



AVAG News

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AVAG Steps Up During the COVID-19 Crisis



Volunteers at AVAG Give Back Day in a photo taken a week before the stay-at-home orders went into effect.

Many charitable organizations had to shut down due to the CDC guidelines. Typically, AVAG would be having numerous meetings, luncheons, dinners, and other events all of which have been put on hold for now. But the needs of our veterans continue and have increased. Accordingly, our staff, volunteers, and partners have been working overtime in unconventional ways to connect with and serve our veterans and the communities.

Here are the highlights from March 1 to June 30, 2020. In a total of 77 Community Give Back Days in 20 communities, AVAG has distributed more than 4500 boxes/bags of groceries including boxes of produce and dairy products (milk, cheese, butter, etc.), and 400 bags of bread. Blessing bags assembled by the Richard Breunig Foundation were filled with essential household items that everyone was in search of (toilet paper, paper towels, soap, sanitizer, etc.). 1250 Easter baskets, 100 furniture items including recliners, refrigerators, mattresses, etc., 125 Bibles, 4 Quilts of Valor, 200 gifts to our National Guard, 200 masks were donated to the communities, and our Outreach Coordinator, Gayle Bohnoff-Vrabec, worked with Veterans to navigate through the VA during their lock-down; making calls and setting up doctor appointments.

Many elderly and low-income veterans and their families have been hit especially hard by this lock-down but we are doing our best to provide the help they need. We sent out over 500 letters and cards of encouragement to people that were on lockdown. ✈

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or learn more about us at AVAGUSA.com

AVAG Works Overtime to Serve During the Coronavirus Shutdown

Community Give Back Days –

Santiago Mountain View Estates
Pacific Palms Mobile Home
Park Santiago Parkside Estates
Santiago Palm Vista Hemet
Ninth Street Mobile Home Park
Diamond Bar Estates
Glen Aire Mobile Estates
Santiago Creek Orange Estates
Santiago Creekside Estates
Santiago Parkside Estates
Santiago Hillside Estates
Santiago Estates Pedley
Santiago Orangewood Estates
Santiago Desert View Estates
Santiago Hemet Valley



Giveaways of furniture, refrigerators, and more...



Sequoia Plaza
Mobile Home
Park San
Bernardino —
AVAG brings
groceries &
supplies for
242 homes.



Bible Giveaway



Bringing Easter Joy to Our Communities

Celebrated around the world, Easter is one of the most important holidays in the Christian religion. The springtime holiday celebrates the belief that Christ resurrected from the dead. But this year, Easter celebrations look a lot different as more than 1.5 billion people worldwide have been asked to stay home amid the spread of Coronavirus.

It seemed like Easter would have been different this year with the stay at home order and Churches being closed and no Easter bunny photos. But AVAG received a call from Janeen Reiser of Children Giving Gifts asking if our communities could use some Easter items. Most stores had been closed down due to the pandemic, so we were excited to hear that there was an opportunity to bless our children in the communities.

On April 2, 2020 we met up with Janeen and Fred Rieser at World Market in Irvine at 8:30 am. Not knowing what we were going to receive we were introduced to Tony Santilla the GM of World Market and Dawn Lownang. Also meeting us there were David and Mellissa Breunig who agreed to help us transport the products in their trailer.

To our surprise we received 85 boxes of Easter gifts consisting of candy and assorted seasonal products that World Market in Irvine would have been selling for Easter if they had been open. We transported them to Creekside Estates mobile home park in Orange where we unloaded and opened all the boxes to see what treasures were inside. We were pleasantly surprised to find a variety of goodies; we thought it was only candy but the goodies included 100 stuffed animals, 150+ decorative eggs, lots of chocolate Easter bunnies, pasta, cookies, cups, books, decorative wreaths, candle holders, place mats, Easter snow globes, baskets, cakes and more. Children Giving Gifts also provided 300+ gifts of purses, ceramic angels, jewelry boxes, silk flowers, and jeweled barrettes.

