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The New Greatest Generation

By Joe Klein

John Gallina and Dale Beatty were best friends.

They joined the North Carolina National Guard while they were still in high school. They served in Iraq together, and they nearly died together on Nov. 15, 2004, when their humvee



was blown up by an antitank mine. Beatty, a staff sergeant, was riding shotgun; Gallina, a specialist, was driving. The humvee flew 200 ft. (60 m) through the air and landed upside down. Beatty realized he was trapped, crushed, the only one still inside. Gallina had been thrown from the vehicle and was out cold. When he came to 45 minutes later, his first question was, Where's Dale? No one would tell him; he figured Beatty was dead.

He later learned that Beatty had been medevacked to Balad and then on to Walter Reed Medical Center, where his left leg was amputated just below the knee. "I woke up in Walter Reed," Beatty recalled. "And they gave me a choice: I could spend the next two years in therapy, trying to save my other leg — but I'd never walk without pain again — or they could amputate it. I told them to cut it off the same place they'd cut the other one." ([See pictures of an American unit's final days in Iraq.](#))

Beatty's wounds were obvious; Gallina's, less so. "When I wear shorts, it gets people's attention," Beatty told me recently. "People are more aware of me than of John. He just got

off the airplane and was out of the National Guard, with not much support." Gallina had suffered a traumatic brain injury, multiple cuts and bruises, a damaged back and severe posttraumatic stress disorder.

The local homebuilders association in Statesville, N.C., offered to build Beatty a house on his family's land. It wasn't a fancy house, but it was designed with a double amputee in mind. Beatty helped build it, and he found that the days he spent hammering nails were better than the days he didn't. He called Gallina and asked him to join in — and Gallina, who had a background in construction, experienced a tremendous satisfaction, a sense of peace, building the home. When the construction was done, their next step seemed obvious. "We were trained in the military never to leave a fallen comrade in the field," Gallina says. "But do we bring them home just to leave them alone? That didn't seem right."

The two men decided to form an organization to do handicapped-access projects for other veterans. They called it Purple Heart Homes. Their first project was to build an extension and wheelchair ramp for a Vietnam veteran named Kevin Smith. "He had been crawling in and out of the house for 40 years, relying on the help of a neighbor to go shopping," Gallina says. "Those Vietnam guys represent around 32% of all veterans, and they didn't get anything like the support we get. You know, for someone like me to have something to focus on, to have a reason to be here, makes all the difference, and there are so many people who need help." ([See 90 years of battlefield portraits.](#))

The story of purple heart homes is extraordinary but not unique. It may not even be unusual, even though most of the news we seem to hear about the veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan is pretty bad. It is all about suicides, domestic violence and posttraumatic stress disorder. It is about veterans who are jobless and homeless. All of which is true, but there is another side of their story that has not been told: the veterans like John Gallina and Dale Beatty, who have come back and decided to continue to serve their country. They are a tiny proportion of the population, and probably a small proportion of returning veterans, but they are beginning to make a real difference. A pair of Marine sergeants named Jake Wood and William McNulty started Team Rubicon, which sends elite teams of former noncoms to organize logistics in areas like Haiti after the earthquake and Joplin, Mo., after the tornado. An Army captain named Wes Moore has started a mentoring program for first-time offenders between the ages of 8 and 12 in Baltimore and travels the country giving motivational speeches to high school kids. A Silver Star recipient and former Marine captain named Brian Stann has become an ultimate-fighting champion and, in his

spare time, runs an employment agency for veterans. Iraq and Afghanistan war vets have gone to work in other parts of the government, like the State Department, where they're having a major impact on the field-level conduct of foreign-aid programs. Some are running for office, as Republicans and as Democrats; others are getting graduate degrees at places like Yale Law School and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and will likely enter politics or public service before long. "They're incredible, some of my best students," says Dr. Elaine Kamarck of the Kennedy School. "Two things set them apart: they've very disciplined, and they're really, really serious about their work."

