



From Brooklyn to Berlin Story and photos by Brian H. Temple

One mechanical engineer wraps up 49 years of service to the Corps of Engineers, the people of Europe, America, and humanity.

12 Engineering in Europe

Lou Brettschneider

Louis "Lou" Brettschneider celebrated completion of his 49-year career with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, May 21, near Wiesbaden, Germany.

About 80 of his colleagues from throughout Western Europe and the United States gathered to honor this 80-year-old mechanical engineer. They celebrated his accomplishments, but more than that, they came to pay tribute to the man known as "Mr. EUD" – a title of endearment given by Corps customers and fellow employees alike for his effective work and selflessness.

Pat Biliter, former Europe District deputy district engineer said, "Of all the wonderful and impressive people I've met during my 20 years at the Europe District, none made a greater impression on me than Lou Brettschneider. ... He was loyal to a fault to his employees ... and no one doubted that EUD (Europe District) was his family."

Brettschneider's career "reads like the chronology of the tumultuous events of the second half of the 20th Century," Biliter said. From his Merchant Marine service during World War II to his more recent involvement in design and construction of infantry bases for the Israel Defense Forces, Brettschneider enjoyed and interacted with people.

He began his European career with the U.S. Army Construction Agency Germany, USACAG (the predecessor to the Engineer Command ENCOM which was transformed into the Europe Division, and eventually whittled down to what is now Europe District) after working as a mechanical engineer on fast-track airfield construction for the North Atlantic District in Newfoundland.

He arrived in Germany in the mid '50s while Russian troops advanced toward Budapest, Hungary. Over the next five years, Brettschneider supervised construction of new family housing areas to accommodate the growing numbers of U.S. Forces here in



Col. Lee A. Staab pins a retirement pin on Lou Brettschneider.

Europe. By 1960, there were 540 installations in West Germany meeting the needs of the soldiers and their families.

As the Cold War's chill enveloped the citizens of Berlin in '61, he was thrust into the rapid renovation of the *Tempelhof, Gatow* and *Tegel* airports there, preparing the way for a possible second Berlin Airlift. Nikita Khrushchev threatened to sign a separate peace treaty

"The Corps gave me as much as I gave the Corps."

with the German Democratic Republic in January 1962 to turn over full control of Berlin to the communist East Germans if the allied occupation of Germany had not ended. As Khrushchev's deadline approached, Brettschneider supervised the installation of aviation guidance systems immune to Soviet jamming. The structures housing these systems were completed by Khrushchev's

deadline and tensions eventually eased.

Brettschneider later witnessed the destruction of the Berlin Wall and said he was grateful for having the opportunity to contribute to the Allies' cause.

"What I can say is that the Corps gave me as much as I gave the Corps. It was a wonderful organization to work for," he said.

"Everything that I learned, and everything that I could contribute to the Corps, was really a pleasure to me. ... I'm grateful to the Corps of Engineers, the people I've worked with and to the value of the work that we did."

Humility, gratitude, and a sense of accomplishment from a job well done are inherent Brettschneider traits, although he claims he was more humanitarian when he was younger. "When you're young you tend to be more humane, more considerate of your fellow humans. At least that's the way I felt back then. I'm now the



Lou Brettschneider shows longtime friend and Europe District interpreter/translator Jackie (Jakoba) Schempp, the boats he sailed on in the Aliyah Bet, the clandestine immigration network delivering Jews into the newly formed Israel.

City College of New York on a \$100-per-year scholarship is what eventually afforded him his engineering career. However, he first served in World War II.

Brettschneider, who suffered from poor eyesight, faced the draft shortly after graduating. His passion was to join the Navy, but he enlisted in the Merchant Marine after failing a Navy eye exam.

After successfully slipping through doctors' exams without anyone noticing his contacts, (he wore an archaic sort of lens that had to be removed with suction cups) one of the last doctors caught a reflection from one. "O.K. son, take them out," Brettschneider recalled the doctor's words. "I had to switch. I went to the Merchant Marine instead. They didn't care whether you could see or not," he chuckled.

