

11 veterans honored at Quilts of Valor presentation

By Lisa Reisman

CLINTON — By any measure, Ray Gustafson served the military with valor. As a Marine in Vietnam from 1966 to 1968, he flew a helicopter carrier in the Tet Offensive and in the bloody Battle of Khe Sanh. Hit by a piece of bomb, he was told there was a 50-50 chance he would walk again. He taught himself to walk.

But Gustafson, who was among the 11 veterans honored at a Quilts of Valor ceremony last Saturday at the American Legion Post 66 in Clinton, now suffers from Parkinson's disease, Type 2 diabetes, and chlo- racne, a debilitating skin rash, all of which are directly linked to exposure to Agent Orange, the herbicide used as a defoliant in Southeast Asia during the war.

In meeting the Quilts of Valor Foundation mission to recognize "those service members and veterans touched by war," as its website states, the presentation was marked at once by a celebratory spirit, as well as an air of solemn gratitude — both for those who never came home and those still feeling its effects.

Before blessing the quilts, Rev. Ellen Kennedy asked the packed room to pause for a moment of silence in memory of Raymond Guarino, who was killed by sniper fire in Vietnam in 1966.

"He's the reason I'm here," said Ronald Manware, a veteran in the Ar-



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Standing, from left: Albert Motta, Stephen McGuirk, Ron Gibson, Marc Gibson, Lisa Distasio and John R. Tubb; seated, from left, Ray Gustafson, Richard Silocka, Sanford Sears, John Callahan and Ronald Manware

my National Guard, who grew up with Guarino in West Haven, and was among those honored.

Sanford Sears, who served the Coast Guard stateside and in South Korea from 1973 to 2000, accepted his quilt on behalf of his late father, a Pearl Harbor survivor.

And Stephen McGuirk — one of six Marine Corps veterans being recognized — thanked the quilters for carrying on a long tradition.

"During our American Civil War," he said, "our government didn't supply very much for our soldiers. It was the women who

made quilts and blankets that kept them warm."

In a powerful testimonial, Marine Corps veteran John Callahan, who served in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967, remembered "a hero who fell on a hand grenade, survived the blast, and gave aid to his wounded comrades before he died" and another who "flew his helicopter carrying wounded with enemy all around, tried to fly away, and was shot to the ground."

Then there was Gustafson, who was accompanied by his friend Gerry Wright, an Army veteran who served two tours of duty as a combat engineer in Viet-

nam from 1968 to 1971, and who's also afflicted with the effects of exposure to Agent Orange, including ischemic heart disease (hardening of the arteries), atrial fibrillation, a skin rash and neuropathy in his feet.

He's disqualified from disability benefits for the skin rash and the neuropathy because of a rule requiring soldiers to have reported symptoms within a year of being exposed.

"I didn't recognize the symptoms until it was too late," he said. "And I'm not alone. There are literally millions of us suffering from the effects. And we're dying at a rate

It's not just his generation that's impacted, according to Gustafson, who's written a book titled "The Silent Enemy: The Insidious Legacy of Agent Orange," a reference to dioxin, a noxious element in Agent Orange, which resides in the fatty tissue and, studies have shown, can be passed on to multiple generations.

Gustafson's older son was born with a latent abnormality in his brain that manifested in his 30s. His younger son was born with a cleft palate. And his granddaughter has left ventricle hypoplasia and pulmonary stenosis.

"None of these are in our DNA," he said.

On Saturday, Gustafson, his quilt wrapped around his shoulders, struggled to accept congratulations, the result of lingering wounds from his heroic service almost five decades earlier.

"It's like the words I have stenciled on my trailer," Wright said, standing beside his friend. "I was killed in Vietnam but I just haven't died yet."

If you know a veteran you'd like to honor, visit www.qovf.org, find the "take action" tab, and click "request a quilt," or email jane.dougherty@qovf.org.

To support the Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act, HR-566 & S-332, call your House and Senate representatives. For more information on the bill, visit congress.gov and type in S332 and HR-566 or "Sprayed and Betrayed AO" on Facebook.

of 390 a year."

Last year, Wright motorcycled more than 10,000 miles through 32 states, towing a trailer painted "sprayed and betrayed," and collecting more than 6,000 signatures in support of the Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act to remove the one-year requirement.

"Why weren't we given protective gear?" Wright asked. "How could we request treatment when we didn't hear about Agent Orange until 1978, when most of us had been discharged? How can the government put an end date on all illness?"