

Altoona Mirror

Local couple write country song about military life

Monday Spotlight: 'The One They Call' will be available on Spotify Feb. 13



U.S. Army veteran Matthew Chapman and his wife, Debbi, stand together in front of Matthew's military memorabilia, reflecting on their song lyrics in "The One They Call," which will be released on Spotify Feb. 13. Mirror photo by Colette Costlow

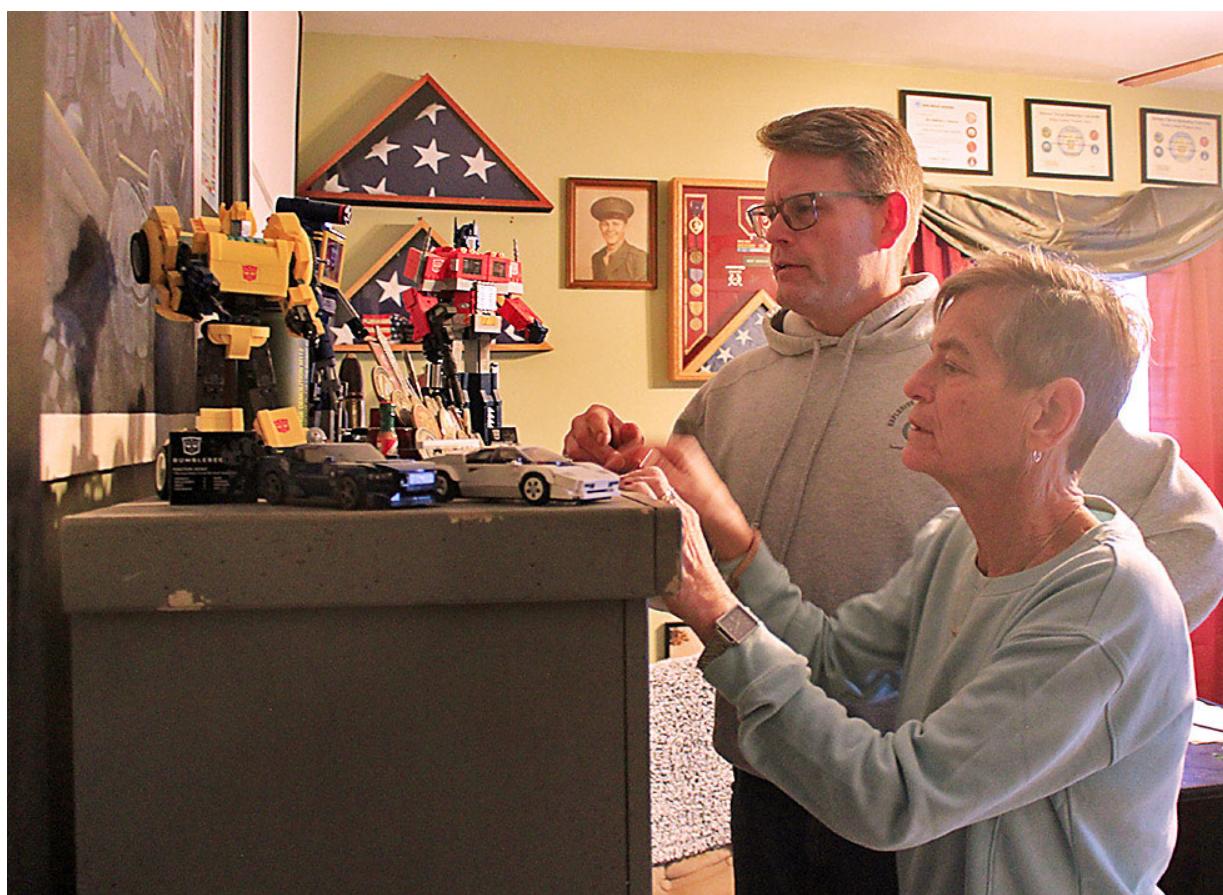
During a December 2014 SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat in Boulder Crest, Virginia, Army veteran Matthew Chapman and his wife, Debbi, sat down with country singer-songwriter Radney Foster to create a melody about their military marriage.

Foster seamlessly documented their unique military story into a song, word for word, according to Matthew, 50, and Debbi, 70.

Unbeknownst to the Chapmans, their song, “The One They Call,” would be covered 10 years later by Foster and country artist Kelly Willis as part of SongwritingWith:Soldiers’ mission-driven music program.

Since 2012, the nonprofit SongwritingWith:Soldiers has held weekend retreats for veterans to share their experiences while writing songs with help from professional songwriters.

Their song will be available on Feb. 13 through Spotify, where they will be listed as official songwriters. It was also positively reviewed by Nashville publication MusicRow, alongside songs written by country artists Luke Combs and Dolly Parton.



Altoona couple Matthew and Debbi Chapman look at army medals — among other decorative objects — placed on a dresser in their home office. Mirror photo by Colette Costlow

“This is nothing that we ever thought would happen,” Debbi said as their story is now being told on a larger scale than imagined.

Reaching out

Matthew and Debbi “fell in love the old-fashioned way — online,” Foster said, tongue-in-cheek during a “Story Behind the Song” interview with SongwritingWith:Soldiers.

