

Tribal Member On New Tour, This One Likely To The Middle East

■ Frank Grammer is duty-bound and looks for an opportunity to "do his part."

By Ron Karten

Late in June, Specialist Frank Grammer, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Army National Guard, began his latest military odyssey in LaGrande, Oregon. After three days there, he was to head to Portland for a plane ride to Fort Bliss in Texas where he will join other units from Oregon, North Dakota, Montana, Utah, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Afterwards, he expected to head to Fort Polk in Louisiana for a month before what appears will be his first combat assignment, either in Afghanistan or Iraq.

In October of this year, Grammer's "six by two" commitment to the National Guard is technically over, but like tens of thousands of others, he learned recently that his commitment will be extended. In the face of it, he is taking the initiative to extend his commitment for another three years.

"I wanted to insure myself and my family for the future," he said.

His childhood was not that well insured. His family broke up by the time he was four.

From the time he was four until his mother was killed under uncertain circumstances when he was 13 he had been shuttled into and out of 49 group and foster homes. Sick of it, he quit school and lit out for the streets of Portland, where he lived homeless for nearly five years.

"I dressed well," he said. "Nobody ever knew by how I looked that I was living on the streets."

It was somewhere during his five years on the streets that he first learned of his Native heritage.

Even before that, however, he

said, "There was something inside me that I kind of knew (I was Native) without knowing."

But when he got tired of life on the streets, he packed up that knowledge and showed up in Grand

and dump trucks with which he helped build virgin roads in severe Alaskan outlands.

When last we checked in with Grammer (*Smoke Signals*, 4/1/03 issue), he was headed to an un-

named destination that everybody assumed was Iraq, but ended up being the Umatilla Army Depot, where he provided "interior and exterior security" for nine months, part of a Homeland Security assignment.

"Those who go through the struggle, the politics, the hard times, there's a satisfaction that still shines through," he said. "A lot of people would say it's hard to understand how there's satisfaction, but there is. If you've been there, you understand. If you haven't, it's hard to understand."

"I don't know what it is about the job," he said. "It's just the military itself. That uniform represents who you are inside. Other people have different things in life

representing who they are (inside). I know they feel the same way.

"It almost seems like (the war's) not actually for the people, (especially) not the military part of it, but I receive my orders and get my job done. The politics is not really for a soldier. It's for civilian life."

Grammer counts on his Native roots to bring him home again. As a great, great grandson of Captain Frank Quenelle, (a photograph of Quenelle with Nez Perce's Chief Joseph is displayed in the Community Center), Grammer looks to his heri-

tage for strength.

"To help pull me through this, to bring me home, I'm going to pull on my Native background. Natives have always been strong people.

"There's a little bit of snickering or the jokes here and there from others who aren't Native. It's just done out of possibly fear or not-knowing, but whenever they're around Native people for awhile, they don't fear us anymore because (my) being Native just becomes a part of them.

"There's a lot of honor and a lot of pride in just being Native," he said.

Along the way, Grammer met Sergeant Malarkey and Lieutenant Compton, two of the original soldiers whose experiences in World War II were the basis for the recent Steven Spielberg movie, *Band of Brothers*, who were sharing their stories with the troops.

"The respect and pride they had," said Grammer. "They did their part. Now it's my turn."

Grammer nevertheless reserves top praise for his wife, Marsha (Standing Rock Sioux), who has "always done right by me; just the smallest things that add up the most."

"And she always has her own little things going — that's what I love about her."

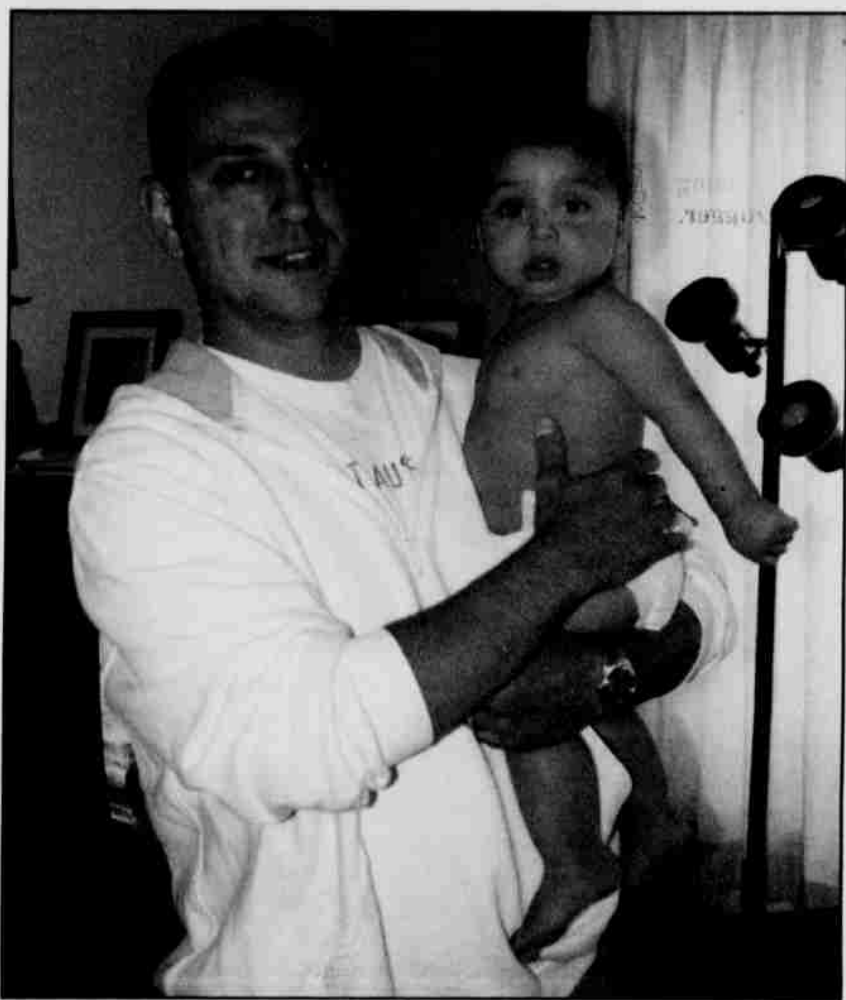
Grammer and Marsha have a baby son, Brandon, and Marsha's older sons, Robin and Brad, round out the family living in Dallas. While Grammer collects old coins and loves football for spare time pursuits, "spending time with my family, that's what matters most," he said.

