IOWA FARM BUREAU

SALUTES OUR VETERANS

HONORING FARMERS WHO SERVED OUR NATION

A message from Iowa Farm Bureau Federation President Brent Johnson:

This Veterans Day, we pause to honor the men and women who have served our nation in uniform and to recognize the courage, duty and sacrifice demonstrated by generations of Americans going back to the founding of our nation 250 years ago.

Among them are farmers, whose contributions to America's founding and continued success are deeply woven into our country's history. These men and women left their families, farms and communities to defend the freedoms we hold dear and strengthen our nation through their courage and dedication.

For farmers who have served in the military, the commitment to service doesn't end when they return home. Many continue serving their communities, supporting their neighbors and helping ensure a strong future for the next generation.



Iowa Farm Bureau President Brent Johnson adorned his combine this fall with a graphic saluting America's 250th anniversary and the men and women who fought for our country's freedom. PHOTO / CONRAD SCHMIDT

In this special Salute to Veterans section, we profile a few Farm Bureau members whose experiences in the military continue to strengthen the leadership, discipline and sense of purpose they bring to their farms and rural communities.

Whether serving in uniform or working the land, these individuals understand hard work, responsibility and commitment to something greater than themselves. They know that success often requires long hours, difficult decisions and perseverance through uncertain conditions.

We owe these individuals a debt of gratitude that goes beyond words. Their willingness to sacrifice time with family, leave their homes and put themselves in harm's way has helped protect the freedoms we enjoy, including the freedom to farm, raise families and build our rural communities.

As Iowa's leading farm organization, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation recognizes that agriculture is about more than producing food, fuel and fiber. It is about people, communities and a shared commitment to something bigger than ourselves. The farmers who have worn our nation's uniform represent the very best of that commitment.

As our nation marks 250 years of independence, this Veterans Day reminds us that freedom is more than an inheritance. It is a responsibility that generations have stepped forward to defend. To all who have served in our armed forces, to the farmers who have worn the uniform and to the families who have stood beside them: thank you for all you have given to our country and our communities.

Your stories belong in more than the pages of this tribute. They belong in the lessons we pass to the next generation — about courage, sacrifice and service to others. We are proud to share them, grateful to learn from them and determined that your service will never be taken for granted.

MYERS LEADS WITH PREPARATION, ADAPTABILITY, SERVICE

By Corey Munson

Long before Clay County Farm Bureau member Anthony Myers deployed to Afghanistan or helped manage 400 acres of Iowa cropland, he learned discipline and hard work on his family's farm near Spencer.

Today, Myers balances a full-time career at New Century FS with row-crop production alongside his brother. He draws on lessons from 12 years in the Iowa Army National Guard, including the importance of preparation, adaptability and service to others.

Myers grew up raising hogs and growing corn and soybeans with his father on farmland that has been in the family for about 75 years. The early mornings, chores and daily responsibilities of livestock and grain production taught him the value of structure and attention to detail.

In 2000, after his junior year of high school, Myers enlisted in the Iowa Army National Guard at age 17. He joined before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, viewing military service as an extension of his rural upbringing.

"I think probably the short brief answer to why I joined would be just an opportunity to serve my country," Myers said. "And I think the structure and the organization and the discipline that the military exhibits was just attractive to my personality and kind of the way I was brought up."



Anthony Myers enlisted in the Iowa Army National Guard at age 17. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



After 12 years in the National Guard, Myers now farms with his brother and works at New Century FS in northwest Iowa. PHOTO / CONRAD SCHMIDT

Family tradition also influenced his decision. Myers' grandfather served in World War II, and two of his older nephews served in the U.S. Marine Corps when Myers enlisted. A third nephew later joined the Army.

"My grandfather being in World War II was probably a subconscious influence on that decision," Myers said. "And then two of my nephews who were older than me were in the Marines before I made the decision to join. I'm certain that was an influence as well."

During his 12 years in the National Guard, Myers attained the rank of sergeant (E-5) and completed three, year-long assignments: one stateside, followed by tours in Afghanistan and Kosovo. While deployed to Afghanistan, he served with an infantry unit providing convoy security.

Myers said the attention to detail and organizational skills he developed on the farm carried over into his military service.

