

# DISTINGUISHED MEMBER OF THE SPECIAL FORCES REGIMENT

## LIEUTENANT GENERAL SAMUEL VAUGHN WILSON

Inducted November 5, 2014



Born Sept. 23, 1923, on his family farm in Rice, Virginia, Sam Vaughan Wilson graduated from Rice High School on May 26, 1940. Only 16, he lied about his age and joined the Virginia National Guard as a bugler. Quickly rising to the rank of first sergeant, he was then sent to Infantry Officer School. Graduating at the head of his class, he was assigned as an instructor in guerrilla and counter-guerrilla tactics at the Infantry School. In 1943, he volunteered for the Office of Strategic Services serving as a reconnaissance officer for the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) more commonly known as "Merrill's Marauders." When the war ended, then-Capt. Wilson, received a Regular Army commission, and reverted to the rank of second lieutenant, with a follow-on assignment at the Infantry School as an instructor.

In 1947, due to his consummate skill in negotiations and diplomacy he was appointed to the newly created graduate-level Foreign Area Specialist Training Program at Columbia University. As a Russian specialist, he joined the State Department Diplomatic Pouch and Courier Service where under the cover of a language student, he traveled throughout Russia and the Eastern Bloc gathering intelligence.

Prior to graduating from the Infantry Officer's Advanced Course in 1953, Maj. Wilson was assigned to the General Staff (G-2) in Washington D.C. Over the course of the next six years, Wilson performed special assignments for the Secretary of Defense and the CIA, including running a series of clandestine operations out of Berlin. Upon graduating from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff course, he was handpicked by Brig. Gen. William P. Yarborough as the Director of Instruction at the U.S. Army Special Warfare School. He expanded language training and instituted new coursework to include Counterinsurgency, Unconventional Warfare and the Military Assistance Training Advisor's course. In June 1961, he was appointed as the Deputy Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, serving as President Kennedy's liaison with U.S. Army Special Forces, which included playing a key staff support role in the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.

Loaned to the U.S. Agency for International Development, Wilson was deployed to Vietnam as the Director for Field Operations where he provided critical input to the establishment of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program. He then went to work for the United States Mission Coordinator and Minister-Counselor for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon before returning to military duty. He assumed command of the 6th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in 1967. He rejoined the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Institute of Military Assistance as the Assistant Commandant. Responsible for all doctrine and instruction of the Institute, he strengthened coursework in counterinsurgency and nation building. Additionally, he was instrumental in negotiations to move the U.S. Army Civil Affairs School from Fort Gordon, Georgia, and the establishment of the Foreign Area Officer's Program at Fort Bragg.

Promoted to brigadier general in the summer of 1970, he became the Assistant Division Commander, 82nd Airborne Division. A year later, appointed the U.S. Defense Attaché to the USSR, the first general officer to hold that portfolio, he used his expertise in language, strategy and Russian history to visibly improve U.S. military relations with the Soviet military. Back in the United States, he held several high level positions including the Deputy Director for Estimates at the Defense Intelligence Agency; the Deputy Director for Attaché Affairs; and, the Deputy to the Director of Central Intelligence Agency for the Intelligence Community. In 1976, as the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Wilson was credited with maintaining calm during a period of critical instability brought on by the death of Mao Zedong, the rise of aircraft hijackings, and the escalated tensions in the Middle East and Africa.

He retired Aug. 31, 1977 at the Rice, Virginia National Guard Armory where he had enlisted 37 years earlier. He immediately accepted a professorship at Hampden-Sydney College. In 1992, he was made president of the college, he championed the right to retain the all-male status of the institution and spearheaded a major fund drive for the creation and funding of the Wilson Center for Leadership in the Public Interest.

Often referred to as "General Sam," his counsel was also often sought by national leaders, including both President George H.W. Bush and President George W. Bush. He was instrumental in the creation of a dedicated counterterrorism unit and the legitimizing of special operations forces under a unified joint command.