

## FROM THE MILITARY TO HOUSTON HOSPICE - A VETERAN'S TRANSITION

By: Volunteer Suzy Martin and Michele Cowart, Communications, Houston Hospice

Houston Hospice Registered Nurse Case Manager and Veteran Wayne McPherson spent much of his professional career in the United States Army, from 1976 through 1991 (pictured right). His military career began in the [101st Airborne Division](#) in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. This Air Assault division provides the U.S. an “unmatched expeditionary Air Assault capability to conduct forcible entry and other worldwide, unified land operations in support of combatant commanders,” according to their website.

From there he was deployed to Germany where he worked as a combat engineer. This battalion developed and implemented quick and creative engineering solutions in support of soldiers on combat missions.

“We repaired runways and had a system to be ready for air traffic within 30 minutes of being notified,” McPherson said. Also, for almost nine years, he worked in electronic communications.

### Worst and Best Days

During training, McPherson recalled a time when he was rappelling down a mountain and his harness broke. He fell 30 feet to the ground and landed on his back. He still suffers health complications from that incident, 45 years later.

When asked about his best day, McPherson reflected on his annual firearms qualification. He said, “I shot expert for 13 years with an M16 rifle. The last time I qualified, I didn’t miss a target.”

### Family History

The McPherson family’s military legacy began with his great-great grandfather who fought in Scotland before he moved to the U.S. Members of his family served in the [Revolutionary War](#), [Civil War](#), [Spanish American War](#), [World War II](#), [Korean War](#), [Vietnam War](#), and [Gulf War](#).

### Education

Military life, as he said, forced him to get an education, making a huge impact on his life. It began when he earned his [GED](#), became a licensed registered nurse (RN) and earned the Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree (BSN). Organizational skills, attention to detail and a determination to get things done were skills that he learned in the Army, and these same skills help him care for hospice patients today.



## Nursing Career

After his discharge from the Army, McPherson pursued a career in nursing that has spanned 25 years, including critical care and hospice care at Houston Hospice.

When asked about the challenges he has faced as an RN, his most difficult experience was when he had to pronounce dead a 5-day-old baby, who was as small as his hand. “Nothing prepared me for that in my years as a nurse,” said McPherson. “I cried with the family,” he said.

McPherson has worked at Houston Hospice for five years. Initially, he cared for patients as a field and on-call nurse for 4 ½ years. Most recently, he transitioned to an RN case manager role. This field position manages and develops the plan of care for hospice patients during their end-of-life journey. In addition, McPherson coordinates the services and activities of the hospice multidisciplinary team to help patients and families live their best quality of life.

## Following His Path

McPherson feels his life has been guided by God who has been active in his life. “I have always trusted God’s guidance, which led me here (Houston Hospice). It was a godsend for me and for my supervisor Diane Gilbert and the on-call team. It just felt like God picked me up in one place and set me right into the lap of the on-call team,” said McPherson.

Five years ago, his mother-in-law became ill and was moved from Tennessee to Texas. “I had already talked to Diane when I was in Tennessee. I was going to apply for a position once I moved to Texas. It was quicker than I had planned!” Their in-person interview lasted three hours and this relationship with the hospice care team was exactly what McPherson needed. “I found I really loved the on-call work. It felt like being the first responder or the last responder.”

In 2021, McPherson was diagnosed with COVID-19 and spent 10 days in a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hospital. “The doctors told me that I wasn’t going to survive this visit, but here I am, he exclaimed!”



Pictured: Wayne McPherson RN and US Army Veteran, Brigadier General Don Wagner, and US Navy Veteran and Houston Hospice Volunteer Lanissa Byrd.

## Hospice Nurse Advice

When meeting nurses interested in a hospice career, McPherson emphasizes their field experience, organizational skills, ability to focus on the job and ability to be specific when charting. “An applicant needs to have some experience before they can tackle something like this (hospice care) as it can pull on your heartstrings. However, if someone comes in that is interested in this job, I will never turn them away. It’s the best job I have ever had,” he said.

## We Honor Veterans

McPherson was recently honored at the Houston Hospice 2022 Veterans Day pinning ceremony, in the [Texas Medical Center](#). Retired [Air Force Brigadier General Don Wagner](#), former president of Houston Hospice (pictured above) performed the surprise event and presented a U.S. Army Veterans certificate and custom-made We Honor Veterans Level 5 Pin in honor of McPherson’s service to the U.S.

McPherson said, “This is the most important pin I have ever received. Even through all the military awards that I have received, this makes me feel the best. The first time I delivered one of these awards to a veteran patient, I saluted him, and his wife saluted back to me for him. At the time I thought, ‘Man, I want one of these,’ never thinking I would get one, but I did!”

## Giving Thanks

McPherson notes: “I have been blessed as a soldier and have been blessed as a nurse and I have had good family backing.”

Houston Hospice, in partnership with [We Honor Veterans](#), a program of the [National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization](#), and in collaboration with the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#), has reached We Honor Veterans Level 5, the highest level of advanced, veteran-specific hospice care dedicated to the unique needs of those who served in the U.S. Armed Forces and their families. [www.houstonhospice.org/veterans](http://www.houstonhospice.org/veterans).