



2023-24 ANNUAL REPORT

*“Action is the foundational key to all success”
Pablo Picasso*

This quote serves as a reminder that no matter how grand or small our ambitions may be, taking action is the crucial element that propels us towards success. It emphasizes the significance of action as the fundamental ingredient in achieving any form of accomplishment. Success requires action.

The memories and stories the Gold Star Families share are truly inspiring and push us to ride one more mile, run one more mile or just do one more event! Throughout this journey, the Gold Star Mission Team is honored to amplify the voices of the families sharing the stories of our Fallen Heroes.

The Gold Star Mission is grateful to the many dedicated volunteers, event participants, sponsors and donors for their continued support! The annual report emphasizes many of our successes and accomplishments, made possible by so many! Please accept our sincerest appreciation for your efforts in making the Gold Star Mission successful!

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From the President

ALWAYS REMEMBER!

Always Remember, Never Forget has been the message and the foundation of the Gold Star Mission since it began in 2017 to honor and remember those post 911 fallen heroes. We honor these heroes and the Gold Star Families by telling the stories of how they lived so that their names are never forgotten. Various events are held annually which include the Gold Star 500, General Logan 200 and the Run for the Fallen to raise money and award scholarships in honor of these post 911 fallen Illinois heroes.



As we start to look at this message the saying Always Remember, Never Forget can mean something different to everyone depending on how and why you engage with the Gold Star Families. When we start to look at the layers it depends on your knowledge and why you engage with the Gold Star Mission and the Gold Star Families of these fallen heroes.

When I joined as a bike rider of the Gold Star 500 in 2018, I had a love for cycling and knew one of these fallen heroes Jacob Palmatier and his family. At the time Jacob had no one riding in his honor and I felt obligated to take my passion for cycling and ride in honor of someone I knew personally. When I arrived the night before the beginning of the ride I met many volunteers, veterans, fellow riders, police officers and a Gold Star Family. As I went to introduce myself to Nita Cross, I asked why she had volunteered. She explained to me that she was a Gold Star Mom, and her son Kyle Wehrly was killed in action in 2005. At the time all I could say to her was that I was sorry for her loss and at that point I was at a loss for words.

During the ride in 2018 I began to listen and understand what the Gold Star Mission was all about. At each stop we met even more volunteers, first responders, people who came out in honor of their local heroes and yes, even more Gold Star Families.

As I listened to Nita and other Gold Star Families, I started to notice that they wanted to tell how their heroes lived their lives and to share these stories so that their name would never die. I also noticed and felt a bond to my fellow riders, volunteers, first responders, veterans, Gold Star Families and to the individuals who came out in honor of these heroes that I had never experienced. This was a very emotional experience and the start of a family bond that I wanted to continue to be part of.

Each year since then my involvement with the Gold Star Mission has allowed me to help tell the stories that the Gold Star Families share about their fallen heroes. We do this by word of mouth, annual events and videos honoring these fallen heroes. As I began to break down the layers of what Always Remember, Never Forget meant to me my introduction to the Gold Star Mission and the Gold Star Families has gone from I am sorry for your loss to please tell me a story about them.

Since I joined in 2018 the number of individuals who come out at each of the stops has grown substantially. Emotions are high when we ride into a town, and we see all the individuals including school children who come out in honor of their local heroes. I feel invigorated and honored to ride in honor of all these fallen heroes. As I continue to hear the stories of these fallen heroes, I also tell the stories about Jacob Palmatier and why I ride in his honor.

The question that I ask you is where you see yourself falling in the layers of Always Remember, Never Forget. You may be a rider, runner, volunteer, scholarship recipient, teacher, neighbor, someone in the local community, student or a first responder. If this is your first encounter as someone who meets a Gold Star Family, take time to introduce yourself and engage in a conversation asking for those stories. This will start the beginning of you better honoring and understanding these families. As you learn their stories you will find yourself asking for more. This will allow you to tell these stories to others and you will begin to feel a connection and a bond. If you find yourself as someone who can share a story with others, tell those stories. As we have seen many times other stories will also come out that you have not yet heard. The more we learn about these fallen heroes the more we want to know.

NEVER FORGET

Barry Tobias
President, Gold Star Mission

What We're About

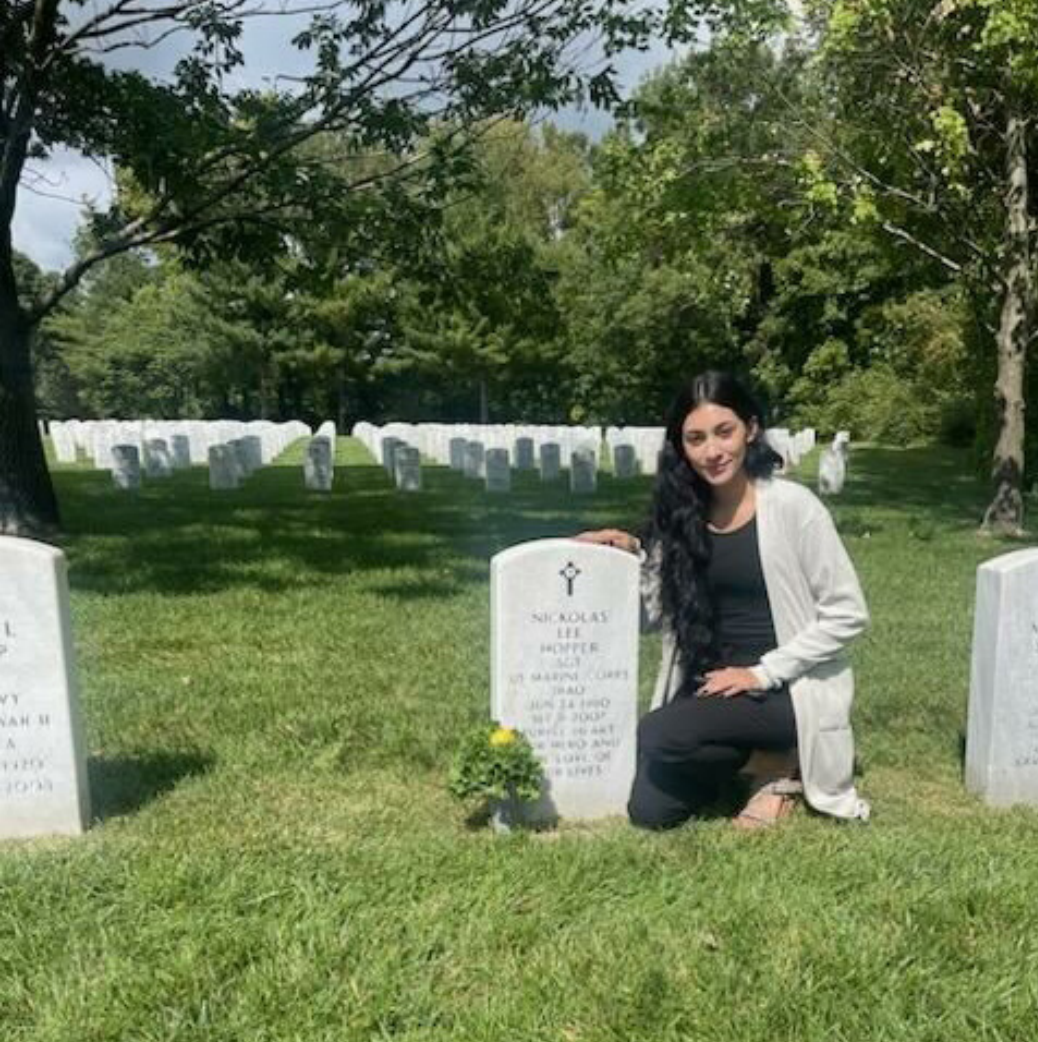


The Gold Star Mission is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization, established in 2017 in Springfield, Illinois after several veterans and friends were moved by stories of the Gold Star Families that lost a loved one in Afghanistan or Iraq. What started as a desire to provide scholarships for surviving children has evolved into a widespread effort to assist Gold Star Families and others preserving the memory of our Fallen Heroes. Since then, we have awarded \$283,000.00 in scholarships honoring our Illinois Fallen.



Additionally, we started The Fallen Heroes History Project, a remembrance program made up of 25-30 minute videos commemorating the life lived as told by their Gold Star Families, fellow service members, friends, and others. To date 14 videos have been posted to goldstarmission.com and there is another half dozen in the works. The success of both programs can be directly tied to maintaining an all-volunteer ran organization partnering with local businesses and organizations that also want to raise awareness of our Fallen Service Members and their Gold Star Families.

Family Profile: The Hoppers



The two joined the team of cyclist and support staff in the parking lot of Sheels in the early morning hours of their first day. The amateur cyclists felt overwhelmed but cared for, especially by the three Gold Star Mothers, on the ride as part of the support staff.

On the 4th day of the ride, Eric asked Andrew to step up to begin the ride with the motto of their mission, the young man belted out, "ALWAYS REMEMBER. NEVER FORGET!!" The rest of the team shouted with the same gusto and repeated it two more times before the cyclist took off to finish the 100-mile ride for that day.

Sleeping and eating in various armories and school gyms each day was a challenge for the 18-year-old teenager. By the 4th day he was awake with the rest of his cot mates, bright and early in the morning. Although Andrew didn't ride all 500 miles, he did complete over 100 miles riding on a borrowed bike! He was sore but he did not say a word of how he felt, to his captain or other cyclist.

Tajia enjoyed and felt so honored to have the privilege to be a part of such an amazing team that would go to such great lengths to honor her hero and all the other fallen men and women. She also enjoyed hearing the tear filled stories from the Gold Star Families after each evening meal.

The first 500 mile bicycle ride for 18 year old Andrew Hopper and 24-year-old Tajia Gonzalez began September 19th in Springfield, Illinois. The two first time cyclists traveled from Washington state to Illinois to join the Gold Star Mission (GSM) team in honoring their Fallen Hero, Sgt Nicholas Hopper. Andrew was almost 3 years old when his father passed away, in their home at Cherry Point Marine Base, on September 8, 2007 due to severe injuries sustained in Iraq. Tajia, the niece of Sgt Hopper, was living with the Hopper family from 2005- 2007.

