

BLOOMINGTON'S *Veterans* Their Struggles and Triumphs

By Craig Coley
Photography
by Martin Boling

Veterans have been an important part of Bloomington since its founding in 1818, when early settlers included soldiers who had fought in the Revolutionary War. David Maxwell, known as the father of Indiana University, was a surgeon in the War of 1812, and numerous campus buildings—including Maxwell Hall and Willkie and McNutt quadrangles—are named for specific veterans, while others honor veterans generally: Memorial Stadium, Memorial Union, Memorial Hall. In addition to those veterans who call Bloomington their hometown, others have come to the city to take advantage of higher education benefits at Indiana University. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about one in 10 men in Monroe County is a veteran.



Like their peers across the country, most of Bloomington's veterans are in their later years. Almost two-thirds are 55 and older. The aging of the veteran population reflects a dramatic shift in the relationship between the nation and its soldiers. In World War II, one in every five families had someone serving in the armed forces. In the Vietnam era, that was down to one family in 10. By the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, those numbers were fewer than one in 100.

It used to be that the nation went to war; now the military goes to war.

Veterans interviewed for this story noted that one result of this shift is a large and growing gap between soldiers and civilians. "I run into more and more people who don't know anything about the military," says Marine Corps veteran and Indiana Guard Reserve Capt. John Summerlot, 44, director of IU's Center for Veteran and Military Students, which supports the approximately 540 veterans who attend IU. "So they're kind of afraid to ask questions when they meet a veteran."

Divergent views

This growing gap leaves many people to get their ideas about who veterans are from the media, which tends to report high rates of veteran homelessness, addiction, and suicide. Just as political opinions have been polarized in recent years, people's views of veterans often align along competing narratives. In the words of columnist Ben Shapiro, one narrative sees men and women of the U.S. military as "volunteers for freedom [standing] between us and those who would plunge our nation into darkness," and the other considers them "victims of some cruel system, ground down into mental dust."

Veterans, as well, have divergent views of the military and their personal experiences. John Thiel has a display cabinet in his living room for his Vietnam service medals and he writes histories of



Vietnam veterans throw medals toward the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., April 23, 1971. A temporary fence keeps them from getting close to the building. Bloomington veteran Tim Bagwell was among those who participated. AP photo

members of the Chemical Corps, where he served. "If I could soldier again like I did in '69, I'd do it all over," Thiel says. Tim Bagwell, on the other hand, was an active-duty Marine in 1971 when he participated in a Vietnam Veterans Against the War protest and threw his service medals onto the west steps of the U.S. Capitol. "The war ruined my life," Bagwell says, "and I would never do it again."



John Thiel.

"Being shot at changes a man. It makes midterms and final exams and even company bankruptcies pale in comparison."
—John Thiel

Today Bagwell is a peace activist and stages anti-war events in Bloomington on Veterans Day.

Ambivalence toward the armed forces is woven into the country's DNA. Though colonists won independence through military victory, they refused to create a standing army because they considered it a threat to civil liberties.

Instead, colonies organized local militias, in which men were expected to mobilize for military service and then return to civilian life. The notion that citizens are responsible for national defense prevailed through the Vietnam War, when soldiers were often held personally responsible for the conflict. Returning soldiers were sometimes spat on by objectors and sometimes spurned by older veterans. When Thiel, the proud Vietnam veteran, moved to Bloomington in 1971, he dropped into the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post, where a World War II veteran called him a "dirty, drug-addict, baby killer" and challenged him to a fight.

The backlash against the Vietnam War led Congress to end the draft in 1973. Because the citizenry could no longer be mustered quickly, a new military model emerged—that of a large, standing army of professional soldiers. Historian and Army veteran Andrew Bacevich argues that this new system leaves citizens feeling alienated from the country's armed forces. In *The Modern American Military* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Bacevich writes, "Long since cast as spectators, citizens found that they had little voice in deciding when Team America suited up or where it played."

Today, citizens are better able to consider the soldier separately from the war. "There has been a huge shift in the way that American

culture understands the soldiers," says Jacob Leaf, 37, assistant manager at Goods for Cooks and an Army veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Most people, in the years since 2001, have been mad at governments, not soldiers."

