



AVAG News

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A panel of veterans, including USMC Command Sergeant Major (ret.) Ron Cabrera, shown above, spoke at the AVAG Veteran's Appreciation Luncheon held at Cottonwood Church in Los Alamitos, CA last November. Each one spoke their life in the military, how it was for them after retiring from the service, and how they came to Christ.

AVAG Veterans' Appreciation Luncheon, Cottonwood Church

The American Veterans' Assistance Group (AVAG) proudly supports veterans and supports activities that honor and recognize veterans. AVAG partners with Cottonwood Church twice a year to hold Veterans' Appreciation Luncheons. There was a luncheon held in May 2023 for Memorial Day. The latest event for Veterans' Day 2023 was held on November 4, 2023, at the beautiful campus of Cottonwood Church in Los Alamitos. There were more than 260 veterans in attendance, and many veterans' organizations were represented.

The 82nd Airborne, led by Robert Crebbs, conducted a flag ceremony to open the event.

As always at AVAG events, an army of smiling servers were on hand, serving an excellent lunch. A special thanks to Ibeth Figueroa and Natalie Favela with Cottonwood Outreach for all of the assistance and the amazing volunteers! Not only did Cottonwood provide volunteers, but also the facility that held the event, beverages, and a donation of \$2000.00 toward the catering costs. The tables were beautifully decorated with various colorful, patriotic-themed materials.

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AVAG in Action

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

In Memoriam

Our communities mourn the loss of two of their members.

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or learn more about us at AVAGUSA.com

AVAG Veterans' Appreciation Luncheon, Cottonwood Church continued

Three honored veterans spoke at the luncheon.

- Alex Gavidia, a USMC veteran, served for four years (2004–2008) completing three tours in Iraq in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He also completed one tour for Operation Enduring Freedom in Iraq.
- Scott Minikus, a Navy veteran, served from 1983–1987 aboard the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70). He completed two tours of duty in the Persian Gulf as an F-14 engine mechanic and with flight deck operations. He is an honorably retired police sergeant from the Long Beach Police Department. He currently works for the Department of Homeland Security and is the honorable mayor pro tem of the city of Cypress.
- Ron Cabrera, retired USMC Command Sergeant Major. He served as an active-duty Marine from 1981 to 1984 as a UH-1N helicopter mechanic and crew chief. After active duty, he served with the California Army National Guard, the Army Reserve, and then back to the Army Guard. Overall, he served our country for forty years!

All three of the speakers shared from their hearts. Their experiences, both in and out of the military, deeply moved the attendees at the event.

Following the meal, there were door prize drawings for dozens of useful items donated by Mellissa Arriola Breunig and David Breunig with the Richard Breunig Foundation.

Both before and after the event, there were veterans' resource tables that the attendees could visit to obtain useful information. The organizations that were represented included:

- Long Beach VA Hospital
- Torres Mortuary
- So Cal Quilts of Valor
- Doctors Home Health and Doctors Hospice Southern, California.
- DAV Chapter 23
- Advantage, OC

Additional thanks and recognition to:

- Pastor Crispin Tenorio and Mireya Tufano from Ekklesia. Today for providing a shuttle van to transport veterans from the Rancho La Paz Mobile Home Park in Anaheim to the event.
- Lana Martinez, who made special, patriotic cupcakes for the event!
- Jason Cruz, with Meals on the Grill, who provided a delicious Thanksgiving spread that was enjoyed by everyone!
- Our hostesses, who did a wonderful job making our veterans feel welcome.

The Veterans' Day Appreciation Luncheon was a huge success! Everyone is looking forward to the next event! 🦋





“This nation will remain the land of the free only so long as it is the home of the brave.”

Elmer Davis





“For the veteran, thank you for bravely doing what you’re called to do so we can safely do what we’re free to do.”

Unknown

Rancho La Paz Veterans attend the AVAG Veterans Appreciation Luncheon Thanks to New AVAG Partnership with Ekklesia.Today



From the Ekklesia.Today Team:

At Ekklesia.Today we partner with organizations that glorify God and love our country. We have found that in AVAG and Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto.

As the church Ekklesia.Today continues to grow, so does the partnership we have cultivated with AVAG. This connection has recently resulted in the church being able to provide transportation to and from the most recent Veterans Day AVAG event.

Equally important to the opportunity to attend the Rancho La Paz AVAG monthly luncheon, Ekklesia.Today also had the great honor of facilitating baptisms for those veterans who desired to publicly declare their new life in Jesus. We have had the pleasure of welcoming many US veterans to the church, and we recognize that is hugely due to our affiliation with AVAG and Chaplain Doreen.

We are so thankful to God for this divine partnership and would like to honor our veterans by inviting them to attend our weekly services Sundays at 10 a.m. and Wednesdays at 7 p.m. at 1280 West Lambert Rd., Ste. A2, Brea, CA 92821. We look forward to many more opportunities to serve God alongside Chaplain Doreen and AVAG.

"What good fellowship we once enjoyed as we walked together to the house of God." Psalms 55:14

Veterans on the bus included:

Jim and Charo Warner
Cheryl and Gene Thorpe
Olie Dunning
Rick Whittington
Don and Rosemary McLeod
Brian Williams
Pepper, the commander of our AVAG chapter at Rancho La Paz.
Pastor Cris and Pastor Josh and his wife Mireya Tufano
Geri ✨



Meet Rancho La Paz Veterans



Donald McLeod

What does a young man, born in “Big Sky Country” (Sand Point, Montana), the son of a professional hockey player, do when he sets out on his own? In 1945, Donald McLeod decided to enlist in the United States Army and began his own career-long trip of adventure!

While in the Army, Donald initially served with the 2nd Infantry. Rather than serving for only one tour, he transferred

to the newly formed U.S. Air Force, where he remained until 1966, when he hung up his military uniform for the final time. He ultimately attained the rank of Technical Sergeant (E-6).