The GSM team was very supportive and caring of the two Gold Star Family members and new cyclist. They began with gifts of clip on shoes, socks, helmets, gloves and layers of outerwear, all from Sheels Sporting Goods store. The team captain Brian, spent a day of intense training before the ride began with Andrew and Tajia.





The mother of Sgt Hopper, Judy, joined the GSM planning team early in August. The first meeting was a little overwhelming, with so many details. The last day while riding in the lead truck into Springfield, along with the other two Gold Star Mothers, she was overjoyed to be able to see her first-time cyclists leading the group into their final destination. That Gold Star Mother was extremely proud to be a part of an awesome group of individuals that honored our great people who sacrificed it all for our freedom. Judy clearly understood how important every detail had to be in writing to complete our mission to



Tajia was excited to stop at North Clay Elementary School on Route 45. She followed her fellow riders into the school parking lot. The students were so eager to talk with the cyclists, Tajia began giving out her uncle's cards, she quickly ran out. She rushed back to get more cards and expressed how amazed she was at the appreciation those young students had for her fallen hero.

Early on, the youngest female rider was reluctant to share her favorite stories of her uncle Nick, but by the time she had gotten to the Effingham VFW she was able to stand up and tell everyone how caring and supportive her uncle was to her and others. She shared a sweet story of a memorable gift he made for her out of an old piece of scrap wood because they lacked the money to purchase anything new.



"ALWAYS REMEMBER and NEVER FORGET!"



My name is Jodi, I am the spouse of Army Corporal Francis Trussel. My husband was killed in action in 2007 in Iraq. We have two sons. Jaden who is 19 and Malikye who is 18. This past December we were invited on a once in a lifetime trip to Poland. This trip was for us to represent Illinois and our Fallen Heroes, but to also build and strengthen our relationships with our Poland Gold Star Families and Military during their Annual Day of Remembrance for their Fallen. It was an absolutely beautiful trip that we are so grateful we got to experience.

Our first night in Poland was amazing, such an amazing country with beautiful people. We got to attend a traditional Polish Christmas Dinner with wonderful people from the Veterans Center here in Poland and several Polish Gold Star Families. Lidia Kordasz-Garniewicz's children played beautiful Christmas carols on the piano while we sang along in English and Polish. We partook in the traditional Christmas wafer ceremony. This is a ceremony of communion wafers and sharing well wishes. The traditional Polish Christmas dinner was such an amazing big meal. We had many appetizers of fish, then had traditional famous Poland Pierogi dumplings that were so good, beet root soup and for our main meal we had asparagus stuffed turkey, Jewish carp, and mashed potatoes! We had a lot of desserts including traditional Polish cakes and apple pie. We also had wine, coffee, and tea. The boys and I received some nice gifts we are grateful for. We had great conversations with the Poland Gold Star Families and talked with each other about our Fallen Heroes.

Our second day in Poland was very busy. In the morning we visited the Veterans Center. We got to see the Hall of Tradition and learn a lot about the history of the Polish Military. We got to see some amazing things, uniforms, weapons, badges, and so much more from the wars Poland has helped in. Afterwards we had a Christmas lunch of dumplings and fish and some Polish deserts. We dined with workers of the Veterans Center and Polish Gold Star Families. We listened to Christmas music and got to partake in another Christmas wafer ceremony. In the afternoon we got to tour some of Poland. We visited the Royal Castle where the king and queen used to live. Lots of beautiful history and art. We then toured old town Warsaw that was completely destroyed in World War II and then rebuilt. It is so beautiful and full of so much history. Beautiful colored buildings, Christmas Markets, and even an ice skating rink. We had such great hosts and loved seeing the beautiful culture of Poland and learning about the history of this amazing country. Micheal was a great tour guide to us.

Family Profile: The Trussels



We were honored that evening to be a part of the ceremony outside of the Veterans Center honoring the Fallen beyond borders. They also honored my husband Frank as well. The solemn Capstrazk ended in front of the monument of the Fallen and killed in missions and military operations outside the country's borders. In the 70-year history of participation in missions and operations outside the borders of our country, Poland has lost 123 defenders of the Homeland. All are listed by name on the wall of the Memorial Square at the Veteran's Center of Actions Beyond Your Borders. On the Square in front of the Center there is a monument dedicated to their memory. A commemoration took place in the presence of the families of the deceased and the highest state officials. In front of the Monument there was a Post of Honor, a candlelight was lit on the Square. A unique, uplifting atmosphere of the ceremony was created by torches carried by infantry of the Military Technical Academy.

The highlight of the ceremony was the presentation of statues by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Director of the Veterans Center, which were received by family members in the name of the deceased. The ceremony ended with lanterns being carried that had drawings of the Fallen Heroes and were lit up. They were absolutely beautiful. By the memorial wall there was a picture of my husband, Frank displayed as well, surrounded by candles. It brought tears to our eyes and was an absolute honor and blessing to see Frank being honored and remembered alongside the Polish Fallen Heroes.

Our last day in Poland was very special to us. This morning was very special to us. We attended mass for the Fallen Soldiers at the Poland Military Garrison Church. It was a beautiful service. The church was breathtaking and the big nativity scene was so heart warming to see. After church we attended the Poland Remembrance Day service for the Poland Fallen Soldiers Beyond Borders. We had the honor of meeting the President of Poland. He thanked us for being there to honor their Fallen Heroes with them. It was a very emotional and heartfelt moment for us and we are so grateful we got to share this with our Poland family.

In the afternoon we attended a concert with the Poland Army Band. It was such a beautiful concert of regular and Christmas songs. My favorite songs were the violin and accordion solos. Afterwards we had a traditional Polish lunch of fish, dumplings, and cake. We were honored to attend the concert and dine with Poland Gold Star Families, everyone from the Veterans Center, and the Polish Military. Our last evening in Poland was nothing short of amazing. We spent time touring the tallest building in Warsaw. The views of the city were absolutely stunning. We then did some shopping and got some yummy gelato.

It was bittersweet saying goodbye to Lidia Kordasz-Garniewicz and our Poland family. They have truly opened their hearts and arms to us while we were in their country. We got to see their beautiful country and learn about the amazing culture and history of Poland. We were blessed to not only be able to honor Frank here, but to be a part of their Remembrance Day and honor and remember all of Poland's Fallen Heroes. This trip really was a full circle for us! We may come from different places and speak different languages but our hearts are the same. We all love the same way and we all grieve the same way. We have a family now in Poland that's for sure and we might just take up Lidia's offer to come back and visit this summer. It's so hard to put this trip into words, it really touched our hearts!! We are so grateful to Gold Star Mission and everyone in Poland for making this trip happen and taking such good care of us. It was a bittersweet goodbye but I know we will be back again someday. Thank You Poland and Gold Star Mission for your hospitality and love.

Gold Star Mission 2023 Events Calendar



1 February 2023	Scholarship Application window closes (Online)
25 March 2023	Annual Scholarship and Appreciation Banquet (Springfield)
5 April 2023	Gold Star Spouses Day
20-23 April 2023	MPA Annual Conference (Chicago)
29 April 2023	Rockford Run for Fallen (1/2 Marathon, 5K & 3K) (Rockford)
19-20 May	NGAI Conference (Collinsville)
8-11 June 2023	Illinois VFW State Convention (Springfield)
23-25 June 2023	Illinois AMVETS State Convention (Springfield)
7-8 July 2023	General Logan 200
12-15 July 2023	Illinois American Legion State Convention (Springfield)
1 August 2023	Gold Star Children's Day
13 August 2023	Illinois State Fair Veterans Day (Springfield)
27 August 2023	Duquoin State Fair Veterans Day (Duquoin)
19-23 September 2023	Gold Star 500 (Central-South Route)
24 September 2023	Gold Star Mother's and Family Day
1 November 2023	Scholarship Application Opens Website (Online)
11 November 2023	Veteran's Day
16 December 2023	Wreaths Across America



Gold Star Mission 2024 Events Calendar



20 January 2024	Wreaths Across America (Wreath Recovery)
1 February 2024	Scholarship Application window closes (Online)
25 March 2024	Annual Scholarship and Appreciation Banquet (Springfield)
5 April 2024	Gold Star Spouses Day
27 April 2024	Rockford Run for Fallen (1/2 Marathon, 5K & 3K) (Rockford)
27 May 2024	Memorial Day (Various)
6-9 June 2024	Illinois VFW State Convention (Springfield)
12-13 July 2024	General Logan 200
9-13 July 2024	Illinois American Legion State Convention (Springfield)
1 August 2024	Gold Star Children's Day
7-11 August 2024	AMVETS National Convention (Springfield)
11 August 2024	Illinois State Fair Veterans Day (Springfield)
24 August 2024	Lincolnland Chapter MOAA/GSM Golf Outing (Petersburg)
25 August 2024	Duquoin State Fair Veterans Day (Duquoin)
24-28 September 2024	Gold Star 500 (Central-South Route)
29 September 2024	Gold Star Mother's and Family Day
1 November 2024	Scholarship Application Opens Website (Online)
11 November 2024	Veteran's Day
14 December 2024	Wreaths Across America (Laying Wreaths)
19-22 December 2024	Polish Remembrance Day (Poland)





The 2024 Gold Star 500

Well if riding a bicycle 500 miles in five days didn't grab your attention, maybe visualizing the route.....Metropolis to Rockford would! Visualize on a map, riding from one of the southernmost points of Illinois to the northern border! It's only 354 miles, as the crow flies, but you know we had to make it at least 500 miles!

To say the first three and a half days were unremarkable is definitely an understatement. Sure, we traveled at least 100 miles a day, encountered numerous great communities, experienced exciting stops at schools, met and interacted with hundreds of amazing people, but that's just a normal Gold Star 500! What we witnessed starting after lunch on the third day was nothing short of heroic! Riders hitting a 15% grade hill (note not the good 15% downhill we are accustomed to) within a few miles of departing our lunch stop. Combine that with getting a 15-20 mile an hour head wind for the rest of the five-day journey! These riders were amazing, fighting through those conditions to reach the finish line. The team work displayed was just as amazing, seeing the rotation of the lead riders, while keeping a tight, often three column wide Peleton, just to combat the head wind! Amazing and inspiring!

