For Immediate Release – County of Berks

Berks County Inducts Five Honorees into the Berks County Military Hall of Fame

Reading, PA— 10/29/2026 — Each year, the Berks County Veterans Affairs office collects nominations for the Berks County Military Hall of Fame. The following are the nominations and the stories of the five 2026 inductees from Lt. Col. Jay Ostrich, USAF (Ret.), Director of the Berks County Veterans Affairs office at the Etchberger Veterans Service Center.

Our deepest gratitude to United States Army Specialist Fourth Class Kent Martin Zerr, United States Navy Boatswain's Mate First Class William Edward Holyoke, United States Navy Ensign Richard Alan Bateman, United States Army Air Forces First Lieutenant Carl Frey Constein, and United States Marine Corps Veteran Sergeant Christopher "Chris" Kaag.

BERKS COUNTY MILITARY HALL OF FAME

Nomination of

Specialist Fourth Class Kent Martin Zerr

United States Army | Vietnam War | Distinguished Service Cross Recipient

There are moments in military history when courage transcends duty, when an ordinary American makes an extraordinary decision that defines the very meaning of sacrifice.

On March 6, 1970, deep in the jungles of Vietnam near the Cambodian border, Army Specialist Fourth Class Kent Martin Zerr faced such a moment.

Serving with the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, Specialist Zerr was leading the way for his fellow Soldiers when his platoon was suddenly attacked by a much larger enemy force. Surrounded by intense machine-gun fire, his fellow Soldiers faced almost certain death.

When one of his comrades was wounded, Zerr didn't seek safety. Instead, he ran directly into enemy fire, rescued his fellow Soldier, and carried him to safety.

But his heroism did not end there.

Returning to the battle, he crawled toward an enemy machine-gun bunker just 15 meters away. Under relentless gunfire, he destroyed the enemy position with a hand grenade, eliminating a deadly threat to his fellow Soldiers.

Then came the ultimate test of character.

As his platoon was ordered to withdraw, Specialist Zerr volunteered to remain behind, exposing himself to enemy fire so his fellow Soldiers could escape. He understood the danger. He knew what remaining behind could cost him.

And he chose their lives over his own.

While providing the covering fire that helped his brothers-in-arms withdraw, Specialist Zerr was mortally wounded.

For his extraordinary heroism, he was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, our nation's second-highest military decoration for valor in combat.

Specialist Kent Martin Zerr never returned home to Berks to live the life he had ahead of him. But because of his actions, other Americans had the opportunity to return to their families and live theirs.

That is the true cost of freedom. That is the meaning of selfless service. And that is why his sacrifice must never be forgotten.

Nomination — William Edward Holyoke

Boatswain's Mate First Class | United States Navy | Medal of Honor Recipient

Some of America's greatest heroes are remembered through monuments, history books, and the generations of families they leave behind. But others, despite extraordinary service to our nation, risk being forgotten simply because no family remains to tell their story.

Today, we have the privilege — and the responsibility — to ensure that one such American hero is never forgotten.

His name is William Edward Holyoke, a United States Navy Sailor and recipient of our nation's highest military decoration for valor: a Medal of Honor.

In June 1900, during the China Relief Expedition aka the Boxer Rebellion, Holyoke served aboard the USS Newark. As part of an international military force, he participated in dangerous combat operations to relieve those threatened and besieged during the Boxer Rebellion.

On June 13 and again from June 20 through 22, Holyoke distinguished himself through extraordinary heroism in the presence of the enemy.

Consider what that meant more than 125 years ago. In a foreign land, thousands of miles from home, without the modern communications, medical evacuation, or battlefield technology our military relies upon today, Holyoke and his fellow Sailors faced the terrifying uncertainty of combat.

He could not know whether he would survive, whether help would arrive, or whether he would ever see America again.

Yet when his country called, he answered. And when danger came, he stood his ground.

His actions were so distinguished that he received the Medal of Honor — a recognition reserved for extraordinary courage in service to our nation.

But perhaps the most moving chapter of William Holyoke's story came long after the guns fell silent.

Having lived in many places throughout his lifetime, Holyoke ultimately chose Berks County as his final home. He died in Reading on April 3, 1934, and was laid to rest in Charles Evans Cemetery.

He left no children of his own, and no surviving family members to preserve his legacy.

But I would submit to you today that William Holyoke does have a family.

It is the United States Navy. It is the grateful nation he served. And it is the people of Berks County, who have the opportunity to claim this extraordinary American as one of our own

Nomination of Ensign Richard Alan Bateman

United States Navy | Korean War

Distinguished Flying Cross Recipient (Posthumous)

Today, we also nominate Ensign Richard Alan Bateman, a son of Berks County whose courage in the skies over Korea earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross.

Born in Reading, on February 7, 1930, Bateman enlisted in the Navy at age 18. He earned his commission as a naval aviator and was assigned aboard the aircraft carrier USS Essex.

On October 26, 1951, 21-year-old Ensign Bateman participated in an attack against heavily defended enemy supply and communication lines near Wonsan, North Korea. Despite intense anti-aircraft fire, he repeatedly attacked enemy gun positions, destroying two and silencing two others. He then struck a railroad supporting enemy operations, helping his fellow aviators complete the mission without the loss of a single aircraft.

Just two days later, on October 28, 1951, Bateman was killed by enemy anti-aircraft fire. He was only 21 years old. His aircraft was lost over Korea, and his remains were never recovered.

