



AVAG News

Spring/Summer 2023 • Volume 10 Issue 2



Veterans and guests filled the room at the 6th Annual Memorial Day Parade and Luncheon held at Cottonwood Church in Los Alamitos on Memorial Day 2023.

AVAG Hosts the 6th Annual Memorial Day Parade and Luncheon

AVAG's annual Memorial Day Parade and Luncheon honoring our fallen heroes was held at Cottonwood Church in Los Alamitos.

Local officials, including Emily Hibard, a city councilwoman for Los Alamitos, Scott Minikus, the pro tem mayor of the city of Cypress, Joseph Dyer, the military and veterans liaison for Congresswoman Steel's office, and Congressman Lou Correa, followed the 82nd Airborne as they led the parade, which included vintage cars and motorcycles. Sgt. Brian Alvarado, a veteran of the Marine Corps, served as the guest of honor.

Following the flag-folding ceremony performed by the 82nd Airborne, the flag was presented to Brian Alvarado. Four special AVAG veterans—Laura Herzog, Brian Alvarado, Travis Mayfield, and Chaplain Saul Castillo—were awarded Certificates of Recognition after brief speeches by the officials.

"Taps," "God bless America," and "The Star-Spangled Banner" were played during the ceremony. The Torres Mortuary donated 26 white doves, which were released during the parade with the help of several distinguished veterans.

Over 300 veterans and guests went inside for a delicious lunch provided by AVAG and Cottonwood and delicious cupcakes by Lana Martinez after the parade and presentations. The event was assisted by volunteers from the Sunburst Academy from the Los Alamitos Joint Forces Training Base. The AVAG hostesses, who have helped with all of the AVAG events, were there to lend their customary support.

Children Giving Gifts provided us with a special gift that was given to each veteran in attendance. Additionally, gift cards and raffle prizes were distributed.

Chaplain Saul Castillo spoke as the event's special guest. He was amazing, sharing the love of Jesus with everyone.

Additionally, Scott Minikus and Tom Cleary gave a testimony about their AVAG-sponsored trip to Israel. The CEO of Honoring Our Fallen, Laura Herzog, spoke about the Gold Star families.

AVAG Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto received so many compliments regarding the event.

Thank you to everyone who help make this event a success. ✨

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Over 300 were in attendance at this Memorial Day event held at Cottonwood Church in Los Alamitos.

AVAG Sponsors Veterans for Outreach Trip to Israel

A team was sent to Israel in February. Veterans participating in the outreach tell their stories.

Father's Day Celebrations

AVAG celebrations were held at Santiago Creek Estates and Casitas Laverne.

Veterans Connect

AVAG's Veterans Connect meets monthly at Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach. Meet a few of the veterans that attend.

AVAG Chaplain Doreen Flies Over Seal Beach

The local Army Veteran Aviation Society honored Chaplain Doreen with a flight to recognize her tireless work.

Vietnam Veterans Day

AVAG observed Vietnam Veterans Day with events at the Anaheim VFW Post 3173 and at Santiago Creek Estates.

Peace Concert Commemorates 70th Anniversary of Korea-U.S. Alliance

Month of the Military Child

The sixth annual Month of the Military Child celebration was held in April at Cottonwood Church.

AVAG in Action

Meet some of our veterans and read how they were assisted by AVAG.

In Memoriam: Michael F. Keele

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AVAG 6th Annual Memorial Day Parade and Luncheon Speakers



Chaplain (MAJ) Saul Castillo

Chaplain Saul Castillo was commissioned an officer in 1994 and received Federal Recognition as a US Army Chaplain in 2000.

CH Castillo's current assignment is Post Chaplain for California's Army National Guard at Camp Roberts Maneuver Training Center. Previous assignments include Command Chaplain for 40th Infantry Division, Chaplain for 1106th Theater Aviation Support Maintenance Group, Squadron Chaplain for 1-18th Cavalry Regiment, Battalion Chaplain for 1-140th Aviation, Battalion Chaplain for 1-143 Field Artillery.

His overseas deployments include Iraq 2004-2005, Kosovo 2008-2009, Afghanistan 2012, and most recent to Poland in 2022 as the Battlegroup Chaplain.

Chaplain Castillo also served as Chaplain Liaison at Joint Personal Effects Depot, Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, the US Department of Defense only port mortuary from 2016-2018. There he served as the Army's Liaison Chaplain for families traveling to Dover to witness the Dignified Transfer of Remains of their loved ones who were killed while serving in contingency operations around the world.

Chaplain Castillo works as California's Full Time Support Chaplain at Joint Forces Headquarters, California Military Department, Sacramento California. He has served as a chaplain for the California Army National Guard for the last 23 years.

Chaplain Castillo has been married to Mireya Castillo for 33 years and has three daughters, Jordyn, Joelle, and Juliane. 🦋



Scott Minikus and Tom Cleary

Pictured above, Scott Minikus, at left, and Tom Cleary, at right, spoke at our Memorial Day luncheon. With tears in their eyes, they shared their experience in Israel, sponsored by AVAG and Richard Breunig Foundation. While there they built bomb shelters and toured the holy land. Two weeks after there was an airstrike in Israel. It was a very emotional testimony for both of these men. 🦋



AVAG News

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For questions or additional information,
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Under the aegis of VAHP
VeteransAffordableHousing.org
(888) 923-VETS (8387)



Chaplain Doug Zimmer and the young women from the Sunburst Academy from the Joint Forces Training Base who volunteered to help at the AVAG Memorial Day Parade and Luncheon.



Sunburst Academy Cadet Perez and Cadet Diaz with USAF veteran Maria Martinez

THE AVAG SPIRIT – Sunburst Academy volunteers did their community service for our veterans.

