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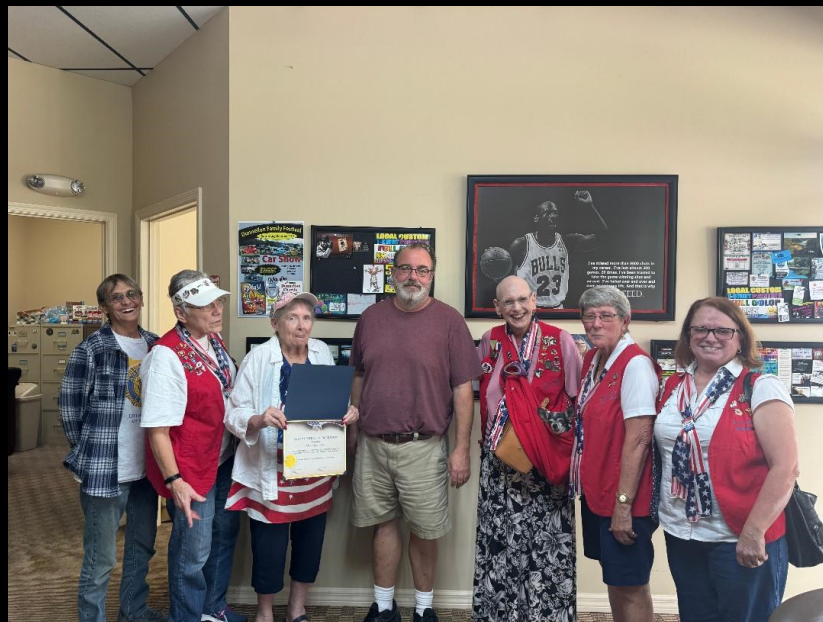
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Female Veterans Network presented to Ink Spot Publications a certificate of appreciation for their support of FVN.

Pictured left to right are LouAnn Braglin, Jo Monty, Founder/ President of FVN Cynthia Henderson, Joanne Hirst, Jane Mundis and Nancy Sigmon



***Mathew Baillargeo, President
Charlene Williams, Operations Manager***

Volume 26 Issue 2

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori

March - April 2024



THE GRAPEVINE

Since 1998



VETERAN BENEFITS

**What Must Be
Done By The
Spouse Upon
Death Of
A Veteran?**



VA SURVIVOR BENEFITS



**What Are The Benefits Available
For A Surviving Spouse
Of A Veteran?**



Editor – CMSgt John Stewart, USAF (retired)

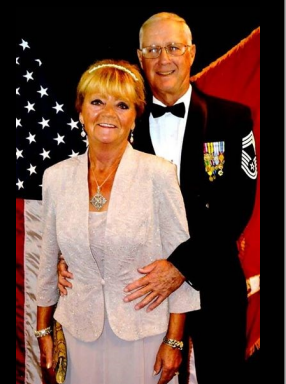
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That Time a Navy Destroyer Landed Atop a German Sub in WWII



Based on official reports and eyewitness accounts, this artwork by USS Borie Warrant Boatswain Hunter Wood shows the battle between the destroyer and the German submarine U-405 on Nov. 1, 1943. (Wikimedia Commons)

Military.com | By Stephen Ruiz

As the USS Borie prepared to ram a German U-boat in the early morning hours of Nov. 1, 1943, the sailors on the Navy destroyer braced for impact. Turbulent waters in the north Atlantic Ocean negated the possibility of a head-on strike, though, producing a sudden wave that lifted the Borie off its intended course.

Instead, the Borie landed on the sub's foredeck, locking the ships together for an incredibly fraught 10 minutes of what would become an hourlong engagement widely considered by military historians as "the most spectacular surface battle since the days of John Paul Jones."

It was unlike anything that Robert Maher, a fire controlman first class who was the gun director pointer on the Borie, had ever seen. "It looked more like a Hollywood epic than an actual battle," Maher wrote in a 1993 Naval History Magazine article.

Commissioned in 1920, the Borie was named after Adolph E. Borie, who served a short stint as secretary of the Navy under President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869. The Clemson-class destroyer had served around the world by the time it was assigned to Task Force 21.14, a hunter-killer group in search of U-boats, during World War II. The USS Card, an escort carrier, and the destroyers USS Goff and USS Barry rounded out the task force.

The German submarine U-405 was on a refueling run north of the Azores on the night of Oct. 31, 1943, when the Borie first made contact. After the warship fired a depth charge at the sub, a malfunction involving the stern tracks propelled the Borie's stern out of the water and forced U-405 to the surface.

With its searchlight on, the Borie approached U-405, which was unable to submerge as it was bombarded by persistent gunfire. German sailors moved furiously to man their deck guns, but almost all were killed before reaching their weapons. The sub's crew fired flare guns, and a sailor on the conning tower waved his arms in a plea for the Borie to stop shooting. Navy Lt. Charles Hutchins, the Borie's captain, ordered his men to cease firing, but a sailor had taken off his headphones and did-

n't hear his captain's demand. He kept shooting, decapitating the pleading sailor.

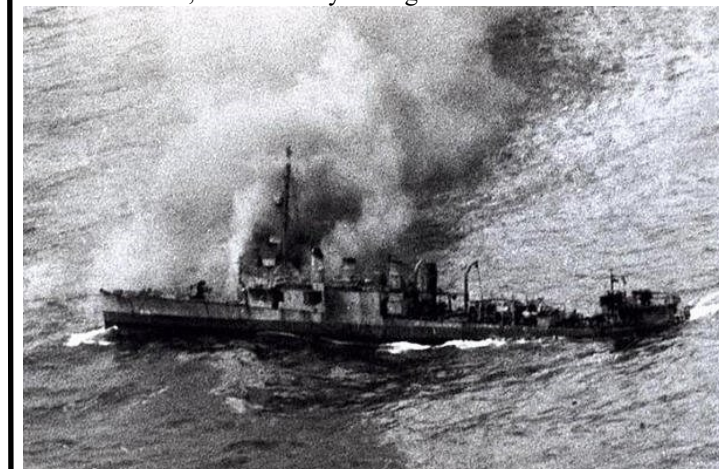
"It was a sight that was to give me nightmares for months," Maher recalled.

The Borie continued its unrelenting barrage of gunfire, and as the destroyer came within striking distance of the sub, Hutchins bellowed: "Stand by for a ram!" U-405 Capt. Rolf-Heinrich Hopman tried to avoid contact, but the sub turned too late. The stormy seas caused the Borie to land on top of U-405's deck at a 30-degree angle.

With the ships interlocked, some of the Borie's crew manned 20mm Oerlikon antiaircraft cannons and four-inch guns, and others picked up Thompson submachine guns, shotguns and pistols. In one historical account, a fireman first class killed a German sailor by hurling a sheath knife at him, while in another, a chief boatswain's mate knocked a submariner into the water with a shell casing.

In the chaotic aftermath after the ships separated, the Borie fired a torpedo at U-405 but missed. U-405 started turning in a tight circle -- something the much larger Borie could not duplicate -- the maneuver resulting in the sub's stern tube pointing at the destroyer. This time, U-405 tried to ram the Borie, but three depth charges stopped its advance and narrowly averted another collision.

U-405 finally surrendered after being struck by another barrage from the Borie's four-inch, prompting "a yell that went up from all hands -- it probably could be heard in Berlin," Hutchins wrote. All 49 German sailors were killed, either during the fighting or when the Borie zigzagged to avoid a torpedo from another U-boat, inadvertently hitting rafts of survivors.



The naval destroyer USS Borie sinks in the North Atlantic on Nov. 2, 1943, after being heavily damaged in a battle with a German submarine, U-405, the previous day. (U.S. Navy photo)

By that point, the Borie was struggling to stay afloat, its collision with U-405 damaging the destroyer's entire port side and almost completely flooding the engine room with bitterly cold, neck-high water. While the crew scrambled valiantly to keep the power on during the Borie's engagement with U-405, eventually the electrical system died, sailors began dumping equipment, weapons and ammunition overboard, and saltwater contaminated its fuel and the boilers' water supply.

By 9 a.m. on Nov. 1, the Borie's last turbine stopped functioning. Despite the tremendous hardship, some ingenious radiomen

got an auxiliary generator working long enough for the destroyer to message the USS Card: "Commenced sinking." The Card promptly launched two aircraft, and after one plane found the stricken ship 14 miles away, the USS Goff (and later the USS Barry) was deployed to the area.

The Borie was beyond saving, though, and Hutchins gave the order to abandon ship at 4:30 p.m. on Nov. 1, 1943. Twenty-seven men died during the rescue effort because of the frigid water and weather, along with the imposing waves that caused the rafts to roll constantly. None of the Borie's sailors died during the battle.



Adm. Royal E. Ingersoll, commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet, pins the Navy Cross on USS Borie Lt. Charles Hutchins on the flight deck of the USS Card. The Borie sank German submarine U-405 on Nov. 1, 1943, then had to be scuttled because of the damage it sustained. (Wikimedia Commons)

A combination of bombs from the USS Card's planes and depth charges sank the Borie on the morning of Nov. 2. "She still went down as a valiant lady," Maher wrote.

The Borie's crew was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation, and Navy Crosses were bestowed to Hutchins, Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Irving Saum and posthumously to Lt. Morrison Brown, the Borie's engineering officer. The destroyer received three battle stars for her WWII service.

Maher wrote about his experience in the book "Sailors' Journey into War," and a second USS Borie was commissioned in September 1944 -- less than a year after the fateful clash between its namesake and a German U-boat.


(Source: <https://www.military.com/history/time-navy-destroyer-landed-atop-german-sub-wwii.html>)



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Let's Talk Gems

Q: What's the difference between a cat and a complex sentence?
A: A cat has claws at the end of its paws and a complex sentence has a pause at the end of its clause.

Q: Why did the duck go to jail?
A: Because he got caught selling quack.



What is *In Memory*?

Since the Vietnam War ended, thousands of Vietnam veterans have suffered due to Agent Orange exposure, PTSD and other illnesses as a result of their service. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) believes all those who served in Vietnam should be honored and remembered for their service. The *In Memory* program enables the families and friends of those who came home and later died the opportunity to have them be forever memorialized.

The plaque on the grounds of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial site in Washington, D.C. that honors these veterans was dedicated in 2004 and reads: *In Memory of the men and women who served in the Vietnam War and later died as a result of their service. We honor and remember their sacrifice.*

In Memory was created in 1993 by the group – Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. VVMF began managing the program and hosting the ceremony in 1999. More than 6,000 veterans have been added to the *In Memory* Honor Roll since the program began. To see all the honorees, please visit the [In Memory Honor Roll](#).

What is Included?

Having a veteran honored includes:

- An invitation to *In Memory* Weekend in Washington, D.C., which **includes a touching ceremony** on the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial where each honoree's name is read aloud. If you are present, you may read the name. Each applicant also receives a printed personal **tribute certificate** with their veteran's photo(s).

- As part of the [In Memory Honor Roll](#), an online personal remembrance page is created for each honoree with their photo and biographical information. Family members can share the page and leave remembrances about their loved one.

- VVMF's mobile exhibit, [The Wall That Heals](#), includes the digital photos of all *In Memory* honorees from the state where the exhibit is on display.

An invitation to join our **Facebook group: In Memory – Families of Vietnam Veterans lost to Agent Orange and PTSD**. The group gives family and friends an online community to connect and share their stories.

o have a veteran considered for the 2024 *In Memory* national ceremony, you must submit your application to VVMF **by March 29, 2024**.

For *The Wall That Heals* local exhibit deadlines, refer to your community's host website.

What's required?

Completed [application form](#)

Copy of military documents that establish service in the Vietnam war zone (e.g. DD-214, service records, Vietnam Service Medal, or other documents/awards)

Copy of death certificate or other formal notification of death

Two clear photographs of the honoree (we recommend one photo from the Vietnam era and one photo that is more recent)

Example proof of service in Vietnam can be established showing receipt of Vietnam Service Medal (VSM), Vietnam Campaign Medal (VCM) and/or Vietnam Service Ribbon on a DD-214 or other military document.

If you do not have a copy of military documents, military service records can be obtained from the National Archives Veterans Service Records. Visit www.archives.gov and click on "Veterans' Service Records."

If you have a question about the program or are experiencing difficulty with the application, contact VVMF at (202) 393-0090 or via e-mail at inmemory@vvmf.org.

Source: (<https://www.vvmf.org/In-Memory-Program>)

(Watch the *In Memory* video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWDNbrn165Y&t=1s>)



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Veterans claims for benefits surge since PACT Act became law

By LINDA F. HERSEY, STARS AND STRIPES



Marine Lance Cpl. Nathaniel Fink (left) and Lance Cpl. Garrett Camacho dispose of trash in a burn pit in 2012 in Afghanistan. (Alfred Lopez/U.S. Marine Corps)

WASHINGTON — An influx of claims for illnesses related to toxic exposures is contributing to a surge in requests by veterans for disability benefits and medical compensation, said Willie Clark, deputy undersecretary for field operations at the Veterans Benefits Administration.

Claims made under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act, now account for nearly 40% of all claims filed by veterans for service-related disabilities since the legislation was enacted in August 2022.

“The PACT Act has spurred an unprecedented rise in the number of claims processed,” Clark said at a news conference Wednesday, adding approval rates of claims for benefits and services top 75%.

The law extends benefits and health services to qualifying veterans from the Vietnam War, Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts, and coverage spans 23 medical conditions presumed to be caused from exposure to toxic and hazardous substances.

Bradford Blodgett, a Vietnam veteran, learned about PACT Act benefits at his local Veterans of Foreign Wars post in

Connecticut, where a veterans service officer helped him fill out forms related to Agent Orange exposure.

Blodgett, 82, has multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that attacks bone marrow and is associated with Agent Orange exposure. The cancer has perforated his ribs and hollowed several vertebrae, requiring surgery, radiation and chemotherapy.



Bradford Blodgett holds his daughter, Gwen, in 1969. The photo was taken at Seward Air Force Base, Alaska, where he was stationed from 1968-1970, after his deployment in Thailand. (Provided by the Blodgett family)

Blodgett received notice in November 2022 that he was approved for 100% disability related to multiple myeloma. The first check arrived a month later — just in time for Blodgett to cover the property taxes on his Connecticut home.



Bradford Blodgett stands next to Anne Childs in this 1967 photo. The couple was married in 1968. (Provided by the Blodgett family)

“My parents were at risk of losing their home due to their inability to pay the taxes,” said Grace Blodgett, his daughter. “The benefit has made a huge difference in their lives. They can afford their groceries and heating, pay their taxes and cover other bills.”

Veterans submitted 1.2 million claims related to the PACT Act from August 2022 through Nov. 18, according to VA figures. Non-PACT claims numbered 1.8 million during the same time.

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The Veterans Benefits Administration processed more than 10,200 claims in a single day in mid-November — setting a record for the agency. The number represented all claims filed.

The agency has undertaken a push to hire up to 2,000 more processors to handle the larger volume of claims. Additional staff has enabled the VA to cut by nearly half a backlog of more than 600,000 claims from a year ago.

“Veterans are getting the message that we want them to file PACT Act claims and that doing so will not reduce their current disability rating or their existing benefits,” Clark said.

Qualifying veterans are eligible for benefits to cover medical conditions that are presumed to be caused from exposure to hazardous and toxic materials during military service, including from radiation and burn pits.

Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., said his office has been working to make certain that veterans know about VA screenings for exposure and how to reach out for help to apply for benefits.

“The PACT Act expands access to VA health care for upwards of 3.5 million post-9/11 veterans, many of whom were exposed to toxic burn pits in Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflict zones around the world,” said Carper, a Navy veteran of the Vietnam War.

Marcellus Beasley, who was exposed to fumes from burn pits during his military service, applied for PACT Act benefits at his local Department of Veterans Affairs office in Wilmington, Del.



Marcellus Beasley served in the Air Force during the Persian Gulf War and spent 90 days in Iraq, where he was exposed to toxic fumes from burn pits. “The burn pits were everywhere,” he said. (Provided by Marcellus Beasley)

Beasley, who served in the Air Force during the Persian Gulf War, said he spent 90 days in Iraq, where he was exposed to burn pits the size of football fields. Trash, sewage, tires and other hazardous materials were incinerated with jet fuel.

“I developed large scales on my skin. If you can imagine

how a lizard sheds its skin, that is what was happening to me,” said Beasley, 60. “No one was thinking about covering their face because of the smoke, and the burn pits were everywhere.”



Marcellus Beasley developed psoriasis after exposure to burn pits while serving in Iraq. Under the PACT Act, he receives benefits related to the chronic skin disorder, which requires daily treatment. (Provided by Marcellus Beasley)

After Beasley left the service, he was diagnosed with psoriasis, a chronic skin condition presumed to be caused from his exposure to burn pits that spewed toxic fumes into the air.

He said he applied for PACT Act benefits with the VA’s help in October 2022 and was approved by January 2023.

“I made an appointment at the VA and met with someone who was almost like a coach and mentor. He helped me provide the in-depth information needed on the form about what happened,” Beasley said.

He now has a full disability rating for medical conditions related to post-traumatic stress disorder, high blood pressure, back and shoulder injuries — and the psoriasis, which requires daily medication and twice monthly injections.

“When we submitted the claim for the PACT benefit and that got approved, it pushed my disability rating to 100%,” Beasley said. “I think I would have been denied if I tried to do this on my own. Servicemen and women are used to being tough and handling things on their own. In this case, the service was free, and I got the help I needed.”

(Source: <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2023-11-30/veterans-pact-act-burn-pits-toxic-exposure-12217671.html>)

Spouse Alphabet

Wife: "How would you describe me?"
Husband: "ABCDEFGHIIJK."
Wife: "What does that mean?"
Husband: "Adorable, beautiful, cute, delightful, elegant, fashionable, gorgeous, and hot."
Wife: "Aw, thank you, but what about IJK?"
Husband: "I'm just kidding!"

Veterans, Gold Star Families get free lifetime pass to national parks, wildlife refuges, other public lands

New pass provides free lifetime access and waived recreation fees for Veterans



The National Park Service unveiled a lifetime pass providing free entrance to national parks for Veterans and their families. The Interagency Military Lifetime Pass waives entrance fees for the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and standard amenity recreation fees for the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers sites for current military service members and their dependents, Veterans and Gold Star Families.

