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VETERANS DAY

LOCAL EVENTS

Observances scheduled throughout area

By ROB LE CATES

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CHAMPAIGN — Local communities are preparing to honor servicemembers as Veterans Day draws near.

All ceremonies listed will start at 11 a.m. Tuesday, Veterans Day, except for Mahomet Christian Church's "Living Flag" tribute.

→ One of the first Asian American U.S. Army generals, University of Illinois alumnus James Mukoyama Jr., will speak at the Chez Veterans Center.

In 1961, at age 17, he began serving in the UI's ROTC Army program, and upon graduation, he was promoted to second lieutenant. He later spent five years total actively deployed in Korea and Vietnam.

The UI event will offer a luncheon honoring those who served in the military, ending around 12:30 p.m.

→ Urbana's Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 630 will have its commemoration at the front of the post at 1303 E. Main St.

→ Parkland College's ceremony will feature Joseph Kirby singing the national anthem, a presentation of campus veterans by Navy veteran Maurice Taylor, and former student Jason Sakowski, a Marine, as the guest speaker.

→ Savoy American Legion Post 1492's ceremony will happen in front of the Robert C. McCleary Municipal Center at 611 N. Dunlap Ave. The event will take place inside the building if the weather doesn't permit.

Bill Smith, the 19th district commander for the state and senior vice commander for the local chapter, will emcee the event.

The legion's national historian, Chuck Zelinsky, will be the keynote speaker. The post's chaplain, Bud Vandiver, will open and close it with a prayer, and members of Scouting America will post the colors.

→ Mahomet Christian Church is hosting its 20th annual "Living Flag" musical performance honoring those who served. The first showing took place Friday, with additional showings at 2 p.m. today and 4 p.m. Sunday.

The performance is free and takes place at the church at 908 N. Lake of the Woods Road in Mahomet.



Provided

St. Joseph-Ogden High School kicked off Veterans Day 2024 with an outdoor tribute to those who served.

QUILT OF VALOR FOUNDATION

Warm, handmade gift honors local Air Force veteran

By ROB LE CATES

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CHAMPAIGN — Jim Rich of Champaign saw some familiar faces when receiving his Quilt of Valor last month.

Rich's daughter nominated him for the award. And his ex-wife's daughter, Esmi Small, who had a history with the program, sewed together his quilt.

"I really hadn't thought too much about it till I saw it, and it was a gorgeous quilt, and it kind of made me think that we are a precious few" to receive one, he said. "It made me feel like what I had done was more valuable in that way."

Rich previously served in the U.S. Air Force, spending some of his enlistment overseas during Desert Storm repairing planes.

Before his service, he tried his hand at college, but it didn't mesh well, he said.

Having grown up in the 2,000-population town of Malad, Idaho, Rich decided to look into the military for further guidance, leaving behind his construction job.

"I wasn't good at college, and I knew at the time I really needed a better way of living," he said. "I was just kind of coasting at the time."

He enlisted in the Air Force in 1987 and was eventually stationed as an avionics technician at Pope Field near Fort Bragg, N.C.

He then spent four years working on air-

craft electronics.

During Desert Storm, Rich deployed to Germany for several months to work on Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport planes.

While in Germany, he found himself wishing he had traveled overseas sooner, as he was enjoying the chance to meet new people, discover different cultures and catch up with friends in Europe.

"The people were very warm to us everywhere we went," he said. "Germany is beautiful, and I had good food and beer."

After his four years in the military, he returned to his hometown as a counselor for teens and enrolled at Idaho State University to pursue a degree in software engineering.

In 2009, he visited Iraq as a civilian in order to help teach manuals he wrote during his service.

The Quilts of Valor Foundation began in 2003 with a goal of providing comfort to war-touched veterans as thanks for their service.

Esmi Small finished her 16th blanket for the Quilt of Valor Foundation earlier this year and gifted it to Rich in October.

Small started five years ago after slowly growing more proficient at sewing.

"We owe so much to our nation's veterans. It's one of the ways we can really thank them by honoring them with warm and pretty quilts," Small said.



Provided

Florence and Arthur Schnell are shown at the beach at the Manhattan Beach Coast Guard Training Station in New York while he was on leave.

'A SAILOR'S SONG'

'THE MOST MUSICAL SHIP OF THE WAR'

Coast Guard trombonist's war years recounted in book by his son

By ROB LE CATES

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RANTOUL — Instead of standard military weaponry such as rifles or artillery, Larry Schnell's father served in the military with a different instrument at hand — a trombone.

