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**November 11, 2019**

## **VIETNAM VET RECEIVES LONG OVERDUE RANK**

**Uniontown, PA** – More than 50 years after Jim Burkholder was shot in the Vietnam War, the Fayette County veteran has finally received some long overdue recognition.

Last week, Burkholder, 75, of Connellsville was officially promoted from U.S. Marine sergeant to staff sergeant - a rank he achieved in the mid-1960s - during a surprise ceremony at the Hopwood Amvets: General George C. Marshall Post 103.

Fayette County Veterans Affairs Director and U.S. Marine Master Sgt. Brian Bensen donned his dress blues and, joined by Fayette County Commissioner Chairman Vince Vicites, delivered the promotion warrant Burkholder waited decades for.

Bensen, who took over the VA director position from Madonna Nicklow following her August retirement, said tracking down Burkholder's promotion records was extremely difficult, but very important.

"At the end of our initial meeting, he said on his way out the door that someone once mentioned he was promoted, but he never saw any paperwork on it and never got a ceremony," Bensen said. "It was something he always wondered about and, as the years go on, of course it gets harder and harder to find any evidence of something like that. I decided to do some digging, because going from an E5 to an E6 is a big accomplishment."

After many phone calls to the U.S. Marine Corps, formal request submissions to the national military archives in Washington, D.C., and nearly three months of waiting, Bensen's persistence paid off.

"I was starting to lose a little hope, but then a large manila envelope was delivered on Halloween," Bensen said. "All the paperwork was there showing that Burkholder really had been promoted all those years before. I couldn't believe it. It was a shot in the dark, but it worked."

Now pastor of the Vietnam Veterans Incorporated of Uniontown, Burkholder joined the U.S. Marine Corps on Aug. 4, 1964. He served with the 1st Marine Division in Vietnam from May 1966 to July 1967.

During his service, Burkholder was injured alongside former Pittsburgh Steelers halfback and U.S. Army veteran Robert "Rocky" Bleier after the latter tripped a landmine that injured his leg and other soldiers.

"He tripped that mine and they said he'd never play football again, but he went on to win three more Super Bowls after we left the military," Burkholder said. "The day I took a bullet, we were pinned down heavy with gunfire all around us. I had my machine gun out in the front of the line while I arranged my men to protect us."

Burkholder was shot in the lower left calf while recovering an injured fellow soldier, "Mack," from the battlefield. While Burkholder made it to a nearby field hospital for treatment, "Mack" did not survive the helicopter flight.

Burkholder was discharged from the military in August 1968, and enjoyed an almost 40-year career at the U.S. Steel Works in Clairton. He and his wife, the late Georgia Burkholder, have one daughter, Sabrina Butterbaugh, and two granddaughters, Alli and Adi.

Despite leaving the marines decades ago, the effects of his service still linger, as Burkholder now suffers from Parkinson's Disease as a result of exposure to the tactical herbicide, "Agent Orange," while in Vietnam.

He finds comfort in spending time with other veterans, regularly attending weekly meetings at the Hopwood Amvets. Knowing this, Bensen said the meeting was the perfect place to honor Burkholder.

"I just thought there was no better way to promote Mr. Burkholder than when he was surrounded by his peers," Bensen said. "This is a man who is a very tough cookie and doesn't show a lot of emotion, but I will always remember for the rest of my life the look on his face as I read his warrant. I've done a lot of cool things, but that was one of the top three moments of my entire career."

Burkholder said he's extremely grateful for Bensen's hard work in tracking down his promotion after all those years - but the moment was bittersweet.

"I'm very proud of it, but I earned it the hard way. It meant an awful lot, but it brought back a lot of memories of all the men I served with and tried to take care of in Vietnam," Burkholder said. "I often wonder what happened to the rest of my men. I feel for the ones we lost and for all the 'Gold Star' mothers across this nation that lost their children. Getting that warrant made me realize how lucky I was."

Vicites said being part of Burkholder's promotion ceremony was an exciting and humbling experience.

"Jim and his fellow veterans deserve all the accolades and recognition they can get," Vicites said. "I'm extremely proud of the work our veterans affairs office is doing for countless Fayette County residents who bravely served our nation. America is number one thanks to our veterans."

Burkholder is one of the many veterans who will be honored this morning during the annual Veterans Day Parade in Uniontown. Hosted by American Legion Post 51, the parade begins at 10:45 a.m. on Gallatin Avenue, turns right onto Main Street and ends at Five Corners.

Lineup begins at 10 a.m. on Peter Street, behind the State Theatre and Taps will be played at Storey Square at 11 a.m. All are welcome to attend a free luncheon in the American Legion Hall, immediately following the parade.

Commissioner Angela Zimmerlink said attending the parade is one of many ways Fayette County residents can honor veterans like Burkholder this Veterans Day.

"Our veterans are very special, so if you are unable to go to a parade, please make sure that when you see a veteran today - and every day - to thank them for the sacrifices they made for our great nation," Zimmerlink said.

Commissioner Dave Lohr encouraged citizens to honor Fayette County veterans because, "Freedom isn't free."

"It's something we've fought hard to win and fought harder to keep," Lohr said. "Unlike Memorial Day, when we honor those whose lives were lost, Veterans Day is about honoring all who have served - in times of war or peace, dead or alive. We should all take the time to thank veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice, because America is 'the home of the free because of the brave.'"

Lohr said Veterans Day is an important holiday in Fayette, because of the county's long and distinguished military history.

"Here in Fayette County, we have living veterans who have served in every recent war, going back to and including World War II," he said. "There is so much good in Fayette County and everywhere you turn, you find someone with a heart for serving others, so it should come as no surprise that so many from Fayette County choose to serve their country."

Bensen said Burkholder and his fellow veterans are his personal heroes, who gave him the opportunity to wear his uniform and serve his country.

"I don't think any of our veterans really got the recognition they deserved in their time. All my love and admiration goes out to Mr. Burkholder for what he's done for us," he said. "Other Vietnam veterans have started asking for help because everything went so perfect with Jim's surprise. I'm very glad he's happy and finally has the rank he earned."

This Veterans Day, Burkholder said he will enjoy his staff sergeant title, while remembering all who served and his time in Vietnam.

"I'm proud of all the men I served with, and words cannot explain the love that all of us brothers had for each other. We were a group of young men right out of high school that grew up fast and realized how much we needed each other," Burkholder said. "That's something this country really needs to do right now when we look around at everything going on in our nation. For now, I just wake up each morning, thank God for another day and keep on moving."

For more information on the Fayette County Veterans Day parade, visit [www.americanlegionpost51.org](http://www.americanlegionpost51.org).

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.FayetteCountyPA.org](http://www.FayetteCountyPA.org).

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*This communication is part of the Fayette County PR Initiative, which is funded through the 2016 Fayette County Local Share Account (LSA) in cooperation with the Fayette County Board of Commissioners, Fayette Chamber of Commerce, The Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette, The Redstone Foundation and other partners. This funding has been designated for the continued promotion and marketing of Fayette County, PA.*

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