THE VETERAN

Vietnam Veterans Against the War **50¢**

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Kim Phuc Visits with VVAW

BARRY ROMO

Her picture will always be with those of us who served in Vietnam. A slender pre-teen Vietnamese girl running and running from American bombs, already horribly burned from American napalm.

This photo became a symbol of the American policy of massive retaliation and its real human consequences. The photo and the news film of that girl, Kim Phuc, have been suspended in time.

Kim has grown up. She's thirty-something and the mother of a two-year-old son. She now lives in Canada, not as a symbol caught in history, but as a human being. Kim visited with VVAW in Chicago over November 12-14, 1996, immediately following her historic appearance at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC on Veterans Day. It's rare that a person lives up to her symbolic significance, but let me quote Kim about fame: "I am not famous, my photo is. If the photographer had taken it two minutes earlier or two minutes later, there would have been no photo. Millions are hurt in war, they just don't have their photo taken, so they don't exist. I must speak for them. Why fight? For what? People who are fighting are just destroying. We live in love and we should live in peace."

Kim Phuc visited with VVAW for three days, and despite the fact that she was always in pain (she almost died that June day in 1972), she exuded joy and love and humanity. People felt good being around her. At Columbia College (Chicago) Kim talked about growing up and how ugly she felt. About how much she wanted just to wear short sleeves but couldn't because of her scars. A student responded with tears in her eyes, "You should never worry about your scars. You are the most beautiful person inside." Another responded, "You are like an angel who has come to us." Kim affected vets and VVAW the same way. Her presence was a reaffirmation of our war on war, that so-called "foreigners" are human beings, not "collateral damage."

BARRY ROMO IS A NATIONAL COORDINATOR OF VVAW.

Kim Phuc (center) with Joel Greenberg and Annie Luginbill, Chicago 1996

South Vietnamese forces follow terrified children after a napalm strike near Trang Ban, June 8, 1972. Kim Phuc had ripped off her burning clothes

Why Are We Still VVAW?

JOHN A. LINDQUIST

If you have been in VVAW for any length of time, you have heard the question before. At various times in our history the question has come up: Why don't we change our name to Vietnam Veterans Against War? Some people have even suggested we change it to Vietnam Vegetables Against the World. I'm going to review part of our history and try to answer this question at the same time.

In June 1967, six Vietnam veterans marched in an antiwar parade in New York City behind a banner that said "VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR." This was the official beginning of our organization.

After our first year of working against the war, VVAW decided to join in the Chicago protest at the Democratic National Convention in August 1968. We functioned as medics and joined in various other aspects of the demonstrations during that week. The police riot that occurred there blew our minds, and not much else was done by VVAW until 1969.

In 1969, the My Lai killings became public, and VVAW again moved into action. The veterans of VVAW thought it was important to educate America about the true nature of the war in Indochina and to expose the lie that My Lai was a one-of-a-kind incident. We wanted to expose the war by giving testimony about crimes we witnessed and policies of the war

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30 YEARS OF VVAW!

VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR

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From the National Office

JOE MILLER

Well, folks, believe it or not, here is another issue of **The Veteran**! Thanks to our editorial staff and to many of you who contributed financially and submitted articles and poetry, this issue is coming out in time to celebrate VVAW's 30th Anniversary.

Here you will find many pieces written by veterans and others that recall the importance of VVAW to their lives, then and now. When we first began in June 1967, who would have thought we'd still be here, fighting many of the same battles, thirty years later? The system that sent us off to war is still screwing over our brothers and sisters from that war and those since. Our struggle for peace and social justice will continue as long as we have breath in our bodies.

So come celebrate with us the victories of the past thirty years and the continuation of struggle! The events surrounding our 30th Anniversary in Chicago will go as follows:

• Friday, May 16th, beginning at 7:00 PM:

Premier showing of **Citizen Soldier: The Story of the VVAW**, a Denis Mueller documentary on 30 years of VVAW. At Chicago Filmmakers, 1543 West Division Street (near Ashland and Milwaukee Avenues).

• Saturday, May 17th, from 11:30 AM to 5:00 PM:

30th Anniversary Event including panels with authors who have written about the war and the veterans' movement, short speeches and a speak-out. There will also be displays of VVAW memorabilia, with lots of stuff to buy, including complete runs of **The Veteran** and classic VVAW t-shirts. At the U.E. Union Hall, first floor and basement, located at 37 South Ashland Avenue.

• Following a break for dinner, we will reconvene at 8:00 PM for a big party at a place to be announced later.

To obtain information concerning hotel accommodations in Chicago, you should call Barry Romo at (773) 327-5756.

We hope to see as many of our old and new friends at this gathering as possible. Who knows when next we might be able to pull something like this together?

Enjoy this issue of the paper, make your plans to come to Chicago to help us celebrate thirty years of social and political activism, and please consider making a regular tax-deductible contribution to Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc.

see page 19 for membership info

Where We Came From, Who We Are, Who Can Join

Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc. (VVAW) is a national veterans' organization that was founded in New York City in 1967 after six Vietnam vets marched together in a peace demonstration. It was organized to voice the growing opposition among returning servicemen and women to the still-raging war in Indochina, and grew rapidly to a membership of over 30,000 throughout the United States as well as active duty GIs stationed in Vietnam. Through ongoing actions and grassroots organization, VVAW exposed the ugly truth about US involvement in Southeast Asia and our first-hand experiences helped many other Americans to see the unjust nature of that war.

VVAW quickly took up the struggle for the rights and needs of veterans. In 1970, we started the first rap groups to deal with traumatic after-effects of war, setting the example for readjustment counselling at Vet Centers now. We exposed the shameful neglect of many disabled vets in VA Hospitals and helped draft legislation to improve educational benefits and create job programs. VVAW fought for amnesty for war resisters, including vets with bad discharges. We helped make known the negative health effects of exposure to chemical defoliants and the VA's attempts to cover-up these conditions as well as their continued refusal to provide treatment and compensation for many Agent Orange Victims.

Today our government is still financing and arming undemocratic and repressive regimes around the world. Recently, American troops have been sent into combat in the Middle East and Central America, for many of the same misguided reasons that were used to send us to Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, many veterans are still denied justice -- facing unemployment, discrimination, homelessness, post-traumatic stress disorder and other health problems, while already inadequate services are being cut back or eliminated.

We believe that service to our country and communities did not end when we were discharged. We remain committed to the struggle for peace and for social and economic justice for all people. We will continue to oppose senseless military adventures and to teach the real lessons of the Vietnam War. We will do all we can to prevent another generation from being put through a similar tragedy and we will continue to demand dignity and respect for veterans of all eras. This is real patriotism and we remain true to our mission. JOIN US!

Editorial Collective
Barry Romo, Joe Miller, Jeff Machota & Lisa Boucher
Special thanks to:
Terry Thiel & Jack Miller

Radio Hanoi Tapes Found in Barn

JOHN "DOC" UPTON

The Vietnam Veterans Radio network has obtained audio tapes, recorded between 1964 and 1971, of regular daily broadcasts from Radio Hanoi's 'Voice of Vietnam', "...to American soldiers involved in the war in Vietnam," featuring reporters Thu Houng (better known as 'Hanoi Hannah') and Van Tung.

VVRN received the Radio Hanoi tapes, as well as recordings of Radio Peking, from Jack Bock, a W.W.II vet from Washington state, who had worked as a civilian communications technician in Japan and Thailand during the Vietnam War. In a letter, Jack said he had heard VVRN on Radio For Peace International's short-wave broadcasts, and thought we might be interested in the tapes, which he had stored in his barn until now. Jack said he had recorded the tapes "to get another slant on the news," and pointed to the "charges and counter-charges over the so-called Gulf of Tonkin Incident in August of 1964" as an example, adding, "Looking back, it is easy to see who was lying."

After receiving the tapes, VVRN's initial review found, as Jack had told us, that they contained a great deal of static and interference, including, no doubt, US jamming. We contacted Chuck Haddix, director of the Marr Sound Archives at the University of Missouri-KC, who offered to 'clean' the tapes for us. However, after hearing a portion of 'partially cleaned' tape, and realizing the historical significance of their content, Chuck put us in touch with Les Waffen, director of the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Branch of the National Archives. Les told us that the tapes of Radio Hanoi were "very rare," and said that his department had the equipment and staff necessary to clean the tapes digitally. They did an incredible job!

Except for a change from patriotic Vietnamese music in the earlier tapes to American rock and folk music later, the format of Radio Hanoi's Voice of Vietnam remained basically the same over the years, and includes:

• News headlines and reports critical of the Vietnam War from the World, and from around the world

• Combat Action Reports, with descriptions of the fighting and the names and locations of the American units involved

• Lists of the names, ranks, and serial numbers of Americans killed in action during the previous 24 hours, along with their families' names and hometown addresses

• Speeches, poems and songs by American POWs, deserters and antiwar activists

• Reports on the anti-Vietnam War activities of active duty GIs, primarily in the US and in Europe, and on VVAW's actions (including the Winter Soldier Investigation, Operation Heart of America, and the signing of the People's Peace Treaty)

• Reminders that "Vietnam is not American soil," concern that "you could go home in a body bag," and encouragement to "demand your withdrawal from Vietnam now"

Copies of the Radio Hanoi/ Radio Peking tapes, cassette and reel-to-reel, are available from VVRN. To receive a chronological catalog outlining the contents of these historic and revealing broadcasts (68 separate entries) from the Voice of Vietnam, send a self-addressed and stamped (52 cents) envelope plus $1.00, or just a buck and a half, to: VVAW/ VVRN, 7807 North Avalon, Kansas City, MO 64152.

DOC UPTON IS THE MIDWEST COORDINATOR OF VVAW AND LIVES IN KANSAS CITY. HE WAS A NAVY MEDIC WITH THE FIRST MARINE DIVISION IN VIETNAM.

"When You Open the Door, the Flies Come In:" My Return Visit to Vietnam

WILLIAM W. COBB, JR.

In April I returned to Vietnam for the first time since I served there with a U.S. Army military intelligence unit twenty-five years ago. I returned in order to launch an exchange program for Vietnamese and American students and instructors, to build some additional material for the Vietnam War class that I teach, and of course my curiosity drew me there as well. How had Saigon changed? Could I find where I'd lived, where I worked, locate any of the interpreters I had used when talking with prisoners and hoi chanhs? I was impressed by how at the same time nothing had changed yet everything had changed.

What's the same? The way that Saigon is laid out Paris-like with all major thoroughfares converging like spokes at the center of the city. The way Vietnamese leave their homes at night and gather on the wide sidewalks in their sling chairs to eat noodle soup, sip coffee, smoke, watch the children play, and exchange gossip in that singsong language that is thousands of years old. The way the city is full of the sound of motor bikes — six million people and each armed with a Honda. And the smell of nuoc mam and heat and humidity. But mostly the beauty and tradition of the people remain the same. This seemed true in the south and farther to the north in Hanoi.

And what has changed? Although most Vietnamese still rely on cottage industry and agriculture to eke out a living (selling everything from paperback editions of Graham Greene's The Quiet American to old Zippo lighters that U.S. soldiers carried during the war and that are inscribed with sage phrases such as: When I die I'm going to Heaven because I've spent my time in Hell), the city skyline in Saigon and Hanoi clearly reveal the Vietnam of the future. Luxury hotels with such names as the New World, the Equatorial, and the Metropole rise high above the existing and aging architecture. Joint-venture agreements have brought billions of dollars into the country to produce synthetic rubber, drill for oil, bottle Coca Cola, and construct hotels perhaps more befitting Waikiki Beach.

William Cobb with members of World University Service, Ho Chi Minh City, 1996

I think I was most impressed by the fondness of the Vietnamese for Americans — despite the enmity of the last many years between their communist government and the U.S. And by their willingness to open the door cautiously to the industrialized democracies' investment, educational system, and tourism. I say cautiously because they realize the truth of the adage that I heard once on my trip: When you open the door, the flies come in.

WILLIAM COBB IS A MEMBER OF VVAW. HE IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT UTAH VALLEY STATE COLLEGE. HE'S A VIETNAM VET.

Notes from the Boonies

PAUL WISOVATY

I know how many members we have in VVAW. (Well, OK, I don't, but somebody in the Chicago office does.) I don't know how many vets belong to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion and Amvets. But I do know one thing: there are a heck of a lot more of them than there are of us.

Why? And what do those numbers tell us about (1) what veterans look for in the organizations they join, and (2) what America looks for in its veterans, and, by extrapolation, in itself?

To tell you the truth, these questions scare the hell out of me. I've been actively involved with the VFW for ten years, and I have not seen, in the leadership of that organization, too many attitudes that I consider particularly healthy, or that I think paint a bright picture for this country as we head into the 21st Century.