During World War II, Arthur Schnell started his service at the Manhattan Beach Coast Guard Training Station in New York, where he played for bond rallies, officer balls and radio broadcasts.

Then, in March 1945, he and many other musicians transferred to a California-based ship, the USS General A.W. Greely.

The relocation came at request of the ship's commander, George Stedman Jr., who implemented musical therapy to help soothe the anxieties and injuries of war by allowing soldiers to focus on the music, even just for a night.

Stedman "recognized the value of music in helping these guys deal with their troubles, because there the military had no post-traumatic stress mitigation procedures," Larry Schnell said. "It was then when (the ship) became probably the most musical ship of the war."

The ship traveled across the world, allowing Arthur to visit India three times and Europe once.

The vessel also operated as a transport for young fresh troops. Toward the



Provided

Larry Schnell discovered boxes of love letters and documents his father kept while he was a musician aboard the USS General A.W. Greely. He used them to inspire his book 'A Sailor's Song: Lost Love Letters of World War II.'

end of the war, Arthur played patriotic and dance tunes for servicemembers haunted by the long, grueling combat.

Some included members of the Merrill's Marauders and the Flying Tigers.

Those soldiers "were just devastated, not just by the brutality of what they were doing, but by the fact that they felt kind of abandoned in their guerrilla-warfare tactics," Larry said. "They were really in a bad psychological shape."

Larry details his fa-

ther's stories in his book "A Sailor's Song: Lost Love Letters of World War II."

Much of the book is based on boxes of love letters and documents from his father's trip overseas, which Larry found stored in his mother's attic following her passing.

"I realized that there was a lot of history there in terms of war letters, and I expected it to be a family thing and I really didn't have time to look at them," he said.

He placed the boxes away, but six years later,

rediscovered them. After inspecting everything, he said he noticed an unusual pattern.

"They were both musicians, there was an extensive exchange about information and music ... and that became the theme" of the letters, he said. "Then there were things that I didn't understand about the letters, such as reference to a code that my father put in there."

Six more years passed, and Larry's brother came forward with the code. Arthur had used it to secretly share where he and the ship were during war.

"It's kind of puzzling why (letters) meant so much to somebody, but it really did," he said.

Larry decided to track the ship through various war zones. Of all the letters, only a fraction of them contained Arthur's location.

Higher-ups checked letters that could contain sensitive information like the whereabouts of the ship, but Arthur's letters slid under the radar.

"It was, of course, completely illegal, but it really helped my mother connect with him," he said.

Through his father, Larry said he understood the importance of music providing morale during times of war.

"I came to really appreciate the idea of music, and it was definitely an emphasis in World War II," Larry said.



Provided

From left, Resmiranda Small, Jordan King and Elizabeth Rich pose with Air Force veteran Jim Rich as he is wrapped in his Quilt of Valor. His daughter and her fiancé attended the private award ceremony.

VETERANS DAY

DANVILLE SCHOOLS

Students bringing veterans concert to VA

Annual event
relocating to make
attendance easier
for target audience

By JENNIFER BAILEY
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DANVILLE — Danville school district students will be honoring veterans in a variety of ways for Veterans Day on Tuesday, including visiting, having lunch with them and providing meaningful cards. One of this year's changes has Danville High School bringing its annual "Salute to Veterans" concert to a luncheon at Veterans Affairs Illiana Health Care System instead of having the audience

travel to the school at night. The 27th annual concert, set for noon to 1 p.m. in the activities room at the VA on East Main Street in Danville, will be a more intimate affair. About 60 to 75 students in the Danville High's band, orchestra and choir programs will perform three 15-minute sets. There's room for about 30 students on the stage at a time. The daytime concert will feature a variety of familiar patriotic music, such as "You're a Grand Old Flag" and an armed-forces medley. Danville High band director Ryan Krapf said when the veterans' concert was conceived many years ago, the idea was to bring veterans to the high school to celebrate them. "The last several years, that



File photo

Danville High School students are taking their annual 'Salute to Veterans' concert to Veterans Affairs Illiana Health Care System.

has become a much more challenging thing, not only for our community veterans but also for the VA," Krapf said. The VA was able to bring many veterans to the high

school in the past, but as the veteran population ages, it's become more challenging to transport them, and some veterans are unable to travel, he said. School officials have worked with the VA to "bring the show to them," Krapf said. The VA also has more staff on site who will be able to help veterans attend the free concert. The VA will provide a lunch for veterans as the students provide the entertainment. "We're trying this," Krapf said. "We're really excited about it." VA officials also are looking forward to having the students visit. Krapf said this could become permanent if it goes over well.

