VVAW: 50 Years of Struggle
The Legacy of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

by Alynne Romo

A VVAW Publication
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Acknowledgements

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Art

The artwork on the cover, “Vietnam Service Ribbon Plagued by Agent Orange”, was painted by VVAW member Jim Wachtendonk. He is well-known to many in the organization for his music. When Agent Orange symptoms restricted his ability to play the guitar, Jim successfully shifted his self-expressions to the art world.

Printing

The book was printed by Lulu Press, Inc. Many thanks to Carl Davidson who arranged for the printing and who makes the book available through www.lulu.com/spotlight/changemaker.
Author
Alynne Romo researched and compiled this book. She is a member of VVAW. She has been a human rights, women’s rights and peace activist over the years. She was the editor of Colombia Bulletin which documented human rights and U.S. policy in Colombia during the height of the War on Drugs in that country.

VVAW Editorial Board
Bill Branson, Jeff Machota and Joe Miller provided oversight. Bill and Joe are VVAW national board members. Jeff is a VVAW national staff member and has been the main person in charge of producing VVAW’s national newspaper, The Veteran, for many years.
All three were highly indispensable throughout the production of this book.

All profits from the sale of this book go to Vietnam Veterans Against the War.
Dedicated to the men and women of VVAW
who, as it turned out, lived in interesting times
Preface

This book focuses on the 50-year history of VVAW. It also places VVAW’s story in the historical context of national and international developments.

Most writings about VVAW prioritize the group’s protests in the 1960s and 1970s. They tend to tell VVAW’s history by following the words and actions of individual leaders. These are fine books, but our goal is to provide a look at VVAW as a whole—not only a view of what VVAW stood for and what it did, but to give the reader a sense of the attitudes, morality, and sheer pluck that VVAW members shared.

Some VVAW endeavors are highlighted in stories while others show up in the time lines. The book doesn’t recount every event that VVAW members undertook. Many of the notes were lost over the years and there were far too many protests, especially at the height of the war, that were occurring too rapidly for all of them to be recorded in the minutes of meetings.

The time lines show many of the historical developments of the day. Examples of events that had an impact on VVAW members are the murders of civil rights leaders, the largely failed missions in Vietnam and the policies of the U.S. government. VVAW’s members were keenly aware of such happenings. They were as influenced by the ongoing lies told by administration officials about the nature of the Vietnam War as they were by the African Americans who stood with clenched fists of protest during the 1968 Olympics.

The book mentions bits of the G.I. resistance movement and just a fraction of the national and international peace protests over the decades. The reader will find mere hints of the attacks against VVAW by police and federal agents. It would take many more books to cover all these topics.

The text reflects VVAW accomplishments and the struggles to bring victories into fruition. VVAW helped end the war in Vietnam. VVAW began the “rap sessions” so that veterans could deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). VVAW was part of the drive to understand and define PTSD. VVAW was there to break the story of Agent Orange and spread the word about the dire effects of dioxin.

Throughout all its years, VVAW stood against war. VVAW’s members knew that they were right to rebel against the endless quagmire of Vietnam—a quagmire described as a one-step-at-a-time entrapment in which each step seemed reasonable
to various administrations, but only led to deeper involvement. VVAW recognizes the same pattern in the current build-up of bases and endless war in the Middle East.

Nearly half a century after it was founded, VVAW provided inspiration and guidance to another group of former soldiers, Iraq Veterans Against the War, providing the younger generation with financial support and know-how on everything from security to organizing.

VVAW stood against injustice. The organization denounced racism and squared off against Nazis and the KKK. It stood with political prisoners and protested for victims of torture and repression. It intervened for veterans at the VA. It joined with Third World solidarity and human rights. It trained women be safe during Take Back the Night marches. It united with Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange. It denounced the war crimes that are increasingly becoming part of standard procedure.

By some miracle, VVAW, which had started out as an underfunded and outnumbered bunch of angry young men, managed to hold together over the years. They are still underfunded, still outnumbered and, yes, still angry. Their ranks were not immune to the ailments that extinguished the lives of so many of Vietnam veterans. Amid immense sorrow, many of their own members succumbed to the same.

On the whole, VVAW members had character. As a group, they retained a blistering sense of humor and a strong moral compass. This book shows that VVAW manifested an unending spirit of defiance: Together, they embraced humanity and fought the inhumane for 50 years.
A War Begins

FOR MANY AMERICANS, the “Vietnam era” may invoke thoughts of hippies or counter-culture. But, in the bigger picture, it was an important moment in human history in which most of the world still struggled to liberate itself from repression. The trend toward democracy had stopped and even reversed during the World War II era: In 1943, planet Earth could claim only nine democracies, with much of the world locked down under dictatorship or colonialism.

France had begun its military conquest of Southeast Asia nearly a century earlier. By 1887, its colony was officially called French Indochina and included modern-day Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The colonizers promoted Catholicism and put limits on civil rights. They ran plantations for tobacco, tea, coffee, indigo and, eventually, rubber. People who resisted French rule—and many did—could face torture at the notorious Hỏa Lò Prison (later dubbed “the Hanoi Hilton” by American POWs.)

By the 1950s, French dominance of Southeast Asia had faded. In 1954, Vietnam was divided in half, with the Viet-Minh (an independence league founded by Hồ Chí Minh) taking charge of the North while former emperor Bảo Đại and politician Ngô Đình Diệm were left with the South. The U.S. had opposed the arrangement. In 1955, Diệm ousted the former emperor and the U.S. sent its first military advisors to South Vietnam.

Enter America

Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy promoted a military build-up in South Vietnam and garnered public support for a fight to stop a spread of communism in southeast Asia.

But, South Vietnam was no democracy. Some American soldiers dismissed the colonized Vietnamese as weak, subjugated people. Other troops came to resent the U.S. government for sending Americans, not to free a people, but to rekindle the colonial conquest.

In 1963, Kennedy increased the number of U.S. Special Forces in South Vietnam to 16,000. Dissatisfied with the South Vietnamese government, the U.S. gave a wink and a nod to a military coup that overthrew the Diệm regime on November 1.

Kennedy was assassinated 21 days later. Vice-president Lyndon Johnson assumed the office immediately.

Above: Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức immolates himself to protest the South Vietnamese regime in 1963. More self-immolations would follow.

We don’t have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. Those people hate us. They are going to throw our asses out of there at any point. But I can’t give up that territory to the communists and get the American people to re-elect me.

—JFK, April, 1963
The Presidency of LBJ

The Time Line
November 22, 1963—Lyndon Baines Johnson was sworn in as president.
December 21, 1963—CIA Director John McCone noted that statistics previously used to assess the Vietnam War were “grossly in error”, an acknowledgement that reports on the war’s success had been too optimistic.
December 31, 1963—The Vietnam War killed 122 American soldiers. By the end of the year, 15,894 military personnel were in Vietnam.
January 10, 1964—The president of South Vietnam, Dương Văn Minh, said he didn’t want the Americans in villages and rural areas of Vietnam where they would be viewed as “more imperialist than the French.”
January 30, 1964—Dương Văn Minh was ousted by Gen. Nguyễn Khánh.
February 3, 1964—Khánh signaled approval for additional U.S. involvement.
March 4, 1964—Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Maxwell Taylor recommended attacks on North Vietnam. Johnson replied that he didn’t want to start a war before the next election.
May 2, 1964—The first major student demonstrations against the war took place in Boston, Seattle, Madison, New York and San Francisco.
May 12, 1964—A dozen men in New York burned their draft cards.
June 6-7, 1964—The Pathet Lao shot down two reconnaissance planes over Laos. Johnson responded with an air strike.
June 12, 1964—South Africa’s Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison.
August 4, 1964—The Gulf of Tonkin incidents took place (facing page).

I am not going to lose Vietnam.
—LBJ to advisors, November 24, 1963
The Reality Behind the Gulf of Tonkin “Incidents”

by Joe Miller

Joe has served many years as a National Coordinator for VVAW. He is a retired academic. In this story, Joe details the Tonkin incidents and his personal connection to the events.

Pictured: LBJ and war architect Robert McNamara head out on the road to nowhere

In early 1964 I lost my Top Secret Crypto clearance and was removed from duty with the Naval Security Group due to my marriage to a foreign national. By mid-June I reported aboard an aircraft carrier, the USS Ticonderoga (CVA-14), and was assigned to the Weapons Department as a clerk typist. The first weeks at this new duty passed without any major event. Most of our time was spent sailing back and forth between Japan and the Philippines, with a week or two off the coast of Vietnam once in awhile.

On August 2, 1964, the Ticonderoga received word that one of our destroyers, the USS Maddox, was under attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Planes from our ship were already in the air, and they were sent to defend the Maddox. The torpedo boats were repulsed, with one of them reported as sinking. The pilots had fired the first salvos in a new, naval side of what was fast becoming an American war against Vietnam.

Two days later there were reports of another attack, this time against two destroyers, the Maddox and the Turner Joy. Once again, our planes, as well as those from other carriers, flew off to the rescue.

This was all we knew at the time.

Our ship’s crew was frustrated because the United States seemed to be letting the “gooks” get away with these “unprovoked” attacks. Keep in mind, there were no real U.S. casualties in these encounters, only those Vietnamese who had their boats shot out from under them. But, President Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam and opened the floodgates for further direct U.S. involvement.

It had begun and we felt the release, not realizing or caring what the consequences might be for anyone. All of a sudden, we had a reason to be out there on that rust bucket—we were now actively fighting “communism.” We didn’t really know or care what that was; we simply gave it a label and felt much better because now we were not wasting our time.

The whole crew was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation for our “actions” in the Gulf of Tonkin. We now had battle ribbons to prove our worth. Most of us saw no battle, fired no rockets, felt no fear—we just sat back on the ship, put on our ribbons, and collected “hazardous duty” pay. What a way to fight a war!

A few days after all the action, the Ticonderoga had occasion to refuel and resupply the Maddox. During these operations, one of my duties was to be above decks on the starboard side to time the process. As I stood there, I heard voices shouting my name from the deck of the Maddox. I looked across the expanse of perhaps forty to sixty feet that separated our two ships, and I recognized a few of my former intelligence workmates from the Naval Security Group on Taiwan. Then it dawned on me what the Maddox had been doing off the coast of northern Vietnam—it was on a Desoto patrol.

Desoto patrols in the Western Pacific had been going on since 1963. These patrols were carried out by regular destroyers which were fitted with a temporary working space, an intelligence van (or “black box”),

continued on next page
right on top of the main deck. Special intelligence personnel, Communications Technicians, were picked up from shore stations around the Western Pacific and carried on board for a couple of weeks while the ship would make certain maneuvers in an attempt to get some sort of reaction from enemy costal installations.

The personnel who worked in the intelligence van included people who were trained in the languages of the countries being investigated, in this case Vietnamese and Chinese. Recordings were made of any reactions to the ship’s presence (voice or electronic), and these recordings were then sent to various shore stations where the Naval Security Group operated, such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Okinawa, or even back to National Security Agency (NSA) headquarters in the United States.

Since the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings in 1968, it has been public knowledge that the Maddox was engaged in such activity when it was attacked by North Vietnam. Add this to the covert operations then being carried out against North Vietnam by the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments (OPLAN 34-A), and it is not too surprising that the Maddox would be a target of North Vietnamese attack. The Maddox was on an intelligence mission, which had as its objective the provocation of shore station communications on the northern coast of Vietnam, as well as those on the Chinese island of Hainan. The collection of communications signals from these areas were meant to aid in the efforts to break Vietnamese and Chinese codes, a task of the U.S. Naval Security Group working under the NSA. The temporary intelligence team on board the Maddox for this mission included Vietnamese and Chinese linguists, a few of whom worked with me at the Naval Security Group Detachment on the island of Taiwan.

On these patrols it was often necessary to turn the ship landward, enter the target nation’s territorial waters, and then begin recording the verbal excitement. This time, however, the response was more intense than anticipated, and the North Vietnamese sent boats to repel the American warship. The Maddox sent out a call for help, and fighters from my ship, the USS Ticonderoga, were sent to save the day. This event actually happened.

That the attack was “unprovoked” was the first lie.

Two days later, our ship received another call for help from the Maddox and the USS Turner Joy. They claimed they were under attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats again. This “attack” took place late at night, during heavy seas. There were no definite sightings of “enemy “ boats. In fact, one of the first U.S. pilots on the scene, Commander James Stockdale from our ship, claimed there was no second attack. He, along with a couple of the officers on the ships, reported this, but their claims were ignored.

This was the second lie. These two lies were the basis for upping the ante in Vietnam.

The official story told to the American people in publications like Time magazine claimed that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had engaged in an “unprovoked” attack on the destroyer Maddox on the afternoon of August 2, 1964 and that the Maddox was sailing along in international waters, just minding its own business when attacked. It was easy for the Johnson-McNamara team in Washington to claim that a second attack had taken place, since the intelligence was “skewed” to support this claim. They had been looking for justification for increased American involvement in Vietnam.

On August 5, 1964, U.S. air attacks were made against military installations in northern Vietnam. These were called “reprisals” for the “unprovoked attacks “against our ships in “international waters.” Lies, lies, and more lies. Then, on August 7, the U.S. Senate (with only two dissenting votes) adopted the “Tonkin Gulf Resolution." This would function for the next six years as a blank check allowing the Johnson and Nixon Administrations to increase the level of direct U.S. involvement in a combat role. Nixon even bragged that he did not need the Tonkin Gulf Resolution to support what he was doing in Indochina: The dynamic of war making had taken over, and other lies were used to continue the war until 1975.

Why do so many still hold to the official “line” from 1964 on the Tonkin Gulf? As late as 2004, Captain Norman Klar, one of the central figures in those operations, himself a top officer in the U.S. Naval Security Group and NSA, still held to the view that there were two attacks on U.S. ships in the Gulf, one on August 2nd and one on August 4th. He certainly knew better, but I can only assume that his “loyalty” to the intelligence game would not allow him to admit it. It was not until 2005 that the NSA finally released declassified material that showed the truth of the “incidents”.

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6
August 7, 1964—Congress granted Johnson the power to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” Johnson’s favorability immediately went from 42% to 72%.

August 28, 1964—Amid rising tensions over police brutality, African Americans in North Philadelphia rioted for two days, resulting in 341 injuries and 774 arrests.

September 10, 1964—LBJ ordered the resumption of naval patrols in the Tonkin Gulf. He authorized covert operations against North Vietnam, actions in Laos and automatic retaliatory capability.

September 26, 1964—Under pressure from the U.S., Gen. Nguyễn Khánh relinquished some of his power to a civilian government for South Vietnam.

December 14, 1964—The U.S. began bombing Laos as part of its secret war against the Pathet Lao. Over the next nine years, the U.S. dropped over two million tons of bombs on one million people in Laos, as much tonnage as was absorbed by several hundred million people in Europe and the Pacific during all of World War II.


January 6, 1965—Ambassador Maxwell Taylor sent a telegram decrying the deteriorating political and military situation in Vietnam. Taylor opposed sending ground troops and preferred bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail.


February 13, 1965—Johnson approved a plan to carry out eight weeks of bombing of North Vietnam. The plan grew into a sustained bombing campaign, Operation Rolling Thunder, lasting from March 2 until November, 1968.


March 8, 1965—Marines landed on the beaches near Da Nang, a port city in central Vietnam would serve as a major base for the U.S. Air Force and Marines. This was the beginning of direct involvement by combat troops.

All men are created equal, they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—Vietnamese Declaration of Independence
VIII. VIETNAM WAS NOT ON THE AMERICAN MIND when LBJ became president. The U.S. was in the midst of the fight for civil rights. In January, George Wallace (“segregation now, tomorrow and forever”) had become governor of Alabama. Black protestors were facing police dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham. The KKK murdered civil rights leader Medgar Evers in Mississippi. The March on Washington took place in August and four Black schoolgirls were murdered in Birmingham in September.

The Civil Rights Movement was feared by some and inspiring to others. For many young people, it was a call to think for themselves, even if that put them at odds with their own families. In 1964, three civil rights workers were killed in Mississippi by the KKK. Even though President Johnson soon signed the Civil Rights Act, racial strife continued. Riots, often sparked by police undertakings, raged in New York City, Rochester, and Philadelphia.

In 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated. Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to lead a march from Selma to Montgomery, AL. When the march was forced to turn back, three of its ministers were beaten by white supremacists. King’s 25,000 marchers were finally allowed to proceed, but the KKK shot and killed their supporter Viola Liuzzo.

Ensuing years saw more violence: Rioting erupted in Watts; activist Vernon Dahmer died when his home was firebombed; and James Meredith was shot by white gunmen while he marched for voter registration. An angry crowd struck Martin Luther King, Jr. with a rock in Chicago. More riots broke out in Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. College students were killed in South Carolina. Dr. King was assassinated in 1968. More riots ensued.

As Fort Hood prepared for possible deployment to the 1968 Democratic National Convention, 160 Black GIs—some of whom had already been deployed to quell riots—met to discuss Army racism and the use of troops against civilians. Forty-three of the soldiers were court-martialed for refusing to deploy.

—Voltaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 16, 1965</td>
<td>A Detroit woman set herself on fire in Detroit to protest the war, copying the protests of Buddhist monks in South Vietnam.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 25, 1965</td>
<td>3,500 people attended the first teach-in against the Vietnam War. It was held at the University of Michigan.</td>
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<td>April 17, 1965</td>
<td>25,000 people rallied in Washington, D.C. against the war.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 20, 1965</td>
<td>The U.S. had 33,000 military personnel in Vietnam and an additional 20,000 on the way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 4, 1965</td>
<td>Johnson asked for another $700 million for the war for the remainder of the year. Congress gave it to him two days later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 5, 1965</td>
<td>Forty men burned their draft cards at Berkeley.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 5, 1965</td>
<td>The first Army combat unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, arrived in Vietnam.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 17, 1965</td>
<td>Presidential advisor Clark Clifford told Johnson that U.S. ground forces should be kept to a minimum, warning against a possible quagmire. His idea did not prevail.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
May 21, 1965—30,000 people attended an anti-war teach-in at Berkeley.
May 22, 1965—War protesters burned 19 draft cards at Berkeley.
June 14, 1965—South Vietnam’s military junta appointed General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu as President of South Vietnam.
June 16, 1965—An anti-war teach-in held near the Pentagon attracted 50,000 protesters.
June 24, 1965—General Westmoreland asked the U.S. to send him more soldiers in Vietnam than had been previously authorized.
July 16, 1965—Westmoreland told Defense Secretary McNamara that air strikes had not disrupted the activity on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Westmoreland said he could reverse the situation by the end of 1965 if he got 57 battalions plus helicopter companies and support units.
July 28, 1965—With support from Congress, Johnson ordered the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam to be brought up to 125,000. He also increased the monthly draft from 17,000 to 35,000.
August 11, 1965—Amid tensions over discrimination in the police department and segregation in the community, a traffic stop incited five days of rioting in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles.
August 31, 1965—Johnson signed a law making draft card burnings punishable by up to five years in prison and a $1000 fine.
October 11, 1965—The Ad Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace was founded.
October 15, 1965—David Miller burned his draft card to protest the war at a Catholic Worker demonstration in Manhattan. Seized by the FBI, Miller served almost two years in prison.
October 16, 1965—The National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam held protests in 40 U.S. cities.
November 2, 1965—A Quaker from Baltimore set himself on fire in front of the Pentagon to protest the war.

The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today is my own government.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.
November 6, 1965—Lieutenant Henry Howe of Fort Bliss joined a peace protest in El Paso, TX carrying a sign that read “End Johnson’s Fascist Aggression in Vietnam”. Upon returning to the Army base, Howe was arrested for “conduct unbecoming”. His arrest and sentencing—dismissal and two years hard labor—became an early catalyst for GI organizing.

November 9, 1965—A member of the Catholic Worker Movement set himself on fire in front of the United Nations to protest the war.

November 9, 1965—A young woman self-immolated in South Bend, IN to protest the war.

November 14-18, 1965—The Battle of Ia Drang, the first head-on engagement between the U.S. and the People’s Army of Vietnam took place. In the aftermath, military strategists on both sides of the battle were convinced they would win the war.

November 27, 1965—250,000 anti-war protesters marched from the White House to the Washington Monument.

November 30, 1965—After meeting with Westmoreland, the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, wrote to Johnson that U.S. troop involvement should be brought up to 400,000 in 1965 and, possibly, up to 600,000 in 1966. McNamara estimated that 1,000 soldiers would die every month during the conflict.

December, 1965—Richard Nixon told Readers Digest that he opposed negotiations to end the war, stating that, “There can be no substitute for victory when the objective is the defeat of communist aggression.”

December 24, 1965—Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam.

December 31, 1965—The number of U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam was 184,314 by year’s end. A total of 1,928 U.S. troops died in Vietnam in 1965.

January 8-14, 1966—Operation Crimp, the largest allied military operation to date, discovered the Tunnels of Củ Chi, a vast 120-mile underground used by North Vietnamese forces. Despite being partially routed, the North Vietnamese would later reuse the area.


January 28-March 6, 1966—Operation Masher, the largest search-and-destroy mission to date in the war, took place as an allied effort to dislodge the North Vietnamese from Binh Dinh, a South Vietnam coastal province. As a result of the mission, 140,000 civilians left their villages and lands largely due to the heavy bombing and artillery. The operation was hailed as a success by the U.S., but American forces would have to return in October to “re-pacify” the same area.

February 1, 1966—Former Green Beret Donald Duncan wrote a story that was critical of the war in Vietnam. It was featured on the cover of Ramparts magazine (see “Resistance Inside and Out” on page 16).
The Reign of Agent Orange: Operation Hades

Operation Hades—later renamed Operation Ranch Hand—was the program in which the United States sprayed 20 million gallons of dangerous herbicides over South Vietnam to kill crops and to destroy trees that might provide cover for the enemy.

Early signs of the dangers of dioxin began to appear in Saigon’s Tu Du hospital in 1967 when increasing numbers of pregnant women gave birth to severely deformed babies and, in some instances, to material that wouldn’t be defined as human at all. But, when South Vietnamese newspapers began to raise an alarm, the U.S. military dismissed any possible correlation between the herbicide sprayings and the subsequent birth defects as pure communist propaganda.

American troops experienced the caustic effects of the herbicides first hand: nausea, nose bleeds, rashes, dizziness, migraines, stomach cramps, and onsets of a peculiar black depression. The military told them the defoliant spray was safe and said that the troops’ symptoms were just jungle rot or war stress. The few soldiers who had received protective paraphernalia found that their gas masks didn’t breathe well in Vietnam and that Agent Orange could eat holes in their gear.

Agent Orange, which kills by over-accelerating cell growth, was dispersed at camp perimeters by the men directly or sprayed from boats, helicopters or low-flying C-132 aircraft to saturate the countryside. When soldiers entered a zone that had been already been drenched, they noticed the stillness—the death of plants, trees, birds, fish and monkeys. Yet, commanders said, the stuff was safe for humans. So, troops drank from the tainted streams and bathed in contaminated water.

Clear and Present Danger

Around this same time, an herbicide facility in Italy malfunctioned, sending a dioxin-laced cloud across the local town. That country’s leaders were not at all dismissive: The village was put on notice about the danger. Citizens were evacuated, given medical examinations and warned not to eat—or even touch—local fruits or vegetable. Within days, 3,300 animals were found dead. Another 80,000 were deliberately slaughtered to keep dioxin out of the food chain. Advice centers were established for pregnant women.
government funded decontamination of the area. Two directors of the factory were arrested, presumably because Italian society thought it was a crime to poison its people, even if only through negligence. One might ask right there: If Italian officials were so savvy as to treat dioxin exposure as an emergency, why didn't U.S. officials respond to the danger? Were there people WE could have arrested?

Just three months after the incident in Italy, the Rand Corporation warned the U.S. government that the herbicide program in Vietnam was counter-productive, ineffective and harmed residents who were near sprayings. Defense Secretary McNamara wasn’t thrilled with the report and referred it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs helpfully dismissed the Rand Report and the military doubled down, spraying more Agent Orange than ever, eventually destroying an area the size of Massachusetts.

By 1969, a chemical plant in Czechoslovakia had managed to poison 60 of its workers with dioxin. Ironically, even though the facility was in a communist country, its product was a major component of Agent Orange, and was being sold through intermediaries to the U.S. to subvert communism.

Operation Hades was generally discontinued in 1970. Were that the end of the story, we could just point to officials who were guilty of willful blindness. But, while their lust for victory offered a motive for their negligence, it is much harder to understand the denials about Agent Orange that continued through time.

We still don’t know exactly how much damage was done. We could guess that Operation Hades was the most colossal accidental mass poisoning in human history, possibly greater than all other known such poisonings combined, even when you include Bhopal. But, we can say for certain that, unlike the other poisonings around the world, our leaders didn’t spring into action to save the people or clean up the mess and absolutely no one was ever arrested.

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February 1, 1966—Johnson ordered a resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam.
February 1, 1966—The Ad Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace held a protest that attracted 75 veterans.
February 5, 1966—100 veterans from various wars sent their medals and discharge papers to Johnson.
March 8, 1966—The U.S. announced it would send many more troops to Vietnam.
March 10, 1966—Nguyễn Chánh Thi, commander of the South Vietnamese Army and ruling junta member, was accused of siding with the Buddhist majority and deposed. The ouster wasn’t opposed by the U.S. since Thi was not inclined to follow American dictates. The next weeks emerged as The Buddhist Uprising, with many anti-government and anti-American protests.
March 26, 1966—Anti-war protests were held across the U.S.
March 27, 1966—20,000 Buddhists in Vietnam protested government policies.
March 30, 1966—General Westmoreland and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge advised South Vietnam to end the Buddhist Uprising.
April, 1966—Ramparts magazine exposed the Michigan State University Group as a propaganda front for the CIA in Vietnam. The CIA began to collect information on Ramparts in violation of U.S. law.
A New Strategy for Killing

Search and Destroy

In previous wars, armies fought to gain and secure territory, and then move on to gain more land. For Vietnam’s guerrilla war, the U.S. developed a new plan: search for the enemy, destroy the enemy, get a body count, then retreat.

But, finding the enemy in a guerrilla war isn’t so easy and the search-and-destroy missions easily degenerated into killing sprees. A military unit would enter a “free-fire zone”, an area that supposedly been cleared of friendly forces. If civilians fled in terror, they were likely mowed down. Commanders could call in artillery fire on nearby locations without regard to whether civilians were in the way. People’s homes were set on fire so often the incursions were called Zippo raids, named after the cigarette lighters soldiers used to ignite the flames. On many occasions, American soldiers who were rattled by a recent assault on their own unit took out their frustrations on the local Vietnamese, even engaging in rape and outright murder to avenge the deaths of their friends.

The military facilitated the victimization of the locals. Having the highest body counts might mean an extra case of beer for the unit and promotions for commanders. Civilian corpses could be counted as slain enemies: “If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC”. This attitude enabled far many more massacres than the U.S. ever acknowledged. For example, General Julian Ewell, aka the Butcher of the Delta, is said to have been responsible for the equivalent of a My Lai each month. In one operation, Ewell had a body count of 11,000, but captured only 750 weapons, a tell-tale sign of the murder of innocents.

In the words of author Nick Turse, “Westmoreland’s search-and-destroy strategy resulted in thousands of destroyed villages, tens of thousands of civilian casualties, hundreds of thousands of refugees, and drove the rural population of Vietnam into the arms of the Viet Cong. [John] Kerry was only speaking the truth when he said that ‘We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them’.”

13
April 8, 1966—Buddhist protests in Vietnam demanded free elections.
April 29, 1966—The U.S. had 250,000 troops in Vietnam.
May 6, 1966—Premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ told General Westmoreland that Buddhist leaders were suspected of being in contact with the Việt Cộng.