Donald served on some very diverse and distant assignments in locations including Germany, England, and Japan.

While assigned to Germany, Donald was among the many brave military personnel that supported the Berlin Airlift in 1948. Knowing that this operation was overcoming the blockade intended to cripple the will of the West Berliners proved to be very satisfying to him. It gave him a strong sense that he had accomplished something worthwhile.

Many soldiers have been stationed in Germany before, but few were assigned to the place he ended up—Thule, Greenland—only 900 miles from the North Pole! He almost “bailed out” of the military because this two-year tour was not only bitterly cold and totally isolated, but since it was an unaccompanied tour, he experienced intense loneliness. In addition to those challenges, due to the latitude of Thule, from November to February, the sun never rose! Perpetual nighttime! The opposite is true in the summer, when the sun never sets for several months! (He didn’t mention if he had any run-ins with polar bears!) The hardships of this forced separation from his first wife more than likely contributed to his eventual divorce.

Another assignment Donald was selected for was at Eglin AFB, in Florida’s “Panhandle.” Due to his skills, he “took care of the aircraft” at an aircraft testing facility on that base.

Donald shared that his transition to civilian life after his military retirement was not difficult. Although he did not serve in any military reserve component per se, he ended up in several rather exciting (and dangerous!) quasi-military employment situations. In one of these “tours,” he was associated with “Air America” in Okinawa.

Although he cannot speak about the specifics of some of the missions he was on, he did say that he was pleasantly surprised by the generosity of the Okinawan people.

Another of his post-military career endeavors placed him in the employ of the Shah of Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi! Donald

revealed that he was an “advisor” for the Shah but would not elaborate. In the late 1970s, radical Islam was rising in Iran, and when the Shah was deposed on February 11, 1979, Donald and many others, considered to be supporters of the Shah, had to escape the country or face “trial” and execution!

Once he was back safely in the United States, Donald quickly found employment within the aerospace industry because of his level of technical skills and experience working with aircraft. At Hughes/McDonnell Douglas in El Segundo, California, he was on the engineering team responsible for the Apache Helicopter project. His skills that he learned in the military and his ability to multi task served him well!

Now that he was back in the States, Donald was able to focus on his love for cars. Over the years, he owned some real “head turners”! One of these unique cars was a classic Mercedes-Benz 300SL “Gullwing.” Another was his Citroën Maserati. With this stunning car, whenever he vacationed in Las Vegas, Donald could pull up in front of any of the major casino resorts, and since his car exuded “success and luxury,” he could just leave his car there without parking it because that automobile fit the image the casino wanted to project! How convenient!

In 1985, after seven years with McDonnell Douglas, Donald decided that he had worked long enough—for pay! He embarked on the next phase of his life! Not only did he retire, but shortly after retiring, Donald married his current wife, Rose Mary, born in Cleveland, Ohio. Together, they served as self-supporting missionaries with Catholic Missions for the next 25 years, starting in California and ending up in Colorado. They both found their volunteer work with children and families to be very rewarding since they “saved many marriages.”

Rose Mary and Donald returned to California after being missionaries. They have now been married for 37 years and live in Rancho LaPaz Mobile Home Park in Anaheim, CA. In recent years, Donald has found that it more difficult to get around since he has developed Parkinson’s disease and Ataxia. His sense of balance is compromised, and he is constantly in danger of falling. He has a faithful service dog, a small, white poodle (Bo Diddley), who helps him maintain his balance, especially on the steps leading to his home in the park. His dear wife, Rose Mary, is a tremendous help to him as well.

Recently, Donald and Rose Mary learned about veterans’ events that are being sponsored at their residence park by AVAG. They have been enjoying In-and-Out cheese burgers, snacks, games, guest speakers, door prizes, receiving a “Quilt of Valor,” and sharing camaraderie with the other veterans in their community. They look forward to the next monthly event! They say that retirement is the best time in their life because they no longer are “caught up in the rat race”! For any Rancho LaPaz residents who have not met Donald, Rose Mary, and Bo Diddley yet, get to know them! They have spent most of their lives serving others, and they have many wonderful stories to share! 🐕



Rick Whittington

Navy veteran Rick Whittington lives in Rancho La Paz, a mobile home community in Anaheim, in which AVAG (American Veterans' Assistance Group) has recently started sponsoring monthly Veterans' Appreciation Luncheons. At the luncheons, veterans and their spouses are treated to a lunch, a door prize drawing, food boxes, and presentations of interest to veterans.

At the second lunch meeting he attended, Rick listened carefully to the presenter about how he might qualify for benefits from the VA (Veterans' Administration). The veteran who was speaking told how he was now getting a check each month since he had "boots on the ground" in Vietnam and had had possible exposure to Agent Orange. Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto, with AVAG, helped Rick get online and then made several trips with him to the VA Hospital in Long Beach. She walked him through each step of applying for benefits. Rick indicated that the time she spent helping him cut at least two months of work down to just two days! He added, "I wouldn't have been able to have done this without Chaplain Doreen's help!"

Rick served in the U.S. Naval Reserve "SeaBees" (Construction Battalion) from 1969 to 1974. His unit was activated and sent to Vietnam for a year. After that, his unit was assigned to Okinawa for thirteen months. His unit constructed "Butler" buildings and quonset huts. In Vietnam, where it was so hot and humid, Rick said that he would lose as much as eight pounds in one day as he and his fellow SeaBees constructed Butler (metal) buildings!

Although Rick never had R&R, he was sent to Sand Point, NAS, WA, for several weeks. He also went through Survival Training at Camp Pendleton, CA.

When asked if he had to do it over again or serve again, he quickly replied, "I'm ready to do it now! Old guys are the only ones who may be able to do it anymore!"

