



Independence

HEALTH SYSTEM

TO MEDIA

CONTACT:

Tom Chakurda
Chief Marketing and Communications Officer
thomas.chakurda@independence.health
412-508-6816 CELL

Melissa Forster
Marketing & Communications Specialist
melissa.forster@independence.health
814-490-6057 CELL

Robin Jennings
robin.jennings@independence.health
724-516-4483 CELL

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Photo: Patient Augustine “Butch” Sirianni, his son Jeremy and Lt. Col. James Tom

INDEPENDENCE HEALTH SYSTEM ICU STAY RESULTS IN SERENDIPITIOUS RECOGNITION FOR VIETNAM VETERAN

GREENSBURG, PA, March 7, 2024 ... Augustine “Butch” Sirianni is a proud U.S. Army veteran, although his unit’s return from Saigon in 1972 was met with protests and insults. It wasn’t until a recent hospitalization that his Vietnam War service was formally recognized and celebrated, thanks to a serendipitous encounter with an attentive member of his care team.

In late February, Sirianni was admitted to the intensive care unit at Independence Health System Westmoreland Hospital with severe breathing issues. His carbon dioxide levels were out of control exacerbating his chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

(COPD). During his ICU stay, the 73-year-old Scottsdale resident shared with one of his physicians, intensivist Kusum Tom, MD, that he had served in Vietnam, attached to the Judge Advocate General's Corps as a court reporter.

Dr. Tom knew what she had to do – notify her husband, Lieutenant Colonel James Tom, an operations officer with The United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration. As fate would have it, Lt. Col. Tom was home with his family for a few days and promptly donned his military uniform, gathered some service mementoes and headed to the hospital. While their meeting was brief, Sirianni was “elated” and overcome with emotion. “I have never felt such honor in my life,” he said, as he reflected on the chance encounter.

With Sirianni's son Jeremy and hospital staff looking on, Lt. Col. Tom officially welcomed Sergeant Sirianni home from the war zone, and thanked him for his tour of duty while attaching a special lapel pin to his hospital gown. The tribute continued with the gifting of an Army challenge coin, which will provide another visual reminder of their meeting, as well as Sirianni's pledge to remain tobacco free, having committed to kick the habit that aggravated his lung disease and contributed to his hospitalization.

Sirianni is one of 8.1 million Vietnam veterans. Their service was never heralded, having occurred during a period in the nation's history when anti-war protests loomed large. In 2012, during the Obama Administration, Congress authorized the creation of the national recognition program. Lt. Col. Tom, whose own military service included a tour in Afghanistan as an Army Infantry trainer, now serves his country by thanking and honoring Vietnam veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice. To date roughly half of those Vietnam vets have been lauded by the commemoration organization.

Beyond individual meetings like the one with Sirianni, Lt. Col. Tom and his colleagues host events at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., which Sirianni has visited, as well as ceremonies nationwide. A special date, March 29, also has been set aside as National Vietnam War Veterans Day, a day meant to pay tribute to veterans, including personnel who were prisoners of war or listed as missing in action. Sirianni was unaware of the March observance until now, but will mark that day proudly with the rest of his family. “I have always felt their appreciation,” Sirianni said. “Now it's so much bigger that I could have ever hoped for.”

To learn more about the United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration, visit www.vietnamwar50th.com.

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