

**Intro:**

We the people of the United States. A House divided against itself cannot stand. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

**Jason Raia:**

Hello and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here*, a new civic education podcast from Freedom's Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civic education, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, chief operating officer at Freedom's Foundation, and this week's host of *George Washington Slept Here*. In our new civic education podcast, the format is simple, a long-form conversation with a friend of freedoms found where we can learn something new. Before we go anywhere, a little housekeeping, we encourage everyone to subscribe to George Washington slept here wherever you listen to podcasts and make sure you get every new podcast as soon as possible. We love hearing from our listeners, so please email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, or suggestions, and hit us up at Freedom's Foundation social media @FFVF on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram at @freedomfoundation. Today's interview is with Freedom's Foundation Friend at VFW programs, Lynn Rolf. Hello, Lynn.

**Lynn Rolf**

Hey, Jay. How are you?

**Jason Raia:**

I'm great. Glad to have you here today. So our conversation is gonna be pretty structured as a way to keep ourselves on track. We wanna explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting here before us? Your current work and what is taking up the bulk of your time. Then I want to talk about the state of America today and particularly what concerns veterans most today. And finally, we will end with a quiz - nothing you need to prepare for, but something where, hopefully, our listeners will learn something a little bit more about you. So your origin story, tell us, where you were born and raised?

**Lynn Rolf:**

I was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a military brat. I'm a product of the Vietnam War.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Proud to say, the son of a Vietnam vet. and grew up all around the world. You know, following my dad as he got different assignments.

**Jason Raia:**

So Colorado Springs, Fort Carson?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And I haven't been back since. And I've been trying to get back. Fiance, I just went out to Denver for a motocross event with her son, and I was hurt. I had to travel.

**Jason Raia:**

So where else did you live?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Germany quite a bit. My dad, probably half his career in Germany. And then came back to Fort Riley, where I happen to also get stationed there. So that was extra special for me and then three times at Fort Leavenworth where I currently reside in West Point, New York, where my dad went to a military academy. We went back when I was a youngster. Pretty much the big ones.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. Fort Leavenworth where you live currently.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Outside the wall.

**Jason Raia:**

Outside of. I know there was a neighbor of yours who is fairly well known amongst Vietnam veterans. His son and you became friends, and he became a pretty good, pretty big influence on your life. And that's Medal of Honor Recipient Roger Donlon. Why don't you tell us a little bit about Roger and growing up with Roger?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. It, you know, it was - it didn't take or it did not hit me until I graduated high school and was getting sworn into the military as a young officer. His story and what he was. I grew up with both of his sons and played soccer.

**Jason Raia**

Mhmm.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And of course, we just lost Josh - Justin, one of his sons, just in the past year, and that hurt big time. But when I was getting sworn in, Roger came down the day I was getting my butterbars put on by my dad. And I looked down and was like, wow. And then I got his book. It's like, man, what a - here I end the whole time. We used to sneak over and Norma always last when she saw me and Derrick would play hooky, go over the house, and get into trouble a little bit. When they were going out on his tour, but growing up with them was unbeknownst to me probably shaped, all my interactions with Roger, potentially into who I am other than my dad's example, who I was as a military officer because of Roger.

**Jason Raia:**

And for those who don't know, Roger Donlon was the first Medal of Honor recipient from Vietnam, commanded special forces as well as, local Vietnamese soldiers as well and they were attacked. And, you know, he is, I met him, four or five years ago, he and Norma came out here to Freedoms Foundation. We did a program in Vietnam for teachers and he came and spoke about his experience. And, just the nicest, most wonderful guy. You would not in meeting him understand, you know, that this is, you know, I mean, this is the movie icon I mean, he's the Rambo. He's, you know, that's who he was. and, but, I mean, just a genuinely kind person, and Norma, his wife, is wonderful. And, you know, she talked about her experience of growing up in a Japanese internment camp. And, they, but they were good people. And, I can understand why he would have been such an influence on you.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Very humble, very I mean, like I said, you know, growing up with him, didn't even know.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. You know, he wasn't he wasn't he wasn't showing that off. He was who he was, and it's about character and it's about, you know, who you are and Roger demonstrates that very much so. So, obviously you have these two monumental influences. Your father and Roger Donlon, Tell us about your decision to join the Army yourself.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. So my dad told me he'd give me a year to pay for college tuition. I thought I was gonna wrestle my whole time and got a little sidetracked a little bit. And dad said, well, you know, your year's up. If you wanna stay in school, you gotta figure out how to pay for it and get a scholarship. And it just happened to be one day I was walking back from class. I saw their RTC department sign. Said hmm, grew up in the military, let me go see what this is about, and I talked to a young captain there. And I told him, you know, my upbringing and I said I wasn't quite sure, but I was researching and kinda talked to me about the requirements and said that I would have a hard time getting the scholarship because my grades are so low. It took me a couple of years to pass college algebra. So my GPA was not the best but I competed for a scholarship and eventually went to Fort Lewis, you know, for camp, got a commission as a military police officer. And it was always the joke with my friends in college and

**Jason Raia:**

You were the troublemaker who is not the police officer.

