

A 9/11 ceremony

# FOCUS

## Marines Foundation is helping veterans treat the wounds we can't see

Story by Robin Seaton Jefferson Photo by Michael Schlueter

One became a special agent in the FBI. Another served Homeland Security. Still another, with three Purple Hearts to his credit, went on to work as an undercover police officer. These are just three of the more than 65 U.S. Marine veterans who formed the Midwest Marines Foundation, since renamed FOCUS Marines Foundation (FMF).

Formed in 2010, FOCUS focused on helping wounded Marines and Navy Corpsmen returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. A Missouri corporation and qualified 501(c)(3) organization, FOCUS seeks participants for its eight-day program who are veterans of the post-9/11 conflicts, who have sustained significant physical or mental injuries, and who are no longer qualified for military service. Though the foundation was formed by Marines to serve Marines, the program now considers other military service men and women as well.

Physical injuries of war are often obvious, but it's the invisible wounds that many times ruin lives, said Ted Kretschmar, vice president of development. Kretschmar served six years in the Navy and four years in the Marine Corps between Korean and Vietnam wars.

"Between 60 and 80 percent of the Marines who come to FOCUS have physical wounds, but helping with those is not the goal of this program. Physical wounds will heal with help from places like the VA. It's the invisible wounds, the mental wounds, that are the big issue," said Kretschmar.

Inflicted with traumatic brain injury (TBI), post traumatic stress (PTS), or even military sexual trauma (MST), male and female candidates for FOCUS are isolated, adrift, usually unemployed and sometimes homeless.

"They struggle with feelings of worthlessness, loss and survivor's guilt," Kretschmar said. "Many admit to attempts to take their lives, some repeated attempts. Our goal is to reverse the downward spiral in which these veterans are trapped."

The retired Marines who started FOCUS came together in 2009. They wanted to provide programs to help wounded warriors transition from military to civilian lives.

"Most are Vietnam-era veterans who came home to a very poor reception. They did not want these returning Marines to go through what they had," Kretschmar said.

Some things are very different from the experiences of the Vietnam veterans.

"A lot of our veterans who have terrible wounds that they would not have survived in other wars, even Vietnam, are triaged and brought out immediately. So we have saved some who would have died in other wars," Kretschmar said. "All of a sudden these very proud Marines, in a heartbeat, they are back at home, they have no mission, no command. They have lost their buddies, their disciplines. They try to get employment, but they can't. They eventually retreat to their apartments or their homes, isolate from the general population, from their families. Their wives often take off because they can't deal with them."

It's a situation where everyone suffers, Kretschmar said, the Marines and their families.

"These guys come back from the Middle East and their families are expecting the same person to come back, and the same person doesn't come back," he said, adding that the inability to deal with the transition and the emotional pain causes some 23 veterans to take their own lives each day in the United States.

"Think about it. Over two million service men and women survived the fight in the Middle East. At least 25 percent of them have invisible wounds."

The geographical reach of FOCUS is nationwide. Participants have come from 44 states, most referred to the program from one or more of the following: District Injured Support Coordinators (DISCs), part of the United States Marine Corps Wounded

Warrior Regiment; the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society Combat Casualty Visiting Nurses (CCVNs); past FOCUS participants; The Mission Continues; the Renewal Coalition; and Marines for Life.

The FOCUS program is a week-long course held four times each year on a secluded farm near Augusta, Missouri, with rolling hills, lush woodlands and a large lake. There is a bunkhouse with a queen-sized bunk bed for each participant and a meeting room and game room on the upper level. A large hall outfitted with tables and comfortable rolling chairs provides a place to learn, eat and enjoy much-needed fellowship. Marines are offered recreational time with hiking, fishing and exercising. Program content is presented by a variety of different instructors and can be broken down into two main components – personal transformation and vocational. Classes are offered with open discussions, open-ended questions, as well as journaling and reflection, all with the goal of making one responsible to – and accountable for – themselves. Following completion of the course, Marine mentors maintain contact with FOCUS graduates.

The first three days of the course are devoted to personal transformation. Facilitated by an acclaimed international speaker with more than twenty years' experience in human behavior, the classes help participants to no longer see themselves as victims; to make positive choices for their futures and take responsibility for themselves and their actions; and to set goals for their lives.

The last two days are centered on vocational pursuits. Participants complete a skills survey and a resume and complete mock interviews with professional, corporate, human resources representatives. They learn computer and networking skills, as well as tools for researching and applying for educational, employment and volunteer opportunities.

Had Marine veteran Corporal Enoch Pashby not come to FOCUS, he said he would certainly be "dead or in prison." Today the war veteran is married, has three children, and is pursuing becoming a pastor and planting a church. He flies to St. Louis from Rapid City, South Dakota, four times a year to mentor other veterans like himself. He brings his pure-bred golden retriever, Chaos, with him. The dog, though a trusted friend, works for Pashby. Chaos calms Pashby's anxiety.

Pashby was on active duty for seven and a half years. He was deployed to Bosnia, Iraq, Okinawa and the Philippines during that time.

"As Marines, we are trained to pay attention to all of our surroundings. While driving a car or going into a building, we case out all of the avenues of attack, ambush spots, escape and egress routes. It's exhausting to be on alert all the time," Pashby explained. "Dogs are naturally hyper alert. When I'm in public, I don't feel the need to pay attention to everyone around me. I just pay attention to him."



