



FREE

VBCMagazine

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25 YEARS AFTER 9/11



IN THIS ISSUE

- WHAT DID 9/11 CHANGE?
- A GENERATION AT WAR
- WEARING THE FLAG
- KENNEDY'S COUP



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HONORING ALL WHO GAVE ALL.**



CONTENTS

FEATURES

What Did 9/11 Change?	6
A Generation at War	10
A Good Day to Study History	15
Kennedy's Coup	20

DEPARTMENTS

From the Director	3
Upcoming Programs	4
Recent Programs	5
In Recognition: Green Star Families	24
Recent News: The VBC Has a New Home	26
In Gratitude	28
Taps	30

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Cover image: Designed to invite reflection, this cover is a photo composite. The single figure is lifted from a 2011 DVIDS photo of a US Marine combat engineer from the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment on patrol in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. He stands with his weapon in one hand and mine detector in the other. He has been positioned as though viewing the vast Afghanistan landscape.

VBC Magazine is published quarterly by The Veterans Breakfast Club, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that harnesses the power of storytelling in order to connect, educate, heal, and inspire.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

This summer marks a milestone for the Veterans Breakfast Club.

On June 11, we cut the ribbon to the VBC Welcome Center in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood—our first permanent brick-and-mortar home after nearly two decades of working out my attic and gathering on Zoom and at breakfast locations far and wide.



The new Welcome Center is a place where people can stop in for coffee, conversation, referrals, and connection. It's large enough for holding programs, meetings, and interviews in our recording studios.

We see the Welcome Center as enhancing the VBC's defining feature: a community organized around listening.

That mission feels especially important as we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of September 11, 2001.

For many of us, 9/11 remains a vivid personal memory. We remember where we were when we heard the news. We remember the smoke, the confusion, and the sense that history had suddenly burst into our lives like an unwelcome intruder.

But twenty-five years is a long time. More than a generation of Americans has grown up with no memory of that day. For them, September 11 belongs to history rather than experience.

This issue explores that transition.

In these pages, you'll find reflections on what 9/11 changed, stories from veterans whose lives were shaped by the wars that followed, and thoughtful examinations of decisions and events that continue to influence our world today.

The stories don't always agree on the larger meaning of 9/11. Think of them, collectively, as a conversation built around diverse experiences and perspectives.

The Veterans Breakfast Club exists to host such conversations. History doesn't write itself, nor do veterans' stories get passed along without someone taking the time to tell them and others taking the time to hear them.

As we celebrate our new home and reflect on the twenty-five years since 9/11, I hope you'll see this issue as an invitation to share your history, tell a story, ask a question, and listen to someone whose experience differs from your own.

That's how memory becomes history and how history stays alive.

Todd

Todd DePastino, Executive Director
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todd@veteransbreakfastclub.org





UPCOMING IN-PERSON PROGRAMS

Our VBC in-person events feature veterans of all eras, backgrounds, and branches sharing memories of service. All in-person events begin at 8:30am and include breakfast, unless otherwise noted. **Also, all VBC breakfasts are now free of charge** (unless otherwise noted) for anyone who would like to attend. However, we do request you make a reservation so we can prepare the space and meal. Please RSVP to betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org or 412-623-9029.

We request RSVPs for all events. RSVP to betty@veteransbreakfastclub.org or 412-623-9029.

Events added often. Check veteransbreakfastclub.org/events for updates.

WEDNESDAY, August 5,
8:30-10:30am: Seven Oaks
Country Club (132 Lisbon
Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

SATURDAY, August 8, 8:30-
10:30am: Operation Troop
Appreciation (2017 Pennsyl-
vania Ave, West Mifflin, PA
15122)

WEDNESDAY, August
12, 11:30am-1:30pm: Jew-
ish Community Center of
Youngstown (505 Gypsy
Lane, Youngstown, Ohio
44504)

WEDNESDAY, August 19,
8:30-10:30am: Christ Church
at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd,
Sewickley, PA 15143)

TUESDAY, September 1,
8:30-10:30am: Christ Unit-
ed Methodist Church (44
Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA
15102)

MONDAY, September 14,
8:30-10:30am: Chartiers
Township Community Cen-
ter (2013 Community Drive
Houston, PA 15342)

WEDNESDAY, September
16, 8:30-10:30am: Ridgcrest
Senior Living (8870 Duncan
Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15237)

THURSDAY, September 24,
8:30-10:30am: Montgomery
County Community College
(340 DeKalb Pike, Blue Bell,
PA 19422)

WEDNESDAY, September
30, 8:30-10:30am: Seven Oaks
Country Club (132 Lisbon
Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

WEDNESDAY, October
7, 11:30am-1:30pm: Jew-
ish Community Center of
Youngstown (505 Gypsy
Lane, Youngstown, Ohio
44504)

WEDNESDAY, October 14,
8:30-10:30am: Christ Church
at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd,
Sewickley, PA 15143)

TUESDAY, November 3,
8:30-10:30am: Christ Unit-
ed Methodist Church (44
Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA
15102)

SATURDAY, November 7,
8:30-10:30am: University of
Pittsburgh-Greensburg (The
Hempfield Room, Chambers
Hall, Greensburg, PA 15601)

SATURDAY, November 14,
8:30-10:30am: Sheraton Valley
Forge (480 N Gulph Rd, King
of Prussia, PA 19406)

FRIDAY, November 20, 8:30-
10:30am: Sechler Law Firm's
Event Center (500 Common-
wealth Drive, Warrendale, PA
15087)

SATURDAY, November
21, 8:30-10:30am: Operation
Troop Appreciation (2017
Pennsylvania Ave, West Mifflin,
PA 15122)

WEDNESDAY, December
2, 8:30-10:30am: Seven Oaks
Country Club (132 Lisbon
Rd, Beaver, PA 15009)

WEDNESDAY, December
2 – SUNDAY, DECEMBER
6: VBC World War II Con-
ference, Hyatt House Tampa
Downtown (325 N Florida
Ave, Tampa, FL 33602)

WEDNESDAY, December 9,
8:30-10:30am: Christ Church
at Grove Farm (249 Duff Rd,
Sewickley, PA 15143)

WEDNESDAY, December
16, 11:30am-1:30pm: Jew-
ish Community Center of
Youngstown (505 Gypsy
Lane, Youngstown, Ohio
44504)

SATURDAY, December 19,
8:30-10:30am: Christ Unit-
ed Methodist Church (44
Highland Rd, Bethel Park, PA
15102)

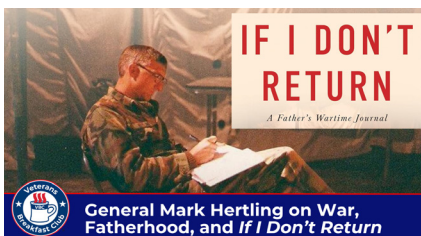
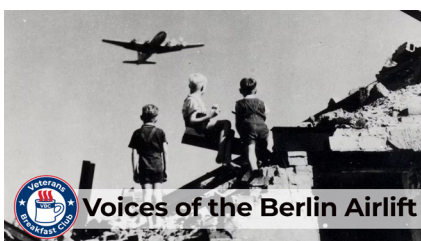
UPCOMING VBC LIVESTREAMS

Mondays and Thursdays at 7pm ET (4pm PT) on Zoom and simulcast to YouTube and Facebook. See schedule and connect at veteransbreakfastclub.org/events



RECENT VBC LIVESTREAMS

Watch past programs at veteransbreakfastclub.org/past-events/.



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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER: WHAT DID 9/11 CHANGE?

By Todd DePastino

On September 11, 2001, nineteen young men boarded four commercial airliners and changed the course of American life—or so it seemed.



United Airlines Flight 175 hits the World Trade Center's south tower, September 11, 2001. (Public domain)

Most of us who were alive that day remember exactly where we were when we saw images of smoke pouring from the North Tower of the World Trade Center. We remember the second plane striking the South Tower live on television. And then, 56 minutes later, that same tower collapsed, followed by its North twin at 10:28am. Meanwhile, another hijacked airplane hit the Pentagon, and reports came in of a fourth crashing into a Pennsylvania field after passengers fought back.

Just writing this brief account makes my stomach flip as it did that morning, as my shock and confusion gave way to a profound sense of doom. Out of the clear blue, everything had suddenly changed.

Now, twenty-five years later, the attacks of September 11 have crossed a threshold. They are no longer merely memories. They belong to history, which, theoretically means they can be examined at a critical distance without one's stomach flipping.

A generation of Americans has grown up with no personal rec-

ollection of that day. More than a third of Americans today are thirty years old or younger. For them, 9/11 belongs to the same category as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, or the moon landing: events they know through photographs, documentaries, and the memories of older people.

That passage from memory into history raises a question historians ask about any major event: What did it mean?

The answers are rarely simple and not always even obvious.

Some events that seem earthshaking at the time fade into obscurity. Others grow larger with the passing years. Sometimes an event's significance turns out to be entirely different from what contemporaries imagined.

Consider the Black Tom Island attack of July 30, 1916. In the middle of the night, German agents detonated a massive munitions depot on a small island in New York Harbor. The resulting blasts, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, shattered windows across Manhattan, damaged the Statue of Liberty, and registered as a small earthquake. Newspapers treated it as a national crisis. Americans wondered whether the nation was under attack.

Today, almost nobody remembers it.

Or consider the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. Armed resistance to federal authority spread across the trans-Appalachian West. President George Washington personally led troops west to suppress the uprising in Western Pennsylvania. Many Americans feared the young republic might collapse before the Constitution had even taken root.

Today, outside the Pittsburgh region and a handful of history classrooms, the Whiskey Rebellion is little more than a footnote.



The Whiskey Rebellion, 1794. Illustration from R.M. Devens' 1882 book, Our First Century. (Public domain)

Other events remain permanently etched in our national memory. Pearl Harbor is one example. Nearly every American knows the date: December 7, 1941. Yet historians point out that the deeper forces drawing the United States into World War II were already in motion. Pearl Harbor accelerated decisions, unified public opinion, and provided a dramatic turning point, but it did not create the global conflict that followed.

