

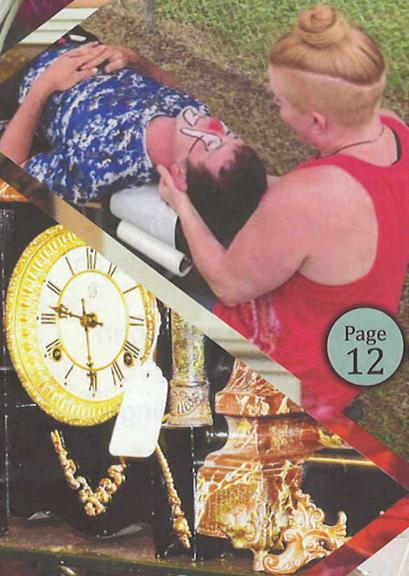
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A magazine for the rest of us

BAKKE ONCE SERVED COUNTRY now serves community

By Bryce Haugen

Les Bakke comes from a proud military tradition. His father was a World War I Army veteran and his two brothers served in the Army in the 1950s.

Bakke knew from a young age he wanted to serve his country, too. In 7th grade, he was inspired to join the Air Force after a recruiter visited his school in far northern Minnesota.

A native of Newfolden, Bakke graduated from high school in 1963, then went off to a much larger community to study history at Moorhead State College. After one year, he dropped out for one simple reason.

"Money. I didn't have any," Bakke recalls.

He searched for construction work in Grand Forks, but at that time, jobs were hard to come by. Instead of construction, he decided to fulfill his dream of joining the Air Force, signing up at the Fargo recruiting station.

On July 23, 1964, Bakke headed off to boot camp at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, where he met people of diverse backgrounds and races for the first time.

"I was a lost little farm boy," Bakke said. "... I was just a little old farm boy trying to keep up with the big city kids. It was a great experience. I realized I could compete with anybody. When you're from a little tiny town you're not sure you're good enough for anything."

A basketball, football and baseball player in high school, Bakke excelled at the physical training.

One time, just for a personal challenge, he ran extra hard during the daily mile run, achieving his goal of finishing first out of 120 men.

However, in the Air Force, Bakke said, "We train the mind, not the body."

And his mind received a lot of training. Following eight weeks of boot camp, he was selected, based on stellar results on a test, to attend Russian language school at Indiana University.

It was an appealing place, especially for a small town boy not used to the hustle and bustle of a Big 10 college campus. Bakke's favorite part: The thousands of women.

"So I enjoyed college," he said with a laugh.

For an intense 10 months, Bakke learned Russian from

native Russian professors who spoke very little English.

"We learned Russian in Russian," Bakke said. "It was by far the best way to learn. We got to the point where we were actually thinking in Russian not translating."

To pass the time, he and some college buddies played pinochle, whist and bridge.

After Bakke passed his language exam, he returned to Texas for even more school, where he learned all the Russian military terms in preparation for a deployment to translate Russian military transmissions. Then he spent four months training to become an intelligence analyst.

In April of 1966, Bakke received his orders. Assigned to the 6921st Security Wing, he was sent to Misawa, in northern Japan, where he tracked, translated and analyzed Russian radio traffic (his focus was the Russian Air Defense Command), reporting directly to the National Security Agency. He needed to pass an extensive FBI background check to even enter the building he worked in.

If the analysts identified any "critical activity," they had only three minutes to report it to NSA.

During his time in Japan, he had a first hand view of some major events.

In 1968, the U.S.S. Pueblo was captured by the North Koreans. The entire base went on a 24-hour alert. In the midst of the incident, Bakke read a highly classified message giving the admiral three choices: To use whatever force necessary to rescue the ship; wait for diplomatic channels to resolve the crisis; or a redacted third option Bakke assumed related to using nuclear weapons. The admiral - wisely, in Bakke's opinion - chose the second option.

Bakke was also listening to communications during a disastrous Russian space mission. Cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov was in a space capsule entering the atmo-



Airforce 1964



NAVPA President



Les Bakke served his country in the Air Force. He continues to serve these days, volunteering with many community organizations. (Photo/ Bryce Haugen)

sphere when his parachute didn't open. Bakke heard Komarov calming relay information to the space command as he tumbled toward his deadly crash.

When Bakke wasn't working, he spent some time exploring Japan on a motorcycle. A favorite spot was Lake Towada, which was at the top of an extinct volcano.

Bakke also did something - volunteering - that he would make a habit of when he retired from the military. He donated his time to help teach English at a local junior high.

Two years of active duty was enough for Bakke, who opted to retire rather than reenlist when his tour ended.

"Military life was not for me," he said. "But I loved what I did and met some really awesome people."

Bakke has no regrets.

"I'd do it again," he said. "I made a difference."

In July 1968, Bakke was ready for the next step in his life and, to him, it was obvious he should return to college. He was accepted back at Moorhead State University on a Friday, he wasted no time zipping back to the Midwest over the weekend and he started classes on Monday.

One of his first classes was a humanities course and, for the first assignment, the professor had the students read the war satire *Catch-22*. Bakke was entranced by the novel, staying up all night to finish it.

"Every character in the book I have met in the Air Force," he said.

With a high aptitude for numbers, Bakke switched majors from English to math. Then, in 1970, he became the first student enrolled in the cutting edge new computer science program.

Bakke graduated in 1972, but he opted to state at

Moorhead State. This time, however, he was on the payroll.

For the next 36 years, Bakke served as the veterans service officer at the college, advising students, helping them fill out paperwork and guiding them through the VA enrollment process.

In 2002-03, Bakke served as the president of the National Association of Veterans Program Administrators.

Throughout his time in Moorhead, he's been community minded, volunteering with, joining and leading so many organizations he's almost lost track.

Bakke joined the American Legion and Vietnam Veterans of America, along with the Veterans of Foreign War auxiliary (because he never served in combat he's not eligible for full VFW membership). He's been a board member of the League of Women Voters, occasionally moderating candidate forums. He was a founding member and president of Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, an organization that helps families of veterans in many ways. He served as a Moorhead Public Service commissioner and currently is on the Housing and Redevelopment Authority board. He volunteers at the Moorhead Public Library. He served as interim director of the Rourke Art Gallery and Museum. He is a former president of the MSUM Alumni Association. He maintains websites for various community groups. That's an incomplete list.

Just like he did in joining the Air Force, Bakke feels called to continue to serve.

"It's fun," he said. "Besides, it's important for citizens to be involved in their community. If you don't do something you have no right to complain ... I'd like to think I've made a difference."