



LAND OF THE FREE

Citing Lifelong Sense of Service, Three Veterans Seek to Inspire Others to Give Back

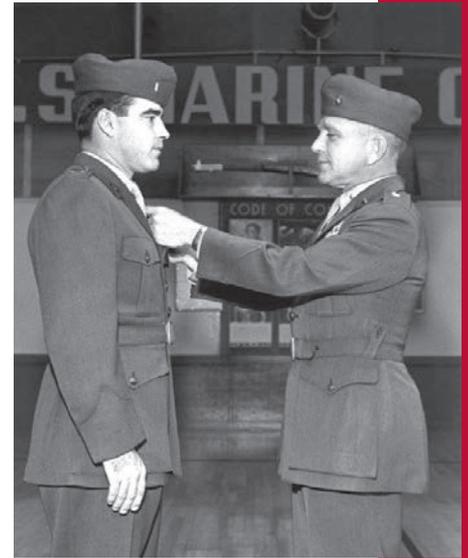
By Sara W. Bock

Each November on Veterans Day, the palatial Pacific Palms Resort in Los Angeles County's City of Industry rolls out the red carpet to welcome a diverse crowd of attendees from golfers and corporate sponsors to wounded warriors, Medal of Honor recipients and representatives from charitable organizations that support military servicemembers, veterans and their families. The day kicks off with the Land of the Free Foundation's annual Veterans Day Golf Classic on the resort's adjacent course

and ends with a gala dinner. Held annually since 2007 in conjunction with the City of Industry's Veterans Day Celebration—which lends a touch of pomp and circumstance by bringing Air Force flyovers, Marine Corps bands and Army helicopter landings—the event has raised more than \$1 million each year for organizations that serve veterans and military families. The foundation, which was launched that same year, has been able to contribute well over \$15 million to those organizations to date.

Top: Land of the Free Foundation founders Ed Roski, John Semcken and Kent Valley host the first annual Land of the Free Foundation Veterans Day Golf Classic at the Pacific Palms Resort in Los Angeles County, Calif., in 2007. Held in conjunction with a local Veterans Day event, the tournament features sights like the military aircraft flyover pictured here.

While the Land of the Free Foundation is relatively new, its genesis was set in motion nearly six decades ago in December 1962, when newly commissioned Marine second lieutenants Ed Roski and Kent Valley arrived at The Basic School in Quantico, Va.



Above left: Semcken, Roski and Valley present an award during the annual Land of the Free Foundation dinner following the Veterans Day Golf Classic, Nov. 11, 2019.

Above right: As a young Marine lieutenant, Roski was awarded two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star for his actions during Operation Starlite in Vietnam.

But while the Land of the Free Foundation is relatively new, its genesis was set in motion nearly six decades ago in December 1962, when newly commissioned Marine second lieutenants Ed Roski and Kent Valley arrived at The Basic School in Quantico, Va., for officer training. Their friendship was an instantaneous one: the pair met in the parking lot on their very first day, and they've been virtually inseparable ever since.

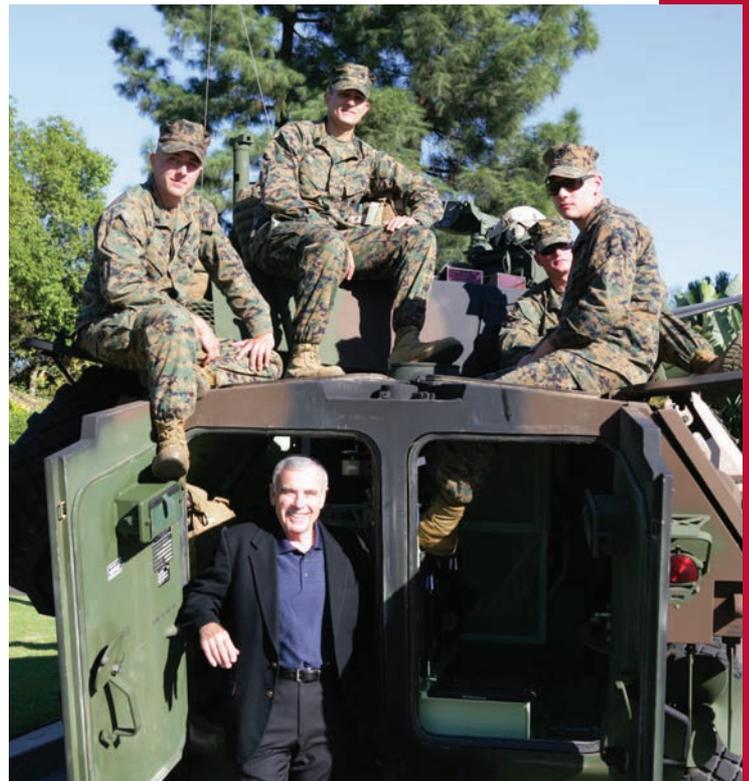
During an April interview with *Leatherneck*, Roski and Valley talked about their arrival at TBS—Roski from the University of Southern California and Valley from the University of Idaho—and how Roski had the foresight to figure out where the bar was in advance, inviting Valley to join him there for a beer after class.

