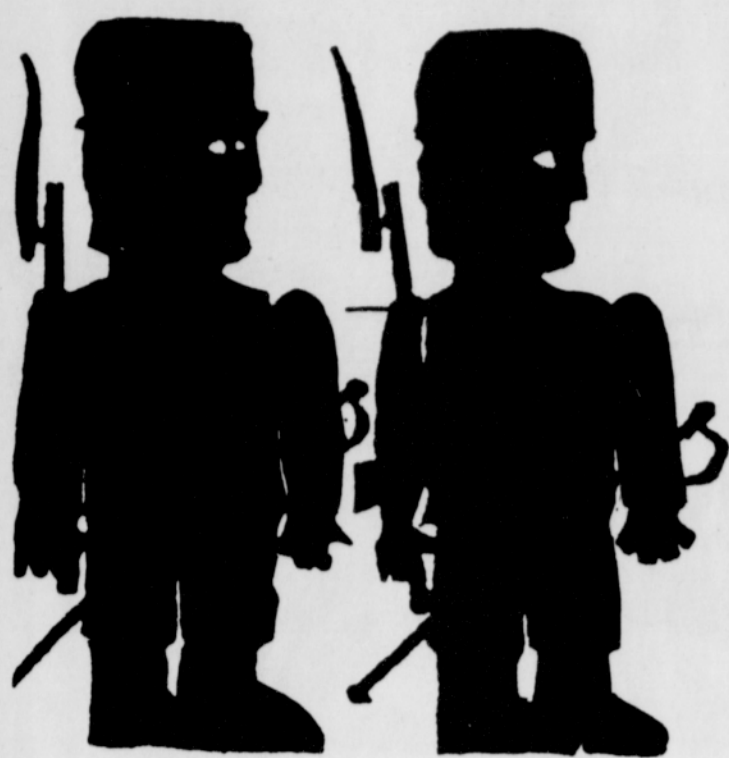


OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE...

ONLY YOUNG ONES



BY T. GRAMSCI

In May of this year, a U.S. Army recruiter showed up at Dayton Middle School to talk to the children about the military. This isn't unusual: The recruiters like to start spreading the propaganda early. What was unusual about this particular incident was what the recruiter carried along as an "instructional aid": he was packing an M-16. Probably somewhere in his mind he thought it would turn the kids on to hold and handle a real weapon; but for most of the children in the school, it was a terrifying experience. They didn't know what this man in uniform was doing on their campus carrying a rifle. Even the teachers were intimidated, so intimidated in fact that they asked the recruiter to leave and then called the Portland-based Northwest Veterans for Peace.

Two of the teachers had heard that the Northwest Vets had a speakers program which travels throughout Oregon talking to civic groups and schools about the realities of the military, the aftermath of war, and the social and psychological difficulties veterans encounter after being released from the military. The teachers at Dayton wanted an alternative view to what the recruiters were pushing in the schools.

The Northwest Vets for Peace grew out of the protests against the Gulf War. "The vets were literally coming out of the walls to join us in protest," says Jerry, a founder, "But after the war was over and resistance diminished, we were still having our Sunday night meetings. Nobody was interested in disbanding. We had found support we had rarely found before.... We all needed to counter the national euphoria over the 'victory' in the Gulf." Another member puts it this way: "Our nation reverted to some primitive form of barbarism during that holocaust against Iraq. The government was telling us that our slaughter of millions in Viet Nam and our eventual defeat there was being vindicated by the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. With that kind of logic, we knew we had to do something."

By the end of the Gulf War there were 50 dedicated members who became quickly involved in not only local issues such as budget cuts at the Portland Veterans' Hospital and countering the hate campaigns of the Oregon Citizens Alliance and neo-Nazis, but also in protesting nuclear tests in Nevada, the plight of nuclear veterans (there are hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were exposed to radiation during the '40s, '50s and '60s, all being part of government "experiments"), and Native American struggles against the U.S. government.

"Some of us were pissed off at this replay of Viet Nam," says Marv, a Viet Nam combat veteran and one of the founders of Vets for Peace. "Others were deeply saddened, hurt, but all of us didn't want it to happen, and we shared that commitment in common." "Yeah, we had a real need to speak up about what the military and government did to the Vietnamese and their country," adds Mike, another Viet Nam combat vet. "We knew what was in store for the Iraqis and the American troops. The Gulf vets are having the same problems the 'Nam vets had — you know, nightmares, post-traumatic stress, unemployment."

