

# Casey Pippen hikes to promote pride in America

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



## Take a hike

For more information about Officer Casey Pippen's organization "American Flag Bearers" and ways to get involved, search "American Flag Bearers, 1st AFB HQ, Monticello, AR" on Facebook. Pippen explains on the page some of the requirements for joining the group:

"The American Flag Bearers welcomes all patriots to join its ranks. We only have one class of membership. In order to become an 'honor guard' in an AFB company you must be:

- "A loyal American
- "A U.S. citizen
- "Open supporter of the entire U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights ...
- "Complete a flag hike of no less than five miles with a 35-pound ruck/pack and bearing the U.S. flag."

When Casey Pippen carries the American flag, he's carrying more than a symbol — he's carrying something that is meant to unite and stir patriotism in the hearts of those who see it, he said.

"We're letting people know what matters to us is being Americans." Casey Pippen

So, he hoists it high as he walks. About once a month, Pippen, a Monticello police officer and member of St. Mark Church, hikes about eight or so miles with a handful of fellow law enforcement officials and first responders along Highway 425 carrying the American flag, as part of his organization "American Flag Bearers."

"We're not out there with a flag that is about division or that is interpreted as being about division — we're out there with a flag that unifies," Pippen, 38, said. "I think that's important because (people) need to see police officers as what the majority of us are — as service people ready to help."

In the spring, Casey Pippen and fellow officer Chris Austin went on their first hike in preparation for a GORUCK event in Little Rock, which are military-style hikes that require participants to carry packs and a team to carry an American flag. Pippen, who hiked all night in the GORUCK Tough challenge Oct. 9, liked that they carried the American flag.

"I said, 'You know that's a good idea,'" Pippen said, adding the reaction to walking down the side of the road with the American flag was shocking. "It was immediate; it was honk, wave, honk, person stopped, people getting out, took pictures ... It was amazing, I was crying."

Since then, the group tries to hike once a month and has another chapter in Crossett.

"I'm proud of it, it means a lot," said Matthew Savage, a nurse who started the Crossett chapter. "When Casey told me about it I said, 'I'm in, let's go.'"

Pippen is quick to point out that these hikes are not to promote a militia mentality and they are not "right-wingers, they're not left wingers, they're not anti-this person or anti-that."

"That flag and the hikes to us are almost like a proclamation of what we are trying to do on the street. We're letting people know what matters to us is being Americans," he said.

While the country continues to grapple with the reality of police brutality, Pippen said he wants to change the conversation using the hikes.

"When they need help, don't tell your kids they have to be afraid of me. And I'm sorry if that has been your experience in the past, and it has been people's experience in the past," Pippen said, adding that Monticello Police Department is not tolerant of unethical behavior. "I am the first person to tell you if I see a bad cop, then there's no tolerance for that stuff."

His need for a code of honor goes back to his eight years in the U.S. Marine Corps and then two years as a contractor for the State Department, mostly stationed in Iraq.

Pippen said he did not have a steady faith life growing up and years of seeing the worst in people during war took its toll. However, in his darkest time when his sense of spirituality was gone, he got finally got a straight answer from an Anglican priest about the difference in the Bible between murder and killing someone when it came to his work as a Marine sniper.

The priest asked if he were to play cards with someone and win against them, did he steal their money?

"No, I didn't steal it. He said, 'Why not?' Because I put my chips on the table and they put their chips on the table they could have taken mine, I could have taken theirs. I didn't steal it, it's not like I went to their room and took it out," Pippen said. "He said, 'My personal belief is that almost every major sin derives from theft. When you go onto the battlefield, have you ever taken the life of someone that wasn't on the battlefield for the purpose of taking life ... for the purpose of engaging you, for the purpose of killing you, have you ever taken someone's life that you can honestly in your mind say was innocent, had no intention of being a warrior?' No,

I have not. 'So in your belief in yourself have you ever stolen a life?' I said no, I have never stolen a life in that context."

It was the first time that Pippen said he felt like "a guardian angel."

"Before the mentality was you're the reaper, the skull, all the things associated with being a sniper that mentally make you feel like you're an angel of death or evil," he said. "It was the first time I associated what I was doing with something noble."

Though life was not perfect after he left the military, everything turned around when he joined the Catholic Church in 2012. He landed a job at the Monticello Police Department and became a coach for his 5-year-old son Connor's soccer team.

"Everything about the sacraments, everything about the history of the Church — to this day, I haven't found one thing that doesn't make sense to me. And when I got back from Iraq, I needed things that made sense because I had seen some of the worst things that didn't make sense," Pippen said. "This pope walked into America and ... he gave the truth that people aren't hearing anymore. You hear all this bad stuff, but it's about what unifies us as people."

For those who want to start a hiking chapter associated with American Flag Bearers, Pippen said to look at its Facebook page (see sidebar) and understand the principles and that discrimination based on race, religion or sexual preference is not tolerated. He added that he and others would gladly come participate in a chapter's first hike.

"I hope their takeaway would be that the things that used to be, that we (the United States) aspired to be is what we should still aspire to be," Pippen said. "I hope that whenever they see us walking with the flag, they look at all of us and say whatever they do, they do with honor."