

Loss of Leg Fails to Slow Philadelphia's Crime Fighter

"He's hell on crime!"

That statement by one of his aides aptly describes Ronald D. Castille, district attorney of the nation's fourth largest city and this year's selection as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

Castille, a life member of Philadelphia DAV Chapter 14, carries the same zeal and competence into his job as was ingrained in him as a young Marine Corps second lieutenant in South Vietnam.

"Then, I had to discipline Marines," Castille says. "Now, I have to discipline civilians."

As district attorney for the city of Philadelphia, Castille oversees a staff of 240 attorneys who prosecute about 50,000 criminal cases each year. With his election to a four-year term on Nov. 5, 1985, Castille became the first republican elected city-wide in 16 years.

It was a major upset in Philadelphia politics, and just one of a series of uphill battles for Castille since losing his right leg to a 50-caliber Viet Cong machine gun slug in 1967.

As a Marine Corps platoon commander, Castille was leading a team assigned to remove casualties of another platoon that was pinned down by a Viet Cong battalion in a rice paddy near Duc Pho in Quang Ngai Province. A machine gun slug struck Castille in the upper right thigh, knocking him down. He patted a fistful of the soft gray mud into his wound to slow the bleeding, then continued to direct his troops in the recovery operation.

"Cpl. Angel Mendez saw me and began coming toward me," Castille explains. "He said, 'Hold on, lieutenant. I'm coming.' I yelled, 'Stay there. Stay there.'"

"He came over and pulled me back. As he pulled me up an embankment, he caught a round in his chest... Angel disobeyed orders."

Castille's eyes get watery as he continues.

"Angel was an orphan from New York City. There is no one to mourn Angel Mendez... but me."

It was March 16, 1967, Castille's 23rd birthday. Helicopters came for the wounded. Castille was the last to be loaded. He was lying on the floor of the last helicopter to leave the area when a machine gun slug ripped through the floor, shattered, and struck his already wounded right leg and lower body.

The shock of the second machine gun blast stopped his kidneys, and he almost bled to death before he reached Clark Air Force Base Hospital in the Philippines two days later.

He lay in a body cast for a week, not realizing how grievously he was injured. Bacteria from the mud he'd packed into his

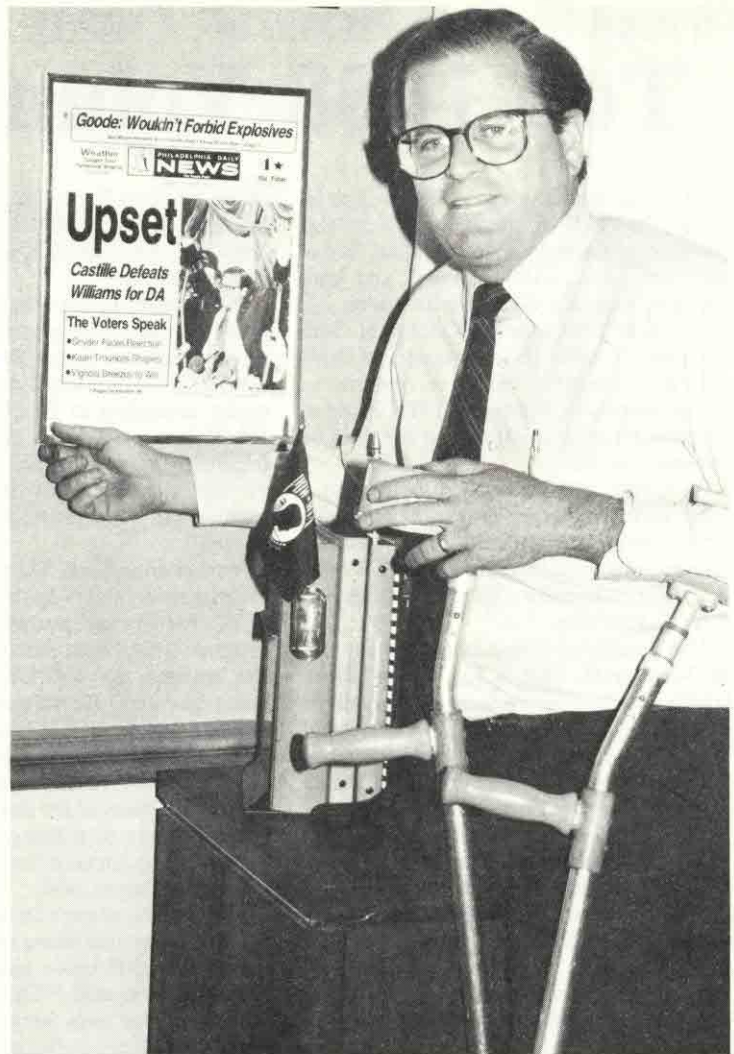
wound had infected his leg, causing gangrene to set in. The doctors had to remove the leg, despite Castille's protests.

"One of the reasons I never felt sorry for myself was that I volunteered for combat," Castille says. "I was lucky. I came back. A lot of my friends didn't. An awful lot didn't."

Castille was sent to the Philadelphia Navy Base Hospital for rehabilitation, and spent 18 months at that facility before joining friends at the University of Virginia Law School. He received his law degree in 1971, and returned to Philadelphia because, as he says, "I fell in love with the city."