Twenty-five years later, historians are beginning to ask whether 9/11 may ultimately occupy a similar place in history.

The attacks themselves were extraordinary. Nearly 3,000 people were killed. The World Trade Center was destroyed and the Pentagon damaged. These mighty symbols of American economic, military, and political power came under direct assault. The result was an enduring spectacle of horror that we'll never forget.

But the attacks of 9/11 weren't just spectacle. They were also strategy. The nineteen hijackers who carried them out were not attempting merely to destroy buildings. They were after something bigger.

The men came primarily from Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon. Many had spent years preparing under the direction of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Their goal was not simply to kill Americans but to provoke a larger conflict, to draw the United States into a prolonged struggle across the Islamic world that would exhaust American power and inflame anti-American sentiment. Then, US-backed "apostate" regimes in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia would be overthrown and replaced by a single transnational caliphate ruled by Sharia law.

The attackers failed to achieve their strategic goals. Al-Qaeda never sparked a global Islamic uprising. It never drove the United States from the world stage. The apostate states are still around, and there is no caliphate. The spectacle of 9/11 endures in our memory. But the strategy behind it is dead and forgotten.

On the American side, most of us woke up on September 12 believing that terrorism would now be an omnipresent threat and the dominant form of warfare in the twenty-first century. But large-scale terrorist attacks inside the United States and Europe after 9/11 proved remarkably rare. The homeland remained far more secure than we had first feared.

One thing Al-Qaeda did successfully trigger was a far-reaching American military response, though not the one bin Laden had imagined.

The years immediately following 9/11 produced a sweeping reorientation of American foreign and domestic policy. President George W. Bush adopted what he called the Freedom Agenda, an ambitious strategy rooted in the belief that terrorism flourished in societies marked by dictatorship, repression, and corruption. If democracy could be spread across the Middle East, the theory held, the conditions that produced terrorism would disappear.

It was, perhaps, the most ambitious American foreign-policy project since Woodrow Wilson's attempt to re-draw the map of Europe and re-write the rules of international order at the end of World War I.

The United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 to destroy al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime that had sheltered it. Initial military operations succeeded quickly. Al-Qaeda's training camps were destroyed, and the Taliban collapsed . . . but the



Statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled in Baghdad's Firdos Square after the US invasion, April 9, 2003. (DoD)

war in Afghanistan continued.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. Although Saddam Hussein's regime had no operational role in the September 11 attacks, administration officials argued that the risks posed by hostile regimes in the post-9/11 world were too great to ignore.

Saddam Hussein was overthrown in weeks. There, too, however, the war continued.

What followed were two decades of counterinsurgency, nation-building, military deployments, and strategic frustration.

Today, Afghanistan is once again governed by the Taliban. After twenty years of war, the last American troops departed in August 2021, and the government the United States spent two decades supporting collapsed in a matter of days.

Iraq presents a more complicated picture. Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship is gone, and Iraqis enjoy civil society, even elections, to an extent unknown before Saddam's ouster. Yet years of insurgency, sectarian violence, and chaos have left Iraq fragile and under the thumb of neighboring Iran. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died in the turmoil that followed the invasion. The survivors live in a country far removed from the democratic model envisioned by advocates of the Freedom Agenda.

Whether Iraq is better off than it was in 2001 remains fiercely debated. What is less disputed is that the Freedom Agenda failed to achieve its grandest objectives.

The United States emerged from the experience more cautious about large-scale nation-building efforts than at any time since Vietnam.

Perhaps the greatest historical consequence of 9/11 lies in the opportunities and priorities it displaced.

When the Twin Towers fell, the United States was without peer, standing at the height of its global power and prestige. Historians call it the "unipolar moment" after the Soviet Union had collapsed and the Cold War ended. No other country could challenge American preeminence. Globalization appeared unstoppable. And, extrapolating from what was happening in Eastern Europe, some policymakers believed that expanding democracy would make great-power war obsolete. Future conflicts would be limited, short, and decisive.

The military itself reflected those assumptions. It was shrinking after the Cold War and focusing on rapid, high-technology conventional warfare, the kind of fighting exhibited in Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

Then came 9/11. It was almost as if, in the vacuum created by the collapse of a rival superpower, a small but deadly network had grown, committed not to national ideals or interests, but to terrorizing the American people.

Homeland security suddenly became a military concern. Counterterrorism became a national obsession and counterinsurgency the central military mission.

For twenty years, the United States focused attention, resources, and strategic energy on wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and related operations around the globe.

Meanwhile, another historical development continued largely in the background: the rise of China.

China's economy skyrocketed in growth. Its military modernized by leaps and bounds, and its influence spread across Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific. By the time American leaders fully shifted their attention from Afghanistan and Iraq, China had become a great power. The vacuum left by the Soviet Union was filled not with scattered Islamic terrorists, but with a formidable strategic rival accounting for 20% of the world's population.

Historians and strategists today ask themselves if China's rise would have happened the way it did without 9/11. The consensus

seems to be that, yes, China was destined to become a great power. But, if the US had never launched its Global War on Terror, that rise would have been slower and more tentative, hemmed in by American diplomatic, commercial, and military countermeasures in the Pacific. Those countermeasures came too late, after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had wound down. 9/11, says one Asia expert, "was a geopolitical gift to China." China got a free hand to expand its power while the US was distracted by wars in the Middle East.

Today, twenty-five years after 9/11, Great Power Competition seems to be the big story of the twenty-first century, not terrorism. From this perspective, 9/11 seems less like the opening act of a new era than the closing act of one that began with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 or the Beirut Barracks Bombing of 1983.

In this sense, perhaps 9/11 accelerated trends already underway by intensifying the US war on Islamic terrorism that had begun in the 1980s. The most important legacy of 9/11 may not be the attacks themselves but the choices that were made later in response.

That's usually how history works. Events that capture our attention are not always the events that shape the future. Sometimes the true significance of a moment lies not in what happened on a single day, but in how nations respond afterward.

September 11 will remain unforgettable. But the story historians will continue debating is not what happened that morning. It is what happened next. ■



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VBC GREATEST GENERATION LIVE ★ WORLD WAR II CONFERENCE

★ TAMPA, FLORIDA ★
DECEMBER 2-6, 2026

For years, the Veterans Breakfast Club has brought people together online to explore the human story of World War II.

Now, for the first time, that community gathers in person.

Join veterans, historians, family members, and friends in Tampa for four days of conversation, remembrance, scholarship, and connection.

CONFERENCE SESSIONS WILL EXPLORE:

- ★ The Bloody 100th and the air war over Europe
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- ★ Marshall, Eisenhower, Patton, and senior command
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- ★ Pearl Harbor remembrance at the Zephyrhills Museum of Military History

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- ★ Helen Patton
- ★ David Nasaw
- ★ James Campbell
- ★ Michael S. Bell
- ★ Michel Paradis
- ★ Michael P. Faley
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\$400

DAY RATES

DEC. 2 — \$75
DEC. 3-5 — \$150/day

TRAVEL INFORMATION



Reserve your place:

glenn@veteransbreakfastclub.org or 412-623-9029

<https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/wwii-tampa-2026/>

Attendees arrange their own airfare and airport transportation.

Suggested airports

TAMPA INTERNATIONAL (TPA) * ST. PETE-CLEARWATER (PIE)

SARASOTA-BRADENTON (SRQ) * ORLANDO INTERNATIONAL (MCO)

SAVE THE DATE!

DECEMBER 2-6, 2026

★ TAMPA, FLORIDA ★



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AFTER 9/11

A GENERATION AT WAR

The wars that followed September 11, 2001, produced a generation of Americans whose lives were shaped by events that began on a single morning and unfolded over two decades.

The Veterans Breakfast Club Veterans History Project has recorded hundreds of interviews with veterans and military family members. The excerpts that follow are drawn from those interviews with men and women who came of age in the shadow of 9/11 and served in the aftermath.

Rather than present their full stories individually, we've arranged them around common experiences: where they were when the attacks occurred, why they chose to serve, what they encountered during war, what it was like to come home, and what remains with them twenty-five years later.

PART I: THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED

Where were you on September 11, 2001?

Corey Mourning, US Army, 2001-2014

I was in Basic Training at Fort Knox. I was seventeen years old, right out of high school.

We were actually on the familiarization range for the M16. We had just finished doing class work learning about the weapon, putting it together, loading, unloading, hot gun, cold gun and stuff like that. They suddenly told us to break for lunch. But it seemed too early for lunch.



Corey Mourning

"What's going on?" we wondered.

We all went to the designated area, and the drill sergeants walked up and said they had bad news.

"The Twin Towers in New York have been hit by a plane."

And everybody's just like, "What?"

Then, one of us asked, "Are we going to war?"

We thought we might get fast-tracked through Basic and head straight to our companies. The drill sergeants didn't have answers. But they said if we did get fast-tracked, we'd have to learn everything with our units on the job.

In the end, we didn't get fast-tracked. We graduated Basic on time.

Andrew Brennan US Army, 2008-2012



Andrew Brennan

My grandfather picked me up from school on September 11. I was a junior in high school at Central Catholic. We had just pulled the car onto Fifth Avenue, when my grandfather said something that stuck with me.

"The war that's going to follow from this is going to change your generation. You need to be on the right side of that."

That changed my life plan right at that moment. Up to that point, my idea of success was to go to Notre Dame and become a lawyer.

But right then, I decided I wanted to go to a service academy.

Karen Bogdan, Air National Guard, 2000-2026

For those of us in the military, September 11 is a day we can't forget. Things changed on that day, and they've not gone back.

On September 11, I was working out at the 171st Air Refueling Wing. We started to hear things about an attack and turned on the news.

"Oh, my goodness," I thought. "We have jets that are out there flying missions right now." I knew the crew members flying them.

The National Guard is different from the regular Army. You spend years in one place. Rank doesn't matter as much. You know everybody, and some of them have worked together for ten or twenty years. You've seen them get married and have kids, and you've watched their kids grow up. You know them personally. They're family.