He was off to war.

Although he earned rank quickly during his tenure at sea, Brettschneider said he started "as the lowest form of life in the engine room – a wiper. And that's what I did, I wiped." He was responsible for cleaning the oil and the grease from the decks and machinery. "I cleaned underneath the deck plates too, stooped over 'sooing' (wiping down everything with a mixture of water, soap and alcohol). It was unpleasant, but it was a new experience. I didn't do it every day," he said.

No matter how hard the work, Brettschneider said he felt good contributing to the war's effort. The manual labor did not last long though. It was an electrical mishap that gave him a quick promotion.

During an engine shut down in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Brettschneider was there with the knowledge to restore propulsion to the ship. "We had a set up which measured how much ground current there was in the ship's structure, and when it went above the allowable amount, it sounded the alarm and cut off power," he said.

In such situations, the system could be adjusted to take on more ground current and this would allow for further engine operation. Brettschneider made the adjustments to allow for start-up operations to get the ship back to London.

"There wasn't much in the way of electrical engineers at all," he said. "When it came to electrical work I at least understood what was going on. Some of the others had difficulty with three-phase current. I finally worked my way up and became the electrical engineer aboard some of the new turbo electric tankers," he said.

He did not witness combat while he served, but one of every 26 mariners died during the war, Brettschneider said, a higher ratio than any of the armed forces. He said he was pleased to have served in the crew's camaraderie.

"You called everybody by their first name. There wasn't much need for discipline on those ships



Photos courtesy of Aliyah Bet and Machal Archives, University of Florida

Lou Brettschneider (circled) along with the crew of the Geula (Paducah). Crew members were volunteers for the Aliyah Bet.

(Right) The Geula (Paducah) as it passes Gibraltar.



because you knew damn well you were dependent on all the guys around you. Even the lowliest people working in the galley, they were still respected as seamen," he said.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Russian author and playwright said, "What a delight it is to respect people," and many who have worked for Brettschneider have been pleased to echo this sentiment.

Col. James M. Barry, one former commander of the District said, "His perseverance, his zest for sharing the greatness of his co-workers and subordinates, his absolute integrity and dignity, his joyful delight in the teamwork of EUD, and his selfless subordination of ego contributed to the well-being of those around him and his beloved organization. ... Even now, four years after relinquishing command, Lou Brettschneider's lessons and personal example remain part of me."

Brettschneider's dedication has touched many outside engineering circles as well.

At the conclusion of World War II, many Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust were displaced

throughout Europe, and thousands opted to build new lives in Palestine, their homeland.

The British, who had colonial control over Palestine, restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine to 1,500 per month. The *yishuv* (the Jewish community in Palestine) responded by increasing the activities of the clandestine network of immigration known as *Aliyah Bet*.

"The very idea of crossing the Atlantic in a yacht ... and to be involved with the Israelis, both considerations told me, yes - do it."

The availability of ships in Europe, most of which were small, soon proved to be insufficient to transport immigrants to Palestine. In the United States, however, there were affordable ships and volunteers to sail them.

Brettschneider was in New York to continue his

veteran of many political arguments," he quipped.

Don't let his words fool you. He is armed with a first-class wit and good timing. His attitude is positive and kind. Brettschneider attributes these traits, in part, to his hard work during his upbringing.

His first attempt to earn money was when he was about age 11, walking the streets of Brooklyn peddling shoe repair services door-to-door. He was uncomfortable approaching strangers in the predominately Italian and Jewish neighborhood at first, he said, but he had to earn some cash.

"The local shoemaker ... offered me a job. He said, 'Look, you go around and ring bells and knock on doors, and tell 'em you'll pick up the shoes and bring them to me. I'll fix 'em, you'll bring them back, and I'll pay you per pair,'" Brettschneider said. That was a fair way for a "poor Jewish kid" to earn some cash in the early '30s, he said. "But, if we look at the rest of my career, one could say I never wanted to be in business for myself. I've always held a job," he added.

