

ARMED FORCES



MERIT AWARD

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O'Donnell named 2020 Armed Forces Merit Award Recipient

FORT WORTH, TEXAS - Bluefield College defensive lineman and military veteran [Collin O'Donnell](#) has been selected as the ninth recipient of [Armed Forces Merit Award](#) presented by the [Football Writers Association of America \(FWAA\)](#).

Coordinated by the staff at the [Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl](#), the **Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the FWAA** was created in June 2012 "to honor an individual and/or a group within the realm of the sport of football."

Brant Ringler, executive director of the Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl, and Doug Lesmerises, FWAA president, announced Wednesday during a teleconference that O'Donnell was selected from a list of 41 nominations (38 individuals and three programs) as the 2020 recipient by a nine-person committee made up of FWAA members and Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl officials.

"Collin has distinguished himself as a collegiate football player, an Army veteran and now as a businessman," said Ringler. Lesmerises added "O'Donnell joins a list of remarkable individuals and programs that have been recipients of the Armed Forces Merit Award. With so many deserving individuals and programs, it is difficult to honor only one recipient annually."



O'Donnell, who maintains a 3.4 grade point average, is a captain on the Bluefield College football team. In his first two seasons with the Rams, O'Donnell has compiled 34 total tackles in 15 games, including 16 unassisted stops. O'Donnell has 7.5 tackles for losses (19.5 yards), one quarterback sack (seven yards) and two passes broken up.

Serving in the U.S Army from 2013-2016, O'Donnell was injured in Afghanistan and after two years at Walter Reed National Military Medical Hospital and seven operations to save his foot, he fully rehabilitated and went back home to Buffalo, N.Y. where he began training with the sole intention of playing college football.

While at Walter Reed National Military Medical Hospital, O'Donnell was invited to the White House, where former President Barack Obama personally awarded him the Presidential Call to Service Award for his outstanding service to community.

Since arriving at Bluefield College in the Summer 2018, O'Donnell has demonstrated constant leadership to the Ram football team as well as service to the community.

- O'Donnell received the 2019 Richmond Touchdown Club Man of the Year Award this past December, one of the highest honors a College football player in the state of Virginia can receive.
- From his start in 2018 to spring 2019, O'Donnell volunteered at nearly every community service event that football has offered, as well as in his spare time.
- In 2019, on Martin Luther King Day, O'Donnell and several players help pack food boxes at the Bluefield Mission for the local hungry people of Bluefield, Va. and W. Va.
- In 2019, Collin took part in a local church organization - The Mercer County (W.Va.) Hunger Challenge to feed displaced Ugandan children, where he and his football teammates prepared more than 1,500 meal packages.
- In the fall of 2019, O'Donnell took part in the Tazewell County Business Challenge for entrepreneurs seeking to open a new business. He proposed an extensive business plan and his idea for a coffee and bake shop located in downtown Bluefield, Va. O'Donnell won the small business grant and opened his Coffee and Bake shop called "The Grind" this past May 2020. The recorded town session for the business pitch is available on the Tazewell County (Va.) Business Challenge Facebook page, Collin presented second.
- O'Donnell received Bluefield College's 2019 Champion of Character award from the Mid-South Conference.

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Army West Point coach and military service veteran [Mike Viti](#) was the 2019 recipient of the Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the FWAA. A graduate of West Point, Viti is in his fifth seasons at the school's fullback coach and co-founded Legacies Alive (LA), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

The mission of the Legacies Alive is to strengthen and support the Gold Star families of our nation's fallen heroes and brings national awareness to the life and character of all service members who paid the ultimate sacrifice. Viti oversees the strategic and executive direction of the organization.

Other recipient include [Nate Boyer](#) of the University of Texas (2012), [Brandon McCoy](#) of the University of North Texas (2013), [Daniel Rodriguez](#) from Clemson University (2014), [Bret Robertson](#) of Westminster College (Fulton, Mo., 2015), [Steven Rhodes](#) from Middle Tennessee State University (2016) and [Dr. Chris Howard](#) from Robert Morris University (2018).

