need within the Central Florida community. They have six beautiful adult children and six grandchildren.

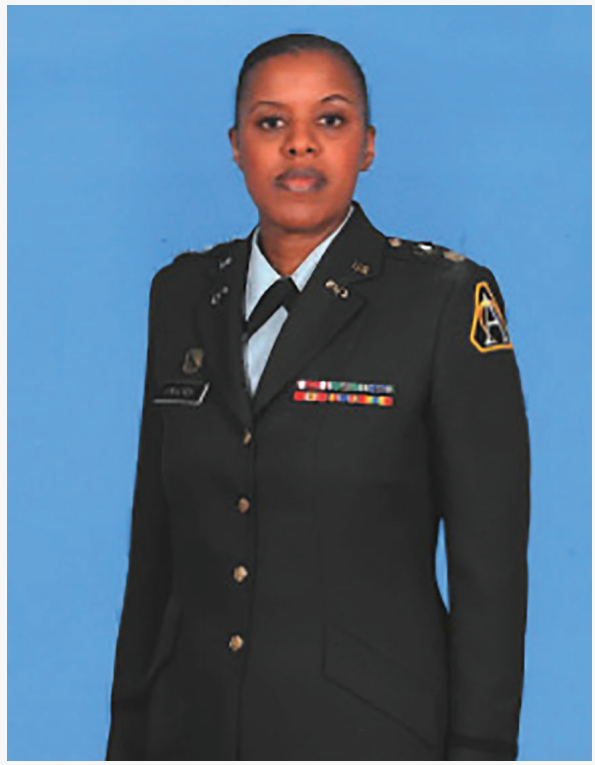
After retiring from her civilian job, Yolanda dedicated herself as the CEO and founder of Enough International Inc. She is a businesswoman, author, counselor and motivational speaker. She is the president of Enough Love 2 Give LLC. She also serves on the J4 Board of Directors for Christian Professional Women in the Central Florida area and runs her own podcast - "Real Talk with Yolanda Frazier."

Yolanda's passions involve teaching, coaching, mentoring, and assisting people. She is honored to be able to advocate and speak for individuals who may have lost hope, feel unseen or unheard. Her enjoyment is twofold as she can fulfill her passions alongside her husband, Carl.

While people often refer to men that served, Yolanda would remind the public that as women Veterans we also provide faithful dedication, sacrifice and commitment to the mission. As women, our love and faithfulness to continue serving after leaving military service is second nature, it is just who we are.

Yolanda implores her sister veterans to connect with another woman veteran. She wishes for you to know that you don't have to transition alone. While programs are great, she believes that personal one-on-one mentoring and support from fellow women Veterans will bring the true sympathy and empathy that is needed.







WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence, and making sure that impact lasts in your absence."
~ Sheryl Sandberg

WORDS TO LIVE BY:
“ Never say never.”



Carla

In the mid-1970s, **Carla Yeoman**, a young woman from a military family came across a newspaper article warning that the Montgomery GI Bill might soon be discontinued. The news prompted her to make a life-changing decision: she enlisted.

"I saw that article in 1976," she recalled. "My father had served in the military, and I knew this was my opportunity. I didn't want to miss it."

That decision led her to join the Women's Army Corps, serving from 1976 to 1979. Over her career, she also spent time in the Air National Guard and later in the United States Air Force Reserve.

Her military occupation, 92B Basic Medical Laboratory Technician, placed her at the heart of medical care. She worked in the hospital laboratory at Fort Hood, Texas, focusing on hematology and the blood bank. "I loved the work," she said. "It was challenging, but it felt good to know we were helping soldiers every day."

She served during peacetime but said the experience still shaped her profoundly. "The biggest takeaway from my service was meeting people from all over the United States," she said. "It broadened my perspective and taught me to value teamwork and shared purpose."

After leaving the military, she transitioned to civilian life with determination. She began a new chapter as a city letter carrier for the United States Postal Service, a career she dedicated herself to for 31 years before retiring.

Outside of work, her greatest joy comes from her family, her son and two grandsons. "I spend as much time as I can with them," she said. "Family time is everything to me."

Today, she continues to advocate for other women Veterans. She urges the public to recognize and appreciate their service. "If you know a woman Veteran, take a moment to thank her for her service," she said. "Women have served and sacrificed in ways that often go unseen."

For women transitioning from military to civilian life, she offers practical guidance.

"Use the Veteran services available to you," she advised. "Those programs exist to help you adjust and thrive after service. Don't be afraid to reach out."





Kimberly

Growing up in a proud military family, **Kimberly Brutsche** was inspired by stories of service long before she wore a uniform. Her grandfather and great-uncles served in World War II, and her father, an artillery Marine, passed on a strong sense of patriotism. "My little sister and I would listen to the Workout to the Running Cadences United States Women Marines CD, imagining ourselves in uniform," she recalled. "We even inspired our little brother to want to do the same."