Earning a mechanical engineering degree from

Merchant Marine service. He was in the New York office looking at a wall covered with listings of ships sailing to various part of the world. He considered passage on a tanker down to Buenos Aires, but one would-be passenger, a Jewish man (although Brettschneider did not know that at the time) said, "Oh, we've got something better for you. We're going across the Atlantic in a yacht." Brettschneider said his ears perked up. He gave Brettschneider the address of where to inquire. When he visited the suggested office, the Zionist movement recruited him.

"As a youngster from Brooklyn, I was not much of a yachtsman, but that sounded very attractive. The very idea of crossing the Atlantic on a yacht, number one, and to be involved also with the Israelis – both considerations told me, yes – do it," he said.

He was an engineer on the *Ben Hecht*, a yacht named for a famous Hollywood producer and playwright who helped finance the mission. The boat sailed under the Honduran flag to deceive British naval vessels patrolling the Mediterranean.

In January 1947 at Port du Bouc, France, the crew picked up its cargo – 600 displaced Jews. For weeks the yacht sailed along the coast of France and Italy and toward Palestine. Three British destroyers trailed the *Ben Hecht* as it approached Palestine, but approximately 10 miles out from a potential docking, British marines forcibly boarded the ship, took control, and towed it into Haifa.

Brettschneider and other crew members could have faced prison sentences had the British discovered they were Americans. Brettschneider, who speaks three languages, used anything but English to avoid capture. With no documents and the appearance of a refugee, Brettschneider, the crew, and the refugees were taken to a British operated relocation camp in Cyprus.

Once released, he joined on a former icebreaker renamed the *Geula* which picked up Jews in Bulgaria and Romania. They were caught in the Mediterranean once again and were back into British custody. Again, crew members had disguised themselves as refugees, and Brettschneider even dressed as a Rabbi. They ended up back in the Cypriot refugee camp.

These "cat and mouse" chases throughout the Mediterranean were common for members of the Aliyah Bet fleet, but even when captured, sometimes with an occasional brawl, Brettschneider maintained respect for the British.

"I have the utmost admiration for the British. ... We used to feel sorry for them. The average [British] soldier at the camp on guard duty used to come to our dining facility to obtain something to eat from crew members who were getting food from Israel. They had a tough time of it," he said.

Reminiscing about his accomplishments through peace and through war, Brettschneider expressed gratitude for the opportunity to derive satisfaction from his work. As a mechanical engineer, Chief of the Mechanical Section of Technical Engineering, and Chief of Project Management here in Europe, he met the needs of the Corps family and served thousands of customers.

"I could have earned a living elsewhere but it would not have been the same. I would not have the satisfaction of knowing that I've contributed in part to something very important. I wish I could have continued with the Corps," Brettschneider said.

If one talks of humility, gratitude, effective mentorship, and a sense of accomplishment for a job well done, Brettschneider indeed comes to mind in Europe District circles.

"Lou is a unique personality. There was never anyone like him in the Corps, and I feel exceptionally

privileged to have known and worked with him for so long. His intellect, wit, sense of humor, honesty, kindness and enthusiasm never failed to cheer me up," Biliter said.

Pat Biliter at Brettschneider's retirement ceremony.

* Tanya Williams, a data manager in the Regulatory Division with the New England District, contributed to this report.

