

North Georgia News

2 Sections 22 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, November 20, 2024

Schools recognize sacrifice for Veterans Day

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County School District put together another poignant Veterans Day ceremony this year, thanking local American heroes for their sacrifices and remembering those who gave all at the Fine Arts Center on Monday, Nov. 11.

With particular recognition to the North Georgia Honor Guard, Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121, 152nd Civil Air Patrol, Union County High School Band, Union County High School Chorus and Union County Middle School Chorus, community involvement from all ages cemented Blairsville's position as a city that honors its veterans.

Along with program guides, clay poppies made

by Mrs. Stephanie Clayton's High School Art Class were handed out to guests as they entered, providing a more permanent alternative to the "buddy poppies" many wear to remember those who have fallen in defense of home and hearth.

UChS Senior and Civil Air Patrol Cadet Capt. Caleb Sheffield was this year's emcee, presenting the different sections of the ceremony along with providing remarks in the student-led service.

"Today is a special day when we honor all (veterans) and thank them for their service to our country," said Sheffield, welcoming the audience before the band and chorus came together to perform Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." It proved so moving that several veterans in the auditorium stood up "to defend

(America) still today."

"Throughout history, we have stood up to those who have threatened our safety and our security; our armed forces have always persevered. They work tirelessly through long hours in training and in combat," Sheffield added before the band and chorus performed the "Armed Forces Medley," playing the theme of each branch of the military. Veterans stood for recognition during their respective service song, receiving cheers and applause.

In return for his pivotal role in bringing flag history and etiquette classes to Union County students, Mark Harbison of the North Georgia Honor Guard was presented with a wooden American flag by elementary schoolers Jaxon Lee and Haylen Davis.

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North Georgia Honor Guard Senior Vice Cmdr. Mark Harbison received special recognition from Elementary School students Haylen Davis and Jaxon Lee on Nov. 11.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Georgia Outdoor News to feature Gun Range



L-R: Chief Range Master Craig Davenport, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, GON Writer Ronnie Garrison, Gun Club President Paul Clark and Sheriff Mack Mason at the Union County Gun Range.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

An upcoming issue of Georgia Outdoor News – the state's premier magazine for "hunting, fishing and everything outdoors" – will highlight the multimillion-dollar Union County Gun Range, possibly in December.

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason contacted GON

in recent months to ask if the magazine would be interested in featuring the professional range for its considerable subscriber base, and leadership at the publication jumped at the chance.

Longtime GON writer Ronnie Garrison is penning the piece, and he traveled to the range last month to gather information from local officials and others who had a hand in

turning the shooting facility dream into a reality. And Garrison was impressed with what he saw.

"If you like to shoot, you definitely need to visit and check (this range) out, because I haven't seen anything anywhere that approaches it, and I've gone to several," Garrison said.

The Gun Range opened
See Gun Range, Page 12A

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Rotary Club treats vets to lunch on namesake day

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Immediately following the Veterans Day Ceremony by Union County Schools Nov. 11, many honored veterans and their loved ones headed across town to the Community Center for the Fourth Annual Veterans Luncheon, organized by the local chapter of the Rotary Club.

The event is a tradition that gives back in some small way to the men and women who served the country with bravery and loyalty. Servicemembers – both active and retired – can enjoy a good meal and good company, listening in on keynote speakers.

Gene Windham, master of ceremonies for the Rotary luncheon and himself a Navy veteran, said it takes nearly a



U.S. Army Lt. Col. Bob Stone of Camp Merrill spoke on the rigorous training and high expectations of Army Rangers in the Nov. 11 Veterans Day Luncheon.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

year to plan everything out, with preparations beginning each February.

Always gauging the reactions of his guests,

Windham asks at the end of every luncheon how the veterans enjoyed the event and if they'd like it to continue the

See Veterans Luncheon, Page 12A

Remembering Noah for Epilepsy Awareness

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Since 1969, the Epilepsy Foundation has marked November as National Epilepsy Awareness Month, and this year the monthlong recognition hits close to home after Union County lost one of its own, 19-year-old Noah Helton, to a neurological disorder that affects 1 in every 26 people.

