

Outstanding Disabled Veteran for 1987 . . .

Living Life as Fully as He Can

Judge Blair "Bruzzie" Reeves, a member of Joseph E. Sarrazin DAV Chapter 5, San Antonio, Tex., has been named the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year for 1987.

Reeves is a paraplegic, service-connected disabled veteran who's been confined to a wheelchair for more than 42 years. But it hasn't stopped him from achieving personal, educational, professional, and community success.

As the Associate Justice, Court of Appeals of the 4th Supreme Judicial District of Texas, Judge Reeves believes in living life to its fullest extent.

"I feel very strongly that the Lord saved me to do something productive and constructive with my life," Reeves said. "This wheelchair has taught me to be persistent. I'm no brain. I just work hard. And I wake up every day wanting to live life as fully as I can."

A San Antonio native, he excelled at football and other sports in high school, and received a football scholarship from Texas A&M University, but opted to attend the University of Texas at Arlington to play football during his freshman year.

Due to lagging grades, Reeves joined the Marine Corps in October 1942, and was soon caught up in the island battles of the South Pacific during World War II.

A member of the Marine Raiders volunteer unit, he fought his way across the Pacific for two and a half years. But shortly after landing on Okinawa in 1945, his fighting days with the Marines ended.

An assistant squad leader at the time, the young corporal was within three days of his 21st birthday.

"We'd secured the northern end of the island and moved south to take the hills along a narrow gauge railroad near the city of Naha," Reeves said.

"We were moving along a cement wall by the tracks firing and throwing grenades into caves, when I heard an artillery round coming in . . ."

As Reeves dove for cover, an enemy machine-gunner fired into the squad, killing three Marines. A ricocheting bullet tore into Reeves back, partially severing his spine.

"I thought I was going to die," he said. "When my squad got to me, I told them I'd had it, and asked them to tell my momma I died like a man, and I wasn't afraid—I was thinking about her then. But they said I'd make it, and packed me out."

Evacuated to the fleet hospital on Guam, Reeves remained in critical condition with a recurring high fever. His doctor told Ma-



The Judge's Energy Saver . . .

Judge Blair Reeves prepares to leave for work on his special adapted motorcycle. He purchased the motorcycle to conserve fuel during the 1973 energy crisis, and still enjoys riding it.

rines who came to visit him that he wouldn't survive his wounds. But Reeves proved him wrong.

"I enlisted with some buddies from the 1941 high school football team," he said. "Some of them were wounded too, and they'd smuggle in peanut butter sandwiches and things when they visited me."

After nearly two years in various hospitals, Reeves was discharged from the Marines in January 1947, and released from the VA hospital in Temple, Tex.

His brother, John "Bubba" Reeves, came to drive him home that Saturday.

"On the way home, Bubba asked what I was going to do with my life," Reeves said. "I said I thought I'd go back to school later on. But he said I'd been laying around for two years, and it was time I went back to work. Then he said he'd enrolled me to start classes at San Antonio Junior College on Monday—I did, under the GI Bill."

That's where he met Betty Armstrong. "We attended classes together and took a liking to each other," he said. "I asked Betty for a date, and before long I was courting her."

Betty and Reeves were married in March 1948, and celebrated their 39th wedding anniversary this year.

During those years the Reeves adopted and raised three children.

"We were like any other family raising a bunch of kids," Betty said. "And our marriage has been a string of a lot of lovely and

wonderful things."

Following junior college, Reeves entered Baylor University Law School in Waco. But, in his first year there, he had an opportunity to build a wheelchair adaptive home with assistance from the VA, and decided to build it in San Antonio.

Transferring to St. Mary's University Law school in San Antonio, he had to overcome an accessibility challenge—his classes were on the second floor.

The challenge was met by rigging a special two-way public address system from the second floor to the first floor law library, where Reeves finished law school by way of headphones and microphone. And, by 1951 he'd passed the bar and entered private law practice with a fellow disabled veteran.