Boyer (long snapper), **McCoy** (defensive lineman), **Rodriguez** (wide receiver) and **Robertson** (defensive back) served in the Army before playing collegiate football. A Marine, **Rhodes** played four seasons at Middle Tennessee and participated in the 2013 Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl with the school.

A 1991 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, **Dr. Howard** was a Rhodes Scholar and received the 1990 Campbell Trophy, the highest academic award in the nation presented to a senior college football player. A member of the College Football Playoff Selection Committee (2017-2019).

[Kansas State](#) and its football team were honored in November 2017 as the sixth recipient of the Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the FWAA for the university's partnership with the United States Army that created a bond between the school's athletic department and the Iron Rangers at Fort Riley.

[ESPN Events](#), a division of ESPN, owns and operates a portfolio of 35 collegiate sporting events nationwide. The roster includes four early-season college football games, 17 college bowl games, 11 college basketball events, a college softball event and two college award shows, which accounts for approximately 400 hours of live programming, reaches nearly 64 million viewers and attracts over 800,000 attendees each year. With satellite offices in more than 10 markets across the country, ESPN Events builds relationships with conferences, schools and local communities, as well as providing unique experiences for teams and fans. For more information, visit the official [website](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [YouTube](#) pages.

The **Football Writers Association of America** (FWAA, <http://www.sportswriters.net>) consists of the men and women across North America who cover college football for a living. Founded in 1941, the membership includes journalists, broadcasters and publicists, as well as key executives in all the areas that involve the game. The FWAA works to govern areas that include game day operations, major awards and an All-America team. Through its website, the FWAA works to improve communication among all those who work within the game. The FWAA also sponsors scholarships for aspiring writers and an annual writing contest. Behind the leadership of President Matt Fortuna of The Athletic, Executive Director Steve Richardson and a board of veteran journalists, the FWAA continues grow and work to help college football prosper at all levels. There are now over 1,400 members.

[Bluefield College](#) is a Baptist liberal arts college in Bluefield, Virginia. Founded in 1922 with an enrollment over 1,000, Bluefield College offers 22 majors with bachelor and master's degree offered. Nestled in the scenic Appalachian Mountains, Bluefield College's 82-acre campus is about 150 feet from the state line between Virginia and West Virginia.

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TIM SIMMONS: Good morning, everyone. My name is Tim Simmons. I'm the coordinator for the Armed Forces Merit Award, presented by the Football Writers Association of America. And to announce the recipient -- the ninth recipient of the award is Brant Ringler, the executive director of the Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl. Brant?

BRANT RINGLER: Thank you, Tim. And, first and foremost, everybody on the call today, thank you for your time. Also, want to thank Collin [O'Donnell] and all other veterans out there for their service to our country. Today's a special day for us all.

You can see right above my head, you'll see the flag of my father. He served in the Army in World War II, so Veterans Day has always been a very special day for me as well.

In regards to the Armed Forces Merit Award, before I present this, I want people to understand this isn't just an award for a person who has served our country and they come back and play football. This award is so much more. It is about service. And Collin has gone on to serve our country but he came back, and he's serving the football team. He's serving his university. He's serving the community in such ways he's received various volunteer awards. And so all of that goes into our decision in selecting our ninth recipient of the Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the Football Writers Association of America.

We would like to present this award to Collin O'Donnell. Thank you, Collin.

TIM SIMMONS: Thanks, Brant. Now from the Football Writers, Doug Lesmerises, the President of the Football Writers Association. Doug?

DOUG LESMERISES: Thank you. On behalf the Football Writers Association, certainly would like to congratulate Collin [O'Donnell] on this honor. It's a privilege, I think, for all of us who cover college football to have people like Collin involved with this sport and someone who has dedicated his life to serving his country, to serving his community. And we're lucky that he's chosen college football as an outlet for his passion as well.

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I'm a little worried about offense linemen who may become aware of this award and then realize, "I gotta try to block this guy." That what he did serving his country, what he's done as a businessman, what he's done in the community, and to think, "Well, now he's just trying to get to the quarterback. Man, that seems kind of easy compared to everything else he's done." So good luck to those offensive linemen out there trying to block Collin.

