

STARS STRIPES®

A TRIBUTE TO OUR VETERANS

2025



An advertising supplement to Stars and Stripes

Saluting our Troops

Stars and Stripes is proud to serve those who currently serve and have served our country. “A Tribute to Our Veterans” was created to honor our nation’s veterans. Read heartwarming, heartbreaking, motivational, and insightful experiences shared by veterans during their time in service. Resources for veterans benefits can also be found in this publication. Find more useful information for veterans at [stripes.com/news/veterans](https://www.stripses.com/news/veterans).



A Heartfelt Thank You to Our Veterans

This Veterans Day, IHG® Army Hotels proudly salutes the brave men and women who have served our nation with honor. We're so grateful for their service and sacrifice. Many of our team members are veterans themselves, and their ongoing dedication inspires all that we do. Across 40 military installations, it is our privilege to welcome veterans with respect and care—and to support them with accommodations and amenities they deserve.



Amenities include:

- ★ Complimentary hot breakfast
- ★ Free high-speed internet
- ★ Fitness centers
- ★ Business centers
- ★ Guest laundry facilities
- ★ Pet-friendly accommodations
- ★ IHG One Rewards points for members



**IHG® ARMY
HOTELS**

IHGAmyHotels.com

Interested in joining our team?
Visit <https://careers.ihg.com/en/veterans>.



FORMER POW SHARES A SPECIAL JOURNEY OF RESILIENCE AND HOPE

By Maureen Dyman,
Courtesy of the Department of Veterans Affairs

In the lobby of the VA Outpatient Clinic in Conroe, Texas, Navy Veteran Mike Penn engages in conversation with fellow Veterans, reminiscing about their military experiences and sharing war stories. As a Navy fighter pilot who served in Vietnam over 50 years ago, Penn has a remarkable story to tell.

On Aug. 6, 1972, during his 85th combat mission off the USS Midway, Penn was shot down and captured by enemy forces. He endured eight months of brutal captivity in Hanoi, facing solitary confinement, beatings and starvation. He lost 60 pounds and struggled to recover from the injuries sustained in his plane crash. Defying the odds, he survived and returned home, opting to serve his country in the military for a few more years before embarking on a successful career as an airline pilot.

However, his journey was not without challenges. Like many Veterans, Penn faced the invisible scars of war, battling PTSD and alcoholism. “I thought I could handle everything

on my own,” he admitted. “But I learned that we all have triggers we don’t recognize.”

The power of support

Penn credits his recovery and career success to determination and the support he received along the way, encouraging other Veterans to be open to seeking help. A VA patient since 1985, he acknowledged the role VA played in discovering a life-threatening cancer during a routine scan. “The Houston VA saved my life,” Penn said. “I will be forever grateful to them for their role in helping me beat cancer a few years back.”

Today, Penn is not just a survivor; he is an inspiration to others. As a motivational speaker, he shares his story, urging Veterans to seek help when they need it. “Drop the Superman complex,” he advised. “Let your guard down and accept help. It’s okay not to be okay.”

During his time in captivity, Penn and the other POWs relied on one another for strength and support. “Once I got out of a couple of months

of solitary confinement and was able to interact with my fellow servicemen, I knew I would be okay,” he recalled. “To this day, I find that no one understands what it’s like to be in combat like another Veteran who has been there.”

Penn retired as an airline pilot just a few years ago and now enjoys spending time with his family, delivering motivational speeches and writing a book about his experiences. His positive attitude is infectious. Even after being shot down, captured, beaten and imprisoned in Vietnam, he still considers it an honor to serve. He routinely encourages his fellow Veterans to believe in themselves and maintain their focus.

“My message to Veterans is to never give up and try to always maintain a positive attitude,” he said. “You will be surprised at what you can achieve and overcome.”

It’s never too late to apply for the VA health care you’ve earned. If you are a Veteran or know a Veteran who has not yet applied for their VA health care benefits, learn how to get started.



SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

By Jennifer Dikes, Courtesy of the Department of Veterans Affairs

As the transportation and beneficiary travel supervisor at VA Salt Lake City Health Care System, Army Veteran and VA employee Theerawong “Odie” Suksutthirot oversees the transportation program that gets Veterans to their health care appointments. That includes emergency ambulance services and travel reimbursements.

Serving rural Veterans

“Many of our Veterans live in rural areas without reliable transportation,” Suksutthirot said. “Not having reliable transportation makes it difficult for them to access medical care.”

It may be a bus or even a flight for Veterans living far from the facility, or it can provide reliable transportation for those who may not have the means or ability to drive themselves.

“Salt Lake City VA is a regional transplant facility offering

specialized services for organ transplant patients and Veterans, including ophthalmology, cardiology and cancer treatment,” said Suksutthirot. “We look out for each other like brothers and sisters. It’s not just about doing a job—it’s about caring for those who served.”

Overcoming barriers to serve

Suksutthirot’s commitment to Veterans stems from his experiences in the Army where he learned the importance of camaraderie and service.

Born in Thailand, he came to the U.S. in 1999 after being adopted by a family member in Toledo, Ohio.

“I came here as a teenager, and the transition was tough,” Suksutthirot said. “Learning English and adjusting to a completely different culture wasn’t easy. It was a big change, but I found strength in my resilience, and that mindset carried me forward.”

After high school, Suksutthirot faced financial struggles and joined the Army to pursue his dream of earning a degree.

“The Army offered to pay for my college education, and I saw it as a way to break free from debt and build a better future,” he said.

Lessons from service

His service took him to Korea and other parts of the world. He learned the value of teamwork and leadership, which shaped his approach to serving Veterans.

Suksutthirot’s work at VA is meaningful for him because it was there for him when he left the military.

“VA saved my life,” he said. “After leaving the Army, I didn’t know much about the benefits available to me. I was struggling, I felt isolated and had a hard time finding a job after service, but through VA’s

outreach program, I was introduced to resources that helped me stand on my own again. In my culture, we value honor and respect, and when someone helps you selflessly, it’s like they’re looking after you. I want to be part of that organization and give back to those who served.”

No Veteran left behind

Part of the satisfaction Suksutthirot gets from his job is he’s making sure Veterans have access to getting the help they need, whether they live far away, are visually impaired, are elderly or are immobilized due to disease or disability. He’s making sure they make it to their health care appointments.

“My dream is the American dream,” he added. “It’s not just about freedom; it’s about what you can contribute to the country that gave you so much.”



To all who served,

Your courage and selflessness are an inspiration, and we recognize the profound impact your service has had on our country and our lives. You have given so much to our nation, and your unwavering commitment to something larger than yourself is an example for us all. On this Veterans Day, we honor your sacrifice not only with words of thanks, but with action.

Veterans embody a powerful sense of community, built on shared experiences and a deep dedication to serving others. That same spirit of service is also at the heart of USAA.

USAA is committing \$500 million over the next five years to strengthen the military community — helping veterans find meaningful careers, build financial security and find the care they need for their well-being. When you are navigating what is next, real and enduring support can make all the difference.

Since our founding more than a century ago, we have been grounded in the same principles that unite our members, and they continue to guide us today. We stand beside those who stood for our nation, because that is what our members do for one another.

Thank you for your service. It is our privilege to serve you.

A stylized, handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Andrade".

Juan C. Andrade
President & CEO, USAA

Learn more at usaa.com/veteransday

Operation Market Garden veterans retrace their footsteps 81 years later

By David Overson, Courtesy of the U.S. Army

U.S. Army veterans who bravely fought in World War II participated in commemorative events honoring the 81st anniversary of Operation Market Garden in several cities in the Netherlands, Sept. 15-22.

