

CAROLINA
MUSEUM OF THE MARINE

Meet the Marine. Be Inspired.

Coming Home: Ties That Bind
Honoring
Colonel John Kopka, USMC (Ret)



Some Marines never truly stop serving.
They simply find new ways to live out the values they carried in uniform.
Col John Kopka is one of those Marines.

A decorated Vietnam War veteran, Col Kopka retired from the United States Marine Corps in 1994 after 30 years of distinguished service. His career included key leadership roles, culminating in his service as Chief of Staff at Camp Lejeune. Earlier, while serving with the 3d Marine Division in Vietnam in 1966, he was awarded the **Silver Star** for conspicuous gallantry and bravery—an enduring testament to his courage under fire and devotion to fellow Marines.

Yet for those who know him best, Col Kopka's legacy is defined not only by his military record, but by how fully he embraced service after coming home.

For more than three decades, he has been a familiar and reassuring presence on the sidelines of Jacksonville High School football games—affectionately known as the “get back coach.” Through countless seasons, he has mentored young people with the same steady discipline, accountability, and respect that defined his Marine Corps career. In 2025, the naming of the Jacksonville High School press box in his honor recognized what the community had long known: his quiet commitment has shaped generations.

Col Kopka has also been a tireless civic leader, earning recognition through the United Way of Onslow County's Golden Rule Award, the Fabric of Our Community Award, and the Heroes Spirit Award from the Jacksonville-Onslow Sports Hall of Fame. Across every role, he has been a bridge—connecting military and civilian communities, past and present, service and citizenship.

Behind the scenes, Col Kopka has likewise been a steadfast champion of the Carolina Museum of the Marine from its earliest days. He was a loyal supporter of museum founder **SgtMaj Joe Houle, USMC (Ret)** lending his time, credibility, and enthusiasm to countless fundraisers and community efforts on behalf of the Museum. Long before construction milestones and exhibit installations, he believed deeply in the mission—and stayed with it.

For the Museum team, Col Kopka has been more than an advocate. He has been a generous source of insight and institutional memory, a trusted voice of encouragement, and—when needed—a welcome source of humor that reminded us why the work matters. In meaningful ways both visible and unseen, he stayed the course with us all the way to the finish line.

It is fitting, then, that the **Coming Home: Ties That Bind** exhibit is sponsored by **The James and Valerie Grabicki Family** to honor Col Kopka and his wife, Pauline. This sponsorship by a sister and her family is a profound recognition that Col Kopka's legacy lies in the people and community he has faithfully served.

In honoring Col John Kopka, we honor a Marine who came home and never stopped living the values of **Honor, Courage, and Commitment.**



Contributed photo: Jacksonville Daily News. Raeford Brown

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