

# The Winter Road to Seoul

On Sundays, Bill McInroe sits in the fifth pew from the back at First United Methodist Church of Riverside. John Yoon stands at the pulpit, looking out over the congregation. Every other week, his father, Young Bong Yoon, sits in the front, holding his Bible, face turned up to hear his son's words.

They had no idea when they met that they had shared snow and explosions, tanks rumbling down a road and refugees walking through the ice and mud, Americans guarding the passage for North Koreans in the winter of 1950. Miles of winter road changed the lives of the Yoon family, and two inches of leaning forward kept Bill McInroe alive.

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Bill McInroe was nineteen years old in July 1950 when he got on the USS Meigs to ship out of San Diego. More than three thousand Marines and Navy Corpsmen sailed on the military transport vessel, and after two weeks at sea, they landed at Kobe, Japan, to prepare their tanks for Inchon.

"Being young, you think you can do anything," McInroe said. "I was gung ho Semper Fi Marine, ready for the hard charge. I was under two sergeants who had survived the Bataan Death March."

He was born in Stephenville, Texas, where his family farmed peanuts and dairy raised cows, but both his father and uncle left for the Army. McInroe ended up in San Diego when he was 12, and loved to work on engines.

"We had brand new M26 Pershing tanks, the cosmoline still on the weapons, they were so new." Cosmoline was a clay-like axle grease used for waterproofing. "We loaded them onto the combat ships, and the back end lowered down, the ocean water rushed in, and we floated out and headed to shore."

From Inchon landing, by September 15 McInroe and his B Company, 1st Tank Battalion fought into Seoul with their tanks straddled on railroad tracks and bridges, perched precariously over the rivers and canyons. They survived a firefight at the railroad station in Seoul, and then fought north into Tagu. By November, they had pushed as far as the frigid mountains of Hagaru-Ri. It was 10 to 15 degrees below zero.

Their instruments froze, and their weapons froze, and the lubricants froze. Even the massive shells loaded into the tanks would not fire. The Marines greased the shells with Procter & Gamble soap sent from America for themselves, and continued to fight and move. "We finally got to Chosin Reservoir," he said, "and set up a base camp. We had five tanks, and we headed north from camp on a small road, and then we took fire from the side of the road." His first sergeant, Hopkins, the veteran of World War II, was six months from retirement. He was killed. McInroe's friend Len Mafoli was captured and taken prisoner. "He was a POW for six months. They ate maggot soup with onions and rice. High protein," McInroe laughed. "He said you couldn't tell until you squeezed them."

One night, McInroe saw a North Korean soldier in the snow. "Just crawling. His head was like a lollipop. It was just huge, covered with ice. You could see his ears inside the casing of ice. He had a brand new uniform. No shoes. He was about 15 or 16 years old."

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Young Bong Yoon was twenty-two. He had been a student at a Methodist seminary in Pyongyang, North Korea, for three years, and in the spring of 1950, he noticed military equipment being sent south on trains. Seminary students like Yoon were targeted by the North Korean government, spied on and often jailed. Yoon's mother had been a very early Christian in North Korea, influenced by Methodist missionaries in the late 1800s. Yoon wanted to be a minister, so he kept a low profile.

After the June invasion of South Korea, it seemed he'd be lucky to survive. He stayed in Pyongyang, trying to avoid the fate of the young soldiers frozen in combat, their bodies lost in the snow, no one to find them until spring.

On November 24, General MacArthur declared that the war was won, but he continued to push the American troops north, toward the border with China. And on November 27, Mao sent thousands of Chinese troops over that border. The Chinese and North Korean troops began to blow up bridges, and half a million Korean civilians began to flee Pyongyang, but the Yoon family waited.

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"We left Hagaru-Ri in a long column, I bet we stretched two to three miles," McInroe said. "Tanks, infantry, artillery. It was the first ten days of December. We had to stop for days while the engineers rebuilt the bridges – they dropped sections of bridge from the air. But retreat hell! Like Chesty Puller said, we were fighting in a different direction."

Alongside them thousands of refugees were fleeing in the snow, their belongings on their backs, being fired upon by Chinese troops and their own countrymen.

Young Bong Yoon and his older brother hadn't joined the throng yet. Their parents, two more brothers and a sister agonized over the decision. But on January 4, Yoon's parents told him and his brother to go. "We're too old, we'll slow you down," they said. "Go." Yoon and his brother found an Army truck stopped in Pyongyang, and two American soldiers told them to get on. There were twenty people on the truck, and a few Army blankets, and the temperature on the road was far below zero. They headed south, into the explosions and smoke.

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"Remember, it's combat," McInroe said, sitting at a round table in the church hall in Riverside, California. "There are infantry up on the hills above the road, covering us. We were in the tank, moving down the road, and it was slippery and icy. So cold. The civilians were so tired trying to walk, trying to climb onto the tank. It was so chaotic that we didn't know who was who – five or six Chinese soldiers would mingle in on the road with the Korean civilians and then start shooting."

Sitting beside him, eating pie and drinking church-made coffee, his Korean Bible in a much-handled black leather case, was Young Bong Yoon. "We figure they must have passed each other on the road," Yoon's son John said. He is senior pastor at the First United Methodist Church of Riverside. "We like to think that Bill was there along the side of that road as they were leaving. That he helped make it possible."

"Four million human beings died there," McInroe said. "Half of them civilians." His map was spread on the table, his Marine signet ring on his thick-knuckled finger, next to his own piece of pie.

Bill McInroe stayed in Korea for another two years as the war continued. One afternoon he drove a wrecker tank, designed to rescue a disabled Pershing, and a mine exploded underneath. Two of his crew were killed, two were injured, and McInroe kept driving, making it to the medics.

"I was in the hospital for three weeks," he said. "They left the tank there. I went to see it when I got out. You know, I drove that day, because we had minesweepers ahead, and we had to go exactly on the track. We hooked up the tank, turned around and headed back out on the same route, but the weight of the other tank triggered the mine sensor. That mine was a US Army ammunition box filled with TNT and shrapnel."

He leaned forward in the folding chair. "That day, I saw the radio on the door. A piece of metal was embedded in there. Like it flew into butter. It had come through the tank and penetrated that radio case. I was leaning forward in the driver's seat, trying to keep us exactly on track, working the gears. If I'd leaned back two inches, that piece of metal would have gone through my spine."

The day he visited the blown-up tank, he posed with a pipe and a jaunty smile. After the war, he received the Purple Heart.

Young Bong Yoon made it to Seoul, and became a military chaplain for the South Korean Army. He worked for the Korean United Methodist Church, and eventually, in 1953, he found his fiancée, who had fled on that same road on a different day. He thought he'd lost her. They were married, and John Yoon was born in Inchon, in 1960.

Young Bong Yoon came to Michigan in 1972 and founded a Korean Methodist church, and his son and three daughters arrived with his wife in 1973. John became a minister as well, and was assigned to Riverside in 2010. Bill McInroe led a church breakfast where Yoon talked about his father's life, and McInroe realized that the snowy road was one he knew.

Christopher Jin-Yong Yoon, born in 1990 in Michigan and graduated in 2012 from UCLA, sat beside his grandfather and Bill McInroe in the church hall. "Haraboji gave me my middle name, right, Dad?" he said. He is the eldest son. He and his brother Joshua Chang-Yong Yoon will be the only ones to carry on the Yoon name.

"Yes, he did," John Yoon said. "That's tradition." The four men were suddenly quiet, bent over their plates of pie. Three heads of thick lustrous black hair, and one gleaming pink scalp fringed with silver.



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Reverend Young Bong Yoon, serving as military chaplain, circa 1954-1958, Seoul-Inchon area, South Korea.  
Photo courtesy the Yoon family



After being discharged from the hospital, Bill McInroe revisits his Sherman M32 B3 wrecker tank, still abandoned where it struck a mine of TNT and shrapnel three weeks earlier, June 22, 1951.  
Photo courtesy Bill McInroe



The surviving tanks of B Company, 1st Tank Battalion, 1st Marine Division in January, 1951 lined up for reconditioning and inspection after the Battle of Chosin Reservoir, Korea.  
Photo courtesy Bill McInroe



Fellowship Hall, apple pie, and stories of the road where their lives first crossed.



Bill McInroe studying the map of battle.



Young Bong Yoon sitting with Bill McInroe and remembering.



McInroe's Marine signet ring, Yoon's wedding ring, and finding the road.



John Yoon and Bill McInroe reflecting in the pews at First United Methodist Church of Riverside.

# From the Green of Vietnam to Toes Painted with Nirvana

They came here because of war, though people might not think of it that way when sitting down in the massage chair to have Anna Nguyen or Ly Ngo bend gracefully over their fingertips and sit with curved back over their feet. But from the years of brutal conflict in Vietnam, the farmlands and jungles and colonial-era streets of Saigon, men who fought alongside Americans were sent to reeducation camps, tortured and starved, and their wives and children had to fend for themselves in the ruined land.

Now nail salons anchor nearly every strip mall and upscale shopping plaza. Excellent Nails, Star Nails, Hot Nails – thousands of doors out of which float the sharp smells of acetone and the lilting voices of women who paint delicate flowerpetals onto toenails, flick of the fingers and concentration.

At Nail Spa Boutique in Riverside, Kim Ngo sits on a low stool where she spends her 8-10 hour days, tonight trimming excess cuticle from Charlie Freeman's toenails, then rubbing off dead skin with a pumice tool, then rinsing the feet, massaging lotion into Freeman's calves. Freeman, a realtor, comes here once a month, and so do her husband, daughter, son, and her seven-year-old granddaughter. She considers pedicures a necessary part of life, saying with laughter, "Red makes my toes look better." Ngo finally strokes on the color. Twenty toes – Too Red.

Kim Ngo came to Riverside twenty years ago from Saigon. She murmurs in Vietnamese that she doesn't miss Saigon so much because she makes a lot more money here, but there is wistfulness in her voice. Her husband was in a re-education camp after the war. "Mani-pedi" is now a part of American language because of women like Ngo who left home.

Minh Pham is here at Nail Spa today, translating. His sister-in-law Nga Pham is working on a manicure at the table near the door. Minh's mother, Dung Nguyen, 61, worked for twenty years at Nail Tyme, in Corona, and now works at Nail Soleil there.

*My father was in re-education camp for ten years for fighting alongside the Americans during the Vietnam War and for trying to flee the country by boat. He saw many of his comrades die from starvation, illness, and being overworked. My father was forced to go into a land mine-filled forest and clear trees and till the land to grow fruits and vegetables. Once a day, he was fed a small bowl of rice and a tablespoon of saltwater. While working, he would pick wild mushrooms and vegetation from the forest to eat. To keep him alive, my mother quit college to sell cigarettes and used clothes in the streets of Saigon, to buy my father medicine and dried fish to eat.*

*My mother had to find work less than a month after coming to America in order to keep our family from becoming homeless. Working in the nail shop was the best fit because she was not required to know English and she knew family friends who owned Nail Tyme. She liked working in the nail shop because the tips helped her pay for food and she could learn English from talking to her customers. But over time, she developed asthma from breathing in the fumes. Her only dreams were for her two sons to graduate from college and to visit her seven siblings still living in Vietnam.*

The chairs are all filled on a Friday night just before Memorial Day. Ten women work at Nail Spa in a Target shopping plaza, opened 15 years ago. My daughters came here for prom manicures, once or twice a year, and then for their brows. No one does my daughter Rosette's brows like Kim Dang, who was always so kind, so patient, and when she asked about my family, I realized I knew little about hers. Her husband was also in a re-education camp, and she came here 20 years ago from the Vietnamese city of Cuu Long.

The culture of Vietnamese-owned nail salons began in 1975, when twenty women refugees arrived at a tent city called Hope Village near Sacramento. The actress Tippi Hedren, famous for Hitchcock films, visited the refugee camp, and the women were fascinated with her painted nails. She arranged for them to attend beauty school, and an industry was born. Now, more than 80% of California nail salons are owned by Vietnamese-born or Vietnamese-Americans, an estimated 50% of all American nail technicians are Vietnamese, and Orange County is the capital of the technology. From Florida to New York to Los Angeles, Vietnamese women dominate the business in salons which also offer eyebrow waxing, facials, and hair services. But sometimes customers forget how physically hard the technicians work, or that they've spent their own savings on technician training and licensing and the equipment of a salon, where specialized chairs cost \$5,000 to \$10,000. Now and then, customers berate technicians for a smudge, or complain about a fill, or make fun of their language, or accuse them of talking about customers in Vietnamese. Nail technicians say sadly that their work isn't always appreciated. But men seem to love the pampering – Minh's cousin's favorite customer in Corona is an African-American construction worker who comes for a mani-pedi twice a month, leaves big tips and smiles.

Tonight, fifty to sixty women will relax in the big chairs, and ten women pull up stools and sit and bend and stand and stretch, with the tiny bottles of vivid paint beside them like totems, like the big Buddha who graces the altar – every salon has a Buddha surrounded by flowers and incense and fruit. Offerings for a good day.

Ming Ming finishes Devan Benter's toes with a hot pink called New York Summer. Ming came here in 2000 from Saigon, because her husband's family was already in Riverside. Nearby, Sylvia Villa's toenails are painted Nirvana, with an overcoat of Big Money, and she smiles.

Ly Ngo came here 20 years ago from Saigon, and now is the manager of Nail Spa. She works at the milky-green Lucite table near the front, doing French tip manicures, keeping an eye on the sign-in sheet and the money, helping a customer into the ubiquitous flat plastic sandals to wear while the polish dries. She listens patiently to a regular customer speak about her family, her work. Ngo and the others overhear cell phone arguments with boyfriends, sad stories of love lost. Do they whisper to each other about the past, about the foods or cousins they miss in Vietnam? Their customers will likely never know.

In the 1970s television commercial for detergent, Madge the manicurist would listen sympathetically to a story about a woman with dishpan hands – and Madge would say, Try Palmolive - you're soaking in it! Back then, my girlfriends and I painted our own fingernails, inexpertly, with polish we bought from Kmart. I had never met a manicurist in my life. Manicures cost \$70 or more, and were the province of the wealthy.

But during that same time, on that same television, images of America's war in Vietnam terrified those watching as napalm fires raged to the sky and children ran away, as soldiers were airlifted in helicopters and then fleeing Vietnamese civilians were huddled in those same helicopters, leaving their country behind.

*Minh Pham: The boat people left during the late 1970s. A lot of the people who escaped had to stay in the refugee camps until a country allowed them to enter. If they were not allowed to enter then they were shipped back to Vietnam. Boat people landed everywhere: Southeast Asian countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines). They waited to enter European countries, and the U.S.*

*In the late 1980s to early 1990s, under "Humanitarian Operation," families of Southern Vietnamese soldiers who suffered persecution from the Communists were allowed to come to America. Our family came under "H.O." in 1994. My mother was studying literature and law in Vietnam before the Viet Cong invaded Saigon. My parents chose to come to America so my brother and I could go to college. My mother told me that if I stayed in Vietnam, I would be selling lottery tickets on the streets or making carpenter nails in a factory. My eighth aunt and her daughter, my female cousin, actually worked in a factory hammering nails until about two years ago. My other aunts helped their sister get a job selling clothes in the outdoor market.*

Minh Pham graduated in June 2013 with a Master of Fine Arts degree from UCRiverside, where he worked for three years on a book of essays and poetry about his parents. For him, his mother bends over thousands of feet a year, and his father worked in a Chinese buffet restaurant. After twenty years, his mother has asthma, joint pain, and some trouble breathing. But she still works six days a week, brushing the small strokes of color that will dry under her breath.



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*Thuan Pham (far-left) in a French tuxedo and Dung Nguyen (second from the left) in a traditional Vietnamese silk dress (áo dài) greeting wedding guests. Two weeks later, Thuan joined the Southern Vietnamese Army.*



*Every salon has a Buddha, and altar, and offerings for good luck. Ming Ming, Nga Pham, and Anna Nguyen on a long Friday.*



*Kim Ngo, Ly Ngo, Kim Dang, Ming Ming, Nga Pham, Anna Nguyen – they left Vietnam for California, for the colors of work.*



*Thuan Pham (center-right) and Dung Nguyen (center-left) at the ceremonial altar before their wedding, offering fruit, tea, and tobacco to their ancestors. Saigon, December 1973.*



*Ming Ming and Jennie Bennett.*



*The vivid enamel choices of survival and prosperity all over America.*



*Sure fingers, delicate petals, and murmured conversations.*

# Riverside National Cemetery

Forty a day. Every day. Ordinary weekdays which remain unremarkable to anyone else. Forty buried each day at Riverside National Cemetery, the busiest national cemetery in the nation, where tens of thousands of war veterans lay above or below their wives in concrete vaults, bones separate as if in floating beds stacked in ironic opposition to twin beds aside each other, and where thousands and still counting also lay single sad vaults of young men and women dying now in Afghanistan and Iraq, too young to have spouses yet.

On Memorial Day, no one is buried. Tiny plastic flags whip, thousands of living people salute and listen to speeches, motorcycles from West Coast Thunder roar past seven thousand strong, and concerts and color guards fill the amphitheater.

But on the Friday before, hundreds of living people were walking, working, crying, folding flags to present to shaking open hands, digging graves with backhoes, laying sod, weed-whacking and mowing, laying flowers. A normal day. This is not a quiet place for reflection. It is the opposite of a small country or city graveyard where someone can grieve privately, in shadow and solitude. But in Section 58A, at the center of an open vista where graves date from 2009-2010, in a canvas chair with a sunshade over her head, Sandra Svoboda was eating lunch, reading a novel, and crocheting with her husband, Ralph.

It is the only time she's happy. He died in 2009, and even now, she has no appetite, no taste for food at all. Today, May 23rd, was his birthday, so she brought cookies, burying them in the grass near his grave marker. When she dies, she will be buried above him. "When they dig it up to put me in there, they're going to find a treasure trove," she said. "The necklace he always wore – my son buried it. Candy Bohemian Nut Roll – that's his favorite. There's a lot of Bohemian Nut Roll under there!"

"Wait," I said. "You bury it?"

"We bring a small spade," Sandra Svoboda said, showing with her hands a tiny sharp shovel.