By US Air Force Veteran Maria Martinez

I wanted to meet some of the cadets. Two stopped to meet me. I asked where they were from. They were from Santa Ana. One was from my neighborhood. What was special is that out of plus 40 volunteers, I had the two best young ladies stop to meet me. Well, God works in mysterious ways. My mentoring qualifications were called The Holy Spirit was among us, and in a short time, people were wondering why the crowd. I said, “Girl Talk.” At the end of our lunch, Chaplain Doreen asked the cadets to let us know about their experience at the Cottonwood Memorial Day Event. They reported “USAF Maria inspired me”. Cadet Perez wants to join the USAF! Cadet Diaz, I believe, changed her mind from the Navy to the USAF. 🦋



The 82nd Airborne, followed by local officials, led the AVAG Memorial Day parade. Guest of Honor Marine Corps veteran Sgt. Brian Alvarado walked alongside Congressman Lou Correa. Following the flag-folding ceremony performed by the 82nd Airborne, the U.S. flag was presented to Alvarado.



Sunburst Academy Cadets Perez and Cadet Diaz were inspired by their conversation with USAF veteran Maria Martinez.

Images from the AVAG 6th Annual Memorial Day Parade





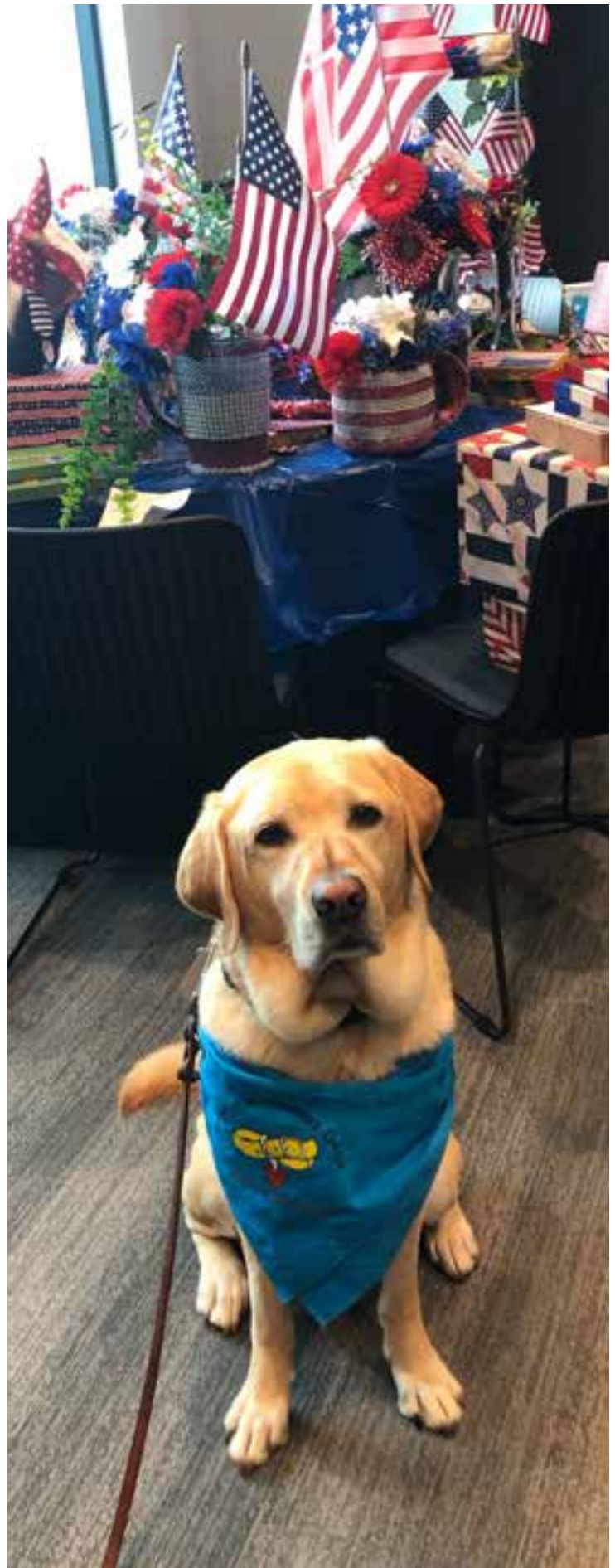
Joseph Dyer, Military and Veterans Liaison for Congresswoman Steel's office presented four special AVAG veterans, Laura Herzog, Brian Alvarado, Travis Mayfield, and Chaplain Saul Castillo with Congressional Certificates of Recognition

An AVAG Veteran Comments on AVAG's Memorial Day Celebration

Leland Weinberg wrote the following letter regarding his observations after attending this year's Memorial Day Luncheon.

This year Memorial Day was observed at the Cottonwood Outreach Memorial Day Luncheon & Charles Cruz Veterans Award Ceremony on May 26th at Cottonwood Church, organized by Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto and other chaplains, volunteers and the American Veterans Assistance Group (AVAG), with my guide dogs for the Blind Pet Ambassador & Alliance of Therapy Dogs, therapy dog Frito, to share with the veterans, families, and volunteers from 12 to 3. Below is a list of my thoughts that I took away from the event that I wanted to share with you.

