

Hightstown Memorial Day Parade 2024

Grand Marshall – Colonel Walter C. Conner

Overview

This year's Grand Marshall of the Hightstown Memorial Day parade is Colonel Walter F. Conner. Colonel Conner has been a resident of Hightstown since marrying his wife, Patricia, in May of 1974. Over the past 50 years, Colonel and Mrs. Conner raised their 8 children in Hightstown and became the proud grandparents of 19 grandchildren.

Colonel Conner's distinguished service in the US Marine Corps covers more than 30 years as a helicopter pilot. His many achievements, medals and personal decorations include: the Purple Heart, The Air Medal (with 29 awards), involvement with the United States Military Pentathlon team (CIOR, as both competitor and coach), Joint Service Commendation Medal, Navy Achievement Medal (gold star), Army Commendation Medal, Selected USMC Reserve Medal (gold star), National Defense Medal, Vietnam Service Medal (3 bronze stars), Armed Forces Reserve Medal (silver hourglass), and the Vietnam Campaign Medal.

Colonel Conner has been the keynote speaker/guest of honor in New Jersey, including the John Basilone Memorial Parade (honoring the WW2 Medal of Honor recipient), as well as many recent military events and Memorial Day celebrations in Mercer County schools. He has been the keynote speaker multiple times at the Mercer County Annual Memorial Day observance at the Greenwood Cemetery Veteran's section.

Colonel Conner spent several decades as a high-school and PAL coach (of many sports) in the community. He was a teacher here in Mercer County for 46 years until his retirement from WWPBS in 2021. He continues to actively volunteer and serve his faith community as part of the Catholic Knights of Columbus.

Colonel Conner's family and connection to the Hightstown community

Colonel Conner was born in Brooklyn NY into a patriotic, working-class American family with a long and distinguished history of defending liberty abroad and honorable service in the United States military. Colonel Conner's maternal grandfather, John Sperring, was a POW in the US Army during WWI; an immigrant to the US, Colonel Conner's grandfather earned US citizenship from this military service. Colonel Conner's father, Walter L. Conner, was a WW2 veteran who served overseas during the war. Colonel Conner had uncles and an aunt who served America in the military at home and abroad during WW2. Colonel Conner's two brothers (Tom and John) also served honorably in the military during the Vietnam War.

Colonel Conner's wife Patricia (maiden name Byrne) was raised in Hightstown and her family also contributed to the security and prosperity of America. Patricia can trace her roots

back to her mother's great grandfather, Hightstonian John E. Ford, who fought for the Union alongside other Hightstonians during the Civil War. Patricia's grandfather (Michael Di Iorio) and other family members she was close to, including uncles from Hightstown, fought and sacrificed for America overseas in WWII and WWI. Patricia's mother (Rosemary Byrne) has resided in Hightstown her whole life and continues to reside here. Rosemary Byrne is the proud grandmother of many grandchildren who served in the US military, including her grandson Joseph Byrne, who was awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star for bravery in Afghanistan.

Civilian Citation for Bravery

Even before joining the military, Walter Conner served his community with distinction. For example, Walter was awarded the "Civilian Citation for Bravery" from the Highland Park PBA for the heroic act of saving the life of a college student. At 18 years old, Walter Conner risked his own life by plunging into the Raritan River to rescue a fellow Rutgers student who jumped off a bridge in a suicide attempt. Walter relied on his teenage lifeguard experiences to navigate the fast-moving Raritan River and swim over to the student, holding the student above the cold winter water until first responders arrived by boat at the scene.

Additional context on Colonel Conner distinguished service and career

Colonel Walter F. Conner enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1967, during his sophomore year at Rutgers to join the United States war effort in Vietnam. After graduating from Parris Island, SC at the top of his class, he was assigned to the Infantry Training Battalion in Camp Lejeune and subsequently graduated as first in his class at the Officer's Candidate School in Quantico Va. After receiving his Commission as a Second Lt. in 1968 he went to The Basic School in Quantico and then on to Army Flight School to earn his aviator wings. He was assigned to a USMC helicopter training squadron in California, received his Navy wings, and went to Vietnam in Nov. of 1969. He was assigned to a squadron to fly the CH-53 helicopter and was reassigned, to HML-167 Helicopter Squadron, to fly the UH-1E helicopter. He flew many missions as an assault helicopter pilot as well as flying various "slick" missions and became a Section and Division lead pilot. He was also assigned to Third Bn 7th Marines as an Air Liaison Officer for the summer months of 1970. His helicopter was shot down by enemy fire in the jungle; Conner received a Purple Heart for the injuries sustained in the crash. He returned to the USA in November of 1970, and was assigned to Marine Corps Air Base El Toro, California as a Search and Rescue Pilot (SAR).

Colonel Conner was promoted to Captain while stationed at El Toro as a SAR pilot and later assigned to a Helicopter Training Squadron. He was released from Active Duty in March of 1973 and returned to New Jersey. Colonel Conner joined MAG -49's HMH 772 at Naval Air Station Willow Grove in 1973 to fly CH-53's as a Reserve Helicopter pilot. He was the Operations Officer and then Executive Officer and became the Squadron Commander in 1986 after being selected Lieutenant Colonel. After numerous deployments and his two years as Squadron Commander he was promoted to full Colonel and reassigned as Assistant Deputy Group Commander at MAG 49. He was reassigned to The Philadelphia

Mobilization Station in Philadelphia as the Station Commander and his unit was activated for Desert Shield/Desert Storm in January of 1991 and stayed active for the duration of the hostilities.

During the Summer Months from 1974-1981 he competed in the CISM and CIOR military games in North America and in Europe as a military pentathlete. He was part of the USA team that took 1st place in 1975. He was the Team Captain in 1980 in Canada and the Chief of Delegation in Italy in 1981. He retired from Federal Service after 31 years in 1998 and joined the N.J. Naval State Guard in 2003 as the Intelligence Officer, then Executive Officer, and Commanding Officer before he retired in 2016.

From 2005-2013, Colonel Conner leveraged his military and civilian experiences as President of the NJ Marine Corps Reserve Association and the State Guard of New Jersey to run a number of counter-terrorism symposiums at locations throughout New Jersey. Well received, his organizations and hosts received recognition from the President of the United States and two NJ Governors. Colonel Conner is a graduate of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ with a BA degree in Liberal Arts and a Master's Degree in History. He also has a Master's Degree in Educational Supervision and Administration from Rider University in Lawrenceville, N.J.

As a civilian he was a History Teacher and Social Studies Teacher, as well as a coach, in Mercer County from 1975 -2021 and a security professional. He has coached numerous sports and taught primarily American Studies. He's been a member of the School and District's crisis management team. As a security consultant who is CERT team trained and qualified, he has conducted security assessments, given school security seminars, as well as been involved in all the Counter Terrorism Symposiums previously mentioned. He was also awarded the Claus Nobel Distinction Award for Social Studies Educators.

Organization memberships/affiliations have included; the Knights of Columbus, NJ Marine Corps Reserve Association, The Trenton Marine Corps League, New Jersey Naval Militia Foundation, The West Windsor-Plainsboro Educational Association and the New Jersey Education Association, the NJ Council of Social Studies.