

They were remembered

By JIM SILVA

This past Memorial Day was very special for Vietnam veterans in Monterey County. The finishing touches were unveiled at our Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Laurel Drive in Salinas. An 8-by-16-foot sculpture of a waving flag with the names of the county's 78 fallen warriors engraved on its base was dedicated. The flag was draped by a parachute. The last order of the day was to cut the ribbons and let the parachute slide to the rear. It was greeted by a huge round of applause, and for those with the names of their sons on that wall there were tears — tears that have been in their hearts for close to 40 years.

This is what Memorial Day is about, not the fanfare, but for those attending it is a way to reconnect with loved ones. When the names of those who died in combat are read, they feel the pain and loss as if it were yesterday.

Why do they come each year to an event so heartfelt and traumatic? One reason: They are there to say "Hello," "Thank you," "I love you," "We'll meet again," "I miss you."

They come because they are among friends who are there for the same reason. You'll see a lot of handshakes, hugs and tears. When they depart from the memorial, they leave in a better state of mind than when they arrived. They feel the closeness of their loved ones, and the love of those sharing the event with them.

Once a veteran, always be a veteran.

The monument looked beautiful. More than 250 flags were blowing in the wind — red, white and blue undulating through the gentle breeze. Flowers from Rose Kershing's fifth-grade class at Spreckels School lined the walkways, each with a small flag, a fallen soldier's name and large red-white-and-blue bow. The students did sign language to the song, "Still in My Heart." It was a touching moment.

It took 20 years, but now Monterey County has a memorial to the young men who lost their lives in Vietnam. This could not have taken place without the hard work and dedication of Dave Keith, who lost his younger brother in Vietnam.

Thanks to him, this county has a memorial everyone can be proud of.



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Veteran Peter Calvert reflects behind the memorial wall.

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to figure out that they were veter-
ans. It was a cold morning and my
eyes grew watery watching them.
For a moment, time stood still.
They looked like three 18-year-
olds. They came over. "Why did
you come here this morning?" I
asked one whose name is Sal.
"We all take turns and come
almost every weekend to keep the
site in shape, so people never for-
get about us," he said.
People send me a lot of e-mails
asking what inspired me to get
involved with veterans. I was a lit-
tle girl in the late '60s. My cousin
had just attended the Monterey
Pop Festival with my parents, and
soon after he was sent to Vietnam.
My mom would watch the news
with Walter Cronkite, and the
casualty list would be shown. She
was always looking for my cousin's
name. I used to run to the TV and
cover the screen with my hands
and my body because it used to
make me feel sad, too.
He did make it home, but months
later he became sick with Agent
Orange poisoning. His parents
fought to get him the proper med-
ical coverage. He eventually died
from the sickness.
I vowed to myself that when I
grew up, I would try to do what I
could to raise awareness of the
plight veterans still face.
No veteran should ever be denied
proper medical care, dignity or
respect.
I'd like to thank some of our local
veterans: Richard Guthrie, Betty
Strickland, Mike Marshall, Rick
Losoya and Nancy Keough. To
Janet Taylor and Mary Otto, where
the story will continue, I dedicate
this to Jim Silva, a Vietnam veteran
whose story was the first one I
read. It has given me a better
understanding and appreciation
for war veterans. A person can
desire to meet a president, celebri-
ty, royalty, etc. A veteran holds a
higher place in my heart. Take a
moment to thank a veteran
because they have earned it. Oh,
and Sal, who I met on the hill:
You are never forgotten.