Some of the accomplishments:

- 513 miles ridden in five days!
- Accumulating over 19,000 miles, or 3/4 the way around the earth!
- Up to 55 riders on their bicycles in all conditions!
- Riders overtook an elevation gain of 11,942 feet!
- The average speed for the ride was 15.2 MPH!
- Riders burned approximately 4000 calories a day just riding!
- Over 36 communities engaged!
- Engaged a dozen K-12 schools, 2 University ROTC Programs!
- 27 Gold Star Families participated (10 from Poland)!
- 18 Gold Star Family members participated the full five days!
- First Gold Star 500 where we didn't stay at least one night in a National Guard Armory!
- Countless stories and memories shared about our Fallen Heroes!
- Several hundred community members engaged!
- Amazing support and enthusiasm from the communities!
- Met many new Gold Star Mission "family members"!

So, a big Thank You to all our riders, volunteers, community support, and most importantly our Gold Star Families for making the 2024 Gold Star 500 a big success!





8th ANNUAL GOLD STAR 500

METROPOLIS TO ROCKFORD
SEP. 24-28 2024

THE GOLD STAR MISSION GSS500 IS A JOURNEY LIKE NO OTHER! THIS FULLY-SUPPORTED, 500-PLUS-MILE JOURNEY ACROSS THE STATE HONORS AND PRESERVES THE MEMORIES OF OUR FALLEN HEROES. ALL FUNDS RAISED GO DIRECTLY TO SUPPORT THE FALLEN HEROES HISTORY PROJECT VIDEOS AND EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS.



THIS YEAR'S ROUTE INFO

SEP. 24: METROPOLIS - VIENNA - GOREVILLE - SESSER - MT. VERNON
SEP. 25: MT. VERNON - SALEM - EFFINGHAM - MATTOON
SEP. 26: MATTOON - CHAMPAIGN-URBANA - BLOOMINGTON-NORMAL
SEP. 27: BLOOMINGTON-NORMAL - PEORIA - PRINCETON
SEP. 28: PRINCETON - MENDOTA - ROCHELLE - ROCKFORD

WE OFFER 1-DAY, 3-DAY, OR 5-DAY RIDE OPTIONS!

INCLUDED WITH YOUR ENTRY!

- CUSTOM PRIMAL WEAR JERSEY-
- ALL MEALS, SNACKS, WATER/GATORADE-
- STATE POLICE ESCORT-
- OVERNIGHT ACCOMMODATIONS-
- BAGGAGE TRANSFER-
- CONSTANT RIDE MONITORING BY RIDE CAPTAINS-
- SAG/MECHANIC SUPPORT-
- MOTIVATIONAL RIDE MUSIC-
- LASTING FRIENDSHIPS-

TRUTH - JUSTICE - THE AMERICAN WAY

CONSIDER GIVING UP A WEEK TO HONOR THOSE WHO MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE! FOR DETAILS AND TO REGISTER OR VOLUNTEER GO TO:
[HTTPS://GOLDSTARMISSION.ORG/](https://goldstarmission.org/) OR SCAN THE QR CODE AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE!

For more information please email goldstarmission@gmail.com

ALWAYS REMEMBER NEVER FORGET

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Over the 23 years that I served in the Army/Army Reserve, I had the distinct honor of serving with a wide range of incredible people from all walks of life. I was also lucky in the timing of where and when I was deployed. In 2000 I deployed to Kosovo, shortly after we arrived it was downgraded to a peacekeeping mission. In 2003 I deployed to Iraq and the insurgency hadn't begun in the area I was until after I left. I could continue listing deployments, but I think you get the point. Over the years, I would hear stories of people I had served with that weren't as lucky. Whenever I see a memorial, hear the National Anthem or hear Taps, I think of them and how grateful I am for the blessings in my life. As a husband and father of three, when I read names on a memorial, I tear up. I don't tear

up because that service member lost his/her life, but because I think about the loss their family experienced.

In 2017, I had heard about the Gold Star 500 through a friend who was in the Illinois National Guard, but it was too late to sign up for the ride. From the description that I got I thought it was a very noble cause and



something I was compelled to do. Since 2018, I have ridden in 6-Gold Star 500's, 1-General Logan 200, 1-Polish Veterans Bicycle Rally and participated in several virtual Run for the Fallen half marathons. The gratitude felt from the Gold Star Family members I've met over the years keeps me coming back for more. I wholeheartedly believe we cannot let their loved ones be forgotten and I'm honored to be able to be a conduit for the Gold Star Mission. Everyone that has been involved with the Gold Star Mission and/or has attended a Gold Star Mission event has gone home and told someone else about the experience. Talking about the experiences and the Gold Star Mission is a reminder to those that hear it that others have given their lives for the freedoms we enjoy.

In addition to reminding



others our freedoms aren't free, it's also an opportunity to educate them that the Global War on Terror didn't just involve American Service Members. Talking about the Polish riders in 2022 and the experience of going to ride in Poland for their first Veterans Bicycle Rally educates people that lives were lost and families were affected in other NATO countries as well.

During the 2023 Gold Star 500, we spoke to several groups of high school students and it dawned on me these students were too young to know what was happening at the height

of our most recent conflicts. If they didn't have a direct connection to someone that was serving, they probably didn't realize our country was at war. I can only hope their families, veteran groups and/or teachers are educating them, but hope isn't a plan. Participating in the Gold Star Mission Events we make sure the public is remembering. If it were only in the communities where we visit it would be worth it. Making headlines in the surrounding newspapers and getting on the evening news only expands the reach of these events. Having Gold Star Family members

veteran groups and/or teachers are educating them, but hope isn't a plan. Participating in the Gold Star Mission Events we make sure the public is remembering. If it were only in the communities where we visit it would be worth it. Making headlines in the surrounding newspapers and getting on the evening news only expands the reach of these events. Having Gold Star Family members with us during the rides and other events only magnifies the impact.

Whether it's helping a Gold Star Mother complete the ride in Poland or helping riders get up a hill in Southern Illinois, they will go home to talk about it. People will ask them if it was hard and they will tell the story about how everyone worked together to advance the Gold Star Mission.

The riders and volunteers in the Gold Star Mission are dedicated to the cause and do everything they can to make sure everyone is supported. During the Gold Star 500 this year, I received the "pack mule" award from Connie. Multiple times each day I was loading and unloading boxes for her as a lighthearted gesture of her appreciation she gave me this pinata at the end of the ride.



Dave Riney taking time to tell others about his son Doug.

Gold Star Mission Fallen Heroes History Project Video

The Gold Star Mission initiated the Fallen Heroes History Project in the Spring of 2022. A group of Gold Star Families and Gold Star Mission Volunteers, as part of a working group, developed an initial concept for this project. The goal of the project is to collect, preserve, and make accessible the memories and stories of Illinois Fallen Heroes, so that present and future generations may learn about these heroes, directly from family and friends.

The Gold Star Mission has been honored to produce and share 14 Fallen Hero History Project Videos to date, with several more in the works for 2025! These videos are so powerful and meaningful! We truly are blessed that these families and friends shared these heroes with us all!

Completed Videos:

Army CPL Jacob Palmatier
 Army 1LT Jared Southworth
 Army SGT Jeremy Sherman
 Army SGT Anthony Maddox
 Army SGT Joshua Rodgers
 Army SSG Matthew Weikert
 USMC Sgt Nickolas Hopper
 Army SSG Paul Smith
 Army SSG Lincoln Hollinsaid
 Army SFC Kyle Wehrly
 Army SSG Kevin Grieco
 Army SGT Dean Shaffer
 USMC Cpl Benjamin Desilets
 Army SGT Douglas Riney



All Illinois Gold Star Families are eligible to participate in this project, and share their memories of their loved one! Completed videos are posted on the Gold Star Mission website at <https://goldstarmission.org/fallen-hero.php>. For more information on this project, please don't hesitate to contact Gold Star Mission at admin@goldstarmission.org.

Randy Hodson



My Gold Star Mission Experiences

The Gold Star Mission is unlike any other experience I've had through cycling. I feel honored to be associated with the good people who give their time for this great cause and with those whose family members have given their lives for my freedoms. As someone who did not serve in the military, I participate to show thanks to those who have served. I'm proud to wear GSM clothing and spread the message and pay tribute to our fallen heroes. I've learned how to approach and talk with Gold Star Families and have a never-ending respect for their sacrifice. I highly recommend this cause and cycling event and hope to see it on a national scale soon.



"Never forget riding in Portugal for Anthony Maddox"

The event is extremely well organized. It is awesome to have police escort along the entire route. I am impressed that so many small town people know we're riding through their town and come out of their homes and businesses to wave at us. The patriotism on display in our heartland is truly

heartwarming. It never gets old to be escorted into town with local fire trucks and motorcycles. Another highlight is the hundreds of school children lined up to high-five and cheer for us. I enjoy riding as a group to help each other complete the day's mileage. The riding itself, while simply the vehicle for the mission, is fun and challenging.

This year's event included polish riders and Gold Star Families who made it very special. I hope someday to ride in Poland on their event.

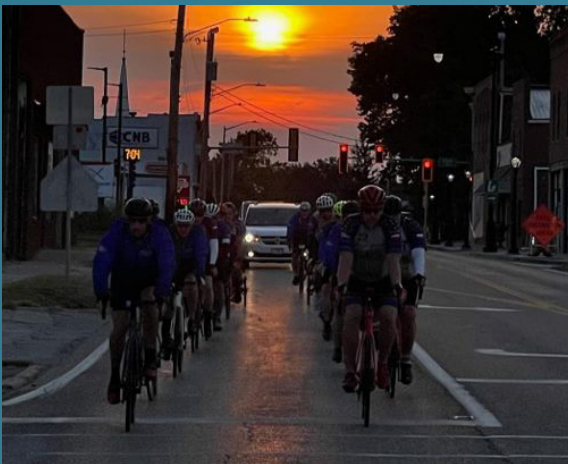
Evening meals with talks from Gold Star Families is emotional and the reason I keep returning. I want to hear how their loved ones lived, who they were as kids and let the families know we will never forget them. I am thankful to Vonda, Judy, Tajia, Susan and Dick, Jerome and others who shared their stories so that I could learn.



