



Purple Heart recipient Erick Torres is pursuing his education at the Fire Academy at Northwest Florida State College and hopes to join the Niceville Fire Department. DREW BOWMAN

# Gift of education

*Purple Heart veterans find path to reinvention with free tuition in Florida College System*

**Pam Forrester** Special to Tallahassee Democrat | USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

**I**t was December 2011 when Erick Torres' 1-501st Infantry Airborne unit from Fort Richardson, Alaska, got the call they were being deployed to Afghanistan. On Mother's Day, just five months later, he was medevac'd to a field hospital with a traumatic brain injury and shrapnel wounds.

"I was the only one who survived in my vehicle" explained Sergeant Erick Torres "As the lead in the convoy on the combat patrol, we hit an IED, (improvised explosive device) blowing up the vehicle, killing the team leader and the driver of my vehicle. I was the gunner that day."

Following his recovery, Erick returned to his combat post in Khost Province and served another year and half in Colorado at Fort Carson. When Torres separated from the army, he returned home to Florida. The Hollywood, Florida, native joined another combat buddy moving to Niceville on the Gulf Coast taking with him a desire to continue his education and a Purple Heart Medal from his military service.

General George Washington created the Badge of Military Merit after the American colonists had won their freedom from England during the Revolutionary War.

On Aug. 7, 1782, General George Washington wrote; "The General ever desirous to cherish virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military merit, directs that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth, or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding."

## Oldest military award

The Purple Heart is the nation's oldest military award, a symbol of honor, patriotism and sacrifice during combat. The award was ignored for nearly 150 years until re-introduced in 1932 by General Douglas MacArthur on the 200th Anniversary of

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# Purple Heart

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General Washington's birth. Army regulations state that the award requires a "singularly meritorious act of extraordinary fidelity service."

One way Florida is recognizing fidelity and service is by offering Purple Heart Medal recipients free tuition in the Florida College System so veterans can continue their education or find a new path after their service to our country.

"We are proud of the stand that Florida is taking to make college more affordable for our military students," said Dr. Devin Stephenson, president of Northwest Florida State College. "Our military citizens are the lifeblood of Northwest Florida, and it is imperative that we take a stand to help them reach their educational and career goals. We believe that the passing of the Military Tuition Assistance legislation and the significant action of our Trustees have further removed any barriers that these students may have had to help them improve their lives. The assistance helps veterans build on their military expertise and creates new careers to expand and strengthen Florida's economy."

Torres agrees that the Purple Heart free tuition and fee waiver at Northwest Florida State College has helped him since returning to Florida.

"It absolutely benefited me to pursue my education at the Fire Academy" explained Torres. "I hope to join the Niceville Fire Department once I finish the course work and take the state exam but I also want to return for additional certifications maybe in plumbing or air conditioning maintenance."

"I know I'm lucky to be alive," said retired Navy Captain Jack Capra, Executive Officer and General Counsel at Northwest Florida State College.

## Flashbacks and a service dog

While serving in Basra during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Capra was assisting the British forces with beginning the reconstruction of the country's judiciary system. Southern Iraq was considered stable before the escalation of the insurgency. Capra often traveled in convoys moving from the military base to the Iraqi courthouses. That day in 2004, his unarmed vehicle rolled over an IED (improvised explosive device) which left him with a concussion and an eye and back injury leading to multiple surgeries.

"Even now, almost 15 years later I still has repercussions; flashbacks, nightmares, and spatial issues from the eye injury," explained Capra who also assists with Veterans on the college campus. "I am sensitive to the needs of Veterans and their special issues because I know firsthand their experiences. When someone sees me with Rocco, my 7-year old Labradoodle service dog, they know I can relate as a Veteran."

A product of the Florida College System himself, Capra received an associate in arts degree from Tallahassee Community College and transferred to Florida State University for his undergraduate degree before completing his law degree at St. Thomas University in Miami.

"The opportunity to go to school not only changes the lives of the Veteran but his family too," continued Capra. "To see both active duty and Veterans, some of them Purple Heart recipients like me, return to the classroom is amazing. They are jumpstarting their ca-



**Purple Heart recipient, Jack Capra, Executive Officer and General Counsel for Northwest Florida State College with his service dog, 7-year-old Labradoodle Rocco and Purple Heart recipient Erick Torres.** DREW BOWMAN

reers."

## Making 'a significant impact'

In 2017-18 Northwest Florida State College welcomed six Purple Heart recipients and the college has the most students receiving post-9/11 GI Bill benefits in the Florida College System.

"The Purple Heart Waiver has made a significant impact on our military community for students like Erick," said Dr. Devin Stephenson, president of Northwest Florida State College. "Our mission is to improve lives, and this waiver is a perfect example of how providing access, launches careers."

In total, 77 Purple Heart recipients attended one of Florida's 28 colleges in 2017-18.

Palm Beach State College and Eastern Florida State College had nine enrolled in each college. On the other side of the Panhandle, Pensacola State had six, Chipola and Florida Gateway College each had two Purple Heart recipients. More than 16,500 military veterans enrolled in the Florida College System last year along with another 7,000 dependents of military service members.

"I've said it once, but I'll keep repeating, I know I'm lucky to have this medal, to still be able to walk, to be alive," said Capra, "I feel a responsibility to make sure all Veterans are taken care of in the Florida College System."