And so, on September 11, it was personal. We had our refueling aircraft up in the air, and I knew the people flying on those airplanes. I had a pit in my stomach and simply wanted to hear that they were okay. Once I knew that, then it was all about doing our jobs.



Karen Bogdan

PART II: ANSWERING THE CALL

Why did you join?

Mark Suckfiel U.S. Army, 2002 - 2011

I'm from a long line of military service that dates back to the American Revolution. It was a foregone conclusion that I would serve.

But, at the same time, I always wanted to be a teacher. So, that's what I was doing on 9/11. I was a college student doing my student teaching at West Mifflin Area High School. The plane that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, on 9/11 actually flew right over my school before it crashed into that field sixty or seventy miles away.

On that day I left the school and went straight to the Army recruiter at the Federal Building in Pittsburgh to enlist. But all federal offices were closed, so I couldn't enlist that day.

I went home and my mother pleaded, "Can you please finish your degree?" We were a blue collar family, and I was the first to be on track to receiving a college degree. So, I finished out my student teaching and enlisted in February 2002.

I joined the United States Army Reserves. My mom hoped I would not be called to active duty. But on November 7, 2003, we were alerted.

A month later, I shipped out to Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, in the depth of winter, to train for desert fighting. I qualified on a machine gun in negative 35-degree weather to go fight in the desert.

Ryan Ahl, Army National Guard, 2002-2026

I was 17 when 9/11 happened.

I was sitting in class, and my history teacher walked in the room and said, "You're going to want to turn on the TV."

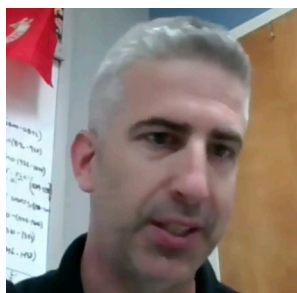


Ryan Ahl

We did, and it was probably about two minutes before the second 747 hit the tower, and that's when everybody knew it wasn't an accident. I was very upset. So upset I went home early because I wanted to speak to my father about it.

My dad and I talked about what we thought was going to happen, who could be responsible, how we thought the country might react, and what we were going to do.

I told my dad I wanted to join the military. That worried him. But, he said, "If that's still your wish, I'll fully support you. You just have to understand that it's going to be different."



Mark Suckfiel

My dad had been in the Army for 21 years, but he hadn't served in war. He knew I would.

I joined the Army National Guard. It had been my plan to go to college, and I thought that was the best way to do it. In 2004, we got the word that we were going to be deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I had anticipated it. It was exactly what I'd signed up for.

Maria Bardakos U.S. Coast Guard, 2001-2006

I joined the Coast Guard in August 2001. I was 20 years old. At the time, you weren't allowed to stay on your parents' insurance unless you were enrolled full-time in college, and college wasn't working out for me.

My dad said, "You need a job with insurance."

I was working as a lifeguard at the time. One day, I was driving down McKnight Road and saw a Coast Guard recruiting office.

"I wonder what this is?" I thought.

I walked in, and a recruiter handed me a sheet and a couple magazines.

"Here's what we do," he said. "If you want to do it, let me know."

I saw that the Coast Guard did search and rescue and law enforcement. Even though they're a military service, they seemed to have a more humanitarian aspect to them.

The next day, I went in and signed up.

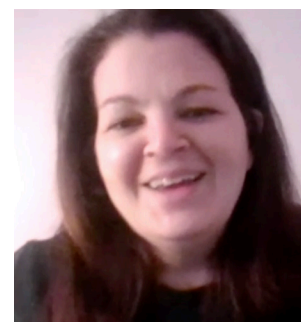
I was supposed to leave for Boot Camp later, but then 9/11 happened, and they moved up my ship-out date to October.

Boot Camp was hell on earth. It was my first time away from home. My whole world was completely rocked. That first day especially was rough, and for the next several weeks, you feel completely inadequate. Someone is always yelling at you for something. You're always doing push-ups because somebody—probably me—was not marching correctly.

And then it's over. All of a sudden you realize, "Oh wow. I did this."

After Boot Camp, I got to my first unit, and it was like an instant family. To this day, there's a group of people who are just a phone call away. They will do whatever it is they can for me, and I for them.

Looking back at who I was when I joined the military and who I was when I came out—and even who I am now—I wouldn't be where I am without that structure. They taught me how to be an adult. They instilled this drive that I didn't have before.



Maria Bardakos

PART III: THE LONG WAR

What was the war actually like?

Antonio Jose Contreas, U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army, 1992 – 2012



Antonio Jose Contreas

You're always alert. You're always thinking what might happen. You're looking at everything, every window, everyone that comes up to you. You're looking at anything that might be out of place or that something made you feel uncomfortable.

The first time we were attacked was in Baghdad. That's when you learn everything is for real now. Your training kicks in.

We had three people get hit. We got hit at the courthouse. So, we had to lock everything down. People were trying to rush into the courthouse, but it's chaos, and you don't know if they are friendly or insurgents. Little kids were trying to get in. I was trying to let them in. It was all crazy.

War is chaotic. You'd be driving and getting shot at. And it takes a while to realize, oh, they're shooting at us. You can't always tell what's going on.

My unit got lucky. We had no one die while I was there. We had a couple close calls. I've seen what a car bomb can do. It's hard.

I did have a friend who died in an explosion, but I wasn't there. I was in training. I read about it in the *Army Times*. That's how I found out. It shook me.

Steve Snyder U.S. Navy, 2001 - 2009

I deployed to Iraq in 2006 without a unit because I was what they call an Individual Augmentee in the Navy Reserves. I was just essentially there to help in any unit that needed it.

I served over near Lake Habbaniyah, part of the Sunni Triangle, about 75 kilometers west of Baghdad. I had dreams of grandeur that I was going to be out there making a difference.

I didn't expect to be inside the wire 99.9 percent of the time. I didn't leave the base at all except for a convoy or two that I was part of. There were incoming mortar attacks from time to time, but I wasn't in danger. Most people would be thankful for that. But being in relative safety the whole time -- that's always kind of been challenging to me.

I was part of the unit that was responsible for taking care of our fallen warriors and sending them home. And what a lot of people don't know is it wasn't just fallen American soldiers. Even insurgents that were killed in gunfights, they were also brought back to the base and cared for. And then they were taken to the entrance of

the base and the locals would come and take the remains.

We cared for anybody regardless of what side they were on. Would I do it all over again? In a heartbeat.

Karen Bogdan, Air National Guard, 2000-2026

Going to Iraq was scary. But it was something that I wanted to do. I volunteered to fill a position that the active duty didn't have somebody to fill.

It was December 2011 when I got there, so we were just starting to draw down our forces. But it was still very active. And it's one of those things that makes you realize just what a gift life is. Every day you have.

I can tell you that I'm fortunate enough to not personally witness much in the way of combat. But just sitting there in the safe dining facility eating your meal and all of a sudden feeling the table and watching your silverware shake and everything because there was an attack.

I'm appreciative of having had the opportunity to go. I'm glad that I did it. As somebody with as many years of service as I have, I wanted to be able to say that yes, I did do my part. I've been there. I've seen it.

But I can tell you honestly that I hope to never have to go back.

I remember seeing a young man I didn't know in the hospital. He wasn't in my maintenance detachment. He was suffering from severe psychological aftermath of having seen a lot firsthand. And to be there and to see this young man in that state—it was difficult.

It's war. It's ugly.

Corey Mourning, US Army, 2001-2014

After two weeks of R&R during which I celebrated my birthday with my twin sister, I returned [to Iraq] and saw that the roads were black. There had been a big fire. It was like *Black Hawk Down*.

One of my friends had died on that day, which was my birthday. Specialist Travis Babbitt. I turned 21 on that day, and he died.

I was happy to have been able to spend that time with my twin, but getting back to work with your friends, your boys, your brothers . . . It was bad.

I felt very helpless. My boys were out there. My brothers. And I know I was lucky to miss it, which I'm very grateful for but my brothers were there.

I think on the date of action in November 2007, probably one of the core values that I fell back on the most was personal courage. Everybody demonstrated their own individual acts of personal courage that day. I even remember times throughout the attack that I had to really kind of take a mental inventory.

"Okay. This is what I got to do. Let's go do it."

And even after all these years, I can still get that feeling in my stomach.

"I know this is dangerous. I could die doing this. But I have to do it for my brother out on the trail."

Those that were killed in action that day—I don't think I'll ever forget their names.

I used to wear one of those bracelets that you see people wear honoring somebody who was killed. I had all their names on my wrist. After a while, I realized I didn't need to wear the bracelet to remember. So, I took the bracelet off and kind of made that next step in my own healing process.

But anytime I'm able to speak, anytime I'm able to talk with service members and veterans, I like to share their stories and things that we did together.

PART IV: COMING HOME

What happened when the deployment ended?

Josh Galiyas, US Army 2001-2008

People were so happy for us at the airport when we arrived on Delta Airlines from Kuwait. We stopped in New York before we then took a smaller plane to Tennessee. People at the airport bought us meals.



Josh Galiyas

It was different from what Vietnam veterans received. And for that, I'm thankful. I feel bad for the guys before me that didn't receive that same welcome.

But coming back was its own thing. I mean, anytime you go to combat, everybody's roles change.

So, my girlfriend's roles changed. My family's roles changed. I would imagine it's even more serious for guys that have families, kids, wives.

I was gone for thirteen months. It's hard to readjust your relationships. The entire time I was deployed, I was like, "I can't wait, I can't wait to get back." And then you get back, and not everything's as great as you wanted it to be. That in itself is a setup for disappointment.

Sometimes, things don't get better because you're home. That's where some of those secondary issues of PTSD come out in guys, from my experience, such as depression and anxiety. Folks turn to alcohol and drugs.

I had a hard time respecting my own buddies that I grew up with. I came back to the same area where I'm from, and most of these guys were basically doing the same thing this whole time. They went to college, but really their lives had changed minimally, where my life went all over the place.

