

# San Gabriel Forum

presents

## **“Tribute to Sun City Veterans - Memories of wars from WW II to Afghanistan”**

**Thursday October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025 - 9.00 AM to 11.00 AM – at The Oaks - 301 Del Webb Blvd**

2025 marks the 250th anniversary of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps, the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, and the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. Sun City veterans have served the nation proudly with much courage. We honor their commitment and sacrifice with this special presentation.

We would like to feature the following veterans from these wars by presenting a panel of Veterans who share war experiences and a member of this group who shares the civilian side of the conflicts.

### **The Second World War 1939-1945**

**Cliff McCrummen**, a native Texan, joined the US Navy at 18 and served from 1944 to 1946. He was assigned to the USS Alabama that sailed to Pearl harbor then to the South Pacific Islands. After the Japanese surrender, the ship entered Tokyo Bay, witnessing significant destruction, then returned to San Francisco.

### **The Korean War 1951-1953**

**Patrick Brian** was a cadet at the US Military Academy, West Points, from 1947-1951, and a US Army artillery officer from 1954 to 1967. His service included time with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, with the 101st Airborne Division in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, with the U.S. Forces, Austria and the Seventh Army, Germany, and as an advisor to Shah Pahlavi in Iran in 1959. Pat retired from the Army as a major in 1967.

### **The Vietnam War 1962-1975**

**Larry Mladek** served several tours in South Vietnam, from 1966 to 1972, as a combatant and then as an advisor. He endured heat, insects, leeches, snakes, swamps, rice paddies, monsoon rains and the endless grind of being a “grunt.” He spent 318 days in the thick, dangerous jungles of the Iron Triangle and Hobo Woods (in Bình Dương province, north of Saigon)) fighting an elusive enemy. He suffered some impact from Agent Orange, the toxic defoliating herbicide. He retired from the Army as a major in December 1981.

### **The Persian Gulf War 1990–1991**

**John McCleskey** served in the U.S. Navy as a Senior Chief Petty Officer during the Persian Gulf War. He was assigned to the USS Oldendorf in Yokosuka Naval Base Japan which departed in June 1990. He arrived Persian Gulf in August of 1991. John is currently a Commander of VFW Post in Georgetown, Texas.

### **The Afghanistan War 2001-2021**

**Robert Jones** served in the U.S. Army from 1985 to 2012. He trained at Fort Riley in Kansas and deployed to Afghanistan in 2007 as a sergeant first class and senior medical asset, embedded with the Afghan National Army.

Bob was moved among forward operation bases (FOBs), with little civilization for miles in between and snow and ice that seemed to never end. He was assigned to FOB Sharana, where its dining facility had recently burned down, along with most equipment and rations and standing water was everywhere in the troops' housing, the aid station was in shambles. Bob's first patient was a badly burned young Afghan girl who could not be treated by the local facility and was evacuated by American helicopter.

Later Bob was assigned to FOB Orgun-E, where he lived with his Afghan National Army counterparts. His main mission was to train and lead medics for soldiers and civilians.

### **Cham Baird presents the civilian side of the wars - WW II & Vietnam**

**WW II** - For almost a century long, Vietnam was a French's colony. In 1941 after Nazis German defeated France, Japanese occupied Vietnam from a fallen French. My parents' house in Hanoi was confiscated, they fled to countryside for food, safety and were shot at, wounded while carrying their two very young children in their arms.

From October 1944 to late 1945, a mass famine that killed 2 million people as foods were seized from farmers to feed the armies.

### **Post WW II**

- My parents bought a house with property in a large harbor called Hai Phong, with all savings for long-term plan into retirement. We were at peace for a few years.
- May 7, 1954 the North Vietnamese defeated the French at Battle of Dien Bien Phu with thousands of casualties. July 21, 1954, Geneva Accords signed, French surrendered all claims to Vietnam, a demilitarized zone separated communist North and capitalist South at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

- August 1954 to May 1955, eight hundred Northerners moved South by planes or shipped provided by the US. and allies. My parents left ancestral land emptied handed by ship to move South.
- After over a week, we disembarked at Vung Tau, 80 miles west of Saigon.

### **Life in South Vietnam**

- Life was difficult, we struggled in the first few years, moved many times for safety and for my father to find work.
- 1955, South government executed, imprisoned thousands of oppositions while Viet Cong (VC) movement arose.
- After Geneva Accords signed in 1954, the North used Ho Chi Minh Trail to re-group, to resupply, to transport troops, equipment, ammunition etc. from North to the highlands in South.
- 1959, Ho Chi Minh was not satisfied with a divided Vietnam, he attacked the South, burned homes, people were displaced, fled to other villages

### **The U.S. and the Vietnam war**

- 1962 US president Kennedy sent advisors to South Vietnam to assess the situation. He was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Vice president Johnson took over, war escalated, sent up to 540, 000 American troops, began the “Americanization” in which the US took the lead, became the “American war.”
- Summer of 1963, Buddhists protest religious limitation and the war, went on hunger strikes, burned themselves with gasoline in Saigon streets. These incidences created a Buddhist crisis for the Diem regime as 70% of Vietnamese were Buddhists, and it was one of the contributing factors leading to the 1963 military coup that assassinated Diem, then the military ruled the government for a few years with chaos
- While applying the attrition strategy in which success be measured by body count, an atrocity happened called the My Lai Massacre in which American soldiers killed 500 unarmed civilians on March 16, 1968.
- Amidst all these events, my siblings and I were growing up in our war-torn country. We went to schools, other people went to work, to the market etc.
- January 30, 1968 (Lunar New Year) Viet Minh and Viet Cong launched surprised attacks over 100 locations called Tet Offensive. My family was

displaced; we separately stayed with different relatives. After a few months, we came back home trying to return to some normalcy.

