



DAV ILLUSTRATION: GEORGE GAOT

Tom Bratten

## Disabled Veteran of the Year

# HUMBLLED BY SERVICE TO VETERANS



When Tom Bratten tripped a land mine in Vietnam, his life changed forever. Some of the changes that tragic incident brought to his life were good, others were not. But ranking right up there with the best of them is his selection as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

"I am very excited by this honor," Mr. Bratten said. "I think there are very, very many people who deserve this award, and I am very fortunate and humbled to be selected."

Since being severely wounded in Vietnam, Mr. Bratten has dedicated his life to serving disabled veterans and their families in a variety of volunteer and professional leadership roles in local and state agencies. His record of achievement in service to veterans is remarkable.

"Tom Bratten has exhibited outstanding determination in serving the needs of our nation's disabled veterans," said DAV National Commander George H. Steese, Jr. "He used the same tough determination to help veterans as he used to survive his wounds and restore his productive life. This is the DAV's most prestigious award, and Mr. Bratten's lifetime of service only adds to its prestige."

A member of DAV Chapter 1 in Baltimore, Md., and National Amputation Chapter 76 in New York, Mr. Bratten lost his left arm, left leg, and suffered other serious injuries during the Vietnam War when he triggered a land mine on May 28, 1970. Then Capt. Bratten was an Army artillery liaison officer in the Americal Division, the famed 1st of the 6th. His battalion commander was Norman Schwarzkopf, who later became a four-star general and

led U.S. and coalition forces in the Persian Gulf War. "In the months I was with him I learned a great deal about the infantry and infantry tactics," Mr. Bratten said. "He was a good teacher and a good friend and still is a good friend."

As artillery liaison officer, Capt. Bratten was a constant companion to then Lt. Col. Schwarzkopf. "We didn't go to bed together, and we didn't go to the bathroom together. Everywhere else, we were together," he recalled.

They were together in a helicopter in 1970 when they received a radio message that an infantry platoon was in the midst of a deadly minefield and had taken casualties. Lt. Col. Schwarzkopf ordered the helicopter to land to aid wounded soldiers. Lt. Col. Schwarzkopf entered the mined area with Capt. Bratten. In the minefield, Capt. Bratten was cutting a sapling to use as a makeshift splint to help a wounded soldier when he triggered the mine.

"Let me tell you, a minefield separates the men from the boys," Mr. Bratten said. "The day I was in that minefield, I had two knees and both of them were banging together. If I had false teeth they'd have been shaking too."

In his autobiography *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, Gen. Schwarzkopf wrote about the incident. "Bratten, I called. 'Grab your knife and cut me a couple of branches to use as a splint.' Bratten took one step and boom! a mine blew off his arm and leg and he went down. I felt shrapnel punch into my chest. I looked down and saw blood coursing from several gashes."

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## Disabled Veteran

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Lt. Col. Schwarzkopf, ignoring his own wounds, helped rush the severely wounded captain to the waiting helicopter for medical evacuation to nearby Chu Lai. Later, following treatment for his own wounds, Lt. Col. Schwarzkopf went to find Capt. Bratten. "He was lying on a gurney behind a curtain, and amazingly, he was conscious and in no apparent pain. 'Hang in there, Bratten,' I told him, 'you're going to make it,'" Gen. Schwarzkopf wrote.

Recovering from his wounds, Mr. Bratten underwent 3 1/2 years of rehabilitation and surgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. "I met a cadre of people at Walter Reed who are the greatest people I ever met," Mr. Bratten said. "We were our own support group. If you thought you were in bad shape, there were plenty of people around you who were worse."

At Walter Reed, Mr. Bratten again met Gen. Schwarzkopf who was admitted for surgery on a very painful back injury. Gen. Schwarzkopf recuperated in a 45-pound body cast. Unable to move and in pain, he began to think about ending his military career. It was Mr. Bratten's encouragement and tough determination that inspired him. In his book, Gen. Schwarzkopf wrote: "Whenever I became depressed and withdrawn, Bratten would shake me back to reality. He'd come over to my bed and say, 'Sir, if I can walk with one leg, how come you can't walk with two?' I was embarrassed because I was eventually going to have a normal life, while Bratten never would. Bratten and his pals...brought people back to life. In my eyes they were heroes."

