



### **Vietnam Veteran Ed Moriarity, 1986**

A student wrote: "I feel like I learned in forty minutes more than I learned in a whole day of school."

# The Veterans Education Project of Amherst, Massachusetts

ROBERT M. WILSON



**Editor's Introduction:** *The Veterans Education Project (VEP), founded in 1982 by Vietnam veterans, is an independent, non-profit organization based in Amherst, Massachusetts. It is a unique, local organization whose history deserves to be written in full. Several of the veterans profiled in Tom Weiner's Called to Serve were active members.*

*The early 1980s, when VEP was created, was a time of mounting international tensions. President Carter had reinstated selective service registration in 1980. That same year, Ronald Reagan campaigned for the White House advocating dramatically increased military spending and espousing a bellicose foreign policy that embraced the concept of limited nuclear war.<sup>1</sup>*

*In a major campaign speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Reagan coined the term "Vietnam syndrome." He alleged that the Soviet Union was outspending the U.S. in the global arms race and warned that America's global power was decreasing. He accused the Carter administration of being "totally oblivious" to the Soviet threat. Reagan characterized the "Vietnam syndrome" as a deep reluctance on the part of the American public to support U.S. military interventions abroad due to widespread public doubt over the morality of America's intentions and actions during the Vietnam conflict. Reagan, however, argued that America had fought for "a noble cause":*

*For too long, we have lived with the “Vietnam Syndrome.” Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors. . . . Over and over they told us for nearly ten years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam. . . . It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause.*

*Reagan concluded with the equally famous line, “Let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Some Vietnam veterans were deeply disturbed by this characterization, having themselves questioned both the necessity and the morality of the war they had been asked to fight. At the same time, shortly after his election, President Reagan began campaigning for Congressional support to send U.S. troops to Central America to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and also to provide support for the government of El Salvador, which was fighting a brutal civil war against its own population. When Congress refused, and later denied all U.S. funding to assist the “Contras” (the “counter-revolutionaries” who were seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government), the stage was set for the Iran-Contra Affair.*

*During the early years of the Reagan administration, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), a national organization formed in 1967, saw an upsurge in activism. As the VVAW’s website explains, “The parallels with Vietnam were particularly striking in Central America where the U.S. supported repressive regimes against popular insurgencies.”<sup>3</sup> Some veterans had sons who were approaching draft age, and they feared for their children’s futures.<sup>4</sup>*

*This was the national context in which the Amherst Veterans Education Project was born.<sup>5</sup> This short “sidebar” article, intended to complement this issue’s Editor’s Choice selection by Tom Weiner on the Vietnam-era draft, offers a personal reflection by Robert M. Wilson, who served as a staff member for twenty years (1992-2012). The Veterans Education Project is a registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization, funded solely by donations from individuals, businesses and foundation grants. It is not affiliated with the Veteran’s Administration or any other government agency, nor does it receive federal or state funding for its operating expenses.*

## MISSION STATEMENT<sup>6</sup>

In 2012, I retired as executive director of the Veterans Education Project. I am not a veteran. I am a former elementary school teacher who volunteered at first with VEP, saw the power and effectiveness of the organization's work in schools, and became a staff member in 1992. In 1998, I was appointed executive director and served until my retirement in 2012.

VEP's goal is to provide opportunities for veterans to share personal stories that illustrate the realities of violence and to deglorify war, in order to promote critical thinking, dialogue and healing in our schools and communities. VEP veterans speak in secondary schools, youth programs, colleges, public venues, and at conferences and workshops for human service and education professionals in the western Massachusetts area. Speakers volunteer their time to participate in training and programs, and their innovative presentations and extensive community services have earned local and national awards and acclaim. Many of the 150 hours of programming VEP veterans deliver each year are provided to schools and the public for free. While each speaker has a



In 2010, VEP organized three *Writing the War Experience* workshops. The project was part of the National Endowment for the Arts' *Operation Homecoming*, a national series of NEA writing workshops for thousands of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.



Cherie Rankin, speaking at a high school, shares her story of serving in Vietnam with the American Red Cross.

unique personal story to share, all veterans seek to help young people better understand the realities of war and to think critically about the decisions we make as civilians regarding war and violence.

In 2007, VEP helped found Military Families Connect (MFC), a family support group that provides peer connection and emotional support to families and individuals with loved ones serving in or returned from Iraq or Afghanistan. MFC no longer meets regularly, but its members

keep in touch for peer support and sometimes meet with and offer support to families with a loved one serving in a war zone. Some family members train to be VEP speakers and share their own stories—revealing the challenges they and their veterans have experienced as a result of deployment.

