

By DAVE GHOSE  
+ Photos by ROB HARDIN

## Michael Ferriter

President and CEO

National Veterans Memorial and Museum

**IN POSITION:** Since June 2018

**PREVIOUS:** President and CEO, The Ferriter Group; various U.S. Army roles, including commanding general, Installation Management Command; commanding general, Maneuver Center of Excellence in Fort Benning, Georgia; and deputy commanding general for operations, Multi-National Corps, Iraq

**EDUCATION:** The Citadel, bachelor's of science in business administration; Central Michigan University, master's of science in administration; Tufts University Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, senior national defense fellow

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:**

Association of United States Army, Association of Defense Communities, 75th Ranger Regiment Association, The Patriot Foundation, Veterans Golfers Association, Down the Stretch Ranch



Michael Ferriter

## Soldier's Story

Michael Ferriter had faith a unique job would come his way after retiring from the military. He was right.

**M**ichael Ferriter's office is a museum within a museum. Photos, awards, statuettes, commemorative coins and more are packed into the small space within the bowels of the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, offering a glimpse

into the man responsible for guiding the new institution.

The mementos honor friends, family and fellow soldiers and trace Ferriter's 35-year career as a U.S. Army ranger, infantryman, paratrooper and three-star general. The diversity of his experiences are showcased, including his three tours of Iraq and his leadership of Fort Benning, the massive military installation near the Georgia-Alabama border he commanded for two years during a time of transformation. While he was in charge of the base, the army moved its Armor School—the training grounds for the cavalry—from Fort Knox to Fort Benning, the longtime home of the Infantry School. “Bringing the armored cavalry and infantry together is like bringing the Shiites and Kurds, but this and many others

were big transformational things that I was asked to do,” he says.

Also on an office wall is a photo of his father, Richard, a fellow infantryman and paratrooper, posing with Lt. Gen. Jim Gavin, the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II. Ferriter learned to admire and appreciate front-line troops from his father. “He said, ‘You can’t be a leader unless you have someone to lead, and you can’t be a good one unless you take care of them.’”

Both sides of Ferriter—the change agent and the champion of the rank and file—are now coalescing in his new job. At the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, Ferriter is building from scratch the first and only nationally designated U.S. museum dedicated to honoring the veteran experience. After some six



## Q&A

Is being an ambassador for the museum your primary role?

That's a fair way to describe it. The more important part of that is, No. 1, ambassador to who and, No. 2, in order to do what? I'm the ambassador in order to reach the veteran groups, the military associations, the veteran service organizations, all the way to the individual veteran. And then I'm the ambassador to the generous people who want to support the museum. And then I'm the ambassador to the community.

Is the museum filling a niche that wasn't being filled before?

According to the people who come in here, absolutely. And that niche is, "You're telling my story. You're telling my dad's story. And you're educating me about these stories." So it fills the niche that takes us directly to the story of veterans, told by veterans and their impact on the American landscape.

What will be the economic impact of this museum?

I would describe the impact not in terms of direct dollars. The first impact is everyone who comes here will be amazingly impressed with the city of Columbus and the people of Columbus. They'll carry away, both near and far, stories of a fantastic experience. And then as a city that has plenty of destination stuff to do, we've become icing on the cake. ... They'll all say, "Hey, you can now bundle a day and a half or two days worth of stuff with the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, COSI, the art museum, the zoo." So, I think it's just built out around the opportunity for people to say, "Yeah, that's the town I want to go to," and from that comes tourism dollars or respect as a community.

What excites you about this building?

First of all, it's a stunning building. They wanted the building to evoke the kind of response from someone who drives up, walks up to it and says, "Wow, that is something special." It achieved that with me. I walk to work every day and as soon as I get out from under the railroad trestle, coming from the Arena District, I see it. And every single day it's the same feeling. It's like, "Wow, that's where I'm going to work."

“You can't be a leader unless you have someone to lead, and you can't be a good one unless you take care of them.”

years of planning and construction, the imposing 53,000-square-foot concrete structure opened in late October with considerable fanfare. The brainchild of L Brands founder Les Wexner and the late Sen. John Glenn, the project aims to enhance Columbus' national status, as well as continue the transformation of the Scioto Peninsula just west of Downtown into the premier cultural district in the city. Backers raised \$82 million—with \$40.6 million coming from Wexner and his wife, Abigail—to support the project, which boasts a renowned design team of Allied Works Architecture (building architect), Olin (landscape architect) and Ralph Appelbaum Associates (exhibit designer).

And while observers are already celebrating the building for its breathtaking ribbon-like design (*Architectural Digest* declared it “among the most

important buildings to be completed this year—and it doesn't disappoint”), Ferriter and his team are now charged with delivering on the next ambitious goal: turning it into a national attraction. He seems off to a good start. Guy Worley, the CEO of the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, says Ferriter passed with flying colors his first major test—the museum's Oct. 27 opening ceremony. Despite miserable weather, Ferriter and his team organized a moving ceremony attended by 4,000 people—including veterans from all walks of life, as well as a star-studded group of speakers: Wexner, U.S. Senators Sherrod Brown and Rob Portman, U.S. Representatives Joyce Beatty and Steve Stivers, U.S. Secretary of Veteran Affairs Robert Wilkie, former Secretary of State Colin Powell and David Glenn, the son of John



## National Veterans Memorial and Museum



Glenn, who died in 2016. “The only thing [Ferriter] failed to do was stop the rain,” Worley says.

## Coming to Columbus

When Ferriter retired in 2014 from his last Army assignment overseeing 75 installations and bases around the world, he and his wife, Margie, decided he shouldn’t take a corporate job. Instead, he focused on helping veterans. After graduating from The Citadel in South Carolina, Ferriter spent the first 20 years of his military career in an infantry battalion, living and working with front-line soldiers. “That really endeared me to being with soldiers and caring for soldiers and caring for their families,” he says.