- God and country first, then family, was such a clear message that many of us have. However, many, including our leaders, don't have it, which exposes us to global risks and evil that threaten our nation's existence as a guiding light of hope to the rest of the world, or as President Reagan said, "we should be as a shining city on a hill."
- Being Jewish, my spirit was lifted by the importance of faith in G-d and Judeo-Christian values and living by the grace of G-d, which provide us the armor or protections of negative values versus the alternative of believing that we are victims and can only be rescued by government action. Believing in government-only rescue has, I believe, created this attitude of victimhood and "me only."
- The sense of community through the Cottonwood Church, AVAG, and volunteers coming together to recognize and reward our veterans for their service and sacrifice with the bond of faith and belief in G-d was uplifting. Discussing the various consequences of war our veterans face today from physical and mental issues and how we should all be responsible to help them and how freedom was paid for by them. When we celebrate and praise our veterans, we all should recognize that freedom isn't free.
- Meeting volunteer Cheryl, retired from Edward Lifesciences, was special since I found out she used to create the heart valves, the type of which was used to replace my aortic valve during my open-heart surgery in October.
- I was so impressed with the Sunburst Academy volunteers from the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos in their professional behavior and spontaneous willingness to help in different ways throughout the event in assisting the veterans and their families. It gives me hope for our youth in the future. Other than boy and girl scouts, they were some of the best volunteers as compared to many of the high school groups I have experienced in the past.
- I really enjoyed providing joy and happiness to so many of the 300 veterans, their families, and volunteers through the interaction of my therapy dog Frito doing his sit, down, shake, salute, and leave it routines for them. ✨



US Army Veteran Travis Mayfield receives the Charles Cruz Memorial Award

Before Travis entered the military, he was going down the wrong path. His dad, a World War II veteran, was a Long Beach police officer. He was a tough old guy, kind of a brawler. His brother was also a police officer. His dad was from Texas, and his mom was from Samoa.

Travis Mayfield served in the Army from 1967 to 1968. The highest rank he achieved was E5. He was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for jump school and ended up with the 101st Airborne Division.

Travis' only travel was to Vietnam. Part of a demolition team responsible for disarming booby traps and mines, he lost part of his hand when a mine blew up, sending shrapnel through his body and eyes.

He was blinded in both eyes and therefore was transferred to Tokyo, Japan, where he had immediate surgery for his eyes and also his right hand. Over the next several months, he had several more surgeries on his hand and eyes. This brought an end to his military career. At the hospital, there were a lot of amputees—guys with limbs amputated because of wounds, gangrene, and other causes. Travis was fortunate that his eyesight returned. For all of his hard work and merits he was awarded the Purple Heart for his injuries.

He learned valuable lessons in the service, especially to respect people, respect quality of life, and to realize people have no idea how lucky they are because of their freedom. People went to serve to preserve their freedom.

His transition returning to civilian life was hard—in fact, very hard. Vietnam veterans were not given any respect. He drank a lot, and his marriage ended in divorce. He had to go to anger management classes. Travis feels that the Long Beach VA back in the day did not do much to help veterans; they were just handing out medication instead of fixing the problems.

Travis is now an advocate for veterans. He owns Next Level Fitness and Wellness Center with his partner, Doctor Vas, an expert in sports medicine. Their facility encompasses chiropractic care, physical therapy, personal trainers, massage therapists, Jujitsu, and nutrition.

The Wellness Center has been a staple in Orange County for over 22 years. Besides the day-to-day people that come in and receive help, the Wellness Center sees people ranging from professional athletes to weekend warriors, but most importantly, our veterans.

Travis also manages a slow-pitch softball team. These men are between the ages of 70 and 75. The team's name is DK Softball. They are a traveling team that travels throughout the United States. In the past 26 years, they have earned 13 world championship rings.

His final words for this interview are that Travis and Dr. Vas built the gym around the values and morals he learned while serving in the military. Flags of all the branches of the military hang freely right in the middle of the gym as a reminder to people of our freedom and respect for our military and veterans who have sacrificed their lives. ✨



Travis received the Charles Cruz Memorial Award at our Memorial Day luncheon at Cottonwood Church. The award is 10 karat gold dog tags that are inscribed with his name, branch of service, and rank. This award is to honor Charles Cruz, a longtime member of American Veterans Assistance Group. His family comes together to make sure that they never forget our veterans.



AVAG Sponsors Veterans for Outreach Trip to Israel

In February, AVAG sponsored a team of veterans to participate in an outreach trip to Israel. The team was supported by Doreen Matsumoto, Richard Breunig Foundation and David and Mellissa Breunig, Susanna Gonzalez, and Amanda Breunig, read the stories on the following pages of some of the veterans that participated in this opportunity. ✂



Team members and outreach supporters gather for a photo with team leader Lisa Farrel, pictured above in the center of the group.



Rev. Thomas Cleary



Roy Gonzales



Scott Minikus



Austin Thomas



Micah Vargus



Rev. Thomas Cleary

Rev. Thomas Cleary, 54, is from Los Angeles, California. A veteran, he served active duty in the Marine Corps and in the Army Reserves for a total of 28 years! He retired as an E7 (Sergeant First Class) due to injuries sustained on his last tour. “My last tour in Iraq was probably the most difficult, because we were there at the beginning of the war and did not have the equipment we needed, like armored vehicles, mounts, etc. So we suffered several injuries due to the IED’s and being in soft top vehicles, escorting convoys and providing area security.”

When he was asked how he heard about the Outreach trip, he said, “I have known Lisa since we were young kids. We grew up in the same church. She called and said there was an opportunity for a veteran to go with them on a missions trip, and asked if I would want to go.” The fact that the American Veterans Assistance Group helped fund this trip was vital according to Thomas. “I would not have been able to take advantage of the opportunity otherwise.” While trying to get his days covered at work and being able to get his passport, there was not much of a concern for anything else. This opportunity was an instant yes! “It was definitely an instant yes in my mind and heart. Then it was prayer that I would be able to get work covered and be able to get my passport.”

Thomas had gone to church since he was little, but found his personal relationship with Jesus at a church summer camp as a teen. Then after meeting his wife as a freshman in high school, he started getting more serious about his walk with God and started a Bible study at school, followed by working as a Youth Pastor.

“It is the Marine/Soldier who prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the wounds of war.....however as a Marine/Soldier we do not debate the “WHY” of war. We simply respond to the call of duty!”

