

Former Maryland National Guard head James F. Fretterd dies at 86



Retired Lt. Gen. James F. Fretterd, who headed the Maryland National Guard for 16 years, has died. (Handout photo)



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Lt. Gen. James F. Fretterd, who headed the Maryland National Guard for 16 years and helped increase the number of women and minorities in the officer ranks, died Saturday of kidney failure at his home in Federalsburg on the Eastern Shore. He was 86.

General Fretterd, one of the longest-serving adjutant generals in Maryland's history, oversaw the state's response to natural disasters, civil disturbances and other emergencies from 1987 to 2003.

He fought to secure more Defense Department funding for the Maryland Guard, established a post-Cold War partnership with the Baltic nation of Estonia, and launched a program to encourage high school dropouts to earn GEDs and learn job skills.

"His passion, his love, was the military," said a daughter, Linda Earls of Greensboro. "He had a fondness for knowing everyone's name, their children's names, even their pet's names. He lived and breathed and cared for his soldiers, his airmen. He took pride in that. It wasn't just a job, it was his life."

Gov. Larry Hogan said General Fretterd served with "great honor and distinction."

"He leaves a legacy of achievement that will forever stand as an example of selfless service and commitment for Maryland's Citizen Soldiers and Airmen," Governor Hogan said in a statement. He ordered the Maryland flag lowered to half-staff beginning at sunrise Monday and lasting until sunset Friday.

James F. Fretterd was born in Staten Island, N.Y., in 1930. His parents, James Vincent Fretterd and Mildred Elizabeth Hallengren, were battered by the Depression and soon moved to Federalsburg to start a chicken farm.

He graduated from Caroline High School in Denton in 1947 — he was named most likely to succeed — and worked at a lumber yard.

"He thought the only way he would eventually become successful was to join the military," Mrs. Earls said.

He enlisted in the Maryland National Guard in 1951 and remained with the organization until he retired in 2003.

He rose through the ranks and served as chief of staff and assistant adjutant general for the Maryland Army National Guard before Gov. William Donald Schaefer appointed him adjutant general of Maryland in 1987.

After a major snowstorm on Governor Schaefer's first day in office and an Amtrak train collision in Chase that killed 16 people in January 1987, Gov. Schaefer placed the state's emergency agency, now known as the Maryland Emergency Management Agency, under General Fretterd's control.

General Fretterd secured \$15 million in federal funding to create a new headquarters for MEMA at a Guard installation in Reisterstown. The installation is now known as the Camp Fretterd Military Reservation.

He also established a partnership with Estonia in which Estonian troops would spend time training in Maryland, and Maryland Guard members would do the same in Estonia.

He chose the Baltic nation because its capital, Tallinn, had a port similar to Baltimore's. Maryland later designated Tallinn a sister city of Annapolis in 1999.

"I think he saw it was an opportunity for the National Guard to contribute over many years," said Maj. Gen. James Adkins, who served as Maryland's adjutant general from 2008 to 2015.

General Fretterd also helped increase the number of women and minorities in the Guard's officer ranks.

"My staff personally monitored individual career patterns for women and minorities and mentored those who demonstrated potential for key leadership roles," he wrote on his resume.

In 2015, when Maj. Gen. Linda L. Singh became the first African-American and the first woman to take command of the Maryland Guard, General Fretterd called her appointment "a dream come true." He said four women were promoted to general on his watch.

"If it wasn't for the women and minorities, we wouldn't have an Army, we wouldn't have an Air Force," he told The Baltimore Sun.

General Fretterd also started the Freestate Challenge Academy, a program in which at-risk youth spend time at military facilities and are encouraged to earn their GEDs and learn job skills such as nursing and carpentry.

He also persuaded some community college and four-year college presidents to offer free tuition to Maryland Guard members.

Maj. Gen. Frank Vavala, adjutant general for Delaware, said he would often call General Fretterd for advice. He called him "Mr. National Guard."

"Jim Fretterd epitomized what it meant to be a citizen soldier," he said. "Jim Fretterd was woven into the very fabric of the state of Maryland and the Maryland National Guard."

General Fretterd earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of the State of New York in 1984 and graduated from a senior executives program at Harvard University, the U.S. Army War College and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

He was awarded the Army Distinguished Service Medal, the National Guard Bureau Distinguished Service Cross, an honorary juris doctor degree from the University of Baltimore, and the Speaker's Medallion from the Maryland House of Delegates.

General Fretterd lived nearly his entire life in Federalsburg. In 1952, the year he married his wife, Ellen Ingram Fretterd, she took the couple's savings of \$10,000 and bought a 129-acre farm in the town at auction.

General Fretterd was with the Guard that day and couldn't be reached to sign off on the decision, so Mrs. Fretterd surprised him with the news.

"They never looked back," Mrs. Earls said. "It was Dad's paradise away from it all. It was worth it for him to drive to Baltimore. He would take off his uniform and relax back in the woods. He would just walk and enjoy the fresh air and wildlife and just be away."

Mrs. Earls said a neighbor would tend to the farm because General Fretterd was busy with the Guard, and they split the profits.

Funeral services are scheduled for 11 a.m. Friday at the Fretterd Community Center.

In addition to Mrs. Earls, he is survived by another daughter, Laura Patrick of Harrington, Del.; a brother, Charles R. Fretterd of Brandon, Miss.; and four grandchildren. His wife of 58 years, who was known as the first lady of the Maryland National Guard, died in 2010.

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