But this is a great big, diverse community in college football. And all of us who are part of it, writing these stories, I think we have times when we realize some of the incredible people who are part of the sport, and Collin is clearly one of them.

So congratulations to Collin on this. And as someone who had a father who served in the military, I know Collin spent a lot of time in Walter Reed Hospital. My dad at times used Walter Reed, was a great resource for him. And so to think of what Collin was sort of choosing for his life when he was going to be done with that and on to the next stage of his life and that he picked college football is a wonderful thing.

So, Collin, I'll tell you this. I know you've also started the coffee shop The grind in Bluefield that I know the pandemic is tough that, kind of thing. All I can do personally at this point is, when this pandemic is over, I will come and get a cup of coffee and a bagel because that's what sportswriters can do to show their appreciation.

So, Collin, thanks for everything you've done. Thank you for being part of the college football landscape, and congratulations on this very deserved award.

TIM SIMMONS: Doug, thank you very much. I guess, how far is Cleveland from Bluefield? Probably five, six-hour drive?

DOUG LESMERISES: Yeah, not too far for a bagel, I'll tell you that.

TIM SIMMONS: Thank you very much. Steve Richardson with the Football Writers, the executive director.

Steve, you want to add anything?



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STEVE RICHARDSON: We really appreciate Collin [O'Donnell], and he's obviously -- he's a great representative for this award. He covers all the bases: Obviously, his service for our country, his efforts on the football field, his academic abilities. And then obviously. As Doug [Lesmerises] touched on, his entrepreneurial expertise at this point in his life is something a lot of people don't ever achieve, owning a business.

So we appreciate all that he's done in this early life of his and wish him well.

TIM SIMMONS: Thanks, Steve.

Now to the Athletic Director -- I should say the Vice President of the Intercollegiate Athletics at Bluefield College, Tonia Walker. Tonia?

TONIA WALKER: Today is, indeed, a great day for Bluefield College. We are very congratulatory of Collin [O'Donnell] for his time spent and his services rendered in the Armed Forces. He certainly is a person that is a grinder. Much like the name of his business, he's a grinder. He's a go-getter. And he has lent his dedication, his resilience, and his service not only to the Armed Forces but also here at Bluefield College. So we are certainly grateful to have him as a part of our campus and Bluefield family and wish him well in the years to come.

TIM SIMMONS: Thank you very much. And now to turn it over to the Assistant Athletic Director for Athletics and the head football coach, Dewey Lusk. Dewey?

DEWEY LUSK: Hello. Doug [Lesmerises], you had mentioned earlier that you would hate to be an offensive lineman trying to block Collin [O'Donnell]. Last year in one of our games, just towards the end of the season, Collin comes up to him and getting ready to go out and play defense, he says, "I'm gonna get you a sack." Sure enough, the next play, he gets a sack. But that's Collin O'Donnell.

I would like to thank Tim [Simmons] of the Armed Forces Merit Award, coordinator; Brant [Ringler], Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl director; and Doug, President of the Football Writers Association because -- I guess I'm biased, but y'all made a pretty good choice in choosing Collin. We call him Sarge, affectionately.

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Sarge, we would like to thank you for your service to our country and your leadership on our football program, and your leadership to our school, and your commitment to community service. Thanks for being a great role model. Congratulations, well-deserved.

TIM SIMMONS: Thanks, Dewey. And now to the recipient -- the ninth recipient of the Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the Football Writers Association, Collin O'Donnell. Collin?

COLLIN O'DONNELL: I just want to thank all of you for making this possible. I'm surrounded today by people who have truly had an incredible impact on my life from my coaching staff who believed in me against all odds to family and friends who constantly support me and are there for me. And for this to happen on a day like Veterans Day, to be able to represent my fellow veterans, to you, I have a message as well and that is that you're needed, you're loved, and you each bring something incredible to your localities and your communities that is valuable. And we need you guys to step up in every facet of the United States.