MAJ. GEN. JAMES MUKOYAMA

HE'S A MILITARY MAN THROUGH AND THROUGH

UI alumnus, one
of the first Asian
American U.S.
Army generals,
to speak at Chez
Veterans Center

By ROB LE CATES
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CHAMPAIGN — Not even the clerks at the grocery store or customer-service representatives are spared from Maj. Gen. James Mukoyama's overwhelming positivity. "I get more out of it than they do, because I see the effect when I'm in person with somebody," he said. "The vast majority of the time, they smile. I'd like to bring joy into people's lives." He even answers the phone with the same 21-word phrase — "Every day is a great day. I have my faith, my family and live in the finest country in the world." Mukoyama is the guest speaker for the University of Illinois Chez Veterans Center's Veterans Day ceremony, which begins at 11 a.m. Tuesday. This year marks the 10th anniversary of the building constructed to house the center. At the commemoration, he will talk more about his life and service.



Provided

Retired Maj. Gen. James Mukoyama earned one of the highest U.S. Army infantry badges, called the Master Combat Infantryman's Badge. He said only around 2 percent of people who test for it receive it. The honor is measured on the individual's knowledge, marksmanship and other infantry skills.

ties. In his junior year, he said, he decided to make the Army a career. "The university was simply a vehicle for me to get my commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army infantry," he said. "If it smelled or looked like the military, I was in it." He left the UI for training at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the infantry, where he received his airborne qualification and volunteered for Vietnam. But instead of being deployed, he faced a delayed entry. He spent some of that time working toward his master's degree, better qualifying him as an officer. When he finally was deployed, he was sent to Korea, not Vietnam, for 13 months of combat patrolling. After that stint overseas, he returned to Fort Lewis, Wash., for 18 months, training soldiers for the Vietnam War. He again volunteered for duty in Vietnam, and this time — in 1969 — he got his wish. He was to spend 12 months there as a company commander. He and his group battled the Viet Cong in the

Mekong Delta. At one point, his unit overran the opposing force's position. "The unit is most vulnerable right after a victory," he said. "It's just human nature to breathe a sigh of relief and kind of let your guard down." In his leadership as a commander, he couldn't afford to do so. He barked orders through the radio to platoon leaders to start recovering the wounded and prepare for potential enemy advances. "I suddenly stopped, and I looked at the three bodies at my feet. Only moments earlier, these were alive human beings," he said. "They were children of God. They were fighting for something just as important to them as I was fighting for, and I'm treating them just like bumps on the log." In those moments of realization, Mukoyama paused and thought about his Christian beliefs and remembered Jesus' words to pray for his enemies. He said he didn't get on his knees or hold a large ceremony, but he tore his mind away from the con-

flict to offer a prayer for the three Viet Cong soldiers. "This all took 30 sec-

onds in my mind and heart, but I was also praying for myself as much as I was praying for them,"

he said. "I knew something had happened to me, something had hardened my heart." This event opened his eyes and changed his outlook of war, he said. In 1986, at age 42, he was promoted to brigadier general, becoming one of the youngest generals in the Army and one of the first Asian Americans to hold the general or admiral title in the U.S. armed forces. Three years later, he was promoted to major general, commanding the 70th Training Division during Operation Desert Storm. He retired from service in 1995. He founded a faith-based nonprofit called Military Outreach USA 15 years ago, and also played an influential role as the president of the Army Reserves Association in the early 1990s. In his founding role, his goals pertained to getting homeless veterans off the street and reducing the suicide rate among veterans. Throughout service, veterans may sustain what Mukoyama called "invisible wounds." His organization helped alleviate that for service members. As president of the reserves association, he testified before Congress on matters concerning the country's reserve soldiers. "I got to a place where I'd have to choose between my career and my soldiers," he said. "There would be no choice, and I never regretted it for a second."

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WE DON'T KNOW
THEM ALL, BUT
WE OWE THEM
ALL
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WITH RESPECT, HONOR,
AND GRATITUDE
THANK YOU
VETERANS

VETERANS DAY

'VOICES TO VETERANS'

VETERAN STORYTELLER

Six Champaign County servicemembers, past and present, among those featured in Savoy author's latest book

By ROB LE CATES

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SAVOY — Several years ago, a Navy veteran of more than 25 years unexpectedly injected new life into his writing career when he decided to start telling the stories of otherwise-forgotten veterans.

David Grogan of Savoy was writing "The Hidden Key," the final book in his Steve Stilwell trilogy — a mystery series starring a fictional attorney — when he started a blog in the summer of 2017 to supplement his readership.

