

'Only in America'

A VFW Life member in Virginia has been named to the President's Council on Sports, Fitness and Nutrition, and he credits his Air Force training for this opportunity

Sep 26, 2019

Rob Wilkins has never competed in a bodybuilding competition, but his lifelong passion for the fitness regimen aligned with his 26-year Air Force career and led to an appointment on the President's Council on Sports, Fitness and Nutrition.

"I just thought it was remarkable," said Wilkins, a Life member with the VFW Department of Virginia. "My initial thought was, 'Only in America.'"

Wilkins deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, and Kabul, Afghanistan, from November 2005 to December 2006, and served in Turkey at Incirlik Air Base during Operation Northern Watch in 1997. After his service in Afghanistan, Wilkins was on the staff of the Joint IED Defeat Organization and Legislative Liaison Office for the secretary of the Air Force. His nomination to the council was announced last year.

"I just thought, 'What a great opportunity for me as an enlisted person,'" Wilkins said of the appointment. "Secondly, because of serving in the Air Force, I just want to make all airmen proud."

The military, according to Wilkins, has given him the opportunity to learn in an environment that he calls the "melting pot of America" and to succeed. "I think I am the Air Force," Wilkins said. "It's been so much a part of me."

Balancing Fitness and the Air Force

Wilkins' military history dates from relatives in World War II to present conflicts. It's simply "part of a family business," he said.

"[There are] about 1 percent serving now, or less, and I think to be amongst those few is a tremendous honor," Wilkins said.

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Balancing his Air Force responsibilities with his bodybuilding routine was “very, very easy,” he said. At the time he was focused on bodybuilding, the Air Force, according to Wilkins, had increased its attention to health and fitness. He was given the opportunity to run a fitness program at Patrick Air Force Base in Florida.

His programming focused on “functional strength” and included beach walks or runs, along with speaking engagements at local schools.

During his time at Patrick AFB, Wilkins said, health screenings revealed existing conditions in some of his fellow airmen.

“If they went undetected, they may have passed away,” said Wilkins, who received an Air Force commendation for organizing the health screenings.

From Muscle Builder to Building Muscle

Wilkins’ fitness journey began in eighth grade, when he discovered Muscle Builder magazine. That piqued his interest in lifting weights, and, though he never competed, he did meet the Weider family in 1983. Joe Weider published fitness magazines, while Joe’s brother, Ben Weider, organized the International Federations of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB). Joe offered Wilkins the opportunity to pen a column in Muscle & Fitness magazine.

Wilkins said he had no writing experience at the time, and the Weiders suggested he take classes at a community college. He did, and he authored a regular column for Muscle & Fitness and Flex magazines until 2007.

Wilkins said he viewed that opportunity as the Weiders putting their trust in him to write articles based on science and research. The Air Force vet also said the brothers, who are both deceased, supported the military.

“They gave me the opportunity, and I think a lot of it had to do with [the fact that] I was a veteran,” Wilkins said.

Since 2001, Wilkins has worked with the Weiders’ estates to offer free tickets to military personnel for the annual Mr. Olympia bodybuilding competition. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Wilkins said, the brothers wanted to show support for the military. At the first event following the attacks, they distributed nearly 1,200 tickets. Since then, 500 are regularly provided to veterans and active-duty military personnel.

Wilkins retired from the Air Force in 2009 and, in addition to his appointment to the president’s council, sits on the board for the Bluemont, Va.- based Boulder Crest Retreat for Military and Veteran Wellness. Wilkins also serves as president of Rolling Thunder, a motorcycle group that advocates on behalf of POWs, MIAs and their families. For more information about the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness and Nutrition, visit

hhs.gov/fitness.

This article is featured in the September 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.