

VETS, from page 8

we facilitated the military coup but take no notice of death squad murders of democracy activists.

The Welcome, released in April of this year, is making the rounds of festivals and will soon be available for purchase: <http://www.thewelcomethemovie.com/>.

Long-term activist Mike Dedrick is in Portland for the convention, and I ask him how he got into the military.

"I was working in construction, putting myself through school," says Dedrick. "But I was fucking around, playing pool. I flunked out of the University of Washington twice and lost my student deferment and got drafted, which would have been two years. So I enlisted for three years 'cause I didn't want to go to Vietnam."

Whereupon he was trained as an intelligence analyst and interrogator, and sent to Vietnam. It was 1967 and Dedrick was 21 years old.

After discharge, he went to Seattle Central Junior College for a few quarters, earning As and Bs. "When I'd dragged my GPA up, I got back into U.W.," Dedrick says. "By the time I'd earned my B.A. in European Medieval History, I was already in Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW)."

After a stint in a factory and two years learning to be an offset printer, he went back to the building trades.

Meanwhile, Dedrick had begun his activism in 1971 as the VVAW Regional Coordinator for Washington and Alaska, working on counter-recruiting and running deserters and soldiers gone AWOL across the border to Canada.

Like other vets I talk to, Dedrick regrets ever having let his guard down. "But you become fed up or burnt out, frustrated, depressed. It doesn't seem like its working."

The one victory he remembers from those years came on August 4, 1974. "I was in the Century Tavern, on University Way, when Nixon resigned, and the owner broke out a case of champagne. That was a good moment but, finally, I just couldn't do it anymore.

"So there's a long history of this [activism], going back to the sixties, only a lot of people, including myself, didn't follow through.

"In '91, the Gulf War really hit me quite hard. I really didn't think this country would do what they did on the so-called Highway of Death, butchering all those Iraqis," he says, speaking of the night raid on Feb. 26, when American aircraft attacked Iraqi military personnel retreating along Highway 80, which runs from Kuwait to Iraq.

The first Gulf War saw the longest strike mission in the history of aerial warfare, and those strikes were televised, giving many of the older vets fresh nightmares.

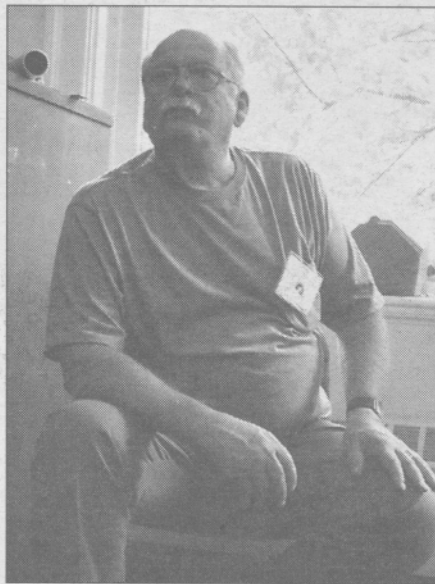
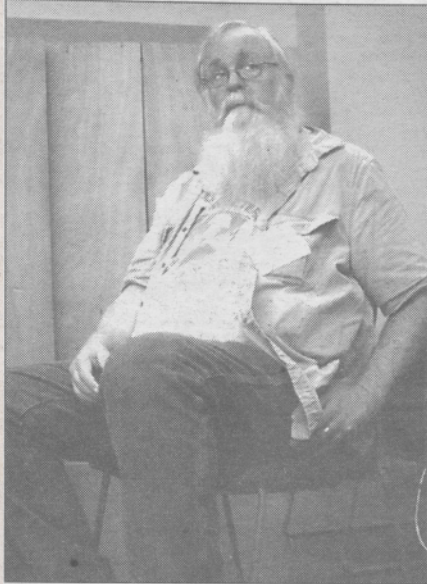
"We got a group of people together, and it was after that that I got involved in the GI Rights Hotline."