It sucks to admit, but sometimes I'll have conversations with these guys, and they'll be talking, and I just don't value what they're saying. So that's why I really do enjoy being around my veteran buddies.

Ryan Ahl, Army National Guard, 2002-2026

Coming home was very . . . it could be very difficult. You have a honeymoon period, but it doesn't last. You are young, and you're amped up on the fact that you were in an area where you could die at any time. You really could. I mean, whether it could be a mortar, it could be a sniper, it could be an IED. You spent a year on edge.

When you come back, you have this loss of perspective.

I mean, a lot of people went into high thrill-seeking things to try to keep that adrenaline up. A lot of people inappropriately self-medicated with alcohol or drugs. And they're trying to deal with their family because as much as you don't want to believe it, life has gone on without you. Things are different.

Family roles have changed.

I wasn't married at the time, but I did have a girlfriend. And reestablishing that relationship was tough.

In war, you feel a real sense of purpose every day. What you are doing is important. You're out there and you're supporting the people around you. It's important just because of that. Because it could come down to their lives being in your hands or vice versa. And then you get home, and you have this loss of purpose.

"What's the point?"

I have PTSD largely from my first deployment, which was more violent than the second. There was that fear of dying every day, and then there was that adrenaline and that sense of purpose that you get used to.

When I came home, I felt angry all the time, and I was worried about it. I didn't like being in crowds, and I felt when I would walk out the door, I would feel like I was missing something because I didn't have my body armor. I didn't have my ammo. I didn't have my weapon.

That was a sensation that didn't go away for a long time. I would always be feeling like I was missing something.

I didn't seek help at first. I didn't want to admit that I needed help. I didn't want to admit weakness because that's what I saw it was, even though it really wasn't. I felt like I was getting along okay or that it was somewhat normal because some of my other friends were going through the same thing and we could talk to each other.

After my second deployment, I knew that something was still wrong. My body had been amped up for stress and violence all the time. When I came back from my second deployment, I realized I was mature enough and old enough to realize there was a problem.

So I went to counseling, and it was like a whole new world opened to me. I never realized how powerful that type of therapy could be, but it was an instant relief. I remember my first therapy session. I just let it all out. And the therapist just let me. I mean, I was upset. I was physically upset. I was emotionally distraught. I just let it all out. That was so fulfilling to be able to do that.

Karen Bogdan, Air National Guard, 2000-2026

Honestly, there are certain details about coming home that I just don't remember. It was all kind of foggy and overwhelming.

I had made it clear to my family that I didn't want any kind of big surprise party or reception or anything like that.

I flew in commercially into the Pittsburgh airport. It was Easter Sunday, in fact, the day that I arrived home. And my kids were there and the rest of my family.

I'll never forget, my daughter was not feeling well. She had been ill and having a rough time. She was at that time just two.

She wouldn't come to me, she wouldn't let me be the one to comfort her because I had been gone for so long and she had gotten used to it not being me to be the one to comfort her. That was really difficult for me.

But the people of the community have been wonderful. On the flight home, the flight attendant learned I was returning from Iraq. She made an announcement on the PA system, and everyone clapped. I was just trying to get rest. But it was nice.

I can't even begin to tell you how many times I've been stopped by people when I'm in uniform and they just say thank you for your service.

We wouldn't be where we are today without that support from the community.

PART V: WHAT REMAINS

Twenty-five years later, what stays with you?

Darrell Utt, US Army Special Forces, 1990-2016



Darrell Utt

The first podcast I did was with Ryan Fugit. It's *Combat Story*. Ryan interviewed me. I'm an introvert but talking with Ryan was therapeutic. It was good to talk about some of those things, some tough topics.

I mean, there's things in combat that you just can't unsee. Once you see those things, they're with you.

It was therapeutic for me.

I really feel like there's an obligation for my generation to tell some of these stories and to let our younger generation know that there's a way to serve.

Maybe we can tell some stories and there'll be some folks out there listening that may get a little inspiration.

Maybe they hear about my background, not being the greatest student in high school and not really having a lot of opportunities to go to college financially right out of high school.

Maybe some of those folks can hear some stories, hear my story, hear other veterans' stories and be like, wow, my story is similar to that guy's story.

Maria Bardakos US Coast Guard, 2001-2006

I think it's important for veterans to talk to somebody about their experiences.

Not every veteran was in combat. I wasn't in combat. I was on a boat. I did security on oil platforms. But my time in a Middle Eastern country, it's always in the back of my mind—when I was there and the people that I was there with.

Now working at the VA, a lot of my patients are Vietnam veterans. And seeing their underlying mental health issues, I think that's the biggest thing.

Veterans often carry around stressful experiences. I hear some of them in my job. My uncle was in Vietnam and over the years he's

always told us little bits and pieces of when he was over there. It wasn't until recently that I even knew he was in combat.

There was so much backlash from the Vietnam War that veterans just held it in and never told anybody, because a lot of them didn't even say that they were in the military at that time.

I love working with veterans because I understand them.

We're allowed to wear military shirts with our scrubs and I usually have a Coast Guard shirt on. Most of the time the patients are like, "Oh, Coast Guard?"

"Yeah, man," I say, "I was in the Coast Guard."

It almost instantly—even though they were a Marine or in the Air Force or in the Army, it doesn't matter. We all went through Boot Camp.

They relax just a little bit, knowing, "Oh, well, you're a veteran too."

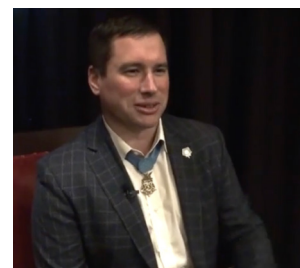
The one thing that I will forever hold with me from my time in the military is just the camaraderie and the brother-and-sisterhood.

I wouldn't change it for the world because I am who I am because of those experiences.

Kyle White, US Army, 2006-2011 (Medal of Honor)

I've been out of the Army going on twelve years now, and you can always recognize and appreciate when somebody demonstrates integrity—telling the truth, making a mistake and owning it, whatever it may be.

That accountability and owning up to it and having that real personal courage to come forward is something I value a lot. ■



Kyle White

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A GOOD DAY TO STUDY HISTORY: FROM WEARING THE FLAG TO STUDYING WHAT IT MEANS

By Nate Webster

Nate Webster grew up in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, and graduated from West Point in 2011. He commissioned as an infantry officer and served with the 101st Airborne, later becoming a Special Forces officer with deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, and locations across Africa. Nate is a recipient of the Pat Tillman Foundation Scholarship and graduated from Harvard Law School in 2026 where his scholarship focused on constitutional law, particularly questions of American civic identity and the intersection of national security and emerging technology. After graduation, Nate intends to practice in Hawaii.

Third Period

I was in third period history class with Mr. Geller the morning of 9/11. He taught seventh-grade world history. If you had asked me then to define history, I suppose I would have said that history is a field of study of past events, finished facts. History happened to other people in distant lands. History is a thing you read. Other people lived it.

That day changed my definition. We all have a visceral version of the next few minutes and hours. In my classroom there was a small TV mounted in the corner a few rows from where I sat. We watched the news like millions of others after the first tower was struck. Then, the second. Then the Pentagon. Then, somewhere over a field in Pennsylvania, 60 miles away from my classroom, United Flight 93 came down.

Later on, I would learn how much weight a place can carry when violence happens there. It is both mundane, quotidian, historical and extraordinary. I've felt it on battlefield tours, visits to sites of atrocities, and in countries where war-torn is a present description. That morning, I felt the shadow of it but did not process it for many years. Our country had been attacked from far away, and a few miles down the road.

At some point, Mr. Geller, a Marine veteran, turned the TV off. We were studying, as best I can recall, the ancient Egyptians. I don't remember everything he said, as I now suspect he was stalling for time and staring at many anxious middle schoolers. I do remember that he told us that what we were watching, what had just happened, would likely shape the rest of our lives, and then he said, "so today is a good day to study history."

He encouraged us to remember, pay attention, take notes, and contextualize. The textbooks we dutifully read, filled with facts and dates and stories, and that small television screen became, on that morning, one and the same. We were in history.

That moment has shaped every path I've walked since. Where I went to college and where I went to war, every relationship I've formed, every effort I've taken — all flowed from that day. Thinking about this has helped me realize that history, when really understood, tells us not only of our past, but hints at our future. As we near two milestone anniversaries this summer — the 250th an-

niversary of the signing of the Constitution and the 25th anniversary of 9/11 — we're given a profound opportunity to learn about ourselves, each other, our place in the world, and what we may become.

Family Business

My own family history and connection with the uniform began, at least in America, seven generations back. A young German man, Valentine Derry, left the old world with his wife and came to the new as a Hessian — one of the mercenaries the British hired to police their colonies and put down an emerging rebellion. Like several thousand other Hessians, once he arrived, he defected and fought for the Patriots for over a year. When the Revolutionary War ended he settled in Fayette County, PA, in a small village about ten miles from where, two centuries later, I was born and raised.

Many of his descendants wore a uniform as well. Most recently, my maternal grandfather, Harry Oldland Sr., who lives near the small town our Hessian ancestor settled in, wore a Marine's uniform in Korea and Vietnam. His son, my uncle Harry, wore the same. Their stories weren't the only ones we told about our family history, but as a young boy, they were the threads I wanted to weave into my own story.

By the time I was old enough to think seriously about what to do with my life, our country had been attacked, was at war, and the family service record made the question of "what do you want to do when you grow up?" simple to answer. Even before 9/11, I'd had a desire to serve, but that moment and the subsequent ones made my path clear. The wars were on the news every night, and it felt like the only path worth walking.



Nate's uncle Harry Oldland Jr (left) and grandfather Harry Oldland Sr (right).
(Nate Webster)

While I had some reservations about what I would potentially be supporting as our war in Afghanistan expanded into Iraq, I read Nate Fick's book *One Bullet Away*, and realized that my duty would be, in fact, small. Not small in its importance, but in its scale and focus. I didn't need to worry about political decisions and grand strategy; my role was most important to those around me, my future platoon, that was my small circle of responsibility.