**Lynn Rolf:**

-- become the, because they told me there was no way I could ever become a military police officer. It was one of the most competitive at the time because it was such a small branch.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And I got selected and it totally changed my life and, of course, my dad being a cavalry officer. First went to Korea for a year because growing up, everyone had wanted to go to all these big installations I had already been to.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And there was an opportunity to go to Korea, and I was like, I've never been there. I'll go. Best, best assignment that I had just to see a whole another piece of the world, learn their culture.

**Jason Raia:**

And you, so that's the demilitarized zone—

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yepp.

**Jason Raia:**

– between North Korea, South Korea.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

It is one of the tensest, duty stations.

**Lynn Rolf:**

My first, first, first meeting I had was up in the U.N. compound to meet my future boss and I'm standing there. I felt something, just, it was a weird feeling on the back of my neck. Turn around. I see North Korean soldier peering in the window late at night, I mean—

**Jason Raia:**

Wow.

**Lynn Rolf:**

That's when I was like oh, this is real.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And then the colonel looked right at him. He says he goes, son, we're just a speed bump.

**Jason Raia:**

Wow.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And I, and to hear that, already nervous, but to internalize that and truly understand what he meant... It was a pretty big eye-opening experience and a sense of responsibility that I had for the Korean populace, us, my soldiers, that I had that were like, well, if we're considered speed bumps, let's try to prevent that.

**Jason Raia:**

Right, right. That changes, you know, you interact.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep. Absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

And, yeah. I've known a couple of people. I actually, met a, what potentially was one of your, though I think different time period, compatriots of yours from the Republic of Korea's army who were stationed at one point, there. And talk about the cooperation with local, Korean soldiers.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Hand in hand, there's two. You have the normal military like we're used to. And then you have a conscription service. We call them KATUSAs. Korean Augmentees (Augmentation) to the United States Army. And they would come in for a couple of years and work with us in our units. And then, of course, you had the whole ROK military. Everything we did was side by side. All of our training, all of our events, because it had to be. I mean, technically to this day there's no peace treaty signed.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. It's just the armistice.

**Lynn Rolf:**

At any moment, if the guy up north decided to do something and come across or do something, you know, at any moment, we would have to, we'd have to be ready in our commitment to the Korean Peninsula - it was to keep it safe. So everything we did and their and their cultures is, you know, all like down the Arabic side. It's foreign to us.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So we had to make sure that we weren't doing certain things and had to learn. So you have no choice but to work together.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. And you wanna be, you know, we're there for a purpose, and we're where, you know, the U.S. soldiers are there at the request of the Korean government and have been since the war, but there needs to be genuine respect for local custom for local beliefs. And I imagine, you know, especially with those who you know, that segment of the population who are annoyed that were there at all. And so you guys are playing that out every time you go out into public, I imagine.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Probably the best way to kinda summarize that. Most of the country really appreciates everything. You just have certain pockets, you know, especially in Seoul just because of the huge demographic.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

That there's a lot of protests that my guys as military police would have to respond to with the Korean police and the Korean military just to make sure that they weren't damaging our property --

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

-- and protecting our families and the other military units there that were doing their day job, but we were keeping them safe from -- now that was very interesting. It's like here we are trying to help you and you're fighting us?

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah and yet at the same time, you know, here you are, and all of your men have, you know, taken this oath to defend the Constitution. And that is this idea of free speech and, you know, assembly and protests and so, you know, there is this, you know, you wanna protect everyone and keep everyone safe, but at the same time, allow them to give voice to their protest in the same way that Americans are entitled.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And that was in his young military officer with, and I pretty much loved the shelter life being a brat, that was really my first exposure to true freedom, you know, that they could express it.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

You know and everything that we fight for ourselves, for our own people. It is really, like, the light bulb clicked on is like, you know what? We're here to protect them, us, and help them fight for their rights.

**Jason Raia:**

Correct.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Just like we would.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So it was --

**Jason Raia:**

It's a way of life that you were defending.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**

And, but I find that fascinating that, you know, that soldiers like yourself who have taken this oath to defend the Constitution, sometimes are put in that position where what you're defending is people, you know, protesting you.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**



And that's gotta be a tough position to be in. And yet, know that there's a value there, that that's really valuable.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. Once you really understand it and see it and feel it. It's in everything. It's a no-brainer. It's like, you know what? I may not agree with you but I'm gonna fight for you.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. So, how long were you in the military? Where else did you serve?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Just shy 10 years. When I left Korea, I went to Fort Leonard Wood, and I had a basic training unit in an advanced military police training unit for about three years. Then I went to my advanced military police training as a young, young officer and right when 9/11 happened, I was scheduled to go to Fort Riley. I had just graduated from the officer advanced course. And we watched the towers go down during our graduation.

