

MEMORIAL DAY TRIBUTE:

HONORING

Sergeant William Christopher Wold

As a Memorial Day tradition, the Hall County Republican Party honors a fallen veteran in the annual American Legion Memorial Day Parade. This year, we are proud to honor **Sergeant (SGT) William Christopher Wold**.

“Courage is contagious. When a brave man takes a stand, the spines of others are stiffened.”

— **Billy Graham**



Born in Wheat Ridge, Colorado in 1983, William “Willy” Christopher Wold later grew up in Camas/Vancouver, Washington. He attended Mountain View High School, graduating early in 2001. At just 17 years old, Willy enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and became one of the youngest recruits to graduate from Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego on September 21, 2001—just days after the attacks of September 11th, a moment that changed a generation.

Following extensive training and screening, SGT Wold was assigned to Presidential Support Duty at Camp David, where he served in the quiet responsibility of guarding President George W. Bush. In 2004, he was reassigned to the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines (3/1), one of the Marine Corps’ most storied and battle-tested units.

The 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines has stood in some of the harshest fighting in American history—from 1913 to the present day—through Haiti, Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Inchon, the Chosin Reservoir, Desert Storm, and Operation Phantom Fury. Its legacy is carried by generations of Marines, including leaders such as William Whaling, Francis McAlister, and Lieutenant General Lewis “Chesty” Puller.

By early 2004, 3/1 had deployed to Iraq and was operating in Al Anbar Province, including Fallujah. In March of that year, four American contractors from Blackwater USA were ambushed, killed, and displayed

publicly in the city. Their deaths marked a turning point that led to Operation Vigilant Resolve, the First Battle of Fallujah.

After coalition forces withdrew, Fallujah slowly descended further into violence. By the fall of 2004, the city had become one of the most dangerous places in the war.

Operation Phantom Fury—also known as the Second Battle of Fallujah—began on November 7, 2004. More than 13,000 American, Iraqi, and British forces moved to reoccupy the city. Marines were among the first to enter its streets, stepping into an urban battlefield unlike anything many had ever seen.

House by house. Room by room. Block by block. It was a kind of fighting that left little room for certainty—only movement, instinct, and survival. Shortly after entering the city, SGT Wold and his team came under fire from a mosque. Ordered to clear the structure, SGT Wold and three fellow Marines moved inside. In a matter of moments, they found themselves face-to-face with nine enemy fighters in a confined room.

What happened next would be remembered by those who survived it as a moment that came down to instinct and courage under impossible conditions. As documented in *The Things They Cannot Say* by Kevin Sites, SGT Wold’s actions that day helped save the lives of the Marines beside him.

But even survival did not mean escape from what had been seen.

Combat in Fallujah demanded more than courage—it demanded a constant confrontation with fear, loss, and the aftermath of violence that rarely ended when the fighting stopped. After clearing buildings, Marines were often tasked with recovering the dead, moving through spaces only moments after combat had ended. Many who were there carried those memories long after they returned home, including SGT Wold. Operation Phantom Fury lasted from November 7 through December 23, 2004, and became the bloodiest battle of the Iraq War. Ninety-five American service members were killed, including four of SGT Wold's fellow Marines. Fifty-four were lost in the first week alone. More than 560 were wounded. The numbers, however, only hint at what was carried home by those who survived.

By March 2005, SGT Wold returned home and was discharged from the Marine Corps. Like so many who served in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), he carried wounds that could not be seen.

Sleep became difficult. Memories did not stay in the past. The weight of what he had experienced followed him into every attempt at normal life.

By July 2005, he had been diagnosed with severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and symptoms consistent with traumatic brain injury (TBI)—conditions that became tragically common among GWOT veterans.

For many returning home, the struggle did not end when the uniform came off. In SGT Wold's case, as he attempted to cope with the intensity of his symptoms, he began to self-medicate, a path that sadly became part of the experience for many veterans trying to manage untreated trauma.

From 2001 to 2023, Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) data estimates that more than 145,000 veterans died by suicide, along with roughly 5,000 to 7,000 active-duty service members. That is more than 6,000 lives lost each year—often in the quiet aftermath of war, long after deployment ended. Suicide rates among this population are estimated to be 20 to 25 times higher than combat deaths in the post-9/11 era, and significantly higher than the general population.

Between 2010 and 2019, the VA also estimates that tens of thousands of veterans died from drug overdoses—losses frequently tied to untreated trauma, pain, and invisible wounds carried home in silence.

