

Founder of National Veterans Nonprofit Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel

Promotion ceremony includes rank pinned by World War II veteran

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, March 10, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- After nearly three decades of service to the nation, local resident Zachariah "Zac" Fike has been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in recognition of 28 years of leadership and service in the United States Army and Army National Guard.

Fike, founder and CEO of the national nonprofit Purple Hearts Reunited, received the promotion during a ceremony on March 5 at the Lincoln Memorial along the National Mall. The new rank was pinned by Private First Class Lockered "Bud" Gahs, a World War II veteran who fought across Europe with the Army's storied 42nd Infantry "Rainbow" Division.

Gahs, a Baltimore, Maryland native who will turn 102 years old this year, served in the Anti-Tank Company of the 222nd Infantry Regiment. During World War II, he fought in France, Germany, and Austria, was decorated for valor during Operation Nordwind, helped liberate the Dachau concentration camp, and drove the first American vehicle into Munich in 1945.

Now one of the last surviving World War II veterans of the Rainbow Division, Gahs has spent years helping honor the legacy of those who served before him. Standing beside Fike at the Lincoln Memorial, he returned to a familiar role that of recognizing the next generation of soldiers.

"I can think of no one better than Bud Gahs, a World War II veteran and fellow infantryman, to pin this new rank on me," Fike said. "This promotion represents not just a personal milestone, but the support and mentorship of the soldiers and veterans who came before me."



Lt. Col. Zachariah Fike and World War II Veteran Lockered "Bud" Gahs pose for a picture in front of President Abraham Lincoln's statue at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, D.C. on March 5, 2026.

Fike began his military career in June 1998 as an intelligence analyst with the 27th Infantry Brigade Combat Team in Syracuse, New York. Over the course of his career, he has served both as an enlisted soldier and a commissioned officer, deploying to Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and the Philippines, while also supporting counterdrug operations along the U.S. Mexico border and numerous domestic emergency response missions.

He has commanded at multiple levels up to and including a Cavalry Squadron. His military honors include two Bronze Star Medals, a Purple Heart for wounds received in Afghanistan, and the Defense Meritorious Service Medal. In 2017, he was named Military Times Army Soldier of the Year, becoming the first National Guard officer to receive the distinction.

The location of the ceremony also held personal significance for Fike. His second great-grandfather and uncle served in the 105th Pennsylvania Infantry during the Civil War, fighting under President Abraham Lincoln's command. Both returned to Washington to recover from wounds sustained at Gettysburg and the Wilderness.

"I come from a long line of military service," Fike said, noting his father's service in Vietnam and his mother's service as a combat medic. "This location has special meaning for many who have served."

Adding historical significance to the ceremony, the Lieutenant Colonel insignia used during the promotion were lent by the Downard family. Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Downard, a legendary Rainbow Division leader during World War II, helped lead Allied assaults across Europe and was photographed rescuing the sole survivor from a Dachau death train in April 1945.



World War II Veteran Lockered "Bud" Gahs pins Lt. Col. Zachariah Fike during a ceremony at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, D.C. on March 5, 2026.



World War II Veteran Lockered "Bud" Gahs pins Lt. Col. Zachariah Fike during a ceremony at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, D.C. on March 5, 2026.

“When placed upon your shoulders, they carry with them the true weight of leadership,” said Donald Downard Jr., whose family loaned the insignia for the ceremony.

Fike described the promotion as a personal capstone to his Army career.

“As I look back on my military service, achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel was a long-term goal,” he said. “To share this moment with Bud, honor the Rainbow Division’s legacy, and recognize the generations who served before me makes it even more meaningful.”



World War II Veteran Lockered “Bud” Gahs points to the lieutenant colonel insignia on Lt. Col. Zachariah Fike during a ceremony at the Lincoln Monument in Washington, D.C. on March 5, 2026.

Closing the ceremony with characteristic humor, Gahs reflected on his role in the promotion.

“I might be the only private in history to promote a colonel,” he joked. “And I might be the last.”

In addition to his military service, Fike founded Purple Hearts Reunited in 2012, a nonprofit organization dedicated to returning lost or stolen military service medals to veterans or their families.

Since its founding, the organization has reunited more than 1,000 medals with veterans or their next of kin across the United States. The organization conducts extensive research to locate recipients or their families and, whenever possible, hosts formal ceremonies to return the medals.

When families cannot be located, Purple Hearts Reunited works to ensure the medals are preserved in museums or other institutions so that the service and sacrifice they represent are not forgotten.

Purple Hearts Reunited is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and is the only organization in the United States dedicated exclusively to returning lost or stolen military medals to veterans and military families at no cost.

[email us here](#)
Scott Brewster

Purple Hearts Reunited

This press release can be viewed online at: <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/898507510>

EIN Presswire's priority is source transparency. We do not allow opaque clients, and our editors try to be careful about weeding out false and misleading content. As a user, if you see something we have missed, please do bring it to our attention. Your help is welcome. EIN Presswire, Everyone's Internet News Presswire™, tries to define some of the boundaries that are reasonable in today's world. Please see our Editorial Guidelines for more information.

© 1995-2026 Newsmatics Inc. All Right Reserved.