Gene Metcalf, now 102 years old, was 19 when he parachuted into Groesbeek, the Netherlands, on Sept. 17, 1944, as part of the 82nd Airborne Division's 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

"I'm very proud of these young guys today," said Metcalf during an Operation Market Garden commemoration ceremony at Nijmegen-Groesbeek Ridge on Sept. 17. "They're carrying on our tradition, and I'm just so proud of them."

Operation Market Garden was conducted by Allied powers during World War II from Sept. 17-27, 1944, and is considered the largest airborne operation in history. More than 41,000 Allied jumpers were dropped into the Netherlands to occupy bridges until land forces arrived. Its intent was to open a liberation route into northern Germany, and it was split into two phases. Phase one, known as Market, used U.S. and

British airborne forces to seize nine bridges. Phase two, known as Garden, used British land forces to further secure the bridges.

As U.S. paratroopers descended on Groesbeek in 1944, they were met with fierce resistance from German forces, Metcalf recalled.

"We dropped right over there," said Metcalf. "They were killing us, their 88s were firing at us, their machine guns, it was just chaos everywhere you looked. Then, the next thing we knew, our training kicked in."

The harrowing experiences of Operation Market Garden left an indelible mark on all who participated, a sentiment echoed by veterans like Frank Stellar who supported the assault.

Stellar, 101 years old, was a crew member on a 'Flying Fortress' B-17 in the 302nd Bomb Squadron, 8th Air Force, during Operation Market Garden.

"Most of us WWII veterans relive those days in our minds every day," said Stellar while sharing his story with local school children at a commemoration ceremony on Sept. 18.

Flying long, dangerous missions



Photo Credit: David Overson

U.S. Army Veteran Gene Metcalf arrives at a Market Garden Commemoration Ceremony located at 'Fox Hill,' which is a major battle location of Operation Market Garden during WWII, September 2025.



Courtesy Photo

U.S. Army WWII veteran Gene Metcalf visits one of his fallen comrades at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten, the Netherlands, September 2025.



Photo Credit: David Overson

U.S. Army Veterans are greeted and honored at a Market Garden Ceremony located at 'Fox Hill,' which is a major WWII battle location in the Netherlands, September 2025

over occupied Europe, enduring heavy German anti-aircraft fire and Luftwaffe fighter attacks, Stellar's work supported major Allied campaigns including Operation Market Garden.

Lester "Les" Schrenk, 101 years old, assigned to the 327th Bomb Squadron, 92nd Bomb Group, flew combat missions in a B-17 Flying Fortress over Nazi occupied Europe.

"I'm just so happy to have survived WWII," said Schrenk.

On his 10th mission in February 1944, Schrenk's plane was shot down over Denmark, where he

was captured by German forces, and sent to Stalag Luft IV in Poland. Alongside other POWs, Schrenk was forced to march the 500-mile "Death March." Approximately 80,000 POWs were forced to march westward, away from the advancing Soviet Army, across Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany in extreme winter conditions, which took place over the course of four months from January-April 1945.

Schrenk was liberated in May of 1945 and is a living example of the "Greatest Generation."

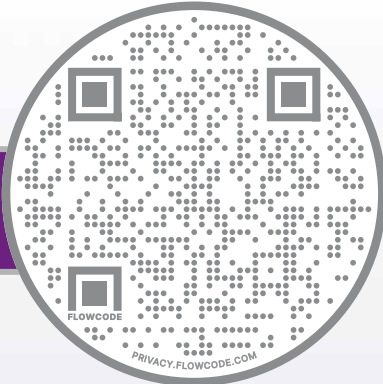


HEROES
WITH HEARING LOSS

Captions keep veterans with hearing loss connected

For our nation’s heroes, hearing loss can create barriers to the most important connections in their lives. The Heroes With Hearing Loss® program, sponsored by Hamilton® CapTel®, provides Captioned Telephone solutions at no cost to veterans. Easy-to-read captions on every phone call enable veterans to maintain meaningful relationships with family and stay connected with fellow servicemembers – an especially important endeavor we honor this Veterans Day.