And I'm so grateful to have this opportunity and to be able to represent my fellow veterans. And I just want to thank my coaches again for giving me this opportunity because they certainly didn't have to.

And to be able to play college football and represent my family, my friends, my state, my country, and still serve my community is something that I don't take for granted and it gets me up every single day. It keeps me inspired. Thank you to the Football Writers Association of America, Lockheed Martin, and the executives at the Armed Forces Bowl for putting this on for me. It means the world.

TIM SIMMONS: Collin, can you kind of go through the progression after you left high school, going into the service, and then how did you end up at Bluefield?

COLLIN O'DONNELL: Yeah, so quite the progression. After high school, I graduated in 2011. I tried college, but it turned out it wasn't for me right away. And so I decided that it was time to go in the Army and follow my grandfather's footsteps dating back to World War II. So I joined up in 2012, had to lose about 75 pounds to do so, and gain it all back for football.

But got into the Armed Forces. Within a few months, I was notified after getting my station at Fort Polk, Louisiana, that we were going to be deploying. And so we ended up going to Afghanistan in early 2014.



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Unfortunately, I didn't get a lot of time overseas. I had only spent maybe about four months over there before everything had happened. I got medevac'd to northern Afghanistan, over to Germany for two weeks, and then back to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Shoutout to everyone Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and other hospitals around the world who are still recovering from wounds and service to their nation. You're not forgotten, and you guys give me inspiration every single day to do what I do.

Following my discharge in 2016, I thought there was a standard for veterans -- I think that it's placed on us -- and that is to get back into the private workforce, go to work, and find a job you love doing. I tried. I tried my very best. I worked for a great company back up in Buffalo, New York. They treated me awesome. They made every accommodation, but there was something missing in my life. Opportunities that I hadn't taken after high school which included college football really started to eat at me.

So I enrolled back in school at my local community college, got my grades back up, and decided to go all in. I got with a program called Athletes of Valor. And Athletes of Valor helps veterans get back into positions of playing college sports after their time in service.

And so I got with the program and I got a call from Bluefield. I had never heard of the area. But I'll tell you within seven and a half hours, I was at Bluefield College going on a tour and waiting to talk with Coach [Dewey] Lusk.

When Coach Lusk and Coach [Dino] Kaklis came into the lunchroom, they sat down and the first thing I said is, "Coach, I will do absolutely anything to play college football. I'll bench whatever you want me to bench. I'll squat whatever you want me to squat. I will play college football however you want me to play and I'll do it at any position." I think Coach Lusk might have thought I was a little crazy at first. But, man, I was just so motivated and ready to get going.

And they gave me that opportunity, and I was able to sign my letter of intent. And a couple of years later, seeing myself in this position and being able to still lead my team every day is a great honor and I don't take it for granted. I'm so grateful for my football team for giving me the opportunity to lead again on the field.



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Q. Collin, congratulations, by the way, on the award. Very well-deserved. Just wanted to get your thoughts, how you parallel your time spent in the military with your football career. What are some parallels, and what are some of the challenges going from the military now being the leader on your team?

COLLIN O'DONNELL: One of the great sayings is, "Not everything in life is football but everything in football has life." So you know, I've learned -- every single thing that has come from the military has been able to translate straight onto the field.

So being able to remain disciplined, be on a time schedule, and really push myself to the next limit is something that a lot of people don't get the opportunity to do ever, let alone twice. So being able to push myself to my limits in my comfort zone every single day is something that I'm enthusiastic about. I think we became complacent when we're comfortable.

We always strive to be better than we were yesterday. You never remain the same. You're either getting better or getting worse.

So being able to get on to the field and stand before my team and whether it's giving them a pep talk or just leading on plays, I think that it's really, really special for me to be able to take that initiative and that role on my football team.

But it is more special to me that my football team trusts me to do that. And when guys come up to me and they have questions, personal questions, or they just want to know about the military or they want to know about a play, I always find that just as honorable because it is my opportunity to connect with my teammates. And the fact they're coming to me, it means the world to me.

So everything about the military has translated to football. But most certainly, the discipline aspect is something that I enjoy.

