

Capt. Mike Ladouceur started the Fallen Heroes Survivors Foundation in honor of one of his Vietnam friends and to give back to other military personnel

A HERO'S HERO

Vietnam War veteran Capt. Mike Ladouceur helps families of fallen soldiers through his foundation

Written by Crystal Rawls

“Out of sight, out of mind is the mentality I’m finding,” says Capt. Mike Ladouceur, as he leans in close to talk about forgotten war heroes. “And it worries me.” A Vietnam War veteran, Capt. Ladouceur knows what soldiers will face when they come home from war - or at the very worst, what their loved ones will face if those soldiers should die. Spurred on by the death of his friend, he and his wife Sally founded the Fallen Heroes Survivors Foundation, Inc., based in Missouri City. The organization provides grief counseling, childcare payments, college scholarships, medical assistance, and living expenses to immediate families across the U.S. who have lost loved ones to war, going as far back as Desert Storm.

Photo by Jason Lehecka

A Red-Blooded American Soldier

Ladouceur grew up in Ogdensburg, a small town on the St. Lawrence River in upstate New York. At 17, as the conflict in Vietnam grew to catastrophic proportions, he faced three options: flee to Canada, be drafted, or join the military voluntarily and have a choice of where he wanted to serve. So following in the footsteps of five generations of his family to have served, Ladouceur enlisted in the Army.

At a scant 120 pounds, he dared to defy the giant, six-foot-seven-inch drill instructor. The drill instructor saw strength and determination in the new recruit and issued Ladouceur a challenge: "If you're a real man, you'll be in the Special Forces." Ladouceur received Special Forces, Ranger, and Airborne training, unaware that preparation in those areas would guide him through every hardship for the rest of his life.

Fighting for Life

On his 18th birthday, Airborne Ranger Ladouceur stepped off the plane in Vietnam and directly into enemy fire. "I'm going to die," he thought as he sprinted across the tarmac through raining bullets. Over the course of 18 months, Ladouceur and his fellow soldiers carried out several covert missions, the details of which he is still not allowed to mention. In one particularly brutal firefight, Ladouceur witnessed three-fourths of his company killed on the battlefield. "You grow up quickly," he says. "The company I was in lost 85 out of 120 men."

Ladouceur tenses up as he recalls a friendship forged in the jungle with a soldier who grew up 50 miles from his hometown. As the young friend lay dying, he whispered one last request and planted a seed more than 30 years in the making: that Ladouceur would look after the family his friend left behind. Not only did Ladouceur keep his promise, he began thinking of ways to help other military families.

Ladouceur himself was shot twice in the legs before returning home to a not-so-warm reception. "We were called baby killers, traitors, all kinds of ungodly names," he says. "People just didn't realize what we went through. Finding a job for a Vietnam vet was almost impossible."

Never Say Die

Instead of letting society dictate his future, Ladouceur tapped into his Special Forces training and forged ahead, graduating magna cum laude with a master's degree in engineering

from Cornell University. He founded a satellite company and worked in sales, service, and installations for several years before moving to Louisiana after his father-in-law passed away. There, he followed his heart to the water.

As a Merchant Mariner, Ladouceur worked his way up from deckhand to captain and thrived on the open ocean. After he and his wife Sally lost their home to Hurricane Katrina, they evacuated their family to Sugar Land. They loved it so much that they stayed. "I'm now a Texan and got here as soon as I could," Ladouceur jokes. Shortly after the move, however, the Ladouceurs lost everything again in a house fire. Once again, military training kicked in and Ladouceur came out in fighting shape.

Never Leave Anyone Behind

One night, Ladouceur received a phone call from a childhood friend asking for help. "He lost his son in Iraq," recalls Ladouceur. "His son's widow was about to lose her house, had trouble with her car, and needed help with her kids."

Ladouceur remembered his friend who died on the battlefield and what little help his friend's family received after his death. According to Ladouceur, families of fallen soldiers receive little to no assistance. "The day your husband died, your paycheck stopped [and] medical care stopped," he says. "If we all work together as Americans

[and] if we all stand together, we can give them guidance, give them a purpose." It was then that Ladouceur and Sally decided to found the Fallen Heroes Survivors Foundation, Inc. in honor of his friend.

A Dedicated Heart

Today, Ladouceur devotes 18-hour days to the foundation, making sure it gets enough funding to help those who need it most. He is quick to eschew praise for his hard work, though. "It's not about me," he says. "It's far from being about me. I'm just one person trying to do what's right."

His bright, friendly eyes dim slightly as he leans in to share one final thought - not about himself, but about the people and the cause he holds so dear to his heart. "For \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month, would you put your life on the line for someone you don't know? On top of that, [soldiers] are volunteers. They put their country before family, not knowing if they'll come home." SLM

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Capt. Ladouceur, his wife Sally, and the Fallen Heroes Survivors Foundation Board of Trustees

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