May 15, 1966—Tens of thousands of people protested in Washington, D.C. against the war.
May 17-18, 1966—U.S. Marines got caught up in fight between against pro-Buddhist and pro-government soldiers with some shots fired.
May 24, 1966—150 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed and 23 American soldiers were wounded in fighting with pro-Buddhist forces.
May 28, 1966—Three Buddhist women—two nuns and one laywoman—self-immolated to protest the South Vietnamese government and U.S. support for the regime. In the next three days, four more Buddhists did the same.
June 1, 1966—Buddhist demonstrators stormed the U.S. Consulate in South Vietnam and set it on fire.
June 4, 1966—Three Buddhist nuns and one monk self-immolated to protest against the government and U.S. support for the regime. Three of the suicide protests were in Da Nang. Another woman self-immolated thirteen days later.

Yea as I walk through the valley of death
I shall fear no evil
For the valleys are gone
And only death awaits
And I am the evil

—Stan Platke, poem from “Winning Hearts and Minds”
June 29, 1966—U.S. planes began bombing Hanoi and Haiphong.
June 30, 1966—The Fort Hood Three announced they couldn’t participate in immoral war. (See “Resistance Inside and Out”, page 16.)
June 23, 1966—South Vietnam finally quelled the Buddhist Uprising.
July 3, 1966—Thirty-one people were arrested during an anti-war protest at the U.S. embassy in London.
July 15, 1966—Operations Hastings and Prairie, using American and South Vietnamese forces were launched. The efforts, which lasted into May, 1967, succeeded in pushing North Vietnamese forces back over the Demilitarized Zone. However, North Vietnamese fighters regrouped and came back.

The Start of VVAW

In April of 1967, Vietnam veterans joined in an anti-war protest in New York City, marching under a banner which described their position on the war: Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Formed two months later by six of those marchers, VVAW was the first organization of veterans whose purpose was to protest a war in which they had fought and which was still going on. The Vietnam veterans had a clear sense of being different from the veterans of earlier wars. They were not being hailed as heroes which carried over into how they were received by large segments of the American public, the government, or traditional veterans organizations such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars which wanted nothing at all to do with VVAW’s experiences or point of view.

Nevertheless, veterans around the country did jump in to join VVAW when the war raged on. Debate about the war eventually climbed to a fever pitch in the U.S. and around the world. In city after city, and in smaller towns around the country, Americans banded together to protest the war. In many places the local anti-war groups welcomed veterans who opposed the war.

VVAW members had the ability to speak out based on their personal experience. They added credibility to the protest actions. In its earliest days, VVAW served primarily as a speakers bureau whose orators asserted that the American people were not being told the truth about the war. They were right.
Some active-duty soldiers began refusing to go to war. Among the first was West Point graduate Richard Steinke who refused orders in June, 1965. “The Vietnamese war is not worth a single American life,” stated Steinke, who was court martialed for his action.

Soldiers were also prosecuted for voicing their opposition to the war. In November, 1965, Lieutenant Henry Howe of Fort Bliss held his sign, “End Johnson’s Fascist Aggression in Vietnam”, at a protest in El Paso, TX. Howe was sentenced to two years hard labor. He was haled with peace signs and clenched fists when he passed by the military barracks on his way to jail.

In February, 1966 former Green Beret Donald Duncan who had served 18 months in Vietnam, wrote a cover story for Ramparts magazine. His article unmasked the war, bringing to light the role of Special Forces in the murder of prisoners, documenting racism in the military and noting the growing support among the Vietnamese people for the Việt Cộng.

In June, three soldiers—James Johnson, David Samas and Dennis Mora—announced they could not participate in the immoral war. They refused to deploy to Vietnam from their base at Fort Hood, TX. Dubbed the Fort Hood Three, their convictions were appealed all the way to the Supreme Court without success.

In 1967, army doctor Capt. Howard Levy refused to train Green Berets whom he called “murderers of women and children.” In July, while the Detroit riots raged, African Americans at Camp Pendleton called a meeting as to why Black men should fight a white man’s war. William Harvey and George Daniels and 12 others sought a discussion with their commander. Harvey and Daniels were sentenced to six and ten years, respectively.

Later that year Vietnam GI was launched. It became the most influential early newspaper of the GI movement with press runs of over 15,000, distribution across the U.S. and a mailing list of 3000 people who were still serving in Vietnam. The anti-war GI press expanded enormously. GI coffeehouses, where soldiers could express themselves freely, cropped up near major bases across the country.

By 1968, soldiers were active in anti-war protests. Thousands of GIs went AWOL. Military stockades became overcrowded. Howard Presbyterian Church in San Francisco gave sanctuary to nine men who refused to serve. Most draft resisters and deserters sought sanctuary in Canada, Mexico or Sweden. A Canadian web site described this new wave of immigrants as the “largest, best educated group this country ever received.” The rate of refusal would continue to climb and by the end of 1973 there were over half a million desertions.

On October 12, 1968 Navy nurse Susan Schnall rented a plane and dropped leaflets on five military bases in San Francisco’s Bay area. She then spoke at an anti-war protest that included 200 active duty and 100 reservists. Schnall was sentenced to six months.

Pictured above: Susan Schnall speaking at the San Francisco protest.
August 8, 1966—Nixon called for escalation of the war in Vietnam.

September 14, 1966—Operation Attleboro was launched as a search-and-destroy mission to find North Vietnamese bases near Cambodia. The U.S. eventually located a base and engaged in battle on October 19. The most significant fighting took place in November when the U.S. repelled an attack and recovered the largest stash of supplies to date. The operation lasted until November 24. The North Vietnamese soon returned to the area.

October 9, 1966—South Korean troops massacred 186 civilians in the village of Binh Tai in Vietnam.

November 12, 1966—Veterans and Reservists Against the War, whose members served in World War I, World War II and Korea, held a rally in which 35 vets burned their discharge papers. They also stated that Veterans Day had been turned into a government prop to exploit to current military engagements.

December 3 - 6, 1966—South Korean troops massacred 430 civilians in the village of Binh Hoa, Vietnam.

December 31, 1966—The Selective Service had drafted 382,000 men in 1966, up from 82,060 the previous year. The U.S. had 389,000 troops in Vietnam. Six thousand men died in Vietnam in 1966 with another 30,000 wounded.

January 6, 1967—Operation Deckhouse Five, involving a large force of U.S. and South Vietnamese Marines, swept the Mekong Delta. The project was later deemed unproductive.

January 8, 1967—The U.S. launched Operation Cedar Falls, a huge search-and-destroy mission involving bombing, artillery and the forced removal of civilians in order to eradicate a Việt Cộng stronghold near Saigon. The mission was the largest American ground operation of the war and lasted until January 26. Although hailed by the military as successful, critics pointed out that North Vietnamese forces soon returned to the area to live among the peasants who had now become much more hostile to Americans.
February 22, 1967—The U.S. began an 82-day mission called Operation Junction City, the largest U.S. airborne operation since World War II, to try to locate rumored Communist secret headquarters in South Vietnam. While able to find some supplies and documents, the mission did not destroy any big secret headquarters.

March 11, 1967—Civil War began in Cambodia.

March 21, 1967—The head of the Selective Service, Gen. Lewis Hershey, was shouted down by students when he tried to deliver a speech at Howard University.

April 4, 1967—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. publicly opposed the Vietnam War during a speech at Riverside Church in New York City.

April 15, 1967—Hundreds of thousands joined an anti-war march organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War which featured Harry Belafonte, Dr. Benjamin Spock and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Among the participants was a group of Vietnam veterans who marched under a banner that read: “Vietnam Veterans Against the War.”

April 21—The U.S. launched Operations Union I and Union II, a massive search-and-destroy effort to fight the People’s Army in northern South Vietnam. The mission was considered a success although the North Vietnamese were able to cover their retreat and return to the area in three months.

May 11, 1967—Operations Malheur I and II, search-and-destroy missions by the 101st Airborne Division, were launched in the coastal Quảng Ngãi province in South Vietnam. The efforts temporarily disrupted North Vietnamese activities. Later, the U.S. Agency for International Development reported 6,400 civilian casualties in that area.

May 16, 1967—A Buddhist nun in South Vietnam self-immolated to protest the war.

June 1, 1967—Six of the Vietnam veterans who had attended the April 15 Mobilization met again in New York City and decided to form Vietnam Veterans Against the War (page 15). The FBI had a file on them by the following September.

July 2, 1967—Operation Buffalo, which was designed to engage the North Vietnamese in the Demilitarized Zone, was undertaken. The U.S. Marines suffered their worst one-day loss for the entire war on its first day.

September 4, 1967—Operation Medina, a search-and-destroy mission, began in the Hải Lăng Forest. The mission was not successful. (During VVAVW’s 1971 Winter Soldier Investigation, one veteran described it as an ambush by the North Vietnamese in which 200 U.S. soldiers went out and only 47 made it back, a recollection that differs from official reports.)

October 12, 1967—Secretary of State Dean Rusk said Congressional peace initiatives were futile because North Vietnam wouldn’t cooperate.

October 16, 1967—A protest at a military induction center in Oakland, CA lead to 39 arrests including that of singer Joan Baez.
October 18, 1967—Seventy-six people were injured in a riot following an anti-war protest against Dow Chemical in Madison.

October 21, 1967—Seventy thousand people protested against the war in Washington, D.C. where a small VVAW group joined with a much larger contingent of veterans from previous wars.

November 2, 1967—A group made up mostly of current and former advisors met with Johnson and decided that the best way to win American support for the war was to provide more optimistic reports.

November 11, 1967—North Vietnam turned three American POWs over to anti-war activist Tom Hayden.

November 17, 1967—Johnson told the public that the U.S. military in Vietnam was inflicting greater losses than it was taking.

November 19, 1967—After a drive to collect 65 signatures and raise funds, VVAW ran a full-page ad in the New York Times. As a result, VVAW membership swelled and the media started calling. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara called the FBI to demand investigations of the signers. The FBI happily complied.

November 21, 1967—General Westmoreland told reporters that the enemy was losing the war.

November 29, 1967—Defense Secretary Robert McNamara announced his resignation following Johnson’s earlier rejection of McNamara’s recommendation to stop bombing North Vietnam and leave the ground war to South Vietnam. McNamara left the office on Feb. 29, 1968.


December 31, 1967—The U.S. had 463,000 troops in Vietnam. Over a million American soldiers had now rotated through the country.

January 21, 1968—The Battle of Khe Sanh began when the People’s Army of North Vietnam bombarded the U.S. Marine garrison at Khe Sanh near the Laotian border. The battle, lasting 77 days, was one of the bloodiest of the war and remains the subject of a debate about whether it served to distract the U.S. from a build-up for the Tet Offensive. During the conflict, a frustrated General Westmoreland concocted a plan to use nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh and near the DMZ.

January 29, 1968—North Vietnam launched the Tet Offensive. The U.S. Embassy in Saigon was attacked. The next six months proved to be the most deadly for American soldiers.

February 8, 1968—Three college students were killed when a civil rights protest in Orangeburg, SC was broken up by police.

February 11-18, 1968—Five hundred and forty-three Americans were killed in Vietnam with another 2547 wounded, the all-time record for a single week during the war.

February 25, 1968—South Korean soldiers massacred 135 civilians and buried them in a mass grave in Hà My, Vietnam.

February 27, 1968—Prominent CBS News anchorman Walter Cronkite returned from Vietnam offering his viewers a very dim view of the war.

March 16, 1968—The Mỹ Lai Massacre took place. With over 500 civilians dead, the events of the day remained hidden from the public until November, 1969 (see story, page 23.)

March 17, 1968—A London anti-war demonstration had 200 arrests and 91 injuries.

March 19, 1968—Howard University students staged a five-day sit-in at the administration building protesting ROTC, the war and demanding a more Afrocentric curriculum.

March 19, 1968—A 16-year-old self-immolated in Syracuse, NY to protest the war.

March 31, 1968—Johnson addressed the country stating that he would not run for reelection and that he was taking steps to limit the war.

April 4, 1968—Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

April 23, 1968—Anti-war and anti-segregation students at Columbia University took over buildings and shut down the campus for a week.

April 27, 1968—Forty active duty GIs marched at head of an anti-war protest in San Francisco.


June 5, 1968—Robert Kennedy was assassinated. Kennedy had been critical of Johnson’s handling of the war.

July, 1968—Presidential candidate Richard Nixon promised to end the draft.

August 22 - 30, 1968—Police attacked anti-war protesters and onlookers at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The controversial conflict would eventually be described as an out-of-control police riot.

August 23, 1968—As troops who were stationed at Fort Hood in Texas started to prepare for possible deployment to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, 160 Black GIs met to discuss Army racism and the use of troops against civilians. After refusing to disperse, MPs attacked the group. Forty-three soldiers were arrested and given court-martials.

September 23, 1968—The Tet Offensive ended.
October 14, 1968—The U.S. announced that it would send 24,000 troops back to Vietnam for involuntary second tours.

October 16, 1968—African American medal-winners Tommie Smith and John Carlos offered their famous black power salute atop the winners’ podium at the Olympics. (Carlos continued to promote human rights and in 2011 he stood with the Occupy Wall Street movement.)

November 1, 1968—Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing of North Vietnam for three and a half years, finally ended. The U.S. estimated that the bombings killed 182,000 people.

November 5, 1968—Richard Nixon was re-elected.

November 11, 1968—The U.S. began covert air strikes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. The bombing continued through 1972. Despite dropping 3 million tons of bombs on Laos, it did not seriously disrupt North Vietnamese operations.

1968—The U.S. had 537,000 soldiers in Vietnam. Counting the first death of an American as having taken place in 1961, Vietnam had now become the longest war in U.S. history up to that time.

Racism in the military

Racism in the Vietnam-era military ranged from the ignorant bigotry of some commanders to outright hatred from white troops, especially after the U.S. broadened the draft to include both unemployed inner city youth and rural poor whites. Commonplace occurrences included verbal epithets, slurs on the latrine walls, displaying the confederate flag and *de facto* segregation. But, more dire incidents began to emerge including one at Cam Ranh Bay in which white sailors donned KKK-style garb and burned a cross.

A VVAW chapter in Vietnam produced a phamplet exposing the racism which could affect all non-white soldiers, the problem for Blacks being the worst. African Americans constituted only 10 percent of the military but found themselves disproportionately assigned to the front lines: They comprised 25% of combat deaths in 1965. Given the racial strife at home, 60 percent of Black troops came to believe they shouldn’t even be fighting in Vietnam.

By 1968, there was a surge of inter-racial violence in the U.S. military including riots. In 1970, seven black soldiers refused orders to go on patrol, claiming their lives were being deliberately endangered by racist officers. African Americans who dissented with their officers or fought with fellow soldiers were more likely to receive discipline and twice as like to get a bad discharge as their white counterparts. African Americans also filled military prisons in disproportionate numbers.

My enemy is the white people, not Viet Cong or Chinese or Japanese. You, my opposer, when I want freedom. You, my opposer, when I want justice. You, my opposer, when I want equality. You won’t even stand up for me in America for my religious beliefs—and you want me to go somewhere and fight, but you won’t even stand up for me here at home?

—Muhammad Ali

Ali refused the draft in 1967. He was sentenced to five years. The conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1971.
January 20, 1969—Richard Nixon was inaugurated.
March 18, 1969—The U.S. started secretly bombing Cambodia. It lasted through May.
April, 1969—American military personnel in Vietnam peaked at 543,000.
July 7, 1969—The first U.S. troops began to withdraw from Vietnam.
August 5, 1969—Airman Louis Parry took refuge in Honolulu's Church of the Crossroads. Days later he called for GIs to go on strike against the military. Thirty-three GIs joined him before they were all picked up by MPs.
1969—The draft lottery began. The 1969-70 academic year then witnessed the largest number of anti-ROTC incidents, including the fire-bombing of 30 buildings in the Spring term alone.
September, 1969—Sixty-five of the nation’s 4,000 draft boards had been attacked or harassed, including 11 incidents of mutilating records.
October, 1969—Nearly 100 Fort Bragg soldiers, most Vietnam vets, marched in an nearby anti-war protest.
October, 1969—VVAW got office space in New York City.
October 15, 1969—Huge protests were held across the country by the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam.
November 9, 1969—A full page ad opposing the war appeared in the New York Times. It was signed by 1366 active duty servicemen.
November 13, 1969—The My Lai Massacre became public. (See page 23.)
November 16, 1969—Over 200 vets and GIs lead the march of a million anti-war protesters in Washington, D.C.
December 14, 1969—1000 servicemen marched against the war at a Moratorium rally in Oceanside, CA near Camp Pendleton.)
January, 1970—VVAW, with 1500 members, began to attract new people with interests in broader issues like the War on Drugs, conditions at the Veterans Administration and Post-Vietnam Syndrome (later called PTSD).
March 11, 1970—Vietnam veterans testified in Annapolis, MD at the Inquiry on War Crimes. In the next two months, similar events took place in five other cities.
April, 1970—The Green Machine, a coffeehouse by Camp Pendleton, was sprayed with machine gun fire, wounding one person.
April 30, 1970—Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia. Protests soon erupted across the country.
Soldiers Resisted, & Reported the My Lai Massacre

On March 16, 1968, a helicopter crew witnessed a rampage by American troops in Quảng Ngãi province and, with their own weapons drawn, faced down their fellow soldiers in order to rescue Vietnamese civilians who were being pursued. Members of the helicopter crew reported the events to officials when they returned to their base.

The killing spree later came to be known in the U.S. as the My Lai Massacre, named for one of the villages (Mỹ Lai) where the murders took place. As many as 504 civilians, mostly women and children, were dead, with many of the women having been raped and mutilated. The massacre was falsified in military reports as a fierce fire fight that killed 22 civilians and 128 Viet Cong. General Westmoreland called it “outstanding”.

A year later, a soldier from another helicopter crew that had flown over the area after the massacre wrote to 30 Congressman asking for an investigation. But, it wasn’t until journalist Seymour Hersh broke the story on November 12, 1969—and graphic pictures of the dead were published eight days later—that officials took notice.

The revelations generated backlash for witnesses and whistle blowers. The subsequent military investigation tried to place blame on four commanders who—conveniently—had already died. In the end, only one man, Lt. William Calley, was convicted. Fifty years later, the soldier who photographed the scene admitted that he’d seen 30 different soldiers kill 100 civilians, but had destroyed all photos that showed the troops engaged in the murders in order to protect them.

Even though the massacre intensified anti-war sentiments, there was never an indictment of the system that turned Mỹ Lai’s province, Quảng Ngãi, into an area with 50,000 civilian casualties a year. In the words of journalist Jonathan Schell, “There can be no doubt that such an atrocity was possible only because a number of [abnormal] methods of killing civilians and destroying their villages had come to be the rule, and not the exception, in our conduct of the war.”
Supporters from the GI coffee house outside Mountain Home Air Force Base. The coffee house movement allowed active duty GIs to talk freely about racism, the war or whatever issues were on their minds.

Kent & Jackson State
On May 4, 1970, four students at Kent State University were killed by the Ohio National Guard during an anti-war protest. Nine other students were wounded. Ten days later, two students at Jackson State University were killed by police in Mississippi. Twelve others were injured.

The attacks galvanized many Vietnam veterans: While their own experiences had dispelled the myth that America was fighting for democracy in Vietnam, seeing their government shoot down young people for exercising a constitutional right was too much. VVAW membership climbed.

May 9, 1970—100,000 protested in Washington, D.C. against the war.
May 16, 1970—Armed Forces Day protests called by the New Mobilization Committee G.I Task Force had 17 events at bases of all military branches.
May 20, 1970—VVAW and Veterans for Peace marched through Syracuse, NY with toy rifles and gathered at the War Memorial for a ceremony.

July, 1970—The horrific Con Son tiger cages for prisoners in South Vietnam were revealed to the American public.
August 29, 1970—30,000 people joined the Chicano Moratorium against the War in East Los Angeles. In the ensuing police riot, 150 people were arrested and four were killed including award-winning journalist Ruben Salazar.
September 4-7, 1970—VVAW’s Operation RAW took place. (See next page.)
September 26, 1970—The Concerned Officers Movement, representing over 300 people, held a press conference presenting their anti-war statement which was signed by 80 active-duty officers.
Operation Rapid American Withdrawal

A War Reenactment Protest March by VVAW

VVAW’S FIRST NATIONAL ACTION was Operation Rapid American Withdrawal. Beginning at Trenton, NJ, the veterans re-enacted search-and-destroy missions and prisoner interrogations as they marched through towns and the countryside toward Valley Forge, PA, a three-day 90-mile trek that began on Sept. 4, 1970.

The marchers included 150 VVAW members (with 110 Purple Hearts) and helpers from friendly peace groups. The goal of the guerrilla theater was to educate the generally naïve American public about how U.S. military training and policy condoned the inhumane treatment of Vietnamese civilians and encouraged brutality.

Among those who joined the procession were veterans wearing red armbands to signify that they had been wounded in Vietnam. Some of the wounded were there in wheelchairs or on stretchers and all of them were on the trip to highlight the need for funds to end the “deplorable, inhumane conditions that prevailed in Veterans’ Administrations hospitals.”

Operation RAW received acclaim from a number of national figures. The closing event included movie stars Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda; activists Mark Lane and Charles Bevel and Pennsylvania’s Rep. Allard Lowenstein. After the final rally, VVAW members visited with patients at the Valley Forge VA hospital.
November 18, 1970—Nixon requested more aid for Cambodia to help keep Lon Nol in power.

November 30, 1970—The Concerned Officers Movement held a press conference urging that the trial of Lt. Calley be halted in favor of a “Citizens Commission of Inquiry” to look into the responsibility of senior commanders.

December, 1970— In the last week of December, newsstands received the upcoming issue of Playboy magazine which included a dramatic, full-page ad for VVAW. The organization’s membership climbed.

January 1, 1971—U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam totaled 334,600. Over the next 15 months there would be 196 acts of disruption against the country’s draft boards.

January 5, 1971—Congress prohibited sending troops or advisors into Cambodia.

January 31, 1971—With 8,500 members and still growing, VVAW held its Winter Soldier Investigation hearings. (See next page.)

February 14, 1971—South Vietnam invaded Laos with air and artillery support from the U.S.

February 18, 1971—Now with almost 10,000 members in 50 states, VVAW leaders met in New York to plan their next action. It would be called Dewey Canyon III.

March 8, 1971—The “Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI” removed 1,000 files from a Pennsylvania FBI office and mailed them to the press in order to expose FBI spying on Americans who were exercising their First Amendment rights.

March 30, 1971—The Army secretly ordered confiscation of anti-war literature being sent to troops in Vietnam.

April 22, 1971—John Kerry testified about VVAW’s Winter Soldier Investigation and the war to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. (See page 141.)

April 23, 1971—VVAW’s Dewey Canyon III began in Washington, D.C. (page 29); VVAW’s membership will reach nearly 20,000 over the upcoming summer months.

April 23, 1971—700 enlisted personnel (300 in uniform) participated in the Concerned Officer’s Movement anti-war memorial service.
VVAW'S SECOND NATIONAL EVENT sought to expose the true nature of the war and to point out that massacres like the one that took place at Mỹ Lai were far more common than the American public was being told. Entitled the Winter Soldier Investigation (WSI), the three-day forum started on January 31, 1971 and allowed 109 veterans—some of whom were officers—and six civilians to testify about the abuses and atrocities they had witnessed in Vietnam.

The term “Winter Soldier” was derived from Thomas Paine’s Revolutionary War pamphlet, The Crisis, and referred to Paine's commentary that a summer soldier is one who shrinks from duty when things get tough. To VVAW and its supporters, the veterans had a continuing duty to report what they had witnessed.

The testimony included an indictment of the military standards aimed towards civilians (including the practice of randomly attacking peasants with guns, artillery or vehicles for the fun of it); severe abuse of prisoners (including beatings, rapes, throwing people out of helicopters, cutting body parts, violent torture during interrogations and cutting off heads); and large scale violations (including incursions outside Vietnam, indiscriminate bombings and using napalm in heavily populated areas.)

The WSI statements about incursions outside Vietnam were timely. Just days earlier, the Pentagon had denied that U.S. troops had carried out operations in Laos. But at the WSI, five Marines recounted their secret missions in Laos and the extent to which the operation was disguised. Their testimony was soon bolstered by newspaper investigations even though much of the press had been hostile at the time. The vets also discussed broader issues like press coverage of the war, POWs, racism in the military, and—in one of the first public discussions on the topic—an analysis on the effects of Agent Orange.


VVAW received support from local attorneys, clergy and union leaders as well as from performers like Phil Ochs, David Crosby and Graham Nash. Nonetheless, the WSI event left the organization completely broke. In 1972, a film of the testimony was released in Manhattan. Entitled Winter Soldier, the film was also reviewed at film festivals in Cannes and Berlin. The film is still available at www.vvaw.org/store.

Although largely ignored by the media, decades later, declassified Army files vindicated veterans' claims that war crimes were being committed in Vietnam (see page 141).
By every conceivable indicator, our army that remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse...

— Marine Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr., June 7, 1971

April 24, 1971—500 GIs led an anti-war march of 500,000 protesters in Washington, D.C.

May 1, 1971—Civil disobedience and protests against the war began in Washington, D.C. 12,000 protesters would be arrested.

May, 1971—Two Buddhist nuns self-immolated in South Vietnam to protest the war.

Memorial Day weekend, 1971—VVAW members conducted a four-day march tracing the route of Paul Revere to the Lexington Green.


June 13, 1971—The New York Times started publishing the Pentagon Papers showing that Johnson administration’s lied to Congress and the public. The study (commissioned by the Defense Department) was given to the press by researchers Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony J. Russo.

June 17, 1971—Nixon declares a “War on Drugs”.

August 1971—VVAW’s newspaper, First Casualty, was launched.

Hill 937, Fragging & Military Mayhem

By 1971, U.S. MILITARY MORALE was seriously impaired. “By every conceivable indicator, our army that remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers,” wrote Marine Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr. in the Armed Forces Journal (June 7). “Sedition, coupled with disaffection from within the ranks, and externally fomented with an audacity and intensity previously inconceivable, infest the Armed Services...”

And with good reason. For one thing, the strategies weren’t working and soldiers were paying the price as illustrated in the story of Hill 937: It was a 10-day battle over an unimportant hill that left 72 American soldiers dead and 372 wounded. It was dubbed Hamburger Hill. Unbelievably, the mound was then abandoned within a month. The officer who had ordered and led the attack ended up with a $10,000 bounty on his head. This practice of killing officers or soldiers, called fragging, was on the increase. According to the Pentagon, there were 209 fraggings in 1970, twice as many as the previous year.

Military brass could embellish as many reports and claim as many victories as it wanted, but the troops knew differently. The military leadership also knew that it had a growing drug problem in the ranks. Not only could drugs be purchased in Vietnam, but the military itself supplied troops with narcotics to get them revved up, which increased drug addiction in the ranks and would later slow PTSD recovery among veterans.

Even when the U.S. switched to an air war, military bases suffered riots, anti-war protests, and resistance. Court-martials, bad discharges and prison rebellions rose. Some personnel refused to deploy or to fly their missions. Various ships were sabotaged. According to the House Armed Service Committee, “Recent instances of sabotage, riot, willful disobedience of orders, and contempt for authority...are clear-cut symptoms of a dangerous deterioration of discipline.”
OPERATION DEWEY CANYON III was a VVAW protest in Washington, D.C. to denounce the war and a call by the veterans to bring their brothers home. VVAW sought to support legislation to end the funding of the war machine. VVAW viewed it as an incursion.

