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Gold Star Families St. Augustine National Cemetery Mini-Tour Teacher Notes

Florida State Standards

SS.1.A.2.4 Identify people from the past who have shown character ideals and principles including honesty, courage, and responsibility.
SS.2.A.1.1 Examine primary and secondary sources.
SS.4.A.1.1 Analyze primary and secondary resources to identify significant individuals and events throughout Florida history.
SS.3.A.1.1 Analyze primary and secondary sources.

Overview of the Tour

The Gold Star Family remains an integral part of honoring the sacrifice of fallen Veterans. This tour introduces students to Veterans and their Gold Star Families by exploring the evolution of this idea in the twentieth century. We will use examples of Veterans interred in the Saint Augustine National Cemetery, as well as the Florida National Cemetery, and two American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) cemeteries overseas: the Aisne-Marne and Meuse-Argonne American Cemeteries in eastern France.

Historical Context

This tour will help you to understand the history and evolution of the idea of the Gold Star Mother/Family and give you insight into the journeys of several Gold Star families with connections to Florida. We will explore how the US government, inspired by mothers who had lost their sons, created the Gold Star program to allow the mothers and wives of deceased World War I servicemembers to visit the overseas gravesites of their sons and husbands. Approximately, 6,700 mothers and widows traveled to ABMC Cemeteries during the 1930s. Because of racial laws and practices of the time, African American mothers and widows traveled on segregated voyages with less than equal accommodations. To a lesser extent, pilgrims traveled to visit daughters and sisters who died in service. Over the twentieth century, the idea of the Gold Star Mother grew into the Gold Star Family. While the pilgrimages were only a part of the

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World War I generation, the extension of the Gold Star to the entire family recognizes the sacrifice and loss of all those related to the fallen servicemember, including fathers, siblings, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Over the course of this tour, we will discuss the evolution of the Gold Star Program using the stories of families, wars, and Veterans buried in both ABMC in France and National Cemetery Administration (NCA) cemeteries in Florida.

Stop One: The Gold Star Program and Mollie Daniels (SANC Flagstaff)

Slide 3:

Introduction to the Gold Star Program

The idea of the Gold Star Mother developed over the course of America's involvement in World War I. The government sought a way to lionize and honor the sacrifice of mothers and, to a lesser extent, widows, who lost their sons in the Great War. After the war, the War Department asked the fallen's next of kin, most often their mother as so many young Veterans died before they could marry, whether she wanted her son's remains returned home or interred in what became the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) overseas American cemeteries. Most wanted the remains returned home, but thousands elected to have their sons rest among their fellow Veterans near the fields in which they made the ultimate sacrifice. So that Americans could find their eternal rest together, and not mixed with French, British or German war dead, the French offered land to the US for American cemeteries. The French government hoped that if the Americans who died for France remained interred on French soil the US would be more likely to come to the nation's aid if needed again in the future.

Throughout the 1920s, reinterments of the dead took place, moving American dead from burials that happened when they died, often near other Allied troops or even in French community cemeteries near hospitals, to the newly established ABMC cemeteries. Later that decade, mothers lobbied the halls of Congress to develop a program for them to travel to the gravesites of their sons. The program that came from their efforts became known as the War Mothers and Widows Pilgrimage. Over time, they became more commonly known as Gold Star Pilgrimages. Between 1930 and 1933, nearly 6,700 mothers and widows traveled overseas to visit the final resting places of their loved ones. The government fully funded these pilgrimages and, in addition to visiting the gravesite, each trip included a Pilgrimage Passport, roundtrip passage on a ship, hotel accommodations, food, tourism, military officer chaperones, and healthcare. Sadly, because of racial laws and prejudices of the time, the government segregated the pilgrimages of white and African American mothers. Later in the tour, when we talk about the life and service of African American Veteran John D. Watkins, we will discuss in more detail how segregation affected the pilgrimages.

