

# MILITARY *families*

FEBRUARY 2024

MAGAZINE

BY U.S. MILITARY PUBLISHING, LLC

## RUNNING HAPPY

*Erika Kemp's*  
**RISE AS A PRO ATHLETE**

**2024**  
**MILITARY**  
**SCHOLARSHIPS**

**ARMY VET**  
**CREATES**  
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**N**early half of people who set a goal for the New Year quit by this month, with only 9% reporting that they are successful in achieving whatever they set out to do. Shocking? No. Motivation is fleeting and unless we adjust old — or bad — habits, a calendar change isn't likely to make much difference.

But all hope is not lost. You don't have to wait another year to start again. For this month's cover feature I spoke with professional runner Erika Kemp. The New Jersey native heads to Florida this month to compete in the Olympic trials. I asked the former Air Force brat, turned Army girlfriend what her advice is to others looking to chase a big, audacious goal. She simply said, "start small." You can read more of her story (and tips) on page 10.

Oftentimes we think drastic leaps are the way to go, but all that does is set us up for failure. Whether you are looking to improve a PFT score, finish a college degree, or simply organize your pantry, you are more likely to succeed by taking small,

attainable steps toward completion. Of course, if it were that easy, we wouldn't be having this conversation.

At the end of the day, at least in my experience, I have found that understanding the "why" behind your "what" is the thing that will keep you going — or at least, that's what worked for me. I ran my first marathon in 2023 and when it's triple digits and you have a long run to conquer, reminding myself of the reason I set out to accomplish 26.2 miles in the first place kept me from quitting.

One other tip: as much as social media can be a cesspool of negativity, it is an awesome accountability tool. Not only can you find other people to connect with who may be vying for a similar goal, but by setting your intention "publicly," your friends and family will keep you honest about progress and setbacks.

Get back to it,



**Bianca Strzalkowski**  
Editor-in-chief

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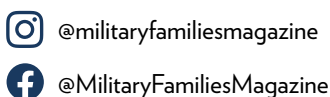
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**The USS Ford returned home after 239 days underway. The Navy's newest, largest and most advanced aircraft carrier's deployment was extended 76 days after conflict began in Israel.**

The Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group worked with 17 nations throughout its deployment during exercises Baltic Operations, Air Defender, Bomber Task Force Viking Trident, Neptune Strike, and Sage Wolverine, according to a press release.

"Though extended, we were the right ship at the right time to answer the call, and our Sailors performed admirably. Ford Sailors honored our namesake's legacies of hard

work, integrity, and courage," Capt. Rick Burgess, Gerald R. Ford's commanding officer, said.

The press release notes some of the ship's impressive accomplishments including logging more than 17,826 flight hours and 10,396 sorties, but also the overwhelming effort it takes to care for sailors. The culinary team, as an example, prepared and served more than 3.1 million meals which included 79,000 chocolate chip cookies.

The Ford deployment also made history with the first military facility working dog, Sage (pictured right), to deploy with a U.S. Navy ship.



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PHOTO BY USO



## Vet tix reaches new milestone

The Veteran Tickets Foundation, also known as Vet Tix, has now distributed 20 million tickets to service members and veterans around the country, valuing at more than \$1.2 billion.

Launched in 2008, Vet Tix works with nearly every MLB, NHL, NBA, NFL, NCAA, and

minor league team, along with NASCAR. Sporting events are in the top category for donations and distributions alike, but Vet Tix also provides tickets to concerts, family programs, performing arts, and comedy clubs.

Visit <https://www.vettix.org/> to learn about open opportunities.



A new organization named an Army combat veteran as its first executive director.

Kevin Emore will lead MilitaryConnected.org, a nonprofit that works with corporate America to become “military-ready.” Its goal is to help companies create fulfilling opportunities for veterans in its ranks.

Emore is a retired Army captain who earned a Bronze Star and Combat Action Badge for service in Iraq. Visit <https://militaryconnected.org/> to learn more about its data-driven programs.

## Marines

**practice counter drone capabilities**

Marines of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit finetuned their counter unmanned aerial systems during realistic urban training last month.

“The need is great for CUAS systems in the battlespace,” said 1st Lt. Daniel Butler, a low altitude air defense (LAAD) officer with 2nd LAAD detachment, 24th MEU. “We keep the Marines on the ground safe from small aerial threats, often before they even know they were there.”



PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. RYAN SAMMET

# A harsh reality

BY ALEXA LECUREUX, AIR FORCE SPOUSE

I want to preface this column by saying my intention is to convey my thoughts in the utmost respectful and delicate way this subject deserves, especially since this will be one of the most sensitive topics I've covered in my writing career to date. To be honest, I've been putting this off for weeks now. It's something I've desperately wanted to write about but at the same time, one I've dreaded because I struggle to find the appropriate words to properly explain my thoughts.

As most people know and were following on the news, the military world was rocked by recent plane crashes that have taken the lives of too many amazing military members. I want to verbalize how the most recent crash has hit too close to home for so many in our flying community and how this affects us as military spouses.

There's so much about this life that military spouses have in common, but one aspect we all share, undoubtedly, is our worst fear, or rather, our worst nightmare ... service men in blues knocking on our door. It's the one thing we hope, wish, and pray to whoever, or whatever it is we believe in, will NEVER happen. We ache and cry for those whose nightmares have become their reality. When one spouse suffers in such a way, selfishly, the what-ifs and could-have-beens are alive and looming in our minds. They're front and center and the fear is incredibly real. As is the guilt that accompanies such selfish thoughts at a time when others are hurting beyond repair.

This recent tragedy hit hard for so many of our friends and fellow spouses. It was a shockwave that rattled our flying community. I know quite a few people who knew those involved; the spouses, children, and babies who will never again be the same.

It hits hard because as much as we want to deny it or refuse to believe it could happen to us, we know we could easily be in that same position. In the blink of an eye, everything can change and that's the realization



that was brought to light by this most recent devastating situation. Honestly, it was the first thing that popped into my mind, *that could happen*.

