

One Families Story: Honoring Our Delta County Heroes

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Introduction. Recently, when writing a book about the VanDenBerg family, Delta County history buffs Bud and John E. VanDenBerg (cousins) discovered that over 25 family members had served in WWII, Korea, and the Vietnam wars, and in more recent wars.

This article focuses just on the 11 Delta County, Colorado veterans from the VanDenBerg and Fisk families, who were born in Crawford, Paonia and other North Fork Valley areas. When returning to Delta County after horrific war time experiences, most never spoke of what they went through. The authors were able to research military and other records and discover their actual stories. Others who are still alive shared their experiences.

The Delta County-born veterans from the VanDenBerg and Fisk families:



Ted VanDenBerg (1919- 2000), US Army. Ted fought in some of the most difficult war theatres in WWII. As part of the Red Arrow Division, he was initially being sent from Crawford to a Scandinavian country to help repel the Nazi invasion. At the last minute, his untrained and “green” division was sent to New Guinea in the Pacific. The Japanese had swept through the area and their next step was taking Australia. The Allied Forces felt that they must be stopped in New Guinea and assigned General McArthur to lead the resistance. Ted served in the first wave of troops assigned to fight the battle hardened jungle fighters of the Japanese Army. His unit suffered enormous casualties, losing 1/3 of the division in 90 days. Ted was assigned to go into the jungle and locate dead Allied soldiers, remove their identifying dog tags, and leave their bodies in place. With this experience, is it any wonder Ted returned to Crawford and never spoke of his time in New Guinea?



Charles VanDenBerg (2017-2008), US Coast Guard. Charles (father of John E.), like many Crawford teens, enlisted right after Pearl Harbor. He enlisted in the Coast Guard and was trained as a baker. He was assigned to a troop ship (the USS Bayfield), ferrying soldiers back and forth to the Philippines. German and Japanese submarines lurked along the way, and over 2000 US soldiers would have perished if their troop ship was sunk, which never happened to the Bayfield. Troops exist on their diet, and Charles served deep in the bowels of the ship, in a bakery that was over 110 degrees. He was an example of an essential worker that allowed the Allied to be ultimately victorious.

Wesley VanDenBerg (1923-1981), US Navy and Army. Wesley served in WWII, both in the Navy and the Army. After Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the Navy. However, the Army had been



ordered to retake Burma from the Japanese, as the Japanese had swept through Burma in a precedent to invading India and China. The terrain was so mountainous, our military was forced to use mules to move critical military supplies to our troops. General Merrill, leader of our effort, sent out a call to all branches of our military for any soldiers who had experience with mules or horses. So, Wesley found himself, as a Crawford boy with lots of large animal time, in the Army, in Burma! He served as a muleskinner, at enormous risk from Japanese snipers who first shot the mules and then the soldiers. General Merrill said, after the Japanese were repelled, "Next time, give me the mule skimmers instead of doughboys, for it is easier to make doughboys out of mule skimmers than to make mule skimmers out of doughboys!".



Roy Fisk (1916-1952), US Navy. Roy served in WWII, in the South Pacific. Roy enlisted in the Navy in 1934, and he was a crew member on the USS Hornet, an aircraft carrier which was sunk by the Japanese in the battle of Santa Cruz. After the Hornet was sunk, Roy volunteered to be in a new PT boat squadron, eventually becoming a Chief Warrant Officer. In his role, he met John F. Kennedy who was on PT109, and in fact, Roy's boat and Kennedy's boat were in a race, which Roy won. Roy was in highly dangerous service in the Solomon Islands. The Allied forces were trying to stop the Japanese advance, and the potential of the Japanese taking Australia. Roy's PT boat primarily operated at night, searching for Japanese ships. When they found a Japanese ship, they attacked in the dark, often sending torpedoes at the enemy's ship and then high tailing it away before being shot at. During this phase of the war, as the Japanese discovered their lethality, over half of all Navy PT boats were sunk and the crews lost. Against all odds, Roy survived the war.



Duard (Bud) VanDenBerg (1931 -), US Army. Bud went to basic training and was quickly sent into combat during the Korean War. He was a member of an artillery unit that was charged with shelling the front line of the enemy troops. Bud said that the second night he was there, he fired a truck full of ammunition, and the barrel of the howitzer glowed with heat. Soon after Bud was in his first major battle, a truce was declared, which continues to this day. Bud then was part of a convoy of 600 trucks that drove hours to the new demilitarized zone. Bud said the entire route was lined with starving, naked, and crying children, who begged for food. The country was devastated by the war. Bud has said the images of the children never leave his mind.



Earl Hugh Busby (1932-2017), US Air Force. As the Korean War began to escalate, Earl enlisted in the Air Force. He Like most of the Crawford boys, Earl was a crack shot with a rifle. Above all, he hated cooking, and to his chagrin, was quickly assigned to be an Air Force cook, and was sent to Lowry Air Base in Denver. There, he tried to get assigned to other duties, but he was told he was needed as a cook, serving 1000's of meals a day to troops departing for the war. He worked for 14 hours a day and eventually was made Head Cook, which he said was better because he supervised rather than cooked. Like Charles

VanDenBerg, who was a troop ship baker in WWII, Earl was an essential part of the war effort, and he did his job willingly and to his best ability.