He responded that what he liked most about his time in the service was that he had a good experience in Okinawa and that it was a "nice place." He also had the opportunity to see "Habu", or "Blackbird", the U.S. Air Force SR-71, a high-altitude, supersonic, strategic reconnaissance aircraft, was stationed on the island of Okinawa during the Vietnam War. Even though the last of these aircraft was retired in 1999, as of 2024, it still holds the world record for being the "fastest air-breathing manned aircraft (Wikipedia) ever built.

What Rick liked least about his time in the service was that he saw too much of the darker side of mankind, especially when he was in Vietnam. Many guys had "poor attitudes" and harbored a lot of prejudice. One time he watched a guy deliberately push someone else into a "binjo ditch," an open sewer. Also, when he had a layover in Hawaii on his way home after his tour of duty, he was spit on and called a

"baby killer." Unfortunately, many of our Vietnam veterans experienced this same manner of disrespect and abuse. Fifty years after the end of America's presence in Vietnam, thankfully, the American public has a much better attitude toward our military and veterans, so veterans can now be proud of their military service.

In his days prior to serving in the military, Rick had a strong interest in music. He and his father had a recording studio named "Pacific Challenger Records." This gave Rick the opportunity to meet many "greats" in the music industry and fueled his interest in becoming a musician. Since he had ties with Murray Wilson, father of the Beach Boys, Rick was asked to be part of the original Beach Boys group, but since Rick had not finished high school yet, Rick's father would not let him quit school to join.

Not only was Rick in the recording business, but his tour with the SeaBees taught him a lot about working with steel, so after his time in the Navy, he started several machine shops, Vision Machine being the latest, with eighty-five employees. His company catered primarily to the aerospace community. One of Rick's many accomplishments was to manufacture nuclear "caskets" for containing nuclear waste. Rather than using lead, the caskets were made of boron carbide aluminum.

Rick is a man of many talents and is full of surprises. In addition to his many ventures, Rick built cars. By the time he was sixteen years old, he had built/owned fifteen cars!

Nowadays, Rick says he is "semi-retired" and works as many as four days a week. He lives with his second wife of seven years, Kim, although he has been with her for forty-five years. He has one son and two grandchildren from a previous marriage.

One final thought that Rick would like to leave with veterans is that they should go meet with a VA representative to see if they are eligible for any benefits that they haven't applied for. He would again like to thank Chaplain Doreen for all of her help in helping him apply for benefits that he found out he was eligible for! 🐦



The SR-71B Blackbird, flown by the Dryden Flight Research Center as NASA 831, slices across the snow-covered southern Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. (USAF / Judson Brohmer)

USAF Veteran Baptized at Ekklesia Today Church

Elvia Huizar was baptized on October 15, 2023, by Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto at Ekklesia Today Church in Placentia, California. Chaplain Doreen met Elvia a few years ago when she was struggling with homelessness. Since then, she's got a home and is working at Disneyland. She's been following the Monday night Facebook live Bible study and had asked Doreen about getting baptized. In the end, Not only did she get baptized but her daughter Desti'Nee Faith Alba did too!

Doreen wishes to express a special thank you to Pastor Crispin Tenorio for allowing her to participate in the baptism. He has been an amazing partner for American Veterans Assistance Group and our veterans.

This is Elvia Huizar's testimony:

Why I chose to be baptized?

I was born into a Catholic Family, raised Catholic, practiced Catholicism, and still to this day claim the Catholic Faith. I have grown and been in situations where evil has been present. Let me just say that evil sees NO RELIGION because evil only dies off and responds to ONE GOD.

After escaping with my young baby daughter an abusive relationship, and having my own blood family turn their backs on us, we learned to "survive and rebuild" thanks to one Man; our Father and Savior, GOD. It was HE who kept me up and going, HE who gave me the strength to fight.

When I realized just a couple of years ago that my will to fight was weakening, I knew why. I sought my God alongside my daughter, Desti'Nee. She and I have prayed together ever since she learned about prayer. I taught her that prayer is a form of "talking to God" and not just learning verses and lines like in the Catholic Faith. Do not get me wrong, An Our Father Prayer is still important, but "talking to God in prayer" can be stronger. Prayer is stronger when you put your heart and true feelings into the conversations with God.

My daughter and I used to take trips to the beach to watch the sun set and listen to the ocean, that was our way of "coming to God" when we needed a spiritual lift. It has been tough, but here we are. They say that there is NO CURE for PTSD, but as Jesus walks beside me, it has been a much more tolerable stroll through life.

As a Catholic, tradition states that a child be baptized 40 days after birth, as a presentation of the new baby to God. It is stated that even as a new born baby, you are born as a sinner and must be baptized to be cleansed for your new life. I chose now to be baptized because I WANTED to be. I know what baptism means and what it stands for in my faith and with my relationship with God. This time I got to CHOOSE who would baptize me. I chose a woman I have come to love, respect, and feel an unfathomable sense of love and safety from, Chaplain Doreen Matsumoto.

I met Chaplain Doreen, briefly, at a Veterans Day Luncheon at Cottonwood Church. I sat at a table with a few other male Vietnam Veterans who spoke of their love and respect for Chaplain Doreen



and how she has saved them from their "demons of PTSD." I listened tentatively to each of their testimonies about her and was left in absolute "aww". Unbeknownst to me that I was soon to become part of their testimonial family with regards to Chaplain Doreen.



I believe she and I met on a more personal note when she had been the one to award me with a Quilt of Valor. The Quilt of Valor is actually quite a "high award" within the Veteran community for any Veteran to receive. Why? Because they are not given, they are earned by Veterans, and they personalize the quilt to the Veteran's personality and traits. It's almost like the equivalent of an "achievement medal" while in the service.

