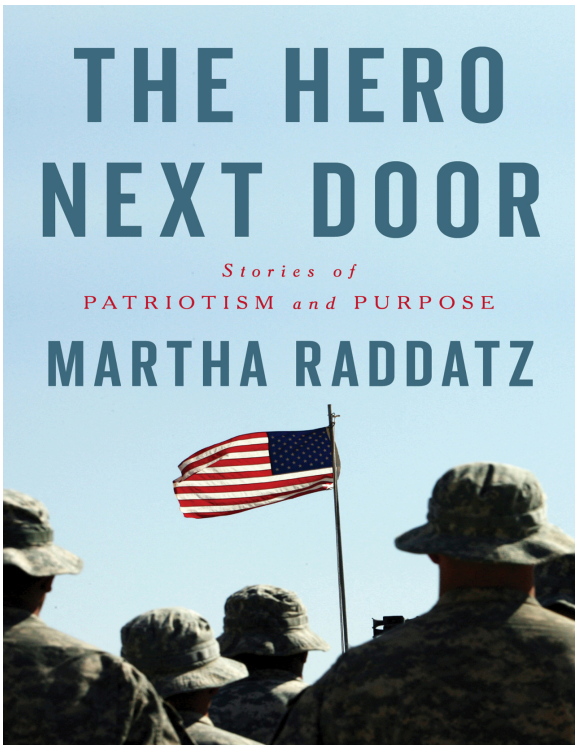


ebookbig.com

or scan the QR code to access the digital study portal.

Ham in 2004, during one of my many trips to Iraq, when he served as commander of US forces in Mosul.

The gray light of the day had begun to fade, and General Ham turned our group toward the large American flag that has flown over the cemetery since it was established as a temporary burial ground on June 6, 1944, the day of the D-Day landings. Several members of our group had been asked to help in the lowering of the flag. The cemetery historian explained the procedure.

As we listened to him describe the protocol for this simple ceremony, I spotted an elderly man in the crowd of tourists nearby, wearing a black baseball cap with giant gold letters that read: "Korean War Veteran." He was a big man, stooped and a bit fragile looking. He watched our group intently, although none among the group were in uniform. I learned later that his name was Martin LeMaster and he had served as a corporal in the US Marine Corps. LeMaster may have been elderly, but there was nothing wrong with his hearing; he had listened to every word the historian had uttered about the flag-folding protocol, and his reaction was swift.

His shuffle gained power as he made his way to our group and zeroed in on the young man at my side. LeMaster raised a finger to the young man's chest.

"Don't you know how to fold an American flag?" he asked. There was a bitterness in his voice. It was an accusation.

The young man straightened up. He was small, in his twenties, wearing a checkered cotton shirt and khaki pants, indistinguishable from any number of college students or young professionals back home.

He stood wide-eyed and nearly froze in place as LeMaster hovered over him. "Yes, sir, I do," he answered quietly. Nothing more.

The moment hung there in the rain, the ceremony on hold because an old veteran had challenged a young man in civilian clothes, questioning his knowledge and perhaps his patriotism as well. Neither man seemed inclined to say more. It was only a matter of seconds, but to me it seemed an endless wait.

Mercifully, the leader of our group stepped forward, and with a few words he said what needed to be said.

"Sir," he began, addressing the older Marine, "my name is General Carter Ham and I would like you to meet Staff Sergeant Salvatore Giunta. Salvatore

Giunta, to whom President Obama is going to present the Medal of Honor."

The Medal of Honor. It's hard to overstate what that means. Certainly, US Marine Corps Corporal LeMaster, veteran of the Korean War, needed no explainer. The Medal of Honor is the US Armed Forces' highest military decoration. It's the oldest such award, and of the many millions of Americans who have fought for their country, fewer than four thousand have received it. Most were awarded during the Civil War, and more recently nearly all have been given posthumously. Giunta would be the first living Medal of Honor recipient since the Vietnam War.

If Martin LeMaster's challenge had seemed over-the-top, a small but jarring aggression in the middle of a cemetery, I felt for him now, standing there. He looked at General Ham and turned back to Staff Sergeant Giunta, a young man who knew how to fold his country's flag and who had known things and done things for his country that were hard for those of us who never served to fathom. Even for a veteran of the Korean War.