For seventeen years, my family has been visiting my mother-in-law's grave in Section 47, space 652 – we have left for Alberta Sims pieces of ham (she taught me to make a great smoked ham), and tiger butter (her favorite Christmas candy). All are removed each week when the cemetery is mowed – the rules clearly state that nothing permanent can be erected or left at the gravesites. My father-in-law was buried above her in 2008. (He was a Corporal in the Marines; his name, General Roscoe Conklin Sims II, after his own father, reflected African-American devotion to names with gravitas following slavery.)

It is truly a city of the dead. Nearly 200,000 veterans and spouses are interred here at the edge of Riverside, in the arid land which during World War II was Camp Haan. Camp Haan opened in 1941 as an Artillery Anti-Aircraft Replacement Training Center, and then in 1942 became a Prisoner of War camp for first Italian and then German POWs, who worked in the surrounding citrus groves. Haan served also as a departure base, and hospital, part of March Air Force Base, which in 1976 donated 740 acres of land for the new cemetery, dedicated in 1978. In 2000, this became the nation's most active National Cemetery, as it has remained since then. It is America's third-largest military cemetery. In 2003, 181 acres were added, for a total of 921 acres of earth to house the dead.

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"Forty people a day," Bill Goree told me, standing beside his mother MaryBell in Section 52. "My neighbor's been working here in maintenance for 30 years, and he told me they do forty a day." He brings his mother once or twice a month to visit her husband, William Aaron Goree, who was born in Mississippi, joined the Navy at 17, and served on the USS Zellers during World War II. "He was a gunner on the turret," Bill said. "They were running picket duty for the whole fleet – that's the early warning, because the kamikaze were aiming for the aircraft carriers. But one lone kamikaze decided to krafe the picket."

His father was hit, blown forty feet back from his gun turret, but he'd shot the Japanese pilot, whose plane went down onto the boat. Goree received a Purple Heart. He left the Navy after the war was over, and was working in Los Angeles at Western Electric, dismantling telephones for parts, when he saw MaryBell, who was 24. "Who's that blonde? Would she go out with me?" is what he asked co-workers. They married in 1948, six months after the first date, and then he joined the Air Force because he wanted to work on jet engines. He became a Chief Master Sergeant, a senior mechanic so skilled that he served in both Korea and Vietnam, doing two tours in the latter. In Da Nang, whenever a B52 went down, he was called to troubleshoot – crawling into the engine to see what had gone wrong, down to each bolt.

He was buried here in January 2011. MaryBell brings flowers and lingers. "If I'm here by myself," she said, "I'll talk to him. I'll be joining him someday." She is 90.

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Over and over, the story changes from war to love. Roger Zay is in Section 56C, planting miniature flags. Seven years he's been inserting them into the grass, seven hundred of them today. His wife's grave is in the middle of the waving, whipping plastic – her flag is about four inches taller than all the rest, hard to pick out at first. He wears his name on his denim vest, and badges and patches which read Fire Support Base Husky. At home, he used an electric pencil sharpener to prepare the flags for the sod – every year, he retrieves the flags before the mowing crew comes, and collects more. (He began with 120, purchased from Lowe's.)

US Army Fire Support Base Husky was outside Xuan Loc, Vietnam, near the Cambodian border. Roger Zay was 18 when he was sent there, the troops firing into the Cambodian border where Vietnamese troops had gathered in a cemetery. "They were firing at us from atop the mausoleums," he said. "They could see us better from there." On May 18, 1969, his 42nd day there, the base was overrun. "I was shell-shocked from then on," Zay said. "A mortar round landed ten feet away, but it didn't go off. We were under fire and firing back all night, into the next day."

He bent to put another flag in the grass and stood up again, sweating. "We lost a lot of guys that day. 110 of us, and more than 25 killed or wounded badly. You just try to survive every day." After more support arrived, he said, his platoon retook the base, rebuilt the compound. Zay was born in El Cajon, California, near the Naval Base in San Diego, to a father who served 21 years in the Navy. Zay's brothers served in the Air Force and Army as well.

His wife died in 1995, of cancer, after they'd been married 25 years and one month. He is remarried, and his second wife has helped decorate Section 56C with the flags. "When I die, I'll be buried here with her," he said. I asked how his current wife feels about that, and he smiled and said, "She knows. She's found a place for herself."

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The hearses came and went like long low boats skimming the narrow roads that wind like Stygian waters, along with stretch limousines and hundreds of cars, and the backhoes and maintenance trucks and tractors carrying new sod. Men and women who met in Europe or America during World War II buried today, and men killed last week in Senjaray.

Three shots rang out into the air over the next rise, the salute for Sergeant First Class Jeffrey Baker, who died May 14th in Senjaray, Afghanistan when his unit was attacked with an improvised explosive device. IED – this is the language of war now, not turret gunners and kamikaze, but IEDs left alongside roads, planted under tanks, detonated with cell phones. Baker was an explosive ordnance disposal specialist who joined the Army in 2004, was on his second deployment, and had a wife and daughter. He was awarded a Bronze Star and Purple Heart – posthumously. That is a term that never changes, no matter the conflict or the theater.

