

# **When Johnny Comes Marching Home(less)**

Stories of America's Homeless Veterans  
and the Shelter That Gave Them Hope

A Personal Memoir

By

**Ken Smith**

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to those American veterans who have witnessed the horrors of war, came home, found no peace, wandered onto our streets, and died;

And to the veterans who came to 17 Court Street in Boston, found that elusive peace, and were allowed to pass with dignity and honor.

Carry the battle to them. Don't let them bring it to you. Put them on the defensive and don't ever apologize for anything.

—Harry S. Truman

## Acknowledgements

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To all the others, you are just too numerous to mention. You know who you are and it's not  
a reflection on you that your name is not in here. I ran out of space to thank everyone.

— Ken Smith

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## **Foreword by General Colin L. Powell**

## Introduction

Once in a lifetime you are given a chance to make a difference. My chance came in the late 1980s when a couple of Vietnam veterans who had never done anything of the magnitude of what you're about to read embarked on a journey that led to one of the most successful veterans' programs in the nation.

After the Vietnam war ended in 1975, Vietnam veterans were quickly forgotten by the government and civilians alike. Sadly, in the years after the last American left Saigon, thousands of American veterans ended up not in comfortable homes with their families, but on the streets, homeless.

This is a story of how a small band of brothers changed the way our nation dealt with homeless veterans. Anti-war protestors, combat veterans, family members of veterans, lawyers, politicians and a few dedicated veteran advocates came together and changed the paradigm on the care and programs that were offered.

But the challenge was immense. Regretfully, two decades later, the problem of homelessness among veterans still exists and while the solutions are evident, there is not the political will to implement them.

When you're an unemployed veteran, homelessness begins on your mother's couch and then moves to your car if you have one and then quickly to the streets where the problems become huge.

Until this country gets serious and makes an effort to work on the underlining problems of more affordable housing, rooming house creation, and jobs, the problem of homeless veterans will be with us into the next generation.

Rooming houses were available until the mid 1980s when developers started to turn them into condos and all those marginal Americans who lived week to week in this type of housing—including many vets—were thrown onto the streets within a few short years.

The mentally ill vets were institutionalized until there was a cry by liberals that it was inhuman to let these Americans live in the group community environment, and it was

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