Veterans and their families have free access to approximately 2,000 public locations spread out across more than 400 million acres of public lands, which host activities to fit any lifestyle—from serene to high octane, including hiking, fishing, paddling, biking, hunting, stargazing, camping, and much more.

The Military Pass has been expanded to include a pass that does not expire for Veterans and Gold Star Family members. The National Defense Authorization Act of 2022 authorized a free lifetime pass to national parks and other federal recreational lands for eligible Veterans and Gold Star Families. In recent years, they were able to receive annual passes.

Are you eligible?

For purposes of this program, a Veteran is identified as an individual who has served in the United States Armed Forces, including the National Guard and Reserve, and is able to present one of the following forms of valid (unexpired) identification:

Department of Defense Identification Card

Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC)

Veteran ID Card

Veterans designation on a state-issued U.S. driver’s license or identification card

Gold Star Families are next of kin of a member of the United States Armed Forces who lost his or her life in a “qualifying situation,” such as a war, an international terrorist attack, or a military operation outside of the United States while serving with the United States Armed Forces.

The America the Beautiful – the National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass (Interagency Pass) Program

The Interagency Pass Program includes a free annual pass for

active-duty members of the U.S. Military and their dependents. Current Military service members must show a valid (unexpired) Department of Defense ID. Dependents of current service members must show a valid (unexpired) DD Form 1173 AD or DEC.

Other free or discounted passes, including some lifetime passes, are available for persons with permanent disabilities, fourth grade students, volunteers and senior citizens age 62 years or older.

How to get your Interagency Pass

Interagency Passes can be obtained in person while visiting a participating site. Visit Places to Get Interagency Passes for a searchable list and be sure to contact the site before you go, to make sure they are open and have passes in stock. In addition, Military passes, as well as those for seniors and persons with permanent disabilities, are available online through the USGS Online Store with an additional processing fee. Existing passes remain valid. You do not need to obtain a new pass if you already have a Lifetime Senior or Access Pass.

For more information about eligibility and passes, visit Free Entrance to National Parks for Veterans and Gold Star Families (U.S. National Park Service) (nps.gov).


The participating agencies also offer several fee-free days for everyone throughout the year to mark days of celebration and commemoration. Examples of fee-free days include the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., National Public Lands Day, Veterans Day and the signing of the Great American Outdoors Act.

Fee-free days and fee policies vary among the agencies, so it’s best to check the agency website or contact the site you plan to visit in advance of your trip.

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What do sea monsters eat?	Fish and ships.
What kind of cheese isn’t yours?	Nacho cheese.

How to report the death of a Veteran to VA

If you’re the survivor of a Veteran who has died, or their legal representative, we encourage you to contact us as soon as possible to report the death. Learn about the information you can provide to help us verify the Veteran’s identity. And find out how to contact us by phone, in person, or by mail.

Reporting right away helps survivors avoid debt

When a Veteran dies, we want to make sure their survivors avoid debt from benefit overpayments. When you contact us to report a death, we’ll stop any benefit payments the Veteran was receiving.

Information you can provide to help us verify the Veteran’s identity

Provide as much of this information as you can:

- Full name
- Social Security number or VA claim number
- Date of birth
- Date of death
- Branch of service

Note: You don’t need to have all of this information ready when you contact us. Provide the information you have. It will help us verify the Veteran’s identity.

If you’re reporting a death in person at a VA regional office or by mail, provide copies of these documents if you have them:

- Death certificate or other public record of the Veteran’s death
- Discharge document (like a DD214)

Get more information about our list of discharge documents here

How to contact us

Calling is the fastest way for you to report a death so we know to stop benefit payments. You can also report in person at a VA regional office or by mail.

By phone

Call us at 800-827-1000 (TTY: 711) and select 5. We’re here Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. ET.

In person

Go to a VA regional office.

By mail

If you report by mail, be sure to include this information:

- Your relationship to the Veteran, and
- Any supporting documents that can help us verify the Veteran’s identity

Send the information to this address:

Department of Veterans Affairs
Claims Intake Center
PO Box 4444
Janesville, WI 53547-4444

Note: When you report a death by mail, it may take longer for us to stop any benefit payments the Veteran was receiving.

(Source: <https://www.va.gov/resources/how-to-report-the-death-of-a-veteran-to-va/>)


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Widow fights for compensation for veteran husband’s suicide after VA rules it wasn’t service-related

By LINDA F. HERSEY, STARS AND STRIPES



Kenneth Landry died by suicide in 2021 72 hours after he contacted the veteran National Suicide Prevention Hotline about a late prescription and ongoing family turmoil, according to Landry’s medical records from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which his widow, Kathryn Landry, shared with Stars and Stripes. (Courtesy of Kathryn Landry)

Kenneth Landry was deployed in Kuwait as an air-traffic controller with Air Force special operations in 2014 when an ATV rollover knocked him unconscious and pinned him underneath the vehicle.

Landry was pulled out by fellow service members and airlifted to Germany, where he was hospitalized in intensive care with trauma to his head, back and femur. He received treatment for a “crush injury” and concussion, followed by rehabilitation, including therapy at a traumatic brain injury clinic.

He remained on active duty, yet his life was never the same. Problems with concentration, headaches, insomnia, and anxiety dogged him. He was honorably discharged in August 2015 but harbored hopes to re-enlist.

Six years later — on Oct. 1, 2021 — Landry put on his military uniform, walked into the bathroom at his California home and shot himself to death. He was 33 years old.

His suicide occurred 72 hours after he contacted the veteran National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 2:14 a.m. about a late prescription and ongoing family turmoil, according to Landry’s medical records from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which his widow, Kathryn Landry, shared with Stars and Stripes.

During the half-hour call, Landry said he had no thoughts or plans to harm himself, but he had considered suicide in the past, according to the hotline’s report of the call, which was included in Landry’s medical records.

But Landry did not answer questions on whether he had access to firearms or a “means to hurt” himself. His suicide risk was listed as “moderate to low.” The counselor forwarded a request for a new refill to his provider.

“This wasn’t a prescription problem. It was a mental health crisis,” said Kathryn Landry, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., and herself a Marine Corps veteran. “In the context of his call for help, he said he did not have his medication.”

Kathryn Landry today is seeking benefits related to her husband’s death. But she faces an uphill battle.

The VA in July 2022 rejected her claim for survivor benefits for herself and their young daughter.

“The VA’s response to his death and my family has been appalling,” Kathryn Landry told Stars and Stripes. “The VA processes these claims like they are an insurance company.” She is appealing.

Her claim is one needle in a very large haystack. The VA currently has more than a million pending claims by veterans and their families that await processing.

Nearly a third of those — or more than 300,000 — are considered “backlogged,” because the claimants have been waiting more than 125 days for a decision.

Last year, the Veterans Benefits Administration reviewed more than a record 1.7 million claims, with veterans and surviving family members receiving more than \$128 billion in compensation and pensions.

In September, Landry sought a second review from the Veterans Board of Appeals. An attorney she retained said the process could take 18 months to two years because of the volume of pending claims.

“In recent years, the board has resolved about 100,000 appeals each year,” according to a statement on the board’s website about long waits for a decision. “Despite the high numbers of decisions each year, there are still over 200,000 pending appeals waiting in line for a decision.”

Claims include requests for disability compensation, indemnity and dependency compensation for survivors and veterans’ pensions benefits.

Along with each request there is a story of sacrifice, hardship and loss.

“This has been devastating for my family. In an instant, I lost my husband, my daughter’s father and our home. We’ve had to redefine our family,” Kathryn Landry said.

She said the VA denied the claim, finding that the head injury from the ATV rollover was mild enough to be “completely healed within days or a few months.”

The VA’s findings, which Kathryn Landry shared with Stars and Stripes, also pointed to a January 2021 VA evaluation with information about Landry’s preexisting conditions.

The neuro-psychological evaluation found that Kenneth Landry had suffered from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder since childhood and that likely contributed to cognitive challenges.

The report also included information about head trauma prior to military service due to his martial arts activities.

Prior to his death, Kenneth Landry had started to dispute the VA’s medical findings and seek disability coverage related to PTSD and TBI.

He filed a “notice of disagreement” and was collecting documents to support a diagnosis of PTSD and lasting effects from head trauma. “But he did not make it to a lot of those appointments,” Kathryn Landry said.

Contradictory statements by doctors and other providers in Landry’s medical records alternately upheld and denied PTSD and TBI related to military service.

“He was initially assessed for TBI” after the ATV crash, a clinician wrote in Landry’s medical notes in February 2015. But the diagnosis later was “found negative,” the provider wrote.

But Landry may be minimizing his symptoms, the same provider wrote, and “under-reported due to not wanting to end his mission.”

A VA medical exam in March 2016, seven months after discharge, found that Landry did not have PTSD, TBI or lasting impacts from head trauma.

However, the provider’s notes from the one-hour evaluation suggested a more nuanced story. Records state Landry was agitated, suspicious and argumentative.

“He abruptly lunged forward from his seat and made a repeat inquiry about the availability of the provider’s notes,” the clinician wrote. “Veteran declined to continue the evaluation process and so the door was opened.” Landry walked out.

The provider was so concerned that he contacted security, which monitored Landry as he left the building. Despite Landry’s behavior, the VA clinician concluded that Landry had no mental health condition.

The provider checked “No” next to three boxes — for TBI,

PTSD or other mental health disorder.

Kathryn Landry is now appealing the VA’s findings and denial of survivor benefits. She described her husband as resilient, persevering through challenges and achieving goals.

But she noticed increasing cognitive challenges that seemed to accelerate in the months prior to his death.

In July 2022, the Veterans Benefits Administration ruled that “it was less likely than not” that Kenneth Landry’s suicide was due to “in-service TBI or undiagnosed PTSD.”

Landry was finishing graduate studies and preparing for a career as a social worker. Posthumously, he earned a master’s degree in social work from the University of Southern California.

“Ken was preparing for a career to help other veterans as a social worker,” she said. “I personally witnessed him assisting others in crisis. I just wish the faith he had in others was strong enough to tie him to this earth.”

(Source: <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2023-11-21/widow-fights-va-veterans-death-12127577.html>)



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Effective 01/01/2024, Medicare will begin to cover mental health services and visits with marriage & family therapists, and mental health counselors.

TRICARE will process these claims secondary to Medicare. Please see <https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/mental-health-care-outpatient> for more information.

Mental health care (outpatient)

One depression screening per year. You must get the screening in a primary care doctor’s office or primary care clinic that can provide follow-up treatment and referrals.

Individual and group psychotherapy with doctors (or with certain other licensed professionals, as the state where you get the services allows).

Family counseling, if the main purpose is to help with your treatment.

Testing to find out if you’re getting the services you need and if your current treatment is helping you.

Psychiatric evaluation.

Medication management.

Certain prescription drugs that aren’t usually “self-administered” (drugs you would normally take on your own), like some injections.

Diagnostic tests.

Partial hospitalization.

Intensive outpatient program services (starting January 1, 2024).

A one-time “Welcome to Medicare” preventive visit. This visit includes a review of your possible risk factors for depression. A yearly “Wellness” visit. Talk to your doctor or other health care provider about changes in your mental health since your last visit.

Part B also covers outpatient mental health services as part of substance use disorder treatment.

Your costs in Original Medicare

You pay nothing for your yearly depression screening if your doctor or health care provider accepts assignment.

After you meet the Part B deductible, you pay 20% of the Medicare-approved amount for visits to your doctor or other health care provider to diagnose or treat your condition.

If you get your services in a hospital outpatient clinic or hospital outpatient department, you may have to pay an additional copayment or coinsurance amount to the hospital.

What it is

Mental health services help diagnose and treat people with mental health conditions, like depression and anxiety. These visits are often called counseling or psychotherapy, and can be done

individually, in group psychotherapy or family settings, and in crisis situations.

Things to know

Part B covers mental health services and visits with these types of health professionals:

- Psychiatrists or other doctors
- Clinical psychologists
- Clinical social workers
- Clinical nurse specialists
- Nurse practitioners
- Physician assistants
- Marriage & family therapists (starting January 1, 2024)
- Mental health counselors (starting January 1, 2024)

Medicare only covers the visits if you get them from a health care provider who accepts assignment

Part B covers outpatient mental health services, including services that are usually provided outside a hospital, in these types of settings:

- A doctor’s or other health care provider's office
- A hospital outpatient department
- A community mental health center

A Mother's Dictionary

- ADULT: A person who has stopped growing at both ends and is now growing in the middle.
- BATHROOM: A room used by the entire family, believed by all except Mom to be self-cleaning.
- COMMITTEE: A body that keeps minutes and wastes hours.
- DATE: Infrequent outings with Dad where Mom can enjoy worrying about the kids in a different setting.
- EMPTY NEST: Wishful thinking
- FABLE: A story told by a teenager arriving home after curfew.
- GUM: Adhesive for the hair.
- HINDSIGHT: What Mom experiences from changing too many diapers.
- INFLATION: Cutting money in half without damaging the paper.
- JUNK: Dad's stuff.
- KISS: Mom's medicine.
- LEMONADE STAND: Complicated business venture where Mom buys powdered mix, sugar, lemons, and paper cups, and sets up a table, chairs, pitchers and ice for kids who sit there for three to six minutes and net a profit of 15 cents.
- MAYBE: No.
- NAIL POLISH: part of an assortment of make-up items such as lipstick, eyeliner, blush etc. which ironically make Mom look better while making her young daughter look "like a tramp."
- OVERSTUFFED RECLINER: Mom's nickname for Dad.
- PANIC: What a mother goes through when the darn wind-up swing stops.
- QUIET: A state of household serenity which occurs before the birth of the first child and occurs again after the last child has left for college.
- REFRIGERATOR: Combination art gallery and air-conditioner for the kitchen.



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It will open your browser to that link and you can view much more information about the subject of the Grapevine article.

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Report a Retiree's Death

If you have a loss, are here to help you. Although it's a difficult time, it's important to report the death of a military retiree promptly. Please follow the steps below to report the death of a military retiree.

The steps and documents needed to claim a retiree's final pay and claim Survivor Benefit Plan payments (if the retiree was enrolled) are also outlined below.

We also have a helpful "[When a Military Retiree Dies](#)" [Check-list](#) you can download and follow as you complete the steps below.

Information Needed to Report a Retiree Death to DFAS

You may report the death of a military retiree online 24/7 using our askDFAS [online Notification of Death form](#).

Before using the tool, you will need to have the following information available for the retiree:

Full Name
Social Security Number
Date of Death
Cause of Death (Natural, Homicide, Pending, or Other)
Marital Status

Additionally, if you are the retiree's spouse you will also need to provide your date of marriage.

Anyone using the tool must also complete all additional fields with a name, relationship, and contact information for the notification of death to be processed.

You may also call our Customer Care Center during business hours [[link to C4 page](#)] to inform DFAS of the death of a military retiree. When you call, please be prepared to provide:

Retiree's Full Name
Retiree's Social Security Number
Date of Death

How to Report a Retiree's Death

To report a retiree's death:

[Fill out the online askDFAS Notification of Death form](#) (available 24/7)

OR

Call our Customer Care Center at 1-800-321-1080

OR

Fax or Mail information to DFAS using the contact information listed later on this page.

DFAS strongly encourages you to use Option A or Option B above to notify us promptly of a retiree's death. If you have any difficulty using the askDFAS online form, please call our Customer Care Center.

Prompt reporting of a death is important to avoid overpayment. Retired pay ends on the date of death of the retiree.

Upon notification of death, we will send a condolence letter with instructions for claiming the retiree's final pay. If the retiree was enrolled in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP), we will send a package that includes forms for claiming SBP annuity payments.

DFAS will stop monthly payments upon notification of death to prevent overpayment. If a payment was made after the date of the retiree's death, we are required to notify the bank to reclaim the entire payment. Once we receive the paperwork outlined below, we can calculate and pay the retiree's final prorated payment to the entitled Arrears of Pay (AOP) beneficiary.

After Reporting the Death to DFAS

When the death of a retiree is reported, we mail a condolence letter to the beneficiary or beneficiaries listed in the retiree's account as the Arrears of Pay (AOP) beneficiary. If there is no beneficiary listed in the retiree's account, we will send the letter to the retiree's legal representative, if known, or to the retiree's last known address.

The condolence letter is generally sent within a week of the report of death. The mailing will include the Arrears of Pay (AOP) claim form—SF 1174 Claim for Unpaid Compensation of Deceased Member of the Uniformed Service. This form, along with the retiree's death certificate indicating the cause and/or manner of death is required for us to calculate and pay the retiree's final pay.

You can also download this form from our [Forms Library webpage](#) and submit it without waiting for the packet in the mail.

If the retiree enrolled in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP), we also mail a letter to the SBP beneficiary/beneficiaries with the following documents:

Survivor Benefit Plan application form (DD 2656-7 Verification for Survivor Annuity)

You can also download this form from our [Forms Library webpage](#) and submit it without waiting for the packet in the mail.

What You Need to Do: Promptly

Complete and Submit the SF 1174 Form and Supporting Documents

Fill out, sign, and return the SF 1174 form and the supporting documents. Please note that the SF 1174 must be signed by two witnesses in addition to the claimant.

Please see the [How to Claim a Retiree’s Arrears of Pay \(AOP\) Using the SF 1174](#) webpage for how-to information and helpful tools for filling out and submitting these documents, including our helpful Form Wizard. The Form Wizard guides you through completing the form correctly and easily.

We are required to have a copy of the retiree’s death certificate that states the cause or manner of death prior to making any AOP payments. If you have not yet provided this, please include a copy with your documents.

Include a completed Direct Deposit Authorization (DFAS-CL Form 1059) with your SF 1174 to have an AOP payment direct deposited to your bank account. You can download this form from our [Forms Library webpage](#). Please avoid using a joint account that was shared with a deceased retiree for this deposit. Banks return those payments to DFAS.

To submit your documents:

Upload a PDF of your completed/signed/witnessed SF 1174 form and supporting documents via the [askDFAS online upload tool](#) on DFAS.mil. Please make sure the retiree’s name and Social Security Number are on each document you upload.

