

## Marine finds peace of mind in Oil Patch work

By: Bryan Horwath – August 11, 2013

A fifth generation Nevadan, Larry Cunningham has always had a special place in his heart for the American West.

“There’s an essence about the West,” Cunningham said. “The country, the beauty, the people. I’ve lived all over the United States, but there’s something special about the West.”

Like so many others, Cunningham came to western North Dakota in search of something.

Unlike a large percentage of those who have come to the Oil Patch in search of

employment or more lucrative employment, Cunningham came for something that can often be the antithesis of life in the Bakken — peace of mind.

After two-plus decades of military service — Cunningham has seen just about everything — that included a stint working at the Pentagon and a period in the private sector, the 57-year-old artist and Target Logistics employee decided to do something he said he’s always wanted to do — live and work in the oil field.

“I find it intriguing here,” said Cunningham, who took some time for an interview at his place of employment Thursday. “Some areas, you have to live there and breathe the environment and



Artist Larry Cunningham, also a Target Logistics employee at the company’s Dickinson crew camp, holds a framed copy of a drawing of a Nevada ranch outside his place of employment Thursday evening.

know the people. It's people that make things happen. When you step out there and look at the beautiful prairie and the sunflowers and you look at the nostalgic history of ranches that are there today as they were back then, you can capture that. Even people who don't have an artistic background admire that with great measure."

Deciding that he needed a change, Cunningham accepted a position at the Target Logistics location near the Stark and Dunn county line, just off Highway 22, in April of 2012. Cunningham works the night shift at the crew camp — Larry oversees what has to be the cleanest, tidiest dining quarters in the Bakken — and tries to find time to pursue his artistic endeavors, including painting, drawing and calligraphy.

In 2009, Cunningham completed a calligraphy project for a café within the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., a city he's spent considerable time in living and working. Cunningham also does projects by request, but isn't one to saturate the market for his work, sticking with projects that are meaningful.

In the main office area of the complex where Cunningham lives and works, several pieces of his art are on display, including a detailed framed drawing of a picturesque ranch in Yerington, Nev., which, as Larry points out, is also known for being mentioned in a John Denver song.

"That ranch is still a beautiful ranch," Cunningham said. "There was a couple that loved to walk through that ranch and take some quiet time. They wanted me to do that picture, so I did it and it turned pretty well. I give away most of my artwork."

Cunningham said he misses the military — he still has the telltale mannerisms of a Marine — but that working in a structured environment in the Oil Patch offers the same type of camaraderie and common purpose found among soldiers.

"I love Washington, D.C., for various reasons," Cunningham said. "But you have to take some time to breathe some fresh air and do something different in life. I've spent plenty of time behind a desk, but what I do here, this is healthy. There's a very diverse base of people here from all over the country and these people have some of the greatest work ethics you can find. These are people who value good, honest work with American values here in the oil field."

A throwback of sorts for much of the country, but someone who clearly has found a home on the western edge in North Dakota's Oil Patch, Cunningham said people in more populated areas of the country could learn from those who reside in rural America.

“These are true Americans here,” Cunningham said. “Most people in America don’t even realize what these people do during an 18-hour workday. You have to have unity in America and that’s something that we have here. The West has always been the backbone of this great country, it’s not the politicians back east — and I served back there for 11 years. The people here are sincere, honest and have the guts to move forward and that’s something we’re missing in other places.”

Using a saying from the military, Cunningham said too many people in America today are in “half-step mode.”

“There’s too many ifs, ands and buts about — too many gray areas,” he said. “In the Oil Patch, it’s definition with purpose. Out here, you have to have tenacity and purpose or you’ll get ‘the look.’”

With that, Larry glanced up at the entrance to the back service area — next to the embroidered American flag that he insisted be put on the wall — in the Target Logistics cafeteria, clearly wondering how far he had fallen behind on his tasks for the evening.

After all, Larry Cunningham values work and he’s found a place where he fits right in.