On the other hand, for people opposed to recent military actions, the idea of veteran-as-villain is often replaced with a veteran-as-victim narrative. "People nowadays seem to have this view that veterans are needy, that they're all damaged somehow," says Pete Scovill, a Vietnam Marine Corps veteran and a Bloomington resident who now works as a public affairs officer for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "There are a substantial number of veterans who have fallen on hard times—perhaps because of their service, perhaps not—but for the most part veterans are assimilated into society and we're doing a pretty good job."

"There's a common stereotype that vets have to go up against, that if you have a mental health issue it must be PTSD, or that every veteran has PTSD, and neither of those are true."
—John Summerlot

Veterans are us

Summerlot, the director of IU's veterans center, says he regularly confronts assumptions people have about his politics, mental health, and opinions about gender based on his veteran status. "The American military is a cross-section of the American population," Summerlot says, and it reflects the entirety of that population. For example, a UCLA study estimates the percentage of transgender adults who have served in the military to be 21%—more than twice the participation rate

John Summerlot.



of the overall adult population. “There’s a reason ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ existed,” Summerlot says.

Part of Summerlot’s role at IU is helping the university community understand veterans, and this starts with identifying them in the first place. “Almost 25% of undergraduate student

veterans are women,” Summerlot says. “I tell faculty, if you’re not looking at the 24-year-old woman in your class as a possible veteran, then you’re missing out on who they might be.”

So, who enlists today?

» Recruits are more likely than civilians to have earned a high school diploma.

» Economically, most recruits are middle class. A neighborhood affluence study of more than 2,000 recruits found that the middle three quintiles were overrepresented, while the top and bottom quintiles were underrepresented.

» Racially, a higher percentage of minorities enlist: 30% in 2016, compared to 23% in the benchmark of comparably aged civilians.

According to the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, about 80% of people who enlist have a relative who served. Michelle Moyd,

The VA doesn’t have enough resources to handle veterans’ claims in a timely way, and often seems to be looking for ways to deny benefits to veterans.
—Michelle Moyd

51, an associate professor of history at IU, grew up in a military household, moving with her father’s Air Force deployments. “For as long as I can remember, my father’s vision for me was that I become an officer,” Moyd says. “And that’s what I did. I don’t remember it being a conscious decision, really.”

Moyd is a historian of eastern Africa and the region’s history of soldiering and warfare. Her research also explores why people enlist in the military, and she has taught a class about soldiers and veterans. “I want students to understand the ways that socioeconomic status and criminal status act in people’s decisions

to join the military—especially students on the left, who might be quick to condemn people who volunteer for military service,” Moyd says.

Jacob Leaf, the assistant manager at Goods for Cooks, was raised in Helena, Montana, by a veteran father who told him that if he wanted to go to college, the service was his best bet. “My only real route for upward mobility, in my mind, was joining the military,” Leaf says. He is now working on a master’s degree in central Eurasian studies at IU and hopes to work as a foreign service officer for the U.S. State Department.

Other veterans faced stark alternatives. Carlos, who asked to be anonymous for this article, entered the Army at age 17 when a juvenile judge told him he could either face criminal charges or enlist in the military.

For others, the motivation to join had less to do with circumstances than an internal drive. “I wanted very much to be a man as quickly as I could,” says Bagwell, the Vietnam veteran turned peace activist. “And I figured the Marine Corps was the quickest way to do that.”

‘I came back a man’

For many, the military delivers on its promise. Veterans often credit their military experience with helping them realize their potential. “You really push the limits with your body and your mind,” says Ashley Assink, 33, an Army veteran of the Iraq War. “You learn a lot about your inner strength and your coping skills.”

Summerlot says the military offers unparalleled responsibilities. “You’re responsible for people, you’re responsible for millions of dollars’ worth

of equipment, you’re responsible for the safety of whatever area you’re in,” Summerlot says. “Oh, and in some cases, if you make a mistake, it could be an international incident.”

George Kristoff, commander of Bloomington’s Veterans of Foreign Wars post, was 19 when he went to Vietnam in 1968. He says, “I went over as a kid and I came back a man.” Thiel says his experiences gave him a cooler head in difficult circumstances. “Being shot at changes a man,” Thiel says. “It makes midterms and final exams and even company bankruptcies pale in comparison.”