First, some qualification. I can say with complete honesty that you will never find a nicer bunch of guys than the members of Tuscola VFW Post 10009. If you have a flat tire, they'll change it. If your kid needs a ride to school, you got it. I am sincerely proud to be able to count these individuals as personal friends, and I suspect that similar statements may be made about members of any VFW Post in America.

But we're not talking about a Monday night euchre club here. We're talking about an organization which claims to speak for all veterans, and to which non-veterans in our society look for leadership, and for articulation of the views of veterans as an interest group. And herein lies the rub.

What do these mainstream veterans' organizations have to say about issues that VVAW thinks are important?

First of all, they tell us that we damn sure would have won that war in Vietnam, if only the politicians in Washington hadn't tied one hand behind our backs. We were the good guys and those scraggly, slant-eyed Victor Charlies were the bad guys, just as sure as the sun comes up over the Gulf of Tonkin and Jane Fonda sleeps around. Ho Chi Minh wasn't much more than a Russian stooge, and Rusty Calley deserves the CMH. (You get my drift.) I suppose I could live with that if these were just a few guys sitting around a bar trying to justify their misspent youth. But they are of course much more. They are a few million American veterans, very well funded and organized, who would like to get my teenage daughter to believe all that crap. (Yeah, sometimes it hits home.) Probably what is more important is that their attitudes on this issue perpetuate the festering of this great open sore we call our Vietnam experience. There's a saying in prison that the first step to freedom is to admit you're guilty. America will never be able to take that step as long as its mainstream veterans' organizations keep insisting we're innocent.

What else? Well, they believe that the American flag is a lot more important than anything it stands for, and they tell anyone who'll listen that all veterans feel the same way. Never mind that some highly decorated vets in the US Senate — John Kerry, Daniel Inouye and Bob Kerry — voted against a Constitutional amendment to "protect" the flag. I suspect that, if you gave them the chance, lots of VFW vets would also vote for an amendment to outlaw burning pictures of Ronald Reagan.

To tie my first point (Nam) into my second (the icon-izing of the flag), they don't seem to be especially fond of civil liberties either. They think free speech is the greatest thing since fruit cocktail in C-rats, as long as that speech is along lines they agree with. Protest the Vietnam War? You might as well throw one of their wives into the back of a deuce-and-a-half like one of mama-san's granddaughters.

Do they do anything right? Well, they try. They have consistently lobbied Washington for increased funding for the Veterans Administration, and especially for VA hospital programs. But even here, when they have a bona fide chance to do something right, they still can't see the forest for the trees.

In the most recent presidential election, they overwhelmingly supported the Republican candidate, for the sole reason that he served in the military. His opponent not only did not serve, but even went so far as to protest our involvement in Vietnam. (Those who don't know any better might assume that such was his Constitutional right, but the VFW will straighten you out on that.) They were not the least bit concerned that their fellow vet promised to cut income taxes 15% across the board, and to cut capital gains taxes a great deal more than that, all the while moving us toward a balanced budget. I am not taking a position here with regard to either taxation or a balanced budget, nor am I trying to promote Bill Clinton. But I think it rather inescapable that, had the VFW's candidate won, a great many social programs — to include the Veterans Administration — would have seen very serious decreases in federal funding.

None of this seems to matter at all to the mainstream organizations. Bob Dole put on a uniform so by God he's their man, and that draft-dodging old Slick Willie sleeps in the White House while homeless vets sleep in the streets. Funding for the VA? Well, like Reagan used to say, you can't solve the country's problems just by throwing money at them.

I suppose that having just turned 50, I'm getting to be a pretty crusty old fart, and I just don't have the tolerance I used to have. On the other hand, maybe I just don't feel like listening to it anymore.

And none of us should either. If nothing else, my daughter deserves better.

PAUL WISOVATY IS A MEMBER OF VVAW. HE LIVES IN TUSCOLA, IL, WHERE HE WORKS FOR THE PROBATION DEPARTMENT. HE WAS IN VIETNAM WITH THE US ARMY 9TH DIVISION IN 1968.

True Believers

ADAM ADRIAN CROWN

I was a true believer.

I was a Boy Scout. John Wayne. Audie Murphy. The sight of Old Glory made my chest swell. The "Star-Spangled Banner" put a tight knot in my throat. I cut out pictures of Marines, square-jawed, fearless young men in their stiletto-sharp dress blues, and tacked them up in my room. I fought hundreds of heroic backyard battles against imaginary enemies, winning the day against overwhelming odds, getting the girl in the last scene.

Once, when saying the pledge of allegiance, as we were required to do in school each morning, I accidentally said, "amen" at the end. The other kids laughed at me. But I didn't care. Any subtle indications to the contrary eluded me. I fervently believed that America was about freedom and justice. Justice for all. It's a hard thing to discover that all you were taught to believe in was a lie.

For me, that staggering moment came in 1970. I was enrolled in a junior college, waiting for the draft board to write me a love letter, wondering whether I should join the Navy first, or go in and go "all the way," Marines, Green Berets, something like that. I was a poor kid, running out of tuition money faster than guys running out of bullets shooting at Superman's chest, and the GI Bill would at least pay for school. I was resigned to the inevitable. Just waiting for the call.

It was very odd to walk into the student union at lunch time. Half of it was a carpeted area furnished with soft overstuffed sofas and chairs. The other half was tile, melamine tables and hard plastic chairs. The tiled area was populated by older students, by jocks, by short-haired button-down, squeaky-clean kids in computer programming and police science. Lots of off-duty cops, too, taking classes to further their careers. On the carpeted area were the long-hairs, the hippies, the "dopers," the "freaks," — in short, those who had begun to ask embarrassing questions about the sociopolitical status quo. I wasn't quite sure where I belonged, but since I was a musician, I generally gravitated toward the carpet.

Quite a number of veterans attended the college, some only recently returned from Vietnam, and many of them members or supporters of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. They could often be identified because they wore some remnant of their uniforms, maybe a jacket with their nametape over the pocket. Some had sewn the American flag on the sleeve upside down. Peace symbols were rampant. It seemed to me that only these vets were completely at ease in either area of the union.

When there were rallies against the war, vets were always in the forefront, as organizers and speakers. Their comments were not always met with universal approval. There were sometimes angry catcalls, usually from the denizens of the tiled floor, none of whom had been in Vietnam and who knew as little about it as I did.

Overnight, it seemed, the nature of the world had changed, as if from flat to round.

I was too ignorant to be anything but innocent. I didn't even know where Vietnam was, not for certain. Oh sure, someplace in Southeast Asia. But what was happening and why? Not a glimmer of a clue. Except, of course, that we must be there carrying out some noble mission, spreading freedom and justice around the world.

Then two things happened that jarred my world apart.

The first was the My Lai Massacre. It had happened in 1968, but the story didn't break until later — not until some vet, safely out of the Army's clutches, reported the incident to his congressman. Eventually the story broke, and with it, my heart. Murdering civilians? Women and children? Even infants? Surely this horrible atrocity was a fluke. It had to be. We were the good guys; we didn't do that kind of thing. After all, my dad had given kids chocolate bars in W.W.II and liberated Jews from death camps. That's what America was all about, right?

The second thing was a weekend gig as a vocalist with a rock-and-roll band. I was playing a lot of softer stuff then: Gordon Lightfoot, Jacques Brel, and my own songs. This was a Creedence Clearwater, Motown, rhythm-and-blues type band, and I almost passed up the invitation to sit in. I don't know why I accepted. Lucky for me I did.

The tenor sax player and the drummer were both vets, and outspokenly against the war. (This surprised me since I had not yet discovered that very few vets were outspokenly in favor of it.) We spent the weekend playing music, doing a lot of blues, smoking, and talking. After a while I shut up and just listened. These two young men, not particular friends of mine, were willing to relive the indescribable pain of the war — what they had seen and what they had done. And they were doing it, I realized later, for my benefit. Twenty-seven years later, I still find my throat tightening as I remember their deep moral grief.

My Lai, it turned out, was nothing unusual. "A daily fucking occurrence," as Nick the drummer put it. And worse things, too. Inexcusable things. Rape. Torture. Mutilation.

In 1997, this is old news. We know now about CIA dope smuggling and American-sponsored atrocities around the globe: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala. But in 1970, it was news I didn't want to hear.

I didn't embrace enlightenment with anything like alacrity. I resisted with everything I had, like a cult member resisting deprogramming. Which is exactly what I was. I denied. I got angry. I got depressed. I denied some more. But gradually, the "preponderance of evidence" forced me to accept the truth in spite of myself.

The sense of betrayal was like a crushing weight on my chest. Overnight, it seemed, the nature of the world had changed, as if from flat to round. But all the historical pieces began to fall into place. Slavery. Centuries of genocide against Native Americans. The internment of Japanese-Americans during W.W.II. The Klan. The murders of the Kennedys and Medger Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. I realized that I had never learned any American history, only American mythology.

Lies, lies, lies.

I knew I would never again be able to feel the kind of "patriotism" I had felt before. I became a man and put away childish things.

The practical problem of the draft remained, my enlightenment notwithstanding. I didn't have the courage to just refuse induction, like the great Muhammad Ali, and take a chance on prison. Going to Canada didn't seem right. Why should I be the one to leave? I wasn't the liar. I finally managed to convince myself that the Coast Guard performed some worthwhile service and I spent two years sailing up and down the coast of Maine under the most incompetent skipper that ever held the unofficial record for ramming the dock at eight knots. But that's another story.

I will never forget the veterans who saved my life with their pain and their truth. Now it's become increasingly fashionable to soothe the grief of survivors, and to assuage the national guilt, by insisting that American boys who died in Vietnam gave their lives in some noble purpose. The truth is that they died — and killed — for no good reason whatsoever. No noble purpose. No crusade for democracy. They didn't give their lives; their lives were swindled from them. To pretend otherwise is the worst disservice to the dead that I can imagine.

Most of those lads, like me, were fundamentally decent boys who had the misfortune of believing in something that didn't exist, and their passion and patriotism, perhaps noble inclinations, were pressed into the most ignoble service by greedy and corrupt politicians. It wouldn't be the first time. But it's about time we make it the last time.

What's important now, is that the real truth of it be told. (The official truth just isn't good enough. Officially, Lee Harvey Oswald shot JFK.) Maybe if we tell the truth, keep telling it, no matter what it costs, no matter how much it hurts, maybe, just maybe, we won't have any more kids coming home in plastic bags. Or with crippled bodies. Or crippled souls. So I will try to do that. It's a debt I owe.

Why Are We Still VVAW?

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that were standard operating procedure, such as free fire zones, H&I fire, strategic hamlets, and search-and-destroy missions. Not many GIs were crazy killers, but we knew we wanted to end the war and bring our brothers and sisters home. As warriors ourselves we could speak out with the truth about our war.

These local Winter Soldier investigations (WSI) reinvigorated VVAW and helped lead up to Operation RAW (for Rapid American Withdrawal), a mass march from New York City across New Jersey to Valley Forge, PA. Along the way, VVAW members and friends performed guerrilla theater, helping to bring the war home to the people of America.

From Operation RAW we organized the national WSI in Detroit (January 31-February 2, 1971), and this helped to build for VVAW's most well-known event, Operation Dewey Canyon III in Washington DC, April 19-23 1971.

These five days amazed us and the nation and pissed off Richard Nixon. Fifteen hundred veterans from all over the country lobbied Congress, marched in the streets, educated the people, returned a three-foot high pile of medals, and, on April 24, led the largest antiwar protest in America's history.

The Gainesville Eight trial of 1972-73 pitted VVAW against the power of the FBI and Richard Nixon. They beat us down to three hundred members, but VVAW survived. Our struggle for survival galvanized us into a fighting force waging a battle for peace and justice. During this time we had our first brush with changing our name.

Building up to the National Steering Committee meeting (NSCM) in Placitis, New Mexico in April 1972, some members from Chicago and California floated the idea of changing the name from VVAW to VVAW/WSO (Vietnam Veterans Against the War/ Winter Soldier Organization).

VVAW Chicago VA Takeover, 1975

Their idea, in a nutshell, was to get out of the "veterans business" and really get into the role of being "anti-imperialist." Fortunately for the organization, the final decision about the name change had to be voted on again in one year's time.

By October 1973, VVAW had declared war on the VA. Across the country we were occupying VA offices and fighting for decent benefits for all veterans. In the midst of all this activity, the idea of changing our name became as popular as a fart in a submarine.

As the 1970s marched on, the fight for universal unconditional amnesty, discharge upgrading, post-Vietnam syndrome, and freedom for Gary Lawton and Ashby Leach drew heavily on our veterans' roots.

Our experience as veterans, warriors, and good organizers also prepared us for one of our longest struggles, the push for testing, treatment, and compensation for Agent Orange (1978-1984).

