

William “Bill” Dudley, Order of La Florida Award Recipient, Part 1, October 1, 2024

Narrator:

You've tuned into another edition of The Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the city of St. Augustine works from those who do the work every day. Hosted by the City of St. Augustine's communications director, Melissa Wissel, The Break Room offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now your host, Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to The Break Room and thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the City of St. Augustine. Over the years, the city commission has established three citizen awards as a way to recognize local individuals for outstanding service and contributions. These awards are the deAviles Award, the Adelaide Sanchez Award, and the Order of La Florida. Each award carries with it distinct criteria which must be met, and the individual is nominated by a commissioner and confirmed by the city commission. The Order of La Florida award is presented in September to coincide with the founding of the city of St. Augustine, which is September 8, 1565. This year, the city commission confirmed two recipients and I have the pleasure of introducing one of those honored individuals, Mister William Bill Dudley. Bill, welcome to The Break Room.

William “Bill” Dudley:

Thank you so much for having me this morning, Melissa. I'm so pleased to be here.

Melissa Wissel:

I wanna talk a little bit about you and how you got to St. Augustine, but I really can't wait to get to these wonderful things that you do in the community, that you are recognized by this award. So give us a recap. You and I were just chatting. You've been here for many years.

William "Bill" Dudley:

I have. I have. Actually, I moved here initially in 1965. I had just come off active duty in the Air force and I came to Fairchild. Fairchild. It was Fairchild Hiller in those days. And I came to Fairchild in flight test. Just coming out of the Air Force. I was a pilot in the Air Force. I flew. And so I was picked up in the flight test department here. And that's what I did for several years. And then I moved out of flight test and moved into management. And I stayed in management for the rest of the period of time that I worked with Fairchild Industries. And I got transferred from Fairchild here in St. Augustine, over to Crestview, Florida, over in Okaloosa county, and then from there up to North Carolina, stayed with Fairchild for another 20 years. Wow.

Melissa Wissel:

Okay.

William "Bill" Dudley:

And retired from them as well.

Melissa Wissel:

Great.

William "Bill" Dudley:

So that's. That was kind of my reason for coming to St. Augustine. And then in 1996, my wife and I bought our retirement home here when we were living over in England.

Melissa Wissel:

Oh, great.

William "Bill" Dudley:

And then in 2000, I retired, retired second time, and, well, not really retired because I'm busier today than I've ever been.

Melissa Wissel:

You're so busy.

William "Bill" Dudley:

But we moved here in 2000. We've been here ever since.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, and I wanna just jump right into talking about how busy you are. The work that you do is so important to this community. So the award, the Order of La Florida, the criteria, as it states, is that an individual, over a long period of time, has unselfishly devoted time and talent to the welfare and betterment of St. Augustine's citizens and heritage, who has exemplified the finest qualities of citizenship and has contributed extraordinary services to the community. That is the work that you do?

William "Bill" Dudley:

That's the work I do.

Melissa Wissel:

In a nutshell, it is tremendous. You have a lot of organizations that you work with, but your legacy is the work and the commitment that you have to our veterans and the veteran community. And I'm just gonna be honest, if I sound like I am quivering a little in my voice, I admire the work that you do. I was married to the military for 26 years, so I have a very warm spot in my heart for the work that you do. So tell us about how you got into all of the things that you got into in supporting and serving our military veteran community. Cause you're still serving.

William "Bill" Dudley:

I am still serving. Melissa, let me back up a little bit to when I actually retired, retired the last time, I wanted to do something to give back to the community. My entire working career, military career, I was always in a transitory type of lifestyle, so I was never able to actually join any organizations or anything in the community. So I wanted to give back to the community. And I kind of took an inventory of my skills, my skill sets, and I'd had a lot of management experience. I had a lot of military experience. So I kind of put the two of them together and said, you know, I ought to be doing something in the veteran community. But I, in the meantime, got on two or three board of directors organizations with different organizations here, and they just weren't producing anything satisfactory for me personally satisfactory for me, until I joined by invitation of a neighbor, the Navy League, and eventually became the president of the local chapter council of the Navy League, went on to become the area president, became the state president, was elected to national vice president and a national director, and I'm still a national director emeritus in the Navy League, and then ultimately became a member of the Veterans Council by invitation of the chairman at that time. And then the chairman actually was appointed by Governor Scott to become a county commissioner and asked me if I would serve the rest of his term out, and I agreed to do that. That was 13 years ago. I'm still the chairman today.

Melissa Wissel:

It's one of those. It'll just be a couple of years.

William "Bill" Dudley:

And I'm still the chairman today.

Melissa Wissel:

You must be doing a great job.

William "Bill" Dudley:

So. And it's the most rewarding, most satisfying thing that I think I have done in my lifetime is the volunteer work that I'm doing now with the. With the veterans council. When we first started meeting, or when I was first meeting, we were, as I like to say, we were meeting in a broom closet, and we had so few attending, you know, our veterans council meetings. And

over the years, we've been able to expand that to now we meet in the Muscovy room the last Thursday night of every. Every month. And we. We have to keep expanding the room and the seating because we have so many people attending. We have a. I think at the time that I took the council over, we had about \$1,200 in our treasury. Today. We have a strong six figure balance sheet, and we are so blessed to have that because we're able to do so many things for veterans.