Now, almost five months removed from the morning of July 1, when Helton was found unresponsive in his bedroom,

his father Nathan Helton and stepmom Rachel Helton hope Noah's memory will increase awareness of epilepsy and its early warning signs.

"We didn't know about sudden, unexpected death in epilepsy until after the fact," Rachel said. "It happens to 1 in every 1,000 people with epilepsy. If we had known, we could have taken steps to prevent it, because there are ways to prevent it."

According to the Epilepsy Foundation, Sudden
See Remembering Noah, Page 2A



Noah Helton

Marines celebrates 249th Birthday with patriots

News Special

On Nov. 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress passed a resolution stating that "two Battalions of Marines be raised" for service as landing forces with the U.S. Fleet.

This resolution established the Continental Marines and marked the birth date of the United States Marine Corps.

On Friday, Nov. 8, members of the Marine Corps League's Unicoi Detachment 783 hosted the Marine Corps Ball where members gathered to celebrate the Corps' 249th Birthday. Also on hand were dignitaries, family members
See USMC Birthday, Page 7A



MCL 783 Commandant Alton "Doc" Coleman presented retired Lt. Col. David Haag with a Certificate of Appreciation at the Marine Corps Ball this month.

Photo/Submitted

Generations team up, pay respects to Old Glory

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Most Americans believe it is disrespectful to burn the U.S. flag, and to some degree, they are correct. But how should the old, worn flags that have flown high and proud for years be put to rest?

Thanks to the Flag Retirement Ceremony at the Maj. Leon Davenport Veterans Building on Saturday, Nov. 16, the community was able to find out.

Organized by the Ira Weaver American Legion
See Flag Retirement, Page 7A



A Veteran and a Scout salute after retiring a wind-worn American flag on Saturday, Nov. 16. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



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Remembering Noah...from Page 1A

Unexpected Death in Epilepsy, or SUDEP, occurs among epileptics who are otherwise healthy and where no other cause of death is found during autopsy. This is the leading cause of death in people with uncontrolled seizures.

People who die from SUDEP often pass away in bed and do not appear to have had a convulsive seizure. Over a third of the time, there is a witnessed seizure or signs of a recent seizure close to the time of death, and victims are often found lying face down.

No one is certain about the cause of death in SUDEP, and it may differ between cases. Some researchers believe a seizure causes an irregular heart rhythm. Other research has shown that breathing difficulties following a seizure lead to death.

"If the epilepsy goes untreated, (SUDEP) happens to 1 in every 50 people with epilepsy," Rachel said. "But Noah was getting treated for epilepsy, and we thought he had been seizure-free."

"But there is a chance he was having seizures but not telling us. Noah was the type that didn't want to worry anybody, and he was afraid of losing his driver's license."

Noah suffered from a rare form of epilepsy known as myoclonic seizures, which are brief, shock-like jerks of a muscle or a group of muscles. In most cases, they only last a second or two. There can be just

one, but sometimes many will occur quickly.

"They look a lot like Tourette's syndrome," Rachel said. "He was so clumsy and would squint his eyes a lot. In seventh grade, I took him to the doctor because I knew something was off."

"This is something else I want parents to look out for, because people think, 'Oh, it's nothing,' but it got worse and worse over the years. It can be stress-induced, from lack of sleep, and lots of things can affect it."

"I'm not trying to put fear in people because there are ways of preventing (SUDEP). But most people, when they think of seizures, think about grand mal seizures where you fall on the floor and jerk, but

there are so many more types of seizures than that.

"I've talked to other parents who thought their kid was ignoring them, but it turns out they were having a seizure."

