

Disabled Veteran of the Year Recognized for Decades of Leadership



Dale Wilson, the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, returned from Vietnam a triple amputee. But that didn't stop him from becoming a leader among veterans, a small business owner, and — most importantly — a husband, father and grandfather.

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By D. Clare

Marine Corporal Dale Eugene Wilson was near the end of his tour in Vietnam on Feb. 19, 1970, when a command detonated artillery shell lifted him in the air and dropped him to the ground smoking from shrapnel and burns.

And though the blast claimed his left leg below the knee, his right leg at the hip, his right arm above the elbow and blew out his ear drums, it did not take the Marine's will to live or change his spirit.

"I don't think he's let the results of his wounds affect his optimism or the positive way he's conducted his life," said Sen. Jim Webb, who served as Wilson's platoon and company commander in Vietnam. "He's always been there

not only for people who served with us in Vietnam, but for veterans in general. He has a tremendous reputation."

For his leadership, inspiration and volunteerism in the decades since his injury, Wilson was named the 2009 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year. Wilson, a past commander of North Carolina Chapter 68, was specifically recognized for his service to his fellow veterans.

Wilson's nomination for the DAV's highest individual honor for members saw his fellow Marines, leading veterans and community members step forward to heap praise upon the man who has touched the lives of thousands.

"Every veteran in the country should look up to Dale Wilson," said Allen Payne, a longtime leader with the North

Carolina Veterans of Foreign Wars. “He’s an amazing man. People seek out Dale Wilson, and he never fails to inspire them.”

“We were going over to the coffee shop one day and he parked by the street. And I said, ‘Dale, why don’t you use a handicap stall?’ He said, ‘I leave it for people who might need it,’” said Edd Furr, life member of North Carolina Chapter 27. “Beyond the leadership he’s provided the veterans community, the people he encounters are drawn to our cause. He’s sacrificed so much for our country, and he always reaches out to do more.”

The occasion of Wilson’s recognition led his Marine buddies to speak out about his valor and leadership as a squad leader in Vietnam.

“There is no doubt in my mind that without Dale Wilson’s ‘bush smarts,’ young boots like me would not have survived,” recalls Kevin “Cannonball” Eddington who served with Wilson in 3rd Plt., Delta Co., 1st Bn., 5th Rg., 1st Marine Division.

Francis “Blue” Karst was in Wilson’s squad. He describes

Wilson as a careful, thoughtful Marine. He recalls a night weeks into his tour when his gun jammed in the middle of a firefight. “He had me take my gun apart in the dark and get it together. He taught me patience under fire. He was a well liked man,” said Karst.

On another night, while rushing to the aide of another company, three of Wilson’s squad members, including Karst, became separated and came under attack by 50 Viet Cong.

“Dale brought in three squad members and saved our lives. Only one of us was injured,” said Karst. “We were down to eight rounds.”

When Wilson was hurt, he said his first thought was that he was grateful that it was him and not his fellow Marines, though his fellow Marines say his absence was difficult to handle.

“The loss of Dale Wilson affected every man in that outfit,” said Eddington.

Wilson was finally recognized for his valor in saving his fellow Marines in 1977, when his hometown of Statesville, N.C., hosted “Dale Wilson Day.” There, with many of his fellow Marines present, Wilson was presented with the Silver Star.

By then, he was already embracing his life and making a name for himself. He’d returned home from the naval hospital in Philadelphia and earned his college degree. He married his wife Linda, raised his family and began his own business venture.

“I tell people all the time, you can’t spend your time looking over your shoulder at what could have been because you’re probably going to trip over something good in front of you and miss it,” Wilson said.

He’d also become involved in the veterans movement and felt compelled to serve and represent his generation who, despite the public’s perception of the war, had served with honor and distinction.

He organized and attended rallies. He joined the DAV, VFW and helped establish an active Marine Corps League presence in the community.

“I feel like as long as I can do something for my fellow man and country, I hope I’ll always be able to stand up,” said Wilson. ☉

Wilson was 19 when he deployed to Vietnam’s Arizona Territory — one of the most dangerous areas of operations for Marines. When he returned home from the war, shortly after starting a family and completing his college education, he joined veterans service organizations and led and participated in rallies to honor his fellow men and women who served in Vietnam.