Q. This season, obviously we've had some challenges with the pandemic. How have you led your team -- is it for you being -- I assume you're quite a bit older than most of your teammates. What has that been like? It almost seems like you're in a player/coach role. So a bit on the pandemic and a little bit on your role with the team.



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COLLIN O'DONNELL: So it certainly has been a different experience than many have. So I'm 27 years old. So you hit the nail on the head with the coach/player role because they do look to me for guidance, but also I'm still on the field with them. And so it is an interesting line that I ride there.

However, as for the pandemic, we started this business in probably the craziest time in modern American history to do so. So we were planning on opening in June. When that couldn't happen, we bought a food truck trailer and we decided to launch that.

And so in order to work out for college football, stay in shape, and make sure that we were getting the business done, me and my team woke up every single day at 2:45 in the morning and worked our butts off every single day, opening the coffee shop by 7:00, and then not going to bed until 9:00 or 10:00 at night. We did for that for over 85 days, from when I previously counted.

So having a team that's willing to follow you -- willing to follow you at all, let alone to the weight room at 3:00 a.m., is really special. And then on the other side of that, willing to have coaches who are willing to accommodate that level of discipline and growth is really, really special because I don't know anywhere else in the United States where someone else would wake up that early to meet me at the weight room and allow me to get my work in with my team. And it is really special.

DOUG LESMERISES: Collin, what do you envision for yourself when you're done with college? I know you have the business. But what would you like to pursue the rest of your life?

COLLIN O'DONNELL: That's a really interesting question I ask myself every day, too. My foundation is certainly in -- I love constitutional law. That's one of my, I guess, passions. And so I want to really pursue constitutional law to the fullest degree. And, eventually, someday I would like to not just represent my team but also my locality in public office of some sort and that's been a longstanding dream of mine and a goal.

And I think the highest honorable one that someone can choose to allow the American people to put their faith in you is very special. And so that's something I'm very passionate about, but I love creating stuff, too. So I don't see my entrepreneurial side falling off anytime soon.

TIM SIMMONS: Collin, what are you majoring in? And you're a junior this season?



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COLLIN O'DONNELL: Yeah. So I'm a junior on the field, senior in the classroom. I was just notified a couple of days ago that we're getting our season of eligibility back, so I will be back next season. I'm getting my undergraduate in criminal justice, my Masters in business, and then I hope to go to law school after that.

TIM SIMMONS: Collin, thank you very much. Congratulations! As for the presentation in person, I think Brant's [Ringler] going to be sending it off to Bluefield. And maybe hopefully this spring, I guess, you're going to have a season, starting what, late February, early March?

COLLIN O'DONNELL: That's correct. Yes, sir.

TIM SIMMONS: Congratulations. And now I would like to turn it over to Bob Redd, the Sports Information Director at Bluefield, and he can kind of explain the football season and where Bluefield College is located.

COLLIN O'DONNELL: Thank you guys so much.

TIM SIMMONS: Thank you.

BOB REDD: First of all, I would like to congratulate Collin [O'Donnell] on this great accomplishment, one of the biggest, if not the biggest, accomplishment we've had in the history of Bluefield College football.

Our program revitalized itself after a 70-year dormancy in 2012, so we're still basically a new football program here at Bluefield. Our season starts February 6th. We play only conference games this year within our division, and we'll run through early to mid-April.

As far as our location of the school, we are about 1500 feet from the West Virginia border here in Virginia. We're actually in West Virginia right now at our weight facility, the Herb Sims Wellness Center. About 1,000 yards away is our main campus over in Virginia. So the two cities of Bluefield, West Virginia, and Bluefield, Virginia, run together and really one big community.

TIM SIMMONS: Thank you very much. Thanks to everybody on your staff for helping coordinate everything.



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BRANT RINGLER: I want to say thanks to Bob, as well, and everybody on this call today. Fantastic job. I think we definitely have the right recipient, for sure. Even more proud after listening to him speak and what he wants to do with his life. I'm excited for him, and I look forward to following his career.