According to Rachel, Noah wasn't properly diagnosed with epilepsy until 10th grade, three years after first taking him to the doctor. Medical professionals originally chalked it up to a mild form of Tourette's. But as the seizures grew worse, he eventually visited a psychiatrist, who ruled out Tourette's. Later, a neurologist correctly diagnosed him with epilepsy.

"He just kept getting worse, but you've got to remember, we were so uninformed at the time," she said. "In hindsight, I should

have driven him to the children's hospital and checked him into the ER.

"I just want people to educate themselves. The Epilepsy Foundation has a ton of information, and I want parents to advocate for their children because a lot of this goes undiagnosed."

Nathan and Rachel Helton would like to thank the community for the outpouring of support their family has received since Noah's passing.

"We haven't had to pay for anything – even his headstone was paid for," she said. "You wouldn't believe the donations. We want the community to know how thankful we are for everything."

For more information, visit <https://www.epilepsy.com/>.

Union County Farmers Market Historic Walking Trail

Chestatee Chattoohoochee RC&D Council is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that lives on grants that it writes and administers for the citizens in the 12 counties of northeast Georgia. A grant application is developed from a need in our area from organizations that we partner with to help make our citizens lives better, more comfortable, more profitable, and provide learning opportunities so that our history will not be lost for future generations to enjoy. Chest Chat has been successful with applying for grants in the past 12+ years that I have been the Executive Director. Our grants and contracts are the only funding mechanism that we have to pay our bills and payroll. (which is the most important thing!) There are only 2 of us!

This year we applied for 9 grants and were awarded 8 of them which will keep us busy for at least 3 more years. Each grant has specific deliverables that I build into the deliverable part of the application and in order to be reimbursed for the events, projects, and field days that we put on; we must achieve the goals that we put in the grant when we said we would do it. Grantors for our grants and contracts are USDA NRCS, USDA Forest Service, Georgia Forestry Commission, Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission, NACD and others.

A grant that the USDA NRCS awarded us is for the Union Farmers Market Historic Farm Stead and is described below. Union County requested funds to construct a walking trail on the Farmer's market's campus. The trail will pass through the historic farm stead on the property and wind through pumpkin fields, pollinator gardens, across and along the creek, and up to an old homestead where settlers made their home. There will be kiosks along the way explaining points of interest for visitors to read and learn about the history of the historic property.

The main objectives of the project are: Make visitors aware of every day farm life in the 1800's Make visitors more aware of the Native Americans that called Northeast Georgia home before 1832 Make visitors more aware of who, what, and where our first settlers were and why they came to present day Union County Demonstrate pollinator crops which can be grown in Union County Identify and exhibit native plants growing along the banks of Butternut Creek Demonstrate how these plants can be incorporated into the home landscape Use the Farmers Market Campus to show local students how people lived everyday lives during the 1800's.

Plans for the project are: Use the Farmers Market Campus as a living classroom to

Frank Riley
Executive Director of RC&D



educate local students about the mountain environment and stream ecology. The trail will be approximately 2,500 feet long starting at a bridge to be constructed near the dog park and ending at the historic farmstead.

The trail construction started in September and will be completed by May 2025 depending on availability of construction crews. There will be a Bridge constructed near the dog park across Butternut Creek and 3 culverts across the small streams in the field. This bridge will not be for vehicles but for walking only. There will be 3 informational Kiosks along the trail explaining that part of the historic farm and demonstrating how the settlers worked, played, and lived. There will be other informational exhibits along the trail. There will be heritage and pollinator Gardens installed in the spring in the fields that the trail meanders through. These crops will be changed like the settlers did by the current growing seasons. For more information on this exciting project stop by the Farmers Market.

