



With the walls of an affordable housing complex rising behind him, Bill Hutchison sits outside his shanty.

the Solitary Man

Haunted by life, 67-year-old veteran just wants to be left alone

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Veterans

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Bill Hutchison doesn't ask for much.

A 12-pack of Keystone Ice, a few cigarettes and a low-roofed shack he built on borrowed land is just about all he needs.

"I stay to myself. I don't bother nobody," says Hutchison, sitting in an old lawn chair, his face to the sun, his back to a piece of plywood he's got shoved up against a cyclone fence.

"All I got is my dog."

But Hutchison, a 67-year-old Army veteran who says the things he saw in Korea make it hard for him to live inside, may lose the little bit he has.

An apartment building is rising on the vacant land behind his shack and a new housing development is being proposed in a field a stone's throw away.

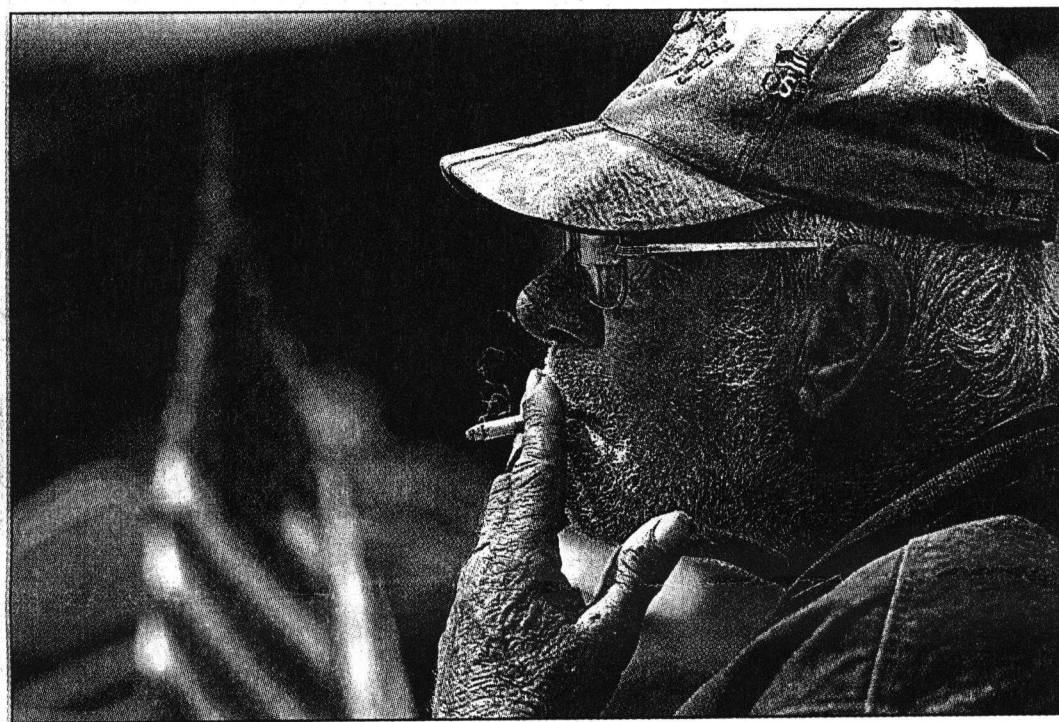
And even though developers say they won't try to get him thrown out, Hutchison worries that when people start moving into the apartment building, with its reverse-gable roofs and recessed decks, that they'll look at his plastic tarps and his rusty old bike and will tell police to make him leave.

"But where can I go?" he says. "I got no place but this."

He sweeps his can of beer toward his shack, toward the gray-muzzled dog he calls Shug, and he ticks off his possessions: A bed, a heater, a portable radio, a milk crate full of books.

He likes Louis L'amour best.

His shack may not look like much, Hutchison admits, but he can see the ocean



'The only thing I got is my beer and my cigarettes,' Hutchison says. 'I don't bother nobody.'

and Antonelli's Pond from its door, and he can sit in the sunshine whenever he wants.