Gene Shipp grew up on a farm in rural Georgia during the Great Depression. He drove a horse-drawn buggy but dreamed of becoming a mechanic, and the Army gave him that chance. After a 30-year career—he served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam—he retired to Bloomington not intending to work, but the energy company Public Service Indiana recruited him for his experience and gave him a second career. “I’ve been blessed,” the 100-year-old Shipp says.

In a 2011 survey by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center of soldiers who had seen active duty, three-quarters said their

More than 90% said the military helped them mature, learn to work with others, and build their self-confidence.

experience helped them get ahead in life. More than 90% said the military helped them mature, learn to work with others, and build their self-confidence. More than 80% said they would advise a young person close to them to join the military.

But Scovill, the VA public affairs officer, cautions that the military is not a cure-all for people who lack self-discipline.

Some people leave the military with the same dysfunctions they had when they entered—maybe more. “If it wasn’t going to work anyway,” Scovill says, “it probably has the opposite effect.”

Employers say they value veterans’ skills. In a 2017 Harris Poll survey, 48% of more than 2,400 hiring managers said they pay more attention to job applications from veterans, and 68% said they would hire a veteran over an equally qualified candidate with no military experience. In the survey, the most-cited qualities veterans bring to the workforce are teamwork, discipline, respect, ability to perform under pressure, and leadership skills. A 2016 study by the Department of Veterans Affairs found that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to have management positions.

But while most employers say they prefer veterans, a substantial

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minority of veterans thinks otherwise. A 2016 survey of post-9/11 veterans found that about one-third think employers devalue their military experience, almost 50% understate or exclude their military experience on resumes, and 20% think their status will be a strike against them.

In Bloomington it is difficult to use census data to gauge how a segment of the population is doing relative to the local average—especially in employment and income—because the local average is distorted by IU’s undergraduates, who number 33,000 among a population of 84,000. Reports based on national data indicate that veterans are much less likely to live in poverty than non-veterans: 6.7% for male veterans compared to 12.9% for all men, and 9.4% for female veterans compared to 15.6% for all women.

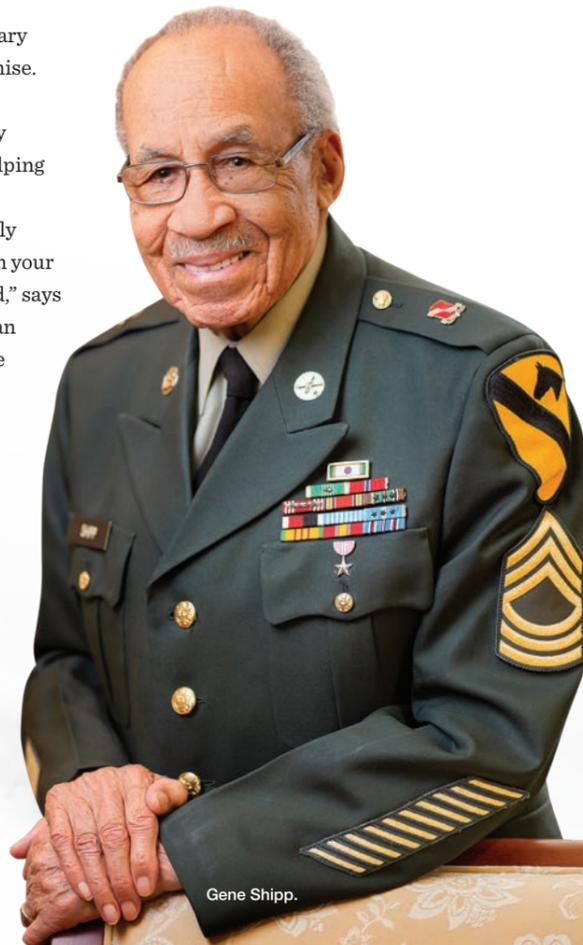
In Bloomington and Monroe County, more than 10% of the businesses are owned by veterans, including more than half of manufacturing enterprises.

