



By Everett S.P. Spain

*Author's Note: The soldiers' names and home locations in this article have been changed for confidentiality.*

As Veterans Day approaches, I find myself asking why I have yet to hang up my Army uniform after many years of service. As I contemplate our country's present challenges, and

hope for the future, my mind is drawn to what I learned about my fellow soldiers and their families when I was the commander of the U.S. Army Garrison-Schweinfurt in Germany. While there, my favorite activity was a twice-monthly meeting with our community's sixty or so newly arrived troopers. About half of them were new to the Army; most of the others were combat veterans. Some were married and a few had children. More than a handful were anxious about being stationed overseas or a pending deployment. I would start by asking about their experiences in Schweinfurt up to that point - both good and bad. Then I would lead an interactive goal setting exercise and share several stories of moral exemplars in the community. All of this was meaningful, yet what fills my mind still today are their inspiring answers to my final question, *"You are a volunteer. Why do you choose to serve?"*

This article is dedicated to the memory of Holocaust survivor and concentration camp liberator Staff Sergeant Stephan Lewy, U.S. Army, who passed away on November 9, 2021, at the age of 96. As a thirteen-year-old boy growing up in Berlin, on Kristallnacht, the Nazis attempted to kill him and the other children of his Jewish orphanage. He escaped, was put on a Kindertransport, and ended up in Boston, where he learned English, became a U.S. citizen, and joined the Army at 18. Assigned to Patton's Third Army, Stephan fought across Europe, including liberating the Buchenwald concentration camp. After the war, Stephan returned to the U.S., pursued his education, led a meaningful career, and raised a wonderful family. He dedicated his twilight years to teaching young Americans to stand up for others who are unable to stand up for themselves. I was honored to be his Holocaust Legacy Partner. Stephan chose to serve so that others might be set free.

### **We Are Inspired by Our Families**

"Sir, I'm Warrant Officer Christina Dukes. Rolla, Missouri. I am proud to serve as part of a family tradition. My great-grandfather was in World War II, my uncle in Korea and Vietnam, and my dad in the Gulf War."

*You carry on their legacy well.*

“Private Jose Rodriguez. I’m from Borinquen, Puerto Rico. I am the first one in my family to ever serve.”

*Amazing. It takes heart to be the first.*

“Private Hajek, first name Billy, from a small town you never heard of in Oregon named Crescent. Even though I have a bunch of older siblings, they aren’t doing much, and I am the person everyone looks up to in my family. I’m hoping they’ll join up as well.”

*I bet they do.*

“Private First-Class Cedric Harris. New York City. So, you asked what made me want to serve? Well, I had one brother killed in combat serving in Iraq, and another was killed by an IED while in Afghanistan. I figure if serving was important enough for both of them to die for, I ought to go ahead and sign up myself.” About every jaw in the room hit the floor.

*Your love is deep.*

“Sergeant Seth Brown. Boswell, Pennsylvania. I have two brothers, one in the Navy and one in the Air Force. I am glad to have joined the superior service.” Laughs and big smiles filled the room.

*I’m thankful you joined, too.*

## **We Are Drawn by Opportunity**

“Staff Sergeant Benjamin Wolffe. U.S. Virgin Islands. Before I joined the Army, I was hanging with the wrong crowd. Several of my friends are dead. I was involved with a

bunch of bad things. I joined the Army as a way out.”

*You made it. Stay strong. Now you can lift others out, too.*

“Sergeant Rhiana Caldwell. Mesa Verde, Colorado. I am now able to provide for my daughter.”

*You are an amazing example for her and us.*

“Sergeant Isaac Williams. Valdosta, Georgia. I was a nobody. Now I am somebody.”

*You have served your nation faithfully in combat. No one can ever take that away.*

“Specialist Marie Johansson. Flagstaff, Arizona. No one in my family is in the military. I’m the only girl and have three brothers. They thought I was crazy when I was thinking about joining up. Most folks said I wouldn’t ever make it. Well, I did.”

*Some people told me I’d never make it, either. Looks like we proved them wrong.*

“Staff Sergeant Olivia Moore. Lawrence, Kansas. I am proud to lead other soldiers and bring out their best.”

*Roger that. Don’t let anything stop you; and keep taking care of others along the way.*

“Sir, I’m Private First-Class Ross Eddins. Milton, Florida. Growing up, my dad was never proud of me. I was the star of my high school’s football and baseball teams. Nothing I ever did was good enough for him. But my dad came to my basic training graduation, and when he saw me in uniform for the first time, he had tears of pride in his eyes.”

