

On the Town *Military Ball salutes veterans*

Color guard — present the colors!” Every single person in the room stood quietly, respectfully, at attention. Completely silent — not a single cough or whisper from the 500 people present. Four Marines marched in formation, entering the room with the flag of the United States of America.

This was the way the 19th annual Military Ball opened, as presented by the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation. The ballroom at Fess Parker’s Doubletree Resort was filled with soldiers and their spouses, as well as veterans from World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The ball was founded by **Pierre Claeysens**, a grateful Belgian immigrant who survived the horrors of World War I as a child, thanks to the U.S. efforts overseas and the Hoover Food Administration. Pierre never forgot his heroes — the American soldiers. At the age of 88, Pierre organized the Military Ball, inviting every veteran in Santa Barbara and personally picking up the tab for all the dinners.

Since Pierre’s passing, the Military Ball — unique in our country — has been under the auspices of the Veterans Foundation, named in Pierre’s honor and founded by **John and Hazel Blankenship**, who both served in Vietnam. They presented a wonderfully rousing program.

Every branch of military was seen proudly in uniform — Marines, Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard and Merchant Marines. At one point in the program when the appropriate theme song was played, each branch stood up and waved, amid cheers or cheerful jeers (you know, that Navy-Marines rivalry thing!).

John Blankenship, executive director of the foundation, welcomed the crowd, which included Brigadier General **Fred Lopez**; World War II vets **Silvio Di Loreto** and **Arthur Petersen** (Screaming

Eagles of the 101st Airborne Division), with his wife, **Gloria**; **Hap and Bonnie DeSimone**; **Alice Robles**; **Peter Hilf**; **Julia Sian** and **Bill Kehoe**; **David Gonzales**; and **Kathy Butts** and her son, **Phillip**. Also present were Pierre Claeysens’ daughter, **Noelle Burkey**, and grandchildren, **Jenna** and **Brett Burkey**, as well as **Venesa**

Faciane, Shelby Hughes and **Anna Villegas**.

Army veteran **Peter Bie** served as our excellent emcee and paid special tribute to the other Vietnam veterans.

Sheriff **Bill Brown**, board member of the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation, presented the Greatest Generation Award to Santa Barbara’s own Tuskegee airman, CMSgt. **Art Hicks**, amid a standing ovation.

The evening’s keynote speaker was U.S. Army Sgt. **Sammy L. Davis**. The decorated soldier (Medal of Honor, Silver Star and two Purple Hearts) was the inspiration for the movie “Forrest Gump,” and he sounded much like Sergeant York.

He talked about lessons on life from the war, and how to find solace — playing “Shenandoah” brought “peace to my soul and strengthened my heart.”

“I did not go to war because I wanted to kill. I went because I loved my father and wanted to make him proud, and because I loved my grandfather and what he fought for, because I love my country ...”

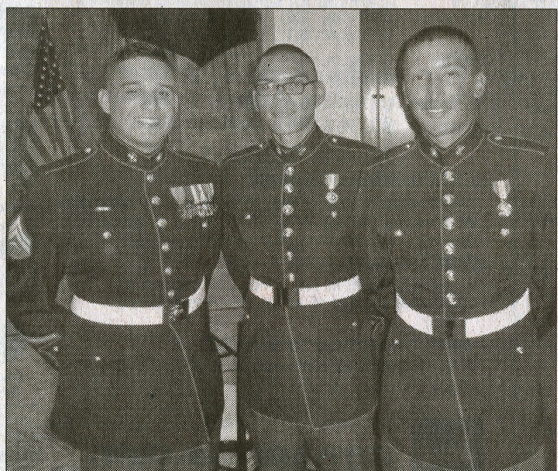
“God bless, take care of one another. We must desperately put ‘We the People’ back into this nation.”



Erin Graffy



At top, from left, having a ball: Lt. Col. Bernard Jones; honoree Art Hicks, former Tuskegee airman; and Sheriff Bill Brown, foundation board member. At right, Matthew Pena, from left, Emmanuel Lopez and Jonathan Rodriguez, who graduated as a marine the day before from MCRC in San Diego.



ERIN GRAFFY / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



At top, from left, Barbara Ardis; Army Sgt. Sammy L. Davis, keynote speaker; Captain James Kearney; and Christine Orpen. At left, Hap DeSimone, with wife Bonnie, was one of the many Vietnam veterans in attendance.