

Where Good Soldiers Come From

1st Sgt. Graber Led North Dakota Soldiers through World War II

By Staff Sgt. Amy Wieser Willson
Joint Force Headquarters

The happy memories flow easily, while the less pleasant ones take some thought for former N.D. Guardsman and World War II veteran John Graber.

The staunch 94-year-old with thick wisps of white hair is candid, lacing his stories with laughter while keeping a few secrets to himself.

His military career began more than seven years before the attacks on Pearl Harbor when Graber — who was five months shy of his 18th birthday — raised his right hand and promised to defend the nation against enemies foreign and domestic. He served with the 164th Infantry Division, making a buck for each weekly drill as a private and later \$1.15 as a corporal.

Profiles
in Guard History
First of a Four-Part Series

Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp



John Graber stands in front of a display cannon on the campus of North Dakota State University.

After drill, Graber and his fellow Soldiers would head to Gus' restaurant for a hamburger or hotdog for a nickel, being sure to tip another nickel. Graber was enjoying it and had every intention of re-enlisting when he made a decision that would quickly move him to more responsibilities as the possibility of war drew nearer.

"I was going to re-up and ... an officer in the artillery told me not to," Graber says. "He said, 'I want you in the artillery.' So, I got into a brand-new artillery outfit, so my promotions were quick. I was a three-striper in three weeks. I was a technical sergeant, which they now call (sergeant first class)."

That artillery outfit was the N.D. National Guard's 188th Field Artillery Regiment.

Ready for War

As the war in Europe continued and relations with Japan deteriorated, President Franklin Roosevelt activated the National Guard in February 1941. The 164th headed to Louisiana for training, and the 188th later headed to Fort Warren, near Cheyenne, Wyo.

The 188th had better accommodations than the infantry, which found a bare-bones camp for their training. In Wyoming, however, "the locals were quite frosty toward the Soldiers, and the Guardsmen never forgot that dogs and Soldiers were not welcome in some parts of Cheyenne," wrote Lt. Col. Peter Conlin in "The Citizen-Soldiers: An Abbreviated History of the N.D. National Guard."

Things weren't so cold for Graber, though, who married his girlfriend from North Dakota, Maxine King, while stationed there.

Thanks to a combination of skill and luck, Graber took a lateral transfer to a first sergeant position, taking on more responsibility for the men who would serve with him. Despite the challenging duty, "it turned out to be a good move," Graber says, "because later in the year they gave the first sergeants another rocker to make them equal to master sergeants, and that was a good raise in pay, too — and I was married, so I could use it."

The first sergeant and his men continued training until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

"Pearl Harbor happened on a Sunday, and on Thursday we were on our way to Fort Lewis, Wash., by convoy truck," Graber said.

Maxine followed and their first child, Judy, was born Dec. 23 of the following year. Graber would remain in the United States until just before Judy's first birthday.

During that time, the field artillery trained and

"In the war, we had good times and bad times."

Graber takes a look at the N.D. Air National Guard Predator ground control station training area as he tours the base in Fargo, N.D., Nov. 16. He claims that there is probably more valuable equipment in the room than there was in his whole company.



Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp

Graber's Army portrait from 1941.



Courtesy Photo

underwent changes. In February 1943, the 188th restructured and second battalion, Graber's unit, became the 957th Field Artillery Battalion. That spring, they headed to California, where they spent the summer training in the Mojave Desert. Then, it was on to Oklahoma, for additional training at Camp Gruber. By the end of the year, they were headed to New York City to catch a ship departing Dec. 5, 1943, for Great Britain.

Waking Up at Normandy

After about two-and-a-half years of training, Graber's unit would move into combat less than a week after D-Day, June 6, 1943.

It was "D6," D-Day plus six, but Graber laughs at his trip from Great Britain into war despite the uncertainty of the situation at the time.

"We boarded the ship at South Hampton, and they took us out of the harbor and we sat for a while. And I was the first sergeant, so I was carrying the orderly room, and I was so pooped out," Graber says.

"There was a command car on the deck of the LST (landing ship, tank) that we crossed the channel on, and I climbed in the back of that command car and fell asleep. And when I woke up, I said, 'Didn't we leave?' and they said, 'Hey buddy, that's France.' I slept across the English Channel. Some people have

(Continued from page 7) swum across it, but I slept across it,” he says with a bright grin and chuckle.

What he woke up to was Utah Beach at Normandy.

Graber, at this time in his late 20s, was in charge of a service battery.

“Our duties were to furnish all of the supplies for the battalion. During the time we were over there, we fired over 90,000 rounds of projectiles that weighed 96 pounds apiece — and service battery hauled every single ounce of that,” he says with pride.

They also hauled food and handled ration detail.

“I gotta say, for wartime, we ate pretty good,” he says. “The cooks that we had were farm boys from North Dakota and they went to a cooking school in Fort Riley, Kan., and, by golly, they turned out to be pretty good cooks.”

Good Times, Bad Times

The artillery regiment participated in the Cherbourg Offensive and Battle of the Bulge before heading to Germany. In his 23 months in combat, Graber took part in five major battles, including Normandy, the European Campaign and Ardennes.

“In the war, we had good times and bad times,” he says.

The good times roll quickly from his lips — the close friends he met in war and since as a result of his service and the chance to stay in some pretty fancy quarters in Germany.

Asked about the worst part of the war, he pauses for a while to reflect before responding.

“A couple of times we got strafed by our own Air Force, and that was a little harassment, but we didn’t lose any men over it, so that came out alright.”

Good or bad, he’s keeping some secrets all to himself.

“Tell me about the liberation of the Belgian women,” an interviewer says.

Graber’s eyes sparkle as he leans back and breaks into a grin. “That’s unmentionable!” he exclaims with a laugh.

