

MEMORIAL DAY

8-MINUTE READ. WORTH EVERY ONE.

MILITARY APPRECIATION MONTH

Most Americans don't know that May is Military Appreciation Month. They know Memorial Day. They know the cookouts and the sales and the extended weekend. But the entire month of May was set aside by this country as a formal acknowledgment of the men and women who put on a uniform and said, I will go. Most people drive through it without noticing. This year, we're asking you to stop.

Military Appreciation Month isn't a ceremony. It isn't a flag on a car or a thank you for your service said too quickly in a grocery store line. It's a sustained, deliberate act of attention. It's thirty-one days to ask yourself what you've actually done to support the people who are carrying a weight that most of us will never feel. Veteran service organizations are underfunded. Military families are underserved. Young men and women are overseas right now in places their families can't find on a map, fighting a war they didn't start, holding a line so the rest of us don't have to think about it. Military Appreciation Month asks us to think about it. All of it. For the whole month. Not just the last Monday.

ARMED FORCES DAY

The third Saturday of May belongs to them. Not to veterans. Not to the fallen. To the ones who are serving right now. Today. Tonight. In the dark, in the cold, on foreign soil, far from everyone they love.

Armed Forces Day was created in 1949 to honor the men and women currently in uniform across every branch of the United States military. It's the one day on the calendar dedicated entirely to the living soldier, the one still deployed, still on watch, still doing the job. And most Americans have never heard of it.

That needs to change.

Right now, there are young troops on foreign land. Some of them are barely old enough to rent a car in the country they're defending. They raised their right hand, they took an oath, and they went where they were sent. They didn't ask for the war they inherited. They didn't choose the geopolitical moment they were born into. They just showed up. They're still showing up.

And when the threats come from the other side of the world, when leaders of foreign nations say they're prepared for whatever we bring them, I find myself wondering something. I wonder if they're prepared for us to bring them peace. For our armed forces to never have to fire a single shot in that direction. For the strongest military on earth to win not by overwhelming force but by the sheer refusal of the American people to let their children fight a war that diplomacy could have ended.

This is Armed Forces Day. It's a salute. Not to war. To the people willing to fight one so the rest of us never have to. To every soldier on foreign soil tonight who deserves to come home whole. We see you. We're fighting for your peace on this end. Come home.

MEMORIAL DAY

Some of them didn't make it.

This month, while America was going about its life, soldiers died. They died doing the job. They died far from home, far from the people who loved them, in places that will never feel the full weight of what was lost there.

We don't know everything about each of them yet. We don't even know all of their names. We know they served. We know they went. We know that somewhere there's a family that got the news and hasn't been the same since. We know there are children who'll grow up with a photograph instead of a parent. We know there are mothers who still reach for the phone to call someone who won't answer.

Memorial Day isn't a day off. It's the day we reckon with the cost of the freedom we spend the other 364 days taking for granted. It's the day we sit with the weight of every name on every wall, every flag in every box, every life that ended before the story could finish.

This tribute belongs to them. The ones who gave everything this month. The ones who gave everything before them. The ones whose names we know, and the ones history never recorded. Every one of them went. Every one of them mattered.

We won't reduce them to statistics. We won't let their service become a caption. This magazine exists, in part, because of them. Every story we tell of a veteran who came home and built something extraordinary carries the weight of the ones who didn't get that chance.

Rest. You held the line. We've got it from here.

FROM THE EDITOR

I was a journalist before I was an editor. And my pieces kept coming back too long.

Not because I didn't know how to edit. Because I don't know how to reduce a person's life to eight hundred words. When I sit across from someone and they start talking, I'm not collecting quotes. I'm reconstructing lives. I want to know what they were like before. I want to know what the turning point felt like from the inside. I want to know what they built and why they built it and what it cost them and what they'd do differently. That's not a short story. That's never going to be a short story.

So, I built a publication that could hold it.

That's the journalism version of how this started. Here's the real version...

My late husband was a Gulf War veteran. He was already out of the military when I met him. He came with PTSD. I know what that looks like from the inside of a household. What it costs a man, what it costs a family, what it costs the people who love him and don't always have the language for what's happening. I'm a survivor of domestic violence. My first son is a survivor of child abuse. We lived inside the consequences of untreated trauma. I'm not telling you this for sympathy. I'm telling you this so you understand why I don't write about veterans from a distance.

I'm a journalist. I'm a storyteller. I'm also a veteran family member. I built this publication because no one else was building it, and because I knew from the inside that the story of what veterans become after service wasn't being told anywhere with the seriousness it deserved.

That's why you can trust what you read here. Not because I have credentials. Because I have proximity. Because this work isn't abstract to me. It never has been.

Every person in this magazine has a story that didn't make the news. We reported it anyway.

I'm writing to you because this is the month to recognize members who currently serve, who have served, and who served and lost their lives for the United States. The country stops this month. Not long enough. Not always for the right reasons. But it stops. And I wanted to put something in front of you while it was stopped that was worth looking at. Not a tribute. Not a ceremony. A letter. And some of the lives that remind me why this work matters.

When a veteran comes home and becomes a banker, or a surgeon, or a nonprofit director, or a tax partner, or a vice president of communications, the journalism that follows them almost never exists. If it does, it starts and ends in one place: what they did in uniform. The service is the story. Everything after is a footnote. That's not journalism. That's a caption.

What happens when veterans leave the uniform and take leadership inside American institutions? That is the story this publication exists to document.

Long-form narrative writing, the kind that reconstructs a life, that finds the through-line between who someone was at nineteen and who they are at forty-five — that writing exists for executives. It exists for athletes, politicians, founders, and artists. Magazines dedicate thousands of words to people who have built far less than the veterans sitting quietly in leadership positions all over this country.

Those veterans don't get those stories. Not because their lives are less interesting. Because the publications that cover veterans aren't built for narrative. The result is a record with a hole in it. Not a market gap. Not a content gap. A record gap. A dignity gap. The stories exist. The people exist. Someone just had to decide to write them down.

I'm also thinking about the ones who didn't come home. Not as a footnote. Not as a disclaimer. This work exists because of them, too. The veterans in these pages made it back. Not everyone did. The children who grew up without parents. The families who put flags in boxes and kept moving. Every side. Every conflict. Every name that didn't make it to a profile in any publication. That weight doesn't leave this work. It's part of why I do it.

New veteran profiles are in production across every category. The VA Facility Recognition Program is expanding. A resource hub is in development. Events coverage is coming. We've been building this since September. We're not slowing down.

This publication runs on support from people who believe the record matters. Veteran Excellence Magazine is a nonprofit, fiscally sponsored by Veterans Collaborative, a 501(c)(3) organization. If these stories are worth telling, help us keep telling them.

Support the work at veteranexcellence.org

Camille D. Ford

Founder and Editor-in-Chief | Veteran Excellence Magazine

Every veteran has a story. We make sure it's told.
