

“Service to My Country, Not a Sacrifice”

Hearfelt and humbling words offered without regret or even a second thought. But from one of the countless men and women who have served our country with honor and dignity through their military support, how could we possibly expect to hear anything less?

Long before Melissa Mitchell became a leader in the loss prevention industry, she served her country as a member of the U.S. Air Force. Following a path forged by others in her family, she was driven to serve. From humble beginnings in the farmlands of western New York, Mitchell soon found herself stationed on an Air Force base in Weisbaden, Germany. In the early 1980s, it wasn't a common occurrence for women to serve in the military. And in the years immediately following the Iran hostage crisis, it wasn't exactly a popular time to be a U.S. soldier in Europe.

But today Mitchell reflects proudly on that important time in her life and remembers the many life lessons that she learned. Confidence, discipline, and humility were powerful messages, but no less important than finding the strength of adaptability, the expression of character, or the rewards of personal and professional balance. She learned that it was important to execute the high standards that had been set, respect the culture where we live and

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By Jacque Brittain



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serve, and embrace the responsibility that comes with leadership. Those lessons still serve her today as director of loss prevention and inventory control for LifeWay Christian Stores.

But Mitchell is not alone.

The Price of Freedom

When America commits to armed conflict, 99 percent of our nation's citizens are counting on the one percent who serve us in the armed forces. Currently, our country has been at war longer than at any other time in American history. In the time since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, more than two million American military personnel have been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, or both. More than \$1.4 trillion has been spent to fund these efforts.

But these costs are dwarfed by a price that reaches far beyond the dollars. Young men and women from across our great country have left behind their lives, their homes, their jobs, and their loved ones to protect our way of life, our interests abroad, and our allies half a world away. Many bear the terrible scars of war, with nearly 50,000 wounded and tens of thousands more live with the emotional pains that haunt their every day. Many others have given more than anyone could ever ask, with more than 6,500 members of the U.S. military sacrificing their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan since the war began.

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Another Turning Point

Following the events of 9/11, Thomas Courtney sat in his living room with his mother and father and watched with the rest of us as our world changed forever. As the horrors of war hit our home soil, he felt the tragedy of those events, and the crushing pain watching those towers fall. “All I could think about was what does this mean? What will the future bring? How will the world change?”

But while staring into the smoke and chaos that marred that tragic morning, he also witnessed the same courageous and selfless acts of heroism that brought all of us closer together that day. “I felt the injustice that was committed. I then asked myself a question that effectively changed my life—How could I not do my part?”

Courtney took some time for self-reflection and to weigh just how he would respond. “Once I made my decision, I got the blessing of my father. I then remember going to tell my mother, who was working on the sales floor at jcpenny. When I told her of my choice, she said to me, ‘I realize your life can be taken, and God can take you home. But it’s your decision, and I’m at peace with that.’” Thomas then left his home and family behind, and joined the Marine Corps.

Similar stories have echoed through living rooms across our country over the past decade. While most served as proud moments, not many of them resulted in fond memories. Courtney was deployed for three tours of duty. “I did two tours in Afghanistan. I stood guard at the U.S. Embassy,” he says. “We were tested by the Taliban and others and had to continuously establish and reestablish control. There were constant engagements, but we were also involved in a lot of humanitarian aid working with the Afghan people. We saw the devastating effects that war had on a country that was already devastated by conflict and poverty. The impact on the people. The look on the faces of families...especially children. They didn’t have anything—no running water, shoes—anything.”

His story moves from Afghanistan to Iraq. “I also did a tour in northwestern Iraq, dealing with the insurgencies encroaching from Syria. That was even more intense,” he explains. “Road mines, hand grenades, 500-pound bombs being dropped. There were times when I’m sure that I shouldn’t have come home at all. I was very fortunate. It changes your life, your soul, your testimony, your whole outlook. It made me appreciate who I was and gave me a greater sense of purpose. It was hard and very lonely. For my married friends, I saw both sides of the struggle. There’s the stress

of war, but also the stress of how their lives were impacted back home without them there for every type of support imaginable. It really speaks to the families that stick with it.”

Courtney was blessed with coming home safely, and returned to work at LifeWay Christian Stores where he worked in retail store development. It was while he was in this capacity that he was approached by his boss about pursuing a position in loss prevention. “He told me that he thought it would be a great opportunity. I didn’t realize that LP had its hands in as much as it did,” he recalls.

“Thomas was recommended by his boss, who was the director of retail store development,” says Melissa Mitchell. “I knew Thomas before he left, but he was different when he came back. You could see the growth. It was as if he had matured fifteen years in those four years.

“The military trains you to do things that are very unique. You hold a great deal of responsibility,” explains Mitchell. “Considering what many do as part of their service, they’re often significantly under-employed when they return home. Based on my experiences, I immediately understood the compatible skills—the way you learn, the way you execute, the discipline, the leadership. It wasn’t that I was looking for a veteran, but I found it to be a plus. The best fit isn’t always the person with the most experience. You also need to consider potential and those who best fit the culture. Thomas was that fit for us.”

Learning Loss Prevention

To help with his development, Courtney completed and was certified through the Loss Prevention Foundation’s LPQualified (LPQ) course. “LPQ provides a foundation for a breadth of information and competencies that could help Thomas develop