

# **Pittsburgh Boomers**

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## **Pittsburgh Military Veterans Share Their Remarkable Experiences**

By John Fries

From World War I to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States has produced many military heroes. Some have names like Douglas MacArthur, George Patton, Norman Schwartzkopf and Tommy Franks, and are familiar to us from newsreels, history books and the evening news.

Countless millions of others have honorably and courageously served our country through the years, both in the U.S. and abroad. Most returned home without great fanfare, but with the satisfaction of a job well done. Many of them continue to serve in other ways as retirees and civilians.

Here, we profile a few of the military veterans and everyday heroes who live in the Pittsburgh area. We thank them for their time in agreeing to be interviewed, and for their willingness to share their stories, which are quite remarkable. Most important, we thank them for their service to our country.

### **George Lichauer: Serving Then, Serving Now**

For the past 20 years, George Lichauer and his wife of 46 years, Flora, have been active as volunteers at the Department of Veterans Affairs H.J. Heinz Medical Center in Aspinwall. They consider it a top priority.

Each Wednesday, the North Side couple spends a large part of the day at the hospital, helping where they're needed. Over the past two decades, they have logged an enormous number of volunteer hours: 18,000 for George and 11,000 for Flora. That's a great amount of service.

Service has been a key part of Lichauer's life for many years. A veteran of the United States Army, he served our country from 1954 to 1954, during the Korean War. His tour was stateside, including time in California and Alaska, then one of the newest states in the union.

"I was stationed on the last island in the eight-island chain that makes up the Alaskan Panhandle," said Lichauer. "Our job was to build airfields and an oil pipeline. It took about four months to install. It was 35 to 40 degrees below zero--so cold that the concrete had to be specially treated."

Military presence was necessary in Alaska, he recalled. "There were lots of casualties there during World War II. And, because of its location, it would have been the first part of the United States hit by the Communists."

Lichauer is grateful for the time he spent in the military. "I was single at the time, and had the opportunity to see parts of the world I would not have otherwise seen. Also, I got an education and learned to drive a truck."

He also found a way to let people know that he was from Pittsburgh. "When we were in bars in some of the small towns," he said with a chuckle, "I would ask for a shot and a beer. Right away, they knew that if you were ordering a boilermaker, you must be from Pittsburgh."

After his discharge, Lichauer

went to work at the former Thorofare supermarket (now Kuhn's) on Highwood Street in the 27th Ward. It was a friendly, familiar store in which employees and shoppers knew each other from the neighborhood. Many of the people who worked there lived on the blocks surrounding the store. He spent 29 years there before retiring in December 1980.

Over the years, Lichauer has remained in contact with some of his Army buddies. One of them is now his brother-in-law. "He lived in West Newton, but moved to Pittsburgh. I introduced him to my sister. They've been married for 47 years."

George and Flora Lichauer has four children, all grown. When asked about today's military, he said the biggest difference since his days in the service is how modernized and computerized they've become.

### **Tony Comport: From Pittsburgh to the South Pole**

If you stop by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Brighton Heights, a residence for the needy elderly, chances are you'll see Tony Comport. The devout Catholic is a very active volunteer there, and has been for the past five years since his mother, who spent her final days there as a resident, passed away. As part of the Little Sisters' family, Comport and his wife, Lee, volunteer several days each week helping the seniors who live at the residence.

During the mid-1950's, Comport was a teenager, living with his family on Liverpool Street in Manchester and attending Oliver High School. When he wasn't in school, he was selling newspapers or caddying at the Highland Country Club. In 1955, when he was 17 years old, he left school and enlisted in the U.S. Navy, where he served until 1960.

During his first year, he was stationed aboard the USS Krishna, a repair ship, in Little Creek, Virginia. Then, in 1956, he volunteered for what was to be an historic assignment.

Operation Deep Freeze was the code name for a series of scientific expeditions to Antarctica in 1955 and 56, as part of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) 1957-58. IGY, as it was known, was a collaboration effort between forty nations to carry out earth science studies from the North Pole to the South Pole and at points in between. The United States, along with several other nations went to the South Pole--the least explored area on Earth. The goal was to advance world knowledge of Antarctic hydrography and weather systems, glacial movements, and marine life.

The U.S. Navy was charged with supporting the U.S. scientists for their portion of the IGY studies. The USS Arneb (AKA 56), an amphibious supply ship, participated in Operation Deep Freeze, bringing supplies, materials and workers to Antarctica.

Comport served on the Arneb during Deep Freeze Operations Two, Three, Four, Five and 60, the final operation. He often worked in frigid temperatures that reached 85 degrees below zero.

"It was quite an experience," said Comport. "Ice would create holes in the ships, and welders would have to repair them. It was the first time, as far as I know, that anyone welded underwater. I worked with a man named John Othmer, who became one of my best friends. He would climb down the side of the ship on a ladder-type device, and I'd watch out from the deck to make sure he was safe. There were times when I saw killer whales and great whites go by."

While in the deep freeze, the occasional problem occurred. "Once, the ice made seven holes in the ship and broke a propeller blade, and we repaired it," he said. "And another time, we lost the fresh water on the ship, and temporarily had to take showers with saltwater."

While in the Navy, Comport had the opportunity, as the enlistment posters once proclaimed, to see the world. He estimates that he traveled about 100,000 miles by ship during his time in the service.