Wounded warriors

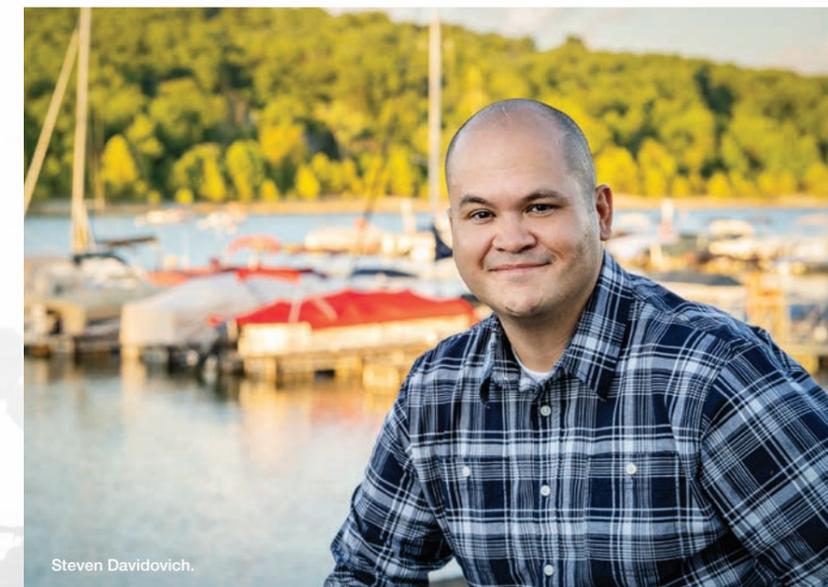
At the same time, many veterans do struggle. Most people enlist in their teens or early 20s and, as Summerlot says, “They’ve never adulted outside the military.” Some of the basic challenges young people face—finding housing, budgeting for food and clothes—were taken care of by the military. In the 2011 Pew survey, 44% of post-9/11 veterans said their readjustment to civilian life was difficult, compared to about 25% of veterans who served in earlier eras. Almost half of post-9/11 veterans said they had strained family relations since leaving, 47% said they had frequent outbursts of anger, and 32% said there were times when they felt they didn’t care about anything.



Michelle Moyd.



Gene Shipp.



Steven Davidovich.



Pete Scovill's medals.

symptoms—years when the weight of responsibilities kept his PTSD emotions repressed. After Thiel retired, his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and "everything went south for me emotionally," Thiel says. A recurring nightmare he had experienced in his first years out of the service returned. He couldn't get out of bed. He took high doses of antidepressants and underwent therapy. The nightmares have lessened, but he still is reluctant to commit to do something in the morning because he can't know whether he will have slept the night before. "I've always had PTSD," Thiel says. "It's in my medical records from the Army. But in '71 that term didn't exist."

Even today, PTSD is not well understood says Steven Davidovich, a clinical social worker at the Bloomington VA Clinic. "It's a complicated one, for sure," Davidovich says. "We see literature from the VA all the time—new trainings, new modalities, and new things going on."

In some cases, Davidovich says, there is a clear link between military experience and symptoms of PTSD, which can include depression,

flashbacks, nightmares, outbursts of anger, emotional numbness, and being easily startled. One of Davidovich's clients is a former combat medic. "He's seen quite a bit and he's kind of crawled into his own little world, shut off from the outside," Davidovich says. "He has black curtains on his windows. No light comes in. He's just there."

Scovill, the Marine Corps veteran and VA public affairs officer, says there are other cases where malingerers exploit the fact that a PTSD diagnosis is largely based on what the veteran reports. "That PTSD diagnosis is worth a percentage of disability, and that's a paycheck—in some cases an enormous one," Scovill says.

Increased awareness of PTSD creates blowback for some veterans. Summerlot recounts occasions at work when people told him they didn't want to anger him because he is a veteran. "There's a common stereotype that vets have to go up against, that if you have a mental health issue it must be PTSD, or that every veteran has PTSD, and neither of those are true," Summerlot says. "The average age of onset of mental health problems throughout the population is 18–22."

PTSD may be difficult to quantify, but veteran suicide is a measurable phenomenon (though perhaps undermeasured, since it relies on the coroner knowing the veteran status of the deceased). According to a 2018 VA report, the suicide rate in 2016 was 1.5 times greater for veterans than for non-veterans, after adjusting for age and gender. While the suicide rate has increased slightly for all age groups of veterans in the past 10 years, the rate for veterans ages 18–34 has risen the most, from 25 per 100,000 in 2005 to 45 per 100,000 in 2016.

Terri Languell, 63, spent her Army career on American soil, and she had traumatic experiences as a military policewoman. She responded to a drunken-driving crash and performed CPR on the driver—whom she knew and who did not survive—inhalating his blood until the ambulance arrived. She was also sexually assaulted. "I didn't report it," Languell says, "because they would have just told me to go do my job."

