

OLD FRIENDS TRADING WAR STORIES

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Vets to serve as Memorial Day Parade co-marshals

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — As part of the Army's 40th Infantry Division during the Korean War, Robert Zettergren of Branford had been living in a 10-by-10-foot bunker for two months when he heard mortars whistling through the night. He dove to the ground. It was too late.

"They got me in the flak jacket, the helmet, the back, rear end, and my leg," said the animated 86-year old on a recent afternoon at his seaside home with Alex Palluzzi Sr., his co-marshal at Branford's Memorial

Day Parade on Monday, May 27.

That Palluzzi Sr., 90, will share marshaling duties with Zettergren seems only fitting. After all, he, too, was on the front lines in the Kumwha Valley, as a chaplain's assistant, giving communion and caring for the wounded while under heavy mortar fire and artillery bombardment.

The similarities don't end there.

The two attended the same North Branford grade school. Growing up, they played basketball and baseball together, and

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Bill O'Brien / Hearst Connecticut Media

Korean War veterans Bob Zettergren and Alex Palluzzi Sr., will as co-marshals of the 2019 Memorial Day Parade on Monday, May 27 in Branford.

regularly walked, or biked, the 3 miles to Branford for candy or to catch a movie at the Branford theater. Zettergren was also a New Haven Register paperboy, walking 13 miles to deliver 53 papers for 22 cents each in North Branford.

"We were North Branford boys but Branford was our second home," said Zettergren.

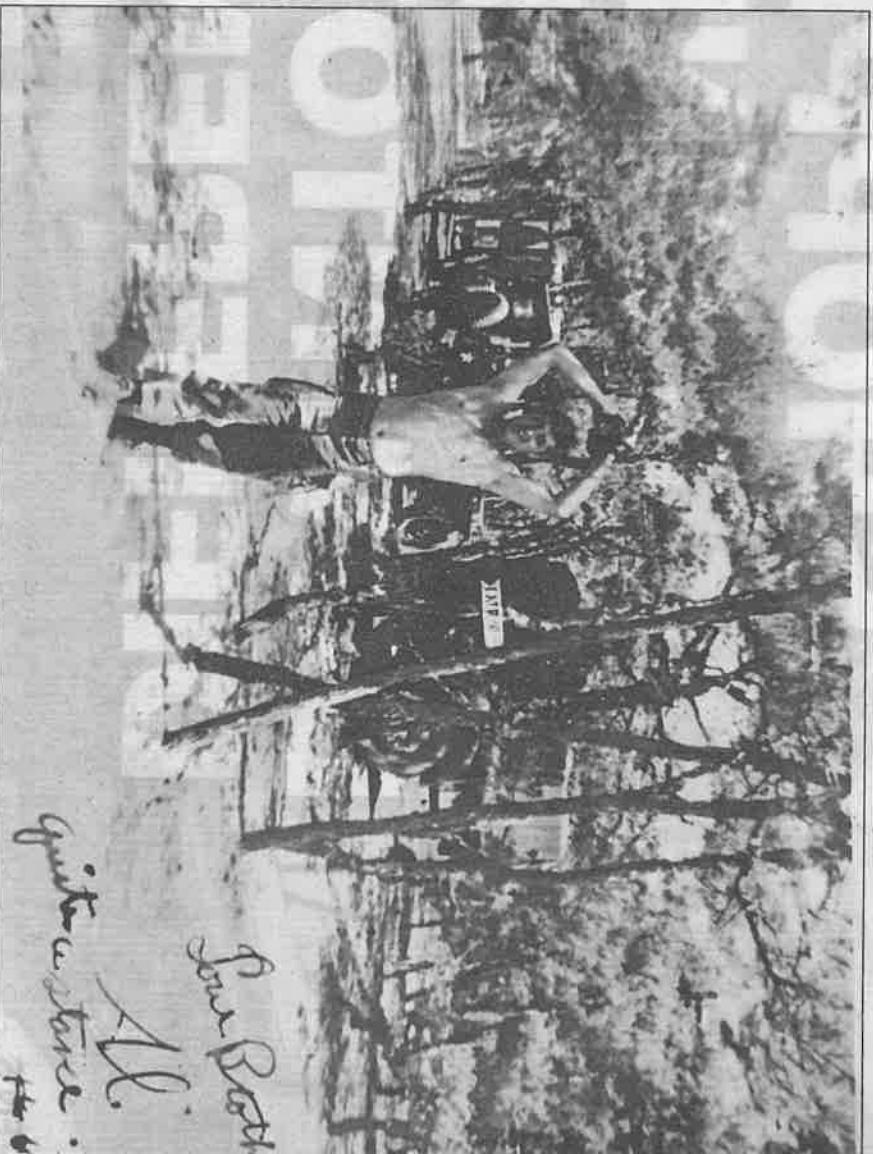
Not long after the North Korean army, in June 1950, crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded South Korea, threatening the south with a communist takeover and prompting the U.S. to involve itself, Palluzzi Sr. enlisted. A year later, in December 1952, Zettergren was drafted.

