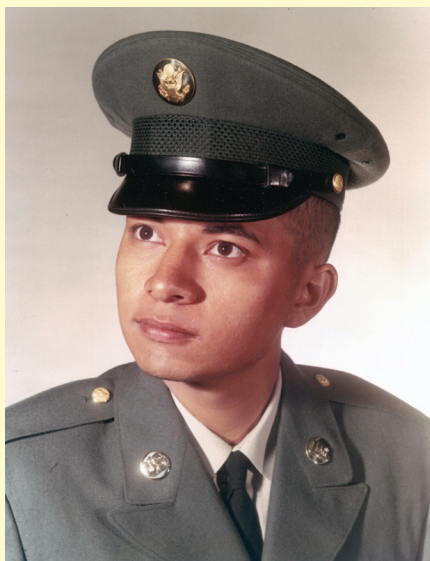


# The healing power of music

## NALC retiree helps vets through guitar program



Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 retiree James Robledo in his Army and postal uniforms

**R**etired Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 letter carrier **James Robledo** often wakes up in the middle of the night, one of the lingering effects of his service in Vietnam. Lately, when he wakes up, he picks up his guitar and softly plays, and the stress melts away.

“I feel comfort with the guitar,” he said. “A guitar is made of wood, not metal. It’s warm, and the vibrations are soothing.”

Robledo learned to play through Guitars for Vets, a nationwide program that teaches military veterans to play the instrument for pleasure and therapy.

Following in the footsteps of his father, a World War II veteran, Robledo volunteered for the Army in 1967 at age 19 while attending college. “I would see the students protesting the Vietnam War, and I thought to myself, ‘What would my dad do?’”

Robledo’s mother, recalling what it had been like to wait anxiously for her husband to come home from war, cried when he told her. When he left home, his father said, “Just keep your butt down, and when you come back, you’ll be a different person.”

His father was right.

Robledo shipped out for a year’s tour in Vietnam in 1969. He had wanted to fight from the air: “I had seen the newsreels showing guys hanging out of choppers shooting machine guns, and I said, ‘That’s what I want to do.’” But his superiors, impressed by his test scores and intelligence, made him an air traffic controller instead.

That job didn’t keep him out of the hazards and trauma of battle, though. His job took him to helicopter bases in combat areas, and his responsibilities included guarding the bases as well as air traffic control duties.

“We landed aircraft during the day,” he said, “and we shot back at muzzle flashes at night.”

Robledo finished his military service in 1970 and held a series of jobs until 1984. That year, one of his two sisters who worked for the Postal Service told him about a job opening as a PTF in Whittier, CA, near the town where he grew up. Robledo carried the mail for 25 years in Whittier, retiring in 2009.

Retirement is supposed to be a time to relax, and Robledo has two grandchildren to enjoy, but he was troubled by the adjustment. “After I retired from the Post Office, all of a sudden I didn’t have a reason to get up early in the morning,” he said.

He found some of the difficulties he had brought from Vietnam bothering him again, and he sought help at the Veterans Administration (VA). “My time in Vietnam left me with symptoms I didn’t know I had,” he said. After retirement, some of those symptoms became harder to deal with. He felt lost. One day, a doctor at the VA asked if he wanted to learn to play guitar.

It was a perfect opportunity. “I had a guitar in the closet that my father left me,” Robledo said, “but I didn’t know what to do with it.” Robledo’s father had played guitar and piano for his fellow troops when he served in World War II.

The doctor referred him to the nearby Loma Linda, CA, chapter of Guitars for Vets, a non-profit group founded in 2007 that has grown from a single instructor teaching a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to play guitar to a program with 40 chapters across the country serving thousands of vets.

The program’s goal is to help veterans through both the healing power of playing the instrument and the process of learning with other veterans who

have had similar experiences and emotions. The instructors are volunteers, and the lessons are free. (For more information, go to [guitars4vets.org](http://guitars4vets.org)).

After he began his classes with Guitars for Vets, including instruction on songwriting, Robledo soon learned how learning and playing the guitar could help soothe his symptoms. After 10 45-minute lessons, he graduated from the program last March and received a new guitar, also at no cost. At the graduation ceremony, every student plays a song; Robledo performed Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville."

Guitars for Vets serves a range of veterans, male and female, young and old, from conflicts from the Korean War to Afghanistan and Iraq, Robledo said. The veterans bring different problems, mental or physical, and playing the guitar can help them in different ways. Robledo recalled a veteran who couldn't open a door with one hand due to a stroke. With guitar lessons as a form of physical therapy, the student regained some use of his hand.

Robledo's adventure wasn't finished. In November of last year, he found himself at the White House as one of several Guitars for Vets graduates invited to a discussion about the history of music in the military and to a concert on the South Lawn that included performances by Mary J. Blige, Common, John Fogerty, Willie Nelson, Romeo Santos and active-duty military members. The events were part of the White House's celebration of Veterans Day.

