

# Vietnam veterans try organizing their own

By SANDRA ARMERUSTER

Clutching a pie tin, the veteran emerged from the garage where he had spent 11 years living inside a car.

It had become a ritual. Each day he would hold the pie tin up to the sun, and then return to his self-imposed confinement.

For 11 years his parents searched for a mental health professional who would make house calls to visit their son. Finally, they found one.

"What are you holding?" the veteran was asked as he held the pie tin aloft.

"It's my Purple Heart," came the reply.

THE STORY is told by Cef Suarez, a 32-year-old Dearborn resident who is president and a founder of the Detroit chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA).

"It's sad to come home from Vietnam to regress to such a situation," said Suarez, a veteran who has worked for Michigan Bell for 14 years.

"We've all regressed to some degree," adds Jack Devine, a 33-year-old Warren resident. Devine, also a VVA member, works as a staff member in the satellite office of U.S. Sen. Don Riegle in Southfield.

"I know that the friends I have made

(through VVA) during the last five or six months will be my friends for the rest of my life," Devine said.

But friendship and a sense of belonging have been a long time coming, according to these veterans.

"We're no different than other veterans. We want a normal life," said Suarez. "We're fragmented. We came home one at a time, and society was against us. So we'd go underground — slip under the mainstream."

"People thought we were dope heads, but everybody wasn't on dope," said Dan Monty, a 34-year-old Garden City resident who serves as second vice president of VVA. "We're not marching on everything or trying to blow up and take over stuff."

ONE BY ONE, veterans now are joining groups dedicated to helping people who served in Vietnam.

The VVA is one such group. The Detroit chapter formed last October includes all of Michigan, said Suarez.

Suarez believes he was one victim of delayed stress syndrome.

"It closes in on you until you just want to run and take off," said Suarez, who added he was "fed up" with media coverage of veterans. Suarez said he was having problems at home when he left his wife last year. After resolving

those problems and returning home, Suarez said he talked with other veterans about forming an organization.

"I said I was willing to work. We keep the grapevine active. So we just kept bringing people in and that's how it (VVA) came about."

Now there are more than 400 on the chapter's mailing list. But there are other groups, such as the Michigan Association of Concerned Veterans, but the veterans hope to join the separate groups by "creating an umbrella organization."

A VETERAN veteran, Devine is writing his master's thesis on Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used widely in Vietnam during the war. Veterans claim that exposure to the chemical has caused a number of health problems.

But Agent Orange is only one of the problems Vietnam veterans say they now face. Others include isolation and alienation, delayed stress syndrome,

and high rates for divorce, suicide and unemployment.

SUAREZ ESTIMATED there are 350,000 Vietnam veterans in Michigan. But that figure doesn't include those troubled veterans who left Vietnam with "bad paper" — a discharge that was less than honorable.

"There was a lot of bad paper coming out of Vietnam," said Devine, estimating that 500,000 Michigan servicemen were in Vietnam. "If you had bad paper, you were wiped out — not considered a veteran."

Veterans say they are trying to learn from those mistakes by coordinating their efforts to organize a drive for help.

"We want what we deserve," said Monty.

Donations can be mailed to the VVA Detroit Chapter 9, P.O. Box 42372, Detroit 48242. The organization is open to all veterans, not just those who served in Vietnam, and to anyone else inter-



Veterans Cef Suarez, Dan Monty and Jack Devine discuss plans for an organization to help others who fought in Vietnam. (Photo by Bill Bresler)

ested in helping. For more information, call 561-4728.

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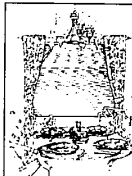
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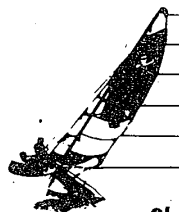
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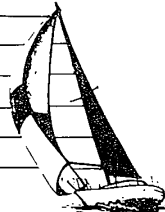


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