“We got up there [the bar] before everybody else, so I realized that I would keep following Ed,” Valley said with a laugh.

He did just that. Upon completion of TBS, both young lieutenants were assigned as infantry officers with the 1st Marine Brigade at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, where they reported in June 1963 as platoon commanders with 1st Battalion, 4th Marines—Roski with “Alpha” Company and Valley with “Bravo.”

“We spent lots of time in the O-Club and let the sergeants train the troops,” Valley jokes. But the moment they'd trained for arrived just two years later, on Feb. 21, 1965, as the U.S. prepared to enter the war in Vietnam. Both Roski and Valley left Hawaii and headed for Okinawa, Japan, where they “reloaded, retrained and did some guerrilla warfare training,” Valley recalled. They both arrived at Chu Lai, Vietnam, on May 7, 1965.

During Operation Starlite, the first major offensive by American troops in Vietnam, Roski, who at the time was attached to Ontos Company, was wounded and returned



Ed Roski visits with Marines manning a static display during the City of Industry's annual Veterans Day celebration, which is held at the Pacific Palms Resort alongside the Land of the Free Foundation's Golf Classic and dinner.



Valley, Semcken and Roski present a gift of appreciation to Navy CAPT Roger L. Meyer, the keynote speaker at the dinner that followed the 2012 Land of the Free Foundation Veterans Day Golf Classic.

home to the Los Angeles area after being awarded two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star for his actions during the battle. In 1966, he went to work at Majestic Realty Co., founded by his father, who had served in the Navy during World War II. The following year, Valley, who had finished his tour in Vietnam and was assigned to Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego before leaving active duty, joined Roski at Majestic, where the duo, now both in their 80s, continue to work together today: Roski as owner, president and chairman of the board, and Valley as executive vice president and senior development partner.

Neither Roski nor Valley makes any mention of their professional success or lists any accolades during the interview—not even the specific actions that led to Roski’s Bronze Star. They choose instead to focus on their fundraising efforts and how they hope that others might be inspired to find ways, both large and small, to support those who serve or have served.

But they do take the time to credit the Marine Corps for setting them up for success.

“I believe that our Marine Corps ‘can do’ training and hard work led to much of the success of Majestic Realty Co.,” said Valley.

The largest private holder of industrial real estate in



A golfer participating in the 2013 Veterans Day Golf Classic visits with Marines while supporting the Land of the Free Foundation’s mission to raise at least \$1 million each year to distribute to organizations that support veterans and military families.

the U.S., Majestic Realty Co. owns, manages and leases approximately 80 million square feet of property nationwide. Roski, a billionaire whose name appeared at No. 115 on the Forbes 400 in 2020 and is a minority owner of the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Kings, also is a lifelong adventurer who has climbed to the base camps at Mount Everest, K2 and Mount Kilimanjaro; visited the wreck of the Titanic in a Russian submarine; and bicycled across countries like Russia, Mongolia and Myanmar.

For the pair of Vietnam War veterans, their connections and high visibility have granted them the opportunity, on a large scale, to continue to fulfill the “lifelong sense of service” that has defined them over the decades that have passed since they last wore the uniform.

“The time we spent on active duty in the United States Marine Corps shaped our lives to respect others and give back to those in need as we have been blessed,” Valley said. “Quite frankly it’s more rewarding for us. We remain more connected to the military community than we otherwise would—to really understand what’s happening to the guys and girls on the front line.”

The two Marines aren’t the only veterans behind the Land of the Free Foundation. In 1995, former U.S. Navy pilot John Semcken walked into an interview at Majestic Realty Co., hoping to lead the development of the STAPLES Center, a behemoth sports and entertainment arena in Los Angeles. The 1978 United States Naval Academy grad flew the F-14 on deployments in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, completed U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School, better known as Top Gun, and later was “voluntold” to work as the Navy’s technical advisor for the 1986 blockbuster film “Top Gun” starring Tom Cruise.

