

KEY PLAYERS

Phil Bauer

TED OLINGER, KP NEWS

Phil Bauer, 83, has been a staple of Key Peninsula culture for more than 30 years. He served as president and treasurer of the KP Civic Center Association and treasurer of Two Waters Arts Alliance; he volunteered for the KP Fair for a decade; built local Houses for Humanity; strapped on skates to supervise Friday Skate Nigh—and for all these troubles received the KP Citizen of the Year Award in 2006. He's hiked up and down the Cascades and Olympics and paddled a canoe 900 miles on the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean. He also logged 1,600 hours flying five different aircraft in the Vietnam War. He still serves on the civic center board after 20 years and helps distribute the KP News every month.

But you wouldn't know any of that unless you saw him in action, or until you sat down at a local watering hole and pried his story out of him one beer at a time.

The Key Peninsula News recently did just that for this inaugural entry in our new, semi-regular feature, Key Players.

Phil Bauer grew up on a farm in central Iowa, south of Waterloo, raising wheat and corn on 800 acres owned by his grandfather, together with hogs, sheep, and a herd of 100 head of Hereford cattle.

"We were in the tenant house," Bauer said. "My mom and dad were teachers, but we worked that farm. I spent all my young life there. My dad would drop out of teaching and work the farm, then go back to teaching. We were like a lot of people—poor. We lived off of pheasant and rabbits and fish and stuff like that."

Bauer's family left the farm for another small town when he was in junior high but he went to high school in Des Moines and, in 1956, to college at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

"Because we were poor I dropped out of college a few times, then I'd go back," he said. "I didn't know what the heck I was going to do. I knew I didn't want to farm."

He graduated with a major in physical education and a minor in English, and then started graduate school. He'd also enrolled in the advanced Reserve Officer

Training Corps. "You had to take two years of ROTC, but if you went into advanced training, you got \$29 a month, which I needed," Bauer said.

"I was in graduate school until the Army called me up in 1961. I got on a train Jan. 22, 1962 and headed out to Fort Benning, Georgia.

"I'll never forget that. Now I'm a really naïve, Midwestern kid. When we went through the outskirts of Birmingham, the abject poverty of the people—talk about wide-eyed. And hearing this George Wallace talking about them, it was just mind-blowing."

Bauer spent 10 weeks in training as a 2nd Lt. infantry officer. He and his class were offered spots in the Ranger, Airborne or flight schools. "We were all college kids, we didn't want anything to do with that," he said. "But about the fourth or fifth week you really get gung-ho. I think on the fifth week I signed up for all three of them.



Phil Bauer at his 80th birthday party in July 2016. Photo: Ted Olinger, KP News

"I went through Ranger school but didn't go through Airborne because I ended up going to flight school at Fort Rucker, Alabama. My first flight in an airplane was my dollar ride in flight school. That's what they call it—you get one free ride and then you're on your way."

After 10 months of training, Bauer was assigned to the 73rd Aviation Co. and on May 31, 1963, deployed to Vietnam as a military advisor. He flew aerial surveillance in a single engine Cessna L-19 Birddog in support of the 9th ARVN Division (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) in Bac Lieu.

"We did a lot of radio relay; following people around; dropping mail; dropping flares at night; marking targets," he said. "It was an interesting tour. Little did I realize what we were getting into." Bauer was one of approximately 16,000 advisors in Vietnam at the time, more than 14 months before the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that led to open war with North Vietnam and the total deployment of 2.7 million Americans.

After a year, Bauer returned to Fort Benning. "I went to helicopter training and got checked out in a Huey, and then right before going back they transferred me over to P-2V school in San Diego."

Bauer returned to Vietnam in 1967 flying the twin engine Lockheed P-2V over the Ho Chi Minh trail on electronic counter measure missions to intercept short

range enemy radio traffic.

"I did that for six months and then ended up going back down to the Mekong Delta to fly some more smaller airplanes, and then into a helicopter unit the last couple months I was there.

"The Huey is the only aircraft I miss flying. They were just great, and they were pretty hard to knock down too. You'd get bullet holes in the main rotor and the mechanics would just put duct tape on them. We got shot at quite a bit.

"There were two wars. There was the air war and there was a ground war, and unless you were a Huey pilot and really down in the weeds, you flew your airplane—and you hung it out during the day, I'm not saying that was safe—but you went back to your unit, your base, your boat at night; had your own bed, your own mess hall, your

own officers' club and your friends, and you were completely divorced from what was really going on. We had no idea what the grunts were doing and obviously they had a terrible, terrible time. And only 10

percent of the people were involved in that; 90 percent had a pretty good deal. I had a pretty vanilla tour.

"And then I got out. I had orders for Fort Hood, Texas, to redeploy back to Vietnam in 10 months in a Cobra (attack helicopter). I said I'm not a killer and I'm not going back. That was the first major decision I ever made, getting out of the Army," Bauer said.

It was the middle of 1968, he'd been on active duty six-and-a-half years and finished as a captain at age 32.

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After a miserable stretch of substitute teaching in Los Angeles, Bauer was hired by Western Airlines in September 1968 and flew airliners for 32 years.

“I flew a lot of different airplanes for Western and Delta: 727, 737, 757, 767, 707, 720, DC-10 and L-1011,” Bauer said. “737s up in the mountains in Montana were probably the most fun flying. The approaches were pretty hairy, particularly in bad weather.”

Bauer met his future wife, Kathy, in 1974. “She came into the cockpit while we were waiting to push back and said, ‘You boys need something to drink?’ She was 23 and holy moly was she good looking. We all just stared at her.”

Phil and Kathy were married to other people and had their own families at the time, but maintained a friendship through the years. After their respective divorces, they were married in 1987 and made a new life for themselves on the Key Peninsula a year later.

“I was flying with a guy named Gary Gebo, he lived in Gig Harbor,” Bauer said. “Gary kept telling me for a year he had property available on the water. Ten acres of woods and an old funky beach house south of Vaughn Bay. I didn’t even go in the house. We drove down the driveway and I said, ‘Gary, I’ll buy it.’ ”

That was 1988. Bauer retired from commercial aviation in 2000. “But even before that, I got drafted by the civic center—I think it was Dave Stratford—and I’m still there,” he said.

Bauer was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2015, but after some surgery and a couple rounds of chemotherapy, he said he is in good shape. “I used to talk about airplanes and girls; now it’s all health,” he said. “That’s something old people do, but why would I do that? I’m not old yet.”



Lieutenant Phil Bauer, left, and Lt. Dave Rooks at the 73rd Aviation Co. tent in Bac Lieu, mid-1963. Photo courtesy: Phil Bauer

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