

by John Kerry
and
Vietnam Veterans
Against The War

THE NEW SOLDIER

Edited by
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To the survivors of the Indochina War-
in the hope that forgiveness will ease
the pain and understanding will
produce a lasting peace.

Preface

Vietnam veterans Against the War (VVAW) began inconspicuously in 1967 when six Vietnam veterans marched together in an anti-war demonstration in New York. This small group of veterans, taking the first step in spreading the concept of anti-war Vietnam veterans, questioned by many about their authenticity, and lacking in funds, were more in the media than in building a big organization. The organization grew slowly.

During the political campaigns of 1968 the idea began to spawn, and many peace campaigns included small contingents of anti-war veterans. Gradually, through chance more than through the concerted efforts of any one group, the idea of a separate veterans peace group spread and a growing number of these veterans joined VVAW. Yet by April 1970 the organization had only 600 members.

In August 1970, VVAW members confronted the national convention of American Legionnaires in Portland, Oregon. Two weeks later, groups of veterans gave public witness to their experiences in Vietnam with vivid performances of guerilla theater on an 80 mile walk from Morristown, New Jersey, to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Armed with rifles and red paint and using professional actors as “innocent civilians,” they attempted to bring home what search and destroy missions in Indochina were really all about.

In February 1971, about 150 anti-war veterans met in a Howard Johnson’s motor lodge in Detroit and conducted hearing on the acts of violence which they had either committed or witnessed during their tours in Vietnam. The hearing were call the Winter Soldier Investigation, a term derived from Thomas Paine, who had written in 1776: “The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country.: These veterans identified with those soldiers who had endured the grueling winter of 1776 at Valley Forge, and they came together in Detroit to tell Americans what their country was really doing in Vietnam. Many wanted to purge the guilt which grew out of an inability to find any moral reason for the brutality, the waste, the destruction, which they had seen. Some of their anguished testimony appears in the following pages. (The entire testimony was read into the Congressional Record by Senator Mark Hatfield, April 6-7, 1971).

Television barely covered the event in Detroit. it was a time when the news or the war crimes trial of Lieutenant William Calley was being broadcast over network television almost every night. Numerous people, including those connected with the news media, did not believe that many of these men were Vietnam veterans.

Something positive had to come out of Detroit, some hope for the future. It was difficult for these men to swallow the public’s indifference. Out of the frustration grew the idea of a march on Washington. On April 18, 1971, about a thousand Vietnam veterans, each bearing some proof that he had been in Vietnam, arrived in Washington and set up a campsite near the Lincoln Memorial, ready to try once again to bring their case before the country. The pictures in this book recount what happened to thme during the remarkable week which ensued.

But behind the pictures of the events in Washington lie the anti-war veterans themselves. Who are they? John Kerry spoke eloquently before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about why the veterans had come to Washington. A study conducted while the vetereans were encamped ton the Mall was even more reviealing

(see Appendix). Most of these veterans had come from the very heart of Middle America. Few had finished college, unable to capitalize on college draft deferments. Most were under twenty-five and had enlisted in the service. But perhaps most significantly, the study reveals that the majority of the anti-war veterans in Washington, once of moderate conservative outlook, had been radicalized by their experiences in Vietnam. It is their hope that Vietnam will not be just an immoral and obscene memory, but rather, as Kerry said before the Senate committee, :the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning.: Thus the New Soldier.

D.T.

G.B.

How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?

I would like to say for the record, and for the men behind me who are also wearing the uniform and their medals, that my being here is really symbolic. I am not here as John Kerry, but as one member of a group of one thousand, which in turn is a small representation of a very much larger group of veterans in this country. were it possible for all of them to sit at this table they would be here and present the same kind of testimony.

I would like to talk about the feelings these men carry with them after coming back from Vietnam. The country doesn't realize it yet but it has created a monster in the form of thousands of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence and who are given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in history—men who have returned with a sense of anger and of betrayal that no one so far has been able to grasp. We are angry because we feel we have been used in the worst fashion by the administration of this country.

in 1970 at West Point Vice President Agnew said “some glamorize the criminal misfits of society while our best men die in Asian rice paddies to preserve the freedom which most of those misfits abuse,” and this was used as a rallying point for our effort in Vietnam. But for us, as boys in Asia whom the country was supposed to support, his statement is a terrible distortion from which we can only draw a very deep sense of revulsion, and hence the anger of some of the men who are here in Washington today. It is a distortion because we in no way consider ourselves the best men of this country; because those he calls misfits were standing up for us in a way that nobody else in this country dared to; because so many who have died would have returned to this country to join the misfits in their efforts to ask for an immediate withdrawal from South Vietnam; because so many of these best have returned as quadriplegics and amputees—and they lie forgotten in veterans Administration hospitals in this country which fly the flag which so many have chosen as their own personal symbol—and we cannot consider our selves America's best men when we are ashamed of and hated for what we were called on to do in Southeast Asia.

in our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse, is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy.

