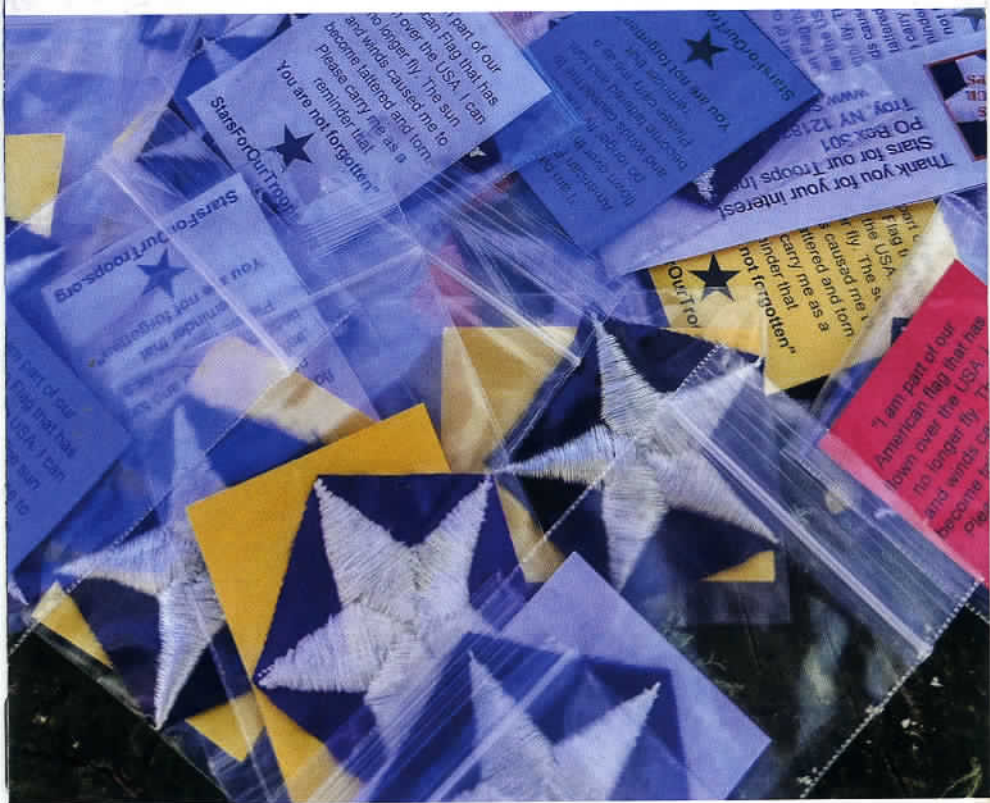


Salute

The magazine for America's military

FALL 2026



Star Light, Star Bright

Volunteer Organization 'Stars for Our Troops' Repurposes Retired American Flags into Keepsakes for Troops, Veterans & First Responders

PAGE 12



Star Light, Star Bright

Volunteer Organization 'Stars for Our Troops' Repurposes Retired American Flags into Keepsakes for Troops, Veterans & First Responders

by DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

The stars on the United States flag originally were designed to represent each of the states, and these bright white lights have become a powerful symbol, inspiring a sense of national unity, collective strength, and patriotic pride. Today, many of the stars on retired American flags are enjoying a "second life" as keepsakes for active-duty troops, veterans, and first responders, serving as thanks and reminders from a grateful nation through a non-profit organization called Stars For Our Troops™.

What started with an enterprising founder, a small group of volunteers and four distressed, retired American flags has become a nationwide movement "thanking those that served and are serving." Stars For Our Troops began with founder Susan Wells and a group of World War II veterans and their families in September 2010. Since those initial four flags, more than 27,000 flags have been used to create an amazing 1.6 million Stars that have been distributed to active-duty troops, veterans, first responders, and their families.

"We are a group of patriotic volunteers who dedicate our time to giving the American flag a new purpose when the flags become tattered and faded," explains Wells. "Once these flags are retired from service, we pass the legacy their embroidered Stars hold on to those who defend them."

Wells was inspired by a woman in Florida who had

been making keepsakes out of Stars and enclosing a note in a small zip pouch. "I have always been patriotic and when this project was shown to me, I knew that I could share Stars," Wells recalls, noting that she was looking for something to do in retirement after working in the air freight and trucking industries. "My Dad was in the Army in World War II; my cousin an Air Force nurse in Desert Storm/Shield. I knew that our military and our veterans would appreciate the Stars."