**Gunnery Sergeant Nick Popaditch**  
(motivational speaker)  
greeting FOCUS participant

Just before Pashby came to FOCUS he was "plotting revenge" on his wife, who had been cheating on him. "This place completely changed my life. I'm absolutely sure if I didn't come here, I'd be dead or in prison."

Pashby said he has never regretted serving his country. In fact, he now believes he endured suffering so that he might help others. "I look back on my life and every time I was inches or seconds

from death, I asked myself, 'Why am I still alive?' I firmly believe I was kept alive because now I have what I consider a passport to reach out to other people."

He said he doesn't understand why anxiety crippled him after war. He never felt it before serving.

"Psychology is illusive. You can take two people and put them in the same situation, and one comes out ok and the other doesn't. I had to open my mind to the fact that I was severely broken and needed to change, and that strength came from God. It's like he was saying, 'Now

you know you're not strong enough. It's my turn.' As a Marine, I want to know I'm strong enough, but the truth is I'm not strong enough without God's help."

Speaking anonymously, one founder of the group said FOCUS has changed his life every bit as much as the fellow Marines he serves.

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is that bugle call. It may be the most performed piece of music in America, played every day in virtually every corner of the country.”

Villanueva retired from the U.S. Air Force after serving 23 years with The USAF Band in Washington, D.C. He is considered the country’s foremost expert on military bugle calls, particularly the call of “Taps.” While in the Air Force, he was the Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC) of The USAF Band’s State Funeral Plans. He was also the NCOIC of the command post at Andrews AFB, which oversaw the arrival and departure ceremonies for the late Presidents Ronald Reagan and

## live “TAPS”

Gerald Ford. As a ceremonial trumpeter, Villanueva has participated in well over 5,000 ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. In 2007, he was inducted into the Buglers Hall of Fame, the first active duty military bugler to be so honored.

Villanueva said “Taps” was specifically composed for the bugle and is unique to the U.S. military. It is sounded at funerals, wreath-layings and memorial services.

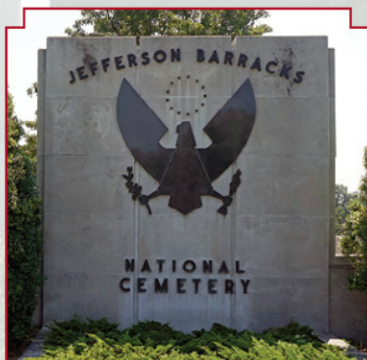
“Its plain but haunting melody consists of just 24 notes and is usually recognized within the first three. With four different tones and lasting less than a minute, ‘Taps’ has the power to evoke emotion from the most battle-hardened warrior,” he said. “The military’s only bugle call played slowly throughout, it has the dual purpose of signaling the day’s end and serving as musical honors to service members who have died.”

The song’s name derives from the three distinct drum taps also used to signal “lights out.” It is performed by polished military professionals, school band students and volunteers alike at veterans’ funerals.

Like “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Villanueva said, “Taps” was born during a war, but its origin has been clouded by competing accounts. For the various accounts of its origins, visit [www.tapsbugler.com](http://www.tapsbugler.com).

While still sounded every evening at military bases to signal the “day is done,” Villanueva said, “the notes of ‘Taps’ have become part of our national conscience.”

Hershey is also a bugler-for-hire. He currently plays for funeral homes and mortuaries in the St. Louis area upon request, including Baue, Stygar, Kutis, Schrader, Hutchens and Collier’s, among others. For more information on Hershey, visit [www.livetaps.org](http://www.livetaps.org). □



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“There is nothing that any of us has done in our lives that even comes close to this. Nothing.”

The single female in a recent FOCUS class said she had finally decided to put away her grieving. She had served in mortuary affairs during post-9/11 conflicts. That means she had prepared the bodies of the fallen Marines as they were brought home. The experience left her with debilitating survivor’s guilt. She said FOCUS changed her life.

Some 503 veterans have completed 19 FOCUS sessions since the camp opened four years ago. From the board members of FOCUS to the Monday Night Brisket Ladies who prepare a meal for upwards of 100 people, over 140 volunteers are changing the lives of servicepeople from all over the country. From the cleaning people, to those who purchase the food that is prepared, to the financial contributors, everyone at FOCUS is about the business of helping serve American heroes.

There is no charge to veterans for participation in FOCUS. All transportation, meals, lodging, instruction and materials are provided.

“FOCUS is the beginning of the rest of the veteran’s life, a chance to make different choices and take different paths,” Kretschmar said. “Team Leaders, DISCs, and Combat Casualty Nurses all contribute to that support.”

Kretschmar said, although there are many organizations providing referrals, FOCUS lives by the soldier’s creed that has been around for as long as warfare itself — leave no man behind.

“If there is a vet out there who is suffering, we want to help them,” Kretschmar said.

FOCUS can send a DISC — a District Injured Service Coordinator who is supplied by the Marine Corps — to follow up with wounded Marines to be an advocate for them and offer help or a nurse with the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society. Friends or family members may refer them, or veterans also can sign up themselves. There is an application on the website at: [www.FocusMarinesFoundation.org](http://www.FocusMarinesFoundation.org). □



**FOCUS MARINES FOUNDATION**  
Serving Wounded Warriors