We are probably angriest about all that we were told about Vietnam and about the mystical war against communism. We found that not only was it a civil war, and effort by a people who had for years been seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever, but also we found that the Vietnamese whom we had enthusiastically molded after our own image were hard put to take up the fight against the threat we were supposedly saving them from. We found most people didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy. They only wanted to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bobs with napalm burning their villages and tearing their

country apart.... They practiced the art of survival by siding with whichever military force was present at a particular time, be it Viet cong, North Vietnamese, or American.

We found that all too often American men were dying in those rice paddies for want of support from their allies. We saw firsthand how monies from American taxes were used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. We saw that many people in this country had a one-sided idea of who was kept free by our flag, and blacks provided the highest percentage of casualties. We saw Vietnam ravaged equally by American bombs and search-and-destroy missions, as well as by Viet Cong terrorism, and yet we listened while this country tried to blame all of the havoc on the Viet Cong. We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soliders [sic] who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum. We learned the meaning of free-fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness of the lives of Orientals.

We watched the United States' 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. We fought (with) weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting the European theater. We watched while men charge up hills because a general said that hill has to be taken, and after losing one platoon or two platoons, they marched away to leave the hill for reoccupation by the North Vietnamese. We watched pride allow the most unimportant battles to be blown into extravaganzas, because we couldn't lose, and we couldn't retreat, and because it didn't matter how many American bodies were lost to prove that point, and so there were Hamburger Hills and Khesahns and Hill 81s and Fire Base 6s, and so many others.

And now we are told that the men who fought there must watch quietly while American lives are lost so that we can exercise the incredible arrogance of Vietnamizing the Vietnamese. Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first President to lose a war."

We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake? But we are trying to do that, and we are doing it with thousands of rationalizations, and if you read carefully the President's last speech to the people of this country, you can see that he says and says clearly, "but the issue, gentlemen, the issue is communism, and the question is whether or not we will leave that country to the Communists or whether or not we will try to give it hope to be a free people." But the point is they are not a free people now, and we cannot fight communism all over the world. I think we should have learned that lesson by now.

Suddenly we are faced with a very sickening situation in this country, because there is no moral indignation and if there is, it comes from people who are almost exhausted by their past indignations...The country seems to have lain down and shrugged off something as serious as Laos, just as we calmly shrugged off the loss of 700,00 lives in Pakistan, the so-called greatest disaster of all times. But we are here as veterans to say we think we are in the midst of the greatest disaster of all times now, because they are

still dying over there—not just Americans, but Vietnamese—and we are rationalizing leaving that country so that those people can go on killing each other for years to come.

Americans seem to have accepted the idea that the war is winding down, at least for Americans, and they have also allowed the bodies which were once used by a President for statistics to prove that we were winning that war, to be used as evidence against a man who followed orders and who interpreted those orders no differently than hundreds of their men in Vietnam.

We veterans can only look with amazement on the fact that this country has been unable to see there is absolutely no difference between ground troops and a helicopter crew, and yet people have accepted a differentiation fed them by the Administration. No ground troops are in Laos, so it is all right to kill Laotians by remote control. But believe me the helicopter crews fill the same body bags and they wreak the same kind of damage on the Vietnamese and Laotian countryside as anybody else, and the President is taking about allowing that to go on for many years to come. One can only ask if we will really be satisfied only when the troops march into Hanoi.

We are asking here in Washington for some action, action from the Congress of the United States of America, which has the power to raise and maintain armies, and which by the Constitution also has the power to declare war. We have come here, not to the President, because we believe that this body can be responsive to the will of the people, and we believe that the will of the people says that we should be out of Vietnam now.

We are here in Washington also to say that the problem of this war is not just a question of war and diplomacy. It is part and parcel of everything that we are trying as human beings to communicate to people in this country—the question of racism, which is rampant in the military, and so many other questions such as the use of weapons; the hypocrisy in our taking umbrage in the Geneva Conventions and using that as justification for a continuation of this war when we are more guilty than any other body of violations of those Geneva Conventions; in the use of free-fire zones, harassment interdiction fire, search-and-destroy missions, the bombings, the torture of prisoners, the killing of prisoners, all accepted policy by many units in South Vietnam. That is what we are trying to say. We are also here to ask, and we are here to ask vehemently, where are the leaders of our country? Where is the leadership? We are here to ask where are McNamara, Rostow, Bundy, Johnson, and so many others? Where are they now that we, the men whom they sent off to war, have returned? These are commanders who have deserted their troops, and there is no more serious crime in the law of war. The Army says they never leave their wounded. The Marines say they never leave even their dead. These men have left all the casualties and retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude. They have left the real stuff of their reputations bleaching behind them in the sun.

Finally, this Administration has done us the ultimate dishonor. They have attempted to disown us and the sacrifices we made for this country. In their blindness and fear they have tried to deny that we are veterans or that we served in Nam. We do not need their testimony. Our own scars and stumps of limbs are witness enough for others and for ourselves.

We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this Administration has wiped away their memories of us. But all that they

have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission—to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more, so when thirty years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say “Vietnam” and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning.

From John Kerry’s statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 22, 1971.