Learn More About HeroesWithHearingLoss.org



Only available stateside. Does not require a VA disability rating.

Provided by Hamilton® CapTel®. FEDERAL LAW PROHIBITS ANYONE BUT REGISTERED USERS WITH HEARING LOSS FROM USING INTERNET PROTOCOL (IP) CAPTIONED TELEPHONES WITH THE CAPTIONS TURNED ON. Automatic speech recognition software generates captions of what the other party to the call says, and, in certain circumstances, a live communications assistant may be included on the call to make needed corrections and/or add call details. The captions are then sent to the phone. There is a cost for each minute of captions generated, paid from a federally administered fund. To learn more, visit fcc.gov. Third-party charges may apply: the Hamilton CapTel phone requires high-speed internet access (Wi-Fi capable) and in some cases, may require telephone service. Third-party trademarks mentioned are the property of their respective owners. CapTel is a registered trademark of Ultratec, Inc. Copyright © 2025 Hamilton Relay. Hamilton is a registered trademark of Nedelco, Inc. d/b/a/ Hamilton Telecommunications.

Service Members, Veterans Gather to Commemorate D-Day

Service members and veterans gathered in Normandy to commemorate the 81st anniversary of Operation Overlord, widely known as D-Day, honoring the pivotal Allied invasion that changed the course of World War II.



A bugler assigned to the U.S. Naval Forces in Europe & Africa Band plays taps during a ceremony dedicated to the Bedford Boys at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, June 6, 2025. On June 6, 1944, soldiers assigned to Alpha Company, 116th Infantry Regiment, from the small community of Bedford, Va., were among the first to land on Omaha Beach. . (Army Sgt. 1st Class Terra Gatti, National Guard/www.war.gov)



The commemorations, which included parachute jumps, flyovers and remembrance ceremonies, highlighted the enduring legacy of the largest coordinated land, sea and air operation in U.S. military history.

U.S. Army paratroopers assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade pay their respects to the service members who fought during World War II as part of the D-Day commemoration in Sainte-Mère-Église, France. (Army Sgt. Joskanny Lua/www.war.gov)



Army Staff Sgt. Mason Puga, a Maryland National Guardsman assigned to the 29th Infantry Division, washes a headstone at the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, Normandy, France. (Army Sgt. 1st Class Terra Gatti, National Guard/www.war.gov)



World War II veterans arrive on a tarmac in Normandy, France, June 1, 2025, for the 81st anniversary of the D-Day invasion. (Army Staff Sgt. Aimee Nordin/www.war.gov)

More than 600 U.S. service members took part in over 80 commemorative events from June 3 to June 8, in about 40 French communities throughout the Normandy region, including the first town to be liberated on the western front, Sainte-Mère-Église.



An Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker assigned to the 100th Air Refueling Wing, flies over Normandy, France, June 5, 2025. U.S. military personnel and equipment participated in commemorative events as part of the 81st anniversary of D-Day. (Air Force Senior Airman Christopher Campbell)



An effigy of Pvt. John Steele hangs from the village church in Sainte-Mère-Église, France, June 3, 2024. (Phillip Walter Wellman/Stars and Stripes)



Service members assigned to 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, attached to U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, execute a jump from a C-130J rear ramp for an airborne operation above Mont-Saint-Michel, France. (Army Staff Sgt. Brandon Julson/www.war.gov)



People hold banners honoring the Bedford Boys, June 6, 2025, at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. Nineteen U.S. service members from Bedford, Va., known as the Bedford Boys, died on Omaha Beach during D-Day, the largest per capita loss of any American town during the war. (Army Sgt. 1st Class Terra Gatti, National Guard /www.war.gov)



Soldiers assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, also known as the Screaming Eagles, march through the streets of Carentan, France, following the Cabbage Patch and Signal Monument ceremonies for the 81st commemoration of D-Day. (Army 1st Lt. Dalton Worley /www.war.gov)



