

By Jesse Jose
A Cup O' Kapeng Barako

This was sent to me by a cyberspace friend, named Lee Lagda. He wrote it, and because to me, it's an excellent piece of writing and good lesson in American history, I am pre-empting this week the space of my *Kapeng Barako* column for this piece.

I think he's a fellow *barako*. He's retired from the US Navy, like me; he joined in 1954. He told me recently, he's "old, old, old...." Perhaps, I should tell him that "old, old, old" is all in the mind. Because there are now Viagra, Cialis and Levitra, the greatest inventions in modern history to keep old, old, old men on the prowl, and humping and pumping, so to speak.

While in the Navy and during the Vietnam War, he served as a "medic" for Special Forces teams for several years. There, they called him "Doc Lee." When he retired from the Navy as a Master Chief Hospital Corpsman, he went "home" to the Philippines and used his GI Bill to study at the University of the Philippines. Upon receiving his master's degree, and then his doctorate's in English Literature, he was hired by UP to teach English Literature there.

Lee was one of the personalities featured in the well-read book, "Pinoy Stewards in the U.S. Sea Services (Seizing Marginal Opportunity), written by Ray Burdeos.

Old age, I suppose, and excellent medical services brought back him back to America. He now lives in San Diego, where he enjoys gardening and writing

his memoir. What follows is a glimpse, and a piece extracted from this memoir:

Mount Rushmore: Spring Vacation of 2009

Every year my wife Raquel and I try to drive to places we have never visited before. This year we decided to tour Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Before we left early June, we read in our local newspaper that the Moslem mosque in

Cypress

was vandalized with hate-filled graffiti spray-painted on its door. It bothered me that some people in the city that we chose to spend our lives together thirty-some years ago would turn out to be racist and intolerant of other cultures and religion. We talked about racism and prejudice in all its ugly forms as we started our journey to visit the sculpted portraits of our founding fathers who envisioned a land of liberty and freedom where people live under equal protection of the law.

We took the desert route (I-395) north passing near Death Valley as the morning was breaking. It was unusually cold but the dawn near

Death Valley

was a great sight. We stopped at Manzanar National Historic Site, near Lone Pine,

California

. Manzanar is probably the most well known of the ten concentration camps used to intern Japanese nationals and American citizens of Japanese descent during the Second World War. It is situated at the foot of the Sierra Nevada

mountains and that morning gusty winds were blowing dust and tumbleweeds all over the place. There is nothing left to mark the camp as a place of internment other than the elevated wooden guardhouse on the northern end of the site. I didn't have to wonder how the Japanese internees felt when they first saw this cold and wind-blown and dusty hell-hole of a place. I did wonder about the genius who thought of the idea of incarcerating even native-born Japanese-Americans? I could rationalize putting Japanese nationals in concentration camps then, but not Japanese-Americans born in America

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. What injustice!

From Manzanar we continued north until we saw the sign on I-395 that Yosemite

National Park

was open. We drove eleven miles mostly uphill only to be told when we got to the gate that the park was closing because of snow. It was true! It was snowing by the time we got to the gate. Snowing in

Central California

in June? Weird weather we were having! We continued north to Reno

,
Nevada

where we took I-80 East towards Salt Lake City

,
Utah

. We didn't stop at these two cities because we had visited both places before. We did stop in Carlin, Nevada

on the northeastern side of the state for our first motel stay. I got stopped by a local policeman for driving 40 miles on a 25-mile zone. Fortunately, he didn't give me a ticket but just warned me.

We woke up early and started our push east. We drove by the Great Salt Lake, the

Bonneville Flats (Speedway

) and

Salt Lake City

. We got off I-80 in Rawlins

,
Wyoming

and took the less traveled state highway to Casper

. We were awed by the miles and miles of grasslands swaying to the winds

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and could picture herds of bison roaming the vast plains a couple of centuries ago. By evening we were in Casper

, Wyoming

where we stopped for our nightly rest. Sunday morning, we stopped at Our Lady of Fatima Church in

Casper

and attended mass. That evening we were in Keystone,

South Dakota

, within a couple of miles from

Mount Rushmore

National Monument

. We encountered some heavy rains along the way. We turned in early and watched the Lakers beat the Orlando Magic.

Monday, June 8th, was my birthday and we celebrated it in Mount

Rushmore

. It was an awesome sight. definitely worth the hundreds of miles we drove to see it. Actually, over 1600 miles from

Cypress

. That afternoon we drove to the unfinished Crazy Horse Memorial nearby.

From there we went to the

Custer

State Park

near where the

Battle

of the

Little Bighorn River

happened. Not very far was Wounded Knee Creek where in 1890 200

Indians were massacred by the reorganized unit that was decimated in the Little Bighorn battle in 1876. The Battle of Little Bighorn was a military encounter but

Wounded Knee

was a massacre of native Americans including women and children. That night we went back to

Mount Rushmore

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to watch the lighting ceremony with a program to highlight the accomplishments of the portrayed Presidents - Washington, Jefferson, T. Roosevelt and Lincoln. Presidents who believed in liberty and freedom and equal protection under the law and justice for all. Presidents who made this country free and great.

America

went through some difficult times where our liberty and freedom were in danger but we managed to survive, stronger than ever. Raquel and I discussed the lessons learned from

Wounded Knee

and Manzanar and their import and significance today to ensure that hate-filled graffiti on the walls of the Cypress Moslem mosque never happen again.

At the conclusion of the lighting ceremony at Mount Rushmore, all veterans were invited to the stage to be recognized. I didn't go and Raquel asked why? I told her that it is a source of personal pride and profound satisfaction that I served my country for 28 years in the military. It was a privilege and an honor. I don't have it to shout it to the whole world.

We took a different route going home by taking I-15 South from Salt Lake City to Las

Vegas

and then home to

Cypress

. We got home safely after more than a week on the road. A pebble struck the windshield of our Lexus at I-15 in

Salt Lake City

and cracked it. Nobody got hurt except my wallet. I forgot to tell you that Mount Rushmore

was sculpted by Gutzon Borglum, an American of Danish origin.

Crazy

Horse

Monument

was the idea of sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, a Bostonian of Polish descent.

Guys, don't give up on people just because their names are foreign-sounding, like Licerio Lagda. # # #

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