

“Did You Kill Anybody?” I Just Didn’t Say Anything, Because People Didn’t Have a Clue!



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By Denver Mills, as told to Pat Joseph

I enlisted in 1966, in the Navy, so that I wouldn't be sent to Vietnam. But it didn't work out that way. I was sent to work as an advisor to the Vietnamese Navy's swift boat operations in Qui Nhon, north of Nha Trang; beautiful country, beautiful people.

We had about ten boats operating there, and about 20 U.S. personnel. The mission was to patrol the coast to make sure the North Vietnamese weren't coming in with contraband. We also worked with Seal Team One insertions and did MEDCAPs, where we'd take corpsmen or doctors in to treat villagers without medical care.

After my tour was over, I still had a year of service left, but the military was drawing down then. So, when I got back from Vietnam I was released from the Navy and went right back into civilian life. That was February 8, 1970.

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The experience of coming back to America after being in a combat zone, immersed in a third-world culture, it's like “Whoa!” For a long time, I felt like I was on the outside, looking in. I settled down in Orange County, where I had a sister living, and started going back to school because that's where all the young people were.

I was only 22, but there was a big difference between the 19-year-old freshmen and those of us who were veterans. My peers were involved in so many things that seemed trivial to me. Anybody who has been in war has a perspective that the protected can never have; the understanding of just how fragile life is—especially in this culture, where there's this denial of death. And so we vets kind of clustered together.

The main group I got involved with was Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Every other weekend we would go to the VA hospital in Long Beach and have hot dogs and hamburgers. We were visiting mostly with the spinal cord injury folks there, so they weren't able to walk. We'd roll them out and give 'em a beer and a hit of pot and let 'em look at girls. Listen to music with them. And then we'd roll 'em back in. We'd come back two or three weeks later and they'd be gone. They'd be dead. These guys were discharged with these horrific

injuries that military medicine wasn't able to handle back then. They would just put them in a VA hospital and they would rot.

I transferred to UC Berkeley as a junior. I came up in 1973 and worked full-time in the library at Boalt Hall while I was going to school.

I wasn't attracted to Cal for the radicalism. I was never a screaming militant or anything.

I went on a few marches, I sure did, but I was working and going to school full-time and I had two kids, so I was very, very busy. I had no money. For entertainment, I remember, I'd buy a quart of Budweiser and go up on Tightwad Hill to watch the games.

Most of the veterans who were at Berkeley didn't do anything to stand out. We grew our hair out, and we never—or at least I never—stood up and said, "I'm a veteran." When we did say it, it was kinda like, "What? You went to Vietnam? Did you kill anybody?" That would be the typical question, which was just like ... you just didn't say anything ... because people just did not have a clue. It wasn't so much hostility as ignorance and detachment from what had happened to so many of us.

I wanted to be a children's librarian, so I studied a lot of mythology and folklore. My ultimate goal was to attend the graduate School of Library Science, but even though I had good grades, I didn't get in.

With two kids to feed, I had to figure out what to do, so I took a job at the Science and Engineering Library at UC Santa Barbara. There I got more involved in veterans' stuff as the result of a seminar led by Professor Walter Capps, who was talking about this new thing that veterans were experiencing called Vietnam Syndrome or "delayed stress." Of course, now we call it post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD.

After I got my master's from UCSB in public and social affairs in 1985, I was hired by the VA to start a mental health program for Vietnam vets there in Santa Barbara. It was called a Vet Center program. I started the one there and then did that for 28 years at various other places around Northern California.

At first, we only saw Vietnam vets, but then, lo and behold, we discovered that WWII and Korea vets had the same problems. Of course, we knew that all along. After WWII and Korea, it was "suck it up and don't talk about it," but we know that a large number of WWII veterans either committed suicide or died from high-risk behaviors.

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PTSD is really a reaction to being exposed to death, and anyone who's been exposed to death in even a single incident, like a car accident—you don't want to go back and think about that all the time. But you can't not think about it. Now imagine you've had a whole bunch of people get killed around you, day after day. Afterward, you're still amped up on the adrenaline and endorphins, and you just want to calm down and stay away from people and keep your mind off what you've been through. So you do things, like you work 80 hours a week, then come home and go down in the basement and drink 'til you pass out. Or maybe go from woman to woman to woman, or you get into drugs and alcohol. That's the avoidance phase.

And it's not just American veterans. It's veterans throughout history. There's a great book called Achilles in Vietnam written by a psychiatrist and professor of classical literature. He compared The Iliad and The Odyssey to the experience of vets he'd worked with. The Greek epics aren't just war stories. They're stories about the

relationships between men, and the terror they felt in combat. Odysseus comes back from war and his own wife doesn't recognize him. This is a very human thing.

I guess I've been struggling, myself, for quite a while, but I think my work with other veterans helped me take care of my own issues in many ways. Helping other people is a healthy thing to do.

When the big influx of post-9/11 veterans came, some after multiple deployments—in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa—it was just crazy. I didn't think anything like that would ever happen again. We started seeing all these young folks. Even the parents were young. And we started working with the families, as well.

At that same time, Ron Williams was seeing a lot of veterans coming through his re-entry student program at Berkeley. He really did an amazing job setting up the Cal Veteran Service Center there. Just amazing. I hired some of those folks, in fact—three or four Cal grads who were combat veterans. And from there I started the Cal Veterans and Military Affiliated Alumni group with the Cal Alumni Association.

The whole "Support the Troops" mindset today has been very meaningful, especially in making the immediate family members aware of the changes that people go through and to not catastrophize it, but just know that they need help readjusting to civilian life. Also, I think it helps end this confusion between the warriors and the war, especially among young people. And that was not too clearly defined back in the Vietnam era. They thought we were all baby killers.

Denver Mills graduated from Berkeley in 1976 and is a retired Vet Centers director, U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs.

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