Wells found an enthusiastic group of volunteers in her city of Troy, NY, the home of "Uncle Sam," former meat-packer Samuel Wilson. These volunteers, known as Star Makers, carefully cut embroidered stars from tattered or faded American flags that are no longer fit to fly; the remaining flag material is disposed of according to proper flag protocol. Each star is placed in a small pouch with a card explaining its origin, providing a tangible reminder of gratitude for the recipient. The enclosed message reads: "I am part of our American flag that has flown over the USA. I can no longer fly. The sun and winds have caused me to become tattered and torn. Please carry me as a reminder that YOU are not forgotten."

The organization became supercharged and grew into a national volunteer effort in 2010 when Wells was invited to speak at one of the Honor Flights taking veterans to visit the monuments in Washington

D.C. "I saw the leader before the flight and offered to give him Stars for all of the veterans," she recalls. "I was invited to speak at the send-off; I went to the airport, met some of the heroes going on the trip, and enjoyed the presentation. I was called up to speak, advised the veterans that there was something special for them in their backpacks, showed the pouched Star, read the message, wished them a fun adventure, and left the podium.

"This is when life changed," she continues. "There were many motorcycle riders there; they escort the veterans to the airport. Some came to me as we were listening to the rest of the program, they had tears in their eyes, or asked for one for a friend, and after the veterans had left for their trip, I was surrounded by these men and women, asking for Stars, wanting to know how to get more, etc. One of the leaders asked me if I needed flags, and I said yes. Did I need helpers to make the Stars? Another yes. He then told me he would check his supply at his VFW post. Someone else had a friend that was a Girl Scout leader and would ask if this is something the girls can do. Another biker came up for a Star, and I asked if he wanted a hug, and he did and it was a bear hug. As I spoke to the riders, it became clear they were Vietnam veterans, and this was the 'thank you' they never received."

Wells said that, at first, the organization focused on delivering Stars to veterans, but then it expanded to active-duty troops and first responders. Some families also place the Stars on the tombs of veterans.

Anyone can become a "Star Maker" by registering on the group's website, starsforourtroops.org. Star Maker kits are available for \$15 and include two washed cantons (the blue field of stars), a small bag of 10 pouched Stars, five business cards, and 100 pouches. Each individual and organization receives an email with the instructions, notes, and flyers; volunteers share their progress via email at three-month intervals and in a yearly update every January. The group also maintains a private Facebook page for Star Makers to share pictures of parties and ask questions. Currently, there are more than 250 Star Makers across the U.S. helping collect, craft, and ship Stars.

Wells also runs three "Star Parties" each month at different venues in the New York Capital District. "I have worked with a local military group during the down time after deployment when the adults are having meetings; the children helped me create Stars, as they knew they were going to someone else's mom or dad," she notes. "Some Star Makers are near bases, and they are meeting and speaking with the military all the time.

"We are attempting to encourage the bases with family centers to become Star Makers and share the Stars within the base and to send home to fellow military or family," Wells adds. "We give each family member a Star when they come to the Albany (NY) International Airport. For some children, it can become a way to talk to mom or dad while they are deployed. The Star can carry a message of love to each other."

Stars For Our Troops accepts donations through its website and works with other national non-profit groups to solicit donations of retired American flags. "We only use American-made flags with embroidered Stars, so that the Star is available to feel when you put your hand in your pocket," she comments. "That is for those in the military to know someone is thinking or praying for them." 



Heartfelt Stories

Wells points out that there are many poignant stories of people sharing Stars and receiving Stars.

"A young veteran was at a woodworkers show, and I was at the Patriot Guard table, with Stars on the table, and saw the look on his face when he saw them," she shares. "He asked politely if he could have a Star and almost broke into tears. After a nice hug, he said he received one at mail call after being out in the desert for two weeks, and it was better than a hot meal or a shower, as it was from home. He made sure it was in his pocket no matter which outfit he was wearing and it helped him get through the rest of his tour. After getting home and leaving the military, he carried the Star in his wallet. One day, his wallet was stolen and he was most upset about losing the Star. He said seeing the Stars there on the table meant so much to him and he could have a Star again. It made his day and certainly was a blessing to the program."