While the two served a year apart, both were assigned to the same division—the 40th—but to different regiments—Palluzzi Sr. in the 223th Infantry Regiment, Zettergren in the 224rd. Both went through basic training and made the 5,500-mile, 17-hour voyage across the Pacific to the Far East. Both eventually were thrown into front-line combat, fighting on the same hills.

If Palluzzi Sr. served as a medical aide before being tapped as the chaplain's assistant and Zettergren as an infantryman, the two alike endured subarctic Korean winters and the baking, gasping heat of summer, subsisting on C rations which, as Palluzzi Sr. put it, "kept us alive and not much more."

Both learned that if they got hit, to lie still. "You don't holler for help, because they'll come up and get you," Zettergren said. At chow time, he said, "you had to run and roll on the ground. If you walked, they'd zero in and you'd be a dead man."

As evidenced by his Purple Heart and numerous commendations, including a Medal of Gratitude melted down from



U.S. Army Sergeant Alex Palluzzi Sr. in Sendai, Japan for extensive training in 1951.

Contributed photos

barbed wire from the DMX and awarded by U.S. Rep. Rosa Delauro, D-3, those lessons registered for Zettergren. Likewise, Palluzzi Sr., who earned three Battle Stars for his service. In 2010, each received a State of Connecticut Korean War Veteran Public Service Award.

To get that kind of recognition "feels pretty darn good," said Zettergren who, like Palluzzi Sr., married "a Branford girl" upon his honorable discharge, and raised his family in Branford. He and his wife Jane have two daughters, Donna and Patti. Palluzzi Sr. and his wife Jeanette have four sons, Alex Jr., Jake, Michael, and Tony.

Both thrived in their work—Zettergren as the owner and operator of Zettergren Flooring, and Palluzzi, Sr., who retired in



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Alex Palluzzi Sr.

1990 as the foreman of the asphalt plant at Ticon-Tomaso Company in North Branford.

"I'm honored," Palluzzi Sr. said, of serving as co-marshal with Zettergren. "I feel proud to have served our country."

And lucky, too, it seems, to have come home in one piece from a war that cost 40,000 American lives, with more than 100,000 wounded, according to www.history.com, and 7,675 personnel "unaccounted for," as reported by the US military.

That luck includes, for Palluzzi Sr., one last close call. On the way back from Korea, his ship docked in Seattle. There was terrible weather. "We had to wait three days for a plane," he said. Once the skies cleared, 35 guys clambered onto the plane. Palluzzi Sr. wasn't among them. The plane went

down. "Imagine that, after surviving the war," he said, shaking his head.

Zettergren feels lucky too. "I still have shrapnel in me from that mortar attack," he said. "I have that, and I have a new broken knee, and staples from open-heart surgery."

None of which will stop him from marshaling the parade with his old friend. "It's such an honor," he said.

"Just awesome," Palluzzi Sr. agreed.

✦ Ceremonies will begin at 10 a.m. on the Branford Green. The parade will step off at 10:30 a.m., head west on Main St. to North Harbor St. and return to the Green. In the event of rain, a notice will be posted on the Branford Recreation Dept. website and ceremonies will be moved to the Branford high school gymnasium.