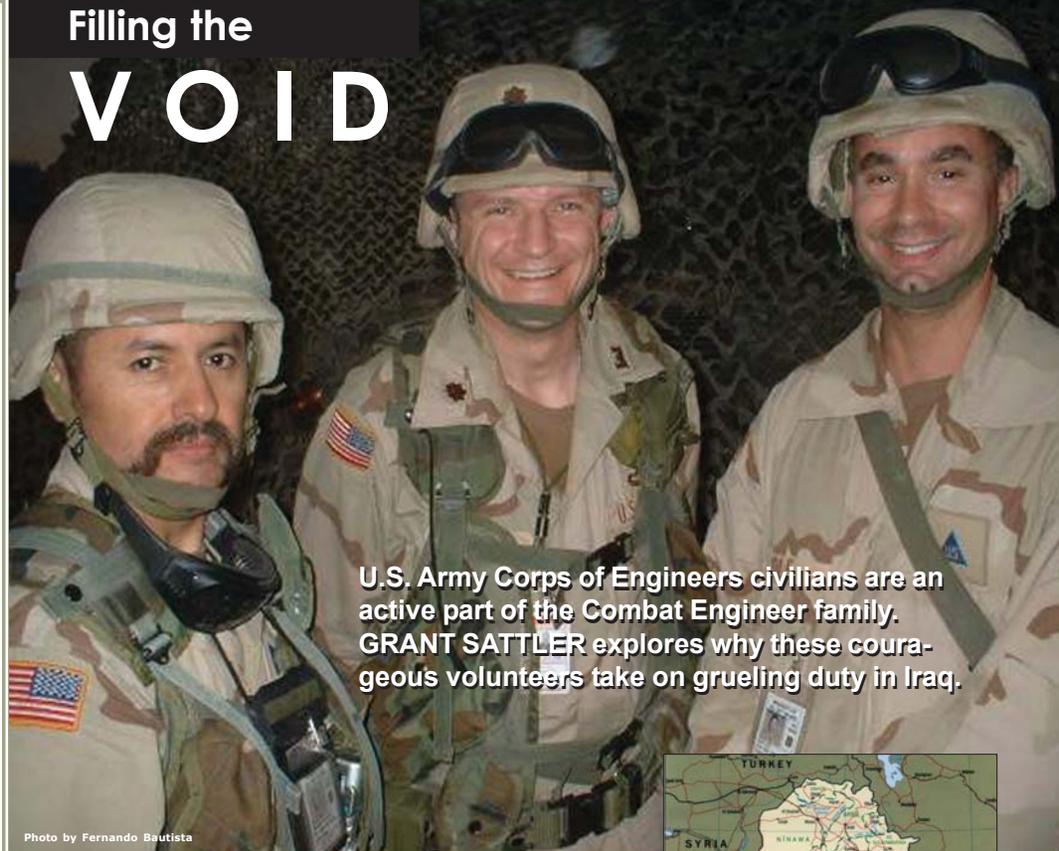


Lou Brettschneider in his home library.



Pat Biliter at Brettschneider's retirement ceremony.

Filling the VOID



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers civilians are an active part of the Combat Engineer family. GRANT SATTLER explores why these courageous volunteers take on grueling duty in Iraq.

Photo by Fernando Bautista

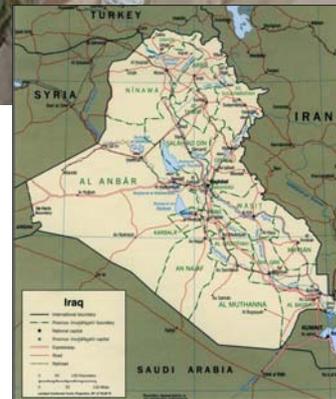
Europe District's Forward Engineer Support Team – A, attached to V Corps for Operation Iraqi Freedom, battle tested the Field Force Engineering concept and the team members' mettle.

The District's five-member FEST-A deployed to Kuwait at the onset of hostilities, then moved north into Iraq to support soldiers with engineering expertise.

Maj. Kristopher Hurst, an activated Army Reservist serving as an Individual Mobilization Augmentee in the District's operations center, switched out of his role as the Heidelberg Regional Program Manager to the 26th Area Support Group to take on the job of FEST-A leader.

Deploying with him were four Department of the Army Civilian volunteers from Europe District: civil engineers John Hasselman and Stephen Martinez, architect Fernando Bautista, and master planner Jon Cole.

Activated on Feb. 14, Hurst and Maj. Michael Fitzgerald, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Liaison Officer attached to V Corps, began the process of selecting the team. "We had to solicit volunteers from the District at large and coordinate with their managers, supervisors, and senior District leadership in order



Courtesy of The University of Texas at Austin

to bring the right skill set together for the team," Hurst said.

The team's composition in terms of skills was based on customer needs. However, selecting individuals was very difficult