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Open to the Public

Media Theatre Veterans Alliance honors WWII vet for his service

By Peg DeGrassa

pdegrassa@delconewsnetwork.com

Navy Combat Veteran Richard “Dick” Wilson, 97, of Middletown Township was recently honored by the Media Theatre Veterans Alliance for his extraordinary service in the United States Navy during World War II.

“Thank you for coming here tonight and honoring my ship and the ones who served on it,” the humble veteran said after being presented with a plaque of commendation onstage. “This award is not just for me, but for all of those who served on my ship.”

After graduating from John Bartram High School, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Navy on Jan. 11, 1943. Being only 17, his mother had to sign for him.

“I joined straight out of high school,” the honoree remembered. “But my parents gave me their blessing. They knew this is what I wanted and I probably would have gotten drafted anyway.”

Wilson was sent to basic training in Sampson, N.Y., and then attended radio school. In August of that same year, he was assigned to the USS Santee, one of five escort carriers that were converted



Peg DeGrassa/MediaNews Group

WWII Navy Veteran Dick Wilson, 97, of Middletown Township talks about his service aboard the USS Santee.

DAILY  TIMES

TOWN TALK

News of Delaware County

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Rich Crowe, Advertising Manager
Kathy Folk, Content Editor
Peg DeGrassa, Editor
Rich Cutler, Advertising Sales
Karen Donehower, Advertising Sales

Linda Lyman, Advertising Sales
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Cover: The Delaware County Veterans Memorial is an open-air living legacy honoring the military service of all veterans for past, present and future sacrifices.



Peg Degrassa/MediaNews Group

WWII Veterans Ed Buffman, left, and Richard Wilson, center, are shown at the Crystal Room reception at Media Theatre, with Pennsylvania Veterans Museum reenactors, Mike Mazza, right, Staff Sgt. Air Corps and Bill Linke, in back, Lt. 4th Air Force. Wilson, a Middletown Township resident and member of the Greatest Generation, was honored by the Media Theatre Veterans Alliance for his extraordinary service to the United States during World War II.

from tankers. The USS Santee (CVE-29), was a prototype of a whole new fighting ship for the Navy.

"I was three years on the same ship," Wilson recounted. "I was there when I was 17, 18, and 19 years old."

Wilson was a radioman on the Santee, one of three sailors who worked around the clock. Wilson and his co-radiomen, manned all radio devices 24/7, sent and received messages, monitored the ship's progress and emergency situations, sent and received distress calls and copied codes.

During the winter of 1943, the Santee sailed in a convoy in the Atlantic Ocean that was in constant peril from the German U-Boats that were patrolling the Atlantic. When the Santee finally completed her operations in the Atlantic, her crew had sunk six German subs and seriously damaged three more.

By early winter 1944, the weary convoy sailed to Glasgow, Scotland, before finally returning to her homeport of Norfolk, Va. Her tour of duty in the At-

lantic was over, but not her service. Her next destination was the South Pacific.

In February of 1944, the Santee left Norfolk, transited through the Panama Canal and embarked with 200 Navy and Marine personnel and 31 aircraft for delivery to Pearl Harbor. She also took on 24 F4F Wildcats and TBF Avengers as her own instruments of war.

By March, the Santee completed its mission in Pearl Harbor, sailing out with a fleet of destroyers, designated Carrier Division 22. The ship joined the fast carriers of the U.S. 5th Fleet and sped westward to Palau, with her planes flying patrols over vulnerable Allied tankers.

In April 1944, the Santee joined Carrier Division 24 and a Destroyer Squadron, and set the course for New Guinea. The Santee's Air Group Aircraft aided in destroying 100 enemy aircraft and ripping up enemy airfields.

During the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October, 1944, the first organized Kamikaze attacks occurred. Focused on

U.S. Navy escort aircraft carriers, the Japanese pilots hit the Santee and many other carriers. Twenty minutes after being hit by a Kamikaze, the Santee was torpedoed, causing major damage. When the ship began listing, the captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. Luckily, damage control was able to right the ship and the crew did not need to abandon ship.

"I shouldn't say that the new generation has no conception of what we endured, but that's what I sometimes think," the proud veteran shared, as he reminisced about his war service.

The Santee returned to Los Angeles for repairs. By February 1945, the Santee was ordered back to Pearl Harbor and steamed to Leyte Gulf in preparation for the Okinawa invasion. The largest force yet assembled in the Pacific gathered in preparation for the assault.