Chaplain Doreen presented the Quilt of Valor to me in front of my daughter, mother, and best friend, and that began developing into a beautiful friendship. I see Doreen as a spiritual mother because of her motherly love towards me and my daughter Desti'Nee. Doreen's willingness and passion for Christ that brought us BOTH closer to our Father. Thank you, Doreen, and God Bless!

Elvia M. Huizar
USAF Veteran 

AVAG: Fighting Hunger in Mobile Home Communities

AVAG is proud to announce its ongoing commitment to fighting hunger in its communities across Southern California. Through partnerships with dedicated volunteers and local heroes, AVAG ensures that vulnerable residents have access to nutritious food.

AVAG's food assistance program extends far beyond traditional food banks. We believe in personalized service and building relationships within the communities we serve. Here are just a few examples of how AVAG is spreading nourishment:

Santiago Creek Orange Estates: Partnering with Linda Cooper Rider, affectionately known as “The Mayor,” AVAG volunteers distribute food boxes right from her welcoming front porch in Creek Orange.

Pacific Palms MHP: Every fourth Tuesday at noon, AVAG sets up a pop-up pantry at Pacific Palms in Highland. Families with children, veterans, and seniors eagerly await their monthly boxes of food, ensuring they have access to essential groceries.

Sequoia MHP: Freshly prepared meals are the highlight at Sequoia in San Bernardino, where AVAG volunteers arrive every third Tuesday to nourish the community with home-cooked goodness.

Hemet Valley RV Park: Flagman Frank, a dedicated AVAG team member, joins forces with bible study member Loretta to bring food assistance to residents in Hemet. This partnership exemplifies the power of community collaboration in tackling hunger.

San Jacinto: Expanding its reach even further, AVAG recently launched a new food distribution location in San Jacinto.

The heart of AVAG's food assistance program lies in its incredible volunteers. These everyday heroes hail from the very communities they serve, generously donating their time and energy to ensure their neighbors have access to food and a sense of community. Their dedication and compassion are the driving force behind AVAG's success. ✨





Thanksgiving Luncheon at Casitas Laverne

For the fourth year in a row, Quality Material Handling (QMH) and AVAG joined forces to bring a delicious Thanksgiving feast to the community. Held at the clubhouse, the event provided not only a warm meal but also a sense of togetherness and appreciation for those who served.

QMH went above and beyond, not only providing all of the food but also preparing the traditional Thanksgiving spread—complete with roasted turkey, fluffy stuffing, creamy mashed potatoes, sweet corn, and all the trimmings. To top it off, homemade pumpkin and apple pies added a touch of sweetness to the celebration. But the true heart of the event was the dedication of QMH employees who volunteered their time to serve the community.

Adding to the festive spirit, Nancy, a veteran's wife from Creek Orange, generously donated wreaths and other items for a raffle. The excitement continued with the raffle of \$25 Starbucks gift cards generously provided by Torres Mortuary.

The event served approximately 70 meals at the clubhouse, and the spirit of giving extended beyond the clubhouse walls. QMH delivered an additional 44 meals to senior shut-ins residing in the mobile home park, ensuring everyone had a chance to enjoy a Thanksgiving feast.

This event is a testament to the commitment of Quality Material Handling to giving back to the community. Their dedication to supporting veterans and seniors, coupled with their unwavering partnership with AVAG, created a memorable Thanksgiving celebration for many. As the sentiment expressed by AVAG states, "We are so grateful to have them as community partners." 🦋



AVAG Annual Toy Drive Spreading Christmas Cheer: A Community Toy Drive Powered by Kindness

AVAG’s annual Christmas events have become a beacon of joy for the children in our community and wouldn’t be possible without the incredible support of amazing individuals and organizations. This year, the spirit of giving shone bright, filling boxes with toys and hearts with warmth.

Special recognition goes to Amanda Elekes and her amazing family and friends. They went above and beyond, sponsoring children and showering them with Christmas magic. Amanda’s dedication to bringing Christmas joy is unwavering, and we express our deepest gratitude for her unwavering generosity.

A heartfelt thank you to the Joint Forces Training Base for allowing us to place a collection box on the base.

We also extend our deepest gratitude to Ibeth Figueroa and the Cottonwood OutReach team for generously supplying AVAG with a wealth of toys.

Our Christmas toy collection boxes were strategically placed, inviting everyone to participate. Thank you also to the American Legion Post 295 in Cypress and Hope Chapel in Huntington Beach for offering welcoming spaces for toy donations. We are also grateful to Linda at Santiago Creek Orange Estates, who hosted a collection box on her porch; My Place Bar and Grill in Huntington Beach; Wilma’s Patio Restaurant in Newport Beach; and Casitas LaVern for hosting boxes and making donating convenient and joyful.

The overflowing boxes were a testament to the generosity of our community. From action figures and dolls to board games and stuffed animals, the toys represented pure joy. These gifts have now been distributed to children in AVAG communities, ensuring no child went without a special Christmas.

To every donor, box host, supporter, and volunteer, we say thank you. Your kindness and generosity brought light into the lives of children, making this Christmas unforgettable. Together, we created a season of wonder and joy, proving that community spirit knows no bounds. 🦋



Amanda Elekes, along with her family and friends, sponsored children for our Christmas event.



Special thanks to the Joint Forces Training Base for allowing us to put a box out to collect toys for the kids.



Thank you Ibeth Figueroa and the Cottonwood OutReach team who supplied AVAG with toys for our toy drive.

Baseball Dreams Take Flight with Community Spirit: AVAG Supports Young Athlete's Journey

Chase Tomczak, a young baseball player with Fellowship Christian Athletics' 12u team, has big dreams on his horizon. This summer, he and his teammates will be traveling to Oneonta, New York, to play in a tournament that will be held in June this year. But reaching for this goal required more than just practice swings and team spirit; it also meant finding a means to raise funds. As a means to accomplish this, Chase started a recycling program.

