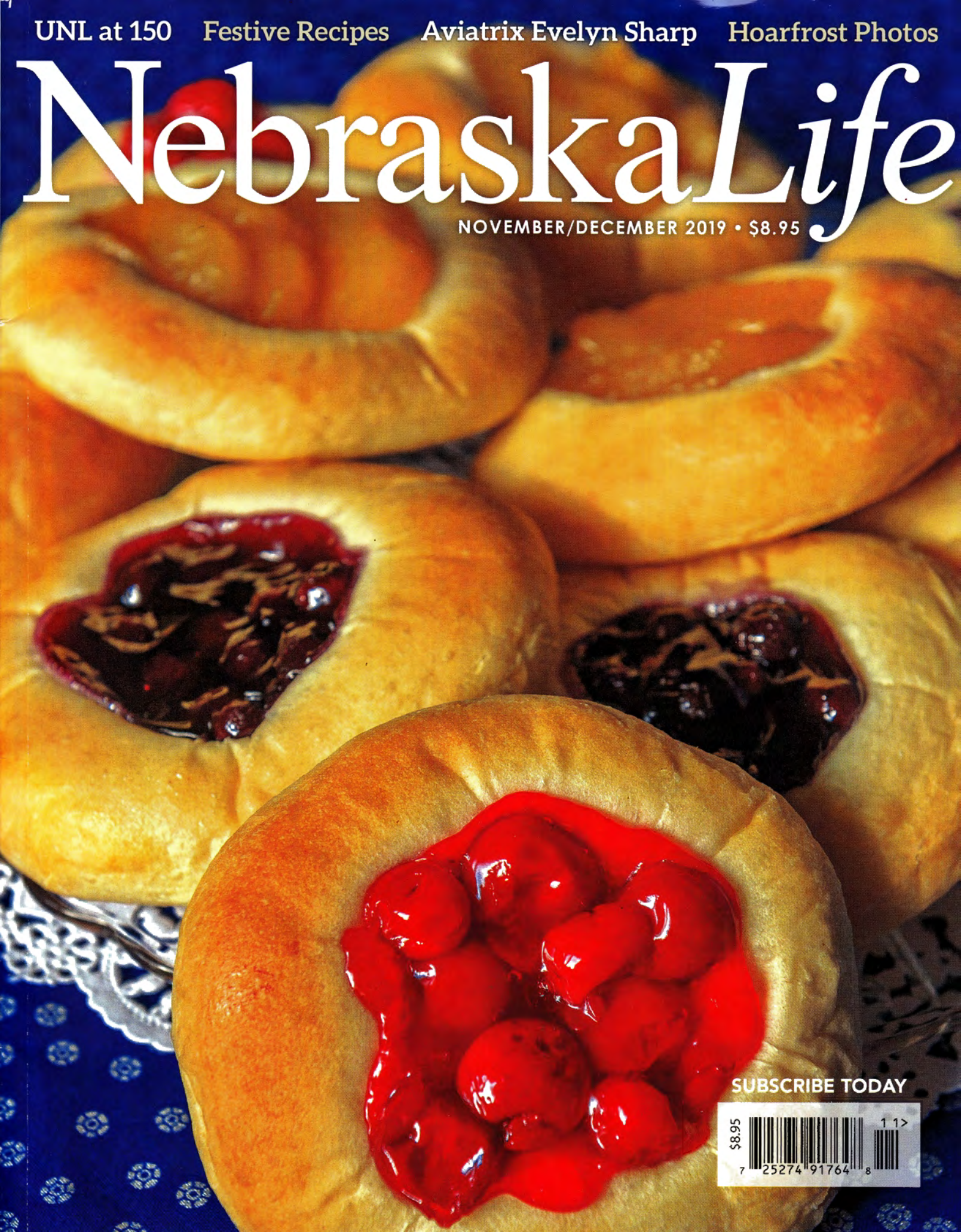


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EXTRAORDINARY WINGS

Teenage Nebraska aviatrix
captured the hearts of America

STORY BY SHERYL SCHMECKPEPER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN J. BARTELS

**EVELYN SHARP FIELD (ODX)
ELEVATION 2070.0
ORD, NEBRASKA**

Thousands attended when Ord Municipal Airport was renamed for local aviatrix Evelyn Sharp in 1948. Valley County aviator Josh Zangger readies his Cessna 210 for take off from Evelyn Sharp Field.





THE CROWD **LOOKED** on with

anticipation as the Curtiss Robin airplane taxied across the picked corn field near Lexington. As much as for show as necessity, Evelyn Sharp of Ord – a month shy of her twentieth birthday – turned the airplane into the wind and throttled up her barnstorming machine. The engine, which had been running poorly, roared to life, and although the passengers paid to take the ride of their lives that day, none of them, including their teenaged pilot, expected what happened next.

