

War Vets Showed Athletic Prowess in Winter Olympics

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By Kelly Gibson

The Winter Olympics are relatively young, appearing on the sporting scene for the first time in 1924. As early as 1928, though, war veterans participated. Here are a few of the better-known Olympian-vets among them. (Vets of the 10th Mountain Division who skied in the Olympics and biathlon vets are covered in separate articles.)

Eddie P.F. Eagan
(1897-1967) b. Denver, Colo.

Eagan served stateside with the Artillery Corps during WWI, from July 4 to Dec. 28, 1918. However, during WWII, he saw service in the China-Burma-India and European theaters with the Army's Air Transport Command. He served as chief of special services from May 13, 1942 until Sept. 30, 1944.

As the only American to win a gold medal at both the Summer and Winter Olympics, Eagan showed natural athletic talent growing up. He is best known for his success as a boxer, winning titles in middle and heavyweight competitions.

In 1919, he won the heavyweight title in the U.S. amateur championships as Yale's boxing captain. Eagan, attending Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, became the first American amateur boxing champion of Great Britain.

In 1920, Eagan participated in the Summer Olympics in Antwerp, where he won a gold medal in the lightweight boxing division.

Despite having no experience with a bobsled, Eagan was invited to join the four-man team participating in the 1932 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, N.Y., along with fellow veteran Billy Fiske. The team earned a gold medal that year.

"That run will always be vivid in my memory," Eagan once recalled. "It took only about two minutes to make, but to me it seemed like an eon. I remember the snow-covered ground flashing by like a motion picture out of focus. Speeding only a few inches from the ground without any sense of security, I hung onto the straps. My hands seemed to be slipping, but I still clung."

Eagan was inducted into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame in 1983. His likeness was immortalized on a commemorative postage stamp in 1990.

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Lindsley “Billy” Fiske III (1911-1940) *b. Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Fiske was the first American pilot killed in WWII, joining the British Royal Air Force (RAF) in September 1939. To bypass U.S. neutrality laws at the time, the American pretended to be Canadian so he could join the war effort.

He flew 42 missions in 27 days with the 601st Squadron, known as the “Millionaire Squadron” for its wealthy members. The unit was stationed at Tangmere Aerodrome, where on Aug. 16, 1940, Fiske’s Hawker Hurricane suffered major damage during the Battle of Britain.

He glided the aircraft back to Tangmere, but the landing caused his fuel tank to explode. Fiske was trapped inside and critically burned. He succumbed to his wounds on Aug. 17, 1940. He was 29.

Often called “The King of Speed,” Fiske earned the nickname after completing the Le Mans, a 24-hour auto race. He exhibited a natural talent for athletics, first introduced to bobsledding during his time at St. Moritz in Switzerland. At 16, Fiske became the youngest member of an entirely rookie American bobsled team, racing in the 1928 Olympics. Despite being the secondary team, Fiske’s sled took gold that year.

He made a second Olympic appearance at the 1932 Winter Games at Lake Placid, N.Y., where he beat his first gold-earning time by two seconds.

Fiske studied economics and history at Cambridge, leading him to work in the international banking business. He was living in London at the outbreak of WWII.

“There is really only one reason, other than my own amusement, and that is the fact that I believe I can lay claim to being the first U.S. citizen to join the RAF in England after the outbreak of war,” Fiske wrote in his diary at the time. “I don’t say this with any particular pride, except perhaps in so far as my conscience is clear.”

A plaque at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London immortalizes Fiske “as an American citizen who died so that England might live.”

Fiske is buried at Boxgrove Priory Church in Sussex, England, where visitors can find a stained glass window memorial, which was dedicated to him in 2008.

Roy Mikkelsen (1907-1967) *b. Konigsberg, Norway*

Mikkelsen was part of the separate 99th Infantry Battalion. The unit consisted of only Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans fluent in that language and who knew how to ski.

The unit trained with the Army’s 10th Mountain Division. On Aug. 24, 1943, it moved from Camp Ripley in Minnesota to Camp Shanks in New York, where it shipped out to Scotland to prepare for the D-Day invasion, landing in France on June 21, 1944.