OR

Mail to:

Defense Finance and Accounting Service
U.S. Military Retired Pay
8899 E 56th Street
Indianapolis IN 46249-1200

OR

Fax to: 1-800-469-6559

Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) Application - What You Need to Do:

Promptly Complete and Submit the DD 2656-7 and Supporting Documents

If the deceased retiree was enrolled in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) or the Retired Serviceman's Family Protection Plan (RSFPP), promptly complete and submit the DD 2656-7 Verification for Survivor Annuity and supporting documents.

Please see the [Start an SBP Annuity webpage](#) for how-to information and helpful tools for filling out and submitting these documents, including our helpful Form Wizard. The Form Wizard guides you through completing the form correctly and easily.

If you have not yet provided a death certificate that includes the cause or manner of death, please include a copy of this with your

documents.

To submit your documents:

Upload a PDF of your completed/signed DD 2656-7 form and supporting documents via the [askDFAS online upload tool](#) on DFAS.mil. Please make sure the retiree’s name and Social Security Number are on each document you upload.

OR

Mail to :

Indianapolis IN 46249-1300
8899 E 56th Street
U.S. Military Retired Pay
Defense Finance and Accounting Service

OR

Fax to: 1-800-982-8459

The Retiree’s Final Tax Document (1099-R)

The retiree’s final tax document (IRS 1099-R) is typically issued at the same time as the Arrears of Pay payment to the AOP beneficiary. If a retiree’s legal representative who is not the AOP beneficiary needs a copy of the 1099-R, they should send a signed and dated letter that includes the retiree’s full name, Social Security Number, the 1099-R request, and the full name and relationship of the requestor, along with a copy of the Certificate of Death (if not already on file). The Certificate of Death is required in order for the 1099-R to be issued.

(Source: <https://www.dfas.mil/RetiredMilitary/survivors/Retiree-Death/>)



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Did You Know?

VFW National has a free bi-monthly e-newsletter called Checkpoint that can be emailed to you. To receive it you must send an email requesting to be on their email list at:

magazine@vfw.org

New to Retired Pay: What to Know for Tax Season

After you retire and begin receiving retired pay, the next tax season will bring a few changes.

Tax Document

First, the retired pay tax document is an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) 1099-R instead of the IRS W-2 you are accustomed to receiving. The IRS 1099-R is the form for Distributions from Pensions, Annuities, Retirement or Profit-Sharing Plans, IRAs, Insurance Contracts, etc. The form is similar to an IRS W-2 but has a number of different boxes that won’t be relevant to your retired pay.

Your annual 1099-R will be available in myPay to view and download. myPay offers printing or downloading of your tax statements for your retired pay. You can print/download your current year tax statement, as well as prior year 1099-Rs (up to four prior years for retirees). In addition, you’ll have earlier access to your 1099-R tax statement in myPay. Statements are generally available in myPay in late December, while paper copies aren’t mailed until mid-to-late January.

If you have the preferences in your account set to receive statements via postal mail, those statements are mailed no later than January 31 of each year, along with your December Retiree Account Statement.

Tax Withholding

Federal Income Tax Withholding

DFAS will withhold federal income tax from your retired pay according to the instructions you provide on your DD Form 2656 when you apply for retired pay. You can also change your federal income tax withholding after your retired pay is established by using myPay (<https://mypay.dfas.mil>) or by sending us a completed, signed IRS W-4 Employee's Withholding Certificate.

State Income Tax Withholding

DFAS can also withhold state income tax from your retired pay for one state at a time, but only if the designated state has signed the standard written State Income Tax Withholding agreement with the Department of Defense (DoD). Please see the table on our webpage for the status of specific states/territories: <https://www.dfas.mil/retstatetax>

Military retirees can start, stop, or change state income tax withholding (SITW) by using myPay, by filling out and sending a DD Form 2866 - Retiree Change of Address/State Tax Withholding Request, or by sending a written request that includes all the necessary information. The information includes your full name, daytime phone number, social security num-

ber, date, and signature on all written correspondence. DFAS cannot process requests that do not include this information. Because tax obligations vary from state to state, contact your state's department of revenue regarding taxability of your military retired pay.

Local Income Tax Withholding

DFAS is unable to withhold local income tax from retired pay.

Military Retired Pay Taxation Tips

Military retired pay is paid for many different reasons under many different laws. There are differences in the types of pay a military retiree might receive and the tax laws that apply to them. Whether a portion or all of an individual’s military retired pay is subject to federal income taxes depends on his/her individual circumstances.

A military retiree can either use myPay or send an IRS Form W-4 to alter the amount DFAS withholds for federal income taxes from their military retired pay. An individual’s choice to have no withholding for federal taxes does not impact whether the individual’s military retired pay is subject to federal income taxes. Ultimately, the IRS will determine the amount of taxes owed on the military retired pay.

Please note: the IRS requires any individual claiming exemption from federal withholding to provide a new Form W-4 at the beginning of each tax year certifying their exemption from withholding.

Additional Information

DFAS cannot provide tax advice. Please consult a tax professional or the IRS. Please see our webpage for more information regarding taxation of retired pay: <https://www.dfas.mil/retpaytax>



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DOD Expands Pilot Program to Renew USID Cards Online

By C. Todd Lopez , DOD News

As part of an expansion of a Defense Department pilot program that kicked off in February 2023, most Uniformed Services Identification, or USID, card holders can now renew their cards online and receive them in the mail, instead of having to schedule an appointment at an ID card office.



Before this expansion, only sponsors with a common access card could request online renewals, but now most retirees and non-CAC holders are eligible.

The ongoing pilot program allows family members, retirees and others to avoid making appointments at a pass and ID card office. Instead, they can renew USID cards online via the [ID Card Office online](#), or IDCO, website. It’s important to note that the pilot program is for renewal of the USID card only — not for the initial issue. Also, the pilot is limited to cardholders within the United States, though expansion to non-US addresses is in the works.

Mike Zarlenga, with the Defense Manpower Data Center, said that DOD currently issues about 4.5 million ID cards each year. About 2.5 million of those are USID cards, and of those, roughly one million are renewals eligible for online renewal. The pilot program, Zarlenga said, is meant to make life easier for family members and retirees.



"We think modern capabilities like renewing a driver's license online make it easier for people to get what they need when they need it without burdening them with having to take a trip somewhere," Zarlenga said. "We're excited about this, and it sounds like people see online renewal as making their lives

easier, based on the feedback we're getting."

The pilot program also enhances the DOD mission by freeing up appointment slots at pass and ID offices for active duty military personnel and civilian government employees who need to apply for or renew a CAC.

"We want to enable the ID card sites today to better service the CAC holders who are our mission enablers," Zarlenga said. "We want to make sure that people visiting that office can get an appointment when they need one, and they can get their CAC and resume their mission or duties with minimal impact to them or to the department."

More information about the online USID card renewal pilot program, including restrictions and requirements, is available on the [cac.mil website](#).

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The Editor

DFAS - What to Do When a Military Retiree Dies - Checklist

What You Need to Do: Claim a Retiree’s Final Pay

When the death of a retiree is reported, we mail a condolence letter to the person/people listed in the retiree’s account as the Arrears of Pay (AOP) beneficiary. If there is no beneficiary listed in the retiree’s account, we will send the letter to the retiree’s legal representative, if known, or to the retiree’s last known address. The condolence letter is generally sent within a week of the report of death.

The mailing will include the **Arrears of Pay (AOP) claim form—SF 1174 Claim for Unpaid Compensation of Deceased Member of the Uniformed Service**.

- ☐ **Complete and submit** the SF 1174 form, along with the retiree’s death certificate indicating the cause and/or manner of death. This death certificate is required for us to calculate and pay the retiree’s final pay. Please note that the SF 1174 must be signed by two witnesses in addition to the claimant.
- ☐ Include a completed **Direct Deposit Authorization (DFAS-CL Form 1059)** with your SF 1174 to have an AOP payment direct deposited to your bank account. Please avoid using a joint account that was shared with a deceased retiree for this deposit. Banks return those payments to DFAS.
- ☐ **Upload** a PDF of your completed/ signed/ witnessed SF 1174 form and supporting documents via the convenient askDFAS **online upload tool** on DFAS.mil: <https://www.dfas.mil/askdfas>. Please make sure the retiree’s name and Social Security Number are on each document you upload.

OR Mail AOP claims to: Defense Finance and Accounting Service, U.S. Military Retired Pay, 8899 E 56th Street, Indianapolis IN 46249-1200 **OR Fax** to: 1-800-469-6559

You can download forms from our **Forms Library webpage** at <https://www.dfas.mil/raforms> and submit them without waiting for the mail.

Please see the **How to Claim a Retiree’s Arrears of Pay (AOP) Using the SF 1174 webpage** at <https://www.dfas.mil/retireeaop> for how-to information and helpful tools for filling out and submitting these documents, including our helpful Form Wizard, which guides you through completing the form correctly and easily.

What You Need to Do: The Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP)

- ☐ If the retiree was enrolled in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) or the Retired Serviceman's Family Protection Plan (RSFPP), **promptly complete and submit** the DD 2656-7 Verification for Survivor Annuity and supporting documents.
- ☐ **Upload** a PDF of your completed/ signed DD 2656-7 form and supporting documents via the convenient askDFAS **online upload tool** on DFAS.mil: <https://www.dfas.mil/askdfas>. Please make sure the retiree’s name and Social Security Number are on each document you upload.

OR Mail SBP claims to: Defense Finance and Accounting Service, U.S. Military Annuity Pay, 8899 E 56th Street, Indianapolis IN 46249-1300 **OR Fax** to: 1-800-982-8459

You can download forms from our **Forms Library webpage** at <https://www.dfas.mil/raforms> and submit them without waiting for the mail.

Please see the **Start an SBP Annuity webpage** at <https://www.dfas.mil/startsbp> for how-to information and helpful tools for filling out and submitting these documents, including our helpful Form Wizard, which guides you through completing the form correctly and easily.

The Retiree’s Final Tax Document (1099-R)

The retiree’s **final tax document (IRS 1099-R)** is typically issued at the same time as the Arrears of Pay payment to the AOP beneficiary.

If a retiree’s legal representative who is not the AOP beneficiary needs a copy of the 1099-R, they should send a signed and dated letter that includes the retiree’s full name, Social Security Number, the 1099-R request, and the full name and relationship of the requestor, **along with a copy of the retiree’s Certificate of Death** (if not already on file). The Certificate of Death is required in order for the 1099-R to be issued.

Oct2023

DFAS - What to Do When a Military Retiree Dies - Checklist

What You Need to Know

We are sorry for your loss, and we are here to help you. Although it's a difficult time, it's important to report the death of a military retiree promptly. Please use one of the options below to report the death of a retiree.

Information about **claiming a retiree's final pay** and **claiming Survivor Benefit Plan payments** (if the retiree was enrolled) is also included in this checklist.

Additional information is available on the DFAS Report a Retiree's Death webpage: <https://www.dfas.mil/retdeath>

Please note: The Arrears of Pay (AOP) beneficiary and Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) beneficiary are designated by the retiree. They can be the same, but are not always the same. Separate claims must be made for AOP and SBP.

How to Report a Retiree's Death

Prompt reporting of a death is important to avoid overpayment. Retired pay ends on the date of death of the retiree.

You can report a retiree's death using our online form or by calling our Customer Care Center, or via fax or mail. Filling out the online askDFAS Notification of Death form is the quickest and most convenient option. It's available 24/7.

- ☐ To use the **online askDFAS Notification of Death form**, visit our Quick Tools webpage: <https://www.dfas.mil/raquicktools>, then click on "To Report the Death of a Retiree."
- ☐ To contact our **Customer Care Center**, call toll-free: 1-800-321-1080 or 1-317-212-0551 (during business hours M-F, Eastern Time).
- ☐ **Fax to:** 1-800-469-6559 OR **Mail to:** Defense Finance and Accounting Service, U.S. Military Retired Pay, 8899 E 56th Street, Indianapolis IN 46249-1200

What Happens When DFAS Receives Notification of Death

Upon notification of death, we will send a condolence letter with instructions for claiming the retiree's final pay. If the retiree was enrolled in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) we will also send the forms to claim SBP annuity payments.

DFAS will **stop monthly payments upon notification of death** to prevent overpayment. Because retired pay ends on the date of death, **if a payment was made after the date of the retiree's death**, we are required to notify the bank to **reclaim the entire payment**. Once we receive the paperwork to claim a retiree's pay, we can calculate and pay the retiree's final pro-rated payment to the entitled Arrears of Pay (AOP) beneficiary.

Supporting Documents Required

- ◆ We are required to have a copy of the **retiree's Certificate of Death** that **states the cause or manner of death** prior to making payments. If you have not yet provided this specific type of death certificate, please include a copy of it with your documents.
- ◆ The supporting documents to claim SBP depends on your individual situation. Please check our webpage for specific information: <https://www.dfas.mil/startsbp>

Reminders

- ☐ Is your form **signed and dated** by you (and by witnesses for the AOP SF 1174)?
- ☐ Did you include supporting documents? Is the retiree's name and Social Security Number on each document?

'My savings were drained': Veterans' pensions and benefits are a target for fraud, feds warn

By LINDA F. HERSEY, STARS AND STRIPES



Veterans and military retirees filed nearly 300,000 fraud reports with the Federal Trade Commission from 2019 through Sept. 30, 2023. Their losses totaled \$842 million. (DOD graphic by Regina Ali)

WASHINGTON — Self-employed contractor Brian Orr, an Army veteran from Colorado, was installing wood floors at a client's home when he got a call Nov. 22 from someone claiming to be a local law enforcement officer.

The caller identified himself as Sgt. Brian Collins of the Douglas County Sheriff's Office and demanded Orr pay back a \$20,900 Small Business Association loan or face jail time.

An arrest warrant had been issued, according to the caller, who forwarded an official-looking stamped document from the "U.S. Court in the District of Colorado" with Orr named as defendant.

Orr said he rushed to pay back a government loan that was not overdue and then kept transferring cash — hundreds of dollars at a time — via a bitcoin ATM as instructed by the caller.

"I panicked. I did not want to go to jail," said Orr, a 46-year-old single parent with a teenage son.

Orr made four transactions totaling \$17,500 in 24 hours, from Nov. 22-23.

Even after Orr made the payments, the calls continued. He said he was told that unless he covered the difference, he would be "remanded" by the court to jail.

"I didn't have the money. I decided to turn myself in," Orr said. He drove to the county sheriff's office in Castle Rock, where the authorities informed him that he was the victim of a scam.

Veterans and military retirees are a common target for

fraud and identity theft because of their benefits, according to the Federal Trade Commission.

"Veterans should know that impostors are reaching out by phone, email, text or social media message. The scammers pretend to be someone legitimate like your bank, a government agency, or even a friend or loved one," said Carol Kando-Pineda, a FTC attorney in the division of consumer and business education.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is also warning veterans and their families to take extra precautions during the holidays as scammers might try to take advantage of people through fraudulent charities that steal money from donors who are led to believe they are giving to legitimate organizations.

More so, with the flow of millions of dollars to veterans through the recently approved PACT Act, the VA said scammers are looking for ways to steal the payments, which include fraudulent offers to make the claims and complete the paperwork on behalf of the veterans.

"The police did not seem surprised at all," Orr said about the scam. "But they and the bank said that the chances of me getting the money back are zero."



Brian Orr and his son, Gage Orr, are shown at an outdoor event in summer 2023 at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado. (Brian Orr)

He had saved the receipt codes for the transactions, but the money moved through anonymous accounts that would be difficult to track.

"My savings were drained," Orr said. "I had enough money left to pay the rent."

The experience shook his sense of safety and security, he said.

"I thought the system would protect me somehow," Orr said. "I just don't pick up the phone anymore when I don't recognize the number. I was violated in my home, in front of my family, when I answered those calls."

Veterans are attractive targets because they have “earned access to valuable benefits” in the form of pensions and disability payments, Kando-Pineda said.

Veterans and military retirees filed nearly 300,000 fraud reports with the FTC from 2019 through Sept. 30, 2023. Their losses totaled \$842 million.

Active-duty service members, by contrast, filed roughly 30,000 reports of fraud during the same time for \$142 million in losses, the FTC reported.

In 2021, military consumers reported \$267 million in losses from fraud, according to the FTC. In 2022, military consumers reported \$414 million in losses — a 55% increase.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough held an inaugural meeting Tuesday of a special task force to address scams perpetuated against veterans.

“Veterans face particularly high risks for fraud with the median loss for veterans from fraud 44% higher than other civilians,” the VA reported.

The agency is setting up a permanent office to coordinate prevention and responses to predatory and fraudulent activities that target veterans’ benefits.

Topping the list of fraud complaints reported by the military community are “impostor scams,” similar to the demands for payment that Orr had from a caller posing as a law enforcement officer.

In Orr’s case, information about his federal Payroll Protection Program loan, also known as PPP, was available online, identifying him and his business — Orr’s Flooring of Castle Rock.

“I thought my loan was forgiven through the bank,” he said. “I was working a lot and did not bother to check up on whether the calls were legit until it was too late.”

“The scammer sounded authoritative and used personal information, including the exact amount of the loan that Brian received in the past, to convince him that this was no scam,” said James Watson-Howatt, a friend who organized a Go Fund Me page to help Orr cover his losses.

The Douglas County Sheriff’s Office posted a warning on social media after reports by Orr and at least one other resident targeted by thieves posing as police officials.

“Criminals are making the rounds again, impersonating members of our office. Remember, we will never call you looking for you to resolve a situation by paying us money,” the sheriff’s office posted this month on X, formerly Twitter.

ter.

Janine Satterfield Williamson of Virginia is advocating for stronger banking safeguards to stem financial fraud after her uncle, a Navy veteran, was defrauded of more than \$3.5 million.

Her lawsuit against Wells Fargo and the Navy Federal Credit Union are before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Va., involving a series of bank transfers by 76-year-old Larry Cook to foreign bank accounts in a wire fraud scheme.

Cook, who had suffered a stroke that left him cognitively impaired, made dozens of wire transfers in 2020 and 2021 prior to his death, the lawsuit states. His niece discovered the transfers when she was settling his estate.