The defining moment came on Sept. 11, 2001, when she was 13. "That day solidified what I had already felt: I wanted to continue my family's legacy of service and dedicate my life to protecting our country," she said.

Kimberly joined the United States Army in 2009 and transitioned to the United States Space Force in 2022. She began as a Field Artillery Officer, leading teams providing long-range fire support, and later served as an Air Defense Artillery Officer, managing systems that intercept enemy aircraft and missiles. Today, she oversees satellites and space systems that support communications, navigation, and missile warning.

Her career is marked by historic milestones. Commissioned before the Combat Exclusion Policy for women was lifted, she became one of the first female leaders in the experimental Cultural Support Team program. She conducted more than 60 combat patrols in Afghanistan alongside Special Forces, earning a Bronze Star for enabling access to vulnerable populations in contested areas. She commanded two artillery batteries, leading Soldiers in the United States, Europe, and the UAE.

Beyond command, she taught at West Point as an Assistant Professor and Course Director, leading the capstone course on officership, and served as an Art of War Scholar at the Army Command and General Staff College. She now directs planning for high-profile Space Force wargames and is a Senior Fellow for INDOPACOM Studies.

Her family's legacy continues to inspire her. Her husband, a former Army captain, served as a Chemical Officer. They are raising a young son, Lukas. Outside of work, Kimberly enjoys hiking, camping, trail running, yoga, surfing, video gaming, crocheting, and photography. She also supports women in the military through ALLTRU, which empowers leaders of character and advances the role of women in conflict resolution.

Her message to the public: "The Combat Exclusion Policy was officially lifted in 2011, but women have been serving in combat long before that," she said. "Courage is defined by action, and while not always seen as the typical prototype, women are warriors."







WORDS TO LIVE BY:

"Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy."

~ Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf



WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"We are as good
s any man."
~ Norma "Kitten"
Van Vechten

Kitten

Norma "Kitten" Van Vechten served in both the United States Army and the United States Air Force National Guard, dedicating 30 years to the uniform. Her military path began in 1962 when, after struggling to find work in Pittsburgh, she decided that if the civilian world had no job for her, the military surely would. Inspired by her father's service, she joined the Women's Army Corps and never looked back.

Early duty brought Kitten to Fort Hood, Texas, where she worked in military pay computing vouchers for soldiers. Those years in the Women's Army Corps taught self-discipline, independence and confidence. When the opportunity arose to continue serving in the Air Force National Guard, she made the transition and found a true calling in airfield management.

Kitten's Air Force years stretched from 1972 to 2002, a period marked by change, technology and a growing role for women across the ranks. At the airfield, she filed flight plans for pilots, kept current publications aboard aircraft, tracked weather for both aircrews and base personnel, and manned the secondary crash phone during emergencies. When crew members returned from deployments, they remembered her as the calm, capable voice who helped them reach home after long missions.

During Operation Desert Storm, Kitten served in home-station support. Though not deployed overseas, her work ensured that aircrews stayed connected with families and that communication remained seamless across operations. Gratitude from returning airmen reminded her that service on the home front was vital to those on the line.

Decades in uniform taught lessons that still shape her worldview. The first is gratitude — for her pension, for Tricare and for the chance to have served at all. The second is conviction: She believes national service should be reinstated for every young person after high school, confident that it would create stronger citizens and a greater sense of shared responsibility.

Family pride runs deep. Her daughter followed in her footsteps as a combat veteran. Kitten is outspoken about the need for improved access and compassion in veteran health care, especially for those who sacrificed their health in service.

Life today in her 80s is quieter but no less purposeful. Retirement revolves around caring for a senior St. Bernard and enjoying the peace she earned through decades of service. Volunteering may have given way to rest, but her belief in contributing to the country remains unshaken.





McKenna

McKenna McArdle served in the United States Air Force from November 2010 to August 2014 as part of the Security Forces' nuclear missile specialty, a role often described as military police. She provided convoy security for the nation's nuclear weapons and later worked as a squadron commander's secretary. In 2011, she was coined by the Commander of the Global Strike Command for being one of the few females in her role and her exceptional proficiency in her job. McKenna is especially proud that she consistently earned expert-level marksmanship, beginning in basic training and continuing through every weapons requalification.

Growing up surrounded by stories of duty and sacrifice, she was inspired to join the Air Force by her grandfather, a Korean War Veteran who served in the Air Force, as well as by her father, a chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear specialist in the Army. Her mother, also an Army Veteran, worked in patient administration but often took on many other responsibilities. Two uncles served in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, and an aunt was a member of the Women's Army Corps.

