



THE AMERICAN LEGION
Veterans Strengthening America

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

PO BOX 1055, INDIANAPOLIS, IN, 46206-1055 • WWW.LEGION.ORG • P: (317) 630-1350 • F: (317) 630-1223

Memorial Day 2026

The American Legion
Media & Communications Division

Veterans, Family, Friends and Honored Guests,
Since the founding of the United States, it is estimated that 558 million Americans and immigrants have lived in this country. More than 1.1 million of them have died defending the United States in wars and combat actions since the American Revolution. They each have stories to tell. The crosses at Normandy. The graves at Arlington. The markers at Punchbowl. The fallen heroes who rest in places unknown.

We are here for **them**.

We are here for heroes such as West Virginia National Guard Specialist Sarah Beckstrom, who was mortally wounded by a terrorist while she patrolled the streets of Washington, D.C., on November 26th. Air Force Staff Sergeant Andrew Wolfe was seriously wounded in the same attack.

Specialist Beckstrom's high school principal recalled her as someone who quote "Carried herself with quiet strength, a contagious smile and a positive energy that lifted people around her." -unquote.

How could we all not be lifted by the breathtaking sacrifices that veterans have made and continue to make on our behalf?

We are here for Specialist Beckstrom, her grieving family members and her friends. We are here to support Staff Sergeant Wolfe and his challenging road to recovery.

We do not forget.

We are here for the 2,341 American servicemembers who lost their lives during the attack on Pearl Harbor 85 years ago.

We are here for the 3,100 combat deaths and thousands more who succumbed to the elements at Korea's "frozen" Chosin Reservoir.

We are here for the men and women who continue to lose their lives during operations in the Middle East.

From Bunker Hill to Baghdad, Americans from communities throughout the United States have answered their nation's call and made the ultimate sacrifice.

Included on this hallowed list of heroes is Air Force Staff Sergeant William Pitsenbarger. Sixty years ago, in a thick jungle near Saigon, a company of soldiers from the 1st Infantry Division was surrounded and outnumbered by Viet Cong. Enemy soldiers were estimated to be close to 400.

Pitsenbarger, a pararescue jumper, voluntarily entered the danger area through a helicopter drop, so he could administer aid and evacuate the wounded. Armed with a rifle, pistol and medical bag, Pitsenbarger refused evacuation nine times while he helped others get to safety. He repeatedly collected and distributed ammunition to soldiers under fire. He continued assisting others, while fighting the enemy even after being wounded three times.

“Pits” as he was affectionately called by his friends, would fall in battle. He epitomized the motto of pararescue jumpers, which is, quote- “These things we do...that others may live.”- unquote.

His body was later found with his rifle in one hand, and his medical bag in the other. He was 21.

For his actions taken on April 11, 1966, William H. Pitsenbarger of Piqua, Ohio, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor and promoted to staff sergeant.

The families started and children produced by those he rescued will always be Staff Sergeant Pitsenbarger's legacy.

He did, so others may live. It is an ethos shared by so many of America's fallen heroes.

From those who absorbed the blast of a grenade while saving their friends, to those who died rescuing crew from a sinking ship, we take this day to reflect on ordinary Americans exhibiting extraordinary valor.

To honor the legacy of the fallen, we should all commit to the freedom offered by the greatest nation on earth. A land where patriotism eclipses politics, where the American Flag is displayed proudly and frequently and where military veterans are society's true celebrities.

We must NEVER forget the families of our fallen. Long after the battlefield guns have been silenced and the bombs stop exploding, the children of our fallen warriors will still be missing a parent. Spouses will be without their life partners. Parents will continue to grieve for their heroic sons and daughters that died way too early.

We need to be present for them, not just as members of The American Legion Family – but as American citizens. Nobody can replace these fallen heroes – especially in the eyes of their families – but we can offer shoulders to cry on, assistance with educational expenses and assurances that their loved one's sacrifice will not be forgotten.

There are many ways to honor the fallen. While we can still enjoy recreational activities over Memorial Day weekend, we take this moment – this special moment – to remember the price that was paid for us to enjoy our American way of life.

Remembering and honoring the legacies of those who didn't make it back is the true meaning of Memorial Day.

Let us remember that tyrannical regimes have been toppled and genocides stopped because Americans sacrificed life and limb. Let us remember that terrorist plots were foiled and killers brought to justice because Americans were willing to pay a high price. Let us remember that without a U.S. military, the world would be a far more oppressive and darker place. Let us remember that freedom has no greater friend than the American soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, Coast Guardsman and Space Force Guardian.

The Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion charges our organization to "Preserve the memories and incidents of our association in the Great Wars."

The true way to honor the fallen is to live in a way worthy of their sacrifice. That means strengthening our communities, helping our fellow veterans, supporting military families, and teaching the next generation what this day truly means.

We must tell their stories.

We must speak their names.

We must ensure that our children and grandchildren understand that the freedoms they inherit were paid for with courage, service, and sacrifice.

Abraham Lincoln said a nation that does not honor its heroes will not long endure. He was right. But we should also ask ourselves, would a nation that didn't honor its heroes be a nation in which we would want to live?

Your attendance here answers that question.

We are here for **them**.

Thank you, God Bless America, God Bless Our Veterans and God Bless our Gold Star Families.