For most of these mothers and widows, the pilgrimage to their loved one's grave in France, Belgium, or England was their first time traveling overseas. It took great courage for these

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women to leave their homes, without their immediate family, and go on such a voyage. While we remain at the flagstaff, we will introduce you to one such brave woman, Mrs. Mollie Daniels of Tennessee.

Slide 4

Pilgrimage Letter Document Based Questions (DBQ)

This slide shows a letter sent to Mollie Daniels regarding what to pack on her Gold Star Pilgrimage. This is a standard letter sent to all mothers and not addressed to her specifically. Here is a transcript of the letter:

"American War Mothers

Dear Gold Star Mother:

When you go on your Pilgrimage, please take with you only the few clothes you will actually need, for you will not care to appear so much better dressed than the large majority of our Mothers who cannot afford an expensive outfit.

The United States is uniformly warmer in temperature than France and England, so it will be well to be provided with a heavy cloth coat and a dress of tweed or light wool. Not more than two additional dresses will be needed and these should not be of too thin material or light in color. Many French Mothers still wear mourning clothes for their sons after all these years and they would not understand our women if their clothes were too gay in appearance. This does not mean that you should wear black altogether but dark clothes will not only stand travel better but will have a much more attractive appearance at all times.

Warm stockings and underclothes should be taken and each Mother will want sensible walking shoes, an umbrella, and overshoes. A small felt hat will be all the headgear needed. Gloves, handkerchiefs, a few simple toilet articles and a small sewing kit for mending will complete the list of necessities.

The American War Mothers will aid you in every way possible.

Be of good courage, you are a Mother of a hero, going to pay homage at his cross, where you will find peace. You will return with a feeling of grateful loyalty to your country that will forever remain in your heart."

After reading the document, answer the following questions:

- What details in this letter help you to know more about the Gold Star pilgrimages?
- What do we learn about the women who made the pilgrimages?
- What do we learn about what they packed?

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- What do we learn about cultural sensitivity with the French?

Slide 5

Mollie Daniels

In 2018, Gail Burnham, who lives in Orlando, saw the work of the UCF VLP in local news media. Gail contacted UCF VLP and told them about her great grandmother, Mollie Daniels. Mollie was a World War I Gold Star Mother. In the early 1930s, Mollie traveled aboard the SS *Geroge Washington* on a pilgrimage to France, where she visited her son, Bernard (Bernie) Daniels (Gail's great uncle) interred in the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery. As Gail noted, "She [Mollie] was from a small town in Tennessee and had never traveled, but she didn't hesitate to go." Mollie collected a series of artifacts while on her pilgrimages, such as her Gold Star letter, her Pilgrimage Passport, postcards, and photographs. We've included images of some of these artifacts on the slides of this tour.

At 17 years old, Bernie Daniels enlisted in the United States Army on April 28, 1908 at Columbus Barracks in Columbus, OH. In order to meet the age criteria, Bernie entered his age as 19. He served with Company K, 6th Infantry Regiment, 10th Infantry Brigade, 5th Infantry Division in WWI. He was killed in action during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. He rests among his fellow Veterans in the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in Plot F, Row 21, Grave 40.

We thank Gail Burnham for generously allowing UCF VLP to publish her family's precious mementos. See more about Gail visit to UCF here:

<https://cah.ucf.edu/news/ucf-veterans-legacy-program-inspires-orlando-resident-to-share-family-history/>

Slide 6

Floridian WWI War Dead Interred Overseas

The UCF VLP thanks Gail Burnham for reaching out and introducing them to Mollie and Bernie. We are fortunate to know the story of one mother who made the pilgrimage to her son's gravesite. In our next two stops here at the flagstaff, we will introduce you to two of the 192 World War I Floridian Veterans whose families chose to lay them to rest overseas in eastern France. While we do not know if their mothers or widows made a pilgrimage, they can help us to explore the history of the Gold Star pilgrimages and the role segregation played in American families' experience of

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mourning their lost loved ones.

