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Army Special Forces Honor Life of “Colonel Maggie” Raye

Twenty-eight years ago at the Fort Bragg Cemetery, U.S. Army Special Forces “Green Berets” carried the casket of singer and comedian, Martha “Maggie” Raye during her funeral. On that day, in October 19, 1994, Raye was the first civilian woman interned at Fort Bragg. Raye, a lifelong patron of the Special Forces, wanted to be buried near “her boys” as she would affectionately call the Green Berets.

Last week, on the anniversary of her death, Green Berets of the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) honored Raye by laying flowers at her grave.

“Maggie represented the very best of American society,” said Col. Pat Nelson, 1st Special Forces Command Chief of Staff during the ceremony. “She was full of love, compassion, and understood the value of people.”

Raye, like similar entertainers of her time such as Bob Hope, spent years traveling to the various war fronts of WWII, Korea, and Vietnam to entertain troops. It was during her many travels to Vietnam that she developed a special relationship with the Special Forces Regiment. “Colonel Maggie” as she was affectionately called was quick to push aside her performances and jump into action to render medical aid on more than one occasion. She would sometimes go missing after having heard of casualties at some far flung outpost and would use her honorary rank to catch rides aboard helicopters.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson confirmed her status as an Honorary Green Beret and Lieutenant Colonel. Maggie was keen to show it off too as she often wore her fatigues and beret during her trips to Vietnam, which totaled 25 months over eight years and often at her own expense.

The stories and heartfelt moments of Raye are plentiful and demonstrate that she truly cared for the Green Berets serving during the Vietnam War. She would relay stories to families, share photographs, and it was often said Maggie had a special way of knowing just what soldiers needed. Sometimes it was a quick laugh and other times it was someone to cry with after a deeply felt loss of a friend during a battle.

Maggie never stopped loving the Green Berets. At her California home, she built an addition, which often served as a place for soldiers to go that Maggie had met over the years she traveled to Vietnam.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton awarded her the nation's highest civilian award—the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Maggie Raye's significance holds a special place in the culture and legacy of Special Forces. Every year, 1st Special Forces Command recognizes select spouses with the Maggie Raye Award for a lifetime of volunteer service on behalf of the Special Forces Regiment. Previous award recipient, Mrs. Leigh Beth Munter, had the honor of laying the flowers at Maggie's grave.

Although twenty-years have passed, Maggie's impact is still felt and honored by the Special Forces due to their value and importance in people and telling the story and history of Special Forces.

"Maggie shows us what it means to appeal to civilian society," added Nelson. "The challenge of today and tomorrow is how do we reinforce the bridge of the civilian-military divide? How do we tell our story in new ways to reach today's society? Maggie Raye's legacy represents just that."

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