

If these walls could talk ...

Vietnam veteran's journey told by his office

By Kasey Brammell
SPECIAL TO INDEPENDENT

A Sun City Grand resident is a retired Vietnam helicopter pilot with many awards that tell his story.

Michael J. Wilton, 77, served 11 years active duty in the Army and 19 years in the reserves.

During his service, he completed two tours in Vietnam and flew more than 3,000 hours. Mr. Wilton flew just over 1,500 combat hours during his first tour, setting the Army record at that time.

Mr. Wilton has awards lining the walls within his home office.

Of these awards, he has three Bronze Stars, 54 Air Medals with "V," two Distinguished Flying Crosses. Three Army Commendation Medals with "V" and a Soldier's Medal for Heroism.

Mr. Wilton said that he had been shot down twice and was lucky enough to



Sun City Grand resident Michael Wilton, 77, flew more than 3,000 hours during his 11 years of active duty in the U.S. Army. He saw major combat in the Vietnam War. [Kasey Brammell/Special to Independent]

not get injured either time.

"Of all the awards I got, I never got a Purple Heart because you've got to bleed. I've been very close to bullets, and everyone aboard my helicopter got wounded but me," he said.

Out of everything he has been given from his service, Mr. Wilton said the most important thing to him was the fact that he learned how to fly.

"I think that's the best thing to have happened to me," Mr. Wilton said. "If I hadn't learned to fly, it

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Michael Wilton walls show off his decorated military career that took him to 11 years in the U.S. Army and 19 years in the reserves. [Kasey Brammell/Special to Independent]

Wilton

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wouldn't have given me my next career: firefighting."

After his service in the military, Mr. Wilton used his experience to fight wildfires across the U.S. for 30 years. Throughout his entire career, Mr. Wilton has flown more than 15,000 hours.

Mr. Wilton was born in Michigan, outside of Detroit, and grew up moving around the country with his family due to his father being in the military.

Mr. Wilton enlisted in the Army in 1963. After basic training and advanced infantry training, he completed paratrooper training. He was selected to attend officer candidate school and graduated as a lieutenant.

He went on to helicopter training at Fort Wolters in Texas and advanced helicopter training at Fort Rucker in Alabama.

His first tour in Vietnam began in 1966, where he served with a tight-knit company known as the Robin Hoods. It was there that he learned to fly combat missions. After that, he set the record for most combat hours flown at the time.

Mr. Wilton received a Soldier's Medal for Heroism in 1967 when he rescued a man out of an upside-down helicopter after it was shot down. He flew back to help him and created a makeshift rope out of seat belts.

"I could see the poor guy trapped underneath there and we couldn't get him out of the heavy grass," he said. "I took out all of the seatbelts out of his helicopter and I tied them together and I tied it to his trans-



Michael Wilton walls show off his decorated military career that took him Special to Independent]

mission and I got up on top and my buddy hovered over; he picked the helicopter up, and I went underneath and got the guy out."

Mr. Wilton also won one of his Distinguished Flying Crosses in 1967 after

a rescue mission in Cambodia. He said they weren't really supposed to be there, but some soldiers went in and got surrounded. Mr. Wilton asked them to blow up a hole in the tree canopy so that he could land and get them out safely.

During his first tour at Christmastime, Mr. Wilton was selected to be Santa Claus for his unit.

"They send me into the mess hall with this big bag full of toys. All the kids are grabbing and all the little boys want a rifle. They all

wanted one, and I only had a few so they didn't all get one," Mr. Wilton said. "All of a sudden I had more kids than I had toys. I turned around to my first sergeant and I said 'you better get me some more toys, quick.' There were no more toys, but the sergeant returned with a large box of oranges to give to the remainder of kids as gifts."

Back home, Mr. Wilton had a young daughter, so he said being Santa Claus and being around the kids at the orphanage was a special experience for him.

Mr. Wilton worked as a helicopter pilot instructor between his tours.

"I was a career officer at that point," Mr. Wilton said. "I wasn't just doing my one year, one tour in Vietnam, and getting out. I was staying. They called us 'lifers.'" During this break in tours, Mr. Wilton's son, Jon, was born.

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Michael Wilton
Vietnam veteran



to 11 years in the U.S. Army and 19 years in the reserves. [Kasey Brammell/

Two and a half years later, Mr. Wilton was called back to Vietnam. He returned in January 1970 as a captain and due to his rank, he was second in charge at the base.

Mr. Wilton won the second of his Distinguished Flying Crosses after he saved people from a helicopter that was shot down. He said it was dark and bullets were still being shot into the air. He had to fly in the dark in order to reach the people on the ground.

"I flashed my lights once in the dark, turned all the lights off, made us black, and we talked to those guys on the ground," he said. "The enemy could hear me coming, but they couldn't see me, so they were just shooting everywhere. We're very lucky that we were able to go over and land and get everyone into the helicopter."

Overall, he stuck to flying every other day as to not get burned out. "I just wanted

to do my job and get out safely," he said. Mr. Wilton was able to return home on Christmas Eve, 1970.

After his second tour in Vietnam, Mr. Wilton was selected to attend Army Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and graduated in March 1971.

Mr. Wilton attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel after retiring from his active Army duty and reserve duty.

After his Army career, Mr. Wilton worked in Alaska, where he flew biology researchers around to do animal tagging, as well as geologists for their work.

"I'm very fortunate to have flown all around Alaska," Mr. Wilton said. "When you're flying in a helicopter, you're low, you get to see everything."

Mr. Wilton met his future wife on match.com in early 2003. After talking for about six months online, they met in person in Boi-

se, Idaho. The couple got married in 2004.

In 2010, Mr. and Mrs. Wilton retired from their careers. Mr. Wilton started playing softball in Idaho and both occupied their time with hobbies and traveling.

The couple moved to Arizona in 2016 after visiting for three years each softball season.

Mr. Wilton still plays in a softball league with Sun City Grand and has recently won a tournament.

His teammate, James Stocker, said that he played against him in previous seasons and was happy when he got to play on the same team during the most recent season.

"He's the type of person you want on your team," Mr. Stocker said.

He said that Mr. Wilton's military experience likely contributes to him being a strong competitor with purpose and focus.

Mr. Stocker described Mr. Wilton as a very kind, modest man and a true hero living among us.

To this day, Mr. Wilton maintains relationships with his fellow Robin Hoods and attends reunions. Mrs. Wilton said she feels blessed to be associated with the Robin Hood family since being married to Mr. Wilton.

Despite the hardships he's faced, Mr. Wilton described himself as lucky multiple times.

"I think I'm a lucky veteran, in a lot of ways," Mr. Wilton said. "There are a lot of veterans that aren't in very good health and so far Diane and I are in very good health, and I think we're very lucky in that way."

Mr. Wilton is proud to say "hoo-rah!"

Editor's Note: Kasey Brammell is a student at ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism.