THE AMERICAN LEGION

"For God & Country"

Dispatch Daily

Anaheim National Convention — September 5, 1999

Legion mourns loss of Pesso

Legionnaires received sad, shocking news as they arrived in Anaheim. Charles Pesso, National Legislative Chairman, passed away from carbon monoxide poisoning. In what friends call a rare mental lapse, Pesso left his car running in his garage after returning from the grocery store. The exhaust fumes filled his condominium and eventually overcame him. Pesso had been chairman since 1989 – and with the Commission since 1962 – and held many other Department and National positions. Any layman could pick up his resume and know Pesso was dedicated to the Legion.

Pesso served as New York's Internal Affairs Chairman, Department Vice Commander, National Distinguished Guests Committee member, Department Citizens Flag Alliance Chairman, National Legislative Commission member, National Legislative Council member, National Legislative Council Vice Chairman and National Veterans Planning and Coordinating Group. "He's been involved in nearly every piece of legislation we've passed in more than 30 years," says Steve Robertson, Director of the National Legislative Commission. "He played an integral role in changing the membership charter to extend the eligibility periods and in having VA added as a cabinet post."

For those who never had the privilege of meeting Pesso in person, photographs published in *The American Legion Magazine* and the *Convention Guide* have effectively captured his persona. Photos of him shepherding legislation during congressional hearings pictured an astute, dogged lobbyist. Yet on the pages of the *Convention Guide*, his portrait reflects his genuine concern for humanity.

Dick Pedro, Department Adjutant of New York, had known Pesso for more than 35 years. "Whenever we'd see each other," recalls Pedro, "he always shook my hand, gave me a hug, then give me a small kiss on the cheek."

Charles Pesso

Pesso served in the Army, stormed through the surf of Normandy and survived the Battle of the Bulge. In 1994,

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Joint session covers spectrum of topics

Military readiness, the Chinese threat and military funerals were just some of the issues addressed at the Foreign Relations and National Security commissions joint session Saturday.

Col. Marcus Beauregard, Air Force Deputy Director, Community Support Policy, opened the session by quoting the DoD's report submitted to Congress earlier this year: "It is our national obligation to demonstrate the country's gratitude to those who, in times of war and peace, have faithfully defended our country. The rendering of military funeral honors for our nation's veterans is our final tribute to those who have made personal sacrifices in defense of our nation."

Beauregard assured those in attendance that DoD is committed to that statement considering veteran deaths are on the rise. The mortality rate by 2008 is projected to be 620,000 annually – that's 1,700 each day. Plans to improve the current process include implementing a toll-free line to be used by funeral directors; establishing an Internet Website (**www.militaryfuneralhonors.osd.mil**) improving support to honors teams. "Under our plan," says Beauregard, "we would honor every request for funeral honors."

Dr. Jonathan Shay, Director of The Center for Security Policy, followed and immediately questioned the thinking behind "shuffling units and crews like decks of cards, sending people into harm's way with complete strangers" and "forcing every unit to constantly retrain at the lowest-common denominator."

He notes there is no enemy forcing the United States to do it – "We're doing it to ourselves." To remedy the problem Shay proposes the Legion continue to lobby for personnel reform. "Cohesion, leadership and training are also combat strength multipliers," states Shay. "We don't need more studies. We simply need to do it."

Discussing military strength provided a

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POW, women at war movies showing

"Return With Honor," a new film by Academy Award-winning filmmakers Feida Lee Mock and Terry Sanders tells the powerful and moving story of American pilots shot down over North Vietnam and the challenge to survive with honor as POWs for up to eight and a half years.

The film is a testament to heroism, courage, ingenuity, faith, endurance and brotherhood under extreme duress. It tells of the sudden transformation - after a harrowing shoot-down and capture - from self-confident, top-gun type aviators to prisoners of war confronting years of captivity.