**Jason Raia:**

Wow.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And I called my dad. I said I said, we're being told to go. So I drove from Fort Leonard Wood to Fort Leavenworth where my dad was retired and still working on base. So I dropped some things and I got to my unit over Riley and took over a logistics piece of the military police battalion to help really fortify Fort Riley.

**Jason Raia:**

So, was that the, was that the first step was, we don't know if this is the first of many, and so we need to secure –

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. I mean, it was just first of all, hunker down, protect, protect the base first and foremost because we don't know, you know, what the next next piece is. And then we started ramping up training for whatever may happen.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Because that point, we have no idea. We just knew, but you knew you as in the military knew, you guys were gonna be involved somewhere somehow and you needed to be ready.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yepp because everyone needs a good military police unit.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right. Wherever you go, wherever you want to know.

**Lynn Rolf:**

We knew odds are one of the units were probably gonna go pretty fast wherever it happened. And then it was about a year and a half, I ended up taking over a military police company. And when that happened, it was almost, it was probably about three months before Iraq kicked off. Of course, Afghanistan hadn't been going on.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

The sister unit went to Afghanistan, and we were the next in the chute and as soon as we got the word, we went through the planning process and went right over right there at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And helped to secure all the roads and started, and I always joke because, you know, I started the first Iraq Highway Patrol over there. I was like a little bit of, I mean, it was really hillbilly, policing, just trying to just teach them the pure basics, but we gave as much as we could of training and said, hey, it's what we hope you do.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Sometimes they would do it. Sometimes they wouldn't.

**Jason Raia:**

So a lot of what you were doing was training locals --

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

-- eventually to succeed you.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep. That was the first initial. And eventually came back to being that.

**Jason Raia:**

Right

**Lynn Rolf:**

And then, of course, we went through the rush and the insurgency and we were just trying to find the deck of cards and protect one of our roles as military police. All the units that would be coming in, we would protect them as they were driving to get to wherever they were going.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

That's one of our bread and butters is security.

**Jason Raia:**

Were you, or certainly, I would assume units like you securing the green zone when that's being set up in Baghdad --

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yepp absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

-- as the place where, you know, senior staff are and the ambassadors and, and all of those functionaries are working. They needed a safe place to be able to do their jobs, and you guys are the ones who are providing that.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. My unit, not specifically, but one of my sister units in the main unit that I belonged to had the green zone

**Jason Raia**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

In Baghdad, my guys had radio relay points because our communications couldn't talk from Kuwait all the way up to Baghdad by radio. So my guy set up kinda radio relay points.

**Jason Raia:**

Yep Yep.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And we called it the 9/11 Sheriff's Net. So they, soldiers, they drove up, if something happened, they would see my MPs on the side of the road and the frequency to call –

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

– to get 9/11, you know, 9-1-1 response there.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So my guys have a lot of quick reactions to certain things either break down or attack.

**Jason Raia:**

Before we get into VFW, I wanna ask you about one more thing, and that's team Rubicon

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yepp.

**Jason Raia:**

Because I know you've been involved with them. I want you to give you the opportunity to tell people who they are, what they do.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**

Because I think they do great work.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Team Rubicon. And especially, like, right now with the tornadoes that just ripped through Texas --

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

-- and going through Georgia and Alabama. When a natural disaster happens, it's a group of veterans, and there's also civilian retired firefighters or, or firefighters that can take time off, paramedics. They are so highly organized and skilled. They're able to go in right away and help with recovery efforts or clean, you know, with the cleanup, give people the right response and be able to do a good assessment of the area. So when FEMA does come in or the government finally starts figuring out more at the county level, of course, you know, they're a huge asset. It's just veterans and those people that are just helping others. I know it was very powerful, because it brought me back to my military time. I've done three tornadoes with them early on, Nebraska, across Kansas. And, just fun getting after and helping people and you know, who better else to get dirty and start slinging slinging mud?

**Jason Raia:**

Well, and I imagine that, particularly for those who have come back from military service, particularly overseas, and, you know, we've heard about it, and I'm sure we will talk about how difficult that transition can be to be able to apply those skills.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

In service of not people six thousand miles away, but people maybe in your own state or two states over or whatever. But, you know, being able to take that service to the country and localize it with people who are just desperately in need of it.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. And it's different. It's different, but the same. And what I mean by the difference is that, yeah, you could do all this stuff overseas and helping, and helping other people, but when you are helping our own communities, it really hits home more.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

I mean, there's more emotions involved and more stress because you – not saying that we wouldn't do a better job for anyone other or anyone, above anyone else – but they're just different when you're helping someone in your own town, same state, neighbors, you just go I mean, we'd go the extra mile for sure.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Absolutely. And it's one of the things that in, at least for Freedoms Foundation, sort of defines what it means to be a good citizen, a responsible citizen. We, we've talked about helping others, being generous, sharing, you know, in this case, your skills sharing what you're able to do to make somebody else's life better. And that for us just ticks a box that says, yep. you're, you're doing it. This is what it means. This is what our system of government is dependent on, is this idea that people help other people.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

In whatever way they can.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. Within 20 minutes when I heard the Kansas tornado come through, which is 3 hours from me, I left the office, came home, told my dad, watch the dog, and I just sent out a quick email to people at work and said, hey, meet me in 2 hours at 7/11. And if you got stuff you wanna donate, actually, you know, I had to go back to my dad's farm and get a trailer. Drove it down and insert Team Rubicon and ourselves and our efforts in a lot faster than

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

There's just pure luck on my part.