He joined the district attorney's staff, and spent 11 years as a trial lawyer, two years as chief of the Career Criminal Unit, and nearly two years as deputy district attorney before seeking the top post in 1985. He began his four-year term as Philadelphia district attorney in January 1986.

Castille is actively involved in veterans' affairs, and is generally regarded as the Vietnam veterans' spokesman in Philadelphia. He is often asked to speak at Memorial Day and Veterans' Day ceremonies.



In 1984, he and three other Vietnam veterans established the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. During the next 3½ years, fund volunteers raised approximately \$750,000 in private donations to erect a monument at Penns Landing to perpetuate the names of the 630 Philadelphians who died in Vietnam.

The monument, covering nearly a square block area and containing a long curved wall on which are etched the 630 names, was completed last year. It was dedicated on Oct. 26, 1987.

Castille is also active in other community affairs, including the Youth Aid Council, Youth Services Coordinating Commission, the Urban Coalition, and the USO. He is founder and member of the board of directors of an anti-drug program, "Philly Kids Play It Safe," and is on the executive committee of the Philadelphia Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

He is also legislative chairman of both the National and Pennsylvania District Attorneys Associations, requiring him to testify before Congress and the State Legislature regarding criminal laws.

As district attorney, Castille has facilitated major changes in the city's juvenile jus-



In photo at left, Philadelphia District Attorney Ron Castille proudly shows off a framed copy of the front page of the Philadelphia Daily News, which reports his stunning upset victory. Above, Castille pauses at the wall of the Philadelphia Vietnam Veterans Memorial that he and other Vietnam vets helped to build. In photo below, Castille, center, stops to chat with colleagues in front of Philadelphia's historic City Hall.

tice system, and was instrumental in passage of state legislation strengthening laws concerning dangerous juvenile offenders.

He has also formed a volunteer program to try to help rehabilitate first-time non-violent juvenile offenders. Youth Aid Panels selected from the community are trained by the district attorney's staff to supervise qualified juvenile cases and administer community service and counseling in lieu of traditional punishment.

"I have very little sympathy for criminals," Castille says. But, he admits that he is willing to give first offenders a chance. "If they take it, great," he says. "If they choose not to take it, they must face the responsibilities."

Castille convened two grand juries shortly after taking office in January 1986 to investigate the operation of the city's abandoned housing abatement program and the reconstruction of 61 homes on Osage Avenue destroyed by the May 1985 MOVE incident.

After an exhaustive examination, the grand jury last year returned separate presentments in each case, recommending charges be filed against three men who were accused of stealing more than \$700,000 in taxpayer funds.

Castille has also prosecuted city employees for loafing on the job at taxpayers' expense, and for taking payoffs for illegal trash removal.

In cooperation with federal, state, and local authorities, the district attorney's of-

fice has waged a successful campaign against organized crime. Castille believes the arrest and prosecution of Nicky Scarfo and his associates on murder and related crimes has effectively decimated the leadership of organized crime in Philadelphia and South Jersey.

His office also is playing a leading role in the investigation and prosecution of Common Pleas Court judges taking bribes. Castille is one of the state's leading advocates for a system of judicial merit selection to replace the present electoral process.

Often at odds with the mayor and other city officials, Castille's latest battle has been an attempt to stop city officials from releasing city prisoners because of a U.S. Court order that sets the city's jail population at 3,750. Castille claims the 3,750 figure is too low; that the city jails can house 4,300 prisoners without overcrowding.

The release of such prisoners causes safety hazard for the citizens of Philadelphia, Castille claims, because some of those being released have prior convictions for

selling drugs and for some violent crimes.

The loss of his right leg has not hampered Castille's interest in sports. He is still an excellent golfer, often playing with the best in celebrity benefit tournaments. He also swims regularly, and loves deep sea fishing, a sport he developed while growing up in Florida.

He also is an expert alpine skier, something he learned during his Navy rehabilitation period. He later spent three winters at Vail, Colo., where he qualified as an instructor for handicapped skiers. He uses a single ski with two outrigger skis.

As the son of a career Air Force pilot who saw service in two wars, Castille spent his early years at various military bases across the country and overseas. He was born in Miami, Fla., on Mar. 16, 1944, and graduated in 1961 from Itazuke High School in Fukuoka, Japan.

He attended Auburn University, where he joined the U.S. Marine Corps Platoon Leaders Program, and was commissioned a second lieutenant after graduation in 1966. He served in South Vietnam with Co. F, 2nd Btn., 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, and planned to make the military a career.

He is married to the former Judy O'Connor, daughter of Cmdr. Robert O'Connor, who was commander of the Philadelphia Navy Base when Castille was stationed there for rehabilitation. Although Judy and Ron had met briefly at that time, they did not meet again until 1981, when he was on the district attorney's staff. They were married a year later. She is an advertising executive.

Despite the seriousness of his job, Castille still has a healthy sense of humor. "People ask me if this is a challenging job," he says. "Being in combat and directing a platoon of troops was the real challenge. People ask me if it's frustrating. I tell them, 'No, golf is really frustrating.'"