We know that what our active-duty service member does is not the safest job in the world. They're fliers. They fly through dangerous combat zones when deployed, they do and see things they'll never fully admit or express. It's no secret to us as spouses. But it's certainly something we don't think about daily. How could we? We'd never survive this life worrying every single time their plane takes off. We bury it, deny it, and avoid it, however, we cope to get through this life, we do it. But it's situations and tragedies such as what so many have just recently experienced that jolt us back into the reality of the lives we live. And for a brief moment we allow ourselves to sit in the grief and intrusive thoughts, and we mourn those who we've

lost as a community and pray for those who were left behind. We are united by a common devastation and loss. It's heart-wrenching and yet, it's true.

To those who have been through the nightmare and to those who are currently experiencing such a tragedy, to those who have lost their airmen too damn soon, please know that we stand with you.

As a military spouse on behalf of all military spouses, bonded by the unimaginable, we stand with you or behind you to catch you or hold you up. We are here. Please know that you sit in our minds and hearts, we grieve with you, and we pray for you, your family, and every single individual affected. We are here. We stand with you. ●

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# Pro-runner with military ties competes at Olympic Trials

BY BIANCA M. STRZALKOWSKI

PHOTOS BY SARAH HEINZ PHOTOGRAPHY

**A former-military-kid-turned-professional-athlete is attracting national attention by encouraging others to feed their curiosities about the sport of running.**

New Jersey native Erika Kemp, whose dad served in the Air Force, made her marathon debut at Boston in 2023, ranking as the fastest American-born Black female with a finish time of 2:33:57. She hopes her presence in the sport will encourage others who look like her.

“Personally, professionally and in running, one of the greatest senses of accomplish-

ment I’ve experienced thus far was black women of all ages reaching out after seeing me run the Boston Marathon, saying they loved seeing me up there in the professional field. Some even want to run it now, too!,” Kemp stated in her athlete bio for this year’s Olympic Trials.

Now, Kemp is vying for a chance to compete on an international stage when she heads to the Trials in Orlando, Florida, this February. She joins 164 other women, with a field made up of 12% of women of color, according to a recent article by “Women’s Running” — signs of expanding representation.





The top three women from this year's Trials who have run 2:29:30 or faster between November 1, 2022, and February 3, 2024, will go to the Paris Olympics in August. Kemp, who recently celebrated her 29th birthday, has been training in the Arizona desert to prepare. She said the environment is much warmer and drier than what she was used to in Boston but adds "change usually doesn't bother me too much."

Part of that resiliency may stem from her background as a military child living on Fort Dix (currently Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst). Her dad left the military when she was around 6 years old, she says, but she recalls lengthy separations while he was stationed overseas.

"I remember the old school Skype calls on the dial-up computer and the awful connection," she said. "And he used to mail us little trinkets from Egypt."

Thankfully technology has improved as her ties to the military continue. Kemp has been dating a soldier for more than two years. The couple initially met in high school.

Because he's stationed in Germany, she says time together is limited but they strive for quality over quantity.

"We've done a really good job of prioritizing time for each other. And I think it means a lot for both of us and it makes us a lot more invested when we do have time together," she said. "When we do see each other, we're not on our phones. And we do get those one to two hours of time a day to Facetime, and we're very engaged, trying to catch up. ... We really make the most of the quality time we get."

Kemp laughed when sharing that they rarely run together because their easy paces differ.

Her success on the track began to emerge when she attended North Carolina State University, including being a six-time All-American and taking first place at USATF championship events. She says as her accomplishments racked up at the Division 1 level, going pro was the obvious progression for her future.

"It's kind of like the next step — if you want to keep going — to run professionally and I just kept getting better and doing those similar things," she said. "So, when I graduated, I was in a really good position. I had a good resume as far as running accomplishments, so I got the chance to do it right out



of school and you just keep getting better, and people keep wanting to support you."

She is currently sponsored by Brooks Running. Now entering her sixth year as a professional athlete, Kemp says she's learned how important it is to take a holistic look at her health.

"I train a lot more than I did in college but even more important than your training is just your overall well-being," she said. "Are you sleeping enough; are you eating correctly; are you getting physical therapy on a regular basis; like your overall health level is almost more important than your fitness level."

She's also learned how to manage her internal monologue.

"Everyone has those voices in their head, especially those negative ones that come out when you're running or things get really tough," Kemp said. "I feel like when I was younger, especially in high school and college, that initial voice that creeps in and is

like, 'I don't want to be here,' 'I do not want to run' — that voice hasn't gone away. I still get that most days but as I've gotten older and learned to appreciate the sport more and do more events and connect with more people and seen what running can do, it gave me a stronger secondary voice."

Kemp wants to see others push through their own self-doubt about running or big goals in general.

"Don't be afraid to start small. If you see people running the Boston Marathon or the NYC Marathon or some big event where you feel 'I don't see a lot of people like me,' but you have that interest — you can start small to give yourself confidence in that space."

"Don't be afraid to meet yourself where you're at. Feed that curiosity."



**Follow Erika Kemp on Instagram at [www.instagram.com/imityrik/](https://www.instagram.com/imityrik/) for more running inspiration.**



# Cross Hawaii off your bucket list with Hale Koa

BY MARISA PALMIERI SHUGRUE, GUARD SPOUSE



**Is visiting all 50 states on your bucket list? Or maybe you'd just like to spend some time in paradise? There's a military benefit that makes going to Hawaii more doable for an average family.**

Reservists and members of the National Guard are entitled to stay at Morale, Welfare and Recreational (MWR) lodging facilities across the U.S. and around the world. My husband has been in the Guard for more than 23 years, and we just took

advantage of this benefit for the first time. I don't know what took us so long.

In November, we traveled to the Hawaiian island of Oahu for eight days to celebrate a few milestones: the end of an overseas deployment, our 15-year anniversary and my 40th birthday.

In my trip-planning research I came across the Hale Koa Hotel, which is an Armed Forces Recreation Centers facility. The oceanfront resort is located on the proper-

ty of the U.S. Army's Fort DeRussy in the popular Waikiki area of Honolulu. I quickly realized the Hale Koa – meaning “house of the warrior” in Hawaiian – would be our answer to planning an affordable trip to Hawaii, which is a notoriously expensive place to visit and live.

## STAYING AT THE HALE KOA

The Hale Koa, built in 1975, features 818 guestrooms, two pools (one adult-only) and several restaurants. The rooms start at \$184 per night (much less than any comparable hotel I priced out). It turned out to be just what we were looking for — a clean, comfortable, family-friendly resort on the Pacific Ocean in walking distance to all of Waikiki's shops, restaurants and activities. An unexpected bonus: The Hale Koa's beach and pool are the perfect spot to catch the free fireworks show that takes place every Friday night at the Hilton Hawaiian Village.