Once we had unloaded, opened and sorted the various goodies, with the help of our volunteers, we assembled all the baskets and eggs and took them out to the following communities:

- Creekside (300 served)
- Barstow (25 served)
- Parkside (425 served)
- Sequoia (40 served.)
- Creek Orange (35 served)
- Diamond Bar (25 served)
- Glen Aire (10 served)

We were also able to give out thirty items of pasta and cookies that were put in blessing bags with other essential items from AVAG.

The following is a list of all the items that American Veterans Assistance Group (AVAG) gave out to the amazing people and families that we have the privilege to be able to support:

Two-hundred plus gifts were given to First Responders, volunteers, adults in need, nurses, and veterans from Children Giving Gifts; fifteen Easter gifts to St. Joseph's Heritage, Dr. Basu; thirty-three baskets to homeless kids at OC Rescue Mission; eighteen gifts to homeless adults at OC Rescue Mission; fifty-eight gifts to seniors at Katella Senior Living Community, which included varied gifts of purses, ceramic angels, jewelry boxes, silk flowers, jeweled barrettes from Children Giving Gifts; forty-five gifts of jewelry were given to the nurses at Katella Senior Living Community from Children Giving Gifts; forty gifts to Grateful Hearts Food Bank for their volunteers and fifteen coffee cups were supplied by the Richard Breunig



World Market of Irvine generously donated 85 boxes of Easter gifts.



Navy Veteran wife, DeeAnna Tomczak & Chaplain Doreen at Creekside Estates where the boxes which contained a wide variety of treasures for filling Easter baskets were unpacked.

Foundation; forty gifts were given to the Richard Breunig Foundation to distribute to their veterans and families in need; sixteen gifts for veterans came from the Cottonwood Veterans Small Group Bible Study; Pastor Gabriel Rodriguez's two daughters and Pastor Naomi's two daughters and son all received Easter baskets; seventy-five Easter candies and twenty Easter baskets were donated to Tranquility Counseling; five kids that were hiding from their fathers because of domestic violence and eight ER Nurses received Easter baskets.

It is with great appreciation that AVAG thanks World Market in Irvine, Children Giving Gifts, and the Richard Breunig Foundation for their generosity. With their help we were able to bless so many this Easter.

This was all about team work and our AVAG Volunteers, Mellissa Breunig, David Breunig, Paul Buron, Amanda Breunig, Doreen Matsumoto, Maria Harrison, Patricia Orozco, Chris Harrison, and DeeAnna Tomczak 🐰