Twenty-five years after leaving the Army, Languell was diagnosed as disabled by PTSD. For the past 10 years she has been leading a peer-support group called Vet to Vet that meets at Ivy Tech Community College—Bloomington. It is a mix of younger and older veterans "trying to get through each day and not stomp all

over the people we love," Languell says. "A lot of veterans don't know they need help until they retire, and then PTSD hits them. People won't ask for help unless they're desperate."



Terri Languell.

For women—a 'doubly dangerous position'

Languell's experience of sexual assault is all too common. A VA survey of more than 20,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan found

that 41% of women (and 4% of men) experienced military sexual trauma, much of it unreported. One of the most prominently displayed pamphlets at the Bloomington VA Clinic is written for victims of military sexual trauma. Another booklet lists support

groups for women veterans. Women face unique challenges in what Michelle Moyd, the IU history professor and Air Force veteran, describes as a "hypermasculine environment."

"I have women who were combat vets who talked about really harrowing experiences of not only having to pay attention to the violence of the conflict that they were involved in, but they were potentially subject to violence from their own unit, their military comrades," Moyd says. "So it's this doubly dangerous position to be in."

There are accounts as early as the Revolutionary War of women disguising themselves as men in order to join the Army. Over time, the military increasingly formalized women's roles in support and medical operations, and in recent years women have entered combat roles. In 2016, all military occupations and positions were opened to women, who now comprise 16% of enlisted forces and 18% of the officer corps.

Ashley Assink enlisted in 2004 at age 18, fulling intending to retire from the Army. She went through basic training and then advanced training as a chemical specialist. Stationed at Fort Drum in upstate New York, Assink was sexually assaulted by a fellow soldier. She took morning-after measures and moved on. She later told a superior, who talked her out of reporting it, but 10 weeks later Assink learned she was pregnant. Although she intended to give the child up for adoption, Assink

**"Having a family in the military is horrible. It's not nurturing. The military doesn't view you as a gender. You're just a number."
—Ashley Assink**



Ashley Assink.

says she changed her mind once he was born. "The second they lay your kid on your chest," she says, "there's just this feeling like, 'Oh my god, he's mine.'"

When she enlisted, Assink had signed a waiver promising that, in the event she became pregnant, someone would care for her child while she was deployed or in training exercises. Her son went to live with her mother. "Having a family in the military is horrible,"

Assink says. “It’s not nurturing. The military doesn’t view you as a gender. You’re just a number. You’re a person who will fit their needs to get the mission done, and that’s all there is to it.”

Assink left the Army in 2010 and moved to Bloomington. Four years later, she was jobless, homeless, and felt like she was failing her boys, who were 5 and 8. One day, while driving south on Ind. 37, she fantasized about turning the car into oncoming traffic. “I was at rock bottom,” Assink says. “There was no help. I was just drowning. I thought about putting my boys up for adoption.”

She didn’t know where to find help. “When you leave the military, they don’t give you a card saying, ‘Call this number if you have trouble,’” Assink says. “There is no guidebook that tells you what steps you should take to get the care that you need.” Desperate, she dialed 211, the community resource service operated by the United Way. A man from the Bloomington VA Clinic called her the next day and helped her get housing and emergency food assistance. Assink hadn’t considered that she was eligible for benefits as a veteran.

Veterans and benefits

Veterans have always had to fight a second battle when they return from war. In 1783, Revolutionary War soldiers demanding payment for their service mobbed Congress, causing Congress to flee while George Washington sent troops to suppress the protest. Veterans of the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the Philippine-American War, 1899–1902, founded Veterans of Foreign Wars to call for health benefits and a pension.

In 1932, during the Great Depression, 17,000 World War I veterans and 26,000 of their family members marched on Washington, D.C., to demand early payment of the \$1,000 service bonus they wouldn’t be eligible to collect until 1945. The so-called

Bonus Marchers were run off by cavalry and tanks. But their march was remembered as World War II wound down and people began to consider what would happen to the returning soldiers. The GI Bill—largely written by members of the American Legion, a veterans organization founded in 1919—provided unemployment benefits, tuition assistance, and mortgage financing. Between World War

II and 1966, one-fifth of all single-family residences were financed by the GI Bill, though lending discrimination meant that mortgage assistance disproportionately benefited white veterans.