It started in Chicago in March 1978, when news broke the story of Maude DeVictor, the mother of the Agent Orange struggle. We began the battle at the Spring NSCM meeting in Chicago, and we carried it to Washington, DC more than once. We first created an information packet to educate veterans and their families, the "Agent Orange Dossier." With this we began to build a movement, organize with other veterans, and demonstrate.

We held national meetings in St. Louis and Washington, DC. We occupied the Capitol lawn in Madison, Wisconsin, and marched in Washington, DC. We held Dewey Canyon IV in DC in 1984, and once again slept on the mall. We marched and demonstrated all over the country on this issue.

With the help of Victor Yannacone we helped organize and sign up veterans in the Agent Orange lawsuit against the chemical companies. We did not win a total victory, but this epic battle will forever be a major part of the history of VVAW.

Between 1984 to 1997 VVAW has been small but active. We worked to stop the war in El Salvador and Nicaragua, we helped to organize some of the largest demonstrations against the Persian Gulf War, and we still work for decent benefits for all veterans and normalization of relations with Vietnam. That battle was finally won in 1995 when the US finally recognized Vietnam. Our public speaking in schools and universities about the war in Vietnam also continues.

When we go about our work, we proudly use our name Vietnam Veterans Against the War. On our trips back to Vietnam, our button and name are recognized and respected. Till the last one of us dies, or we dry up and blow away, our name will not change. See you May 16-17, 1997 in Chicago for the 30th Anniversary.

JOHN LINDQUIST IS A FORMER VVAW NATIONAL COORDINATOR. HE'S A MARINE VIETNAM VET WHO LIVES IN MILWAUKEE AND WORKS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF SANITATION.

VVAW: One Member's Journey Through The Past

J.W. ANDERSON

"I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity."

--Dwight D. Eisenhower

It was September of 1970. I had just been discharged from the Army and was leaving Fort Dix, NJ. Uncle had just let me out thirty days early to go to college in Minnesota. As I got to the post gate, something came over me. I had just spent almost two years of my life in Uncle's army and I felt confused, used, pissed off, and at the same time, relieved.

I knew when I was drafted that my life after high school was going nowhere, yet I did not want to be in the military. I was young, naive, and impressionable. Even the word "Vietnam" scared the hell out of me. But now it was over. Or was it? The army had gotten what it wanted out of me, I'd served my country, yet I had this hollow feeling inside.

Both my parents were W.W.II veterans and were proud of that fact. Shouldn't I be proud too? After all I had served my country, but to what end? Why were we in Vietnam? Why were boys my age dying in droves? Why was the Vietnamese population being killed in a genocidal fashion? Why are people in the streets protesting MY government's actions? Why were students being slaughtered on their college campuses? What has happened to this great country I grew up in? Well, maybe that's the way life is, or maybe MY government had lied to me. All I knew was that Uncle used me and now had no further use for me. Given what I could expect from the GI Bill, I realized I had no real value now that I was a veteran.

At this point I stopped my car at the unguarded gate, emptied my duffel bag of all its military garb, sprinkled the clothing with lighter fluid and set it afire. As I sped away and watched it in my rear view mirror, all I could say to myself was: Fuck them. I was a civilian now, not thinking that I was in the inactive reserves and if caught probably could have been right back in Uncle's army.

By the time I got to Minnesota to attend Mankato State University, I was really anxious. Here I was a 22-year-old freshman. I don't think I'd ever felt this alone.

VVAW Takeover of the Statue of Liberty, 1976

At least in Uncle's army I had buddies I could count on. *Now what do I do?* I thought. When classes started I felt even more alone. What was I doing here with all these kids who didn't have a clue about what was going on beyond their academic borders? So I became a loner, went to classes, and got high every chance I could. But no matter what I did, I could not get away from the Vietnam War. It was all around me. On the news, in the movies, on campus, in the music.

In the Spring of 1971, I felt that there had to be other vets who had the same values I had. After all there were a lot of vets on campus. In the student union one day I ran into a Vietnam vet who invited me to a Vets Club "smoker." I got to the meeting and I could have sworn I was at a fraternity meeting. Guys talking about what they were going to do at the fraternity charity festival. No talk about the war or its effects outside of ridiculing the students who were protesting it. Come on, throw me a bone, what is this: VFW, the younger? Just then I spotted another vet who looked just as bewildered as I must have appeared. He told me about a "Teach-In" that would be happening later in the week. The focus was on the campus antiwar movement and it was being sponsored by the Student Mobilization Committee (SMC).

It was at the SMC Teach-In that I first heard of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). There was an open mike, and as I listened to fellow veterans, I realized I was not alone in my thoughts and beliefs. I got up and talked about the mangled bodies that we came across daily in air evacuation and how fellow GIs went literally crazy as part and parcel of their role in the war.

I was approached by a few veterans who had spoken earlier about their roles in the war and how they had become antiwar vets. They had just started a local chapter of VVAW. Always the hesitant one, I hemmed and hawed about getting involved. I did agree to go to an antiwar march in the Twin Cities that weekend.

At the antiwar march in Minneapolis, the Vietnam veterans were to march in the front. There were hundreds of us. I couldn't believe it. I was able to talk to a number of VVAW members from across the state. Finally I realized that I was not alone in my thinking. I found what I was looking for. It was here that we organized for Dewey Canyon III, a limited incursion into the foreign land of Washington, DC, in April of 1971. It was here that I joined VVAW.

Dewey Canyon III was amazing. Over 1,000 Vietnam vets from all over the country demonstrating against the war. Guerrilla theater, "lobbying" Congress, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, marching on the Pentagon, occupying the Supreme Court steps, being locked out of Arlington National Cemetery, and — perhaps the climax to this emotional roller coaster — the returning of medals from the war.

The irony of the week's activities was the U.S. government's fencing off of the Capitol from its veterans. This demonstrated that the government did not know or care what they had created by sending its boys off to an undeclared and undefined war. All the government knew was that the contingent of veterans camped on the mall was the first time in history returning servicemen had voiced opposition to a war that was still raging.

Upon returning to Minnesota, our campus VVAW organized, was recognized as a "legal" student organization, membership grew and a number of us ran for and won seats in the Student Senate. We were gaining local political clout and were getting our message out about the "real" war in Vietnam. We were invited to address high school and college classes all over southern Minnesota, and students and teachers alike were listening.

Between 1972 and 1975 our local VVAW organization became the leader of the antiwar movement on campus. The Mankato office also focused on other issues of concern to veterans, such as bad discharges, SPN codes, jobs, amnesty, and military recruiting on campus. The Mankato VVAW office organized a statewide VVAW meeting that was accompanied by a peace conference sponsored by VVAW and the

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VVAW History: San Francisco Vets Day Parade 1972

STEVEN HASSNA

The clear blue skies and bright sun were a signal that it was a good day for a parade. No overcast or wind off the Pacific Ocean as usual this time of year, mid-November, Northern California coast. It was cool, warranting a sweater, but not uncomfortable to be outside which is where most of us would spend the day.

VVAW in a traditional parade, what a trip, most of us thought as we made our way to our assigned area to form up. Which, by the way, was in the rear of the whole column of participating groups. That was no surprise. The powers that be would rather have had us behind the street sweepers that came last of all.

Everybody was there, VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), American Legion, National Guard, Reserves, school bands, other groups from all around the Bay Area and finally us: two hundred long-haired, jungle-fatigued young men and women Vietnam vets with attitudes. As a former Army Drill Sergeant, I watched with a smile as our group, which any self-respecting Drill Sergeant would have called a herd, formed up. It seemed that everyone had forgotten, or was trying to forget, what a formation of four ranks was or looked like. Also what any facing movement right or left was like, or what "keep in step" meant.

The parade moved out from the bottom of O'Farrell Street in the financial district of San Francisco, and finally we started to move from our position by the Trans America building. I felt a warm feeling of pride in my heart as we moved out, knowing that our group was in fact a fine example of a well-tuned herd. I think everyone else knew and felt the same.

VVAW participation in this parade had taken months to realize. Shortly after people returned from the last patrol to Miami, we started to work on the San Francisco Vets parade. At first the city was receptive to us but then said no. The San Francisco City government probably got flack from the main-line vets' groups about the VVAW being allowed to participate at all. This was, after all, supposed to be a morale booster. The war was just about over and had been a mess by any stretch of the word. "We ain't going to have a bunch of antiwar, anti-military pukes remind us how screwed up things are," was the attitude of the people in charge.

So, instead of letting us be part of the parade, they made us go the long way around. People in the San Francisco chapter started to brainstorm ways of getting in. Jack McClosky, Lee Thorn, Mike Oliver, Jim O'Donnell and others explored all kinds of ideas.

1972 was an election year with the fuhrer, Herr Nixon, making sure he would win. But San Francisco was a democratic city, so McGovern showed up for a rally at the Cow Palace, a place in the south side of San Francisco (actually in Daly City) used for rodeos, concerts and exhibitions of all kinds. A perfect place for large noisy crowds.

There were three main VVAW chapters in the Bay Area: San Francisco, Redwood City (south on the peninsula) and San Jose, further south. A bunch of us decided to go to the rally. I was roving between the three chapters, sort of a member at large. About fifteen of us met in front of the entrance and tried to get in. You guessed it, no access, full up was the reason.

The entrance to the Cow Palace was a walled affair with a roof that faced inward and chain link fence between turnstile-type gates with ticket booths. This formed a courtyard to the doors to the building. There we were, outside looking in. What to do? Easy, we're vets, right? We know how to climb, so climb we did. Myself and others put our backs to the wall, interlaced our fingers, and each of the others put a foot in our hands and we hoisted them up to the roof.

Once there, they helped others coming up. There were wives, women friends and kids in the group and everyone worked together. Once everyone was on the roof, we reversed the process into the inner courtyard. Within two minutes, start to finish, we were formed up and ready to enter the rally. We entered by a side door, unfurled the VVAW banner and walked around the edge of the rally.

On the main floor was folding chair seating and bleachers around the walls. We walked between the chairs and bleachers. People saw the VVAW banner and our group and started to applaud and cheer their approval. The place was packed but one more group for the cause was OK. We settled in for the speeches and such.

After the rally, we left and formed up outside to make sure everyone was ready to go home. That's when the unexpected happened. In forming up, we were right by the driveway that the VIPs used. There were crowds of people and limos were moving slowly. McGovern's car stopped abreast of our group, the window opened, and there I was staring into the car at McGovern and the mayor of San Francisco, Joseph Alioto. I leaned forward and told McGovern that San Francisco had denied VVAW a position in the Vets Parade. The Mayor frowned and looked away. McGovern said he couldn't do anything about that. I replied that I didn't expect him to do anything, we just wanted him to know that little fact. He looked at the Mayor, the Mayor looked at the floor and I stood there feeling out of place and with nothing more to say. I did tell the Mayor that it was nothing personal, just politics, but I don't know if he got that.

Now for me to be at that spot at that time was just happenstance. I was not a spokesperson for the group. I was just there and seized the opportunity to speak. Any one of us would have done the same thing if they were standing where I had been.

Over the next week or so, people were trying to figure out how to get in the parade. Then the idea was there and once people saw it, they were surprised how obvious it was and they hadn't seen it sooner.

Some of the vets in the Redwood City VVAW chapter went to Canada Junior College and belonged to the Vets Club there. So the Vets Club of Canada College applied to the City of San Francisco for a spot in the parade and was approved. Now, weeks later, VVAW was standing in position

Bay Area May Day March, Vet's Contingent, 1977

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Reflections at the Moving Wall

John Zutz

I almost died at the Moving Wall when it was in Milwaukee recently. It wasn't my fault. Honest.

I had attended the opening ceremonies and waited till the crowd cleared out to pay my respects. One guy I wanted to say "Hi" to was a childhood friend, "Pappy." I had been surprised when I originally found his name at The Highground Veterans Memorial Park while cruising the list of over 1200 from Wisconsin who died in the war.

Pappy lived a block down the street. I smoked my first cigarette with him. Occasionally his older brother would let us ride in the back of his souped-up Hudson Hornet. We were parted during junior high, when my family moved.

The other guy I wanted to remember, "Flipper," was in my squad in Vietnam. During my tour he was the only enemy-caused casualty in my company. He died what I still think was a senseless death, as if any war-related death makes sense.

There were some nice ladies operating computers near The Moving Wall to help people find their loved ones. Although I knew how the wall worked, I was interested in whether the computers could enhance the experience, so I approached them. After I told them the names, they produced two sheets of computer paper. On the upper right of each sheet I found the panel numbers and line numbers to help find the names on The Wall.

I went to Pappy first because I had never found him on the wall before. After recalling our times together, I read the printout to discover he had been in-country a grand total of nineteen days before he was killed in a non-hostile accident. The printout told me his body had been recovered, and that he got a posthumous promotion (to PFC!).