The military had used limited incursions during the war. Two of them—Operations Dewey Canyon I and II—had gone into Laos in 1969 and 1971, respectively. VVAW envisioned their event as a limited incursion into contested territory, the nation’s capital. So, on the cold, foggy morning of April 19, 1971 the demonstration began. About 900 vets and several Gold Star parents (whose sons had died in Vietnam) marched to Arlington National Cemetery to pay tribute to their fallen comrades. When the authorities refused to let the group enter the cemetery, the vets and Gold Star parents held a brief ceremony at the gate. A Gold Star father played “Taps” and a wreath was laid at the locked gate.

The vets marched back through Washington to the Capitol steps, vowing to return to the cemetery at a later date. Awaiting the veterans was a group of Congressmen who talked about how they were trying to end the war. After several

continued on next page

Photos: Vets returned their medals. More than one also sent back his cane.
had spoken at length, the vets got impatient. “You’ve been talking to us long enough, it’s time you began listening,” one person called out.

Next, the vets marched to the Mall behind the Capitol building and set up a permanent camp for the remainder of their stay. A U.S. District Court had decided that this Mall encampment was illegal, but the court of Appeals reversed the order. The battle for the Mall had begun.

Nixon received hourly reports on the protest developments. His spokesman told the press that the vets weren’t vets at all. The newspapers began talking about “alleged veterans.” This tactic stopped when the veterans produced over 900 DD 214’s (discharge papers).

Meanwhile, 200 vets went to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to listen to a hearing on the war. Others lobbied Congressmen or performed Operation RAW-style guerilla theater re-enactments around the city. Two hundred vets also returned to Arlington National Cemetery, gained entrance and conducted the ceremony that had been disallowed the day before.

But the big battle came when the Supreme Court reversed the order of the Court of Appeals and gave the vets until 4:30 the next afternoon (Wednesday) to get off the Mall.

On Wednesday, the vets continued to lobby Congress. By now, it had become clear that the Congressmen were just glad-handing the veterans. The vets began to take a more militant attitude: About 50 vets from New York took over Senator Buckley’s office when he refused to meet with them.

At 4:30 that afternoon, at the time when VVAW was supposed to clear off the Mall, nobody moved. A deal was offered: The vets could remain but only if they stayed awake all night. After a couple rounds of voting, the group opted for sleep. The Justice Department backed down, no arrests were made and the vets won a major victory defying the Supreme Court. That night the vets slept on the Mall.

And when they flamboyantly cast away their medals near the capital building, they did so with the rage of ‘survivor-heros’, not only rejecting tainted awards but literally throwing them in the face of those who awarded them…

— Robert Jay Lifton, “Home From the War”
On Thursday, 100 angry vets marched to the Supreme Court and held a demonstration against the war. The police ordered them away; the vets refused. The cops gave warning but the vets still stayed and were arrested. The news spread rapidly to the other veterans, many of whom were still lobbying. The anger was deepening and frustration with the Congressmen was growing. At the same time, the District Court dissolved its original injunction and castigated the Justice Department for refusing to carry out the Supreme Court order. On Thursday night, plans were made for the final day of the demonstration. All vets would dispose of their war medals in a compelling act against the war.

**The Return of Their Medals**

On Friday, one thousand veterans marched to the Capitol building where they placed a sign marked “trash” on a fenced statue. One by one, each veteran approached this staging area. Into the microphone, they their names and their units. Many of the men expressed their personal viewpoints against the war. Then, angrily, they hurled their war medals over the fence toward the Capitol Building itself.

One veteran threw away his nine Purple Hearts. Another threw a cane he used as a result of a war injury. And on and on it went. Discharge papers, Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, Purple Hearts. Thousands of medals were thrown back at the very same government that had sent each of the veterans to fight. Never in the history of the U.S. had veterans come home to protest a war while it was still raging.

In the wake of Dewey Canyon III, VVAW membership skyrocketed to nearly 30,000 including 9,000 active-duty GIs.

Photos. On facing page, vets cheer in front of the Supreme Court. Below, men in the crowd during events. Additional photos of Dewey Canyon III are shown in the “More on VVAW” section in the back of this book starting on page 110.
Fighting Racism at Home

In 1971, VVAW began to send food to support the African American community in Cairo, IL. The Cairo United Front had been created by Rev. Charles Koen, a 25 year old Baptist minister, to combat racial injustice in the town.

The United Front instituted a boycott of white-owned stores because of their racist practices. In retaliation, the white Citizens Council and the police had shot into the black community 174 times in a little over two years. Most of the shooting was done at night by snipers.

In deciding to support the community, VVAW issued a statement which read, in part, “In many ways the black people of Cairo are suffering the same indignities as of the Vietnamese people. They are being economically exploited, socially ostracized, and politically denied a say in their destiny. Like the Vietnamese they have finally united against that power structure that has suppressed them and are fighting it. The racism which we saw in Vietnam and which many of us agree is one of the reasons for war crimes, exists in Cairo.” VVAW sent convoys of food and supplies to Cairo for about a decade.

August 6-9, 1971—VVAW commemorated the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. VVAW membership had risen to nearly 20,000 including 2,000 soldiers serving in Vietnam.

August 16, 1971—Two South Vietnamese veterans self-immolated to protest the war.

August 18, 1971—VVAW members were clubbed by police when they tried to attend Nixon’s speech at the Illinois state capitol.

September 3, 1971—Nixon’s “plumbers” burglarized a psychiatrist’s office to get information on Pentagon Papers author Daniel Ellsberg.

September 3, 1971—Members of VVAW marched from Ft. Worth to Arlington, TX reenacting Vietnam War-style searches and interrogations along the way to protest the war.

1971—VVAW’s rap groups (now group therapy) evolved.

1971—Sailors in the Saigon area circulated petitions against further military involvement in southeast Asia, gathering around 2,000 signatures before the military cracked down with physical assaults, arrests and discharges.

September 14, 1971—VVAW protested Kissinger and McNamara at the grand opening of the JFK Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

October, 1971—VVAW denounced less-than-honorable military discharges for gays.

October 11, 1971—Soldiers near the Cambodian border refused to patrol outside their firebase and another 65 signed a letter to Senator Kennedy protesting that they are being ordered to carry out operations contrary to U.S. policy.

October 12, 1971—VVAW supported S.O.S. (Stop Our Ship), the crew members’ effort to stop the attack carrier USS Coral Sea from departing from its base in California. (Attack carriers were involved in half the bombings of Indochina.)

October 13, 1971—VVAW participated in the National Moratorium protest.

October 29, 1971—The number of American troops in Vietnam dropped to 196,700, the lowest since 1966.
Veterans Day, 1971—VVAW held programs across the country mostly involving memorials, lobbying and parades. The events included the participation of active duty military personnel: 150 at Fort Sam Houston, 200 at Fort Campbell, and 71 at Fort McClellan. Seven VVAW members were arrested while trying to join a memorial event in New York City. Another 250 VVAW members had received permission to join the official parade in San Francisco but were attacked by city police before they arrived at the viewing stand (with five veterans being hospitalized and over 100 arrested.) Thirty-five people in New Orleans and more than one hundred (including active-duty servicemen) in Kileen, TX (Fort Hood) were arrested for marching without a permit.

Thanksgiving, 1971—Members of VVAW fasted and held memorial services at state capitals across the nation.

Christmas Eve, 1971—VVAW’s “Operation Peace on Earth” (above).


January 2, 1972—The last draft lottery. These men were never called to duty. The U.S. now had more Conscientious Objectors than draftees.

March 7, 1972—The U.S. bombings of North Vietnam already equaled the number of raids for all of 1971.
March 30, 1972—North Vietnam launched the Easter Offensive to create as many gains as possible in advance of the Paris Peace Accords. The offensive caught the U.S. off guard with simultaneous attacks on three fronts. It lasted until October 22.

April 15, 1972—The U.S. began three days of heavy bombing of North Vietnam; a resurgence of anti-war protests included activity on bases.

April 19, 1972—VVAW took over the naval reserve center in North Hollywood, CA for seven hours.

April 20, 1972—Nixon said the troop level would drop from 69,000 to 49,000 by July. Many troops being pulled out of Vietnam found themselves in Thailand to further the air war from there.

April 21, 1972—VVAW members turned themselves in at San Diego naval headquarters for committing war crimes while in Vietnam. They were charged with trespassing and defacing government property.

April 22, 1972—VVAW participated in Peace Action Day with large protests.

April 29, 1972—A VVAW protest shut down traffic on California Highway 1.

May 8, 1972—Nixon ordered the mining of Haiphong Harbor.

May 10, 1972—The U.S. launched large-scale bombing against North Vietnam.

May 10, 1972—VVAW joined a Fresno vigil held until 3:00 a.m. to mark the moment that the Harbor mines would become active.

May, 1972—VVAW members put themselves between police and students after two protests in succession at the University of New Mexico had involved police shootings.

May, 1972—VVAW participated in various protests including “mining” the harbor at Bellingham, WA with multi-colored balloons.

May 11, 1972—VVAW took over the Air Force recruiting office in downtown San Francisco.

May, 1972—VVAW led 800 people in a takeover of a Federal Building in Potsdam, NY.

VVAW protests in Colorado included a silent vigil in Laramie, march from Greeley to Denver, events at Lowry Air Force Base and Denver, and a 24-hour blockade of Highway 36 in Boulder. New England VVAW members occupied the captain’s quarters on the USS Constitution.

May 13, 1972—VVAW and active-duty brothers blocked entrances to an air force base in Idaho.
May 17, 1972—The U.S. started transferring military equipment to South Vietnam. In the first round, the U.S. supplied artillery, anti-tank weapons, 69 helicopters, 55 jet fighters, seven patrol boats and 100 other aircraft.

May 17, 1972—GIs exposed and denounced the Philippines as a forward base for the U.S. military.

May 20, 1972—VVAW participated in an “Armed Farces Day” protest at Portsmouth Naval Prison and held a People’s Trial of Nixon and Westmoreland. In addition to burning draft cards and discharge papers in Monterey, CA, VVAW also participated in: a protest at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base which includes former POW George Smith; a vigil at Lockbourne Air Force Base which included active-duty airmen; a Sing-in at Fort Campbell with GIs and peace activist Dave Dellinger; protests at Fort Carson, Fort Ord, Santa Ana Helicopter Station and Norton Air Force Base; a protest at Travis Air Force Base with Jane Fonda and a protest in Long Beach; a two-day protest at Fort Devens in Massachusetts with active-duty GIs, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn and Gold Star Mother Pat Litchfield; a large rally at Great Lakes Naval Station led by 400 active-duty sailors and Marines; and, having been denied permission to join the San Diego Armed Forces Day Parade, local VVAW reconstituted itself as the “San Marcos Drum and Bugle Corps”, got in, and then held a rally that included Joe Givens of the Black Serviceman’s Caucus and Tony Russo of the Pentagon Papers.
According to Jeb Magruder (of Nixon’s re-election group and later convicted in the Watergate scandal), the 1972 Republican Convention was held in Miami because their first choice, San Diego, was vulnerable to protests from the “thousands of indigenous anti-war activists in southern California.”

VVAW began organizing nationally for a turnout in Miami. As the convention opening neared, VVAW convoys snaked across various parts of the country. By that time, the VVAW contingent was dubbed the “Last Patrol,” in hopes that the war would be winding down.

The convoys arrived on Sunday, August 20 to find a wide range of protesters. Before they had even unpacked their gear, VVAW members discovered that Nazis had seized the protest stage and microphone. Within minutes the vets deposed the Nazis, much to the appreciation of members of the local Jewish community who witnessed the altercation. VVAW then set up its encampment to rest and make plans.

On Tuesday, 1,200 veterans conducted a silent march in formation to the convention site. Journalist Hunter S. Thompson described the march as, “contagious, almost threatening.” The march halted and faced 500 riot police guarding the site. After a brief standoff, a negotiated settlement allowed VVAW representatives to air grievances to Republican representatives.

On the last day, VVAW members managed small disruptions in both the convention proceedings and Nixon’s speech. Then they headed for Gainesville (previous page) to see about the arrests of their members there.

Lessons for the Movement

Many protestors found VVAW’s involvement inspiring. By the end of the convention they had also gained respect for VVAW’s self-discipline and cohesion. The developments during the convention helped consolidate the view among the anti-war protestors that VVAW had been good at keeping the police, Nazis and other ne’er-do-wells at bay: VVAW had controlled who was able to join its ranks and meetings. The organization also knew how to use electronic communications to stay on alert for trouble.

Due, in part, to the vets’ experiences and training in Vietnam, and to government interference in VVAW’s activities after they returned home, VVAW was unique in the anti-war movement: It understood the importance of doing security. Over the next decades, VVAW trained many organizations on how to keep control of their events without interference from police or provocateurs.
June 17, 1972—Some of Nixon’s operatives were arrested for burglarizing the Democratic Party offices at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C.

July 13, 1972—VVAW members were arrested in Gainesville, FL (page 35) in the lead-up to the Republican National Convention to be held in Miami.

August 21, 1972—The Republican National Convention began in Miami Beach (story on facing page).

October 12, 1972—An anti-war protest led by African American sailors on the \textit{USS Kitty Hawk} turned into a brawl. Nearly 50 sailors were injured.

October 20, 1972—The U.S. transferred additional military equipment to South Vietnam: 234 jet fighters, 32 transport planes, 277 helicopters, 72 tanks, 117 armored personnel carriers, artillery and 1,726 trucks—valued together at over $750 million, The U.S. also transferred the titles to all its military bases and the equipment on them.

November 30, 1972—The White House announced that 27,000 troops remained in Vietnam.


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**Supporting People’s Health Care**

In 1973, VVAW helped create the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Clinic to aid the largely rural and African American community in Bogue Chitto, AL. The program had been initiated by local activists who had been part of the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968.

Dubbed Operation County Fair, VVAW sought funds to build and maintain the sizeable free clinic. The staff oversaw the general needs of a community that otherwise had little access to health care. It also had a team to detect diseases like anemia, tuberculosis, rickets and parasites—afflictions that normally went untreated. The staff also developed a transport system to help in emergencies or with patients who were normally unable to travel.

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**Supporting Wounded Knee**

VVAW was able to covertly get supplies into Wounded Knee during the Native American takeover there. The following is excerpted from VVAW’s \textit{Winter Soldier}, May, 1973:

“VVAW thinks it is important for all of America to see the reasons behind Wounded Knee, as America must seek out the reasons behind the Vietnam War. VVAW takes special interest because we can see the roots of the Vietnam War in the way the United States has treated Native Americans.

“The people at Wounded Knee are sending us a message... that there comes a time when people must stand and fight to create the kind of life that is worth living as human beings. There are certain basic human rights which, when denied, cannot be negotiated but must be taken. They need our help. There is still a long legal battle ahead. By sending food and money, by educating others about Wounded Knee, and by thinking about what was done as it relates to our own lives, that is how we can support the American Indian. We must, like them, develop the strength to respect our lives; to resist the rape of our land; and to think seriously about what are the qualities of human life and social community that are important, and fight to create a situation where they can be achieved.”
December 18, 1972—The U.S. started heavy bombing of North Vietnam.


December 27, 1972—Capt. Michael Heck, a B-52 pilot, refused to fly saying, “a man has to answer to himself, first.” With over 200 previous combat missions, Heck realized his targets were now hospitals and civilians.

January 20, 1973—Anti-Nixon protests across the country included 5,000 VVAW members who were among the 100,000 at the inauguration.

January 20, 1973—VVAW members in Okinawa protested the war, staging a demonstration with kites and balloons along Kadena Air Force Base runways, bringing about the diversion of several KC-135s, an outpouring of Japanese police, and steadfastness on the part of the protesters.

January 27, 1973—The Peace Accords were signed by the U.S. and Vietnam.


January 30, 1973—Former Nixon aides were convicted in the Watergate burglary case.

February 2, 1973—The head of the Veterans Administration, Donald Johnson, went public with a proposal to save $160 million by cutting disability payments to Vietnam vets, amputees being the most seriously affected.

February 27, 1973—Some 200 Ogalala Lakota and followers of the American Indian Movement occupied the town of Wounded Knee, SD on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. (See VVAW statement on page 37.) The occupation resulted in a 71-day standoff with the government.

March 1, 1973—VVAW members testified in Japan about nuclear weapons.


April 1, 1973—VVAW protested President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s visit to U.S.

April, 1973—VVAW’s newspaper was renamed Winter Soldier. Its circulation was 25,000 per issue.

April 7, 1973—VVAW joined a PTSD conference held in Columbus, OH.

May 4, 1973—VVAW participated in a Washington, D.C. amnesty conference addressing the issue of war resisters and deserters.


May 30, 1973—The Pentagon announced 40 percent reductions in the B-52 bombing raids over Cambodia due to budgetary constraints and morale problems with bomber crews. Sorties had numbered around 50-60/day for the previous three months at a cost of $20,000 - $30,000 per mission. Smaller fighter-bombers still launched about 150 attacks per day on Cambodia.

Never before have so many questioned as much as these veterans have, the essential rightness of what they were forced to do.

– Murray Polner, “No Victory Parades”
June 6, 1973—Three Air Force officers of the Strategic Air Command in Guam were removed from the B-52 bombing runs because they had joined Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman in a legal challenge over the constitutionality of the bombing campaign in Cambodia. Military officials said the three were now deemed unreliable.


June 27, 1973—Ex-POW Abel Kavanaugh committed suicide. Kavanaugh and other ex-POWs were being threatened by the U.S. government for making pro-peace statements while they were in captivity. Officials backed away after the suicide.

July 17, 1973—Secretary of Defense Schlesinger told Congress that the U.S. carried out 3,500 secret bombing raids in Cambodia in 1969 and 1970.

August 15, 1973—U.S. B-52s dropped bombs on Cambodia.

October 15, 1973—Two sailors on the USS Midway were sent to the brig for distributing a VVAW newspaper.

November 19, 1973—VVAW took over the director’s office of the Veterans Administration in Milwaukee.

January 25, 1974—VVAW members took over Saigon Information Office in Washington, D.C. and draped banners reading “Implement the Peace Accords” out the window.

February 4, 1974—The House of Representatives authorized an investigation into the legality of impeaching Nixon. Protests over the next months rallied under slogans like “Impeach Nixon” and “Throw the Bum Out!”

February 18, 1974—VVAW protested an “Honor America” event in Alabama which featured Richard Nixon and segregationist George Wallace.

March 15, 1974—VVAW protested Nixon’s visit to Chicago.

March 17, 1974—VVAW participated in International Day of Solidarity with the Crusade for Justice and the Chicano Movement in Denver.

May 17, 1974—Sixteen people were arrested for “demonstrating on government property” during a protest at the Milwaukee Veterans Administration.


August 9, 1974—Nixon resigned.

There is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people.

—Howard Zinn
Fighting Suppression and Repression

Under director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI began targeting American progressives in the 1950s. By monitoring groups through infiltration and surveillance, the FBI sought to destroy the “threat” from the left. The targets included Martin Luther King, Jr., feminist organizations, and the anti-war movement. Eventually, the web of repression also involved the CIA and various state and local police departments.

Nixon insisted that the FBI go after VVAW and the agency easily obliged. The FBI gathered at least 21,000 pages of documents on VVAW (a more thorough set of notes than the organization maintained on itself.) Government agencies infiltrated meetings and repeatedly tried to bait members into engaging in violent or illegal activities.

One of the methods of repression was the prosecution of activists on bogus charges. The practice was widespread. VVAW had to defend its own members and understood the need for solidarity with other organizers who had been victimized. Throughout the 1970s VVAW stood in solidarity with political prisoners and folks who faced unfair charges including the Attica Brothers, Leavenworth Brothers, Gary Lawton, Zurebu Gardner, Bob Hood and many others.

Ford’s Administration

August 9, 1974—Gerald Ford was sworn in.
August 19, 1974—VVAW members raised a protest banner from box seats during a baseball game at Shea Stadium. They were beaten and arrested.
August 19, 1974—VVAW took over the director’s office of the Chicago Veterans Administration (VA) for three hours.
August, 1974—VVAW denounced U.S. support for Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos.
August 26, 1974—VVAW protested at the VA building in San Francisco.
August 30, 1974—A VVAW member was inexplicably placed under house arrest by the Secret Service during Gerald Ford’s visit to Columbus, OH.
September 8, 1974—Ford pardoned Nixon. VVAW joined the protests.
September, 1974—VVAW called for Independence for Puerto Rico.
VVAW Fighting for Veterans’ Rights and Benefits

There had been problems with the quality of care at the Veterans Administration (VA) dating back for many decades before Vietnam. By the time Vietnam veterans needed health care, those problems had become catastrophic.

The national press published stories and photographs of some of the appalling conditions which included filthy and decayed buildings, rats running wild in the wards, and actively in-use industrial garbage cans sitting right next to patients’ hospital beds. The media described the VA hospitals as understaffed, overcrowded and downright medieval.

Many veterans challenged the outrageous situation. VVAW was consistently the most vigorous and vocal group, spurred on by both individual cases and the overall injustice being done to their fellow veterans. Protesters interrupted Nixon’s nominating speech in 1972, conducted hunger strikes in 1974, and carried out a long succession of takeovers of various VA offices all around the country to demand improvements.

Despite dissent, congressional investigations, and recurring press coverage, the Veterans Administration deficiencies continued mercilessly over the decades including:

- assuming that veterans who reported an illness were just trying to get over on the system;
- failing to recognize Agent Orange as a major health concern;
- failing to accurately assess or treat PTSD;
- diverting funds that were intended to help vets’ readjustment problems;
- failing to provide sufficient medical staffing;
- ignoring test results;
- failing to regularly change surgical dressings;
- conducting unnecessary surgery;
- failing to get patients’ consent for research;
- transferring diseases (HIV, hepatitis and legionaries disease);
- using poorly disinfected equipment;
- accepting bribes and kickbacks;
- mishandling claims;
- losing paperwork;
- delaying appointments for patients; and even
- mis-identifying graves in VA-run cemeteries.

To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan

—Abraham Lincoln quote on a plaque at VA headquarters
The U.S. Turn Toward State-sponsored Terror

Parts of Africa—Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique—gained independence from Portugal during the Ford administration. But, South Africa’s Black population continued to struggle against apartheid. In 1976, up to 20,000 young students in Soweto protested the imposition of Afrikaans as the official language for their schools. Police attacked the rally, killing 23. The violence that escalated over the next few days took hundreds of lives and injured 1,000. The incident ramped up international support for the anti-apartheid movement, but when Henry Kissinger met with South Africa’s president a week after the protest began, Kissinger didn’t mention Soweto. The U.S. government continued to support the apartheid government for years.

Meanwhile, military agencies in South America’s right-wing dictatorships had formalized joint efforts to suppress dissidents as part of Operation Condor. Henry Kissinger, the CIA and the U.S. Army School of the Americas (see page 75) were involved in the plans. In 1976, a junta seized power in Argentina, enacting a “dirty war” of state terrorism with forced disappearances, tortures, assassinations and death squads. The Ford administration increased military aid. Eventually, the “dirty wars” would be exported to Central America under the Carter and Reagan administrations.

September 16, 1974—Ford announced his amnesty program for “draft dodgers” and “deserters” who would be required to serve two years public service. There was no mention of less-than-honorable discharges.

September 17, 1974—Cincinnati police arrested seven protesters including four VVAW members at a picket line to support James Hardy, a Black community activist on trial.

September 21, 1974—VVAW participated in the 2nd International Conference of Exiles. The conference had delegates from Canada, Sweden, England, France and the U.S. The participants agree to boycott Ford’s program (see page 47), continue to campaign for Universal and Unconditional Amnesty, and seek an end to U.S. intervention in Indochina.

September, 1974—Hearings were held for the Iwakuni Five, soldiers who had been charged with distributing unauthorized literature that called for an end to U.S. support for South Korea’s dictator.

September 30, 1974—Chicago VVAW members picketed the VA.

September, 1974—Cincinnati VVAW held a demonstration at the VA hospital.
September 30, 1974—VVAW members sat in tiger cages in Santa Cruz, CA to bring attention to the 200,000 political prisoners being held in South Vietnam.

October 27, 1974—VVAW participated in a Puerto Rico Independence demonstration in New York City.

October, 1974—VVAW asserted that there are 580,000 less-than-honorable discharges from the War in Vietnam.

October 11, 1974—VVAW participated in Days of Concern events (about the ongoing war) in Oakland, CA.

October 29, 1974—VVAW “liberated” the Cambodian Mission office of Phnom Penh in New York City.

November 16, 1974—VVAW members from Washington rallied at the Peace Arch on Canadian border.

November 16, 1974—VVAW participated in the Second National Council for Universal and Unconditional Amnesty in Louisville, KY.

November 25, 1974—GIs in Berlin went on strike against working conditions.

November 30, 1974—A VVAW member was among 17 people arrested at Denver area rally for United Farm Workers.

December 4, 1974—A Senate subcommittee found that the VA had allowed the use of behavior-control drugs and brain surgery on unwilling patients.

January 25, 1975—Four VVAW members were among 17 people arrested during a march by Chicago Committee to Stop Police Repression.

No matter that patriotism is too often the refuge of scoundrels. Dissent, rebellion, and all-around hell-raising remain the true duty of patriots.

—Barbara Ehrenreich
January 27, 1975—VVAW participated in 15 rallies across the country commemorating the signing of the Paris peace agreement and demanding an end to the war.

February, 1975—VVAW protested against Bird Air (a firm connected to the CIA) for flying supplies to Phnom Penh in Cambodia.

March 28, 1975—VVAW occupied the Veterans Administration office in Syracuse, NY.

March 29, 1975—VVAW protested in various cities on Vietnam Veterans Day for benefits and amnesty.

May 17, 1975—VVAW participated in Armed Forces Day protests.

April 29, 1975—U.S forces were evacuated from South Vietnam. The Vietnam Era officially ended the following day.

August 11, 1975—VVAW picketed the Veterans Administration Regional Office in Detroit, MI.

October, 1975—VVAW’s newspaper was renamed *The Veteran*.

October, 1975—Sailors assigned to the *USS Haddock* nuclear sub started a successful campaign to stop the ship from sailing out of Hawaii before needed repairs were undertaken.

November 11, 1975—VVAW picketed the Veterans Administration offices in Boston and Chicago.

December 1, 1975—VVAW picketed the Veterans Administration in Milwaukee.

December 2, 1975—The king of Laos was overthrown by the Pathet Lao.

March 24, 1976—VVAW picketed the Veterans Administration in Buffalo, NY.

April 5, 1976—VVAW protested at the Veterans Administration in New York City.

June 6, 1976—VVAW, once again, took over the Statue of Liberty. This time VVAW was demanding an extension of the GI bill and improvements at the Veterans Administration. The organization dropped banners (pictured above) from the statue’s crown.

July 4, 1976—VVAW protested in Philadelphia. (A month later, VFW leaders tried to blame the radical groups that were in Philly on the 4th for making members of their convention sick. The illness actually turned out to be Legionnaires’ Disease.)
Fatigues for Freedom Fighters
& Support for Southern Africa

By 1977, VVAW was joining African Liberation Day protests, educational programs and forums in support of the struggles for Black rights in southern Africa.

In 1978, VVAW began the “Fatigues for Freedom Fighters” campaign which collected boots, clothing, and money for South Africa. At one program in New York City, during which vets had donated eight sets of fatigues and two sets of boots, one veteran pointed out, “In Vietnam, I realized I fought on the wrong side—a lot of other guys realized this too. Tonight I feel better knowing that somebody will be wearing these fatigues soon fighting for freedom instead of against it.”

VVAW carried out the campaign in several cities across the country, raising awareness as well as funds. VVAW presented the gear to South Africa’s Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) on Africa Liberation Day.

Photo: PAC supporters
VVAW’s Fight for Veterans’ Reprieves and Upgrades

IN THE MID-1970S, hundreds of thousands of American men were still ensnared by military regulations and laws enacted by previous administrations. The men fell into two categories: those who had refused to serve in the war and those who had served but left without honorable discharges. The latter group included soldiers who resisted or opposed the war while they were in the military, African Americans who had protested military racism, and soldiers who had developed PTSD during their service.

