

Final tribute for Savannah war hero - Georgia Military Veterans Hall of Fame honors Monroe days before death

*By Chuck Mobley For Savannah Morning News
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The first chapter of Charles Monroe Jr.'s chronicle of courage was written on a frost-bitten, combat-scarred hill in Korea in November 1950. The final chapter was recorded last month when he was inducted into the Georgia Military Veterans Hall of Fame. He died six days later. In those intervening 69 years, Monroe displayed rare fortitude, grace and compassion, conduct made even more remarkable by the grievous wounds he suffered in the Korean War.

"Daddy joined (in 1949) when he was 16," said Monroe's daughter, Brenda Remick, during a meeting earlier this week of Marine Corps League Detachment 564. Monroe's father supplied the required permission, but his mother "wasn't too happy about it."

Monroe had plenty of young friends in Dog Company, a Marine Corps Reserve unit of about 180 men based in Savannah. Jerry Gill and Monroe were both students at Commercial High School. "My family was poor," recalled Gill, now 88. His Marine Corps paycheck, \$37.50 every three months, along with the two pairs of pants and shoes he'd been issued, were helpful in those hard times.

Monroe's circumstances were similar. He was the oldest of eight children. School ended for Gill and Monroe in August 1950, when Dog Company was called to active duty as part of the American response to the invasion of South Korea. Just four months later, as an 18-year-old private, he was marching with the famed 1st Marine Division on its drive to the Chosin Reservoir. On the night of Nov. 28, 1950, during an enemy attack, Monroe was struck in both legs, both arms, the back and the head by shrapnel when a grenade exploded in his foxhole. He still, however, had a lot of fight left in him. The young private "repeatedly refused evacuation and medical attention, and fearlessly remained directly in the line of the hostile assault ... (and) continued to deliver accurate and effective fire until he lost consciousness," read the citation for the Navy Cross, the nation's second-highest medal for gallantry, that he was awarded, along with the Purple Heart.

Monroe was evacuated to a hospital ship after the battle, and Savannahians followed his struggles to recover through articles in the Morning News and Evening Press. A Jan. 4, 1951, story said the removal of one eye "was advised by doctors as a means of saving the sight in the other." Later that month, as Monroe was undergoing treatment at Bethesda Naval Hospital, his mother, Lois Monroe, flew up to see him and brought the family Christmas tree along. He'd asked her in a letter to save it for him, but, as his hospitalization continued, she decided this course would be best. Eastern Air Lines packed the tree - lights, ornaments and all - for free.

Sadly, an effort to save the other eye failed. "The lights went out completely after the operation,"

Monroe recalled in an Evening Press article. At 19, he was medically discharged from the Marine Corps.

A couple of years later, on of all things a blind date, he met the love of his life. He and his brother Jimmy swapped dates midway through the evening, Monroe's daughter said, and he and Celia "were always together after that." They were married in the mid-1950s.

"He never actually saw my mother or I," said Remick, "but he was an incredible father."

Officially a high school dropout, Monroe went back to class. He completed his high school requirements, earned an associate of arts degree from Armstrong State College in 1955, picked up his bachelor's degree from ASC in 1972, and attained a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling from the University of Georgia in 1973.

He then chose to assist other sightless veterans. Over a long and distinguished career, he worked as a rehabilitation consultant with the Veterans Administration and as national field service director of the Blinded Veterans Association. Beyond that, he was appointed to the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped, and served as one of 22 advisers nationwide to the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare on implementation of the recommendations of the White House Conference on the Handicapped.

As Monroe traveled from coast to coast to attend conferences and committee meetings, he did so without asking for or seeking any special aids or assistance. That approach also applied to home. He told Celia to treat him like anyone else, Remick remembered, "so sometimes she'd rearrange the house and not tell him."

In the mid-1980s, Monroe retired, and he and Celia returned to Georgia. They moved into a circa-1900 farmhouse in Guyton, and Monroe helped construct some of the additions to the house. He also enjoyed socializing with old friends from Dog Company. Then, two unexpected honors brought further acclaim to his life.

The first occurred in 2007. In January of that year, the Marine Corps' Reserve Training Center at Hunter Army Airfield was named in his honor. It was the culmination of months of research, and then consideration by the chain of command. Monroe's heroism in Korea and his dedication to helping blind veterans were cited as reasons.

The second occurred in November when he was inducted into the Georgia Military Veterans Hall of Fame at a banquet in Columbus. Nominees must have ties to Georgia and qualify in one of three areas: valor for heroic action in combat; outstanding achievement while in service; or significant local, state or national contributions after leaving active duty. There was no question about Monroe's record of heroic action in Korea, but a paperwork glitch left his nomination in limbo. Finally, just days before the deadline, through the efforts of Bob Longueira, commandant of Marine Corps League Detachment 564, and others, the proper paperwork was filed.

Though he was too ill to attend, Monroe was inducted Nov. 2. His old friend and Dog Company companion Gill attended and accepted the award. "We told him about it before he passed away," Gill said.

Monroe's framed photo and citation, along with those of the other inductees, will hang in the Georgia Military Veterans Hall of Fame in the Floyd Veterans Memorial Building, which is across the street from

the state Capitol in Atlanta. This Ambassador for Peace Medal was presented to Brenda Lee Remick, the daughter of Charles Monroe Jr., this week. [Shelly Mobley/savannahnow.com] Bob Longueira, commandant of Marine Corps League Detachment 564, speaks with Brenda Lee Remick after presenting her the Ambassador for Peace Medal in her father's honor this past week. [Shelly Mobley/savannahnow.com] Brenda Lee Remick recounts her father's extraordinary career.