Butler



I wanted to write how the Gold Star 500 cycling event has assisted me dealing with post-traumatic stress and survivors' remorse.



I served in the Illinois Army National Guard for nearly thirty years. I deployed to Iraq with the 1544th Transportation Company out of Paris, Illinois. I was a convoy commander for my unit performing gun truck security missions all over Iraq. During our deployment five of my friends paid the ultimate sacrifice and over thirty members received purple hearts.

I would like to discuss what the ride means to me and how it has changed my life. Every year I ride in honor of my friends, the "Fallen Five" as this ride affords me the opportunity to help preserve their memory. The ride allows me to honor and pay tribute to all of Illinois'

fallen heroes. As a retired veteran I lost my purpose in life by no longer wearing the uniform. I felt disconnected and my identity was gone. This annual event allows me to feel that bond again with other military members and veterans coming together for a purpose. This ride gives me the drive to push forward throughout the year so that I do not let my team members down during the ride. I have gained a new group of friends because of this ride that understand my daily demons that I face, that I can reach out to and talk at any time.



I have been treated by mental health counselors on and off throughout the years of my military career with a mild degree of success. I have been seeing my current counselor, James, for two years now and he notices the change in me as the annual ride approaches.

Due to some of my injuries I was not sure that I would be able to ride in 2022. James made it a point to push me to go even if I could not ride as he sees the value of how this event makes a positive impact on my mental health.

As stated, I have suffered with PTS and survivors' remorse since 2003. This ride has given me a healthy outlet for these conditions. Prior to starting this event, when things would get so dark for me, I would use alcohol to find numbness and drown my feelings. Now, when things start going bad, I get on my bicycle and face the darkness head on. During our event I can see the joy in the Gold Star families, that we meet along the ride, and their appreciation that we are willing to carry on their service.





member's memory and legacy through us telling their story. Interacting and speaking with the Gold Star families has helped me see the value in my life again. So many times, I have wondered why I got to live, and my friends did not. Why I got to come home from war, and they did not. This event has helped me realize why. This event has given me purpose for why I got to come home and to continue pushing forward in life.

I had never ridden a bike for fitness let alone 500 miles before my first Gold Star 500. I had a friend that rode in the first one and suggested that I ride with him in the next one. I went out and bought a used bicycle and started training and completed my first Gold Star 500 in 2019. I can tell you that I never expected to receive so much healing, sense of togetherness and sense of purpose from a cycling event.

Originally, I did the ride to honor our fallen service members and their families. I still ride for them but, selfishly, I also ride for me because this ride has given me purpose and meaning again. This ride has had such a profound impact on my life it is hard to explain. For the average person they would



say it is just a bike ride, yet for me it is so much more. In many ways this ride has saved me. My mental health is better than it has ever been, my family life has flourished, and I have

a new network of brothers and sisters that share the same goal. I will be forever grateful for this organization and our mission. Best Regards, Raymond "Keith" Butler

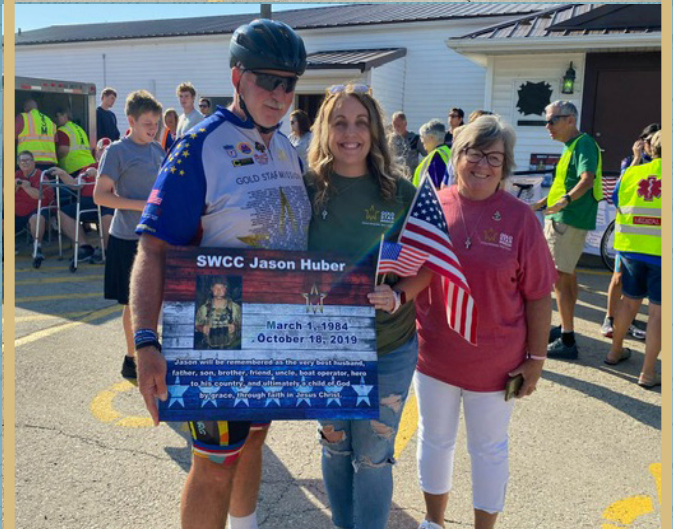


Oelrichs



2024 General Logan 200

I expected the 200 to be a meaningful but long and grueling affair. It turned out to be way more impactful and moving than expected, with each stop reminding us of the high price of freedom. We also ended up moving way faster than expected, with many fun sprints to town and county line signs supported by and even encouraged by our officers/police escort. The friendships developed during our shared all night riding experience leave me appreciating both the time spent and memories created. Can't wait to do it again!





Volunteer Profile: Diane Rogers

I joined the Illinois National Guard on 8 November of 1971 and served proudly for 41 years.



Little did I know that I would get the opportunity to continue to serve our proud military and its deserving veterans and families. Early in 2017 I received a call from Chuck Kitson about an organization called Gold Star Mission (GSM). He briefly explained the mission and said they could use volunteers. I was intrigued and said I was willing to help. At the time I had no idea how important the mission was and how volunteering would soon become a passion.

My first exposure was the Gold Star 500 in September of 2017. I soon realized that the preparation for these events took numerous hours, days, and months to plan. I gained so much respect for the people involved in these missions.



Their dedication and hard work are second to none. I was immediately hooked and did not look back.

Volunteering for the Gold Star Mission is not an easy task, but it does not compare to what the Gold Star families and our fallen soldiers have endured. The time spent and all the challenging work turn into an honor and a privilege to serve this tremendous group of people. I had the honor to meet and work with the Gold Star Families. They have more strength and faith than anyone I have met. I have the greatest respect for what these Families have endured and sacrificed for this country.

Meeting and working with all the other volunteers are also a tremendous experience. They come from all occupations and all ages for the same reason. To honor our fallen soldiers. I have helped with the Gold

Star Mission for 6 Years and have wonderful memories and gained new friends who are dedicated to a cause that means so much to our fallen heroes and their families. I for one hope to continue to be part of this mission as long as I can.

ALWAYS REMEMBER,
NEVER FORGET



Gold Star Mission 2025 Events Calendar



15 January 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
18 January 2025	Wreaths Across America (Clean-up)
19 February 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
19 March 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
22 March 2025	Annual Scholarship and Appreciation Banquet (Springfield)
5 April 2025	Gold Star Spouses Day
16 April 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
25-26 April 2025	Annual NGAI Conference (Peoria)
26 April 2025	Watseka Gold Star Family Monument Groundbreaking (Watseka)
21 May 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
1 June 2025	Survivor Outreach River Cruise Event (Hanibal)
6-8 June 2025	Illinois VFW State Convention
8-13 June 2025	Polish Day of Remembrance Bicycle Rally (Poland)
18 June 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
21 June 2025	Survivor Adventure Day (Casey)
11-12 July 2025	General Logan 200
10-12 July 2025	Illinois American Legion State Convention
16 July 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
26 July 2025	Survivor Outreach Event (Chicago)
1 August 2025	Gold Star Children's Day
10 August 2025	Veterans & Gold Star Family Day Illinois State Fair (Springfield)
20 August 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
24 August 2025	Veterans & Gold Star Family Day Illinois State Fair (Duquoin)
17 September 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
23-27 September 25	2025 GS500 (Central-East-South)
28 September 2025	Gold Star Mother's Day
11 October 2025	Lincoln Land Chapter MOAA Golf Outing (Petersburg)
1 November 2025	Scholarship Application Window Opens
11 November 2025	Veterans Day (Various)
19 November 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
13 December 2025	Wreaths Across America (Various)
17 December 2025	GSM Monthly Board Meeting
18-22 December 25	Polish Remembrance Day (Poland)



2023-24 FINANCIAL REPORT



2023-24 Financial Report



Gold Star Mission is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. One hundred percent of the donations we receive support the Gold Star Mission. Ninety-seven percent pays for the programs, the balance goes to supporting our established programs. To date, more than \$445,000 has gone directly to programs designed to Always Remember, Never Forget our Fallen Military Heroes and to value their sacrifices and honor their families.

After close evaluation by Guidestar the GSM maintained the Silver Seal of Transparency in 2024. We strive to be transparent in our operations by making the following information publicly available:

EXPENSES	2023	2024	CUMULATIVE
Program Services (Scholarships, Videos, etc.)	\$115,068.00	\$126,127.00	\$686,252.00
General and Administrative	\$5,321.00	\$8,013.00	\$30,912.00
Office Expenses, Salaries, Facilities	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total Expenses	\$122,412.00	\$134,141.00	\$717,164.00
REVENUES	2023	2024	CUMULATIVE
Individual Donations	\$88,505.00	\$67,510.00	\$620,798.00
Corporporate Grants	\$49,659.17	\$40,126.00	\$236,426.00
Total Revenues	\$138,164.17	\$107,636.00	\$85,7224.00



Call Outs



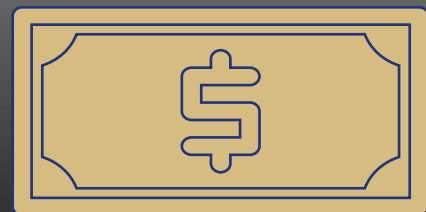
Over **19,000** miles were ridden during GSM events in 2024



Cumulative Bicycle Miles: **146,740** or “just about six times around the earth”!



53 Organized Events in 8 years



Less than \$0.04 on each dollar spent spent on administrative cost

0

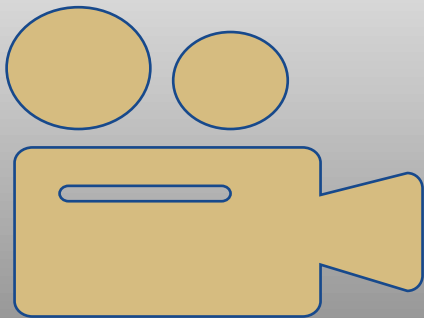
ZERO cost associated with salaries or facilities



Cumulative Miles Ran in GSM Events: **8,685** or “equal the distance from Springfield Illinois to the South Pole”!



