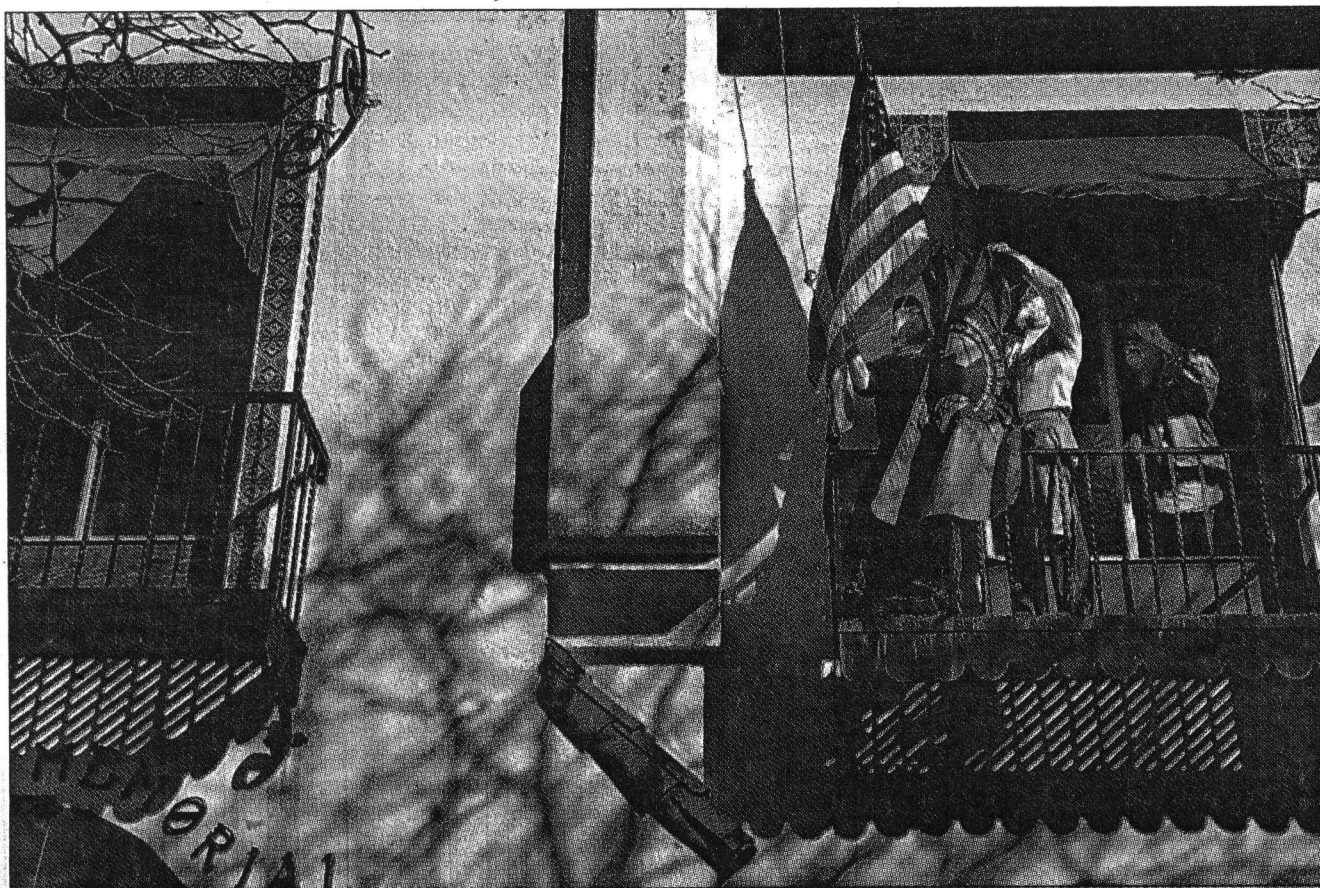


VETS RETURN HOME, FOR A DAY



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Vietnam veterans Juergen M. Lang and Gordon Smith lower the stars and stripes, as well as the flag for soldiers missing in action and held prisoner of war, at the Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Building on Thursday as former Marine Harry Meserve waits nearby.