"I don't want to die," he said, "but I didn't join for the college money."

The concentration required for demolition work sets the bar highest for Grammer. "As a combat engineer in war, our life expectation is about seven seconds."

Still, with a certainty that he knows how to survive, whether on the streets of Portland, Kabul or Baghdad, Grammer already has the question settled in his head.

"When I get back," he said, "I will feel I have cheated death." ■



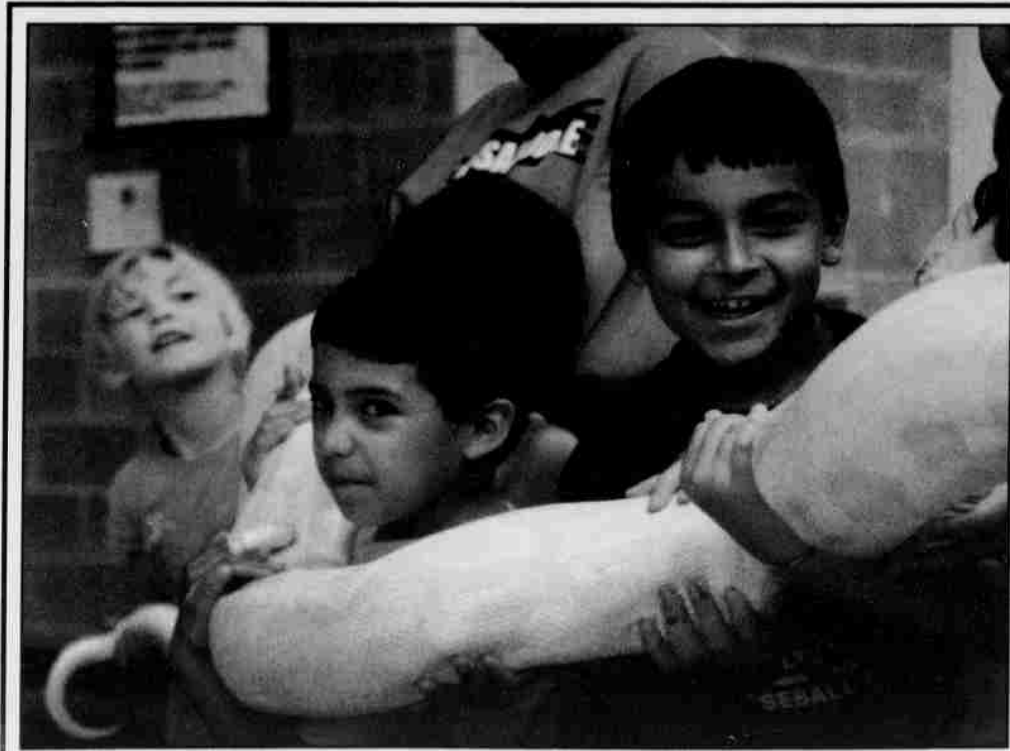
Family Man — Tribal member Frank Grammer and his son, Brandon, at home in Dallas. Father and son had to say goodbye for more than a year for Grammer's latest assignment with the Army National Guard.

Photo by Ron Karten

Ronde to learn more.

Members of the Reibach family took him in. "Slowly but surely I got back on my feet," he said.

Since the beginning of 1999, Grammer has served across this country — from the Umatilla Chemical Weapons Depot in Oregon to Missouri, Washington state and Alaska — and overseas in Germany. He has trained as a combat engineer learning to detonate and disarm explosives, and to operate a number of vehicles used for road construction, including excavators



Animal Kingdom — Brad's World Reptiles put on a show at the Tribal gymnasium in Grand Ronde. The show was funded by a Department of Education grant. Kalim Mercier (left, at right) and Michael Reyes hold an albino Burmese Python named "Sunshine," while Goldie Bly, (above) age 7, pets an Australian Bearded Dragon. Photos by Peta Tinda