Robledo isn't finished with the program—he is helping other vets enjoy the benefits and joy of learning the guitar. Guitars for Vets asked him to volunteer as "quartermaster" of the chapter to handle the guitars the group loans and donates to participants. "I jumped right on it," he said. He is

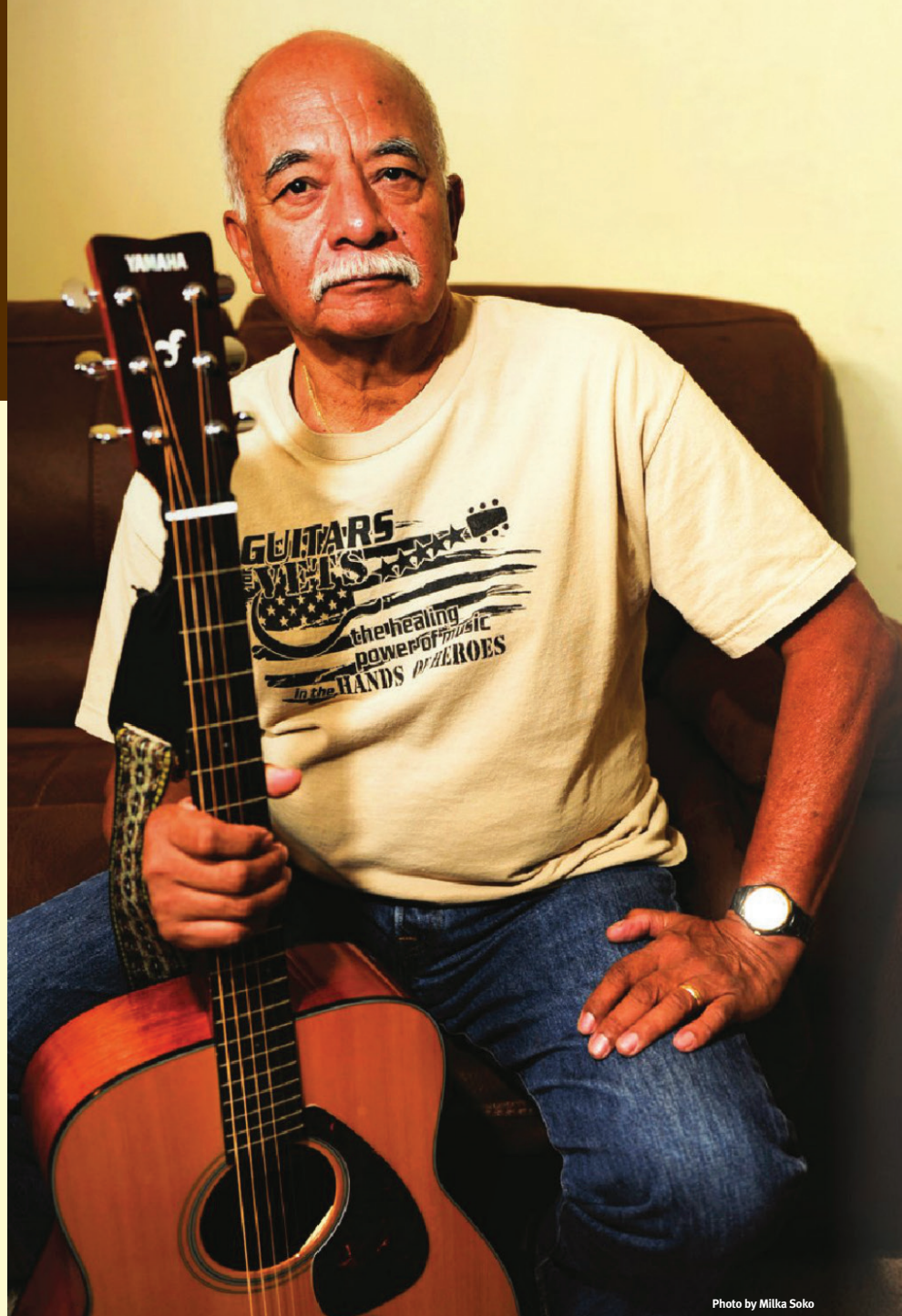


Photo by Milka Soko

responsible for the safekeeping of the 22 loaner guitars the program uses to teach students and the new guitars they receive when they graduate.

And Robledo is bringing what he has learned about the joy and healing power of playing the guitar to other veterans—after some additional lessons, he is set to become an instructor for Guitars for Vets this month.

"I am thrilled at being able to help other veterans find peace and comfort as I have," he said. "When someone picks up a guitar and starts to strum it, the rest of the world seems to disappear." **PR**