

Montana's Mike White Named DAV's Outstanding Vet of Year

"I think I've succeeded if people I meet can't remember which leg I've lost."

That's the attitude of Michael G. White of Helena, Mont., a combat-wounded veteran of the Vietnam War and this year's selection as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

White, 39, a talkative, fun-loving individual, has overcome the loss of his right leg and minimal use of his left leg to become a leading advocate for the handicapped in Montana. He will receive the DAV's top award from DAV National Commander Albert H. Linden, Jr., at the National Convention's opening session July 20 in Reno.

He was selected for this year's honor because of his involvement in many state and community programs on behalf of the handicapped, his active participation in various athletic events, and his ability to become a leader and an inspiration to others in the community.

For many *DAV Magazine* readers, Mike White's story should be familiar. He was mentioned in the story about Gene Murphy of Sioux Falls, S.D., the 1984 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year and now DAV national 1st junior vice commander.

"Gene Murphy was a squad leader in the platoon I commanded in Vietnam," White said. "Our stories parallel so closely that it becomes eerie."

White, a first lieutenant, was a platoon leader in Co. C, 1st Btn., 12th Inf. Regt., 4th Inf. Div. In March 1969, White's platoon was ambushed while walking point for the company. They managed to fight their way out of that "fix," and Murphy, White, and two others in the platoon were awarded Bronze stars with 'V' devices.

"One month later, we were assigned by our company commander to clear a North Vietnamese Army bunker area in a hilly, overgrown jungle area near Kontum," White said. "There were six of us wounded that day. I was walking near a well disguised bunker when a North Vietnamese soldier shot me with his AK47 about six or seven times."

White was shot in the left thigh, shattering his femur, and the left knee, paralyzing his leg below the knee. His right leg was broken below the knee, and he sustained a "minor" wound to his right knee and a slight wound in the right thumb.

The six wounded men were carried by poncho stretcher approximately 1 kilometer to an area where they could be medivaced. However, because of heavy enemy fire and approaching darkness, the helicopters had to return to base. The next morn-

ing, approximately 14 hours later, they were lifted through the trees to be medivaced.

"In Murphy's story, I was the lieutenant that screamed during the night, once the morphine ran out," White said.

He doesn't remember screaming. "But if 'Murph' said his lieutenant screamed, I guess that was me, because I was the only lieutenant that was wounded," he said.

White credits the men of his platoon with saving his life. They took turns to stay with him, and to wake him periodically to keep him from going into shock. He said it was not uncommon in Vietnam for men with wounds to die as a result of shock.

White is expecting a joyful reunion when he and Murphy meet at the DAV National Convention in Reno. He said he has not seen nor spoken to Murphy or any of his platoon since the day they were wounded in April 1969.

"We really weren't in any condition to wave or say goodbye when we were being lifted through the trees," White said laughingly.

At the 71st Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku, White was placed in a cast from his neck to his toes. While being readied for transfer to a hospital in Japan, a doctor noticed circulation problems in White's right leg. His cast was removed, and doctors discovered that the "minor" wound in his right leg had injured an artery.

Despite several arterial graphs during the next few days in an attempt to save the leg, the leg was amputated two inches above the knee about four days after the problem had been discovered.

White was sent to Valley Forge General Hospital in Pennsylvania on May 21, 1969. His recovery was slow, due to complications with his remaining left leg, which required additional surgery.

White credits those at Valley Forge General Hospital, both the patients and the staff, for his successful recovery and rehabilitation. "It's really a dynamite hospital," he says. "They had all types of programs aimed at getting you active again. Even if I couldn't do some of the things physically, it gave me hope that some day I could."

White met his wife, Lee, at Valley Forge. The daughter of a career Army man, Lee was teaching school nearby and came to visit another patient at the hospital.

"He was away from his bed at the time, so I told her to visit with me while she was waiting," White said with a chuckle. "Each time she came to visit him she'd spend some time with me also. It wasn't long before she was spending more time with me



Mike White sits at his desk at the VA Regional Office at Fort Harrison, Mont., above. At left is his wife, Lee, whom he met and married while being rehabilitated at Valley Forge General Hospital in 1970. Below are their two sons, Lyam, left, 13, and Jeremy, 8.

than with him." They were married at Valley Forge on May 18, 1970.

White, a native of Plattsburg, N.Y., first became involved with the DAV when he and Lee were invited by National Amputation Chapter 76 to a weekend in New York City in October 1970. He is now a life member of Lewis and Clark DAV Chapter 3 in Helena.