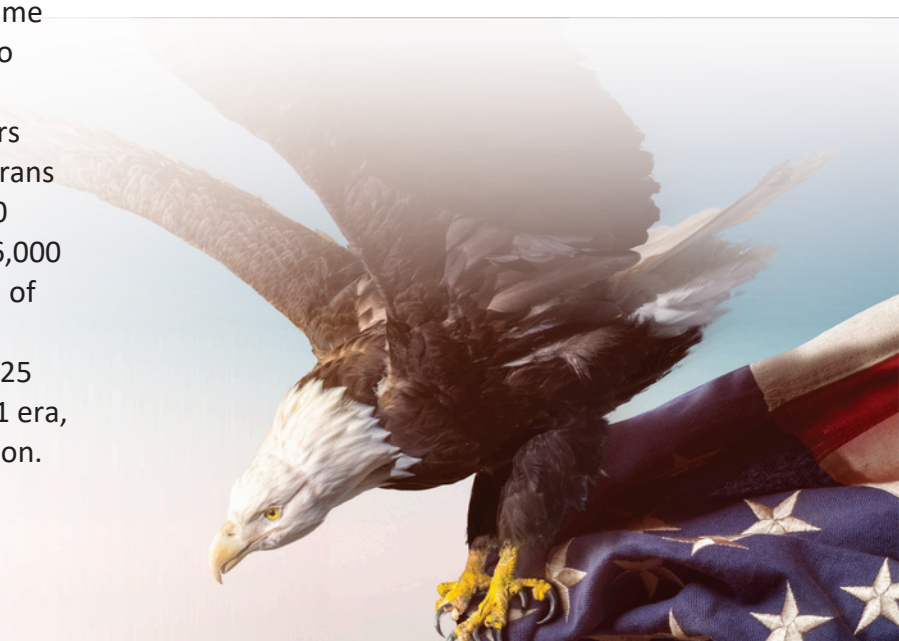
After reaching out for care through the VA and private treatment, SGT Wold came to believe that healing might only be possible among those who understood what he had lived through—his fellow Marines.

During his second deployment to Iraq, while still struggling with PTSD and substance dependency, his condition worsened. He was transferred to Naval Medical Center San Diego for treatment while awaiting medical discharge.

Near the end of that treatment, SGT Wold was found unresponsive by visiting friends.

On November 9, 2006, at 9:45 a.m., SGT William Christopher Wold was pronounced dead at Balboa Naval Medical Center. The official cause of death was an accidental overdose.

We are now in the fourth generation of Americans shaped by the Global War on Terror. Nearly three million have served. More than 53,000 have been wounded in action. Over 7,000 have died in uniform. But even these numbers do not tell the full story. They do not capture the invisible wounds carried quietly by so many who came home.



Estimates from the Department of War and Department of Veterans Affairs suggest that 11% to 20% of those deployed experienced PTSD. The VA estimates that 1.5 to 2 million veterans have received treatment for PTSD. More than 450,000 are believed to have suffered traumatic brain injuries.

These are not just statistics. They are fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, and friends. They are Americans who answered their nation's call, carried the burden of war, and came home forever changed.

When we think of Memorial Day, we often honor those whose names are engraved on monuments and walls of remembrance — those who never made it home from the battlefield. And we should.

But we must also remember the sacrifices of those whose names are not etched in marble, yet rest quietly beneath headstones in cemeteries across our nation.

Names like Harnett, Hanley, Goski, Ford, Rimer, and Wold.

They fought in distant places such as Chosin, Hue, Wanat, Kamdesh, Najaf and Fallujah. Some survived the battlefield only to continue fighting a different war long after returning home.

Some wounds do not reveal themselves in uniform. Some are carried silently for years. And too many stories end in tragedy.

The cost of war is not measured only by those lost in combat, but also by those who continued to suffer long after the fighting ended.

SGT William "Willy" Christopher Wold is survived by his mother Sandi Wold, his stepfather, three brothers, and two sisters.

Today, we remember SGT Wold—not only for his courage and sacrifice in combat, but also for the burdens he carried after returning home. His story stands as a solemn reminder of the weight so many veterans continue to bear, often in silence, and of our responsibility to care for those who have carried the weight of war for our nation.

To all who served in the Global War on Terror—thank you for your service, your sacrifice, and the sacrifice of your families.

"It is foolish and wrong to mourn the men who died. Rather, we should thank God that such men lived." —
Gen. George S. Patton

Semper Fidelis, SGT Wold!

Are you struggling with PTSD or thoughts of suicide. Do you know someone who needs help?

You matter. Your life matters. Help is available.

www.gainesvilleamericanlegion.org/be-the-one

www.newsroom.woundedwarriorproject.org/prevent-suicide

www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/