Throughout the war, Graber’s unit served under the VII Corps. Graber is especially proud of North Dakota’s connections with “Lightning” Joe Collins, VII Corps commander, and Collins’ nephew, Lt. Col. James L. Collins Jr., who commanded Graber’s unit. Both Collins were West Point graduates, and the elder would go on to be the Army Chief of Staff during the Korean War. The younger Collins served as battalion commander for the 957th Field Artillery and developed close ties to the North Dakota Guardsmen.

“West Pointers weren’t real fond of National Guard Soldiers, and that’s what we were,” Graber recalled. “(James Collins) was a Pointer, but he sure liked his North Dakota boys. We showed him where the good Soldiers come from.”

James Collins, who retired from the Army as a brigadier general, attended every reunion with those North Dakota boys until he died, Graber says.

Graber, now a widower, has lost a lot of family and good friends over the years. The reunions stopped about a decade ago, when barely a dozen remained who could travel. Of the two companies of infantry and two batteries of artillery that mobilized out of Fargo, Graber is only aware of one other



Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp

A photo of prized military memorabilia and personal items in a shadow box in John Graber's home. The shadow box includes service medals, rank and a family photo from John and wife, Maxine's, 50th wedding anniversary on June 1, 1991. The New Testament Bible was issued to U.S. Military personnel during WWII and is dated January 25, 1941.

man still in the area.

Graber takes it as life experience, saying, “So that’s what you get when you get to be 94; you see a lot of people go that are important in your life.”

He insists that “life’s been good to me,” and he’s glad he had the opportunity to serve with so many fine North Dakotans.

“I was always proud of my military service. Can’t say you were glad that there was a war, but it made men out of boys in a hurry.” ■

This story is part of a quarterly N.D. National Guard history series that profiles the brave veterans who have served before us. For more information on the history of the N.D. National Guard, go to <http://bit.ly/NDNGhistory>.

See More Online:



Watch an interview with John Graber discussing his experiences at <http://bit.ly/JohnGraber>

View and download photos of Graber on Flickr at <http://bit.ly/JohnGraberPhotos>



Weekend Events Attract Guard Family Members, Youth

“Resiliency” was more than a buzzword at this year’s Adjutant General’s Symposium for Families and Youth Symposium. It was also a theme for discussion amongst Guardsmen and their Families throughout the weekend.

More than 100 family members joined North Dakota Soldiers and Airmen during the Guard’s annual Professional Development Weekend.

Maj. Gen. David Sprynczynatyk, North Dakota adjutant general, welcomed attendees by thanking them for their support throughout the organization’s array of missions during the past decade.

“We’re extremely grateful for your attendance this weekend. As I’ve stated before, taking care of Soldiers and Airmen is my No. 1 priority,” he said. “Part of doing that is taking care of you, their Families, as well.”

Below, Maj. Gen. David Sprynczynatyk visits with children of N.D. National Guard members at the Adjutant General’s Symposium for Families. Left, “Best Warrior” winners Spc. Ryan Lindberg, second from the left, winner in the enlisted category, and Sgt. Joel Erickson, winner in the noncommissioned officer category, both of the 188th Engineer Company, display their trophies with American Legion members Carrol Quam, left, and Jeff Hall. The Officers of the Year (OAY) for the N.D. Air and Army National Guard also were named. The Air Guard Company Grade OAY is Lt. Robert Davidson, of the 119th Operational Support Squadron, and the Field Grade OAY is Maj. Mitchell Johnson, of the 178th Reconnaissance Squadron. The Company Grade OAY for the N.D. Army National Guard is Capt. Derek Kuntz, of the 164th Engineer Battalion, while the Field Grade OAY is Maj. Russ Wolf, also of the 164th Engineer Battalion. The enlisted Airmen of the Year will be named at the 119th Wing’s Airmen of the Year banquet April 2-3.



Ginny and Chief Master Sgt. Monte Bachmann were named the 2010 N.D. Air National Guard Family of the Year. Joining them are Travis and Becki Walterson, son and daughter-in-law, on the left and Gage, in the middle. Right, Tammy and Sgt. 1st Class Wesley Widmer are joined by their children, from left to right, Michael, Rebecca, Randii, Joshua and Noah. The Widmers are the 2010 N.D. Army National Guard Family of the Year.

Rob Keller, Service Member and Family Support division director, reminded attendees that the organization was entering its tenth year in the Global War on Terrorism and that overseas mobilizations have been commonplace for much of that time.

A portion of Saturday afternoon was spent viewing a 30-minute DVD titled “We’re in this Together.” Developed and produced in Bismarck by members of the N.D. National Guard, the video addresses how to persevere through life’s challenges with testimonials from North Dakota Guardsmen and their Families.

“This is the new normal in which we are operating,” he said. “This weekend, we primarily want to recognize our Families for the sacrifices they have made. We also want to build on resiliency, which is not just a word, but also is a skill.”

National Guard youth also had the opportunity to participate in multiple events over the weekend at the N.D. National Guard’s Youth Symposium. Children of military members were invited to attend presentations from national motivational speakers and collaborate with military youths from across the state. They also took the stage at the Adjutant General’s Symposium for Families, where they had a chance to ask Maj. Gen. David Sprynczynatyk a range of questions. See Sprynczynatyk’s responses by viewing video at <http://bit.ly/NDNGYouth>. ■



From the Beginning



Retired Chief Master Sgt. Fred Quam stands alongside a P-51 Mustang at the Fargo Air Museum in March. Quam, who retired 34 years ago from the N.D. Air National Guard, is one of only three Happy Hooligans still alive who served when the unit was first formed in January 1947.

Quam Among First Airmen in N.D. Air National Guard

By Staff Sgt. Amy Wieser Willson
Joint Force Headquarters

Fred Quam holds a title that only two other men alive today can claim: He is one of the inaugural Happy Hooligans. In fact, he was a Hooligan before they were even called Hooligans.

