

News and stories

Gold Star Memorial in Marietta honors sacrifice of fallen, their families

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Doug Loyer | [News and Sentinel](#)

MARIETTA — In honor of those who have paid the ultimate price for the country and to honor the families who lost loved ones, a Gold Star Memorial Monument was dedicated Saturday in Gold Star Park on Harmar Hill, which was formerly known as Lookout Park.

The rain held off, the American flag was raised and Carlin's Battery D 1st West Virginia Light Artillery group from Parkersburg shot off a Civil War cannon to get the memorial event under way.

In addition, Gabby Martinez of Marietta High School performed the National Anthem, Veritas Classical Academy sang patriotic songs and Susan Henning Smith played "Taps" during Saturday's monument dedication.

A Gold Star Family member can be any relative: mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, adoptive or foster parents, wife, husband, child, stepchild, adopted child, brothers, sisters, half brothers or sisters, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces or nephews of any loved one who made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom.

The Gold Star Family Memorial was created by Congressional Medal

of Honor recipient Hershel "Woody" Williams. Now 94, Williams was presented that award by President Truman in 1945 at the White House for his heroics fighting on Iwo Jima during World War II.

The memorial itself has a cutout in the shape of a saluting soldier. The back has four panels; one representing Marietta, the second representing the loss families suffer, the third depicts patriotism showing the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima and the fourth panel honors hallowed ground where they rest.

"This will be our 38th Gold Star Family Monument in the country" said Williams. "What a fantastic place this is, It's an ideal setting. The public needs to know that sacrifices have been made so that we can be who we are and do what we do."

Williams explained that there was nothing like this honoring the families until 2013. The first monument was dedicated that year in Institute, W.Va. Other communities then started to pick up on the idea. The monument dedicated in Gold Star Park will be the fifth monument in Ohio with two more in the process. There are also five monuments in West Virginia. There's only 14 states that don't have a monument or are not working on one.

"This monument is for those in the communities that gave more than us. By erecting this monument, this community is accomplishing a feeling of hope and assurance," said Williams. "This memorial should serve as a reminder that we are free because of them. It is this sort of program for recognition and honor of Gold Star families that reminds us of who we are, where we are and that we are blessed every day because they made it possible."

Another speaker at the dedication was Karen Kelly, a Gold Star Mother who lost her son, Robert Kelly, in Afghanistan in 2010. She is the wife of current White House Chief of Staff John Kelly.

"I'm honored that the people of Marietta are recognizing Gold Star families," said Kelly. "The fact that Woody's dream is coming true is a beautiful thing."

"We Gold Star families have lost our sons, daughters, husbands and wives but we are not alone in our pain," said Kelly. "The men and women our children and spouses served with also feel the pain and loss. They lost their brothers and sisters in arms ... their friends, mentors and confidants. They've lost leaders they never will forget," she said.

"From the very moment we learn of our loss, all of our lives changed forever. We did not know that the pain would ever leave us," said Kelly. "This monument honors Gold Star families and their pain and sacrifices. It is my hope that this memorial will become a place of healing and friendship. That those who come here will connect with other families and share stories of the ones they have lost. As long as we speak of them, they are not gone."

According to Roy Trembly, Commandant for the Sgt. Bob O'Malley Detachment Marine Corps League 1436 and Committee Co-Chair, they started the Gold Star Memorial project last July. Ground breaking took place in October.

"This is a happy day," said David Smith, the other Committee Co-Chair. "We've been working towards this. We're proud for the part that we've been able to play in this. This park is the perfect setting for the monument. The purpose is to give families a quiet place to come and reflect and remember."

Retired U.S. Army Capt. James McCormick served as Master of Ceremonies.

"By having this event, we honor the families and their sacrifices," said McCormick. "I was shot three times, but that is nothing compared to what they sacrificed."

McCormick is well decorated and has three Purple Hearts.

"It's not a lot to ask for us to remember what they gave. It's so much more than just a monument, a name on a wall or a flag," said McCormick. "It really represents who we are as American people."

We are willing to sacrifice anything for freedom.”

Marietta Mayor Joe Mathews said he thought it was a beautiful and fantastic event, a great crowd attended and was honored to have Williams present to celebrate with the local community.

U.S. Rep. Bill Johnson also said it was a special day.

“I served 26 and a half years in the U.S. Air Force and love this country with all my heart,” said Johnson. “I lost a first cousin so my family know the grief of losing a loved one in service to our country.

“This is an important memorial. We have to teach what freedom costs to future generations,” said Johnson. “This will be here for kids and grandkids and future generations to see and learn that freedom is not free. It comes with a price.”

Jesse Ault passed away in Iraq in 2008 at age 28. His best friend in high school was Travis Russell. They did everything together.

“We were best friends and joined the Army together,” shared Russell, who now lives in Williamstown.

Ault’s mother, Ginny Billiter of Greenback, W.Va., was going to be in town for the Gold Star Memorial dedication and sent the information to Russell. He came up from behind her and surprised her. He also brought his wife and two kids. They all wore shirts in memory of Ault. Some had “Chap” on the shirts, which was his nickname.

“It’s great that they do this for Gold Star families,” said Russell. “She’s been through a lot. There will never be another one like Jesse. He was always a good friend and dependable. You could always lean on him.”

“I’m glad to see people honor my son and others who gave their lives,” said Billiter. “I’m happy to see so many people show up and I’m glad to see my son’s best friend and family. Travis surprised

me. I let him know about this but wasn't sure if he would be here.

They got a chance to visit, share some laughs and catch up. She said her heart was full of a lot of happy memories.

The Gold Star Monument is now paid for, but will need maintenance. Organizers would also like to add five benches, a walking path and other enhancements. Donations may be made through the City of Marietta, which has set up a separate account that can accept donations or through the Marine Corps League. If donating to the account, please note that it is for the Gold Star Monument.

Other Gold Star Monuments are in the works. To find out more information, visit hwwmohf.org.