WWII Navy veteran Jack Hugman attends a ceremony at the C-47 Memorial Garden in Picauville, France. (Air Force 2nd Lt. Heather Cozad Staley/www.war.gov)



Missing Vet Found After 51 Years Laid to Rest by Family Who Never Gave Up

By Katie Lang, Courtesy DOD News

Under a clear-blue autumn sky, a 21-gun salute reverberated through Arlington National Cemetery's Section 47 in September 2024, splitting the silence that had enveloped the mourners paying their final respects to Marine Corps Capt. Ronald Forrester. Two V-22 Ospreys performed a flyover while "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band sounded taps and Marine leaders offered their condolences to the fallen veteran's family.

"This is a resting place to receive those who have served faithfully with honor and courage and commitment," said Navy Capt. Doyl McMurray, a chaplain officiating the service. "Today, Capt. Ronald W. Forrester, at long last, takes his rightful place on these hallowed grounds."

The ceremony lasted only about 30 minutes, but for Forrester's family and friends, it was 51 years in the making. The 25-year-old Forrester was shot down in an A6A Intruder over North Vietnam on Dec. 27, 1972, and was declared missing in action. He remained unaccounted for until Dec. 5, 2023, when his remains were finally identified by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

Karoni Forrester was just 2 when her father disappeared. She started looking for answers when she was a teen. Over the decades, she attended DPAA family member updates and other accountability events, where she's made lifelong friends with other POW/MIA families, many of whom showed up at Arlington to support her at her father's long-awaited funeral.

"I went into the Marine Corps in 1972. I was in boot camp when her dad came up MIA," said veteran Chuck Price, who attended the services after meeting Karoni during a Run for the Wall cross-country ride years ago. "You [attend these funerals] with mixed emotions. You're glad the family got closure."

"I sang at the service today," said Rosalie Glascock, who met Karoni in 2015 at a National League of Families convention. "I actually sang at the convention. ... [Karoni] loved my voice. She said, 'When daddy gets home, I want you to sing at his service.' And she called it in, because daddy's home."

A Daughter's Wish Realized

Karoni said that, for her, the most emotional part of this portion

of the journey was when she received her father's remains at a dignified transfer in Baltimore — which happened to fall on her 54th birthday.

"It was that night when I went to blow out my birthday candle, all this emotion started coming up inside me. I realized that I always knew what my wish was," Karoni said, referring to her father's return. "But I didn't have a backup plan for a birthday wish!"

She said in her father's casket,

she placed several mementos, including various POW/MIA bracelets that folks had worn in support of her father over the years.

"His best friend growing up passed away three or four years ago. I had gone to high school with his sons, and they found a bracelet that his dad had worn for mine. So, they sent it to me, and I thought it was appropriate to bury that with him," Karoni said. "And back when they used to put little pictures in charms, I found one of me as a little baby, and I gave him that."

Karoni said seeing all the faces of veterans and POW/MIA families who she's met over the years made the services particularly special.



Marine Corps Capt. Ron Forrester holds his baby daughter, Karoni, before deploying to Vietnam.
Photo courtesy of Karoni Forrester



Veterans and other supporters of Marine Corps Capt. Ronald Forrester attend his military funeral honors at Arlington National Cemetery.
Photo credit: Arlington National Cemetery

“It’s people like this showing up,” she said while talking to Glascock. “I haven’t seen her in years, but years ago I asked her, ‘If he comes home, will you sing?’ And it was so beautiful.”