Their diminishing ranks don’t concern him as much as the younger Airmen who refuse to believe the stories from the time North Dakota got its first-ever Air National Guard unit on Jan. 16, 1947.

“It’s kind of fun to think back,” he says, “but what bothers me is some of these young guys now don’t believe what we tell them. They say, ‘No, nobody ever did that.’”

But they did do that. They hauled coal in to the stove in the maintenance office to keep it warm, and then took “turns on night

duty to keep the fires going.” Gasoline-powered ground heaters ran in the hangars and word spread that when the birds started dropping to the floor from the exhaust fumes, it was time to shut them down. In the days before machines kept the flight-lines clean, Airmen did it with a broom and dustpan. In winter, they sometimes had to hand-crank the planes to get them started — but first they had to shovel them out.

At one time, the Air Guard in Fargo had 35 planes, including 28 P-51 Mustangs, which are single-seat fighter aircraft.

“In the wintertime, you’d get a windstorm and snow and these airplanes were just about all covered, and we didn’t have a front-end loader or a bucket loader or a Bobcat to (clear the snow),” Quam says. “... We’d have to shovel ‘em out, then we’d have to wait for the city to come with their blower, and they’d make a path for us. And then we’d hook onto each plane individually after we’d shovel out the front of the wheel ... get the

ramp all cleared, get them all parked in a nice row and come back in the morning and (do) the same thing all over again.”

Those were just some of the tasks that helped Quam and the others earn their full-time salary of \$170 a month.

❖ Keeping Them Flying ❖

Quam joined the Air Guard as a full-time aircraft mechanic after almost four years in the active-duty Air Force. There were only 45 other full-time Hooligans in 1947, including Homer Goebel and Marshall Johnson, the other two charter members still alive. Within a year, Quam made line chief and was in charge of other mechanics. After serving stateside on active-duty for the Korean War from April 1951 until November 1952, he moved into quality control, which is where he stayed until his retirement in 1976 as a chief master sergeant.

At 94, he can still rattle off the planes he worked on over the years with a memory sharper than men half his age. First, there was the A-20 Havoc, a light bomber, which is what he learned to maintain at factory school. Then came the T-6 Texan training aircraft, P-51 Mustang, B-25 Mitchell bomber, C-47 Skytrain transport plane, C-46 Commando transport plane, F-94A Starfire interceptor plane, T-33A Shooting Star training plane, F-89 Scorpion interceptor, F-102 Delta Dagger interceptor and F-101 Voodoo fighter. He ended his career with the F-4 Phantom fighter jet.

“I may have missed one or two,” Quam says humbly upon

P-51 Mustang planes sit covered in snow at Hector Field in Fargo, N.D., around 1949. Retired Chief Master Sgt. Fred Quam and two or three other mechanics would have to shovel the planes, which numbered as many as 35 at one point, out by hand after each snowstorm.



Courtesy Photos



Left, this portrait shows Fred Quam, one of the Airmen who joined the N.D. Air National Guard when the unit first formed in January 1947. Quam served in the active-duty Air Force at the time this picture was taken. After a short break in service, he became one of the original “Happy Hooligans” and rose to the rank of chief master sergeant.

finishing the list.

He says the P-51 was his favorite, and he gets a bit of a dreamy look on his face as he says, “It’s just the sound of it, I guess. This one, when it goes, it just kind of gets to you.”

When the North Dakota Air Guard first got off the ground, there were two T-6 aircraft on base for Quam and two or three other mechanics to work on.

“One day (the commander, Lt. Col. Richard Neece) was going to go somewhere and one of the struts on the airplane was flat and the other one was up, so it was sitting cockeyed,” Quam recalls. “We had no tools to fix it, so (the commander) says, ‘Let the air out of the other one.’ So, we let the air out so it leveled out, and then he flew to Omaha.”

In Omaha, the commander had air pumped in and scrounged up a toolbox to bring back.

“So, that’s how we got started: one toolbox, two airplanes and no other equipment.”

❖ Responding at Home ❖

There had been other growing pains starting the never-before-seen unit in 1947. First came the debate of which city would get an Air Guard unit: Grand Forks or Fargo. Then, the Airmen had a few operational disagreements with the airport manager, although “he finally warmed up to us after he found out all the good things we could do for the airport,” Quam says.

The community would soon see the Hooligans’ reach stretch beyond Fargo’s Hector Field.

In the winter of 1949, Operation Haylift had the Guardsmen flying a C-47 over ranches in western North Dakota after an abundance of snow prevented farmers from getting feed to their cattle. Airmen were secured to the cargo aircraft by ropes tied around their waists as they kicked bales out where needed.

“It was cold weather, and we had a tough time keeping the planes going,” Quam says.

Although they were based out of the Minot Air Force Base for the mission, they would fly the plane back to Fargo each night to keep it indoors during the blizzard conditions.

The weather made it a dangerous mission, and one man, Maj. Donald C. Jones, didn’t survive.

As commander, Jones had flown to the mission site in a P-51. He called Quam to say he was on his way home, but the blustery weather contributed to the plane crashing just 20 minutes later.

Over the years, the Hooligans would respond to more natural disasters, including flooding and the Fargo tornado of 1957. The F5-category twister had wiped out a nine-mile swath of Fargo, missing Quam’s house by just half of a block.

“I stood on the corner of 15th Avenue and Broadway all night trying to keep people from ... going beyond this point,” Quam says. “... It was bad and we, the Guard, controlled traffic ... ’til everything got back in order again so they could go up and down the streets.”

One of the more unique humanitarian missions Quam saw involved transporting a young man with polio, who was encased in an iron lung, to a hospital out of state.