In 1972, VVAW joined the struggle for amnesty for draft-resisters who had gone into exile. The organization worked with other groups that were mostly in and around the National Council for Universal and Unconditional Amnesty (NCUUA), a coalition made up of primarily religious groups and people in exile. VVAW brought two very unique perspectives to the coalition.

Photos:
Top of page and top of page 47: protests in the U.S. demanding Universal and Unconditional Amnesty
Pictured at left: an anti-war protest in Canada attended by U.S. war resisters in exile
First, VVAW’s members were former soldiers who had actually served in the immoral war and who were now offering their whole-hearted support to those who had refused to be a part of it.

VVAW also linked the politics of the war with the policies that had rendered the less-than-honorable discharges to over half-a-million men who had served.

VVAW sponsored speaking tours across the nation, held debates and community meetings as well as participating in national and international conferences.

VVAW opposed the amnesty programs proposed by both Ford and Carter. Ford had given Nixon a complete pardon, but his amnesty program in 1974 excluded the 500,000+ less-than-honorable discharges handed out during the Vietnam era. Nor did Ford’s pardon mention people who had refused to register for the draft. There was no attempt to clear the records of resisters who had served prison terms.

VVAW continued to demand universal and unconditional amnesty for all war resisters. According to VVAW, Carter’s 1977 pardon only affected 50,000 out of over 1 million Americans in need of amnesty. It excluded 650,000 less-than-honorable discharged vets, 30,000 military deserters, and 227,000 draft violators. The presidential programs created a divide in the amnesty coalition.

**Bad Papers & Special Codes**

As VVAW saw it, the largest group in need of amnesty—those with bad discharges—had been left behind: “For veterans, the bad discharges mean more than just a slap on the wrist from the military. If you’ve got one, it means that you are marked for the rest of your life. Employers don’t want a vet with a bad discharge; the VA doesn’t care if you live or die and the GI Bill is out of reach,” wrote the organization in *The Veteran*.

There are five classifications for discharge from the military: Honorable and the four less-than-honorable categories—general, undesirable, bad conduct and dishonorable. Anyone who gets undesirable discharge or below is not eligible for veterans’ benefits.

SPN codes were an additional problem. These were Separation Program Numbers representing 530 different codes that could include things like apathy, shirker or sexuality. A vet who was given a general discharge under honorable conditions (meaning he was still eligible for VA benefits) could get a code for “disloyal or subversive security program” if he had gotten a lot of anti-war literature in the mail while he was in the Army. Many Puerto Ricans who were drafted and were discharged early because they didn’t speak English had received bad discharges for failing to qualify. In the Air Force, African Americans got 30% of the Undesirable Discharges in 1972 even though they were only 12% of the enlistees.

Over the years, VVAW worked for discharge upgrades through veterans’ education, public education, and protests. Volunteers helped vets with individual counseling and in 1973 VVAW initiated the Discharge Upgrading Project in San Francisco. In 1974, Discharge Upgrading Projects were functioning in San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, Long Beach, Denver, St, Louis, Milwaukee, Chicago, Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati, Buffalo, New York City, Washington DC and Miami.
VVAW Confronts Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

VVAW encountered what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) long before the Veterans’ Administration acknowledged it as a widespread problem among Vietnam vets. The disorder was recognized in a vague way in World War I as a clinical condition, called “shell shock”, and was associated with combat duty. By World War II, these psychological casualties were being hospitalized.

But, Vietnam was different. It didn’t have armies in traditional combat, taking casualties as they seized territory. Vietnam was a guerrilla war in which the enemy could suddenly attack out of nowhere at any time, inflict casualties and then disappear. There is extra stress in this combat situation. Adding to that stress was the type of military training that soldiers often received which encouraged them to turn their rage on innocent civilians. Later in life, the former soldiers would experience PTSD.

Public Perception

Many in the public think “some people just can’t take it”. In fact, most people, even those who haven’t been in combat, are susceptible to PTSD especially when they suffer through multiple traumatic incidents. These can include surviving physical abuse, being raped, living through a natural disaster or even experiencing a car crash. Vietnam’s combat vets witnessed multiple incidents—sometimes in close proximity and quite horrific. It was the vets themselves who had to gather the body parts to take their brothers home. To make it worse, some soldiers witnessed their units rape, torture or massacre civilians or were possibly engaged in such atrocities themselves.

What the Veterans’ Administration could not seem to grasp at the time was that the soldiers might suffer a delayed reaction to all the violence. In previous wars, troops came home on ships. It took months to travel back to the U.S. It gave them lots of time to talk it out with their fellow soldiers. But, for this war, home was an airplane ride away. Just put away all the sorrow, angst, fear, guarding, and adrenaline. Just be happy to be home. And, sure, at first they were.

Delayed Trauma

It might seem a though people who were able to withstand the war while fighting in it, shouldn’t have problems when they stopped fighting. But, the part of the brain that processes such extreme circumstances isn’t the same part that processes ordinary life. When there is great violence or personal threat, the older
(in terms of human evolution) and less cerebral parts of the brain take over. It is a built-in reflex that helps humans survive. Without proper counseling, those older parts of the brain—and the memories that they store—reassert themselves. Psychiatrists now understand that a normal, healthy brain should be traumatized by the horrors of war and that the manifestation of PTSD is when that trauma has not been adequately treated. The symptoms can include flashbacks, nightmares, rages, depression, anxiety, self-destructive behavior, drug and/or alcohol abuse, and suicide.

By 1970, VVAW members were aware of the value of “rap groups” in which vets could work through the memories and discuss the problems they were having stateside. Soon the discussion groups were springing up everywhere. VVAW expanded its raps groups and, at one point, there were 1,000 across the country. VVAW placed self-help groups in street-front veterans’ centers. Two doctors, Robert Lifton and Chaim Shatan, were among the few professionals who also worked to educate the public and other mental health professionals on the issue. VVAW raised demands with the VA and worked to educate VA staff.

VVAW counseled veterans on fighting for PTSD benefits and educated the public through articles, letters and forums.

The Veterans’ Administration was extremely slow to accept that PTSD was a major concern affecting a great many. It took until the turn of the century for concerned professionals to establish that a large majority of Vietnam veterans struggle with chronic PTSD. VVAW remains involved with the issue of PTSD and was able to work with veterans of the Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

Excerpts from “Please Read This”:

A very sad thing happened while we were there—to everyone...

We began slowly with each death and every casualty until there were so many deaths and so many wounded, we started to treat death and loss of limbs with callousness, and it happens because the human mind can’t hold that much suffering and survive...

And when they came out of My Lai, I heard the stories they came back with. I didn’t know whether they were true because I wasn’t there. If they were true, it meant my company had murdered people...

It meant because of lies I had been told I was sitting in the middle of a useless war, it meant if I died in Vietnam my life would have been used and wasted...

It meant if I decided not to do my job anymore I would be sent to jail and court-martialed. It meant a lot of people would think I was a traitor to my country because I didn’t believe in the war anymore...

It meant a lot of bad things I didn’t want to think about, based on stories I wasn’t sure were true. So I decided to forget about it.

—Jeff Needle, 1970
VVAW Takes on the Agent Orange Struggle

SOLDIERS WHO RETURNED HOME all had one thing in common—a desire to get back to life. But, the timing for Vietnam veterans was bad. The economy declined until it was the worst economic mess since the Great Depression. Jobs were hard to find. Inflation soared. For many vets, it was still hard times.

But, for some, things were about to get a whole lot worse: Vietnam veterans, who were significantly younger (averaging only the age of 23) than veterans of previous wars inexplicably began suffering from many old men’s ailments: problems of the liver or heart or kidneys; impaired vision or hearing; fatigue; loss of sex drive; blood in the urine; precancerous growths; low sperm counts; depression; and cancer. Their wives suffered miscarriages and stillbirths. Some children born after dad’s return had birth defects (often multiple birth defects) whereas no such problems had emerged with the kids born before dad left.

When the veterans took these concerns to VA hospitals, they were accused of faking it—that they had done something to themselves to try for a free ride on their veterans’ benefits. Or, perhaps, Veterans Administration doctors asserted, the veteran just had psychological problems. Vietnam vets didn’t appreciate being called crazy liars. The VA didn’t like their ‘attitude problem’. Things were off to a bad start.

Finding the Connection

Whereas the VA never thought outside the box, some vets and their families and friends began to suspect a link to Agent Orange when they discovered that too many others who had served (often in the same units) were experiencing the same bizarre afflictions. They saw a correlation and found the probable causation: The poison that had been sprayed all around them in Vietnam. But, it was a long time before the idea caught on.

The veterans who took their exposure complaints to the VA learned that those doctors had never heard of Agent Orange. Yes, the higher-ups in the Administration were aware, but they just issued decrees that the only ailment associated with the dioxin was the skin lesions of chloracne.

It was a phone call from a dying veteran’s wife that ignited a challenge to the old thinking: In 1977, a Chicago VA worker, Maude DeVictor, received a phone call about Charles Owen and his exposure to Agent Orange. A diligent worker with a conscience, Maude hadn’t heard of the defoliant, but wondered if other sick vets had experienced similar exposures and results. So, she began to ask them.

They had.

Maude took her concerns to her supervisor who ordered her to stop tracking this lead. She then took her discoveries about Agent Orange to the news media by approaching local reporter Bill Curtis at a TV station. Maude didn’t go to the reporter alone: VVAW was at her side urging the reporter to listen to what she had to say. Curtis did break the story and it went national. As things went public, hundreds of vets began calling.
For VVAW one story wasn’t enough. The organization immediately began public education. It established a clearinghouse that printed and distributed materials about Agent Orange.

**VA Denying the Link**

The VA officially responded to public queries by saying that it only had 27 cases of herbicide-related exposure in Vietnam; that chloracne was the only disability recognized as a result of that exposure; and that any other symptoms were fully reversible. The VA told its personnel that they must not write any information in veteran’s files suggesting that there was a relationship between an illness and defoliants; must not make statements about Agent Orange; and must not examine patients for herbicide poisoning.

Agent Orange, claimed one VA official, was no more toxic than aspirin.

The rest of the world was beginning to understand otherwise. There had been alarming dioxin spills in the U.S. and scientific research from various locations was accumulating: It amounted to “we know it’s bad, the question is how bad?” The VA wasn’t going to be able to refute this much longer. What it could do is block medical claims by making the vets prove they were exposed: On what date were you exposed? What was your location? The VA and the Department of Defense teamed up for a new Catch-22: Detailed records on troop locations on any given day were non-existent, said the military. You need those records to prove you were exposed, said the VA. Ergo, soldier gets nothing.

Now, nearly a decade after being exposed to dioxin, Vietnam veterans of all political persuasions knew two things. First, was that their belief, as young soldiers, that their own country wouldn’t lie to them had been utterly wrong. Second, was that they were going to have to continue to shoulder the ongoing medical bills for their children’s birth defects and their own illnesses.

**Forcing the Issue**

In 1978, Paul Reutershan, a veteran with chloracne who was dying of cancer at the age of 28, filed a lawsuit against the Agent Orange manufacturers. Reutershan’s case attracted national attention and his statement during an interview, “I died in Vietnam, but I didn’t even know it, “drew sympathy across the country. Before he died later that year, he founded Agent Orange Victims International to continue the fight, not only for the rights of the people affected by the dioxin, but to make sure that nothing like that ever happened again.

Thousands of veterans joined Reutershan’s lawsuit and eventually the chemical companies agreed to a settlement. The funds may have helped veterans and their families offset some marginal medical costs, but the average payout totaled just $3800. Families of veterans who had already died got $400 less, and that was if they could prove that dad died from Agent Orange.

VVAW held a veterans’ conference in Chicago focusing on Agent Orange. VVAW expanded its literature about the defoliant and the lawsuits against the chemical companies. It reached out to the public, the media, and local and national elected officials. Members of VVAW also attempted to meet with VA director Max Cleland about Agent Orange but he turned them down. VVAW counseled their fellow veterans on

*continued on next page*
their rights and worked with environmental activists to alert community leaders about the use of dioxins in locally-sprayed weed killers. VVAW supported University of Wisconsin researchers who were looking into the effects of dioxin: Dow Chemical went after the research and members of VVAW found themselves targeted by chemical companies and were subjected to surveillance and break-ins.

Public awareness increased so much that the VA retreated into a huddle and tried to stay there: It instituted closed meetings. That wasn’t quite legal.

It claimed it couldn’t study the problem because there were no test subjects. Clearly, there were.

The head of the VA, Max Cleland, claimed the VA couldn’t do an outreach program to vets with unusual health problems because that might cause “needless anxiety.” Max became unpopular.

After some intervention, the VA did step out of its huddle offering better public relations. It sounded like it was going to do something. But, its next step—an advisory committee—was ineffective. Its ensuing “investigations” were limited. And so, it went, on and on.

By April 1993, the VA had compensated only 486 victims out of 39,419 claims. By 2012, there were 230,000 claims. Today, 50 years after the dousing of Vietnam, the VA recognizes that 2.6 million veterans were probably exposed.

I died in Vietnam, but I didn’t even know it.

— Paul Reutershan

October 1, 1977—The Navy established a facility on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The base eventually sent bombing operations to Afghanistan and Iraq.

October 11, 1977—VVAW joined protesters at Kent State rallying to stop the university from building over the site of the 1970 massacre there.

November 15, 1977—Six thousand people protested the Shah of Iran’s visit in Washington, D.C.

November, 1977—VVAW members confronted KKK members in San Diego. The racists were “hunting” illegal immigrants.

Fall, 1977—VVAW stood against the KKK in Chicago and Columbia, OH.

December 20, 1977—Vietnam joined the U.N.

December 31, 1977—Carter visited the Shah of Iran, calling the country “an island of stability” in the Middle East.

March 14, 1978—Israel invaded Lebanon.

Spring, 1978—VVAW denounced the use of secret trials in South Africa.

March 25, 1978—VVAW hosted a veterans’ conference in Chicago.

April, 1978—VVAW joined rallies in NYC for Cambodia and Vietnam.

April 22, 1978—VVAW carried out a counter recruiting action in the Bay Area.

Summer, 1978—VVAW called for an end to the arms race.

Summer, 1978—VVAW denounced white minority rule in South Africa.

Fall, 1978—VVAW supported the United League anti-Klan protests in Mississippi.

September, 1978—Congress lifted the embargo against Turkey, allowing our military to regain a presence there. The Incirlik Air Base, which houses nuclear bombs, would go on to carry out missions in the Gulf and Iraq Wars.
December 14, 1978—Paul Reutersham (see page 51) died of Agent Orange, just days after winning his class action suit.
January 7, 1979—The Pol Pot regime in Cambodia collapsed.
January 16, 1979—The Shah of Iran was forced out of power.
May 9, 1979—The Salvadoran Civil War began.

Foreshadows of More Wars

The Presidency of Jimmy Carter left two legacies in American foreign policy that would have a long term effect: the “dirty wars” in Central America and the Carter Doctrine in the Middle East. The policies would lead to wars in the decades to come. VVAW would oppose them.

The Dirty Wars

By the time Carter became president, the CIA was marching lockstep with Argentina and its cohorts, dragging Latin America through more “dirty wars”. In 1980, the architects of Operation Condor (page 42) brought a junta to power in Bolivia’s Cocaine Coup. The coup got funds from drug traffickers and support from European mercenaries who were recruited by Nazi Klaus Barbie.

Meanwhile, in response to a left wing upsurge in Central America, a new offensive grew out of Operation Condor. This one, called Operation Charly, created a campaign of assassinations, forced disappearances and tortures in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Argentina (coordinating with the CIA) also set up military centers in Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras.

For his part, Carter tried to prioritize human rights, to pull the CIA back from its paramilitary approach, and turn the intelligence agency toward information gathering. None of it stuck. The agency was able to covertly continue. When it did encounter limitations, it relied on its allies to carry out the mission: Israel sent ship loads of arms. Carter’s CIA reforms were eventually overturned.

The Carter Doctrine

Although Carter was able to help bring about the Camp David Peace Accords, his Middle East policy actually left a more long-lasting and sinister path by way of the Carter Doctrine. In a 1980 speech, Carter asserted that the U.S. would use military force to defend “its national interests” in the Persian Gulf. After all, the U.S. needed Middle East oil to run its military and its military was already pretty big, and still getting bigger, partly to get more oil.

Carter’s administration began to develop the Rapid Deployment Force (again, heavily reliant on oil) to enable the U.S. military to be highly mobile so it could get to areas where it had no military bases. Carter also initiated the building of new military bases in the Middle East. Carter, himself, never started a war anywhere. But, all of his successors carried out military actions in at least one country in the Persian Gulf. As of 2017, the U.S. maintains military bases in every Persian Gulf country except Iran. Such military dominance provokes militant anti-American hostility and the wars continue.
In 1977, VVAW made the campaign to free Ashby Leach a major focus of its work. Ashby was a former medic who had served with the Marines in Vietnam where he was wounded. When he returned home, he found a job with Chessie Railroad. He requested the GI Bill, but like other vets, was turned down. He lobbied to get that changed but ultimately was fired for being a malcontent.

Frustrated by having spent five years going through the system only to have it all backfire, Ashby took matters into his own hands. He went to the Cleveland headquarters of the railroad and, unloaded shotgun in hand, demanded that Chessie honor the GI Bill for Vietnam veterans. He was arrested. Many veterans sympathized with Ashby’s predicament.

June 20, 1979—The Nicaraguan National Guard killed ABC news correspondent Bill Stewart and his interpreter Juan Espinosa. The incident was caught on camera and broadcast in the U.S. where support for the Somoza regime plummeted.


July 6, 1979—VVAW joined a Wisconsin protest against nukes.

November 4, 1979—Ninety people, including 52 Americans, were taken hostage in Iran. The incident grew into an international crisis and would lead to the Iran-Contra affair.

March 22, 1980—VVAW participated in an anti-draft protest in Washington, D.C. due to statements from the government that it might re-implement the program.

March 24, 1980—El Salvador’s Archbishop Oscar Romero, a vocal critic of human rights violations and violence, was murdered while saying Mass by four unknown assassins presumed to be members of a death squad led by Roberto D’Aubuisson.

Spring, 1980—In response to a new program, 9,000 vets in Minnesota requested Agent Orange screening.


December 2, 1980—Missionaries from the U.S. were raped and murdered in El Salvador by the National Guard.
The Reagan Era

January 20, 1981—Ronald Reagan was inaugurated and 52 American hostages were released by Iran.

February, 1981—VVAW denounced Reagan’s plan to continue the draft.

March 8, 1981—Vets Unity Day events were held in over 25 cities.

March, 1981—VVAW rallies were held around the U.S. to protest Reagan’s cuts to vets’ programs.

March 6, 1981—Vietnam veteran Peter DeMott was sentenced for attacking a Trident submarine at a General Dynamics shipyard. He repeatedly backed a truck into the ship’s rudder in what he referred to as a spontaneous act of disarmament. DeMott and his friends would attack another Trident—the next time with hammers—in 1982.

Agent Orange:
Conference, Days of Action

The National Veterans Task Force on Agent Orange held a conference on May 24, 1981 in Washington, D.C. to discuss developments in the fight to get testing, treatment, and compensation for victims of Agent Orange. VVAW was a member of the Task Force which included 28 veterans and environmental groups. The conference consisted of scientific and medical panels, workshops, and strategy planning. It also presented updates on the Veterans Class-Action suit against the manufacturers of Agent Orange, on sending for records, and on filing for disabilities.

The conference highlighted the government’s role in holding back the process. Although bills had been introduced in Congress by Rep. Tom Daschle and Sen. Larry Pressler (that the VA should presume a service connection for diseases for veterans exposed to the defoliants) and by Rep. Benjamin Gilman, Sen. Alan Cranston, and Sen. John Heinz (to require VA guidelines for Agent Orange claims), the government, said a conference organizer, “hasn’t even defined for us what we are supposed to provide for proof” of poisoning.

VVAW also held a series of events before the conference including a picket line at the Veterans Administration Office, a march, and a rally in Lafayette Park. After the conference ended, VVAW went to Arlington National Cemetery to lay a wreath in memory of the victims of Agent Orange. VVAW was, once again, stopped at the gate of the cemetery by National Park Police. The wreath was left outside the gate.


May 24, 1981—VVAW participated in the National Veterans Task Force Conference.

May 25, 1981—Vietnam veterans began a sit-in at the Los Angeles Veterans Administration calling for treatment for Agent Orange and good medical care for veterans. The group was evicted by police after 18 days. A hunger strike by some of the participants lasted 45 days.

June 7, 1981—The Israeli Air Force destroyed a nuclear reactor in Iraq.

July 17, 1981—Targeting PLO offices, Israeli aircraft bombed Beirut, destroying apartment buildings and killing 300 civilians.

1981—The Palmerola Air Base was established by Honduras and began serving as a base for the U.S. military in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

September 26, 1981—VVAW members testified at hearings of the New York State Dioxin Study Commission.

Fall, 1981—Vietnam veterans marched from New Mexico to California to protest unfair treatment by Veterans Administration.


Vets Center Invaded

On February 12, 1982, a new Vets Center in Mobile, AL was raided by federal state and local officials without an initial warrant. Agents seized client files and Alabama Veterans Service files before the office was shut down.

During and shortly after the fiasco, the staff and volunteers were arrested and injured. Evidently, their crime was smoking pot on Veterans’ Day and doing drugs in their off time, but the government agents were clearly hostile toward the left-wing attitudes at the center: Their crime became a “conspiracy” and eventually involved the Vets Center in Birmingham and the regional office in Atlanta. The Alabama vets had been the nucleus and leadership for the Southeastern part of the Vietnam veterans movement for a decade. In the last two years before the raid, the vets had been “investigated” by various government agencies.

Among the prosecuted was Dave Curry (picture on stretcher) who also worked with the Southern Poverty Law Center and NAACP. Dave went on to be a professor in St. Louis. Among those who did the prosecuting was Jeff Sessions. Sessions went on to become a gnome in the Trump administration.
Operation Dewey Canyon IV

VVAW MEMBERS RETURNED to Washington, D.C. on May 12, 1981 to address veterans’ issues and U.S. policy overseas. VVAW held three days of events that included protests at the Veterans Administration and Congress and a visit to Arlington National Cemetery.

VVAW rallied to go to the nation’s capital to demand treatment for Agent Orange victims, to call for benefits for veterans, to oppose cuts to the VA, to support incarcerated vets, to demand single-type discharges and to oppose aid for the government of El Salvador.

While in Washington, VVAW also helped gather together the National Vietnam Vets Network. The groups were united under two principles: first, fight for decent benefits for all veterans regardless of discharge status, and second, there shall be no more Vietnams. The network sought to coordinate their activities, exchange information and publish an internal newsletter.

The vets groups that initially joined were the Agent Orange Victims of New Jersey; VVAW; Veterans for Peace; Vietnam Veterans Awareness Works of Limo, Ohio; Vietnam Veterans of America of Fairbanks, Alaska; Veterans of the Vietnam War of Salt Lake City; and the Vietnam Veterans and Family Outreach Group from LaCrosse, WI.

VVAW members in southern California who were unable to travel to Washington held a corresponding protest in San Bernardino, CA.
December 11, 1981—El Salvador’s army killed over 800 civilians in the village of El Mozote which had been neutral in the country’s civil war.

December 15, 1981—Iraq’s Embassy in Lebanon was bombed killing 61.

January 7, 1982—Ronald Reagan ordered the continuation of compulsory draft registration. (800,000 fail to sign up, the lowest compliance rate ever.)

February 12, 1982—A Vets Center was invaded by police. (See page 56.)

March 10, 1982—The U.S. put an embargo on Libyan oil for supporting terrorists.


March 26, 1982—The ground-breaking ceremony for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was held in Washington, D.C.

1982—Vice-President Bush began pushing for CIA and military involvement in the War on Drugs.

May 12, 1982—Operation Dewey Canyon IV took place. (See page 57.)

June 6, 1982—The Lebanon War began with Israeli forces invading southern Lebanon to drive out the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The U.N. Security Council demanded Israel withdraw its troops.

June 12, 1982—VVAW participated in a nuclear weapons protest in New York City attended by one million people.

August 21, 1982—U.S. Marines and French troops arrived in Lebanon to oversee the withdrawal of the PLO.

November, 13, 1982—VVAW participated in National Salute, the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

April 18, 1983—The U.S. Embassy was bombed in Beirut killing 63 people.

April 27, 1983—VVAW, Black Veterans for Social Justice and Vietnam Veterans of America joined forces to lobby for veterans’ rights in New York.

May 2, 1983—VVAW participated in Armed Forces Day.

May 6, 1983—VVAW held a forum on the draft.


May, 1983—VVAW raised funds for a Vietnam veteran memorial in New Mexico.

July 17, 1983—The New York Times reported that in the 1960s, up to 70 inmates at a Philadelphia prison had been subjected to dioxin by Dow Chemical with some of the inmates developing severe chloracne, lesions and blisters. No records identifying the inmates were found.

August 21, 1983—Benigno Aquino, one of the Philippine leaders who opposed the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, was assassinated.

October 23, 1983—Marine barracks in Beirut were destroyed by a suicide bomber, killing 241 American and 58 French service members.
By the 1980s, the Reagan Administration’s foreign policy had made the phrase “No More Vietnams” quite popular. It was expressed on book covers, political buttons, banners and street corners. It was mostly utilized in relation to Nicaragua, El Salvador and neighboring countries where Reagan was keen to defeat leftist movements.

Writing in The Veteran in 1982, Jack Elder explained the situation for the majority of people in Central America: “Hunger and its variations—malnutrition, pellagra, starvation—don’t receive much attention in the news media. They probably aren’t considered much of a factor either by the Pentagon and State Department in their analysis of the current crisis in Central America. And yet, the issue of hunger is at the very core of the crisis,” said Elder.

The Need to Own Land

“In both El Salvador and Guatemala about 5% of the population controls 70% of the land. This translates into great tracts of productive land for the few fortunate farmers and no land at all for great numbers of agricultural day laborers (formerly farmers). ...Without some land on which to grow subsistence crops, a family is essentially condemned to starvation. When the government aggravates this critical situation by razing villages and burning crops, the displacement of rural populations reaches disastrous proportions. And the guerrilla ranks swell.”

Eldera VVAW member, pointed out that most people scratch out only a subsistence living tending to coffee plants and harvesting fruit for United Brands and Dole.

“Profits which don’t directly go to foreign investors, go to members of the upper classes who effectively keep their money from benefitting the workers. This double concentration of land and money in the hands of just scores of families results first in frustration, then desperation for the millions of poor who sink deeper and deeper into misery and hopelessness.”

“It was clear during Dewey Canyon IV that our representatives in Congress lack the guts to resist the Reagan Administration line that Central America is next on the Commies hit list. We need to educate ourselves and our representatives. We need to know the root cause of the struggle in Central America. Then we can recognize the Administration’s [bull] for what it is and demand what really will help El Salvador and Guatemala—no U.S. aid, no U. S. intervention!”

VVAW support the people’s movements in Central America. It joined many protests, denounced the Contras and sent delegations to the region. VVAW also supported the School of the Americas Watch (page 75.)

Three years after writing his essay for VVAW, Jack Elder became the first person in the Sanctuary Movement to successfully claim Freedom of Religion as a defense in violating immigration laws when he sheltered Central Americans. Elder retold horror stories from Guatemala in which army helicopters came to villages: “The soldiers would take children from the arms of mothers, hold them by the feet and kill them by smashing their heads against rocks. Babies were kicked around a soccer field like a soccer ball. Pregnant women were slashed open and the fetus taken out.” Elder was ultimately convicted. He served time after he turned down a probation deal that would have forced him out of the Catholic refugee center and not allowed him to speak up on behalf of the sanctuary movement.
THROUGHOUT THE 1980S
VVAW continued to research, protest and speak out about Agent Orange and the lack of treatment for exposed soldiers. By this time, it was becoming clear that the veterans were not the only Americans who experienced the negative aftereffects of dioxin: Children of veterans were suffering from birth defects that would trace back to the poison. However, the Veterans Administration was still managing to drag its feet about recognizing any correlation between Agent Orange and the serious diseases and conditions that the dioxin caused. With determination, the veterans and their families struggled on.

