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Arizona's most decorated Vietnam veteran calls Eagar home

By: Larisa Bogardus, The Independent
11/10/2003



EAGAR - Reggie Wilkins doesn't talk about his wartime experiences much. When he does, Arizona's most decorated Vietnam veteran talks more about the people he met than his heroics.

Wilkins' two Purple Hearts, five Bronze Stars and numerous other medals and citations collected during more than three tours of duty speak for themselves.

During a reconnaissance mission in Kien Hoa Province in 1968, he ran through enemy fire to rescue his wounded platoon leader, then led an assault on the enemy position, routing the Viet Cong. Two years later, on a search and clear mission near Thon Bon, his unit was attacked by North Vietnamese forces. Again, Wilkins ran through the enemy barrage to help wounded fellow soldiers, providing suppression fire while the casualties were moved to safety.

Yet another commendation is for serving as a platoon leader working with the local National Security Guard Detachment, the first unit of its kind.

To learn of these exploits, however, you'll have to read his commendations, because Wilkins doesn't like to "brag."

The son of a World War II veteran who stormed Normandy, Wilkins dropped out of high school in 1966 to enlist at the age of 17, later earning his GED in the military. "I just wanted to go and serve my country," said the Nutrioso native who, as an only child, didn't have to serve. Little did he realize at the time that his experiences would affect the rest of his life.

Today, he is 100 percent disabled as a result of repeated exposure to Agent Orange. "The trees and foliage would just die," Wilkins said of the chemical attacks. "It was like when Escudilla burned." His voice is a husky whisper after thyroid surgery for chemically-induced tumors paralyzed his vocal cords. His joints are so damaged he's undergone two hip replacements and he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite his many health problems, Wilkins only learned three years ago that he was eligible for veterans benefits and health care.

But as the only one of 36 men assigned to his first unit to survive the conflict, Wilkins counts himself very lucky.

"I was part of a recon unit," he said. "They'd drop us off at night and pick us up four or five days later."

Anecdotes offer glimpses of Wilkins' life as a soldier. "We'd carry 15 or 20 canteens because we had to come down off the mountains to get water," he said. "When we did, the gooks would hear us and when we were going back up, they'd ambush us."

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At one time, his unit traveled with a Viet Cong defector who walked point, looking for signs of booby traps. "He was 70 years old and had fought all his life and never been hit," Wilkins said. "I wish I could write down what he knew - just half of what he knew." The old man's luck finally ran out when he failed to spot a booby trap and lost a leg as a result. "We took care of him, though," Wilkins noted.

During his own tours of duty, Wilkins was wounded five times, three by friendly fire. Again, he is reticent about his experiences, acknowledging only that he was once riding in a helicopter that was shot down and "the blades tore me up."


He was also one of the very few to live through the famous Massacre at Fire Base Mary Ann, sustaining a leg injury that nearly cost him a foot. Living a life so close to the edge, three-day passes and leave times were spent partying, because "you don't know if the next day is your last day. Everybody counted the days before they could go home on their helmet."

When asked why he reenlisted not once, but three times after living through such horrors, Wilkins simply states, "I loved the Vietnamese people, the culture . . . I'd go back over there in a heartbeat. I'd like to see what Hanoi looks like and I loved Saigon. It was a beautiful country."


He speaks with admiration of the "Doughnut Dollies," women volunteers who delivered care packages and letters to soldiers in the field.

Wilkins' voice is still laced with bitterness as he recalls the war protesters who spit on him and his comrades when they returned to the U.S. His final assignment was as a door gunner, a member of the Delta 52 Night Hawks, who strafed hostile areas in the dark. "After that, I didn't think I wanted (to serve) anymore," said the man who received enough medals and citations for an entire unit. His honorifics include: Qualified "expert" in reconnaissance; citations for excellence in marksmanship; three Army Commendation Medals, two with oak leaf clusters, for meritorious achievement in Vietnam; one Air Medal for participating in more than 25 aerial missions over hostile territory; one Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal with a V device; one National Defense Service medal; and two letters of appreciation for service signed by former President Richard Nixon.

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