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Metro buses shuttle mourners lined up at Indian Wells Tennis Gardens to memorial services for President Gerald R. Ford in Palm Desert on December 29.



Photos by Gayle Anderson

## Metro Heeded Call to Duty at Ford Memorial in Palm Desert

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Honor Roll> [President Gerald R. Ford Memorial Shuttle Service Volunteers](#)

By GAYLE ANDERSON

(Jan. 5, 2007) When the word came from Palm Desert that President Gerald R. Ford had died in Rancho Mirage Dec. 26, Metro and 3 other transit agencies were recruited by the federal government to provide shuttle services for members of the public who wished to pay their last respects to the friend and neighbor who had served as the 38<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

The convoy of 18 buses, some 30 operators and two fully equipped field equipment tow trucks left East Valley Division 15 in two shifts at 11:30 a.m., Dec. 29. The first shift, which delivered 16 buses for presidential duty, arrived in Palm Desert about 3 p.m.



Metro buses on the right, and a squadron of OCTA coaches on the left, line the entrance to the Indian Wells Tennis Gardens. Metro and OCTA, with support from the local SunLine Transit, provided the shuttle service.

After refueling at the local SunLine Transit yard, the buses lined up along a gracefully landscaped drive that leads to the Indian Wells Tennis Gardens, where members of the public had been gathering since mid-morning. Under tight security that involved a Riverside County Sheriff's command post at Indian wells and Secret Service checkpoints along the way to St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Palm Desert, Metro began picking up the first busloads at 4:45 p.m. at the Tennis Gardens before winding their way down the palm-lined boulevards of the desert communities to the church where the president lay in repose.



Metro Bus Operator Victor Pages

The first bus was operated by Victor Pages, an extraboard operator assigned to West Valley Division 8. "I'd call this special duty," said Pages, who as an extraboard operator is prepared to drive every route, know every shift, and practically heed every call that comes over the dispatch information.

The assignment meant Pages would conduct a 12-hour shift that included a convoy to a destination some 120 miles away, navigation of a totally unfamiliar route, and direction from several levels of security checks. "But, in this case," said Pages, "this duty means being a part of history."



Line of mourners began to form mid-morning at Indian Wells Tennis Gardens.

When Pages' 45-foot Metro Rapid bus, already swept and wanded by Riverside County Sheriff Deputies, opened its doors at the entrance to the tennis gardens, the first group of security-cleared and wanded public was allowed to board. The public, who had been waiting well over 6 hours, were relieved to be underway. When the bus finally departed, a cheer went up from the passengers, charging the atmosphere with energy that felt more like a Rose Bowl shuttle than a funeral procession.

Even so, the first passenger to board was a resident of Michigan here to cheer the Wolverines on against USC at the Rose Bowl. Joseph Hansen, a city councilman from Pontiac, Mich., and graduate of the University of Michigan, knew he had to go to Palm Desert when he heard of Ford's death.



Arriving in Palm Desert at approximately 11 a.m., Michigan resident Joseph Hansen, center, was among the first group of mourners to board the shuttle at 4:45 p.m.

"I immediately rented a car and drove out here," he said. "President Ford is from Michigan and played football for the University where I got my two degrees. I owe him that respect, for what he did for Michigan and for what he did for the country."

After a 30-minute delay imposed mid-route by the Secret Service, the first two Metro buses arrived at the church. Under the glare of media lights from the riser set up across the street, mourners were each handed commemorative cards before filing silently into the church.

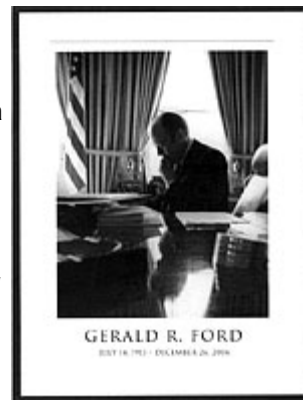




Mourners file silently into St. Margaret's Episcopal Church, where the 38th President of the United States lay in repose.

The cards identified the somber occasion -- one bore the presidential seal and a brief biography on one side and, on the other side, a photo of the late president at his desk in the Oval Office. The other was a prayer card from the church that held the initial services attended by the Ford family, friends and dignitaries such as former California Governor Pete Wilson and former U.S. Rep. Jack Kemp.

The silence continued inside the church, where mourners were greeted by the President's son, Jack Ford, who shook every hand and thanked every individual for coming to pay their respects. It was a touching reminder of a personal connection to the humanity of late President. The children of the president continued to hold vigil in this manner when services continued in Washington D.C. through six days later at the burial in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



Meanwhile, members of the public moved in single file past the flag-draped coffin guarded by United States Marines in full dress from the nearby Twentynine Palms Marine Corps base, and exited into the courtyard where Gerald and Betty Ford had often socialized after Sunday services.



Mourner's depart Metro bus at shuttle's end to sign remembrance books at Indian Wells Tennis Gardens.

Back on the bus, the mourners drove past the glare of media lights on the return trip to Indian Wells, where they exited at a site set up to allow the mourners to sign remembrance books before returning to the vast parking lot and home.

It was full circle for the local mourners, estimated to number in the thousands, but the Metro buses continued their somber duty until Pages and the other operators were relieved by the second shift of Metro bus operators who had departed East Valley Division 15 at 9 p.m.

On into the night, the waiting lines of mourners finally begin to wane in the early morning hours. The Secret Service stopped the proceedings shortly before dawn, sending Metro buses back to SunLine Transit for refueling and the long ride home.



A caravan of Metro buses commandeer the I-10 on the road home to East Valley Division 15. Each sector provided up to 5 buses for the service.

**President Gerald R. Ford Memorial Shuttle Service Volunteers**

**West Valley Division 8:** \* Anthony Bryant \* Jeffery Cummins \* Joseph DeMelo \* Kamran Firouzi \* Robert Higbee \* Frank Marino \* Phillip McCown \* Humberto Munguia \* Victor Pages \* Luis Santos \* Harjot Singh \* Matthew Smiley \* Lawrence Thomas \* Eduardo Uvals \* Saeid Vahedi \* Jojie Velasquez \*

**East Valley Division 15:** \* Vachik Ebrahimian \* Fernando Garcia \* Nicole Jiho \* Alvaro Jimenez \* Crystal Leonard \* Daniel Magana \* Librada Martinez \* Rafael Melgar \* James Nichols \* Dagaberto Rodriguez \* Tino Rodriguez \* Juan Rosas \* Juan Salazar \* Timothy Swayne \* Michael Turner \* Renee Williams \*

**Transportation Operations Supervisors:** \* Luis Alcantar \* Karla Aleman \* John Dover \* Charles Jenkins \* Ovidiu Mateescu \* Russ Modell \* Harvey Thomas \* Xavier Varela \*

**Fleet Management and Support Services personnel:** \* Sean Dunning \* Pete Gamino \* Keith Nielsen \* Paul Rankin

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