

‘Grandfather Told Me to Join the VFW’

Military service strengthens the bond between great-grandfather and his great-grandson, a veteran of Operation Southern Watch

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Within moments of meeting Joshua Barela, it is evident how vital family is to him. His life path, marked by service in the U.S. Navy and Air Force, has deepened his connection to his great-grandfather, Julian Barela.

Living in a different state and enduring many hardships during his childhood, Joshua visited his great-grandfather only a handful of times. With a college scholarship awaiting him in Florida, Joshua chose to delay college to serve in the Navy, a decision that ultimately brought him closer to his great-grandparents.

He entered the Navy at 18 years old. He later deployed to the Persian Gulf during Operation Southern Watch with the Airborne Command & Control Squadron (VAW) 116, also known as the Sun Kings, aboard the USS Constellation. When he returned to the U.S., he was stationed within driving distance of his great-grandparents.

“Upon return from my first deployment, I was stationed closer to my grandparents and drove several hours to visit them at their home,” Joshua said. “Whenever I would leave their house, I told them, ‘I love you,’ and they would always say, ‘Mijo, we love you more.’”

These visits provided Joshua and Julian the chance to forge a bond that continues to inspire Joshua’s own family stories.

Before these encounters, the Barela family was unaware of the extent of Julian’s WWII military service. During his time on the USS Hansford (APA-106), Julian participated in significant battles, including Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and was present in Tokyo Bay on V-J Day for the surrender ceremony on the USS Missouri (BB-63). He also took part in Operation Magic Carpet, caring for liberated Allied prisoners.

“For the first time, grandfather shared his testimony about his WWII Navy combat service

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experiences, including the Battle of Iwo Jima, where he witnessed the historic raising of our American Flag on Mt. Suribachi,” Joshua said. “I could tell in his facial expressions as he shared about his combat deployments that grandfather felt very blessed to be alive. “As a peaceful, humble, quiet, and resilient man of action, grandfather Barela never talked about his heroic service and WWII combat tours with anyone. After my first deployment to a combat zone, my grandfather explained for the first time the extent of his military service and war experiences.”

Joshua credits his military service with opening the door to his great-grandfather’s historic accounts. Their mutual understanding fostered a connection that encouraged the elder Barela to open up about his military combat experiences. At the same time, it gave Joshua the background to dig deeper into the stories.

Their discussions opened a new chapter in the family’s history, instilling great pride in Joshua as he was able to share this treasured story with other family members. It also started Joshua on his own path to becoming a VFW Life Member.

“Grandfather, a VFW Life member [Colorado River Valley Post 10005 in Bullhead City, Arizona], also presented me with my first VFW magazine and told me to join the VFW,” Joshua said. “He explained that the VFW does much good work for military service members, veterans, their families, and communities. Through leading by example, grandfather still served at his local VFW Post after the age of 90.”

During that conversation, Joshua was yet to finish his military service. After several deployments in the Navy, he returned to his educational track, becoming the first in his family to graduate from college. In just two years, he completed a four-year bachelor’s degree with honors. Then, after earning his first master’s degree, he applied for the U.S. Air Force officer program and became the first commissioned officer in his family.

While in the Air Force, Joshua led hundreds of airmen in aircraft flight operations, aviation maintenance, logistics, engineering and deployments, managed billions of dollars in vital national assets and set up a new nuclear command.

In his final military post as captain, Joshua taught the next generation of military officers as assistant professor in Aerospace Studies at North Carolina State University.

Since his discharge from the Air Force, Joshua has earned three more degrees: an MBA, Ed.S., and a Ph.D., in education with high distinction. He and his wife, Bernice, are co-founders and leaders of Christian Academy & Lighthouse Inc. (CAL), a charitable nonprofit organization that “serves impoverished children, orphans, and widows around the world with God’s love (John 3:16).”

CAL works with populations in unreached areas of Asia to provide quality education for

children, launch schools and churches, and grant children educational scholarships to improve their lives. The organization also supports widows and orphans with needed assistance.

Joshua is proud to be a part of Julian's lineage and is grateful for all he learned from his great-grandfather, including living a life of service.

"When he told his story [about watching the flag being raised on Mount Suribachi], his face looked like he went back in time," Joshua recalled. "He said, 'I feel so blessed just to be alive.' His life was thankfulness and grace and being a good grandparent and example for us. He maximized his time on earth."

Today, Joshua is a VFW Legacy life member of the VFW Department of Florida. He has visited VFW Posts in other states with Bernice and their five children, and the family completed a VFW Day of Service this year at a local nursing facility in Virginia. His children also recently entered an essay for the VFW Patriot's Pen youth scholarship contest.

"Grandfather's heroic life is the greatest example and life lesson for me," Joshua said. "Today, I still treasure and share his heroic life testimony with my children."

This article is featured in the 2025 January/February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Jane Blumenthal Martin who is a Kansas City, Missouri-based writer and educator.