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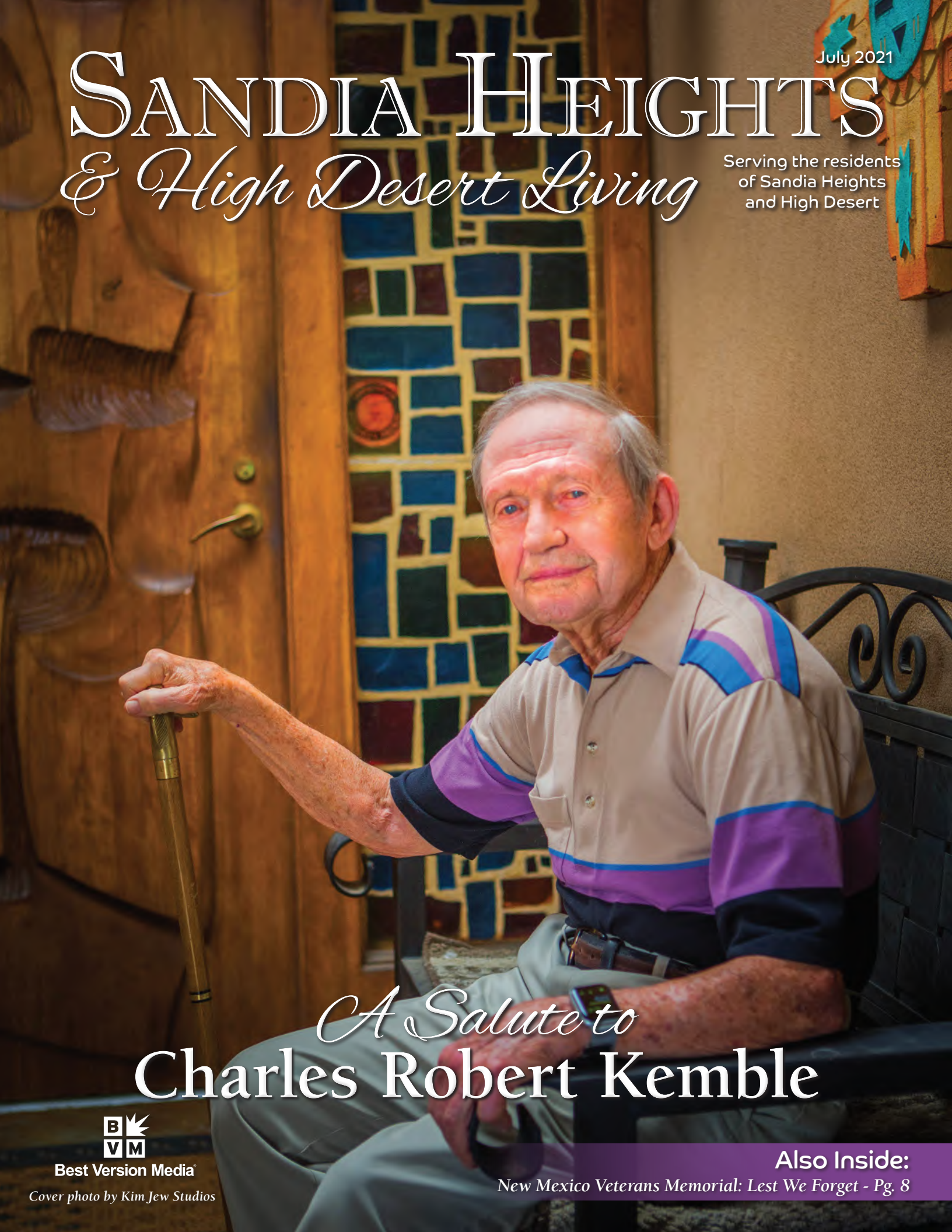

A Salute to Charles Robert Kemble

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Cover photo by Kim Jew Studios

Also Inside:

A Salute to Charles Robert Kemble

By Marie Cimarusti | Photography by Kim Jew Studios

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALBUQUERQUE PLUMBING HEATING & COOLING FOR BRINGING THIS MONTH'S COVER STORY.

In this article, I'm honored to introduce you to Charles Robert Kemble. Bob, as he asked to be called, has lived in Sandia Heights since 1986. He enjoys daily walks through the "uplifting scenic views" of his neighborhood he describes as being "blessedly quiet." He also feels lucky for his many "thoughtful, knowledgeable, intelligent, and helpful" neighbors and friends. A large part of Bob's career was spent in the military. Early on, he was an enlisted paratrooper and he retired as a Brigadier General, wearing many hats along the way. He has a special understanding of an important era of our military history; World War II, to be specific. At age 95, Bob is a member of the Greatest Generation and a veteran of WWII. His willingness to share his story offers us a rare glimpse of a bygone era through the eyes of someone who actually lived through it.

