

Chapel Hill man gets Bronze Star — 47 years late



The Herald-Sun/RANDALL L. HILL

AR: Daniel Wolfe, of Chapel Hill, was given the Bronze Star (above) Saturday in Chapel Hill. In Korea in 1951 he retrieved a slain comrade who could be seen only by flashes of light.

Award for valor given for retrieving slain paratrooper in 1951 Korea

By JONATHAN BUTLER
The Chapel Hill Herald

CHAPEL HILL — They say it's never too late.

Forty-seven years — almost to the date — after Daniel Wolfe crawled through artillery-swept terrain in 1951 Korea to retrieve a fallen comrade, he was honored with the Bronze Star for valor.

In an emotional moment, Wolfe, 68, thanked his family, who sat in the audience at the National Armory in Chapel Hill on Saturday.

"They saw me through the best of times and helped me manage the worst of times," Wolfe said, while trying to hold back the tears. "This was the forgotten war. Fifty-

four thousand men were killed in three years; 10,000 were wounded."

Wolfe was nominated for the Bronze Star 47 years ago, but the paperwork was destroyed by enemy fire.

"Our headquarters was bombed by the Chinese and the papers were lost," he said. "I was so happy to get out of there alive."

It wasn't until Wolfe attended a recent reunion that he was asked about his Bronze Star. He contacted Rep. David Price's office, who got in touch with the Department of the Army.

One of the requirements is that a request has to be forwarded by a member of Congress. An eyewitness account also is needed, which he had from his commanding officer and another soldier.

"It was a very strong case," said Price, who attended the ceremony.

Wolfe was 21 and living in the Bronx, N.Y., when he was drafted. It was about six years after World War II during the

please see **BRONZE/8**



IT'S OFFICIAL: Lt. Col. James Rhoads of Chapel Hill presented the Bronze Star for valor on Daniel Wolfe's jacket Saturday. Rhoads received the medal 47 years after his act of heroism.

BRONZE

FROM 1

recession and he was working for 75 cents an hour in the garment district.

"I was kind of happy to get drafted," he said. "I couldn't get a job, and it was something to do."

He saw high school buddies getting their physicals as well, then it was off to basic training at Indian-town Gap, Pa., for 16 weeks in the infantry.

Seeing action

Wolfe and other young men boarded a train to Seattle, Wash., and were shipped to Korea aboard the USS Gen. Simon Buckner.

He remembered being told by a commanding officer that no one was to be left behind — dead or alive they were brought out. That stuck with him.

They arrived in Yokohama, Japan, and were briefed on what to expect from the terrain and the Chinese, who Wolfe described as "super soldiers." Wolfe was part of the 3rd Division, 15th Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Company L.

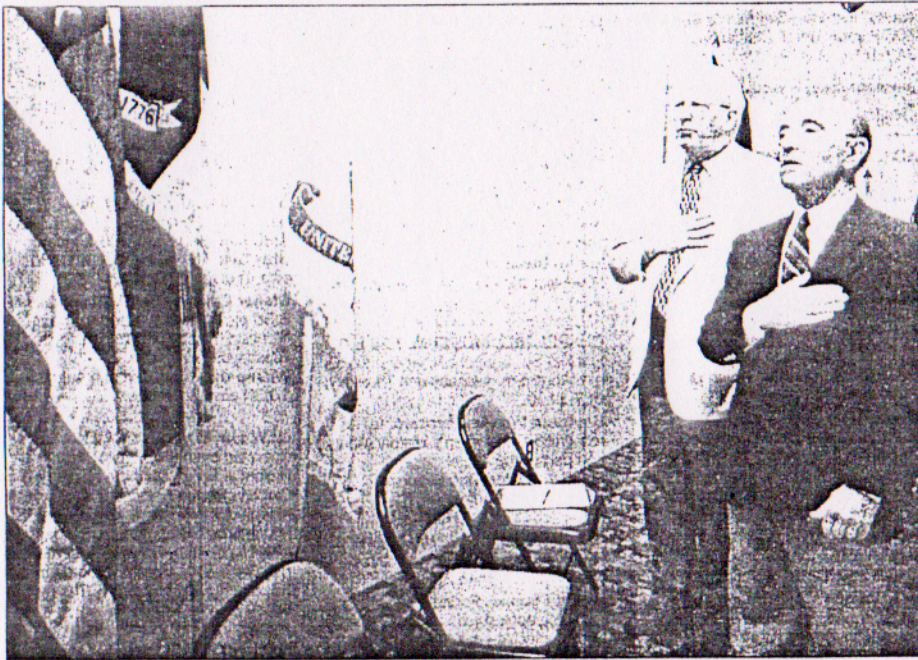
"It was a static war," Wolfe said, sitting at his home in Governor's Village. "We didn't take any new territories, but moved around in trenches and lived in bunkers."

