

Steve Conto Veteran Volunteer of the Year

Steve Conto served our nation in the Navy for over two decades and has continued his service here in Wisconsin for the past seventeen years by documenting and caring for the gravesites of Wisconsin soldiers that were killed during the Vietnam War. He enlisted in the Navy in 1976, served during the Gulf War, and retired in 1998. While too young to serve during the Vietnam War, his older stepbrother was wounded in Vietnam and he calls all of the guys who served there his big brothers. He was inspired in 2002 after seeing the film *We Were Soldiers* to provide this act of service to veterans that were killed during the Vietnam War. Steve calls the results of these efforts "The Final Bridge," as he "wanted to create a bridge between their names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall and their final resting place so families, comrades and friends can easily find them."



When he started this project, Steve was surprised to find that the state and individual counties did not have complete burial records for veterans. In total, he identified 1,248 Vietnam veterans through several avenues of research, including those who lived in Wisconsin, those who worked here, those who married someone from here, and those who lived elsewhere but are buried in Wisconsin. To find all of the gravesites, he spoke with cemeteries and hundreds of family members of those killed. After locating the gravesites, he traveled with a clipboard, weed trimmer and a bucket of cleaning supplies to each gravesite in the state to record its exact location and to provide necessary cleaning and upkeep. Some of the resting places he visited were difficult to find because grave markers had become hidden by grass, leaves, and other debris. When describing the visit to each gravesite, Steve says that "I clean the marker and I trim around the marker. I sweep it, wash it, clean it, dry it and put a flag by it if I'm allowed, depending on the regulations of the cemetery. Then I take a picture. I'll render honors (salute) and I'll say something to the individual, a welcome home or a quick greeting." He was frequently joined by his wife, Cindy, or his friend Mike Weaver, who was a medic in Vietnam, as they traveled with Steve through all kinds of weather to locate the gravesites. As a result of these efforts, Steve created a registry of all 1,140 Wisconsin Vietnam KIAs with names, hometowns and gravesites by map coordinates that now resides with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum in Madison, with the "The Final Bridge" being an officially recognized resource book used by county veterans service officers and others who, like Steve Conto, want Wisconsin's fallen Vietnam veterans to be remembered.

In addition to documenting all of their locations, relatives now know techniques and nationally approved gravestone cleaning solutions for maintenance. He has done additional research through the families of fallen soldiers into the circumstances of their deaths and about the units and veterans with whom they served. He captures their memories through poems and prose describing their service, which he shares with families and the community. Steve is hoping to eventually get to each of the documented graves of Wisconsin KIAs outside of the state, which includes thirty other states, Arlington National Cemetery, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.