I had found Flipper's name before, but, as I approached, my mind went over the same things I have thought about in the past. I recalled the times we worked side by side. I remembered the mission he died attempting to perform, hauling a load of cement blocks uphill through the pass from Nha Trang to Ban Me Thout, in a clapped-out five-ton dump truck that couldn't maintain speed on level ground.

As I touched Flipper's name I remembered the fist-sized hole blown by the RPG *[rocket propelled grenade]* through the dump bed directly behind the driver's seat. I remembered the buck sergeant, our squad leader, who had been sitting on the passenger side, and who came out without a visible scratch. I remembered the memorial service where the chaplain told us all how valiantly Flipper died.

I remembered all the good reasons it shouldn't have happened.

While moving away from The Wall I glanced at the printout detailing his death. Under "casualty information" was the date of death, body recovered, no posthumous promotion, casualty type: hostile, died of wounds.

But on the next line I read, "Cause: Misadventure."

The thought flashed through my mind that misadventure is like bad luck. I could ask for over 58,000 of those printouts, and each one of them could say, "Cause: Misadventure." He was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. It was just that his head tried to occupy the same space as some fast-moving shrapnel.

Almost as quickly I thought of other things that ought to be written in that "cause" space: Stupidity, Blind Adherence to Regulations, any number of other things.

And with the memories of what really happened fresh in my mind, contrasting with the insipid printout, I couldn't decide how to react to the situation. I started chuckling.

The few people remaining, fighting the mosquitoes, were quiet and somber. They started acting nervous, glancing at me out of the corners of their eyes. The more they glanced the funnier the situation seemed. I started laughing. They stared in open-mouthed disbelief.

I tried to explain what I was so seemingly jolly about. "Misadventure," I said loudly, pointing to the printout. Their angry glares convinced me they didn't find it a bit funny. I quickly retreated.

Annie Pine, Gold Star Mother, Agent Orange Demo, New York City, 1980s

Two of the volunteer "counselors" caught up to me to make sure I was OK. I assured them I had made my peace years ago.

Believe me, if looks could kill I would have died that night at The Moving Wall. Of course, if I had died, the coroner would have had to list the cause of death as "Misadventure." It wasn't my fault, honest.

John Zutz is a former VVAW regional coordinator. He lives in Milwaukee and makes great beer. He's a Vietnam veteran.

One Member's Journey Through The Past

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Mankato State Student Activities Office. Members of the VVAW national office attended and both John Kerry and Al Hubbard of the national office addressed the conference.

In 1975, I withdrew from my activities in VVAW in order to finish graduate school. Nixon was gone, the war was finally winding down, and with a family to care for, I had to move on. Of course this didn't mean that the VVAW values embedded in me were gone. I was just in hiatus, probably for longer than I will openly admit. Nor did this mean that I no longer had the unannounced visits from the FBI. VVAW was still considered a threat to J. Edgar and labeled a subversive organization, and of course I needed watching.

It is now over twenty-five years since I first became involved with VVAW. Do I still consider myself a member of VVAW? As we say in Minnesota: YOU BETCHA. I have considered myself a member since that fateful day in 1971. There are a still a number of VVAW members from our college years that get together to discuss the war and its impact on our lives, families, and the world.

The impact of Vietnam will be with all of us for the rest of our lives. We can take pride in the fact that VVAW played a large role in ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the same military madness still hovers over Washington, DC, almost as if we learned nothing from Vietnam.

What does VVAW mean to me in 1997? Simply put, it means a voice for veterans that are not enamored of war and military achievements. It means striving to redirect government resources so that the 30+ percent of homeless Vietnam veterans can find homes, jobs, and health care. It means a world without war for our children and grandchildren. It means peace, and unfortunately there is still plenty of work to do.

As Graham Nash so aptly wrote in 1988:

Men who were fighting for all of our lives
Are now fighting for children, for homes and for wives
Fighting for the memory of all who fell before
But the soldiers of peace just can't kill anymore

30 Years of Struggle

30 YEARS!

By Annie Hirschman

If we all recorded all we remember we'd be in DEEP kimchee big time. This beaucoup dinky-dao group is still crazy after thirty big ones.

I remember the first time I met VVAW in 1967, and it was Shelly who gently explained what they were doing on the line of march. I think I fell in love with vets then. Then there was Hubbard. It took work to realize that the huge load of anger he carried was not directed at any one person. More than anything I thank Al for showing me what we now call PTSD. I remember these two from the early days because they seemed such polar opposites and yet were so related.

Jim Duffy showed up at the Vietnam Peace Parade Committee one day and scared the wits out of Norma Becker and the mostly pacifist organizers. He was instrumental in waking us to reality and sparked even greater urgency (and confusion, and fights, and parties).

I remember our poets and bards: Jan, Bill (Ehrhart), Pete,...etc.

Then there was 26th Street. The New York office and the place I met Danny Friedman, Brian Matarese, Mark O' Connor and Pete Mahoney (and lots of others but they're not in this part of the story). George Bush was UN ambassador and the UN was to discuss the Vietnam situation. We decided that he should hear from vets. He refused. We were undeterred. I was included for three reasons: I was VVAW all the way, I'd worked at the UN in high school and I worked at a blood bank. The UN Association dinner was to be at a Bronx private school. We scouted the place and were already there when the guests arrived. There was a demo outside, but we were inside. "If you won't talk to us veterans, then the blood of Vietnam be on your head." Then the guys hit him with the "blood" and we bailed out of there. It was GREAT!

In the summer of 1972 we decided to go to Miami (for the convention demos). I got in a van with Pete Mahoney and we drove south. The stop at Gainesville might have been a mistake. Pete was arrested, the van disappeared (I was a New Yorker and didn't drive anyway), and I was in nowhere Florida knowing nobody. A HUGE vet named Sugar Bear offered me a ride to Miami. I didn't know that a large car could remain airborne that long.

South Beach was a working man's retirement enclave and very quiet so the Miami Beach authorities set the demonstrators' campground there. When we arrived we found the surrounding neighborhood practically boarded up. They'd been told to especially fear the "drug-crazed veterans." The Nazis arrived at mid-week. In a community that included many Holocaust survivors and that was already edgy this was a lit fuse. One of the Nazis hit a guy named Steve with a chair (Jack put in a stitch or two), Danny Friedman hit the Nazi, and we all surrounded the fifty or so idiots to prevent further bleeding. Each Nazi was carried out of the area by three or four veterans. All of a sudden the South Beach folks were not scared of us. They adopted the VVAW and opened their homes for showers, their kitchens for food and even sent chicken soup. One asked me if there was "something these boys want." I mentioned that they like beer (OK — there's no cure for stupidity).

Nazis beaten by VVAW after attacking African Liberation Day March, Washington DC, 1977

I met many people at the Miami action. Barry gave a particularly California twist to VVAW, along with Rusty, Tim Teater, Steve and many others.

I've already written about Wounded Knee and all the inside and outside vets I thank for that action.

Quirks abound in this group. Branson is a Conan fanatic. John Lindquist can fold up and fit in the back of a Toyota wagon, Annie Bailey once told a Cadillac owner to "buy brains" (she'd just hit the car with both fists for nearly hitting John), and the only place Davis fits in a Toyota is driving it. These incidents are from a national meeting in NJ also noted for Barry falling out of a lounge chair while asleep and Suki Walktendonk oozing up my stairs and rendering my husband temporarily speechless.

I've left out some good stuff, some probably illegal stuff and a lot of embarrassing stuff. Here's to many more memories.

This year has been a hard one as we've lost Jack McCloskey and Shelly Ramsdell. I've been glad that we "honor the dead and fight like hell for the living" but I'm pissed that there is no e-mail where they are now. If you can sense this guys — this memory is for you.

Annie Hirschman is in the Clarence Fitch Chapter of VVAW. She works as a nurse and lives in New Jersey. She's a long time civil rights activist and served as a nurse at Wounded Knee.

VVAW Detroit VA Patient Walkout for Better Treatment, 1975

for Peace & Justice

Why?

Ben Chitty

People sometimes ask me why I'm still in Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Other veterans ask me. My kids ask me. My wife asks me (a lot). Co-workers, fellow union members, neighbors, the guys at the corner store, sometimes even a politician or two — all wonder why I'm still fighting a war that ended more than half my life and so many years ago. Here's what I tell them.

There are three things people say about our war in Vietnam that are not true. Sometimes the people saying them are just confused. Sometimes they want us to believe things about themselves or about ourselves which are not true. And sometimes they want us to think and do things which will help them, and usually hurt us.

One thing people will tell us about Vietnam is that we could have won the war. People who say this don't really understand the war we were fighting. Sure, there are lots of wars in Vietnam we could have won. We could have nuked Hanoi, killed everything that moved, paved the boondocks with asphalt, called it a parking lot, declared victory, and gone home. We could have won that war. But that's not the war we were fighting.

We went to war to fight for the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. Specifically, we went to Vietnam to persuade the Vietnamese to support the brutal and corrupt puppet regime we had installed in Saigon. In the end, the only way we could persuade the Vietnamese people was to kill them. Way more than half the people we killed in Vietnam were non-combatants — men, women and children.

The problem with murder as a technique of persuasion is that victims have survivors. Every Vietnamese we killed had family, friends, neighbors — all of them curious to know why their son, daughter, mother, father, sister, brother, cousin, friend, neighbor had to die. Every time we killed a Vietnamese, we made two, three, many communist sympathizers. Every advance in our occupation, every increment in our body count, made our position worse. The better we fought, the more we lost.

That was not a war we could win. Anyone who tells us we could have won that war doesn't understand the war we were fighting.

A second thing people tell us about our war is that it was just some kind of mistake, an aberration in American history, an experience from which we can draw political and military lessons which will help us win the next war: keep the dying away from the television cameras, keep the casualties light (and long delayed), keep the country united in support of the troops.

Sure there were mistakes, and lots of them. There were mistakes of ignorance. The U.S. government didn't understand the role of nationalism in the Vietnamese communist movement. The Pentagon didn't understand guerrilla tactics in a people's war. Americans didn't understand Vietnamese history and culture. There were mistakes of greed and ambition. Defense contractors profiteered on cut-rate munitions — Agent Orange and the early versions of the M-16 are just some notorious examples. Officers went to war to get promoted. There were mistakes of rage — My Lai comes too quickly to mind. There were mistakes of cowardice. Presidents and politicians refused to risk their careers by admitting error.

But the U.S. war in Vietnam was not itself some kind of mistake. It was pretty much the same kind of war the United States has always fought. In almost every war in our history, we have gone to some other place to fight with the people who live there over who gets to run that place.

The oldest war in our history began even before we were a nation: we fought a long series of wars with the native Americans over the land, and we won, confined the survivors to reservations, and took the land. We fought a war with Mexicans over part of Mexico, and now we call it Texas. We fought a war first with the Spanish and then with the Filipinos over the Philippines, and the Philippines became an American colony for more than four decades. We fought wars all over the Caribbean and Latin America over who ran those countries.

So our war in Vietnam was no mistake: it was the kind of war we usually fight, for the same reason we usually fight wars. Sometimes we call this manifest destiny, sometimes benevolent intervention, sometimes crusading for democracy. The real name is empire: we fought an imperial war in Vietnam, and it was an all-American kind of war.

A third thing people tell us about our war in Vietnam is that it's over (so forget about it, already). Let's put it behind us, get on with our lives, get back to business. But our war's not over just about anywhere we care to look.

The actual shooting itself is still going on — the last of the Khmer Rouge still fight in Cambodia. The dying over there is still going on. The ordnance we left behind — mines, shells, bombs, dioxin — still maims and kills people, sometimes people who were not even born when we left.

The war's not over here for us, the veterans. Too many of us are still dying from Agent Orange, without compensation for our survivors. Too many of us are in prison, locked away by a society that couldn't understand what happened to us, and really didn't want to know. Too many of us are homeless on the streets. The war's not over for us, and maybe never will be.

But the main and most important way our war's not over is this: our country is still the kind of country that enlists its young people to go to other countries and fight the people who live there over what kind of government they can have and who gets to run it. Since our war in Vietnam, the U.S. has sent arms or troops to Afghanistan, Grenada, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti, and now Bosnia. The empire lives, and under siege. And still devours our children.

So, why do people say these things about our war that aren't true? There are different reasons for different folks.

Some veterans can't believe they risked and suffered so much

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1972 Republican Convention: (l-r) Bill Weyman, Ron Kovic, Bobby Muller in wheelchairs; Al Hubbard, standing

Black Political Prisoner:

Nam Vet Deserves Freedom

Ben Chitty

Some stories show with such clarity how deeply our society buries its wrongs that you have to wonder if the people responsible are as crazy as they are evil.

Consider the case of Elmer Pratt, serving a life sentence for the December 1968 murder of 27-year-old schoolteacher Caroline Olsen during an $18 robbery on a tennis court in Santa Monica, California. Arrested by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1970, Pratt was convicted in 1972 on an identification by an eyewitness (the victim's husband, wounded in the attack), and on the testimony of a man to whom Pratt had admitted the crime.

