



CONWAY — Retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. James B. Vaught, one of Horry County's most decorated U.S. Army veterans and a direct descendant of Francis Marion, died Friday after being found in a pond near Old Reaves Ferry Road.

The 86-year-old Conway man was remembered this weekend for his amazing service to his country, his educated opinion and his lack of fear to be an outspoken citizen of Horry County.

Horry County Coroner Robert Edge said Vaught was found in a pond near Old Reaves Ferry Road at about 5:30 p.m. Friday after his family notified authorities that he had not come home. Edge said a land and water search ensued and Vaught was eventually found.

"We're not sure how he got there, but he was found near a pontoon boat," Edge said.

He said Saturday's autopsy showed Vaught died of asphyxia due to drowning, but there were also signs of cardiac disease.

Vaught's family has deep roots in Horry County. The first two of his line to settle here came from Germany and put down roots in 1683. He and his wife, Florence, were very active with the Horry County Museum.

Vaught was born in Conway and attended the Citadel in Charleston in the early 1940s. He was drafted in 1945 and received his commission as a second lieutenant in February 1946. His civil and military education spanned more than 23 years, and has more than 38 years of service. His last assignment was commanding general, combined field Army, Republic of Korea/United States, assigned to defend the DMZ from Camp Red Cloud Korea. He served with the 82nd Airborne, the 1st Cavalry Air Assault and seven other divisions, the Army General Staff, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Office of the Secretary of Defense.

After pinning his first and second stars, Vaught was the Chief of Staff, 18th Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, Assistant Division Commander 82nd Airborne, Chief of Staff, Allied Land Forces Southeastern Europe, commanding General 24th Infantry Division, and was Director of Operations, Readiness and Mobilization Headquarters, for the Army during President Jimmy Carter's term in office.

As director, Vaught stood with Carter and other top national security officials in the White House Situation Room to scrutinize classified plans to end the Iranian hostage crisis. The mission was to rescue 53 American hostages who had been held since the previous November.

Shortly after a group of Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran that November, Vaught took a high-speed Concorde flight from Europe back to Washington. For months he led a group of elite soldiers from various branches of the military through training exercises to prepare for the rescue mission, which grew more urgent – and captured more of America's attention – with each passing day. A series of misfires, including a helicopter crash that killed eight American soldiers, ensured the failure of what would come to be known as one of the biggest blunders of Carter's presidency.

Since Vaught's retirement in 1983, he served as a consultant and adviser to military and civilian agencies in the development and production of avionics, digital communications, night vision equipment and radar for military use, such as special operations. He was also a member of the special operations policy and advisory group for the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

In 1985, Vaught chaired a study group sponsored by the American Security Council. The group produced and sent the "Peace through Strength" proposal to the White House. President Ronald Reagan adopted the idea and used it to neutralize and eliminate the Soviet Union without firing a shot.

Vaught was in Seoul, South Korea, when the North Koreans announced they had violated the 1994 “No Nuclear Weapons in Korea” agreement, which prompted him to write the “Six Nations” proposal. Vaught sent the proposal to all six capitals – the United States, China, Japan, North Korea, Russia and South Korea – and implored them to use diplomacy to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.

In March 2006, Vaught received the National Defense Industrial Association’s Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict Lifetime Achievement Award for his more than 60 years of contributions to the U.S. Special Operations Community.

“What a great American,” said Horry County Chairman Mark Lazarus. “His service to the United States and what he’s done in his career is really profound. It’s just a sad day. It really is.”

Vaught often found himself in front of the County Council, providing white papers and doing his best to convince the council of his opinion. In fact, Lazarus remembers Vaught recently wagging his finger and telling Lazarus to start the paving work on International Drive and ended the conversation with “get it done!”

“It’ll give me more determination to get the paving done on International Drive,” Lazarus said. “He’ll be greatly missed.”

Liz Gilland, former chairwoman for County Council with nearly two decades of public service, said she worked with Vaught for years.

“He was a living legend to me,” she said. “He was extremely interested in getting involved. He kept his eye on us to make sure we did everything best for the county, or at least what he thought was best for the county. He was always preparing white papers for us to review when making decisions.”

Gilland said Vaught stood out from others who spoke to council through the years.

“He not only got up there and spoke his opinion, he got up there with a depth of knowledge and a huge portion of care for the county he was born in,” Gilland said. “I considered General Vaught a very good friend and true American hero.”