

Former Vietnam POW Donald "Digger" Odell dies

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Lt. Col. Donald "Digger" Odell, former Vietnam prisoner of war died Thursday, Oct. 22. He was a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel and was also a fighter pilot.

O'Dell, who was a Pontiac native and later a resident of Mount Clemens after retiring from the Air Force, had a storied military career, which included five and a half years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam and nearly 20 years at Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Harrison Township.

He was first assigned to the 94th Fighter Interceptor Squadron from June 1966 until February 1967. He was then assigned to the F-105 fighter-bomber crew training at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas and then the 34th at Korat Air Base in Thailand in August 1967. After being released from prisoner of war status in March 1973, he returned home in April 1973 and retired from active duty in 1975.

He received multiple honors for his service, including the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal for Valor with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Air Force Commendation Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal with 11 Bronze Stars, and the Prisoner of War Medal.

Odell received recognition for his time served, not only with medals, but also in 2017 with a street at Selfridge now named Digger Odell Street, a roadway that connects the commissary to the marina, an honor that humbled him, as he told the Macomb Daily previously "Selfridge is home to me."

"I am deeply saddened by the death of my longtime friend and a real American hero, retired Lt. Col. Donald "Digger" Odell. A special moment with my longtime friend was in May 2016, when I was a member of Congress and it was my honor to present a pin and commemorative certificate to Digger and approximately 300 other veterans of the Vietnam War to commemorate them for their selfless service to the United States. He was, and remains, a true hero. RIP, Great American Patriot," said Public Works Commissioner Candice Miller in a statement on the passing of Odell.

He was also inducted into the inaugural class of the Michigan Military and Veterans Hall of Honor in 2019.

After retiring from the Air Force, he served for 12 years as the civilian public affairs officer for Selfridge Air National Guard Base, retiring in 1990. While serving as public affairs officer, he was among the founders of the current Selfridge Base Community Council, which brings together business leaders and local community leaders with military personnel at the base.

Odell was organizer and co-founder of the Wertz Warrior snowmobile ride program, an annual fundraiser for Michigan Special Olympics and was also in demand as a speaker for military and veteran events.

He was the father of five children. Arrangements for Odell are not yet known.

Macomb Daily staff writers Don Gardner and Gina Joseph contributed to this report.