Lt. Gen. Donald M. Lionetti passes away
By David Christensen and Bobbi Lionetti, Foreword by Brig. Gen. Brian Gibson

The Air Defense Artillery community lost a giant of the branch, a friend to thousands, and a selfless Soldier with the passing of retired Lt. Gen. Donald Lionetti on March 6. His influence on our branch was irreplaceably monumental: from leading small units in Vietnam, to serving multiple tours in the Pentagon shaping Department of the Army decision making on equipment, organizations and people. He served the branch as the commanding general through the Desert Storm period, and to his penultimate assignment as the commanding general of the Army Space and Missile Defense Command. We are eternally grateful for he and his family’s contributions and sacrifice on behalf of Air Defenders. His legacy will forever shape the branch. First To Fire!

Lt. Gen. Donald M. Lionetti was born in New Jersey on March 6, 1940, into a close-knit large Italian-American family. During his formative years, Lionetti was introduced to the value of hard work and genuine patriotism. His earliest memories were of the final days of World War II and the celebrations that followed in the New York City area. He would fondly recollect the return of his eight uncles, all enlisted Soldiers or Sailors, which would have a major impact on him for the rest of his life.

Lionetti excelled academically and athletically which led to the offer and acceptance of a congressional appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1957. During his time at West Point, he was an above average cadet. He fully immersed himself into activities. Most notably his excellent grades in Plebe boxing because, as he is quick to point out, “I was always a good bleeder.”

During his sophomore year at the academy, he met one of the most important influences of his life. It would be here, at a social event, that he met the love of his life, Ms. Bobbi Tibbett. Lionetti would later reflect that “I would make many other important decisions over the years, but none as brilliant as this one.” Their 58-year adventure, involved 33 moves and three children. Throughout the years, they would establish a nurturing environment within which these great children who, with their terrific spouses, produced three wonderful grandchildren. In an interview in 2010, Lionetti fondly remembered that “Throughout it all, Bobbi’s cheerful and positive approach in every assignment contributed immeasurably to my successes. What a team!”

Lionetti commissioned in May 1961 and in August, he and Bobbi arrived at Fort Sill, Okla., to attend the Artillery Officer Basic Course, with officers who received initial assignment orders to Air Defense units moving on to Fort Bliss for further training. It was later on that Lionetti remembered that “So many of the young wives became pregnant we suspected it was the Oklahoma water.” The couple welcomed their first child, Laura, who arrived in April 1962.

For the Lionetti’s, early company-grade assignments in the U.S. and Germany were fun and rewarding. He served in strategic defense of the U.S. as a Nike Hercules launcher platoon leader in the Baltimore-Washington defense during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. After that, Lionetti served with the Air Force at a NORAD Control Center in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where he helped integrate the joint United States Air Force fighter - Nike missile defenses of the Boston NORAD sector. Their next assignment was to Germany where he was first assigned as a team commander for a German AF Hercules battalion, then as a detachment commander with the Third German Panzer Grenadier Division where he was responsible for their Eight-Inch Howitzer and Honest John support. While in Germany, Don Jr. was born at the U.S. Army Hospital in Bremerhaven in July 1965.

Lionetti returned to CONUS and served at Fort Bliss with 15th ADA Group which participated in the training and deployment of M-42 Duster and Quad-50 battalions to Vietnam. After his deployment, he served as a battery commander in 1st First Field Force Vietnam Artillery, followed by promotion to major and served in the Corps Artillery as Assistant S-3 (Plans).

After attending the ADA Advanced Course at Fort Bliss, Texas, he earned a Master’s Degree in Engineering from Arizona State University. During this time his son, Christopher arrived on the scene in 1970. Following his time at Arizona State University, Lionetti was assigned to West Point as an instructor of engineering subjects and formula translation programming. He next attended the Command and General Staff College with a follow-on assignment to the 3rd Armored Division in Germany. During this time he was fortunate to serve a year as executive officer in Lt. Col. Wally Arnold’s ADA battalion, “where Wally was a terrific mentor.” Following his tenure as executive officer the newly promoted Lt. Col. Lionetti relocated his family to Vilsek where he was responsible for the pre-command

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courses at Seventh Army Training Command.