He was retired from the Army on Oct. 7, 1970, and he and Lee moved to Los Angeles, where he attended California State University, Los Angeles, earning a bachelor's degree in English in 1973. He began

to study for a master's degree at California State University, Northridge, but dropped his studies in June 1974 to become a veterans' representative on campus for the Veterans Administration.

In subsequent years, he worked as a VA veterans benefits counselor and Congressional liaison in Southern California. He was transferred to the VA Medical and Regional Office Center at Fort Harrison, Mont., in April 1980, as a veterans benefits counselor, and last year was promoted to educational liaison representative.

In this job, White works with outside agencies and institutions regarding educational benefits paid by the VA. He drives a VA van with hand controls to widely scattered educational institutions throughout the "Big Sky" country of Montana.

Although he has an artificial leg, White spends much of his day in a wheelchair, especially while working at his desk. He can wear his artificial leg only a part of each day, because of the strain it puts on his "good" leg. Because there is no feeling below the knee of his left leg, it is susceptible to blisters and other problems.

When not on the job, White is constantly on the go. He served as chairman of the Fort Harrison Equal Employment Opportunity Committee last year, was chairman of the state committee for the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, and now

is a board member of the Montana Independent Living Project, an advocacy group that evolved from the International Year of Disabled Persons committee.

This group aims to make the public aware of the needs and abilities of those who must live with handicaps, and is consistently trying to improve the quality of life for the disabled. It is through this group that White is often called for counseling and advice.

During the kickoff ceremony to the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, White offered to speak to any school students. The amiable ex-GI knew most of the city's school teachers were present, and figured this was a good way to reach the youngsters with the truth about handicapped persons.

As a result, White now regularly speaks to many elementary and middle school classes, and some teachers have instituted a regular handicapped awareness program on a quarterly or annual basis.

"This is something that gives me real satisfaction," White says. "It gives me a thrill when these youngsters meet me on the street and wave and say, 'Hi, Mr. White. Remember me when you spoke at my school?'"

"That's why I say I think I've succeeded if they don't remember which leg I've lost. These youngsters are honest and open. They don't look at your disabilities. They only see your abilities, and accept you as you are."

But, athletics are Mike White's first love. With the help of his artificial leg, he bowls each week in two leagues, maintaining a 167 average. He plays first base, pitcher, and manager of the DAV Chapter 3 slow-pitch softball team during the summer, plays wheelchair basketball in the winter, and each June competes in the Governor's Cup Marathon and Races.

In addition, he coaches his son's soccer team, is head referee in the Small-Fry Football League, and referees local high school football games.

The Chapter 3 softball team includes five other Vietnam disabled veterans, causing one of them to quip, "We're a bunch of crips, but we sure have a lot of fun."

He has played wheelchair basketball for the past three years, and each year the team has played in the Coors Wheelchair Tournament at Montana State University in Bozeman. Last year the team placed second, and this year came home with the championship trophy.

The big athletic event for Mike is the Governor's Cup Marathon and Races each

June. This event, which includes a 10K race, a 20K race, and a marathon, follows a course from a nearby old mining town. Much of the course is on a gravel road, so Mike trains on a gravel road near his home.

In 1980, Mike was the first and only wheelchair to enter the competition. He won the 10K race. The following year he entered the marathon, and ran it in 3 hours and 12 minutes. Mike's running started a trend, and now more wheelchairs are entering the competition each year. A wheelchair runner from Seattle won the marathon this year, and Mike won the 20K race.

Despite his many activities, White maintains a closeness with his family, which includes his wife, Lee, and sons, Lyam, 13, and Jeremy, 8. As members of St. Helena Cathedral Parish, they are active in family programs sponsored by the parish.

This past winter, Mike took his two sons for a series of skiing lessons at a nearby ski area. "They loved it," he said. "In fact, I was itching to get on the slopes with them. It was all I could do to sit there and watch them."

He said that skiing was one of the programs at Valley Forge that he was unable to participate in while he was being rehabilitated. Remembering, he had a glint of excitement in his eyes and a happy grin on his face. "Maybe this year I'll give skiing a try," he said.



At left, Mike White holds the giant championship trophy his wheelchair basketball team won this winter at the annual Coors Wheelchair Basketball Tournament at Montana State University in Bozeman. At right, he runs on a gravel road near his home as he trains for the annual Governor's Cup Marathon and Races each June.