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Pacifica American Legion and Lions member Robert Biby says, 'Whether as a nation or as a community, we must work together'

An interview-biography

Written by Jean Bartlett

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"Until I joined the U.S. Marine Corps at the age of 18, I did not know the ocean," longtime Pacifican Robert Biby began. "I did know snow, lots of it, and I knew farmers. Knowing farmers really meant knowing about working together. Just like everyone, farmers have different opinions on various things. Oh boy, do they. But when roads needed to be cleared, or extra help was needed on someone's farm, or there was a fundraising bake sale, or a graduation ceremony, everyone got together and nobody shouted or screamed at each other. We were all happy to see one another and be together. When you know from an early age that working together is the only way to get things done, that's your 'normal.' As a nation, we are where we are today because for the most part, people have set aside their differences and worked together. I believe in order to keep our nation functioning, we must work together, make that our 'normal.' This nation and I go back a long ways."

←American Legion Post 238 Officer Robert Biby stands at attention during the inaugural unveiling and dedication of the granite stone monument that memorializes the names of Pacifica's Vietnam and Iraq fallen on Veterans Day 2021. (Jean Bartlett photo.)

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"I was born on March 2, 1936, in Mahomet, Illinois, when Mahomet was a little town out in the country. Back then it was 15 miles from the Champaign-Urbana metropolitan area. The one time I drove through it, many years later, those 15 miles are now full of suburbs."

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Robert Thomas Biby was the first of Ruth (Duke) and Denver John Biby's six children: Robert, Thomas, Richard, Nancy, John and Billy.

"The first three years of my childhood I was absolutely spoiled rotten and it was great! My brother Tom didn't come along until I was 3 and a half, and among all of my cousins, I was the youngest by a lot. My cousins were either teenagers or adults. About six months after I was born, my parents moved from Mahomet, IL, to Akron, Ohio, or more specifically, Cuyahoga Falls, OH, which is a suburb of Akron. We lived just three miles from my mom's older sister and her husband.

"When we first moved to Cuyahoga Falls, we lived with my granddad, Grandpa Duke, my mom's dad. Grandma Duke died before I was born. People often say they can't remember things that happened to them when they were really little, but I remember Grandpa Duke and my dad teaching me that I had to stand up for myself before I even turned 2. Grandpa Duke had chickens in the backyard and there was a leghorn rooster, and that leghorn rooster absolutely hated me. Neither Dad nor Granddad would protect me. They said it was up to me to fend for myself against that leghorn. And I did. One day I kicked at him and he backed off. Lesson learned!

"My dad at that point in time was a truck driver. He was the middle son, of three sons – Horace, Denver and Hobert – and he was born on a farm in North Dakota. My dad's parents had moved to North Dakota from Illinois, and my dad's mom had a lot of family left in Illinois.

"Back then, when my dad was a kid in North Dakota, the seasons were a lot different. Grain in North Dakota was harvested before the corn was ready in Illinois. And so later in life, when her boys were teenagers, Dad's mom would take the train down to Illinois to spend a couple of months with her relatives, and my dad and his brothers would also go so they could harvest corn. My parents met in Illinois, either the first or second year my dad was in Illinois harvesting. He ended up marrying my mom and staying in Illinois, and he became a truck driver and he remained a truck driver until 1942.

"More kids in my family had come along by then, and kept coming after! Tom came along in late December, 1939, and then Richard, Nancy and John, and then lastly my brother Billy, who is 16 years younger than I am. Nancy, Billy and I are the only three surviving children. Richard died in a car accident when he was a teenager and I was in the service. John was a professional truck driver and he died one winter in a collision with another truck driver in a snow storm. We lost Tom in May of 2014 to the complications of Alzheimer's."

Robert remembers exactly where he was when he heard the news that the Japanese Navy Air Service had attacked the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii. That happened just before 8:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 7, 1941, Hawaiian time, which is just before 2 p.m., Ohio time. The 5-year-old was leaving the movie theater in the northern part of Akron with his cousin, and the two of them were heading across the street to catch the bus over to Cuyahoga Falls.

"There was a news vendor at the bus stop and he was shouting, 'Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Pearl Harbor attacked!'

"We got home and my family had blackout curtains up. I asked them, 'Why?' I was young but I knew Cuyahoga Falls was in the middle of nowhere and Japan and Germany were far away. I was told it was because the Mayor of the City said so. And I said, 'Germany is umpteen miles that way and they don't have an airplane that will reach us.' Germany at that point had one airplane that might have made New York City, but they wouldn't have been able to get back to Germany without refueling and that was a passenger plane. I asked my cousin, 'Where is Hawaii?' She told me where it was located, so I knew Japan

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was a long way from us. 'There is nothing that is going to get us here in Cuyahoga Falls or Akron,' I pointed out. 'So, why do we have to use blackout curtains?' It was three days before our founding fathers decided, 'Yah, we don't need blackout curtains.' Ha! Ha!

"My dad was not drafted. As a child in the Township School that I later went to, he was poking this girl's pigtail in his inkwell when she turned around and poked him in the eye with a pencil. Shockingly, it did not blind him. He had 20/20 vision in that eye though it would get a little blurry at times. But what that eye-poking did do was make his right eye oval, and because of that he was classified as 4-F." (4-F, medically unfit for the military.)

