



Gen. Lyon and B-25
Mitchell Bomber

The Achievement-Filled Life of an Orange County Icon

■ By KATIE MURAR

With more than 100,000 homes built over a nearly seven-decade long career, **William Lyon**'s influence on the development of the western U.S., and his stature in the homebuilding industry, is unmatched.

In Orange County, where the creation and development of the area's political infrastructure, arts community and philanthropic sectors all bear Lyon's fingerprints, his larger-than-life presence is even more pronounced.

"He lived the fullest life, fuller than anyone I know," said **Mike Meyer**, retired managing partner of **EYKenneth Leventhal Real Estate Group** in Orange County, who knew Lyon for nearly 55 years. "He was an incredible businessman, a patriot, and a philanthropist who has left a huge legacy in Orange County."

Lyon, who helped shape and modernize Orange County's business community, and

whose work at **William Lyon Homes** and its predecessor companies helped turn the area into the country's largest hub for homebuilders, died May 22 at age 97.

A major general of the United States Air Force who also served as Chief of the Air Force Reserve, Lyon was often referred to simply as "The General."

Those who knew him best describe a gentler side than the military moniker would suggest.

"I think because of his reputation and accomplishments, some may have expected my dad to be a very dry, serious person, but the truth is, he was just a lot of fun," said his son, **Bill H. Lyon** (see page 47 for more).

Early Years

Lyon was born in Los Angeles in 1923 to parents Abraham and Susan Lyon; his father, an ambulance driver in the Army Medical Corps, met his mother, a nurse, during World War I.

Before Lyon would go on to create the homebuilding company that is now known as William Lyon Homes, he was a plucky child looking to prove himself to his family, including his elder brother **Leon** and to his father, who emigrated from Russia through Ellis Island "with virtually nothing."

"My dad always had this feeling that he was viewed as not being enough, or up for the task," said Bill H. Lyon. "He wasn't the best student, and wasn't engaged in the things his brother was."

The two young boys attended a military boarding school, where 7-year-old Lyon would get into trouble for things like not making his bed neatly enough, or fumbling a wooden rifle in a parade.

He graduated from **Beverly Hills High School** in 1941, the same year as the attack on Pearl Harbor. He was in his first semester at the **University of Southern California** at the time, and left to enlist in the Navy as an air cadet along with one of his high school

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Leon and William Lyon at Page Military Academy



Gen. William and Willa Dean Lyon



During service in Korea

friends.

After a deviated septum caused Lyon to fail his physical, he had sinus surgery, and tried to enlist again a few months later.

The same doctor turned him away once again, saying "I didn't like your nose before, and I still don't like it," according to a 1998 interview between the General and the Business Journal.

"Anyone who knows my father knows that when he is passionate about something, he doesn't give up," Bill H. said.

Lyon attended the **Dallas Aviation School and Air College**, and after receiving his license he went into teaching. His students, ironically, included Navy pilots.

Finally joining the Army Air Corps Reserve in 1943, Lyon ferried aircraft around the world in WWII before flying combat missions in the Korean War.

He returned to Los Angeles after flying 75 missions. His homebuilding career soon began.

Homebuilding Origins

It started the way many successful family businesses do: around the dinner table.

Lyon's father was a former homebuilder, but at this time had a liquor distributorship and operated Guardian Thrift and Loan. The father supplied the initial funding, and he and his two sons went on to create what was then called **Luxury Homes** in 1954.

Lyon fell in love with the business, and

wanted to keep operating it from Fullerton, where he lived with his first wife, Miriam, and two daughters: **Susan Lyon Isola**, who was 5 when **Luxury Homes** launched; and her younger sister, **Christine**, who was almost 4.

Miriam died in 1970, when the girls were in college, from a brain aneurysm.

As a single dad, Lyon focused on his career full throttle, and it was at work that his future wife, **Willa Dean Harwell**, caught his eye.

She was a bookkeeper that moved up to become the first female vice president of the company, and he asked her out in 1971. They married that year, and had William Harwell Lyon two years later.

A Sale, and Buyback

The three business partners remained involved until the company sold in 1968 to **American Standard**. The deal would be the first of many mergers Lyon made to better and grow the business, all while never taking his hands out of the operation.

The resulting combination had its thorns, with opposing cultures between the large New York-based plumbing and heating company and the homebuilder, notes **Peter Ochs**, who took a job with American Standard in 1967 to work on the merger as a newly minted Stanford MBA.

