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Where are they now? Former Hackensack wrestler Stan Sebastian

BY RON FOX
SPECIAL TO THE RECORD |
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Surviving a tour in Vietnam more than made up for Stan Sebastian's loss in the closing seconds of his state championship wrestling bout six years earlier.



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Former Hackensack wrestler Stan Sebastian and his wife, Sandie, display Stan's military honors from Vietnam.

While there was no gold medal for the Hackensack High School student in 1964 — he settled for silver — there were two bronze medals bestowed on the Army first lieutenant during wartime.

Twice, death seemed imminent.

After earning a degree in business from Rutgers and having gone through ROTC on campus, Sebastian entered the Army and soon found himself in Vietnam in 1970.

His most pivotal decision may have saved his life.

"I had been in artillery, but I switched to the finance corps," Sebastian, 70, said from his home in Denville. "In artillery, you're a forward observer and the lifespan of forward observers is five minutes."

So with the new job description, Sebastian felt reasonably safe until the day he was part of a three-vehicle convoy transporting \$15 million in military certificates and foreign currency through dangerous territory.

"Always listen to your sergeant," the young officer had been advised during training. Luckily, the sergeant in the jeep with him had a sixth sense. Once past the rice paddies and into a clearing, he realized they were in jeopardy and abruptly turned the vehicle around, drawing fire from the Viet Cong.

"Sergeant Cruz had an Audie Murphy burp gun and he kept blasting away at them right next to my ear," Sebastian recalled with a wince.

That mission earned him and his unit teammates the bronze star for valor.

While Sebastian was stationed in Chu Lai, the move to finance seemed about to backfire. A lieutenant colonel newly in charge of the 23rd Administration Support Company came up with the foolish idea to send his finance people up to the war zone to offer troops the opportunity to change allocations in their personal insurance plans.

"We went up there with our satchels and he got five of us killed," said Sebastian, who received his second bronze star, this one for achievement.

Sebastian, who said he's not related to two-time state wrestling champion Johnny Sebastian of Bergen Catholic, thought back to his own state experience. The 1964 tournament ended badly for Hackensack teammates Reggie Williams, Tony Karcich and Sebastian as all three lost in the title round.

"I was leading with 27 seconds left in overtime," Sebastian recalled, proud to have fended off Madison's Pete Jileba until then. "He was trying to get me in a pancake move the whole match, but then I just misstepped. He caught me and rolled me to my back.

"It was a moment you'd love to have back," he said. "All three of us lost in close matches." It was Sebastian's only defeat of the season and he finished with a 46-4 career mark.

As a 191-pound college sophomore, Sebastian saw it all end when Rutgers' 280-pound heavyweight landed on him in practice.

The result was a dislocated right elbow and a broken radial head of the forearm. He still feels occasional elbow pain 50 years later.

Once out of the Army, Sebastian earned a master's degree in hospital administration at Columbia University. He began his new career at Riverside Hospital in Boonton, moved on to the Staten Island Hospital system, then spent 27 years at St. Clare's Hospital in Dover, serving as associate director of operations.

Along the way, he and his wife of 30 years, Sandie, raised three daughters.

Sebastian spent his final eight years in St. Clare's corporate division before retiring.

"I sort of oversaw the whole megillah," he said of a merger of four hospital systems while serving as legal appliance officer, adding with a laugh, "but I'm not a lawyer."

But certainly a winner.