

# WI Auto Repair Shop Creates Special Military Cart for Southwest Airlines to Carry Fallen Soldiers

by **Stacey Phillips**, Assistant Editor

When **Richard Kalashian** isn't working as a service writer at *S&S Research* in Geneseo, Wisconsin, he spends much of his time supporting veterans through the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) organization. His most recent project involved creating a special cart

share," said Williams, who served eight years in the Wisconsin National Guard's 128th Air Refueling wing for the Air Force. "We wanted to honor the ones that fought for our freedom."

After the cart was stripped and sanded, Williams and Kalashian worked together to come up with a design with the help of *Modern Ink*. Nearly all of the materials needed for the project were donated by local businesses and the remainder came from the money Kalashian raised for the VFW.

Williams said it was a team effort that included **John Riley** in the body shop, **Chuck Gosh** from *C&M Auto Parts*, who supplied miscellaneous parts, **Jerry Kachelmeyer** from *Single Source* who supplied paint, **Doug Kaempfer** from *Dou-*

*gies's Pinstripes*, and **Ron Scheel** from *Modern Ink*, who supplied the graphics. Kalashian's daughter, *Laura Houlihan*, also helped spread the word through social media.

"It kind of puts a tear in my eye," said Kalashian. "They know I'm a Vietnam veteran and they've been supportive of me over the years and they all volunteered to help on the project."

Kalashian began working for Williams at *S&S Research* seven years ago after retiring from a Saturn dealership as a service manager. Williams, who has owned *S&S Research* since 1977, specializes in auto and collision repair. Over the course of owning his own business, Williams said he learned the importance of connecting with the community, especially during the challenging times.

In 2009, he found out that that Wisconsin Department of Transportation wanted to widen a 17-mile stretch of Highway 83 in front of his business. Since the highway was the main access to his shop, he created alternative directions for existing and potential customers and kept them updated about the construction process through his website and social media to ensure his business survived.

Now five years later, he has 13 employees and was recognized for being one of the nation's top repair facilities by *Monday Morning Mechanic/Auto Profit Masters*.

"We're family-owned and concerned about veterans and the community," said Williams. The shop has supported local veterans over the

years by fixing vehicles at no charge and donating money from car shows to those who are in need. Much of this is through the VFW where Kalashian organizes fundraising activities and is a service officer. Over the last year and a half Kalashian raised more than

Kalashian said that other airlines have shown interest in expanding the project but nothing is finalized.

"It means a lot to me," said Kalashian. "I think Southwest Airlines recognized that there was a need to honor our fallen soldiers in a more re-



**John Riley** worked on the cart at *S&S Research's* body shop

to carry fallen soldiers at Milwaukee's General Mitchell International Airport with the support of the employees he works with in the auto repair shop.

About a year and a half ago Kalashian was waiting for a friend at O'Hare International Airport when he noticed a casket being unloaded from a military plane and placed on a baggage cart. As a veteran himself, he said it just didn't feel right with the grieving family watching across the tarmac. "They treated it more or less like regular baggage," said Kalashian.

"It kind of bothered me because when I came back from a Vietnam tour at O'Hare field some 40 years ago I remember how unwelcome I was when I arrived at the airport. Kalashian recalled how his parents brought him a suitcase filled with clothes and he went to the men's room at the airport to change into civilian clothes.

"That all created a flashback for me," said Kalashian. "I know how I felt and here we have a fallen soldier who gave his life and is treated like baggage."

Kalashian, who served in Vietnam from 1968-69, said he knew that something needed to be done. "I decided to contact Southwest Airlines and approached them with the idea of using one of their carts and redecorating it to give honor to our fallen soldiers," he said.

In September, the airline company gave him the approval to go ahead with the project. **Bob Williams**, Kalashian's boss and the owner of *S&S Research*, offered to lend a hand. "I don't feel veterans get their fare



Southwest Airlines provided one of their baggage carts for the project

\$24,000 and said whether they are on active duty or retired, 100 cent of the money goes to the veterans.

Now decorated in red, white and blue, with a painted gold eagle and red ribbon, the veteran's cart is ready to be used by Southwest at the airport.

spectful manner. They stepped up to the plate and let me use one of their carts to transform it into a patriotic military casket cart to honor our fallen soldiers on their final homecoming. I'm hoping other airlines will follow in Southwest's direction."

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