“Of course, they didn’t have the means to treat it well here, so we, with our C-47, transported him with the iron lung and everything to another hospital. So, that was a special mission. ... It was quite a job to rig up equipment to keep the lung running.”

❖ Still Serving ❖

After 33 years as a Happy Hooligan, Quam has now spent 34 years as a retired Happy Hooligan. Don’t be fooled by the word “retired,” though. He’s a life member of the El Zagal Shrine and American Legion, a charter member of the Golden K Kiwanis and serves as chaplain for Masonic Daylight Lodge #135.

In 2002, Quam helped to get the Fargo Air Museum started. Volunteerism wasn’t new to him, having won in 1959 one of only two Community Service Awards ever presented in the N.D. Air Guard. It took on a new importance then, however, as he tried to stay busy after losing Lois, his wife of 58 years.

When Quam walked into the museum one day and asked what needed to be done, he was directed to a stack of magazines upstairs that could use some organizing. Before long, he connected with a couple from St. Paul who were impressed with his efforts. They regularly toured military museums, but rarely found libraries. After the man passed away, more than 40 boxes of military books from his personal library were donated to the museum. The library continued to grow from there.

Today, Quam tracks more than 2,600 books and 100 journals and magazines by description, catalog number, title, author, publication date and more. He logs more regularly — all on the computer, which he taught himself to use at age 80. Community members and college students rely on the library’s vast collection to supplement their research on all things aircraft and military.

Quam continues to volunteer about

Tech. Sgt. Braddy A. Schneider



Fred Quam looks on as Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Alexander Macdonald, left, and Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Darrol Schroeder unveil his portrait at the Fargo Air Museum on April 17, 2010. The portrait was commissioned in order to commemorate Quam’s service in the N.D. Air National Guard and also to commemorate his contributions to compiling materials for the Fargo Air Museum library.

six hours a week at the library, which was named the Fred Quam Research Library in his honor just last year. During a ceremony, Retired Maj. Gen. Alexander Macdonald, former North Dakota adjutant general, and Retired Maj. Gen. Darrol Schroeder, former chief of staff, unveiled a portrait of Quam that now hangs in the library.

“That was pretty special,” he says. “My kids were all here.”

On a recent winter day, as Quam sat in the library that now bears his name and likeness, he was asked what advice he might have for those serving today. He pondered that a few moments before replying, “Do what you want to do and do

it good.”

His life of service as a Hooligan and active retiree show that he takes his own advice. ■

This story is part of a quarterly N.D. National Guard history series that profiles the veterans who have served before us. Next month will feature Bernie Wagner, who served with the 164th Infantry Division during World War II and was the first executive officer for the 141st Engineer Combat Battalion. For more information on the history of the N.D. National Guard, go to <http://bit.ly/NDNGhistory>.

To nominate someone for this feature, e-mail amy.wieserwillson@us.army.mil.



Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp



See More Online!

Watch a video interview of Fred Quam discussing his experiences at <http://bit.ly/QuamVideo>.

View and download photos of Quam on Flickr at <http://bit.ly/QuamPhotos>.

Fred Quam stands amongst the thousands of books, journals and magazines in the Fargo Air Museum. A longtime museum volunteer, Quam dedicates six to eight hours of time each week to the library. He learned to use the computer at age 80 and diligently catalogs each new book and periodical through ReaderWare software.

BENT, NOT BROKEN

Veteran Won't Let Rules, Injury Stand in the Way of Service

By Staff Sgt. Amy Wieser Willson
Joint Force Headquarters

If there's a theme that runs throughout Bernie Wagner's illustrious military career and, indeed, his amazing life, it's that he's not afraid to break a few rules to get the job done and take care of his Soldiers.

Such was the case when he joined the N.D. National Guard at age 16, having lied about his age.

More recently, that mischievousness was seen when, against his daughter's wishes, the 90-year-old Valley City resident "snuck out," driving to Fargo with his wife, Mary, for an interview about his career.

It's not easy to cover such a career in just a day, however, especially when Wagner's legacy continues to bring together the Soldiers with whom he served decades ago.

'GOTTA BE BORN IN 1919'

That career started in 1937, when the 16-year-old from Sanborn, N.D., went with a friend to the Valley City Armory. Wagner enjoyed the military-style marching his basketball coach, a North Dakota Guardsman, had them do at practice. Plus, the money was good: \$1 a drill or \$16 a quarter, which was equivalent to the cost of college tuition. So, he thought he'd sign up.

As he approached the battalion commander, the man gruffly asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I want to join the Guard," Wagner replied.

"How old are you?" the commander shot back. "When were you born?"

"1921," Wagner replied.

The commander looked at Wagner's friend and said, "March him around the block and tell him he's gotta be born in 1919."

So, Wagner marched around the block and came back.

"I got down to the same office, same guy: 'Whaddya want?' he barked. I said, 'I'd like to join the Guard.' 'When were you born?' (he said). I said, '1919.' 'Sign right here,' (he replied). So, I got in the Guard."

Wagner was the newest infantryman with Company G of the 164th Infantry Regiment, joining them for drill in Valley City every Tuesday night. His work ethic was quickly noticed, and before long he was the mortar sergeant and then platoon sergeant of the weapons platoon.

"We didn't have weapons then; we just worked with a book," he said.



