

SPRING 2021

# VETERANS' LIFE STORIES

*Honoring and capturing the voices of our country's  
Veterans through interviewing them and writing  
their stories*

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# A Message to the Reader

Dear Readers,

Our veterans have done so much for this country, yet often their stories go unheard. We may also tend to generalize their experiences, without first considering the vastly different backgrounds and journeys that each veteran may have taken throughout their lives. Veterans' Life Stories was founded to honor and capture the voice of our country's veterans through interviewing them and writing down their stories. We aim to foster a sense of connection between our veterans and the public in order to offer a glimpse of who these veterans are as well as the events and circumstances that have shaped them into the people they are today. This inaugural Spring 2021 edition of our magazine represents the culmination of some of the amazing stories from the veterans we had the opportunity to interview. It is our pleasure to now share them with you.

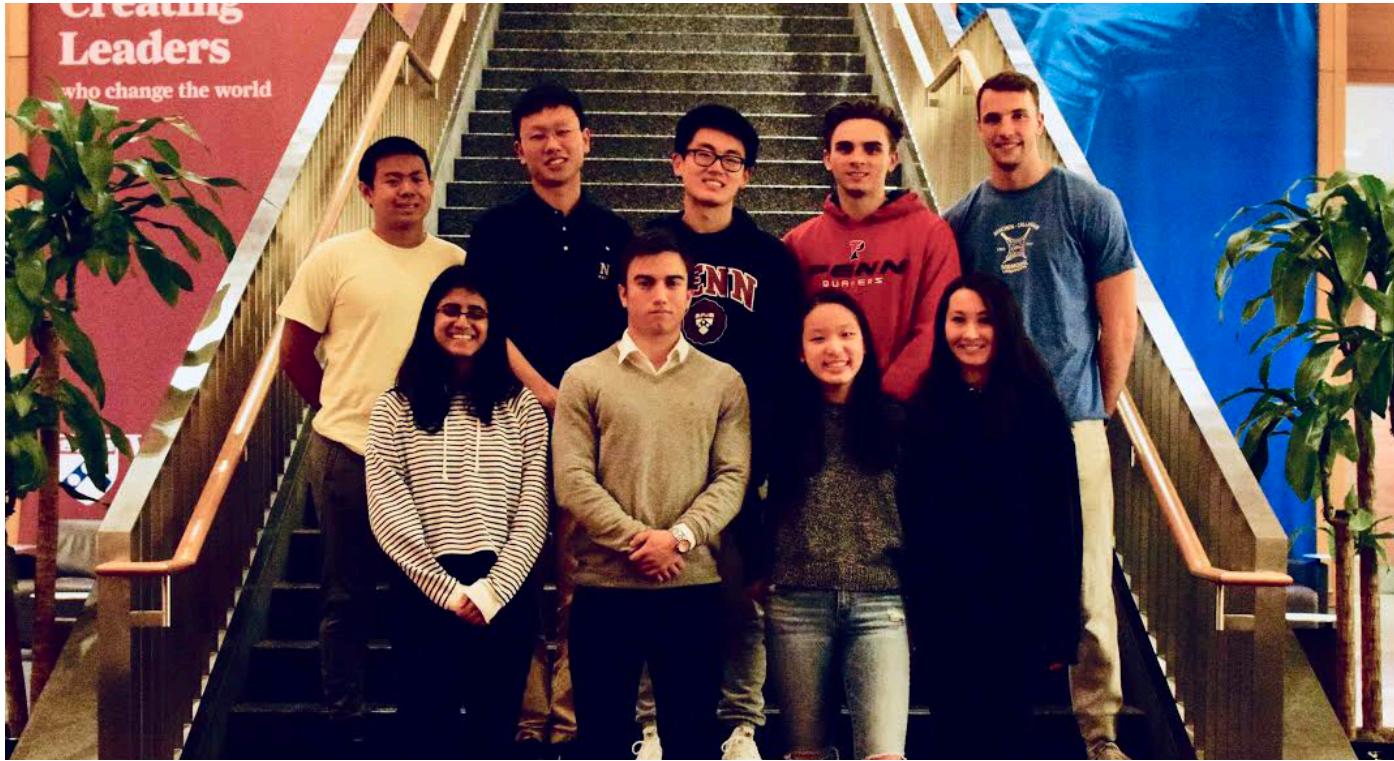
These stories primarily come from interviews with veteran patients at the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center as well as veteran students at the University of Pennsylvania. Each story provides a unique insight into the upbringing, experience in the military, and life afterwards of each veteran. No two veterans have the same narrative and by telling these stories directly from their first-person perspective, we are able to truly experience events through their eyes. Lastly, our goal was not to focus on any one aspect of these veterans' lives, but rather to provide a broad yet accurate overview of who they really are.

This first magazine issue of Veterans' Life Stories would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication from all our writers. We would also like to thank all the veterans who have told their stories to us and have allowed us to now share them with you. We hope that through these narratives, you may learn more about our country's veterans and better get to understand who they are.

Sincerely,

Peter Ma, Caitlin Leung, Ally DiGiovanni, Jessica Shen, and Jessica Abene  
Veterans' Life Stories Board





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## MANY THANKS TO



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PENN VETERAN

## Jesse Raines

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING VETS IN THE CLASSROOM

INTERVIEWED BY PETER MA

**M**ost veterans are quite surprised to hear that I am part of this Keep Vets in the Classroom advocate group at Penn. Previously, I would never have told anyone my veteran story beforehand, and I never participated in any of the school's attempts to honor my service. I just wanted to be left alone. But this summer, they quietly sent out a letter that said the LPS program for veterans was going away. I read the letter and instantly realized that this meant that there wouldn't be veterans on campus anymore. It really kind of hurt that the school would make a decision to cut a program that would no longer provide the guys getting out of the military now the same opportunities that I had. It really affected me and I immediately thought, what can I do to change this?

The LPS program is important because it provides a holistic admissions process for veteran adults. How can the next generation of veterans applying to college otherwise compete with a perfect 4.0 student out of a prestigious high school with a 1600 SAT and a perfectly polished essay? My number one goal is to get Penn to look at veterans holistically just like they do for any other special group. The administration seems very willing to come up with a solution that keeps veterans on campus, but I just don't know if we're talking about them accepting three veterans a year or 30 a year. I don't know if the veteran community at Penn will shrink or grow five years from now.

If you break us down into social peer groups, veterans have one of the lowest college graduation rates in the nation. Only around 51% of us start college and graduate. The numbers are pretty abysmal considering that we are federally financed. Across the United States, there are something like half a million veteran students,

but a lot of veterans don't even think about the idea of going to a school like Penn. For some, it is a huge challenge. Many of them are low income, first-generation; many others fear rejection or think that they won't fit in.

I think it's also important for veterans to come specifically to schools like Penn so that they can interact with the traditional students who don't have military service in the family and who don't really know what that means. These people are going off and getting elected, they're becoming CEOs of companies, and they're making policies in Washington. And it is important for them to be in a diverse environment like this as opposed to the bubbles in which they grew up. By making good friends and developing personal connections with veterans here, in the future these students won't see it as oh we lost three guys in Nigeria, but rather we lost three guys who could have been our friends and roommates. I truly believe in this whole diversity thing that Penn preaches, and I think that veterans should be part of that diversity. We really bring unique conversations to classrooms. Could you imagine sitting in a Middle Eastern class and talking about policy? How about we ask the guy who went to Iraq two years ago? I think he would have something important to say. For this to happen, for this diversity to exist, we need to keep vets in the classroom.



*"I truly believe in this whole diversity thing that Penn preaches, and I think that veterans should be part of that diversity."*

VETERAN

## Andrea Goldstein

FROM SCHOOL TO SERVICE TO SCHOOL

INTERVIEWED BY ANH CAO AND CASEY CHENG

**M**y name is Andrea Goldstein. I'm a US Navy Veteran, originally from New York. I went to Trinity School in NYC and grew up on the upper west side of Manhattan. My parents divorced when I was in eighth grade, but they're both happily recommitted now, and I have four step-siblings. This created a really big, blended family that I love. After my mom and stepdad moved upstate, I did as well and fell in love with it—I now live in Kinderhook, NY. I served in the Navy on active duty from 2009 to 2016 after graduating from the University of Chicago, studying history and classics. Afterwards, I attended The Fletcher School at Tufts University to get my masters degree. I was most recently CEO of Service to School, a college access non-profit that serves veterans.

I was motivated to join the military because it felt like a call to serve. I'm not from a military family at all, besides my grandfathers serving in WWII, so my parents were shocked when they learned I wanted to join the military. They didn't understand it at first, but they were supportive of me once they realized I was serious about it. My friends, on the other hand, were less surprised. They knew that I was interested in military history and often made choices that were not common. They were more along the lines of "how did you not see this coming?" rather than extremely shocked.

The most meaningful experience I had during my term is the people I served alongside. The camaraderie is incredible and it was an honor to serve all over the world with people everywhere from the US. I still keep in touch with some of the people that served with me, oftentimes through Instagram DMs. The transition from being in college to working in the military and vice versa was hard but in

different ways. I knew it was going to be hard to get through officer candidate school and become militarized. However, I also didn't realize it was also going to be difficult to leave the military and transition back.

When I completed my time in the military, I became involved with Service to School, a nonprofit that provides service member and veterans free college application support and mentorship to help them get into the best colleges and universities possible. S2S works with both service members and top colleges/universities to increase access to high quality higher education. I recognized that I had a good education. However, I did not see other veterans at the University of Chicago, especially within the undergraduate population. I noticed that my fellow sailors were underserved when applying to colleges. S2S helps fill this gap. Since I believe that veterans are an invisible minority, a college campus would be a good place to bridge this understanding where

minds are open and we are already trying to start a dialogue. In the future, we would like to expand and reach more service members and veterans.

If there's anything I'd like to share, it would be that there are so many ways to serve. My time in the military was my way of serving, and it made for an incredible career. I was given so much responsibility for national security decisions, the leadership of other people, managing equipment, and a lot of financial decisions when I was just 22. You don't get that experience at an early age anywhere else. It was amazing and still is. Now, I still have this opportunity to serve in these outside roles where I'm punching above my weight because I got to start doing that when I was 22. Everyone should find a way to serve that's meaningful to them.



VA VETERAN

## Ronald

### AN ESCAPE FROM PENNSYLVANIA

INTERVIEWED BY RACHEL WU

I was in a foster home for 10 years. Most of it was alright, but the last couple of years were bad. People, the foster parents, were not nice. I grew up in Pennsylvania. It's alright. I went to the Navy in 1963, stationed in Virginia on a ship called the U.S.S. Newport News. It was a heavy cruiser. It was scrapped in 1974. It was during the beginning of the Vietnam Era and I didn't want to go into the army. I went to the Navy recruiters and signed up. I just wanted to get out of Pennsylvania. I went to boot camp in Illinois. I was there for about eight weeks. The boot camp was easy, it was mostly studying, very little physical. I was a seaman recruit when I got on, then when I got off I was a seaman. That's three steps up from that. I was discharged before my birthday in 1966. And we went overseas a couple times: Spain, France, Italy.

