

Our American Heroes

Think about your favorite superhero. Maybe it's Spider-Man, Iron Man, or Wonder Woman! Why do you admire this particular hero? Is it for their super strength, like Spiderman? Or for their incredible intelligence, like Iron Man? Perhaps it's their unshakeable courage, like Wonder Woman.

Each of these men and women is a superhero because they use their talents for good and to protect the ones they love.

But did you know that in America, we have our own superheroes? America's superheroes include the men and women who serve in our military.

Just like Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Wonder Woman, the men and women in our military are strong, smart, and brave. They dedicate their lives to defending the freedom of each and every American and to keeping each of us safe.

There are six branches of the United States military – the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, the Air Force, and the Space Force.¹ Each branch has an important specialty and skill set, but they all work together to form a strong team. This is similar to how each member of a superhero squad has their own superpower; each hero is remarkable by themselves, but they are much stronger when they work together.

There are also many Special Operations units within our military, which are highly specialized elite forces. You may have heard of some of these! Some of the more commonly mentioned units are the Army Rangers, the Green Berets, the Navy SEALs, the Marine Raiders, or the Air Force's Pararescue specialists (PJs). However, there are many units that make up our Special Operations forces.

Our military men and women have had an important responsibility and duty to the American people for more than 200 years. Without our military, America would not exist – in fact, it would never have even been born.

The Army is the oldest branch of the military – it was established before the Declaration of Independence was signed! The members of the Army are called soldiers. The Army fights on land, across all types of terrain – from snow-covered mountains and dense forests to blistering hot deserts and endless valleys. Today, the Army is the largest branch of the military.²



The Army was established on June 14, 1775, by the Second Continental Congress to defend the 13 colonies from the British. Known at the time as the Continental Army, George Washington was unanimously selected as the Commander-in-Chief.

Later that year, in the fall of 1775, the Continental Navy was established.⁴ The Navy fights on oceans that are far away and is in charge of all of the big warships. Today, some Navy ships, called aircraft carriers, are so big that there are thousands of sailors working aboard, with planes that take off and land on them! The men and women in the Navy are called sailors.⁵

George Washington was one of the strongest supporters of starting up a navy in the colonies. At the time, Britain had the strongest navy in the world. As Washington wrote, "It follows then as certain as that night succeeds the day, that without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive, and with it, everything honorable and glorious."⁶

Washington knew that a navy was critical for the success of the colonies in a war against Britain. The Navy would be important to make sure that American ships – filled with goods – could make it to their destination to be sold. The Navy would also make it harder for British ships – filled with supplies – to reach the British army in the colonies.

The third branch, the Marine Corps, was established by the Second Continental Congress on November 10, 1775.⁷ The Marine Corps is an amphibious force – meaning they operate on land and sea (like frogs and other amphibians you learn about in science class). They help out the other branches of the military with their missions and are called Marines.

After the American victory in the Revolutionary War, the Navy and the Marine Corps dissolved. After all, paying for these forces was expensive, and Britain no longer seemed to be a problem.

However, George Washington knew that with all of the goods being transported along the American coastline, America would need to make sure that the law was followed. So, to enforce laws and prevent people from sneaking goods in and out of the country (which is called smuggling), George Washington established the Revenue Cutter Service in 1790.

Later (in 1915), the Revenue Cutter Service became the Coast Guard, which has a particularly unique job. You can think of the Coast Guard as the police and guardian angels of the sea who have the important job of rescuing and performing life-saving missions for people who need help.⁸ The Coast Guard service members are nicknamed coasties.⁹

But even with the Coast Guard protecting America's waters, American ships were getting attacked by pirates as they sailed across the seas. Our newly independent nation realized that the protection of Americans across the oceans of the world was needed.

The Navy was reestablished by Congress in 1794 to fight off these pirates, and as the Navy expanded, the Marine Corps was reestablished just a few years later in 1798.^{10 11}

Since the establishment of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, soldiers and sailors bravely defended America in the earliest challenges to our freedom and the Constitution.