"I chose the Air Force to follow in my grandfather's footsteps," she said. "He passed away before I enlisted, and as the youngest grandchild, I wanted to continue our family's military tradition." Her service supported the Global War on Terrorism, and she received a medal for her direct role in post-9/11 counterterrorism operations.

"Every day you wake up with a purpose and a drive to complete a task not only for yourself but for your team," she reflected. "In the military, I felt like I never met a stranger. We all had one thing in common, we loved our country."

Now a proud homeowner, she shares her life with her Army Veteran boyfriend, tends to 14 chickens, and grows vegetables in her garden. She volunteers with organizations such as Villagers for Veterans, Michael's Foundation, Christ's Closet and local nonprofits that support underprivileged youth.

McKenna wants the public to better recognize the service of women Veterans. "We are out here! Yes, some of us are young women and some are older women, many of us have disabilities you cannot see. So when we walk into the VA or use the "Veterans Only" parking spot at Lowe's, thank us just as we would thank you."

To other women Veterans adjusting to civilian life, McKenna offers simple advice: "Find a women's Veteran organization. Go to the events and make friends — you'll discover lifelong connections."







WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"I'd rather laugh with
the sinners, than cry
with the saints."
~ Billy Joel

WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Charm is deceitful,
and beauty is vain, but a
woman who fears the Lord
is to be praised."
~ Proverbs 31:30



Natalie

Natalie Vines served in the United States Army from 1992 to 2013, building a career that spanned from combat medic to commissioned communications officer. From the start, she was motivated by a deep desire to serve her country and contribute to something greater than herself.

The journey began in the Army Reserves, where Natalie trained and served as a Combat Medic before transitioning to active duty. Her first assignment was performing as an Airborne Clarinet Player with the 82nd Airborne Division Band at Fort Bragg.

When the opportunity arose to attend Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Natalie seized it. Completing that rigorous training led to a commission in the Army Signal Corps. As a communications officer using her expertise in tactical communications and leadership under pressure, Natalie went to Korea, Fort Bragg, Washington D.C., Fort Hood, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord. She deployed three times, first to Haiti in 1995 and later to Iraq from 2004-2005 and 2008-2009.

Natalie earned the Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal, and the Combat Action Badge, among numerous other honors. She also achieved the coveted Master Parachute Badge, a testament to her skill and persistence in airborne operations, a rare distinction for a female soldier in her era.

Over two decades, Natalie witnessed the military's evolving recognition of women's contributions. Her experiences with discrimination became fuel for determination. Competing with male peers was never about proving equality. It was about exceeding expectations and setting new standards for what women could accomplish in combat and command.

Life after active duty remains rooted in service. Following a medical retirement in 2013, Natalie and her husband Brian, whom she met at Fort Bragg, settled in The Colony, Texas. Married since 1999, they share a deep Christian faith, a love of fitness, and a passion for volunteering to help disabled Veterans. Brian now serves as her full-time caregiver, while their Boston Terrier Libby keeps them company.

Natalie continues to serve Veterans through the Adaptive Training Foundation, mentoring and training adaptive athletes. Following a recent leg amputation, she is working closely with the VA and ATF to master her new prosthetic and return to the sports she loves: snowboarding, scuba diving, adventure racing, running, hiking, and wake surfing.





Suni

Suni Berger served in the United States Air Force for over 21 years. She began her career in 1999 as a C-130 engine mechanic, working on the T56-A-7B/15 turboprop engines. She was responsible for diagnosing, modifying, and restoring the systems that kept aircraft flying safely — a task she describes as "complex, exacting, and rewarding."

In 2006, she transitioned into logistics and war planning, where she orchestrated operations on a global scale. She coordinated airlift evacuations and the delivery of critical equipment, from drones to ribbon bridges. "One of the most impactful missions I worked on was coordinating the emergency evacuation of 200 personnel from Yemen during a base overrun," she said. For that and other efforts, she earned the Defense Meritorious Service Medal and Joint Service Commendation Medal. She also supported other operations including Operation Northern Watch, Operation Enduring Freedom, and various Special Operations deployments. "You're stronger than you think," she said when reflecting on her years in uniform. "Failing doesn't mean you can't succeed — always have a solution for the problem."

Now a program manager at Acron Aviation, a former division of L3Harris, Suni oversees authorized and licensed repair centers around the world.

In her spare time Suni is dedicated to supporting the veteran community. Through the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association® (CVMA), she organizes the annual "Christmas for Kids" drive, which supports children through donations and partnerships with local veterans affairs offices. "I'll never get over the excitement when the kids see the bikes and trailer roll up," she said. "Their eyes light up when the guys come out carrying armloads of presents."

Raised by a supportive network of parents, friends, and neighbors, Suni also raised a daughter of her own, born in 2003. "I could not have accomplished all I did without them," she said. Now, she splits her time between Florida and Virginia, where she cares for her partner's 13-year-old daughter while he is deployed.