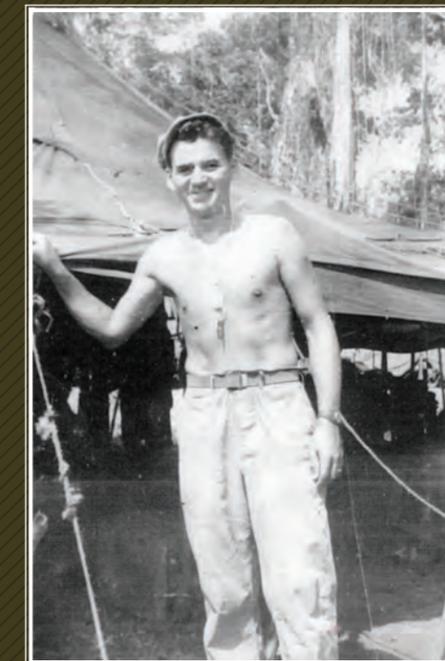
Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp

Retired Lt. Col. Bernie Wagner in a portrait taken March 3, 2011. A World War II and Korean War vet, Wagner, of Valley City, N.D., served with the N.D. National Guard's 164th Infantry Regiment's Company G and the 141st Engineer Combat Battalion before retiring as the state's maintenance officer. The pin on Wagner's jacket represents the Legion of Merit Award in Legionnaire (Combat) Conditions, which he received as a result of the leadership actions he took in World War II.

MOBILIZING FOR THE WAR

In February 1941, the regiment was called up for World War II, but they still didn't have weapons in the beginning. First, they reported to Camp Claiborne, La., where the Guardsmen experienced treatment like they had never before seen. A sign posted at the local swimming pool proclaimed, "No Soldiers or Dogs Allowed." The sentiment seemed the

The caption on this photo reads, "From a beach near Lunga Point, U.S. Marines prepare to leave Guadalcanal. With their equipment, they will board boats, which will carry them to transports." The N.D. National Guard's 164th Infantry Regiment arrived on the island in October 1942, where the First Marine Division had been battling fiercely against the Japanese since August for control of the unfinished Henderson Airfield. Before leaving Guadalcanal five months later, 150 North Dakota Soldiers would be killed in action or die from their wounds. Another 360 were wounded, retired Lt. Col. Bernie Wagner among them. Right, Bernie Wagner stops for a photo while on Guadalcanal during World War II.



Courtesy Photos

same among townspeople.

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Wagner and his Soldiers were sent to guard the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Calif., since authorities feared an attack by paratroopers on the West Coast. They pulled shifts on guard with M1 rifles before retiring to the "cow palace" for sleep.

"We always joked that we each had our own stall," Wagner said.

Leaving on Christmas day in an unheated, three-quarter-ton truck, Wagner's platoon headed to Montana to guard the Bozeman Pass, through which equipment for the war effort was traveling. They were treated considerably better there, with highway patrolmen offering the Guardsmen rides and the town allowing Soldiers to watch movies at the theater for free. A resident who worked as a signal maintainer in the area got to be a friend of Wagner's, taking him to mass on Sundays with the understanding that Wagner would "keep the guys away from their daughter."

The man also gave Wagner a heads-up that the game warden might be paying him a visit based on reports that the Guardsmen were shooting deer in the area.

Always willing to bend the rules a bit to take care of his Soldiers, Wagner flatly denied the charges once the warden arrived. He insisted the men received fresh meat via train from Helena, Mont. He went on to explain that the attic, which held the butchered deer so it could cure, had been nailed shut before they arrived and was presumably empty, although the warden questioned the new-looking nails holding the door shut.

"I said, 'How about having dinner with us,' because he was there over the noon hour," Wagner recalls of the conversation with the warden. "And he said, 'What are you having?' And I said, 'Beef, roast beef.'"

So, we had dinner and he got outside and he said, 'That's the best damn roast beef I ever had.' And it was deer. He had a job to do, and we didn't waste anything."

Mary had the opportunity to visit Wagner while he was stationed in Bozeman, and it was there that he proposed marriage. Finding a time to get married would prove challenging, though.

SHIPPING OVERSEAS

In March 1942, after 13 months of stateside duty, Wagner and the rest of Company G headed to New Caledonia, a French colony in the South Pacific, which was a growing base for seizing control of the Solomon Islands. In "They Were Ready: The 164th Infantry in the Pacific War, 1942-1945," author Terry L. Shoptaugh writes that the Guardsmen would, in general, recall New Caledonia as "a pleasant interlude in an otherwise grim war."

"We had a really good crew," Wagner said of his weapons platoon, one of four platoons in the company.

"We had a good company. I had the weapons platoon, and we were just an outstanding bunch of guys that stuck together," he said. "I was their old cluck hen with the chicks."

Wagner was loyal to that crew, and they to him. He soon became one of five in the company selected to attend Officer Candidate School.

"I wasn't too hip about doing that, and anyway, we got alerted and the battalion commander, the last thing he said when we got into this truck was, 'You stay and get commissioned, or you don't come back.'"

A half-dozen Soldiers from the weapons platoon fought the move and begged for him to come back. The platoon

sergeant knew little about weapons and Wagner had been training them for a while now. They took their concerns up to the commander.

"So I quit OCS on New Caledonia and went back into combat with the guys as a staff sergeant," Wagner said. "... When I think back, it was a good choice."

FIRST TO FIGHT

They spent about six months protecting strategic interests in New Caledonia before deploying in October 1942 to Guadalcanal, where the First Marine Division had been battling fiercely against the Japanese since August for control of the unfinished Henderson Airfield.

Landing there was a confusing time for the men, who began marching not knowing where they were headed and soon became lost while being shelled. It was a day that the North Dakota boys would not soon forget. Even that morning's breakfast remains a clear memory for Wagner.

"(It) was the only time I had baked beans at four in the morning, the day we left into Guadalcanal. ... For breakfast, we had baked beans, and you remember that as a young guy."

