



# VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR, INC

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July 2009

I want to begin this update by once again thanking you for your incredible support of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. We could never have accomplished all that we have done without your help.

I am very excited to be able to tell you that, as of July 1, Iraq Veterans Against the War has hired an Iraq veteran who is a great organizer to head up the new IVAW Field Organizing Program. At least two additional full time organizers will be hired before this fall.

The field organizing program will organize both veterans and active duty soldiers. (20% of IVAW members are on Active Duty.) They will develop leadership, work on campaigns that affect the members short and medium-term as well as long-term goals, and they will work with local members to develop plans and strategy.

**It is a direct result of your contributions that Vietnam Veterans Against the War can offer financial support to IVAW. Because of you, IVAW can move from doing field organizing as opportunities arise to being able to mount a national program with full time staff.** Without you, IVAW's field organizing program would be much less comprehensive.

I look forward to letting you know about the accomplishments of the IVAW Field Organizing Program in my fall update.

**Thanks to your generous support, our military counselor, Ray Parrish, continues to help veterans and GIs.** You may recall my writing to you about Carl, a National Guard member who applied for conscientious objector status. Ray spent many hours with Carl going over his application and making sure that he could truthfully meet the qualifications for CO status. Carl waited for months and months. He would skip his National Guard meetings if he expected that weapons training would be part of the meeting. He constantly wondered what would happen with his application and what he would do if it were denied.

Although Ray has done about 30 consultations with soldiers wanting to apply for CO status since he began working for VVAW, he has not received any reports of success from people he has counseled. Until now! Ray accompanied Carl to his hearing and Carl is now a recognized conscientious objector.

Ray regularly gets calls from and about GIs deployed in Iraq. The wife of a deployed Marine found Ray on the internet. Her husband Joe had been suffering from severe PTSD, but his superiors would not let him see a mental health professional. Desperate, Joe made a suicide attempt in front of his commanding officer.

After that, Joe was transferred to a Navy hospital ship but his wife was unable to contact him. Ray offered moral support and explained to her that patients on hospital ships are supposed to be able to call relatives. He encouraged her to contact the Red Cross, her Congressional Representative, and the chaplain's office. Something worked and Mary was finally able to talk with Joe.

In a different case, a soldier called Ray recently because he could not convince his command that his PTSD was making him a danger to his unit. Ray explained to Harold that medical treatment was his right. He told Harold that any officer who denied a soldier's access to necessary medical treatment was breaking regulations. The officer could be court-martialed for violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Ray believes that letting GIs know that they actually have some rights is crucial. He worries that so many soldiers are sunk into passivity because they have come to believe that there is nothing they can do to change their situation. "Embrace the suck" is a new phrase going around that expresses young GIs' sense of hopelessness.

I would also like to share with you an email Ray received from the mother of James Burmeister. Both Ray and Carol Trainer of Kentuckiana VVAW had supported James when he turned himself in after being AWOL. James was sent to prison rather than given a discharge. Ray continues to stay in contact while James is serving his sentence. This is what James' mother Helen Burmeister said:

*Ray never hesitated to talk to me, my husband or James' girlfriend at any time, day or night, when we called with concerns or questions on what to expect from the US Army procedures. His help was invaluable to us. I will forward some other emails that we received from Ray, but I can tell you it does not even come close to showing how much help Ray has been to my family.*

*Thank you,  
Helen Burmeister*

In another piece of major news, **Vietnam Veterans Against the War has just hired a second military counselor, Johana (Hans) Buwalda**, a licensed counselor, who has volunteered with Iraq Veterans Against the War for the last two years. She not only does therapy but also mental health assessments for veterans who need them for AWOL or for disability claims. She has worked with war survivors for 20 years, including living in a war zone in the Philippines for three years. We are thrilled to have her working for VVAW. I am also very much looking forward to telling you more about Hans's work in my fall letter

Vietnam Veterans Against the War has long been active in the effort to get compensation for victims of Agent Orange, the defoliant that was sprayed on vegetation in Vietnam during the war. Both US soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers and civilians have suffered from cancers, birth defects, and a great variety of illnesses caused by the chemical.