What's wrong with this picture?

The victim's husband first described a much larger man, then identified someone other than Pratt as the assailant, then identified still another suspect, and then still one more, before finally identifying Pratt at the trial. The witness who related Pratt's admission was a police informant. A second police informant (not yet identified) was on Pratt's defense team. And, on the day of the murder, Pratt attended a meeting in Oakland, California, over 300 miles away — which was under FBI surveillance.

But 26 years after his arrest, Elmer Pratt remains in prison. Tracing how this happened illuminates some of the hidden history of the Vietnam experience and its toxic legacy.

Elmer Pratt was born and raised in Louisiana, joined the Army, and served two years in Vietnam, receiving two Purple Hearts, cited twice for bravery. After his discharge in 1968, he enrolled at the University of California at Los Angeles. He also became active in the Black Panther Party, eventually becoming head of the LA chapter. One of his comrades was an older man named Julius Butler, an ex-deputy sheriff and chief of Panther security for southern California. Butler was a tough guy — a retired LAPD captain recalled that when the Panthers confronted the police, Butler always stood out from the rest in the obscenity of his language.

Pratt grew to distrust Butler, and in August 1969, confronted, threatened, and expelled him from the Party. Too late: Butler had already become a police informant, perhaps even a provocateur, because (he told the FBI) he disagreed with the direction the Panthers had taken. Worse for Pratt, Butler took the precaution of depositing a sealed letter with one of his police controls, in which he claimed he had heard Pratt admit the Santa Monica murder. After a 1970 FBI Cointelpro review of the LA Panther situation, the letter was turned over to the LA District Attorney's office. At the trial, Butler denied he had any relationship with the police or the FBI.

Pratt had an alibi — on the day of the murder he had attended a Panther meeting in Oakland. Pratt had already survived one Cointelpro action, a police assault on the LA Panther headquarters which he escaped because he had been sleeping on the floor to relieve the pain of a spinal injury from Vietnam. But now his luck ran out. Cointelpro had succeeded in provoking a split in the Party between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. Pratt had gone with the Cleaver faction, and by the time of his arrest had himself been expelled from the Party. Most of the other Panthers stayed with Newton's faction, and refused to corroborate Pratt's alibi — only Kathleen Cleaver testified on his behalf at the trial in 1972. (Unknown to Pratt, the FBI maintained wiretap surveillance of the Oakland meeting, and logged Pratt's presence before and after the murder. These logs — described by retired FBI agent Wesley Swearingen in depositions and publications — can no longer be located by the Bureau.)

Pratt continued to maintain his innocence through four appeals and more than a dozen parole hearings. Olsen's identification was discredited in 1972. Butler's relationship with the police was disclosed in 1979. The FBI surveillance was described in 1985. Other ex-Panthers confirmed Pratt's alibi in 1992. The courts held that all these were "harmless errors" (despite affidavits to the contrary from three of the original jurors), not the new evidence that might force a new trial.

California prison officials also tried to close the case. Pratt's prison records were altered to show he plotted to kill prison guards with poison darts, kidnap their children, and twice to escape. None of it was true — Pratt's good behavior had earned him family visits and outside work privileges — but the false reports earned him high-risk status and trigger-happy guards.

From December 16 through January 10, Pratt's latest appeal was heard before Judge Everett Dickey in the Orange County Superior Court. Testimony focussed on the role of Julius Butler, and uncovered a history of his cooperation with the LAPD, the LA District Attorney, and the FBI (including his "confidential informant" cards in an LAPD file) which surprised even Pratt's lawyers. Commenting on the contradictions between Butler's testimony and other evidence, Judge Dickey said "It's always unfortunate when the Court has to reach the conclusion that somebody is deliberately lying on the witness stand." Butler himself at one point had to acknowledge on the stand that he could understand why people might think he had been a police informant (though he continues to deny being a "snitch").

Written arguments have been submitted, oral arguments follow at the end of February, and a decision can expected by late March or April.

News coverage of the appeal has provided glimpses of some of the participants twenty-five years after the 1972 conviction. Caroline Olsen's husband is dead, as are Larry Hotter and Herbert Swilly, the two friends of Julius Butler who may have committed the murder. Butler himself — after arranging with the DA to reduce some felony convictions to misdemeanors — became a lawyer, and now serves as chairman of the board at Los Angeles First African Methodist Episcopal Church. Richard Kalustian, the district attorney who directed the original charade, is now a Superior Court judge in Los Angeles County. Johnnie Cochran remains Pratt's lead lawyer.

Jeane Hamilton, one of the original jurors, is now a schoolteacher. She attended every day of the Orange County hearing. In her opinion, "We were victims. We were pawns of the government. We were set up. It's so difficult to put into words. It's such an injustice."

Pretty good words. But the last word belongs to Elmer Pratt, now known as Geronimo ji-Jaga. In a letter to long-time friend Mohammed Mubarak the day after the new hearing started, he wrote: "My interest was, is always not merely to clear my name, but more importantly to clear our movement of such vile obliquity."

Nice word, obliquity. It means "divergence from moral conduct, moral delinquency, mental perversity."

And describes exactly what keeps Geronimo Pratt behind bars.

For more information, contact Geronimo Pratt Defense, P.O. Box 781328, Los Angeles, California 90016 (213-294-8320).

Ben Chitty is the East Coast Coordinator of VVAW and a member of the Clarence Fitch Chapter. He lives in New York and works in the University library at the . He served in the U.S. Navy 1965-9, Vietnam 1966-7, 1968.

While I Was Sleeping

Jim Creaven

I awoke this morning in the Nam. Looking around it became quickly obvious that I had overslept, badly. Much had changed. We had gotten older, very noticeably so, and fatter. There was a lesser amount of hair, much pickier as to its choice of location, coloration, and distribution. The uniforms were strange, too, camouflaged, not that worn and faded green as they had been last night. Everyone seemed to have received a lot of medals, too; it appears like I picked a fortuitous time to have dozed off. There were E-5s there with more ribbons than I remember seeing in all of John Wayne's movies combined. More than Westmoreland had the last time I looked, must have been hell. Glad I missed it.

Who the hell are these guys? Where are my friends? What happened to the guys who helped me carry and listen to all those Rolling Stones, Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane tapes? The ones who wore peace symbols, montagnard bands, and round shades, and partied half the night? Who talked of nothing else but getting back to the world, out of uniforms, out of the Army, in one piece if possible, or with at least the most important piece intact? So, who the hell are these guys? The lifers are easy enough to spot: black shoes, white socks, starched jeans pressed so many times by the base laundry that they have a white stripe on that razor crease. Starched and pressed jungle shirts with so many patches, medals, flags and buttons that the shirts must be almost bulletproof. But who are the rest? The ones massed around the beer tent at such an early hour, where the rain that was falling and mixing with copious amounts of spilled beer produced a quagmire much like the war itself, sloppy and hard to extricate oneself from. The ones lined up in front of the tattoo and mystery meat tents? These overweight, out of shape, middle-aged guys buying jungle boots for fifty bucks, pins and ribbons by the handful, unit T-shirts, and clocks with pictures of tanks and planes and napalm exploding over a green canopy of trees? Did I miss something? Is this the right war?

Then it hit me. I hadn't slept at all — I was in the middle of a Vietnam vet reunion and revisionism was rearing its ugly head, eyes dimmed with the passing years, making heroes of us all. It made no difference to the beast where, when or what you had done, you were now a hero. There were no cooks here. No truck drivers, mail clerks or generals' chauffeurs. We are heroes, each and every one. No sir, no clerks here, just recon, LURPS, special forces and rangers. You probably deserved that Silver Star more than most who received them 25 years ago, well step right up and for just a few bucks slap one on. What, you were an REMF? No problem. Not your fault that the brass didn't have enough brains to recognize the second coming of Audie Murphy; you would have won those medals if you had been given a chance, you know you would. Right the wrongs.

So how the hell did those puny peasants ever win? Look around, there had to have been a terrible mistake. Check those refs' cards again, would ya? I mean, just look at us. All these medals, all these patches, who could have borne us? Look over there at those bumper stickers that say: "We were winning when I left," those shirts proclaiming every unit as the "baddest of the bad." Check those cards, check the math, we had to have kicked ass. There has to be a reason. We had the planes, choppers, ships, and of course, God. He's always been on our side, right? So there has to be a reason. Ah! Now I see. The answer is becoming painfully clear. It was that bitch. Yeah, you know the one. Hanoi Jane. Jane Fonda. That seems to be the consensus, judging by the patches anyway. She went over there with that starlet's body, flashed that face, that smile, showed those legs on top of that tank, exposed those little guys to a real American woman, and fired up those bloody little bastards. Then all hell broke loose. They knew what they were fighting for now! Barbarella! We never had a chance after that, doomed, done in by the oldest trick in the book: a traitorous woman. Check it out with Samson. Oh sure, they had that experience thing, fighting the French, then the Japanese, then the French again. Sure, it was their country, they had no place else to go and all that, but we were winning. It was her fault. Had to be. There's no other reasonable explanation. She must sell those exercise tapes over there, for sure nobody here buys. I can just picture it: working those rice fields all day, coming home to the thatched hut, popping a tape in the VCR, and getting the burn as those calories literally melt away. Jane-san, number one. Cellulite, number ten.

Sitting around that night, next to the travel trailers at the picnic table, with the colored lights in their white globes dangling overhead, beer and Jack Daniel's everywhere, grills smoking, war stories flying by, I finally understood the answer to a question that had lurked in the back of my mind for these last 25 years. Why, if war is hell, do we keep doing it? Why do men keep going? Not even women want the chance to participate in mankind's strangest way of reaching out to touch someone. I mean, I was there, I did it, enjoyed the full Army experience, a grunt, point man, sixty days in the field at a time, cookouts each night hiking all day, communing with nature. Offer me the chance to do it again, with pay adjusted for inflation of course, and I would have to say, with all due respect, "Sir! No thank you, Sir! Freak off, Sir!" So why are fathers letting sons and now daughters go? Why are they not telling them the truth? Why isn't every one of us spreading the word: war sucks! Don't go! Let them come here for a change. Why are we always the visiting team? The answer is that we can't afford to be honest. For many, that one year, that one tour (or, for those a tad slower on the uptake, two or three) was the high point of their life. Nothing will ever again offer that same rush, the same feelings of sheer excitement and adventure, and the basis for telling some great stories, that like waistlines never seem to shrink, but inevitably expand with time. We can't afford to tell the truth: that war is simply nothing more than organized, legalized murder. Who would want to hear our tales of glory? Who would go? If you told them about the mud, the leeches, the c-rats, living like an animal in the jungle, who would go? If we told of friendly fire, booby traps, mosquitoes so big they need numbers on their wings, officers trying to rack up points for promotions regardless of the cost in human lives, who would go? If we told about walking like a duck in a shooting gallery, taking fire, losing a best friend, firing back at bushes and trees, and getting to do it again the next day, or even later the same day, who would go?

No, we must keep the secret. That's tradition. Don't tell, let them find out for themselves, just like we did. Don't tell them that war is really getting to go to some far-off land, getting to meet some different unusual people, and getting to kill them. That's tradition!

Why?

continued from page 11

for something so wrong. The families of some of the casualties of our war can't believe their sacrifices were so meaningless. These delusions are not exactly harmless, but they are not malicious either.

But some of the people who lie to us about our war are not so innocent.

Some of them always supported the war, always made sure our government could not recognize its folly and disengage. Some of them actually fought in the war, but most were chickenhawks — too busy or too important to share the killing and dying they sent us to do for them. As long as we believe their lies about our war, we cannot recognize their crimes — against us, against our country, and against the Vietnamese people. Of course, one by one they die off — unindicted, unconvicted, unpunished. For the most part (and just barely), at least we will outlive them.

But some of them are our own age, some even younger, a new generation. Their lies are the worst of all. No only do they deny us our experience, they want us and our children to believe some other things which are not true. What's best for them is good for the rest of us. We live in the best of times and places in human history so far — discrimination is dead, poverty self-inflicted, incarceration better than education, and the environment will heal itself. Our government represents us.

And if you believe that, I can show you a bridge here in New York City...

We Watched Them Die

DURANGO DAVE

"It's got to stop," the President said,
Who had to get himself reelect-ed.
The North Vietnamese were communist-led;
He couldn't be seen as soft on the Red.
The Industrial Complex must be fed...
and we watched them die on TV.

"It's got to stop," the Young Soldier said
In a nameless battle that was part of Tet.
Amidst a pall of death and blood and lead,
he held what remained of his best friend's head.
Reporters were there, earning their daily bread
and we watched them die on TV.

