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Upset vet gives back his medals

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By Michael Stetz

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

May 8, 2006

And now what?

He had protested. He had become president of the San Diego chapter of Veterans For Peace.

He had helped put up thousands of white crosses around San Diego County to mark the dead in a solemn display called "Arlington West."

And still . . .

The war goes on. Three years, two months. With more than 2,300 U.S. soldiers and Marines dead.

What more could David Patterson, an electronics technician from Ramona, do about it?

There was this: He could give up his military medals. Send them directly to President Bush, care of the White House.

Patterson, 53, got the idea from a friend, who e-mailed him about a Navy veteran in Orlando, Fla.,



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

And now what? He had protested. He had become president of the San Diego chapter of Veterans For Peace.

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who had done just that.

The action struck Patterson. What a powerful, personal statement. Here, take these back. I don't want them anymore.

So in March, the mild-mannered Air Force veteran with graying hair sat down and wrote to the President of the United States of America:

“I am saddened to give up my hard earned medals. But the hate, torture and death you have instrumented in this world tarnish the symbolism they carry.”

Patterson doesn't know if his gesture will do any good.

He hasn't heard back from the White House. And his action has received little media attention.

Still, he feels good about taking his anti-war crusade a step further.

Patterson had to order the medals because he didn't have them at hand. The military doesn't award most medals when troops are discharged – just ribbons, he said. It cost him \$38 to get the actual ones.

He didn't do anything John Wayne-like to earn the honors, he readily admits. Didn't take out an enemy machine-gun nest or rescue a wounded buddy.

He jokes that he got the Good Conduct Medal simply because he stayed out of jail for the four years in the early 1970s when he served as a weapons systems technician. He also got the National Defense Service Medal and the Philippine Republic Presidential Unit Citation.

But the medals do mean something to him. He served. And proudly so, he adds.

But then came this war.

“A bunch of people are dying for no reason,” Patterson said.

Returning medals is no easy thing to do emotionally. People earn them for defending their country – an honor that has few equals. But Joe DuRocher, for one, figured it had to be done. DuRocher is the Orlando law professor who sent back his aviator wings and shoulder boards and inspired Patterson to do the same.

“They don't hand Navy wings out of Cracker Jack boxes,” DuRocher said in a recent telephone interview.

Like Patterson, DuRocher is quick to say he did nothing particularly heroic in his military career. As a Navy helicopter pilot he took part in the blockade of Cuba. And he was part of the recovery team that retrieved John Glenn, the first American to orbit the globe, from the ocean.

A former public defender who now teaches at the Barry University School of Law, DuRocher said he's drawn to “fight for the little guy.” Detainees and Iraqi prisoners have been abused, tortured and not given proper legal representation or rights, he asserts.

So he wrote his letter. In part, it said:

“As a citizen, a patriot, a parent and grandparent, a lawyer and law teacher I am left with such a feeling of loss and helplessness. I think of myself as a good American and I ask myself what can I do when I see the face of evil? Illegal and immoral war, torture and confinement for life without trial have never been part of our Constitutional tradition.” DuRocher, like Patterson, is still waiting for a response from the president.

The White House has no record of receiving either man's medals, said Blair Jones, a spokesman. The White House gets a large volume of mail, so Jones is not disputing that they were sent, he said.

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He was uncertain how many medals the White House has received in protest of the war. When it does, "they are kindly sent back to the owners," Jones said.

DuRocher's action has been picked up by liberal blogs on the Web and he has received more than 1,000 e-mail responses, he said. The vast majority, 95 percent he estimates, have been positive.

Returning medals is not new. Nor is it without controversy.

In one much-publicized protest during the Vietnam War, veterans threw their medals over the fence of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, who tried to unseat President Bush in the last presidential election, was criticized during the campaign because he took part in that protest. Kerry, a highly decorated veteran of the Vietnam War, maintained that he threw away only ribbons, not the medals themselves.

Other U.S. military actions have spurred similar protests. In 1986, Charles Liteky gave up the Medal of Honor – the nation's highest military honor – because of U.S. action in Central America.

Neither DuRocher nor Patterson is trying to persuade other military veterans to return their medals. That's an individual decision, they say.

Patterson, for one, just wanted to make a statement. He is tired of war and points to recent polls as proof he's not alone. In an April USA Today/Gallup Poll, 65 percent of those asked said they disapproved of the way President Bush was handling the war.

When he helps put up the crosses, Patterson hears mostly positive feedback. He said that's true even in Oceanside, near Camp Pendleton, where Marines often stop by to offer their support.

■ Michael Stetz: (619) 293-1720; michael.stetz@uniontrib.com

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