Another perk of the Hale Koa is an on-site PX. As a Guard family, we've never lived on post so our kids love the novelty of shopping at the PX. It was nice to grab inexpensive, tax-free drinks and snacks for the day, rather than pay tourist prices the whole trip.





### Military travel tip

Did you know military members, including reservists and National Guardsmen, receive TSA PreCheck benefits for free? TSA PreCheck is an expedited security screening process at airports. It typically costs \$78 for a five-year membership and requires an online application plus in-person enrollment. To receive this benefit, enter your DOD ID number in the Known Traveler Number field when booking your flight. Unfortunately, spouses don't qualify.



### WHAT WE DID ON OAHU

We rented a car so we could experience all of Oahu's "must do" activities. We spent one afternoon paying our respects at Pearl Harbor, taking the Navy-operated boat to the USS Arizona Memorial. The Arizona program, exhibits and grounds are free and part of the National Park Service. Reservations are recommended for the Arizona memorial. Other attractions at Pearl Harbor include the Battleship Missouri Memorial, Pacific Fleet Submarine Museum and Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum.

Another day we climbed the iconic Diamond Head, a dormant volcanic crater with stunning views of Honolulu and the ocean waiting for you at the top. Then we snorkeled at Hanauma Bay, home to a coral reef and a variety of vibrant tropical fish. These spots are crowded and touristy but worth doing. They both require reser-

ventions and a fee; some military discounts are available.

We also spent part of our trip on Oahu's North Shore, stopping at the Dole Plantation for its famous pineapple-favored Dole Whip along the way. Unfortunately, the weather didn't cooperate during our time on the North Shore, but we still enjoyed watching surfers near the famed Banzai Pipeline, seeing the beautiful beaches at Turtle Bay Resort, walking around the surf town of Haleiwa and visiting the Polynesian Cultural Center in Laie.

As all good vacations do, our trip to Oahu came and went too quickly. If you're traveling to Hawaii and planning to spend some time in Waikiki, remember your MWR benefits and consider the Hale Koa. It helped our family make amazing memories and cross the Aloha State off our bucket list. ●

### MWR LODGING AROUND THE GLOBE

#### United States

Shades of Green at Walt Disney World Resort (Florida)  
Fort Fisher Air Force Recreation Area (North Carolina)  
Seward Resort (Alaska)  
Big Bear Recreation Facility (California)  
Hale Koa Hotel (Oahu, Hawaii)  
Kilauea Military Camp (The Big Island, Hawaii)

#### Europe

Edelweiss Lodge and Resort  
(Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany)

#### Asia

New Sanno Hotel (Tokyo, Japan)  
Okuma Beach (Okinawa, Japan)  
Dragon Hill Lodge (Seoul, South Korea)



# Army veteran, spouse create weighted workout gear

BY KARI WILLIAMS

**Trent and Megan Brown were purchasing so many ammunition pellets that they ended up on a TSA watch list.**

But the couple — an Army veteran and a former Division 1 All-American Athlete, respectively — were doing nothing more than creating weighted workout clothing, and the pellets were an early experiment in finding a product that would add weight to what would become known as KILOGEAR.

“You catch the attention of all kinds of people,” said Trent, who served as a military police officer, “but then ironically when they found out what we were doing, they loved it.”

The Browns founded KILOGEAR in 2016, creating a doctor-designed athletic apparel line that features strategically placed

micro-weights as a form of resistance training.

Megan, a former field hockey athlete, said that Trent and she both are familiar with what it takes to be a successful athlete, including incorporating resistance weight training.

“Most people consider going to the gym as resistance weight training,” Megan said. “Go hit the gym, go hit the weights. You’re going to be stronger, all of those things. And after having played sports, I went into high tech. And one of the things I really struggled with as a woman was doing it all. I don’t think anybody can do it.”

Going to the gym became a lower priority, so Megan turned her body into the gym — using everything from ankle and wrist weights to weighted vests and weighted shoes.



CREDIT: DEAN ISIDRO



But Trent, who “trained in load” through his military career, had safety concerns.

“We knew that, even in the military, back then we knew there was more damage done to the body through a lot of the training techniques with load, whether rucksacks, weighted vests, or all of the other stuff that comes with it versus the good side of this,” Trent said.

### BACKED BY SCIENCE

Trent and Megan said they worked with top doctors in sports medicine and movement; engineers; trainers; professional athletes; and elite military individuals over the course of eight years to develop KILOGEAR. The goal was to carry load efficiently and safely.

They found that microloading the body on “the perfect locations” allowed the body to move safely without compromising biomechanics.

“I expected that the heavier the better,” Trent said, “but the reality of it was, the lighter and the perfect location the better. And so now we have a solution that’s been refined over these eight years that fits your lifestyle, whether you’re an elite military person, or the family members within that family structure.”

From the military perspective, Megan said the men and women in uniform need to be “in the best shape that they possibly can be,” and KILOGEAR can be layered into existing training regimens.

“When Trent talks about functionally strong, KILOGEAR allows you to wear the weight so that whatever movement you want to focus on, whether it’s shooting a basketball, hitting a tennis ball or working on long range shooting you are going to get stronger in all of those movements that are required to complete that task perfectly,” Megan said.

And for military spouses and mothers, who might not have access to a gym, Megan said the best approach is to walk in the gear.

“Get a walking club started,” Megan said. “How many women own a million black leggings out there and yet they don’t do anything for the body, just clothe it?”

### BETTING ON THEMSELVES

The Browns each had their own successful, individual careers, and chose to pause helping other companies to build their own.

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“We took the risk and put our money where our mouth is,” she said, “and put every dime we have into this company. We have lots of skin in the game on this because we truly believe in it.”

Trent agreed.

“To believe in a company, you have to support it,” he said. “Before we went and talked about bringing any kind of additional capital into the company, we put our own capital into the company.”

As the company has grown, Trent said his military background helps him think about the team rather than himself.

“We think about our customer. We think about our team in order to develop amazing solutions for our customer base,” he said. “And we celebrate those customers. We’ve never forgotten — We’ve never forgotten the military families that are out there.” ●

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# 2024

## scholarships

### for military-connected students

BY USMP STAFF

#### YEAR-ROUND SCHOLARSHIPS

##### National Military Family Association

**Who's eligible:** Open to spouses of service members who served post-9/11 and are on active duty, reservists, guardsmen, retirees, 100% disabled, or are a fallen service member.

