



Major General Eldon A. Bargewell

Coastal Washington Town Celebrates the Life of a Hometown Hero

By Suzanne Harrison

By all accounts, Major General (MG) Eldon A. Bargewell was a humble man. Dedicated to Special Operations and uneasy with the lifetime of honors bestowed upon him, many described the retired operator as the kind of man who did what was right, not what would earn awards. Yet, he was a highly decorated soldier who continued to earn recognition for heroism and valor even after his retirement in early 2007. He did so while inspiring countless others along the way.

Among his awards were the Distinguished Service Cross, four Purple Hearts, three Bronze Stars for combat valor, and three additional Bronze Stars for meritorious service. A proud Ranger and Special Forces soldier, in 2010 he was awarded the U.S. Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) highest honor, the Bull Simons Award. Less than a decade later, in 2019, Bargewell died in a tragic accident at age 71. On 20 May 2023, his hometown of Hoquiam, Washington, dedicated a park and statue to honor MG Bargewell.

Hundreds of colleagues, friends and family members attended the dedication ceremony, many

of them speaking of Bargewell's distinguished 40-year Army career on that sunny Saturday in Hoquiam. The coastal town is about an hour south of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, where Bargewell served in his first officer assignment in 1973. However, his distinguished career began when he enlisted in the Army in 1967. After completing the Special Forces Qualification Course in 1968, he was assigned to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG). It did not take long for him to make his mark in Vietnam, both with his colleagues and for his heroism.

According to his Distinguished Service Cross citation, then-Staff Sergeant Bargewell exhibited valor on 27 September 1971 while operating on a long-range reconnaissance team far into enemy territory. "On that date," the citation reads, "his 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 wounds, placed a deadly volume of machine gun fire on the enemy line. As the enemy

The statue honoring the late MG Eldon A. Bargewell, created by sculptor Rip Caswell, is the centerpiece of a park dedicated in his honor in Hoquiam, Washington.



LEFT: 24 August 1986, Mount Rainier, Washington (MG Bargewell on right). **RIGHT:** Bargewell (on the right) in a helicopter.

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."

Bargewell earned a commission two years later after completing Officer Candidate School. His first officer assignment was as a Long-Range Reconnaissance Platoon Leader in Company B, 75th Infantry (Ranger), at Fort Lewis. Again, he made an impression. It was there in 1974,

as a platoon leader for the newly activated 2nd Battalion, 75th Infantry, that he met Lieutenant General (Retired) Lawson W. Magruder, III, then a captain and his company commander. Magruder said Bargewell was the only selectee who had both an OCS commission and Vietnam experience.

The unit trained non-stop, preparing for upcoming deployment. "Key to our success in that first year was the development of high standards built on a foundation of trust that led to a winning Ranger spirit and incredible teamwork," Magruder said during the park dedication. "Eldon was instrumental in helping me imbue those high standards and realism in our Bravo Company training because of his vast combat experience. Even though I was also a Vietnam combat veteran and commanding a company for the second time, I was a far more effective leader because Eldon was at my side."

In 1981, Bargewell volunteered for his first of many assignments at 1st Special Forces Operational

Detachment-Delta, Fort Bragg (Fort Liberty since 2 June 2023), North Carolina, where he would spend much of his career and would excel as a leader. Command Sergeant Major (Retired) Mike Vining, who served with Bargewell episodically for 17 years, recalls that his former commander had a high standard for his soldiers. Bargewell, he said, led by example, always put the mission first, and expected the best from his soldiers. "If you went in to see him on a matter, you had to be well prepared. You had to do your homework," Vining said.

He was described during the ceremony as rarely smiling and very serious, although those who knew him best said he had a great sense of humor. "Eldon had a dry sense of humor and at times it took a while to see that it was meant to be funny," Vining said. "He was a very hard worker and when he was given a task, he was all business."

Bargewell also listened to his soldiers and rewarded them appropriately. "If Eldon approved a military

award for you, you earned it,” Vining said. “One time, I felt a person should be getting a higher award. I went in to see Eldon and he agreed. He said if I write it, he will approve it. Eldon agreed by his standard, it should be higher, and that tells you something.”

Bargewell served in key joint assignments from 1993 to 2005 at Joint Special Operations Command, Special Operations Command, Europe (SOCEUR), USSOCOM, Allied Command Europe, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He also served in Panama, Iraq, and Sarajevo, among other places far from Hoquiam, earning many honors along the way, and inspiring his subordinates, peers, and leaders.

“I gave Eldon Bargewell the toughest assignments. He always succeeded and never let us down,” said General (Retired) Peter Schoomaker, the 35th Army chief of Staff. “MG (William) Bill Garrison (former JSOC Commander) once commented that Eldon was the kind of Soldier that we all aspired to be. I totally agree... no better way to describe him.”

While those who knew him best said Bargewell would likely be embarrassed by all the accolades, the Hoquiam locals said that they needed to honor their “hometown hero.” To them, Bargewell served as an inspiration. Jason “Jay” Fry, a long-time friend and neighbor who led the dedication effort, said that the town followed closely Bargewell’s promotions, decorations, and achievements, which were reported in the local newspaper. Once a vibrant logging town, the town has seen hard times over

the years as industries left and the population dwindled. “The town was depressed,” said Fry. “He was someone for the town to look up to.”

