

Local veteran receives Bronze Star 40 years after Vietnam

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Robert Dewey Wolford, 62, of Battle Creek recently retired as a plumber and pipefitter with Local 333 after 38 years.

He also visited Ft. Custer National Cemetery to witness the Veterans Day ceremonies last week and walked away with a Bronze Star (and two Oak Leaf Clusters as well). Both the Bronze Star and one of the Oak Leaf clusters is for valor and heroism while another Oak Leaf is for meritorious service.

Col. Frank Walker, Michigan Air National Guard,

introduced Wolford to the Veterans Day crowd and described the action that deemed him worthy of receiving the medal.

"For heroism in connection with military operations against a hostile force, Spec. Wolford distinguished himself by actions on Jan. 31, 1968," said Walker. "C Troop, Third Squadron, First Cavalry in the Republic of Vietnam, was moving to aid a friendly force when they came upon heavy enemy fire. Spec. Wolford, a machine gunner on an armored personnel carrier immediately placed suppressive fire on the hostile

positions."

Walker continued by describing how Wolford, 'with complete disregard for his own personal safety' then carried wounded comrades through a bullet swept area to a 'dust off' zone where helicopters removed the wounded.

Later in the battle Walker described how a re-supply helicopter landed near the ongoing action with badly needed ammunition. Wolford again moved through intense enemy fire bringing ammunition to his comrades.

"His valorous actions contributed immensely to the success of the mission and the defeat of the enemy force," said Walker. "Spec. Wolford's personal bravery, aggressiveness, and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service."

Walker added that Wolford reflects "great credit" on himself, his unit, the 25th Infantry Division and the United States Army.

"It was the very first day of the Tet Offensive," said Wolford later. "We could tell something was different by the volume of incoming fire we were taking (he was assigned to the Than Son Nut airbase outside Saigon at the time). The night before I saw tracers going out, but in the morning the tracers were coming in, and when you see personnel carriers on fire burning into a puddle of aluminum you know something different is going on."

He described the enemy that day as being 'hard core' North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regu-



Col. Rodger Seidel (right) pins the Bronze Star on Robert Wolford's jacket. (*Shopper News Photo by Doug Allen*)

lars and was amazed at their numbers as they tried to breach the perimeter of the airbase.

He could tell something extraordinary was happening by the amount of wounded and killed American soldiers that kept streaming into the evacuation area.

"We kept throwing hand grenades over the concertina wire and the NVA kept coming," he said. "I'd been in Vietnam for only a couple months, but you could tell we were facing a huge change from the enemy."

The Tet Offensive lasted 77 days and was a major offensive launched by North Vietnam against numerous American and South Vietnamese installations, according to About.com.

Approximately 1,500 Americans and 45,000 North Vietnamese were killed during Tet.

"A lot of guys did some amazing things that day," he said. "Some of them didn't make it back. There's no time to think about it when it's happening. You do what you need to do to stay alive and help your buddies."

Col. Rodger Seidel, Michigan Air National Guard, commander 110 Fighter Wing, and keynote speaker for the event then pinned the medal on Wolford's leather jacket.

While receiving a rousing round of applause from the audience Wolford grinned and

waved and Walker said, "well deserved Specialist Wolford."

Wolford is a 1965 graduate of Battle Creek Central and was busily engaged in a plumbing and pipefitting apprenticeship

program when the Army came knocking with their draft notice.

"I wasn't too happy about

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Robert Wolford with the Bronze Star as seen on his jacket. (Shopper News Photo by Doug Allen)

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that," he said. "But, what do you do? I went to Vietnam."

He's been married to Sheila for seven years and while they don't have any children he's got three step grandchildren.

His dad, Donald, passed away in 2001 and his mom Lucille still lives in the area. His brother Terry lives in Battle Creek while his brother Donald Jr. lives in Tennessee.

While shaking hands with plenty of well-wishers after the ceremony, Wolford talked about the Bronze Star and how it's more than 40 years overdue.

"The mention of the awards and description of that day were on my discharge papers," said Wolford. "But, somehow it just slipped through, no one ever brought it up, and that was ok by me. I was young. I thought they'd get around to it eventually. But at the same time, it was the Army, the Vietnam War. I just wanted to get away from all that so I never really pursued it."

Wolford said he returned 'stateside' and served another seven months at Ft. Benning in Georgia.

Every once in awhile, he

said, there would be an award ceremony.

"I was thinking it won't be so bad not having to put on the dress greens and stand up in front of a bunch of people," said Wolford. "Being young it didn't bother me all that much, but it would have been easier back then. What I mean is, I would have been on stage with a whole bunch of other guys getting their medals. Now, I'm the only one, I wasn't quite sure where to sit, and there were a lot of people out there today."

He said it would have been easier to do this medal thing a long time ago.

"It was nice though," he

said with a little bit of a grin tugging at the side of his face.

Wolford said that during recent trips to the VA Medical Center in Battle Creek for some medical assistance, personnel there started the process of honoring him when his war record was reviewed.

He's also proud of receiving the Bronze Star.

"This is a bigger deal than I was planning on," he said. "It was nice seeing all the people out there and to know so many come out here every year to honor veterans. We should honor them for their service to our country."