Wolfe was immediately sent by way of train and truck to the front lines inside what was called the Iron Triangle, northwest of Chorwon, Korea.

"I didn't hear any sounds until we were close. Then I heard these booms," he said. "And I thought, 'Am I putting myself in the middle of all this?'"

Black and white photos of his days in the Army sat on the bookshelf behind him. He flipped through a photo album and pointed out friends who he still sees from time to time and some who died in action.

Patrols and raids were done at



RECITE PLEDGE: Daniel Wolfe (right) and U.S. Rep. David Price join in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance during the presentation of the Bronze Star

for valor Saturday at the UNC Naval Armory on South Columbia Street. Price forwarded the request for the medal to be given to Wolfe.

The Herald Staff/RANDALL L. HILL

"I didn't hear any sounds until we were close. Then I heard these booms. And I thought, 'Am I putting myself in the middle of all this?'"

DANIEL WOLFE

night for surprise and to hide numbers.

"I was frightened," he said. "I don't know if I killed anyone.

When they fired, we saw a blue flash and we fired back. I threw grenades at the blue flashes."

On Aug. 8, 1951, the men were

preparing to advance. Before every major raid the chaplain appeared as soldiers checked their gear. It was getting dark, and they still had to cross a river that separated them from the Chinese.

Wolfe was in the attack platoon and had been designated the runner, who delivered reports from the point man — checking on the whereabouts of the enemy — back to his commanding officer, Lt. Col. Wilbur Sidney.

During one such run, the point man noticed the smell of garlic

and realized he most likely had flushed out a Chinese listening post. The Chinese had a love of kimchee, a spicy marinated cabbage.

Beating a retreat

"They were probably just as frightened as we were and breathing hard so we could smell the garlic," he said. "We were caught in an ambush and all hell broke loose. We fired back, but our ammunition ran low. Sidney stood up and yelled at the enemy. He ordered us to withdraw, but instead of going back the way we came, he ordered us down the bank toward the river."

As the men climbed down the bank, someone pointed to a fallen soldier about 40 feet away. It was dark and Wolfe asked the guy to help, but he ran, so Wolfe crawled to the body.

"The only times you could see was when a grenade went off," he said. "I got to the body but didn't know if he was dead or alive. I dragged him to the ridge and down, but he kept getting snagged."

At this point, Wolfe pinched him and realizing he was dead, took off this belt, tied it around the soldier's legs — to keep him from getting snagged — and pulled him down the bank to the river.

The soldier's name was Robert Massengill and he was a paratrooper, but Wolfe said he didn't know where he was from. They hardly knew each other.

Wolfe then floated the body to an outpost where he was debriefed, but he never saw the soldier who ran off again.

The peace talks, being held about 20 miles away, were not going well and there was talk of invading North Korea. Veteran soldiers were being asked to go to

Japan and train with new recruits.

Wolfe could have opted to stay for another month before his time was up and go home, but he chose the assignment in Japan.

Near the end of 1952 Wolfe went to Japan, but the peace talks improved, and he was allowed to leave a few months later in 1953.

Getting on with life

"I remember coming home with a duffel bag on my shoulder," he said. "My parents knew I was coming, but didn't know when. When I saw them, they had aged so much in those few years."

Wolfe went to college under the G.I. Bill and received a degree in biology with a minor in education and became a teacher. He met his wife, Sheila, while teaching biology. She was the school librarian. They've been married 36 years.

He retired recently and they moved to Florida, then to the Chapel Hill area. They had three children.

"I didn't know about the incident until just recently," Marc, his son, said before the ceremony. "He talked a little about his experiences, then he started going to reunions."

His wife, Sheila, was only 14 when Wolfe was in battle and didn't know him.

