



Military Heritage Museum

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www.militaryheritagemuseum.org

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MILITARY HERITAGE MUSEUM ANNOUNCES THIRD ANNUAL PATRIOTS GALA HONORING HEROES AND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

PUNTA GORDA, FL – The Military Heritage Museum in Punta Gorda is proud to announce its 3rd Annual Patriots Gala, a distinguished evening celebrating military service, education, and community partnership. The event will be held on **February 21, 2026 at 6 p.m.** at the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center, located at 75 Taylor Street, Punta Gorda, Florida.

Wall of Warriors Recipient: Rear Admiral Lawrence C. Chambers

This year's Wall of Warriors recipient is **Rear Admiral Lawrence C. Chambers**, a groundbreaking naval officer who achieved numerous historic firsts during his distinguished 36-year military career. Admiral Chambers was the second African American to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1952 and went on to become the first African American to command an attack squadron, the first to command an aircraft carrier, and the first African American Naval Academy graduate to attain flag rank. As commanding officer of USS Midway during the evacuation of Saigon, his leadership during this critical operation has been featured in documentaries and numerous publications. Following his military service, he continued his distinguished career in corporate leadership and international operations.

Education Partner of the Year - Charlotte County School District

The **Charlotte County School District** will be honored as Education Partner of the Year, recognizing their outstanding commitment to military heritage education and transformative partnership with the museum. Through this collaboration, nearly 1,300 fifth-grade students tour the museum annually, participating in an immersive educational experience featuring flight simulators, virtual reality, and 3D educational films centered around military history. The interactive program, which includes personal storytelling sessions with military veterans, has demonstrated measurable success with participating students showing significant improvement in their history test scores. This hands-on approach to learning creates lasting connections between students and the sacrifices made by service members throughout American history, exemplifying the power of community partnerships in education.

Volunteer of the Year: Captain Don Long

Captain Don Long will receive the Museum's Volunteer of the Year award. A Vietnam Veteran and retired American Airlines pilot with over 27,000 flight hours and recipient of the FAA 50-year pilot award, Captain Long volunteers five days a week at the Military Heritage Museum, where he has built and trained alongside 30+ volunteer instructors on four flight simulators, inspiring the next generation of aviators.

Keynote Speaker: Rocky Bleier

The evening's keynote speaker will be **Rocky Bleier**, the four-time super bowl winning Pittsburgh Steelers running back whose remarkable story of resilience exemplifies the American spirit. Drafted by the U.S. Army during his 1968 rookie season, Bleier suffered severe combat injuries in Vietnam yet fought his way back to a decade-long professional football career. Now a decorated veteran and motivational speaker, he serves on multiple veteran organizations including the Congressional Committee for the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War and the Purple Heart Foundation, dedicating his life to helping fellow veterans and first responders overcome trauma and reintegrate into civilian life.

Event details

The Patriots Gala will feature a cocktail hour with hors d'oeuvres, followed by dinner and program. The evening will conclude with entertainment and dancing, creating a memorable celebration of military heritage and community spirit. This event is military dress and black tie.

Tickets: \$150 per person

Sponsorship packages are available for businesses and organizations wishing to support this important community event and to preserve history.

Contact information:

For tickets and sponsorship opportunities, contact:

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The Military Heritage Museum's Patriots Gala continues to serve as Southwest Florida's premier event honoring military service while supporting the museum's educational mission and community outreach programs. The Military Heritage Museum is located at 900 West Marion Avenue in Punta Gorda. For more information or reservations, please go to the website and sign up at www.militaryheritagemuseum.org or call 941-575-9002.

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