

# Veteran's Unlikely Path Leads to a Lifetime of Service

## 'Remi gets me out of my shell to where I'm able to help people'

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Maddie Fletcher is in her second year as Commander of VFW Post 5444 in Dover Plains, New York. It is just the latest way she is #StillServing after taking an unexpected career path.

From a young age, Fletcher wanted to be a chef and dreamt of attending the Culinary Institute of America (CIA). A Navy recruiter overheard her discussing this with a friend and told her that the military sent its cooks to the CIA to train for free.

"I got sucked in that way," she joked. "Then, two weeks before I graduated boot camp, they canceled the program."

Although things did not go according to plan, Fletcher eventually got there. After retiring from the Navy in 2008, she received her bachelor's degree from the CIA just as she had always hoped.

Fletcher worked as an executive chef in a few restaurants, but her service-connected injuries forced her to change courses.

Today, in addition to Post Commander, Fletcher is also employed as a VFW-Accredited Service Officer and serves as the VFW District Senior Vice, Media and Training Events Chair and Community Services Chair. Each of these roles allows her to continue serving in countless ways.

"With my job, I'm able to help veterans get the benefits they need," she said. "And as Post Commander, I'm trying to add a new spin on things. For instance, we had a poker benefit to raise funds to help veterans in our area. I'm throwing more events to bring people to the Post. We're able to help more people that way."

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Fletcher's support for veterans extends beyond her work with the VFW.

"A lot of how I'm still serving is by helping in the community. I just did the Hometown Heroes Banner Program," she said. "We put up more than 100 banners around town to get veterans and their families the recognition they deserve."

Fletcher, who suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress and anxiety, knows how important it is that veterans feel this kind of community support. She also believes connection is key. About two years ago, she started a women's veterans group, which meets once a month to check in on one another.

"If anyone needs anything, we're there to make sure they're okay. We're there for the good times and the bad," she said. "It's a way to be with our comrades and talk through everything going on in our lives, which is a nice release."

Fletcher's service dog Remi accompanies her to these get-togethers and others, lending support to all.

"Remi gets me out of my shell to where I'm able to help people," she explained. "He's also a comfort to others. Like with the women's group, when we have problems and talk about it, he goes to where the anxiety is and can get people to open up."

Fletcher and Remi have been together for five years now. As she continues to support other veterans, Fletcher knows Remi will be right by her side to assist.

"He goes everywhere with me," she said. "I'm able to help more veterans who are going through a tough time because of him."

Despite her life looking differently from what she once imagined, it seems Fletcher has found her calling through the many ways she is #StillServing.

"Even before my job with the VFW, I was kind of a liaison," she explained. "Just wanting to help people, veterans would contact me. Through my connections with different programs, I would point them in the right direction. I made sure they got the help they needed."