Guarded by destroyers and destroyer escorts, in March 1945, the Santee's planes provided air cover for the fleet of transports carrying the 7th and 96th Army Division, scheduled for the Southern landing on Okinawa. In April, the Okinawa landing began at 8:30 a.m. The Santee's torpedo bombers laid down thick clouds of smoke over the area to provide a screen for the landing craft. While this was taking place, the Santee fighters constantly strafed the landing beaches.

For 42 days, the Santee's aircraft winged over target sectors in the East China Sea, with daily returns to Okinawa for routine ground support. During these long weeks, the Santee was on constant alert for Japanese suicide attacks. Guns were manned 24 hours a day.

By Aug. 14, 1945, hostilities with the Japanese had ceased and the Santee was sent to Formosa to evacuate ex-prisoners of war who were captured in 1942 by Japanese troops in Malaysia, the Bataan Peninsula and the island of Corregidor. The Santee also picked up over 100 Japanese POWs and took them to Pearl Harbor. From November 1945 to February 1946, the Santee transported large numbers of troops back to the United States. On Feb. 3, 1946, the Santee safely returned to San Pedro, Calif.

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On March 4, 1946, Petty Officer Dick Wilson was honorably discharged as Radioman 3rd Class.

“I am absolutely happy I served, but three years was enough,” the good-natured Wilson said with a smile.

He returned home and went to work at his family business, the Wilson Safe Co., while attending the University of Pennsylvania at night. Wilson married his wife, Peg, and they had two children: Ray Wilson, who currently is a resident of Upper Providence and the third generation owner of Wilson Safe Co. in Southwest Philadelphia, and Margaret Larkin, a resident of Springfield. The couple has four grandchildren.

In addition to the award given in recognition of his service, members of the Media Theatre Veterans Alliance, Ed Buffman, Bob McMahon and Arthur Burn, presented Wilson with a Navy Combat Action Ribbon (CAR). The CAR was originally awarded retroactively to March 1961 for Navy Veterans. Then, in 1999, it was made retroactive to Dec. 7, 1941, allowing WWII veter-



Peg Degrassa/MediaNews Group

Veteran Arthur Burn, center, reads the service history of honoree Dick Wilson, second from left, as Pa. Veterans Museum reenactor Mike Mazza, on far left, WWII Veteran Ed Buffman and Vietnam Veteran Bob McMahon, far right, gather on stage to honor Wilson for his years of service.

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Peg Degrassa/MediaNews Group
 WWII Navy Veteran Dick Wilson enjoys the reception in Media Theatre's Crystal Room with his wife Peggy prior to "Sister Act" Saturday evening. Wilson was honored for his service during WWII.

ans to apply for the honor.

The Media Theatre Alliance also presented Wilson with a Ruptured Duck Pin. The honorable service lapel button, colloquially called "Ruptured Duck" by the members of the military, is a lapel button awarded for honorable federal military service between 1925 and 1946. The award can be worn on the left lapel of civilian clothing.

"We wanted to get these honorable awards for our fellow veteran," Buffman, also a WWII veteran, told Wilson, "because you belong to the Greatest Generation."

Wilson can add the new additions to his other medals and awards: Navy Presidential Unit Citation, Pacific Theater Medal with Five Battle Stars, European Theater Medal with One Battle Star, Philippine Liberation Medal with Two Battle Stars, American Theater Medal with One Battle Star, World War II Victory Medal, and Good Conduct Medal.

"It's important that we never forget what these ships and their crews did for the United States," the honoree said. "Thank you for coming here and honoring my ship and those who served aboard it"

The Media Theatre Veterans Alliance is in its 21st year of honoring local veterans for their service. All veterans and their families are invited to attend a private reception and to view a show at discounted prices, to show support and honor their comrades. A different veteran is chosen by the Alliance to be singled out and honored during the run of each show.

To nominate a special veteran to be honored, or find out more about the Media Theatre Veterans Alliance, contact the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum, 12 E. State St., Media, at 610-566-0788 or visit paveteransmuseum.org.



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Benjamin Sides

Benjamin Sides enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1954 and attended boot camp in South Carolina. His first assignment was as an ammo carrier in a platoon in North Carolina, where he was a gunner on a machine gun. In 1955, Ben boarded the USS Sanborn (APA193) for a five-month tour across the Mediterranean as part of a naval occupation Force. The tour consisted of Africa, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Crete, Sardinia, and Turkey.

