Attorney appointed to national Vietnam vet group

By Rich Swenson
staff writer

When the United States pulled out of the Vietnam War a decade ago, American soldiers were hardly welcomed home with open arms. In fact, they were treated as outcasts by many.

But time has a way of healing. An understanding and realization of what American GIs went through in fighting and dying for their country resulted in a successful effort to mainstream them back into American society.

Some have had a more difficult time readjusting than others, however. But they're getting help — from the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA).

The VVA is a non-profit organization that serves thousands of Vietnam veterans in 160 chapters established around the country. It assists the veterans in finding jobs, provides counseling services and gets them involved in community projects.

BIRMINGHAM ATTORNEY Randy Wright — a Vietnam veteran and president of the Detroit chapter of the VVA — has played an integral part in making the 500-member Detroit branch the largest and most active chapter nationwide.

His leadership efforts in Detroit were rewarded by his recent appointment to the 22-member National Board of Directors of the VVA, based in Washington, D.C. Wright fills a vacancy left by a resigning member. He will serve until the November 1985 elections, which will be held at the national convention in Detroit.

"They (board of directors) approached me," Wright said. "It's an acknowledgment of the success of the Detroit chapter.

"We've been very active — we have 130,000 Vietnam veterans in the Detroit area. Eighty percent have readjusted successfully, but there are still 20 percent that need our help."

The Detroit chapter has grown steadily since its establishment in 1978. The organization continues to provide services for local veterans (4,000 Agent Orange claims have been filed on behalf of veterans), but a new emphasis has been placed on developing projects to help the community.

THE GROUP recently sponsored a cleanup of the high-crime Cass Corridor area and is now offering a security service for neighboring residents. Also, a new Vietnam Veteran's Service Center at Woodward and Temple (formerly Greenfield's Restaurant) is now in the works.

"The hardcore problems are in the inner city," Wright said. "We've taken a stand there out of a commitment to demonstrate the ability of Vietnam veterans as a group.

"Our overall goal is to be a service organization for Vietnam veterans. But we also have a commitment to the community. It provides an opportunity for our members to contribute, and it's therapeutic — it helps them get their dignity back."

The board of directors meets every two months in Washington and Wright hopes to implement Detroit's successful VVA approach to chapters across the nation.

"I'm going to coach them on establishing chapters in metropolitan areas," he said.

A COMBAT veteran, Wright was drafted soon after graduating from Western Michigan University in 1968. He was shipped to Vietnam as the war continued to escalate. After his tour of duty ended in 1971, he enlisted in an officer's program. He eventually became a rifle platoon leader, taking his unit deep into the jungles of Vietnam.

"It (the war) was much worse than they made it out to be," he said. "Our commitment was to do the job, survive the experience and get home. My unit had some of the finest people I've ever dealt with — they were dedicated and outstanding.

"But Vietnam was a different war than the others. No one celebrated when we came home. There's something about that distinction that caused a lot of problems. I never was able to understand the unconsciousness of the war."

While more than 55,000 American soldiers died in combat, the aftereffects of the war on returning veterans was shocking, according to Wright. He said that according to studies, the number of suicides after the war was higher than the actual number that died in Vietnam.

"I ATTRIBUTE it to the lack of community support for Vietnam veterans as soldiers," he said. "The community focused their anger about Vietnam on the soldier rather than the government. It was an angry, frustrating experience for a lot of men. I can tell the Vietnam War is still not over for many of them."

When Wright returned home, he immediately enrolled at Wayne State University's law school and buried himself in his studies to avoid thinking about the war.

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STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Birmingham attorney Randy Wright has been appointed to the National Board of Directors of the Vietnam Veterans of America. "I'm against war," he said. "It's irresponsible."

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