



Above: An Agent Orange Workshop was one of many panels held during the 1981 "Seven Days of Vietnam Veterans Week;" Right: Chapter 1 color guard members at the groundbreaking for Rutland's Memorial Plaza.



"We wanted to help all veterans, not just the Vietnam-era vet," says Howland. "Because of some restrictions in VVA's charter, we felt it would serve our community better if VAC set up its own organization." In the beginning the project faced resistance from the traditional veterans organizations in the area, including the American Legion and Disabled American Veterans. "There was a rift between World War II veterans and Vietnam veterans," Howland remembers.

"Our relationship with VVA and Chapter 1 has always been there and always will be," Howland says. Current Chapter President John Bergeron notes that involving the entire community in chapter activities has helped educate veterans and non-veterans alike. "Over the years the level of activity in the chapter has been up and down, but we have a new batch of members, and it has breathed new life into the chapter," he says.

Bergeron's cobbler shop in the center of town has helped spur activity, as well. "I have VVA posters in my shop window, and some days I'll have five or six people come in and ask about the organization," he says. "I can work and talk with them at the same time, and it has really helped educate folks about who we are."

Much of the chapter's energy the last several months has been focused on building a memorial to

Rutland County residents who served during the Vietnam era. Several years ago, a sculptor who was a Vietnam veteran began working on a monument for the community. John Reno died before he could complete the project, and the three-ton piece of marble, the basis for his work, disappeared.

"I had some spare time one day," Bergeron remembers. "I played detective for a few hours and went knocking on doors and asking questions. Pretty soon

I located the marble in a gravel pit in Fairhaven. It was off to one side and had been protected by the pit operator." The gravel pit operator agreed to load the marble on his flatbed and transport it to West Rutland where a sculptor has volunteered to complete the project. Rutland's nearly 700-square-foot memorial plaza will contain benches and landscaping, with the marble sculpture as its centerpiece.

"It will resemble a tomb," Bergeron says. "A soldier at rest is depicted, and the names of all Rutland County Vietnam veterans will be included." The effort to locate the names of the men and women has been daunting, but with the assistance of the local newspaper and television, as well as word of mouth, Bergeron expects that it will be successful. "I've had wives come into my shop with their husbands' DD-214's," he says. "They say their husbands won't do it, but they feel it is important for them to be recognized for their service."

The dedication is scheduled for Memorial Day, but Bergeron says they aren't locked into anything. "The city has donated the land, contractors are donating time and materials, and we have raised nearly \$15,000 toward the cost," he says. "If we can't complete it by Memorial Day, we'll just wait until we can."

Chapter 1 also is involved in an educational outreach program with area schools. In addition to having teams of Vietnam veterans going to the schools, the Superintendent of Schools

is interested in formalizing and expanding the project. "Our activities continue to attract new members all the time," Bergeron remarks. "We are involved in the community, and we support each other."

A sad postscript to this story is the fact that Donny Bodette died last fall from multiple cancers. His vision and determination will be missed, but his gift to those who followed is not diminished.

More than 50,000 VVA members owe a great deal to this man whose inner strength and courage persuaded Bobby Muller that a lobbying organization wasn't enough. Today VVA and Chapter 1 are as strong and vital as they were 20 years ago when Bodette proudly proclaimed: "You already have your first chapter!"

"There's no denying that these guys made it happen," Muller says. Muller, Bodette, and Jacobsen found a piece of paper and scrawled out what became the first chapter charter in VVA history. ■



In Service to America: Chapter 1 members collected clothing and money to ship to flood victims in The South.



Chapter 1 color guard members at the 1981 groundbreaking ceremony for the Vermont Vietnam Veterans Memorial.