



Banner days at Fort McHenry

Local resident has star-spangled career

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Vince Vaise eats, breathes and sleeps Fort McHenry.

And, oh yeah, he bleeds for it, too. Take a recent Friday, for instance.

As the Linthicum resident and the site's chief of interpretation was giving a tour, he stopped to help another park ranger take down the giant replica of the flag that served as inspiration for "The Star-Spangled Banner," which measures 30-by-42 feet. Wind gusts can damage the flag, and it was blowing fairly briskly.

So, Vaise grabbed one of the ropes to slowly pull it down, but not before a strong burst of air turned the flag into a giant sail. Before he could let go, it dragged the 40-year-old across the grounds and headfirst into the corner of a building.

Vaise ended up with a scrape on his head, a larger, bloody scrape on his arm, ripped pants and a partially-crushed hat. But instead of tending to his wounds, Vaise picked himself right back up, and went running after the flag, which had gotten stuck on the top of the building. Once he and another National Park Service ranger had the banner secured, Vaise dusted off his damaged hat, put it back on his head, and resumed the tour as if nothing had happened.

"I'll tell you, it's very weird," he said a few days later, adding that he has no lasting ill effects from the incident. "I'm a hero to the staff. They all talk about my battle wounds."

It was the first time anything like that had ever happened to Vaise, and when asked if it's happened since, he quickly replied, "It better not."

Nevertheless, it's all part of a busy day's work for Vaise, whose work entails ensuring the national monument and historic shrine's story is told correctly, right down to what information the other rangers pass along to visitors, how the exhibits are presented and how any reenactments or special events are handled.

"It's hard to find anyone more enthusiastic," said Gay Vietzke, fort superintendent. "He treats every visitor as if they're the most important person that comes here."

Vietzke then related the story of when the fort got a new cannon and had to test fire it to ensure it was working properly. When it went off, Vaise went off too, issuing "whooping calls of glee," she said. "He was so excited," she added. "It sounded like someone's team had won the Super Bowl."

Key developments

Vaise began working at the fort as a volunteer when he was still in high school in 1988, after a teacher who volunteered there noted his keen interest in history and mentioned that he might like it too.

"I've always liked history, but I never wanted to be in archives," he said. "I like to talk too much and I like to use my hands when I talk."

After college (no surprise, he got a history degree), Vaise turned work at the fort into a career, rising up the ranks to his current post. He supervises 30 people, and although he does a lot of paperwork, he's never too busy to get out on the grounds and share his vast knowledge of topics like the War of 1812 and Francis Scott Key with the public.

Vaise also is chief of interpretation at another National Park Service site, Hampton in Towson, and supervises rangers who give historic talks and tours of Baltimore's Inner Harbor and Fells Point. He handles all this with a boyish grin, an uplifting attitude and occasional good-humored winks.

"I'm just a big kid," laughed the father of a 3-year-old; he also has another child on the way.

Vaise's office reflects his many responsibilities. In addition to plenty of papers, there are parts of various military uniforms and other historic paraphernalia. Up to a couple days ago, he also had a rather large blacksmith's forge sitting right in the middle of the room.

"Doesn't everyone's office have a blacksmith's forge?" he chuckled, later explaining that the forge was on its way to Hampton. "When you have a lot of exhibits and do a lot of different things, it's like a juggling act."

Catherine Holden, a seasonal ranger at the fort from Catonsville, said working with Vaise is a treat. "Vince is a really enthusiastic leader," she said. "His passion is contagious; it seeps through the entire staff."

Making history

At some point, you'd think Vaise would like to take a holiday from history.

But it hasn't happened yet - not even close.

In fact, Vaise is so enamored of Fort McHenry that he used to keep a spyglass trained on the site from his home. He's since moved, and his only regret is that it's a little too far inland to see the

fort now. He joked that he has to rely on his "palantir" to keep tabs on the fort, Hampton and the rangers at the harbor. A palantir is a term invented by author J.R.R. Tolkien and refers to a stone that functions as a kind of crystal ball. Vaise's stone is actually an old duckpin bowling ball. Some of these were spray-painted to look like cannon balls for display purposes at the fort.

Not to be outdone, the history buff said he was also first in line for the state's new War of 1812 commemorative license plate. His reads "Huzzah 1."

"Vince is the epitome of what it means to be at Fort McHenry," said Martin Lavender of Pikesville, who Vaise recruited to be a volunteer there 15 years ago.

Vaise said the story of the fort is "incredible" and also ever-changing, with new research and different ways to make exhibits more accessible and educational for visitors. One major example of this is the new visitor center, which is currently under construction and due to open in 2011. Not surprisingly, Vaise has a hand in how the information inside will be presented.

"What happened long ago is only half the story," he said. "(The other half) is how it affects us today."

Vaise considers himself lucky to be in a job he loves at a place he loves. "It's an honor to work at Fort McHenry," he said. "I think I am one of the only people in the world who has no complaints about anything."

For more information about Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, call the visitor center desk at 410-962-4290. Ext. 801. The fort's website is www.nps.gov/fomc.

The fort's biggest event of the year, the "Star-Spangled Banner Weekend" will be held Sept. 11 and 12 and includes a whole host of activities. Among them is a free program at 6 p.m. Sept. 11 that will feature musket and cannon firings, re-enactors in War of 1812 regalia, fireworks and a performance by the Naval Academy Band.

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