A soft spot slowed the accelerating airplane, and the breeze that would have provided lift, died. Without enough speed to take off, and with the plane approaching an irrigation ditch, Sharp nudged her machine skyward only briefly before sinking and dragging through a weedy field to a rough stop. The incident on Aug. 31, 1939 left Sharp's airplane slightly damaged but everyone walked away. Unfortunately, a close call less than five years later would ultimately prove too close.

At a time when men such as Charles Lindbergh, Orville and Wilbur Wright, and Nebraska's Savidge brothers were aviation royalty, women – if they left the ground at all – were typically in the passenger seat. With big dreams supported by fellow Ord residents, Evelyn Sharp took to the sky to become known as the "World's Youngest Aviatrix." When her flying skills were needed during World War II, Sharp made the ultimate sacrifice and tragically soared into history.

Evelyn Sharp lived a hard-scrabble life near the Sandhills in Ord. Her parents' cafe and boarding house failed during the Great Depression, and when her father, John Sharp, plead guilty to bootlegging, the \$10 fine he paid was money the family could not afford to lose.

Although the nation was suffering economically, people still yearned for entertainment, and few entertainers offered more thrills than barnstormers, those aerial acrobats who defied death each time they climbed into the cockpit. After seeing a Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" biplane overhead at age 3, Evelyn declared that she wanted to "drive an airplane." When the opportunity presented itself when Sharp

was a teenager, Ord residents became her cheering section. They even helped her buy an airplane.

Before ever leaving the ground, she rode over it on her horse, Chalky. Hitching the animal to a cart, she sold ice cream from her father's Home Ice Cream Factory in downtown Ord's former Ravenna Creamery. A nickel bought two scoops. After finishing her ice cream route, Sharp, her friends and the horse would frolic in the North Loup River where she was a lifeguard. Sharp participated in the Ord High School glee club, band and thespian group, and the local Campfire Girls troop. Sharp's classmates named her "best girl athlete."

While Sharp was loving life, the Depression was gnawing away at Nebraska and the United States. Farmers lost livelihoods, businesses failed, and rain clouds dissipated into dry air. Her desire to fly never wavered.

Evelyn's lofty dream became reality when a down-on-his-luck pilot named Jack Jefford made John Sharp an offer. Jefford had flown into Ord hoping to sell flying lessons, but it was a luxury



Valley County Museum

Sharp was a member of both the Women's Auxillary Ferrying Service and the Women Airforce Service Pilots during WWII.



The community of Ord remembers Sharp in many ways. Northwest of Ord near the entrance to Evelyn Sharp Field as small airplanes pass overhead, fans of the famous flier visit this marker dedicated in 1973.

few could afford. Faced with an overdue bill at Sharp's cafe and boarding house, Jefford offered to give Evelyn flying lessons as payment. John Sharp agreed, and his 15-year-old daughter first took to the skies from the Gregory farm, 6 miles north of Ord, on Feb. 4, 1935.

The following spring, she flew solo over the frozen North Loup River Valley. The private flying license she earned five months later allowed her to fly passengers, the first of whom was her mother, Mary. Evelyn's dog, Scottie, often rode along.

Evelyn's aerial antics caught the attention of admirers who read about the young aviator in newspapers. She received letters from fans nationwide – some of them young men who sent poetry or requested photographs – but also young girls who looked up to the pioneering female pilot. *The Ord Quiz* newspaper reported, "Ordites are ... watching, waiting and admiring, knowing that here is a little girl who really is going places."

She piloted the first airplane to land at Grand Island's new Arrasmith Field where she autographed postcards bearing her photo. Unfortunately, notoriety doesn't buy airplanes. By the time Sharp graduated from high school in 1937, Jefford had

flown the coop. Luckily for Sharp, local optometrist Glen Auble recognized her abilities and had a vision of her potential promotional appeal.

Already known widely as "Sharpie," if Auble could persuade fellow Ord businessmen to take her under their wing by providing a down payment on an airplane, the attractive and popular girl with an enthusiastic following could put Ord on the map. Auble accomplished his mission, and Sharp obtained a Taylor Cub, a simple, affordable aircraft. She spent the next two weeks flying 80 passengers including businessmen, classmates and, of course, Scottie.

Grateful for the community support, Sharp named her airplane "The Ord." In a presentation to the Ord Rotary Club, she said she hoped to bring fame to the city by her aviation achievements. She needed a transport license before she could charge for rides and repay her investors. With Jefford gone, Sharp failed her test. Unable to make the payments on the airplane, it had to be returned.

