

# An Honorary Salute to all Veterans

BY SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

The year was 1893 when Katharine Lee Bates visited Pikes Peak in Colorado. She kept a journal that described wagons pulled by horses, relieved by mules, rarified air and treacherous terrain. As she looked "out over the sea-like expanse of fertile country spreading under ample skies," she penned a poem that would become "America the Beautiful." Bates, a Wellesley College professor and poet, revised the poem in 1904, and made some final additions in 1913. Her lyrics, set to the music of "Auld Lang Syne," were eventually changed to a melody written by Samuel Augustus Ward in 1926. Thus, the popular American ballad was officially born.

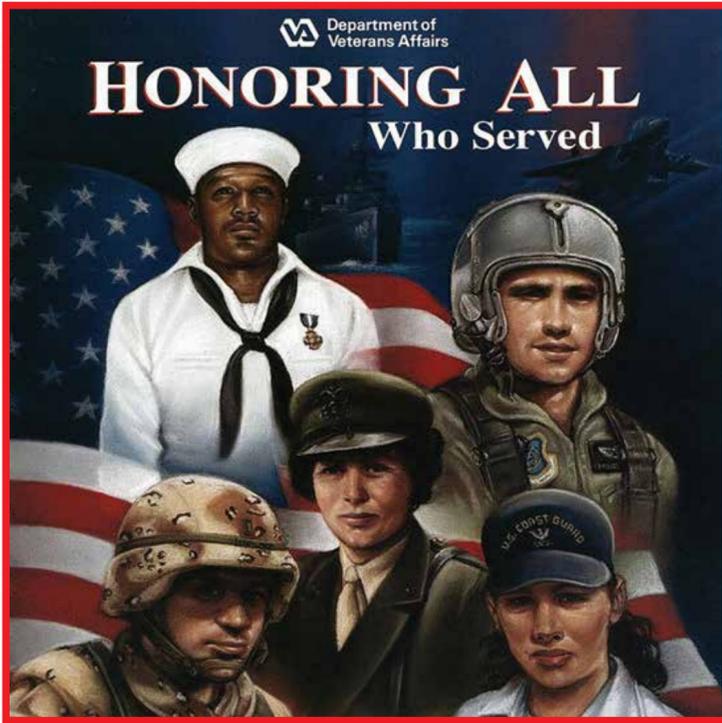
Bates died March 28, 1929, and is buried in Falmouth, Mass. Shortly after her death, there was an effort made to establish "America the Beautiful" as the nation's anthem. The song, however, lost out to "The Star-Spangled Banner." As we celebrate Veteran's Day November 11, we are honored to share the following stories with you of a few American veterans. These women and men enlisted in the military with American pride, and perhaps like Bates, found themselves "looking out over the sea-like expanse of fertile country spreading under ample skies" no matter where they were stationed. American patriotism may have been the backbone that inspired these veterans to enlist, but as you read their words, you will no doubt be moved by their experiences and how it shaped who they are today.

**Miller King, Army LTC; Commander, 10th Battalion, 95th Regiment (Health Services).** King grew up a military brat

and comes from a long line of family members who served. The baton is being passed onto her daughter, a JROTC Cadet Lieutenant Colonel at Clear Lake High School, and her son, who is currently attending the Citadel in Charleston, S.C. After graduating college, King became a police officer before joining the Army Reserves in 2001. Presently Commander of the 10th Battalion, 95th Regiment, Health Services, Ellington Field, her unit specializes in medical training. She has been deployed twice to Iraq and her Army husband has been deployed seven times (Iraq and Afghanistan). Her first go-around in Iraq was for 13 months, and the second time took her away from home for a year. "We saw and felt the rockets," she said. "Every Friday night, without fail, between 9 p.m. and midnight, you were going to get rocketed. For a couple of months, it scares the living daylights out of you, but you can't live your life like that. So every day you wake up, thinking, I'm here and I have a mission. I

may not be the guy kicking in doors looking for the bad guys, but I'm a part of that team and I know that somebody is out there doing that job and it's my job to make sure that person is taken care of. So, if that person is hurt, then I know my team of health providers can take care of them."