**What's the basics:** Awards available for all levels of degrees, professional licenses, and certifications, supervised clinical hours, and business expenses.

**Link:** <https://www.militaryfamily.org/programs/spouses-scholarships/military-spouse-scholarship-faqs/>

##### MyCAA

##### (My Career Advancement Account)

**Who's eligible:** Spouses of service members with the rank of E1-E5; W1-W2; O1-O2.

**What's the basics:** Maximum tuition assistance benefit of \$4000 to be used toward an associate degree, license or certification.

**Link:** <https://mycaa.militaryonesource.mil/mycaa/>

#### BRANCH AID SOCIETIES

##### Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society

**Who's eligible:** Spouses and children of qualified Marines and sailors.

**What's the basics:** Scholarships and interest-free loans for career & technical

education; associate degrees; bachelor degrees; master degrees.

**Link:** <https://www.nmcra.org/our-services/scholarships>

##### Air Force Aid Society

**Who's eligible:** Children and spouses of Air Force and Space Force members.

**Link:** <https://afas.org/haparnoldgrant/>

**Deadline:** April 30, 2024.

##### Army Emergency Relief (for military spouses)

**What's the basics:** The Mrs. Patty Shinseki Spouse Scholarship Program is a need-based scholarship program established to assist Army spouses in obtaining an undergraduate degree or similar professional certification.

**Deadline:** Year-round

**Link:** <https://www.armyemergencyrelief.org/scholarships/spouse/>

##### Army Emergency Relief (for military kids)

**What's the basics:** The Maj. Gen. James Ursano Scholarship Program is a need-based scholarship program established to assist children of Army soldiers in obtaining their first undergraduate degree. **Deadline:** April 1, 2024.

**Link:** <https://www.armyemergencyrelief.org/scholarships/child/>

##### Coast Guard Mutual Assistance

**Who's eligible:** Coasties, spouses and their children.

**What's the basics:** Interest-free loans for education expenses up to \$6,000.

**Deadline:** Year-round.

**Link:** <https://mycgma.org/programs/education-loan/>

#### PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS

##### Pat Tillman Foundation

**Who's eligible:** Active-duty service members, veterans, military spouses.

**Deadline:** February 1, 2024.

**Link:** <https://pattillmanfoundation.org/apply/>

##### Fisher House Foundation

**Who's eligible:** College students of active duty, Guard and reserve or retired military commissary customers.

**What's the basics:** A total of 500 scholarships are distributed in the amount of \$2,000 each.

**Deadline:** February 14, 2024

**Link:** <https://fisherhouse.org/programs/scholarship-programs/scholarships-for-military-children/>

##### FINRA Foundation Military Spouse Fellowship Program

**What's the basics:** The fellowship provides military spouses the opportunity to earn the Accredited Financial Counselor® certification.

**Application details:** Visit <https://www.afcpe.org/certification/finra-foundation-fellowship/read-first-then-apply/>



for 2024 application updates.

### Florida Advisory Council on Military Education

**Who's eligible:** Active duty, guardsman, reservist, veteran or spouse of someone stationed in Florida, residing in Florida or attending a Florida higher education institution.

**Deadline:** April 1, 2024.

**Link:** <https://www.fla-acme.org/scholarships>

### Hope For The Warriors

**What's the basics:** Five different categories of scholarships with application cycles in the spring and fall.

**Application details:** Fall 2024 application period opens March 1, 2024.

**Link:** <https://www.hopeforthewarriors.org/programs/financial-wellness-life-roles/military-spouse-scholarships/>

### Council of College and Military Educators (CCME)

**What's the basics:** The organization awards \$1000 scholarships with the application process typically running July to November.

**Application details:** Check back to <https://www.ccmeonline.org/scholarships> for 2025 updates.

### Coast Guard Foundation

**Who's eligible:** Spouses and children of enlisted Coast Guard members; children of fallen Coast Guard members; and enlisted Coast Guard members.

**Deadline:** March 1, 2024.

**Link:** <https://1coastguard-foundationscholars.communityforce.com/Funds/Search.aspx#4371597136646D517975544F-5976596D4E73384E69673D3D>

## NATIONAL SPOUSE CLUBS

### Navy Wives Clubs of America

**Who's eligible:** Up to 31 scholarships awarded annually, with eligibility for spouses/dependents of the Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps.

**Deadline:** March 31, 2024.

**Link:** <https://navywivesclubsofamerica.org/scholarships/>

## LOCAL SPOUSE CLUBS

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<https://www.fortcavazosscholarship.org/>

### JNSA Lackland Spouses' Club (Texas)

<https://www.lacklandspousesclub.org/scholarships>

### Stuttgart Community Spouses Club (Germany)

<https://stuttgartspousesclub.org/Scholarships>

### Aviano Air Base (Italy)

<https://ciaoavianoab.wordpress.com/about/>

Annually, our team compiles a list of credible financial aid opportunities for service members, veterans, military spouses and/or military kids. It is recommended that readers always review eligibility details and deadlines for changes. Know of a scholarship that should be added? Email us at [editor@usmilitarypublishing.com](mailto:editor@usmilitarypublishing.com).





# Adaptive kayak gives OIF veteran freedom

BY ALLISON CHURCHILL, ARMY PUBLIC AFFAIRS VETERAN

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOPE FOR THE WARRIORS

**Dave Jenkins passed out while out for a run during his second deployment to Iraq in 2008. Doctors suspected bronchitis, but exposure to burn pits had reduced his lung capacity to 66%.**

Over the next nine years it would decline to 30%. Dave and his wife, Ginger, moved from Ohio to Florida seeking better air. They found it, though PTSD and other physical limitations led to Dave withdrawing from the world.

But now, thanks to Hope For The Warriors granting his Warrior's Wish, Dave and Ginger are kayaking up and down the canal behind their home, letting him interact with neighbors and enjoy nature.

Dave had separated from the active-duty Air Force in 1998. Not long after, friends in the Air National Guard told him about recent missions, and he emailed one to ask, "Can I come play?"

