

# From the Harbor to the world

March 13-2006



Former Hoquiamite Maj. Gen. Eldon Bargewell, fourth from left, poses with his Army bodyguards at the Crossed Swords Parade Ground in Baghdad, Iraq.

ELDON BARGEWELL PHOTO

# HHS grad reflects on career of making a difference

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**BAGHDAD, Iraq** — Maj. Gen. Eldon Bargewell always knew, deep down, that he was going to be a soldier.

“As a child growing up, I was always interested in the military,” says the 59-year-old former Hoquiamite, currently serving as strategic operations officer for the Multi-National Force in Iraq. “I still remember watching newsreels from World War II and the Korean War, and thinking that was something I wanted to be a part of. When I was promoted to brigadier general — one star — my mother told me that when I was 6, we were watching a newsreel of the Korean War, and a general was talking on it, and I pointed and told her that’s what I wanted to be when I grew up.”



**Bargewell**

Later this year, Bargewell will retire from the Army after a 39-year career that has included tours as a Green Beret in Vietnam, being a founding member and later commander of the elite Delta Force, combat commands in Panama and Operation Desert Storm, and a stint as commander of all Special Operations Forces in Europe.

Bargewell was born in Tacoma, but his family lived in Hoquiam, and his father, Arthur, was principal of Washington Elementary School for a number of years. The future general graduated from Hoquiam High School in 1965, and at first attended Grays Harbor College on a football

scholarship.

“When that didn’t work out, due to knee injuries, I enlisted (in the Army) in January 1967, and volunteered for Airborne Infantry training,” Bargewell says. “I also volunteered for Special Forces/Green Berets. I spent the next couple of years in Vietnam as a Special Forces weapons specialist.”

In 1970, as a staff sergeant in Vietnam, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army’s second-highest medal for bravery (only the Medal of Honor is higher). His citation reads, in part: “(H)is team came under attack by an estimated 75- to 100-man enemy force. Staff Sergeant Bargewell suffered multiple fragmentation wounds from an exploding B-40 rocket in the initial assault, but despite the serious

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ELDON BARGEWELL PHOTO

Maj. Gen. Eldon Bargewell, foreground, in the field with U.S. troops in Iraq. Note the soldier behind Bargewell, also wearing two general’s stars — as a decoy to confuse possible snipers.

# BARGEWELL

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wounds, placed a deadly volume of machine gun fire on the enemy line. As the enemy advanced, he succeeded in breaking the assault and forced them to withdraw with numerous casualties. When the enemy regrouped, they resumed their assault on the beleaguered team, placing a heavy volume of small arms and automatic weapons fire on Staff Sergeant Bargewell's sector of the defensive perimeter.

"Again he exposed himself to the enemy fire in order to hold his position and prevent the enemy from overrunning the small team. After breaking the enemy assault, the team withdrew to a nearby guard. At the landing zone, Staff Sergeant Bargewell refused medical treatment in order to defend a sector of the perimeter, and insured the safe extraction of his team."

The Army says Bargewell is the most highly decorated soldier currently on active duty. In addition to the Distinguished Service Cross, Bargewell's decorations include three Bronze Stars (with the combat "V" for valor under fire), four Purple Hearts, the Army Commendation Medal (with combat "V") and a Presidential Unit Citation for his Vietnam service with the legendary Special Forces unit known as the Military Assistance Command Vietnam/Studies and Observations Group.

Bargewell says the people he's served with over the years deserve far more credit than he does.

"The Army as a huge institution and machine can grind on you sometimes, so it's the personal and professional relationships you have that make it all worthwhile," he says. "Being a non-commissioned officer and officer leader gave me great satisfaction, training people and leading them in combat. Being responsible for their lives was at times stressful, but it made me feel that my life was successful, that I was

given the opportunity to make a difference in their lives, and make them successful and productive soldiers and later civilians."

The general adds that the perspective he got from others he served with revealed that his small-town upbringing, lamented by so many kids as "boring," was actually a blessing.

"I think my memories of Hoquiam were only reinforced as a great place to be raised after several years in the Army, listening to my men about some of the places they grew up in and how they were really not very good," Bargewell says. "I decided I was fortunate to be raised in a place with low crime, lack of racial problems, good schools and people who cared about their community in general. Hoquiam and Aberdeen may not be the center of the universe for business and entertainment, but it is a place where you can rise up to success if you have the motivation."

Similarly, the general says he'd unhesitatingly recommend a career in the service to young people these days.

"There are so many opportunities to learn, not just a trade, but more importantly to mature," he says. "Learn what it means to have discipline, work ethics, character and really figuring out what you want to do with the 50 years of your working life. If you are not a young person who is totally committed to attending college with a clear view of what you want to do, then I say go in the military for a couple of years, and don't waste your parents' money playing around at college."

He intends to retire to Alabama, but only because that's where his wife is from.

"I dragged her around the Army for over 25 years doing what I wanted, so when I decided to retire after 39 years of service, I felt it only fair that



ELDON BARGEWELL PHOTO

Maj. Gen. Bargewell looks over the situation from a bridge on the Tigris River in Iraq.

she get to pick where she wanted to have a home and be close to family," the general says. "Even though my family has passed in recent years, I do intend to visit (Grays Harbor) with friends in my retirement."

Before he leaves the Army, however, there's more work to be done in Iraq, and like many soldiers, Bargewell says the good news about the war isn't being reported.

"I will say the news slant is negative, when in fact we have done more good over here than anyone will ever know," he says. "We have given the Iraqi people a chance at a decent life, we have opened that window, and now it is theirs to grab. I would say it's a love-hate relationship between us (and the Iraqis). They're grateful, and know they still need us here, but as any country would, having their sovereignty and nationalistic feelings, they

would of course like to see us gone."

Bargewell adds that his time in Iraq has reinforced his feeling that the greatest accomplishment a person can have in life is to make a difference in the world.

"I think the greatest achievement in my life is being given the opportunity, in the Army, to make the world a better place to live, and being able to lead young men and women to becoming good soldiers and citizens," the general says. "The greatest feeling in the world is to lead a young private or lieutenant, who's all thumbs and confused about what he or she is supposed to be doing, and being able to mold that person into someone that can accomplish his mission or job and feel right about it. Watching their confidence and expertise grow under your direction validates why you're there doing what you're doing."