[See a TIME photographer's Iraq diary.](#)

[See pictures of Iraq veteran June Moss.](#)

The returning veterans are bringing skills that seem to be on the wane in American society, qualities we really need now: crisp decisionmaking, rigor, optimism, entrepreneurial creativity, a larger sense of purpose and real patriotism (as opposed to self-righteous flag waving). Indeed, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required a new military skill set, far more sophisticated than for previous conflicts — and far different from the yes-sir, no-sir rote discipline that most civilians associate with the military. "World War I was fought by large units like battalions," says John Nagl, a former Army officer who is chairman of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a Washington think tank almost entirely staffed by this new generation of veterans. "World War II was fought by companies. Vietnam, by platoons. The current wars are all about small teams who have to interact with the local Iraqi and Afghan populations. That has required a different kind of soldier." ([See pictures of Robert Gates in America's war zones.](#))

I first noticed this when I embedded with a company of the 4th Infantry Division in the town of Senjaray, in a Taliban-controlled area of southern Afghanistan. The company commander, Captain Jeremiah Ellis, essentially became the mayor of the town — dealing with the local shura (council of elders), providing security, asking the public about the kinds of development projects they wanted, funding those projects through his CERP (commander's emergency-response program) money. It occurred to me that Ellis had developed the political skills to be the mayor of his hometown in Iowa or, eventually, the governor of that state. Ellis and his First Sergeant Jack Robison later showed their entrepreneurial creativity in another way: worried that their troops might succumb to the violence that was afflicting other soldiers when they returned from a deployment, they

organized a three-day Outward Bound program back at Fort Carson in Colorado — rock climbing, white-water rafting and adventure races — to take the edge off a very difficult year in Senjaray. Ellis invited in therapists from his alma mater, the University of New Hampshire, as well as from the Army, to get the soldiers talking about their anger and their fears. "When we rotate home, we work on fixing up every piece of equipment except their brains," Ellis says. "Had to do something about that."

The Pentagon is rightly worried that many of its best young leaders, especially captains like Ellis, are leaving the service after multiple tours in war zones. But the military's brain drain is civilian America's gain: "These soldiers had to rebuild communities and make difficult decisions under huge pressure," says General David Petraeus, whose revamped training procedures helped create this force. "They've had to show incredible flexibility, never knowing whether they're going to be greeted with a handshake or a hand grenade. They've been exposed to experiences that are totally unique, compared with most Americans. Once they've seen the elephant, they surely can help rebuild Joplin. I believe they are our next great generation of leaders." ([Watch TIME's video about the new greatest generation.](#))

And Petraeus, in many ways, is their spiritual father. He has surrounded himself with military intellectuals from the service academies, like Liz McNally, a tiny West Point graduate and Rhodes scholar who did a tour in Baghdad at the age of 24, running a platoon of military police officers, and later became the general's speech writer. Or Seth Moulton, a Marine captain who had been the Harvard class-of-2001 commencement speaker and became particularly adept at working with Iraqis to organize construction projects. "Petraeus was an amazing boss," Moulton says. "Our mission was to defeat the military bureaucracy. We were able to build border forts, using Iraqi engineers and work crews, for one-fifth the price that the American contractors were charging and in one-third the time. Our proposals went right to his desk, rather than through the bureaucracy. The only thing he demanded of us was success." ([See pictures of Iraq's fragile progress.](#))

Moulton, McNally and other activist veterans have stayed in touch since leaving the service. After years of watching them in action downrange and back home, I can pretty much spot them on sight: fit, smart, confident and strong. They look you straight in the eye when they talk; they can be funny as hell, but their language isn't fancy. "There's a special bond among those of us who came from privileged educational backgrounds and chose to serve," says Moulton. "We're a group that really wants to see America become a better place. We hate

the divisive politics of the baby-boom generation. They're running the country into the ground." That's another lovely thing about these veterans: they don't mince words.

The First Mission: Taking Care of One Another

Paul Rieckhoff was one of the first home from Iraq in January 2004, and he came home angry. He was an Army National Guard officer with a degree from Amherst College. He had spent much of his tour in a tough neighborhood in Baghdad, watching as his troops were killed or wounded because they didn't have proper body armor or were driving around in open humvees. Soon after he came home, a member of his unit committed suicide. "There was all this stuff going on, and no one was speaking for the troops," Rieckhoff says. "It was amazing and disgusting. No one was lobbying for them." He and another vet set up a website, Operation Truth, which became a message center for returning vets — and he ultimately formed Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), which remains the most important organization representing the new generation of veterans.

[Watch TIME's video "A New Season of Fighting in Afghanistan."](#)

In the beginning, IAVA was overtly antiwar and fairly political. "We hate the war but love the Army," Rieckhoff told me in 2006. He helped found an organization called VoteVets, which supported Democratic veterans running for Congress. "But pretty soon I saw that there were other vets who favored the war and were running for office too — and I didn't want to work against them. We separated IAVA from VoteVets. And I've got to say that if Pete Hegseth, a Republican, who started Veterans for Freedom, ran for office, I'd work for him. I'd work for any veterans running for office because I know their values."