Friends of Union County Library Thanksgiving Bake Sale Nov. 26



Advocating for Libraries, Literacy, and Lifelong Learning

Friends of Union County Library (FOUCL) are once again having a just before Thanksgiving Bake Sale. If you can bake for this sale, please drop off baked goods in the Community Room on Monday, November 25, from 3 until 5 PM at Union County Public Library (UCPL), 303 Hunt Martin Rd., Blairsville. FOUCL members will be there setting up, collecting, and pricing that day. The bake sale is open to the public the following day, November 26, from 10 AM until 2 PM or until all the goodies are gone.

If you are unable to bake, but would like to make a monetary contribution, we would appreciate a donation in any amount you would like to give. Cash is good, but we also accept checks made out to FOUCL. A third method for donations is through PayPal at foucl.org. All proceeds from this sale benefit Union County Public Library.

FOUCL will elect officers and have a brainstorming session for 2025 at UCPL on Wednesday, November 20, beginning at 1 PM. If you are a member or would like to be, please plan to join us in the Community Room that day.

The last few months of 2024 are busy ones for members of FOUCL. Along with the recent Everything Christmas Sale,

Friends of Union County Library



Annual Fall Bake Sale

Tuesday, November 26th
10 am- 2 pm

Union County Public Library
Community Room

All proceeds Benefit the Union County Public Library

we also participated at Boo Bash in Meeks Park on Halloween. Our mascot Owl-iver, FOUCL members, and several UCPL staff members greeted and treated the many families who came by our woodland-themed booth to say hello and pick up donated candy.

In December, FOUCL is happy to once again give picture books to UCPL families who attend storytime (thanks to a generous donation from one of our members); and we are also excited about a Clued In Ugly Sweater Murder Mystery event happening in the Community Room on

Monday, December 9. Put on your ugly holiday sweater and join us at one of two time slots to share some hot cocoa and snacks while solving a holiday mystery. This will be an easy mix and mingle kind of mystery solving with two different sessions. Adults are encouraged to attend from 1 until 3 PM and upper elementary age children and above are invited to attend from 4:30 until 6:30 PM. There will be prizes for winning the mystery and for best/worst ugly sweater!

Save the date and watch for more details as December 9 gets closer.

RCB Financial Corporation and River City Bank Declares Dividend

RCB Financial Corporation and its subsidiary River City Bank announced today that its Board of Directors has declared a \$0.10 per share dividend, payable on December 9, 2024, to common shareholders of record at the close of business on October 15, 2024.

River City Bank, headquartered in Rome, GA, is a

locally owned, full-service community bank founded in 2006. The Bank focuses on delivering exceptional client service while offering a full range of competitive financial products to commercial and retail clients in North Georgia. In addition, the Bank offers conventional mortgage products and brokerage services, along with

treasury management services. The Bank was voted Best Bank in the annual Best of Rome awards the past two years and has been consistently recognized by Bauer Financial, the nation's leading independent bank rating firm, which awarded River City Bank a 5-Star rating. Member FDIC. Equal Housing Lender. NMLS# 446231.

Veterans Day ...from Page 1A



On Veterans Day, Union County students presented local veterans David Swafford and Josh McCuen with Quilts of Valor for their honorable service in combat. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

"We would like to thank all of our veterans for all of their sacrifices. What you have done for us will not be forgotten," said Lee, who mentioned his own grandfather's service in Vietnam.

On behalf of Union County Elementary School, Davis thanked Harbison for his "time and effort teaching us honor, dignity and respect to our flag and our country."

And what better time to present two Quilts of Valor than during a Veterans Day ceremony? Indeed, two recipients for the honor were called on-stage to receive quilts handmade with love and prayers from the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild.

Josh McCuen may currently be a school resource officer, but not too long ago, he served the country as a member of the U.S. Army, earning the rank of sergeant. McCuen was an "expert" marksman and trained as a paratrooper; he would go on to be stationed in South Korea, near the Korean Demilitarized Zone.

Following the fateful attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, McCuen was part of a communications team that established a 15-foot touch screen "to track all aircraft and vessels traveling up and down the East Coast." McCuen's unit faced fire during deployment in Afghanistan and was part of the "Thunder Run" raids on

Baghdad in Iraq.

