

2023

# Salute



Honoring those who proudly  
served the United States

Special Publication of  
PALATKA DAILY NEWS

# SALUTE

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# Ronnie Davis

## MOVING TO GROW

*Army vet served in variety of roles during 21-year military career.*

Ronnie Davis today.

Brandon D. Oliver/ Palatka Daily News

**By Brandon D. Oliver**  
*Palatka Daily News*

**R**onnie Davis has always been a man who, while grateful for the opportunities in the present, has had his eye on the future. Throughout his military career, the retired first sergeant charted a course that saw him perform an array of job functions during his 21 years in the Army.

Davis, now 64, was still a child when plotted his future. He was a junior at Palatka Central High School in 1976 when he got his mother's permission to enlist in the Army under the Early Enlistment Program. Davis said he wanted to attend college, but because he didn't have any scholarships lined up, he knew the military would be his best shot at higher education.

With the Vietnam War still fresh in everyone's mind at the time, Davis said his family was worried but knew enlisting would be the foundation of a great future.

"(My mother) was somewhat saddened," he said in October. "However, she felt in the best interest of my future, it was the right thing to do for that time period. (My grandmother) also reminded me of joining the service to possibly get a career and still come out and be young enough to start a second career."

So after Davis graduated from Palatka Central in 1977, he shipped off to basic training in Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

He and his fellow trainees used camaraderie and



Photo submitted by Ronnie Davis.

First Sgt. Ronnie Davis is pictured in his official Army photo.

*See DAVIS page 6*



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Remember their sacrifice!



Photos submitted by Ronnie Davis  
Clockwise Left to Right: Ronnie Davis is pictured in the late 1970s with two weapons he used in the Army.

Ronnie Davis reads while in the Army barracks in the late 1970.

Sgt. 1st Class Ronnie Davis, an Army drill instructor in the early 1990s, congratulates a trainee for finishing basic training.

## DAVIS *Continued from page 4*

support to push each other to pass weapons training, complete 2-mile runs in the summer heat and even mentally block out the bombs they heard going off while they were trying to sleep. Fort Sill, after all, was an artillery installation, Davis said.

“There, I met other ... trainees from other parts of other states,” he said about basic training. “And we started to bond together then. I still have contact with two soldiers that I started basic with and still proud to this day that I can reach out to them. It was like a bond as if we were all from the same atmosphere.”

After finishing basic and additional training at Fort Sill, Davis had his first permanent duty assignment at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where he worked in communications. When his unit would go on deployments, it was his job to make sure they had what they needed to make secure and non-secure

transmissions to their leaders or aviation team with which they were associated.

Davis eventually saw soldiers working on the Forward Area Alerting Radar system and decided he wanted to do that instead. Davis said he wanted to challenge himself and knew he could move up the ranks faster working on weapons systems than he would in communications.

Davis remembered an officer advising him to “challenge the leadership and to move to grow.” So grow he did. He left for Fort Bliss, Texas, in the late 1970s to get trained and certified to work on Vulcan weapons and FAAR systems.

His hard work, dedication and discipline paid off in 1982 when he was stationed in Mannheim, Germany, where he continued to work with the weapons and radar systems, this time with the 1st Infantry Division, famously known as the Big Red 1. Although he was there

*See DAVIS page 8*



# THANK YOU TO THOSE WHO COURAGEOUSLY SERVE YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW



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**Monica Baez**  
Step Father - Army

**Melanie Blair**  
Mother - Army  
Husband - Marines

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Father-in-law - Navy

**Tammy Chaney**  
Father-in-law - Army  
Brother-in-law - Army

**Robert Cooper**  
Father - Coast Guard  
National Guard  
Nephew - Marines

**Tammy Crabtree**  
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**Dennis Dowling**  
Father - Air Force

**Lisa Fells**  
Sons - Army  
Nephews - Navy

**Trish Foster**  
Father - Army  
Nephew - Air Force

**James Gardner**  
Navy - National Guard  
Father - Army

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Grandfather - Navy

**Lori Heard**  
Grandfather - Army

**Eunice Hendley**  
Son - Marines  
Son - Army

**Barbara Hinkle**  
Son - Air Force

**Eva Hottinger**  
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Grandson - Marines

**Anne Hunter**  
Brother - Marines

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2 Cousins - Navy

**Linda Myers**  
Father - Air Force  
Sister - Air Force

**Kim Preu**  
Brother - Air Force  
Father-in-law - Navy

**Christina Quiles**  
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**Darrin Rembert - Army**  
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**Elio Rodriquez**  
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Photos submitted by Ronnie Davis

Clockwise Left to Right: Ronnie Davis stands in front of an Army tank while stationed in Bosnia and Herzegovina on a peacekeeping mission in the 1990s.

Ronnie Davis and other Army soldiers load weapons and ammunition.

Ronnie Davis stands next to a Vulcan weapon system in the late 1970s while he served in the Army starting in 1977.

## DAVIS *Continued from page 6*

as part of a peacekeeping unit, the Berlin Wall was still up and his division was prepared to deploy if necessary.

Despite Cold War tensions and the anti-military demonstrations that sometimes occurred, Davis took time to enjoy the beauty Germany had to offer.

“Going to Germany and being from a place like Palatka was like a fairytale because you have the Rhine River,” Davis said. “You have castles. You have all kinds of exotic cars. People appreciate life.”