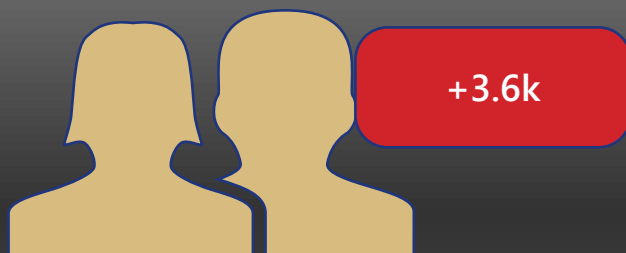
Countless shared memories



14 Fallen Heroes History Project
videos since 2022



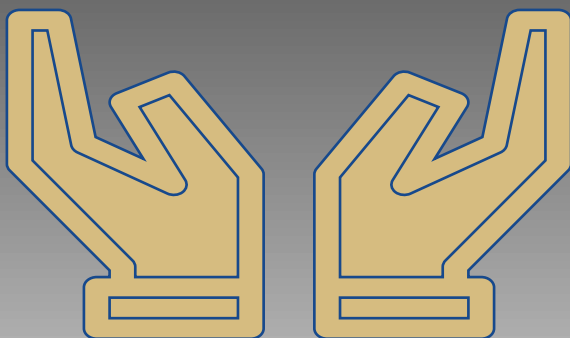
283 scholarships awarded
March 2018-2024



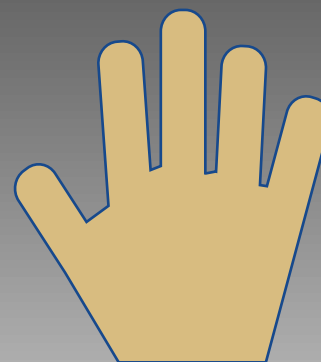
3,600 Facebook Friends



6 International Engagements
with Poland



Cumulative Volunteer Hours:
+17,000 from over
300 Volunteers



+3,980 Volunteer hours
documented in 2023-2024

Survivor Outreach Services Partnership



Survivor Outreach Services is the official Army program designed to provide long-term support to Families of fallen Soldiers. If you are a surviving Family member, we are here for you. Survivors developed this program, and it is continually refined based on Survivor feedback and senior Army leader involvement.

SOS is a “one” Army program. Survivor Outreach Coordinators and financial counselors provide outreach and support to survivors, regardless of a loved one’s Army component, duty status, location or manner of death. SOS serves Army National Guard, Army Reserve and active component Families at SOS offices across the country.

Survivor Outreach Mission Statement:

The Survivor Outreach Services (SOS) Program demonstrates the Army’s commitment to Families of the Fallen, utilizing a holistic and multi-agency approach to delivering services and support for as long as the Family desires.

Duties:

- ★ Provide long-term case management support for Survivors
- ★ Work closely with the Casualty Assistance Center (CAC), Benefits Coordinators, and Casualty Assistance Officers (CAO) to ensure the Survivor receives the necessary services and support
- ★ Assist Survivors with navigating benefit questions and managing benefit milestones
- ★ Partner with local agencies, and nonprofit organization to better serve Families.
- ★ Liaison to DOD Agencies and Benefit Coordinators such as Defense Health Agency, Veterans Affairs and DFAS



Survivor Outreach Services Events



June 2024: Partnered with the Lucky Horseshoes baseball team on Veterans night in Springfield. One of the four Gold Star Families that attended were selected to go on the field and throw out the ceremonial first pitch in addition to meeting several players. The Goldstar father selected his grandson to do the honors with him proudly wearing his Gold Star Mission hat. During the meet and greet, the grandson shared with Survivor Outreach he was 2 when his uncle passed. He liked that he continues to be honored.



June 2024: Survivor Outreach Weekend in Hannibal, MO came together perfect. Gold Star Mission provided volunteers supporting over 81 Survivors from Illinois and Missouri.



September 2024: SOSOC Attended 2nd Annual Motorcycle and Jeep ride in Watseka, Illinois. Gold Star Family and retired Veteran spearheaded the coordination efforts with the Woody Williams Foundation to help build a Gold Star memorial in the local park. 5 Survivors from across the state, along with 3 non-government organizations Gold Star Mothers, Patriot Guard and Gold Star Mission were all present. The ride surpassed the \$100,000.00 goal!



November 2024: American Gold Star hosted tree lighting in Bloomington and Peoria, Illinois. Both locations displayed handmade ornaments honoring the Fallen. Illinois National Guard and Gold Star Mission had leadership present making lasting impressions.

SPONSORS AND DONORS



Our Sponsors



As a non-profit organization, Gold Star Mission relies on contributions from our donors, sponsors and partners. Your contributions are the reason we can continue our mission to make sure to ALWAYS REMEMBER and NEVER FORGET our fallen Military Heroes, their families, and their sacrifices. What may seem like a small donation from you, whether it be your time, money, or support during an programmed event, Gold Star Mission can't operate without your support!

Platinum Sponsors:

Archer Daniels Midland (ADM)
American Legion Post #568 Riders
(Gibson City)
Battery Specialists
Kwik-Wall



**The Legion of
Young Polish Women**
Women With A Cause



**BATTERY SPECIALISTS
+
GOLF CARS**

SCHEELS
GEAR. PASSION. SPORTS.

Gold Sponsors:

American Legion Post 673 (Huntley)
Scheels



Silver Sponsors:

All Stars-n-Stitches
American Legion Post 306 Sons (Metropolis)
American Legion Post 568 (Gibson City)
American Legion Post 568 Auxiliary
American Legion Post 568 Sons
American Legion Post 905 (Kincaid)
Bob Ridings Taylorville
Memorial Bracelets
Mission BBQ (Peoria & Springfield)
Northender's VFW Post 10302 Auxiliary
VFW Post 630 (Urbana) Torre, 29, Aurora IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Benjamin Desilets, 21, Elmhurst IL ~ Army Specialist William Dusenberry, 30, Lake Zurich IL ~
Wheel Fast Bicycle Company



**MEMORIAL
BRACELETS**
NEVER, EVER, EVER FORGET

MISSION BBQ
The American Way



"Friends & Family":

American Legion Department of Illinois
AMVETS Department of Illinois
Illinois National Guard
Northender VFW Post 10302
U-Haul Sixth St Springfield
VFW Department of Illinois



Our Partners



Air Evac Lifeteam - Watson
 Archer Daniels Midland (ADM)
 ADM-VETS (Corporate, Havana, Quincy, & Camanche IA)
 Altamont Grade School
 American Legion Auxiliary
 Department of Illinois
 American Legion District #19
 Auxiliary
 American Legion Department of Illinois
 Sons of American Legion
 Detachment of Illinois
 American Legion Post #512 - Altamont
 American Legion Post #445
 Auxiliary - Bradford
 American Legion Post #554 - Carlinville
 American Legion Post #554
 Auxiliary - Carlinville
 American Legion Post #446 - Centralia
 American Legion Post #120 - Effingham
 American Legion Post #120
 Auxiliary - Effingham
 American Legion Post #169 - Eldorado
 American Legion Post #14 - Flora
 American Legion Post #14
 Auxiliary - Flora
 American Legion Post #568 - Gibson City
 American Legion Post #568 Riders - Gibson City
 American Legion Post #167 - Harrisburg
 American Legion Post #167
 Auxiliary - Harrisburg
 American Legion Post #645 - Herrin

American Legion Post #645
 Auxiliary - Herrin
 American Legion Post #905 - Kincaid
 American Legion Post #905
 Auxiliary - Kincaid
 American Legion Post #938 - Ladd
 American Legion Post #79 - LeRoy
 American Legion Post #650 - Mansfield
 American Legion Post #88 - Mattoon
 American Legion Post #88
 Auxiliary - Mattoon
 American Legion Post #306 - Metropolis
 American Legion Post #306
 Auxiliary - Metropolis
 American Legion Post #141 - Mt Vernon
 American Legion Post #458 - Neoga
 American Legion Post #109 - Norris City
 American Legion Post #109
 Auxiliary - Norris City
 American Legion Post #580 - Pesotum
 American Legion Post #809 - Rochester
 American Legion Post #560 - Sesser
 American Legion Post #480 - Steeleville
 American Legion Post #480
 Auxiliary - Steeleville
 American Legion Post #683 - St. Libory
 American Legion Post #289
 Auxiliary - Strasburg
 American Legion Post #73 - Taylorville

American Legion Post #73
 Auxiliary - Taylorville
 American Legion Post #386 - Virden
 American Legion Post #386
 Auxiliary - Virden
 American Legion Post #262 - Waverly
 American Legion Post #262
 Auxiliary - Waverly
 AMVETS Department of Illinois
 AMVETS Post #16 - Litchfield
 AMVETS Post #100 - Jacksonville
 AMVETS Post #169 Riders - North Pekin
 Arcola Junior High / Senior High
 Rider Nation
 BATTERY Specialists + GOLF
 CARS
 Bike Surgeon
 Bob Ridings Ford
 Carlinville High School
 Casey's General Store
 Caterpillar
 Caterpillar AFSN
 Cisne High School
 City of Arcola
 City of Ava
 City of Carlinville
 City of Effingham
 City of Harrisburg
 City of Jacksonville
 City of Litchfield
 City of Mattoon
 City of Metropolis
 City of Mt Vernon
 City of Normal
 City of Pana
 City of Peoria