During the War of 1812, they successfully defeated the British (again!) and during the Civil War from 1861-1865, ensured victory for the Union.

In the early 1900s, following the Wright Brothers' first flight, the American military took to the sky and got its first pilots. At the time, these airmen were a part of the Army.

During World War II, the size of America's air forces dramatically increased. The technology of airplanes had gotten much better by the time that the war began (1939), and a significant portion of the war was fought from the air.

Throughout World War II, the air forces were expanded and reorganized, but it wasn't until after the war ended that the Air Force was established as its own branch of the military in 1947.¹² The Air Force is responsible for all of the missions and operations that take place in the sky, and its service members are called Airmen.¹³

As you can see, throughout history, the American military has developed, changed, and adapted to meet the challenges our nation faces.

As humans continue to explore what lies beyond planet Earth and develop new technology that makes it possible to travel to the stars, the United States established the sixth and newest branch of the military in 2019 – the Space Force. Service members in the Space Force are called guardians.

Did you know that satellites that are floating up above Earth make the maps on your cell phone work and give you information about the weather? Keeping space safe and open for everyone is important to make sure the systems that power these daily gadgets work. The Space Force protects these systems and defends American interests on Earth and beyond from space.¹⁴

No matter what challenge, threat, or disaster the United States has faced, the brave men and women of our military have answered the call to service and stood on the frontlines defending our freedom.

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But this is only possible because of the individual heroes who make up our armed forces and how seriously they take their duties and responsibilities.

The men and women of our military are a team, and each branch (with the exception of the Navy) has its own official motto – like a cheer for a sports team – that guides, encourages, and bonds them together.

The Army's motto, "This We'll Defend," reflects its commitment to protecting the American people, our freedom, and our homeland.

Although the Navy doesn't have an official motto, some say that "Not self, but country" (Non sibi sed patriae) is its unofficial motto. This phrase emphasizes the sacrifices that each sailor makes and is a reminder that they serve not for personal glory, but for America.

The Marine Corps motto, "Always Faithful" (Semper Fidelis), is a way of life that puts loyalty to one's fellow Marines and to our country above all else.

"Aim High...Fly-Fight-Win" is the motto of the Air Force. It was voted on by the airmen and is a reminder to push the boundaries of what's possible and to always improve.

The Coast Guard's motto, "Always Ready" (Semper Paratus), reflects the branch's constant readiness – 365 days per year – to travel across rough ocean waters, or through challenging storms for any mission or rescue that may arise.

"Always Above" (Semper Supra) was chosen as the motto for the Space Force. Just as space is never-ending, so too is the force's commitment to defending America in space, the pursuit of excellence, and the wonder of what lies beyond.¹⁵

The men and women in our U.S. military embody the values of bravery and courage that America is built upon. So, remember to take time to thank our American heroes. Without them, the freedom, safety, and success we enjoy in America would not be possible.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.usa.gov/join-military>
2. <https://www.usa.gov/join-military>
3. <https://www.goarmy.com/about/what-is-the-army/history.html>
4. <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/heritage/origins-of-the-navy/birth-of-the-us-navy.html>
5. <https://www.usa.gov/join-military>
6. <https://www.history.com/news/7-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-u-s-navy>
7. <https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/Brief-Histories/Brief-History-of-the-United-States-Marine-Corps/>
8. <https://www.gocoastguard.com/about-the-coast-guard/learn-the-history>
9. <https://www.usa.gov/join-military>
10. <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/heritage/origins-of-the-navy/birth-of-the-us-navy.html>
11. <https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/Brief-Histories/Brief-History-of-the-United-States-Marine-Corps/>
12. <https://www.afhra.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/433914/the-birth-of-the-united-states-air-force/#:~:text=The%20National%20Security%20Act%20of,the%20Chief%20of%20Staff%2C%20USAF>
13. <https://www.usa.gov/join-military>
14. <https://www.spaceforce.mil/About-Us/About-Space-Force/History/>
15. <https://www.uso.org/stories/2990-what-are-the-mottos-of-the-6-branches-of-the-u-s-military>