This is a common sentiment among the new generation of vets turned pols. They feel closer to one another than they do to either political party. The three Democratic veterans elected to Congress in 2006 were supplanted by seven Republican veterans in subsequent elections. When Tommy Sowers, a Special Ops officer, ran a losing campaign for Congress as a Missouri Democrat in 2010, one of his major fundraisers was Jason Lewis, a Republican who is now an investment banker. "We worked together as Special Operators," Lewis told me, "and I was immediately impressed by Tommy. Everyone is. He has exceptional aptitude, the ability to break a complicated problem down into its component parts very quickly." Between operations, Sowers and Lewis argued about economics. "Tommy was something of a Keynesian. I was more of an economic classicist. But our philosophical

differences weren't nearly as important as the values we had in common." (Sowers told me that if Lewis wants to run for Congress, he'll happily reciprocate and raise money for him.)

Many returning veterans follow politics closely. "One thing about the military was, it forced you to learn," says Gallina. "If you were willing to learn, you could rise fast — so we all became avid readers, and we've carried that through back home." They aren't thrilled by what they see. They tend to view public life through the prism of military values — which are, at times, contradictory. There is a basic altruism. Gallina intuitively expanded the notion that you don't leave a fallen comrade in the field to include the veterans of other wars; from there, it's a short jump to including civilians as members of their community too. Veterans are trained to believe that everyone in their unit rises and falls together. "In the military, it's never about you," Lewis told me. "It's always about something larger."

But there is another, competing and decidedly conservative sense that is common to veterans: that American society has gone soft and is filled with whiners, an entitlement culture lacking a sense of individual accountability. One veteran who served in Congress described his whining civilian colleagues as "a professional bed-wetting society." Indeed, it is hard to imagine a value structure more different from military life than the national political culture of blather and complaint. "The toughest part of leadership is telling people they have to do something that involves pain," says Eric Greitens, a former Navy SEAL who runs a program for badly wounded returning veterans called the Mission Continues. "We had to do that every day: 'At 0100 we're going to stage a raid. The enemy is heavily armed and waiting for us. I can't promise you we're going to accomplish this without casualties. But we need to take out this cell of snipers.' You just don't find many politicians willing to get people to do tough things." ([See the top 10 elite fighting units.](#))

And while there is general admiration for fellow veterans who run for office, some of the most impressive members of this generation have a disdain for public life. "I just don't believe that politics needs to be total combat," says Nathaniel Fick, a former Marine and Dartmouth classics major who now is president of CNAS and whose friends continually press him to run for office. "I've seen total combat. I wouldn't want to give up my privacy and expose my family to the craziness the system seems to require. My kid is not a prop. Anyway, most of my friends feel politically homeless," he adds, acknowledging that neither party reflected the combination of service and get-it-done pragmatism most veterans value. "But I do believe that we have something important to contribute. We know how to lead."

How to Build a Leader

"The main reason why I chose West Point over Yale," says McNally, who now works for McKinsey & Co., "is that it was a complete experience, not just academically but a serious physical challenge — and in leadership as well. You get real responsibility very quickly: in Germany, I was 22 and leading 30 people who didn't have a college education. And I had to make it work. Most of the college grads I know who didn't join the military don't know 30 people without a college education." ([See why young vets have trouble finding work.](#))

McNally's parents were mildly horrified by her decision. Her dad, Dr. Richard Young, a pediatric neurologist who has taught for 30 years at Yale, said the toughest moment was dropping her off at West Point. "They announced, 'You have exactly one minute to kiss your loved one goodbye,'" Young told me. "At other colleges, you at least get to help them unpack." But he quickly adjusted to being a military dad. "I was always the sort of dad who became the soccer coach." So he decided to enlist in the Connecticut National Guard. He has done four tours as a combat physician in Iraq and says, "These are the most diverse and extraordinary people I've ever met. I'd love to see the values and ethics of the military spread into the general population."