I was in the Navy in the 60s, during the Civil Rights era. On my ship, I had two black friends. Back then, that's what they called 'em, Black. We used to go downtown and sit in restaurants and make people angry. They would never serve us because it was two blacks. They wouldn't serve blacks in the restaurant. We used to sit there for a couple of hours and leave. That was just to make them angry. Which it did. They would never come near us, we were just sitting there. So then I went home, stayed with my mother for a while in Pennsylvania. Then I moved and stayed in the Salvation Army Men's Center. When I was there, I started to work for Conway Amusement, setting up rides and everything. Stayed for a while there, then moved back. That's where I met my wife during a carnival.

Her name is Brenda. We saw each other, and it was, like they say, love at first sight. I was there for a week and she kept coming to my ride. That was 1970, so it was 50 years. I was putting the rides up, in the summertime it was

hot, and I had my shirt off. You could see all my muscles. And she used to come around and watch us. She was nineteen. In March of '71, I took her to Maryland and got married. Now going on forty-nine years. It's not easy, but we're still there.

I have three children. Two sons, Kenneth and Christopher, and one daughter, Michelle. Our daughter lives near us in New Jersey, just a few blocks away. We live in senior housing. My two sons were both in the Marines. They joined when they were eighteen. They got tired of living in Pennsylvania. They both live in Idaho now. I have five grandchildren. They're all girls. They all live in Idaho. And one great-granddaughter. She just turned two. We went out to see them for the first time this past July and we stayed there for a week in Idaho.

My father had my brother, two sisters, and one step-sister. They're all gone now. My sister Martha she died in 2010 of cancer. My father died in October 1964 of a heart attack, the sixth one he'd had. He died taking my brother back to the Navy. He died right there in the airport. My mother died in 2003. She was 90 when she passed away.

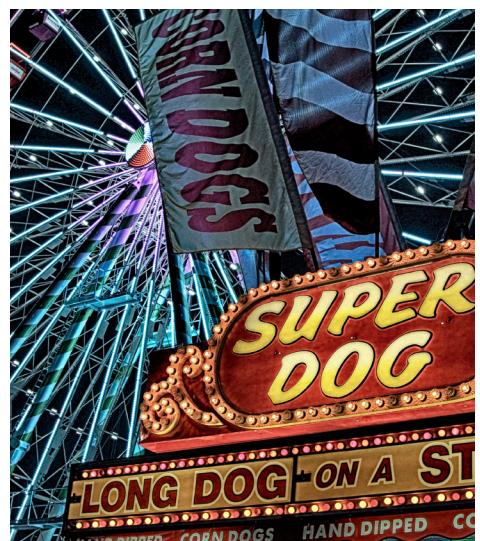
Me and my brother are the only ones left out of the six of us. I'm the oldest by 5 minutes. My brother, who lives in California, is my twin, identical. He was in the Navy, too. He was a seaman in California, all his life practically. He stayed in California. We don't see him too much, the last time he was here was in 2014. We talk on the phone every now and then, but not that often. Our family isn't much for, you know, interaction with family. Never have been. Me and my brother were in foster homes for 10 years. My mother was ill when we were three months old so we went into foster homes until we were about nine and a half.

They took us back in the Summer of '56. When you're in a foster home for ten years, your parents are like strangers. We were never close.

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I hitchhiked across the country, back and forth. One time to California. Got arrested twice in Arizona for hitchhiking. I used to like to travel, but not anymore. I like California, but I wouldn't move there. I'm a Jersey person now. And my kids moved to Idaho, but I'm not going to Idaho. In the wintertime? No. I'm staying in Jersey. I've been here 19 years, I'm not going anywhere. I've been to 22 states. I lived in Pennsylvania, Virginia, New Jersey, Illinois. I lived in Houston, Texas for a while. I worked at a Burger King in Texas. Used to call me Yankee all the time. I was there for a year and a half, then went back to Pennsylvania. It's hard traveling now.

And then I had this thing here with my foot, so I came to the VA hospital. I've been coming here since 2009, off and on. Now I'm on home care. I had a heart bypass ten years ago. Still here.



PENN VETERAN

## James Goins

SCOUTS, AIR FORCE, AND MY MISSION TO SOUTH KOREA

INTERVIEWED BY SERENA CHEN AND SERENA TAM

**H**ow did I get involved with the military? That's such a long story.

I started out with Cub Scouts when I was five years old and continued until Boy Scouts in high school, and then finally Eagle Scouts; it was basically a place for a bunch of young boys to do all kinds of crazy stuff. You started fires with rocks, lived in tents outside, learned how to create baskets, how to make ropes, and just things you didn't think about making in your daily life. You don't really know what life is like until you have a deer eat your food, or until you have a spider wake you up, or until you have a giant cockroach in the shower, or until you've gone to sleep with cougar sounds in the background.

And all these values taught me loyalty; they taught me how to live in the wild, how to focus, how to make informed decisions based on very little information, how to step out of my comfort zone. They taught me how to jump straight into the water, even when I can't see what's in it. I learned to trust my squad and to swim where they tell me to swim. It was all about honor, loyalty, being a patriot, and about being yourself. It was about the small moments, because I learned that small moments can lead to big victories. I learned not to be focused on myself, because I'm part of a whole, so I learned how to help others because helping others means helping yourself.

I was still in high school when I decided I wanted to join the military. It was senior year, and everyone else was applying to college and thinking about jobs, and my mom had just sat me down after Eagle Scouts to tell me that I had to leave and find my own place after high school—that essentially, I was being evicted. And so, I decided I wanted to join the military.

But I was seventeen, and you couldn't join the military at seventeen without having your parent sign their consent. And at that time the war was picking back up, year 2010 or 2011, the war in the Middle East, so when I asked my mom, she was like, "You want me to what? You want me to sign for you to go to war?" And I was like, "Yeah. It'll be fun."

We met with the recruiters, for both the Air Force and the Marines. And what attracted me to the Marines was so superficial—it was their uniform. It was so badass, all bright and crisp. I'm skinny, but I thought maybe it could look like that on me! And they were telling us how it was just about loyalty and honor and learning things that you couldn't learn in the classroom. It just sounded so similar to Boy Scouts, so I was like, sign me up! But then someone came along and told me I should join the Air Force, and back then I didn't even know that the United States had an Air Force.

So, we met with their recruiter, and they took us out to eat, and I love food, so I was wooed. I mean, the Marines didn't take us out to eat. So, then I told my mom I wanted to join the Air Force, and she told me I was kind of crazy, but that she'll let me make my own choices. And so, three months after I graduated high school, I went to boot camp and joined the Air Force.

What does the Air Force do? The Air Force does everything. There's so much the Air Force does that goes unnoticed. So many people think all we do is fight, but 40-60% of the missions we do are humanitarian missions. Combat rescue, pararescue, surveillance missions. 100,000 flight hours in four years—that was the milestone we hit in recon. That's almost like non-stop flying. Our mission was really simple and I still love it to this day: Aim high, and fly, fight, win.

We have a lot of pride in what we



do. Every time when I look up in the sky, I'm reminded of what we do. Any plane you see in the sky is there because of the Air Force. The Air Force, you know, we're the best.

Almost everyone think that everyone in the Air Force can fly planes. But I'd say only between 5-15% fly out of over 300,000 people. I never flew, but I was on plenty of planes. But being part of the Air Force meant that everything you did mattered. Imagine assembling and handling equipment worth 4.8 million dollars, and you drop it. Your one small screw up could impact the whole thing that you don't know about. Same for people whose jobs are as basic as cooking for the Air Force. Without food, people will be sluggish. Sluggish people make more mistakes.

Small things matter a lot.

I only did one mission: to South Korea. And it was badass. It was awesome. I was an admin person in the Air Force, which meant that I could be in any unit. I could be sent anywhere as an individual, which is unique because when you think about the military, you typically think about working in groups. But it also meant I had to get comfortable with being alone and meeting new people. It's just what I had to do.

On my mission to South Korea, I was in charge of security. I was only 23. And I was in charge of the security of over 400,000 people. It felt so strange! All I could think was if I hit the wrong button, this person loses their security. If I hit the wrong button, it could impact our host nationals. If I hit the wrong button, I could be putting lives at stake. If I don't pay attention, somebody could gain access to certain information they shouldn't have access to. I was constantly battling against that "if."

I would say that's the difference between the Air Force and the Army, Navy, and Coastguard. While they're more focused on organizing and leading people, everything in the Air Force is about understanding resources. No matter what job you have, you're dealing with resources. Is this jet ready for flight? Is there anything mechanical I need to inform the pilot about? How are my decisions as security going to impact everyone else? And because of that, you get to make

decisions that impact everyone, even if you're at a lower level. That's something I've found really rewarding, because all the time I get to make a difference and impact lives indirectly, which is just as significant as doing so directly.

My time with the Air Force has also really changed the way I see the world. Now when I hear loud sounds, I think—that could be a bomber. Now when I hear a fast sound, I think—that could be a fighter jet. When I hear a low, humming sound, I think—that could be a 747 plane.

People always say, "Good morning." I don't like the term "Good morning," I don't use that term. Even now when I hear it, it makes me shake a little. You never use the term "Good morning" because you never know what the night crew did—they could have screwed something up and now we're down two jets. So, you just say "Morning." And what's something else you learn in the same process of just saying "Morning" is that no matter what they did last night, or what the crew after you does, just focus on the positive. If you focus on the negative there'll be a lot of negatives, and if you focus on the positives there'll be a lot of positives.



*"You never use the term 'Good Morning' because you never know what the night crew did - they could have screwed something up and now we're down two jets."*

VA VETERAN

# William

A CALL FROM UNCLE SAM

INTERVIEWED BY JEFFREY JIANG

**M**y name is William. Born in 1942, I'm a native of New York. My father passed away before I turned three, leaving my mother to raise me and my five sisters. I was independent as a kid, but I didn't do well in school.

One day, Uncle Sam called on me.

I joined the United States Army in 1964, serving for two years. Initially, I spent time training in South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Then, I went to Vietnam for six and a half months. There, I helped transport ammunition and had a lot of fun along the way.

Eventually, it was time to come home. Veterans did important work overseas, but not everyone respected us when we returned. I remember traveling with my best friend, with whom I served in Vietnam, through a train station in New York. Two hippies glared and spat at us. It was hard to resist the urge to fight back, but we were uniformed service members, and we had our standards. Elsewhere, I ran into people who looked at me like I was trash. Thankfully, I had a mother who was there for me and appreciated what I did.

My favorite part of military service was actually my time in Vietnam. It wasn't the case that I got sent to Vietnam against my will—I chose to go there. I also really enjoyed the camaraderie of the service, especially when we were ready to come out.

I came out of the Army to get married, and I did so, but not immediately. My one and only marriage ended in divorce, and due to many miscarriages, we had no kids. I decided to call it when I found out she had given her heart to someone else.

On the career front, I worked for

three decades at Blessing Health System, rising to the position of senior manager. My job took me to New Jersey and also home to New York. After I left Blessing, Merck & Co. hired me when I was 52. (An odd time to find myself a great-paying job, but that's what happened!) I worked there for twenty years, finally retiring for good at the age of 72.