Fred Reiser



Janeen Reiser



Chaplain Doreen



Army Veteran David Breunig



Katella Senior Living Community



Amanda Breunig dropping off gifts for the residents and nursing staff



St. Joseph Heritage Nurses



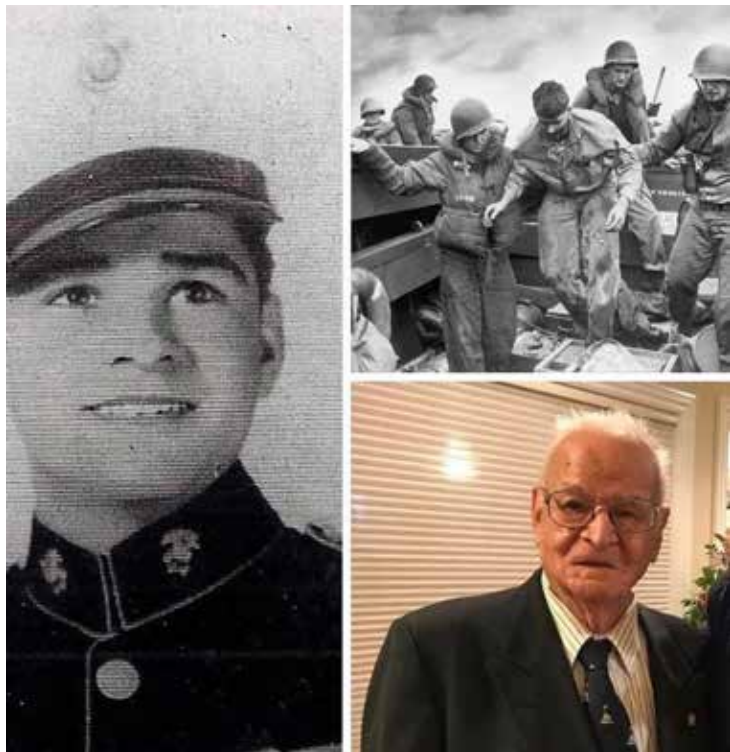
Grateful Hearts Volunteers

A Tale of Two Brothers Who Served in WWII

AVAG was introduced to the story of the two brothers after dropping off a blessing bag to Martha Lucero at Casitas LaVerne during COVID-19. She expressed concern about veteran Pasqual Mercado, who was feeling depressed during the lockdown. He had suffered two strokes and is now in hospice. He resides with his daughter, Cathy Capone.

Chaplain Doreen reached out to SoCal Quilts of Valor for AVAG to be able to present a quilt to him at his home in Murrieta. We arrived

with volunteers to let him know that he was not forgotten. We also presented him with three challenge coins, Purple Heart, a challenge coin from DAV Chapter 23 in Orange, an AVAG challenge coin, and a challenge coin from original Green Beret Richard Simonian. We also learned that he was going to be 94 on May 14. While visiting with him, he told us about his brother, Robert, who also served in WWII. His brother passed away in 2005. Here are their stories:



Pasqual Mercado, then and now.

Pasqual Mercado

US Marine Corps WWII Veteran, Pasqual “Pat” Mercado served in “I” Company 3rd Bn. 28th Marine, 5th Division from November 1943 – April 1946. He was wounded in the Battle of Iwo Jima; shot in the face and laying on his stomach. If a Marine was on their stomach that meant that they were dead. Another Marine heard him grunt and turned him over signifying that he was alive and needed transport. He was in the San Diego Military Hospital for 14 months, many surgeries were performed, and then medically discharged.

We asked him if you had to do it all over again, would you serve? He said, “Yes!”

When asked what he liked and didn’t like so much about serving in the military, he said he liked being part of a unit of men proud to serve their country. But, he didn’t like being away from his family.

Another benefit of his time in the military was that it allowed him to spend time in Saipan and also Hawaii where he was stationed — locations he might have otherwise missed.

When he was asked if there were lessons he learned in the service that were later used in civilian life, he said, “My Captain and Lieutenant always emphasized not to smoke or drink, (in the war it could kill you). I always took that to heart. So, I never really drank (only on special occasions) after that. And I never smoked after being in the service. I also made sure I never ‘ran around with women’.”

About his transition from the service returning to civilian life he said, “My transition was okay because I was in the military hospital for so long, 14 months, that my transition was somewhat smooth.

He remembers favorite officers or non-commissioned officers that helped him during his time in the service, “Captain Young and Lieutenant Mahoney — they helped me learn the ropes.”

Robert Mercado

Robert Mercado served in the U.S. Marine Corps in the South Pacific during WWII. Robert fought at New Guinea, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, Peleliu, Palau Islands, and at Cape Gloucester, New Britain. He was awarded the Purple Heart and his unit received a Presidential Citation.

Robert retired at the age of 70 from DiSalvo Trucking as a Diesel Mechanic – he was a member of Machinist Local 1186. His favorite saying was, “It’s better to say I love you than goodbye.”

Robert and his wife, Mary were married for 61 years, had three sons, and a daughter, Becky Mercado Glaser, who shared her dad’s story and photos with us, thirteen grandchildren, and eleven great-grandchildren at the time of his death.