"You always had to run a pretty tight ship when it comes to farming," Myers said. "And that attention to detail, that organization really carried through well to my experience in the military."

His military experience also taught him how to work with people from different backgrounds, a skill he continues to use in

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BEEKEEPING PROVIDES HEALING FOR VETERANS

By Tom Block

Like many veterans in her generation, Katie Flinn was motivated to join the military after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

"I was able bodied, wanting to serve my country. So three months after 9/11, I rose my right hand," says Flinn, a Warren County Farm Bureau member who owns Milk & Honey Orchard and Apiary near Indianola, along with her husband, Wade, and their four children.

She served for 18 years in the Air Force 132nd Security Forces squadron, rising to the rank of master sergeant.

"Being a 9/11 enlistee, we went immediately on Operation Noble Eagle. I served under this for the next 4 years," says Flinn. Her squadron's primary duties were to secure and defend the base and its personnel. She also deployed under Operation Enduring Freedom to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia at Eskan Village.

Her interest in agriculture grew during her military service as she began collecting jars of honey everywhere she went — orange blossom honey in Australia; warm, spicy sidr in Saudi Arabia.

"I knew halfway through my military career that I wanted to be involved in agriculture after," she says. "When I got out, I wanted bees, but we lived in town."



Katie Flinn joined the Air Force after 9/11, serving 18 years in security forces. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



Flinn, a Warren County Farm Bureau member, is Iowa's first honey sommelier and owner of Milk & Honey Orchard and Apiary near Indianola. PHOTO / CONRAD SCHMIDT

To further her knowledge of honey production, she enrolled in Heroes to Hives, a online program that has trained over 19,000 U.S. military members and their families in the art and science of beekeeping.

In late 2020, she and Wade found the country property they were looking for south of Indianola, and in a stroke of fate, it came with existing beehives.

"We were thrilled to take them on and quickly went from one to four to 65 (hives)," says Flinn. "We were so busy working we didn't realize they were therapy."

She'd been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and life was further complicated by the COVID lockdown in 2020.

"Beekeeping and honey tasting helps tremendously with PTSD in the form of apitherapy," explains Flinn. "From the aromas of the hive to the concentration during a honey tasting, it assists with PTSD symptoms."

The military and beekeeping have a lot of similarities in the regime of patterns involved in handling the bees, articulating movement and problem solving, she says. There's also the honeying, which unlocks memories of her military service.

"There are certain honeys that take me

SEE FLINN PAGE 7A



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SERVICE EXTENDS TO EVERY PART OF COMSTOCK'S LIFE

By Bob Bjoin

For Earl Comstock, service has meant more than simply wearing a military uniform, milking cows on the farm or keeping Lucas County Veterans Memorial Park tidy and growing in downtown Chariton.

It has meant responsibility, perseverance, persistence and a commitment to give back. Stick with the difficult job, find a way to keep going when things don't go as planned and be an active member of your community, he says.

Those are life lessons he has followed consistently from the Marine Corps to the farm and, eventually, into decades of work honoring veterans and serving his town.

"I think the military preaches you persistence," Comstock said. "We don't care how many times you go down; it's how many times you get on your feet. That's the only thing that counts. And that translates to farming, too."

Comstock, 85, and his wife, Linda, have spent their years serving others — the epitome of a life devoted to family, the military and community. Looking back on his journey, he says he wouldn't have it any other way.

"We've wanted to dedicate our time ... making sure we're an active part in what we do. That's all that matters," he said.



Earl Comstock served in the Marine Corps from 1958 to 1967. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



Comstock was integral in developing a Veterans Memorial Park in Chariton, which honors veterans with memorials representing major conflicts. PHOTO / CONRAD SCHMIDT

MILITARY CAREER AND RETURNING HOME

Comstock entered the Marine Corps in 1958 and served nine years, leaving in 1967 as a staff sergeant, E-6. He was deployed overseas and later became a drill instructor when the military was expanding for the Vietnam era.

But with two young daughters at home, Earl and Linda decided it was time he returned to Iowa.

"I had two daughters, and I never got to see them," he said.

