

Valor honor Seymour's former Santa Claus who served in Vietnam

By Michael P. Mayko Oct. 22, 2020 Updated: Oct. 22, 2020 12:26 p.m.

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Vietnam veteran Steve Urban, center, is wrapped with a handmade quilt by Quilts of Valor Foundation representatives Chuck Larkins, left, and Jane Dougherty at his home in Seymour, Conn., on Wednesday Oct. 21, 2020. The Agency on Aging also helped make the honor possible.



Photo: Christian Abraham / Hearst Connecticut Media

SEYMOUR — The quilt was given with love and respect.

But its receipt required two years of blood, sweat and tears.

From 1969 to 1970 Stephen Urban drove convoy trucks for the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Like many of his colleagues he witnessed horrible death, came home to disrespect, and did his best to overcome this and live a productive life. For almost two decades he served as Santa Claus in Seymour's annual Christmas parade, until he no longer could.

“I really enjoyed and loved hearing the kids’ requests,” he said. “I think I had more fun than the kids, but I just couldn’t hold them anymore and I was afraid I’d drop one.”

Quilts of Valor Foundation representatives Chuck Larkins, left, and Jane Dougherty prepare to honor Vietnam veteran Steve Urban with a handmade quilt by at his home in Seymour, Conn., on Wednesday Oct. 21, 2020. The Agency on Aging also helped make the honor possible.



Photo: Christian Abraham / Hearst Connecticut Media



Vietnam veteran Steve Urban poses before being honored by Quilts of Valor Foundation at his home in Seymour, Conn., on Wednesday Oct. 21, 2020. The Agency on Aging also helped make the honor possible.

Now, soon to be 73, he is confined to a wheelchair and fighting the effects of post-traumatic stress syndrome caused by the horrors of war and cancer resulting from exposure to Agent Orange, an herbicide used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War.

“I’m in constant pain in my neck, back, arms and legs,” he said. “I have undergone four operations.”

On Wednesday nearly two dozen people celebrated Urban's service outside his Woodlawn Drive home with a keepsake handmade quilt designed and made by Jane Dougherty, the state's co-coordinator of Quilts for Valor, and Charles Larkins, an Air Force veteran. It took them about 28 hours to make.

"It's beautiful," Urban said, turning over the patchwork quilt. On one side it's covered with trucks—a tribute to his military convoy duties. Turn it over and there are patriotic symbols, a huge American flag down the middle with a truck inside and the words "Your Service Is Our Freedom" sewn in cursive throughout.



As the nearly two dozen people gathered, including Cherie Strucaly, of the state's Agency on Aging, and William Savastano, a fellow Vietnam vet from North Branford, admired the quilt, Urban remarked that quilts should be "given to all veterans...It would mean a lot to us."

It was Savastano who recommended Urban for a quilt. This spring Savastano signed on to be Urban's telephone buddy — a service veterans provide to their home bound colleagues.

"We talk mostly about the service, but the conversation could be about anything," Savastano said. "Sixty years ago, when we both were young, I used to live near and worked at the Mermaid Tavern at the Stratford Motor Inn. We didn't know each other but we reminisce about those days."

The Quilts of Valor Foundation was founded in 2003 by Catherine Roberts whose son was deployed to Iraq, said Dougherty. One night Roberts had a dream about a distraught soldier who was comforted by a quilt and she then took it upon herself to make one for such a veteran. Her first gift spawned an idea that led to a nationwide foundation. In 17 years some 250,000 handmade quilts have wrapped veterans' shoulders.

"We have three to four million veterans so there is plenty of opportunity," she said.

Last year in Connecticut 718 quilts were made for veterans. This year's COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the number. But Dougherty estimates that since 2004 thousands of quilts — maybe as many as 10,000 — have been made for Connecticut veterans.

The attention given during the quilt ceremony was a far cry from what Urban and thousands of Vietnam veterans experienced upon coming home from Southeast Asia. Waiting for them at fences were demonstrators who would jeer, ridicule and spit on the returning veterans.

"They'd call us baby killers and worse," said Urban. "They didn't understand what we had been through."

Images of a veteran being decapitated in an accident and a young South Vietnamese boy being run over after falling in front of one of the convoy trucks still fill his head.

"I see two psychiatrists," he said.

After the war, Urban, who grew up in Stratford, married Bernice, his high school sweetheart, and worked at both General Electric and Sikorsky.

"I'm proud of my service," he said. "I felt I did something good for my country."

