

# 'They Made Me Feel at Home'

## A VFW Post in San Diego offers a 'family-friendly environment' for its guests

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This month, VFW magazine continues its “Destination Post Series.” The series will feature 125 VFW Posts located in sought-after tourist destinations. Featured VFW Posts are those that make a real difference in the communities in which the Posts are located. This month’s article takes VFW magazine to San Diego, California.

San Diego is known as a military town with beaches, nearby mountains and deserts. Visitors typically find themselves in tourist areas, such as Coronado Island, Seaport Village or Balboa Park. While these spots are popular, visitors typically do not get to see all of what San Diego has to offer.

A hidden gem is VFW Post 7420 in the San Diego neighborhood of Barrio Logan, the heart of the city’s Chicano culture. The Post sits on the corner of Logan Avenue and South Evans Street near Chicano Park, which features Mexican-inspired murals painted on the underpass of the iconic San Diego-Coronado Bridge. Mexican-American influences are found throughout Barrio Logan, with shops, restaurants, street vendors and art galleries. The community is located just south of downtown San Diego and north of Naval Station San Diego.

### **STARTED BY MEXICAN-AMERICANS**

VFW Post 7420 was established on April 14, 1955, in downtown San Diego. The Post in the 1970s bought property in the barrio, where the Post sits today.

“Post 7420 was founded by World War II and Korean War veterans that were not being admitted to other veterans service organizations because they were Mexican,” said Livier “Livy” Lazaro, commander of Post 7420. “So they just chartered their own VFW Post instead. They knew the importance of veterans service organizations.”

Lazaro, a retired Army veteran, is the first female commander of VFW Post 7420, something she said that she takes pride in.

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“It is an honor to be a caretaker of the Post,” said Lazaro, as she sits in the Post’s museum. “I’m just doing everything I can to make those who came before me proud.”

Lazaro said VFW Post 7420 strives to be an integral part of the community, welcoming in veterans and their families. There is always something happening at the Post, she said.

For example, the Post hosts steak nights on the last Friday of each month. Guests can expect a full steak dinner at a reasonable rate. Such dinners include entertainment by musicians such as Bill Caballero, a Latin jazz musician.

Regular karaoke nights, dance nights and events such as comedy shows hosted at the VFW Post attract visitors as well.

### **HONORING DEPORTED VETERANS**

This year, on the afternoon of May 27, Memorial Day, VFW Post 7420 members held a ceremony at Friendship Park in Tijuana, Mexico, to commemorate deported veterans who died in exile. Along with Post 7420 members, deported U.S. veterans living in Tijuana attended the ceremony to honor fellow deported veterans. The names of known deceased veterans were recited, one after another.

“The list gets longer and longer each year,” said Johnny Odom, a retired Army veteran and VFW Post 7420 quartermaster. “It’s a shame that this is happening to our own veterans. They served honorably just like everyone else, but they are treated with disrespect and forgotten about by our government. In some cases, deported veterans have started families while away from the U.S. Many want to come back home, but some just want to be able to get health care services at VA. They don’t have access to it being deported.”

One of the veterans who attended the ceremony was Oliván Acosta, a Marine Corps Reserve veteran. He was deported in 2022.

Acosta said that due to a misunderstanding in 2014, he was arrested at his home for domestic violence, for which he ended up not getting charged. However, he broke probation when he tried to contact his wife. Acosta claims he was just trying to get her to “come back home,” but scared her in the process. Acosta was sentenced to serve time in jail for one year and three months.

“I thought that when I left the jail, I would be deported,” Acosta said. “But they told me to go home.”

After his release, Acosta lived in a halfway house, then later lived with his son, a Navy chief petty officer, who lived on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. However, Acosta said officials came to his house two years later to deport him. Acosta said he did not understand why he was being deported.

“I already served my time,” Acosta said. “I feel like I’m being double-punished. I’ve never had a criminal mindset. I’ve never even had a speeding ticket. We are human, and we all make mistakes.”

Acosta said he is hopeful to come back to the U.S. someday.

“It’s always been home,” Acosta said.

### **‘DEMORALIZING’ DEPORTATION**

But not all deported veterans have a criminal record. One such veteran is David Kinyua Bariu, from Kenya.

Born in Nairobi, Bariu came to the U.S. in 1998 for an education in business administration at Southern Arkansas University. At the age of 22, Bariu received a student visa, but he then later joined the U.S. Army.

“I talked to an Army recruiter who told me that I was eligible to join because I had a student visa,” Bariu said.

Two weeks later, Bariu was at boot camp in Fort Benning, Georgia. He served at Washington’s Fort Lewis soon after. But two years later, things changed.

“My recruiter was court-martialed for illegally recruiting international students into the Army to receive bonuses,” Bariu said. “As a result, I was honorably discharged.”

Bariu found himself in immigration court, where a judge said he was in violation of his student visa. In an opinion article for the San Diego Union-Tribune, Bariu wrote that he was told that he had to “accept a voluntary departure” back to Kenya.

