

Joseph S. Garcia

February 25, 1919 ~ April 8, 2024

Joseph S. Garcia passed away peacefully in his sleep at the William E. Christoffersen Salt Lake Veterans Home on April 8, 2024. He was 105.

Mr. Garcia was born in Kansas City, Kansas, on February 25, 1919, in the midst of the Spanish Flu pandemic. His parents, Jose and Aurora were hard-working Mexican immigrants who came to America to work in the railroad industry. In the early 1920s, the family relocated to Tehachapi, California, where Mr. Garcia's parents separated. As a newly single parent in need of employment, Mr. Garcia's mother sought work in Tehachapi and Los Angeles before finding a job in Bakersfield, California, as a clerk in a laundry and dry-cleaning establishment.

It was there that she met Mr. Garcia's eventual stepfather, Jose Uribe, who went on to open a successful laundry and dry-cleaning store of his own in the area, where the young family thrived until a fire destroyed the store on the eve of the Great Depression.

Unable to rebuild, the family moved to Fresno, California, where Mr. Garcia grew to manhood. He proved to be a hard-working and enterprising young man, working as a picker in the fields, as a mule skinner on a large ranch, and ultimately, in a trade he would master for the next fifty years, as a foundry man. He was especially proud of the fact that he helped unionize the foundry he worked at in Fresno, ultimately earning himself what was then a handsome salary of twenty-one dollars a week.

It was enough money to enable the still teenaged Mr. Garcia, in 1938, to buy a 1932 Chevrolet Confederate. He used the car to travel all over California with his best friend and sparring partner, Richard "The Sheik" Rangel, a ranked middleweight boxer who was prominent in the California fight scene throughout the 1940s. So good were Mr. Garcia's own pugilistic skills, that Rangel and one of his promoters, Ralph Giordano, also known as Young Corbett III, the World Welterweight Champion in 1933, tried to get Mr. Garcia to go professional as a welterweight.

But Mr. Garcia had other ideas.

In 1939, he met Katherine Lujan, or Kay, to those who knew and loved her. In 1940, they were married in what some called the social event of the season. It took place at Ryan's Auditorium, the largest fight venue in Fresno, thanks in large part to Mr. Garcia's friendships with Rangel and Corbett. Soon afterward, they were on their way to San Francisco, where Mr. Garcia got a job in a San Francisco foundry as a moulder.

In 1944, despite the fact he had two children and was working in a defense-related industry, Mr. Garcia received a draft notice from Uncle Sam. At the time, the United States was fighting a world war against fascist elements in Europe and Asia. Mr. Garcia's employers told him they could get him exempt from the call up, but he refused, telling them it was his duty as an American to get into the fight.

After basic infantry training at Camp Roberts, California, that's exactly what he did.

He joined the 41st Infantry Division as it was preparing for the invasion of the Philippine Islands. He saw combat on the Zamboanga peninsula, serving as a company runner, ammo bearer, assistant machine gunner, and machine gunner.

Like most veterans of his age, he didn't always talk about his wartime experiences, but on occasions he would recall a story or two. One particular favorite was about the time he and his machine gun team were nearly surrounded by Japanese marines on a hilltop. In the din of a firefight, just before the team was about to be overrun, a US Army Piper Cub aircraft appeared overheard. Mr. Garcia recalled how the pilot, who was wearing a red baseball cap, shouted down at him that his team was about to be surrounded. The pilot then pointed in the direction the team should go to escape. Without hesitation, Mr. Garcia gathered up his team and not only escaped, but lived to fight another day.

Some sixty years after the war ended, as Mr. Garcia recounted that particular story at a reunion of 41st ID veterans, another veteran sitting next to him gasped, and then, as the entire room turned towards him to see why, the ex-soldier pulled out a red baseball cap and remarked, "I was that pilot."

Mr. Garcia's long life, it seemed, was a litany of such magical moments.

After the war, he moved his growing family to Santa Clara, California. Amidst the apricot and cherry trees, he built, with hard work and his bare hands, a middle-class American dream for his wife and five children. To pay for it, in addition to his day job, he worked nights and weekends, including as a vendor at San Francisco Giants games in Candlestick Park, football games at Stanford Stadium and the Salinas Rodeo.

Another favorite memory pertained to those times after the Giants games when the vendors would gather in the bowels of the stadium to split their earnings and have a beer with players like Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, Dick Dietz, Tito Fuentes, Jimmy Davenport, and the Alou brothers, all of whom regularly came by to say hello.

After fifty years in the foundry business, Mr. Garcia retired and again demonstrating a love for exploration and adventure that defined his life, bought an RV and moved from California to Salt Lake City, Utah.

He and Kay loved the mountains, camping, fishing, and above all else, sharing that love with their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Even after Kay's passing in 2004, Mr. Garcia continued to travel with family and close friends.

That travel included a road trip with two of his adult grandchildren in August 2023 when he went to Portland, Oregon, to attend the final reunion of his World War II division. So determined was he to make the trip that he spent the months beforehand doing laps with his walker around his neighborhood and arm presses in his favorite living room chair.

Mr. Garcia, a lifelong Catholic, was devoted to his faith to the end. He was preceded in death by his wife of sixty-four years, Kay, and a grandson, Edward. He is survived by his five children—Joseph Jr. (Velma), Rachel, Carmen (Al), Emily (Dave) and Dolores, nine grandchildren, twenty-two great grandchildren, and thirteen great, great grandchildren.

A memorial service will take place on Tuesday, April 30th 2024 at 11:30 am at the St. Thomas More Catholic Church located at 3015 E. Creek Rd, Cottonwood Heights, UT. Friends and family may gather 30 minutes prior. Interment to follow at Utah Veterans Memorial Park in Bluffdale, UT.

You may watch the service online through Zoom by clicking the "Watch Service" button above.