From 1984 until 1988, he was stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, where he continued working with the Big Red 1. But similar to his career in communications, Davis was looking to switch career paths.

He became a drill sergeant – a sergeant first class, to be exact – in 1989 and was tasked with molding trainees into

soldiers at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

A year into his job as a drill sergeant, the U.S. found itself in the Gulf War, and Davis’ time as a drill instructor was extended so he could train more soldiers to go overseas. By 1992, Davis was burnt out and again switched careers, becoming a paratrooper.

“After doing three years as a drill sergeant, my mind was focused on continuing to move forward, not ever ... going back to being a weapons system technician in Kansas where I served,” Davis said.

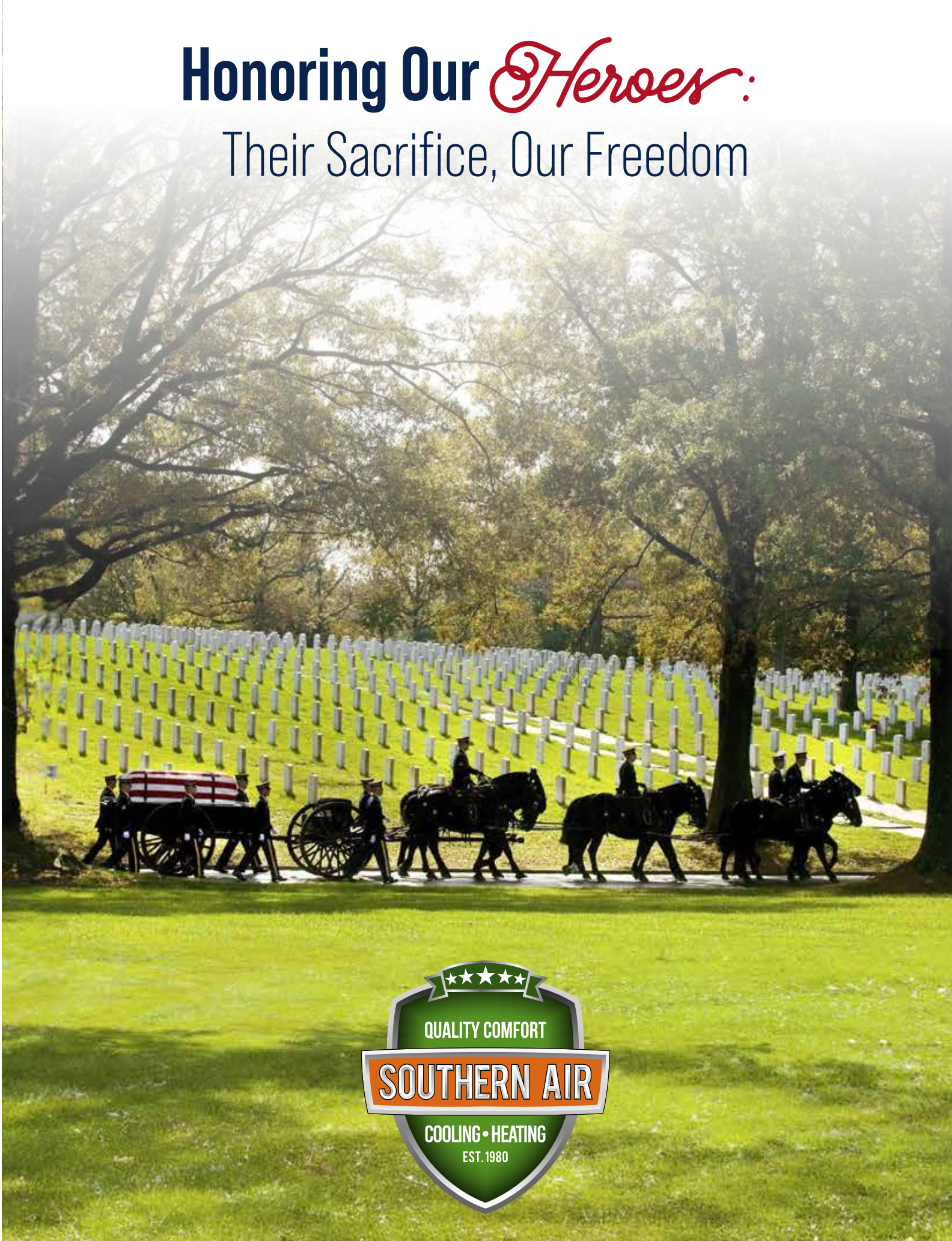
Because he had been a drill sergeant and proven his leadership skills, he became a platoon sergeant with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The facility has recently undergone a name change and is currently Fort Liberty.

*See DAVIS page 10*



# Honoring Our *Heroes*:

Their Sacrifice, Our Freedom







Photos submitted by Ronnie Davis  
Top Left: Sgt. 1st Class Ronnie Davis, a drill instructor in the early 1990s, is pictured with one of his graduating classes.

Below: Ronnie Davis is among a class of trainees who graduated Army basic training in 1977.



## DAVIS *Continued from page 8*

While still a paratrooper, he also handled administrative tasks and even served as a mortuary escort when someone in his platoon died.

He later returned to Germany from 1993 through 1997, but in 1996, he was deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of a peacekeeping force. He returned to the U.S. in 1997 and retired as a first sergeant a year later.

Davis said he loved the Army, but, like numerous times before, he wanted to try out a new career.