Downtown memorial building opened for one day before renovation

By JASON HOPPIN

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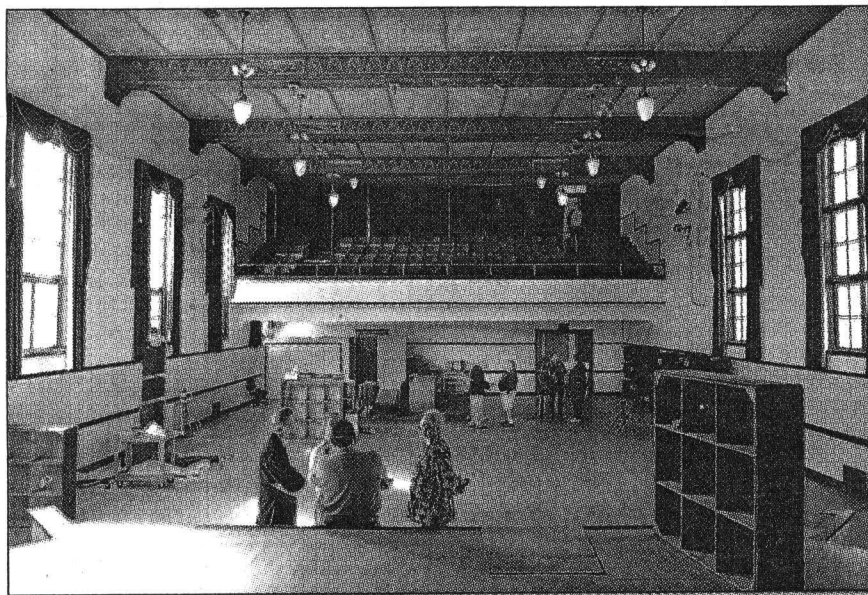
SANTA CRUZ — For the first time in nearly two years, local veterans got a chance Thursday to visit Santa Cruz County's troubled Veterans Memorial Building, a place many see as a home away from home.

The 1932 historic landmark is slated for a \$3.6 million structural renovation, which could get under way within a matter of weeks. The work caps an episode that began when the county declared the building unsafe in 2010, touching off a tense standoff with veterans — including heated arguments, a lawsuit, dueling structural evaluations and more — that is only now starting to unwind.

Once reopened in spring 2013, the building will pretty much look as it does today. Thursday's ceremony helped bring closure to what has been a persistent dispute, but was mainly a chance for aging vets to get what could be one last look inside.

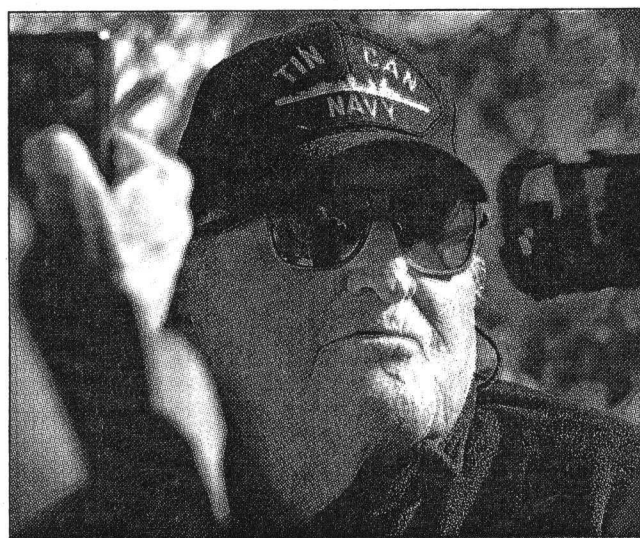
"This is a chance for those who may never see this building again, due to health decline or death. We want to make sure we thank them. We hadn't been able to get together for a couple years, so this is a feel-good time for all of us," said Bob Patton, president of the United Veterans Council of Santa Cruz.

After meeting and sharing stories at the Museum of Art and History, several



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ABOVE: Veterans and other members of the public had a last chance for an inside look at the Veterans Memorial Building on Thursday before a seismic retrofit gets under way.



LEFT: World War II veteran Maurice Ricketts, who helps run the War Veterans Emergency HAM Radio Station, is interviewed at the building's Salute and Send-off on Thursday.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Vietnam Veteran Rudy Quijance attends Thursday's Salute and Send-off to the Santa Cruz Vets Hall.

VETS

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dozen veterans walked down Front Street to the Vets Hall. The Tin Can Band played a few songs, and veterans mingled inside the building's auditorium and meeting rooms.

Several veterans saluted as an American flag that hung outside the building was lowered, soon to be raised at a temporary veterans' facility on Emeline Avenue.

Thursday's event was made possible in part by Supervisor Greg Caput, who helped secure veterans' entry into the building.

"They have an emotional attachment to this building, and it looked like at one time it might be knocked down," Caput said.

Many said Thursday that the expected downsizing of the military will increase the demand for benefits and employment services, underscoring the importance of the hall. It served not only as a

meeting place for local veterans, but as a way find help and, occasionally, even be seen by a traveling doctor.

"We're one of the few counties in California that has no VA medical facility," Patton said. "This is like the backwaters of veterans services."

Pat Hendrix, a Vietnam-era veteran of the Women's Army Corps, heads the Women's Veterans of the Monterey Bay Area. But since the building closed, the group has largely dissipated, she said.

Hendrix vowed it would

return.

"We have not fallen because the building's been taken over. We've just moved the front-line," Hendrix said.

Among the oldest vets to pay their respect Thursday was 91-year-old Donald Miller, who served in the Middle East during World War II. A recent transplant to the area, Miller had never been to the Veterans Hall, but came to support his comrades.

"It's a beautiful building," he said. "The veterans need a place to come and meet."