



## Agent Orange and a Hostile Homecoming: A Vietnam Veteran's Story of Sacrifice

Dr. Kevin P. Wallace  
Van of Valor

**MANTEO, N.C.** — For Vietnam veteran Thomas E. Higgins, a Purple Heart is more than a medal—it's a testament to his service and the decades of health issues caused by Agent Orange.

In a recent interview with Dr. Kevin P. Wallace of the Van of Valor, Higgins, 80, recounted being wounded in 1965 and returning home to a country that treated him with hostility instead of gratitude.

Higgins, now 79 and a resident of Manteo, N.C., served in the Army Security Agency (the Agency), and held a Top Secret Crypto clearance. He was recognized for his military service decades after the war.

"That was the worst experience of my life, coming home," Higgins said of his return to a vastly different nation.

## From Crypto Clearance to Combat

A former resident of Farmingdale, N.Y., Higgins explained that the deaths of his parents led him to enlist in the Army as an Military Policeman in 1964. He served with the 8th Radio Research Field Station, at Phu Bai, Vietnam, a former French base where his unit provided security and transportation for the Agency.

"We were basically their Uber drivers back then," Higgins said, describing how his unit drove Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) to support Marines who had arrived in 1965 without their own transport.

The camaraderie with the Marines was a happy memory, but it was also at Phu Bai that Higgins experienced his first major combat incident. In May 1965, during a patrol on Route 1, the APC he was in hit a landmine.

"I was up in the turret, right behind the .50 cal. when we got hit," Higgins recalled. "The shrapnel from the blast shredded the left side of the jacket, there was metal in my arm."

Higgins' life was saved by a flak jacket he'd borrowed from a buddy.

"That thing saved my life," he said, recalling how he maintained his defensive position despite the deafening ringing in his ears. After the incident, a mix-up led to Higgins' family receiving an MIA notice, only to be surprised by his next letter home stating he was wounded.

## **A Lifetime of Lingerin Scars**

The physical wounds eventually healed, but decades later, Higgins is still dealing with the long-term effects of the war, particularly from Agent Orange. The tactical compound was used extensively near his base, with one trauma surgeon, Dr. Gus Kappler, estimating that 54,300 gallons were sprayed over Phu Bai between 1970 and 1971.

"Of my fellow soldiers that I knew, most have died from Agent Orange," Higgins said. The chemical exposure resulted in a severe heart condition for

Higgins, who underwent a procedure just weeks before the interview to shock his heart back into rhythm.

"I had a heart attack and they got me going again," he told Wallace, a fellow Purple Heart recipient and co-founder of the veteran support organization Van of Valor.

### **Hostility at Home, Honor at Last**

Higgins' difficult experiences didn't end on the battlefield. When he returned to the U.S., he found an unwelcoming public. "This wasn't the same country he had left and defended abroad," the interview notes stated.

He recalled living near college professors in New York whose "antics on the war were just poison."

Back then, there was no recognition for Purple Heart recipients like there is today.

Now living in Manteo, Higgins finds solace in his daily walks with his chocolate lab, Mike.

He often wears a "combat wounded veteran," shirt, a detail that prompted the initial meeting with Wallace and his wife, Lauren. When people thank him for his service and ask what more they can do, his response is a reflection on the true cost of war.

"It's not about me, it's about the people on the wall who never made it home," Higgins said.