"I knew nothing about the homebuilding industry, but after the merger, Bill asked me

to work with him in the new residential subsidiary, and I said of course," Ochs said.

He was in Southern California working on creating new joint ventures for Lyon's firm, when in 1971 he approached Lyon about the cultural and organizational problems he had noticed that resulted as part of the merger.

"I was nervous, but he heard me out and agreed with me," Ochs said.

"He said he wanted to buy the company back, and asked if I would help. I said yes, again."

William Lyon Co.

They spent months trying to garner the capital necessary to close the deal, but it never went through due to a hesitant American Standard.

Undeterred, Lyon left the business, and worked with Ochs to form a new entity, and ultimately bought the assets back from American Standard to reassemble the homebuilding business.

The newly formed William Lyon Co. launched in 1972, specialized in entry-level housing during a period of economic expansion for the state.

"He was fantastic at buying land," remembers Ochs. "He got right to it, tying up these spectacular parcels in Southern California."

"That was his biggest skill," Meyer adds. "He had a sense for where demand would be, and he could make good deals because of his local connections, which larger, national

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Politically Connected

When President **Ronald Reagan** visited Gen. **William Lyon**'s 134-acre home in Coto de Caza, he quipped that the Orange County estate was "a hell of a lot better than the White House."

The hillside estate has been home to many political functions, and has been visited by several Republican presidents, some of whom Lyon counted as friends, including Reagan.

The **Richard Nixon Foundation** called Lyon "an Orange County icon, stalwart patriot and longtime supporter" of the Yorba Linda library and foundation.

Lyon's Coto de Caza home also served as the birthplace for the founding chapter of **The New Majority**, a political nonprofit organization dedicated to "enhancing the image of the Republican party in California," according to **Tom Tucker**, a founding member along with **Larry Higby** and **Mark Johnson**.

"In 1998, the Republican Party's image was becoming increasingly tarnished, and there wasn't any overlap with the party and the education, business and nonprofit sectors," Johnson



Lyon and George Argyros, who bought AirCal together in 1981, later helped launch The New Majority

said.

Johnson, Tucker and Higby conceived the idea during an event for **Dan Lungren**, a 1998 Republican candidate for governor, at Lyon's home.

They engaged Lyon, known for his involvement in Republican politics, as well as his business success.

"Bill was the magic key that could open up almost any door," Higby said. "He would sometimes meet first with candidates before bringing them in to meet us, and it was incredibly useful."

Securing Lyon was crucial in getting everyone on board, including **Don Bren** and one-time business partner **George Argyros**, another founding member, according to Tucker.

Lyon and Argyros went in together to buy **AirCal** out of bankruptcy in 1981, see page 40 for more.

Lyon's political interests frequently intersected with his charitable causes, like when he held a fundraising event at his estate for the Reagan presidential library. Tickets ran \$100,000 per couple, according to news reports.

—Katie Murar

companies lacked."

Becoming the General

Lyon maintained his position in the Air Force Reserve while running the real estate business, holding various positions throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

From 1972 to 1975, he served as a mobilization assistant to the Commander and Chief of the Strategic Air Command, and he soon after received a promotion to serve as Chief of the Air Force Reserve in Washington, D.C.

It's his military work that in particular garnered the respect of another real estate giant in OC, **Irvine Co.** Chairman **Donald Bren**.

"He was a unique leader who essentially was responsible for two leadership positions concurrently," said Bren, a former Marine, noting Lyon's 1974 promotion to Major General and taking the Air Force Reserve Chief position the following year.

"The General was a longtime good friend who was highly respected for his outstand-

ing contributions to his country and his community," Bren said.

Lyon left the business in Ochs' hands between 1975 and 1979, when he returned to take back the company.

"[Lyon] had just returned from this huge job, where he oversaw hundreds of thousands of people and a massive budget, and I tried to make his transition back as easy as possible," said Ochs, who left the company in 1980 to form **Fieldstone Group of Cos.**, where he currently serves as chairman of the board.

Though he retired from the Air Force, Lyon remained engaged in aviation pursuits in following years, including the acquisition of AirCal in 1981.

Lyon partnered with prominent OC businessman **George Argyros** to buy the airline in a bankruptcy proceeding for about \$61 million. They tripled their initial investment in a 1986 sale to **American Airlines**, which paid a reported \$225 million. **Bob Crandall**, then chairman and CEO of the airline,

offered Lyon a seat on the board following the sale.

