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## Missing for six decades, local soldier finally laid to rest

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What would Roosevelt "Jack" Clark have thought if he were alive to see it?

Hundreds of Bakersfield High School students, including scores of Junior ROTC cadets, lined the streets around the campus Friday as the funeral procession carrying Clark's remains passed by his alma mater.

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Family and friends of Pfc. Roosevelt "Jack" Clark release dozens of white doves at the end of his service Friday at Hillcrest Memorial Park and Mortuary.



Escorted by Bakersfield police motorcycle officers and members of the Patriot Guard Riders, the motorcade elicited a respectful silence from the students.

"I'm glad for his family that he's finally made it back home where he belongs," said Desmon McGhee, 16, a technical sergeant with the Air Force Junior ROTC.

Calling the event a "teachable moment," BHS Principal David Reese invited students to come out of their classrooms to show their respect to the deceased soldier and his family.

"We're always talking about the Driller family," Reese said. "Part of that is remembering those who came before you."

Pfc. Clark, who grew up in Arvin and played for the 1949 Drillers football team, was reported missing in action in late November 1950, while fighting with the 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, in North Korea.

He was 18.

Nearly 62 years passed with little word. Clark was declared dead, and members of his extended family began to accept the possibility that their loved one's remains might never be found or identified.

But at Friday's funeral service held at People's Missionary Baptist Church in southeast Bakersfield, Rosa Rentie, one of Clark's first cousins, recalled receiving a called from the Army five or six years ago.

They wanted DNA samples from Rentie and her mother in hopes of identifying remains handed over by North Korea years before.

"She died a few months before we got the notification that they had identified Roosevelt's remains," Rentie said of her mom.

The church welcomed an estimated 200 to 300 mourners, black, white, Hispanic, Asian -- they came to pay their respects to a man who left home at age 18 and finally returned more than six decades later.

Veteran film and television actor James McEachin, 82, who turned to writing in his later years, spoke at Friday's service, drawing a standing ovation at the conclusion of his remarks, a rarity at a funeral.

The poetry in his words was that powerful.

"On days of remembrances past, I have borne in mind that last full measure of devotion of which Abraham Lincoln so eloquently spoke at Gettysburg," he said.

McEachin saw heavy combat and was seriously wounded during the Korean War. He was awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart for



his valor and service.

McEachin spoke of "the symmetrical obedience of numberless headstones that stand like dwarfed sentries for the honored dead."

"One cannot help but be touched by the price of our liberties, humbled by graves that stretch from coast to coast."

McEachin told the gathering that he enlisted in "that same segregated Army" that Clark was a part of, and he entreated all Americans to remember and honor Clark and all those who have served, living or dead -- for without them we would be lost.

"No veterans, no democracy," he said. "No democracy, no America."

Bakersfield physician and poet Portia S. Choi was a 2-year-old living in Korea when war broke out in June 1950. As she spoke to the gathering Friday, she thanked Clark and his family for the sacrifices they made.

Then she read her poem, "Face of a Child," seemingly drawn from the memories of a little girl faced with the terror and heartbreak of war.

The final line describes an American soldier, with ebony-colored skin, who finds and protects orphaned Korean children.

"He saved children," Choi read. "That girl forever sees him."

Another Korean-American, Hong Ki Park, came from Los Angeles to attend the service. As president of the Korean Veterans Association, Western Region, Hong said he felt compelled to attend, to thank Clark and his family personally.

"You defended Korea when it was in grave danger," he said. "History knows -- and every Korean knows -- you saved our country."

Not everyone who wanted to attend Clark's memorial service was able to.

Bakersfield resident Neal Vance planned to be at Clark's funeral, but health issues prevented his attendance.

Vance said he's had a hard time sleeping since he learned that the remains of a comrade had been identified.

Although Vance didn't know Clark, the coincidences between their lives make him feel like he did.

At age 80, Vance is the same age Clark would be had he survived. Like Clark, Vance went to Bakersfield High, left school early to join the Army and was sent to combat duty in Korea.

And both men were in the snow and below-zero cold of North Korea when Chinese troops unexpectedly entered the war, devastating American lines in an extended battle that would change the course of the war.

"It was a lousy day," Vance said in obvious understatement.


"Clark went through hell that day. I'm sure he did," Vance said.

"But now he's home for good."

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