After retirement, he founded The Ferriter Group, which became a vehicle for improving the lives of veterans after they leave the military. He hosted seminars for wounded warriors, the families of the fallen, college kids and high schoolers to build their strength, resiliency and self-confidence. He also connected with veterans in the business world, forming the Veterans Business Alliance, a 200-plus-strong network of companies. The goal was to connect veterans to businesses looking to hire the ex-military. “He’s about taking care of the little guy,” says Earl Rice, a retired command sergeant major who



worked with Ferriter to find employment opportunities for veterans. “Some people when they get up in these higher-level positions, it becomes about them, and that has never, never, never been the case with him.”

Ferriter says he didn’t take a more conventional job after retirement because he and his wife “knew something special would come along.” On May 11, he says, that opportunity arrived when he received a phone call from the search firm Korn Ferry, which was looking for someone to lead a new veterans museum in Columbus, Ohio. Within a month—and after two trips to Columbus, a city he’d never visited before—Ferriter signed on to lead the new institution.

## National Veterans Memorial and Museum

300 W. Broad St., Columbus 43215

**OPENED:** October 2018

**ABOUT:** The National Veterans Memorial and Museum is the first federally designated museum dedicated to telling the individual stories and shared experiences of veterans throughout history.

**EMPLOYEES:** About 20

**BUDGET:** About \$5 million

Worley, the CDDC chief executive, led the search for the NVMM’s inaugural leader. He and his CDDC colleagues were impressed with Ferriter’s military experiences—three tours of duty in Iraq, one in Somalia, jumping out airplanes more than 200 times with his troops—that had earned him the respect of the country’s veterans. What’s more, Ferriter has shown entrepreneurial talent during his military career and as bridge to the business world after he left the army. “We thought that those entrepreneurial skills would translate very well in this new startup that is the National Veterans Memorial and Museum,” Worley says.

Ferriter’s former military colleagues say Columbus leaders found the ideal person for the job. “I can’t think of anybody better to lead that organization right now as it starts up,” says Lou Zeisman, a retired Army colonel who has known Ferriter since the early 1990s. Rice, the retired command sergeant major, says no one is better equipped to honor the legacies and experiences of veterans. “That’s what he’s been doing his whole life, and so it fits right into the mold,” Rice says.

Both Rice and Zeisman praise Ferriter for his compassion. He cares for his people, gets to know them and their families and builds personal connections with them. He’s also comfortable talking with all types—from enlisted folks to generals. “Matter of fact, he’d rather talk to enlisted soldiers sometimes,” Zeisman says. Soldiers followed Ferriter because they respected him, Rice says. “They want to work harder to please him because of the type of person he is, and they know that he’s not going to ask them to do something that he wouldn’t do,” Rice says.

In August 2015, Zeisman’s wife, Missy, suffered a massive brain aneurysm while they were posted in Hawaii. After Missy underwent emergency surgery, Zeisman was surprised to see a familiar face at the hospital the next day. On his own dime, Ferriter flew from Seattle to Hawaii overnight to be with his old friend and didn’t leave his side for a week. “I just think he’s a hell of a man, and his character is beyond reproach,” Zeisman says.

## Just the Beginning

Like the paratrooper he used to be, Ferriter jumped right into the action



at the NVMM. He reported to work in early June, about 10 days after he was offered the job. "The reason is there is a lot of work to do," he says. "I've been involved in startups before. Big transformations. You have to see it through the eyes of the customer, the veteran, the family."

Ferriter says he's given more than 40 tours to groups and individuals in the days before and after the museum opened in late October. On opening weekend, he walked the floor all day on Saturday and Sunday, asking visitors for their impressions. Many were awestruck. Others were grateful. And some offered a more practical recommendation: The museum needs more tissues. "They are tears of joy and tears of pride and tears of understanding, but not tears of pity," Ferriter says.

Ferriter sees himself as an ambassador for the museum, and he's already building ties with veterans groups, other cultural institutions and community and business leaders. He and his Scioto Peninsula neighbor, COSI CEO Fred-eric Bertley, are talking about shared services and creating a combined curriculum for visitors to both institutions,

while Ferriter is discussing collaborative leadership programming with Trevor Brown, the dean of the Ohio State University John Glenn College of Public Affairs. Ferriter connected with the members of the Veterans Jobs Mission, a coalition of some 200 companies committed to hiring veterans, and lobbied the CEO of the Association of the United States Army to hold one of its conferences in Columbus.

The NVMM is a subsidiary of the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, but that should change in 2019, when the museum is expected to spin off as a separate 501(c)3 nonprofit with its own board of directors. Worley, the CDDC CEO, is confident that the museum will do well on its own with

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Ferriter in charge. "He's representing it in a very positive light already, and I expect that will just continue to grow over time," Worley says.

Indeed, Ferriter has big plans. He wants to expand the museum beyond its walls with traveling exhibits, leadership fellowships and online content, including virtual tours of the building and a "veterans business store" that would sell products from veteran-owned businesses. He says he's pitched Bob Wheeler, the CEO of Ohio-based Airstream, on giving him a couple of recreation vehicles he could use as mobile museums.

Even though the museum just opened, there already is talk about expanding it. During the opening ceremony, Wexner talked about creating a second building focused on education. Asked about Wexner's comment, Ferriter says, "There are no specific plans, other than we feel that we'll have sufficient presence for maybe an auditorium, classroom space, additional exhibit. As Les Wexner said, 'This is just the beginning.'"

*Dave Ghose is the editor.*

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