Thomas “Gunny” Cleary

While in Israel, he plans to rely on God to lead and guide him. But will also be leaning on those who have been there before. However, he is not nervous about sharing the word of God in other countries. He did this while serving in the military overseas all the time. This time going in a group of fellow believers, he reminds us of the bible verse, Matt 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them.”

Although he has never shared the gospel in an official capacity, It has always just been a big part of his life, that he share whenever possible with whoever is willing to listen.

“God gave me 2 Samuel 22 before I left for the war in Iraq. Because of that I was able to volunteer myself and my guys for the advance party, as well as other difficult or dangerous missions, because I already knew I had God’s covering and

promises over me and my guys. So we just had to focus on the mission and not worry about anything else. God was faithful! Because although we did suffer many injuries, myself included, we all made it home! Not only that, but God healed my leg and made it possible to avoid major surgery.”

When asked if there any attributes that he can contribute on this trip that he feels will be beneficial, he responded, “I will draw off my life of service to others. Whether it was in the Church, in the Military or on the streets as a Police Officer.”

When asked where he wants to go, he said he can’t wait to see The Holy city of Jerusalem, and the Dead Sea! “I just want to walk where Jesus walked, follow my leaders, and serve. I know something special will be there for me.” ✨

Scott Minikus

Scott Minikus, from Cypress, CA, learned about this trip from Doreen Matsumoto at the Regional Military Affairs Committee Meeting. Scott served in the Navy and was a Petty Officer 3rd Class, saying, “It was the best decision I made for myself.” He has traveled to other nations, which has helped him understand how blessed we really are to live in the United States.

“I was amazed at how generous the AVAG group is, and I plan on paying it forward.” For Scott, the decision to go on this trip to Israel was an instant yes! Although tensions in the area are high due to changes in government policy, he trusts God will protect him and the others who are going. He is glad that his fellow brothers and sisters will be there too, serving the Lord. This is also his first time on a mission trip. He has been a believer all his life but started fellowship by attending church about a year and a half ago.

“If you commit yourself to a task and are willing to give 100%, help others along the way, provide encouragement, and strive to be the best, then you can be.”

While on this trip, he hopes he can contribute leadership abilities, kindness, politeness, and his willingness to learn from others. He is looking forward to walking in Jesus’ footsteps while in Israel. He also hopes to be baptized in the Jordan River. ✕



Austin Thomas

Austin Thomas, a retired Sgt. 1st class Army veteran from Los Angeles, California, served for 22 years. While stationed back home as an Army recruiter, he attended Cottonwood Church, where he met Lisa Farrel and learned about this wonderful opportunity.

When asked about AVAG and fellow donors of this opportunity, Austin gratefully said, “It touched my heart and made me feel loved and appreciated.” Being a believer most of his life, he was very excited when he received the call about the mission trip to Israel.

“It was an instant yes!” Austin said. Although he says he is not nervous, maybe, he still has a few butterflies.

As a retired soldier, his concern for safety is something he stays mindful of when traveling, especially overseas. All prior time spent overseas was during times of war, which he describes as “chaotic, stressful, exciting, gratifying, and many other things.” Austin believes that God called him to service. “He put it on my heart and mind when I was a little boy.”

While serving, Austin was selected to serve with the 3d Infantry Regiment, traditionally known as “The Old Guard,” at Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall/ Arlington National Cemetery. He stated that it was, “by far the most rewarding experience of my entire Army Career. To honor my fallen Brothers and Sisters touched my soul and gave me peace.”

Being in the Army taught him many things, but one thing he’d say is, “I learned we are all family. As a leader, it didn’t matter your race, financial status, or anything superficial; you are my Soldier, you are my responsibility,



I love you, and I got your back. Sometimes that love came with a hug and sometimes a boot, but it’s always love. Just like the Lord, He loves us completely, and sometimes that love comes in the form of discipline.”

This is his first time truly stepping out and being used by God in this way. “I want to honor God and make him proud. I became serious about my walk with Christ back in 2018, when I first started to attend services at Cottonwood. I rededicated my life to the Lord, and my son and I were both baptized at Cottonwood.”

Austin trusts the Lord will use him and the Holy Spirit will continue to move and guide him. He will remain in prayer and remain obedient to the Lord. He hopes to go everywhere he may be allowed to go. “Wherever our master walked and breathed the air.” To him, just to be there is special, but being there with his church family is also very special! He hopes to get some souvenirs, too! ✕



AVAG celebrates Father's Day at Santiago Creek Estates

Our AVAG Father's Day luncheon saw a great turnout.

The veterans and seniors really enjoyed the luncheon. We had chicken and potatoes, fruit, dessert, and a pastor salad.

Each of the men received a special gift, which included a watch, sunglasses, and a pen set. Children Giving Gifts donated these items to us. Additionally, we had some raffle prizes and distributed two \$50 Arco gas station gift cards. David Winterhalter and George Roth were the winners.

Veteran Ray Davis, an AVAG supporter, gave us some unique challenge coins to present to our veterans. 🦋



Casitas Laverne and AVAG Father's Day Luncheon

AVAG put on a special celebration for the all fathers in the community of Casitas Laverne. The event featured gifts for all the men in attendance as well as a beautiful luncheon for the community. Children Giving Gifts provided the gifts, and everyone had a great time.

Chaplain Doreen shared a story from our Bible study workbook, Operation Timothy, Book 1, about forgiveness.

The story was about a father who placed an ad in a local newspaper, asking his son for forgiveness. He titled it "Johnny all is forgiven." In the story, hundreds of young men named Johnny showed up to reconnect with the father.

The story was a powerful reminder of the importance of forgiveness, and it touched everyone who heard it.