**Jason Raia:**

But still, you know, it's part of that is because you're bringing you know, that training and that experience as having served and being a veteran. So, you come back, from Iraq, you eventually leave the army. You wind up at VFW.

**Lynn Rolf:**

No. I was lost. I thought when I made the decision to leave, I thought I could just hunt for the rest of my life and fish and stay away and just do what I thought I loved at the time and really went down a dark tunnel for quite a while. Luckily, my dad reached out to some of his buddies that were working on base, and I got a job. You know, I worked as a defense contractor, but I still wasn't, I was not happy. Still wrestling with a lot of history and demons and Dad realized it. Sat me down and talked a great length, and we started connecting with others and one of my high school buddies had just gotten out too - young marine. We're like, well, let's go. It was Veterans Day.

**Jason Raia:**

Mhmm.

**Lynn Rolf:**

We're down in Leavenworth, Kansas, one of the largest parades in the country. And, we're standing there and seen a sign for VFW. I looked at it. I was like, well, my dad and my granddad belong. Let's go. It's like, I'm in Iraq, but let's go in.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay

**Lynn Rolf:**

And that was the start. Got invited to a meeting a couple of weeks later. I kinda laughed. They're, you know, much older.

**Jason Raia:**

I was gonna say, I imagine there was a fairly significant generation gap.

**Lynn Rolf:**

They you would have thought, when I first walked in, they're like, what are these two young punks want?

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Because they're much, much older. A lot of Korean war guys.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And and and at the time, there's a healthy population of WWII still.

**Jason Raia:**

Sure.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And we're the young young guys just walked off the street, and they weren't quite sure what to do with us.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So I went to the meeting and, like, man, I think I can. I think I can help out because of a lot of their struggles, you know, they're complaining by communication. They were complaining about lack of involvement. They wanna do certain things and have no connections with the Fort. So, of course, some would call it a fatal mistake. And I would say it was my best mistake I made. I raised my hand. You know I said, hey, I, I can help with this. So I got friends all across Fort Leavenworth and, and just got swallowed up and all the events and started learning more. And it's like, so, I ended up taking over the VF, that post, within just a couple months because they pretty much just left their hands up or raised their hands.



**Jason Raia:**

They were waiting for someone to succeed them.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. They were just there, just treading water. I think this is very common, with membership organizations, with, veteran service organizations, posts and chapters and what have you, that you have people who've done it for a long time, love the organization have just devoted, you know, all kinds of time and and their life to it, but are just ready to move on. And so they're just waiting for somebody like you.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Right. And then eventually, I went to a district meeting, which was the next level up. Same thing happened. I raised my hand because no one was willing to step up.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So I took over the whole district, and I had the largest post in Kansas all at the same time.

**Jason Raia:**

Wow.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And I went to my first state meeting and was not happy with what I saw. It's like, you know, I just wasted a lot of money for a hotel—

**Jason Raia:**

Yep.

**Lynn Rolf:**

—drove four hours across Kansas to go to this meeting. I need something out of this. Almost stepped away. And then I discovered that the national headquarters was only an hour away. All this whole time, I had no idea.

**Jason Raia:**

You had no idea.

**Lynn Rolf:**

No idea.

**Jason Raia:**

It's over in Kansas City.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yepp. Just, just an hour from my cabin and went over and was like, I saw this, but shouldn't we? And they're like, yeah, we should be, you know, but each level being essentially even though we have governing bylaws, each one's a franchise.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So it just depends on the people that are within those leadership roles to make the best out of what they can.

**Jason Raia:**

And it's a franchise made up of volunteers.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

And, you know, we have that same thing here at Freedoms Foundation. Is the constant, you know, mantra that these are volunteers. They are giving of their own free will to support you and to support the organization and support, in your case, fellow veterans. And they're volunteers. And so the national headquarters supports all of those volunteers. And so at what point did you become part of the national staff?