"There was a good group of men and women at Walter Reed who instilled in you

the desire to live, and you wanted to do something with that life," Mr. Bratten said. "Rather than sit back and draw your check, you wanted to go out and amount to something in society."

Mr. Bratten's life has been one of service and dedication to his country, even from the earliest age. "My real father was killed D-Day [June 6, 1944]. I guess the Veterans Administration has taken care of me from the womb until I go to the tomb. So I was aware of veterans issues when I was in the military," he said.

"Once I was wounded, and spent 3 1/2 years in Walter Reed, I read up a lot on veterans benefits — what did they have to offer — education, counseling if you needed it. So I just felt like the good Lord gave me a chance to survive, and I figured I might not be able to pay back the good Lord, but I could help fellow veterans. And that's why I became involved."

"I didn't want to ever see veterans do without when they have a justifiable claim for benefits," he said. "Veterans want good health care, a place to be buried, and a good veterans home if they need it. My goal is to serve. I believe that I can do something to better the lives of veterans."

Following his rehabilitation, Mr. Bratten served as a certified counselor in post-traumatic stress disorder. He is a member of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies and the International Association of Trauma Counselors. He earned a B.A. in political science and a master's degree in public administration, both from The American University in Washington, D.C.

In 1993 Mr. Bratten's determination was rewarded when he was named Director of the Maryland Veterans Commission. He served in that position for six years, and was responsible for managing and directing the veterans benefits and claims assistance and representation program, the state veterans cemeteries, and the veterans memorials and


monuments. He directed nine service offices stationed throughout the state. Recognizing the need for additional training, he worked with the DAV to arrange an intensive three-day training program to enhance his service office staff.

Mr. Bratten also represented the 8th Congressional District on the Maryland Veterans Commission from 1987 to 1993 and served on the Maryland World War II Memorial Commission, the Maryland Military Monuments Commission, and the Maryland Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission.

Based on his outstanding service to disabled veterans, Tom Bratten was selected as Secretary of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs in 1999. Gov. Parris N. Glendening called him "a real American hero who has dedicated his career to improving the lives of veterans."

His involvement today allows him to direct how veterans are served in Maryland. Mr. Bratten works closely with the Baltimore DAV National Service Office on a variety of projects including a DAV Homeless Veterans Initiative "stand down" conducted June 2001 in Annapolis.

Now 30 years after he was wounded, Mr. Bratten still draws enjoyment from helping veterans. "I feel that my day has been a success if I've helped a veteran. I have great staff members in the department that I run in Maryland," he said. "You know we take care of five cemeteries in Maryland, we have service officers, and we take care of the memorials and monuments."

"I do not like the word 'No,'" Mr. Bratten said. "When someone says, 'No, you can't have that,' I want to know why they can't have it. It's just interesting that there are so many veterans that deserve compensation and pension and their claims are denied. I can't see how anybody should deny a veteran a claim if it's justified." 

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## DAV Urges President

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training and placement service for military personnel and veterans, and would create a presidential committee to encourage employers to hire veterans and disabled veterans.

The DAV is closely monitoring a number of other bills important to disabled veterans and their families. These include the following:

- **S. 2079**, to make improvements in judicial review of administrative decisions of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- **S. 2205**, to clarify the statute regarding disability compensation for women veterans who have service-connected mastectomies, and to provide permanent authority for counseling and treatment for sexual trauma.

- **S. 2209**, to provide an additional program of service-disabled veterans' insurance.
- **S. 2237**, to enhance compensation for veterans with hearing loss.
- **H.R. 4018**, to amend title 38, United States Code, to make improvements in judicial review of administrative decisions of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- **H.R. 4036**, to allow the payment of veterans' benefits in all hospitalization and convalescent claims to begin effective the first day of the month in which hospitalization or treatment begins.
- **H.R. 4842**, to terminate the requirement that VA disability compensation be reduced by the amount of payment under Department of Defense separation programs.
- **H. Con. Res. 359**, to oppose deductibles for veterans receiving health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs. 