Little did he know that decision would shift him to the nonfiction side of the bookstore.

His blog, "Voices to Veterans," has featured people from all across the country and their journeys with military service.

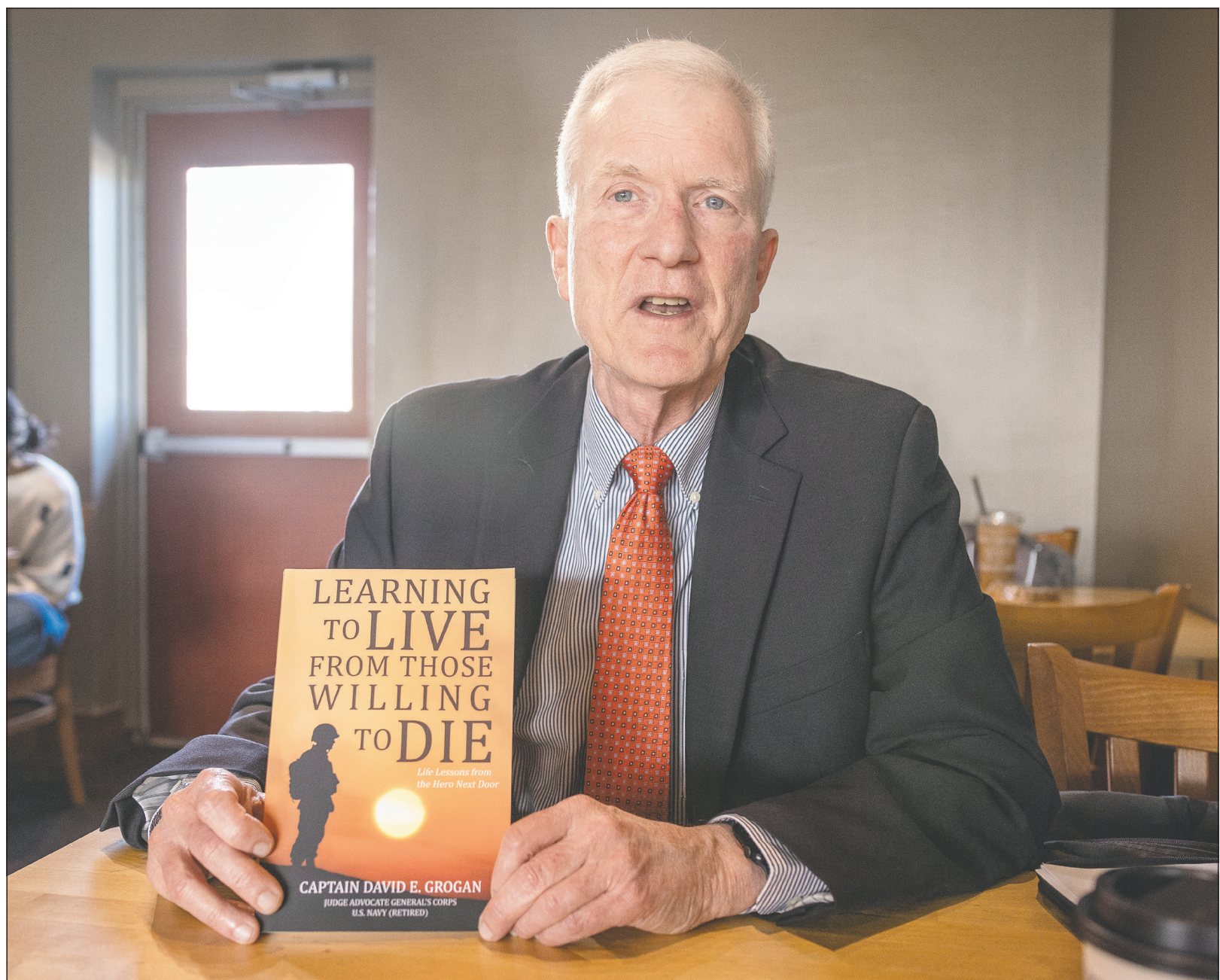
Grogan turned 26 of those monthly blog posts into his latest book, "Learning to Live from Those Willing to Die: Life Lessons from the Hero Next Door."

The book serves as a reminder of military service history.

"The importance is to preserve the stories of the veterans for their families and friends, and to make sure that as many people as possible know what it means to serve in the military," he said.