Forty a day. On the main road, preparing for a Navy funeral for an aged veteran, Master Chief Petty Officer Stephen Hughes was spending his last day at Riverside National Cemetery, after 32 years of folding flags in perfect ritual, teaching someone else to take his place. Hughes watched as Senior Chief Petty Officer Willie Crane instructed Second Class Petty Officer Ryan Villanueva to keep the flag taut, snap it crisply in display for the family, then fold in half, then begin the slow walk forward while folding tight triangles. Crane told Villanueva, "Keep your fold inside the line, then fold this into the blue, and you won't see any red. This is the most important fold." He was referring to the line where stripes give way to blue. "Then he can tuck it."

They did it again and again, Hughes beside Villanueva, saying gently, "You always start marching with your left foot – you always start the fold on the left, and the corner faces your ribbons." The colored bars on their chests opposite each other, he re-folded while Crane stood holding his end tight. Hughes said, "Military custom is you don't want the red to show. That's representing the blood shed."

Then the blue represents the sky. They held the triangular bundle which is handed to more than 250 people in a week. Part of the volunteers of the Military Honor Detail, Crane estimated that he serves "200 times a year. I've done it about a thousand times." Villanueva headed off in his Navy dress whites to fold a flag for the first time, and Hughes bid farewell to them and to this cemetery.

The flowers I had picked in my garden would wilt soon. I headed back to Section 47. On the adjacent hill, dried stubble was the color of lions. A crew of twenty was working to realign the granite grave markers, which shift each year – after a decade, sections need complete overhauls. New sod is laid, and the crew moves to another section. A tractor-trailer rumbled by carrying more of the large cement vaults waiting by the hundreds at the western edge, where the verdant green steps at chainlink dividing grass from dry buckwheat and rabbitbrush. Here, another crew was laying split slate to finish the long wall of Columbarium C, where ashes are interred. Soon, 921 acres will not be enough – but there is land beyond, and conflicts and theaters that do not end.

Where a wide swath of markers were laid in 1995, there were no flowers today except one dozen apricot roses on the Sims stone. My ex-husband had been here; I placed my bouquet beside his. The last row of markers was decorated with tiny red-white-and-blue trios – one carnation, one ribbon, one paper flag the size of four stamps. This row makes me saddest, every time I'm here. World War I. World War II. Korea. Vietnam. But for this row, the conflicts seem more euphemistic: Operation Desert Storm. Operation Iraqi Freedom. Persian Gulf.

For those who take a narrow and pale view of patriotism, who rage about immigrants, this row may be instructive. Some men under this sod: Jose Angel Garibay, Cpl US Marine Corps, Persian Gulf Iraq 1981-2003. Quoc Binh Tran, Sgt US Army, Operation Iraqi Freedom 1977-2004. Daniel Lim, Sgt US Army Afghanistan Bronze Star Purple Heart 1986-2010. Rudy Salas Cpl US Marine Operation Iraqi Freedom 1983-2004.

This place bustling with ceremony and mowing and crying and jokes and flags – so many flags large and miniscule – will probably remain busiest forever. The VA Cemetery in West Los Angeles is crowded and difficult to visit, and the Barstow cemetery unpopular. Older generations who served under the draft, whose wives will join them, will lie beside the new generations.

When I turned to leave, there was the solitary figure of Sandra Svoboda, still in her canvas chair, four hours later. Her large drink in the cupholder. Her bags of yarn closed. She watched planes take off from March Air Reserve Base. "We owned a small aircraft company in North Hollywood," she said, "so Ralph is happy looking out at the planes."

She was born on a base in Wiesbaden, Germany, to a military father and British mother, and met Ralph in 1967, when she was 18, at a GI swimming pool in El Paso. He was a medic, stationed at McClellan AFB. "We were married ten months later. He was my life."

She stays for five or six hours every time she comes. "If he were closer, I'd be here every day," she said. "I bring a tape recorder and play the music he liked. House of the Rising Sun is his favorite song." Ralph died at 65, of cancer. Sandra pointed to the marker, whose last line was Take Care of Your Little Self. "That's what we always said to each other when we left the house or the office. We worked together all day, and if one of us left, we'd say *Take care of your little self, and no orgies while I'm gone*. I left that last part off the gravestone. But we held hands every day. And now my kids say it to their spouses when they go somewhere: *No Orgies*."



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Master Chief Petty Officer Stephen Hughes watching Senior Chief Petty Officer Willie Crane, left, and Second Class Petty Officer Ryan Villanueva fold the flag taut.



