



Steve Campbell / Chronicle

Tony Santos, 52, holds a Montagnard crossbow in front of the Vietnam memorial and parade float he and fellow members of the Texas Viet-Nam Veterans keep outside his Houston home, which also houses a small war museum. City officials have told Santos the signs, flags and float must go.

Shrine

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down my flags for nobody. I didn't go to Canada or Mexico. I volunteered because my country was at war with Vietnam. I got wounded and spent a year and a half at William Beaumont General Hospital in El Paso."

Santos, 52, still carrying what he says is a slug from a Vietnamese AK-47 rifle in his head, is commander of Texas Viet-Nam Veterans, a small unit of survivors of World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

Tuesday, Santos and a contingent of his troops are expected to carry their appeal of the city's case to City Council. Their message is that city officials know about and approve of his museum and, besides, some of his neighbors run businesses out of their homes.

First Assistant City Attorney Berta Mejia said her hope is that the impasse can be resolved short of a civil lawsuit to force Santos to take down his flags and signs.

If Santos can abide "with certain conditions," she said, he might be able to continue on with his activities. He has only to eliminate some of the garish displays and make the place into a sort of "extension" of his existing residence.

It was "a complaint from someone who lives in the neighborhood" that caused city officials to go out and look over the museum - from the outside - before sending him a letter, Mejia confirmed.

Santos, meanwhile, is keenly interested in knowing exactly who in his neighborhood filed that complaint.

He blames the former resident of a now-vacant house opposite his, but a woman who resided there two weeks ago said she is innocent.

"We haven't said a word," she insisted, asking not to be identified. "We just decided to move. Tony always been nice to us."

A random poll of people living along Shamrock did not turn up anyone with a gripe about the throng of aging veterans hanging around, the flags and impromptu cannon, the additional traffic and parking problems caused by Santos' friends, or a even neighbor who said the men make too much noise.

"I like the museum and I hope they stay," said Gina Cowan, who lives across the street at 5446 Shamrock. "I'm pretty sure the complaint was from those people (in the vacant house) who had a dispute with them."

"I think it's an honor to have something like that in our neighborhood," said Elva Ramirez of 5411 Shamrock. "My son's in the Marines and I don't want them to take anything down."

"I have never complained," said Adelina Garcia of 5430 Shamrock. "It's their yard and they can do what they want. They're helping the vets who fought for this country."

Santos, who resides at 5443 Shamrock next door to his museum, is a San Antonio native who moved to Houston decades ago because of the big Veterans Administration Hospital here. He has needed access to the VA since he was shot in the head in Saigon in 1967.

The wound cost him the hearing in one ear and the sight in one eye and left him with a steel plate in his skull. He said he is 100 percent disabled as a result of the injury.

Shrine to vets gets city's attention

By JOHN MAKEIG
Houston Chronicle

Signs, flags, float must go, letter says

One glance at the front of Tony Santos' house on Shamrock Street tells a viewer exactly who he is, where he has been and how he passes his time.

Beyond the big U.S., Texas and POW-MIA flags flying from tall posts, there is a parade float bearing a casket draped with an American flag. Eleven smaller flags line the float, and in the back is a placard with the names of 130 Americans who died in Vietnam.

Off to the right is a large section of pipe with a pair of unattached wheels at the base - all meant to resemble an Army howitzer. Around the front of the house are large signs proclaiming the site a museum.

The house at 5447 Shamrock is a sort of shrine where Santos and his friends congregate to swap war stories, plan parade marches and pass the time. The small

home's interior is awash with flags, posters, bayonets, deactivated grenades and mortar shells, war medals and much more.

It also is a house that has attracted attention at City Hall. Citing possible deed restriction violations, Assistant City Attorney Alberta Johnson sent Santos a letter saying the signs, flags and float must go.

Fat chance, responds Santos.

"The city called and said this is not the place for a museum," Santos said. "But I'm not taking

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