

‘It’s Beyond Words’

Veterans unite for annual Purple Heart pheasant hunt in South Dakota

May 23, 2025

The ninth annual Decorated Purple Heart Pheasant Hunt in Gettysburg, South Dakota, brought veterans together for an outdoor hunting experience. The Winston M. Toomey VFW Post 8530 hosted this year’s event which saw five Purple Heart recipients from across the country gather in Gettysburg for an all-expense-paid, five-day hunt.

VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief Carol Whitmore attended and visited with the Purple Heart recipients.

“This is such a tremendous program, it is so impactful for fellow veterans that don't get a chance to meet other veterans from different states and to have a little camaraderie here in the state and bonding over a hunting trip, that they would never normally get to do,” Whitmore said. “It's beyond words, how you can describe and the good feelings that you get.”

Here is a look at this year’s recipients.

David Barcus, from Amsterdam, Ohio, dedicated over a decade to serving his country, beginning his military career in 1992 and continuing until 2005. He was part of the 1484 and 1485 Transportation Company, Detachment 1 of the Ohio Army National Guard (OHARNG), his assignments took him to posts in Honduras, Nicaragua, Kuwait, and Iraq.

Barcus served as an 88M20 Heavy Motor Vehicle Operator, skilled in maneuvering heavy military transport and operating a .50 caliber crew service weapon. On Oct. 22, 2003, while manning a rear gun truck on MSR Tampa, enroute to Camp Anaconda, Barcus and his driver endured an IED attack, and was injured and earned the Purple Heart Award.

After he retired from the military, he held positions at the Department of Correction and Rehabilitation for the State of Ohio, American Electric Power, the steel industry, and at the Jefferson County Airpark. Barcus urges Veterans to stay connected with one another and engage with veteran organizations for support and community.

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He is a member of VFW Post 232 in Amsterdam, Ohio.

Ben Mastridge, a native of Levittown, Pennsylvania, was drafted into the Army at the age of 19 and assigned to the 25th Infantry Division in Pleiku, Vietnam. Serving as a #4 gunner on a 105 mm Howitzer with the 2nd Battalion, 9th Artillery, Mastridge faced the realities of combat in the Central Highlands.

On June 4, 1966, Mastridge sustained a shrapnel wound to his right foot during what he believes was a mortar attack, an injury that earned him the Purple Heart. Reflecting on his experience, he emphasizes the importance of camaraderie and support among veterans: "It's important to take care of your fellow veterans because someone else is always worse off than you are."

Although Mastridge has never been to South Dakota, he has hunted pheasant before, and the opportunity to join a hunt in South Dakota intrigued him. In addition to his service in Vietnam, Mastridge has also served the veteran community back home, holding the position of VFW Department of Pennsylvania Commander in 2010-2011. He remains active in VFW Post 6495 in Levittown, Pa.

James "Zeke" Lloyd of Placitas, New Mexico, served his country as a U.S. Navy aviator from Jan. 9, 1968, to July 5, 1973. As a distinguished member of the VA-105 "Gunslingers" aboard the USS Saratoga, Lloyd flew the A-7 Corsair II in numerous missions over North Vietnam during Operations "Linebacker I and II" (April 1972 to February 1973).

On Aug. 6, 1972, when Lloyd was shot down deep in North Vietnam, he survived the crash and was rescued early the following day, thanks to the bravery and skill of his fellow service members.

An avid outdoorsman, Lloyd enjoys pheasant hunting and has a lot of experience in bird hunting. His connection to a veteran Marine helicopter pilot, who also served in Vietnam, introduced him to a hunting trip in South Dakota, a place he's eager to explore.

Talmage Lloyd of Eupora, Mississippi, served his country with distinction as a U.S. Army medical evacuation helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War. Drafted in April 1967 at the age of 23, he deployed to northern South Vietnam along the DMZ, serving in the 237th Medical Detachment (Helicopter Ambulance) from November 1968 to June 1969. During his deployment, Talmage was wounded in action while attempting to evacuate a wounded South Vietnamese soldier.

In total, Talmage dedicated approximately four years to active duty and later served an additional four years with the Mississippi Army National Guard. After his military service, he pursued a civilian career as an industrial forester, continuing his commitment to service and stewardship.

Talmage is a member of VFW Post 3806 in Eupora, and deeply values the opportunity to connect with fellow veterans.

William Back, a native of Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, enlisted in the military on Sept. 11, 1969, at the age of 19. In Vietnam, Back served in the 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry, part of the 9th Infantry Division. His service lasted from February to October 1970, after which his division returned to the United States. He continued his military career with the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division until April 1971.

Black was recognized with two Purple Hearts. He received his first on May 5, 1970, when shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade injured his left thigh during operations in Cambodia. The second Purple Heart came on July 21, 1970, when the armored personnel carrier he was on hit a landmine, resulting in a cracked tail bone.

A lifelong outdoorsman, he has hunted pheasants a few times but primarily enjoys hunting turkey, bear, and deer.

As a lifetime member of VFW Post 5956 in Manheim, Pennsylvania, Back remains active in the veterans' community, expressing deep gratitude for his fellow veterans. He recently applied to join a veteran hunting group, hoping to connect with other veterans and continue the camaraderie he values so much.

This year, area landowners inviting the veterans to hunt included the Roseland farm, Larson Family farms, Potts farm, Robbennolt farm and S3G Hunting. Lunches for the event were provided by Langers Family Foods.

Veterans Wanted for 2025 Hunt

VFW Post 8530 is hosting its 10th annual Purple Heart Decorated Pheasant Hunt from Nov. 6-12. Selected hunters will arrive on November 6 and depart November 12. Travel, lodging, meals, ammunition, shotguns, retrieving dogs and bird-cleaning services are included. Service dogs are allowed but not your own hunting/retrieving dog.

Veterans wishing to participate must provide a COPY of their DD-214 and corrections DD-215, if needed, stating Purple Heart and Honorable Discharge designations. Please only send DD-214 and DD-215. Do not send originals, only copies, as no application materials will be returned.

If you applied in the past and were not selected, you need to re-apply. Winners are chosen by random lottery; all the names are put together and drawn from a hat.

Application must include:

Legible Name

Contact info (phone number and mailing address required, email optional)
DD214 showing Purple Heart and Honorable Discharge (DD215 if necessary)

Please submit by July 15. Names will be drawn July 15.

Send to:

SD Decorated Pheasant Hunt
C/O Curtis Hamburger
400 E Commercial Ave.
Gettysburg, SD 57442

OR

curtishamburger@yahoo.com

605.769.0176

Article has been edited for length and was written by Tim Potts, Black Hills Pioneer

This article is featured in the 2025 May issue of Checkpoint. If you're a VFW member and don't currently receive the VFW Checkpoint, please contact VFW magazine at magazine@vfw.org.