

# They're history



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The Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Building was the site of considerable controversy during the Vietnam War.

*Vet Veterans*

## Veterans had to fight more than a war

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON  
Special to the Mercury News

The 62-year-old Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Building, next to the main post office, will hold a Veterans Day open house Friday.

After 10 years under the county parks and recreation department, the hall is under new management, opening another chapter in the history of the often controversial veterans organization.

This state and national landmark is one of two built by the county in 1932 as monuments to U.S. veterans of all wars. They were designed in Mediterranean



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style by Stockton's Davis-Pearce company, acclaimed architects of the College (now University) of the Pacific. The other hall was built in Watsonville.

The Santa Cruz veterans hall is reminiscent of a Foreign Legion post in Casablanca, Morocco, especially its balconied club room, with fireplace and stenciled open-beam ceiling. Painted beam work in the auditorium includes wartime scenes. The facade's iron balcony has art representing early branches of the armed services. The tower's weather vane bears the silhouette of a cavalry charge, recalling that the hall was dedicated with the first flag planted on San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War.

In the 1960s, the unpopular Vietnam War produced veterans the country wanted to forget and whom even veterans groups did not welcome. Out of all eligible

Vietnam veterans, only 6 percent belong to veterans groups.

Some Vietnam veterans were already opposed to the war when they were drafted; others turned against the war because of their combat experience. Many felt alienated from pro-Nixon veterans groups, and they distrusted government and bureaucracies.

As many as 17,000 Vietnam veterans live in the Monterey Bay area. In 1974, the Veterans Co-op was formed as a coalition of local college veterans clubs, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and Winter Soldier. But established veterans groups denied them use of the hall, saying they would engage in unsuitable activities. The conflict resulted in veterans losing control over the building from 1976 to 1980.

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# Santa Cruz veterans building site of controversy in the past

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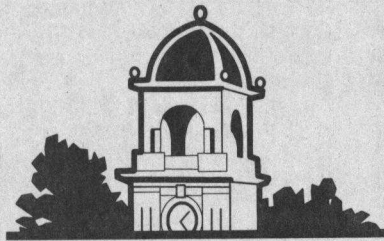
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By that time, the balance was starting to shift. Of the 20 active members in Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 888, 15 were Vietnam vets. One was Bill Motto, a highly decorated combat paramedic and an anti-war activist. He waged a seven-year battle for his military benefits, but his claim was denied in 1982. Many say that brought on the heart attack that killed him soon after, at age 32. His benefits were posthumously awarded in 1985.

In 1983, the post reorganized as the Bill Motto Post 5888.

The following year, the VFW's 1984 national convention came out in support of President Reagan's interventionist policy in Central America, and VFW members were urged to send money to Nicaraguan Contras.

The 35-member Bill Motto post drafted a resolution calling for non-intervention and self-determination in Central America. Labeled communist and disloyal, the post said it favored seeking peaceful solutions. The resolution was rejected at the



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state VFW convention, but the post delivered a copy to the Nicaraguan government. Soon after, the post was suspended from the VFW.

Shortly after the suspension, it became the other was ousted in 1971 for disagreeing with the VFW's support of the Vietnam War.

After its suspension, membership swelled to 200, and the post garnered support from across the nation. The post went to court to fight its suspension, saying its members had fought and bled for the freedom to dissent. They were reinstated in an out-of-court settlement. The national VFW retracted its derogatory re-

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marks and gave the post seats on two key committees.

A modified version of the post's resolution to "re-examine Central American policy" became the first grass-roots resolution adopted by the VFW.

Since then, the Bill Motto post has drafted successful resolutions on alleviating the suffering of Amerasian children in Southeast Asia and to ban veterans of the Persian Gulf War from donating blood until the cause of the mysterious "gulf war syndrome" is identified.

The open house will be Friday from 1 to 9 p.m. at the Santa Cruz Veterans Memorial Building, 846 Front St., Santa Cruz.

*Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.*