

THE BEAUTY OF AGING WARRIORS

ALUM TOM SANDERS HONORS SOLDIERS WITH HIS PHOTOGRAPHS OF WWII VETS

BY MARY MCNALLY

CAL POLY ALUMNUS TOM SANDERS has spent most of the last four years capturing the images of World War II veterans in an effort to honor not only these aging warriors but all men and women in uniform.

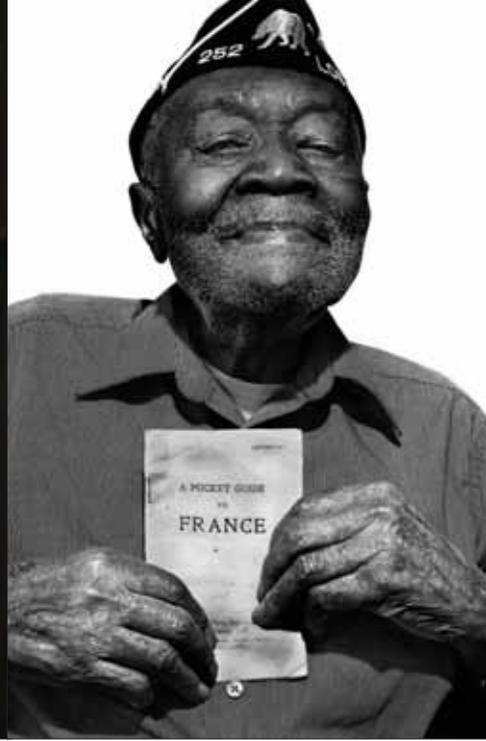
The photographer's quest has taken him across the country, garnering media attention and critical acclaim. It has also propelled him to a new level of professional success; he recently signed a deal with Welcome Books, a division of Random House, to publish his collection of veterans' photos as a fine arts book in 2011.

Sanders (B.F.A., Applied Art and Design, 2006) found his calling through a class assignment his senior year at Cal Poly. The directive was simply to photograph interesting people. On a whim, he stopped at The Villages, a local retirement community, where he was introduced to Army Ranger Lt. Randall Harris.

Harris was a World War II veteran who survived a direct hit to the abdomen by cinching a canteen belt around his waist to hold in his intestines.

Villages staffers Dawneen Lorance, and Cal Poly grad Mindy Nissen (B.S., Social Sciences, 1976; M.A., Education, 1978), were so moved by the photo, they asked Sanders to photograph 15 additional veterans as the cornerstone of a Memorial Day celebration at the home.

"He spent time with them," Lorance said. "At the Memorial Day event, he talked about how he realized that at 20 or 21, he was a privileged Cal Poly student, while at the same age, these guys were getting shot at. He got it."



From his experiences with the veterans, Sanders said he has learned to make every day count and, at the same time, not to take disruptions in his own life too seriously. He also learned to appreciate the sacrifices made by others.

When Lorance moved to a new job at Belmont Villages in the Hollywood Hills, she once again called on Sanders to photograph her WWII vets. That home is one of 20 sister properties across the country. When a company executive saw the photos, Sanders was commissioned to shoot portraits of each of the resident vets at all of their properties.

Belmont displays the images as if in a gallery, complete with a grand opening that may feature a band and wine and cheese gala, a color guard, an opportunity to meet Sanders, and a ceremony featuring active military members to honor each of the vets. The events are well attended by local media, caretakers and by family members who often travel long distances to see their loved ones celebrated.

For his efforts, Sanders is rewarded with many thanks, "There is a place in heaven for what you are doing," one woman told him.

Staffers at the retirement community say the experience has opened up conversations between the veterans themselves as well as with their families, caretakers and others.

"His photograph opened up a lot for me," said fighter pilot Bill Warren, who served in the Air Corps, forerunner of today's Air Force. He likes to explain to young people "what the war was all about."

He also receives letters and e-mails from people asking

him to photograph aging family members who have served their country, requests he is troubled he won't be able to fulfill quickly enough.

The urgency of his mission is reflected in Department of Veterans Affairs' estimates that more than 1,100 WWII vets die each day. Sometimes, they die between the time Sanders takes their picture and the tribute event at their home. In fact, Harris is now one of the fallen.

Sanders' work with veterans helped him find his niche in portrait photography. He said he is drawn to "authentic, genuine people" who have a story to tell and that he tries to create a "timeless image with a lot of truth."

He said his work has evolved and that his studies at Cal Poly helped him with his art in ways he didn't anticipate. Not a painter, for instance, he didn't understand why he had to paint a color wheel in an art class. Now, though, he says he has a sharp eye for color. And he believes the perspective he acquired in classes such as philosophy and English helps him to convey an intrinsic humanity in his subjects.