October 25, 1983—The U.S. invaded Grenada.
1984—Osama bin Laden, having left Saudi Arabia to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, was now in charge of a front group in Afghanistan funded by ISI (Pakistan) which was a conduit for the CIA covert war.
February, 1984—VVAW called for the U.S. to get out of Lebanon.
March 5, 1984—Iran accused Iraq of using chemical weapons.
April 13, 1984—VVAW member Jack Elder was arrested for providing a haven for Central American refugees. (See story, page 59.)
July 1-8, 1984—VVAW participated in a veterans’ delegation to Nicaragua.
September 1984—An upswing in political violence in South Africa began. It would continue, resulting in 19,000 deaths in the next nine years.
November 1, 1984—VVAW held a protest at the Chicago Veterans’ Administration due to the firing of whistle-blower Maude DeVictor.
November 4, 1984—The Sandinistas won the Nicaragua elections.
December, 1, 1984—VVAW and other vets gathered in front of the U.S. Embassy in Managua to protest intervention in Central America, just one stop for their delegation visiting Nicaragua. (See story, page 119.)
January 14, 1985—The EPA classified dioxin as a probable human carcinogen.

January, 1985—VVAW participated in a Greenpeace Great Lakes event on dioxin-contaminated sites.

February, 1985—VVAW members in Illinois began a series of meetings with their senator and two congressmen.

March 1, 1985—Reagan described the Nicaraguan contras as the “moral equals of our founding fathers.”

June 17, 1985—National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane wrote an secret directive calling for the U.S. to help Iran which included sending military equipment. CIA director William Casey supported McFarlane’s plan.

August 4, 1985—VVAW participated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki memorial events.

August 20, 1985—The U.S. and Israel started secretly shipping anti-tank missiles to Iran.

September 9, 1985—Reagan issued sanctions against South Africa.

October 1, 1985—Israel bombed the headquarters of the PLO which had been moved to Tunis after being forced out of Lebanon.

December 4, 1985—Robert McFarlane resigned. Oliver North suggested part of the proceeds from the secret arms sales to Iran be given to Contras.

December 27, 1985—Reagan’s planned budget for 1987 cut veteran’s benefits by reducing the number of patients and by requiring health insurance companies to help pay costs.

February 25, 1986—Ferdinand Marcos went into exile ending his two-decade-long authoritarian rule of the Philippines.

April 5, 1986—A West Berlin discotheque known as a hangout for U.S. soldiers, was bombed leaving three dead and 230 injured.

April 15, 1986—The U.S. bombed Libya in retaliation for the Berlin discotheque bombing, killing 60 Libyans but leaving Maummar Gaddafi and his family alive, they having been warned of the imminent attack.


August 22-24, 1986—The Veterans Peace Coalition was formed. VVAW hosted the gathering of 12 groups.

September 26, 1986—Reagan vetoed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act.

November 3, 1986—A Lebanese magazine reported that the U.S. was secretly selling weapons to Iran to gain the release of American hostages.

November 21, 1986—Oliver North destroyed Iran-Contra documents.

November 26, 1986—Attorney General Edwin Meese announced that the profits from the secret weapon sales to Iran had been illegally diverted to the Contras.

War does not determine who is right, only who is left.

—Bertrand Russell
December 3, 1986—The U.S. Commerce Department hosted the Expo-Maquila conference in Mexico, inviting 120,000 American businesses to learn how to move manufacturing to Mexico and ship almost finished products to the U.S., thus avoiding tariffs.

December 13, 1986—VVAW participated in a protest at the Contra training base in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

January 2, 1987—Reagan’s proposed budget cut $200 million from veterans’ medical programs and gave $100 million to the Contras.

January, 1987—VVAW members participated in an anti-Klan, pro-civil rights march in Georgia.

March 4, 1987—Reagan admitted that his overtures to Iran had turned into an arms-for-hostages deal.

April 11, 1987—South Africa outlawed protest (by action, speech or written word) of the county’s official policy of detention without trial. It also became illegal to call for the release of detainees.

April 17, 1987—VVAW participated in a protest at Reagan’s “western White House” in California.

April 25, 1987—VVAW participated in a Washington D.C. march of 100,000 protesting U.S. policies on apartheid and Central America.

July 4, 1987—VVAW member Jim Wachtendonk joined John Ritter (both pictured, above) on stage for the Welcome Home Tribute for Vietnam Veterans broadcast on HBO. Proceeds went to veterans’ charities.

July 24, 1987—The U.S. Navy began to protect Kuwaiti-owned oil tankers from Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war.

November 18, 1987—U.S. House and Senate panels released reports that Reagan had the “ultimate responsibility” in the Iran-Contra affair.

December 8, 1987—Palestinian uprisings began in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

January 2, 1988—The U.S. and Canada signed NAFTA.

February 3, 1988—The House of Representatives refused to grant Reagan’s wish for money to support the Contras.

February 29, 1988—Bishop Desmond Tutu and other religious leaders were arrested while kneeling near South Africa’s parliament with a petition against the government ban on anti-apartheid groups.

March 11, 1988—Robert McFarlane plead guilty in the Iran-Contra case.
April 14, 1988—The Soviet Union agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan.
July 3, 1988—The U.S. Navy shot down an Iranian airliner killing 290 people, having mistaken the plane for a jet fighter.
August 11, 1988—Al-Qaeda was formed by Osama bin Laden.
August 20, 1988—The Iran-Iraq War ended.
1988—The Russian Mafia began to expand while the Soviet Union went into a state of decline.
December 21, 1988—A bomb on a Pan-Am plane exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 people on board and 11 on the ground. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya was given credit for the bombing.

VVAW Supports the Veterans
Fast for Life

On September 1, 1986, Charles Liteky, a Vietnam vet and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and George Mizo, a Vietnam combat veteran, began a water-only fast on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington to protest the “immoral, illegal and insane” U.S. government war moves in Central America. On September 15, they were joined by WW II veteran Duncan Murphy and Vietnam veteran Brian Willson. The fast continued for 47 days until the veterans felt their action had brought about significant increase in public awareness and opposition to Reagan Administration policies in Central America.

Liteky, a former priest, received the Medal of Honor for bravery in Vietnam for rescuing 20 wounded men during a four-hour fire fight despite being wounded himself. On July 29, he had returned that medal to protest the Reagan Administration’s policies in Central America and war on Nicaragua. Liteky, the coordinator for the National Federation of Veterans for Peace, said the fast was triggered by the Senate approval of $100 million in aid for the Contras.

At the outset of the fast, Liteky and Mizo stated their reasoning: “Some of us have spent time in Nicaragua. We’re in constant contact with people there and we believe that the situation there is nowhere like the Administration is painting it to be. We feel that the Sandinista government has been vilified by the Reagan Administration and the State Department.”

The Fast ended on October 17. VVAW was among the many who backed the veterans’ action. Legislative supporters included Tom Harkin, Charles Mathias, Robert J. Mrazek, Patrick Leahy, and John Kerry. But, Senator Warren Rudman likened the four veterans to terrorists. The FBI initiated a terrorism investigation on the Fast. FBI agent Jack Ryan refused to carry out the investigation. Ryan was fired 10 months short of his retirement. He lost his pension and eventually lived in a homeless shelter. Ryan told the LA Times that he believed U.S. policy in Central America was “violent, illegal and immoral.”
January 20, 1989—GHW Bush was inaugurated.
1989—The Vietnam Veterans Radio Network was founded in Kansas City.
August 24, 1989—The Vietnam Veterans Fast for Reconciliation with Vietnam began (below).
November, 16, 1989—Six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were massacred in El Salvador. The Jesuits had all been priests or scholars at the José Simeón Cañas Central American University. They had supported a peace settlement between the government and the rebels. The murders brought international attention and condemnation.
December 20, 1989—The U.S. invaded Panama (facing page).
May 4, 1990—VVAW attended the 20th anniversary of the massacre at Kent State (page 66).
February 11, 1990—Nelson Mandela was freed.
August, 1990—Iraq invaded Kuwait. Osama bin Laden, having established al Qaeda in 1988, offered to have his Sunni branch of the mujahideen protect Saudi Arabia from Iraq, but the Saudi monarch refused and opted

continued on page 66

VVAW Supports Fast for Reconciliation with Vietnam

Vietnam veteran Alan Miller began a fast on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. on August 24, 1989. Miller sought to end the 14-year-old trade embargo on Vietnam. He had gone to Vietnam over the summer with a delegation that visited medical facilities and orphanages. It also provided donations of medical supplies and equipment.

Miller ended the fast on October 2nd. With him at the time were four members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and Charlie Liteky (see also page 63), the fellow veteran who would be taking on the segment of the fast scheduled to end on Veterans Day.

Photo: People from from Japan, Guatemala, El Salvador, South Africa and Vietnam join the veterans.
ON DECEMBER 20, 1989, the U.S. undertook Operation Just Cause to oust Manuel Noriega from Panama. It might seem strange, given Noriega’s cooperation with U.S. support for the Contras and his assistance in providing the U.S. with information on international drug traffickers.

The CIA had long known about Noriega’s own involvement with drug cartels and had blocked the DEA from indicting Noriega in 1971. When George Bush headed the CIA in 1976, he was quite friendly with Noriega. But a decade later, Eugene Hasenfus, a pilot for the CIA was shot down over Nicaragua. Hasenfus had helped supply the Contras. Documents on his plane revealed CIA activities in Latin America and the agency’s connection to Noriega. The ensuing public relations fiasco gave the DEA its opportunity to pursue its case against Noriega: Grand juries in Florida provided an indictment in 1988.

Invasion and Occupation

VVAW condemned the invasion, noting that “while perestroika swept Eastern Europe, the U.S. military swept Panama...The U.S. government once again resorted to military force in order to protect their interests in Panama. Within a week’s time, the entire country from the Darien province on the Colombian border to the Chiriqui province on the western frontier had come under the control of U.S. occupation forces. Nothing in Panama’s past could have prepared people for the sheer magnitude of the violence unleashed beginning on December 20th and it will no doubt take several years to overcome the devastation.”

Writing in The Veteran, VVAW also challenged the U.S. media: “All in all, the performance of U.S. newspapers and TV during the invasion was shameful. Tough questions were never approached. While TV viewers in other parts of the world saw images of Panama City in flames, looking like the war zone it was, here in the U.S. we saw wounded American troops coming home. A truthful depiction of how the people of Panama were dying because of the invasion was neither spoken nor shown.”

“The aggression launched against the Republic of Panama,” The Veteran noted, “was quite literally an invasion, a large scale offensive against Panamanian armed forces... And sadly, it was a victory for the aggressor.” On December 29, a U.N. General Assembly resolution called the intervention in Panama a flagrant violation of international law.
Honoring Victims at Kent State

In 1990, VVAW joined the May 4 Task Force (M4TF) at the 20 year commemoration of the massacre of Kent State students. VVAW had a long history of supporting M4TF. In 1977, when M4TF created the May 4th Coalition to stop the university from building a gym over part of the massacre site, VVAW joined the protests (pictured below).

The movement to stop the gym was not an effort to preserve the site just out of sentiment: The physical features of an area—exactly where the National Guard stood and then knelt to shoot, how far away the protesters were, and the close proximity of dormitories and campus walkways—easily showed visitors what little danger the guardsmen faced and how idiotically dangerous it was to shoot. The fight to stop the university from destroying the site included a 62-day tent-city occupation of the “Blanket Hill” gym-site. Ongoing protests included militant re-occupations of the site. The university built bigger and bigger fences to keep protesters out and the protesters repeatedly tore them down. There were around 400 arrests.

The M4TF continued to commemorate, educate, and support the families of the victims. They also pursued the truth in government accountability for the massacre. The task force worked for the construction of a memorial of the massacre but their plans were thwarted by conservatives, including the American Legion, who denounced the idea as a “memorial to terrorists”. In 1990, VVAW joined the protest of a mini-memorial that had been erected near the site.

M4TF went to have greater successes. In 1997, Crosby, Stills and Nash performed “Ohio” at KSU. In 2010, M4TF gained U.S. government recognition of the site as a national landmark. The group also opened the May 4th Visitors Center, which provides historical documents and media as well as offering visual presentations and tours.
IRAQ WAS INVADED by the U.S. on January 17, 1991. The build-up for the attack was named Operation Desert Shield—an appropriate title, given that its mission was to protect Saudi oil from Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein who had a standing rivalry with the Saudis. Hussein had invaded Kuwait. Western nations knew his forces were then within striking distance of the Saudi oil fields and infrastructure. The U.S. deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to the region.

No Blood For Oil

In 1990, before Iraq even invaded Kuwait (August 2), VVAW became aware that George Bush was about to start a war. With the decline of the Soviet Union, intellectual circles were debating whether the U.S. would pursue economic domination of the world, or geostrategic military might. In early summer, the military suddenly became provocatively aggressive in several Third World countries. At the same time, it was showering the U.S. media with splendid footage showing it rescuing stranded hurricane victims in the Philippines. George Bush was going to pull the trigger and the military knew it. So did VVAW.

In Chicago, the location of VVAW’s national office, members began discussions with peace and solidarity groups about the situation. The recent military incursions into Grenada and Panama had been surprises. This time, the peace movement should be ready. In late August, the U.S. turned its ships toward the Middle East. By early September, Chicago held its first protest against the impending war.

One of the speakers at that rally was a U.S. veteran of the Panama invasion. He ended his speech with the words, “And I say, we should shed no blood for oil!” It took the crowd mere seconds to turn his phrase into the chant that became the new slogan for the anti-war movement.

Leadership in the Struggle

VVAW members were among the leaders of the anti-war movement that emerged. They helped spearhead protests and coalitions at the local, regional, and national levels. VVAW worked closely with United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), the largest national coalition to oppose the war. When UFPJ held its massive anti-war march in Washington, D.C., on January 26, VVAW members were among the contingent of veterans at the front of the procession.

“I support the troops by wanting them home alive,” a VVAW member told the New York Times during the march. “We have to separate the warriors from the war... you don’t blame the troops for the policy they’re carrying out.”

The protests against the war were extensive. Marches and active resistance took place across the U.S. and in Australia, Japan, Algiers, Sudan, Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, The Netherlands, Spain, England, Germany, France,
Italy, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden and Canada. Protest strikes occurred in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Jericho, Italy and Spain. Dockworkers and seafarers in France and Spain carried out slowdowns. Draft resisters in Germany ceased their court-ordered work. Civilians working on ships or at bases demanded wage hikes to compensate for the increased danger.

**Aftermath of the War: More Bases, More Vets’ Problems**

Even though America’s military actions were alienating people in the Middle East, the U.S. continued to expand its military presence in the region during and after the war. The bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were enlarged. Bahrain housed the Navy’s Fifth Fleet. Air facilities were built in Qatar. Operations in the United Arab Emirates and Oman were augmented.

Meanwhile, Gulf War veterans began to experience a variety of medical problems that the military claimed were just stress induced. Writing in *The Veteran*, VVAW responded: “Given the nature and severity of these ailments, the government’s assertion is ridiculous. These veterans were exposed to the never-before-encountered hyper polluted atmosphere produced by the burning oil fields and never-before-used experimental drugs that were supposed to provide protection from chemical and biological weapons.”

Symptoms included fatigue, headache, weight loss, hair loss and discoloration, memory loss, skin rashes and growths, “pins-and needles” sensations or a loss of sensation, confusion, nervousness, muscular weakness and spasm, respiratory problems, deterioration of organs, impotence, infertility, miscarriage, and birth defects.

VVAW encouraged Congress to go beyond just letting the VA to start a registry to track the problems, given the VA’s past behavior of concealing information on problems faced by GIs exposed to Agent Orange.

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1991—Following Operation Desert Storm, Qatar permitted the U.S. to have a military facility there which eventually housed the U.S. Combined Air Operations Center for the Middle East, the forward headquarters for the U.S. Air Force Central Command.

September 29, 1991—Haiti had a coup amid reports of CIA involvement.

1991—The National Campaign to Demilitarize Our Schools was formed. VVAW endorsed the group and a VVAW member served on its board.

1991—Congress passed the Agent Orange Act authorizing the National Academy of Sciences to study and analyze Vietnam veterans’ exposure to dioxins.


August, 1992—VVAW held a homeless vets stand down in Milwaukee. (See page 70.)


Fall, 1992—VVAW cosponsored a presentation by H. Bruce Franklin on his book, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America.*
**VVAW at 25 Years**

**By the time VVAW was a quarter-century old** it had accomplished a great deal. It had testified against the war crimes that were the Vietnam War. It had stood against the continuing wars in Indochina, the colonial policies and racial oppression in Africa, the Contras and their cohorts in Latin America, and the U.S. drive for domination of the Middle East.

Twenty-five years after VVAW was born, more vets than exhibited PTSD. Thousands of veterans had already committed suicide. The disastrous effects of Agent Orange hadn’t abated and the children of some of the veterans who had been affected were living with disabilities caused by the poison. Far too many vets were still homeless.

The veterans who had continued to affiliate with VVAW over the years were looking at middle age. Since none of VVAW’s members were paid to lead the organization, they held regular jobs. Many forewent self-indulgences in order to finance VVAW’s materials, events or campaigns.

VVAW members increasingly found themselves giving talks at schools and colleges, not just for their current activism for veterans’ rights or against U.S. international aggression: They were also part of history and teachers invited them to address classes about the Vietnam War or the organization itself.

At the twenty-five year mark, members of VVAW might hope the group could remain in the equilibrium that it had achieved by 1992. The veterans were slowing down. There was no assumption that the organization would continue on for another 25 years.

But it did.

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Fall, 1992—VVAW worked with the Black Veterans for Social Justice and the National Association of Black Veterans to provide housing for homeless veterans.

Fall, 1992—VVAW attended the National Conference for Homeless Veterans in Boston.

December 24, 1992—Bush pardoned Casper Weinberger and five others implicated in the Iran-Contra affair.
Stand Downs:
VVAW Reaches Out to Homeless Vets

Stand Down—A military command for a combat unit to move out of a war zone to a safe place to regroup. Once they were in a secure base camp, soldiers could shower, get clean uniforms, receive medical care, get mail and relax some.

VVAW got involved in the issue of homelessness among veterans in the 1980s. In the 1990s, VVAW joined the grassroots movement for Stand Downs. The idea for Stand Downs had been hatched in San Diego by two veterans. Robert Van Keuren had returned from patrolling jungle waterways near the Cambodian border during the Vietnam War and found himself homeless. Eventually, Robert got his act together and along with Jon Nahison, a clinical psychologist and former Army soldier, organized a Stand Down for homeless vets. The idea was to bring volunteers together to hold an event over one to three days to provide services like food; hot showers; a change of clothing; and counseling on health care, housing, employment or even legal issues.

VVAW quickly discovered that much of the public believed that homeless people wanted to live on the streets. “The majority of these vets want a job. I can’t swallow the argument that these people are homeless by choice,” wrote Jess Jespersen, the Midwest Regional Coordinator of VVAW, in The Veteran. Jess had helped out with a Stand Down in Milwaukee and advocated that other VVAW chapters join in. “I did not meet one veteran out of the 97 vets seen that wanted to live on the streets. Where this type of mentality comes from I can only guess.”

Other VVAW members in urban areas did get involved. Some VVAW chapters held multiple Stand Downs every year and served hundreds or even thousands of veterans at a time. Eventually, the Veterans Administration and various government agencies joined in. The Veterans Administration now sponsors Stand Downs across the country.

In 2012, Van Keuren’s effort for homeless veterans was honored in his hometown of Syracuse, NY where a new veterans housing complex was named after him.

VVAW continues to support the Stand Downs.

I can’t swallow the argument that these people are homeless by choice.

—Jess Jespersen, VVAW officer
Stand To

Stand to, but whispered, stand to
When every sense was brought to bear
We stretched to know the morning’s air
Adrenaline...beyond beware...
Nerves not strong were shattered
Stand to. Selector switch caressed like braille
each tick of time a separate tale. We willed
the dawn to no avail; and nothing, nothing mattered
Stand to. When in the silence breathing’s loud
cursing exhalations cloud; should war erupt
would dad be proud? Will I survive the latter?
Stand to. Altho the curse of morning’s rain
when every sense is stretched and strained
the clicker of the sentry’s plain...
Or was that Charlie’s clacker?
Stand to. For all of those who’ve left us now
It’s we who show the others how
the subtleties of surviving now
that’s all that really matters.

Stand Down
We opened “c’s” so quietly
while digging foxholes frantically
and saddled up the nights O.P.s
The silence growing fatter.
Stand down. Weary from the mountain climb
the commo check go’s down the line;
a letter read a final time
the mist as thick as batter.
Stand down. Fatigue that few have ever known
weariness of every bone
the single thought...to make it home
the luxury of water!
Stand down. The mud that kept mosquitoes off
the blessed ground that’s almost soft
the drone of casper high aloft
no doubt which side I’d rather.
Stand down. Squad by squad we’re dusted off
back to beds with pillows soft
a chance to grieve the ones we’d lost
and trounce the whores who flatter.

Stand down again stand down.
Bring solace to each other
Take an honest look around
and see where each of us is bound.
Let not our lot be six feet down
I’m begging you my brother.

Stand Round
We’ve come too far
to die in vain, despite our anguish
and our pain
Count not your loss; instead your gain
and doubt and fear will scatter.

—by Rick Harrienger
printed in The Veteran,
Spring 2012
January 20, 1993—Clinton was sworn in.
January 29, 1993—Clinton announced the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy for the military. (See story, page 78.)
March 14, 1993—Disabled Nicaraguan vets met with VVAW.
May, 1993—The United Nations created an international tribunal regarding the human rights violations that had taken place in Bosnia, the first such tribunal since the Nuremberg Trials. VVAW called for an end of the embargo against Bosnia. (See Bosnia story, facing page.)

June 16, 1993—The U.S. struck Baghdad with 23 cruise missiles to hit the Iraqi Intelligence Service which had been implicated in a plot to assassinate former President Bush. VVAW denounced the bombing in the next issue of The Veteran.

June 1993—VVAW members attended the 25th anniversary of the Presidio 27 in San Francisco. The Presidio, a military stockade, was the site of a 1968 sit-in staged by prisoners singing “We Shall Overcome” to protest the war and prison conditions. Twenty-seven who refused to stop were charged with mutiny. The overly harsh punishment drew national attention. The charges were reduced to willful disobedience. Three of the prisoners went to Canada.


1993—VVAW called for the release of all political prisoners in the Philippines.

November 11, 1993—Le Ly Hayslip, author of When Heaven and Earth Changed Places spoke at VVAW Veterans’ Day program in Chicago. Hayslip was the founder of the East Meets West foundation which funded a shelter for 136 needy children in Vietnam. Her foundation went on to establish education, healthcare, and sanitation programs in Vietnam and other countries in southeast Asia. Hayslip also create the Global Village Foundation in 1999 to help rebuild Vietnam and enhance dialogue between the U.S. and Vietnam.

February, 1994—The New England Journal of Medicine reported that the War on Drugs resulted in the incarceration of a million Americans each year.

February 3, 1994—Clinton lifted the trade embargo against Vietnam.

Spring, 1994—The Veteran reported that 123,000 Vietnam veterans had committed suicide, twice the number killed in combat in Vietnam.

April 7, 1994—Genocide began in Rwanda. Over 800,000 people (20% of the population of the country) would be killed in the next three months. The U.S. did nothing to stop the killing. Records later showed the CIA and the Clinton administration knew about the planned genocide before it happened.

Nixon (pictured above) died in 1994. Not everyone was upset.
At one commemoration a man in a Nixon mask jumped up and gave Nixon’s classic two-arm victory sign.

“Why don’t you show some respect?” someone yelled.

“He didn’t show any respect for the people he bombed!” was the reply.
When Yugoslavia broke apart in the 1980s, the six republics that emerged were based on ancient kingdoms and territories. Forces inside Serbia’s republic began to embrace a nationalism along the lines of creating Great Serbia—a state that would include areas beyond its borders that contained any significant Serbian populations. Officers in the Serbian army drafted the “RAM plan” to conquer the new lands and by January, 1992 thousands of Serb troops were heading for Bosnia.

In April, France asked the U.S. to participate in a peacekeeping mission to prevent the outbreak of violence. Then-president Bush did nothing. The Siege of Sarajevo in Bosnia began. It involved shellings, massacres, concentration camps, sexual enslavement and torture.

The concentration camps were exposed in August by The Guardian newspaper which reported that the conditions were reminiscent of Nazi camps. The Bush administration, it turned out, had known about the camps a month earlier.

VVAW opposed the embargo that had been placed on Bosnia. In 1993, VVAW pointed out that lifting the embargo would allow the Bosnians to defend themselves. “Effective resistance now,” VVAW said, “could help deter the spread of aggression to Macedonia and Kosovo, by all reports the next intended victims in the Serbian expansionist program.”

President Clinton finally lifted the embargo in 1994. NATO began a bombing campaign that lasted into 1995, the year the war ended. Overall estimates of the human cost of the war vary, but often concur at 150,000 people killed, 175,000 wounded and 10,000 missing. There were as many as 50,000 rapes.

When VVAW’s warning about Kosovo came to fruition in 1999, NATO once again resorted to bombing. VVAW members were conflicted. All could agree that inaction by Bush and Clinton had led to the dilemma. But, some members wanted to hold to principle to demand an end to NATO bombing. Others saw a need for pragmatism: What else could stop the next round of slaughter? Both sides wrote articles for The Veteran.

In the end, a UN Tribunal charged 161 people. It was the first prosecution of its kind since World War II’s Nuremberg Trial. The UN indicted prime ministers, presidents, concentration camp commanders, military commanders and common soldiers.
There are many terrorist states in the world, but the United States is unusual in that it is officially committed to international terrorism.

—Noam Chomsky

1994—VVAW member John Zutz assisted with a loan program for women in Vietnam to help them start small businesses.

February 6, 1995—The U.N. secretary general asked NATO to strike against Serb military positions around Sarajevo, Bosnia. NATO went on to carry out various operations against the Serbs through mid-September.

1995—Public Law 95-125 was codified by Congress. It denied benefits to people with less-than-honorable discharges.

May, 1995—The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated, its accompanying Education Center to follow in three years.

July 11, 1995—The U.S. established relations with Vietnam.

1996—The U.S. government admitted that soldiers may have been exposed to the nerve agents sarin and cyclosarin while destroying rockets in Khamisiyah, Iraq in March, 1991.

March 1, 1996—Clinton cut aid to Colombia for not doing enough to fight the drug trade.

November 11, 1996—Phan Thị Kim Phúc called for peace during her speech at Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

November 15, 1996—Vietnam veterans including VVAW rallied at Fort Benning to protest the School of the Americas. (See facing page.)

1996—Al-Qaeda announced a jihad to expel foreign troops and interests from what it considered to be Islamic lands, issuing a fatwa (binding religious edict) declaring war against the U.S. and its allies.

1997—The International Agency for Research on Cancer declared dioxin to be a known human carcinogen.

Spring, 1997—VVAW joined the call for the release of Vietnam vet and former Black Panther Geronimo Pratt from prison.

June 10, 1997—Geronimo Pratt was released.

July 16, 1997—Philippine veterans who fought under the American flag during World War II rallied at the White House to protest the U.S. refusal to honor their service.

Summer, 1997—Country Joe McDonald played a concert in Milwaukee celebrating VVAW’s 30th anniversary.