A room would just make him feel all caged up.

"An apartment?" says Hutchison taking a sip of beer and shaking his head.

"No ma'am."

At 67, Hutchison may be one of the older ones, but he's not the only veteran in Santa Cruz County living with his back to the rest of the world.

Veterans officials estimate that they serve a few hundred men here who live like Hutchison. Men who make their homes in the woods and on the streets because when-

ever they go into a room, they have to look for a way out.

They are men who need a 12-pack to sleep through the night. Men who can't live with their demons, so they make friends with them.

"There are a lot of them out there," says Cy Wannarka, director of Veterans Services for the county.

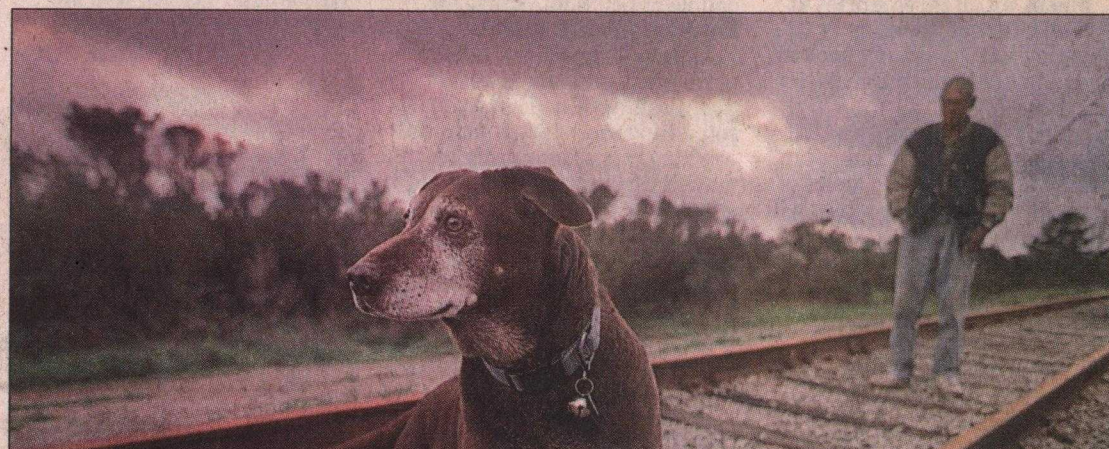
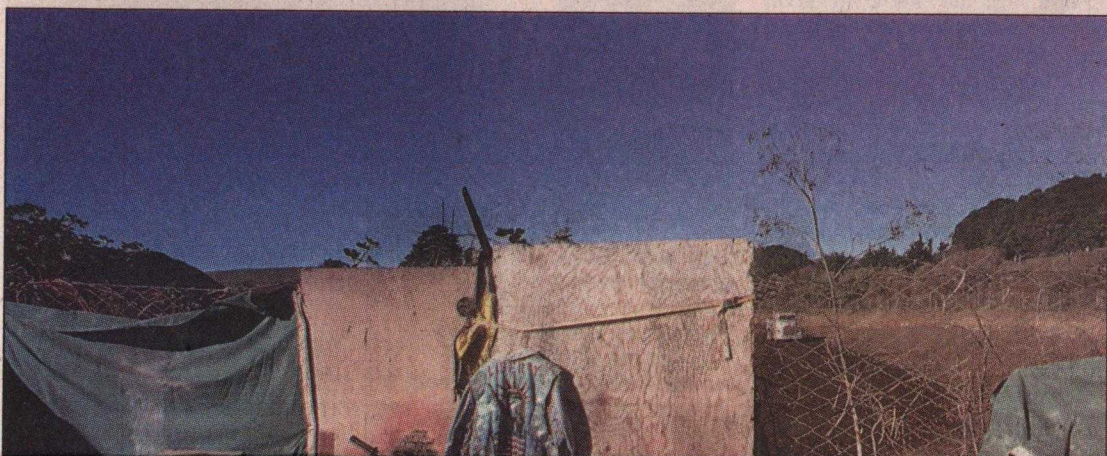
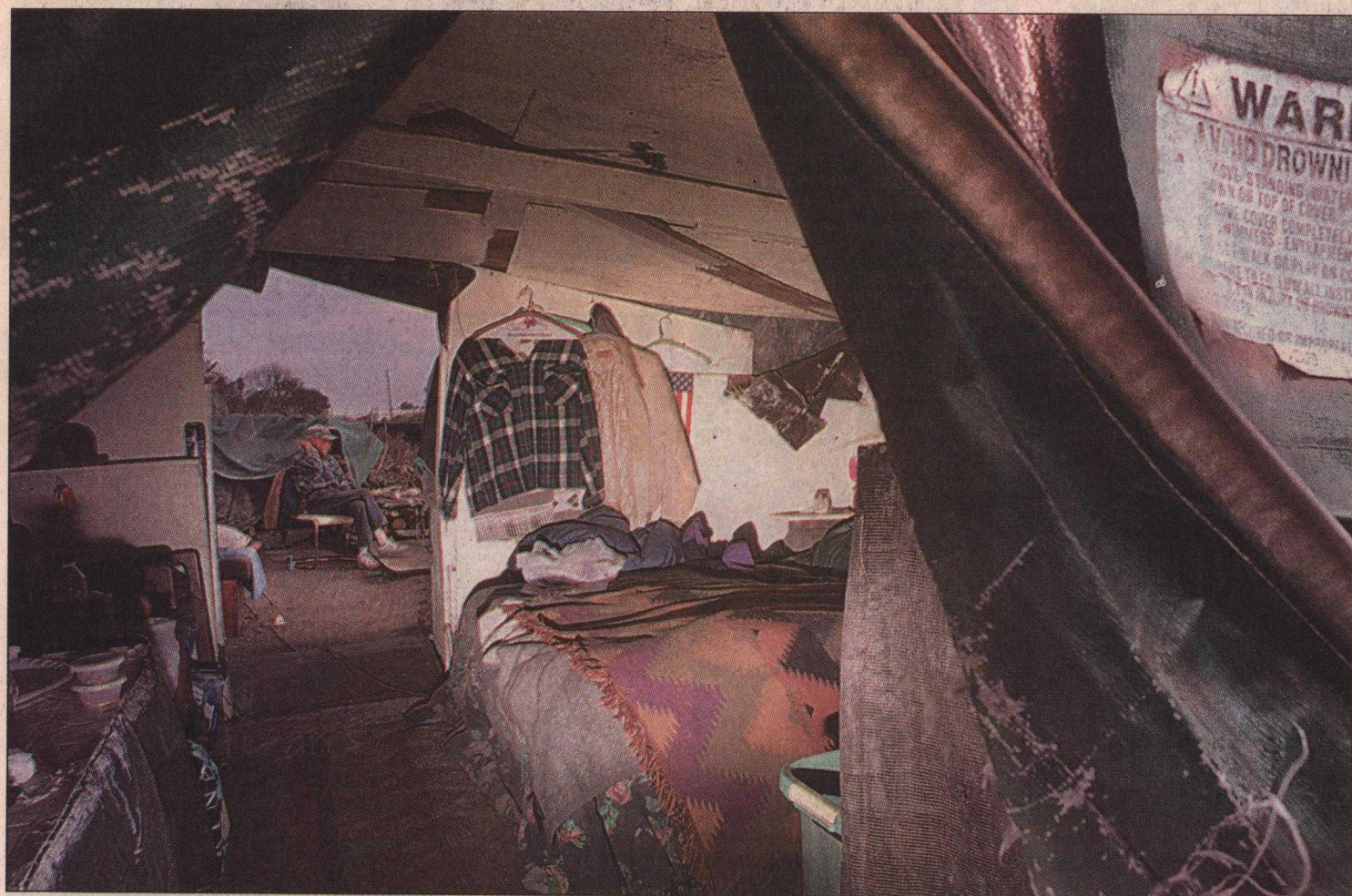
"You could get these guys 100 percent benefits, and they still can't sleep inside," he says.

