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One of a Kind

Meet the last U.S. veteran of the Spanish Civil War



Top: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain

Photo courtesy of ALBA

Above: Berg on Morotai Island during WWII

Courtesy photo

At left: Del Berg, present day

Photo by Phil Schermeister

In For Whom the Bell Tolls, American Robert Jordan travels to Spain to join the fight against Franco and his fascist supporters during the Spanish Civil War (1936-'39). Like Hemingway's hero, Del Berg joined the Republican cause, and today he is the sole surviving American veteran of that war.

By Chace Anderson

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OOKING BACK ON A LONG LIFE of activism, Del Berg recalls when and where that passion took shape.

It's a rare glimpse of history as told by the last surviving American veteran of the Spanish Civil War – and one of very few surviving veterans of that war worldwide.

"Deep inside of me I wanted to do what I could to stop fascism," says Berg, 99, from his Columbia home. "Having grown up as a poor farm kid, I could relate to what was happening in Spain. I was thoroughly committed to going there and helping."

Some 40,000 foreign fighters, including Berg and about 2,800 other Americans in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, joined the fight against fascists supporting General Francisco Franco's campaign to overthrow the democratically elected government.

Today, he looks back on that fight as his proudest accomplishment. His only regret: "That we didn't defeat Franco."

His service in Spain was just one chapter in a long life marked by hard physical labor and a commitment to supporting working people against the interests of "big money."

Berg survived the Great Depression, served in a horse-drawn U.S. Army artillery unit in the 1930s, fought in World War



Berg in Spain (standing, second from right) with battery mates

II, worked as a farm laborer for 20 years, became active in the campaign for fair wages and working conditions in California's fields and orchards, and was a member of the Communist Party.

"I'm always on the side of working people," he says. "It's been that way all my life."

That life began in 1915 in Anaheim, where Berg's father was a farmer. When Del was six, his family – including an older brother and a younger sister – moved to Manteca.

Berg's formal education ended in his junior year of high school when the family moved to Oregon and could no longer afford school supplies.

"I worked on farms doing general labor and milking

(Continued on next page)

cows for about \$7 a week,” Berg says. By the time he was 20, the country was mired in the Depression and jobs were scarce.

“Being poor, being a farmer, I automatically felt a part of the downturn,” says Berg. “You don’t need school to learn what’s going on; just sit out on a farm and look around. You’ll be able to see what’s happening with the economy.”

Berg left Oregon to live in a transient camp in Los Angeles. “Recruiters for the circus and the Army came through the camp about the same time, and I signed up with the Army.”

He was assigned to the horse-drawn 76th Field Artillery at the Presidio of Monterey.

While in the service, Berg began to read about what was going on in Spain. Franco’s Nationalist rebels were supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, while European and North American volunteers joined the Republican cause.



Del Berg (back row, far right) during Army training near Riverside, California, early 1940s

Berg bought his way out of the Army for the princely sum of \$120, a practice not only legal at the time but one that dated back to the Civil War when wealthy Union soldiers were allowed to buy exemptions from service. He then moved back to Los Angeles and worked as a dishwasher at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel.

“One day on the subway to work I saw this sign on a building,” Berg recalls. “It said ‘Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.’ I went inside and told them I wanted to go to Spain.

“I read everything I could about the war and Franco. I thought, ‘The dirty SOB.’ I didn’t want him to win.”

In early 1938, Berg and other volunteers took a ship to Paris and, led by a professional smuggler, made their way by bus and foot through the Pyrenees to Spain.

“At first they put me in field artillery, but soon I left that for an anti-aircraft unit,” he remembers. “We had Czech, French, German and Spanish batteries. I ended up working in communications, laying telephone lines and pulling them up again. That’s how I got to the front.”

In the Battle of the Ebro River, one bridge that provided an important connection to the Mediterranean Sea for the fascists was a key target. “When it was

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blown up," Berg says, "we were the ones who laid the line from the command post to the bridge."

While billeted in a Valencia monastery, Berg's unit came under fire one night when fascists bombed the city. "I heard planes and I sat up in bed," he recalls. "Right then the blast hit the other end of the monastery. One Italian was killed, and shrapnel from the bomb hit me in the chest and lodged in my liver."