Having both been raised on farms, they prepared for a life in rural Chariton. They bought an 80-acre farm in Pleasant Township and started milking cows in 1967. When falling milk prices forced difficult discussions, they sold the farm and bought 400 acres in Liberty Township, switching to beef cattle and hogs. After farming a few years, their third daughter was born.

Fast-forward to the 1980s and yet another challenge loomed — the farm crisis.

Linda went to work for Hy-Vee, a position she eventually held for 35 years, while the family looked for ways to keep the farm. Earl took a feed sales job and re-entered service as an active guard reserve in the Air National Guard.

Although they sold roughly 200 acres of land during that time, the off-farm work gave the couple a more reliable source of income and retirement security to remain on the farm and raise their daughters, Lesha, Tammy and Christal.

"We stuck it out," Comstock said. "We looked for a way that we could continue living on that farm."

The family then farmed for decades, eventually reducing the operation as they aged. Today, Comstock says he still "piddles" around mowing and cutting brush while renting the remaining 40 acres.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Ask Comstock anything about military service, and he admittedly gets a little emotional. Retirement from serving his country didn't mean an end to service.

Earl and Linda became deeply involved with the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and the development of a Veterans Memorial Park in Chariton. The park honors veterans and the American way of life, with memorials representing major conflicts and those who served and paid the ultimate sacrifice, a Freedom Rock, a veterans memorial flagpole, memorial bricks and an Iowa bell.

For the 250th anniversary of America this year, Chariton High School students designed a project honoring all 50 states, with social studies classes providing sayings of 25 words or less describing what students thought made America great. The permanent display was installed by students from Indian Hills Community College.

Fourth graders from Van Allen Elementary visit the park each year, rotating through five stations where they learn about veterans; the meaning of the flags, the mural, bell and memorial bricks; and what it means to be an American.

"We really thought we needed this in our community for educational purposes," Comstock said. "It has been really successful ... and we continue to add something new each year."

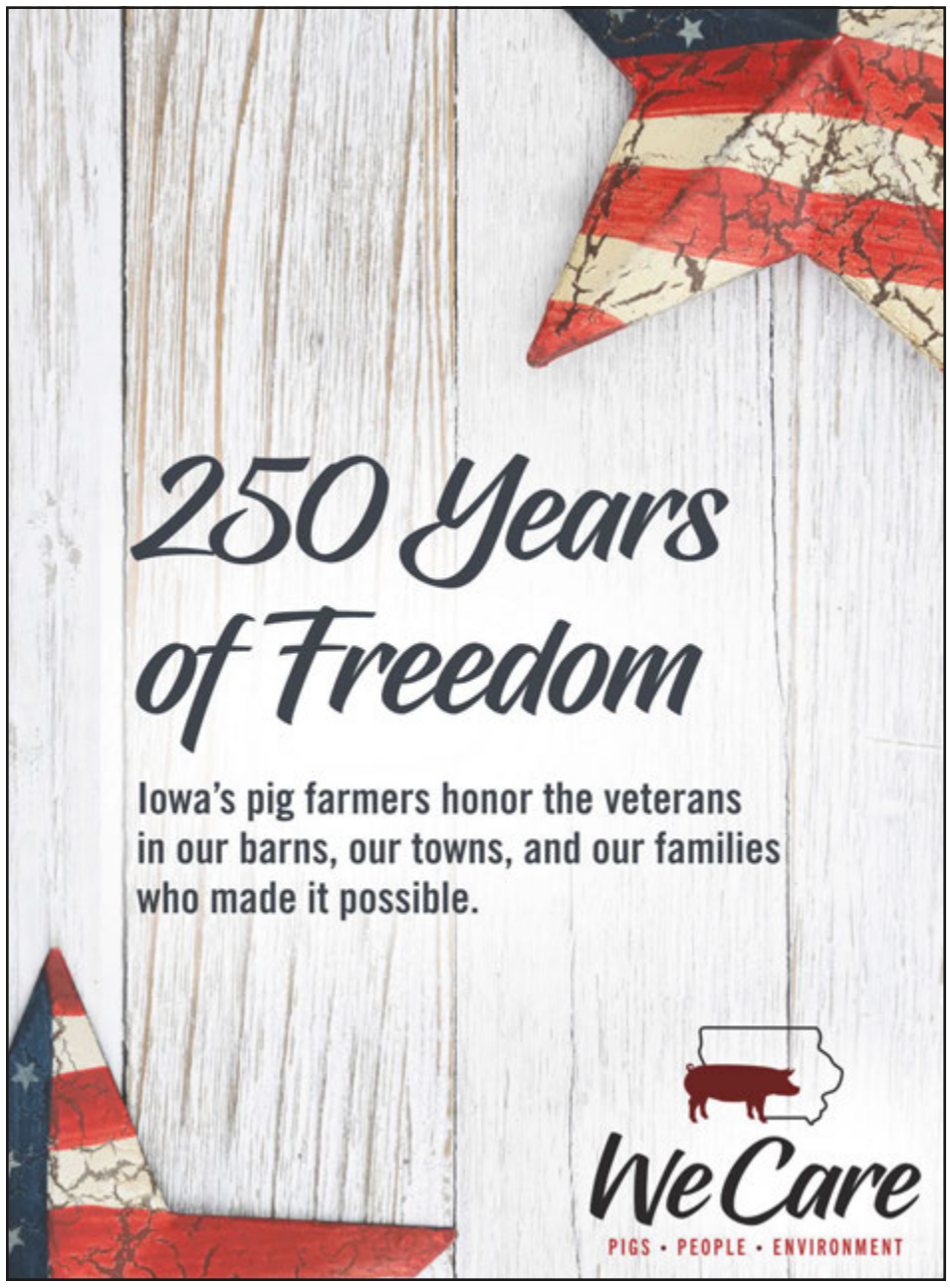
When a local veteran dies, the Comstocks help honor that person by raising a service flag at the park for three days and tolling the bell according to the veteran's age.