I'm not a hero, but I'm not a coward.

I did what I had to do, and I did the best I could.



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*"It was hard to resist the urge to fight back, but we were uniformed service members, and we had our standards."*

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VA VETERAN

## Larry FROM PHOTOGRAPHY TO FAMILY

INTERVIEWED BY JESSICA ABENE

I'll give you a quickie. I was born in Delaware. One of six children, adopted. Two here two there. One brother that I grew up with. Right now he's in a nursing home doing pretty bad. He's one year older than I.

Spent a lot of time in camps, Scout camps coming up. I got in some trouble, not a whole bunch of trouble. I didn't do really well in school. I wasn't that interested. I was interested in things like camp, theater, photography, and art, and singing, and drama. That's what I was interested in. So when it came time to go to college I went and took the army test. I didn't see college in the future. I didn't see the money to go to college, I didn't see the willingness or the smarts to go to college so I took the test and they said I could do anything I wanted to do and I chose moPic specialists since one of my loves was photography.



So I chose moPic specialists at 84 C 20. And I did that and went to the school in Fort Llama, New Jersey and from there instead of going to 'Nam, they stopped sending people to 'Nam, they sent me to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. There I ran into a lot of negative army experience. A lot of racism down there in that time in the early 70s especially for someone of my color wanting to be a photographer. They were like "no what the hell are you doing here" basically.

I ran into a lot of problems down there but I also did a lot of growing down there had some good experiences besides the negative, really negative some of them. It really made a difference. I got out of the army December 1974. I got on the fire department in Delaware in 1975, June 1975.

Fire department and I was doing theater as well, that was a love of mine. I ran into one of my dance partners and we got to dancing really really close and we danced out six babies. We have a couple grandkids now, we lost three sons, a set of twins, preemies. We are no longer married but we communicate, stay in touch.

So I retired from the fire department, resigned actually to do theater. I though it was gonna pay off for me, it didn't, instead, ran into a lot of chemicals: alcohol, cocaine, all that mess. That tour my marriage up. Basically from late 70s early 80s, it's been fighting the demons of the past, military demons of the past, but I managed to keep employment though all of that matter of fact. In fact I'm ready to get out of here to go back to work now. I drive a patient van, I gotta do easy stuff because I have two bad knees due to basketball, football, all that mess.

Love my two grandkids, they love me, my kids love me, love them. Always important. I never remarried. I don't think that's ever gonna happen.

I hope I live some more life, see what's around the next bend because there are some other things going on. 65 now and there is a couple more chapters and I'm anxious to see what they are.

I just moved into a new apartment, a nice new apartment and that's as far as I got. I haven't had

*"Go to sleep, get up,  
keep it moving"*

a chance to put my things away, got my TV and stereo ready, but everything started going south as far as physically. I started feeling like really bad I'm not even sure. I have some junk food that I bought. That's what I've been living off in that place a bunch of ordered subs, Chinese food, pizza, and all that mess because I'm always on the run driving that van. Go to sleep, get up, keep it moving.

Trying to get one of my kids up here, I had them up here the other day and my intentions were to give them the keys to my apartment and go in there and try to straighten things up. I have a couple dirty dishes in the sink and I know I got some trash that's in the trash bag sitting on the floor, and I know I got some half a pizza sitting in the refrigerator, and I got some Chinese food left over so I'll try to get them to get in there and get rid of that. And then when I go home I'll try to eat right because I can cook. I cook really good. So I'll try to eat right and get rid of the old mess.

VETERAN

## Kirstie Ennis

THE MARINE CORPS AND MY TRANSITION BACK TO CIVILIAN LIFE

INTERVIEWED BY JESSICA SHEN



I served six years in the Marine Corps as a helicopter door gunner and airframes mechanic. I was raised by two marine parents. My superheroes, if you will. They weren't wearing capes. They got up every morning and put on uniform, and I idolized them for that. I looked up to the whole idea of doing something greater than yourself. I wanted to join the Marine Corps to give my parents a reason to be proud of me like I was proud of them.

Another part of the reason was because I got to a certain point where I just needed to leave. I was an absolute jerk as a kid. School was always easy, athletics were kind of a joke, so I was always getting in trouble. If I didn't get out of where I was, I was gonna fall into the vicious cycle of living in a small town and getting married at eighteen.

I remember sitting in a chemistry lab that day I went to the recruiter's office. I looked around the room and rudely compared what I wanted out of life to what I had and was like, I don't want this. I don't want to be working a 9-5 job. I don't want to be stuck in this tiny town, barely making ends meet. My intention was to finish college and get my bachelor's before I joined, but in that moment, you got to go with your gut, so I went. Always trust your gut, don't second guess it.

I finished high school early and did two years of college. Four months after my 17th birthday, I went off to the military. Joining the military so young, that's all you know. When I look at the things every other seventeen year old is doing across the country, there are times I'm like, What did I miss? I would love to look back and say that

from eighteen to twenty-two, I went to a state university and this is what I experienced, but I think enlisting was what I needed. I think God designs us a certain way and gives us what we actually need. I probably wouldn't have thrived if I went to a university for four years; that's just the way I'm wired. There are days where I kick myself in the ass, and I'm like Man, there's a different route you could've gone down, but the reality is you just got to figure out what works for you.

*"There are days where I kick myself in the ass, and I'm like Man, there's a different route you could have gone down, but the reality is you just got to figure out what works for you."*

My stations were at Marine Corps Air Station in San Diego and Kaneohe Bay in Hawaii. I'm originally from a little town in the panhandle of Florida, and so when I found out I was going to San Diego, I was in culture shock. Leaving behind what you're comfortable with is hard. Going into these environments, nobody can school you up on that. It's one of those things you take with a grain of salt, and you need really thick skin to get through it. Especially being the only woman in the shop of forty people, they don't want you there. It's a whole different dynamic, like you're ruining the good old boys' club. Once I proved to them

I wanted to be there and could do my job as good as, if not better, than they could, everything changed. It took a long time to get that trust and a relationship where they treated me like one of the guys. Being a woman in the military, there are stigmas associated. But you can make your experience as good and as bad as you choose.

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*"It took a long time to get that trust and a relationship where they treated me like one of the guys. Being a woman in the military, there are stigmas associated. But you can make your experience as good and as bad as you choose."*

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Day to day was pretty simple. You fly, and you fix the helicopters that you're outbound on. You wake up early at 5AM, get in the shop at 5:30AM. My favorite days were actually in Afghanistan, where I was deployed. There's just a different sense of purpose and fulfillment when you're over in the combat zone. I guess one of the things people don't talk about too much is overseas. If you asked me at 17 if I thought I would've enjoyed being in a third world country, I would've told you no. But looking back, there's never a question of what your purpose or role is in a combat zone. You're not worried about anything but making sure that you don't die, and also that your buddies don't die. I think that one of the things that's not talked about a lot is that comparison, that transition from that way of life to being a civilian again. Coming

back home abruptly, all of a sudden you have to worry about what to wear or how your hair's going to look and what to eat.

On my second deployment to Afghanistan, I was five months in, and while performing duties as a helicopter door gunner, my helicopter went down. Due to the crash, I sustained some pretty severe injuries—everything from losing my left leg to severe head trauma, fractures throughout my spine, and damage to my arms, ears, and eyes. It was a long road to recovery. For a long time, doctors were telling me, you can go back to your job, but then I kept being found unfit for duty. In the moment they told me it was over, it destroyed me. It stripped me of my purpose of being a Marine. It took a long time to rebuild that side of things mentally and emotionally, more so than recovering from the physical injuries.

I really had to figure out how to repurpose myself, so I filled into athletics as a form of therapy. I use sports now as a tool to make money, but also to pay it forward. I climb the biggest mountains in the world and snowboard them for charity. I would do it all over again even knowing what I know now. The only regret is after I got hurt, I was very selfish. I only focused on the pain that I was in, and I wasn't recognizing the pain that I was giving other people. I was just a bitter and mean person for a while after I got hurt, instead of appreciating the people who were actually trying to help me. After I said sorry, people turned the other cheek. Otherwise, in terms of everything leading up to where I am today, it's all perspective. I can look at everything that I've lost and be upset about it, or I can look at what I gained.

I joined the Marine Corps to serve people, and now I live my life for other people. I have three masters degrees in psychology, business administration, and public administration, and have almost completed my first semester for my doctorate in education. When I'm done with the extreme athletics, I want to get involved in the education system to revamp things and hopefully still inspire the younger generation, just in a different way. I can't run around with machine guns and protect people who can't protect themselves, but I can at least inspire

people to seize more of their potential. That's kind of a different path, but I guess when you boil it down, same objective. It all ties back to people.

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*"I joined the Marine Corps to serve people, and now I live my life for other people."*

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VA VETERAN

# James

## EVERYDAY IS A HOLIDAY

INTERVIEWED BY RACHEL WU AND ELYSE DECKER

I'm from Pennsylvania. I'm a Vietnam era veteran which means I didn't step on Vietnam soil. My training was on a base in Texas and took 8 or 9 weeks. The first place I was stationed was in Arkansas, which was a B52 base. From there I went to Alaska. I loved it. Anyone who goes there will fall in love with it. There is ice fog and the sun stands up, circles around, and never goes below the horizon in the summer.

I worked in the air force and I served for 13 years, pretty much in radio the entire time. I worked with KC 135s and B-52s on the aircraft radios, fixing the transistors, since, when I first went in, they had very limited transistors and that was the way they had to communicate. I liked tinkering with technology in the past but now I have shakes so I don't anymore.

After Alaska, I worked on KC-135 tankers in Nebraska. I fell and really hurt my back in '81, twisted all of my muscles. They put me in the hospital.

the base.

There were a lot of people that did more than me and that did less than me. A lot of people defend the constitution. I have trouble with that now because of who's in office now.

I have a lot of favorite memories. I like going to Alaska because of the Aurora Borealis, especially since I worked the night shift all my life. Another favorite is of my daughter on Easter standing on a snow mound. She's 45 years old now. I just have one daughter, I couldn't deal with two. My daughter is about 15 miles from where I am and she's not having a good time in life right now. She had a divorce because her childhood sweetheart decided to wander around. Problem is he got caught. They've been together for almost 25 years.

Music sort of relaxes me if I am having a really bad day. I listen to pretty much everything except for gangster rap. Well, I'm also not good enough to

follow up the hall and she doesn't know I'm there. Or I stop in the bathroom and come up the hall. It's part of my ancestry. Blackfoot Cherokee. The only reason I know this is that my mom had jet black hair.

In school, I majored in fine arts and commercial art. I still do that. I arrange flowers – silk flowers. I worked with model trains and I try building different circuits to form flashlights and all that good stuff, as a hobby. I have two Nikon cameras, a p1000 and a 7001. I enjoy it and I have a Cannon XAH1 or whatever. It's a videotape recorder. High definition! I photograph anything that looks interesting. It could be a plane going across the sky or the man in the moon. I did like to cook. Since I've gotten down, my wife does most of the cooking. I'm trying to retire gracefully. But I've had a good life. Wouldn't change anything, you know? I'll say this. Every day is a holiday. It's what you make of it. I'm done.