In 1942, Robert's dad went to work for Goodyear Tire & Rubber as a mechanic in Akron. At that point in time, Akron had five tire factories: Goodyear, Goodrich, Firestone, General and Mohawk. Just eight miles southwest of Akron, in the City of Barberton, was the tire manufacturer, Seiberling Rubber Company. Along with the rubber products these six companies made to meet military needs – such as rubber boats, barrage balloons and life vests – all of these companies had other factories producing non-rubber products for the military. Goodyear's productions included anti-aircraft guns, high-explosive shells and .50 caliber machine gun cartridges. Their aircraft factory turned out more than 4,000 Navy Corsair fighters.

"During the War, when we lived in Cuyahoga Falls, I did see aircraft a few times when I was walking to school. That was of course, a thrill! One day, one of the ferry pilots flew a brand new B-17 low enough so I could distinctly make out the air holes and the jackets of the .50 caliber sitting in the ball turret in the plane. I figured the pilot decided to buzz home before he headed to his real destination."

Ferry pilots moved aircraft from one place to another generally for the purpose of delivering new or used aircraft to a buyer. The Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress" was a heavy bomber.

"Sometimes test pilots would fly over us kids, when we were playing in the street, and they would tilt the plane a little and wave at us. They were flying the Vought F4U Corsair (a fighter aircraft with a bent wing design). We did see at one point a Navy plane that was a straight wing. The pilots did not have helmets they had leather flight caps. It was pretty fantastic to see this as a kid."

"In the spring of 1944, when I was just 8, my family took the train to North Dakota. My dad's brother Hobert had the homeplace there and three miles from that was a farm that became vacant, and my dad decided it was time to return to farming. So, I grew up on a farm in North Dakota in a town called Clyde. We did not have electricity or running water on the farm until the summer between my junior and senior year of high school."

Clyde is an unincorporated community in Cavalier County. In 2002, Clyde reported it had six residents and it borders on "ghost town" status.

"Twenty miles to our east was the county seat, Langdon. Langdon has grown up, (in the 2020 census, Langdon's population was 1,909), and Clyde has gone from a population of 30 to 40 when I lived there, to a population of maybe 4 in 2024. There are many towns in North Dakota that are there only in name now. In the mid-1960s and 1970s, they just became smaller and smaller.

"But it's 1944 and we have a farm. My father had not yet changed his draft board status from Ohio to North Dakota, and he got a letter from the Draft Board. He had been upgraded from 4-F. He had to report for duty, the notice said. They needed truck drivers. Really, at that point, they needed everyone. But once my dad reported to Langdon and they found out he was a farmer, he was given an agricultural deferment. Farmers were considered critical personnel."

Robert began elementary school in Cuyahoga Falls. Once the family moved to Clyde, Robert went to the Township School in Huron Township, the same school his dad had attended.

"Our farm was a quarter of a mile across the pasture from the school. A lot of Midwestern states are divided into townships, six square miles. The year after I graduated from eighth grade, Huron closed the school and other townships closed their schools, and so kids started to go to the towns where there was a grade school and a high school. When I started high school, Dad was driving me and my three younger siblings all to school in Clyde.

"Did my mom work? She had six kids, talk about work! She was a great cook and oh, her chocolate cookies and chocolate cake were renowned in the whole area. In fact, the other women were a little bit envious because whenever we had a bake sale, Mom's chocolate cake was the one all the husbands were bidding on."

There were some severely cold temperatures in Robert's young life, but nothing compared to the blizzard of 1949. It came in on January 2nd, and it was the first in a series of storms that swept through Wyoming, Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Utah and Idaho, and it lasted seven straight weeks. It was 10 days before the National Guard could even get through in many areas, across these many states, to open up snow-drenched roads and streets. Dynamite was used to clear snowed-under railroad lines, and the Air Force and the National Guard dropped food, blankets and other supplies to people trapped in their homes, along with feed for cattle and sheep stranded in fields.

"It was the winter of my eighth grade year that we had storm after storm. Farmers in Western North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming, lost hundreds of cows in the fields and up there with us, there were six weeks where there wasn't a wheel turning in the whole county because of the snow. During that time we had two straight weeks when the high temperature, with no wind, was minus 35. The National Guard was delivering hay to the cows stranded in the fields by airplane. There were two or three weeks when the trains could not come through, and the town store was getting low on food. During that time, I could walk to school, and did, maybe missing a few days when it was just impossible to be outside.

"Back then you didn't put anything on your face, as far as a mask. Kids wore normal clothes, and over those they wore padded coveralls, or winter coveralls, and a parka. We always had ear flaps for our ears.

"Now when it was just normal cold, but not miserably cold, my dad had a team of horses in the barn and he would harness them up and we had this little sled that we would sit on, and he would drive the horses to school and back, mostly just to get them out and give them some exercise. But if it was really cold, my brothers and sister would get to stay home, the horses stayed in the barn and I walked across the pasture to school.

"Did I have a job as a kid? Up until the summer of my junior year in high school, I helped Dad work on our farm. But that summer of my junior year, I worked for neighboring farmers and made hay, and that work included stocking baled hay and working the tractor on the field. With the tractor, I was doing plowing, cultivating the soil and planting fields. I was not using the tractor to spread fertilizer. While it was already used in other states, fertilizer was just being introduced where we were. We would raise grain on a field for three years and then let it rest for a year, and then sow it with either alfalfa or sweet clover. The sweet clover and alfalfa would create nitrogen in their root system and you would plow that back in and cultivate it for weed control throughout the year."