1997—The naval facility at Juffair, Bahrain got upgraded. It went on to serve as the primary base in the region for the U.S. Navy and Marines during the Iraq War. It was also investigated for abuse, racial intimidation, and anti-gay and sexual harassment during the war.


February 23, 1998—Radical jihad leaders including bin Laden, issued a fatwa calling on Muslims to kill Americans.

March 20, 1998—The results of an extensive government health study in Australia showed that, in addition to significant health problems among Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange, the children of Vietnam veterans
Opposing the SOA Death School

The School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) was founded in 1990 in the aftermath of the 1989 murder of Jesuits in El Salvador. Nineteen of the officers who took part in that massacre had been trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) which is notorious for training foreign military personnel including paramilitaries and dictators.

VVAW members frequently joined the annual protest against the SOA which is housed at Fort Benning in Georgia.

In 1996, VVAW members Ben Chitty and Louis De Benedicte attended the protest. Louis, an Army vet, engaged in some organized civil disobedience: He walked onto the base with Jesuit priest Bill Bichsel from Tacoma, WA and the two chained shut the SOA doors. They were immediately arrested, along with three others who were passing out leaflets: Will Prior, a Vietnam veteran from Las Cruces, NM; John Lennehan, a peace activist from King’s Bay, GA; and Fred Mercy a Jesuit from Spokane, WA.

The next day, Bichsel and Mercy knelt before a sign outside the School. Bichsel threw some of his own blood on the sign and he and Mercy were again arrested. Later in the day, protesters held a memorial service for some of the victims killed by SOA graduates. When it was over, participants crossed the street and embraced three counter-protesters.

The School of the Americas Watch was founded by Roy Bourgeois, a Vietnam veteran and Maryknoll priest. The School of the Americas itself was renamed as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in 2000. It remains in operation.

Pictured above: Protesters in front of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala hang pictures of death squad victims calling for the closure of the School of the Americas.
VVAW Joins the Fight to Stop the Bombing in Vieques

VVAW BECAME part of the effort to extricate the U.S. Navy from Vieques, Puerto Rico. The anti-base movement had existed as far back as the 1940s when residents were forced out of their homes by the U.S. government to make way for the military. Vieques had become a place where the Navy conducted bombings exercises which included the use of depleted uranium and napalm. The practice affected much of the island leaving large craters, undetonated bombs, and live artillery shells on the island’s beaches. The bombings had a detrimental impact on the local environment including the death of ocean creatures. Vieques’ main industry is fishing. Residents see a correlation between their high cancer rate, the highest in Puerto Rico, and the toxic contaminants left behind by the bombing.

The anti-bombing movement made some progress during its protests in the 1990s. In April, 1999 a civilian was killed when jets misfired two bombs. The accident galvanized the movement. Protest camps sprung up in Vieques and at other naval sites in Puerto Rico.

In November, VVAW members attended a New York demonstration and decided to rally veterans of all nationalities to help the cause. They drafted a statement entitled “Veterans Support Vieques” and persuaded thirteen leaders of the veterans’ community to sign on. The number of names continued to grow as the statement was circulated at VA hospitals, vet centers, online and at meetings. It was also printed in several newspapers, including Stars & Stripes.

VVAW attended a meeting with Todo Nueva York con Vieques, Todo El Barrio con Vieques, and the Vieques Support Campaign. At their request, VVAW held a press conference on that was covered on Spanish-language television and in the New York Daily News. VVAW also participated in several demonstrations at the Federal Building and circulated a response to the American Legion national commander’s public demand that the President order a resumption of the bombing to ensure national security.

VVAW contacted Veterans For Peace in Puerto Rico. The VFP chapter agreed to a veterans’ delegation to Vieques. The visitors included Black Vets for Social Justice; a Vietnam Marine vet who was a former Jersey City councilman; a Vietnam-era vet who was vice-president of his municipal workers’ union; a member of the Alliance of Atomic Veterans; photographer Dan Steiger and filmmaker John Nastasi.

The delegation met with officials in San Juan and went to the Peace and Justice Camp, one of the many occupation sites where protesters acted as human shields to stop the bombings. The next morning the delegation saw first hand the destruction of the earth. According to one delegate, “The area looked like a war zone, with bomb craters everywhere full of filthy, discolored water. One hill used for napalm strikes was completely charred. Unexploded live ordnance lay everywhere.” The group also visited other camps and met with a fellow Vietnam veteran who was among those who worked to show the location of live mines and bombs in order to protect people.

On May 4, armed FBI agents and U.S. marshals conducted pre-dawn amphibious raids on the encampments. Over 200 people were handcuffed, removed and detained but not charged with any crime. Coast Guard ships and helicopters patrolled the surrounding waters while the camps were destroyed. A Navy spokesman immediately announced that bombings would resume as soon as possible.

The response throughout Puerto Rico was immediate. There were massive demonstrations at military bases. Students shut down the schools. Utility workers went on a one-day strike and the governor responded by calling out the National Guard. Picket lines went up in front of government buildings and workplaces. People were demonstrating everywhere. A new civil disobedience campaign developed. Every week there were more arrests as groups slipped through the fences to return to the bombing ranges. Hundreds were arrested, charged with trespassing and ordered not to return. The campaign gained the support of the Dalai Lama, Reverend Jesse Jackson and Rigoberta Menchú, all of whom visited the camps. The Navy began evacuating the base in 2001 and turned the land back over to Puerto Rico in 2003. T
The 1994 three-strikes crime bill provided $10 billion for new prisons and $1.2 billion for border control. The law-and-order measure increased penalties for smuggling illegal immigrants, expanded the death penalty, and imposed longer sentences for federal offenders with three or more violent felony convictions or drug trafficking. The bill was the beginning of legislation that would eventually make the U.S. #1 in the world for rate of incarceration. By 2008, the U.S. housed nearly 25% of the planet's prisoners. An entire generation of minority youth had been sent to jail at much higher rates than their white counterparts.

Clinton also embraced the so-called “war on drugs” as his Colombia policy. Clinton fell for the disinformation campaign that the country’s rebels were responsible for Colombia’s cocaine. In reality, rebel involvement in drugs was marginal. People inside the Colombian government and its military had much better connections. Ernesto Samper was elected as president in 1994 when his campaign received over $6 million from the Cali Cartel.

The U.S.’s real interest in Colombia was multi-fold: Colombia had newly discovered oil, was of geo-strategic interest to the U.S. military, and offered a potential doorway to new international trade routes. In 1996, Clinton elevated the position of Drug Czar to a cabinet position and appointed Barry McCaffrey who had previously headed the U.S. Southern Command, then headquartered in Panama.

The U.S. poured millions into counternarcotics in Colombia with no net change in the amount of cocaine arriving in the States. What the U.S. actually did was help fund another “dirty war”.

VVAW Steps Up

VVAW got involved in 1988 when it met with Pedro Alcántara, a Colombian Senator who had been forced into exile after surviving two assassination attempts. Alcántara pointed out that the country had 170 right-wing paramilitary groups that targeted trade unionists, peasant and community activists, students, cultural workers, and politicians. The paramilitary were so heavily involved in the drug trade that they came to be called narco-paramilitary. They were usually members of the U.S.-funded Colombian military.

By 1992, Colombia’s violence had gotten worse. Over 1,700 members of Sen. Alcantara’s Patriotic Union party had been assassinated. Human rights workers who were investigating assassinations were

Pictured: Human rights activists who had been on their way to investigate a massacre in Colombia, were intercepted, pulled from their vehicle, handcuffed and murdered.
themselves assassinated. Peasants who were in the path of the narcotraffickers were killed just for living in the wrong place. The military was bombing villages. $38.5 million of the $40.3 million allocated to Colombia for anti-narcotics assistance in 1990 went to logistical support for counter-insurgency by the Colombian military, not to the police who carried out up to 90% of all the anti-narcotics raids. Colombia was having 100 massacres a year and the number was climbing.

VVAW continued to denounce the situation. VVAW hosted Afro-Colombian leader Luis G. Murillo who was in exile. Murillo had been the governor of the Choco region before he was forced out by death threats.

VVAW also launched a campaign to raise money for a bullet-proof vest for Sister Caroline Pardo, a Colombian nun engaged in human rights work in dangerous parts of the country. VVAW members also went on a number of delegations to Colombia.

People’s Tribunal

In 2000, VVAW participated in a People’s Tribunal about a 1998 massacre that had taken place in Santo Domingo in central Colombia. The attack had been carried out by military helicopters that dropped at least two American-made cluster bombs. Sixteen villagers were killed and another 25 were wounded. VVAW member Barry Romo visited the village after the attack. He testified as to what he’d seen and heard at the Tribunal, as did some of the villagers who had witnessed the attack.

“Children and grandchildren were killed in front of their parents. A mother was decapitated,” Barry wrote in The Veteran. “When people tried to drive the survivors to a hospital, they were followed by the Hueys for three kilometers, under fire. Not only did the voices of the victims tell a story, the physical evidence proved that it was the government that was responsible for the attack, not the guerrillas. There was not one explosion, but four. The shrapnel was not the nuts and bolts of a homemade mine; it was aluminum from an AN-M41 fragmentation bomb.”

The Tribunal was hosted by the Center for International Human Rights at Northwestern University Law School. It was sponsored by human rights and religious organizations and included a number of lawyers and political figures. The Tribunal featured a report from the FBI which had analyzed remaining parts of the bombs dropped on the village and found that they pointed directly to the Colombian military.

One of the Colombian witnesses who testified at the Tribunal was assassinated a few years later in Colombia.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

Bill Clinton implemented a new policy designed to prevent the military from discriminating against closeted homosexual personnel while still barring people who had come out of the closet. “When did the military and congressional homophobes start obsessing over gays in the military?” asked Bill Johnson, a Sgt in the Air Force 1966-70, in The Veteran. “What changed by 1992 when this incredibly idiotic policy kicked in? An idiotic policy addressing a problem that didn’t exist. Did it come about due to a combination of homophobic Army officers and theocratic right wing politicians? One can only speculate.”

Johnson served as a Legal Specialist. “I saw attempted murder, rape, assault, incest, bad checks, adultery (punishable in the military) and gold smuggling, but never did I see any incident or policy violation involving homosexual conduct.”

“The current policy of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ was established to fix something not broken,” added Johnson who went on to quote arch-conservative Senator Barry Goldwater: “If I’m in a foxhole I don’t care if the guy next to me is straight or not—I just want him to be able to shoot straight!”
Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the End of the War

It wasn’t a war for everyone. No senators’ sons fought. Only the sons of the poor and working people.

—Roger Quindel, veteran

VVAW’S MILWAUKEE CHAPTER had always been one of the most active from leading a convoy down to the Republican National Convention in 1972 to helping the homeless beginning in the 1980s. And they may well hold the record for the most times a chapter took over VA buildings. So, leave it to them to be the only team members to connect with Vietnamese, Laotian, and Hmong populations to help celebrate the 25th anniversary of the war’s end!

The Milwaukee event included local officials, the Veterans Administration and community leaders. Hundreds of Hmong citizens in camouflage combat fatigues stood in ranks while their national anthem was played. The welcoming remarks were translated into three languages, reported John Zutz in The Veteran.

“Steve Schofield, a former Special Forces major who later served as a civilian health care worker in Laos described how Hmong farmers and hunters were recruited into guerrilla warfare on behalf of the United States, only to be driven from their homes and their native land after the North triumphed. He described how Hmong children as young as eight were conscripted with tacit American approval into secret attacks in the supposedly neutral country. Schofield also recalled how the United States abandoned the Hmong, leaving them to become refugees or to be hunted down by the Pathet Lao regime,” wrote Zutz.

Commemorative wreaths were delivered by way of a Huey helicopter that was crewed by Vietnam veterans. Meanwhile, a living statue had suddenly materialized for the ceremony.

Roger Quindel, who had served two combat tours spoke on his recollections of the mud and the blood, the snakes and the rats. “It wasn’t a war for everyone. No senators’ sons fought. Only the sons of the poor and working people,” said Quindel, now a county supervisor.

Milwaukee’s VVAW chapter continues to support the Hmong community in its effort to have its veterans’ service recognized.

New View of Tonkin

Twenty-five years after the end of the war, Vietnam had become a peaceful tourist destination. Pictured is beautiful Halong Bay in the Gulf of Tonkin. What appears to be an old “junker” is actually a dinner cruise ship. Modern cruise ships outfitted to resemble the junks are popular among visiting tourists.
August 7, 1998—The U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were 
bombed, evidently by Osama bin Laden. Twelve Americans were among 
the 250 dead. Over 5,500 were injured.

August 20, 1998—The Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Sudan was 
destroyed by a U.S. missile. Clinton had claimed the factory was making 
a nerve agent and that it was tied to Osama bin Laden. The destruction of 
the plant stopped ongoing relief work to the famine-stricken nation and it 
eliminated 50% of the medicine production in the country. Sudan asked 
the U.N. Security Council to investigate the factory site for any evidence 
of a nerve agent or its components. The U.S. opposed the investigation. A 
number of criticisms have emerged over the years questioning the targeting 
of the factory.

November 21, 1998—VVAW attended the protest at Fort Benning, GA 
against the School of the Americas.


January 20, 1999—NATO undertook a bombing campaign against Serbia. 
(See Bosnia, Kosovo story on page 73.)

June 25, 1999—The International Day in Support of Torture Victims and 
Survivors was established by U.N. proclamation as part of the effort toward 
establishing the new International Criminal Court.

September, 1999—The U.S. military consolidated its surveillance bases 
in Australia. It closed the Nurrungar base and expanded the satellite facil-
ity at Pine Gap. Both locations had been used to pinpoint locations in the 
1970 bombing of Cambodia. Pine Gap monitored weapons signals, satellite 
transmissions, and phone calls in the eastern hemisphere. In the coming 
decades, it would also support drones and U.S. actions in Afghanistan and 
Iraq.

1999—VVAW hosted a Counter-Recruitment Fair in Champaign-Urbana, 
IL.

November 11, 1999—Dr. Orlando Tizon, a Philippine torture survivor, 
spoke at a VVAW Veterans’ Day event. He called for the outlawing of tor-
ture worldwide.

November 19, 1999—VVAW supported the SOA Watch protest at Fort 
Benning, GA.

1999—The United Nations Environmental Program drafted a treaty that 
would limit chemicals including dioxin that can linger in the natural sur-
roundings and accumulate in the food chain and have adverse effects on 
health and environment.

April 15, 2000—VVAW participated in a delegation to Chiapas.

October 12, 2000—The *USS Cole*, a destroyer, was bombed while refu-
eling off the coast of Yemen. Seventeen sailors were killed and 29 were
injured.

November 16, 2000—President Clinton went to Vietnam.

The enormous gap between what U.S. leaders do in the world and what 
Americans think their leaders are doing is one of the great propaganda accomplish-
ments.

—Michael Parenti
PHAN THỊ KIM PHÚC is remembered by many Americans as “the napalm girl” whose image was captured in 1972 in by AP photographer Nick Ut. Kim Phúc was only nine years old at the time. She and her family had fled the napalming of her village when a South Vietnamese pilot mistakenly thought that the fleeing residents were North Vietnamese forces and bombed them as well.

Ut and a war correspondent, Christopher Wain, took Kim Phúc and other injured children to a hospital in Saigon. She was not expected to survive. Despite surgeries and treatments, she still has massive scars from the incident. She eventually went to live in Canada.

In 1996, Kim Phúc gave a speech at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. and then traveled to Chicago where she spoke at a local college and spent three days as a guest of VVAW.

“Her picture will always be with those of us who served in Vietnam. A slender pre-teen girl running and running from American bombs, already horribly burned from American napalm,” wrote The Veteran. “Her presence was a reaffirmation of our war on war, that so-called ‘foreigners’ are human beings, not ‘collateral damage’.”

“I am not famous, my photo is,” Kim Phúc told local VVAW members. “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 Phúc created a foundation to give medical and psychological assistance to child victims of war. The Kim Phuc Foundation went on to support orphanages, health care and education in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia.
The Bush II Regime

January 20, 2001—George W. Bush was inaugurated.
Memorial Day, 2001—The Jersey City Vietnam Vets Memorial (pictured, below) was dedicated.

Local VVAW efforts paid off on Memorial Day, 2001 with the dedication of the Jersey City Vietnam Veterans Memorial in remembrance of the 64 local young men who lost their lives in that war as well as those who died from war-related causes after returning home.

The ceremony was attended by more than 400 veterans and concerned citizens. Statements were presented by local and state officials. Also present was artist June Svetlovsky, who contributed her talent and time to help design the monument, and poet Marc Levy.

Greg Payton asked the participants, “What would their lives have been like if they were still here? Would they be homeless or unemployed and ignored like so many others? Would they be addicted to drugs or alcohol or sick with AIDS? Would they have been racially profiled while driving down the highways of the country they fought for?”

Reverend Mona Fitch, whose brother, Clarence, died after returning from Vietnam, led the gathering in prayer and in singing “Ain’t Gonna Study War No More.”

June 14, 2001—Bush announced that the U.S. would stop bombing Vieques. (Story on page 76.)
September 11, 2001—The World Trade Center was bombed. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld orders his aides to look for evidence of Iraqi involvement.
September 17, 2001—Bush identified Osama bin Laden as the prime suspect of the 9-11 bombing.
September 22, 2001—Bush warned the Taliban of quick punishment if they failed to turn over bin Laden.
October 26, 2001—Bush signed the Patriot Act.
November 27, 2001—A Rumsfeld memo considered war with Iraq: “How Start?” asked one section, listing multiple possible justifications.
The terrorist attacks on September 11 horrified and outraged people throughout this country and the world. Within hours, the World Trade Centers’ towers and part of the Pentagon lay in flaming ruins with many thousand injured, missing or killed. Firefighters, EMS workers, police and citizens mounted a heroic rescue effort.

After the initial shock and disbelief wore off, angry voices began calling for retaliation and revenge. The President declared war against international terrorism and Congress voted to give the White House unrestricted authority to respond. Government spokesmen pointed the finger at Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. The President demanded that Afghanistan surrender bin Laden and his lieutenants or face attack while the Pentagon began deploying troops, aircraft and ships to the region. Events are moving toward major U.S. military action against Afghanistan. It is time we take a look at the road the government is taking us down. Will war bring those responsible for these criminal attacks to justice?

We agree with Congresswoman Barbara Lee that “military action will not prevent further acts of international terrorism against the United States”. The use of massive military power will only escalate the cycle of violence, spreading more death and destruction to innocent people with no end in sight.

We are veterans. We have been to war and have seen what military power can and cannot accomplish. We know what war does to those who fight it and those who live where it is fought. We hear our government loudly pledge support for our servicemen and women as they are sent into battle but have seen it turn its back on many when they returned.

We speak out of duty to our country and the world, in solidarity with those serving in the military when we take this stand: We condemn the criminal attacks of September 11 and demand that those responsible be held accountable and brought to justice. We mourn for the victims and offer our heartfelt sorrow and sympathy to the families and friends of those we lost. We condemn bigotry and violence against Arabs, Muslims and immigrants. We oppose efforts to curtail our basic civil liberties and democratic rights and must defend the Constitution from those who are undermining it. We do not believe that militarism and war will provide justice or security and oppose major U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan or other countries.

Our country has to address the reasons behind the violence that has come to our

continued on next page
shores. For over a century, Western corporations have dominated the Middle East to profit from its oil. For the last 50 years, the U.S. has supported Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands and propped up corrupt regimes in some Arab countries. The continued American presence in Saudi Arabia and the suffering of the Iraqi people has added to this resentment. As long as U.S. foreign policy continues to be based on corporate exploitation and military domination, we will continue to make more enemies in the poor, underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Excerpted from reflections by VVAW member Stephen Sinsley in The Veteran in 2001:

I reflect on the cowardice and utter lack of professionalism the mainstream press has shown in kowtowing to Pentagon and State Department spin doctors. Our government learned a lot from the Vietnam experience, but unfortunately not enough. It did learn that control of the news media is of primary importance to avoid the public’s questioning of its actions. Starting with Grenada we had total muzzling and spoon-feeding of the media so the folks back home wouldn’t see or know what really went down. The destruction in Panama with over eight thousand civilian casualties was not reported by our compliant press. Nicaragua is a suspect chapter in our foreign policy hall of shame, where far too many of the nitty gritty details were hidden by the Iran/Contra pardons issued by Reagan/Bush. People who should rightfully be in federal prison today now hold positions in and around the beltway.

Twin fates on a towering day; Thoughts on September 11th 2001 on September 12th

I fall asleep watching the late news:
The mews of a teenage girl with 10 pairs of low-riding jeans and the means to buy thong panties.
I wake to scenes seen around all the clocks:
fluttering, heavy, human leaves
and stacks of unbalanced blocks
that used to be floors in buildings
topping in unseasonable falls.
And, Pentagon puzzles being spilled.

I, you, we, see packs of staggering, fleeing, and
rescuing people powdered with dust, blood and screams
intertcut with four (count ‘em, 4!) views of planes plunging into the skyline.
Sure enough reality TV for survivors now.
A headline says: War has come home

Whip that National Missile Defense on those suicides
swinging knives and box cutters and making sighs.
“I can’t believe it,” people keep saying. Meaning,
“My mind won’t accept it until the T-shirts come out.”

It’ll take a little while for easy and vacuous smiles
to reappear like spring flowers or frivolous weeds
and to build new towers of smugness.

Timothy McVeigh’s been outdone.
Some foreign scum won the trashing championship.
But the stock market will open tomorrow
so we can get back to business as usual.
And, we’re gonna get ‘em ‘cause
We’re #1 and too good to die!!

But you can’t win playing defense . . .
Or, without knowing the real rules of
the game called Empire.

And Boy George,
with training wheels on his boots,
staggers toward more war.

— Horace Coleman
December 13, 2001—Bush announced that the U.S. would withdraw from the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty, saying it prevented the U.S. from developing effective defenses.

December 28, 2001—Bush told reporters that he foresees U.S. troops being in Afghanistan for a “long period of time” despite their progress.

January 25, 2002—A witness from the 1998 Tribunal on Santo Domingo (page 78) was assassinated by paramilitaries in Colombia.

February 2, 2002—Bush gave Congress a wartime budget of $2.1 trillion, a return to deficit spending.

February 7, 2002—Bush signed a memorandum reversing America’s commitments to parts of the Geneva Convention.

March 10, 2002—Administration officials described America as having the right to use nuclear weapons if it or its allies were attacked.

March 24, 2002—Bush and Putin agreed to reduce nuclear arsenals.

March 2002—VVAW issued a statement on the War on Terror.

May 9, 2002—VVAW attended an event for Madame Binh, the 75-year-old vice-president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Madame Binh had negotiated at the Paris Peace Conference on behalf of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam.

August, 2002—Bush met with advisors about a possible attack on Iraq.

August, 2002—The Torture Memos were drafted by Deputy Assistant U.S. Attorney John Yoo. They held that “enhanced interrogation” was within the law as a matter of expanded presidential authority.

October 2, 2002—Bush announced a resolution authorizing war against Iraq. A subsequent Chicago protest against the war included Illinois State Senator Barack Obama who called the war dumb and rash, stating that it was an attempt to shove “ideological agendas down our throats” and distract from problems like poverty and health care.
October 26, 2002—World-wide anti-war protests began.

November 2002—Military Families Speak Out (MFSO) was founded to oppose the planned invasion of Iraq.

November 25, 2002—The Department of Homeland Security was established. Four days later Bush cut back federal employee pay raises, citing the need to finance the War on Terror.

January 2003—VVAW participated in the founding meeting of U.S. Labor Against War.


January 18, 2003—Hundreds of thousands, including VVAW, protested in Washington, D.C. against the war.

February 15, 2003—VVAW was among the millions who protested worldwide. It was the largest protest in human history up to that date according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

March 18, 2003—Coalition forces bombed Iraq.

March 20, 2003—Operation Dire Distress began. (See next page.)

March 20-27, 2003—VVAW joined protests across the U.S. People around the world protested including in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Atlanta, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Baghdad (hundreds of thousands), London (half a million) and ten other cities in Britain, a million across Spain, Paris (100,000), Lisbon, various cities in Germany, Switzerland (40,000), Indonesia, Australia (40,000), Greece, Denmark, Finland, Pakistan (100,000), Malaysia, Seoul, Rome, Milan, Turin, Rio de Janiero, Bangkok, Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Naples, New Zealand, Calcutta, Bangladesh, Japan, Kenya, Somalia, Bahrain, Cairo, Syria and cities throughout Africa.

You want a fight, President Bush? Let’s fight to wean ourselves off Middle East oil through an energy policy that doesn’t simply serve the interests of Exxon and Mobil.

—future president Barack Obama, October 2, 2002, Chicago
March 28, 2003—The second week of world-wide protests included events in China, Santiago, Mexico City, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Caracus, Moscow, Budapest, Warsaw and Dublin.

May 1, 2003—Vieques, Puerto Rico (page 76) celebrated as the Navy pulled out.

June, 2003—Amnesty International reported that there had been human rights abuses at U.S. military detention centers and prisons in Iraq.

August 2003—MFSO, VFP, Iraq veterans and Gold Star Families for Peace (with support from VVAW members) conducted a bus tour across the country culminating in a rally in Washington D.C.

August 23, 2003—VVAW joined Peace Action, MFSO, Vets for Peace and others for a press conference and protest at the Peace House in Crawford, TX, home of Bush’s “western White House”.

**Operation Dire Distress**

**TWO DAYS AFTER THE COALITION FORCES BEGAN BOMBING IRAQ, VVAW was attending a two-day gathering of veterans’ groups, military family members and supporters. VVAW was one of the sponsors of the gathering called Operation Dire Distress. The term dire distress indicates extreme danger to life. The same signal—shown in the photo at right—is sent by turning the American flag upside down.**

The event started with a teach-in at Kay Chapel on the campus of American University. In addition to VVAW, speakers included Bobby Muller (Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation), Daniel Ellsberg, and retired rear admiral Gene R. La Rocque. Louisa Franklin-Ramirez, who had been first arrested for protesting against war back in 1917, was introduced to the crowd and received a standing ovation.

The next day there was a peace march and laying of wreaths at the memorials for Vietnam, Korea and World War II soldiers. The protest then went to the Department of Veterans Affairs and presented statements regarding biological, chemical and radiation exposure from Gulf, Vietnam and atomic veterans. The statements were read aloud, attached to a wreath and presented to the VA.

At the Ellipse, marchers placed medals, ribbons, and statements into a body bag for the White House. There was also a petition signed by over 2,000 veterans. The White House declined to accept any of it. The body bag became a traveling exhibit allowing others around the country to add their own mementos.
November 2003—AP reported massive human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. (See also Feb., 2004 entry, below.)

December 13, 2003—Former leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, was captured.

February 2004—A military investigation found “numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuse” at the U.S. military-run Abu Ghraib prison. The report was not released to the public.

March 20, 2004—VVAW participated in anti-war protests around the country including those in Denver, CO; Rockford, IL; Milwaukee, WI; the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana; Chicago, IL; Eureka, CA; Fayetteville, NC; Lansing, MI; Farmington, NM; Ann Arbor, MI and New York City.

April 28-30, 2004—60 Minutes and New Yorker magazine exposed the abuse at Abu Ghraib.

July, 2004—Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) was officially founded.

August 29, 2004—VVAW joined with 500,000 anti-war protestors in New York during the Republican National Convention.

October 15, 2004—VVAW joined with 15,000 others at the annual School of the Americas Watch protest.

November 2, 2004—Bush was re-elected.

December 11, 2004—Over 350 veterans and family members met in New York and issued a joint statement against the war.

January 10, 2005—The Iraq war troop surge began.

Spring, 2005—VVAW called on its members to support IVAW around the country.