*"I'm trying to retire gracefully. But I've had a good life. Wouldn't change anything, you know? I'll say this. Everyday is a holiday. It's what you make of it."*

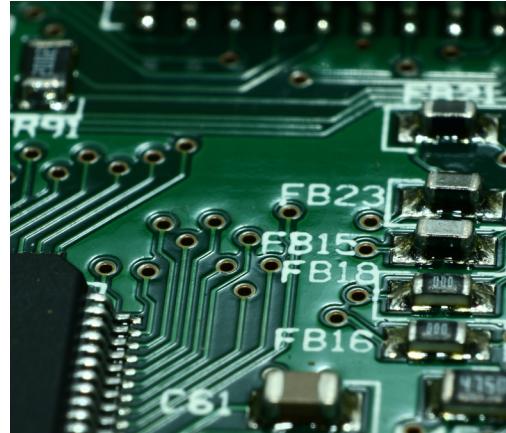
tal and did surgery. After that, I was trying to recover and came up with cancer, testicular. Then I got out and healed. Now I have prostate cancer.

All the people that I knew that were around me fought dying. Dying of cancers and everything else. There were bad chemicals in Arkansas. If you had less than two stripes, you got to go on jobs and we used to spray along the fence and you could see where we stopped because where we were spraying was dead. We were marking the grounds to make it clear where you could and could not enter

understand operas.

After I was discharged, me and the first wife that was in Alaska got a house that she wanted so much. So she gets the house then she gets, "Oh I don't want to live here anymore," and we divorced. Then I hooked up with a lady from Delaware. We ended up married.

I worked for the Delaware state park system as a volunteer. I volunteered for a fire company. I did a volunteer job for the ranger. I have very light steps. You can't hear me. Yeah, tell the wife that. You know, I will



PENN VETERAN

## Jesse Hamilton

FROM IRAQ AND REINTEGRATION

INTERVIEWED BY JESSICA SHEN AND MATTHEW WANG

**F**or what should've been my senior year in college, I volunteered to go to Iraq as an advisor to the newly-formed Iraqi army. The job I had was particularly tough because you never felt safe. Advisors were rarely on U.S. bases and most combat operations were with Iraqi troops as opposed to with American troops.

My time training the Iraqis was often frustrating because after the U.S. won the initial ground war, the decision was made to disband the Iraqi Army, so we were basically starting from scratch. And in addition to having to train new soldiers, there were numerous cultural and language barriers. I knew very basic Arabic, and some of the Iraqis knew basic English, so we were able to muddle through communication and coordination. My team and I went over to Iraq optimistic about the long-term stability and prospects for the Iraqi nation; we definitely left disillusioned. I think we underestimated the amount of time, effort, and resources it would actually take to get the entire government apparatus up and running.

My reintegration back into society was weird, to say the least. I left Fallujah, Iraq which was literally a war zone in early August of 2006, and I was back in a classroom in late August 2006. The juxtaposition in time of those two realities was just very odd. Also, talking about the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder is not something that happens in the military, but it's real and has deleterious effects on the lives of a lot of combat vets. Mainly, it's problematic because the rest of the U.S. population have never served in the military, and many of those who have did not engage in direct combat, so there's a lack of awareness.

People might not realize that for many of those that enlist in the military, they're enlisting because that is

their best choice in life at that particular point. A lot of my friends who served came from lower income backgrounds. They couldn't go to college, and their parents didn't have a lot of money. Had they not chosen to join the military, they likely would've continued down a path of struggle. So, the military offers an opportunity out of a situation like that and for me, it was a way to pay for college. The veterans you see at Penn have worked incredibly hard to get to where they are now. Many of them got dealt a bad hand in life but managed to defy all odds and get here."

*"Many of them [the veterans at Penn] got dealt a bad hand in life but managed to defy all odds and get here."*



PENN VETERAN

## Jesse Raines

COMRADERY AND GOING TO PENN

INTERVIEWED BY PETER MA

I grew up in a pretty rough neighborhood in Nevada. I didn't have a lot of money and I pretty much didn't have any passing grades in any class from fifth grade on. I didn't graduate high school—none of my friends graduated and no one from my family graduated. Basically, when you hit 16 or 17 years old, it was common to just drop out and start working. So, that's what I did too. I started working at pizza places and that was the first time I really got a spark that I wanted to do something in my life. So, in 2004, I opened a small pizza place of my own. However, the mixture of being a young 21-year-old, not having any education and not understanding business, made it one of the worst experiences of my life. I worked from 9 AM to 9 PM seven days a week and had four days off a year. I was very happy when I finally closed the place.

This closing kind of lined up with the Battle of Fallujah in Iraq, in 2005. It was a big battle—the biggest battle on global terrorism in my opinion, with the exception of the invasion on Iraq. I could watch news of Fallujah live on CNN and that was the first time I really wanted to get involved with what I viewed as my generation's moment. I had thought the Iraq War was stupid from the beginning, but that didn't change the fact that my generation—we were the 18, 19, and 20-year-olds—was fighting in this war and that people I knew were going in it.

So, in 2005, after Fallujah, and after I had closed my restaurant, I decided to join the army. I signed up as 11 Bravo, which was an infantryman, the most front-line fighting guy. I later ended up in a sniper section in Korea, where I met a woman and got married. Then, I went to Fort Hood where I got recruited for long-range surveillance (LRS) in a new elite unit called R&S, reconnaissance and surveillance. 2011 was when I did my

major deployment to Afghanistan. We were originally going to do all sorts of cool stuff like downed aircraft recovery, raids, and all these different kinds of things, but last minute they put us in an area of operations (AO), which was not something our unit was designed for. We were organized in these very small six-man teams—our whole squadron totaled 270 people compared with the normal thousand-member battalions—but they gave us an entire AO in Southern Afghanistan. We were a scalpel and they were giving us a job suited for hammers. It was one of the worst places at the time. You couldn't drive off the hardball road without hitting an IED. I got there in June 2011 and it got kinetic right away. The second mission I went on, my friend died and I hit a big IED and got injured. That was just how the deployment was going to go.

It was a very rough time. In terms of operation tempo, most people were going out four, five times a week, but we were going out for 12, sometimes 15 times a week. Sometimes we would go out for a patrol all day long, pull back in, fill the truck up, and then go right back out. Anytime the commander wanted to go anywhere, anytime something was happening, anytime someone needed anything done quick, they came to us. It was high stress job. My unit was engaged pretty regularly, especially with IEDs, and we would pretty often get shot at. One time our unit even had a firefight that lasted from sun up to sundown.

It was a tough time, but there were also some amazing things that came from it. You can't imagine the level of comradery you can build with people until all this modern crap is



*"We were a scalpel  
and they were giving  
us a job suited for  
hammers."*

gone. There's no what am I going to wear tomorrow? You're going to wear a uniform. There's no hey how am I going to pay my cell phone bill? You don't have a phone. There's no where am I going to sleep? You're going to sleep whenever you are told to sleep. Life is boiled down to these ultra-simplistic means and you realize how little you can get by with. Pretty much all you really need to get by is water, reasonable amounts of food, and then your friends. That's it. Everything else is tertiary. Everything else you don't really need any more after a while. You get to a point where all you have are the twelve guys around you. Even if we don't like each other, no one else could say anything about our section. We were brothers.

And you're kind of in this existence where only yesterday, today, and tomorrow matter. Three days in the future is too far to think about and a week ago never happened. You're just in this weird limbo of existence and that's kind of what deployments turn into after a while. You realize that after a certain point your guys are just kind of like these robots. You can go out for 12 hours, be dead tired, come back, and have go get right back on your trucks ready to go. It's kind of an amazing thing, really. You don't see that in regular life anymore, people pushing themselves to this point of absolute performance, out of dedication to each other. What the army tells us to do doesn't matter anymore. We're doing it essentially because if one of us is going, we're all going to go. It's a beautiful thing that you don't get to see anymore.

Eventually, I got a little tired of the army and also had some traumatic

brain injuries from that big IED I hit, so I decided to leave the military. I went from Afghanistan to a community college classroom in like 90 days, which was not a great idea. I went from having a support structure—from never being more than 5 feet away from somebody—to living completely on my own, in a city that I had been away from my entire adult life, in a classroom that I had never really sat in, and being asked to do things that I didn't really understand. I didn't even know what a syllabus was. That was how far out of touch from being a student I was. Although I still did fairly well for about a year in the community college, I was very aimless and had no idea what I wanted to do. I got divorced and was living in a terrible neighborhood, completely on the fringe as my friends would say. I constantly wanted to rejoin the army because at least I understood that

*"You can't imagine  
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In 2014, I came home from the gym to find a dude robbing my house. I got into a fight with him and he shot a gun. It missed me, but it was very traumatic and that was my tipping point. The next day, by pure chance, a private military company called me and asked if I wanted to go back to Afghanistan. I said okay and three weeks later I was on a plane going back to Afghanistan. That just made sense to me at the time and I just thought that would fix everything.

So, I went back and worked as a private military contractor. It gave me another year to think about things. During then, a friend of mine who I was in the infantry with had got-

ten out and had been accepted into Wesleyan University. I knew enough to know that it was a good school, so I was like how did you get into Wesleyan? He told me that opportunities were available to veterans, you just have to really want to do it. I sat down and thought about it after the conversation with him. Within five minutes of just sitting there quietly, I was hundred percent dedicated and was like this is what I am going to do, this is my new goal.

I quit that private contracting job, got back to the states, and hit the ground just completely focused on that. I applied to 14 schools and got into many of them. I ended up choosing Penn and decided to major in African studies, which was something that I loved a lot. I had lived in Africa for my private contracting job, so it had always been a focal point in my life, but it wasn't until I sat in a class that I really fell in love with the subject.

My first summer at Penn, I went to Kenya and that was the first time I was completely surrounded by undergrads. But after that summer, I left Kenya with ten really close undergrad friends. We were part of a unique group and we still are. That was when I really realized that Penn was a lot more than just classes and that I was a lot more than just a veteran—I was also a student. I've since joined clubs, been more active, and tried to be a bigger part of the community. And since then, I've totally loved it. I think this is the best experience I've had and it came at the right time. I think I was on the course to make some bad decisions and coming to Penn has let me realize that there are other things in life besides fighting wars.

I'm not going to pretend that I'm a 19-year-old. I'm a 35-year-old who has spent more time in Afghanistan than in a classroom. Certainly, there's no escaping those experiences. But being a veteran is just one of the many experiences that should define you, not the only one. I'm not going to stand up on the first day of every class and be like let me explain why I'm older than you. What I am going to say is I study Africa and this is why I love Africa. Those are the things I like to say when I'm introducing myself. I just try to be a student and the more I just try to be a student the more enjoyable it seems to be.

VA VETERAN

# Inocencio

## THE MARINES AND VETERANS HAVEN

INTERVIEWED BY PETER MA

I was born and raised in New York to a small Puerto Rican family. I'm the only boy and I have two sisters. I was a clean-cut kid who didn't look for trouble. I was athletic and played a lot of sports. But eventually, I got tired of the city life and I wanted more out of life. So right out of high school I knew I wanted to join the military.