Wes Moore will tell you, without hesitation, that the values and ethics of the Army saved his life. He grew up tough in Baltimore and the Bronx. His dad died when he was young, and he began to get into trouble. His mother and her parents scraped together the money to send him to Valley Forge Military Academy. From there, he went on to the Army and, eventually, Johns Hopkins University and, on a Rhodes scholarship, Oxford. On one of his visits home from the military, Moore found out that a young man with the same name as his, who had lived two blocks away in Baltimore, had just been convicted of murder and would be spending life in prison. Moore befriended "the other Wes Moore" — which became the title of the best-selling book he wrote about the forces that had sent them to such different fates. He also started a mentoring program for first-time criminals in Baltimore while working for Citibank in New York. (He has since left Citibank and is developing educational-technology products for Oprah Winfrey.)

I once asked Moore whether the skills he learned in the Army had any influence on his life as a civilian. "Absolutely! On every big decision I make," he said and began to tell me about his tour as a counterintelligence officer in a difficult section of eastern Afghanistan. "People have the wrong impression of the military," he said. "It is extremely entrepreneurial. I had more freedom to make decisions there than I do at Citibank. My commander would tell me

what needed to be done, and then it was up to me to figure out how to do it." ([See pictures of President Obama in Afghanistan.](#))

Actually, Moore — and every other military officer — was trained to construct an action plan for every mission. "We were taught to write a five-paragraph memo. I still use it whenever I have a major decision to make. Want me to show you how it works?" And he proceeded to lay out a five-point memo describing his proposed campaign to stop the city of Baltimore from building a \$70 million juvenile-detention facility and channel the funds to more-productive programs for at-risk kids. The inevitable military acronym for the five-paragraph memo is SMESC, and the mnemonic device is "Sergeant major eats sugar cookies."

Situation: What's the problem? Mission: What's our strategy for solving it? Execution: What tactics are we going to use? Support: What are the logistics; how many troops and what sort of equipment will we need? Command: What other organizations (air strikes, aerial reconnaissance, Afghan security forces) will have to be involved? "You know, it's difficult to leave the military and not come out bored," Moore told me. "There's a significant letdown, which is a big part of the psychological problems so many of us have. In civilian life, you miss the sense of excitement and purpose and camaraderie. But I think that's what is motivating so many of us into different forms of public service."

Public-Service Warriors

More than a few of the veterans who are doing extraordinary things were altruists before they joined the military. Seth Moulton, the Harvard valedictorian, decided to join the Marines because it was the "purest form of service," even though his mother told Boston magazine she initially thought that "there was no career choice he could have made that would have made me more unhappy, except if he had chosen a life of crime." Rye Barcott decided to prepare for his stint in the Marines by visiting the enormous Kibera slum in Kenya — he speaks Swahili — and writing his senior thesis at the University of North Carolina about ethnic differences there. Eventually, Barcott found himself simultaneously serving as an intelligence officer in Iraq and launching a nongovernmental program in Kibera, which featured interethnic soccer teams and a health clinic. Eric Greitens decided to become a Navy SEAL when he visited Rwanda after the genocide, which he believed could easily have been prevented by a careful use of military force. ([See pictures of marines' tattoos in Afghanistan.](#))

For others, like Brian Stann, the altruism really kicked in after their military service ended. Stann received a Silver Star for his heroism when his unit was isolated in Iraq and he spent

nearly a week fending off repeated enemy attacks by coordinating air strikes and organizing a perimeter defense. When I met him in Alpharetta, Ga., Stann didn't mention any of this, nor did he speak very much about his stellar career in ultimate fighting. (He is currently the sixth-ranked middleweight.) He was, however, obsessed with his responsibility to the Marines under his command who didn't make it.

"I lost friends who will never have the opportunities I've had — to get married and have children or just to have a peaceful day with friends. I live every day for them," Stann told me and then began to describe the way he found to honor them: Hire Heroes, the employment program he runs. "We teach them how to do résumés, how to present themselves for interviews, and then match them with prospective employers. It's amazing, but a lot of them never list their military service on their résumés. They think it isn't relevant — or they think it might work against them, given all the bad publicity we've gotten." Stann said he often runs into employers who are reluctant to hire vets for those reasons. "I tell them, 'No decision you'll ask them to make will be harder than decisions they've already made. No amount of pressure you put on them will equal the pressures they've already experienced.'" (There are some companies that understand the value of these qualities: Siemens has set a goal of making veterans 10% of all new hires.)

Stann told me that despite this work, he still struggles with survivor's guilt. But not too much. "It's easy to control PTSD," the middleweight says, "when you get to punch somebody in the face every day."

