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FEATURED

TOP STORY

O'Donnell's passion for aircraft, electronics leads him to Air Force

By Ryan Spoehr / Thistle Correspondent
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O'Donnell performing maintenance on search radar equipment at the radar station in Unalakleet, Alaska in 19
Photo submitted

As a child working on a farm outside of Gays Mills, Wis., in the '50s and '60s, Bob O'Donnell would often find himself gazing at planes as they flew overhead.

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“When you are working on a farm over the summer, if aircraft fly over, it becomes very intriguing,” O'Donnell said.

He didn't know it then, but one day he would be maintaining electrical equipment and monitoring all aircraft movement in different areas of the U.S.

For O'Donnell joining the military seemed inevitable. He had three brothers who had served in the armed forces before him, all of which chose the U.S. Army.

As a youth O'Donnell made the decision that if he were to go into the military he wanted to go in the U.S. Air Force.



“I was interested in electricity and electronics,” O'Donnell said. “The Air Force offered schools and training. The Navy offered that too, but not as much.”

On Aug. 16, 1967, O'Donnell became airman. He knew he wanted to work with electronics, but before entering he had very little experience.

“It was just the basic equipment on the farm,” O'Donnell said.

After joining, he immediately began using state of the art equipment.

"There were some sophisticated transistor electronics at that time. It was much like what TV was at that time," he said. "What we worked with was like a very powerful radio set."

After boot camp, he spent over one year learning the ins and outs of his position working in aircraft control and warning radar repair.

During in his four years in the service, O'Donnell was stationed in Biloxi, Miss., Alaska and Antigo, Wis.

He said the experience in Alaska was interesting because there would be Russian aircraft flying over the base checking things out. Since this was the late '60s, the U.S. was still engulfed in the Cold War with the U.S.S.R.

O'Donnell's job was to operate and maintain search radar equipment and search the western coast of Alaska to identify and monitor all U.S. and foreign aircraft.

The last 12 months of his tenure in the Air Force was spent in Antigo where he was part of the defense for the majority of the northern portion of the U.S. The majority of work was to collect information on the traffic going through and around O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

O'Donnell was a sergeant when he finished serving in the Air Force and went on to continue his education at UW-Stevens Point. From there he graduated with a business administration degree.

He ended up using his background in electronics as a springboard into his career in agri-business.

"The experience lent itself right away," O'Donnell said.

In the first three years of his career, he used electronics and then he went on to sell farm feed processing equipment for Olds Seed Company, which eventually merged with Advanta and then joined Land O' Lakes.

O'Donnell lived in Madison for two years when he started his career. He settled in McFarland in 1977 and has been here ever since.

Looking back, O'Donnell said being in the military was a learning experience on several different levels, including meeting others. He said a large percentage of people he was around in the Air Force were from the Northeast, which has a different type of culture than the Midwest.

“Half the people that made up my squadron were from Massachusetts and Vermont,” he said. “When you exercise, eat, drink and spend 24 hours a day with people of other backgrounds, it's different. They have a different way of thinking.”

As for the young ones who are about to or are thinking about joining the Air Force or any other branch of the military, O'Donnell has advice for those people.

“Follow your interest,” he said. “If you would like to see other places of the world (the military is) a good way to do it.”

He said if people are willing to go through the training and put in the work, they should think about joining the military. The hands-on training can be valuable and apply to work later in life.

“A corporation is very similar to the military. There is a commander in the military and a president in a company. Everyone has a goal for the company. They have a battle plan and everyone works as a unit,” O'Donnell said. “The military teaches discipline and that lends to structure and command. It instills the ideas of teamwork and cooperation.”

But he said there can be more benefits, even beyond trade skills. And whether it is through active military service or just volunteering for an organization to help out those who are less fortunate, he encourages young people to get out and do something for their country, whether it be domestically or overseas. He said it can be an eye-opening experience, not only to learn lessons for the trades, but to look at things from a different perspective.

“Some (people) don't understand how lucky they are to be born here (in the U.S.),” O'Donnell said.

O'Donnell retired from agri-business in 2010 after 33 years.

He now helps out at the American Legion with integrating youth from the community. He also volunteers with the VA Hospital with picking up disabled veterans to make sure they get back home alright.

“It's very interesting. It's sort of a bonding with veterans if they have difficulty, have walkers, etc.,” O'Donnell said. “But it goes back to the entrance to the military. You learn to take care of your buddies.”