



Advisor for Air Force SDVOSB Program

# Veteran helps others achieve American dream

By Annette Crawford  
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A bureaucratic mix-up. That's how Eugene Toni explained being drafted in the Army to his mother. If he had told her the truth, "she would have killed me," said the 58-year-old.

In reality, there was no mix-up. Toni was attending Camden County College in New Jersey and working part-time at a women's shoe store. His manager's stepson – who wasn't going to college -- was drafted in 1969. Toni thought it unfair that his student status made him ineligible for the draft. To rectify that inequality, Toni went to the draft board and asked that his deferment be changed. He was drafted immediately.

His quest to do the right thing cost him dearly. On Oct. 9, 1970, while with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division on a reconnaissance patrol in the Vietnam jungle, Sergeant Toni stepped on a land mine. He lost both of his legs below the knees.

It took many years to recover, but it wasn't only the physical wounds that needed healing.

"After I was hurt I was mad," said the Philadelphia native. "I

spent many years angry and driven."

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder added to the volatile mix. He sought therapy to help deal with the pain, and as part of his treatment in 1990, went to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The black granite wall features the names of 58,175 names of dead and missing servicemembers.

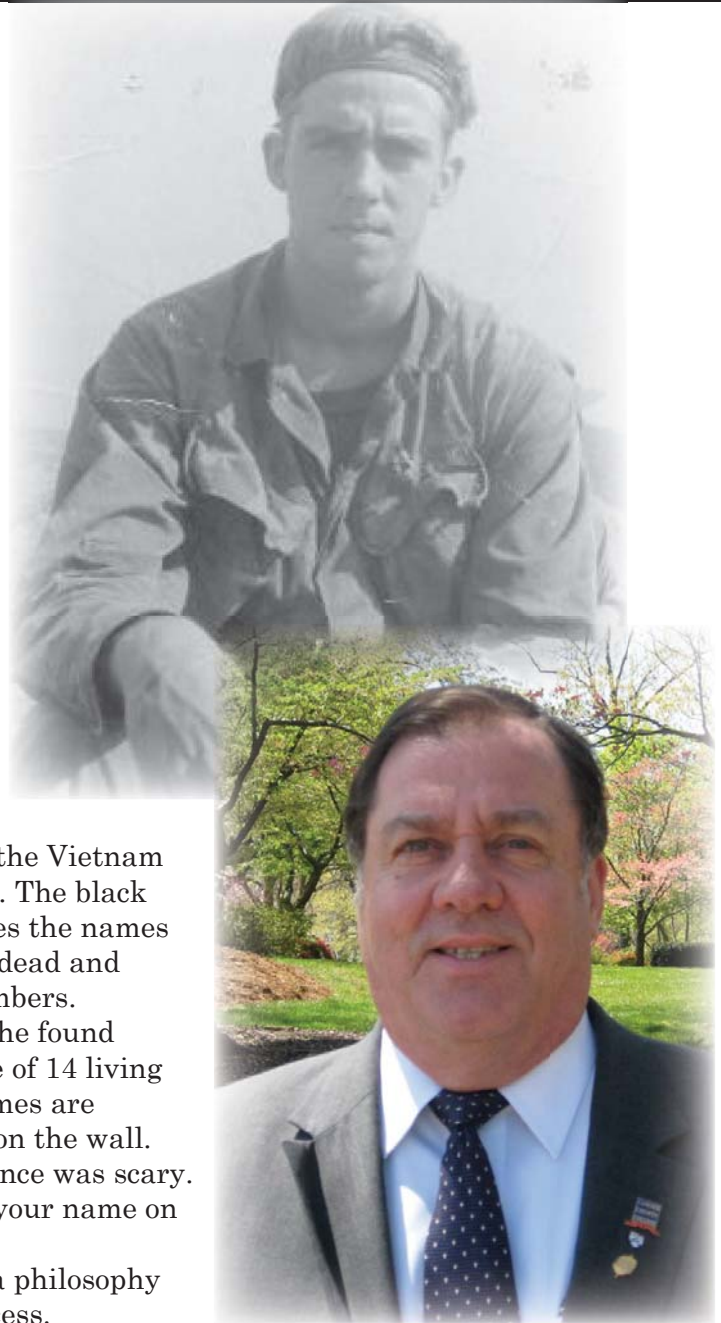
To his surprise, he found his own name – one of 14 living veterans whose names are mistakenly etched on the wall. He said the experience was scary.

"It's like seeing your name on a gravestone."

Toni developed a philosophy in his recovery process.

"Life is like a stool. If the stool only has two legs – work and home – it isn't very stable. If you volunteer your time for an activity, now the stool has three legs," he said.

Toni has found that balance many times over, citing his faith and personal accountability as key contributing factors in his recovery. As the program



Eugene Toni -- during the Vietnam War and today. (Courtesy photos)

advisor for the Air Force Small Business Office's Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) program, he knows only too well what today's veterans are experiencing.

"I love talking to veterans. My experience in Vietnam and the

extent of my disabilities make it easy for me to relate to the problems they may be having with the system,” Toni said.

“Having been a contracting officer for 30 years also provides a wealth of experience on how the system works and to be able to explain to them what just happened and why,” he said. “They may not always like the answer but if they can understand it they will go away better for the experience and better prepared for the next (hurdle).”

Toni returned to Camden County College in 1972, where he completed his associate’s degree in marketing in 1973 with a 4.0 grade-point average. Two years later, he earned a bachelor’s degree in economics from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. While working in civil service in Washington, D.C., Toni earned his master’s degree in public administration at George Washington University.

The volunteer piece of the “three-legged stool” grew while he was a student at the University of Pennsylvania. Working with university officials, he poured his efforts into increasing accessibility for physically challenged students like himself.

Over the next 30-plus years, Toni volunteered with the American Red Cross, the

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**Eugene Toni**  
Program Advisor  
Air Force Small Business Office SDVOSB program

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Amputee Coalition of America, the Knights of Columbus, his church and his children’s school. He spearheaded the drive to construct a new school building in 2006 while serving as president of the board for St. Coletta of Greater Washington, a non-profit school which serves children and adults with cognitive disabilities and supports their families. His latest achievement was being named the first recipient of Camden County College’s Outstanding Alumnus Award in May 2008.

Toni’s passion for veteran-related issues is a perfect fit in his role as advisor for SDVOSBs.

“We are honored to have Gene on our Air Force Small Business team,” said Ronald A. Poussard, director of the Office of Small Business Programs, Office of the

Secretary of the Air Force.

“As a service-disabled veteran who served his country in Vietnam, and with his outstanding background in contracting, he is uniquely qualified to work with today’s service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses,” Poussard said. “We rely on Gene’s perspective and valued advice in striving to go beyond goals for our service-disabled veterans.”

Toni said he admires the determination of service-disabled vets who start a small business.

“I love asking them simple questions such as ‘Why did you pick your company’s name? How do you get financing? What made you want to start a business?’ Each and every one of them has a story, and that story is the American dream.”