Like a lot of farm kids, Robert started driving at a young age.

"At 12, I had a card from the County Sheriff that I could be on the road in a truck or car, if it was daylight and I was on farm business. I had my first official state card when I was 14 and I was able to drive anywhere in the state if I was on farm business. I was able to drive either the family truck or a neighbor's truck. But the very first time I actually got behind a wheel, I was even younger."

Robert, a born storyteller, leaned back in his chair.

"When we first moved to North Dakota, it was before combines." A combine, or combine harvester, is a large, automated machine used to harvest, thresh, and clean a variety of crops, and/or, it combines three separate processes into one.

"My granddad had a threshing machine and a big tractor, and he would thresh fields for four or five of the farmers." (A threshing machine separates grain from the stalks and husks.) "They would be a crew and we would set the threshing machine up because all the grain was cut and bundled. Then you would walk through the fields and pick up the bundles and stand them up in shocks (bundles of grain and straw are called shocks), and by standing them up, you got all the heads off the ground, and then tractors with front end loaders would come around and pick up the shocks and bring them up to the threshing machine. I was too young for driving and so I would be helping back and forth. The grain would come out the back of the thresher and we would put that in the wagons and trucks. One of these farmers had the smallest Farmall tractor that was made."

"It was raining and it had been raining, so there was no activity, and Mom and Granddad and the kids had gone somewhere. I was at the farm by myself and I was 10 or 11. I walked over to this small Farmall tractor, unhooked it from the grain wagon that it was hooked to and got in. Of course I wasn't supposed to be doing this. Next thing you know, I am driving it around the yard. When I was heading partly down the lane, I saw Granddad's car coming along the highway from the west. I whipped it around, drove it up and backed it in absolutely perfectly. By the time they were driving up the lane, I had the Farmall hooked back up and was, absolutely innocently, looking around the machinery when they drove into the yard. Nothing was said. Several years later they laughed, 'Yeah, we saw you do that U-turn!'

"When I was 15, Dad quit driving us to school. Our neighbors, the Browns, were just down the highway. Mr. Brown's son David was a couple of years younger than I am. He would drive up to our place with his younger brother and two sisters. Then the eight of us, would pile into my family's 1951 Hudson and I would drive us all to school. I did that for a year and then David was deemed old enough to drive himself and his siblings to school. This was just life growing up in a small farming community.

"I knew how to feed the cows and the pigs and the chickens, from an early age, and milk the cows by hand. Dad and I milked the cows every morning and evening. When I was a teenager, my parents finally took a vacation in the fall and Uncle Hobart would come over and check with us, every other day. I took the kids to school and milked the cows early morning and evening by myself. When I went into the military and before I was out of boot camp, Dad bought a milking machine. It ticked me off that my kid brothers never did learn how to milk cows!

"But don't get me wrong. I had a fantastic childhood and youth because I had really good people for parents, and they not only cared for their children, they really cared about each other."

Schools, at least in the Biby area of North Dakota, did not have the student population to support a lot of extracurricular activities.

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"In elementary school, we didn't have band. For about a year we learned to play these little plastic tonettes but that was about it for music. We did have a baseball diamond so we played baseball. We had five or six players on each side. In high school, we would play football a little bit. Normally during PE time we would play soccer, until it started to snow and then it was basketball inside. So the most organized sport we played in high school was basketball."

Robert went to Clyde High School. There were three students, including him, in his class.

"When I started it was me, one other boy and a girl. At the end of my sophomore year, she and her family moved away and Marvin, a boy that had quit high school for a while to be on the farm, came back to school. So my junior year, there were three boys: Leonard, Marvin and myself. We did not have a senior prom. We did have, every other year, a high school trip. It was juniors and seniors and the teachers and the chaperones. Our junior class was huge. There were 11 of them! As to my education, it was actually quite a good one."

Outside of school and farm work, Robert went rabbit hunting in the wintertime. That started right after he graduated from eighth grade. His family had gotten a Sheltie/Border Collie mix that summer before his freshman year, and named her Lady. Lady and Robert were best pals and went everywhere together, including rabbit hunting, even when it was 20 below zero. "We both loved it."

Fishing was another great pastime as a kid and that was done in Canada.

"We would spend the weekend at Rock Lake in Manitoba, Canada. It was only about 30 miles north of the Canadian border, and our house, as the crow flies, was a little more than 20 miles south of the Canadian border."

The summer after Robert graduated from high school, he and his two classmates, Leonard and Marvin, headed to Montana to look for work.

"I knew for a long time I wasn't going to be a farmer because I am sensitive to wool. Wheat is okay but barley chaff itches like all get-out."

Barley chaff is the dry, scaly husk or hull that surrounds the ripe seeds of barley.

"We looked for work for a while but didn't find anything and so we headed home. This is the winter of 1954. I knew I wasn't going to look for land to farm so I decided I would join the service and I signed up with the Marine Corps.

"I chose the Marines because of the stories I had read in Collier's Magazine about Korea. In the early days of the Korean War, the U.S. Army didn't do too well. A Marine recruiter came to town in January of 1955, and we signed up in Langdon. We then waded through three feet of snow to get on a Greyhound Bus and go to Grand Forks, ND, and then a bunch of us got on a train to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and we were inducted in Minneapolis, then we went on to Wisconsin. On January 25, 1955, they put us on an airplane and flew us to San Diego and I started the Marine Corps.