So for Comstock, community service isn't just about belonging to an organization; it means making a difference. He and Linda now are working with the local American Legion to raise funds to refurbish the Legion building. They are involved in activities at First Lutheran Church and have been longtime members and leaders in Lucas County Farm Bureau.

"I've been a Farm Bureau member since 1969," Comstock said. He has served on the county board and as president and as a voting delegate.

Linda has been a strong advocate for Farm Bureau membership, recognized multiple times with the "membership topper" award for her member recruiting efforts.

"Without membership, we have no voice," Comstock said. "Farm Bureau is a very proud, family organization. It has been a privilege to be involved."



MARINE CORPS SERVICE BRINGS LIFE INTO FOCUS FOR BLACK

By Corey Munson

Brad Black spent six years in the U.S. Marine Corps, including a deployment to Afghanistan. When he returned to farming in Calhoun and Webster counties, he brought lessons from military service to his corn and soybean operation.

Black enlisted at age 24, after college and marriage. Stepping away from the family acreage between Barnum and Rockwell City helped him clarify what he wanted to do with his life.

"I needed to get away from the farm for a little while to figure that out, to realize, yep, this is what I want," Black said. "Everything else isn't quite as good as this."

In spring 2010, Black returned home to farm alongside his father and uncle ahead of his initial deployment. By July, he had received mobilization orders and shipped out to Afghanistan in 2011, missing his first two harvests due to overseas service.

"It's all of the things that you miss about being on the farm," Black said. "This is kind of the culmination of all the work that you do throughout the year, and I missed the first two of them."

While deployed, he served as security for logistic convoys, shepherding "fuel, food and bullets" out of Camp Leatherneck in Helmand Province to forward operating bases.

"We were the UPS for southern Afghanistan," Black said. "Our job was not to pick a fight but to get from point A to point B as quickly and safely as possible."

When he returned to civilian life for good, lessons from military service became part of his approach to farming.



Brad Black says serving six years in the Marine Corps gave him discipline. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



After serving in the Marine Corps, Black returned to farm with his family. He and his wife, Rachel, have four children. PHOTO / CONRAD SCHMIDT

MAKING THE BEST OF EVERY SITUATION

Growing up around equipment, Black learned his father's mechanical philosophy: "It's only temporary unless it works."

That approach also proved useful during his deployment.

"A lot of times things would go south or things would go haywire, and you have to make the best out of a bad situation and figure out a way to get through on your own," Black said. "And that kind of mentality of fixing it on your own to get through, to get by, really served me well over there."

Black said military service also taught him discipline and the importance of taking initiative.