He would never return home to Berks County, celebrate another birthday, or experience the future he had sacrificed for his country. He has no known grave where his family can gather to honor him.

For his extraordinary heroism, Ensign Bateman was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Yet no medal can fully measure the cost of the life he gave in service to others.

He has no grave to visit, but he has a hometown that can remember. He has no headstone in Berks County, but he deserves a permanent place in our history.

Nomination of First Lieutenant Carl Frey Constein

United States Army Air Forces | World War II

Distinguished Flying Cross Recipient

Special Achievement Nomination

During World War II, some of America's most courageous aviators fought their battles not against enemy fighter planes, but against an equally unforgiving enemy — the towering Himalayan Mountains.

Today, we honor and nominate one of those extraordinary aviators, First Lieutenant Carl Frey Constein, a native of Fleetwood, Berks County, whose courage and determination helped sustain Allied forces fighting in China.

Born on August 18, 1920, Constein entered military service in 1943 and earned his pilot's wings in 1944. He was assigned to the Army Air Forces' Air Transport Command in India, where he flew one of the most dangerous aviation routes in history.

The route was known simply as "The Hump."

But there was nothing simple about flying it.

Imagine piloting a heavily loaded transport aircraft over the Himalayas, carrying desperately needed fuel, ammunition, and supplies to American and Chinese forces fighting the Japanese.

Below you were some of the world's most unforgiving mountains and jungles. Around you were violent thunderstorms reaching 40,000 feet, blinding snow, severe icing, and turbulence capable of throwing an aircraft out of control.

There were no modern navigation systems, no sophisticated weather radar, and precious few opportunities for an emergency landing.

A mechanical failure, a navigation error, or one encounter with severe weather could mean death for an entire crew.

Yet these missions were absolutely essential. With overland supply routes into China cut off, Allied forces depended upon courageous aircrews willing to risk their lives to keep the war effort alive.

Lieutenant Constein answered that call not once, not twice, but 96 times.

Ninety-six missions across a treacherous mountain route where survival was never guaranteed.

For his extraordinary service, Constein earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and two Air Medals, recognizing hundreds of hours of dangerous operational flying.

But his contributions to our nation did not end when World War II concluded.

Returning to Berks County, Constein dedicated his civilian life to education, ultimately serving as superintendent of the Antietam and Wilson school districts.

He also became a prolific author, writing nine books, including three documenting his experiences flying The Hump. Through those firsthand accounts, he preserved the extraordinary sacrifices of an often-overlooked group of World War II aviators.

He did not simply survive history. He made certain that history would survive him. Now we get to do that for him, today. Ninety-six missions. Ninety-six acts of courage. And a lifetime devoted to ensuring that the sacrifices of his fellow aviators would never be forgotten.

//

Nomination of Sergeant Christopher “Chris” Kaag

United States Marine Corps Veteran

It is also my profound privilege to nominate United States Marine Corps Sergeant Chris Kaag for posthumous induction into the Berks County Military Hall of Fame.

Some Marines demonstrate their courage on the battlefield. Others demonstrate it through a lifetime of sacrifice. Sergeant Chris Kaag did both, serving his country in uniform and then giving his community a master class in resilience, courage, and leading from the front.

Chris enlisted in the Marine Corps immediately after high school, serving as an infantryman with Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment. During his deployment with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, he supported operations off the coast of West Africa, including the evacuation of American citizens from Liberia.

He was a young Marine Noncommissioned Officer with a promising military career ahead of him. But in 1997, at just 21 years old, Chris received a devastating diagnosis: adrenomyeloneuropathy, a rare, progressive neurological disease. Within months, he lost the use of his legs. His military career was over, and the future he had worked so hard to build was suddenly taken from him.

For most people, such a diagnosis would have been overwhelming. Chris had lost his mobility, his military career, and much of the independence most of us take for granted.

But Chris Kaag refused to allow what he had lost define what he could still accomplish.

The Marine Corps had taught him that leadership is not about rank, position, or physical strength. It’s about character, accountability, perseverance, and placing the needs of others before your own.

Chris took those lessons and spent the next three decades demonstrating them to an entire community.

In 2004, he founded Corps Fitness in Wyomissing, transforming a fitness facility into a proving ground for personal accountability, teamwork, and mental toughness. From his wheelchair, Chris trained and inspired thousands of athletes, veterans, first responders, and ordinary citizens. He demanded their very best because he demanded nothing less of himself.

In 2007, he founded the IM ABLE Foundation, dedicated to removing barriers that prevent people with disabilities from enjoying active, fulfilling lives.

But Chris did more than encourage others to overcome adversity.

He led from the front.

Chris understood something that every great military leader eventually learns: the greatest measure of leadership is not how many people follow you, but how many people become stronger because you led them.

His motto was simple: “No Excuses.”

And he lived those words every single day.

That is the legacy of a Marine. That is the legacy of a leader. And that is precisely the kind of legacy the Berks County Military Hall of Fame exists to preserve.

//

Honoring our military Heroes is more than just a privilege – it is our sacred duty. These five extraordinary Americans answered their Nation's call with courage, sacrifice, and selfless service. Now it is our turn to answer the call, ensuring their legacies of honor, valor, and dedication to country are forever enshrined in the Berks County Military. I respectfully and enthusiastically recommend these five extraordinary Heroes for induction into the Berks County Military Hall of Fame and ask for your unanimous vote ratifying their nominations.

###