

VETERANS SERVING VETERANS Working as one ex-soldier to another becomes personal



Ron Pawlowski (left), owner of Calumet Orthopedic and Prosthetics, and Al Palinski, a longtime patient and friend, talk at the Hobart medical office on May 7. Pawlowski, a Vietnam War veteran, regularly sees Palinski, who has worn a leg prosthetic since he was injured in the Korean War. (Anthony D. Alonzo photo)

By Steve Euvino

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HOBART - One veteran helping another – Ron Pawlowski and Al Palinski know something about that. Both men are veterans and have tended to the needs of veterans.

Pawlowski is president of Calumet Orthopedics & Prosthetics, a 62-year-old business started by his late father Walter, a World War II veteran. Following Palinski's discharge from the military, Calumet began treating him in 1962 after he lost his left leg to a land mine in the Korean War.

Following his initial treatment, Palinski agreed to continue his military service by caring for hospitalized veterans.

After his father began the business on 8th Avenue in the Ambridge section of Gary, Pawlowski attended Andean High School and entered college. Drafted into the Army, he served in Vietnam during 1969-70. Working in a 24/7 mobile surgical unit, Pawlowski cared for soldiers and civilians, as his unit started an amputee clinic for injured Vietnamese people.

"When you're working to save someone's life, it leaves a mark," said Pawlowski. "It left a mark on Al when he stepped on a land mine."

"At first, you're glad to be alive," Palinski said of his injury. After going from Korea to Hawaii and California, he was treated in Battle Creek, Mich. After being fitted with a prosthetic leg, he said, "I was getting along real good."

Pawlowski, today a member of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Valparaiso, returned home and continued in the family business. His clientele included Palinski, who would return to Calumet for refittings.

"Legs are mechanical. They wear out," Pawlowski explained about prosthetics. "Also, people change physically, including weight," which affects a prosthetic limb.

In Palinski's case, Pawlowski said, there was also a "connection" – military service. "We are vets, whatever service

or branch,” Pawlowski said. “Even though we were two wars apart, there was a connection. Wars don’t change a whole lot.”

Pawlowski learned much through the military, as schoolwork was “very textbook” with its approach. Wartime, he said, was a “whole different story.”

That’s where prosthetics can help, Pawlowski said, physically and emotionally. “You’re giving people hope, you’re encouraging them,” he said, “so they can achieve something and feel better about themselves.”

Amputations, Pawlowski explained, can be the result of disease, such as diabetes, or non-disease-related trauma, including a vehicle accident or, with Palinski, an explosion.

“The tragedy is always there,” Pawlowski said, but with a disease, amputation is an elective process and “you know you’re going to lose a limb.” In Palinski’s case, “you don’t see it. It’s always the other guy who gets it. The trauma is very sudden.”

Another difference, Pawlowski said, is how people deal with what happened to them. “It’s more than medical,” he said. “It’s emotional – you see people adjusting to get their lives together.”

Pawlowski said Palinski never let his limitations stop him, living a simple life while caring for his mother.

These days, Palinski is feeling pretty good at 86. The Gary resident, who retired from the military after eight years, nine months, and 27 days, spends part of his day enjoying coffee and a doughnut in Hobart, when he’s not fishing or working in his garden.

“I stay in shape,” Palinski said, “but as you get older, you lose muscle mass and you start shrinking.”

So Palinski returns to Calumet. “When I have a problem, I take it over there and they help me out. They work on adjusting [the prosthesis].”

After being fitted with his initial new leg, Palinski was asked if he would continue to serve, this time in a military hospital. He decided to give it a shot and eventually reached the rank of staff sergeant.

Palinski served in the neuro-psychiatric ward of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The patients there, Palinski said, “are always looking for a buddy, so I always had a good word to say. They would open up to me.”

The ex-infantryman, who retired at age 35, said of his service at Walter Reed, “mostly, I was there. The mental patients were still grabbing hold of something, they were a little confused. They wondered what they were going to do – too much uncertainty.”

In working with fellow veterans, Pawlowski said, “It’s not just about getting hurt, it’s where you were, what you had seen. I talk to a lot of veterans. It’s a very personal thing. It’s part of a camaraderie. You can talk to a patient [who was a veteran] and tell them, ‘you can do that.’”