In 2007, I matriculated to West Point. As cadets, we were all aware that once we graduated we would be going to war. Nate Fick's story of invading Afghanistan, and then, for reasons that were unclear to him, Iraq, while leading with moral courage, gave me solace, especially as the war in Iraq escalated into new levels of violence and domestic criticism mounted.



Nate Webster (right) as a West Point cadet, 2008. (Nate Webster)

We silently memorialized the graduates who'd lost their lives with taps overlooking the historic Plane, a parade field they'd recently walked across. The stark reality of what awaited us became real. What I now understand is that as raw as the risk felt, it was also part of the draw.

Deployments

After graduation and initial infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia, I was assigned to the storied 101st Airborne Division. Ahead of our deployment to Afghanistan, we trained extensively on our individual and collective tasks in the summer heat of Fort Campbell, Kentucky and in the musky humidity of Fort Polk, Louisiana. Although we were tactically ready, I felt like we were behind in understanding the complexity of the country, the people, and their history.

After arriving in country, my concerns became true. My battalion deployed to Paktia Province near the border with Pakistan. It is a rugged, mountainous, complicated place. No matter how well we operated, it felt like we didn't know where we were and who we fought alongside. We weren't lost on the map, but we functioned without knowing where we were in the story of that place, or what role we played.

The strategic confusion out of DC and the Pentagon, while not a constant consideration, did seep into our daily patrols. It was 2012, eleven years into the war, and we were confidently told by our leaders that we would be imminently departing Afghanistan. We worked endlessly on evacuating several small bases in the province while attempting, without having the necessary expertise to



On patrol in Paktia Province, Afghanistan, 2012. (Nate Webster)

train our Afghan counterparts to become a professional fighting force before we left. We epitomized the frustrating reflection that the conflict in Afghanistan "[wasn't] a 20-year war, but a one-year war fought 20 times." We tried in earnest but struggled in our missions, namely because we weren't trained in how to train others.

There were some units operating around us that seemed to have done their homework. They knew where they were, what they were tasked to do, knew the locals, and had invested in those relationships by returning to the same villages and provinces again and again. They were Green Berets.

They lived in the villages we only visited, moved through the world differently, thoughtfully. They were trained in how to train. They built rapport organically, by working side by side with the Afghans. The intention they operated with reminded me of the professors I'd had at West Point who were Green Berets. They'd taught differently, forcing us to think about problems in greater detail, and admit that the assumptions we had could be wrong. In Afghanistan I saw that commitment to truth pay off. Believing that you can never learn too much and should always question what you've learned against what is in front of you is part of a Green Beret's training. In them I saw what Mr. Geller would have hoped for: soldiers who had studied history.

The pull toward Special Forces had been building in me for years. As a cadet I read Eric Blehm's *The Only Thing Worth Dying For* and could not put it down. I started it on a train ride down to NYC, and don't remember if I explored the city at all that weekend. I couldn't stop reading the story of the Special Forces ODA (Operational Force Alpha or A-team) in the early weeks of the war, twelve men whose job hinged on trusting one another.

During my second year at West Point I took American Politics with Major Tommy Sowers, a Green Beret with combat experience now teaching in the classroom. He pressed us to think about active citizenship as a discipline. What did it mean to study politics? To be engaged in civics while being civil? To be political, and a future instrument of policy, while also being polite? Those unresolved questions of the social contract we signed, what we owe one another, and how it has evolved over the years, became real in time. We read Locke, Hobbes, Jefferson, and overlaid that with our pending deployments. Like Mr. Geller, he knew we needed to know our history before we went out and tried to make our mark on the world, wherever that would be.

Then, in Afghanistan, I saw that intellectual approach in action. Special Forces teams learned the language (or enough of it to be useful), the history of the regions they deployed to, and synthesized that with their mission. The stories of those teams have been told over the years in many books, but the throughline that connected their work was the cultural attributes of the Green Berets. They committed to knowing and understanding. That understanding came from two streams. One was study, hard and deliberate — the kind every Green Beret will recognize as the output from the imperative to *understand your operational environment*. The other was a practiced, and perhaps even forced, introspection, the willingness to let what you were seeing actually change you and challenge your assumptions.

The teams I admired had figured out that you cannot read a place well from the outside until you have done some honest reading on the inside. Introspection was the thing that made extrospection possible. Their quiet work was not solely combat but building local forces who could conceivably secure their own homes long after the Green Berets and the United States were gone. While I loved serving as an infantry officer, I wanted a different challenge. After departing Afghanistan I committed myself to joining their ranks.



A teammate and I flew this flag in Iraq on August 31st, 2021, as America ended its mission in Afghanistan. (Nate Webster)

Becoming a Green Beret

Training to become a Green Beret at Fort Bragg was an amazing opportunity, not simply because of the adrenaline rush of a night skydive, or the constant positive pressure to improve from the incredible people from all walks of life unified in purpose, but because the work, at the deepest level, was about empowerment. We were, at the most aspirational level, strengthening communities to remain free, embodied in our motto, *De Oppresso Liber*, to liberate the oppressed. We trained individuals in medicine and planning and the skills that allowed a place to stand on its own.

From West Africa to East Africa, to Iraq, we worked diligently, and it is work I'm proud of, and the work is continued by tens of thousands of soldiers around the world today. Seeing a Kenyan soldier asked to guard his country's porous border finally understand how to use a tourniquet, and therefore how to potentially save his or a friend's life while on patrol, was deeply satisfying work. This work of teaching and training others channels our country's ideal of self-determination in a personal way — learn how to take care of yourself well so you can learn how to take care

of each other well. When we went abroad, we weren't simply projections of America's military might, but our highest aspirations. The success of our mission was measured, in the end, not by how well we performed tasks ourselves, but by how well our partners persisted after we left.

I loved the adventure, the learning, but somewhere in those years of operating around the world, I came up against something uncomfortable about myself: I had lost my connection to home. I did not feel particularly rooted anywhere. I had spent a great deal of discipline understanding places far from my own, on people who weren't my neighbors, friends, or family, and in that decade, the place I had sworn to represent had changed. I knew how to salute the flag, how to wear it proudly, but I slowly realized I had an elementary understanding of the country behind it.

Coming Home

I left the military in 2022, and the residue of the work came with me. Nobody who has done that work walks out cleanly, and I was no exception. Adjustment was bumpy, but I had support, mostly with other vets similarly navigating the internal path as well, and thankfully I had a new history to learn.

The Green Beret mission — strengthening communities to remain free, teaching people the competencies of freedom — had an equivalent at home. As soldiers, we often operated in places where the rule of law was thin. Here at home, we have a robust system that I aimed to learn in order to continue the impact I wanted to have.

Our law is the working machinery by which a free people governs itself, argues with itself, rights its wrongs, and structures its communities. Law, like the military, is also a family affair for me. My paternal grandfather served during WWII and used the GI Bill to earn a law degree, after which he practiced for 50 years. His sons, my father and uncle, still practice in the same family firm. I realized those two paths could become one, in my own way.

In May of 2026, I graduated from Harvard Law School. While it was strange to sit in a classroom in my mid-thirties, after having spent so many years sitting in the back of a Chinook or on a range, it was rewarding to hear my classmates talk about what made them concerned and excited about America as it enters a new era. Being back in the classroom was a humble reminder that I was not too old to learn, and certainly not too old enough to learn from those younger than me.

My classmates were brilliant, almost without exception. They had been preparing for law school since they were children, the way I had been planning to be a soldier. While our experiences, slang, and upbringings were different, we connected over our attempt to grapple with the law, what role it plays in our society, and how it reflects who we are. What I discovered, sitting in lecture halls and reading cases, was that the country I had spent more than a decade serving was stranger and more magnificent than I had understood. The Constitution was a working argument. And it has been working — fitfully, imperfectly, sometimes poorly — for more than two centuries, and the working of it was the whole point. The founders handed us the obligation to keep finishing the thing they had started, knowing we never would. Knowing we would pass it down, just like military leaders do every time they change command and hand off the guidon, hoping the next generation will read and try to understand its history.

A Good Day, Still

Graduating in 2026, the year that marks twenty-five years since the towers fell, closed a chapter of my own history that began with 9/11. Law school gave me the intellectual groundwork to build on and find ways to bind us in a way we have not felt since that spirit of unification in the months after the attack. I haven't figured out how that will take shape, but I do know that the lessons I've learned, starting in that middle school classroom — knowing our history, understanding the people around me, and the skills refined as a Green Beret — will apply.

We have two anniversaries to remember this year. I have been thinking about what it means to stand between them. The two hundred and fiftieth reminds us of how far we have come and how much we have had to overcome to be where we are today. The twenty-fifth ought to do the same.

Both are invitations to study history as a living thing — something we are still in the middle of. Our communities, our neighborhoods, and our country are held together by enough of us being willing to learn the story of a person whose politics, faith, geography, or history is different, and to respect it as true and complicated and theirs. We have never agreed about everything. The country was built to have “a more perfect union” as a guiding, aspirational verb.

I have spent the years since seventh grade trying to learn and apply history. In a humvee, on a patrol base, in a seminar, or around a table. Some days I think I have actually managed it. On other days, I keep trying. But every day, like that fateful one twenty-five years ago, remains a good day to study history. ■



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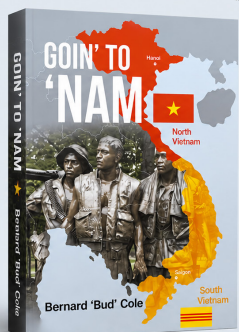
— Major General Charles R. “Chuck” Henry, DCMC (Retired)

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Private Henry Parham, 1944

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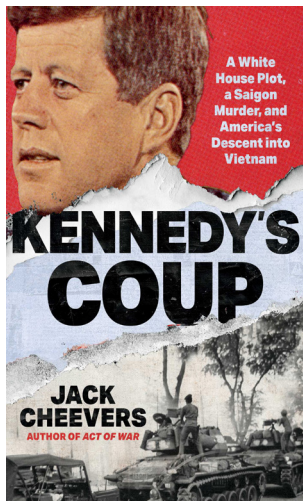
PSALM 89:15

— Ethel Parham, Henry's beloved wife

KENNEDY'S COUP:

A WILD ALARM ON A HOT NIGHT

By Jack Cheevers



The following is excerpted from Jack Cheevers' book *Kennedy's Coup* which vividly recreates the Kennedy Administration's secret encouragement of the fatal 1963 military coup against South Vietnam's defiant president. A preface and closing has been provided by the author to give the excerpt context.