Hands-On

William Lyon Co. saw large gains throughout the 1970s and delivered north of 1,500 homes in 1980. Notable early projects included Rancho Potrero in Thousand Oaks; Anaheim Hills; and Victoria in Rancho Cucamonga, according to Meyer.

At its height, the company was among the largest real estate companies in the nation, posting revenue of \$1.2 billion in 1991.

"No matter how big the company got, it was never just a company to Bill, it was a family," said **Wade Cable**, former president of William Lyon Homes.

The two met in the midst of another major merger, when Lyon acquired the **Presley Cos.**—which Cable was running—from **Pacific Lighting** in 1987.

"The General was such a hands-on guy, and when he got involved in something, he showed up personally," Cable said.

Philanthropy Focus



At Orangewood Children's Home groundbreaking in the early 1980s

It's nearly impossible to document the breadth of Gen. **William Lyon's** philanthropic efforts in Orange County.

From donating time, money and resources to dozens of causes in the county, his full impact isn't quantifiable, but it's safe to say there are several organizations that would likely not be around today, at least in the same capacity, if not for his generosity.

"His four primary passions were family, business, philanthropy, and politics, and he donated the same amount of passion and commitment to each of those throughout his career," said **Gary Hunt**, former executive vice president of Irvine Co. and current vice chairman of **California Strategies LLC**.

"The General's word was his bond, and everyone knew that."

At the forefront of the philanthropic passion is helping abused and neglected children. That focus took shape with **Orangewood Foundation**, a nonprofit that provides services to foster youth in Orange County.

Lyon was introduced to the precursor to the organization in the late 1970s through his stepdaughter, **Marcia**, who worked for the **Anaheim Police Department** (see page 42).

Lyon and his wife, **Willa Dean**, began their association by donating a decorated Christmas tree to the then Albert Sitton Home, which was renamed Orangewood when it was later expanded into a campus in Orange for battered and abused children.

"We were very overcrowded, and in

need of a new facility," said Director **Bill Steiner**, who founded Orangewood and once served as chairman of the OC Board of Supervisors.

"The presiding judge of the juvenile court was the one who thought Gen. Lyon would be the best person to help lead this effort."

The new center would require \$8.5 million in private donations, and Lyon put together a board of 14 people in 1980 to meet that need.

He kicked off the funding round, pledging \$1 million over five years with the stipulation that it had to be matched by the rest of the board.

The board stepped up, and with another \$1 million donation from the **Harry and Grace Steele Foundation** and a nearly \$120,000 gift from the **Junior League of Orange County**, the Orangewood board had a good start.

The facility opened in 1985, and still serves thousands of kids each year.

"Their pledge triggered the generosity of others, and they continued to donate over the years," Steiner said. "While there were many causes that the General and Mrs. Lyon were involved in, they embraced this one fiercely, and they were the heart and soul of this effort."

Lyon and his family also gave significantly to the **Segerstrom Center for the**

Arts (formerly called the Orange County Performing Arts Center) after being approached by the late **Henry Segerstrom** to make a donation to kick off the construction of the first hall, which opened in 1986, according to **Tim Strader Sr.**, who was president of the center at the time.

"But he didn't just give money, he gave time and talent to talk about the project with other leaders in the community, and share why having a performing arts center would be a significant cultural addition for residents," Strader said.

Other community organizations include, but are certainly not limited to, the **United Way** and the **Orange County Boy Scouts Council**.

"My parents gave more than anyone knew," said **Bill H. Lyon**.

—Katie Murar



Gen. Lyon visiting with Orangewood kids in mid 1980s

Family Anecdotes: Driving Lessons, Life Lessons

Bill H. Lyon Son

"When my parents had me, my dad was 50. He was often mistaken for my grandpa, which didn't really bother him until they wouldn't let him in the delivery room at first, because they didn't believe him.

"My dad was incredibly goofy, and would always entertain me. My mom tells a story of him climbing into my crib, and letting me bury him in my stuffed animals.

"He had great one-liners. A few months ago, during a checkup, a nurse commented that my dad looked handsome, to which he responded: 'you must be drunk.' He kept his sense of humor to the very end.

"He taught me how to drive when I was about 11, and he definitely gave me more trust than I thought I deserved."

For more anecdotes from Bill H., see our Leader Board, page 47.