Enter AVAG, with a heart for its residents, including veterans like Chase's father, Chris Tomczak. When Chris and his wife, DeeAnna, reached out to AVAG about their son's fundraising efforts, the organization didn't hesitate to rally behind the family.

"Doreen with AVAG reached out to the residents at Santiago Creek Orange Estates to assist with cans and plastic bottles for Chase's fundraising," recalls Chris. "The residents have been awesome with providing material to recycle and with straight donations. We are still collecting and raising funds and are very grateful for the help and support of AVAG."

The support AVAG facilitated went beyond fundraising assistance. This holiday season, they even ensured the Tomczak family had a festive spirit by gifting them a Christmas tree.

Chase's story is a heartwarming reminder that achieving dreams often requires a village. In this case, the village of Creek Orange, spurred by AVAG's dedication, has come together to empower a young athlete's ambitions. With their continued support, Chase and his team can step onto the field in Oneonta knowing they have the unwavering backing of their community behind them. ✨



Chase Tomczak
is the son of Navy Veteran
Chris Tomczak.

**Dear Creek Orange,
Chase would love your help. Chase wishes to partner
with you to collect your recyclable plastic bottles
and cans.**

**Chase will be using what he earns to go towards
his trip to Cooperstown.**

**If you would like to help, please bring your
recyclable bottles and cans to the Clubhouse
and place them into the bin provided.**

**If you would like to have your recyclables picked up
from your house, please call
DeeAnna (Chase's Mom) at 714-944-7833.**



Supported by
American Veterans Assistance Group



Veterans' Connect Christmas Party

Hope Chapel, in Huntington Beach, supports veterans. Not only do they have a team of volunteer chaplains to serve in a variety of ministries, but they also sponsor a Veterans' Connect event every month. The church, in cooperation with AVAG (American Veterans' Assistance Group), hosts a Veterans' Connect on the fourth Saturday each month. It lasts from noon until about 1:45 p.m. A group of about 25 veterans and/or spouses typically attend. Veterans of all ages and branches of service are represented. Many are "regulars" who attend every month.

During the month of December, the fourth Saturday seemed too close to Christmas and New Year's Day, so a Veteran's Connect Christmas Party was scheduled on December 7th instead! Nearly forty veterans showed up, including a van load of veterans from the VA Hospital Blind Rehabilitation Program! (Thanks for bringing them, Liz!) There was lots of friendly joking and laughing as attendees played games for prizes! Have you ever tried to correctly identify "reindeer poop"?! There were also a few rounds of "Have You Ever...?" and a segment of "Name That Tune!".

After the crazy games, veteran-loving volunteers served up a delicious buffet dinner for party goers. There were also a number of door prizes and an opportunity to exchange gifts with anyone who wanted to participate. Everyone enjoyed the evening. What a way to start the Christmas season! 🦋



Have you never attended Veterans' Connect?

Chaplain Doreen and a lot of friendly veterans invite you to the next one!

WHEN:

Fourth Saturday every month
12:00 p.m.–1:45 p.m.

WHERE:

Hope Chapel
715 Lake Street, Huntington Beach, CA
(seven blocks from the beach!)

Hope to "connect" with YOU!



7th Annual Christmas Event at Sequoia Mobile Home Park.

AVAG and the Richard Breunig Foundation partnered together this year again to bring joy to so many children at Sequoia Mobile Home Park. The families came in and socialized with each other and had pizza, refreshments, and treats.

Sequoia Mobile Home Park has a large clubhouse, so we were able to use one of the rooms for our Children Giving Gifts Shop for the children to go shopping for their parents. It teaches them that it is better to give than to receive. After they went shopping for their parents, they were called out by numbers to come in and pick the toys that they would like. We also had six bikes donated by the Richard Breunig Foundation to raffle off at the end of the event.

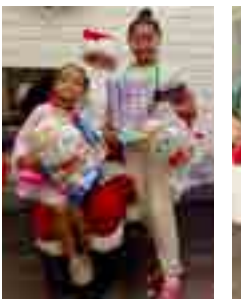
We had our very own Michael Goens, a Navy veteran, dress up as Santa Claus, to greet all the children, and give them candy canes. His assistant, Bobby, passed out Squishmallows.

Coordinating this event is not an easy task. It takes months to plan. Fortunately, we had many volunteers for this event, and so many wonderful people have allowed us to put toy collection boxes at their businesses or locations. Special thanks to the Joint Forces Training Base, Amanda Elekes, who allows us every year to put a box at JFTB. Thank you to Sierra Nevada's Bike Night at My Place Bar and Grill, which allows us to put a toy box out every year. We had a new location in Newport Beach, Wilma's Patio. Thank you to the owner, Sheri Drewrey, who allowed us to place a box to collect toys.

And special thanks to veteran Wayne and his wife, Marla from Veterans Connect, who put this connection together.

Also, Hope Chapel Huntington Beach let us put our yearly toy collection box there. Our friend, Linda Cooperider, as we know her as "The Mayor" at Creek Orange, put one on her deck at her home, and the neighborhood came and filled it up.

Thank you, Cottonwood Church, who gave us bags of toys. And to the many other individuals who came and dropped off toys to make this event successful. 🦋



Diamond Bar Mobile Home Park Hosts the 4th Annual Sponsored Children’s Christmas Event.

For the fourth year in a row, Chaplain Doreen and a team of volunteers from Diamond Bar Mobile Home Park brought holiday cheer to the children of the community with their annual Christmas gift-giving event.

This year’s event was a great success, with a large turnout of children who were all eager to participate. Yes, the manager of the mobile home park, generously provided refreshments for the event, and the Bible study group from Diamond Bar helped out with games and activities.