“I was lucky enough to get a lawyer in Texas, and I filed for naturalization under Section 329 of the *Immigration and Nationality Act*, which extends citizenship to non-citizen service members during periods of hostilities,” Bariu said. “This process kept me legally in the country and allowed me to join the Air Force Reserve, where I served for over five years at Carswell Air Force Base in Texas.”

Even after joining the military for a second time, Bariu’s immigration troubles were about to get worse.

“Unfortunately, all of my military service, work history and education was disregarded in 2007 when Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents came to my Irving, Texas, residence and detained me,” Bariu said in the article.

“They confiscated my military certifications and Department of Veterans Affairs ID card,

and I was detained for one year at the ICE Rolling Plains Detention Center, in Haskell, Texas, before being unceremoniously deported back to Kenya in 2008.”

Bariu cited “racial profiling and racism” for the reason he was deported.

**SAN DIEGO-AREA POSTS MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Listed below are other VFW Posts near San Diego. The Posts listed are just a small sampling of the many outstanding Posts in the area.

<b>VFW Post 2422 in Coronado</b> 557 Orange Ave Coronado, CA 92118 (619) 435-6917 Commander Boyd Zbinden	Commander William Kimble <a href="https://www.facebook.com/VFW-Post7907">https://www.facebook.com/VFW-Post7907</a>
<b>VFW Post 5985 in San Diego (Pacific Beach)</b> 853 Turquoise St San Diego, CA 92109 (858) 488-3631 Commander Michael Hill <a href="https://www.facebook.com/vfw5985">https://www.facebook.com/vfw5985</a>	<b>VFW Post 7264 in Joshua Tree</b> 6402 Veterans Way Joshua Tree, CA 92252 (760) 366-2717 Commander Frank Clark <a href="https://www.facebook.com/VFW7264JT">https://www.facebook.com/VFW7264JT</a>
<b>VFW Post 9578 in Alpine</b> 844 Tavern Rd Alpine, CA 91901 (619) 445-6040 Commander John Sullivan <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Al-pineVFW9578">https://www.facebook.com/Al-pineVFW9578</a>	<b>VFW Post 2080 in Campo</b> 301 Sheridan Rd Campo, CA 91906 (619) 478-9212 Commander James Collins <a href="https://www.facebook.com/CampoVFW">https://www.facebook.com/CampoVFW</a>
<b>VFW Post 7907 in Poway</b> 12342 Old Pomerado Rd Poway, CA 92064 (858) 748-7907	<b>VFW Post 1513 in Escondido</b> 515 W Valley Pkwy Escondido, CA 92025 (760) 877-6229 Commander Andres Aguilar <a href="https://www.facebook.com/vfw-post1513">https://www.facebook.com/vfw-post1513</a>

“It made me mentally damaged, because I considered America my home,” Bariu said.

Bariu added that the deportation to Kenya also was “demoralizing” and put his life at risk.

“It was a hostile environment, because Al-Shabab terrorizes Kenyan citizens,” Bariu said. “Being a deported U.S. veteran in the region didn’t make it easy on me. I was in danger for years.”

After years living in Kenya, traveling the country for work, he finally received word from the Immigrant Military Members and Veterans Initiative that he was eligible for return to the

U.S.

Bariu said if it were not for help from the Black Deported Veterans of America and members of VFW Post 7420, he would not have been able to travel back to the U.S. for a naturalization interview. Bariu's 14-year immigration battle finally ended in 2023 when he became a U.S. citizen.

"I was still serving when they detained me," Bariu said. "I thought I would never be able to come back home. I feel blessed now that I'm back."

Black Deported Veterans of America Co-Director James Smith, a member of VFW Post 7420, said he joined VFW Post 7420 after finding out that members at the Post have the same passion of bringing deported veterans home.

"When I first started working with the Post, they made me feel at home," said Smith, who served in the Marine Corps from 1981 to 1987. "Joining the Post gave me a reason to be proud of being a veteran. They were serious about community service and bringing home deported veterans. And working with the VFW has given Black Deported Veterans of America more opportunities to tell legislators about deported veterans."

To learn more about Black Deported Veterans of America, visit <https://www.bdva.us>.

### **'ONE BIG FAMILY'**

In addition to the Post's efforts working on behalf of deported veterans, its members keep busy in the community. One such example is the Post's partnership with Feeding San Diego. Members can be seen distributing food to those suffering from food insecurity.

In January, historical levels of flooding took place, and many local families were displaced and in need of meals. VFW Post 7420 members and volunteers immediately started preparing hot meals, an estimated 400 meals a day, for flood victims in shelters and hotels.

"It is a collective effort with everyone here at Post 7420," said Odom. "We are one big family here. We do everything we can to help our community and veterans. It is self-rewarding to be a part of this organization."

VFW Post 7420 Senior Vice Commander Angel Garcia said he grew up in Barrio Logan close to the Post. Before even considering joining the Marine Corps, Garcia said he attended holiday events with his family at the Post, including receiving Christmas gifts that were distributed by VFW members.

Garcia, who served from 1993 to 1997, called it a "full-circle" moment when he became a member of the Post.

“The VFW is such an exclusive club of war veterans, and it is an honor to be a part of that,” Garcia said.

*This article is featured in the 2024 September issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiwa](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.*