Stop Two: Luther Wade Pilcher (SANC Flagstaff) Aisne-Marne American Cemetery (Plot B, Row 10, Grave 68)

Slide 7

Luther Wade Pilcher

(Note: For a full biography of this Veteran, please visit the UCF VLP website:
<https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/biographies/amac/BB-10-68-F.html>)

Early Life:

The first of our Florida Veterans you will meet today is Luther Wade Pilcher. Luther was born January 1, 1898, in Dothan, AL. He had four siblings and his dad worked as a carpenter. While living in Dothan, Bercie Brown, a fourteen-year-old African American girl worked for the Pilchers as a servant. By 1910, the Pilchers left Dothan for the Florida Panhandle town of Noma. Luther's father owned and operated a general store there. As they had in Alabama, the Pilchers employed a live-in African American servant, in this case, twenty-four-year-old Bessie G. Gregory.

Military Life:

Luther joined the Marines at the age of 17 in Birmingham, AL on April 27, 1915. Like many, he joined under the auspices of being older than he really was. On May 4, 1915 he went to the Marine Barracks at the Navy Yard in Norfolk, VA where he trained with Company 1 until August. After the Haitian president was assassinated, he and a regiment of Marines deployed there to help restore order. He traveled aboard the USS *Connecticut* and arrived on August 4th. The US involvement was to protect Americans and US political and economic interests. Pilcher's unit played a crucial part in enforcing and carrying out this task. Pilcher also played a role in training and supervising the Haitian Gendarmerie, which was an armed force made up of US leadership and local troops. It was responsible for maintaining law and order in Haiti after the Marines left.

About a month after the US joined World War I in April of 1917, Luther received a promotion to the rank of corporal. On July 31, 1917, he and the 5th Marine Regiment boarded the USS *Henderson* to join the war effort in France. On August 1, Luther received another promotion as sergeant. They arrived in France on August 20 and trained in France before going into battle in 1918.

Luther's unit played a vital role in the counteroffensive against the German's final 1918 Spring Offensive. On June 6, 1918, the Marines engaged in battle against the

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Germans forces at Belleau Wood, just fifty miles east of Paris. This was the costliest day in the Marine Corps 142-year history. The Marines suffered 1,087 casualties that day, among them was Luther Wade Pilcher.

Legacy:

On June 26, 1918 the Marines successfully cleared Belleau Wood of German troops. Belleau Wood was the closest point the Germans got to Paris in 1918 and it became a legendary battle for Marines. To this day, the Marines, nicknamed the Devil Dogs because of their ferocity in this Battle, still make pilgrimages to Belleau Wood to drink from the Devil Dog fountain— on a farm just past the wood and the cemetery where Pilcher rests. After his death, Luther received the Distinguished Service and Navy Cross for his service and sacrifice. Additionally, his regiment received the French Fourragère (awarded to distinguished military units in the form of a braided cord) from the French government. Luther rests among his fellow Veterans in Plot B, Row 10, Grave 68 in the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery, Belleau France.

Stop Three: John D. Watkins (SANC Flagstaff) Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery (Plot H Row 6 Grave 23)

Slide 8

John D. Watkins

(Note: For a full biography of this Veteran, please visit the UCF VLP website:

<https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/biographies/maac/BH-6-23-F.html>)

Early Life:

John D. Watkins was born in Ocala, FL on February 22, 1889. His parents were James and Sarah. His father was born into slavery but his mother, born after the Civil War, was born free. John was one of four siblings, all of which went to school. His parents owned their own home, exceptional for African American families anywhere in the US and particularly in the south. His father worked as a farm laborer and his mother took care of the children. John and his family grew up in the Jim Crow South and were subjected to Black Codes—southern laws that took away the constitutional rights of African Americans and meant to terrorize them. Black Codes and segregation remained prominent across the South through the early-twentieth century. By 1918, John was labeled as a “vagrant”, illegal for African Americans at the time, a crime that often resulted in imprisonment and labor on a chain gang. Instead of a prison sentence, his arrest may have led to his enlistment in the military.

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Military Life:

When John enlisted, he listed automobile driver as a special skill not everyone had in the early 20th century— hinting at previous employment that we have not found in the historical record. He was inducted into the Army in Tampa, FL in 1918 and sent to Camp Dix, NJ in July. Because the Army remained segregated during World War I, John became a part of the all Black 807th Pioneer Infantry.