And then there are those who find their way into public service because they simply enjoy hanging out with other vets and doing good things. Jake Wood joined the Marines after graduating from the University of Wisconsin in 2004 because "I wasn't ready to put on a suit. The idea of Goldman Sachs didn't sound too appealing." Jake is an enormous man, a former offensive tackle at Wisconsin. He served two rough tours as a sergeant in Iraq and Afghanistan, then left the military because he'd compounded old football injuries on patrol. "So there I was in January 2010, filling out my business-school applications and feeling pretty bored, when I heard about the earthquake in Haiti. I knew that I could help out. There were thousands injured, looting, mobs in the streets, but I knew it wasn't going to be any worse than Fallujah. So I went on Facebook to see if any of my friends were interested." Four friends were, including William McNulty, who had a connection with the Jesuits in Haiti. Woods raised \$6,000 in a day on Facebook. They were in Haiti 72 hours later. "There was a lot of looting and chaos," says McNulty. "Other relief agencies don't like those sorts of

situations, but we'd seen a lot worse. We know how to do chaos. We're Marines." ([See how an army town copes with PTSD.](#))

They spent 20 days in Haiti helping organize medical facilities. When they got home, Jake's father told them they had \$150,000 in donations they hadn't used. "You can either give it back, pay taxes on it or form a 501(c)(3)," he said — and Team Rubicon was born. They now have 500 former noncoms who serve as volunteers.

"After I got out of the Rangers," says Ford Sypher, a University of Kansas graduate now trying to decide between pursuing a Ph.D. in global studies or a medical degree, "I was looking for something to fill the void. It was like losing your family." Then McNulty invited him to join an Alabama tornado-relief crew. "I rented a chainsaw, and within 20 minutes it felt like I was back in the service again. We shared a common language and knew how to organize ourselves to work efficiently. I took a team to Walker County, and FEMA offered us trailers to live in. We refused because we're used to sleeping on the ground; other people aren't. You know, our generation of vets isn't really into joining organizations like the VFW or the Legion, but we do have a need to share our stories and experiences. When we go out on these disaster-relief missions, it's very therapeutic — and we're doing something tangible and immediate to help people."

"You're a Marine Captain. Figure It Out."

It will be decades before we find out if these veterans will prove, as Petraeus believes, the next great generation of American leaders. "It will be a phenomenal waste if 10 years from now, we turn out to be just another interest group, limiting ourselves to veterans' issues," says Michael Breen, vice president of the Truman National Security Project, which has provided a home in the Democratic Party for returning veterans with a desire for public service. Breen need not worry too much. The vets are just beginning to understand the value of the skills they have to offer, the amazing things they may be able to accomplish as civilians. In the coming years, people like Eric Greitens, Wes Moore and Liz McNally may run for office; an Iraq or Afghanistan veteran, or two, may someday be elected President — and he or she will bring to office the sense of grace under pressure, of purposeful leadership that comes from service in combat, an experience that none of the baby-boom Presidents have had. ([See pictures of President Obama in Iraq.](#))

For now, just listening to them talk about their experiences is thrilling. Seth Moulton returned from his last tour working for Petraeus in 2007 and did a joint master's program at

Harvard's Business School and Kennedy School of Government. He and his friend David Callaway, a former combat surgeon who was then affiliated with the Harvard Medical Faculty Physicians, were sitting together at a Truman Project conference when Callaway got word of the Haiti earthquake. Harvard wanted him to organize a team of doctors to help out. "I turned to Seth and said, 'I need you to go down there and start organizing logistics,'" Callaway told me. "Seth said, 'I don't know anything about medical logistics.' And I told him, 'Seth, you're a Marine captain. Figure it out.'"

Moulton went to Haiti and quickly began reorganizing the main hospital in Port-au-Prince. "There were bodies outside the building that needed to be disposed of," he recalls. "And there was total confusion about operating schedules, so I had to work that out. It turned out that I did have some skills that were useful." All the medical records had been destroyed, and there were no working computers. Moulton came up with another idea. "We could develop something like an iPhone app for doctors to input into the new system," he told me. "When the U.N. heard about that, they wanted us to develop it for them. They invited our team to a meeting in Santo Domingo — but when we got there, we realized we didn't have a business plan. We had an hour before the meeting, and I just sat down and wrote a five-point action memo. Dave said, 'I knew your Harvard Business School training would come in handy.' And I said to him, 'Harvard Business School! I learned how to do that in the United States Marines.'"