

Strawberry Bullet



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Serving the 500,000 Veterans Living in Greater Los Angeles

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STRAWBERRY BULLET MARKS INDEPENDENCE EVE 2014

Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio, who installed and maintained the *Strawberry Flag* project at the West Los Angeles VA in 2009–2010 and more recently published the *Strawberry Bulletin* newspaper for military veterans and the arts community from 2011–2013, present this one-shot, one-sheet *Strawberry Bullet* to celebrate Independence Day 2014.

Strawberry Flag was a social practice artwork in the form of an aquaponic strawberry farm of nearly 1,000 plants installed and maintained on the lawn in front of Buildings 205, 208, and 209. As part of that project, Bon and the Studio presented an Independence Eve celebration on July 3, 2010 complete with a marching-in-place parade presided over by the Strawberry Queen. The *Flag* is gone, but the Studio's interest in veterans remains, and we publish this *Bullet* to mark the fourth anniversary of that Independence Eve event.



Then-VA Secretary Jim Nicholson designated Building 205 to be rehabbed for housing homeless veterans in 2007, but the nearly vacant structure still lies fallow today.

Valentini Appeal Delayed During Settlement Talks

The pending appeals in the lawsuit challenging VA land use at the West Los Angeles campus have been placed on hold pending settlement discussions among lawyers for the plaintiff veterans and the defendant VA officials. The opening briefs were originally due to be filed April 7 of this year. But after initial discussions exploring a possible resolution of the case, the Chief Mediator for the Ninth Circuit appeals court accepted the case for mediation and set a new briefing schedule.

The briefing is now stayed to facilitate mediation, but if the parties are not able to reach a settlement, the briefing will resume in August.

The lawsuit, *Valentini v. Shinseki*, was filed in June 2011 by the ACLU of Southern California, the Inner City Law Center, Harvard and UCLA law professors, and private law firms representing a plaintiff class of veterans who challenged VA land use and treatment policies at the West L.A. campus on various grounds. By a succession of motions to dismiss, the government defendants whittled plaintiffs' claims to one: that the VA's practices in allowing outside groups to use veterans' land violate statutory restrictions.

The veteran plaintiffs prevailed on that claim, and VA officials appealed an August 29, 2013 federal court judgment holding several land deals at the West Los Angeles VA property to be "unauthorized by law and therefore void." The land deals struck down include the operation of a hotel laundry service, a commercial vehicle parking enterprise, the UCLA baseball stadium, and a private school athletic complex.

The veteran plaintiffs have filed a cross-appeal to review the court's earlier dismissal of their claims that not only attack the leases struck down by the district court's August 29 ruling but also seek to require the VA to provide long-term housing for veterans at West L.A.

L.A. Mayor Focuses on Needs of Vets

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has recently sponsored a variety of initiatives directed to the needs of military veterans. He has reconstituted the City's Military Veterans Advisory Council, which has been out of service since the aftermath of World War Two. In May, he hosted the Mayor's Veterans Business Summit to encourage and assist veteran-owned businesses, and in June he announced the launch of a program to secure 10,000 jobs for veterans by 2017.

Garcetti, 43, is himself a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy Reserve, serving with the Information Dominance Corps, a group designed to elevate information as a main battery of Naval warfighting capabilities and establish Naval prominence in intelligence, cyber warfare, and information management.

A recent May 22 meeting of the reconstituted Military Veterans Advisory Council drew an audience of over 70 people. It included reports from Garcetti's Veterans Affairs Coordinator Joseph Chicas, questions from the seven-member council, and public comments, all on subjects ranging from L.A. city schools programs for military families to employment options and housing access for vets to a calendar of upcoming events. Monthly meetings

(generally the fourth Thursday at 11:30 a.m.) are open to the public at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall, 1816 So. Figueroa Street, Los Angeles.

The May 19 Veterans Business Summit at City Hall was keyed to veteran-owned businesses and featured exhibitor displays in the rotunda, sack lunches from Homeboy Bakery in the forecourt, and an informative panel on How to Start a Business in Los Angeles presented by the City's Business Source Center (www.LABusinessSource.org).

On June 9, Garcetti hosted a press conference and pledged to secure 10,000 jobs for veterans by 2017. "Our troops are finally returning home," Garcetti said. "They need more than a smile and a hug. They need housing. They need jobs. They need full integration back into civilian life." Through the "10,000 Strong" initiative, more than 100 employers have agreed to hire veterans.