Bob was born in 1925 in Ottumwa, Iowa. He said, "I was raised in the Great Depression days by parents who were very highly regarded but of financially stretched means." The family owned

The Kemble Florist Company. During the Depression, it was "food before flowers," said Bob. Their six greenhouses, operated by his father, and a retail store, run by his mother, survived because people still made purchases for weddings, funerals, and holidays. "My father was clearly the most beloved community leader in the area. My mother was exceptional for the 1920s and 1930s as a respected business woman. My father was my model. My self-effacing mother was my quiet guide."

Bob had a sister and a brother -- his best friend -- four and two years older, respectively. "Our family lived life by the Midwest patterns of the day," said Bob. Regarding their family attitudes and values, he said, "We pretty much didn't think about race or religious differences of friends. Our family members all worked. I had a magazine route and caddied. When older, we siblings worked long hours for the family business. The mostly unspoken parental guidance was clear: enjoy an active adolescent life; pay attention to studies; do your part in the abundance of family work; acquire a (then uncommon) college degree and establish a career to provide my eventual family with security. 'Security' was the top aim in Depression days. High personal ambitions were never preached. Good works and achievements were pleasantly acknowledged but my life's direction was left to me to develop."

With war clouds gathering, Bob set out in the direction of college and the armed forces. He said, "At age 16, I passed the Army Air Corps entrance mental tests only to be rejected because of a previously undetected heart murmur. I was classified 4F and excused from military service. However, I learned that my 'perhaps inconsequential' heart sound could only be heard after exercise. So, at the Induction Center during group examination, I stood in the rear and faked jumping before the heart check. With no murmur detected, I enlisted in the Army Special Training Program at the University of Kansas at age 17."

At 18, Bob enlisted in the regular Army and had basic training at Fort Benning, GA. After Louisiana field maneuvers, his group was moved to England on the wooden-decked Mauretania, a British liner and sister ship to the Lusitania that was tragically torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat in 1915. Bob said, "The Mauretania crossed the Atlantic on a zigzag course to reduce odds of Nazi submarines getting an easy target fix. She was 'double loaded' with close to 3,000 troops. We enlisted men were in below-water decks for 36 hours, allowed up to fresh air decks for 12 hours, and were fed British rations such as stewed tomatoes and hard tack biscuits twice a day."

When the Mauretania reached Liverpool, four paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division boarded to ask for much-needed volunteers due to the U.S. losses suffered after D-Day just weeks earlier. "I naively thought, *why not?*" said Bob. "So, with about 30 others, we took a tough crash parachute training program near Leicester. We jumped to rolling landings from seven-foot platforms and climbed 30-foot ropes followed by five daytime and one nighttime parachute jumps. We shipped to France and I was assigned to *A Company of the 505 Parachute Regiment* doing hurried training for Operation Market Garden in Holland." The mission, in part, was to seize a series of three bridges. According to postwar judgment, the operation failed because of "inadequate planning, poor intelligence, and believing airborne

Paratrooper – 82nd Airborne Division

forces could resist heavily armed troops for an extended period." The now-familiar phrase, *a bridge too far*, was coined from that operation.

Bob was injured in that mission. He said, "The 82nd, including my 505 Regiment, performed admirably making courageous but costly small boat crossings near Nijmegen, the 'middle bridge.' They got no help from Kemble. On the jump from only about 500 feet, I found myself descending into a tree line, so I 'slipped' the chute to guide over it. That increased the speed of descent and, clearing the trees, I came in on my butt with an extra 35 pounds of packaged demolitions. It hurt. On the third day, after the truly wounded were evacuated, I was flown to England." Bob rejoined the 505 Regiment in a camp near Suippes, France, where his broken pelvic bone finished healing with six weeks of limited movement.

In France, Bob received tragic news. He said, "After a long absence, the mail caught up. Joyfully, I had a packet of at least a dozen letters, but then found I was reading condolences about my father's death at age 56 from a heart attack 10 days

West Point Professor

Bob & Helen – West Point Graduation

earlier. Stunned, I had heard nothing nor any reports of illness. After writing that I had joined the 82nd, my father sent me a couple of unusually touching V-letters. Learning later that he had suffered a previous heart incident, I realized he doubted he would see me again. Yet, he volunteered at age 54 to accept an Army commission to fill an administrative position. My brother felt that his many hours in various civic leadership roles in support of the war contributed harmful stress. Such were America's WWII commitments."

In December 1944, the 82nd led the Allied response to the surprise Nazi incursion with 17 divisions through the Ardennes. That became the massive Battle of the Bulge. On the 29th, Bob was summoned to the Message Center at 1st Battalion Headquarters. There, the Sergeant Major curtly asked him, "I suppose you want to accept your appointment to West Point?" Bob was confused but relieved it wasn't more bad news from home. He said, "You've got the wrong guy, Sergeant. I never applied to West Point." After double-checking Bob's name and serial number, the Sergeant sarcastically said, "You've got an appointment to the Military Academy and I have to confirm that you want to accept it." Bob replied, "Yeah. What do I do now?"