The question of whether the government is doing enough for veterans—and how best to do it—is an ongoing debate. Benefits that served one generation might be insufficient to the needs of another. The promise of a low-interest mortgage loan, for example, isn’t much help to someone unable to afford rent. A 2008 U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department study conservatively



Pete Scovill.

counted 185,000 veterans experiencing homelessness. That year, through a new program, veterans were allocated a special class of Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers from HUD, provided the veterans engage with VA mental health services.

Ashley Assink was housed through this program, which has reduced the number of homeless veterans by half. Bloomington has 80 vouchers to allot, and there are usually a few available, which means that veterans can be housed quickly. In Indiana, the VA counted 539 homeless veterans in 2018, down 25% from 2011.

Veterans organizations monitor how the VA dispenses benefits. “Someone has to watch people giving us services,” says David Cobb, 68, chairman of the board of Bloomington’s AMVETS post. Moyd says the VA doesn’t have enough resources to handle veterans’ claims in a timely way, and often seems to be looking for ways to deny benefits to veterans.

Even politicians who are happy to approve large military budgets can become stingy when it comes to funding the VA, perhaps because about half of the Pentagon’s budget goes to private contractors, while the VA is a big government agency. In fact, the Veterans Health Administration, one of three branches of the VA, is the largest health care system in the country. In Bloomington, however, the VA’s primary care clinic, called the Bloomington Community Based Outpatient Clinic, is operated by Valor Healthcare, a private contractor. The mental health clinic, referred to earlier in this article, is a separate facility operated by the VA. About 4,500 veterans are enrolled in the two clinics.

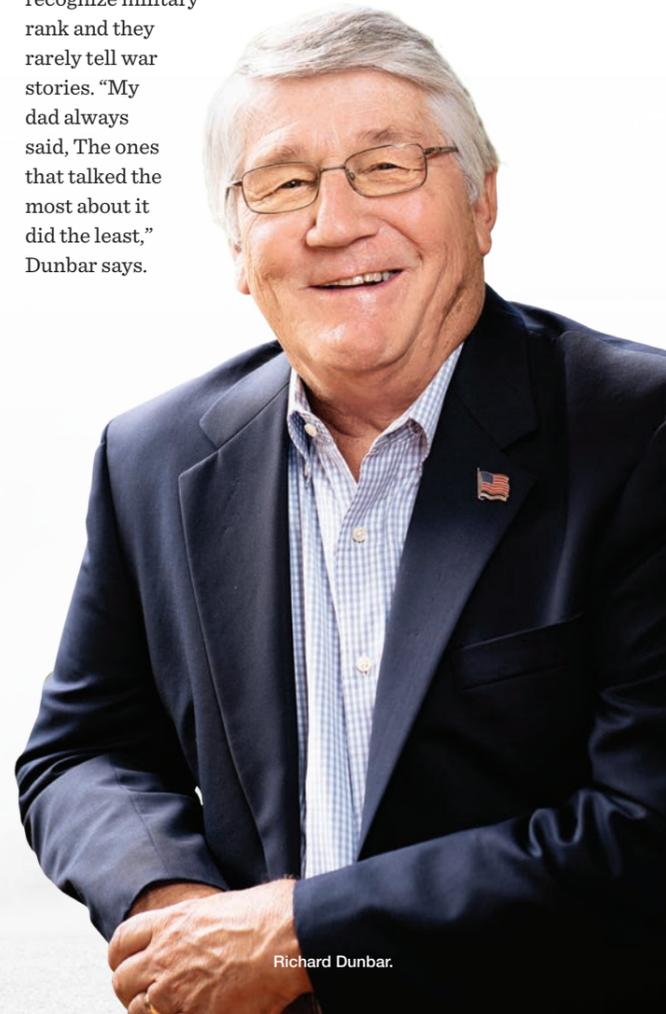
Veterans interviewed for this article who have access to private insurance use it instead of VA health services. “VA medical isn’t great,” says Leaf, “but it’s free.”

Scovill, the VA public affairs officer, says, “I’ve had multiple surgeries, and the VA’s never done it. Veterans my age didn’t touch the VA for years and years. The thinking was, ‘The VA is for people who really need it.’”