SoCal Quilts of Valor and AVAG Honors Pasqual Mercado



In the picture is Mellissa Breunig, QOV Rep Edna Wright, Pasqual Mercado with daughter, Doreen Matsumoto, and Amanda Breunig.



Pasqual Mercado and family at left. At right, he gives his quilt and the entire experience a "thumbs up."



Richard and Sumie Breunig with their children Janet & David

Meet Sumie Breunig – AVAG's Oldest Volunteer

Sumie Breunig, a 91-year-old veterans' widow, met her husband when he was overseas in Japan. She spoke no English and he spoke almost no Japanese, but he said it was love at first sight. But if you ask her, the only reason she gave him a shot is because she thought he was rich. This little lady is so feisty and strong for 91. Richard A. Breunig was 17 when he joined the Navy at the tail end of World War II in 1944. After he was honorably discharged, he realized the service still needed him and went back into the Navy to serve in the Korean conflict and continued to serve through the Vietnam war.

He served for a total of twenty years. After retiring from the service, he went to work at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard as a master machinist for fifteen years. He retired at age 55. His son, David Breunig and his wife Mellissa, carry on his legacy with the Richard Breunig Foundation.

David's mother was tired of being stuck at home and decided to volunteer with AVAG. Sumie helped distribute blessing bags to our veterans and seniors at Casitas La Verne Mobile Home Park, she knocked on the doors and brought smiles to their faces. She said it's nice to help people; everyone needs help once in a while. 🦋



Sumie delivering blessing bags.



Left to right, David Breunig, Mellissa Breunig, Doreen Matsumoto, Sumie Breunig, in the red jacket, and Mr. Richard Simonian.

AVAG's Military Gratitude Packing Small Group



Military Gratitude Packing Small Group volunteers above, left to right: Melissa Applebaum (her husband, Vietnam Army Veteran Loren took the picture). Linda Lee Smith, Sheri Walker, Yuko Nagle, Veteran Gail Smith, Amanda Breunig (her father is an Army Veteran), Vicky Jackson (her brother served state side during the Vietnam War) and Doreen Matsumoto.

AVAG volunteers work together to bring joy and encouragement to our active duty service men and women and our veterans. Starting in January 2020, the Military Gratitude Packing Small Group began. These

volunteers started meeting once a month to prepare cards, letters, and care packages with the help of AVAG supplying the postage. We have been able to send out over 350 letters and packages.

Here are a few pictures of our members and their heroes.



Amanda Breunig and her father, Army Veteran David Breunig above. "I come from a very patriotic family, my father served in the Army in the first Gulf War, my grandfather – Navy Veteran served in three active wars; WWII, the Korean Conflict, and the Vietnam War and my uncle – Navy Veteran served in the Vietnam War. Having this opportunity to show our military they are appreciated is definitely an opportunity I would not miss."



Vicky Perez Jackson (above) and her brother, Army Veteran Frank D. Perez, who was stationed in North Carolina during the Vietnam War. "I was in elementary school when he served and I was proud to write him letters. It's an honor to be able to show our appreciation to our veterans."



Yuko Nagle (at left) with daughter, Jennifer at her Air National Guard Graduation. Jennifer Childers is in the Air National Guard. She is married with three children. It has been by prayer and faith, the Childers family endeavor the military life.



Linda Lee Taylor (at top) gave us a picture of her hero. "My Dad, Robert Lee Taylor (February 18, 1900 – February 7, 1979) served in WWI. He was sent to France. He told them he was 18 years old when he joined the army in 1917. This picture (shown above) was taken in Cleveland, Ohio 1971."



From Gayle Vrabec (photo above left): I joined the Military Packing Group because of my mother, who served in WWII (Margaret is pictured above center and right). My Mom, although all her three brothers and her fiancé (Dad) had gone to serve, felt strongly about going to help the war effort. She and her best friend went to the recruiter and joined that very day, much to her families surprise. They were called to service quickly. Mom served from 1941-1945. During that time she rose through the ranks quickly, becoming a First Sergeant in the Women's Army Core (WAC) and was a D.I. (drill instructor) over a full company of 100 women. Mom and I had together joined many groups that helped Veteran's and up until she passed at 100-years she was volunteering. She is my inspiration and has given me purpose to continue helping our Veterans in any way I can. I'm grateful to those who serve/served our country. This group is an opportunity to show my appreciation.



