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CRAFTSMAN BRIAN STEORTS

Show Your Flag

A VETERAN'S MESSAGE
OF UNITY AND UNDERSTANDING
BY CRAIG GRALLEY



“After the events of 9/11, everyone flew the flag, but that isn’t happening anymore. We need to create an awareness of the flag and the message it offers.”

—Brian Steorts

When Great Falls craftsman and Afghan war veteran Brian Steorts learned that nearly all American flags were made in China, it bothered him. Even the small flags attached to round wooden dowels waved at 4th of July celebrations or found in Arlington Cemetery came from China.

It was at that point, Brian says, “Something clicked.” A war-related injury had just cut short his career as a Special Operations helicopter pilot, and Brian turned to woodworking as part of his rehabilitation therapy. What project did this carpenter choose to restore his body and ease his mind? It was hand-crafting American flags, made from reclaimed wood using US-made paints and materials.

In those early years, Brian produced more than 100 flags in his garage and began donating them to first-responder organizations, like firehouses and police stations, to express his appreciation for their service. Interest in his artwork grew, and in October 2015 he began hiring combat veterans to help launch his Ashburn-based company, Flags of Valor.

This former Special Operations pilot, who flew military and humanitarian missions over countries such as Afghanistan, Djibouti and Haiti, is enthusiastic about his current assignment: to encourage the display of the American flag. “After the events of 9/11, everyone flew the flag, but that isn’t happening anymore,” Brian says. “We need to create an awareness of the flag and the message it offers.”

For Brian, that message is one of national unity, sorely needed always and especially in this political season. Displaying the flag should remind Americans of the special place our country holds in the world. While open about his own views, Brian won’t criticize those who purchase foreign-made US flags. “If waving a flag made in China is what it takes to remember and honor our country, then I’m fine with that. It’s the remembrance that counts.”



Brian’s own awareness is home-grown and based on a family tradition of service. Brian’s whole family served in the military, including his grandfather, father, sister and brother, Bill, who also works at Flags of Valor.

Their father was an Air Force meteorologist who chased hurricanes around the country, so home for the Steorts family was on military bases in Texas and Florida and other states scattered throughout the US. In 1998, Brian joined the military, too, first



"Front Line," 50-star American flag in black and white, 22" x 42". This flag is dedicated to the servicemembers overseas on the front lines who are unable to wear the red, white and blue on their camouflage.

Photograph by Chris Coppock Photography

as an Army infantryman. Three years later, after his tour was up, he enrolled at the University of Alabama. But the events of 9/11 brought Brian back into the military, and he went to Air Force flight school to become a Special Operations helicopter pilot.

In creating his flags, Brian shuns uniformity. Based on the availability of materials, he uses century-old reclaimed wood, like barn siding or sections of southern pine that he distresses. The flags have an unusual depth and color, and the technique Brian employs

with paint and stain brings out the rich grain of the wood, revealing the individuality of each piece.

Brian's designs are based on early American and contemporary flags, but he's created special flag designs for first responders. One flag has a thin blue line running horizontally with the stripe, and another, a thin red line; they're produced to honor police and firefighting professionals.

I noticed that the flags weren't signed, as a piece of folk art or Americana might be. Brian says he's been



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—Flags of Valor employee and veteran

hesitant to add marks to the face of the flag, even a signature, feeling they should stand as intended without embellishment. He was willing to make one exception: a flag he donated was signed by a Medal of Honor recipient, then auctioned.

Brian is scrupulous about using only American-made materials. The paint and varnish, brushes and tape, even the wood-working tools used to create his art and the hardware to hang it, are produced right here in the United States. It has required extensive research. “I had to place a lot of calls,” Brian said, “and I sent a lot of e-mails, too.” One of his first calls, to the manufacturer of DeWalt Tools, yielded an immediate response. “The vice president of the company told me all his tools are made in the United States, and then



offered all I needed free of charge.” The tools arrived on two large pallets a few days later.

While the handcrafted pieces Flags of Valor produces are unique, the workplace Brian created is very special, too. Brian employs combat veterans who are working through some of their war-related struggles.



Above, top: "Thin Blue Line," 50-star American flag with blue line, 22" x 42". This flag is a tribute to police first responders.

Opposite, top: "Thin Red Line," 50-star American flag with red line, 22" x 42". This flag is a tribute to firefighter first responders.

Photographs courtesy Little Moon Photography

This page at right and opposite page at left: "Welcome Home" flags, 22" x 42" each; photographs taken at Great Falls Park and at Arlington Cemetery. This flag is a tribute to the American veterans who served in the Vietnam War, as a way of saying, "we remember you, and honor your service."

Photograph by Chris Coppock Photography

It is a comfortable environment for those who have experienced war firsthand. One of these veterans, "Art" (not his real name), experiences post-traumatic stress. (Brian hesitates to use the official terminology, post-traumatic stress disorder, because he doesn't believe it is a disorder; rather a natural reaction to the experiences soldiers face in combat.) In describing what it's like to work for Flags of Valor, Art says, "The employees here understand what it means to have been in combat. Some days are better than others," he says. "And that's OK. People here understand."

Understanding: that's Brian's point, too. By displaying our flag and encouraging others to do the same, he wants our country to experience greater unity and understanding. As for the veterans who work at Flags of Valor, the emblem of our country holds special



significance. They have displayed our flag as not many of us have: on their uniforms in combat. And in doing so, for us, they have held it high, serving bravely, with honor and valor. é

Flags of Valor | www.flagsofvalor.com