“I had known the Army since 17, so I didn’t know what it was like to not be in the Army,” Davis said. “So I wanted to try something new or take a break. And I chose to go ahead and retire.”

He may have been a civilian, but he retained the need to stay active, which is why he applied to and got hired by the Fulton County, Georgia, School District as an IT support employee. He eventually worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Atlanta for 15 years until he retired again.

A special point of pride for Davis, who has a wife, two adult daughters and an adult son, was getting an associate degree in computer networking and later earning a

bachelor’s degree in technology management in 2005.

Because Davis enlisted in the military to afford college, getting a degree nearly 30 years after he graduated high school felt like he’d come full circle.

“After getting that degree, I felt elated,” he said. “I felt like I’d really accomplished my mission.”

After spending decades in Georgia, Davis moved back to Palatka, closing on a South Historic District home in July. He loves playing pickleball, attending Mt. Tabor First Baptist Church in Palatka, reconnecting with classmates and finding ways to make his community a better place.

While he doesn’t believe military service should be mandatory for everyone, he believes it should be mandatory for people who leave high school without having committed to a vocation, post-secondary education, employment, Job Corps or another viable option.

The military provides structure and discipline, and by having otherwise idle individuals focused on bettering themselves, society could improve as well, Davis said.

“I think it would make it a better foundation for the whole nation,” he said, “because you’re going to be a better citizen.





To our country's past, present, and future veterans,

**Thank You!**

*"There is a certain enthusiasm in liberty, that makes human nature rise above itself, in acts of bravery and heroism."*

*-Alexander Hamilton*

**Happy Veterans Day!**



# Cynthia Washington

## A CALL TO RETURN



*Putnam native cherished time in Army despite ups and downs.*

Photos submitted by Cynthia Washington

Cynthia Washington worked in logistics for the Army Reserve during her second stint in the military.

**By Sarah Cavacini**  
*Palatka Daily News*

**W**elaka native Cynthia Washington enlisted in the Army because her family and friends took to the military.

However, the once-nervous Army newcomer found her bearings and spent nearly 30 years serving her country.

"I just felt the connection with the people," she said.

Washington graduated from Crescent City High School in 1979 but didn't immediately venture into the military.

She worked for the Putnam County School District as a bus aide after graduating but decided to leave home for the Army at 21. She never considered another branch of service.

"That's where everybody was going and I (saw) they

liked it," she said.

But Washington felt nervous during boot camp in Missouri. Washington, now 63, wasn't used to people yelling at her and telling her what to do. She admitted to shedding a few tears at first.

"My drill sergeant told me, she's like, 'Washington, you really want to be in the military?'" Washington recalled.

She told her sergeant she wanted a life in the service but still got reprimanded for calling her leader "ma'am" and not "sergeant," Washington recalled with a chuckle.

"She said, 'We can send you back to Welaka, wherever that is,'" Washington said. "It was different."

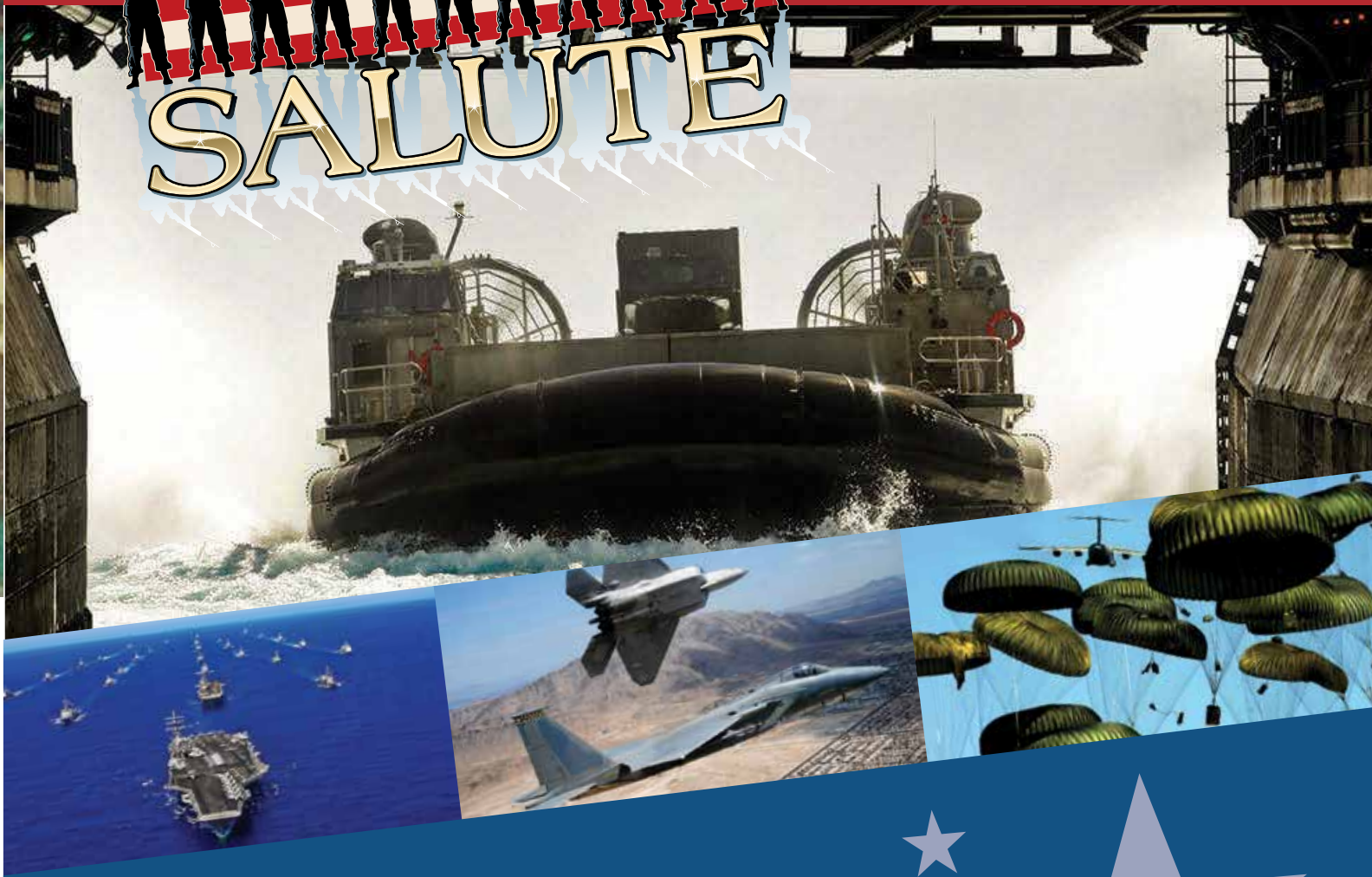
She wanted to work with supply logistics for the Army.