He joined the 332nd Expeditionary Wing in Balad, Iraq, in 2006. Burn pits were active then, he said. On his second trip to Balad, he noticed he had breathing problems and was sent home after he passed out.

When his lung capacity dropped to 30%, the VA rated him 100% disabled. His doctors said that unless they found medication to slow the decline, he had about 10 years left to live. A reassessment for PTSD raised his rating to 170%.



"As time goes on with disabilities, you start losing motivation to do things," he said.



Ginger stopped working to take care of him.

One day he saw an interview on the news with a founder for Hope For The Warriors, prompting him to reach out.

"They've gone way further than I thought organizations would go for me," he said.

Kady Luke, Warrior's Wish program manager, encouraged Dave to apply. Hope For The Warriors doesn't have a set number of wishes it grants each year; Dave was one of 12 severely injured veterans selected from 22 requests in 2023. Veterans can reapply but can only have one wish granted. Luke said the selection committee looks at how the wish will improve quality of life. Past recipients have received everything from family trips to amusement parks, hobby supplies such as woodworking tools and exercise equipment.

The Jenkinses had tried a few different activities upon moving to Florida. Hiking didn't really do it for them. They took morning walks, but the sidewalks could get too crowded.

"Not every person, period, but especially not every combat veteran wants to be around people," said Ginger.

They had even considered renting an RV to drive to the Grand Canyon, but the cost was too prohibitive to do so more than once.

Then Dave remembered the freedom he felt while kayaking on a trip organized by Wounded Warrior Project. It hadn't gone perfectly – Dave had just received his service dog, Freedom, and trying to get him

on the kayak was "entertaining." Dave and Ginger also have a canal behind their home.

A friend helped Dave research his options, and they found VooDoo's adaptive kayaks. They have room for Freedom as well as a raised seat that not only is easier for Dave to get in and out of, but the seat supports his back. His granted wish also included a kayak for Ginger,

as well as a trailer to transport them.

They get out about once a week. The paddling wears Dave out, but he feels better for having done it, he said. They can be neighborly, waving to whomever they pass on their route and picking up trash, or just enjoy nature.

The Jenkinses plan to explore other waterways in their area. But recently Dave's also been more willing to venture out to where other people might be, like the local pool hall and or even going to popular grocery store Publix on a Saturday.

"It's a baby step for me to get back into society," Dave said.

Luke said she's glad the kayaks are helping them that way.

"I love how they persevered through Dave's injuries. They found a place in Florida that had low humidity that allowed him to breathe easier," she said. "They're really enjoying their time." ●

**Learn more about Warrior's Wish and Hope For The Warriors' other programs at <https://www.hopeforthewarriors.org>.**



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# New initiative addresses retention concerns

BY JESSICA MANFRE, COAST GUARD SPOUSE



Dr. Jill Biden delivered keynote remarks at the launch as part of her Joining Forces initiative.

**Two organizations announced a new first-of-its-kind effort to tackle the double digit unemployment rate plaguing the military spouse community.**

Blue Star Families and Hiring Our Heroes partnered, in collaboration with the Department of Defense Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), to launch the 4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success.

"I think it is important to understand that military spouse employment is not only

vital for financial stability of our military families but is important for military readiness," said Katherine McCarthy, a Navy spouse. "Financial instability is a huge concern among military families and not only distracts service members from the mission but leads to difficulties in recruiting and retention."

The Austin native was present at the launch and introduced First Lady Dr. Jill Biden to introduce the new initiative. Despite an exceptional educational and professional background, everything changed when her husband moved from

the private sector to the Navy.

"I was immediately handed the challenge of aligning my education and personal career goals with the geographic constraint of where the Navy planned on sending us," she said.

McCarthy's master's in international human rights led to social work, being an English teacher and during their OCONUS tour, unemployed.

"Between all of these career shifts, we were also growing our family and I was facing



difficulty finding work while pregnant in a new duty station. All of the challenges that come with being a female and being a mother have been amplified as a military spouse,” she added.

Now the national donor relations manager for the U.S. Navy Memorial, McCarthy said she wishes the initiative had come along sooner but is grateful for the collaborative effort to pursue the issue.

President of Hiring our Heroes, Eric Eversole, saw the writing on the wall.

“When I took over this organization in 2013 it was very clear to me that this was a crisis,” he said. “In addition to the other challenges our military spouses face, it was obvious to me that unemployment was going to impact the health of the force.”

He had his introduction to military culture long before leading HOH. Eversole enlisted in 1994 with the Air National Guard, commissioning into the Navy JAG Corps after completing law school and serving a combined 24 years of active and reserve time before retiring in 2019.

“This new initiative really sprang as a way to create a national call to action for companies to do something that quite honestly is so easy, especially post-COVID,” he explained. “It’s the same thing we asked back in 2011, 2012 and 2013 for veterans. We were able to create things like the Veterans Job Commission with JP Morgan and a slew of other organizations like the George W. Bush Institute. Now it’s time to do it again for our spouses.”

McCarthy is hopeful this initiative will make waves.

“The 4+1 Commitment provides a framework for employer flexibility in several different areas. Remote and transferable work allows us to take our jobs with us as we PCS, flexible work hours give us the opportunity to provide a stable environment for our families when service members are deployed or work non-traditional hours and PCS leave gives us grace as we transition from duty station to duty station,” she explained. “Supporting government spouse employment programs is hugely impactful, as these organizations provide connections and opportunities to employment when military spouses are new to an area and need extra support.”

The initiative is under Blue Star Families’ “Do Your Part” campaign, which is



made possible by Craig Newmark philanthropies. It asks companies to adopt voluntary commitments to hiring military spouses. Examples include things like facilitating ways for job transferability, offering remote work, flexible hours and providing paid PCS leave.

While the initiative has laid out its plan, HOH and BSF are also working towards increasing federal employment opportunities as well.

“We are seeing a groundswell of support for major companies across the country and think this is important. We’re seeing significant changes across the federal agencies too which is going to be huge,” Eversole said.

The +1 portion asks companies to join an existing government military spouse employment program, like the Military

Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot or Military Spouse Employment Partnership. Starbucks was the first company to sign up and is a founding member of the “Do Your Part” campaign.

At its launch, Dr. Biden implored at least 1000 companies to join in.