Julie led a fun game of bingo, while Alice kept the energy high with a round of musical chairs. Time was taken to read the children the story of the Good Shepherd, reminding them of the true meaning of Christmas.

One of the highlights of the event was the “Children Giving Gifts” shop, where the children learned about the joy of giving. Each child was given the opportunity to shop for a gift for their parents or guardians. A special thank you to Mellissa Breunig and Julie’s grandson Joseph, who were on hand to assist as personal shoppers for all the kids.

The children were all smiles as they picked out special gifts for their loved ones, and the excitement was palpable as they waited their turn to receive their own sponsored gifts.

The annual Diamond Bar Mobile Home Park Christmas gift-giving event is a wonderful tradition that brings holiday cheer to the children of the community. Thanks to the hard work of Chaplain Doreen and her team of volunteers, this year’s event was another success, spreading joy and goodwill throughout the community. 🦋





Seventh Annual Christmas Event at Orangewood Mobile Home Park in San Bernardino.

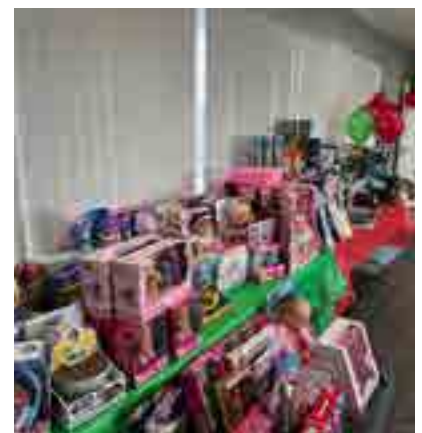
The American Veterans Assistance Group invited all the children from Orangewood, Hillside, Glen Aire, Pacific Palms, and Sequoia Mobile Home Park to participate in this annual Christmas event. As the children walked in, we had refreshments, cookies, and treats for everyone. Thank you to the manager, Veronica, who supplied all of the treats. Then we had our freebie table filled with necessities for the family and extra toys for the kids. The families were greeted by our friendly volunteers, David and Jesus, who checked them in, and then they went into the Children Giving Gifts Shop to shop for their parents for Christmas.

We partner with Children Giving Gifts so that the children have the opportunity to learn that it is better to give than to receive. After that, their personal shopper led them to the display of hundreds of toys. They were able to pick what they wanted, and then they went outside and received a raffle ticket from Sumi and Janet Breunig. The child was then allowed to place the ticket in one of the special items that we were raffling off at the end of the event. There were six bikes, a hover board, and a big kitchen Barbie playset. The Richard Breunig Foundation, with the founders, Mellissa and David Breunig, supplied brand new tennis shoes for the kids that pre-registered.

Each child also received a Squishmallows handed out by our volunteer Bobby from Sequoia Mobile Home Park.

It was great to have so many volunteers and our veterans help with this event. It was a huge success, with over 270 children participating in this event.

Special thanks to the Richard Breunig Foundation for partnering with AVAG to make this event successful. 🦋





Barstow Desert View Christmas Sponsored Children Event

Chaplain Doreen reached out to the manager, Maria Harrison, at Desert View Mobile Home Park in Barstow to see if any of the children needed to be sponsored for Christmas.

To her surprise, there were so many children who wanted to be sponsored for Christmas. All kinds of letters came in saying what they would like for Christmas, some just saying anything and saying thank you, while others were more elaborate.

We were able to partner with so many amazing people who wanted to sponsor these children. Especially Amanda Elekes from the Joint Forces Training Base, who helped Doreen obtain sponsors for this event. With the help of Mellissa and David Breunig, Flagman Frank, Stacey, Paul Buron, and Chaplain Doreen, they filled their trucks with packages for all the boys and girls.

Arriving in Barstow, they found the manager had decorated so beautifully, and she made posole for all the residents. They also had special treats, cookies, and drinks.

Chaplain Doreen shared the true story of Christmas from Luke Chapter 2 in the Bible. The children sat in front and listened to the story of how Jesus was born.

Then each child came up as their name was called to receive their very special gifts from their sponsors.

A special thanks to everyone who helped make this event successful. 🦋



Meet a Cherokee MHP AVAG Veteran



Jim Long

U.S. Army Veteran Jim Long first learned about the monthly AVAG Veterans' Appreciation Luncheons at Cherokee Mobile Home Park, in Anaheim, from his wife's cousin, Tony Martinez (also a veteran), a resident at Cherokee. Now Jim and his wife, Cecilia (better known as "CeCe"), regularly attend the event, although they live in Rancho Fullerton, another mobile home park for senior adults where there are not many veterans.

Jim was born in Detroit. His father was drafted into the military in WWII but returned to Detroit to work with the car maker, Hudson. Not long thereafter, the family returned to Connecticut, where his parents were originally from. That is where Jim called "home" for many years. Jim recalls a vastly different childhood, remembering boys casually toting rifles to school and the ubiquitous presence of pocket knives and games like "mumbly peg" – a stark contrast to today's youth.

The U.S. Army drafted Jim during Thanksgiving week of 1968. At that time, draftees typically ended up being sent to Vietnam, but it didn't turn out quite that way for Jim. He first headed to Fort Jackson, SC, for induction. Since it was so close to Christmas, he was sent home for a few weeks. After Christmas, he was sent to Fort Polk, LA, to complete Army Basic Training. In "holdover" status since his Army training school was not ready to begin for a number of weeks, he performed very "important" duties, such as policing the area! Finally, he traveled to Fort Gordon, GA, for AIT (Technical School) as Radio Operator.

Just a few days into his Radio training, Jim and three of the other young recruits in his class were pulled out of the class and told to report to such-and-such building the next day. They reported and were put in a "crash course" Radio Operator class, which they completed in just five days instead of the six weeks the class normally would take to complete! That would seem like a good thing, but it put Jim back in "holdover" status again. So for the remainder of the six weeks while his former classmates were still in class, he policed the area until he got his orders, supposedly to go to Vietnam.

