

Quilts of Valor project honors 9 local veterans

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By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — As an ensign in the Naval Reserves in the mid-1960s, North Branford's Jim Woodman was stationed on the USS Chickashaw off the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. The ship was docked in San Diego, Calif., when Woodman suffered a collapsed lung and was admitted to the thoracic unit at Balboa Naval Hospital.

At a ceremony in the gallery of Stony Creek's Willoughby Wallace Memorial Library on a recent rain-swept Tuesday, Woodman and the nurse who tended him back to health were each wrapped in quilts as part of the Quilts of Valor initiative, whose mission is "to cover service members and veterans touched by war," as its website reads.

"He did look good in his uniform," recalled the nurse, now Joan Woodman, who joined the Navy Nurse Corps before her senior year of college. The presentation saw nine veterans individually honored, with Jane Dougherty, Connecticut co-coordinator of the Quilts of Valor Foundation, emceeing.

"This is just wonderful," said Stanley Prusinski, 93, of Northford, a Navy veteran who served in the Pacific from 1943 to 1946, as Kim Bennett wrapped him in his quilt.

Prusinski, along with six of his fellow veterans,

"Our hearts went into every stitch."

Chuck Larkins, quilter

enjoyed quilts intricately crafted by Bennett and other members of the Willoughby Wallace Quilters. They included Navy veteran Joseph Busher of East Haven; North Branford's Richard Castiglione, who served in the Army; Guilford's Caesar Rodriguez, of the 26th Marine Regiment; Martin Hallier of Branford, who repaired ships for the Navy from 1957 to 1962; and Navy veteran Bert Stiller of Northford.

For the Woodmans, the quiltmakers were North Branford's Claire and Chuck Larkins. Claire met Joan at a knitting group. A close friendship between the couples developed from there. Then Chuck, an Air Force veteran who served in Vietnam, nominated the two for quilts of valor.

"I made Jim's and Claire made Joan's," said Chuck, who caught the quilting bug from Dougherty at a Quilts of Valor presentation at Branford VFW Post 12106 last year.

"Knowing them like we do, our hearts went into every stitch."

If you know a veteran you'd like to honor, visit www.qovf.org, find the "take action" tab, and click "request a quilt," or email jane.dougherty@qovf.org.



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Front row, from left: Joan Woodman, Stanley Prusinski, Michael Massino, and Bert Stiller. Back row, from left: Jim Woodman, Caesar Rodriguez, Martin Hallier, Joseph Busher, and Richard Castiglione.