"He would tell me about his experiences, but it wasn't real to me," she said. "But they became real at the reunions. Danny would write love letters for some of the other soldiers. I am very proud of my husband. He is a very modest man."

in the Korean War.
report whether the
had a mental illne

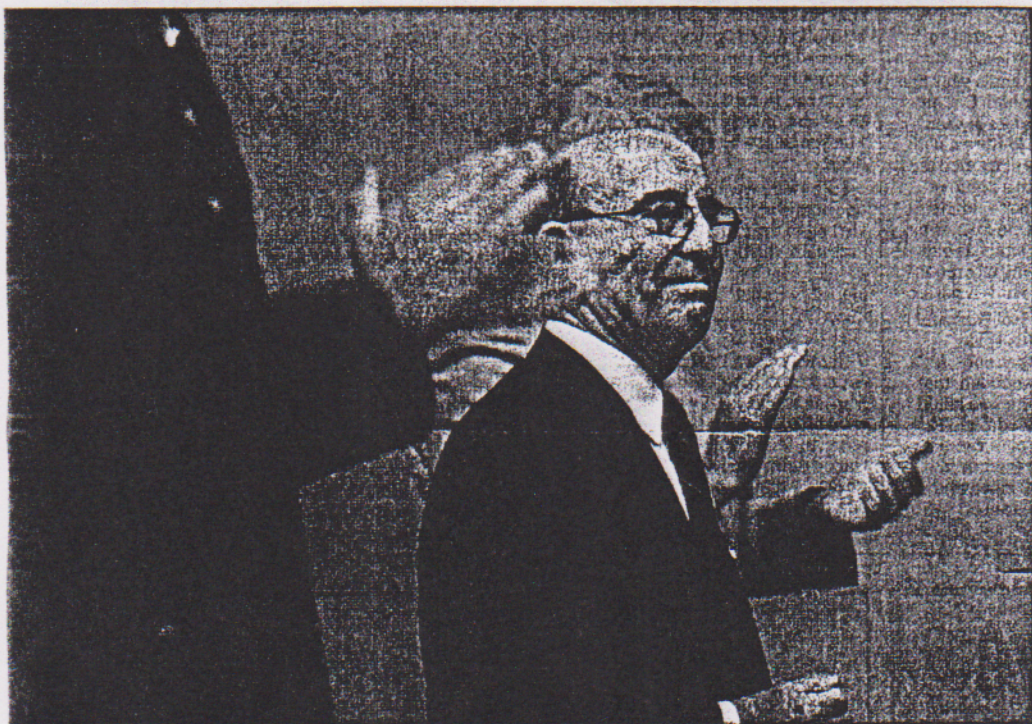
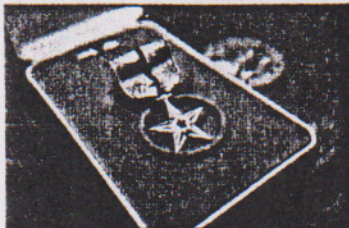
By CRAIG JARVIS
STAFF WRITER

A disturbed man strides into the U.S. Capitol, kills two police officers and injures a tourist when he opens fire with a .38-caliber handgun.

Episodes like those have highlighted how easy it is for mentally ill people to obtain handguns. In fact, in most of the country, one could easily obtain a gun without scrutiny. Currently, only one-third

THE NEWS OBSERVER

'When I got home, I was just glad to be alive. I didn't think about anything like [medals].'



After receiving his Bronze Star for valor in the Korean War, Daniel Wolfe stands for a round of applause in the Naval Armory building at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Above right, the medal.

STAFF PHOTO BY NERISSA MILLER

Honor catches up to hero at last

By JAY PRICE AND DUDLEY PRICE
STAFF WRITERS

CHAPEL HILL

Forty-six years later, Daniel Wolfe can still remember the distant thump of friendly artillery as Company L walked silently along a ridge above the Imjin River on the way to a night raid, and the odd thought that the glow over his left shoulder came from the lights of Panmunjom 20 miles away, where North Korea and South Korea were in the midst of a fruitless round of peace talks.

He can still remember how perfect

the ambush was, a crescent of winking blue flashes from the Chinese submachine guns, arrayed like seats in an amphitheater around the spot on the trail where the American soldiers had become suspicious and stopped.

And he can remember being the last man after the retreat began and dashing back toward the blue flashes to retrieve the body of Sgt. Robert Massengale, and how the dense brush kept snagging Massengale as Wolfe turned and dragged him to a 60-foot cliff, down into the river and a mile downstream while bullets whined all around them.

"It's funny how vivid this is, and yet I

can't remember what happened yesterday," said Wolfe, 68, who lives in northern Chatham County.

His recent memory might be fuzzy, but it's unlikely that he will forget what happened Saturday, when he was awarded a Bronze Star — with a V for valor — for his courage and gallantry during the Korean War.