After his return to the United States, Ben extended his service for one year and went to Panama as part of the Marine Barracks 2nd Guard Detachment at the U.S. Naval Air Station in Coco Sola. Armed with a 45-caliber pistol and five rounds of ammo, he was stationed as a guard at vital parts of the ship to maintain security. Guard duties also included patrolling the ammo dump, the main gate and the remote radio station.

At the end of his time in Panama, Ben re-enlisted and went to the Aviation Fundamental School in Jacksonville, Fla. He served in the Aircraft Engineering Squadron 12 Marine Corps Air Station in Quantico, Va., as an aircraft mechanic. In 1962, he was discharged after over eight years of service.

Ben has been a member of the Smedley Butler Marine Corps Detachment since 2005 and has held the positions of paymaster, historian, color guard, director and chairman of the Honor Guard, with which he has taken part in an estimated 3,000 funerals.

He is an active member of the DCVMA's Casket Flag Ceremonies, has been awarded the Marine of the Year award



and ribbon in 2015 and was installed into the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in 2017 for Unconditional Services to the community.

Please join the Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association as we honor Benjamin Sides with the 2022 Freedom Medal for his lifetime of patriotic service to our great nation.

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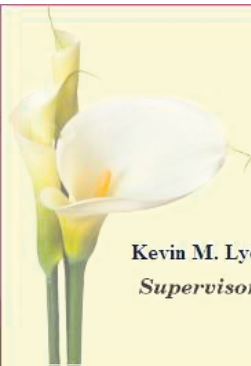
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**HONORING
VETERANS**

Denise Leslie

The Honorable Denise Leslie, mayor of Brookhaven, graduated from Sun Valley High School and attended Neumann University. She enlisted in the Navy in 1987 and attended boot camp in Orlando, Fla.

Upon completion of boot camp, she began her military education at the Hospital Corpsmen School in Illinois, then moved on to the Medical Technology School at Fort Sam Houston in Texas. She was then stationed in the laboratory at the Bethesda Naval



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Hospital in Maryland. While stationed at Bethesda, she was named Sailor of the Quarter. Sailor of the Quarter is an extremely honorable award as it means that she was selected out of all the other sailors at the station as being the “best of the best.”

She began her eight-month tour aboard the USNS Comfort at the onset of the Persian Gulf War. While aboard the Comfort, her role was in the hospital laboratory, ensuring that the laboratory was prepared for any situation, including mass casualties. She returned to Bethesda in 1991 and was honorably discharged.

Leslie has dedicated much of her post-Navy life to the Brookhaven community. She served on the Brookhaven Borough Council for 11 years, chairing several committees. She is a member of Brookhaven American Legion Post 94, coordinating Memorial Day and Veterans Day services for the borough. She has organized numerous military welcome home events with the help of organizations such as Warrior Watch Riders, Delco Cruisers, Welcome Home, and A Hero’s Welcome. Denise was appointed mayor of Brookhaven in October 2020 and was elected in November 2021.

Please join the Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association as we honor Mayor Denise Leslie with the 2022 Freedom Medal for her lifetime of patriotic service to our great nation.

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Brig. Gen. Daniel Van Wyk

Brig. Gen. Daniel Van Wyk's military career spans over 34 years. The first six years of his military career were spent with the U.S. Air Force, where he was commissioned a lieutenant. He was stationed at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina and then the Lowry Air Force Base in Denver. During his time with the Air Force, he rose to the rank of first lieutenant and then captain.

Daniel departed active duty as a captain and joined the Delaware Air National Guard, where he would spend the remaining years of his military career. He was stationed at New Castle County Airport Air National Guard Base when he was activated for Desert Storm. He



spent five months stationed at Al Kharg Air Base in Saudi Arabia before returning to the United States.

After returning from Saudi Arabia, he assumed command of the 166th Logistics Group, where he served as lieutenant colonel. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, he was activated for the Global War on Terrorism and was appointed Vice Wing Commander 166th Air Wing stateside for Operation Enduring Freedom.

After spending 34 years of his life in the military, Daniel retired in 2012 at the rank of brigadier general. He has served as the post commander for the Veterans of Foreign War Post 6835 and currently serves as chief counsel for the Delaware County Office of Child Support Endangerment.

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HONORING VETERANS

Gen. Jay Paxton

Gen. Jay Paxton was born in Chester and raised in nearby Broomall. He attended Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Va., and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps.

Initial assignments in the operating forces included rifle and weapons platoon commander and company executive officer, followed by regimental training officer then executive officer. As a captain, he commanded Co. L, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.