But it was the invasion of Afghanistan that roused them to action. In 2002 Dedrick helped organize Seattle's VFP Chapter 92 and served as its first president. Today it has 150 members and is one of six chapters in the state of Washington.

The Seattle chapter has a pool of half a dozen members who do tabling at state conventions of school officials - counselors, superintendents, principals - where they talk about a key provision of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act where, every fall, students can "opt out" of the requirement that the school give the student's name and contact information to the military. "I see a potential for some structural institution changes with this approach," Dedrick says.

The approach, which is only two or three years old, was developed with Washington Truth in Recruiting, where Dedrick serves on the board. "We pay for a table and make our spiel, Dedrick says."

Of course, Dedrick and his VFP colleagues continue to go out to schools to talk to kids directly, describing what a war looks like, what it feels like to be in a war,



Joe Murphy, left, and Mike Dedrick presented a caucus on counter-recruiting in high schools and advocating for model school district policies at the Veterans for Peace/Veterans Against the War National Conference. Among the major leverage points is the "opt out" option on having your children's information automatically sent to the military. "The military has been treating our schools as a press-gang operation," Dedrick says.

military life, the economics of war.

"Once I was telling some students about some prisoners who were tortured and seeing kids that were killed, and one student said, 'I can't believe they let you come in here and say that.' But, generally, it's throwing a pebble into a pond: you never know who that ripple is going to reach," Dedrick observes, then adds philosophically, "It's a short life and you've got a limited amount of resources. My priority is to educate kids about war and militarism."

Dedrick had hoped to make a presentation on counter-recruiting, but by the time he contacted convention planners, one Jim Murphy from Ithaca, New York, had already made that request. "So I called him up and piggy backed," Dedrick says. When the two men met for the first time in Portland, they recognized they'd had parallel lives.

Jim Murphy served on temporary duty in Vietnam in 1966, and again in 1968 as an Air Force radioman. Seven years ago, he retired as dean of a NYC public high school, a career of 23 years. An anti-war activist since 1971, Murphy is currently with the Veterans Fellowship of Reconciliation chapter in Ithaca, and he co-founded New York Veterans Speak Out, which does truth-in-recruiting presentations in NYC and around the state.

On Friday morning, Dedrick begins their workshop, "Military Recruiters in Public Schools: Counter-recruiting in High Schools and Advocating for Model School District Policies," with a characteristically blunt statement:

"The military has been treating our schools as a press-gang operation," he says, then goes on to describe the success of the Washington strategy of targeting school administrators.

Dedrick points out that the No Child Left Behind provision is not the whole problem. "For years before (NCLB), many schools were already giving the military carte blanche information on students," he says. "And I don't trust Facebook and Monster.com not to be turning all the information they collect over to the military. So it may be that opt out is not so meaningful anymore. But it does get us into the schools."

When approaching superintendents and principals, he advises his audience, don't talk in political terms, but rather politely point out that their job as educators is to honor students' rights to information, including balanced information on controversial issues.

"Go to a school board meeting," Dedrick advises. "Write a letter asking if the district has a public policy in place."

In New York, Murphy and his colleagues give presentations in the South Bronx and Washington Heights, places where the "poverty draft" is vigorously at work, that is, the military's campaign to target low-income neighborhoods with promises - very questionable promises - of education and jobs.

"You ask an African-American adolescent in NY high school: How do you feel about the term 'sand nigger.' You can see you're getting a rise out of him. 'Well, that's what you're going to hear every day if you sign up,' I tell him. 'And you're going to accept that. And that's when you know they own you.' We make sure the kids know that basic training is an experience in racism."

Joanne Luchini is in the audience with hand-outs to distribute at this workshop. The stepped-up recruitment effort under the NCLB Act got more civilians involved, and Luchini works through a Portland organization called Recruiter Watch-PDX. Her volunteer work is a conspicuous example of how civilians can partner with veterans to do this work, though she is quick to point out that, when it comes to telling the truth about war or military culture, it's the veterans who have the credibility.