In a ceremony that should have happened in 1952, Army Lt. Col. Jim Rhoads pinned the medal on Wolfe's chest as more than a dozen family members and friends watched at the Naval Armory at the University of

See MEDAL, PAGE 2B

MEDAL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Wolfe's daughter Sharon, a museum curator in New York City, said neither she nor her brother, Marc, knew of her father's brave deed until about two months ago, when he wrote about it for a creative writing class. Her father is an unassuming man who rarely discussed the war, she said. Still, she was not surprised, either.

"I'm very proud," Sharon Wolfe said. "It's kind of in keeping with his morality and loyalty to friends."

Overshadowed by the scope of the world wars and the social impact of Vietnam, the Korean War is sometimes called the Forgotten War by its veterans.

Wolfe's act of courage would have been forgotten, too, if it hadn't been for his former company commander, Lt. Col. Wilbur "Sid" Sidney, who heard during the company's first reunion in 1997 that right after the aborted raid someone had recommended Wolfe for a decoration.

Sidney knows a bit about medals, having won more than 70 himself during a 36-year military career that included World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars. He started researching the matter.

"As far as I could tell, the original award was in draft form and being sent back to our administration unit and one of our administrative jeeps was destroyed by enemy fire, perhaps a mortar, artillery or a direct hit by an anti-tank gun," Sidney said in a telephone interview Friday from Boca Raton, Fla. He had stopped there to visit a friend en route to Wolfe's ceremony, but collapsed Thursday with a diabetes-related problem and couldn't attend.

The two men in the jeep were killed and nothing was left of the paperwork they were transporting, Sidney said.

Sidney probed the U.S. Army bureaucracy by telephone for nearly a year before getting everything straightened out, in part with the help of U.S. Rep. David Price. Two months ago, Wolfe heard that he would be getting the medal.

From his home in the Governors Village subdivision, Wolfe keeps track of the survivors of Company L and occasionally publishes a newsletter for them, full of reminiscing, corny GI humor and reports of knee replacements, bypass surgery and holdovers.



At left, a photo of Daniel Wolfe taken while he was serving in Korea in 1952. Below, Wolfe shakes hands with Army Lt. Col. Jim Rhoads after Rhoads had presented the medal to him.

He's retired from teaching high school biology and math in the South Bronx, the blighted "Fort Apache" section of New York City. Wolfe, a soft-spoken, jolly man not much heavier than the 133 pounds he weighed in Korea, said he thinks his time in the Army helped him earn the respect of some of the country's toughest kids.

The Wolfes had retired to Florida but didn't like it. Sheila Wolfe, a former librarian, ran across one of the many Top 10 lists featuring the Triangle. He said sure, why not, and a year ago they moved to Chatham County.

A corner of one room in their home is dedicated to Korea, with a couple of shelves of framed pictures. He pointed to a photo of himself and five other soldiers from Company L. One man, the only one without a smile, is clowning around, balancing a canteen on Wolfe's smooth-shaven pate.

"That one, a piece of shrapnel went right across his spine," Wolfe said. "The other ones, let's see, that one was wounded, that one was OK, that one was killed, that one was wounded."

On the raid for which Wolfe was decorated, 80 or so men went out and about five were killed and a

When it was ambushed, the company returned fire for a few minutes, then Sidney called for the retreat along the river; a calculated risk because the bank was believed to be mined. But, Sidney said this week, it would have been folly to go back down the trail, where they were expected.

Wolfe was getting ready to dash for the cliff when another soldier ran past with an armload of rifles he had retrieved and mentioned that Massengale was lying nearby. Wolfe asked for help, but the other soldier ignored him and kept going. Without thinking, Wolfe ran toward the Chinese soldiers and quickly found Massengale, who appeared to be dead.

Still, Wolfe wasn't about to leave one of his buddies on that ridge. He began dragging Massengale and when the brush became a problem, he took off his belt and looped it around Massengale's knees, so he could lift the body over the snags.

Halfway down the cliff, he caught up with Sgt. Benny Hoover, a seasoned World War II vet who had taken it on himself to cover the rear while the company waded down the river.

Hoover laid down covering fire



STAFF PHOTO BY NERISSA MILLER

where Wolfe stopped and pinched Massengale's cheek to make sure he was dead before pulling him into the water.

Wolfe now thinks that Hoover, who was later killed, was the one who recommended him for a medal. Back in those days, though, the thought of some sort of recognition never occurred to Wolfe.

"When I got home, I was just glad to be alive," he said. "I didn't

Even 46 years late, Wolfe said he was proud to get the decoration because the war was a yardstick like none other in his life and the medal formally marks how he measured up.

"It's not something where I decided to be a hero," Wolfe said. "It was just instinctive, and because it was instinctive I think it was truly a part of who I am."

Jay Price can be reached