

John William Wilt, Jr.

U.S. Marine Corps, Lance Corporal

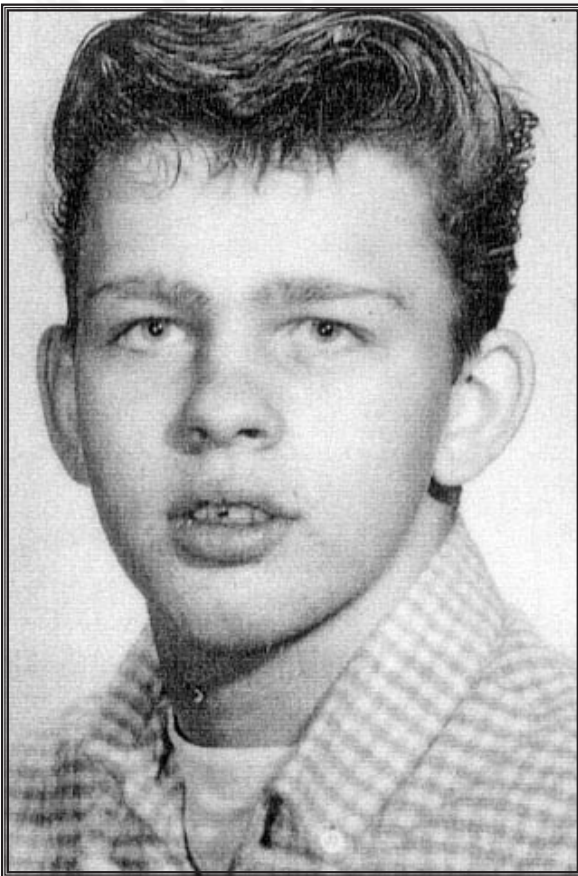
1946 - 1966

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Instructed by Rebecca Bartlett

Lance Corporal John William Wilt, Jr.'s life began on August 14, 1946, in Grafton, West Virginia. Young Wilt's parents, John Wilt, Sr. and Betty (née Smith, later Mathis), resettled the family to nearby Newburg, Preston County, where he spent his early years with siblings Richard, Debra Lynn, and Sheila.

Newburg of the 1940s and 1950s was full of miners, railroaders, and farmers. In this rural setting, John Jr. enjoyed baseball, basketball, and especially fishing. He was known throughout town for his happy disposition, but eventually it became clear that he wanted to experience a bigger life outside Newburg. His father, John Sr., was a World War II veteran who perhaps shared stories of his time overseas that fired the young boy's imagination.



Wilt as a young boy. He is buried alongside his father in the West Virginia National Cemetery. *FindAGrave*

His parents divorced in 1959, when Wilt was 13 years old. After spending a few years at Newburg High School—he never graduated—Wilt decided to visit his mother, who had moved to Texas. After enrolling at La Marque High School, Wilt realized he wanted to follow in his father's military footsteps. On his eighteenth birthday, Wilt enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Wilt joined the U.S. Marines under the "Buddy System" of the 1960s, created to allow soldiers to sign up and train with someone they knew. His "buddy" was Private E. J. Haynes, Jr. of Texas.

The pair ended up at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, and Wilt's first year in the military may not have been as glamorous as he expected. On June 17, 1965, Wilt was found in violation of Article 113 of the Uniform Military Code of Justice. "Any sentinel or look-out who is found drunk or sleeping upon his post . . . shall be punished." Wilt had been caught napping at his

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security post at 4:30 AM. He received a \$10.00 fine but no rank reductions, which must have been a relief since the punishment could have been much more severe.

On July 18, 1965, Wilt was assigned as a rifleman in Company L, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment (3/9), 3rd Marine Division. By early August 1965, he was participating in intense training at Camp Hansen at Okinawa, Japan. Fifteen hundred miles away from Okinawa, however, the Vietnam War was beginning to heat up, and American troops were being sent to that country in larger numbers. Wilt was soon among them. He arrived in Quang Nam, Vietnam, on August 15, having spent less than two full weeks in Okinawa.

When United States forces first arrived South Vietnam, they made use of an old French colonial base at Da Nang as a primary entry point for airlifting in troops. Da Nang soon became famous as an especially dangerous place, under constant attack from Viet Cong guerilla forces supplied and reinforced by North Vietnam. Wilt's unit was tasked with defending Marble Mountain Airfield located about five miles southeast of the main U.S. airbase at Da Nang. For the next decade many servicemen, including young Wilt, would first encounter the hard hand of war at Da Nang.