"I gained discipline while I was serving, something that I didn't really have before," he said. "The ability to see what needed to be done and actually do it — that kind of self-starting motivation ... that discipline, I picked up while I served."

That discipline carries into his fieldwork. Black's operation uses no-till practices across all acres and plants cover crops on 15% to 20% of the land. He said those practices helped him continue harvesting during recent wet autumn weather.

"We started harvest on Saturday, and I'm fairly certain we were the only ones working that day within a 40-mile radius of us," Black said. "I would attribute that to no-till. Because we no-till everything, our soil has structure and it could hold the tractors and the combines up."

Outside the growing season, Black drives a livestock semi, transferring feeder pigs to stay connected to animal agriculture. He also served 14 years on the Calhoun County Farm Bureau board, including terms as county president and as a voting delegate at the American Farm Bureau Federation annual convention.

Black recently stepped back from the board after building a new home a mile from the farm's shop and moving across the county line into Webster County.

He and his wife, Rachel, are raising four children: Aiden, Oliver, Alex and Emma. Rachel is an elementary music teacher in the Manson Northwest Webster school district.

The family's history in the area dates to the 1860s, when Black's family homesteaded land there. His grandfather reacquired the property during the 1950s after it had left the family.

"You hear the phrase of moving someplace and putting roots down," Black said. "It really is a tangible feeling of roots going down."

MYERS

FROM PAGE 1A

his daily life working in agriculture.

"In the military, you're exposed to a lot of different personalities, and learning how to work with a group of people from all different backgrounds is probably one of the experiences that I think about most often," Myers said.

After completing his military service and earning a college degree, Myers pursued a career in agriculture. His brother handles most of the day-to-day fieldwork on their 400-acre corn and soybean operation, while Myers helps during planting, harvest and other busy periods.

Myers also works full time for New Century FS, supporting area farmers and cooperative operations. He sees his work in agribusiness as another way to serve others.

"That selfless service piece, just being helpful (and) of service to other people, is something that's rewarding to me in my work today as well," Myers said.

His commitment to leadership has led him to participate in industry development programs, including the Iowa Farm Bureau Ag Leaders Institute and Growmark's Aspiring Leaders initiative through New Century FS.

"It's encouraged me to just conduct myself in a way that is representative of leadership, regardless of where I'm at — in my work and through roles in ag groups and the community," Myers said.

Myers lives near Spencer with his wife, Mariel, and stepdaughter, Louizianne.



IOWA ROOTS SHAPE SWENKA'S CAREER AS NAVY PILOT

By Tom Block

The lessons learned growing up on his family's multigenerational crop and livestock farm in eastern Iowa shaped a military career that has taken Navy Lt. George "Jake" Swenka around the world.

The son of Johnson County Farm Bureau members Steve and Amy Swenka, Jake learned at an early age that chores had to get done regardless of the weather or how he felt. Now a Navy helicopter pilot and instructor, Swenka says he often shares the importance of a strong work ethic and personal responsibility with younger pilots.

"I always say the biggest thing that can separate yourself from the rest of the pack is, I call it the 'give a damn factor'— be personally invested in what you're doing and make sure that you put in the work. What you put into it is what you're going to get out of it," Swenka says. "I 100% agree that the farming background helped with that. I definitely say I'm not the smartest among all my peers, but I think I work harder than the majority of them because I have that farming mentality and attitude."

Swenka is currently stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, serving as an instructor at the Helicopter Maritime Strike Weapons School Atlantic, where he helps prepare crews for operational deployments and develops tactics to help Navy personnel to respond to evolving threats. He flies the MH-60 Romeo, a version of the Navy's Black Hawk helicopter equipped for anti-submarine and surface warfare missions.



Lt. George "Jake" Swenka and his grandpa, George V. Swenka. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



Jake Swenka has served two deployments as a Navy helicopter pilot and is currently serving as an instructor at the Helicopter Maritime Strike Weapons School in Jacksonville. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

A FAMILY HISTORY OF SERVICE

Like farming, military service runs in the Swenka family.

His great-grandfather served in the Navy before earning a law degree from the University of Iowa and returning to military service as a Navy judge advocate general (JAG) officer. His grandpa, George V. Swenka, served in the Iowa Army National Guard.