"A lot of guys just can't come in."

See **HUTCHISON** on **PAGE B4**

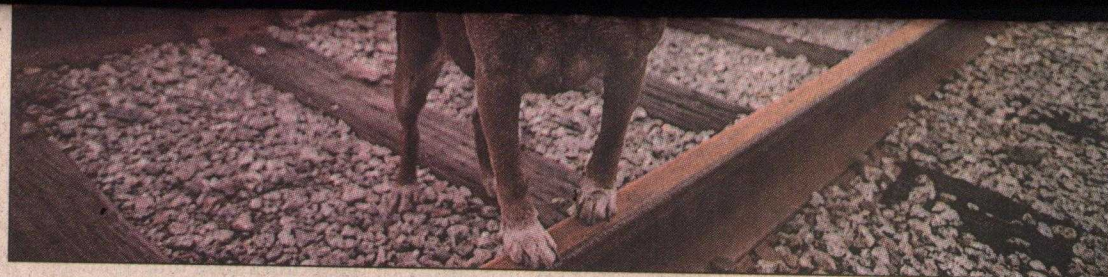
the Solitary Man

Photos by SHMUEL THALER *Sentinel staff photographer*





TOP LEFT: A donated fold-out bed, a propane stove and a few chairs make up Bill Hutchison's home



TOP RIGHT: Hutchison proudly wears a Veteran's Service Medal.

ABOVE LEFT: All of Hutchison's possessions were donated or scavenged. He's most proud of his battery-operated TV.

ABOVE RIGHT: Hutchison's dog, Shug, is the first to sense an approaching train.

RIGHT: Hutchison is proud of his country. American flags dot his shanty.



Hutchison

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Along the DMZ

Sometimes the beer makes Hutchison's mind do funny things. On certain afternoons when he's a little unsteady on his feet, he'll remember he fought on Pork Chop Hill in Korea, even though he wasn't in the service that year, or he'll say kids broke into his shack and stole his Purple Heart.

But on other days, the memories come fast and pure.

Those times are the hardest.

He grew up in Missouri, Hutchison says on a November day when his mind, and his feet, are steady.

His parents died when he was 9, and his grandpa and grandma brought him to live on their farm, he says.

He helped milk the cows and

brought in kindling to start the wood stove every morning, and sometimes he'd get to ride his grandpa's long-eared mule to school.

"I was a working boy," he says. In 1956, when he was 20, Hutchison joined the Army and was sent to Korea.

"Did I see combat? Sure I saw combat," Hutchison says. "I was on the DMZ for 18 months. I watched my best friend get killed."

But that's about all Hutchison will say.

"I don't like to go there. It brings back bad memories," Hutchison says and turns his head away.

But Norman Tredway of New Jersey remembers those years. He served in the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, about the same time as Hutchison — '55 and '56 — and he knows what it might have done to Hutchison.

"It was an extremely dangerous place," says Tredway, who as head of the Korea Defense Veterans of

America, is pressing to have the government change the status of veterans like him and Hutchison from noncombat to combat.

"When you went on patrol, you never knew what was going to happen."

Tredway tells stories of men who stepped on land mines during those years but whose deaths were recorded as training accidents. Of gunshots that came over soldiers' heads as they walked the border. Of a traffic guard found lying dead with a single gunshot wound to his neck.

Loudspeakers from the North Korean side would blare music and propaganda all hours of the night and day, Tredway says.

Sometimes they would even call out a soldier's name.

"They'd say things like, 'Hey Norm Tredway what are you doing out there? Wouldn't your rather be home in New Jersey?'" Tredway says.

"Psychologically, that'd hurt

you."

He saw men break from the strain, and says it's not too hard to image what it did to Hutchison.

"Can I imagine him (Hutchison) living like he does? Absolutely," Tredway, 67, says.

"If he feels he can go out where he wants, he's in control.

"If he's not in control that bothers him."

'It was beautiful'

When he got out of the service, Hutchison drove truck out of Fenton, Mo., near St. Louis.

