

THE First Thirty

Continued from previous page

public relations, spoke at conventions, forged bonds with and challenged other veterans' organizations, and testified before Congress.

WHEN CHAPTER 1 ALMOST DIED

Despite the passion and energy of the first years, Chapter 1 was close to expiring in 1991 when the Moving Wall visited Rutland's central green, called Main Street Park. Those attending included Mike Divoll, who had been a triage medic on the U.S.S. *Constellation* in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1966.

Inquiring about the Vietnam veterans' organization in a tent set up near The Wall, he was told by the small group, "We're it." The chapter had been reduced to a shell and was, in Divoll's words, "on the verge of collapse."

"After The Moving Wall left, a few of us said we can't let this die," he said. Divoll became president, saw to it that a slate of officers was elected, and gave the group a semblance of structure. Meetings had a short business session and then a group discussion or rap session on any topic the members wanted to discuss.

Divoll said, however, that there was a challenge to the election, and he encountered some friction. He later became secretary but then backed away from the group. Now he's back as a board member. Steve Faye took over as president from 1992 to 1994 and held other offices for several years after that.

John Bergeron was president from 1995-2004, a period when chapter energy and activities varied. Bergeron is an Air Force veteran from the Vietnam era. His devotion to the cause was clearly evident. Operating a shoe repair shop in downtown Rutland, he also ran a kind of drop-in center for the chapter. His storefront was filled with patriotic symbols and armed forces displays.

RUTLAND COUNTY VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

Bergeron planted—or perhaps "found" is a better word—the seed that produced Chapter 1's most visible achievement: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Rutland's Main Street Park. Investigating reports of a marble sculpture of a soldier by local Vietnam veteran John Reno, then deceased, Bergeron located the sculpture in a gravel pit in western Rutland County and removed it for safe-keeping. Five years later, after an extensive fundraising effort and volunteer participation, the memorial was dedicated on Memorial Day 2000.

Reno's sculpture was refined and finished by sculptor Don Ramey, who donated his services. It became the centerpiece of the memorial. Surrounding and supporting the large marble block of the soldier, lying as if in state, are the eighteen names of Rutland County men who died in Vietnam. Plaques at the edges of the concrete oval containing the sculpture spell out a brief history of the Vietnam War and the history of the memorial. A third plaque pays tribute to Chapter 1 founder Don Bodette, who died of cancer on August 10, 1997. The fourth plaque, an Honor Roll, lists those who served in Vietnam from Rutland County.

CHAPTER 1 TODAY

Chapter 1 celebrated its 25th anniversary April 16, 2005, with a banquet attended by Vermont Gov. James Douglas, VVA National President Tom Corey, and about ninety others. We have about 137 members and four associate members and enjoy a healthy balance in our treasury. Of the 137 members, 75 are life members.

Aided to a degree by our distinction of being "Chapter 1" and the efforts of veteran Membership Chairman Dick Doyle, we have a solid membership list, including members from England, Paraguay, the Philippines, Italy, Hawaii, Alaska, and other states. Despite the above signs of health, we are not an active chapter in the sense of sponsoring frequent activities, holding fundraisers, showing ourselves at ceremonies, and lobbying legislators. A handful of members attend our monthly meetings.

Nevertheless, and thanks to our income source, we're able to support several veteran and community efforts. Recent and ongoing assistance has gone to the Dodge House, Vermont's only facility devoted to homeless veterans, located in Rutland. The Dodge House is a project of the Veterans Assistance Office, which Don Bodette helped create.



Chapter 1's Andy Moschetto chaired the committee that oversaw the construction of the Rutland County Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Here he speaks at the Memorial Day dedication in 2000. Then chapter President John Bergeron (in suit and tie) is just to the left of Moschetto.

During the deployments of Vermont National Guard troops in the Middle East, Chapter 1 has been a go-to source of help for families of soldiers facing financial pressures. Our disbursements through a "family readiness coordinator" for the Guard have totaled \$3,775. Last year, the Vermont National Guard presented Chapter 1 a bronze "Minuteman" statue in appreciation of our help to Guard families.

We were pleased to provide \$1,000 to support the Vermont VVA service officer program, which helps veterans with benefits and interaction with the VA. We also support such veteran-related groups as the Friends of Veterans, which serves Vermont and New Hampshire, and we have given to the Boys & Girls Club of Rutland County.

THE FUTURE

Chapter 1's current president is Adrian Megrath, who served with an artillery survey unit of the 82nd Airborne Division in Vietnam in 1969 and has been chapter president since 2004. He also serves as president of the board for Dodge House and as a representative to VVA's Vermont State Council.

Megrath established the Chapter 1 website, www.vvachapter1.com. He's also the webmaster. His acquaintance with the site's designers has helped keep the cost well within the chapter's means. Chapter history, photos and memorabilia, the Rutland County Vietnam Veterans Memorial, monthly newsletters, and useful links are all included.

Chapter 1 will not go on forever. We are closely identified with a war that ended more than thirty years ago. While mindful of the needs of our newer veterans, we draw from a gradually shrinking number of eligible members. Interestingly, though, we continue to gain new members seeking to understand, preserve, or affirm their Vietnam-era military experiences.

No doubt the healing from our war and the Vietnam veteran's greater respect in the eyes of the public play a part in this continued interest. Veterans may now justifiably take pride in, and wish to claim a measure of credit for, service they once kept hidden or suppressed.

Our own Rutland County Vietnam Veterans Memorial Honor Roll reflects this evolving status. When we dedicated the memorial in 2000, we had compiled a list of about 125 names of those who had served in the war after entering the service from Rutland County. There was no available list of all who had served, so Chapter 1 became the keeper of the list of those eligible for the Honor Roll.

Our Honor Roll is a weather-resistant heavy plastic sheet mounted in a metal frame and supported by a metal post. As veterans themselves and family members have come forward to request inclusion on the Honor Roll, we have updated it six times, most recently last year with the addition of ten names. The total now is 280, plus the eighteen killed in action.

The Rutland Garden Club has faithfully maintained the memorial as part of its community work. The city of Rutland owns the site.

Jack Crowther is Chapter 1's secretary and historian. He served in Vietnam from September 1965 to February 1966 as an assistant gunner on a 4.2 mortar platoon at Lai Khe. A retired journalist and writer, he's married with two grown children.