"It's got to stop," the Protesters said.
"Far, far too many are already dead."
A generation tired of being bled.
They sang and marched and much to my dread,
the Guard opened fire, and the students fled,
and we watched them die on TV.

"It's got to stop," the Politicians said.
"We need to reduce the de-fi-cit,
Cut Veterans' Benefits; goodbye hospital bed!"
They didn't go, they stayed home instead,
and somehow don't feel that they owe a debt
to those we watched die on TV.

"America is like a melting pot. The people at the bottom
get burned, and the scum floats to the top." — Charlie King

"DAVID C. NEIL, DURANGO, COLORADO. BORN IN 1961, I TALKED TO RECRUITERS FROM THE AIR FORCE AND NAVY (WANTED TO FLY) PRIOR TO GRADUATION FROM HIGH SCHOOL IN 1979, AND WAS TOLD THAT I WAS UNABLE TO SERVE DUE TO MY ASTHMA. I'M FINDING THERE ARE OTHER WAYS TO SERVE..."

Shelly's Song

For Sheldon Ramsdell
August 31, 1935 - March 25, 1996

JAN BARRY

Dead in San Francisco, the obits noted
he was an activist: Vietnam Veterans Against
the War, Gene McCarthy, AIDS. What friends recall
is the artist, whose best work was his life.

From blustery Maine he joined the Navy,
cruising the South China Sea on a carrier,
flying photo missions over Indochina
while kids back home necked to rock 'n' roll.

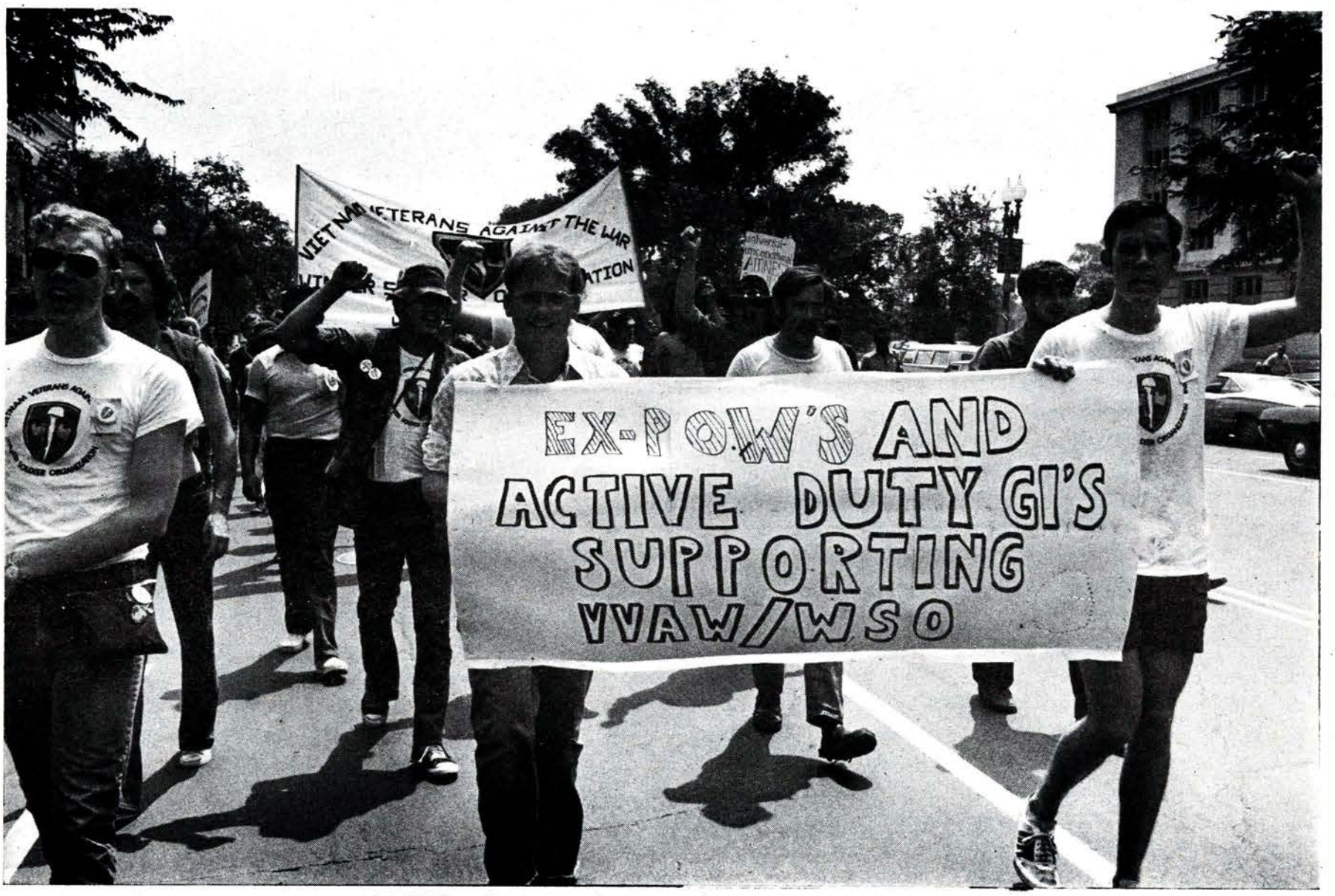
Surviving a crashing fighter that exploded
across the flight deck, he mustered out
and aimed his photographer's eye on New York,
artfully shooting celebrities.

With a Manhattan pad and a Broadway clientele,
life was lush — except for the growing, gnawing war.
When a peace parade thronged down Fifth Avenue,
he joined a motley crew of dissident vets.

As America split, he felt this is where he fit.
He'd shot Vietnam before war flared into living rooms.
His aerial photos helped planners plot bomb targets.
He enlisted in the end-the-war campaign.

He brought his camera, his wacky sense of comic
relief, and his secret of being gay.
He kissed off Broadway, his photos in national
magazines. He'd heard another call.

JAN BARRY WAS A FOUNDING MEMBER OF VVAW AND A FORMER NATIONAL OFFICER. HE LIVES IN NEW JERSEY AND IS A POET, WRITER AND EDITOR. HE'S AN ARMY VIETNAM VETERAN



Ex-POWs and Active Duty GIs Supporting VVAW, Washington, DC, 1974

Requiem for a Vietnamese Sampan Girl

JACKSON H. DAY

Decades have passed
since your unspeakable death
at the hands of the Americans.

*

But I only just heard.
My heart is pierced
as if it were yesterday.

I feel such anger.
I rage at all who do not know,
who have not heard,
who do not share
the burden of your pain,
the burden of our shame.

*

Driving down the highway,
I am surrounded by wildflowers:
Pink and violet wildflowers
Dancing in the sun.

I feel your presence among the wildflowers.
My eyes fill with tears.
I drive down the highway,
sobbing among the wildflowers,
seeing rainbows in the bright sunlight.

*

Our Lady of the wildflowers:
Have mercy upon us who share a terrible humanity;
Grant us the peace that dances in the sun.

"Some background may be appropriate: At the annual meeting of the National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers in October, we heard a presentation on PTSD which included the concept of "Secondary Trauma." That is, if you have been through a terrible experience and been traumatized by it, and now you tell me about it, I too am now traumatized by it. Surely not as much as you, but traumatized, nevertheless. That's important knowledge for people in the helping professions, who have to learn to handle what they hear and not be damaged by it, or their ability to help may go away.

"With this in the background, a fellow veteran minister shared with me the account of an atrocity which had recently been shared with him by a veteran who had been involved in it. He was upset and needed someone to share with. After hearing the account, I needed to deal with the account somehow. Seeing some wildflowers along the highway the next day, I absolutely went to pieces. My own way of exposing trauma to the healing resources it needs is poetry."

-- Jackson Day

11/11/84

STEVEN HASSNA

Their faces were a little clearer on this wretched
day.
They're always there, but today they
seemed to take on a clearer ghost image.
Whose image? you say.
Why, all those people I killed,
that's who.
How many? you think.
Hundreds, my reply, and not all Vietnamese.
Their images are still there.
They were soldiers fighting for their homes,
and they could also fight back and
die with honor.
If there is such a thing in war.
It's the Americans I killed that
haunt me on this wretched day.
They do not condemn me,
No pointing with outstretched, bony,
death, index finger.
Their faces just drift past my eyes
that I cannot close.
Army drill sergeant, '68, '69.
I fought the Vietnamese in '67.
I killed Americans in '68 and '69.
No, I didn't fire the shots that took their lives,
Or plant the booby traps
that rendered them dismembered,
Or detonate the unexploded bombs
dropped by our own planes.
But I didn't tell them to go home, either,
When they stood before me
in ranks of ten, four deep,
The young, the confused, the lied-to.
And they stood there over and over
and over, far too many times.
I trained 1200 young men to die.
My medic friends say "It's all right, Steve,
time to move on."
But then, they just tried to save lives,
And many they did.
My truck-driver friend says, "Steve,
it's okay. No use looking back."
But then, he just hauled bombs to
the waiting planes.
And their faces are still in my eyes,
Ranks of ten, hundreds deep.
I will join them someday,
I don't know when.
And what can I say?
I was only following orders?
I thought I could help keep you alive?
Maybe I will be blind when I'm
finally among them,
And they will let me rest with them,
And comfort my sorrow.
And never again will I ever see
their faces on this cursed, wretched day,
November 11th, any year,
Veterans' day.

STEVE HASSNA IS THE WEST COAST COORDINATOR OF VVAW. HE LIVES IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA AND IS A POET AND AUTHOR. HE SERVED IN THE 101ST AIRBORNE IN VIETNAM AND WAS A DRILL INSTRUCTOR.

LETTERS TO VVAW

Mr. Miller,

I am Thomas B. Chapman II and forty-seven years old. I just stumbled onto your VVAW home page. I read some of your info and I see that you folks help with bad discharges. I'm not sure if you are the man that I need to talk with...or even if I have missed the boat. But as I sit here and peck at this keyboard I feel overwhelmed ...overwhelmed by the flooding in of my 27 years of carrying this burden (which I shall tell you more about later)...overwhelmed with a somewhat strange, maybe hopeful feeling of finally stepping out to resolve my internal war that has raged both consciously and subconsciously ever since I chose to leave the military service after one year and three days of stateside service. Joe, however it goes, I am thankful for this opportunity to speak my heart to a caring "ear."

I was drafted in mid summer 1968. You know, Joe, as I sit here trying to get this all out, I find it difficult to remember specific dates so I may be off a little in that area. I was a nineteen year old boy who had been on the honor roll most of my school years, active in 4-H and sports, and worked a part time job at fourteen years of age and full time while attending school at fifteen years old — paying much of my own way and helping a little in the support of our family.

I did basic training in Fort Polk, Louisiana and hated it...people demanding respect and giving none in return. They said that it would get better when I got to AIT; I went through medical training in Fort Sam Houston, Texas...saw the same nonsense going on there (now let me tell you — I was somewhat of a rebellious kid and didn't like military treatment). I was permanent duty at Ft. Carson, Colorado. I would screen sick call in the morning and clean the dispensary and find sometimes hours awaiting the end of the duty day. I, along with another medic, was ordered to sham in the back of an aid vehicle in the motor pool so that the "brass" wouldn't see us and come down on the sergeant who ordered us into the ambulances to kill time. This stunk! Here I was with a mother and father in Chicago in bad health and I needed to be there with them instead of here playing games.

I applied for a compassionate reassignment and when the paperwork was returned to the company clerk he said that I had grounds for a hardship discharge. I took a leave of absence to go home and I never returned. I called my company commander when my leave was over and told him that I wasn't going back to the army.

I assumed another name and SS# and stayed away for several years until I grew tired of looking over my shoulder, went back to my real name and SS# and awaited the Feds. The FBI picked me up in 1976 and took me to Fort. Knox, Kentucky, where I waited in the stockade for my discharge. The Red Cross contacted the military and informed them that my little brother had overdosed on drugs and that it looked like he would die. The army let me go home to see my brother (the only compassionate thing that I saw them do in my one year and three days with them and I do appreciate them doing that!). My brother, thanks to God, did live.

How many lives would I have taken? Would my life have been taken?

The army had me to return to Fort Knox to pick up my "undesirable discharge" papers. I first realized what undesirable discharge meant when I applied as a medic at the hometown fire department. The captain liked my qualifications and attitude. He told me that the city would be giving tests in a few months and that in the meantime I could work as a volunteer. We shook hands and I turned to leave, stopped, turned and walked back to the gentleman. I told him that I should let him know that I have a "U D." He said, as he tore up my paperwork and tossed it into the trash can, "The city frowns on that." I was very discouraged.

