

'America loves you': Jay Leno surprises wounded veteran with new car

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Behind every salute and every handshake from a soldier, there's a great story. Jay Leno set out to share one of those stories, and went above and beyond to show his appreciation for their service — by giving a soldier a brand new car.

"We took all these wounded warriors and did sort of a lottery and reached in and picked a soldier at random (to) do something for him and hopefully it expresses what we want to do for all the soldiers," Leno said.

That soldier was Cpl. Ethan Leberge. Leberge had been on foot patrol in Afghanistan when a suicide bomber drove up and detonated himself, seriously injuring Leberge and killing two fellow soldiers who had been standing with him.



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"I had shrapnel that went through my ... foot into my left knee and I had a hole in the back of my left leg," Leberge said. "I had a superficial wound above my right knee and I also had shrapnel that went into my arm, broke off the end of my radius, broke up a couple of bones in my wrist and essentially shattered my thumb."

In addition to those injuries, Leberge also suffered a traumatic brain injury that has been causing memory problems.

"If you called Cpl. Leberge a hero, he'd laugh," Sgt Clinton Lien said. "He'd never consider himself a hero but he is to guys like us."

Leno, 64, said that when he meets many soldiers, most are barely out of their teens and he finds they're often worlds apart. But Leno said he and Leberge were quickly able to find common ground in their love of cars, and Leno had just the thing for Leberge: a ride in a 2015 Dodge SRT Hellcat.

When Leno asked Leberge if he wanted to take it for a spin and was met with a resounding "hell yeah!"

"It's too cool!" Leberge said, opening it up on the country roads near his base in Fort Campbell, Ky.

The two took a break from their joyride to grab lunch at Knockum Hill Bar B Que, where Leno got to sit down and hear Leberge's story.

"Where I'm sitting now, I don't know exactly how well I'll recover," Leberge said.

Leno asked if he ever gets discouraged, and while Leberge said he does find himself down every now and then, family and friends help him make it through.



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When they arrived back to base, Leberge gave an instant review of the Hellcat, "That was awesome ... I wouldn't mind having one of these."

"It's yours," Leno said handing Leberge the keys. "America loves you. Thank you buddy. Have a lot of fun. Don't get any tickets."

"I can't promise that," Leberge said with a smile.

Want to join Al Roker and Jay Leno in helping out the USO? Visit Al's fundraising page at [Crowdrise.com/Roker](https://www.crowdrise.com/Roker). You can also buy a TODAY camo hat that Al gave to soldiers during his USO tour in Afghanistan. If you want to buy the hat, [visit this link](#). Net proceeds will go to support the USO and our troops.

TODAY producer Robin Sindler contributed to this report.