Ord residents came to the rescue again by hosting a benefit dance. A 14-piece band performed, a stage show play entertained, and the Auble Brothers Jewelry

Store provided an expensive ring as a door prize. Sharp greeted every guest.

Proceeds provided tuition to Lincoln Airplane and Flying School, the same Nebraska institution where aviator Charles Lindbergh learned to fly. In 1938, Sharp obtained her transport license and a Curtiss Robin OX-5 which she used to barnstorm around Nebraska. That summer she flew up to 90 passengers a day.

Her popularity soared, too. The determined and engaging girl-pilot received telegrams and letters from celebrities such as Clark Gable and Eleanor Roosevelt. Fan letters piled up at the Ord Post Office, which is fitting considering that red, white and blue envelopes showing Sharp's face and declaring "FIRST AIR MAIL FLIGHT, Ord, Nebraska, carried by Evelyn Sharp, World's Youngest Aviatix," remain cherished possessions of Valley County families today.

In July 1938, the young flier met a woman her mother called Aunt Elsie. She had never heard of the woman, but something about her seemed familiar, and they stayed in touch.

Evelyn came into the world in October 1919, born to a 27-year-old woman in Melstone, Montana with a soft smile and



abundant brown hair. The woman was not Mary Sharp. When her husband abandoned his responsibilities, the woman worked as a housekeeper until she gave birth. She had little education and even less means to raise a child.

John and Mary Sharp may not have had the means either, but they had the desire. On Dec. 22, 1919, Lois Genevieve Crouse became Evelyn Genevieve Sharp.

The couple tried business ventures in Montana before moving to Nebraska, first to Hastings, then a ranch near Ericson, and eventually Ord.

"Everybody gravitated toward Evelyn because she had so much personality," said Dorothy Andreesen, caretaker of the Evelyn Sharp exhibit at Valley County Museum in Ord. "I think every young man who was ever nearby fell in love with her."

Newspapers had a heyday when Sharp became a flight instructor with the Civilian Pilot Training Program in South Dakota in June 1940. Because she was still a minor, her father had to sign the employment contract. Headlines read, "AGAIN YOUNGEST," "Evelyn Sharp is believed to be the youngest woman flying instructor in the country," "pretty, 20-year-old, brown eyes, 5 feet 4," and "Civilian pilot



Vintage air mail envelopes, historic photos and a propeller from one of Sharp's airplanes are part of the collection that Dorothy Andreesen oversees at the Valley County Museum in Ord. Center image, retired teacher Rich Cecetka and local Girl Scouts maintain Sharp's grave.

WHERE TO SEE **SHARPIE** IN ORD

Growing up in Ord left a lasting impact on Evelyn Sharp. The community has never forgotten her. Here's a list of where to learn more about the fearless female flier in the town she called home no matter where she was soaring.

Valley County Museum

Near the northwest corner of the town square where Sharp sold ice cream as a child, this museum has a section devoted to Ord's celebrity aviatrix. Photos, autographed postcards and a propeller from one of her airplanes are highlights of the collection. 117 S. 16th St. Call (308) 730-2165 or (308) 728-3433 or to make an appointment.

Evelyn Sharp Field

In 1948, Sharp Field was dedicated at Ord Municipal Airport. Thousands of people attended the event, but the site – with the exception of passing traffic and an occasional takeoff or landing – is a peaceful place of remembrance today. A three-blade propeller from a P-38 "Lightning" marks the location.

The terminal displays Sharp memorabilia, and a segment of Nebraska Highway 11 near the airport has been designated as Evelyn Sharp Road. Two miles northwest of Ord. (308) 728-3913.

Nebraska Historical Marker

Dedicated in 1973, this marker describing Sharp's accomplishments and tragic death keeps her memory alive for future generations. Northwest of Ord near the entrance to Evelyn Sharp Field. (308) 728-3913.

Evelyn's Grave

Airplanes arriving to and leaving from Evelyn Sharp Field often fly over Sharp's grave in Ord Cemetery. A bronze plate dedicated to her government service appears next to her headstone. Look for a metal sculpture shaped like an airplane and reading "SHARP" in the north section of the cemetery. East of Nebraska Highway 11, 1 mile north of Ord Golf Club.



Nebraska State Historical Society (both)

After Ord businessmen helped her buy an airplane, the girl known as Sharpie sold rides to pay them back. She flew the first air mail delivery into the community, and her dog, Scottie, was a frequent flyer in her airplane named "The Ord."

From her headquarters at Long Beach Army Air Base in California, Sharp delivered military aircraft to installations across the United States. She became certified to fly North American Aviation's P-51 "Mustang" in June 1943.