As John traveled to France aboard the *USS Siboney*. He received a promotion to corporal in September 1918. John and the 807th Pioneer Infantry fought in the largest battle in US history, the Meuse-Argonne Campaign. The 807th rebuilt transportation infrastructure, leveled ground for weapons, and buried the dead. African Americans were most often in labor and support jobs, but this did not shield them from the dangers of combat. Soldiers in the 807th often worked on the frontlines where they dug trenches and built bridges. On multiple occasions, they faced the attacks of German troops. Because the US Army did not train or equip them with weapons, troops from the 807th fought off the enemy with tools, bayonets, and weapons dropped by the Germans. Very few soldiers from the 807th returned home alive after the war.

John survived the war and enjoyed the Armistice on November 11, 1918. Unfortunately, shortly after, he fell sick with the flu in December 1918. The 1918 Influenza pandemic, which arrived in Europe with American troops, raged across the continent, afflicting many soldiers and civilians of all nationalities. Among American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) African Americans, especially suffered as they did not receive the same level of treatment and resources as white soldiers, treated in segregated poorly staffed facilities. This substandard care led to higher rates of illness and death among African Americans. John D. Watkins died on December 8, 1918 due to pneumonia, a complication of the flu.

Legacy:

After John's death, the Army awarded the 807th Pioneer Infantry the Silver Band for fighting in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign, and later, France awarded it the Croix de Guerre for bravery in combat. The African American and key black intellectuals highly regarded the 807th community. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most prominent black intellectuals of the period and leader of the NAACP, wrote about the bravery and accomplishments of the 807th Pioneer Infantry, using them as evidence that African Americans had earned the right to equal treatment and full citizenship in the US. John's mother, Sarah, chose to lay him to rest in the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery in Plot H Row 6 Grave 23.

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Slide 9

African American Gold Star Mothers

While African American mothers, such as Sarah Watkins, had the opportunity to make the pilgrimage to visit their son's graves overseas, segregation and racial prejudices created differences. For instance, the government prioritized pilgrimages of white mothers and widows over those of African Americans. While white women traveled aboard luxury line steamers, African American mothers traveled aboard commercial vessels. African American women did not stay in the same five-star hotels as white women, nor did they receive equal food. Very often they were served stereotypical meals— that is what white organizers thought African Americans ate. As with the white mothers and widows, US military officers escorted the African American pilgrims. Per military segregation regulations, only African American officers were authorized to do so.

Due to the racial segregation that surrounded the Gold Star Pilgrimages, some African American mothers and widows protested against the mistreatment. While many likely quietly refused to travel for these reasons, at least twenty-three African American mothers prominently decided to boycott the pilgrimages. Such a situation placed many mothers and widows in a difficult position. Most of them had never traveled outside the US before and recognized this was likely their only real opportunity to visit the gravesites of their fallen sons and husbands. Despite the cruelties of segregation, many black chose to go on the segregated pilgrimages to see their son's final resting place. In some cases, these mothers and widows received scrutiny by their fellow African Americans for going on the segregated trip. And all suffered indignities related to institutionalized discrimination in the US as it played out in these voyages.

Slide 10

African American Gold Star Mothers DBQ

As part of your discussion of the racial segregation experienced by African American Gold Star Mothers, have students do another DBQ. Read the article, have the students answer the questions below. Here is a transcript of the article:

"GOLD STAR MOTHERS GROUP ARRIVES HERE AFTER DELAY BY FOG

Delegation Will Lay Wreath at Arc de Triomphe This Afternoon

Party R, the last-but-one of the groups of gold star mothers reached the Gare des Invalides at 8 p.m. last night and were immediately shown to their hotels preparatory to a program of sightseeing today. Their arrival at Cherbourg yesterday on the George Washington had been delayed by fog.