Susan Lyon Isola Daughter

"Even when times in the business were difficult, he never gave up, and I always admired that. It seemed like he was always pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

"He used to take us to his housing developments, and we would hide in the closets when there were open houses, and listen to what the buyers were saying. We would run and tell dad, and he would make adjustments based on what people commented on.

"Halloweens were a big deal in our house; he used to dress up as Frankenstein.

"I was 6 or 7 the first time I flew with my dad. He used to fly us to Sun Valley a lot for vacations, and we would be his co-pilots. I always felt incredibly safe with him.

"I now have my pilot's license, and Christine is getting hers now. Aviation is in our DNA. The exact plane my mother was a stewardess on is in the **Lyon Air Museum**.

"My dad used to towel dry my and Christine's hair. He used to shine his shoes all the time, and he used a similar method for both."



Photo taken circa 1945

Christine Rhoades Daughter

"You would rarely find him in the kitchen, but when he was, he was likely making us the same hot chocolate recipe his mom made for him.

"He started building up his car collection in the 1960s. The first one in his collection was a 1935 Packard, and he taught me how to polish the car with him. That was when I learned the phrase, 'you need to use more elbow grease!'

"He loved to surprise us. One time, he packed the four of us into a T-Bird, and drove down Harbor Boulevard. All of a sudden he took a hard right, and drove into Disneyland. It was such a surprise, and it's something I did with my kids, and now my oldest daughter does it with her sons.

"I had my first car lesson when I was 9, Susie was 11, when we were on vacation in Hawaii. He took us through the pineapple fields in a stick shift Jeep. One of our favorite things was driving lessons with Dad.

"At a slumber party, my friends and I decided we wanted to toilet paper somebody's house. He drove the getaway car."

Marcia Stone Stepdaughter

"I was 19 when my mom married [Lyon], and he never made me feel like I was any-

thing other than his daughter. He was a legend in my eyes, and even being his daughter, I found myself in awe of him when I was around him.

"For the last 14 years of my career, I worked for both the homebuilding company and the apartment company, and I learned what he was truly about in the business world. Everyone in the company respected him to the highest degree, and he held us to the highest work ethics. It was clear that he had developed a very strong culture, because everyone got along so well. When you work for a company where everyone loves who they work with, that comes from the top.

"He loved my mom so much, and she loved him. They were devoted to one another. My husband and I have been married 45 years, and they really taught us how to love, and how special that is.

"As a police officer in Anaheim, I had to take a baby to what was then the Albert Sitton Home, and it was such a dark, lonely place, I was devastated to let her go. I told my mom about it—she was a vice president for William Lyon Homes at the time—and she asked the company's contractors and vendors to give donations to the organization. She made donations too, and provided television sets for the children's rooms. When Bill caught wind, that's when the **Orangewood Foundation** really took off, and he helped to make it what it is today."

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“When I arranged the meeting between Pacific Lighting and the William Lyon Co., I waited for him in the lobby, expecting him to show up with a team of lawyers and accountants. He showed up alone. It was just his way,” said Cable, who ran operations for William Lyon Homes between 1999 and 2007.

Emile Haddad, now chief executive of **FivePoint Holdings**, remembers in the late 1990s when the General was looking to make a deal with his former employer, **Lennar Corp.**, which had just acquired the 2,200-acre Coto de Caza development site from **Chevron’s** land division.

“I was still fairly young in my career at the time, and I remember getting a call at home from Gen. Lyon, which was an incredibly surreal experience,” Haddad said. “But he didn’t make me feel like he was this powerful figure, he had a very humble approach to the discussion.

“No matter how successful he got, he never lost his direction.”

Dealing with Down Times

Lyon went through numerous market cycles with his company, the most notable downturns being the recession of the early 1990s and the financial crisis of 2008.

The financial impact to Lyon and his company were perhaps harder during the first event, with Lyon holding on to land that had sharply lost its value, finding himself in a sticky situation with the lenders who financed those deals.

“He found a way to get all of the lenders in the same room and on the same page, and he worked out a nonjudicial restructuring in which he said he would take care of his debts if they gave him time,” Meyer said. “Most lenders don’t have that patience, but they worked with him as he modified the debt plans, and brought on new investors.”

According to an unpublished manuscript, Lyon told the banks he would “stay with the company and keep working until we recapitulated as much as possible.”

“We restructured the company. I liquidated some of my personal assets, and we downsized. But we paid off every debt.

