

# Vietnam era Marine accepts medals with pride

The News-Star  
December 17, 2008

War protestors greeted Lake Providence native Vernon Ford more than four decades ago when the U.S. Marine stepped off a plane in Los Angeles.

Although he had been wounded twice within a month while serving his country in Vietnam during the fall of 1966, the angry war protestors jeered him. Instead of being met with fanfare, he was met with attempts to disgrace him.

"When you get spit on in the Los Angeles airport, you feel ashamed of your service," said the 63-year-old Ford. "I've been ashamed of my service all these years."

But Ford's years of embarrassment turned to pride today as 5th District U.S. Rep Rodney Alexander presented the retired Monroe firefighter with eight medals he earned during his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Those medals include the Silver Star with Citation, the Purple Heart with one Gold Star, the Combat Action Ribbon, the Presidential Citation Ribbon Bar, the Navy Unit Commendation Ribbon Bar, the Good Conduct Medal, the National Defense Service Medal and the Vietnam Service Medal with one Bronze Campaign Star.

Ford, a Ouachita High School graduate, served in the First Marine Division from 1965 to 1968.

On July 22, 1966, he was serving as a fire team leader during Operation Hastings when he was shot in the side by a machine gun during a North Vietnamese Army ambush of his squad.

During the ambush, Ford courageously shouted his name every 30 seconds to help his squad make its way through the dense jungle.

A Marine a few feet away from Ford was killed by enemy gunfire.

After the squad overran

the enemy position, Ford refused to be airlift to a hospital and chose to stay with his squad. He was awarded the Silver Star for his efforts, one of the highest valor medals given to a Marine.

Less than a month later on Aug. 11, 1966, Ford's squad was attacking an enemy position during Operation Colorado when a grenade blast less than 10 feet from him peppered him with shrapnel.

"They picked a lot of lead out of me," he said.

For years, Ford said the people he worked with never knew about his service in Vietnam because he chose not to talk about it — he was too ashamed. But several years ago his family talked him into trying to get the medals he had earned.

He began working with officials from the state Department of Veterans Affairs.

Tommy Sims, the department's northeast regional manager, was instrumental in getting Ford the medals he should have gotten 40 years ago.

"He's not only a hero Marine, but he's a hero as a fireman," Sims said during the short ceremony at Alexander's Monroe office. "He's got a lot to be proud of."

Alexander, R-Quitman, said his office works with veterans to get the medals they earned during their military service so people will know how much the veterans have sacrificed for their country.

"We understand there are a lot of soldiers who leave the battle zone aren't concerned about medals," Alexander said. "We do what we can to recognize veterans and educate the public as to the importance of what they have done."

Ford, who now lives in West Monroe, said he is no longer ashamed of his service in Vietnam.

"I'm feeling much better," Ford said. "It's been a long time coming."