Our Partners



City of Princeton	Fire Department - Litchfield	Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs
City of Rochelle	Fire Department - Mattoon	Illinois National Guard
City of Rockford	Fire Department - Metropolis	Illinois State Police
City of Sesser	Fire Department - Mt Vernon	Illinois State University - Department of Psychology
City of Shelbyville	Fire Department - Murphysboro	Illinois State University ROTC
City of Sparta	Fire Department - Rockford	Illinois Survivor Outreach Services
City of Springfield	Fire Department - Salem	Jackson County VFW Post #7190 - Murphysboro
City of Staunton	Fire Department - Sparta	Jackson County VFW Post #7190 Auxiliary - Murphysboro
City of Taylorville	Fire Department - Springfield	Jacksonville High School
City of Waverly	Fire Department - Steeleville	John A. Logan Community College
Coles County Veteran Support Coalition	Fire Department Taylorville	Lebanon High School
Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association - IL 24-1	Fire Department - Washington	Litchfield High School
Crab Orchard High School	Fire Department - Waverly	Marine Community Fire Protection District
Crowdson Creative - Video Production	Fire Department - North Chicago	Marine Elementary School
Dairy Queen Grill & Chill - Sparta	Fire Protection District - Carlinville	Massac County High School
Eastern Illinois University ROTC	Fire Protection District - Girard	Massac County Sheriff's Department
Effingham High School	Fire Protection District - Marine Community	Mattoon Chamber of Commerce
Effingham McDonalds	Fire Protection District - Massac County	Mattoon YMCA
Effingham Tourism Department	Fire Protection District - North Clay	Meijer
Elks Lodge #158 - Springfield	Fire Protection District - Rochester	Mel-O-Cream Donuts
Elks Lodge #572 - Murphysboro	Fire Protection District - Sesser	Memorial Bracelets
Elks Lodge #819 - Mt Vernon	Fire Protection District - Shelbyville	Mermet Springs Scuba - Belknap
Elks Lodge #1058 - Harrisburg	Fire Protection District - Staunton	Metropolis Tourism Department
Emergency Management Agency - Massac County	Fire Protection District - Virden	Midland Community Bank (MCB)
Farm & Home Supply - Springfield	Flags of Freedom - Princeton	Mission BBQ (Peoria & Springfield)
Fire Department - Altamont	General John A. Logan Museum	MJ Kellner
Fire Department - Effingham	Greco Graphics	Moose Lodge #1339 - Princeton
Fire Department - Farina	Hampton Inn Litchfield	Morgan County VFW Post #1379 - Jacksonville
Fire Department - Harrisburg	Harrisburg Hardees	Morgan County VFW Post #1379 Auxiliary - Jacksonville
Fire Department - Herrin	Harrisburg High School	Mt Vernon Township High School
Fire Department - Jacksonville	House of Praise - Compton	
Fire Department - Lebanon	Humana	
Fire Department - LeRoy	Illinois Department of Military Affairs	

Our Partners



Murphysboro High School	Steeleville High School	VFW Post #4183 Auxiliary - Scott AFB
Nancy's Pizza	Steph's Coffee Shoppe	VFW Post #4753 - Sesser
Neoga Junior High / High School	Taylorville High School	VFW Post #4829 - Shelbyville
New Berlin High School	Taylorville Memorial Hospital	VFW Post #4829 Auxiliary - Shelbyville
Normal Community High School	TRICO Community Unit School District #176	VFW Post #2698 - Sparta
North Clay Community Unit School District #25	Troxell Insurance	VFW Post #2698 Auxiliary-Sparta
North Mac Community Unit School District #34	U-Haul	VFW Post #755 - Springfield
North Wayne Community Unit School District #200	Veterans Rolling Smoke & BBQ - Harrisburg	VFW Post #10302 - Springfield
Pana High School	Veterans United Foundation	VFW Post #10302 Auxiliary - Springfield
Patriot Guard	VFW Department of Illinois	VFW Post #1241 - Staunton
Percival Springs Airport & RV - Watson	VFW Post #7676 - Altamont	VFW Post #1241 Auxiliary - Staunton
Police Department - Jacksonville	VFW Post #454 - Bloomington	VFW Post #4495 - Taylorville
Prairie Farms Dairy	VFW Post #454 Auxiliary - Bloomington	VFW Post #630 - Urbana
Prairie State Bank & Trust	VFW Post #2055 - Centralia	VFW Post #5222 - Vienna
Prairieland Ambulance Virden	VFW Post #6865 - Coulterville	VFW Post #9153 - Waltonville
Primal Wear	VFW Post #6865 Auxiliary - Coulterville	VFW Post #9016 - Washington
Princeton High School	VFW Post #1769 - Effingham	VFW Post #6634 - Wyanet
PS Printing - Taylorville	VFW Post #1769 Auxiliary - Effingham	Vienna High School
Republic Services	VFW Post #3479 - Eldorado	Village of Bradford
Rockford SheVet Chapter	VFW Post #3479 Auxiliary - Eldorado	Village of Deer Creek
Rolling Thunder-Illinois Chapter 2	VFW Post #4535 - Fairfield	Village of Dix
Salem High School	VFW Post #4535 Auxiliary - Fairfield	Village of Edinburg
Scheels	VFW Post #3912 - Litchfield	Village of Goreville
Scott Air Force Base	VFW Post #3912 Auxiliary - Litchfield	Village of Ladd
Sesser-Valier Community School District	VFW Post #5149 - Rockford	Village of Marine
Shelby County Tourism	VFW Post #5149 Auxiliary - Rockford	Village of New Berlin
Shelbyville High School	VFW Post #4183 - Scott AFB	Village of Strasburg
Sons of American Legion Post #650 - Mansfield		Waltonville High School
Sons of American Legion Post #306 - Metropolis		Waverly Community Unit School District #6
South-Central High School		Wheelfast Bicycles
SpringHill Suites by Marriott		White Oak Community Building - Carlock
Springfield Southwest		Winnebago County

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM



2024 Scholarship Recipient: Angeli Grieco



The Meaning of a Gold Star



What do gold stars mean to people? Like the sun, gold stars can mean a star that exhibits bright colors and yellowish tints like some of the bedazzling illuminations in the night sky. Except, to me, gold stars do not mean the brightest stars in the sky or even a Christmas ornament. Gold stars are representations to military families, like mine, who had lost their loved ones in an active conflict. I have been a gold star child for fifteen years since October 27th, 2008 which was a day that marked when my life had changed forever.

As a military-brat, blood running red, white, and blue, my dad, Kevin Grieco, first served in the Navy after high school and after 9/11 had wanted to do more for his country to "stop them from coming here". He was fighting in the War on Terror in Afghanistan for his family. For me, leaving his screaming wife and toddlers, aged two and four, he left, and he never came back. My dad was killed in action while protecting what he loved and he did it for us. Gold stars are a representation of him and his sacrifices for the safety of an entire nation. However, like the blue star, symbolizing service members in active duty, the gold star symbolizes when they don't come back. As I grew older, I could feel the effects of having only one parent pulling the chariot. Except, my mother wasn't pulling the chariot, she had impossibly carried the entire chariot on her back starting from ground zero and raising up two kids on her own



entirely. "You matured quickly", "you're my right hand", and "what would I do without you?". These were the words spoken to me which caused me to learn to grow up, rise up to adversity and take it head on at such an early age. It wasn't just strength, it was stability; it was to keep my small family secured by always being the middle ground and harnessing that inner vitality for them from such a unique circumstance. Knowing that I will see an empty seat next to my mom for graduations, or the absent arms walking me down the aisle, spawned a transformative

mindset. I could've just changed into a pessimistic defeatist, but this situation of my life caused me to be an optimistic opportunist for my family. For me, Father's Day is always hard without my dad as well as any holiday and birthday, but it encourages realization that his shadow, footprint, and legacy remain, for he is a hero and I am his daughter. The gold star will always exist as a symbol of sacrifice, bravery, and strength. Yes I'm different, but in an admirable way, for now I harbor the perspective of what a tremendous loss can account for in a person, giving me the uttermost desire to service the vulnerable and save lives.

Because of my life situation, I feel that I have been called to help others thinking childishly, "if I couldn't save my dad, maybe I could save everyone else."

I am equipped with astounding strength and determination derived from literal blood, sweat, and tears to leave my own footprints in this world. I leap at opportunities all for the satisfaction that the grief that grew up with me could construct an unassailable woman which I know the gold star pins and folded flags in my bedroom shelf represent, for I will always be a gold star child. To many, a gold star is a Christmas ornament for the top of the tree or the brightest star in the sky. To me, however, a gold star is a symbol of sacrifice, the backbone of my identity, grief-driven grit, and the ambition to be an unstoppable force just like my dad would've wanted me to be.

2023 Scholarship Recipients



When I first learned about Gold Star Mission, I was inspired by their dedication to preserving the memories of fallen service members and was eager to get involved. Thanks to the support of GSM scholarship, I was able to purchase a laptop that I use nearly every day for schoolwork and studying. Most recently, the GSM scholarship helped me apply for several PM&R residency programs as I continue to work towards my goal of becoming a psychiatrist. While I knew the financial support of the scholarship would significantly help with my education expenses, I had no idea just how much becoming a member of the GSM family would impact me. This past year, I met the family of SPC Drew McDaniel and was awarded a scholarship in his honor. By talking with his family, I was able to not only learn about WHAT Drew did in his life, but more importantly, WHO he was as a son, brother, friend, and father. I am profoundly grateful that the McDaniels were willing to share Drew's story with me and provide a window to his lively spirit and genuine character. I am honored to bear the responsibility of sharing his story with friends and family.

