

CHAPTER 12 – REFLECTIONS AT 30 YEARS

By Bob Hopkins

Bobby Mueller, to be sure, was a veteran activist with an idea and little else. He wanted to transform the way veterans business was conducted in the halls of Congress and in the wards and offices of the Veterans Administration. On April 10, 1979, the Internal Revenue Service recognized the Council of Vietnam Veterans as a War Veterans Organization, as described in Section 501 (c) (19) of the IRS code. On November 15, 1979 the fledgling organization was renamed the Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. VVA was a reality.

Mueller knew little about how the organization would evolve. He didn't even know what to call the various loosely defined veterans groups that called him. Finally, the term Chapter was selected and general guidelines were set up to form these Chapters.

Vic Cicconetti was a vet with the same fire in his belly as Mueller. He was instrumental in bringing together a group of vets at the YMCA in Asbury Park in 1981. One vet came because he wanted to play softball. Another showed up because his wife saw an article in the newspaper and made him go. Some came out of anger at how they had been treated by their fellow countrymen when they came home. A couple wanted to push for legislation to address the unfilled needs of their brothers and sisters. Several wanted to bring home the POWs they believed we left behind.

No matter how they arrived at the meetings, all, for the first time, felt a sense of belonging. They were starting their final journey home.

Looking for direction, they contacted Mueller and he met with a group of them. They voted to go with this charismatic, yet controversial leader, and were assigned the number 12 for their Chapter. Cicconetti, Sam Siciliano, and Tom Scalzo lent their names, as one year trustees, to the Articles of Incorporation and on May 3, 1982 Secretary of State Jane Burgio filed the papers necessary to give birth to Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 12, Asbury Park, N.J., Inc. A new era of veterans' advocacy was born in New Jersey!

The early days of the Chapter were exciting and, at times, confrontational. Some members left, while others stayed and worked through the problems that most new organizations have. At one point in 1983 less than 35 active members remained in the Chapter. The early euphoria of marching in the November, 1982 parade in Washington, dedicating the "Wall", was tempered by controversy in setting the direction for Chapter 12. The growing pains of the Chapter were symptomatic of the organization as a whole. It wasn't until the Founding Convention in late 1983 that direction for both the Chapter and the National organization was set. It was there that Bob Hopkins and Vic Cicconetti, the only delegates from New Jersey, got their baptism of fire in veteran's affairs. It would serve them, and the Chapter, well.

In early 1984 the Chapter bid a fond farewell to the YMCA and moved into their new quarters, courtesy of VFW Gimbel Lehy Quirk Post 2226, Oakhurst, where it remains to this day. It moved, only on the condition that it retain its identity and that there were no strings attached. That promise has always been kept.

In 1984 Art O'Keefe involved the Chapter in a controversy over the failure of the Immigration Service to bestow citizenship, posthumously, on Wladyslaw "Scotty" Staniszewski, a Scottish born veteran of Polish descent, who had emigrated to this country in 1964 and joined the Marine Corps in 1965, telling his mother that "A country worth living in is a country worth fighting for." On July 7, 1967 he was killed in Vietnam while fulfilling his commitment to his new homeland.

What neither he nor his parents ever imagined was that under immigrations laws he was not entitled to citizenship, since he was unable to show up at an immigration office to pledge allegiance to the United States! His death, in service to his new country, did not automatically qualify him for citizenship!

Enraged by this, Chapter members teamed with Charles Fisk of Massachusetts and pushed for passage of H.R. 960, introduced by Representative Brian Donnelly of Massachusetts. Due to their tireless efforts, led by O'Keefe, the bill was pushed through Congress and "Scotty" was given his citizenship. As a result, President Reagan ordered a search of all existing records and over 200 other émigrés, who had also died in service to this country in Vietnam, were awarded posthumous citizenship.

In 1985, VVA had grown to 4 Chapters in New Jersey and a State Council was formed. Chapter members Cicconetti and Jim Monahan had lent their expertise to help the forming Chapters incorporate. Final incorporation of the State Council took place in February, 1986 and Chapter members Bob Hopkins and Jim Burdge were elected as Officers.

The Chapter continued to grow and expand its agenda. The Chapter took point for the State Council in May and June, 1987, during heated debate over the refunding of the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission. In emotional testimony before several committees of the Assembly in Trenton, Chapter members, in conjunction with other VVA Chapters and veterans groups, forced the passage of the refunding bill. VVA, for the second time in less than 4 years, was credited with saving the Agent Orange Commission and its work on the Pointman Project.

Ever vigilant to the needs of fellow veterans, Chapter 12 expanded its PTSD/Substance Abuse Committee and applied for a grant to do training for professionals who come in contact with Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD and/or substance abuse. Early on in the history of the Chapter, Frank Lieb had prevailed on Doctor Thomas Lozinski to conduct professional counseling sessions for Vietnam veterans. Doctor Lozinski joined the Chapter as an Associate member and remains as part of the Chapter 12 family.

In 1991, the Monmouth County Board of Alcohol and Drug Abuse awarded the first of its kind grant to Chapter 12 to present training for professionals. The Chapter fulfilled the grant and continued training, using other monies. The Board of Alcohol and Drug Abuse used the Chapter 12 experience as a model for grass roots prevention and treatment programs, where monies granted by the Board are used to bolster innovative programs until they can find other sources of funding.

The Chapter had always been willing to take on new projects and many of its members have been recognized for outstanding contributions to the veteran's community. Henry Rossi was the first State Service Officer from VVA in New Jersey accredited by the VA. George Kauffmann, an Associate member, swam around Manhattan Island to push the POW/MIA issue. The late Senator Richard Van Wagner, the "Godfather" of Vietnam veterans in New Jersey, helped push through needed veterans' legislation in the

state. Wayne Wilson served as the Director of the Agent Orange Commission and Paul Sutton took point on homeless veterans' issues.

