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FROM ENLISTED TO ELECTED

U.S. Rep. Tim Walz brings an E-9's outlook to Congress

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From Enlisted to Elected

MEET TIM WALZ, THE HIGHEST-RANKING ENLISTED
GUARDSMAN TO EVER SERVE IN CONGRESS.

By Matt Alderton ■ Photography by Drake Sorey

The Sand Hills region of north-central Nebraska meanders across the Great Plains like a grassy fog hugging the swells of a sandy sea. Spanning nearly 20,000 square miles—just over a quarter of the Cornhusker State—it sits atop the gargantuan Ogallala Aquifer, which appears to be simmering underground, giving the surrounding land its characteristic hills-and-valleys texture.

Often called the “Nebraska Outback,” this part of the country screams “adventure.” For Rep. Tim Walz (D-Minn.), however, it didn’t scream loud enough. In April 1981—just a few days after his 17th birthday—he enlisted in the Nebraska National Guard.

“If you were a kid in rural America, adventure was something you were always looking for,” says Walz, who was born in 1964 in West Point, Neb., but raised 230 miles northwest in Valentine. “I saw the military as an adventure.”

Indeed, Walz has always craved adventure. He remembers, for instance, watching the Apollo 11 moon landing and realizing—perhaps for the first time—the size of the world around him. “Being 5 years old in 1969 and wanting to be an astronaut is one of my great memories,” Walz says. “I was always interested in the idea of getting away, the idea of exploring.”

Although basic training was in Fort Benning, Ga.—a long way from the moon—the National Guard nonetheless gave Walz the opportunity to finally commence his great adventure, which has since carried him from the Sand Hills to Capitol Hill, where he currently is finishing his third term as the highest-ranking enlisted soldier to ever serve in Congress.

‘SOMETHING BIGGER’

His thirst for adventure was one reason Walz enlisted. Another was his family legacy: Walz’s father, a teacher and school administrator, was a veteran of the Korean War. When Walz was in high school, his father was diagnosed with cancer, at which point he moved the family east to Butte, Neb.

“It was pretty clear that my dad was not going to live much longer,” says Walz, whose father died shortly after he graduated from high school in 1982. “He was making plans and thought the Guard was a great place where I could get an education. Of course, coming from a military family, it was also just expected that you’d do your duty.”

Walz’s service with the National Guard spanned 24 years, during which time he did stints in the Nebraska, Texas, Arkansas and Minnesota National Guards, serving at various points as both a full- and part-time



BEFORE AND AFTER

(above left) Tim Walz enlisted in the Army National Guard at age 17. (Photo courtesy of Tim Walz's office)

(above right) Congressman Walz talks with troops at Camp Riley in Minnesota (Photo courtesy of Tim Walz's office)

(right) Detail of Congressman Walz's uniform

Guardsmen. Although he began as a private, he was a command sergeant major when he retired in 2005, having risen in rank from E-2 to E-9. “The rank I held the longest was first sergeant,” says Walz, who was a first sergeant—an E-8—from 1998 until 2004. “As an enlisted troop leader, my job was to take care of my unit and make sure my guys were trained.”

It was as a first sergeant that Walz experienced the proudest moment of his military career. It was 2003, and the U.S. military had mobilized the National Guard in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Walz’s artillery unit was deployed for nine months in Vicenza, Italy, where it provided flight line security and training for the 173rd

Airborne Brigade Combat Team while its troops were downrange.

“The unit [I helped train] had a stellar performance [when they were later deployed] in Iraq for 22 months,” Walz says. “That was a high point for me: We were finally witnessing the transformation of the Guard into a full partner in defense. It was very gratifying to see the troops I served with—and, in some cases, trained—accomplish their missions.”

It was a good feeling. That he felt it many times during his service is why he remained enlisted for so many years. “I got far more from the service than I ever gave,” Walz says. “Those who’ve done it know it’s not just one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer-

time. It’s an opportunity to be part of something bigger than yourself.”

Walz sought “something bigger” not only in the Guard, but also in civilian life: In 1989, he once again followed in his father’s footsteps when he became a teacher.

“Being a teacher seemed to me like a good way to make a real positive difference,” Walz says. “It’s a noble profession, and I’m very proud of it.”