Her advice to other women veterans transitioning to civilian life is candid and heartfelt: "It's scary out here, Sis. You're brushed aside, ignored… but you know what you did. Brush it off, stand up, look around — your sisters are right in front of you, waiting with open arms."

To women Veterans, she offers this message: "We exist — and not just behind a desk. We also feel the call to serve our country, to protect our families and freedoms. We have been here, and we will be there for the wars to come."







WORDS TO LIVE BY:

"Think like a queen.
A queen is not afraid to fail.
Failure is another stepping
stone to greatness."
~ Oprah



WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"If you stumble, make it part
of the dance."
~ Maria Urke."

Terry

Terry McArdle served in the United States Army, Army Reserve, and Army National Guard from July 1983 to July 1989 as a Patient Administration Specialist.

As a Patient Administration Specialist, Terry supported healthcare teams by managing patient records, handling admissions and discharges, verifying insurance, and assisting clinical staff with essential administrative duties.

Terry's assignments included infantry medical support in the field, setting up clinics, and working in the motor pool at Fort Benning, Georgia. In Korea, she served as a drug, alcohol, and mental health counselor, providing critical care and support for soldiers in need. Later, she continued her career as a Patient Administration Specialist at Fort Benning. Though her service did not coincide with wartime, Terry took great pride in her varied responsibilities and her role in strengthening the Army's medical readiness.

One of the most significant moments of Terry's service occurred on a personal level, meeting her husband, also a Veteran, while they were stationed in Korea. Their shared military background laid the foundation for a marriage that has endured for nearly four decades. Today, Terry and her husband are celebrating 39 years of marriage. Their family continues the tradition of service: their son currently serves in the United States Navy, and their daughter is a United States Air Force Veteran. They are also proud grandparents to two grandchildren.

Outside of her military career, Terry has built a successful professional life. She works as an accounting specialist for a powerline company, managing financial operations and ensuring accuracy in a high-responsibility role. Her dedication to service also extends into her community. She volunteers with Homes for Troops and is an active member of Kiwanis, giving back to both Veterans and her local community.

Terry lives a vibrant and active life. She is passionate about fitness, often participating in CrossFit and boot camp workouts. She also enjoys dancing, shopping, and paddleboarding, activities that reflect her energy, joy, and love of adventure.

Terry wants the public to know that women Veterans are proud of their service and proud of their sisters in arms. To women navigating the transition into civilian life, she offers this advice: lean on family for support. "The camaraderie you had in the military is hard to find as a civilian," she notes, "and sometimes it takes years."





Valecia

A proud daughter and devoted soldier, **Valecia Parker** followed in her father's footsteps when she joined the United States Army, driven by love for her country and family. Serving as a 91B Medic, she dedicated her career to caring for others, providing shots to soldiers, tending to newborns, and working in the Army's nursery clinics. "I'm a big Daddy's girl," she said. "I followed my father. I totally enjoyed serving my country."

After her military service Valecia continued serving her country as a civilian employee at the Pentagon. That journey took a harrowing turn on September 11, 2001, when she became a survivor of the Pentagon attack. Wounded during the terrorist strike, she was awarded the Defense of Freedom Medal, the civilian equivalent of the Purple Heart, created to honor those injured or killed in the attacks. Despite the trauma of that day, her resilience and faith carried her forward.

"I felt strong and ready to defend our country," she said. "I knew what my job was and wanted to be remembered as a person who loved my country and my job."

Even in retirement, her determination and strength continue to inspire. At the 2024 National Veterans Golden Age Games, she completed a 20k cycling race, earning a bronze medal, a testament to her perseverance and spirit.

Valecia finds joy in spending time with her loved ones. She is a mother to one daughter, grandmother to four, and great-grandmother to two. "I'm just enjoying my grandsons and granddaughters," she said. "Enjoying the life that God has given me."

Her passions include traveling, embracing life's blessings, and offering wisdom to other women Veterans: "Be yourself and live peacefully."

She hopes the public recognizes that women Veterans are as strong and capable as their male counterparts. "We were ready to do what we needed to do," she said. "We are strong when needed yet soft as well. Our service was and is needed."







WORDS TO LIVE BY:
"Your life and body is yours to plan and take good care of. Give thanks and prayer daily because the next minute or tomorrow is not promised."

WOMEN VETERANS BUSINESS DIRECTORY

Supporting women veteran-owned businesses is a crucial step towards fostering equality and empowerment. Women who have served in the military bring unique skills and experiences to the entrepreneurial world, and by supporting their ventures, we not only acknowledge their sacrifices but also harness their potential as valuable contributors to our economy.

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*We hope the Veterans we featured in the debut issue of this magazine **inspired you** with examples of their leadership, resourcefulness, knowledge and sacrifice.*

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