Throughout its history, VEP has sought to create new programs to meet evolving community needs. Since 2000, VEP has sponsored community forums on the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the impact of these conflicts on veterans and their families, and related problems such as a rise in PTSD and homelessness within this generation of veterans. Our veterans and staff have created prevention programs for youth in which veterans share their stories about the consequences and costs of violence, and of overcoming addiction, family violence, and incarceration to lead productive lives. VEP has helped veterans of color and women veterans to relate their stories to the progress of the civil rights and women's movements, adding a valuable dimension to the study of history. Most recently, the group has



VEP speakers pose after speaking at a college. Clockwise, from left: Jon Schnauber, Heather Rudolph, Cayenne Isekson, Rob Wilson (author of this article), Jack Brainard, Don Chevannes (2008).

sponsored events to expose and explore an epidemic of sexual assault in the military, helping women veterans who are survivors to speak out.

## VEP'S HISTORY

The Veterans Education Project was started by Amherst-area Vietnam veterans in 1982, the same year Sylvester Stallone's popular film fantasy about a Vietnam veteran, *Rambo*, was released. The veterans wanted to visit schools in order to provide student audiences a realistic narrative about the Vietnam War and its veterans, one that countered Hollywood's unrealistic glorifications of war and went beyond the few pages most high school history textbooks of the time dedicated to the war. They also thought it important for teens who were considering military service to hear first-hand perspectives on the realities and potential human costs of war, something not offered by recruiters' benefits-oriented presentations.

Our thirtieth anniversary newsletter recounts some of our earliest history:

At work on a spring day in 1982, veteran Rob Stenson heard the noise of a military "Huey" helicopter flying low, a very familiar sound from his days of service in Vietnam. He took a break



Iraq veteran Tyler Boudreau reading from his war memoir, on a panel with artist Matt Mitchell (seated next to Boudreau) at UMass. A portrait by Mitchell of an Iraq veteran sits on the easel. In 2010, VEP and the University of Massachusetts Fine Arts Center worked together on a series of public events titled *War Veterans: A Commemoration*.

and tracked it to the high school football field. Students on the sidelines cheered as a team of Army recruiters jumped out and moved inside to an all-school assembly. This is a sales presentation on the benefits of military service, Rob thought. Wouldn't it be useful for them to hear, as well, from men and women who had served, but were not working for the military? People who could share a narrative of the Vietnam War that presented the unvarnished realities of war?

The concept for the Veterans Education Project (VEP) was born. After many planning meetings, a speakers' bureau of local veterans formed. VEP's first volunteer veterans practiced their stories and began visiting schools.<sup>7</sup>

Initially, there was only limited interest at area schools in VEP programming. Negative stereotypes of Vietnam veterans were common, as was the concern that a veteran's honest yet critical stories about the war would be unpatriotic. However, word spread that VEP speakers' stories brought history to life, offered an entertaining and worthwhile complement to classroom lessons, and engaged even hard-to-reach teen audiences. Teachers soon realized that veterans' oral histories also encouraged students to think critically about what they were being exposed to in their textbooks, in news media, and on movie screens.

VEP is the only veterans' organization in the U.S. that has a primary mission of sharing personal stories with audiences. Speakers are trained to focus on their authentic experiences and to put them into the historical context of the era in which they served. Personal opinions about the history of a war and the politics of the era are offered during post-presentation discussion, in response to student questions. When sharing personal perspectives, VEP veterans explain that every veteran's opinion, like his or her experience, is different and should not be confused with historical facts.



Ray Elliott tells stories of serving in a segregated Army in WWII, sharing both history and life lessons with a group of incarcerated youth (2007).

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

In my twenty years of working with VEP veterans in area classrooms with veterans of every war and conflict from WWII to the present, I have heard vivid stories that evoke important moments in history and illuminate classic literary themes about war, from Homer to current-day authors. These personal histories—and the discussions that follow—add an important perspective to books and articles about history. And they are every bit as eye-opening and visceral as documentary films and serious fictional movie accounts of war, such as “Schindler’s List” and “Saving Private Ryan” (WWII), “Platoon” (Vietnam), and “Restrepo” (Afghanistan).

I have come to appreciate the courage it takes to share one’s own stories—including memories that are intimate and, at times, painful—with a room full of strangers. It has been rewarding to observe and to hear how much these audiences learn, and how deeply they became engaged in the veteran’s narrative.

