



Photos by Todd Luck

Bernard Wallace holds the Bronze Star, one of seven medals presented to by Sen. Richard Burr at Carver School Road Church of Christ on Sunday, Aug. 16.

Veteran receives overdue medals, but continues to fight for benefits

THE CHRONICLE
BY TODD LUCK

Forty-five years after his service in Vietnam, Bernard Wallace was presented with medals, including a bronze star, from Sen. Richard Burr on Sunday, Aug. 16.

Wallace received his medals at his church, Carver School Road Church of Christ. He received seven medals and a flag that flew over Washington, D.C., in his honor.

He said people are still telling him congratulations for his belated bronze star, given for combat heroism or meritorious service. He said receiving the medals was an emotional experience.

"I was elated. I was kind of shocked," he said.

His wife, Barbara Wallace, was looking on with pride as Burr handed him the medals. She said most congregants had only seen medal ceremonies on TV. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/frontline>

"It was such a wonderful occasion to have Senator Burr come to the church," she said. "The people at the church were just ecstatic. They had never seen that before."

Wallace is still working to get his claims accepted.

Wallace was drafted into the Army during the Vietnam War and served from 1969 to 1971 in the 101st Airborne. He became a radio transmission operator (RTO) who was on the battlefield, calling in artillery attacks.

Wallace believes the bronze star came from an incident in which he helped save the life of a fellow soldier. He said a soldier on patrol named Eisenhower fell in a river and couldn't swim. Wallace said he dove into the river after Eisenhower, who was being swept away by the current. Wallace grabbed him, but the young soldier was struggling, threatening to drown them both. A sergeant managed to grab Eisenhower and pull him out of the river as Wallace sank down underneath the water. Wallace said he swam with everything he had to get back to the surface, grabbing onto a rock and eventually back onto shore.

Wallace said he received some medals during the war, but few were ever given to him in a ceremony. It was far more common for a superior officer to just had them to him in an office. He said he was aware he'd earned a bronze star, but never received it. He said he wasn't thinking much about recognition at the time.

"All I was concerned

was at the time, during that confrontation, was getting home," he said. "Whatever medals I got, weren't that important."

After his tour of duty, he said a persistent recruiter convinced him to sign up for the National Guard, where he served for 22 years. Among his friends there was a sergeant named Joey Ireland, who did some digging into his records and saw the bronze star. Wallace told Ireland that the medal was "no big deal," but over the years Ireland encouraged him to get it.

Wallace, who retired from the National Guard in 1998, has spent the last couple years trying to get his claims accepted by Veterans Affairs so he can get Veterans Administration (VA) treatment covered for things like a mental health issue he says stems from his war service. He was told he would have to prove he was in the 101st Airborne. He turned to HARRY Veterans Outreach Services for help.

Helping veterans navigate the complexities of VA claims is a big part of HARRY, which was founded by Cait Shabazz in honor of her late brother, Marine veteran Harry Smith. Shabazz said that HARRY contacts Burr's office for every veteran's claim in an attempt to get complete service records for those veterans. She said she tries to get them any medals they didn't receive.

"It lets them know their service did not go unnoticed," said Shabazz.

Burr, a former ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs committee, regularly awards overdue medals to veterans.

Lost or misplaced records is very common among veterans, said Shabazz. Wallace was literally on the way out of Vietnam, when he was told some of his records had been destroyed in a fire. However, he does believe he has all of them now. He's still working on his claims, trying to get the VA to accept them.

One claim the VA did accept was his Post Traumatic Stress Disease (PTSD) claim. However, Wallace said the coverage for his PTSD is taken out of his National Guard retirement benefits, reducing it from about \$500 to less than \$60. He said he was challenging that, too. Shabazz said it wasn't unusual for veterans who don't have a high level of disability to have their VA benefits taken out of their retirement and it's another issue HARRY will be advocating on.

"It seems like it's just a constant battle to do everything," said Barbara Wallace. "All these things deserved by these veterans, they have to have to fight like tooth and nail to get what they deserve."

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