

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Via called 'small stature but a giant of a man'

Sunday, August 23, 2009

By PAUL COLLINS - Bulletin Staff Writer

Mention new three-star Army Lt. Gen. Dennis L. Via, a Henry County native, to his family and friends and they talk about his good character, drive, hard work, humility and desire to help others.

Via, a 1976 graduate of G.W. Carver High School, was promoted from major general to lieutenant general Aug. 14.

Edward L. Fontaine, 79, of Martinsville, said he taught Via brick masonry during his junior and senior years at Carver High School. "He was a great student, a GREAT student. ... I asked who wanted to go to college, and his hand was the first to go up." "I am so proud to have been part of his life," Fontaine said.



Former teacher Edward L. Fontaine shows a framed letter and photo of Lt. Gen. Dennis Via. Fontaine taught Via at Carver High School.

Curtis Millner, Iriswood District board member on the Henry County School Board and commander of American Legion Post Homer Dillard Post 78, said he first met Via in 1980 when Via reported for duty as a second lieutenant to Ft. Bragg, N.C. They were standing in line in mess hall. They struck up a conversation and found out that Via's mother was baby-sitting Millner's niece. Millner had completed 20 years of service then and was a maintenance chief warrant officer.

"He was just so respectful," Millner said. Even though Via outranked Millner, "he called me, 'sir.' I said that wasn't proper. He said his mother taught him to respect his elders." Via was "quick to grasp things, very understanding and an all-around likable person," said Millner.

Since Millner has been on the Henry County School Board, Via has spoken a number of times to Henry County students and at the American Legion Homer Dillard Post 78's annual Veterans Day banquet. Via is a member of that post.

Millner was one of about 100 local or former local residents who attended the ceremony where Via was promoted, and he said he felt elated there. "I'm just proud to know him, call him a friend."

Andrew Wills was a physical education teacher and head varsity boys basketball coach at Carver High School when Via was a student there. Wills said that "as a trainer (on the team, Via) was No. 1 cheerleader. He was always positive with the team. I could have left Dennis in charge of the team."

Wills and his wife, Carol, who was a guidance counselor at Carver, also attended the promotion ceremony. Carol Wills said the auditorium was packed with local residents along with generals, VIPs and others with whom Via has served during his military career, even some from Europe. Many talked about how Via and his wife, Linda, had helped them with their careers and families.

Carol Wills said she was brought to tears by Via's humility as he said he was standing on the shoulders of people who were important in his life.

Thelma Saunders, of Preston, also was at the ceremony. "He was real small stature but a giant of a man," she said of Via.

She added that he has been "a great, great mentor" to her grandson William Terrell, who graduated from Magna Vista High School in 1999 and joined the Army the same year. Via stays in touch with Terrell and others through e-mails, he said.

"I can't praise him high enough," Saunders said of Via. "Even as high as he has risen, he has not forgotten us."