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News

Wineka column: Wounds heal easier in company of comrades at coffee shop

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John Hedley enjoys a cup of coffee and chats with his fellow veterans at Richard's Coffee Shop and Military Museum in Mooresville. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

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MOORESVILLE — The scene repeats itself each Thursday morning. Military veterans from World War II to modern-day conflicts cram into Richard's Coffee Shop.

"A bunch of old guys in funny hats," John Hedley says, confident that within this crowd lies the spirit to keep the coffee shop going for a long time.

Thursday is free coffee day for vets.

Every day, the stories are no charge.

The noise from all the conversation rolls like a tide against the walls, which are crammed with photographs, newspaper articles, guns, flags, letters of commendation, medals, uniforms and other artifacts.

All of it has been donated over the years by various brothers in arms.

The Thursday crowd often spills out the front door and onto the sidewalk along South Main Street.

"There's no other place like this in the country," says Larry Nosker, a Vietnam veteran who served in the Air Force.

The men and women who come here like to call it their "living" museum.

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About mid-morning, coffee shop manager Ralph Dagenhart, a Vietnam veteran, picks up a microphone from behind the counter and makes a few announcements.

The shop has four first-time visitors who are veterans, he reports.

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Vietnam Veteran Bernard Kibling joins his fellow veterans at Richard's Coffee Shop and Military Museum in Mooresville. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

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As Dagenhart introduces them, they wave and receive a hearty welcome and signature key ring in return. Part of the coffee shop's DNA — established by the late Richard Warren — is to make sure veterans feel welcome.

The newcomers already have signed the "Book of Honor," joining some 8,000 other service veterans whose names have been recorded at the shop.

Later, Hedley steals a moment to update his fellow veterans on their progress toward purchasing and renovating a bigger building at 165 N. Main St.

The former art gallery sits directly across the street from where Warren started Pat's Gourmet Coffee Shop more than 15 years ago. It was named for his then wife, Pat.

Warren served in Vietnam as a combat pilot, flying a Huey C model gunship for the U.S. Army.

Whenever a veteran entered his shop, Warren extended the Vietnam veterans' greeting of "Welcome Home," because most Vietnam servicemen never received even that simplest kind of greeting when they returned from their war long ago.

In time, word spread about Warren's coffee shop and its special affection for those who served, and it became a favorite place for veterans and active-duty personnel.

The shop established traditions such as the Book of Honor, free -coffee Thursdays and the homemade key rings for "newbies."

The key rings are made of colored beads, sometimes fashioned after the military ribbons worn on dress uniforms.

Though simple, they become treasured keepsakes for many of the vets, because it's a quiet thank-you for their service.

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Most important, Warren's coffee shop became and remains a safe haven and place for healing, says Father Leo Fahey, unofficial chaplain for the shop.

"There are a lot of wounded bodies and wounded spirits here," he says.

Veterans who couldn't even share their war experiences with close family members found they could talk with guys who may have gone through the same kinds of things.

"That's what it's all about — bringing these guys together," says John Casson, who was stationed in Germany during the Berlin Crisis.

Casson remembers when Joe Sparacio started coming to the coffee shop. Suffering from severe post traumatic stress disorder — thanks to two tours in Vietnam — Sparacio wouldn't talk to anyone at first.

But his fellow veterans eventually knocked down the wall.

"The doctor told me to come here, and I've been coming here ever since — every day," Sparacio says. The coffee shop, which also offers microwavable food such as muffins and sandwiches, is open every day except Sunday and holidays.

Sparacio laughs that the psychiatrist charged \$100 to send him to a coffee shop.



Vietnam Veteran Richard Warren's photo hangs on the wall of his former Coffee Shop business in Mooresville. Warren passed away a couple of years ago and the veterans refuse to let the business die. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

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Daron Stewart takes some ribbing from his buddies for waiting until Friday to buy his wife earrings at K-Dee's Jewelers, where Christmas sales are up seven percent over last year. Stewart said he'd already bought his wife a laptop and was looking for a stocking stuffer. Photo by Emily Ford

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Vietnam Veteran Joe Sparacio joins his fellow veterans at Richard's Coffee Shop and Military Museum in Mooresville. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

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Today, Sparacio is chairman of the events committee and constantly talks up a big fundraiser planned for Jan. 17 (See the accompanying box.)

Bernard Kibling says he brought his brother-in-law, who lives in Boston, to the coffee shop last year.

In the Navy, he was a ship's boilermaker and was ordered, during a fire, to close a door on shipmates so the fire could be contained. The men were lost.

His brother-in-law never spoke about the incident with family until after he had met the guys at the coffee shop, where these kinds of stories are more easily shared, Kibling says.

Garland Graham of Salisbury often travels to Richard's Coffee Shop on Thursdays with his friend, Gary Gardner of Faith. "It's relaxing to me," Graham says.



Vietnam Veteran Joe Sparacio (center right) tells his fellow veterans at Richard's Coffee Shop and Military Museum about an upcoming fundraiser to benefit the relocation of the museum in Mooresville. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

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He served overseas in Thailand and Laos from 1962-63, before the United States' heavy involvement in Vietnam.

