

A Special Edition
A Salute to Veterans
Quarterly
Remembering the Southwest Valley

Three Rivers Historical Society

Salt • Agua Fria • Gila

Bob Ketcham's WWII Story

My story began on December 17, 1944. The 106th green Infantry Division had relieved the crack Indian Head 2nd Division, which Roosevelt had proclaimed second to none. The 2nd Division told us that it was a quiet sector and it was unlikely that anything of significance would occur in that area.

We were high in the Ardennes Forest. The pine trees were covered with snow. It looked like a scene on a Christmas card. "Nothing to fear", American Intelligence had repeatedly said. "No one in their mind would attack in such a snowy, forested mountainous area." Apparently, that was the high commands' reasoning for placing a green, untested division in that sector.

Adolph Hitler had masterminded a breakthrough plan. His generals did not like the plan and they told him so. But Hitler's mind was made up; he needed some victories as things had been going badly for the Germans. Von Rundstedt was in command.

On a foggy, December morning the attack began at dawn. Hitler released over a quarter of a million soldiers. They were heavily equipped, and their purpose was to split the Allied Forces. For a while it appeared that he might accomplish that.

We, of the 106th, were all that stood in his way. The 106th was composed of the 422nd, 423rd, and 424th regiments. We were spread out thinly over thirty-seven miles of defensive positions. I was in the 422nd, which appeared to take the brunt of the attack. There was turmoil; no one seemed to know what was going on. Everywhere you looked there were Germans. It was soon obvious that the division was surrounded and was being cut to pieces.

Unfortunately for the Allies, the weather was horrendous with snow and fog, so we had no aerial support. Soon our artillery was knocked out and nothing was left of our tank division. Shortly the division was broken into mere pockets of three or four men.

Perhaps ten days had passed; it was close to December 28th. Those left of the division were now on their own. There was no leadership left. I was with a corporal, a gunsmith from Montana. We were alone, lost, hungry, but still attempting to find an escape route from the encirclement. We heard distant noises, a small group digging foxholes. Friend or Foe? Hesitantly, we decided to chance it. Fortunately, it was a small group of Americans, ten or twelve men. It was getting toward evening, so we dug in with them.

During the night we heard the grinding of a few German tanks around us. Come dawn, we were pinned down by German machine guns and "88's", German anti-tank, anti-aircraft artillery.

Finally, a German officer came running through waving a white flag, asking us to surrender. By this time, there were six of us and one officer left. The officer accepted the surrender demands which I imagine was the smart thing to do under the circumstances. Our ammunition was nil and food had been gone for days.

January 1, 1945, began the long trek of prisoners bound to some distant stalag in the land of who knows where.

First, we were put in freight cars, about seventy to a box car. After a few miles American fighter pilots mistook the prisoner train for an ammunition train. They swept down, firing away with machine guns and cannon, blowing holes in the cars. About one-third of the men in my car were either killed or wounded. When the shooting stopped the German guards unlock the cars to survey the damage. Those of us who survived refused to ride the rails again. We might not survive the long march, but we were damn sure not likely to survive the box car attacks.

We marched for approximately 10 days, 30-40 miles per day. We received a cup of cold soup each day. The German guards didn't fare much better. Malnutrition, sickness and pneumonia began taking its toll. We marched through the Ruhr Valley, spending nights in cities like Essen, Dusseldorf and Cologne. Each night was filled with terror as the English were doing their bombing raids.

I distinctly remember an experience on around the fifth day of the march. I was walking close to a picket fence surrounding a small German home. An elderly woman standing near the fence motioned for me to take a small parcel she held. When I gently opened it, I found a small loaf of bread! She had gambled her life to give the enemy a bit of food. I suddenly felt there was hope! A few days later we marched through a bombed-out city and the citizenry lined up to spit, taunt and insult us. As we marched, our number grew smaller as sickness began to thin our ranks. I have no idea what happened to those who fell along the way.

We finally reached our destination, Stalag 1V B. It was a camp of 10,000 British prisoners. Many had been held since the African Campaign almost five years before. Unfortunately, a few of us had come down with pneumonia and were destined to spend the rest of the war in Stalag 1VB.



Patch of the 106th Green Infantry Division
Green was a descriptor of untried troops,
Lacking battle experience.