*You’ve just put tears in our eyes, too.*

“Major Russell Feldman. Norman, Oklahoma. I get to wear the American flag on my shoulder and a nametape on my chest that says, “U.S. Army.” And I focus on just those first two letters “U.S., us. It’s us.” It is an honor to be part of the best team in the world.

*Count me in. I get to wear that superman cape, too.*

### **We Feel a Duty to Protect Others**

“Sir, Specialist Pellitier,” I calmly interrupted with, “Would you please share your first name, again?” “Sorry, Sir, Nather Pellitier. Many people can’t serve. They’re disqualified physically, mentally, or morally. Maybe they don’t have the legal status. I am most proud to serve because I can.”

*Thank you for stewarding your gifts for others.*

“Private Ikemba Soriyan. Redwood, California. I came to this country when I was ten, my parents hoping for a better life. It has given us opportunity and freedom. I felt I owed my country and wanted to pay it back for the many blessings we have received.”

*You are doing that and more every day.*

“Captain Treavor Urquhart. Cincinnati, Ohio. I am proud to do something that very few of my fellow Americans choose to do.”

*You have honor, knowing there is good and evil in the world, and courage, a willingness to do something about it.*

“First Lieutenant Marco Filippini. Gadson, South Carolina. I am proud to serve the cause of freedom around the globe.”

*Thank you for making the world a better place.*

“Sir, Specialist Hunter Wojtczak. Ogunquit, Maine. Sir...,” his voice trailed off, and he broke down. Another soldier stood up, put his arm around Wojtczak’s shoulder, and told him to take his time. “We (sobbing), we, we are protecting our nation, our kids...” That is all he could get out. The other soldier remained by him.

*I’ll stand a guard post next to you, anytime.*

“Second Lieutenant Ryan Bucholtz, Boston, Massachusetts.” Bucholtz clenched his jaw and slowly looked around the room. “I am proud to serve as a soldier because I know that if someone tries to take someone else’s freedom away, *first they are going to have to deal with me.*”

*Oppressors beware.*

The deep inspiration of hearing our soldiers’ stories was only matched by hearing what inspired their spouses. At our community’s monthly newcomer spouse meeting, I would start by asking how many years each had been associated with the Army and how many months their loved one had been deployed or away. As soon as the spouses realized I was deeply interested in their stories, out their stories came. Even though they occasionally shed tears as they shared the frustrating parts of Army life, an underlying sense of optimism and hope typically took over the room. Towards the end of the meeting, I would similarly ask them, “So why do you choose to serve as a military spouse?” I remember a time when a woman who had been mostly quiet raised her hand.

“I am Yung Donlon and my family is originally from Korea.” Mrs. Donlon then turned towards her fellow spouses and continued, “If it weren’t for soldiers like your spouses who came to Korea to rescue us many years ago, my parents would have certainly been killed by the communists before I was ever born. I would have never been alive. Yet I have had a full

and rich life, and now I am an American and have American children. Millions of Koreans are free because of people like your spouses. Their service and your sacrifices are not in vain. Your spouses are all heroes.”

*Since a hero is someone who is courageous in the pursuit of a noble purpose, military spouses are heroes, too.*

Towards the end of my tour in Schweinfurt, on a dark and rainy evening, I attended a deployment sendoff ceremony for the troopers of Charlie Company, 44th Expeditionary Signal Battalion. As I watched them say goodbye to their family and friends, my mind raced back to the reasons they had told me they choose to serve - their families, their opportunities, and their sense of duty to protect others. Then they formed up and their company commander spoke eloquently about how proud he was of his soldiers, how confident he was in their training and readiness, how thankful he was for the support and sacrifices of their families. He then unexpectedly asked me to offer a few words. I do not remember exactly why, but I asked the company, “What do you think of when I say the word *America*?” The soldiers answered with words like ‘freedom,’ ‘hope,’ ‘home,’ ‘equality,’ ‘courage,’ and ‘democracy’. Inspired to be in their presence and to also wear the American flag on my shoulder, I brought my comments to a close by summarizing what their collective decision to serve meant to me. “Soldiers and families of Charlie Company, thank you for what you have chosen and continue to choose to do. You aren’t just serving America, *you are America.*”

*Colonel Everett Spain is the Head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the United States Military Academy. Everett has served with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, 1st Cavalry Division in Iraq, V Corps in Europe, 1st Infantry Division in Kosovo, Multi-National Force-Iraq, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, and as a White*

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