As a major and lieutenant colonel, he served as an operations and exercise officer in II MEF and subsequently commanded 1st Battalion, 8th Marines for 27 months. They were redesignated BLT 1/8 and deployed with 22nd MEU in 1993-94 as Landing Force Sixth Fleet in support of stability operations in Bosnia and later as United Nations Quick Reaction Force in Somalia.

Returning to II MEF he served briefly as deputy G-3 operations. As a colonel, Paxton returned to Camp Pendleton and 1st Marine Division where he was the G-3 division operations officer for one year followed by command of 1st Marine Regiment for two years.

His non-fleet tours include Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., where he commanded company B as a captain, and Marine Corps Recruiting Station New York, which he commanded as a



major. He served in Plans Division for the Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies and Operations as a lieutenant colonel. This was followed by a tour as the executive assistant and Marine aide to the Under Secretary of the Navy. Paxton was also designated a joint qualified officer and served initially as amphibious operations officer and concurrently as executive officer of the Crisis Action Team at Combined Forces/United States Forces/United Nations Command, Korea.

As a general officer, Paxton served initially as director, Programs Division, Deputy Commandant Programs and Resources. This was followed by three years as commanding general of Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, and the Western Recruiting Region. He then assumed command of 1st Marine Division for a year fol-



lowed by a subsequent year as chief of staff for Multi-National Forces – Iraq.

He returned to the Joint Staff for just under three years, serving most of that tour as J-3, director of operations. Returning to the Marine Corps, he assumed command of II Marine Expeditionary Force and commander Marine Forces Africa. That was followed by commanding general Ma-

Please Join The Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association As We Honor Jay Paxton With The 2022 Freedom Medal For His Lifetime Of Patriotic Service To Our Great Nation.

rine Corps Forces Command, commanding general Fleet Marine Force Atlantic and commander Marine Forces Europe.

He was promoted to general on Dec. 15, 2012, and served as assistant commandant of the Marine Corps until his retirement in August 2016, completing over 42 years of commissioned service.

Please join the Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association as we honor Gen. Jay Paxton with the 2022 Freedom Medal for his lifetime of patriotic service to our great nation.

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HONORING VETERANS

Carl Ewing

Carl Ewing enlisted in the United States Army in 1966. That same year, he completed his basic training at Fort Jackson, S.C. After graduating from basic training, Ewing attended military police school at Fort Gordon in Georgia. From there, he spent five months at the Military Ocean Terminal in Bayonne, N.J. His final assignment sent him to Baumholder Army Base in Germany, where he served from 1967-1969 as part of the Charlie Battery Fifth Missile Sixth Artillery Unit's military police. In August 1969, Ewing was honorably discharged at Fort Dix, N.J..

Ewing's volunteer work began before he enlisted in the Army, joining the Newtown Square Fire Company at 16. He spent nearly 60 years in active service at the fire company and held several positions, including lieutenant, captain, assistant chief, 1st assistant chief and chief of the department (1987-1989).

After a leg injury prevented him from continuing his service as a firefighter, Ewing found his next job as a volunteer for the fire company as a fire police officer. He became the fire police chief in 2003 and remains in the position. In 2010, Ewing designed the Newtown Square Traffic (Fire Police) Unit, and his design is studied by other fire police units throughout Pennsylvania before purchasing their own units.

Ewing's dedicated volunteer history is only deepened by his 15 years of work experience as a machinist at Guyer's Tool and Die. His work experience has been called upon endlessly and has saved the volunteer fire company thousands of dollars in repairs, equipment costs and so much more. In 1987, he introduced an accountability system to ensure that all firefighters are accounted for when on the scene of a fire, 13 years before the NIOSH cited the fire service (January 2000) for lack of accountability.

The best example of his dedication was a year ago when he was acting as Santa for the Santa rides in Newtown Square. Ewing was asked by the mother of a 6-year-old girl who was sick and had



2022 Freedom Medal Honoree

a recent brain surgery to visit her daughter. When Ewing as Santa entered the residence, he noticed that there was no tree, no decorations, no presents and no furniture.

The girl's mother told him that all the furniture had been sold to cover hospital bills. He left the little girl with some candy canes, and after he left their residence, radioed the Delaware County firefighters for assistance, letting them know he needed toys, a tree and furniture. After the Santa rides were completed, several fire trucks and cars from all over Delaware County were packed up with toys, decorations, a Christmas tree and furniture. Ewing led the caravan back to the house at around midnight and got everything set up. He told the little girl's mother that the fire company's Ladies Auxiliary would be stopping by in the morning with Christmas dinner.

