

VFW's John Hamilton goes to the mat for veterans

Marine Corps Sergeant John Hamilton fought for his country in Vietnam, with three Purple Hearts to show for it, and now he is fighting for veterans of the Vietnam War—and all wars. As adjutant general of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Hamilton manages the daily operations of the VFW, whose services include assistance in obtaining disability and other veterans benefits, grants for military families struggling to pay for basic expenses, and a scholarship program with Sport Clips to help junior enlisted personnel and veterans attend post-secondary schools. An estimated 50 percent of the 1.3 million VFW members are Vietnam vets (some of whom may also have served in other wars). Born on the Fourth of July, the son of a Marine, Hamilton joined the Corps in 1968. After his discharge, he became a business owner in Jacksonville, Fla. Oh, and one more thing: Hamilton was a professional wrestler. One of his names in the ring: “Dr. Death.”

Why did you enlist in the Marines, particularly at the height of the war?

Well, I'm a third-generation Marine. My father was a career Marine, and that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to serve and felt motivated to do that.

Tell us about your time in the war.

I was trained as an antitank assault man, but when I got to Vietnam, I worked as a basic infantry rifleman, doing the patrols, doing the ambushes, that kind of stuff.

How did you get your first Purple Heart?

They fired mortars and rockets into the area where I was. I received shrapnel wounds in the head and the back and the shoulder.



COURTESY VFW

What led to the second Purple Heart?

I was in Quang Nam province. That's where our battalion headquarters was, out in the toolies, out in the jungle. We would go out in small clusters, working out of little platoon patrol bases. The operation was called Pipestone Canyon. Go Noi Island is where I was wounded. That was a pretty intense operation.

I was actually leaving the island on an amtrac [amphibious, tracked personnel transporter] that ran over a box mine and blew up. It caught on fire, and we had a lot of people burned. I was sitting on a fuel cell that ignited and, of course, then I ignited. Two or three of us caught

fire. We were medevaced to Da Nang by helicopter. I went back to the bush a couple of weeks later, I think. Then the third time I was wounded, they medevaced me out of country.

What happened the third time?

We were in a night defensive position in a battalion area. We were on the berm surrounding our position and started receiving enemy fire, and I was wounded.

You later were a pro wrestler. How did you overcome all of those wounds and have such a physical postwar career?

Probably the lesson of Vietnam for me was that you can adapt and you can overcome and you know there are challenges or opportunities. So I just got in the gym and got to running and lifting and wound up getting back into pretty damn good shape.

How did you get into wrestling?

I had a couple of cousins who wrestled. One was Rocky Montana. So I became the younger brother, Johnny Montana. There was also a Lenny Montana. I just intended to work out with them and get into shape. That's how it all got started. I never wanted to get into the wrestling business, but frankly, the money was good. They didn't need a lot of riflemen or antitank assault men back in the world. And I needed a job.

How did you get the name Dr. Death?

It was kind of a moniker from my Vietnam days, when I had an old Marine Corps sweatshirt with the sleeves cut out. I drew a tombstone on the back of it. GIs have a sick sense of humor. Out of that came the name Dr. Death. [In wrestling] Dr. Death was a masked guy, skull and crossbones on the mask.

What are the VFW's plans for the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War?

We are going to publish a special issue of VFW magazine in August 2014, focusing on events that occurred in 1964. We're going to have a monthly magazine series beginning with the February 2015 issue about major battles in Vietnam. And we are planning to publish a book titled *America's Deadliest Battles in Vietnam* in late 2015. We are going to make a concerted effort to distribute the book in schools.

Another thing we will do is designate VFW posts as commemorative posts. They will sponsor events with the local media, local schools, local veterans to celebrate the service of those who gave. We've got roughly 7,200 posts around America and overseas. They will have to request to be designated a commemorative post after demonstrating community service, though we're not going to mandate it. We plan to launch this program in May 2015.

We are also honoring our Vietnam veterans with special recognition at the July 2015 national VFW convention in Pittsburgh.

Any details yet on the July 2015 event?

Vietnam veterans will be recognized during the national convention with special badges and announcements on the convention floor.

Are veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan joining the VFW?

They're joining in larger numbers than has any other generation, percentage-wise. But there aren't as many. The military is dwindling. You hear about soldiers who are on their fourth and fifth and sixth deployment. Sometimes deployments are six months instead of 13 months, like Vietnam might have been, but they're doing it over and over and over again.

It's got to be, my God, hard on them, hard on their families. Some have taken their own lives. Suicide among the most recent veterans is a complex problem, and research should focus on individual causes. Meanwhile, everyone concerned—the Defense Department, VA and veterans organizations—must use every means available to prevent suicides.

What is the VFW doing to help?

We lobby hard for increased suicide-prevention measures, better and more available counseling to service members and their families. We're really very much involved in education and employment. We fought very hard for the new GI bill to send these young folks back to school. Look, if you get out and you can't get an education and you can't get a job, guess what happens to the suicide rate? It goes up. So we realize education is another way to help fight that.

As you move through the various generations of war veterans, has the mission of the VFW changed?

No, it has not changed. There is a common bond among veterans who served, whether it was in World War I, II, Korea, Vietnam or whatever. We've been placed in harm's way, and we put our chests between us and the bad guys.

There are some things that are different. The length of deployment may vary. The World War II veteran went over there, and he didn't know whether he was coming home in one year or 10. The Vietnam guys, you knew it was a finite time, which was a plus. But there are tremendous similarities that go from war to war.

What are some of those similarities?

They talk about IEDs [improvised explosive devices] today. We had booby traps in Vietnam. They talk about suicide bombers. We had sappers [North

Vietnamese trained to get inside fortified areas with explosives]. In World War II, the Japanese had kamikaze pilots.

There have always been radicals and fanatics willing to blow themselves up for the emperor, for God, for whatever the case may be. There are some common bonds there. And we want to reach out to these young men and women to let them know that in the VFW they have a home. We understand. We get it. H

JOHN HAMILTON

Title: Adjutant general of the Veterans of Foreign Wars since July 2013

Previous position: Commander-in-chief (top volunteer leader), VFW, 2012-13

Born: July 4, 1950, Wilmington, N.C.; raised in Jacksonville, Fla.

Education: Georgia Military Academy, a college prep school, graduated 1967; attended North Georgia College

Military service: U.S. Marine Corps, September 1968-July 1970; Vietnam, March-September 1969 (after third wound, stationed on Okinawa, Japan)

Unit: 1st Platoon, E Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division

Postwar career: Business ventures in Jacksonville, including owner of carpet stores, manufacturer's representative for a chemical company, owner of a janitorial supply company; 15 years as professional wrestler, beginning in 1974



COURTESY JOHN HAMILTON

John Hamilton was wounded three times during his tour in Vietnam.