“I did that and it kind of changed my life,” said Semcken, who served as a naval aviator for eight years and made a brief cameo appearance in “Top Gun,” singing “You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling” alongside Cruise and actor Anthony Edwards. After he finished working on the movie’s production, Semcken was contacted by ABC and was asked to work as a technical advisor for the World War II-era miniseries “War and Remembrance.”

“They offered me more money than I ever thought existed, so I got out of the Navy,” said Semcken, who moved to Los Angeles shortly thereafter. But the film industry turned out to not be the right fit for Semcken, who missed the military experience “where everybody’s working as a team to reach a goal,” he said. He began working in real estate and competed against Roski on a major deal—which he lost—and soon joined Majestic in 1996, where he continues to work today as senior vice president and senior development partner.



Left: Valley served as a platoon commander with 1/4 in Vietnam before leaving active duty and joining Roski at Majestic Realty Co.

Below: Semcken is shown here during his days as an F-14 Tomcat pilot in the Navy.



Pictured with the cast of the movie “Top Gun,” Semcken, standing on the far left, was a technical advisor for the film while still an active-duty naval aviator.

Hiring Semcken was a no-brainer for Roski, who says that the two connected over their shared military experiences and have “been partners ever since.”

“The first meeting was about two hours long and we never talked one second about real estate. It was all about the Marines and the Navy,” recalled Semcken.

Roski, Valley and Semcken had long been involved in philanthropy and fundraising as individuals, but in 2007, a phone call from an old friend Roski and Valley had served with in Vietnam led them to contemplate what they might be able to accomplish for their fellow veterans if they

“I believe that our Marine Corps ‘can do’ training and hard work led to much of the success of Majestic Realty Co.”—Kent Valley

Right: The Pacific Palms Resort, which is owned by Roski and Semcken, is located adjacent to the golf course in Los Angeles County's City of Industry where the Land of the Free Foundation hosts its annual classic.

Below: Marines in uniform are a common sight during the annual Veterans Day Celebration and Golf Classic at the Pacific Palms Resort.



combined their efforts. Major General Mike Myatt was serving on the board of directors for the Semper Fi Fund and appealed to the real estate developers for support.

"The guys coming back from Iraq at the time were having a really hard time," Semcken recalls the general saying. "In his words, they were getting 'blown up' and there wasn't enough money to take care of them. Ed has a hotel that has a golf course, and he, Kent and I all got in a room together and said, 'We've got to do something. We need to raise money to help these guys and their families.' And we took the line from the last line of the National Anthem, 'land of the free and the home of the brave,' and that's how it came to be."

The Land of the Free Foundation's mission is straightforward: "Supporting the men and women of the armed services, past, present and future, and their families, who work and sacrifice every day so that we always live in the land of the free."

And while the annual golf classic and dinner—paid for entirely by Roski, Valley and Semcken—raises the majority of Land of the Free's funds with entry fees and sponsorships that range from \$2,500 to more than \$50,000, the foundation also solicits donations on its website throughout the year through a donation portal and an online store. Every single dollar the foundation raises is passed down directly to veteran-related charities that are hand-selected by Roski, Valley and Semcken.

There's no formal selection process for beneficiaries, but the three—who receive far more requests than they're able to fill—spend the entire year reviewing requests, interviewing new applicants and selecting



Valley, Semcken and Roski come together for a photo during the 2012 Land of the Free Foundation Veterans Day Golf Classic. The trio of veterans, friends and colleagues put their heads together in 2007 to find a way to use their connections and resources to benefit veterans and military families during the height of the war in Iraq, and the Land of the Free Foundation was born.



Participants ready their golf carts to commence an annual Veterans Day Golf Classic hosted by the Land of the Free Foundations on the lush grounds of the Pacific Palms Resort.



beneficiaries, whose representatives are presented with checks during the annual foundation dinner following the golf tournament. In order to meet the foundation's criteria, organizations must spend at least 85 percent of donated funds on programming.

"I challenge anybody to look at who we've given money to over the years, to find one that wasn't really doing it right," said Semcken.

The Land of the Free Foundation supports what it considers "priority organizations" like Semper Fi Fund & America's Fund, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and the Medal of Honor Foundation, as well as smaller organizations that support veterans and their families. The foundation has given vital funding to the Marines Memorial Association, the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation, Troops to College, and dozens of others—approximately 75 in total.

Their primary focus has and continues to be "the families and the guys at the tip of the spear," Semcken said. but they also give particular consideration to organizations that address veteran homelessness, education and PTSD.

The Semper Fi Fund, founded in 2003 by a group of

Marine Corps spouses at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., began by supporting wounded, ill and injured Marines and Sailors and their families, both financially and through various programs, and has since expanded to supporting all branches of the armed forces with the addition of "America's Fund" to its name. The highly rated charity has been a major recipient of funds from the Land of the Free since its inception.

