

SUMMER 1970:



DRAWING BY ANTHONY RUSSO

PEOPLE'S ARMY JAMBOREE

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

Twenty-four years ago a protest against the American Legion both galvanized and polarized Portland, Oregon. The following is a personal recollection scribbled to assist an interview and subsequently tampered with by revisions and additions.

I spent most of 1966 and a few months of 1967 as a USMC combat correspondent in Vietnam. My job was to travel with infantry ("grunts") and sometimes reconnaissance patrols and record with words and camera our experiences in conflict with Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army. My weapons were an increasingly battered and rusty M-14 rifle (rice grew out of its barrel, I claimed), various pens, pencils and spiral-lined notepads, and a Nikonos underwater 35-mm camera I asked a friend to buy for me cheap in Hong Kong while he was on R&R (Rest & Relaxation, usually five days in some other Southeast Asian country, Australia or Hawaii, the only stateside recess from the war).

I quickly accepted the war's grim circumstances but no amount of star spangled banner justified the horror of indiscriminate eco/genocide against Vietnamese, who mostly died because they were in the way.

I survived my one-year assignment to war by embracing a thought that guilt was the provenance of only the living, though I refrained from personal atrocities.

Alive and back stateside I attempted to keep the promise of my accepted guilt.

I was an early member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and organized chapters of disaffected Vietnam veterans all over the country, diminishing my responsibility with successful geographic recruitings until finally I was only a state coordinator (Oregon). My dream of being absolutely free from antiwar obligations were interrupted and dramatically postponed by the student strike at Portland State University in the spring of 1970* and by the People's Army Jamboree late that summer.

I was a rather forceful speaker at the time, blunt but oratorical. I could recruit by force of voice but I was miserably incapable of keeping the flock my tongue gathered. I was fortunate that ideas and possible political strategies I was able to articulate attracted some who could administer them.

(As a result of my association with the VVAW I have two layers of combat comrades: we watched each others' backs in both the war and the war against the war. We were 360-degree soldiers.)

The first time I heard about the American Legion's plans for a convention in Portland the summer of 1970 was the previous December following a speech I made at the third of the Moratoriums held nationwide in the autumn of 1969. A reporter from the *Oregon Journal*, a Vietnam veteran, told me the Legion was coming and suggested something ought to be done to confront their unconditional support of the Vietnam War.

The most logical opposition would be Vietnam veterans, he said. As it turned out, Vietnam Veterans Against the War spearheaded the protest but were only a small part of an amalgamation of NW antiwar organizations; a hodgepodge of angst-crazed freaks mirthfully named "The People's Army Jamboree."

Each opposition to the war had its own logic and internal history. For most veterans it was either sympathy for Vietnamese and guilt in assisting in killing them, or that one American life lost was worth more than the entire nation of Vietnamese and for that reason those who held that point of view thought the war should be ended. Regardless of their reasons for opposing the war they fought in, the usual attitude toward the dissenting veterans was as traitors (from the Right) and babykillers (from the Left), though both attitudes were to change. I estimated that for every vet who made public his or her protest, perhaps 10 or 100 were in quiet sympathy.

The VVAW started organizing in early 1968. Its first of many factional divisions resulted from the McCarthy for President campaign when more extreme vets devoted to urban warfare refused to reorganize into presidential politics. However, from the McCarthy campaign grew a national register of antiwar vets who later joined the VVAW, which, primarily fallow for a year of recruiting and organizing throughout the country, resurged into public notice in the spring of 1970 on a hundred campuses during the national college strike against the war. At PSU the vets became medics and inadvertently became focus

of the strike when police charged to destroy their ersatz hospital and beat up several demonstrators. Confronting the American Legion seemed a high point, a direct challenge to military power which culminated the following year, in the spring of 1971, when the VVAW camped out for a week in Washington, D.C., hurling our war medals at Congress and a hundred pounds of chicken-shit (from nearby Maryland chicken farms) at the Pentagon on May Day. Also, the week following the American Legion Convention in Portland, an East Coast contingent of VVAW marched from Morristown, N.J., to Valley Forge, Pa., sweeping through cities and towns along the way, which became famous as a form of unique guerrilla theater; the vets pretending to assault actors staged among each village's citizens in the manner they earlier mishandled Vietnamese peasants.

The idea of doing something about the presence of the American Legion in Portland was thought about through the winter and spring of 1970. More immediate matters took precedence, but after the PSU strike in May organizing to protest the Legion Convention was frontburner priority.

It was unfortunate we had so long to wait, almost three months. By then the devil of factionalism had subdivided us almost to the point of dissolution. People who had been recognized as leaders of the local antiwar movement resisted relinquishing stature and power to newcomers, who had evolved into the practical leadership during the strike in May. A new group of leaders emerged from the ranks of barricaded persons who formed a community of spirit while isolating the campus from the outside world for six days, living together behind accumulations of furniture and rubbish. The barricade community dominated the strike and its independent-minded citizenry rebelled against the organizational leadership that remained inside PSU's buildings and issued masses of mimeographed proclamations that were usually ignored.