Senior Chief Petty Officer Willie Crane with folded flag.



Sandra Svoboda spending Friday afternoon with her husband – "Take Care of Your Little Self" reads his grave marker.



Roger Zay, the Friday before Memorial Day, planting 700 flags at Riverside National Cemetery.



Realignment of the grave markers, section by section, making honor perfect.



MaryBell Goree – "I'll talk to him here. I'll be joining him someday."

# Green Hornet, Canteen, Foxhole

“He was my best friend, since we were five or six years old,” Andrew Melendrez said, standing with five other men wearing VFW caps for the post named after Ysmael “Smiley” Villegas, here at Riverside National Cemetery. Melendrez is a small man, wearing a black sweater, and he is 90 years old. This month, his best friend would have turned 90. But he died the day before his 21st birthday, in 1945.

“Casa Blanca was so small, everybody knew each other,” Melendrez said, looking over the crowd. “Me, I was an orphan – my mother died when I was 9, my father when I was 13, and I picked oranges until I joined the Marines. I was in the Battle of the Bulge – when we went across, they had the minefield set up for us. The Germans. I was wounded by a mine – shrapnel in my leg. I spent three months in the hospital in Paris, and Smiley, he wrote to me. He was in Luzon. He wrote, *I heard you got hurt*. A week later I got a letter from Riverside, from my aunt and uncle, to say he was killed.”

Four men in the Honor Guard were waiting to raise the American flag and the National Medal of Honor flag. Richard De La Hoya, Post Commander for VFW 184, was born in 1945 in Casa Blanca, drafted into the 101st Airborne, and survived Hamburger Hill in Vietnam. Lorenzo Maya, born in South Texas, joined the Marines in 1965, served in Vietnam 1966-67, and moved here in 1977. Maurice Morton, born in Perris, graduated from Riverside Poly, was drafted in 1969, and served in Korea. Joe Diaz joked, “I didn’t know my name was Jose until a corporal from the Ozarks called out, *Jo-zee Di-az* when I was in boot camp.” A Casa Blanca native, he enlisted in the Marines in 1963, as a Ramona High senior. He was sent to Vietnam 1966-67.

Harvey Zamora, also from Casa Blanca, joined the Marines in 1954. He said, “I had my mother sign the enlistment papers for me. I was 17 and a half. She was crying.” Zamora went to Korea, and his whole body shifted when he crouched to show me what he did. “I was in the heavy artillery, and we were just behind the line. The enemy was about 10 miles away. We were ready, because we had trained in Twentynine Palms, in the winter. We made foxholes under the snow, and we covered our shoulders with our sleeping bags. The shells, they weighed 89 pounds. Two guys would ram in the shell, and then another guy put in the powder charge. Me – I pulled the string.” His clasped hands slanted down over and over, as if he pulled the heavy string even this morning. The shells flew 14 miles. “I never saw them – the enemy. We just shot and shot at them.”

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Staff Sergeant Ysmael R. Villegas did not come back.

On this day, hundreds gathered to honor him. Childhood friends. Five of his sisters and one brother. Elected officials and politicians, and former neighbors. Students from the middle school named after him read an essay about Villegas’ life, including the exact details of his bravery in battle, and performed the jitterbug to Glenn Miller, his favorite band.

His sister Rafaela’s recollections: He loved Mutt & Jeff comics, had posters of Glenn Miller and Harry James orchestras hanging in his bedroom, and at the dances, girls loved to partner with “Smiley,” who always wore a white carnation. Everyone remembers his lime green 1937 Buick, which he proudly named The Green Hornet.

A love story shared by Rafaela, Lottie, Beatrice, Martha, Pat, and Art, here today: Their mother came to Casa Blanca when she was 15, from Torreon, Mexico, where she was born in 1909. “My father was living here in Casa Blanca,” Beatrice said, under a black-lace umbrella against the sun. “His friends were her brothers. He heard she was coming. They were married a year later.” Fourteen children born, twelve surviving. Six brothers and six sisters. And yet, Beatrice said, and the others all nodded in the row of chairs facing the picture of their brother in his uniform: “Our mother never got over it – losing her son like that. She died in 1969.”

Andrew Melendrez was sent back to the front after he got the letter about Smiley’s death. When Melendrez returned to Casa Blanca, he married Beatrice.