John Wilt, Jr. in high school. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

When Wilt's unit landed there in 1965, they were surprised to find no ammunition waiting for them. Fortunately they suffered no enemy attacks that day. But on August 17, having been on the ground in Vietnam for less than forty-eight hours, they engaged ten Viet Cong and kept their heads down under sporadic sniper fire. The sniper fire did not let up for a month.

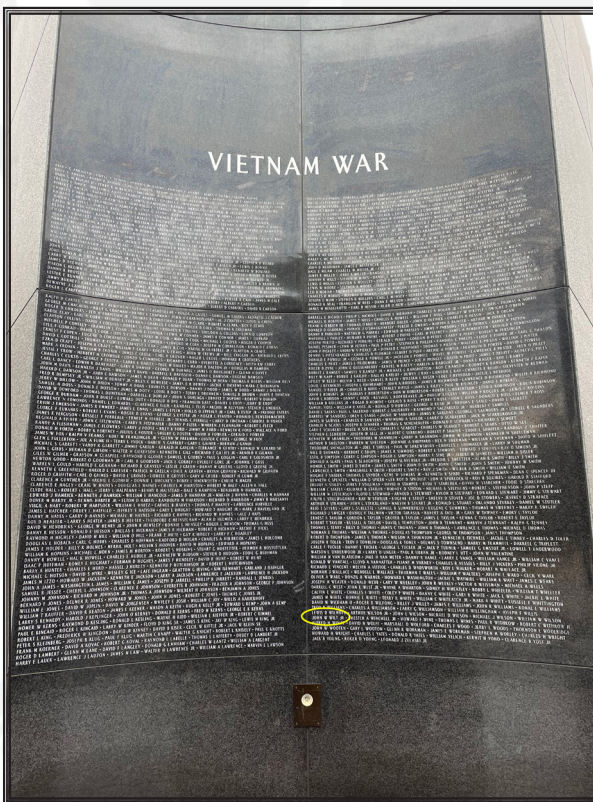
The unit continued to train intensely despite the nonstop threat of snipers. Stress and fatigue began to take a toll; the battalion struggled to meet standards for operating and repairing their firearms. They were assigned a chaplain and other counselors to cope with the strain. At times other battalions relieved 3/9 from their place at the front line, only for 3/9 to be reassigned to manual labor elsewhere instead of rest and recuperation. In February 1966, Wilt's friend and squad leader, Tom Lonze, was wounded in action and sent to a military hospital.

The month before, Wilt had received a probational promotion to lance corporal. His new rank was short-lived. On March 26, 1966, Wilt and three other men were cleaning their weapons when Viet Cong attacked their outpost. The four Marines' bodies were later found surrounded by the rifles they had dismantled for maintenance. Overexertion and exhaustion after eighteen months of unrelenting hardship may have led to the deaths of Wilt and his fellow soldiers. The 3rd Battalion's report of the

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action states they were killed “while engaged in action against hostile forces.”

Wilt was 19 years old. For his sacrifice he received the Purple Heart, the National Defense Service medal, the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon, the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross, and the Republic of Vietnam Service Medal. His remains were returned halfway around the world to West Virginia, where he was buried in Pruntytown, just miles from his birthplace. Wilt's name is also listed on panel 06E, line 52 on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C.



Wilt's name (circled) on the Vietnam War wall of the West Virginia Veterans Memorial at the state capitol in Charleston. *Courtesy of Kyle Warmack*



Map of South Vietnam in 1966-1967, showing provincial boundaries and military zones. The city of Da Nang in Qang Nam province can be found in the northern part of the country, third from the border with North Vietnam. *The United States Army in Vietnam: Combat Operations, Taking the Offensive, October 1966-October 1967. Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1998*

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Resting Place

West Virginia National Cemetery
42 Veterans Memorial Lane, Grafton, WV 26354
(304) 265-2044

Section 1
Site 1730

Date of interment: October 25, 1988

About the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in or near Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's earliest National Cemeteries, the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. When the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton in the community of Pruntytown. The same National Cemetery Administration staff cares for both facilities.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, and Grafton High School.

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