David Swafford not only earned a Master of Business Administration but worked his way up to being a major in the U.S. Air Force. He was called to active duty in 1979 and served on B-52 bombers as an instructor, evaluator and navigator.

Swafford was stationed at several bases in California, New Mexico and North Dakota before, in 1995, he served in Saudi Arabia during Operation Southern Watch as Chief of Combat Operations. Following his military career, Swafford worked for three years with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and is nearing 19 years with the Internal Revenue Service.

Along with honoring the men and women still among the living, the ceremony made sure to remember the fallen. The Missing Man Table was set up in a corner of the stage, quiet and still. Built upon symbolism, every piece of the display – from the table itself to the items placed upon it – represent an aspect of grieving those who did not return home.

Shots rang out in the auditorium as the North Georgia Honor Guard fired the traditional gun salute for the dead and missing, followed immediately by an ethereal version of "Amazing Grace" performed by the Ensemble Chorus.

With the retiring of the colors, the UCHS Band helped close things out with "Stars and Stripes Forever." The words of organizer Arthur "Art" McCann, himself a retired Army Ranger, rang out before the official dismissal, reminding everyone why they had gathered there that day:

"When you see a veteran or active-duty serviceman at any time, be sure you reach out and thank them for their service."

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November 19, 2024

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By Sharon Hunter

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Flag Retirement...from Page 1A



Local Civil Air Patrol cadets of the North Georgia Composite Squadron demonstrated proper flag retirement etiquette in Saturday's program by the American Legion.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks.

Post 121, American Legion Auxiliary, Sons of the American Legion and American Legion Riders, the event also involved organizations like Sons of the American Revolution, 152nd Civil Air Patrol and local Scout chapters.

Judy Yohe served as the emcee, welcoming guests and offering some insight into the meaning of "the most recognized flag in the world" — the American flag.

The North Georgia Honor Guard shared the process for properly folding a flag according to the 13 steps that define the country's faith and morals.

Recognizable from military funerals and flag presentations, the folding represents more than just motion. For example, the

first fold represents the gift of life, while the final fold, leaving only the stars visible, represents a steadfast belief in God.

When it comes to properly retiring a flag, they can be totally burnt and the ashes buried, but as explained by Capt. Ken Stanger and demonstrated by Civil Air Patrol cadets, there are extra steps that some may feel more comfortable completing.

During the "Flag Dissection" portion of the ceremony, Stanger and his helpers broke down the proper protocol for dismantling a flag, ensuring that "you're only burning pieces of fabric" once the stars and stripes are separated.

First, the field of stars must be cut away from the

stripes. Then, one by one, those stripes are stripped away. Finally, to symbolically remove the association of the 50 United States from the blue, a single star may be cut out.

That said, not all the flags retired that day were rended apart. In fact, most of the flags were taken to the flames whole, folded and carried in the arms of those who have spent years defending America's honor or learning how to do so.

Each veteran volunteer paired up with a kid from the Scouts or Civil Air Patrol, and together, they received their flags and threw them into the fire. In a final show of respect, adult and child may either turn and face each other to salute or provide the gesture to the burning flag.

Courtesy of Jeremiah Frizzell, the solemn, well-known tune of Taps rang out on trumpet, signifying the end of the ceremony and an appropriate send-off to old flags that have come to the end of their service.

Post 121 Cmdr. Mike Merritt revealed that a general would see to properly disposing of the rest of the flags, which had been brought by the bag and tubful. Still, for more than 25 students and even more veterans, lifelong memories were made.

Perhaps more importantly, lessons were learned about how to properly respect one of the most potent symbols of everything America holds dear.

USMC Birthday...from Page 1A



The Marine Corps Ball is always a fun occasion to honor those who served as well as the birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps itself.

Photo/Submitted

and friends. The event was held in The View at Butternut Creek, in its main ballroom, and featured a delicious buffet complete with a prime rib carving station.

