

Richard Simonian | **EVERYDAY HEROES**

Welcome home

Giving struggling vets a place to call their own is the mission of a former Green Beret's nonprofit.

By [NICOLE GREGORY](#) /
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Richard Simonian looks you straight in the eye when he speaks. He's got a friendly smile, a warm handshake, but his eyes tell you: This trim 81-year-old successful businessman and former Green Beret, this man whose mission is to provide struggling veterans homes they could never afford, he misses nothing.

Within minutes of an introduction, he pulls a reporter over to see a framed article that ran in an issue of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. "This guy here," he says, pointing to a blurry black-and-white image of a group of soldiers in Vietnam, "his name is Wayne Marchand, and he is part of the reason for all of this."

Marchand was caught and executed by the North Vietnamese, the first Special Forces soldier killed there in 1963.

That was a long time ago, but Simonian remembers his friend. He has feelings about the fact that he was discharged after serving in Germany, while Marchand went into Vietnam and never returned. He pauses to try to say what they are.

"Survivor guilt," fills in Simonian's colleague and friend Jim Duffy, also a former Green Beret. Simonian nods.

Simonian likes to be around veterans such as Duffy and John Stryker Meyer, another former Green Beret, who are both board members of Simonian's nonprofit organization, the Veterans Affordable Housing Program, which works with eligible veterans to buy or rent spacious manufactured housing at low cost.

Vets trust each other, and those who know Simonian revere and treasure him.

A self-made businessman, owner of the Santiago Communities, 40 mobile home parks in five states, Simonian has for years been deeply involved with Chapter 78, the Orange County organization of Veterans Affairs. He has supported many of its activities, but Simonian's primary focus for the last two years has been to reach struggling vets and help them get a home.

So far he has placed 100 such vets – some disabled from war injuries, some nearly homeless, and all struggling financially – into spacious mobile homes in one of his mobile home communities and, in some cases, supplied furniture and food as well.



Simonian freely admits he wasn't always such a good guy.

Today he's a success in every way: He is healthy, happily married and doing work he loves.

But growing up in East Los Angeles, he was a juvenile delinquent. The son of first-generation immigrants from Armenia, he was kicked out of high school for causing an explosion in chemistry class (as he tells the story, Simonian's eyes twinkle), and he spent time in juvenile hall.

He joined the Army in 1952 when he was just 21 – the Cold War with Russia was in full swing. He went into basic training, advanced training, then on to become a paratrooper. He was asked if he wanted to volunteer for a secret mission: All he knew was that it was a new, special group, and if he signed on he could be promoted quickly.

Simonian immediately said yes and was sent to Europe for clandestine missions in East Germany.

This wasn't just any group: It was the 10th Special Forces, the first Green Beret group.

After three years, he was discharged. He returned to Southern California and had to adjust to civilian life.

"The military feeds you, houses you, clothes you. They take care of you. That's what a lot of the veterans are having trouble with now," Simonian says. "When you come back, you don't know anything."

Simonian taught himself how to draw building plans and managed to convince others that he knew what he was doing. And though he had no formal training, he eventually became an expert in water systems, sewers and underground utilities.

But remember, Simonian was a Green Beret. "There is a Special Forces mindset," Duffy explains, "an adaptability and motivation to overcome crises and challenges, to think that nothing really is impossible."

The 1960s was boom time for building in California. Simonian built his first mobile home park in 1967, seizing one opportunity after another, making acquaintances with bankers, lenders and politicians. There were ups and downs, successes and failures, good times and bad.

Simonian remembers a time when he came face to face with death – not in wartime but in civilian life: An employee he'd fired broke into a meeting and put a gun to Simonian's head.

For 10 minutes, he did not know whether he'd live or die in that room.

Eventually the employee put the gun down; Simonian never pressed charges, but made sure the gunman eventually got psychological help. He struggles to explain the reason this episode is so closely linked to his commitment to offer quality, dignified houses to vets. It boils down to this: Life is important. It should be meaningful.

So when at a Christmas party in 2010 Simonian found himself talking to a man from a veterans organization about the most pressing challenges facing many veterans, "I thought to myself, how can I help?" Almost immediately, his nonprofit vet housing program was born. Today it offers financing opportunities, rent relief and even monthly stipends for struggling vets.

One important message he wants vets to know: This is not government related. The rules and bureaucracy that make government programs so slow and cumbersome don't apply to this nonprofit.

Applicants don't need a credit score or even necessarily a down payment for this housing, and applications can be approved within a couple of days.

Simonian is there for his fellow vets – that is clear. And he is humble, the first to say he has tremendous help from those around him – the employees, board members and, of course, his trusted former Green Beret friends.

And he still takes orders, only these days from his wife, Bonnie. "I'm a smart guy. When my wife tells me what to do, I do it!"

How you can help:

Tell a veteran who is in need of housing to call Veterans Affordable Housing at 888-923-VETS (8387); or email info@veteransaffordablehousing.org; or visit www.veteransaffordablehousing.org