**Lynn Rolf:**

From the time I first joined to the time I became state commander - six years.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

My year as state commander, I was all, I also took over. We call them conferences around the whole world, four conferences in the VFW. Kansas, believe it or not, belongs to the west.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So essentially all the way from California to Asia and I took over the role of the west, Chairman. And at the time, my predecessor was retiring and I caught word of it. And, my old boss, and he's since retired, called me and he said, hey, I have an opportunity. I was like, I said I've heard this before. And he mentioned to me, I was like, oh, whatever I can do.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So -

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, famous fatal word. Never more fatal words than whatever I can do.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And I knew, I knew what VFW programs were. And to me, that spoke to everything that I believed in, and I, of course, sent my resume, did a couple of interviews, and got hired about nine years ago. And it's almost well, I've pretty much been in the programs of directors just as long as I was in the military now.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Until this day, I'd be proud, of course, it's extremely proud of my service, but what I'm able to do now and the impact and potentially the either the mentoring of everything I went through coming up in the VFW that I can share to, to some of the newer younger members that are coming up now because we're starting to see more Iraq and Afghanistan soldiers now joining. Us as an organization are in the upward climb now.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, I'm not - I'm so happy to hear that.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. We just hit, essentially, we hit where we were last year.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And now we've grown from there. So a lot of positives and great energy are coming through the VFW right now.

**Jason Raia:**

And, and not, not to be macabre, but the reality is we're losing WWII veterans, you know, such a – that that means you've got a significant number of new people coming into the organization for the first time ever because they are not only replacing, but replacing plus those guys that you're losing every day.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. And and and with that, Korean, Vietnam too.

**Jason Raia:**

Yep.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Because it – Vietnam vets have a whole nother set of situations with what they experienced in Vietnam with a lot of the Agent Orange and diseases and things like –

**Jason Raia:**

Jungle warfare. Yeah.

**Lynn Rolf:**

I mean, it is just ravaging through those veterans now, so we, yeah, we essentially have three generations that we're, you know, are losing and then trying to, like, trying to build back up from our generation.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Well, that's I mean, that's great news about the growth. So you're here in Valley Forge because you are with one of your programs. Voice of Democracy, the audio essay contest. Last year, you celebrated 75 years, which is amazing. I remember when I was in high school, I did the VOD, and, I think I, I made it second at the, maybe I got beyond the post, but not not very far. Certainly not to state, but one of the things that the students who go on to become the state winner is there is scholarship from VFW, and then there is the opportunity to come here to Valley Forge to do Spirit of America. So tell us all about the Voice of Democracy as a contest, what it includes, tell us about the scholarship, and tell us why VFW decided to do it all those years ago.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. So as an organization, we award well over \$3,000,000, and it starts at the local level. Young student enters a voice recording based on a theme that's selected every year, and they compete at the local level, of course, they win a smaller scholarship there than the county or district level and then state level. And when they win that, all of the states and then our three departments that are overseas all compete together at our level, national, for a chance to come to D.C. initially, which you spent a week touring and educating them on Capital, but we'll give the national winner \$35,000 and it goes down to the lowest amounts, \$1500 or \$1000. So everyone that wins at the state level gets, at least, some type of scholarship from us.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And then as you stated, in the summer, we have the extreme honor because, you know, a lot of a lot of kids do go to D.C. for school trips and family vacations, but they don't think about Valley Forge or –

**Jason Raia:**

Tou know, Philadelphia.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Really where everything started.

**Jason Raia:**

Yep but we'd say that.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah, so somehow the organization made the right decision way back. And I I think it was in early eighties or so—

**Jason Raia:**

I think that's right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

—decided to team with Freedoms Foundation, because it goes to the question of the scholarship itself, the Voice of Democracy. And you know, you and I have had tons of discussions on republic, and democracy, and First Amendment, and no better place, but to culminate their whole experience than here.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Where the country founded, and built itself, and then teach them a little bit about Valley Forge itself.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

You know, with the George Washington and what we'd —

**Jason Raia:**

Ike Eisenhower called it, Valley Forge: the crucible of democracy.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**

Because that's where the, and, and, of course, the connection of VFW, that's where the military was --

**Lynn Rolf:**

Absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

-- came to be. The rag tag group of volunteers who came together and faced down the red coats, who were at the time the greatest army in the world, happened right after Valley Forge. And it was because of the training and you know, and surviving winter and surviving the illness. And, you know, three thousand soldiers were lost to, you know, illness and weather. But those who, you know, survived, they had been forged. And, and then they go out and they go to Monmouth and they nearly lose, but they don't. They fight them to a draw, and, and it's the last time they almost lose to the British.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

And, so, you know, from the very beginning, the military has played an important role in maintaining our democracy, our republic, you know? And, yes, you and I've had the conversation about is it a democracy? Is it a republic? I know you get questions all the time. Why is it in the voice of the republic? And it's like, you know, we know we all know a republic is a representative democracy. And, yes, we are a republic, based on the ideas of the Roman Republic. And certainly that's Ben Franklin's comment when he comes out of Independence Hall and they say, Mr. Franklin, what kind of government have you given us? And he says a republic if you can keep it. So, yes, we know that. But we also know that a republic is, you know, and democracy was the word we for generations. And certainly when VFW was founded, you know, democracy was the word that we used, it's a general term. And that's how I like to talk, you know, think about it as this is the general term. Republic is the specific term, and, you know, and and it's certainly, not worth, not worth arguing over because if we are all, if we all are believing, believers in freedom, either works.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Absolutely.