*See WASHINGTON page 14*





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Photos submitted by Cynthia Washington

Cynthia Washington receives paperwork while serving in the Army in the early 1980s.

## WASHINGTON *Continued from page 12*

Washington said her job in the military was in Massachusetts, where she worked to make sure everyone in the Army had what they needed if a vehicle would break down or there were other emergencies.

After Massachusetts, Washington was stationed in Asia. She stayed for two years at a base in Okinawa, Japan, alongside the U.S. Marine Corps.

Being with another branch of service was like a competition, she said, describing it more like a friendly one. Marine and Army officers challenged one another to a monthly race running around the base.

"It was like a motivation, you know," she said. "(It was) a self-esteem thing."

She next moved to Germany for four years and everyone became like a huge family. She met many new people and learned and saw things she never could have in Wela-ka, she said.

"It was a good move," she added.

Part of her time in Germany coincided with Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield, which lasted from 1990 to 1991, according to the Army's website. The site also states that soldiers from Germany supported and deployed to Kuwait and then Iraq as a "response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait."

She said she left the Army for the first time after 12 years of service at the rank of an E6 staff sergeant. Washington, who estimates she was 32 when she was discharged, had a child and thought it would be better if she left military life.

Washington stayed out for 10 years but felt unfulfilled. During her time as a civilian, she had a second child and spent the years bouncing around to different jobs.

"Everywhere I went, I was overqualified," she said. "How are you going to be overqualified and not have a job?"

*See WASHINGTON page 16*





# Lest we forget

celebrate • honor • remember

On Veterans Day, we pay tribute to those who fought and made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. Their courage and service will never be forgotten, and we owe them and their loved ones a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid. Let us always remember their dedication, heroism and legacy.

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During the early 2000s, after a decade of being away from the Army, Washington couldn't take it anymore and wanted back in. People, her family especially, asked her why she wanted to go back.

"With me going back, I know I had to, kind of like, prove a point because I gotta show you what I can do," she resolved. "Don't let my age fool you. Don't get it twisted."

She enlisted in to the Army Reserves, where she felt comfortable working and didn't feel obligated to seek out promotions. Washington said she worked like this for at least four years.

Then, she found out her unit would be deployed to Afghanistan.

"Then I was like, 'Oh my God, I've got to step up now,'" she said.

Once overseas again, Washington regained her E4 corporal rank and was put on the Army Reserves Guard. She said serving again full-time was the best thing she could have done.

Fear and nerves still came in waves even though this was her second time serving overseas during a military conflict. When serving in active duty, the most important thing someone can do is pray every day, she said.

"Even though I had went to Desert Storm/Desert Shield in Saudi Arabia, it was bringing back memories. You know, it's real," Washington said. "You don't ever know what the day brings. So, prayer (is) the first thing when you get up. And you wake up and look around and everything (isn't) blown up. Thank God for another day, you know, and then you take it from there."

Serving in the military taught her to be grateful for everything she has and to not take life in America for granted. She said she learned how to handle change, communicate with other people while respecting their feelings and work with others to accomplish a mission.

She thanked God for returning from Afghanistan and getting to know herself better. Despite the military conflicts, being discharged from and rejoining, and whatever else was thrown at her, Washington has no regrets.

"I loved it," she said. "If I had to do it all over again, I would. I would do it all over again."



Photos submitted by Cynthia Washington

Top: Cynthia Washington's official Army headshot. Left: Army Staff Sgt. Cynthia Washington, center, stands alongside her fellow Army soldiers when she served in the military during her first stint. Right: Army Staff Sgt. Cynthia Washington, then known as Cynthia Stewart, smiles for her Army headshot.