She wants to see tighter regulations to protect consumers.

“Thieves target money, and veterans have money,” Satterfield said, referring to veterans’ pensions and benefits. “The military lives and breathes protection of its citizens every day. Shouldn’t the bank or credit union do the same for its clients?”

(Source: <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2023-12-21/veterans-scams-fraud-pact-act-holidays-12430435.html>)

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I'm an anesthesiologist. I get to pass gas for a living.

VA MISSION Act: Answers to top questions about community care appointments

Note: This article is part of a series on VA’s progress implementing the VA MISSION Act of 2018.

With the implementation of the MISSION Act, eligible Veterans have more convenient choices for getting timely, high-quality health care. Veterans eligible for community care can choose to receive care from a VA medical facility or a community provider in VA’s network.

This article answers some common questions about making community care appointments.

1. When will I be referred to a community provider?

Eligibility for community care depends on specific eligibility criteria, and your care team can help you understand your options if you are eligible. In most situations you can choose to receive your care in VA. If you are eligible and do choose to receive care in the community, **you must receive approval from VA** before receiving care to avoid being billed for the care. [Emergency care](#) and the community [urgent care](#) benefit are exceptions; you do not need prior approval for these types of care, though you may have a copayment for receiving such care.

2. How do I find a community provider near me?

You can either choose your preferred community provider or a VA staff member can help you select one. **The selected community provider must be part of VA’s network of community providers and must be an eligible provider.** VA’s network includes (1) providers that participate in regional community care networks that are managed for VA by third-party administrators under contract with VA, as well as (2) other community providers with whom VA contracts directly for certain services. A VA staff member will be able to confirm if you can go to a specific community provider.

To find an in-network community provider near you, use the [VA Facility Locator](#). Before an appointment is scheduled, make sure to confirm that you are authorized to receive this care and have received a referral from VA to see the community provider.

If your preferred provider is not in VA’s network, VA may be able to add the provider to its network, or you can choose to schedule with a network provider that offers the same care.

3. How do I schedule a community care appointment?

Once an eligible community provider has been selected, VA will send you and the community provider a referral. VA will also send any pertinent medical documentation to the community provider to ensure proper care coordination between your VA care team and the community provider.

There are several options for scheduling an appointment, depending on the type of care you need. Your VA medical facility will work with you to identify the scheduling options available to you.

You may be able to:

Directly schedule an appointment and inform a VA staff member about the appointment.

Request an appointment by logging into [My HealtheVet](#) and using the VA Online Scheduling application for certain types of routine services.

Ask a VA staff member to schedule the appointment.

Ask a VA third-party administrator (TPA) to schedule the appointment.


4. It’s been five days since I was approved to see a community provider, and no one has contacted me to schedule my appointment. What do I do?

If you are experiencing delays in scheduling your community care appointment, please contact your VA medical facility for assistance.

5. My appointment was cancelled. How do I reschedule?

You may reschedule an appointment with your community provider when scheduling issues arise or contact your VA medical facility community care office for assistance.

Click [here](#) for more information on making community care appointments.



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‘Worth every bit of the struggle’: How Fort Moore regiment turns soldiers into Rangers

By COREY DICKSTEIN, STARS AND STRIPES

FORT MOORE, Ga. — Exhausted after three straight days of intense training exercises that took the young soldiers more than 50 miles on foot, they plopped down against pine trees just inside the wood line on the post’s Cole Range.

One of the soldiers — a private — limped his way through the center of the makeshift defensive formation of tired troopers, insisting to a noncommissioned officer checking on his conditions that he was “all good, sergeant,” and only suffering from minor chafing. Two more soldiers limped past the same NCO, telling him that they, too, were good to go and ready to continue their attempts to earn a spot in one of the Army’s most elite formations — the 75th Ranger Regiment.

“They’re gonna make it,” said Army 1st Sgt. Tyler Fillion, the senior enlisted leader for the Fort Moore-based regiment’s Selection and Training Company. “They want it. They’re tough.”

Fillion carefully watched the latest class of Ranger hopefuls navigate the eight-week course to earn a spot in the special operations formation known as Ranger Assessment and Selection Program 1, or RASP 1.

“Look, at this point, everyone’s broken,” he said. “They’re going to end up going 80 miles or something on foot by the end of today. Everyone is at the baseline of just, ‘Ouch.’ We’re looking for those guys and girls who can put that aside, put their head down and keep getting after it. If you can do that. If you can show you want it, we’re probably going to take you.”



Ranger candidates pictured during marksmanship in an iteration of a Ranger Assessment and Selection Program in 2023. The course qualifies soldiers to serve in the elite Ranger Regiment. (Landon Carter/75th Ranger Regiment)

Each year more than 1,000 soldiers — the vast majority being new troops fresh out of Army initial entrance training — come to Fort Moore, the former Fort Benning, to attempt

to join the legendary Ranger Regiment, according to data provided by the unit. Somewhere between 30% and 50% of those who start the eight yearly RASP 1 courses will earn the Ranger’s coveted tan beret and a spot in the regiment that has for decades produced some of the Army’s highest achieving soldiers.

The special operations unit, which includes combat battalions at Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., and Fort Moore, where the regiment and its military intelligence apparatus are headquartered, was among the U.S. military’s most heavily deployed formations during operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria during the Global War on Terror.

The unit’s soldiers earned countless valor and combat medals — including two Medals of Honor — and Purple Hearts as they carried out dangerous, classified combat operations nearly daily for some 20 years. In recent years, the regiment’s Rangers have dominated Army soldier competitions in the U.S., with 75th Rangers winning the last three Best Ranger Competitions among others, including 2023’s Best Mortar and Best Squad competitions.

Fillion, a longtime Ranger who joined the 75th via RASP 1 as a sergeant in 2010 after serving two deployments to Iraq in the conventional Army, said the RASP programs that he has helped oversee for the last year and a half play a critical part in ensuring the Ranger regiment retains its reputation as the Army’s premier light infantry and direct-action raid force. From the first day when Ranger hopefuls enter the regiment’s pre-RASP program — a Ranger-run course meant to get soldiers in shape to succeed at RASP 1 — they are introduced to the unit’s unique culture, which Fillion said is built around teamwork, the dedication to mental and physical excellence and the will to continue the mission at all costs.

The secretive unit has long shied away from media attention, but it recently invited Stars and Stripes to observe some of the training in RASP 1 and RASP 2, a similar, shorter Ranger assessment program for staff sergeants through captains to earn leadership positions in the 75th Ranger Regiment. Though unit leaders were careful not to reveal specific details about the RASP courses to ensure future candidates enter the program with limited knowledge of what to expect, they offered some insights of how physical-grueling and mentally taxing the Ranger tryouts can be.

That is by design, Fillion noted. Rangers must be prepared to go to combat at any time, if events in their selection course are “as difficult as the worst day of combat,” then they can enter any situation knowing they can succeed, he said. But as the Army — and the military overall — faces unprecedented recruiting challenges at a time when fewer young Americans than ever have an interest in military service or even qualify to enter the ranks, Fillion has a message to anyone with even the slightest interest in becoming a Ranger: Come try out.

“We have people who think they need to be an Olympic athlete, you need to be a Division I [college] athlete to come here, and that’s not the case,” Fillion said. “You have to have a certain type of inner resolve, but you don’t need to be [Olympic swimmer] Michael Phelps ... or Mr. ultramarathon runner — you need the drive to want to harden yourself to have that kind of resolve.”

So, what qualities are Fillion and his Ranger cadre looking for in those who earn the tan beret? A never-quit, team-first attitude, and a dedication to the eight Army special operations attributes: Integrity, courage, perseverance, personal responsibility, professionalism, adaptability, teamwork and capability, Fillion said.



Army soldiers in the 75th Ranger Regiment’s Ranger Assessment and Selection Program conduct physical training with a worm during an iteration of RASP in 2023. The course qualifies soldiers to serve in the elite Ranger Regiment. (Landon Carter/75th Ranger Regiment)

The physicality for which the Rangers are known will come once a soldier joins the unit and is subjected to its purpose-built physical training program run by strength and conditioning experts. The unit holds all its troops from the infantrymen who make up the majority of the 3,000-Ranger regiment to its lawyers and human resources officers to stringent, higher-than-normal fitness and conditioning standards.

“If somebody’s physically weak, we’ll get them stronger,” Fillion said. “If they have the desire and the other attributes — they’re getting hired, and we’ll build them up.”

RASP 1

In January 2010, after almost a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 75th Ranger Regiment scrapped its long-held selection process known as the Ranger Indoctrination Program, or RIP, in favor of a longer, more skill-focused program in RASP 1. The new program for soldiers in the ranks of E-1 to E-5 added a second, four-week phase to RIP’s program, which aimed to provide new Rangers with the skills that they would need in the intense combat that they were almost assured to find once they joined their units.

“We were taking people straight from RIP, and 90 days later they were in a pretty kinetic environment, whether it’s Baghdad or Afghanistan, so they said, ‘Hey, how can we provide a better product?’” Fillion said. “The first four weeks really remain the same as RIP — and that’s the assessment of who the candidates are. Then, the second four weeks are about the training, still assessing, but giving them the skills they need to succeed at their battalion on marksmanship, demolition, those things that they need so we can provide a better warfighter to the unit.”

The eight yearly iterations of RASP typically begin with 135 to 170 Ranger candidates, said Tracy Bailey, a spokeswoman for the 75th Ranger Regiment. They are led by a noncommissioned officer cadre purposely selected from across the regiment, said Fillion, who added cadre members were among the highest performing NCOs in the 75th.



Ranger candidates climb ropes during physical training as part of the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program in April 2023, which qualifies soldiers to join the 75th Ranger Regiment. (Landon Carter/75th Ranger Regiment)

He called the cadre RASP 1’s “special sauce” because they lead from the front, conducting all the training right alongside the Ranger candidates. When RASP 1 candidates conduct PT sessions, the cadre do the same exercises, often with more weight, Fillion said.

“Everything the candidates do, the cadre is doing,” he said. “The leaders go first. There should be someone out here showing [Ranger candidates] what the expectation is all the time. Because they don’t have a model for that ... And that sets the model and their minds that when they go to their Ranger battalion, they’re going to be led by an NCO who doesn’t say, ‘Do what I say,’ they’re going to say, ‘Hey, follow me. I’m going to teach you how to do this because I’m going to do it, too.’”

Many of the events that Ranger candidates face are linked to the unit’s legacy from operations in World War II such as the Cabanatuan Raid, which saw Rangers sneak behind Japanese lines to free some 500 American prisoners in the Philippines, and Operation Gothic Serpent, the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia depicted in the book and movie “Black Hawk Down.” The RASP 1 course even includes a

history test for Ranger candidates, Fillion said.

The unit’s storied history is part of its culture, he said. Tying the regiment’s past accomplishments to candidates suffering allows them to embrace that legacy.

Fillion said the first two weeks of RASP 1 are easily the most intense — designed to bring young soldiers to the brink of their mental and physical capabilities.

Throughout the course, soldiers low crawl across long distances, ruck march for miles with heavy loads, fight hand-to-hand, face mass casualty events and strenuous workouts that push most candidates to the brink, Fillion said.

“We want them to leave this program, knowing that when we put them in a Ranger battalion, and they’ve got to go to the top of that mountain, they’re gonna get there,” he said. “And we want them to know that they have the reservoir of strength to be able to go there.”

RASP 2

For higher-ranked soldiers looking to enter the 75th Ranger Regiment and for its seasoned Rangers attempting to earn new leadership roles in the formation, RASP 2 is meant to challenge their ability to make good decisions under physical and mental stress.

The three-week course is meant to validate soldiers — including longtime Rangers — in the ranks of staff sergeant to captain as prepared to lead Rangers, Fillion said. While RASP 1 focuses largely on training, RASP 2 is about proving the skills that soldiers already possess.

On a recent day on Cole Range, several dozen RASP 2 candidates spent hours on various challenges that included long runs and mental puzzles squeezed between brief strength training sessions and obstacle courses.

After completing one of the sessions, a longtime Ranger, Sgt. 1st Class Moore — whose first name was withheld by public affairs officials citing U.S. Army Special Operations Command security policy — described the course as “very physically and mentally taxing.”

The physical activities and puzzles are meant to demonstrate a Ranger’s ability to think clearly and make quick decisions under the stressors of combat, said Fillion, who has completed RASP 2 twice and might attend again next year, if he is selected for a sergeant major position in the Ranger regiment. The repetitive validation of everyone in the regiment’s senior ranks — including validation courses for top officers such as battalion and regimental commanders — is part of what makes the unit run smoothly and maintain its elite fighting capabilities, Fillion said.

For Moore, an infantryman and veteran of five combat tours who has served in the Ranger Regiment since he enlisted in 2011, passing RASP 2 would earn him a promotion to a Ranger platoon sergeant. He said he found the physical requirements for RASP 2 similar to RASP 1, but RASP 2 candidates must come with greater knowledge.



New Army Rangers don their tan berets after graduating a Ranger Assessment and Selection Program course at Fort Moore, Ga., in March 2023. (Landon Carter/75th Ranger Regiment)

“[The cadre] is not here to teach you, they’re here to validate,” Moore said. “RASP 1 is more about teaching you how to be physically fit, how to maintain your physicality, how to land navigate. ... In RASP 2 those are skills you better already have.”

He said teamwork was the key to success in the course. Like Fillion, he encouraged those interested in joining the Rangers to come to RASP and give it a shot — especially if they are willing to be humbled.

“If you have the drive to serve, the 75th Ranger Regiment is where you want to do it,” Moore said. “If you want to constantly be pushed to be better and feel inferior to all your peers and grow thick skin — the 75th Ranger Regiment is where to do it. It’s worth every bit of the struggle.”

Fillion concurred. Becoming a Ranger is not easy, the first sergeant said, but those who earn their way into the unit have accomplished something incredible.

“Not only do they earn their spot, they continue to earn it every day, they continue to meet the standard, they continue to better themselves, and they continue to better those around them,” Fillion said. “Then we take it a step further and revalidate all of the senior leaders around this formation — they’ve not only proved themselves and earned their spot, but they continue to do it over and over and continue to prove they belong here.”

(Source; <https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2023-12-24/army-rangers-training-fort-moore-12297488.html>)

Younger veterans uncomfortable with ‘thank you for your service,’ poll finds

By J.P. LAWRENCE , STARS AND STRIPES



A girl holds a sign welcoming veterans of World War II and the Vietnam and Korean wars outside the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., on Nov. 2, 2019. Many young veterans are uncomfortable with the phrase thank you for your service, a recent USAA survey found. Most veterans over age 45 said it didn't bother them. (Kirstin Spanu/U.S. Marine Corps)

Younger American veterans and military personnel who receive a spoken thanks for their service are more apt to think “thanks but no thanks,” according to a new poll.

The finding came from a survey of 1,639 veterans and service members released Wednesday by financial services company [USAA as part of a Veterans Day initiative](#).

About two-thirds of a mix of mostly veterans and some currently serving troops between the ages of 18 and 44 said the phrase “thank you for your service” makes them feel uncomfortable or awkward.

The survey found a generational divide on the phrase, which gained prominence after the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan more than 20 years ago.

Most veterans over 45 said the phrase does not bother them. And 76% of veterans over 65 said the phrase does not make them feel awkward, with most responding that thanking them for their service is the most appropriate way to honor them.

In contrast, 69% of veterans and currently serving troops ages 18-29 said the phrase makes them uncomfortable, and 66% of respondents ages of 30-44 agreed.

The divide on “thank you for your service” comes from the difference in how various generations were viewed on returning home from war, said Kayla Williams, a former Army linguist who deployed to Iraq during the 2003 invasion, who now works at the Rand Corp. think tank as a researcher.

In her conversations with Vietnam War veterans, Williams often hears of a lack of public appreciation at the time, which is why they welcome the hearing the phrase now.

But the launch of an all-volunteer military force means that younger veterans view their service differently than those who were drafted, she said.

“All of us chose to join the military,” Williams said. “Many chose to do so in a post-9/11 environment where we knew we were going to deploy, so it’s awkward being thanked for doing the job you signed up to do.”

Veterans of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria often have complicated feelings about their service that can’t be distilled into a short response when someone thanks them out of nowhere at the grocery store or on the bus, said Malia Du Mont, who served in Afghanistan and now is an officer in the Army Reserve.

These veterans deployed during wars that affected them deeply but that the American public largely ignored, Du Mont said.

“‘Thank you for your service,’ for a lot of people feels like an empty phrase,” she said. “For younger veterans, I think, there’s an unspoken disappointment that when people say ‘thank you for your service,’ there’s that lack of understanding.”

USAA also surveyed more than 800 civilians and found that slightly more than half said they’d be surprised to learn that “thank you for your service” could make some veterans and service members uncomfortable.

The awkwardness is an “imperfect starting place” that could prompt conversations with civilians leading to more mutual understanding, said Phil Klay, a Marine veteran who deployed to Iraq in 2007 and won a National Book Award for his short stories on war and coming home.

“I’ve always felt like the phrase itself is a good thing,” Klay said. “Now, does it mean that it’s always offered sincerely? Does it mean the veteran might not have much more complicated feelings about their service? Does it mean that the phrase is sufficient? No.”

(Source: <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2023-11-09/veterans-thanks-poll-11990002.html>)

A taxing situation

According to unofficial sources, a new simplified income-tax form contains only four lines:

- 1. What was your income for the year?
- 2. What were your expenses?
- 3. How much have you left?
- 4. Send it in.

Quick List of what to do in the Event of a Veteran’s Death

IMMEDIATELY REPORT DEATH TO THE FOLLOWING AGENCIES:

VA Pension or Compensation (if veteran was receiving) to avoid an overpayment, you must notify the federal VA immediately at **1-800-827-1000**. You will need the veteran’s full name, social security number, branch of Service, DOB, and date of death

Social Security Office Bend Phone: **800-772-1213**

DEERS Phone: **800-538-9552**

DFAS (Retired military only) Phone: **888-332-7411**

VA Sponsored Life Insurance Phone: **800-669-8477**

SGLI Life Insurance (retired military only) Phone: **800-419-1473**

VA healthcare (if vet was enrolled) Notify the clinic to which they were assigned. Bend CBOC Phone: **541-647-5200**

Secure a DD214 (Discharge papers from service)

You will need the veteran’s DD214 to obtain a flag from the funeral home and obtain other federal VA benefits. If you do not have a DD214 you may submit an Urgent Request for Military Records to National Personnel Record Center.

