

National cemetery dedicated before crowd of 1,000 Sunday

BY HERB BENHAM, Californian staff writer
hbenham@bakersfield.com | Sunday, Dec 7 2008 9:22 PM

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Is it too late to sign up? I'm over 50, but I think I could run through a field of mud if I had a full head of steam and a tailwind, and I'm from Bakersfield so I know I could learn how to shoot a gun.



Photo by Troy Harvey / The Californian

The Bakersfield National Cemetery plaque is unveiled during the groundbreaking and dedication ceremony Sunday.

Sunday, I attended the groundbreaking/dedication ceremony for the Bakersfield National Cemetery on East Bear Mountain Boulevard. Tejon Ranch donated 500 acres at the top of White Wolf Pass. The property is not impressive at all if you don't like green meadows, 350-year-old oak trees, breathtaking mountain passes, poppies in the spring and crystal clear days in the winter when the valley below is smothered in fog.

I have some advice. If you're a veteran and fought bravely for this country and you own a piece of dirt in another cemetery, put it on Craigslist. If you're like me, and were not in the military, consider enlisting because you're definitely going to want to be buried in the Bakersfield National Cemetery. Do it for your family who will thank you every time they visit.

Yes, it was impressive. Thank CEO Bob Stine and the Tejon Ranch Company for donating what might become the most beautiful of the 125 national cemeteries. Thank your local veterans' organizations. Thank the next person you see. Thank God, if he is in your wheelhouse.

Sunday midday was overcast in the valley. In fact it was raining. The weather and the mood was about as ominous as a mid-winter day in pre-Depression America can be. Maybe no one would show up at the dedication.

Wrong. These are veterans. If they can pick their way through enemy fire, parachute out of airplanes into rice fields and trudge on through freezing cold or miserable Middle Eastern desert heat, do you think they are going to be phased by a little rain? A patch of fog? I doubt it.

Close to 1,000 people showed on the 67th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the first Gulf War, Iraq. Families too. Widows. Patriots. Admirers. People who were just looking for something to do on Sunday.



Photo by Troy Harvey / The Californian

Retired Sgt. First Class James Wulf waits in a field before he is called to play taps on his trumpet during the Bakersfield National Cemetery groundbreaking and dedication ceremony Sunday.



Photo by Troy Harvey / The Californian

Retired Sgt. First Class James Wulf plays taps on his trumpet during the Bakersfield National Cemetery groundbreaking and dedication ceremony Sunday.

Congressman Kevin McCarthy spoke, as did Tejon's Ranch's Stine and Wesley Jones, director of the cemetery. Other people too. The program was full, but the speeches were short, which is always appreciated.

The spectacular setting said everything. What it didn't say was filled in by the visuals of the veterans from every branch of the service, the American flags and several widows of World War II soldiers. Halfway through the dedication, the skies opened, the sun blazed through and what was beautiful became heavenly. How much more could anyone take?

If the angels had touched down for a test run, it would not have lifted more than a few eyebrows.

I sat next to Mark Torres, a 73-year-old veteran of the Korean War and a resident of Arvin.

"We used to have Easter egg hunts at the cross down the hill," said Torres, who had brought his 9-year-old grandson, Jason, to the dedication. "I told my wife, I want this to be my final resting place. It's very close to home."

Eventually, Torres may have close to 200,000 neighbors, most from the Central Valley. Like a housing tract, there is phase one, phase two and keep counting. The first veterans are expected to be "welcomed" in the summer of 2009.

"I'm hoping that this will be my last duty station," said Gene Shebley, who served in the U.S. Navy during the first Gulf War.

Who could blame him? It would be hard to imagine a finer place to serve.



Photo by Troy Harvey / The Californian

Members of the California State Honor Guard present a rifle salute during the Bakersfield National Cemetery groundbreaking and dedication ceremony Sunday.



Photo by Troy Harvey / The Californian

Patriot Guard Riders holding American flags surround a tent during the Bakersfield National Cemetery groundbreaking and dedication ceremony Sunday.