LeMaster let out a stunned and sober, "Whoa," and took a step backwards. And then, pulling himself upright with all his strength, the old Marine slowly lifted his hand in a salute to the young soldier, a faint tear of gratitude in his eye. Sal Giunta returned the gesture, saluting the veteran who had fought in a war decades before he was born. And then Giunta said, "Your service allows us to live the way we do. We all owe you thanks."

General Ham invited the old veteran to help with the sunset ceremony. As "Taps" played and a small crowd gathered, these veterans, one a Medal of Honor recipient, the other a proud veteran of the Korean War, lowered the flag over the graves of the thousands of service members who had died in World War II.

Martin LeMaster told me later it was the greatest day of his life since his return from Korea. He had also learned a lesson, standing on that hallowed ground—one I had learned in my own way long before: There is no sure way to spot a hero.

How could anyone have known Sal Giunta was a hero? Who would have imagined it, looking at him there, in his ordinary civilian attire? Just a few years prior to that day in Normandy, he had been mopping the floors at a Subway sandwich shop in Iowa. But he had felt a call to duty. He joined the Army and went to war. In October 2007, at twenty-two, in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley, while under withering enemy fire, he exhibited what his Medal of Honor citation calls "unwavering courage, selflessness and decisive leadership." Extraordinary attributes that helped "defeat an enemy ambush and recover a fellow American soldier from the enemy."

On that afternoon in Normandy, after the flag had come down and the last light of the day was gone, we were leaving the cemetery, retracing our steps along a row of the white crosses. It was still raining. Sal Giunta was at my side, quiet as we walked, moved by what had happened with the old Marine.

There among the crosses, he leaned my way and said, in a voice just above a whisper, "I'm nothing compared to any of these men."

That is a sentiment I have heard often during my decades covering the remarkable 9/11 generation of warriors and their families. Whether it is a survivor from a bloody battle, or a spouse back home dealing with loss, none consider what they have done anything other than ordinary. That is true of everyone in this book. They don't believe they deserve to be called heroes. Perhaps there is a lesson in that. The one sure way to spot a hero may be to look for the ones who insist they are not.

People sometimes ask why I am so interested in stories about war and our troops. I understand why they ask. I've had the privilege to cover all kinds of stories, and at this stage of my career I could turn down certain assignments—but I run first to the world's conflict zones. While I've reported on my share of presidential campaigns and natural disasters and other issues that have little or nothing to do with the military, when I get on a plane for ABC News, it's more often than not to go to a battlefield or a warship, a military base or military hospital. I have no military background of my own, no ancestral ties to the

military, and I didn't grow up in a family or culture that was tethered to war or the military life. But I have interviewed dozens of American generals and battlefield commanders, hundreds of soldiers and Marines, and I've made sure to meet their families too.

I grew up as a fatherless, scaredy-cat little girl. I tell people this when they wonder why I ever go to dangerous places, as a way of convincing them that I am hardly a thrill seeker, and I certainly don't take long trips to Iraq or Afghanistan or Ukraine for the rush of adrenaline. But perhaps that childhood fear has something to do with why I go. I remember hating the fact that I was so often afraid, and I remember thinking, even at a young age, that I wanted to do something to change that.

Going to a war is an aggressive way to counter one's fears, but the men and women I've met in war zones rarely seem frightened—or at least they seem to have conquered their fears and learned to face them. Or disguise them. It's a quality that can be both awe-inspiring and sometimes terribly sad—I have witnessed countless examples of both—and it has always intrigued me.

Another, simpler answer: You learn in these places how a moment can reveal character, and I have learned valuable lessons from the servicemen and -women I have come to know, life lessons about courage and selflessness, purpose and resilience, that have relevance for us all. I also learned, early on in my time as a war correspondent, that true heroes are rarely the ones you'd imagine. The generals have said this to me too. All too often, the swaggering soldier or Marine who exudes bravado and bluster isn't the one who shines in the moment. And I have been moved by those who aren't battlefield heroes, but who suffer the loss of a father or mother, brother or sister, son or daughter, husband or wife—or whose loved ones return home as shadows of who they were before they went to war. These people serve their country too, in powerful ways.

From the first day I started covering the Pentagon more than thirty years ago, I kept two words in my head like a mantra: "Respect. Remember."