Ewing is married to the former Marge Brown. They have two daughters, Janet and Sarah, who they raised in Newtown



Square, and they are proud grandparents to Cole and Dillon.

Join the Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association as we honor Carl Ewing with the 2022 Freedom Medal for his lifetime of patriotic service to our great nation.



DELAWARE COUNTY VETERANS MEMORIAL

MISSION STATEMENT

The Mission of the Delaware County Veterans Memorial in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania is to educate, encourage, motivate and to inspire all students and citizens to acquire knowledge and skills in order to protect our history, liberty, and freedoms, made affordable to us by those who served and/or gave the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

Lest We Forget

Throughout the year, the Delaware County Veterans Memorial honors our Veterans and active military by hosting special events on occasions such as Patriot Day and Remembrance Day. These poignant and moving events are always open to the public.



Visit our website at www.DelcoVeteransMemorial.org to see our upcoming calendar of events. We hope that you will join us!

Educational Programming

The Delaware County Veterans Memorial serves as an interactive educational venue to honor the military service of all Veterans for past, present, and future sacrifices. It educates students about Veterans, United States Military History and the founding of our nation. As a highly visible and dynamic destination point, the Memorial serves as a place to honor our loved ones in a peaceful reflection, to pay tribute to the brave men and women who made, and those who continue to make, sacrifices that ensure our life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

Working with local school district administrators, teachers, Veterans, historians and civic leaders, the DCVMA Education Committee has developed a curriculum based, age appropriate program for students grade K through 12 so that they have a better understanding of the foundation of our nation and those who fight to keep the United States strong. Students who participate in this unique educational program learn about the history of our great nation and its people.

Schedule a group visit or learn more about our educational programming by calling (610) 400 - 8722 or visiting www.DelcoVeteransMemorial.org





Casket Flag Raising Ceremonies

The Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association offers a unique and powerful way to honor the memory of a Veteran. The Casket Flag Raising Ceremony is a celebration, where your Veteran loved ones are memorialized. The Government issued United States Flag, which draped the casket of a Veteran, will fly high above the Veterans Memorial in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. Family members will have the opportunity to speak on their late Veteran's behalf at the ceremony. It is a powerful, moving and well-deserved posthumous memorial to someone who risked so much for our Country.

Honor your deceased Veteran's memory by having his or her casket flag flown over the Delaware County Veterans Memorial on the second Sunday of every month from April through November.

Individuals who are interested in honoring a Veteran in this manner may call DCVMA at (610) 400 - 8722 or contact the DCVMA by email at info@delcoveteransmemorial.com

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'Delco Welcomes Veterans' outreach fair provides resources to veterans

For MediaNews Group

The Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association, in partnership with the Delaware County Veterans Network Coalition and Coatesville VA, hosted "Delco Welcomes Veterans," a veteran and families outreach fair, on Aug. 13 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 4599 West Chester Pike, Newtown Square.

The free event for veterans and their families included resources for veterans, as well as live entertainment and food.

Representatives from the Coatesville VA Medical Center answered questions on veteran's health care, eligibility and enrollment, support access for transition-



Courtesy of the Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association

Vet 2 Vet Service Dogs participate in the "Delco Welcomes Veterans" fair.

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ing military members to the VA, as well as suicide prevention, women veterans, LGBTQ+ veterans, and caregiver support resources.

More than 20 veteran-friendly groups were in attendance, including local representatives, Delaware County VA and other veteran organizations, university and community college representatives, SE PA legal aid, spiritual services and other health care support organizations.

For more information, call 610-400-8722 or email to info@delcoveteransmemorial.com.

About DCVMA: The Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association is an open-air living legacy to the military history and active service members of our country located in Newtown Square. Open daily year-round and free to the public, visitors are welcomed to learn, honor and reflect on the American wars and conflicts, from the War of 1812 to the wars of the Middle East.



Courtesy of the Delaware County Veterans Memorial Association

Participating in the “Delco Welcomes Veterans” fair are, from left, Kathleen Dolengo (Caregiver Support Program from Coatesville VA); Christina Clements (LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinator from Coatesville VA) Rose Marie McGee (Women Veterans Center); Sharda Wescott (Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinator for Suicide Prevention from Coatesville VA); and Ralph Galati.



Delaware County Council



Delaware County Council thanks and honors our County’s Veterans for their bravery and sacrifice.