The war within me...Mr. Miller, I got off track here but I really needed to pour this out. I thank you for "listening." At one point while in Fort Carson, I was assigned to work at the hospital. If I remember right, Carson was the largest or one of the largest posts for returnees from Vietnam. I enjoyed serving the men there. Many of them had not been on solid foods for a long time. I worked the night shift and as I made my rounds I found that some men were ready for solid foods and often it would be days (if memory serves me well) before a doctor would sign orders to change diet. Well, I knew an ol' boy in the kitchen and he would give me a big bowl of fruit that I hid in the bottom of my "rounds" cart. I would check the men's charts to see who was able to take solids and I would let them choose what fruit they wanted. Joe, money can't buy the feeling one gets just watching the appreciation on their faces for a simple piece of fruit. It gave me a feeling of self worth.

Well, at some point of time around the compassionate reassignment/hardship discharge period, another medic and I got orders for Nam. There was an error made — they had us down as ground pounders instead of medics and that voided those orders. I was told that the error would be corrected and that we would still go when new orders were issued. Joe, I was terrified. I reasoned that if I went and was killed that my parents would just die. I was told by the returnees that I served in the hospital (all the men except one who wanted to go back and kill, kill, kill) that if they had it to do over again they would not go — no matter what the cost. They hated the killing of innocent people...men, women and children. I was really torn, Joe.

I was a good medic; I could save lives if I went to war. But I knew in my heart that if I was faced with a kill-or-be-killed situation, I would kill: whether it was myself I was defending or the lives of the men that I would be there to patch up and protect. I have lived with this struggle over half my life...thinking myself to be a stinking coward. Unless God changes something, I shall go to my grave feeling like a coward.

Joe, I had a girlfriend to whom I returned when I left the military. She lived on the top floor of a high-rise apartment. I took her home after a date one night (not long after quitting the army). I kissed her goodnight at the door of her apartment, turned and walked towards the elevator as she entered her apartment. Suddenly I heard gunshots (at that time I wasn't carrying a gun or any other weapon). I immediately turned and ran towards the apartment, thinking: what am I going to do against a gun? The answer was that I didn't know but I had to rescue her. As I broke through the door the lights came on and I saw her sliding down the wall to the floor with a trail of blood on the wall. I grabbed her, eased her onto the floor and called the emergency squad (or whatever they were called back then). Her brother had shot her in the dark, thinking that she was a burglar. Thankfully, she turned out fine. I realize, Joe, that I would have gladly laid down my life to save hers.

I reason that I am not a coward based upon my reactions to that situation. However, Joe, somehow that does not resolve my internal war of whether I made the right choice as a twenty year old boy and how many lives I could have saved (even one life) to return home to his/their family? How many lives would I have taken? Would my life have been taken? Would I have returned as a basket case like several guys that I know who were there? Am I just a STINKING COWARD and trying to make excuses? If you don't like to see a grown man cry then you had better turn your head 'cause this is tearing me up!!!! How many men (boys) died, Joe, because I wasn't there to defend them...to watch their backs...to patch them up...HOW MANY, JOE? HOW MANY DIED ,JOE, BECAUSE I WASN'T THERE — HOW MANY?

Well, Joe, that felt good. I just took a few minutes to just bawl. I found a quarter of a century of pain flowing out like the explosion of a dam. I have never been able to get it out as I just did...grieving...sobbing...cleansing. You know, Joe, I was just thinking that if I feel this way...how many others are in the same boat that I'm in? How many others need the healing that just began in me? How many others are so very much worse than I am? How can I help them, Joe? Joe, how can I help in what you good people are doing? I sure do thank you (until you are better paid) for being there for me. Please let me know what I can do to help.

Thank you, Joe, for allowing me to bend your ear.

LETTERS TO VVAW

Out of the Canadian Blue

Dear Dr. Miller and VVAW:

Greetings out of the blue from a 53 year old stranger living in Toronto. I learned of you today by something which I encountered on the Internet. It is an electronic reproduction of the column you wrote for the **Daily Illini** back in August 1994. Your title for the piece has gone missing but the topic concerns the importance of the "Gulf of Tonkin Incidents" in your life, and their overlooked importance in American history.

Basically, thank you. Thank you for shoving the nose of American history into the yellow puddle of Tonkin and swatting it noisily but gently with a rolled up newspaper. I'd like to share a few things, if you don't mind: firstly, my own circumstances and decision.

The years of my life, 1961-1967, were spent as an undergrad up at Elmhurst College and grad at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. A dear friend of mine from Palatine, Illinois was killed during the Christmas 1965 "bombing halt-peace offensive." He was a Warrant Officer helicopter pilot. His death was a shock to me. I credit returned vets at NIU in 1966-7 for having the courage to denounce the war and bring my attention to the antiwar literature. I also followed closely the pathetic court-martial of Lt. Howard Levy, M.D. I knew I could not take Vietnamese life for this terrible political mistake but hoped against hope I would not have to face a "decision." My order to report for induction came in the wake of Tet and the awful assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I felt my country then was the equivalent of "rabid" — it had gone berserk — and I was not about to let it put me in jail for opposition to its mistaken politics, as it did Dr. Howard Levy. On 12 May 1968, I entered Canada, and there at the bridge I applied for landed immigrant status. I had a job offer in clinical psychology at a 550-bed rehabilitation center and I began treating victims of severe psychological and emotional trauma. So have I spent much of my life.

While my actions infuriated several of my family members, one who supported me ethically was Arthur Bounds Chilton. He was a graduate of Annapolis circa WWII and became a nuclear engineer during his naval career. After retiring he taught at the University of Illinois, and if I understand correctly, he founded the journal **Ploughshares** at your institution. Do you know of him?

Returning to the Tonkin Resolution, you note that two congressmen did not support the resolution in the Senate. Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon was a flamboyant character of whom you may know something. But you may never have had occasion to learn anything about the other person who voted no, senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska. I have done so, and believe me, it is worth the time! In your library should be a copy of Many Battles, which is the memoirs of Dr. Gruening. He was a spectacular person with a spectacular mind and I find it sad that his interesting life is so soon forgotten.

I have an unusual point of view about American political science and a related unusual point of view about the root causes of the Vietnam War, but I do not wish to impose those upon you in an introductory letter. Thanks again for allowing your 1994 article onto the Internet.

Cordially,

Edward M. Chilton
Rehabilitation Consultant

San Francisco Vets Day Parade 1972

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in front of the street sweepers getting ready to move out. Who says a little creative thinking doesn't go a long way.

The parade went up O'Farrell to Polk, turned left down about three blocks to City Hall, the civic center, and the reviewing stand filled with city VIPs and military brass. When we turned on to O'Farrell at the end of the column, we opened our banner and people started to shout their approval. Jack McClosky was on one side of the banner and another vet on the other side led us out. It felt just great, total irony to the max. Here we were, an antiwar group getting support from the crowds on the sidewalk.

At the corner of O'Farrell and Polk where we would make the left is the Mitchell Brothers Theater, one of San Francisco's X-rated movie houses. The marquee is on both streets. There is also a huge mural of the earth on the Polk side, whales, fish, birds, rain forest, etc. — quite impressive. It was the marquee that got everyone's attention today though. In bold letters it read, "Mitchell Brothers Theater salutes Vietnam Veterans Against the War." So, even though we were last, every other group had to read that sign as they passed. The cheers went up as we made the turn and headed down Polk to City Hall. About a block from the reviewing stand, we got our escort in the form of two lines of mounted San Francisco police. One on each side of the street. Just like the one I saw in Golden Gate Park when I met VVAW for the first time. But that's another story.

Down Polk we went, street sweepers pulling drag. As we approached the reviewing stand, the VIP and brass stood out of respect even though they probably didn't want to. The only thing we didn't have was a color guard. It had been discussed but nobody wanted to carry the Stars and Bars, so it was left out. Too bad, for what happened next would have been one of the best pictures even taken.

We stopped in front of the reviewing stand, the VIPs and brass still standing. On command, every one of us came to a smart position of attention, did a very crisp left face, and, facing the crowd, with our backs to the brass, on command two hundred clenched fists were in the air. The media and onlookers went nuts. Shouts of "right on" and "stop the war" were heard all through the crowd. The brass sat down and looked at the floor. What a picture that would have been if we'd had a color guard. Then the brass would have had to stand and salute sixty feet from the flag's approach, the whole time it was in front and sixty feet as it left. Oh well, it was still a great picture.

On command, the fists came down, we did another crisp right face and moved out. Clear of the reviewing stand, we broke ranks and walked from the area, off to other parts of the city to party and debrief another well-executed operation by a bunch of crazed Nam vets.

Well, troops, that's it. A piece of our history for the archives. I would like to say how proud I was to be part of all that and also to be a member of the VVAW since 1972. I remain yours in struggle.

STEVE HASSNA IS THE WEST COAST COORDINATOR OF VVAW. HE LIVES IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA AND IS A POET AND AUTHOR. HE SERVED IN THE 101ST AIRBORNE IN VIETNAM AND WAS A DRILL INSTRUCTOR.

30 YEARS
ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

VIETNAM VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR

Founded in 1967, VVAW Pioneered
Post Traumatic Stress Rap Groups and
Work on Agent Orange
From the 60's to the 90's
30 Years of Struggle for Veterans, Peace and Justice

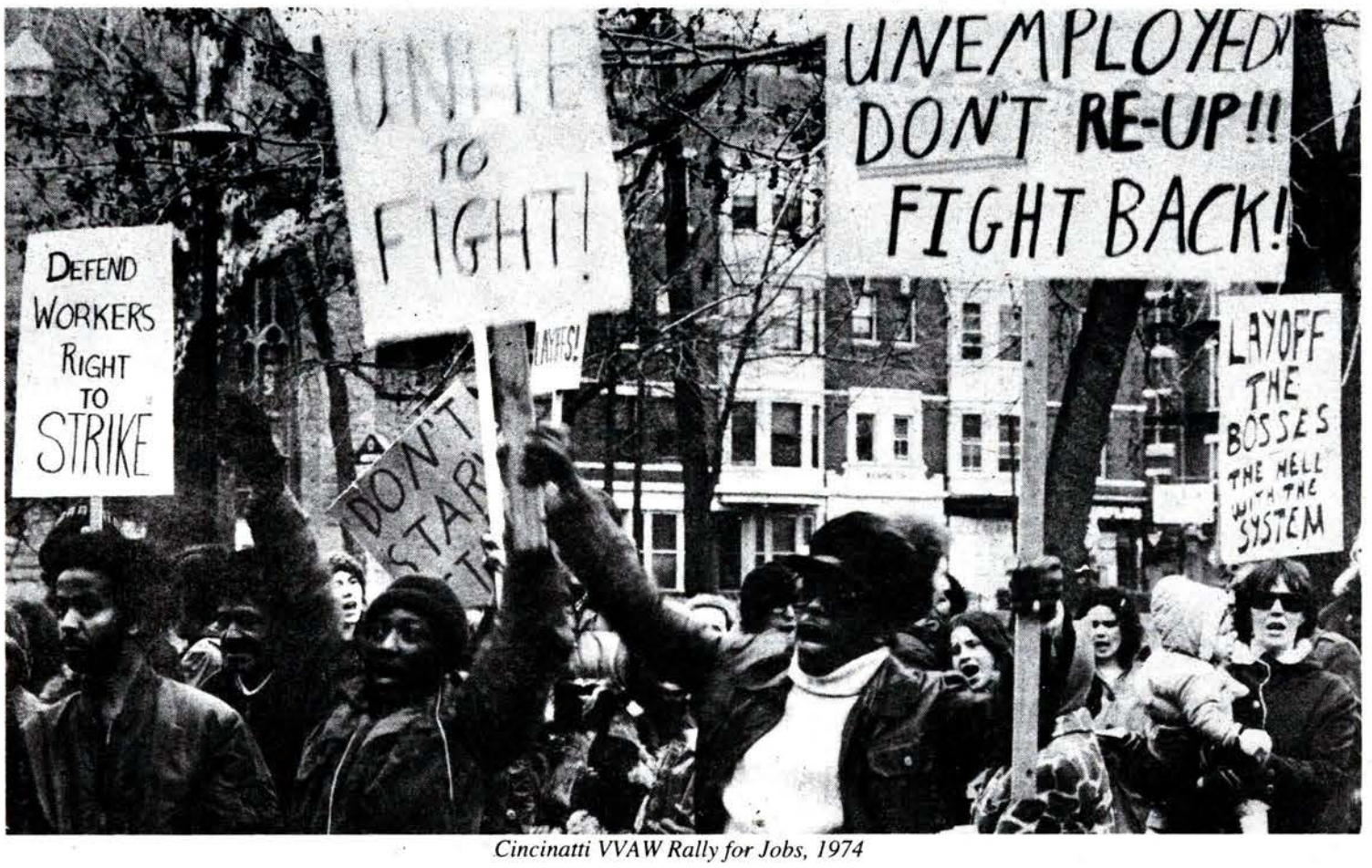
Friday May16th, 1997

• Premier showing of **Citizen Soldier: The Story of the VVAW**,
a Denis Mueller documentary
7:30 pm at the U.E. Union Hall, 37 S. Ashland

Saturday, May 17th, 1997

• **30th Anniversary Event** - panels, speeches, speak-out, memorabilia, etc.
11:30 am-5 pm at the U.E. Union Hall, 1st floor & basement, 37 S. Ashland
• **Party** -- 8 pm (tba)

for more information, contact Barry Romo at (773) 327-5756



Cincinatti VVAW Rally for Jobs, 1974

Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc.

