



Georgia Department of Veterans Service

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

December 2023

REMEMBER, HONOR, TEACH: WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA

Rainy weather did not stop service members, veterans, families, friends, and volunteers gathering at Georgia’s veteran memorial cemeteries (GVMC) to pay tribute to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice during our annual Wreaths Across America ceremonies.

Every veteran interred at a state veterans cemetery was honored with a graveside wreath, placed by a volunteer, family member, or fellow veteran.

Over 600 guests gathered at GVMC-Glenville and 2,400 wreaths were donated. Members of the 13th Colony Sound Chorus provided a musical accompaniment to the ceremony, which also included a presentation of colors from Air Force JROTC color guard and cadets of Effingham County High School.

GVMC-Milledgeville gathered a sizeable crowd of veterans, families, and volunteers to distribute over 3,700 wreaths. The Patriot Guard Riders of Georgia provided their support—not only with a generous donation of wreaths, but with a Rolling Honor Guard to escort their delivery!

We are grateful for the public’s support of our Wreaths Across America programs, but events like these would not be possible without our hardworking cemetery staff. Thank you for your dedication in honoring and remembering Georgia’s veterans!



WWII MIA SOLDIER IDENTIFIED, RETURNING HOME TO GEORGIA



Missing since January 1945 and declared unrecoverable on May 11, 1951, Atlanta native and WWII United States Army Private First Class Hood E. Cole’s remains have finally been identified.

PFC Cole served in L Company, 3rd Battalion, 276th Infantry Regiment, 70th Infantry Division. While deployed near Baerenthal, France, he was killed in action when his unit was attacked by German forces.

In April 2018, unknown remains were exhumed by the Department of Defense and the American Battle Monuments Commission. After anthropological and dental analysis, they were identified as the remains as PFC Cole.

PFC Cole will be laid to rest on January 15, 2024 in Canton at the Georgia National Cemetery. Thank you for your service and welcome home, PFC Cole.



PACT ACT PROGRESS: OVER 5 MILLION VETERANS SCREENED FOR TOXIC EXPOSURE

Veterans are taking advantage of toxic exposure screenings provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs! The results are “leading to better health outcomes – and better quality of life – for these heroes who were exposed to toxins while serving our country,” explained VA Secretary Denis McDonough.

VA recently announced over 5 million veterans have taken advantage of new toxic exposure screenings – and 43 percent of those screened have reported at least one case of toxic exposure.

The announcement marks 13 months since President Biden signed the PACT Act into law and, as a result, millions of veterans throughout the nation have received expanded and extended benefits for over 300 presumptive conditions.

The most reported toxic exposures include burn pits and Agent Orange. These two conditions make up more than 60 percent of the veterans screened alone.

With the goal of screening all veterans enrolled in VA health care for toxic exposure once every five years, VA Under Secretary for Health Shereef Elnahal, M.D., reports VA is making significant progress in achieving this milestone.

“Most importantly, this means we’ve had 5 million opportunities to provide veterans with the exposure-informed care they deserve,” said Elnahal.

Don’t wait to schedule your screening if you think you were exposed!

GDVS Veterans Service Officers can help you start a claim for veterans benefits and toxic exposures covered by the PACT Act, as well as helping you start the enrollment process for VA healthcare.

Find your local office at <https://veterans.georgia.gov/field-offices>.

GET TO KNOW YOUR VSO: JOHN WAGENKNECHT



“Being able to make a meaningful impact on veterans and their family’s lives” is what Veterans Service

Officer John Wagenknecht likes most about working for the Georgia Department of Veterans Service.

Wagenknecht, who has been with the GDVS for nearly a year, currently works in our Gainesville office –and he mans the Hartwell office on a bi-monthly rotation.

A native of Savanna, Illinois, Wagenknecht retired as Sergeant First Class after serving 20 years in the United States Army.

His time in the military is his inspiration to spend his post-military career helping veterans and their families.

“I understand the sacrifices they made and they are of great value to our communities,” said Wagenknecht.

When he is not assisting veterans, he is spending time with his family and pets. Dairy Queen Blizzards are a favorite pleasure and never fail to make him smile after a tough day.

Wagenknecht’s advice to new and future VSOs?

“Read everything, research, and ask questions. Do everything you can to assist them with receiving the benefits they are entitled to.”

UNWRAP JOY, NOT FRAUD: AVOID HOLIDAY SCAMS

Veterans are a lucrative target for fraudsters, online scammers, and con artists – and the holiday season increases scam activity.

Scams can range from benefit payment redirection fraud and identity theft to fraudsters impersonating VA personnel in emails, texts, and even in person.

GDVS and VA staff will **NEVER** ask you to pay for services or for your banking information. They will also never ask you to provide personal information through email or texts.

Stay aware of current scams and find details on how to keep yourself safe with updates from VA’s Cybersecurity Spot: <https://digital.va.gov/cyber/>.

NOTES OF GRATITUDE: CAROL CRAWFORD

A special acknowledgment goes to Waynesboro office manager Carol Crawford, whose exemplary assistance to a local veteran left his family with a loss of words for the genuine care they received.

The family sent a letter to GDVS South Region Director Sherri Whitfield celebrating Crawford for the support and care she showed their son.

“I lack the ability to truly express how blessed we veterans are to have someone of her caliber assisting us with matters we fully do not understand,” explained the veteran’s family.

“Carol went above and beyond by assisting us with services we were unaware we were eligible for.”