- November 1968, President Nixon was elected and Ho Chi Minh died the next year. Nixon initiated “Vietnamization” having fewer American troops in combat and more bombing.
- 1972, after re-election, Nixon ordered massive bombing raids in North Vietnam included and destroyed my home town Hai Phong. This was successful, the North wanted to negotiate. January 27, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords signed, and US troops withdrew by March 1973.
- While the conflicts raging on, our father died in 1970. My mother was living in Saigon with my two sisters who were employees of the U.S. government and an American private company. My brother worked as City Manager of Phu Bon, a small town near the highlands.
- I taught 5<sup>th</sup> grade at a five-room public school in Long Khanh about two-hour bus ride from Saigon. I was told that some of my students’ families were South Vietnamese during the days, but Viet Cong at nights and taken up arms fighting against villagers and Americans.
- In Long Khanh, we lived closed enough to fighting zones to hear daily roaring sounds of artilleries, mortars, rockets, grenades, machine guns, mines, helicopters, bombs etc. Some loud explosions shook the walls in houses and woke us up countless times during the nights! The blaring sirens put us in constant alert status. However, we kept on living one day at a time and seemed to have been immune to the ongoing battles in our surroundings.

During school years, I came home from teaching in Long Khanh each weekend to my family house in Saigon. Even though, Saigon was a relatively safe place to live, but the appearance of uniformed soldiers on the streets, military vehicles, equipment etc. were the evidence of a war raging all around our country. On TV screens, the fighting was displayed daily with North, South Vietnamese and American troops being killed, people displaced, destructions of properties, villages burnt to piled of rubbles.

- 1972, during the bombing of my home town Hai Phong, my close friend who was a B-52 bomber pilot was killed in a mission in the North. I also had a relative who was a Marine killed in combat at age 20, and a relative who

was in the Navy patrolling the dangerous waters. My neighbors and friends also suffered similar losses

- From early 1973, American troops left Vietnam except their foot prints in the society. After a decade of deployment, relationships happened, some had happy endings, many did not. Mostly young Vietnamese women were left behind in hardships with young Amerasian children who became fatherless, in orphanage and being treated as collateral damage of the war! Countless heart-broken stories were told during these periods.

### **Evacuation and ending of the war**

- From 1972 to early 1975, the war was continued on and without supports from the US, the South military was not able to defend the country and lost more territories. Mid-March 1975, Viet Minh attacked North and East of Saigon which gained them the control of major arteries leading to Saigon. April 21, 1975, South Vietnam president Thieu resigned, a week later the government surrendered.
- My siblings and I were in the at-risk categories for re-education, we prepared to escape. April 27, my mother, my sister, and I were being evacuated along with many others boarding a U.S. C-130 military plane sitting on the floor liked sardines holding our possession in small bags on our laps. We arrived at camps in the American Clark Airbase in Manilla, Philippines. Around noon of April 30 when the radio announced Saigon fell into the communists' control, we were all stunned feeling hopeless! Many wept uncontrollable! None of us knew how and where the rest of our families were?! Or we would ever see them again!
- In the last few days of April 1975, Saigon was in total chaos, roads were full of belongings people could not carry, traffic flow was at stand still, people clambered onto anything to escape. My families were among about 130,000 Vietnamese were evacuated by air plus a few hundred thousand escaped by ships. This called "The First Wave" of the diaspora!
- The Vietnam War had ended leaving behind over 58,000 American soldiers and 1.5 million Vietnamese killed plus 300,000 Americans and three million Vietnamese wounded not counting the massive destruction of lands and properties! The communists captured about 400,000 South Vietnamese in

re-education camps for months, years, decades being brain washed in living condition of unimaginable brutality! Thousands died in camps!

- The Second Wave of diaspora called the “Boat People” who had escaped crossing the open seas. From 1975 to 1992, about three million had tried even multiple times, thousands had paid for freedom with their own life and love ones in the journey while thousands had been rescued, resettled in Asia and many locations in the world. In early 1980s, my “Boat People” relatives were rescued to freedom among the fortunate groups.

This year, fifty years later, Vietnam is still a communist-socialist country. However, after decades, its economy had been rebuilt, relatives were allowed to visit families living in Vietnam. My brother visited in 2004; my niece made a few trips from 2006 to 2023.

We are truly blessed for living in freedom remembering, praying for many millions of our country men who had suffered so much pain, losses and lives were forever altered in all these years!

