

# Your Neighbor

## A legacy of military service

### *Rick Beetstra follows family footsteps in distinguished Air Force career*

BY BOB DUMAS  
EDITOR

Rick Beetstra was born to serve. Later this year, the Mahopac resident will mark 20 years as a member of the U.S. Air Force—specifically, the Air National Guard—and says he will remain in the military as long as it is willing to have him.

It's not surprising he feels this way. Beetstra's family has a military legacy. His dad was a Vietnam veteran, drafted straight out of high school, and both his grandfathers served in World War II.

"One was in the Army and the other was in the Dutch navy," he said. "He was originally from Holland and came here straight off the boat. When he came to the U.S., he joined the Merchant Marines."

With one grandfather in the Army and the other in Merchant Marines and Dutch navy, Beetstra said he wanted to do something a little different.

"I wanted to be different than them," said Beetstra, a technical sergeant (E6). "I grew up in Holbrook (Long Island) near McArthur Airport and I took a liking to that. So, I always wanted to be a fighter pilot, but I had restrictions due to my height and vision. I am 6-foot-6, so I was too tall."

Beetstra enlisted in December 1999.

"I decided to enlist for two reasons: I always wanted to do good for my country and I also wanted to help pay for college," he said.

Beetstra, who graduated from Ronkonkoma High School in 1994, went to Briarcliff College in Bethpage where he earned his associate's degree in applied science. In 2003, he earned a bachelor's degree from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan where he majored in graphic design.

When the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened, Beetstra was at the center of the response—literally Ground Zero.

"I was going to school full time when it happened," he recalled. "I got a phone call from the base and they said they would have to activate me in 10 days. I had to go to Ground Zero and do security with NYPD doing credential checks and helping Verizon [restore] the phone systems. They gave us all-access to the site to get up close and personal to where the towers were. It was very surreal; a reality check—this is really happening. You realize, there are really bad people out there. It was very emotional; you could see everything."

"I grew up with the twin towers," he added. "They were an icon of New York. But when you walked up, all you saw was a big hole with debris and all the people's personal items—clothes, hats, shoes, paperwork, strollers. It made me mad, but being New Yorkers, it made us stronger



Rick Beetstra

and we all came together as one to make the city better."

In 2003-04, he was deployed to South Korea for more training and to relieve some people during the holidays. Then, in 2014-15, he was sent to Djibouti, Africa.

"I was a communications specialist and was supervisor for the IT department that overlooked the secure radios, networks and computers at our locations," he said. "I was deployed six months after I got married, so I missed our first holidays together as a husband and wife."

Beetstra's wife, Nancy—who he met through the dating website match.com—was a Marine vet herself who had been in combat, so she understood.

"It wasn't the greatest," he said, "but she gets it."

Then in December 2015, Nancy learned she was pregnant.

"And that was just when I found out I was going back to Africa for another deployment," he said. "That was right around the time we moved to Mahopac; I was scheduled to be [in Africa] for four months, but she was pregnant and having some complications, so I got an early release. It took me four days of nonstop traveling with no sleep to get home, but I was able to get there four days before the baby was born."

While Beetstra is stateside, his crew is overseas and tragically lost seven members when their helicopter crashed on the Iraq/Syria border on March 15. He said it was a gut-wrenching experience.

"I knew the two flight engineers; they were friends of mine," he said. "From what I am being told, it was an unfortu-



Beetstra and his daughter, Arabella

nate accident where they hit some power lines. Emotionally, it took a toll on me. It wasn't something I was expecting. I worked with them for so long. I was in shock. Your gut just falls to the floor.

"I went to a week's worth of funerals," he continued. "It was very emotional for me and the entire base. It's like losing a family member. It leaves a void. We are such a close-knit unit, and everyone knows each other."

Right now, Beetstra said he is in a window where he is protected from being deployed and has some time to spend with his wife and 2-year-old daughter, Arabella. In his civilian life, he is employed as an IT staffer and works with computers and networks. He's loving life in his new hometown, Mahopac.

"My mom passed away a few years ago and she was the last of my immediate family members. I had no more ties to Long Island," he said. "My wife's family is from the Westchester area, so it was easier for me to pick up and move up there to her apartment in Scarsdale. We lived there for two years and then started looking for a house. It was too expensive in Westchester, but my vet's status gave us good discounts in Putnam County. We found our dream house in Mahopac."

"I love it here; it's small-town, but not too small," he added. "Everyone knows everyone, but you still have your privacy. I like living in the country where we are. It's more rural than Long Island."

Since service is in his blood, Beetstra joined the Mahopac Fire Department. He figured it was also a good way to meet new people and learn his way around town.

"It's helping me to get to know the area and I am building another family through the fire department that fills the void when I am not on deployment," he said.

Now, Beetstra says, his goal is to complete 20 years with the military—maybe more.

"I am 42, so maybe until I am 50," he said. "I want to stay in as long as I can. I love what I do and will stay until they don't want me anymore."



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICK BEETSTRA  
Beetstra and his wife, Nancy