

# Most Crowded Course on Campus: The Vietnam War

By Paul Dean

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SANTA BARBARA, California — Vietnam veterans are fighting unfinished wars on a campus here.

"When I was your age," a former GI explained to a class, "I watched while my best friend's head was blown off."

He recounted how he took to hard drugs, liquor, "you name it; you try anything to forget."

"When they buried the Unknown Soldier I had the tube on and started crying for three hours and couldn't stop," he said.

The students were stunned. They were hearing about the unknown war. Vietnam, they agreed, was stifled by condemnation while they were growing up, and largely ignored by their high schools. They knew little of the horrors and despair that was being revealed to their class.

Some students had tears in their eyes. They stood and applauded. They crowded the stage, standing six deep around the Vietnam veterans.

Later a veteran discussed this sympathetic reception from the students. Suppose such public acceptance had been offered when he came home 17 years ago?

"It would have helped," he said. "Oh, yes, it would have helped so much."

The students said it was a living education, as vital as hearing Abraham Lincoln lecture on emancipation. This was history hot to the touch, offering a chance to see its participants, to understand them, to assess and to challenge.

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"It is the most profound, the most powerful course in America today," said Shad Meshad, regional director of an organization called the Veterans Outreach Program.

The course is called Religious Studies 155, the Vietnam War and American Religion, Its Influence Upon American Social, Cultural and Religious Life.

Polemics are avoided and politicizing is out. Still, the course cannot avoid one irony: It is scholarship of calm understanding on a campus where 15 years ago this topic ignited what amounted to a 90-day civil war: flak-jacketed police on one side, demonstrating students on

the other, bombings, tear gas, helicopter surveillance, curfews and beatings.

Walter Capps, professor of religious studies, founded the course. Mr. Capps, who holds a doctorate in religion from Yale University, was an associate professor at Santa Barbara in 1970. He was ghostwriting letters for draft evaders,

groping. There was rich, fertile ground here. And I was hooked. What were these vets telling me? What were they communicating? Maybe they didn't know either.

"I didn't stay with the center. But I did stay with the topic."

Since 1979 and the beginning of his 10-week

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marching in peace demonstrations and joining protests against the Vietnam War.

He was and remains, however, a discriminating pacifist. His protests were not a conscientious objection to all wars, just Vietnam. The war led to his confusion as a teacher, as a citizen and, eventually, as program director of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, a liberal think-tank based in Santa Barbara.

He remembers 1977 and a postwar vacuum at the center when he was there. Where did Vietnam fit in the liberal philosophy?

MR. Capps organized a conference. Intellectuals showed up. So did two Vietnam veterans: Mr. Meshad, a former captain and army psychologist in Vietnam, and Fred Downs, a writer who as an infantry lieutenant lost an arm in Vietnam.

The gulf between the vets and the intellectuals, Mr. Capps recalled, was broader than the Tonkin.

The intellectuals "were condescending and looked upon the vets as victims," he said. "The vets were angry and tired and not sure that they wanted to tell us anything. When they did, they used battle talk and four-letter words."

There was little communication. There certainly were contradictions. The intellectuals "had protested the war and now they were being told things they didn't want to hear," Mr. Capps said. "They'd treated the war like an intellectual puzzle but were hearing stories that were close to the Holocaust."

He recalled of the vets that "I had a great deal of identification and compassion with their

course, the effects of the topic have become indelible on campus. It has grown from 60 students to a crowd that often overflows the 860-capacity lecture hall. It has grown from standard university funding to \$3,000 in private donations this quarter to pay the traveling expenses of blue-chip guest speakers.

Local veterans who monitor the course range from the scarred to the well. They include all ranks, many who were in combat, some who were rear-echelon and feel guilty about it, a few who consider themselves better men because of the Vietnam experience and others who were destroyed by it.

Several have lectured the class. All have been expert witnesses ready to adjudicate or supply information when there were student questions. They have been counterpoints, memory banks and ombudsmen.

They usually enter the hall together. They sit together, at the front and right of the class. Some have shown up in jungle fatigues.

On this day, Paul Sgroi, 37, a Santa Barbara city employee, took the first 30 minutes. A regular, he has written an open letter, 12 pages, single-spaced, as course material. He was not well, he said; his mind was scrambled during a tour as a combat photographer with the 1st Cavalry Division: deaths, drugs, depression, booze, nightmares, divorce, emotional withdrawal, a suicide attempt and, now, a tearful restlessness.

Students were sprawled in the aisles. Knees were hugged to chins. When Mr. Sgroi paused between sentences, the big hall was silent as a chapel.

He spoke of coming home and the extremes of that first day. On an airliner he was upgraded to first class. On a New Jersey street, a woman spat in his face.

"The army spent 16 weeks teaching me how to kill, but not 16 seconds telling me that I no longer had to kill," he said. "I don't know what the hell I'm going to do. . . . The nightmares are back because the counseling is bringing them back. . . . I may never be normal again. . . . I still need help. . . . You've heard what it's like to go through war. I hope you learn what it's like to come out of war."

The second speaker was hesitant. It was his first session. Twenty years ago he was a door gunner on a CH-46 helicopter of the 1st Marine Air Wing. He began: "My name is Craig Taylor and I'm a Vietnam veteran. It's taken me 17 years to say that with pride."

Mr. Taylor, 40, a Santa Barbara carpenter, talked about Cerritos College and anti-war protesters after his return. He did not fit, not even with his own family.

HE rebelled. He became a Vietnam Veteran Against the War. Then followed experiences with marijuana, LSD, a motorcycle gang, two divorces and "a nowhere existence for myself."

"Then I found out I had a special feeling inside of me that kept cropping up," he said. He went to the films "The Deer Hunter," "Coming Home" and "Apocalypse Now." "I found myself in the audience crying, breaking down, especially at the sound and vision of helicopters," he said.

The feeling was diagnosed: PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder. Mr. Taylor started to attend group counseling sessions and meetings with other vets.

At the end of the class there was a standing ovation.

Later, Mr. Capps said: "I have to get myself into the topic each year, and that isn't just academic and objective. I don't think I can interpret that topic without being in there with them."

"But it's a price I'm still willing to pay."

That's because his friends, his Vietnam veterans, are pushing him toward a new challenge: to create full study and acknowledgement of the Vietnam War until there is complete understanding throughout all levels of the United States.

"To get it into the textbooks," he said, "to make it part of the community, to get it registered someplace and to file it away."