"I went to Cuba, Panama, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia and South America. Our ship was the first American ship in Sydney since World War II."

His time in Sydney was enjoyable, with the exception of a typhoon that lasted for three days. While there, he stopped by the restaurants and bars. "The people there were great," he said. "When they realized that we were from the United States, they wouldn't let us pay for anything. One bartender said that he appreciated the U.S. because of how we stood by them during World War II."

When Comport was discharged from the Navy, he was 22 years old. "My whole life had changed in just a few years," he said. For a while, he drove a streetcar in Washington, D.C., which was a good experience until New Years Eve 1961. "At the end of my shift, I noticed two men lying in the back of the car. It turned out that they had been robbed and shot. I quit the job that night."

He later worked as a busboy in the Democrat Club, also in D.C. around the time President Kennedy was inaugurated. One patron he met while on the job was former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

After returning to Pittsburgh, he met and married Lee. He tried to find work as a metalsmith, a skill he learned in the Navy, but the local shops wouldn't hire him because he wasn't a union member. So he took a different path, and began working as a bill collector, ultimately spending many years working for such companies as PPG, Hahn Furniture and Sears.

Today, Comport is retired. He and Lee live in a quiet street in Duquesne Heights. They have six children, ten grandchildren, and a friendly greyhound named Stretch. His basement is decorated with memorabilia from his years in the service, and he even has a hardbound book about Operation Deep Freeze in which his picture appears.

He enjoys the volunteer time he spends at Little Sisters of the Poor, and when you visit, it's apparent that the sisters and the staff enjoy having him there.

### **Jerry Wega: A Career in Service**

Jerry Wega is a retired postal carrier who spent 20 years working out of the Mt. Oliver, then Brentwood, post offices. Before that, he spent 21 years in the United States Army and retired as an E-7 Master Sergeant. Today, he regularly volunteers at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center on University Drive in Oakland.

Wega grew up in Castle Shannon and joined the service in 1950. In 1953, he met and married Elizabeth, a Mt. Oliver resident, and for the next 18 years, the two traveled across the U.S. and around the world as Wega served our country. His career took him to a number of diverse places. "I was stationed in Alaska, California, Louisiana and Korea, did two tours in Germany and one tour in Thailand," he said.

His long tenure in the service brought him more than a few interesting experiences. In 1958, he became a heavy weapons instructor. In 1971, he went to Vietnam as an aviator, doing night missions.

Then, there was the time he spent with Hollywood's most famous Green Beret.

"In 1967, I was a sergeant, and stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia," he recalled. "And I really liked it there. At the time, they were filming the movie "Green Berets" with John Wayne at the base. I supplied the actors playing soldiers with uniforms--new ones every day." Wayne, who both starred in and co-directed the picture, was interesting to observe, especially given his commanding presence. "He even screamed at some of the actors to see if they could take it."

Times have changed, according to Wega, who said that military life is much different today that it was during his tenure. "I believe that kids should go into the service right after high school. They could do eight to ten weeks of basic training, do their service, and then go to college. The government pays for it. The experience would be good for discipline."

Today, Wega stays in contact with some of the people with whom he served. He and his wife live in Brentwood. His son, Michael, who was born in Germany in 1962, lives just a short distance away. Michael's son is also named Michael.

### **Ron Boyden: Retired Sergeant Enjoyed "Twenty Beautiful Years"**

Vandergrift resident Ron Boyden is a very active volunteer at the Department of Veterans Affairs' Medical Center on University Drive in Oakland. There, his roles range from assisting disabled military veterans with problems they're having to helping with bingo, social activities and more. Before volunteering at University Drive, he volunteered at the department's H.J. Heinz Medical Center in Aspinwall.

He also has a special talent to which many people over the years can attest—he's an excellent cook. What's interesting is that he developed some of his culinary skills in the rice paddies of Vietnam nearly 40 years ago.

"When I first went to Vietnam," said the retired U.S. Army E-6 sergeant, "I was an Infantry grunt. While I was there, I started a mess hall."

Boyden served in the Army from 1958 until 1978. Over a distinguished 20-year career, he was stationed in numerous cities and countries, including Ft. Jackson, South Carolina; Fort Benning, Georgia; Fort Riley, Kansas; Fort Dixon, New Jersey; and such remote locations as Korea, Japan, Germany, and Vietnam.

Boyden, who grew up in the Hill District and graduated from Schenley High School in 1958, enlisted in the Army at the suggestion of his father. He said that his two decades in the military were wonderful.

"I had twenty beautiful years," he said. "And, I enjoyed everything but Vietnam. I received my orders to go there, and reported to South Carolina in April 1968, the day after Martin Luther King died. Then, I went to Panama for two weeks before going to Vietnam."

His military experience included time spent as a drill sergeant. "When guys were still being drafted, there was no problem. Some were in their twenties. They'd be in for two years, then they were out."

After retiring from the military, Boyden went into food service full time. He worked on an offshore oil rig and lived in San Francisco and Georgia before returning to the Pittsburgh area.

Once he was back home, he served as food service supervisor at Western Penitentiary and also at the Post Office.

He also married Marsha, who grew up in Vandergrift. They have a son, age 36, and two daughters, ages 26 and 34.

He enjoys the time he spends as a Department of Veterans Affairs volunteer, and also looks back fondly on the time he spent in the United States military.

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