

# Military honors



Ramona LaSarte pins the Bronze Star on her husband, Vic. The Worley resident received the medals Saturday for his service in Vietnam. - Ralph Bartholdt

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Vic LaSarte comes from a long line of veterans.

So, when the Coeur d'Alene Tribal member was drafted in 1969, it was a proud moment.

"My uncles went before me," said Mr. LaSarte. "They served."

When he was wounded in Vietnam though and shuffled from hospital to hospital, leading to his discharge, and the years of dealing with the memories n all of that tarnished his experience as a soldier.

Last week, however, Mr. LaSarte stood in front of hundreds of people, many of them his people, Coeur d'Alenes, to receive one of the military's highest combat decorations for his service with the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam as a young man.

Vic LaSarte, now 60, received the Bronze Star for being one of the last soldiers to leave a firebase as the enemy overran the position. He made sure the wounded were evacuated and that nothing useful including ammunition or weapons was left to the enemy that swept in from the jungles along the DMZ.

He was five months into his tour and a piece of shrapnel struck him in the leg.

"We encountered hand to hand combat," he recalls. "I was blown off the hooch."

The explosion left him hobbling to a remaining helicopter that fluttered away ushering LaSarte and his fellow soldiers to safety.

What began then, as he landed in the rear, was a series of visits to hospitals and doctors where his leg was wrapped in a cast and he was moved down the line to other hospitals eventually ending up in Japan, before being sent stateside.

The former Worley High School basketball star finished his service at Fort Sill before being discharged with the ribbons and the service medal that marked him as a Vietnam veteran, but the commendation from his officers at the front didn't catch up to him.

"There was a document recommending him for the Bronze Star," said Mike Ogle, a retired

service member who works for the Department of Veteran's Affairs in Spokane, and who helped Mr. LaSarte claim his medals almost 40 years after he left the fighting in Vietnam.

"He was out of mind, out of sight," said Mr. Ogle.

Mr. LaSarte returned home to Idaho, he married, but the relationship ended in divorce. He married again. He and his wife Ramona have been together 33 years and it was his family that helped him through difficult times, he said.

"They lived through my alcoholism, my isolation," said Mr. LaSarte. "My family really did help me through."

Ramona didn't know that her husband suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, or how it recurs and affects the entire family. She didn't learn it until the couple began volunteering at the VA hospital.

"He had nightmares," she said. "A lot of nightmares."

After 20 years at Kaiser Aluminum, Mr. LaSarte retired and worked for almost a decade as an alcohol counselor.

After suffering a heart attack he began putting time in as a volunteer working with homeless veterans.

"I wanted to give back to the vets, to help them as much as possible, like they helped me," he said.

Mr. Ogle was going through the paper trail process of securing a purple heart for Mr. LaSarte when he learned about the Bronze Star recommendation.

It was brought before a board and Mr. Ogle learned in December that his friend would receive the medal. He telephoned Mr. LaSarte.

"I broke down in the hallway when he called," said the former trooper.

He didn't want a ceremony.

"I wanted to keep it low profile," he said.

He planned on getting a frame for the Bronze Star and hanging it in his living room.

His friends and veterans insisted on Saturday's ceremony.

"They were cheering him on," said Mr. Ogle. "It was really a glorious moment. It showed he is a role model.

"There still are hero veterans among the tribal community of the Coeur d'Alenes. They have quite a few of them and Vic is one of them.

"This validates that he is a hero."

For Mr. LaSarte, the recognition was a long time coming.

Not that he thought he deserved it, but for a long time he felt something was unfinished.

"It honestly feels good," he said. "Like, now I can put it away. I'm kind of healed now that they acknowledged it.

"I feel, I guess, redeemed.

"Affirmed."

In addition to the bronze Star Vic LaSarte received the Army Commendation medal, Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry and the Republic of Vietnam Civil Actions Medal First Class.