At first, I was going to join the Air Force. An old friend of mine who I grew up with playing ball with was going to the Air Force. He wanted me to join him as his buddy. I agreed and we had to go take the Air Force exam in Brooklyn. He made it on time for the exam, but I was late that day. They wouldn't let me in to the exam no matter what I said, but this one officer there told me that I wasn't late to take the Marine Corps exam. I was late, but I was there, so I decided to take that exam instead and I passed! My friend wasn't too happy about that but I was excited.

My military life was mostly good to me. I loved it so much that I wanted to make a career out of it. I saw a little action in my first year overseas in Africa. I was stationed aboard an aircraft carrier called the U.S.S Inchon. We went port to port and thanks to God I made it back in one piece. Afterwards, I went back to the States where I got stationed in Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. There, they needed a small arms technician to repair weapons. They called me in and asked me to change my MOS, my job field. At first, I was a little nervous to change jobs, but I met this Sergeant who ran the armory where they kept all the weapons. I became his partner and he taught me everything. He was an old grumpy dude, but after I got to know him, he was actually the sweetest person you could meet. I had to prove to him over time that I knew what I was doing and over time he came to trust me. Together, we ins-

pected any weapon from the about 200 guys in my company, Fox, that was broken down. Over 250 weapons were assigned under my name—.45 caliber pistols, M16 rifles, sniper rifles, machine guns, etc. I loved my job. I was so good at it that a newspaper company even came and interviewed me about my outstanding work.



They wanted me to stay in Camp Lejeune for 7 more years, but I didn't want to stay in one base for so long, so I left. I was honorably discharged and moved back to New York with my mom. I started looking for work and found a job as a mail clerk. I didn't mind doing it as it was something new and something interesting. I was athletic and every weekend I would go play some kind of sport—baseball, softball, or football. I moved to a house by the beach. It was a dream come true, I loved being by the water. After work I would come home, throw my stuff on the floor, change into my shorts and sneakers, and head right to the beach.

However, I had an issue was alcohol. It started when I was in the Marines where I would drink to fit in with the guys. But it got too much. The alcohol got control of me. I became a full-blown alcoholic. During my 15-year relationship with my girlfriend, I had to admit myself to treatments. I never thought I would meet a woman who would put up with my drinking problem as much as she did. She was

very supportive and she helped me in a lot of ways. But I lost that relationship because of alcohol. At that time, I was ashamed to admit it, but now that I look back at it, I realize I lost a good woman.

My alcohol issue after that kept escalating. I've been in and out of programs, I can't even count how many I've been in. I always do so well in these programs, but they only last for a while. My issue is that after these programs end, I would have to go back out into the real world. And that's what I would do. I would go out and look for work. I did everything that was positive for me and I was happy. But something negative would always happen. And when it did, I would turn back to alcohol and relapse. That has been my issue even to this day.

There's no guarantee that I'll ever stop drinking. I know myself. I would be lying if I said I would. But I really have to stop the urge and craving to drink. I am so grateful that I have gotten a referral to go to Veterans Haven, a two-year program to help get myself together. I know that if I don't get myself together in this two-year time, nothing will help me. I'm hoping and praying that this is it. And I hope they are able to help me and put me to work.

I got to find something to do so that my stinking thinking won't be thinking about drinking. I know I have to take care of myself cause no one else can. But I just have to take it one day at a time.

I'm counting down the hours until I leave for there. And I'll keep moving on. Keep going forward and don't turn back.

VA VETERAN

# Fred

FRIENDSHIP AND TRAVEL

INTERVIEWED BY JEFFREY JIANG

come from a military family. Both my grandfather and father served in the Navy. My grandfather, especially, was a big influence on my decision to join. I also have two brothers who served in the Army.

I showed up at Navy Boot Camp at age 22, graduated, and served in our Navy from 1986 to 1996. My first assignment was aboard the USS Hector, a repair ship whose mission was to prepare and transport supplies to war vessels. My second ship was the USS Halsey, a cruiser, aboard which I enjoyed three world tours, visiting almost every country one could imagine. Next, I served as a military police (MP) officer for six years in the Philippines. The highlight of my time as an MP was a prison escort duty to Iraq.

When I reflect on my time in service, I think of the incredible friendships I formed while in the Navy. Especially at sea, in close quarters for six months at a time, my fellow sailors and I truly became a family-like unit. But even on shore duty, close-knit relationships with my brothers and sisters in arms blossomed. The family vibe of the people I served with is something I will always cherish.

Which branch of service would I recommend? I know I'm biased, but I'd definitely say Navy. It's the best choice one could make. Seeing the world and taking advantage of the numerous opportunities that the Navy offers are incredible perks of being a sailor.

Personally, speaking of opportunities, I was a beneficiary of the great employment prospects for veteran sailors. After coming out of the Navy, I worked for the United States Postal Service (USPS) for 30 years, in addition to being offered a detective position by the local police department.

For me, one of the most challeng-

ing aspects about serving in the military is the significant time spent away from one's family. Other than during the holidays, I was mostly away. I had a wonderful wife who did an unbelievable job in raising our children and running our household.

In short, the two best aspects of serving in the Navy are friendship and travel. My best moment? Receiving a letter of commendation from the commander of the United States Fifth Fleet. On a more practical level, the discipline that I learned while in the Navy has been a tremendous foundation for success back in civilian life.

I can't help but smile when I talk about my Navy days—I enjoyed every day so very much.

*"In close quarters for six months at a time, my fellow sailors and I became a family-like unit. But even on shore duty, close-knit relationships with my brothers and sisters in arms blossomed."*



VETERAN

## Lori Robinson BIGGER THAN MYSELF

INTERVIEWED BY PETER MA

**M**y dad was in the Air Force, so my entire life all I've known was to move every two or three years. However, this was the most amazing experience growing up. We lived overseas and I got to see so many things firsthand. I skied in Germany, got wooden shoes made in Amsterdam, and watched the changing of the guards in Buckingham palace with my face through the steel bars. This opportunity to travel and see different parts of the world was phenomenal. It also made me proud to be an American. Every time I came back into the States, it made me grateful for the privileges we have as U.S. citizens.

My dad wanted me to go to the Air Force academy, but I felt like I had been in the Air Force for 18 years already, so I wasn't going to stay there. I ended up going to the University of

New Hampshire to become a teacher. However, that required me to stay a fifth year to get a master's degree and I wasn't up for that. I decided to sign up for the ROTC at my university to do that for four years and then figure out what I wanted to do for the rest of my life after that. When I first got my assignment as an air battle manager (someone who talks to fighter pilots and tells them where to go), the guy in charge of the detachment told me, "Lori, you need to talk to your father and have him get you out of this assignment. It's a horrible assignment and you're not gonna like it." However, I refused to ask my dad to do anything for me. I was on my own now and that was it. So, I stuck with that assignment. I honestly never thought I would end up doing it for more than five or ten years, but I loved what I did.

Throughout my career, I've had some unique, unbelievable

opportunities. I became an instructor at the Air Force's Fighter Weapons School—the first female instructor. My career there allowed me to start becoming a better person, a better airman. I learned a lot about teamwork and operations, but what really stood out to me was when my mentor told me that I was part of something bigger than myself. I didn't really understand that at the time, but as time went on, I realized that it really wasn't about me, it was about the institution. While I may have been good at what I did, but if I didn't make those around me better, the institution was never going to get better.

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*"I was part of something bigger than myself."*

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At the end of the day, I consider myself very lucky, honored, and humbled to have had the privileges to do the things that I did. I was put into positions that women weren't put into. I eventually became combatant commander—the first female combatant commander—and the highest-ranking woman in military by the time I retired. But I never walked in a room and said I was a woman. I walked in and said I'm an airman, a commander, a four-star general in the Pacific Air Forces, and I just happened to be a woman. If I made being a woman more important than all those things, then I made that more important than the institution and being a woman isn't more important than the institution. People ask how I did it and I tell them, I just try to do the best that I can do every single day, with every single task that was given to me. You'll never know where an opportunity will



come and you'll never know what's going happen to you, but it starts with being the best that you can be. Keep doing that and you'll continue to earn trust and greater responsibilities.

I've had so many great memories in the Air Force. If you had told me when I was in university that I was going to go to China twice, meet the air chief of the Chinese Air Force, sit down, and talk with him, I would have thought you were kidding me. If you had told me that I was going to go to New Zealand and Australia and learn about their Air Forces, meet with their air chiefs, and fly on their airplanes, I would have said you're absolutely crazy. But I got to do those things. One time, there was this big conference in Japan, about 3 days after I took command of the Pacific Air Forces. The chief of the Japanese Air Force wanted me to be the dean of all the air chiefs there. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I decided to just dive in. Later I found out what it meant to be the dean—I was the one who had to talk to the Defense Minister and the Prime Minister of Japan on behalf of all the other air chiefs. And I hadn't even been the commander for a week at this point. But I just dove in. It wasn't about me; it was about being the commander of the Pacific Air Forces.

I can't think of a bad memory from my time in the Air Force. Yes, there was stress for sure. When your job is protecting the United States from threats such as North Korean ballistic missiles, working with federal agencies for hurricane seasons and wil-

dfires, and being responsible to the Secretary of Defense for these activities, in addition to defending United States and Canadian air space against air threats such as that from Russia—yes there's going to be stress there. But none of those were bad memories or hardships. People also ask me if there is anything I would do differently. I look back and there's not a single thing. I was lucky to have great people who took care of me and believed in me. I relied on my team to help me. I did the things I needed to do to enable my team to do what they needed to do. And in the end, I was able to learn about what it meant to be part of something bigger than myself.

Work-life balance was hard, but it was something I always strived for because family is important. When I deployed to Oman or Saudi Arabia, I would talk with my husband and my kids, but things would happen and I would have to get back to work. They were the ones who had to deal with the broken-down car or refrigerator at home. I would say it is the families that enable military members to focus on the jobs at hand. Their constant love, support, and role as part of the bigger military family is just so important. For our last two jobs, my husband and I never signed anything "Lori and David Robinson," it was always "Team Robinson". For me, it's about the team. You're part of something bigger than yourself and you have to be the best that you can be. But you also have to work on your work-life balance and don't forget about your family.

I retired from the Air Force

in 2018, after 37 years there. For the first three months afterwards, I just drooled. I was absolutely exhausted. I never knew how tired I was until I stopped. They tell to take care of yourself, to enjoy the fruits of everything you've worked for. But you can't go stagnant, you can't just stop. You got to keep your mind and your body active. Now I'm giving some speeches and working on capstones where we mentor new one-star generals and their spouses. It's been an interesting

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*"This General thing  
is interesting, but  
what is more impor-  
tant to me is Mrs.  
Robinson, Mom, and  
Gigi, that's what my  
grandchildren call  
me."*

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transition back to normal life. In the military, I had people run my schedule, take care of my travels, housing, and food so that I could focus on my job. I was used to that, but now all of a sudden, I have to do all of that myself. I was also so used to going onto an Air Force base and knowing people there, but I don't know anybody now. But the quiet time is nice. I have had the chance to see the kids and grandchildren, without trying to cram the time in. This General thing is interesting, but what is more important to me is Mrs. Robinson, Mom, and Gigi, that's what my grandchildren call me. They're my life and joy. Nowadays I get to run my own schedule. Now I try to enjoy everything to the fullest.