Chronology: Operation Dewey Canyon III

Operation Dewey Canyon I took place during January and February 1969. During a five-day period in February, elements of the Third Marine Division invaded Laos. Operation Dewey Canyon II was the name given to the first seven days of the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in February 1971. The name of the operation was subsequently changed. Operation Dewey Canyon III took place in Washington, D.C., April 19 through April 23, 1971. It was called "a limited incursion in to the country of Congress."

Sunday/April 18, 1971

Anti-war Vietnam veterans from nearly every state begin filtering into West Potomac Park. By nightfall, only 900 have registered and the veteran leaders are worried that they will not have the requisite numbers for the desired impact.

Monday/April 19, 1971

About 1,100 veterans move across the Lincoln Memorial Bridge to Arlington Cemetery, some in wheelchairs, some on crutches, Mothers who lost their sons in Vietnam (Gold Star Mothers) head the procession.

A brief ceremony for the war dead on both sides is conducted by Reverend Jackson Day on the small plot of grass outside the Cemetery beneath the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the grave of John F. Kennedy. (Reverend Day had resigned his military chaplainship a few days before.)

After the ceremony, a small delegation of mother and veterans is barred from entering the Cemetery and lays two memorial wreaths at the entrance. The march reforms and makes its way to the Capitol.

The march reaches the Capitol steps. Congressman Paul McCloskey, who joined the march en route, and Representatives Bellas Abzug, Donald Edwards, and Ogden Reid address the crowd. Jan Crumb, member of the executive committee of VVAW, formally presents sixteen demands to Congress.

The veterans march to the Mall and establish a campsite on a small grassy quadrangle between Third and Fourth streets. Some veterans go directly into the halls of Congress to lobby against the war.

Washington District Court of Appeals lifts an injunction barring veterans camping on the Mall. The injunction had been requested by the Justice Department.

Tuesday/April 20, 1971

About 200 veterans attend hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on proposals to end the war.

Veterans lobby all day in Congress.

A contingent of 200 veterans, feelings that the affront of the day before cannot be overlooked, marches from the Mall back to Arlington Cemetery. they march single file across the Lincoln Memorial Bridge. The Superintendent tries to stop the veterans at the gates but then backs down.

In the afternoon, a guerilla theater performance is given on the steps of the Capitol.

Senators Claiborne Pell and Philip Hart hold a fund-raising party for the veterans. During the party, it is announced that Chief Justice Warren Burger has reversed the decision of the Court of Appeals—allegedly, the speediest process of an appeal to the Supreme Court on record. The injunction is once again in effect and the veterans are given until 4:30 the following afternoon to break camp.

Wednesday/April 21, 1971

A Contingent of fifty veterans marches to the Pentagon to turn themselves in as war criminals. They are not arrested.

Lobbying on Capitol Hill continues all day. Guerilla theater is performed in front of the Justice Department.

At 4.30 PM, the appointed hour of eviction from the camp, an alarm clock rings over the microphone on the speaker's platform. No police are in sight. The area is packed with curious onlookers. The Supreme Court is meeting in special session.

At 5:30 PM, Ramsey Clark announces that the Supreme Court has offered the veterans an option: Stay on the Mall, don't sleep, and the government won't arrest you; or sleep on the Mall and the government will arrest you. The veterans retire into their various delegations and vote, in effect, on whether to sleep or not to sleep. By a close vote a majority choose to sleep. All agree to abide by that decision.

Washington Park Police state they have no intention of inspecting the campsite during the night. The cast of the musical *Hair* entertains the troops.

Senator Edward Kennedy make a midnight visit to the Mall. He remains for one hour talking and singing with veterans.

The veterans sleep on the Mall without interruption.

Thursday/April 22, 1971

A large group of veterans march to the steps of the Supreme Court to ask the Court why it has not ruled on the constitutionality of the war. They sing *God Bless America*. One hundred and ten are arrested for disturbing the peace and are led off the steps with their hands clasped behind their heads.

John Kerry testifies before a special session of the Senate Foreign Relations committee for two hours.

Lobbying on Capitol Hill continues all day.

A District Court judge angrily dissolves his injunction order, rebuking Justice Department lawyers for requesting the court order and then not enforcing it.

Veterans stage a candlelight march around the White House. A huge American flag is carried upside down as a signal of distress. The march ends back at the camp when the flag carriers mount the stage (see cover)

Friday/April 23, 1971

Veterans cast down their medals and ribbons on the steps of the Capitol.

Congressman Jonathan Bingham holds hearings with former intelligence and public information officers over distortion of news and information concerning the war.

Senators George McGovern and Philip Hart hold hearings on atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers in Vietnam.

Veterans begin breaking camp. A tree, donated by the veterans, is planted as a symbolic plea for the preservation of all life and the environment.

the quadrangle on the Mall is vacant. Not on act of violence has been committed. They came in peace.

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The war in Indochina continues.

I went into the Marine Corps one week after graduation from high school, and boy, I really loved it. When we sang the Marine Corps Hymn tears would get in my eyes. There was no Vietnam for us then, no Gulf of Tonkin or anything.

Jon Birch/Cpl., B Company, 3rd Shore Party, 11th Marine Regt., May '65-Feb. '66

