

A moment with Steve Zozaya

By Charles Sanderson

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SURREAL MOMENTS COME unexpected. They sneak up and show you something beautiful. One such moment happened in a lobby at the Arizona Army National Guard Headquarters, in Phoenix; home for the 158th Bushmasters Battalion.

LPM had arranged for a photo of Steve Zozaya, 89, and two currently enlisted members of the Bushmasters who had seen recent active duty in Afghanistan. It was to be a meeting of shared identities and pride, stretching across two generations. The result now graces the cover of this issue.

In February of 1941 Zozaya set aside the opportunity to be a football star at Northern Arizona University and joined the Army. He became a member of Bushmasters Company G, serving four years during World War II.

He remembered the day Pearl Harbor was attacked in a 2004 interview by Pete Dimas. "I was in the hospital. No training, not getting up in the morning. The day before, the hospital was full of troops. Then we heard... The next day, that hospital was empty." He took Zapata, a younger soldier, under his wing during the war. They remain friends to this day.

Steve came home from the war with a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star and... met a girl. Julia Soto became his wife, and together, they had a son. They would start a successful construction company and have further success with Phoenix's first FM radio station to broadcast in Spanish, KNNN radio. Both Steve and Julia would serve on the Arizona LULAC board.

Steve loves to talk. Ask him about drinking jungle juice in World War II: "It would eat through the cup." Ask him about Post 41: "They have a picture of me on the wall there. You want that picture?" Ask him about his wife and the radio business: "It's called KEZ now."



As we waited for the photographer to set up, Master Sgt. Zamora took an opportunity to introduce a few younger soldiers to Zozaya. Possibly to show them the legacy of their famed battalion. Steve stood and shook each of their hands.

Then the profound sincerity of age took over. Steve, who turns 90 in December, opened his heart. He thanked the soldiers for their hard work, "Great outfit. But I wish you were all here. None of you should be over there. When we fought World War II, we knew who we were fightin'. You don't know what's coming at you now.

"We shouldn't be there." And he choked up. "I have two nephews over there." Steve Zozaya stared into the young soldiers faces with all the emotion of a grieving father. The young men stood, in awe and respect, not knowing what to do. "Mijos, you should be here. Home. With me. Not in Iraq."

A family member who'd driven him to the photo shoot changed the topic to lighter subjects, and the moment was gone. We entered the hangar and the

photo shoot began. As Zozaya sat, perched on the edge of a Humvee with Col. Gonzalez, the photographer asked them to converse while she adjusted camera settings. They didn't stop talking and sharing stories until the photo shoot was over, 40 minutes later. Two soldiers connecting in a way no one else can.

All the while, the younger Bushmaster's eyes were full of respect and admiration, while the older Bushmaster's eyes simply glowed with life.

As we shuffled out of the hangar, Steve turned to me. "Guero, you call me. I got all kinds of stuff to show you about Post 41. Good stuff." Staff Sgt. Steve Zozaya walked to his car, and was gone.

