

# Remembering Vietnam

Veterans Memorial Committee remembers local soldiers at May 28 ceremony. **By Adam Joseph**

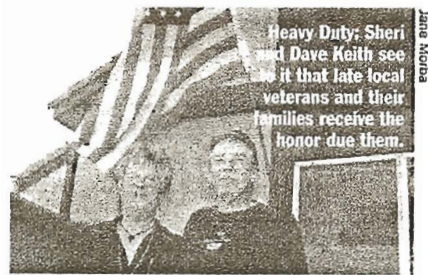
Poetry, commemoration, and a supportive wife help Dave Keith, 62, smile after seven surgeries, a broken back and three tours of duty in Vietnam, the war that took the life of his younger brother on Mother's Day at the age of 20.

Keith's handlebar moustache covers an honest face. He stares straight ahead at a hand-knitted throw decorated with an American flag that lies draped over a chair in his Salinas home.

"Everyone went [to Vietnam] for liberty and willingly died for it," he says, leaning forward in his easy chair.

Like Keith, 78 Monterey County families lost sons, brothers and spouses who served in Vietnam. "I refuse to let these men be forgotten," Keith says.

In 1990, Keith and his wife, Sheri, founded the Monterey County Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee with the intent of creating a memorial to all of the local soldiers who lost their lives.



Heavy Duty: Sheri and Dave Keith see to it that late local veterans and their families receive the honor due them.

After finding a spot atop a hill within the eight-acre area now known as All Veterans Memorial Park in Salinas, the committee staged a "claiming of the hill." They planted an American flag into the ground and didn't move for nine hours until the city of Salinas agreed to lease the space for \$1 per year for 25 years.

"We gave up many hills in Nam," Keith says. "We figured we'd try this one and we got it."

The memorial is on public land, but it was built entirely with private support—about 15 years and \$700,000 in donated cash, services and materials. There's a granite waving flag centerpiece and a concrete sandbag wall.

On May 28, at 11am, the Veterans Memorial Committee will hold a commemorative ceremony and kick off a new campaign to raise \$300,000 to complete construction of the monument and landscaping of the park.

The Saturday event will also include

a flag raising ceremony and salute with units from Monterey-based military personnel, Purple Heart Veterans, Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle riders clubs and County Supervisors Jerry Smith, Butch Lindley, and Fernando Armenta, all of whom served in Vietnam.

Located on East Laurel Drive, the Vietnam Memorial provides a 360 degree view of Salinas.

It's designed to look like a human heart and is surrounded by seven trees, symbolizing "the seven days of the week the military is on call," and "the human heart [that] goes to war and is most touched by war," Keith says.

Keith uses poetry to explain the memorial, and to explain how he made it this far. At the age of 39, Keith broke his back—the result of the injuries he sustained fighting in the war. His broken back kept him off of his feet for many years, and added to his anger and depression, also lasting wounds from his experience in Vietnam.

"It was either poetry or prison," Keith says. He chose the former.

Keith gets up from the easy chair and disappears for a moment. He returns with a spiral-bound, soft-cover book titled, *Where Were You When the Lights Went Out, Poems by Dave Keith*.

"War! Takes away the fragrance flower," reads a line from Keith's poem, "Springtime in my Youth," which reflects on childhood's death to war.

In addition to planning the Monterey County Vietnam Memorial and raising \$700,000 for its construction, Dave and Sheri Keith also produced the Presidential Memorial Recognition Certificate, signed by President George W. Bush, which will be presented to local residents on May 28, honoring their family members who fought and died in Vietnam.

"We tracked down 12 families of the 78; the rest of them have either moved on or passed away," Keith says.

Keith's eyes tear up slightly as he speaks of today's soldiers going off to fight in the Middle East.

"These kids I see going to Iraq are giving up the right to hold their children's hand and kiss their wives for the one word of freedom, just as we did when we went to Nam."

**THE CEREMONY BEGINS AT 11AM, MAY 28, AT ALL VETERANS MEMORIAL PARK, 855 EAST LAUREL DR., SALINAS. FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL 657-9700.**