The evening's program included the Pledge of Allegiance, the Marine's Hymn, the Missing Man Table, Gen. LeJeune's Birthday Message, ceremonial cutting of the cake and a birthday message from the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Eric

M. Smith.

Detachment 783's Commandant, Alton "Doc" Coleman, served as the evening's master of ceremonies.

After dinner, Coleman addressed the history of the Marine Corps and how it has proven to be a formidable force since its inception 249 years ago, noting numerous battles in which the Corps had distinguished itself.

This was followed by an award ceremony. Recipients

included Calvin "Gunny" Triplett, Distinguished Service Medal; Claudia Entwisle, Detachment Associate Member of the Year; and Ashford Todd, Detachment Marine of the Year.

A Certificate of Appreciation was awarded to retired U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. David Haag for his volunteerism and leadership.

The evening culminated with continued camaraderie and dancing.

VFW Post 7394 and American Red Cross Blood Drive



American Red Cross

VFW Post 7394 and the American Red Cross are hosting an upcoming blood drive on Wednesday, November 20, 2024, 9 AM - 1:30 PM at the Major Leon Davenport Building located at 78 Blue Ridge Hwy, Blairsville, GA 30512. Please join our lifesaving mission and schedule an appointment today! Go to www.redcross.org to make an appointment.

Gun Range...from Page 1A

at the end of June, but its inception traces back over seven years to July 10, 2017 – the night the sheriff convened a meeting with hundreds of local Second Amendment enthusiasts, which led to the formation of the Union County Gun Club.

For years, Gun Club members and Sheriff Mason lobbied lawmakers and agencies at the state and federal level, eventually securing a 14-acre piece of U.S. Forest Service land off Georgia 180 for the range, plus 90% federal funding via the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act.

“This article will let people know that this Pittman-Robertson money is available and what can be done if people stick together for a common goal,” Sheriff Mason said. “I’m thankful GON decided to come up here.”

“They’re pro-Second Amendment, pro-gun, pro-hunting, and hopefully they’ll get the word out that Pittman-Robertson money is available if people go about it the right way, be it a private range or, in this case, the government’s involved.”

Today, the range is managed by the Recreation Department under Union County Government, in affiliation with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. And with the range mission completed, the Gun Club is sorting out its purpose moving forward.

Gun Club President Paul Clark said the group is now working toward organizing shooting events for participation by its members and the public.

“We don’t anticipate going away, it’s just our mission is going to change,” Clark said.

Union County Sole

Commissioner Lamar Paris played a pivotal role in the development of the range. He fully embraced the idea and even raised the bar on expectations to build a Gun Range that is worthy of a feature article in the state’s most popular magazine for outdoorsmen.

“It’s a real honor that GON has considered the Union County Gun Range to be such an excellent example of gun ranges in the United States that they’ve chosen to let people know that we’re here,” Paris said.

Continuing, “We’ve got a great place to shoot your weapons and sight them in for hunting season, to learn to shoot for those who are not comfortable with guns in their life yet, and it’s just a great asset to the community.”

Chief Range Master Craig Davenport works six days a week to ensure the facility’s 25-yard pistol range and 150-yard rifle range operate safely and securely for members and guests. Davenport is particularly keen to promote the Gun Range for use by families and youth.

“I have parents bringing their kids, grandparents bringing their grandkids, fathers bringing their daughters, husbands bringing their wives, boyfriends bringing their girlfriends,” Davenport said. “To me, it’s a terrific family environment.”

Added Davenport, “To see the younger generation coming and working in a healthy balance between the technology age and the outdoors is a good thing, because you see so many young people – they’re not going outdoors; they’re buying a keyboard or they’re on a game console.”

So far, the range has

enjoyed patronage by people of all ages and experience levels from around the Southeast, and positive word of mouth about one of the nicest public shooting ranges in Georgia continues to increase use by locals and visitors alike.

