

## Strong Community Bond Gives VTANG The Strength To Soar

Brigadier General David Baczewski (Ret.) recalls how he and his family found the place they call home today

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Brigadier General David Baczewski (Ret.)

**D**avid Baczewski has spent most of his life wrapped in what he calls a "blue blanket."

The 52-year-old Westford resident was born on an Air Force base. He grew up and earned his own appointment to the Air Force Academy, where he met the woman he would marry. Fourteen years of active duty followed, as a pilot aid training instructor.

Throughout his Air Force experience, Brigadier General David Baczewski (Ret.) and his family enjoyed the security and support that comes with service in the armed forces. Then he moved to Vermont, where he and his family found themselves wrapped in a blanket thicker than they ever imagined.

"It's almost hard for me to put into words, but I felt more connected to the community here than I have ever really, even in the Air Force," said Baczewski, who went on to spend 12 years in the Vermont Air National Guard (VTANG) and rise to the position of Commander for the 158th Fighter Wing. "We had fellow Guard members who felt like family and friends, but it was almost like our entire neighborhood was part of it."

"It's this link within the community that I think is special about Vermont and the Vermont Air Guard."

Baczewski says that special bond between the VTANG and its surrounding communities is often overlooked, as it has largely been in discussions about the basing of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter in South Burlington. The dialog there has been so driven by speculation over clinical, non-human elements such as noise data that the true measure of the mission's value — bolstering a unit that is deeply rooted in Vermont and its communities — has been lost.

"The members of the Vermont Guard ... come in from all over, and they bring the community into that unit," Baczewski said. "They do their drill, they do their deployments, and then they kiss the Guard with them, back out into their community. There's a true link there, one that isn't often discussed. Those tentacles between the Guard and its surrounding communities are very strong."

Baczewski began exploring a move from the Air Force into the Air Guard in 2001. He wanted a home base within reasonable travel distance of family in his home state of West Virginia. His search ended where it began: Vermont.

"It was the first unit I visited," Baczewski said. "I fell in love with the unit, the people, the location — everything about it. They offered me a job ... and I took it. I didn't even visit another unit."

He moved his family to Vermont and settled down in Westford in June of 2002, and "never looked back," he said. Though the new location was idyllic in many aspects, Baczewski had some apprehension about venturing out from under the blue blanket.

"It was really the first time that we lived in a community that did not have military members, and at first we weren't sure what it was going to be like," he said.

The neighborhood's newest members received a reception they describe as "fantastic." Baczewski was taken aback by his neighbors' "curiosity and desire to understand" his job as an F-16 pilot in the Vermont Guard, and his eyes were truly opened to their special connection when he was deployed to the Middle East in the summer of 2004.

"Normally when you get ready to deploy, there's outreach within the units and the military, and you have this family support network setup," Baczewski said, "but the neighborhood just took it on. They were part of the deployment with me. They could take care of anything for my wife; they were always asking to help."

"So for the three months that I was gone, the outpouring of support that my neighbors showed toward my wife and my family was phenomenal, and I was so appreciative and couldn't wait to get home to thank them."

On his first evening back in Westford post-deployment, Baczewski hosted a neighborhood get-together with a barbecue and a bonfire. The level of appreciation he felt proved far warmer than any blue blanket.

"I was trying very hard to thank them, and they couldn't thank me enough for going over there and serving," he said. "That link right there is part of the reason that when my wife and I retired ... we could have moved anywhere, but Vermont was home. We have friends that are like brothers and sisters, in the Guard and outside the Guard. When I talk to other people within the Guard, my story is similar to theirs."

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