

QC Veterans Take on Historic Mission

Later this spring, after a dozen years as a mobile program, the Armed Forces Heritage Museum (AFHM) will welcome visitors to its new headquarters in the historic Captain James Lawrence House in Burlington, New Jersey. AFHM, a nonprofit run by volunteers, documents New Jersey's military history; programs include a stunning, multigenerational oral history archive of men and women who served in diverse capacities. In 2020, the museum received the History Program of the Year Award for Education from the Burlington County Parks Service and Commissioners. Critical to this success is the work of two Queens College alumni—retired U.S. Air Force officers Colonel Bob von Barga '58, who on May 27 will receive Burlington County's History Award for Achievement and Leadership, and Colonel (Dr.) Lewis Wetstein '68.

AFHM grew out of a smaller project. In the late 1990s, the Air Force replaced its venerable C-141 Lockheed Starlifter. One disabled aircraft, with a broken wing spar, remained at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey. As a member of a cadre of retired military, community leaders and retired New Jersey State Police, von Barga built a park on the base with the aircraft as its focal point. At the dedication ceremony, he recalls, "A man came up to me and said, 'What you've done here is beautiful. This is really a top-notch job. But what this base needs is a museum that the public can get to. Existing museums and exhibits are all behind the security gate and inaccessible to the public.'"

Mobile Museum

A plan to construct a museum building on the perimeter of the base was sanctioned by Air Mobility Command, but failed to obtain Pentagon approval. Von Barga relates that a change of course was initiated by their group's board chairman, who said: "This isn't going to work. If we can't have people come to the museum, why don't we take the museum to the people?" With the help of USAF Brigadier General Robert Dutko (ret.), the group secured a trailer from Ewing Township that had been used as a stage. The trailer was refurbished as a mobile museum with panels, interactive exhibits, and outside tents.

[The Armed Forces Heritage Museum](#) (AFHM) () opened in 2010 as a nonprofit organization with von Barga as its first executive director. Its stated mission is to preserve the military history of the State of New Jersey and the neighboring region. However, in his view, its purpose is larger than that. "We want to honor the people who went and served the nation. Most of them came back and never spoke about it."

Toward that end, the AFHM mobile museum travels to public events with its exhibits, docents, and—most important—veterans who speak about their experiences in wartime and peacetime roles. Though they scaled back during the pandemic, von Barga observes that "We have really established ourselves in the community. We have good political and financial support. People want us to participate at their township functions, state fairs, schools, and other events like the big New Jersey history conference held at the Monmouth Battlefield."

Chronicling humanitarian missions as well as combat, AFHM even produces its own documentaries. The museum made a short film on the 2015 airlift of an [Urban Disaster Recovery Team to Nepal after an earthquake](#).

Von Bargaen is especially proud of AFHM's Living History Project. He has recorded and filmed people he calls "phenomenal"—ordinary men and women whose heroism, resourcefulness, and moral courage would otherwise be unknown to the larger public. He was especially moved by the [exploits of Ernest Kaufman](#), a Jew imprisoned at age 18 at the Buchenwald concentration camp immediately after Krystallnacht, "The Night of Broken Glass," in 1939. With the help of an American sponsor, Kaufman's family obtained his release on the condition that he leave Germany immediately. He immigrated to the United States, enlisted in the U.S. Army when Pearl Harbor was attacked, was commissioned an officer, and went on to distinguished service as an intelligence officer in Europe. Unfortunately, his entire family in Germany was lost in the Holocaust.

Not all von Bargaen's subjects are military members. Among his interviewees are [conscientious objectors](#). "These men were much maligned by the public during the Second World War. They were Americans who, because of their religious convictions, would not bear arms. They relate the unthinkable actions they endured to prove that they were not cowards, but patriotic citizens. I think we tell their story well."

Making History

It is not surprising that von Bargaen was a history major at QC. He was commissioned through the college's Air Force ROTC program (phased out in 1960, but documented in [Special Collections and Archives](#)). His active and reserve duty service consisted of air refueling and airlift assignments as a navigator, flight examiner, and operations staff officer while amassing over 5,000 hours of flying time. When promoted to lieutenant colonel, he became Air Base Group commander at McGuire AFB. Upon promotion to colonel, he served as a Homeland Defense senior staff officer.

At McGuire, von Bargaen first crossed paths with Wetstein, a cardiac surgeon who joined the military soon after medical school. In the 1970s he was a flight surgeon in a medical unit at McGuire where he reported to von Bargaen. Colonel Wetstein retired from the Air Force as the New Jersey State Air Surgeon. In civilian life, he has held many professional offices; he was president of several medical societies in New Jersey and is currently chief of thoracic surgery at Ocean University Medical Center in Brick Township. "I don't need any more titles, but I want to contribute," he says. An enthusiastic supporter and founding member of AFHM, he is credited by von Bargaen with much of the museum's fundraising success. "I loved the military," Wetstein reflects. "I got involved because this country's been great to me. The people I met—they were all A+."

Only recently, von Bargaen and Wetstein discovered that they both are QC alumni, something they realized serendipitously as they remain involved with the college and the friends they made. Von Bargaen, who attended his 50th and 60th reunions, recently donated rare 1954–57 [film footage of the college](#) to the QC Special Collections and Archives in Rosenthal Library, where it is now available for viewing or research. Von Bargaen shot the footage on 8mm film and narrated it.

Both alumni appreciate the start QC gave them. "My parents had no money," says Wetstein. "I had an outstanding education that was financially accessible." Von Bargaen echoes that sentiment. "It gave me a well-rounded education. My father and mother came from Germany; they were both immigrants who instilled in me a strong sense of citizenship. QC really gave me an opportunity to excel in life that wasn't available in other parts of the country." He remembers Dean Margaret Kiely with especially high regard. "There was an aura about her—just to be with her. She was an inspiration." Although they plan to continue mobile exhibits, they also look forward to establishing headquarters in this highly appropriate location. The 18th-century

Captain James Lawrence House was the birthplace of a War of 1812 naval hero, and today is a part of the Burlington County Historical Society. Renovations are being completed to make the space ready for AFHM.

After a lifetime of achievements, von Bargaen and Wetstein are not resting on their laurels. Wetstein is impressed with the men and women who volunteer their time: "They are really good people. They're there to do the nitty-gritty work, to make this thing happen." Von Bargaen, now AFHM's president emeritus, is working on documentaries about Gold Star mothers and the desegregation of the military. "We'll tell the story the way it was then and the way it is today," he promises. "I'm not going to whitewash anything."

He adds, "Overall, we want to tell the story of individuals and what they accomplished—we put a face on history and tell their story. If you're a good storyteller, history becomes alive and people listen and learn."