“We can do this. When I came on board HOH in 2013 the DOD was paying out nearly a billion dollars in unemployment compensation because that was the first stop after leaving service. In 2022 it was down to \$115 million,” Eversole said. “If we work together, we’re going to be able to tackle some of these larger challenges and that’s what we’re already seeing with some of this.” ●

Visit <https://bluestarfam.org/4plus1/> to learn more about the 4+1 Commitment

# Survival expert launches new podcast about Operation Acid Gambit

BY CRYSTAL KUPPER, AIR FORCE VETERAN SPOUSE



**When retired Sgt. Maj. Kelly Venden remembers his 21 years in the Army, one event ranks above the others: Operation Acid Gambit.**

That mission happened on Dec. 20, 1989, when Venden and 22 of his fellow Delta Force operators executed their first successful hostage rescue, saving an imprisoned American CIA operative in Panama.

"That was the epitome of my military career," said Venden, who went on to serve as an air marshal, firearms instructor and now government civilian stationed in Germany. "I still have lasting friendships from that day — it's something I will never forget."

Fans of military history haven't forgotten, either, leading to multiple media ap-

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*"I think it's important to know about ops like Acid Gambit simply because those are the things that shape us and our ways going forward."*

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pearances for Venden over the last three decades.

The most recent one came in December, as Venden commemorated the 34th anniversary of Acid Gambit with an appearance on a podcast called RESCUE. Hosted

by Marine veteran and survival expert Donny Dust, the 20-part podcast focuses on unique rescue missions worldwide.

"It's important to pay homage to those people who are fighting and serving every day," said Dust, a former infantry machine



gunner and counterintelligence specialist. "I think it's important to know about ops like Acid Gambit simply because those are the things that shape us and our ways going forward."

Venden and Dust, a TikTok star with nearly 11 million followers, discussed the operation's details during the Sony Music Entertainment-produced podcast. Some of those include how a Delta Force operator and Venden, then age 26, were the pair chosen to breach the cell door holding Kurt Muse, a hostage at a fetid Central American prison, then rescue him.

Venden and the rest of his unit trained for months for that exact situation.

"We did everything we could think of to make things go bad so we could be successful in any situation," said Venden. "It was so impressive to see how they built a mockup [of the prison], with all the money and time with the aircraft and role players and all that stuff, just to prepare us to be on target at that very moment to make sure we succeeded. That left a lasting impression."

What they hadn't counted on, however, was the helicopter crashing that Venden, Muse and the others climbed into for extraction. Venden landed on his head and upper chest from the fall out of the aircraft. He cracked his skull, broke his nose and four ribs and punctured a lung in the process, alongside a myriad of scrapes and bruises. The group hunkered down in a nearby building and behind a vehicle until an armored personnel carrier retrieved them.

"It was both exciting and scary, because you never know who's coming from where to get you," Venden said. "Let's just say



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that your confidence in your teammates is at its utmost, because those are the only folks you had to count on in that moment."

Muse went on to write a book called "Six Minutes to Freedom" and now gives talks about his experience. He also calls Venden every year, usually on Acid Gambit's anniversary.

"Thank you very much," he often says. "Because I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Dust was happy for the chance to meet

Venden through the RESCUE podcast, calling it a "throwback moment" to discuss everything from the gear used ("They were wearing, like, skateboard helmets," he said) to strategy. But beyond military details, he said, the podcast was meant for more.

"People give the title of 'hero' to pop stars and actors in movies, but I get the opportunity to share with the world who the real heroes are," Dust said. "It's quite an honor." ●

**RESCUE is available on Apple.**

# Organization advocates for quality child care

BY TANEIKA DUHANEY, NAVY VETERAN



**One organization is fighting for improved access to quality child care for military families who continue to face rising costs.**

The national price for child care increased 32% from 2019, according to data from the Bank of America Institute. Military families also frequently experience long wait lists and limited options at duty stations around the U.S. Operation Child Care Project, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, is working to bridge the gap between the demand for and availability of child care.

Kayla Corbitt, founder and executive director of OCCP, says her team is dedicated exclusively to addressing child care access and equity for military and veteran families.

"There are a lot of organizations that have historically included child care as part of what they do. [However] the issue with having such a monumental, complicated, and ever-changing issue as child care is that it rarely fills the need. [Current offerings] often don't consider the unique circumstances many military families deal with,

especially reservists and Guard," she said.

Operation Child Care Project offers case management services to help military families identify which child care benefits they are eligible for and outline the likelihood of getting access to such benefits.

"A lot of resources are advertised. However, it's not always clear which resources are actually obtainable," she said. "The [current process and system] lacks transparency. As a result, [many] families do not get much-needed assistance."

While living overseas, Corbitt, a military spouse and parent, realized that the only spouses who could work were those who did not have children or whose children were school-aged. As she researched the 'why' behind this phenomenon, she realized that the difference often came down to child care access. To that end, Corbitt applied her formal education and contracting experience to help families navigate the convoluted child care application process.

Upon returning stateside with a new child,

Corbitt tried to access child care for her family with the information she gained helping others overseas.

"I was approved [for child care] and then denied. Ultimately, I lost about \$7,000 and [was forced] to quit my job as I could no longer afford to work," said Corbitt. "That's when I realized that my one-on-one advocacy with families and talking to local commands wouldn't solve the issue."

Though Corbitt has been advocating for child care resources through military family readiness centers as an employee, contractor, or volunteer for more than 11 years, she didn't establish the OCCP until 2022. Today, it aims to serve current and former active duty, reservists, veterans, and National Guard members.

"We partner with local agencies wherever the service member's family is located to help fill the child care gap. We vet all resources to make sure they are actually obtainable by the families we serve," said Corbitt. "When you input income and basic housing allowance, it often cancels many child care options. Additionally, some child care programs require children to be in certain programs or housing. However, since military families relocate frequently, they are not likely to meet that criteria."

In addition to case management and advocacy, OCCP is preparing to launch a child care scholarship program. The scholarship will provide wrap-around support for military families that received OCCP case management services but still require financial assistance for child care. Through the scholarship, military families can select child care providers and settings that work best for them.