Jack Cheevers is also the author of *Act of War: Lyndon Johnson, North Korea, and the Capture of the Spy Ship Pueblo*, winner of the 2014 Samuel Eliot Morison Award for Naval Literature. He worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for twenty-seven years, including stints at the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Oak-*

land Tribune, and the *Associated Press* and *United Press International* bureaus in San Francisco. A Massachusetts native, he is a proud graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. He lives on a pond in New Hampshire.

Kennedy's Coup (Simon & Schuster) was released in February 2026 and is available at bookshop.org.

Preface

In the summer of 1963, the Kennedy administration faced a worrisome political backlash over its strong support of South Vietnam's tough, authoritarian president, Ngo Dinh Diem.

Diem had asked, two years earlier, for American help in battling an increasingly dangerous insurgency by communist-led Viet Cong guerillas. JFK responded with Operation Beef-Up, a massive infusion of helicopters, tanks, artillery, armored personnel carriers, fixed-wing aircraft, small arms, napalm and well-trained American combat advisers. Millions of dollars in economic aid began flowing to South Vietnam as well.

As he struggled to put down the Viet Cong, Diem confronted a second crisis: a widening protest movement by Buddhists, who constituted about 70 percent of South Vietnam's population.

Buddhists claimed that Diem, an ardent Catholic, and his government were persecuting them by restricting their purchases of land for schools and pagodas and otherwise suppressing their belief system. They further alleged that they faced discrimination in hiring and promotions in the military and civil service, and that local government officials were killing some Buddhists and forcing others to convert to Catholicism. Though the persecution allegation was false, according to a subsequent UN investigation, and other charges sometimes exaggerated or baseless, they were

picked up by the American press and widely publicized in the United States.

The protest campaign picked up momentum when Diem's security forces killed eight people during a chaotic demonstration outside a government radio station in Hue in May 1963. The following month, a Buddhist monk set himself on fire in a Saigon intersection, and photographs of his horrifying death appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States.

JFK found himself on the defensive as members of Congress and editorial writers bashed him for backing a supposed religious bigot and demanded cuts, and even cancellation of U.S. aid to South Vietnam. So vociferous was the criticism that Kennedy began to think Diem, a long-time U.S. ally, might have to be ousted. "The time may come when we're gonna have to try to do something about Diem, and I think that's going to be an awfully critical period," Kennedy told his new ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, shortly before he flew to Saigon. "I don't know how well you're prepared for that out there, or who we would sort of support. . . . I think that's going to be one of your key problems this year."

Any residual White House sympathy for Diem evaporated in late August when South Vietnamese police and soldiers raided Buddhist pagodas in several cities and arrested 1,400 monks and nuns in an effort to decapitate the protest movement. Diem and his brother and right-hand man, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were delighted, but the rest of the world was outraged, along with many Americans.

JFK's advisers split into two bitterly antagonistic camps: those who wanted Diem gone, and those who wanted him left in place. Diem's opponents—chiefly Lodge, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman, and Michael Forrestal, the Vietnam specialist on Kennedy's National Security Council—felt he was too repressive and unpopular to ever win the war against the Viet Cong. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, CIA director John McCone, and Frederick Nolting, Lodge's predecessor as ambassador, still backed Diem as an experienced and competent leader who could eventually defeat the communists. Kennedy's military commander in South Vietnam, General Paul Harkins, agreed.

But it wasn't clear who ordered the pagoda raids or even who carried them out. Hilsman believed that Nhu, who headed South Vietnam's special forces and secret police, was the culprit. A former World War II guerilla leader in Burma who held a Yale PhD in international relations, Hilsman was convinced that Nhu and his notorious wife, Madame Nhu—aka the "Dragon Lady"—had become intolerable embarrassments to the Kennedy administration and needed to be removed.

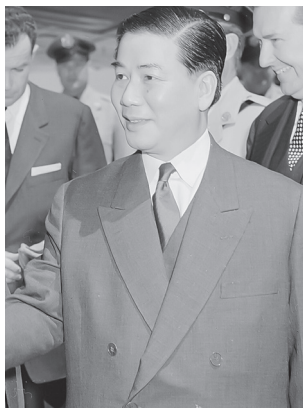
He decided to take action.

(Note: Also referred to below are Marine general Victor Krulak, the counterinsurgency specialist for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and George Ball, JFK's under secretary of state for economic affairs.)

Excerpted from *Kennedy's Coup* by Jack Cheevers

On Saturday, August 24, in his office at the State Department, Hilsman drafted one of the most fateful directives of the Vietnam War, a message to Lodge that came to be known as "the green light cable."

"US government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands," Hilsman wrote. "Diem must be given chance to rid himself of Nhu and his coterie and replace them with best military and political personalities available." The embassy was to inform South Vietnamese military and civilian leaders that if Nhu and his wife weren't axed, Washington "would find it impossible" to extend further military and economic support to South Vietnam.



President Ngo Dinh Diem,
May 1957. (Public Domain)

Diem should be given "a reasonable opportunity to remove Nhu," Hilsman went on, but if he refused, "we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem." The cable also instructed Lodge to tell Diem's generals that Washington would give them "direct support in any interim period of breakdown" of Diem's government.

The new ambassador—in Saigon barely two days—was further told to "urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we

might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary." Lodge should work with Harkins to protect American citizens during "this operation." Hilsman closed by assuring Lodge that "we will back you to the hilt on actions you take to achieve our objectives."

Thus, with a single telegram, Hilsman laid the groundwork for a complete reversal of nearly a decade of American policy toward Vietnam. On the strength of no authority but his own, he moved to pull the rug out from under a longtime anti-communist ally during wartime.

Worse, he did so in pursuit of a chimera. U.S. diplomats had been telling Washington for years that as corrosive as Nhu's presence was, he and his brother were Siamese twins who could never be separated. One of Lodge's predecessors, Elbridge Durbrow, urged Diem in 1960 to appoint Nhu as an ambassador and send him into comfortable, semipermanent exile abroad. Diem ignored him. He and his brother were bonded not only by blood, but by past triumphs and a shared vision for the future of their country.

Nhu was Diem's right-hand man, the cutthroat executor of his policies. He headed the crucial strategic hamlet program, ran the secret police, and oversaw the Republican Youth, all key pillars of strength for the regime. Nhu functioned as his brother's big thinker, writing his speeches and coming up with personalism as the regime's official ideology.

To Diem, resisting foreign pressure was an art form. Getting him to ship his indispensable brother out of South Vietnam had as much chance of success as persuading JFK to send his brother and right-hand man, Robert, to the moon. (Recognizing this sibling parallel, some Americans called Nhu "Bobby Nhu.")

The green light cable didn't directly order Lodge to foment a coup. But by imposing an unattainable condition on Diem, and encouraging his generals to turn against him when he failed to meet it, Hilsman's instruction set in motion a series of events that culminated in the president's overthrow and brutal murder nine weeks later.

As soon as the green light cable was drafted, Hilsman and his bureaucratic allies set out to ram it through the government's interdepartmental clearance process without nearly as much top-level scrutiny as it needed.

On that late-summer weekend, much of official Washington was on vacation or otherwise out of town. Kennedy was with his family in Hyannis Port, mourning his prematurely born son Patrick, who'd died at a Boston hospital on August 9, after less than two days of life. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was climbing the Grand Teton mountains in Wyoming. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was in New York meeting with UN officials and taking in a Yankees game. CIA director John McCone was yachting in Puget Sound. McGeorge Bundy, JFK's national security assistant, was at his vacation home in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts.

Hilsman took the draft telegram to Harriman, his immediate superior, for approval, and they brought it to Forrestal. Forrestal telephoned George Ball, the acting secretary of state in Rusk's absence, and relayed the message to him. Then Forrestal sent a copy over the secure White House communications system to JFK in Hyannis Port.

In a memo earlier that day, Forrestal told the president "it is now quite certain" that Nhu is "calling the shots—even though the CIA was reporting that it was unclear who was in charge in Saigon. Forrestal added: Averell and Roger now agree that we must move before the situation in Saigon freezes." When Forrestal later sent Kennedy the text of the green light cable, he again nudged the president to act quickly, writing in a cover memo: "Since the situation in Saigon may not remain fluid for long, [the State] Department believes desirable transmit this message tonight."

Forrestal next called Roswell Gilpatric, McNamara's second-in-command, at his farm on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Immediately suspicious of how the cable was being handled, Gilpatric had Forrestal read it to him twice. He realized the message was "highly controversial" and figured the anti-Diem clique was trying to rush it through at a time when top officials who might object were gone.

"I frankly thought it was an end run," Gilpatric recalled. "I didn't see why it had to be done Saturday night with the president away, with Rusk away, with McNamara away, Bundy away." But Gilpatric raised no showstopper objections to the cable, seeing it as a political matter more in the State Department's bailiwick than the Pentagon's.

Forrestal then turned to Krulak, who was in Forrestal's White House office as he made the clearance calls. Forrestal asked him to deliver a copy of the cable to General Maxwell Taylor, who JFK had made chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1962. Krulak hurried away.

Kennedy called Forrestal, saying, "I want to talk to George Ball and Harriman about this telegram. Where are they?" Forrestal said he'd find them. Ball, it turned out, was playing golf in Pocomac, Maryland. As he finished up the ninth hole, Harriman and Hilsman "appeared in a great sweat" and drove Ball to his home,



President Kennedy and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge discussing President Diem and South Vietnam in the Oval Office on August 15, 1963.
(The Kennedy Library)

where he got on the phone with the president to go over the cable.