It was a wonderful way to celebrate fathers and bring the community together. 🦋



Veterans Connect

At Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach, Veterans Connect meets on the fourth Saturday of every month at noon. Veterans have the opportunity to discuss their experiences and the activities in which they are currently engaged. All veterans, their wives, families, and patriots are welcome to attend. ✕



From Chaplain Doreen:

We were able to baptize Navy Veteran Tony Melvin.

He has been participating in our events and luncheon and started coming to our Veterans Connect. He gave his life to the Lord and decided to get baptized. Chaplain veteran David Breunig assisted me in baptizing him at Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach.

We had a bunch of the veterans show up and support.



Meet a “Veterans Connect” Veteran

Sean Erdtsieck

The Aircraft Carrier Nimitz was “home” to Sean Erdtsieck for the four years that he served in the US Navy, from 1993 - 1997. When he originally enlisted, he wanted to be an aircraft mechanic, but was assigned as an Aviation Boatswain’s Mate/Fuels instead. He reached the rank of Petty Officer Third Class.

During the voyages he took aboard the Nimitz, Sean visited the Persian Gulf, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Dubai, Diego Garcia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand. As a young father with a wife and two children at home, the frequent, long deployments and travel put a strain on his marriage. After his discharge, he joined the Reserves briefly, but soon found that it was not a good fit for him and he determined that the Navy life was not the kind of career that he wanted.

While in the Navy, Sean fell in with the wrong crowd and made choices that he thought better of later. One of his Petty Officers talked honestly with Sean and helped to set him on a better course.

When asked what he would do differently, if he were to join the Navy again, he quickly responded, “I would have gotten a guaranteed job so that I could have trained to be an aircraft mechanic instead of an aircraft refueler!” He did enjoy the camaraderie and the “brotherhood” that he experienced in the military and continues to enjoy to this day in several Veterans groups, including Veterans Connect at Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach.

Sean said that while in the military he learned to “never volunteer!”. Despite that, now that he serves the Lord, he did volunteer to teach a fifth grade Sunday School class at his church!



The military taught Sean discipline. He said that he learned to “discipline myself so that others wouldn’t need to”. Also, he learned to follow orders, a trait which has helped him ever since his discharge. His transition from military life to civilian life was very difficult though. He didn’t take the “transition” class, prior to discharge, seriously since he had been told he would be hired by a relative once he got out. Follow-on, promised jobs vanished and left him searching for direction for quite a while. Two years later, he and his wife divorced. Eventually he found a career path that was a good fit.

Sean recently met another veteran who had served in the military for many years with Sean’s father! They became quick “brothers”. This new brother invited Sean to Veterans Connect in March 2023. He looks forward to attending the meetings every month. 🦋



More “Veterans Connect” Veterans



“Doc” Douglas Eudaly

“Doc” Douglas Eudaly is a Korean War veteran who spent two years (1952–1954) in the U.S. Army but never made it to Korea! The Army had other plans for him. As a Corporal (E-4), “Doc” served primarily in California but was sent to Camp Desert Rock, Nevada, in 1953 with several other enlistees. They were told to dig trenches. Little did they know at the time that those trenches were going to be their “shelter” during the live nuclear testing that they would be part of there on Frenchman’s Flat!

After his short experience in the Army, “Doc” did not choose to reenlist, but served his remaining military obligation (of six years) in the Inactive Reserve.

Despite his dangerous assignment in Nevada, he said he “absolutely” would serve again, and he wouldn’t do anything differently! Just “doing your duty” was what he identified as both the best and the worst of his time in the military. In retrospect, he said that his experiences helped him learn to follow his responsibilities through to completion, a valuable life skill.

“Doc” said that his transition to civilian life was relatively easy. He had lived on base at Camp Irwin, CA, with his family. Upon discharge, he moved to Oregon and began working for his father-in-law at a plywood mill.

Even though he currently lives in Concord, CA, “Doc” is temporarily staying at the VA Hospital in Long Beach as part of the VA Blind Center’s training and rehabilitation. A small contingent of veterans from that program visited the Veterans Connect at Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach in April (the fourth Saturday every month). He enjoyed the meeting and added much with his participation. He loves acronyms and finds/creates them for many things. For example, J.O.Y.—Jesus Owns You, or B.I.B.L.E.—Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.

It was a pleasure having “Doc” at the Veterans Connect meeting. He is easy to get to know and has a great attitude toward life. ✨



Luke Hudson

Luke Hudson served in the US Marine Corps for four years at Camp Pendleton, CA. In 2005–2006, he was deployed to Iraq. At the end of his service commitment, Luke chose not to reenlist.

Luke enjoyed the camaraderie that he felt with his fellow Marines. The Marine Corps taught him dedication, commitment, and perseverance. A platoon sergeant gave Luke “leeway” in some of the situations he faced, and his guidance and help were very useful.

While serving in the Marine Corps, Luke traveled to parts of the world that he never would have seen otherwise. He went on R&R to Hong Kong and Singapore. Also, he was able to travel to Iraq, Egypt, and Australia.

When asked if he would serve in the military again, he quickly said, “Yes!” He said one thing he would have done differently would have been to have sought help for a substance abuse problem that started when he was in the Marine Corps. His transition from the military was very tough, and he lived on the streets for four years due to his substance abuse.

Now, Luke is living sober and has a strong faith in God. He is using his tough life experiences with substance abuse as a foundation for his career as a Veteran Advocate for Veterans in Recovery. He recently started attending Veterans Connect at Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach, CA, and has enjoyed the fellowship and discussions about the life-changing way of Jesus Christ. ✨

Frank Miezwa

Even though his father was a WWII veteran and a retired career Marine, Frank Miezwa, a Disneyland employee, chose to join the California Air National Guard instead. Frank attained the rank of E-7 (MSgt) during his career with the Air Guard, which lasted from 1983 until 2012.