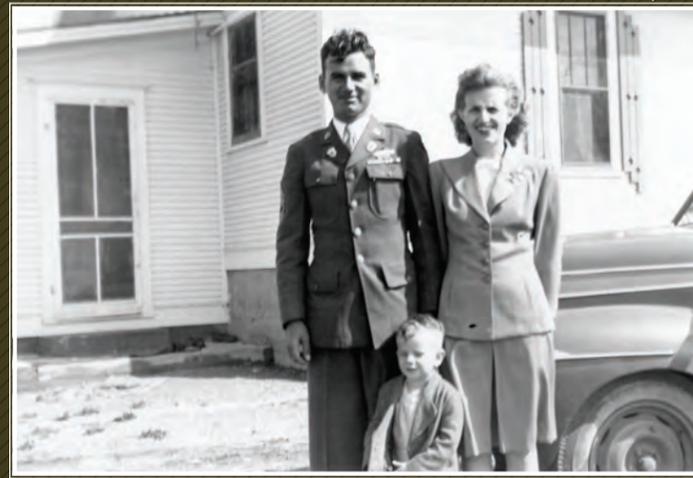
Once they connected with the Marines, they were briefed and told that the Japanese weren't very good at shooting, "which wasn't the truth," Wagner said.

Wagner's platoon members were good shots, too.

"We had good fighters," he said. "Good Browning Automatic Rifle guys right up



Mary Wagner and her husband, Retired Lt. Col. Bernie Wagner, pose for a portrait March 3, 2011, in Fargo, N.D. Mary has been close by his side through all of his service; they married in 1945. Right, Bernie Wagner poses in this photo from about 1950 with his wife, Mary, and son, Chuck. Wagner stressed the importance of family throughout his military career with the N.D. National Guard, and encouraged his Soldiers to bring their families to camp during part of annual training each summer. Chuck later went on to join the N.D. National Guard, as well, and retired as a colonel serving as Maj. Gen. Mike Haugen's chief of staff. The Wagners have one other child, a daughter named Pat.



Courtesy Photo

“cracked up from the shelling that they’d got.”

After reaching the aid station, Wagner continued to insist he needed to go back to the line.

“The medic said, ‘You can’t go back. You can’t go back. You’ve got problems,’” Wagner recalled. “And I said, ‘I’ve got to go back.’ So, he set me down and fed me aspirins every half an hour and pretty soon he looked at my eyes and said, ‘You can make it, but when you get back off of patrol, turn yourself in.’ And I never did.”

As he approached the front again, a Marine from Tower City stared and said, “Bernie, I’ve got your helmet. I thought you got killed.”

The steel pot had a six- to eight-inch split across it, and Wagner credits it with saving his life. He lost it as he carried the other men back for help, though. When the Marine found it, he saw Wagner’s wallet with an ID tucked inside of the liner next to a rosary and presumed him to be dead.

Wagner quickly ensured his family had not been notified of his death.

With the loss of the rifle platoon leader, Wagner was given a field commission and the lieutenant’s rank.

“The company commander said, ‘You’re going to take over this platoon,’ and it was all goofed up with wounds ... and it was a little tougher for me coming out of a weapons platoon to a rifle platoon. ... I had to show them who was boss, and we got organized and went back.”

Wagner knew the men needed strong leadership, but he also knew they needed protection, which is something he had always provided his troops, whether it was covering for them sneaking into town for a beer or shooting game or preparing them for a series of drawn out battles with the Japanese.

Wagner’s actions as he assumed command and “reorganized the platoon into fighting condition” earned him the Legion of Merit through Legionnaire (Combat) Conditions. A small red and white pin representative of the award still adorns his jacket.

PRESUMED DEAD

Wagner’s weapons platoon leader was killed and Sgt. Sam Noeske, from Jud, N.D., was wounded in battle on the island.

“I got knocked out at the same time, and the company commander asked if I would take them back, and I did,” Wagner said. He also helped carry back “the tallest guy in Emmons County,” who had been injured, and escorted two squad leaders who had

MARRYING MARRY

The men spent about five horrific months on Guadalcanal before being shipped to Fiji, which was a vacation in comparison. From there, they moved to Bougainville and Wagner was again sent back for Officer Candidate School since “I didn’t have a commission, but I had the bars.”

It was a new kind of challenge as he tried to become physically

fit and resist the fights paratroopers would pick downtown to get the candidates to wash out.

“You were in good condition for combat, but not for push-ups and pull-ups,” he said.

Wagner connected with a dog trainer in the evenings, following the dogs around to get in shape. When the workout was done, he’d return to the PX and purchase a pint of ice cream for a dime. He shared the reward with the dogs.

Wagner had started the war as a “buck sergeant,” rose in rank to a first sergeant and then became a second lieutenant.

“That wasn’t a promotion for me, but it was a good thing, and I got to go back to the States, so we decided to get married. Mary had waited long enough.”

They wed in 1945 and then headed to Florida, where Wagner would teach jungle tactics.

“I’d gone to college and studied to be a teacher standard, so for our honeymoon we got stationed at Camp Landing, Fla.”