Nevada VVAW activist Rena Kopystynski lost her husband to Agent Orange related

illnesses last year. Her son and grandson suffer from birth defects. She was invited to come to Paris to testify at The International Peoples' Tribunal of Conscience in Support of the Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange on May 15 to 16, 2009.

The Tribunal received evidence and testimony from 27 people including victims and expert witnesses. After examining the evidence the Tribunal found that the United States Government and the Chemical manufacturers were aware of the fact that Agent Orange contained the dangerous chemical Dioxin. Nevertheless, they continued to manufacture and use it and in fact suppressed a study that showed that Dioxin caused birth defects in experimental animals.

At the Tribunal, Rena learned about the even worse situation of the Vietnamese victims: "The one thing that I thought I understood, but, now realize that I could never have conceived of, was the situation in Vietnam, especially amongst second and third generation offspring. Babies born without limbs; heads larger than their bodies, but heads with no eyes or eye sockets; twisted bodies, limbs and some with no brain or brain cavity. Mothers, whose milk is so contaminated by dioxin that they are poisoning their own babies every time they nurse, but, have no alternative because there is no such luxury as formula. The soil in Vietnam is still contaminated."

Rena pledged to fight for compensation for both US and Vietnamese victims. She hopes to go to Vietnam next year to visit Vietnamese victims and their families. Just before I started this update to you, Rena wrote that she has been contacted by members of the Obama administration requesting copies of her speech.

**Vietnam Veterans Against the War works to support the efforts of the Vietnamese victims to finally receive compensation. Thanks to your generous support, we were able to make a major contribution to the expenses of a tour of Vietnamese victims last year.** Such tours make it possible for people in the United States to learn about the Vietnamese sufferers from Agent Orange related illnesses and how they have been denied the right to compensation by the US government and the chemical companies.

To give you a couple of notes regarding activity of VVAW chapters:

Kentuckiana VVAW joined with the Louisville Peace Action Coalition and the new Louisville Ivaw chapter for a forum "Iraq, Afghanistan, and Torture" at a gallery with a photo exhibit on Iraq by nationally recognized photographer Molly Bingham. Harold Trainer spoke for VVAW.

Carol Trainer, Louisville VVAW contact is extremely excited about the formation of the new IVAW chapter. For months she has been emailing young veterans in hopes of sparking interest in a chapter. She was thrilled when she got a response from Brian, who spoke for IVAW at the forum and who has submitted the paperwork for the Louisville IVAW chapter.

Chicago VVAW joined IVAW and US Labor Against the War in bringing an Iraqi labor leader to Chicago to talk about his work and to raise money for the Iraqi Labor Coalition. VVAW was eager to commit its energy to this effort because the Iraqi labor unions represent an important hope for Iraq's future. At this time they are the most progressive and secular force

in Iraq.

Jan A. Ruhman, VVAW contact in San Diego had breakfast with war resister Robin Long immediately after he was released from the Naval Brig on Thursday July 9th. You may remember that Robin had sought refuge in Canada, but was deported to the United States for prosecution in summer 2008. He served 12 months of a 15 month sentence.

Robin gave a press conference the next day, where he spoke of his moral opposition to the Iraq War. He was covered by the main newspapers in San Diego and Los Angeles and by local television. Because Robin left prison dead broke, Jan presented Robin with a \$500 check from Vietnam Veterans Against the War so that he can get his life back on track. He plans to study in Northern California and he would like to be a massage therapist, serving veterans.

**In closing, I want to thank you again for your support of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.** I know that you cannot make a financial contribution every time you receive an update, but if you can donate at this time, you will be helping us continue helping veterans and active duty GIs, offering support to Iraq Veterans Against the War, and working to achieve just compensation for Vietnamese and US victims of Agent Orange.

Sincerely,



Barry Romo  
National Coordinator



*Aaron Hughes, IVAW's new lead Field Organizer, speaking at VVAW's Memorial Day Event in Chicago, 2009*

I am sending Vietnam Veterans Against the War \$35 \$50 \$100 \$250 \$500 Other to support its work for peace and for decent benefits for all veterans. Checks to VVAW are tax deductible. You can also donate online at [vvaaw.org](http://vvaaw.org).

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