It is a story of survival - physical, mental and spiritual - told in the pilots' own words, rich with survivor humor and footage never before seen from the archives of North Vietnam. It is also the story of the wives left behind who for years did not know "whether they were wives or widows." And it is the story of a government which plunged America into a war which it could not predict an end. Finally, it is a universal story of honor, love and duty.

"Return With Honor" is about the resilience of the human spirit, told with first person accounts from an ensemble cast of dozens of fighter pilots - from Ev Alvarez, the first shot down in North Vietnam, to senior ranking officers, Jim Stockdale, Korean War ace Robbie Risner to Naval Academy graduate, Senator and presidential candidate John McCain.

Tom Hanks, an Academy Award-winning actor and director, previewed the film. "I was fascinated and moved by the stories these men told of extraordinary courage and sacrifice. These are tales of heroism that I hadn't heard before. This is one of those films that satisfy both my mind and emotions. I hope that all Americans will have a chance to see this remarkable story."

Now showing in the Patriotic Theater (in the rear of Hall A, Convention Center)

"Return With Honor"
Sun. thru Wed.
9:45 a.m. & 12:45 p.m.

"Free a Man to Fight"
Sun.
8:30 a.m. & 11:30 a.m.
Mon. thru Wed.
8:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.

The 102-minute movie was produced and directed by Feida Lee Mock and Terry Sanders who won an Oscar for "Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision," a feature documentary film about the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

"Free a Man To Fight" is a documentary about women who served in the military in such capacities as mechanics, pilots, code breakers and medics during World War II.

The vast number of Americans don't know that women were in the military and served in World War II," said retired Maj. Gen. Jeanne Holm, a 33-year veteran of the Air Force and author of two books on the subject.

That was the case with the film's producer and director, Mindy Pomper, who only learned about the women when she went to hear about the Tuskegee Airmen, the famed black aviators, at an air museum. It was there she first heard about the women pilots of WWII.

After traveling around the country to collect stories, she and executive producer Roberta Shintani spent nearly six years making the film which explores almost every aspect women were involved in during the war. Their stories are told with archival footage interwoven with 40 interviews with the war's sometimes forgotten veterans.

Original legislation limited women to four jobs in the military - cooks, clerks, drivers and telephone operators. By the end of the first year of the war though, they were serving in almost 200 job categories.

Although one survey of the times showed 80 percent of American women were reluctant to join, many of the approximately 400,000 who did eventually sign up were attracted by the "free a man to fight" slogan and their patriotism. Fran Tuchband decided to enlist so she could learn how to fly the B-26, a twin-engine bomber. After her training, she headed to Idaho where she helped train men getting ready for aerial combat.

"To me, we were the beginning of the generation who showed that women were more than housewives," Tuchband said.

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perfect segue for former Assistant Defense Secretary, Frank Gaffney Jr. He believes, "The thought at the forefront of American thinking should be, 'Are the United States and China on a collision course?"

Gaffney cited many "choices" that are being made which are steering the two nations on a crash course. For example, China's military modernization program – building a more "technologically capable force" – is one factor. According to Gaffney, stealing, spying and borrowing information has greatly accelerated this process. Another factor is China's intent to lure Asian nations such as Japan, South Korea and the Philippines as allies "through intimidation, bribes and other techniques."

"Chinese espionage, according to the FBI, is working so effectively," says Gaffney. "The KGB in its heyday paled in comparison." According to Gaffney, China is also working systems within the United States. Investing in the stock market has helped the country finance military and espionage missions. And, as revealed in recent news stories, the country has become adept at American politics – supporting candidates, and in turn, being granted favorable legislation. China may be the country which tests troop readiness, sparks America's need for a missile defense system and subsequently, creates a new generation of membership for The American Legion. "We need a new policy," Gaffney concludes. "Not one of dealing with China on its own terms, but one of democratic engagement – involving the United States and other countries that believe in democratic values."

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Pesso was invited by France to attend the 50th anniversary of the invasion and participate in the ceremonies. Such invitations were not uncommon for the respected Legionnaire. President Clinton made it a practice to extend such invitations to Pesso on a regular basis. "Since Clinton has been in office," notes Robertson, "Charlie has attended nearly every memorial service for the last eight years."