National Office

P.O. Box 408594, Chicago, IL 60640

Membership Application

Name_____

Address _____

Phone _____

Dates of Service (if applicable) _____

Branch _____

Unit _____

Overseas Duty _____

Dates _____

Military Occupation _____

Rank _____

Membership in VVAW is open to all people who want to build a veterans' movement that fights for peace and justice. Most of our members are veterans of the Vietnam era, but we welcome veterans of all eras, as well as family members and friends to our ranks. The initiation fee is $20.00, sent to the National Office (not required of homeless, unemployed or incarcerated vets).

VVAW is a democratic organization. Chapters decide on local programs and projects under the general guidelines of the national program. Chapters elect local leadership and representatives to annual national meetings where major organizational decisions are made and national coordinators elected. These coordinators are responsible for the day to day organizational leadership of VVAW and issuing national publications.

Signature _____

Date _____

(Make checks payable to VVAW. Contributions are tax deductible.)

MACV Insignia

US Military Assistance Command (MACV) [official design by the institute of Heraldry, US Army]. Under this insignia 60,000 Americans and 3 million Vietnamese died.

Yellow and red are the Vietnam colors. The red ground alludes to the infiltration and aggression from beyond the embattled yellow "wall" (i.e. The Great Wall of China). The opening in the wall through which this infiltration and aggression flow is blocked by the white sword representing United States military aid and support. The wall is arched and the sword pointed upward in reference to the offensive action pushing the aggression back.

It was first issued to the 12,000 "advisors" in Vietnam in March of 1963.

Insignia of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

We took the MACV patch as our own, replacing the sword with the upside-down rifle with helmet, the international symbol of soldiers killed in action. This was done to expose the lies and hypocrisy of US aggression in Vietnam as well as its cost in human lives. As with all the propaganda put out by the government to justify US intervention in Indochina, the MACV insignia also put forward lies. The US military was not protecting the Vietnamese from invasion from the People's Republic of China, but was instead trying to "save" Vietnam from itself.

Our insignia has come to represent veterans fighting against new "adventures" like the Vietnam War, while at the same time fighting for a decent way of life for veterans and their families.

Our insignia is 30 years old. It belongs to VVAW and no other organization or group may use it for any reason without permission.

VVAW Internet Information

JOE MILLER AND BEN CHITTY

Many have been surprised to find Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc. on the Internet. For those of you who may not have found us yet, we are present in two ways.

First of all, there is the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc. Home Page, located at **http://www.prairienet.org/vvaw/**. This was set up by Lisa Boucher and Jeff Machota, who also maintain the page. This home page contains the complete text of the previous issue of The Veteran, along with VVAW's History of the Vietnam War, contact information, and some important and informative links. A very significant section includes otherwise unavailable photos of VVAW members in action over the years. We must also acknowledge the graphics assistance by Jack Miller and Terry Thiel. The homepage is constantly being updated and improved, so you should certainly check it out.

Secondly, in late 1995, we set up VVAW-NET, which is an informal communications network of folks involved and interested in the activities of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc. To participate in the network, VVAW requires that an individual supply a "snailmail" address (US Postal Service) and a very brief statement of his or her interest in or connection to the organization.

Communications are distributed by "core" members through blind-copy electronic mail. Postings to the net are addressed to one of the core members. The current distributors are Joe Miller from the National Office (**jtmiller@uiuc.edu**) and Ben Chitty from the New York chapter (**abcqc@cunyvm.cuny.edu**).

The network serves mainly to broadcast news about VVAW and about issues in which the organization has taken an interest. Responses to postings are encouraged, but have not been common. Either distributor can redistribute information (or answer questions) submitted by any participant in the network.

Names and addresses (electronic or otherwise) of network participants are not public information.

We have found that these Internet connections are immensely useful for maintaining contact with members and friends across the miles, as well as for reconnecting with former members after many years. We hope you find them interesting and useful as well.

Beware of VVAW AI

This notice is to alert you to a handful of individualists calling themselves the "Vietnam Veterans Against the War Anti-Imperialist." Their activities are centered mainly in Seattle, San Francisco and New York City. They often claim to be part of our organization and their most recent antics include burning American flags at demonstrations.

"VVAW AI" is not a faction, caucus or part of VVAW. They are not affiliated with us in any way. "VVAW AI" is actually the creation of an obscure, ultra-left sect called the Revolutionary Communist Party and is designed to pimp off of VVAW's history of struggle and continued activism. Their objective is to create confusion and deception in order to promote themselves.

We urge all people and organizations to beware of this bogus outfit. Don't be fooled: they are not what they claim. Forewarned is forearmed.

RECOLLECTIONS

KEN SAUVAGE

One of the first things to amaze me after I got back from Vietnam was the lack of awareness and caring shown by everybody I met of the horror that was taking place in Vietnam. My amazement quickly turned to overwhelming anger. The only people who seemed to be recognizing and verbalizing the horror were people in the antiwar movement. These are the people I sought out. I did not at this time, however, join VVAW. In retrospect, I think this was because, after getting out, my strongest impulse was to try to get as far away from the pain as possible. I didn't talk about Vietnam, didn't think about Vietnam, and (with the help of lots of cheap vodka) did my best not to dream about Vietnam. Deny, deny, deny.

I officially joined VVAW in the late Seventies in time for the arms race that was heating up and the inadequate Agent Orange settlement.

I now belong to four different veterans' organizations, each for different reasons. I currently work to assist veterans and I need the contacts in the official veteran community. VVAW, though, is the only one with which I am politically, spiritually, and personally aligned. Despite the good people involved, the rhetoric coming out of the "mainstream" veterans organizations is hard to take: flag amendments, continuing the arms race, the innate right to own an assault weapon, opposition to normalizing relations with Vietnam.

VVAW's commitment to social justice, its caring for veterans and all other people, its recognition of the never-ending impact of war upon those people touched by its trauma, its watchdog voice calling for the remembrance of the horror of war as this country continues to involve itself militarily all over the world, is a breath of fresh air — a contact with sanity.

Even though I have been back from Vietnam for twenty-six years (and it has been twenty years since the war was officially "over"), the lessons learned and the wisdom gained from that experience, currently organized as VVAW, will always be valid and needed.

KEN SAUVAGE IS A LONG-TIME MEMBER OF CHICAGO VVAW. HE LIVES IN NORTHERN IL AND WORKS WITH VET SERVICES. HE'S A VIETNAM VETERAN.

TOM HANLEY

EDWARD DAMATO

I hadn't thought about Tom Hanley until I read about his death in the Daily News. On page two it read, "Astoria G.I. Dies In Vietnam." This was big news in 1965. I couldn't believe that Tom was dead. It seemed like we were just *in high school. The* article said Tom, a cook, was killed by mortar fire. I could picture him slinging hash and daring soldiers to take seconds. The article said Tom was an honors student. This was not the Tom I knew.

I had seen Tom in school over the years, but never knew him. That changed when he was assigned to the seat next to me in a commercial art class. It was my last year in high school and I needed a few credits to graduate, so I took this easy course. I think Tom took it because it might be fun. When he sat next to me I felt a little nervous because Tom had a reputation as a tough guy.

"Hi," he said. "We're going to have fun here."

"I sure hope so," I responded.

"Don't worry, we will."

We did. Tom kept me laughing all the time. He never carried books. He said he didn't need them. He had a way of opening his eyes so wide that the whites surrounded his steel-blue irises. It had the effect of making you think twice about whether he was serious. I think that's how he got his reputation as a tough guy. You could never quite tell if he was going to laugh or beat your brains in. I never saw him in a fight, although he almost single-handedly destroyed a gang that had just formed in the school. They called themselves the Chancellors and they wore purple sweaters with their names on the back. I think Tom found it an affront to the school and he set about to get rid of it.

"Ed, we have to do something about the Chancellors," he said as he sat down at our desk.

"Forget it," I said. "They're jerks."

"No, we have to get rid of them," he said, his eyes opening wider than I had ever seen them.

He came up with a plan to start a counter-gang that would scare them out of the school. He decided that there should be a founding meeting in the first floor boy's room at three o'clock that afternoon. He decided that the name of the group should be the Bug Jitters and that he would be the leader. By lunch time everyone in the school was talking about the meeting.

At three I went to the boy's room. The hallway was mobbed. A haze of cigarette smoke hung in the air. I pushed through the crowd and inched my way into the bathroom. It was crowded with guys smoking and laughing. Tom was standing near the window victoriously proclaiming, "The Chancellors are history." He was right. We never saw the Chancellor sweaters again. In fact, I don't remember seeing any of the gang in school either.

The next day, as I was looking out of the window of my ceramics class, I saw Tom standing on the sidewalk at the rear door of the school.

"Hey, Tom, don't you have a class?"

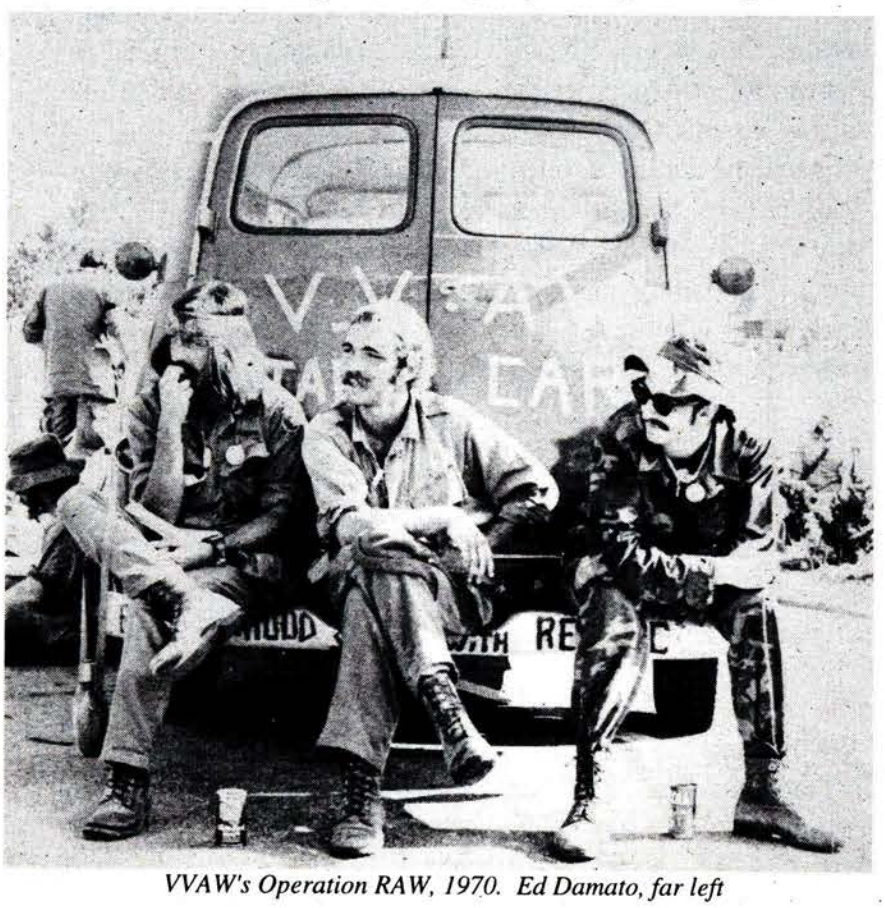
"I need some fresh air."

"You sure took care of the Chancellors."

"**We** took care of the Chancellors," he said as he gave me the wide-eyed look. I laughed.

Now Tom Hanley was dead in Vietnam. The paper said he was an honors student. I wondered if it made his death more tragic. Tom was funny, and he was a loyal friend once he let you into his confidence. He was an unforgettable person but he wasn't an honors student.

Later on I would go to Vietnam. Later on I would learn about My Lai and Tonkin. I would try to understand the light at the end of the tunnel and destroying villages in order to save them. That was later on. For me, the first lie about Vietnam was the report on Tom Hanley, about how he was an honors student.



VVAW's Operation RAW, 1970. Ed Damato, far left

ED DAMATO IS A FORMER CHAPTER, EAST COAST AND NATIONAL COORDINATOR OF VVAW. HE LIVES IN NEW YORK CITY AND WORKS AS A CHEF. HE SERVED IN THE 9TH DIVISION IN VIETNAM.