To make an urgent burial request, you will need to complete request form SF 180 to the best of your ability. <http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/standard-form-....>

Please provide the Next of Kin’s dated signature and proof of death.

Fax the request form to the urgent fax line which is **(314) 801-0764**. Make the fax to ATTN: URGENT BURIAL, and please provide the date and time needed for burial/memorial service. Be sure to include a good phone number so they can call if any questions arise and a return fax number with the name the fax is to be addressed. Emergency requests are usually completed within 72 hours after receiving a faxed request. You can send a written request that includes the above information. That request can be faxed or mailed.

National Personnel Records Center
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138

Make Funeral Arrangements (Work with your funeral home):

National Cemetery Option (casket and cremated remains)

Veterans who die on active duty, or with discharges that are other than dishonorable, are entitled by law a grave site in any national cemetery with available space, opening and closing of the grave. Burial benefits available include a grave site in a national cemetery with available space, opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a Government headstone or marker, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate, at no cost to the family.

Keep in mind the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) furnishes upon request, at no charge to the applicant, a Government headstone or marker for the unmarked grave of any deceased **eligible** Veteran in any cemetery around the world, regardless of their date of death.

To schedule a burial at a National Cemetery you will need to complete a two-step process:

Step 1: Fax Eligibility Documentation to 1-866-900-6417 *or* Scan and Email to NCA.Scheduling@va.gov

Step 2: Call 1-800-535-1117

It is encouraged that you visit the National Cemetery benefits page at https://www.cem.va.gov/burial_benefits/need.asp where you will find useful information related to any burial requests and benefits.

BURIAL at SEA **1-866-787-0081**

Death Certificates on average run about \$25.00 each and the funeral home often talks people into buying more than they need. BE ADVISED most agencies, other than insurance companies, will accept a copy of the death certificate.

Make an appointment with your Veterans Service Officer

If you are eligible, your VSO can help you apply for VA benefits including:

- Government Marker/Headstone/Medallion
- Presidential Memorial Certificates
- Burial Reimbursement
- Surviving Spousal Pension (income based program, vet must have served during a recognized wartime period)
- Dependency and indemnity Compensation (service connected death)

You will need to obtain following documents *prior* to your scheduled appointment:

- DD214
- Death Certificate
- Itemized burial expenses
- Proof of relationship
- Proof of income (if applying for pension)



www.stripes.com

Stars and Stripes has one of the widest distribution ranges of any newspaper in the world. Between the Pacific and European editions, *Stars and Stripes* services over 50 countries where there are bases, posts, service members, ships, or embassies. I am proud that *Stars and Stripes* has for two decades supported and continues in support of our Grapevine.

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VA Survivor Benefits

VA Home Loan Guaranty

A VA loan guaranty to acquire a home may be available to an un-remarried spouse of a veteran or service member who died as a result of service-connected disabilities, a surviving spouse who remarries after age 57, or a spouse of a service member officially listed as missing in action or who is currently a prisoner of war for more than 90 days. Spouses of those listed MIA/POW are limited to one loan. Surviving spouses of certain totally disabled veterans, whose disability may not have been the cause of death, may also be eligible for VA loan guaranty.

The loan may be used to purchase, construct or improve a home; purchase a manufactured home and/or lot; or refinance existing mortgages or other liens on a dwelling owned as the surviving spouse’s home.

“No-Fee” passports

“No-fee” passports are available to immediate family members (spouse, children, parents, brothers and sisters) for the expressed purpose of visiting their loved one’s grave or memorialization site at an American military cemetery on foreign soil. For additional information, telephone 703-696-6897, visit www.abmc.gov, or write to:

American Battle Monuments Commission
Courthouse Plaza II, Suite 500
2300 Clarendon Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22201

Burial benefits from the National Cemetery Administration

Eligible veterans and their spouses and dependents can be buried in one of the [national cemeteries](#) across the nation maintained by the VA. Burial benefits for veterans in these cemeteries include opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a government headstone or marker, a burial flag and a Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC), at no cost to the family.

Burial benefits available for spouses and dependents buried in a national cemetery include burial with the veteran, perpetual care of the gravesite, and the spouse’s or dependents’ names and dates of birth and death inscribed on the veteran’s headstone, at no cost to the family. Spouses and dependents may also be eligible to be buried in a VA national cemetery.

Please note, when veterans are buried at private cemeteries, the government provides a headstone or marker, a burial flag and a PMC. The VA also may pay for some of the burial and funeral expenses. Many states have their own veteran cemeteries, which may have state residency requirements.

Did you hear the one about...
...the shepherd who drove his sheep through town and was given a ticket for making a ewe turn?
...the nurse who was chewed out by the doctor because she was absent without gauze?

How can the VA appointments tool help me manage my care?

This tool offers a secure, online way to schedule, view, and organize your VA and community care appointments. The appointments you can schedule online depend on your facility, the type of health service, and other factors.



You can use this tool to:

- Schedule some of your VA health appointments online
- Request approved community care appointments online
- Cancel appointments made online
- View appointments on your health calendar
- Find the location of the VA or community care facility for your appointments
- Print a list of your future appointments

Am I eligible to use this tool?

You can use this tool if you meet all of the requirements listed below.

All of these must be true. You’re:

- Enrolled in VA health care, and
- Scheduling your appointment with a VA health facility that uses online scheduling, and
- Registered or you’ve had an appointment at that facility before

Find out how to apply for VA health care

And, you must have one of these free accounts:

- A verified Login.gov account, or
- A verified ID.me account, or
- A Premium DS Logon account, or
- A Premium My HealtheVet account

If you don’t have one of these accounts, you can create a free Login.gov or ID.me account.

How do I know if my VA health facility uses online scheduling?

What types of VA health appointments can I schedule online?

It depends on the VA health facility where you’re receiving care. You can typically schedule an appointment online for the types of care that don’t require a referral.

Once you’re signed in to the appointments tool, you’ll find the

types of appointments you can schedule online at your registered health facility. You can also check with the facility where you receive care about scheduling appointments online.

Can I use this tool to schedule community (non-VA) appointments?

Yes. If you’re eligible to receive care from a community provider outside of VA, you can use this tool to submit appointment requests. You must receive prior approval from us before getting care from a community provider.

Can I schedule appointments through VA secure messaging?

If you use secure messaging with your VA health care team, you may be able to use this service to schedule and cancel appointments.

Learn more about secure messaging

Please note: The fastest way to schedule appointments is usually to call the health facility where you get care. To reschedule or cancel an existing appointment, please contact your facility as soon as possible.

Find your health facility’s phone number

Will my personal health information be protected?

Yes. This is a secure website. We follow strict security policies and practices to protect your personal health information. And only you and your VA health care team will have access to your secure messages.

If you print or download any messages, you’ll need to take responsibility for protecting that information.

Get tips for protecting your personal health information

What if I have more questions?

For questions about scheduling an appointment please call your VA or community care health facility.

Find your health facility’s phone number

For questions about the VA appointments tool

Please call 877-470-5947 (711). We’re here Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET.

For questions about joining a VA Video Connect appointment

Please call 866-651-3180 (711). We’re here 24/7.

CHAMPVA benefits

Are you the spouse or surviving spouse of—or a child of—a Veteran with disabilities or a Veteran who has died? If you don’t qualify for TRICARE (the Department of Defense’s health care program for active-duty and retired service members and their families), you may be able to get health insurance through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA). Through this program, we cover the cost of some of your health care services and supplies. This is called cost sharing. You may only be eligible for health care through CHAMPVA if you don’t qualify for TRICARE and at least one of these descriptions is true for you.

At least one of these must be true:

You’re the spouse or child of a Veteran who’s been rated permanently and totally disabled for a service-connected disability by a VA regional office, or

You’re the surviving spouse or child of a Veteran who died from a VA-rated service-connected disability, or

You’re the surviving spouse or child of a Veteran who was at the time of death rated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected disability, or

You’re the surviving spouse or child of a service member who died in the line of duty, not due to misconduct (in most of these cases, family members qualify for TRICARE, not CHAMPVA).

A service-connected disability is a disability that we’ve concluded was caused—or made worse—by the Veteran’s active-duty service. A permanent disability is one that’s not expected to improve.

Note: A Veteran who’s the qualifying CHAMPVA sponsor for their family may also qualify for the VA health care program based on their own Veteran status. If 2 spouses are both Veterans who qualify as CHAMPVA sponsors for their family, they both may now qualify for CHAMPVA benefits. Each time they need medical care, they may choose to get care through the VA health care program or using their CHAMPVA coverage.

There are other factors that may affect whether you or other family members qualify for CHAMPVA.. Go to this website to see them: https://www.va.gov/health-care/family-caregiver-benefits/champva/

With CHAMPVA, you’ll be covered for services and supplies when we determine they are medically necessary and were received from an authorized provider. When providers are performing services within the scope of their license or certification, we consider them to be authorized.

Covered services include:

Ambulance service

Ambulatory surgery
Durable medical equipment (DME)
Family planning and maternity
Hospice
Inpatient services
Mental health services
Outpatient services
Pharmacy (prescription medicines)
Skilled nursing care
Transplants

When you’re signed up for CHAMPVA, you’ll get a copy of the CHAMPVA Program Guide. This guide will tell you more about covered and non-covered services and supplies.

Download the CHAMPVA Program Guide (PDF)

Download fact sheets on CHAMPVA benefits

You’ll need to apply for these benefits.

To apply, submit these required documents:

Application for CHAMPVA Benefits (VA Form 10-10d), and

Other Health Insurance Certification (VA Form 10-7959c), and

Documents related to your Medicare status:

If you qualify for Medicare for any reason, you’ll need to submit a copy of your Medicare card.

If you’re 65 years old or older and don’t qualify for Medicare, you’ll need to send us documentation from the Social Security Administration that confirms you don’t qualify for Medicare benefits under anyone’s Social Security number.

To speed up the processing of your application, you can also send copies (not originals) of these optional documents:

The page from the VBA rating decision showing your Veteran is permanently and totally disabled (or the death rating if you’re a survivor)

Your Veteran’s DD214 (Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty)—or, if the Veteran was a World War II or Korean War Veteran, the Report of Separation. If you don’t have a copy of the necessary form, you can request it by submitting a Standard Form 180, Request Pertaining to Military Records, from the National Archives.Find out how to request military service records online, by mail, or by fax

Documents related to any dependent children you’re including in your application:

A copy of each child’s birth certificate or adoption papers

School certification of enrollment for children ages 18-23.

Download our fact sheet on school enrollment certification requirements (PDF)

‘It was a battle’: Navy vet Everett Alvarez says belief in America got him through 8½ years as POW in Vietnam

By DOUG G. WARE, STARS AND STRIPES

ROCKVILLE, Md. — The passage of almost 60 years has done nothing to dim former Navy fighter pilot Everett Alvarez Jr.’s memories of the night that he was shot down in the South China Sea and began what would be the second-longest period of captivity for an American service member in the Vietnam War.

At 85 years old, Alvarez still vividly remembers his Douglas A4 Skyhawk filling with smoke and coming apart as he had just a few seconds to make a series of life-or-death choices.

“I was really low. I knew I had to get out right there,” he said Wednesday in an interview at his suburban Washington, D.C., home. “I was trying to get altitude, I was trying to get out to the sea [away from the North Vietnamese coastline], I was trying to maintain control, but I couldn’t do it.”

Then a lieutenant junior grade, Alvarez made one final radio transmission to his wingmen from the USS Constellation before he hit the ejector seat and bailed out into the stormy darkness on Aug. 5, 1964 — only three days after the Gulf of Tonkin incident that triggered America’s full-scale entry into the war.

“I’ll see you guys later,” he told them.

Alvarez would ultimately spend 8½ years as a prisoner of war — much of it in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton.”

He was the first American to be shot down over North Vietnam and the first to be taken prisoner there. This week, he’s also among many veterans who are being honored with a “Welcome Home” celebration on the National Mall by the Vietnam War Commemoration to remember the 50th anniversary of the end of U.S. involvement in the conflict.

Only Floyd James Thompson, an Army Special Forces officer advising the South Vietnamese, was imprisoned longer. He was captured in South Vietnam on March 26, 1964 — more than five months before the Gulf of Tonkin incident — and held for nearly 10 years. He died in 2002.

From pilot to prisoner

Alvarez said it’s a miracle that he ejected and made it to the ground alive. Just another second or two in either direction, he said, would have brought certain death.

“I timed it pretty well,” he said, then revising that assessment. “I didn’t time it pretty well. God timed it pretty well. I figured someone is watching over me.”

Even after ending up in the gulf, still alive, Alvarez said he

was then immediately met by gunfire from armed fishermen on the water.

“[They] told me to put my hands up in the air, which I did,” he said. “And they got me, quickly.”



Former POW Everett Alvarez Jr. reads a copy of Stars and Stripes as he relaxes in the hospital after his release from the Hanoi Hilton in 1973. (Defense Department)

About a week later, Alvarez found himself in Hoa Lo Prison — now infamously known as the “Hanoi Hilton,” a large complex built by colonialists to house political prisoners when the region was known as French Indochina.

“I could hear the clanking of the big gate that opened up into the prison as we drove in. I was still blindfolded and they led me into a room where that was my first living quarters. ... It was a barren room, a little table, about a 10 feet by 12 [feet] room. They had a metal frame with a slat, a board, which would be the bed.”

Given nothing but a straw mat and a pillow, which was just a straw bundle, and a mosquito net, Alvarez began serving what would turn out to be more than 3,100 days of continuous captivity by the North Vietnamese.

During those days, Alvarez said he was often moved over to different parts of the prison complex, and sometimes he was moved away from the complex and into the forest. At times he had roommates, and other times he didn’t. Sometimes his captors could be benevolent, and other times they were just violent.

“I told them as little as I could,” he said. “They quizzed me for six weeks to learn everything they could.”

Late in 1965, his captors moved Alvarez and other captured Americans to a group of small huts somewhere outside Hanoi — a period that the naval aviator called the “second phase of his POW life.” After several weeks, they were sent back to Hanoi and cycled through locations the POWs called “the zoo” and “the briar patch.”

At one point in 1966, the North Vietnamese marched Alvarez and several other captive Americans through the streets

of Hanoi, then the capital of North Vietnam. Alvarez said “the Hanoi march” began what might have been the most hostile period of his detention, one that would last for three years.

“Things were starting to turn rough by then. After the march, things really got rough,” he said. “They would punish us. They would torture us for propaganda.

“About three years of constant punishment, torture, different things, they weren’t having success converting us to their ideology, and so they really went after us for propaganda purposes — statements, letters, tapes.”

The tough treatment of Alvarez and the other POWs continued through the next few years, especially after an escape attempt. That treatment included malnourishment, which gave Alvarez dysentery and reduced him to a little more than 100 pounds.

During his time in captivity, Alvarez said there were so many unknowns that he basically had no choice but to hang on to the few morsels of motivation he could muster — thoughts of home, trust in his faith and confidence in his country.

“It was a battle. You have got to hang on to your values, you have got to hang on to your ideals, you have got to hang on to, you know, you’re a member of a team, a group. Everybody was in this thing to keep resisting,” he said.

It was about that time that Alvarez received what was perhaps his worst injury, and one that still causes him trouble today. One of the guards flew into a rage and swung the butt of his rifle into the left side of Alvarez’s face.

“To this day, that’s why I have difficulty. It dislocated my jaw,” he said, also noting he sustained a variety of other injuries that required surgeries on both arms and his back.

Another thing that kept him and the other American POWs going during those dark years in captivity, he said, was communicating with each other. Sometimes they scribbled messages for each other on the bottom of their dishes, and other times they spoke to each other via a finger-tapped communication code.

Going home, finally

The constant interrogations and punishments for Americans at the prison would go on for a couple more years before Alvarez finally began to see some light at the end of the tunnel for him and the others at Hoa Lo.

President Richard Nixon famously increased bombing in North Vietnam in 1972, which included the Hanoi area toward the end of that year. They are often referred to as the “Christmas bombings” and one of the goals of that strategy

was to push North Vietnam to the bargaining table.

Scholars and historians have debated for decades how successful Nixon’s strategy was, but Alvarez said when he heard the intensity of the American bombs exploding around him, he knew that the end of the war was in sight. He also knew something was afoot because the POWs’ living conditions began to improve, which is a common bargaining strategy often seen at the end of modern conflicts.

“We knew [North Vietnam] couldn’t last long,” Alvarez said of the relentless U.S. bombing in the latter part of 1972. A couple of weeks later in January 1973, Alvarez said he and the other American prisoners were told they were finally getting released.

“They said, ‘You will be going home soon,’ ” he said.

On Jan. 27, 1973, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ended with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and officials on both sides began planning for the release of the POWs.

“We were anxious to go,” Alvarez said.

Escorted by their guards to a nearby landing strip on Feb. 12, Alvarez and dozens of other American POWs stood on the tarmac and watched as their plane — a Lockheed C-141 Starlifter — swooped in to pick them up and take them to a U.S. base in the Philippines. Alvarez was the first one called to board the plane.

“What I remember the most is the plane started up and we were taxiing, and we got to the end of the runway ... we lifted off and everybody let out a big cheer,” he said. “And we toasted each other with a little Coke or soft drink that we had and said, ‘We made it.’



Navy pilot Everett Alvarez Jr. speaks to reporters at Travis Air Force Base, Calif., in February 1973 after his return from Vietnam. (Phillip M. Porter/U.S. Navy)

Upon arrival in the Philippines, Alvarez was the second one off the plane — after the senior-ranking officer of the group — and he was told he’d have an opportunity to say a few words to the waiting crowd and a row of television cameras.

“I have to tell you, I was just amazed at the crowd and the attention,” Alvarez said, noting he’d heard about the rising anti-war movement in the U.S.

“I came down the ramp and I had no idea what I was going to say. But there’s [an] admiral ... at the bottom of the steps. I gave him a salute and I said, ‘Lt. j.g. Alvarez reporting back, sir.’ ”

That moment was captured by a photographer and displayed on the front page of the Feb. 14, 1973, edition of Stars and Stripes.

