

Indian River Woodcarvers Honor Purple Heart Recipients

By John Bircher, MOPH Public Relations

On Saturday, January 20, 2018, sixty Purple Heart recipients from across America gathered at the National Navy UDT-SEAL Museum in Fort Pierce, Florida. They were there to be individually honored by the Indian River Woodcarvers Club for their service and sacrifice to their Nation.



Hundreds Gather in Ft. Pierce for Ceremony



Eagle Head Canes Wait for their new owner

For the past six years, the woodcarvers have held an annual ceremony to present a special cane, hand carved by Club members with an American Bald Eagle on top which serves as the cane's handle, to current and former members of the Armed Forces who have been wounded in combat or by an act of international terrorism. For their wounds, they each have received the Purple Heart medal. In addition to the eagle, the US National Emblem, the woodcarvers individualize each cane for the specific veteran to whom it will be presented. Some of the canes are carved in a few weeks while others take several months to complete, depending on the individual carver. Each cane shows the history of the individual veteran's service to his country, including details about the individual's service branch, awards earned and dates of enlistment and discharge.

A little known fact is that the bald eagle was chosen on June 20, 1782 as the official emblem of the United States because of its long life, great strength and majestic looks. It was also believed that it existed only on the North American continent. Ironically, it was on August 7th that same year that General George Washington established the Badge of Merit, forerunner of the Purple Heart, as America's first military decoration



The Beginning of a Purple Heart Cane



Indian River Woodcarvers at work

The Indian River Woodcarvers took on the Purple Heart Cane Project about six years ago after hearing about a similar program in Michigan. Until now, it was primarily by word of mouth that Purple Heart recipients were even aware of the project. At their first ceremony, the local carvers gave out only two canes, but the program has grown every year, reaching its peak this year with sixty recipients. Each cane is consecutively numbered and, to date, 294 veterans have received the canes. There are only two criteria to qualify to receive a cane – provide proof that you are a Purple Heart recipient (DD-214), and agree to attend the ceremony in person.



Under the Watchful Eye of an Eagle



Jonathan and Michael Suldo Intro by Lasenby

Among this year's recipients, were a father and son duo, Michael and Jonathan Suldo, who flew in from Lafayette, Louisiana to receive their canes and sat next to each other at the ceremony. The father, Michael, is a US Navy veteran who flew helicopters in Vietnam. His son Jonathan served with the Louisiana Army National Guard's 256th Infantry Brigade Combat Team in Iraq. Although they served during different conflicts and in different branches of the military, they were both wounded in action and received the Purple Heart medal. Also receiving a cane this year was Patriot James Schaller, Adjutant of New York Chapter 187 who flew in from Tonawanda, NY with his wife Carol. Schaller was the 2012-2013 MOPH Patriot of the Year. Although a few of the cane recipients were members of the MOPH, the majority were not.

Guest speaker for the ceremony was Retired Army Major General Wayne Jackson, a 38 year Army veteran, who spoke on the history of the Purple Heart medal. Master of Ceremonies for the day was Lloyd Lasenby, who leads the Indian River Woodcarvers Purple Heart Cane Program.



MG Jackson and Terry Mize, of Lula, GA



Lloyd Lasenby Introduces Jim Schaller

According to Lasenby, “Florida has the second largest number of veterans outside California and we always have requests from people who want to receive a cane. We are trying to fill every request, but it gets harder every year.” Unfortunately, “although there are Woodcarving Clubs in almost every state,” said Lasenby, “very few are interested in replicating our Purple Heart project.” He is hoping that MOPH Chapters will reach out to Woodcarving Clubs in their local areas and encourage them to join the effort to recognize the service and sacrifice of Purple Heart recipients. For more information on the Purple Heart Cane Project or to apply for a cane, go to <http://indianriverwoodcarvers.weebly.com/> .