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— MIKE DEDRICK  
COUNTER-RECRUITMENT SPECIALIST

As one of the many thousands of people who support Bradley Manning, the young Army intelligence analyst accused of leaking to Wikileaks a video showing a US Apache helicopter crew killing two Reuters journalists and other civilians in Iraq, I arrive early for the Friday afternoon panel, Campaign to Free Bradley Manning and All GI Resisters.

The presenter is Jeff Paterson, a young Christopher Walken look-alike who was the first public resister to the 1991 Gulf War. He founded Courage to Resist, which raised the money to get Manning a civilian attorney and pressured the government to get Manning moved from Quantico to the Joint Regional Corrections Facility at Fort Leavenworth. Since the move, Courage to Resist reports, Manning's overall mood has improved, he is regularly in touch with his new defense team, and is allowed visits from his family.

"We are reclaiming the path of transparency and holding our government accountable," Paterson states with evident pride.

This year, the Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) is holding its own convention jointly with VFP, though because of dual membership (two Iraq vets serve on the national VFP board) and the inter-generational camaraderie, there's no sense of separation.

According to Daniel Shea, IVAW has modeled themselves on the film "Sir! No Sir!" by opening GI coffee houses. Jorge González is on the Resisters panel to briefly describe his work at Coffee Strong, an Internet café within blocks of Tacoma's Fort Lewis. The café provides a safe place for active duty soldiers, military families and veterans to discuss war, deployment, PTSD and the hardships of life in the military. Movie nights and concerts attract soldiers who live on base and are looking for a hangout; once there, they can make connections to the GI Rights Hotline, National Lawyers Guild, Soldiers Project NW, Women Organizing Women, and Pack Parachute - that is, organizations that provide information and services.

"Vets and civilians have a role in helping them make connections," González cautions, "but it has to be soldiers doing it themselves."

Sarah Bjorknas has come down from Vancouver, B.C. to talk about their policy, now in its seventh year, of welcoming war resisters at the Catholic Worker House on East Pender Street. She explains their program of advising about legal status, offering hospitality and social support, while trying to persuade the Canadian government to get on the side of sheltering war resisters. She is dismayed that the government, which has now turned right, is not inclined to repeat the generosity of 1966-72, when 16,000 U.S. male immigrants (considered a solid estimate and probably low) crossed the border, largely congregating in Toronto's Yorktown and in Vancouver.

Kathy Gilbert is on the program briefly, talking about the Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyer's Guild, which has provided legal support to vets since Vietnam.

The session ends with facilitator Gerry Condon reminding us that President Carter campaigned on the issue of draft-resister amnesty, and that it was his first act as president, in January 1977. He made it possible for AWOL soldiers to return to a U.S. base and be processed. "It was not an automatic amnesty," Condon says, "but it was in the spirit of leniency."

It is late Friday afternoon, and the auditorium is filling with people ready to hear S. Brian Willson talk about "Going AWOL from the American Way of Life." Willson, who has a lifetime of protests, was in the national spotlight in 1987 when he lay in the path of a munitions train that accelerated and took off his legs.

I don't go into the auditorium. Though I plan to read Willson's new book, "Blood on the Tracks," I can't absorb one more word. Rather, I want time to think about all the passion and anger, energy and resolve, determination and hope of these two days.

As we come up on the 10-year anniversary of the so-called War on Terror, I believe there is no more important task than to encourage and support resistance inside the military, and VFP are pointing to a variety of ways we can all contribute.

But also, I want to listen to the haunting voice of Melissa Steinman, still with me from "The Welcome," where she is seen reading her poem about Viet Nam vets reaching out to the GIs in Iraq:

*"... we're most of the way up the hill,  
but we saw you coming, so we ran all the way back  
to get you.*

*Don't get me wrong. The path is narrow and uphill in all directions,  
but we have cleared most of the brush before you,  
and as long as it takes,  
we will walk it with you."*