"My training was at MCRD, Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. It is still there. It is now a national historic place thanks to a couple of Marines serving in Congress.

"I served from 1955 through 1959. I was in boot camp in January, February and March of 1955.

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"My first duty station was AmTracs at Camp Delmar in northwestern San Diego County. AmTracs are amphibious landing vehicles. Camp Delmar is at the north end of Oceanside, CA, which is the south edge of Camp Pendleton. I was just getting settled in there and this list comes out about duty stations overseas. The Commandant said that Marines leftover from Korea had started to ask for duty stations in Japan and then when their year in Japan was up, they would go back to Korea for a year and they would have a mama-san in each location and the Commandant decided and stated, 'I am not creating another batch of China Marines.'

"Because before the Korean War, Marines would go to China and spend their entire career in China; they would never come home. The China Marines loved being China Marines. When WWII started, there were China Marines that were captured by the Japanese attacking China. But in 1955, all these duty stations came up because everyone in their one-year tour was coming back to the States. I looked up the choices and asked the Sergeant, 'What is Kwajalein?' And he said, 'It's a little island right out in the middle of the Pacific.'

Robert requested Kwajalein for his first year and Japan for his second, and his request was granted. He arrived at Kwajalein in August of 1955.

Located in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kwajalein is the largest atoll in the world. While it only has a land area of six square miles, it surrounds a 655-square-mile lagoon. It is approximately 2,100 nautical miles southwest of Honolulu, HI. Enewetak Atoll is about 350 miles northwest of Kwajalein. Bikini Atoll is approximately 225 miles northwest of Kwajalein.

"When I was on Kwajalein, they were doing A-bomb tests on Enewetak Atoll."

The United States detonated the world's first hydrogen bomb on Eniwetok Atoll and overall, there were 43 nuclear tests conducted at Enewetak from 1948 to 1958. The radiological cleanup, rehabilitation and resettlement of Enewetak was planned and carried out by the United States over an eight-year period, from 1972 until 1980, and is considered successful. There were 23 nuclear tests conducted at the Bikini Atoll beginning in 1946 and ending in 1958. To date, the Bikini Atoll remains uninhabitable.

"Kwajalein was a Naval Air Station and our Marines detachment, of which there were 42 of us, was essentially base security. We would keep the Navy guys from not doing things they shouldn't of! When the Navy was delivering an atomic bomb somewhere out in the Pacific, the planes would land with us and spend the night. We would guard the Navy planes at night, along with Air Force guards. This was back during the days when they would rotate the planes – atomic bombs could only be out for so long. Our detachment also served as jeep patrol in vintage WWII jeeps."

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"During my time on Kwajalein, Underwater Demolition Teams, UDTs, from Hawaii showed up because a new passage was needed from the lagoon out to the ocean. This was the result of an incident that took place in 1950."

On the night of September 19, 1950, a military aircraft took off from Kwajalein Atoll. The plane held 26 U.S. Navy personnel, including 11 Navy nurses. The nurses were on their way to Yokosuka, Japan. Their assignment was to set up a hospital in order to treat Korean War wounded. The plane had stopped on Kwajalein to refuel. Ninety seconds after takeoff, the plane crashed into the sea. No one survived.

"Apparently, a great many of the passengers were able to get out of the plane before it sank, but they couldn't get out of the surf. Back in those days, you had to go way up to the western side of the lagoon to get out into the ocean and then go back down and around, so it was over half an hour before a rescue boat got out there and that was too late.

"The UDTs, who are the predecessors of the Navy Seals, were there in 1955 to blow a small hole in the reef so patrol boats stationed in the lagoon could get to somebody, quickly, on the ocean side of the island.

"The detachment had Aqua Lungs and we didn't know how to use them. So the Navy took us over to the pool and taught four of us how to use them. That's when I found out I have negative buoyancy. I didn't know that before I arrived at Kwajalein. In fact, not long before it was discovered I had this staying-afloat issue, the American Red Cross had noted that every person can do the 'Dead Man's Float.'"

The Dead Man's Float, or Survivor's Float, is as follows. Take a deep breath and assume the position of a 'dead man' with your head, arms and legs hung down in the water. Every twenty seconds, or so, you bring your head up and refill your lungs, expending as little energy as possible while treading with your arms and legs.

"When I was in boot camp in San Diego, we went over to the base pool which was an Olympic size pool with a shallow end. Now, as a kid, I didn't have much opportunity to be in the water at all, and when I was in the water, I just splashed around. But here I am in boot camp following orders. We went down to the deep end of the pool and the job was to swim the width of the pool. Everyone lined up. First group went in. I'm in the next group. I jumped in and went straight to the bottom, but then I leaned forward and walked across the bottom. About halfway across, this pole started jabbing me in the chest. I pushed it away and it jabbed me again. I grabbed a hold of it and the drill instructor pulled me up and yelled, 'Let, go. Swim!' So I let go and sank down to the bottom again and leaned forward and started walking across the pool. I got hit in the chest again with the pole and was pulled up. 'Get your ass out of there! You are taking swimming lessons!' About a half dozen of us went to the shallow end and took swimming lessons and I did fine. What I didn't know then but I learned on Kwajalein, was as long as I kept moving, kept swimming, I stayed afloat.