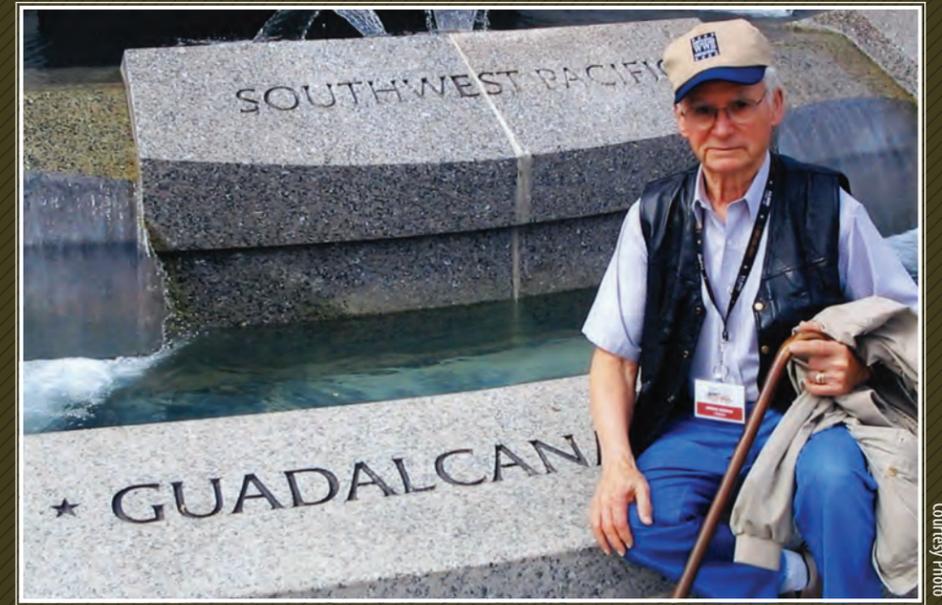
WAGNER TODAY

Nearly seven decades later, onlookers can’t help but notice the love in their eyes as they look at each other. Wagner stressed the importance of family throughout his military career, and encouraged his Soldiers to bring their families to camp during part of annual training each summer.

“It’s tough on families in the Guard, but we’d go to Guard Camp and if they could make it, we’d work it out some way to get them up there for extra duty,” Wagner said of the families. “And what the colonels didn’t know was all right. We didn’t tell them everything.”

In 1950, the 164th got called up again, this time for the Korean War. Wagner was pulled early from a military school in Fort Bliss, Texas, and headed home.

He got the promotion he was going to school for despite leaving early, and by Jan. 16, 1951, was on his way to Fort Rucker, Ala., with Company G. While there, however, he was hospitalized as a result of the injuries he sustained during World War II. Despite that, he moved his family back home at the end of their stay at Rucker and reported to the West Coast to prepare to ship overseas. It was there that they pulled his medical records and told him no. Instead of deploying with his men, he spent 20 months guarding a Northern Pacific railway stateside. Despite his loy-



Courtesy Photo

Wagner poses next to the Guadalcanal marker on the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., during an Honor Flight trip there May 3-5, 2007. He served on the island from October 1942 until March 1943 with the N.D. National Guard’s 164th Infantry Regiment’s Company G. The regiment was the first U.S. Army unit to conduct an offensive operation against the enemy in any theater during the war. Elements of the division defended Henderson Field against heavy enemy attacks from Oct. 23-25, took part in the offensive across the Matanikau River in November, and attacked and took Mount Austen in January 1943.

alty to his men, he knew the danger of war and the importance of surviving to return home and provide for Mary and their two young children, Pat and Chuck. He had just started farming, as well.

Five years later, a major organizational change took place in the Guard, converting all units to engineers. Valley City’s 164th became the 141st Engineer Combat Battalion, and Wagner would serve as the new headquarters’ first training officer, and later its executive officer and battalion commander. He eventually retired as the state maintenance officer for the N.D. Guard. After all of these years, a “141” license plate still adorns his car. He still carries a 141st matchbook in his pocket, too.

“We always promoted the 141 ... You carried these ... and if somebody flashed this to you, you had to have this,” Wagner said of the matches. “If you flashed it and the guy had one, well then the one who flashed had to buy a drink, but if he didn’t have one, he had to buy for the whole group.”

His ties to both units remain strong, and he continues to organize annual reunions for the 164th Infantry Regiment, as well as biennial reunions for Company G members. Pat serves as the secretary for the 164th Infantry Association of the United States of America and helps prepare the reunion invitations. Mary

stuffs the envelopes. Wagner’s son, Chuck, followed in his dad’s footsteps and served as Maj. Gen. Mike Haugen’s chief of staff before retiring from the Guard as a colonel — one step higher than his father’s retired rank.

“The military was a good life for us,” Wagner said. “It kept us going.”

Nearly 75 years after enlisting in the N.D. Guard, it would be hard not to argue that Wagner, in return, helped keep the Guard going and continues to serve his fellow Soldiers and his country in many ways. ■

This story is part of a N.D. National Guard history series that profiles the veterans who have served before us. For more information on the history of the N.D. National Guard, go to <http://bit.ly/NDNGhistory>. For more of the history of the 164th Infantry Regiment in World War II, go to <http://bit.ly/164NDNG>. To nominate someone for this feature, email amy.wieser-wilson@us.army.mil.

SEE MORE ONLINE:



Watch a video interview of Bernie Wagner discussing even more of his experiences at www.youtube.com/NDNationalGuard

View and download photos of Wagner on Flickr at <http://bit.ly/WagnerPhotos>.

GOOD NIGHT, VIETNAM

Era of Vietnam War Veterans Serving in N.D. Guard Ends with Peterson

By Staff Sgt. Amy Wieser Willson
Joint Force Headquarters

While most N.D. Guardsmen are war veterans, one holds a special distinction: He's the last serving Vietnam War combat veteran in the N.D. National Guard.

When Master Sgt. Alan K. Peterson, of West Fargo, N.D., retired last month, he ended an era in both the Army and Air National Guard in the state. There's believed to be only one remaining Vietnam vet nationwide in the Air Force, and while it's unknown, there are presumably very few left in the Army.

SETTING SAIL

After having seen the photos and trinkets his uncle brought back from his travels with the Navy, Peterson enlisted in the service's delayed entry program shortly before graduating from Pine River, Minn., High School in 1970. The war in Vietnam was well under way by then, with involvement peaking the year prior with a half-million U.S. military personnel serving there. On April 28, 1971 — barely a year after graduating high school — Peterson found himself involved in the war, as well.

He first headed to the Philippines to fulfill a 90-day "mess cooking" stint — similar to the Army's KP, or "kitchen patrol" — required for those ranked E-3 and below. After 60 days, he was attached to a ship and itching to get up top.