Bob later learned that a high school counselor who he had once asked about West Point as a route to a college degree had relayed that to his ailing but approving father. Friends reached out to Congressman Karl LeCompte to consider Bob for an appointment. On July 1, 1945, Bob entered the United States

Reconnaissance troop commander, Germany

Military Academy at West Point, NY. He graduated in 1949 with a BS degree in engineering and an appointment as a 2nd Lieutenant, Armor Branch. Bob became President of the Class of '49 and remains active in that role today. Sharing incentive to tell his story now, Bob said, "I regretfully note that there are only 74 remaining members of a class which, in 1945, entered about 890 and graduated 474 in 1949." Bob is the primary author of the *History of USMA Class of 1949*, published in 2018. He also wrote *The Image of the Army Officer in America: Background for Current Views*, published in 1973.

Bob's journey has had many twists and turns, but it was pure serendipity that led him to the love of his life. He was in Washington D.C. to be in a parade in celebration of Harry Truman's presidency. He set up a meeting with Congressman LeCompte to thank him in person for his appointment to West Point. Bob said, "After the parade, I was greeted in his office by an attractive secretary. That was Helen Elizabeth Elfstrom. Rep. LeCompte warmly welcomed me for a lengthy chat. As we left his office, he tossed his car keys to Helen saying, 'Why don't you show Bob Mount Vernon?' My guide was impressive: both smartly attractive and very competent. We married the next year after USMA graduation. Later, LeCompte became the godfather of our first child."

Like others of the Greatest Generation, Helen felt a strong calling for public service. After high school graduation, she held various jobs while going to college. Using her earnings, she took flying lessons and, at 18, became the youngest woman

Kemble Kompany
Chris, Keith, Carol, Geoff, Cyndy

to have a pilot's license in Iowa. When the U.S. entered WWII, she became secretary to the county draft board. She also joined the Civil Air Patrol to use her flying skills to help the nation, as needed.

Bob and Helen married on July 3, 1949, and spent 58 happy years together until her passing in 2007. They raised five children. Bob said, "Our children are spread all around the country. As with all large families, they're very different in their personalities, but we're very close." In the Kemble family, there are also 16 grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. Helen's family was always her top priority but throughout her lifetime, she continued to serve by putting in thousands of volunteer hours in organizations such as the United Way, the New Mexico Art Museum, and the Albuquerque Assistance League. As with her role as the President of the West Point Officers' Wives Association, much of that time was spent in leadership positions.

For Bob, life after West Point graduation included: serving as a reconnaissance troop commander in Germany facing the Soviets and East Germans; commanding one of the first units to initiate President Truman's order to racially integrate forces; helping to write *I Corps* counter-invasion plans in Korea; and being Executive Assistant to the Director of Operations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. Twice, Bob taught at USMA: first as an English Dept. assistant professor from 1955-1960; then as a permanent professor teaching American Studies from 1966-1972.

During those years, Bob continued his education and earned his MA degree in American & European Literature from University of Pennsylvania in 1956 and

Exec Asst to Dir of Ops of Joint Chiefs of Staff

his Ph.D. in American Studies from George Washington University in 1966.

In 1972, Bob left his professorship at West Point when he was invited to be the President of the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell. In his five-year tenure, NMMI was returned to full enrollment and led state schools in computerizing both administrative functions and specialized academics. During that time, he was promoted to Brigadier General in the NM National Guard/NM Reserves. From 1977-1986, Bob served as the President of Lamar University in Beaumont, TX, again upgrading support systems and broadening the curriculum for the 14,000-student school. His next step was to return to New Mexico to retire in his favorite state, but his working years were not over yet. He said, "Soon, at a surprise request of Governor Carruthers, I joined his new team in 1986 as a Cabinet Secretary for four years, charged with organizing the initial NM Department of Public Safety." From 1990 until he truly retired in 2007, Bob was a consultant for Booz Allen Hamilton, then an advisor to the human services departments for the cities of Chicago and Seattle. He still does some occasional pro bono consulting.

General Kemble has experienced so much in his life. He traveled to 50 states and over 100 countries on six continents. He had a 33-year military career often overlapping with over 30 years in higher education and government positions totaling 50+ years of service. He was the recipient of many honors, including the

NM Military Institute President

Bronze Star and other combat awards. Even with all this, he is an unassuming man who reflects the values of his generation. "The Depression marked the time when everyday Americans were never more thoughtful of one another," said Bob. "Those gratifying times were not directed at attaining considerable future wealth and standing but focused on family well-being and, when called on, providing local assistance and national service—come what may. As Tom Brokaw wrote in his book, *The Greatest Generation*, 'They tried to do what was right.'"

Bob's moral compass was highly influenced by West Point's motto, *Duty, Honor, Country*, and by a favorite quote from JFK, "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try." Bob said, "A life of service. That's what my father sent me off to do and that's how I've mostly tried to live my life." Mission accomplished.

Lamar University President