

Vietnam: The Dirty War Told by the Men Who Fought and Opposed It

Book review

Nick Medvecky

a review of

Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Richard Stacewicz, Twayne Publishers, 1997, New York, 471 pp.

FE Note: Nick Medvecky was a civil rights activist (1961–65) in the South and, later, an anti-war coordinator. He covered the VVAW Winter Soldier Investigation for *Creem* magazine. He is currently serving a federal prison term: #12155039, P.O. Box 8000, Bradford, PA 16701.

For April 15th, 1967, the Detroit section of the anti-Vietnam war movement chartered an entire train. War protesters from around the nation converged on New York City for a huge march and rally.

Before the sun set that day, a half million people rallied at Sheep Meadow in South Central Park and marched down Fifth Avenue, overflowing numerous streets and filling the United Nations plaza. Another 100,000 demonstrated in San Francisco. It was an auspicious display of the power of the antiwar movement, demonstrating the mass proportions it had achieved in just two years of organizing.

Behind the parade leaders that day (including Martin Luther King, Jr., signifying the melding of the two great movements of the '60s), marched several thousand military veterans, most of them from World War II. In front of them was a small group of young men carrying a banner reading, "Vietnam Veterans Against the War."-VVAW.

While that spring-showered day only witnessed about a dozen men of this new vets group in attendance, within three years more than 50,000 Vietnam veterans would join this movement, actively opposing the war-over half of them combat experienced-officers as well as enlisted men. April 15th, 1967, was the first time in American history that soldiers returned to organize against an ongoing war.

That July, as a non-Vietnam veteran of the 101st Airborne Division (U.S. Army, 1959–61) and chairman of the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam, I flew to Chicago to meet with one of those young vets who had marched with us in New York City-Jan Barry Crumb. Along with veterans from several different cities, we made plans for the development of such groups, both Vietnam vets and others, across the nation.

The most significant by far was to be the VVAW. Back in Detroit we already founded the Veterans Against the War, a group which included veterans from all branches of the military since we had few Vietnam vets at that time.

Winter Soldiers, a book by historian Richard Stacewicz, is the oral history of the VVAW-men who changed the character of the anti-war movement, a movement whose activists had come mostly from the universities.

The most significant work accomplished by the VVAW was in reaching back to the soldiers themselves. By June 1971, *Detroit News* columnist and military historian, retired colonel Robert Heinl, would make the extraordinary admission that the military in Vietnam was nearing a state of complete collapse. What that former officer would not admit was the critical role of opposition by soldiers from that war, and even from within the armed forces itself.

Jan Barry Crumb (who served in Vietnam and then resigned from West Point rather than continue to be a part of the war) asks, "Who's going to tell the history of the Vietnam war?" *Winter Soldiers* helps answer that question. With its easy-to-read, oral-history format, the book documents the struggles of these men, from their pre-induction days, to their experiences in Vietnam, to their contributions to stopping the war and beyond.

In addition to being the point-men of the anti-war movement and the profound influence they had on its mass base and the general public, examples of the accomplishments of the VVAW include: counseling those with post-Vietnam syndrome, a forerunner of the now-recognized Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); the creation of such organizations as Twice Born Men and Swords to Plowshares; and their work in exposing Agent Orange.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War held their own demonstrations as well. Their actions were often outrageous, always surprising, sometimes funny and sometimes not-so-funny. In public and dramatic protests, and ingenious forms of guerilla theatre, they "invaded" communities giving citizens a mock taste of the war they had fought in Vietnam. They threw their medals back at those who sent them to Vietnam when a fence was erected physically barring them from the halls of Congress; they printed and distributed a variety of underground newspapers and films; established coffee houses outside of military bases and counseled all comers against the draft.

Winter Soldiers also documents world events revolving around and shaping these men, the "sea" in which they swam. While the Vietnamese were forced to fight an anti-colonial war for independence against the United States, their erstwhile ally of World War II, they had to wait another 30 years (1945–75) and suffer three million dead before achieving self-determination.