"They always tell me how I went over there and stirred things up," Graham complains.

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Richard Warren died in 2009 from health complications connected to his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. But before he died, Warren set in motion the process for establishing a tax-exempt nonprofit he wanted to name Welcome Home Veterans Inc.

Meanwhile, complications between Warren's ex-wife, Pat, and the landlord led to the coffee shop's closing soon after his death.

Several regulars of the old place refused to let Warren's dream die, and they reopened "Richard's Coffee Shop" in a new place — 128 S. Main St. — on July 4, 2009.

In addition, Warren's buddies were successful in making Welcome Home Veterans a 501(c)3 organization, which is important now in receiving tax-deductible donations.

Richard's Coffee Shop is not only the most patriotic coffee shop in America, it's probably the world's only nonprofit one for veterans.

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With the large crowds on free-coffee Thursdays and music-day Saturdays, when local musicians stop in to play country, bluegrass, gospel and patriotic music, the Welcome Home Veterans board needs the bigger place at 165 N. Main St.

The 5,000-square-foot building also would offer enough room for all the donated military treasures now in storage, a kitchen, media center and gift shop.

It could allow the group to expand its outreach support to organizations such as the USO, Blue and Gold Star Mothers, the Red Cross, American Legion and Veterans of Foreign War chapters.

In addition, Hedley envisions school groups coming to the new place and students talking one-on-one with veterans of wars that they've only read about in textbooks.

Hedley, a Vietnam veteran and retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, serves as president of the Welcome Home board.

The purchase price of the new building is \$390,000.

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Hedley says the group will ultimately have to raise between \$450,000 and \$500,000 to renovate the structure and purchase it outright.

Hedley said the fundraising started this summer when the board had \$4,500 to its name. Now there's a solid \$75,000 in the bank.

By raising an additional \$30,000 to \$40,000, Welcome Home Veterans could make a good down payment and set up a workable mortgage, Hedley says.

Project leader Tom Harrell of Salisbury says the group has yet to reach the majority of roughly 90,000 veterans who live in Mecklenburg, Iredell, Rowan and Cabarrus counties, where most of the coffee shop regulars are from.

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Hedley has a special affection for the late Richard Warren.

In Vietnam, he led an Army reconnaissance unit whose missions by their nature were secretive, unless they came under attack and needed fire support from the air.

One day when Warren was still alive, Hedley brought to the coffee shop a dozen or so men from his platoon who were visiting Hedley's lake house in Denver as part of a reunion.

The hard-core combat veterans all wore red kerchiefs, the symbol of Hedley's unit.

The next time Hedley saw Warren alone, Warren said they had to talk. When he saw the red kerchiefs, Warren explained, he realized that his Huey gunship had once come to the rescue of Hedley's men in the bush.

The more they shared their memories of locations and events in the war, the more they realized that Warren's Huey had come to the rescue of Hedley and his men.

"That's a debt I don't know how to repay," Hedley says. "It's un-repayable. ... I believe that I owe my life — and the lives of my soldiers — to Richard's actions."

This past July, a week before his own platoon's reunion, Hedley traveled to the Warhawk Air Museum in Nampa, Idaho, where Warren's Huey gunship is one of the aircraft on display.

A large section of a wall at Richard's Coffee Shop is dedicated to Warren, and it includes a photograph of his gunship.

"That bird probably saved my life," Hedley says.

At the Idaho museum, Hedley met Warren's co-pilot, crew chief and door gunner and he told them, of course, of the coffee shop back in North Carolina.

In the front window is a piece of granite carved with these words about the shop's mission:

"Dedicated to honoring American veterans and active-duty military personnel in memory of Richard."

Hedley knows what that all encompasses.

"This is a phenomenal place," he says.

Richard's Coffee Shop at 128 S. Main St., Mooresville, is open 8 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday.

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Contact Mark Wineka at 704-797-4263, or mwineka@salisburypost.com

Want to donate to Welcome Home Veterans?

Richard's Coffee Shop in Mooresville — dedicated to honoring veterans and active-duty military personnel — is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit, charitable organization which is accepting contributions toward the purchase and renovation of a new building at 165 N. Main St.

If you would like to make a contribution toward that effort, send your tax-deductible donation to Welcome Home Veterans, 128 S. Main St., Mooresville, NC 28115.

For more information, visit the organization's website at www.WelcomeVets.com

To raise additional money for Welcome Home Veterans, 150 n Out Billiards & Darts in the Mooresville Plaza is sponsoring a Veterans-Celebrity 8-Ball Shootout from 7 p.m.-midnight Jan. 17.

Several NASCAR drivers will be among the celebrities competing in the "Breakin' Balls" tournament that evening.

All proceeds will go to Welcome Home Veterans, and the public is being encouraged to attend the big night.

Hundreds of military veterans are expected to be in the crowd.

For more information, visit www.150noutbilliardsanddarts.com

The business is located at the intersection of N.C. 115 and N.C. 150, 3 miles east of Interstate 77.

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