Fame and notoriety, however, did not put Pesso out of reach with Legionnaires at the Post level. "He was one of his generation's heroes," says National Commander Butch Miller. "But his humility kept his heroism in the background."

Pesso had the reputation as the man who knows Washington. If a veteran needed information on burial rights, receiving benefits or simply who to contact in the VA, Pesso would give them an answer.

A testimonial for such dedication came at his funeral. More than 300 fellow Legionnaires were able to attend. That figure is more impressive considering the memorial occurred with so many Legionnaires and close friends here at Convention.

Pesso's family has requested that as an alternative to sending flowers, contributions can be made in his honor to the National Emergency Fund or American Legion Baseball Scholarship Fund.

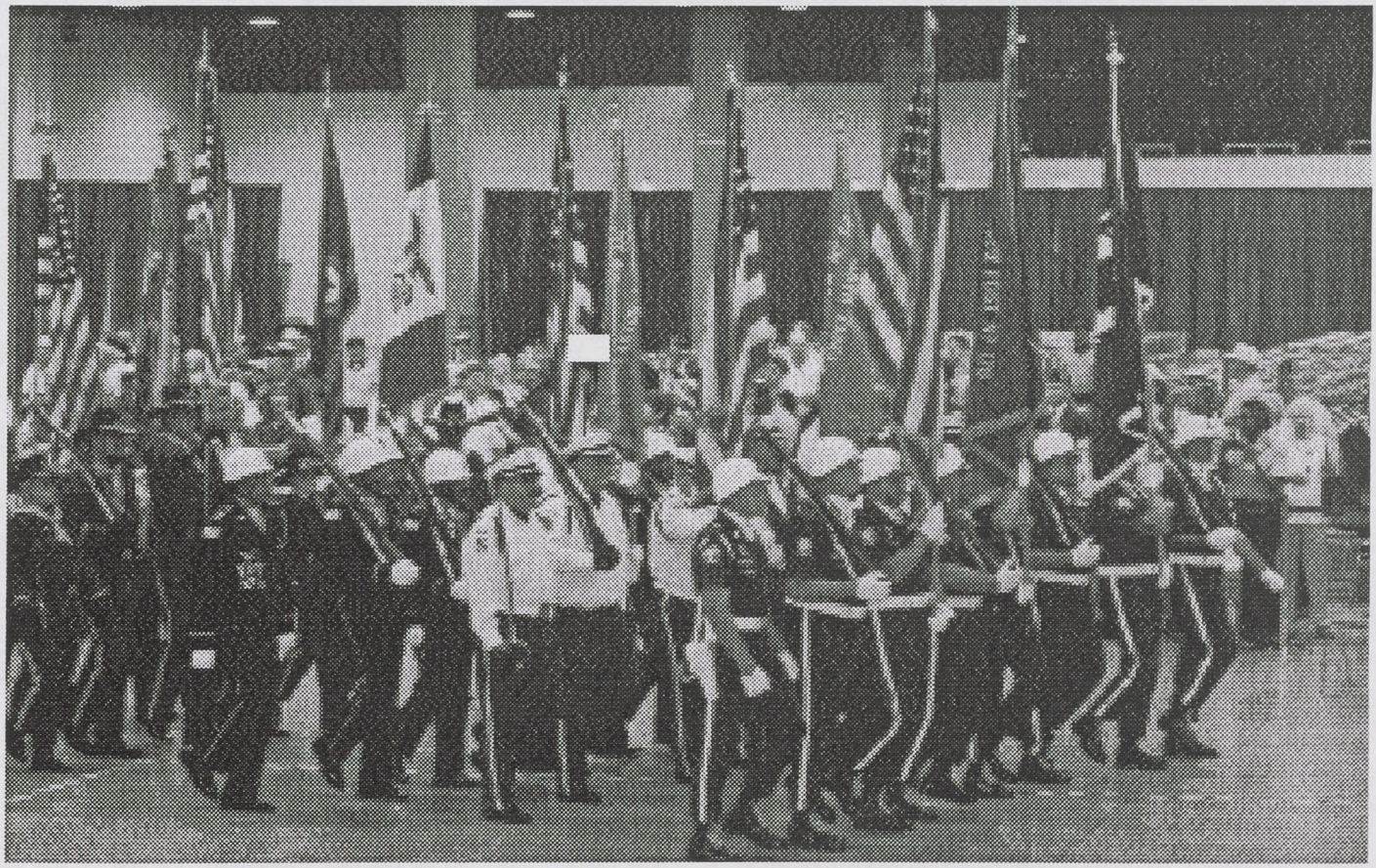
In Memory

"He put his whole heart and soul into the Legion," Herman Harrington, National Internal Affairs Chairman.

"The symbolism of his passing can be compared to the movie 'Star Wars.' In the film, the Force was the strength of all Jedi's souls. Today, The American Legion Force is not as strong as it was with the passing of Charles," National Commander Butch Miller.

"Charlie had more than 300 members from The American Legion family attend his funeral. That really shows how well-respected he is in Brooklyn and Kings County," Dick Pedro, Department Adjutant of New York.

"We were both in armored forces tanks, so we were able to exchange many war stories and become great friends. Very few people recognize the quiet way which he mobilized the Legislative Council and individual Legionnaires to help pass Legion-sponsored legislation," PNC John Geiger.



GRAND FINALE - Color guards march into Anaheim Convention Center at the conclusion of the Senior Color Guard Contest Saturday. Post 86 of Rockville, Md. won the Military Class competition; Open Military Class honors went to "Pure Heaven" of Ames, Iowa and Vanguard Auxiliary Unit 1 of Rockland, Maine won the Open Class. ***Photo by Tom Strattman***

Convention medical services announced

Arrangements have been made through various agencies to provide medical care for our attendees at the 81st National Convention in Anaheim.

