

Dale Eugene Wayrynen

Born

January 18, 1947, Moose Lake, Minnesota

Entered Service

May 1965

Company B, 2d Battalion, 502d

Infantry, 1st Brigade, 101st

Airborne Division, the “Screaming Eagles”

Vietnam War

Died

May 18, 1967, Duc Pho, Quang Ngai Province,
Republic of Vietnam



Photo, from: Elizabeth Reed

Early Years

For Dale Wayrynen, being the best at whatever he opted to do was not a choice; it was just understood from the outset. The oldest of four brothers in a tight-knit northern Minnesota household, he grew up in tiny McGregor, population 275. Wayrynen was a natural leader and an outstanding athlete by any standard. During his final year at McGregor High School, he was quarterback and co-captain of the football team, as well as co-captain of the basketball and baseball teams. He was a member of the student council, a class officer, and received all-conference honors in football and baseball. The village of McGregor would not soon forget Dale Wayrynen.

During his senior year, he began talking about Vietnam. His father, Eugene, had been a “waist gunner” on a B-17 during WWII. His plane had been shot down and he finished the war in a German POW camp. Now, the younger Wayrynen was feeling the pull to do his part in his war, and after graduation in May 1965, he joined the Army. He applied for jump school and became a proud member of the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. In March 1967, he volunteered to go to Vietnam and was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, the “Screaming Eagles.”

The War Years

Six weeks later, Wayrynen was beginning to settle into his new unit. He had been assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry, part of the First Brigade, 101st Airborne and they were stationed near the town of Duc Pho in Quang Ngai Province. Known as “Battlin’ Bravo,” the company motto was: “They’ve got us surrounded, the poor bastards.”

On 18 May, units of North Vietnamese regular infantry attacked a Bravo Co. patrol near Duc Pho on what was known as Hill 424. When the attack began Dale Wayrynen was several miles away, with other soldiers from his Bravo Co. platoon. They were patrolling separately from the main body of troops and received news of the attack by radio. Wayrynen’s squad immediately set out to assist and ran several miles, fighting their way through outlying NVA units as they moved toward Hill 424.

Bill Gunter and Don Singleton were with Dale Wayrynen that day. "When we got to the base of the hill we could hear some gunfire," Gunter said. "And then we walked slowly up the hill until we reached the company. ...There was wounded all over the place and some killed." The NVA had broken off their attack and retreated into the thick jungle growth, taking their own dead and wounded with them.

Among the friendly casualties were a number of Montagnard soldiers who had been helping the Americans. The platoon made stretchers to move the wounded off Hill 424 and started down a jungle path in single file as darkness fell. The path was going in the general direction the platoon leader wanted to go; Bill Gunter was walking point. Directly behind him was Dale Wayrynen, followed by Don Singleton, and the rest of the troop column.

Gunter led the platoon a short distance into the tall grass and jungle growth. He moved hesitantly, and then slowed to a stop. The sky was covered in thick clouds, and as night closed in, it quickly became so dark Gunter was struggling to follow the narrow path. The only light was from occasional flashes of distant lightning. There was a thunderstorm somewhere beyond the horizon. The unit radioed for illumination flares and waited.

Wayrynen squatted down behind Gunter in the dark. He could hear the rumble of thunder, or maybe it was big guns firing miles away. The intermittent rumbles continued, followed by the flashes of light. They called it "heat lightning" during the short intense summers back home, when the storms moved across the lakes.

It was miserably hot. Dale could feel the sweat trickling from under his helmet and down the sides of his neck, soaking into the soggy collar of his fatigues. "This sure isn't Minnesota," he thought to himself, smiling. Flickering lightning momentarily lit the anxious faces of the soldiers crouched behind him and provided brief glimpses of the surrounding jungle before they were plunged back into total darkness. He could hear the breathing of his buddies near him, but could see nothing.

"I turned around to say something to Dale and then I turned back and looked at the trail," Gunter said. "...There was a slight burst of lightning, and I was looking dead at an NVA. I could reach out and touch him, with several behind him. All I did was yell and started firing."

The American platoon had blindly stumbled onto a heavily fortified NVA bunker complex in the jungle, and an enemy patrol had nearly walked into them in the dark. Alerted by the gunfire and Gunter's warning yell, the North Vietnamese soldiers in the bunker immediately swept the area with automatic weapons fire.

Gunter was hit and fell to the ground. As he struggled to crawl into the cover of the tall grass, another NVA soldier charged toward him, illuminated by muzzle flashes from the weapons of the Airborne troops who were firing at the bunker. As Gunter attempted to turn and defend himself, Dale Wayrynen leapt over him and killed the attacking enemy soldier. Wayrynen then grabbed Gunter by his shoulders and dragged him down the trail where the rest of the squad had hastily formed a defensive line.