**Jason Raia:**

And freedom is the is the key to it.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep. Yeah. And I love those discussions

**Jason Raia:**

Absolutely.

**Lynn Rolf:**

This is exactly what we fought for to have these discussions and, we just talked to kids downstairs about framing an argument versus getting in an argument.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Sometimes you're forced to make changes, you know, the gentleman who plays Mr. Adams is not available to do early morning stuff with us. So we made this change, with Thomas Jefferson and, you know, it's built around the Declaration of Independence and the idea of how do you make an argument? And this idea of how can you disagree without being disagreeable? You know? Like, I because we know people, you know, the people have fundamental beliefs that, that contrast, that are different that, you know, the question is how do you do that? And stick to your core belief, but engage with other people who may have different beliefs. And because that's certainly what the founders were doing. You know, one of the things I loved about the argument between Jefferson and Adams, or when we did it, you know, with Jefferson and Hamilton, is I remember two students walking out one year and going, I never realized how much they hated each other. You know, it's like the founders were not an anomaly. The founders had different ideas and they disagreed vehemently and, and made those arguments and yet look what they accomplished, what they were able to accomplish you know, by setting aside, you know, the, the disagreement and, and finding the places where they did agree and the the the places where they knew, this was what was best for the country, for this new country. And pursue that and worry about the other things later.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

And that meant some cans got kicked down the road, and they still do. You know? But you know, it means that when we can find common ground, there are great things to be accomplished.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Absolutely. If we can do a little bit of something to teach young people how to engage in a way that is respectful, and that's one of those key for us, you know, those key principles to be



respectful of others and the rights and beliefs of others and how we translate that in daily life is really, really important. Tell me, anything, what other programs do you have? I know there's a Patriot's Pen.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. We've got a middle school which mirrors Voice Democracy. It's just a written essay, you know, and it's the same exact process We'll bring to the national winner to D.C. I've got a big troop support program where I do financial assistance. We've got the largest student veteran scholarship for young service members. And then we have a military assistance program where we're able to help units because sometimes, as we know, there's a lot of government entities. They have a very limited budget, and we're able to come in as a local VFW and help them. Especially if they're getting ready to go overseas.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Like, especially now over to Poland and –

**Jason Raia:**

With Ukraine.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. Yeah. That whole interesting dynamic that's happening over there that we're able to at least give him a little thank you first.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Help the family members know that, hey, while your service member's over there, if you need something, you know, call your VFW, we're able to, especially if a family, like, loses a transmission or water heater blows up or something - -

**Jason Raia:**

All those things that just pop up, but now all of a sudden, yeah.

**Lynn Rolf:**

That maybe that person that's left back may not know how to handle or or doesn't know the resources that are out there. At least they know they can get a hold of us. And if we can't help, we at least have a network that can reach out.

**Jason Raia:**

Who knows somebody who can?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. Yeah. So that's a big one. And then, of course, the mental wellness program that we launched seven years ago to reduce the stigma behind mental health conditions. It's very, that was near and dear to my heart based on my experience.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. Let's, I want to pause there because, I mean, this is sort of transitioning us into this, the, you know, what I wanna talk about are the concerns of veterans today. But, mental health, you know, we talk about, post stress, post traumatic stress. We know there is a massive problem with suicide, for returning veterans. Talk about what those difficulties are, what those problems are, and what is being done to help, but also what can people who are listening to this podcast do to help.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So, you know, back when we first crafted the program, we did a deep dive with the VA to look at the notorious 22 or 20 or 18. Sometimes, you know, it fluctuates so much, but we can't get focused on that number. It's just that we know that there's a crisis out there. And it's not just a veteran crisis. I mean, it's our, it's everyone's crisis.

**Jason Raia:**

It's a young people's, it's a young people's –

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. A lot of loneliness.

**Jason Raia:**

But the number, that number, that number that got bandied around a lot was 22 a day. 22 veterans a day were committing suicide.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yepp. And then when we did our deep dive, we saw that 16 of the 22, was based on not being connected with the Veterans Administration for health care.

