



VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR, INC

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Dear Vietnam Veterans Against the War supporter:

I can't tell you how much I appreciate your contributions to Vietnam Veterans Against the War. There is so much you have made possible: our Military Counseling Program, the resurgence of VVAW chapters, our co-sponsorship of the Different Drummer Internet Café at Fort Drum, and our financial support for the staff person for the Iraq Veterans Against the War Chicago chapter, to name just a few. It is thanks to you that Vietnam Veterans Against the War has been able to make such a meaningful contribution to the anti-war movement.

You helped us support IVAW's "Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan." Young veterans and active duty soldiers testified movingly and devastatingly. They modeled the event on the Vietnam Veterans Against the War Winter Soldier Investigation in 1971, where VVAW members testified about atrocities they had witnessed or committed in Vietnam.

Iraq Veterans Against the War stood on our shoulders and reached higher. The focus of their message was not that atrocities are being committed, but the normal "rules of engagement" for occupation are an atrocity. You can hear and see their devastating testimony at ivaw.org and witness their eloquence, courage, grace, and determination to bring this unjust war to an end.

Thanks to you, we were able to make a very substantial financial contribution to Winter Soldier. We provided the leadership and the bulk of the 80 individuals who formed the security team. The right-wing Gathering of Eagles was threatening to bring 5,000 demonstrators, so we braced for an intense opening day. We had to laugh when one of our members overheard the first counter-demonstrator talking on his cell phone at 8 am asking, "Where is everybody?"

The Eagles (among ourselves we called them "the Pigeons") finally mobilized less than 40 picketers. However, one individual managed to make it past several layers of security by posing as a member of the press and got into the main hall where testimony was going on. He got "Kerry lied and soldiers died!" out of his mouth (John Kerry was involved in the original Winter Soldier Investigation), but then he was removed by our security so quickly that most of the audience didn't even realize what was happening. Later we learned that he had a history of arrests for throwing blood and otherwise disrupting anti-war gatherings.

In order to focus on their core tasks of mobilizing their membership, recruiting and verifying the stories of testifiers, Iraq Veterans Against the War asked VVAW to take over some key logistical tasks. Besides security, we handled all participant housing, registration and the majority of the travel arrangements. We also contributed to the mental health support team, which was needed because of the traumatic nature of much of the testimony.

Thanks to you we were also able to make many in-kind contributions for the event. We rented a bus to bring IVAW members from the Midwest to DC. We paid for the security team's walkie-talkies and bright red security shirts. We also subsidized some of the security team members' travel and housing.

Our members gave their all. Most of us slept little and came home exhausted and sick (as did many of the IVAW members as well.) IVAW'S incredible anti-war statement is still resonating. Media coverage at the time included the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the military paper, *Stars and Stripes*. A documentary film of the event will come out this fall. More recently, IVAW was invited to testify before the Progressive Caucus of Congress, which was broadcast on C-Span 3. They were also recently covered on television by the *PBS NewsHour*.

Winter Soldier also greatly increased the political strength of Iraq Veterans Against the War with over 300 new members joining, bringing their membership to more than 1,000.

You probably remember that, as of December 2007, Vietnam Veterans Against the War became a partner in the Different Drummer Café outside Ft. Drum in Watertown, New York. Recently the Café was the destination point of a peace march through small towns and cities in upstate New York. Although this area sends a disproportionate number of its youth into the military, the march was greeted warmly as it passed. Onlookers generally welcomed our message to bring the troops home and offer them the decent health care they have every right to expect. The march received coverage in both local media and in the *New York Times*.

At the end of the march, a spring festival was held for marchers and soldiers from Ft. Drum in Watertown, and when rain began to drown out the music of the visiting bands, the Café was available for the crowd to continue the program and the music.

Both our partner, Tod Ensign of Citizen Soldier and our new employee, Cara Smith, were deeply involved in the planning of the march and the festival. Cara has been an excellent manager. She has done wonders for the physical appearance of the Café, painting it herself with the help of her husband. She has also secured the donation of a new television and a pool table. We do, however, remain concerned that we have not been able to hire a veteran to serve as an organizer at the Cafe.

Recently, one of our National Coordinators, Marty Webster, traveled to the Café and spoke at a well-attended panel on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The audience included soldiers from the base, veterans and college students from nearby and not so nearby areas. Soldiers from the base talked about their own experiences of PTSD. Emergency medical technicians and personnel from the Sheriff's Department attended as well. The panel was covered on local television.

In other active duty organizing, I had the honor of joining Chicago and Cleveland Iraq Veterans Against the War members on a road trip to Ft. Hood, Texas. There we supported the Ft. Hood chapter of IVAW, which was holding a Memorial Day barbecue for their fellow soldiers. The IVAW chapter was actually able to hold the barbecue on land controlled by civilians but located right on the base itself. Twenty soldiers from the base attended. There were Active Duty Soldiers speaking, and a Mexican family of musicians entertained and attracted a crowd from the local civilian community. A highlight was an international phone call from the front lines in Iraq with a member of the Ft. Hood IVAW chapter who is currently deployed there.

