

Sky is falling on tower prices. C8

CLASS OF 2010: Cincy recruit picks Notre Dame over Ohio State. C1

South Bend Tribune

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Purpose

this from his mind? His personal nurse painted it. And, in his own quest to heal a societal wound, Miller called the Center for the Homeless. He dug into his military roots and the realization that our nation's veterans chronically end up homeless.

What emerged were eight veterans, all residents of the shelter, who marched Monday in the West Side Memorial Day Parade.

He dubs them Miller's Vets.

"What it's done to these guys — they're on a mission," says Miller, a retired lieutenant commander in the U.S. Naval Reserves with World War II and the Korean War on his résumé, along with service as a judge in St. Joseph Superior Court. "I didn't realize how powerful it would be."

They were No. 12 out of more than 120 units in the crowd-pleasing parade down Ford Street, from the Indiana Titans football squad to a youth soccer team, from high school bands to gargantuan yellow snow plows, and ending with nearly 30 horses and their human companions from the local Rancho Tres Luceros.

In the crowd, retired Air Force Master Sgt. Russ Skarski nodded and saluted to fellow military members. A Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran, he says the military can feud but are unified like siblings in tough moments.

Lions and lambs

Ray Nye was an Army mechanic in Germany and Russia. The Miller's Vets experience, he says, "knocks the cobwebs out of you."

When Miller found them at the center, it had been a long time since the men had finished their military service. 1995. 1988. 1980. A long time since they'd pulled on a uniform ... or marched. One man had a pony tail to his waist. That soon was cut.

They started their drills about one month ago. The first steps were rusty, says 1st Sgt. John Pettinato, an active duty Marine who has helped them to remember.

Left foot forward. Fall in. Present arms. Order arms.

The old pride crept back in slowly. Miller could see shoulders pull back, heads rise.

"You lose that and get depressed," Darren Lee explains of the merciless years that passed. He was an Army combat medic in Korea. "You put on that uniform, and it gives you a sense of self-esteem. Makes you stand a little taller."

"We formed a little bit of a family," he says.

"A band of brothers," adds Robert Towns, who was in the Army's military police in the United States.

"It gives a little more meaning to Memorial Day," says Lucas Humfleet, who was an aircraft mechanic for the Air Force at a base in Arkansas. "We had quite a few people at the center who had questions. They had relatives in the military."

Before they step off on the parade Monday, the

eight men gather around Miller in a circle, and he prays, "Some of us are lions, some of us are lambs."

Miller keys his project — and the logo painted by his nurse — to the Bible passage from the book of Isaiah that says the lion will lay down with the lamb, meaning that even the most fierce eventually will be made gentle.

He's told the men, "You're as different as the dickens, but you've got one thing in common, and that's that you all served our country."

As they march, the men call out: "We are the lions. We are the lambs. Company Charlie. Let's roll."

The work ahead

Miller wore his formal Navy whites as he rode ahead of the group in a convertible with his son, a federal judge in South Bend.

Miller isn't worried about his initial crew of eight. They have access to programs at the center, he says, so that "they're going to make it."

He says they will be "bait" used to catch those who are sleeping under the bridges — and in vacant buildings like the man in that photo — and make them Miller's Vets, too.

First he wants to reach out to other shelters and agencies with homeless veterans.

Danny Forrest, who served in the Army, sees his job as letting stranded veterans know they can set higher standards for themselves and find safe places like the center to eat, sleep, go sober, gain skills and start anew.



Tribune Photo/MARCUS MARTER

The eight men of Miller's Vets, who all live at the Center for the Homeless, march Monday in the West Side Memorial Day Parade in South Bend.

Marching with a new purpose

■ Homeless veterans rediscover pride in West Side parade.

By JOSEPH DITS
Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND — It was one photo in The Tribune that kept 88-year-old Robert L. Miller Sr. awake at night.

Photographer Jim Rider's image, printed on Dec. 21, showed a homeless man sleeping in a narrow wooden box, almost like a coffin, in a vacant industrial building.

How could Miller rinse

See PURPOSE/A4

Inside

Troops in Iraq, Afghanistan honor their fallen. Obama observes Memorial Day at Arlington.

Local parades mark holiday. Loved ones honor those whom they've lost.

An assortment of photos from Memorial Day events.

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