Ted VanDenBerg (1933-), US Army. Ted was drafted into the Army in 1953. After basic training, he volunteered for the Army's Airborne section, and went to Fort Benning, Georgia for jump school, and became a paratrooper. He joined the 11th Airborne in Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Being an armed paratrooper was one of the most dangerous roles in the Army, but fortunately, due to the ending of the war, Ted did not have to serve in combat. Ted tells the story about being able to invite his parents (Andy and Kleo) and his sister Dolly to come to Fort Carson, Colorado to see him jump. Ted was honorably discharged after 3 ½ years of returned to Colorado.



George VanDenBerg (1935-), US Navy. George volunteered for the Navy in 1955, wanting to get his military service done so he could move on with his career. During rifle qualification, George (who was right-handed) was not able to shoot and close his right eye. He had to learn to shoot left-handed and still got the second-best score in the company. Those Crawford boys knew how to shoot! He was then assigned to a destroyer, the USS Algerholm. He wanted something interesting to do on the ship, and applied to be the ship's barber, and the

departing barber gave him a few basic instructions. During his try out, he was asked to cut the hair of the ship's chief officer! He passed the test! He was not a war time sailor, but he said that being in the Navy changed him, learning how to read and judge people, and learning to think through decisions. After he left the service, George was involved with many interesting jobs, and using some of what he learned in the Navy, was eventually appointed to be the Fish and Game Commissioner for the State of Colorado.



Les VanDenBerg (1936-) US Army. Les tried to enlist in the Navy like his brother George, but when he went to Denver to get joined up, he became ill and George went on with the Navy. After he recovered, he was assigned to the Army. Another peace-time soldier, Les was trained in an anti-aircraft unit and in an M-16 tank. He was sent to Germany, which was in recovery from the devastation of WWII. Les said that his military service taught him to take care of himself, and to "grow up."

Les later became a minister, and then spent much of his career in real estate.



Gary VanDenBerg, (1943 -) US Navy. Gary volunteered for the Navy in 1965, timing his enrollment so as to not miss hunting season in Delta County! He was assigned to the USS Southerland, which was a WWII destroyer that had been updated with a new superstructure and engines. The Vietnam was on, and Gary’s ship was assigned to go up and down the coast, stopping and checking small boats for contraband. In addition, a spotter plane would identify enemy targets on land, and Gary’s destroyer would shell the positions with 5 inch guns. Gary said that the enemy soldiers would shoot rifles at the off-shore destroyer, and he and the other sailors were trained to avoid the side of the ship which faced the shore. He remembered the “PING” of the enemy bullets hitting the other side of the ship. Gary eventually was promoted to be an E5 Petty Officer, 2nd Class. Gary served two tours of duty in Vietnam. After the war, Gary joined the civilian service and worked as a Repair Superintendent for Navy work in Washington, Oregon, and Alaska.



John Dallas VanDenBerg, (1943 -) US Navy. Also during the Vietnam era, John volunteered for the Navy. He was assigned to a brand-new ship, the USS Ramsey. It was a guided missile, anti-submarine destroyer escort. In Vietnam, John’s ship also shelled enemy coastal areas and protected larger Navy ships. After the war, John returned to Delta County, first working in the coal mines and then as a custom builder.



The parents who sent their boys off to war. It is important to note not only the sacrifice of the veterans, but also to recognize what their parents went through. The mothers (pictured here) lived in constant fear of hearing that their son was killed. Maggie VanDenBerg, the VanDenBerg family matriarch, sent 5 sons into WWII. Tracy Busby sent her son off, as did Roy Fisk’s mother. Kleo VanDenBerg, mother of George, Bud, Lester, and Ted, sent four boys off to the service. Ada VanDenBerg, mother of Gary and John D., sent two sons off to war. Gary remembered that Ada and John (Gary’s Dad) wrote him every week that he was in Vietnam. Gary remembered his Dad dropping him off at the train station in Grand Junction and the look of sadness on his Dad’s face when he got on the train, heading off to war. Bud and John asked one of the cousins who knew Maggie how all of her sons survived such a difficult war experiences, and she said “Prayer, constant prayer”.

Conclusion. The authors want to salute our heroes from Delta County, not only the VanDenBerg and Fisk veterans, but all those from the county who have served. When reflecting on the importance of recognizing our Delta County veterans, Bud shared that, at 90 years old, a full 70 years after being in combat, he still remembers the fear of death during an intense fire fight on the front lines. Most of the younger residents of the county have no frame of reference for what our veterans went through, and yet can read about these experiences, and like all of us, have tremendous gratitude for the service they went through. We all owe them a great debt and thanks.