HONORING THOSE WHO SERVED

AGCS Kenneth Semmler, USN RET

Submitted by Ken Semmler

September 9, 1956, marked the start of my Naval career at Litchfield Naval Air Facility. It marked my ninth month in the Navy, having completed several schools and "A" School at Lakehurst, NJ. As an about to be promoted to E4 (AG3), I was now a qualified weather observer. What a place to start for a sailor . . . the desert. My arrival was met with 100-degree temperature, which was not pleasant because the Navy required that I travel in dress blues. For the uninformed, dress blues are wool. Transportation was found to take me to the base where I was assigned a bunk in an open bay barracks of about 60 men.

The next day I went to the office assigned which was a space at ground level in the tower facing the runway. Great visibility for my hourly observations which were sent nationwide. Since this local weather observation was vital to our pilots, the job was important. What was interesting was to look across the runway and see the many rows of old aircraft. Because of the variety and sheer number of the planes, Hollywood sent a large crew to get maybe a two second segment for a movie. Would you believe it was a two-day process just to get that segment? As I sat at our weather observation window, I was able to see Jeff Chandler and crew walk by. The theme implied that the aircraft were for sale and the buyers needed to walk through the rows of aircraft. Truth be known, the planes would be for sale later when the base was closed.

Barrack's life is different. Early on I experienced a short fight between a couple of sailors next to my bunk. One solid punch dropped the other sailor; the sound of the one hit still rings in my mind today. Such actions in the Navy are highly frowned on and the authorities got involved.

My liberty did not extend much beyond the base. I often went to a local Lutheran church and the result was finding the girl who ended up being my lifelong mate . . . Lenore Bensburg.

My tour of duty at Litchfield Naval Air Facility was short with orders to report to San Diego in May 1957. Visits were made back to Goodyear/Avondale as often as I could. In two years, Lenore and I were married, and we were now a Navy couple with a long career in the service.

Richard John Stucky, U.S. Navy, WWII

Submitted by Meredith Stucky

Following graduation from high school in 1943, Dick Stucky joined the Navy Seabees in San Diego and found himself on a troop train heading for Camp Perry in Virginia. When the train left San Diego it didn't have any air conditioning, but resourceful Seabees fixed that issue. They were moved to Quonset Point, RI, and a few months later they were aboard the Frederick Funston on their way to the Island of Oahu, Hawaii. Dick had been assigned to manage ship's service store for the battalion.

Jacob Stucky, Dick's grandson, interviewed him for an Agua Fria ROTC assignment. Jacob asked Dick what he did in the war and was incredibly surprised when Dick proudly answered, "I ran the best battalion beer garden in the Pacific." From Hawaii they moved to the island of Samar in the Philippines where Dick set up the next best beer garden in the Pacific. His job in the war was to keep up the morale of the troops. He was perfect choice for the job. He was discharged in 1948.

An Honor Nobody Wants

WHAT IS A GOLD STAR FAMILY?

A Gold Star Family is the immediate family member(s) of a fallen service member who died while serving in a time of conflict.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE A GOLD STAR FAMILY?

A Gold Star Family can display a Gold Star Service Flag for service members who were killed or died, while serving in the Armed Forces, from causes other than dishonorable. In 1917, **Robert Queissner**, an



Army captain, designed a flag to honor the service of his sons in World War I. The flag had a blue star on a white field, with a red border. The number of gold stars on the flag corresponds with the number of individuals who were killed or died. A gold star is placed over the blue star on a Blue Star Service Flag so that the blue forms a border and creates GoldStar Service Flag. The U.S. Department of Defense also issues Gold Star lapel pins to immediate family members of a fallen service member of the military. These pins are worn by spouses, parents, and children of service members killed in the line of duty and contain a gold star on a purple circular background.

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WHO CREATED THE GOLD STAR SERVICE FLAG?

President Wilson authorized a suggestion made by the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defenses, that mothers who had lost a child who served in the war could wear a traditional black mourning armband with a gold gilt star in 1918. This approval led to the tradition of a gold star covering the blue star on the Service flag to show that the service member had passed. It's believed Wilson coined the term "Gold Star Mother."

WHO CAN DISPLAY A SERVICE FLAG?

The Department of Defense specifies that immediate family members authorized to display the flag include: spouses, parents, children, siblings, stepparents, stepchildren, stepsiblings, half-siblings, adopted parents, adopted children and adopted siblings of a United States service member. The flag can be displayed in the authorized residence's window.

The Service flag can also be displayed by an organization to honor the service members of that organization serving during a period of hostilities or war.



In addition to the Gold Star Service Flag, the Gold Star Lapel Pin established in 1947 can be worn by Gold Star family members.

GOLD STAR MOTHERS STAMP

On September 21, 1948, the U.S. Postal Service issued the **Gold Star Mothers Stamp** to honor mothers whose sons and daughters had been killed in wars around the world.