Debbi of Altoona wasn’t looking for a serious romantic relationship in 2000. With her registered nursing license from Altoona Hospital, she was a recently divorced mother of four who wanted a fresh start in North Carolina.

But socializing through online chatrooms was where she met explosive ordnance disposal technician Matthew Chapman from Crofton, Maryland, who at the time, was stationed in Germany.



“The One They Call” cover photo will accompany Matthew and Debbi’s song, which is set to debut on Feb. 13 on Spotify. Courtesy photo

Something clicked and the long-distance pair spoke every day for the next 10 months, using spotty internet or satellite phones to keep in touch.

alone, to which he responded, “If you want me to come over, I’ll come over,” Debbi said. Their plan fell through when the military extended his training in Africa, so they decided to meet in person on Thanksgiving break instead.

Debbi waited for Matthew at the Pittsburgh airport with a bouquet of yellow roses, remembering that Matthew said he had never received flowers before. Getting off the plane, Matthew picked Debbi up and spun her around, “and this little old lady standing next to us said, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s so cute,’ ” Debbi said.

Matthew eventually asked Debbi to marry him twice, but she rejected him both times because of their 20-year age difference.

“None of this looks right on paper,” Debbi said, reciting the opening line from “The One They Call.”



Matthew Chapman looks at the boots he wore during the Iraq invasion, noticing the worn-down tread and dog tag stuck between the laces. Mirror photo by Colette Costlow

Debbi’s response changed in 2001 when two planes struck the World Trade Center in New York City, and Matthew’s unit was going to be deployed.

Watching and waiting

Debbi wanted to be the person the military called if something went awry during Matthew’s deployment, so she wrote him an ambiguous letter instructing him to meet her at the Fayetteville courthouse in North Carolina.

jeans and a sweater on a Friday, and by Tuesday, Matthew packed his bags to follow the Third Infantry Division to Baghdad, Iraq.

She didn't hear from him for an entire month.

Matthew's group carried a satellite phone to inform the National Ground Intelligence Center if they noticed chemical weapons or mutations, he said, but they were also able to use it to contact loved ones for 15 minutes a month.

"So every time he would call me, I would always say 'Everything's good here, hon. Don't worry about anything, I love you,'" Debbi said, in case their conversation would be cut short before saying goodbye.

There was a lot of uncertainty surrounding Matthew's well-being at this time because they were never sure of his future deployment status or if he'd be in the middle of an attack, Debbi's second-eldest child, Charlotte Vandevander, 45, said.

That uncertainty also weighed on Debbi's mental health as well.

"They tell spouses, 'Don't tell them (soldiers) if something bad happens because they have to be mission-ready,'" she said, understanding that she couldn't lean on her husband to express her anxiety over his well-being.

Matthew was attracted to Debbi's inner strength, he said, "because I knew I could focus on what I had to do because she could handle things."

After each deployment, Matthew changed a little too, Vandevander said, noticing how new, heavy experiences with the military weighed on him.

Being apart for months at a time throughout their marriage, Vandevander said she was excited when her mother and stepfather participated in the SongwritingWith:Soldiers retreat in 2014, as they would get a chance to reconnect again.

Opening up

Matthew and Debbi were among five other military couples at the songwriting retreat, unsure of what to expect during their time in Boulder Crest.

Sitting down on a couch in the music studio with Foster, the couple began to talk about their shared experience, to which Foster would spin lines and melodies for their potential song.

"We would say something, he'd start playing and there's a lyric," Matthew said.

started writing the song and put everything in the song that I had said,” she said.

“I know when you get on that plane / My heart’s gonna go insane” was another lyric pulled straight from their love story, reflecting on times when Debbi had to drop Matthew off at an airport before a deployment.

Two hours felt like two minutes when writing their song in the studio with Foster, she said.

The songwriting process became therapeutic, Matthew said, recalling that Foster turned their past conflicts into a compelling melody.

“And for them to give us a safe place to voice how we’re feeling” was healing for Debbi after keeping her anxiety locked away from Matthew for years.

After the four-day retreat ended, they quickly filed away their experiences. Matthew was eventually discharged from the army in 2017, and they moved to Altoona in 2020.

They began receiving emails again from SongwritingWith:Soldiers in December 2025, informing the couple that “The One They Call” would be recorded by country singers. Then came a flow of interview requests, pictures and press releases, to which the Chapmans remained awestruck.

They couldn’t believe that their song was being revisited 10 years later, Vandevander said, mentioning that they seemed excited about the opportunity over Christmas dinner.

Listening along

While their song begins to take off, Debbi said, “I kept thinking, ‘It’s just us, we’re just plain people.’”

She said this experience won’t feel real until they hear Foster and Willis perform their song for the first time for a live audience on Feb. 21 at City Winery in Nashville, Tennessee.

Matthew and Debbi plan on being audience members.

Vandevander thinks the trip will be fun for the two, as they will have an unforgettable experience together.

“Hopefully it’ll be a little bit healing in a way to hear the song and everything that came out of it,” she said.

Being considered songwriters is “not us,” Debbi said tongue-in-cheek, still amazed by their song that is set to debut on Spotify.

marriage story during wartime.

Military deployments can be terrifying because the family doesn't know where their loved one is or if they were killed in action, Debbi said.

"It's interesting to think that the people who hear this song who don't have that experience of being in the military can step back and go, 'that's what that's like,'" Matthew said.

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