During convention hours our attendees, if inside the Hilton, would go to the nearest house telephone, dial "**0**", ask for first aid, provide the operator the location where medical assistance is needed and hotel personnel will respond accordingly.

During regular convention hours our attendees, if inside the Convention Center, would go to the nearest telephone, dial "**8080**," ask for first aid/security, provide the location where medical assistance is needed and the appropriate medical personnel will respond.

The VAMC at Long Beach will have personnel on-site throughout the Convention and they will also have an urgent care clinic set up in Hall A of the Convention Center Sept. 7 and 8 from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Emergency medical care and other medical services will be provided by one of the four listed hospitals or clinics. Should these services be needed, our attendees would dial the respective hospital's number or the numbers listed above and seek the appropriate assistance. Any questions concerning medical services during the Convention, call **(714) 740-4511.**

VAMC Long Beach
5901 East 7th Street
Long Beach, Calif.
(562) 494-5498

Santa Ana Veterans Clinic
2740 South Bristol St., #110
Santa Ana, Calif.
(714) 825-3500

Anaheim Veterans Clinic
1801 W. Romneya Dr., #303
Anaheim, Calif.
(714) 780-5400

UCI Medical Group
101 The City Dr.
Orange, Calif.
(714) 456-7890

Disney welcomes The American Legion (again)

Anaheim is not the only southern California location which has hosted Legionnaires. When The American Legion announced in November 1938, the 20th Annual National Convention would be held in Los Angeles, Walt Disney provided a complimentary drawing for publishing to *The American Legion Magazine.*

According to the November 1938 edition in which the drawing was printed, the Legion would be welcomed "by one of the world's best known quacks, (having reference only to genus and manner of speech). Donald Duck, who has quacked his cheerful message from the silver screen in all parts of the world, tips the good left hand (if such it can be called) of friendly fellowship. A bulletin issued from headquarters says that Donald is practicing his marching step to take part in the big parade."

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