From Sheri Walker (at left): "Having five generations of veterans in my family I am so proud of. I want to be able to give back to our veterans for all they have done. I found our small group that had a great purpose to serve our veterans. I believe that's where I belong."



From Melissa Applebaum (above left with husband Loren): "I joined the Small Military Packing Group to give back to the service members and their families that I worked with for 35 years. My association with the military began with my father who enlisted in the Army after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and continued when I married my husband a Vietnam vet who served in an Artillery 105 Battery during the 1968/1969 time period (pictured



at right in Vietnam). My own introduction to the military world began when I worked for the Navy and later the Air Force where I truly learned what 'service before self' means. It was eye opening to witness the sacrifice of the military members and their families to keep America safe and strong. The military is on duty 24/7, and a normal work day is 12 hours. So, it is now my honor to give a little something back to these proud Americans."

Flagman Frank Delivers Fresh, Hot Meals to Veterans and Seniors

Flagman Frank Waldrop joined us to keep our senior communities healthy with nutritious food. On Tuesdays he fills up our truck with freshly prepared meals for some of our veterans and senior residents at Casitas La Verne and Creek Orange.

We have been delivering food and necessities to them since this pandemic started. And now that Flagman Frank has connected us to Bracken's Kitchen we are able to provide them with freshly prepared food for breakfast and dinner plus homemade soups.

The residents couldn't believe all the food we brought for them. It's heartwarming to talk to these widows of veterans and to also reassure them they are not forgotten; tears filled their eyes when they talked about their husbands. Most of the seniors don't get a hot meal because they don't cook anymore. They are looking forward to our first AVAG meeting when the clubhouse reopens.

In its simplest form Bracken's Kitchen delivers hot and nutritious meals in a fun, and dignified manner. The program serves the highest quality and most nutritious meals that their clients will get all week. In doing so they are not only nourishing the body but the soul as well. 🦋



Flagman Frank Waldrop hard at work.



The City of Los Alamitos Recreation & Community Services Steps up to Partner with AVAG

When COVID-19 hit and people started to lose their jobs they began to worry about how they were going to feed their families, AVAG reached out to Erica Halberg from the City of Los Alamitos Recreation regarding their food program. Previously, they would supply us with bread almost every Friday for our communities. Erica mentioned that they would be starting a food distribution on March 31 to help people struggling during the stay at home order. On that day we picked up 35 boxes of food for our community at Creekside Estates Mobile Home Park.



Huntington Beach representative, Stevie Rivera (pictured above wearing the black bandana and red patterned face mask) volunteered while his gym was temporarily closed due to COVID-19.



As shown above, the boxes were distributed via curbside drive-up using masks, gloves and observing social distancing at Creekside Estates in Orange.



Health officials said that older adults, as well as people with compromised immune systems and those with underlying chronic medical conditions, seem to be at higher risk of developing serious, life-threatening complications from the Coronavirus. AVAG took the initiative to make sure that our seniors were provided for during this crisis by delivering food and necessities to their doors at Creek Orange.

The Los Alamitos Recreation and Community Services Department continues to “Create Quality of Life” for its community during these unprecedented times. They provide for their community through the Senior Grocery Program sponsored by Second Harvest Food Bank. This program provides free groceries to adults over the age of 60 and to low-income families. Groceries are distributed weekly on a first come, first serve basis to the first 175 households (Tuesday from 11:30 am – 12:30 pm at the Los Alamitos Community Center at 10911 Oak Street, Los Alamitos 90720). Over the past three months, the program has provided groceries to over 500 households and has directly benefited military veterans with the assistance from the American Veterans Assistance Group (AVAG).