The stories of six Champaign-Urbana veterans made the cut when the book hit shelves in early September:

→ Marine 1st Lt. Iris Nigg Lundin was one of



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Navy veteran David Grogan of Savoy started as a fiction writer, but while working on the final book in his mystery trilogy, he started documenting veterans stories on a blog called 'Voices to Veterans.' That blog gave rise to his latest work, 'Learning to Live from Those Willing to Die: Life Lessons from the Hero Next Door.'

the first female officers and one of the first four women to earn Aerial

Navigator wings. She died in 2020 at the age of 101.

→ Army Sgt. 1st Class Hub Burnett deployed to Saudi Arabia in 1992, served in a hospital in Baghdad in 2004 and was noted for his leadership skills.

→ Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Jim McCune traveled the world aboard the USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63).

→ Airman Ronnie Turner Winston enlisted with no prior experience during the Gulf War and continues to serve in community organizations.

→ Army Spec. Eric Ferguson couldn't pay for college, so he enlisted to serve in Operation Desert Storm, not knowing where his service would take him.

→ Army Sgt. Richard Berg deployed in Vietnam for one year and maintained a radio station at the top of a 200-foot-tall hill north of Quy Nhon and is known for his sense of humor.

Veterans became heroes for Grogan while growing up outside Cleveland. His father served as an Air Force pilot, and his uncle was a sailor.

At 18, he left for the College of William and Mary, where he met his college sweetheart, Sharon. After graduation, the two left for Houston, began their careers and married two years later.

After three years of reviewing real-estate deals as a public accountant, he and his wife left for Charlottesville, Va., with new goals on the horizon.

He started law school at the University of Virginia, and while there, attended a party that altered his career's trajectory. An intriguing anecdote from a Navy officer named "Whit" about his escapades convinced Grogan to enlist in the same branch.

During his 26 years of service, he traveled the world; assisted the fight against pirates and international terrorism; traveled to county capitals and met royalty; deployed to the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf on a nuclear-

"I thought what I would really like to do is capture the lessons that we can learn from these veterans' lives so that those lessons aren't lost when they pass away."

— **DAVID GROGAN** about his latest book, 'Learning to Live from Those Willing to Die: Life Lessons from the Hero Next Door'

powered aircraft carrier and launched in planes from the ship underway; and prosecuted and defended court-martial cases.

He published professional articles in the Virginia Law Review, the Virginia Journal of International Law and the Naval Law Review. He also appeared in the U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings magazine and the "War on the Rocks" blog.

Through Grogan's blog, he helped veterans who never got to share their stories connect with loved ones.

The book's foreword notes: "An email from the daughter of one of the veterans whose story I'd written validated the transition. She said she sat down with her boys, and they read about what their grandfather did during the Vietnam War. They hadn't heard the stories, and without the 'Voices to Veterans' blog post about her father, they might never have."

"That's when I realized how important veterans' stories are to veterans' families and friends."

The book takes readers through the servicemembers' lives.

"If you think about it in terms of a motion picture, it's fast motion until you get to the military," he said. "The military goes normal speed and then fast motion after they get out."

On a single neighborhood walk, he committed to the blog and also spotted a car with a Vietnam service license plate that had pulled into a driveway near him.

The driver, Richard Berg, ended up as Grogan's first interview and is featured in the book's "Sometimes You Just Gotta Laugh" chapter.

In January 2024, a

heart-related health scare landed Grogan in the hospital for a short visit. He then started to see life through a different lens, reinforcing the need to write and preserve those stories.

After he left the hospital, he started working toward the publication of his latest book.

Grogan contemplated how to categorize each veteran's story. He wanted to avoid repetitive formats, like by service or conflict, because it would be a book with another listing of stories. He decided to analyze each story and divide the chapters into life lessons.

"I thought what I would really like to do is capture the lessons that we can learn from these veterans' lives so that those lessons aren't lost when they pass away," he said.

Grogan vowed to use the stories he collected to give back to veterans.

"I've never profited off of any of these stories, and when I do these stories for the veterans, they're all free," he said. "I promised (the veterans) I wouldn't make any money off the book and I would donate 100 percent of my royalties to charity."

All profits will be donated to America's Vet-Dogs, an organization that places service dogs with veterans with physical disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder and those in the rehabilitation process — for free.

The charity already received around \$1,000 from sales and started the advertising process recently.

"This book is relevant to a much broader audience, and it's interesting for people who are veterans, but it isn't just a book about old veterans," he said.



Join us in thanking the men and women who served our country, preserving our freedom.

Let us not forget the supreme sacrifice these brave individuals were prepared to make to protect the America we love so much.

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November 11, 2025

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