Veterans helping veterans

While the VFW, American Legion, and AMVETS lobby at the state and national levels on behalf of veterans, at the level of the “post”—as the local clubs are called—Bloomington is the focus. Supporting a youth sports team. Raising money for a hospital. Sponsoring the Honor Guard, which performs taps and a 21-gun salute at veteran funerals. “It’s about community service and giving back,” says Richard Dunbar, 73, commander of Bloomington’s American Legion post, which is open to veterans who served during wartime even if they were not deployed to a combat zone. It has 1,260 members—a number that includes family members of veterans. Dunbar

says they don’t recognize military rank and they rarely tell war stories. “My dad always said, The ones that talked the most about it did the least,” Dunbar says.



Richard Dunbar.

Bloomington’s Veterans of Foreign Wars post, chartered in 1921, is the oldest continuously chartered VFW post in the state. VFW membership is limited to veterans—and their family members—who have served in a combat area. Bloomington’s post has 403 members, about half of them family members of veterans. George Kristoff, a Vietnam veteran who commands the VFW, says members are united by their bond of service, but not



George Kristoff.

by any politics. “There is a range of political views, but you don’t hear it discussed down here,” Kristoff says. “This is not a political organization, and we try to keep politics completely out of it.”

Founded in 1944, AMVETS is the newest and most inclusive of the veterans groups, welcoming veterans—and family members—who have been honorably discharged wherever and whenever they served. Bloomington’s post, founded in 1999, has about 600 members—200 of them veterans, the rest family.

Membership in these organizations reflects the aging of the veteran population. “My generation were joiners,” says Cobb, the AMVETS chairman. “The younger generation don’t join the way we do.” Each post is open to non-members on certain days and for events, such as fish fries and bingo, that bring in revenue and let people see what the posts are like. Jason Endris, 45, chairman of the Legion’s board of trustees, says he is always working on ways to attract younger veterans. “This is a great place for them just to come and talk about their experiences, good or bad, with other veterans that have been through it and can understand where they’re coming from,” Endris says.

Changing attitudes

It is common for veterans, when they reflect on their time in the military, to have mixed feelings. For example, Ashley Assink says that, despite her sexual assault and the ensuing lack of support,



Jacob Leaf.

“As I started to study the history of the regions we were involved with, I started to understand why these people were so pissed off at us all the time.”
—Jacob Leaf

A 2011 Pew Research Center survey of soldiers who had been on active duty found that 96% were proud of their service, though they were about evenly divided as to whether the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were worth fighting. Time and experience will sometimes shift perspective, as happened to Jacob Leaf. When he enlisted in the Army as a high schooler, he was a “long-haired Goth kid,” a social progressive, and fiscal conservative who would vote twice for George W. Bush. An infantryman, he was in basic training on September 11, 2001. He fought in Iraq in 2003–04 and in Afghanistan from 2005–06. At the time, he says, he felt like “we were Team America, bringing the freedom.”

He left the Army with an intense hatred of Islam. Then he went to college, where he gravitated to anthropology. “As I started to study the history of the regions we were involved with,” Leaf says, “I started to understand why these people were so pissed off at us all the time.” Leaf witnessed the effect of Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons on the Kurds, and he feels there was a purpose for U.S. intervention there, even if that reason wasn’t the

she has no regrets. “I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat,” Assink says. Today she has a job where she feels valued, one that pays well enough for her to support herself and her sons. “When the national anthem is played, I still get goosebumps and chills,” she says. “There is a sense of pride and accomplishment that is almost exhilarating.”

reason sold to the public. Now he is working on a master’s degree at IU in Central Eurasian studies with a focus on Afghanistan.

Moyd, the IU history professor, had a similar change of viewpoint. “I was raised in a politically left-leaning household, but I was quite naive,” Moyd says. “I was very much embedded in all the stories that we tell about ourselves—that we’re a democracy, that we bring freedom to other people, that we support freedom elsewhere, that our military is the best of the best and it’s professional, and we don’t do horrible things—or if we do, it’s justified.”