To show our appreciation for the 90 boxes of food that the Los Alamitos Recreation & Community Services provided, AVAG presented a plaque of appreciation and a donation to support their Scholarship Program.

The Scholarship Program allows low-income Los Alamitos residents to register for a recreation class for free or at a minimal cost. In addition to the Senior Grocery Program, the Los Alamitos Recreation and Community Services Department facilitates biweekly Senior Wellness Calls to ensure their community members are safe, healthy, and have access to resources. 🦋

For more information visit www.cityoflosalamitos.org/recreation



Building Relationships with Veterans



Larry Martinez



Larry is proud to be a Native American who served his country.

Chaplain Doreen met Marine Corps veteran, Larry Martinez, at the American Legion Post 295 Bike Night. A mutual friend, Janny Greeling-Gati, asked if we would present him with a Quilt of Valor. With the help of So Cal Quilts of Valor, we were able to fill her request. This was going to be a surprise; he had no idea we were going to be recognizing him. When we called him up and presented the quilt, we asked him if he had anything to say and with tears in his eyes, he said, "Thank you, he has always felt that himself and other brothers that served in Vietnam had been forgotten."

Since then, Chaplain Doreen has kept in touch with him and his wife, Karen. We have been able to get to know him and about the time he spent in the service. Larry Martinez served in the Marine Corps for four years, stationed in Vietnam. We asked if he had to do it over again, would he serve and he said, "Yes!" What he liked best about serving in the military was that it was structured and "at 18, I needed it, but the one thing I didn't like was being away from home. The lessons I learned in the

service that I used in civilian life were self-control respect for all. It was rough for me and a lot of confusion transitioning especially coming back feeling unappreciated.

"With the help of AVAG and other organizations, they have shown me that I am appreciated and honored for my service. I have received my Quilt of Valor and proclamations from city officials. I was given free tickets through Vet Tix."

About Vet Tix: Vet Tix provides tickets to events which reduce stress, strengthen family bonds, build life-long memories and encourage service members and veterans to stay engaged with local community events. They support our troops by honoring their service and providing positive family and life experiences, during and after their years of service to our country. Vet Tix provides tickets to all branches of currently-serving Military and Veterans, including immediate family of troops KIA. Vet Tix secures tickets to sporting events, concerts, performing arts, educational and family activities across the nation.



Larry displays the sign he made to express his appreciation for Vet Tix and its supporters.

Vet Tixers sign up online at www.vettix.org, where their service is verified. Vet Tixers request tickets to events that interest them. A lottery system ensures that everyone has a fair chance to receive event tickets. Other than a small delivery fee all tickets are free. 🐦

Our Community Roots with the Military



In our last newsletter, you read about one of our AVAG supporters, Yesenia Macias, Community Manager at Sequoia Plaza Mobile Home Park. We asked her if she had any veterans in her family and she proudly said, “Yes, her uncle Angel Y. Bañuelos, Staff Sergeant, US Army.”

Army veteran, Angel Y. Bañuelos (at left) served 9 years in the US Army. He served at Ft. Bragg, NC, Ft. Shafter, HI, and MacDill AFB Tampa, FL.

We asked him to share his story:

If you had to do it over again, would you serve? Yes, without a doubt

Would you do anything differently? Yes, I’d become a Warrant Officer

What did you like best about serving in the military? Army Values, friendships, camaraderie, deployments

What did you dislike the most? Unrecoverable time spent away from the family. Can’t have both, but it’s the only thing I disliked.

Were there lessons learned in the service that you used in civilian life? Yes, there are many.

How was your transition from the service returning to civilian life? Very easy. The Army paid for my education and gave me the IT and leadership experience needed to find a job. I had a job offer before I separated from the service. Most of the friends I served with in Tampa were honorably discharged around the same time, lived in the same town, and worked in the same field.

