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WKU honors nation's veterans, inductees three into ROTC Hall of Fame

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Western Kentucky Department of Military Science and Leadership Head Academic Affairs Robert “Bud” Fischer, center, lay a wreath during WKU the country after being introduced by WKU ROTC Cadet senior Joseph L Bowling Green, Ky., on Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgc Grace Ramey

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SLIDE SHOW:
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Commemorating Veterans Day on Thursday, students and alumni gathered at Western Kentucky University for a ceremonial wreath-laying and to honor the latest inductees into the university's ROTC Hall of Fame.

Speaking to a class of ROTC cadets dressed in military fatigues and several program alumni and their families, WKU Provost Robert "Bud" Fischer encouraged the public to reflect on, listen to and welcome the nation's veterans.

"These heroes not only defend our nation abroad, they serve here at home," Fischer said. "During these past two difficult years, military personnel have been called to support efforts in fighting COVID-19, to assist migrants in search of peace and safety and to help citizens who've suffered devastating losses during natural disasters."

This year's ROTC Hall of Fame inductees include retired Lt. Col. Bill Pearson, Lt. Col. William Willis Jr. and Lt. Col. John Perkins, who died in 2010.

A brief biography for each inductee is included below:

Bill Pearson

Serving as commissioned infantry at the height of the Vietnam War, Pearson was in combat as an infantry platoon leader. For the valor he exhibited during his 1967 tour, Pearson was recognized with several honors, including the Combat Infantry Badge, Airborne wings and a Ranger tab, later Jumpmaster certification, a WKU news release said.

Pearson later earned his Aviator wings and Cobra/gunship qualification, then served another Vietnam tour flying the iconic helicopters and commanding a Cobra platoon in the 3-17th Air Cavalry. Once engaged by enemy ground fire, Pearson had to call upon all his skill to fight and survive.

Pearson went on to earn several other honors, including his Senior Army Aviator Wings and Senior Parachutist badge, Legion of Merit, three Bronze Stars and other medals.

Perhaps Pearson's greatest accomplishment is his work as a teacher and recruiter for the Army.

Having earned his master's degree at WKU and later serving in its ROTC Department, cadet enrollment tripled during his tenure there. The feat was especially remarkable given the tumultuous politics of the mid-1970s as the Vietnam War was drawing down. His time at WKU also allowed him to advise and assist the campus Pershing Rifle and Rebelette organizations, later leading them to victory at a national drill competition.

Pearson was later assigned to Iran (then an ally) to advise an Iranian aviation battalion. He arrived the day martial law was declared there, and the Shah was overthrown just months later. Pearson and his team were trapped by the Revolutionary Guard 250 miles from Tehran – where the Americans who could get to Tehran were assembled at the Hilton hotel. To get his team to Tehran, Pearson commandeered a school bus and led them through

several Revolutionary Guard blockades along the way. They got out on the last U.S. evacuation flight.

Pearson's last assignment was working in the Pentagon as the Aviation officer for the Chief of Army Reserve. After retiring, Pearson returned to teaching.

John Perkins

Perkins, who died in 2010, attended WKU from 1936 to 1941, entering the Army as a 2nd lieutenant that year to fight in Europe in World War II.

He was in amphibious landings at Casablanca, Sicily, Salerno, Anzio and southern France and was awarded a litany of medals. They include the American Defense Ribbon, Legion of Merit, Army of Occupation Award, EAME Ribbon with 10 bronze stars and arrowhead for 10 campaigns, Bronze Star Service Medal, Distinguished Unit Ribbon, American Theater Ribbon, WWII Victory Medal, Italian Cross of Military Valor, Army Commendation Ribbon, and WWII French Fourragere.

Perkins separated from the service in 1947 as lieutenant colonel and was a member of the Retired Officers Association. As a civilian, he went on to a successful career in sales.

He was inducted into the Bowling Green High School Hall of Honor, was a member of the WKU Hilltopper 100 Club, the W Club and a founding member of the College Heights Foundation Golf Classic. His pride in being a member of WKU's ROTC program and the Army was evident throughout his life in his character, his love of his family and his service to his country and his community, the WKU release said.

William (Bill) Wesley Willis Jr.

Described as a “nerd” – a label he's embraced throughout his life – Willis had a knack for school and took that love for learning to WKU, where he majored in chemistry and mathematics.

At WKU, Willis was introduced to the Pershing Rifles immediately and accepted their invitation to join. He

immersed himself in his academic studies and in service to Company B-3, serving as a member of the drill teams, as the Color Guard commander and as the S-1/Adjutant.

Willis earned one of the first Army ROTC scholarships, attesting to his academic excellence.

For his senior year, Willis was elected executive officer of the Pershing Rifles company and was also the commander of the Scabbard and Blade company. The cadre chose him to be the cadet brigade commander where he adeptly oversaw two cadet battalions of over 500 cadets.

Later, Willis became a parachutist and earned his Canadian Jump Wings then later went on to earn a master's degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Texas at El Paso.

After his 21 years of active duty, Willis began an encore career in what he believed he was born to do: teach. His highest recognition was given by the governor of Virginia when he was

selected as the 2006-07 Virginia Teacher of the Year in Virginia Education Region IV.

As a master gardener, he and his wife, Sharon, both currently serve with the Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service helping to maintain three local National Wildlife Refuges and assist visitors to those areas. His teaching continues as a volunteer in the refuge centers.

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