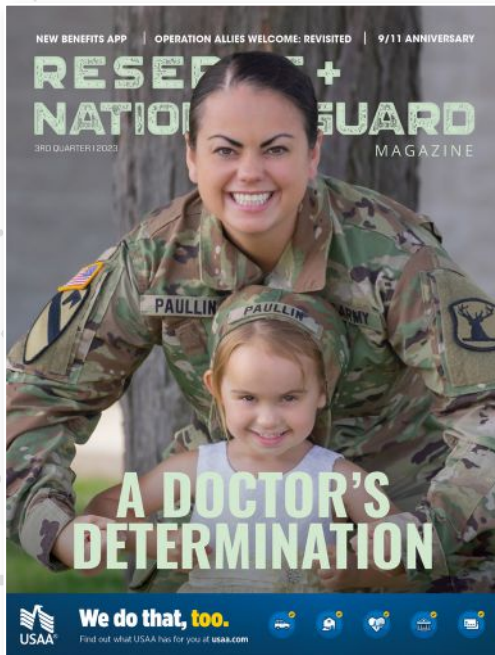
"We trust families to know what's best for them. If [additional care] is part of their care plan with [the Operation Child Care Project], then the scholarship is approved." ●

Visit <https://www.occpproject.org/> to learn more



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# Soldier shares inspiring journey to Miss America competition

BY SIERRA STARKS, ARMY SPOUSE



**In the weeks leading up to taking the stage at the Miss America competition in January, Vanessa Munson's preparation looks a bit different than her peers. She is in the process of transitioning out of the Army, where she has served since 2019.**

Winning the title of Miss Washington over the summer was a dream many years in the making, says Munson. The 23-year-old attributes her ability to truly own the stage to her career as a soldier.

"When I won [Miss Washington], I really felt like I was the woman that I had always wanted to be," said Munson. "I felt very confident and capable in my life experiences, what I wanted to bring to the table, who I knew I was."

The Army's return to the classic "Be All You Can Be" slogan is indicative of Munson's journey today. But she admits that years ago she used to put herself in a box. It was her father who initially approached her about considering the military to

receive tuition assistance and other scholarship opportunities she desired.

"[Joining the Army] was honestly not anything that I had ever envisioned for myself because, truthfully, I just couldn't see myself being in a position like this," said Munson, who enlisted as a human resources specialist. "But I think that's very small-minded thinking, because, realistically, we can be anything that we want to be."

Munson enrolled in an undergraduate



degree program while serving on active duty and still found time to compete in local pageants. She has also faced personal adversity in the form of hearing loss and has undergone multiple surgeries, recently receiving a permanent hearing aid implant. Instead of shying away from her impairment, Munson sees it as an opportunity to promote a message of inclusivity and empowerment. This advocacy work has included giving away Barbie dolls fitted with hearing aids to students in her home state of Washington.

"I want to be able to showcase that you can be OK with who you are, despite whatever challenges you're facing," she explained. "It's that belief in yourself that really needs to be the biggest thing when it comes to a challenge like hearing."

Sharing her story of service, resilience and accomplishment has resonated with a wide range of audiences. School tour stops, media appearances and other community engagements have packed Munson's past few months, which has been beneficial for local Army recruiting efforts. As the Armed Forces struggle to figure out how to appeal to and attract Gen Z into their ranks, Munson brings the perspective of a young soldier who served in the Army while maintaining a commitment to her personal goals. That perspective, she says,




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is one military leaders should pay attention to and cater to.

"You can be a soldier, and then you can go be all of these other things," she noted. "You have you at the center. And I think it's important that the military recognizes that."

As she stepped into the national spotlight in January, Munson joins the growing list of service members who are well-renowned beauty pageant title holders, such as Mauna Spence Carroll, who represented the

state of Colorado in the 2021 Miss America competition and Deshauna Barber, who was crowned Miss USA 2016 while serving as an Army Reserve soldier.

Their unique paths echo the evolving landscape of the military, reflecting the idea that being a member of the military does not necessarily have to clash with the value of individual empowerment. ●

**Follow [www.instagram.com/vanessamunson](https://www.instagram.com/vanessamunson) for updates on Vanessa Munson.**



# Accidental home cook writes book to help readers connect over food

BY LYNN BEHA, AIR FORCE SPOUSE

**An Air Force wife created the ultimate kitchen companion to help others feel confident while cooking.**

Author and food blogger Bri McKoy knows firsthand about the value of creating connections as a transient military family. She is sharing tips in her new cookbook, "The Cook's Book: Recipes for Keeps & Essential Techniques to Master Everyday

Cooking," that uses food to bring others together.

"We do not have the luxury of waiting a year to meet the neighbors, right?" said McKoy, who has PCSed with her husband seven times. "We have to dig deep and dig fast."

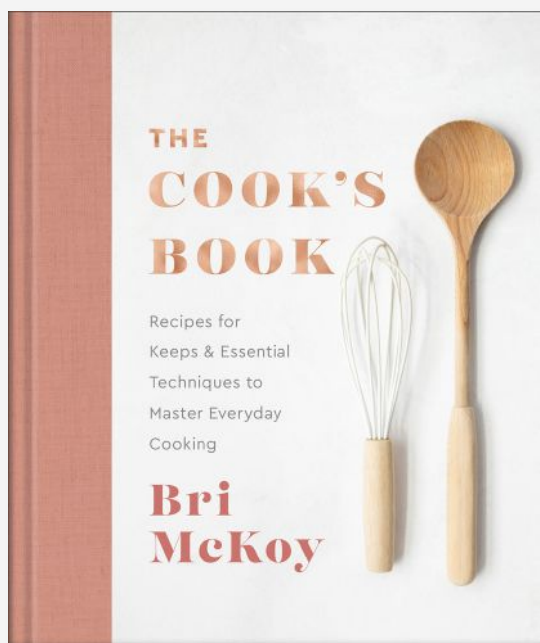
"One day I was like, you know what? We're

just going to start feeding people. We're going to start inviting people over for meals."

She and her husband did, and deep friendships began to blossom over food.

"There's something magical happening here," McKoy acknowledges after recounting a dinner that led her to learn about





a new friend's hardships. "I think there's something vulnerable about eating in front of someone else that allows you to open up a little bit more."

Over time McKoy has come to realize it's "nice to have a little confidence in the kitchen so I'm not stressed out about if our new neighbors are going to get dried out chicken."

She adds, "If I could be more confident, I'd probably be more at ease."

In "The Cook's Book," McKoy shares mistakes she has made in learning to cook over the years. She's the first to admit the experience of cooking for others is more about sharing the food than the quality of it, but her goal in writing it is to help uncertain cooks gain confidence in the kitchen

so that hosting meals becomes a delight.