VA VETERAN

# Lou

## FAMILY COMES FIRST

INTERVIEWED BY RACHEL WU

I was born in Pennsylvania, near where Rocky ran through the Italian market. My Mom used to take me with her when she shopped at the open stalls along the street. I had wonderful parents; we didn't have much, but they taught us that family came first. There were five of us; two brothers and two sisters. Our grandparents came from the poor, southern part of Italy. We moved when I was 9 years old; we lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same elementary school that Tina Fey eventually went to. I graduated from my high school in 1960, along with Jim Croce, a future folk singer star.

missions to South East Asia.

In July 1967, I was ordered to the little known island of Mactan, in the middle of the Philippines. As the Maintenance Control Officer and flight line officer, I was responsible for the maintenance and safety of C-124, Globemasters ("Old Shaky"), and C-133, both extremely large and propeller driven aircraft, the former referred to as a million leaky rivets, flying in formation, the latter resembling a big cigar! The best part of my assignment at Mactan Air Base was that I met my future wife while there and of all places, a Tupperware Party!! Mactan Air

had nothing to do, so I said let's go back to the base; however my buddy said, no let's follow my secretary.

I had no choice but to agree, since I had no idea of how to get back to the base. We arrived at a building, but we didn't go inside because it was just a room full of women; at this point, in fact, I was doing my best to just duck away. But suddenly, the women came walking by as they departed the room and my eyes met with the most incredible eyes I'd ever seen! For just a split moment, our eyes met as Helen, who would become my future wife,

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*"I went back to the Philippines and married the girl that I fell in love with the first moment our eyes met at that Tupperware party!"*

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For the next 4 years all I did was study and graduated at Villanova University in 1964 with a degree in chemistry. The only thing I really learned was that I didn't want to be a chemist; however, I did learn how to think and how to be a good citizen.

After graduation, I joined the United States Air Force, being influenced by my older brother, Pete, who enlisted several years prior. I spent several months at Lackland AFB, Texas, (currently one of the quarantine locations for the people suspected of the Coronavirus) at Officer Training School and was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant. In April 1965, I was assigned to Chanute AFB, IL, training as an aircraft maintenance officer. In January 1966, I was assigned to Dover AFB, DE as a C-141, Starlifter jet cargo aircraft, Flight Line Maintenance Officer. My job was to make sure the C-141's were safe and ready to fly the important

Base was not my assignment of choice, since I had no experience with C-124 and/or C-133 aircraft. The first several months were not pleasant for me; lots of personnel/training issues and very little supply parts to repair incoming aircraft.

Making matters worse, a major aircraft accident occurred the first week I was there while I was processing in, initiating a major investigation. I basically just wanted to finish up there as quickly as I could and be reassigned. But one day, a friend asked me to go with him to buy a painting and said his secretary knew where to buy one. He had noticed that all I was doing for my first two months was working and sleeping and he thought that I might go crazy if I didn't get out of my "Hooch" (a small wooden/metal roof tent) and leave the base. So I took him up on his offer and went with him. After we had purchased the painting, we

walked by. That was the very first time we met; I found out later that her eyes were greenish, probably due to her Spanish heritage. Later that week, my friend's secretary asked me if I had noticed someone at the Tupperware Party; apparently Helen had remembered me too. Helen and I had to follow Philippine tradition and met chaperoned much later at a Christmas party. I was made captain and in August 1968, my assignment at Mactan Air Base was completed, but since I had always told myself that I would not consider marriage until I was 30 years old, I departed the Philippines as a single man.

I was next assigned to Travis AFB, California (another current Coronavirus quarantine location) as a Contract Airlift Survey Officer, part of a team that reviewed commercial aircraft carriers that were awarded contracts and also conduct pre-award surveys



of carriers that airlifted military service members to various locations, including Vietnam. Of course, I had not forgotten about Helen and I wrote to her every day; she did the same.

One day, in autumn 1969, I proposed to Helen and in November that year, I went back to the Philippines and married the girl that I fell in love with the first moment our eyes met at that Tupperware Party! It wasn't easy getting back, but I managed to get a "hop" on a C-141 flight as a courier and flew to Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, following a hectic stop at Guam, where I had to account for additional courier material. Somehow, I managed to fly to Mactan Island, and on 29 November 1969, Helen and I were married in the Sacred Heart Church. We recently celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary. Our first son, Louis, was born in July 1971, and is named after my father; it's an Italian tradition to name your first son, after your father (I also was named after my father). Our second son, Joseph, was born in February 1973 and we named him after my mother's father, Giuseppe (Italian for Joseph). Our youngest son, Brian, was born in 1975 and is named after the Brian Piccolo, the Chicago football player.

After a Quality Assurance training assignment in New York in 1973, I was assigned to the General Electric engine plant in Ohio. I was the Deputy of Quality Assurance at the Air Force Plant Representative Office (AFPRO), a resident unit to assure contract compliance to the numerous military engines that General Electric was manufacturing for the military. I was promoted to major while stationed there, and then moved on to Kirtland AFB, NM, serving as the Quality Assurance member of the Air Force Contract Management Division (AFCMD) team, under Air Force Systems Command. The team visited

each of the AFPRO's throughout the country to major weapon system contractors. Our job was to make sure the AFPRO's been following AFCMD procedures, assuring that taxpayers' money was being spent wisely. The commander of AFCMD assigned me to the AFPRO in Florida to help solve some of the personnel and Quality Assurance issues that had surfaced there. I was assigned as Deputy Commander of that AFPRO in 1980 and quickly went to work soothing relationships among the working personnel and the commander. The commander was a brilliant guy, but a bit hard-nosed, trying to get things done. I managed to hire a new Quality Assurance director and things immediately improved. It was there that I made Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1983, I was assigned to Elmendorf AFB, Alaska as the Director of Logistics of the 11th Tactical Control Group; my job was to ensure the successful completion of the Seek Igloo program, an aggressive plan to replace the aging radar units at the remote radar stations throughout Alaska with state of the art Long Range Radar units, as well as reducing manpower/costs with Minimum Attended Radar facilities, that were to be operated by contract personnel. In addition, I was the Source Selection Officer for determining the follow-on contractor, under the newly written Alaskan Air Command, minimum attendant radar site, service contract, saving the Air Force millions of dollars.

In 1987, my family and I departed Alaska and headed to my home town in Pennsylvania, where I was assigned as the Deputy Director of Contracting at the Defense Personnel Support Center (DPSC), part of the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), the contracting center for buying all of the Department of Defense (DOD) medical, food, and clothing/uniforms

through civilian/contract agencies. Also, the center dealt with emergency purchases; once, when I was the Duty Officer of Day, there was a patient in Hawaii who was dying and needed a rare medicine. I was able to expedite the necessary arrangements to have the proper medicine located and sent directly to Hawaii; fortunately, the medicine got to him in time to save his life.

In 1988, I retired from the United States Air Force and we moved to Delaware. I went back to school, Delaware State University (DSU) and graduated in 1995 with a degree in Plant Science/Horticulture. I currently do volunteer "work" at the Herbarium/Arboretum there. The Herbarium is like a plant library/museum; collected plants are identified, pressed/dried, mounted on paper sheets, and filed by plant family, in special metal cabinets. Also, the Herbarium teaches students, including special sessions for local kindergarten/elementary students. DSU's Arboretum is a special place where one can learn so much about all types of trees.

Now-a-days, I spend much of my time in our yard and garden, just enjoying Mother Nature. I try to read more, mostly about the wars our country has fought and make up for all the reading my Dad told me to do when I was young, but didn't do. What a mistake I made then! That mistake put me way behind others while growing up. I also enjoyed riding motorcycles until I tore my right Achilles tendon, just by bumping my foot into the bedroom dresser! My wish is that our young people today, look ahead and prepare for the future, of course; but also spend some time learning about those who came before their lifetime and find out what obstacles they had to face and how they overcame them. You'll find that lots of good things happened and there were lots of good people who accomplished amazing things.

VA VETERAN

## David

ON FAMILY AND ENJOYING LIFE

INTERVIEWED BY JAKUB JARMULA



I was born in New York in 1945. My parents, my brother, and I moved to Pennsylvania when I was four years old, and I have lived in Pennsylvania ever since. I served from 1967-1969 in Hawaii, and I did not have to go to Vietnam. After being discharged, I resumed my job as a butcher. After the store closed, I became a building engineer until I retired in 2008 due to my health. I had to have operations on my colon, pancreas, and left knee, and I come in for dialysis. Otherwise, I have been pretty healthy. I was also a minister. I enjoyed mentoring others and giving back.

I have been married for 53 years, and I have two daughters—46 and 50 years old—who live nearby. For the past three years, my wife has been in a nursing home for her arthritis. I make sure to visit her with my daughters, but I still miss her. My older daughter works in the VA hospital in admissions and registration.

During my retirement, I have been enjoying life. In church, I played trombone for the band with my brother on the drums. From August to October, we traveled up and down the Eastern Seaboard to perform: New York, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. I first started playing the trombone in the 8th grade, but I don't find much time to play anymore. However, my grandchildren—four boys and two girls—play it now.

VA VETERAN

## John PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

INTERVIEWED BY BRIAN XU

**M**y name is John. I was born in New York. I have two older brothers and 2 younger sisters. I love them all. My childhood was fine. My family moved to Pennsylvania when I was about 4 and I have lived there pretty much ever since then. Growing up, I went to catholic school for two years, but later I didn't want to go to school anymore, so I dropped out, and joined the army. It was the only branch accepting 17-year-old dropouts.

After joining the army, I went through basic training as an armor crewman for a tanker. I spent 4 years in the army but didn't fight in any wars. I wasn't scared to be put in an actual war cause I was young during that period. But they just never put me in one.

We didn't do much at the time. We just stared at the Russians and they stared back at us. That was all. A couple times, we got fired up. When the Iranians took over our embassy, we said, we're going to kick their ass. But we did nothing, we're still doing nothing. One time they blew up the marine barriers and killed a bunch of marines who were sleeping. But we still did nothing. It's politics. We got fired up, we thought we would do something, but we did nothing. Reagan was a war monger, but he did nothing.

But I really liked being in the army. I liked playing army, especially our war games. We fired tanks at targets and tried to beat other teams. We had cool equipment on the tanks. Lasers. They would put targets on each person and vehicle. When we got hit, it would start beeping.

Eventually I got out of the army, came home, and went back to work. When people get out of the military, most of them feel it's hard to adjust. But all I wanted to do was to get a job,

maybe drive a forklift. If I hit stuff, fire me. It's easy enough. I bounced around, doing warehouse work, fixing lighting, and working at a sock shipping company. I made conduit and armored cable for a while in a cellphone accessory warehouse. Then I worked 17 years in a drug packaging plant. But in the end, I lost my job and became unemployed. Now I'm here in the hospital. I got a mass, in my small intestine, looming right after the stomach. This is my third stay here.