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# Explore the history of Veterans Day

*Service members make numerous sacrifices in defense of their countries. While the debts to service members may never be the kind that can be repaid in full, paying tribute to veterans, on Veterans Day and throughout the year, can be a great way to show them just how much their efforts are appreciated.*

## Veterans Day begins with Armistice Day

Veterans Day is a byproduct of the end of World War I, when Germany and the Allied Nations signed the Treaty of Versailles, formally ceasing fighting and establishing terms of peace. On Nov. 11, 1919, the first anniversary of the signing of the treaty, the first Armistice Day events were held. Armistice Day was initially a legal holiday to honor the end of World War I only, states History.com. The United States Congress passed a resolution in 1926 for an annual observance, and Nov. 11 became a national holiday starting in 1938. However, in 1954, after the country had been embroiled in both World War II and the Korean War, Congress amended the Act of 1938 by renaming the commemoration “Veterans Day” to honor veterans of all wars.

## Veterans Day in October?

According to Military.com, for a short time, thanks to the Uniform Holiday Bill, which in 1968 established three-day weekends for federal employees by celebrating national holidays on Mondays, Veterans Day was moved to the fourth Monday of October — the first being Oct. 25, 1971. However, many people did not agree with this decision, continuing to honor the holiday on the original date. In 1975, President

Gerald Ford signed a new law that returned Veterans Day to Nov. 11 beginning in 1978. Since then, parades, memorial events, volunteer efforts, and other celebrations revolving around veterans have been held on Nov. 11.

## Veterans around the world

Many countries, including the United States, celebrate veterans on or near Nov. 11. America’s closest neighbor to the north, Canada, commemorates veterans on Remembrance Day (also Nov. 11), as does the United Kingdom. Britain also has Remembrance Sunday, which is the second Sunday of November. Remembrance Day also is called Poppy Day, when people of the Commonwealth member states wear a red poppy flower in honor of military members who have died in the line of duty.

## Paying tribute

Veterans Day and its sister holidays mark the honoring of veterans of all wars, with a particular focus on living veterans. It is a day to celebrate the dedication and selflessness of hardworking military men and women.

---

*Article and photo courtesy of  
Metro Creative Graphics*



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Remembering Their Lives.  
Celebrating Their Memories.



*Les Sims*

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# AMERICAN HEROES



# Arnold Mitchell

## SPECIAL DELIVERY



*Marine made sure coded messages  
got to those who "need to know."*

Trisha Murphy/ Palatka Daily News

Arnold Dee Mitchell stands next to a patriotic sign made by his friends, Richard and Annie Brinker of Palatka.

**By Trisha Murphy**  
*Palatka Daily News*

On his 17th birthday, Arnold Dee Mitchell wasn't doing what most teens would do to celebrate their big day. Instead, the teenager was busy signing up to join the U.S. Marine Corps.

"My dad had been in the service and his dad, too," said Mitchell, now 77, of Palatka, who served his country for four and a half years. "They both were Marines."

Mitchell, who was on his own at age 14, said he was starting to feel desperate and tired of bouncing around the country, not knowing for sure what he wanted to do with his life. The teenager also had an interest in rodeos and riding bucking horses, but it didn't seem like it would lead to a successful future.

"I knew I was never going to be anything sitting in a

combine cutting wheat and wasting my money at rodeos on the weekend," he said. "I followed the rodeo circuit for about a year and a half and spent a lot of time eating dirt."

After flying to Oklahoma City and spending three days persuading his mother to sign a release to allow him to join the Marines, Mitchell was sent to San Diego, California, for boot camp and later to Camp Pendleton near Oceanside, California, where he earned his general education diploma.

To Mitchell's surprise, he had one of the highest scores on the General Classification Test, an exam that dates back to World War II and was developed to classify incoming servicemen.

"My score was 121 or 122, and they said I was the only

*See MITCHELL page 24*





# *Thank You!*

We take this moment to honor those who served our nation and are now serving with us to protect our community, as well as all of our residents who answered the call to protect our freedoms both home and abroad.

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Trisha Murphy/ Palatka Daily News

Left: Arnold Dee Mitchell holds a picture of him in his dress blue uniform that was taken shortly after he joined the Marine Corps in the early 1960s at age 17. Right: Arnold Dee and Valin Mitchell have been married for 35 years and have made their home in Putnam County since 1967, except for about six to eight years when he was traveling for work.

## **MITCHELL** *Continued from page 22*

one in our outfit who qualified,” he said. “And they transferred me to Pensacola to learn top-secret communications.”

Mitchell’s stay in Florida was short-lived. He eventually transferred to North Carolina to be part of the Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Companies, where he worked with the Army, Navy and allied forces.

From there, he was transferred to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, with the same outfit and later transferred to Hawaii and then Okinawa, Japan, where he prepared to go to Vietnam.

He was honorably discharged in 1967, having served as a private and then lance corporal.

While in the Marines, Mitchell was part of an elite outfit called Recon. He had to grow up fast and put his top secret training to use, learning terms like “had the need to know.”

“I was on the front line at age 18-and-a-half and I carried a pistol almost anywhere I went,” he said.

Mitchell said part of his job was delivering top-secret communications to wherever he was sent.

“You could only give that information to the one it was meant for, who ‘had the need to know,’” he said. “It didn’t have to be an officer. In a code, they would tell us who it

was addressed to, and if someone came and wanted to see it, they couldn’t because it was classified (as) ‘had the need to know.’”

Mitchell said the secret messages would come in Morse code and then be transcribed. The code would change every day to keep the details of the messages a secret to everyone except the people who needed to know.

“Nobody really knew you had the top secret message because there was no indication who would deliver it or receive it,” he said.