After his return and recuperation in 1973, Alvarez went on to several different enterprises. He retired from the Navy in 1980 and subsequently served a few political appointments for President Ronald Reagan for the remainder of the decade, including deputy director of the Peace Corps and deputy administrator with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

He became a lifetime member of the Board of Fellows at Santa Clara University in California — his alma mater — and founded the information technology consulting firm Alvarez LLC about 20 years ago. The firm is still active in federal government information technology — and Alvarez is still chief executive. His son Marc is president of the company.

Alvarez has also written two books about his experiences in Vietnam, received numerous medals from his time in the Navy and might soon receive the Congressional Gold Medal, which lawmakers are now considering.

“What’s the status on that?” he asked with a smile.

As he now prepares to be honored at the Welcome Home Celebration in Washington this weekend, the proud American grandson of immigrants from Mexico points to several things that have allowed him to be successful in serving his country and realizing the American Dream.

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve just had a lot of support. I think I’ve been successful in most things I’ve tried to do. I’ve graduated in electrical engineering from a college. I became a Navy pilot. I was a political appointee. I got into the business world,” Alvarez said. “I was nothing special. I’m just one of the guys that had to do what we had to do. And that’s how we did it, one day at a time. I had a lot of discussions — a lot of conversation with the man upstairs. That’s what worked for me.”

(Source: <https://www.stripes.com/veterans/2023-05-11/navy-pilot-vietnam-war-hanoi-hilton-10084744.html>)

*Used with permission from Stars and Stripes.
Visit their website at www.stripes.com*

Top Rated Veterans & Military Charities

(Source: https://www.charitywatch.org/top-rated-charities) Charity	
Armed Services YMCA of the USA	A-
Bob Woodruff Foundation	A-
Fisher House Foundation	A+
Folds of Honor Foundation	A+
Gary Sinise Foundation	A
Homes For Our Troops	A
Hope For The Warriors	A
Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund	A+
Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America	A-
K9s For Warriors	B+
Mission Continues	A-
National Military Family Association	A
Semper Fi & America's Fund	A+
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors	A
Wounded Warriors Family Support	A



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HOW I LEARNED TO MIND MY OWN BUSINESS

I was walking past the mental hospital the other day.
And all of the patients were shouting "13....13....13..."

The fence was too high to see over, but
I saw a little gap in the planks.

So I looked through to see what was going on....
Some idiot poked me in the eye with a stick.

Then they all started shouting "14....14....14..."

What Does the Space Force Do? 4 Years After Its Birth, Glimpses of the Service's Mission Emerge

Military.com | By Thomas Novelty



A U.S. Space Force 2nd Lieutenant wears the Space Force patch in San Angelo, Texas, March 26, 2021. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Ashley Thrash)

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colorado -- Staring at the computer screen in an office complex not too far from Schriever and Peterson Space Force Bases, a Guardian had a rapidly diminishing timer with only eight minutes left to carefully type in the complex computer code needed to hack an enemy satellite.

The low-Earth orbit satellite, which was traveling at roughly 18,000 miles an hour, was reportedly gathering intelligence about U.S. military assets across the Midwest, Southeast, Gulf of Mexico and Eastern Seaboard on four passes -- leaving only a small contact window in which the Guardians could work to stop the enemy from collecting photos and reconnaissance.

Their plan was to slowly redirect the satellite's camera away from its intended targets by a few degrees each pass, a subtle averted gaze so as not to arouse suspicion. But if the enemy noticed any small changes, the Guardians' cover could be blown. One young specialist came up with the idea to send the operator false data, so the enemy would think it was business as usual. Then, once their mission was complete, they'd hack into the logs and erase them, hiding all traces they were even there.

A single mistype could shut down the whole operation or, worse, blow their cover. After the eight minutes, a quiet settled into the laboratory as the contact window closed and connection with the enemy's satellite was lost. It would be another hour before another pass and a chance to inflict further damage on the enemy. In the downtime, the Guardians grabbed snacks, checked their text messages and, at one point, talked about comic book collections.

The November exercise -- a simulation put on at the nonprofit Stephenson Stellar Corporation's headquarters in Colorado Springs -- was targeting the "People's Republic of Atlantica," a "small but potent threat" that has "assumed a partnership with a great Power Competitor." The imagined scenario offered a rare

glimpse into the very real approaches that Space Force Guardians could use to hack, defend, operate and control an enemy's satellite, strategies the service remains tight-lipped about as it tries to preserve a competitive edge.

On Dec. 20, the Space Force is celebrating four years as a service. The smallest military branch, with around 8,600 service members, it's shrouded in more secrecy than many of the others, leading to a seemingly perpetual question from the public: "What does the Space Force do?"

Americans can see F-35s on an Air Force base's runway. They can see Army soldiers driving Humvees and watch Navy aircraft carriers ship off to sea.

But you can't see outer space and, due to the highly classified nature of the Space Force's operations, broadcasting what it does is often not possible, especially when many Guardians work from sensitive compartmented information facilities, also known as SCIFs, on carefully guarded military installations. Those SCIFs come with special rules about access to cell phones, among other protections meant to keep information from leaking out.

"I don't talk about work, and my wife doesn't really know what I do," said one enlisted Guardian, who didn't want to be named because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media. "It helps when you work in a SCIF; you have to leave work at the door."

But the Space Force's mission statement -- "secure our Nation's interests in, from, and to space" -- is a tall order for a small force and encompasses more than just monitoring satellites, keeping an eye out for space debris, or launching the occasional rocket into the atmosphere.

It ranges from operating the global positioning system that helps billions navigate worldwide, detecting missiles being fired across the globe at a moment's notice, and protecting satellites and their networks from being attacked.

At first, the service debuted as a punch line for late-night talk shows, only exacerbated by its Star Trek-ian uniform unveiling, and faced an unclear future following President Donald Trump's one term in office. Trump had been an early proponent of the service, pushing ahead with its creation despite skepticism from lawmakers.

Since then, the service branch has outlived a Netflix comedy show of the same name, seen a historic increase in funding in 2024's annual defense policy bill, and set up commands in the Pacific, Middle East and South Korea.

The very real threats in space are growing, underscoring the important need for Guardians to prepare and train, like in the scenario set up by Stephenson Stellar, on how to defend against attacks on satellites.

"Over the past year and a half, there has been regular testing and use of reversible non-destructive capabilities, as well as a

destructive test that created a debris field, jeopardizing safe operations and indicating that the domain will continue to become more contested," retired Gen. John "Jay" Raymond, the first chief of space operations for the service, wrote in a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington D.C.-based think tank, published in April. "China and Russia are developing and integrating space capabilities that will afford them the same advantages the United States currently enjoys, placing U.S. forces at great risk."

Training to Meet the Threats

Sitting in a conference room at the Stephenson Stellar offices, six Space Force Guardians, an Air Force Academy cadet, and several civilians from other space- and cyber-focused groups watched slideshows on what tactics would work best to degrade the capabilities of an enemy satellite.

During the discussion, some tactics involved draining the enemy satellite's battery; other ideas included changing the data so that it would give false diagnostic reports to the adversary to make them believe the satellite was functioning like normal. But most of the discussions of tactics skirted around the ideas of just blatantly destroying or crashing the satellite.

Maj. Victor Beitelman, a former Army signal officer who transferred into the Space Force in 2021, participated in the training. He told Military.com that he joined the Army to be "the tip of the spear" but that takes on a different practice in space.

"Brute force is not the way that you're going to win in space," Beitelman said. "There are ways that you can deny adversaries access to space, but it comes at the cost of sacrificing everything that's on orbit. Outmaneuvering and outpacing these threats and things like that is, that's the kind of mindset that we want in the younger generation."



Space Force Guardians as well as civilians participate in a workshop at Stephenson Stellar Corps Space Cyber Range laboratory in Colorado Springs. (Photo courtesy of Stephenson Stellar Corporation)

One type of attack is referred to as kinetic, such as missiles to destroy a satellite ground station or a satellite itself. No country has tried this on another nation's satellite, according to

CSIS, but the United States, Russia, China and India have all had success testing such attacks on their own satellites.

In 2007, China fired a ballistic missile, destroying its own satellite and creating a cloud of more than 3,000 pieces of space debris, the largest ever tracked, according to the nonprofit Secure World Foundation

These types of attacks are discouraged in the international community, in part, because of the amount of debris they cause. Picking up wreckage in space isn't possible, and the remnants of a destroyed satellite can orbit for years. There are more than 6,000 active total satellites in space and upward of 40,000 pieces of orbital debris, causing plenty of obstacles for operators.

But there are less destructive ways to interfere with satellites, such as using high-powered lasers to blind a camera. There is also a variety of methods in which an attacker could jam a satellite or, like the Guardians training in November at Stephenson Stellar were learning, types of cyberattacks.

Potential enemies have clearly demonstrated they too are developing technology and techniques to mess with satellites.

A 2021 threat report from the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence indicated that "China has ground-based lasers capable of blinding or damaging optical sensors on low-altitude satellites," CSIS said in its 2023 threat assessment report.

Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine has also showcased the ways it's been utilizing space for warfighting. In a major show of force in November 2021, Russia launched a missile destroying one of its own satellites, creating more than 1,500 pieces of orbital debris.

But Russia has also consistently used cyberattacks against Ukraine's ground stations and toyed with commercial airline GPS. In March 2022, Starlink -- which provides free satellite internet and communications for Ukraine -- encountered Russian satellite communications jamming attempts.

It's the competitive nature of what's going on in space, with multiple countries trying to develop technologies that could surprise potential enemies, that makes so much of the Space Force's mission classified and kept secret from the public, exacerbating the relative confusion over what Guardians do.

"If you shoot a bullet, anybody can visualize that and see what the effect is," said Master Sgt. Stephen Lescroart, an enlisted cyber intelligence Guardian.

Lescroart, however, believes that the impact of what the Space Force is doing might be greater than the immediately obvious boom from other services' weapons. "With things in the cyber realm and the space realm, there are our force multipliers that support other things, and make that force greater than it is," he said.

What the Space Force might do in response to an enemy attack is generally highly classified, but Guardians are training for a wide variety of possibilities to attack and defend against those tactics.

"Now, with space, we are at the tip of the spear, but you don't have to be in orbit to actually be directly impacting national security," Beitelman said.

Preparing to Launch

The Space Force of 2019 looked a lot different than the service preparing to take on 2024's challenges.

Kari Bingen, director of the Aerospace Security Project and a senior fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told Military.com that the service worked on setting up the basics for the first couple of years.

Now, especially as threats grow in Europe, the Pacific and, most recently, in the Middle East, Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance B. Saltzman has been showcasing how the Space Force can be there to help.

"They spent the last three or four years doing organizational changes," Bingen said. "But now he's really tweaking it to posture them for combatant command and operational support, the same way that you see the other services be able to present forces and capabilities to combatant commanders who then execute warfighting operations."

In another important milestone for the service, U.S. Space Command -- the combatant command for all military operations in space -- reached full operational capability last week following a years-long political battle over whether it would be based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, or Huntsville, Alabama.

"As the command has matured, challenges to a safe, secure, stable, and sustainable space domain have significantly increased," Army Gen. James Dickinson, head of U.S. Space Command, said in a press release. "Both the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation are fielding counter space capabilities designed to hold U.S., allied and partner space assets at risk. And North Korea and Iran are in the early stages of developing their space enterprise."

The Space Force is tasked with training and preparing Guardians to meet those challenges, which are evolving every day.

Stephenson Stellar's initiative, the Stellar Space Cyber Range, is being supported by the Air Force Research Laboratory, which awarded the group a \$22.7 million contract in 2021.

The goal, Stephenson Stellar CEO and President Jeff Moulton told Military.com, is to get more funding to eventually launch four CubeSats, a type of microsatellite, into low-Earth orbit that participants in the training will be able to maneuver, hack and practice with in real time.

"You have to have that real environment to practice," Moulton said. "And no one's going to let you practice on their satellites, and that's what we were trying to do."

Training in real-world environments is becoming only more important as global tensions from adversaries such as China and Russia grow.

Just last week, China deployed its highly secretive space plane into outer space for the third time. It was just one day before the Space Force's own space plane, the comparable X-37B, was set to launch. That takeoff, organized with Elon Musk's SpaceX, has been repeatedly delayed.

Saltzman told reporters last week at the Space Force Association's Spacepower Conference that China's planned launch sent a message.

"It's no surprise that the Chinese are extremely interested in our space plane. We're extremely interested in theirs," Saltzman reportedly said. "It's probably no coincidence that they're trying to match us in the timing and sequence of this."

(Source: <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/12/20/what-does-space-force-do-4-years-after-its-birth-glimpses-of-services-mission-emerge.html>)

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All bottled up

“We used to play spin the bottle when I was a kid. A girl would spin the bottle, and if the bottle pointed to you when it stopped, the girl could either kiss you or give you a nickel. By the time I was 14, I owned my own house.”



Is CHAMPVA for your family?

Here's some information on how CHAMPVA can help your family

January 31, 2024

By Stephanie Slater
Office of Integrated Veteran Care

What is CHAMPVA?

Are you a Veteran with a permanent and total service-connected disability? Did you know your family members may have access to VA-covered care through the Civilian Health and Medical Program of VA (CHAMPVA)?

To help Veterans and their family members learn more about the program, [theSITREP – VA Health Care Made Simple](#) invited CHAMPVA’s deputy director and Coast Guard Veteran Luke Davis to its podcast. In the podcast, Davis answers frequently asked questions about CHAMPVA in a [series of videos](#) worth watching

Top three takeaways from [VA health care for Veterans families | CHAMPVA](#):

1. CHAMPVA is a health care benefit program for family members of Veterans with a permanent and total service-connected disability, provided they don’t qualify for TRICARE. (TRICARE is the Department of Defense’s health care program for active-duty and retired service members and their families.)

2. CHAMPVA is not an insurance policy, but it shares the cost for care and will pay as secondary to any other health insurance.

3, Family members can enroll in CHAMPVA by completing and mailing a [CHAMPVA application form](#) and [Other Health Insurance certification form](#).

Can CHAMPVA be used outside the U.S.?

Top two points from [Using CHAMPVA when traveling overseas](#):

1. CHAMPVA provides the same benefits if you live or travel overseas. Deductibles and cost shares are the same as if you were in the U.S. Claim payments are made in U.S. dollars.

2. You may have to pay up front for your services, but you will be reimbursed once your claim has been ap-

proved.

Who can you see with CHAMPVA?

Three highlights from [Who can you see with CHAMPVA](#):

1. Because CHAMPVA doesn’t have in-network providers, family members can see their regular providers and specialists as long as they accept CHAMPVA payment methods.

2. Providers who accept TRICARE or Medicare are more likely to honor CHAMPVA.

3. Family members are encouraged to reach out to their providers and find out if they accept CHAMPVA.

For more information

Call 800-733-8387, Monday through Friday from 8:05 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. ET for more information about CHAMPVA. You can also view this [CHAMPVA fact sheet](#) or visit the [CHAMPVA website](#).

CHAMPVA Eligibility

To be eligible for CHAMPVA, you cannot be eligible for TRICARE, and you must be in one of these categories:

1. The spouse or child of a Veteran who has been rated permanently and totally disabled for a service-connected disability by a VA regional office.

2. The surviving spouse or child of a Veteran who died from a VA-rated service-connected disability.

3. The surviving spouse or child of a Veteran who was at the time death rated permanently and totally disabled from a service-connected disability.

4. The surviving spouse or child of a military member who died in the line of duty, not due to misconduct (in most of these cases, these family members are eligible for TRICARE, not CHAMPVA).

More info: <https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/dependents/champva/champva-eligibility.asp>

988 Crisis Line: 1 Million Veterans, Service Members Called in a Year

(Editor’s note: This article deals with suicide. If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, call the 988 National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline opens 988lifeline.org and press “1”, or text 838255, or chat opens 988 chatfor the dedicated Veterans Crisis Line and Military Crisis Line. For Spanish, press “2”.)

It’s been a little more than a year since the [988 National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline opens 98lifeline.org](#) phone number, texts, and chats have been active, and more than 5.5 million people have contacted the new, confidential, 24/7 service in times of crisis.

Nearly one-quarter, or 1 million, contacts have been made to 988’s dedicated [Veterans Crisis Lineopens veteranscrisisline.net](#) and [Military Crisis Lineopens veteranscrisisline.net](#).

“The 988 Lifeline is an important and critical resource for service members and their families who may be experiencing mental health-related distress, such as thoughts of suicide, to connect for immediate crisis intervention and confidential support,” said Dr. Liz Clark, director of the [Department of Defense Suicide Prevention Officeopens DSPO.mil](#).

“The lifeline is staffed with trained crisis counselors who actively listen and collaborate with callers, and provide support and resources as needed. Every life is worth living, and we actively encourage our military community to reach out for care, support, and help,” Clark said.

Data from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMSHA, discussed in a [recent podcastListen to the podcast](#) on “Navigating Crisis with 988,” show 80% of the time, or more, a suicidal crisis can be helped by using 988.

Getting the Word Out

The 988 Lifeline went live in July 2022 after a six-year effort to create a national three-digit number akin to 911, and all involved continue to publicize it to lessen the stigma of seeking help at a time of mental health crisis.

Maria Mouratidis, a clinical psychologist and deputy chief of the DHA’s [Psychological Health Center of Excellenceopens Health.mil](#), said what is needed to get people to use resources such as 988, is to “normalize seeking help and having conversations about mental health and suicide, while increasing psychological health literacy and education about treatment,” as well as “providing education about and access to mental health resources.”

“By reducing the stigma of seeking help for mental health issues and education, people in crisis may seek help at the earliest signs of stress or symptoms,” she suggested.

Mouratidis said awareness and empathy are important. Be

aware of those around you “who may be feeling ostracized, marginalized, or isolated. Engage them. Convey that there is hope.”

For military families, sharing the message and resources of the [Real Warriors Campaignopens Health.mil](#) is key, Mouratidis emphasized. The campaign’s partnership between PHCoE and DSPO is [adding more emphasis on suicide prevention and reducing stigmaopens Health.mil article](#) in line with Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III’s goal to [eliminate suicide in the militaryopens defense.gov](#).



