

THE First 30

2008 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Vietnam Veterans of America. Originally conceived without thought to membership, VVA was organized as a guerilla force to storm the halls of Congress on behalf of the nation's veterans of the Vietnam War. But the intended targets repeatedly asked, "How many people do you represent? How large is your membership?"

In this issue, we profile the first thirty chapters. Well, make that the surviving thirteen chapters. The path of every successful venture is littered with failures. Of the original thirty VVA chapters, seventeen were stillborn, only existed as a number, or met with a quick end.

But others prospered, sometimes struggled, and survived. We asked those original survivors to recount their histories and discuss their challenges. These are their stories.

RUTLAND, VT., CHAPTER 1

Mobilizing Locally

BY JACK CROWTHER

Together then, together now." That was the idea that drove Don Bodette, the Rutland, Vermont, man whose experiences in Vietnam and whose commitment to veterans shaped VVA's national organization. Bodette was a Marine who had earned the Purple Heart in Vietnam. His veterans' advocacy efforts began in the 1970s when memories of the Vietnam War were still fresh. It would be years before post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange would be recognized as part of the war's legacy. Many veterans felt the pain of psychological and physical injuries as well as the stigma of having served in an unpopular war.

Bodette's plainly worded newspaper ad read: "Vietnam veterans, we need to talk." It began efforts to help veterans cope with a variety of war-related problems. Jake Jacobsen, Albert and Mary Trombley, Mike Dodge, Dennis Ross, Clark Howland, and Mark Truhan were among others active in those early years.

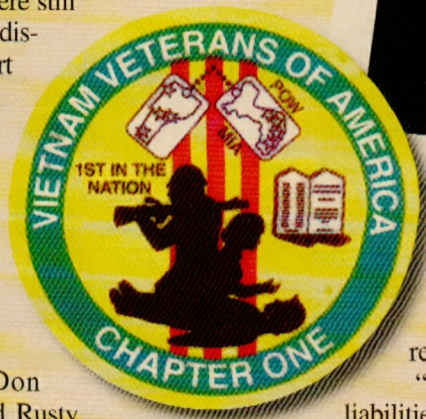
In 1979, VVA founder Bobby Muller met Don Bodette during a trip to Vermont. Bodette credited Rusty Sachs, a lawyer in Hartford, Vt., and a Marine veteran of Vietnam, with making the connection. Sachs also was a Vietnam veteran activist.

Bodette supported the idea of an organization for Vietnam-era veterans, but felt it needed to mobilize locally in chapters to succeed. He persuaded Muller to adopt his model. Chapter 1 of Vietnam Veterans of America was established on April 13, 1980, when Muller presented its charter to Don Bodette.

EARLY YEARS

Don Bodette led Chapter 1 from 1980-84. He was followed by Jake Jacobsen from 1984-89 and Mark Truhan from 1989-91. All three had been there from the beginning.

Jacobsen, still a Chapter 1 member living in West Rutland, describes the early years as "looking for the wounded"; that is, Vietnam veterans suffering a variety of ills, from shame about their service, and from other physical,



mental, and emotional ailments. He and Bodette were "on the same page from day one" with regard to Vietnam veterans, he said.

"We felt regrouping the wounded—making them feel like assets, not liabilities—would pay off in the long haul," he said. "Chapter 1 was always looking to fill a void in these people's lives by planting seeds and consistently challenging them to make a difference." The issues, he said, "were world issues and not just an isolated thing for a group of veterans. This approach widened the market that could be affected by these veterans."

Early chapter records suggest that there were as many as 46 members. Jacobsen says it was a time of high energy and lots of activity. "Every time we turned around, we had more things going on than hours of the day," he said.

They met with individual veterans in need of help, once evacuating a man from his home by toboggan in an ice storm when he needed to get to the VA hospital for medication.

A converted school bus served as a mobile rap center and traveled the state. In 1981, the group sponsored Vietnam Veterans Week to highlight issues such as Agent Orange and to involve agencies that could help veterans. Members did

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