We remind Veterans to visit the County’s Department of Military and Veterans Affairs for assistance with benefits and other valuable resources.

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The Associated Press

Dionne Williamson, of Patuxent River, Md., grooms Woody before her riding lesson at Cloverleaf Equine Center in Clifton, Va.

As suicides rise, US military seeks to address mental health

*By Ashraf Khalil,
The Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — After finishing a tour in Afghanistan in 2013, Dionne Williamson felt emotionally numb. More warning signs appeared during several years of subsequent overseas postings.

“It’s like I lost me somewhere,” said Williamson, a Navy lieutenant commander who experienced disorientation, depression, memory loss and chronic exhaustion. “I went to my captain and said, ‘Sir, I need help. Something’s wrong.’”

As the Pentagon seeks to confront spiraling suicide rates in the military ranks, Williamson’s experiences shine a light on the realities for service members seeking mental health help. For most, simply acknowledging their difficulties can be intimidating. And what comes next can be frustrating and dispiriting.

Williamson, 46, eventually found stability through a month-long hospitalization and a therapeutic program that incorporates horseback riding. But she had to fight for years to get the

help she needed. “It’s a wonder how I made it through,” she said.

In March, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced the creation of an independent committee to review the military’s mental health and suicide prevention programs.

According to Defense Department data, suicides among active-duty service members increased by more than 40% between 2015 and 2020. The numbers jumped by 15% in 2020 alone. In longtime suicide hotspot postings such as Alaska — service members and their families contend with extreme isolation and a harsh climate — the rate has doubled.

A 2021 study by the Cost of War Project concluded that since 9/11, four times as many service members and veterans have died by suicide as have perished in combat. The study detailed stress factors particular to military life: “high exposure to trauma — mental, physical, moral, and sexual — stress and burnout, the influence of the military’s hegemonic masculine

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The Associated Press

Dionne Williamson, right, of Patuxent River, Md., takes instruction from Equine Coordinator Clarice Gutman, left, during a riding lesson at Cloverleaf Equine Center in Clifton, Va.

culture, continued access to guns, and the difficulty of reintegrating into civilian life.”

The Pentagon did not respond to repeated requests for comment. But Austin has publicly acknowledged that the Pentagon’s current mental health offerings — including a Defense Suicide Prevention Office established in 2011 — have proven insufficient.

“It is imperative that we take care of all our teammates and continue to reinforce that mental health and suicide prevention remain a key priority,” Austin wrote in March. “Clearly we have more work to do.”

Last year the Army issued fresh guidelines to its commanders on how to handle mental health issues in the ranks, complete with briefing slides and a script. But daunting long-term challenges remain. Many soldiers fear the stigma of admitting to mental health issues within the internal military culture of self-sufficiency. And those who seek help often find that stigma is not only real, but compounded by bureaucratic obstacles.

Much like the issue of food insecurity in military families, a network of military-adjacent charitable organizations has tried to fill the gaps with a variety of programs and outreach efforts.

Some are purely recreational, such as an annual fishing tournament in Alaska designed to provide fresh air and socialization for service members. Others are more focused on self-care, like an Armed Services YMCA program that offers free childcare so that military parents can attend therapy sessions.

The situation in Alaska is particularly dire. In January, after a string of suicides, Command Sgt. Maj. Phil Blaisdell addressed his soldiers in an emotional Instagram post. “When did suicide become the answer,” he asked. “Please send me a DM if you need something. Please ...”

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said that while posting to Alaska can be a dream for some service members, it’s a solitary nightmare for others that needs to be addressed.



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Courtesy of Armed Services YMCA

Capt. John Moline, right, poses for a photo with others during the annual ASYMCA Alaska Combat Fishing Tournament on May 25 in Seward, Alaska. The tournament, which began in 2007 and now involves more than 300 soldiers, includes a day of deep-water fishing followed by a celebratory banquet with prizes for the largest catch, smallest catch and soldier who got the sickest.

“You’ve got to be paying attention to this when you see the statistics jump as they are,” Murkowski said. “Right now, you’ve got everybody. You’ve got the Joint Chiefs looking at Alaska and saying, ‘Holy smokes, what’s going on up there?’”

The stresses of an Alaska posting are compounded by a shortage of on-the-ground therapists. During a visit to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska earlier this year, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth heard from base health care workers who say they are understaffed, burned out and can’t see patients on a timely basis. If a soldier seeks help, they often have to wait weeks for an appointment.