She maintained this outlook through Princeton University, which she attended through the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps program. She maintained it through a career in Air Force intelligence, which included a deployment to Somalia in 1992–93. The Air Force recruited her to teach at its academy and sent her to graduate school in order to prepare. Moyd was out of the military, pursuing a graduate degree in history at Cornell University, when news broke that U.S. Army and intelligence personnel had been torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. She remembers that her classmates were not surprised by the scandal, but Moyd was shocked. For her doctorate, she focused on the reasons African soldiers enlisted in the colonial army of racist Germans, leaning into the question of why a soldier will fight for a government whose values conflict with the soldier’s own.

But Moyd doesn’t regret her military service. It allowed her to attend Princeton without financially burdening her parents, and then, by sending her to get a master’s degree, helped her to discover her passion for scholarship.

Finding purpose—on both ends of the spectrum

For some veterans, though, there is no ambiguity. Bagwell, the Vietnam veteran turned peace activist, sees nothing but tragedy in his military experience. “I feel culpable and complicit in the deaths of 3 million people,” Bagwell says. “Although I’m fairly certain I never killed anyone, I was there in support of the events that led to those deaths.” The son of a veteran, Bagwell grew up having dirt-clod wars with his brother, later wearing Army-surplus combat boots and fatigues to high school. He enlisted at age 17 with his parents’ permission and trained as an infantry machine-gunner. His disillusionment began the first week he was in the jungle, when he witnessed intelligence officers interrogating, torturing, and killing a captured North Vietnamese soldier.

His battalion, nicknamed “The Walking Dead,” suffered the highest casualty rate in Marine Corps history. At times, when helicopters couldn’t reach them, they carried their dead and went without meals—once for a week. To keep from falling asleep while standing watch, Bagwell planted his bayonet on the ground with the blade at his heart. He got jungle rot up to the shinbones of each

leg. “Not particularly brave,” he says, he fired his weapon only once—into the air in a moment of frustration.

After his tour, with two years left to serve on his enlistment, he was stationed at Marine Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., and became orderly to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy Admiral Thomas Moorer. In 1970, Moorer returned from a fact-finding trip to Vietnam and declared that the war was winnable. “Because I had been there, I knew that he was lying for political reasons,” Bagwell says, “and I decided that I needed to get out of uniform.” He applied for conscientious objector status, joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and was honorably discharged.

“It has not been an easy or pretty life,” Bagwell says. “I’ve hospitalized myself for both suicidal and homicidal ideation. People will say ‘thank you for your service,’ which I absolutely detest because I feel that it’s being used just to make them feel better about themselves.” In 1999, Bagwell began writing poetry as a way to work through his PTSD. His poems are brutally candid. As he puts it in one poem:

*My words are caustic, inelegant,
intentionally and painfully direct—
steamy scat at your formal dinner party.*

Bagwell has found purpose in opposing war. His vanity license plate has a Marine Corps tag with the words STPWAR. For Veterans Day, he stages events like last year’s 12-hour program of speeches and anti-war films at the Burkirk-Chumley Theater.

“I feel culpable and complicit in the deaths of 3 million people, although I’m fairly certain I never killed anyone.”
—Tim Bagwell

While not optimistic, he thinks societies can abolish war the way they have slavery. “We have halted so many things that people used to think were human nature,” Bagwell says. “Humans have the capacity for cultural flexibility if they have the political will. The

reason we still have war is not enough people have the political will to cause it to be stopped. We as capitalist consumers get so bought off with the luxurious conveniences of our lives.”

On the other end of the spectrum is Carlos, mentioned earlier as the anonymous veteran who enlisted to avoid facing criminal charges. He “immediately felt at home” in the Army, fought in Vietnam, and then re-enlisted in 1978 to train as a Green Beret. Over the next 25 years, he dropped in six-man teams at

night from very high altitudes into places where the United States had no official involvement: Cambodia, Thailand, Panama, Haiti, Tanzania, Colombia, Bolivia. He carried equipment that couldn’t be traced back to the United States and was told that if he died it would be classified as an accident. “We were helping governments that asked for help under the table,” Carlos says. “Have you ever kept track of an atrocity overseas that’s going on and on and on, and suddenly it stops? There’s a reason why it stops.”

Carlos won’t talk specifically about what he did and he never expects to be honored for it. Now 67, he has a regular job he enjoys, a granddaughter he adores, and no trouble sleeping at night.

“My grandfather always told me it doesn’t matter who knows what you’ve done,” Carlos says. “You know you did it; that’s what’s important.” ✨



Tim Bagwell.