According to SAMSHA, it’s OK to talk about suicide with someone at risk. SAMHSA recommends people ask whether somebody is having thoughts about suicide and then actively listen and try to problem solve. Emergency medical intervention is not always needed at the time, so people at risk of suicide should be asked if they know where to get help, know about 988, and possibly be assisted in being linked to mental health and other resources, such as housing and food.

Dedicated Veterans/Military Crisis Line

This line serves veterans, active duty service members, National Guard and Reserve members, and those who support them.

After dialing 988, press “1” to be connected directly to the Veterans Crisis Line. You can also text 838255 or go to the [chat](#) app. You don’t need to be enrolled in Department of Veterans Affairs benefits, receiving care at a military hospital or clinic, or a military health care plan to connect.

You can also reach 988 from the Defense Health Agency’s [Psychological Center of Excellence websiteopens Health.mil](#).

The contact is then routed directly to one of the VA’s crisis counseling centers that are trained in military culture and can better understand where veterans and military personnel are coming from and can connect them with appropriate resources.

There's no charge, and you decide how much information to share. In addition, you don’t have to press “1” if you prefer to talk to one of the Lifeline’s 200 call centers.

Spanish-speaking 988 callers can press “2” for Spanish-language services.

For those who are hearing impaired, click the "ASL Now" button on the website and follow the prompts.

Veterans also can take a free, 10-minute [self-checkopens vetsselfcheck.org](#) through a VA-affiliated website to assess their stress or depression levels to help a 988 counselor better understand their needs.

If you are stationed or living overseas and need help, a veteran or other military member can contact the Veterans Crisis Line via chat online from anywhere with an internet connection and get a phone call back at no charge.

If you want to call the line directly from overseas, there are toll-free numbers available both commercial and through DSN. For the most current listing of the numbers from overseas, visit the [Veterans Crisis Line Calling from Overseas pageopens veteranscrisisline.org](#).

Resources

For anyone experiencing a mental health crisis, needing immediate assistance, or simply wanting to talk, confidential help is available 24/7.

[Military OneSourceopens militaryonesource.mil](#) is a 24/7 gateway to trusted information for service members and families that provides resources and confidential help. Call 800-342-9667.

The [Psychological Health Resource Centeropens Health.mil](#) is available 24/7 for service members, veterans, and family members with questions about psychological health topics. Trained mental health consultants can help you access mental health care and community support resources in your local area. Call 1-866-966-1020, start a live chat, or visit [www.health.mil/PHRCopens Health.mil](#).

The [inTransitionopens health.mil](#) program has [opens in-Transition page on Health.mil](#)[20 FAQsopens Health.mil opens inTransition page on Health.mil](#)that are a helpful introduction to the program. You can call 800-424-7877, or at 800-748-81111 in Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea only. You can also email the program directly at: [dha.ncr.j-9.mbx.inTransition@health.mil](#)[send an email](#).

The [Military Health Systemopens Health.mil](#), DOD, and VA have many other mental health resources available to any service member, families, or veteran beneficiaries who are struggling with mental health challenges. Read [Mental Health is Health Careopens Health.mil](#) for a complete list of resources for immediate assistance or to make appointments.

To set up a mental health appointment through TRICARE, visit: [www.tricare.mil/MentalHealthopens TRICARE.mil](#).

Other critical areas of public outreach are available across the armed services, DSPO said. These include:

Educating and training service members to see signs and reduce suicide risks through the:

U.S. Army’s [Suicide Preventionopens army.mil](#) efforts

U.S. Air and Space Force’s [Ask, Care, Escortopens af.mil](#) program

U.S. Navy’s [Ask, Care, Treatopens navy.mil](#) program

Increasing service members’ knowledge and comfort for reaching out to help resources via the DSPO [Resources Exist, Asking Can Help programopens army.mil](#), or REACH

Encouraging supportive language through DSPO’s [Your Words Matteropens dspo.mil](#) campaign, which calls for the end of stigmatizing or negative language when addressing mental health

Sharing resources to support service members and their families through the [Healthy Relationshipopens dspo.mil](#) program, a free, educational consultation designed to strengthen relationships through a series of personalized coaching sessions tailored to help set goals and strengthen communication skills

Collaborating with the DOD Educational Agency to support school-age children in talking about their feelings via the [Acknowledge, Care, Telloopens dspo.mil](#) program.

(Source: https://health.mil/News/Dvids-Articles/2023/11/10/news457600?utm_medium=govdelivery&utm_source=email)

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‘Embrace the Suck’–Life as a Gold Star Child is a Race With No Finish Line

By BAILEY DONAHUE

It’s Saturday morning in Lynchburg, Virginia, shortly before sunrise. I lace my Nikes and head out the door for a weekly run with my dad. I’m 12 years old.

I tiptoe down the steps and gently open and close the front door so I don’t disturb my mother and siblings, still asleep in their beds. My father and I hop in his 1984 Jeep Cherokee and cruise to the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. The sound of Mumford and Sons blares from the speakers as the cool wind blows through our hair.

When we arrive at the base of the trail, the sky is split into deep blue and orange streaks—the afterglow that appears for only a few minutes after sunrise.

I follow his lead. As we jog down the path, our legs fly over roots and leaves as the sound of our footsteps and breaths echo in sync along the winding trails. A couple of miles in, he points to one mountain, Sharp Top, as we stretch at an over-look.

“Look, Bailey!” he says. “That’s your mountain.”

A few miles later, when fatigue kicks in from the altitude, he repeats the same words he always says when grit is required more than ever before.

“Embrace the suck.”

When my father and I arrive back home, he begins making breakfast. The smell of pancakes and coffee blends with the sounds of Pearl Jam. My brother, sister, and mom slowly gather at the dining room table. We eat, make a plan for how we want to spend the day, and then leisurely stack dirty dishes into the dishwasher.

The time I spend with my dad is rare but intentional, like wearing the necklace he gave me from Iraq when I turned 10, brittle from age and reserved for the most special occasions.

I am always happier when I’m with him, especially on the days he drops me off at school because they are so rare. They mean he isn’t at work or deployed to another combat zone. It means more time with my partner in crime.



Bailey Donanue and her dad, Mike, run along a trail in August 2014. Photo courtesy of the author.

And it means one more ride in his beat-up, faded-from-the-sun Jeep, and looking at him behind the driver’s seat saying three words I can still hear.

“Do good things.”

* * * *

It’s a Tuesday afternoon on Sept. 16, 2014. I am 16.

The day ended 10 minutes ago, but I’m working on an extra credit assignment with my brother Seamus, who shares a history class with me. When it’s over, we walk down the hall and through the side doors of our school, laughing over stupid jokes before we go our separate ways. He has cross-country practice, and my mom is picking me up. She is never late.

Five minutes pass. I begin to worry.

Another five minutes pass. Now I’m scared.

Now 15 minutes have passed.

I call her cell phone.

No response.

Another five minutes pass. Silence.

After 25 minutes, I begin pacing the sidewalk.

30 minutes. Still. No. Response.

I call again and again. My mother finally picks up.

I can feel her tears as she tells me a family friend will pick me up. She says she has to stay late at work.

I know she is lying.

Our conversation is abrupt. She tells me she loves me.

I call my best friend, Jesse. “I hope this doesn’t have anything to do with my dad,” I tell her.

A few minutes later, my mom’s friend arrives. I pelt her with questions.

I know something is wrong.

She tells me she doesn’t know. That she doesn’t have answers.

I know she is lying. I worry that my dad is dead.



Bailey Donahue, age 11, poses with her dad’s race bib. Photo courtesy of the author.

Then, as we round the corner of my street, I see a strange car in my driveway. And I know.

It takes me only a few steps to get to my front door. I turn the door handle with the greatest hesitancy that my body can allow. That’s when I see two men in uniform standing in my living room.

My mother is on her knees, kneeling atop a carpet my dad sent us from Afghanistan.

“You have the wrong guy,” she cries out. “I know he’s out there hiding, you just have to go find him!”

I walk towards my mom and wrap my arms around her.

In my head, I see a montage of future moments flash in my mind. College acceptance. Graduation. The flat tires and car problems he’s supposed to help fix. Getting my first job. Walking down the aisle on my wedding day. The marathon we were supposed to run together.

But this time, without my dad. All taken away by a Taliban fighter.

After a few seconds, I let go of my mother and slowly walk upstairs to my room. I shut my door and sit on my bed.

Time stops. All I can hear is the watch on my bedside table.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The minute hand moves forward without me. I sit for a while without moving. I stare blankly.

My mom’s friend slowly opens my door and embraces me. I begin to feel my body again. She ushers me downstairs as our house fills with family, friends, and strangers. My mom is on all fours on our front lawn, throwing up as our casualty assistance officer drives down the street and parks in our driveway.

Next, I see Seamus walk through the front door. His eyes are the saddest I’ve ever seen them. I walk back upstairs, wanting to hide from it all.

My dad was supposed to be home already. But he was involuntarily extended for 30 days. He had just 23 days of his deployment remaining.

Time passes.

I hear the house pile with more people. More time passes. I isolate myself from it all.



Mike Donahue in Afghanistan in 2014. Photo courtesy of the author.

From my bedroom, I hear my brother and another family friend leave to pick up my older sister, Victoria, from college in Boone, North Carolina. My mom’s greatest fear was that my sister would find out about our dad from someone else, so she’d told her over the phone—only after telling my sister to hand the phone to her roommate.

“I need you to step into a different room and let me know when you have. I’m about to tell Victoria that her father is dead, and I need you to be by her side until we can pick her up so she’s safe.”

I lay on my bed beneath the sheets. I listen to the watch on my bedside table again.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

* * * *

It’s Wednesday morning. My first day waking up as a Gold Star child. As I open my eyes, I think my dad’s death was just a nightmare.

Then I hear my mom’s sharp reverberating cries and I remember our new reality.

Moments later, a family friend enters my bedroom. We have to fly to Delaware for my dad’s dignified transfer. I sit on my floor and stare blankly in my mirror. My mom’s friend brushes my hair. She tells me I’ll look beautiful.

I feel nauseous.

Later in the day, as the plane’s wheels on our commercial flight lift from the tarmac, tears stream down my face. I hope the flight will crash.

As my family and I arrive at a hotel, my mom talks to the widow of someone killed alongside my dad. She has two children. One is a young daughter.

I sit with her, broken by her youth. She is 9 years old.

We eventually drive to [Dover Air Force Base](#) and are shuttled



Mike Donahue hanging out with kids around the Um Eneej village outside the old Radio Relay Point 10’ in Iraq in 2008. Photo courtesy of the author.



The dignified transfer of Mike Donahue on Sept. 17, 2014, at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. Photo courtesy of the author.

to the tarmac. We wait.

When the tail of the plane opens, six uniformed men march onboard and carry my dad’s flag-draped coffin from the aircraft to American soil. It’s dark outside except for the lights illuminating the runway. A spotlight on the dream I can’t wake up from.

We stand in silence until my mom points out a butterfly that has landed on my dad’s casket. It is in the direct light. You can’t miss it. I smile.

As they carry him to the vehicle, the butterfly flits away.

The next two weeks are a blur, and before I know it, I’m looking at my dad in his casket. He looks real and absent at the same time.

Until now, none of it felt real.

Later, the awareness of his absence grows as I hear the sharp, hollow sounds of horses drawing louder on the roads between fields of green and rows of white, leading my father’s flag-draped silver box into [Section 60](#).

When the horses come to a stop, eight men in uniform lift his casket and march in synchronicity. They set him down a few feet away from rows of chairs. Red roses mark our seats.



The funeral of Mike Donahue at Arlington National Cemetery. Photo courtesy of the author.

When the chaplain begins to speak, all falls silent. His words are beautiful, but I can’t process them. I am beginning to realize that I will never see my dad again.

A soldier plays “Amazing Grace” on the bagpipes. A retired soldier places an [82nd Airborne](#) medallion on my dad’s casket.

Seven men in crisp uniforms each fire their rifles three times. A bugler plays [taps](#).

An officer kneels down and presents my family with a folded American flag, an honor I don’t wish to receive. I can’t accept that he’s a few feet away from me, waiting to join a sea of white stones and perfectly cut green grass. I don’t want to walk away.

My father, [Mike Donahue](#), is dead.

* * * *

It’s a Wednesday in May. I’m 25 years old—the age my dad was when I was born.

It’s just before sunrise when I put on my [Hokas](#) and tiptoe over the creaky wood of the cabin I’m sharing with others, careful not to wake them. I gently open and close the front door, then walk down the steps and stretch.

I follow the dirt path that leads to the end of the ranch, the sound of my dad’s playlist blaring in my headphones as I run alone down a [Texas road](#). With each step, the sky splits into deep blue and orange streaks—the afterglow that appears for only a few minutes after sunrise.

A few miles later, when fatigue begins to kick in, I hear the same words my father would always say when grit was required more than ever before.

“Embrace the suck.”



Bailey Donahue runs a marathon in honor of her dad alongside Wear Blue in San Antonio, Texas, in December 2021. Photo courtesy of the author.

For years, I’ve felt like people are temporary, like the whispers my brother and I heard in the hallways when we returned to school two weeks after my dad was killed. I hated that. I hated the announcement my school made over the intercom and the condolences texts sent by strangers. I hated seeing my mom cry. I hated that I couldn’t focus in class or bear to think about taking the SATs or where to apply for college. Or how I tried to hide my pain for so long that I no longer recognized myself.

I hated that I was afraid to take up any space at all until I filled my space up so much that I didn’t have room to feel anything



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anymore. Worst of all, I hated myself. So much that I considered how much easier it'd be if everything just stopped.

I push on under the vast Texas sky.

I remember the military bases as playgrounds, the paracord bracelets I wore as jewelry, and traveling through cardboard box tunnels with my brother when the Army moved us into a new home.

I begin to realize the gifts my father has given me, even in loss. Because of my dad, I recognize the individual value of every person I meet. Because of my dad, I live my life with intention and purpose. I connect more deeply with people. Because of my dad, I know the finiteness of life and the importance of the words spoken about your character when your life comes to an end.

Because of my dad, I graduated from college debt-free and now serve families like mine through the [Children of Fallen Patriots Foundation](#). I have met friends who also lost a parent, and I ran my first Wear Blue marathon with them. Because of my dad, I met President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden and asked her what advice she had for a 24-year-old.

"Be kind," the first lady told me.
"Always be kind."

I cannot change the fact that I lost my father. But I can learn to love where I am and find meaning while sitting in discomfort. Above all, I can find the good in every day.

I can embrace the suck. It's the duality of fullness and emptiness at the same time. Often, it's being in two places at once. On one hand, I'm stuck with the grief of losing a piece of myself. On the other, I'm hungry to grow older, to take all that life has to offer.



After running the Marine Corps Half Marathon alongside Wear Blue, Bailey's brother, Seamus Donahue, leaves his medal at his father's gravesite. Photo courtesy of the author.



Sunrise at the Lucky Spur Ranch in Justin, Texas, where Bailey Donahue joined other Gold Star children and siblings for a week-long writing seminar in May. Photo by Bailey Donahue.

Living without him is a race that never ends.

(Source: https://thewarhorse.org/waking-up-as-the-gold-star-child-of-an-american-soldier/?mc_cid=a86038b0e3&mc_eid=90dbe284fd)

the WAR HORSE

Bailey Donahue is an enrollment administrator at Children of Fallen Patriots Foundation helping to provide college scholarships and educational counseling to military children who have lost a parent in the line of duty. She studied public health and holds a master's from the University of North Carolina – Wilmington and is a 2023 War Horse Writing Fellow. Her father, Army Maj. Michael Donahue, was killed in action on September 16, 2014. Donahue describes her dad as "a hero loved deeply and widely with a passion for running and living life adventurously and intentionally."



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What Are My TRICARE Health Care Provider Options?

FALLS CHURCH, Va. – Are you looking for a new doctor for yourself or your family? In your search, you may see terms like “TRICARE-authorized provider,” “network provider,” and “non-network provider.” Knowing what these terms mean can help you choose which provider you see.

A TRICARE-authorized provider is a provider approved by TRICARE to give health care services to beneficiaries.

“Before you get care from a civilian provider, it’s important to make sure the provider is TRICARE-authorized,” said Paul Wuerdeman, TRICARE Health Plan provider networks lead with the Defense Health Agency. “A provider must be TRICARE-authorized for TRICARE to pay any part of your claim.”

There are two types of TRICARE-authorized providers: **network providers** and **non-network providers**. Read on to learn about these providers and how to find providers near you.

Network providers

A [network provider goes to TRICARE.mil](#) is any TRICARE-authorized provider that has signed an agreement with your regional contractor. Network providers have agreed to follow TRICARE’s policies and procedures. This means that they:

- Have agreed to the contracted rate as payment in full for [covered services goes to TRICARE.mil](#)
- Won’t ask you pay amounts
- File claims for you

Do you live overseas?

Network providers overseas also have an agreement with the [TRICARE overseas contractor Goes to International SOS](#). However, network providers only agree to provide cashless and claimless services to those who have [TRICARE Prime Overseas goes to TRICARE.mil](#) or [TRICARE Prime Remote Overseas goes to TRICARE.mil](#). If you have [TRICARE Select Overseas goes to TRICARE.mil](#), you may have to pay up front to get services or file your own claims when you see a network provider.

Non-network providers

A non-network provider is a TRICARE-authorized provider that doesn’t have an agreement with TRICARE.

There are two types of non-network providers:

Participating providers accept the TRICARE-allowable charge as payment in full for covered services. This means you’ll only have to pay your cost-share when you see the provider. You also won’t have to file claims.

Non-participating providers are typically the most expensive provider option. That’s because they haven’t agreed to accept the TRICARE-allowable charge. Instead, they can charge up to 15% more than the TRICARE-allowable charge. When you see a non-participating provider, you should expect to pay the provider up front. Then you’ll need to [file a claim goes to TRICARE.mil](#) with TRICARE for reimbursement. Keep in mind that you won’t be reimbursed for your cost-share or any charges above the TRICARE-allowable charge.