"Wowie, can you imagine me in a pursuit plane, and the fastest one in the world at that," Sharp wrote to a friend. While working toward her instrument card, which would allow her to fly at night and during inclement weather, Sharpie successfully piloted a Douglas C-47 transport plane with the cockpit windows completely taped over.

IN LATE MARCH 1944, Sharp, by then a WASP squadron commander, received orders to fly a Lockheed P-38 "Lightning" fighter from California to New Jersey. Encountering inclement conditions near New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, Sharpie landed. Though she had earned her instrument rating, military regulations required her to land when the weather turned bad. No such restrictions existed for male pilots.

She spent the unscheduled layover on April 2, 1944 catching up on letter writing to friends in Ord and looking forward to her next assignment. Upon her return from New Jersey, Sharp was scheduled to fly a bomber into Great Falls, Montana where she planned to see her biological father, Orla Crouse, for the first time. Father and daughter would never meet.

Lift-off the following morning did not go as planned. Like that close call in Nebraska years earlier, there was not enough power to properly take off, and not enough

training is likely to be more popular at Mitchell ... than most other places."

While there she taught more than 350 men to fly. Most of them would use those skills while serving during World War II.

Sharp was training pilots on Dec. 7, 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Earlier that year, when asked by the *Bakersfield Californian* newspaper if she'd volunteer if war broke out, the patriotic Nebraskan said, "Certainly! I'll do everything I can."

She suited-up for the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, an elite group of female aviators who ferried military airplanes from manufacturing plants to shipping points. In 1943 the group became part of the Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASP.

During a stop in New York City in January 1943, Sharp met with Aunt Elsie, who told a story about a young woman, abandoned by her husband, who gave up her baby because she didn't have the means to care for it.

The woman was Elsie Crouse; the baby was Evelyn.

In a letter to Crouse days later, Sharp wrote, "I always thought I was adopted but had never found out for sure. I resemble no one in our family, and I could also never get mother to say anything about my birth. So you see, I really wasn't surprised. What surprised me was who my real mother was."

Evelyn supposedly never talked to John and Mary Sharp about her parentage, but she must have wondered about her biological father.

Valley County Museum



Michael Bupp, The Sentinel

Sharp died when her plane crashed in Pennsylvania in 1944. Seventy-four years later, landowner David Peiffer honored Sharp by placing this granite marker near the crash site.

runway to abort. A farmer who heard the malfunctioning airplane stepped outside and saw smoke billowing from the plane's left engine. Other witnesses reported Sharp trying to turn the machine when it crashed on a grassy knoll near the edge of a ravine. A pilot in the air reported seeing Evelyn waving from near the wreckage, but when the farmer arrived moments later, all he could do was carry her lifeless body away from the burning airplane. At 24, Ord's famous aviatrix was dead.

John and Mary Sharp, and Aunt Elsie, met the train carrying their daughter back to the Nebraska valley where she first took to the skies. Hundreds of people attended her funeral at Ord Cemetery. The list of items transported with her body, and that Mary Sharp signed for, included a diamond ring.

Was Sharp engaged at the time of her death? The secret of who gifted the ring to Evelyn died with her.

Decades later, David Peiffer – the new owner of the land where Sharp perished – heard a snippet of her tragic tale and wanted to know more. After finding the book *Sharpie: The Life Story of Evelyn Sharp, Nebraska's Aviatrix*, he tracked down the author, Lincoln writer and pilot Diane Bartels.

When Peiffer told Bartels that he wanted to erect a monument to Sharp, Bartels provided the wording for the plaque and solicited donors for the project. "Mr. Peiffer didn't know much about

Evelyn Sharp, but he wanted to make sure she wasn't forgotten," Bartels said.

In 2018, nearly three quarters of a century after Sharp's death, the new memorial to the aviatrix was dedicated in the Pennsylvania field where her life ended. Propeller blades from a P-38 point to the sky in honor of the courageous Nebraska woman who flew for town and country.

Back in Ord, Sharp's memory lives on thanks to people like Andreesen, who hopes the community will revive its annual Evelyn Sharp Days celebration; and former elementary school teacher Rich Cecetka. During his 43-year teaching career, Cecetka shared Sharp's story with students, read her biography in his classes, and took sixth graders to decorate her grave. Although retired from teaching, Cecetka still maintains the gravesite, and organizes an observance on Sharp's birthday.

Records indicate Sharp's birthdate as Oct. 20, 1919. She grew up believing she was born on Oct. 1 of that year, and that is the date on her headstone. A bronze plate commemorates Sharp's government service, an American flag waves.

"When it comes to our heroes, it's been said that we shouldn't be sad that they died but be thankful that they lived," Cecetka said. "Heroes are only gone when they are forgotten. I never knew Evelyn Sharp, but I'll never forget her. I hope Ord and Nebraska never do either." ♡



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