March 19, 2005—VVAW joined a protest at Fort Bragg, near Fayetteville, NC.
Support Our Troops

You ask me if I support the troops?
The men and women in uniform took an oath to protect and defend the Constitution and to obey the orders of the president. Now the president issues unconstitutional orders.

You ask me if I support the troops?
Under “don’t ask, don’t tell,” men and women in the armed forces can be good at their jobs and honorable in their profession, then harassed, discharged, imprisoned — and sometimes murdered — if they tell the truth about who they love.

You ask me if I support the troops?
For nearly a quarter-century at the Air Force Academy, female students were abused and raped and silenced for the good of the service, while their rapists became officers (and gentlemen) and the men who told the women to keep quiet have since retired full of honor and pay.

You ask me if I support the troops?
The Pentagon uses weapons so toxic they sicken everyone exposed to them, for years afterwards.

You ask me if I support the troops?
Again and again, the Corps sent Marines to their deaths test-flying an airplane (the Osprey) which the service did not need and cannot use.

You ask me if I support the troops?
The president’s advisers give him intelligence briefings custom-fitted to their imperial political agendas, and the president orders soldiers into action based on this faulty intelligence.

You ask me if I support the troops?
One out of every three veterans of Desert Shield and Desert Storm is rated disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA says it doesn’t know what happened to them, and the Pentagon just doesn’t say, period. But the president does propose to cut the VA’s budget. And the Senate majority leader says veterans will have to make sacrifices to help pay for this war.

You ask me if I support the troops?
I spent years of my youth in Vietnam learning hard and brutal lessons about war and about my country. In his own youth, the president joined the National Guard to keep from going to Vietnam, then went AWOL from the Guard. Now he turns my lessons upside down, and sends the children of my friends and neighbors into the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time.

You ask me if I support the troops?
You might say, in a way, I reckon I do.

—by VVAW member Ben Chitty
Protest at the 2004 Republican Convention

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of people flocked to New York City on August 29, 2004, the day before the Republican National Convention began. They marched from the convention site to Central Park. Although the United for Peace and Justice coalition (which included VVAW) had been denied a permit to the park, the police did not interfere with its peaceful assembly.

Steve Noetzel, a longtime VVAW member from San Francisco, organized a “veterans’ reunion” at Summit Rock, the highest point in the park. Many longtime activists gathered there and were joined by IVAW and MFSO members. VVAW and other “seasoned” activists held a brief, moving ceremony and “passed the torch” to the young Iraq vets who were following a similar path.

VVAW participated in various events over the following days including a concert; a rally for Veterans Healthcare Reform organized by the New York State council of Vietnam Veterans of America; a forum on “Keeping Our Commitment to America’s Veterans” by the Veterans Institute for Security and Democracy; and the “March For Our Lives” by the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign.

VVAW took part in the American Friends Service Committee’s “Eyes Wide Open” display of combat boots and sandals symbolizing the human cost of the war, which was displayed throughout the week. VVAW also joined the nightly “Naming The Dead” ceremonies at a downtown church.

Vigil for the Fallen

On Thursday, the last day of the convention, VVAW members and other veterans, military families and concerned citizens gathered at Union Square Park to conduct a dawn-to-dusk Vigil for the Fallen with the slogan: “We Remember: He Lied and They Died.”

The vigil included a 100-foot-long Iraq memorial wall bearing the names of the soldiers killed in Iraq. There were also crosses bearing names and pictures of people who lost their lives in Iraq. Banners representing VVAW, Veterans for Peace, Iraq Vets Against the War, Military Families Speak Out, and a Disabled American Veterans chapter were displayed.

The day concluded with rallies that involved musicians, veterans and survivors of those killed in the war.
March 17-19, 2005—A Lubbock, TX symposium included VVAW members debating opponents about John Kerry and the Swift Boat incident.

March 19, 2005—VVAW participated in a “Bring The Troops Home Now” demonstration in Fayetteville, NC.

August 29, 2005—Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast resulting in deadly flooding. Federal agencies were painfully slow to respond. Louisiana’s National Guard wasn’t able to help much either: It was missing 40% of its troops and 75% of its equipment due to the war in Iraq.

Fall, 2005—VVAW and Vets for Peace members took supplies to Louisiana for hurricane relief.

September 24, 2005—VVAW joined 250,000 people in Washington, D.C. to protest against the war.

November, 2005—VVAW participated in a program with the Vietnamese delegates of the Agent Orange Justice Tour. (See page 94.)

November 11, 2005—VVAW set up the Sea of Tombstones. (Page 94.)

2005—MFSO membership had grown to include 2,000 families.

February 12, 2006—VVAW joined a Baton Rouge, La candlelight vigil.

March 14-19, 2006—VVAW, VFP and IVAW joined forces to march from Mobile, AL to New Orleans, LA. The goal was to protest the staggering cost of the war in Iraq and contrast that to the virtual abandonment of the hurricane-stricken residents of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans.

May 26, 2006—VVAW members participated in an anti-Cheney protest at Louisiana State University.

August 13, 2006—An event at the Peace Arch (between the state of Washington and Canada) was held in support of Iraq war resisters.

September 9, 2006—VVAW participated in a workshop about recruiting and military presence in schools in New York City.

November 3, 2006—A Chicago man set himself on fire to protest the war.
November 17, 2006—Bush said the Vietnam War shows that the U.S. will succeed in Iraq “unless we quit”.
January 10, 2007—A new Iraq war troop surge began.
January 27, 2007—VVAW participated in a Washington, D.C. march with 500,000 other anti-war protesters.
March 17-19, 2007—VVAW members joined the anti-war protests across the country.
March 23, 2007—VVAW joined with like-minded organizations to hold a fundraiser for war resister Kyle Snyder.
May 2007—55% of Americans believed the Iraq War was a mistake. 51% of registered voters favored withdrawal.
Summer, 2007—MFSO had grown to include over 3,600 military families.
November, 2007—The total number of U.S. military forces in Iraq hit its peak at 170,300.
December, 2007—The Great Recession began.
March 13-16, 2008—With help from VVAW, IVAW held its own Winter Soldier Investigation in Silver Springs, MD. (Story on page 141.)
June 13, 2008—Iraq’s Prime Minister said negotiations with U.S. were deadlocked over concerns of sovereignty.
July 1, 2008—The Iraq Foreign Minister said U.S. contractors won’t have immunity under the pact being negotiated with the U.S.
November 16, 2008—The Iraqi Cabinet approved a security pact which would have U.S. troops out of Iraqi cities by the end of 2009 and the last of all U.S. military personnel gone by the end of 2011.

Above: VVAW members preparing to march in a Milwaukee, WI rally to end the war
VVAW Support for Resister:
James Burmeister Denounces Bait and Kill

In 2008, VVAW members from Kentucky protested in support of PFC James Burmeister, who spoke out against the Iraq War and its illegal and immoral tactics. James had served in combat in Iraq from September 2006 until late February, 2007. When he returned to Germany for R&R, James was diagnosed with PTSD. He was prescribed with a variety of drugs which affected his ability to focus, eye-hand coordination and judgment. His psychiatrist suspected James had suffered a traumatic brain injury during his war service and did not recommend James for redeployment to Iraq. Nonetheless, the commanders ordered James to go back.

James went instead to Toronto where he suffered from seizures, numbness, nosebleeds and was diagnosed with PTSD. He also made a moral decision to speak out against the Bait and Kill tactics the Army was using. Bait and Kill is a tactic in which the Army sets out ammunition, detonation cords or plastic explosives and then hides a sniper to kill anyone who might pick up the objects. After the U.S. government deemed Bait and Kill to be illegal, James turned himself into Ft. Knox army base in Kentucky. He was charged with desertion and bad conduct.

VVAW members made financial contributions to what is now the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. The museum grew out of the Vietnam Veterans Art Group formed in 1981. The group had been able to put together an exhibit to tour museums and galleries across the country. From there the idea of a dedicated museum grew.

The museum found a permanent home in a building donated by the city of Chicago, opening its doors as the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in 1996. It broadened its scope in 2010 and took on its current name.

“You could have just stood in the Museum’s foyer,” according to one VVAW member. “Above your head was what first looked like a metallic chandelier without lights. Then you heard the soft tickling of metal touching metal, saw the small chains and recognized dog tags [pictured at top right]. Thousands of them, representing Nam KIAs.”

VVAW held its 40th anniversary event in Chicago in 2007 and invited attendees to the museum. Pictured at right is “Waiting for Henry Kissinger” by Charlie Shobe which was featured in The Veteran in 2006. Information about the museum can be found at nvam.org.
Sea of Tombstones

Beginning in October of 2005, VVAW members were among the veterans from the Delaware Valley area who worked on the preparation, installation and observation of their project called “Arlington North—A Sea of Tombstones.” The display commemorated troops who had been killed in the Iraq war. Each soldier was represented on a white-painted wooden plaque that was erected alongside others on the lawn at the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia.

December 14, 2008—Bush signed the security pact with Iraq. During the related press conference, Bush was forced to dodge two shoes thrown at him by an Iraqi journalist who also yelled out (in Arabic), “This is a farewell...you dog!” with the first shoe, followed by “This is for the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq!” with the second.

January 19, 2009—VVAW participated in a boot-throwing “Good-bye Bush” demonstration in Washington, D.C.

Vietnamese Agent Orange Tour

In 2005, VVAW cosponsored the fourth visit by the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA), a membership organization in Vietnam fighting for justice for the Vietnamese. The group made a 10-city tour with a stop in Chicago that included an interview on NPR’s World View program. VVAW made a generous donation to support the tour. VVAW has strongly supported the Vietnamese people in their efforts to achieve recognition and to get relief from the massive damage Agent Orange has done to their environment and their people. VVAW helped found the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign (see page 106), one of the organizations in the U.S. that is working to support VAVA.

Pictured at left are three of the VAVA delegates. Shown in the far right of the photo is Tran Thi Hoan, who was born without the bottom half of her legs.
January 20, 2009—Barack Obama took office.

January 22, 2009—Obama signed an executive order to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and stop torture during detentions. The camp had been established under the Bush administration which acknowledged holding 779 prisoners who had been transported there from their home countries—mostly Afghanistan and Iraq—to be held indefinitely without trial. Obama’s order was not carried out.

January 25, 2009—VVAW participated in a Martin Luther King, Jr. commemoration in New York City to raise funds for the peace group Pax Christi.

February 16, 2009—VVAW participated in a counter-recruitment protest in Philadelphia.

February 28, 2009—VVAW helped organize an IVAW Winter Soldier Investigation in Texas.

March, 2009—VVAW participated in an Iraq War protest in Long Beach, CA that marched past military facilities.

Spring 2009—VVAW leaders went on a west coast speaking tour.

Spring 2009—The Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign launched a legislative lobbying effort.

Spring 2009—VVAW met with the Georgia Veterans Alliance.

May 6, 2009—The U.S. government dropped its case against Lt. Ehren Watada, the first commissioned officer to publicly refuse deployment to Iraq.

May 16, 2009—VVAW and others met to discuss de-militarizing Chicago schools.
June 27, 2009 —The removal of American combat troops from major Iraqi cities began.

August 16, 2009—VVAW held a regional conference in the southeastern U.S.

September 25, 2009—Obama, French President Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Brown accused Iran of constructing a secret nuclear facility.

October 22, 2009—Obama signed the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act. The bill allowed Congress to set a budget for VA health care costs one year in advance of normal annual budgeting, allowing the VA to plan ahead.

Fall, 2009—VVAW gave IVAW a $30,000 grant to help carry out their work.

January 5, 2010—Bradley Manning began sending downloads on the Iraq and Afghan wars to WikiLeaks.

February 18, 2010—WikiLeaks began posting the material from Manning.

March 23, 2010 –The Affordable Care Act became law. At that time 1.3 million vets and 950,000 spouses & children of vets had lacked health insurance. (See follow-up story on page 108.)

April 16, 2010—California VVAW held a conference for veterans and their families.

April 18, 2010—A Los Angeles protest against Dow Chemical (next page) called on the company to clean up its Agent Orange mess.

2010—IVAW had 61 chapters including five at military bases.

April 23, 2010 – Obama spoke at a naturalization ceremony for active-duty military forces. He called for immigration reform.

May 4, 2010—VVAW participated in 40th anniversary of the Kent State massacre.

May 5, 2010—Obama signed the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act. The legislation was designed to address the needs of vets who were severely disabled by their injuries, as well as their families.

Support for War Resister
Robin Long

Robin Long was America’s first active duty GI resister ever to be extradited to the U.S. from Canada. Robin had been refused refugee status and deported from a country long known as a refuge for many people in search of asylum. In the photo at left, Robin receives a $500 check from VVAW following his release after serving 15 months in the brig at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego, CA.
May 27, 2010—Bradley Manning was arrested by the U.S. Army.
Spring, 2010—VVAW called for support for veterans’ justice for PTSD-related crimes. (See story, page 98).
August 13, 2010—Amid controversy, Obama supported the building of an Islamic center near New York’s ground zero, site of the 9/11 attacks.
December 22, 2010—Obama signed the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act.
March 8, 2011—Obama ended his two-year ban on the military trials for detainees who were being held at Guantanamo Bay. The move criticized by Human Rights Watch.
March 19, 2011—VVAW supported the Madison workers’ rights rally in the face of Scott Walker’s attacks on collective bargaining rights.
March 19, 2011—Protests were held around the country on 8th anniversary of the war.
March 19, 2011—Obama ordered air strikes against Libya.
May 2, 2011—Osama bin Laden was killed.
May, 2011—IVAW launched Operation Recovery. (See next page.)
July 25, 2011—The Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011 was introduced. The Act addressed the ongoing health problems for Americans and Vietnamese who had been exposed to Agent Orange.
August 8, 2011—The 2nd International Conference of Victims of Agent Orange was held in Vietnam. VVAW actively supported the gathering’s Appeal and Call to Action which called for solidarity, for the U.S. government and chemical companies to accept responsibility, and for governments that have allowed the dioxin to in their countries to disclose locations of its use, storage or disposal.
August 18, 2011—Obama called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down and issued an executive order prohibiting certain financial transactions with Syria.
Veterans Courts, Deportations & Justice

In 2010, VVAW member Jan A. Ruhman wrote an article for The Veteran pointing out that the U.S. needed Veterans Diversion and Treatment Courts to handle veterans who committed PTSD-related crimes. Such courts were modeled on a system developed in Buffalo, New York by Robert T. Russell, Jr., a City Court Judge who understood that there are problems unique to veterans. The special courts acknowledge that a veteran may have committed their offense as a result of PTSD, substance abuse, or psychological problems that stem from combat service in the military. The court system assesses the situation and can suspend the conviction while placing the veteran on probation and sending the veteran into a court supervised treatment program run by the VA or another court-approved program.

Eventually, Veterans Courts sprung up across the country.

Jan also spoke out about the deportations of immigrant veterans. Despite lobbying and letter-writing campaigns, veterans were being sent south of the border. The Deported Veterans Support House was set up in Tijuana by Hector Barajas, who served six years in the U.S. Army as a paratrooper. Jan supported the project and was a founding member of the Banished Veterans Defense Committee.

Help for Veterans and Iraqi Civilians

IRAQ VETERANS Against the War had been around for a few years by 2011. It had taken notes from VVAW’s playbook (pictured is an IVAW member at their Winter Soldier Investigation), but IVAW moved into new territory with Operation Recovery which fought the redeployment of service members who already suffered from PTSD and other traumas caused by their military service. IVAW also launched the Right to Heal campaign, demanding that the human rights impacts of the Iraq war be addressed with rehabilitation and reparations for those all those who were impacted by the lasting effects of the war.

Help for Homeless Veterans

In 2014, VVAW and Veterans’ Fellowship of Reconciliation launched a project to provide short-term food relief to veterans living on the edge by donating $50 food cards to vets. The project also offered assistance and advice about using VA services and aided with initial transportation and accompaniment, as needed. Meanwhile, VVAW’s Milwaukee chapter offered their support to the Homeless Veterans Initiative which reaches out to homeless veterans with food, clothing, and household items. It also provides help with filing claims, blood pressure check-ups, social activities and other services.
October 21, 2011 – Obama announced that by the end of the year nearly all U.S. troops will be withdrawn and the Iraq War would be over.

December 18, 2011—U.S. troops left Iraq in accordance with the agreement under Bush.


February 6, 2012—Obama signed an executive order to freeze Iran’s assets.

February 23, 2012—Obama apologized to Afghan President Hamid Karzai for the burning of Korans by NATO troops.

March 26, 2012—Obama held separate meetings with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Russia, China and Pakistan on nuclear security, non-proliferation and disarmament.

June, 2012—The Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign (page 103) sent a delegation to Vietnam.

June 15, 2012—Obama issued an order to end deportations of young undocumented immigrants.

August 6, 2012—Obama signed the Honoring America’s Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act which pushed the Westboro Baptist hate group away from military funerals and provided health care for Marines and family members exposed to carcinogens at Camp Lejeune.

January 16, 2013—The Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Alliance (page 103) participated in public hearings.

February 1, 2013—The Department of Veteran Affairs released a study showing that 22 veterans commit suicide each day.

July 13, 2013—A self-proclaimed neighborhood watchman was acquitted of murdering 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin who was visiting relatives in the community, prompting the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement.

June 26, 2013—Congresswoman Barbara Lee introduced a bill to aid Agent Orange victims in the U.S. and Vietnam.

There is no honorable way to kill, no gentle way to destroy. There is nothing good in war. Except its ending.

—Abraham Lincoln
July 26, 2013—The President of Vietnam met with VVAW in New York City following his previous day’s meeting with Obama.  
August 31, 2013—Obama sought congressional authorization for military action against Syria.  
September 21, 2013—VVAW joined a International Day of Peace vigil.  
February 27, 2014—The Senate voted down Sen. Bernie Sanders’ bill that would have expanded health care, education and jobs training for veterans. It had included opening 27 new veterans’ medical centers and clinics.

VVAW Military and Veterans Counseling

VVAW MAINTAINED a military counseling center in Chicago for nearly a decade. Beginning back in 2004, VVAW hired Ray Parrish to be the director of their Military and Veterans Counseling Service. The organization focused on reaching out to veterans with PTSD or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)* so severe that they ended up with less-than-honorable military discharges due to misconduct or as veterans who were discharged for pre-existing mental disorders. Both were ways for the government to avoid treating or compensating them.

Many veterans rejected going to the VA. It was part of the government that they blame for their distress. VVAW’s counseling service was able to make progress through its national work via phone, mail or internet as well as locally through referrals from various governmental and private social service agencies, shelters, nursing facilities and word of mouth.

With the objective of helping the veterans recover through treatment, they were provided with the psychological evaluations and legal representation needed to win VA disability claims and cases that went to the Board for the Correction of Military Records or the Discharge Review Boards for discharge upgrade or medical retirement.

In 2009, the center hired therapist Johanna “Hans” Buwalda. The VVAW center was the only veterans group employing a therapist. In addition to individual counseling, Hans ran peer groups for male and female veterans and their family or friends.

A Prisoners’ Rights Coalition newsletter with an article about the service resulted in a flood of letters from incarcerated vets. Within months, the center had recruited volunteers who became experts on claims and discharge upgrades.

The center discovered that veterans face a multitude of problems in prison and nursing homes. There was abuse and neglect in both populations. Both types of facilities were full of vets with bad discharges, PTSD, TBI and/or Agent Orange diseases. These vets rarely knew that there was help for them. Hans began training other mental health professionals on how to write evaluations that were needed to win VA disability and discharge upgrade claims. She was able to expand this work nationally with volunteers from the Soldiers Project.

Unfortunately, the center closed in 2013 when funding ran out.

* TBI inflicted many soldiers in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It is often caused by falls, crashes or explosions—especially from the Improvised Explosive Devices used in those wars.
March 6, 2014—The Senate voted down Sen. Gillibrand’s Military Justice Improvement Act which would have taken the prosecution of sexual assaults out of the military’s chain of command.

May 26, 2014—VVAW held its Memorial Day event in Chicago in conjunction with IVAW.

June 14, 2014—The VVAW chapter in New York held a fund-raiser for the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign.

August 7, 2014—Obama signed the Veterans’ Access to Care through Choice, Accountability, and Transparency Act of 2014 and announced the authorization of targeted air strikes against ISIL in Iraq.

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**Housing, Medical Aid for People in Vietnam**

_VVAW DONATED_ $10,000 to the Vietnam Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin to help build new housing in Vietnam in 2015 and 2016. The first two homes (pictured) were in Quảng Bình province in north central Vietnam. Slightly north of the line that divided North Vietnam from the south during the war, Quảng Bình was the most heavily bombed province during the conflict with U.S. when B-52s delivered more tonnage there than was dropped on all of Germany and Japan during World War II.

Many VVAW members also individual contributions to Vietnam. One example is Jack Klien, a member of VVAW’s Milwaukee chapter. Jack returned to Vietnam in 2015 and visited a clinic in Quảng Trị where he donated money for years.

Jack found the trip itself to be healing. At one stop, he prayed under a pine tree while holding his unit challenge coin. “I placed the coin deep in to the sand,” Jack wrote in _The Veteran_. “I remembered the beauty I had seen and felt 45 years earlier. More importantly I had made a huge step towards burying the horror with the coin.”
August 9, 2014—Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American, was shot by a white officer in Ferguson, MO. The killing came less than a month after another African American, Eric Garner, died from a choke hold in New York while in police custody for selling cigarettes taken out of a pack. The unrest that followed in Ferguson was met with a militarized police force.

September 10, 2014—Obama outlined his plan to fight ISIL.

September 21, 2014—VVAW members joined the People’s Climate March.

November 7, 2014—Obama announced that he would send 1,500 troops to Iraq to train Iraqi and Kurdish forces to fight ISIL.

December 17, 2015—Obama announced that the U.S. would restore full relations with Cuba.

December 20, 2014—VVAW attended a New York City commemoration of the World War I Christmas Truce. The 1914 truce witnessed soldiers from opposing side crossing over the trenches to mingle, sing or play football together before the battles recommenced.

February 12, 2015—Obama signed the Suicide Prevention Act designed to provide better mental health care for veterans.


September 28, 2015—Vietnam-era vets won compensation for Agent Orange exposure in Japan. (See page 106.)

January 16, 2016—Obama signed an executive order lifting some of the economic sanctions against Iran.

February 23, 2016—Obama unveiled his plan to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center. Presidential candidate Donald Trump vowed to fill it up with “some bad dudes” and keep the center open.

March 31, 2016—Obama hosted the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, D.C. involving the presidents of nine countries. Russia’s President Putin declined to attend.

April 24, 2016—Obama announced a plan to increase the U.S. military presence in Syria to at least 250 personnel.

May 23, 2016—While visiting Hanoi, Obama announced the complete lifting of the 32-year-old arms embargo on Vietnam.

November 11, 2016—VVAW joined with the Veterans Peace Council and other groups to form a Peace Contingent in the New York City Armistice/Veterans Day parade.

November 11, 2016—VVAW and IVAW co-hosted the Veterans Day ceremony in Chicago. Speakers included representatives from the Torture Justice Initiative and the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

January 17, 2017—Obama commuted the sentence of Chelsea Manning who had begun serving a 35-year sentence in Leavenworth for releasing the “Collateral Murder Video” (depicting the slaughter of civilians) and other materials to WikiLeaks.

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No war by any nation in any age has ever been declared by the people.
—Eugene Debs
Agent Orange Continues to Affect Millions
Civilians, Veterans Organize

The United States used 19 million gallons of herbicides including 13 million gallons of Agent Orange in South Vietnam. As many as 4.8 million Vietnamese were exposed and many more continue to be exposed to dioxin in the environment. Such exposure is associated with cancers, immune deficiencies, reproductive illnesses and severe birth defects in Vietnamese, Americans and Vietnamese Americans who were directly exposed as well as their children and grandchildren.

Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign

In 2005, VVAW members cofounded the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign (VAORRC), dedicated to uniting former enemies to assist the victims of the war and to hold responsible those whose use of chemical weapons constitutes crimes against humanity. VAORRC continues to educate the public and elected officials and to advocate for the victims.

Varieties of Agent Orange Relief Act

In 2008, the American Public Health Association passed a policy recommending that the VA should continue to address the enduring psychological and physical health effects of Agent Orange and dioxin on U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War and their children; that the U.S. government and involved chemical companies should provide resources for services for those harmed by Agent Orange; and that the government and the relevant companies should remediate or attempt to clean up areas in Vietnam that still contain high levels of dioxin.

In 2011, Rep. Bob Filner introduced the Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act which aimed to provide medical assistance for the children and grandchildren of American veterans who served in Vietnam and for Vietnamese Americans and their children affected by Agent Orange. The bill also sought health care and social services for exposed Vietnamese people and remediation of the areas in Vietnam that remain contaminated by dioxin. The bill did not pass into law. As of this writing, the Agent Orange Relief Act of 2017 submitted by Rep. Barbara Lee sits in a committee.

Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Alliance

Early in 2012, VVAW helped mentor a new group that named itself the Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Alliance (COVVHA). The organization was primarily composed of veterans’ children and grandchildren who suffered birth defects due to Agent Orange exposure in previous generations.

In September, COVVHA National Coordinator Heather Bowser—born missing her right leg below the knee, several fingers and the big toe on her left foot—traveled to Japan to be in solidarity with the people there who were coming to terms with their own exposure to Agent Orange. In 2013, COVVHA members testified at the Institute of Medicine, an independent non-governmental organization to provide unbiased and authoritative advice to decision makers and the public.

Today, COVVHA advocates for the rights of Agent Orange victims and for recognition of the inter-generational birth defects that affect families who have members who were exposed to the dioxin. The U.S.

*continued on next page*
government refuses to fund investigations for veterans’ children suffering with debilitating birth defects and unexplained illnesses. Other countries like Vietnam and Australia conduct research in search of answers.

Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin

Since its founding in 2004, the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) has sent many delegations to the U.S. In December of 2015, VAVA visited senators, legislative aides, and Congresswoman Barbara Lee to thank them all for their support for the victims of the spraying of chemical herbicides during the war. Nguyễn Văn Rinh, President of VAVA, expressed his appreciation to Congresswoman Lee for sponsoring HR 2114, the Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act. The VAVA delegation was joined by VAORRC and COVVHA.

VAVA then traveled to New York for a gathering with members of VVAW. It was an extraordinary event as folks told their stories. Frank Toner had served as a medic in-country and refused to carry a gun. Per Odman was a Swedish national who volunteered for the Marines and fought at Khe Sanh. Joe Hirsch was in military intelligence and speaks fluent Vietnamese. Ken Dalton was in the Navy, based on a ship off the coast of Vietnam. Brian Matarrese was in the U.S. Army during the war.

VVAW contributed to VAVA for the building of homes in Vietnam. Individual VVAW members also donated $10,000 to the victims of Agent Orange.

VVAW Fundraising for the My Lai Memorial

In 2016, VVAW promoted a fund-raising drive to help restore a mosaic tile mural at the site of the My Lai Massacre in Quảng Ngãi.

Former Vietnam Army Medic Mike Hastie had recently returned from a trip to Mỹ Lai with three peace activists.

“I see the My Lai Massacre as a metaphor for the entire war in Vietnam,” Mike wrote in the following issue of The Veteran. “The United States was responsible for over 20 million bomb craters during the war—what some people have called, My Lais from the skies.”

Mike’s delegation was also able to meet with a My Lai survivor, Pham Thanh Cong, who was only eleven years old when the massacre took place in 1968. Four of his family members were killed by a U.S. hand grenade. Cong’s father died in 1970, leaving the boy homeless.

By the time Mike and his delegation visited, Cong was 58 years old and had just seen his book about My Lai, “The Witness From Pinkville”, get published.

Lying is the most powerful weapon in war.
—Mike Hastie
The Times of Trump

January 20, 2017—Donald Trump was inaugurated.