Mitchell and his wife, Valin, were married Oct. 29, 1988, and have been together for 35 years. They have lived in Putnam County since 1967, except for about six to eight years when Arnold Mitchell traveled for work. They have nine children between them, 25 grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren and another two expected in December and March. He is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Palatka.

Mitchell enjoys fishing and used to hunt, but he said age crept up on him so he can no longer do the latter because he can’t climb trees.

*See MITCHELL page 26*



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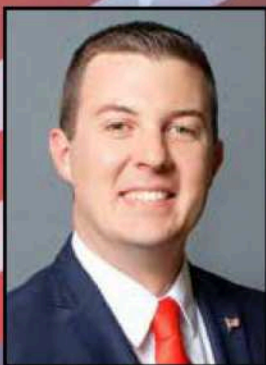
# Honoring the Best & the Bravest

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**PFC Haylee Ann Mullins -  
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**Brian Shuler - Navy**



*Matt Reynolds*

Putnam County Clerk of Circuit Court & Comptroller

[putnamclerk.com](http://putnamclerk.com)





Trisha Murphy / Palatka Daily News

Left: Arnold Dee Mitchell points to the wall in his home showcasing members of his family.

Right: Arnold Dee Mitchell kneels next to some of the 11 crosses he and his wife, Valin, place on their lawn for Memorial Day in 2022. The white crosses had the names of 11 servicemen who were from Putnam County who were casualties of the Vietnam War.

## MITCHELL *Continued from page 24*

"I like fishing so good. I put a pond in my yard and put fish in it, and I go out there and fish," he said. "I'm also very involved with my church work."

After his honorable discharge from the Marine Corps, Mitchell worked for about 20 years at the Putnam Correctional Institution in East Palatka, where he was the maintenance and construction superintendent. He also had his own construction business. He retired in 2012.

During his time in the Marine Corps, Mitchell received campaign ribbons with a gold star for serving in Guantanamo Bay twice and Vietnam once.

Mitchell said serving his country had its ups and downs. He was exposed to the Agent Orange chemical three times and later developed a brain tumor, which caused him to stay in the veterans hospital in Gainesville for 29 days for surgery and treatment.

Although he was never wounded in combat, Mitchell admits he saw things in Vietnam he would care to forget.

"I am 40% disabled with post-traumatic stress disorder and can't be around loud noises," he said.

When asked if he had fears while serving in the Marine Corps, his answer was "yes."

"Every day I was there," he answered. "The Vietnamese would put beer and cold drinks laced with glass in burlap bags and try to hand them out. They also would put young children in the bags with a hand grenade and have them pull the pin when our soldiers were close enough. That was a tough thing to see."

Mitchell recalls being in a war-related squirmish as part of company Charlie 2-4, Second Battalion, Fourth Regiment, where not many Marines came back alive. He was also one of 17 who survived out of 146 troops who were ambushed by the Viet Cong.

"I have had experiences, even after me and my wife got

married, where I have slept on the couch because of having a flashback," he said.

Mitchell knows why it took some persuasion for his mother to give her permission for him to join the Marine Corps.

"She was afraid I would go over there and get killed," he said. "When I joined, the Vietnam War wasn't going on. I was one of the originals who hit the beach landing on May 5, 1965."

Mitchell said even as bad as some of his war experiences were, if he had to do it all over again, he most likely would.

"I really love this country," he said. "I have been around a good portion of the world and there is nowhere that even compares to this wonderful country we live in."

Mitchell said one of the highlights of serving in the Marines came when Bob Hope hosted a United Service Organizations show in 1965 while he was in Vietnam.

Despite his heroics while in the service, Mitchell calls himself a normal, country guy who is strong-minded.

"I think serving your country is a wonderful thing to happen," he said. "I think every young man, if he could do it without the risk of dying, should do it. You learn discipline, obedience and appreciation for the freedoms we have in this country."

Mitchell remembers thinking lots of times he could die while in wartime. He knows who the heroes of wartime are: the ones who come home in a body bag.

"Sometimes I reflect on it and wonder why someone else died and not me," he said. "I was fortunate. They gave all they had to give so we could live and have the freedoms we have today. I am just another cog in the wheel."



## Honoring Our Veterans: A Grateful Salute

At the Putnam County School District, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to our Veterans - those who have valiantly served our nation and continue to do so today. Among our dedicated staff, we're proud to have numerous individuals who not only educate the youth of Putnam County but have also proudly served in the armed forces.

Join us in a moment of honor and recognition as we celebrate those who have devoted their lives to our great nation, and in turn, to the students of our school district. The values instilled by our Veterans echo through our hallways, shaping the future of our students and making our nation stronger than ever.

### Their Sacrifice. Our Inspiration.



**Tim Parker**  
Putnam County  
Property  
Appraiser



Dear Veterans,

In celebration of Veteran's Day, I would like to extend my most heartfelt thanks to our veterans, their families and their loved ones. Our veterans know sacrifice and dedication to duty. They sacrifice for their country and for freedom of people they may never meet. They serve faithfully in allegiance to our country.

Our duty as citizens is to protect the honor of those heroes who sacrifice for our freedom and safekeeping during their service, after their service, and in their passing, so that they may continue to live in dignity here and in our memory.

On behalf of my office, I would like to wish you and your family a happy and safe Veteran's Day.