Fry said the town did not want to forget the man who inspired them through the years. So, Fry and several others who grew up in Hoquiam created the MG Eldon Bargewell Memorial Committee four years ago, hoping to raise about \$300,000. He pitched the idea to the Hoquiam Historical Preservation Committee and City Council.

“There were countless people involved in making this happen,” Fry, committee chairman, said, including more than 450 donors who contributed roughly \$380,000 to pay for the statue, park landscaping, and upkeep. Fry hopes the fund will continue to grow in order to sustain the park for years to come. Since the dedication, the park has become a popular stop for locals and visitors, Fry said.

David Mitchell, who attended high school and community college with Bargewell and who serves on the committee, hopes the park and his classmate’s story will inspire a younger generation of Hoquiam residents. “He means a lot to the community – a community that’s trying to find itself again,” said Mitchell. “Eldon always had a strong focus. All the way through high school he had a drive and a focus for what he wanted to do. His story helps show young people that if you have the drive – even if you live in a small town – you can still achieve great things. Eldon is a personification of what someone can achieve if they have the will, drive, and pride to succeed if you don’t give up.”

Mitchell, an artist, assisted with the creative vision for the park and donated a drawing of Bargewell that captured the way many of the townsfolk remembered him. While he had not seen his classmate in decades, “That’s the face I knew,” Mitchell said. “I wanted to create an image that all the people I went to school with could relate to – an image of a man finding his place.”

Delta Park and Bargewell’s memorial statue is situated on a triangle formed by Emerson, N, and Maple Streets in Hoquiam. The centerpiece of the park is a bronze likeness of Bargewell, sculpted by Rip Caswell, who grew up in the nearby town of Montesano. Caswell, owner of a studio in Troutdale, Oregon, said he was honored to create the statue. He hoped to capture Bargewell’s essence, using a Vietnam-era picture of him and imagining the



The city of Hoquiam contributed signage directing visitors to the park in honor of the late MG Eldon A. Bargewell.



moment Bargewell earned his Distinguished Service Cross.

In addition to the statue, there are plaques commemorating Bargewell's leadership from Vietnam to Iraq, listing the operations he participated in, and recognizing his Distinguished Service Cross. Local businesses donated time and supplies to build much of the park. The city assisted with signage, parking modifications, and crosswalks.

More than 400 people attended the statue unveiling. Soldiers from 5th Special Forces Group and the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, provided ceremonial honors. The dedication was also attended by veterans of the MACV-SOG.



(image credit: David Mitchell, used with permission)

MG Eldon Bargewell, depicted in the Vietnam era, was drawn by Hoquiam native David Mitchell, who attended high school with the late general.

Soldiers from the 1st Special Forces Group Public Affairs Office captured the event. During his invocation, Army Chaplain Major (MAJ) Patrick Cobb summarized what many attendees echoed. “General Bargewell lived a life worthy of his calling.”

Members of Bargewell's family, including his wife, Marian, attended the ceremony. Mrs. Bargewell described a time when her husband was invited to throw out a first pitch at a Yankee's baseball game in New York City. Flown in a private jet by the Yankee's General Manager and given first-class accommodations, Marian Bargewell said her husband worried he would embarrass the Army if he could not throw the ball over the plate. “Eldon was scared to death. He was so afraid he was going to make a fool of himself throwing that ball,” she said.

So, he and Marian walked over to Central Park to practice until he felt comfortable. He had his chance the next day and got the ball over the plate. “It may have been a little to side, but they called it a strike,” Marian Bargewell said.

Admiral (Ret.) Eric Olson, former commander of USSOCOM, recalled friendly competition between him and Bargewell during overlapping Special Operations assignments. “I felt not so much like a peer, but like the proverbial grasshopper at the feet of the Shaolin master. He knew that I still had much to learn in some specific areas of warfare where he was quite expert, and he taught me as much as he could,” Olson said. “The standard that I wanted to achieve was Eldon Bargewell's approval. And it was a high standard for sure.”

Bargewell and Olson served as Army-Navy counterparts for about a year, often organizing training exchanges and the occasional surprise raids on each other's units. “It was just two guys from Washington State far away from home, doing what we thought was right for our teams and our country. I know for sure that my unit was better for having trained with and against Eldon's – and I

think that Eldon would acknowledge that his force might have learned a thing or two from us.”

Schoomaker summed up the sentiment for his friends, colleagues, and townspeople. “For more than forty years, since our earliest days in the unit, I was privileged to both serve with Eldon and to know him as a close friend. He was one of the finest leaders of his generation, living all seven of the Army values to the fullest: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. Without a doubt, Eldon was a warrior ... the very epitome of the Warrior Ethos: Always place the mission first; Never Quit; Never Accept Defeat; and, Never Leave a Fallen Comrade.”



(image credit: U.S. Army)

MG Eldon A. Bargewell