

News and stories

Louisiana monument honors Gold Star families

Oct 2 2018

[Texarkana Gazette](#)

NEW ORLEANS— Louisiana has dedicated a monument to the families of people who died in the line of duty during military service—and the veteran who has pushed for such monuments nationwide will celebrate his 95th birthday in Louisiana.

The National World War II Museum will hold a reception and celebration Tuesday for Hershel "Woody" Williams, who won the Medal of Honor as a Marine on Iwo Jima during that war.

Williams, of Fairmount, West Virginia, was present Sunday when Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards dedicated the state's monument to Gold Star families. It's described as the first such monument on state capitol grounds anywhere in the country. It is in a section of the capitol grounds called Louisiana Veterans Memorial Park.

Those present included Jessika Summers and Antoinette Cothran, whose nephew, Marine Lance Cpl. Derrick Cothran, died in Iraq in 2006, The Advocate reported. Also there were Jessica Fugitt, whose fiance, Lt. Patrick Ruth, was killed in a training accident a year ago, and Ruth's father, David Ruth.

The Arkansas and West Virginia legislatures also have authorized monuments to Gold Star families on capital grounds.

The Louisiana monument's four panels representing homeland, families, patriot, and sacrifice, and its cutout of a saluting service member to honor dead service members, are along the lines suggested by Williams' Medal of Honor Foundation, which he created in 2010 to campaign for such monuments. The foundation also provides scholarships for "gold star children."

According to the foundation, there are 42 monuments and 44 more in programs in a total of 39 states. The first was erected in 2013, in the Donel C. Kinnard Memorial State Veterans Cemetery in Dunbar, West Virginia.

Williams was born Oct. 2, 1923, in Quiet Dell, West Virginia. During the battle of Iwo Jima, on Feb. 23, 1945, he volunteered to take a flamethrower to open a way for infantry through "devastating machine gun fire" from a "network of reinforced concrete pillboxes, buried mines and black volcanic sands," according to his Medal of Honor citation.

According to the foundation website, Williams delivered telegrams informing gold star families about a service member's death before he enlisted in the Marine Corps. After World War II, he decided that families who had lost a loved one during the war were not getting enough consideration and recognition.

He retired from the Marines and Marine Corps Reserves after 20 years and worked for 33 as a veteran service representative in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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