

Georgia's Vietnam Veterans Memorial holds a special place in Tommy Clack's heart.

Outstanding Disabled Vet for 1989 is Tommy Clack

"God left me with a good mind, a gift of gab, and a strong heart ..."

Johnny Thomas (Tommy) Clack, who lost both legs and his right arm during a firefight in Vietnam in 1969, believes that ability is no more than opportunity.

"God left me with a good mind, a gift of gab, and a strong heart; and I try to make the best use of these every day," he says.

Although confined to a wheelchair, Clack has traveled to all 50 states of the country as a speaker and lecturer; has organized and coordinated political campaigns for local, state, and national candidates; has been the staff assistant to the director of the Atlanta VA medical center for the past 10 years; and along the way has worked on a voluntary basis to spearhead programs at the state and local levels that have benefitted Vietnam veterans.

That's why the 42-year-old life member of Carroll County, Ga., DAV Chapter 57 has been selected as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran for 1989.

As a forward observer with units of the 25th Infantry Division, Clack was struck by an exploding shell on May 29, 1969, which blew off both legs above the knee and his right arm at the shoulder.

"I didn't know what hit me," he said. "I was conscious, but did not have an awareness of time. It seemed like only 10 or 15 minutes later I was being lifted out by helicopter."

Clack spent the next 21 months in hospitals, and underwent more than 30 operations. He finally ended up at the Atlanta VA medical center, after being medically retired from the Army as a captain. He was released from the hospital in March 1971.

Clack says he was able to keep a positive attitude while in the hospital, "because I was always around people who were worse off than I was. I felt lucky I had what I had left."

He gives credit for his life being spared to several factors: the quick arrival of the evacuation helicopter, life-saving emergency medical treatment by the doctors at the 12th Evac Hospital in Vietnam and the 106th Army Hospital in Japan, and the "dedicated VA medical personnel who have given me excellent care for 20 years."

He explained that he was among some 200 Vietnam veterans who had lost limbs in combat and were taken to the Atlanta VA Medical Center for treatment in 1969.

"We were treated like their sons," he says of the VA personnel who had a part in the treatment and rehabilitation. "Many of them came to the wards after duty hours to visit and offer advice and help," he said.

Of the more than 200 amputees in this group receiving treatment at the Atlanta VA medical center, "all now have jobs, families, and are a productive part of the communities in which they live," Clack said.

"I keep in touch with each one, and we're planning to have a reunion in May 1990. We're all average American citizens.

I believe we are a positive by-product of the world's largest and best medical system in the world—the VA," Clack says.

Although he has more surgery scheduled for the future, he considers himself "a very healthy person." He exercises regularly, and is careful to eat healthy foods. "I don't buy the theory that amputees don't live long lives," he says.

But, it has been Clack's positive attitude and extreme zeal to put more into life than to take from life that has inspired him to accomplish unusual feats.

He graduated from Decatur High School, just outside Atlanta, in 1965, where he was an honors student and outstanding track athlete. He attended the University of Houston on an athletic scholarship, and entered the U.S. Army in August 1966, where he was an honor graduate of Basic, Advanced, Officer Candidates School, Ranger, Jungle Survival, and Instructor Schools.

He taught artillery in the Officer Candidates School at Fort Sill, Okla., and while there ran with the track team and was on the Pentathlon Team. He then served as a forward observer with the 25th Division's Company C, 2nd Battalion, 27th Brigade. He was awarded the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Army Commendation, Purple Heart, and various Vietnam medals.

After his release from the hospital in 1971, Tommy began to put into practice his beliefs about abilities and a positive attitude. He travelled widely as a speaker, and volunteered his organizational skills for political campaigns and veterans' projects.

He represented the state of Georgia on the U.S. Senate Advisory Committee to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee from 1975 to 1978. He was appointed by Gov. Jimmy Carter to the State Board of the Georgia Department of Veterans Services in 1972, re-appointed by Gov. George Busbee in 1979, and by Gov. Joe Frank Harris

in 1986. While on the board, he served as chairman from 1981 to 1983 and is currently serving as secretary. He served in nearly all posts of the Jaycees from 1970-82, including Georgia Jaycee president, chairman of the board, and U.S. Jaycees Act Team member.

