

VVA Board of Directors

VIC Report: January 2012

The VIC had a productive and successful year, which included the adoption of *VIN-4, PTSD and Parole/Clemency, VIN-5, and Retention of Benefits for Incarcerated Veterans* and *VIN- 6, PTSD Treatment of Incarcerated Veterans* at the 15th National Convention in Reno. I had the opportunity to visit and interact with the incarcerated veteran organizations and programs at the Soledad and Auburn Correctional Facilities which proved to be interesting and rewarding experiences.

The CTF Veterans Service Office located in the labyrinth of Soledad has demonstrated remarkable success in obtaining benefits and services for disenfranchised veterans and dependents under the tutelage of Col. Thomas H. Griffin, (USA, ret) VSO Certifying Officer of the Monterrey County Office of Military and Veteran Affairs. VSO's Edwin Munis and Doc Piper and the veterans at Soledad are proud of their advocacy program summed up by the mission statement of "Helping Ourselves by Helping Others". Observing *The Wall That Heals: The Traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial* on the Soledad Yard was an iconic moment for the 15-year effort to ameliorate the divisive political and psychological wounds of Vietnam. It was fittingly appropriate the traveling wall should be starkly displayed on a prison athletic field attesting the Vietnam experience is more than 56,000 men and women whose deaths are just a small part of this American tragedy. The deep psychological and emotional wounds of Vietnam were disproportionately born by veterans abandoned and shunned and not surprisingly, over represented in jail and prison these last 40 years.

On Veterans Day Mokie Porter and I met AVVA President Nancy Switzer in Rochester and drove to an early afternoon meeting at Dick Heffron's home in Auburn. Dick works as a caseworker at the Auburn Correctional Facility and is advisor of VVA# 205, the incarcerated chapter at Auburn. The meeting included Central District Director Ron Fairbanks from the NY St Council and VVA 704 President Bob Smith, Nick Valenti, Lou Patti. Membership compliance issues of VVA 205 were addressed successfully removing them from the suspension list. The membership issues involve the ability of incarcerated chapters to meet VVA annual reporting requirements have been exasperated by the recent demand for filing the IRS 990. With Dick Heffron's support and help by Rochester VVA Chapter VVA 205 hopefully will remain a viable chapter. One of the recommendations arising from this meeting was that the Membership Committee considers a less punitive and adversarial approach to the dissolution of the Chapter Charters. The recent deluge of Chapter Charter Revocations is alarming to us all and a particular concern for incarcerated chapters. National Directors and Council of State Council Presidents should consider a more honorable discharge process than an overly adversarial termination process for the VVA Chapters. Basically, it is suggested that, when possible providing a Certificate and Plaque of Appreciation and which acknowledges the years of service of the Chapter be considered.

After the meeting, Mokie, Nancy and I followed Dick Heffron to the prison for the 2011 Veterans Day Vigil conducted by the Veterans Group of Auburn and VVA# 205. Nancy

and I had an opportunity to address the large group of prisoners and veteran supporters gathered to observe the 11-11-11 Ceremony in America's oldest correctional center operating, continuously since 1817. The atmosphere and appreciation of all those attending was unique and Mokie Porter was able to videotape the 2 hour ceremony. We were able to conduct interviews with VVA 205 VP Andrew Retsivo and President B. Hatch both founding members, and also interview several contemporary vets. One of the original founders, Ernie Bullock, now a guest was able to attend. Ernie works as a VA Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist in Syracuse and continues to serve veterans since his release from Auburn. The Auburn Correctional Center was a remarkable experience and hopefully one we can do again. However, the next visit must include an opportunity to meet the incarcerated veterans at Attica.

I hope 2012 provides some opportunities to visit several more incarcerated veteran programs. In particular, I like to travel Alabama and visit VVA #190 at the Holman Unit and meet with Craig R. McLaren the Exec Director of the oldest incarcerated VVA chapter. I also plan to attend another Calif State Council meeting to assist the veterans incarcerated in the country's largest state prison system of special concern those imprisoned under the nefarious 3 strike law like Arthur Lee Johnson, an old non violent Namvet. Another visit to Soledad is quite possible, as well as, promised visits with the San Quentin Veterans group, with retired Correctional Sgt John Cheney. Additionally I have been invited to attend a Veterans Appreciation Day Ceremony by the Vacaville CMF veterans in February. Finally, I have been invited to meet with the incarcerated veteran group at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem and hope to make that trip before the Leadership Conference.

TP Hubert, VIC Chair
January 13, 2012