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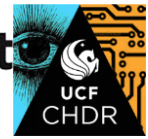
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Headed by Mrs. Bird W. Seymour of Rantoul, Kansas, the group will lay a wreath at the Arc de Triomphe at 3:30 o'clock this afternoon. Mrs Seymour lost two sons in the historic battles in the Meuse-Argonne sectors. A series of entertainments will be held for the members of the party during their stay in Paris.

In the meantime, party Q, the second and last group of colored war matrons comprising 40 in all, will visit Fontainebleau today, with the exception of four of their number, who will leave for Brookwood cemetery, in England. This group spent yesterday in a shopping tour of the city.

The Q division will leave for the Oise-Aisne cemetery tomorrow. An extensive sightseeing tour occupied the time of the colored mothers yesterday and the day previous, when they were officially welcomed by representatives of the French and American governments."

After reading the document, answer the following questions:

- What do we learn about the different Pilgrimage experiences of African American and white Gold Star Mothers?
- What do we learn about racial discrimination as an accepted practice/reality?
- What do we learn about contrasting opinions within the African American community regarding the Pilgrimages?
- What do we learn about the similarities and differences in the racial standards in the US and France in the early-twentieth century?

Slide 11

Service Banners and World War II War Dead

During World War I, the US government issued American families service banners, which they could hand in their windows to show they had a "man-in-service." Due to the longer and much larger American involvement in World War II, their use soared as millions of American families proudly showed they had someone in service with banners like the one pictured on this slide. While their use during the Korean War continued, they fell out of favor during Vietnam. The banners saw some resurgence after September 11, 2001 and the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

Families hung their service banners in the windows of their homes to signify, most commonly, a son or sons in military service during wartime. The banners featured a blue star for each family member in service. In the case of a fallen family member, the family replaced the blue star banner with a gold star one.

As with World War I, the ABMC established American cemeteries overseas for World War II war dead. Again, the US government, this time through the Return of the World War II Dead Program, gave families of the fallen the option to bring their loved one's remains home or have them interred overseas. Unlike World War I, the

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government funded no Gold Star Pilgrimages— with men buried in American cemeteries not just in a few countries in Europe but also in North Africa and Asia.

We will now move through SANC and discuss Floridan Veterans who served during World War II, Korea, Vietnam made the ultimate sacrifice. We will also talk about Gold Star families of the GWOT generation, who are buried in Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, FL. Over the course of these conflicts, the concept of the Gold Star Mother or Widow evolved to include the entire family of the lost servicemember.

Stop Four: Walter R. Battenburg (Plot D, Site 142)

Slide 12

Walter R. Battenburg

(Note: For a full biography of this Veteran, please visit the UCF VLP website with this link: <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/biographies/sanc/BD-0-142-F.html>)

Early Life:

Walter R. Battenburg was born on August 13, 1925 in Milwaukee, WI to Walter Sr. and Dolores Battenburg. Walter Sr. originally from Canada, joined the Canadian Army Medical Corps on July 18, 1917, during the First World War. He was given a compassionate discharge on August 14. Walter Sr. moved to Milwaukee in 1919 and became a laborer in a chemical plant. Walter's mother, Dolores Battenburg, was born in Milwaukee in 1899.

Military Service:

Walter registered for the draft on August 13, 1943, at age 18. He served in the US Army Air Force during World War II. He served as a Staff Sergeant with the 67th Bombardment Squadron, 44th Bombardment Group, 8th Air Force. Walter died in service on March 24, 1945, at age 20 on a B-24 Bomber named Kay Bar. German anti-aircraft fire shot down his aircraft during Operation Varsity. He was initially considered missing in action in April 1945. In May, the US Army Air Force confirmed Walter was killed in action.

Legacy:

The 44th Heritage Memorial Group dedicated a plaque outside the Shipdham Flying Club building, in Shipdham, England, to commemorate the 44th Bombardment Group. A Monument, which sits on the grounds of the All Saints Church of Shipdham, commemorates all the US servicemen of the 44th Bombardment Group, and the Shipdham Memorial Cross commemorates all those servicemembers of the 8th Air Force who died during World War II.