Melissa Wissel:

When you say the meetings, you said the last Thursday of the month.

William "Bill" Dudley:

The last Thursday of the month.

Melissa Wissel:

Is that open to the public?

William "Bill" Dudley:

It's open to the public, and we invite the public to come in and be with us. And we have members of the state legislature that attend our meetings. We have county commissioners that attend our meetings. We have members of the sheriff's department that attend our meetings on a very regular basis.

Melissa Wissel:

I'm a little biased, like I said, having been married to the military for 26 years, that I think the military and our veterans are, I'm gonna just say, one of the most deserving people of support and help. They serve. They sacrifice so that we can sit here and do what we do. And I think, you know, we don't have a draft anymore, so people are not obligated to serve. And I don't want to see it get lost of what it means to serve and to come back and to try to rebuild a life. Cause when you get out of the military, that's tough.

William "Bill" Dudley:

It is.

Melissa Wissel:

You have such an identity when you're in the military that's so clear for most, I would say I'm going off my own experiences, but you get out and you. Where do you go? What do you do? You still want to define yourself and have that identity. And the military so great with that, but it's hard when you get out and you come to a community.

William "Bill" Dudley:

Well, that support system in the military, when you're in uniform, that support system comes with your service in the military. It comes when you put that uniform on and you train as a unit and everything you do is in a team environment. And when you take that uniform off and you step out of uniform and you step back into civilian life, that's not there anymore. And that transition is very, very hard, very difficult on veterans. And so many of our veterans, many of our veterans are suffering from PTSD today and they just can't find themselves anymore and they're just lost. And that's where the VA comes into play. And we interface with the VA a great deal in helping veterans get the healthcare service they need. Working with our veteran service office here in the county, the director of the veteran service office and I work very, very closely hand in hand. We meet almost daily. We're on the phone together all the time working with veterans. And, you know, we're so proud of that, that we're able to help those veterans and find the things that they need. And I mentioned about, you know, strong financial position that we, the veterans council is in. We use that money every single week. We have veterans who have needs such as utility payments, late rent payments, mortgages, car repairs, utility payments, all these things, and we're able to help them immediately. We can, we can write a check right then. I don't have to go before process that through any boards or anything like that. I can make the decision right on the spot or any, you know, when the veteran walks out of, out of our office, they've got a check in hand or I pick up the phone, call FPL. I've got a portal with FPL and I can just go right into that portal and pay their light bill, their utility payments for them, things like that. That means so much to those veterans.

Melissa Wissel:

It's so critical because those little things I think people don't realize, it's that one thing that keeps them in their home and not being put out of their home and finding themselves homeless.

William "Bill" Dudley:

And so many times when they walk out of there, they are that one step away from becoming homeless. And had they not been able to find that, that financial help right then that same day, they would have been homeless the next day.

Melissa Wissel:

And I'm sure they walk out with a sense of relief. They still want to, they still have a purpose, they still have lives that they're trying to live and do it successfully. Now let me ask you this. We're going to run out of time and I'm just going to put that out there. But we're not going to rush because we're going to just post. We're going to have a part two, right? We're going to do a part two of this interview because we haven't even gotten to the cool stuff that you're doing. But what you're talking about is so important. Before we sign off, I want you to please share with our listeners. If you are a veteran or you know of a veteran, where do they go? When you say they come to you and you can help pay this bill or help that one month's rent, where do they go for that?

William "Bill" Dudley:

Well, what I do is I direct all veterans and veterans widows, even in need, I direct them to go to our veteran service office and then the veteran service office reaches out to me and contacts me. They do the screening process, if you will, verifying that they're a veteran and their DD 214s or that they are widow or whatever the case is. But I asked them to just go to the veteran service office first in accounting, and that's in the Health and Human Services building us at 200 San Sebastian View. Their phone number is 904-206-9160 okay. And I asked them to go to the veteran service office first and let me correct that as 904 209 6160. and then the veteran service officer will contact me and say, bill, we have a veteran here that you need to speak with. And then I go to the office and meet with a veteran.

Melissa Wissel:

And that office, the health and Human Services building is up north of town off us one.

William “Bill” Dudley:

It is.

Melissa Wissel:

You kind of go up where the new apartments are. There's a gas station up there.

William “Bill” Dudley:

There's a new gate station there. Take a left there, go across the railroad track, and it's the first building on your right hand side.

Melissa Wissel:

Veteran services.

William “Bill” Dudley:

Veteran services. They go into veteran service office.

Melissa Wissel:

So I'm going to do this, Bill. I'm going to tell people, thank you for listening. We didn't even get to do our halfway mark, so we're going to wrap this episode, but we're going to just come back to studio and we're going to finish the interview because I also do want to talk to you and share with our listeners the programs that you're working on that really are the hallmark of you receiving this Order of La Florida award.

William “Bill” Dudley:

Look forward to speaking about those.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the city of St. Augustine. Join us each week as the city's communications director, Melissa Wissel, has in depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you at this time next week for another edition of The Break Room.