Sincerely,  
*Tim Parker*

Putnam County Property Appraiser

### VETERANS EXEMPTIONS

If you are or anyone you know is eligible for a Veteran-related exemption, please call our office at 386-329-0286 for more information.

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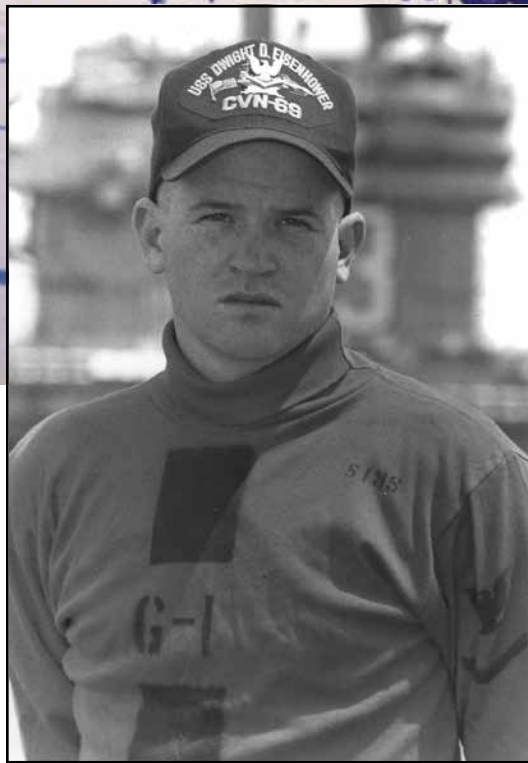
[pa.putnam-fl.com](http://pa.putnam-fl.com)

## May Their Sacrifices Never Be Forgotten



# Les Sims

## FIRST IN LINE



Photos submitted by Les Sims

Above: Pictured is the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, where Les Sims was stationed while in the Navy. Left: Les Sims stands stoic on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower during his time in the Navy.

*Veteran applies Navy lessons  
to civilian, business life.*

**By Sarah Cavacini**  
*Palatka Daily News*

**T**he current president of Armstrong Roofing in San Mateo saw the Navy as the next step forward while growing up in St. Augustine.

Serving in the military was Les Sims' way toward new opportunities because his family couldn't afford to send him to college, he said.

"I enlisted just as soon as I could," Sims said.

### **His starting point**

In 1994, 17-year-old Sims joined the Navy six days after graduating high school.

Sims, who was honorably discharged from the military as a petty officer third class, grew up swimming

*See SIMS page 30*



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Photos submitted by Les Sims

Navy veteran Les Sims stands on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1994 next to an air hanger his squadron would use during missions.

## *SIMS* Continued from page 28

and surfing. He and his friends planned to go into the Marines together. He didn't plan to be a "sailor" in the Navy, he joked.

Then, he graduated from Flagler-Palm Coast High School earlier than his friends and met a Navy recruiter.

"(The recruiter) said, 'You know, what do you like to do?' and I told him. And he said, 'Well, you ever thought of being a rescue swimmer?'" Sims recalled.

The recruiter told Sims rescue swimmers fly around in helicopters, jump out and save people.

"I'm like, 'Well, that sounds cool. OK, let's do that,'" Sims said.

The Navy veteran said he was decked out in full gear as he trained in boot camp from 3 a.m. – 6: 30 p.m. daily to

become a rescue swimmer.

Sims, now 47, was stationed on the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and was enlisted to serve four years. Although it was a new experience and he was away from home, he wasn't scared at all.

"I'm ambitious. I'm one of those guys who's always looking for the positive in everything," Sims said. "At no point, I think, in my entire military career, even in the bad times, was I ever scared."

During his first two weeks on the Eisenhower in the summer of 1994, Sims traveled to Haiti when the Caribbean country's military overthrew their government. The United States' goal in Operation Uphold Democracy was to restore peace, Sims said.

*See SIMS page 32*





**"And the star-spangled banner  
forever shall wave  
O'er the land of the free and  
the home of the brave!"**

*Francis Scott Key*

As we celebrate Veterans Day, we are once again reminded that freedom is not free. Just as America fought for independence in 1776, American troops continue to defend freedom around the world today. Veterans Day is a day to honor the men and women who have sacrificed so much to protect our liberty. It's a day to proudly celebrate our great country and the ideals it represents.

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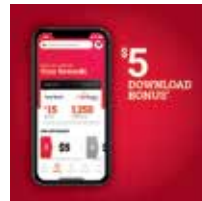
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He was one of the first rescue swimmers to volunteer to drop down onto Haiti beaches. Just two days prior to the drop plan, Sims turned 18, which meant he could finally spring into action. Anyone under 18 could not participate in that operation, he said.

Sims hit the beaches with attack helicopters and tactical vehicles. The Haitian military wanted to fight until the U.S. troops hit the beach, Sims said, but laid down their weapons after American forces touched down.

"We had no loss of life, not a shot fired," Sims said. "That was the first operation and a really eye-opening operation that I got to be involved with."

Sims said he always wanted to be the first to volunteer for operations. Every time officers asked who wanted to go on deployment, he immediately put up his hand. He didn't have a wife or children at the time and didn't ask where the operations would take him or what they planned to do.

His mom never asked why or where he was being deployed because she didn't want to burden Sims, he said, but she had many sleepless nights.

"You find out in hindsight that this took way more of a toll on my mom," he said. "A lot of times, I couldn't tell her I was even leaving. I would just have to disappear."