In June of 1977, Lionetti was entrusted with battalion command at Ramstein AFB, providing Chaparral and Vulcan protection for the air base as well as Sembach and Rhein Ordnance Barracks. While visiting the troops on the Vulcan range in Toden-dorf, Lionetti was heard to say, “almost as much fun as strafing,” as he stepped away from the controls after firing. He next served in the office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans (ODCSOPS) Training Directorate under Maj. Gen. Jim Smith and then Maj. Gen. Sandy Melloy, two outstanding leaders. Lionetti was entrusted with the implementation of the Review of Education and Training for Officers (RETO) which brought us the Combined Arms Services and Staff School and also improved curricula for other TRADOC schools and programs.

Following his time on Army staff, Lionetti escaped to the National War College and after a year received a promotion and an assignment as a brigade commander. Posted to Fort Lewis, now Col. Lionetti was assigned command of the 9th Divisional Air Defense Artillery, consisting of a Hawk battalion, the divisional Chaparral-Vulcan battalion, and consolidated Stinger assets. The division was designated by Chief of Staff of the Army Edward Meyer as the high technology test bed (HTTB) and charged with working directly with defense industry to define a lighter, more agile division; deployable by no more than 1,000 C-141 sorties. This change increased the combat power and expedited deployability of a heavy division. Many innovations came out of the HTTB, to include Avenger, a pedestal mounted Stinger System and a lightweight 155 mm howitzer.

Back to ODCSOPS, he ran the Firepower Division developing and defending budget for field artillery and ADA systems with a platoon of superstars like Maj. Gen. James J. Cravens and Col. (R) Vinny Tedesco, Force Integration staff officers. He helped define the future with the two chiefs of branch and Lt. Gen. Jay Garner would later replace him. Lionetti was promoted to brigadier general and assigned as assistant commandant at the U.S. Army ADA Center and School, again “working for a fantastic leader and mentor,” Maj. Gen. Don Infante. During his two years there, he revised the Officer Advance Course (OAC), Officer Basic Course (OBC) and pre-command courses with a new emphasis on small group instruction and again Jay Garner replaced him.

At Peterson AFB, Lionetti served as Director of Plans (J-5) at United States Space Command. This command defined the requirements for National Missile Defense; and is where simulations and wargaming were invented to exercise the Battle Command System. Representing the biggest user of space products (the Army) he ensured requirements for future space systems did not neglect the needs of the terrestrial warfighter. Again he was selected for promotion and assigned to command at Fort Bliss, but Maj. Gen. Garner assumed command due to the delay of his confirmation list. So, when Lionetti finally arrived in November 1989, this time he replaced Garner.

His greatest fulfillment in uniform came as commanding general, US Army Air Defense Artillery Center and Fort Bliss. As chief of branch, Lionetti provided strategic vision, operational concepts and materiel requirements, which the Gulf War would later validate. He planned and deployed over 11,000 Soldiers to southwest Asia including most of the Patriot battalions, supported them overseas and cared for their families who remained at Fort Bliss. Despite his pleas to extend beyond two years in command, he became chief of staff, Training and Doctrine Command. Under Gen. Fred Franks’ leadership, Lionetti synchronized the efforts of an 1,100 person staff during a period of significant redirection for the Army following the Gulf War.

The assignment as the commanding general, U.S. Army Space, and Strategic Defense Command was an honor for the recently promoted Lionetti. He was the senior Army spokesman for missile defense systems and the principal advocate of investment strategies for tailored space applications to support the warfighter. He was dual-hatted as commander, Army Space Command, and the Army component command of U.S. Space Command. World-class scientists and engineers in Huntsville staffed the research, technology and acquisition element of the command. The command operated the Kwajalein Missile Range for the Department of Defense which scored accuracy of offensive ballistic missiles and provided the sensors to evaluate incoming reentry vehicles for the development of missile defenses. Army Space Soldiers operated strategic communications systems globally and provided satellite imagery through Major Army Commands to warfighters. After two years in this position Lionetti retired from active duty and once again Garner was ready to take over.

After retirement, Lionetti established a successful consulting business, but after a few years he was enticed to work full time as Vice President for Air and Missile Defense Systems at Lockheed Martin, Orlando, Fla., where he supported the development of Medium Extended Air Defense System, a new multinational AMD system. After that, he returned to consulting for the defense industry in fields of his expertise. Lionetti even tried golf, but found the game anything but relaxing, and gave it up after a few years. He eventually learned that to hit the ball further, you must swing easier, but said, “I came to my senses about golf and now just work for Bobbi, and we love spending time with our children and grandchildren.”