You can see non-network providers if you have [TRICARE Select goes to TRICARE.mil](#), [TRICARE Reserve Select goes to TRICARE.mil](#), [TRICARE Retired Reserve goes to TRICARE.mil](#), or [TRICARE Young Adult Select goes to TRICARE.mil](#). If you have [TRICARE Prime Remote goes to TRICARE.mil](#), you can use non-network providers if network providers aren’t available in your remote location.

If you’re enrolled in TRICARE Prime, you may see a non-network provider only if:

You decide to use the [point-of-service option goes to TRICARE.mil](#), or

Your regional contractor approves it because no other providers are available


How to find TRICARE-authorized providers

To find a network or non-network provider near you, you can use the [Find a Doctor tool goes to TRICARE.mil](#). You can also go to [All Provider Directories goes to TRICARE.mil](#).

Before you visit a non-network provider, check to see if they accept TRICARE patients. Non-network providers who have

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accepted TRICARE in the past may not always accept TRICARE.

Medicare and TRICARE For Life providers

Do you have [TRICARE For Lifegoes to TRICARE.mil](#)? As outlined in the [TRICARE For Life Handbookgoes to TRICARE.mil](#), you may get health care services from Medicare participating and M

-dicare non-participating providers. Go to [Medicare.govgoes to Medicare.gov](#) to find providers near you.

You can also get care from providers who have opted out of Medicare. But keep in mind that you'll have significant out-of-pocket expenses when you get care from opt-out providers. If you get services for which TRICARE For Life is the primary payer, you must visit TRICARE-authorized providers and facilities.

Avoid unexpected costs

Want to avoid surprise costs? Knowing the type of provider you're seeing and your plan's rules for getting care can help. Network providers typically have lower out-of-pocket costs than non-network providers. If you aren't sure if you're seeing a network or a non-network provider, ask before you get care.

Remember that some services from your provider may require a [referral or pre-authorizationgoes to TRICARE.mil](#). This depends on your health plan. Go to [Book Appointmentsgoes to TRICARE.mil](#) to learn how to get care with your plan.

Would you like the latest TRICARE news sent to you by email? Visit [TRICARE Subscriptionsgoes to TRICARE.mil](#), and create your personalized profile to get benefit updates, news, and more.

(Source: <https://health.mil/News/Dvids-Articles/2023/12/21/news460628>)

You can read, or download, an online version of this Grapevine publication at www.veteransgrapevine.com

Then, in articles having blue text, click on it and the link will take you to much more

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Try Messages on VA.gov

We're building a new home for My HealtheVet on VA.gov

We're building the new [My HealtheVet portal on VA.gov](#) so you can manage your health care needs in the same place that you manage your other VA benefits and services. We're also improving the trusted health tools you use today. And we want your feedback to help us make sure these tools serve your needs.

As part of this effort, we've built a new version of My HealtheVet secure messaging on VA.gov. You can communicate privately and securely with your VA health care team on My HealtheVet on VA.gov just as you do on My HealtheVet today. We encourage you to try it now.

Try messages on VA.gov

When you visit My HealtheVet's secure messaging feature, you'll find a link to try messaging on VA.gov. You may be prompted to sign in to VA.gov before using this tool. Once you're on the new messages page, you can perform all the important tasks you're used to:

- Send and receive non-urgent messages with VA providers and staff on your care team.
- Organize messages in folders.
- Download and print messages.

We've made some upgrades to make messages more accessible and easier to use. When you try messaging on VA.gov, you may notice these new features:

The new **mobile-first design** makes it easier to use messages—from wherever you are on any device.

Just like modern email, the new tool supports **full threading** of messages. Threading collects all the messages in a conversation

We've **improved accessibility** for all veterans, including those who use screen readers.

A **more secure** sign-in experience meets modern standards to better protect your data.

Drafts **autosave** every 10 seconds instead of 2 minutes, so you can trust that your writing is saved.

Note: Veterans who receive care from a VA health facility that uses the My VA Health portal will still need to go to that portal to manage their messages for now.

If you'd like to test other My HealtheVet tools as they move to VA.gov, you can sign up for our online feedback sessions. These sessions last about an hour or less. And you'll receive a thank-you gift. Learn more and register on our feedback partner's Veteran participant recruitment website.

Vietnam War Veterans Health Issues

VA provides support for Agent Orange exposure and its related health issues



It's important to understand the health care needs of Vietnam War Veterans because of the long-term effects of military service during the Vietnam War era. If you served during the Vietnam War, including Veterans who served on Blue Water Navy vessels or Coast Guard ships, you may be at risk of certain health conditions. Understanding these needs will allow you to receive better care.

Learn about these conditions and what to do next to take care of your health.

Health risks related to the Vietnam War

Diseases related to Agent Orange: The toxic chemical used to clear trees and plants can cause long-term health effects.

Hepatitis C: This disease can harm your liver.

Hearing problems caused by noise: Harmful sounds from guns, explosives, rockets, heavy weapons, jets and aircraft, and machinery can cause or add to hearing loss and ringing in the ears.

Illnesses or injuries caused by job-related hazards: You may have come across chemicals, paints, radiation, and other hazards.

Mental health conditions and PTSD: Veterans who served in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos during the Vietnam War have a higher prevalence of mental health issues, particularly PTSD, compared with both other Vietnam-era Veterans and non-Veterans.

What you can do now

Take these steps to make sure you're taking care of your health:

Get your [toxic exposure screening](#). This makes your VA health care team aware of any potential exposures to toxins during your military service.

Talk to your primary health care provider or your [local VA environmental health coordinator](#) about other health concerns related to your military service. Remember, you can use [Secure Messaging](#) (*sign in required*) to send a private note to your doctor if you have any questions or worries.

Ask your local VA environmental health coordinator about getting a free [Agent Orange Registry health exam](#).

Find out if you can get benefits from any illness or injury caused, or made worse, by your active-duty service, such as

illness-related to [Agent Orange](#) or contact with [hazardous materials](#).

Be sure your doctor knows if you have a history of Agent Orange exposure. Because of the possibility of increased cancer risk, your doctor may suggest [cancer screening tests](#) and to report any symptoms as soon as they appear.

Expanded eligibility and benefits through the PACT Act

The [PACT Act](#) expands eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras. The PACT Act also added 2 new Agent Orange presumptive conditions, 5 new Agent Orange presumptive-exposure locations, and 3 new radiation presumptive-exposure locations for Vietnam Era Veterans. To see a complete list of the new presumptive conditions and locations, visit [The PACT Act and your VA benefits](#).

With a My HealtheVet [Premium](#) account, you can send your health care team a [Secure Message](#) to discuss any possible toxic exposure in your service history.

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PTSD Treatment Basics

PTSD treatment works. Those who have gone through trauma can learn to feel safe in the world and cope with stress. There are several helpful treatments, so you have options. There is no one treatment that is right for everyone. Working with your health care provider, you can decide together which is best for you based on benefits, risks, side effects and other preferences.

Talk Therapies

Studies show that certain talk therapies (psychotherapies) work best. The talk therapies with the most research support are trauma-focused. "Trauma-focused" means that the treatment focuses on the traumatic event and what it means to you. The talk therapies that work best are: Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Prolonged Exposure (PE).

In these talk therapies, you'll learn ways to work through your trauma, by visualizing, talking or thinking about the traumatic event until it becomes less upsetting. Or you will focus on changing unhelpful beliefs about the trauma or since the trauma happened. These talk therapies usually last about 8-16 sessions. There are other options that have less research support but may be good options for you. Learn more about [Talk Therapies for PTSD](#).

Medication

There are medications that are helpful for treating PTSD symptoms. Your best options are those with the most evidence: paroxetine, sertraline and venlafaxine. Over time, you will work with your provider to check on your response to the medication, discuss side effects, and change the dose, if needed. The benefits of medications take time to work and end after you stop taking them. And there are some medications that are not helpful for PTSD. Learn more about [Medications for PTSD](#).

Getting Started and Checking In

The articles below give basic information about how to get started with treatment and how to know if your treatment is working for you.

Why Get Treatment?Deciding to get help and taking the steps to start can be hard. Learn why getting help for your symptoms is the best thing you can do to get your life back on track.

Choosing a TreatmentThere are several effective PTSD treatments. This means you have options. Learn how you can work with your provider to choose the best treatment for you.

Types of ProvidersMany types of professionals provide evidence-based talk therapy and medication to people who go through trauma. Learn about the training and education of these mental health providers.

Signs of Good PTSD CareIn the best cases, people see PTSD

symptoms get better while in treatment. But some people may not feel satisfied or feel they don't see progress. Learn 4 signs of quality PTSD care and how you can be an active player in your treatment.

Visit our Get Help section to learn how to [find help in a crisis](#), [locate a provider](#), [get care for Veterans](#) and information about [self-help and coping](#) to manage stress.




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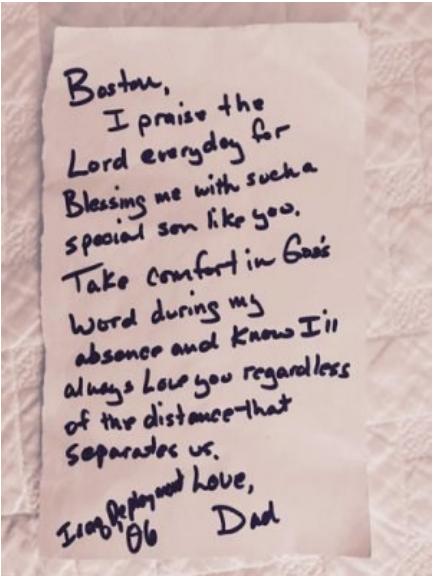
The Shoulders I Stood on Were Gone. How Little I Knew of the Journey Before Me.

By BOSTON GILBERT

A Delta Force unit zipped over the barren desert. Two Black Hawks contained assault forces. Four Little Birds carried riders and artillery. It was a perfect blue sky in Taji, Iraq. The operators stalked a high-profile target. All went according to plan until it didn't.

The date was Nov. 27, 2006. For the first time in his seasoned career, the flight lead heard "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!" over the radio.

Meanwhile, I was sound asleep in the bedroom I shared with my little brother. We lived in a small but comfortable home in scorching Phoenix. The morning commenced with what I expected to be a normal day at Corte Sierra Elementary School. Abnormal for a school night, my mom told us we would sleep over at a friend's house that evening. Even my fourth-grade sensitivities knew something was off.



A note from Air Force Maj. Troy Gilbert to his son, Boston, before he deployed to Iraq in 2006. Photo courtesy of the author.

I missed my dad. He deployed two months prior and was set to return just after Christmas. I missed the smell of his Barbasol shaving cream lather. I missed him steering with his knees, convincing me the wheel of his 1992 Chevy Silverado moved by magic. We listened to '80s rock because, according to him, that was "real music."

Boom! An unidentified projectile removed the tail rotor from one of the Little Birds. An 80-mile-per-hour crash landing ensued. It was not long before the shooter showed himself. Moving with intent, five weaponized trucks housing dozens of al-Qaida affiliates traversed the flat earth. Heavy machine guns with long-range capabilities enabled the trucks to fire first. The operators dug in the sand for cover as rounds cracked like fireworks. My dad was skybound. Perched in his F-16 viper, he showed restraint during an air-to-air refuel as a call for air support pierced the radio. At 100 shots per second, his 20 mm Gatling guns devastated the lead trucks after he rolled off the tanker. A tight turn to initiate his subsequent attack dropped him 200 feet from the deck. He was pushing the edge of aviation and he knew it. After scattering the remaining enemy forces in a final act of fire, 500 miles per hour met the brutal fact of the desert floor.

Major Troy "Trojan" Gilbert died with his nose to the grindstone.

My friend's mother drove us to our home rather than to school the following morning. She was quiet. The front door opened, revealing my grandparents, friends, and other family members encircling the couch where my mom sat somberly. After hearing the unheard, I retreated to the bathroom for solitude. I was nine. Dad was gone. I couldn't believe it.

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves," wrote neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl.

I wanted my physical father, but I could not have him. From that moment on I was left with the tremendous task of filling the void he left. Symbolically speaking, his passing represented disintegration and chaos in my world. My role model father, the impetus for my life and the shoulders I stood on, was gone. How little I knew of the pilgrimage set before me. How little I knew of the question entangled in my journey: How can I make meaning from my loss?



Al Qaeda insurgents took the body of Air Force Maj. Troy Gilbert from the wreckage of his F-16 before U.S. forces could arrive. This screengrab is from a propaganda video that included footage from the crash site. Photo courtesy of the author.

Parts from my dad's jet lay strewn across a carrot field. Prior to the arrival of U.S. forces at the crash site, insurgents filmed the scene and took his body from the wreckage. He was lying prostrate on a plastic sheet as smoke billowed in the background. They titled the propaganda video "The Missing." We

buried an empty casket. Ten years passed before his recovery and homecoming.

I fondly remember my dad taking my mom, brother, and me to watch Star Wars: Episode III in the theater. He waxed poetic about collecting Marvel’s early Star Wars comic books and watching the originals as a kid. It wasn’t until years later that I understood the profound connection linking me and the protagonist of the original trilogy. Luke Skywalker tells his companions he wished he had known his father. Central to Luke’s destiny is discovering the truth about his father.



The dignified transfer of Air Force Maj. Troy Gilbert. A 29-person team consisting of several members of Task Force 160, the unit that he died protecting, retrieved his body and escorted him home. Photo by Senior Airman Aaron J. Jenne, courtesy of the U.S. Air Force.

A hero from a war bearing my dad’s callsign also went missing. The Odyssey contains a much older example of the archetypal father quest found in Star Wars. Reeling from his father’s absence, King Odysseus’ son Telemachus is in turmoil. Immature, victimized, and disoriented, Telemachus is an embittered bystander as suitors take advantage of the vacant throne on his home island of Ithaca. They ravage his kingdom and harass his mother.

I puked on the flight back from the funeral. Was it the stress? The attention? Was I purging the tumultuous two weeks leading up to the service? I was just a boy when I gazed upon his white marble headstone for the first time. Little did I know his death marked my separation from childhood and my entry into a liminal space.

It is not a coincidence that I found soccer soon after losing my father. The unpredictability and finality of his death proved to be fertile soil for the game to sprout as my primary identity. Budding as an athlete, soccer promised security, validation, and self-worth. Like Telemachus, who tells Athena, “Mother has always told me I’m his son, it’s true, but I am not so certain,” I was unsure who I was. Seeking individuation through soccer, I was subject to the instability of its every whim.

The decade between my father’s death, confiscation, and return saw an eclectic array of service members hunt for his remains: SEALs, Green Berets, intel analysts, search dogs, and Marines chased the ghost. Their first discovery catapulted me back to Arlington National Cemetery for a second burial seven years after the first. A small box of toe bone fragments was laid on his casket.

Three years later, a tribal chieftain local to Fallujah disclosed the whereabouts of my father’s full remains. A 29-person team consisting of several members of Task Force 160, the unit that he died protecting, retrieved his body and escorted him home. It is not a coincidence that I lost soccer soon after finding my father.



Air Force Maj. Troy Gilbert with his sons. Gilbert was killed in Iraq in November 2006 while protecting U.S. troops. Photo courtesy of the author.

I underwent consecutive foot surgeries during my sophomore season of college soccer, only nine months after my father’s homecoming. Soccer as my chief identity was a house of cards, and it fell hard. The psychospiritual challenges that afflicted me during my two-year-long recovery resembled the struggles of my fabled forerunners from Ithaca and Tatooine. Ancient Greeks would have understood this juncture in my life as a kairos (καιρός): a word they used to describe the right, critical, or opportune moment for action.

Luke Skywalker’s lowest moment is when the tyrannical Darth Vader reveals himself as Luke’s father. For Telemachus, it is his depression at the suitors’ exploitation of his home and his mother, and his inability to do anything about it. Each character’s kairos was essential to the formation of their character and the discovery of their identity.

My kairos led to a personal revelation in a movie theater with my then-girlfriend and now-wife. Fans of the original Lion King, we spent a night out watching the digital remake. After grappling with the death of his father and evading his destiny, Simba has an encounter that changes the course of his life. The pride’s mandrill shaman, Rafiki, facilitates a communion between Simba and his father, Mufasa, who reveals himself as a ghost in the sky. In desperation, Simba pleads, “Don’t leave me again.” Mufasa’s response gripped me through the screen.

“I never left you. I never will. Remember who you are.” To this, Rafiki questions Simba, “And so, I ask again. ... Who are you?”

Without reservation, Simba replies, “I am Simba, son of Mufasa.”

A tear slipped my guard and quietly rolled down my cheek. It clicked. I know who I am.

I am Boston, son of Troy. Nothing can take that away from me. In all three epic stories, the sons return where they started: basking in the simplicity of their secure identity as beloved sons of their fathers. Telemachus and Odysseus are reunited and slay the suitors. Luke Skywalker redeems Darth Vader by turning him from the Dark Side and reinstating him properly as Anakin Skywalker once again. Simba heeds Mufasa’s call to reclaim his right as the one true king of the Pride Lands.

Renowned poet T.S. Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Although I can never bring my dad back, I am invigorated by the prospect of making him come alive by accepting my unshaken identity as his son, boldly embracing the challenges in my life like he did, and living as well as I know how. In doing so, I gain an immense sense of myself through remembering and relating to him.



“It is not a coincidence that I found soccer soon after losing my father,” writes Boston Gilbert. “Budding as an athlete, soccer promised security, validation, and self-worth.” Photo courtesy of the author.



The empty casket of Air Force Maj. Troy Gilbert is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Photo courtesy of the author.

I would alter Frankl’s quote: “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to know ourselves.”

Even in death, my father beckons me to uncover my unique personhood.

Boston Gilbert is the eldest son of Major Troy “Trojan” Gilbert, who was killed in action near Taji, Iraq, in November 2006 while providing close air support to a Delta Force unit. Boston is happily married to his wife, Eliana, and works for the military

nonprofit No Greater Sacrifice. He is a 2023 War Horse writing fellow.

(Source: <https://thewarhorse.org/pilot-heroes-son-makes-meaning-out-of-loss-in-self-discovery/>)

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“First, the doctor told me the good news. He said that I was going to have a disease named after me.”

—Steve Martin