-Taylor Justison

2023 Scholarship Recipient

EVAN ALLE

NAVY PO1 JENNIFER VALDIVIA, 1/16/2007, CAMBRIDGE, IL

BRENNA BAKER

ARMY SGT JASON MCLEOD, 11/23/2009, CRYSTAL LAKE, IL

ELLA BRADLEY

MARINE PVT EDUARDO LOPEZ, 10/19/2006, AURORA, IL

EVAN CHEEK

ARMY SGT TERRY LISK, 6/26/2006, FOX LAKE, IL

ISAIAH DEITERS

ARMY PVT SCOTT TYRRELL, 11/20/2003, STERLING, IL

SAMUEL DEITERS

MARINE CPL SARA MEDINA, 5/12/2015, PLAINFIELD, IL

LUCAS DOTSON

ARMY MAJ PAUL SYVERSON III, 6/16/2004, LAKE ZURICH, IL

TYLIN DYER

ARMY SPC MIGUEL VILLALON, 1/11/2020, JOLIET, IL

CARTER ETHERIDGE

ARMY SPC MICHAEL PITTMAN, 6/15/2007, ROCK ISLAND, IL

CADE ETTER

NAVY PO1 JERRY THARP, 7/12/2006, KEITHSBURG, IL

DRAKE GOETTEN

MARINE SGT TREVOR GOLDYN, 8/11/2020, FRANKFORT, IL

CARLEE GRADY

ARMY CPL KEITH NURNBERG, 9/5/2007, MCHENRY, IL

AUBREY HEADON

MARINE CPL EVAN JAMES, 3/24/2003, LAHARPE, IL

HUNTER HILDEBRAND

MARINE LCPL JONATHAN COLLINS, 8/8/2004, CRYSTAL LAKE, IL

JACKSON HYDE

ARMY SPC JAIME MORENO, 10/13/2004, ROUND LAKE BEACH, IL

JARRETT JONES

ARMY SPC CHRISTOPHER PATTERSON, 1/6/2012, AURORA, IL

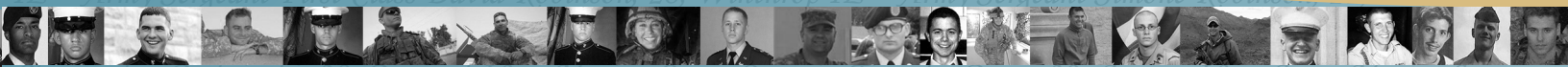
JOE JUNE

NAVY PO1 GARY ROVINSKI, 6/5/2006, ROSEVILLE, IL

TAYLOR JUSTISON

NAVY PO2 DION ROBERTS, 9/22/2012, NORTH CHICAGO, IL

2023 Scholarship Recipients



PATRYCJA KORDASZ

ARMY LTC ROBERT BALDWIN, 9/21/2010, MUSCATINE, IL

AMBRIA MADDOX

MARINE SSGT JUSTUS BARTELT, 7/16/2010, POLO, IL

WIAT MILLER

ARMY PFC AARON TOPPEN, 6/9/2014, MOKENA, IL

JORDAN OLIVER

ARMY SPC JOSEPH DIMOCK II, 7/10/2010, WILDWOOD, IL

ANNA SCHLEYHAN

ARMY SGT UDAY SINGH, 12/1/2003, LAKE FOREST, IL

STALEY SCHOEN

MARINE CAPT TIMOTHY RYAN, 5/19/2003, AURORA, IL

SHELBY SEILER

ARMY SGT JOHN PENNICH, 10/16/2008, BEACH PARK, IL

ANJALI SIVASOTHY

ARMY PFC CALEB LUFKIN, 5/25/2006, KNOXVILLE, IL

EMILY SPANN

ARMY SSG JOSHUA POWELL, 9/21/2010, PLEASANT PLAINS, IL

AMELIA SZLAZAK

ARMY SPC COLLIER BARCUS, 7/8/2004, MCHENRY, IL

LEAH TILLMAN

ARMY SFC GARY VASQUEZ, 9/29/2008, ROUND LAKE, IL

JADEN TRUSSEL

ARMY SPC RYAN CARLOCK, 9/9/2003, MACOMB, IL

KENNADY WATSON

MARINE LCPL BRANDEN RAMEY, 11/8/2004, BELVIDERE, IL

JORDAN WATTS

MARINE SGT EDWARD DAVIS III, 4/28/2006, ANTIOCH, IL

JEDRZEJ WILCZYNSKI

MARINE CPL NATHAN CARLSON, 6/8/2022, ROCKFORD, IL

HAILEY WINSLOW

MARINE CPL ADAM MCKISKI, 8/7/2008, CHERRY VALLEY, IL

TATUM YOUNG

MARINE LCPL NEIL PETSCHKE, 12/21/2004, LENA, IL

Scholarship Recipient Carter Etheridge:

When someone asks me about what my Michael P. Pittman bracelet represents, I always tell them about the Gold Star Mission and their objective of keeping the fallen service members' names and memories alive. I talk to them about Michael's life and his sacrifice to our nation. It is interesting to see people's reaction to what I tell them. Some say, "that's really cool" or "that's nice." I have found that most people, when I tell them about Michael's life or the GSM in general, enter a moment of silence. They ponder and really try to take in what I am telling them. The look of realization and shock take over and it changes their moods. Wearing this bracelet serves as a reminder to be thankful for everything in life. I have learned to be thankful for the times when I am up, and the times when I am down. Every day, I thank God for the blessings I have been given. Family, friends, school and those lost are just some of the things I list in my prayers.



2024 Scholarship Recipients



Scholarship Recipient Jordan Oliver:

Hello, my name is Jordi Oliver, a student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The Gold Star Missions program is deeply meaningful to me, it's an event I eagerly anticipate each year. Wearing the bracelets honoring heroes like PFC. Shane Daniel Penley, SGT Steven Menemeyer, CPL Jonathan Beatty, and SPC Joseph Dimock II is a profound honor. Participating in Gold Star Missions has taught me the value of unity and support within the military community. Regardless of our backgrounds or paths, we are all part of one family, dedicated to supporting each other and honoring those who have served. My family's close ties to the military have enriched my experience, and meeting incredible families through this organization has been a privilege. Through Gold Star Missions, I've learned that we can make a meaningful impact by serving others and preserving the legacies of those who came before us. This scholarship enables me to pursue my passion for Agricultural Communications and the ability to make a positive impact. I aim to use my skills to give back and continue serving through organizations like Gold Star Missions, ensuring that our soldiers' stories are shared, and their legacies honored.

ALWAYS REMEMBER -
NEVER FORGET.

JORDAN OLIVER

ARMY SPC JUSTIN KYLE ADAMS, 22/11/2013, LITCHFIELD

BRAYLON NUGENT

ARMY PFC CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL ALCOZER, 19/11/2005,

ELMHURST

KYLEE GARRETT

ARMY SPC CHRISTOPHER ALLEN BARTKIEWICZ, 30/09/2008,

DUNFERMLINE

ASHLEY JONES

ARMY SSG JEREMY EUGENE BESSA, 20/02/2009, WOODRIDGE

ANNA SCHLEYHAN

MARINE CORPS PFC SEAN THOMAS CARDELLI, 01/02/2006,

DOWNERS GROVE

SHELBY SEILER

ARMY PFC SHAWN CHRISTOPHER EDWARDS, 23/04/2004,

BENSENVILLE

HUNTER HILDEBRAND

ARMY SGT KRAIG DAVID FOYTECK, 30/10/2006, SKOKIE

WIAT MILLER

NAVY HM3 MITCH C. GOAD, 03/09/2010, MANTENO

ANGELI GRIECO

ARMY SSG KEVIN DOUGLAS GRIECO, 27/10/2008, BARTLETT

JOSHUA GRIECO

ARMY SSG KEVIN DOUGLAS GRIECO, 27/10/2008, BARTLETT

AUBREY HEADON

NAVY CPO JASON STANLEY HUBER, 10/18/2019, COVINGTON

KENNADY WATSON

MARINE CPL BRIAN MATTHEW KENNEDY, 20/03/2003, EVANSTON

CARTER ETHERIDGE

ARMY SSG ROBERT JAMES MILLER, 25/01/2008, OVIEDO

ZACHARY POWELL

ARMY SSG JOSHUA DAVID POWELL, 21/09/2010, NEW BERLIN

LAURA STREAM

ARMY SGT SCOTT BRADLEY STREAM, 24/02/2009, MATTOON

JADEN TRUSSEL

ARMY CPL FRANCIS MARION TRUSSEL JR, 26/05/2007, LINCOLN

2024 Scholarship Recipients



TESS ALLEN

AIR FORCE CAPT BRANDON LEE CYR, 27/04/2013, WOODBRIDGE

BAILEY WAYNE

MARINE CORPS SGT THOMAS MICHAEL GILBERT, 25/10/2006, DOWNERS GROVE

OLIVIA MARCHIZZA

ARMY SGT JACK TAFT HENNESSY, 01/10/2004, NAPERVILLE

JOHN BERNIS

MARINE CORPS LCPL JAKUB HENRYK KOWALIK, 12/05/2003, NILES

AMANDA WEBER

MARINE CORPS LCPL NICHOLAS DAVID LARSON, 09/11/2004, WHEATON

FRANKIE LEIGH NICHOLE

ARMY PFC DUANE EDWARD LONGSTRETH, 07/08/2003, SPRINGFIELD

TAYLOR JUSTISON

ARMY SPC DREW KRISTOPHER MCDANIEL, 18/09/2008, URBANA

ELISE HORTON

ARMY SPC SETH ALLEN MILLER, 14/04/2008, VISALIA

ABIGAIL LESKO

ARMY PFC SHAWN DAVID PAHNKE, 17/06/2003, SHELBYVILLE

LUCAS DOTSON

MARINE CORPS CAPT JOSHUA COLE PAIRSH, 22/01/2012, EQUALITY

MORGAN SNEEL

ARMY CPL DEMETRIUS LAMONT RICE, 14/07/2004, CHICAGO

BROOKE LALLEY

AIR FORCE SSGT COURTNEY JO RUSH, 04/01/2012, GALESBURG

STALEY SCHOEN

ARMY SPC SETH AARON MUEHRING SANDERS, 27/09/2009, MT VERNON

LAYLA HEIN

ARMY SPC KEVIN RYAN SHIELDS, 01/12/2007, ROSCOE

BROOKE DUNCAN

ARMY SPC WILLIAM DAVID TEMPLETON, 07/03/2011, PINCKNEYVILLE

LUKE JUNE

NAVY MRFN JACK BERNARD VALENTINE, 07/12/2006, ZION

ROBYN KOPENY

ARMY PFC FRANCESKA VELEZ, 05/11/2002, CHICAGO

ROSE TATGE

ARMY SPC GRANT ANDREW YOHINKA, 03/07/2002, BOURBANNAIS

Scholarship & Appreciation Banquet

Our Scholarship and Appreciation Banquet bridges generations while amplifying the voices of our Gold Star Families. It's also an opportunity for us to thank all who make each of our events possible, the participants, the volunteers, and our donors and partners.

Could you imagine sitting at a table with a Gold Star Family, a Veteran, a kind person and a teenager and their family and each person is there to remember those who died in service of our nation?

To date at our annual awards banquet we've awarded \$283,000 in scholarships to those seeking higher education who are dedicated to honoring the legacy of our fallen heroes.