“We have people who need our services and we can’t get to them,” one longtime counselor told Wormuth during a meeting. “We need staff and until we get them, we will continue to have soldiers die.”

The annual Combat Fishing Tournament in Seward, Alaska,

was formed to “get the kids out of the barracks, get them off the base for the day and get them out of their heads,” said co-founder Keith Manternach.

The tournament, which was begun in 2007 and now involves more than 300 service members, includes a day of deep-water fishing followed by a celebratory banquet with prizes for the largest catch, smallest catch and the person who gets the sickest.

“I think there’s a huge element of mental health to it,” Manternach said.

It’s not just in Alaska.

Sgt. Antonio Rivera, an 18-year veteran who completed three tours in Iraq and a year at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, freely acknowledges that he has serious PTSD.

“I know that I need help. There’s signs and I’ve waited long enough,” said Rivera, 48, who is assigned to Fort Hood in Tex-



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To our veteran associates,

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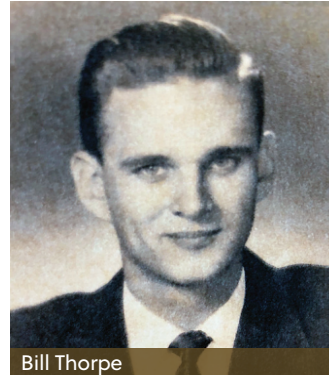
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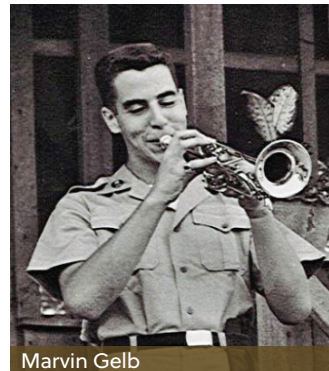
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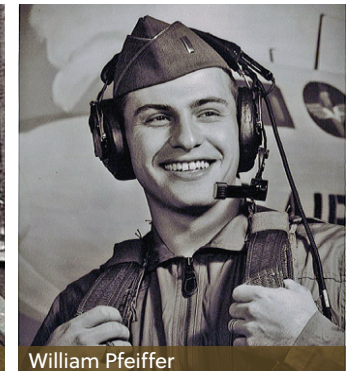
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HONORING ALL WHO SERVED

as. “I don’t want my children to suffer because of me not going to get help.”

He’s doing yoga, but says he needs more. He’s reluctant to seek help inside the military.

“Personally I’d feel more comfortable being able to talk to someone outside,” he said. “It would allow me to open up a lot more without having to be worried about how it’s going to affect my career.”

Others who speak up say it’s a struggle to get assistance.

Despite the on-base presence of “tons of briefings and brochures on suicide and PTSD,” Williamson said she found herself fighting for years to get time off and therapy.

Eventually, she entered a monthlong in-patient program in Arizona. When she returned, a therapist recommended equine-assisted therapy, which proved to be a breakthrough.

Now Williamson is a regular at the Cloverleaf Equine Center in Clifton, Virginia, where riding sessions can be combined with a variety of therapeutic practices and exercises. Working with horses has long been used as a form for therapy for people with physical or mental disabilities and children diagnosed with autism. But in recent years, it has been embraced for helping service members with anxiety and PTSD.

“In order to be able to work with horses, you need to be able to regulate your emotions. They communicate through body language and energy,” said Shelby Morrison, Cloverleaf’s communications director. “They respond to energies around them. They respond to negativity, positivity, anxiety, excitement.”

Military clients, Morrison said, come with “a lot of anxiety, depression, PTSD. ... We use the horse to get them out of their triggers.”

For Williamson, the regular riding sessions have helped stabilize her. She still struggles, and she said her long campaign for treatment has damaged her relationship with multiple superior officers. She’s currently on limited duty and isn’t sure if she’ll retire when she hits her 20-year anniversary in March.

Nevertheless, she says, the equine therapy has helped her feel optimistic for the first time in recent memory.



Courtesy of Armed Services YMCA

People pose for a photo during the annual ASYMCA Alaska Combat Fishing Tournament on May 25 in Seward, Alaska.

“Now even if I can’t get out of bed, I make sure to come here,” she said. “If I didn’t come here, I don’t know where I would even be.”

Associated Press writer Lolita C. Bal-

dor contributed to this report.

The national suicide and crisis lifeline is available by calling or texting 988. There is also an online chat at 988lifeline.org.

