

# Florida executes William Reaves Jr., 77, a Vietnam veteran with PTSD

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Florida executed William Reaves Jr., a 77-year-old Army veteran of the Vietnam War rated 100 percent disabled by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Tuesday evening at Florida State Prison near Starke. He was pronounced dead at 6:12 p.m. after a three-drug lethal injection, becoming the 18th person put to death in Florida this year and the 32nd in the United States. The US Supreme Court denied Reaves' petition for a stay of execution.

The curtain to the death chamber rose promptly at 6 p.m. Reaves was already strapped to a gurney with an IV in his arm. Asked if he had a final statement, he replied, "No, I do not." The injection of a sedative, a paralytic and a heart-stopping drug began immediately. About 30 seconds later Reaves took several large breaths and stopped moving. After a few minutes the team warden shook his shoulders and shouted his name. A medic was then called in and pronounced him dead about a minute later.

This "consciousness check" was the subject of one of Reaves' final appeals. His attorneys argued that his severe hearing loss meant he might not respond to verbal cues, so the state would not be able to reliably confirm he was unconscious before the second and third drugs were administered. They cited autopsies of executed Florida prisoners showing 33 had suffered flash pulmonary edema, which produces a sensation of drowning. The courts rejected the claim. The executioner, a private citizen by Florida law, is paid \$200 for the grisly procedure and may remain anonymous.

The execution came three weeks after Tennessee's failed attempt to execute Christa Pike on September 30, which witnesses described as hours of chaos and anguish as prison staff struggled to administer two doses of pentobarbital intravenously. Pike survived and was rushed to a hospital, where she was placed on a ventilator in critical condition. She has since regained consciousness

and been returned to prison. Republican Governor Bill Lee had denied her clemency petition and has not commuted her sentence. President Donald Trump's response was to question how such an execution could fail, telling reporters that it "shouldn't be very difficult."

It also came two weeks after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that former Army Major Nidal Hasan would be executed by firing squad on December 3 at Fort Hood, Texas, and that the killing would be broadcast live. Trump subsequently canceled the livestream, declaring that Hasan "will die, as scheduled, by firing squad" at the Army base where the mass shooting took place.

The case of William Reaves encapsulates the barbaric and reactionary character of capital punishment in America and in Florida in particular: the execution of an elderly man, a combat veteran whose service-related psychological injuries were never adequately presented to the jury.

At about 3 a.m. on September 23, 1986, Indian River County Deputy Richard Raczkoski, 29, responded to a 911 call from a pay phone outside a Zippy Mart near Vero Beach. Reaves, then 37 and recently released from prison, had placed the call. While the two men talked, a .38-caliber pistol fell from Reaves' waistband. After a struggle Reaves regained the weapon, and as the deputy retreated, he fired seven times, hitting Raczkoski three times in the back and once in the arm. The deputy died later that morning. Reaves, who told police he had been high on cocaine, was arrested days later in Georgia.

Reaves was drafted and arrived in Vietnam in 1969 at age 20 as a member of Charlie Platoon in the Army's Fourth Infantry Division. His unit conducted "search and destroy" missions hunting North Vietnamese fighters and snipers in the jungle. His squad was once ambushed in an open field from three directions. When a close friend was shot in the back, Reaves disobeyed a direct order, jumped onto the evacuation helicopter and held him as he died.

By the end of his tour Reaves was using heroin. Older soldiers, his former attorney Chance Meyer wrote this month in *Slate*, taught him to use heroin and opium-laced marijuana to numb his terror. Family and friends said the once calm young man and model student came home from war overly anxious and distracted, unable to sit through family dinners. A Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital denied him help, and his addiction deepened.

Mental health experts who later evaluated Reaves concluded that on the night of the shooting he was experiencing a flashback, reliving a firefight. “William’s flashbacks were triggered by men in uniform and the sight of guns,” Meyer wrote. “Even though Raczkoski only wanted to help him, William thought he was fighting for his life.”

Reaves’ first conviction and death sentence in 1987 were overturned because the prosecutor had previously represented him as a public defender. At his 1992 retrial his attorney, who had never tried a capital case, failed to have his mental health properly evaluated and never presented a PTSD diagnosis. Instead, a defense expert testified Reaves suffered from “Vietnam Syndrome,” which prosecutors told the jury had been invented.

The jury recommended death by a 10-2 vote, an outcome that would have produced a life sentence in nearly every other state. In a clearly unconstitutional move, Florida has since lowered the threshold further, allowing a death sentence on an 8-4 vote.

Only years later did the VA rate Reaves 100 percent disabled by service-related PTSD. In 2015 federal Judge Donald Middlebrooks vacated the death sentence, calling the prosecution’s testimony about Reaves’ military record “utterly intolerable” and “simply disgraceful.” In 2017 the US Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit reinstated it on procedural grounds.

On Monday more than 100 veterans wrote to Governor Ron DeSantis pleading for mercy: “We ask service members to risk their lives for this country; in return, our country assumes a solemn duty not to abandon them when they come home carrying wounds we cannot see.” DeSantis allowed the execution to proceed.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, Reaves was at least the 235th military veteran executed in the modern era and the 14th military veteran executed by order of DeSantis.

In Florida the governor decides who dies and when, signing warrants with no published criteria and typically giving condemned prisoners about a month to mount appeals. Clemency proceedings are conducted in secret.

Reaves met his clemency lawyer just five minutes before his interview, and the Florida Supreme Court ruled he had no constitutional right to effective representation in the process. Indian River County Sheriff Eric Flowers lobbied DeSantis in 2024 to sign the warrant. After witnessing the execution, Flowers complained that Reaves had died “so peacefully.”

DeSantis presided over a record 19 executions last year, and Florida has carried out more executions in 2026 than the rest of the country combined. This killing spree is part of a national drive led by Trump, who on his first day back in office in January 2025 ordered the Justice Department to pursue the death penalty aggressively and to ensure states have the drugs to carry it out.

On a single day, November 5, executions are scheduled in Indiana, Alabama and Florida, where Jesse Guardado would be the state’s 19th this year, tying last year’s record. Beyond Guardado, one additional active warrant remains, which would bring the death toll to 20, a new state record. That would be half the 40 executions carried out in Texas in 2000 under Governor George W. Bush, who took office as president the following January and launched the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A *Lancet* survey estimated that there had been 655,000 excess deaths in Iraq by mid-2006; the Costs of War Project estimated approximately 176,000 direct war deaths in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. The Afghanistan figure excludes indirect deaths caused by the destruction of food and water supplies, healthcare and other infrastructure.

The execution of William Reaves joins these two forms of state violence. The same state that drafted a young man, trained him to kill in a war that took millions of Vietnamese lives and abandoned him when he came home broken has now strapped him to a gurney and killed him. A ruling class that wages war abroad and executes at home will not abolish the death penalty. That task falls to the working class, as part of the struggle against war and the capitalist system that produces both.



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