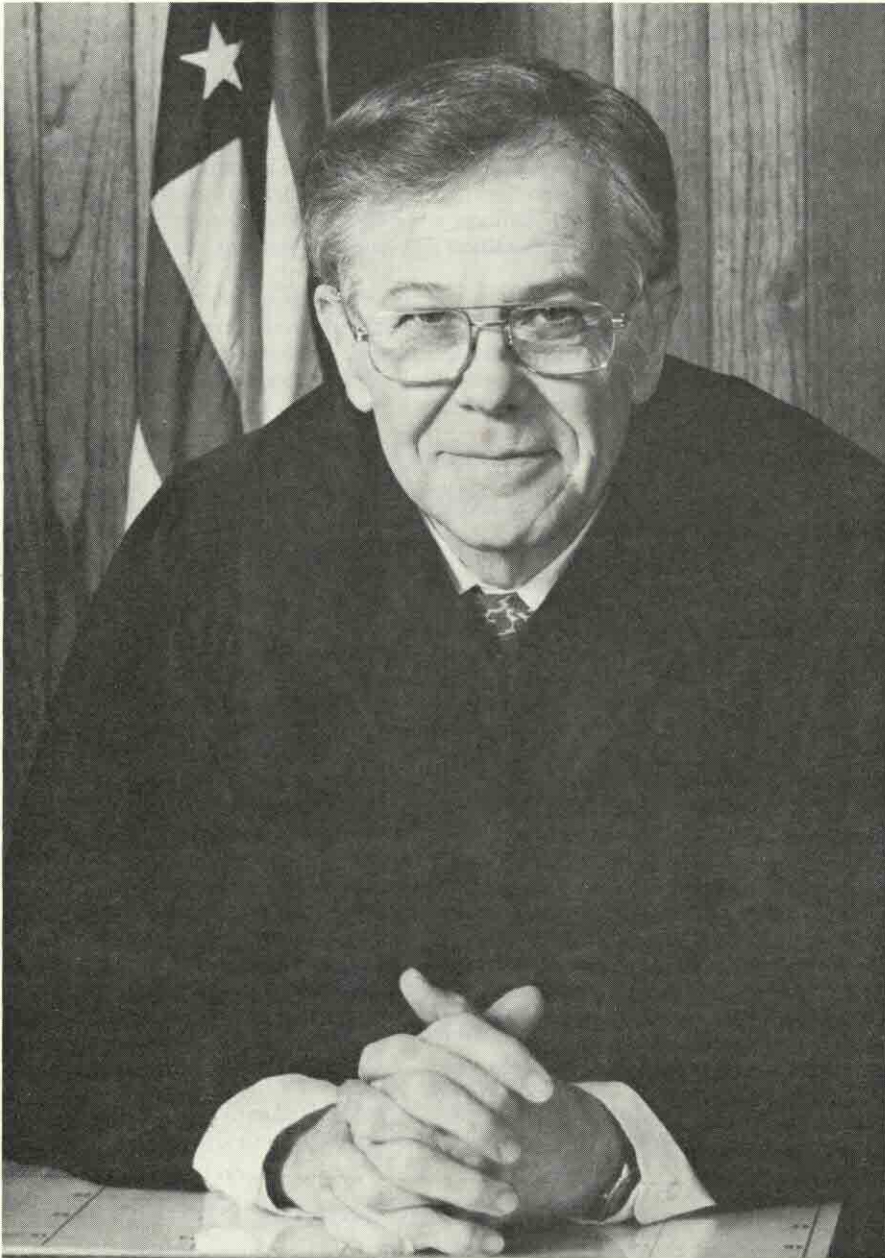
In 1952, he ran for Justice of the Peace, who doubled as coroner. His political career was underway, but not without a fight.

Some alleged Reeves wouldn't be able to do the coroner's job because being in a wheelchair would prevent him from inspecting many crime scenes.

The voters didn't see it that way—Reeves won the election and did the job well enough to be reelected five consecutive times.

He also continued private practice until elected County Judge of Bexar County, Texas, in 1967, when he put his political career on the line.

Shortly after his election, voters



Judge Blair "Bruzzie" Reeves

rejected a tax increase needed to make the Bexar County Hospital a teaching facility of the University of Texas Medical School. Without it, Reeves knew there'd be no medical school and little probability of a future VA medical center.

Defying opposition, he spearheaded a delegation to Austin, securing legislation to allow Commissions Court to raise assessments without a referendum, and cast the swing vote to complete the job.

Reeves' battle for the medical complex paid off. Today, the University of Texas Health Science Center and the VA Medical Center in San Antonio not only serve countless veterans, but are an important part of the local economy. And Reeves was reelected County Judge in 1970 and 1974.

JULY 1987

In his 35-year political career, Reeves has only been defeated twice. And the judge is eyeing the 4th Courts Chief Justice slot when the current Chief Justice completes his term in 1990.

"I'm honored to be the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran for 1987," he said. "And I'm proud to represent more than two million disabled veterans who pick up the pieces of their lives and start over again.

"But, there's something important to remember in all this—no one is unto himself.

"I've been blessed with good friends and a loving family, and this award isn't just for me, it's for all my friends and my family who helped along the way, and I thank God for them."



A DAV First

"This is the first time in the award's 26-year history that the DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Award has gone to a second winner from the same city," according to DAV National Employment Director Ronald W. Drach.

Judge Blair "Bruzzie" Reeves of San Antonio, Tex., joins fellow San Antonian Armando C. Albarran, who won the prestigious award in 1985.

Armando and Reeves have even more in common though.

Both Reeves and Armando are service-connected disabled veterans (Reeves from World War II, and Armando from the Vietnam War) who attended San Antonio Junior College. And, while attending the college, Reeves met and married his wife, Betty, and Armando met and married his wife, Tillie.

Commenting on the irony of it all, Armando said "it's a small world after all."



Judge Reeves wheels along in the Vietnam Veterans walk in San Antonio last summer.