I got some enlightenment for people, especially for the younger folks. What is the value of life? Well, it depends on who's life. If it's a single parent taking care of 3 kids, that's pretty valuable, isn't it? If you're just some jerk who is not helping anybody, that's worth nothing.

Another important thing I want people to know is that we need to get rid of all this plastic we keep throwing everywhere. That may be what's getting everybody sick. It's in everything, it's in the milk right now. When TVs used to break when I was a kid, you had to get it fixed. Now, it's cheaper to just buy a new one and toss the old. At present, there are no methods to better the situation. What are we going to do, stop plastics? Put everybody out of work? I think scientists are looking to alternatives. Biodegradable products maybe, as long as it works.

My hospitals service is fine. Every day, I meet a new doctor and they say they are on my team. I can't even remember their name; I just recognize their face. I just met two new ones yesterday. I haven't seen my psychiatrist in years, but he still calls me at home. If he doesn't hear from me, he says, what's going on? I tell him, I'm okay. I'm bipolar with depression. Everybody thinks bipolar means I'm going to start screaming at them. But it's not. Sometimes it works to your benefit. You work hard, sometimes you talk too fast, but you're working. You get

the job done. And your hands just keep moving.

I hope they can do something to help me recover. It depends what they do. I could be on feeding tubes, colostomy bags for the rest of my life with what I have. I might die. Who knows? Maybe then I won't have to worry about it. But that can't happen. I plan on leaving here. I plan on running around doing job interviews. I plan on getting social security. So, I don't know. I guess it all depends on the outcome.

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*"I plan on leaving here. I plan on running around doing job interviews. I plan on getting social security"*

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VA VETERAN

# Kenneth

ON RACE, LOVE AND CULTURE

INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW HU AND SERENA TAM

I grew up in South Carolina. My childhood was pretty good. With three brothers and three sisters, I was one of the middle people who had older siblings look out for me throughout my whole life. I had a big sister who you could call a big brother because she was the top dog in the family. She passed just a couple of weeks ago. She was my best friend.

I was born in 1960; at that time there was a lot of racial tension, which affected my schooling a lot. I went to an all-black Catholic school for elementary school, but middle school was when things started getting racially-divided, because we had riots, white versus black. I didn't choose between the two sides though. I was one of the people who didn't care about racism; I didn't care about black and white. My dad hated white people, however. He didn't hate them, but he hated the way he got treated by them. But I could get along with anybody; I had white friends and black friends. I slept over at my white friend's house, I slept over at my black friends' house. I got called "cracker" a lot, simply because I wasn't like them - that I liked white people too.

I went to high school in South Carolina. Peer pressure makes you do silly things. When I got to ninth grade, I got in some trouble; I stole some money and my dad threatened to send me to reform school. My sister came in from New York and took me to keep me out of trouble. So I moved to New York, and with all my friends gone, I was a loner. I made it up to tenth grade, but I hated being alone. So I decided to join the military. I wanted to make my dad proud. He was a soldier too.

My cousin was in the Marines then, so I went and took the Marines test - but I failed it. So I came back home to South Carolina and used my Marines test results to apply to the army.

I guess they have lower standards in their test, because I got enlisted. So that's how my military career started.



One year in Texas.

I served in the Army for four years total. For my first year, they gave me an MOS of 19 delta, an armor division in Texas. It was tanks and APCs - Armored Personnel Carriers, which is what I drove. In the army, you're still a teenager in your head, so you still did teenager stuff; when you got off of work you drank a lot of beer and smoked weed. You meet people from all over there, so that was pretty cool. But it was hard to retain friendships for long, because people are always being shipped somewhere else.

Texas is a big state, it's got nothing but desert and rocks and stuff. The water that you drink is so hot that you had to drag ice up there. I can't drink anything hot so I had a problem with that. Out in the woods, you'd be out there for days and days and you'd be so happy to come back in.



Two years in Korea.

I got an order to go to Korea for my second year. I had never been to a whole new country before; I had to start over with more people that I didn't know, but once I got into the tune, I quickly made a lot of friends. We were in a little Korean village, and they gave us a seminar about what to do and what not to do. They warned us about venereal disease and showed us discourage us from mingling too much. I'm pretty timid, but I just try to make the best of things. My friends liked to go partying with a bunch of girls, but I had a girlfriend. She was Korean. They warn you about getting a wife and how she'd marry you and then leave you the moment you got back to the states just to leave you, but I didn't think about any of that. Dating a Korean was an experience. They have traditions like taking your shoes off, bathing you - I never had anyone bathe me so it was kind of awkward. That relationship didn't go far though because her mother wanted her to go out like the other girls and make mo-

ney with her body. She didn't want to disobey her mother, so I lost her that way.

In Korea, I stayed neat and proper, so they picked me out to be the driver for the Sergeant Major. This job had many perks because it usually meant that I could go anywhere with the Sergeant's car after driving him home, and it also meant that I didn't have to get up in the morning and run five miles and all that. It depended on the sergeant though.



### One year in Germany.

After two years in Korea, I got sent to Germany for my final year. The two countries couldn't have been more different. In Korea, everybody's for themselves, but everything in Germany was so clean and beautiful. I went to a couple churches for a couple of weddings. I wasn't invited, but I just wanted to see what was going on in there. We couldn't be in the towns though, or they would complain about us tearing up the streets with our tanks. So we were in the woods and the fields all the time. If we wanted to go into the city, we would call a cab to a city, and it would be a Mercedes-Benz. The drivers in Germany drive like racecar drivers - there's no speed limit.

I remember seeing beautiful glass windows. I thought there were mannequins in the window but it was ac-

*"I just did my time in the Army and learned what I could learn from all types of people."*

tually real people. They were hookers in the window but they were standing like mannequins. That's where you'll find most GIs. While my friends were having fun, I was bored. Boring to my friends at least. I didn't roll like that, I never could do that.

Everybody who went tried to learn the language. I learned a little bit of Korean. I learned a little of German. And now when I run into Koreans in the Korean store, and I speak to them, they get surprised, and that's cool to me. I have a Korean friend who owns a fish store, and I shop there a lot. Every time I go there I speak to them and I get what I want so they give me some extra fruit, so that's pretty cool.

I guess my experiences were not all about war and stuff, but I just did my time in the Army and learned what I could learn from all types of people. As a matter of fact, I would always talk my way into being the big guy's friend. Most of my life I didn't have to fight anyone. I would talk to them, make them understand, make them laugh, and they would fight for me.

### Post-military life.

Even when I got out, I was going to reenlist and join the reserves. But I helped out with a guy who knew carpentry and taught me everything he knew, and I made a lot of money using those skills so I didn't have to go back. I was offered \$35,000 to reenlist, and back then, that amount of money would make anybody jump. But losing six years of my life to being disciplined and being told what to do all the time - it wasn't worth it for me.

When I got out and went back to South Carolina, my family was arou-

nd me, so the transition back to civilian life wasn't too bad. I eventually met my wife back in '82. I was 22. She was from Pennsylvania, so that's how I ended up here. We moved to Pennsylvania to help take care of her mother, and I really enjoy living in the city. There are a lot of cultures here, especially Korean and Chinese cultures. That's a definite plus for me because I love Korean food.

I just adopted three kids. They were my nieces and nephew but they were going to put them in a foster home and separate them, and I couldn't let that happen. So I got three kids now, two girls and a boy. They are 1.5 years old, 5 years old, and 10 years old. My baby girl, the youngest one, gives me so much joy because I get to watch her grow up. I'd never taken care of a baby from such a young age before. She just learned how to talk, and now she tells me I love you all the time through the phone.

I'm in the hospital because I have a kidney problem. But after I get out of here, I can go home to my kids. Take them shopping. They love shopping. And I love my wife; I got a great wife. She'd do anything for me.

I go to a bus stop, a train, I don't know why but people pick me out to talk to. I don't want to talk, but they pick me out to talk to.



VA VETERAN

## Earnest

### A STRONG WILL TO LIVE

INTERVIEWED BY ALLY DIGIOVANNI AND RYAN RIZZO

I was born in Pennsylvania in 1961. One of six kids — the oldest boy. We moved around Pennsylvania and lived there for 10 years. When I was 18, I joined the army. I just wanted to get away from what I was doing. I wanted a fresh start in life, you know. I was a cook back then, but I wasn't going to be a cook my whole life.

My first duty station was Korea. While stationed in Korea, I went up to the DMZ line. It was a one year tour; it was a good one. I liked everything about it. You know, you became more of a man out there. We had to be on our feet, know where we was going, and be ready to fight.

Korea was nothing like it is now. Back then it was a real shock. When you see the movies, with the rice patties, you think it's just fake. No, that's for real.

War over there was still for real.

After Korea, I was transferred to Fort Hood where I served for three and a half years. I became a buck sergeant over there, quick too — under a year and a half. I later joined the 1067 National Guard unit. They asked me if I wanted to go to Iraq. I said, "Sure, why not?"

I served in Iraq for about one year. It wasn't bad, you know. We had bombs falling in our camp every day, but after a while, we just got used to it. I mean, I'm not saying it was right, cuz we were still supposed to go into the shelters. But we just kept walking. We wouldn't think twice about it.

Don't get me wrong, being in the military was rough. When I first joined, we started with 190 people. The unit graduated at 90. We had 3 suicide attempts, 3 AWOL attempts. It was a lot of training. Some people couldn't

cut it. Or didn't want to cut it. But if you could hang, you learned a lot.

They put me in the gas chamber for the first time; they ran us to the gas chamber so we'd be out of breath. They put two 6'8 guys at the door so you couldn't get out. My first time in, we went nuts. I cut my wrist hitting the glass. We moved those 6'8 guys out of the way, and everyone got out. But the next time we went into the gas chambers, I just walked in and walked out. I started to understand what they were trying to teach us. It teaches you skills. Y'all don't learn that stuff out in the world.

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*"I started to understand what they were trying to teach us. It teaches you skills. Y'all don't learn that stuff out in the world"*

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It taught me how to deal with people, too. It taught me to have respect for all people — people of different colors, races, men, women, different countries. You know you have to serve with everybody.

It taught me to have respect for my country, too. People always complain about this country. You know, in Iraq, we couldn't drink any water. Every 10 feet was a ski sled, a palette of water. They had burn pits, and they

was burning everything over there. When I first got to Korea, there was a 12 o'clock curfew for everybody in the country. Can you imagine living like that? You learn a lot by being in other people's countries. You see how other people live, and you learn to respect your own country.

Some of my proudest moments was serving in Iraq, serving in Fort Dix. Just serving. Got 5 army commendations, 5 army achievement medals, 6 good conduct medals, service ribbons, Pennsylvania ribbons. Have over 21 ribbons. My family will tell you I was gonna serve since I was 6; I was watching John Wayne movies since I was 5. I always wanted to be in the military.

It's just that sometimes, it's just that simple for me. Sometimes, things are just that fast. In war, you just can't think about what you're doing. You have to react that fast, too, and you learn which way you should react and which way you shouldn't react. Same way in the civilian world.

That's life, and that's what I learned in the military.