Throughout Sims' career, his unit was sent on numerous operations in Bosnia, Israel and Turkey, among other nations.

### **Being thankful**

When Sims was deployed to different countries, he didn't see the areas most tourists visit. Instead, he experienced the rural sides of economically disadvantaged nations. Sims said visiting Haiti for the first time made him value

just how well people have it in America.

"I got to really see how they operate, how people live in these third-world countries," he said.

Now, he takes what he saw and what he learned and continues to pass it along to his three children.

"I think that's helped in some of their successes in their life, just realizing that ... some of their problems are what I call 'first-world problems,'" he said.

Sims said he met his wife, Gina, and had children after moving to Putnam County in 2000.

After his career in the Navy, Sims took some contracting jobs before ending up at Armstrong Roofing, where he's worked since he settled in Putnam.

Sims also stays involved with the community by serving as the chairman of the Education Foundation of Putnam County and president of the Florida Roofing and Sheet Metal Contractors Association. Gov. Ron DeSantis appointed him to the Career-Source of Florida board.

Not only has what he experienced while serving in the Navy helped him as a parent, but he applies that knowledge to his career, he said. Sims saw tough, sometimes gruesome sights while in the military, but it taught him how to handle hardships later in life.

Sims said Nothing ever surprised him when he was on active duty, and he rolled with whatever task came his way. He learned how to overcome adversity, and he works to teach his staff at Armstrong Roofing the same lessons.

"When you think there's no options in life and life is tough and life is bad," Sims said, "there's always an option."



Photos submitted by Les Sims  
Les Sims served in the Navy from 1994 to 1998.



Photos submitted by Les Sims  
Navy veteran Les Sims is pictured in 2023.





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# VFW *to honor veterans with memorial plaza*



File Photo/ Palatka Daily News

Two statues of U.S. service members holding American flags have been placed at the VFW Post 3349 War Memorial Plaza.

**By Brandon D. Oliver**  
*Palatka Daily News*

*This story was originally published in the March 29, 2023, edition of the Palatka Daily News*

A veterans group in Palatka is overseeing construction on a memorial for military service members and hopes to have it completed in time for Memorial Day.

The VFW Post 3349 War Memorial Plaza currently consists of a stone walkway, benches bearing the names of some of America's major military conflicts and waist-high statues of service members clutching American flags.

Post Quartermaster Gerald Shuler said work on the plaza has been coming along nicely but he can't wait to see the finished product, which will include, among

other things, posts to erect American, Florida and prisoner of war flags to be used during ceremonies.

"We've been working on it now for a few months," Shuler said, estimating work began around January. "It's still a work in progress."

Officials at the post, 3201 Reid St., came up with the idea to build a memorial plaza after veteran Ron Sliter said he would donate money toward the cause, Shuler said. Sliter wanted to see a memorial that featured the conflict in which he served, the quartermaster said, so post officials matched his donation and began laying out plans.



"We had a Korean War veteran," Shuler said. "He said he would donate \$5,000 toward a memorial that included the Korean War."

The two memorial plaza benches – which list World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan – are situated around a fire pit that will be used for ceremonies, Shuler said. The post last year purchased the adjoining lot to its west, which still needs to be cleared before more benches and a walkway can be added, he said.

Although the lot wasn't purchased to be used for a memorial, Shuler said, post officials ultimately decided to use it for part of the project.

"Eventually, we're going to have some benches out there for a place to sit and a footpath that goes out to the water," he said, pointing to the stream that flows nearby.

Shuler said the post wants to have the project completed by May 29 so Memorial Day and, later, Veterans Day ceremonies can take place there every year.

The site can also be used for memorial services for veterans who have passed away, Shuler added. To do so, he said, the deceased service member's family would need to contact the post to coordinate the service.

Aside from its ceremonial uses, the plaza will be a place where veterans can visit – alone or with their families – to simply reflect on their time in the military and remember the people who served with them, Shuler said.

"For veterans," he said, "they can come, sit and collect their thoughts, remember things."

For information or to inquire about visiting the memorial plaza when it's finished, call Post 3349 at 386-328-2863.



File Photo/ Palatka Daily News

Gerald Shuler, the quartermaster of VFW Post 3349 in Palatka, stands at the memorial plaza the group is having built.

# VETERANS DAY



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Brandon D. Oliver/Palatka Daily News

JROTC cadets carry the American and Florida flags during the Palatka Junior-Senior High School Homecoming Parade in October.

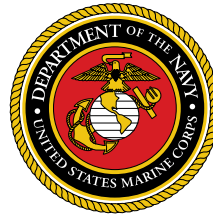
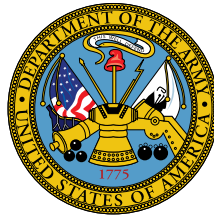
## Palatka Daily News

**T**he Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps operates in more than 1,700 private and public high schools and mentors about 314,000 cadets annually, according to [usarmyjrotc.com](http://usarmyjrotc.com).

Crescent City, Interlachen and Palatka junior-senior high schools have JROTC programs that provide cadets with discipline, leadership skills and career options after graduating from high school.

According to the website, 50% of JROTC cadets are minorities and 40% are female. Nationwide, the program is led by about 4,000 instructors who are retired from active duty, reserve duty or National Guard Army service.

**Veterans Day is a great time for anyone to learn more about the various branches of the U.S. military.**



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## PALATKA DAILY NEWS



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