

Aakre helps chronicle 'tremendous' work of the National Guard

BY TRAVIS GULBRANDSON

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When Chaplain (Major) Elmer "Sandy" Aakre was approached by Lt. Col. Michael Werdel about writing a history of Huron's 153rd Engineer Battalion, he had no idea it would take him three years to complete.

"I thought surely there would be records that are ready to copy," Aakre said.

But Aakre found the task more difficult than he had anticipated.

"The more I worked on it, the bigger it got," he said.

Aakre ended up marshalling material from across the state, including Wagner, Winner, Parkston, Platte, Madison, DeSmet, Huron, Lemmon, Belle Fourche, Spearfish and Rapid City, a process he recounted in an interview with the Plain Talk last year.

"There's a bunch of files in cabinets, and you just have to get into them, so it's really (written) from the ground up," he said. "It's an outline of the history – the men fill it in. But, I gave an outline of the events as best I could find them, and then tried to connect people with them."

It was a subject close to Aakre's heart, as he served 22 years as a chaplain with the South Dakota Army National Guard, including more than a decade with the 153rd before he retired in February 2010.

He was deployed several times, the longest being to Iraq from December 2003 to March 2005 with the 153rd.

Being in a poverty-stricken country like Iraq puts things in perspective, Aakre said.

"We have so much and we don't really appreciate it," he said. "We saw kids playing with soccer balls made out of rags. No shoes. They were just happier than clams to have something to play with."

Before the 153rd left Iraq, they delivered to the children one dozen soccer balls, three needles and an air pump that were donated by a church in Arizona.

"When they gave those kids a soccer ball they thought they were in Heaven," Aakre said. "Something that small meant so very, very much to them."

This point was driven home to Aakre when

he would go fishing at a nearby river, which he described as "unbelievably filthy."

"The water is just as black as Diet Coke," he said. "All the sewage goes in the river, you've got dead camels in the river, you've got women washing clothes in the river and guys with gas stations dumping their oil in the river. And kids swimming in the river."

Despite this, the river was home to many Eurasian carp, which Aakre would catch in his spare time.

"As soon as I'd catch one, there'd be a little kid sitting there with his hands out," he said. "I'd say, 'Where did that little rascal come from?' They just seemed to come right out of the ground."

Once the child had the fish, he would take it home to one of the tiny makeshift houses standing nearby.

"(His mother) had a small hatchet there, and she'd just chop it into chunks – didn't scale it or gut it – throw it in the frying pan, dump it in rice and they'd all sit down and eat."

Aakre said. "I'd catch another fish, they'd run up."

Although Aakre was a history major and teacher before he attended the seminary, he had not undertaken such a wide-ranging project before.

He said he was interested in the sheer number of projects in which the 153rd took part over the years.

"There were a lot of letters from when men cut the roads open with snow so the farmers could get feed to their cattle," he said. "A lot of thank-you letters, a lot of pictures that I couldn't publish because they were so dark and grainy – pictures of the guys sitting there and the people so appreciative of what was done. ...

"A tremendous amount of work has been done by the Guard in various places," he said.

Aakre said some of the aspects of the project he found most interesting related to the unit's first commander, Theodore Spaulding, who was an assistant adjutant general by the time he retired in 1972.

During World War II, Spaulding was a survivor of the Bataan death march and lived in Japanese prison camps for four years.

"The steel that was in the man to help him

survive the things that he did and suffered, he put into that unit. And there's a discipline in there," Aakre said.

An important part of the discipline was knowledge, as indicated by a memo Spaulding wrote: "Note to the 153rd Battalion and staff: I'll back your decisions in your units, but make too many wrong ones and you'll be looking for a new job."

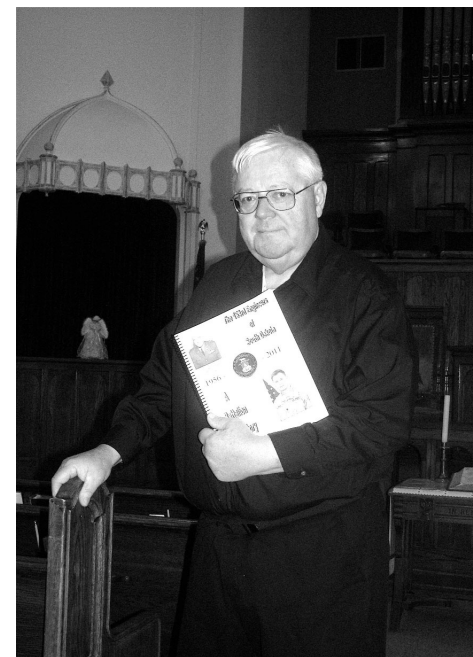
"This commander surrounded himself with good people, and from what I'm told ... he made everybody better, and they made him better," Aakre said. "He pushed himself and he pushed them. There were at one time, six engineering units in the state. We're the last one up. That's because he said, 'This is what you need to know.' He kept the recruitment up, he kept the training up. He was a great believer in education."

That belief lives on today.

"All the men that (Spaulding) had with him on his staff from 1956 on, they were commanders, ultimately, of this unit," Aakre said. "He trained them, and his influence stays in that unit."

Aakre said one of the first copies of the book went to Spaulding's widow.

Another went to the outgoing unit commander, Lt. Col. Joseph Eining, who was



Chaplain Sandy Aakre

assigned to the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade.

"(At the time), I said, 'There's a bunch of men sitting back there that are a lot more qualified than me to do this,' Aakre said.

Eining told him, "That might be true, Sandy, but you're the one who did it. And that makes the difference."

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