January 21, 2017—VVAW joined with millions of people who gathered worldwide in the Women’s March in response to the views expressed by Trump. With 420 marches in the U.S. and 168 in other countries it was the largest single-day protest in American history and the largest worldwide protest in recent history.

January 25, 2017—Trump signed an “order” that a wall be built on border with Mexico, but the demand was not funded.

January 25, 2017—Trump signed an order to withhold federal grants from sanctuary cities. Legal challenges ensued.

January 27, 2017—Trump suspended the Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days. Although federal courts blocked Trump’s proclamation, a limit was set at 50,000 refugees for 2017. That number was reached by July 12.

January 27, 2017—Trump ordered a travel ban on visitors from Muslim countries. Resisters took the ban to the courts.

January 28, 2017—Anti-travel ban protesters jammed international airports.

February 11, 2017—North Korea test-fired a ballistic missile, the first in a series that escalated tensions with nearby nations and the U.S.

Any excuse will serve a tyrant.
—Aesop
More Untruths about Agent Orange Exposed

In March, 2017 Jim Sampsel, a Department of Veterans Affairs analyst, told an advisory committee that he believed much of the coverage on dioxin was media “hype” and “hysteria.” Sampsel’s job includes determining whether or not veterans were in contact with Agent Orange outside of Vietnam. Veterans who served in Thailand, Japan and Korea—as well as those who served aboard ships off the coast of Vietnam—have come to believe that they, too, were exposed to the dioxins.

In 2007, Japan began asking the U.S. to check on its storage of Agent Orange on Okinawa. The island had been a hub of U.S. operations during the war and served as the storage depot for everything from beer to nerve gas.

Only one veterans’ claim of Agent Orange exposure on Okinawa had been approved (in 1988) by the VA. Subsequent claims were being denied because the Pentagon said no records showed Agent Orange had been on the island. Then the VA screwed up: In its haste to deny a claim to a vet who had served in Okinawa 1962-64, it stated that herbicide agents “were stored and then later disposed in Okinawa from August 1969 to March 1970.” The statement matched public records on the movement of biochemical weapons through the area, according to reporter Jon Mitchell. In 2011, the Japan Times published Mitchell’s article which included accounts from three more veterans who had handled or sprayed defoliants in Okinawa, plus a photograph of an Agent Orange drum on the island. Other vets came forward. Their combined testimonies suggest the defoliants were actually on the island from 1961 to 1975. Evidence also emerged that Japanese civilians were exposed.

Enter Doctor Orange

Sampsel would prefer to ignore all that and instead rely on Dr. Alvin Young. For decades, Dr. Young (nicknamed Doctor Orange by his detractors) was the government scientist who claimed that veterans were just making up ailments to get compensation. Dr. Young was the main person that the Pentagon relied on to downplay the threat of dioxins. His own research, funded by the chemical companies, was debunked by the scientific community. Dr. Young testified on behalf of the chemical companies during a 2004 lawsuit brought by vets. Dr. Young has made millions.

Young was hired by the Defense Department to research claims being made about Agent Orange having been in Korea and Okinawa. Young said he couldn’t find any paperwork about the defoliants being in Korea and called those vets’ claims groundless. Even after Dow Chemical Co. barrels were unearthed in an Okinawan soccer field, Young dismissed the find as “probably solvent.” Tests in 2014 proved the barrels had held dioxin.

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March 2017—VVAW took a stand against torture and in support of the Syrian refugees and immigrants.
March 8, 2017—The drafting of legislation to repeal Obamacare began.
March 10, 2017—The U.N. warned that the world is facing the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II, with up to 20 million people at risk of starvation and famine in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria.
March 30, 2017—U.N. experts warned that newly proposed restrictions by a number of states seeking to limit protests will criminalize the right to protest and free speech in America.
April 6, 2017—In response to a suspected chemical attack, the U.S. launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian air base.
Concern for Veterans’ Health Care

Donald Trump readily exploited veterans during his presidential campaign, at one point claiming to have raised $6 million for them at a fund-raiser. The event had been an excuse for Trump to duck out of a debate. Trump’s campaign came under fire for fudging the amount of money he claimed to have raised and the distribution (or lack thereof) of the donations.

Trump showed little understanding of veterans’ issues. He attacked fellow Republican John McCain as a loser for becoming a POW during the Vietnam War. He dismissed PTSD as a symptom of people who are weak.

One of Trump’s campaign pledges was to repeal Obamacare. But, prior to Obamacare, nearly a million veterans had been without health insurance. The Act had brought that number down to 552,000. The greatest help came for veterans who earned less that $16,400 a year. They were eligible under Medicaid expansion. Before Obamacare, about 21.6% of these veterans were uninsured. By 2015, the number dropped to 12.2%.

Trump’s pick to run the Veteran’s Health Administration, David Shulkin, pledged not to privatize the system. But in no time, Shulkin was cutting VA jobs and shuttering VA hospitals. The cutbacks, combined with the new proposal in the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, would actually amount to privatization.

April 22, 2017—Protesters staged a sit-in at the Texas governor’s office to rally against deportations of immigrants. The immigration office in San Francisco was also blocked.

April 29, 2017—The People’s Climate Change March took place.

June, 2017—VVAW opposed plans to privatize the VA, cut social services.

June 1, 2017—Trump said the U.S. would withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement.

July 9, 2017—VVAW members joined Black Lives Matters and other protesters in Charlottesville, VA to confront the KKK over the removal of a confederate statue. (A similar protest there two months later turned deadly.)
More on 50 years of Vietnam Veterans Against the War

Photos, Ongoing Projects & Thanks to Members

Over the years, VVAW members have participated in protests, conferences, meetings, lobbying for change, international delegations and spoken out at countless events. There have been tens of thousands of members and it is not possible for this book to have remembered every speech given or every action that they carried out collectively or as individuals. But, there are names of some of the people who went the extra mile for the organization and they are listed in the boxes on the following pages. There are also some extra photos of members and friends in action.

The following pages provide more information and photos of VVAW’s long-term efforts—newspapers, international delegations, Memorial Day programs and public speaking—that spanned the decades.
Dewey Canyon III

Top left: A veteran throws away his medal: This photo was one of the highly publicized images of the protest.

Top right: A sit-in blocking the doors of a government office

Middle: Another veteran throws away his medal

Bottom left: A guerilla theater reenactment of U.S. military actions in Vietnam

Bottom right: Veterans cheer in front of the Capitol building.
More
Dewey Canyon III

Top right: A disabled veteran gets help up the Capital steps from his fellow vets

Top left: A Gold Star mother is directed toward the main staging area

Middle: Gold Star parents make their way forward to support the Dewey Canyon III protest

Bottom: A group of veterans carry on a discussion on the Capital lawn between events. In the center of the photo at the top is future Senator John Kerry who spoke on behalf of his fellow members of VVAW at a hearing of the Senate Relations Committee. (See story on page xx.) Also in photo on the right is Senator Edward Kennedy.
More Protests

Top: VVAW in a 1972 march in Times Square

Middle: VVAW supporting the Penndleton 14, African Americans who had taken on the KKK at their military base

Bottom: VVAW protesting the war with a march through Pennsylvania to a military base
Upper left: Upper left: VVAW in an anti-war march

Middle: A contingent of veterans at a VVAW march

Lower left: Members of the Miami chapter of VVAW

Lower right: VVAW members from the Boston chapter carry out reenactments in the city

Above: VVAW member Bobby Muller who went on to found Vietnam Veterans of America

Facing page—

Top: VVAW members in a Chicago protest

Middle: Members of VVAW’s Monterey, CA chapter ride in a truck to attend a Free Billy Dean Smith rally

Bottom: VVAW members after being arrested during a VVAW action at the Pentagon to protest against the war
More VVAV
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Depicted on these two pages are VVAW members shown in various scenes during the protests, primarily at the Republican National Convention in Miami in August. The story is on page 36.

Shown in the middle photo on the left side of this page is a group of protesters—mostly VVAW members—preparing to be arrested during the Democratic National Convention. It was also held in Miami, a month before the Republican gathering.

1972 Protests at Conventions

Below: The VW bug was the lead car of “The Last Patrol” convoy of VVAW members who drove down from Milwaukee, WI.
The military used cadence to train new recruits to march in sync during boot camp. VVAW members enjoyed doing the chants, but with the words re-written to reflect their collective point of view.

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Donald P. Williams
Doug Mason
Doug Swanson
Doug Wright
Douglas Craig
Douglas Nelson
Earle Mitchell
Ed Flowers
Ed Murphy
Ed Selby
Ed Visco
More Protests

Facing page—

Top: Members of the Bay Area VVAW chapter speaking at a protest in California

Middle: The Nassau (NY) VVAW chapter marches in an anti-war protest in Long Island, NY

Bottom: The Syracuse (NY) chapter of VVAW prepare to march at a protest, probably around 1973

This page—

Top: VVAW members protesting in Florida around the time of the Republican National Convention

Second from top: VVAW members supporting draft resisters while protesting against Nixon and the war

Second from bottom: Members of VVAW after their takeover of the Statue of Liberty in 1971, one of many building occupations carried out around the country during Operation Peace on Earth. See the story on page 33. This photo, taken by Anthony Camerano, appeared in The Nation magazine in January, 2017 along with an article on the Vietnam peace movement adapted from Tom Hayden’s last book.

Bottom: VVAW joins an anti-Nixon protest outside the Committee to Re-elect the President headquarters in New York City. Back then, the re-election committee tried to refer to itself with letters CRP, but a great many people preferred the acronym CREEP.
VVAW’s Journeys on International Delegations

Over the decades VVAW sent countless delegations and representatives overseas. The first formal visits were in 1971. VVAW traveled to Hanoi with the War Resisters League and Women Strike for Peace. That same year, VVAW also participated on a speaking tour in Europe. In 1972, VVAW joined another delegation to Vietnam. The group, which included Joan Baez, human rights attorney Telford Taylor, Rev. Michael Allen and VVAW’s Barry Romo, was in Hanoi during the Christmas bombing.

Delegations to Europe and Japan

In 1973, VVAW headed for the International Conference on Exiles in Paris, scheduled for February 19. The event would focus on the amnesty issue for war resisters and would draw various groups together internationally. But, at the last minute, Paris police (believed by many to have been under pressure from the American government) banned the conference.

Some of the VVAW members who had gone to the Paris conference had also planned to attend the International Emergency Conference on Vietnam scheduled for Rome a week after the Paris conference. This time, the conference proceeded as planned.

In Rome, VVAW members met with representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam; the Pathet Lao; the Laotians Students Union of Paris; the United FNL Groups of Sweden; the Danish Vietnam Committee; the Italian Dock Workers Union, the Italian Vietnam Committee; representatives of Zimbabwe African People’s Union; and the Japanese delegation; as well as representatives of AMEX-Canada; the Union of American Exiles in Britain; RITA-ACT of Germany; exiles from Vancouver, Montreal, Sweden, France; and the Cambodia delegation in Paris.

Later that year, VVAW attended the 19th World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs held in three cities in Japan. That delegation also met with the local VVAW GI groups resident in Japan.

In the 1970s VVAW also traveled to Berlin and attended conferences in Canada, France and Japan.

Visiting Third World Countries

Starting in the 1980s, VVAW members were on many fact-finding missions to various Third World countries including Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama and the Philippines.

The largest VVAW delegation was the one that went to Nicaragua in April, 1986. A group of 14 VVAW members from across the U.S., the delegation met with Omar Cabanas, Photo: VVAW delegates John Lindquist (left) and Bill Davis (right) meeting with Fire on the Mountain author Omar Cabanas (center) in Nicaragua in 1986.
Let this be the last American blood spilled on Nicaraguan soil.

—VVAW delegates pressing their own blooddrops onto the earth

author of *Fire on the Mountain*, who served as an assistant to Tomas Borge. A highpoint for VVAW was when they joined a protest at the U.S. Embassy that came on the heels of a vote back in the U.S. denying funding to the Contras. Upon arriving at the embassy, VVAW’s delegation formed in columns behind the its banner and marched toward the crowd. As they drew closer, in step, VVAW began to chant: “Reagan, Reagan, he’s no good, Send him back to Hollywood. If he’d been in Nam back then, He’d never made it home again. Sound off ..."

The crowd roared approval as VVAW neatly peeled off in a single column to join their moving picket line, according to Bill Davis, who wrote up the experience in *The Veteran*. “People came out of the crowd to greet us with handshakes and hugs. One long-time member of VVAW, who had hitchhiked up from Rivas where he works as a nurse, stood by smiling until we dragged him into the line with us,” wrote Davis.

Clarence Fitch spoke from the microphone on behalf of VVAW. Then Manuel Martinez from Chicago stepped forward, pointed at the Embassy, and said, before a hushed crowd, “The war machine is oiled with blood of innocent victims.” Ron Arm, from the Madison chapter, stepped out next, stating, “If there is any American blood to be drawn in Nicaragua, let it be a gift to help heal the wounds of the sons and daughters of Nicaragua who have suffered at the hands of the U.S.-Contra aggression.”

Then Billy Curmano of the Minnesota chapter spoke, “We, as Vietnam vets, know the pain and agony of spilling blood on foreign soil.” Three VVAW members moved into a circle facing each other. Removing their VVAW buttons they pricked a finger drawing a drop of blood. Forming an arch with the bleeding fingers they knelt to the ground and pressed the blood to the pavement, saying in unison, “Let this be the last American blood spilled on Nicaraguan soil. Viva Nicaragua Libre.” The crowd broke into cheers.

VVAW members also traveled on missions of peace to Chiapas, Iran and Vieques as well as on human rights delegations to Colombia.

**Back to Vietnam**

VVAW’s first post-war visit to Vietnam was in 1986. The destinations included Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi, the tunnels at Cu Chi and Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum. They also visited factories, villages and the countryside. VVAW continued to send delegations to Vietnam in the 1990s and into the next century. Increasingly, Vietnam veterans were also going back on their own to make amends or to come to terms with what happened there.
The Fight for Veterans’ Rights

VVAW fought for better health care from the Veterans Administration, for discharge upgrades and for amnesty for veterans who had gone AWOL. VVAW protests that were focused in the VA peaked in the mid-1970s. In 1976, VVAW took over the Statue of Liberty (photo on page 44) demanding improvements for veterans.

Above: VVAW member Al Hubbard during a VA protest

Below: a VVAW takeover of a VA office. The portrait of Nixon has been turned upside down
Facing page, upper left: a VVAW protest at a courthouse.

Facing page, middle: a VVAW information table with a scroll petition aimed at the Veterans Administration

Facing page, lower left: a VVAW march for veteran’s benefits

This page, below: VVAW members in California call for Senator Alan Cranston to work for improvements for veterans, especially regarding discharge upgrades and benefits

Right: VVAW demands discharge upgrades at the U.S. Military Court of Appeals
More VVAW
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More VVAW

Above and left: Scenes from VVAW protests

Below: VVAW’s traveling exhibit set up in a park. The exhibit was developed in the 1980s. It presented various issues on the Vietnam war, the need for improvements in veteran’s benefits, and the crisis of Agent Orange.
Top, left: The Milwaukee chapter of VVAW on the march

Top, right: California’s Bay Area chapter of VVAW marches at a protest

Bottom, left: A group at a VVAW campout near Madison, WI. The gatherings were started as a way for vets to avoid July 4 fireworks which could ignite an episode of PTSD. Eventually, the campouts became national gatherings.

Middle: VVAW members at another Wisconsin campout. Dave Kettenhofen, who is on the National Staff, is pictured second from the left in the front row.

Bottom, right: VVAW protesting war in the Middle East
More VVAW Activities

Top left: VVAW members from the Milwaukee-area chapter pour refreshments at a concession stand at a local festival to help raise money for their many community projects. The chapter community efforts included peace projects, work on behalf of homeless veterans and programs for public education.

Second from top: Regina Upton, a member of the Missouri chapter of VVAW, is shown sitting in the front and center of the photo while visiting Vietnam with a U.S. medical team.

Second from bottom: VVAW’s William Cobb meets with people in Vietnam about a student exchange program.

Bottom: VVAW members at a national meeting. The gatherings were held once a year and brought together reps from regions across the country.

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Teaching, Speaking Out

Over the years, many Vietnam vets were called upon to give public accounts of their experiences in Vietnam and their thoughts on the war. VVAW members had a clear point-of-view on that war and on the conflicts that followed. They welcomed the opportunity teach people what they learned.

Pictured are just some of the VVAW members who spoke at various events at schools, colleges, churches, museums and public informational programs.

Barry Romo is in the top, left photo—appropriately, with a microphone in his hand, though he was good with a megaphone, too. Barry was VVAW’s most articulate orator about the war. He was a featured speaker at countless events. He also gave media interviews and was great at deposing the opposition during debates. Barry was VVAW’s longest serving National Coordinator. He received a Bronze star and served as a lieutenant in the 196th Infantry Brigade in Vietnam.

Truth, it is said, is war’s first casualty. Memory is its second.

—Tom Hayden
anti-war activist
More VVAW
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More photos and acknowledgments

Photos, top, left: Charlie Branson who served for a number of years on VVAW’s National Staff.

Top right: Ed Damato at a VA takeover. He served as a VVAW National Coordinator. He was in the Army in Vietnam.

Lower right: Maude DeVictor unearthed the story of Agent Orange. (See article, page 50.) Her role in the events was featured in the 1986 film Unnatural Causes, which starred John Ritter as a veteran dying of Agent Orange. Maude joined VVAW and was a recipients of a VVAW Service Award.

Lower left: Clarence Fitch was an East Coast coordinator. He served in the Marines during Vietnam. The film Another Brother tells Clarence’s story. After Clarence died in 1990, the New Jersey VVAW chapter was named after him.
Bill Davis, pictured in the top left photo, served as a VVAW National Coordinator. He was also on the board of VAORRC and the Vice-President of U.S. Labor Against War. Bill died in 2007. His terrific sense of humor is missed by all who knew him. Bill served in the Air Force during the war.

Above: Sukie Wachtendonk with her son Zak. Sukie’s husband, Jim, was exposed to Agent Orange. Their children and grandchildren had serious birth defects. Sukie created an clearinghouse for info on the dioxin. Zak died at age 30 from Agent Orange complications.

Top photo: Ann Bailey and John Zutz who both helped lead VVAW
Second from top: Al Hubbard, an early VVAW activist

Left: Ray Parrish (left) and James Major Gates chat in Chicago

Middle: Buzz Doyle gives a speech at a Veterans Day event

Right: Ann Hirschman, a long-time member who served as on VVAW’s board of directors
Always Remembering on Memorial Day

VVAW HONORED MEMORIAL DAY dating back to the group’s early years. At first, VVAW was frequently shunned by other vets’ groups and and by the local government officials who were responsible for conducting the Memorial Day or Veterans Day ceremonies sponsored by the town or city. So, VVAW held its own ceremonies. By the 1990s, VVAW’s commemorations had become acceptable. The city police were being sent to the VVAW events to guard—rather than menace—them. VVAW often found that the conservative veterans groups were no longer commendeering the “official” ceremonies for themselves.

Pictured at right, top: A VVAW Memorial Day ceremony in Chicago closes with a silent gathering around the Memorial Fountain

Right, middle: VVAW members from the chapter in Madison, WI participate in an official candle-light ceremony on Memorial Day. The event took place in the rotunda in the the State Capital Bulding.

Lower, right: Two VVAW members from the Chicago chapter wait to lay flowers, a traditional part of the re-memberence during their Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies

Lower left: VVAW members from a California chapter honor the dead by placing wreaths at a local cemetery on Memorial Day
Above: Members of VVAW’s Milwaukee chapter visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

Above: VVAW’s Adrian Vaaler plays taps in 1972 with empty boots displayed at the ceremony. Valaar also helped create a Vietnam Vets memorial in Oregon.

Above: Pete Zastrow, who served many years as a VVAW National Coordinator, speaking from the podium at a Memorial Day ceremony in Chicago. Also in attendance at that event was Mayor Harold Washington. Members of VVAW served as the mayor’s advisors on veterans affairs.

Below: The Eyes Wide Open Exhibit created by the American Friends Service Committee is valuable any time of year.

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VVAW Newspapers Over the Years

VVAW’s national newspaper was called *The First Casualty* when it was first produced in 1971. In 1973, the newspaper’s name was changed to *Winter Soldier*. At the time, the organization was printing 25,000 copies. Finally, in 1975 it became *The Veteran*, which currently prints 18,000 copies two times a year. All three publications were produced by VVAW staff. For the past 21 years, the paper has been produced by National Staff member Jeff Machota, first with the copy editing assistance of Lisa Boucher, now with the assistance of Ellie Shunas, Charlie Branson, Jen Tayabji, Joe Miller, and Bill Branson. Jeff also coordinated the project to get all issues of the paper online at VVAW’s website, vvaw.org.
Still more wars to protest

With Washington, D.C. starting what seem to be endless wars, VVAW members joined in many anti-war activities.

Pictured going from top to bottom are VVAW chapter protest in Portland, Chicago and New York City.
More photos and acknowledgments

Upper left: Jan Barry (second from right) at a protest. Jan was VVAW’s first president.

Right-hand photos: VVAW members at more protests

Below (top): Frank Toner, Brian Matarrese and Ken Dalton. Brian served as a VVAW board member.

Left: VVAW members after a Milwaukee Beer Fest fundraiser. At the far-right in the back row is Jeff Machota. He produces The Veteran and has received VVAW’s Service Award.
Above: Members gather together to celebrate the 40th anniversary of VVAW in 2007

Bottom, right: John Lindquist who served in VVAW leadership rests up after a Stand Down.

Bottom, left: Dave Cline served as a VVAW National Officer for many years. He had received three Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star while in the infantry in Vietnam. Dave joined the GI antiwar movement while he was still on active duty. He produced the underground G.I. newspaper Fatigue Press at Ford Hood, Texas and helped establish the nearby Oleo Strut coffeehouse. Dave was also involved in quite a number of other causes including helping the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam. He died in 2007.

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Left and middle photos: VVAW members finally get to participate in official Veterans Day parades in New York and California.

Below: Bill Branson (left) and Joe Miller at a protest. Both served as VVAW National Officers. Both were in military intelligence in Vietnam.
Top, right: The VVAW chapter in Arizona ready to join with IVAW at a protest.

Second from top, right: Members of the Chicago chapter gather at an event.

Left, top: Members from different chapters around the country encounter one another at a national protest. Pictured from left to right: Jim Murphy, Bruce Hyland, Barry Romo and Marty Webster. Marty served as a board member of VVAW.

Bottom, left: Members of the New Jersey’s VVAW Clarence Fitch Chapter preparing to protest.

And for the music...
Thanks to the musicians who wrote songs against the war and to the people who performed the music at VVAW events. Our deep appreciation goes to long-time VVAW friend Country Joe McDonald.
Oh, About The War Crimes...

A DAY BEFORE DEWEY CANYON III in 1971, John Kerry spoke at length to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Representing VVAW, Kerry brought up VVAW's Winter Soldier Investigation testimony in which the veterans, “told the stories at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam...”

“We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum,” Kerry said. “We learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of orientals.”

“We watched the U.S. falsification of body counts, in fact, the glorification of body counts. We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break,” Kerry said. He called upon Congress to end the war. Pro-war hawks lashed out at the allegations. The media yawned.

Secret Army investigations on atrocities in war were released in 1994, revealing that while the Vietnam war was still going on, the Army had substantiated 320 atrocities with over 500 more it discounted or were unproven. The revelations included seven massacres and 141 cases of torture. The Army also revealed that it had taken action against 203 soldiers with 23 convicted. The stiffest sentence went to an interrogator who molested a 13-year-old girl. He served seven months.

While unintentional civilian deaths during war is not considered to be a war crime, a war crime occurs in an intentional attack directed against civilians. The military did not address VVAW's assertion that policies enacted by higher-ups were largely responsible for the atrocities carried out during the war. By not confronting the contradiction, the military allowed its skewed priorities to continue.

Under President George HW Bush, more innocents were killed during the invasion of Panama than those who died when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The aerial bombings during the ensuing Gulf War mostly targeted civilian facilities.

In 2008, IVAW held its own Winter Soldier Investigation involving over 100 members of the organization who had served in the Iraq War. Their testimony reflected the same patterns by zealous commanders as in Vietnam, goading the troops into firing at innocent civilians,
cars, their houses or their animals. And there were similar patterns of denial and cover-up. VVAW supported this younger generation of contentious veterans and $20,000 out of the $169,000 that VVAW gave to IVAW went directly for the Winter Soldier Investigation. Although the big TV networks ignored IVAW’s investigation, IVAW took the concept on tour, traveling around the country with more investigations. IVAW continued to speak out against the war, its impact on soldiers and its atrocities. In 2010, IVAW called for the prosecution of senior Bush administration officials for conspiring to manipulate intelligence to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The Official Sanctioning of War Crimes

In 2016, VVAW denounced the Pentagon’s new “Law of War Manual.” The book “reads like it was written by Hitler’s Ministry of War,” according to international law authority Francis Boyle, adding that the document allows massacres of civilian populations. The previous manual had assumed that deliberate targeting of civilians was a war crime.

Journalist Sherwood Ross pointed out that the manual also authorizes napalm and detrimental herbicides; allowed cluster munitions, mines and booby-traps; approved drone attacks; and sanctioned the use of exploding hollow-point bullets and depleted uranium in munitions.

War at Home

The same mindset driving the military toward war crimes is affecting policies at home. “Forces that are traditionally advertised to ‘protect and serve’ have become noticeably militaristic,” says Colin Jenkins of the Hampton Institute. “Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that soldiers, many of whom carry the mental baggage of war, are being streamlined from the streets of Fallujah to the city blocks of the U.S.”

According to Radley Balko of the Huffington Post, this is a continuing trajectory: “For 30 years, politicians and public officials have been arming, training, and dressing cops as if they’re fighting a war,” Balko said. Military training includes an element of psychology that diminishes the enemy in the eyes of the soldier, so that the enemy is easier to kill. Says Balko: “They’ve been dehumanizing drug offenders and criminal suspects as the enemy. And of course they’ve explicitly and repeatedly told them they’re fighting a war. It shouldn’t be all that surprising that a lot of cops have started to believe it.”

Racial profiling has increased for Asians, Arabs, Middle Easterners and Muslims. One study found that an African American is killed by police, security guards or vigilantes every 24 hours. Forty-three percent of these shootings occurred after an incident of racial profiling.

So, it is rather appropriate that the last entry in this book’s 50-year time line is one in which members of VVAW, an organization that stands against war and war crimes, also stood up at a protest alongside members of Black Lives Matter.
Additional Resources

Winter Soldiers:  
An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War  
by Richard Stacewicz

The Turning:  
A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War  
by Andrew E. Hunt

The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990  
by Marilyn Young

Passing Time:  
Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War  
by W. D. Ehrhart

The New Soldier  
Paperback – October, 1971  
by John Kerry

The Winter Soldier Investigation:  
An Inquiry Into American War Crimes  
by Vietnam Veterans Against the War

Home from the War:  
Learning From Vietnam Veterans  
by Robert Jay Lifton

Kill Anything That Moves:  
The Real American War in Vietnam  
by Nick Turse

Soldiers in Revolt:  
G.I. Resistance During the War  
by David Cortright

Sir! No Sir!  
The Suppressed Story of the GI Movement to End The War in Vietnam  
film by David Zeiger
Resources on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident


Vietnam Veterans Against the War website: vvaw.org

VVAW’s website provides:

VVAW’s national newspapers (current and historical issues of the papers)

commentary, upcoming events & media gallery

contact and membership info

information on its Archive Project

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Materials available through the website include:

And a Hard Rain Fell
by John Ketwig

Wilson and Jernigan
a novel, by Bill Shunas

Winter Soldier
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Nothing is more precious than independence and peace.
—Ho Chi Minh

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