

Introduction: A Look At An Impossible Job

BY KELLY HERTZ
kelly.hertz@yankton.net

This was an impossible job. That's the best way to sum up the *Press & Dakotan's* special "Heritage" edition saluting the men and women in our military.

The task could be considered impossible because there is no way to truly do the topic of military service any sense of total justice — not in this limited space.

The truth is, any space that we could muster wouldn't be nearly enough to fully examine the heritage of military service among the people of this region.

The Heritage edition you are reading today was originally conceived when we noted just how quickly the generation of World War II veterans are leaving us. Next year will be the 70th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, meaning that every soldier who took part in this epic operation would have to be at least in their late 80s. It was a sobering realization.

For those of us of a certain middle age, the concept of life without these World War II veterans playing an integral part was unthinkable and mournful. Those veterans have always been there for us. They have always been the pillars of the society we knew. Their exploits — real or fictionalized — were always part of our television and our movies. In some ways, World War II was as fresh to us as it was to those who actually waged that war, or endured it on the home front.

But that generation is fading fast. And they are taking with them some extraordinary experiences.

And that's how this year's Heritage project was born. It quickly expanded to include all veterans of all eras, for their service to the nation was no less important and just as essential.

But the end result is impossible. For every story or account we have in these pages, there are countless other experiences that go unreported. They may be part of family lore, or they may be secrets that are rarely revealed. We would love to tap into those, but the constraints are too many, the time and

space far too limited.

What we offer today is a very broad sampling. There are stories of veterans, and there are stories of projects tied to the military. There are first-hand accounts written by veterans, and there are other accounts offered up from readers.

Also, we were fortunate to recruit the services of Yankton resident Doug Sall, who authored several profiles for this section, plus wrote a first-hand account of his experience during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Many of these profiles are tied to books that veterans have written about their war experiences. Most of these books are still available, usually through local libraries, and offer rich first-hand accounts of ordinary people doing what really were extraordinary things, often under deadly circumstances.

The accounts in this section range from World War II to Afghanistan. During this process, we deliberately chose to, as a rule, exclude accounts from before World War II, which was a painful decision in some ways. We needed to set some parameters on this overwhelming task, and we concluded that since the World War I vets are now all gone, we would have to leave those tales to other historical sources. (But they really are worth seeking out, if you have the time, especially since 2014 will be the centennial of the start of that Great War, which had such a profound influence on the 20th century.)

This truly was an impossible task, and we do not pretend that it is all encompassing or even broadly touches all the bases.

Instead, we look at it as a beginning. Perhaps these two sections can serve as a beginning of a dialogue between veterans and those who do not know their stories. It can be a point of sharing, with the past informing the future, with those who served offering their reasons about why such service is so important to all of us.

We hope you enjoy this section, and we hope you take the time to ask veterans to tell their stories. That's where the real education begins.

You can follow Kelly Hertz on Twitter at twitter.com/kelly_hertz/. Discuss this story at www.yankton.net/.



A photo at the centerpiece of the military monument on the grounds of the Yankton County Government Center in the summer of 2013. Many county government sites across South Dakota have similar monuments honoring our veterans and soldiers, as do numerous communities throughout the region. (Kelly Hertz/P&D)



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