"In Kwajalein, I jumped into the swimming pool and I lifted my head up, like you are supposed to do for a dead's man float, and the surface was up there somewhere. I clawed my way back up. Okay. I can do this. Deep breathe, do a dead man's float and start counting. Thirty-five seconds later I was standing at the bottom of a 15-foot pool but I've got enough weight to walk over to the wall and jump back up. And that, as it turns out, is negative buoyancy."

Negative buoyancy means that if your body weighs more than the amount of fluid it displaces, you sink. Your buoyancy depends upon the composition of your body. Fatty tissues are positively buoyant in water,

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whereas muscles are negatively buoyant. The proportions of these different tissues in your body affect your buoyancy in the water and determine your personal weighting requirements.

"If I put on a face mask and fins and kept moving, I could stay in the water all afternoon. The water temperature on Kwajalein was 82 to 85 degrees. It was wonderful. These many years since, my muscle tone and fat have changed places. So now I can almost stay on the surface!"

Robert's service on Kwajalein also meant being entrusted as Corporal of the Guard as needed. The Corporal of the Guard's Office and the Sergeant of the Guard's office were in front of the base's small, two-cell brig. Robert was on duty 71 hours by the time the Inspector General from the Pentagon completed his review. In the military, the maximum duty you can do, without sleep, is 72 hours.

"I was petrified prior to meeting him, recalled the Corporal of the Guard assigned to that event, but the Inspector General turned out to be a really nice person, completely disarming. When he left, I walked down to the barracks. I was going to rest awhile. I didn't even bother to get out of my uniform. Twenty some hours later, I woke up. There wasn't even a wrinkle in my uniform. I never moved – even when the guys came in to ask me if I wanted to go to the movies and lifted the bunk up and dropped it. Ha! Ha!

"The biggest thing for me on Kwajalein happened one morning at 5 a.m. I was supernumerary that night, meaning doing whatever came up. There was a guy who was supposed to have been on duty at 4 a.m. I had already tried to wake him up once and now I headed back a second time. I tilted his bunk over. 'Get your ass up.' It was almost 5 a.m. when I was walking back up the road to the brig. I went to step up on the curb and all of a sudden, it went from nighttime to daylight. I missed that step and skinned my shin. I looked at the palm tree in the yard in front of me to judge by its shadow where the light was coming from. But there was no shadow, just orangish light. I looked up and a dome of light diminished into the north. A B-52 had dropped a thermonuclear bomb over Enewetak Atoll."

Following his one year stay on Kwajalein, Robert headed to Japan where he spent a year at the Naval Air Station in Atsugi.

"Atsugi was where MacArthur landed at the end of WWII."

The surrender of the Empire of Japan to the Allied Forces, which marked the end of World War II, was announced by Emperor Hirohito on August 15, 1945, and formally signed on September 2, 1945. General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, arrived at Atsugi on August 30, 1945, to accept the formal Japanese surrender aboard the USS Missouri and assume the duties as military Governor of Japan.

"It was a nice tour in Japan, both on duty and on liberty. On liberty we would take the train up to Yokohama, and once in a while, maybe twice, to Tokyo. This was after the American occupation had ended, which end was in 1952. I was a PFC (Private First Class) and I became a Corporal there. We did base security in Atsugi. When carriers would come into Yokosuka Naval Air Station, their planes would all fly off the carrier before it got into port and they would land at Atsugi, where we served as security. The carrier remained in Yokosuka.

"The base and the barracks were about a mile from the airfield and the planes would circle around and land. One day, I heard a whistling when I was out walking. I looked up and I thought, my God, they took an F-80 and they stretched the bejeebers out of it! Well, it was a U-2 and it was the first time a U-2 not only landed in Japan but landed outside of the U.S."

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The Lockheed U-2 was a high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft. Approved in 1954, it had its first test flight in 1955.

"The pilot pulled that aircraft into a hangar, got whatever was needed done, done. He was there 24 or 48 hours. We didn't know. He kept out of sight. He did stop in the Officers' Club to have a drink but he talked to no one."

After his service in Japan, Robert returned from his two years overseas and was sent to Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, CA. This was towards the end of 1957.

"They put me in the Atomic Experimental Company. Along with another Marine, Newton, I was assigned air delivery. With the AEC we were trained to respond if our frontlines got hit with tactical nukes. Our job was to go in with a unit that could set up showers in the field to work with the contamination. There was another group, to wash off all the equipment. Newton and I, we would put out the cross to mark the location and we received supplies from airdrops. The AEC ran out of money and was disbanded. But because we had been working with the air delivery platoon for the division, we ended up in air delivery. There was a platoon of us for the entire division and the senior members of our platoon were leftover guys from WWII. What we did specifically was pack 24-foot chutes and put them on these little practice containers, and then we would practice kicking them out of the side of a DC-4 to try and hit the cross in the middle of the field."

When the AEC disbanded, Robert became the jeep driver for the leader of the platoon, the Chief Warrant Officer.

"He was from WWII and he was highly respected in the Marine Corps. I am doing PM on the jeep and I get a phone call. 'You want to go to jump school?' 'Hell, yes!' In the spring of 1958, I went to the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia. That included rigger school where I learned how to pack parachutes, all the way up to 100-foot, and how to kick 'big stuff' out of the back of airplanes. I did like jumping out of airplanes and I was not scared the first time I jumped – nervous, yes, scared, no. The instant you go out the door you are committed. Enjoy it!"

