

# 15 veterans honored at Quilts of Valor ceremony

By Lisa Reisman

CLINTON — It was a spring evening otherwise warmed by an air of camaraderie, good-natured ribbing, and deep gratitude. Still, minutes into the Quilts of Valor ceremony last week at the American Legion Post 66 in Clinton, there was a pause.

"We're out of order," 7th District Commander Eileen Richard announced to the lively audience.

The quilts had been arranged in order of each of the 15 honorees, and Calvin Bunnell, who served in the Navy, was occupying the seat reserved for Air Force veteran Ludwig Spokas.

That mattered. There's nothing cookie-cutter about the quilts, each of which is created, sewn, long-armed, and bound by a team of volunteers, according to Jane Dougherty, Connecticut coordinator of the Quilts of Valor Foundation, which was established in 2003 by a mother who found solace in her sewing machine when her son was deployed to Iraq.

To meet the initiative's mission to "cover service members and veterans touched by war," as its website reads, "each quilt, each pattern, is made specifically with a person in mind," she said.

"Each has healing properties. Each has been infused with prayer and love at every stage of the process," she added, which, together, give them "healing powers." Once swathed and secured in a quilt, veterans sometimes open up about what they've endured and often feel a surge of emotion.

Count Navy man Bunnell among them.

"I can feel the love that came with it from the people who made it," said the



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Top, from left, Thomas Kelley, Johnnie Brown, Woodrow James, Gerome Turner, Tina Lanzi, Ludwig Spokas and Calvin Bunnell; bottom, from left, Vincent Bystrek, David Roane, Dennis Dougherty, James B. Hayes, Donald Wells, Arthur Nedobity, William Burdick, and Douglas Shomo

Meriden resident, whose teal-and-brown spangled quilt eventually found him. "It means a lot," said

Clinton's Donald Wells, a Marine Corps veteran. "It's a show of respect. We didn't get a lot of it, espe-

cially after Vietnam." Army veteran Tom Kelley of Cromwell, who served in Vietnam, agreed.

"It's nice to be recognized now, it feels good," he said.

For Woodrow James, a Cromwell resident who

served the Air Force in the Vietnam era, "this means everything to me, I never expected it. To see that a group of people took the time to show their gratitude with something like this, you can't explain how wonderful it feels."

After declaring that his quilt was "going to go right on my chair," Army veteran James Hayes of East Haddam cleared his throat, wrapped the patriotic pattern more tightly around him, and smiled broadly.

"It fits me to a T," he said, unwittingly giving proof to the earlier scramble to ensure each quilt found its veteran.

If you know a veteran you'd like to honor, visit [www.qovf.org](http://www.qovf.org), find the "take action" tab, and click "request a quilt," or email [jane.dougherty@qovf.org](mailto:jane.dougherty@qovf.org).

## 'A TRUE PATRIOT' Breakfast honors town's veterans

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By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — Chances are, few on the Shoreline know the name of Army Sgt. 1st Class Randy D. Collins. During nearly two decades of active duty, he was stationed in Germany, Kosovo, and Kuwait, among other assignments. He was deployed to Iraq in January 2005.

But Army veteran Robert Reynolds knows his name.

At the first Nick Palermo Veterans Recognition Breakfast at the Branford High School Commons last Tuesday, Reynolds pulled up on his phone an obituary of Collins, who was killed in a mortar attack in Iraq on May 24, 2005, at the age of 36.

According to the obituary, Collins, the father of two children, was scheduled to spend Christmas that year with his family in one of his first holiday visits home since he began his military career. During his leave, he and his wife would also renew their wedding vows.

"This is what Memorial Day means to me," Reynolds said, holding up a photo of a smiling Collins on his phone.

The Branford resident, who served with Collins in California and New York, said he bonded with Collins and the rest of his squad through the often trying conditions they endured.

"Everyone was on the same team,"

said Reynolds, who also did humanitarian work in Haiti, "helping elevate people who needed help," as he put it. "We were a brotherhood. We had each other's backs. No one cared about anyone's politics or anything else."

At the well-attended event organized and hosted by the high school's Horizons Program, Reynolds was hardly the only veteran with pride at having been part of that fellowship.

"What we did was for the right reasons and not for recognition," said Superintendent of Schools Hamlet Hernandez, a Marine Corps veteran who served in South Korea as a lieutenant colonel in the infantry division.

Likewise, Branford's Madeline Clem, who enlisted in the Air Force as a communications specialist in California from 1956 to 1959.

"Coming from a small suburb of Atlanta, I met women in all walks of life," said the spirited 82-year-old, standing in front of a table laden with bagels and muffins. "It was the most interesting part of my life and I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

So would Reynolds, it seems. That doesn't mean the breakfast wasn't tinged with sadness. Or that Memorial Day won't be, either.

"Randy was willing to serve our country regardless of the danger," he said, as the BHS band finished its rendition of "America the Beautiful." "That's a true patriot."



From left, Lia Coppola, Donald Langlois, commander American Legion Post 83, and Alison Chadwick at last Tuesday's Nick Palermo Veterans Recognition Breakfast at BHS. Lia and Alison are students in the high school's Horizons Program, which organized the event.

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