At first, those words were a reminder of how to cover the institution of the military; to hold it accountable, to press for truth, and to do so from a starting point of respect, remembering what it had done for all Americans. I wanted to

be worthy of the military's trust, so that I could be the first to report difficult stories as well as covering missions and victories.

Since then, those words have come to characterize how I approach covering stories of individual soldiers and of people touched by the military. I have witnessed the extraordinary courage of young service members and their families and watched from close range—in battlefields and on the home front and in the hospitals in between—as these people show remarkable courage and resilience and conquer unimaginable pain.

Too often their stories are lost or overrun by the broader narratives of the wars they are sent to fight—that's the nature of a busy news cycle. But I find it hard to forget or walk away.

So that's one more answer to that question. One more reason why I keep going. And one reason why I am writing this book.

Few Americans have heard of Captain Rosemary Mariner. Or Dr. Rocco Armonda. Or Specialist Steven Schulz and his mom, Debbie. Fewer still will know Josh Webster, Kevin Mott Jr., Danielle Thiriot, or Mark Little. The list is long, far longer than this book can cover, of men and women who have answered the call, time and again, people whose valor and selflessness know no bounds.

When you spend so much time covering war, you meet men and women at all ranks, people who are not easily forgotten. Some of their stories are unhappy ones—tragic, even—but many are inspiring and uplifting. I feel privileged to have found these people and they have stayed with me. I'm writing this book because I think every American should know their names.

I first met Sergeant Mark Little in an American combat support hospital in Baghdad, on a cloudless day in September 2007. I was watching as a young man was brought in on a stretcher. Even from my vantage point it was clear: Both his legs were gone, or about to be.

The remarkable thing about Mark Little wasn't his injury. It was a tough time in a tough war, and sadly, he was hardly alone. What struck me was that

from his very first moments in that setting, under such terrible circumstances, he was smiling. Painkillers, sure, but he had just suffered a grievous, life-altering injury and he was determined to fight his way through it.

I made a mental note: "Whenever I get back home, I'm going to find Mark Little's family." I knew that if my son had gone through anything like what he had suffered, and someone had been with him, I would have wanted to talk to that someone. I would have wanted to know.

I had overheard Mark say he was from Falls Church, Virginia, not far from where I live. Two weeks later, I met his mother at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. Her son had been brought there to continue his recovery.

She was appreciative and of course she wanted to know everything about that day in Baghdad. We spoke for a long time, at Mark's side. At one point, I asked Mark about the moment he'd realized how bad his injuries were.

"Ma'am, they aren't bad," he said with a smile. "I'm alive."

In this book, I share stories about people I have interviewed over the years who have shaped how I think about service, honor, and war. Individually, their stories are deeply inspiring. Together, they offer something beyond inspiration: insight into what it means to live with a life-defining courage and sense of purpose.

Unlike Sal Giunta, who received the Medal of Honor he so richly deserves, none of the people in this book have received national recognition. They represent the generation that has answered the call to service since 9/11, who collectively serve as powerful antidotes to the corrosive cynicism that prevails in so much of our culture today. In that sense this is a patriotic book.

It is also personal for me. I have known many of these people and their families for decades. These aren't portraits drawn from internet searches; they are people whose stories are in my reporter's notebook, etched in my memory—in my heart. A few of those profiled here have intersected with one another over the years, but I wanted to give each their own separate chapter.

So in these pages you will meet a combat neurosurgeon. A lifesaving pararescueman. A fighter pilot who is also an artist and finds a profound, Zen-like peace in the sky. One soldier who laughs off his injuries and a Marine who became a successful entrepreneur, whose startups help people who have suffered from the same spinal injury that altered his life. They were talented battlefield leaders who were loved and revered by their men.

There are trailblazers here as well. A woman who inspired a generation of combat pilots, and the extraordinary pilot who followed in her "contrails." And there are mothers. Their sons are heroes, no question; but as I have come to know the moms, it's their humanity and selfless service that have stayed with me.

Taken together, these stories remind us of the power of selflessness and commitment to a common purpose. They offer profound lessons in leadership and response to crisis—even, in some cases, at low rungs of an organization—that will be valuable to people in any line of work or human endeavor. They remind us that life can turn on a moment, and that the outcome can be determined by both the hand of fate and the degree or preparation for whatever that moment may bring. They tell us that all the division and cynicism roiling through the nation's bloodstream isn't a given—in fact, in one of our nation's largest and most important institutions, they are hard to find. They remind us that as a nation, we are woefully disconnected from the men and women who are sent to fight our wars.

