

SOUND OFF!



BULLETIN

THE NEWSLETTER OF VETERANS UNITED FOR TRUTH, INC.

#44

"VETERANS STANDING UP FOR EACH OTHER"

25 DECEMBER 2010

I KNOW I DON'T DO ENOUGH ~ WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

HOLIDAYS OR NOT, VETERAN-LED GROUP AIDS NEEDIEST OF VETERANS

Don Terry - December 25, 2010

The sound of men's voices echoed through the concrete columns of Lower Wacker Drive, desolate and frigid on a recent stormy Sunday night. Nearby, a homeless Army veteran stuck his head out of his foxhole of thin blankets and piles of tattered clothing, soiled and stained by life on the street.

With his back against a wall, his posture was more prayerful than protective against the bitter wind, driving snow and the other perils that might leap from the darkness. But as the voices got closer, the veteran, Lonzell Tate, 60, said he realized help was marching toward him, "like the cavalry."

"They always show up," Mr. Tate said. "You can count on them."

The voices belonged to a small group of military veterans and other volunteers organized by Jim Proffitt, 61, a former Marine. Mr. Proffitt has spent nearly every Sunday of the last 21 years slowly driving the streets of downtown Chicago, offering his dispossessed former comrades-in-arms sandwiches, coffee, clothes and proof that someone cares about them.

"It really hurts me to see how a lot of veterans end up," he said.

Mr. Proffitt is the national chairman for the homeless for [VietNow](#), a veterans advocacy organization. He drives the group's white 16-foot truck loaded with sandwiches and other supplies. Printed on the side of the truck is VietNow's raison d'être: "Veterans Helping Veterans."

But Mr. Proffitt and his band of brothers — and sisters — will feed anyone who is homeless and hungry along their route. At the group's small warehouse and office in Lombard — where the sandwiches are prepared, the coffee is brewed and the donated clothes are bagged — is a sign declaring, "Veterans Helping Americans." The group calls its rolling Sunday service The Chicago Homeless Sandwich Run.

According to Anne Bowhay, a spokeswoman for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, nearly 90,000 people, including those living with friends and family, experienced homelessness in Chicago during the school year that ended in June 2010. That was an increase of 19.9 percent. In the course of a year more than 3.5 million people across the country will be homeless. An estimated 10 percent to as high as 25 percent of the nation's adult male homeless population used to wear an American military uniform.

While the number of homeless veterans has decreased in recent years — in part because of the \$3.5 billion spent on housing, health care and other programs by the Obama administration — "the numbers for everyone else are going up," said Neil Donovan, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Mr. Proffitt and his wife, Virginia, started the Sandwich Run in 1989, handing out 30 sandwiches and coffee from the back of their car. "It was just us in those days," Mrs. Proffitt said. But now they have a platoon of reinforcements — volunteers from a V.F.W. post, college and high school students, women's groups, churches and people sent by the DuPage County Probation and Court Services to fulfill community-service requirements for minor offenses.

Kelvin West, 39, said he finished his community service months ago, but he still volunteers. "It's an awesome thing to give back to the people who fought for your country," Mr. West said.

Each Sunday, the volunteers prepare 1,100 sandwiches and put two into each brown paper bag they distribute along with cookies, chips and juice. They feed about 800 people a week in a nine-mile radius starting from the Loop. Last year, Mrs. Proffitt said, they made and distributed 56,100 sandwiches.

The effort survives largely on donations of money and used clothing. Pants, gloves, boots and coats are always in demand, and someone recently dropped off a wedding dress.

Mr. Proffitt makes the Sandwich Run 51 Sundays a year, taking a day off in November during Veteran's Week to visit the Vietnam War Memorial wall in Washington. Once, he also took a Sunday off for his daughter's wedding.

"I think I quit a thousand times," he said. "Then somebody comes up and gives you a hug and says you give them hope, and you see the reaction and the need out there, how can you stop?"

Memories of the fallen also keep him going. Near the front door of the group's warehouse are photographs of four deceased veterans who had worked on the Run. "This is our Wall," Mr. Proffitt said.

Two of the four men died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds. "If you talk to enough vets, a lot of them will tell you they have contemplated suicide," Mr. Proffitt said.

One of the group's regular stops is a half-block south of the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue. More than 25 homeless men were there on a recent Sunday, lined up for coffee, bag lunches and warm clothes.

"Got any jeans?" a man asked when he reached the back of the truck.

"No pants today," said Mike Nolan, 41, an Army veteran and roofer. "We can only give out what we get."

"No problem," the man said. "Happy holidays, gentlemen. Are you all coming back next week?"

"Like always," Mr. Nolan said, handing him a cup of coffee.

"God bless you," the man said, raising his paper cup as a toast.

"No shopping!" shouted an impatient man in the middle of the line. "Take your stuff and move on. It's cold out here."

At Wabash Avenue and Chestnut Street, about 40 people were waiting. Lou Rociola, 61, who served in Vietnam with the Marines, shouted from the back of the open truck, "Ladies to the front."

Four young women approached, their teeth chattering. Each took a bag lunch, but all of the coats were already gone.

"The first time I went out on the Run I was depressed for days, seeing all these people living in the streets," said Mr. Rociola, who has been volunteering on the truck for six years. "I still get depressed. But not for days anymore. It bothers me to say, I might be getting used to it."

On the last Sunday before Christmas, the truck made its regular stop at a shabby "men's hotel" on South Clark Street. Its rooms are about the size of jail cells. Mr. Nolan grabbed a box of lunches to deliver door-to-door to the men too sick or too old to come downstairs. Before going inside, he pulled his ski mask over his face for protection. One of the resident vets has tuberculosis.

There was a coroner's seal on the door of Room 120.

"Oh, no," Mr. Nolan said. "Harold died."

Harold was a 79-year-old Army vet whom Mr. Nolan had been trying to get into better housing. A clerk at the front desk told Mr. Nolan that Harold had apparently committed suicide a couple of days earlier.

"I'm sure the younger guys were preying on him," Mr. Nolan said.

During the ride to the next stop, the Pacific Garden Mission, the mood was subdued. Mr. Proffitt lingered on the truck as the other volunteers went inside to begin dispensing hot meals — donated by local restaurants — to hundreds of homeless men. He called his wife and asked her to contact the medical examiner's office.

"We're going to make sure Harold doesn't end up in Potter's Field," Mr. Proffitt said. "If he doesn't have any family, we'll bury him. He's a veteran."

He sighed and jumped off the back of the truck.

"We still have people to take care of," he said.

He rolled up the sleeves of his gray sweatshirt with U.S. Marines printed across the chest and hurried inside.

The Sandwich Run still had stops to make.

Donate to VietNow <http://www.vietnow.com/donate.htm>

dterry@chicagonewscoop.org - <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/26/us/26cnhomeless.html>