"I wanted to get on the flight deck — little extra money, you got hazardous duty pay and you got to work in the open air, which I enjoyed. I didn't have enough seniority to do that," he says.

He stayed in the airframes division for the length of that first, short cruise before an opportunity to apply for a plane captain spot in a line division presented itself. He got the job and was promoted to an E-4, or petty officer third class, which is a noncommissioned officer in the Navy. That made him second in charge in a squadron of 10 that managed 14 aircraft. In this role, he served on two additional cruises, working on the USS Kitty Hawk CVA-63.

Similar to a crew chief in the Army and Air Force, a plane captain in the Navy maintains and cleans the aircraft, monitors the work that's done on it, helps the pilot into the cockpit, and conducts a preflight turnaround for the aircraft. Peterson also did maintenance turnarounds, which allowed him to sit in the aircraft while it was tied to the deck and operate the controls while it was being worked on.

MAKING LANDFALL

His time on the ship doing 30- to 40-day stints in the Gulf of Tonkin off of the Vietnam coast would be limited, though. Soon, Peterson was part of a group of 15 or so sent to shore in July 1972. For the next eight months, he stayed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base outside of Da Nang replacing tailhooks, patching holes and repairing landing gear on aircraft that couldn't be recovered by the carrier ships.

"The amenities we have now days for creature comfort weren't there at that time," he says of his accommodations near Da Nang. "Any correspondence I had back home was letters, and usually that was about a two-week turnaround before I got one back."

The workdays on land were shorter than the 14- to 16-hour shifts at sea, though. Peterson worked dawn to dusk with the open-air maintenance work ceasing at dark to prevent becoming a lighted target at night.

"When I look back at it, it was fun to get off the ship," Peterson says. "Life on the ship was pretty monotonous after a fashion. Our close-circuit TVs were limited to what you could watch and there wasn't many of those you could watch ... so you read, laid in your rack, read books, (read) whatever you could get your hands on, walk around, actually run on the flight deck and do PT (physical training), too, to take up your time. Sleep. That's about it."

The berthing compartment where he slept differed greatly from the damp huts near Da Nang that were sunk 3-4 feet into the ground with hurricane fans blowing through at night. Other than the climate and extra amenities, his living conditions in the Iraq War three decades later would prove similar.

NAVY TO ARMY

When Peterson's Navy stint concluded, the young war veteran did much the same as his peers in the 1970s: grew his hair long and sprouted a beard. By the end of the era, in February 1979, he was ready to don the uniform again, though.

"I still had a beard and long hair, and they told me, 'You know, you're going to have to cut that off.' I guess it was time for a change," he says.

He started as a combat engineer with the Army National Guard unit in Hazen,

N.D., while working in a coal mine in the area. His first platoon leader, Dennis Jacobson, still serves with the N.D. National Guard, but now has two stars on his uniform.

After seven years as an engineer and traditional Guardsman, Peterson switched back into a maintenance job, but life outside of the Guard took a major downturn. The house he grew up in was engulfed in a fire, claiming his parents' lives. Plus, work in the coal mine had slowed, and in December 1986 he received a 30-day notice for being laid off.

"That was a pretty tough year for me. I had a wife and three kids to take care of. What am I going to do?"

He drilled the weekend he received the layoff notice and saw a job posting for a maintenance position in Minot. He had his application submitted in a matter of days and before long embarked on a full-time career for the N.D. Guard, first in the Minot shop and later at the Fargo shop, from which he retired Nov. 30.

In the years in between, he shared his knowledge as a maintenance supervisor, deployed to Iraq with the 142nd Engineer Combat Battalion, and developed a unique connection with his middle son, Joshua, who also deployed with him to Iraq in the same maintenance section.

"When I look back, (Vietnam) kind of set me up for the deployment to Iraq and what I experienced over there," he says.

The one major difference? Coming home.

"(My son and I) sat together on the ride back and talked about the year we were gone and things that happened and how we would react. ... It's quite a different feeling when you get off the plane and all those people are lined up to greet you. It's a lot to take in. ... It wasn't the same back

during Vietnam. There was nobody. When I flew back and got out, it was just my parents there to greet me."

Now, he's looking back at both deployments along with a decades-long military career and pondering how he has already turned the mandatory retirement age of 60.

"Here now it's my turn (to retire), and I say, 'Wow, where did all those years go?'"

"I think the Guard for me has been a good choice. It has given me a direction in life and supported me quite well. I look back at all the experiences that I have had and all the people that I've either worked with or just crossed paths, and I feel it was well worth it." ■

This story is part of a N.D. National Guard history series that profiles the brave veterans who have served before us. For more information on the history of the N.D. National Guard, go to <http://bit.ly/NDNG-history>.



Left, this portrait of Peterson dates to his time in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War in 1972. Right, Peterson retired from the N.D. National Guard Nov. 30, 2011.

fr INTERACT WITH US!

See more photos of Master Sgt. Al Peterson at <http://bit.ly/PetersonPhotos>. Video interviews from this story are also available at <http://bit.ly/HistoryVideos>.



Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp



Courtesy Photo

Top, Master Sgt. Al Peterson works in the N.D. Army National Guard's Field Maintenance Shop No. 2 in Fargo, N.D., Nov. 16. He retired at the end of November and was the last Vietnam Veteran still serving in the N.D. National Guard. Peterson served in the U.S. Navy during the war, including on the USS Kitty Hawk and at Tan Son Nhut Air Base outside of Da Nang. Above, Peterson, left, accepts the Plane Captain of the Month award from his squadron commander on the USS Kitty Hawk in 1972. Peterson served in the Lemoore, Calif.-based Attack Squadron 195 during his time in the U.S. Navy.



Peterson poses on the USS Kitty Hawk in 1972 during his time in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War.

Courtesy Photos