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Some of the language of the citation on March 28, 1945, the day Villegas was posthumously awarded the National Medal of Honor, the first ever such recipient in Riverside County. *Squad leader, forward position, connected caves and foxholes, bursting grenades and demolition charges, heavy machine gunfire. Crest of the hill. Gallantry, disregard, bullets, charge, firing at point blank range.*

*Killed the Japanese in a foxhole. Second, third, fourth, fifth, destroying the enemy within. Sixth foxhole, hit and killed by enemy fire. Inspired his men to a determined attack, swept the enemy from the field.*

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But there is another story. After the singing of “God Bless America,” and the benediction, as the crowd mingled in the sun, someone said, “You need to talk to him.” I was pointed to a shady slot of gravel between two massive cypress trees, where a man wearing a red windbreaker sat on a white folding chair.

We were left alone. His name is Javier Marquez. In July, he will be 89 years old. He was born in Los Angeles, lived across the street from Mission San Gabriel as a child, and moved to Colton. Drafted at 19 into the Army, he went to basic training with Smiley Villegas. “We used to come home together on leave,” Marquez said, smiling a little, silver stubble on his cheeks transparent when the wind moved the branches and sun slanted across him.

Late in 1944, the 32nd Division left Tacloban and landed at Luzon. There were up to 20,000 men in the division, he estimated. “Smiley and I were in the same company, different platoons,” Marquez said, reciting so quickly the words he must have said a thousand times when he was a soldier. “F Company, 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Infantry Division. But I’d see him all the time.”

“I was in a rifle platoon. We had semi-automatic M-1s. The Japanese, they had bolt action rifles. That day, as we were headed up the slope, Smiley said to me in Spanish, ‘There’s a lot of Japanese up on that hill.’ We were up high, on a little knoll, my platoon and Smiley’s. When we got out to clear the area, it was really fortified. There was heavy machine gun fire which had the company cut off. I had this other guy with me, and we moved forward. He was about 5-10 yards from me, and he got shot. He made a sound. Oof. Just that sound. I waited. I knew the Japanese guy would have to load the bolt action. I heard him, right about there.” He pointed to the cypress behind me – about five yards. “You couldn’t see anything – it was all jungle and brush and smoke and noise. I tracked him. So then he came out, and I couldn’t help it. I yelled at him – *you SOB!* – he had killed my guy – I wanted him to see my face – he looked at me and then I shot him. He went down but I didn’t even stay to see if he was dead.”

He rubbed at his face, looked into the dark branches of the cypress. Then he said, “My sergeant told me, help this guy with the bazooka. We were shooting anti-tank shells, and they were pointed, they weren’t exploding, and we needed different rounds. I could hear all the racket from Smiley’s platoon. I went down to get supplies, I went past the medic station, and there he was. On the stretcher.” He had to stop. He was crying. He trembled all over, in the small chair, moved his hands over his face again, and said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This story isn’t about me.”

But it was. He was quiet, his face reshaping itself. Then he said, “A week prior, we were on a lower slope, and there was a little valley, and the Japanese were on a high ridge. There was heavy machine gun fire, they were firing down at Smiley’s platoon, off to my left about 40 yards, and they were getting peppered. Smiley said, ‘We’re gonna go get that – so-and-so.’ He was in front of his squad, just crawling up the hill. Then Smiley went around through the brush, climbed up the hill from the back, and killed the guy. Maybe an hour passed, maybe two. Here he comes up the slope, head of his squad, laughing and waving, and he had the machine gun on his back, and killed the guy. Maybe an hour passed, maybe two. Here he comes up the slope, head of his squad, laughing and waving, and he had the machine gun on his back. You know, we used to have two canteens on our ammo belt.” He pointed to his waist. “Smiley’s canteens were full of holes where he got shot, and his clothes were all shredded from crawling up the hill and getting fired at. He was just lucky. That day, anyway.”

Marquez was still staring into the swaying spears of cypress. He returned to Colton in July 1946. He joined the Air Force Reserves in 1947, served four years, then served five years in the Naval Reserves, and finally was in the National Guard for years. He has three daughters, all of whom went to college, six grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. He lived. Yet the tiny stiff hairs on his cheeks and jaw still glistened with the remnants of saltwater rubbed from his eyes.



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Harvey Zamora demonstrating how to load the heavy artillery in Korea.



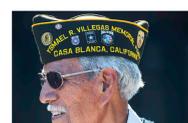
Lorenzo Maya, Maurice Morton, Joe Diaz, and Harvey Zamora, veterans, Honor Guard for VFW 184 – Casa Blanca.



Some of the Villegas family: sisters Rafaela Bedolla, Elodia Manzanares, Beatrice Melendrez; brother Arthur Villegas.



Smiley Villegas, who didn’t return from Luzon, first veteran interred at Riverside National Cemetery.



Andrew Melendrez, childhood friend of Villegas, received a Silver Star at the Battle of the Bulge.



Jungle battle in the Philippines. Photo courtesy March Field Air Museum



Javier Marquez, 89, remembers combat in Luzon with Smiley Villegas.