Following his time in the Marines, Robert has only jumped once, for his 70th birthday, and he still loves it. His sister and her daughter wanted to take him for his 80th birthday. "But, they didn't show!" Robert noted.

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"I am now 88 years old and I still haven't done my 80th birthday jump. But I am going to do it."

Robert Biby served in the Marine Corps for four years. He started as a Private, became a PFC, then a Corporal and when he left the Marine Corps in February of 1959, he did so as a Sergeant.

"In 1959, I talked to three different Master Sergeants that were in intelligence, battalion and regimental. I said, 'What is coming down the pike?' If there was a war, I was going to stay. And they said, 'Nothing is coming down the pike, just more years of Junk on the Bunk Inspections.' So I got out."

Junk on the Bunk Inspections is a humorous Marine term for the prolonged inspections of Marine' gear and bunks before a field op.

"I spent a couple of days at a buddy's house in Riverside, California, and then headed to Ohio. I did not want to drive back to North Dakota in February. I took the southern route and I don't remember a lot of snow."

One of Robert's cousins was a manager at General Tire & Rubber in Indiana, and Robert got a job there with the evening crew that lasted until mid-summer. He then headed then to North Dakota where he drove a gravel truck through December of 1959. In January of 1960, he headed to Rapid City, South Dakota, and went to work for a lumber company. He got to be friends with the guy that owned the apartment building he was living at. His name was Don, and Don and his wife Faith, who was from San Francisco, were thinking of moving back to San Francisco.

"Don was an engineer and he had gotten a job building Titan Missile sites – we had three Titan Missile sites that went in and around the Rapid City, South Dakota, area. Don got me a job on the crew, which was more money than my lumber job. But once the site was done, the job was done. Don and Faith decided it was time to move to San Francisco, and while Faith stayed in South Dakota with their two little girls, Don drove out to San Francisco to look for work and a place to live. I drove out with him. I was ready to make a move. This is February of 1961.

"So we got a couple of rooms at a boarding house on California Street at Leavenworth, which was right across the street from the bar where Don and Faith had married. When they married, Don's wife's friend Shirley had served as maid of honor. Don ran into Shirley. She was going through a divorce and she was living on Palou Drive off of Rosita Road in Pacifica. I met her when she invited Don over for a visit and I tagged along. Once Don got a job, Don, his wife and their two little girls stayed with Shirley until Don and his family moved into their own place. I was living at the boarding house in San Francisco and I started going to San Francisco State.

"I was studying the basics with an eventual goal to become an engineer. I was on the GI Bill and I was working out of the hiring hall for UPS. So if I wasn't going to school, I was a lumper, someone who unloads cargo, for UPS.

"When Shirley's divorce was finalized, she went to work at San Francisco State as secretary to the registrar. She had also moved from Pacifica to a townhouse in Park Merced in San Francisco. Shirley and I visited back and forth and Don said, 'You can't go with her, she's older than you.' But you like who you like.

"She had a two-bedroom place and I moved out of the boarding house and rented the second bedroom.

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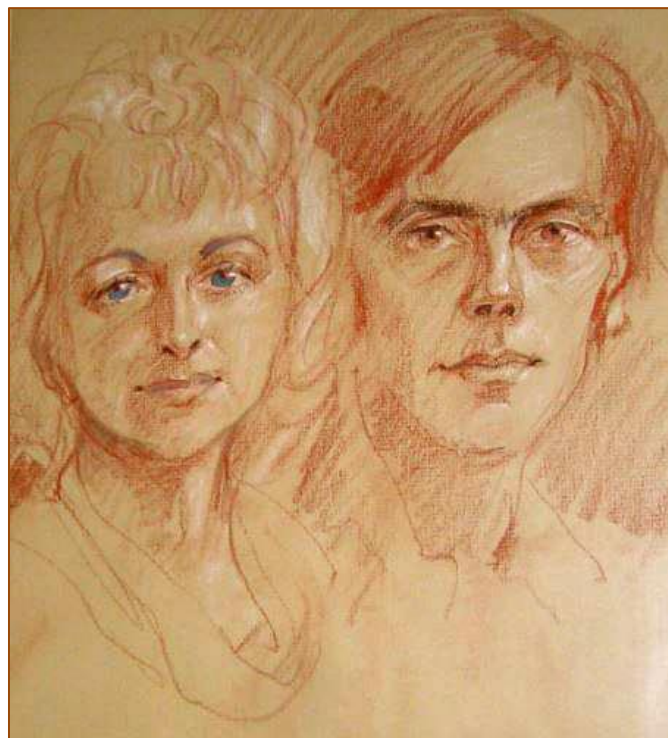
"Let me tell you about Shirley," Robert smiled. "She was a lot of fun and we never argued. Sure, we had spirited discussions, but that's all they were. Talking about her makes me happy and sad. I still miss her.

"Shirley was born in 1920 in Culpeper, Virginia. Her folks were Margaret and James Finley. She never really talked about growing up in Virginia, although the thing about Shirley was she was always waiting for you to ask. She and her mom and her brother William came to San Francisco in 1938. Her mom's sister Maddie had run off with a drummer and the drummer left her in San Francisco. Maddie called Margaret, and Margaret and her two kids came out to help Maddie and start a new life for themselves as well. Shirley had graduated from Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, I believe in a Home Economics Certificate Program.