The same shift of power occurred during organizing of the People's Army Jamboree. The new group which emerged during the strike was voted to lead the PAJ in a tumultuous meeting of most of the esoteric groups who were to participate, representing most of the variations of Oregon's small counterculture (with the distinct exception of black activist groups). I was elected titular leader of the PAJ because I represented the VVAW, which was publicly promoted confronting the Legion. Vietnam veterans were the logical figureheads for our raggedy-ann clash with the Pentagon's war policies as signified by elder veterans whose organization rubberstamped every military ambition and pretension.

Ultimately, however, significant power remained with the old leaders who opened negotiations with Portland city officials for a site in which to encamp whoever came into town to protest. At this point the two factions started tearing at each other; one attempted to retain control by dealing with the city and encouraging the fear that Portland would be invaded by hordes of hippies; the other split rail sent out warnings to stay out of Portland because it might be an ambush to cripple the antiwar movement. This faction, the newcomers (which included me), also supported the Governor's rock festival, "Vortex", which was inspired to detour incoming demonstrators from Portland. Our

support was from concern that police did not distinguish pot-smoking music lovers from hardcore political dissenters. With the cultural side of the counterculture removed, the streets of the city were open to the political side which would be free from worry that its activities would harm the spaced-out innocents.

I was not a very good organizer but I had talent as a front man. I made speeches, was interviewed by local and network radio and TV and also newspapers and wire services. I was allowed semi-equal time on the local TV and radio media to counter a rather hysterical diatribe by Governor Tom McCall against the People's Army Jamboree, which I compared to a speech by Adolf Hitler in the early 1930s to clear away public opinion for the upcoming Final Solution.

I spent little time in an office rented in the city's Burnside district for organizing the demonstration. Many people worked long hours every day without pay to put the affair together. I played grasshopper. When my presence or tongue were required I was usually found at Reuben's 5 Tavern.

I used to think Reuben's 5 regulars were queenbees of the liberated future. Maturity unblinkingly redefines us as just another tavern crowd, despite our exotic disguises, esoteric philosophies and wanton behavior.

Yet, in the summer of 1970, we bartenders at Reuben's 5 arranged our working schedules around our political activities. Reuben's 5 was our center. We drank wine (and smoked illicit drugs outside) and dithered about arcane and esoteric particles of political theory, none of which would survive reality but sounded impressive at the bar. Reuben's 5 was at its peak that summer, featured in local and national media as the colorful headquarters of the babyboomer rebels. Hunter Thompson commanded several tables throughout the Legion Convention, a blond woman and a darkhaired woman on either side as book-ends. Reporters sought and interviewed me at Reuben's 5 in the weeks before our intensely advertised clash of generations soon to appear live in Portland while police agents sat at the bar.


Articles and newscasts escalated the tension, as did rumors that a "hippy army" planned to invade and takeover Portland and that residents had bought out the city's stock of aerospray oven cleaner to be used in defense against subversive and personally repellent leftwing Huns.

There were also rumors and substantial evidence that a trap was about to be sprung on us. The city was to be packed with police from all over Oregon and most of the state national guard (the rest would surround the revelers at Vortex). A U.S. Army unit from Fort Lewis was to be stationed just across the Columbia River in Washington State. A few of us suspected a slaughter, a testing of how much public opinion would be strained by massacring a bunch of dope-smoking longhaired (usually white) hippies in a far off not very important city in the upper-left edge of the country. The previous year police had attacked and killed several Black Panthers in a number of cities with hardly a murmur from the mainstream, known then as the silent majority. The Portland media portrayed the People's Army Jamboree as if it intended to maraud the city like a biker gang. Sympathetic national guardsmen told us they were being trained in summer camp to attack hippies.

Perhaps the sum of these parts didn't add up to our paranoia, but we who were paranoid would have been irresponsible to not attempt to prevent the possible disaster we were paranoid about. We few conspirators staged a clandestine operation to keep people out of Portland. We sent messages and made telephone calls to radical groups all over the country, warning them and explaining we didn't desire to attract fatal attention. We also allied ourselves with the efforts to organize Vortex, which would draw off the non-political hippies and suck up out of staters on the road for Portland. We told everybody else that this was our demonstration and we wished to do it by ourselves.

In the meantime we participated in negotiations with the city. We applied for parade permits and argued for the use of a city park for our counterculture encampment. We wanted beautiful Washington Park for our campground, which we visualized as a final romp of flower children among the park's famous roses. We got instead Delta Park, former site of the city

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*See *Bloody Monday*, May 1992 NCTE, a personal account of the police attack at PSU.