



**Georgia Department  
of Veterans Service**

Cultivating community connections  
– empowering Georgia’s veterans  
and their families to flourish.

April 2026

**A SOLDIER’S FINAL JOURNEY:  
PVT. BENETT WATERS RETURNS TO GEORGIA**



World War II U.S. Army Airforce Private Bennett Hubert Waters returned home on April 9<sup>th</sup> after missing in action for over 80 years. Family, friends, veterans and residents of Pierce County in Blackshear gathered to pay tribute and honor the former POW and Georgia serviceman killed in action.

Waters enlisted in the United States Army Air Force in 1940, before the United States joined World War II. He was later assigned to the 17<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, 27<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group on the Bataan Peninsula. He was captured and taken as a Prisoner of War by the Empire of Japan on April 9, 1942, and held in the Philippines until 1944, when the Japanese military attempted to relocate him and other POWs on the transport ship Oryoku Maru.

Unaware there were allied POWs on board, a U.S. carrier-borne aircraft bombed the Oryoku Maru, which sank in Subic Bay. Waters survived the attack on the Oryoku Maru and was transferred to Takao, Formosa aboard the Enoura Maru. According to reporting from the Japanese government, Waters died during an attack on the Enoura Maru on January 9, 1945.

In 1946, the American Graves Registration Command exhumed the remains of 312 bodies from a mass grave on a beach near where Waters died. After unsuccessful attempts to identify the remains, they were interred in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. In 2022 and 2023, Unknowns linked to the Enoura Maru were disinterred for further analysis. Private Waters’ remains were identified on June 18, 2025.

Waters was escorted home by Sgt. Andrew Walsh, with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team. Waters was his great-great uncle, and at his grandmother’s request, Walsh brought him home to rejoin his family.

**VETERANS INVITED TO SHARE EXPERIENCES IN NATIONAL NEUROLOGICAL HEALTH STUDY**

The Department of Veterans Affairs is supporting a review that will allow veterans to share their experiences related to neurological conditions diagnosed after deployments to the Gulf War and post-9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On May 20–21, 2026, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine will host virtual listening sessions to examine whether eight neurodegenerative conditions may be linked to deployment-related exposures. Substances under review include pesticides, jet fuels, solvents, heavy metals, PFAS, and particulate matter. The conditions being studied range from Parkinson’s disease and Alzheimer’s to less common diagnoses such as lateral sclerosis and myasthenia gravis.

These listening sessions will help epidemiologists and toxicologists better understand exposure levels and potential connections to later-life illnesses. Veterans will have five minutes to share their perspectives through a live or pre-recorded video.

If you would like to participate, register at <https://events.nationalacademies.org/46672>.



## GDVS EMPLOYEE OF THE QUARTER TANYA ROGERS PROVIDES HIGHEST LEVEL OF SUPPORT

The GDVS recently selected our Employee of the Quarter for the first quarter of 2026 – Tanya Rogers!

Rogers is an exceptional employee who works in the Gainesville GDVS field service office and who also serves as a Suicide Prevention Specialist.



In just over 2 years of serving Georgia’s veterans and their families, caretakers, and survivors, she has made a positive impact on their lives in the Hall County area, while also building key relationships in the Gainesville community.

Rogers is an active participant in the Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce, where she promotes GDVS involvement in local events. She also makes connections with hospices and hospitals to promote the availability of help at every stage of life.

Rogers has shown outstanding expertise and meticulous attention to detail with claims and appeals. “I deeply care about them. I will listen to them and find the best way to assist them or their family,” said Rogers.

As the wife of a veteran who served 25 years in the military, his service led her to the desire to continue helping the veteran community.

Her advice to new and future VSOs?

“Learn as much as you can! This position is ever changing. Search for the gray areas, not everything is black and white. Remember your why when the job gets hard.”

## VETERANS CHOOSE VA: ENROLLMENT ON THE RISE

According to the VA, over 739,000 veterans have enrolled since the PACT Act became law in August 2022—cementing its place as the largest expansion of VA health care and disability benefits in decades.

VA accelerated the PACT Act’s eligibility timeline in 2024. This change means veterans will be eligible to enroll in VA health care whether they served in the Vietnam War, Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, Global War on Terror, or any other combat zone after 9/11 without first applying for VA disability benefits. This also includes those who never deployed but were exposed to toxins or hazards while training or on active duty in the United States.

Eligibility is based on where and when you served, not on whether you have a current diagnosis.

Interested in learning more? Visit [VA.gov/health-care/apply](https://va.gov/health-care/apply).

## FT. BENNING OPENS NEW HEALTH AND FITNESS CENTER

Veterans and service members now have a space at Fort Benning that addresses holistic health and fitness—the H2F Crook Soldier Performance Readiness Center.

The Center is named after Georgia’s late Command Sgt. Maj. Edward “Eddie” Crook Jr., a decorated combat veteran and 1960 Olympic boxing champion.

From the boxing ring to the battlefield, Crook’s life was extraordinary.

After winning a gold medal alongside Muhammed Ali in the 1960 Olympics, Crook went on to have a decorated 30 year Army career, where he served two combat tours in Vietnam and received a Silver Star, a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts for his actions.

He also founded the ‘Smokers’ boxing program at Fort Benning.



## YOUR NEW FREE MENTAL HEALTH TOOL

Don’t forget—the HereNOW Help is available at no charge to Georgia’s veterans.

HereNOW Help is a free, confidential, mobile mental and behavioral health app for your phone.

Support is available 24/7.

Learn more and download the app at <https://herenowhelp.com/veterans/>.

Use access code **241442** to join!