A Brother Found

“I’m so proud of my niece,” said Capt. Forrester’s twin brother, Donald Forrester. “She has devoted her life to advocacy —



Donald Forrester, the brother of Marine Corps Capt. Ronald W. Forrester, places a yellow rose on the casket during his brother’s funeral at Arlington National Cemetery
Photo credit: Arlington National Cemetery

finding her dad and finding others — and she’ll continue to do that.” He said his brother’s positive identification was an answer to a prayer. “Knowing with certainty that he’s not here gives me the ability to rest in peace,” he said. Donald said the groundswell of support has also been a great comfort for the family. “We had a celebration of life service in Austin in February [2024], and the church was packed. I’m thinking there was 600-700 people that came,” he said.

Donald remembered his brother fondly as a “geek” who carried a slide rule around in high school and “always colored within the lines.” “Ron enriched my life in so many ways. It was fun being a twin. We were competitive. We were close. We had different friends, but it was a good time,” he said. Donald also remembered being contacted by a Marine who served with his brother. “He said that enlisted men didn’t really socialize with officers, but he said, ‘Your brother was always kind. He always took the time to share supportive words,’”



Veterans and Marines salute the casket of Marine Corps Capt. Ronald Forrester during his military funeral honors at Arlington National Cemetery.
Photo credit: Arlington National Cemetery

Donald said. “And that’s a nice compliment.” When Donald attended the dignified transfer, he said he didn’t expect to be allowed to spend time by the coffin — something that gave him a bit of anxiety. “I was very teary-eyed that day, but sometimes tears express what you can’t put into words,” he said. “I try to always let things that surface that remind me of him be the catalyst for gratitude. It makes a world of difference.” While Capt. Forrester’s long journey has finally been closed, many other POW/MIA families continue to hold out hope for their loved ones to return. From the Vietnam War alone, there are still more than 1,500 U.S. personnel unaccounted for.



Thank You For Your Service!

GREEN BAY PACKERS

GIVE BACK

Learn more at packers.com/giveback



Stop the Bleed Veteran Spotlight



Gilbert Agaran

Military Service:
U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman

Location:
Suffolk, Virginia

Service:
Separated active duty January 2002

Instructor License:
STOP THE BLEED® Instructor licensed by Stop the Bleed Coalition

Veteran Gilbert Agaran served as a U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman. He separated from active duty in January of 2002 and is now a licensed Stop the Bleed® Coalition instructor. During his military experience, he acted in high-pressure environments where immediate medical response was critical.

“During my time as a Navy Hospital Corpsman, I served alongside Marines and sailors in environments where immediate medical response often made the difference between life and death. That experience taught me the critical importance of staying calm under pressure and acting quickly to control severe bleeding. When I transitioned into civilian life, I knew I wanted to carry that mission forward—teaching others lifesaving skills through the STOP THE BLEED® campaign felt like a natural way to continue serving and empowering communities to be ready when seconds matter.”

Agaran is dedicated to making Stop the

Bleed® training widely available beyond classroom settings. He actively contributes to community preparedness and resilience through collaborative efforts with local agencies.

As part of his commitment to healthcare and readiness, Agaran has expanded Stop the Bleed® training in the western Tidewater region of Virginia to include Suffolk, Portsmouth and the surrounding areas.

Agaran has trained hundreds of individuals, including teachers, staff and everyday citizens. In addition, his work has built

strong partnerships with local health departments and emergency response teams to increase training accessibility and community impact.

“One of my proudest accomplishments has been expanding STOP THE BLEED® training across schools, businesses, and community organizations in the Western Tidewater region. I’ve had the privilege of training hundreds of people—from teachers and staff to everyday citizens—equipping them with the skills to step in and save a life. I’m also proud of the partnerships I’ve built with local health departments and emergency response teams to make these trainings widely accessible, ensuring that the impact goes far beyond a single classroom session.”



Justin Gardiner

Military Service:
U.S. Army, Infantryman – 173rd Airborne Brigade

Location:
California

Service:
Joined 2006

Awards & Honors:
Combat Infantryman Badge, Purple Heart Medal

Veteran Justin Gardiner enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2006. He served as an infantryman with the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

While on deployment to Afghanistan, Gardiner was wounded in action. He earned the Combat Infantryman Badge and Purple Heart Medal for his service and sacrifice.