Some facts about Veterans Day

Here's a look at Veterans Day, a holiday honoring men and women who have served in the U.S. armed forces, according to CNN. The holiday is observed annually in the United States on Nov. 11 – the anniversary of the end of World War I.

FACTS

According to the most recent data from the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS):
There are approximately 19.5 million

veterans in the United States.
There are approximately 2 million female veterans.
There are more than 9 million veterans over the age of 65.
As of June 2020, there are 5.06 million

veterans receiving disability compensation.

TIMELINE

- Nov. 11, 1918: The armistice ending World War I begins at 11 a.m.
- 1919: President Woodrow Wilson proclaims Nov. 11 as Armistice Day.
- Nov. 11, 1921: The first Unknown Soldier is reburied at Arlington National Cemetery. The tomb has the words inscribed, "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God."
- May 13, 1938: Armistice Day becomes a federal holiday.



- June 1, 1954: President Dwight Eisenhower signs a bill changing Armistice Day to Veterans Day in order to include all U.S. veterans.
- May 30, 1958: Unknown Soldiers from World War II and the Korean War are reburied next to the Unknown Soldier from World War I.
- 1968: Congress changes the date of Veterans Day to the fourth Monday in October in order to give federal employees a three-day weekend. The change begins in 1971.
- Sept. 25, 1975: President Gerald Ford changes the date of Veterans Day back to Nov. 11. The change begins in 1978.
- May 28, 1984: An unknown soldier from the Vietnam War is reburied in Arlington National Cemetery. In 1998, he is identified through DNA tests as Michael Blassie, a 24-year-old pilot shot down in 1972 on the border of Cambodia.

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A day to honor all veterans

Metro Creative

The month of November is a special time for the nation's veterans. While Memorial Day honors fallen soldiers and service people, Veterans Day, which takes place each November, is an opportunity to commemorate the efforts of all who have been in the armed forces, with a special emphasis on living veterans.

While people are encouraged to thank veterans throughout the year, Veterans Day is a particularly poignant time to show your appreciation for the men and women of the military.

Veterans Day takes place on Nov. 11 and marks an important moment in history.

On November 11, 1918, World War I, known at the time as The Great War, unofficially ended when an armistice, or temporary cessation of hostilities, took place between Germany and the Allied nations on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month.

World War I ended on paper when the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919. In November 1919, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Nov. 11 as the first commemoration of Armistice Day, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Armistice Day became a federal holiday in the United States in 1938. However, after subsequent wars, including World War II and the Korean War, veterans' service organizations lobbied for Armistice Day to be revised so it would be more inclusive of all veterans.

On June 1, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation to strike the word Armistice from the holiday's name in favor of Veterans.

Since then, Nov. 11 has been known as Veterans Day and has honored veterans of all wars.

Veterans Day was moved to the fourth Monday in October for roughly seven

years under the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which sought to ensure three-day weekends for federal employees by celebrating certain national holidays on Mondays. But since Nov. 11 bore such significance, many states disapproved and continued to observe the holiday on Nov. 11.

In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed legislation to return the observation of Veterans Day to Nov. 11 beginning in 1978. Should the day fall on a Saturday or Sunday, the federal government observes the holiday on the previous Friday or following Monday, respectively, according to History.com.

The United States isn't the only country to celebrate its veterans. Canada, Great Britain, Australia and France also commemorate the veterans of World War I and II on or near Nov. 11 as Remembrance Day or Remembrance Sunday.

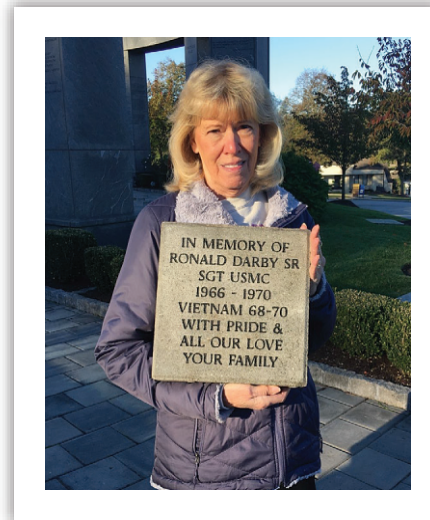
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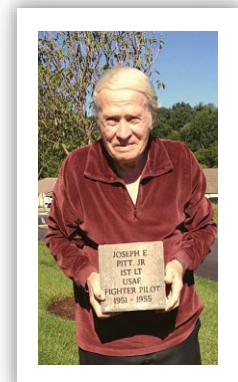


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