"Out here in California, Shirley first worked as a swim suit model. Eventually she went to work as a clerk in the banking industry. At one point she worked in the display advertising department of the Pacifica Tribune. She was also married a few times, three times before she met me, but I was the keeper and we were married for 48 years. I think what happened to her in her first marriage, took a toll on her, though she was not one for talking about things. When her first husband was stationed at Fort Ord, a former U.S. Army post in the Monterey, CA, area, Shirley was raped, and became pregnant as a result of that rape. She subsequently gave her daughter up for adoption, though of course, she never forgot about her and thought about her much more than she ever mentioned to me, or probably anyone, though she did tell me she had a daughter and the circumstances behind her daughter's adoption.

"I don't really remember when I officially took Shirley out on our first date. I remember I helped her look for a car and then I think I took her to the movies. But we just fell into dating. I was still going to school and working at UPS, and Shirley was working at San Francisco State.

"We were married in May of 1963."



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"In early 1963, we moved to Pacifica. I had $250 that I hadn't spent from my mustering out pay and Shirley's brother wanted to buy her a Christmas present. She told him, 'I don't need a TV set, give me money!' So, Shirley had $250. We showed up at Charlie Fisher's. Charlie Fisher was a longtime Pacifica realtor and broker, and he had gotten Shirley and her third husband that house she lived in when I first met her on Palou. With that $500 Shirley and I had, we bought a house in Pacifica at 528 Valencia Way. Charlie Fisher took a second mortgage for us, at $7,000. I think the house was $18,000. Who can imagine that now?

"When Shirley got pregnant, I dropped out of school and went to work for Western Electric. I worked as a technician. We modified and installed central office equipment for the phone company. When people wanted to know what I did, I would tell them, when you pick up the telephone and you dial, and all those noises go on before the other person answers, that's me. I spent 29 years with Western Electric. I went from Level 1 to Level 4. It was a good job and they gave me early retirement.

"But back to 1963, I had this good job, Shirley and I were going to have a baby and we lived in Pacifica. All was right with the world.

"Late in Shirley's pregnancy, she called me at work. It was a Monday. 'I am going into labor,' she said. 'I'll come get you,' I said. 'No,' she said, 'don't bother. A friend is taking me to Kaiser on Geary in San Francisco.'

"I got there in the afternoon and she was in labor but comfortable. I came again to Kaiser on Tuesday morning and she was still in labor, but comfortable. The doctor said it was okay for me to leave and go to work and so I did. I came back Tuesday evening and she was still in labor but it was easing off. The doctor said, 'If the labor doesn't intensify, I am going to send her home tomorrow.' I came by the next morning and was sent to work. At noon, the doctor said, 'Pick her up. The labor has pretty well stopped. When her labor starts again and her contractions are three minutes apart, let me know.'

"Early Sunday morning, Shirley woke me up. She wanted to know if her contractions were three minutes apart. They were a minute and a half apart.

"From Valencia Way in Pacifica to Kaiser in San Francisco, it took me 10 minutes. It was early Sunday morning and when I came to a red light, I would slow down to about 35 and look both ways to make sure there was no cross traffic. The entire way we saw maybe four or five cars. I dropped Shirley off at Kaiser and they put her in a wheelchair. I parked the car and raced back into the hospital. The doctor came out of the examining room and he was pushing the gurney that Shirley was on. He didn't have staff do it. I helped him get the gurney in the elevator and I should have known something was wrong because he tried to beat the elevator button through the wall waiting for the doors to open. We got up to the third floor, the delivery floor. The doctor wheeled Shirley through the double doors and told me to wait out in the lobby.

"I'll share this part because I think it is important but I know many will doubt me. I am standing in the lobby, looking out the window at downtown San Francisco and over to Oakland. All of a sudden, Shirley is sitting above my left shoulder and she says, 'I am dying. So, I am saying, goodbye.' And I said, 'No, you are not going to die. If you are going to die, you do that on your own time, not on mine. You are not going to die and leave me with a baby. Get your ass back in there.' I turned and headed to the delivery room and she was floating ahead of me. I had my hand on the door and a nurse who had been coming down the hall to my left put her hand on my shoulder. 'You can't go in there, Sir.' I said, 'My wife is in there and she's in trouble.' But she said, 'You need to go to the waiting room.' I did and there were two other guys there. They'd been through it before.

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"The doctor came out. We lost the baby.

"Robin was stillborn. She had the umbilical cord wrapped around her throat. That probably happened on the previous Monday or Tuesday, and when she died, that is when contractions eased off. So much had happened and it hardly seemed possible that this was still 1963, September of 1963. But my Shirley was still alive.

"I never spoke to Shirley about seeing her in the waiting room. I signed the death certificate and signed the waiver over to the hospital. The doctor wanted to use our baby for study and Shirley was totally fine with that.

"Seven years later, Shirley and I got into metaphysics, well, Shirley was always interested in metaphysics, I just joined her. One day we were visiting with our friends, John and his wife. We had gotten to be friends with them through our respective study of metaphysics. Suddenly, John said to Shirley, 'Something is bothering you. Do you want to do something about it?' Shirley did want to do something about it and John led her into a self-hypnosis.

