

# The News & Observer

## Single-handed Hero

BY ROGER WINSTEAD  
STAFF WRITER

### SHARPSBURG

Nightfall shrouded the pagoda and an eerie quiet fell momentarily over this remote corner of the Vietnam War. Fresh-faced grunts on patrol from the 101st Recon Unit surrounded a Buddhist temple, stepping cautiously across the holy ground.

An odd shadow on the fresh dirt beyond a headstone caught the attention of a 19-year-old soldier. Placing one foot in front of the other, the curious private kept his eyes straight ahead. The ground cracked and snapped beneath his boot and then came the step, a step in the wrong direction. Click. Boom. Blackness.

In an instant, both of James "Butch" Robbins' legs and one of his arms ceased to exist.

Buried just below the foreign soil, a booby-trapped 105mm shell blew this farmer's son into another world. Robbins spent almost two years in four hospitals and underwent 25 operations. One thing he definitely did not lose on that dark November night in 1968 was his will to live.

"I could have come home in a pine box," says Robbins. "But I'd like to think that I survived that night for a reason."

Hold no pity for Butch Robbins. Don't look away from him. Ask about his life today or how it could have been. Learn from a man who could have turned over and died back in Southeast Asia, but instead lives with



the hand he was dealt, playing the cards for all they're worth.

Today, Robbins splits his time between farming 250 acres of hay and traveling the country on a professional speakers circuit. Fortune 500 companies pay to hear his words. He stands before huge groups of white-collar, button-down types who need a psych-up. They listen and learn about life from a small town eastern North Carolina hay farmer.

Literally singlehandedly, Robbins works the field. Some days he has help, but most days he takes care of business alone. From driving the baler to unclogging tangled hay, Robbins works harder than many men twice his size.



With one strong arm and a mighty will, Robbins lifts his 3-foot-tall body with ease. One pull, two twists, a swing and he's up on his tractor. Three pulls, three bounces, a slide and he sits behind the steering wheel of a 7-ton hay baler. A roll, a drop, a waddle and Robbins is off on his own two stumps, heading across an open field.

Robbins uses no artificial limbs. A wheelchair eases the travel time over long distances, but going from truck

to baler, he walks on what's left of his legs. He tried prostheses years ago but found them awkward and uncomfortable.

The sun makes its way westward as lunchtime comes and goes. Robbins' stomach growls as he leaves the damp Wilson County field behind. Motor-ing several miles up US 301 towards Rocky Mount, he heads to his favorite restaurant, Don's Seafood.

No one pays much attention to Robbins as his wheelchair glides through the front door. But he gets a reaction when he rolls under a long, executive boardroom table surrounded by patrons sipping tea and coffee.

"Look out! Trouble's coming," says one man loudly.

Robbins parks and says something unprintable under his breath. This group of regulars picks on each other constantly, when not discussing the hot topic of the day. Robbins is no exception, in kidding or being kidded.

"If you can't laugh at yourself, you know..." he says.

Though he lives alone, Robbins rarely gets lonely. The oversized television in the corner of his sparsely furnished living room keeps him company. He also visits his children

- married twice, he's the father of four - when he can. He goes out dancing occasionally with lady friends. He has even won bowling trophies.

"Everybody else is handicapped," he states. "I'm handicapable."

Robbins places emphasis on "capable," letting the sound linger. Capable. Able. Both words define him and give weight to his words.

This day he's telling his story to fifth-graders at Englewood Elementary School in Rocky Mount. The students have been learning about physical disabilities in class and they are now learning first-hand about being "handicapable."

Robbins asks from his wheelchair if they feel comfortable. The children answer yes, and then Robbins asks if he can get comfortable too. Again, they answer yes. Without blinking or saying another word, he drops out of his wheelchair and onto the tiled floor. The children watch intently as he walks back and forth between them. Tiny hands hit the air as they clamor

to ask him questions. Robbins answers each child, thoughtfully and sometimes with humor.

When it's time to head to the cafeteria for lunch, the children file past Robbins, thanking him and patting him on the back. A small girl stops short of the classroom door and turns back to the Vietnam veteran: "You're the bravest man I know," she says.

Robbins smiles his smile and he nods, "Thank you."