"The Cook's Book" takes the reader from the very start of the journey to becoming a confident cook, sharing tasty recipes while teaching essential skills. McKoy says her top three tips (which are further detailed in her book) are:

1. **Learn to cook food without it sticking;**
2. **Bring all your senses to your cooking;**
3. **Have one to three go-to recipes in your back pocket.**

McKoy said she mastered early on her First Hello Pasta to have a quick and reliable recipe to turn to when inviting someone new over. She knows it's delicious and can adapt it for dietary requirements with confidence, so she's able to enjoy her time with her guests.

"Food is a great gateway," McKoy said, as it's a way to connect with others through all phases of life. We can whip up an easy meal at a friend's house while the kiddos run around or drop off Chicken Pot Pie Soup for a meal train or use meals as an excuse for spouses of deployed service members to check in with each other. McKoy organizes weekly dinners with her friends to find camaraderie on the loneliest nights of deployments. ●

**"The Cook's Book" includes everything needed to host meals confidently, including recommended equipment, differences between salts, flavorful recipes, and everyday wine pairings. Visit <https://book.brimckoy.com/> to order a copy and follow Bri McKoy on Instagram @brimckoy**

# How service members can break the cycle of living paycheck to paycheck

BY BRANDON LOVINGIER, CHFC®, MQFP®, ARMY VETERAN

**It's stressful getting to the end of the month and being completely out of money! When you're stressed out about money, it's impossible to concentrate on anything else. That's a problem**

No shame or blame though. We've resorted to putting rent on a credit card before (bad idea!). Luckily, service members have tons of resources and programs to help break the cycle of living paycheck to paycheck.

## BUILD SPENDING AWARENESS

First, you have to track what you're spending. A budget (yeah, I said it) is the best way to track your money. You can call it a spending plan or cashflow plan, but you need to know where your hard-earned money is going.

However, I'm not talking about a half-hearted budget full of pretty, round numbers (guesses) – I want the facts! Whether you use a budgeting app, Google form, or a notebook, find a system you'll actually use.

Without accurate information, you could be spending money and not even know it (those subscriptions you forgot about). There could also be fraudulent charges. Track every cent until you understand your spending. Until you know where your money is going, you can't fix it.

Ultimately, you really only have a couple options – earn more or spend less.

## OPTION ONE: EARN MORE

Research the Joint Ethics Regulations and unit-specific policies first. The mission always comes first, and you can't solicit (sell to) your teammates. Also, beware of multi-level marketing (MLM) gigs. They're often "paying" you with their products or "special" discounts. You need actual money, not more stuff to sell.

There are plenty of "gig economy" jobs like delivering food or rideshares. Just know, you'll often get paid as a contractor (1099) and you're responsible for paying taxes on your earnings.

Also, don't overlook working toward promotions. Improving your physical fitness or working on your degree costs you nothing but your time.

## OPTION TWO: CUT SPENDING

Although less fun, cutting spending is often the best choice. Military life is hectic enough without adding a second job. It does you no good to make more money if you're not controlling spending.

Just like we're taught in first-aid, bleeding (spending) is a major issue and must be controlled. You might not need a "tourniquet" per se, but applying pressure on some spending categories might be needed.

Cooking at home, food drops, or meal planning can help reduce your grocery bills. If you're going out a lot or driving a more expensive car than you can afford,

you may need some lifestyle changes. Think carefully about what's really important and cut spending on anything that doesn't truly improve your life.

## DON'T MAKE THINGS WORSE

Please don't turn to payday loans, "buy now-pay later," or credit cards. These only make things worse – a lot worse! Trust me, these companies aren't helping anyone but themselves. Stay away!

## DON'T HESITATE TO GET HELP

You have free access to Personal Financial Counselors. Visit the DOD Financial Readiness (FINRED) or Military One-Source websites to find one. They're a great resource for financial issues. They're trained financial counselors with one mission – helping you.

Also, don't forget about the relief societies either – the Army Emergency Relief, Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, Air Force Aid Society, or Coast Guard Mutual Assistance. They each have their own requirements and funding, but they can offer counseling, education, grants, and zero-interest loans.

## YOU CAN DO THIS!

No matter where you are financially, you can improve where you are. Use your resources to make this the year you break the cycle of living paycheck to paycheck! ●

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**1 Checking Cash Promotion Offer Terms and Conditions Eligibility:** Offer available for new USAA Classic Checking accounts from USAA Federal Savings Bank, also known as FSB, opened between October 11, 2023, and March 14, 2024. The account is not eligible for this offer if: 1) the primary account holder of the newly-opened account currently has, or has had, ownership of a USAA FSB checking account in the 12 months prior to new account opening. The primary account holder is the account holder whose U.S. taxpayer identification number is used for tax reporting purposes on the new account; or 2) the account is titled as a trust account, estate, Uniform Transfer to Minor Account, also known as UTMA, or other fiduciary account. The new USAA Classic Checking account must remain open and in good standing through the time we attempt to deposit any earned bonus payment. Offer may be discontinued or changed at any time without notice. **Bonus Requirements and Payment:** To qualify for the bonus, open a new USAA Classic Checking account between October 11, 2023, and March 14, 2024, and receive a qualifying direct deposit into the new USAA Classic Checking account within 180 calendar days after account opening. A qualifying direct deposit is a single Automated Clearing House, also known as ACH, electronic deposit of \$100 or more. We will attempt to deposit the \$200 bonus into your new USAA Classic Checking account within 60 days after the first qualifying direct deposit amount has been received. You are responsible for any federal, state, or local taxes due on the bonus and we will report the bonus as income to the tax authorities if required by applicable law. Consult your tax advisor. **Additional Terms and Conditions:** All account applications are subject to approval and may be subject to a \$25 minimum opening deposit. For Annual Percentage Yield, refer to [usaa.com/checking](https://usaa.com/checking). Offer can't be paid without a valid U.S. taxpayer identification number or combined with any other offer related to consumer deposit accounts. Offer is limited to one bonus per member, one bonus per account, on first eligible account only. Offer cannot be reproduced, purchased, sold, transferred or traded. See the USAA FSB Depository Agreement and Disclosures for terms and conditions of your USAA Classic Checking account. Membership eligibility and product restrictions apply and subject to change.

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