"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

—Maya Angelou (1928–2014)

In Memoriam: Pete Natividad

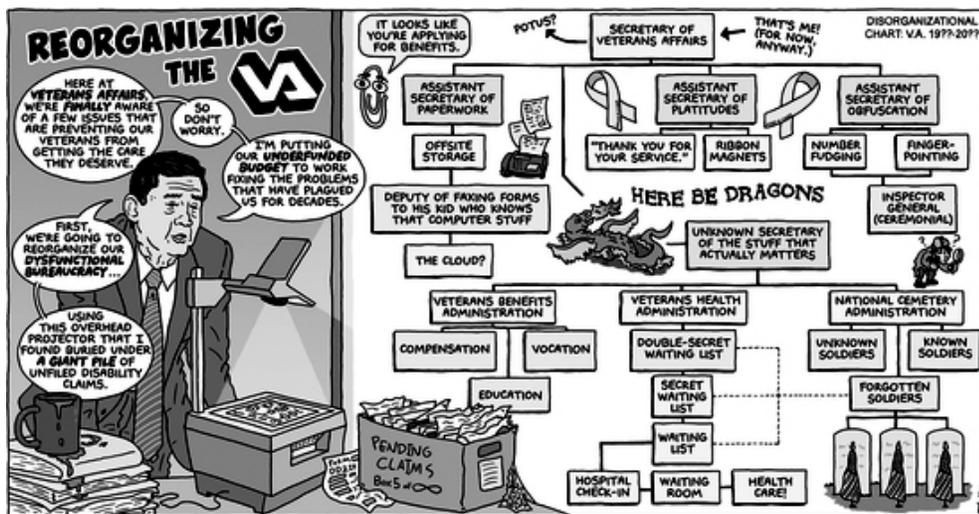
By Lauren Bon

Pete Natividad passed away. He participated in the work I made. He was especially active during *Farmlab* (2006–9), a project that was born of inquiries that were left unfinished when *Not a Cornfield* (2005–6) ended. The South Central garden was not only ended and the gardeners evicted, but the earth they cultivated and the trees they cared for were bulldozed; *Farmlab* was born of this disregard for the real value of things—earth, seed, water, and process.

I didn't know too much about Pete during those years, even though I saw him regularly. He was already an older man, and, while he liked to tell stories about his childhood fishing in the L.A. River, there were many things I didn't know about him. What I did know was that he was a passionate activist, a man who loved to grow things, and that he liked being around *Farmlab* and participating in our performative actions like *Agbins on Skid Row* (2006) and the first *FLAG Garden* at L.A. State Historic Park (2008).

It seemed to me that something must have happened a few years ago that made Pete not want to be around the Studio anymore. But at his memorial service, held June 13 near the *Junker Garden* that he tended, I learned from his many lovely family members that Pete had a tendency to simply disappear for long stretches of time. I also learned that he had a troublesome past that haunted him and that made him want to reach out and help other living things.

Pete made many recordings of his social engagement and activism, and his family brought them to us at the memorial service. The formidable box of well-organized videos is only a fragment of what Pete left behind. I hope that our study of this material will keep Pete an active part of the continued inquiries that brought us together—how to keep living things alive in often-difficult situations.



Opinion

Shinseki: A Good Man in a Nasty Job

Eric Shinseki resigned his cabinet post as VA Secretary on Friday, May 30, “leaving behind,” *The New York Times* wrote, “a sprawling bureaucracy embroiled in scandal....”

How did this happen to a man like Shinseki?

He was himself a soldier—a U.S. Army general. This man served two combat tours in Vietnam and earned three Bronze Stars for valor and a Purple Heart with an Oak Leaf Cluster. He was later the Chief of Staff of the Army for four years.

He had a reputation for telling the truth, even when his listeners did not want to hear it. As Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Shinseki told the U.S. Senate Armed Services Comm. that “something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers” would probably be required for postwar Iraq, an estimate far higher than the figure being proposed by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld in his invasion plan. From then on, Shinseki’s influence on the Joint Chiefs of Staff reportedly waned. But he had been right, as later events proved.

In a message to VA employees the day he resigned, Shinseki said he was “deeply grateful to the employees and leaders who...live by the VA’s core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence.”

And therein lies the tale. The “core values” that Shinseki not only practiced as a soldier but also relied upon from the other soldiers to whom he entrusted his life in combat were simply *not* the core values of the federal bureaucracy he chaired at the VA.

Those appointed to chair government bureaucracies are not the real “heads” of the agencies they captain. Department Secretar-

ies come and go, but lifelong bureaucrats stay on until, as well as because of, their pensions. So when a man like Gen. Shinseki pledges to fix a problem, his sincerity must confront the fact that he cannot generally make anything happen that the bureaucrats don’t want to happen. It is near impossible for him to overcome bureaucratic inertia and misfeasance. He will be fed a healthy potion of lies and obfuscations to convince him that he is making progress. The bureaucrats are nothing if they are not masters of statistics, metrics, and PowerPoint.

On the other hand, we cannot entirely excuse Shinseki. After all: Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. And it was more often than twice. The May 28 Interim Report from the VA Office of the Inspector General, issued two days before the resignation, identified 18 similar reports it had made to the VA Secretary and the Congress since 2005.

In a speech delivered hours before his resignation, Shinseki said that he was “too trusting” of some people working for him. He criticized a “systemic, totally unacceptable lack of integrity” at some veterans’ health care centers that he said he could not explain. But he knew. He knew something was going on that was at odds with his “core values.”

It is as Raymond Chandler wrote of the detective antihero in his noir murder mysteries: “Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor.” But he has to know what’s going on. And how to deal with it.

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“If you’re always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.”

—Maya Angelou (1928–2014)