**Jason Raia:**

So they were just out there on their own?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. They were just sitting in a dark room. No friends. Disconnected from everything. So we, we, we launched this campaign, with our Service Officer Program that can help them get benefits, get them enrolled in health care. Now, and I got it. You know, the perception of the VA is that it's broken, which it, it's not. We, the org, as the VFW, we're their biggest fan because we help create the VA system. But we're also their biggest critic and very, very much holding them accountable. At least get some type of benefit and know the resources that are out there. And not everyone's gonna do it. But we have some great partners, Dr. [Barbara Van Dahlen](#), with, give an hour, as licensed practitioners that donate an hour today to be able to help those vets that aren't willing or they don't trust VA or they buy into some of the hype, or the media sensationalization of the VA. So we have those resources there that can at least get the veteran some type of help. Now what we also really discovered was the socioeconomic stressors is a big one also. So, you do have the mental health piece, but a lot of times the mental health piece comes from they don't feel like they're able to take care of their family anymore or they lost everything through some reason or they're under employed or.... So with our programs from the financial aid management program, we've got our student veterans scholarship, we're able to at least get them back to even and then give them some goals.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So with our connections with Student Veterans of America and other groups, you give them more hope. Something to lift or some, instead of making the fatal decision. And that's our goal as an organization is just to show the veterans that they matter first and foremost.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. And get them connected to other people.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Other, Yeah, other resources, groups. Yeah.

**Jason Raia:**

Well and that was, you know, I'm this goes back to previous generations where, you know, the, that mental health stigma certainly was the rule. You know, you didn't, you know, you didn't ever admit to anything. But I remember my Great-grandfather, sorry, my Great Uncle. My mother's uncle who had served in World War II, like just about everybody else, and, but he was a member of the VFW. And I remember a couple of times getting to go into the Canteen.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

You know, and I and it's still an image burned in my memory but certainly those guys, the best they had was talking with somebody else and probably self-medicating at the Canteen. And what you all are trying to do is something significantly more productive --

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.

**Jason Raia:**

-- for young veterans than just that.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Absolutely. Absolutely. And, but we can't get to any event until we find those vets that are totally disconnected. So everything that we can do in, in with our networks in our community that we should be building with other like-minded entities and then educating the public, so someone might just stumble by a booth or an event and they're like, oh, what's this about? They see it, and they're like, oh, Susie's son --

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

-- is...he's struggling.

**Jason Raia:**

She, she was telling me about how much, maybe this would help.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. So she's able to reach out and say, hey, connect her with her friend and say, hey, this might be a good thing for your son or daughter.

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

And then and then break that barrier that's down and, and then the discussions can happen and figure out the right, what that right fit is to get that veteran or service member.

**Jason Raia:**

So I will start by saying I'm not a veteran. I have not served. I have not been able to ask these questions definitively as an outsider, but, you know, I was raised to believe my father, my grandfather, you know, served. So I would be raised to see military service as an honorable thing. I think most veterans see it as honorable and yet they come home and there is this struggle to reconnect. What's that about?

**Lynn Rolf:**

I, I think being too, too humble and maybe their experience sometimes could be great and wonderful. Sometimes something bad's happened and they've seen stuff and they don't wanna be anywhere associated that could potentially remind them of what happened. Deal with it all the time myself. But I wouldn't have learned if I would not have had this support, support structure I stumbled upon by just happening to go in the VFW. So a lot of that itself is chosen to disconnect. So that way they're not reminded.

**Jason Raia:**

So they're trying to give themselves distance to something that happened, some experience.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yes. More than likely.

**Jason Raia:**

But, often what they're doing is putting distance between themselves and the people around them right now in order to avoid. So, and and then once you're once you're isolated like that, it's

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. It's dark. It's a dark hole.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah. And it's that you can't dig yourself out. It's a --

**Lynn Rolf:**

And that's why anything that any organization does is try to find within our concentric circles of safety that we've got to just grab someone new and who knows who that person knows. And that ripple effect, hopefully, we can find those vets that are out there. And even other people that just need help.

**Jason Raia:**

Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Doesn't have to be a vet. It can be anyone that's that's in a in a crisis that a lot of great tools that that are out there that we just we have to do better as as Americans across our country because of our, I mentioned earlier about COVID. I mean, these young, young youth had a hard time.

**Jason Raia:**

Oh, yeah.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So anything that we can do to help everyone, that's really our, all of our duty.

**Jason Raia:**

I'm glad you said it that way. It's, you know, it just brings me back to another one of our keys, our principles of, of, of civic responsibility is personal accountability, you know, that you take, you know, we don't wait for someone else to come fix the problem. And that's what always has impressed me about organizations like VFW that, you know, this is veterans getting together to serve the best, you know, the, the best interests of veterans. So tell us about, you know, what other concerns certainly, suicide prevention, and, and helping veterans deal with post traumatic stress is really important. What are the other majors concerns that you're hearing from veterans as a national officer at the VFW?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Well, really right now, and I'm looking at the best way to frame this with our, you know, our federal government. Yeah. They did a great thing recently with compromise and came to a deal to fix that situation. But there's a lot of angst about, because there were some things thrown out there about veteran benefits being cut. And is the government really doing enough? And we, of

course, say no. You know, we cannot and I have a favorite saying that I've heard from a lot of the past VFW members, they say hey, they sent us off. We thought they do our government and our country should have the responsibility to make sure since we got broke, anything you do to help us, Please.