As always, when I talk about Ray Parrish's work as our Military Counselor, I need to thank you as one of the people that had made it possible for VVAW to have a (now) nearly full-time staff person. Ray continues to follow up with veterans and GI's who have contacted him previously as well as responding to people calling him for the first time.

In March I told you about Ray's work with Alex, the soldier who is an immigrant from Romania. (details changed to conceal his identity.) Alex is now out of the service, but the strain of debt,

poverty and PTSD, have led to the break-up of his marriage. Alex currently has no care for his PTSD or for his medical problems. He is waiting on the VA to make a determination about the service connection of his disability, which would enable him to get care at the VA. With his medical problems and his not speaking English, he has been unable to secure employment. He is so desperate, he is thinking of re-enlisting. He would need the recruiters to take his tests for him as they did for his original enlistment because he speaks so little English.

Ray is working with him intensively to help him apply for “expedited treatment” and has involved Sen. Obama’s office to help make sure that the VA Regional office doesn’t ignore the request. Ray has also found translators, accompanied him to appointments, and has been working to get him free medical treatment in a civilian hospital.

In a turn-around from Ray’s having to ask Congressional Representatives for help, the office of Representative John Lewis (D-GA, and a former civil rights leader) has called Ray for assistance in dealing with a surge of homeless Vietnam vets. They are completely frustrated because their VA regional office and their VA Board of Veterans’ Appeals are ignoring valid claims for benefits and disability. Ray will be giving Lewis’s staff a briefing on PTSD, and Ray will be participating in a conference call with the staff and a local reporter in order to bring public attention to the unresponsiveness of the VA.

One soldier named Charles has called Ray several times, sometimes at 2 am, from Iraq, where he is on active duty. After being back for only three months from his second deployment, he was stop-lossed and sent for a third time. He got to a combat stress treatment unit where their doctors said he was unfit for front line duty and needed treatment. Charles’s command refused to change plans to send him back to the front lines.

Charles went in to his commanding officer and had a nervous breakdown right in the commander’s office. He called Ray again, and Ray made it clear to him that it is against military regulations for the military to deny him medical treatment. It gave Charles greater confidence to know that he is legally in the right.

Charles was sent to another psychiatrist who could only offer Charles an opportunity to be sent to a reportedly less stressful front line base. Charles is giving it a try. Ray will continue to support him, and I will tell you how Charles is doing in my next update.

Ray has also been contacted by the family of an AWOL soldier, James Burmeister. James couldn’t get treatment for PTSD, so he fled to Canada. Ray put James in touch with Canadian support people and advised the Canadian psychiatrist as to the correct psychiatric language to use for the VA and the military.

James decided to turn himself in at Ft. Knox, but he has been there four months now because the military has lost his records. With Ray’s expertise about content, Burmeister’s supporters have put up a web site on James’ case. The site has generated e-mail from around the world that has already resulted in better conditions for James.

All over the country, we continue to speak to young people about the reality of life in the military and to urge them not to swallow whole everything that military recruiters tell them. As always, we are especially proud of the efforts of Jim Murphy and Dayl Wise in New York. Working with Veterans For Peace and veterans from all eras, including Iraq and World War II, their group has spoken in 55 high schools this year and 15 colleges. I myself have spoken at eight schools in the Chicago area this spring. The teacher at one school told me how impressed he was by the respectful attention his students paid as they soaked up what I had to say about the Vietnam and Iraq Wars.

Around the country Vietnam Veterans against the War joined other anti-war veterans' groups in Memorial Day observations. Because the current administration hides the costs of war from the public, it is up to us to make the tragic losses real to our fellow citizens. In Philadelphia, our members took leadership roles in the display of tombstones commemorating the 4,083 US dead. In Southern California, VVAW members presented wreaths honoring the dead and hosted anti-war figure, Col. Ann Wright, who has just published her book, *Dissent*. Vietnam Veterans Against the War Central Coast Chapter leader Steve Crandall was quoted in the main Santa Barbara newspaper.

In Chicago, our annual Memorial Day ceremony featured immigrant parents who had lost children in the military and included a display of 148 boots representing the 148 soldiers from Illinois that have been killed. In Jersey City, our members joined Veterans For Peace in commemorating the death of Dave Cline, VVAW National Coordinator and VFP National President. In Milwaukee, we joined other anti-war veterans in assisting wheelchair bound veterans so that they could participate in the city's event at Wood National Cemetery.

Anti-war veterans and GI's are still the most effective anti-war voices. With your help we will continue to fight to make our voices heard. I cannot say often enough how important you are to Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Your tax deductible donations enable us to be a powerful advocate, and I am profoundly grateful for your support.

I cannot expect that you will be able to make a donation every time you receive an update, but, if you are able to do so at this time, you will continue to make Vietnam Veterans Against the War stronger in pursuit of peace and decent benefits for all veterans.

Sincerely,



Barry Romo
National Coordinator

P.S. I urge you to consider using your tax rebate to contribute to Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

I am sending Vietnam Veterans Against the War \$35 \$50 \$100 \$250 \$500 Other to support its work for peace and its efforts to expose the Bush Administration's hypocritical neglect of returning veterans. Checks to VVAW are tax deductible. You can also donate online at vvaaw.org.

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