Visiting Normandy that day, I was deeply moved by the act of remembering the hundreds of thousands of people who shipped out on D-Day, many running toward their deaths to stop Nazi Germany from overtaking Europe. I thought, too, of the mothers and fathers, spouses, children, sisters, and friends whose own courage held up the country, those soldiers left behind. Regardless of our politics or thoughts about any given war, the safety of this country depends on people who give deeply of themselves. I'm not here to judge the wars themselves, or how they were prosecuted. Readers will make up their own minds, or probably already have. It is those who went to war I want to honor. They volunteer and get to work, ready to sacrifice for the greater good. For the person next to them. For the mission. They might have had no idea what shape the sacrifice could

take. But they go, and for many, when their moment comes, they are unselfish. Unflinching. They are heroes.

In 2024 I found retired Army neurosurgeon Rocco Armonda in eastern Ukraine, in a hospital near the front lines. He had been working long hours in a crowded surgery ward, his patients among the more than fourteen thousand soldiers and civilians brought during the past year into the triage wing of Dnipro's Mechnikov Hospital. It was nonstop work, awful work, a steady flow of shrapnel wounds and brain injuries and lost limbs and worse. The Ukrainian doctors and nurses were exhausted but determined; many said they considered themselves every bit the fighters that the soldiers were.

"It was a simple call," Rocco Armonda told me. "One of my old Army buddies was helping Ukrainians doing trauma work and said they needed neurosurgeons, and I was there."

"I was there." I have heard that sentiment often from service members. "You have a problem? I'm coming—I'm on my way...." So many veterans feel the tug of mission long after their military service is over. I have seen the power and impact of that devotion up close. In this case, in the tragic yet inspiring setting of a frontline surgery ward.

Rocco Armonda was one of those surgeons who could have practiced his craft anywhere, but he was a West Point grad, and so he took his skills to Afghanistan and then to Iraq, and then to the renowned Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, where he was on duty in 2006 when my colleague Bob Woodruff came in clinging to life by the thinnest of threads.

Dr. Armonda was there. There, for a day and night of lifesaving operations on Bob Woodruff's brain, after he had been gravely wounded by a roadside bomb in Iraq.

Two decades later, I had found Dr. Armonda again, now a volunteer in another war zone, joining the long days and nights on duty at Mechnikov Hospital where he says they have seen ten times the number of traumatic brain injures he saw in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rosemary Mariner is the oldest member of the group in these pages. "Trailblazer" is an overused term, but that's the word for her. From an early age, growing up in San Diego, Rosemary had a passion for flying. Her mother was a World War II Navy nurse, and her father served in the Army Air Corps and then as an Air Force attack pilot during the Korean War. Rosemary's interest in flying for the military may also have been kindled by tragedy; her father and his copilot were killed in a plane crash in 1956. Rosemary was three years old when she lost her dad—something she and I had in common.

As a young girl, Rosemary had watched planes at Naval Air Station Miramar and worked odd jobs, cleaning houses and washing aircraft, to earn money for flying lessons and flight time. It wasn't long before she began piling up the "firsts."

She was the first woman to graduate from Purdue University's aeronautics program—which she did at age nineteen. She got her pilot's license and was one of the first eight women selected for the Navy's pilot training program. In 1974, Rosemary was among the first six women to earn wings as a US Naval Aviator and was the first woman to fly a frontline tactical strike aircraft.

First. First. First.

Trailblazer.

There would be more glass ceilings to break. 1982: first female aviator assigned to an aircraft carrier. 1987: first woman screened for command of an aviation unit in the US Navy. And in 1990, first woman to command a Navy aviation squadron.

By the time I met her, in 1993, Rosemary was already a superstar pilot; I just hadn't known. She told me her goal was to repeal the laws that forbade women from flying in combat. In the years that followed, I watched her fight for that. I also saw that beyond her own successes, Rosemary was playing a "Mama Bear" role for many young women in the military, as they faced sexism and abuse on their journeys up a very difficult ladder. She did not want special treatment for women—she wanted equal treatment.