“Everybody that was owed five cents got the full five cents.”

As personal losses mounted against professional ones, Lyon remained optimistic.

“What I always admired about him was



when times were good, he was a General: very tough and always pushing people to be their best,” said **Frank Suryan**, who in 1989 launched an apartment group now known as **Lyon Living**, the company’s multifamily arm.

“But when times were tough, he was a compassionate, empathetic and charming leader.”

Lyon Living

Suryan met Lyon when he worked for **Western National**, which Lyon counted as an investor.

“He asked me if I’d ever consider leaving, and when the General calls, you answer,” Suryan said.

He was 30 when he launched the apartment group with the General, who Suryan described as “very presidential looking, a tall, well-groomed and dressed man that commanded respect by his presence. But then he would open his mouth, and he would change into this charming, funny person,” Suryan said. “It caught me off guard.”

Lyon Living started out as a property man-

agement firm for previously acquired assets, but changed course in 1991 when the economy tanked.

“As part of his renegotiation with the banks, they separated the apartments from the homebuilding companies, and I managed the apartments on behalf of the banks, while Bill continued to run the homebuilding side,” Suryan said. “It took about seven years, but we got through it, mainly because of the relationships we had built with the lenders.

“The General also had to personally leverage his assets, but taking risks was not something he was afraid of.”

The apartment company now counts some 14,000 units; its assets are worth more than \$3 billion.

Lyon has also seen banking issues from the other side of the table; he was a founder and former chairman of **Commercial Bank of California**, based in Irvine.

Glass Half Full

When the homebuilding company was forced to restructure again in 2011 along with many other real estate companies following the Great Recession, the General was again looking forward, not back.

“It was a few years after he took the company private, and never once did he regret that decision, despite his personal losses,” said **Matt Zaist**, who took on the chief executive position in 2016, about three years after William Lyon Homes went public for the second time.

“During some of the darkest times, he could tell I was in stress, and he would walk in to my office, and he would tell me a story or a joke, and he would laugh so hard he wouldn’t be able to get to the punchline, and before I knew it I was laughing right along with him,” Zaist said. “It was my weekly medicine.”

The General’s sense of humor is perhaps one of his most memorable qualities, with family members, friends and colleagues all referencing his quick wit and dry humor.

“He always had us listen to records of stand-up comedians of the 1960s,” such as **Shelly Berman**, **Jonathan Winters** and **Bob Newhart**, recalls Lyon’s daughter, **Christine**.

Recent Sale

Zaist is one of many in Orange County who considers the General a father figure of

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sorts.

He met Lyon when he was attending Santa Margarita Catholic High School with Bill H.; the two met in 1989, when the school was in its second year of operation. They bonded over their mutual love for cars.

“When I first met [Lyon], he really didn’t come across as this larger than life, legendary icon. He appeared to me as a humble, down-to-earth man that was more than willing to take time out of his day to talk to me about anything,” Zaist said.

The recent sale of William Lyon Homes brings the story full circle.

“It was my job to make sure I found the best solution for our shareholders, and find a company that had a compatible culture with the one that the General worked so hard to create,” Zaist said.

“While it was an emotional decision for Bill H., he knew it would be the best thing for the company, and the family was supportive as well.”

The sale to **Taylor Morrison Home Corp.** closed in February for about \$2.5 billion, including the assumption debt. It’s a far cry from the \$400 million the company was worth in 2011, Zaist said.

The combined company is the country’s fifth-largest homebuilder.

As of February, the Lyon family had shares worth close to \$100 million, according to SEC filings.

Interest in the homebuilder only makes up



Founder of Lyon Air Museum piloted planes into his 80s

a portion of Lyon’s wealth.

Among Gen. Lyon’s other holdings are a stake—said to be between 25% to 50%—in Lyon Living, representing a substantial part of the General’s personal wealth, as well as a well-known and expansive car collection.

The total value of the collection, which includes cars mostly from the 1930s and 1940s, runs in the hundreds of millions. To the family, it is priceless, as it serves as the base for many family memories (see

story, this page).

Accolades from Builders

Lyon has been described as a pioneer, among the last of a generation of Southern California master planners.

“He comes from an era when there was much more respect for land. Now, it’s just seen as a commodity,” Haddad said. “As a result, he brought about a sense of pride to the negotiations when he bought land, and he understood that by acquiring land, he was acquiring a heritage.”