King lights up when talking about her advancement over the years. She's proud of her rank as Lieutenant Colonel and worked hard to get there. "My passion is not because I wear the U.S. Army emblem on my left side, I wear it over my heart because that's where it belongs. A lot of people think I'm just driven. No. It's because I have a passion for it," she said. King knows without a doubt the Army will be her career. "We have



*To those in uniform serving today and to those who have served in the past, we honor you today and every day.*

a very strong bond, whether you're in the reserves or on active duty, we are a family. You can ask any Soldier, Sailor, Marine or Airman and they may give you a tagline answer, but take them out of the military for a period of time and put them in the civilian element and the one thing they'll tell you they miss is how we are when we're together."

**Rob Hefner, Army LTC, 24-year veteran.** It was during the first Gulf War that Hefner decided to enlist. Yet his time being a corps cadet at Texas A&M gave him structure and an automatic sense of belonging—something he missed after graduation. He enlisted in 1991 as a soldier, retiring as lieutenant colonel in 2014. During his tenure, there were deployments to Iraq and a seven-month assignment in Bosnia. "After I returned from Iraq, I wanted to go back," he said. "I put my name on several volunteer lists and didn't get a call. It's very difficult to explain to somebody who hasn't experienced it," said Hefner, who shared that many he served with felt the same way. "We were over there to make the Iraqi Army competent; that was my job, but there were Iraqi soldiers I was training who tried to kill me. You never really knew." One big lesson he learned was how to handle fear. "I expect my soldiers to be afraid, but I don't have that luxury, because I can't allow fear to influence my decisions...Being in charge is much like being a servant leader—letting go of yourself and focusing on others. If you do that, you can actually achieve great things."

Deployment is always hardest on family members, and Hefner didn't realize just how difficult until he read his son's college essay. "He said the most difficult thing he had to go through was waiting on me to call." Today, Hefner works as a superintendent for Lennar Homes, but it's the time he spends helping veterans and their families that is dear to his heart. He uses his construction and leadership skills to recruit volunteers to help a widow in need or a veteran in distress through the non-profit organization, SERVE. Their



Miller King, Army



Rob Hefner, Army



Tana Plescher, Navy with patient

mission is bringing Gulf Coast area veterans groups and organizations together to combine resources and information to improve the lives of military personnel and their families. "There's a brotherhood that connects all veterans—Navy, Army, Marines—it's the same clubhouse, just a different room," Hefner said.

**Tana Plescher, Navy Hospital Corpsman, Operation Iraqi Freedom.** "I knew since I was seven years old that I was going to be in medicine," said Plescher, who joined the Navy in 1997 and whose ship, the USNS Comfort, was in Washington D.C. on 9/11/2001, and subsequently responded to New York. Her ship is only one of two in the world that provide afloat, mobile, acute surgical medical facilities when called upon to the U.S. military, and hospital services to support U.S. disaster relief and humanitarian operations worldwide. "My first duty station was in Hawaii where I took care of military personnel and civilians. My second duty station was at National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, MD where I was in charge of the OB/GYN clinic," she said. Then came Iraq. "I was there during Shock and Awe in 2003. We thought we'd have minimal casualties and the war wouldn't go on very long, but it didn't turn out that way," she said. One experience she will never forget involved a severely injured Army medic. "He'd been shot in the stomach at close range and was badly injured. I immediately felt a connection to him because he looked so much like my brother, even though he never opened his eyes and was unconscious the entire time I cared for him. He died several times, and we brought him back; he eventually was sent to a hospital in Germany and I never knew what happened to him."