Did you have any favorite officers or non-commissioned officers you remember as helping you? Yes, too many to list. I’ve passed on their advice to my nephews and nieces.

Did you see any country while in the military that you would have missed otherwise? While in the military yes, Bosnia. However, I’ve been working as a civilian for the Department of Defense for over 12 years and have been able to travel to numerous locations. I currently live in Germany and my family and I have been blessed with having the opportunity to travel around Europe. Without the Army and DOD, I wouldn’t have been able to see as much as I have. ✕

Barstow Veterans’ Home Facing Closure



Barstow veterans’ home may be forced to close and about 200 veterans forced to relocate because of the California budget crisis linked to COVID-19. The facility in Barstow is slated for closure as part of the state’s effort to address a massive budget shortfall. AVAG put out a call to action.

We asked Santiago Communities Sales Manager, Jamie Grace and manager of Santiago Desert View, Maria Lugo to partner with us to support the veterans’ home. On Thursday, June 4, all of the veterans from Desert View helped hang the support banner. They all agreed that this home is necessary for our veterans and the community of Barstow. After we hung the banner, we treated our veterans to lunch and gave them blessing bags. ✕



Army Veterans Serving At Grateful Hearts Food Bank Share Their Stories

We recently met Army veterans Mark Hunt and Anton Mandarino at Grateful Hearts food bank in Los Alamitos, California, where they were volunteering — filling up 60 bags of food for us to take out to seniors and low-income families.

Working with Blair Pietrini, founder of Grateful Hearts, and our partners, So Cal Quilts of Valor, we were able to surprise Mark and Anton with a special quilt to honor their service.

Mark and Anton Share Their Stories

Mark Hunt (pictured below) served in the US Army for 12 years (2008-2020) as a Staff Sergeant (E6).

Where did you serve? Fort Riley, Kansas; Kandahar, Afghanistan; March Air Force Base, California; Los Alamitos, California; Camp Pendleton, California

After active duty did you serve in reserves or National Guard? Yes; Reserves

If you had to do it over again, would you serve? Yes, in a heartbeat.

Would you do anything differently? Honestly, there was a lot of positives and a lot of things that I would not have learned or done if I didn't do exactly the path I did. If there were any additions, I would have made at a younger year in my Army career, it would probably be to volunteer for Airborne School while my knees were still good.

What was it you liked best about serving in the military? I loved the opportunities to meet certain people, do certain things, and give myself a certain mindset about life that I would never been able to do if I didn't serve. Every bit of my time in the military was worth it.

What did you dislike the most? Sometimes the long hours with the added stress, anxiety, mental exhaustion, and pain would get to me, but I would never take back those times. Those are the best stories, and best times to reflect on. Best worst times of my life.

Were there lessons learned in the service that you used in civilian life? Patience and different type of maturity was a huge lesson or learning experience in the service that helped me in civilian life. I feel



Wrapped in Love with their Quilt of Valor, left to right, Blair Pietrini, Jose Gonzalez, Mark Hunt, Anton Mandarino, Chaplain Doreen, and Mellissa Breunig.

when I got back into the civilian way of things, school was a lot more focused, leadership roles were given to me without question at work, and even relationships with others were more respectful.

How was your transition from the service returning to civilian life?

I would be lying if I said my transition into civilian life was easy. There were a lot of habits from the military that I had to turn the “off” switch considering my leadership role I gained not transferring into my daily civilian life, how I would talk in a combat unit compared to the average civilian life, and many other things only acceptable in the military.

Did you have any favorite officers or non-commissioned officers you remember as helping you?

My platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Keller (at the time) built me into the leader I am today; my First Sergeant, First Sergeant Patro motivated everyone in our company to be the best even on our worst day; Sergeant First Class Hamby that took me under his wing and taught me everything he knew to continue to mold me into my later NCO years as a great leader and the best at my job.

Did you travel to any country on R&R? When I went on R&R, I made sure I visited family in California and North Dakota. When I went on leave anytime, I made sure I saw family because I didn't see them often.

