

"I always thought the whole country had turned its back on us.
... This is a new start, a new chance. People do care about us."

— ARMY VETERAN KERMIT DAVIS



GARY REYES — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Homeless veterans wait in line for lunch during the Stand Down retreat Sunday in Boulder Creek. Nearly 200 veterans gathered at a campsite to receive services provided by Veterans Affairs and community groups.

Veterans allowed to 'Stand Down'

HOMELESS OFFERED REST WITHOUT WORRIES

✓ Homeless-2000
By Leslie Griffy
Mercury News

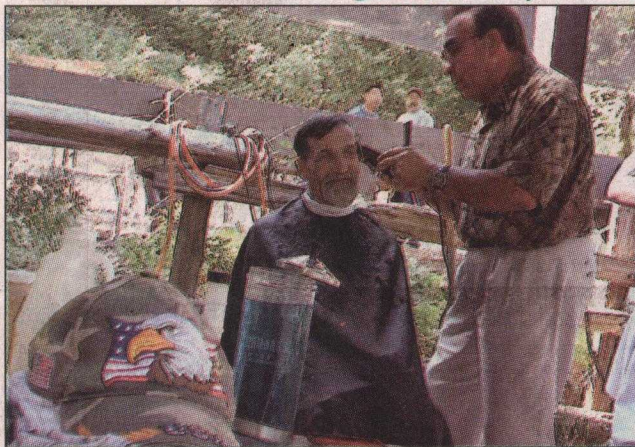
Former Marine Joseph Martinez smiled warmly Sunday as he shoveled gravel out of a gutter at a retreat for homeless veterans in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The recovering drug addict said he had been released from the military without counseling or training in 1988 even though his "addiction was bubbling inside."

The addiction cost him years of his life. And like so many veterans, he slipped through the cracks.

Over the weekend, however, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs tried to do for him, and nearly 200 other homeless vets, what was not done when they first came home — coordinate medical, legal and other services for those who served.

Without those services, re-assimilation into civilian life, particularly for the Vietnam generation, was tough.



Online Extra

Watch a video of the Stand Down at
www.mercurynews.com.

Joseph Castro gives veteran John Kibler a free haircut Sunday at the weekend Stand Down retreat in Boulder Creek.

See **STAND DOWN**, Page 6B

STAND DOWN | Services for vets

Continued from Page 1B

"I always thought the whole country had turned its back on us," said one Army vet, Kermit Davis, as he waited for an X-ray in a mobile dental van brought to the Boy Scout campgrounds in Boulder Creek for the weekend retreat nestled in the hills.

"This is a new start, a new chance," he said. "People do care about us."

All of the services were in a single location. Those who needed them were tracked down through service agencies that help veterans, and the homeless, and shuttled to the retreat. It was there that Martinez completed five hours of community service ordered on the spot by a judge.

He and Davis are among hundreds of thousands of former service members that Veterans Affairs classifies as homeless.

An estimated 200,000 veterans sleep on America's streets every night, said Kate Severin, outreach coordinator for the Veterans Affairs' Palo Alto health care system. More are in shelters, transitional housing or temporarily staying, like Martinez, in drug rehab programs. About 49,546 homeless veterans live in California.

Toppling barriers

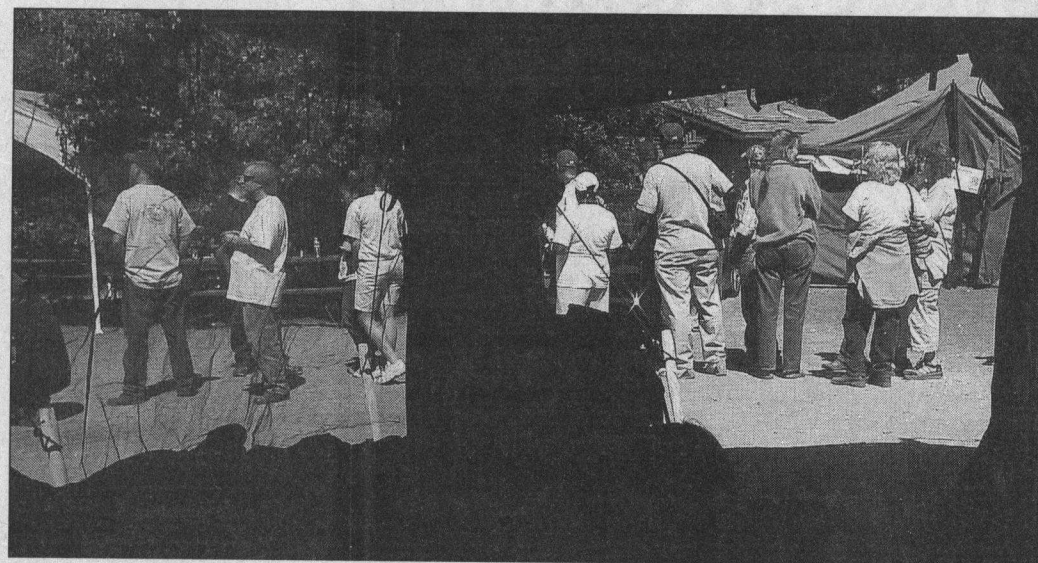
The event was the South Bay's first VA-sponsored "Stand Down," a military tradition that allows those on the front line to step back to rest, seek medical treatment and change out their gear. Severin said the vets at the retreat are, in essence, on the front lines of homelessness.