But a few years back, he and his wife, Marian, decided to come to California.

They lived in a campground off Highway 9 and Hutchison worked baling newspapers.

"We had it easy," he says.

Then Marian died from a heart attack.

"I just bummed around after I

lost her," Hutchison says. "She was my life. I lost everything."

He was chased out of a campground in Pogonip and moved into the fields near Natural Bridges State Park, a spot favored by homeless campers he didn't particularly like.

"Then I come up here and there was all these trees, and it was beautiful," he says.

He stops talking to let a visitor admire the blue sky, the trees by a creek, the empty space.

"So I got me a tent with my Social Security check," he says.

He pitched it in a stand of brush that wedged up against a yard owned by Granite Construction.

Not many people knew he was there, but after awhile, the men at Granite Construction befriended him.

"He was always really nice and cordial," says Granite Construction's Dave Smith, who knew Hutchison and would give him left-over wood.

In exchange, Hutchison served as the yard's unofficial night watchman.

"I looked at it like we could all be in that position," Smith says of his generosity.

After a few months, Hutchison built his shanty, equipping it with a hide-a-bed and some chairs the construction workers gave him. He found a barbecue that had been set out with the garbage. Then some lawn chairs, a lantern and four plastic houseplants.

It's home, Hutchison says.

When Hutchison needs to do laundry, he rides his bike to the coin laundry a few blocks away. He uses a shower at the Homeless Garden Project, buys his beer and beans at Safeway, accepts free cups of coffee from a woman at the gas station.

"Almar Avenue is about as far as I get," Hutchison says.

See **HUTCHISON** on **PAGE B5**



ABOVE: Hutchison knows the train schedule by heart and is friends with everyone aboard.



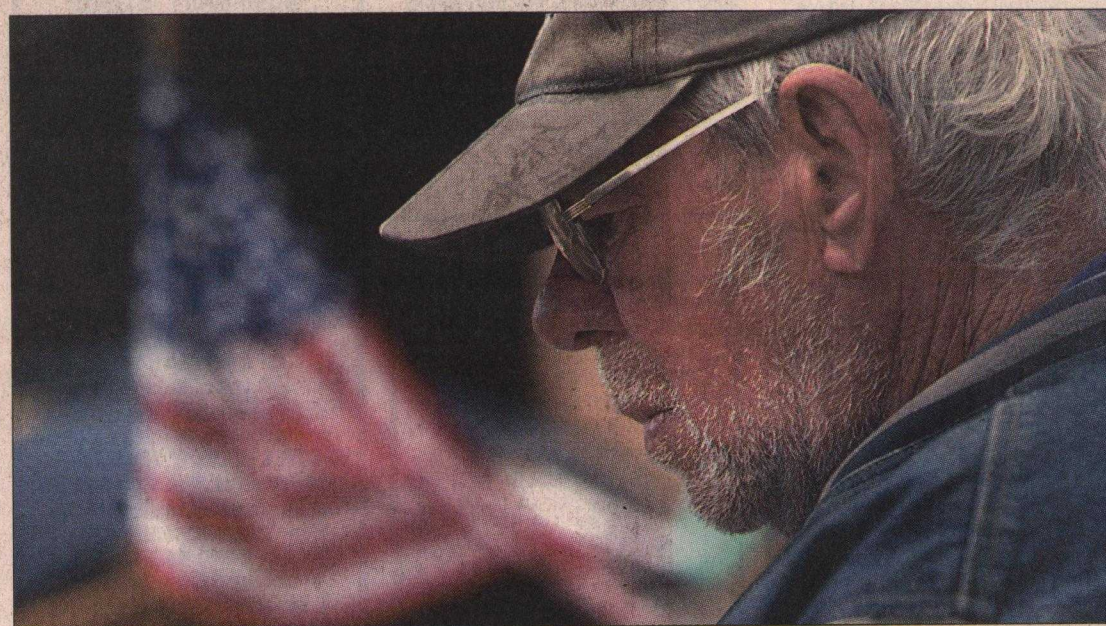
LEFT: Hutchison emerges from his shanty on a windy morning.



can't stand up.