“I joined the Army in 2006 as an Infantryman and was assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I deployed with the “Sky Soldiers” to Afghanistan where I was subsequently wounded in action, receiving the Combat Infantryman Badge and Purple Heart Medal. This is what inspired me to get involved with the Stop the Bleed campaign. Having witnessed firsthand the importance of recognizing and stopping life threatening bleeding and the benefits of tactical casualty care, I knew it was important to help spread that awareness and teach others the same techniques and life saving measures I learned while serving.”

Gardiner is now committed to teaching the same techniques he learned in the military to help others be prepared in emergencies.

Gardiner has taught Stop the Bleed®, Active Violence Response, and Officer Safety Courses for the California Association of Code Enforcement Officers (CACEO) for several years.

He was also the recipient of the first-ever Instructor of the Year Award from CACEO.

“One of my proudest moments as an instructor was receiving the very first annual



Instructor of the Year Award from the California Association of Code Enforcement Officers. I have been teaching Stop the Bleed, Active Violence Response, and other Officer Safety Courses for several years for CACEO prior to receiving the award and it was a huge honor to be selected for it.”

His experiences training have also led to some interesting experiences, like being featured on an episode of “The College Tour” as a former student who became Adjunct Professor teaching Code Compliance courses at a Southern California Community College.

As a veteran, Gardiner continues to train both professionals and community members in lifesaving techniques. His instruction with Stop the Bleed® bridges his military experience with public safety and civilian preparedness initiatives.





DECEMBER 27 | 11 AM
NAVY-MARINE CORPS MEMORIAL STADIUM



***GET YOUR TICKETS AND BE
A PART OF THE DMV'S COLLEGE
FOOTBALL BOWL GAME***



By Karen Amaro, Courtesy of the U.S. Marines

U.S. Marine Corps/Cpl. Memphis Pitts

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Cpl. Leighton Willhite, who served in the Battle of Iwo Jima, views the name painted on a World War II-era Sherman Tank at the Museum Support Facility in Dumfries, Virginia.

The National Museum of the Marine Corps reunited a World War II veteran with the tank he drove during the Battle of Iwo Jima, in a ceremony held Aug. 15 at the Museum Support Facility.

In a powerful moment of living history on the 80th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, Cpl. Leighton Willhite, 100, stood beside "Lucky," the very M4A3 Sherman tank he drove ashore during the assault on Iwo Jima in 1945. He was joined by his son, grandson and great-grandson.

"It's amazing," Willhite said. "I never thought I would see the tank again. That tank was my life."

At just 19 years old, Willhite landed with C Company, 5th Tank Battalion, in Lucky during the opening assault on Iwo Jima. Lucky was among the Marine Corps' newest standard tanks and saw its combat debut on the island. Willhite's crew supported Marines near Hill 362A, north of Mount Suribachi, and carried out rescue missions under heavy fire.

In one defining moment, when a fellow tank, Jeannie, became trapped, Willhite volunteered to cover his commander, Lt. Leonard Blake, as they moved to rescue the crew. Willhite was awarded

the Bronze Star with "V" device for valor, and Blake received the Silver Star.

After the battle, Lucky returned to Hawaii in April 1945 and was one of 72 tanks selected for conversion into CB-H5 flamethrower tanks in preparation for the planned invasion of Japan. Following the war, Lucky was transferred to Camp Lejeune, N.C., where it remained largely unnoticed, in the woods of 2nd Tank Battalion's training areas, until the early 2000s, when it was recovered and entered the Museum's collection. At the time, its historical significance was not yet known.

Its true identity came to light in 2023, when Jon Bernstein, the Museum's Arms & Armor Curator, conducted a routine inspection of the tank, then on loan to the Pima Air & Space Museum in Tucson, Arizona. During the inspection, Bernstein noticed a set of distinctive weld scars, marks unique to the 5th Tank Battalion's improvised self-protection modifications for Iwo Jima.