"Founders Ed, Kent and John have brought the patriotic community together. Their annual event has become a Veterans Day institution in Los Angeles—a yearly tribute—where love of our country, pride in our flag and

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“I want to get the word out that you all can do something,” Roski said. “We really want people to think, ‘We could do that!’ ”—Ed Roski



Each year, the staff of the Pacific Palms Resort creates elaborate ice sculptures for the foundation’s dinner. In 2007, the sculptures pictured here commemorated the 10th anniversary of the Land of the Free Foundation.

support of our military are celebrated and cherished,” said Karen Guenther, founder and CEO of Semper Fi Fund and America’s Fund, in a statement to *Leatherneck*. “Ed, Kent and John have become part of our SF&AF family. They have continued their support over the years to make sure our mission continues—that no servicemember will be forgotten on their road to recovery and that they will experience the love and appreciation of the American people. Our servicemembers and their families are thriving in ways they otherwise wouldn’t have, thanks to their unwavering support.”

Land of the Free also greatly values and supports the efforts of TAPS, led by president, founder and Gold Star spouse Bonnie Carroll, which provides a 24/7 support network and connections to resources for surviving loved ones of fallen military servicemembers. The generosity of Roski, Valley and Semcken does not go unnoticed.

“John Semcken, Ed Roski and Kent Valley are true American patriots,” Carroll said of the Land of the Free’s founders. “They have served, and they continue to serve, raising millions of dollars to support mission critical military charities like TAPS and the Semper Fi Fund. The families of our nation’s fallen heroes have felt the impact of their steadfast, selfless support and we are profoundly grateful to them!”

During the annual dinner, the foundation honors groups

like Medal of Honor recipients, World War II veterans and recovering combat-wounded servicemembers, and Roski, Valley and Semcken present large checks to the charities and organizations they’ve chosen to support. It’s been a unique opportunity for them to expose their friends and other members of the greater Los Angeles community to the men and women who serve and have served and solicit their support.

Gone are the days when Los Angeles was a large military hub, said Semcken, referencing the closures of various military installations that previously occupied large swaths of the sprawling county. “The people in Los Angeles, they couldn’t tell the difference between an Air Force general and an Army private, but they all are very patriotic. This is a very expensive golf tournament, and every year it’s sold out. We’re amazed that people even though the wars are kind of slowing down, they all recognize that the need doesn’t,” he added, referencing their personal friends and corporations that have rallied around their cause and made generous contributions to the foundation.

As they share the story of their efforts to give back, all three veterans emphasize their hope that others will join them in finding ways, in their own communities, to support the men and women of the armed forces, past, present and future.

“I want to get the word out that you all can do something.”



Roski, Valley and Semcken present a \$100,000 donation to TAPS founder and president Bonnie Carroll during the 2011 Land of the Free Foundation dinner on Veterans Day. From the foundation's inception, worthy organizations like TAPS and Semper Fi Fund have been the primary recipients of the funds raised during the golf tournament.

Roski said. "We really want people to think, 'We could do that!'"

"Everyone has different capacities to do it," said Semcken. "We've been rather lucky, so we have a bigger capacity, but everybody has the ability to do it. We would love if our story just encouraged somebody else to do what we did."

After a challenging year that forced the cancellation of the Land of the Free Foundation's annual dinner due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the modification of the golf tournament to meet health and safety protocols, the event—or lack thereof—still managed to raise \$1 million in support of the organizations that work tirelessly to ensure that the unique needs of veterans and military families are met. Roski, Valley and Semcken call to mind the lessons they learned from serving in the Navy and Marine Corps and say that they continue to apply them today.

"This year is a perfect example. You never know what's coming over the hill or whether the ship is sailing into a storm," said Semcken. "We're kind of perpetually prepared."

"Never stop until you've reached your objective," Valley added.

Editor's note: All photos courtesy of Land of the Free Foundation. Sara W. Bock has written previously about TAPS and the Semper Fi Fund. To learn more, visit the Leatherneck online archives to read "Keeping Up With the Terrain: Over 15 years, Semper Fi Fund Founders Adapt Mission as Needs Evolve," and the two-part article: "Survivors Helping Survivors Heal: TAPS Provides Peer Support, Resources and Comfort in Tragedy."



A Marine color guard supports an annual Land of the Free Foundation dinner. In an area that in recent years has lacked a substantial military presence, Roski, Valley and Semcken take pride in giving their friends and colleagues in Los Angeles an opportunity to spend time with the military community.