

Honoring a Bronze Star Recipient

VFW members honor a fallen hero half a century later

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Roger Soiset stood among the 80 guests happily crammed into Trinity Baptist Church in Thomasville, Ga., on a warm afternoon in July 2019.

The VFW member from Post 5255 in Grayson, Ga., had traveled across the state with four others who served alongside him in the 1st Plt., 7th Bn., 199th Inf. Bde. to honor a fallen comrade for his heroic efforts during the Vietnam War.

The four veterans — all VFW members — joined Lynwood “The Bear” Thornton’s family, church members and other invited guests in a posthumous ceremony awarding Thornton the Bronze Star almost half a century after his death.

Thornton, who died on Jan. 17, 1970, in Long Khanh Province, Vietnam, fought and sacrificed himself to save the platoon from an ambush by the Viet Cong, but had “fallen through the cracks,” according to Soiset.

The appeal for Thornton’s Bronze Star began over five years ago, led by Soiset, who served as the lieutenant in charge of the platoon when Thornton was killed in 1970.

“Thornton should have gotten a Bronze Star at the time,” Soiset recalled. “But when we eventually submitted a request, it was initially rejected because it wasn’t filled out right. Then it just kept getting rejected.”

With help from Lyndall Knight, a Thomasville resident and retired sergeant major in the Army, however, the request for the Bronze Star Medal was finally accepted and approved by President Donald J. Trump in May 2019.

“I had kind of given up on trying until about a year ago, when [Thornton’s] sister’s husband [Knight] got involved,” Soiset said. “He was very proficient in filling the forms out and getting the right people involved.”

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111

Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

The President not only approved the request for Thornton, but also granted one on behalf of Harold Jantz, a living member of Soiset's platoon who is a VFW life member of Post 2913 in Patchogue, N.Y.

Jantz's Bronze Star Medal ceremony happened a month before Thornton's at the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C.

"That was a pretty impressive ceremony," Soiset said of Jantz's trip to Capitol Hill. "Some of Thornton's family couldn't make the trip to Washington, D.C., so that's why we had decided to do his near his home in Thomasville."

At Trinity Baptist Church, Soiset watched the Thornton family receive the Bronze Star Medal, which came along with a certificate reading: "Private First Class Thornton's actions are in keeping with the finest traditions of military service and bring great credit upon him, the 199th Infantry Brigade and the United States Army."

He was joined by surviving members of the platoon, which included Jantz, Robert Kenney and Richard Uhler. Kenney served as a rifleman in Vietnam, and Uhler was a platoon medic at the time.

Following Thornton's ceremony in July, Soiset traveled to Conyers, Ga., for an additional homage at the "Walk of Heroes," a veterans' memorial park created and currently operated by triple-amputee veteran Tommy Clack.

"One of the many things to see there is a section with pavers for families to dedicate a stone with service details inscribed for their deceased members, as well as for living veterans to have one placed," Soiset added. "Two of the pavers now in place are for Lynwood Thornton and myself, side-by-side."

This article is courtesy of VFW National Chaplain Jim Jenkins, and is featured in the March/April 2020 issue of VFW Checkpoint. If you're a Post, District or Department Commander and aren't receiving the Checkpoint e-newsletter, please contact the VFW magazine at magazine@vfw.org.