

The Best-Conditioned Chaplain in the VFW

A Vietnam vet turned to bodybuilding and running to placate the 'wicked' effects of PTSD. He's since earned titles in both sports.

BY KARI WILLIAMS

Sandbags and a bamboo stick. That's how Vietnam veteran Jerry Augustine stayed in shape overseas. And it helped lead him to a bodybuilding journey that culminated with the honors of Mr. New England and Mr. Northeast America in 1975.

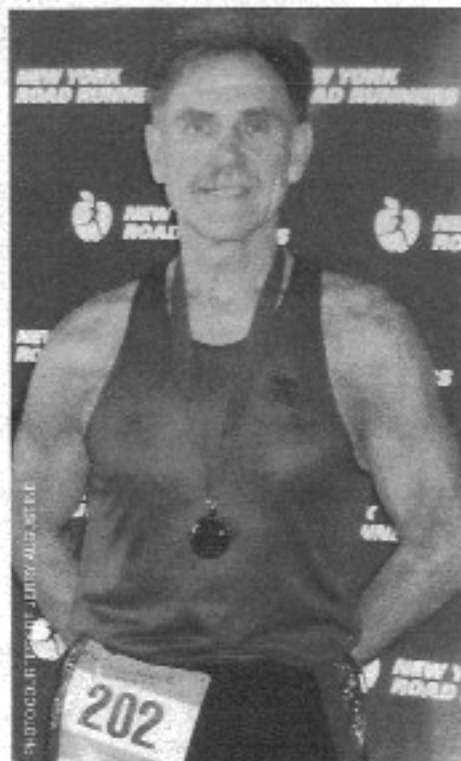
Augustine served in Vietnam from Aug. 4, 1966 to Aug. 4, 1967. He initially was with the 3rd Bn., 21st Inf., 196th Light Inf. Bde., and was transferred to the 2nd Bn., 12th Inf., 4th Inf. Div., after seven months. A friend from the Army suggested that Augustine try bodybuilding because he "had good potential."

"I just loved the competition," Augustine said, "and when I came out of Vietnam, I just had these goals that I had to do. I had to be the best at something. I think it was because we didn't get the recognition when we came home from Vietnam."

Augustine, who served as a combat infantryman, said he was "really wired up" after returning stateside. He worked at his father's roofing company and lifted weights in the evening.

He competed professionally for eight years, ending his bodybuilding career with the victories as Mr. New England and Mr. Northeast America. His focus then shifted to the family roofing business, which he bought from his father. In 1981, Augustine was diagnosed with a mood disorder and underwent "day treatment" for two years at the Newington (Conn.) VA Hospital.

"PTSD had a real wicked effect on me," said Augustine, who has been married and divorced three times. "It wasn't good [for] my family life, and I became like a walking time bomb almost."



VFW member Jerry Augustine uses running as a way to combat symptoms of PTSD. He began competing in the Empire State Building Run-Up in 1996, winning first place in the 50-59-year-old division in 2001.

During his first week in Vietnam, while on ambush patrol, he fell into a backyard well.

Another time, Augustine was nearly hit by a rifle-propelled grenade that hit a tree and bounced on his boot.

"That should've killed me right on the spot," Augustine said.

His unit also was at the Battle of Dau Tang while attached to the 1st Infantry Division. One of Augustine's jobs was to put fallen soldiers in body bags.

"[The] night that we did that, we had to go into the jungle where the battle was, we had to stay in their positions ...

[There was] blood all over the ground, trees were all just chopped up, everything chopped up and then the smell of death," Augustine said.

Doctors, according to Augustine, prescribed him Prozac in 1992, which made him "so lethargic" he could not work.

"A friend who was from a family that competed in running in road races suggested that I try running to relieve stress," Augustine said. "I immediately ran that evening, something I had never done except basic training, and I felt a relief."

Every weekend for 17 years, beginning in 1992, Augustine competed in a race, ranging from 5Ks to marathons.

"When I got into running, it seemed like every road race, I had to do the best I could," Augustine said.

Then in 1996, at 50 years old, he entered the Empire State Building Run-Up — a race up 86 flights of stairs in the 1,250-foot-tall building. Augustine earned second place with a time of 14:58.

He competed in the run-up regularly, consistently placing second or third and keeping his times between 14:28 and 15:03. In 2001, he won the 50-59 age division with a time of 15:18, competing against 18 others in the division. Augustine spent time training in Las Vegas at the Hilton Hotel, running its 38 flights of stairs in preparation for the first-place victory.

He competed again in 2002, placing third in his division, and in 2007, he secured third place in the 60s division.

Augustine's athletic accomplishments also earned him a place in the Middletown (Conn.) Sports Hall of Fame.

He currently is a chaplain for five organizations, including VFW Post 1840 in Middletown, Conn., and the American Legion.

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