Through careful analysis of those scars, along with field modifications and comparisons to archival photographs and

historical records, Bernstein was able to positively identify the tank as belonging to C Company, 5th Tank Battalion. Further paint excavation revealed the name "Lucky" and the unit's tactical markings, confirming not only the tank's battlefield role but also its direct connection to its original crew, including Cpl. Willhite.

Today, Lucky is one of only six confirmed Sherman tanks from Iwo Jima still in existence.

This reunion carried even greater meaning because 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of Emperor Hirohito announcing Japan's surrender and ending World War II. For Willhite, who celebrated his 100th birthday on April 9, standing beside Lucky

once more was more than just a personal milestone—it was a living reminder of the service and sacrifice of Marines in one of the Corps' most pivotal battles.

As the number of World War II veterans dwindles each year, gatherings like this become increasingly rare and precious. They offer something no book or artifact alone can provide: the chance to see history embodied in those who lived it.

"Having Cpl. Willhite here, standing beside this tank again after 80 years, is very special," said Museum Director Keil Gentry. "It is a powerful reminder of the courage and sacrifice that defined the Marines who fought on Iwo Jima."

Lucky's journey is far from over. It is now undergoing a meticulous restoration to its 1945 appearance, so that future visitors will not only see the tank but also sense the bond it once shared with the Marines who fought beside it. For generations to come, Lucky will stand as a storyteller in steel, carrying forward the legacy of those who battled on Iwo Jima.

The National Museum of the Marine Corps, located near Marine Corps Base Quantico in Triangle, Va., is a lasting tribute to U.S. Marines—past, present and future. With immersive exhibits and world-class collections, the museum preserves and shares the history, culture and traditions of the Marine Corps. For more information, visit www.usmcmuseum.com.



U.S. Marine Corps/Cpl. Memphis Pitts

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Cpl. Leighton Willhite, who served in the Battle of Iwo Jima, left, looks at pictures of the tank after it was recovered with Master Gunnery Sgt. Lisa Marshall, senior career counselor with Manpower and Reserve Affairs, at the Museum Support Facility in Dumfries, Virginia.

"Today is the end of the beginning and is the culmination of two years of research and piecing the story together. To bring Cpl. Willhite back together with the tank he drove in battle is to bring that story to life."

-Jon Bernstein, National Museum of the Marine Corps' Arms & Armor Curator



EXCHANGE

SALUTE TO SERVICE

One day is not enough! The Exchange is honoring active-duty service members, retirees and disabled Veterans with special in-store giveaways in November.

If you are serving on active duty or a Veteran with in-store shopping privileges at your PX or BX, join us on these dates to receive your keepsakes:

Nov. 1 and Nov. 29: Collectible penny POGs



Nov. 11: Challenge coin



Nov. 15: Veteran for Life decal



Nov. 22: Veteran for Life patch



Scan to learn more about our Veterans giveaways or visit us at [SHOPMYEXCHANGE.COM/SALUTETOSERVICE](https://shopmyexchange.com/salutetoservice)

LEARN MORE ABOUT SHOPPING BENEFITS AT [SHOPMYEXCHANGE.COM/VETS](https://shopmyexchange.com/vets)



Sandals®

This November, our Black Friday Sale is bringing our biggest savings of the year all month long. And from November 9-11, we're giving even more to our veterans with an additional 15% off. You've given your all. Let us take care of the rest.

BLACK FRIDAY SALE NOW ON

Sandals.com 1-800-Sandals
or Call Your Travel Advisor

JAMAICA | ANTIGUA | SAINT LUCIA | THE BAHAMAS | GRENADA | BARBADOS | CURAÇAO | SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Sandals is a registered trademark. Unique Vacations, Inc. is an affiliate of Unique Travel Corp., the worldwide representative of Sandals Resorts. 468/0125