



Vietnam Veterans Of America Chapter One

www.vietnamvetschapter1.org

JUNE 2019



MINUTES OF CHAPTER MEETING

JUNE 12, 2019

A nominal meeting of the Board of Directors took place. Directors present included President Andy Megrath, Secretary Jack Crowther, Treasurer Richard Reed, Jim Ficken, and Bill Whitney. No Board of Directors business was conducted.



The accompanying picture shows Chapter 1 President Andy Megrath turning over a check for the Stafford Technical Center to the incoming director, Melissa Connor. The chapter provided two \$1,000 scholarships to outstanding Stafford graduates to further their educations in a chosen field. The money is part of a \$10,000 contribution the chapter made to establish the scholarship for at least five years.

Jack Crowther introduced Stephen Abatiell of Shrewsbury, who has been involved in relief work in Vietnam, in particular work related to health effects of Agent Orange in North Vietnam. Jack had invited Stephen with the thought that Chapter 1 and he might collaborate in some way, since Chapter 1 regularly deals with Agent Orange issues.

Though not a veteran himself, Stephen's father, Peter, served with the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam from late 1970 to early 1972, primarily around Bien Hoa. Peter Abatiell, by virtue of his last name, is the first name on the Rutland County Vietnam Veterans Memorial Honor Roll in Rutland. The Honor Roll lists those who served in Vietnam after entering the service from Rutland County.

While working in California, Stephen applied for a grant, proposing a project in which he would travel to Vietnam with his father. The trip was with an environmental education organization, "so we kind of focused around Agent Orange," Stephen said. Peter Abatiell had experienced a cancer linked to Agent Orange exposure.

Seeking to do some volunteer work, they located an organization on the outskirts of Hanoi that was founded by a U.S. veteran and a North Vietnamese veteran in about 1988, "right when the country opened back up again and relationships were kind of normalizing," Stephen said.

Funding for the group was international, including the U.S., Vietnam, Germany, Japan, France, and Canada. A boarding school and a Vietnam veterans hospital operate in the same location. Some 120 young people live there getting an education and vocational training in such things as sewing, flower-making and weaving. Partner nations and non-profits support the enterprise, with most funding for the so-called Friendship Village now coming from the non-profits.

Stephen Abatiel has been involved for five or six years now and currently serves as president of the U.S. component. In Vietnam, veterans volunteer time to support the project, serving six weeks at a time.

The U.S. component is called Vietnam Friendship Village, Project USA. "That's our non-profit," Stephen noted. A man named George Mizo was the American founder. He eventually died from illnesses presumed to have originated with Agent Orange exposure.

Asked what the basic mission of the project was, Stephen said it was essentially a veterans hospital with the added component of the international group. Cooperation, friendship and reconciliation are the broad goals. Stephen believes that other veterans hospitals in Vietnam do not have the youth programs, which serve third and fourth generation offspring of those exposed to Agent Orange, themselves suffering effects of their parents and grandparents exposure to the chemical. The dioxin in Agent Orange is considered the element that has led to the health effects.

Coming around to possible collaboration with Chapter 1, Stephen mentioned a German-made documentary, in English, called "Lighter Than Orange." Much of the film concerns two children who are residents of the Friendship Village. Stephen has used the film to raise funds and talk about the village, combining the film showing with a raffle of items made in the village and/or a Skype interaction with someone in Vietnam.

As a suggestion, Stephen suggested an event on Aug. 10, which has been designated International Agent Orange Relief Day.

The web site for his organization is vietnamfriendship.org.

In concluding, Jack Crowther invited Stephen to make a specific proposal for future collaboration, which the chapter would then consider.

The minutes of the April meeting were approved.

Treasurer Richard Reed reported a total balance of \$86,577.73 in its accounts. Net income from ripoff tickets for the year beginning March 1 is \$6,161. The report was approved unanimously.

Andy Megrath cited a press release from VVA national noting a legal victory for “blue water Navy veterans.” The win allows veterans who served off the coast of Vietnam to receive the same benefits as troops serving in the country. The decision reverses a decision by the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2002 affecting Navy, Coast Guard and Marine veterans that served in the waters off Vietnam rather than within the country. That decision had limited the scope of the Agent Orange Act of 1991 “to those veterans who could provide proof of ‘boots on the ground’ in Vietnam,” according to the VVA press release. Now the blue water Vietnam vets get the benefits of those who served in-country.

Andy also read from another VVA communication that noted the end of the VA’s traditional community care and Veterans Choice programs this month and their replacement with a new Community Care Network and new eligibility criteria. The urgent care benefit was expected to start this month with “a complete rollout of the Community Care Network” by 2020.

To understand the new community care benefits, go to <https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/pubs/factsheets.asp>. Sharon Hodge of VVA national noted in her memo that to use the community care benefit requires a referral by the VA.

Andy reported the chapter received \$1,224 from VVA national as its compensation for the chapter’s life memberships, which number about 124.

Andy read a letter from member Joanne Reynolds, thanking him for a Vietnam Veterans women’s coin he gave her. Joanne expressed a wish that she could be more active in the chapter but has a problem with travel at night. With that in mind, the chapter’s next meeting will be Sept. 4 at 4 p.m., rather than our traditional 6 p.m. Note that this is the first Wednesday in September.

Andy is scheduled to attend the VVA national convention in Seattle from July 15 to 20, representing the VVA State Council with council President Perry Melvin. Andy is vice president of the council. Chapter 1 is actually eligible to send three additional delegates based on its membership, but we know of no others interested in attending.

As it did at the last convention, the organization is expected to discuss the future of VVA, a single-war veterans group, as its members die off.

Richard Reed went to the 40th anniversary of the Vet Center in Burlington on June 11. He said it was a good event with “a lot of Viet Nam vets there,” though not a huge crowd. The 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War was “dovetailed” into the celebration of the Vet Center, he said. The vet centers “were the brainchild of Vietnam veterans,” he noted.

Richard also relayed Joanne Reynolds’ desire to stay involved in the chapter, suggesting the earlier meeting time, subsequently adopted. He thought an earlier time might bring other members out as well.

Richard is still pursuing the possibility of locating the bust from the original Rutland County Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the Interstate 89 rest stop in Sharon, home of the Vermont Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial . We are also considering an application from the West Rutland American Legion, which offers an indoor space often used for public events.

Respectfully submitted,
Jack Crowther, secretary

**THE NEXT MEETING WILL BE WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 4, AT 4 P.M. AT THE CHAPTER OFFICES
AT THE VFW, 15 WALES ST., RUTLAND. A MEETING OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
WILL PRECEDE THE REGULAR MEETING.**