Like the National Guard, teaching allowed Walz to simultaneously learn about the world and give back to society at large. It also helped him become a better Guardsman. “[Teaching and military] careers are incredibly compatible,” he says. “As a senior enlisted soldier, your No. 1 goal in life is taking care of the soldiers under you by making sure they’re trained, equipped and informed. I think teaching made me a better soldier and trainer of soldiers, and the skills I learned soldiering—a sense of responsibility, commitment to others, being able to plan and time manage—were certainly helpful to me [as a teacher].”

REDEFINING SERVICE

Because teachers and servicemen are supposed to be politically neutral, Walz had never considered himself a political person. That changed in 2004, however, when he was released from federal active duty. He'd just returned from Operation Enduring Freedom and attempted to take two of his students to a campaign appearance by President George W. Bush, a Republican, who was seeking re-election against Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.). When campaign staffers noticed a Kerry campaign sticker on one of the students' wallets, they refused them entry.

Upset by the experience, Walz—who'd moved to his wife's hometown of Mankato, Minn., in 1996—volunteered locally for the Kerry campaign, members of which noticed his military-grade efficiency and encouraged him to run his own campaign two years later. In 2006, Walz ran for Congress against a six-term Republican in Minnesota's First Congressional District, which had elected a Republican Congressman for 100 of the previous 114 years.

"I had no money and no political connections and had never run for office, but I put together a really unique campaign in a really tough district and won," says Walz, who ran as a political outsider whose key issues were the Iraq war, taking care of veterans, reforming the federal government and restoring the declining middle class. "I wanted to run then for the same reason I want to now—to make a difference. One of the things we always say in my office is: Politics is simply a means to an end, and that end is a better, fairer, more just and more prosperous country. That's why I got involved [in politics]."

Although he's advocated for a variety of issues on Capitol Hill, ranging from economic reform to clean energy, Walz says his proudest achievements in Congress have been in the area of veterans' affairs. "I often tell people: If you've lost all faith in your government or Congress, watch a VA hearing or a Guard and Reserve Caucus meeting,"

he says. "What you'll see is good, solid, thoughtful legislators working for the common goal of national security and care of our Guard."

As a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and co-chair of the bipartisan House National Guard and Reserve Components Caucus, Walz has helped introduce and/or pass legislation to:

- Recognize as veterans Guardsmen who've served at least 20 years in the Guard or Reserve but were never deployed;
- Extend increased education benefits to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars;
- Enhance and expand veterans' health care including a mandate that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) develop a program for long-term rehabilitative care for veterans with traumatic brain injury;
- Raise troops' pay;
- Give the chief of the National Guard Bureau (NGB) a permanent seat on the Joint Chiefs of Staff (see p. 10); and
- Ensure the Transportation Security Administration complies with the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA).

Now in the midst of a re-election campaign that he hopes will win him a fourth term in Congress—and a new chapter in his great adventure—Walz says he remains an effective lawmaker because he prioritizes policies over politics. "I believe I'm effective right now because I'm focused on real outcomes," he says. "I don't see politics as a career; it's just another way for me to serve."

Of course, his rank doesn't hurt, either. "According to the House historian, since the founding of the republic there's never been another E-9 in Congress, although I think there were a couple of E-8s," Walz says. "It's no secret that Congress isn't real popular right now, and that it isn't getting much done. My argument is—I think we could use a few more E-9s in there." ≡



EANGUS for Life

Not only is Tim Walz a Guardsman, a teacher and a Congressman, he's also a Life Member of EANGUS.

"I've been a member for a little over 30 years," says Walz, who joined EANGUS in 1981 at the age of 17. "My first sergeant signed me up during my first drill. At the time, I didn't know what it was; my first sergeant told me to do it, so I did it."

Although he joined on an order, Walz has since witnessed firsthand the value of his EANGUS membership. "EANGUS is the voice of hundred of thousands of Guardsmen and -women, and an advocate for the things that make this nation strong," he says. "It's not just about making sure [Guardsmen] are paid, although that's part of it. And it's not just about making sure they have a G.I. Bill, although that's part of it, too. It's about making sure they have a voice in the Pentagon."

As a Guardsman, Walz understood the value of having that voice. Now, as a Congressman, he also understands the value of hearing it.

"EANGUS is helpful to me in learning the issues, and I'm a 25-year veteran and a 30-year member of the organization," Walz says. "Think about how important [its counsel] is to my colleagues, who mean well but don't have military service. To be informed about the issues, especially from the perspective of the enlisted soldier, is critical. I can't say enough about what EANGUS does and the way they do it." ≡