Officials designed the retreat as a way to give homeless vets a chance to rest without worrying about housing, food or clothing. The veterans visited a dentist, a doctor and transitional housing organizations. They got haircuts and met with judges for sentencing on minor offenses.

"So many things can be barriers for finding work or housing," Severin said, citing criminal records, health issues and even physical appearance.

An old ticket kept Martinez from having a driver's license. So on Saturday, a judge at the retreat ordered Martinez to perform community service. Working at the camp, he was done paying his debt to society by 2 p.m. Sunday.

"It will be so much easier to



GARY REYES — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Veterans and volunteers stand in line for lunch Sunday during the weekend Stand Down retreat in Boulder Creek. "Stand down" is a military tradition that allows those on the front line to rest.

get work with a driver's license," said Martinez, a Marine from 1981 to 1988 who celebrated 91 days sober on Sunday.

Martinez isn't sure where he began to go off track. But, he said, by the time he was discharged from the service something was wrong.

But nobody saw his addiction.

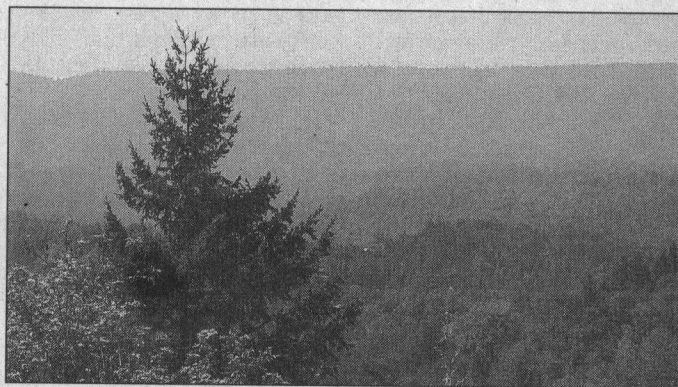
Veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan go through a more vigorous screening than was offered to those before, Severin said. But some of those who returned from Vietnam and some veterans who, like Martinez, served into the '80s are still paying the cost of limited services.

At that time, post-traumatic stress disorder was nearly unknown. The unpopular Vietnam War made for a cold reception for soldiers coming home, Davis said.

The dental van was one of the most popular services provided at the retreat, said Katelyn Campbell, with Palo Alto's Veterans Affairs unit. That's largely because the government won't cover veterans' trips to the dentist unless the issues with their teeth stem from their time in uniform.

Having medical services in a single place for the weekend allowed doctors to do comprehensive work with homeless veterans that normally doesn't happen. It is difficult to schedule appointments for a transient population, said Ian Tong, medical director for veteran outreach in Palo Alto.

"Getting them to specialists — dermatologists, dentists — all of this would normally take



The Santa Cruz Mountains around Boulder Creek provided the backdrop for the homeless veterans retreat over the weekend.

a year," he said. "What might take months and months to accomplish, we can do right here."

But getting the homeless veterans from Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties in a single location wasn't easy. Non-profits that work with veterans and those that work with the homeless signed people up for months before the event, Severin said. Officials handed out fliers with information about the services planned for the Stand Down and detailed information about how veterans with no transportation could get up into the hills.

Saturday volunteers picked up veterans from designated locations and drove them far up into the hills for the weekend.

Therapy, training

For Deborah Taylor, a 57-year-old veteran from the Women's Army Corps, getting her teeth fixed was a goal for the retreat. But, she said, she got much more.

She lives in a drug treatment center in San Francisco, but she has long wanted treatment for PTSD.

For years, Taylor said, she tried to deal with the anxiety caused by her service in the 1970s through using drugs. She'd try to pull herself up, staying sober for three or five years at a time. But she'd always slip back into drug use.

She wasn't sure where to go but believed that dealing with her underlying anxiety could help lift the haze.

At the Stand Down, a counselor helped sign her up for therapy. And, she signed up for computer training.

"With this, I can keep on keeping on," Taylor said with a laugh. "When I go home, I can look for a job. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I have a future. I can make plans. I have something to look forward to. What more could you ask of two days?"

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