



Televised shots like this from the Persian Gulf War in 1990 triggered nightmares in Vietnam-era vets. With that already in the back of many minds, chapters of veterans against the war were quickly reformed when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan.

But then the vets came to town

An immersion into the anti-war movement at the Veterans for Peace National Conference in Portland

BY MARTHA GIES
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Portland author Martha Gies is the daughter of Lt. Carl Parker Gies (1915-64), World War II pilot and recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross. She is also the newest associate member of Veterans for Peace.

There was not much promise in the week beginning August 1. On Tuesday, following the Congressional battle over the debt ceiling, President Obama signed into law the Budget Control Act of 2011, and one day later national debt surpassed 100 percent of gross domestic product for the first time since World War II.

On that same day, Wednesday, August 3, Nick Turse posted to Tomdispatch.com an article about the clandestine reach of the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), now metastasized to 120 countries, where special op teams from all branches of the military carry out "assassinations, counterterrorist raids, long-range reconnaissance, intelligence analysis, foreign troop training, and weapons of mass destruction counter-proliferation operations." And while Turse's chilling exposé was probably seen only by lefties – it went to Huffington Post, Common Dreams and Counterpunch within a day – by Saturday the New York Times had published a long and thoughtful piece by Drew Westen about the demise of our hope in Obama ("...the arc of history does not bend toward justice through capitulation cast as compromise.") that quickly became one of the most widely e-mailed of the year.

What a week! As some of us clicked frantically through websites looking for the elusive good news, others went outdoors into the novel Oregon sunshine, where news might never reach at all.

But then, on August 3, the vets came to town.

At Portland State University's historic Lincoln Hall, 400 veterans convened for an annual national convention to talk about peace and to scheme, on several simultaneous fronts; to wage it even in the face of a war machine so lucrative that even Eisenhower might gasp.

Hope, in the form of resilience, resistance

and nonviolent revolution, was brewing in our midst.

To abolish war, that's the mission of Veterans for Peace (VFP), explains Daniel Shea, a Portland veteran of Vietnam who serves on the national board. "Some members are pacifists," he adds, "but I don't count myself as a pacifist because I do believe in self-defense. If somebody were occupying our country, I'd join in the fight. But that would be the only time."

Shea, along with other members of local VFP Chapter 72, spent months planning the convention, which Portland hosted for the first time. Vets arrived from across the country for five days of film, music, tabling and book sales, speeches and a business meeting at which 16 resolutions, on issues from depleted uranium to Palestine to toxic chemical dumping in South Korea required their vote. Shea, an artist with a day job at the Oregon Symphony, personally curated an exhibit at the Littman Gallery called The Tenacity of Hope.

On Thursday, day two of the convention, the workshops begin and the corridors of Lincoln Hall are loud with talk and laughter as vets, WW II to Iraq, high five, hug and try to figure out where each of the nine offerings will be held in that first time slot. Back-to-back presentations include two on PTSD (encounters with the criminal justice system and transformational healing), drone payloads that target civilians, helping GIs who want out of the military, and a teach-in on the basics of organizing behind VFP's new campaign: How is the War Economy Working for You?

"Man, how do you choose?" I hear one vet grumble in the elevator. "They're not going to repeat any of these!"

In the afternoon, I pass up a session by Col. Ann Wright, who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq war, talking about organizing the 2011 Gaza flotilla; and a panel on the continuing tragic aftermath of war in Vietnam, where people still sicken and die

from Agent Orange, and unexploded landmines still maim and kill. I choose to watch "The Welcome," a powerful new 90-minute film shot during a unique veterans' healing retreat in Ashland, Oregon. Under the guidance of author and storyteller Michael Meade, veterans begin to transform the raw nightmare of war into poetry. The film ends with retreat participants reading their poems to an audience of 650 people who pack the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Bowmer Theater.

One particularly moving poem, by Melissa Steinman, a veteran of Kuwait, speaks to the hidden path to healing through the jungle of underbrush and to the gratitude she feels to older vets. Her poem is called "Old Timers – A Term of Endearment."

*From across the valley, a brother runs
towards me,
and nearly out of breath he says, "There was
no path
to healing when we came back.*

*But we are used to cutting through jungles,
we started hacking through the bush 40 years
ago,
in a direction that might lead to it..."*

Older vets companioning young vets is a key dynamic in VFP. "The Iraq vets would tell you that they're standing on the shoulders of Vietnam vets," says Daniel Shea, "and we're standing on the shoulders of WW II combatants who realized later that it was too high a price, that war could have been averted."

Shea appears in "The Welcome," one of the two dozen vets who went through the retreat with Meade, but misses the VFP screening to give a workshop on recent U.S. actions in Libya, where we bombed "to protect civilian lives" and in Honduras, where