"He asked me what I really thought," Ball remembered. "I had told him that Averell and Hilsman very much wanted to do this. I had made some changes in the telegram; I had watered it down myself, actually, over their earlier version. I read him the critical paragraphs. I told him that this would certainly be taken as encouragement by the generals to [mount] a coup. But I said I thought that, in my judgment, the situation with Diem was becoming an enormous humiliation to the United States, that we were supporting a regime which was behaving in the most unconscionable and cruel, uncivilized way toward a significant minority of the population. Madame Nhu was making the most outrageous statements, and Nhu was a very devious and unreliable fellow. I thought to send this telegram to Lodge, who'd just arrived there, was probably all right. So [Kennedy] approved it."

At about 7 p.m., Forrestal got in touch again with Krulak, asking him if he'd shown the cable to Taylor. Forrestal recalled Krulak replying that Taylor had reviewed the text and "it's all right with him if everybody else is in agreement." Forrestal checked again with Kennedy, who gave his final sign-off.

The cable was transmitted to Saigon at 8:11 p.m.

But Krulak gave a different account, saying he wasn't able to show the message to Taylor until about 9:45 p.m., after it had already been sent to Lodge. Taylor, who opposed ousting Diem, read the text and commented to Krulak that it reflected "the well-known compulsion of Hilsman and Forrestal to depose Diem."

Taylor added that he was glad he wasn't on the receiving end of the instruction, since it was so vague, and more thought should have been put into drafting it. He later complained that Hilsman, Harriman, and Forrestal had executed "an egregious end run" around the usual vetting process.

Hilsman subsequently insisted that the green light cable was properly cleared with Kennedy and other Washington principals. But some top officials said they'd been hustled rather than consulted. After Hilsman asserted that he'd discussed the message with Marshall Carter, the CIA's acting director in McCone's absence, Carter "took angry exception," saying he never saw the text before it was sent to Saigon. In a 1967 memorandum, Carter branded the message "ill-conceived, ill-timed, and inadequately coordinated."

Nevertheless, in a matter of hours, the Kennedy administration had made a decision, after years of full-throated U.S. support for Diem, that could trigger a revolt against him. Kennedy and his

men had given little if any consideration to important questions raised by the green light cable. If Diem were deposed, who or what would replace him? Would the new government be an improvement over the present one? Would it have the support of the people and the ability to prosecute the war any more effectively?

Closing

With the Kennedy administration's covert encouragement, troops under the command of rebel generals swept into Saigon on Nov. 1, 1963 and laid siege to Diem's palace. Despite heavy shelling and aerial bombing, Diem and Nhu escaped that night but surrendered at a Catholic church the next day. Insurgent soldiers placed the brothers inside an armored personnel carrier, tied their hands, and brutally murdered them.

The generals, who had promised to turn power over to civilians, instead formed a junta and tried to govern the country themselves. They proved to be inept and, three months later, were overthrown by another general.

South Vietnam spiraled into political disarray sometimes bordering on chaos. Over the next 18 months, seven different governments rose and fell. Buddhists and Catholics fought each other in bloody street battles in August 1964.

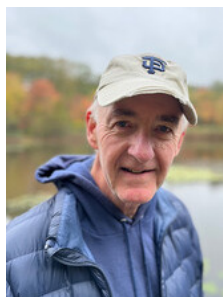
Three weeks after Diem's killing, JFK was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson took over. He tried to keep the war on the back burner as he campaigned for president in 1964. But the Pentagon, warning that the war was being lost, urged Johnson to dispatch American combat troops to South Vietnam and begin heavy bombing of North Vietnam.

By March 1965, LBJ had lost patience with the chronic political infighting and turmoil in South Vietnam. He ordered the first Marine units to South Vietnam and launched Operation Rolling Thunder, a strategic bombing campaign that went on until Halloween 1968.

At the time of JFK's death, there were about 16,000 U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam, serving in advisory roles. Five years later, under Johnson, more than 500,000 American troops were engaged in the war. ■

SAVE THE DATE

A VBC Evening with historian Jack Cheevers
Author of *Kennedy's Coup*
Monday, July 20th, 7:00pm



Join us for an evening with historian Jack Cheevers as he discusses his latest book *Kennedy's Coup*. Released in February 2026, it is based on a decade of research and writing, enriched by eyewitness interviews and revealing documents obtained through dozens of freedom of information requests. *Kennedy's Coup* vividly recreates the Kennedy

Administration's secret encouragement of the fatal 1963 military coup against South Vietnam's defiant president.

Zoom link for the July 20th program will be available via the online events tab at veteransbreakfastclub.org.



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A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"One day, those of us who built the Veterans Breakfast Club and shared stories here will be gone. My greatest hope and concern is that our community of listening continues for generations to come. That's why we invite you to consider a planned gift. With your support, our veteran voices will never be lost."

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"Each person possesses a page of our Great History Book, and the pages are being put together by the VBC."

—Roland Glenn, WWII Infantry Officer, Okinawa

THE CALL THAT NEVER CAME

By Matt Cahill

Matt Cahill is the Founder and Executive Chair of Green Star Families. A retired U.S. Army Sergeant First Class and medic, he served with the 101st Airborne Division and later in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. He holds a Master of Social Work and is a PATH Intl. Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning. His work focuses on supporting veterans and advocating for recognition of families impacted by veteran suicide.

Six years ago, my friend and fellow veteran, Andy McCaffrey took his life.

Four years earlier, standing in my kitchen late at night, we had made a promise to each other. It was not a dramatic conversation, and it wasn't something either of us spent much time dwelling on afterward. We had both lived enough life to understand that there are places the mind can go when the weight becomes too much. Before the night ended, we agreed that if either of us ever found ourselves there again, feeling like we couldn't take another step or make it through another day, we would call the other first before making a decision that couldn't be taken back.

Andy never made that call.

I have thought about that fact more times than I can count. Over the years, I have replayed that conversation in my mind and asked myself the same questions again and again. Why then? What was weighing on him that day? What happened between the promise we made and the decision he ultimately made? Most of all, why didn't he call? Like so many families and friends left behind after a suicide, I have learned that some questions will always remain unanswered.

One fact I do know the answer to is who Andy was.

I met him in 1995 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, when we were both serving with the 101st Airborne Division. The pace was relentless, training schedules were endless, sleep in short supply, and everyone was expected to perform regardless of what hell their personal lives were in. It was the kind of environment where people revealed who they really were because there was very little energy left for pretending.

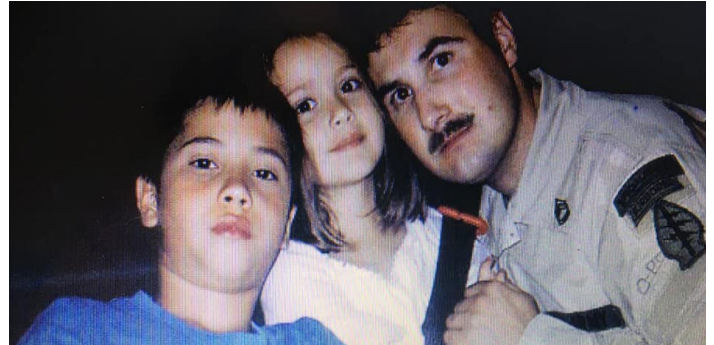
One afternoon, Andy came walking toward me with his hand held out and said, "Doc, I need stitches."

At first, I thought he was joking. Then I looked down and saw he had managed to split his hand open trying to tear into an MRE with a bayonet. The cut was deep enough that it clearly needed attention.

That was my job, but there was one problem. I had never actually performed sutures on my own before. I had trained for it, done it under supervision, and been cleared to do it independently. What I had never done was sit in the dirt, surrounded by Soldiers, and be entirely responsible for the outcome.

I told him I didn't have anything to numb the pain. He looked at me and, in true Andy fashion, said, "You got this, Doc."

I became hyper-focused. The noise around us faded away, and



*Andrew McCaffrey with two of his children.
(The McCaffrey Family)*

it became just another task that needed to be done. Andy sat there while I stitched his hand back together without saying a word about the pain. More importantly, he never gave me a reason to doubt myself.

Looking back, I realize that moment was about more than his cut hand. Andy was helping me, a young medic, find confidence in my abilities before I had fully learned to trust myself.

That was Andy. There was never any façade with him. He was direct, honest, and comfortable in his own skin. You always knew where you stood because he didn't mince words, and if he respected you, it was because you had earned it.

Over the years, our lives took different directions, but our friendship remained. Sometimes months would pass without us talking, and then one phone call would put us right back where we left off. The military has a way of creating friendships that endure. Time passes, people move, careers change, families grow, but some bonds never seem to fade.

I eventually left active duty and returned home to Pennsylvania while Andy continued serving and eventually found his way into Special Forces, deploying multiple times to Afghanistan. During one of those deployments, he was wounded in an explosion that took part of his arm. Most people would have looked at that injury and accepted that their military career was over. Andy looked at it as his next challenge.

That grit carried him through recovery and rehabilitation, and eventually he became the first amputee from Afghanistan to return to combat as a Green Beret. It was an extraordinary accomplishment, but if you knew Andy like I did, that probably wouldn't surprise you. What mattered to him wasn't making history. What mattered to him was getting back to his team and continuing to serve.

As time marched on and we got older, our conversations changed. We went from talking about adventure, chasing adrenaline, and figuring out what challenge we wanted to tackle next to talking about injuries, surgeries, recovery, and the things that stay with people long after military service ends. Like most veterans know all too well, we talked about pain, both visible and invisible.

The promise Andy and I made that night happened during a visit in 2016 when he and his wife came to stay with us. It was late, everyone else had gone to bed, and Andy and I were standing in my kitchen talking. The conversation wandered through old memories before eventually landing on subjects most veterans rarely discuss out loud, and almost never with anyone else.

By that point, I had my own experiences with dark places. Years earlier, I had contemplated ending my own life and came far closer than I care to admit. So when Andy and I started talking about those dark places, I knew exactly what he meant. I understood how convincing those thoughts can feel when you're in the middle of them and how difficult it can be to see a way through.