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Walter's mother Dolores attended a Gold Star Luncheon in 1965. The American Legion Auxiliary of Ocala put on the luncheon. It honored mothers who lost their sons in World War II. She served her community remembering the legacies of those fallen during the war.

Stop Five: William R. Cooper (Section E, Site 5)

Slide 13

William R. Cooper

Early Life:

William R. Cooper was born in Thomasville, GA on June 21, 1926, to Carlos, a World War I Veteran, and Hillie Cooper. He was the youngest of three boys. William's family moved to Florida in 1935, relocating to Leon County, possibly due to his father being a salesman. Unfortunately, by 1940 his father passed away, so Hillie moved her three boys and herself to Duval County. There, she became a beautician and had her own business.

William and his brother, Belvin, registered for the draft in Miami, FL in 1942. William lied about his age in order to register. His draft card stated that he was born on November 27, 1924. This was a common occurrence during this time since some young men wanted to join the fight as quickly as possible.

Military Life:

William enlisted in the Army in November of 1945 in Texas. He went to the Philippines and served as a metalworker. In 1946, William married Elinor McFarlin in Tennessee. He transferred from the Army to the newly formed US Air Force in 1947. He became a member of 314th Air Police Squadron and then joined the Combat Plans Division in October 1950. He deployed to fight in the Korean War in May 1951. Not soon after, William R. Cooper was killed in action in June 1951.

Legacy:

For his actions and sacrifice, William earned the Bronze Star Medal. William left behind his wife, two sons, and his brothers. In 2008, William's brother, Belvin, a World War II veteran, passed away due to natural causes.

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Stop Six: Randolph Wright Ford (Section E, Site 31-A)

Slide 14

Randolph Wright Ford

Early Life:

Randolph Wright Ford was born July 19, 1935 in Gainesville, FL to parents Francis A. Ford and Marian Ford. He had two sisters: Gwendolyn and Charlotte.

Military Service:

Randolph joined the Navy in 1952 and served for 16 years. He married wife Frankie Ford during service. Randolph was a Naval Aviator in Attack Squadron (VA) 860. He flew for the squadron while it was deployed off the coast of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. On June 11, 1968, enemy fire shot down his aircraft, which led to his capture by the North Vietnamese. The Navy designated him as a Prisoner of War (POW). Though neither the Navy nor his family knew at the time, Randolph Wright Ford died a few days after his capture on June 20, 1968.

Legacy:

Because the North Vietnamese did not inform the US of Randolph's death, his family believed him alive and a POW throughout the duration of the war. They learned the truth of his death in 1985, when the US government, working with the Vietnamese government, returned his remains home. His family interred him here in the Saint Augustine National Cemetery in Section E, Site 31-A on November 21, 1985.

Randolph had three children: Leslie Ford (daughter), Daniel Ford (son), Curtis Ford (son) to carry on his legacy. All members of this Gold Star family deeply mourned his loss. Tom Davis Jr's name appears with 58,275 others on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., Panel 55W, Line 5, to honor and remember him.

Stop Seven: Tom Davis Jr. (Section B, Site 567)

Slide 15

Tom Davis Jr.

Early Life:

Tom Davis was born November 6, 1936 in Florida. He lived with his mom, Annie, who was a widow, and his younger brother Calvin. By 1950, the family lived in St. Johns

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Military Life:

Tom enlisted in the Army on April 24, 1967, at the age of 31. He was in A Troop, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry Division. He rose to the rank of staff sergeant and served as an Armor Crewman. During the Vietnam War, he served Thua Thien Province of the Republic of Vietnam. On March 25, 1968, Tom Davis Jr. died by hostile action through small arms fire.

Legacy:

Because of his service and sacrifice, Tom received the Purple Heart. His family chose to have him interred in the Saint Augustine National Cemetery in Section B, Site 567. He is also honored on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. on Panel 46E, Line 16.

