

✓ ^{Veterans} 'We consider ourselves patriots'

Embattled VFW commander digs in for fight

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SANTA CRUZ — The leader of the post drummed from the Veterans of Foreign Wars calls himself a "classic draftee" who spent one year training to fight, one year in Vietnam and the rest of his life remembering the war.

Richard Anderson, 37, is commander of Post 5888, which on Monday had its charter revoked for publicly opposing the 2.1 million-member organization's hawkish national policy of "American primacy" in Latin America.

The 67-member post was granted an alternative writ in court this morning. Superior Court Judge Donald May, ruling from his chambers, set an April 18 show-cause hearing in the case.

"I do not say that the membership of the VFW is going to all of a sudden go liberal and believe in working for peace as much as they do for war," he said.

"But I do see a fundamental change among men our age, in their 30s, 40s and World War II vets, who would like to use a traditional organization like the VFW to do something for peace."

Anderson, who held the rank of Army Specialist 5, is one of 7,000 Vietnam veterans who have settled in the hills and along the beaches around Santa Cruz.

"The weather and terrain are a lot like Vietnam," he said.

Anderson, who wears a baseball cap with the VFW insignia over his graying hair instead of the usual military-style VFW hat, operates heavy machinery for the UC Santa Cruz from early morning until late afternoon. Then he heads down to the post in town to meet with other veterans.

Although the post is active in helping disabled vets and in other community efforts, Anderson has spent most of his time lately answering questions about the post resolution calling for "a policy of self-determination and non-intervention in Central America."

Anderson said it "rubs me the wrong way" that some VFW members consider him a "traitor" because the post carried its resolution to the Nicaraguan government in December.

"We consider ourselves patriots, there's no question about that," he said. "We fought for our government. We bled for our country. We're fighting for the same freedoms we fought over on the battlefield."

"There's nothing different about us except that we're well-informed men of conscience," he said. "We don't align ourselves with any communists or anything like that. We just say that our country is making a mistake and we're going to tell it so. That's our duty."

About three-quarters of Post 5888's members are Vietnam War veterans, although recently more World War II vets and an 86-year-old World War I vet joined in sympathy with its stand on Central America.

Beyond the issues of freedom of speech, the right to dissent and the questions of foreign policy, Post 5888's battle with national headquarters also reflects some members' uneasiness with the VFW's "military mentality," Anderson said.

"When the organization is hawkish, that draws people of that mentality, and it pushes away guys who say they'd like to work for peace," he said. "It just continues to perpetuate itself. The bigger it gets, the more hawkish."

Anderson said he's somewhat uncomfortable about being part of an effort that could break down the VFW's chain of command "because a lot of men are very happy with that. It's sort of a dream world."