

# One in a *Ver*Million

# Meet Elmer 'Sandy' Aakre

**By Travis Gulbrandson**

travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

Chaplain (Major) Elmer "Sandy" Aakre waited longer than most people to join the National Guard.

"I was sworn in three days before I turned 40," he said.

Raised in Montana, Aakre worked in that state as a teacher for 12 years before he came to South Dakota in 1981, graduating from the North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls in 1984.

Aakre was a minister at First Baptist Church when he was contacted by an ROTC member about a demonstration protesting President Ronald Reagan's military policies.

"He said, 'There were all these pastors there - where was my pastor?'" Aakre said. "I came to church the next day, and there was a card waiting for me."

The card was sent by the Army, asking if Aakre was interested in becoming a military chaplain.

After some encouragement from his

wife Shelley, Aakre found he met all the requirements except weight.

"From the 27th of March to the 27th of July, I lost 100 pounds - basically I just quit eating," he said.

Aakre served with the 1st Battalion of the 147th Field Artillery in Sioux Falls from 1988 to 1999, and with the 153rd Engineer Battalion in Huron from 1999 to 2010. He was deployed several times, the longest being to Iraq from December 2003 to March 2005.

He said he was glad to help.

"You get really close to these guys and gals," he said. "I became closer to them than my own brothers. ... I got to know the fears and the tears and the joys."

Aakre got to assist them with problems at home, as well. He recalled one incident in Iraq when he was waiting in line at the "telephone shack" and a man came out in tears.

"He said, 'My wife's really upset. The baby needs diapers, our washer is leaking water on the floor

and she went outside and there's a flat tire on the car,'" Aakre said.

Aakre took the phone, and 15 minutes later two retired sergeant majors were at the woman's door.

"One of the sergeant majors had a little thermos of coffee and some diapers, and said, 'My plumber is coming over to fix this thing.'"

The other sergeant major enlisted his son to help fix the tire.

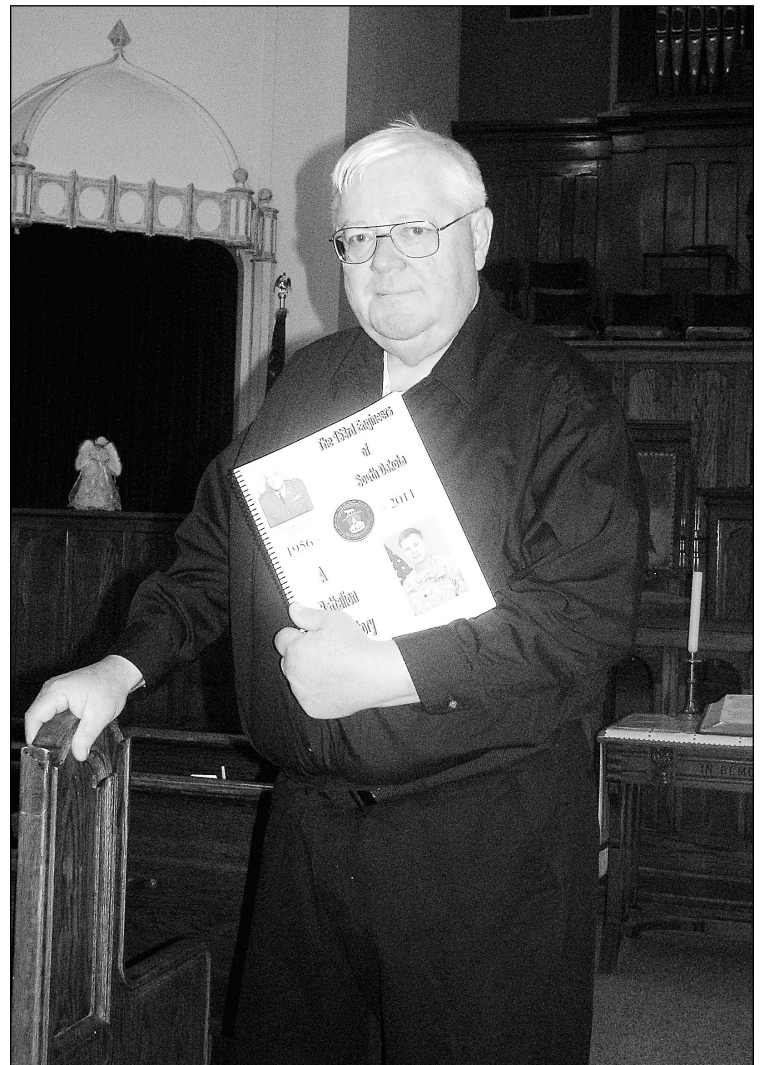
"They called back an hour later ... and she was happy as a clam," Aakre said.

"Everybody was so nice and kind, and the world was right. That's what the family support group was able to do."

Aakre said he's glad he was able to help provide that kind of support for more than 20 years.

"I miss them," he said.

Be sure to check upcoming issues of the Vermillion Plain Talk for an article on Aakre's latest project, a book chronicling the history of the 153rd Engineer Battalion.



CHAPLAIN (MAJOR) ELMER "SANDY" AAKRE

# YALC changes lives of illiterate adults

**By Huma Sheikh**

Higher level grade requirements discourage adults to be part of literacy programs but at the Yankton Area Literacy Council (YALC), adults who cannot read beyond a third-grade level are welcome.

"Yankton adults don't need a driver's license to get in the program," said Ms. Bev Calvert, YALC program coordinator. "We understand they can't get a driver's license without

reading and writing skills."

This is one of the major successes of YALC. Ninety three percent of adults in Yankton County are trained in reading, writing and speaking English as a second language. In Clay County, 6 percent of adult learners are American while in Bon Homme, the percentage of Americans stands at eight. All other adults are ESL learners. In a 2003 assessment, more than 550 Clay County adults lacked basic literacy skills.

Students work individually with a tutor for a minimum of two hours per week. None of the students are charged. Tutors are volunteers. Students and tutors set up times and locations to meet at the Yankton office.

"Students start at a lower level and do assignments. Their progress is assessed for about a half-hour by their tutors each time they meet," said Calvert. "We have been blessed in Yankton. We have some wonderful teachers in

Yankton."

YALC is planning on coming to Vermillion.

"We are trying to set up for readings in Vermillion if we find a small location and funding will be best to go along with it. We buy books for students and each book costs about \$25-30," she said.

Community programs are held in malls and libraries to encourage kids to read so that they force their parents to read.

YALC also holds literacy programs in Yankton

County and surrounding areas to inform people about their literacy activities. In September, a week-long 'Adult Education and Family Literacy Week' was held in Yankton to remind people that YALC helps students of any educational background to improve their literacy throughout the year. The second annual "Scrabble Tournament Spellebrate for a Good Cause" Scrabble tournament is set for Jan. 29, 2012, to raise funds for and awareness about the program.

Brochures are also issued to get the message out about

the YALC. People who wish to volunteer or know someone in need of literacy services complete the form at the end of the brochure and send it back to the YALC. The brochures are available at the Yankton library and YALC office.

YALC is a volunteer-based organization founded in 1987. It organizes literacy programs in Yankton, Bon Homme, Charles Mix and Clay counties. Its work is funded by United Way and Volunteer Services of Greater Yankton and by community fundraisers.

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