Attached to various outfits, the 99th participated in battles in France, Belgium and Germany. The 99th became the third battalion of the 474th Infantry Regiment in January 1945, ending the war in Drammen, Norway, June-October 1945.

For its actions during WWII, the 1,000-member 99th received a collective 15 Silver Stars, 20 Bronze Stars, 305 Purple Hearts and 814 Combat Infantry Badges. Some 54 members were KIA.

Mikkelsen, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1924, participated in the ski jump event at the 1932 and 1936 Winter Olympics. While he did not medal either year, he did earn national titles in 1933 and 1935 at the U.S. Ski Jumping Championships. Mikkelsen was instrumental in getting the Olympic Winter Games to Squaw Valley, Calif., in 1960.

Mikkelsen was inducted into the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame in 1964. His statute stands at the Western SkiSport Museum near the Boreal Ski area outside of Soda Springs, Calif.

Norman D. Vaughan (1905-2005) b. Salem, Mass.

Vaughan joined the U.S. Army Air Forces in February 1942. He commanded the search and rescue element of the North Atlantic Wing of the Air Transport Command, leading a dogsled team on some 200 rescue missions across Greenland during WWII.

“This push came from a strong sense of patriotism and a lust for adventure,” Vaughn wrote in his 1995 autobiography *My Life of Adventure*. “I wanted a chance to live fully again.”

Perhaps his most important mission took place on July 16, 1942, when he was sent to rescue 25 airmen stranded on a remote part of Greenland. He played an instrumental role in keeping abandoned technology from falling into enemy hands.

Vaughan also designed a dog parachute to drop rescue dogs into Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge to tend to wounded soldiers. Due to logistical issues, the plan was scrapped at the last minute.

As an Air Force reservist, Vaughan also served as part of a psychological warfare unit operating out of Tokyo during the Korean War. He flew some missions out of Japan over Korea in 1952.

His part in competitive winter sports began 20 years earlier. Qualifying after he won a New England Sled Dog Club race in Wonalancet, N.H., Vaughan was invited to participate in the 1932 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid. It was the only time dog sledding (mushing) was an Olympic event. Of the 12 competing teams—Canada with five teams and the United States with seven—Vaughan’s placed 11th.

He is best known for his role in exploring Antarctica with Adm. Richard Byrd in 1928-30. Vaughan was very active late in his life, completing the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race six times after he turned 70. At 89, he climbed Antarctica’s Mt. Vaughan, named after the explorer himself.

Vaughan is honored in the Alaska Sports Hall of Fame. He also ranks among the handful of “Polar Luminaries” listed by the American Polar Society.

Wordsworth Michael Elliott (1942-) b. Durango, Colo.

Elliott enlisted in the Army in June 1966 for a three year stint, reporting to Vietnam in May 1968. He served on MACV Advisory Team 70 as an assistant regimental advisor to the 3rd Bn., 7th Inf. Regt., 5th ARVN Div., operating near Phu Hoa Dong, a village north of Cu Chi near the 25th Infantry Division base camp. He was awarded a CIB.

“I had a very positive experience in Vietnam,” Elliott told Universal Sports. “I am extremely proud of serving in the U.S. Army and the duty I performed in Vietnam.”

He said he was nearly convinced to sign up for a second tour, but decided to complete his education and return to skiing. He was honorably discharged in May 1969 upon returning from Vietnam.

Elliott participated in three Winter Games (1964, 1968 and 1972.) He competed in the 15 km, 30 km, 50 km and cross-country relay events. The relay was his best event, in which he ranked 13th in 1964, and 12th in both the 1968 and 1972 Games. He was put on temporary duty in the Army to train for and compete in the 1968 Olympics.

Additionally, Elliott made appearances in the International Ski Federation World Championships in 1962, 1966 and 1970. He participated in the Military World Skiing Championship in 1968, and he won 10 National Master's Cross-Country championships.

Elliott served on President Ford's Commission on Olympic Sports. In 1993, he was inducted into the Colorado Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame.

Currently, he is the director of skier services at the Purgatory-Durango Ski Resort in Colorado.

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