When I got out of the service, returning to civilian life was easy for me. I'm a cook by trade, anyway, so adapting back to the civilian world is nothing for me. I've done it quite a couple of times. Just came back home with my kids.

I'm proudest of my kids. I have three — two girls and a boy. My oldest is 19, she'll be 20 this year. My boy is 18, he'll be 19 this year. My baby is 16. And I'm a grandfather of five months. That was a surprise. The good thing about my daughter is she got so much family. My mom and brothers and sisters will do anything for my kids. So she has a

lot to fall back on.

My family's the most important thing to me right now. I want to see my grandkids know who their grandpop is. That's what's gonna keep me going through what I'm going through now. They think I have cancer so I gotta figure out a plan with that. I said, "Doc, just do what you gotta do." That how I am. Just get it done, cuz they keep prolonging how they want to deal with this, and they can't agree themselves, so that makes it difficult on me, sitting in the room every day thinking about it.

But I want them to know that I have a strong will to live. Cuz when you lose life, you learn to value it more. I was in a car accident two years ago, two days before Christmas. I was coming down 82, hit a patch of ice, went down a mountain. The truck landed in between the mountains. Couldn't

see it from the top, couldn't see it from the bottom. My army training saved me again. I kicked out the window, climbed out the truck, climbed down the hill. It was steep, too. I'm not exaggerating this. You ever ask my kids, they'll tell you. My face was pretty swollen. They said it looked like a pumpkin.

So, I'm grateful for life. You know, cuz god, if he wanted to take me, he had a couple of chances. I could tell you stories all day. But my goal is to live, and if I live five years, I wouldn't have to work another day in my life.

I just want to travel. You know when you go someplace like the art museum, and you spend an hour with a group or something, and time's up but you just started seeing the stuff you wanted to see? Well, I want to rent an RV. Not a big one, a medium sized one. And just travel. Everywhere

in the US. You know, I been around the world, but I wanna see the United States. I haven't even seen all of Pennsylvania. They got museums down here by the stadium, do you know that? There's a black art museum. I haven't seen it yet, and I'm still trying to get there.

I just wanna see things and just enjoy them. Once I know that my kids are OK. And if there's a place I like and I wanna stay for a year, I'll stay. If I wanna stay for a week, I'll stay. That's what I wanna do. I wanna go all the way out to California and then come back. Split the country in half — one half this way, the other half come back.

That's what I wanna do with that, and that's what I wanna do with the rest of my life.



VA VETERAN

## David

ON SERVICE AND YOUTH

INTERVIEWED BY NEENA ANTHONY AND SERENA CHEN

Well, I enlisted in the army, and I was doing Vietnam, early Vietnam. The five of the guys, one guy was too young, he had to wait a week before he could join. The other guy flunked his test and a year later he got drafted. I think the scores were a little lower for draftees. The military tests were very simple. There were levels of it. My buddies scored high enough, and I didn't score high enough. Basic training was tough. We were all physical guys. I went to easy school, it was tough up here. Crew chief, mechanic. They went to the infantry. One guy went to Vietnam, nominated for silver but was awarded the bronze star. Was a good guy. When he got out, he worked for Diamond Furniture Store in Pennsylvania.

A third of us went in, basic training. I volunteered but for some reason, nerves, blood pressure, I don't know, they wouldn't accept me. So I ended up in the aviation outfit. Went to school. I think I was accessed and they got me out. Went to Fort Benning. I said I volunteered for Vietnam and they sent me to Germany. That's it. I was over there for about seven months.

As I recall, I had bipolar depression, or something like that. Actually I had a breakdown, a psychotic episode. They sent me loose on the street. I was very sick. I went to a psychiatrist, for one week I was in the Veteran's Hospital. I was there for nine months. I got better. I was there on a lot of meds. It's been really all manageable since then. But alcohol was the main catalyst of all that. I was alcoholically insane. I could never drink. I still have chronic schizoaffective bipolar. I probably always had it, but it wasn't that bad. I was catatonic two times in my life. Then I got a heart condition.

Got married, had a kid. My buddy,



when I met my wife, said what the hell did she see in you. My daughter had a kid. I tried. I went to school. I got a GED. I got an Associate's in Automotive Technology, which is just a big name for a grease monkey school. I applied for the post office. I scored high, well, I think I scored high. I scored a 95 on one test, and a 92 on the other, and an 82, and they wouldn't hire me. So I figured, maybe they're discriminating against me. I headed down to the Equal Opportunity office downtown and they said no, and what could I say? I have a permanent disability. I did work. I worked about 40 years, over a seven year period, as a volunteer both here, and in two other hospitals as a laborer.

We used to have yearly get-togethers. There was this one guy—he wasn't in the service but he was kinda successful financially—and he lived in a mansion. 8-iron fence, 2 acres of land, we had parties out there. I don't drink but they never bothered me. I

was at one around Christmas.

I moved back to Pennsylvania, and there's the white junkies. I got robbed twice. One time, I didn't see him. I woke up to find myself robbed. The guy did fess up, and I had him charged. Another time when I was at Mass on Easter, they robbed me at 12 o'clock. There were 5 or 6 burglaries. Lots of cocaine there. They're gonna have to knock that down. The drugs are terrible. You might see 15 people laying around, getting high. I was going down the street one time and I saw this lady shooting heroin in her neck looking at a mirror. It's an epidemic, worse than the 60s.

I'm an AA'er now, 35 years. I slipped a couple times. They're loaded with junkies. And look at the bars. The bars are closing. That's the sign, a cop told me. Bars, banks, when they close, you watch out.

When I was younger, I boxed at a few clubs. I was a novice, had 8 fights and lost half as many as I won. The guy who won went into the Marines and was in Pennsylvania with me. I was gonna fight some more, but they cancelled it for a rock concert. I liked getting hit. I was legally blind, and fought under severe handicap. Now I had an operation and I can see fine. I met my opponent many years later, in AA.

Where I was stationed, you were either going to Vietnam or coming back from Vietnam. And in the company I was transferred to, about 75% of the vets were back from Vietnam. Back in 61, people lost their leg, spin we called them, I don't know what he did to lose his leg. But I'm putting this all together, my memory about the prep and generation for war, I don't know. But I know almost all the vets that came back, no matter what rank, V5, V6, they had brand new cars, they wanted to get married. I wondered why they went to war in the first place. Maybe in the 70s, morale was fighting against socialism-communism. That's what I think the psychology behind it was. I don't know if it was right or wrong, but I like freedom. I can't see why anybody wouldn't like freedom.

I got most of my tattoos before the service. Oddly enough, back then, nobody had tattoos. Now, everybody's got tattoos. My grandson and my daughter's got tattoos. People thought I was lower class, like the cook thought that. Of course, I didn't have all these back then. Maybe I got drunk from nights out. I don't think I have a favorite one. They're all the same. Well, maybe my family. I have my daughter,

granddaughter, and great-granddaughter's name.

I was born in Pennsylvania, bred in South Carolina. My first recognition was in South Carolina, about one or two years old. My grandfather owned a farm there, a slave farm. Well they gave the blacks down there 27 acres or 30 acres after the civil war. Somehow, he bought some off a black man. He was a moonshiner, mechanic farmer, and had four sons. My grandmother was a flapper, like the flappers back in the 20s. They had a picture of my father, my biological father, when he was about 5 or 6 months old. And this is another story in itself: my father and mother kidnapped me drunk when I was about 7 years old and took me to South Carolina.

I became religious. I've been on mass for 43 years. Now, I know people who don't believe in god, some who are atheists, some who just drink and die. I have no prejudice against people who don't believe in God. But I would say the biggest part of my mental illness was the lack of God, and what I call now faith, trust, and confidence in God. Although, when I get off medication, I do tend to freak out more. I hallucinate, I get flashbacks, and I lose a lot of weight.




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*"I don't know if it was right or wrong, but I like freedom. I can't see why anybody wouldn't like freedom."*

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VA VETERAN

## James ON WRITING AND RELIGION

INTERVIEWED BY ALEXA PISCIOTTI AND SONIA RADU



I think I'm most excited about my book. That's right, I have a book coming out sometime soon. I think in February or March, which is longer than I wanted but I'm willing to wait for it because the world really needs to hear about this stuff right now. The world needs to hear about this so much so that Newman Publication didn't even question me when I said I wanted to publish it, they just took it, they took my handwritten manuscript. It was handwritten! It's taken around a year now and I'm really ready for it to be available for the world to read. It's going to be controversial, I'm sure of it, but sometimes that's important.

I wrote this book under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It gave me the idea for it. The first creation of man was created in the image of God, but it wasn't as most people think of Adam. The image of God actually was a hermaphrodite before Adam was separated into Adam and Eve. Woman comes from man. This is groundbreaking information for the people that aren't aware of this.

I also tell the story of the Prodigal Son from a new perspective. Very few people realize that the father in that story was a single father. He missed his son so dearly and so when this son came back all that this father wanted was for his son to come home. I know,

from experience, that fathers worry just as much as mothers do. I have a daughter, so I know that the father felt "here comes my boy", of course I want to run out there and hug him! So I tell what the father went through.

The dog and the rabbit is another story that I wrote, but mostly for the kids. But there's a lot of applications for adults too. The dog always chases the rabbit, but one day the rabbit falls into a hole. The dog talks to him about getting out of the hole and, well, I won't spoil the rest! You'll have to read the book to find out what happens.

But anyway, the book really asks what the title says which is "What Is This?". It breaks down a lot of central things.

But enough about my book... I grew up right here in Pennsylvania but I've been living in California for the past several years. Now I'm back in Pennsylvania for a little while, but I've been traveling a lot, preaching and working on my book. In fact, I was just in Utah preaching after an invitation to visit.

I grew up in quite the religious family—I've been preaching since I was 3 years old and I preach every chance that I get. It's my calling and I have committed my life to it. My job doesn't feel like a job, I don't want people to hide themselves from being true to themselves. I'm just a person, I'm just another human being that makes mistakes. I want to be a servant to

others as a minister; I love that servant role.

I was in the military for 13 years as a military chaplain. I don't feel like what I did was as important as all of the heroes who served our nation, they deserve the glory; my service was simply the spiritual last rights, death notification of families--there's no glory in it. 13 years in Vietnam. I had seen death before I even went there, but the hardest part was still delivering the death notices. I still today don't know the proper way to do that. You never know how someone's going to react, you never know what they want you to do. I think there's no good way to do it. I went there at 16 and it changed my life. I don't know, I don't really like to talk about myself much.

But I wanted to be a chaplain all of my life. It was one of my two callings, along with becoming a lawyer. I've been preaching since I was 3 years old, as I mentioned, and I just recently became certified as a paralegal in 2018. I'm really happy with myself for doing this. The paralegals are the ones that do all of the work for the lawyers anyway. The paralegal course is supposed to be 11 months and of course I finished it in 8. So now I've done the two things I really wanted to do in life.

Now that my book's finally done, and at this time in life, I just want to find a place and relax for a change. I'm looking forward to it.

*"I've been preaching since I was 3 years old and I preach every chance I get. It's my calling and I have committed my life to it."*

# How to Get Involved



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