

By Thom Wilborn

Deputy VA Secretary Mansfield Chosen

In the stolen moments quietly fishing aboard his boat in the sparkling waters of the Chesapeake Bay, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon H. Mansfield's thoughts sometimes drift away on the waves back to Vietnam and the 1968 Tet Offensive.

He remembers the fury of the battle in which he was shot and left paralyzed. He takes great pride in making a long, difficult recovery, the achievements and his life of service to disabled veterans — all factors that have earned him recognition as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year.

"Gordon Mansfield overcame his disability and turned it into strength," said National Commander Paul W. Jackson, who will present the award to Mansfield August 12 at the 85th National Convention in Chicago. "He is a person of determination who has become a powerful advocate for his fellow veterans. Each day, his achievements mean better lives for disabled veterans and their families."

As a 27-year-old captain, Mansfield led his company of 101st Airborne Division troops near Hai Lang in the I Corps area near the border dividing North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam had announced it would observe a seven-day truce beginning Jan. 27, 1968 — the Tet New Year. Instead of the announced cease fire, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched country-wide attacks against South



Vietnamese cities beginning the night of Jan. 30-31 aimed at starting a revolt among the citizens of the South.

Even though advance intelligence had foretold a major enemy offensive operation was planned, American military units were hard pressed by the sudden attacks by swarms of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops.

Mansfield, who had been wounded in combat earlier in the week, was leading his men in a fight against a large enemy force on Feb. 4, 1968, when he was again shot. Although sustaining a spinal cord injury, he remained with his troops to ensure their safety and the evacuation of the wounded before he permitted his medivac to a nearby Navy support hospital. He was later transferred to the U.S. Army

Hospital at Camp Zama, Japan, and then back to the Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania where he began his rehabilitation.

A recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross, Bronze Star, two Purple Heart medals, Combat Infantryman's Badge and Presidential Unit Citation, Mansfield was medically retired in September 1968, about the time he was celebrating his 28th birthday. Although his life had been spared, Mansfield faced a long, difficult recovery and rehabilitation.

His road to rehabilitation took him to Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the VA medical center in Washington, D.C., where his treatment and therapy continued for the

next five years. While there he enrolled in the American University Law School.

Determined to make something of his now shattered life, Mansfield continued his education at the University of Miami Law School and earned his law degree under the VA Vocational Rehabilitation program.

Shortly after graduation, he was back in the VA medical center for a second major operation on his spine, and another rehabilitation program. After his recovery, Mansfield began practicing law in Ocala, Fla., serving as counsel in a Legal Aid Program, providing assistance to his fellow veterans. He also became involved with forming a DAV Chapter in Marion County, Fla., and is a life member of the DAV.

In 1981, Mansfield accepted the first of several positions he would hold with the Paralyzed Veterans of America. Primarily, he served as an advocate of both veterans and people with disabilities, often appearing before Congress and working closely with elected officials and policymakers. Mansfield's role was instrumental in elevating the VA to a Cabinet-level department. He also worked to help establish the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, as well as important legislation, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Disabled Voters Access Act, the Air Carrier Access Act and the Fair Housing Act.

Mansfield's outstanding work on behalf of disabled veterans and persons with disabilities did not go unnoticed by policy makers. In 1989, he was named Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity with the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In that position, Mansfield was responsible for ensuring the availability of accessible housing for disabled people in new multi-family housing.

In 2001, President Bush selected Mansfield to serve as VA Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs, where he represented the department's programs and poli-



cies before Congress. He was elevated to Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs in 2004.

As Deputy Secretary, Mansfield is effectively the chief operating officer of the federal government's second largest agency, responsible for a \$70 billion budget and 230,000 employees, ensuring that veterans receive the rightful benefits they earned in service to our nation.

Mansfield oversees the health care of 5.25 million veterans each year, ensuring that compensation and pension payments are made to 3.7 million veterans and educational benefits go to 1 million veterans attending colleges, job training programs and business start-up classes. His job includes oversight of memorial burial services to 100,000 veterans and their family members each year in 142 VA National Cemeteries.

Mansfield's outstanding career of service to veterans and their families has been recognized with the Presidential Distinguished Service Award and the Villanova University Alumni Human Relations Medal. He was also inducted into the U.S. Army Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame in 1997.

"Gordon Mansfield has served his nation well, both as a veteran and a veterans' advocate," said Commander Jackson. "He learned on the battlefield to care for those around him, and he instituted it throughout his life of service to veterans and their families."

"He joins a long list of outstanding disabled veterans," Jackson said. "He enhances the prestige of our award with his lifetime achievements. He has followed the credo to always care for the veteran in whatever position he has occupied. He has honored veterans with his life, and he is most deserving of the DAV's highest award."



Left, a paratrooper of the famed 101st Airborne guides a medical evacuation helicopter in the jungle near Hue, Republic of South Vietnam, April 1968. Above, Deputy Secretary Mansfield takes to the slopes on a mono-ski at the Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic.