What has been especially rewarding to me is to have seen how the positive response of an audience to a story validates a veteran. Many of our veterans carry emotional wounds from their wartime service and sacrifices. Similar to the veterans whom Tom Weiner interviewed in his oral history collection, *Called To Serve*, some experienced the injury and terror of combat. Many lost comrades. Others became deeply disillusioned with their war and suffered the debilitating confusion of cognitive dissonance. And some—including veterans of our recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have struggled with the alienation and anger symptomatic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

To be able to talk about the events that inflicted those wounds, and to see that audiences are understanding and empathic to the veteran storyteller, is deeply moving. In the words of Don Chevannes, a once-homeless Vietnam veteran who now frequently speaks with VEP and who was interviewed in *Called to Serve*, “I can see it in [the audience’s faces] that they are listening and learning. Man, that feels good. You can’t put a price tag on it.”<sup>8</sup>

As our website states: “VEP stories show firsthand the realities and human costs of war, and share strategies and resources for veterans returning to civilian life. By sharing their experiences, our veteran speakers gain an authentic connection with our community, provide a bridge between civilian and military worlds, and help us to heal the emotional wounds of war.”<sup>9</sup>





### 100 Faces of War

At a 2008 exhibit co-sponsored by VEP, Afghanistan veteran Jon Schnauber contemplates some of the portraits and stories of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans painted by Amherst artist Matt Mitchell in his *100 Faces of War* project. Each portrait is accompanied by a statement or personal story written by the person pictured. *100 Faces* literally puts a human face on the costs and sacrifices of war, as it shares the written stories and perspectives of those who served or worked as civilians in war zones. For more information, see [www.100facesofwarexperience.org](http://www.100facesofwarexperience.org).

### Notes

1. See Eric Mlyn, *The State, Society, and Limited Nuclear War* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) and Robert Sheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (NY: Random House, 1982).
2. Ronald Reagan, "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety," speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago, August 18, 1980. For more on the "Vietnam Syndrome" see also Michael T. Klare, *Beyond the Vietnam Syndrome: U.S. Interventionism in the 1980's* (Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies, 1989); Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and Geoff Simons, *Vietnam Syndrome: The Impact on Us Foreign Policy* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).
3. Barry Romo, Pete Zastrow and Joe Miller, "History of the U.S. War in Vietnam," (2002) located at [www.vvaw.org/about/warhistory.php](http://www.vvaw.org/about/warhistory.php); accessed April 5, 2013.
4. Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (NY: New York University Press, 1999). For more on VVAW see Richard Stacewicz, *Winter*

*Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1998) and Richard Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

5. For more on the local context and anti-war activism in Massachusetts in the 1980s, see Robert Surbrug, *Beyond Vietnam: the Politics of Protest in Massachusetts, 1974-1990* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

6. This section is adapted from the Veterans Education Project homepage, [www.vetsed.org/](http://www.vetsed.org/) Accessed April 4, 2013.

7. Newsletter, Veteran's Education Project, 1982-2012. Accessed on April 4, 2013 at <http://vetsed.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/vep-30th-aniv-insert-highres.pdf>. VEP has published a newsletter beginning in 1986. Several issues are available as PDF downloads on their website.

8. Quoted in R. Wilson., S. Leary, M. Mitchell, and D. Ritchie, "Military Veterans Sharing First Person Stories of War and Homecoming: A Pathway to Engagement, Personal Healing, and Public Understanding of Veterans' Issues," *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 79(3-4), 2009 July-Dec.), 393.

9. [www.vetsed.org](http://www.vetsed.org/), accessed April 14, 2013. A collection of oral histories that includes some of VEP's WWII veterans sharing their stories, as well as complementary information, photographs and timelines, can be found on the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association's *American Centuries* website. See: First Person: Twentieth-Century History as Told by People Who Lived It and Made It. <http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/activities/oralhistory/index.html>. VEP has received extensive newspaper coverage over the decades. See, for example: *The Republican* (Springfield MA), April 8, 2013, "Events to explore sexual assault," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 19, 2011, "Haunting memories: In talks and photos, veterans show new generation the long-term effects of war," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, April 16, 2009, "Veterans Education Project looks at war's truth and consequences," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, March 28, 2009, "Fights & Rights: Project chronicles WWII's 'Double V' campaign to overcome foreign fascism, domestic racism," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, November 11, 2009, "Keeping the Focus on Vets by Spreading Their Stories," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 14, 2007, "Fighting fear and uncertainty: Military family members lend each other a shoulder to lean on," and the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 17, 2006, "Speakers in schools 'de-glorify war.'"

