

# Meet Paula "Polly the Pirate" Phillips-Reding (1968 - 2023)

by Kirk Phillips, 23 May 2024



Kirk Phillips, 14 Mar 2023, On the Way to Moffitt Tampa from Oklahoma

I heard the rumble. I felt the vibration. Another plane had gone down, this time into the Pentagon, said Major Phillips.

Most Memorial days after 9/11, I typically write or speak about one-hundred-sixty-eight colleagues who had just been killed in an instant when one of "those" jetliners hit the Pentagon and about how, in a matter of seconds, my world had changed; in fact, how the whole world had changed for all of us. Or about a gunner who was sitting above and beside us in the HUMVEE on a mission when an IED blasted through our

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armor like hot, melting razor blades, ravishing and destroying him to his soul, followed by the painstaking yet joyous honor, strength, and respect of his unit and fellow soldiers throughout his memorial service as we prepared him for his long journey back home strapped in a flag-draped coffin on the floor of a C-17 cargo jet.

But on this Memorial Day, for the first time, I want to honor the life and service of Paula "Polly the Pirate" Phillips-Reding, a young Air Force veteran who passed away late last year at 55.

Like so many other fallen veterans, Polly's story is one of courage and dedication. Fresh out of high school, she answered the call to serve, spending several years stationed in the Philippines and Texas before returning to her simple rural home in Oklahoma. For over thirty years, she led a life like many Americans—working daily, doing minimum wage jobs, volunteering, and quietly serving her community through her church or local library.

But the pull of public service never left Polly. In a testament to her character, she ran for City Clerk in her local town and won, securing victory with just 139 votes. Tragically, shortly thereafter, like so many of our heroic veterans, Polly's life was cut short by a *rare, undiagnosable condition* – oh boy, don't we hear that a lot -- that led to blindness,



Melissa Phillips - Mull, 16 Apr 2023, City Clerk Election Filing

paralysis, intense pain, and death in a matter of months. What followed, you may be wondering. Do I dare mention the “VA” or “Social Security Administration,” both MIA when she needed them the most? Or AFLAC? Well, don’t get me started on that soap box.

This Memorial Day, as we honor the sacrifices of so many, please remember Polly -- a young, beautiful, and caring veteran whose life of service and commitment to her community is worthy of our deepest respect and gratitude. Her story is a poignant reminder of the extraordinary



**Kirk Phillips, 18 Sep 2023, Service for Paula Phillips-Reading**

individuals who wear the uniform and answer the call, often with the ultimate price. This leads me to conclude with a heartfelt mention of the ultimate sacrifice I alluded to earlier, one that I hold near and dear to my heart from afar, a place away where cable television, cell phones, or Facebook are almost non-existent: a rustic, dusty, dirty, highly volatile, and dangerous desert where caring and compassion come after the bullets and bombs.

As I wrote in my small journal then, as a battle-worn, -torn, and -tired serviceman, it was about Precious, another loving name I gave a young girl of only five years of age. She was strapped with explosives from men on “her side” of the war. She was forced to penetrate our forward operating base near Pakistan.

Well, what I wrote at the time: *“The ultimate sacrifice brings an unwanted silence that makes us appreciate that even the worst situations offer us great opportunities and provide us the*

*freedom to do what we do every day. Oh my God, oh my God, help us all.”*

Honoring and remembering those ultimate sacrifices is important to those who have yet to fall and join the ranks of those we memorialize today. They protect and provide us with freedom every day. Please take a few moments to appreciate all the beautiful and blessed opportunities and freedoms we have today, in this moment, and every moment after that. If they could speak to us, our fallen veterans would want us to do just that.

God bless the veterans who have gone before us and those who are serving today. And God bless you and the U.S.A.