

# The Land of the Free and the

By Susan J. Sherman, Editor

The dictionary defines Patriotism as the “Love of, and devotion to, one’s country.” It means different things to many people today, especially when, as proud Americans, we watch with mixed-emotions as our children, husbands, friends, and neighbors go off to Iraq and Afghanistan, never knowing if they’ll return in one piece, to fight for another’s freedom. We watch with quiet trepidation as these brave men and women leave the security and comfort of their homes to defend nations steeped in constant religious and political turmoil.

Patriotism, I’m sure you’ll agree, is what our country was founded upon when our forefathers got together and proudly penned the Declaration of Independence, and Betsy Ross sewed by hand our first precious symbol of freedom from a few scraps of red, white, and blue cloth. It’s the glue that holds us together as a great nation, as we put our faith, trust, and hope in the hands of the true heroes—the patriots—who defend our country’s freedom every day—the soldiers who, without a moments hesitation, hear their call to arms and go off to serve their country well.

I recently saw this quote about what it means to be a soldier, written by an eight-year-old boy in an Indiana grade school. It sums things up so eloquently—“A Soldier is an individual and a team in one being. They are the ones who step forward, when everyone else steps back. They are the people who risk their lives to save someone, who they have never even seen. Without them, there would be no America.” The veterans and soldiers profiled here, all from our area, committed themselves to making a difference. Each of them epitomize the meaning of what it means to be a true patriot, a brave defender of our most precious American asset—our freedom.



## Colonel (Ret) Lettie Bien

COL (Ret) Bien retired in 2007 as an Army Colonel after 30 years of military service. Her last assignment was as a civil affairs officer assigned to OSD/SOLIC Policy Office in the Pentagon. During her years of combined active duty and reserve services, COL Bien served for almost a year as the US Senior Advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Industry and Minerals in Baghdad. She lives with her husband Dr. David

Schmitt, an internist; they have a daughter Maggie, who lives in Spain.

From the moment COL Bien retired, she knew that her calling had to be the care of our military veterans, those in Iraq and Afghanistan and the older ones from WWI, Korea, Vietnam and other conflicts. She said, “Truthfully, when I came home from Iraq physically safe and sound, I knew that it was plain good luck. I had been in some precarious positions but nothing like our young men and women are experiencing on a daily basis in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of these wonderful patriots are in their 3rd, even 4th rotation, into harm’s way.”

COL Bien’s last assignment was at the Pentagon. She said, “The Secretary of Defense would host the injured troops from Walter Reed and other surrounding military hospitals to a luncheon in the building on some regular basis. When I saw these kids, it broke my heart. I saw, with tears in my eyes, extreme, serious, and lifetime debilitating injuries. Missing limbs, crushed heads, burns. 18 and 19 year olds with their dreams and aspirations in front of them changed in a second while fighting for our country. I was also a ‘combat Vet’ and if something had happened to me, I would have wanted someone with a clear and strong voice, persistence, and credentials to champion my cause. It was fortuitous when the Miami VAHS asked me if I would lead the campaign to get a Fisher House here. It is an honor for me. I dream of the day we cut the ribbon and our injured military and their families will have a place to stay on the campus of the Miami VAHS.”

COL Bien received a B.A. from Florida State University, a M.A. in Public Administration and Management from Webster University, and her Juris Doctor Degree from the University of Miami Law School. She is currently the Director of Marketing and Business Development for Investor Solutions, an independent fiduciary investment firm in Miami. COL Bien is Community Chairperson for The Fisher House Foundation and Miami Veterans Health System (VAHS).



## Lieutenant Colonel (Ret) Allen West

LTC (Ret) Allen West has devoted his entire life to military service. Born and raised in Atlanta, he holds several Master’s degrees in Political Science and Military Arts and Sciences. He retired from more than 20 years of active service in the US army in 2004 and moved his wife Angela, a financial planner, and two young daughters, Aubrey (15) and Austen (11), to Broward County where he

taught high school. He later returned to Afghanistan as an advisor to the Afghan army in 2007 where he trained officers to take on the responsibility of securing their own country. He served in Operation Desert Storm and in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

A fierce advocate of helping our men and women in uniform and their families, he is a proponent of Fisher House, a unique private and publicly funded military program that provides temporary housing to military families (Army, Navy, and Air Force) in need.

LTC West said, “Having lived my entire life helping soldiers and their families during deployments and combat operations, I know to focus on predictability. Most soldiers and families want honesty from those who lead them. I want to reduce combat tours to eight months. Ensure we provide the best possible benefits to soldiers and their families by way of tax and educational benefits, sustained healthcare, and support programs. We must provide the best possible facilities for troops and their families on our military installations. I never want to see (them) as victims, but as heroes, true American Patriots who represent what is best in all of us. We have to...treat our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen with the highest regard.”

LTC West has been honored with a Bronze Star, three Meritorious Service Medals and three Army Commendation Medals (one with Valor) and a Valorous Unit Award. He received his valor award as a Captain in Desert Shield/Storm, was the US Army ROTC Instructor of the Year in 1993, and was a Distinguished Honor Graduate III Corps at Fort Hood, Texas Air Assault School. LTC West is currently running for Congress in Florida’s 22nd Congressional District.

