

Vale veteran recalls 16 months in Korean War

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This photo shows Larry Mendiola in his home in Vale.

Larry Meyer | The Argus Observer

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the third in a seven-part series leading up to Veterans Day. Don't miss our special Veterans publication today.

VALE — Larry Mendiola, 84, a lifelong Malheur County resident, is a Korean War veteran, but also served his community in a variety of ways as he took on several occupations.

The Vale man was drafted into the United States Army in 1953, and was discharged in 1955.

“I was drafted as a private,” he said.

However, he made his way through the non-commissioned ranks, and was discharged as a corporal.

Mendiola spent 16 months in Korea, working most of his time as a mechanic on Jeeps and other light vehicles. At different times, he also was a member of the 40th and 25th infantry divisions.

As a mechanic, Mendiola moved back and forth between Seoul, the capital of South Korea, and up north near the 38th parallel, which is still the dividing line between South and North Korea.

Most of the time, he said, he was away from the fighting, but Mendiola did come under fire for about three weeks.

His main remembrances of South Korea, however, were of people living in the streets and in cardboard shacks.

“It was a mess when we got there,” he said of the country.

“It doesn’t look like the same place,” he said, of scenes of South Korea he has seen since.

Mendiola was born in Winnemucca, Nevada, and raised in Harper, where he graduated high school.

Back then, Harper had two stores and two service stations, he said.

Mendiola was working for the Oregon Highway Department at Harper when he was drafted. He returned to the highway department after being discharged, but worked out Ontario for another year.

At the urging of a friend, Mendiola said, he went to barber school in late 1957, and ended up cutting hair for 50 years. In addition, he farmed for 50 years, and was a part-time bartender for both the Elks Lodge and former Golden Slipper.

He liked being his own boss, Mendiola said.

Now retired, he was honored in 2006 as Grand Marshal of Vale’s annual 4th of July Parade; his wife, Dottie, was marshal in 2007. The couple married in 1956.

Mendiola has been a member of the American Legion for more than 60 years, and was honored in 2016 for his 60th anniversary with the wartime veterans organization.

Larry Meyer

Larry Meyer is a reporter for the Argus Observer.