"In this self-hypnosis, Shirley said, 'I am above my body and I hear the doctor saying, 'We are losing her.' I am dying and I am going to say goodbye to Bob. I found Bob in the waiting room, and I am saying goodbye to him and Bob told me, 'No, you are not going to die.' And then Shirley recounted, word for word, what I said to her.

"Shirley continued, 'Then, I am back in the room and there is a white light there on the wall that wasn't there before and it is warm and comforting and I am going towards the light. A voice says, 'It's not your time yet, you have to go back.' The next thing I know, I am back in my body, and I hear one of the doctors say, 'We got her back.'

"People have told me this story is crazy but at this stage in my life, maybe it is time to share it with more people. For me, it holds a lot of comfort and maybe it will bring comfort to someone else."

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As to the daughter Shirley gave up for adoption, when that little girl became an adult and her own children were nearly grown, she went on a search for her biological mother and found her, and it was an extraordinary day for both Marilyn and her birth mother, and their relationship remained extraordinary with many, many visits until Shirley's death in 2011. Robert said Marilyn is family to him.

Shirley worked for 20 years at San Francisco State University and when she retired, she set her sights on volunteering locally and met that goal at 200 percent.

She was a longtime Pacifica Lions Club Lioness. She was a Woman of the Pacifica Moose Lodge. She was a member of Beta Sigma Phi Sorority and the Pacifica American Legion Auxiliary. She volunteered as the executive secretary for the Pacifica Chamber of Commerce.

"Shirley was also a member of the steering committee of Pacifica's Frontier Days, and she worked alongside a number of other Pacificans to establish and give Pacifica national recognition on the rodeo circuit for many years. As far as being a volunteer, Shirley was always a wheeler-dealer," Robert paused to laugh. "If Shirley was going to be in something she would say, 'I am going to run it!' She got me involved with the rodeo. I was one of her volunteers! I used to direct the traffic!"

In between the couple's regular jobs, Shirley's growing volunteerism and the couple's favorite date nights – which included dinner and dancing at Nick's here in town, or at the Pacifica Moose Lodge, or dinner at San Francisco's Cliff House – the couple had their share of beloved pets.

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"A temporary adoption of a white standard poodle, who just showed up one day at our house on Valencia, started that ball rolling. We went all over asking everybody – is this your dog? Nobody knew her. We named her, Fluffy. One day Fluffy and I were at Central Market on Crespi and this woman hollers, and there went Fluffy. Well, we missed Fluffy something fierce and went right away to the Peninsula Humane Society to adopt, and we adopted Missy. Missy was so tiny she fit right in my hand. She was a Sheltie and she was a great dog, and she got along just fine with the two cats that subsequently moved in: a Siamese cat named May-ling, and a little later, May-ling's son, Taiping. May-ling had a night out before we had her spayed. Missy lived to be about 13 and died at home. By then, and since 1969, we were living where I still live in Park Pacifica.

"When we were ready, we got another dog and Shirley named him, Beauregard. May-ling was still going when we got Beau and they became buddies, with the understanding that May-ling was in charge. We had wonderful pets."

←Robert and Beau, late 1970s.

Shirley was not the only volunteer in their household. In the early 1980s, Robert became a volunteer with the Moose Lodge, and shortly thereafter, he joined the Pacifica Lions Club and Pacifica American Legion Post 238.

"I joined the Lions Club first and I became an officer in the Lions Club. This was, I believe, in 1982. Joe Gibbs, Shirley Gibb's brother-in-law, wore my butt down to join the American Legion. I actually didn't think I could. To be a member of the American Legion, you don't have to have served in a war, but you have to have served during a time the United States was in a war. Officially, mostly, the Korean War ended on July 27, 1953, but Congress, more officially, cut off the Korean War on February 1, 1955. I joined January 25, 1955, so I only qualified with five days!"

The Korean War was fought from June 25, 1950 to July 27, 1953. But while the truce in Korea was in effect following the Armistice of July 27, 1953, no treaty was signed and military representatives of both sides continued to meet periodically, through January 31, 1955, for the purpose of discussing alleged violations.

Robert has served many times as an officer for both the Lions Club and the American Legion.

"Early on, while I was still working full-time, I was serving as Adjutant for the Legion and as an officer in the Lions Club, and a fellow Lions Club member suggested the American Legion might need me more at that time as an officer, as the Lions Club had at least 70 members back then. I took his advice and for about 10 years, I did not serve during that time as a Lions officer. I am still active in both the American Legion and the Lions Club.

"I became a member of the American Legion because I believe that along with our VFW, it keeps remembrance of our service members alive and it keeps the community aware that we have military members among us. And I believe in serving community. I fully support the American Legion's youth mentoring programs, our Legion's Color Guard, our involvement with the American Cancer Society Relay for Life, and any support we can give our veterans. We do need younger members who have served in the military to join the Legion. There is never a time in life when somebody doesn't need something and through the American Legion, and very much through the Lions as well, you can be that person who is there for someone else.

"Regardless of religion, regardless of race, regardless of political party, I believe volunteering strengthens all of our relationships because you get out of your own head and make yourself available to someone in need."

Robert Biby at home in Pacifica, September 2024. (Jean Bartlett photo.)

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco. She is also a former Hallmark Card writer, a produced playwright and a published author.

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