In the mid 90s, the Chapter experienced a drop in membership and there was controversy within the Chapter. There was a period of time that focus was lost and egos took over. Membership, which had topped 240, was down to 135 and dwindling. The Chapter was at a cross roads. It is often, at this point, when organizations, lacking any internal leadership or will to survive, often disband. Fortunately, for the Chapter, there was a core of veteran Chapter members who persisted and convinced some newer members to become more actively involved.

A meeting was held and several members, some old, some new, agreed to take on Officer and BOD positions, with the proviso that none of them would abandon the Chapter and that they would remain involved even if they were no longer in leadership positions. Egos were to be checked at the door. The needs of veterans were to be paramount in any project the Chapter took on.

This "pact" led to the election of Dennis Beauregard, Jim Monahan, Ernie Diorio, Paul Bausch, and Matt Rogalski, along with a Board of Directors that had new and old Chapter members. Rogalski, upon moving to Florida, was replaced by Rich Brandon. The core of the Officer leadership has remained in place since then, continually being reelected based on their accomplishments and dedication. The Board of Directors was expanded by two additional positions to accommodate the number of people willing to serve.

This continuity of service has been beneficial to the health and vitality of the Chapter. Bob Hopkins has served as Membership Chair for all but two of the past 30 years. Mike Berman has provided pro bono legal counsel to the Chapter since the 1980s. The Officers have all served for over 13 continuous years. Of the original members of the Chapter, Bob Hopkins, Don Davison and Bucky Grimm still serve in leadership positions and several others remain on the Chapter roles, participating in various events during the year.

The Chapter, under President Beauregard's leadership, has recruited many new members and persuaded older members, who had let their memberships lapse, to re-involve themselves in the Chapter. Membership roles have steadily risen and now stand at nearly 300!

Concomitant with the resurgence of the membership numbers has been the number of projects taken on by the Chapter, some new, others resurrected. The School Speakers Program has been ably led by Dennis Beauregard, Don Davison and Ernie Diorio. Several Chapter members participate in these educational programs and are well received by the students. The Chapter also participated in the New Jersey Adopt a Highway Program and established a Food Pantry for Veterans, in conjunction with the letter carriers of the Middletown Post Office, and with the support of the Oakhurst VFW post.

Remembering and supporting both our veterans and active duty personnel is a top priority of the Chapter. Teaming with various organizations, especially VFW Post 2226, the Chapter has recognized the service of our Iraqi and Afghani vets and participated at functions where these soldiers were recognized. Several members of the Chapter form the core of VFW Post 2179, Middletown, visits to hospitalized vets. The past Commander of the VFW post, Ron Kowalski, had commended the Chapter for its ongoing support. The Chapter also sends members, semi annually, to visit hospitalized vets at Walter Reed

Medical Center in Washington, bringing them candy, specially designed T shirts, and, most importantly, emotional support, one generation of vets to another.

The Chapter participates in a yearly Christmas toy drive for needy children. It also took the lead in raising funds to help defray the costs of sending the adult child of a Chapter member to Germany for a radical medical treatment, to combat the crippling effects of a disease known as Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy. For these, and other community and veteran related projects, the Chapter was honored by the Chapel of the Four Chaplains. In addition, several Chapter members have been inducted into that organization, in recognition of their service to their comrades and the community at large.

There are two stories that are symbolic of the dedication to the "pact" that was agreed to in the mid 90s. Several years ago Rich Brandon, the Chapter Treasurer, relocated to New York, 170 miles from the Chapter's home. Instead of resigning, he indicated he wanted to complete his term in office. As his term was about to expire, he advised the Chapter that he would like to continue in the position and has been reelected ever since. He commutes monthly to the General Membership meeting, a round trip of over 340 miles! Another member of the Board of Directors, Tony Ponzo, relocated to Pennsylvania, 60 miles away. Instead of resigning, he made arrangements to travel to Ocean Township and attend the Chapter meetings.

The award winning Chapter newsletter, Back in the World, has been published, on a monthly basis, since 1983. It was the brainchild of Bob Hopkins, and Roy "Moose" Carey and is one of the longest continually published newsletters in VVA. It is a valuable source of information of Chapter functions, veterans' benefits, current events associated with our military, and veterans' oriented issues. The reigns of editing and publishing the newsletter have been passed down to Jim, Jimmy, and Maureen Monahan, Pete Torres, Linda Ponzo, and Rob "Perry White" Ford, all of whom have maintained the high quality of production that has come to be expected.

The Chapter, located in one of the hardest hit Hurricane Sandy areas, has been involved in ongoing recovery projects. Chapter members, many of whom suffered losses, have selflessly come to the aid of their fellow vets and the community at large. That support has taken many forms, including physical labor, food, clothing, and furniture distributions, and substantial financial donations. With full recovery expected to take months/years, this remains an open ended commitment to the community.

The story of Chapter 12 would be quite different were it not for the support of the families. Without the encouragement and emotional backing of the parents, wives/husbands, and children none of what the Chapter has accomplished would have come to fruition. Even in the darkest hours, both individually and collectively, they were there to console, cajole, buttress, reinforce, and support their loved ones, allowing the members the time needed, often at a cost to the family, to continue the healing process. It is impossible to ever fully thank them for their sacrifices and dedication to the Chapter. We salute them.

Continuity, dedication, and a plan of direction have kept Chapter 12 viable and involved in both the civilian and veteran's community for over 30 years. It has weathered growing pains, occasional internal dissent, and the normal challenges associated with any organization to keep focused on issues affecting the veteran and his/her family. We look forward to many more years of comradeship and service.