Jake says he picked up an interest in aviation watching planes fly over the family's farm en route to the Cedar Rapids airport.

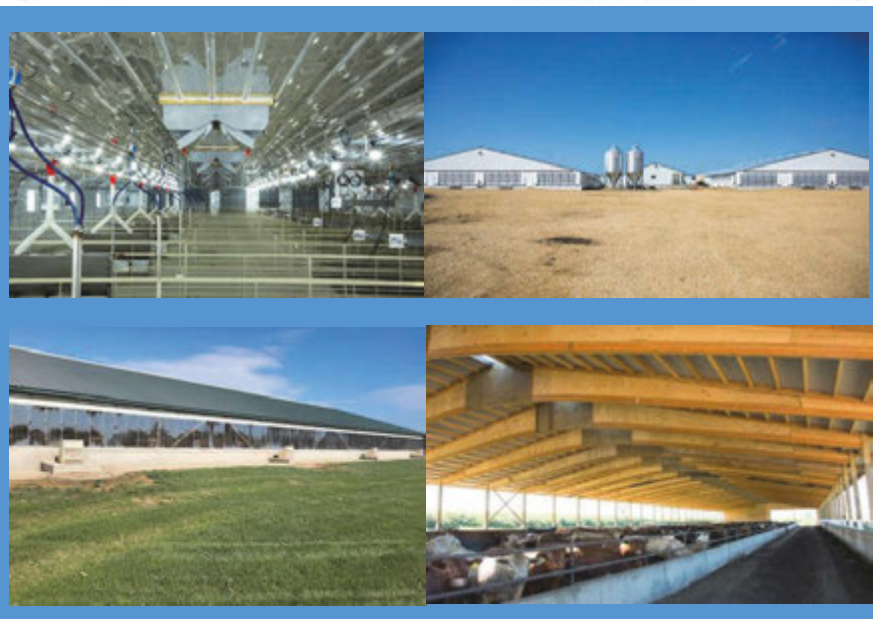
"Sometimes the B-17 Aluminum Overcast would fly over eastern Iowa, so that kind of sparked my interest and I thought aviation would be cool," he recalls. "I kind of figured if I wanted to be one of the best pilots, Navy pilots are probably a little better than Air Force pilots because anyone can land on a runway, but trying to land on something moving at sea" is more challenging.

After graduating as valedictorian of his class at Clear Creek Amana High School in 2013, Swenka entered the U.S. Naval Academy in June 2013. He earned a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering in 2017.

Swenka said growing up around livestock and farm equipment provided real-life skills that translated over to engineering training.

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SWENKA

FROM PAGE 6A

"I figured I know how to get my hands dirty; I know how to work on machinery. We do all of our own maintenance for the most part, so it's probably a good fit," he says. "I didn't realize an engineering degree is a lot of theory-based and proof of concept, not as much getting your hands dirty.

"But I honestly do feel that I was probably better prepared for some of the actual hands-on stuff just because I had the experience of growing up on a farm. Some of my other friends may have been smarter and they were good with the theory and math, but in terms of how does the thing function, I feel like I was definitely better prepared."

Swenka began his career as a naval aviator in Pensacola after graduating from the Naval Academy.

He has completed two formal deployments during his Navy career. His first deployment took him to the Middle East aboard the USS Michael Murphy, where his duties included escorting U.S. and coalition vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman.

Swenka says the experience gave him an appreciation for the current situation in the Middle East, although tensions are higher now than during his deployment.

"When I was there, it wasn't quite as kinetic as it is right now, but at least (I) have some appreciation of what those guys are going through right now," he said.

His second deployment took him to the South China Sea from late 2022 into 2023. He also was part of a few smaller detachments that required crews to always be on standby for rapid mobilization.

"Our old squadron's slogan was we're able to outfit a detachment and go out to sea within 72 hours of notification," he explains.

STAYING CONNECTED TO IOWA

While his military career has taken him to various bases around the world, Swenka maintains a strong connection to his family's farm.

When leave allows, he returns home to help with baling hay or harvesting crops. While that's not quite the "rest and relaxation" that some of his peers have in mind, Swenka says it's a welcome respite for him.

