

From Boy Scout in Bethlehem to Tank Driver in Desert Storm

Note: On Veteran's Day and Memorial Day our thoughts turn to those who have made sacrifices to our country through their military service. This article is a look at former Bethlehem resident, David Bissette, and his experiences in Desert Storm.

My time as a middle school teacher and principal was often marked with contacts with children of unique inquisitiveness and unquestioned abilities. One such student was David Bissette, the son of my teaching partner at West Middle School in the late 1970's. David could have been a twin to Ralphie with a Red Ryder BB gun in the 1983 movie, *The Christmas Story*. David loved to rummage through my science experiments in my classroom while waiting for his mother to finish her school day. He was also a student at Bethlehem while I was principal who loved to "Stump the Principal" to win free ice cream. Richard Garren, former scout leader of Troop 275 in Bethlehem rekindled my memory of this young man as he recounted his escapades on hikes, his love of herpetology, and his attainment of the Life Scout award.

Little did we know that this Life Scout and former student and present-day Wake Forest resident would end up fighting in one of the most intense battles of the Gulf War and Operation Desert Storm. When David finished high school in 1989 he opted to delay attending college and joined the army.

"I thought it was a good time to join," he said. "The Soviet Union was collapsing, Germany was getting ready to reunify and I was going to go to Europe to hang out with the young people." Bissette thought he needed to develop his maturity before going off to college. Little did he know when he signed up for the army, that he would most definitely receive that opportunity.

Bissette's military service started smoothly. He trained at Fort Knox, Ky. and became an Abrams tank driver and was awarded the Top Gun Award on the 9mm pistol. He deployed to Northern Germany, where he was stationed with the 2nd Armored Division, also known as "Hell on Wheels." Bissette looks back on his time in Germany fondly, referring to it as "like Boy Scouts with guns" maybe in a nod to his own boy scout experience. But things didn't go on that way for long.

"In November of 1990, I had a little snafu," he said. "Colin Powell came on Armed Forces radio and television and said that 2nd Armored out of Garlstedt, Germany, was going to be redeployed to the Persian Gulf. The fun and games of Germany were long gone, and the reality of Iraq was a serious reality. January, 1991 found Bissette on stevedore duty in Al Jubail with the 1st Infantry Division "Big Red One" waiting for their tanks to arrive from Germany. Two months later, the carnage of Desert Storm began.

Bissette's brigade was attached to the 1st Infantry Division, and in February of 1991 he found himself crossing over the Great Saudi Berm. He and his comrades-in-arms were greeted by a sign reading, "Welcome to Iraq courtesy of the Big Red One" (a nickname for the 1st Infantry Division).

He recalls early in his arrival in Iraq watching the fireworks associated with the use of some of the biggest conventional munitions on the Iraqis. As he and his crew sat on top of his tank watching, he didn't know the target, but the unbelievable sight reminded him of what a nuclear bomb might resemble. The soldiers were listening to BBC radio broadcasts during the explosion, and Bissette vividly recalls the radio host saying, "Oh my God, the Yanks have nuked the Iraqis."

But as frightening as the

sight of exploding munitions on the distant horizon may be, it fades in comparison to the shock of combat. Bissette reflects on the Battle of Norfolk, which the U.S. soldiers called "fright night," as one of the worst experiences of his life. He explained that close quarters combat with hostile infantry is the worst situation for a tank crew to find



Bissette rides atop a tank during maneuvers in the Bergen Hohne NATO training area in Germany.

itself in. U.S. and U.K. forces engaged Iraqi troops, including the Republican Guard, Saddam Hussein's elite soldiers. In Bissette's words, "They were climbing on our tanks trying to drop grenades down our hatches and so the tank commanders and the gunners had their machine guns shooting at the sides of their wingmen to shoot the infantry off the sides of our tanks.

The battle lasted for about 100 hours. "For the whole hundred hours of the ground action I think I may have gotten two hours of sleep," said Bissette. Because of the lack of sleep, Bissette said near the end of the battle, the sand dunes looked like moving ocean waves. The battle resulted in a victory for the coalition forces, with the Iraqis sustaining heavy losses. But despite the explosions and the battles, Bissette's remembers vividly a poignant experience that conveyed a message of hope reminiscent of a biblical Noah experience. "After

the cease fire (in Kuwait) the sky was ablaze with burning oil wells and we pulled our tank into battle position," he recalls. "Out of the sky flew an oil-soaked white dove and landed on the end of our gun tube — we took care of it for a couple of weeks and cleaned it up and then one day it took off."

His time in the military more than prepared him for college. When he returned home, he attended UNC-G and studied fine arts. He was amused by classmates and friends' complaints about college life, after having experienced the difficulties of Desert Storm. He graduated with honors and has since worked in a variety of capacities, doing print and web design, working on IBM's website, starting a business with a friend in 2003 and then The Grain Mill, a cooperatively owned bulk food store in downtown Wake Forest in 2010, which he still operates today. He is also the owner of the Stroud House Bed and Breakfast. Bissette lives in Wake Forest. He has three daughters, Anna, Katelyn and Sarah, and his wife Rebecca, whom he married in March of 2018.

His military service is still affecting him today, as he sometimes struggles with PTSD, as do many veterans. He is unable to enjoy fireworks up close due to the exploding noise. It is noteworthy that David still connects with his fellow tank soldiers; Richard Garren, his former scout leader; and some of his scouting and school friends.

David can be contacted via email at david@

thegrainmillwtf.com or www.TheGrainMillWF.com for those of you who may want to thank him for his service as one of many who paid the price of military service.

References:

Hometown Hero, week of September 7, 2017, Wake Forest Weekly.

Richard Garren, former boy scout leader of Troop 275 in Bethlehem Interview with David Bissette. (Submitted by Dr. Warren Hollar)



David Bissette today

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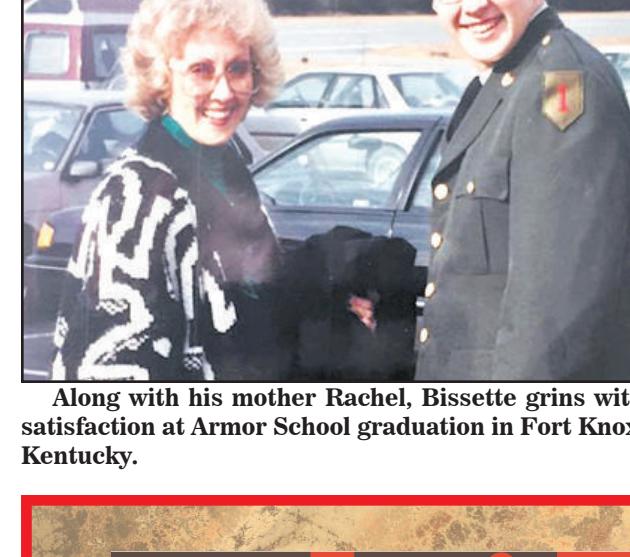
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Along with his mother Rachel, Bissette grins with satisfaction at Armor School graduation in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Date	Artist
May 4	Sam Reider & The Human Hands
May 11	Gigi Dover & The Big Love
May 18	Amanda Anne Platt & The Honeycutters
May 25	Mason Via & Hot Trail Mix
June 1	Super Doppler
June 8	Orquesta GarDel
June 15	The Digs
June 22	The Moon and You
June 29	Twisted Pine
Sept 7	Big Sound Harbor
Sept 14	Seth Walker
Sept 21	Howard Levy/Chris Siebold
Sept 28	Laurie Lewis and the Right Hands

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