And it hasn't been easy. The Vets want to make their program a regular part of the curriculum, but the school board has fought them at every turn. Paige, a former school teacher, now a NW Vet and a member of Teachers, Parents and Youth for Peace, has been at the center of the struggle with the school board: "We tried for six months to get the 'No Recruiters on Campus' issue on the school board agenda. We went to meeting after meeting, and the most frequent response from them was, 'Oh, no, the pains-in-the-ass are here again.' They finally rejected the ban in January 1992, by a 5-2 vote; and the two who voted for the ban did so because the military discriminates against gays. They did, however, come up with a watered-down compromise. They decided that recruiters could only come to campuses once a week, and it's a rotating schedule. What that means is the Army gets one week, then the Navy, followed by the Air Force... until it rotates around to us. So, in reality, we get to visit the schools every six weeks after all five services get their chance. And the other little 'glitch' is that with us, we have to be invited by the school to be able to speak there. I guess that's some kind of victory, as those Army jocks were showing up on some campuses as many as four times a week."

"And now, if we're going to make any headway, we have to start all over again because we have a new superintendent of schools for Portland, not that the old Super cared that much for what we were doing. Hopefully, this new person will be a little more accessible."

"Most parents don't even know how the War Boys are trying to program their kids. Ask the people in this group, or better still, ask the parents of the 60,000 who never came back from Viet Nam."

It is plain to see that the Vets' own experiences of war, whether it was as combat soldier, nurse, wife or family, are something they would do anything in their power to have all kids avoid. Roger, a Marine infantryman in Viet Nam, says, "They tell the kids everything except what the military is really about. They dangle technology and trade skills in front of them and then tell them that they can travel to all these really exotic places and get money for a college edu-

cation when they get out. They never tell them about the effects of combat, or the destruction and death. They avoid everything concerning the real function of an army." Marv nods his head: "And all this learning a trade business... the military trades are a whole other world compared to the way the trades are run in civilian life. Most soldiers have to be completely retrained in their specialty after they get out."

"Those recruiters are slick and sly. They really go after the minorities," points out Carol, a Native American and ex-trauma nurse who tended wounded soldiers in Viet Nam. "They target them because they know if you're from a minority group — they don't want gays, of course — then you're not going to have many promising opportunities once you leave high school, if you even get to finish." This is a burning issue for the Northwest Vets.

When the Vets go into a classroom or school assembly, they begin telling their stories, one by one; and each story covers some aspect of military life. The program generally covers personal experiences during combat, the emotional effects of battle, the personal histories of the Vets before and after going to war, the conditions in their childhoods that ultimately led them to join the military, the Veterans Administration and its treatment of vets, alternatives to military service, and the realities and hardships of choosing conscientious objector status.

Once the program is under way, the students are usually in rapt attention. The Vets approach their task gently and softly; after all, they are challenging assumptions that have been in these students' lives since birth. "For the most part, all these kids know about the military is what they see on TV or in the movies," Don, a former door gunner on an assault helicopter, comments. "Some of their fathers were in Viet Nam, and when we want to bring it home to them we just ask them if their dads have ever spoken about their experiences in the war. So far, only a few have any knowledge of what their fathers experienced in 'Nam.'"

But the most frequently asked question is — If the Vets had the chance to do it over again, would they? Don continues: "We try to distinguish between defending your country and being sent to some hapless third world nation that is somehow restricting corporate America's interests. And these kids are sharp. They understand that the American military is used more for foreign policy applications than domestic security. They understand even better when we illustrate how people like Dan Quayle and Eliot Abrams — you know, the ruling class — are always calling for holy wars against America's supposed enemies; but when it comes down to picking up a weapon and serving your country, they are always conspicuously absent."

In conversations with these Vets, it is evident that most of them have a difficult time understanding the resistance they have encountered in the schools. They simply want to help, share experiences, tell the truth to children. The truth has been a very painful issue to confront for most of them, but the need to get the message across has acted as a kind of counterbalance to the pain of remembering.

Ted, a combat soldier with the 25th Infantry Division ("Tropical Lightning"), says, "There are so many facts about Viet Nam and its aftermath which this 'civilization' has conveniently buried so it doesn't have to confront its actions and behavior there. Three million Vietnamese perished under bombs and bullets. Most of their capital cities and towns were completely destroyed. We poisoned their earth and ruined their economy."

"And that's only what happened to the Vietnamese. When they stopped counting American 'Nam suicides in 1980, there were 72,000 men and women who had taken their own lives.* Who knows how many more have died at their own hands? If you look at the history of this country, we've had a war for every generation, sometimes two. That's quite a legacy. Sometimes I can't ignore what my parents' generation bequeathed to us. They didn't give us tools or the facilities to make a better world — you know, have us build hospitals or schools. No, they gave us Viet Nam to destroy, gave us guns, bombs, fire, poison to use in Viet Nam. And then they said, 'Here you go, kids. It's all yours. Do whatever you want.' And you know, we did."

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*This number is not substantiated and seems wildly out of proportion. Many Viet Nam veterans have committed suicide but any form of "body-count" associated with the war is to be regarded with skepticism.

— MPMc/NCTE