We understood each other without having to explain every detail because some experiences create their own language, even in silence. Before the night ended, we made a promise. If things ever got bad enough, call first.

He never made that call.

In August of 2020, Andy ended his life.

The following year, after pandemic restrictions eased, Andy's former First Sergeant and close friends held a Viking funeral, just as Andy had requested. I attended and spent time with his daughter, Izabel, who was trying to make sense of a loss that would never fully make sense.



*Andrew McCaffrey's Viking Funeral, 2021.
(The McCaffrey Family)*

During our conversation, she told me about something that happened while she was traveling to the funeral. She had a layover along the way, and at some point the weight of everything caught up with her. Overwhelmed with grief and exhausted from the journey, she went to the airport USO facility looking for a quiet place to sit, collect herself, and find refuge in an area she felt comfortable in.

At first, she was turned away and found herself having to explain who her father was, his military service, and why she belonged there before she was eventually allowed inside.

Eventually, the situation was resolved, and she was able to get the rest she needed, but that wasn't what stayed with me.

What stayed with me was the thought of a young woman traveling to her father's funeral, carrying a grief most people will never understand, and finding there was no place for her to go. She was hurting, she was alone, and she was trying to make sense of losing her father. I couldn't stop thinking about that.

The more I thought about that conversation, the more it bothered me. I wanted to know if Izabel's experience was unusual, and what I discovered was that it wasn't.

After the funeral, I found myself talking with surviving spouses, parents, children, and siblings from across the country. Their stories were different, how it happened was different, but I kept hearing the same things. They felt invisible after the suicide. They were grieving while also trying to figure out where they fit and whether anyone understood what they were carrying.

Andy's family was not the exception. There were thousands of families across this country trying to make sense of a loss that would never make sense. They were looking for community and for recognition. They just wanted reassurance that they had not been forgotten.

That is when Green Star Families was born.

It was born from the belief that Izabel should never have felt alone while traveling to her father's funeral, or been made to feel like she didn't belong. It was born from conversations with families who felt invisible after losing someone they loved. Most of all, it was born from the belief that these families have nothing to be ashamed of, that they matter, and that they deserve to know they have not been forgotten.

I know that nothing will change what happened to Andy. Nothing will answer every question his family still carries, and nothing will erase the loss felt by those who loved him. What we can do is make sure families facing similar losses know they are not alone.

When people ask why Green Star Families exists, my answer is simple. It exists because behind every veteran suicide is a family whose life changes forever.

Andy never made that call, and his daughter should never have had to feel alone and wonder where she belonged.

These families deserve to be seen. They deserve to be supported and honored. They deserve meaningful recognition, not to be treated as an afterthought. Most of all, they deserve to know they have not been forgotten. ■

Legislative Update

Green Star recognition continues to gain momentum across the country.



**GREEN STAR
FAMILIES
OF AMERICA**

At the federal level, the Sgt. Walter F. Hartnett IV Green Star Veterans Service Act (H.R. 6022) remains under consideration in Congress and has gained additional bipartisan co-sponsors.

At the state level, California became the first state to formally recognize Green Star Families when SCR 154 was adopted on May 29, 2026.

Pennsylvania followed with House Bill 2449, which passed the Pennsylvania House with bipartisan support and now moves to the Senate.

While there is still work ahead, these milestones represent meaningful progress toward ensuring families impacted by veteran suicide are seen, recognized, and no longer feel invisible.

For updates and information, visit GreenStarFamilies.org.

THE VBC HAS A NEW HOME!

On June 11, 2026, the Veterans Breakfast Club celebrated a milestone nearly two decades in the making: the opening of its first-ever brick-and-mortar home.

Located at 5850 Centre Avenue in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood, the new VBC Welcome Center gives the organization a permanent place where veterans, family members, students, and community members can gather, share stories, learn from one another, and build connections. The ribbon-cutting ceremony drew veterans from across the region along with public officials, military representatives, supporters, and community leaders, marking the beginning of a new chapter in the VBC's history.

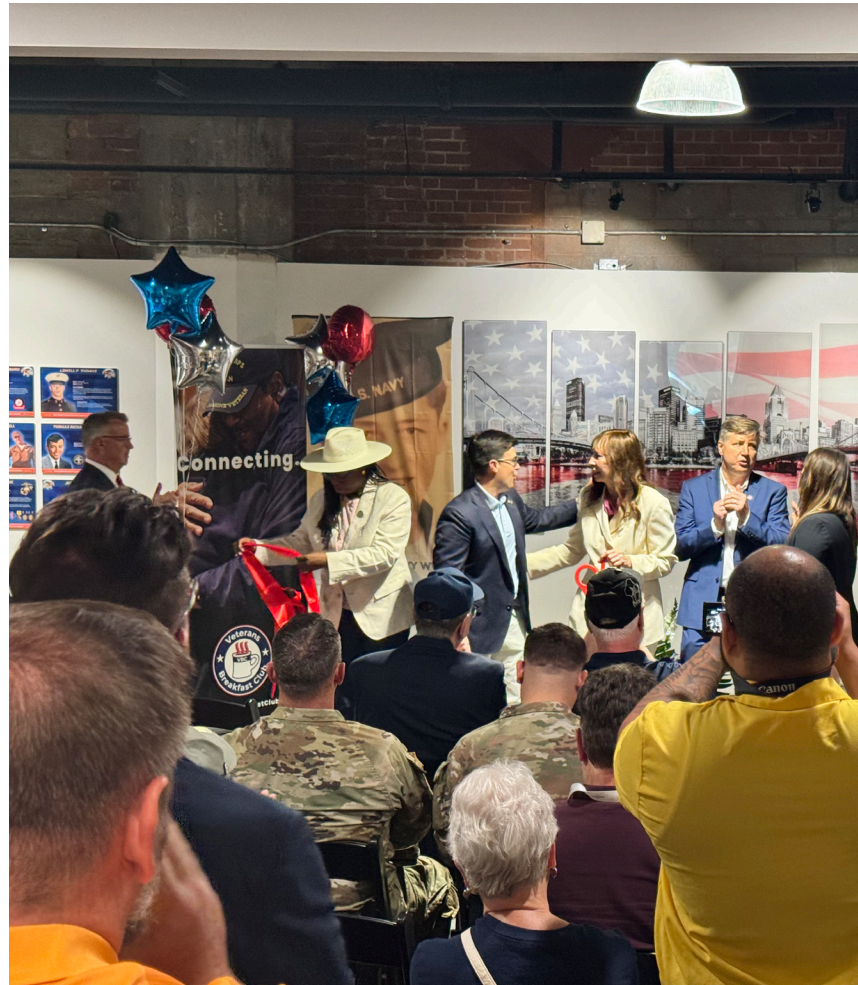
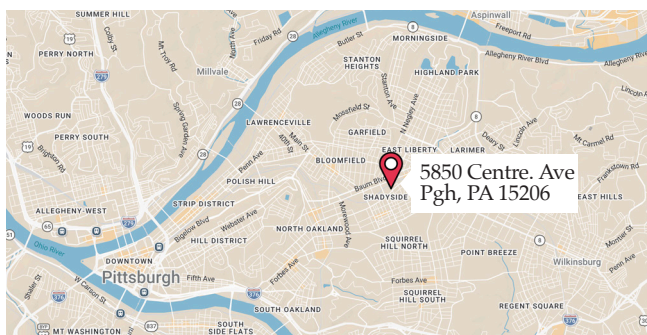
Among those attending were Pittsburgh Mayor Corey O'Connor, Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato, and numerous civic and military leaders who joined VBC members in celebrating the occasion. KDKA's Larry Richert emceed the festivities, which included remarks, tours of the new facility, and opportunities for visitors to see firsthand how the space will serve veterans and the broader community.

The Welcome Center is more than an office. It is a place where anyone can stop in for conversation, coffee, information, and connection. Veterans seeking services can receive referrals and guidance. Community members can learn about military service and veteran experiences. The center will host storytelling programs, workshops, oral history projects, exhibits, and special events throughout the year.

What makes the Welcome Center especially unique is its partnership with the Phase 4 Learning Center, a school that prepares young people for careers, higher education, and military service. Students will interview veterans, learn firsthand about military service and citizenship, and help us capture and preserve stories. Veterans, in turn, will find opportunities to mentor, teach, and build relationships with a new generation.

Whether you're a veteran, family member, student, supporter, or simply curious about the military experience, we invite you to stop by and see us.

The Veterans Breakfast Club Welcome Center is located at 5850 Centre Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15206. Come in and join the conversation. ■



Images: Scenes from the opening of the VBC's first-ever brick-and-mortar home at 5850 Centre Ave in Pittsburgh. (VBC)





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Every in-person breakfast is now free—coffee, food, and 90 minutes of conversation. Your \$50 annual membership helps make that possible. On average, each breakfast costs about \$1,500 for food alone.

Your support ensures that any veteran or anyone from the community can attend, regardless of means.

FAQs

Do I have to be a member to attend?

No. All VBC events are open to everyone.

Who can join? Anyone—veteran or civilian.

How do I join? Sign up at veteransbreakfastclub.org/membership or mail a check to: Veterans Breakfast Club, 200 Magnolia Pl, Pittsburgh, PA 15228 ("VBC Membership" in memo)

Can I gift a membership? Yes—visit our website to purchase a gift membership.

Every veteran has a story. Your membership helps make sure there's always a place to tell it.

TO THOSE WHO RECENTLY PASSED, WE SALUTE YOU.



Ed Brown



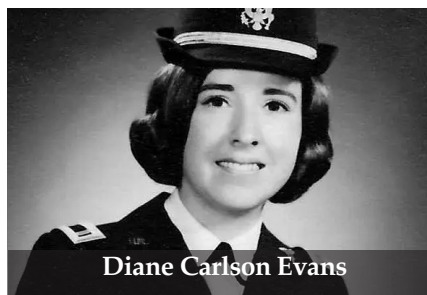
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