Stop Eight: Christian Williams (SANC Flagstaff) Florida National Cemetery (Section 402, Site 53)

Slide 16

Christian Williams

(Note: For a full biography of this Veteran, please visit the UCF VLP website: <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/biographies/fnc/B402-0-53-f.htm>. For a PowerPoint tribute see: <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/instructionalmaterials/UCF-VLP-ChristianBWilliamsTributePP.pdf>

Early Life:

Christian Williams was born on November 30, 1978, in the Philippines to Jack (retired Navy) and Maria Lisa Bautista Williams, known as Lisa. He was the oldest of 4 children. The Williams family moved to Winter Haven, FL in 1994. Christian attended Lake Region High School where he participated in the Marine Corps Junior ROTC and was a champion weightlifter. He graduated from high school in May 1997.

Military Life:

Christian joined the U.S. Marine Corps in June of 1997. He trained at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, SC. He was stationed in Camp Lejeune, NC. He deployed around the world with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) in the year 2000. After September 11, 2001, deployed with the 22nd MEU in the year 2002 in support of the GWOT. (A MEU is the smallest air-ground task force in the United States Fleet Marine Force. Each MEU is an expeditionary rapid reaction force ready to answer to any crisis, where it be disaster aid/or combat mission.)

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He deployed in 2003 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Afterwards, he was stationed in Twentynine Palms, CA with Delta Company, 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division. He deployed to Al Anbar, Iraq in 2006. On July 29 a driver of a Vehicle-Born Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED), otherwise known as a truck bomb, attacked Christian's security checkpoint. While the Marines were able to stop the vehicle, it still exploded. Christian Williams and three of his fellow Marines died of their wounds.

Legacy:

After the explosion on July 29, 3rd LAR suffered further loss from an attack on August 20. The unit returned to Twentynine Palms in September 2006. Christian was survived by his parents and siblings. When his remains returned to the US, the Marines stationed in Tampa made sure his final journey went past his community, including his high school before arriving in Bushnell— people lined the streets to pay their respects. The family interred him near their home in Section 402, Site 53 of the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, FL. To this day, his mother, Lisa and the whole family grieve and honor Christian in many ways. Lisa has been an active member of her local Gold Star Association. His father worked to erect a monument to him and other fallen servicemembers in Lake Alfred, FL. Christian's best friend, Derek, holds a Memorial Day Walk for Christian each year. In May 2024, as we see in the photo, Lisa made clear, before a group of MCJROTC cadets at Florida National Cemetery, that the pain of losing your child never goes away. She insisted that she did not feel honored being a Gold Star mother; she would rather have her son. She did not want him forgotten and she wanted every student there to remember Christian and his sacrifice.

After the ceremony, all of Christian's nieces and nephews worked with UCF VLP to create rubbings of their uncle's headstone to take with them. This ritual allowed these children, some of them too young to understand the event, a way to be engaged with their family— their Gold Star family.

To hear the words Lisa spoke at her son's graveside, please click this link:

<https://youtu.be/4B76BJO9gho>

Slide 17

Gold Star Families Today

As we close our tour, we will discuss the current state of the Gold Star Family. The Blue Star represents servicemembers in a war, the Silver Star is for those wounded in combat, and, as we learned in great detail, the Gold Star is for the war dead. The

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Gold Star Program no longer only focuses on mothers, but on all members of the family who are impacted by a loved one's death in war. There are multiple programs created out of the Gold Star Mothers, such as Gold Star Wives and branch specific groups.

While overseas pilgrimages are no longer active, families are still invited to memorials and other events remembering the conflicts in which their family members served. Today, the program provides benefits, assistance, and support to families who have lost a loved one in service. Some of these examples of assistance include birthday cards to children who lost their mother or father, scholarship programs, assistance with the creation of hometown memorials, and mental health counseling.

While we have only focused on eight Veterans interred in the St. Augustine National Cemetery and beyond whose families are Gold Star Families, it is important to recognize that they are not the only ones in this cemetery or others whose families who retain this status. Any servicemember who is considered "war dead," meaning fallen in an ongoing war, merits the Gold Star.

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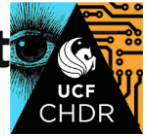
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