"I was wounded in the right lower leg and knocked down," Gunter said, "So Dale jumped out and drug me back to where some of the other guys were and they started firing."

At that moment, the illumination flares burst overhead, bathing the area in brilliant light. Despite the injuries to his leg, Gunter lay down in a prone position and resumed firing at the enemy. NVA rounds were striking all around them, and there were explosions from enemy hand grenades.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a body came flying through the air. Gunter grunted in pain as it sprawled across his legs and there was a loud, muffled explosion. An NVA hand grenade had been thrown into the midst of the tightly grouped Americans, endangering the entire squad, as well as the platoon leader who was nearby. It had exploded at Gunter's feet. Dale Wayrynen had shouted a warning, pushed another soldier out of the way, and had thrown himself on the grenade at the moment it exploded, taking the full force of the blast with his chest.

“At this time I did not know where Dale was,” Gunter said. “Then all of a sudden it was someone landing on my legs and ka-boom!”

Bill Gunter had additional injuries to his legs and Don Singleton was injured by the same grenade; however Wayrynen, by his selfless act, had spared the rest of his squad. Wayrynen lived for several hours. Then, as the fighting subsided and the sounds of battle were replaced by the moans of the wounded and the hushed tones of those caring for them, Dale Wayrynen died.

He was killed in action in Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam, on May 18, 1967.

On 15 October 1969, Dale Wayrynen’s family was flown to Washington, D.C., to receive his Medal of Honor “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty.” He was twenty years old.

Decorations & honors:

- Congressional Medal of Honor, October 16, 1969
 - Dale Walrynen Memorial, McGregor, Minnesota, dedicated July 4, 1976
 - Dale E. Wayrynen Recreation Center at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, dedicated October 30, 1974
 - Dale Wayrynen Veterans Memorial Gymnasium at the McGregor School (McGregor, Minnesota), dedicated on August 19, 1995
 - Dale Wayrynen Memorial Highway (formerly Hwy 210/169) that runs 42 miles through Aitkin County, Minnesota, dedicated on July 4, 1996
 - Granted and assigned distinction of Distinguished Member of the 502nd Infantry
- Dale posthumously received the Congressional Medal of Honor along with the following citation on October 16, 1969:

-The President of the United States of America, authorized by an Act of Congress, March 3, 1863, has awarded in the name of The Congress the Medal of Honor posthumously to

SPECIALIST FOUR DALE E. WAYRYNEN
UNITED STATES ARMY

for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty:

Specialist Wayrynen distinguished himself with Company B, 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, during combat operations near Duc Pho, Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam. His platoon was assisting in the night evacuation of the wounded from an earlier enemy contact when the lead man of the unit met face to face with a Viet Cong soldier. The American’s shouted warning also alerted the enemy who immediately swept the area with automatic weapons fire from a strongly built bunker close to the trail and threw hand grenades from another nearby fortified position. Almost immediately, the lead man was wounded and knocked from his feet. Specialist Wayrynen, the second man in the formation, leaped beyond his fallen comrade to kill another enemy soldier who appeared on the trail, and he dragged his injured companion back to where the point squad had taken cover. Suddenly, a live enemy grenade landed in the center of the tightly grouped men. Specialist Wayrynen, quickly assessing the danger to the entire squad as well as to his platoon leader who was nearby, shouted a warning, pushed one soldier out of the way, and threw himself on the grenade at the moment it exploded. He was mortally wounded. His deep and abiding concern for his fellow soldiers was significantly reflected

in his supreme and courageous act that preserved the lives of his comrades. Specialist Wayrynen's heroic actions are in keeping with the highest traditions of the service, and they reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Army.

[Signature of President Richard Nixon]

Compiled by DeAnn Caddy, Captain Robert Orr DAR Chapter

Burial:

Rice River Lutheran Cemetery, McGregor, Aitkin county, Minnesota, USA.



Monument located in the town square, by Don Morfe 7/17/2004



SOURCES:

1. Fineagrave.com #7861233
2. "Vietnam vets remember Dale Wayryene's sacrifice" [Title] by Mark Steil, Minnesota Public Radio News, 2007 For more information and an oral history about Dale Eugene Wayrynen, please go to:
<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/...>
3. Department of the Army General Order #66, 27 October 1969 (vvmf.org)
4. The Road to Remembrance,[Title] There's no time like the last weekend in May to start the journey down Dale Wayrynen Memorial Highway [sub title] by Kathleen Pakarinen.
5. County's Most Decorated Hero Fought in County's Most Controversial War.[title]
6. " Medal of Honor recipients" Medal of honor citations. United States Army Center of Military History.

Next of Kin: Brother- John