En route to Vietnam, the plane was delayed on a stopover in Okinawa. As it turns out, Jim's orders did not take him to Vietnam, but the Army in Okinawa had no record of him having orders to their unit either, so they didn't know what to do with him! They told him, "Since you're a radio guy, take this PRC-24 (a backpack radio) and go with these two civilians on a plane and helicopter wherever they go. For the next two months, Jim bounced around with the CIA in Cambodia!

For the final eighteen months of Jim's active duty commitment, things became more structured. He received orders to transfer to Germany as part of the 32nd Signal Battalion, Company C. Since his unit was

located in close proximity to the U.S. Army's 3rd Tank Division, Jim's unit would move to an assigned spot, set up communications equipment, generators, etc., whenever the "tankers" played military war games. Ultimately, Jim attained the rank of E-5, and at the end of his two-year enlistment (1968-1970), he returned home to Connecticut.

After returning home from the Army, Jim had no trouble transitioning into civilian life. The company, Combustion Engineering, made equipment for power generation (such as boilers and nuclear reactors). They had jobs waiting for returning G.I.'s, so Jim was hired right away.

Sometime later, he married his first wife, Catherine. He served with the Connecticut State Police for six years, but realized that his family was more important than a law enforcement career, so he sought after another career.

Jim was hired by Westinghouse and relocated his family to California. Eventually, Siemens bought that division, but Jim was able to stay with that company for 32 years. With Siemens, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Mexico, and the Philippines. He worked at nuclear plants, utilities, hospitals, and military bases, spending a great deal of time at Vandenberg AFB on California's Central Coast. After a satisfying career, the company asked him to retire and gave him a six-month salary severance and full benefits. He went straight to Social Security and got set up for his retirement. He then became a part-time consultant for a while.

Jim was married to his first wife for 42 years. His wife's health declined, and for her final seven years, it was necessary to hire a caregiver. The caregiver was a godsend and lovingly cared for Jim's wife until her passing. Later, when Jim felt that he wanted to marry again, the first person he thought of was Cecilia (aka CeCe), his former wife's caregiver! She was a friendly, personable, caring person, and also a widow. It made sense that they should be together! CeCe and Jim, both retired, have now been married for ten years. They are active volunteers at their home church, Eastside Christian Church. The church, a "mega-church" located in Anaheim, has a congregation of about 2500, not to mention the six satellite churches (including one in Minnesota). CeCe greets worshipers as they arrive for services each week. Her friendly, welcoming smile is a real asset. Jim devotes at least two days each week to set-up, tear-down, and preparation for the many functions and seasons throughout the year.

As busy as Jim is with volunteer activities, he still has time for a hobby. Model railroading. At home, he has an HO-scale model railroad. He also supports the Orange Empire Railroad Museum short track and their 125th scale (garden scale) train set-up.

In reflecting on his military service, Jim said he would do it again because he really loves our country. Nothing stood out to him about what he liked best about the service. He said that he was just a clueless teenager who did what he was told and didn't ask questions! He DID recall what he liked the least, however. His father had warned him that the military is "stupid!" "The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing!" Wisdom proved true from the very first days of Jim's enlistment. Despite this, Jim's son was in the U.S. Marines, and his grandson is in the Navy. A strong military family tradition continues!

Overall, life has been good to Jim and his wife, CeCe. Their combined families include five children, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. 🦋

Remembering Bob Campbell, U.S. Navy Veteran



Robert (Bob) Campbell was born at home on July 10, 1940, in Antioch, Tennessee. He was the youngest of the eight children of Amos Jasper and Mary Francis Campbell. He spent his childhood on a farm, living in a house that had been owned by a doctor during the Civil War. The house had no electricity and no running water but was lit by carbide lamps. There were also kerosene lamps, a fireplace, a wood cook stove, and an outhouse in the backyard. There was a well on the back porch. When it ran dry, it was necessary to carry a bucket from the spring down the hill. There was a graveyard beside the house that dated back to before the Civil War.

His brothers, Amos, Jr., and James, were 20 and 19 years older and went to fight in World War II in Europe and North Africa. James lost a lung in the war.

His mother died when he was only 14. He quit school at 15 and tried to join the Army. His brother told on him, so he had to wait until he was 17 to join the Navy. He came to know the Lord during his teen years in Tennessee.

He went to boot camp in San Diego, finding himself in a whole new world. Inside toilets made a big impression. He was stationed on two different ships that sailed the Pacific, then decided to go back home. There were no good jobs and no good pay there, so he stayed in the Naval Reserves and then reenlisted in 1962.

He was sent to Los Alamitos Naval Air Station where he got his GED and advanced in rank. While there he reconnected with a former shipmate, Doug. Doug enlisted his girlfriend Linda to find Bob a blind date. She arranged for her best friend Linda for the date, which resulted in 58 years of marriage to Phyliss. Bob and Phyliss married in September 1965 at the base chapel.

In November of 1967, he was transferred to Alameda Naval Air Station. He reenlisted in November of 1969, expecting he would likely be sent to a ship in the Pacific again. Instead, he was trained with the Navy SEALs to be a Boat Captain for a SEAL Team Assault Boat (STAB). This boat was used to insert SEALs on missions and to patrol the Mekong Delta for Viet Cong. After two months of training, he was sent to Vietnam in February of 1970.

After several close calls, the STAB boats were pulled out of Vietnam in November of that year, and he returned home for Thanksgiving. By February of 1971, they had moved into their home in Cypress, CA. Bob was stationed on a Reservist training ship based in Long Beach.