BELOW LEFT: A bulldozer clears the ground for affordable apartments Hutchison says he can't afford.

BELOW RIGHT: 'Everybody at Safeway knows me,' Hutchison says. 'They call me the old man.'



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Sometimes Hutchison will panhandle for a few dollars even though he says it makes him feel humiliated.

Jay Coffin, who owns Pure Water of Santa Cruz in the Almar Center, says he lets Hutchison use the restroom and buys him tamales when the tamale vendor comes by.

When some kids beat up Hutchison and stole his money a few months back, Coffin agreed to hold Hutchison's \$446 Social Security check for safekeeping.

"We've never had problems with him," he says.

Hutchison sits by the American flag he flies from the back of his bike and says he doesn't have much regard for the drug addicts who live out in the fields around him.

But he likes the guys on the trains that pass in front of his

shack.

They always give him a wave.

Hard to come in

Out of the 22,500 veterans in Santa Cruz County, "there are a couple hundred I would say that float in and out," says Wannarka of the Veterans Services Office.

Some can't sit unless they have their back to the wall. Some have to have an open door, a way out. A lot don't want to be inside.

"Some of it is just habit," Wannarka says. "Some of it is the PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)."

For veterans like Hutchison, there are lots of options, but not all of them work.

A few years back, Hutchison tried to give up his beer.

Eric Seiley, Santa Cruz Police Department's Homeless Resource Officer, lent him a hand, taking him to the Veterans Services Office to sign up for aid, getting

him a bus pass, letting him know about the recovery programs sponsored by the VA.

"He reduced his drinking, and you could see signs that he looked healthy," Seiley says. "I think he was really trying."

But like many veterans, taking the final step into a program was too much.

"For some people, getting sober is a lot like dying," Wannarka says.

"They've never been there. Never known anyone who has been there and come back. ... So it's a big leap of faith."

One day, as Hutchison walked back from the grocery store, he found the body of a 22-year-old man hanging from a rope off the railroad trestle.

"Man," says Hutchison, "that took something out of me."

"I had to go into therapy after it."

Hutchison says he's back to

about a 12-pack of beer a day now.

Those who know Hutchison say the hanging was the thing that broke his desire to stop drinking.

That, and the memories of his wife and the DMZ.

Everyone handles combat differently, Wannarka says.

Some hold it together.

Some become alcoholics or drug addicts.

Some can't sleep through the night.

"But," he says, "I think anybody who has actually been in a war comes back with something."

'That's me'

By March, Hutchison's face is bronze from the sun.

His fingernails are black, but his camp is clean.

"Yesterday those guys over there, they threw me two sheets of plywood over the fence," Hutchison says, nodding his head to the

men putting up the shells of 206 affordable apartments which Hutchison says he can't afford even if he wanted to.

"They're good people," he says. "They treat me decent, those guys."

"Bill's a very strong man," says Seiley of the Santa Cruz Police Department.

"He doesn't expect sympathy for the choices he made in his life. He takes full responsibility for that."

You never hear Hutchison say "poor me," he says.

But Seiley is afraid it's only a matter of months before people complain and force Hutchison out, or the veteran's heart acts up again.

"He's living on borrowed time, out there in his shanty," Seiley says.

A cold ocean wind flaps the plastic around Hutchison's shack.

With the war going on in Iraq, the memories come back, he says.

"Flashbacks?" he says. "Yeah, I have them."

He sits in his chair as the sound of hammering floats over to his spot, but he has a hard time with the next questions: Is that why you drink? To stop the flashbacks from coming?

He swallows hard, lowers his head and touches his hand to his heart.

"That's me," he says in a near whisper.

It's all he can say.

Hutchison never planned to end up here.

But he likes his solitude and his shack and his dog named Shug.

"All I ask is for my country to leave me alone and let me die in peace," he says.

He lets a tendril of cigarette smoke out from the side of his mouth.

"That's not asking that much," he says.