Some of Frank’s early years were spent as a Traditional Guardsman, known by many as a “Weekend Warrior.” Eventually he was hired into an Excepted Civil Service position at the Air National Guard Station in Costa Mesa (a remnant of the former WWII Santa Ana Army Air Base, a pilot training base). While there, he served a number of active duty tours that took him to Saudi Arabia, Germany, Hawaii, Honduras, Panama, and several locations in California.

When Frank’s military squadron moved in 2008 from the Costa Mesa ANG Station to Beale AFB, in Northern California, Frank transferred to an Air National Guard Unit at March Air Reserve Base. He served his remaining years of service there until he retired in 2012.

Frank emphatically stated that he would gladly enlist again. He liked the camaraderie with his fellow service members the best, many of whom he still maintains contact with. One of his pet peeves, though, was the “hurry up and wait” that was always inevitable. A life skill that he learned in the military was, “Do what you SAY you’re going to do!” When he retired, the transition was difficult, but he quickly



adapted. Now, over a decade later, he works at the ski resorts in the nearby mountains on the weekends.

As a young airman, Frank relied on the NCOs to “show him the ropes”. He learned to do what was needed the military way. While he never had any R&R, per se, his five-month tour of duty in Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm afforded him travel opportunities that he never would have had otherwise.

Frank lives in the Inland Empire, so he would not normally have come to Huntington Beach to attend the monthly Veterans’ Connect, but one of his military friends planned a tour at the former Costa Mesa ANG Station that day, so he attended the tour and accepted an invitation to come to Veterans Connect afterward with his friend. He enjoyed the fellowship, meeting a good group of (mostly) guys, studying the Word of God, and the good food that followed. 🦋

AVAG Chaplain Doreen Flies Over Seal Beach



The coastal weather could not have been any better to recognize AVAG Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto for her tireless Veteran work and ministry in the Southern California area with a Bell 212 model helicopter VIP flight over Seal Beach courtesy of the local Army Veteran Aviation Alumni.

“Thank you Retired Command Sergeant Major and former Marine Huey Crew Chief Ron Cabrera and Retired CW4 Rod Anderson for this honor.” 🦋



AVAG Observes Vietnam Veterans Day



Brittanie Ngo at Santiago Creek Orange Estates where she attended the Vietnam Veterans Day event on March 29, 2023.

The Vietnam War created a lasting slogan: “Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.”

It has been nearly 50 years since the fall when two unlikely allies born worlds apart came together, bonded by their life’s mission to herald our Vietnam veterans, ensuring that never again would they experience the misdirected wrath of an ungrateful nation.

Brittanie Ngo escaped Saigon in 1975, in the final days before the fall. At only 6 weeks old, she arrived at Camp Pendleton, CA, on a C-130 and now serves with the Army State Guard and as a civilian with the Air Force.

David Keil was born in Orange County, CA, and served a total of 11 years as an Army and Air Force veteran, following in the footsteps of his Army Green Beret father, Cpt. Larry M. Keil, who also served in Vietnam from 1969–70. Even though his father was physically present, his mind often wandered to the jungles of Vietnam. A story often told by many other Vietnam veterans.

Despite Brittanie and David’s differing backgrounds and perspectives, planning this unique event served to bring together the values that they have in common: patriotism and gratitude.

These citizens love their country and have always understood that freedom is not free. They chose careers supporting our nation’s defense and continue these efforts in their personal lives, culminating in the Vietnam Veterans Appreciation and Remembrance Dinner held on Sunday, April 30th, 2023, at the Anaheim VFW Post 3173.

Their desire was to promote gratitude and healing to ensure that our veterans realize that their sacrifices were never in vain. It was an evening of comradery for U.S. Vietnam Veterans and soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in a room filled with grateful refugees, volunteers, and supporters. The night was comprised of military honors, ending with speeches from Vietnamese refugees who have come full circle to protect our nation’s freedoms.

As Ronald Reagan once said, “Freedom is never more than one generation from extinction.”

Despite being born a generation apart from our Vietnam Veterans, Brittanie and David have never forgotten and will never forget. They will honor those who wore dog tags instead of love beads, those who have a title that cannot be inherited, that can never be purchased, that earned it with blood, sweat, and tears, and who forever own the title of Vietnam Veteran. 🇺🇸



At far left, Congressman Lou Correa and AVAG's Roland Rodriguez. Center, Congresswoman Young Kim presents the event's commemorative pin to a veteran. At left, Congresswoman Young Kim, Congresswoman, Michelle Steel, VFW Post 3173 member Raine Marie Broussard, and Congressman Lou Carillo.



Santiago Creek Orange Estates Celebrates Vietnam Veterans

In recognition of the National Vietnam Veterans Day observed on March 29th, AVAG invited Vietnam Veterans to a luncheon at the Creek Orange Mobile Home Park clubhouse.

In appreciation for their service during the Vietnam War, the vets were given certificates from representatives Max Madrid, Veterans Liaison, and Mariana Flores, Field Representative of the California State Legislature, and Congressional House of Representatives Congressman Lou Correa.

Additionally, each veteran received a special commemorative Vietnam veteran pin acknowledging their service.

So Cal Quilts of Valor also presented several veterans with beautiful quilts to commemorate their service to our country.

There were so many veterans and their families in attendance that there was not an extra seat available in the clubhouse.

The event opened with Chaplain Doug Zimmer leading the Pledge of Allegiance and Chaplain Doreen leading the prayer of thanksgiving for the food and our honored guests.

Each veteran had an opportunity to enter and win some amazing prizes.

A delicious lunch was prepared and served to all the people in attendance by Jason Cruz with Meals on the Grill. He wanted to prepare a special tri-tip meal for our veterans in honor of his late father, Army Veteran Charles Cruz, who served in Vietnam.