In 1973, the USS Hooper was decommissioned, and Bob had orders to report to a ship in the Philippines. Instead, he left active duty and rejoined the Reserves after 16 years of active duty. The Navy sent him to Ford Motor Company training school until the end of his enlistment.

He went to work in January of 1974 for the City of Cypress under the CETA program, which paid his first year's wages. During his 27 years with the city, he advanced to Public Works Maintenance Supervisor. He took college courses under the GI Bill. He also stayed in the Naval Reserves and advanced to Senior Chief Boatswains Mate until he aged out after 33 years of total service.

At age 60, Bob retired from the City of Cypress and shortly after joined the Vietnam Vets Motorcycle Club, where he became friends with many vets with similar war experiences.

Since 2015, Bob experienced many health issues, and on December 9, 2023, he peacefully went home to be with his Lord and Savior, surrounded by family and friends. 🦋



In Memoriam – Harold Gomer 1923-2023

U.S. Navy World War II veteran Harold Gomer was born on October 20, 1923, in Grand Meadow, Minnesota. His father, Hugo, and mother, Ethel, were farmers. Harold was the second-oldest of five children. Following the death of his father when Harold was 7, the family moved to Austin, Minnesota, which he called home for 86 years.

As a young man, a friend got him interested in boxing. He began fighting in the Golden Gloves flyweight division in 1938, nicknamed “Fancy Footwork Gomer” due to his fighting style. Fighters at that time earned \$1.50 for three rounds.

For one bout, Harold was matched against a best friend. He did not want to fight him but was talked into it, and they fought anyway. Harold landed a knock-out blow in the first round and caught his friend before he hit the canvas, carrying him to his corner. They remained friends. In 1942, he became the District Flyweight Champion.

Harold was working for Hormel Meat Packing as a butcher when he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in November 1942 at the age of 19. He was sent to Farragut, Idaho, for bootcamp. Following bootcamp, he was assigned as a Coxswain to the USS Ammen (DD-527). His duties aboard were ship maintenance and a battle station at the 20 mm mid-ship gun responsible for air defense.

During his three years aboard the Ammen, the ship was sent into harm’s way with numerous Naval Task Forces to provide antisubmarine and anti-aircraft protection, as well as providing gunfire support and shore bombardments for troop landings. The Ammen participated as an escort to the Aleutian Islands near Alaska for the landings on Attu Island and Kiska. From there, the Ammen was deployed to the New Guinea area, where it participated in many operations, and then to the Leyte Gulf and Okinawa.

In 1945, Harold was transferred to Florida to participate in the extensive overhaul of the USS Logic (AM-258), before it was transferred to the Republic of China under a lend-lease program. He was asked to go with the ship to China but declined because he had decided to return to civilian life and was discharged in January 1946.

Following his discharge, Harold returned to Austin, Minnesota. Hormel Meat Packing offered him his old job back, and he worked with the company until retiring after 40 years.

A few months after his return, he married his childhood sweetheart, Shirley Mae, on April 28, 1946. They started a family which would include three girls and one boy. Every year, when the kids were young, the family would go on a grand vacation to places like Yellowstone National Park and Mount Rushmore. His family grew to include 8 grandchildren, 13 great-grandchildren, and 9 great-great-grandchildren.

Harold and Shirley loved dancing and danced every weekend. They taught themselves to dance, and Shirley made great outfits for them to wear to the dances. They became so good that people called them “Fred and Ginger.”

Harold, being very handy, helped build his family’s first home. The family then moved a couple of more times into houses that he restored from top to bottom. Restoring homes was something he enjoyed and had a knack for.

Harold, a member of Austin American Legion Post 91, served as Commander for two years and managed the bar. In his honor, the post has a special chair engraved with his name. Harold also served for 40 years as a member of the Post’s Funeral Escort.

In 2016, following the death of his wife, Shirley, he moved to Orange County, California, to live with his daughter Pam. After relocating to Orange County, he enjoyed his retirement, occasionally going dancing at the Legion Club and visiting Las Vegas for a little gambling.

Harold Gomer became a member of AVAG when the chapter started at Creek Orange. AVAG celebrated his birthday every year. Last year’s celebration for his 100th birthday was covered in the last issue of AVAG News. AVAG has been able to provide him and his daughter, Pam, with AVAG resources. Both such amazing people—they have always been there to help in any way.

Harold passed away peacefully at his daughter’s home in Orange, California on Tuesday, November 14, 2023.

We thank you, Harold, for serving our country so faithfully and for being such a great friend. You will be truly missed. 🐦

Happy Birthday Jack Gutman, Rancho LaPaz MHP WWII D-Day veteran

AVAG celebrated Jack Gutman's 98th birthday in December, 2023. Jack is the author of *One Veteran's Journey To Heal the Wounds of War*, a book about his decades long struggle with PTSD, and he is a man with many jokes.

In honor of his big day, AVAG was able to deliver him a lift recliner.

A big "thank you" to Cory Vigil for connecting us with Heidi and Joann who made this blessing possible. 🦋



Meet Mike Scuro U.S. Navy Veteran



U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander (ret.) Mike Scuro flew search and rescue helicopters in Vietnam and picked up the astronauts on the Apollo mission.

Chaplain Doreen met him at the Westmount of Cypress senior living community at a veterans event that AVAG sponsored. He was using a hand-push wheelchair but was in desperate need of an electric wheelchair because it was hard for his wife to push him in it.

AVAG was able to fulfill his request for an electric wheelchair. Thank you to Julie and our friends at AR Mobility in Huntington Beach who work with us on these requests.

Mike was so happy. He said he had been depressed because he couldn't get around, and he was worried that his wife wasn't going to be able to continue to push him in the wheelchair. Once he got in it, he was driving around the parking lot. I did a follow-up call with his daughter, Angie, and she said he loves it. 🦋

AVAG News

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