“When I got to California in 1987, [Lyon] was already an icon,” said **Larry Webb**, who founded Aliso Viejo-based **New Home Co.** in 2009, and before that ran John Laing Homes in Irvine. “[He] was among the last of his generation, and he made me proud to be a homebuilder.”

Also included on the General’s long list of mentees: **Doug Bauer** and **Tom Mitchell**, former executives of the Newport Beach company who both left in 2009 to start Irvine-based **TRI Pointe Group**, now largest OC-based builder.

“He was a legend that taught us everything we know about the business,” Bauer said.

“It’s amazing if you look at (the) number of homes and communities that Gen. Lyon is responsible for in Orange County. There’s probably not one city that doesn’t have a William Lyon home,” added Mitchell. ■



OCBJ INSIDER

by Mark Mueller

Battlefield Stories

Until a few years ago, Gen. **William Lyon** was a lunchtime mainstay at Newport Beach's swank **Pacific Club**, the unofficial home of OC's real estate community.

He could also do more casual fare; he was a regular at the **Trabuco Oaks Steakhouse**, known for its prime rib special, casual vibes and "a strict no-tie policy."

It's the latter restaurant where Business Journal Publisher **Richard Reisman** and Lyon broke bread in 1998, and patched up a previously icy relationship between the icon and our paper, following an article a few years prior concerning the builder and a loan default.

"Mr. Reisman, I never thought that we'd meet, unless on a battlefield," Lyon said, not entirely joking.

The meeting (during a meet-and-greet for an up-and-coming law enforcement officer named **Mike Carona**) led to an expansive feature later that year (the headline: Lyon Untamed), and a quip Reisman still remembers, at a charity event he attended a few months later, held at Lyon's Coto de Caza estate.

Told by an alarmed guest that "the press was here" at the private event, Lyon said loudly: "Mr. Reisman and I have buried the hatchet."

Lyon was true to his word; the paper had an amicable, professional relationship since—through several market cycles, corporate ups and downs, and executive changes. His largest quibble with me took place more than a decade ago, concerning our estimate of his fortune, for our annual OC's Wealthiest issue.

I'll leave it to others to decide whether he said

our estimate (now in the \$1 billion range) was too high, or too low.

A considerable portion of Lyon's fortune and time went to charity and community efforts. It's unsurprising that our last big interview with the General took place about a decade ago, at the time of the **Lyon Air Museum** opening.

The 30,000-square-foot facility at John Wayne Airport combined Lyon's passion for flying, interest in preserving the memory of those who served in WWII, and his support for youth education.

"I've always wanted to share this with children because these things fade away into our history," Lyon told us.

He was also the leading benefactor to the **Orangewood Foundation**, a nonprofit that serves troubled children; see **Bill H. Lyon's** Leader Board tribute on page 47 to learn how that support ended up being repaid in full.

The Business Journal is donating a portion of the proceeds from the numerous tribute ads to Lyon you'll see in this and future editions to Orangewood. For more on the organization, visit www.orangewoodfoundation.org.

Christopher Trela's front-page feature details myriad ways area restaurants are preparing to reopen, including the use of face shields, plexiglass barriers and spaced-out tables.

Not all restaurants are reinventing their operations. Near the entrance to the Balboa Peninsula, **Chihuahua Cerveza's** flagship restaurant and taproom largely had a business-as-usual vibe and busy crowd over the Memorial Day weekend.

The attitude isn't surprising, considering the **Gary Jabara**-funded business is selling "F COVID-19" T-shirts on its website. Profits from the shirt sales go to the **Restaurant Employee Relief Fund** (rerf.us).

Medical improvements aside, Chihuahua's 64-ounce to-go growlers of beer, at \$6 each, might be the best thing to come out of the pandemic.

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Opinion, Analysis, Insight

Portrait of a Hero

My father, Gen. **William Lyon**, led an achievement filled life, rising to levels in the **U.S. Air Force** and business that few have ever accomplished. He was in some ways larger than life even though for those who knew him, he was very human.

When I was in the second grade, the teacher asked us who our heroes were. Some said George Washington or Spiderman. I said my dad because he was the best example of who I thought I should grow up to be.

Dad connected with people. He loved to visit and tell a story, asking me before he started if I had heard it before. He would often ignore my yes answer to weave a story that included subtleties I hadn't noticed before.

My father had a wonderful sense of humor, sometimes breaking out into giggles. During the many speeches he gave over the years, he always started with a joke, which often surprised audiences expecting something quite different from a military man.