Range hours have transitioned to accommodate the shorter days of fall and winter, with the facility open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday shooting takes place from 1-4 p.m., and the range is closed on Mondays.

Individuals may purchase an annual membership for \$200, and families can obtain an annual membership for \$300. The daily shooting fee for non-members is \$15 per person, and \$5 for people 15 and under, though children 5 and younger are not allowed on the range.

On top of providing a safe place for law enforcement and the public to practice, the facility serves as a local economic draw and helps raise money for the development of shooting sports via a federal excise tax that benefits the



Chief Range Master Davenport, Commission Paris and Sheriff Mason giving GON Writer Garrison a tour of the Pistol Range last month.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Wildlife Restoration Program that funded the range.

To view day-pass discount days and see what’s going on at the facility,

visit the Union County Gun

Range Facebook page. For

additional information on the range, check out [https://www.unioncountyga.gov/parks-](https://www.unioncountyga.gov/parks-recreation/grange/)

recreation/grange/.

And be sure to read the Gun Range article when it appears in Georgia Outdoor News.

Veterans Luncheon

...from Page 1A



As always, Veteran Gene Windham of the Rotary Club was thrilled to welcome everyone to this year’s Veterans Day Luncheon.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

next year.

The 2024 keynote speaker was U.S. Army Lt. Col. Bob Stone, commanding officer of the 5th Ranger Training Battalion at Camp Frank D. Merrill.

Referred to as a sub-installation of Fort Moore – formerly Fort Benning – Camp Merrill is located in Dahlonega and is just one stop in the process of becoming an Army Ranger.

“I’m continually impressed ... at the turnout of veterans and what you all do for us,” Stone said, grateful to Windham for asking him to attend.

“The history of the American Ranger dates back to our earliest wars,” Stone continued, offering background on the elite force. The French and Indian War saw the first use of “Ranger” as it relates to an American military position, and by World War II, the first battalions had been formed.

With the onset of the Korean War in the 1950s, the first official Ranger “classes” became available. From there, the course was refined through the years, today producing some of the best soldiers the United States Army has to offer.

So how do they do it? Stone said there’s an emphasis on physical fitness and discipline. The training is grueling; students burn about 9,000 to 10,000 calories a day and sleep less than an hour per night. In short, Ranger hopefuls must learn to “be comfortable being uncomfortable.”

After three months at Camp Darby, students are transferred to the foot of the Appalachian Mountains for the next step of the course.

At Camp Merrill specifically, the Chattahoochee National Forest serves as the staging ground for combat and mountaineer training. This includes climbing, rappelling

and carrying heavy loads up steep terrain.

Once they complete that leg of their journey, the students are sent off to Florida to Camp Rudder, located on the Eglin Air Force Base. Where once they grappled mountainous terrain, the students must adapt to the flat land and master traversing the swamp.

“Those not from the Army are asking yourselves why,” Stone said. “‘Why would the Army torture these volunteers, and why would they put themselves through such arduous tasks?’ The answer is simple: it’s because the sons and daughters of America deserve the best leaders we can provide.”

Class sizes vary but average about 170 by the time they reach Merrill. That said, it takes a special breed to survive the rigorous requirements of graduating as a Ranger, and about 25%-30% of all recruits make it to elite training. Of those, only 40% graduate. It’s worth noting that more than 150 females have completed the course.

Stone said that, ultimately, the goal of Ranger training is to create a leader, someone who inspires their fellow patriots and stands on their own as an independent, balanced individual with mental and physical fortitude.

As he put it, “At the end of the day, I would say that the outcome of the course is the same – a more elite soldier and a leader that understands how to inspire people and get commitment rather than compliance.”

The information relayed was nostalgic for the handful of Ranger veterans in attendance. Either way, Stone was received well among all branches and visitors, and when Windham asked if guests wanted to return for Veterans Day 2025, the response was a resounding “yes.”