**Jason Raia:**

Well, and those kinds of things which do seem pretty straightforward get caught up in the political mind. And that's where I think a lot of us go, can we separate these things out? Yes, there are certain things we wanna fight about better policy and, you know, Republican versus Democrat and all that kinds of. But then there are some other things like what do we do for our veterans? We as a nation went to war. We sent this generation of soldiers and sailors and marines and airmen and and somewhere along the line, they were hurt. They were broken. They were, they received injuries. Don't we owe them to provide them with the best care that we can. And shouldn't that be fairly straightforward? You know? And that's I think that's a fair question for veterans and their families to ask. And we know everything's complicated. We know that there's all kinds of considerations, but, ad it's certainly a consideration or ought to be a consideration when the government decides we're going to send soldiers into a theater. I want us to consider that every time.

**Jason Raia:**

Yep.

**Lynn Rolf**

Whether that's Ukraine or Taiwan or some, you know, other thing that's going on somewhere in the world. What are the consequences for those that we are gonna send into the fight?

**Lynn Rolf:**

And then, you know, our simple things like military retirement, service member gets out, they'll get penalized if they draw a medical pension for their disability. They can't, there's a cap. Sometimes they lose money now because they've already earned their military retirement, but then you throw on the VA compensation. It's like, okay. That's a no brainer. It's like why, you know, they the service member earned twenty years of service—

**Jason Raia:**

It's a job, it's retirement. It has nothing to do —.

**Lynn Rolf:**

I've got an issue that I broke myself and now I'm gonna get penalized. So we're right now, that's that's our one of our top legislative priorities right now is fix the concurrent receipt or the Major Richard Star Act that's going through and that's, that's gonna be a long battle.

**Jason Raia:**

Yeah and dealing with the intricacies of government bureaucracy. is fun for no one. So, least of all, veterans. So, this has been a great conversation. I want to, we end every conversation with a quiz. So I have a quiz for you. So, excluding Washington and Lincoln, who's your favorite president?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Because I've been coming to Freedom's Foundation so much, Jefferson has fascinated me so much.

**Jason Raia:**

He will be happy to hear it.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. And now I've met a few Presidents, you know, through the service and what I've done, but I think I would have really liked to have hung out with Jefferson.

**Jason Raia:**

That's very cool. Let's see. What's one thing you would want every American to learn more about?

**Lynn Rolf:**

Flag protocol.

**Jason Raia:**

Ah, excellent. That's a good point.

**Lynn Rolf:**

That is a daily educational opportunity that I provide every day.

**Jason Raia:**

And it's one of those elements of civic education –

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep.



**Jason Raia:**

– that used to be part of –

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah and we've lost that.

**Jason Raia**

You learned it somewhere. You know, whether you were in scouts or whether you learned it at school or you learned it in some other thing, but you learned it. And now I can't think of where young people would learn it if they're not in scouting. And we've gotta find some other places to do it. What pet peeve annoys you the most? I have a million of these, so I talk about them all the time, but, any particular pet peeves?

**Lynn Rolf:**

When I see military uniforms in movies, they're so jacked up. We cannot get through anything. And it's like, because my drill sergeant that, that I had that worked for me. Just beat it into my head. It's the right way and --

**Jason Raia:**

Right. Right.

**Lynn Rolf:**

So my mind is in it and I do it for the VFW. Anytime there's a military picture and, you know, I'm the guy that looks at it and says, okay. This is wrong, and this is wrong, or this is right. So that's the first thing that popped into my head.

**Jason Raia:**

So this is to all those producers out there. If you're gonna do a military movie, call Lynn Rolf at VFW. He'll make sure you get the uniforms right. That's a great one. Favorite movie.

**Lynn Rolf:**

*Gardens of Stone.*

**Jason Raia:**

Ooo, I don't know that.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yep. it's got a lot of the old guys. Well, James Caan. Darth Vader, um...

**Jason Raia:**

James Earl Jones? No.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Yeah. James Earl Jones. He's the Sergeant Major.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay.

**Lynn Rolf**

But it's all based at Arlington in the old guard.

**Jason Raia:**

Okay. I'm gonna have to check it out. I've been watching a lot of my father's old favorite movies. So you know, including a lot of Clint Eastwood westerns and, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and, *Pale Rider* and, you know, *Cool Hand Luke*. And so, so that'd fit right in with those. So our final question that we ask every guest, it's a simple one, bourbon or scotch.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Bourbon.

**Jason Raia:**

Amen. Lynn, thank you for being such a great guest. I had such a great time chatting with you on the podcast today.

**Lynn Rolf:**

Thanks my friend.

**Jason Raia:**

I wanna thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen. A special shout out to our friend of the pod Bill Franz for his art design on the logo. And special thanks also to long-time FVFF historic interpreter, Bob Gleason, for his contributions to the intro music. And most of all, I want to thank all of our listeners. Please subscribe, follow, rate, and review *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to podcasts and tell your friends. To learn more about Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge and the work that we do in civic education please visit [\\_](#)

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