Discharged in 2005, Plescher served 6-1/2 years active duty and two years in the reserves. She now works as Harris County Outreach Coordinator for Grace After Fire, a non-profit organization that provides the means for women Veterans to gain self-knowledge and self-renewal. Three years ago, she

was watching an award show on the internet and the camera panned the audience. Sitting on the front row was a man in a wheelchair sitting next to his mother. It was the Army medic she'd taken care of. "I recognized him from his eyes, even though they were never opened. I was able to locate him and we met. It was very emotional and one of the proudest moments of my life, knowing he had survived," she said. Plescher reminds herself daily not to sweat the small stuff. "I have a new perspective on life."

**Jennifer Nelson-Goldstein, Army Sergeant, Bosnia.** As a computer analyst in Bosnia, Goldstein traveled around to the various Army bases, making sure their communications were working. "Sometimes, a Black Hawk helicopter would take us out on a mission; then we'd come back and take a convoy elsewhere, and go fix what needed to be done," she said. "We also supplied security clearances for those coming into the country. When the U.S. started bombing Belgrade, our mission completely changed, so no matter where we were, we were involved in combat." Goldstein was also in Croatia, Herzegovina, and Hungary. "When we were in Sarajevo we were in a valley with foliage, surrounded by mountains. You had to figure out how to get yourself through that terrain, especially during night patrols while shooting was going on. Sarajevo and Zagreb were the two scariest places," she said. But what affected her most was seeing the aftermath of combat in Sarajevo. "I saw the way it affects civilians, particularly the poverty. That's the one thing that still haunts me. We had an abundance of food, but couldn't give it out, even with so many children starving. I still have a hard time getting that out of my head, but the policy was in effect because of the black market. It was pretty sad." Despite that, a particular highlight of Goldstein's service was attending the 50th commemoration ceremony of Iwo Jima. "All those war veterans and Congressional Medal of Honor winners were there and we got to show them around Okinawa. I was in the color guard, so that was an honor."



Jennifer Nelson-Goldstein, Army



Rod Bown, Marine



**Texas has about 177,500 female veterans, the most of any state, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Her family sent Christmas presents for 25 days leading up to Christmas and even made it a point to have Christmas in July when she came home. She worked in law enforcement after her stint in the Army and is currently a reservationist for American Airlines.

**Rod Bown, U.S. Marine Corps, Major, Vietnam.** Bown's father was a Marine during WWI; his uncle a Marine in Korea; his brother was a Marine pilot, so Bown knew he'd be a pilot, too. Joining the Marines in 1959, and during pilot training, he flew a T-28 Trojan from his base in Santa Ana, Calif. to Corpus Christi, Texas. It took 12 hours each way, with two refueling stops. On his second trip to Corpus he met his future wife, Sue, but when he proposed, she said no. Seven years later, she said, "I guess so."

Bown's first deployment to Da Nang was in 1964 where he piloted an F-8 Crusader on reconnaissance missions. His second tour was in 1968 in F-4 Phantom IIs. Over all, he conducted around 100 missions, and has many stories to tell. He wrote about one of them titled, "Nobody's Home," that recounts a mission into Laos in the Crusader and his return to the aircraft carrier. "When I landed, the tail hook did not come down. I was 100 miles from Da Nang—single pilot, single engine, over water. I was told to head to Da Nang, but when I landed, no one was there. I found out there had been a typhoon evacuation and everyone had left. The only way you can start this aircraft is with an external starter, so a crew finally flew in and got me going." But while there, he found out from an Air Force pilot about an area where the North Vietnamese were burying weapons. During his second tour (1968 in a Phantom), it got pretty hairy—flying 2,000 feet over mountains, over water and at night. The sensors on his plane were taking photos. After 13 years of service, Bown got his PhD in aerospace engineering from University of Texas, worked for Lockheed a few years, then began teaching computer science at University of Houston-Clear Lake, retiring after 25 years. He and Sue have been married 52 years, have two sons and four grandchildren. As for the positive aspects of his military life, he says it's simple: Semper fidelis (Always Faithful), the Marine's motto. "In the Marine Corps, you're a Marine first, rank and job comes second. When we run into each other as strangers, we are immediate friends and comrades."