Ms. Elite USA, Brittanie Ngo, a Vietnamese refugee, attended the event in her pageant gown and crown and shared her story about escaping Vietnam at the end of the war. She recognized and thanked all the Vietnam veterans for their sacrifice and service. ✨



Jason Cruz, pictured above at far right, prepared and provided all the food for our Vietnam veterans event at Creek Orange.





Performers Young-Hoon Heo, left, and, to his right, Jae-Eun Paik came over and hugged Howard Koch after the performance.

Peace Concert Commemorates 70th Anniversary of Korea-U.S. Alliance

A peace concert was held on June 28, 2023, at The Music Center’s Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Korea-U.S. alliance and the 73rd anniversary of the Korean War. The concert was organized by the Korea-U.S. Alliance Foundation (KUSAF), the Korean Defense Veterans Association (KDVA), and the Seoul National University Alumni Association (SNUAA).

AVAG was invited to attend the concert. Howard Koch, a 98-year-old World War II and Korean War veteran, was one of those able to attend as our guest. He was definitely the star of the show.

Conductor Gum Nanse, leading the Seongnam City orchestra, opened the concert by taking the audience on a beautiful musical journey. The concert also featured performances by renowned performers, including Jae-Eun Paik, YoungHoon Heo, and pianist Charlie Albright.

After the concert, the performers came over to thank Howard Koch for his service.

The peace concert was a fitting tribute to the veterans who have served to protect the Korea-U.S. alliance. It was an amazing experience for our AVAG veterans. 🦋



Chaplain Kim, Howard Koch, and Michael Dishon



Howard Koch and retired deputy chief and Marine Corps Veteran Lee Barker.



The concert directors of the concert thanked Howard for coming to this event.

Month of the Military Child Celebrated at Cottonwood Church

The sixth annual Month of the Military Child celebration was celebrated at Cottonwood Church on April 29, 2023. The Orange County Veterans & Military Families Collaborative (OCVMFC) was proud to partner with Strong Families, Strong Children (SFSC) for this event. Thanks to Lori Pack, Chair of the OCVMFC Families Working Group, and the SFSC program for making the event possible.

The event honored the military-connected youth in attendance. The festivities opened up with Pete Seitz leading the Pledge of Allegiance, and the national anthem was sung by Mia Borm. Mia is one of the military-connected teens. She has such a beautiful voice, and she did an outstanding job.

Karen Francis introduced AVAG's very own Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto to do the invocation. Karen Francis also acknowledged the organization Children Giving Gifts, which donated numerous items to AVAG. AVAG put these items together and set up a booth where the children in attendance could select gifts for their parents or guardians.

The Sunburst Academy from the Joint Forces Training Base-Los Alamitos helped AVAG set up and tear down our booth. They were great volunteers and were each allowed to select a gift in appreciation for their help.

As you can see in the photos, a representative from the office of Congresswoman Michelle Steel, California's 45th District, helped as a personal shopper for some of the children at the AVAG booth.

Thank you to David and Brianna, who dressed up as Beauty and the Beast characters. They walked around the event and had their pictures taken with numerous attendees.

Our friends and partners at the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1024 displayed an actual Vietnam War-era helicopter. It was a learning experience for the children whose parents are serving in the military.

It was an amazing turnout, and there were so many vendors. Numerous veterans were there enjoying the festivities, many of whom had attended our previous events.

Food and dessert were supplied by the local American Legion Post 716 from Los Alamitos and the American Legion Auxiliary Leisure World, Seal Beach.

Thanks to the American Legion Auxiliary Newport Beach Post 291 for providing the crafts. Cory Vigil, from Post 291, was given a special award. We have partnered with Newport Beach Post 291 and Cory Vigil many times to help our veterans. ✧





Month of the Military Child Celebration: Chaplain Doreen's Invocation



Good afternoon. My name is Chaplain Doreen. I work with the American Veterans Assistance Group. We work with veterans helping with home repairs, rent assistance, medical benefits, equipment, and household items from furniture to toilet paper. We help with spiritual development and burial benefits.

Thank you, Karen. I am so honored to be here to support this incredible event.

As Karen shared, we will have a special booth set up with items for the children to put together a special gift for their parents or guardians. These items are supplied by our partners from Children Giving Gifts founders Janean and Fred Rusher.

This shows the children it is better to give than to receive.

I would also like to thank the veterans from the VAA Chapter 1024 and DAV Chapter 23 who brought the Vietnam Veterans Helicopter for the children to learn and be educated on the Vietnam War.

Also, thank you to David Keil and Brittanie Ngo.

Please join me in a moment of silence for Tom Bell, who is in the hospital and recovering. He was the one that recruited me to be part of this amazing event today. (Moment of silence.)

I was also asked to pray over our event today.

Please join me in prayer.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this glorious day and for bringing us all together.

These children are a precious gift from you, God.

We lift them up to you for protection and provision.

Keep them healthy and help them to thrive.

Watch over them in every area of their lives.

I pray for children around the world that you would be in their lives and that they would grow up knowing they are loved by you.

Your scriptures say;

Proverbs 22:6 "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it."

Keep this scripture in their hearts.

Lord, we thank you that we are able to show these children they are loved.

God, you have good plans for their lives. We thank you and give you all the glory in Jesus name, amen. 🙏

AVAG In Action

Dale Fredrick – U.S. Army Santiago Orangewood Estates

Dale Frederick was born in Fort Frances, Canada. After the separation of his parents when he was nine months old, his mom moved them to International Falls, Minnesota.

Dale served in the United States Army from 1967 until 1970. He decided to sign up for the Army shortly before graduating from high school. It was just after that his mother noticed that he received a draft notice. It was then that he told his mother not to worry because he had already joined the Army.

He was a SPC-5 Crew Chief and worked on helicopters. He began at Fort Ord, California, then went to Eustis, Virginia, then on to Fort Hood, Texas.