The only way the war could be waged was to strip young recruits of their critical processes through brutal indoctrination, inculcate them with racial hatred, teach them to obey authority without question, and demonize the Vietnamese. But 2,000 years of struggle by the Vietnamese, the unexpected backlash of radicalization and opposition to the war by the American public (a 1967 Gallup poll showed 52% of Americans opposed the war) and these soldiers brought the U.S. political leadership instead to defeat.

In the beginning of their organizing efforts, VVAW testimony about the brutal norm of that criminal war was mostly met with deaf ears. While the American public was used to taking their doses of sin in religious dollops, they were not prepared to hear the brutality of the war committed by their sons that were sent there.

When the story of the My Lai massacre broke in 1969 (belatedly reported by the corporate press), documenting graphically the slaughter of hundreds of Vietnamese women, young children and even infants (the only "enemy" available), it lay bare the American psyche to the reality of that conflict and the U.S. role in it. The public then listened to these veterans-loud and clear.

In January 1971, the VVAW convened a "Winter Soldier Investigation" in Detroit with the intent of documenting to the public what they knew, had seen and participated in. Their testimony vividly indicted the U.S. political and military leadership that trained and sent them to Vietnam. In the summer of 1972, representatives of the VVAW traveled to the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal in Paris where they further testified, and embraced the "enemy" they had once fought.

The anti-war vets established direct contacts with the Vietnamese and declared their own peace with documents such as with the Peoples Peace Treaty.

The book also documents several journeys by Vietnam veterans to North Vietnam during the war and the relationship they developed with the Vietnamese. It's well known that American troops refused to fight in growing numbers. What's not generally known is the role of direct opposition within the military, much of it fostered by returned vets.

The work of the VVAW so impressed the Vietnamese political leadership that they issued directives to their commanders and troops in the field not to fire on American soldiers who wore paraphernalia of protest or carried their weapons in an upside-down position, part of the VVAW symbol. As the war progressed, there were examples of entire American units in the field signing up for VVAW membership. Little could the small minds that had sown these men (half of who were under the age of 19) in that ancient, fertile and besieged land, realize they would harvest a crop of dragon's teeth in return.

If you've been around the revolutionary block, you'll find *Winter Soldiers* to be a stroll down memory lane, with glances at some facets of that experience long forgotten or others never known. If you're coming of age as we enter

the final years of the twentieth century, you'll be able to see in the men of the VVAW your own reflection, given similar objective circumstances what was done, what could be done, and what it will be necessary to do.

Excerpt from *Winter Soldiers*

Joe Urgo: I was not carrying ammunition any more. I decided: if the shit gets hot again, I'm running— I'm not going to kill. By the end of the year the attitude among the troops was so rebellious that nobody was wearing their helmets anymore. We weren't saluting the officers. The base police were given orders to write up all the guys coming off the night shift if they did not have their helmets on and if they didn't salute the officers. Now we're going to take the chickenshit to a new level. Nobody's going to tell me why my friends died, but they are going to write me up because I'm not going to salute this asshole.

I got late copies of the Daily News with the 1968 [Democratic] convention laid out all across the pages. I can remember walking up and down the barracks when everybody was in there and holding up the Daily News that showed the police beating people, and saying, "This is what we're in Vietnam protecting?"

I organized a whole lot of people to vote for Nixon, because I thought Nixon was going to end the war. I just turned twenty-one, so that was the first time I ever voted. It was all part of our protest to end the war. It was like we had an anti-war mood growing in the barracks. I can tell you, it got so serious—the harassment—that there was a discussion about killing one sergeant. That's always been amazing to me. We were not a line unit, an infantry unit, [where] killing was normal, but we discussed whether we should kill them. It was that kind of atmosphere. Fragging. It was an incredible experience. It changed my life. I can remember actually thinking that that twenty-first birthday was the first day that I can remember that I wanted to mark things from.

I came back the day before Christmas in 1968, totally stressed out and anguished. I came back and dressed up in my uniform and went to midnight mass with the family because I wanted that attention, respect, acknowledgment. I still wanted something to be proud of. Stuff never goes away like that. At midnight mass, all the priest talked about was grace. I can remember leaving the church in a new level of anger because people were dying—this asshole doesn't say anything about what's going on in the world.



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