Tommy has been staff assistant to the Atlanta VA medical center Director as his health system specialist since 1979. He directs the Affirmative Action Program, Employee Transportation, Community Relations, and Special Events and Projects. Tommy has served as president of the Employees' Association (a staff volunteer group) since 1980. He also represents the VA on several DeKalb County and Metro Atlanta committees.

"I believe in community service and volunteer efforts," Tommy says. "The more people we interact with, the better it makes us as people."

In this regard, Tommy has been extremely active. He has been president of Operation Buddy, Inc., a sheltered workshop for veterans since 1974; on the board of directors of the Samuel L. Jones Boys Club since 1971; the Metro Atlanta Task Committee on the Handicapped (MATCH) since 1978; the Metro Atlanta Council on the Handicapped since 1981; and the Red Cross Advisory Committee with the DeKalb/Rockdale County Service Center.

One of his pet projects has been the Georgia Veterans Leadership Program (GVLP), which he helped to organize in 1983. He currently serves as chairman/president. This program works to increase job opportunities and improve job skills for veterans, help veterans with small business ventures, and other activities involving veterans.

The program has helped some 420 veterans secure \$84 million in Small Business Administration (SBA) loans since 1983. Clack and Ron Miller, GVLP executive di-

rector, were co-chairmen last year of the committee to erect Georgia's State Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the State Capitol Complex.

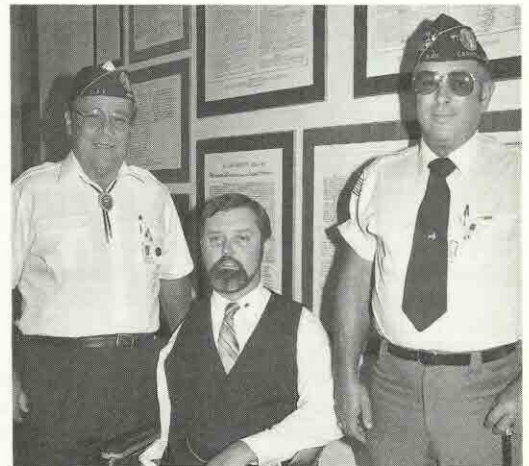
He's been honored by many organizations for his outstanding contributions to humanity and his many volunteer efforts, and in 1981 was recognized as one of three "Outstanding Handicapped Employees" in the VA nationwide.

Tommy's whirlwind activities of the 1970s seemed to leave little room for romance. However, he became friends in the early 1980s with one of the secretaries at the VA medical center, and this friendship blossomed into love. Tommy and Cheryl Lynn were married on Sept. 3, 1983. They now have a son, Adam, who is 3½ years old, and a daughter, who is 21 months.

Tommy learned to shoot and hunt when he was a boy, a sport he still enjoys. He hunts deer and ducks each fall from his wheelchair, and always gets his deer. He also enjoys trap and skeet shooting when time allows. He uses a 20-gauge shotgun, because he says "It's easier on my shoulder."

As a man on the go, Tommy says he tries to live up to what American essayist Ruskin has said: "Man's greatest reward for his toil is not what he gets for it, but what he becomes by it."

Below, Howard Lee, left, immediate past commander of Carroll County DAV Chapter 57, and Wayne Myers, current commander, chat with Clack at the Atlanta VA medical center. This is Clack's home chapter and the chapter that nominated him for the award as the DAV's Outstanding Veteran of the Year. Lee and Myers work as volunteers at the hospital, driving a chapter van 120 miles roundtrip each day with veterans needing medical treatment.



In the photo at left, from left, Dr. Wendell Musser, chief of staff; Tommy Clack, staff assistant to the VA medical center director; Robert Long associate director and Glenn Alred, director, Atlanta VA medical center, work together daily.