

## Five Rangers among 18 inducted into Georgia Military Veterans Hall of Fame



Seven Medal of Honor (MOH) recipients from three different military branches of service were among 18 inaugural inductees at the first Georgia Military Veterans' Hall of Fame (GMVHOF) ceremony in Columbus.

Each inductee -- or representative -- was presented with an engraved medal, coin and other awards at the Nov. 22, 2013, ceremony held at the Doubletree Hotel.

"Georgia is one of the states with the highest number of veterans living within its borders," said retired Army COL Paul Longgrear, who, along with Richard "Rick" H. White, also a retired Army colonel, created the non-profit GMVHOF. "This program enables us to reach across all branches of military service to honor Georgia's veterans."

White said the "rarest Georgia inductee" was George W. Leland from Savannah, a U.S. Navy gunner's mate during the Civil War who was presented with the Medal of Honor for attempting to free the U.S.S. Lehigh, an ironclad that ran aground at the battle of Charleston Harbor.

Two other inductees, Air Force COL Joe Madison Jackson and Marine MAJ Stephen Wesley Pless, both Newnan natives, are Vietnam veterans awarded the MOH for "selflessness, bravery and leadership" in combat. A bust of Pless was donated to the GMVHOF by Winston Skinner of Newnan.

The other four MOH recipients inducted into the GMVHOF are Gen. Raymond Gilbert Davis, a Marine Korean War veteran from Fitzgerald; SGT Rodney Davis, a Marine Vietnam veteran from Macon killed when he leaped onto an exploding grenade to save his men; Henry Elrod, a Marine pilot from Ashburn killed while leading a ground force on Wake Island after destroying an enemy warship and two planes before being shot down; and Hilliard Wilbanks, an Air Force captain from Cornelia killed in Vietnam while flying an

unarmed airplane and firing his handgun to divert the enemy from an outnumbered Army Ranger force.

Inductee Johnny Calhoun, a Newnan native who was part of a secret Special Forces unit fighting behind enemy lines in Laos during the Vietnam War, was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for sacrificing his life to save his team.

Two inductees who are members of the Army Ranger Hall of Fame are decorated combat veterans of two wars. Retired COL Ralph Puckett fought in Korea and Vietnam, receiving two Distinguished Service Crosses during a 30-year career. Retired MSG (E-7) Vincent Melillo, 95, is an original WW II Merrill's Marauder. Each Marauder received the Presidential Unit Citation. He fought with the 5<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team in Korea.

Underage WW II veteran Wendall Leon Jones of Tifton was 16 years old when he enlisted in the Navy and 17 when he landed on the beach at Normandy. He was wounded numerous times while engaging in what has been called "almost superhuman feats of bravery."

MAJ GEN David L. Grange and COL Ben Purcell are Army inductees who received multiple Silver Stars for heroism during the Vietnam War. Purcell, a Clarksville native, was a North Vietnamese prisoner of war for more than five years. Both veterans are graduates of North Georgia University in Dahlonega.

The remaining inductees were honored for their selfless service and achievements. Retired Sergeant Major of the Army William Connelly of Monticello is the sixth of 14 soldiers to be named to the highest ranking enlisted position in the Army.

Johnny "Tommy" Clack, an Army captain from Decatur was medically retired after sacrificing two legs and an arm in Vietnam in 1969. He has spent more than 40 years of tireless service aiding veterans and their families throughout Georgia.

The Honorable Pete Wheeler from Albany is an Army WW II veteran who has served more than 60 years as Georgia's director of the Department of Veterans Service. John Phillip Yates, a WW II pilot from Griffin, flew more than 200 missions in Europe and was awarded six Air Medals and four Battle Stars. He has served 22 years in the Georgia House of Representatives and is chairman of the Defense and Veterans Affairs Committee.

Retired LT COL Allan B. Imes of Griffin served three tours in Ranger and Special Forces units in Vietnam. For 17 years, he was in charge of the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps at Griffin High School, where he helped mold hundreds of students into mature and patriotic adults.

The 2014 GMVHOF ceremony will be held once again during November. Information about the organization, how to submit a veteran or make a tax-deductible contribution can be found at the website:

*by Jonnie Melillo Clasen*

<http://www.GMVHOF.org>



Five Army Rangers were inducted into the GMVHOF. Seated is Rosemary Wilbanks, widow of Hilliard Wilbanks. Standing (L-R) are Rangers Allan Imes, David L. Grange, Vincent Melillo and Ralph Puckett.