GSM LEADERSHIP



2023-24 GSM Leadership



BOARD MEMBERS & KEY LEADERS

Gold Star Mission Corporation
(All officers serve one-year term;
that may be extended until successor
has been elected)

Current Board

President

Barry Tobias

Vice President

Brian Monahan

Secretary

Rebecca Carter

Treasurer

Tim Barnhart

Other Key Leaders

Director of Operations

Eric Murray

Assistant to the Director of

Operations

Chuck Kitson

Volunteer Director

Kate Hames

Annual Report Editors

Robert R. Adams

Kassidy Snyder

GSM Run for The Fallen Director

Candace White

General Logan 200 Director

Brian Monahan

Gold Star 500 Director

Eric Murray

GOLD STAR MISSION ADVISORY COUNCIL

The advisory council involves thoughtful leaders who regularly provide advice to the Gold Star Mission Leadership, and serve as a resource to help guide the direction of the organization and navigate its future.

Maj. Gen. (ret.) William Enyart

Former Adjutant General

Illinois National Guard

Maj. Gen. (ret.) Mark Rabin

Former General,

Illinois Air National Guard

Brig. Gen. (ret.) Steve Huber

Former Deputy Commanding

General,

1st Army Division East

Brig. Gen. (ret.) Chris Lawson

Vice Director J5

National Guard Bureau

Col. (ret.) Troy Phillips

Former Commander of 404th

Maneuver Enhancement Brigade

Col. David Helfrich

Founder and former President

Gold Star Mission

Col. Andrew Adamczyk

Co-Founder and Former Vice

President Gold Star Mission



Former Board Members

President

Matt Jones

17 Mar 2022 - 16 Mar 2023

Secretary

Chris Milchuck

17 Mar 2022 - 16 Mar 2023

Former Key Leaders

Social Media Director

Kathy Kelhhofer

30, Champaign IL ~ Marine Corps Sergeant Benjamin Smith, 24, Carterville IL ~ Air Force Senior Airman Bradley Smith, 24, Troy IL ~ Marine Corps First Sergeant Edward Smith, 38, Chicago IL ~ Army Sergeant Gerrick Smith, 19, Sullivan IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Paul Smith, 43, East Peoria IL ~ Army First Lieutenant Paul Southworth, 26, Oakland IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal John Sparks, 23, Chicago IL ~ Army Private First Class Cole Spencer, 21, Gays IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal James Stack, 20, Arlington Heights IL ~ Army Specialist Jared Stanker, 22, Evergreen Park IL ~ Army Specialist Lucas Starcevich, 25, Canton IL ~ Navy Vice Admiral Scott Stearney, 58, Chicago IL ~ Army Captain Joshua Steele, 26, North Henderson IL ~ Air Force Lieutenant Colonel John Stein, 39, Bardolph IL ~ Army Sergeant Scott Stream, 39, Mattoon IL ~ Army Specialist John Sullivan, 26, Countryside IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Michael Sutter, 28, Tinley Park IL ~ Army Major Paul Syverson, 32, Lake Zurich IL ~ Navy Commander Adrian Szwec, 43, Chicago IL ~ Army Sergeant Christopher Abeyta, 23, Midlothian IL ~ Army Specialist Omar Albrak Jr, 20, Chicago IL ~ Army Private First Class Christopher Alcozer, 21, Elmhurst IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Roberto Andrade Jr, 26, Chicago IL ~ Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Christopher Antonik, 29, Crystal Lake IL ~ Army Major David Audo, 35, Saint Joseph IL ~ Army Specialist David Badie, 23, Rockford IL ~ Army Lieutenant Colonel Robert Baldwin, 39, Muscatine IL ~ Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Terry Ball Jr, 36, East Peoria IL ~ Army First Lieutenant Debra Banaszak, 35, Bloomington IL ~ Army Specialist Collier Barcus, 21, McHenry IL ~ Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Justus Bartelt, 27, Polo IL ~ Army Specialist Christopher Bartkiewicz, 25, Dunfermline IL ~ Army Sergeant Michael Bartley, 23, Barnhill IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Jordan Basteau, 19, Pekin IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Jonathan Beatty, 22, Streator IL ~ Marine Corps Captain Ryan Beaupre, 30, Bloomington IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Christopher Belchik, 30, Brighton IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Jeremy Bessa, 26, Woodridge IL ~ Army Sergeant Bradley Beste, 22, Naperville IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Mario Bievre, 34, Glendale Heights IL ~ Army Corporal Albert Bitton, 20, Chicago IL ~ Army Sergeant Holli Bolinski, 37, Pinckneyville IL ~ Marine Corps Christopher Boyd, 22, Palatine IL ~ Army Corporal Phillip Brodnick, 25, New Lennon IL ~ Army Specialist Ja'mel Bryant, 22, Belleville IL ~ Army Corporal Ryan Buckley, 21, Nokomis IL ~ Navy Petty Officer 2 Ryan Burris, 23, Lisle IL ~ Army Private Matthew Bush, 20, East Alton IL ~ Army Specialist Norman Cain III, 22, Freeport IL ~ Marine Corps Private First Class Sean Cardelli, 20, Downers Grove IL ~ Army Specialist Ryan Carlock, 25, Macomb IL ~ Army Specialist Miguel Carrasquillo, 25, River Grove IL ~ Marine Corps Sergeant David Caruso, 25, Naperville IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Alec Catherwood, 19, Byron IL ~ Army Sergeant Jessica Cawvey, 21, Normal IL ~ Army Sergeant First Class William Chaney, 59, Schaumburg IL ~ Navy Petty Officer 1 Regina Clark, 43, Colona IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Kevin Clarke, 21, Tinley Park IL ~ Army Corporal Karen Clifton, 22, Mount Zion IL ~ Marine Lance Corporal Jonathan Collins, 19, Crystal Lake IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Pedro Colon, 25,



**THANK YOU TO ALL WHO HELP US
CONTINUE OUR MISSION AND SPREAD
THE WORD TO**

ALWAYS REMEMBER, NEVER FORGET

Cicero IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Kenneth Corzine, 23, Bethalto IL ~ Army Corporal Jeremiah Costello, 22, Carlinville IL ~ Army Sergeant Sirlou Cuaresma, 25, Chicago IL ~ Marine Corporal Ryan Cummings, 22, Streamwood IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Nickolas Daniels, 25, Elmwood IL ~ Navy Machinist Mate Fireman Recruit Bryant Davis, 20, Chicago IL ~ Marine Corps Sergeant Edward Davis, 31, Antioch IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Edwin Dazachacon, 38, Belleville IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Jesse De La Torre, 29, Aurora IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Benjamin Desilets, 21, Elmwood IL ~ Army Specialist Joseph Dimock, 21, Wildwood IL ~ Army Private First Class Adam Dobereiner, 21, Moline IL ~ Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Christopher Donaldson, 28, Effingham IL ~ Army Sergeant James Dorsey, 23, Beardstown IL ~ Army Sergeant First Class Shawn Dostie, 32, Granite City IL ~ Army Specialist William Dusenberry, 30, Lake Zurich IL ~ Army Private James Ebberts, 19, Tinley Park IL ~ Army Private First Class Shawn Edwards, 20, Bensenville IL ~ Army Private First Class Wyatt Eisenhower, 26, Pinckneyville IL ~ Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Jordan Emrick, 26, Hoyleton IL ~ Army Sergeant Blake Evans, 24, Rockford IL ~ Army Staff Sergeant Donald Farmer, 33, Zion IL ~ Army Sergeant Kraig Foyteck, 26, Skokie IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Phillip Frank, 20, Elk Grove IL ~ Air Force Staff Sergeant Jacob Frazier, 24, St Charles IL ~ Army Specialist Ryan Garbs, 20, Edwardsville IL ~ Army Sergeant Landis Garrison, 23, Rapids City IL ~ Army Specialist Ronald Gebur, 23, Delavan IL ~ Army First Lieutenant David Giaim

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IL ~ Army Private First Class Robert Liggett, 23, Urbana IL ~ Army Sergeant Eric Liu, 28, Chicago IL ~ Army Sergeant Terry Lisk, 26, Fox Lake IL ~ Army Private First Class Duane Longstreth, 19, Springfield IL ~ Marine Corps Private Eduardo Lopez, 21, Aurora IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Jamie Lowe, 21, Johnsonville IL ~ Army Specialist Jacob Lowell, 22, New Lenox IL ~ , Army Private First Class Caleb Lufkin, 24, Knoxville IL ~ Army Corporal Bryant Luxmore, 25, New Windsor IL ~ Army Captain Shane Mahaffee, 36, Gurnee IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Sean Maher, 19, Grayslake IL ~ Army Private First Class Matthew Martinek, 20, DeKalb IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Alex Martinez, 21, Elgin IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Philip Martini, 24, Lansing IL ~ Navy Seaman Carlos Mazon, 19, Chicago IL ~ Marine Corps Captain Nathan McHone, 29, Crystal Lake IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Adam McKiski, 21, Cherry Valley IL ~ Army Sergeant Jason McLeod, 22, Crystal Lake IL ~ Army Private First Class Andrew Meari, 21, Plainfield IL, Army Staff Sergeant Joshua Melton, 26, Carlyle IL ~ Army Sergeant Steven Mennemeyer, 26, Granite City IL ~ Army Private First Class Devin Michel, 19, Stockton IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Anthony Mihaló, 23, Naperville IL ~ Air Force Senior Airman Daniel Miller, 24, Galesburg IL ~ Marine Corps Corporal Nathaniel Moore, 22, Champaign IL ~ Army Specialist Jaime Moreno, 28, Round Lake Beach IL ~ Marine Corps Private First Class Geoffrey Morris, 19, Gurnee IL ~ Army Sergeant Shawna Morrison, 26, Champaign IL ~ Army Specialist Charles Neeley, 19, Mattoon IL ~ Army Private First Class William Newgard, 20, Arlington Heights IL ~ Marine Corps Lance Corporal Robert Newton, 21, Creve Couer IL ~ Army Sergeant Kenneth Nichols, 28, Chrisman IL ~ Army Corporal Keith Nurnberg, 26, McHenry IL ~ Army Specialist George Obourn, 20, Creve Couer IL ~ Army Sergeant First Class James Ochsner, 36, Waukegan IL ~ Army Private First







**GOLD
STAR
MISSION**

ALWAYS REMEMBER, NEVER FORGET