



**Fitzgerald Awards 2023 Dr. Charles J. Martoni Veterans Service Award**  
*U.S. Army Veteran Harry J. Van Riper Recognized in Ceremony at Courthouse*

County Executive Rich Fitzgerald today presented U.S. Army Veteran Harry J. Van Riper with the 2023 Dr. Charles J. Martoni Veterans Service Award during a ceremony at the county Courthouse. The award recognizes individuals who continue their service to the country following their discharge from military service. Mr. Van Riper was nominated by a fellow Vietnam Veteran for his contributions and service to his fellow veterans.

“This year’s awardee has not only demonstrated the characteristics that we look for when awarding the Martoni Award but has another connection to Dr. Martoni. Just like Chuck, Harry Van Riper found a career at the Community College of Allegheny County while also serving his community,” said Fitzgerald. “We are grateful for Harry’s positive attitude, but it is his personal service and commitment to fellow veterans which really highlights what this award means. It’s my pleasure to celebrate Harry today and his many contributions to our community.”

Richard S. Weber, a former Army officer and fellow Vietnam Veteran, nominated Harry for the award. In his recommendation, he wrote: “When I first met Harry, he told me, ‘Losing my arm was the best thing that ever happened to me.’ Harry is and will continue to be every veteran’s inspiration.”

Harry Van Riper served in the United States Army, serving with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The then-Corporal was in combat for four months and eight days when his truck was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade on August 19, 1968. He lost his left arm, a portion of his leg, and still has shrapnel in his body. The doctors gave him less than a 15% chance of survival. His injury occurred during the 1968 2<sup>nd</sup> Tet Offensive. His unit ended the Tet Offensive, earning the Presidential Unit Citation, the highest award for a combat unit.

Upon his return home from Vietnam, Harry used his G.I. bill to attend and graduate from Duquesne University. Although he had offers to go to medical school, Harry chose his true passion of teaching. For over 30 years, he taught both math and science at the Community College of Allegheny County.

While his contributions in the military were significant, it is his dedication to his fellow veterans and the American Legion, a veterans’ service organization, that resulted in this nomination. For years, Harry has volunteered at the local Veterans Administration hospital, educating and counseling veterans there. He has also been an active and engaged member of American Legion Post 548, currently serving as its chaplain. He was the Pennsylvania American Legion Chaplain of the Year in 2018. He has been honored by the Steelers in their “Salute to HEROES.”

Harry is also a member of Serving Our Sentinels, a service organization working to help veterans who have fallen on hard times. He has served on the organization’s team for over 10 years as a board member and financial manager. Douglas Miller, President of the organization, said that when Harry returned from Vietnam, gravely injured, there was no homecoming. Despite the physical and mental devastation, Harry remains proud of his country and of his service to it.

Today, he uses those experiences to help other veterans recognize that there is life beyond what they may be experiencing now: “His audiences and those who know Mr. Van Riper are awed by his quiet personality, physical fortitude, and his strong faith,” said Mr. Miller.

If that work is not enough, Harry has also volunteered for a Veterans Administration feasibility study for a “smart” limb. Working with the Utah Veterans Administration and Utah Children’s Hospital, he will have a robotic prosthetic limb attached to the bone, making it a permanent part of the body and nervous system. Inside the implant is a sensor that will transmit signals from the brain to the prosthesis allowing Harry to use his hand intuitively. While Harry has said that he lives perfectly well without his arm, he’s intrigued by the science behind the technology. Knowing that his participation in the pilot may lead to children without limbs being fitted with an implant and having bionic arms that can be snapped in as they grow is his living legacy, says Weber.

Nominations submitted to Veterans Services were reviewed by a panel led by Veterans Services’ which included a member of the Martoni family. The finalists were then presented to County Executive Fitzgerald for review and selection.

“It is heartening to see the many nominations submitted for this award and to see what we already knew, that so many people who served in the military continue serving their community after their discharge,” said Timothy Martin, LSW, Chief Veterans Affairs Officer for Allegheny County. “Continuing service takes an extraordinary person who holds patriotism, love, honor, duty, and loyalty to the highest regard, and we see all of those characteristics and more in Harry. Congratulations to him on this award.”

Harry was notified of his selection as the 2023 Dr. Charles J. Martoni Veterans Service Award winner last week. A Hampton resident, he was joined by family and friends at the Courthouse this afternoon to receive the award:

“I volunteered for 400 hours in the Veterans Administration drug and alcohol program (the Domiciliary at Heinz Campus),” said Mr. Van Riper. “I have run into many of my students from the ‘Dom.’ They were thankful for the learning skills I gave them. This was an amazing experience I will never forget.”

### **About the Dr. Charles J. Martoni Veterans Service Award**

*On November 10, 2021, County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and former Chief Veterans Affairs Officer Dwight Boddorf announced the creation of the Allegheny County Veterans Service Award. The award was created to recognize those individuals who continue their service to our country following their discharge. In tribute to his military service and long and distinguished service to our community, the award was named in honor of former County Council Member Dr. Charles Martoni.*

*Previous recipients:*

*2021 – Dr. Charles J. Martoni (posthumously)*

*2022 – Nathan Mallory*

*Read more about the award at <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/veterans/veterans-service-award.aspx>.*