In 1940, **President Franklin Roosevelt** proclaimed the last Sunday in September as Gold Star Mothers Day. This year Gold Star Mothers Day was September 24



Just A Common Soldier

By Lawrence Vaincourt

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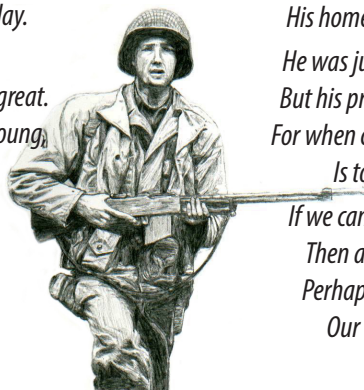
*He was getting old and paunchy and his hair was falling fast,
And he sat around the Legion, telling stories of the past.
Of a war that he had fought in and the deeds that he had done,
In his exploits with his buddies, they were heroes, every one.*

*And tho' sometimes, to his neighbors, his tales became a joke,
All his Legion buddies listened, for they knew whereof he spoke.
But we'll hear his tales no longer for old Bill has passed away,
And the world's a little poorer, for a soldier died today.*

*He will not be mourned by many, just his children and his wife,
For he lived an ordinary and quite uneventful life.
Held a job and raised a family, quietly going his own way,
And the world won't note his passing, though a soldier died today.*

*When politicians leave this earth, their bodies lie in state,
While thousands note their passing and proclaim that they were great.
Papers tell their whole life stories, from the time that they were young,
But the passing of a soldier goes unnoticed and unsung.*

*Is the greatest contribution to the welfare of our land
A guy who breaks his promises and cons his fellow man?
Or the ordinary fellow who, in times of war and strife,
Goes off to serve his Country and offers up his life?*



*A politician's stipend and the style in which he lives
Are sometime disproportionate to the service that he gives.*

*While the ordinary soldier, who offered up his all,
Is paid with a medal and perhaps, a pension small.*

*It is so easy to forget them for it was so long ago,
That the old Bills of our Country went to battle, but we know
It was not the politicians with their compromise and ploys,
Who won for us the freedom that our Country now enjoys.*

*Should you find yourself in danger, with your enemies at hand,
Would you want a politician with his ever-shifting stand?
Or would you prefer a soldier, who has sworn to defend
His home, his kin and Country and would fight until the end?*

*He was just a common soldier and his ranks are growing thin,
But his presence should remind us we may need his like again.
For when countries are in conflict, then we find the soldier's part
Is to clean up all troubles that the politicians start.*

*If we cannot do him honor while he's here to hear the praise,
Then at least give him homage at the ending of his days.
Perhaps just a simple headline in a paper that would say,
Our Country is in mourning, for a soldier died today.*

Litchfield Park's World War II Memorials



Enter local community minded, patriotic men: Tom Heim, Jim Warkomski and Bob McMillan. In 2002 they started a campaign to build a new memorial to those valiant men. It became a community effort with contributions coming from all corners to fund the project. Local businessmen supported the memorial with labor and materials. Litchfield Elementary School agreed to the placement of the memorial on the west side of the campus near the flagpole where it could easily be seen and visited.

The memorial was completed, and dedication took place on May 17, 2007. Take a moment, stop by and honor our local heroes.

Years ago, a World War II memorial stood proudly on the southeast corner of Litchfield Road and Indian School Road. It was erected soon after the end of the war and listed the names of all the men from Litchfield Park who had served their country. In this small town, almost 200 men went to war. Many years later the memorial was removed because it was in such poor condition.



A Request for Political Asylum

By David Olsen

Submitted by Betty Lynch

During the Cold War, I was Base Operations Officer at Kindley Air Force Base in Bermuda. Late one night a Russian transport overflowed on a direct flight from Havana to Madrid. About an hour later, the Russian aircraft called to declare an inflight emergency due to hydraulic system failure. When the aircraft arrived, I entered the passenger compartment and gave the usual greeting, "I am Major Olsen, United States Air Force. How can I help you?" We discussed the problem and the aircraft was towed to the passenger terminal so the passengers could wait there while the repairs were done.

The passengers were crowded into the small terminal. A man stopped me and asked if this was America. I explained that it was a U. S. Air Force base in Bermuda, an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The man replied, "Would you please help us, sir, we wish to request political asylum in the United States." The Russian pilot immediately called all the passengers to him and forbade them to speak to anyone.