Did you see any country while in the military that you would have missed otherwise? I've been all over the United States, but overseas I was able to see Afghanistan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Kyrgyzstan, and Germany.





US Army Veteran, **Anton Mandarin** (pictured above) served for 20+ years. He achieved the rank of O-3 while stationed at Fort Bragg, NC.

After active duty did you serve in reserves or National Guard? Yes; National Guard.

If you had to do it over again, would you serve? Yes.

Would you do anything differently? Yes, would finish college before I retired instead of early years as I did in 1984.

What was it you liked best about serving in the military? Discipline, team work, detail-oriented schools; like we say "It is not a tour, it's an adventure."

Were there lessons learned in the service that you used in civilian life? I say everything from boot camp all the way through the National Guard.

How was your transition from the service returning to civilian life? Sad, felt like a fish out of water.

Did you have any favorite officers or non-commissioned officers you remember as helping you? General Flynn and General Powell

Did you travel to any country on R&R? Yes, Panama, Amazon (Brazil and Columbia), Antarctica, Europe, South Korea, and Africa.

Did you see any country while in the military that you would have missed otherwise? Yes, the Netherlands, Italy, and South Africa.

Grateful Hearts Plants Roots with AVAG

During this pandemic Grateful Hearts Storehouse has provided food every week for our team to go out and help our communities. We are grateful to Blair Pietrini, founder of Grateful Hearts. Here's her story.

Meet Grateful Hearts Founder, Blair Pietrini



Blair Pietrini founded Grateful Hearts Storehouse in 1998 after receiving several heartbreaking phone calls from single mothers in need who were requesting help from the church she was working at. Since the church had no program in place to assist them, it soon became what would turn into her life's work and passion.

Grateful Hearts is a community resource center for those in need — whether it is supplying a single mom with a refrigerator, providing deployed soldiers families with Christmas dinner and gifts, or delivering food to shut-ins. The mission of Grateful Hearts is to see that none of our neighbors go hungry, ever.

AVAG is grateful that she has extended her support during this time for our communities due to quite a few people having lost their jobs and were struggling to make ends meet. Our seniors were stuck at home. Blair has been a blessing to us.

We wanted to show our appreciation to all the volunteers who bring pallets of food and load up our cars, especially the veterans that are volunteering at Grateful Hearts. We were able to present Blair with a plaque and a check. We brought gifts to her volunteers, masks, and gloves. And for her veterans that volunteer we presented Quilts of Valor.



Doreen Matsumoto presented Blair Pietrini the founder of Grateful Hearts with a plaque of appreciation on behalf of AVAG.



The National Guard Deployed to Southern California Cities



Sgt Ramos, Chaplain Doreen and Blair Pietrini



The National Guard was deployed to several Southern California cities to assist local police departments as unrest and violence worsened in the region. The mayors of Long Beach, Los Angeles and Santa Monica requested the help of National Guard troops in their respective cities and received approval from California Gov. Gavin Newsom.

We met Sgt Ramos from the Los Alamitos Joint Training Base when he stopped by Grateful Hearts to ask for water and energy drinks for the National Guard serving to protect our properties and businesses in our State of California during this civil unrest. He jumped right in as AVAG was filling up trucks to take provisions to communities in need.

After all the rioting, the National Guard was called in; they have been working around the clock to protect our businesses and communities. Los Alamitos Joint Training base has sent hundreds of men and women out.

We wanted to show our gratitude to them. We had 200 boxes of decorative socks that were donated to us from Cottonwood Church to give out at our recognition night. But that was canceled due to the COVID-19, and since Father's Day was so close, we decided to go to the base and ask if we could pass out the boxes. It was amazing to see these men and women light up with just a thank you and a small gift of appreciation. It was our honor to do this; they looked exhausted as if they had been up for days.



Col Richard Lalor, PAO at left



AVAG News

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