# Home of the Brave

*“...ask not what your country can do for you,  
ask what you can do for your country.”*

*—John F. Kennedy*

## **USAF Staff Sergeant Brian Nicoletti and Meghan Nicoletti**



USAF Staff Sergeant Brian Nicoletti is with the Air Force Reserves out of Homestead Air Reserve Base, FL, 482nd Security Forces Group. His Reserve unit was activated to Kirkuk, Iraq on January 3, 2008; his return “window” is estimated anytime from July to mid-August.

Brian’s wife Meghan, who owns a surf shop called Surf Syndicate in Ft. Lauderdale, keeps the home fires burning while Brian serves his country. She learned a long time ago as a young air force bride, “that to make a military marriage successful, I had to be self-sufficient and handle almost everything while my husband was away—but—I also had to have enough sense to hand back the reins when my husband returned.” The hardest thing for Brian about being in Iraq, said Meghan, “is maintaining a positive attitude.” To that end, she tries to give him upbeat news of home and sends photos and decorations to make his bunk more “homey”. June 15th is their 23rd wedding anniversary. They have three sons: Ryan (22), who is also in the Air Force, married to Kelly (both are stationed at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany); their middle son, Gumba (21), a college student, is actually an exchange student who came to the couple from Mongolia for school six years ago and never left; their youngest son, Colin (20), is enrolled at BCC and works at the surf shop with Meghan.

When Brian and Meghan first married in 1985, Brian was an Active Duty Air Force Combat Controller (Special Forces). He was away often, on classified missions for extended periods. At the time, they lived in Panama, Central America – during the Noriega regime. They had two very young children living in a country in the midst of a revolution. Meghan recalls, “As the conflict ended, we looked ahead and we both realized that Brian needed to complete his college degree in order to advance his career.”

Brian left the Air Force and enrolled at North Georgia College where he received his degree in Criminal Justice in 1992. He spent a few years working in law enforcement in Georgia, and then the couple moved closer to family in New Jersey. Later, a start-up family business in South Florida lured them to Ft. Lauderdale in 1997. When the business faltered, Brian and Meghan found themselves in Parkland, where Brian became a Police Officer for the City in 1998. In 2000, he was recognized as Officer of the Year. He was highly commended for his work on Parkland’s K-9 Patrol Program, which he conceived and created, as well as for his work on the Commercial Motor Vehicle Enforcement Program.

When Brian returns from Iraq, he will continue in his current position as a BSO Deputy. He continues to be a proactive member of the law enforcement community by teaching Commercial Motor Vehicle Enforcement to newly elected Judges at their annual judicial conventions, and to new recruits at the Police Academy.



## **Air Force Tech. Sergeant Tony Capra (1977-2008)**

Sergeant Tony Capra, 31, died on April 9 in Iraq when he was investigating a suspicious explosive device and it detonated before he could defuse it. He leaves behind his wife Angela, and five children, Mark, Victoria, Jared, Shawn, and Adrianna, 11 brothers and sisters, and his mother and his father. Sergeant Capra was on his fourth tour in Iraq; he was awarded his second Bronze Star, The Purple

Heart, and a Combat Action Medal posthumously.

Sergeant Capra excelled as an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Operator in the U.S. Air Force and was the team leader of the 332nd Expeditionary Civil Engineer Squadron. For the past 11 years, he dedicated his life to protecting our freedom and is the true definition of what it means to be a patriot. According to his family, he made many sacrifices for his country and was always available to work. In the end, he made the ultimate sacrifice by giving his life for his country. On June 22, the American Legion in Boca Raton held a fundraiser in honor of Sergeant Capra, to help support his family, and as a reminder to all of us, “that freedom is not free.”

According to Sergeant Capra’s uncle, Paul Oleksak, here’s how family members best remember Tony:

“Tony loved all kinds of sweets, Oreo cookies, pudding cups, and sticks of butter.”

“He loved playing games with his brothers and sisters, training his brothers to become ‘stunt men’.”

“Tony loved his five children and always wanted to adopt more.”

“Tony was a truly brilliant man, he never complained about going to work, he loved his job, and working with his hands. He was known as a highly proficient EOD Operator and a courageous man. Above all other family members, Tony was always ready to do the right thing without hesitation.”

“He was a hardworking Airman, loving husband and dad, blessed son, caring grandson and nephew, and he was the best brother we could have ever asked for.”

“If someone had told Tony 11 years ago (when he was first enlisting in the Air Force), ‘You and Angie are going to have five kids, you’re going to be in the bomb squad, you’ll be deployed several times, and when you are 31 you’re going to die in war while diffusing a bomb - do you still want to do this?’ Tony probably would have said, ‘Sure, but can someone get a video of it for me?’”

Sergeant Tony Capra was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

# A Toast to Our Troops

An evening of fine art, fine music with fine wine, food, and chocolate tasting benefiting The Fisher House was held at the Coral Springs Museum of Art. The Fisher House, a not-for-profit organization, provides **free or low cost lodging to veterans and military families receiving treatment at military medical centers** ([www.fisherhouse.org](http://www.fisherhouse.org)).

A special feature of the event was photographic art by Marc Gagnon, including a military piece in collaboration with Parkland resident SFC Miguel Figueroa who served in Iraq.



*V.I.P. guests included Coral Springs Mayor Scott Brook, Coral Springs Vice Mayor Vince Boccia, Families of Local Military Troops, COL (Ret) Lettie J. Bien of Fisher House, and LTC (Ret) Allen West.*



# Liberty A Declaration for All



**Artist: Marc Gagnon  
2007**

**Collage - 16" x 20"**

This collage shows the foundation of America which is the Fight for Liberty.  
Liberty is not for a specific class of people, but for all