It became obvious that these passengers were being transported against their wishes and no doubt were headed to Siberia or a gulag.

I called the base commander and advised him of the situation; he contacted the State Department for guidance. Just as the repairs were being completed, the commander called to say we would not accept their request for political asylum. I was astonished and asked their reasoning? He said the request for asylum was given on Bermudian soil and therefore was not valid.

At dawn, the passengers were herded back onto the repaired aircraft. As I stood at the foot of the stairs leading up to the door all I could do was shake my head in the negative. It was humiliating to stand there in silence as I watched those people climb the stairs to what I feared was a one-way trip to a long sentence.

Five Aragon Sons Serve Their Country

In 1927, **Tomas and Justita Aragon** and three sons moved from New Mexico to Avondale, Arizona. As the years went by the family grew to 13 children, nine sons and four daughters.

During WWII, five of the older boys were in the war at the same time and all returned home to their family. Four of the boys, **Andy, Abe, Mauricio and Alonzo (Al)**, all served in the Army seeing action in North Africa and Europe. Mauricio was wounded four times earning the Purple Heart and gaining a battlefield commission. He also distinguished himself in the capture of two German soldiers. Andy and Alonzo received wounds but were able to return to the front. **Abe** was a medic and escaped injury. Lino, the youngest of the brothers to serve in WWII, broke tradition and joined the Navy. He saw action in the Pacific theater including Tarawa, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Their mother, **Justita**, attributed the safe return of five sons from WWII to her almost constant prayers for their safety.

Andy, the oldest, stayed in Avondale and helped his father with the family businesses. Abe returned from the war and became a boilermaker, taking his trade to Hawaii. Mauricio, upon his return, also stayed in Avondale and worked at the grocery store and the Avondale Liquor Store. Alonzo took advantage of the G.I. Bill, attended college majoring in education. He was a teacher and coach at Avondale Elementary and Peoria School Districts.

Lino, the youngest of the boys who went to war, returned to pursue an education. He, too, took advantage of the G.I. Bill. After graduating from college, he worked for Rockwell International as a quality control engineer and was part of the Apollo space program. He was thrilled to watch the Apollo lift off, knowing that he had been a part of its development.

Stateside Medic Trauma

Submitted by Judy Graham

My brother, **Bob Graham**, joined the Air Force after high school graduation during the Vietnam War. He became a medic and served his entire time at Andrews Air Force Base. Andrews AFB received severely injured men and women from the war. Once they were stabilized, they were flown to a military hospital closer to their homes. Bob spent four years in that job and found it exceedingly difficult because he never had the opportunity to see them recover. He was so young that it had a lifelong effect on Bob.

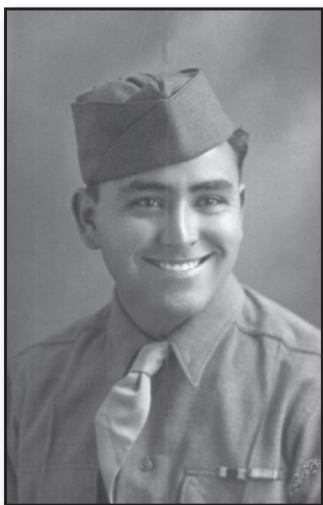
The Graham family had several vets. Father-in-law **John C. Graham** joined when WWII began. He attended Officer Candidate School and became an officer. He fought at the Battle of the Bulge. He went on to train soldiers for the Korean Conflict. He retired as a major. While he attended 100th Division reunions, he would not talk about the war.

Cousin **Perry Shirk** served in the Air Force for 22 years. He flew F-86's. He was proud of his service and shared his stories. He is buried at Arlington Cemetery. Niece, Col. Kimberly Peeples, is the current Base Commander at Ft. Myers. She graduated from West Point and she and her husband both served in Iraq. After serving at the Pentagon, she was sent to Fort Myers.

Uncle **Harland Palmquist**, a farmer from Clark, SD, entered the Army during WWII and served as crew chief for B-17 bombers in England, North Africa, Corsica and Italy. He did not talk about the war and Judy only found out about his exploits in his obituary.



Pfc Miguel Bejarano Commended for Sicilian Service



Pfc Miguel Bejarano, a member of Company B, 396th Port Battalion, was cited by Lt. Col Kath. "Through your whole-hearted efforts, which were made through enemy attack and fire from shore batteries, and though exhausted and with little sleep, you continued your part in the operation until it was carried out successfully..."

While Miguel was in Sicily, his brother, Gustavo, was in New Guinea and his cousin Pvt Carlos Rivera was stationed in England. All the men were employees of Goodyear Farms prior to the war.