During his convalescence in Spain, Berg read Leo Tolstoy and was particularly influenced by *War and Peace*. "The international brigades didn't belong to any particular party," he explains, "but many of the conversations we had were about communism and what it meant."

Berg was still recovering from his wound in a Spanish hospital when both sides agreed to withdraw foreign volunteers.

"Those of us in the international brigades had known we were temporary," Berg says. "By late 1938, we were no longer a very formidable group."

About a third of the 2,800 Americans who fought in

Spain lost their lives in the conflict. Little did Berg suspect that he would outlive all his fellow survivors.

He has, according to the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives in New York City. Its records show that the second to last U.S. survivor, John Hovan, died March 27, 2014 in Providence, Rhode Island.

Berg is one of fewer than a dozen veterans of the Spanish Civil War believed still living worldwide.

Berg returned to America in early 1939 and eventually joined his father, who was farming near Modesto. When America entered World War II, he was drafted, assigned to the 389th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion and again worked in communications, primarily as a switchboard operator.

In 1944, the American command was convinced a landing strip on the Japanese-held island of Morotai was essential for the invasion of the Philippines and, Berg says, "to help cut oil supplies from Borneo to Japan." Berg was with the 389th when it arrived on Morotai shortly after the island was invaded, and he remained there until the end of the war.

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After his discharge, Berg returned to Modesto and for more than 20 years worked as a farm laborer, picking fruit in the summer and pruning in the fall and winter. His life was much like those of poor and struggling Californians found in the pages of John Steinbeck's novels, laborers who followed crops while fighting for dignity and a decent wage.

Berg was one of a handful of farm workers chosen to testify at a Congressional hearing on farm labor attended by Eleanor Roosevelt.

He later became – and continues to be – a friend of Dolores Huerta, who along with Cesar Chavez, organized the United Farm Workers.

“Off and on I’ve been a member of Communist Party USA all my life,” Berg says. “I believe the party always tried to understand what needed to be done. It was giving effective leadership to the working-class movement.”

During the McCarthy period, the FBI investigated Berg. “Yeah, they came around and harassed me,” he says. “It was part of the repression of CPUSA. I was pruning at the time, and they talked to my boss. They even talked to my girlfriend’s son, asking who my friends were.

“Ah hell,” he concludes, waving his hand dismissively, “none of my friends would give them any information. They didn’t learn nothing.”

The drive to discredit Senator Joseph McCarthy and his crusade against communists in government, show business and other fields was waged on many fronts. But Berg is not averse to taking some of the credit for his demise: “In the

’50s we kicked ol’ McCarthy’s butt wherever we found it sticking out.”

As a member of the NAACP, an organization open to all races, Berg served as vice president of the Modesto chapter and worked to end housing discrimination in the Central Valley. Looking for more income, he left farm labor and

started first a landscaping and then a cement finishing business.

In the late ’60s he retired, met his wife, June, now 92, and bought three acres in the Columbia

area. They built a rock house, using stone they found and redwood beams they salvaged and re-milled.

Today Del Berg regularly visits by phone with his two grown sons from earlier relationships and reads voraciously. On his coffee table are copies of *Hightower Lowdown*, *International Brigade Newsletter*, *The Washington Spectator*, and *Intelligence Report* from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

While activism has been its own reward in many ways, there have been accolades along the way. Berg has been formally commended by the Alliance for Retired Americans, the California Democratic Council and Tuolumne County Citizens for Peace.

Berg often receives letters from students seeking advice. “They have only a little political understanding,” he says. “But in their own way, they want to know if they can do something about what is happening around them.”

Although hard of hearing, Berg’s hips and knees are his own, though he sometimes uses a walker or cane to get around. What’s the secret to his longevity?

“Not dying,” he answers quickly. And then he slaps a knee and laughs.

Perhaps there are other factors.

“Maybe all that hard work is why I’ve lived as long as I have,” he says. “The work was really physical exercise. It kept me in shape and I enjoyed it.

“I think staying politically active keeps me alive, too. It fills my life. I never slowed down – I’m right in the middle of things yet.”

In just three years, the Spanish Civil War claimed an estimated 500,000 lives and left many others seriously wounded, including Berg.



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