"To me, it's almost like a therapy. I think manual labor is a little more gratifying and refreshing than maybe some of the mental (stress) that we all go through every day," he says. "My mom's still kind enough to have my chore clothes, my belt, my knife ... all sitting aside when I come home, and I just throw it on and got out and help my dad and brother. It's almost like I never left.

"I can't express enough how happy I am to have the Iowa roots that I do."

His farm roots have been recognized throughout his military career, from his work ethic to his call sign — "Cream Corn" — a moniker that was assigned by some senior pilots a few months into his first squadron assignment and has stuck ever since. Navy call signs, he explains, are meant to be light-hearted and usually come with a backstory.

"It was really easy for them to anchor on corn. They were trying to figure out what could go with it ... just cycling through all the different adjectives you could use ... and Cream Corn was the funniest one."

Swenka said returning to Iowa is part of his long-term plans, although the timing is uncertain. His wife, Stacie, is a Cedar Rapids native, and they have a young daughter, Madelyn. For now, the military remains his mission, but preserving the family farming tradition is also important to him.

"One of my dreams is to farm with my brother," he says. "There's no better person than my dad to help oversee that next generation."

SUPPORT MATTERS TO SERVICE MEMBERS

Swenka also stressed how much public support means to military members serving around the globe.

"Morale is a huge thing," he said. "Just letting people know that we have their support can really give everyone the motivation to keep going."

FLINN

FROM PAGE 3A

back to the Middle East, back to Australia, back to Hawaii," she says. "Those honeys hold core food memory that transport to uniform memory of comrades from the past."

Flinn is Iowa's first honey sommelier. She trained with the Italian Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey in Bologna, Italy, where she learned to smell and taste honey based on 18 botanical sources along with beekeepers from all over the world.

That, too, has a connection to her family's military service. Her grandfather, Robert Reber, served in the 34th Infantry "Red Bull" during World War II, including deployments to Africa and Italy.

"My grandfather had a charm bracelet made of each village their troops liberated in Italy. I plan to visit those villages next year while in Italy," says Flinn.

She is also using her skills to help other veterans dealing with PTSD.

"We sponsor a veteran each season to get them going in beekeeping and hold Hero Honey Tastings for Veterans, simply sharing camaraderie (with) our fellow brothers and sisters in arms," she says.

Milk & Honey products are available online at www.milkmiele.com and through a handful of local outlets. The farm also hosts events including popular Hive to Table dinners, featuring special honey pairings with each course.

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1 Available on the purchase or lease of an eligible new 2025/2026/2027MY Ford Maverick®, Ranger®, F-150®, Super Duty or F-150 Lightning®. Not available on any other Ford or Lincoln vehicles, or F-150 Raptor®, F-150 Raptor R™, Ranger Raptor or F-650® and F-750® Super Duty. Vehicle eligibility may change at any time. Available to U.S. residents only. Place a new retail order or take new retail delivery from an authorized Ford Dealer's stock by 1/04/27. Limit of five purchases/leases per household during the program offer (PGM# 32900). Offer subject to dealer participation. May not be used/combined with most other Ford private offers. See an authorized Ford Dealer or go to https://www.fordrecognizesu.com, for complete details and eligibility (PGM# 32900). Check with your local dealer for current information. Offer subject to confirmation of eligibility.

2 Available on the purchase of an eligible certified used 2021-2027MY Ford Blue Advantage Gold, EV (F-150 Lightning only), or Blue Certified, Ford Maverick, Ranger, F-150, Super Duty or F-150 Lightning with under 80,000 miles. Not available on any other Ford or Lincoln vehicles, or F-150 Raptor, F-150 Raptor R, Ranger Raptor or F-650 and F-750 Super Duty. Vehicle eligibility may change at any time. This offer is not eligible for customers purchasing a vehicle in the state of Arkansas, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. Take delivery from an authorized Ford Dealer's stock by 1/4/2027. Limit of five purchases per household during the program offer (PGM# 32902). Offer subject to dealer participation. May not be used/combined with most other Ford private offers. See an authorized Ford Dealer or go to https://www.fordrecognizesu.com, for complete details and eligibility (PGM# 32902). Check with your local Ford Dealer for current information. Offer subject to confirmation of eligibility.

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