Del Castillo Family Has Five Sons in WWII

Gabriel Del Castillo had been employed by Goodyear Farms since coming from Mexico in 1919. Five of his sons were in World War II at the same time. A sixth, Ysidro, received a medical discharge from the Army Air Corp and returned home to Camp 50, Litchfield Park.

Son, Corporal Gustavo, Army, was in the European Theater, Pfc Joaquin served in the Pacific, Pfc Fernando in Italy, Alberto in New Guinea and Pvt Enriquez was training at Camp Roberts, California. The Del Castillo family service flag displayed more stars than any other family at Goodyear Farms.



FIVE BROTHERS DEL CASTILLO in the Armed Services, left to right: Pfc. Fernando, 25, in Italy; Pvt. Enriquez, 19, Camp Roberts, Calif. Below, left to right: Pvt. Alberto, 23, New Guinea; Pfc. Joaquin, 26, sonoplace in the Pacific; and P. Gustavo, 32, in the European theater, not pictured. Bottom right: Pvt. Ysidro Del Castillo, 30, at Harrington Airbase, Kansas

Thanks to Meredith Stucky
for finding these stories in the "Wingfoot Clan".

I Wish ...

Sue Dunaway

I wish my Dad were still alive . . . he would have some good stories. He was first stationed at Papago Park's base when they had the 1st Cavalry based there (before it became a POW camp). His thoroughbred horse was called "Mad Plumber." He met my mom while riding his horse around the area and she was riding a horse from the local riding stables.

He was then transferred to Luke AFB as a weather observer; he had worked as a weather observer at the airport in St. Joseph, Missouri, before the war. Then he was transferred to Marana AFB, then New Guinea. Before he died, we took him to Luke AFB during one of their air shows and they let him view their current weather & communication's room. He really liked that. Plus, we got to see one of the first Stealth Bombers, but they wouldn't let me touch it!

Ed: I think Sue Dunaway expresses the feelings of many of us!

Ketchum Story

Prison life could have been worse. This camp was not run by the SS, so we received better treatment. Still, our food consisted of one cup of potato soup and a slice of bread each day. The guards chided me for eating potato peels out of the garbage cans. I felt they were instrumental in keeping me alive. The sleeping bunks were full of lice. We could never get rid of them.

The winter was long; many prisoners were dying of malnutrition and pneumonia. Many of them seemed to have lost hope . I made it a point to try to get them up and moving. Moving around helped keep me going.

We received little knowledge of what was going on in the war. Occasionally, we would get a little news from an underground radio that the British had. We heard that the Rhine River had been crossed, but wondered if we would be prisoners for weeks, months or even years. By this time all the rail lines and bridges were out, so we received no help from the Red Cross. We could only imagine how rough it was for the G.I.s in combat. The rumors that the Russians were closing in made the guards jumpy and worried.

On the morning of April 23, 1945, the day was crisp and clear. Imagine our surprise when we saw that the German guards had disappeared. Within a few minutes we learned why...suddenly hundreds of Russian soldiers came over the ridge. A fellow prisoner and I decided we would volunteer to join the Russians in their advancement.

The Russians were suspicious of us at first and there was a language barrier. With the Russians we advanced to the Elbe River. Suddenly, across the river a Jeep patrol appeared. This was the initial meeting of the Russian and American Allied forces. I remember embracing among the Russian and American troops. I remember the Russians testing the American M1 rifle and many toasts commemorating that occasion. Then came the "Oath of the Elbe".

At that historic moment, all of the soldiers present, American and Russian, solemnly swore that they would do everything in their power to prevent such things from ever happening in the world again, and that the nations must live at peace.

From a letter written by Bob Ketchum to Albert Kotzebue who was a part of the Jeep patrol that rescued Bob and returned him to the American Command. Thank you, Mike Ketcham for sharing your dad's story.

Bob Schulke

Bob Schulke, a longtime West Valley resident, joined the Navy when WWII began. He was one of the early naval aviators to come to Goodyear to test airplanes modified by Goodyear Aircraft Corporation and to ferry them to where they were needed. The Litchfield Naval Air Facility was under construction, so he and his fellow flyers lived in local apartments. Our community was lucky that he met and married Margaret Collier and decided to stay in the area.



This picture of a young sailor and his car was a common sight during the years that Litchfield Naval Air Facility was an active Navy base. The sailors often walked to the business district of Goodyear and Avondale for a Coke or movie, maybe even meet a young lady!



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