As a crew chief, he made sure the helicopter was maintained, equipped and repaired properly before it was sent into the fight. He was good at his job so everyone wanted him to work on their helicopter. They needed a crew chief they could depend on that would keep their helicopters in good running order. They knew Dale was the guy to get it done. The mechanics used to say the helicopters belong to us, not the pilot. It belongs to the crew chief who does the work to make sure they're safe. He loved doing this in the Army. It was his calling to fix things.

He said he was lucky enough not to have to go to Vietnam.

He never got shot or had to shoot anyone.

The best thing he learned in the military was good mechanical techniques and diagnostics as a technician. It was an important part of his life.

Reflecting back on his life he says he would do his service all over again. He realizes that war is not good. It's a waste of life. He spoke about 9/11, and how four airplanes hurt our country. Can you imagine what a nuclear war would do.

After separating from the Army, Dale worked for the San Bernardino Fire Department fixing fire trucks. From 1972 to 1973 he worked for IBM on typewriters. For the next 50+ years, like his grandfather, he did work for Goodyear, BF Goodrich and Fire Stone.

He enjoys working on typewriters and is still doing it today. Yes, there are people that still want their typewriter fixed.

Dale has been coming to our AVAG meetings at Sequoia Mobile Home Park in San Bernardino. We learned that he hadn't had a heater in his house for over 25 years, that his water heater wasn't working and that both stair cases into his home (the front and back) were falling apart. AVAG was able to do the repairs on his home. AVAG loves doing work on a veteran's home, especially when the veterans are so kind and thankful. After the work was done, every time I speak to Dale he says "bless you". We are grateful to be able to help him and we thank him for serving our country so well. ✨



Joe Esquibel Pacific Palms MHP, Highland

Joe Esquibel served in the United States Army for 4 1/2 years, from 1971 to 1976. The highest rank he achieved during his service was E4. Joe served in Fort Carson, Colorado, and in Germany. He also served in the National Guard.

He said if he had to do it over again, he would've stayed in for 20 years and retired. What Joe liked most about the military was meeting new friends, traveling overseas, and the extended partying, especially when he was in Germany.

In the Army, he learned his mechanical skills and how to take orders. He had some good friends during his service, Warrant Officer Reeves and Sergeant Hess.

When he was discharged from the Army, he found it difficult to adjust to civilian life. He found a job working for the railroad in Barstow.

He took advantage of the G.I. Bill, went to college, and also bought his first home in Colorado with a VA loan. ✨



Larry Pangburn – U.S. Navy

In June, AVAG delivered a electric wheelchair to veteran Larry Pangburn at Sequoia Mobile Home Park.

He was in the Navy, 1967 to 1981. While serving he worked as an engineer doing mechanical work on the airplanes, cranes and other mechanic duties. 🦅



Richard Iantorni – U.S. Air Force

On June 6, AVAG was contacted by Brian Thom, Case Manager for the VA Long Beach Healthcare System Community Resource & Referral Center in Santa Ana, regarding a homeless veteran who was in need of an electric wheelchair and could hardly walk. Richard Iantorni is an Air Force veteran who served for four years.

With God’s perfect timing, we still had one electric wheelchair to distribute.

I arranged for David Breunig and Mellissa Arriola Breunig to help with the trailer to transport it to the Motel 6 he was staying at the next day.

Mr. Iantorni is a very intelligent man, and he was very grateful. The VA is trying to place him in an assisted senior living facility. 🦅



In Memoriam: Michael F. Keele



The AVAG Team said goodbye to our good friend Mike Keele on May 3, 2023 at the Riverside National Cemetery. It was great to see our AVAG team represented there. He had a beautiful turn out of family and friends. We were able to support Cora Keele in this time of need. I had the honor to give the eulogy and message.

Mike was a Franklin High School graduate and after leaving the Army majored in Police Science and Administration at CSU, Los Angeles. After graduating in 1973, Mike served as a deputy sheriff with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department for 15 years before moving to the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office where he worked for 21 years.

Mike was an honorary member of the Special Forces Association Chapter 78, where he worked on fundraisers and special projects. He also worked with high school students in the Rancho Cucamonga area talking about the Vietnam War from a veteran's perspective.

Mike was our AVAG chairman. Before every meeting he first enjoyed the M&Ms and donuts, but after that it was all about helping our veterans.

In addition to helping American Veterans Assistance Group, he was a supporter of the Richard Breunig Foundation.

When Mike was not assisting veterans he would love to be in the garage, where he worked on fabricated cars and go carts from the frame up.

He also enjoyed racing at Irwindale Speedway, passing everyone on the track with ease. We were all set to have him in a race car at the Long Beach Grand Prix this year, but God had other race plans in heaven for him.

I had the honor to baptize Mike and Cora and also counsel them before they got married. That was a special day for both of them.

On my last visit with Mike, we prayed and before I left, he said I'm ready, and I replied you may be ready, but I'm not ready to let you go. I started to cry and so did he. He was the kindest man, generous and loving, but most of all he was a God-fearing man. 🦋

I had the honor to give the following eulogy and message from Second Corinthians 5:1-15 MSG if you'd like to open up your Bible and read it.

Mike Keele was born June 7, 1946 and passed on April 8, 2023.

He married Cora on May 20, 2017.

He is the father to son Greg, and stepfather to Eric and Lance and Laurie and Lisa — grandchildren Kayla, Cade, Jackson, Carter and Kennedy.

Mike Keele served with B Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, with the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam from late 1967 through 1968. As a crew chief Mike was responsible for keeping his helicopter flying in all sorts of weather and against enemy anti-aircraft gunfire.

During his tour of duty Mike earned a Distinguished Flying Cross, an Air Medal with 24 Oak Leaf Clusters, and a Bronze Star Medal for his heroic service to our Country. The DFC was earned flying top-secret missions into Laos and North Vietnam.

