



MEMORIAL DAY | A HAMPTON ROADS PERSPECTIVE

Gifts of thanks



CHRIS TYREE/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

In his Norfolk garage, Bill Callahan, 81, has made hundreds of wooden plaques to give to the families of local warriors who have fallen in the line of duty. The Navy veteran says he wants to give each family a tribute that will stand the test of time.



HONORING THE NATION'S WAR DEAD is more than a once-a-year gesture for two Hampton Roads residents. With their hands and their hearts, they create lasting memorials to those who served.

BY KATE WILTROUT
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Their tools come from different eras. Bill Callahan employs saws, a drill press and a belt sander. Meriwether Ball uses her keyboard and the Internet. Their goal, though, is the same: to honor military members who have died in uniform. Memorial Day is the nation's annual reminder to honor its war dead, but Callahan and Ball need no prompting. They do it year-round. Callahan crafts memorial plaques in his Norfolk garage

for families of local service members killed in action; Ball, in Portsmouth, posts stories of fallen Marines on a Web site she founded.

The first memorial plaque Callahan remembers making, in 1998, wasn't for a person. It was for a Virginia Beach Police Department mounted patrol horse that died after being hit by a car.

The retired Navy baker, 81, has lost count of how many of the inch-thick Baltic plywood and mahogany veneer plaques he has made since.

He delivered one in the shape of a ship's

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Rest easy

A tribute to Hampton Roads' fallen warriors in images and words. **The Daily Break**

ONLINE Take a video tour of local military memorials at pilotonline.com.

INSIDE Purple Heart stories wanted for new museum of war heroes. **Page A3**

MEMORIAL DAY IN HAMPTON ROADS

Thanks: Two year-round tributes

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wheel to the former skipper of the Norfolk-based destroyer Cole, which lost 17 sailors in a terrorist attack in 2000.

He constructed a plaque presented to President Bush during a trip to Norfolk in 2001 that featured badges from local police and fire departments that sent volunteers to New York City after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Other keepsakes went to families of Navy SEALs killed in Afghanistan in 2002.

More recently, Callahan carved shield-shaped plaques for the families of Bradley Harper, James Edge and Kyle Brown. They were Marines with local ties who died in Iraq in 2005 and 2006.

The plaques are adorned with red felt shadow boxes that hold pictures and medals.

Individually carved letters and numbers - made of dense dogwood that Callahan spray-paints gold - spell out names and dates.

Callahan envisions the wooden remembrances outlasting newspaper clippings, certificates and proclamations. Memories may fade, but the families of those killed in action will have something to hold onto for decades.

It's the children he thinks about most.

"When the children grow up, they'll have something they can remember their dads with," Callahan said. "That's the important part of that."

Pictures of the finished plaques and thank-you notes from recipients fill two albums.

Next to a picture of the plaque for Edge, a Marine captain killed in Iraq in April 2005, rests a letter from his mother, Janice Whorton, who lives in Norfolk.

Callahan and Whorton have never met; a casualty assistance officer delivered the keepsake.

"On behalf of my family and Jamie's widow and children, I extend our heartfelt gratitude for your tribute to his sacrifice. It was extremely thoughtful of you," Whorton wrote.

"It's letters like that that kind of make it worthwhile," said Callahan, who lives with his wife of 58 years in the Elizabeth Park neighborhood

"I think that's my calling - not to be a Marine, but to sit on the sidelines and honor them." MERIWETHER BALL, FOUNDER OF CORPS STORIES



GENEVIEVE ROSS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

of Norfolk, off Military Highway.

Callahan loves to tinker in his garage workshop, but glaucoma and cataract surgery have temporarily sidelined him.

He'd be happy not to have to make any more plaques, but he's a realist. Two tins full of pre-made gold letters sit ready, waiting for the next name to honor.

Five years ago, Meriwether Ball was working as a freelance newspaper writer in Massachusetts when she found herself gravitating to stories involving Marines and their religious faith.

Her editors were less than enthusiastic about the topic.

So in 2002, Ball, now 42, founded Corps Stories, a Web site dedicated to telling stories of Marines who "serve God, the Corps, their community - or all three."

Then came wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and with them, Marine casualties.

Ball, whose beloved uncle was a Marine pilot, decided to devote a section of her Web site to newspaper stories about fallen Marines.



BROWN



EDGE



HARPER

Bill Callahan carved shield-shaped plaques for the families of Kyle Brown, James Edge and Bradley Harper, three Marines with local ties who died in Iraq in 2005 and 2006.

The concept is simple: She buys reprint rights from newspapers across the country and tries to post one story about every fallen Marine.

Corps Stories now has more than 700 articles dating back to 2003. Some are just a few sentences from small-town papers. Others are lengthy descriptions of a Marine's life, or front-page accounts of their funerals.

In a few cases, when nothing more has been written, Ball

simply posts the Department of Defense death announcement.

"The tragedy is that some Marines die, and they never get a story written about them at all," said Ball, who moved to Portsmouth's Port Norfolk neighborhood in 2004 and has worked full time on the site since last summer.

Reprints can cost between \$3 and \$4, which Ball said she pays so that Marines who want to read about a fallen

buddy won't have to.

Corps Stories is now registered with the state as a nonprofit corporation, and Ball has applied for a grant to finance her work from the McCormick Tribune Foundation.

The other content on her site includes guest editorials from Marines, interviews with Marine notables, lists of noteworthy books and names of Marines who went on to be famous.

Ball traveled to the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, earlier this year to report on the Marines serving there.

"In Memoriam" has become the most trafficked part of the site, she said, with 7,000 hits a day.

"I don't have the courage to be a Marine," Ball said. "I think that's my calling - not to be a Marine, but to sit on the sidelines and honor them."

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