He didn't have a middle name, quipping that his parents couldn't afford one. He made sure I received one because he never wanted me to be a "Junior." Also, he didn't want to be a "Senior."

Portrait of Vitality

Dad, who loved flying, often reminded my mother, **Willa Dean**, of the disclaimer he gave her before they were married, "Don't ever ask me to quit flying, and don't ever ask me to retire." He continued to pilot corporate jets well into his 80s, often amazing professional pilots with the smoothness of his takeoffs and landings.

He was profoundly patriotic, and he founded the **Lyon Air Museum** to make sure that the sacrifices of the Greatest Generation in WWII would never be forgotten.

My father had so much vitality. On the tennis court, he dove for

a ball which shocked everyone because he was 83 years old. He emerged a little bloodied, but then continued playing. I finally beat him for the first time when he was 90. One of the favorite memories of **Angelina**, my eldest daughter, was playing doubles with him when she was 9.

Dad loved automobiles, particularly the prewar classics he saw around Los Angeles growing up. His absolute favorite was the Duesenberg J 101 that my mother gave him for his 60th birthday party. He also enjoyed the 1941 Ford Super Deluxe that we gave him for his 90th birthday. It was almost identical to the car his parents bought him when he

graduated high school. He said it made him feel 18 again.

He did not view himself as the smartest guy in the room, and in fact struggled with academics as a child, but my dad was a fighter. He believed that if he cared more about something than anyone else, his determination could win the day. My father credited most of his accomplishments to perseverance, or as he would say, "Staying the Course."

Right after the attack on Pearl Harbor, my father went to enlist in the Navy as a pilot. He failed the medical because he had a deviated septum and even after

a surgery to correct it, he failed again. Rather than give up, he went to commercial aviation school, qualifying him to instruct military pilots for the war. Later, he became a ferry pilot as a warrant officer with the Army Air Corps where he flew many different types of aircraft to destinations all over the world. He finally received a full commission in the Air Force Reserve after WWII ended and his military career took off from there.

He would often advise others who wished to be successful to volunteer for a mission or an assignment because that creates exposure and the opportunity to learn.

By Bill H. Lyon



Gen. William Lyon with his son, Bill H. Lyon, in a 1930 Duesenberg at the 2007 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. Photo was taken right before the start of the 80-mile Tour d'Elegance, where the wiper motor started sprouting flames halfway through the drive. Photo by Scott Williamson, Photodesign

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Portrait of Volunteering

My mom and dad became involved with more than just writing a check for multiple charities. He was the founding chairman of the **Orangewood Children's Foundation** and a founding board member of the **Segerstrom Center for the Arts** and the first chairman to succeed Henry Segerstrom.

At a luncheon in 2008 where Dad was giving a speech to more than 500 people, he had a cardiac event that dropped him to the floor. A Huntington Beach police detective and fireman who were in the audience immediately started CPR and saved his life. Ironically, that detective had come from a troubled home and had spent time at Orangewood Children's Home, an experience which he credits with saving his life. That day, the detective repaid the favor to my father, giving us another 11 great years with him.

What continues to surprise me is the number of individuals he and my mother have helped simply because they could, without anyone else ever knowing. My parents quietly put several students through college without any fanfare. They used their network to solve community problems and were not motivated by who got the credit. Dad exemplified the adage: the more you do, the more you can do.

Portrait of a Gentleman

My father was a gentleman. He believed in doing the right thing and acting with integrity. He did what he said he was going to do and did not tolerate those who were not true to their word.

Dad was a true patriarch, the backbone of our family for as long as I can remember. He was always the one who supported everyone else when they were ill or having trouble or needed advice. This was also true with aspiring entrepreneurs he met for the first time.

He was a great dad. Emotional support, financial support, moral support—he was always there. This is the legacy I intend to pass on as I strive to be that rock of reliability for my children.

I greatly appreciate the OCBJ giving me this opportunity to provide more color on my dad as a person (see article, page 1). He



William Lyon around 1941 in his Navy ROTC uniform while attending USC

left a résumé a mile long filled with several lifetime's worth of accomplishments.

What I admire him most for was the foundation of love he provided our entire family. He will be greatly missed and never forgotten.

Editor's Note: Bill H. Lyon was executive chairman of William Lyon Homes, which was bought in February for \$2.5 billion, including \$950 million of equity, by Taylor Morrison Home Corp.